

The Countess

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It plummeted out of the sky like a lightning bolt, a blur of movement sensed rather than seen, to fasten vice-like talons on its hapless prey. Caught in mid-flight some fifty feet off the ground its victim died in a flurry of blood and feathers as the falcon triumphantly sounded its victory cry and swept once again skywards on outspread wings.

Ezra Standish watched the magnificent bird fly away and urged his horse forward once more, his curiosity piqued. The falcon was not a native of these parts and he was sure he had seen the characteristic jesses of a trained hunting bird trailing from its feet. Who, he mused, would be in possession of a sporting falcon in these parts? This frontier wilderness, that could barely lay claim to being civilised, was hardly a place in which falconry was likely to be a recreational activity. Losing sight of the bird and its kill, he turned his thoughts to the more mundane, reminded at a most basic level by the falcon's actions that he had missed the midday meal. For that he had only himself to blame, having left Bitter Creek far later in the day than he had planned, he had then been obliged to make up for lost time.

His feelings for that particular town were ambivalent but he owed a significant debt of gratitude to its doctor. He now counted John Mason among his limited circle of friends, besides which, the good doctor kept an excellent selection of vintage wines. In fact his late start for the return journey had been caused by a sociable evening the night before spent sampling some of Mason's very best; an evening which had finally drawn to a close in the early hours of the morning. After that, an early start had been out of the question as he had not surfaced until mid-morning and then had remained closeted in the darkness of his hotel room until his head had cleared sufficiently to contemplate attempting the ride back. He had no doubt that Mr. Larabee and Co. would have something to say about his extended absence.

He flexed his shoulders, feeling the stiffness of the recently healed scars across his back and he quickly pushed the recollection of the horse-whip descending on his unprotected flesh to the furthest recesses of his mind. Something to be brought out and re-examined later when the memory no longer had the power to hurt.

As his horse pranced nervously sideways, Ezra instantly shut out any thoughts of the past to focus totally on his immediate surroundings. Glancing around he patted the fretting animal on the neck and wondered what had so disturbed the normally placid beast. Unable to find any reason for the horse's skittish behaviour he warily urged the gelding forward, trusting in its instincts as much as his own. A few yards along the track, the roan balked and sidestepped obviously reluctant to continue. At that point Ezra decided that discretion was definitely the better part of valour and drew his Remington, keeping it loosely in his left hand while holding the reins in his right.

He heard a faint but insistent humming in the air and paused to listen, trying to get both a bearing on its source and identify its cause. As he urged the suspicious gelding on, using his knees to encourage the nervous animal to keep moving, the intensity of the sound increased, then suddenly the horse reared almost unseating the Southerner as something flew within inches of man and animal, uttering a piercing screech. Intent on calming the spooked horse and keeping himself in the saddle, Ezra did not immediately notice the rider approaching.

"I must apologise for Kia's bad manners. Please forgive us for causing distress to your animal."

The Southerner brought the unsettled roan under control and turned the beast around, keeping his gun at the ready until he could determine whether or not the unexpected rider was likely to pose any kind of threat.

"Please," the lightly accented voice continued, "your gun is entirely unnecessary. I have no weapon."

Ezra kicked his horse forward. What he had, at first glance, taken for a young man he discovered was actually a mature woman riding astride and dressed in close fitting tailored pants, short jacket and flat

brimmed hat. Even more interesting than the revelation of the rider's gender was that on her left wrist, which was protected by the cuff of a heavy leather gauntlet, perched the falcon he had seen earlier and which had been the apparent cause of the gelding's upset. The woman had the reins looped loosely over the pommel, while her hands were occupied with winding a length of twine around her fingers into a convenient bundle which she tucked into her waistband. This simple device -- the lure -- had been the source of the humming; bait whirled in the air to bring the bird back home.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but I find it's best to be prudent around these parts. I didn't mean to intrude."

Holstering his gun, he rested his forearms across the saddle horn intentionally maintaining some distance between himself and the rider. His prudence was as much to avoid getting too close to the large bird, which seemed to stare at him with malicious intensity, as keep a buffer between himself and the unknown woman. In his experience the fact that she was female was no guarantee of his continued well being.

"No intrusion. The hunt is finished for today."

She signalled her horse, a well-bred and handsome grey, with her knees and moved closer, putting herself between him and the bird. He noticed that the leather jesses were now threaded through her gloved fingers and with a knowing smile she slipped the falcon's hood into place.

"Do not worry about her. Kia is really very sweet."

"I'm sure she is ma'am. A peregrine falcon is just not something I expected to see around these parts."

The woman's gaze travelled over him, and Ezra believed the experience was the closest he was ever likely to come to being stripped naked in public. He kept his expression neutral but the woman's brazen appraisal of him left him feeling more than a little uncomfortable. There was something about this confident and aristocratic woman sitting astride a powerful horse with a menacing bird of prey perched on her arm that raised the Southerner's hackles, making him unusually reticent.

"Tell me. Do you travel this road often?"

Ezra returned her gaze, deliberately offering the same degree of scrutiny that she had expended on him.

"On occasion," he admitted guardedly, reluctant to give anything away.

The ghost of a smile played across her full lips and she seemed to find the situation amusing.

"Please, let me introduce myself." She held out a gloved hand in introduction. "I am Countess von Hohenstaffel. My brother and I have acquired a property a few miles from here."

Standish considered the possibilities and by a process of elimination decided that she was probably talking about the Williams ranch which he knew had been vacant for some time. He merely nodded, more out of politeness than interest, Europe seemed to have an abundance of lesser nobility, but etiquette dictated that he should make his own introduction.

"Ezra Standish."

She held his hand a fraction longer than was proper before releasing it then, sighing regretfully, she gathered the reins into her right hand.

"Well, Herr Standish. It was a pleasure but now I must go. I have no doubt that we shall meet again very soon. *Auf Wiedersehen.*"

Ezra tipped his hat, waiting until she had nudged her horse into a canter and had gone some distance before urging his own mount along the road.

Vin Tanner leaned easily back in his chair, long legs stretched out across the boards as he watched the activity in the street and considered the question Larabee had just put to him. The two men were in their customary place in front of the saloon ostensibly keeping the peace but in reality just shooting the breeze as the town sweltered in the mid-afternoon heat. The temperature had risen to such a degree that even Tanner, who rarely acknowledged either heat or cold, had removed his buckskin jacket. Chris too sat hatless and in his shirtsleeves, occasionally taking a pull on his beer in an attempt to obtain some relief, but it seemed as fast as he poured fluid in he sweated it out.

"Well?"

Tanner turned his head at Chris' prompt then squinted down the street along which a few citizens still went about their business.

"I reckon it won't take more'n a coupla days either way."

Chris wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

"This ain't a good time for travelling, Vin, and it's a fair haul over to the mission."

The Texan swallowed a healthy measure of his own beer and again his keen blue eyes flicked to the end of the street, uncharacteristically distracted. Chris twisted in his chair to follow the sharpshooter's gaze and realised that Tanner's mind was far from the forthcoming trip to the San Juan mission.

"You lookin' out for Ezra?"

"It's gettin' late."

"This is Ezra we're talkin' about. That man's notion of time ain't the same as everyone else's."

Tanner nodded in mute acceptance of Larabee's words. It was true that the gambler had an unusually flexible interpretation of minutes and hours and it was not beyond the realms of possibility that the Southerner was still in Bitter Creek. That knowledge did little to overcome Vin's unease.

"Ezra can take care of himself, Vin," he reminded the ex-bounty hunter quietly, "Been doing it a long time 'fore you and I came along, and will be doing it a long time after we're gone."

Tanner's attitude to the gambler had undergone a subtle change since Ezra's flogging, an act of violence which, even in their violent world, had been enough to create a sense of outrage in the Texan. That the dapper Southerner had endured the ordeal and its aftermath alone had struck a chord with the wiry tracker and it had been Vin who had kept Ezra from being hanged for a murder he did not commit. The three men would carry that secret to their graves, and an unspoken oath now bonded them together closer than ties of blood.

"Guess you're right." He pulled his gaze away from the street but with obvious reluctance. "Want another beer?"

Ezra crouched in front of the horse's offside foreleg and ran a practiced hand over the animal's fetlock. *Lame. Damn!* He sighed and, resigning himself to a long walk, wondered if he would reach town before nightfall. Looking skywards he squinted against the bright orb of the sun and decided that at least darkness would bring some relief from the unrelenting heat. Rising he patted the gelding's neck.

"Well, fellah. Looks like it's Shanks' mare for the rest of the way. Puts us on equal footing wouldn't you say?"

The horse, understandably, refrained from comment.

The Southerner shrugged out of his jacket, carefully folded it and tucked it behind the cantle before taking

the reins in his hand and starting the long walk home with the foundered horse in tow.

It was at times like this, the gambler reflected, that he regretted his rejection of company on these trips. Had he accepted the offer of either Josiah or Vin to accompany him he would not now be in this unenviable position of being reduced to independent locomotion. Indeed his horse may still have pulled up lame but at least he would have had the option of sharing the second mount.

Several miles down the track Ezra paused to drink from his water canteen, sweat now soaking the back of his linen shirt and dust coating his boots and pant legs. Stopping the bottle he glanced around to get his bearings and considered striking out further East whether he might be able to reach the Wells homestead quicker than he could get back to town. After brief consideration he dismissed the notion and, wiping the sweat from his brow, continued along the same road, once again wondering what had prompted him to travel West in the first place and more to the point, why he continued to stay in such a remote backwater. But of course, he mused, there had been that unpleasant misunderstanding in New Orleans, then he had been forced to leave St. Louis rather sooner than he had planned and Kansas City -- well the less he dwelled on that the better. Paso Del Norte then. Was this where he was destined to play out the remainder of his life? Unbidden, a thought that actually had the power to frighten him emerged from his consciousness: *Why not?* For probably the first time in his life he felt that he had found a place where he could belong and was doing something where he had succeeded in giving as much as he took. *Well almost if one didn't count poker winnings.* Maude, he knew, would be disappointed in these alarmingly domesticated thoughts. Sometimes, he would have to confess, he disappointed himself -- but for entirely different reasons.

The distinctive sound of hoofs, a large number of them if Ezra was any judge, thundered in the near distance and the Southerner halted cautiously guiding the gelding off the main track. While at the moment he would welcome the appearance of a friendly face, he was not trusting enough to believe that all travellers, especially those in a large company, were likely to be benevolent.

There were five or six of them, and Ezra believed at first that they would pass him by, a single horseman of no particular consequence but just as the last rider had passed the lead horseman wheeled and started back towards him. The gambler rested his hand on the butt of his Remington and stood close enough to his horse to reach his rifle should that become necessary as two of the riders separated from the group and closed in. He stood impassively at the side of the well-defined track while the horsemen brought their beasts to a showy stop, one mount rearing and pawing the air so abrupt was the command to halt. This particular animal at the urging of its rider then high-stepped in short, controlled movements to within five feet of the Southerner and his horse.

"Herr Standish! Did I not predict that we would meet again? But I did not dream that it would be so soon."

Ezra tipped the brim of his hat not certain if he should consider this meeting particularly fortuitous.

"Countess."

She dismounted, casually throwing the reins of her grey to the second rider. She no longer had the falcon he noted and she had changed her clothes for something a little less masculine. Pushing back her hat she let it hang down her back from the braided cord around her neck and shook out her dark mane of hair as once again she studied him.

"You have a problem, I think?"

A number of alternative responses presented themselves and were dismissed before Ezra settled on the simple truth.

"Horse foundered a few miles back."

The woman moved forward, lightly brushing past him as she bent to examine the gelding's leg.

"This is bad luck." She straightened again, turning to face him as she gently stroked the horse's neck.

"You will not object if I offer you a remount, Herr Standish?"

"That's very generous of you but I could hardly expect..."

"Nonsense." She turned to one of her companions and uttered a command in what the gambler assumed to be the woman's native tongue before continuing in English. "Friedrich will give you his horse."

As she spoke, the tall man was already dismounting, preparing to offer his own mount.

"It is best I think, that you leave your horse with us," she continued, "the ranch is very close and my stable-hands will take good care of him. Bring Kaiser back to us whenever you are ready."

While Ezra had misgivings about the trade, he thought about the alternatives and quickly decided he would rather be indebted to this enigmatic woman than continue his journey on foot. It was, after all, a generous offer and to refuse would not only be churlish, it would be incredibly foolish. With a nod of acceptance, he slowly began to remove his possessions from the saddle before the exchange took place. Then, surrendering the reins to Friedrich, he transferred his equipment to the big black realising, at close quarters, that the animal had a good two hands on his own horse. As Ezra finished securing his belongings to his satisfaction the Countess took off her glove and extended her hand.

"It is now certain that we will be meeting again, Herr Standish. I look forward to offering you the hospitality of my house very soon."

"My thanks, Countess. I am in your debt."

She paused and smiled archly before striding to her own horse. "I do believe you are right. How very nice."

Ezra swung into the saddle and turned the horse towards home, wondering why he suddenly felt so ill at ease.

Vin rose slowly from his chair and took a step forward, his gaze fixed on the far end of the street. He swatted Chris' arm with the back of his hand and a broad smile split his tanned face.

"Will you take a look at this?"

Larabee leaned forward and followed the tracker's line of sight frowning slightly, finally realising that the elegant piece of high-stepping horseflesh coming down main street was ridden by none other than Ezra.

"That man could fall into a midden and come out smelling of lilacs," he commented, his voice tinged with reluctant admiration.

Ezra drew rein in front of the saloon and dismounted, brushing the accumulated dust off his jacket before securing the animal to the tether rail.

"Poker stakes must be getting' higher," observed Vin with a grin as he walked slowly forward to inspect the Southerner's new mount.

He ran an appraising hand over the glossy black hide, circling the impressive animal then rapidly sidestepped, laughing, as the beast flattened its ears and tried to bite him.

"Got yourself a passel of trouble here, Ezra. This fella's not been cut."

Standish took off his hat and dusted the brim, suddenly transferring his attention to the Texan. "I beg your pardon?"

"This here's a stallion."

Ezra pulled a wry face and settled his hat back on his head. "I assure you, Mr. Tanner, that I am quite aware of that particular fact. This animal is the spawn of Satan and I, for one, will not experience one moment of regret in returning him to his rightful owner."

"Never seen a horse like this around these parts before. Where'd you get him?" Chris stepped off the boardwalk and made his own inspection of the horse.

Ezra straightened, realising just how weary he was, and sighed heavily.

"That Mr. Larabee is a long story. One I shall be more than happy to relate after I have partaken of some liquid refreshment. Gentlemen?"

With a sweeping gesture he ushered the two men into the saloon, pausing as he entered to cast a last glance at the beautiful but high spirited animal now tethered at the hitching rail and turning a malevolent eye on anyone who dared approach.

"I think I may live to regret this day, my fine friend," he muttered beneath his breath, before turning his back and vanishing into the cool, darkness of the bar.

"So she's a real Countess, Ezra?"

J.D. was finding it difficult to contain his excitement. He had already fallen in love with the black horse, so much so that he had volunteered to take the animal to the livery for the gambler and had not returned for an hour. Now the prospect of having genuine nobility in the vicinity of the town was proving too much for the youngster.

Ezra dealt cards to the four men around the table then fanned his own hand and discarded before answering. "That is what the lady claims, Mr. Dunne, and I have no reason, as yet, to suspect any artifice."

"What?" The youngest of the seven looked confused as once again Ezra threw out a word he had never heard.

Josiah, his chair pulled close to the table but outside of the poker game, leaned towards a frowning J.D. "He doesn't think she's lying."

The Southerner smiled and waited for the others to discard.

"The Countess certainly has the manner appropriate to landed gentry, and a most impressive retinue."

Chris raised his head from his cards.

"Two. And just how many is impressive, Ezra?"

"There were five men accompanying the lady when I saw her for the second time, although at our first meeting she was unescorted."

"Five hands or five guns?"

The gambler raised the ante and waited for the others to either continue or fold.

"I believe all the riders were armed, Mr. Larabee, other than that I would not care to hazard a guess."

Chris called and spread out his cards. Two pair, kings over eights.

"I reckon it'd be right neighbourly if we made a call on our newest residents tomorrow. What d'ya think, Vin?"

Tanner threw his cards down. Three jacks.

"Can make a stop off at the old Williams place on my way to the mission."

"Von Hohenstaffel," corrected Ezra absently, not noticing the rapid exchange of glances around the table as the six men tried to make some sense of the alien name.

Chris' expression remained neutral as Standish laid down a full house and took the pot.

"I think we should maybe consider a friendly show of force."

The Southerner shuffled and dealt another hand.

"An oxymoron I believe, Mr. Larabee."

"A what moron?" This time it was Buck who had difficulty deciphering the gambler's words.

"Friendly and force are not words that are customarily paired," he elaborated, "In fact as I understand they

embrace two opposing concepts."

Chris downed the last of his whiskey and checked his cards.

"Well, whatever you want to call it, we're riding out there. First thing tomorrow."

It was obvious that Larabee was keen to get the 'friendly' show of force over with. The seven set out just after sunup, Chris riding point and setting a punishing pace flanked by Ezra and Vin. A little way behind and at a slightly slower speed the remaining four rode line abreast, trying to keep out of Larabee's dust and fathom exactly why this particular excursion was necessary.

"What d'you reckon's gotten into Chris?" asked a puzzled JD of his friend, Buck, "He's in a mighty big hurry."

"Hell, boy. Don't ask me but he's sure got a burr under his saddle over this Countess thing."

The youngest member of the group looked wistfully after Ezra's borrowed mount. He had desperately tried to convince the gambler that he could be trusted to ride the big stallion but Ezra had politely declined his offer.

"Sure wish I was in Ezra's boots right now."

"If truth be told, JD" offered Josiah, "I reckon Ezra'd be a sight happier if you *were* in his boots. I believe the reason he didn't want you to ride that horse had nothing to do with your skills as a horseman but because he's a man who sets store by appearances"

"So?"

"It wouldn't be the act of a gentleman to front up to the Countess with someone else riding the horse she had personally loaned to him. First off she might think he was afraid and then again she might be just downright insulted."

"Oh, yeah," agreed JD, finally making some sense of what the preacher was saying, "You could be right. Do you think she really is a Countess?"

Josiah smiled.

"Reckon we'll soon find out. Ezra certainly seems to think she might be."

"What was her name again?"

"Von Hohenstaffel."

Dunne shook his head wondering how anyone got their tongue around a name like that. A Countess with an impossible name and a magnificent horse that he couldn't ride. He had a bad feeling that the day wasn't about to get any easier.

Chris reined in within sight of the ranch which, until recently had belonged to Zack Williams. The last time any of the men had been near the place it had been in a state of disrepair, fences broken and the house in need of work. Even the stock had dwindled to a few rangy head of cattle as the herd was gradually lost to either rustlers or disease. Only now there was no sign of neglect, instead the ranch had about it a distinct air

of prosperity. Rather than cattle the new owners were running horses and the perimeter fence was now painted a pristine white. Vin let out a low whistle at the impressive transformation.

"Holy Hell! How come no one let on about was goin' on out here?"

Chris shrugged.

"No cause for people to come out this way much. How long since you rode out this way, Vin?"

Ezra, momentarily distracted by the fractious Kaiser fighting the bit and eager to run, brought the horse back under control and pointed to a plume of dust moving rapidly towards them.

"Gentlemen, I believe a welcoming committee has been dispatched in our honour. Do we proceed?"

Chris turned to look over his shoulder and waited for the rest of the party to close up, then spurred his horse onto a slow walk.

"We do."

The seven spread out into a loose flying wedge formation with Chris at the centre moving at a leisurely pace towards the ranch as an unknown number of riders continued to approach them at speed. Several minutes later Chris halted as the welcoming party fanned out in front of the seven lawmen effectively blocking any further progress. Six men in all. One man, tall and very blond, rode forward stopping a few feet from Chris.

"You have business here?" His voice was heavily accented. The delivery haughty and abrupt; the question a demand. No pretense at welcome.

"I make it my business to know who's new in these parts," drawled Chris slowly, "Live longer that way."

The man drew himself up and with an arrogant tilt of the head first looked Chris up and down as if he was an unusual specimen requiring closer examination, then allowed his gaze to rove along the line of riders before turning his icy blue eyes back on the man in black, condescension written plainly on his face.

"And you might be?"

Chris ducked his head and smiled.

"Well, mister. We're what you might call the law in these parts and I'm more interested in who the hell you might be."

The blond man's lips curved into a sneer and he urged his horse close enough to make Chris' mount back up a step.

"My name is Count Erik Von Hohenstaffel and you are on my property."

Ezra coughed politely and kneed the stallion forward.

"If I may explain, sir. I am here at the invitation of your sister, the Countess. You may in fact recognise this fine animal as one of your own stock. Kaiser, I believe?"

Von Hohenstaffel immediately turned his attention to the impeccably dressed Southerner.

"Ah so! The owner of the lame horse." He openly appraised the gambler. "Ja, Katrin was quite taken with you Herr...Standish, is it not?"

Ezra tipped his hat in acknowledgement.

"And these men?" He waved his arm in a sweeping gesture to encompass the remaining six peacekeepers.

"My... friends."

The Count stood briefly in his stirrups and turned to the men ranged behind him, uttering a sharp command in a foreign tongue. The five riders immediately wheeled their mounts and rode back towards the ranch. Von Hohenstaffel once again addressed Ezra, deliberately ignoring Chris.

“My apologies. I have been most inhospitable, but you understand that when seven armed men approach it is wise to take some precautions. I beg your pardon for I am sure Katrin will be most pleased to see you again, Herr Standish.”

He manoeuvred his horse in a tight circle until he was facing the ranch again and urged the animal into a walk, indicating to Ezra and presumably the others, to follow.

Buck closed the gap where Ezra had moved out of line.

“I smell trouble, Chris. This fella’s about as friendly as a rattlesnake.”

“Know what you mean,” Larabee agreed, quietly, “Just keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Think Ezra knows what he’s doin’?”

“Hell, I’m counting on it.”

Chris Larabee was not a happy man. The intended show of force had somehow deteriorated into a social occasion for which he totally blamed the gambler. Admitted, he had been given the opportunity to check out the both property and its new owners, but he was as uncomfortable with the outcome as he had been with the idea of these decidedly odd foreigners and their hired guns moving into his territory. Buck, unsurprisingly, had immediately set his sights on the Countess as a challenge to be conquered, and had spent the better part of an hour flirting outrageously with the woman who, if anything, was encouraging the ladies’ man. JD was likewise enamoured but not with the Countess. Rather his interest lay with her fine bloodstock. Chris decided he would be lucky if he ever managed to tear the kid away from the corral. Vin had simply vanished. Having no time for social niceties, he had wandered away soon after they had arrived and while Chris had every confidence that he would discover more in his casual sortie than any of the others could possibly imagine he would have preferred to have had the tracker on hand. Josiah and Nathan were engaged in conversation with some of the ranch hands and, in spite of a difference in language for it seemed that all the Von Hohenstaffel’s retinue had been imported, the two men seemed to be managing quite capably.

Ezra was another story. Early in the proceedings the Southerner had disappeared into the house with Erik Von Hohenstaffel and Chris had seen neither of them since. No one else had been invited inside, in fact refreshments had been served in the yard. Chris had been irritated from the first by the obvious distinction made between the gambler and the rest of them and while it suited his purposes to let Ezra have free reign to do what he did best, he hoped that the gambler would not be too tempted by the obviously rich pickings and get himself into trouble. Unable to resist a smile, Chris watched with interest as Buck persisted in his predictable antics with the raven-haired Katrin. One thing could be said for Buck Wilmington, he never let a minor consideration such as class distinction ever get in the way of his ardour. And the woman was undoubtedly striking. Dangerous too, he imagined. Although Ezra had said nothing openly he had the impression that the gambler found something vaguely disturbing in the Countess and, given the situation they now found themselves in, his gut feeling told him that the Southerner had every reason to be wary.

“So, Herr Standish,” started the Count as he offered the gambler a brandy, “You tell me that you are a gambler. Are you familiar with the game of chemin de fer?”

“Baccarat?” Ezra took a drink of the fiery spirit, appreciating its quality as it burned a path to his stomach, “I prefer poker, Sir. Baccarat is a game that requires little skill and holds no real challenge.”

Von Hohenstaffel laughed.

“Ah, poker. The game of the masses. Still, you would have little opportunity here to indulge yourself in anything more than relieving a ranch hand of his hard earned wages, *nicht wahr?*”

“Oh, it keeps me amused.”

“Amused certainly, but rich? I think not.”

Ezra shrugged not caring to pursue any further inquiries into his current financial status and downed the rest of the brandy.

Continuing, the count waved his hand expansively to encompass the room and, by inference, the entire holding. “Would you believe that this all became mine at the turn of a card?”

Ezra had no trouble believing it at all. Fortunes could be won and lost at the gaming table in the time it took to draw a breath and he had himself experienced both ends of the gambling spectrum. But his high rolling days were behind him now. In spite of his mother’s disapproval of his most recently acquired vocation, his life had changed considerably since he had first set foot in the Territory and, while he would never admit it to his colleagues, he found a certain degree of satisfaction in his new role of peace keeper.

“Indeed, sir. But you are unlikely to find such high stakes on offer here.”

The Count inclined his head abruptly and took the gambler’s empty glass.

“So say you, Herr Standish. Yet I believe you may discover that there are assets more valuable even than money.”

Ezra retrieved his hat from the sideboard.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Count Von Hohenstaffel but I’m afraid that we have business to attend in town but I trust we shall meet again soon.”

The man extended his hand.

“I look forward to matching wits with you over a game of cards, Herr Standish. I think that you may prove to be a formidable opponent and worthy of my attention.”

Ezra smiled and completed the handshake.

“My dear, sir. I would be honoured.”

Chris started to move the moment he saw Standish emerge from the house, intercepting the Southerner as he crossed the yard towards the corral. The two men fell easily into step neither of them missing a beat.

“Mr. Larabee, might I suggest we make our farewells and depart from this fine establishment post-haste. I see no reason for us to remain here any longer.”

The man in black did not dispute the gamblers assessment, merely nodding his agreement. “Couldn’t agree more. I’ve seen enough.”

If Ezra was at all surprised by Larabee’s ready acquiescence he made nothing of it, instead he gestured to the remainder of the group.

“I believe however, Mr. Larabee, that you may require all your excellent powers of persuasion to induce our colleagues to depart quite so readily.”

Chris shot a bemused sidelong glance at Standish and strode towards his horse. He didn’t shout but his gravelly voice carried clearly across the yard as without preamble he prepared to mount the beast.

“Okay, boys! Mount up. We got other business to take care of!”

Five men responded almost as one and within minutes were all mounted and ready to ride. Ezra, refusing to show any signs of haste, gathered Kaiser’s reins from the rail.

“Of course, a direct order may be equally effective,” he murmured drily, as he lead the big animal forward

and made a half bow in front of Katrin. "Thank you for your hospitality, Madame. You have been most gracious."

She smiled.

"And you are most welcome, Herr Standish. Please visit us often." She leaned forward to formally kiss him on both cheeks murmuring as she did so: "But, *Liebling*, I would prefer to see you alone next time."

Standish inclined his head politely, neither accepting nor declining her invitation and swung, with an elegant economy of movement, into the saddle. The Countess stepped quickly forward to grasp the bridle in her hand as she moved up beside horse and man, pressing sinuously against the Southerner's leg.

"It is possible," she purred, her voice low, "that I shall make the effort to visit your delightful little town very soon. I would wish for us to become better acquainted."

Her hand crept from his knee to his thigh and as she persisted in stroking ever higher, angling suggestively towards his crotch, he kned the horse sharply forward using the animal's shoulder to nudge her out of the

way before she embarrassed him totally. He tipped his hat and she laughed throatily.

"Adieu, *mein Liebe*."

The gambler kicked the strongly muscled horse into a canter and surged ahead of the other riders, relieved to put some distance between himself and the noblewoman who had succeeded in both exciting him and repelling him at the same time. The others spurred their horses on to catch up with the stallion and its distracted rider, but for once Ezra was not content to dally at the back of the posse and allowed the beast its head forcing the remaining six to keep up with him.

"What's the hurry?" asked J.D. more than a little puzzled by the gambler's uncharacteristic behaviour, "You'd think all the hounds of hell were after him?"

Vin and Buck traded knowing grins.

"You see how that woman was lookin' at Ezra, Vin?"

"Like a cat with a canary."

Buck laughed. "Yeah! One with a mighty big appetite, and I reckon she's hungerin' after that boy."

"Poor Ezra," sympathised the tracker insincerely.

"*Poor* Ezra? Don't ya mean lucky son of a gun?"

J.D. shook his head as if pondering a weighty question.

"Don't know so much about being lucky, Buck. You notice the way that lady looks you up and down as if..." he hesitated for a moment, "...as if you got no clothes on? You know what I mean?"

The two men shifted uncomfortably in their saddles and exchanged a look of mutual understanding. They knew exactly what he meant.

Chris pushed through the bat-wing doors of the saloon, allowing his eyes to adjust to the shadows after the bright sunlight for a moment before scanning the meagre crowd for the elusive gambler. Ezra had been a missing link since they had returned to town more than an hour ago, and Chris was running out of options as to where the Southerner might be found. Damn! That man could go to ground quicker than a gopher. He fronted up to the bar and signalled Inez to serve him. The attractive Mexican woman poured him a shot of whiskey and smiled in genuine pleasure.

“Senor, Chris. You want that I make you something to eat?”

Larabee shook his head and quickly swallowed the fiery amber liquid, immediately holding out the glass for a refill.

“Ezra showed up yet?”

She wiped down the bar in front of the gunman more out of habit than necessity.

“No. You wish to see him?”

Chris leaned his elbow on the bar and turned to face the room, his gaze once again sweeping the patrons as if Standish may have suddenly appeared while his back was turned. How the hell could one man manage to be so hard to pin down in a town this size? He had to admit a grudging respect for the wily gambler’s ability to make himself scarce but his temper wasn’t improved by the fact. He turned to the woman again and set his glass down on the bar top refusing a third shot.

“When he comes in, tell him I’m looking for him.”

Inez nodded.

“Si.”

Stern-faced, Larabee strode out of the saloon and Inez decided that, in his present mood, if he was looking for her, she wouldn’t particularly want to be found.

Ezra liked watching Mary work. As the woman’s hands deftly set the type in the press she exuded an air of confident efficiency that appealed to that part of the Southerner that craved order and routine. He certainly admired her dedication to the business yet the more he watched her, the more he realised that he was not cut out for the tedious routine of manual labour. While he could, in part, understand the attraction of the creative process involved and the sense of achievement in producing a daily broadsheet, the sheer drudgery of the entire procedure lead him to believe that such a mundane existence would never satisfy his own ambitions.

“What was that name again?” Mary lifted her head and brushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Von Hohenstaffel,” he repeated, “Count Erik.”

“I can make some enquiries for you, if you like. I still have a few contacts in the East.”

“I would be eternally grateful, Miz Travis, for any assistance you can offer. I shall, of course, pursue my own line of enquiry but I have no doubt that you have access to sources beyond even my particular circle of influence.”

The gambler slowly rotated the brim of his hat though his fingers. His expression gave nothing away yet his actions signalled more clearly than he would have wished, his troubled state of mind. The blonde woman frowned and wiped a trace of ink from her hands with a rag.

“Is there something you’d like to talk about, Ezra?”

The Southerner’s head came up and Mary was once again struck by the man’s extraordinarily green eyes.

“No,” he sighed, “I am merely dwelling on the fact that I enjoy watching you at work far more than any gentleman should. Were I not such an out and out cad I would be offering my assistance, however I confess to an inherent aversion to menial tasks.”

Mary looked at him steadily for several moments recognising the underlying melancholy in his self-critical analysis.

"We each follow our path, Ezra. Ours just happen to be a little different."

The gambler abruptly stood and smiled brightly, setting his hat back on his head.

"My dear, you are absolutely right. I shall now repair to the saloon and put my own particular talents to good use."

His hand was already on the door handle when Mary's voice called him back.

"Ezra! Whatever it is...be careful."

He acknowledged her concern with a quick tip of his hat, and a moment later he was gone.

"Ezra!"

The Southerner heard Chris before he saw the man himself and, turning without any display of haste, he waited for the man in black to catch up with him.

"Mr. Larabee. You called?"

Chris' steel blue eyes bored chillingly into the gambler's own.

"Ezra, where the hell have you been? I need to talk to you."

With leisurely indifference, Standish adjusted his cuffs and straightened his jacket, mannerisms he knew irritated the blond gunfighter.

"That, Mr. Larabee is clearly evident from the enthusiasm with which you pursued me. Is there some calamity of which I am as yet unaware?"

"Ezra!" His name uttered through clenched teeth carried a warning that only Larabee could attach to a single word.

The gambler knew when he had gone far enough. "Might I suggest then that we retire to the saloon? I believe liquid sustenance might be in order."

Chris sighed. Nothing was ever straightforward where Ezra was concerned.

The ever-present deck of cards was in Ezra's hands before Chris had even sat down across the table from the urbane gambler, the Southerner's nimble fingers shuffling the pasteboards with impressive dexterity.

"Now, Mr. Larabee, there was something you wanted to say?"

"Well, first up I'd like to know why you took off from the ranch this morning like a jackrabbit with its ass on fire!" He looked levelly at the younger man for a moment, then relaxed slightly, continuing before Ezra could answer him. "That woman sure acts more like a working girl than any lady."

"You noticed," replied Ezra drily, remembering too well the touch of her hand on his thigh.

Chris shrugged, smiling faintly. "So she's fast and loose. Ain't nothing new! I'm more interested if you turned anything up since you were the privileged one that got to talk to the Count."

"The man is an inveterate gambler and, in fact, acquired the Williams' spread in a card game. I get the impression that he enjoys playing for very high stakes, so what could possibly interest him in this particular social backwater I cannot begin to imagine. These people are hedonists not ranchers."

"Hedo-what?"

"Hedonists, Mr. Larabee. Devoted purely to the pursuit of pleasure. I doubt that either one of them has done a stroke of work in their lives."

Chris's expression barely concealed the mischief in his eyes. "A bit like you, Ezra?"

The Southerner smiled flashing his gold tooth at the slight, aware that there was no malice in Chris's words.

"Touché, Mr. Larabee."

“Something’s not right out there, I can feel it. Can’t put my finger on it yet -- it’s like an itch I can’t scratch.”

Standish flipped a card over - the Queen of Clubs

“Well, Mr. Larabee I’m sure if you’d like to pay the Countess a social call she’ll offer to scratch it for you.”

The blond man’s fierce stare merely made the gambler laugh as he imagined the fiery Countess’s seduction of the aloof gunman.

“I reckon you’re right, but from what I saw she’s got her eye fixed on you so better watch your back.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Larabee,” he muttered, “It’s not my back I’m particularly concerned about.”

The gunfighter picked up the whiskey bottle and poured himself a drink.

“I s’pose all we can do is keep a close eye on them,” sighed Larabee, “They’ve done nothin’ wrong.”

“No, they haven’t, but I have to confess that I share your unease at their proximity. The further the distance I am able to maintain between the Countess Katrin and myself, the happier I shall be.”

Vin pulled up a chair in time to overhear the last of the conversation.

“What, and miss a chance to get your hands on some of that money?”

“Oh, rest assured Mr.Tanner I believe I shall soon have the opportunity to relieve the Count of some of his cash reserves. The man is a keen gambler and, in the not too distant future, I intend to ascertain the extent of the man’s skill. It should alleviate the boredom of playing for the pennies I now glean from the working population of this town.”

Tanner shook his head.

“You never worried none about takin’ pennies before.”

“And fear not, the possibility of engaging in a high stakes game will not in any way prevent me from continuing to relieve you of your meagre earnings Mr. Tanner.”

The Texan feigned offence. “You don’t earn no more’n me.”

“No, Mr. Tanner but I have other means by which to supplement my income. I’m afraid seven dollars a week

is barely enough to cover my hotel expenses.”

“Shoot, Ezra. One day that big appetite you have for money is going to get you into big trouble.”

The gambler merely grinned and held up the cards.

“Care for a game, Mr. Tanner? Mr.Larabee?”

Vin checked the saddle cinch and allowed the stirrup to drop back into place. The sun had barely risen above the horizon and the morning was still cool but the cloudless sky suggested the coming of another scorching day. He checked the saddlebags one more time and although he had done so twice already, made certain that the spare canteens of water he was carrying were full. A man didn’t survive in this kind of country for long by being careless and no-one would ever accuse the Texan of being the least bit careless. He looked up as he heard the familiar jingle of spurs, already knowing who was approaching.

“You sure you don’t want company?”

The black clad gunfighter stepped down from the wooden walkway and rested a hand on the packhorse’s rump.

“Ain’t we been through this already? Seems I remember talkin’ this over last night.”

Larabee ducked his head a little guiltily and smiled.

"Thought you might've changed your mind."

Tanner paused and leaned both arms across his saddle.

"Don't know what's gotten you so antsy lately, Cowboy, but you're startin' to crowd me some."

"Don't mean nothin' by it, Vin. I know you can take care of yourself."

Vin nodded, satisfied.

"See you in three, maybe four days then." He swung easily up into the saddle and reached for the pack horse's lead rein. "If I'm not back by Friday, then you can start worryin'."

Larabee stood back as the tracker kicked his horse into a trot and the two men exchanged brief nods as their only farewell.

Chris watched the sharpshooter until he disappeared from sight then turned to step back onto the boardwalk. First coffee then breakfast. He smiled and shook his head. Antsy? Hell, Vin was right, he'd been skittering around all week like virgin on her wedding night. Damned heatwave was enough to send anybody loco.

Vin was glad to leave the town behind. A man needed space to stretch out a little, breathe some fresh air away from the smoke and fumes of the saloon and the suffocating claustrophobia of being surrounded by too many people. He was beginning to feel the constraints of being in one place too long. When had getting to Tascosa lost its urgency for him? At one time Chris had been fully prepared to go with him, back to Texas, but somewhere along the way the need of the town for protection had seduced him -- no, not only him -- all of them. And the longer he stayed, the harder it was to leave. There was always a reason to put off going for another day, and another, and another until the notion of pulling up stakes became too difficult to imagine. One thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't hide forever, even if he had to leave the closest thing he had ever had to a family behind.

He turned his mind to his destination. The mission at San Juan. Remote and peaceful, and within a stone's throw of the Mexican border. Freedom lay beyond that invisible line. Just keep ridin', cross the Rio Grande and the bounty on his head could be just a bad memory. But he knew he couldn't do it. He was a Tanner and whatever else that stood for it meant he didn't run and more importantly didn't turn his back on his friends. No, he would go back to town at the end of this trip but whether Chris liked it or not it was time for him to start thinking about striking out for Tascosa again.

Mindful of the growing heat of the day, he stopped to spell the horses. He planned on being at San Juan by nightfall and that meant a hard ride in front of him but not at the expense of the horses. He took a mouthful of warm water from his canteen before stoppering it again and moving to check the pack saddle. The distant cry of a bird drew his attention and he squinted into the sky finally fixing on a speck circling high in the air almost out of sight. Out of curiosity he took out his telescope and trained the lens on the slowly moving shape, impressed by the graceful beauty of the bird as it rode the thermal currents high in the sky. He guessed this was the Countess' hunting falcon Ezra had told him about, obviously hunting for a meal. Closing the brass instrument, he tucked it safely in his saddle bag before collecting the lead rope of the pack animal and mounting up. For some reason he couldn't name, he found the prospect of meeting up with any of the Hohenstaffel's retinue not entirely to his liking and, with no further hesitation, he set about putting a healthy distance between himself and the old Williams' spread.

There was no warning. The first Vin knew was that he heard -- and felt -- a sudden rush of air, and almost simultaneously something struck him with great force in the side of the head. The horse, panicking at the

sudden, silent, attack reared and in the moment that he was thrown violently from the saddle he felt an agonising pain in his neck, then his head connected with the ground detonating coloured flashes that exploded in front of his eyes, and he slid without any resistance into unconsciousness.

Something was not right. Aside from the fact that his head felt as if it was splitting in two and the fierce burning pain in his neck and shoulder he felt...wet? Panicking, he tried to struggle up but the attempt, as half-hearted as it was, made him dizzy and sick and he fell back again with a groan. Through the fog still lingering in his mind he could identify the nearby sounds of voices pitched low although he didn't understand what was being said and he realised then that he was lying on something soft -- a bed. At that same instant he felt the unmistakable sensation of something warm and wet being moved across his exposed skin, and he simultaneously tried to open his eyes, avoid the intrusive touch and cover himself. Hell and damnation! Not only was he naked but he was being washed, and of the two he wasn't exactly sure

which bothered him most. Unfortunately he achieved none of his goals. When he tried to move pain lanced through both the wound in his neck and his lower back and he was unable to prevent another groan escaping. The third time he tried to move a firm hand in the middle of his chest that he was too weak to resist convinced him that he should remain where he was.

"Please, be still. You will only hurt yourself."

A woman.

He fought the lethargy that seemed to be slowing his every action and with a huge effort of will opened his eyes. Where was he? He remembered being thrown from his horse and the stabbing pain in his neck and shoulder but no more. That someone had found him and was taking care of him was obvious. Who that might be was another question.

The room was shaded by heavy drapes at the window and the light was a muted glow but he guessed it was early afternoon; several hours since he had fallen from his horse. What had happened to the horses? He was supposed to be taking supplies to San Juan. He closed his eyes again, partly because the effort in holding them open was more taxing than he could have imagined but partly because he reasoned that he wouldn't feel quite so embarrassed if he couldn't see who was tending his needs. He was wrong. As soon as he felt hands on his body again he wanted to crawl away and hide. Then he felt something soft and light being drawn over him and he was finally able to relax.

"Here. You must drink."

The woman's voice again.

He felt his head and shoulders being gently raised and a cup held to his lips. The water tasted slightly bitter but he drank thirstily and within a few minutes he found the soothing murmur of voices was once again lulling him to sleep and the pain in his head did not seem quite so intense.

The horse was magnificent. J.D. had groomed and tended the fractious stallion with the care a mother showed a newborn child and now the animal stood sleek and glossy in the corral, occasionally pawing the ground but otherwise reasonably placid. The livery had charged Ezra extra for stabling the animal after it had kicked one of the stalls to kindling and, if truth be told, the Southerner was glad to be finally taking the beast back to its rightful owner. This time he had accepted J.D.'s offer to ride with him recalling too well his last solitary excursion and this time he had also suggested that Dunne ride the stallion; as much to show his

appreciation for J.D.'s assistance over the past few days as to avoid the hard work of having to continually demonstrate his mastery over the big black. He had come to the conclusion that one did not so much ride the animal as be taken on a journey of enlightenment in which the dominance of man over beast was put severely to the question.

Ezra happily led J.D.'s well-behaved bay from the livery and waited for the younger man to finish saddling Kaiser before mounting up. The stallion's ears flicked back then forward as if deciding whether it was going to bite, kick or buck and Ezra's mount danced nimbly sideways to avoid a confrontation. Shortening the reins the Southerner paused to adjust his hat before turning to his companion.

"Ready, Mr. Dunne?"

Dunne swung himself into the English saddle and grinned hugely.

"Ready as I'll ever be, Ezra."

The stallion was more than ready and J.D. was forced to put the lively animal under a tight rein to curb his enthusiasm before he took off at a run. Ezra merely laughed recalling his own similar difficulties, pleased that someone other than himself was being put to the test.

"Whatever you do Mr. Dunne I advise you not to give him his head, otherwise you may find yourself a good way south of the border before he tires enough to stop. That is of course provided he hasn't already thrown you into some ditch along the way."

He urged the bay forward still grinning broadly and left J.D. to follow, presuming of course he could convince the animal to at least make a start in the direction that he was expecting it to go.

Ezra found J.D. an unexpectedly entertaining companion and the ride was far pleasanter than his previous two forays into the same territory. The day was hot and cloudless, an exact copy of the countless days that had preceded it, and the two men maintained a leisurely pace frequently passing the water canteen between them as they rode. Grimacing at the metallic taste of the lukewarm liquid Ezra recapped the bottle and hung it once again from his saddle. He was tempted to take a drink from his hip flask but experience told him that although far more desirable in taste, the whiskey would merely increase his thirst. He glanced up to find J.D. had reined in the black and was preparing to dismount.

"Mr. Dunne. Might I inquire as to your intentions?"

The younger man squatted and looked closely at the signs in the dust.

"Look here, Ezra. I think this is blood. And it looks like someone took a tumble from a horse."

The Southerner rolled his eyes and nudged his horse forward, looking down at the ground where J.D. had indicated.

"I'm impressed, Mr. Dunne, until now I believed Mr. Tanner to be the only tracker in our worthy band of brothers."

J.D. looked up sharply, not certain if Ezra was being serious or, as was usually the case, mocking him. He could read nothing from the man's expression and decided that he was being complimented. Working his way around the confusing jumble of signs he finally rested back on his heels.

"There were two or three riders here, Ezra. My guess is someone rode into an ambush."

The gambler looked around, his hand hovering over his sidearm. A quick assessment of the terrain indicated that it was not the best place to be caught unawares and after a moment's hesitation he drew his gun.

"Then perhaps, Mr. Dunne we should take our leave unless you are particularly keen on experiencing a similar fate to that which obviously befell our predecessor."

J.D. stood up and moved further along the trail.

"But what if there's someone who needs help, Ezra? We can't just go without at least having a look around."

Ezra sighed wearily and reluctantly dismounted.

"God Almighty, save me from the good intentions of a man with a conscience."

The younger man scouted ahead, trailing the big horse behind him by the reins as he followed a side trail for a short distance. Ezra followed at a modest distance, eyes and ears attuned to the minute sounds of the quiet morning, his weapon cocked, and ready for any trouble.

"Find anything, my good Samaritan?" the easy tone belying his true concern.

Dunne stooped to pick something up from the ground and the Southerner joined him when no response was forthcoming. The younger man held out a small piece of bloodstained leather, a frown creasing his brow.

"Does this look familiar, Ezra?"

The gambler turned the scrap over in his fingers. He knew exactly what the boy was thinking; that it was a close match for Tanner's familiar buckskin jacket.

"This could belong to anyone J.D. I think it would be unwise to read anything into it at this time."

Both men turned their attention back to the dust beneath their feet but the ground had been churned by many hooves and feet and there was nothing to be gleaned from the confusion of footprints by either man. Ezra finally holstered his gun and remounted.

"I think we should continue on to our destination, Mr. Dunne. Afterwards I believe it may be prudent for us to pay a visit to Mercyville and ascertain Mr. Tanner's whereabouts. It was his intention to deliver some documents from the Judge to the Sheriff there."

J.D. nodded and threw himself athletically into the saddle.

"Let's get going then."

Standish shook his head and followed. Was nothing ever simple?

It was dark; a complete absence of light that was unnatural. His head buzzed unpleasantly and he was finding it difficult to follow a logical train of thought. He seemed to recall waking up at some time in a bed. He definitely remembered being struck by something before being thrown from his horse, and the painful throbbing in his neck confirmed at least that much to be true. Struggling with the gaps in his memory he remembered a woman's voice, kind words and a soft feather bed yet here he was huddled in a small, dark place shivering from the cold. So where was he? Mustering enough energy to move he started to explore his environment -- his prison -- for without doubt he recognised it for what it was.

He found he could kneel but not stand, and that he had enough room to stretch out full length but no more than that; so a six foot by six foot cell with a four or five foot ceiling. Already the oppressiveness of close confinement was making his heart race but he pushed aside the panic. What the hell had he gotten himself into? Sliding into a corner he felt the rough wall against his bare skin and realised he was naked except for a pair of rough, woven pants. Everything else was gone; his boots, his buckskins, his weapon. They had left him the mountain lion's tooth on a leather thong around his neck but that was all.

Vin felt his stomach rumble and he tried not to think of food. Or drink. Pointless when there was none to be had. Breathing evenly he stretched out and concentrated on conserving his strength and maintaining his

sanity. If the opportunity to escape from this hole presented itself he wanted to be ready; if it didn't then it wouldn't matter anyway because he would simply die. He was wagering on the fact that if someone had taken the trouble to keep him alive so far that his immediate death was not part of the plan.

The sound of footsteps overhead dragged him out of a semi-trance but he remained motionless, eyes closed as he listened intently to the sounds above. One person, a man he thought by the heavy tread, walking then pausing at intervals then walking again. Maybe now he would at least be given something to drink. His mind continued on to the next logical progression. Of course drinking would bring its own torment for if he was permitted to eat and drink he would eventually have to answer the call of nature and the thought of languishing in his own filth in a black pit made him shiver from something other than the cold.

The light was not particularly bright but it seared his eyes like a bolt of lightning, creating a blood-red haze, as his closed eyelids filtered the worst of it. He controlled the urge to open his eyes, maintaining his relaxed pose and ignoring the fact that his prison cell had finally been breached. No good reacting until he knew if it was worth it. His skin prickled as he heard another sound; a sigh almost, followed by a low, throaty growl. Still he contained himself, determined not to display any fear although the seeds of it were spreading rapidly through his belly.

"You will open your eyes now." It was a command. An unspoken threat woven between the words.

Vin heard a sigh and a scuffle of boots, followed by a clink of metal on metal, then a soft thud as something heavy landed in the pit with him. Something very much alive. He reacted then, blinking, and waiting for his pupils to adjust with agonising slowness to the sudden assault. He was already wedged in the corner otherwise he would have scooted backwards as far as he could from the beast now sharing his cell. It was a dog, he was sure of it, but unlike any dog he had ever seen, and it eyed him malevolently, saliva dripping from its jaws, as it stared unwinkingly at him.

"You would like some food, no? Perhaps a little water?"

Vin did not take his eyes off the dog.

"Answer me!"

The Texan started at the shout and the dog lunged forward snarling.

"Yes!" The reply was out before he could even think about it.

"Yes, sir," prompted the voice, silkily.

Vin' first instinct was to refuse. To say instead exactly what this man could do with his food but he knew he needed to eat if he was ever going to get out of this prison.

"Yes, sir."

"That's better."

He heard another thud and realised that the bone on which still hung a few shreds of stringy meat that had landed between him and the dog was to be his meal. He looked first at the dog and then at the unappetising morsel. Hell! He wasn't that hungry yet.

His captor interpreted his hesitation correctly. "You eat first, or you will not drink -- today or tomorrow."

He knew when to accept defeat. *Bide your time, Tanner*. He reached for the bone, pulling his hand away with a curse as the dog lunged again its teeth snapping shut within a hair's breadth of the Texan's fingers.

"Goddamn!"

He heard a soft laugh.

"Teufel believes the food to be his. I think you will perhaps have to fight him for it."

Toyfell? *What the hell kind of a name was that?* He didn't have the energy for this. The dog was heavily

muscled in the shoulder and probably weighed ninety pounds; he was injured and weak. He knew for a fact that Ezra would have put his money on the dog.

He fainted and the dog snarled a warning. Three times he fainted with his right hand, distracting the animal, and letting his actions become predictable. On the fourth pass he dived forward with both hands in front of him, grabbing the bone with his left as the dog leapt for his right. Sharp teeth sank easily into his wrist and he yelled out in pain but he had the food and would not surrender it. White hot lances of fire shot through his arm as he struggled free, feeling warm blood pour from the deep puncture wounds just above his wrist. *Son of a bitch.*

The dog suddenly lost interest, springing out of the pit at the call of its master and a tin flask was tossed into the cell before the grid in the ceiling was once more lowered into place and the Texan was again plunged into darkness.

Swearing he reached out and fumbled around for the flask. Not even full. He shook the container and figured there was maybe a cupful. Just enough to take the edge off his thirst. Leaning back against the wall he hefted the measly bone in one hand and the flask in the other. What the hell, he had eaten worse in his time. He pulled off some of the meat with his teeth hoping it wasn't tainted; the last thing he needed on top of everything else was a bellyache and a raging dose of the flux.

oooOOOooo

Ezra slowed his horse to a walk as the arched entrance to the Count's ranch loomed before them. He had to admit that he preferred riding away from this particular place rather than toward it but he had business to attend and surely the Countess would be able to conduct herself in a seemly manner for the short amount of time it would take for him to reclaim his mount. He had known New Orleans courtesans who were less forward than this lady and, he reminded himself, he was using the term very loosely. On his previous visit he had believed her quite capable of pulling him from his horse and publicly rutting with him right there on the ground. Dear Lord! He could only hope that today the woman was otherwise engaged. Dealing with the Count was less likely to involve personal risk and, he decided, far more likely to result in financial gain.

J.D. rode slightly ahead of the recalcitrant gambler, looking back every few seconds and concerned that Ezra looked more like a man going to the gallows than someone paying a visit to a Countess. The Southerner had been quiet for the last few miles and the younger man had respected his mood but now they were within a hundred yards of the ranch house and Ezra seemed more reluctant than ever to continue. Dunne was puzzled by the gambler's uncharacteristically reticent behaviour but put it down to his concern for Vin.

"Hey, Ezra. How soon d'you think we can get started for Mercyville?"

He could see the change come over Standish as he smoothly assumed a completely different persona. Goddamn! Dunne realised at that moment that the gambler was capable of changing his mood and personality like he changed his clothes!

"Well, Mr. Dunne, I hardly see any reason to delay our departure once we have effected the change in horses." He pulled out his silver pocket watch. "In which case we should be in Mercyville by mid-afternoon."

J.D. dropped back to ride beside the Southerner.

"You don't like the Countess, do you?"

Ezra gave a sardonic smile. "My dear boy, whatever brought you to that conclusion?"

"Vin says she's no lady and all she wants to do is get into your britches. Called her a high class whore."

The gambler struggled to maintain his composure, not sure whether he wanted to laugh or defend the woman's honour so maligned by the outspoken bounty-hunter, as by rights he should if he were a true gentleman. Tugging at his collar which suddenly seemed to have become too tight he settled on an amused smile.

"Mr. Tanner is at times most astute, if a trifle indelicate."

"Is that why you don't like her?"

"J.D.," began Ezra patiently, "It is not a matter of disliking the lady, it's a question of personal integrity."

Dunne suddenly began to laugh.

"Chris reckons she's like a fox in a hen-house -- and you're one of the chickens."

Standish abruptly straightened in the saddle, the fact that he had finally taken offence clearly evident, and urged his horse forwards.

"Yes, well, we shall see about that, Mr. Dunne. Pay attention and you just might learn something."

The yard, although deserted when they first approached, soon became a mass of noise and confusion as a pack of hounds emerged from an outbuilding and swarmed around the horses legs baying and snapping at each other. Kaiser kicked out and sent one unfortunate animal flying but the dog merely shook itself and returned, undaunted, to the fray. J.D. shot a quick look at the Southerner who was leaning casually on the saddle horn, unperturbed by the madness swirling and boiling at his feet. A shrill whistle was followed by guttural shouts and the dogs suddenly peeled away, charging towards an unseen master.

"Hunting hounds," mused Ezra, "I wonder what our friends intend pursuing in this inhospitable neck of the woods. Finding a jackrabbit around here let alone game worthy of the chase would be a worthy achievement."

"There's wolves," pointed out J.D. "If you go into the hills."

"Yes," agreed the gambler absently, "There are wolves, indeed."

But J.D. didn't think he sounded as if he meant quite the same thing.

"Ah, *mein freund*, Herr Standish! *Wie geht es ihnen?*" The Count appeared from the stable, a horse-whip in his hand which he struck repeatedly against his boot as he walked. "My apologies. How are you today?"

J.D. watched the colour drain from Ezra's face and he realised with a sick lurch of his stomach that the source of his discomfiture was the whip in Erik's hand. The young man had seen the scars the gambler now carried on his back and could understand his reaction. He quickly dismounted and the Southerner followed suit, managing to regain his composure if not his colour by the time the Count had reached them.

"So, you have come for your horse, yes?"

"Indeed. I have already imposed on your generosity far too much."

Erik waved an elegantly dismissive hand.

"It is nothing. I will have my groom ready your own horse for you immediately." He called out a rapid stream of what the two men took to be instructions before turning his attention back to them. "Please, if you will follow me I will see to it that you given refreshments while you wait."

Ezra nodded. "Thank you."

J.D. hurried to catch up with the Southerner, afraid he would become distracted under the Count's influence. Ezra had already mentioned von Hohenstaffel's love for gambling, and J.D. knew all too well Standish's flexible interpretation of time if he became involved in a card game.

"Mercyville," he hissed, as a reminder as they were ushered inside the cool interior of the ranch house.

"Mr. Dunne," Ezra muttered quietly, "In spite of my advancing years, I am not yet feeble-minded. Be assured that I do recall the urgency of our mission."

The Count offered drinks, amused when J.D. refused alcohol.

"Young man, maybe it is better that I seek a wet nurse for you?" He was smiling but the words were viciously barbed and J.D. felt a ripple of unease run through him. He was glad Ezra was there.

"I believe Mr. Dunne will be perfectly happy with water, Erik," interrupted Ezra with abrupt finality, "But I, on the other hand, would prefer some of your most excellent brandy."

The Count inclined his head graciously accepting the unspoken rebuke, first offering Ezra a fine cognac and then with a slight bow presenting J.D. with a glass of water.

"You have some time to spare, Herr Standish? I have not yet had the opportunity to challenge you to a game of cards and I'm sorely in need of some entertainment in this hell hole. Not even any decent game for the hunt!"

"Ah, the hounds. Do you have something particular in mind? As you have already noticed, game is undeniably scarce in these parts."

"Oh, I make do," commented the Count, off-handedly, "One adapts."

"I'm sure one does." Ezra quickly finished off the cognac and placed his glass down on an elegantly turned ormolu side table. "Now you'll have to excuse us. I regret my young friend and I have some urgent business to attend. Maybe we can arrange a hand or two of poker some other time?"

"Come now," protested the Count, somewhat petulantly, "What can be so important that you cannot spare an hour or two? I can guarantee some entertaining play and some very interesting stakes."

"Believe me I can think of nothing better, but we're looking for a friend of ours," explained Ezra, "You might remember him from our last visit..."

"He's a tracker," interrupted J.D. enthusiastically, "Vin Tanner."

Von Hohenstaffel frowned slightly and swirled the amber liquid in the bottom of his glass. Finally he looked up settling his gaze on the younger of the two, a cold smile touching his lips but never reaching his eyes.

"Yes, Herr Standish, if I recall correctly he was dressed in skins and smelled like a wild animal."

Ezra cut off J.D.'s forthcoming protest with a warning glare. "That would indeed be our Mr. Tanner," agreed the Southerner, easily, "A man not acquainted with the custom of regular bathing."

The Count laughed then and moved around behind Dunne, resting a carefully manicured hand on his shoulder.

"And this one, Herr Standish? A mere youth. How fortunate that he has a sophisticated man of the world such as yourself to instruct him."

The gambler retrieved his hat from the sideboard, signalling that he was ready to leave.

"Indeed." His voice was flat and expressionless. "Now we really must be on our way."

He extended his hand with a smile but it matched von Hohenstaffel's in its chill. Dunne was confused at the sudden undercurrent of tension in the room but he knew that both men were operating on two levels. Each saying one thing but meaning another entirely. He hoped Ezra knew what he was doing because he had the

uneasy feeling that Count Erik von Hohenstaffel was a very dangerous man.

"Of course. I understand your concern for your friend. We can always match our wits at the tables some

other time."

"I look forward to it, Sir."

Ezra tipped his hat and, turning his back on the Count, ushered a more than willing J.D. back into the yard.

Vin sat with his injured hand tucked in his armpit. He couldn't tell whether an hour had passed or a day since he had been bitten by the hound from hell. Minute after black minute had followed one after the other, the monotony only broken by his need to sleep, eat or relieve himself. His wrist throbbed painfully where the dog had sunk its teeth into his arm and it felt tender and swollen. He had no way of tending it and he fully expected it to fester. If he'd been out on the trail he could have at least cauterised the punctures. Hell, the dog could well be rabid. He had scant water remaining and he couldn't spare any of it to douse the wound; it was little enough for him to drink. He had gnawed the bone to nothing, even sucking out the marrow but it had barely taken the edge of his hunger, and now he drew himself into a ball and curled up in the corner. He could do nothing but wait and hope that eventually he would be missed and Chris would realise that he was in trouble. What had his parting words been? If I'm not back by Friday then you can worry? Of course by the time that happened it might be too late.

He was no stranger to deprivation. He had learned to live off the land and as a buffalo hunter he had spent weeks out on the trail with no company save his own. Out of necessity he had learned to tend his own wounds; had learned to eat a rattlesnake raw; had learned to eat roots and grubs if necessary to stay alive but here, in this dark empty pit, his skills meant nothing. Whether he lived or died was solely at the mercy of whoever held the key to his prison. He reached for the tin flask and swirled the remaining mouthful in the bottom just to reassure himself that it was still there. He was thirsty but not desperate -- not yet. He would try to sleep. That way at least he could conserve energy and for a short while the hopelessness of his situation might be forgotten. He raised his fingers to the side of his neck and winced. Damn that hurt! Again he tried to remember what had happened but his head ached too much and he gave up. *Sleep, Tanner, there's nothing else to do.*

Chris had been unable to shake the feeling of unease that had plagued him since Vin left. Damn! He knew Tanner was a grown man and had been looking out for himself a long time before he'd happened along but that didn't stop him from being concerned. About Ezra and J.D. too, he thought absently, a whole passel of trouble right there with those two together and unchaperoned. He poured himself another Red-Eye and downed it in one swallow. The kid stood little chance against the gambler's manipulative ways and God alone knew where the pair of them might end up. The Southerner was likely to lead the young Dunne into all kinds of temptation given half a chance... That train of thought came to an abrupt halt as he realised what he was doing. What the hell was he doing? Since when had he signed on as nursemaid? He quickly disposed of another shot of whiskey and decided irritably that it was still too god-damned hot.

The heat-induced torpidity of the township was contagious. The jail was empty, the streets were quiet and almost everyone was indoors seeking respite from the midday sun. Chris was loath to stir himself from his comfortable spot in the corner but the Judge paid him to be the law in the town, he could hardly justify spending his entire day with a bottle of whiskey as a companion. As it was, the almost too difficult decision

as to whether he should stay or go was made for him. The rising rumble of many voices in the street was enough to capture his interest; the shrill, horror-filled scream of a woman brought him to his feet and the familiar voice of Josiah summoning him was enough to finally draw him from the relative coolness of the saloon.

"What's up, Josiah?"

A small crowd had gathered around a wagon driven by a man and woman of middle-years, and from the awed expressions on the faces of the onlookers, he gathered the ruckus was over whatever they had brought in the wagon with them. He pushed forward, the crowd parting easily before him to let him through. That the shapeless bundle on the wagon bed was a body was clear enough, and there was blood enough on both the boards and the blanket to be certain that Nathan's assistance would not be required this time. The preacher stood with his head down, his look of extreme sorrow mirroring exactly Jackson's expression and for a moment Chris' gut clenched in anticipation of what he was about to see.

"Josiah? Nathan?"

The bigger man threw back the old blanket which had, until then, offered the man underneath some degree of dignity and a soft gasp issued from the assembled townsfolk. Larabee was no stranger to violent death but he felt his gorge rise at the sight which Josiah had now exposed to view. That this had been a young man in the prime of his life was evident and the long brown hair and lean body reminded Chris so much of Vin that he felt his gut clench in sudden fear until reason took hold and he was able to shake the awful vision that it was the Texan lying there. The body had been savagely mauled, by what manner of creature Chris could not hazard a guess, but surely not human at any rate. There was not much left of the face to afford a ready identification but the townsfolk knew enough to put two and two together and name the corpse.

"It's the McKenzie boy," whispered one woman, "The Lord have mercy on the poor lad's soul."

The man who had been at the reins moved with wooden precision to the back of the wagon.

"Aye. That's my son, Angus," He looked to Chris. "Found him this mornin'. Been missin' for nigh on three days. The lad had tried to get home."

Josiah grasped the man's arm in unspoken sympathy and the man nodded dourly, keeping a firm grip on his emotions.

Chris moved to the side of the wagon and stared for a long moment at the pitiful remains of what had been a vital young man; someone's son.

"This is how you found him?"

"Just as you see him now. About two miles from my boundary fence."

"And is this how he was dressed when he went missing?"

The man seemed to suddenly realise what was being asked of him. The body was dressed in nothing more than rough homespun pants tied at the waist with twine; no boots, no shirt, no hat.

"Lord Jesus, no! Angus was dressed proper and all. Had his working clothes on."

"Was he wearing a gun?"

"Not a sidearm; not Angus, but he always carried a shotgun with him."

"And he was on horseback?"

"A sure thing. But Bessie came home yesterday. That's when I knew something was wrong and went looking for my boy."

Josiah pulled the blanket back over the ruined face.

"May the Lord Bless You and Keep You," he intoned, sombrely, "And may you find eternal peace in his care."

The elder McKenzie nodded his thanks and started to move back to the front of the wagon but turned and looked sadly at the three men.

"I don't know what killed my son but, man or beast, I'd appreciate some help tracking it down."

Chris nodded. "We'll take care of it. You just take care of your family."

McKenzie tipped his hat. "Much obliged."

Slowly the man led the pair of horses drawing the wagon and its grisly load down the street in the direction of the undertaker, his hunched shoulders a symbol of sorrow and defeat.

Chris shook his head slowly.

"Never seen nothin' like that before. Not even a mountain lion does that to a man."

Nathan looked thoughtfully after the wagon then turned to Chris and Josiah, his face troubled.

"I've seen it before." He paused. "On the plantation, they'd sometimes send the coon hounds after a runaway slave. That's pretty much how a man looks when he's been mauled over by a pack of dogs."

"Dogs?" Chris frowned. "Ain't no dogs around here that I know of in any number. Wolves maybe?"

Nathan shook his head.

"I'm tellin' you, Chris. That man was killed by dogs and if we don't find 'em he might not be the last."

Larabee ran his hands through his hair.

"Damn, I sure wish Vin was here but he ain't due back until tomorrow at the earliest. Can't say how long J.D. and Ezra'll be gone so it looks like it's just the four of us. Nathan, you stay...no Josiah you stay and keep an eye on things here...we might need you, Nathan, so you and Buck come with me." He looked around suddenly. "Where the hell is, Buck?"

As if summoned, the mustached ladies' man came jogging out of the boarding house, hurriedly fastening his braces and looking slightly used, his gun belt over his shoulder and his hat tucked under his arm.

"Hey, what's the ruckus? Did I miss something?"

Chris shook his head and strode away towards the livery.

"You tell him, Nathan! We're leaving in ten minutes."

Ezra was not happy. He was already hot and tired, and Mercyville was nothing more than a cess pit of a town which, in his estimation, made Purgatorio look like the streets of Paris by comparison. J.D. Seemed not to notice either its status as a pestilential hole or the stench that emanated from the tannery on the edge of the town.

"Dear God," uttered the Southerner, looking with undisguised horror at his surroundings, "I will never again complain of the rude facilities offered by our own fair town."

"I expect you'll want a drink first, before we see the sheriff."

"On the contrary! I believe it would be prudent to terminate our business here as soon as humanly possible and remove ourselves from this noxious environment."

"Huh?"

Ezra sighed and shook his head. The day was definitely getting longer.

"No, J.D. We'll go find the sheriff first."

The younger man pointed to what appeared to be the most strongly-built structure in the town; the jail

house.

"Guess this is it, Ezra."

"Most observant, Mr. Dunne," muttered the gambler, as he dismounted and stretched, feeling the tightness of his scarred back under his jacket, "Let us proceed."

The Sheriff, a grizzled man in his early fifties, shook his head.

"Ain't seen no one like that. Been expecting those papers though. In fact, thought you was the ones sent by the Judge. Yesterday you say?" He scratched his head. "You know I don't know what's happening round here lately, folks going missing and all."

Ezra slowly raised his eyes from the wanted posters he'd been casually scanning.

"Missing?"

"Oh, coupla young fellas didn't come back after a spell boundary riding. Some folks reckon they lit out for Kansas City looking for some fun."

"How long ago was this?"

The Sheriff scratched his beard thoughtfully.

"Let's see, Jimmy Fryer he went about a month back, and Tom Gaynor's been missing 'bout two weeks now."

Ezra thoughtfully brushed the dust of his hat and after a moment settled it back on his head.

"Well, thank-you, Sheriff but we must be on our way." He started to leave then turned back to look over his shoulder. "There is a telegraph office here, I assume?"

The Sheriff jerked a thumb which seemed to indicate the latter end of the main street.

"Just next to the blacksmith."

"Thank you."

"Say, I hope you find your friend."

The Southerner nodded once and, stepping out into the street, looked in both directions until his gaze finally rested on a hotel which seemed slightly less repulsive than the other establishments of a similar nature. He pointed across the street.

"JD, much as it goes against my better judgement, we need to rest the horses before starting back, so I suggest you repair to the hotel across the street and see if you can't find something fit to eat."

"What about you?"

"I intend to telegraph Mr. Larabee and inform him that our intrepid Mr. Tanner seems to be lost."

J.D. laughed.

"Vin? Lost? Ha, he couldn't ever get lost!"

Ezra sighed.

"No, I fear you are absolutely correct, Mr. Dunne but I don't believe I have the right or, indeed, the courage to inform Mr. Larabee of my suspicions just yet. If Mr. Tanner has suffered some misfortune we shall find out

soon enough."

The Queen Charlotte turned out to be a modest but respectable hotel and by the time Ezra had arranged for a telegram to be sent, J.D. had managed to order something for them to eat.

"I've wired Chris and asked him to meet us at Von Hohenstaffel's ranch."

J.D.'s head snapped up from his food and he swallowed convulsively. "We're going back there?"

Ezra calmly put his loaded fork back down on his plate.

"Am I to understand you have misgivings about renewing your acquaintance with the Count and Countess?"

"There's something wrong with that place, Ezra. Don't you feel it?"

The gambler pushed aside his half-finished meal, appetite suddenly gone.

"Would you care to elaborate, Mr. Dunne?"

"Shoot, Ezra. You know. It's like when you were talking to the Count this morning. Neither of you were saying what you really meant."

Standish smiled.

"I'll admit I have my own reservations about the Count and his sister. They are a strange couple and, by all appearances, indulge in every vice imaginable, but the ranch is a convenient half-way house and it would seem prudent to meet there."

J.D. stabbed a fork into his food. "You gonna play poker with him?"

Ezra leaned back.

"My dear boy," he drawled lazily, "if the stakes were high enough I'd play poker with the Devil himself."

The younger man glanced up and eyed the Southerner carefully.

"You know what, Ezra? I really think you would."

oooOOOooo

Mary Travis was glad to have an excuse for leaving the oppressive heat of the newspaper office behind for a while. On such days, even wearing her most lightweight dress, she felt constrained and uncomfortable. She lifted the hair from the back of her neck and sighed, wishing she could just take off her clothes and lie back in a cool tub. Starting guiltily as if she had spoken her thoughts aloud in a room full of strangers she started to walk down to the hotel. Perhaps a drink of lemonade would be just the thing.

"Miz Travis?" She turned at the sound of her name being called and found Ted Booth, the clerk from the telegraph office, hailing her from across the street. "Wire for you Miz Travis. Come all the way from Boston too."

Mary quickly crossed the street and took the flimsy from the man.

"Thank you, Ted. I've been waiting for this."

The clerk held out a second slip of paper. "And this just came in for Chris Larabee. You seen him around?"

"I think he rode out to the McKenzie place an hour or two ago, Ted."

"Well, this here's from Mr. Standish and I reckon Chris'll want to see this right soon."

"It's important? I could give it to Josiah..."

"I ain't supposed to give this to anybody but Chris, but," he lowered his voice, and pressed the slip into her hand. "If you could see that Josiah gets it I'd be mighty obliged."

She nodded and smiled.

"Certainly, Ted."

With a swish of her skirts she turned and crossed to the saloon, knowing she would be able to find the preacher either there or in the church. Curiosity piqued, she shamelessly unfolded the paper in her hand and studied the brief communication.

"Courier missed appointment in Mercyville. Suggest meet von Hohenstaffel ranch soonest. Ezra."

Courier? And what was Ezra doing in Mercyville? She shrugged, unable to make any sense of the terse message, and pushed through the bat-wing doors, slipping her own telegram into her apron pocket. Now, to find Josiah.

His head buzzed, feeling too light, and the heat of fever was burning him up, robbing his body of the little moisture he had managed to conserve. He ran his tongue over dry lips and wondered if this was how he was going to die. Not how he would have chosen to go; already buried and out of the sun. If he had to die, he wanted to feel the wind on his face, the warmth of the sun on his skin and be able to touch the earth, not be under it. He shivered again and wrapped his arms around his knees, his misery complete.

The trapdoor swung up almost soundlessly on well oiled hinges and the small cell was flooded once again with warm light thrown from a shielded lantern. Vin did not stir. He didn't care. He would not dance to the madman's tune whatever the cost.

"Wake up, my Sleeping Beauty. I have need of you my friend."

"Fuck off."

A laugh.

"I see the spirit is not yet broken. You should do nicely."

Vin heard movement above and fully expected to share his prison with the hell-hound again but instead he was shocked into alertness as he was unexpectedly doused with a bucketful cold water. Gasping, he shook his head and flicked the water from his face and hair, tasting the salt and feeling the bite of it in his wounds. Still he did not move, biding his time; but a spark of defiance flickered uncertainly deep in his psyche.

"Get up!" It was a command.

The Texan threw back his head, allowing his eyes time to adjust to the light. "You want me, you bastard. You come down and get me."

"You get up, or you die – now!"

Vin waited, not sure how much strength he had left in him to put up any kind of resistance. He was hungry, thirsty, tired and feverish but he'd been down that road before. Hell, this was nothing on what the Comanches could dish out to a prisoner. Given half a chance he would kill with his bare hands -- he'd done that before as well. If his captor wanted an animal then that's just what he'd get.

He got up.

"Excellent. You are no good to me if you cannot move."

"I'm no good to you dead then am I?"

"Do not tempt me. You could still be useful as dog meat -- but of course the entertainment value would no longer be there." The lamp moved and Vin realised that the man had moved away. "Hans! Dieter! See to him."

He struggled only slightly as he was dragged from the pit, but still the wounds in his neck and shoulder broke open as his arms were wrenched roughly behind his back. Wild-eyed he breathed heavily through clenched teeth, wondering if he could summon the strength to bolt. Instead he shuddered as another chill wracked his body. Not now, Tanner. Now was not the time.

The sun was well past its zenith but none of the punishing heat seemed yet to have gone out of the day. The two riders, ignoring their own discomfort, had maintained a steady ground-eating canter since leaving

Mercyville, driven by a sense of urgency that neither man could have put into words but which both men felt equally. They had spoken no more than a dozen words in the two hours they had been travelling. Their sortie had suddenly become a mission, and that mission had only one goal: to find out what had happened to Vin Tanner.

Ezra's horse stumbled and the gambler abruptly reined in, calling out to his companion who promptly followed suit and circled back to join the Southerner, a mixture of concern and impatience on his young face.

"What is it, Ezra?"

Standish leaned on the saddle horn and sighed.

"The horses are tiring, J.D." He unhooked his water canteen from the saddle and took a long drink before offering it to Dunne. "And I would rather not arrive at our destination without something in reserve."

The younger man took several quick swallows of the tepid liquid and handed the canteen back to the gambler.

"You expecting trouble, Ezra."

The Southerner capped the water bottle and looked seriously at his young companion.

"Just bein' prudent, Mr. Dunne."

J.D. took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve, squinting up at the source of his discomfort then out into the distance. The older man followed his gaze, easily reading the doubt and concern on his face.

"Vin can take care of himself, J.D. He'll be alright."

Dunne firmly fixed his hat back on his head and took up the reins, nudging his horse into a walk.

"I sure hope you're right, Ezra."

The Southerner secured the canteen and watched J.D. for a long moment before urging his own mount forward.

"Believe me, so do I, kid."

Larabee had spent the last hour backtracking the blood trail from the spot where McKenzie had found his son. Buck and Nathan had fanned out on either side of him and had been quartering a square mile of scrub between them. He had picked up the boy's tracks easily enough, bare and bloodied feet leaving distinct impressions at regular enough intervals to make it a simple trail to follow. He was able to follow well enough but he knew he did not have Vin's tracking ability and he sorely missed being able to rely on the Texan's skill. What Chris knew he was missing were the more subtle signs. He had found no other spoor, no sign of dogs or any other animal for that matter and he wondered just how far this boy had travelled. A sudden yell from Buck brought his head up.

"Chris! I think you should take a look at this."

Larabee tugged at his horse's reins and jogged over to where Buck squatted on his heels indicating a spot on the ground. The gunslinger tried to decipher the confused signs, identifying blood, numerous four-toed animal prints -- the dogs -- hoofs, and what looked like boot prints.

"Seems we're not just looking for dogs, Chris. There was a man here." He gestured at the distinct footprints. "Reckon his is where the kid was brought to ground. Lots of blood."

Chris circled, gradually widening his perimeter as he searched the ground for further sign.

"So how did he get away, Buck? If he was brought down here, why didn't he die here."

Buck shrugged and stood up.

"Beats me, but Nathan was right about one thing. The dogs."

Larabee dropped into a crouch, his fingers reaching out to touch a deep, clearly defined print unlike the others.

"Well, Buck, if this here belongs to a dog then I sure as hell don't want to come face to face with it."

Wilmington joined him and leaned over his shoulder. "Jesus! That's one big mother of a dog."

Chris looked away towards their starting point.

"I think this is the one that killed Angus McKenzie. The tracks head back that way." He stood up and pointed. "Look. The kid was brought down here by the pack, but he got away and kept going. This one circled behind and it's my guess it finished him off where his Pa found him this morning."

Buck looked unhappily at his oldest friend.

"So, we keep going?"

Larabee sighed and looked back over the vast emptiness of scrub.

"We keep going."

Josiah stretched his long frame out on the roof and rested for a moment, feeling the heat of the sun relentlessly hammering at his skin and bringing him out in a fresh welter of perspiration. Releasing his grip on the hammer, he decided that the shingles could wait a while longer. It was just too damned hot to keep up any sort of physical exertion for long. If he had any sense he'd be sitting in the saloon with a beer in his hand, and if J.D. and Ezra would just get their carcasses back to town he could at least ride out and join Chris in some purposeful activity. But, knowing the Southerner, he was probably sitting comfortably in the shade with a shot of whiskey in his hand attempting to fleece the Count out of his inheritance and in no hurry to return to the dull tedium of town.

The street was almost deserted; a few folk were out and about but those with more sense were indoors; even the blacksmith had shut up shop for the day and Josiah recalled seeing him head towards the saloon some time before. Finally he sat up and wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, his gaze unintentionally drifting to the north where he knew Chris had gone. He sighed, not particularly envying the three men but still chafing at the inactivity of remaining the watchman.

"Josiah?"

At the sound of his name, the big man scooted to the edge of the roof, dangling his legs over the eaves as he looked down onto the street below.

"Mary?"

The blonde woman immediately looked up, startled to find the preacher looking down at her from the rooftop.

"No wonder I couldn't find you, Josiah," she sighed, "That's where you've been hiding."

Sanchez laughed; a deep rumble.

"Just fixin' a few loose shingles, Mary." He hefted the hammer. "Or at least tryin' to."

The woman squinted against the sun and waved a slip of paper in his direction.

"A telegram came in for Chris a little while ago. Ted thought it might be important. It's from Ezra."

Josiah got to his feet. No wonder Ezra and J.D. still weren't back. Where the hell was he to be sending a telegraph?

"Ezra? What's he gotten himself into this time? Be right down Mary."

He scrambled crab-wise across the sloping roof and swung down onto the ladder, making an economical but nonetheless rapid descent. He took the message slip from Mary and quickly scanned the few words, his face promptly creasing in a worried frown. The gambler had not said much but it was what he had left unsaid that concerned Sanchez.

"Courier? I guess that means Vin. He was supposed to make a delivery for the Judge in Mercyville before going on to the mission."

Mary looked over his shoulder.

"Maybe he decided to go on to the mission first?" she suggested helpfully

Josiah gnawed his lip and re-read the message. It was definitely a summons for Chris; and a clear request for help.

"Maybe."

"You don't think Vin's in some kind of trouble do you?"

He handed Mary the hammer and took her by the shoulders.

"What I think is that I'd better go find Chris. Can you keep an eye on things here?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, half-smiling. "Me? I'll just load up with some double-ought buck shall I?"

Josiah laughed.

"I hope it doesn't come to that but it might be worth keeping the old shotgun handy just in case."

She patted his arm. "I'm sure there'll be no trouble. You go."

He nodded once and retrieved his gun belt from the ladder where it had been hanging while he worked.

"Thanks, Mary."

She watched him stride away towards the livery, then looked ruefully at the hammer still in her hand.

"Don't mention it."

Ezra slowly dismounted and looked around the empty yard, as beside him J.D. mirrored his actions.

"I must say I expected Mr. Larabee to arrive before us," he muttered, "I can only hope we are not obliged to spend too much time in the company of our noble friends while we wait."

J.D. nudged the Southerner.

"Here they come."

The gambler closed his eyes for a brief moment and sighed. "Once more into the breach."

"What?"

"Never mind, Mr. Dunne." He looked seriously at the younger man, concern in his vivid green eyes. "Let me do the talking and try to stay out of trouble."

"Herr Standish! Back so soon? So you were unsuccessful in your search?"

The Count and Countess stood together, arms linked, smiling benignly at the two travellers.

"Alas, it seems Mr. Tanner may have suffered a misfortune on his journey. Word has already been sent to Mr. Larabee and I expect him to meet us here within the hour. I trust you have no objection to that?"

The pair exchanged enigmatic glances before Katrin detached herself from her brother and moved forward sinuously to place a possessive hand on the Southerner's arm.

"Of course not, *Liebling*. Now do come inside out of this cursed heat. You can rest while you wait for your friend to arrive."

Standish nodded his acceptance and allowed the Countess to take his arm. Erik fell into step beside the much shorter J.D. and draped an arm around his shoulders, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

"Tell me, *jungend*. Is Herr Standish likely to be a formidable opponent at cards? I have so missed having a challenge of late!"

Dunne drew back, uncomfortable with the Count's easy familiarity.

"Ezra don't lose much if that's what you mean. And he reckons when he does it's because he feels sorry for us! Heard he used to be a high rolling gambler down in New Orleans 'fore he came out West."

"How very interesting. Do you play cards too?"

"Just poker and faro."

"You play well?"

"Not as good as Ezra," he admitted, "But then, I ain't seen anyone as good as Ezra."

The Count laughed, but it was an unpleasant sound.

"We shall see the truth in that, my young man. We shall see."

Ezra looked critically around the well-appointed guest room. At any other time he would have been more than impressed but right now the expensive decor and heavy European furniture meant little when set against his own general weariness and his increasing concern for the Texan's safety. He smiled wryly as he peeled off his jacket, then slowly removed his gun belt and shoulder rig before shedding his vest and finally easing his suspenders off his shoulders. Not at all like you, Ezra Standish. Concerned for someone else's welfare other than your own? He poured water from the ewer into the basin and stripped off his shirt, aware of the subtle aroma of lavender rising from the wash basin. The water was coolly refreshing as he doused his head and his chest, glad of the opportunity to rid himself of some of the grime and sweat of the trail. He paused for a moment in his ablutions, leaning his hands on the wash stand and letting the water to run freely down his skin in rivulets, suddenly weary beyond measure.

He didn't hear the door open but his eye caught the movement in the looking glass which stood on the shelf in front of him. Without any sign of haste he turned to reach for the towel, a perfectly natural movement which concealed that fact that at the same time he was gently sliding his Colt out of the shoulder holster. Holding the gun loosely in his left hand as he dried his face and chest, he slowly turned to present the business end of the short-barrelled gun to his unannounced visitor.

"Why, Herr Standish. Do you really mean to shoot me?"

Katrin von Hohenstaffel seemed to find the prospect amusing as she continued blithely into the room ignoring the weapon aimed at her.

"I believe it is customary to knock," admonished the Southerner, placing the gun on the night stand and picking up his shirt, "And where I come from a lady does not enter a gentleman's room uninvited."

"I'm sure you are making that up!" she laughed lightly. "I go where I wish, but then, I am no lady."

Ezra wisely decided to refrain from comment, deciding she would hardly be flattered if he was boorish enough to agree with her. He wiped the last traces of moisture from his chest and dropped the towel on the bed, wishing he had a clean shirt as he inspected the well-creased and sweaty item now in his hand. As if reading his mind she moved forward and took it from him.

"This will not do. Erik will have a spare shirt that you can have. You are not very different in size, although

I think perhaps on second thoughts..." she put a hand on his chest, then stepped back her eyes appraising him, lingering suggestively below his waist, "you are bigger."

Ezra barely maintained his composure, abruptly turning his back on her and busying himself with the shaving equipment on the wash stand, although he seriously questioned his sanity in picking up a razor anywhere near this woman. He was certainly beginning to question her sanity.

He tensed as he felt her hand brush over the newly-healed skin of his back. Damn. He had not intended that she should see the scars, let alone touch them but now he was rendered powerless to move as light fingers traced the path of the individual whip strokes. Sinuous. Sensuous. Seductive.

"*Liebling*," she breathed, awe rather than sympathy in her voice, "You have suffered."

He leaned on the washstand again, head bowed, and took a deep breath. "A misunderstanding," he countered easily, but his words were at odds with the emotions churning inside him.

"This caused you much pain."

He suddenly became aware that the rapid breathing sounding in his ears was not his own, and that the touch had become a caress. More, that the woman was excited by not only the scars, but also by the very suggestion of pain. He slowly turned around and looked into almost black eyes, pupils so large that the coloured iris had all but disappeared. That she was beautiful was undeniable but there was something about her which sent a chill through the gambler. Madness? Lust? Whatever, he did not trust her and for the first time in his life he found himself wishing harm to a woman. His expression became cold as he drew back from her.

"I think it would be best, Madam, if you left."

She smiled, a feral curving of the lips that suggested predator.

"Of course, Herr Standish," she replied evenly, "I shall send Erik's valet with a clean shirt for you."

The Southerner reached out and retrieved his own creased and still-damp shirt from the woman's hands.

"Thank you but that won't be necessary." He took her arm and escorted her to the door. "Now if you would be so kind as to allow me to finish dressing..."

She laughed and again ran her fingers down his chest.

"Herr Standish, such modesty! I shall expect you downstairs in no more than a quarter hour."

He inclined his head, closing the door behind her and quickly sliding home the bolt wondering if it hadn't been a huge mistake to come to this place after all. He hoped J.D. had had the sense to lock his door.

Vin eyed the pitcher of water in front of him, feeling his thirst increase at the very thought of the soothing liquid flowing down his parched throat. He knew was being watched, just as he knew that they expected him to greedily drink his fill; the usual instinct of a man distracted by thirst. Of course if he did, he would then suffer the agonies of violent stomach cramps and he would probably puke back up whatever he had drunk. *Be smart, Tanner.* He reached out and took a generous swig of the water, swilling it around his mouth before spitting it out. The next mouthful he swallowed, resisting the urge to chug the entire gallon. He limited himself to a cupful and returned the jug to a level spot on the floor his hands shaking with the effort. Flexing his fingers he looked at the swollen inflammation of his wrist and at the yellow liquid oozing from the teeth marks in his flesh. No wonder he felt so sick.

So far he had exchanged one prison for another; the only difference being that this one was above ground. He thought he was in a barn but couldn't be sure. It certainly stank of livestock but he began to

wonder if it wasn't just himself he could smell. He knew it was still light outside from the fingers of sunlight that found their way through the chinks in the wooden walls but whether it was morning or afternoon and of what day he had no idea. Had anyone even missed him yet?

He drank a second cupful of water, the first had barely taken the edge of his thirst, and felt the liquid hit his stomach. For a moment he felt as if he would indeed puke it up again but his body finally accepted the offering and he breathed easier. Stretching a cramp out of his leg he looked around again. No chance of escape here. His ankles were fastened in leg irons; he could barely take a step let alone run so he rested. No doubt he would know soon enough what they intended to do with him. His biggest question was not particularly what but why?

He had identified his jailer and his prison. This was the old Williams' ranch and his captor was none other than Count Erik von Hohenstaffel; the voice had given him away in the end. Knowing these facts, of course, did not help him a great deal. He was still a prisoner, still sick and injured, still hungry, but he was now angry and he intended to use that anger to his own advantage. Weakened he might be, but defeated -- never. He would give this bastard a run for his money and then he would kill him.

Buck stopped and waited for Chris and Nathan to draw level with him.

"Do you know how far we've come? It's a mighty long way for a kid to run."

Larabee rubbed his eyes, gritty now with dust and aching with tension.

"And just how fast d'you think you'd go, Buck, with a pack of hounds on your tail?"

"Chris is right. Some of those runaway slaves I told you about, ran clean into the next county before they were brought down. Heard tell of a few even getting away. A desperate man will do anything to stay alive."

"Guess you're right at that, Nathan." He shifted in his saddle and stared off into the West. "But you know where we're headin' right now, don't you?"

Chris brought his head up squinting against the setting sun.

"Yes I do. And I don't much like what I'm thinking."

Nathan looked from one to the other.

"And what are you thinking?"

"We're almost on the old Williams' spread. Soon as we cross the dry creek bed over there."

Buck sighed heavily.

"So what do you plan to do?"

Chris tightened his grip on the reins and pulled his horse's head up with more force than he intended.

"The only thing we can do. We go on."

"You know, it'll be dark pretty soon, Chris," pointed out Nathan reasonably.

"I ain't afraid of the dark."

Buck looked uncomfortable. "Me neither, Chris but I'm a mite worried about just what might be out there waitin' for us."

Larabee looked from one to other of his companions.

"We still have a couple of hours of useful light left. I say we go on. That's if you ladies are finished with the social chit chat!"

He spurred his horse forward leaving Buck and Nathan to exchange wistfully amused glances.

"Best do as he says, Nate, else there'll be hell to pay. Once he's gotten a burr in his britches there's no

reasoning with him."

Nathan laughed richly.

"Know what you mean, Buck. Come on, or he'll be over the border before we catch up again."

The two men urged their horses forward in pursuit.

"Now, is that the Mexican border or the Canadian border?"

Josiah realised he was going to be overtaken by nightfall before he had any chance of catching up with Chris and the others. His only other option was to go straight to the von Hohenstaffel ranch and meet up with Ezra and J.D. First then for all of them join up with Chris once it got light. The pressure of time wasted weighed heavily on him and he turned his horse reluctantly in the direction of the old Williams' spread hoping that he was making the right decision. He looked around the vast emptiness that surrounded him and decided he would rather not be caught out alone if there was any chance of a pack of wild dogs or wolves being on the loose. He had his carbine and a loaded sidearm but he knew he'd feel a lot better around a few more people. Safety in numbers and all that. With that he kicked his mount into a trot and hoped he could still reach the ranch before full dark.

The game had been in progress for an hour. Ezra had finally succumbed to the Count's unrelenting and persistent badgering to play a few hands when it had become clear that Chris had been delayed. Even if he arrived within the next hour a search by night would be difficult, if not impossible. There was nothing for it but to accept the Count's invitation to stay and indulge his passion for cards. He was also gambler enough to understand that the evening could turn out to be financially advantageous and he was not a man to let an opportunity like that pass.

The Count was both a skillful player and an accomplished cheat but that knowledge merely gave Ezra the excuse he needed to freely exercise his own dexterity in card manipulation with impunity. If von Hohenstaffel doubted that the Southerner's run of luck was anything but that, he kept his skepticism to himself. Finally the Count threw down his cards and laughed.

"Herr Standish, you are indeed a master of the game. You have beaten me in eight out of ten hands. Either you are exceptionally lucky or you are an exceptional trickster."

Ezra levelled a cool green stare at his host as he shuffled the deck.

"I take it then that skill is not an option?" he drawled sarcastically.

"Oh, on the contrary, you are most skillful, Herr Standish." He leaned across and poured another cognac for the gambler. "However I have the impression that you are bored. All this," he gestured at the table, "is all too easy for you, *nicht wahr?* There is no challenge for you any more."

Ezra tilted his head to one side, recalling Erik's previous comments about high stakes. "Your point being?"

Von Hohenstaffel drew deeply on his cigar and blew a cloud of aromatic smoke into the air.

"Would you consider playing for significantly higher stakes, Herr Standish? Something a little more interesting than money? Something with an element of risk?"

Ezra spread his hands. He had close on five hundred dollars in winnings, several pieces of valuable jewellery acquired over the course of ten years of successful gaming, and himself, although he hardly thought that the Count would place any great value on that particular piece of property.

"What do you suggest? My assets are purely liquid in nature, Sir."

The Count leaned back, a spark of fanaticism in his clear blue eyes.

"What if I said that I would be asking you to wager a man's life on the turn of a card?"

Ezra puffed leisurely on his own cigar, then took another drink before answering. "An interesting concept."

Erik leaned forward, his excitement tangible.

"I'm afraid there is to be no choice in this. This is a game which must be played."

The Southerner straightened and looked around the room suspecting a trap. J.D. still sat quietly by the window looking out into the night, his attention anywhere but on the two men playing cards.

"I will have your weapons, Herr Standish."

The demand, spoken with quiet intensity, was accompanied by a smile as von Hohenstaffel brought a Navy Colt from under the table and aimed it Ezra's chest. Slowly, without protest, the Southerner pulled the Remington from his gunbelt and slid it across the table, then took the Colt from his shoulder rig and did the same. He regretted now not having his Derringer; this was exactly the situation it was made for.

"Thank you. I knew you would be sensible. Now your friend." He moved the gun back under the table and out of sight but still levelled at the gambler's body. "You will not warn the young man in any way or be assured you will die a painful and slow death. How is it they say? Gut shot, I believe."

"J.D.!"

The young rose and came over.

"Finished already, Ezra?"

Ezra held out his hand. "Your guns if you please, Mr. Dunne."

J.D. took a step back, defensively resting his hands on the butts of his pearl-handled Colts. "Ezra, you ain't bettin' my guns."

The gambler laughed easily.

"I have no intention of wagering your weapons, Mr. Dunne, however I would like to borrow them for a moment."

Reluctantly the younger man handed over the guns, not understanding but trusting the Southerner. Standish carefully laid the matching weapons on the baize surface and pushed them across to von Hohenstaffel.

The Count quickly brought his own weapon back into view as he swept the revolvers out of reach and J.D. looked accusingly at the gambler.

"Geez, Ezra. What did you go and do that for? What's going on?"

"Young man, your friend Herr Standish is merely avoiding the possibility of experiencing several rounds of lead in his belly and at the same time ensuring your continued existence. Now sit down, Herr Dunne." He picked up Ezra's Remington with his left hand and aimed it at J.D. Adding further weight to his request. "Please."

J.D. struggled briefly against the rope that tied him to the chair but it was secure and all he had succeeded in doing was rubbing the skin off his wrists.

"The boy is merely an insurance, shall we say." The Count waved a gun in Dunne's direction. "The stakes I propose are much more interesting than a mere callow youth's insignificant life."

Ezra still affected a nonchalant ease, slouched in his chair with a cigar in one hand and a glass of fine

cognac in the other. "So, what precisely is that I am playing for, Sir."

"As I have already said, a man's life. The rules are very simple. Just one rule in fact; you lose -- he dies."

"And this man. Might I have the benefit of knowing for whose life I am playing?"

The Count struck a small gong at his side, some sort of summons, and looked evenly at the Southerner.

"But Herr Standish, you already know this man and I believe he might have some value to you."

Two brutish, muscular men appeared dragging a slightly smaller man between them. Dirty, unkempt, dressed in homespun pants, the man hung his head as if too weak to keep it upright and he seemed to be on the verge of exhaustion. Ezra noticed the angry looking wound at the junction of his neck and shoulder and from the bruised ribs, he guessed the man had already been ill-used. At a signal from von Hohenstaffel one of the lackeys jerked the man's head up by its long, ratty hair.

Ezra only just resisted the urge to leap to his feet although the muscles in his legs twitched in anticipation. Instead he forced himself to breath normally, taking a moment to gather his wits as he squinted through the haze of smoke at the sorry spectacle in front of him.

"Why, Mr. Tanner," he drawled, "Just as I suspected, you have indeed fallen upon grave misfortune. I would

offer to come to your assistance but the Count is assuring my continued co-operation with the persuasive power of a Navy Colt, so you will forgive me if I don't rise."

The Texan looked from Ezra to J.D. and back. "Whatever he's askin' you to do, Ezra, don't do it."

He grunted as one of his escorts fisted him in the kidney and turned a defiant glare on von Hohenstaffel which the Count ignored.

"So, Herr Standish, tell me. Is this man worth your time. Will you accept the wager?"

"What are the terms, Sir?"

"This man is about to become the object of the hunt. I did warn you I had to find my own game in these parts did I not? My men will now take him and release him. Each hand you win will allow him an additional fifteen minutes grace in order to make his escape. So, you win four hands and he has one hour. The first hand you lose, I release the dogs and the hunt begins."

"Nooooo!" J.D. struggled against his bonds. "Don't do it, Ezra! He's crazy!"

The Southerner deliberately avoided looking at his young companion.

"I accept." He fixed his gaze instead on the bedraggled Texan. "My sincere apologies Mr. Tanner. Rest assured I will do my very best to afford you the time you need."

Tanner nodded once. "I know you will, pard. Play well."

The Count waved a hand in dismissal and the two men hauled the weary man out of the room. Von Hohenstaffel settled down in his chair, the Colt aimed casually but effectively at the gambler.

"You will see that this adds a little spice to the game, Herr Standish. After all, what is money really against a human life."

Standish raised an eyebrow and aimed a sceptical stare in the nobleman's direction.

"I'm surprised you know the difference."

Vin was disorientated and he felt as if he was trying to move his limbs through a river of molasses. He remembered now; the bastards had forced him to drink laudanum. He rolled lazily onto his back and, feeling the hard stones digging into his flesh, recollected a ride in a wagon and later being unceremoniously

dumped from the tailgate. After a few minutes of watching the stars flicker overhead he struggled to his knees and concentrated on getting his bearings, wondering how much time he had. *Jesus, Ezra, I hope your luck's with you tonight. It sure as hell ain't with me.* He managed to get to his feet then, after swaying dangerously for a moment until he regained his equilibrium, he stumbled forward a few steps only to fall heavily again, cursing as he hit the hard ground. His right thigh burned fiercely and felt sticky, wetness flowing down his leg where they had cut him deeply to provide a blood trail for the hounds. Goddamn! Taking a deep breath he tried again and, at last, succeeded in remaining on his feet. Right, one thing at a time, Vin. Direction. He looked up at the sky, thankful for a cloudless night, and found the star groupings he was looking for. He would have to strike east and hope for the best. He thought he might have been brought north of the ranch house yet there was nothing but his instinct to confirm it. Heading east though, he knew would ultimately bring him towards town, then all he needed was some familiar landmark to set him on the right track. He moved as quickly as he was able, ignoring the stones under his bare feet as he focused on covering as much ground as he could in the time he had been given.

Katrin Von Hohenstaffel swept into the room, a vision of elegant formality, dressed in a black riding habit, carrying a whip in her hand and wearing a petulant expression on her face. Ezra spared her a momentary and casually dismissive glance and promptly turned his attention back to his cards. Leaning over Erik's shoulder she kissed his cheek.

"*Mein liebe*, when do I get to hunt? My babies are restless; they need to taste blood again."

"You bitch!" J.D. spat the words at the woman, unable to contain his rage and frustration a moment longer. Katrin moved with a speed the young Easterner would not have believed possible and, in defence, he jerked his head sideways to avoid being struck but the crop found its mark and slashed viciously across his face. He gasped in shocked disbelief, head falling forward and eyes tearing from the pain of it as a raised welt burned in a fiery line along his cheek. The ominous sound of a weapon being cocked, forced him to lift his head again. Dear God, he was going to die! Blinking tears away he found that rather than his own imminent demise it appeared he was about to witness Ezra's. The Southerner had launched himself from his seat at the table and had a vice-like grip on the Countess' wrist, forcing her arm back as she raised it ready to strike JD a second time. A few feet away, across the green felt expanse of the card table, the Count had trained the Colt on the gambler and had it cocked and was already squeezing the trigger preparing to fire.

"Where do you prefer I shoot you, Herr Standish?" He questioned mildly, as if asking if the gambler if he would like another drink. "You see, I should hate to terminate the game at this early stage, but if you persist in this foolish show of loyalty to your young friend I shall be forced to pull the trigger. Unfortunately I cannot guarantee my marksmanship."

Ezra hesitated a moment, casting a quick glance at Dunne, his green eyes questioning.

"I'm fine, Ezra."

The Southerner held his gaze for a moment longer then released his grip on the woman and Katrin flounced angrily away to stand behind Erik impatiently cutting the air with her riding crop. The count gestured with the gun inviting Ezra to take his seat again. The gambler straightened his jacket and adjusted his cuffs with a meticulous deliberation that was almost a challenge in itself, finally returning to his seat and wordlessly picking up his cards.

"I believe you called, Sir?" He threw his cards down fanning them for display. "A full house. Kings and Tens."

The Count tossed down three nines and twisted to look at his sister.

"Katrin, I fear the dogs may go hungry a while longer yet. The man is indeed blessed with the Devil's own luck."

The Countess wet her lips and looked at the Southerner from hooded eyes.

"Then let me take the boy, Erik. It's very boring just watching you play cards. I could show him the meaning of pleasure." She was almost purring, pleading.

Von Hohenstaffel dealt another hand.

"Later, darling, later. Can't you see we're busy. You'll have your fun soon enough." He smiled wolfishly at Ezra. "After all, Herr Standish's luck cannot hold forever."

The gambler kept his face neutral. *That's what you think, you bastard.*

Chris was angry. No, Chris was furious. Neither man wanted to be the one to suggest that they make camp but it was dark enough now to be dangerous for the horses and they needed to stop. In the end Buck just halted, dismounted and started unpacking his bedroll. Nathan followed suit.

"If Chris wants to go on, he can go alone," muttered Buck in irritation, "Can't even see a trail any more. Following ghosts is what we're doin'."

Chris circled his horse and came back to where Nathan and he were setting up camp. He looked for a long moment at the two men, his eyes blazing in mute fury, then wordlessly got down from his horse. As much as he disliked the idea of having to stop and rest, he was forced to recognise the practicality of it. They weren't so much following a trail anymore as being drawn towards a final destination, one that left the gunslinger with a distinctly bad feeling. Whatever the circumstances, Angus McKenzie had been killed, and no matter which way Larabee tried to look at it, the evidence pointed to the fact that the von Hohenstaffel's were somehow involved. McKenzie had been running from their property. He hobbled his mount and stripped it of his gear, throwing his saddle down next to the fire Nathan was already building. A man had a right to protect his property, but if that included setting dogs on trespassers -- dogs that killed -- then he was overstepping the bounds of morality, if not the law.

"It'll all still be there in the mornin', Chris," pointed out Buck reasonably, "Don't matter how fast we move, it won't bring the McKenzie boy back."

"He was just a kid." Chris shook his head mourning yet another wasted life. "No older than J.D."

Buck nodded and Chris knew he wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already crossed his mind.

"We'll start out again at first light. Might as well get some rest now."

Chris nodded. "I'll take first watch."

A few miles away, Sanchez pulled his woollen poncho around him and wondered again at the vagaries of nature that could change scorching heat through the day to freezing cold at night. He had not been able to decide in all his time in the territory which was worse. He kicked his horse back into a walk, not wanting to risk injury to either the animal or himself over the treacherous ground. It certainly slowed his journey but at least he would get there in one piece. He scanned the empty landscape and was surprised to see a flicker of light at the extreme of his visual field. He stopped again and rose in the stirrups, focusing on the distant flame. Campfire? He settled back in the saddle and crossed his arms over the pommel. Decision time. Strike north towards the light, or keep going west to the ranch? Choice made he tugged the reins to change the animal's direction and nudged the beast forward again. At least he could see the light to the north, the ranch

was still out of sight. His mount balked suddenly as the night echoed with the baying of a solitary hound and Josiah patted the skittish animal. Not even a full moon. The single howl, became a chorus and Josiah kicked the horse into a trot. This was not a night to be travelling alone he reminded himself, still unsettled by the knowledge that Angus McKenzie might have met his end against a pack of wild dogs. He drew his rifle from its scabbard and rested it across his knees. Trust in God and a loaded Winchester.

Chris was out of his bedroll and on his feet before the last echo of the howl had died, his gaze fixed on the source of the sound. Buck already stood, alert, nearby with his rifle loosely tucked under his arm; watching and waiting. The still night air echoed again with mournful howls, a canine chorus that drifted on the wind, rising and dying only to rise again before tapering off to an uncertain silence.

"There's our dogs," whispered Buck, the hair on the back of his neck still standing on end.

The howling started again with renewed vigour, this time over-ridden by a deeper, sharper bark. A single voice that silenced the howls to hesitant whimpers as it stamped its authority over the pack.

"How far d'you reckon, Chris?"

"Not far enough, if you ask me," chimed in Nathan, still sleepy and with his blanket thrown around his shoulders, "Those hounds sound mighty mean."

Chris turned on his heel and returned to his bed roll.

"They ain't met me yet."

The three men turned as one at the sound of hoof beats, each drawing a weapon as they spun in the direction of the sound.

"Who's there? Identify yourself!"

"Josiah. Comin' in, boys. Put your guns away."

Chris holstered his gun and strode forward. "Josiah? What's up? Somethin' wrong in town?"

Sanchez jumped down from his horse and brushed dust from his clothes.

"Nope. Town's just fine. Been lookin' for you since late afternoon. You boys sure covered some distance." He paused for breath. "Ezra sent a wire from Mercyville..."

"Jesus! What the hell...?" interrupted Larabee, his frustration evident at the latest development.

"Hold on, Chris, take a look at this before you start getting riled..." He handed the crumpled message to the gunfighter. "Don't say too much but it seems Vin didn't make it to Mercyville. Ezra and J.D. seem to think he might be in some trouble."

The blond man dropped his gaze to the note and leaned towards the firelight to bring the words into focus.

"They're at the Williams' place now?" He couldn't get his tongue around the new owners' foreign name quite the way Ezra could. "I don't understand."

Josiah shrugged. "I reckon he'll still be waiting on us there. Probably wondering why no one's turned up yet."

Buck shifted restlessly, obviously not happy with the way the conversation was heading, and certainly not happy that J.D. might be in some way involved.

"Well, it seems we're all goin' in the same direction whether we like it or not and I'm not so sure I like it at all.

Them folks are plain strange if you ask me."

Josiah stared thoughtfully off to the west.

"All roads lead to Rome, Buck. Let's hope this particular road also leads us to some answers."

Chris looked blankly at the three men, his face a study in confusion.

"So where's Vin?"

One man was not going in the same direction. One man was trying to put as much distance between himself and the von Hohenstaffel's as was humanly possible.

It was no longer warm. The crushing heat of the day had given way to the chilling night of the desert and Vin shivered uncontrollably. Even his fever could no longer warm him, as the sweat generated from his physical activity and his raging body temperature, cooled rapidly on his skin. He sat for a moment to rest and licked some of the salt from his own body; no sense in wasting what might just keep him alive. Now, at least, was a good time to travel. Come sun up, if he was still running, the heat of the day would soon finish him off. He wondered if Chris had started to worry yet. He'd said he'd be back by Friday. Was it Friday yet? No matter. Right now, he couldn't rely on anyone but himself, and Ezra's poker skills, to ensure his continued existence.

The laudanum was wearing off and his head was at least clearer but as its mind-fogging properties waned so did its pain-killing abilities. His neck had stiffened and the wound there throbbed in time with the beating of his heart, his wrist was a constant source of pain but neither were incapacitating, just debilitating. He got to his feet again and stared up into the sky, checking his bearings before he set out once again.

The baying of a solitary hound carried on the night wind froze him in his tracks and sent a thrill of fear through him. He held his breath and listened, his ears straining. After a few seconds it came again, then once more with additional voices joining in the eerily haunting song and he looked away to his right, finally pinpointing the source. He tried to judge the distance but he could only estimate that they were not close -- not yet. Once the pack was released he knew that there was no way he would be able to outrun them; his only chance would be to outsmart them. He looked around the barren surroundings. Right! How hard could that be? A deeper, sharper bark suddenly started in counterpoint to the baying and Vin started to run. The hell-hound was on the loose. He had to run now, and he knew without doubt that he was running for his life.

Mary Travis was afraid. Not that being afraid was sufficient to prevent her from accomplishing what she had set out to do, but she was now wondering at the wisdom of her impulsiveness. She had taken the buggy and driven out of town. Alone and in the dark. On the seat beside her there was a heavy pistol, which had belonged to her husband and, wedged at her knee, a loaded shotgun. The weapons gave her an additional sense of security but it didn't take away the fear. There were other dangers on the roads for a lone woman besides the dogs that Chris was searching for; dangers on two legs.

She kept the horse to the worn track, nothing more than twin ruts carved into the dirt by passing wagons, but at least a defined pathway that she could follow with ease even in the wan light of a half moon. She had cursed herself over and over again for not having remembered the telegram until after Josiah had left. She had been too concerned with what the message to Chris had said to pay attention to her own wire. Which was why she was now having to do something, which would be seen by any of the seven men who represented the law in the town as both reckless and foolish. The fact that they would probably be right did nothing to alter her resolve and she flicked the reins again, urging the animal onward, telling herself that she had been looking after herself for a long time before Chris Larabee and the others had shown up.

The telegram. She had promised that she would do some checking on the von Hohenstaffel's for Ezra and, finally, there had been a reply to her request for information. The telegram had arrived and she had ignored it. That act of omission, she knew, may well have placed Ezra, J.D. and possibly the others in grave danger. This was no European nobility they were dealing with, but common criminals wanted from New York to St. Louis. Con artists and, if the rumours were to be believed, cold blooded murderers. The least she could do was try to warn them. Now, before it was too late. She pulled the gun into her lap. *Please God, don't let it be too late.*

Ezra resisted the temptation to look at his pocket watch. They had played seven or eight hands of poker already and the longer they played the more difficult it became to convince von Hohenstaffel that he was winning legitimately. So far he had been obliged to cheat only once; a quick deal from the bottom of the deck and his lowly pair had been transformed into three of a kind, enough to win the hand. So far he had gained Vin almost another two hours on his life but even he knew that the madness would have to end soon. The Count would be forced to change the rules of engagement once it became clear that Ezra would never allow him to win. As he shuffled and cut the deck yet again he considered the undeniable, if unsavoury, fact that by accepting the Count's terms, he had probably forfeited his own life; for there could be no witnesses to this insane game. Still, he would play it out to its conclusion and could only hope that at the end of it he might somehow escape what already seemed to be a foregone conclusion. One thing he was sure of; he had never enjoyed gambling less.

He dealt quickly and picked up his cards. He still had one or two aces up his sleeve -- he grinned sardonically, more like a pair of kings to be truthful -- and he believed he was good for stringing out the game for at least another quarter hour. *How far can you travel in fifteen minutes, Vin?*

"Cards, Erik?"

He helped himself to another glass of cognac. At least he could go out in as civilised a manner as possible. No point in being churlish about it.

The Count threw down three cards. Ezra had elected to throw down only one and saw the uncertainty in von Hohenstaffel's eyes, feeling a degree of satisfaction in unsettling the blond haired noble. The man was not to know that the Southerner had nothing in his hand worth a damn.

Forced into the role of captive audience, J.D. watched the game with a mixture of excitement and dread. He had every confidence that that the gambler could finesse his way out of any situation where cards and money were involved; after all, that was what he was best at. The hands of the clock seemed to be creeping at a snail's pace around the dial and J.D. had watched each minute as it passed. It was already well after nine, and the two men had been playing for over an hour.

Dunne's mind drifted to the other player in this game -- Vin. He had not even recognised the Texan when they had dragged him in! Hell, he looked just about ready to drop then and he was still expected to outrun a pack of dogs? He switched his gaze to the woman -- the Countess -- who had been so ready to lay into him with the whip. Even now she watched Ezra with a predatory gaze, a hunger almost that he did not understand. Not love certainly, nor was it hate, but something more primitive and bestial. Something very dangerous. His attention, which had been wandering, was drawn abruptly back to the game as the chilling snick of a weapon being cocked registered in his brain. The Count was standing, with the Navy Colt aimed at Ezra for the second time that night.

"Katrin was correct, Herr Standish. I regret to say that this game has become boring."

Ezra threw his cards down with a look of exaggerated regret. "My dear, Count. Surely you don't intend to renege on our agreement?" The eyes he raised to stare at the nobleman were as hard and cold as emeralds. "After all, I cannot be held responsible for either your appalling skill at poker or your ineptitude at cheating."

The insult was thinly veiled but there was no mistaking the challenge in the Southerner's voice. There was no pretence of civility now, and as Von Hohenstaffel's complexion paled his finger tightened convulsively on the trigger. J.D. jerked violently in reaction to the explosive report of the gun, barely able to comprehend at first that the Count really had fired the weapon. Across the table, the Southerner looked slightly surprised, as if the last thing he expected was to be shot. That was not in any of the rules; and that was definitely not how a gentleman behaved. He watched as the gambler touched the spreading stain on the left side of his chest in shocked disbelief before sliding untidily from his chair to the floor where he lay, unmoving. Unconscious? Dead? J.D. felt a surge of impotent rage as the Count threw down the gun on the table and looked down at the fallen man almost apologetically.

"I will not tolerate rudeness, Herr Standish." He turned quickly to his sister. "I think I will join you tonight, Katrin. I have missed the thrill of the chase and I believe our quarry tonight may prove to be quite a challenge."

Von Hohenstaffel fastened pale, blue eyes on Dunne.

"I am sorry about your friend but he really left me with no alternative. I do not believe the shot was fatal, but

without assistance I fear he may die anyway. Pity. He played poker so very well. A worthy opponent."

Without a second glance at either Dunne or the fallen Southerner he took Katrin's arm and the two of them swept regally out of the room.

J.D. realised then he had not said anything. Made no protest. Had not cried out in alarm. Struck dumb by the casual brutality of the Count's actions. He struggled briefly but the ropes binding him were secure.

"Ezra!" Desperate. Willing an answer.

No response.

"Ezra?" A whisper. Fearful.

J.D. hung his head sadly and wondered again why Chris and the others had not come. It was too late now. Too late for Vin and too late for Ezra.

The Texan stopped running for a moment and listened. He could hear the excited yipping of the dogs as they caught a scent -- his scent -- and gave voice. How far? He estimated they were still a long way behind but they were covering the distance far quicker than he could. At this rate they would be on him in less than fifteen minutes. He smiled slyly. It had cost him in blood but he had set a false trail, hoping it would buy him some time in the long run. That the pack would lose the scent completely was more than he could hope for but he would take any reprieve he could get however small. He spared a moment to wonder what would happen to Ezra and J.D. A fate like his own? He tried to imagine Ezra in a similar situation and failed; the Southerner would rather die where he stood than be reduced to this. *So what does that say about you, Tanner?* He set off at a jog trot again and answered his own question. It says you want to live.

Buck knew better than to argue with Chris when he had made up his mind. Instead he rode at his side, his right arm, prepared to follow wherever the blond gunfighter led. That Larabee was a man on a mission was obvious and Buck felt a moment's pity for whoever was destined to be on the receiving end of his fury. For now they followed the sound of the dogs. The intermittent barking became an excited cacophony of yipping and baying in the distance and Nathan drew his horse level with Chris.

"They've got a scent. Them hounds is on the hunt."

Chris nodded, his face grim. "But huntin' what exactly?"

No one answered him and, in silence, the four of them pushed on with increased urgency.

Mary saw the lights of the ranch in the distance and breathed a sigh of relief. She had driven recklessly and the horse was tiring but she was at least within sight of her destination. Now she just hoped that she would find at least one of the seven still there. If not, she might have a difficult time explaining to the von Hohenstaffel's precisely what she was doing roaming the countryside in full dark when most dutiful women were safely indoors. She raised her head at the sound of dogs barking in the distance and closed her hand around the butt of the pistol in her lap, hoping she wouldn't need to use it.

Ezra did not want to think about being shot. It reminded him that he had severely underestimated the Count's sense of honour. That he was even alive to reflect upon it reassured him somewhat but he could still feel blood trickling warmly through his fingers and the left side of his chest was a solid band of pain. *Mr. Jackson where are you when a man needs you?* He would have tried to get up, but parts of him seemed not to want to co-operate, so he dismissed that idea and instead closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on not bleeding his life out onto the rug.

Mary drew the buggy to a halt in the semicircular driveway in front of the house. It was very quiet although lights showed in almost every window and she found it odd that the front door was standing wide open.

"Hello! Is there anyone home?"

She set the brake and climbed down from the buggy, keeping the heavy pistol in her right hand but concealed in her skirts. Slowly she walked up the wide steps to the porch and stood before the open door for a moment. A warm light from the hall spilled out onto the porch and she reached forward to knock on the door, uncomfortable about walking in unannounced although it seemed to her that the house was deserted.

"Hello?" Hesitantly she stepped over the threshold and moved warily up the hall.

She found she was shaking, and suddenly she wondered what on earth she was doing breaking into someone's house. Had she completely lost her senses?

"Hey! In here!"

She jumped at the unexpected sound of a human voice then realised she recognised it. "J.D.?"

Cautiously pushing open the next door along, she was shocked to see Dunne tied securely to a chair. To say he looked distressed would have been a gross understatement. Darting over to him, she began to untie

the ropes but he shook his head.

"No, leave me. It's Ezra." He gestured with his head in the direction of the card table. "He's been shot."

Only then did Mary realise that the Southerner was also in the room, sprawled on his back a few feet away. He lay very still but she could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest, and she paled at the amount of blood that not only stained his vest but which had pooled on the floor.

"My God!" She left Dunne and quickly dropped to her knees beside the gambler but she was uncertain just what she should do. There seemed to be so much blood. After a few moments of shocked inactivity, she found that she was capable of rational thought again and, as her mind started to race with every possible course of action open to her, she jumped up. "J.D! You've got to help me."

She started to tug at the ropes, breaking fingernails and skinning knuckles as she struggled with the knots, but once his hands were untied, Dunne made short work of the rest and freed himself.

"He's not dead is he?"

"No, he's not dead," Mary assured him, as she rifled through the dresser drawers, "But we need to stop the bleeding now, before he loses any more!" She found some table linen which she promptly thrust at J.D. "Come on."

The woman knelt down and, gently moving the gambler's hand which he still had pressed against his chest, deftly unfastened, then pulled aside, Ezra's vest and shirt. The bullet had entered the left of his body at the level of the lowest rib and dark blood still welled sluggishly from the ugly wound. Hastily folding a white linen napkin she pressed it hard against his side, an action which elicited the first response from the Southerner.

"Holy Mother," he breathed, his bloodied hand ineffectually pushing at what he perceived to be the source of his pain.

Mary looked up at J.D. kneeling across from her. "Here. You hold this." She took his hand and placed it over the already bloody linen cloth. "We need to turn him over."

J.D. followed her instructions. Hell, Nathan usually handled this kind of stuff, what did he know? The younger man eased the gambler onto his side while Mary tugged at the layers of clothing. Another wound almost in the middle of his back, where the bullet had exited, still bled freely. The newspaperwoman wadded a tablecloth and pushed it firmly against the wound, rolling the Southerner again onto his back to allow his own body weight to provide the pressure that would, hopefully, staunch the bleeding.

Ezra blinked lazily and after a few moments managed to focus on Mary.

"Sacrificing your petticoats again, Miz Travis?" He took a short, shallow breath to fuel his next words. "You seem to be making a habit of this."

She smiled and wiped his face with a spare table napkin. "Not this time, Ezra. And it's you that seems to be making a habit of this!"

Grimacing, he tightened his grip on her hand and closed his eyes again for a moment. "I believe I said something to which the Count took exception."

Mary looked at J.D. questioningly.

"He told him he couldn't play poker and that he was a lousy cheat. At least I think that's what he said."

The woman sighed.

"Maybe it would just have been simpler to simply put a gun to your own head, Ezra."

He laughed then in spite of the pain it caused him and looked evenly at her. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained, so they say Miz Travis."

Finally, Mary looked at Dunne.

"Just what did happen here, J.D.?"

As briefly as possible but trying not to leave out any detail, the younger man explained the day's events from finding the signs that Vin had been ambushed, to their trip to Mercyville and the telegraph to Chris, through to the insane card game with the Texan as the stakes and finally the shooting of Ezra. Mary listened with increasing horror, now glad that she had acted on impulse and come out to the ranch. In turn Mary recounted her side of the story; the McKenzie boy, Chris going off to find the wild dogs, the telegraph messages and Josiah riding off to find Chris then her own decision to personally bring the news about the von Hohenstaffel's to Ezra.

J.D. looked anxiously from Ezra to Mary.

"Will you be alright here? I really gotta go. Vin needs help and they already got a good head start."

She nodded and picked up the gun that she had placed on the floor beside her. "I'll use this if I have to."

Dunne nodded, believing her. He quickly retrieved his own twin Colts which the count had left on the sideboard then, on second thoughts, picked up Ezra's Remington and knelt beside the wounded man.

"Here, Ez. You hang on to this. You might need it if they come back."

Standish nodded and took the revolver in his right hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Dunne."

J.D. nodded, satisfied that Ezra was not about to die immediately, and stood up, suddenly torn between the need to go and the desire to stay. Ezra, correctly interpreting his hesitation, waved his gun in the direction of the door.

"Go, Mr. Dunne. Vin needs you more than I do." The Easterner needed no second prompting; he ran from the room not hearing the whispered post-script. "Be careful, J.D."

The hounds were on the scent, barking wildly as their sensitive noses picked up the trail and falling over each other to take the lead. The eight foxhounds were small and agile; they would run down the quarry and harry it to the point of exhaustion, killing small game and savagely attacking anything larger. The mastiff, standing just over two feet tall at the shoulder and weighing as much as a grown man, followed in the pack's wake waiting for its master's signal; permission to attack. The mastiff was capable of easily running a man down and it would kill on command. His master had named him well, Teufel -- Devil -- for that was exactly what his prey believed him to be when he appeared out of the night and closed his massive jaws around a fragile throat.

Katrin urged her horse forward, slashing its flanks with the crop as she followed the hounds. She would see blood tonight; feel it on her hands, smell it, taste it. He would be hers if he put up a good fight; if not Teufel would finish him. She spared a moment of regret for the gambler. A pity Erik had shot him. She had wanted him so badly; those green eyes had captivated her from the start. She might even have loved him if he had given her a chance.

Erik shouted and drew his own mount to a halt as the hounds milled around in confusion, snuffing an object on the ground. Katrin sent her horse through the pack driving them apart as she leaned down and lifted the shapeless mass from the earth with her crop. The coarse fabric was sticky with congealed blood and Katrin dropped the sodden mass to the ground.

"So, he lays a false trail, Erik. How clever!"

Von Hohenstaffel swore. "Too clever, my heart. But he will pay."

Calling the dogs to order they trotted back the way they had come. Katrin laughing as Erik continued to curse.

Time. Too much time.

Or not enough.

Vin felt sick. If there had been anything in his stomach he would be emptying it onto the ground but all he could do was retch weakly. He had finally reached the end of his endurance and was still no nearer to reaching safety. Under normal circumstances he could have led them a merry chase, turned them so far around that they would have been riding up their own asses but he knew he now had nothing left to give, nothing held in reserve. He had fallen again and this time, finding he had no strength left to rise, he remained where he was and listened for the approach of the dogs. It shouldn't be long now.

The Texan slowly lifted his head. Had he been asleep? Time seemed to have passed but it could have been ten seconds or ten minutes for all he knew. The air was still and he could no longer hear his pursuers. He painfully pushed himself on to one elbow and looked around. Nothing. He squinted trying to make sense of the shifting shadows. Wrong Tanner. Something out there. The shape coalesced, took form and Vin felt his heart constrict in his chest. It did not come swiftly, it came purposefully, blending so well with the night that for a moment Tanner believed the form to be an evil manifestation of his own fevered imagination but it was real. It lived and it breathed and it was the herald of his imminent death.

The growl came from deep within the animal's chest; a rumbling warning but still it did not move. One hundred and thirty pounds of malevolence glared at him from a distance of twenty feet, muscular forequarters tensed in anticipation, but still the beast held position. Waiting. Vin moved slowly but all his senses were alert, and a surge of energy suffused his limbs with renewed strength as his heart hammered wildly in his chest. This was how it felt to be alive and he was not about to surrender quite so easily. That was not the Tanner way.

He drew his legs up and rolled smoothly onto his knees, his own eyes locked onto the unwavering stare of the dog but as he moved he saw the curl of the lip and an impressively huge fang gleamed whitely in the pale moonlight. He reached down beside him and, without looking, groped blindly in the dirt and found a fist sized rock. Closing his fingers around its roughness he tried not to think about the unevenness of the contest and sat back on his heels, with his hand held loosely at his side. Waiting.

The rider approached quietly, given away only by the metallic jingling of the horse's tack as it shook its head. Vin did not look away from the massive canine, recognising that this new development was in no way likely to mean his salvation. The horse stopped some distance from where the dog kept its vigil; the rider still in shadow.

"You have done well. My best challenge yet." Not the Count then. This was a woman. The sister. Katrin. "Your friend did well by you, did he not? See how far you have come."

Vin remained silent. Needing no distractions.

"Ach, strong and with courage. I like that. Most men are now usually crying for their mothers and begging for mercy." She kicked the horse forward and rode in a wide circle around Tanner, coming to a halt some way behind him. Trying to distract him. "But I do not believe you are the begging kind."

"I'd like to make you beg you crazy bitch," he muttered heatedly, unable to stop his anger towards her

surfacing, and he heard her laugh throatily.

"You would do violence to a woman? So, you are no gentleman! Now Herr Standish was indeed a gentleman." She sighed regretfully.

Was? Vin didn't allow his mind to follow that thought through to its obvious conclusion and kept his attention focused on the dog instead.

She moved again and Vin flinched involuntarily but the Countess only completed the circle and halted her horse in front of him again.

"You are lucky Erik did not find you first. Those hounds would have already torn you to pieces, but the stupid animals lost the trail. I sent him back. I knew Teufel could find you, so we came on alone. Now at least you can die with dignity."

Vin was at a loss to see what dignity was afforded him in being mauled to death by some monstrous dog. He had been attacked by a wolf once and survived but he had fully clothed, protected by buckskin and still he had been badly bitten before he had managed to shoot the starving animal. Now he had no such protection, no weapon, and his adversary was no starving wolf. He watched from the corner of his eye as she backed the horse away and readied himself for the coming assault, as she raised her riding crop.

"Ende!"

The dog covered the ground between them at a speed Vin could scarcely credit to such a heavy animal and, as it launched itself into the air, he closed his eyes. The body slammed into him with such force that he was driven backwards and man and beast rolled together in a welter of limbs, each struggling for superiority. The Texan, on the ground and fending off the attack, felt the huge jaws close around his forearm and grunted, an inarticulate sound of rage and pain. He thrust his arm further into the dog's jaws rather than trying to pull away, shoving the animal back, and brought the rock in his other hand forcefully against the side of the mastiff's head. The animal responded by sinking its teeth further into flesh and briefly shaking its head. Claws scratched his naked chest, his belly, his thighs, as the animal sought purchase scoring long bloody welts in the flesh that Vin barely noticed. Locked in a nightmare battle with the huge dog, he would fight until his last breath whatever the cost. His reality became the heaving weight of the dog, the slippery wetness of his own blood and the flashing teeth and claws that tore mercilessly at his defenceless body. The dog sought his throat, snarling, its teeth snapping air as he managed to jerk aside; once, twice before the fangs raked a long furrow along his shoulder and laid it open. In a last effort to protect himself the Texan threw all his weight against the animal, putting it momentarily off balance and he rolled out from under it and scrambled to his feet.

"Aufhören!"

The dog stood its ground, sides heaving, watching its prey as bloodied saliva dripped from its mouth; unsure why it had been commanded to stop, and patiently waiting for the signal to finish. Vin stood, shoulders hunched, blood pouring from a dozen places on his body, out of breath and out of strength, knowing he could not hope to prevail -- waiting for the end.

He felt it before he heard it. The thrumming vibration of galloping hoof beats transmitted through the soles of his feet; urgent and fast, then the unmistakable sound of approaching horses ridden at speed. He heard the woman shout again, a note of panic in her voice, and braced himself for the killing stroke. The dog came in low and fast, unstoppable, its hindquarters bunching as it gathered itself to spring and, in a smooth extension of its body which made it appear as if the dog was literally flying, the mastiff hurled itself at the Texan.

The night exploded in a flash of light and a blast of gunfire but Vin had only one thing on his mind; keeping those teeth away from his throat. He met the beast squarely, body tensed but, unable to withstand the onslaught, he slammed into the unyielding earth. His ribs yielded beneath the crushing weight of the dog as it landed squarely on his chest, a moment before his head struck a rock and he slid into grateful oblivion.

Chris would have liked to have had the luxury of dismounting before he fired but he knew that there was no time. They had already impotently witnessed the unequal first round; had seen the man – incredibly -- regain his footing, had seen the woman call off the dog, and now were about to bear witness to the bloody finale. Unless they were able to change the odds. He released the reins, brought the Winchester out of its scabbard and smoothly up to his shoulder, taking a chance and firing as he saw the huge animal gathering itself to strike.

Goddamn! Missed.

"Get the woman!" he had yelled at Buck, trusting the man riding on his left to do what was necessary, as he chambered another round and once again fired.

Josiah and Nathan were both firing their handguns but there was little hope of either of them hitting the target at the distance they were attempting. The best they could hope for would be distraction. And from what Chris could see it wasn't working. On his third shot, man and dog slammed into the ground and he hoped to God he had hit the right one. Although, he thought grimly, if this poor bastard was in a similar condition to the McKenzie boy, a bullet might well be a blessing.

Buck and Josiah peeled off in pursuit of the woman on horseback. Chris kicked free of the stirrups and dismounted while the horse was still on the move, drawing his sidearm, ready to finish off the black beast but there was no movement from either the dog, or the man pinned beneath it. Warily, Larabee toed the animal, and only when he was satisfied that there was no spark of life remaining did he holster his weapon. Nathan jogged to his side and helped push the mastiff off its victim before turning his attention to the unmoving and bloody form of the man.

"Jesus! What does this goddamned thing weigh?" grunted Chris as he dragged the dead canine to one side, amazed by its size and pausing to examine the animal with a morbid curiosity. "Never seen nothin' like this before."

"Chris."

Larabee, momentarily distracted by the unusual dog, glanced back over his shoulder at the healer and remembered the casualty still lying on the ground.

"Chris." Repeated Jackson gently. "Come on over here."

The gunslinger rose. "Is he dead?"

"Chris. It's Vin."

The blond man paled. "Christ! Did I shoot him?"

Nathan shook his head, as he ran practiced hands over Tanner's body.

"Don't think so, Chris. He's pretty badly torn up but he's breathin' fine. Looks like your aim was right on." He glanced up seeing the concern and something like dread in Larabee's eyes. "I'll get my pack."

J.D. could not remember ever being so full of anger. Driven by a need for vengeance he had never

before experienced in his young life, he was riding for Vin and he was riding for Ezra. And if he was too late to stop what was happening to Vin then he vowed to himself and to whatever God might be above him, that he would exact the worst kind of retribution. He had never intentionally killed a woman but he would happily take his gun to this particular female without any trace of guilt. His face still throbbed, a line of fire etched into his skin, from where she had slashed him with her quirt and he wondered if he would be permanently marked. It felt as if she had opened his cheek to the bone but it had not bled and he kept repeating to himself that it was really nothing. He kept his eyes to the ground although he was having no difficulty in following the trail; two horses and a pack of dogs were not hard to track even with his limited skills. Vin had been patiently teaching him but his ability was still rudimentary and he found himself giving thanks that he was not required to do any more than follow a trail as clear and wide as a Boston city street.

His mind was a confused and seething mass of disconnected images from which he tried to make some sense. Was it only that morning he and Ezra had set out to take the Countess' black stallion back to the ranch? It had started out as a pleasant enough day and, although he would never admit it to Buck, he had actually enjoyed the ride in Ezra's company. He had also seen a different side to the gambler, one which he now believed the Southerner, for some reason known only to him, went out of his way to conceal. But now he had been shot. J.D. knew next to nothing about doctoring but he knew enough to be sure the wound was serious and he did know that people who lost too much blood, died. He recalled the pool of dark blood that Ezra had been lying in and wondered exactly how much was too much. At least Mary was now there to take care of him.

His thoughts skidded away to focus on Vin. He had to find the Texan but in the back of his mind lurked the terrifying thought that maybe he was already too late. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be hunted down; chased for mile after mile by dogs. Vin had looked as if he would not last even one mile let alone many. In fact he looked a lot like Chris had when they'd sprung him from that jail compound in Jericho last year.

His overactive brain jumped ahead to settle on Chris. He must be out here somewhere. Mary had said they were out tracking the dogs -- the question was, just where? And more importantly could he find them? He reined sharply in and scanned the landscape in the desperate hope that he would catch sight of something. Anything. Goddamn it! Not a sound or a movement to give him a clue. He could be out here all night being no use to anybody. Vin was out here, Ezra was back at the ranch; both men in bad shape, and he was sitting in the middle of a big nothing, not even sure if he was going the right way anymore. He swept off his hat and slapped it in frustration against his thigh. Where the hell had everyone disappeared?

A single shot rang out, startling his horse and setting his own heart racing, closely followed by several more that reverberated across the landscape in a brief but almost continuous roll of gunfire. Finally two more sharp cracks -- a rifle he thought -- and silence descended once more. Without a second thought J.D. kicked his horse into a gallop, and turned the horse towards the sound of the gunfire, hoping he wasn't riding straight into a whole mess of trouble.

Chris sat beside the still figure of the tracker, his hard gaze alternating between looking at the bloodied Texan and into the night. Although he looked calm and relaxed, Nathan could see the signs of tension and knew that in reality he was wound as tightly as coiled spring.

They had spread out Chris's bedroll for Vin and while Nathan had cleaned up the unconscious man as

best he could, the blond gunfighter had silently made a fire. Chris's first instinct had been to double Vin on his horse and get him somewhere warm and safe, but Nathan had pointed out that he would probably do more harm than good. So Larabee had reluctantly conceded to the healer and now looked on as Nathan tried to patch up some of the damage.

"Some of these are a few days old, Chris." He pointed to the wound in Tanner's neck. Two distinct sets of puncture marks, partially healed but angry-looking and weeping unhealthily. "Long enough to be festering."

Chris merely nodded and looked away. He just wanted Nathan to fix him and wanted Vin to wake up.

Nathan checked the water boiling on the fire and dropped in some herbs, filling the air with a pungent but not unpleasant aroma, then opened up a small rawhide roll which was his medical pack. From the depths of his saddle bags he had retrieved some bandages and some squares of plain muslin with which to dress the tracker's various injuries. He was ready. He glanced up at Chris.

"You might want to be ready in case he comes out of it fightin'. Gotta stitch up this shoulder."

Again a nod but this time the gunfighter paid attention to what was going on. Tanner stirred restlessly as Nathan plied his needle, moaning occasionally as the former slave skilfully sewed skin and muscle together, then finally closed the wound and tied off the thread.

"Ain't much fight left in him, I reckon," observed Chris, bitterly, as Nathan carefully bandaged the shoulder and sat back on his heels.

"Better this way for now, Chris. He'll be hurtin' enough when he does wake up. He's runnin' a fever too."

The tracker surfaced by degrees, his initial protests at Nathan's ongoing interventions confined to incoherent mumbles and weak attempts to push him away, but gradually increasing in vigour until he finally regained consciousness with a curse.

"Son of a bitch!"

Nathan ignored him and finished cleaning the long scratches on his chest and belly. "Just quiet down, Vin. No sense in fussin'."

The Texan groaned, his eyes fluttering. "Thought I was a dead man." He rasped out finally. "Wherever you came from, I'm mighty grateful."

Chris smiled for the first time at the sound of Tanner's voice.

"Don't mention it." He put a hand on the tracker's good shoulder. "That was a mighty impressive fight."

"Is that what it was? Reckon I just didn't know when to give up."

Some of the hard edge went out of Chris' voice. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

Vin fell silent, his face a study in concentration, then suddenly he paled visibly and raised panic-stricken eyes to the gunfighter.

"Ezra. There's something wrong. She said Ezra was a gentleman. Was."

Chris frowned and looked quickly at Nathan wondering if the tracker might not be delirious. The healer shrugged, equally puzzled but recognising that something was troubling the injured Texan.

"What about Ezra?" he prompted gently.

"Was, not is." He repeated, his agitation mounting. "Talked about him as if he was gone. Got to get back to the ranch."

The bounty-hunter struggled frantically to get up and, disregarding his injuries, he finally managed to stand, trembling like a blown horse but determined, showing the same grit he had in facing off against the mastiff. Chris did not understand what he was talking about but he did understand the urgency and fear in his voice and it was enough for him to act. He nodded.

"Okay. We'll go right now. You sure you're up to it?"

Tanner heaved a sigh.

"No, but ain't no time to waste."

Nathan shook his head not sure who was worse; Vin for wanting to go, or Chris for letting him.

"You loco, Vin? You can't hardly stand yet."

"Don't plan on walkin' anywhere, Nathan," he grimaced, "Just get me on a horse."

Ezra had discovered that if he lay absolutely still, refrained from speaking and breathed only shallowly that the pain was tolerable. As a result he had slipped into an almost trance-like state of consciousness, awake but with eyes closed and thoughts focused inwards. He could still feel the comforting weight of the gun J.D. had placed in his hand but his legs, in fact his entire lower body, felt cold and numb. He wondered how long he had been lying on the floor and if the loss of sensation was anything to do with that, or perhaps the amount of blood he had lost. He knew he had bled more than was good for him; his clothes were sticky with it and where he was lying, the carpet was unpleasantly moist under his back. His jacket would be ruined, beyond salvation. No matter though, because if the inestimable Mr. Jackson did not appear to render aid shortly, he guessed he would likely have no further need for a jacket at all. Except perhaps for his laying out, and the black, he thought, would serve quite nicely for that.

"Ezra?"

With an effort he responded to his name, slightly irritated that his plans for his own funeral had been interrupted. He was much too tired to engage in conversation, even with the lovely Mary Travis, but opening his eyes he managed to bring the woman's face into focus.

"Ezra, someone's coming. I just heard a horse come into the yard."

"Only one?"

She answered with a nod.

"Then I think it might be wise, Mrs. Travis, if you concealed yourself."

"I..."

The Southerner cut off her protest. "Now, Mary! There isn't much time." He lifted his gun, which seemed suddenly to have grown exceedingly heavy. "Do not concern yourself on my account, dear lady. Mr. Remington is quite sufficient protection I assure you."

With a rustle of skirts the newspaperwoman disappeared from his sight and he sighed. Those few words had cost him dearly, taxing his already meagre reserves of energy to the point of exhaustion. He drew back the hammer on the gun surprised at how difficult that small task was and, with his finger curled around the trigger, extended his arm down his right thigh, partially concealing the weapon against his leg. He just hoped he didn't end up shooting himself.

At the sound of booted feet in the hall he held his breath, very aware that in his present position he was entirely too vulnerable. He closed his eyes and waited, knowing his own best chance of survival would depend on the element of surprise and for that he would best be served by playing possum. He rejected the alternative -- playing dead -- as being slightly too close to the truth for comfort. The footsteps came closer. Confident. A master in his own house and Ezra knew, without a doubt, that this was von Hohenstaffel returned. The voice was certainly right but instead of a cultured European accent the next word was delivered in old fashioned Anglo-Saxon.

"Fuck!"

The clatter of furniture being thrown aside startled the Southerner but he controlled his reaction, guessing the Count had taken his frustration out on the chair where J.D. had been restrained. No doubt the fact that Dunne had escaped would be something of a concern to von Hohenstaffel. Ezra waited for the inevitable and found his fluttering heart racing even faster as he heard the footsteps stop beside him, then the heavy sound of breathing as the nobleman leaned over him. His jacket and shirt were roughly pulled aside as the Count examined the results of his marksmanship. Ezra barely managed to keep himself from gasping aloud and, while he still had mastery over his senses, he smoothly brought the gun up to Erik's neck.

The Southerner had to admit that he was gratified by the man's response. The look of shock painted on the handsome features was almost comical and Ezra was tempted to laugh. Almost. The situation was still far too dire for him to indulge in such frivolity.

"My dear, Count," he managed conversationally, "How good of you to return. Might I ask if your hunt was successful?"

Von Hohenstaffel had composed himself enough to assume a sneer. "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"Yes," agreed the gambler evenly, "You probably should, because rest assured I fully intend to kill you."

Ezra knew that the Count was rapidly calculating his chances; working out if he could turn the situation to his advantage. He also knew that if he didn't make good his threat and pull the trigger soon that he would no longer be able to hold up the gun. For a long minute the two men stared each into the other's eyes, vivid green holding ice blue, then von Hohenstaffel made his decision. And Ezra pulled the trigger.

The Count's eyes flew open in shocked horror as his hands clutched his throat, blood pulsing between his fingers. The gambler watched with detached interest as the man staggered to his feet, fully aware that his lifeblood was rapidly draining out of him. Not dead, but dying, and it gave the Southerner a certain sense of satisfaction that von Hohenstaffel was not about to have an easy end. A part of him wanted him to suffer, to feel pain and dread; payback for what he had done to Tanner. It surprised him that he could so bereft of sympathy, but the urge to exact revenge had robbed him of any compassion.

He allowed his arm to fall back to his side, the effort of holding the gun suddenly too much. Von Hohenstaffel was making inarticulate choking noises but he was still on his feet, reeling back towards the card table and the gambler calmly speculated on how long it took a man to bleed to death; after all he had been slowly bleeding onto the carpet for quite some time now and he was still alive. He wondered if Erik would like to wager on this particular outcome.

That the Count was suddenly pointing a gun at him was a development Ezra had not taken into consideration; he most definitely would have to revise the odds now. On reflection he believed it was his own Colt that was currently aimed at his heart. Pity J.D. had not thought to leave him both weapons. It crossed his mind that it was quite ironic really that he was going to finally meet his end with a bullet from his own gun. He flinched at the very loud report of the discharging weapon, his entire body tensing in anticipation, but he felt nothing. The Count grunted as a circle of bright red blossomed in the centre of his chest, then fell to his knees before crashing face down onto the floor a few feet from the startled gambler. He tore his eyes from the dead man to the slim figure that now moved into his field of vision, a still smoking pistol held in her hand.

"Mrs. Travis," he breathed, barely able to find his voice, "Good shot."

She looked down at the body, her face hard.

"I'd like to do that again."

Ezra looked up, believing her.

"I think once is quite enough, dear lady."

Buck brought his mount to a halt and signalled to Josiah to stop.

"We lost her, Josiah. Ain't no catchin' that stallion of hers once it gets up to speed. She could ride clear to Bolivia without us even layin' eyes on her again."

"You wanna be the one to tell Chris that?"

Buck savagely turned his horse around and waited for Sanchez to catch up.

"Can't chase the wind, Josiah, and I ain't about to try. Let's go back."

Josiah held up his hand for silence and put his head on one side, listening.

"Hear that?"

Buck strained his ears, searching for a sound, then shook his head.

"Uh uh."

"Listen!" insisted Sanchez and the two men fell into absolute silence.

On the night breeze they both identified the sound of a single horse moving quickly towards them.

"Someone's in a mighty big hurry," commented Buck, "You wanna wait?"

"Could be the woman," ventured Sanchez, doubtfully.

Buck gave him a sceptical glance. "Right, Josiah! She's gonna come runnin' right back into Buck's lovin' arms." Buck wheeled again and spurred his horse forward at an easy trot. "How about we have a look and see whose britches are on fire."

A few minutes later Sanchez pointed out a growing shape materialising out of the darkness and the two men angled to intercept the rider.

"It's J.D!" yelled Buck in surprise as they crossed diagonally to cut him off. "Whoa, boy. Steady on, it's ol' Buck."

So savage was the halt that J.D. executed that the horse went down on its haunches. "Buck! I thought I'd never find you. Where's Nathan? Ezra's been shot. Mary's with him but he's bleeding somethin' awful. And Vin's out here somewhere. The dogs -- the Count's hunting....." he trailed off, no longer making any sense to either man and Buck grabbed him by the arm.

"Easy, son! Now what'd you say 'bout Ezra and Vin?"

"The Count shot Ezra, back at the ranch. He's hurt bad. They set the dogs to run after Vin, so I came looking for him, tracked the pack for a while then heard the gunshots."

Sanchez looked back towards where they had left Chris and Nathan. "The dogs were huntin' Vin?"

He exchanged an anguished look with Wilmington as the awful reality dawned but J.D. missed the significance of the glance.

"That's what I said. I was tracking him," he began again, breathlessly.

Buck released his grip on the younger man's arm and dropped his gaze. "It's okay, J.D. I think we found Vin."

Chris had stopped twice already, concerned for his passenger, but Vin had merely cursed him for a fool insisting that he did not need Chris to be looking out for him every five minutes. Larabee had smiled, reassured by the Texan's feisty attitude and had continued knowing every jarring mile was an ordeal for the

injured bounty hunter.

Nathan had given up on both men, understanding that talking sense to either of them was useless. He could only tag along and be ready to pick up the pieces at the end. Vin was in no shape to be taking off on a wild night ride but there was no stopping the stubborn Texan once he had his mind set. Larabee was no better; disposition of a country mule and the attitude of an ornery mountain grizzly. No dealin' with that kind of man, not if you wanted to stay in one piece. So they rode.

"Riders! Over there!" J.D. saw them first and smoothly changed direction.

The two groups of riders met and merged, horses milling as breathless voices exchanged information.

"Ezra's been shot," yelled Buck, "At the ranch. You're needed, Nathan."

The healer looked from Vin to Buck, indecision clearly etched on his face but J.D. kneed his horse forward and clutched Jackson's arm.

"Nathan! Ezra's been hurt bad. He's shot!" His voice was frantic. "The bullet went clean through his back."

Chris turned to the healer.

"Go. Now!" It was an order that brooked no argument. "We'll catch up. Buck, you go with him."

Wilmington nodded, his face grave, and joined the healer as they urged their already tired mounts on again in a race against time that neither of them wanted to lose.

In spite of the overwhelming temptation to race after the two men, Chris kept a tight rein on his own horse and in doing so forced Josiah and J.D. to match his pace.

"You lost the woman?" This directed at Sanchez.

Josiah nodded but understood that there was no censure in Larabee's voice, just grim resignation. The preacher knew the reaction would be different in the cold light of day, when Vin was safe and, God-willing, Ezra too. He also knew the gunfighter would not rest until those responsible had been punished. Vengeance was a strong motivator and Larabee knew the emotion too well to disregard it, although he would consider it justice. In this case, Josiah felt he was bound to agree.

"We can start afresh in the morning, Chris. Spell the horses first and get some rest. We'll find them both."

He saw Chris nod. Tomorrow.

"What happened with Ezra, J.D.?" asked Vin quietly, "I knew somethin' had gone wrong when that hellcat started talkin' like he was dead." He looked searchingly at J.D. "He ain't dead is he?"

"No, Vin. He ain't dead. Leastways he wasn't when I left. Mary was tendin' him."

Chris' head came up with a snap. "Mary?"

"Shoot, Chris. Don't ask me! I'm just glad she showed up when she did, else we'd've been in real deep trouble."

Larabee remained silently contemplative and the group continued without speaking, taking their lead from the gunman. For all of them it was simply too much to deal with. For now they would just concentrate on taking one step at a time, and the first one was getting back to the ranch.

Buck hit the ground running the moment his horse slowed, charging up the steps and through the front door, crashing noisily into empty rooms before bringing up short in the doorway of the salon staring down the business end of a wicked-looking pistol being pointed at him by none other than Mary Travis. He back-pedalled several steps and put both hands out in front of his chest, a warding gesture.

"Whoa, there, Mary! It's ol' Bucklin here. Don't go gettin' twitchy now."

She lowered the gun and wiped her forehead with her sleeve. "My God, you scared me, Buck!"

He moved forward and gently removed the pistol from her hand.

"Not as much as you scared me," he admitted softly, placing the gun on the table.

His gaze travelled to the floor, first to Ezra then on to the very dead Count von Hohenstaffel and finally back to Mary.

"He was going to kill, Ezra," she said by way of explanation, "So I shot him."

Buck raised an expressive eyebrow and crossed to briefly check the body before turning his attention to the gambler.

"You've been a busy lady, Miz Travis." His voice held a note of grudging admiration.

She gave a quick nod and knelt at the Southerner's head, gently stroking his face. "Ezra," she called softly.

Nathan, still breathing heavily from his sprint to the house, slid into place at Mary's side and dropped his saddlebags on the floor.

"How long since he got shot?"

Mary looked up. "About three hours I think, maybe more. I managed to stop the bleeding but he'd already lost a lot of blood before I got here."

The healer nodded approvingly.

"You did good, Mrs. Travis. Real good." He looked across at Wilmington. "I think we should move him somewhere more comfortable where I can get a good look."

"That sounds a most agreeable suggestion, Mr. Jackson. I'd prefer a feather bed but at this moment I confess any available surface which is not as unyielding as this floor will be acceptable."

Nathan smiled, for once glad to hear the Southerner's verbosity.

"Come on, Buck. Help me get him onto the sofa. Mary can you bring the lamp?"

Mary sat quietly on a chair beside the sleeping man. The healer had painstakingly cleaned and bandaged his wounds before Buck, in a search of the house, had found a bottle of tincture of opium. Nathan had immediately dosed the already exhausted Southerner who had drifted off into a deep sleep within minutes. Buck had then followed Nathan out to the yard and pumped the water for him while he washed Ezra's blood from his hands.

"Is he gonna be alright, Nathan?"

The healer shook his head. "Can't say, Buck. Don't know what that bullet did on its way through. I ain't no doctor." He scrubbed his arms and hands then rinsed his face and sat down on the edge of the trough, his head in his hands.

Wilmington leaned on the pump handle and watched Jackson for a few moments.

"What is it, Nathan?" he prompted gently, "There's something you're not sayin'."

Jackson sighed heavily, his face a picture of doubt.

"Remember Mort Brooks?"

"The cowpoke from the Butler place that broke his back? What's that got to do with Ezra."

"Well, I don't know I'm getting this right but Mort couldn't feel nothin' in his legs after that accident."

"That's right. Never walked again. Finally shot himself as I recall."

"Well, I'm thinking Ezra's the same. He ain't got no feeling his legs."

Buck straightened. "That can't be. Ezra didn't break his back. He got shot."

Jackson shook his head, his uncertainty plain. "I know that, but the bullet went mighty close to his backbone. Maybe did some damage."

Wilmington started to pace distractedly, finally wheeling to face Jackson again. "You sure about this, Nathan."

The healer stood up and hung his head.

"No. I can't say anything's certain. Hell, Buck, I don't know nothin'! I just try to heal folks, but one thing I do know: Ezra can't feel anything from the waist down."

Buck swallowed hard as the implications sank in. "Nothin' at all?"

"Nope. I really think Ezra's crippled."

"Does he know?"

Nathan smiled sadly. "I reckon he does, but you know Ezra. Wouldn't say nothing even if he had to crawl."

Buck dug his hands in his pocket, his voice soft. "Maybe would've been kinder to let him go, Nathan."

The healer raised troubled eyes to the ladies' man. "Can't let a man die, Buck. That's not for me to decide."

"Ezra won't thank you for it."

Nathan shrugged. "I can live with that."

Buck turned away.

"I wonder if Ezra can?"

It was the early hours of the morning before Chris and the others arrived at the von Hohenstaffel spread, horses and men equally spent. The euphoria induced by the ongoing excitement had gradually dissipated leaving all four riders tired and aching, wanting nothing more than to crash into a bunk and sleep till daylight.

The ranch house lights burned brightly and although it was not home and, for at least two of the riders, held unpleasant associations, it was still a welcoming sight. Chris dismounted and stretched out the kinks in his muscles before offering his hand to help the Texan down. The two men grasped forearms and Tanner slid painfully from the saddle then limped stiffly over to the water pump and, working the handle, doused his head before drinking his fill from his cupped hands. Leaning heavily on the pump he took several deep breaths before straightening. Chris moved in beside him.

"You alright, pard?"

Vin nodded and managed a crooked grin.

"Reckon I'll feel better once I get into some proper clothes."

Chris nodded and waited for the younger man to precede him into the house, not convinced that the tracker wouldn't still keel over from his injuries, but the wiry Texan it seemed was as resilient as he was stubborn. He looked over his shoulder to find Josiah and J.D. had taken the horses in tow and were heading for the stables. One less chore for him to think about.

Buck launched himself from a delicate chair that looked as if it wouldn't hold his large frame as the two men crossed the threshold. He had been sitting patiently in the hall, the lookout and night watchman. Tired but unable to rest, he had stationed himself outside the salon, armed and ready for trouble. One part of him would have welcomed the opportunity to bust a few heads but he had combed the ranch and the servants

and ranch-hands had all fled. The bunkhouse and servants quarters all showed signs of the staff hastily pulling up stakes and moving on. The horses had been turned loose and all that remained of any livestock were a few chickens scratching around the yard. It was no more than an empty shell – a ghost ranch.

"Vin! Chris! Thought you'd decided to go back to town."

"Took it slow," explained Chris unnecessarily, "J.D's plain wore out and my horse was carryin' double. No sense in rushin'."

He cast a glance at the salon door. "Ezra?"

Buck dropped his gaze. "Hangin' in there."

"But?" Larabee could always tell when there was a 'but' with his oldest friend.

"Nathan thinks the bullet busted up something in his back. Thinks he might not be able to walk."

Chris's expression was unreadable but he squared his shoulders before he walked in to the room, as if assuming a new, heavier burden than the ones he already carried.

Vin took hold of Buck's arm as he passed, his blue eyes shadowed with unspoken sorrow.

"Nathan's sure about that?"

"Pretty sure. He checked him out good and all. Said he's going to call on Dr. Mason in Bitter Creek though."

Tanner sighed.

"Reckon we'll know soon enough with or without a doctor."

"Reckon you're right."

The Texan followed Larabee into the salon, nodding a greeting to Mary, just in time to hear Chris exclaim disbelievingly: "The Count's dead?"

"Dead as a doornail when we got here, Chris. Ezra got a shot at him and Mary here finished him off."

"What?" He looked sharply at the newspaperwoman.

Mary sighed.

"It was nothing. He was going to kill Ezra so I shot him -- in the back."

Chris shook his head trying to get his head around the notion of Mary cold-bloodedly shooting a man.

"I don't rightly hold with the idea of shooting a man in the back, but this time I reckon I'll make an exception."

"Thank you, Mr. Larabee. I'm sure Ezra will appreciate the dispensation."

Chris laughed.

"Mary, with a tongue like that you sure don't need a gun."

It was obvious the blonde woman didn't know whether to be amused or take exception to his comment but in the end she smiled, conceding that her own sarcasm had provoked the response in the first place.

"Buck took the body out to the barn," interrupted Nathan. He pointed to a large stain on the wooden floor boards. "Most of that leaked out of the Count, the rest is Ezra's. Had to take the rug up."

"Jesus! Either of 'em got any left?"

Nathan shrugged.

"Gotta say the Count's bled pretty white. Ezra shot him in the neck. He was already dyin' when Mary shot him clean through the heart."

Chris glanced quickly at Mary. "You can spare me the details, Nathan. How's Ezra?"

The healer sighed.

"Doesn't seem to have gotten any worse in the last couple of hours. I thought maybe now everyone's

here we could get him upstairs and into a bed. At least make him more comfortable." He switched his gaze to Vin. "And I reckon we can do the same for you."

"Rather take my bedroll and sleep outside."

Mary jumped up and looked aghast, moving quickly to his side and placing a hand on his uninjured arm. "Nonsense, Vin. In fact I insist that you come along with me right now. You need a bath and you need some sleep."

The Texan turned pleading eyes on Larabee who merely smiled. "She's right, Vin. Reckon if you don't lie down soon we'll be picking you up off the floor. So get."

Nathan agreed and nodded to the woman.

"Thanks Mary. And Vin, just as soon as we get Ezra settled I'll fix you up properly."

Tanner knew when he was beaten and allowed Mary to lead him out of the salon and up the stairs.

Josiah had made a pot of coffee which now simmered over the range and five of them sat around the scrubbed wooden table in the kitchen. Mary was upstairs with the two injured men, unwilling to leave either of them for long. J.D. had been glad to get out of the salon and now sat drinking coffee generously laced with some brandy that Chris had liberated from the Count's stock and which now stood, severely depleted, in the centre of the table.

Chris was still trying to put together the pieces from the individual stories in an attempt to see the whole picture. Their knowledge of what had happened to Vin was patchy. They guessed he had been ambushed on the way to Mercyville and had spent three days incarcerated somewhere on the property. Ezra had been chosen as the instrument by which they could initiate their insane game and once he was induced to play against von Hohenstaffel there was no alternative for him but to continue. That the Count and his sister had already practiced the hunt was obvious from the murder of the McKenzie boy and once J.D. had mentioned the missing youths from Mercyville Chris believed that somewhere on the huge spread they would eventually find two, if not more bodies.

Larabee splashed more brandy into his cup, quite aware that he was drinking more alcohol than coffee and not caring in the least -- after all there was plenty more where that came from. He swirled the dark liquid around in the bottom of his cup. He hated to leave anything unfinished and there were too many loose ends to this business. Katrin von Hohenstaffel for one. He shuddered at the thought of the woman roaming free. Would she even dare come back to the ranch house? The hounds were still out there and he wondered how much livestock would be killed before they could be brought down. He would have to organise a posse to see to it. He rubbed his eyes. Too much still to do.

"I gotta turn in," he confessed finally, "Who'll take first watch?"

Josiah stood up and poured himself another coffee.

"I'll do it. I ain't been chasing over the whole damn countryside all day."

Chris gladly accepted the offer. "Fine. Give me four hours. I'll bed down in the parlour. J.D.? Buck? Nathan?"

J.D. stood up. "I reckon I'll just sleep in the hall. This place gives me the creeps."

"Know what you mean, kid," agreed Buck, "I'm with you."

Nathan sipped his coffee.

"I'll stay a while longer, Chris, and keep Josiah company. Got to check on Ezra and Vin soon anyway, and give Mary a break."

Chris tipped his hat. "Four hours."

Vin knew this room. He had been cared for in this room before he had been imprisoned. Someone had washed him in this very bed. He remembered the smell of lavender and the flocked wallpaper, the soft mattress and the heavy drapes. The bed now felt too soft, the air too sweet and if he had not been so exhausted he would have crawled out from under the covers, pulled the quilt around him and slept on the floor. Instead he surrendered and allowed himself to relax, pushing away the memories that threatened to suffocate him, and focusing on the fact that he was now surrounded by friends rather than enemies. He had been embarrassed that Mary had insisted on helping him but the bath had soothed away some of the aches and pains, not to mention soaked away some of the filth and she had given him his privacy and left him with his dignity intact. She had washed his hair though and he could still feel her fingers working in the soap, massaging his scalp. He had never realised that having someone else wash your hair could feel so damned good. He threw back the covers, feeling hot and sick again, allowing the cool air to wash over him. These last few days he always seemed to be too hot or too cold. Finally finding some relief and a reasonably comfortable position he dropped into a fitful doze.

He dreamed. Twisted nightmares from the depths of his imagination, that took his fears and made them real. Suffocating in the confines of his prison, earth being shovelled in on him burying him alive, filling his mouth and nose...running endlessly and getting nowhere, the howling of a pack of monstrous dogs snapping at his heels, tearing flesh from his body...slavering jaws closing around his throat...Awake. Afraid.

Had he called out? He lay trembling, his body in a lather of sweat as he tried to bring his racing heart back under control. He sat up and gasped in shock as a hand touched his shoulder.

"It's alright, Vin. You were dreaming. Come on. Lie down."

Mary again. Did she never sleep?

"Nathan left this for you to drink."

She put a cup to his lips and he tasted the familiar bitter taste of one of the healer's medicinal teas. He hoped it wasn't something to make him sleep, he wanted to be able to escape from his nightmares not be trapped in a sleep from which he couldn't wake. He drifted off to sleep again feeling the welcome relief of a cool, damp cloth on his forehead. There were no more dreams.

Sleep did not come readily although Chris was so tired his head ached. He had pulled a bolster from the ornate chaise lounge, wrapped himself in his duster, and stretched out on the rug but his overactive brain refused to succumb. He turned onto his side and stared at the wall. The ghostly face of the Countess slowly formed before his eyes emerging eerily from the darkness, and he was on his feet with his gun drawn and cocked before he realised that he was staring at an oil painting. He laughed, a short bark that sounded strained even to himself and although he released the hammer on the Colt he didn't holster it. Moving to the window he pulled back the drapes, flooding the room with pale moonlight and walked back to stand in front of the portrait studying the woman who had caused such havoc. The face was not classically beautiful but there was no doubt about it, the woman was striking in appearance. The artist had captured not only her looks but her very essence; not only the sultry, sensuousness that he remembered so well but the hint of cruelty in the full, pouting mouth and the hardness in the almond-shaped eyes. No doubt her seductive charms had been put to good use on many occasions. He looked away. Pity it was only a painting. Chris wanted the woman so much he could taste it – and he wanted to be the one to put a bullet through her.

"Mercenary bitch!"

He realised he had spoken aloud, venting his anger, and the force of his own emotions startled him. He had never shot a woman. Had never needed to, or wanted to, but he knew without any doubt that he would have no hesitation in pulling the trigger and sending this murdering hellcat to her Maker. He bent to retrieve his duster from the floor and tossed the bolster back onto the chaise with a sigh. There would be no sleep for him in this room tonight and with a final glance at the now mocking Countess he strode out into the hall and bedded down by the front door. Surprisingly, he slept, exhaustion finally winning out, but his hand never once strayed from his gun.

Ezra believed he fully understood what it felt like to be skewered with a hot poker. The Count's bullet had reamed a searing path through his rib cage starting low in his chest on the left side and exiting in the small of his back and while the gambler had considered himself fortunate to still be alive to feel pain he was quickly beginning to revise his initial estimation of his apparent good fortune. Having spent the best part of half an hour focusing his energies on trying to move either leg just a fraction of an inch with no success he had come to the disagreeable conclusion that he was indeed crippled. As he paused to consider the truth of his affliction, two distinct feelings fought for supremacy: dread and melancholy. A profound sense of loss washed over him in a rolling wave of emotion, leaving in its wake such a deep well of sorrow, that he almost wished the bullet had killed him.

Nathan stood silently at the door, guiltily observing the injured Southerner whose emotions were so clearly on display, his thoughts for once as readable as an open book. He felt his own sense of inadequacy, knowing that he had no skill that would help the gambler and that he had no answers for him. With a sigh he tapped on the door and crossed to the bedside. He would do the only thing he knew how; try and take away some of the hurt but he seriously doubted that anything he could say or do would alleviate the kind of pain that Ezra was feeling.

He carried the lamp to the table and leaned over the wounded man.

"Didn't think you'd be awake yet. Sorry I wasn't here."

Ezra raised a hand and waved away the healer's apology.

"No matter, Mr. Jackson. I have merely been passing the time in idle thought. I believe time is a commodity I will soon have in abundance, is it not?"

"You're gonna be fine, Ezra. Now let me take a look at these bandages."

Ezra laughed.

"Mr. Jackson, you are an incredibly poor liar. I am unable to feel or move my legs. That hardly justifies your optimistic prognosis of "fine"."

Nathan hung his head as he started to cut away the bandages.

"I'm sorry. I just don't know enough, Ezra. I think the bullet clipped your backbone and did some damage. You need to see a proper doctor."

Jackson was surprised when the Southerner laid a hand on his arm, an unusually affectionate gesture for the gambler. "Nathan, that would hardly change things. Knowing why something happened does not necessarily alter the result. Can a 'real' doctor undo what has already been done any more than you can?"

The healer covered the well-tended hand with his own, unable to answer the question but his silence only served to confirm to the injured man the hopelessness of his situation. Jackson focused his attention on the

bullet wounds once more only interrupting his ministrations to pour a generous measure of opium for the gambler. The least he could offer the troubled Southerner was some ease from the pain and the blessed release of sleep.

Four hours had been Larabee's instructions, so at first light Josiah gently shook the gunfighter's shoulder. Chris was awake in an instant, tensed and aware but quickly relaxing as he recognised his surroundings and the man leaning over him. The entire sequence from first touch to full awareness took less than a second and Josiah wondered at how the response would have differed if he had not been a friend. Even for Chris this morning's reaction was impressive; he was on a hair trigger and no mistake.

"Coffee's on."

Chris groaned, rested but hardly refreshed, deciding he could probably have spent a more comfortable night on his bedroll under the stars, and got to his feet.

"Be right there."

Ten minutes later, Buck found him outside, stripped to the waist and washing at the water pump. The mustached man stretched and glanced at the sun tipping over the horizon, an explosion of colour sending bands of pink and gold across the pale morning sky.

"Shaping up to be another hot one, pard."

Larabee shrugged back into his shirt, the fabric sticking to his still wet skin and slung his gunbelt over his shoulder.

"Reckon it's you, me, J.D. and Josiah. Nathan's got work enough. You want to split up or stick together?"

Buck slowly shook his head.

"You're really gonna do this aren't you? You know she's probably a long ways gone by now."

Larabee's head came up, eyes hard and uncompromising. "If your not up to this, Buck, say so."

Wilmington raised his hands in supplication, recognising the dangerous mood in his friend.

"Now hold on! I'm with you. Just think we could use a few more men."

"Fine!" Chris tucked in his shirt tails and savagely cinched his gun belt around his hips. "Just get Ezra and Vin out here and saddled up. Maybe Mary too?"

Buck ducked his head. When Chris was being reasonable he was hard to deal with, when he was being unreasonable he was impossible.

"Mary mightn't be such a bad idea," he observed, wickedly, "Don't have no problem with shootin' a man in the back neither."

Larabee's glare could have melted brass but Buck knew when it was time to quit and with a grin he turned on his heel and ran up the front steps shouting for J.D.

"And where the hell do you think you're goin'?"

Tanner jogged down the steps, with a little more care than usual but otherwise resembling pretty much the old Vin. He was dressed in reasonably fitting tan moleskins, a white shirt that was just a little too large, a pair of shiny black boots and, unless Chris was mistaken, was wearing Ezra's gunbelt with the Remington in the holster. Injuries concealed, the only sign of his ordeal were the dark circles under his eyes and the feverish flush to his cheeks.

"First off, you need me. Second, ain't no way I'm gonna let you have that lady all to yourself."

Larabee looked up at Jackson who had followed the tracker out onto the porch.

"Nathan?"

"I ain't gonna be the one to try and stop him. You know he's got a head as thick as a mule."

"It's not his head I'm worried about."

The Texan turned to the gunfighter his icy blue stare brooking no argument.

"Look, Chris. I know we're friends an' all but, no offence, I ain't your responsibility. I'll either ride with you or I'll ride alone. If I feel lousy, or fall off my goddamn horse then that's my problem but I'm going after that bitch or I'll die in tryin'."

Larabee traded glares with the bounty-hunter for several seconds before nodding. Sentiments like that he could understand. Satisfied, Vin walked stiffly across to the stable and Chris referred to Nathan again.

"Is he goin' to be alright?"

"Only Vin knows how Vin feels. I've patched up everything I can but he's gonna be pretty sore for a few days yet. Just keep an eye on him, Chris."

Vin had saddled up Ezra's horse, appropriating his rifle as well as his tack and was already mounted when he came out of the stable. Chris suspected that it was because it had been a real effort for him to mount up and he had not wanted any witnesses, but said nothing. As Vin had already pointed out, it wasn't his responsibility.

Nathan took off his hat and threw it to the tracker.

"Here, you'll need this. Gonna be another broiler today."

Tanner nodded his thanks and settled the wide brimmed hat on his head, then looked at the other four men.

"We waitin' on somethin' in particular, or we gonna move sometime today?"

Chris finally broke into a grin and shook his head before gathering up the reins and spurring his horse forward.

"Let's go, boys, before Vin gets his fancy drawers into a knot."

The laughter drifted back to the healer and he hoped that they would still have something to laugh about at the end of the day.

The big horse stood perfectly still, so still that horse and rider might have been carved out of marble, rather than the living flesh and blood that they were. The woman had shed her hat, veil and hunting jacket and now wore only the long skirt and white blouse of her riding habit. She had unpinned her long hair and it hung in waves over her shoulders. It had been a hard ride but she had lost her pursuers quickly, their mounts no match for the mighty stallion. Katrin shifted slightly in the saddle and nudged the horse forward. No more running now. She wondered if it was safe to go back to the house. Surely Erik would have taken care of things by now. Damn that Southern stud! He had ruined everything.

She smiled wickedly, suddenly recalling the wonderful smoothness of his chest and the criss-cross ridges of scars on his back. How she would have loved the opportunity to pleasure that man. Pity Erik had shot him. She thought back to the one she had hunted last night. He indeed had been a man. Handsome, if a little rough around the edges, yet strong and fearless. So sad he had to die. They all died in the end. With a heavy sigh she glanced towards the sunrise. Time to go home.

The Texan slid down from his horse again, and crouched in the dust as his hand traced a shape on the ground. Chris leaned on the pommel of his saddle and waited for the tracker to offer a verdict. They had

covered a lot of ground and followed a lot of tracks but Chris was no longer sure that they ever really had a chance of catching up with Katrin. Now he was ready to call it quits, but Vin was like a dog with a bone. He had been up and down off that horse, each painful manoeuvre wearing him down, until the gunfighter thought the exhausted tracker would never be able to climb back into the saddle again.

They were all tired and distracted and Chris wondered if he shouldn't send the others back. He and Vin would continue in the hope of picking up her trail again. Tanner suddenly straightened and looked away towards the south, taking a few steps forward and trailing his horse by the reins. Squatting on his heels again he cast his keen gaze in a circle and laughed softly.

"Son of a bitch!"

Chris exchanged puzzled glances with the other four men and moved forward. "What is it?"

The Texan stood up. "She ain't goin' west, boys. She's goin' home."

"What?"

"She cut around in a big circle here," he swept his arm around taking in most of the distance they had covered in the last twenty minutes, "Tracks here are coming back, she's crossed her own trail and these are going back that way. I'm telling you, she's headed for home."

"You're sure. She's not just laying a false trail?"

The Texan looked as if Wilmington had just indecently propositioned him, which as far as Vin was concerned he had. "You sayin' I can't read a sign?"

Buck sighed. Everyone was so goddamned touchy.

"That's not what I'm sayin', Vin, but this is one tricky lady."

Vin pushed back his borrowed hat and squinted up at the mustached man. "Tricky, maybe but she ain't too smart."

Chris looked back over his shoulder his eyes shadowed with doubt and worry. The ranch. He started to turn his horse. "Don't know about that, Vin. Maybe she is the smart one after all. We're the ones sitting out here, while she's on her way back to the ranch! She's still way ahead of us whichever way you look at it."

Vin, his face a study in defeat, stood beside his horse preparing to mount and rested a hand on the horn, his head down, finally too tired to get back up in the saddle. "Sorry, Ezra."

Chris heard the barely audible whisper and in a sudden movement jumped from his own horse and strode across to Vin, grabbing him bodily and almost throwing him into the saddle.

"No! This ain't finished yet. Not by a long shot."

The gunfighter remounted and savagely dug his spurs in sending the animal forward in a burst of speed that was quickly matched by the other four riders, the start of a desperate race to an uncertain finish.

Ezra had found an escape from living the nightmare that plagued even his waking moments. He had found that the benefits of opium tincture went beyond easing the pain of his wounds and that, in sufficient quantities, it could also ease the pain in his soul. For a short time at least. The contents of the bottle on the nightstand had suddenly become as desirable as the finest French brandy. He knew he could reach it if he leaned over and stretched just a little; and while the action might send fresh waves of pain through his back and side, it was such a small discomfort really given the rewards. He shifted his shoulders and put his hand out, ignoring the tightening down his side as he inched progressively closer until his fingers were within reach of the medicine. As his gaze fell on the pistol -- Mary's pistol -- resting next to the bottle on the little

table, he hesitated and slowly changed direction, letting his hand close over the butt of the heavy weapon and drawing it towards him. Perhaps a different kind of escape had been offered to him. A more permanent solution should the burden become too much for him to bear.

Breathing heavily from the exertion he lifted the gun and rolled his upper body back onto the bed, allowing his hand, and the gun, to fall loosely on the coverlet by his leg. For a long moment he looked at the ugly weapon then held it up and promptly emptied out the cartridges. Carefully, he selected just one and loaded it into the gun before snapping it shut and spinning the chamber. After all, he had always been a gambler and the odds of five to one were pretty much in his favour. Not quite deciding his ultimate fate on the turn of a card but then one had to make do. Sadly he brought back the hammer and felt it click satisfyingly into place. Now, having found the means, all he had to find was the courage.

Nathan walked slowly from the stables and tried to imagine what it would be like not to be able to do that. Walking was something everyone took for granted but with each step he thought more and more of Ezra and how little he had been able to do for him. He didn't even know if the paralysis was likely to be permanent or not. He knew of similar wounds in the war that, once healed, had allowed the men to walk again. He decided that as soon as Chris and the others came back that he would ride over to Bitter Creek and talk to John Mason. The doctor knew Ezra, and Nathan was hoping that as well as giving him some advice on treatment he would be able to talk to him. He had seen some men who had been crippled, especially in the war, who either just gave up and died or who had found a way to take their own lives. Ezra was an intelligent man; he would have already weighed the consequences and realised that there was more to being paralysed than just being unable to walk, it meant the loss of control of his bodily functions too. He paused and sat for a moment on the porch steps. Hard thing for a grown man to take and no mistake. He wondered whether it might not be best to let Mary tend him for a while, then again that might just make things worse. Damn. He didn't know what the right thing to do was any more. How did you talk to a proud man about such things? Ezra would die rather than lose his dignity.

The healer experienced a moment of dreadful insight. Would he really rather die? A man like Ezra certainly might consider it an option. Had Buck been right after all? Would he have rather died than survive and remain a cripple? He wondered if he should sit with the gambler; just in case he got any ideas into that stubborn Southern head of his. The man could be as mule-headed as Vin when he wanted to be.

He glanced up as a rustle of skirts announced Mary's arrival.

"You been to see Ezra, Mrs. Travis?"

She wiped her hands on the apron she had appropriated from the kitchen.

"I looked in about an hour ago. I gave him some more medicine if that's alright. He was hurting so much."

Nathan frowned.

"That's mighty powerful stuff, Mary. Have to watch how much he's takin'. A man can get too much of a good thing."

Mary smiled and laid a hand in his arm. "I know, Nathan, but I don't think that's our main concern at the moment."

The healer ducked his head. "No. You're right. At least when he's sleepin', he ain't hurtin' so much." Or thinking, he added silently.

The newspaperwoman sat down on the step beside Jackson, her face a picture of sorrowful concern.

"He will be alright won't he, Nathan? He seems to have suffered so much."

"Sure had his share of misfortune lately, Mrs. Travis and no mistake. Truth is I can't say. The wounds are clean, but there's an awful lot of swelling in his back. Leastwise I didn't have to go digging around for a bullet." He sighed and stood up. "If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Travis, I think one of us should stay with him. I don't think this is the time for him to be alone."

She nodded. "Of course. Just call if you need anything."

The room was light and airy, drapes pulled back and the window opened but Ezra appreciated none of it. He was in twilight world filled with dark thoughts. The gun weighed heavily in his hand but he dared not relinquish it. He had hidden the brass cartridges under the feather mattress but he had kept a tight grip on the pistol. What he was going to do when Nathan came to change the bandages he had not yet decided but only because it was getting harder to follow his thoughts through to a logical conclusion. For now it was enough that he had the means to choose his own destiny and not even Mr. Jackson was going to deny him that.

His fingers wandered to the wound in his side and he wondered how something so small and insignificant could reduce him to his current sorry condition. He had almost bled his life away through that small hole; that and the troublesome wound in his back that he could not see or touch. Instead he had been saved from that fate to endure an even greater horror, where he was reduced to being half a man, or no man at all considering he was about as much use as a eunuch; facing the indignity of being reliant on others for his every need and knowing, that before long, he would be soiling himself like an infant. He would have pulled the gun from under the covers right then and loaded every chamber, abandoning the idea of Russian roulette that he had so carefully planned, but he heard heavy footsteps on the landing and immediately relaxed his hand. There would be time enough.

The healer carried a tray of food and Ezra hoped that he was not expected to eat. The very idea set his stomach roiling in vigorous protest. He turned his head to the wall and closed his eyes, shutting out Jackson's presence.

"Ezra, come on. You've got to eat. Mary made some broth and there's some barley water."

The Southerner sighed. "My dear Mr. Jackson, I trust you do not expect me to voluntarily eat such disgusting pap?" He was surprised that his words were slurred, and it took him an inordinate amount of time to complete the sentence.

He heard Nathan set down the tray on the side table but still refused to look in his direction. After several moments of silence he felt the man's hand first on his forehead then unceremoniously peeling his eyelids back one after the other to peer into his eyes. Whatever he saw there, he seemed unimpressed. "Ezra, look at me. You can't keep pretending I'm not here."

The man was undeniably persistent.

"Would that it were possible, Mr. Jackson," he retorted waspishly, "but you seem determined to torment me."

With a sigh he turned his head and opened his eyes, the shadowed sockets in a pale face accentuating the brilliant green of his irises.

Nathan held a cup to his lips, and he understood from the pungent aroma that he was being asked to drink some of the healer's medicinal tea. After a moment of deliberation he chose not to protest, aware of just how weak he really was. The bitter brew made him grimace and his stomach fluttered uncertainly but he kept it down. That done, Nathan sat down on the edge of the bed and gently checked over the dressing on

his side. He turned his upper body towards the wall to allow Jackson to inspect the wound in his back,, conscious of the fact that his legs remained stubbornly in the same position, no more than useless appendages.

"Still a lot of swelling, Ezra. Is it still painin' you?"

"It would cause me much less distress Mr. Jackson if you did not insist on regularly manhandling my injuries."

"Sorry, Ezra." He eased the gambler down again. "But I don't want you to start bleeding again or for those wounds to fester. Now are you going to have some of this broth or do I have to spoon feed it to you myself?"

The Southerner glanced at Jackson as if calculating the possibility of him carrying out his threat and decided he was not prepared to take the chance. He released his grip on the gun and brought his hand out from under the covers to accept the offered cup.

"Be it upon your own head if this returns with interest, Mr. Jackson. I confess that I'm feeling decidedly unwell."

"That's likely the opium," explained Nathan, "You'll feel better with something in your stomach."

"As long as it stays there," the gambler muttered, irritably.

He finished the broth, complained bitterly about the barley water, and asked for a whiskey chaser. A request that was promptly refused by a stern-faced Jackson.

"You must be feelin' better," he observed drily, "You're starting to complain."

"How fares our Mr. Tanner? I understand from Miz Travis that he was somewhat worse for wear after his ordeal."

Jackson sighed still annoyed that the tracker had chosen to ignore his injuries and ride off on a wild goose chase.

"Damned fool, don't know when to lie down and stay put," he grumbled, "Can't hardly get himself up on a horse and he's gone chasing halfway across the territory looking for that woman!"

Ezra leaned back and stared down at his toes, suddenly envious of the Texan. "A wasted gesture indeed, Mr. Jackson, as I have no doubt that she is now many miles from here."

Jackson shrugged. "I hope you're right, Ezra. The further the better."

Something was definitely wrong.

The horse stopped and pawed the ground impatiently but she held him on a tight rein. No activity. No sign of life at all in fact. The corral was empty, its gate standing open, and for a very brief moment she mourned the loss of her horses. They had gone -- the servants, the *caballeros* -- craven cowards all of them! Cold fury in her eyes she again scanned the ranch house. Someone would pay for this! Slowly she walked the horse down the shallow incline and drew the shotgun from its scabbard. If there was anyone still remaining who had not run away, they would soon wish that they had gone with the others. Dismounting she secured the stallion behind the barn and crept along the wall, slipping noiselessly through the slightly open door.

Katrin's nose twitched. She smelled blood. Blood and the slight taint of corruption. Something dead. In the musty darkness she padded softly to where Kia, the falcon, was still sleeping hooded and secured to its perch. Quietly she released the thongs and slipped off the hood, watching as the big bird blinked its eyes and swivelled its head looking keenly around the barn.

"Go," she whispered, "Fly free. Hunt well."

She turned and looked around. Death was here. She walked slowly her eyes sweeping the straw-covered floor. There. She stopped, not breathing. An untidy bundle dropped in the corner. Her hand came slowly to her mouth. Erik? Several slow steps and she was looking down on the grey, slack-featured face of her brother. The salon carpet was thrown partly across him and she could smell the blood, rich and rank. Erik! Kneeling she touched the marbled cheek. Cold as ice. Gently she stroked the blond hair falling lankly across his brow, ignoring the gaping wound in his neck. In a last gesture of farewell she kissed her gloved fingers and touched them to his blued lips. Someone would definitely pay for this. Holding the shotgun loosely under her left arm she moved out of the barn; searching, stalking, hunting.

The woman was very blonde. She was throwing corn to the scattered chickens in the yard and they promptly milled around her feet clucking and flapping. Katrin marked her for later attention and, unseen, continued around the back of the house and through the back door. She scanned the kitchen, offended that strangers were using her house so casually. *Peasants!* There had been two horses in the stable, so there was at least one other person in the house. Her house. There was a sound from the stairs and she moved quietly into the salon, concealing herself behind the door.

The black man, one of Herr Standish's friends she recalled, jogged down the stairs with a tray in his hands and turned towards the kitchen. *Making themselves very much at home.* Quickly and quietly she moved lightly up the steps and onto the landing, darting out of sight then checking through the rooms. One door was open and she slid sinuously along the wall to peer around the jamb.

Katrin almost laughed. It was too delicious for words. The Southerner. Ezra. In bed. She could see the white bandage above his waist, a spot of blood showing at his right side and her delight increased. She shuddered, remembering the feel of his skin against her fingers and wondered if he would still object to her touch. She watched a moment longer and decided that he was probably in no condition to object to anything. Breathless with anticipation she moved along the upstairs hall. Yes, indeed. Someone was going to pay.

Nathan yawned and stretched, more tired than he cared to admit. Between tending Vin and watching over Ezra he'd had precious little sleep and it was finally starting to catch up with him. With things now quiet, he thought it might be time to at least catch an hour or so. He strolled out to the yard and caught up with Mary, yawning wide enough to crack his jaw before he could speak. He apologised.

"Sorry, Mrs, Travis but I've just got to get some shut-eye. Will you be alright with Ezra? I just finished tending him and although he cussed and moaned he did have the broth." He chuckled. "Even asked me for a shot of whiskey from that hip flask of his."

She brushed the chicken feed from her hands and walked with the healer back towards the house. "Don't worry, Nathan, I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will, ma'am. I'll be bunking down in the parlor if you need me."

That the wiry Texan was still in the saddle was as much a surprise to himself as it was to the other four men riding with him, and more attributable to tenacity than common sense. The punishing pace was beginning to tell and once or twice he had almost slipped from the saddle. Now Chris rode almost knee to knee with him and he knew the gunslinger would see to it that he did not fall. The anticipation of catching up with the woman was keeping all other thoughts at bay; thoughts of the heat that consumed his body, thoughts of the sickness that rose in waves from his stomach, thoughts of the raging pain in his arm and the ache in his head. He had shot and killed women before. Some of them were worse than the men he'd

claimed bounty on, and some had tried to kill him first. Doing it again would not be difficult and, in this case, it would be more like delivering the mercy stroke to a rabid animal. He would look upon it as performing a public service. He had no doubt that Chris was in a similar frame of mind and would be with him all the way, but in the end he knew he had to do it alone. What was it that Josiah was so fond of reminding them: vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord? Well, the Lord would have to stand back this time unless He had taken to dispensing justice with a forty-five and got there before Vin Tanner because, with all due respect to the Almighty, he didn't have time to wait. He felt a grip like a vice on his upper arm and automatically shifted his seat. Damn! He had almost done it again. He spared a grateful nod to Larabee and dug in his knees. Jesus, how much further could it be?

Tanner almost slid from the saddle as Chris sharply reined his own horse in and simultaneously grabbed for the other horse's bridle before the Texan, unheeding, charged on alone. He barely saved himself by grabbing the horse's mane, wincing as his crotch slammed into the unyielding pommel.

"Goddamn it, Chris!"

Larabee dismounted and Vin had no choice but to follow suit as the same powerful grip that had kept him in the saddle now jerked him out of it, and pulled him down onto the ground. It finally registered that they were behind a small rise that backed onto the von Hohenstaffel ranch house. J.D. silently took the reins from his hand, gathering up the horses and ground-tethering them a few yards up the track and well out of sight.

"Keep your head down," snapped the gunfighter, tightly, "No good charging in there all piss and vinegar. Gotta play this smart."

Vin got down beside Larabee and peered into the natural depression, wishing he had his spy glass. His spy glass, his mare's leg, his buckskins...shit, that bitch owed him plenty. His body protested as he shimmied forward on his elbows and he wondered if he would be able to get up again. Being on a horse was one thing, trying to get his abused body to co-operate on foot was something else entirely. Larabee was giving instructions and he saw Josiah and Buck peel off in opposite directions, J.D. was pointing over to the east and Vin followed his line of sight. The black stallion had been tethered in the shade behind the barn, almost out of sight but not quite. The fleeting thought crossed his mind that he'd make a tracker out of Dunne yet.

"Come on, Vin. J.D., cover us." Any concerns about getting up from the ground immediately vanished as Chris unceremoniously hauled him to his feet and dusted him off. "You with me, pard?"

Tanner unholstered his borrowed gun -- Ezra's gun -- and focused his attention on the ranch house.

"All the way, Cowboy. Let's go."

Mary did not like the house. She found its overbearing opulence distasteful although she remembered that as a child and as a young woman she too had lived in such splendid surroundings. She smiled inwardly wondering just when she had changed from an Eastern belle into a simple frontiers-woman. Stephen had been responsible for that. New Mexico territory had been an eye-opener for her but she had risen to the challenge and now actually relished her independence. It had been difficult, and losing Stephen had not made it any easier, but she had come to terms with his passing and she felt that her decision to remain in the territory rather than return back east to her family had been justified many times over.

She certainly did not like the house now it was empty. The sensation of being alone in a hostile environment pressed upon her and although she kept reminding herself that she was safe, that Nathan was just a few rooms away, her unease persisted. The recollection that she had shot a man, had contributed to his death, made her shudder involuntarily and she wondered how it felt for someone like Chris, or Vin even,

who had killed so many in the course of their lives. Yet, she felt no guilt; the man had been about to kill Ezra and had been responsible for the horrors inflicted on Vin, but she did feel as if somehow the experience had sullied her.

Dragging her thoughts back to the present she listened to the creakings and minute noises of the rambling house and could not help but wonder when the others were going to return. More than anything she wanted to get back to town; to the newspaper, to normality, and to forget what she had seen and done over the past twenty-four hours. With a sigh she moved towards the stairs and slowly ascended. Ezra. She could at least try to offer some comfort to the Southerner, although she did not know what would be the right thing to say to a man who had within a moment of time gone from being a vigorous, sophisticated and charming rogue to an invalid, robbed of his vitality by a small piece of lead no bigger than a pea.

On the landing she paused, sure she had sensed movement. She hoped Ezra was not about to try anything foolish. If he tried to get out of bed alone she had no idea what damage he might do.

"Ezra?"

Suddenly aware that something was not right, Mary whirled and connected with the butt of a rifle slamming against the side of her head. A split second of coloured flashes exploded before her eyes before darkness descended and she crumpled bonelessly to the floor.

He had been dozing. Nathan had been right, the food had made him feel better and the disgusting herbal concoction had chased away his headache and, he believed, reduced his fever. At first he had been more than a little piqued that the healer had pocketed the opium bottle on his last visit, removing the temptation for him to slip away from harsh reality but, with his head clearer, his despair did not seem quite so overwhelming.

The room was warm and sunny, and he actually felt some degree of comfort in reclining against downy softness. In fact, if the crushing weight of his affliction had not been so great he might actually have enjoyed the luxury of lying abed in the middle of the day. Since his change in career it had been an aspect of his former life which he had missed the most. His companions invariably rose with the sun and expected him to do the same, with no consideration that he had often only fallen into his bed scant hours before, after a full night at the gaming table. He recalled that now-distant part of his life when he had won and lost fortunes in a single night -- he had been something of a legend on the Mississippi -- and had spent nights at the gaming tables and long lazy days in bed, more often than not with a charming companion with whom he could pass the time.

A wave of sadness passed over him and he brought his thoughts back to the present. That life was gone and, if he admitted it, he did not miss it as much as he would have others believe. This little backwater that he had wound up in, a brief stopover to replenish his dwindling cash reserves on his way to California, had staked a claim on him in a way that nowhere else in the world had managed. Not Paris, Vienna, New York or, for that matter, any other cosmopolitan city he had passed through in his adult life, had managed to hold him in quite the same way that this godforsaken New Mexico widening in the road had done. The difference was not in the location, which was as hostile and uncivilised as anything he had ever previously experienced, but in the people with whom he had been obliged to associate.

A loose alliance formed in a time of need had grown into something even he had difficulty explaining, but the end result had been a strange and unique sense of camaraderie that was foreign to his very nature. And these men had become his friends.

"Ezra?" Mary's voice.

He opened his eyes, surprised at the strength of feeling his thoughts had succeeded in generating, and quickly composed himself.

"Mrs. Travis?" He heard a soft bump and leaned a little way forward, curious that Mary had called out to him yet had not appeared. "Mary?"

Damn! He started to throw back the covers then stopped and laughed softly. What exactly was he intending to do? March out into the hall and investigate?

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," he muttered, trying not to recall the last time he had used that particular tenet considering it had put him in this very situation, and took hold of his right leg.

The effort left him sweating, and he knew he had started his wounds bleeding afresh but he was at least sitting up on the edge of the bed. It was a decidedly odd experience to see his feet planted firmly on the floor but of having no sensation that they were in contact with the polished wooden boards. He glanced behind him at the gun lying in the bed and impulsively reached for it with his left hand, tucking it out of sight under the rumpled covers. It would not do for Mary or Nathan to see that he had been sleeping with a loaded gun in his hand. In all honesty, he was feeling slightly foolish now and blamed an over indulgence in tincture of opium for the dark and confused state of mind that had driven him to consider taking his own life.

"Mary?" he called again. "Nathan?"

The silence that greeted him sent a flutter of apprehension through him and only served to heighten his sense of vulnerability. He slammed the heel of his hand down on his unfeeling thigh, a mark of his frustration. Goddamn it!

"Herr Standish! Please do not get up on my account. After all I am quite aware that you have suffered an accident. In fact I am surprised that you are still alive. Not unhappy you understand, merely surprised."

The cold hand of dread closed over his heart and he found himself looking straight into deep blue eyes that reflected only madness and the menacing twin bores of a double barrelled shotgun; a rather fine 12 bore Purdey if he was not mistaken and capable of removing quite a significant portion of his anatomy. Ezra swallowed and permitted his hands to fall to his sides gripping the edge of the mattress. He had no intention of admitting to the Countess that he could not have risen on any account even if she had threatened to shoot him where he sat.

"As indeed am I, my dear. However your brother fired in haste and here I am."

She glanced around the room.

"Your friends have gone."

"I believe my associates are currently attempting to ascertain your whereabouts."

She laughed and he moved his left hand closer to the disarranged sheets as if to cover himself; the action drawing the eye of the woman to his state of undress.

"Please, you are too modest. I take no offence."

His fingers closed around the butt of the gun and he wondered if it would be possible to fire before she could cock her own weapon and pull the triggers. He was a betting man after all and he was prepared to wager that he had faster reflexes but of being then able avoid being cut in half by the explosive power of the shotgun, he was not so confident. A bluff then and, when she held all the aces, that was possibly the only option remaining to him. He moved with a speed that impressed even himself, the revolver becoming an extension of his arm, as he levelled the heavy weapon at the woman.

If she was in any way surprised she did not show it.

"Why, Herr Standish. That is no welcome to extend to a lady."

He snorted in amusement. "That is simply because, my dear, you are no lady."

She sighed sadly.

"I think maybe Erik was right after all. You have no manners." She raised the shotgun a little to point in the centre of his chest. "A pity it has to end this way."

Ezra realised that in a moment that she would increase the pressure on the triggers and without hesitation he fired -- the hammer falling with an ominous click on an empty chamber.

Vin was spent. Done in. He should have listened to Chris but he had been too ornery, too blasted pig-headed and mulish to listen and Chris had given him the rope that he had now played out far enough for him to hang himself. Should've stayed behind. Would've been there when the bitch came back. Should've known she would come back. His ears were filled with the sound of his own laboured breathing and his palm was slick with sweat around the butt of the weapon in his hand. Ezra's gun -- just didn't feel right. He missed the comforting weight of the mare's leg in his hand.

"Vin?"

He shook the sweat out of his eyes and threw down Nathan's hat. Didn't feel right either. Nothing felt right; like he was wearing not only someone else's clothes but someone else's skin.

"Vin?" More insistent. He dredged the last of his strength from a tiny reserve fuelled by little more than resolve and turned to the source of the voice; an anxious-looking Chris Larabee.

"I'm okay."

He focused on the ranch and pointed to the back door. Chris' s nod told him he would be right behind him. Buck and Josiah had already swung around the front and J.D. was bringing up the rear. Running crabwise and making himself as small a target as possible he crossed the yards of open space and stopped just outside the back door, pressed hard against the jamb. Chris joined him taking the other side of the door and he grinned, the feeling of detachment increasing but his desire for activity driving him on. The blood sang in his veins and his weariness momentarily eased. She was so close he could feel it.

Tanner ran in a crouch along the hall to the foot of the stairs and saw, out of the tail of his eye, Buck skitter through the front door with Josiah close behind. He held out a hand, signalling silence and cocked his head to one side, listening, waiting. Voices. He pointed upwards and felt Chris so close behind him that under other circumstances he might have commented about Larabee gettin' a mite too friendly. Right now it didn't matter. She was here somewhere, and he intended to be the one that found her. He took several deep breaths knowing that to negotiate the stairs was not going to be easy. He didn't fancy being a sitting duck for someone at the top of the stairs with all the advantages of elevation. He glanced down the hall again and saw Nathan appear from the front parlor, but his eye caught a sudden glint of light and he realised that the mirror on the hall-stand gave him a clear view to the top of the landing. Nothing. He swung around the ornate newel post and crept up the stairs, his heart hammering as he tried to combine stealth with speed and keep himself from getting his fool head blown off. By the time he reached the landing and crouched against the wall while he scanned the hallway, the sweat was running down his face and he was feeling light-headed. He wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve and winced as a stab of pain reminded him that his arm was heavily bandaged for a reason. He struggled to bring his ragged breathing under control and tried to pinpoint the sound of the voice. There it was again. Ezra.

"...you are no lady."

It sure as hell wasn't Mary he was talking to.

"You got that one right, Ezra," he whispered to himself and edged closer to the next doorway along; the room he knew Nathan was using for the gambler.

Ezra closed his eyes. He was a dead man. The choice was no longer his; and now the decision had been made for him, he knew it was not what he wanted. He heard the woman laugh again and knew that he could not hope to find a loaded chamber before she could cut him down. He had lost his only chance. With a sigh of resignation he opened his eyes again, determined that he would not die a coward.

A movement on the landing caught his eye; just a momentary flash of black, and he understood then that he was no longer alone but the click of the Countess cocking the hammers rudely reminded him that it was a little too late for him.

"I would say *auf wiedersehen* but I don't think we will meet again, unless it is in hell."

In a desperate move to avoid the coming blast of the shotgun, Ezra mustered all his strength and threw himself forward onto the floor. He landed heavily as his paralysed legs dragged uselessly behind, and swearing, brought up his gun in a reflex action as Vin stepped through the door.

"And that's just where you're going lady!"

The first bullet struck her high in the back and she jerked forward, stunned surprise painted on her face, as her finger tightened reflexively on the trigger and one barrel discharged harmlessly into the wall. Spinning she turned to face the Texan, blood already welling up in her mouth as she tried to draw a wavering bead on the man who had shot her. The second bullet struck her in the hip and she grunted, staggering from the force of it but managing to stay on her feet, her face twisting in a combination of hate and agony. The Texan took another step forward and fired a third shot.

From his vantage point on the floor, watching the woman bleed, seeing her finger still curled around the trigger, the awful reality dawned on the Southerner that Vin was not going to kill her quickly. He was sure the former bounty-hunter could have done it with one, clean shot, but there was a touch of madness in his eyes and he was deliberately prolonging the end; inflicting pain with no intention of showing mercy.

"Dear God, Vin," breathed the gambler, "Finish it!"

The shotgun blasted again as Katrin managed to pull the second trigger and the tracker's head jerked to one side as the shot creased his left ear. He fired a fourth time and the woman went onto her knees clutching her belly, her mouth a wide, silent scream.

"Goddamn, Vin! That's enough!"

A figure in black swept into the room roughly shouldering the Texan aside. In one smooth motion he brought up his gun and delivered the killing stroke through the centre of the forehead; ending it. Slowly she slumped forward and lay still.

Vin stared at the body on the floor, the gun still held loosely at his side, as he swayed unsteadily. A few moments later his knees buckled and he dropped like a stone, connecting with the hard boards with a solid thud. Slowly, sadly, Chris dropped to one knee beside the Texan and gently took the gun from his nerveless fingers before crossing to the fallen gambler.

"You okay, Ezra?"

"I'm still here, Mr. Larabee and for now that's more than I could have hoped for and certainly all I can ask for."

She was not dead. He had emptied his gun and she would not die, but kept coming towards him, her mouth open in a silent scream but instead of sound, thick, dark blood kept welling out from between her lips and her finger was pulling back on the trigger. The shotgun exploded and Vin jerked back screaming.

"Nooooo!"

He sat up, panting; the sweat running off him in rivulets, as he shook from the rigors of his fever and the memory of his dream. A firm hand pushed him back against the pillows and he felt the welcome touch of a damp cloth on his burning body and a cup at his lips. He drank thirstily but as soon as he had emptied the cup, he craved more.

"She's dead!"

Nathan dipped the rag in the basin and sponged the Texan's sweating body again, feeling the heat from him through the cloth.

"Yes. She's dead."

Some of the tension went out of him but he immediately started to shiver and Nathan knew it was not because he was cold but rather because he was too hot and the fever was reaching a critical phase. All he could do was try and keep the tracker from burning up and hope the fever would break overnight. He poured another cup of medicinal tea, trusting the combination of feverfew and coneflower would bring some results. Vin grabbed the cup in shaking hands and drained it then fell back, his head tossing restlessly from side to side in his delirium.

"Can I help?"

Nathan glanced up and frowned.

"Mary! You should be restin' up. That was quite a whop you took."

The woman fingered the bruise above her right ear and gave a half smile.

"I'm fine, Nathan. Just a headache." She looked down at the sharpshooter. "And I thought you might need some help here."

"You sure you're feelin' alright?"

"Positive," she replied firmly, "Now what can I do?"

Nathan stood up. "You just sit right here, ma'am, and keep washing him down. I need to make some more tea."

Mary gently bathed the man's abused body, thinking that she seemed to be making a habit lately of tending to these men. He did not seem to be aware that she was there, in fact at times he seemed to be merely sleeping and at others he would toss and moan in a fever of delirium. His brown hair hung in lank, damp strands plastered across his forehead and neck, and she smiled fondly remembering his embarrassment when she had offered to wash it for him. Surely that wasn't only yesterday? He had been feverish then, but now he was truly sick. In obvious distress, Vin rolled his head from side to side mumbling incoherently, and she jumped back as he struggled to sit up, his eyes suddenly wide with fear.

"Not dead! She's not dead!"

Mary moved to sit on the edge of the bed and instinctively threw a protective arm around him, drawing him to her, and resting his head on her shoulder. Comforting him as she would her own son, smoothing his hair and murmuring reassurances as she rocked him. After a moment or two he settled, eyes closing, and as his breathing became easier she continued to hold him, bracing herself against the headboard of the bed and allowing him to rest against her. Reaching across to the basin on the night stand with one hand, she

squeezed water from the rag and started bathing his face again.

Nathan smiled at the unexpected sight as he came back through the door. He could hear Mary murmuring as she urged him to drink from the cup she held to his lips, then returned to cooling his fever, applying the wet cloth freely to his hot, dry, skin.

He set down his herbal decoction and leaned over the tracker, gauging his temperature with the back of his hand across his forehead. He looked at the newspaperwoman and shook his head in wonder; whatever she was doing was working. There was no doubt that the Texan's state of agitation, if not his fever, had lessened.

"Looks like you got the magic touch, ma'am. He looks a mite easier than when I left."

Mary rested her cheek against the top of Vin's head and absently rubbed his back.

"Not magic, Nathan. He's just hurt and frightened. No different to Billy really."

Nathan cocked an amused eyebrow at the analogy. "No, ma'am." Except Vin was certainly no little boy. A fact Mary might very well discover if the sheet covering him slipped very much further.

Ezra felt extremely vulnerable. A sensation he didn't much like. Nathan had insisted that he lie on his stomach and rest, so he was face down on the bed, his head cradled on his outstretched arms when Chris walked in. He didn't have to see him, he recognised the jingling spurs. With some difficulty he turned his head to face the stern-faced gunfighter. He kept movement of his upper body to a minimum having quickly learned that anything but the smallest shift in position would reward him with waves of pain which he had already decided he should avoid at all costs.

"Please excuse my back, Mr. Larabee, but as you can see, I am presently indisposed."

The older man dropped into a crouch beside the bed at eye level and held a gun out where Ezra would be able to see it.

"Yours, I think."

Ezra's glance at the weapon was noncommittal. "I believe you will find that to be Mrs. Travis' gun."

"But it was in your hand."

"Your point being, Mr. Larabee?"

"Can you tell me why this gun has only one bullet?"

"It's no longer of any consequence."

Chris's voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "Then let me tell you, Ezra. You were playing a goddamn game!" He rose abruptly; a menacing figure standing over the injured Southerner. "I know you're a bettin' man but seems to me that odd of 1 to 5 are pretty slim when you're gamblin' with your life!" In a move that both startled and disturbed the gambler, he angrily set the chamber spinning before aiming the gun just above the Southerner's head. "So, let's see whether you would have drawn a losin' hand."

He pulled the trigger and Ezra flinched as the hammer fell, clicking loudly on an empty chamber.

"Well, I guess you're lucky this time."

He continued to fire, cocking and firing with impressive speed until, on the fourth pull of the trigger, the hammer found the live round and the shot cracked over Ezra's head blasting a hole in the wall and showering the bed with wooden splinters.

"So, how many times would you have pulled the trigger, Ezra? Just once? Twice? Every day until you finally hit the right one?"

He threw the Colt on the bed beside the pale Southerner, his expression a mixture of fury and disgust.

"I told you once before never to run out on me again, Ezra. Just 'cos you can't walk doesn't change anything!" Larabee started to stalk out, but quickly wheeled back and snatched up the gun. "No more games!"

The gambler dropped his head onto the pillow, his heart frantically hammering in an apparent bid to escape his chest. "I shall take that as an order then shall I, Mr. Larabee?"

Josiah shovelled the last spadeful of earth onto the mound, wiping the sweat from his face as he leaned on the tool and surveyed his handiwork. The freshly turned soil stood out like fresh wounds in the ground and the preacher could not help but whisper a prayer for the unfortunate and misguided souls now lying forever beneath the earth.

"Thanks, Josiah."

He glanced up in surprise to find Chris strolling towards him. Peering keenly at the gunfighter and noting the deeply etched lines around the eyes; the obvious signs of tiredness giving way to something else. Worry? The gunfighter toyed with the hat he now held in his hand looking askance at the graves. No doubt about it, the man was troubled. Josiah drove the spade into the ground, dusted off his hands and picked up his coat.

"Chris. Everything alright?" He paused, frowning, "Vin?"

Larabee smiled, amused at the assumption that his first concern would be for the tracker, and shook his head.

"Anything I can do? I'm a mighty good listener."

He hesitated for a moment before looking again at the two mounds.

"Josiah, I've put a lot of people in the ground in my time, some of them I'm not particularly proud of and I never killed a woman before today but when it comes down to it, it ain't any different to killin' a man." He

switched his gaze back to the older man. "But you know, even in the worst times of my life I ain't ever once thought about killing myself."

Josiah sighed and started to walk back to the ranch house, gripping Larabee's shoulder with a firm hand and urging him to walk alongside.

"Would this be Ezra we're talking about?"

"Goddamn, Josiah! He was getting ready to shoot himself."

"Understandable, Chris. He's a proud man."

Chris stopped in surprise. "You think what he was going to do was right? Josiah..."

The preacher held up a hand cutting Chris off mid-sentence.

"I said it was understandable, not that it was right. Just put yourself in his place right now, Chris. He's been badly hurt, his independence and his dignity have been ripped away from him and right now he's looking into a future where all he can see is life as a cripple. For a man like Ezra -- for any man -- that's hard medicine to swallow."

Chris stopped and guiltily kicked the ground. "I just whaled into him, Josiah. Accused him of trying to run out on me again."

Josiah laughed softly. "Well, maybe it was the best thing you could have done, Chris. I don't think Ezra's likely to be thinking clearly right now, and a dose of Larabee common-sense might not go astray,"

"So, what do I do now, Josiah? How do you keep a man from wanting to die?"

The preacher sighed and slowly started walking towards the ranch house. "You have to give him a reason to want to live."

The fever had broken a few hours after midnight and the tracker had fallen into a sleep of exhaustion, no longer tormented by the dreams of delirium; his breathing deep and regular, his body relaxed. The man, indeed the whole room, smelled of sweat and the sour odour of sickness, mingled with the sharp tang of herbs, but the crisis was over.

He woke just before dawn, every muscle aching, feeling as if he had spent two days in the desert without water. He stirred but found it difficult to move, and the sensation of a weight across his chest momentarily alarmed him. Too weak to pull himself away he slowly turned his head, eyes widening, as he saw a tumble of blonde hair cascading over his shoulder and realised that the weight he could feel was Mary's arm lying across his upper body. She had fallen asleep with her head on the mattress beside him; one arm thrown protectively across his body, while her other hand rested lightly on his arm. A tiny frown creased his forehead then, tentatively, he moved his arm and rested it across the woman's back. His fingers gently stroked the silken hair, his touch delicate as if afraid the slight motion might waken her. He remembered then Mary's voice talking to him through his fever, her soft touch soothing him and he sighed at the memory, a slow smile spreading across his face as he closed his eyes again and drifted easily into a restful sleep.

She was gone when he woke again to full daylight, to clean sheets and a feeling of well being that was at odds with his sallow complexion and weakened physical state. His limbs felt boneless, and as if they were made of lead, a feeling that Nathan assured him would go as soon as he had begun to eat and drink again. He had already downed several cups of Jackson's tea, a measure of his body's need for fluid that he had done so without protest. Now he just wanted to get up.

"Damnit, Vin! Don't you ever learn? You ain't going nowhere yet."

"I don't want to go anywhere, Nathan. I just want to get out of this blasted bed."

He struggled to get up, ignoring his state of undress in his determination to rise and roughly pushing aside the bed covers

"Uh, Vin, you might want to think twice about gettin' up right now." Intent on his goal Tanner was in no mood to be given any advice or detect the warning in the healer's voice until: "What do you think, Mrs. Travis?"

The Texan's head flew up in sudden alarm as, mortified, he clutched desperately at the covers he had been so quick so throw aside and dragged them back in front of him to cover his nakedness.

"Mary!"

The newspaperwoman stood in the doorway of the room, with a bundle of clothing over her arm, desperately trying not to smile. The slight flush of blood in her cheeks was nothing in comparison to the blush that darkened Tanner's face, but she stepped forward and held out the freshly washed clothes.

"I think, you might want to consider putting these on before you decide to go rushing off anywhere, Vin."

Nathan laughed richly as the tracker, defeated, slid back into bed and defensively drew the covers up to his chin.

"No, ma'am. I figure I'll just stay right here if it's all the same to you."

The main street of the town looked just the way it had when he had ridden out of town some four days before. The day was still hot, the street was still dusty, the citizens even more lethargic, but it was business as usual and there was barely a second glance for the buggy being driven down the street. No, nothing had changed -- except him.

Nathan had wanted him to travel in the wagon bed. He had refused. He may not be able to sit astride a horse but he would not be carted back to town like some sack of grain in the back of a wagon. So he had won a small victory and, in spite of the pain it caused him, he was at least riding back into town with a modicum of dignity. Not that anyone but himself would ever know the agony that sitting for several hours in a jolting buggy had caused him. But, now that they had finally arrived, he felt a rising sense of panic. His infirmity would be on public display; a source of curiosity and comment, an open invitation to pity -- and even ridicule. He swallowed hard wondering if he could get through the next few minutes without being violently ill.

Nathan brought the buggy to a halt outside the boarding house and set the brake.

"You ready for this, Ezra?"

Amazing. The man was a clairvoyant as well as a de facto physician.

"Never in a thousand years, Mr. Jackson."

"Ain't no easy way to do this, you know that."

He knew. The sarcastic reply that automatically rose to his lips died as he recognised the genuine concern in the healer's warm brown eyes. Instead he took a deep breath and braced himself giving a sharp nod. If he was to lose his dignity he could at least hang onto his pride even if he was down to the last shred of that particular commodity.

"Then might I suggest we get this over with as quickly as possible, before my resolve deserts me altogether."

Jackson lightly squeezed his shoulder and nodded. "Let's do it."

Josiah and Nathan had brought him inside. Not, as he had expected, carried like a child but suspended between the shoulders of the two bigger men. His feet had dragged uselessly but at least he was upright and his passage from the buggy to the boarding house had attracted scant attention, indeed little more than if the two men had just escorted him from the saloon to his lodgings after an overindulgence in alcohol. He laughed inwardly. Priorities, Ezra. Certainly preferable to be considered a drunk than a cripple.

He ignored the throbbing pain in his side and the burning in his back in his relief to be home and welcomed the softness of the feather mattress as the two men carefully lowered him to the bed. He hardly noticed that he was being undressed, as the reality of his situation now that he was back in his own room flooded back ten-fold. Was this room to become his prison -- the centre of his universe? Somehow the thought saddened him more than anything that had come before. His life reduced to this one small, cheerless room; rented accommodation in a public boarding house? Lord, if this was all he had to look forward to then he should have loaded the gun with all six bullets, leaving nothing to chance, while he had the opportunity -- and then had the courage to pull the trigger -- and the Devil take the self-righteous Mr. Larabee!

"Ezra?"

The voice brought him out of his bitter reverie and he looked earnestly at the healer, his heart thudding in his chest and his throat so constricted he could hardly force out the words.

"Mr. Jackson. Tell me one thing, and I want you to swear upon your life that you will tell me the absolute, irrevocable, truth. Do you believe that I will walk again?"

Nathan opened his mouth, hesitated, closed it and looked in mute appeal to the preacher standing next to him. Ezra smiled, his brilliant green eyes reflecting only immeasurable sadness .

"Thank you. You have answered my question most eloquently, Mr. Jackson."

Sweat was coating his face and he was clenching his jaw so tightly that it ached. His clawed fingers gripped the pillow beneath his head with an almost savage ferocity in his determination not to make a sound. Dear Lord, would it never stop!

Lying face down he could not see his tormentor, and he had yet to decide whether that was a boon or a curse. He had the advantage of concealing his own expression but the disadvantage of not being able to gauge the reaction of the man currently examining him; John Mason, physician, surgeon and friend. Ezra suddenly gasped and wondered if Mason had suddenly forgotten that small detail as he believed he would be suffering less were he in the unfriendly hands of hostile Comanches. The hand on his shoulder made him realise that the pain had lessened to a dull ache and he lifted his head to look into the serious but annoyingly neutral face of the doctor. Ezra came to the conclusion that the doctor must be an accomplished poker player..

Eased once again onto his back by Nathan and Mason he waited, bringing his ragged breathing under control and more scared than he cared to admit, while John washed his hands in the basin on the washstand.

"Well, Dr. Mason..?" He prompted, then found himself lost for words. What was he going to say?

"Ezra, I'm going to be honest with you." The Southerner's stomach lurched and he held his breath. Dear God, he was going to hear the words he had dreaded since the moment John had laid practiced hands on him. "And the truth is that I can't give you a definite answer. I've seen a few similar injuries over my career and all of them have been different. All I can tell you is that there seems to be no damage to the spine itself. In fact I'd say you're a very lucky man because the one thing I can tell you with certainty is that if the bullet had hit just one more inch to the right you would never walk again."

Ezra felt the blood drain out of his face, pooling somewhere in the region of his belly and he felt that any moment he might faint dead away.

"The bullet has caused a great deal of local swelling and I believe that the pressure on the spine is the cause of the paralysis. If this is the case then once the swelling subsides you should regain some feeling."

"Some?"

"As I said, I can't give you a definite answer and I don't want to give you false hope, but if you ask me for my best estimation I'd say that your condition is temporary."

Ezra's head filled with the noise of rushing wind through his ears as Mason's voice suddenly faded to an extreme distance and his vision blurred, then the sharp tang of ammonia assailed his nostrils instantly clearing his head and he instinctively jerked away from the source. He waved away the offending bottle and drew in a deep breath.

"Good God! Are you trying to kill me, John?"

"My dear, Ezra," answered the doctor, mildly, "these are just smelling salts."

The gambler raised himself on one elbow, his green eyes blazing and his entire body stiff with indignation. "Smelling salts? I expected more from you! I'm no over-laced, self-indulgent female with an

attack of the vapours!"

Mason laughed and capped the small bottle. "No, but I must say you're very becoming when you swoon like that."

Ezra shook his head and breathed deeply trying to get the sting of the ammonia out of his nose, then suddenly he stopped and laughed softly. "Temporary?"

Mason sat down on the edge of the bed, his expression becoming serious.

"Wounds need time to heal, Ezra. And I will warn you now that you cannot make this happen any faster than nature intended. The only treatment I can recommend is patience and rest. I can't give you any more than that."

The Southerner reached out and grasped Mason's sleeve.

"You have already given me more than enough, John, if only because you have given me the one thing I feared to entertain -- hope."

Mason inclined his head and closed his hand over the gambler's in a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be back to see you again next week. Until then I'll leave you in Mr. Jackson's capable hands."

Ezra turned his gaze to the healer, a glint of wickedness in his eyes.

"I do believe, Mr. Jackson, that you may inform Mr. Larabee that it is now safe to restore my side-arms to me -- and with their full complement of bullets I might add."

Chris leaned casually against the door frame of the sheriff's office and looked thoughtfully across the street at the two men sitting on the verandah of the saloon. *Close call, Larabee. Nearly lost both of 'em. Why that should actually worry him had become a concern in itself. Gettin' soft maybe?* His eyes tracked to centre on the Texan. Vin, never a man for idle talk, had remained close-lipped about his ordeal although Chris knew he was still troubled by it. He also knew from experience that the scars that were visible were not always the ones that caused the most pain. Then there was Ezra. Smart-mouthed, double-dealing, wise-ass Southerner, who had achieved something that few people ever had. He had scared the bejesus out of him. For Christ's sake! He still had difficulty believing that had been going to kill himself. The smooth-talking con man, who could be a burr under everyone's saddle blanket, had been ready to take a gun to his head. What troubled him most was that he should care. Caring was the bear trap that one day snapped shut and ripped the heart right out of you; he had already learned that lesson the hard way. Best not to care, to feel, to become attached, for down that road just waited sorrow and pain.

He realised that he was no longer alone. Buck had joined him in the shadow of the doorway and was now following the direction of his gaze.

"Somethin' on your mind, pard?"

Chris flicked a glance at the ladies' man. "Nothin' in particular. Just thinking."

"Thinking that it's time to be movin' on maybe?"

Chris frowned. "What?"

"I've seen that look before."

Larabee shook his head, a half-smile forming on his lips. "Just thinking how things change, Buck."

Wilmington dug his thumbs in his belt and ducked his head.

"Know what you mean, Chris. One minute you just drift along, goin' from one cow town to another, hellraisin' and then movin' on, next minute you're startin' to put down roots. Scares the hell outta me, pard!

This town kinda takes a hold and ain't keen to let go, that's no mistake."

For a moment both men stared across the street at the two men outside the saloon.

"Ain' the town, Buck."

He pushed away from the jamb and walked slowly out onto the boardwalk. No, it was a lot more than the town.

Across the street, Tanner looked contemplatively at the cards in his hand, not really seeing them as his mind drifted. He had not yet managed to get through a day without being plagued by dark visions of being hunted like an animal; and the dull ache of his healing wounds was a constant reminder of something he desperately wanted to forget.

"Mr. Tanner, should I perhaps find some other way of entertaining myself while you come to a decision or have you succeeded in divining the meaning of life from these modest cards?"

Ignoring the gambler's sarcasm, and the cards in his hand, Vin raised his eyes to the Southerner.

"I ain't never got around to thankin' you, Ezra."

"Thanking me? For what? Allowing you to win that last hand? I assure it was nothing, as I fully intend to recoup my losses in full while relieving you of the burden of having to carry around any large sums of money."

"Hell, you know what I'm talking about!"

Standish collapsed the fan of cards between his hands and toyed with the five painted pasteboards.

"I rather believe you have Mr. Larabee to thank for that."

Vin put his cards down on the table and distractedly rubbed his injured thigh, not looking at the gambler.

"You too, Ezra. Bought me time."

"Not quite enough if you recall, Mr. Tanner," he replied softly.

The Texan picked up his cards again and flashed the gambler a brief smile. "Wrong, Ezra. Reckon it was just about enough. Still here ain't I?"

Standish glanced thoughtfully down at his legs, the shadow of regret momentarily passing across the Southerner's face, his response barely breathed. "As am I, Mr. Tanner. As am I."

Two weeks. Ezra was almost used to the routine but he knew he would never get used to the indignity of it all. Some days he just wanted to stay in bed; pull the covers over his head, draw the curtains and hibernate in the safety of his own room with no prying eyes to dwell on his continued infirmity, but Nathan was ruthless. Today was one of those days.

He was tired and he was angry and as each day passed, his resolve and his hope crumbled, eroded to nothing, as he began to realise that in spite of John Mason's optimistic words, he may yet be facing a lifetime of unending horror. As if the fact that Nathan had become an unlikely nursemaid was not sufficient to endure, Nathan had even begun to talk of contacting Maude, and the only thing that had so far prevented him was the fact that Ezra had refused to divulge her current whereabouts. Good God, the very thought of his mother descending upon the town and showering him with insincere sympathy send chills down his spine -- well, some of his spine at least.

He raised himself on his elbows and, not for the first time, wished that Erik von Hohenstaffel's bullet had done its work with more efficiency. He no longer wanted to put an end his own life but he could not help but think that it would have been better if he had not survived that night. What use was he now? Not that he had ever been much use to society, at least not before he stumbled across this town, and just when he was

beginning to think he had found a purpose it had been wrenched from him. As long as he could shuffle and deal a deck he would not go hungry; he had lived off his talents before and he could do it again but now it could only be through the indulgence of others. He also had to live with the consequences of his actions, and a hasty departure to avoid disgruntled townsfolk was out of the question in his current circumstances and how long could he go on making a living in one small town from his gambling alone? Indeed, how soon before his companions tired of him? How soon before he tired of himself? With a sigh he dropped back against his pillows and pulled the covers over his head and God help the man who tried to move him today.

A soft knock heralded Nathan's arrival and the Southerner burrowed deeper into the soft down pillow, wondering why Jackson even bothered with the formality when he was hardly in a position to refuse him entry.

From his cocoon of bed linen, he heard the familiar footsteps across the carpet and sighed.

"Go away."

Nathan put a gentle hand on his shoulder and he shrugged it off.

"Come on. Can't stay in bed all day, Ezra."

"I am asking you to leave, Mr. Jackson. I would appreciate it if you did so."

"Ezra? You feelin' poorly?"

The Southerner slowly drew the covers away from his face. "I just want to be left alone! Is that too much to ask, or have I now become public property?"

Jackson stood for a long moment and looked down at the gambler. "Is that really what you want, Ezra? You want me to go?"

"Goddamn it, yes!"

The healer looked sadly at the Southerner. "You sure 'bout this now?"

Ezra pulled the bedding back over his head.

"Just go away."

The quiet closure of the door announced Jackson's departure and the gambler closed his eyes once again but discovered no sense of satisfaction at the victory.

Chris watched Nathan approach the sheriff's office, a study in concentration and obviously unhappy, and almost flinched as the normally even tempered healer slammed his hand against the wall where the gunslinger stood.

"Of all the stubborn, bad-tempered, misguided, ungrateful, self-pitying..."

Larabee interrupted Jackson's tirade. "Got a problem with Ezra?"

Nathan sighed in exasperation. "Sent me away. Told me to leave him alone."

Chris shrugged. "So, leave him."

The healer raised soulful brown eyes to the gunfighter. "Chris, he can't manage on his own."

"I know that but maybe he needs find that out for himself, Nathan. Ain't gonna help him if you keep babyin' him all the time. Ezra's a grown man."

"I can't just leave him."

Chris stared across at the boarding house and looked back to Nathan. "Yes you can, and you will. Sometimes there's only one way to learn a lesson -- and that's the hard way."

Jackson looked at the gunfighter doubtfully but nodded finally. "I'll go back in a while and make sure he's doin' alright."

Chris' smile was calculating. "No. I will."

Chris wondered at the wisdom of his strategy as he neared Ezra's room and heard the ominous sound of something fragile breaking into very small pieces. He waited for a moment, his hand resting on the door knob, as a second crash followed the first; something larger this time that struck the back of the door and shattered with a resounding smash. Without bothering to knock, the gunfighter thrust open the door and drew back momentarily at the sight that greeted him. How one man who was unable to walk could wreak such havoc was almost beyond Chris's ability to comprehend.

Ezra was on the floor beside the bed, still partly wrapped in the bedclothes, his hand closing around the ewer which had obviously tumbled to the floor when he had tipped over the night stand. The room stank; an unpleasant combination of bay rum, whiskey, sweat and piss. Chris shook his head and stepped over the shards of what seemed to be the remains of the wash bowl and a crystal decanter.

"Shit, Ezra!"

The gambler savagely pulled at the bedding around him and snarled: "No, however I believe that may be the next act if you care to stay and see out the performance!"

Chris stood amongst the debris and quickly glanced around. Everything within Ezra's reach had been lobbed in the direction of the door. Liquid seeped down the wallpaper where a bottle of cologne had struck the wall and shattered, whiskey was rapidly soaking into the rug, even the lamp from beside the bed lay in ruins; the oil joining the alcohol to form a disgusting alliance on the floor. He raised flinty eyes to the Southerner.

"You riled about somethin', Ezra?" His tone was deceptively mild.

The brilliant green eyes bored into the gunfighter, the fury behind them flashing with the intensity of a summer storm. "Of course not, Mr. Larabee! I am merely rearranging the decor of this hell hole to reflect my current mood!" It was not quite a shout.

Chris moved forward and tugged the bedclothes that were still caught under the mattress free, letting the damp mass fall to the floor with a slight grimace of distaste. That explained one of the odours he had detected on walking through the door. Ezra, no longer supported by the sheets, slid untidily onto his side.

"Should've let Nathan fix you up this mornin'. Saved yourself all this."

Ezra pushed himself a little way up from the floor and twisted to look at the gunfighter. "Mr. Larabee, this might be difficult for you to understand, but I'm tired of being treated like a child."

"Well, you're sure actin' like one now. Seems to me it ain't Nathan you need, more like a wet nurse."

If Larabee was expecting a reaction there was none. The gambler merely turned his face away and hung his head, his hands fastened on the sheets in a white-knuckled grip. Chris crouched down and putting a hand on Ezra's well-muscled shoulder, felt a ridge of scar tissue under his fingers that reminded him of how much the man had endured in recent months. Some of his anger trickled away and he sighed.

"You want some help?"

The response was barely audible. "Just leave me alone."

"You want that?" snapped Chris, suddenly and sharply pushing Ezra's shoulder back and forcing him to raise his head. "You want that I leave you to crawl around in your own filth feelin' sorry for yourself and stinking like a pig? Well, I ain't Nathan and I ain't gonna do that!"

He clamped a hand on the Southerner's bicep and hauled him roughly into a sit, before shifting his stance and preparing to lift the gambler from behind. For a moment the Southerner tried to resist but the gunfighter had him in a bear hug and his struggles lacked both the energy and conviction to have any effect.

His protests fell on deaf ears as the gunfighter kicked away the bedding and manhandled him across to the only chair, unceremoniously dumping him into it. Ezra spat invective with all the venom of an angry rattlesnake, cursing not only Larabee but his entire family heritage in his tirade.

"You angry, Ezra?" He stood with his chest heaving from the exertion. "Well, that's good! It sure as hell beats watching you wallow in self-pity, 'cos if that's all you can manage I might as well put you out of your misery right now."

The gambler glared at Larabee, his breath a tortured rasping as he fought for control of his emotions. "Then do it, Mr. Larabee. Do it and be damned!"

Chris drew his gun and, reversing it, threw it at the white-faced Southerner. "No, you do it!" Ezra reflexively caught the weapon. "Isn't that what you want? Or is that too hard as well? Too much of a goddamned coward to pull the trigger..."

Larabee stopped then, suddenly afraid that he had gone too far, as he saw the Southerner's muscles tense, but he was totally unprepared for Ezra's next move. The gambler threw aside the Colt and thrust himself out of the chair with an inarticulate roar of fury. The gunfighter instinctively jumped forward to catch him before he fell, only to hesitate and hold back as Standish, standing upright, swayed for one long minute on unsteady legs before teetering forward, no longer able to bear his own weight. Reacting quickly, he completed the move he had started before Ezra had so amazingly succeeded in staying on his feet, and caught the falling man. The two men stood, chest to chest in the parody of an embrace, Chris awkwardly supporting the exhausted Southerner under the arms. Chest heaving, Ezra clutched at the gunfighter's shirt sleeves, digging his fingers brutally into Larabee's upper arms in an effort to prevent himself from sliding to the floor. Hastily Chris adjusted his own grip, preparing for the gambler's imminent fall but, incredibly, Ezra sustained the pose for several seconds more before his legs began to shake, threatening finally to give way.

The Southerner looked down at his own legs, shock etched on his face, unwilling to trust that he had remained on his feet, if only for a few moments, and wondering when it would all become just another part of the nightmare, a cruel joke that his body was playing on him.

"Holy Christ!" Larabee took a firmer grip on the Southerner and carefully manoeuvred him back into the chair, suddenly at a loss to articulate the unexpected emotion surging through him. Then at last he found his voice. "Goddamn it, Ezra, you did it! You were standing."

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The two men rode in companionable silence, reins slack, allowing the horses to amble at their own pace. The air was still and warm; the heat rising in shimmering waves from the hot ground, and neither of them was inclined to hurry. For both of them the ride had been a pilgrimage of sorts, an opportunity to exorcise the ghosts of the recent past and now they were going home. The man in buckskins occasionally raised a hand to his neck and rubbed the dual scars marking the soft skin there, while his companion merely revelled in the simple joy of sitting astride a horse once again. Walking was still not quite as free and easy as he would like, a residual weakness in his left leg causing a slight limp and, on some days, the pain in his back was a torment, but he had no complaint.

They had stood over the two simple unmarked graves, not to mourn -- neither to gloat -- but rather to bury their own fears and finally lay them to rest. Vin had stood for a long time in the barn looking into the open pit that had been his cell before abruptly turning away and seeking clean, open air outside the rambling

shed. There had been no need for talk and the two men had finally mounted their horses, both with some degree of difficulty, and had ridden away never once looking back.

The plaintive cry of the predatory bird drew Ezra's eye skywards and he paused to watch the lone creature soar high above, dipping and swooping on the air currents a picture of rare elegance and beauty.

The whispered sigh of a rifle clearing the scabbard brought his attention to the man beside him and he watched as Vin raised the weapon to his shoulder preparing to fire. Impulsively he reached across and without a word, forced the barrel of the Winchester down, shaking his head. For a moment the Texan hesitated then with a nod deftly reversed the rifle and slotted it back into its scabbard. As one, the two men urged their horses onwards, eyes turned once again towards the town they called home.

It plummeted out of the sky like a lightning bolt, a blur of movement sensed rather than seen, to fasten vice-like talons on its hapless prey. Caught in mid-flight some fifty feet off the ground its victim died in a flurry of blood and feathers as the falcon triumphantly sounded its victory cry and swept once again skywards on outspread wings.

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