

Comes the Morning

by jann

This is a sequel to [Endure the Night](#).

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~ CHAPTER ONE ~

"The prosecution calls Vin Tanner to the stand."

Langston Sykes, a lawyer duly imported from a neighboring town for the express purpose of acting as prosecutor in the trial of one Mordecai Bliss -- accused murderer and self-proclaimed minister of God -- called on the man upon whom his entire case rested. And a fragile foundation it was to bear such a weight, he reflected as he waited for his witness to take the stand, for he had struggled for two days to prepare this one and only witness to proffer his testimony, trying desperately to get him to stay focused on the task at hand and to bring order to a mind left badly confused by a blow to the head -- a blow inflicted by the man on trial for the murder of one of the town's fair citizens.

It hadn't been easy. In fact he had nearly admitted defeat on several occasions in the course of his preparations. But there was that in Vin Tanner that refused to give itself over to despair, that fought back against harm done, that spoke with an eloquence that went beyond mere words. Still, for all the man's determination and grit -- and for all the admiration those attributes inspired -- it was words needed that day. And words came hard and few to him now.

Sykes watched then as Vin Tanner -- looking decidedly more upright and reliable minus the hat and hide coat he'd insisted he leave in his hotel room -- shot a look to the man in black who sat beside him. As stalwart a presence in the courtroom as he was in the town, Chris Larabee sat as tall as he stood, his men ranged around and behind him to form an impenetrable wall of protection and warning about the recovering tracker. Mary and Nettie and Gloria Potter were there as well, grouped at the men's backs in their own show of support. And when Chris Larabee squarely met that gaze leveled at him and gave a nod of encouragement, Vin took

a breath in and held it. Then, getting up from his seat, he slowly crossed the room to the chair sitting next to the desk serving as a judge's bench, the Honorable Judge Orrin B. Travis presiding.

J. D. followed. And when Vin stopped in front of Sykes, the young peacekeeper held out the tome borrowed from the town's resident -- if reluctant -- preacher, Josiah Sanchez, and solemnly instructed: "Place your right hand on the Bible and repeat after me...."

He received a frown in response, Vin catching his lower lip between his teeth as he considered which hand to raise. And realizing the confusion keeping both hands tightly clenched at his sides, J. D. glanced down at the correct one, nodding slightly in encouragement when it slowly rose to the proffered Bible.

That done, he continued. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

Vin knew what was expected of him, had seen enough witnesses sworn in during the past months in his duties as a lawman. So with a quick nod, he said, "I do."

"Then take the stand."

He slid into the witness chair as directed, his gaze following J. D. as he returned to his seat among the Seven, then taking in the rest of his fellow peacekeepers, resting on each face in turn before turning to the three women behind them. He then swept the packed meeting room of the Grain Exchange, cataloguing faces known and unknown, danger looked for and found only in the dark form seated in smug complacency at the defense table. And noting that small smile offered, one hinting at knowledge unshared, he lifted his chin and met that look with an unblinking gaze of his own, taking satisfaction in the arm bound across the other man's chest, sure that it was his bullet and not Buck Wilmington's that had broken Bliss' arm two weeks earlier.

Challenge offered and met, his attention was then diverted as the prosecutor began his exam, saying, "What can you tell us about the night Amy Callenbeck was murdered?"

Vin blinked, the memory of that night slipping among the shadows that danced always at the edges of his mind now, too much crowding into his thoughts for him to be able to keep hold of them all. And shifting in his seat, he concentrated on the man before him rather than on the one smiling at the table or on the room full of people waiting for him to give voice to visions known but not always easy to take hold of. And at last, he tracked his way to the familiar, saying, "It was dark."

After two days of frustration, Sykes had learned not to expect more, Tanner's thoughts too disordered to allow him to move easily through them, words sometimes beyond him or tangled up in meanings unclear to anyone but himself. So he prompted him to continue. "And did something happen to make you think there was something wrong that night?"

Vin frowned, following the trail in the dim light of shadows. And

finding sign, he stopped to examine it, offering it up to the one waiting, saying, "She screamed."

"Who?"

The name came without hesitation, it having been drilled into him repeatedly in the past two days. "Mrs. Callenbeck."

"And where were you when you heard this scream?"

"Outside."

"By the gunsmith's shop?"

"Across the street."

"And what did you do then?"

Vin blinked, tracking still through the shadows, the trail there but his mind wanting to drift away from it. And frowning in concentration, he said, "I ran to the door and went in."

"The front door?"

"No. The back."

Sykes looked to the jury, judging their tolerance of Vin's hard won testimony, the townspeople's familiarity with the damage done to him both a blessing and a potential source of trouble. And seeing no more yet than interest in the story being told, he went on, saying, "And what did you find when you entered the shop?"

Again one thing stood out in Vin's memory. "It was dark."

"In the shop?" And when Vin nodded, Sykes added, "There was no light anywhere?"

"Upstairs."

"There was a light coming from up the stairs, from Mrs. Callenbeck's private quarters?"

Vin nodded again.

"Objection!" Theodore Kinsale, the lawyer for the defense, stood to emphasize his protest. "The prosecution is leading the witness!"

Judge Travis waved him back into his seat. "I'll allow it." Then with a nod to Sykes, he said, "Continue."

The prosecutor did as ordered, turning back to the witness to attempt to drag further information out of him. "And then what happened?" he asked.

"I went up the stairs."

"And what did you find when you reached the upper floor?"

"A man coming out of her room."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It was dark."

That much came easily, the darkness the one thing always known.

"Then what happened?"

Vin blinked at that, the trail lost. So Sykes tried again. "It was

dark, and someone came out of Mrs. Callenbeck's room. What happened next?"

Another blink, then: "We went in her room."

"Was her room lit?"

Vin nodded.

"And were you then able to get a good look at the man you found in Mrs. Callenbeck's home?"

Another nod.

"And do you see that man here in this courtroom?"

Vin shifted his gaze, letting it drift over the crowd assembled, only one face sought. And finding it, he gave still another nod.

Having no need to check the jury, their interest assured at that point, Sykes paused a moment, then said, "And can you point him out?"

Without hesitation, Vin raised a hand, index finger pointing towards the defense table and the man who sat there with unruffled calm.

"You recognized Mr. Bliss?" Sykes asked, deliberately leaving off the man's title.

"He was there," Vin slowly stated, his brows drawn down now into a frown as the visions in his head came to life. "He was there and she was dead."

"Mrs. Callenbeck was dead when you found her?"

Vin closed his eyes against the vision of the young life lost. "She was in the bed," he softly recalled, the words simple, but what lay behind them bound up in the darkness lying deep within the shadows. "She didn't move. And there was blood."

"Where?"

Vin raised a hand to his throat.

"Why was that, Mr. Tanner? Why was her throat bleeding?"

"It was cut."

Again the words were simple, yet Sykes had no need to check the jury's reaction to them, the response of all those in the room a collective breath drawn in and held in expectation of the words to follow. And prompting those words, Sykes said, "Do you know who did that to her?"

Vin kept his eyes closed for another moment, his gaze in his vision shifting from the woman lying pale and bloody in the bed to the one who stood over her, a darkness in his eyes far deeper than that edging the dim light in the room. Then, blinking his eyes open again, he looked to Bliss, who sighed and shook his head, a wronged man holding no grudge against one so sorely afflicted and sadly mistaken.

"Are you saying the defendant is the one who killed Mrs. Callenbeck?"

Sykes prompted.

"Yes."

"And how do you know it was him? Did you see him do it?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he did it?"

"He told me."

"He told you he killed Amy Callenbeck? He admitted that to you?"

Vin nodded.

"And did you see a knife in his possession?"

Another nod. "It was gold and shining."

Sykes moved to the defense table, picking up a cane lying there. Then, turning back to his witness, he pulled on the golden lion's head that topped the cane and a metal blade slid free of the wooden sheath.

"Is this the knife?" he asked, holding the knife high, twisting it so that it caught the dim light streaming in through dusty windows, caught and held the attention of all those in the room.

Vin, too, fastened his attention on it, gold and silver gleaming in the light of the sun as well as in the bright flashings of lightning in memory, his face paling and his breath coming fast now.

That reaction anticipated, having met it during the preparation phase of the trial, Sykes slipped the knife back into its sheath and returned the cane to the table. And moving to stand once more before his witness, blocking all sight of the sheathed knife on the table, he continued.

"Was that the knife the defendant had on his person, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin nodded, his eyes unfocused and his mind filled still with visions of gold and silver.

"You were hurt that night, were you not?" Sykes asked, pushing past that which held his witness transfixed. And moving again to the table set aside for his use, he picked up a piece of paper left lying there. "I have here a sworn affidavit from Mr. Jackson, the town's esteemed healer who cared for you that night. In it he states that -- among other injuries -- you received a knife wound in one shoulder. Do you remember being attacked?"

Silver and gold flashed again in memory, a shining streak with pain at the end of its flight. Vin raised a hand then to his shoulder in remembrance of the knife embedded there, of the twisting removal of it, the pain of it still fresh.

Taking that as an affirmative response, Sykes pressed ahead. "And can you tell us who it was who stabbed you?"

A crow's wings sounded in memory. And tracing the bird's flight, Vin's eyes slowly came into focus, his gaze shifting from shadows to the dark form seated at the defense table a dozen feet away.

"Is that person here in this courtroom?" Sykes continued. "Can you point him out?"

The hand not held to Vin's shoulder raised and again he pointed a finger in accusation, Bliss giving a small sad shake of his head in return. Opportunity provided, Sykes moved on to motive.

"And did the defendant say why he killed Mrs. Callenbeck?"

For the same reason you hunted bounties, Mr. Tanner -- money.

The darkness within stirred at the words echoing in his head, knowledge long denied giving warning of danger. And heeding it, as he'd always heeded threats to his existence, Vin backed away from it, saying instead,

"He likes it."

Sykes frowned, the testimony offered not that rehearsed. "He likes what, Mr. Tanner?"

"Killing people."

"Objection!" Again Theodore Kinsale took to his feet, this time in outrage. "Calls for a conclusion! Not to mention the fact that it is utterly absurd!"

Again Travis waved him back into his seat. "I'll allow the testimony if Mr. Tanner can substantiate his claim."

Several blinks followed that pronouncement, and Sykes hurried to translate for the confused witness. "How do you know the defendant likes to kill people, Mr. Tanner? Did he tell you so?"

Vin nodded, words echoing in his head, gold gleaming in memory, silver flashing in the dim light, thunder crashing as lightning flared.

There's nothing like it in all the world. To hold that power in your hands, to sit in judgment on who will live and who will die -- it's more seductive than a lover's touch. It was metal though that touched him in memory, cold and deadly, drawn down his cheek, terror and pain and knowledge denied. Can you feel the seductive power of it, boy? Do you want to wrap yourself around it, take it inside you, feed on it? Would you forsake all else in life for it? Have you forsaken all else?

It was too much, his mind dizzy now with visions and a taunting knowledge, with pain and fear and too many dead in memory. And closing his eyes against it all, he said, in both declaration and denial, "I don't like it." His face paled further and his breathing quickened as the long familiar pain in his head flared to life. And rocking against that pain and the memories and the darkness stirring within, he shook his head, saying, "I don't want to do this no more."

Sykes shot a look to Chris and the healer sitting in the chair beside the one in which Vin had sat, Nathan leaning forward in readiness to go to the tracker's aid, Chris' expression one of a cold anger held in tight rein.

Sykes looked then to the jury, the twelve men sitting still and at ease, their eyes on Vin unshifting.

It was enough, the accusation made and confirmed. To push for more, to try for that last nail in Bliss' gallows would risk the loss of what had been gained. So Sykes turned back to the bench and said only, "The prosecution rests."

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

At Nathan's insistence, the trial went into recess, the judge setting it to reconvene at one o'clock that afternoon, thereby giving Vin a chance to recover before the cross examination could begin. The Seven then exited the courtroom, with six forming a shield about the seventh, the townspeople moving aside to let them pass, murmuring their sympathies as they went or merely staring curiously. And going straight to Nathan's

clinic, the healer led Vin inside, Chris at their heels and the rest of the Seven dispersing to their individual pursuits.

"Can you do something for him, Nathan, without knocking him out?" Chris asked when Vin went willingly to the bed, curling up on it with his head buried beneath his arms, rocking against the pain.

"I can do something to make his head stop hurting so bad," the healer replied, taking up his mortar and pestle and setting them down on his work table. "But I can't do nothing to stop what's going to happen in that courtroom soon as that weasel of a lawyer Bliss hired for himself gets a hold of him." He shook his head disapprovingly, taking a pinch of herbs out of a cloth bag. He then turned, looking over his shoulder to say, "You know he ain't going to get through it. It would be hard enough for him on a good day. And now he's wore out and hurting. Can't we get the judge to wait 'til tomorrow?"

"You really think he'd do any better then?"

Nathan sighed. "Maybe not. But it just ain't right. He ain't the one on trial, so why's he the one got to sit in front of folks and be made a fool of?"

"Because he is the one on trial." Chris shot a look to the man rocking against his pain and moved closer to the healer, lowering his voice to say, "There's no way Bliss' lawyer ain't going to try to make him out to be some kind of idiot up on that stand. You heard Sykes. Not that we needed him telling us that -- not when there's folks in this town already convinced of it. So Kinsale would be a fool not to take advantage of it. And I believe Sykes when he says Kinsale is no fool."

"So we got to let him tear Vin to pieces in front of the whole town?"

Chris sighed. "We've already been through this, Nate. Either Vin testifies or Bliss goes free."

"Couldn't we just wait maybe 'til we hear back from all them telegraphs we sent asking about unsolved murders 'round about?"

"You think if there was anything to report, we wouldn't have heard by now?"

"But we did get back them two telegraphs."

"Yeah. But no one could say for sure that Bliss was in either town the days the killings took place, just that he'd been through around the same time." Chris heaved another sigh. "So, with no other witnesses, no evidence and no confession, all we got is Vin's word."

"And half the time can't no one even make out what he's saying."

Nathan turned back to his preparations at that, dropping his pinch of herbs into the mortar and then reaching into another bag for more.

"He did all right with Sykes," Chris pointed out.

"'Cause Sykes had him by the hand, kept his mind on what he needed to say." The healer flicked the Seven's leader a scoffing look. "You think Bliss' lawyer is going to do that?"

Another sigh. "No."

"And you think Vin is ready to handle someone trying to trip him up, make him look like he don't know his hat from his boots?"

"No. But we've been through that too. And you saw yourself how much trouble Sykes had getting Vin to tell what happened in a way that made sense. If he had tried to prepare him by doing like Kinsale probably will and confuse him, he'd have risked confusing his testimony for the prosecution as well. And, too, maybe he'd have gotten Vin so riled up we'd never have gotten him to testify at all. Besides, it's not like he didn't try to prepare him about what to expect and how to handle it."

"For all the good that's going to do."

Chris gave yet another sigh. "I know it's not much, Nathan, but what are our choices? We don't have anything against Bliss but what Vin saw that night. So if we don't let him try to convince a jury of that, Bliss goes free and stays free. At least this way we've got a chance of preventing another killing. And if things go the way Sykes hopes, Kinsale will get Vin so confused he won't be able to say anything at all, much less something that can be used against him. And if Kinsale hammers at him and gets him all worked up, maybe the jury will feel sorry for him."

It was Nathan's turn to sigh then. "Yeah," he admitted. "I know. But I don't like it. All this comes down on Vin's shoulders and he just ain't strong enough to stand up under it."

"He's stood up to worse."

"Maybe. But not when he was so bad hurt as this. And it ain't just his thinking I'm talking about neither. It's what he's feeling too. He knows things ain't the way they're supposed to be and he can't figure out how to get back to the way he was. Lord knows he tries, but he just can't do it. Not yet. So he has to depend on other folks to do for him. And he ain't used to that. His whole life he's kept himself in one piece all by his lonesome -- and not just with a gun. You've seen how quick that boy can come up with a way to get around or through something. He's always thinking five steps ahead of the rest of us. Now he's five steps behind. And he don't like it. What's more -- it scares him."

Chris shot a look to the one in the bed, rocking still against the pain in his head. "I know, Nathan. And that's another reason why it's so important that he get up in that courtroom and do this. He needs to know that we still depend on him, that he can still protect the town, that he can still take the bad guys out."

"But what if the jury don't believe him? What if they set Bliss free?"

"Then he'll at least know he did his best, that he did what was hard -- that he can do what's hard." Chris shifted his gaze back to the healer.

"He's given his testimony, told what happened -- and that alone proves something. Besides, it looked to me like the jury believed him."

"You really think that? You seen who they got on that jury. Stan Remsen ain't ever even liked Vin. And a couple of the other men are friends of Conklin's. And you know how much he hates Vin."

"Yeah. But they don't have to like him -- they just have to believe him."

"And you think they will?"

"I don't know. But like I keep saying -- we ain't got no other choice."

Shaking his head in an admission of defeat, Nathan moved from worry to guilt. And dropping his second pinch of herbs into the mortar, he began furiously grinding away. "I should have listened to you and Buck all that time you was going on about what a snake that man is," he declared in tones of self-disgust. "Can't believe he had me fooled like that. And to think of all the times I sent Vin off with him."

Chris watched the healer work for a moment, a question that had been nagging at him for weeks working its way back into the forefront of his thoughts. And at last he said, "You ever figure out what the hell Bliss wanted with Vin all that time? Can't be he was wanting to kill him or he'd have done it ten times over. So what kept him going after him?" Nathan shrugged. "Who know what goes through a mind like that? Could be he was playing with him, like a cat going after a mouse with a broke leg, knowing it ain't going to get away." He shook his head, this time again one of disgust as he said, "Just can't believe I didn't see what was going on."

"You don't need to feel bad -- he had lots of folks fooled. Still does."

Nathan grunted. "You hear that Ware woman took him a Bible to the jail the other day? J. D. says the two of them sat there for an hour talking about Vin and his 'troubles.' And she clucked over Vin so many times J. D. was sure she was going to sprout feathers and start laying eggs."

"She ain't the only one talking like that. Mary says there's plenty of folks believe the lies Bliss has been spouting about Vin going crazy and shooting him for no reason. They think this trial's nothing but a cover-up and that Vin should be sent away, locked up someplace where he can't hurt nobody again."

Nathan laid down his pestle and took up the kettle left sitting ready on the hot stove in the corner of the room and poured some water into the mortar. Then, stirring the mixture there, he shifted his gaze to the Seven's leader and said, "Vin knows what the townsfolk are saying. He asked me the other day if he's crazy like they say or just stupid."

Chris gave a curse. "Ain't no way Bliss is walking out of that courtroom a free man."

"Might not be no way we can stop it," Nathan warned. Then picking up the mortar, he poured its contents into a cup. Then exchanging vessels, he moved to the bed to do what he could to ease Vin's physical pain, praying as he did so that there wouldn't be worse pain to come.

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The herbal tea eased Vin's headache enough that he was able to fall into a natural sleep. And when they woke him a couple of hours later, to

feed him and get him ready to return to the makeshift courtroom, he made only a few grumbling complaints, shaking his head when Nathan asked if his head still hurt. He then willingly ate the lunch Nettie brought him. But when he'd gotten cleaned up and Nathan pointed out that it was time to return to the courtroom, he turned difficult.

"Ain't going," he mutinously declared.

"Trial ain't over," Chris pointed out in a reasonable tone. "You got to go back and finish testifying."

Vin frowned. "Said everything," he pointed out in confusion.

"Yeah. But now Bliss' lawyer gets to ask you some questions. You know that."

Vin shifted his gaze to Nathan, who sighed and said, "Ain't none of us happy about this, but we ain't got no choice. You don't get back on that stand, Bliss walks out of that courtroom a free man. You don't want that, you got to get back in there and convince them twelve men that Bliss done what you say he did."

Nettie was then appealed to, but she was as unyielding as the two men, saying only, "You're a Tanner, boy. So I reckon you'll do whatever needs doing."

With a sigh, Vin raised one hand to rub at his head

"You hurting again?" Nathan asked.

The tracker shook his head. Then, tapping his skull, he softly said, "It's there. I just can't..." He trailed off, the words not coming, the thoughts behind them slipping in and out of the shadows, just beyond reach.

"You did fine this morning," Nathan pointed out, one hand going to rest on the tracker's near shoulder. "You just got to keep your mind on what folks are saying and then do your best to think on it. And don't let that slick lawyer fella rattle you none."

"Remember what Sykes warned you about?" Chris added. "Kinsale will say all sorts of things, trying to get you confused or make you look bad.

Just don't pay him no mind. You're up there to tell what you know and nothing else. Okay?"

"But what if?" Vin trailed off, unwilling more than unable to complete the thought.

Green eyes squarely met blue. "Ain't no 'what if,'" Chris declared.

"There's only you doing your best. Won't no one ask more of you than that."

"He's right," Nettie agreed. "You get up on that stand and stick to what you know is true, and it will be up to the jury to do the right thing with it. And that's not on you -- it's on them. So you just march into that courtroom with your head up and don't let anyone make you forget you're a Tanner."

Spare words offered, but an unshakable belief in him giving voice to them. And taking hold of that belief, Vin Tanner marched off to do his

best.

~ CHAPTER THREE ~

"I remind you that you're still under oath, Mr. Tanner," Judge Travis said as the trial resumed and Vin once again took the witness stand. The tracker nodded, then turned to warily eye the one who rose from his seat at the defense table next to Bliss and crossed the room to him.

"I trust you are feeling better," Theodore Kinsale said as he came to a stop before the witness stand, both tone and expression one of concern. And when Vin only blinked in response, he softened his tone further, saying, "I know how trying this is for you, Mr. Tanner. I'm afraid, however, that there are a few questions I really do need to ask you."

Vin worked his way through the gently-uttered words, searching out danger and finding it in the unexpected: a vicious prey turned kind, but its claws nonetheless sharp for being sheathed. More wary than ever then, he shot a look to Chris, who gave a spare nod of encouragement. And straightening in his seat, he turned back to Kinsale and firmly declared, as if in hopes of settling the matter before it could even be broached, "He killed her."

"Who killed her?" Kinsale asked, willing to allow the witness his head.

"Him." Vin's gaze flicked to the man at the defense table watching him with knowing eyes.

"And who did he kill?"

Another blink. Then: "Mrs. Callenbeck."

"And when was this?"

The tone was one of curiosity, Kinsale's expression that of a friendly interest. And blinking his confusion at that as well as at the question, Vin remained silent.

"You needn't give the exact date," Kinsale continued, urging gently.

"Just give an approximation."

Vin didn't even bother to blink that time, merely stared blankly at the man before him.

"Take a guess," Kinsale translated. And when Vin only continued to gaze at him, he tried again. "Can you at least tell us the month? Or maybe how long ago the killing took place?"

Still Vin made no reply.

The defense counsel softened his voice, the tone of it now that of a kindly adult seeking information from a young child.. "Do you know today's date, Mr. Tanner? Can you tell us what month it is now?"

"Objection!" Sykes called. "Irrelevant."

Kinsale turned to the judge. "Your honor, I am merely trying to determine the reliability of Mr. Tanner's memory."

"To what purpose?" Sykes challenged. "The date of the murder is not in question."

"No. But the reliability of Mr. Tanner's memory is."

"You've already made your point," the judge dryly observed. "Now move

on."

Kinsale turned back to the witness, the blank look there mute testimony given. And satisfied, he continued. "You don't remember when Mrs. Callenbeck was killed, but you remember the night in question? You remember my client killing her?"

Again the tone was one of curiosity rather than challenge, and again Vin shot a look to Chris, who that time only shrugged in response. And turning back to Kinsale, Vin warily said, "He was there."

"And when exactly did you come to this sudden revelation? When Reverend Bliss returned to town several weeks ago?"

Vin shook his head.

"When then?"

"At Chris' shack."

"At Mr. Larabee's home the day you attacked my client, you mean?"

Vin nodded, even as Sykes thundered an objection.

"Your honor, that is highly inflammatory!"

Kinsale raised one eyebrow and turned to the irate prosecutor. "And how would you classify Mr. Tanner's behavior towards my client, sir? As a gentle invitation to a tea party?" He let out his breath in disgust. "He tackled the man to the ground and beat him!"

"Your honor! This line of questioning has not even been introduced!"

Kinsale appealed to the judge in turn. "Mr. Tanner himself introduced it, your honor. I'm merely clarifying."

"I'll allow it," Travis stated. "But watch your phrasing, Mr. Kinsale."

Kinsale nodded, then turned back to the witness, saying, "And did this revelation come to you before or after you tackled my client?"

"Before."

"And is that why you tackled him? Because you suddenly decided he was guilty of murder?"

That earned him another blink.

"Come, Mr. Tanner, there must have been some reason why you saw fit to tackle my client. Was it because he threatened you? Or Mr. Larabee, perhaps?"

A vision flashed then of gold. And with a frown, Vin said, "He had a knife."

"Where?"

"In his cane."

"Was it sheathed?"

Vin's brows drew more deeply into a frown. "He was reaching for it."

"He was reaching for it?" Kinsale echoed. Then with a look to the jury, he said, "In other words, it was still sheathed."

He gave Vin no time to reply, simply moved ahead, saying, "Tell us again about the night Amy Callenbeck was killed."

"Objection!" Sykes protested. "We've already covered that ground."

Kinsale looked to the judge. "Mr. Sykes is correct, your honor."

However, this time I'd like to hear the tale in Mr. Tanner's own words."

"Your honor!" Sykes' tone that time was one of indignation.

"Mr. Tanner has already given his testimony, Mr. Kinsale," the judge decreed. "I see no reason to go over it again -- unless you wish to clarify some portion of it, in which case you may do so. Otherwise, move on."

Kinsale turned back to Vin, unruffled, content with the point made, and continued on a different tack. "You say, Mr. Tanner, that Reverend Bliss confessed to having killed Amy Callenbeck and that he then tried to kill you in turn." He cocked his head. "Now, why would he want to kill you?"

"I saw him."

"Yet you saw Reverend Bliss almost immediately upon his return to town several weeks ago, did you not?" He waited only for Vin's blink before continuing. "And did he at that time, or at any other time preceding the altercation at Mr. Larabee's ranch, try to kill you? Did he offer you any harm whatsoever?"

Vin shifted in his seat and shot another look to Chris. And, as if to stretch his legs, Kinsale moved so that he stood blocking the witness' view of the Seven's leader. "Well, Mr. Tanner?" he pressed. "Did Reverend Bliss at any time do you an injury or even attempt to do so?"

Vin shifted in his seat again, searching within now for a direction, tracking through the shadows in his mind in search of the dark, aware of its presence, yet unable to give name to it, harm done not always that of the body. Still, he tried, words tangling with confused thoughts as he said, "He knows. And he wants me.... He tried...." He shook his head in frustration. Then words echoed out of the shadows: Your place among the guardians of the sheep is uncertain at the moment, a wolf among them sporting sheep's clothing, neither one nor the other: too wild yet to safely be let loose among the sheep, and too unmindful of that wild which proved your worth to them to set you free of the chains with which they have bound you. And so you will remain -- unless you either give up all that is in you of freedom or reclaim it. And offering in explanation Bliss' own words simplified he said, "He wants to set the wolf free."

A murmur ran through those assembled in the courtroom, the sound one of confusion and a wary judgment. Chris' jaw tightened in response, and more than one whispered curse issued from the other five peacekeepers. Kinsale waited until the sound died down, then continued, head again cocked as he said, "I'm afraid you've lost me, Mr. Tanner. What is this about a wolf? And what does the Reverend Bliss know?"

"Wolves hunt," Vin replied, his tone implying the explanation should be self evident. "And he knows about the dark."

"The dark? Wolves?" Kinsale looked to the jury, hands spread in a confusion mirrored in their expressions. And content once again with the point made, he turned back to the confused witness, saying in tones of

pity, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Tanner. Apparently I have kept you at this for too long. My apologies to you, sir."

Dismissing him then, he turned to the judge, saying, "I believe I've gotten all the coherent testimony I'm going to get out of this witness, your honor." Then, in tones more pitying still, he gently added, "Perhaps one of his friends could come up and lead him back to his seat? Or perhaps to some place where he can lie down and recover his equilibrium?"

Travis merely waved Vin out of his seat, saying, "Go back and sit with Chris."

Vin eagerly did as he was told, getting up from the witness stand to settle into his chair among the Seven. And when he had done so, he turned to Chris with a worried, "Did I forget?"

Chris laid a hand on his near shoulder, easing the tension in his jaws with an effort. "No, Vin. You didn't forget. You did the Tanner name proud up there."

Vin gave a nod, then said, "Can we go?"

Chris shook his head, his voice as tight as his expression as he said, "Trial ain't over yet."

"Yeah," Nathan muttered from his seat on Vin's other side. "Ain't no way that weasel's letting things rest the way they are."

J. D. leaned forward, the one arm not broken by Bliss' bullet two weeks earlier resting on the back of Vin's chair and his brows wrinkled in confusion. "Why didn't Kinsale tear into him like Sykes said he would?" he asked. "He didn't hardly even ask him nothing."

"Because," Josiah explained in a low voice, "he's smart enough to play a rope out and let a man hang himself. That way you don't have to worry about anyone calling foul."

"Or feeling sorry for whoever's about to get lynched," Buck added.

"And no doubt," Ezra drawled, his tone languid but his eyes upon the defense lawyer hard, "the little weasel has more than one ace up his sleeve."

And just what that ace was, they learned a moment later when Kinsale announced his next witness, saying, "The defense calls Mr. Nathan Jackson to the stand."

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"Mr. Tanner suffered a head wound, did he not?" Kinsale asked once a reluctant Nathan had taken the stand. "One so severe that he was unconscious for nearly two weeks?"

Nathan nodded.

"And upon at last regaining consciousness, what was his condition? Was he alert and aware?"

Nathan flicked a look to the man in question, who sat watching with brows drawn down in a frown. Knowing what was coming as soon as he was called as a witness for the opposition, he'd tried to get Chris to take

Vin out of the courtroom. The tracker, however, had turned stubborn, insisting on staying, too aware of the sudden tension to risk turning his back on it. And shifting his gaze away from those blue eyes watching him, Nathan returned his gaze to the defense attorney and offered a grudging truth.

"He didn't seem to know what was going on," he slowly admitted. "It was like his body was awake, but his mind was still asleep."

"And how long did this state continue?"

Nathan shrugged. "He gradually got better, became more aware of things."

"And now? Would you say he is fully recovered?"

Another quick look to Vin, then back to Kinsale. "He mostly understands what folks say and can pretty much make himself understood."

"But he's still easily confused?"

"Sometimes." Nathan carefully refrained from looking at Vin that time.

"Just sometimes? Or often enough that you feel the need to keep someone in constant attendance upon him?"

Nathan shifted in his seat. "It ain't like he can't do for himself," he hedged.

"In other words, he can feed and dress himself," Kinsale suggested.

"But can he otherwise take care of himself? Can he, for example, be trusted with a weapon?"

"He can use one just fine."

"Use one, perhaps. But I notice he doesn't wear one. Is that because he chooses not to or because he's been prohibited from doing so?"

Another shift and a careful attention to the man before him rather than to the one seated a dozen feet away. "We thought it best that he didn't wear one just yet."

"Because he is not yet functioning normally?"

"Yes."

One simple word, but with a truth behind it that was anything but simple.

"And on what level would you say Mr. Tanner is currently functioning?"

Kinsale shot an assessing look to the one watching, taking note of his stillness and the blue eyes wide in a pale face. Then turning back to his witness, he added, "In other words, at what mental age would you place him?"

"Objection, your honor! Mr. Jackson is not a doctor and is therefore not qualified to make that kind of diagnosis."

Kinsale turned to the judge. "While Mr. Jackson may not be a qualified physician, even a lay person is capable of judging a man by his actions -- and I believe Mr. Jackson has enough experience in the field of medicine to qualify as more than a simple lay person. And since he has spent considerable time around Mr. Tanner, both before and after his injury, he is certainly qualified to render his own personal opinion as to

the level at which he is currently functioning."

The judge nodded. "Objection overruled."

"Well, Mr. Jackson?" Kinsale continued. "At what mental age would you place Mr. Tanner?"

Nathan was silent for a moment, considering truths, having to choose between them. Then, once again hedging his way around them, he said, "I don't know, that's hard to say."

Kinsale, however, was determined on a particular truth. "But surely you must have some idea," he charged. "Just take a guess. Give us a rough estimate. Would you say he's functioning on an adult level? Or perhaps as the equivalent of a young teen?"

A simple question with an easy answer -- but Nathan struggled to give it, greater truths needing to be served and again a choice having to be made between them. And at last, choice made if not agreeably so, he softly said, "Maybe not that high."

"How about a ten year old then? Or seven?"

Dark eyes flashed at being forced into that truth. "I reckon about that," Nathan coldly conceded. Then, with another look to the one who watched him with a hurt confusion, he tried to offer another truth as well, saying, "But it ain't like --"

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Kinsale interrupted with practiced ease. "But I believe you've answered the question." He moved on then, truths attained and discarded, others still to be had. "Now, bearing that diagnosis in mind, was it ever your contention that it might be in Mr. Tanner's best interests to send him to some place where he could receive proper care and treatment?"

"Objection!" Sykes called. "I fail to see the relevance in this line of questioning."

Kinsale sighed, a man of patience sorely tried. And turning his attention to Judge Travis, he said, "Your honor, I am merely trying to ascertain the level of mental impairment Mr. Tanner has suffered, which all goes to his reliability as a witness."

"Objection overruled." Travis waved the defense counsel on.

"Again, Mr. Jackson," Kinsale continued, turning back to his witness, "I ask if you ever suggested that Mr. Tanner might be better off in professional hands."

Another disagreeable truth demanded and another choice made. "Yes," Nathan admitted. And again attempting to offer up a greater truth, he added, "But that was before."

"Before what?" Kinsale managed to look puzzled. "You've already stated that Mr. Tanner is still functioning as a young child, unable to fully care for himself. Are you suggesting that he would derive no benefit from an institution trained to handle his sort of impairment?"

"I ain't saying that, just that we've been doing fine on our own, so there ain't no need to worry about that no more."

"Indeed?" Puzzlement turned into surprise. "Tell me, Mr. Jackson, have you experience in such matters?"

"Some. I seen a lot of head injuries in the war."

"You were a stretcher bearer for the Union Army, were you not?"

"Yeah."

"So tell me, in your experience, can a head injury leave a victim prone to violent episodes?"

"Sometimes." The word was clipped, the tone one of annoyance, a partial truth told and again an attempt to offer another in its place. "But that ain't got nothing to do with Vin."

"No? Mr. Tanner has exhibited no violent tendencies since his injury?"

Kinsale didn't wait for an answer, simply moved to the defense table, rifling through a sheaf of papers lying there, selecting one before turning back to his witness. And flicking his gaze from paper to healer, he said, "I refer you to an incident less than a month ago in which Mr. Tanner held a gun on my client when he went to the assistance of a young woman who had been accosted by a couple of drunken cowboys. There was also an incident outside the general store a few days later in which blows were exchanged. He even struck one of this town's peacekeepers -- Buck Wilmington. And then, of course, there's the altercation with my client at Mr. Larabee's place of residence." Kinsale laid the paper back on the desk, his attention all for the healer as he asked, "Do you consider this normal behavior for Mr. Tanner?"

"No."

"Yet you see no reason to send him to a facility better equipped to treat him?"

"No. I don't."

"Because they would be unable to do anything for him that you yourself cannot do?"

"Because it ain't needed," Nathan firmly stated, that truth known without a doubt. "He ain't that bad off."

Kinsale raised an eyebrow and looked to the jury before continuing.

"And how bad would you consider 'bad,' Mr. Jackson? You've admitted Mr. Tanner has had a number of violent episodes, that he is easily confused, that he is functioning on the level of a seven year old and thus needs constant supervision. How much worse would he have to be before you would consider him in need of professional care?"

"I don't know how much worse he'd have to be. I only know he ain't needing it now."

"But he is bad enough that you consider him unfit to care for himself, correct?"

Another shift in his seat, another truth grudgingly admitted. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Because he is physically unable to do so?"

"No."

"Because he is mentally unable to do so then?"

Nathan stared hard at the defense counsel, eyes carefully averted from the one he knew was watching with a confusion that had more to do with the heart than the mind. And at last, admitting a truth that couldn't be avoided, he sighed and said, "Yeah."

"And this because his mind is confused, disordered, not functioning normally?"

"Yeah."

"Confused enough that he could be mistaken about the identity of Amy Callenbeck's killer? Confused enough that he could be mistaken about a murder having taken place at all?"

Up went Nathan's chin, anger rising in him. "There ain't no mistaking murder being done!"

"No?" Kinsale moved back to the defense table, Nathan watching with dark eyes, his gaze shifting to the man seated there at ease, a sorrowful look on his face at being so ill-used but bearing his cross with Christian fortitude, sure of the Lord's protection.

"According to your sworn affidavit here," Kinsale continued as he again sorted through the papers on the table, picking out the one in question, "you cannot ascertain any cause of death for Mrs. Callenbeck due to the condition of her body." He looked up, fixing Nathan with an easy gaze. "She was burned beyond all recognition, was she not?"

"Yeah." Nathan frowned, that truth unexpected.

"So as far as you know she could have died from the fire itself?"

That time Nathan avoided one truth to put forth another. "It wasn't no fire that left a stab wound in Vin Tanner's shoulder!"

"No. But is there any physical evidence that Mrs. Callenbeck was murdered?"

"No." One word. One truth. And blue eyes shadowed with truths unspoken.

"In which case, the only evidence you have is Mr. Tanner's word as to what took place?"

Nathan shook his head. "We know someone was hired to kill her."

"But you have no proof that the hired assassin fulfilled his end of the bargain made, do you?"

"No."

"So then you have only Vin Tanner's word that a murder took place?"

"I reckon."

"And is it possible that Mr. Tanner is too confused to really be able to say what occurred that night?"

Up went Nathan's chin. "If he says that's what happened --"

"I asked only if it is possible that he could be mistaken, Mr.

Jackson," Kinsale interrupted. "You yourself have stated that he is subject to confusion on occasion. Could this be one of those occasions?"

Nathan shifted his gaze from counsel to accused, dark eyes meeting dark, anger countered with a calm assurance, truth against truth and right

of no consequence. But truth was all he had of right in that moment, so the healer gave it, reluctantly saying, "I suppose anything is possible."

Kinsale nodded, content with that truth. "Thank you, Mr. Jackson." Then turning to the judge, he added, "That's all I have for this witness, your honor."

He returned to his seat then, a look of satisfaction exchanged with his client.

"Mr. Sykes?" Judge Travis called, his gaze on the prosecutor sitting alone at his own table. "Do you wish to cross?"

Sykes nodded, but remained in place, asking, "Mr. Jackson, has Mr. Tanner ever wavered in his identification of Amy Callenbeck's killer?"

"No, sir, he hasn't."

"If this were not a true memory, would you expect him to show some confusion as to the killer's identity? Wouldn't the description tend to change with time?"

"Yes." Nathan spoke that truth without hesitation.

"So, in your estimation, Mr. Tanner's testimony is based on a true accounting of what happened that night in Amy Callenbeck's bedroom?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson. I have no further questions."

Travis dismissed the witness, then turned his attention back to the defense counsel. "Mr. Kinsale, call your next witness, please."

Kinsale stood again, Bliss seated at his side looking straight ahead, eyes shining dark at the next words uttered: "The defense calls Chris Larabee to the stand."

~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

"Mr. Larabee," Kinsale began, standing easy beneath the hard eyes of his openly hostile witness, "you are the acknowledged head of this town's regulators, are you not?"

"I am."

"So it was your responsibility to investigate the death of Amy Callenbeck?"

"It was."

"And did your investigation reveal any clues as to the identity of the supposed killer?"

"No."

Unruffled by the terse replies snapped out as if the witness were being charged by the syllable, Kinsale continued, saying, "And can you tell the jury why it is you suspected foul play?"

The words came more abundantly then, but no less grudgingly, Chris eyeing Kinsale with one lip slightly curled, as if in distaste at an offensive odor. "Mrs. Callenbeck was the sole witness to her husband's murder," he replied. "So that alone would have aroused suspicion. Add to that the fact that one of my men was attacked in her room and nearly died

well, it don't take a genius to add two and two together."

"And did you find any evidence to support that theory?"

"Just a confession from the man who hired the killer."

"The alleged killer?"

Chris cocked his head. "Amy Callenbeck is dead -- ain't no alleging about it."

"Dead, yes," Kinsale conceded. "But as we've seen -- there's no proof as to the actual cause of her death."

"No proof except an eyewitness."

"Who only recently made any claims as to what he supposedly saw."

Kinsale raised one eyebrow. "Tell me, Mr. Larabee, are there any other witnesses who can place my client at the scene of the crime or in its vicinity? Did anyone at all see him after the closing of his Revival meeting that night? Was he seen walking the streets or slipping through the alleyways, perhaps?"

"No."

Up went Kinsale's other eyebrow. "And do you not find that strange? Surely the alarm cannot have been raised too long after the fire in the gunsmith's shop began -- otherwise Mr. Tanner could not have survived. So how could my client have escaped detection?"

"The gunsmith shop ain't that far from the hotel. He could have slipped over there easy enough."

"Without anyone in the hotel seeing him?"

"There's more than one way into that hotel."

Kinsale gave a brief nod of acknowledgment, then pressed ahead. "Did you have any reason to suspect Reverend Bliss prior to Mr. Tanner's accusation two weeks ago?"

"No."

"Any reason to suspect him afterwards? By which I mean, were you able to go back and discover clues missed earlier? Could you find any evidence at all to support Mr. Tanner's claim, no matter how circumstantial?"

"No."

"And what was Reverend Bliss' reaction that day at your home, when Mr. Tanner accused him of having killed Mrs. Callenbeck? Did he confess?"

"Not in so many words."

"Oh?" Up went the eyebrows again. "Then what led you to believe Mr. Tanner's accusation?"

"You mean beyond the fact that Vin said he did it?" Chris allowed a note of challenge to slip into his voice, a man's honor a sacred thing. Then, as if he couldn't really expect such a one to understand something so elemental, he shrugged and added, "Well, there was the fact that Bliss pulled a gun -- not once, but twice -- threatening the second time to shoot one of my men in order to escape."

"Did he pull a gun the first time before or after he was attacked by Mr. Tanner?"

"Objection!" Sykes called, exasperation coloring his tone.

The judge fastened an annoyed gaze on the counsel for the defense.

"You've been warned before, Mr. Kinsale, about phrasing."

Kinsale looked suitably abashed. "I beg your pardon, your honor. I meant to ask if the first incident occurred before or after the altercation with Mr. Tanner."

Mollified, if not fooled, Travis turned his attention to the man in the witness chair. "Answer the question, Mr. Larabee."

Jaws tightening, Chris brusquely admitted, "It came after."

"And what was going on at that time?" Kinsale continued. "Had Mr. Tanner calmed down by that point?"

"No."

"He was still attempting to come to fisticuffs with my client?"

"Yes."

"In fact, you had to forcibly restrain him, did you not?"

"Yes."

"And why is that, Mr. Larabee? You seem to have such faith in Mr. Tanner's judgment, why did you then find it necessary to intervene?"

"I didn't know at the time why he was acting like that."

"Did you perhaps think that he was acting in an irrational manner?"

"I suppose."

"And why was that?"

"Because I didn't know at the time he had a rational reason for doing what he did."

"Rational, Mr. Larabee?" Kinsale's eyebrows that time disappeared into the thin hair draped over his forehead. "Are you and your men in the habit of interviewing suspected criminals with your fists?"

"Objection!"

Kinsale raised one hand in concession. "I withdraw the question, your honor."

He shot a look then to the jury, their eyes locked on the witness, more than one brow drawn down into a frown. And satisfied, he turned so that his gaze could shift to the one seated behind the prosecutor's table, Tanner's eyes, too, fastened on the one caught between truths and fighting hard not to surrender to them. Kinsale's gaze drifted then to his client, whose dark eyes glinted in triumph. And turning back to his witness, he continued.

"Mr. Larabee, you admit Mr. Tanner acted without apparent provocation and that he had to be forcibly restrained from continuing his altercation with my client. Do you then consider it irrational that a man thus set upon might fear for his continued good health, if not his life? And if so, do you consider it an act of confession that he might wish to defend himself?"

"He didn't need to defend himself. I had the situation under control."

"Under such able control that Mr. Tanner got hold of your gun and shot

my client?"

"That was only after Bliss went for his gun."

"Yet it was my client who was shot -- not Mr. Tanner."

Chris gave another shrug, one corner of his mouth twitching upwards.

"Guess Vin's the faster draw."

Another nod of acknowledgment, then: "And the second incident? Did it not occur after you informed Mr. Jackson that he was not to render my client aid?" Chris gave a grudging nod. "And might not such a statement logically be taken as a threat from which one might seek to defend oneself?"

"I reckon a guilty man might see it that way."

"But not an innocent one?"

Chris only shrugged in reply, and Kinsale moved on.

"Tell me, Mr. Larabee, had you, previous to that day at your ranch, asked Mr. Tanner what happened the night Mrs. Callenbeck died?"

"Yes."

"And was he able to tell you anything?"

"Nothing we could really use to identify the killer."

"So he indicated that he had indeed seen someone in Mrs. Callenbeck's room that night? Did he describe him?"

"He said he was big and dark."

"Oh?" Kinsale turned to survey the room packed with townspeople. "Are you aware, Mr. Larabee, that any number of men in this room fit that description much better than my client? Mr. Jackson, for instance." He didn't wait for a reply, one not expected, simply returned full circle back to his witness and continued, saying, "Did Mr. Tanner give any further descriptions?"

"No."

"None?" Again Kinsale's eyebrows took refuge behind the hair on his forehead. "Come, Mr. Larabee. Did he not on various occasions make reference to a crow? Did he not, in fact, indicate that it was said crow that was responsible for what transpired that night?"

For the first time, Chris looked to Vin, green eyes searching out blue.

And tightly he said, "He might have."

"And did you then consider the possibility that Mr. Tanner had been attacked by a bird rather than by a knife-wielding intruder?"

"Objection!" Sykes leaped from his seat in outrage at that one, his ire not enough, however, to quell the laughter sweeping the courtroom.

Travis banged his gavel down, demanding order. Before he could render judgment in favor of the objection, however, Kinsale retreated, victory in hand, saying, "I withdraw the question."

He returned to the attack then, his tone conversational as he asked,

"You threatened at one point, did you not, Mr. Larabee, to lock Mr.

Tanner up and throw away the key?"

"I might have."

"And why is that? Had he become hard to manage?"

"Not really."

"Oh? So he was a model patient?"

"Not exactly."

"In fact, he'd made a habit of slipping away from whoever had been set to watch over him, had he not?" Another nod. "And this gave you cause for concern?"

"I suppose."

"And why was that?"

Chris leveled a glare at the defense counsel. "I don't know. I reckon I was worried he might get hurt somehow."

"And did you also fear he might hurt others?"

"No."

"Then why did you refuse to allow him to wear a gun? Why is he still not allowed to wear one? Are you afraid that he might somehow manage to shoot himself? Or are you more concerned that someone else might get hurt?"

"Vin wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Not on purpose, perhaps."

Kinsale left it at that, moving ahead with his attack. "Tell me, who was guarding a couple of prisoners a few weeks ago on the day they escaped?"

"Bliss."

"Accompanied by Mr. Tanner?"

"Yes."

"And how did the prisoners come to escape?"

"Objection! Irrelevant!"

Kinsale turned to the judge. "I am attempting, your honor, to show a pattern of violent and disruptive behavior."

"To what purpose?" Sykes demanded to know. "Mr. Tanner is not on trial."

"No. But his reliability as a witness is." Kinsale heaved an audible sigh. "Your honor, we've already been through this."

Travis nodded, then growled: "Mr. Kinsale, I'll allow you to proceed -- but get to the point."

"Yes, your honor."

Kinsale returned to his interrupted examination of the witness. "Mr. Larabee, how were the prisoners able to escape?"

"They got hold of a knife."

"Provided by Mr. Tanner -- unwittingly, of course?"

"Yes."

Kinsale nodded, his point made, his gaze shifting once more to the jury, pleased to see more frowns appearing there. Then turning his attention back to his witness, he said, "Have there been any complaints by the townspeople about Mr. Tanner? Any calls for his banishment?"

"None that I've heard."

"But there have been complaints made?"

"None officially."

"But unofficially?"

Chris upped the wattage on the glare aimed at the defense counsel, his voice tight with anger as he admitted, "Maybe one or two."

"And did you take these complaints seriously?"

"No."

Back went Kinsale's eyebrows into hiding behind the fringe of hair on his forehead. "Why not?" he asked in feigned surprise. "You admit you and your men have been unable to control Mr. Tanner, that he has been responsible for setting a couple of dangerous criminals free, that he has proven violent on more than one occasion. And you yourself even threatened to lock him up. So why have you not done so?"

"Because things aren't as bad as you're making them sound."

"Oh? Then Mr. Tanner didn't allow prisoners to escape? He hasn't been involved in a number of altercations, some of which involved firearms? He hasn't escaped the watchful eyes set over him time and again?"

Chris only raised his chin in reply, and Kinsale went on.

"And Reverend Bliss? Has he given you any cause to think that he is anything other than what he claims -- a traveling minister intent on bringing God's Word to the citizen's of this territory?"

Chris transferred his gaze to the man in question, dark meeting dark in that gaze. And unable to give voice to the hairs standing at attention on the nape of his neck, he forced out a terse: "No."

"Is it possible he has given you no cause because he is indeed what he claims to be?" Kinsale moved to the defense table and picked up a stack of telegraphs lying there. And crossing to the jury, he handed them out, saying, "I have here a number of testimonials from various ministers and respected citizens of towns throughout the territory praising Reverend Bliss in the most glowing of terms."

"The Devil's been known to appear as an angel of light."

The words were growled, Larabee reaching a dangerous point in his anger, blue eyes on him shadowed in hurt threatening to overcome the good sense that told him it would be a really bad idea to slam his fist into the defense counsel's face.

Unaware in that moment of just how dangerous a move it was to place himself within swinging distance of his witness, Kinsale returned to stand before him, his tone agreeable as he said, "Indeed, Mr. Larabee. But you've admitted you have no reason to suspect my client of any wrongdoing -- other than the word of a man you yourself considered locking up, whom you will not allow to carry a weapon for fear of the harm he might do, whom you can't even allow to walk down the street unescorted. So why is it that you are so willing to take the word of a mentally incompetent man over a highly respected man of God?"

"Objection, your honor!" Sykes thundered, slamming down the pencil he'd been using to jot down notes. "Mr. Tanner's competence to stand witness has not been disproved!"

"No," Kinsale conceded, his gaze once more turned to the judge. "But it has certainly been called into question, Mr. Jackson having testified as to Mr. Tanner's lack of mental acuity, which would certainly cast doubts as to his competence. And since it is only Mr. Tanner's testimony that places my client at the scene of the crime, his competence is crucial to my client's defense."

Travis fingered his gavel. "Let's leave it to the jury to decide Mr. Tanner's competence, shall we, Mr. Kinsale? Rephrase the question." Kinsale gave a nod to the judge, then turned back to his witness. "To repeat: Why do you insist on taking the word of a mentally impaired man over that of the Reverend Bliss?"

"Because I know Vin. And if he says a thing happened, it did."

The words were spoken with a sincerity and trust that had heads in the courtroom nodding. Kinsale, however, was unruffled by the hit scored, and continued, saying, "How very admirable a sentiment, Mr. Larabee. But can you honestly say that the Vin Tanner sitting in this courtroom is the same man you came to know prior to his head injury? You've never looked on him since as you might a stranger, not knowing what to expect of him?"

Chris' gaze went to the one waiting with pale face for his answer and steadfastly said, "He might not be the same man in some ways, but he's the same in all the ways that count."

"Oh?" Kinsale followed the witness' gaze for a moment, then shifted his own to the jury, watching them as he said, "And what ways would those be? Reliability? Steadiness of character? Sharpness of mind?"

Sykes immediately objected, but not before more frowns appeared on the faces of the jury members.

"Objection overruled," Travis decreed.

Satisfied, Kinsale continued. "Yet again I ask, Mr. Larabee, why it is you took Mr. Tanner's word for what happened. You admit Reverend Bliss gave you no reason to suspect him. And in fact, he was alone with Mr. Tanner a great deal since his return to town a few weeks ago. So why, if he had tried to kill Mr. Tanner once, would he not do so again? Why would he not have eliminated a potential witness against him?"

"Who says he didn't try to do just that?"

Kinsale's eyebrows rose to new heights. "Are you saying he did?"

"Someone sure did."

"And when was this?"

"The day before Vin finally remembered what happened." Chris once again shifted his glare to the defendant. "Someone shot at him and J. D. while they were out swimming."

"And was Mr. Tanner hit?"

"No. J. D. was though. Got his arm broke."

"Yet you assume Mr. Tanner was the target? Why?"

Chris returned his attention to the defense counsel. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"You mean you could come up with no other reason why someone would shoot at your men?" Kinsale challenged. "You didn't consider the possibility that the man hit was in fact the target? Or that someone was simply trying to rob both men? They had horses, weapons -- both prime targets for thievery. Or perhaps it was someone out for revenge against either man or both. Surely you and your men have, in the course of your duties as lawmen and in your previous endeavors, aroused a certain amount of ire in men who would not be averse to taking revenge if the opportunity presented itself? You considered none of these possibilities?"

"I considered them."

"But you discounted them." A statement, not a question. "Why? For the same reasons you discounted any other possibilities where Amy Callenbeck's death is concerned?" Kinsale sighed. "Tell me, Mr. Larabee, did you at any time consider the possibility that Mrs. Callenbeck was not murdered, that she in fact died as a result of the fire that destroyed her place of business? Did you consider the possibility that -- if she were indeed murdered -- that Mr. Tanner might be confused as to the killer's identity, that it might have been someone else who committed the crime?"

"Yeah, I considered the possibilities," Chris slowly admitted, his anger simmering now just below the surface. "Just like I've considered the possibility that your mother might actually have been married when she gave birth to you." He ignored the laughter rippling through the courtroom to add, "But I don't consider any of those possibilities at all probable."

"Mr. Larabee," Judge Travis growled warningly. "May I remind you that you are in a court of law and not a saloon?"

Kinsale waved the warning off, amicably saying, "It's all right, your honor. Mr. Larabee is only defending a friend." He focused his attention then on his witness. "But while I find that admirable, I must question whether or not that bond of friendship has clouded your judgment, sir. After all, you've admitted that Mr. Tanner is a sometimes violent and disruptive man, and hard to control. Mr. Jackson has testified as to his mental impairment. We've heard testimony that his memory of the events of that night were such that no one could make sense of them -- unless, of course, you believe his earlier claims that it was a crow who killed Mrs. Callenbeck -- if in fact she was even murdered at all."

"Objection!"

Travis glared at the defense counsel. "Mr. Kinsale, would you prefer that I move the court to the saloon so that you and Mr. Larabee can trade insults with abandon?"

Kinsale assumed a contrite air. "I apologize, your honor. I don't know what came over me."

"Just see that whatever it was doesn't come over you again, sir, or I'll see that it's forcibly removed."

With that, Travis banged his gavel on the desk and growled: "Proceed!" Unabashed, Kinsale continued. "So, again, Mr. Larabee, I ask you -- why would you take Mr. Tanner's word over that of Reverend Bliss? Because he is a friend and you would rather believe his accusation than consider the possibility that the man you knew and fought beside is gone forever, that in his place you must contend with a violent and dangerous man with greatly impaired mental faculties?"

"Your honor! I object!"

His glare transferring to the prosecutor, Travis growled: "On what grounds, Mr. Sykes?"

"On the grounds that it is Mr. Larabee's job as a law enforcement officer to act in accordance with eyewitness testimony, not to judge its worthiness. That's for a jury to decide!"

"And I am asking for no more than that, your honor," Kinsale pointed out in reasonable tones. "I am perfectly willing to leave it to the jury assembled here and now to decide the worthiness of testimony offered. Mr. Larabee having set himself up as a character witness for Mr. Tanner's earlier testimony, I am now simply trying to show that he is perhaps biased in his assessment of Mr. Tanner's reliability."

Travis' glare switched to the defense counsel at that, but he gave him his head, snapping out: "Proceed." Then shifting that glare to the witness he warned: "And this time see if you can manage to answer the question, Mr. Larabee."

Kinsale smothered a smile of satisfaction and said, "Again, Mr. Larabee -- why would you arrest my client for murder on no more than the word of a violent and mentally deficient man?"

"Because even a clock that's broke tells the right time twice a day."

The words were snapped out, the witness' glare putting the judge's to shame, Larabee unmindful of blue eyes closing in sudden pain.

Kinsale nodded, his witness' analogy more apt than any he would have dared make. "Yes," he conceded. Then, head cocked, he added, "But would you offer that up as evidence by which to hang a man?"

A murmur rippled through the courtroom and Kinsale drank it in for a moment before saying, "I have no further questions for this witness, your honor."

He returned to the defense table then and Travis fixed his attention on the prosecutor. "Mr. Sykes, do you wish to cross?"

"Yes, your honor, I do."

Sykes rose, moving to stand before the jury. "Mr. Larabee, you've said that Mr. Tanner has remained the same in all the ways that count. By that I assume you meant those inner qualities that make a man who and

what he is. But he has remained much the same in other, more outward qualities, hasn't he? In fact, you've used him on occasion since his injury in his duties as lawman, haven't you?"

"Yes." Chris shot another look to the man in question, willing him to raise eyes now downturned. "He fought off whoever shot J. D. and fixed him up, then got him home. He's also done some tracking."

"Both of which would require a great deal of thought and concentration, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes."

Sykes nodded thoughtfully. "And Mr. Tanner's memory is not entirely confused, is it? Did he, for instance, remember any events of the night Mrs. Callenbeck died which can be verified by other witnesses?"

"Yes." The word was nearly crowed. "He remembered it was storming that night. He remembered seeing Amy Callenbeck in the bed where she was later found. He remembered getting stabbed. And he remembered the fire -- even remembered Amy burning in it."

"So -- in response to Mr. Kinsale's oft repeated question concerning your reasons for taking Mr. Tanner's word as to the events of that night -- you, in fact, did have some basis for considering the rest of his testimony reliable, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

Sykes turned then to study the defendant. "And as for having suspicions about the accused, you, in fact, had reason to wonder about his interest in Mr. Tanner, didn't you?"

"I did," Chris firmly agreed. "Every time Vin turned around, Bliss was there, offering to take care of him, sticking his nose in his business."

"And do you know why that was?"

"No. Bliss and Vin had nothing in common that I could see."

Another nod. "And why were you and Mr. Tanner at your ranch the day the accused was arrested for murder?"

"It was a trap to flush out whoever had shot at Vin and J. D. the day before. We thought the shooter would be more likely to try again if Vin made an easier target."

"And did anyone ride out to your ranch that day?"

"Just Bliss."

"Who came armed with both a knife and a pistol?"

"Yes."

One last nod, then: "No further questions, your honor."

"Mr. Kinsale?" Travis asked. "Do you have any further questions for this witness?"

"Just a few, your honor." Kinsale remained seated, Bliss at his side with that gleam of triumph in his eyes still. "Mr. Larabee, is it possible that Mr. Tanner might remember some details of Mrs. Callenbeck's death correctly yet be unable to accurately remember others?"

Back came the glare, the anger shining out of Chris' eyes as he grudgingly said, "I suppose."

Kinsale leaned back in his seat, his posture relaxed. "You say no one but my client rode out to your ranch that day you laid a trap for whoever shot Mr. Dunne. Is it possible this was because Mr. Dunne was the intended target? Or because no one was out to dispose of Mr. Tanner?"

"I suppose."

Another grudging admission, the glare upping its wattage. Yet Kinsale, as before, was unaffected. "And do you consider it unusual," he asked with no hint of challenge, "for someone to ride out to an isolated area armed against the possibility of bandits?"

"No."

"And is it possible that Reverend Bliss sought out Mr. Tanner's company for no reason more sinister than that he enjoyed it?"

"Possible? Maybe." Chris' expression hardened. "Likely? No way in hell."

"Mr. Larabee!" Travis admonished.

Again Kinsale rose to his witness' defense. "That's all right, your honor. I have no more questions for Mr. Larabee."

"Then call your next witness."

"I have no further witnesses, your honor. The defense rests."

~ CHAPTER FIVE ~

"Murder was done," Langston Sykes solemnly declared, his eyes on the jury seated before him as he gave his closing argument. "A young woman was killed -- not because of any sin of her own, but simply because of what she saw. And a young man was gravely wounded for the same reason. Now, the defense can squirm and wiggle its way around that all it wants -- but the plain truth is that we have eyewitness testimony as to the manner of Amy Callenbeck's death. We know how she died. We know who killed her -- by his own confession. And that man is here in this courtroom before you now."

He moved a few feet over, his eyes sweeping each of the jury members in turn. "You can believe that, you can believe Mr. Tanner's testimony to that effect, and send the murderer away where he will never again be able to hurt another living being. Or you can choose to disbelieve the testimony given in this courtroom today, you can choose to discount it as the confusion of a man you've heard described as being the mental equivalent of a seven year old -- and you can loose a murderer back onto the streets of your fair town. But before you do so, before you have need to explain to the people of this territory how it is you failed in your duty to keep their women and children safe -- let me remind you that even a seven year old can give true and reliable testimony."

He shifted his gaze then to Vin, who sat between Chris and Nathan, head down, looking at neither man to the side of him, nor at anyone else in the room.

"Before the injuries incurred in the process of doing his duty to this town," Sykes continued, "I dare say there is not a man among you who would not have taken Mr. Tanner's word without question. And I submit to you that the man you see now is the same man. True, his mind works a little slower now, but it does work nonetheless. And as we've demonstrated, at least some of his memories are intact. And if some, then why not all?"

He shifted his gaze to Bliss, seated at the defense table, and the jury's eyes followed. "A trap was laid to catch the man who shot at Mr. Tanner and Mr. Dunne one summer day when they went swimming. Only one man

fell into it: Mordecai Bliss. And twice he attempted to escape that trap, even at the cost of another man's life." He raised one eyebrow. "Hardly the actions of an innocent man -- much less a true man of God." Back went his attention to the jury. "You have all the evidence you need to convict and a duty laid before you. Do not fail in that duty, or you will answer to both God and your fellow citizens."

Sykes stood a moment longer, his gaze again sweeping the members of the jury. Then, with a nod to them as if in acknowledgment that they would do right in their duty, he returned to his seat at the prosecutor's table.

"Mr. Kinsale," Judge Travis called. "You may now close."

The counsel for the defense rose, a hand going to his client's shoulder as he stood. Then crossing to the jury, he said, "I'm not going to insult you by reminding you of all the testimony you heard here today. You know the facts. You know there is no evidence that a murder was committed -- except for the testimony of a man shown by his own friends and colleagues to be mentally deficient and dangerously violent. And even if such a crime did indeed take place, you know that we have only the word of this same man that my client is, in fact, the perpetrator."

He shook his head. "The prosecution could bring forth no other witnesses, no other evidence. The entire case rests on the word of one man -- who at first attributed the murder to a small black bird. And while I don't doubt the sincerity of Mr. Tanner's testimony in this courtroom today, I do doubt its reliability."

Kinsale shot a look to his client, sitting composed at the defense table, his expression one of Christian fortitude. "My client has maintained his innocence all along, and there is nothing in his prior actions that would point to any guilt. Yes, he resorted to a gun that day at Mr. Larabee's ranch -- but would any man here have done less than to attempt to defend himself against a beating and a possible lynching? And his only other crime was to do no more than express an interest in Mr. Tanner's health and well being. The work of a killer or of a man of God doing his Christian duty? I leave it to you to decide."

Back went the defense counsel's attention to the jury. "The prosecution would have you believe that Reverend Bliss is a hired assassin, that his role as a minister is assumed, a fake, a cover. Yet you've read testimonials to the contrary. And indeed, many of you sat in his Revival held here months ago and were witness yourselves to the truth of who he is.

"Now, you can discount that. You can ignore logic and reason and rational thought. And instead you can believe the word of a man lost in the confusion that is now his mind. You can fail in your duty to this town and to the citizens of this Territory. Or you can do what is right and true and exonerate Reverend Bliss of any and all wrongdoing. The choice is yours. And I have full confidence in your ability to make the right one."

With that, Kinsale returned to his seat beside his client.

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When the jury retired to deliberate, the Seven would have followed their example and retired as well -- to the saloon -- had not the seventh of their number showed no inclination to move from his seat there in the makeshift courtroom. Head downbent, neither speaking nor looking at anyone, Vin seemed lost in some inner chaos, this not the drifting they were used to but a deliberate withdrawal begun with Nathan's testimony and ending with Chris'.

Six pairs of eyes met over that head bent low then shifted away, none of the others knowing what to say to ease the pain of truths too plainly uttered, it being neither the time nor the place to bring forth those truths left unspoken. Instead, the six simply reclaimed their own seats, grouping themselves about their injured member again as if they could thereby do more than merely keep the curious at bay.

And that the townspeople in the room were curious was obvious by the murmurings and guarded looks cast their way. But if Vin was aware of it, if he was aware of the dark form seated six feet away with back turned and head held high, he gave no sign of it, gave no sign of any awareness at all until the jury filed back into the room fifteen minutes after they'd left it. And lifting his head as they reclaimed their seats, Vin stared past Bliss into the faces of those twelve men.

When the last of them had been seated, Travis asked the jury if they'd reached a verdict.

"We have, your honor," the one elected foreman declared as he stood.

"And what say you?"

The foreman stood straight, hat held in hand. And looking only to the judge, he solemnly pronounced: "We find the defendant, the Reverend Mordecai Bliss, not guilty."

A murmur swept through the courtroom, a sound of both surprise and agreement with the verdict rendered, only the Seven sitting in silence, their faces revealing nothing, more than one hand going to Vin Tanner's

shoulders as they slumped, his head once again lowering, his face concealed by the long hair hanging free.

The banging of the gavel brought the courtroom back to order, and all that was left was the dismissal of the jury, Judge Travis thanking them for their time. He then turned to Bliss, his tone carefully neutral as he said, "The defendant is free to go."

"Thank you, your honor," Kinsale spoke on behalf of his client. And standing up, he then said, "Before you hang up your robes for the day, however, there is one small matter I would like to bring before you."

Stopping in the act of rising, Travis sank back into his chair. "Oh?" he said in wary surprise. "And what would that be, Mr. Kinsale?"

"Just this, your honor -- my client would like to press assault charges against Mr. Tanner."

"What?" Chris Larabee growled, leaping to his feet. "No way in hell!"

Travis banged his gavel down. But it was to Kinsale he directed his attention. "Am I to assume you are referring to the incident in Mr. Larabee's home on the day Reverend Bliss was arrested?"

"I am, your honor. And may I remind you that we've already heard testimony to the fact that Mr. Tanner willfully and without provocation attacked my client."

"I'm well aware of the testimony, Mr. Kinsale," Travis gruffly pointed out.

"Then your honor is also aware that my client is within his rights to press charges." Then, with Bliss sitting in perfect calm beside him, his expression one of sorrowful regret, Kinsale added, "And while it greatly pains the Reverend to insist on those rights, he feels it to be a necessity in light of the fact that this town's peacekeepers are failing in their duty not only to the town, but to Mr. Tanner as well."

"The hell you say!" Buck snapped out, also rising to his feet. "Ain't nobody failed in their duty but twelve men who couldn't find their asses with a mirror and a two year old pointing the way!"

Down went the gavel again. "Sit down, Mr. Wilmington," the judge ordered. "You too, Mr. Larabee."

Kinsale waited only until the two men had reluctantly regained their seats before continuing. "Your honor, I think it is clear from the testimony offered by Mr. Tanner's own friends and associates that he is in need of more help than he is currently receiving. And if he does not receive that help, it seems quite possible that will not only he suffer as a result of his tendency towards violence, but that someone else might as well. And the Reverend feels it is his Christian duty to ensure that such does not happen."

"Ain't nobody in any danger from no one but your client!" Nathan spat out.

Kinsale ignored the outburst. "However, your honor, despite the harm done to him, my client has no desire to see Mr. Tanner punished. So he is

perfectly willing to drop the charges if Mr. Larabee will agree to do as Mr. Jackson originally requested and send Mr. Tanner to an institution where he can receive the help he needs."

Six of the Seven erupted in angry outbursts, Mary and Nettie Wells giving sharp cries of distress. Only Vin sat in silence, head jerking up, his eyes wide in a face gone deathly pale. And behind them, the assembled townspeople looked at one another in shock, low murmurs of anger or agreement sounding among them.

"That will be enough!" Travis ordered, his gavel banging repeatedly. And once some measure of order had been restored -- the six peacekeepers remaining on their feet with fire in their eyes -- he turned his attention back to the counsel for the defense. "Your client is certainly free to press charges, Mr. Kinsale. As to your suggestion about institutionalizing Mr. Tanner --"

Kinsale held up his hand, halting the judge's words. "Your honor, if I might have a moment with Mr. Larabee, I feel sure we can come to some kind of amicable agreement."

"The hell you say!" Chris growled.

Kinsale turned to the gunslinger, unfazed by his anger. "I assure you, Mr. Larabee, it will be in Mr. Tanner's best interests if you give me a moment of your time."

Chris was tempted to do as requested and give him a moment of his time -- but only at the end of his fist. But something in the lawyer's face and tone gave warning of something left unvoiced, some danger lying beneath the surface. So with a quick jerk of his head, he agreed and followed warily as Kinsale led him to one of the offices there in the Grain Exchange.

He waited only until the door had closed behind them before growling: "There ain't no way in hell Bliss is getting away with this, Kinsale. Not with what he did to Amy Callenbeck. And not with what he did to Vin and is trying to do. So if you think you're going to strike some kind of deal in here --"

"A deal, Mr. Larabee?" Kinsale broke in. "There is no deal to be made. My client holds all the cards -- thanks to you and Mr. Jackson. All that remains is to for him to collect his winnings. And what coin that will be paid in is entirely up to you. Either you send Mr. Tanner to jail or to a mental asylum. The choice is yours."

Chris set his jaw. "Ain't neither going to happen. No way in hell."

Kinsale raised one eyebrow. "I beg to differ with you, Mr. Larabee." And digging one hand into a pocket of his suit, he withdrew a folded piece of paper. "You see, Mr. Larabee, my client has a particular ace up his sleeve. And I'm sure you'll agree that it is a most impressive ace indeed." With that, he unfolded the paper to reveal a Wanted poster with Vin's name and likeness on it.

"As you can see, Mr. Larabee," Kinsale continued, "my client is being most generous. He could easily have brought this small matter to the attention of the judge. But he has no desire to see Mr. Tanner swinging at the end of a rope. He does, however, desire what is best for him. And I think, after today's testimony, that it is obviously in Mr. Tanner's best interests that he receive professional help. Do you not agree?" Chris stood silent for a long moment, his mind tracking through the possibilities, seeking out a means of escape and finding none to which he was willing to trust Vin's life.

"Is the choice truly that hard to make?" Kinsale at last prompted. "A few months of Mr. Tanner's life in exchange for the rest of it?"

"A few months?" Chris echoed, grasping at that straw offered.

Kinsale nodded. "Mr. Tanner has progressed remarkably in the past few months. And if he is as competent as you believe, I see no reason to think such progress will not continue at the same pace -- provided, of course, that he receives professional guidance and treatment."

Again Chris stood silent, weighing choice against choice. And at last, he gritted his teeth and said, "Fine. I'll agree to three months -- and not a day more."

"Excellent," Kinsale congratulated as he folded the Wanted poster up and returned it to his pocket. "Now, shall we return to the judge with your decision?"

He started to lead the way to the door, then stopped, looking over his shoulder to say, "Oh, there is one small detail I should mention, Mr. Larabee. If Mr. Tanner should mysteriously disappear en route to the asylum, if he should somehow manage to escape once there -- my client will consider that a breach of this little agreement and will distribute the facts of Mr. Tanner's status as a fugitive to the proper authorities. For his own good, you understand."

"I understand plain enough," Chris growled, hands clenching into fists at his side.

With a nod, Kinsale then led the way back to the courtroom, where he reclaimed his place at Bliss' side, while Chris returned to his seat beside Vin, carefully avoiding looking into the blue eyes turned to him in question and alarm, his head shaking at the whispered questions put to him by the other five.

"Have you and Mr. Larabee reached some kind of agreement, Mr. Kinsale?" the judge asked, his curious gaze shifting between the two men.

Kinsale stood. "We have, your honor. Mr. Larabee has agreed to a placement for Mr. Tanner in the Territorial Asylum for the Insane."

Again the courtroom erupted in surprise, five of the Seven taking to their feet, their anger equally divided between Bliss' lawyer and their own leader, who sat in rigid silence at Vin's side refusing to meet the shocked look of betrayal in the blue eyes still turned to him. And behind them sat Nettie, Mary and Mrs. Potter, their hands pressed to mouths

fallen open in shock and dismay. Only Bliss showed no reaction, sitting calm in his seat as if unaware of what he had set in motion.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Buck thundered in Larabee's ear, leaning over to take hold of one shoulder in an attempt to force him into facing him. "You telling me you agreed to this?"

Chris only shoved his hand away, his gaze kept safely turned from both the man behind and the one beside him. Then the judge was again demanding order in the courtroom and Buck settled down, returning to his seat, but with a look of determined resistance set in hard lines.

"You agree to this?" Travis asked, echoing Buck's earlier question to Chris, his own surprise evident.

"I do," Chris forced out between gritted teeth.

Another murmur swept through the room, this one quenched with a single pounding of the judge's gavel.

"Is there anything further?" Travis asked, his gaze shifting to Kinsale before letting it drift to the man at his side..

"No, your honor," the defense counsel declared. "Although, if it please the court, I would like to have Mr. Tanner taken into immediate custody." And waiting only for the judge's reluctant agreement, he turned to the spectators at his back and nodded, two men standing at that gesture. Five of the Seven again erupted into anger.

"What the hell is going on here?" Buck furiously demanded to know.

"Ain't no one taking nobody nowhere 'til we get some answers!"

Kinsale shifted his gaze to Chris, who tightened his jaw still further before turning to his men and snapping out, "You'll get your answers -- later. But right now you're to keep out of this, let these men do their job."

Buck stared at Chris as at a stranger, his head shaking in disbelief. And when he would have continued his protest, Chris cut him off. "Let it rest, Buck. Like it or not, this is the way things have to be. Now, you want to fight it, you'll have to take your first swing at me. You understand?" He shifted a look of warning and challenge to the other four peacekeepers, who stood as Buck did, in shock and wavering trust. In the end, however, that trust they'd always had in one who'd never yet abused it held fast. And though fists knotted at their sides, they stood silent, willing to trust that all was not as it seemed.

"Sully, Tomlin," Kinsale murmured to the two men standing awaiting his orders.

They moved then, through the spectators, skirting the line of chairs to the one still seated in shock, blue eyes wide and expression uncomprehending.

"Come along, mister," one of them gruffly ordered as he reached down to take hold of an arm. "We got a long ride ahead of us."

Vin tried to pull loose of the stranger's grip, his gaze shifting to the one sitting rigid beside him, his voice rising in alarm as he said,

"Chris?"

One word, but with months of trust and caring behind it. And reacting instinctively to it, Chris shot out a hand to break the hold on Vin's arm. His eyes were on Kinsale though as he said, "Just give us a minute." Kinsale paused, his gaze shifting to Bliss, who sat with his back turned still to the drama unfolding behind him. And finding whatever answer he sought, he nodded to the two men standing guard.

Chris turned to Vin then, hands going to his shoulders as he leaned close and softly said, "It's all right, cowboy. It's just for a little while. You'll be better in no time. Then you can come home. Okay?" Vin shook his head at words understood yet beyond comprehension. "I'm sorry," Chris continued, his voice hard but with an edge of pain to it and his eyes dark with anger born of that pain. "This ain't what I want, but we don't have a choice. So you go with these men and everything will be okay. I promise."

Again Vin shook his head, eyes giving voice to that which he had no words to say, his hands rising to clutch at Chris' arms.

The other five peacemakers drew close, Buck's hands going to the ones on Vin's shoulders and Nathan's over his.

"I don't know what the hell's going on," Buck softly growled. "But I do know this, Vin -- there's not a one of us who'll let you come to harm. Now, you got our word on that. So you trust Chris, just like we're doing. And I swear you won't regret it. Okay?"

Another shake of his head, the movement frantic, face paling further, breath ragged now.

"I think it best not to prolong this, gentlemen," Kinsale murmured.

"Sully, Tomlin, please escort Mr. Tanner outside."

That time Chris offered no resistance when hands reached down to take hold of Vin's arms, breaking his hold on him. And when Vin fought against them, his breath coming in panicked gasps and his hands clawing at the ones holding him captive, Chris sat with jaw clenched and gaze murderous. Even when Vin was dragged out of his chair and halfway across the room, struggling and panting his fear and anger, he sat still, the men behind him vibrating with an anger held back for reasons unknown and answers soon to be demanded. And as Vin disappeared through the door, giving one last desperate cry of "Chris!" with a look to him thrown over his shoulder, he only closed his eyes against that plea, a helplessness known only once before washing over him.

"You made the right choice, Mr. Larabee," Kinsale softly declared once silence again descended upon the courtroom, all there too stunned to give voice to questions not yet formed. "You'll see -- it's for the best."

"The best?" Chris growled. And opening his eyes to fasten them upon the Devil and his minion, he warned in dangerous tones: "I'll tell you what's best -- if you and that piece of slime you call a client get the

hell out of my town and stay out."

Kinsale nodded, then placed a hand on Bliss' shoulder, urging him up from his seat. But instead of making a hasty departure as warned, Bliss moved to stand in front of what remained of the Seven, unmindful of the restraint they employed at having him so close at hand, his eyes on them dark, his expression flat.

"You can train a wolf to guard the sheep," he softly stated. "But sooner or later he'll remember what sheep are for. And when that day comes, you'll have to shoot the wolf to save the sheep." He inclined his head.

"Consider today a bullet saved." And holding out his hand for the golden-headed cane reclaimed from the prosecutor's table, he turned and limped out of the makeshift courtroom, what lay behind thus dismissed, what lay before still to be decided: a wolf set free of the sheep by his hand but not yet his to command, moves still to be played in the game ahead.

And as the doors of the Grain Exchange closed behind him, Chris Larabee could have sworn he heard the receding sound of a crow's wings flapping.

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~ CHAPTER SIX ~

Vin waited. Waited while Sully and Tomlin bound his hands and tied him onto his mount. Waited while they gathered the reins and led him out of town. Waited for a mile and then five and more. Waited with gaze turned behind, fully expecting to see six horsemen galloping after him, knowing they would not truly allow what was happening to happen. Waited with the vision in his head of Chris shadowing him when Eli Joe set him up to be hanged, refusing to allow the law to have its head when he thought Yates to be a Federal Marshall come to return him to Tascosa.

Vin waited, expectant, even when Sully brought his horse to a halt and hauled him off it, the sun setting and camp to be made. Waited then for the sun to set, his captors to fall asleep, for the moon to rise.

Waited for the soft sounds of six sets of boots creeping close or just one. Waited for the touch of a knife on the ropes keeping him bound in place. Waited for what he knew would come, but that came only in sleep -- Chris riding into camp with the others at his back, a crow taking flight in panic before them.

He waited, refusing to consider why or how or if, focusing only on what he knew would be. He waited for a promise given and trust earned. He waited for all he knew, for all that made sense in the world.

And when the sun rose the next morning and he awakened with the slow confusion that had long since marked him to a toe hard against his leg, he waited only for the fog to clear and the rope binding him to a tree to be loosened, a wild in him to be free of his bonds, escape to be had on his own in place of a hope that was too long in coming. He rose unsteadily to his feet then, at Tomlin's command, hands still bound in

front of him, taking one step then two before stumbling to his knees, waiting for the one at his back to prod him along. And no sooner did he sense the man's closeness than he exploded upwards, twisting around even as he brought his bound hands upwards, slamming them hard into Tomlin's face, the man's head snapping back with the force of his blow, his knees buckling as he staggered back.

He grabbed Tomlin's gun then, his hold on it awkward but his finger finding the trigger and hammer easily enough. And swinging it around -- Sully's position already marked -- he had the second man covered before he knew what had happened, his arms moving away from his gun when the realization hit.

Vin stepped to the side then, away from the man at his back, but not quickly enough, Tomlin not fully taken out and recovering in time to tackle him from behind, carrying him face down to the ground, the gun discharging as they fell.

The air knocked out of him, Vin could do no more than lie beneath the larger man's weight trying to regain breath lost, the gun snatched out of his hand with a growl in his ear. And when the weight on his back shifted and then eased, he fought not against the hand fisted in his hair, dragging him up and to his feet, but against lungs refusing to inflate, attempting to bend low against the hand holding him upright in order to ease the ache in his chest. Then at last breath came, a choking rush of it, his lungs wheezing as if suddenly gone rusty, the world going dim growing light again.

"Damn dummy like to broke my jaw!" Tomlin growled as his partner crossed to them.

"That lawyer fella warned he wouldn't go easy," Sully pointed out, taking care to stand out of range of a kick. "And you heard as well as I did in that courtroom how dangerous he is. You should have been more careful."

"Yeah, I heard," Tomlin snapped back. "And I heard, too, how dumb he is. So who'd expect someone so damned stupid to be so damned sneaky?" He slammed his gun back into its holster, then rubbed his already swelling jaw. "I'm thinking we ain't getting paid near enough for this job. Think maybe we deserve a bonus." Tomlin jerked the hand then in Vin's hair, shaking him hard.

"You're not getting paid to rough him up," Sully warned. "And if he doesn't show up at the nuthouse in one piece, you're not likely to get paid at all."

Another hard shake. "Hey, can I help it if the dummy falls off his horse?"

Sully shook his head. "We don't have time for this, Tomlin. You saw those six friends of his. There's not a one of them I want to tangle with, much less all of them. And I won't rest easy 'til we're a hell of a lot farther out of their reach than we are now."

Tomlin gave a snort of disgust. "Why would they want to come after a dummy, risk taking a bullet for the likes of him? Seems to me they'd be glad to get rid of him, all the trouble he was to them. And for sure they didn't put up no fight against sending him off. Hell, they probably bought that preacher man a round of drinks for saving them the bother of locking him up themselves."

Vin growled, breath enough at last to manage that, twisting against Tomlin's hold on him, only to fall to his knees when Tomlin yanked hard on his head, forcing him down.

"What's the matter, dummy?" his captor demanded with a laugh. "You worried maybe I'm right?" Tomlin pulled downwards again, forcing Vin's head up. "You think I didn't notice you checking our backtrail yesterday, waiting for them friends of yours to come riding to the rescue? Bet you sat up half the night too, waiting on them. For all the good it did you." He gave another laugh and another jarring shake of Vin's head. "Face it, boy. They ain't coming after you."

"They'll come!" Vin declared with as much breath as he could manage.

"They'll come and bury you!"

Another laugh. "If they was coming, boy, they'd have been here by now."

"They'll come!" Vin doggedly repeated. "They always come!"

"Maybe once they would have," Tomlin jeered. "But not no more. Ain't nobody got no use for a dummy like you, 'specially not a bunch of gunslingers. You'd just get in the way of things, slow them down. And I reckon they're smart enough to know that, even if you ain't."

"I ain't no dummy!"

"That ain't what those friends of yours said on the witness stand," Tomlin pointed out with another laugh. He gave a snort then and added, "Hell, with friends like that, you don't need to worry about what your enemies got in mind for you."

Sully sighed, then took hold of one of Vin's arms, hauling him to his feet. "I told you, Tomlin," he warned when his companion glared at him.

"We don't have time for this. So go get the horses ready. I'll take care of Tanner and get breakfast started."

Tomlin glared at his companion a moment, a challenge given. But when Sully returned the look with an unwinking gaze, he gave in, sullen in defeat. "Fine," he snapped, loosing his hold on Vin's hair with a jerk.

"But this ain't over."

He stomped off then, to the horses picketed on the other side of the camp. And turning to Vin, Sully growled out in a low voice: "Do yourself a favor, Tanner, and don't rile Tomlin any more than you already have. That nuthouse you're going to is filled with people not half as crazy as he is."

"Ain't going to no nuthouse!" Vin rasped, chin out and jaw set.

Sully let out a snort. "Oh, you'll get there, all right. Unless, of course, those friends of yours show up like you keep hoping."

"They will!"

"You'd better hope so," Sully warned. "And if you keep riling Tomlin, you'd better hope it's soon. Now, come on. We've got a long ride ahead of us and I want to get to it. But first," he paused, stepping a few feet away to his bedroll and saddle, collecting a length of rope and fixing it into a loop as he returned. "This ought to keep you out of trouble," he said as he slipped the loop over Vin's head and down to his chest, ignoring the glaring eyes fastened on him. And adjusting the rope so that it rested just above Vin's elbows, he tightened it and knotted it in place, leaving the remainder of the rope free, taking it up as a lead and using it to pull Vin to the edge of camp to tend to his needs.

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Half an hour later, they were back on the trail, Vin's arms still bound to his sides by the loop of rope, the end of it tied to Sully's horse, and his hands again tied to the saddle horn. And again he waited, all through the morning, his head turned again and again in search of distant horsemen or near, Tomlin riding behind and laughing each time he did. He ignored the jeers, sure that rescue would come. But as the sun rose in the late summer sky, beating down on his unprotected head, he turned away from that hope, still sure of it, but eyes focused ahead now in defiance of the one taking delight in each mile passed and each turn of his head in search of that which didn't come.

He rode then in stoic silence, enduring sweat dripping into his eyes and the chafing of ropes at his wrists, a thirst growing in him and a gnawing need to be free of his bindings, a fear stirring as well that he refused to acknowledge. Even when they paused at noon to rest the horses and partake of a meager lunch, he held onto that stubborn silence, giving no voice to his anger when Tomlin loosed his bound hands from the saddle horn and jerked him off his horse by the rope tied around his chest, letting him fall sprawling to the ground. Nor did he resist when Tomlin kicked him to his feet and pulled him into the shade where Sully was already dividing up food.

Shoved then to the ground, he sat and took the hard biscuit tossed to him, raising it awkwardly to take a bite of it, swallowing with difficulty against the dryness of his mouth.

"So, dummy," Tomlin jeered when his own lunch was consumed. "Where's them friends of yours?"

Vin ignored him, busying himself with the canteen Sully at last handed him.

"Hey!" Tomlin snapped, kicking out at his intended victim's outstretched legs. "You deaf as well as dumb?"

He laughed at his joke, but Vin merely pulled his legs up out of reach, his attention all for the tepid water that did nothing to slake his thirst. Tomlin, however, was not to be so easily cheated of his amusement.

"You know, dummy," he continued. "I saw a crow this morning. You reckon

maybe it was the one what killed that lady back in town? Think we should track it down and haul it in for trial?" He turned to his partner then. "What do you say, Sully? Might be a big reward for its capture." Sully only shook his head and leaned back against a convenient rock, hat tilted against the sun to shade fair skin. Tomlin turned back then to a more attentive audience, blue eyes watching warily. "I heard some of the townsfolk in the courtroom talking, boy. They said you used to really be something. Said you were a mean cuss could shoot the wings off a fly in flight. So how'd you come to let some little ol' bird take you down?" He gave another jeering laugh. "Hell, no wonder them gunslinger friends of yours wanted you gone. Wouldn't do them no good to have it getting out that one of them got drawed down by a bird."

A reaction won, but not the one expected. "Before you go poking at a bear in a cage, Tomlin," Sully warned from beneath his hat, "you'd best make sure the cage door is locked."

"Like I need to be scared of a dummy?" Tomlin scoffed.

"A dummy that needs all that rope around him? Yeah, I'd say so." That earned a grin from Vin and a glare from Tomlin.

"Sounds to me like you're the one scared," Tomlin accused. "First you're worried about the dummy's friends. And now about the dummy himself?"

"I worry about everything. That's how I stay alive."

"Well don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. I've proved it often enough, haven't I?"

"Yeah. You've proved it. But I heard the same folks talking in that courtroom as you. And if you're smart, you'll keep that length of rope between you and Tanner, and one hand on your gun butt."

Tomlin gave a scoffing chuff of breath, then turned his attention back to Vin. "That right, dummy? I need to be scared of you?"

Vin held out his bound hands, chin rising in challenge.

Tomlin eyed him thoughtfully, aware he had a good three or four inches on his captive, as well as at least 30 pounds, that pitted against a decade less of life Tanner had in his favor. Still, he had no doubt he could take him.

As if aware of those thoughts, Sully pulled his hat off his head to run the fingers of one hand through his thinning red hair. "You let the bear loose of its cage," he warned, "and don't be surprised when you get bit."

Tomlin only grinned and reached for the knife at his belt. He'd no more than started to lean forward though when Vin snapped his head to the side, alerted to the sounds of a rider moving openly into camp. Hope flaring in him died almost instantly though, a pale horse coming into view with a stranger on its back.

Sully and Tomlin both stood, Tomlin sheathing his knife to free his hand to rest on his gun butt.

"Something we can do for you?" Sully asked as the newcomer eased his

horse up to them, the man sitting easy in his saddle despite long years, gun worn low on his hip and narrowed pale eyes warning of a hard life lived.

The man jerked his head at the one on the ground. "That Tanner?" Tomlin's hand shifted to grip the handle of his gun, but left it holstered still. "That some business of yours?" he demanded to know in warning tones.

"Name's Pike Warner," the stranger said in introduction, his eyes shifting easily between the bound man and his captors. "I'm the sheriff over at Rock Creek." He flashed the badge pinned beneath his vest. "Had a telegraph yesterday from a friend name of Larabee. Reckon you know him?" "We know who he is," Sully conceded, aware of the expectant stillness that came over his prisoner. "And you'd best know we've been hired nice and legal to transport this man down to the Territorial Asylum for the Insane. We have the papers to prove it."

Warner gave a nod of concession. "I don't aim to interfere with that." He shot a look to the one bound, noting with interest the paling of his face and the hope dying there. "But I don't reckon you'd be disagreeable to some company on your way, now would you?"

"Any particular reason why you should be playing escort to this man, Sheriff?" Sully asked.

"None but the asking of a friend who wants to make sure his friend gets to where he's going in one piece."

Tomlin tightened his grip on his gun. "You accusing us of something, Sheriff?"

Warner shook his head. "All I'm doing is a friend a favor. And seeing as how tight you have the man trussed up there, I reckon he must be dangerous enough that you'd be glad of some added protection."

"The day I need protecting from a dummy," Tomlin growled, "is the day I hang up my guns."

Sully took a step forward, laying a hand on his partner's arm in warning. Then nodding to the lawman looking down on them, he amiably said, "We'd appreciate the help, Sheriff. Just want to get Tanner to where he's going as soon as possible, with as little trouble as possible."

Warner gave a nod, his gaze shifting again to the man still seated on the ground, head lowered now and long hair hiding his face from view.

Then to Sully he said, "You ready to get back on the trail?"

Sully shook Tomlin's arm, saying by way of reply. "You go see to the horses. I'll clean up here and get Tanner on the move."

Tomlin did as told with a glare to Warner and Sully both, while Sully gathered together what remained uneaten of lunch, then tugged on the rope Tomlin had loosed, gruffly ordering, "Come on, Tanner. Let's go."

Vin looked up at him at that, a dark in his eyes giving warning of depths unsuspected and best left unfathomed, and Sully took an involuntary step back. And that noted, Warner cocked his head, his gaze shifting

from man to man before him. "Why don't you go help your friend with the horses," he then suggested. "I'll watch Tanner."

Sully willingly handed the rope off to the sheriff, his eye nonetheless on the two as he moved to help in collecting the horses.

Warner watched him go, then turned a curious gaze to his charge.

"Larabee wanted me to give you a message," he said when blue eyes turned up to him. "Said to tell you to stick with these two yahoos, not to try to make a break for it. Said things will work out for the best if you trust him on this."

Eyes dark with suspicion asked the obvious.

Warner nodded, that questioning expected. "Larabee figured you'd be unlikely to take my word for that, so he also told me to tell you that he hasn't forgotten how lively the women are back in Texas." He cocked his head at that. "That mean something to you?"

Vin eyed the sheriff a moment longer, a promise once given noted, help offered when needed despite the risks. And with a nod, he stood, words coming easily to him in his relief. "Yeah, Sheriff," he softly said.

"It means everything."

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They were another four days on the trail, Warner keeping to himself but sticking close to Vin, Tomlin surly at being denied his entertainment and forced to settle for the occasional gibe tossed at the one who rode each day in silence, unheeding of insult offered. And when his gaze was no longer turned behind in hope but ahead, Tomlin grew jumpy at the expectation plain on Vin's face. So it was a relief to them all when at last they topped a rise to find the sprawl of buildings that was the Territorial Asylum for the Insane spread out below them.

Vin shifted in his saddle at the sight of it, pulling against ropes at wrists and chest, eyes searching out places for a possible ambush, sure that it was then at hand, five days of waiting and tensing at each bend in the trail at last over. He had no idea why Chris would have waited so long, had fully expected him to make good on his promise delivered much sooner than this. And that he would indeed make good on that promise of help, that the boys would keep him from harm as Buck had solemnly declared, he was sure of, as sure as he'd been each time he'd trusted the rest of the Seven to watch his back. He had no idea of the game being played, didn't know if he'd lost the trail of it somewhere in the confusion that had reigned in that courtroom, but he knew the men he rode with and had risked his life to protect -- and that was all the knowledge he had need of. They would save him from what lay below. That he knew. As they then started down the long slope, his gaze shifted constantly, ready for what would soon come. And as they drew ever closer to the sprawl of buildings, his gaze began to turn back, the tension in him growing, Chris' words in the courtroom whispering out of the shadows in his mind. It's all right, cowboy. It's just for a little while. You'll be

better in no time. Then you can come home, okay?

Words dismissed as spoken for Bliss' benefit, but now taking on a different sound, one too filled with a terrible horror for him to give ear to it. So, with a shake of his head, he dismissed the words again, turning determinedly away from the sound whispering in shadows, shooting a look to Warner, wishing now he had thought to ask for details of the rescue to come, wondering if Chris would have confided that knowledge to him. And noting the ease with which the man rode down that long slope, he decided he was unaware of anything to come. So he turned away from him and darted his gaze ahead and behind, refusing to take heed of the buildings growing steadily nearer.

Then they were on level ground, the Asylum only half a mile ahead, the brick buildings grouped around a larger one in their midst, the look of them forbidding, a darkness seeming to settle upon them, a lack of light that was nothing of shadows, the land about them dry and brown, vegetation taking hard hold on barren ground. And unable at last to avoid looking in that direction, Vin pulled instinctively back against reins not held, the vision before him a thing of horror made real, his feet straining against the stirrups as if he could thereby bring his horse to a halt, his bound hands struggling against the rope keeping him captive. He threw a look behind him then, eyes frantic for sight of six riders or one, for some sign that promises given were now to be made good. And when the land behind was as empty of promise as that before, he turned to the men riding beside him, searching out words to tell them to wait, that there had been some mistake, that this wasn't happening -- couldn't be happening. That if they would only just wait, everything would be all right, everything would be as promised.

But he couldn't find the words, couldn't even breathe for the fear that was clawing its way out of the shadows now, that was drawing closer with every jarring step his horse took. He shook his head against it, refusing to give it a name, a need in him to believe in promises given and the men who gave them. And at last, in desperation, he decided that it had all indeed been a mistake, that Chris and the boys would be found within this place, papers in hand that would free him, all having been settled back in town between lawyers and the judge while he waited out that long ride here.

The fear remained, sliding still out of the shadows. But he ignored it now, intent on that inner vision of rescue, of trust rightly placed. It was all a mistake, soon to be corrected. He had only to trust in Chris, in the rest of the boys, and it would all work out for the best. That he knew.

That he knew, yet still the fear grew as they entered the Asylum grounds, men with dull eyes looking up from their labors there as they passed, men Vin knew to be keepers of the lost standing near, their own eyes hard and watching him in judgment, searching out what had brought him

there. And as the horses came to a stop before the central building in the complex, his fear became a pounding in his chest and a cold that had him shaking, trust all that kept him from giving into that fear, all that enabled him to keep his feet when his bound hands were loosed and he was pulled from his horse, the rope at his chest removed. It was all he could do to remember to place one foot in front of the other, but he managed it, trust leading him forward to where he knew Chris Larabee waited.

Up a long flight of steps he stumbled, led by hands on his arms, eyes growing wider in fear when doors opened to a dark interior, eerie sounds echoing among the high ceilings found within. His boots rang on marble floors, his breath came in ragged pants, and his eyes darted about the darkness in search of six men true to their word. And when he was led into a small reception area, he held his breath in fear and hope -- to find it empty of life save an older woman sitting behind a desk, curious gaze turned up to them as they approached.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" she asked when the hands on his arm brought him to a stop before her. Then taking in the ropes at his wrists, she lowered her tone to that used in a sickroom -- or among the mentally deficient. "You have admittance papers with you?"

"Yes'm, we do," Sully told her, digging them out of a pocket and handing them over.

Vin waited then, waited for the soft oh of recognition, for the words that would free him, for the signal to men who had only stepped out of the room for a breath of fresh air, that were there somewhere, just beyond sight.

Instead, the woman gave a nod and rang a bell, a door opening to the side of the room in response, two large men moving towards her, towards him.

"This is Mr. Tanner," the woman told the newcomers. "He'll be staying with us for a while. Please take him to see Dr. Creed." She held out the papers given to her then and one of the men stepped forward to take them.

Vin shook his head at that, without words to point out the mistake, pulling against the hands holding him in place, wanting to make them understand that something had gone wrong, that if they would only wait, everything would be explained, all would be made right.

Then one of the attendants was reaching out to him, Tomlin at his right shoving him forward with a jeering, "So long, dummy."

The shadows took over then, knowledge and promises and trust assured all forgotten, only a wild and desperate need in him to be gone from that place recognized among the shadows, his mind clouding with fear, instincts taking over.

Gone were the Seven and hope. Gone was trust and the belief to which it gave birth. In their place was only the need to stay ahead of the hunt

and the trap closing about him. And as those behind let go of him and those before took hold, he exploded, head butting, bound arms jabbing, feet kicking. Then, as those who would bind him to that place fell away with yelps and muttered oaths, he was running, boots slipping on the slick floor yet carrying him to the double front doors, hands fumbling at one of the handles there, freedom a press and a pull away. But no sooner did the latch click than hands were on him, pulling at him, dragging him away from that escape. And with a wordless cry of rage and fear, of betrayal and despair, he fought -- with feet and elbows, with bound hands and butting head, with teeth even when that was all that was left to him, larger bodies than his forcing him to the floor and pinning him there.

Trapped, unable to move, barely able to breathe, he waited. Not for hope or promises made, but for the ending of them. And at last it came in the pricking of a needle in one hip, and in the darkness that chased the shadows into deeper hiding as he slid into unconsciousness.

~ CHAPTER SEVEN ~

He awoke to the dark and a hard surface beneath him, arms wrapped around himself and holding tight, eyes opening slowly as his mind even more slowly cleared, sounds coming to him as it did: inhuman cries arising from human torment, wails and howls of the mad, echoing as much in his mind as off prison walls. Visions came then as well, out of the shadows, eyes newly opened closing against them, his arms wrapping more tightly still, something needed onto which to take hold, even if only himself, promises made now broken and a scream of his own working in him at the loss.

He curled into a ball around that wakening sound, only to cut himself on the sharp edges of those promises broken, the shards of them littering the shadows and spilling into the light, delicate and shining, small pieces of hope shattered. And turning to anger to hold that pain at bay, the scream held back was then transformed into a raging fury that swept out of the shadows, sweeping those bits of hope away: what was lost to be forgotten, what couldn't be had unwanted, hope not so much shattered now as annihilated.

He hunted down the shadow visions then in his rage, murderously intent on them, a need in him to punish himself, to post warning against that trust that had kept him five days on the trail to this place, escape that could have been his gone and perhaps lost forever. He'd been a fool more times in his life than he cared to count, had regrets and hurts too many to number. And nothing had he learned from those hard lessons, believing once again in promises made, giving himself willingly to men good of heart but too flawed to hold true to that trust placed in them. He didn't know what had happened or why. Didn't know why he'd been abandoned to that place. Knew only that to look back now for the sign of that which had led him there would be to lose his way completely, knew

that only by keeping his eye on the trail ahead could he track his way to the end of it. What had been was behind, to be buried in shadows unmourned. It was all he knew of survival, to turn from loss, to let go of what couldn't be held fast.

And so he let go -- let go of hope and trust, of home and friends, of all that might trip him up or hold him back. A hard thing done, heart and mind set against what had been and would never again be, the need of it long known and accepted.

In that moment, Seven became one, the highest number to which Vin Tanner dared count. And the trail then marked, survival to be his at any cost, as it had always been, he opened his eyes to search out the path on which he'd been set, seeking out sign by which to track.

Comfort then to be denied, he loosened his hold on himself only to discover that comfort was dictated by some binding he couldn't name, arms held in place not by ropes but by some construction of cloth and tie.

Fury rising again to the surface, he struggled against that bond, growling out curses in three languages, bootless feet scrabbling for purchase against stone as he sat up and scrambled across the floor in search of something solid to guard his back, hitting at last against what felt like brick. But fight though he might against that binding, it remained unyielding. And at last conceding defeat, he gave it up to sit in stillness, chest heaving with effort spent and mind empty of all but the darkness surrounding him. Then gradually he noticed how incomplete that dark was, a small square of light shining dimly through a grilled opening in the door. And through it sounds came, not only the wailing shut out by a mind now closed to it, but the occasional scrape of boot on stone, the creaking of wood he took to be a chair. A guard he decided, set to watch over the lost.

Up went his chin at the thought, a hardness growing in him. Lost he might be, but the finding his to command, escape to be his as well. And that decided, he set himself to wait.

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Hours later, the sun long risen and the dim light of morning filtering through the grilled opening of the gate to his prison, his wait came to an end, a key grating in the lock set in solid wood. And struggling to his feet as the door swung open, awkward in the cloth binding wrapped from waist to neck, he stood with back straight and head held high.

Expecting the guard who moved into the room, he was surprised when behind him came another visitor, this one of a higher order: suit-clad and distinguished, a dark head of hair graying prematurely at the temples, glasses perched on the end of his nose. And in his wake came an older woman, small and round and kind of eye, that last obvious even in the pale light spilling into his cell from the corridor beyond, a pad and pencil held ready in her hands.

"Ah, Mr. Tanner," the second man spoke in pleasant tones. "I'm glad to

see you are in a better mood today. I missed welcoming you on your arrival yesterday. But perhaps we shall be able to have a nice visit later, once you have gotten settled into your new home."

Up went Vin's chin, no words offered.

His visitor went on, undeterred. "I'm Dr. Ledingham Creed," he said.

"I'm the director here. I'll also be supervising your treatment." And when Vin edged his chin up another notch, the doctor smiled and added, "Don't worry, Mr. Tanner. There's no cause for alarm. We're up to the standards of modern practice here."

The woman at his back spoke then. "Do you wish Henricks to take him over to Ward C now?"

Creed nodded. "He seems calm enough, so yes. Martin will need to clean him up first though. Then I'll expect him in my office at ten." To Vin then, he added, "Have you eaten this morning, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin narrowed his eyes at the man, refusing still to speak. And, taking that for a 'no,' the doctor continued, this time speaking to the guard standing vigilant at the door. "Take him to the kitchen first, Henricks. Make sure he's well fed. Then to the baths. Mrs. Bunch will let Martin know to expect him."

Blue eyes glinted, an anger stirring at a world moving too fast and beyond his doing, a fear beneath that Vin refused to acknowledge.

Creed dismissed him then, turning to leave without another word, the woman scurrying out in his wake, leaving the guard to stand eyeing him with disfavor.

"Come on then," Henricks growled. "I ain't got all day." And when Vin remained in place, not eager to leave that place known for another unknown, his mind still tracking the doctor's words, Henricks cursed and crossed the room to him.

Vin slid away from him along the wall, into a corner, eyes narrowed and a growl offered in warning, hands inside the straitjacket tightening into fists.

Henricks growled back, scowling as he said, "You'll do like the doc says, boy, with or without that nutshell you got on. So make it easy on yourself and stand still while I get it off."

He came to a stop in front of Vin but slightly to the side, wary of wayward feet. And when Vin stood still as ordered, having tracked his way as far as the offer to remove his bindings, Henricks reached out to take firm hold of one straitjacketed arm, turning Vin around. And pressed face first against the wall with a larger body pinning him against an attempt at escape, the tracker was tempted to do just that, the instinct in him strong to resist any and all captivity. But Henricks did no more than he'd said he would, loosening the ties holding the constrictive jacket on him -- so he reined in instinct and held still.

"There," Henricks announced when he'd gotten the last tie loosed. Then stepping back he waited for Vin to shrug out of the restraint, warning

as he did so: "You want to keep that thing off, you'd best mind what I tell you. You pull anything like you did yesterday, you'll be right back here. You understand?"

Vin raised his chin for a reply, Henricks taking it for what it was -- defiance. And having long since learned the advisability of establishing the rightful pecking order in that place, he grabbed hold of Vin's shirtfront and slammed him into the wall at his back, his head bouncing off brick, hands going instinctively to push against the other man's chest in a move more defensive than offensive. And pressing his weight into him once again to hold him in place, Henricks snarled: "I asked you if you understand, boy. And we ain't going nowhere 'til I know you know exactly the way things are around here. And the way things are is this: I ask you a question and you answer it. You understand?"

His face was inches away from Vin's, his bulk hard against the younger man's slight frame, holding him captive, a look in his eyes not of anger but of implacable determination. Vin wanted to fight against it, wanted to stand in defiance and anger. But more than that, he wanted out of that place. And if giving this man a piece of his pride would gain him that, it was not too high a price to pay. So lowering his eyes, he gave a quick nod.

Satisfied for the moment, Henricks loosed him but for a hard grip on one arm. And stepping back, he pulled him with him, leading him out the door of his prison.

Vin went willingly enough, the stone floor cold against stockinged feet, wanting to ask for his boots back, worried that he'd apparently been judged too great a risk for such a sharp-toed weapon. Still, he was not deemed so great a risk as to be transferred in chains, only one keeper needed in the moving of him. And keeping an eye out as they moved, he noted the path they trod, taking in each barred window, each locked door through which they passed, each keeper at his station or at hand for some reason unknown, searching out weak points and possible routes of escape.

Soon they were in the kitchen, a small beefy man looking up from the table at which he sat chopping sorry-looking vegetables.

"Doc wants him fed," Henricks announced with a jerk of his head to Vin.

The cook grunted, looking over a shoulder to a young man lazily pushing a broom along the slate floors. "Arnie Joe," he called, "scrape out whatever's left in them pots on the stove and bring me a bowl of it."

Arnie Joe giggled, then recited some children's foolery in a singsong voice. And setting the broom carefully down, he did as instructed, ladling out a bowl of gummy porridge and sidestepping across the room to the cook, who took the bowl and slid it across the table before going back to his vegetables.

"Go on and sit," Henricks told Vin. And when the tracker only stood staring at the young man performing an intricate dance back to his broom

while reciting his rhymes with a vacuous grin, the keeper followed his gaze and said, "What's the matter? Ain't you never seen a crazy man before?" Vin shot a look to him, brows drawn down, and he laughed. "Well, you'd best get used to it, 'cause this place is chockfull of the likes of him." He pushed Vin towards the chair before which the bowl of porridge sat. "Chew while you look or go hungry. I told you -- I ain't got all day."

Vin did as instructed, sliding into the chair indicated, his gaze dropping to the bowl of cold porridge, hungry enough to take up the spoon there, his gaze drifting back to the one emitting an occasional giggle while he swept. And forcing the unappetizing food down, his stomach rebelled at not only that, but at being trapped there, in that room, in that place, a cold certainty forming that there were those who looked on him as he looked now on the one happily laughing at some joke only he could fathom.

He wanted then to throw the bowl of porridge against the wall, wanted to turn to men sane there in that room and deny any kinship with a man obviously lost to reason. He wanted to get up and run, to fight and claw his way out of that place. Wanted to feel the sun and wind on him, to ride to some place far distant, to lose himself in mountains high above such horror, where the air was fresh and clean and unbreathed by Man. But he'd long since learned to turn without complaint from wants beyond reach. So he sat in that chair in that place and forced down cold porridge on top of the scream that once again demanded release.

~ CHAPTER EIGHT ~

After forcing down his meager breakfast, Vin was led out of the kitchen with a bruising grip on his arm, escape routes once again noted and planned as he passed along the building's lower level, his eyes averted again and again from men and women wandering free with vacant expressions or led with the light of madness burning in hollow eyes. But when he'd passed through door after door and up one flight of stairs and down myriad hallways, and up another flight, he began to lose the trail working in his mind. He refused to panic, however, knowing that one door would lead to another and eventually to freedom. He'd simply have to watch and wait for his chance. And that it wouldn't come in that moment, he had to accept, too many keepers passed, too many on the grounds glimpsed through barred windows.

Having once awakened bound and securely imprisoned, he wouldn't risk such again without some certainty of success. But that freedom would be his, he was determined -- escape to be had from not only bars and locks, but from those things longed for and once so very nearly his, danger in want, survival in need only.

"Martin!" Henricks called on opening one final door, that one leading to a small room with half a dozen filled tubs in it, all of them occupied, several keepers in attendance, two of them struggling with a

recalcitrant bather.

A seventh inmate was there as well, awaiting his turn at a bath in chains and in clothing stained with a foul-smelling substance Vin had no desire to have named

Nose wrinkling in distaste even as something within shrank from too close an association with men scorned and lost, Vin decided that five days of trail dust and sweat were preferable to that which promised to leave him feeling dirtier still. He would then have backed out of the room, would have turned away from that which was too disturbing to look upon. But stockinged feet offered no purchase on the slippery floor, Henricks hauling him into the room after him with ease.

"Martin!" the attendant called again. "I've got a new one for you!"

A heavysset man, a few years Vin's senior, looked up from the chair on which he lounged, his gaze shifting from the struggles of his fellow keepers to the new arrival. "He the dummy?" he asked, eyeing Vin with lazy interest.

Henricks shrugged. "Ain't shown much in the way of sense so far, so your guess is as good as mine." He loosed his hold on Vin, unheeding of the glare aimed his way. "The doc says to clean him up proper, then fetch him along to his office at ten." He shoved the tracker forward at that, then turned on his heel and slipped back out of the room.

Vin watched him go, calculating his chances of making it to the door and beyond. Then a shouted curse caught his attention and he turned his head, a hard blow on flesh sounding from the direction of the tubs, laughter following as the bather who had been giving his keepers trouble covered his head with his arms, cowering now in the dirty bath water.

"Damned lunatic nearly bit my finger off!" one of the attendants complained, hand drawing back from the blow struck to insert his injured finger into his mouth, angry eyes on the now compliant bather. "Next time I'm muzzling him!"

The other attendants merely laughed again, Martin among them. Then he turned his attention to Vin, who stood in the middle of the room watching with wary eyes and muscles tensed for flight. And getting up from his chair, Martin sauntered over to his new charge, looking him up and down with disapproval.

"Where'd they get this one, you reckon?" he wondered aloud. "Looks like some kind of wild man come down from the mountain, all that hair and dirt on him."

"Smells more like a pig farmer," the one bitten sneered.

"Sooney!" another attendant called, laughter following.

Vin narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting from keeper to kept when two of the men bathing took up the chorus of hog-calling.

"Quiet down!" the injured attendant snapped. "I've had all I'm taking out of you freaks for one day!"

"You're done," another attendant told the two cackling bathers. "Get on

out of there and get dressed."

"Yeah, got us a pig boy in bad need of a bath," Martin put in, reaching out to take up a dirty curl. And when Vin jerked his head away with a glared warning, Martin grinned and added, "But first I'd best get this rat's nest taken care of." Eyes still on his charge, he called out, "Hey, Cormer fetch me the scissors! I've got me a pig boy that needs scalping."

Up went Vin's chin and he found words enough to growl out, "You ain't cutting my hair."

Martin's grin widened. "Now, that's where you're wrong, Pig Boy. The doc don't cotton to long hair on a man. Says it's the Devil's reins."

Cormer handed him the scissors then, and he waved them at Vin, snapping them open and closed as he tauntingly said, "Looks like Satan is going to have to find him a new pig to ride." Then, to the man standing grinning at his elbow, he added, "Grab him, Cormer."

Vin flew forward at that, one hand going to each man before him, shoving them back, Cormer slipping on the wet floor and going down hard, Martin struggling to keep his balance, then tripping on his fallen fellow with a curse.

Already at the door and slipping through as the first cries of alarm were raised, Vin shot into the hallway blessedly empty, turning away from the direction just traveled, too many doors locked that way, searching out now some other means of escape. And charging past doors both open and closed, he ran around the far corner, sliding on the slick floor in his socks, bouncing off the wall to race for a pair of double doors set at the end of that short bend of hallway. But cries of hunters on his trail had an attendant opening a door ten feet from the escape marked. And seeing the wild vision racing towards him, he stepped out into the hall to block the escapee's path, making a grab for him. But Vin swung an arm up and out, connecting solidly to the side of the man's head. Then he was slamming into the closed doors he prayed were unlocked, hands scrabbling at the knobs, the doors unyielding.

He pulled at the knobs then and pushed, throwing his weight against the door, still to no avail. Then the attendant he'd hit was on him, grabbing his arms, trying to twist them behind him. Vin, however, shoved off the door and turned, knee going up with enough force to send the man to the ground groaning in agony. And looking up from him to find Martin and two other keepers rounding the bend in the hallway and bearing down on him, he jumped the fallen man and darted into the room the keeper had just exited, searching out either escape or a weapon by which to come at it. Neither, however, was to be found, the room in which he stood a small ward with barred windows and filled with beds, men lounging there or moving freely about, a second attendant moving in Vin's direction. Panting, the tracker spun around, intent on gaining the doors again. He no sooner reached them, however, than he collided with Martin charging

in, the keeper going down a second time. And before Vin could regain his balance, the other two attendants tackled him over the prone man's body, all three going down with a crash and a flailing of arms and legs. Vin was instantly twisting and punching, kicking and scrambling, and very nearly slipping out from beneath his captors, only to be held in place with a hand catching at his hair, his head yanked back, hands taking hold of arms and legs, bodies heavier than his pinning him face down on the floor.

Panting and grunting as he continued to struggle, curses growled and threats made, he was unaware of the sounds of cheering and wailed fear arising from the room's inmates. He was, however, aware when Martin crawled forward to take hold of his hair, jerking his head up, only to slam it onto the floor again and again, until at last he lost consciousness.

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When he awoke, he was back in his cell, or one like it, arms again bound by the straitjacket and head hurting with a dull ache that kept his face pressed against cold stone, too uncaring of the effort required to sit up and too uncertain of the room spinning, his stomach warning against any attempt at movement.

A few minutes later, as he lay drifting, memory returned in a rush. He then fought against his bindings, heedless now of bodily discomfort, needing to feel the familiar length of his hair, terrified that he might find it gone, hacked off while he lay unaware and unknowing. And when his struggles dislodged a curl, the long strand falling into his face, he nearly wept with relief.

The ache in his head was then worth it, a second imprisonment a small price to pay for victory achieved. And tilting his head carefully against the dizziness and nausea, he dislodged more strands, the lengths of hair falling to form a curtain blocking sight of stone and brick, legs curling up for protection and warmth, his mind allowed to drift again, refuge sought in a fog too long familiar, not even a key turned in the lock to his prison some time later rousing him. It was only a toe prodded against his stockinged feet that brought him to awareness, his head turning so that he could peer through the strands of hair hanging in his face at his visitor.

"The doc's here," Henricks announced, reaching down to sit the tracker up, sliding him back to prop him against the wall.

Vin considered fighting him, as little as he was able. But his head hurt too much to even try. So he merely settled back against the wall, waiting to see if his stomach was going to rebel at the movement that once again set his world to spinning.

Creed entered the room then, Mrs. Bunch at his back, as before. "How long was he unconscious?" he asked.

"Twenty minutes maybe."

The doctor moved to stand at Vin's feet, gazing down at the bruise

forming on his forehead. "And did Martin say what happened?"

"Said Tanner put up a fight when he tried to cut his hair, then took off. And when Martin caught up with him and tackled him, he fell and hit his head."

Vin glared his protest, but said nothing, only sat waiting for what would come next, legs pulled up to bound arms, braced for either flight or whatever fight he could manage.

"That's quite a bruise for a simple fall," Mrs. Bunch pointed out in timidly accusing tones, peering down at the lump forming.

Creed ignored the comment, fixing a disapproving eye on the one on the floor. "I'm afraid you're not off to a very good start, Mr. Tanner.

You've been here less than twenty-four hours and already you've had cause to be sent to a Composing Room twice. Now, I know you've yet to have the rules explained to you, so I'm going to be lenient. But any further such outbursts will result in most unfavorable consequences. Do you understand?"

Vin only upped the wattage on his glare for an answer, prompting a warning from Henricks. "You forget already how things work around here?" he growled. "The doc asked you a question. Now, you'd best answer it."

Vin held his glare for another moment, switching it from doctor to keeper, defiant still, but nothing to be gained by it in that moment. So, with a lift of his chin, he conceded only as much as was necessary, sullenly saying, "I understand."

The doctor nodded. "One of the things we'll help you with during your stay here, Mr. Tanner, is your tendency towards violence. No doubt such behavior marked you even before your unfortunate injury and is, I suspect, responsible for what happened to you. So if you are ever to function well enough to return to society, that wildness in you must be tamed. And in order for that to happen, we must first get you looking more civilized. You will then better be able to act in a like manner."

Vin stiffened at that, afraid he knew what was coming. And raising his chin, he warned, "You ain't cutting my hair."

"I'm afraid it's a necessary part of your treatment, Mr. Tanner. One's outward appearance, after all, is but a reflection of the inner man. To be well and whole, the two must conform." Creed turned his gaze to Henricks. "Get Banting to help you. Pym as well, if need be. Then, once he's composed, we'll try the baths again. And after that, I'll want him in my office."

"No." Vin shook his head, a panic again rising and sounding now in his voice. And pushing with his legs, he slid up the wall, gaining his feet none too steadily, the room again spinning.

Creed sighed. "I suspect such obstinacy is nothing new, men of violence not usually given to reason. And in his present condition, it is perhaps unavoidable. So let's make this easy on all involved." He spoke over his shoulder then. "Mrs. Bunch, please ask Banting and Pym to step in

here. And I'll need a mild sedative as well, just in case."

"Yes, Doctor."

Mrs. Bunch turned to comply with the orders given, only to stop when Vin slid as far as he could away from the ones assembled, back to the wall, growling, "It's mine!"

A warning given, but more than that, a desperate claim staked to that part of himself that was all that remained to him of a choice made long ago. Hair unbound and untamed was all that spoke of a freedom once known and slowly hemmed in by needs he'd never given name, need giving way to need one time too many, his presence in that place proof of that.

He'd given up too much, had nothing left but himself to offer, had nothing but that onto which to hold. And to give that last bit of himself up would be to lose himself, a loss not of the mind but of the heart, of all that he was and ever would be, thin strands of hope by which to hang, but all he had of that commodity left in him.

Something of that shone through the panic in his eyes, riveting Mrs. Bunch in place, her gaze shifting to the one who had the ordering of the drama being witnessed. "Doctor?" she hesitantly began. "Do you think perhaps you could relax the rules this one time?"

Creed turned unbelieving eyes on her. "Order must be maintained, my good woman, and the rules of civilized behavior heeded! It's what separates us from the animals."

"But it's only hair, Doctor, and not even all that long."

"Only hair, Mrs. Bunch?" Creed shook his head in disappointment.

"You've been here long enough to know how dependent our patients are on us to bring order to their lives. We must set them an example, not only in how we ourselves behave, but in what behaviors we expect of them. So to allow Mr. Tanner to continue in his wild ways would be to encourage them. And how would that ultimately benefit him?"

"I don't suppose it would, sir," Mrs. Bunch reluctantly granted.

"Then do as I ask, please."

Carefully averting her gaze from blue eyes searching out hope, Mrs. Bunch ducked her head and slipped out of the room. And as if her departure were a signal, Vin erupted out of the corner into which he'd wedged himself, head down to butt into Henricks' midriff, the larger man staggering back with an explosive breath. He kept to his feet though, Vin the one going down, unable to keep his balance with arms bound awkwardly around his torso, landing hard on one hip and immediately twisting to bring his legs under him in order to push his way up again. But before he could coordinate his moves, Henricks was on him, having only to straddle him to pin him in place. And there he held him, unfazed by his attempts to buck him off, his weight solid and unyielding.

Trapped and knowing it, Vin let out a string of curses punctuated by threats, words failing him when a new voice spoke, saying, "You want me to stick him, Doc?"

Vin's protests then became inarticulate cries of anger and loss anticipated, uneasy by the doctor's dismissal of the sedative. Instead they increased to a frantic pitch when Henricks leaned forward to place his hands on his shoulders, pinning him more securely still. Another pair of hands then held the panicked tracker's head, pressing hard against the bruising sustained in his earlier struggles with Martin. Vin was unaware of that pain, however, was aware of nothing but the feel of a third man's hand taking hold of a length of his hair and the sound of scissors opening and closing.

His cries became a howl then, the scream that had been working in him finding release at last.

~ CHAPTER NINE ~

He didn't know how many times the scissors cut, his mind too filled with a raging loss to count, a piece of him ripped away with each strand taken. He knew, however, when the scissors fell silent, halted by a voice speaking breathlessly from the doorway of his prison.

Vin, too, fell silent then, seeking to judge whether the interruption was salvation at hand or a new torment offered. And fighting the panic that left his body trembling and his breath coming in ragged pants, he struggled to make sense of hurried words.

" the doors locked and all patients confined to their rooms for the rest of the day," a voice Vin recognized as Creed's commanded. "Mrs. Bunch, please see to that. Henricks, you'll remain here. Banting and Pym will come with me."

Vin was loosed then, hands releasing their hold on him and the weight on his back lifting. He neither knew nor cared why it was so, only closed his eyes and sobbed out his breath in relief, curling into a ball as footsteps echoed, receding, the door closing and locking as they silenced. And when he could draw breath without it shuddering through him, he pulled his legs under him and pushed himself up so that he sat with his back against the wall. Then he steeled himself to open his eyes, afraid to know but needing evidence he couldn't gain by touch of bound hands. Breath held, he searched out those butchered pieces of his hair, his stomach clenching at sight of them, several long lengths lying scattered about the floor among more bountiful shorter clippings, far too much taken but perhaps enough remaining. And desperate to know the full extent of the damage done, he put his head down and shook it, hope and the fear to hope at war within, the victor uncertain when shortened locks and long both fell into his face.

It was too much and not enough. Closing then eyes and mind both to what couldn't be borne, he rested his head back against the wall, unmoving, working to lose himself in fog and shadows, afraid to look too closely within for fear of what he might find missing.

And so he sat for time uncounted, uncaring of the slow progression across the sky of a sun he couldn't see but only gauge by the dim light of

his prison cell. Then a soft voice spoke to him, echoing kindness and a pained regret, and he opened dull eyes to find Creed's shadow, Mrs. Bunch, standing four feet in front of him, her gaze on him one of pity. Pity for what, he neither knew nor cared, turning away from it, his loss held tight and guarded close. Then a harsh voice speaking from the doorway of his cell had him jerking his gaze in that direction. And finding Henricks standing there with a watchful eye, he pressed his back hard against the wall.

The attendant's attention however, was not on him but on the woman standing with timid defiance in the middle of the small cell, hands clasp and unclasp. "You sure the doc knows you're here, Mrs. B?" Henricks uncertainly asked. "I can't see him letting you come down here alone."

Mrs. Bunch looked over one shoulder at him. "But I'm not alone," she pointed out. And in tones of apology, she added, "And you needn't fear you'll get in trouble for this, as I take full responsibility."

Henricks remained unconvinced. "I don't know, Mrs. B. You might want to think about this. That one's awful wild. And I don't much figure he'll sit any more still for you than he did for the rest of us."

Vin pressed harder into the wall at that, eyes darting from man to woman before him. And resettling her gaze on him, Mrs. Bunch softly said, "If you catch a wild thing in a trap, Mr. Henricks, it will fight to get free. But if you give it room enough to come to you, sometimes you can lay gentle hold of it."

"That sounds nice and pretty, ma'am," the skeptical keeper conceded. "But it's much more likely you'll get your hand bit off if you try anything so foolish."

The old woman sighed. "Perhaps so. But it simply wouldn't be right to leave a body, whether man or beast, caught in a trap without at least trying to relieve its suffering, now would it?"

Henricks gave up. "Have it your way then, ma'am. But if he so much as looks at you cross-eyed, I'm putting my foot down hard. You understand?"

Mrs. Bunch nodded, and her self-appointed guardian took up a watchful stance, shoulder against the door jamb, gaze fixed unwaveringly on the one waiting in wary stillness, eyes wide and dark with the expectation of more harm to come.

The old woman stood uncertain beneath that look for a long moment, her courage at last faltering and her gaze falling to the floor. But she had only to catch sight of the curls lying there to regain the determination that had led her to that small cell. And, eyeing those severed locks, she said, "I knew a woman once who had the most beautiful hair I've ever seen. It was long and of a shining gold. I swear it looked like a halo on her. And so it should have, for one more like a saint I never knew."

She spoke in gentle tones, an old woman reminiscing about things long

gone, as if to a dear friend over a cup of tea in the parlor rather than to a man sitting bound and wild of eye in a madhouse. And looking up, gray eyes sought out blue. "What makes me think on that," she confessed, "is that one day this woman I knew became ill with a fever that wouldn't quit, and one of the women in the town caring for her took a pair of scissors and cut her hair right off. Said it was the only way to break the fever." She shook her head at the memory. "I never did hold with that old wives' tale, but for sure something worked and the woman's fever broke. But something else broke as well, something deep inside her when she found out what had been done." Mrs. Bunch fixed Vin then with a knowing eye and added, "Seems she thought on that hair of hers as the best part of who she was."

Blue eyes narrowed and gray eyes refused to turn aside, pity gone and compassion there in its place. Then slowly the old woman continued. "She couldn't have been more wrong, you know. The best of who she was couldn't be taken from her. She was everything that was kind and loving -- and that had nothing to do with the length of her hair."

Vin continued to sit still, tracking his way through words to the meaning behind them, comfort offered, but a warning of danger there as well. And when he held that gaze upon him with unblinking eyes, Henricks let out a scoffing breath.

"You really think he understands what you're trying to say, Mrs. B?" he asked.

She studied Vin a moment longer, noting the slight lifting of his chin at the attendant's words and the look hardening in his eyes. And with a nod, she said, "You understand, don't you, Mr. Tanner? And you understand, as well, that your reprieve is temporary, that the doctor's orders still stand."

Vin lifted his chin higher at that, the look flashing in his eyes not defiance, but fear.

"I'm sorry," the old woman continued, true regret in her voice. "It won't come today -- there was trouble in one of the wards and the staff is too busy guarding against further trouble to worry about this. But tomorrow Henricks will get the help he needs and they'll finish what they started."

Vin clenched his jaws at that and turned his head, away from gray eyes knowing what was to come and sorry for it, away from hope denied and loss assured, wanting nothing more than to be left alone. But Mrs. Bunch had more to offer him.

"I'm not very smart, Mr. Tanner, or brave," she admitted. "So I can't see a way around this. But I thought maybe -- if you'd let me -- that I could finish cutting your hair."

Panic flared in the eyes Vin turned back to her, and she hastily added, "I'd save as much as I could. And I know it wouldn't be enough. But maybe it would be something?"

Some small remnant of hope remaining? Some small remembrance of things past and long gone? Or perhaps only some small token of defiance, of resistance? Vin started to shake his head, to refuse too little offered in place of too much taken. Then he noted the look in those gray eyes and realized that the something offered was not hope or remembrance, or defiance even, but simply an acknowledgment -- of him, of that place, of the wrong turns life could take and too frequently did. It wasn't enough. But in that moment, having lost all else that mattered, it was something. So, blue eyes held fast to gray and Vin Tanner gave the smallest of nods in an acknowledgment of his own.

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He kept his eyes closed while she cut, concentrating on the gentle touch of her fingers rather than on the snipping of scissors or the soft brush of hair falling away. And when she finished with a sigh and moved to stand before him, he opened his eyes to look up at her, unmoving in the chair they'd dragged into the room and set him in.

Mrs. Bunch looked doubtful, gray eyes going to Henricks standing in the doorway still, his opinion silently requested. And in reply, eyeing the hair that hung in ragged curls below his charge's ears still, he shrugged, saying, "Looks like something chewed him up and spit him out. And I don't much think the doc will consider it anywhere near short enough." Then, noting the slumping of the hopeful barber's shoulders, he gruffly added, "But if you keep him distracted enough next time he sees him, he just might let it pass."

With a sigh then of resigned acceptance, Mrs. Bunch snapped her scissors shut and slipped them into her pocket. Then, to Vin, she said, "You keep your hair tucked behind your ears, and maybe the doctor won't pay it any mind."

It wasn't much upon which to hang his hope, but it was all Vin had. So he took hold of it and gave a nod, of compliance and gratitude. And offering a sad smile in return, Mrs. Bunch reached out to pat one shoulder, then stooped to gather up the shorn locks from the floor. "You'll stay here the night," she told him, straightening up again. "There was trouble in one of the wards earlier and Doctor Creed has ordered everyone to stay in their rooms, so you'll be taken to your ward in the morning. In the meantime, please try not to worry. I'm sure everything will be okay."

This ain't what I want, but we don't have a choice. So you go with these men and everything will be okay. I promise.

A promise given, echoing in memory. Want denied, choices made -- and nothing would ever be okay again, what had been lost now beyond reach. Eyes closing then against that loss, mind turning away from it, Vin returned to the shadows within, only vaguely aware when he was loosed from his bonds and guided from the chair, curling up on the floor with his back to the wall, hands tucked beneath his arms to keep them from

searching out the shorn reminder of things lost.

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He awoke the next morning clutching his harmonica, that comfort sought in the night, hands searching out in troubled sleep what couldn't be found in his waking hours. And reassured by that small weight, he curled into a ball, attempting to shut out stone and brick and too much of darkness. His harmonica went then to his lips, but he made no attempt to search out the familiar on it for fear that it too would be taken from him, a surprise working in him that it yet remained. Then something else worked in him, a vague awareness of some balance lost. And tracking through the fog in his mind to the dim light of morning, he realized that there was no comforting curtain of hair falling in his downturned face. Closing his eyes against that awareness, he curled more tightly into himself. Then, taking a breath in deep, he slowly reached up to the back of his head, feeling along the shortened strands of his hair, growing still at reaching the ends of it, allowing the loss to filter slowly into his numbed mind. Inches gone, years as well, a stranger to himself now in body as well as mind, nothing now as it had been, all that he'd counted on taken or betrayed.

The room seemed to tilt then beneath him and he lowered the hand at his hair to the floor in search of an anchor. And screwing his eyes more tightly shut, he pressed his hand against stone, taking some of that hardness inside him, setting heart and mind against the ache working in him, vision turned away from what lay behind, survival to be found in what lay ahead -- a long familiar instinct that was all sometimes that had kept him alive and sane. Hunter turned hunted, he was as a wild thing trapped and determined to gain its freedom no matter the cost in pieces of itself left behind. All that he was then focused on that need to survive, his inward gaze on the trail ahead searching out sign, alert to danger and false trails laid, all else giving way, loss now to be of his choosing.

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~ CHAPTER TEN ~

Breakfast that morning was in his cell, Henricks delivering a chunk of bread and a cup of water, which he set inside the door with the warning that he'd soon return to take him to his ward. And taking the lifting of Vin's chin as acknowledgment, he closed and locked the door, leaving the tracker to devour his meager meal, the edge barely taken off his hunger, too many meals missed in the past days.

The last crumb licked, Vin then waited, silent and still, a hunter awaiting his prey, the hunted hoping to escape the predator's hungry eye. And as he waited, he considered the previous day's path to the upper reaches of the asylum, weak points reviewed, his chances at escape weighed. Then Henricks returned, the key rattling in the lock and the door swinging open. And looking up at his entrance, Vin was instantly on his

feet at sight of the leg irons he carried.

"Now don't you go making this hard on yourself," Henricks warned, moving warily into the room, another attendant following at his back. "The doc ain't inclined to take a chance on you making another break for it. So these are only to get you to where you're going. And if you give me trouble over it, you'll find there's worse things in this place than where you are now. So you just stand easy there and let us get these things on you."

Vin tensed, eyes darting to the open door, chances considered and instantly dismissed, too many keepers and doors to be gotten through and nothing to be gained by the attempt but a more secure prison than the one to which he was headed. So he reined in instinct, standing still if defiant, hands clenched and chin upraised, as the attendants approached. "Turn around," Henricks commanded, coming to a halt, his companion slipping around him.

Vin hesitated, instinct warning against such a move. Before he could reconsider his decision to submit to the irons though, the second attendant was on him, taking rough hold of him and spinning him about, shoving him hard into the wall, one arm twisted behind his back to hold him there.

Henricks then stepped up to him, kneeling to fasten the irons around his ankles. And when he had them secured, he got up, stepping back and saying to his fellow keeper, "Okay, Banting. You can let him go."

Vin turned as soon as the weight holding him captive was released, the short chain between the iron cuffs clanking against the stone, his fists braced against the brick at his back, his breath coming fast and his eyes narrowed. And when the attendants reached out to grab him, it took all he had of restraint to let them take hold of his arms and pull him forward and out of the cell. And as he shuffled between the two men to the upper reaches of the asylum, he again tried marking the path, only to again lose his way, but his certainty remaining that he would sooner or later escape that place. Then one final door was opened to them, leading not to the baths but to a hall familiar from his attempt at escape the day before, Martin there with keys in hand, glowering at him.

Henricks let loose of him then, handing Martin the key to his irons.

"Doc wants him shackled any time he's off the floor," he told him. "Said he's on restrictions today too."

"He get wild again?" Martin asked.

"Didn't care none for getting his hair cut yesterday," Banting replied.

"You'd think, the way he carried on, that we were cutting off something important."

Martin eyed Vin's too long locks with a curl of his lip. "You call that a haircut?" He shook his head and turned to Cormer seated at a desk behind them, saying, "You'd best fetch the scissors again so we can show these boys how to do it up right."

Vin stiffened, muscles tensing for another fight, only to blink in surprise when Henricks gruffly commanded, "Leave it be."

Martin turned back to him, a scowl on his face. "What are you talking about?" he challenged. "It ain't near short enough and you know it."

"Maybe not. But it will do."

"The hell it will!" Martin puffed his chest out. "You don't give the orders around here -- I do. And I say the damned rat's nest goes."

"You can say whatever you want," Henricks allowed. "But you'd best do as you're told."

The words were ones of warning, the tone easy but with a hard edge to it, and Martin backed away with a deepening of his scowl as he accusingly said, "You going soft, Henricks? He's just a dummy. What's it matter to you?"

"Never you mind what it matters to me. Just do like I tell you and I won't have to come back and explain things to you in painful detail."

He turned to leave then, Banting letting go his hold on Vin and following after him, Martin pushing past the stunned tracker to slam the door shut and turn the key hard in the lock after the departing attendants. And spinning about, he grabbed hold of one of Vin's arms, jerking him after him as he headed for the door to the baths, no allowances made for the tracker's shortened steps.

Unable to keep up, Vin tripped, both hands going out to break his fall, Martin loosing his hold on him and derisively saying, "Ain't bad enough he's dumb as a rock, but he's clumsy too." He swung a leg back and forward then, connecting hard with Vin's thigh. "Come on, Pig Boy. Get up. It's time to wash the stink off you."

He drew his leg back for another swing, but Vin rolled away from it, gathering his legs under him and pushing up to his knees, Corner coming up behind him to take hold of an arm, nearly oversetting him again as he pulled him upright. Then, before he could gain his balance, he was shoved forward, stumbling into Martin, the keeper shoving him back towards Corner with a growled: "Maybe you'd do better on all fours, Pig Boy. That way you could pretend you were back in your pen with the other pigs."

Corner laughed, taking his turn again at shoving the unbalanced tracker. "Reckon maybe we should fill his tub with mud instead of water," he jeered. "Make him feel right at home."

Falling into Martin again, Vin clawed for purchase, Martin shoving him away roughly, his nose wrinkled in disgust as he said, "Hell, I'm going to need a bath myself now."

Corner stepped to the side then, allowing Vin to fall to the floor again. And when Vin lay there, mind swirling in confusion, it was Corner's turn to let loose a kick, his foot connecting with a rib. "Get on your feet, Pig Boy," he commanded. "It's getting hard to breathe for the stink."

Vin slowly gathered himself again, pushing up to his hands and knees. But when he pulled his feet beneath him, Cormer gave him a shove with one foot, knocking him back to the floor. "Pigs don't walk on their hind legs," he sneered. "They walk on all fours."

Wary gaze on Cormer, Vin again pushed up to his hands and knees. then slid his feet forward beneath him. And when the attendant swung back his foot, he launched himself at the man, tackling him about the legs, carrying him to the floor beneath him. He then rolled away and into the wall, using the solid support to push himself up. Before he could do more than get to his knees though, Martin was on him, both hands fisting into his shirt and pulling him up to slam him into the wall at his back. Head hitting hard, the headache from the previous day came back full force and he closed his eyes against it. Then a fist pounded into his gut, the air rushing out of him in a grunt of pain. Knees buckling, he would then have fallen if not for the hands at his shoulders pushing him hard into the wall.

"Step back," Cormer growled, waiting only for Martin to grant him access before taking a shot of his own at Vin's abdomen. And when the tracker doubled over and dropped to his knees, arms tight about his middle and breaths drawn in ragged gasps, Cormer took hold of his hair and pulled him up by it, shoving him hard into the wall again.

"I'm guessing you must like that cell of yours," he growled, "seeing as you can't seem to bear to leave it for more than five minutes at a time."

"Forget that," Martin advised with a grin. "We can take care of Pig Boy ourselves."

He grabbed one of Vin's arms then, leaving Cormer to take the other. Then half-dragging him into the baths, he kicked the door shut behind them. And with one look around the empty room, he nodded to the nearest tub, filled to the brim with water dark from numerous baths taken and a scummy film of soap riding on top.

He had only to grin at Cormer for the other man to know what he had in mind. Then together they dragged Vin to the tub chosen, their free hands going with one accord to the back of his head, pushing it down towards the water.

Realizing then what they had in mind, Vin gathered breath enough to fight them. But with his arms held tight and his legs in irons, he was unable to do more than bang his knees into the side of the tub as his head was forced down into the dirty water. And eyes closing, he held what little breath he had, fighting still for his release, the effort using up his reserve of air held back. Then, just as he thought he would have to take in a lungful of water, he was pulled out of it. No sooner though did he take breath than he was shoved back into it again.

Again and again he was dunked, until he was coughing and wheezing and too weak to stand on his own. Then, with one last shove of his head into

the water, his irons were released and he was hauled up and away from the tub. Rough hands then removed his clothes, more than one slap dispensed when he was unable to cooperate, aware of nothing but the need to draw in air between fits of coughing. Nor was he aware when he was shoved into the tub, his pounding head and wheezing lungs all he knew, not even the shock of cold water or the rough scrub brush raked over his body bringing him to awareness.

Then, as the ache in his lungs eased and he was able to draw in breath without coughing, he became aware of a hand in his hair, catching in a snarl and jerking hard. He started to raise a hand to it, only to grasp instead at the side of the tub when he was shoved into the water again, drawing dirty water into his lungs that time, his feet pushing to propel him upwards. And coughing and sputtering as he broke the surface, he blinked water and soap out of his eyes.

When he could again give thought to something more than his next breath, the attendant's laughter and jeering comments rang in his ears. And that time when a hand fisted in his hair, pulling on it, he gave in to the cold anger working in him, reaching up to take hold of the hand in his hair, jerking it forward so that Cormer toppled into the tub headfirst on top of him. His victory was short-lived, however, for Martin was immediately there, arm going around his neck, pulling up and back, dragging him out of the tub and once again reducing his world to the acquisition of oxygen.

Then Cormer was before him, face livid and right arm swinging up to connect with his jaw.

"Not his face!" Martin warned, tightening his arm around Vin's neck.

Cormer then concentrated on ribs and abdomen, raining blow after blow on the helpless tracker. Then, when he sagged against the arm at his throat, unable to stand or to breathe, Martin released him and he sank to the floor, curling into a ball, arms around his middle as he sucked in gulps of air around the pain of ribs and gut. And so he lay, for minutes long or short, unaware of time passing, and not stirring until a toe nudged hard at his back.

"Get up, Pig Boy," Martin growled. "The doc's waiting on you."

Something soft dropped onto his face then and he reached up to take hold of it, eyes opening to discover he'd been tossed unfamiliar clothing.

And at another, harder, nudge in his back, he pushed himself up so that he was sitting, clothes clasped to him as he scrambled back to rest against the side of the tub, breath still coming in hard pants.

"Get dressed already," Martin commanded. "Or are you too dumb to know how to do it yourself?"

Vin glared up at him, then shifted his attention to the clothes he held, nothing more offered than a shirt and pants, both worn and stained, cheaply made and plainly fashioned. But at least they were clean, so he slipped them on over his wet body, both too large, as he discovered

when he dragged himself to his feet, the sleeves of the shirt hanging even with the tips of his fingers, the pants loose at the waist and dragging at his heels.

He looked then for his own clothes, finding them in a loose pile behind Martin. And rushing forward, he pushed past him, making a grab for his pants, his right hand slipping into one of the pockets, surprised when the attendant reacted with nothing more than a laugh.

"You looking for this?" Martin asked, his face lit with a taunting grin.

Vin jerked his head up, his hand sliding out of the pocket empty, the treasure he'd sought in the hand Martin raised to his mouth, one jarring note sounding as he blew into the purloined harmonica.

"Hey, Cormer," Martin then called, the harmonica lowering. "You ever knowed a pig to make music?"

"Nah," Cormer replied with a grin. "All's they do is squeal."

"Then I don't guess Pig Boy will be needing this back, will he?" Martin again raised the harmonica to his lips, blowing in it, his eyes above it daring Vin to launch a protest.

And with a curse, Vin did just that, rushing forward, head down to butt into the attendant. But Martin was ready for him and stepped sideways, the harmonica held tight as he shoved the attacking tracker hard, laughing as Vin fell face down onto the floor. And before he could rise, Cormer was on him, straddling his hips, hands to his shoulders, pinning him down.

"Get the irons," he called over his shoulder, then made a grab for Vin's arms when he got them under him, trying to push up. And pulling them back, he twisted them behind his back, his weight resting on his arms now.

Vin let loose a string of curses then, the two attendants only laughing as Martin replaced the irons around his ankles. And when he was done, both men moved away from him, allowing him to climb awkwardly to his feet.

He turned then, eyes on the harmonica Martin raised tauntingly to his mouth, blowing a note on it before lowering it to warn, "You'd best get this through your head, Pig Boy -- you get nothing I don't give you, go nowhere I don't take you. Your life is mine now. I tell you when to eat, when to sleep. When to breathe. You make a move I don't like, cause any kind of trouble at all, and you'll be begging to go back to that cell of yours." He grinned. "Face it, boy -- you're in Hell and I'm the Devil. And ain't nobody or nothing going to save you."

He shoved the harmonica into his pocket then, Vin watching with fists tight at his sides, a need working in him to retrieve that last bit of comfort left to him. But there was a greater need holding him back, survival more to him than comfort, more than trust or hope, more than freedom even. And if comfort had to be sacrificed, he would harden himself

to do without, as he'd always done, a hard life lived all he knew of the world. Doing without, depending on no one, pride ground into the dirt -- he would survive. It was all he had left to him. So when Martin and Corner each took hold of an arm, he made no move against them, allowing them to lead him out of the room wherever they would, survival to be his at any cost.

~ CHAPTER ELEVEN ~

Vin was blank of face when he was marshaled into Creed's outer office, his mind set not on hands gripping tight to his arms or even on the aches from various parts of his abused body, but on the trail laid out before him: landmarks searched out, side paths noted, and those places where danger might lie in wait picked out and a way worked out around them. Yet he was aware enough of his place on that trail to take note when they came to a stop and Martin spoke. And focusing his attention then upon him, he realized he spoke not to him, but to Mrs. Bunch, who sat at a desk guarding a door he assumed led to the doctor's office.

"The doc ready for him?" Martin asked.

Mrs. Bunch shook her head, her eyes widening in dismay as they shifted to Vin. "What happened to his face?" she asked of the red mark left by Corner along his jaw.

"He fell," Martin claimed in a smug tone. "Slipped in some water, hit up against a tub."

"Is that right, Mr. Tanner?" the old woman asked, eyes narrowing now.

Vin stood still, mind again working at the path on which he was set, sign read and dismissed, a promising trail offered, but Martin's tightening grip on his arm not needed as warning that it would lead only to more danger still. So he gave a curt nod of agreement.

Grey eyes clouded with uncertainty, but Mrs. Bunch said only, "The doctor will be a few minutes yet." And nodding to a chair beside the outer door, she added, "Please have a seat, Mr. Tanner."

Martin and Corner made no move to release him, Martin shaking his head as he said, "We'd best keep a hold on him, ma'am. Don't want him getting wild on you."

"Nonsense. Mr. Tanner is perfectly capable of sitting in a chair for a few minutes. So you two may safely return to your duties."

The two keepers exchanged looks over their charge's head. Then it was Corner's turn to try to convince the old woman of the error of her ways.

"He's been fighting the bit every step of the way since he got here, ma'am. Martin and I had all we could manage getting him cleaned up and down here. So just 'cause he's quiet now don't hardly mean a thing. Soon as we let him go, he's apt to try to tear the place apart."

Mrs. Bunch shifted a look to the man in question, who stood with face still blank but jaw tight and eyes warning of an anger reined in, if only barely. And as doubts fluttered within, she took in the wet hair dripping into his face, the shortened strands a tangled mess and sure to

catch the doctor's unforgiving eye. The previous day's courage returned to her then, her back straightening as she firmly declared, "He'll do fine. And if he doesn't, Teague is right outside the door and well able to handle anything that comes up. So you two go ahead and go." She sat then, waiting for them to do just that. And with a shrug, Martin said, "Fine. Have it your way. But if things get out of hand, remember that we warned you. And you be sure to tell the doc that too." He jerked Vin forward then and to the side, Cormer following. And shoving him down hard into the chair, Martin leaned down to growl, "You'd best stay put, Tanner. You give these folks any trouble at all, and you'll find out just how unpleasant life can get around here. You understand?"

Vin only looked up at him, expression unchanging. And letting out a breath of disgust, Martin straightened up again, saying, "Damned dummy don't understand nothing."

"Mr. Martin!" Mrs. Bunch snapped out in tones of reproach. "Such language! And I'll thank you not to refer to any of the patients here in that manner. The doctor most assuredly would not like it."

Shooting the old woman a dark look at the threat assumed, Martin offered a grudging apology. "Sorry, ma'am. Reckon I've been around them that don't take to kind words and polite ways too long to remember my manners around civilized folks."

He nodded to Cormer then and both men stepped away from Vin and out the door, leaving it open behind them. And immediately, Martin's voice carried clearly back into the office, his voice raised in warning to the guard stationed at a desk outside the door to be on the lookout for trouble from the dummy within.

Mrs. Bunch pursed her lips at that, anger rising sharp in her. And shifting a look to Vin, she found that anger mirrored in his eyes and in the set of his jaw. "Imbecile," she snapped, her tone one of satisfaction at the epithet uttered.

Vin shot her a startled look, hurt taking the place of anger in his eyes. Then she gave him a conspiratorial smile and he realized it was not of him she spoke but Martin. And easing back into his chair against the pain in his ribs and middle, he resigned himself to wait for what would come next. Mrs. Bunch, however, was determined to put that wait to good use. And bending down to rummage through a bottom drawer of her desk, she sat up again in triumph, a long-handled comb in one hand.

"We can't have you going in to see the Doctor looking like a hen's been scratching in your hair, now can we?" she told him as she got up from her desk and crossed the small room to him. "He'd call for a pair of scissors for sure then. So why don't I see what I can do to make you look a bit more presentable?"

She waited for him to track his way through her offer and give a small nod, his eyes following as she moved to one side and reached up a hand

to pull back a dripping lock from his face. And when she then dragged the comb through it slowly, stopping when she hit a snarl, gentle fingers untangling it, he gave himself over to her ministrations, closing his eyes and drifting away from that place, from the pain in body and heart, into the fog lurking at the edges of his conscious mind.

A minute later though, she spoke, working at something in her mind even as she worked at the tangled mess of his hair, the comb moving as freely now as words, a soft echo of things lost calling him back to awareness. "I had a son," she told him, the words spoken with an ache of remembrance, as of times long past. "He was a wild one, too. I swear, that boy never walked when he could run. Never stayed indoors when he could be out. Never stayed in one place when he could be somewhere else." The comb hit another snarl then and she worked at it, fingers as gentle as her voice as she continued. "Laney was his name. And for all his wild ways, he was a good boy. Never gave his father or me any real cause to worry." She laughed then, a soft sound with an edge of pain to it. "Oh, now he gave me frights almost daily -- climbing up roofs and trees, taking off to go exploring when he was barely able to walk even, wanting only the fastest and meanest horses to ride. But he had a good heart and never had an ounce of hate in him."

She paused then, her fingers still at work on the snarl, Vin sitting still, waiting for her to work out some other snarl tangling inside her. And when the comb again moved freely in his hair, she spoke again, her words even softer than before. "He never could stand to see man nor beast suffer. So when the War came, it seemed only natural to him that he go off to do what he could to help put an end to brother fighting against brother."

Again she fell silent, the comb still at work, her free hand smoothing Vin's hair back. "It wasn't at all natural, though," she added, words whisper soft, "when he didn't come home again, when we got a letter from his commanding officer saying he'd fallen, that they'd buried him in some place we'd never heard tell of." She sighed. "No, it wasn't natural at all."

She rested her free hand on top of Vin's head then, the comb stilling. "I suppose you remind me of him some," she said. "I see that same wild in you that he had, the same good heart shining out of your eyes." The comb went back to work, her free hand again pulling his hair back for the comb to be drawn through it. Then, more briskly, shaking her head of such thoughts, she added, "I guess I sound like a foolish old woman, talking like that. My Henry always did say I spoke more with my heart than my mind. Got myself into trouble more than once that way."

She lowered her head then and moved to Vin's other side. But no sooner did she set the comb to his hair than he reached up to lay a hand on hers, head tilting up, his eyes opening to seek hers out.

"Ain't foolish," he softly declared.

She took in a breath, startled. Then with a laugh catching on a memory painful still, she twisted her hand and took his, saying, "Just like Laney, you are -- making a silly old woman feel better." And with a pat, she let him go, turning back to her task.

A minute later, she stepped back to eye him critically, and said, "There now. All wet like that and combed back, you can't hardly tell your hair is long at all. Just make sure you don't go running your hands through it, else you're liable to get it to looking all wild -- and the doctor won't help but notice it then."

Blue eyes shifted to the door to Creed's office at that reminder. And following his gaze, Mrs. Bunch sighed. "I suppose we might as well get this over and done with now," she said. And smoothing down a lock threatening to curl over Vin's ear, she added, "Just relax and answer the doctor's questions as best you can. And everything will turn out right." Vin turned his gaze back to her, eyes accusing. And with another sigh, she patted him on the shoulder and crossed the room to the doctor's office, slipping the comb into a pocket of her dress as she softly knocked for admittance, opening the door and slipping inside when it was granted. Then, a moment later, she was back, standing in the doorway beckoning to him.

He wanted to refuse, wanted to get up and walk out of that office, out of that place and as far from what men termed civilization as he could. But he knew he wouldn't get far at all, probably no farther than the desk beyond the outer door where another of the endless supply of keepers sat. So shoving down his fear, he pushed up from his chair and shuffled across the room, hunching slightly against the pain stirred to angry life by the movement, and stepped inside Creed's inner sanctum, Mrs. Bunch stepping back to let him pass. And to his relief, she remained, slipping around him to take up a chair at the side of the doctor's desk, leaving one in front of it for him, nodding at him to sit down.

"Well, Mr. Tanner," Creed said approvingly when he'd taken the seat indicated, looking him up and down. "I must say, you're looking much more civilized than you did upon your arrival." Then his eyes narrowed, his gaze directed at the wet hair tucked behind Vin's ears. And to his assistant, he added, "I believe, however, that he could still use --" He broke off at the sound of a crash, shifting his gaze to the woman sitting with one hand over her mouth and gaze focused on a vase of flowers lying broken on the floor, water pooling around it and blossoms scattered amid the shards. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Doctor," Mrs. Bunch apologized. "I'm afraid I bumped it with my elbow. How clumsy of me." She rose from her chair. "Let me get it cleaned up."

She bustled about then, collecting the pieces of glass and dumping them in a waste can along with the dispossessed flowers, carrying on a rambling apology as she did. Creed tapped impatient fingers on his desk, watching her, while Vin sat still in his chair, taking care not to draw

attention to himself and his overlong hair. Then, when Mrs. Bunch finally returned to her seat, Creed wrinkled his brow, looking peeved. "Now, where were we?" he asked.

Mrs. Bunch folded her hands in her lap, grey eyes innocent as she said, "You were about to go over the rules of the Asylum, Doctor."

Creed nodded, then pushed his glasses further back on his nose, turning to Vin as he said, "As I noted yesterday -- you got off to a bad start with us, Mr. Tanner. But once the newness of your situation has worn off, I'm hoping you'll come to accept the necessity of your placement here. Indeed, you'll find it to be in your best interests to do so, since continued resistance to the help we have to offer will only serve to make you decidedly unhappy -- as those chains about your ankles will attest. "

Vin shifted uncomfortably, the chains rattling as he did so, his sore ribs protesting, his head starting to ache in earnest as he struggled to make sense of the flow of words.

Creed steepled his fingers, tapping them together lightly as he continued. "Now, to make your stay here as pleasant as possible, you'll need to follow a few simple rules. First and foremost -- you must show respect, not only towards the staff, but towards your fellow patients, as well. Any failure to do so will result in highly unpleasant consequences -- as you have already discovered."

Vin glowered at that, but sat quietly listening, seeking out the path that would lead him out of that place, his head pounding now. And taking that silence for acceptance, Creed went on.

"You'll need to work hard, as well, to overcome a lifetime of poor choices made." The doctor shot a look to a letter lying open on the desk before him. "Mr. Kinsale was kind enough to provide a brief history for me, so that I might better understand the burden under which you labor. And I must say that I find it not at all surprising that you should have been brought to such straits." One finger flicked the paper damning him to that place. "Buffalo hunter, bounty hunter. Gun for hire. Even lived among the savages." Again he shook his head. "It's no wonder you are without civilized behavior or thought -- a disordered life will naturally result in a disordered mind."

"But Doctor," Mrs. Bunch timidly interrupted, her gaze shifting from Vin wrinkling his brow at the long string of too-large words, to the one from which they'd issued. "I thought his problem was due to an injury. A blow to the head, wasn't it?"

Creed looked over his glasses at her. "That might have exacerbated the problem, my good woman. But it was the disordered state of his life that led to the physical injury. So, in effect, it was that lack of civilized behavior, that lack of moral rectitude, that is responsible for his being here. And to bring order to his mind, he must first bring order to his life."

The doctor returned his attention to Vin then. "It is our job here to teach you the ways of civilized man, to instill in you a moral code, to eradicate the wildness that leads you again and again to make wrong choices. Do you understand?"

Vin blinked at him, and Creed sighed. "No, of course you don't. Such concepts are beyond your ability to comprehend." He turned to Mrs. Bunch, his voice lowering as he said, "I daresay he's not much more than an animal, really. Some sort of predator perhaps, hunting down those weaker than himself, with no awareness of right or wrong, merely the satisfying of some barbaric bloodlust."

Easily able to follow that speech, Vin chuffed out his breath, his expression one of indignant disgust. And noting that, Mrs. Bunch offered a small protest on his behalf.

"Really, Doctor. I do think he understands much more than you might think. He seems to me to --"

"And where did you obtain your degree, madam?" Creed broke in, his tone dismissing, his expression one of annoyance. "With whom have you studied?"

Mrs. Bunch deflated. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I didn't mean any disrespect. It's just that he doesn't seem so much barbaric to me as just frightened. And who wouldn't be in the same situation?"

"A man of reason wouldn't be," the doctor harrumphed. "Such a one would understand that we are here only to help and would take full and grateful advantage of that so that he might better himself." Again he looked over his glasses and down his nose at his presumptuous assistant. "And now, if I may proceed?"

Her voice small, her head lowering, Mrs. Bunch gave a nod. "Of course, Doctor," she conceded.

"Very well, then." It was Creed's turn to blink. "Now, where were we?"

"I think you were about to test Mr. Tanner, sir." Mrs. Bunch raised her head at that, just enough to search out a notebook lying on the desk.

"Ah, yes." Creed adjusted the glasses on his nose to a more comfortable angle, pale eyes behind thick lenses fastened now on the patient seated before him. "What we will do now, Mr. Tanner, is determine just how well your mind is functioning. And to begin, I'd like you to read a passage out of this book for me."

He picked up a slim volume from his desk and handed it to Vin. "It is a simple children's reader," he explained as the tracker gingerly took it, lower lip caught between his teeth as he struggled to make out the words on the cover, letters known but tumbling together in his aching head. "Open it to the first page," Creed continued, "and start reading." Vin looked at the reader for a long moment, wanting to set it down, to walk away from it, to search out some place without words, without pitying looks or jeering calls, without promises unkept, without sounds and visions, with nothing more than a silence in which he might find those

things lost or taken or left behind. He wanted to be somewhere -- anywhere -- but in a room with chains binding him, with a guard a raised voice away, with locks and walls and too much of confusion standing between him and freedom. He wanted away from eyes watching him, waiting for him to fail, to prove that he was no longer who or what he had been. But he was long used to turning away from want and setting need in its stead. So he remained in that place, in that chair, willing to do whatever he must to prove himself. And opening the book proffered, he flipped to the first page of text -- two lines of print spanning six inches of paper, black against white, thoughts become words and both beyond his grasp in that moment.

"You may begin," Creed told him when he sat too long staring at words that hovered on the edge of memory, too much crowding in his mind for him to take hold of them. And when another minute passed, the doctor said only, "Perhaps you'll fare better at the next test." He then reached out to take the book back, Mrs. Bunch sadly lowering her gaze to the notebook in her lap, note taken there of his failure.

Vin wanted to snatch the book back, to tell the doctor to wait, to give him time enough to search through the fog. But words failed him still -- and Creed moved on, laying the book back down on his desk and taking up a stack of coins, spreading them out on the desk in front of Vin and saying, "Please pick out one dollar and twenty-five cents worth of coins, Mr. Tanner."

Moving confidently then, Vin easily picked out a silver dollar and a two bit piece, setting them to the side of the other coins and looking up in triumph at the doctor, who nodded approvingly.

"Very good, Mr. Tanner. Now, can you pick out coins totaling forty-three cents in value?"

Back went Vin's teeth to his lower lip, his gaze traveling from coin to coin. Two bits he knew was right and he set that aside, three pennies following. But what more he needed was lost in shadows. Something less than two bits, he felt sure. And when Creed shifted in his seat, preparatory, Vin feared, to snatching the coins away as he had the book, Vin hurriedly reached out to slide two dimes beside the two bit piece and pennies, looking up uncertainly for the doctor's judgment.

That time, Creed shook his head, Mrs. Bunch setting pencil to paper again, head lowering another notch.

Vin threw himself back in his chair at that, his head and bruised ribs protesting, the chain at his ankles rattling. And setting his jaw against the anger working in him, he waited for the doctor to continue.

"Let's try something a bit simpler then," Creed decided. "The year, perhaps. Or the name of the President."

Vin blinked, years marked not by numbers in his mind, but events: harsh winters, injuries sustained, the forming of the Seven. Such things had meaning to him. And while he felt sure he'd at some point made note of

the more accepted way of marking time passed, he couldn't bring it to mind. No more could he put a name to one too far removed from his life to have ever been a part of it. The President might run the country, but never had he had the running of Vin Tanner's life, men coming and going in that office without impressing themselves on his mind. Yet he knew such was common knowledge in the society through which he drifted, dancing in and out along the fringes of it. These things were important to most men -- to civilized men. And the fact that it had never been important to him set him apart, marked him as something less than other men. No matter that he could track better than most or shoot farther. No matter that he had kept himself alive under conditions that would have broken men more learned than he. Such would not save him now. Only words rightly spoken would do so. Yet he had no such words. And even had he other words to admit that lack in him, he would not have said them, would not have condemned himself to that place as rightfully there. He lifted a hand to his head then, rubbing it as if he might thereby ease the pain flaring there. But that time, rather than fight the hurt and the confusion it brought, he gave himself over to it, nothing to be gained in struggling to be more than he was, too much to be lost in rendering himself up to judgment. So he shut his mind to words and visions, from too much asked and too little given. And as shadows grew long within, obscuring the path on which he traveled, he lost himself in them, that all there was to be had of escape.

~ CHAPTER TWELVE ~

Vin continued to drift, unaware when Creed put an end to the testing, when Mrs. Bunch closed her notebook, when Teague escorted him out of the room and back to his ward. Neither was he aware when he was transferred to another set of hands, this hold on him bruising, his welcome back to the ward jeering as Cormer propelled him forward and down the hall. Then several discordant notes sounded, cutting through the fog insulating him. And jerking his head around in search of the source of the jarring symphony, he discovered Martin seated at the desk by the door into the ward, harmonica in hand and eyes above it taunting.

Need gave way to need then and Vin made a lunge for his stolen treasure. And when Cormer's grip on his arm brought him up short, the tracker swung without thought at him. Cormer, however, merely shoved him face first into the wall, laughter sounding behind him.

"Maybe he needs another bath," Martin suggested. "The cold water might cool that temper of his down some."

With a growl, Vin tried to push off the wall, but Cormer only pulled one arm behind his back, shoving it up high with a growl of his own. "You'd best watch it, Pig Boy. The doc might be soft on you nuts, but there's plenty of ways to make your life a living hell that he won't never know about. So you calm it down or you'll find out what a few of them are."

Martin laughed again. "Why do you even bother, Cormer? You think he understood a word you said?"

"Maybe not," the angry attendant conceded. "But I reckon he'll understand this." And so saying, he shoved Vin's arm up higher still, forcing him to rise on his toes, a gasp of pain escaping him. Then leaning forward to growl in his ear, he added, "You understand that, don't you, Pig Boy?" And when Vin only stood panting his pain and anger, Cormer shoved his arm up another inch. "You understanding yet, boy?"

Vin gave a nod at that, eyes closed tight, face screwed up in pain, and Cormer let loose of him, stepping back with his hand still on his arm. Then, jerking him away from the wall, he pulled him roughly forward and led him to a room further down the hall, Martin trailing behind them, blowing tauntingly on the harmonica again.

Struggling to ignore both that and the pain in his arm, Vin shuffled beside Cormer, leg irons clanking against the floor. Then he was pulled to a stop before a heavy wooden door with a grill set high on it, and he waited as Cormer unlocked it, saying, "Welcome to your new pigsty, Tanner."

The door swung open then, and Vin was shoved through it, falling against a bed just inside the door, the patient ensconced there shoving him in turn, screeching invectives at him.

"Shut up, Osgood," Cormer snapped to the man flailing his arms against his mattress. "Ain't no one after your virtue -- even if you had any." He reached down then to haul Vin to his feet. And shoving him towards one end of the small room, he added, "Whatever you might have been used to in the pigsty, Tanner, we keep it one to a bed around here. Although if you want to share, I'm sure we could find someone who'd be more than happy to oblige."

Vin kept to his feet with an effort that time, ignoring the coarse remark and Martin's jeering laugh, shuffling away from his keepers and towards an unoccupied bed in the far corner, moving past other beds occupied, the men there watching as he passed or lost in some inner torment with unfocused eyes, his gaze shying away from them and searching out some means of escape instead.

His gaze went first to the windows, narrow and high. But with bars across them from bottom to top, they offered little hope of escape. So he dismissed them, shifting his gaze next to the dingy walls, only to discover that they offered no more hope than the windows, as both outer and inner walls were of a brick he'd need a hammer and chisel to get through.

That left only the door. And looking back over his shoulder at it, he was forced to concede it was just as hopeless, unless he could overpower a keeper for his keys. But even then he knew he would get only so far, no keeper, apparently, having keys to every lock. He would therefore have to bide his time and wait for a chance to present itself. And so

resigned, he sat down on the bed that was apparently to be his, pulling his chained legs up as he slid back to wedge himself in the corner of the wall, moving slowly against the hurts that were becoming too numerous to count, eyes going to the two keepers watching him.

Seeing his eyes upon them, Martin blew one last note on the harmonica and lowered it, stuffing it in his pocket. Then with a grin, he advanced on the bed, Cormer at his back with a grin of his own.

"I wouldn't get too comfortable, Pig Boy," he warned. "The doc's ordered you put on restrictions for the rest of the day. And that means you get to trade one set of chains for another."

Vin pressed harder into his corner, hands going to the thin mattress beneath him, bracing himself for whatever was to come. Still, when Martin launched himself at him, grabbing hold of the chain between his legs and jerking hard on it, sliding him across the bed, he was caught by surprise. And before he could catch hold of something in order to stop his forward slide, Cormer was on him, knee going to his chest as he grabbed an arm, pulling it back and up, an iron band clamping around his wrist and locking shut. Then the maneuver was repeated with his other arm. And that done, he moved to the leg irons, unlocking them and slipping them off.

Both keepers then released him, standing back to watch in satisfaction as he sat up again, scrambling back into his corner, jerking at the chains connecting iron cuffs to the wall a foot above his bed.

"Now, you be a good pig, Tanner," Martin warned with a jeering laugh, "and tomorrow you'll get to play at being a man."

He gave another laugh then, Cormer joining in. Then they turned and headed for the door, Martin reaching out to cuff Osgood as Cormer unlocked the door, both men slipping through it and clanging it shut behind them, the key turning audibly in the lock.

Vin stared after them for a long moment, struggling to contain his fury and despair, no good to come of either. Then, with one last tug on his chains, he settled himself into the corner and turned his attention back to his surroundings, taking the room itself in with one sweeping glance: windows dusty and grimy, the light allowed in having a sickly hue to it; floor dirty, looking as if it had never come in contact with soap and water; and the walls painted what might once have been green long years ago.

"It's not exactly the Ritz, is it?" a soft voice questioned, the tone with a hint of humor to it and nothing of madness.

Vin slitted a look at the speaker, his reluctance to take in his companions in hell overcome by curiosity, blue eyes wary nonetheless as they settled on a young man seated in the bed next to him, back against the wall, head pillowed by unchained arms and legs crossed in an air of idle repose, reddish hair sticking up in short spikes and freckles sprinkled over his face making him look far too young to be in such a place as

this.

"The name's Paulie," his companion said, bending at the waist in a lazy bow. "Paulie Thurgood at your service."

His tone was light, his manner one of an introduction made in polite society, and green eyes sparkled with amusement, as at a joke well played out. Yet there was a note sounding as well, distant and sad, that caught Vin's ear, and some of his wariness eased in recognition of the familiar.

"I see by your face," his companion continued, eyeing the beginning bruise along his jaw, "that the welcoming committee was out in full force today. And no doubt Cormer and Martin have already wormed their way into your heart."

"'Wormed' is right," another voice jeered. "The spineless dirt crawlers."

Vin shifted his gaze to the bed across from his, surprised to find a boy sitting there, old enough to have a fine stubble of beard working on his face, but a year or two shy yet of manhood. Then noting that he too was shackled to the wall, he turned back to his garrulous companion, a question in his eyes.

"That's Aubrey," Paulie informed him. "Known throughout the ward for his gentle ways and cheerful personality." He gave an indulgent smile when the boy let loose a string of curses at him. "As you can imagine, we've taken him much to heart and cannot even begin to understand why his parents would wish to deprive themselves of so charming a companion. Although, perhaps it is as he claims, and they suffer from a marked lack of intelligence and understanding of the young." He shook his head.

"And alas, the good doctor seems to suffer from the same affliction. Hence the chains you see there."

The young man in question scowled furiously and snarled: "You just wait 'til I get loose, Thurgood. I'll shut that mouth of yours up but good."

Paulie shifted his gaze back to Vin and lowered his voice, saying, "You see what an optimistic fellow he is? Here five days now and still he goes in defiance of the restrictions imposed upon him, sure they will be lifted by some act of God. One has to admire such an indomitable spirit."

Vin blinked, tracking his way through the flow of words.

"That doctor's an idiot," Aubrey spat out. "Anyone with any sense would know that it's my parents who are the problem and not me. If they'd just leave me be, everything would be all right."

"Including your mother's arm, no doubt," Paulie put in.

The kid snarled a curse. "That was her own fault! She had no right to try and take that bottle away from me. I'm sixteen and near enough a man to do whatever I want now. And a man's allowed to have a little drink without some woman coming along and trying to tell him different.

Besides, it's not like I meant to break her arm -- she made me do it!"

Paulie nodded in solemn agreement. "Just like Kilgallen made you split his head the other day."

"Damn right!" Aubrey declared. "I didn't do nothing. He was just trying to get me in trouble with that idiot doctor." He jerked the chain on one arm. "All the guards here are the same. They don't care about anything. Except for getting revenge for things I never did."

Shifting his gaze back to Vin, who sat staring with wide eyes at the belligerent youth, Paulie wryly said, "Utterly charming. Don't you agree?"

Aubrey made a rude noise, then lay down on the bed, turning his back to the room.

Paulie continued with his introductions then, turning to nod at a thirtyish man lying in the bed next to him, unfocused eyes staring up at the ceiling. "To my right you'll find Elmer Rodin, grieving widower to his dearly departed wife Margaret." He shook his head, his expression set in mournful lines. "A sad tale, indeed. Two young lovers, utterly devoted to one another." He paused, then added in lower tones, "Unfortunately, poor Elmer proved not to be the hero of this dramatic tale of passion, as he discovered upon returning home one day to find his beloved in the arms of her heart's desire."

"I'd have shot them both," Aubrey declared with a snort, head still turned away.

"And why am I not surprised?" Paulie murmured. Then, more loudly he added, "It so happens that Elmer did exactly that. Fortunately though, his family was influential enough to have him sent here instead of to prison -- or worse."

Aubrey turned his head to look over his shoulder, his gaze going to the man lying oblivious of the attention aimed his way. "He really killed them?" he asked, his tone one of disbelief. "He doesn't look like a killer to me."

Paulie raised an eyebrow at him. "And what, my dear boy, does a killer look like?"

Vin shifted in his bed, eyes on the youth, who jerked up in his bed, his brows drawing down in another scowl as he growled, "I ain't your dear boy, Thurgood. So don't go getting any ideas in that head of yours. You so much as look at me funny and you'll find out just what a killer looks like."

Brave words, but Vin recognized the fear behind them, anger a defense, the boy wielding it as a weapon, either unaware or uncaring of the dangerous path upon which he'd set himself.

Paulie stared at him, his expression one of affront, his anger more controlled and wielded more carefully as he coolly said, "I assure you, you vain arrogant little whelp, I have no designs of any kind upon your person. And if you wish to insure that you remain free of unwanted attention, I suggest you adjust that attitude of yours and do what the doctor

orders, or you'll find yourself sent out of one of the few places in here free of that particular perversion and straight to the D Ward -- like the man who had that bed before you."

Aubrey's scowl deepened, his tone belligerent still, but his fear more evident as he asked, "What's the D Ward?"

"D for demented, I suspect." Still affronted, Paulie turned his attention to Vin, offering his explanation to him instead of the boy. "Ward C is the last stop before Hell. Here you'll find those who need to be locked up, for whatever reason, but who aren't entirely without hope of eventually being redeemed. Ward D is set aside for the irredeemable, the hopelessly lost, those totally and irrevocably mad." He nodded to two empty beds on the far side of the room. "There was a purging here just last week. One man was sent to an open ward as a reward for good behavior, and one man was released after he agreed to accede to his family's choice of a bride."

Aubrey gave a snort of disgust. "His parent's locked him up 'cause he wouldn't marry who they wanted him to?"

Paulie shrugged. "That sort of thing happens all the time here -- as I can personally attest."

"Your parents sent you here because you wouldn't marry like they wanted?"

"No. Because I chose the pursuit of passion over filthy lucre."

"You mean you wouldn't give up some woman you were in love with?"

Paulie shook his head. "Not a woman, but a muse." And when both his listeners sat watching him in confusion, he more simply stated: "I preferred being an artist to being a banker like my esteemed father."

"So they locked you up for that?"

"Indeed."

Aubrey snorted. Then his brow wrinkled. "That's three that got sent elsewhere," he said. "But there were four beds empty when I got here. What happened to the other fellow?"

Paulie shot his gaze to the locked door to the room, then, lowering his voice and sliding to the edge of his bed to lean forward, he softly said, "I don't know what happened to him. Not for sure, anyway. Let's just say it's not a good idea to tangle with the attendants in this place. People who do have a tendency to disappear."

Vin wrapped his chained arms around his aching ribs and leaned his head tiredly against the wall at his back, his breath let out in a sigh.

Paulie eyed him knowingly. "A hint to the two of you -- one must learn the fine art of appeasement in order to avoid trouble here. It saves a lot of pain in the long run."

Aubrey sat up a little higher in the bed, his expression set in lines of warning. "Anybody messes with me, they'll wish they hadn't."

One eyebrow rose. "Yes," Paulie solemnly agreed. "In fact, Dr. Creed and Martin are both no doubt ready to beg your forgiveness. I'm sure

they're just waiting for an opportune time to tender their apologies." When a curse was Aubrey's only reply, Paulie returned to his introductions, nodding to the man in the opposite corner, seated on his mattress with bits of wadded paper and other material scattered about the bed before him, his gaze on them intent, his lips moving in silent conversation with himself.

"And that," the room's self-appointed spokesman continued, "is Lt. Charles H. Messing, U. S. Army, retired. I'd add 'former hero of the War Between the States' to the list -- except that I'm afraid our dear lieutenant remains forever locked in battle." Again he nodded. "Those bits you see there on his bed are his armies, blue and gray. And all his time is devoted to their maneuvering in some battle or other." He shrugged. "The word is he's been like that ever since the war ended."

"So you're saying he's crazy."

Paulie shot a look to the sneering youth. "Who's crazier -- the man affected by war or the man who isn't?"

Vin let out a huff of agreement and Aubrey shot both men a look of venom before subsiding into silence again.

"And last, but not least," Paulie went on, ignoring the look, "is Osgood." He smiled at Vin. "I believe you two have already met."

The tracker shifted his gaze to the man in the bed by the door, who sat watching them with owlish eyes in a pale face, his obese body hunched into himself, as if for protection.

"We've been graced with his scintillating presence due to a...." Paulie paused, one finger tapping his lips. "Now, how shall I say this?" He smiled, then added, "Ah, yes. To put it kindly: he tends to pay an overly fond attention to the fairer sex."

Osgood only continued to stare at them, his look one of suspicion.

Paulie turned away from him back to Vin. "And there you have it -- our merry band of fellows." He cocked his head, eyeing the silent tracker curiously. "That just leaves you, my friend, without a name or history" And when Vin only blinked at him, he gently added, "You are capable of speech, aren't you?"

Vin gave another blink, then nodded.

"And can you tell us your name?"

Another nod, then a soft, "Vin."

His companion smiled. "Well, Vin, I'd welcome you to the fold, but I hardly think that the appropriate sentiment. Sympathy perhaps would be more the thing."

Aubrey gave another snort. "Aren't you going to ask what he's doing here?"

Paulie shook his head. "A man is like a painting -- the truth must be revealed layer upon layer, and that only after sufficient study."

Still another snort. "Fine. You don't want to ask him, then I will."

Aubrey fixed his new roommate with a curious eye then. "So, Vin, what are

you doing here? You do something crazy? Or is someone just trying to punish you for something?"

"I ain't crazy!" Vin hurried to declare.

"Then someone's trying to punish you," Aubrey guessed. "What for?" Visions flashed, words echoing, Chris and Nathan on the witness stand, Bliss set free, the Seven watching as he was dragged away from them. And turning away from all that he'd lost or maybe never even had, Vin slid down into the bed, chains rattling as he rolled onto his side, his back to the room.

But Aubrey was determined on an answer, irked at being ignored. "So, what are you being punished for, Pig Boy?"

Vin closed his eyes at that, shutting out words and visions, pain and loss. And as much to remind himself as to answer the boys' question, he softly said, "This is what I get for being stupid."

~ CHAPTER THIRTEEN ~

He slept poorly that night, his dreams filled with crows and chains, with a suffocating darkness and laughter echoing, with backs turned and trails lost. And waking at last to morning's first light shining weakly through dirty windows, he lay huddled against the brick wall at his back, irons rattling as he wrapped his arms about himself as far as they would reach. Visions returned to him then: hopes and the dying of them, promises and trust broken, all that he'd ever set his heart on within reach and then cruelly snatched away. He tried to turn away from such thoughts, to set in their place a cool consideration of the paths left open to him, but again and again he sought out those things left behind, their loss a wound left exposed.

Then sounds beyond the grilled opening of his prison door distracted him -- the changing of the guard, he decided. And concentrating on that, on picking out Martin and Corner's voices, he was at last able to turn from those things best forgotten, sitting up now to await the new day, back to the wall and jaw set.

Then his attention was distracted again, this time by a mumbling as Rodin awakened, his wife's name on his lips as it had been the day before, his eyes then blank as he'd settled them on one or the other of his roommates all that day, asking if they'd seen his dear Margaret, only Paulie giving him reply, each time as patiently as if it were the first. And two beds beyond was Lt. Messing, stirring quietly, the silence there a change from the cries and groans throughout the long night that had signaled one nightmare after another, Vin awakening to each one, heart racing as much from the memory of his own nightmares as in fear of some expected danger.

Osgood, too, was stirring, his body a large lump under thin blankets, the second purloined from Rodin's bed during the night. Then Paulie also woke and threw his own covers off with a grumble, having taken in the theft. And stumbling out of bed, he crossed to the waking thief and

ripped off both blankets, ignoring the squeals of protest.

"I warned you not to try that again," Paulie snapped out, glaring over his shoulder at Osgood as he moved to settle the blankets over Rodin, who only blinked at him, asking sleepily if he knew where his wife was. Paulie patted his shoulder, softly saying, "She stepped out for a bit. But I'm sure she'll be back soon. And in the meantime, breakfast will be along shortly."

Rodin seemed content with that and quieted down. And satisfied, Paulie moved to his own bed and slipped back under the covers, a glare aimed at Osgood shutting off the thief's indignant protests.

A snort sounded then, and Paulie sat up to turn his glare on Aubrey, who eyed him with disdain over the blanket pulled up to his chin. "That sure showed him," the boy jeered.

Paulie held his glare for another moment, then gave a small grin and shrugged, saying, "All in good time, my boy. All in good time."

He dismissed the youth with that and turned to the newest member of their community, who sat pressed into his corner, watching him. And shaking his head in dismay at sight of Vin's tousled curls and dark-rimmed eyes, he chidingly said, "This just won't do, my friend. As much as I hate to say it -- you look like an escapee from a lunatic asylum."

Aubrey snickered. "He should be so lucky."

"As should we all." Paulie gave a sigh at that and settled back into his bed, hands linked beneath his head, gaze turned towards the ceiling. Silence then reigned for a few minutes, broken only when Vin, having carefully tracked his way through meanings and possibilities, softly said, "You believe in luck?"

Paulie turned his head in surprise, having given up the day before on getting any words other than his name out of the quiet man, not even sure how much he understood of what went on around him. And noting the blue eyes fixed unwaveringly upon him, a spark of intelligence shining there, he worked at revising his opinion of the man and slowly said, "I believe we all make our own luck in life."

"How?"

The word was one of curiosity, but the tone was that of a determined enquiry, a searching out of something vital.

Paulie cocked his head, considering both question and questioner, a hardness noted in the eyes upon him, something dark and dangerous behind it. Desperation shone there as well, that of a wild thing trapped and determined to go free again. And raising himself up on one elbow, he fixed his gaze on that look and carefully said, "I'm not sure really. But I expect it might be something worth giving some thought to in the days to come."

Blue eyes held brown for a long moment. Then with a nod, Vin leaned his head against the brick at his back and settled himself to wait.

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The rattling of a key in the door's lock announced the arrival of Martin and Cormer, a wheeled cart pushed into the room first, a pot and two pitchers resting on it, along with bowls, cups and a crusty loaf of bread.

"Ah," Paulie said with enthusiasm, sitting up in bed and settling his blankets neatly. "Room service has arrived."

Aubrey gave a snort and sat up as well, his brows drawn well down into a scowl, his watchful gaze on the two attendants as Martin took up one of the pitchers and poured a stream of dark liquid into a cup. He then handed it to Osgood, who took it with a sigh and downed the drink with a grimace before handing the cup back.

Paulie turned to Vin, who was watching the performance with suspicion.

"Not to worry," he told him. "It's just Creed's home-brewed tonic, guaranteed to clean the body of all poisons that might have built up during the night." He shrugged. "After all, one can't have a healthy mind unless one also has a healthy body, right?"

Vin turned his gaze to his roommate, his expression easing not at all.

He then shifted it back to the attendants, Cormer now dishing up a bowl of porridge for Osgood, Martin moving on to Messing with the tonic.

"It's awful stuff, really," Paulie went on. "But it appears to be harmless enough. So if you want your breakfast -- and to get out of those chains -- you'd best take it without a fuss."

He shot a pointed look to Aubrey at that, but the boy only deepened his scowl, saying, "They can't make me do nothing I don't want to."

"Except stay in that bed in chains?"

The boy snarled out a curse, then turned his gaze back to the attendants slowly making their rounds, Rodin now reluctantly drinking the tonic offered.

Vin watched as well, eyes shifting from the keys dangling free on Martin's belt to the door left open, paths laid out and the ending of them considered. Then Paulie was next in line for the tonic, pushing himself up in the bed to take the cup held out to him with a cheerful flow of words, Martin glaring at him in return, then snatching the cup back when he was done. And when the keeper moved around that bed to Vin's with a grin of anticipation, the tracker looked up at him with jaw set and gaze unblinking. But keeping those paths considered in mind and Paulie's words of warning, he took the proffered cup without hesitation, deriving some measure of grim satisfaction in the keeper's unhappy surprise at such an easy surrender. And when he drank the foul concoction without a grimace and handed the cup back empty, Martin scowled.

He moved on then to Aubrey, his grin returning at seeing the glare aimed his way and the fists bunched below the wrist irons. "Now, you going to make this easy on yourself or hard?" he asked, pouring out a generous measure of the tonic. And holding out the cup, he only laughed when the boy knocked it out of his hand.

"Hey, Cormer," he called over his shoulder to his fellow attendant.
"I'm beginning to think the boy likes having us on him."

Cormer handed Vin a cup of water and tossed him the chunk of bread that was to be all of his breakfast that day, then turned his attention to the youth glaring his defiance. Then with a shake of his head, he said, "He ain't anywheres near pretty enough for me. So reckon I'll let you do the honors this time."

Martin gave another laugh, then ripped the blanket off the boy, making a quick grab for his legs, pulling him down in the bed so that he hung over the end, his arms stretched out above him and held in place by the chains anchored to the wall. Then climbing on top of him as he tried to twist out of his grasp, he settled his weight on the boy's thighs and leaned forward to take hold of his head.

Ignoring the resulting screams and curses, Cormer collected the fallen cup and poured another measure of the tonic. Then moving back to the bed, he stared down at the boy, who hurriedly turned silent, his mouth clamped tightly shut now. "You know we can make you drink this," he warned. "Same as we've done every day so far. So why don't you just do it the easy way for once?"

The boy glared at him for another moment. Then something in him eased and he nodded, glaring still but mouth opening to accept the drink, head coming up as Cormer put the cup to his lips. He pulled his head away though after that first sip, angling it so that when he spit the tonic out, it sprayed directly into Martin's face above him.

The keeper let go of him with a curse, one hand hitting hard against the side of Aubrey's head before that arm rose to wipe at his face. Then moving both hands to the boy's throat, he pressed hard, his face lit with a grin as he said, "You can open that trap of yours any time now, boy. But just remember -- the longer you keep it shut, the better I like it."

Vin started to move forward on his bed at that, the chains forgotten drawing him up short, the bread in his hand crushed as struggled against them, curses forming on his lips. Then Paulie hissed at him, warning he'd only make things worse by interfering. And even as Vin reluctantly held back his anger, Aubrey gave in, his mouth opening wide in a gasp, Cormer pouring the tonic in then snapping at Martin to let up so that he could swallow it.

Martin's grin widened and he pressed harder still for a few seconds, the boy's face turning red and his eyes going wide in panic. Then the attendant eased his grip enough for him to swallow the mouthful of tonic and three more after it. And letting loose of him, Martin reached out to cuff his head again, growling, "You got way too much fight in you, boy. And I think it's about time it got took out of you." He gave another cuff, then got up, adding, "And I reckon we can start by letting you go hungry."

He took hold of the cart and shoved it ahead of him to the door, Corner trailing after him. And once the door had slammed and locked behind them, Paulie shook his head at the boy twisted now onto his side, face still red as he took in wheezing gulps of air.

"That sure showed them," he said with a sigh. Then turning to Vin, who sat watching the boy still, he added, "As I said -- it's not a good idea to rile those two. Creed might frown on outright brutality, but some of his so-called therapies put anything the attendants can come up with to shame -- as I'm afraid our rebellious roommate will soon find out."

Vin shifted his gaze to Paulie. "What's going to happen to him?"

Paulie shrugged. "Could be any number of highly unpleasant procedures, none of which you want to know about. Trust me."

He turned back to his porridge then, eyes turned away from the boy moving back up into the bed, curling into himself, chains rattling as he buried his head in his arms.

Vin eased back into his bed then as well, back going to the wall again, the mutilated piece of bread still clenched in one hand. And shifting his gaze, he stared down at it.

"They'll be back soon," Paulie offered, eyes still on his porridge. "To collect the bowls. And if you aren't finished with what passes for your breakfast by then, they'll take that too."

Vin tightened his hold. Then, shifting his gaze back to the boy denied food, he shrugged and said, "Ain't hungry. Give it to the kid."

He opened his hand then, his eyes again on Paulie, who sighed and set his bowl down on his bed. "He won't thank you for it, you know. A more ungrateful brat I've never run across." Nonetheless, he got up and collected the bread, then turned and crossed to the boy who lay unheeding, offering it with a murmured, "Might I remind you how unwise it is to bite the hand that feeds you?"

Aubrey kicked out at him with a snarled curse. Paulie, however, was prepared, and jumped nimbly out of reach. Then with a shrug, he tossed the bread back to Vin and returned to his own unfinished breakfast. And, after a long moment, the tracker collected the bread from his lap where it had landed and carried it to his mouth, his eyes on the boy as he took a bite of it.

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As predicted, the two keepers were soon back to collect the breakfast remains. They then returned a few minutes later, Corner rolling a different cart into the room, this one holding a basin of water and shaving paraphernalia on it, Martin following with a wooden chair, leather straps hanging down from its arms.

Paulie gave a wink to Vin, who eyed the chair with chin raised. "Creed spares us nothing in his efforts to turn us into civilized gentlemen, you see -- going so far even as to provide us with our own personal valets. Truly, the man spoils us."

"Spoils you is right," Martin growled, slamming the chair down onto the floor. "The man's crazier than you nuts if he thinks he can fix a one of you, coming in here with all his talk of newfangled treatments, expecting us to play nursemaid to you. Well, he'll learn soon enough that he can't make silk purses out of pigs' ears. Then it will be back to the old way of doing things."

He waited then as Cormer roused Osgood out of his bed and herded him to the waiting chair. And while Cormer strapped him in, Martin stropped the razor halfheartedly and continued with his complaint. "Shaving a man or spouting words out of the Bible at him ain't going to keep him from being crazy. A man is what he is, and ain't nothing going to change that. You let him know who's boss though and maybe -- just maybe -- you can keep him in line." He dropped the leather strop then and leaned over the one in the chair, one hand going to pull the man's head back, the other holding the razor to his throat. "Ain't that right, Ozzie? You know who's boss around here, don't you?"

Osgood stuttered out, "Yes, sir, Mr. Martin. There's never been any doubt in my mind who's the boss here."

Martin removed the razor, patting Osgood on the shoulder as he straightened up again. "That's why you and me get along so good." He laid the razor down, working the shaving brush against the soap to build up a lather. "Now, if it was me instead of Creed, I wouldn't go wasting my time trying to talk some sense into you about that little problem of yours. Nope. I'd just take me this here razor and...." He grinned. "Well, let's just say you wouldn't be showing no more interest in the ladies." He laughed then, Cormer joining in. And twenty minutes later, it was Vin's turn in the chair, Martin's knee on his chest as he unlocked the irons around his wrists, his voice taunting as he said, "You ain't got to worry, Pig Boy. We ain't had the razor slip more than a time or ten. And we only lost that one fella when he sneezed."

He pushed off Vin then, grinning at the tightening of his already set jaw when he dug his knee harder into him. And hauling him to his feet with his hands fisted in the tracker's shirt, he shoved him towards the chair, where Cormer stood waiting with the razor held high, the blade shining dully.

His eyes caught by that play of light, Vin stood unmoving, visions of gold and silver flashing in his mind, a crow's wings sounding in the shadows there. Then Martin was behind him shoving him forward, towards the chair and the straps hanging off it.

Gaze shifting from blade to bindings, he wanted to run, wanted to turn and fight. Wanted to scream out his anger and fear. Wanted to turn back time to that first path opened up more years ago than he cared to count and leading to that moment, wanted to take another -- any other but that one and the ones that had come after, all of them long and hard and wide enough only for one. He wanted all that and more, wanted too much

that couldn't be had -- and he'd long since learned the futility of wanting anything. So he set aside want and kept his gaze on the paths now open to him, stepping carefully around traps laid and past false trails leading nowhere but to dead ends. And shrugging off Martin's hand at his back again, he stiffly sat down in the chair, arms laid along the wooden supports, gaze unflinchingly set at a distance as Martin strapped one arm down.

"Hey, Cormer," the attendant said with a grin. "I didn't know pigs ever needed shaving."

"Don't reckon they do," his companion decided. "Only time a razor ever comes near them is on hog-butchering day."

Martin laughed, then shifted his attention to Vin's other arm, buckling the strap and pulling it as tight as it would go. "Can't have you getting wild on us, now can we?" The restraints safely attended to, he then stepped back, rubbing his chin as he added, "You know, I think I heard tell once that music's supposed to tame down wild beasts." And with that, he grinned and pulled the harmonica he'd stolen from a shirt pocket.

"That's 'breast,'" Paulie helpfully corrected.

Cormer snorted. "Sounds to me like you been hanging around Osgood too long."

Paulie rolled his eyes. "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak," he quoted. And when the two keepers merely stared at him, he sighed and added, "It's from a play -- by William Congreve."

"Like you would know," Martin dismissed with a sneer. Then setting the harmonica to his lips, he began a cacophonous symphony, lowering himself to the foot of Rodin's bed as he played, sitting three feet away from Vin, whose gaze shifted to him at the first note sounding.

Cormer took hold of the tracker's hair then, using it to pull his head back, setting the shaving brush to his face and lathering a week's worth of bristles before setting the razor to it. Then with a grin, he said, "Yep. This sure does remind me of all the fun I used to have on hog butchering day."

He moved the razor up and down Vin's jaw line then, the tracker holding still, hands gripping tightly to the chair arm and breath held as the keeper continued to reminisce. "Folks used to make a real day of it, you know. Everyone would bring their pigs for the killing and we'd take turns with the knife at their throats." Into the cold dirty water went the razor, the soap and bristles rinsed off. "Used to be a game to see who could do it the cleanest." Cormer shook the razor off and set it at Vin's throat that time. "Just one swipe and phfft they'd be gone." Up went the razor, from throat to jaw, a trickle of blood left behind and mixing with the soap remaining.

Martin continued to play the harmonica, the sound breathy now, the eyes above it on the trickle of blood sliding beneath Vin's shirt.

"Of course, sometimes you'd get a young 'un at his first killing, didn't know what he was doing," Cormer continued, razor dipped in the water again, Vin's head pulled back further as the blade then returned to his throat. "And when that happened, it could take another pass or two with that knife to get the deed done." Another pass of his own, from throat to jaw, another trickle of blood resulting, Vin pushing hard into the chair at his back away from the blade.

"Wasn't a pretty thing at all when that happened," Cormer added with a shake of his head and a dipping of the razor into the water. "Pigs would squeal something awful." Back went the razor to Vin's throat. And holding it there for a moment, the edge of it biting deep this time, the attendant grinned and said, "It used to set the women to squealing too. But me, I never minded. It was just pigs, after all."

Martin fell silent on the harmonica, breath held, eyes transfixed on the blood trailing down Vin's throat. Then up flashed the razor, the tracker jerking beneath Cormer's hand, a small gasp of pain sounding as the blade nicked the skin along his jawbone. And lowering the mouth organ, Martin licked his lips, then laughed.

Paulie sat up in his bed, his gaze too fastened on the blood at Vin's throat. And carefully he said, "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but you might want to take care there. You know how Rodin is at the least little whiff of ... bodily fluids. He sees that and he's likely to have the entire ward in an uproar."

Cormer snapped a look to the man in question, relieved to see his gaze fastened on the ceiling above his bed. Then grabbing the towel hanging from a dowel at the side of the cart, he draped it around Vin's throat.

"Hell," Martin protested. "You turning soft, Cormer, worrying about some nut's delicate constitution?"

"I don't give a damn about Rodin," Cormer shot back. "But I remember the last time something set him off. Took us half the day to get things calmed down again -- and a week for my arm to stop hurting after he bit it."

He hurriedly finished his task, wiping Vin down with the towel when he was done, then moving to release him from the straps. And with a grumble, Martin got up to haul the tracker out of the chair and shove him back towards the bed and the chains waiting there.

"Don't guess the kid needs that peach fuzz of his shaved," Cormer decided with a look to Aubrey, lying still with his back turned to the room.

"So, soon as you get Pig Boy settled, we can get out of here."

Again Paulie spoke, his tone one of apology as he said, "You might want to consider the fact that Vin has been chained up all night and half the morning. Your duties already being so heavy, you know -- I wouldn't want you to have to attend to laundry on top of that."

Martin gave a curse, then took hold of Vin, spinning him around and shoving him towards the privy closet at the other end of the room. "Make

it fast, Pig Boy," he growled. "We ain't got all day to nursemaid you." Vin caught himself against the foot of Rodin's bed, the man there shifting his blank gaze to him, his brow wrinkling as he said, "Have you seen my Margaret? I can't find her."

"Check the cemetery," Martin growled. He then laughed at the look of confusion that crossed Rodin's face. And ignoring the muttered protest from Paulie and the glare Vin aimed at him, he hauled the tracker up and again shoved him towards the door set in the wall at the foot of Messing's bed.

A want rose in Vin at that, long years of fighting his way past trouble he couldn't turn his back on balling his hand into a fist at his side. But that need in him to survive at all costs, to keep the pieces of his heart beating, no matter how bruised or broken they might be, had him uncurling those fingers tightly clenched. And turning away from Rodin's grief and Martin's jeering grin, he chose -- as he had always chosen -- need over want, his jaw set as his open hand rose to unlatch the privy door.

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~ CHAPTER FOURTEEN ~

When he stepped back into the room, Vin turned his gaze away from Martin waiting for him, away from Rodin mumbling in his bed, from bars on the windows and locks on the doors, from too much taken and lost and abandoned. And latching the privy door behind him, he moved towards his bed and the chains waiting there. He'd taken no more than a couple of steps though when something large and heavy slammed into him, that weight bearing him down to the floor and holding him there.

"You damned Rebs!" a voice screamed even as a fist connected with Vin's jaw, his head snapping to the side, but not before he caught a glimpse of Messing's crazed face above him, eyes wild and lips drawn back in a vicious snarl. Then landing another blow, the former Army lieutenant again screamed, the words more a despairing cry than accusation. "You killed them! You killed them all!"

Over and over he screamed those words, striking out at each cry, Vin twisting beneath him after the second blow, arms coming up to deflect those following, his mind hazy with pain and confusion, unaware of the yells and wails sounding, of the laughter and shouted encouragement. Then the weight centered on his thighs shifted and the tracker was able to throw Messing off. And regaining his feet, he searched out escape, gaze darting from Messing blocking the path forward to Martin on one side grinning.

"The lieutenant don't cotton much to southern boys," the keeper offered in explanation. "Seems some damned Johnny Rebs wiped out a whole mess of his men and he ain't hardly gotten over it at all." Martin shook his head, the grin widening. "Don't know how it is, though, that he came to figure you for one of them."

"It was probably the smell that tipped him off," Corner jeered, watching from six feet behind Messing as he climbed to his feet again. Vin watched as well, his gaze wary. And stepping back, he pressed against the wall beside the privy door, hands flat against it and knees bent. And when Messing rushed forward, his eyes wide with some remembered horror, Vin met that headlong rush with one of his own, pushing off of the wall to throw his entire weight against Messing, sending him crashing into Osgood's bed, overturning it and sending its screeching occupant tumbling to the floor along with it, Messing landing on top of him. Breathing heavily, Vin backed into the wall again, his eyes shifting from Messing attempting to untangle himself from Osgood and the bed, to the other occupants of the room: Martin three feet away and grinning at him still, Corner kicking out at the screeching Osgood, Rodin sitting up in bed wailing, Paulie standing uncertainly beyond Corner, and Aubrey watching with interest from his corner of the room.

Then pounding feet beyond the half-open door heralded reinforcements and two attendants barreled into the room, both jumping over the overturned bed to take hold of Messing as he regained his feet with a roar and started towards Vin again.

Martin moved forward with a curse then, skirting the empty bed next to Messing's and past Vin, his gaze on the fray at the door. Then Messing broke loose of his captors' hold on him and stumbled forward, one hand going out to catch his balance on the shaving cart left standing in the middle of the room, his gaze falling on the razor lying there. And snatching it up, he was unaware of the curses and warnings snapped out, his attention all for Vin backed against the wall, the blade slashing out to remove Martin from his path, the attendant scrambling safely out of reach as the crazed man moved forward in a rush.

Having nowhere to go but ahead, Vin again met that headlong rush with one of his own, his hands reaching out to grab the arm wielding the razor, pulling on it as he twisted, sending the larger man crashing into the wall. They both fell to the floor then, Vin still holding fast to Messing's arm and scrambling to pin the larger man down as he slammed the hand gripping the razor onto the floor. Then an arm went around his throat from behind, pressing hard, Martin yelling something not understood, the tracker's breath choked off but his determination to keep hold of Messing's arm unwavering. But when a second arm joined the first and his lungs began to scream for air, Vin shifted his attention from the man beneath to the one behind, his hands letting go of one arm to claw at the other.

He was pulled back then and up, a sharp pain slashing through his left thigh as Messing sat up and made use of the razor he held. And even as a scream rose in Vin, it was choked off by the arm around his throat, not so much as a gasp escaping as Martin continued to pull him back. Then, just as the light began to dim, an unfamiliar voice sounded in one

ear and another pair of hands joined his on the arms choking him, breaking Martin's hold. And unable to support his own weight, Vin fell to the floor.

Curling onto his right side, he fought to take in more air than was possible, his breath coming in wheezing gasps, the pain in his thigh forgotten until a hand pressed down on the wound there, the voice that had shouted in his ear now raised again in some demand barely heard and not understood. And whether that demand was aimed at him or someone else, he neither knew nor cared, his focus all on deciding whether it was more important to take air in or to release it in a scream now that such was an option. When he could manage neither, when he could only choke on the mixed signals sent to his oxygen starved body, he tried to twist away from the hand on his thigh, one arm swinging blindly, only to have it caught and pinned to the floor at his head by a heavy weight, his other arm captured as well.

Panic setting in, he then managed to take in air enough to let out a hoarse scream of rage and pain, twisting and kicking with his free leg against the weight pinning arms and his wounded leg to the floor. Voices became clear then, the one that had shouted in his ear now above him and crying, "I need more help here!" Then, with a grunt when Vin's bare foot again connected with yielding flesh: "You -- hold his leg!" Frantic to be free, Vin took desperate note then of his surroundings, faces taking shape above him: Martin scowling down on him, his weight keeping his arms pinned to the floor above his head; Paulie taking hold of his right leg with a look of apology; and a third face hovering above his, dark eyes in a darker face gentle. And seeing Vin's gaze on him, the keeper spoke soothingly.

"Now, ain't no one going to hurt you," he assured him. "We just need to keep you still so you don't do yourself more hurt than has already been done. You calm down and we'll get you up off this floor and into your bed. All right?"

The tracker's panic eased at the gentle tone, his breath coming ragged still but more easily now, the gash in his thigh sending tendrils of pain shooting through him, his body trembling with the force of it, but easing beneath the flow of soft words offered in comfort.

He became aware then of the others in the room: Cormer and the first two attendants on the scene fighting to hold Messing down on the floor, the former lieutenant screaming out names as if calling to those lost, Rodin huddled in his bed emitting frightened wails, and Osgood still on the floor next to his overturned bed screeching demands for help. Only Aubrey had no part in the drama unfolding, sitting up in his bed, with eyes wide and uncertain.

And into that scene of chaos came additional reinforcements, three more attendants rushing through the door and going to the aid of those piled on top of Messing, who went limp beneath the additional weight, his

despairing cries reduced now to whimpers. Then Corner, red-faced and short of breath, demanded restraints, and one of the keepers pushed up from the pile on Messing and wended his way out of the room past the group around Vin and over the bed blocking the door.

"Okay," the keeper pressing against Vin's wound then declared. "Let's get this man into his bed."

Martin growled in reply, his brows drawing down into a scowl as he said, "You ain't the boss around here, Timothy. And won't no darkie ever be. You're only here 'til Kilgallen gets back. Then you can go find some cotton to pick or something."

Dark eyes narrowed, but Timothy said only, "You aim to leave this man lying here, do you?"

"Hell, yeah," Martin growled. "He goes on the bed, he'll get blood all over it. And who you reckon is going to clean it up?"

"I will," Timothy snapped out. "Now, are you going to help or not?"

"Not," Martin snapped back.

Timothy raised his chin at that, but Paulie spoke before he could make reply, apologetically saying, "I don't mean to interrupt your fascinating little t^hte-...-t^hte, gentlemen, but I do believe we're rather in the way here." And shifting his gaze to Rodin on the bed scarce feet away and wailing still, he added, "And too, it might be a bit quieter on the other side of the room."

Martin shot a look to the wailing Rodin, then let out a curse and turned back to his fellow keeper, growling, "Fine. But you'd best remember you'll be cleaning up whatever mess Tanner makes of his bed."

At that, Paulie let loose his hold on Vin and stood, saying, "I'll get some towels off the shaving cart to put under his leg. That will at least keep the mattress clean."

He moved away then and the two attendants transferred their holds on Vin, Martin lifting the tracker's upper body and Timothy taking his legs.

They then carried him slung between them to his bed, Vin gritting his teeth against the pain. And when they had him laid down on the towels spread out, Timothy turned to Paulie and said, "Fetch another towel, then hold it against the bleeding. I'm going to go get the doctor."

Paulie nodded then ran to do as he was bid, Timothy moving ahead of him out of the room.

"Damned darkie," Martin growled at the departing attendant's back.

"Thinks he's as good as real folks."

Panting against the pain stabbing up his leg and radiating throughout the rest of his body, Vin still found breath enough to say, "Good thing he's got you to put him in his place."

"Damned right," Martin agreed with a laugh. Then, eyeing the chains hanging off the wall, he added, "And speaking of putting animals in their place, Pig Boy...."

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Vin was again in wrist irons and dizzy with pain when Creed arrived a few minutes later, Mrs. Bunch at his side, a young man coming behind that Vin took to be a doctor from the suit and earnest air he wore, and Timothy bringing up the rear. And shifting his gaze from Osgood still on the floor and ranting incoherently to Rodin in his bed wailing, to Paulie holding the bloody towel to Vin's leg, and on to Messing now on his feet in leg irons and a strait jacket and held by four pairs of hands, Creed at last settled his gaze on Martin, who was setting the shaving cart to rights.

"Anyone hurt besides Mr. Tanner?" he asked. And when Martin shook his head, the doctor turned his attention to the men surrounding Messing. "Very well, then. Ward and Demmler, please escort Mr. Messing to a Composing Room -- and tell Henricks he's to remain there overnight. Tyndale, you and Bonner return to your patients, and take Mr. Thurgood and Mr. Osgood with you -- and keep them with you until after the noon meal. Knudsen, I'll need you to escort Mrs. Bunch to my office for my medical bag. And you, Cormer, will get a sedative for Mr. Rodin, then clean up the mess in here." Then, to the young man standing behind him, he said, "Dr. Chesney, please see to Mr. Rodin."

While his staff scrambled to do as they were bid, Creed turned to the remaining three, saying, "Come with me, if you please." He then moved to the far end of the room where Paulie continued to sit with the towel pressed against Vin's leg. And with a nod, Creed said, "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Thurgood, but Timothy will take over now. You go on with Bonner and Tyndale. And I'll expect you to behave for them. Understood?"

Paulie sighed, then relinquished his place on the bed to the dark attendant. And as he moved reluctantly away, Creed turned to the attendant waiting to collect him and said, "And just in case -- please be sure to check Mr. Thurgood's pockets before you return him."

Paulie heaved another sigh, this one in protest at the insult offered, then smiled widely at Tyndale and began a cheerful discourse on a jaunt he'd taken to the Continent one memorable summer.

Creed shook his head, then turned his attention back to Vin, who lay watching him with pain-dulled eyes. And shifting his gaze to Martin, now standing at the head of the tracker's bed, he said, "While we wait for Mrs. Bunch to return, why don't you tell me what happened."

Martin gestured to the man in the bed. "I let him up to go to the privy and next thing I know, Mr. Messing was on him. And somehow during the fight, the lieutenant grabbed the razor off the shaving cart."

Creed raised an eyebrow. "How many times have I told you, Martin, that you are not to refer to Mr. Messing in that fashion? He'll never get better if we continue to cater to his fantasies."

Martin scowled, but said only, "I'm sorry, Doctor. But he gets riled if we don't call him Lieutenant. And he like to took Cormer's head off the

other day when he forgot to say 'sir' to him."

"Nonetheless, he'll have to learn that he is no longer in the Army -- or the war. So you're to treat him as such. Do you understand?"

Martin nodded. "Yes, sir."

Satisfied, Creed continued. "Do you have any idea what set him off this time?"

Martin shrugged. "Mr. Tanner must have said something to him."

Vin shifted in the bed at that, his brows drawing down as he glared up at Martin, Timothy shifting his gaze from that look to his fellow attendant, his own brows drawing down thoughtfully.

Unaware of that byplay Creed fell silent for a moment, considering.

Then, with a sigh, he said, "I suppose it might be best to return to the drug therapy for now. Let's continue it through the week and see how things go."

He then looked over to Rodin as Cormer returned with the sedative and handed it to Dr. Chesney. "And Mr. Rodin? Has there been any improvement in his condition?"

"No, sir. Him and Mr. Osgood are the same as always. Mr. Thurgood, too."

"And Mr. Tanner? Has he settled in all right?"

Again Martin shrugged. "About as good as expected, I suppose."

"Then we'll lift the restrictions once his leg has been tended. You'll need to keep him on this floor until he is able to walk on his own though. And in the meantime, you'll have to help him move about, as obviously we don't want to give him a crutch or a cane until we're certain he won't use them as weapons."

Martin frowned, but made no protest.

"As to his therapy -- Dr. Chesney will be working with him on his control, same as Mr. Timmons," Creed continued. And pausing at the thought, he turned to Aubrey, who sat glaring at the mention of his name. Then pushing the glasses up on his nose, the doctor added, "And how is Mr. Timmons doing today?"

Martin snorted. "He's bound and determined still to show us he's the boss. Threw a fit -- and his dinner -- last night when he dropped his spoon and none of the other patients would fetch it for him. Then he spit out his tonic in my face earlier." He glared at the boy, who glared back. "And he never shuts that mouth of his. He's either whining or complaining or cussing someone out. Or yelling his head off if he don't get his way."

Chesney joined them then and Creed shifted his gaze to Rodin, lying in his bed quietly now. "He give you any trouble, Doctor?"

"No, sir. Cormer didn't even need to hold him still."

Creed looked beyond the young doctor to the attendant waiting at the foot of Rodin's bed. "Very well, Cormer, you may remove that shaving cart now. And in the future, I expect you to take much greater care with the

razor -- and any other dangerous implements."

Corner grumbled a sullen, "Yes, sir," then took hold of the cart and pushed it out of the room.

Creed then returned his attention to Chesney. "Martin tells me that Mr. Timmons has not made any improvements in his attitude and behavior. After five days of treatment, he remains stubborn, violent, verbally abusive, and defiant. So obviously we'll have to refine our methods." He cocked his head. "Your suggestion?"

Chesney looked thoughtful. "Well, we could try a mild sedative, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Creed agreed without enthusiasm. "But if it is strong enough to dampen his violent impulses, it would also be strong enough to cloud his senses -- which would make it nearly impossible for him to benefit from any other therapy."

"So he needs something that will sedate him without affecting his ability to reason?"

"Exactly."

Chesney narrowed his eyes in thought. "Well, I suppose we could always try a phlebotomy. It's a bit old fashioned, but it should do the trick."

"Indeed," Creed agreed. "And while it is, as you say, old fashioned, such tried and true methods do sometimes have their place in a more modern age. So let's combine that with a composing diet and see how he does."

Mrs. Bunch returned then with Creed's medical bag in one hand and a bottle of laudanum in the other. "I thought you might want this if you need to do any stitching, Doctor," she said as she handed the bottle to Creed, along with the bag.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bunch. Now, Martin, I'll need another sedative, as well as a bowl and something I can use for a tourniquet. And ask Corner to return with you."

And as Martin departed to collect the requested items, Creed took a scalpel out of his medical bag. He then handed both it and the laudanum to Chesney. "I'll take care of Mr. Timmons," he said, rolling up his sleeves. "You see to Mr. Tanner."

He turned to the boy then, who sat watching him with wide eyes fastened on the scalpel. And trying for a kindly smile, the doctor said, "You needn't be alarmed. I'll be doing no more than making a small incision in your arm. And I'll sedate you first, so you won't feel a thing during the procedure."

"What procedure?" the boy stammered out. And backing in his bed against the wall, he roughened his voice, warning, "You ain't getting near me with that. You ain't cutting me. I ain't done nothing!"

Creed ignored him, turning back to watch Chesney, who was measuring out a dose of laudanum for Vin with a spoon dug out of the medical bag. And when Vin too, tried to back away, only Timothy's hand on him keeping

him in place, Mrs. Bunch moved to his side, a hand going to his shoulder. "Now, now," she soothed. "You can't have the doctor sewing you up without something to ease the pain."

Vin shook his head at her, words tangling with the fear of lying insensible in that place, of losing what small measure of control he had over his life. And understanding that look in his eyes, the old woman patted his shoulder and said, "You take the medicine without a fight and you won't have to take but a small dose, just enough to hold off the worst of the pain. Right, Doctor?"

Mrs. Bunch turned to Chesney then, waiting expectantly. And, after a pause, the young doctor gave a nod and agreed, saying, "As long as he remains still, I don't see why we can't keep the dose at a minimum."

Vin lay eyeing Chesney for a long moment, studying the paths laid before him, the pain in his leg making it hard to think clearly. Then shifting his gaze to Creed, who stood watching him carefully, he knew this was another test, too many failed already to allow for another failure.

So with a tight nod, he chose the shortest available path out of that place. But when Chesney moved to the bed, spoon held out, Vin looked beyond him to the boy pressed against the brick at his back, sitting defiant in his bed, chains above fists clenched, and softly asked, "They going to hurt him?"

Mrs. Bunch gave a sad shake of her head. "He'll be all right. Dr. Creed's just going to bleed him a bit to help calm him down so he can get control of himself."

Vin sat watching the boy for a long moment, searching out the path he'd set himself upon, the trail narrow and sharp-edged above a long drop, and twisting high into barren rocks, the footing becoming ever more dangerous. It was a familiar trail, one he'd set foot upon himself more than once in his life, sometimes by choice and sometimes by chance -- and always despite warnings given, only headlong tumbles down those trails saving him. And sure that it would be the same for the boy, he sighed and closed his eyes, praying for Aubrey's sake that his own tumble came soon.

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Chapter Notes... In case you wanted to know more -- and a warning if you don't: Bloodletting and cupping were actually used in psychiatric treatment on violent patients as a form of sedation -- which in fact worked, since the loss of blood led to a drop in blood pressure, which in turn had a sedative effect on the patient. I don't know that it was used for the reason I have it used here. If not, consider it literary license. And um, I do have one of those somewhere. Oops! Must have left it in my other wallet. Anyway, while bloodletting was apparently going out of style at this time, it was still in use into the early 20th century -- so again I'm taking some literary license by having it put to use by a forward thinking doctor like Creed. (And he was indeed advanced for his

time, especially in a public institution, which generally tended to be hell holes acting as nothing more than warehouses for the mentally ill -- and yes, as Paulie claims, for the inconvenient or uncooperative, as well.)

There were a variety of methods used in bloodletting and cupping, most of which are much more sophisticated than what you will see (sort of) described in the next chapter. But while other methods are more sophisticated, they require more in the way of explanation -- and detail given. And me, I prefer to leave some things to the imagination. Hence the simpler -- and less detailed, if perhaps more gory -- method used here. Nonetheless, if you're squeamish, you might want to skim or skip the opening part of chapter 15 and pick it up after the first break (indicated by *~*~*).

One final note -- while this therapy seems barbaric (and was), there were others that were actually much worse. And don't worry, as I have no intention of getting into those -- although I warn you now that we will be seeing a much darker side of this particular asylum in the chapters to come.

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~ CHAPTER FIFTEEN ~

(Please note warning above)

What followed was sanity amid the madness, and mad for being so sane, the muted conversation passing back and forth between the two doctors sounding far too normal following the violence done and being done. Perhaps it was only the laudanum working in Vin that had him feeling caught up in some nightmare. Or maybe it was the loss of blood or the confusion that was now so much a part of him. But whatever it was, it left him unable to track from thought to thought, to make out the difference in harms done: a razor exchanged for a surgeon's scalpel, one wielded by a madman and one by a man in full possession of his faculties -- and Vin unable to distinguish between them.

Somehow though, it seemed important that he do so, that he make some kind of sense out of what made no sense at all. So while the laudanum took effect and Chesney set to work stitching up the deep gash that ran from knee to hip on one leg, he settled his gaze on the bed across from him, watching as Martin and Cormer held a screaming Aubrey down, as Creed injected him with a sedative, as the boy's screams then became soft cries before fading altogether. He wanted to turn his eyes away when Creed tied a tourniquet around the unconscious Aubrey's upper arm and rolled his sleeve up to study the flesh thus exposed for a likely place upon which to set his scalpel, yet he did no more than shift his gaze from the boy to the doctor, searching for some measure of understanding there.

He watched then as Martin held Aubrey's lax arm over a bowl, as Creed lowered the scalpel to the spot chosen, his movements precise and

unhurried, his expression one of detachment. There was no fear or desperation in those movements, no remembered horrors shining madly in his eyes, no hoarse screams for what had been lost echoing about the room. There was only a calm amid the silence, a determined duty being done.

And while the surgeon's blade sliced delicately to set blood flowing, scant feet away a needle went in and out to stop another spill of blood. All else forgotten or denied in that moment, Vin watched that flow of blood, followed the trail it left down the boy's arm and into the bowl catching it. And in years to come, whenever that vision came to his mind, it was the colors that were to stand out in memory: the red of blood spilled, the blue of the bowl catching it, and the yellow flowers painted along the vessel's side. And ever after, Vin was to hate yellow flowers.

He was never to know how much blood collected in that flowered bowl. Nor did he ever take count of the stitches set in his leg, for such a reckoning left too much without measure. And in the end, unwilling to consider the sum total of harm done, he closed his eyes against it, turned his mind from too much blood spilled, from too much harm done and too few paths left open. Instead, he drifted, giving himself over to the pain and to the laudanum dulling it, only barely aware when Chesney finished and Timothy slipped his pants off and a clean pair on, taking up the bloodied towels as well. Nor did he open his eyes when Mrs. Bunch gave one last pat to his shoulder. And when Timothy unlocked the iron bands about his wrists, he merely curled into himself and sought out the only escape open to him.

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The sleep that followed was restless, silver blades flashing in his dreams, wielded by madmen with changing faces. The victims, too, changed, their blood flowing freely onto a ground dotted with yellow flowers, his voice unheard as he cried out for help, even Chris Larabee turning away from him, either unaware or uncaring of his pleas. And when he would have run after him, chains held him fast, and a crow swooped out of the sky with a mocking cry and dark knowledge in its eyes.

He awoke at that, a moment needed in which to take in his surroundings, chains and the dark bird of his dreams soon giving way to a locked door and the soft sounds of his roommates' breathing. And gingerly pulling himself up so that his back rested against the brick, he shifted his gaze to the dim sky glimpsed through barred windows and tried to set his mind to the consideration of the paths left open to him.

His attempt was soon interrupted, however, by a key turning in the lock on the room door. And turning his gaze in that direction, Vin watched warily as the door swung open and Martin stepped into the room.

"So, you're finally awake, Pig Boy," the keeper said with a grin.

"Thought you was going to sleep the day away. And it surely would have been a shame to miss out on your visitor, him coming so special-like to see

you."

Vin pulled himself farther up in his bed, heart racing in anticipation, a hope in him denied now embraced, his gaze shifting beyond Martin as the attendant looked over his shoulder and pushed the door open wider. But when a dark form took shape in the doorway, all hope vanished. "Ah, Mr. Tanner," a silky voice greeted him. "We meet again. And under much improved circumstances." The Reverend Mordecai Bliss took a slow look around the room, then gave the smallest of smiles as he added, "From my point of view, that is."

As Vin sat watching in a frozen stillness, eyes wide and face pale, Bliss slowly thumped his way towards him, the golden head of his cane clenched tightly in his left hand, his right arm still bound across his chest. And raising one eyebrow, Bliss assumed a hurt air, saying, "Why, Mr. Tanner -- you don't seem at all pleased to see me. And here I've come all this way to not only assure myself that you are being well taken care of, but to offer spiritual enlightenment to you and to all the other unfortunates incarcerated here."

Martin laughed jeeringly. "Pig Boy ain't the grateful type. In fact, I'd say he's been downright ungrateful since he got here."

Bliss sighed, shaking his head. "Mr. Tanner has so far shown a marked tendency to refuse the help he so sorely needs. And the Lord knows I tried to steer him along the right path. But he refused to acknowledge the truths pointed out to him time and again, instead insisting on following his own path -- which, sadly, led straight here."

Vin raised his chin at that, an anger sparking in his eyes. And eyeing that defiant gesture, Bliss cocked his head and said, "Do you deny it, Mr. Tanner? Do you deny that I warned you against placing your trust in those interested only in protecting sheep from wolves such as yourself? Do you deny that I offered you escape when Mr. Larabee first proposed locking you up? And do you continue to deny your very nature?"

Up went Vin's chin another notch.

Bliss stopped at the foot of Aubrey's bed, his gaze flicking to the boy's sleeping form and to the bonds on his wrists. Then shifting that gaze back to Vin, he said, "You should have taken the chance offered while your chains were easily broken. Now I fear you shall never escape them." He paused, then added, "Not without help, that is."

Vin's eyes narrowed at that and he shot a look to Martin, who stood lounging in the doorway watching with a small smile of satisfaction. Bliss followed his gaze. And with a smile mirroring the keeper's, he added, "Have no fear where Mr. Martin is concerned. He and I have had a nice talk. And when the time comes that you decide to seek escape -- in the right direction, of course -- he shall prove invaluable."

Back went Vin's gaze to Bliss, surprise flashing into suspicion. And with a shrug, Bliss said, "Every man has his price -- it is simply a matter of discovering what that is and in what coin payment must be made."

Martin laughed. "Any coin that spends is good enough for me. But why you want to waste any of it helping the likes of Pig Boy is beyond me."

Vin's eyes flashed, this time with anger. "Don't need no help."

"Indeed?" Bliss' tone was one of polite skepticism. "Or is it only that you do not need that help which was never offered?"

He raised his cane and studied its golden lion's head as he twisted it in the room's dim light, aware of the tracker's gaze upon it and the further paling of his face, of the rough edge to his breathing. Then shifting his own gaze back to him, Bliss added, "I cannot say that I blame you for being unwilling to trust yourself to another's aid again, Mr. Tanner. After all, Mr. Larabee has turned his back to you, as did Mr. Jackson and the rest of the Seven as well." He shook his head in feigned surprise. "I must say I expected more of a fight out of them in that courtroom. Instead they all but did my attorney's job for him. In fact, I daresay I would never have been found innocent without their help." Again the cane twisted in the light, Vin's gaze held by the light dancing off its golden surface, visions flashing amid the shadows growing darker.

"I wouldn't hold that against them, though," Bliss continued. "After all, your comrades worked nearly as hard as did you at denying the wild in you. It's not their fault they were at last forced into admitting the truth, into acknowledging the wolf hiding among them dressed in sheep's clothing. They've sworn, after all, to protect their flock from such as you, to hunt down the hunter and destroy him. So perhaps you should be grateful that they chose to attempt to tame you by sending you here rather than punish you by sending you to prison for assault.

"The question now, though, is this: Will you allow yourself to be tamed? Will you deny the hunter in you, that need that courses in your blood to seek out prey? Will you forego the chase and the kill that comes at the ending of it? Will you never again allow yourself to smell the fear as those weaker than you flee before you, to taste the power you hold over their very lives? Will you be content to lie before the fire dreaming of times lost? And will you give up your freedom, give up all that you are, to settle for what scraps Mr. Larabee will allow?"

Vin only sat still, the shadows within stirring, dark calling to dark and a crow's wings sounding.

"You can give it all up, boy," Bliss conceded, his voice lowering, whispering now among the shadows. "You can lie down with the dogs and share their fleas. You can even accept without protest the chains with which they seek to bind you. But it will never change who and what you are. It will never grant you peace. And sooner or later what is wild in you will refuse to be denied. Then the hunter will become the hunted, and the wolf will be forced to flee before a pack of howling dogs. And do you doubt it, you have only to look around you at the walls and locks and chains that surround you. You have only to ask yourself who put you

here, who it is who seeks to destroy the wild in you."

Bliss moved away, his cane thumping against the hard floor as he made his way to the window between Paulie and Rodin's beds. And fastening his gaze without, he said, "You put a wild thing in chains and something in it dies long before its body seeks escape in death. I've seen it. I've seen it in animals, and I've seen it in men. It's there in the eyes, in the dimming of the light as realization slowly dawns that bondage is all there is to be of life -- if such can truly be called 'life.' And when that light is gone, the body is all that remains."

He was silent for a moment, sounds drifting in from the hall beyond Martin standing guard at the open door to that small prison -- sounds of life confined to small spaces and too many lost within them, with a world lying free and out of reach beyond.

"How long will it be," Bliss continued, his voice still low, his gaze still on the world beyond that room, "before you are unable to look in a mirror for fear of seeing that look of death in your own eyes, Mr. Tanner? How long before you accept that this is all that you will ever have of life? How long before you admit to having chosen wrong weeks ago when the choice was laid before you?"

He turned then, to fasten eyes bright with an evangelistic fire on the tracker. "Look around you, Mr. Tanner! Within these walls you are nothing but an idiot in a madhouse, doomed to live out a pitiful existence in chains. But out there, in the wild that dwells within you, you are a master of the hunt, free to choose your own paths, to search out your own destiny. Here you are less than nothing. There you are everything!"

Vin started to turn away, to turn from choices he had no wish to consider, from uncomfortable truths and knowledge shared. But Bliss' cane thumped down onto the floor with a crack and he jerked his gaze back to the one who would have him choose between shades of darkness.

"What is there to choose among, boy?" Bliss growled when Vin stayed too long silent. "Have I not proven to you the truths spoken? Has not Mr. Larabee failed you, as I warned? Has he not done as he himself threatened by sending you here? Has he not set himself against you? You heard him on that witness stand! He thinks you far less than you are. He judges your worth by a shepherd's standards, giving no heed to the instincts that run true in you and despising the wild he can never even begin to fathom. He has taken the trust and hope you placed in him and in turn set you in chains you'll never be able to break." He paused, dark eyes intent on blue, then softly added, "Not without my help."

Up jerked Vin's chin, words coming easily in his anger. "Go to hell!" he snapped out.

"When the time comes, boy, and gladly," Bliss agreed with a smile. "But you're already there ahead of me. So I suggest you pay heed this time to my warning if you wish to effect an escape."

Vin did turn away then, his gaze going to the boy sleeping in the bed

across from him, chains binding him and a bandage wrapped around one lower arm.

Bliss leaned forward, his weight on the hand resting on his cane, determined to win back the pawn lost and again within his grasp, the game set and ready to begin. "I know you," he softly declared. "I know you as Chris Larabee never could. I know the hunger in you for the chase, for pitting yourself against forces greater than yourself. I know the lust in you for victory and the power it brings. I know the wild that drives you, a wild that can never be tamed. I know you as you refuse to know yourself. I am you, Mr. Tanner. I am you unafraid to acknowledge the truth of who and what I am. You run from that truth, while I embrace it. You fear it, while I wield it. And as a result, you sit here in this madhouse while I walk free beyond its walls. And so it shall remain until you admit to the only truth that shall set you free."

He straightened, thumping his cane on the floor for emphasis as his weight eased off it. "Once again a choice is being laid before you -- the same as was previously offered: Come with me and assume your rightful place among men -- or remain in captivity."

Vin kept his head turned for a reply, his jaw set and fists clenched.

Bliss gave a nod, that move expected. And countering it, he said, "You think on it, boy. You think on all you have to gain -- and all you stand to lose. And when you've at last come to the realization that this life you've chosen is no life at all, let Mr. Martin know."

He turned then and thumped away, Martin straightening in the doorway at his approach. Bliss stopped though when a single word sounded, the tone not of desperation but of defiance.

"Bliss!"

He turned again, his gaze going to the one watching with an unyielding gaze of his own. "It's Smith now," he corrected. "The Reverend Lucifer Smith." He smiled. "A rather fitting name, wouldn't you say?"

Vin ignored him, a crow known by any name assumed. And raising his chin, he firmly declared, "I ain't you."

"No, Mr. Tanner, you aren't," Bliss agreed. "You're more than I am.

Much more. And when you're ready to find out how much more, you need only send word. The game will then begin."

And with a final thump of his cane, he limped through the door, which clanged shut behind him, the sound of Martin's laughter echoing as the key turned in the lock.

~ CHAPTER SIXTEEN ~

Again Vin tried to set his mind along whatever paths would lead him out of that place, his gaze once more upon the glimpse of sky through the barred window. His thoughts, however, kept turning to crows and wolves and a dark knowledge he had no desire to consider. So while light filled his vision, it was the shadows he saw, a stirring in them that sent him in search of the only escape available, his mind drifting away from a

darkness gathering both within and without, Bliss' visit there warning of some danger still to be played out.

It wasn't until a hand at his shoulder demanded his attention some time later that he returned to awareness. And focusing on the one at his side, he blinked up at Paulie, who was eyeing him with concern.

"Are you all right?"

Vin blinked at the question, unwanted images returning, his eyes losing their focus again as he slowly said, "There was a crow."

"What?" It was Paulie's turn to blink. And when Vin made no reply, he let his hand fall, saying, "I wouldn't worry about it. A man can see all sorts of things when he's pumped full of what passes for medicine in this place."

He moved away then, crossing to Aubrey's bed. And looking down upon the still sleeping youth, he said, "He looks peaceful enough."

A snort sounded. "I'm betting he wakes up spitting," Osgood predicted from his own bed. "And if you're smart, you'll stay out of the line of fire."

Ignoring the comment, Paulie turned back to Vin, his eyes on him sympathetic as he said, "Was it bad?"

Another blink and Vin shifted his gaze to the one lying pale in the bed across from him. And lost still in the shadows, vision faded into vision, flash following flash of silver, and the color of blood spilled unchanging. Then softly he said, "He likes it."

"Who?" Paulie asked in confusion. "Who likes what?"

"The crow. He likes killing." Vin frowned, then added, "It's a game. And I ain't playing."

Used to such ramblings in that place, Paulie let the confusion of words go, saying only, "Well, I don't blame you for that." Then, crossing to his own bed, he threw himself down on it. And looking up at the ceiling, he sighed and said, "While this suffering artist routine should prove beneficial to my art once I am able to return to it, it hasn't so far proved particularly amusing. So I rather think I have suffered sufficiently." He turned his head to Vin. "While being dragged hither and yon for exercise, both physical and moral, this afternoon, I searched out a means by which we might quit this place -- and I must say that they keep our temporary abode remarkably well guarded. Which leads me to suspect that we're not the only ones who have had cause to find fault with the service here."

He looked around at the two men sleeping and Osgood stretched out on his bed. Then returning his gaze to the one watching intently, he sat up and moved to the edge of his own bed, leaning forward as he softly said, "There are too many locks between here and the lower floor, and too many keys to be purloined. I checked out the windows as well, and all are securely barred. That leaves only the exercise yard. And while the wall is high, I believe we can get over it without too much difficulty."

The trick will be in creating a disturbance that will enable us to slip away unnoticed. We can then borrow a couple of horses from the stables -- and perhaps enable those remaining to set off for a bit of exercise while we're at it."

Paulie shifted a look to Vin's wounded leg. "Of course, we'll have to wait until you're in better form. But I do think it can be done."

Vin tracked through the abundance of words to the end of the trail and shifted uneasily, tensing against the shaft of pain that shot up his leg. And determined to choose a path not offered, he lifted his chin and firmly declared, "Now."

Paulie shook his head. "I doubt that you can even hobble at the moment, much less run or climb a wall. And if we try this before it has any chance of succeeding, we'll only get caught -- and then we'll have no chance at all. So we have to do it right the first time. Which means we wait."

Vin shook his head, tired of waiting. Tired of waiting for that which didn't come, tired of hoping and wanting and believing. Tired of having his life in someone else's hands. "Now," he repeated, more forcefully. "Not now," Paulie countered, just as firmly. "Later. When you can maneuver as you'll need to."

Letting out his breath in a chuff of frustration, Vin sought out words to explain that wild need in him to escape that place, to escape the shadows swirling within and the deeper darkness they concealed. To explain the urge to get up and do something, even if it was only to pound his fists uselessly against the brick wall of his prison. To explain the sharp pain curling deep within at having iron bars between him and the world lying in sight but just beyond reach. To explain the scream forming, one of rage and fear -- and in denial of the knowledge shining darkly in Bliss' eyes. He wanted to explain, but had no words adequate to the task, had never had such words. Still, he tried, saying only, "I can't."

Can't breathe, can't think, can't bear the chains and the locks and the close walls. Can't look back on those things lost or ahead to what never again might be. Can't hold on and can't let go.

Those words unspoken understood, Paulie leaned forward still further and softly said, "Yes you can. You wouldn't be here if you couldn't. You would never have survived this long if you couldn't get up each and every time life beat you down, if you couldn't find your own way to keep going, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. If you couldn't do whatever you had to, even when what you did made no sense to anyone else, when they looked down their noses at you for the choices you made, you wouldn't be here now. I know, Vin. I know -- because I wouldn't be here either."

He sighed then, brown eyes locked onto blue. "All our lives we've done what most men wouldn't have in them to do. And we'll do it again,

because it's all we know. Maybe we'll hate it, but we'll do it. And maybe we'll be labeled mad for doing it, but we'll do it. And we'll survive for doing it -- because it's all we know to do."

Vin frowned, his brows drawn down in concentration as he tracked his way through the flow of words. And when he was sure of the trail down which they led, he turned away from it, that path too long familiar, too many days of his life spent enduring what couldn't be escaped, waiting for his chance, forcing it at times when it was too long in coming.

Already he'd wasted enough time waiting, and all he had gotten for it was chains -- and a way out of that place that would lead only to a different set of chains. And if he was to escape those bonds, he would have to choose his own path out of that place, as he had always chosen his own path. So with a lift of his chin he more firmly repeated, "Now."

And again Paulie shook his head. "You aren't even allowed off the floor until Dr. Creed gives the okay. Remember? And he's not going to do that until your leg is sufficiently healed. So like it or not, we'll have to wait."

Words came to Vin then, curses flowing easily at this latest set of chains holding him in place. And with no other choice to be made or forced, he reluctantly settled back to wait.

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Not at all resigned to his fate, Vin was determined to put the enforced wait to good use, working over the next few days at compelling both body and mind to bend to his will, biting back the pain as he exercised his leg by walking up and down the small room, and struggling to keep his mind focused and alert, closing himself to what little distractions were offered.

And while he waited, life in that place went on in some mad semblance of normal -- Messing returning to the room the day after his removal from it, his eyes glazed and kept that way with the addition of some unnamed medication to his tonic each morning; and Aubrey awakening from his ordeal greatly subdued, the loss of blood and a diet free of the iron needed to rebuild his strength combining with the remembered horror to keep him quiet and tractable enough that his restrictions were soon lifted. Even the keepers were subdued, both Martin and Cormer content in the days that followed with no more than an occasional jibe aimed at whoever was handiest.

All this Vin noted vaguely then dismissed, not even Paulie's amiable chatterings distracting him from his struggles. Nor did he pay more than minimal attention to Dr. Chesney's daily attempts at therapy, his own therapy of far greater use to him. And so it was that on the fourth day following his injury, when he was able to walk around the small prison of his room without aid -- albeit with a pronounced limp -- he eagerly awaited Creed's daily rounds and what he hoped would be the end of his confinement.

Paulie, however, proved far less enthusiastic about the possibilities thus offered, having spent the past five days trying to talk Vin out of a hasty attempt at escape. "It's too soon," he hoarsely whispered when he'd managed to get Vin to sit still long enough to listen to his objections. "We should wait until your leg is well healed."

It was the sensible thing to do. And even in his confusion and desperation to be quit of that place, Vin knew that. Yet he knew as well, had learned long ago, that sometimes the sensible thing to do was also the worst possible choice. And too, he knew that whatever game Bliss had set in motion was awaiting only his first move. So if he was to escape Bliss as well as that place, his first move would have to be made soon and in a direction opposite to that anticipated. And as much unwilling as he was unable to explain, he only shook his head.

Paulie threw his hands up at that, his frustration plain. Before he could launch into any further objections though, the key sounded in the lock on their prison door, announcing the keepers' start to the day -- and he had only to see the grin of anticipation Martin aimed in Vin's direction as soon as he stepped through the door for those objections to die unvoiced.

Vin, too, noted that grin and pushed back into his bed, his back going to the wall. Martin, however, then proceeded to ignore him, his attention all for his duties as he and Corner worked their way around the room, dispensing both breakfast and the daily tonic. And when they at last made it to Vin's bedside, Martin said only, as if in passing, "By the way, Pig Boy, I forgot to tell you -- Dr. Chesney said you could go out with the rest of the nuts today for some exercise. If you feel up to it."

He grinned again at that and Vin frowned in response, waiting for what would come next. But Martin only handed him his tonic and then breakfast before moving on to Aubrey. And once the last of his duties was done, he joined Corner at the door. He no sooner pulled the door open though than he turned back, his grin again in place as he said, "Oh yeah. Almost forgot -- today's bath day."

He laughed then and followed Corner out of the room. And when the door had safely closed and locked behind the two keepers, Aubrey frowned after them, softly growling, "What's he so happy about? He planning on drowning somebody?"

Paulie shrugged. "With Martin one never knows. In fact, I've found him to be more unpredictable than the maddest among us."

Aubrey snorted. "You been here long enough to get that all figured out, have you?"

Paulie looked up from his bowl of gruel, the spoon stopping halfway to his mouth. And looking past the boy into the distance far behind, he softly said, "One doesn't have to set up housekeeping in a madhouse to dwell among the mad. They're all around us, boy. And sometimes you only

recognize them by their very reasonableness."

Another snort sounded. "You know how crazy that sounds, Thurgood?"

Aubrey shook his head. "I'm beginning to think you ain't got all your wheels on tight."

"Oh, they're tight," Paulie softly corrected. "Perhaps even too tight."

The boy frowned at that and shifted his gaze to the tracker, asking,

"He making sense to you?"

His thoughts drifting to a scalpel and a bright blue bowl, Vin nodded, words coming easily as he said, "Sometimes the world's at its craziest when folks think it makes some kind of sense."

Aubrey rolled his eyes and muttered, "That's what I get for asking a dummy a simple question."

Paulie's gaze snapped back into focus. And glaring at the youth, he snapped out: "One day I hope you have gained enough wisdom to know how incredibly asinine a comment that was."

Aubrey flushed, but his tone was sullen as he said, "I didn't mean nothing by it. What he said just didn't make sense, is all."

Paulie started to remonstrate further, but Vin stopped him with a soft: "He's just a kid."

Just a kid who had yet to learn the hard lessons, who still retained that childish belief in order and rules obeyed. Just a kid assured enough of his place in life to rebel against it, to risk what he felt certain he would never lose by despising it. Just a kid who had not yet truly come to realize just how easy it was to lose what he treasured most. Just a kid who had no idea how young he was.

And flaunting that ignorance, Aubrey scowled, the anger that had long marked him rising to the surface. "I ain't a kid!" he protested. "I'm old enough to get married or fight a war or do a man's work."

"And old enough to break your mother's arm?" Paulie added in a jeering tone.

Again Aubrey flushed. "I told you -- that wasn't my fault. She made me do it."

It was Paulie's turn to snort. "When you're old enough to accept the blame for your own actions, boy, then you can rightly lay claim to manhood. But until that day comes, I suggest you learn to heed the advice of those older and wiser than you."

"Someone like you, maybe?"

Paulie shook his head, his gaze falling to the bowl he held. "No. I suggest you seek counsel from someone far wiser than I -- someone with sense enough to stay out of places such as this."

They fell silent then and remained so until the keepers returned for the breakfast dishes, Martin's grin returning once that task was accomplished.

"All right, you nuts," he ordered, pulling Rodin out of his bed. "Time to go make believe any of you got a chance in hell of at least looking

like you ain't totally off your rockers -- and out the door and running naked through the streets."

He laughed and joined Corner at the door, Rodin in tow, waiting for the rest to file into line, Paulie having to help Messing, who moved unsteadily, his vacant eyes focused on nothing any of them could see. Martin continued to grin as he led the way to the bathing room, Vin moving uneasily in line behind him, his eyes searching out danger as he moved into the room. But Martin only pointed to a tub, partially filled, directing him to use that one so that he might keep the stitches in his wounded leg high and dry.

Vin did as told, undressing along with the others, Messing the only one needing help. And moving to his appointed tub, he stepped carefully into it, easing down into the tepid water, his eyes shifting to the two keepers as he remembered his previous experience in that room. But whatever had Martin grinning, it was apparently not the anticipation of a repeat of the previous week's entertainment. So he settled back in the water, grateful that it was clean this time, their group apparently the first to use the baths that morning.

And while he scrubbed both body and hair, Vin savored thoughts of the coming escape, as sure as he was determined that it would come that afternoon. He had only to get through the next few hours, then he would again be free to choose his own path. And what that path might be, he had yet to consider, such a looking ahead far too likely to lead to a searching of those things left behind.

Lost in his thoughts, he was therefore unaware of Martin's approach until he leaned over him, his voice jeering as he said, "You ain't going to get no cleaner than that, Pig Boy. So get out and get dressed."

The keeper then stood with that unnerving cat-that-has-the-canary-in-its-sight grin as Vin did as he was told, skirting uneasily around the

shaving chair set up behind the line of tubs, Messing already strapped there, the razor in Corner's hands moving up and down his lathered cheeks. And glad for those bindings as both memory and the pain in his leg stirred, Vin moved to the bundle of clean clothes the other men were already sorting through in search of the coming week's wardrobe.

Once he'd found some reasonably fitting clothes and slipped into them, Vin moved to sit on the bench along one wall, watching as Rodin took Messing's place in the shaving chair, the lieutenant taking his vacated spot there on the bench, his eyes still unfocused, the hands resting on his legs in restless motion. And as if hypnotized by the movement, Vin started to drift, his own eyes losing their focus, his mind this time though not blank, but filled with flashing blades and pools of blood, and a crow's wings flapping above a field of yellow flowers.

Then a screech jarred him back to reality. And focusing on the group gathered at the shaving chair, he blinked to discover Osgood now in place

and complaining in high-pitched tones, Cormer and Martin behind him scowling.

"I demand to see the doctor!" he whined. "It's probably going to need stitches." He moaned, his eyes tearing and his lips trembling. "I can feel the blood pouring down my neck. Somebody do something before I bleed to death!"

Happy to oblige, Martin cuffed the side of Osgood's head, growling, "It's just a nick, you big fat baby. I hardly even touched you." Then waving a pair of scissors held in one hand, he added, "But if you don't shut up, I'll take the whole damn ear off."

Osgood subsided with a snuffle, his eyes closing in anticipation of amputation as Martin returned to his barbering, the scissors he wielded snipping at the bound inmate's hair.

And as Vin watched the short locks fall in growing horror, Martin shifted his gaze to him and grinned.

~ CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ~

Vin was on his feet without thought and moving forward, snatching up the razor from the shaving cart beside which Osgood sat bound. And before Martin could do more than widen his eyes in alarm, Vin was upon him, taking hold of one arm and twisting it behind his back, trapping it there as the razor blade rose to the keeper's throat. And when Martin started to wield the scissors he still held in defense, Vin pressed the razor harder against his throat and growled.

As the scissors dropped to the floor, Cormer let out a curse and then a growl of his own, warning, "You don't need this kind of trouble, boy. Let Martin go and we'll forget you ever did anything this stupid."

Vin only stepped back in reply, pulling Martin with him, the keeper stumbling as he pressed against the man at his back, chin up in an effort to gain some tiny distance from the blade at his throat. And skirting the shaving chair and Osgood in it, Vin jerked his head towards the rear of the room. "Over there," he snapped out to Cormer. "Now."

"Ain't no way you're getting out of here," the keeper defiantly declared, remaining in place. "So just you put that down. Now."

The razor bit into Martin's throat at that and the keeper let out a strangled, "Just do what the hell he says, you fool!"

Cormer hesitated, his gaze shifting from the keeper to the kept and back again. Then noting the trickle of blood now adorning Martin's throat, he let out another curse and stepped back in the direction indicated.

Rodin noted the blood as well and let out a wail, Osgood adding his own high-pitched cries for help as he struggled against the straps pinning him to the shaving chair.

Paulie was on his feet then, hissing a warning to Osgood to keep quiet as he hurried past the blank-faced Messing to Rodin, attempting to soothe him. It was a futile gesture though, as Aubrey discovered when he raced to the door leading into the hallway and cracked it open, turning

his head with eyes bright to report, "Company's coming!"

Rodin forgotten, Paulie flashed a look to Vin, who stood caught between the door to one side and Cormer to the other, his breath coming fast, instinct running ahead of reason, eyes dark with a determination to survive at all costs. It was madness, a fool's hope of escape. But already it was too late to turn back. So racing to the door, Paulie stood to one side of it, Aubrey watching wide-eyed to the other as the door opened and a keeper stepped inside, only to crumple to the floor with one blow to the jaw.

Shaking his hand with a pained expression, Paulie took a quick look into the hallway, then grabbed hold of the unconscious keeper and dragged him into the room, snagging his ring of keys before stepping over him to close the door. "These will only get us off this ward," he warned with a look over his shoulder to the tracker. "And we won't even get that far before someone sounds the alarm."

"We getting out of here?" Aubrey asked, excitement in his voice, the lethargy that had marked him the past few days forgotten.

"Just go," Vin commanded, propelling Martin before him.

Paulie, however, shook his head. "We should have a plan."

Again it was too late, the only plan feasible in that moment instinct, the same instinct that had always before led Vin out of trouble he never would have been able to think his way out of in time. And trusting to that as he had always trusted to it, he more forcefully repeated, "Go!"

He was nearly to the door, Paulie standing beside it with one hand on the knob, teeth biting into his lower lip, reason demanding some marked path down which to flee. Then Aubrey was pushing him away, jerking the door open, grabbing him and pulling him out into the hall, Vin with Martin right behind them.

"Come on!" the youth hissed, shoving Paulie down the hallway and to the door into the central section of the ward when he balked. "Get it open already!"

With another bite of his lip, Paulie did as commanded, fumbling with the keys, inserting one after another before finally finding the right one, the lock clicking as the key turned. They had no more than gotten it open though than a voice behind them called out an alarm.

Vin spun around at the cry, Martin held close against him, the keeper pressing even closer as the razor bit into his throat again.

"Back off!" the tracker growled, moving blindly through the door, Paulie and Aubrey bunching through it ahead of him.

Then Cormer was in the doorway to the bathing room, supporting his fallen comrade and warning the keeper standing uncertain down the hall to keep back. "Tanner's gone loco!" he shouted. "They all have! Martin's as good as dead if you spook him."

Alerted by the commotion, two more keepers came out a door further down the hall, Timothy one of them. And as Vin started to back out of the

door behind him, the dark keeper stepped forward, one hand raised placatingly as he said, "Now, Mr. Tanner, there's no need to be doing this. I know you want out of here and I don't blame you a bit. But this ain't the way to do it. All you'll get is more trouble than you already got. So give me that razor before you do something we can't fix."

Vin's only response was to move further back, his eyes darting from keeper to keeper before him, leaving it to Paulie to warn off the ones he could hear behind.

Getting more into the spirit of the adventure now, his coconspirator assumed a threatening tone as he commanded, "Someone unlock that door, then clear the hall, or else you'll be needing a mop to clean up after your friend here!"

"Yeah," the youngest of the conspirators echoed. "You don't let us through, you're going to need a dozen bowls to catch all the blood that's going to spill."

Content to leave those unseen to his fellows, Vin concentrated on those in sight, moving back, pulling Martin with him, the razor never wavering from the keeper's throat. And when the only response to the demands made behind was a grumbling refusal, Vin tensed, the razor again biting into Martin's throat.

The keeper squeaked out a curse in response, then hoarsely yelled, "You trying to get me killed here?"

More grumbling ensued, but nonetheless, one of the keepers fumbled his keys out and moved towards the door at the far end of the hall, while the others moved reluctantly through various doorways.

Still though Timothy followed, stepping through the door the escapees had left open behind them, his hands up and spread wide, his voice soothing as he said, "It's still not too late, boys. No one's been hurt and I'm sure you'd like to keep it that way. So just come on back to your room and we'll fix this. I promise -- ain't nothing bad going to happen if you give this up now."

Cormer appeared in the doorway behind him, minus the keeper he'd been supporting, and snarled, "Give it up, Timothy. Ain't a one of them nuts going to listen to reason. They're like animals -- killing a man ain't nothing to them. And from what I hear, it's what Tanner does best."

Timothy rounded on him, voice furious as he hissed, "You ain't helping things talking like that. We got to calm these boys down, not rile them up even more."

Cormer ignored him and instead called out: "Somebody go sound the alarm, let Creed and the outside guards know what's going on."

With a nod, the keeper who had just unlocked the door out of the ward slipped through it and disappeared.

Timothy turned back to Vin then. "Things are only going to get ugly -- and I do mean ugly -- if you don't stop this now." And when Vin's only response was another step towards the door out of the ward, he more

softly said, "You got to trust in something besides that razor, son. You got to trust that you ain't alone in this, that it's all going to work out for the best if you just wait things out."

~ Ain't a one of us who'll let you come to harm. Now, you got our word on that. So you trust Chris, just like we're doing. And I swear you won't regret it.

~ Larabee wanted me to give you a message. Said to tell you to stick with these two yahoos, not to try to make a break for it. Said things will work out for the best if you trust him on this.

Vin raised his chin at the memory of those promises made, too much demanded and nothing offered in return, trust given already regretted, harm done that could never be undone. Not again would he make that mistake, only in himself and what had kept him that long alive would he place his trust. And with a shake of his head, in denial both of the memories and the want that stirred in him at them, he moved back, the razor still held unwaveringly to Martin's throat.

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Through door after door they went, and down a flight of stairs and to the next, keepers standing watch as they passed, Timothy and Corner following, and Vin moving always backwards, his companions going ahead, Aubrey growing more bold with each free step taken, Paulie more nervous. Vin was unaware of that, however, all that was in him focused on one thing and one thing only -- taking one step back and then another, each step taking him further from chains and walls and locked doors. And so focused was he that he failed to note the growing weakness of his wounded leg until he was backing down the final flight of stairs with Martin's weight against him threatening to overbalance him. Then, as he braced himself, his knee buckled and he fell, the razor sliding along Martin's throat in a shallow cut, his hold on the keeper's arm giving way.

Twisting, he tried to catch himself with arms outstretched, the razor dropping from his grasp as he splayed his hands out, only to crash into Paulie, who let out a yelp of surprise and alarm as he too fell, a quick grab at the banister keeping him nearly upright as Vin slid past him.

Then it was Aubrey's turn, Vin knocking him the last few steps down the stairs, the two of them coming to rest in a tangle on the floor below.

There was a brief pause, those watching frozen, the two on the floor needing a moment to recover the breath knocked out of them. Then Aubrey let out a curse and pushed at the body on top of his. And as if that were the signal they'd been awaiting, the keepers swarmed on the would-be escapees, two grabbing hold of Paulie and hauling him down the stairs, while the rest converged on the fallen men, hands reaching out to take rough hold of them.

Vin went instantly on the offensive, instinct again at work in him, hands and feet and teeth in motion, curses and threats snarled as more hands laid hold of him, pinning him to the floor. And still he fought,

that struggle to survive all he knew, all that he had ever had of hope. At last though he had to admit defeat, had to lie still and panting, his body trembling beneath the weights holding it still. Then some of the weight was off him and Martin was standing over him, one hand held to his throat, blood seeping beneath it. And seeing Vin's gaze on him, he snarled a curse and drew one foot back.

Vin braced for the kick he knew was coming, but a hand reached out to stop Martin's leg before it could complete its swing. And looking up at his fellow keeper from his position at the tracker's shoulder, Timothy scowled and said, "Now we ain't going to have none of that."

Martin jerked his leg free and returned Timothy's scowl in full measure. "Who the hell do you think you are taking charge here, telling anyone what they can and can't do? That damned nut nearly slit my throat! And if I want to get some of my own back, I reckon I have a right!"

Timothy rose, slowly, deliberately, setting himself between the man helpless on the floor and his keeper. "No one is doing any more hurt than has already been done -- not if I have any say about it."

Martin flushed red with anger, but what reply he would have made was forestalled by a clattering of footsteps on the stairs above. And looking up, he ground his teeth at seeing Creed, together with one of the staff doctors and the Reverend Lucifer Smith, descending towards the group gathered at the foot of the stairs.

"Is that all of them?" Creed asked when he came to a stop several steps from the bottom, nodding to the three men held captive, Vin and Aubrey on the floor still, Paulie on his feet and smiling up at the good doctor.

"Hey, doc," he cheerily called. "Glad you could make our little soir,e."

Creed ignored him, centering his attention on Martin as he asked. "What happened?"

"Tanner went crazy! That's what happened!"

"Yeah," Corner agreed, looking up from his hold on Aubrey. "He just all of a sudden went nuts. Grabbed a razor and Martin both."

Creed frowned. "You were warned to keep stricter control of any dangerous implements, were you not?"

The Reverend Smith came to the keepers' defense, stooping down on the stairs behind Creed and rising with the offending razor in his unbound hand, mildly saying, "I suspect that a man such as Mr. Tanner has no real need of such a weapon, as paltry as it may be. For had he been so moved by the Devil in him, I have no doubt he could have taken Mr. Martin hostage with no more than his bare hands. After all, it is a simple enough task to break a man's neck when you know how to do it. And I feel certain that Mr. Tanner has had many an occasion to perfect that particular skill."

He shrugged, folding the razor and tossing it to Martin, who deftly

caught it with his free hand. Then, cocking his head at the one lying on the floor watching him with a darkness growing in his eyes, he continued. "I fear a man such as Mr. Tanner has any number of such deadly tricks

up his sleeve. And it is no doubt only the wound to his leg which has held him back thus far. But now that he appears to be well on the road to recovery, I expect he will be back to his old tricks."

"The Reverend's right," Martin agreed, taking his cue with pleasure.

"Tanner might not be the sharpest tack in the barrel, but he's for damned sure the deadliest."

Creed studied the man in question for a moment consideringly, Tanner's eyes filled with a wild that warned he was dangerous still. Then shifting his gaze to the other two would-be escapees, he said, "And Mr. Timmons and Mr. Thurgood? How do they fit into this?"

"They were in it with Tanner," Martin reported. "Ask Tyndale. It was his head Thurgood nearly took off upstairs."

Paulie shifted between keepers and tried his most disarming smile. "He tripped," he innocently declared. "And can I help it if he landed right on my fist?"

Again Creed ignored him. And turning back to Martin, he asked, "Anyone else hurt?"

It was Timothy, however, who replied. "No, sir. They weren't wanting to hurt anyone. All's they wanted was out."

"And my head took off!" Martin snapped, jerking his hand away from his throat to reveal the damage done. "And they damned near did it, too!"

Creed nodded. "Very well. We'll have a week of full restrictions for Mr. Timmons. Two weeks for Mr. Thurgood. And let's keep them confined to the floor until further notice."

"And Tanner?"

The Reverend Smith cleared his throat before Creed could reply. "I don't mean to be presumptuous, Doctor, but I daresay that any punishment you might lavish on Mr. Tanner would have little, if any, effect. A man so used to the worst life has to offer would surely be immune to anything that one as civilized as yourself could devise."

Again Creed nodded. "You may well be correct, Reverend. However, it is not punishment that we employ here, but therapy -- and modern therapies can sometimes work wonders, with even the most desperate of cases."

"Indeed. And I applaud your forward thinking, Doctor. But perhaps a different therapy is indicated here, one that would instill a moral sense that is apparently sadly lacking. And one, moreover, that was of a sufficient intensity and duration that all resistance might be broken down."

The Reverend kept careful watch on his intended pawn, aware when his eyes widened in understanding and pleased when he stiffened, muscles tightening beneath the hands holding him still.

Creed sighed. "Such a therapy, is of course, the ideal. Yet we are sadly lacking in the manpower necessary to put it into effect. Our resources are already stretched much too thinly. And to stretch them further, for the benefit of but one man...." He shook his head. "Well, it is simply unthinkable."

"But if such a therapy could be undergone with no additional strain upon your resources?"

Creed quirked an eyebrow upwards. "You have something in mind, sir?"

The Reverend Smith shrugged. "I make no claim to any proficiency in your area of expertise, Doctor. But I have long wrestled with demons and the evil in men's souls. And I have no firm commitments which must be honored for the next while. So if I may be of any assistance to you, you need only ask."

Vin resumed his struggles then, in fury and fear, grunting with the wasted effort, his eyes darting about the room in search of some escape -- any escape. But he was surrounded on all sides, his only weapon gone, those who would have helped him as trapped as he. And shifting his gaze to the one watching him with a smile of satisfaction ghosting on his lips, he wanted to shout out a warning of the crow perched in their midst. He had already learned, however, the futility of such an action, had discovered how little he could count on anyone but himself. No. The only hope he had now was to play at whatever game Bliss had in mind -- and to beat him at it. So, stilling once again, he lay waiting for Bliss' next move.

The distraction ended, Creed allowed himself to be unwittingly maneuvered, nodding his agreement to the proposition. "Very well, Reverend. I am not one to set himself above any help offered. So if you are sincere in your desire, we can meet to discuss the matter once rounds are over."

"Rest assured, Doctor -- I have never been more sincere. And I look forward to making the acquaintance of Mr. Tanner's particular demons." Giving rein then to the smile held back, the Reverend Lucifer Smith savored the vision of not only making the acquaintance of his quarry's demons -- but of setting them free.

~ CHAPTER EIGHTEEN ~

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It was Timothy and two other keepers who escorted a strait-jacketed Vin to a Composing Room, that to be his place of residence while undergoing the Reverend Smith's own brand of therapy. And once there, he waited for the strait-jacket to be removed, an accusing glance aimed in Timothy's direction when he made no move to do so.

"I'm sorry," the keeper apologized, "but the doc said nothing is to be done without the Reverend's say-so. And he ain't said nothing about taking that thing off you, so it's got to stay 'til he does."

Vin made no reply, only moved to the far corner of the room and turned his back to it, sliding down the brick wall to the floor, legs drawing up in protection.

Timothy sighed and waved the other two escorts, as well as Henricks, from the cell. Then fastening a weary look on the man in the corner, he said, "I told you this wasn't the way to go about getting out of here. I told you, you have to have faith that things will work out for right. And they will. But you got to give it a chance. You've only been here a little over a week, and that ain't enough time to work things out like they need to be. So you got to hold on. You got to wait out the bad stuff so's you can get to the good. Now, I know it's hard. But I suspect you've done plenty of hard things in your life, otherwise you wouldn't be here. And there ain't no reason why you can't do this as well, now is there?"

When his only answer was a defiant glare, Timothy heaved another sigh. Then trying again he said, "Look, son. You might think you're alone in this, but you ain't. You got folks in here, believe it or not, who care about doing right by you. And I'm betting you got folks on the outside too who care, who are doing their best to see that things work out like they're supposed to. Now maybe it don't seem that way, and maybe you reckon you're only here because everyone's given up on you. But I'm telling you that it just isn't so. No matter how or why you come to be here, you got someone who cares, you got someone who's going to see to it that you get better and go home where you belong. And if you can't trust in anything else in this life, you've got to trust in that. So you hang on -- things are going to work out. You just got to have faith in that and believe in someone and something besides yourself."

Vin turned his head away at that, his jaw set and his lips curled in a sneer. And with a shake of his head, Timothy said only, "I'll be by to check on you again. And in the meantime, you take my advice and don't give that preacher any trouble. You do like he says and I'm betting you'll be out of here in no time."

Jerking his head around at that, Vin upped the wattage on the glare aimed at the keeper. And with a final sigh, Timothy took his leave, the door of the cell clanging shut behind him. And turning then from thoughts of faith and the false hope born of such belief, Vin instead set his mind to a consideration of the game about to be played.

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He had hours in which to track his way through the trail Bliss had marked, vague memories stirring amid the images they evoked of chains and wolves running free, of crows and the hunt, of darkness and shadows. Too much of what had passed in the preceding weeks went unremembered, words and actions tangled or lost. But some part of him beneath the chaos that was still too much his mind knew and understood what it was that drove Bliss, knew and recognized that dark knowledge in him. And it was

that part of him to which he turned, that part that had always before led him out of traps laid, that part that needed no words or measured thoughts, that acted out of that instinct in him strong to survive. In the end, he arrived at no set plan, merely a determination to outplay Bliss at his own game no matter the cost. He let his mind drift then to other games played, other prices paid, no accounting ever made for fear of the sum total. He had no doubt, however, that he would not long be able to escape that knowledge, for he had seen it shining in Bliss' eyes often enough to know that it lay at the heart of the game they would play. And aware that the next move was his opponent's, Vin set himself to wait.

When Bliss at last arrived, the lock clicking as the key turned in it and the door swinging open to admit him, Vin aimed a dark look of challenge at him, an unwilling player perhaps, but one set nonetheless on victory.

Challenge noted and accepted with a small smile of triumph, Bliss moved slowly into the room, Henricks at his back with a chair in hand. And once it had been set down three feet in front of the one sitting bound in a corner, Bliss took possession of it, his cane laid gently across his knees, his back straight yet his manner one of ease. And letting his gaze drift about the small prison cell as the door to it clanged shut and locked behind Henricks, he set the game in motion.

"I understand you were used to living in a wagon on the street," he said in an amiable tone. Then waving his unbound hand at the tracker's present accommodations he added, "Surely this must be a far cry from that wolf's den -- no sky to be seen, no quick and easy escape." He paused, then quirked one eyebrow upwards. "No escape at all, in fact -- despite your best efforts."

Vin raised his chin in reply and Bliss brushed at a piece of lint off one pants leg, his tone mild as he said, "You'll die in this place, boy. Trapped and chained. Bars between you and freedom, the sky glimpsed at best between them. You can bite and scratch and chew at your own limbs, yet still you won't find escape. And you know as well as I do that you'll never survive such a captivity."

Vin turned his head away then, his hands in the straitjacket bunching into useless fists.

"Do you wait for your comrades to ride to the rescue? Do you still have such faith in them?" Bliss shook his head on a sigh. "What faith did they ever have in you? What respect did they ever give you? What did they ever do for you but lock you up in this place?"

His head jerking around again, Vin fiercely spat out, "That was you!"

"Was it?" Bliss shook his head again. "Judge Travis would never have sent you here at my command. It took Chris Larabee to convince him of that. And sadly, it took little enough to convince him. In fact, my lawyer had only to remind Mr. Larabee of the facts to which he himself openly

admitted. And to his credit, it must be said that he could not in good conscience continue to allow you free rein of the town, not with your proclivity towards violence. In fact, it was his duty as the protector of sheep to guard them against any further predations. And while such a realization was no doubt unpleasant, it was nonetheless the only one to be made."

Vin refused to turn away from that point, needing that reminder to keep him focused. Alone in this game he was and would be, with no one and nothing to count on save himself, same as it always had been. And to allow himself so much as a tiny hope would be to hold back from what would have to be done. He could afford no hesitations, no glances back for what would never come. All that was in him would have to be set on whatever trail would lead him out of that place. And if the only trail left to him was the one now laid before him, so it would be. So he only stared unblinkingly at his opponent, waiting.

"Ah," Bliss conceded with a smile, approving of the move made. "Already you have discarded those players in the game. Very good. I had feared it might take some time to clear the board. And that having been done, we can proceed."

He fell silent a moment, sitting still as he considered his move, Vin waiting patiently, long years having taught him the danger of rushing blindly down a dangerous path. Hours he'd been known to sit waiting, days even, searching out the trail ahead and behind -- sometimes as hunter, sometimes as the one hunted. And never had he made a move as either that wasn't planned well in advance, each footfall set in precise lines, each tensing of a muscle part of a carefully orchestrated movement. And not only his own movements did he consider but those of the hunter or hunted as well, each possibility considered and played out, each step and his response to it carefully choreographed.

He was a man prone to impulse, quick sometimes to anger and rash action -- but never when on either end of the hunt. Then it had always been that instinct in him that had taken command, that will in him to survive. And that lay in some part of him not touched by the world or any measure of it. Time in that place was without form, one minute as an hour or a day. So while his body might consider such, his mind was lost to it, was bound by an awareness that filtered out all that did not lend itself to his survival.

And so he sat again and waited, his mind as still as his body, ready to match move for move.

Aware of that stillness and the reason for it, Bliss allowed himself a moment to savor the victory, the hunt well begun, the maneuvering of the prey to be his, the ending of it all to be at his command. Never before had he such a one in his power, never before had he the challenge presented. The game long grown dull was now come to life -- and all other considerations faded away. All that mattered was there in that room,

will matched against will, darkness calling to dark, knowledge shared and the doubling of it at hand.

"This is all that is, boy," he softly said at last, voice low and smooth, gliding from his lips with the deceptive ease of a hawk riding a high wind in search of a feast below, no movement of body visible and upheld by that unseen. "All that has gone before has led you to this place. Every step taken has been with this destination in mind. Every hunt undertaken, every escape made, has been in preparation for what is to come. Every death has been to but whet your appetite, every hurt to gather strength. Every thought, every breath has been for this. It's who you are, who you have been and who you will always be. Nothing else exists in this life for you, boy, but this, try as you might to escape it, to deny its hold on you."

Not from that either would Vin turn away, despite the fear stirring in him at those words spoken. Instead, he met the dark knowledge in those eyes upon him with a continuation of that stillness that was both weapon and defense.

Undaunted, Bliss continued. "When have you ever been anything more than this, or even anything else? When have you ever lived as one tame until you rode into that town, until you threw in your lot with that pack of sheepdogs? You've lived with Indians as wild and free as yourself -- and as dangerous. And not from them did you learn to stand meekly in chains. You've ridden unfettered and alone upon the plains, the hunt your excuse to ride free of restraint. And when the buffalo proved unequal to your skill, it was a more cunning prey you sought -- until you in turn became the hunted.

"Again and again you've chosen those paths that would lead you to this place, to this choice laid before you now. Hunter. Warrior. Lone wolf. Which of these choices was thrust upon you? When were you never free to choose other paths? You could have laid down your gun at any time and taken up a plow. You could have bound yourself to some plot of land rather than roaming free upon it. You could have taken your place among the sheep at any time, yet you shied free of them. And even when you shackled yourself to their care, you were never any more than a wolf on the hunt, only the blood let at your hand keeping you there."

Something flickered in Vin's eyes, some question never before considered, the answering of it tangling beyond his reach.

And aware of that, Bliss pressed ahead. "How many have died at your hand, boy? How many times did you choose death over life? How much blood have you on your hands that can never be washed away?"

Vin flexed his hands in the jacket binding them to his sides, sweat beading on them, the wetness of it a heavy weight.

"Did you think to wash it away by playing at guardian of sheep? Did you think they wouldn't recognize the wild in you? Did you even think to disguise it?" Bliss shook his head. "Whatever you hoped to gain from that

place and those people, it was not to be counted among them. Had it been so, you would have laid down your weapons and set aside the trappings giving truth to the wild in you. No. It wasn't to be a sheep that you set yourself in chains, it was for the hunt allowed and sanctioned. No more could you hunt men and not be hunted in turn -- not with that price on your head. So you had either to give up the pretense of righteousness and give free rein to what lies within you or find some other legally acceptable means of maintaining it."

That move unexpected, Vin had no move of his own planned to offset it. And knocked off balance, he reacted with a flash of anger born of that fear stirring in him, snarling, "That's a lie!"

"Is it?" One move nearer victory, Bliss took another step closer.

"You're a wanted man, Tanner. You should be hiding in the shadows, alert for those who dwell there, hungry for so valuable a kill. Yet you stand in plain sight, your fame spreading as one of the Seven. How many towns with your picture hanging on a wall have you ridden into? How many lawmen have you dared to recognize you?" He shook his head. "You didn't even bother to change your name. And you want me to believe it hasn't been a dangerous game to you, that you haven't taken pride in eluding the hunters while counting yourself among them?"

Bliss fell silent again, his gaze going to the golden head of the cane lying across his lap. And sliding his free hand to the lion's head adorning its top, he caressed it with a lover's touch, aware when the tempo of his opponent's breathing changed. Then with a fluid movement, he disengaged that blade hidden there, holding it up before him, twisting it with gaze rapt upon it.

"It is an addiction, Mr. Tanner," he softly observed. "And after a while, those fixes we allow ourselves begin to loose their hold, so that we must then seek out stronger doses. Perhaps by drawing closer to the hunted." And with that he ran the silver blade of his knife gently across his lips, his eyes half lidded at the cold feel of it. Then pausing, the eyes above the knife fastened on the one sitting short of breath and wide of eye in the corner, his gaze fastened with horror upon that silver instrument of destruction. And with a small inclination of his head to include him, Bliss added, "Or perhaps by drawing closer to the hunter."

He shrugged, drawing the knife away to twist it in the meager light of the cell again. "In either case, there is no cure -- only the next fix. And yours is now past due -- as is mine."

Then lowering his arm, he slid the knife back into its sheath. And in sharper tones he said, "The game has long grown stale, the hunts upon which I have set myself of no real challenge, sheep far too easily led to the slaughter. No, Mr. Tanner. I want more. Much more. And you can provide that, you with that wild in you, that scent for the trail, that lust in you to pursue and capture. There is that in you I have seen

nowhere else, not even when looking into a mirror, for my own image pales in comparison. So I warn you now -- I will drink of that wild in you, I will touch that power you wield as you bring this game of ours to new heights. And this you will do not because I command it, but because it is in you to soar above all that you have ever before allowed yourself."

Vin raised his eyes to Bliss' at that, the movement slow and measured, his breathing once more under his control. Then, as the words slowly formed, he offered a warning of his own. "You'd best be careful, Bliss. A man sets himself too close to a wild thing, he's apt to get bit."

Another inclination of his head, this one in acknowledgment. And accepting the challenge offered, Bliss said, "I'm willing to take my chances, boy. In fact, I insist upon it. So why don't you do us both a favor and have done with this place and all the chains that have ever been set upon you, whether by force or by your own doing. Accept who you are and embrace it. The hunt can then begin."

"And if I say no?"

Bliss gave a secret smile of assurance. "Oh, you'll agree, boy. It simply is not in you to do anything else. You'll bite and you'll scratch and you'll chew -- and in the end you'll have no choice but to play the game or forfeit all you hold dear."

When Vin made no reply to that, merely sat still and silent again, Bliss raised one eyebrow. "How long do you think you can last before that want in you becomes a need beyond your ability to control, before that desire for freedom becomes a madness in you?" He took tight hold of the cane lying across his lap. "Think, boy! You're bound and imprisoned behind more locks than you can count. You've no way out of this but the way I offer." He stood then, the cane thumping onto the floor, the knife it sheathed clicking into place. "Know this, boy -- I am your only hope. It is I who am your resurrection and your life. Without me, you'll be no more than another madman lost and forsaken, and bound in place not by chains but by your own fears."

He gave one last thump of his cane and a final warning. "My patience grows thin. So think well and think wisely, for the offer made will not long remain on the table."

Bliss thumped away then, rapping on the door with his cane for release, no look back given as the door swung open and he limped through it. And when the door clanged shut behind him, Vin leaned his head against the wall at his back and gave careful thought to that which kept him bound.

~ CHAPTER NINETEEN ~

He drifted again, away from Bliss' words and back, considering the trail marked and then turning to look behind, memories both bad and good mixing into a form he couldn't take hold of. He tried to shake his mind of it, to find instead his place along the path on which he'd been set, but there were too many trails leading to that place and too many leading away -- with only one lying ahead and open to him. And though he

searched out each one lying before again and again, forcing himself back to the task each time his mind wandered, still he could see no choice but the one -- and that a hard trail and dangerous.

Time there was when he would have taken it and not looked back, would have forged ahead in defiance of traps laid, would have taken pride in eluding them. So had he lived his life, dancing on a thin edge, a long drop awaiting a step badly placed, head up for fear of looking down into the abyss. And always he'd known what the ending of it would be, that long drop the only thing certain in his life. Yet he'd refused to step back from it, wasn't sure he could keep his balance without that fear of falling to keep him upright. It was all he knew, all he had ever known. And now that edge was grown thinner, pieces of it crumbling away beneath him, his balance lost so that he couldn't tell in which direction lay firm ground and which annihilation. He would have to look down, would have to risk the fear taking hold. Would have to stare into the abyss without losing himself in it. Would have to risk the darkness there calling to the dark within.

He would have to do it, but wasn't sure he could.

And so it was he met with relief the sound of the lock to his cell turning, his senses sharpening in anticipation of some push to come -- and him having only to step away from it to find his balance again.

To his surprise though, it was not a push that came as the door swung open but a hand held out to draw him towards solid ground -- Mrs. Bunch stepping into the room with Henricks at her back, the keeper grumbling, the old woman returning a timid: "I told you -- you needn't worry. If anyone catches me here, I'll simply tell them I'm here at Dr. Creed's bidding."

"And if the doc finds out...?"

Mrs. Bunch sighed, sad eyes fastened on the one in the corner. "I won't open that door 'til trouble comes knocking on it."

Henricks too cast his eye on Vin, his look that of a man going against all sense and resenting both the cause and the doing of it, his tone one of warning as he said, "Looks to me like trouble's already snuck in the back way, Mrs. B. And if you take my advice, you'll run it out quick and bar the doors and shutter the windows so it don't get back in again."

Taking in a breath and straightening her back, Mrs. Bunch shook her head. "I know how it seems, Mr. Henricks. But sometimes the good Lord sends us angels in tatters with their hands held out and the Devil peeking over their shoulders."

"And sometimes it's Lucifer himself who comes knocking all dressed in fine clothes and smelling sweet."

That won a smile out of the old woman. And nodding to Vin, she said, "You see any clothes on him that aren't tatters?"

It was Henricks turn to sigh, defeat conceded as he'd known all along

he would be obliged to do. But his concession was not to be a gracious one, his expression one of glum resignation as he sourly mumbled: "Give me the Devil any day over a woman bound to have her way." And stepping back through the door he added, "I'll be right outside if you need me." Then with a glared warning to Vin, he pulled the door shut behind him. Mrs. Bunch simply stood once he'd gone, looking down on the one looking up. And with another sigh, she said, "Seems to me, son, that you and trouble have spent far too much time knocking heads together of late. And I figure you must have a mighty powerful headache 'long about now." Vin only continued to look up at her, waiting. And moving closer, her hands going to the back of the chair still set a few feet in front of him, she added, "I'm thinking trouble's got a harder head than you, so maybe it would be a good idea if you were to learn to sidestep it at least every once in a while."

Too weary from gathering his thoughts to gather words as well, Vin only frowned, his arms shifting in the cloth binding them to his side, sure that if he could only get clear of it he could get clear of all that held him back as well.

It was then Mrs. Bunch's turn to frown, her eyes on the strait jacket as she said, "I do hope Dr. Creed knows what he's doing turning you over to Reverend Smith like this. Not that I mean any disrespect to either of them, you understand -- the good Lord knows I'm not anywhere near as smart as either of them and couldn't find my way around the hen house with the rooster leading me. But it does seem odd him taking to the man like he has and him not even a doctor but a man of God. Although the Reverend does have a powerful way about him -- and not just when he's standing behind a pulpit either. So I suppose it's not too surprising that he was able to convince the doctor to let him try out his theories." Her hands turned restless upon the chair back and her frown deepened. "But still, I hope he knows what he's doing."

Vin's hands balled into fists inside the strait jacket, words gathering now to denounce Bliss, to put an end to his game. But to do so would be to close the only sure trail out of that place -- and that he was not yet prepared to do. Not until he could find another to set in its place. So he forced his hands open, forced the words gathered back into the shadows. And searching out then a trail of his own choosing, he gathered other words, fighting against the restraints and letting all the desperation held so far back sound in his voice as he roughly said, "Get this off?"

The hands on the chair back took tight hold. And for a moment Mrs. Bunch held her breath, daring to consider the request, her heart rushing to a reply her mind refused to consider. Before she could do more than draw in a breath though, the door swung open and Henricks stuck his head inside the cell.

"Dinner's here, Mrs. B.," he warned. "Kitchen staff's banging on the

door for me to go fetch the cart in. So you'd best come on out of there now."

She nodded, not turning away from Vin, who looked at her still with all the hope he would allow himself in his eyes. "Can't you take that jacket off him?" she asked. "He's calm enough now, so surely it's no longer necessary."

Henricks shook his head. "It's Reverend Smith's orders. And it's not worth my job to go against them." He glared at Vin again and added, "And if you don't mind my saying so, ma'am, it's not worth your job to be getting so involved with the likes of this one. He's trouble on the hoof and he'll trample you for sure if you don't watch out."

Vin raised his chin at that, pride mixing with defiance in that gesture. And seeing that, Mrs. Bunch gave another sigh and a warning of her own, softly saying: "You remember what I said, Mr. Tanner, and don't go locking horns with trouble again. You do just what the Reverend tells you to do and you'll be out of here in no time. And if you need anything, you let Mr. Henricks here know and I'll see what I can do. All right?"

She didn't wait for a reply, knowing by the tilt of Vin's chin that one wouldn't be forthcoming. Instead, she nodded her head and added, "I know it seems like things are never going to get better, but life has a way of working for the good in the end. You just have to hold out for it. Like the Good Book says: Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. So what you're going through now is the night. And no matter how dark it seems, morning will come. You just have to believe that."

She gave a brief smile then, but there was too much of hope in it, too many memories of kindness lost to him for Vin to risk believing in it. And taking care to maintain his balance restored, he turned away from that hope held out as from a trap laid. Then with one last sigh and a rustling of her dress, Mrs. Bunch was gone.

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Vin rested then, head back and eyes closed, trying hard not to think, not to allow his mind to wander into areas best left untrodden for fear of too many traps laid and too weary of mind to search out a trail other than the one already laid out for him. Then the key grated in the cell door lock again and he opened his eyes to watch as Henricks reappeared, dinner in one hand and a chair in the other. And thumping the chair down at a right angle to the other already there, he glared at Vin and growled, "You want to eat, set your carcass down in that chair and don't give me any trouble."

Vin shot a look to the door left open, the key still in the lock, the other keys dangling from the ring. Then pulling his legs beneath him, he pushed himself up, most of the weight borne on his right leg and keeping tightly to the corner for balance. And when he was up and had himself centered, he turned around, face to the wall, waiting for Henricks to

loose the strait jacket so that he could eat.

"Forget it, Tanner," Henricks snapped out. "That thing's not coming off for anything -- not 'til the Reverend gives the okay. Not for meals. Not for anything. You want to eat, someone feeds you. You hear nature calling and someone is going to get as familiar with you as your mamma ever was. So set yourself down in that chair and let's get this over with."

Vin spun slowly around, a frown in place, fear skittering among the shadows but his chin up in defiance of it.

Unimpressed, Henricks toed the chair, unbalancing it for a moment so that it threatened to topple before clattering back into place. "Sit," he then commanded again. "Or go hungry." And when Vin only raised his chin higher in reply, Henricks shrugged. "Makes it easy on me," he said.

Then moving back to the door, plate still in hand, he stepped through it and back, this time holding a chamber pot in place of the laden plate.

"You hear nature calling your name," he warned, "now's the time to answer it. You leave it 'til the night shift comes on and you might find one or two of them will get a mite more familiar with you than your mamma ever did. So speak now or hold your... tongue... 'til morning."

Hands clenching into fists inside his bindings, anger mixing now with the fear of a wild thing left helpless, Vin set his jaw in stubborn lines, his eyes flashing a warning against thinking him too easy a prey. Again Henricks shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then stepping back through the door, he slammed it shut behind him.

Vin watched him go, waiting only for the lock to turn before sliding back down onto the floor, wedging himself once more into the corner to again take stock.

His leg throbbed, his head hurt, and breakfast was too many hours in the past and away for comfort. And after hours in their bindings, his arms were starting to ache. Visions and dreams and words spoken and left unsaid echoed in his mind. Promises made and hopes held out taunted him. He was trapped and bound and alone, teetering still on that thin edge. And his one hope of escaping the abyss at his feet was a trail shrouded in the same darkness as waited below, a crow perched on the rocks high above it with that dark in its eyes.

One trail leading either to salvation or destruction. One trail out of that place.

His one hope, yet he turned away from it, willing to risk that thin edge still, determined on a trail of his own blazing, one leading away from the dark.

It was little enough to risk his balance on, little enough on which to chance that long drop at his feet. Not on hope did he then rely but on a stillness within, on that patience in him to wait out both hunted and hunter -- and chance itself. So he settled himself to once again wait, shutting his eyes tight, closing himself off to pain and discomfort, to

all that was and all that had never been or that ever would be, keeping to the safety of shadows. It was easier thus to balance on the thin edge on which he was perched, nothing to distract him from the all important task of keeping his head up and his balance maintained, that stillness of body as well as of mind, no movement to call attention to himself. And after a time, those shadows within found counterparts without, true darkness gathering as the light through the barred window in the door to his cell dimmed.

Escape came to him then in sleep.

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Release, however, proved far too temporary, visions swirling in the dark: choices made and not yet made, trails behind and ahead -- and a crow soaring above it all. And as the familiar shape called to him, he turned his gaze to it -- and away from the abyss growing wide at his feet, the thin edge on which he balanced falling away and chains holding him in place, a dark-enshrouded trail a leap away onto solid ground and what lay behind him beyond range of his vision. Then down swooped the dark bird, a golden object falling from its grasp, catching the light as it tumbled through the air.

Mesmerized, he followed its shining path, the dark form above forgotten as the golden object came to earth, settling on the edge of the abyss between his feet.

For long moments he stood staring at it, not daring to trust in its shape: a gold key he knew without a doubt would unlock the chains keeping him in precarious balance on the edge of annihilation. Then the ground beneath him began to give way, pieces of it falling into the abyss -- and the fear held back escaped his hold on it, screaming at him to grab at whatever would save him. And bending down with chains rattling, he scooped up the key and set it in the locks, fingers fumbling in his panic. Then, as those bindings gave way, as the ground beneath him fell into the abyss, he made a desperate leap for the trail stretching out before him with its promise of solid footing.

He landed hard, falling forward onto smooth rock, grateful for the solid feel of it beneath him, face pressed against it and fingers trying to dig a hold in it. Then, as his panicked breathing eased, a whisper of wings sounded. And daring to raise his head, he watched as the crow settled onto the ground before him, head cocked and dark eyes filled with a knowing that mocked him.

Then the darkness closed in.

In a flash of terror, he awoke, heart pounding at the choice made, eyes opening wide to darkness still to find himself again balanced precariously, with arms bound, on the edge of annihilation.

He fought then, struggling to break free, to loose all that bound him to that thin edge, a terror in him that he would fall into the abyss and be swallowed by the darkness awaiting him there -- and an equal fear

that he would remain forever in chains, unable to step back or move forward. But though he battered and bruised himself against the brick walls to either side of him, though he clawed at the cloth keeping him prisoner and contorted within it, his bindings remained firmly in place. Wails drifted in through the barred window of his cell then, echoing those rising within, only the shortness of his panting breath holding them back. Then at last, after a time uncounted, exhaustion took over from the fear and he slipped back into the darkness of sleep -- and the visions awaiting him there.

~ CHAPTER TWENTY ~

He awoke with the night's dark visions entrenched, with head pounding still, and aware of bruises and sore muscles he hadn't noticed the day before, that fall down the stairs having apparently been as thorough as it had been short. Instinctively he made to rub at eyes that felt gritty with restless sleep, only to be forcefully reminded of the bindings keeping his arms in place. And finding himself unable to move, he froze, a wild thing's response to entrapment, the enemy sought out before he dared risk giving himself away by struggling against his bonds. Opening his eyes then, he took in the cell bare of all but the two chairs, the dim half-light of morning to come revealing nothing he need fear. Nothing in the shadows without, at least. Within stirred a fear of that long known and never acknowledged, given new life in that place. He could feel it poised in the shadows, like a wild thing crouched in a hole into which it had fallen, no escape but up and out in one scrambling leap, that stillness but a gathering of strength to make the attempt. He moved then to cover that opening, to trap the fear within its dark hole. And pushing awkwardly up from the floor, his wounded leg more stiff now than hurting, he paced the length of his cell and back, that movement at least free of any restraint but walls too closely set together and impossible to circumvent. Solid. Immovable. There. And holding him in place.

His breathing grew ragged then, the air in the small cell seeming to be slowly used up with each breath he took, the fear threatening to escape his hold on it. And stopping, he closed his eyes, forcing his mind away from the walls without and the fear within, from the bindings holding his arms captive, from the aching of his bruised body and of all that he had lost and might never find again. He then expanded his lungs to their fullest, taking air in, holding it for a long moment before slowly releasing it, willing tense muscles to relax, conjuring in his mind an open space, nothing but green stretching endlessly below and open sky above. And after a few minutes, he was almost able to forget the closeness of the cell walls, could at least trust in the air around him not to give out.

He moved then, deliberately seeking out what he fought to escape, as if he could thereby deny its power over him. And stepping back to the wall

with eyes now open, he pressed against the solid brick, taking in the coolness of it through his shirt as he slid along it to one corner, setting his mind to a belief that the walls were not prison but protection. Once there, he slid down to rest again on the floor, trying to keep both mind and body still, gathering strength.

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That stillness that had always been both protection and weapon gradually found if barely held onto, he then became aware of sounds filtering in through the barred opening in the cell door. The changing of the guard, he suspected, the sun now risen if not yet fully evidenced by the meager light striving to banish the night's gloom. And soon the day would begin again.

Moving once more within his bindings at the thought of what was to come, his hands tightened into fists and he set his mind to a consideration of the moves ahead. Balance regained if fragile yet, he was determined to beat Bliss at his own game, the rules of it long known and the playing of it familiar. But no sooner did he consider a move than his mind drifted away from it, drawn to a succession of thoughts and visions, brushing against them in slow procession without pattern or logic. And no sooner did he remember the task on which he was supposed to be set than he'd wander away from it again.

Once more he felt walls closing in on him. This time though the barriers were within, a constriction of cluttered pathways through his mind, no clear trail to be found there. It was as if he were lost in some maze of canyons with walls too high to scale, the sky barely glimpsed above, ground hard beneath his feet and no sign indicating the path he need take, the trail itself sometimes lost in a confusion of rockslides blocking the way. He couldn't see the sun to gauge its direction. Couldn't judge by shadows, for they filled the canyon to its highest point. Couldn't map the maze out, for nothing looked familiar, even while strangely known.

Again that fear within sought escape. And in that moment he longed to be able to climb onto his horse and ride out into the desert, away from towns and people and the tangled mess too near an association with both could make of his life. If he could just drift away bodily as he did mentally, he felt sure his mind would clear, would come into that focus on which he'd always depended. And then he could consider the trail ahead and the traps laid, could maneuver around them with ease. But until he could manage that, he would have to either stall the game set or find some way around it.

His maneuverability, however, soon became much more limited when the door to his cell opened some time later and not Henricks but Martin stepped through it.

"Get on your feet, Pig Boy," the keeper growled. And holding up a chamber pot in one hand, he added, "Time to muck out the sty."

Vin made no move to do as commanded, only sat glaring his refusal. Martin glared right back. "This ain't no more fun for me, Pig Boy, than it is for you. But it's a hell of a lot easier than having to clean both you and your clothes up. So get on them feet. Now."

He marched into the room, chamber pot dangling from one hand and glare firmly in place, coming to a stop three feet in front of Vin, who looked beyond him to the door left open.

"Now, you ain't dumb enough to try anything that stupid, are you?"

Martin growled, noting the direction of his gaze. Then with a jeering laugh, he added, "What am I saying? Of course you're that dumb!"

With a snort he then closed the distance between them, reaching down to fist his free hand into the strait jacket, hauling Vin up roughly and slamming him back into the wall, muttering as he did: "Smith ain't paying me nowheres near enough for this. And Creed didn't hire me to wetnurse no damn dummies. So don't even think of giving me no trouble or I'll tie you into knots so tight you'll be leaking out your ears."

After the first surprise, Vin ignored the warning given, instinctively struggling in Martin's grasp, twisting and growling a warning of his own. But even as he did so, he knew that he would give in, would rather that than the alternative. So when Martin slammed him more forcefully into the wall, he went still. And shifting his gaze to a distance, he allowed Martin to attend to his needs, his mind curling away from the keeper's touch.

To his relief -- and surprise -- Martin made short work of the task, his movements hurried and none too gentle, and the nose wrinkling in distaste explaining the absence of his usual delight in inflicting pain or humiliation. Still, though, Vin felt more dirtied than if he had refused the keeper's help and allowed nature to take its inevitable course. He willed his mind to drift then, away from the unwelcome touch, to shut it off from the fear scrabbling now for release -- a wild thing all too aware of its helplessness. But it took only a hard shove from Martin to bring him back to his present circumstances. And barely managing to keep his balance, he stumbled forward and against one of the chairs Henricks had brought into his cell the day before.

"Sit!" Martin snapped out. And waiting only until Vin had reluctantly done so, he headed for the cell's open door, chamber pot held now at arm's length before him, more grumbling promising a hard time to come. He was almost instantly back, returning with a bowl in hand this time in place of the chamber pot. And moving to the second chair, he pulled it close to the one in which Vin waited, glare firmly set in place, and thumped himself into it.

"Don't know what the hell Smith wants with you," he grumbled as he took up the spoon resting in the bowl and dug it into the porridge there.

"Man like him is smart enough to get whatever he wants in life and with none the wiser for it. So what could a dummy like you have that he wants

or needs?"

He thrust the porridge-laden spoon up and forward, Vin forcing his mouth open to accept it, his last meal twenty-four hours in the past and all his strength needed for the game ahead.

"All that talk about you being a hunter, having some kind of wild in you." Martin snorted. "Hell, a dummy like you would be doing good to find his head to scratch it much less go after a man with brains." He jabbed the spoon into Vin's open mouth, jerking it back out again as his lips closed around it. Then scooping more of the porridge up, he added, "At least he got the wild part right." He thrust the spoon back into Vin's mouth. "You're dumb as any animal and twice as wild. But what good either of those are to a man like Smith beats me." He grinned then. And pulling the spoon back out of Vin's mouth, he added, "Them friends of yours must be smarter though. From what Smith says, they got rid of you quick enough."

Vin went still, his thoughts drifting unbidden and unwanted to the trial and its aftermath, to promises made and trust broken. And jaws clenching tight, he shut his mind to it, turned his head from it, empty gaze shifting to the brick of his prison.

Martin shrugged. "You don't want no more, it's fine by me."

He stood then, Vin's nearly untouched breakfast in hand, and moved to the cell door, slipping through it and back again, this time a leather strap in his hold. Vin, however, had his head turned still so was unaware of it until Martin looped it around his chest. He then bolted instantly out of the chair and to the wall, his back to it and his breath coming fast, preparing for battle.

Martin glowered at him, a hint of satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

"Henricks don't know what a favor Smith did him last night setting them boys of his on to him like he done. Hell, all he got out of it was some broken ribs and a few dollars gone missing. Could have had him a dummy to mess with instead." He twirled the leather strap, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards. "Guess some of us are more lucky than others."

Vin eyed him warily, his gaze darting past him to the door open behind him, then back again.

Martin only grinned. "You really are dumb, Pig Boy. You know that? Ain't no way you're getting out of here. Not out of this room. Not out of this nuthouse." He struck out then with the strap, the buckled end hitting Vin on one arm. "So get on back into that chair like a good pig or I'll thrash you into it."

He snapped out the strap again, hitting Vin this time on his wounded leg, Vin turning with a gasp into the wall in an effort to shield the leg from further harm. Then the buckles hit again, this time on his back.

"In the chair, dummy," Martin snapped out.

Allowing Vin no chance to do as commanded, the leather strap hit out again and again, Vin turning and twisting away from it until finally with

a growl he launched himself at the keeper, head down to butt into his midriff. And unable to catch his balance or stop his forward motion as Martin stumbled back, he fell headlong to the floor, the wind knocked out of him as he hit, another set of bruises added to the growing list. The leather strap whipped out again before he could remember how to breathe, the blows raining hard, Martin grunting with the force of his exertions. And when Vin was at last able to take in air, he tried rolling away, tried pulling his legs up under him to push himself up. But the keeper was on him then, boots slamming into his arm-wrapped midsection, and he tried instead to curl into a ball, legs coming up to add protection to ribs and belly.

It was a sign of surrender, but Martin ignored it, moving deliberately around him, boots hitting where they'd do the most damage -- and unseen. Then a soft voice spoke from the doorway, the words unhurried but the tone that of a man who had no need to raise his voice to be heard -- and obeyed.

"That will be sufficient," Bliss commanded.

Martin stopped. And looking over one shoulder to the man standing in the doorway, unbound hand balanced on the golden lion's head atop his cane, he growled, "Pig Boy's still got too damned much fight in him. Best you let me knock it out of him."

Bliss stared back at the defiant keeper with dark eyes. "I do not wish that wild in him destroyed -- merely harnessed. And I assure you, there are far subtler ways of accomplishing that task. So please assist Mr. Tanner into a chair and leave us."

The keeper drew his brow down into a frown, his tone surly as he said: "The Doc wants him shaved." He turned to glare at Vin, whose own gaze was fixed on Bliss. Then, with another snort, he added, "He reckons what looks like a man will act like one."

Bliss let out a sigh, the sound that of a man suffering a fool and none too gladly. "A wolf shorn of his fur will have his teeth still," he softly pointed out. "But if such will keep the good doctor happy, then by all means, shear away."

Martin took hold of Vin at that, hauling him up and slamming him down into one of the chairs with a warning growl. And that time Vin remained still while the strap was set across his chest and buckled in place. As Martin then went to collect the shaving cart, he turned his face to the wall, his gaze fixed on the shadow cast there, the dark shape a pale imitation of the darker form behind him standing still and watchful. And when Martin returned, he suffered without protest the keeper's hand fisting into his hair, his head pulled back and held while the shaving brush was set to face and throat.

It was Bliss, however, who took up the razor, waving Martin off with it when Vin had been fully lathered. And when the keeper loosed his hold on him, the tracker fought to keep his gaze to the wall, visions

flashing of another silver blade.

"I'm sure you have other duties to which you need attend," Bliss said by way of dismissal to the keeper. "I'll let you know when I have need of you again."

Martin gave one last glare to Vin, then moved away, only to stop when Bliss softly added, "And do remember what I told you, Martin -- I want Mr. Tanner left in one piece. He is of no use to me otherwise." He paused then, his back to the keeper still, his gaze on the razor turning in his free hand. Then almost as an afterthought, he added, "And if Mr. Tanner is of no use to me, then neither shall you be."

Martin took a step back, then another, his voice tight as he said, "I'll remember."

He hurried through the door then, pulling it to behind him, the key turning in the lock. And once the sound of his footsteps hurrying away faded, Bliss moved to stand at Vin's back, his gaze still on the razor as he softly said, "It pains me to see one so wild at the mercy of such sheep. Martin and his ilk should tremble at your passing, should run in terror before you. Instead they bind you in their chains and spit on your prostrate form."

His gaze to the wall still, all that was in Vin was focused on the one behind, keeping back with difficulty the fear that screamed at him to run, to flee before the hound, his hiding place discovered.

Bliss sighed. "I suppose though that you have become too used to it, having given yourself freely already to the mercy of Mr. Larabee and his forsaken sheep."

He snaked his arm around Vin then, bringing the razor to his throat, Vin's head going up and back instinctively to escape the sharp blade. "Too long, boy, have you abased yourself," Bliss continued, the razor held still at Vin's throat, his head down so that he spoke softly into his captive's ear. "And for what? For the sake of a friendship that has done you more harm than that which any enemy could devise? In hopes of a protection from which you now find yourself requiring protection? So that you might walk free among sheep who would trample you into the dirt?"

The razor held fast, but still Vin pulled away from it, his head pressing into Bliss at his back, their breaths mingling, Bliss' slow and easy, Vin's hard and fast.

"You gave up all that you are and gained nothing in return," Bliss pointed out. "Yet still you cling to the very sheep that sent you here, that keep you here, that will see that you die here wrapped in their chains. They should fear you. Instead they despise you. And yet you refuse the freedom I offer you. Why? Do you hold out some false hope that if you allow them to shear you of more than those locks of yours that you will be able to assume a sheep's guise, that they will then allow you into their fold? Do you truly believe that they will ever stop fearing

you, will ever trust that wild in you? And do you truly believe that you will ever be able to do so either?"

Vin closed his eyes, as if he could thereby shut himself off from Bliss' words. But he was trapped by too many bonds, not the least of which was that fear Bliss would have him face.

"Most men fear what they do not understand," Bliss continued. "They fear those things that have no place in their own lives. Yet it is that very understanding that frightens you. It is all that is in you from which you seek escape, by denying its very existence. Yet you are who you are, boy. And there is no escaping it. So why not embrace it instead? Why not glory in it?"

The razor moved then, gliding slowly up Vin's throat.

"Think back to that very first time you held the power of life and death in your hands. Consider the surprise you felt at discovering the ease with which you could choose between them. A man in your sights alive one minute and bereft of life in the next. What God gave, you took away. A mere mortal daring to name himself equal to the most powerful of beings, to challenge that very power."

The razor was removed, the lather rinsed away in the basin provided. Then back it went, the edge resting for a moment at the base of Vin's throat, his life in Bliss' hands, only a small bit of pressure needed to take it from him, a side to side motion and the choice would be made. Then Bliss' voice was hissing in his ear again.

"Only a fool would turn away from such power, boy. Only one bereft of all sense would choose to live captive to sheep so that he might thereby escape the wild in him. And despite all opinions to the contrary, I know you are neither fool nor idiot. So have done with this foolish resistance and take your rightful place in the wild."

The razor moved again, the touch of it against Vin's skin somehow loving as it slid upwards, Bliss' breath in his ear that of a lover wooing him to some pleasure that would bind them into an unholy alliance.

"I will have you, boy, in the end. Your power will be mine, and you will give it willingly. And you know that as well as I. So resist, if you will, for a time. It will only make the victory that much sweeter."

Again the razor slid up Vin's throat and he closed his eyes more tightly shut against it -- and against the abyss yawning at his feet.

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Chapter warning: Sensitive readers might want to skip or skim that section set off by scene breaks (*~*~*) near the end of the following chapter.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE ~

It was another three days before Bliss tired of the game, three days in which Vin remained bound by the strait jacket and subject to Martin's dubious ministrations. But not again did the keeper lay violent hands on

him, having to make do instead with a constant stream of verbal abuse that went nearly unnoticed when set against Bliss' mental manipulations. And so adept was Bliss at the game being played that Vin began to feel the weight of those words settling on him, like lead weights lining the cloth binding him, forcing breath and the hope of some other trail to be found out of him. Yet still he resisted Bliss' offer of escape, that defiance all that held the fear at bay, all that kept him from giving in to the wild need tearing in him to be free of walls and chains and the darkness waiting.

For three days more Bliss hissed in his ear, reminding him of too much he'd hoped to leave behind in shadows, words hitting close enough to truths long held that the dark images cast by those truths took on solid form. And try as he might to avoid traps laid, to keep his balance on the thin edge on which he perched, he was no match for Bliss' maneuverings, had never been one to fence with words, to use them against a man.

So after a time he gave up trying to keep back the shadows, instead taking refuge in them in order to escape the greater darkness.

For three days more Creed gave Bliss his head, stopping in on his rounds each morning, Mrs. Bunch at his back, her worried eyes on Vin, who steadfastly turned away from her searching gaze for fear that she would draw him back out of the shadows that were his only protection. No, the light was not for one such as he, too long a stay there working against that night vision that enabled him to move freely about in the shadows. Timothy, too, put in an appearance each day, each time at the barred window to his cell, Martin allowing him no further. And him too Vin ignored, that which was of no help a hindrance to him.

Three days more of holding out and at the end of it Bliss stood before the chair in which Vin had been set, resting his unbound hand on his cane as he said, "However stimulating these little sessions of ours have been, Mr. Tanner, I must admit that I have found them somewhat less than satisfying. A wolf chained has limited appeal. And after a time the stink of sheep becomes unbearable. So I have arranged a means by which I might satisfy that urge you have so assiduously sought to deny."

Vin shifted his gaze from the wall to Bliss, his eyes narrowing, his expression tightening into wariness, uncertain as to which way he would now be called upon to move.

He had not long to wait, Bliss' gaze steady as he said, "Again you have a choice laid before you, Mr. Tanner: to remain in chains or to be set free of them. To remain among the sheep or to assume your rightful place among your own kind. To continue to deny what lies within you or to make full and profitable use of it."

Vin turned his head away in reply, his gaze going back to the brick wall of his prison, but his attention all for the one who alone had offered him a way out of that place.

Bliss thumped his cane on the stone floor, impatient with such foolish defiance. "Come, boy," he snapped out. "You know as well as do I what your choice will ultimately have to be. You can continue to deny what lies within, to claim righteousness in the hopes that it will somehow in the end prove enough to save you from yourself. But righteousness will not save you here. You may shine bright with the very light of Heaven, but still you will be branded an idiot, still your freedom will be forfeit. You will be kept in chains until such a time as sheep like Creed, like Nathan Jackson and Chris Larabee, deem you worthy of their company. Indeed, until they deem you worthy of your own company, free of their constraints. If such should, in fact, ever come to pass."

Still Vin kept his head turned, his jaw clenched tight at hearing his fears expressed, his hands within the strait jacket bunching into fists in an effort to hold back the panic building, waiting for Bliss to finish his move.

Bliss, however, was in no hurry. "Did I not know you better, Mr. Tanner, I would think the sheep correct in their assessment of you, for it would seem the height of folly to hold back from the chance offered to escape this place." He paused then, that familiar dark knowledge shining in his eyes. Then, cocking his head, he added, "But I do know you, boy. I know that obstinate determination to win at all costs, to forge your own path in life free of another's choosing. So while you may give yourself freely into another's keeping, let any man attempt to bend you to his will and you will fight against that domination with all that is in you. It's one of the things I admire most in you.

"But while such determination is admirable, it serves in this case to keep you from the truth you must accept if you are ever to take your rightful place in the world. And I fear that any further effort on my part to help you arrive at that truth will serve only to drive you further from it. So I will withdraw from the field of battle and give you a week in which to come to the realization that you have but one choice and one choice only."

Vin continued to keep his head turned, sitting rigid in his chair as Bliss limped away then rapped his cane on the cell door for his release. And when the door squeaked open and clanged shut, when the key had turned in the lock, when the thumping of Bliss' cane on the stone floor without faded, he slowly rose and moved back to his corner, sliding down the brick to sit with eyes closed and hands still fisted tight.

He should have felt some victory at the move, should have taken pride in outlasting Bliss' maneuverings. But still the man was free to continue as he had, too many dead at his hands and more apparently soon to come. And nothing that Vin had done or could do would change that. Nonetheless, an urge of his own rose in him, a need to give warning. Yet the only ones who might take heed were days away and far beyond his reach -- and had already turned their backs on him. On no one else could he

depend. And on no one else would he.

Unable then to check Bliss' latest move, he sat back to plan his response to it, all possible paths out of that place considered, escape surely to be had within one week's time. And if not....

He refused to consider the possibility, determined to beat Bliss at his own game. And beat him he would once he'd regained what passed for freedom in that place. The hunted would then become the hunter again. He smiled at that vision of a crow trapped beneath a wolf's paw.

That vision soon faded, however, when he became aware of the passage of time and no keeper came to return him to his ward. Surely Bliss had had time enough to confess his failure to Creed. And surely Creed would then have no reason to keep him there.

The wait turned uneasy, fear stirring that this was but another unforeseen twist in the game. Then Martin at last arrived and Vin had only to note the sly grin on the man's face to be sure that Bliss had an ace of some kind up his sleeve which was now about to be played.

And so it was to his surprise when Martin spoke, saying, "On your feet, Pig Boy. Time to set them trotters of yours free."

Vin hesitated a moment, warily eyeing that grin still in place. But if some move was about to be played, it would be to his advantage to meet it with his arms unbound. So he pushed up, keeping to his corner.

"Now turn around," Martin commanded.

Another hesitation, then Vin turned slowly to the wall, shoulders tensed against an attack. Yet when Martin moved in behind him, he did no more than he'd said, loosening the ties on the strait jacket before stepping back again. He then watched without comment while Vin spun around and shrugged off his bindings.

"Toss it here," Martin directed when he'd freed himself. And when Vin had done so, the keeper added, "Now wait right there."

He turned then and strode out of the cell, the door remaining open behind him. Vin assumed he'd gone to collect the leg irons for his journey back to his ward. But when he returned, it was a plate laden with food he carried.

Vin frowned at that and Martin's grin turned more sly still. But he said only, "You ain't going nowheres tonight, Pig Boy. So you might as well hunker on back down and get comfortable." He laid the plate on the floor. "Enjoy your slops."

And with a laugh he was back out the door, closing it behind him that time and locking it.

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Martin gave no hint as to what the next move would be when he returned for the plate, only wished Vin a good night with a mocking laugh as he once again departed. And though he sat worrying at what would come until the light slowly gave way to the night shadows, Vin could make no sense of the trail laid, could not discern the path it might take. Neither

could he plan his own move in response. So at last he gave in to the headache that was the sole result of his mental struggle and curled up on the stone floor to drift into a restless sleep.

Before long, visions came to him of things past and to come, a crow flitting through his dreams, flapping soundlessly out of the moonless night and into deep shadows, Vin unable to track its flight and stumbling in the darkness after it.

He had no idea how long he searched for it before a sound jarred him awake, his restless mind alert to dangers both real and imagined. And lying still, he searched out the source of that danger, sifting through the shadows in the cell before the sound repeated. His gaze went then to the door, a key scraping in its lock warning of some move about to be played. He was instantly up, on his feet with his back to the wall, his hands fisting and unfisting at his sides. Then the door swung slowly open, a pale ribbon of light chasing shadows about the room. And as the dark threatened to give way to the widening spill of light, a dark form moved into the doorway, casting the room once more into near darkness. Bliss, Vin thought, come to renew the game. Then his midnight visitor raised the lantern dangling from one hand, and he could see easily enough in the play of light and shadow on the man's face that it was not Bliss standing there watching him, but one of the night attendants. Steck. He'd never had dealings with him -- for which he was grateful. His size or perhaps an inch shorter, Steck nonetheless outweighed him by a good thirty pounds. And much of that was muscle. Muscle he seemed to take special delight in putting to good use, as the inmate in the cell next to his could no doubt attest, his wails of fear the previous night having turned to howls of pain after the keeper disappeared into his cell for a time.

Steck smiled at him, his tongue darting out to wet his lips before he casually said, "Quiet night, Tanner. No one howling at the moon or arguing with himself at the top of his lungs. All that quiet, a man can start to feeling a mite lonely. Don't you think?"

Ignoring the shiver that went up his spine, Vin slid a few inches to the side, away from the open door, hoping to draw the keeper after him, his gaze going to the keys held loosely in the hand not holding the lantern.

"Cooped up like you've been all this time by your lonesome," Steck continued, "you must be hungering for some company."

Vin slid another few inches away, the movement more involuntary than planned, his hands pressed against the brick at his back, his knees bending, his breath coming fast.

Steck chuffed out a breath. "Martin said you weren't much for talking. But that's okay. There's other ways the two of us can pass the time." He backed up then and stooped down to set the lantern onto the floor in the near corner, his gaze never leaving Vin. And moving back to the

door, he reached out to swing it shut, half turning as he raised the key to the lock.

Taking advantage of that momentary distraction, Vin flung himself across the room, barreling into Steck before he could turn to meet the attack, one arm striking out, his fist connecting with the keeper's jaw. There was too little force behind the blow, however, Vin's arms weakened by days of inactivity. So Steck only stumbled back, his balance upset but not lost. And in that stumbling he kicked the lantern set on the floor, sending it crashing into the wall and shattering, oil spilling and bursting into flames.

Vin froze at the sight, visions of another such fire dancing in his mind as did the shadows on the wall, blinding him to all else. And before he could separate the flames of vision from those burning bright in his cell, Steck was on him, shoving him back and into the wall beside the closed door, one arm pressed hard against his neck and threatening to cut off his air.

"Now, there's no need to get so riled," Steck panted, grinning. "If you want to get physical, all you have to do is say so."

He pressed himself against Vin at that, his grin fading into a look of anticipated pleasure. And stifling a gag reflex, Vin responded with an arch of his back, pushing hard with both hands against the keeper's chest as he did so. Then relaxing his spine, he brought a knee up into the space created, ramming it hard into Steck's groin.

The keeper immediately fell away from Vin with a high-pitched screech. And as he curled into himself on the floor, Vin jumped over him and to the door, grabbing the keys out of the lock. He had no sooner pulled the door open though and stepped into the hall than he spotted a second attendant racing towards him. And waiting until the last moment, he sidestepped the onrushing keeper and pushed him hard into the wall, content when the man slid down it to the floor. He then ran to the door set at the end of the hall, fumbling a key into his hand and setting it into the lock. When it didn't fit, he tried another and then another, his hands clumsy in his haste, his breath turning frantic. Then the keeper was up and shouting, and an answering shout came from beyond the door at which Vin stood.

He gave it up then, turning to run towards the opposite end of the hall where a second door was set, barreling once more into the unsteady keeper as he went and knocking him back down to the floor. But pounding feet warned that avenue of escape had been closed as well. And turning back he sought out some other means of escape, his gaze darting from closed door to closed door on one side of the hall and the barred windows set in the wall on the other side, then to the keeper climbing back to his feet again.

With nowhere else to go, Vin pressed against the wall beside the door, waiting as voices were raised in question on the other side of that

barrier, as a key was set into the lock and turned, and as the door swung outward. And waiting no longer, he exploded off the wall and into the door, pushing hard against it, knocking one attendant back into the other, the sound of pounding feet at his back warning that the second keeper was back in action. He was through the doorway then, twisting to avoid the keepers tangling there, only to have an arm caught. And spinning, he hit out blindly, pulling against that hold on him.

It wasn't enough, for the second keeper tackled him before he could break free, hurtling him into the other attendants, the four of them going down in a tangle of arms and legs, with Vin somehow ending up at the bottom of the heap. And when he tried to fight his way clear, an arm swung, a fist hitting hard against his jaw and slamming his head into the stone floor, the twin blows enough to render him unconscious.

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It was still dark when he awoke, stone cold against his face giving warning that he was back in his cell. And opening his eyes to confirm it, he took in the expected surroundings and groaned, as much from frustration at yet another failed escape attempt as from the pain of new bruises and the healing wound in his thigh. And crawling back into his corner, he sat waiting for the next move in the game, which came hours later with the changing of the guards.

As expected, Martin put in an appearance first thing, his sly grin in place as he unlocked the door and moved into the room, keys on their ring swinging tauntingly. "Heard you had you some fun last night," he jeered. "Too bad I missed it."

Vin eyed him blankly for a moment, then turned his head away.

"You ain't never going to learn, are you, boy?" Martin continued.

"There's only one way out of here, like it or not. And the sooner you start using that empty head of yours for something more than giving root to that rat's nest you're using for hair, the better off you'll be. So you just let me know when you're ready to give in. And if you say it nice enough, I might even pass that message along to the good ol' Rev. In the meantime though, I wouldn't get too comfortable. The Doc will be here soon and I'm betting he'll have big plans for you."

He laughed, giving the keys he held another twirl. Then stepping back through the doorway, he closed the door and locked it. And sticking his face up to the grilled opening there, he added, "By the way, I hear there's an opening in Ward D."

And with another laugh and a jingling of his keys, he moved off.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO ~

"A worthy experiment to be sure," Dr. Creed announced later that morning to those assembled in Vin's small cell, his gaze on the one standing defiant in his corner but his words aimed at no one in particular. "I fear, however, that, despite Reverend Smith's protestations to the

contrary, this particular subject was ill chosen."

Martin snorted. "Tanner ain't been nothing but trouble since he got here. A man can't hardly turn his back without him jumping on it. And I say it's about time something was done."

Vin stirred at that, bracing his bare feet so that he pressed hard into the wall at his back, his hands flattening against it, his gaze shifting warily from man to man before him and then to the one standing, as always, behind the doctor.

Mrs. Bunch stood a little straighter beneath that look. And clutching her ever-present notebook to her breast, she dared a protest. "But, Doctor! It's only been a few days. Surely you can give it more time?"

"To what purpose?" Creed shot a look of annoyance over his shoulder.

"So that yet another employee of this asylum can be attacked and perhaps grievously injured?"

"It ain't from any want of him trying that it ain't happened yet,"

Martin added. "He's like them wild animals that don't quit once they get a taste for killing. Heard tell of wolves going plumb loco and killing off whole herds of sheep just for the hell of it. And ain't nothing that can stop them but a bullet."

"Mr. Tanner is hardly an animal!"

"No?" Martin gave another snort. "He ain't no smarter than one. And he for sure acts like one. So in my book he ain't got no right to expect to be treated any better than one. And maybe we can't do to him like we'd do to a loco wolf, but we can at least lock him up good and tight so's he can't hurt folks."

Mrs. Bunch straightened to her full height and coldly said, "Indeed, sir. I'm surprised that you stop short of putting him down with a bullet to his head."

Dr. Creed raised a hand at that, mildly saying, "Mr. Martin has a point, madam. In order to enjoy the benefits of civilization, a man must exhibit a certain degree of civilized behavior. And I have seen no evidence to this point that would indicate Mr. Tanner is capable of such. In fact, all the evidence presented thus far suggests otherwise."

Vin raised his chin at that. And taking courage from that small gesture of defiance, Mrs. Bunch tried again. "I know he's had a bit of trouble adjusting --"

"A bit?" Martin jeered with another snort.

Again the point went to the attendant. "Mr. Tanner has been afforded more chances than most are given," Creed pointed out, "to the extent that he has had intense individual therapy. And as we have seen, it has made no difference. Indeed, in this particular case I fear there was never any real hope of success. Between Mr. Tanner's apparent lack of any real moral sense prior to his injury and the effects of said injury to his mental capacities, I fear we can appeal to neither his morality nor his intelligence in an effort to redirect his behavior. So it only makes

sense to apply limited resources to those patients who are not only more likely to respond but to make better use of the second chance given."

Again Martin snorted. "In other words, you figure there ain't no use in trying to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse?"

"Exactly. Although I would not have put it so crudely."

Vin's breathing came harder, his lungs taking added oxygen in to prepare for whatever was to come, a panic working in him that he could see no way out, that once again his life was subject to another man's ordering, as if he were a steer to be sold at market. He wanted to dispel such illusions, wanted to shout out that he was more than a dumb animal without reason or hopes or fears. He wanted to rail at the notion that it was somehow civilized to herd men as cattle bunched for slaughtering. Out of mind, out of sight. What couldn't be brought to order must be destroyed or hidden away. Let no man roam free, not even within his own mind.

He wanted to speak the words that would somehow save him. But even as he searched them out, he knew he would never be able to speak them, for words that had once come hard then came not at all. So he stood mute and defiant, wild in his refusal to go tamely to the slaughter.

And recognizing that wild in him, Mrs. Bunch added her defiance to his.

"You can't put a saddle on a horse that's never been broken and not expect it to buck off any man who attempts to ride it."

"No. But when you get one that breaks the bones of any man trying to tame him," Martin added with a sneer, "you don't keep putting riders up on him. You put him down. Plain and simple."

Mrs. Bunch would have offered further argument, but Creed raised an eyebrow at her and said, "The matter is settled, madam. In fact, it was never open to discussion. So if you are quite finished, please take note of Mr. Tanner's transfer to Ward D, effective immediately."

Vin's hands clenched into fists, his breath stopping for a moment before coming even harder, his eyes searching out an escape he knew didn't exist. Yet still he tried, launching himself at Martin, knocking him off his feet with one well-aimed blow. Then he was across the small cell and to the open door before Creed could do more than gape in surprise. It wasn't until he slipped out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him and turning the keys left dangling in the lock, that the stunned doctor found his voice, raising it in alarm. Martin, too, came to life then, regaining his feet and slamming against the locked door, letting out a string of curses when it refused to budge.

Vin ignored him, his attention all for the door leading out of that ward. He no sooner took a step towards it though than it swung open to admit two burly guards who stood blocking that avenue of escape. And when he turned to try for the door set at the other end of the ward, two more guards stepped out of a room down the hall, their eyes on him with no alarm evident, as if they'd been waiting for such a move.

There was no escape. Vin knew it. Knew too that there would be no other chance, that he'd be moved in chains and locked securely away. Yet there was that in him that refused to submit tamely to such a fate. So again he turned, throwing himself against the keepers blocking the doorway, hoping to unbalance them enough to slip past them. But arms reached out to grab him before he could regain his own balance and he went down with the keepers in a tumble of arms and legs. And before he could get clear, the other two keepers were on him, a fist connecting hard with his chin, a bright light flashing, only to be instantly dimmed as he slid into unconsciousness.

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A tugging at the buttons of his pants roused him. And acting on instinct, he went instantly on the defensive, eyes coming wide open and breath coming in panicked gasps as he sought to strike out -- only to discover that he was unable to move the arms stretched above his head or legs heavy with a weight pressing him into a surface barely softer than the stone floor. A mattress, he guessed as the shapes swimming in his confused mind took on human form -- two men looming over him, one holding his legs still, the other unbuttoning his pants. And behind them stood Martin, Vin's harmonica at his lips, random notes issuing from it, the keeper's eyes lighting when he saw the tracker's panicked gaze on him. Then lowering the mouth organ, he grinned and said, "Welcome to Hell, Pig Boy."

Vin blinked, the words taking a moment to form into sounds that made sense. Then shifting his wide-eyed gaze to the room in which he lay, he took a quick look around to discover unfamiliar dark walls and high barred windows -- and a herd of men lying on mattresses laid on the floor or stumbling mindlessly about, the air filled with a stench and a keening wail that sounded eerily inhuman.

Ward D.

Vin's struggles increased then, a wild need to escape that place supplanting the fear that had taken hold of him at his awakening. With a mindless desperation he sought to set himself beyond reach of walls and locks and hands holding him down. Too many times had he been at the mercy of man and fate. Too many times had he been herded down paths of another's choosing. Too many times had he been trapped with no way out. And each time he had reacted the same, that wild in him growing that much stronger, that much more dangerous -- a wolf shaped by the unrelenting hunter driving it ever deeper into the wilderness, becoming more cunning and more determined to survive with every step taken, move played out against move, dark rising against the dark, only a deeper shade holding it off

He raged against the restraints of metal cuffs tight on his wrists and the chains holding him in place, against hands pinning him with bruising force, against every harm done to him, against every wrong path down

which he'd been forced. He fought against high walls built up and doors barred against him, against all those things that had ever been taken from him or held back. He fought with all the wild in him, with all the fear and anger and with a lifetime's worth of hurt. And when the one holding his legs snapped out a curse and shifted to bring more weight to bear on him, pressing him even harder into the thin mattress on which he lay, Vin growled out threats and curses of his own, wordless sounds of fear, anger and a wild determination sounding as well.

"Hold him still, Morelle!" the man fumbling with his buttons heatedly commanded. Then contributing his own curses to the mix he added, "Why the hell didn't Creed do this himself before he sent him to us?"

Keepers, Vin realized. Keepers of the damned. And with a raging snarl, he increased his efforts to break free.

Martin eyed his futile efforts with a satisfied smile, then snorted and said, "What do you think, Ramos? The doc don't waste time on gutter trash like Pig Boy. Why get them lily white hands of his dirty when he has the likes of us to do it for him?"

"Yeah," Morelle agreed with a sneer. "Easy to keep your hands clean when you got people to take the trash out for you." He gave a snort of his own. "Must be nice to live so far upwind of the dump that you don't ever have to smell the stink."

Ramos grunted in agreement, struggling to undo the last of the buttons on Vin's pants as the tracker twisted beneath him, arching his back and rattling the chains binding him to the wall, still spitting out curses and wordless cries of panic. Then slipping that last button free, the keeper jerked the pants down past his captive's hips and lower, exposing the long slash on his thigh, the healing edges of it red still and puckered beneath the row of dark stitches.

Morelle cursed at the length of it. "Hell, how am I going to hold this nut still long enough for you to get all them stitches out?"

Vin stopped struggling then, his fears easing, eyes blinking, breath coming in heaving gasps, but his muscles nonetheless still tensed and ready, his wary gaze shifting from keeper to keeper.

When his gaze fell on Martin, the attendant dug a small pair of surgical scissors out of one pocket and tossed them to Ramos. "Don't reckon you'd like to take those to that rat's nest on top of his head after you get them stitches out, would you?"

Ramos' only reply was a particularly rude suggestion as to what Martin could do to entertain himself

Martin laughed, raising the harmonica again and blowing into it as Ramos set to work. And when Vin remained still, wide eyes wary on the one wielding the scissors as he lowered them to begin taking out the stitches, Martin cut short his impromptu concert in order to instead offer a lazy commentary.

"You're lucky, Pig Boy, that there weren't any beds open in the cage

with the real nutcases -- you know, the ones like you that are nothing more than mad dogs frothing at the mouth at just the thought of sinking their teeth into someone. But the way those animals go at it in there, there should be room for you any day now. And in the meantime, you get to hang out in here with the dummies." He grinned. "And while there ain't a one of them got brains enough to figure out how to take a man down, much less backbone enough to try it, I reckon you should feel right at home."

Vin raised his eyes then, daring to take them off Ramos to take another, more thorough, look at what was to be his home for however long it took to escape it. And again his gaze went first to brick and barred windows, then on to the line of bars set at one end of the long room, several desks on the other side of it, a matching long room behind another line of bars and filled with men beyond that. That inventory completed, he reluctantly took stock of the men abandoned to their fate in that room with him. And shifting his gaze slowly from man to man, he took in long matted hair, unwashed bodies, and tattered and stained clothing -- all marks of men who had given up all hope of fitting into a civilized society, or of men on which a civilized society had long since given up.

He looked then past the dirt and the long hair to the men beneath: some lying still on filthy and battered mattresses laid bare upon the floor like straw gathered for some wild thing's nest; some rolling back and forth on the bed that was all they could claim of the world, like a bear he had once seen pacing before the bars of its tiny cage. Others trapped in that place were moving about: some stumbling between beds as if unable to find their way in the dark; some with purposeful strides, seemingly in a hurry to get somewhere, only to turn and march off in the opposite direction when faced with some obstacle in their path, substituting one goal for another with thoughtless ease and unperturbed at attaining neither. Then there was one who stood with his face to a wall, his head and arms pressed against it as if he were entreating it to give way before him. And when it remained solid and unyielding, he drew his head back then brought it forward again, banging it against the brick of his prison. Again and again he did it, a dull thud sounding each time, no sound of pain or protest escaping the man.

Vin turned away then, closing his eyes against men lost not only to those in the world beyond but to themselves. Out of mind, out of sight. Yet he couldn't so easily escape them, that keening wail still sounding from a man lying curled in one corner of the room shrunken into himself, wordlessly railing against whatever had brought him to that place. And in lower keys were whimpers and mindless mutterings, as well as snatches of poetry or song that seemed almost obscene when given voice in a place devoid of either, note building upon note to form a chorus of lost souls. And providing a macabre harmony, screams echoed out of the room

beyond that one, where souls were not only lost but raging against that loss, against hope denied and trust betrayed.

It was a melody too well known and long since denied, and Vin would have put hands to his ears to block it, to shut off the echoes that rose within, would have run from it as he had always run. But his hands were bound. And all hope of escape but one was blocked, and that one hope such that he turned away from it with the same fear and rage with which he had turned from the lack of hope.

Unable then to escape, he would have to endure, would have to suffer through whatever was to come, would have to wait it out in that still place deep within. And thus determined, he forced his eyes open again, fastening them once more on Ramos as he tugged at another stitch, trying to focus solely on that. But Martin wasn't finished.

"I don't blame you, Pig Boy, for not wanting to take too long a look at your new roommates. They do, after all, turn a man's stomach something fierce. And I ain't just talking about the smell neither." Martin let his gaze wander around the room, his nose wrinkling in disgust as one of the men wandering aimlessly stopped long enough to relieve himself against one wall of the prison. "They ain't even human. Hell, they ain't even animals. They're nothing but bodies without brains enough between them to spit."

He turned his gaze back to Vin then. "Bet you didn't know it was even possible for anyone to be dumber than you. Not that you got them beat by much, mind you. After all, you're dumb enough to get yourself tossed out with the rest of the trash around here when you could have had it better." He gave another snort. "Hell, boy, I ain't sure but what you ain't even stupider than the worst of this lot."

Vin kept his gaze fixed firmly on Ramos, refusing to acknowledge the jibes. But Martin was undeterred.

"And before you go straining what little brains you got still that aren't scrambled all to hell, you'd best know that ain't no one ever got out of here but feet first. So you might as well get used to your new sty, 'cause this is it. This is the rest of your life, day in and day out 'til your body stops working same as your brain. And until then, this is all you'll see of the world. You don't go past those bars and won't nobody come past them you'll want to see. Hell, even Creed don't come down here. No reason for him to -- ain't nothing he or anyone can do for the likes of you. Ain't no one who even wants to try."

Vin tightened his jaw and Martin grinned.

"Face it, Pig Boy -- you ain't never going to be different or have different than this. Not unless all that praying Reverend Smith done over you turns a lot more convincing than it has been so far."

Still Vin ignored him, yet Martin had only to see the hands clenching above iron cuffs to know that his point had been made. So with a nod of satisfaction, he turned his attention back to the stolen harmonica,

raising it to his lips to blow tunelessly upon it. And try as he might to close himself to the sound, Vin could not help noting that the quavering notes produced sounded like nothing so much as a death knell to hope for all those who had been abandoned there.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE ~

(please note warning posted above)

He thought he might be going crazy. He'd thought it before, back in town, when his mind seemed sometimes to get so far lost that he figured that must be what it was to lose your mind. Now he knew differently. Now he knew the fragile feeling of a mind on the brink of shattering into a thousand pieces, like a pane of glass between its breaking and all the pieces exploding away from one another -- one fraction of a moment in which some unknown force held all the pieces together as if they were still whole, as if they still had some chance of staying that way, and as if a puff of wind wouldn't send them crashing into shards upon the ground and him falling headlong into madness.

He'd known when the first crack had appeared, had felt its jagged descent into that place of stillness deep within to which he'd escaped, could pinpoint the moment when he felt himself falling apart.

Once the last stitch was removed from the healing wound on his thigh, Ramos had surprised Vin by unlocking the cuffs about his wrists. And as Vin slid his arms down to his chest, his hands rubbing bruised wrists, Morelle released his legs with a quick jerk back and away. Then his new keepers had stood and walked off, Martin trailing behind them and blowing a final farewell on the harmonica that served as a reminder to Vin of just how easily that which he had could be taken from him. He'd scrambled back into his pants then, watching wary still as the cell door to his new prison opened and clanged shut again, Ramos and Morelle taking up their stations at their desks, Martin returning to his own duties.

And sitting up, Vin had pushed back so that he hit up against the wall at the head of his mattress, needing that touch of something solid and real to steady him. Then, legs drawn up and arms wrapped around his torso, he'd sat with his eyes closed to wait.

How long he waited and for what, he couldn't have said. But after a time he felt a movement of air, some slight sound that disturbed the stillness in which he'd sought refuge. And opening his eyes, he looked up -- and into the face of one who wasn't there.

Oh, a human form stood next to his bed, towering over him, real and solid. But it was like looking upon a corpse with eyes open and devoid of life, mouth slack, face pale and with that stillness of a soul departed. Yet this corpse breathed, its chest rising and falling in defiance of a death that had already taken place.

It was then Vin first felt something within giving way.

Long since had he learned to read a man by the look in his eyes, by the

way he moved, by the set of his jaw and by the bare twitching of a lone finger. He'd known enough of the good and the bad in men to be able to judge either, to put that knowledge to use in planning one move ahead. It was how he had managed to survive that long. But he was unable to read the man who stood looking down on him without expression, without movement or seemingly even an awareness of his presence there. He was human, but there was nothing of humanity in him, nothing recognizable about him but the shape of his body. And that scared Vin in a way he had never been scared, his fear not of harm to come, but of some unbalancing of all that was known to him and familiar, leaving him grasping in desperation for anything that might keep him from falling.

Again and again he felt himself losing his balance, each man in that place somehow lost beyond all finding. Eyes blank, movements without purpose, words spoken without sense, they were less than animal, even beasts of the field having some instinct to survive, to keep themselves and their nests clean, to strive towards some goal even if it was no more than the next meal or a mate. The men among whom he now found himself had none of that evident, seemed not to know where they were or to care, lived only in the moment, taking in food with their hands or by putting their face down to their plates and licking them clean. And they fouled their surroundings as no animal would do if given a choice. There was no privy closet, no chamber pots but those passed around by the keepers after each meal. And while some could be brought to use them, others of the lost men simply relieved themselves as nature called, the results of their efforts sometimes adorning the walls or even themselves.

They went without baths, without any personal grooming. And from the looks of them -- and the smell -- Vin had no doubt it had been weeks or more since some had felt the touch of water. Their hair was almost universally long and matted, their beards testament to meals eaten without care. And because they were left to their own filth, they were crawling with vermin, had bites and sores and rashes all over their bodies.

Larger vermin thrived there as well, rats scampering boldly among them at all times of the day and night.

Nor was Vin immune to such, despite having abandoned his pest-ridden excuse for a mattress that first day, preferring to curl up on the hard stone of the floor instead. And there was not even that vain hope of protection to be had from the rats that spent their days and nights scavenging for food, not at all particular what form it took and not easily dissuaded from a particular morsel, having long lost their fear of man. So unafraid were they, in fact, that more than once had Vin seen lone rats perched on their human companions calmly eating some bit of food or refuse. Not that relations between human and rodent were always so benign, for the rats were known to bite the hands -- and any other appendage they could take hold of -- of those who provided their sustenance. And for some reason, toenails proved a particular draw, which fact Vin

learned that first night by the weight of a furry body settled heavy on one foot. He'd remained awake all the rest of that night, on guard against further depredations. And after that he'd taken to limiting his sleep to quick catnaps throughout the day so as to never again leave himself so vulnerable, keeping his feet tucked beneath a neighboring mattress to protect them while he dozed.

Not only against such inhuman marauders did he need to defend himself, but against the human as well. Never did the keepers move about the men lost there but as herders among cattle milling about in the slaughter pens -- brutality as much defense as it was a weapon. What was doomed had to be kept at a distance, had to become less than it was in order for those in charge of its care to be able to accept its fate without protest. Blows, beatings, starvation and neglect were the norm in that place. And it was not only the keepers who resorted to such, the kept sometimes turning on their own: territories invaded or defended, food taken, boredom relieved, delusions or anger acted out, physical urges finding release in unwilling or unaware partners. There was no banding together, no cooperation among the damned. Nor was there ever an acknowledgment

of them as human, the keepers going about their duties with curses and commands, but with never a name spoken, names not offered even amongst themselves, as if there was no awareness within that set them apart one from another. No words of any kind were offered between them, not in any lucid manner, so that they all remained as shadows to each other, nameless and unknown.

And with each blow he suffered or witnessed, with each blank gaze aimed in his direction and each withdrawal from it, with each rat that scampered across his sleeping form, with each itch he scratched, each fraction of an inch his beard grew, each feeling of something crawling on his scalp, Vin felt another crack started.

He tried to set himself apart, wedged himself into a corner of the room unoccupied and spent much of his day there trying to close himself off to the sights and the sounds and the smells, telling himself over and over again that he was not such as those lost ones. But he remembered too many looks received in the weeks before he'd been cast away there, recalled too many whispers, had too clear a memory of Chris and Nathan on that witness stand to be sure that he was not looked on with the same degree of pity and disgust as were his companions there in that place. And so it was that when Mrs. Bunch sought him out on his second day there, standing at the bars at the end of the long room with a handkerchief held to her mouth and nose and Ramos trying to persuade her that such

was no place for a lady such as she, he turned away from her, ashamed to be seen, afraid to risk seeing pity and disgust in her eyes. And not to his surprise, she didn't come back. Timothy did, however, coming

each day beyond the bars to sit and speak softly to him. But him too Vin refused to acknowledge after that first look at his face, at the horror he read there.

No one else came. And there was that part of Vin that waited for someone to come, for Chris or Nathan, for any or all of the Seven to come striding in there with guns drawn to demand his release. But each time that vision ended with that same look in their eyes of pity and disgust and horror. It was only in his dreams that anyone looked on him any differently -- and then it was only the crow, sitting perched on some branch high above him waiting patiently, expectation and a dark knowledge shared all that showed in its eyes.

Each day in that place the cracks within grew longer, until there was no telling where one crack began and another left off, until he couldn't understand what was holding the shattered pieces of himself together. Still though, Vin held out against the crow in his dreams, turned away from it again and again, determined to find his own way out of that hell into which he had descended. But no such escape seemed remotely possible, there being no way out but the one door and it kept always locked, with at least one man left on the other side of it when the keepers' duty forced them to go among their charges. And as Martin had warned, never did any of the kept pass beyond those bars.

It was hopeless. And each day of waiting left Vin more hopelessly lost and with another set of cracks.

Yet as hopeless as it was, still there was one path left open to him. He never understood what kept him holding out against that escape Bliss had offered. Pride, denial, stubbornness. That need in him to live up to a name that was all that was left to him of some long lost happiness. All that or none of it maybe. But whatever it was that enabled him to hold out, it was fear that at last forced him to give in.

Over and over again he told himself that he was not such as these men lost. Yet on his fifth day among them, when one dared to snatch his meager portion of lunch away even as Ramos handed it to him, he reacted as any of them would, growling with a wordless rage as he exploded upwards, launching himself upon the thief, not stopping at reclaiming what was his but going beyond to give warning against any such further attempt. And not with words was that warning given, words coming not at all to him in that moment and no hope of them being understood if they had been offered. Instead he gave warning with his fists, pummeling the would-be thief, unaffected by his cries of pain and fear. He was like a man possessed -- or an animal -- controlled by some need or instinct wild in him to keep what little he had left in life. He acted without thought, without conscious awareness of what he did, all the years of too much and not enough, of loss and trusts broken, of struggling to survive horror succeeding horror went screaming through him, all else giving way before that murderous charge. And it was only hands pulling him off the lost

one that saved them both, the pain of hitting hard against the wall cutting through that blinding rage and bringing him back to awareness. He sat then, unmindful of the keepers' edict that both men could go without their lunch that day, his hunger forgotten, a fear starting in him as the rage dissipated. All that he had fought against, both without and within, and in an instant it had mattered not at all. All within him that he had ever looked on with pride and he had tossed it away for a plate of kitchen scraps. He knew then that he was no different from those lost ones there in that place, that he was as lost as they, knew that he had taken some turn wrong on that path he had so long struggled to keep foot upon. He'd lost his balance. And now he was losing his mind. He spent the rest of that day huddled in his corner, unaware of anything but the fear that seeped slowly into every part of his being. He was lost, even to himself, and no one would ever find him. He would live out his days in that hole with the other lost ones and the rats, a shadow of himself that no one would ever recognize, that no one would even look upon, their heads turned away in pity and disgust. He would wander without purpose between the walls of his prison or lie uncaring in his own filth. His eyes would take on that cast of death -- if they had not already done so. And who knew? Perhaps the other lost ones in that place knew they were lost. Perhaps he could not even look forward to the solace of oblivion.

He could feel that fear cold in his back and tight about his chest. It crawled along his skin, clamped his jaws together, shivered through his arms and legs. It took hold of his mind, expanding until he was numb with the enormity of it, until he wanted to loose it in a scream and keep screaming until every last bit of it was gone. But he was afraid it was only that scream held back that was keeping the shattered pieces of his sanity from exploding into a thousand separate shards.

Not even in his sleep, when at last it overtook him, could he escape that fear. Tearing through dream shadows, he ran from fear and chains and men with dead eyes. But hardest he ran from himself, from that darkness within long denied. But as far as he ran and as fast, he could not outrun himself. Nor could he outrun the crow who sailed in the air above him, waiting. And when at last he could run no more and dropped to the ground in exhaustion, fighting to drag air into his lungs, the crow lit upon a branch above him. He knew it was there, could feel its eyes upon him willing him to look up, to embrace the knowledge from which he ran. And at last, because he could run no farther, because there was no one else to whom he might turn and no place left but one to which he might run, he looked up.

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Chapter note: That bit about rats and toenails can be found in the book *Ghost Soldiers*, by Hampton Sides (an account of the POW experience in WWII Philippines following the Bataan Death March and the subsequent

rescue of one POW camp by the newly formed Rangers) -- a recommended read for those with a strong stomach.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR ~

Not on awakening did Vin's decision waver. A hard choice made, but that the only way to keep hold of what little he had left and that only himself. Try though he had to find some way around that choice, to forge his own trail out of the chains placed on him, again and again had he been blocked. And with each closing off of a trail came a hardening of that will in him to survive. With each crack in his sanity grew the terror of a complete shattering. So while he had no doubt that a greater danger lay ahead on that trail laid out and left open to him, he was determined to do as he had always done -- to escape traps laid, to strike out into the wilderness in defiance of paths leading him away from that of his own choosing. Always before had he thus survived. And if he had lost pieces of himself in the process, at least he had not completely shattered.

So it was that when Ramos and Morelle made their morning rounds with the rising of the sun that he asked to speak with Martin. He then settled back to wait, his eyes closed against the lost ones stirring to some semblance of life around him, determined to set himself apart from them, to guard against any further cracks. And when morning passed into afternoon and then into evening with no sign of Bliss' henchman, he grew increasingly still, both within and without, afraid that the slightest movement, the smallest of fears would send the cracked pieces of himself flying and so far scattered that he'd never be able to find them all, much less put them back together again.

And still he waited as night fell, darkness stealing into the room and welcome, the dark behind his eyes no longer enough to conceal the unbearable. And in that dark he set his mind not to the sounds of harsh breathing or whimpers surrounding him, of rats scurrying across the floor or the keepers standing vigil, but upon the stars barely glimpsed in the small rectangles of night sky visible to him through barred windows -- small pinpoints of light, tiny beacons of distant hopes too dim to chase away the dark. Yet still they were enough to cling to, enough to keep the dark from swallowing up all there was of light. And holding fast to the fragile pieces of himself, Vin Tanner waited out the night, waited until the last remnants of the darkness gave way to the new risen sun. Then he waited still.

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Through another long morning he sat unmoving and silent, searching out that confusion that had for too long marked his thoughts, escaping into it as he could not escape the world. He was then able to drift in and out of sleep as the sun rose and hours later began another slow descent, inner visions mixing with outer so that after a time he couldn't tell

which was which and the fear grew in him that it was too late, that he had somehow unknowingly shattered and that confusion was the result, that this was to be his Hell. But finally, as shadows grew long, Martin put in an appearance, swaggering into the foul cell with his nose wrinkled in disgust but with a knowing smirk on his face.

"You wanting out, Pig Boy?" he asked as he came to a standstill before Vin, who sat wedged in his corner with his eyes raised dully up to him. And taking that lack of a denial as agreement, Martin gave a scornful laugh and toed at some rat pellets scattered on the floor at his feet. "Must say I'm surprised. Figured this place would be better than anything you were ever used to, so why would you have any call to want out of it?"

Vin blinked, his mind struggling to clear and working to exchange one nightmare for another, to sort out that from which he had some chance of waking from that which he knew he would never escape. Then, shades of darkness at last distinguished and the choice once again made, he gave another blink. "Tell him," he hoarsely commanded.

"Smith?" Martin pulled Vin's harmonica out of a pocket and studied it for a moment before saying, "He'll be here tomorrow."

He raised the instrument to his lips and blew, a harsh sound resulting and one of the lost ones there setting up a wild laugh in response.

Vin pulled more tightly into himself, struggling to keep from setting his hands over his ears to block both sounds, a shivering starting in him at the thought of another night spent in that place.

Seeing that, Martin blew another series of taunting notes before lowering the stolen harmonica. Then, with a curl of his lip, he shook his head and said, "I never could figure what a man like Smith wants with a dummy like you. What have you got that any pig in a sty ain't got? Huh? Tell me that." And when Vin only stared up at him with dull eyes, Martin snorted. "Hell, don't guess it makes me no nevermind if that preacher would rather have him a pig than a real man. But don't think that you won't wind up back here again. A pig like you ain't meant for nothing better. And Smith will find that out soon enough. Then it will be me and you again, Pig Boy. And won't nothing save you then."

He stuffed Vin's harmonica back into his pocket. "In the meantime, you have some sweet dreams, you hear? And don't let the bedbugs bite." Then with another laugh, he added, "Oops. Guess it's already too late for that."

Vin turned his head away, wrapping his arms around his middle, holding tight, as if he could thereby keep the cracked pieces of himself in place. And once again, having no other choice, he set himself to wait.

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Again he went without sleep, without awareness, without hope beyond a determination to survive as he had always survived. Night fell and once more he was unable to distinguish one darkness from the other. Yet he

knew it was not necessary, for long since had he learned to move freely in shadows. Where other men looked for the light, stumbling in the blackness of night in search of it, he slipped from shadow to shadow with ease. Let other men rail against the setting of the sun -- Vin Tanner only squared his shoulders against the loss and learned to live in the dark.

He waited that long night without dreaming, without thought or acknowledgment of the path on which he was about to set foot. Such was beyond

him, all that he was intent on maintaining the illusion of wholeness.

And so it continued as the sun once again rose, the soft morning light chasing away the shadows that surrounded him but not touching the darkness within. He only sat with blank eyes, aware of nothing but the dark until the soft sound of a crow's wings flapping had him looking up to find the Reverend Mordecai Bliss standing over him.

Not a word did the false preacher say. He only stood studying Vin with a dark knowing gaze. And when Vin kept shadow-dark eyes fixed upon him unblinking and unflinching, Bliss gave a slow satisfied nod. Still though he had no words to offer, no smile of triumph lit his face. He simply turned and walked away, to the door of the cell through which Vin could not pass without his help. Yet Vin knew as it opened and clanged shut behind Bliss that he would be back. Knew it as he knew darkness would always fall, would always succeed each day's brief reign of light, would be there always in the play of shadows on the brightest of days, and could be had by the mere closing of one's eyes. Let the sun shine as bright as it would, still the world would never be rid of the dark. That was simply the way things were and would always be.

And so again he waited. But this time he knew the wait would not be long, so he kept his mind clear, closing his eyes as he could not then afford to close his mind to the lost ones who mumbled and sang and shrieked around him. And indeed, Martin was let into his cell not two hours after Bliss' departure, Cormer at his back and a set of irons in each keeper's hands.

"Seems there was some kind of mistake," Martin said as he came to a stop at Vin's feet, his lips fashioned into a sneering grin. "Turns out Steck has a reputation for certain, shall we say... appetites. And the word is that maybe he was trying to satisfy that appetite the night you tried to escape from your cell down in the Composing Rooms, that maybe you were only defending yourself when you attacked him. So Creed -- after some smooth talking from the Reverend Smith -- has decided to give you one more chance."

Cormer snorted his opinion of the good doctor's gullibility. "Like you couldn't give ol' Pig Boy a hundred chances and him not land back here every time. Hell, they're wasting our time trying to teach a dumb pig new tricks. They ought to just find him a sty somewheres and leave him

to wallow in it."

"Damned right," Martin agreed. "Except even pigs in a sty got some use. Ain't no use anyone will ever have for the likes of him. We hike all the way down here to fetch him and, come one day real soon, we'll be hiking him back. Waste of damn time." He shook his head. "But don't no one ever ask us. Think they all know so much. Well, they'll find out all right and tight. Then Pig Boy will be right back in this pest hole with the rest of the useless dummies."

The two keepers stood sneering down on Vin then -- until one of the lost ones wandering aimlessly stumbled into Martin. And with a growl of disgust, the keeper shoved him away. Then wiping his hand on his pants to rid himself of the contact, he turned to Cormer and said, "Let's get Pig Boy the hell out of here before we catch something."

They wasted no time then in setting the irons around Vin's ankles and wrists, Cormer cursing at having to get that close to him.

"We're going to have to burn them clothes of his," he pointed out as he set the lock on the ankle irons. "No telling what half that crap he got on them is and I don't even want to know what he's got living in them. And I'm guessing it will take three or four changes of bath water to get him even near clean."

He shook his head, waiting while Martin finished locking the wrist irons. "What the hell we going to all this bother for anyways? It's not like Creed is ever going to be able to fix him up any. A pig is a pig. And a dummy is a dummy. Hell. Let Creed have to clean him up and I bet he wouldn't be so set on sending him back to the regular crazies."

Martin gave the wrist irons a tug, then straightened up. "I wouldn't go blaming the doc. Seems ol' Preacher Smith sees something in Pig Boy that don't none of the rest of us see and he's determined to get at it, whatever the hell it is. Like a dog with a bone, not letting go of it even when the meat's all chewed off."

Vin sat still and silent while the chains were set, uncaring of the taunts aimed at him. His attention was instead all for the far wall of bars twenty-five feet away where Morelle sat at his desk, keys twirling idly in one hand waiting on them. A dozen or so steps was all it would take to cover the distance. A dozen steps between where he sat and the trail out of that place. A dozen steps, twenty-five feet -- and he'd be free, or at least on his way to it.

Martin took hold of one of his arms then and jerked him to his shackled feet.

Twenty-five feet. A dozen steps. And he'd be free.

Then Cormer grabbed his other arm and the two men pulled him forward, hands tight on him and Cormer still grumbling. "If this is all that preacher's idea, why's Pig Boy going to his ward instead of back to a Composing Room? If he deserves a second chance, why ain't Smith giving it to him?"

"The preacher man give up on him. Says he does better wrestling with the Devil than dummies."

Cormer snorted. "Smith's given up on him and Creed ain't done a thing for him. Yet here we are having to mess with him again. Hell. All them fancy men with their fancy ideas and sooner or later they find out what we already know -- a dummy don't get no smarter than he is and a nut don't stop acting crazy. All you can do is lock them up and keep them away from good honest folks. Anything else is like trying to teach a pig to sing."

"Or play a harmonica," Martin added with a taunting laugh.

Vin ignored the jibe, his gaze fastened on Morelle as he moved to unlock the cell door, a fear in him starting that it was all a mistake, a dream from which he was about to awaken. Then the key in the keeper's hand was set in the lock. The lock turned. The door swung open. And Martin jerked him forward.

He stumbled through the doorway then, out of that place -- and onto the trail stretching long and dark before him.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE ~

"The prodigal returns," Paulie announced when Vin was escorted back into his ward after a thorough cleaning and a change of clothes, his hair still dripping wet from repeated washings. "Quick, someone prepare the fatted calf!"

"More like a fatted rat," Martin corrected as he gave Vin a hard shove towards his bed at the far end of the room. Then with a laugh he added, "Maybe we can get one of his little friends from Ward D."

Vin hit up hard against Rodin's bed, one knee cracking against the frame and jarring the man lying there into as much of an awareness as he ever showed. And looking up with confused eyes, Rodin asked as he always did, "Have you seen my Margaret?"

Osgood grumbled a cursed response from his bed by the door, eliciting another laugh from Martin. The keeper then clanged his way back out of the room, the lock clicking loud in a reminder to Vin that a change in cells left him in prison still. The prodigal then turned his attention to his reclaimed roommates: Osgood venting his ill humor in a rambling mumble, Messing in his bed moving paper armies about, Rodin waiting for an answer he would never accept, Paulie chained still to the wall as a result of their attempted escape but his usual cheer undiminished and Aubrey with a scowl aimed at no one and everyone. Nothing had changed among them. He was still among men lost. Yet relief swept through him that he should be back in that place, back among men more solid than shadows, back where he too had substance, where he was more than the filth and the degradation and the rats, and where words once again had meaning.

Then, as if aware of that near gladness in him to be there, Paulie

cheerily said, "There's no place like home, eh, Vin?"

The prodigal shifted his gaze back to the one sitting at ease in his bed with his manacled arms crossed behind his head, a grin plastered to his face. He alone seemed to know himself, a man unbowed by fate, smiling in defiance of all that man could do to him and had done. No cracks, no darkness stirring, no fear, no surrender. He had survived and would survive. And that thanks to no bargains made with the Devil. Of that and more was Vin sure.

A snort sounded from the bed in the corner, Aubrey as always refusing to let Paulie's enthusiasms go unchecked. "Hell, Thurgood, that gal your pa picked out for you to marry must be a real dog if this place is more home to you than any she could make."

Paulie sat up straighter, the grin fading. "It isn't a question of my chosen bride's desirability," he coolly stated, "but a question of choice, a matter of a man standing up for what he believes in, for what is important to him rather than taking the easier path of another's choosing."

Vin pushed away from Rodin's bed and moved blindly to the window beside it, both hands rising to take hold of the iron bars.

Behind him came another snort, this time from Osgood. "And what girl would that be you aren't inclined to marry? The Queen of England, maybe?" His chains rattling as he lowered one arm to flick at a speck of dust on his shirt, Paulie grandly said, "If you must know, she is the Territorial Governor's niece."

Osgood hooted. "Oh yeah? Funny then that the governor never heard of you. Well, not until you ran up all those bills in some fancy hotel someplace in his name, telling everyone in town you were there to pave the way for some official visit, that you were the governor's right hand man."

Paulie scowled. "He only said that to punish me for refusing to marry his niece."

"I thought you said your folks put you in here," Aubrey pointed out in tones of suspicion.

"They did."

Another snort came from Osgood. "A month ago you said it was your brother, that he was trying to cheat you out of your inheritance."

"That too."

Aubrey's eyes narrowed. "But I thought your father was still alive."

"He is. My brother is simply looking to the future."

Osgood shook his head. "Two months ago you said you were a reporter in here on a secret assignment to uncover corruption in State Asylums. And the month before that, you claimed you were hired to help one of the inmates escape. Then there was the month before that when you swore --"

"You mean there's no banker father?" Aubrey angrily broke in, his scowl back and aimed directly at Paulie. "No bride? You mean you're just as

crazy as the rest of the nuts in this place?"

Vin kept his head turned, his gaze upon the grey sky without but all his attention on the silence that waited for Paulie to speak, to say the words that would prove the boy's trust in him had not somehow been misplaced, that he was as Aubrey had believed and was no more lost than he felt himself to be. Vin waited as well, holding as tight to the cracks ready to shatter as he did to the iron bars of his prison.

Long seconds passed, and then, at last, Paulie softly said, in tones of regret and loss, "We're all of us crazy, I suppose. Don't you think? We're simply all crazy in our own ways, in ways that seem perfectly sane to us."

Another silence descended: Osgood satisfied with having upset some balance barely maintained; Rodin and Messing as unaware as always; Vin still and waiting, the cracks kept back from giving way by no more than a breath held; and Aubrey scrabbling for something solid onto which to take hold -- some immovable center of the universe upon which he could rely, too much of what he had thought he had known proven false in the short years of his young life and even more there in that place.

It was a fragile sound, that silence. More fragile than the cracks threatening to give way within Vin Tanner. And finding strength in that fragility, reaching out as he always did to his fellow travelers on the wrong paths taken, Vin risked a breath, then another. And when the cracks held, he risked movement enough to look over one shoulder, his eyes on the boy lost and needing the right path clearly marked. "Go home, kid," he hoarsely advised. "You ain't this lost yet and you don't never want to be."

Paulie sighed, his own risks taken by that breath released, cracks holding, and offering his own mark in addition to the tracker's. "Vin is right, Aubrey. You aren't like us. Not like any of us. You've no horrors to escape, no sins that can't be forgiven, no pieces of yourself so far lost that you'll never find them again ever. You've got a whole long life ahead of you to get things right. So do whatever you have to do to get out of this madhouse, this asylum for lost souls. Lick Creed's boots if that's what it takes. But get out. Because if you don't do it soon, you never will."

Aubrey gave a laugh, a harsh sound and bitter, a crack of his own started. "Why the hell should I listen to you? You're crazy! And Tanner ain't nothing but a dummy. What do either of you know?"

Angry words, but a fear behind them, that of a child afraid of the dark.

"What do we know?" Paulie echoed. "Not enough. Or perhaps too much. But of this you can be sure: we know what it is to be lost. So believe me when I tell you that if there is anyone out there wanting to find you, let them do it. Let yourself be found and stay that way. It's the only hope you have. It's the only hope any of us have."

Aubrey shot a look from Paulie to Vin, both of them watching him with a sorrow plain, a regret for all they'd lost, for all they'd thrown away or left behind, for all they hadn't known was theirs or hadn't noticed was within reach. And sliding down into his bed, he curled into himself, his head turning to the wall as he unsteadily said, "Don't you worry none. Ain't no way I'm staying in this nuthouse any longer than I have to."

The key scratched in the lock then, putting an end to whatever more might have been said. And a moment later, Martin was among them again. "All right, you nuts," he growled. "Time for some exercise. So get a move on -- we ain't got all day. You too, Pig Boy."

Vin was still for a long moment, watching as Aubrey and Osgood got up and moved to the door, watching as Rodin and Messing were prodded out of their beds. He turned then to look at Paulie, sitting still in his bed looking up at him, chains at his wrists and a knowing in his eyes -- and a sadness born of it. And with a knowing of his own, Vin knew the man wasn't mad. Lost he might be, as were they all, each lost on some trail of their own or another's choosing. Lost and maybe no way out for any of them -- except the boy, who had taken pause in his headlong rush down the path on which he'd so blindly set, so sure was he of the ending of it. Brought up short by the sheer walls rising high on either side of that narrow path, he'd at last seen that they rose higher and higher ahead, that it was only behind that they showed promise of being scalable, of leading maybe to some other trail that didn't end at some dark abyss.

No, Paulie wasn't mad. Neither perhaps were Rodin and Messing. After all, how mad would a man have to be to live with memories too horrible to take hold of? How mad would a man have to be to know the worst of himself and not shatter into a thousand pieces? Better to hide in that safe place within, out of the reach of shadows. Better to lose oneself, so far lost that one could never again be found.

And maybe he would be better off that lost as well. Maybe that was the only way to stay sane. Yet Martin stood impatient at the door, waiting. And beyond the open door lay the trail out of that place, all he had of hope offered, the one chance he had of finding himself -- if he wasn't destroyed in the trying.

It was a fool's bargain, certainty against a near impossibility. But he hadn't survived that long by not risking everything against long odds, by not taking whatever chance was offered. Better that, he'd always known, than to bet everything on a safety that had never been his since his ma had died. Safety had never been attained by staying in place, it had always been found in moving forward, in leaping blindly sometimes and trusting to that instinct that had so far kept him alive. And that instinct screamed in him to be quit of that place, to risk everything for the feel of the wind in his hair and the sun on his face, for an

unbroken horizon and nothing between him and the stars but high clouds and a whisper of night wind.

No. The waiting was over. It was time to risk all. And with one last look to Paulie in his chains and a nod of farewell, he fell in line behind Messing and set deliberate foot upon the trail Bliss had opened to him.

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He remained at the end of the line as it wound through the maze of halls and locked doors, Martin at his back until they neared the set of doors that would lead into the exercise yard. Then a hand on his arm held him back and he nearly panicked, sure that the freedom held out to him was about to be denied, just another move in Bliss' cruel game. And twisting out from beneath that hand, Vin drew his own back to strike out, escape to be his at any cost. But Martin only threw his hands up and grinned.

"You ain't free yet, Pig Boy," he pointed out with a nod to the doors through which the other inmates were departing, a keeper standing guard there and another in view at the other end of the hall. "You start a ruckus now, and you'll end up back in chains and no telling when -- or if -- you'll get another chance like this."

Vin froze, arm still raised, eyes flicking between keepers, the one at the end of the hall watching him and poised to race to Martin's assistance. And swallowing hard against the panic trying to claw its way past his pounding heart and out, he forced his arm down, forced himself to remain in place.

Martin looked almost disappointed. But he lowered his own arms and turned to give a nod to the keeper watching. Then to Vin he softly said, "You'd best listen close, Pig Boy, and get this right, 'cause you're only getting the one chance. You blow it and it will be Ward D for you and you won't never get out, preacher or no preacher. You got that?"

He waited until Vin nodded, then continued. "You get out in that yard there and stick close to the far wall, right by a barrel left sitting there. Before long, there will be a commotion. Don't matter what or why -- just get up on that barrel and over the wall once things get going good. There will be someone on the other side with a horse for you and he'll take you to that fool preacher." Martin gave a sneer. "And God help him if he thinks he'll get any use out of you."

He gave Vin no time to digest his instructions, simply shoved him towards the door, and Vin made no objection, too glad of the doors left open for him to care how he got through them. So, unmindful of the hand hard at his back, he moved towards that rectangle of light, a wild need in him to break into a run, to claim for himself what could so easily be denied him. A closing of the door. A turning of the lock. Hands on him and chains. And back to Ward D and the madness waiting him there. And terrified that one wrong move would put an end to this last sorry hope, he

found it hard to move at all, only Martin's hand at his back keeping him in motion.

Then with one last shove, he was through the door, out of that place if still trapped by high walls surrounding the small yard and by the keepers mingling among the mad and the lost. Yet it was not walls nor those who would keep him within the prison they formed that he saw but the sky above. Gray with low clouds hanging heavy, it was nonetheless beautiful to him and he raised his face to it, bathing in the weak light shining down on him, reveling in the soft breeze stirring the shortened locks of his hair. He drank it all in as would a man lost in the desert who had stumbled upon a hidden spring. And in that moment he was free. Three steps beyond the door of his prison he stood, content in that moment with that small taste of freedom. Then another shove reminded him that a greater freedom was to be had. So he searched out the barrel Martin had told him stood ready for his escape. And flicking his gaze all around the small dusty enclosure filled with men, both kept and their keepers, he took note of those standing watch. Then, all possible moves planned out and countermoves set, he moved among the inmates milling about, Osgood and Messing, Rodin and Aubrey, all swallowed in the throng, a few among the many he would be leaving behind and with no regrets allowed. And taking his position next to the barrel standing as if forgotten by some careless workman, he waited -- his back to the wall, muscles tensed, breath coming fast to store up needed oxygen, heart pumping adrenaline for the flight to come, gaze searching out any possible danger.

And across the yard Martin watched him, leaning against the brick wall of the asylum with Vin's harmonica in one hand. Then, seeing Vin's gaze light on him, he raised the instrument to his lips and blew.

It was a taunt, a reminder to Vin of all that he had lost, had had taken from him and would never get back. And not just that small bit of tin, but too many small bits of himself, some given freely and regretted, some taken by force of might or guile. Too much he'd lost. And all he had left to him was that instinct in him strong to survive. And it was that instinct that kept him in place, that kept him from hurling himself upon the keeper to reclaim that small part of his life.

He stood there, leaning tense against that wall at his back, the one remaining barrier to his freedom, and kept still, waiting.

Fortunately for his strained nerves, he didn't have long to wait, a shriek rising among the throng of inmates a few minutes later, both guards and inmates reacting immediately, some moving towards the screams and the sounds of a scuffle, some moving away. And still Martin stood blowing into Vin's harmonica, grinning at him even as he taunted him with the nearness of all that he had lost.

Vin had only to jump onto the barrel and over the wall. And in seconds he would be free and riding away from that place. Yet when he moved, it

was not onto the barrel but across the yard, not to what he hoped to find but towards that which he'd lost. And launching himself across the yard, dodging inmates, ignoring the shouted commands of keepers wading into the throng, he threw himself upon the startled Martin. One hand snatched back his harmonica, that small part of himself reclaimed. And the other hand rose in a smashing right cross, landing hard on the hated keeper's chin.

He didn't wait for the man to crumple into the dirt, just turned and ran. Then with his harmonica clutched in a tight fist, he was up on the barrel and over the wall, dropping lightly to the ground. And before he could even turn to search out the help promised, it was there, two horses sliding to a halt before him, dust stirring, bits jangling, horses snorting their objections to such harsh handling. Then a familiar form on one of them -- Tomlin, Bliss' hired keeper -- reached out a hand to him, the reins of the other horse held out.

"Come on, dummy!" Tomlin shouted. "Don't just stand there! Mount up!" Vin hesitated no longer. And shoving the harmonica into a pocket, he reached up to the reins held out. But instead of taking them, he took hold of Tomlin's arm, pulling hard, his other hand coming up in another right cross. And again he wasted no time in observing the result of his move. Instead he grabbed the reins loosed as Tomlin fell from his saddle, then swung up onto his chosen mount's back, his bare feet sliding into the stirrups. And pulling hard on the reins, he forced the horse to spin around, then kicked it into a run -- back in the direction from which it had just come.

.It was a mad race, away from Bliss and his game, from the prison behind him and all that lay miles distant and years past. And if it was towards nothing to which Vin could give name, it was at least a move forward and a trail of his choosing. Past keepers shouting, reaching up to take hold of him, he rode. And over a low fence he kicked the horse. Not stopping. Not looking back. Aware of nothing but the stretch of open ground between him and a small stand of trees a mile beyond. There he could lose himself, could lay down a false trail and be miles gone before anyone could have a hope of catching up to him.

He was running free. And if he would have a new set of men at his heels, he'd been long used to that. Once before he'd run and found a place to hide. So he had no doubt he could do it again. And there was a whole wide country in which to hide, in which to lose himself and maybe at last find some small part of himself long gone missing. Everything that had ever been he'd leave behind. He needed only a few hours' head start. And then he would be free.

One mile, half a mile, and he'd have his chance. Then he was at the trees and among them, his horse reined back, his way picked carefully as he searched out all possible paths, his goal a particularly dense clump of trees. But as he drew level with them, a dark shape moved out of

their shadows in a crash of snapping branches -- a dark horse and its dark rider moving to block his path.

Vin pulled his own horse up short, his eyes wide on the one blocking his way. Then the dark-clad horseman cocked his head to one side and casually said, "Going my way?"

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX ~

Vin pulled back on his reins hard, his hands on them clutching into fists, his bare feet pushing against the stirrups, his legs gripping tight as the horse danced back in response, its head shaking at such rough treatment. But Vin was aware of none of that, his gaze all for the one seated on the horse before him watching with dark eyes and a slow smile of triumph -- and holding a gun pointed unwaveringly at him.

"The game begins, Mr. Tanner," the Reverend Mordecai Bliss declared, that slow smile gaining momentum and widening into a grin. "But while such a game between us of hunter and hunted should prove vastly entertaining, I much prefer one of a more cooperative nature. So I really must insist that you forego any further attempts at escape."

Vin looked the false preacher up and down, taking in the gun held easily in his left hand, his broken right arm now unencumbered but for a black silk sling, his right hand holding tight to his reins. And unable in that moment to give voice to the defiance stirring within, Vin settled for a lifting of his chin and a glare that warned plainly of an intended resistance.

Message received, Bliss sighed, the sound that of a man faced with the unreasonable. "Do not test me, boy," he warned in turn. "This little game of ours will be played out or it will come to a most unsatisfactory end right here and now. And I assure you, said end will prove far less than fatal. Although I wager that after another week in that hellhole from which I just effected your release, you'll be wishing I had been more merciful."

Vin tightened his grip on the reins, his hands whitening under the additional pressure, his horse dancing back again in response. And with a knowing in his eyes, Bliss continued. "The choice is as it has been, Mr. Tanner -- to live free in the pursuit of that wild in you or to live in chains amid your own filth for the rest of your miserable life."

Up went Vin's chin another notch, determination now added to his defiance. And finding words, he warningly proclaimed, "Ain't going back." It wasn't a choice between two possibilities but a statement of fact. Nonetheless, Bliss took it as a matter settled to his satisfaction.

"Then let us move forward."

He waved the gun to his right, his eyes never leaving his captive as he waited for him to move in the direction indicated. Then a crashing in the trees behind Vin warned of pursuit and the gun swung in that

direction instead.

Head turned in search of new danger, Vin again tightened his hold on his reins, ready to bolt, past Bliss if need be, willing to chance a bullet rather than risk the certainty of a return to the asylum. It was Tomlin, however, who came into sight, his face flushed with anger and a swelling on his chin that would darken soon into a bruise.

"Damned dummy!" he snarled as he pulled his horse to a stop behind Vin's. "Forgot how damned sneaky he is."

Again Bliss sighed. "I did warn you, Mr. Tomlin. Repeatedly. And how fortunate for you that I anticipated this move." He swung the gun back to cover Vin. And to his less than effective cohort, he added, "Now, if you think you can manage to restrain Mr. Tanner without allowing him to get the upper hand once again, we can then proceed to the rendezvous point."

Vin bristled at the mention of restraints, his body tensing, his eyes darting in search of escape, his horse sidling in response to the tightening of his leg muscles as he settled his bare feet more firmly in the stirrups. Before he could weigh the risk, though, Tomlin kicked his horse forward, bringing it alongside his. Then, even as he pulled on his reins in an instinctive movement away from such crowding, Tomlin reached out to snag a rope onto the bridle of Vin's horse, the other end of it already looped around his own saddle horn.

"You ain't getting away from me this time," he growled.

Vin, however, had other ideas, and pulled hard on his reins, jerking his horse's head back towards one knee and leaning forward to grab at the rope even then being knotted in place. Tomlin, however, was prepared for such a move and took advantage of the shifting of Vin's center of gravity, latching onto his reaching arm and pulling hard.

Vin came out of his saddle without a chance of resistance, landing face down in the dirt with a grunting expulsion of air. And before he could convince his lungs to take breath in, Tomlin was upon him, a pair of manacles quickly dug out of his saddlebag in one hand, his other taking hold of one of Vin's shoulders to turn him onto his back. And that done, he gave Vin no chance to collect his breath, swinging one leg across him to straddle him, forcing out any remaining air as he came down hard on Vin's unprotected middle. He then took one of his arms and snapped the manacle around his wrist, locking it in place before moving to do the same to his other arm, Vin too busy with the struggle to draw in air to offer any resistance.

When the tracker was safely secured, Tomlin pushed up and off him, hauling him with him, holding him upright against his attempt to lean over to take in wheezing breaths. Then looking up to Bliss, who had sat unmoving through the scuffle, he gave a snort of disgust and said, "You sure you know what you're doing messing with a dummy like him? Seems to me he's a hell of a lot more trouble than he could possibly be worth."

Bliss sat studying the captive for a moment, Vin raising defiant eyes to meet his, a dark knowledge shared shadowing there, a warning of a game just begun and the winning of it uncertain, challenge offered and met. And holding fast to that defiant gaze, Bliss gave the faintest of smiles and slowly said, "Have no fear, Mr. Tomlin, I know exactly what I am doing."

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Once Tomlin had reseated the captive on his horse, they moved back in the direction Vin had raced, skirting the asylum to the north and west beyond it. And as they traveled towards whatever game Bliss had set in motion, Vin sat with deceptive ease on his horse, his hands resting on the saddle horn, his posture that of slouched relaxation. His gaze, however, shifted constantly from side to side, searching out some means of escape. Not that such was likely, for a long length of chain was attached to the shorter one between the manacles at his wrists and looped around Tomlin's saddle horn along with the rope already tied there, keeping him no more than six feet from the man riding slightly ahead and to one side. And behind rode Bliss, Vin aware of his gaze on him, that unwanted regard raising an itch between his shoulder blades, one born of an instinct long honed, the watcher always aware of being watched, the hunted knowing when the hunter drew near.

Not that it was only Bliss who kept that itch in need of a scratching, another hunt set off for him no doubt and the countryside alerted to the madman escaped and dangerous. And it was that itch that proved the greater, that fear of shattering into madness still gripping him hard, the threat of being lost to himself more than the danger of losing his way on whatever trail Bliss had laid out for him. And when at last that itch grew too hard to ignore, he twisted around enough to look past Bliss and back along their trail.

"No need to worry, boy," the false preacher assured him, noting the direction of his gaze. "Any posse sent after you will find a likely trail laid in a direction opposite to the one we now travel. So, as long as you do as you are bid, you need have no fear of being discovered and returned to your own little corner of Hell."

Vin shifted his gaze to study Bliss for a long moment, struck as always by the man's absolute assurance, by that arrogant belief in his own invincibility that he wore as a dark mantle setting him apart from lesser beings. And certain then as Bliss was certain that one fear could be safely dismissed -- for the moment at least -- Vin turned to another, possibilities considered, moves and countermoves plotted and planned. Then, relaxing on more familiar ground, he was able to gather words. And nodding to the manacles he wore, he set about searching out the rules of the game being played. "What about these?"

Bliss raised an eyebrow. "What about them, Mr. Tanner? Do you wish them gone, I fear you wish in vain, for you have already proven yourself

unwilling to satisfy the bargain made."

"People might get curious."

"Indeed. But, in truth, you'll have little enough opportunity to arouse anyone's curiosity. Should, however, your fame precede you in the days ahead, I need only lay claim to your capture. And should you go unrecognized for one escape, I can instead bring to mind another, that one ahead of a lynch mob in the sovereign state of Texas."

Vin snorted. "You give up preaching for bounty hunting?"

"The Lord does work in mysterious ways, boy."

Vin blinked, that possibility not considered, Bliss in his dark suit a far cry from any bounty hunter he'd ever chanced upon. Yet the dark look in his eyes testified to the truth of such a claim. Still, the trail laid out was cluttered with false sign nonetheless. And needing to ease a new fear rising, Vin squinted up at the sun to dispel it. Then, as it eased, he spoke with a certainty he wasn't sure he felt, saying, "This ain't the way to Texas."

Bliss, however, was undisturbed by such minor details. "Indeed, boy. But it would seem that you are not the only wanted man to be had in this locale." Bliss urged his horse forward so that he rode level with Vin, then switched his reins to the right hand dangling from the sling and dug his left into a breast pocket of his coat. And pulling out a folded piece of paper, he shook it open and held it up for Vin's inspection. Tomlin cast a look back and snorted. "Like he can read."

"Perhaps not," Bliss conceded. "But I've no doubt that Mr. Tanner recognizes a wanted poster when he sees one."

And indeed Vin had no trouble identifying the paper as such, even without an identifying likeness of the felon to mark it. Still, it made no sense. And seeing the frown that drew down his brows in confusion, Bliss refolded the paper and returned it to his pocket.

"Why the confusion, Mr. Tanner? Did you think I desired the services of a wolf in order to track down sheep such as I have long hunted? Any farmyard dog could manage those whose continued existence proves inconvenient to others with money enough to remove such inconveniences. No. I have far more interesting prey in mind for you, ones more suited to your talents, men as hard and cunning as any wolf in the wild -- a true hunt, where predator and prey are evenly matched."

Vin blinked, comparing the present vision to memories of a spring night and death laid out for a crow's feast, words stirring at that touch of darkness remembered.

"You ever get up close when you kill, Mr. Tanner? Ever see the light go out of your victims' eyes? Ever feel their last breath on your face or touch the warmth of their blood? There's nothing like it in all the world. To hold that power in your hands, to sit in judgment on who will live and who will die -- it's more seductive than a lover's touch."

Those words echoed out of Vin's disjointed memory, bringing with them a

past vision of dark and light -- and a fear curled up tight within him. He refused, however, to acknowledge that fear. Instead, he sought out words of his own to banish it, aiming them at Bliss. "Thought it was the killing you liked."

"Ah yes. But death is but the end goal. And victory without challenge rings hollow."

Vin tracked through the words, seeking out the trail both behind and ahead of them. And frowning at the signs read, he said, "You want me to hunt bounty for you?"

"Not for, Mr. Tanner. With."

Another long moment passed, only the thudding of the horses' hooves in the soft ground and the occasional jingle of tack sounding in the silence that grew. Then, tracking ahead of Bliss' words, Vin deepened his frown and said, "I hunt men down and you kill them?"

The words were curious, the tone condemning -- and Bliss raised an eyebrow in challenge. "You object?" He shook his head, his disappointment plain. "Come, Mr. Tanner, I believe we've already established that your record in regards to the 'dead or alive' portion of bounty hunting is not unblemished. So it ill becomes you to declare a righteousness that does not and never has existed."

The fear within uncurled a little and Vin shifted in his saddle, the manacles at his wrist a jangling reminder of a different fear. And fighting both with anger, he tightened his jaw muscles and said, "And if I say I won't do it?"

"Oh, you'll do it. Why else are you here?"

Bliss spoke as one sure of himself and the power he wielded, as if he had only to say a thing to make it so. And there was truth enough in that arrogant certainty that Vin made no attempt to shake him from it, knowing the futility of trading words with one so well versed in them. And when his silence lengthened, Bliss took that as concession and forged ahead as if the matter were settled.

"A man and his wife were killed at a ranch near here three days ago.

The theory reported is that a couple of men came in out of the desert on foot and left the ranch riding two of the couple's horses. Two days ago, a young girl was raped and murdered not half a mile from her parent's homestead -- and ten miles from the ranch where the first murders occurred -- by two men, according to the sheriff who investigated the case."

Bliss waved a dismissive hand. "The reward offered is quite paltry, hardly worth the effort of walking across town to collect it, much less across the desert. But one must, at times, make do with what is at hand."

Tomlin gave another snort. "You making do with the bounty -- or the bounty hunter?"

Vin shot a glare to his guard, but it was Bliss who offered a response, his tone mild as he said, "I find this disparagement of Mr. Tanner's abilities rather surprising, sir, since he did, after all, prove himself

by giving you the slip. With ease, I might add."

Tomlin jerked his head around, a scowl warning of a hit fairly made if not to be acknowledged. "He got lucky is all. And besides, taking off from me is a damned sight different from tracking down a couple of murdering thieves."

"Indeed. And no doubt our quarry will prove far superior foes.

Nonetheless, I have no doubt that Mr. Tanner is up to the task."

Tomlin's scowl deepened, but he wasn't ready to concede defeat. "Tracks that old will be hard to follow -- even for a man with all his wits about him."

"Then the task will be all the more challenging and the victory in the end that much sweeter."

Tomlin gave another snort. "I wouldn't go holding my hand out for that bounty money just yet. Men like that won't come easy."

"No. I wouldn't think they would. And in fact, I'm counting on it."

Bliss gave a smile at that, the movement somehow reminiscent of a fox licking its chops of blood after a slaughter, and Tomlin shifted beneath it and returned his attention uncomfortably to the land ahead.

Silence descended, a mile passing and another. Then Vin turned to the one riding beside him still and gave voice to the question that had been working in him. "Why you doing this?"

Bliss shrugged. "The same reason as you once did, I imagine."

"Like hell!"

Bliss rode with his reins gripped loosely in his right hand in its sling -- the picture of a man at ease. And casting his gaze in his companion's direction, he made a lazy reply. "Deny it all you wish, Mr. Tanner. But such denial changes nothing. You are still as you were and will always be. As you once chose to hunt men, so have you chosen now. No one forced you then and no one forces you now, despite those cuffs on your wrists. You could have remained in that asylum, could have kept your conscience clear, could demand your return there now. Yet here you are."

Then, cocking his head, he gave Vin another chance to change his mind.

"Am I mistaken, Mr. Tanner? Do you wish to be returned to your happy little home in Ward D?"

When Vin made no reply, only sat working his jaw into lines of stubborn refusal, Bliss nodded. "Let us dispense then with these token protestations. You are where you have chosen to be and you will do as you long ago chose to do. And whatever serves as your conscience may rest easy at the knowledge that you will be doing no more than what the law allows in disposing of those who have set themselves in conflict with it."

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Such a distinction proved of little consolation to Vin. Nor did the choice of prey matter in the end, death the same whether it came to the innocent or guilty and him fully determined to forge his own trail around it. He had only to wait his chance.

And wait he did, miles more traveled past the asylum before they came to a tumble of rocks. Tomlin led the way then between them and to a small spring with a camp set up beside it. And standing there watching them, cocked gun in hand, was Sully, Tomlin's partner on Vin's forced removal to the asylum weeks past.

"He give you the slip?" the redheaded gunman asked as he eased the hammer of his gun back into its resting position. And when Tomlin only glared at him, Vin's mark on him plain, Sully slipped the gun back into its holster. "Figured he had when I didn't see you come out like you were supposed to. So I headed back here to wait."

He switched his gaze to Vin sitting still but watchful, then on to Bliss. "He give you any more trouble than that?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Tomlin gruffly declared before the preacher could make reply. Then, unhooking the chain anchoring Vin to his saddle horn, he gave it a sharp tug, taking up the slack and jerking Vin out of his saddle and to the ground, his horse dancing away at the violent dismount.

Vin was instantly on his feet. And taking hold of the chain he too pulled hard and it was then Tomlin's turn to fly out of the saddle. But before Vin could attempt to pull the chain free of his hold, Sully had his pistol out again and had moved forward to jam it into his neck, the sound of the hammer cocking again loud in Vin's ears.

Bliss sighed, his free hand moving to rest on his saddle horn as he settled himself with the weary resignation of a man faced with the inevitable stupidity of one far inferior. Then with a tone that warned he was not amused, he said, "And now, Mr. Tomlin, if you are finished 'handling' Mr. Tanner, perhaps you would be so kind as to ready him for travel."

Tomlin got up from the ground with a snarl, the chain still firmly in his grip. And giving it another jerk so that Vin stumbled forward, he took hold of one of the tracker's arms and dragged him to the camp, shoving him down roughly to the ground in front of the cold remains of the campfire and beside a saddlebag lying in front of it. Then with a growled warning to Vin to stay put, he dug into the saddlebag and withdrew a pair of pants and a set of drawers. And tossing them at Vin, he commanded him to get dressed.

Vin looked from him to the clothes he gathered in his hands. Both garments were clean and appeared new, the pants being of a far more durable material than what he then wore. Yet he hesitated to don them, afraid that it would somehow signal some measure of surrender he wasn't yet ready to concede.

"Come, Mr. Tanner," Bliss urged, still at ease in the saddle but his tone one of impatience. "We have no time for such a display of modesty. So unless you are willing to risk discovery, I suggest that you change your clothes so that we may be on our way."

Vin hesitated only a moment longer, the trails behind and before considered, the one behind certain, the one ahead still open to new paths laid. And again making his choice between them, he dug into one pocket to retrieve his harmonica, then fumbled with the buttons of the pants he wore and slid them down and off.

Noting as he did so the lack of anything beneath, Tomlin gave a leering grin. "Reckon he must have been right popular with all them crazies," he taunted. "So popular that they didn't want to waste any more time than necessary getting down to business."

Vin slipped into the drawers with a glare up at the one grinning down at him. It was Bliss, however, who made reply, sighing with his resignation more pained now than weary. "I bid you desist, Mr. Tomlin, for while a certain lack of refinement is to be expected in a hired gun, I find such vulgar displays offensive. You will therefore refrain from any further remarks of a crude nature. Am I understood?"

Tomlin scowled up at his employer sitting on his horse as if bored by antics too juvenile to be endured. "Maybe I ain't no fancy gentleman like yourself, Preacher. But at least I don't take on no airs to disguise the stink of death on me."

Bliss moved not a muscle, only looked with his boredom plain and a warning dark behind it and in the lazy tone of his voice. "And do you wish to remain free of such a foul odor, my good man, I would suggest that you keep your opinions to yourself and do as you are paid to do and only that." And when Tomlin made no reply, only shifted once again beneath that regard, he added, "Now, if you are finished displaying your inferior breeding, perhaps you can finish getting Mr. Tanner ready for travel."

Glad of the excuse to avoid that dark-eyed gaze, Tomlin stooped to dig socks and a pair of boots out of the saddlebag from whence the clothes had come. And slamming them onto the ground at Vin's feet, he stood waiting impatiently for his charge to finish dressing.

Then, when he was done and Tomlin would have reached down to drag him to his newly shod feet, Bliss stopped him, saying, "That is quite all right, Mr. Tomlin -- Mr. Sully will take charge of Mr. Tanner now."

Tomlin set his jaw in lines of anger, but his gaze was carefully averted from Bliss as he tossed Vin's chain to his partner. "Fine," he snarled. "Ain't like I've a mind to nursemaid no dummy anyhow."

Bliss waited while the others gained their mounts. Then, straightening in his saddle, he somberly said, "Very well, gentlemen. Let the hunt begin."

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN ~

Vin missed his hat, wasn't used to being out in the sun without it. For that matter, he wasn't used to being out of the sun without it either. Nor was he used to riding the range without his hide coat to keep the

elements off him, to help him blend into the colorless land. He missed his own boots and clothes. Missed his horse, his gun. Missed all the things that were his and chosen by him and acquired over a lifetime of being on his own and surviving whatever life threw at him. But nothing else would he allow himself to miss, all those things beyond touch and lost to him or taken or maybe just left behind. A man missed too much of what lay ahead in looking back. And the trail ahead was too dangerous a path to risk his attention elsewhere.

So he set himself to studying the land about, seeking out ways and means of escape. He could only work at that for so long though before his mind drifted away, moving freely from thought to memory and back again, like a housewife rooting through her attic in search of whatever treasures might have been stored there and forgotten, never lingering too long on any one discovery before moving on to the next. And no sooner did Vin bring his mind to bear once again on escape than some new thought took control, some long forgotten memory crowded out the concerns of the present or worry for the future, the past to be dusted off and labeled before being once again relegated to some dark corner of his mind.

So lost did he become in that mental sorting and reorganizing that he was unaware when scrub gave way to fences and weathered buildings -- until the cocking of a rifle scattered all thoughts but one and he sat up straight in his saddle, his hand going automatically to a gun long since gone, and the clanking of chain reminding him that much more than that was gone as well.

Blinking the confusion from his eyes, Vin took in his surroundings: a tumbledown house, a barn barely there, and a middle-aged man nearly as careworn as both standing on the canted porch with a rifle aimed squarely at Bliss' chest.

Bliss, however, showed no alarm, merely raised a slow hand to tip his hat to the man watching wary. "Good afternoon, sir," he smoothly greeted their unwilling host. "Have I the honor of addressing a Mr. Ben Gaither?"

The man narrowed his eyes, his rifle pulled back more firmly into his shoulder. And ignoring Bliss' question, he asked one of his own. "Who are you? And what are you wanting with Ben Gaither?"

Bliss lowered his arm, that hand coming to rest on his saddle horn, still no alarm evident, his posture one of ease, as was his tone as he said, "I, sir, am a servant of justice, in search of two murdering thieves who have recently plied their evil trade in this vicinity -- as Mr. Gaither and his family can sorely attest."

The man's eyes narrowed still further, this time in skeptical regard.

"You some kind of lawman?"

"In a manner of speaking," Bliss hedged. "We are, however, bound by no specific geographical boundaries. Instead we ply our trade as chance and circumstance permit."

The man on the porch gave a chuff of disgust. "Bounty hunters."

Bliss inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"And him?" The man jerked his chin at Vin sitting watching with sharp eyes belying his look of disinterest, the manacles at his wrists setting him outside the law.

"Merely proof of our efficacy as purveyors of justice, sir."

The man's gaze swung back to Bliss, his look considering, his tone now thoughtful as he said, "You got one in the hand and now you're going after two in the bush?"

"Such is my intention, yes."

The considering gaze shifted now to Tomlin and Sully, their eyes hard, their posture that of men taking none too kindly to a rifle aimed at them and held back from making that plain by one with eyes harder still. Killers, maybe, and not welcome among decent folk, his rifle still at the ready making that point of his own plain. Yet there was that in him that recognized the hope they held out to him, in the form of a prisoner bound and on his way to see justice met, a hard man by his looks and no match for such as these. And giving in to a need strong in him to exact some payment for the harm done to him and his, that overcoming his distaste for the company kept and their means of exacting payment, he returned his attention to Bliss, his tone one of challenge as he said, "You aiming to bring the bastards in alive -- or dead?"

The faintest of smiles touched one corner of Bliss' mouth. "Have you a preference, sir?"

"They killed my little girl, mister. So you send them to Hell and take your time in the sending."

A burning rage given voice and Bliss nodded, in both understanding and approval of the sentiment expressed. "Mr. Gaither, then. And my sympathies, sir, for your grievous loss. But rest assured that the foul creatures responsible will soon be meeting their just rewards. In order to assure that outcome, however, we will need to pick up their trail. So if you could direct us to the location at which your tragedy occurred, we'll be on our way."

Gaither kept the rifle up and aimed at Bliss still. Then with another look to the men behind and Vin in his chains, he hesitated only a moment more before lowering it. "All right, mister. But I'd best take you there. I got to warn you though that a posse didn't have much luck. Picked up the trail easy enough, but then lost it a few miles out. Couldn't even be sure the killers left the area. So most folks hereabouts are feeling mighty skittish. Lots of homesteaders have sent their womenfolk and young 'uns into town for safekeeping. So you'd best take care who you come up on out there. Lots of itchy trigger fingers just waiting for a chance to get scratched."

He stepped off the porch, rifle still in hand. "It's not far, so I'll just walk you over."

He led them then a short distance from the house and along a dusty track before stopping and saying, "This is it. Right through there." He pointed his rifle to the side of the road where a section of scrub had been trampled.

Tomlin was first through the break in the thin growth, Bliss behind him and Gaither bringing up the rear. And between them rode Vin, trailing behind Sully at the end of rope and chain. His face was blank still, but something within stirred, wrongs done in that place no longer just words on a wanted poster or strategy in a game played, a faceless tragedy to be used or discarded at will. And staring ahead at Bliss, he knew this for part of the game, a move he couldn't check without leaving himself open to a greater danger, some parts of himself to be sacrificed to save others -- that a lesson long ago learned and sometimes ruthlessly played out. He set his mind then to the playing of the game, looking ahead as they followed the signs of men passing for a hundred feet or so, finally stopping at a small clearing where the trampling seemed to be at its worst.

"This is where they...." Gaither faltered, then went grimly on. "This is where I found her, clothes all torn, blood everywhere." His voice started to shake, with anger and despair and a horror still fresh. "She was fourteen years old and they did unspeakable things to her. She was my little girl and they killed her like she was nothing." He looked up at Bliss, eyes shimmering with tears, searching out some answer, needing to make sense of a world become suddenly and horribly unfathomable. "How do you explain something like that? How do you explain to a five year old why his sister isn't coming home again? How do you explain to a mother that she needs to find heart enough in the shreds of it left to give hope to the children still alive and needing her? How do you explain any of this?"

It was a cry of loss unimagined, a plea for not comfort but assurance that the world was still safe, that those left would not be torn from him as well, that good still existed in the world, that evil was nothing but unlucky chance and not all there was of life.

It wasn't the false preacher though who gave answer, but Vin, lifting his gaze from the dark-stained ground to fasten it on one too unused to the darkness to recognize it in human form. "Some men got a dark in them, mister." His voice was raspy, the words coming easily from some untouched place within. "One so deep that light won't never shine there. So they got to steal all there is of light from them that got it so they won't be alone in the dark."

The grief-stricken father blinked up at him, but it was Bliss who offered words. "Spoken as one long accustomed to the dark, Mr. Tanner?" Vin ignored him, instead returning his gaze to the ground and the remnants of fresh horror scattered there, moves considered in the game playing, sacrifices to be made.

Gaither looked uncertainly from captive to captor, settling his gaze at last on Bliss. "I'm a simple man, mister. Don't know much about the why's and wherefore's of life. Always done what the Good Book says, or tried to, anyway. Always done my best to do right by folk. But this...." He shook his head, his gaze moving to the ground at his feet, his daughter's blood soaked there, pieces and bits of her clothing trampled into the dust giving mute testament to a young life brutally ended and no reason but the darkness of some men's souls offered. "I don't know how a man's supposed to feel when something like this happens. Don't know if the Lord will hold me to blame for the way I do feel -- wanting them that done this to suffer the way they made my girl suffer. All's I know is this -- " And lifting his head again, eyes dark with an anger shimmering behind the tears, he fiercely added, "If I were to get my hands on them sons of bitches, I'd shoot them full of holes, let plenty of light in before they take their places in Hell."

It was as if a light had dimmed in the speaking of those words, a darkness let in where none had shadowed before. And Vin looked up again with shadows in his own eyes, a long familiar anger at such a loss stirring. He made no attempt at a reply that time, however, instead leaving it to Bliss to offer the assurance sought.

"Indeed, sir. And you have my word that the men who have done such a foul deed will be dispatched to the bowels of Hell just as we can arrange it. Now perhaps you should return to your home, leave justice in our hands."

The grieving father, however, wasn't ready to turn his back on that place. "She was fourteen, mister. Had her whole life in front of her. She didn't deserve this. Don't no one deserve this. So don't let them that done this get away. They got to pay. They got to pay for what they done to my little girl, for what they made her suffer and for all they took from her. And you got to make sure they don't do this to no one else." Gaither gripped his rifle hard then and turned, away from the blood on the ground but taking that darkness starting with him, Vin watching as he moved away and for a long moment after he disappeared into the scrub and back to a home that would never be the same with one well loved missing from it.

Tomlin, however, went untouched by the drama just unfolded. "We going to do this or not?" he asked, his bored gaze on Bliss.

Bliss only watched their captive, waiting.

"Hell," Tomlin continued, flicking a dismissive look to Vin. "I bet the dummy don't even have a clue as to what happened here."

"Oh, he knows," Bliss replied, his gaze still on Vin. "He knows far more than you could ever understand. You only play at shadows. He lives them. He knows their every shade, every shifting pattern, knows how deeply among them a man might go before becoming one with them."

Tomlin snorted. "You make him sound like some kind of stone cold killer

instead of some half-witted dummy escaped out of the nuthouse." Bliss turned then to the doubting Tomlin, his eyes on him hard and devoid of light. "And do you think he would not slit your throat without pause did he have the means to do so?" His mouth upturned into a mirthless smile. "Sleep well at night then, sir, and turn your back on him with assurance by day. But I do not recommend it. No, I do not recommend it at all."

Vin shifted his gaze then, turning to lock blue eyes with dark, an acknowledgment passing between predator and prey and neither of them knowing which was which. Then, without a word or change of expression, Vin slid off his horse to kneel on the stained ground, one hand reaching to take up a bit of bloodied cloth.

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He held on to that bit of cloth, kept it clutched in one hand as he rode, never letting it go as he slid off his horse time and again to study the telltale signs of his prey's passing. He didn't know why he held on to it. Maybe to keep his mind focused. Maybe to remind him it was that which had set him along the trail he followed and not the iron cuffs at his wrists. But whatever the reason, he held on to that bit of a young girl's life -- and death -- and his mind remained focused. Focused enough that he allowed himself no consideration of anything beyond the hunt, beyond signs and possibilities, beyond instinct and too deep a knowledge of men gone wrong.

No words passed between the hunters, the only sounds that of the horses' hooves thudding softly, the jangling of tack, the rattle of the chain running from the manacles about Vin's wrists to Sully's saddle horn. Vin, however, was too absorbed in studying and planning ahead to be aware of that lack of words or to care if he had taken note. It was the way he worked, instinct and dark knowledge not much given to an easy definition, an orderly recitation of form. Never had he had the words to explain what he did or knew or felt, nor was what he did something that could be taught. Oh, he could point out the difference in hoof prints, could detail the signs read and what they meant, could tell the tricks the hunted sometimes employed. But how could one teach the instinct that allowed him to guess a trail not seen, to plot moves before they were played out and counter them? How could one share that gift of knowing, that understanding of a mind not his, maybe not even human? What words could he use to describe that wild in him that had so little of human thought or experience in it?

He couldn't lay it out in his mind, couldn't grab hold of it to study it or understand it, no more than he could explain the sounds he breathed out on his harmonica, those bits of himself expressed in notes no one but him found melodious. And maybe that was because there was something off about him, something out of tune with the rest of the world. Maybe that wild in him was a savage thing born of some inner darkness that

most men never knew or maybe just hid well enough that it never saw the light of day. And maybe Bliss was right, maybe they weren't so far different. Maybe he was only better at hiding that darkness within. And maybe that bit of cloth held tight was no more than an excuse to unleash the wild in him and call it justice served.

Vin eased his hold on the cloth at the thought, looked down on it as if he could read some sign in the blood stained dark there, could somehow tell from that whether or not the trail he followed was the right one and not a trap laid from which he might never escape. But it wasn't any sign he was used to following and he couldn't read it, could only rely on that instinct in him strong to make right what had gone wrong even if by another's hand, to keep from harm those who walked too freely in the light to know what danger lay in the dark. That was how he had always kept back the darkness gathered, by safeguarding that light by which the more fortunate walked. It was what kept him from getting lost. And if the trail upon which he'd set himself was lit with only a lighter shade of dark, it would be enough to keep him going. And so he closed his hand about the cloth again and turned his attention back to the trail ahead.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT ~

By the time Bliss called a halt to the hunt, the sun was low in the sky and Vin weary from too little food and too much sun, and exhausted from the strain of following one trail while searching out another. He therefore climbed gratefully off his horse when Sully ordered him down and onto the ground in the spot indicated, the shadows cast by the low scrub long enough by then to provide some measure of shade. And when Bliss limped to join him and Tomlin began a grumbling removal of the horses' saddles, Vin breathed a sigh of relief that the halt was apparently to be for the night.

His relief was tempered though when Sully secured the chain leading from his manacles about a sturdy-looking bit of scrub and padlocked it in place. And when the gunman then left to collect his saddlebags and returned to pull a set of leg irons out of it, Vin scrambled to his feet, breath coming fast and jaw set in dangerous lines.

"Tomlin!" Sully called, stopping to stand out of reach of whatever counteroffensive the captive might launch. "Give me a hand here."

Tomlin gave a grunting acknowledgment, then took hold of the saddle he'd just uncinched, dragging it off the horse and hauling it to the camp being set up. And dumping it onto the ground in a cloud of dust, he grabbed his pistol out of its holster, aimed it at Vin's right leg and growled, "Now, I say it would be a whole mite easier to hobble him with a bullet. He won't even think to try escaping then."

Bliss slipped a flask out of his waistcoat and unscrewed its lid, his gaze never rising from his task as he mildly said, "Indeed, Mr. Tomlin."

However, a tracker with but one useful leg leaves much to be desired. In which case I believe it sufficient to simply point out to our guest that he has yet to partake of the evening meal.. Nor will he until those leg irons are safely in place."

Vin looked then from Bliss, to Tomlin with his gun out and cocked, and to Sully behind him, leg irons in hand. It was useless to stand against them, that he knew. They had only to do as Bliss had said and starve him into submission. And he could ill afford such weakness, needing all his strength if he was to have any chance at escape. So, with a lift of his chin, he gave in, sitting down again, his gaze shifting to a distance behind his captors, his posture that of a man giving in but not up. Sully approached warily then, setting the irons around Vin's ankles as Tomlin stood guard. And when he was safely secured, they went about setting up the camp, not again acknowledging his existence, except to offer him food, until the meal was done. And then he became the center of Bliss' attention, the older man leaning back against his saddle on the ground, hands folded across his middle in the pose of a man well satisfied, his gaze on the one across the fire staring back with the light of flames dancing in his eyes.

"Admit it, boy," he softly commanded, his voice drifting into the night as did the ashes above the burning bits of wood. "You were in your element today. You had only to smell blood spilled and the wild in you couldn't be denied."

Tomlin snorted. "He don't look wild to me. Just looks like a dummy in chains. And the only reason he's wearing them is to keep him from taking off -- never mind what you said about him being dangerous. Hell, he ain't got sense enough for that."

"Doesn't take much sense to be dangerous," Sully pointed out as he tossed a handful of kindling onto the fire. "And sometimes the less sense a man has, the more dangerous he is."

"You saying you're scared of him?"

"I'm saying I have sense enough not to go riling a cougar, in chains or not."

Tomlin gave a derisive laugh. "Hell, the dummy there ain't nothing but an ol' pussy cat. Just look at him!"

Sully did, his gaze shifting to the one sitting still and in chains, but with a darkness shadowing eyes untouched by the light of the fire mirrored there. "Maybe," he conceded doubtfully. "But even the tamest of cats have claws."

Tomlin shook his head and lay back against his saddle, his pose that of a man in no fear of any danger, real or imagined. "Sully, you're just an old woman. Always have been. And the preacher there ain't no better -- both of you scared of a damned dummy."

"Maybe. But it's better to die old and cautious than young and reckless."

When Tomlin only offered another snort in response, Bliss took up the challenge. "You have no hope then, Mr. Sully, for your companion's longevity? You think the race goes to the slow and steady rather than to those who race ahead incautiously?"

"Something like that."

Tomlin moved his hands to the back of his head, lacing his fingers to provide a cushion against his hard pillow. "Hell, Sully. No one ever got ahead by sitting in a rocking chair knitting."

"And few young men grow old if they don't first grow wise," Bliss pointed out. Then, taking up the cane lying at his side, he turned his gaze to the lion head shining gold at its head, twisting it in the shifting light of the fire. "There are, however, different manners of wisdom. There is the intellectual knowledge of the world and the way it works. And there is an instinctual understanding that has nothing to do with a man's intelligence. Give a learned man unused to the wild a map, and he can follow it to his destination. But without that map, he is lost. The wilderness has no meaning for him save as a collection of dirt and trees and mountains that stand between him and wherever he wishes to be. A man such as Mr. Tanner, however, has intimate knowledge of each and every tree, recognizes a piece of land by its smell, by the particular shade of its soil. He knows the passes through the mountains and where each and every spring is located. It is, in fact, men such as he who draw the maps for the rest of us."

Vin paid scant attention to the words, the day too long and wearying for him to track his way through them. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the lion head glittering, the crackling of that small campfire mixing with the roar of an engulfing blaze, memories stirring and overlaying the present darkness with one past.

Tomlin flicked him a sneering look. "So what if you're right about him and you got your own little map maker, some dummy who ain't any more than a dumb animal scratching in the dirt to keep himself fed. I still say it's a lot of trouble to go to just so's you can go chasing down a hundred dollar reward."

Bliss continued to study the golden lion's head. "Civilized men have long journeyed into the wilderness, Mr. Tomlin, sometimes at great expense, in order to experience this sort of test. Man against nature. The tame against the wild. Pitting one's skills against a worthy adversary." He looked up then, his cane stilling, his voice taking on a seductive tone. "But what is a hunt for grizzly or lions as compared to the ultimate test -- man against man? And not just any man, but murderers and thieves, hard men and dangerous, who are as likely to turn hunter as to allow themselves to be hunted."

Vin blinked, memories stilling along with the cane as something in that flow of words captured his attention, some soft sound of hunger, the indrawn breath of a predator sifting the still air for a telling scent.

And turning his gaze upwards to the shadows shifting across Bliss' face, he searched out danger.

Oblivious to the game being played in shadows, Tomlin continued his challenge. "So you figure the dummy really knows what he's doing out here. You reckon he can read sign well enough to track down them killers you're after. And maybe he can. Maybe he's got sense enough to be your hound dog. But even if he does, how do you know he ain't just running you in circles or leading you on some wild goose chase?"

"Because he wants those men, Mr. Tomlin. Not for the paltry money their capture will bring. Not to stay out of some asylum. And not even for the challenge. But to survive."

"To survive? What's that mean? You plan on killing him if he don't do like you say? Thought you was just going to send him back to that nuthouse."

Bliss shook his head. "It is not a fear of death which drives him, but a fear of extinction, of the dying out of a breed." And when Tomlin only looked puzzled, he thumped his cane onto the ground. "Come, come, sir. It is not that far a reach to understand the simplicity of nature. All you need do is to look at the animal kingdom. Do you then see a community of beasts coexisting in harmonious accord? No. You see predators and prey, even those within a species in competition with one another for food, for mates, for territory. And it is the strong who survive, even within a group. Not necessarily the young, mind you, for sometimes it is the older who outlast the younger, having learned the dangers inherent in the wild. As Mr. Sully pointed out, the young and reckless do not last long. It is the slow and steady who win the race to survival. And it is they who live long enough to pass on that slow and steady nature to their offspring. The survival of the fittest, Mr. Tomlin. That is what it is all about."

"And you think the dummy there is fit enough to survive? More fit than most? More fit than the rest of us, maybe?"

Tomlin's tone was scoffing, and Bliss looked across the fire to the one watching, cataloguing, searching out the shadows, one who had long since learned to offer challenge only when he could be sure of winning, who knew when to submit to a greater force or withdraw to await a weakening, a mistake made. And with a small smile of satisfaction, he said, "I assure you, Mr. Tomlin -- of Mr. Tanner's superiority in this matter I have no doubt."

Tomlin sat up at that, scowling. And rushing to head off whatever angry words his partner was fixing to utter heedless of danger, Sully rejoined the discussion. "What are you saying, Reverend? That Tanner is hunting down those men to prove he deserves to be top dog?"

"No. It is not a contest of which I speak but an instinct in him strong to survive, to seek out the weaker and destroy them before they can pass that weakness on to their offspring. It is not even a conscious act

on his part. He has no idea why he does what he does, he simply does it. Oh, he might try to rationalize it by saying he is doing the world a favor by ridding it of evil. But the truth is, he is no better than the criminals he hunts. He's simply the superior killer."

Vin grew still at that, denial rising quick in him. But quicker still was that fear buried deep and warning of truths best left unspoken, of a darkness too well known and understood. And refusing to offer challenge, to risk defeat without some assurance of success, he turned away from

his fear and the one who stirred it to life, lying down on the hard ground and curling into himself with a rattle of chains, his back to the warmth of the fire and the light.

As exhausted as he was though, Vin was unable to sleep, too cold and weary to give in to his body's needs. So it was that long after the others sought their hard beds and grew still and quiet, he lay looking up at the stars shining among the scattering of clouds in the night sky.

Always they had spoken to him of freedom, nothing between him and them, the wide land beneath them stretching away to forever. And still they spoke of that longing in him, no matter the chains binding him. So long as they shone, so long as the land stretched away to forever, some part of him would be free. And somehow, someday, sometime, he would loose his chains and never again be bound by them. Of that he was certain.

Thus comforted, he sought out the harmonica he dared not play for fear of having it once again taken from him, fingering it in the pocket in which it was safe hidden, hearing within himself the notes of longing and regret, of a still desert night and things long lost and never forgotten. And with that music playing in his head, he at last fell asleep.

His rest was not peaceful, however, his dreams of a crow in flight mocking a wolf prowling in shadows, blood staining its fur, a deadness in its eyes and slaughter in its wake -- and a choice of two paths on which it might travel, one leading deeper into the shadows, one away. And when the wolf set foot on the path into shadows, Vin jerked awake, heart racing and his eyes opening to a sky thick with clouds and devoid of stars.

He slept no more after that, turning to lay on his side again, curled against the cold, his mind skipping from thought to thought, nothing sure or real to him but the irons clamped tight about wrists and ankles. Not even the soft sounds of breathing beyond the softly glowing campfire or the occasional stirring of a sleeping form was real to him. They were ghost sounds in the night, with only the barest trace of light from a dying fire to keep him from being alone in the dark.

He didn't then consider escape, didn't challenge his place there on that trail laid out or where it would end. Plans and choices were made and no profit in doubting them. He would simply have to wait to see how it all played out.

And wait he did, for long hours, the campfire warm ashes by the time the sun showed promise of a new day's rising. He felt no less alone, however, as the world grew light again and the camp stirred to life. Nor did he have any better chance at escape, breakfast accomplished while he was still in chains, his needs taken care of before he was loosed from his night's anchor, the leg irons removed with Tomlin at the ready, gun drawn and an eagerness shining in his eyes to make use of it.

Then he was on his horse and once again tethered to Sully's mount, Tomlin and Bliss strung behind Sully as they set off into the early morning, dew still heavy in the tracks sunk into the soft earth and leading further into the desert, the bloodied bit of cloth once again clutched as a talisman, his protection against setting foot too deep into the shadows.

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The sun rose and fell and still Vin followed the killers' trail, although at times it proved nearly impossible, his mind wandering again and again, the strain of trying to keep it focused exhausting him. At one point in the early afternoon, he lost the trail, his mind wandering too far and too long. And tempted as he was to keep going, to stray far from the trail laid, he had only to look on that bit of bloodied cloth still clutched in one hand to remember there was more at stake than his own freedom. So he turned and backtracked, ignoring Tomlin's jeers.

After that, Bliss rode beside him, making comments and asking questions about the trail followed, as if he were an eager student wanting to soak up knowledge. His eyes, however, told another tale, a darkness there that absorbed not knowledge but light, feeding on it as a crow upon a bloody corpse. His interest was genuine, that Vin knew. He knew as well though that Bliss' aim was to keep him focused on the task at hand, to keep his mind from wandering any more freely than did his chained body. And it worked, Bliss' voice drawing his attention back to the tracks he followed each time he started to drift. Never though did he acknowledge Bliss' presence there or those freely flowing words. Still, Bliss only let up on their infrequent stops for rest and food.

As the day wore on and Vin grew wearier with each mile passed, he began to wonder how it was Bliss kept going. No longer a young man, hampered by a bad leg and an injured arm, and surely not used to long hours in the saddle, he was nonetheless unflagging in both energy and interest, the urge in him strong to push forward. Not even long shadows of the setting sun persuaded him to call a halt to the hunt, only the smell of smoke blowing faint from the trail ahead causing him to pull up rein. "We catch up to them already?" Tomlin asked in surprise, his horse dancing with its rider's rising excitement.

Bliss looked to Vin for an answer and the tracker struggled to track his way through the possibilities, raising the hand not holding on to the bloodied cloth to rub at his aching head, his other hand brought up as

well by the chain stretched between wrist cuffs. Then, finding what he felt sure was the correct sign, he searched out the words needed and worked his tongue around them. "Tracks are still old."

"Maybe they've holed up in a camp," Sully offered. "Men like that might be stupid enough to stop running too soon."

His earlier boredom gone, Tomlin straightened in his saddle and eagerly said, "Only one way to find out."

Bliss shifted his gaze from eager gunman to quiet captive, one a hunting dog straining at its leash to get to the kill, the other a wolf tired from a long hunt and seemingly too weary to heed the instinct that had driven it to that point. And that it was only weariness responsible for that dull look in Tanner's eyes, that look of near defeat, Bliss was sure. Let him catch sight of his prey and he would revive, that thrill coursing now through his master to be his as well. His heart would then race, his mind sharpen, his breath come fast and shallow. His vision would narrow, only that which lay before in existence. Muscles would tighten, his body grow warm. He would raise his head, nostrils flaring, to catch the scent of fear -- and death at hand.

And with that certainty in mind, Bliss nodded to Tomlin, saying, "We'll circle around, come in from behind and scout out their position -- quietly."

"And if it's them?"

Bliss looked to Vin, but it was to Tomlin he spoke. "If it's them, then to the victor will go the spoils."

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They did as Bliss had decreed, circling around and coming upon the camp from behind, Tomlin in the lead that time, Vin riding as if drifted away, gaze at a distance, giving no sign of awareness. Yet he was alert to every whisper of wind in the dry brush, of the squeak of saddle leather, of hooves falling upon the soft ground. He noted every shadow swaying, every twitch in the hand resting on Tomlin's gun in its holster, of the soft rise of dust beneath the horses' hooves. And he knew what lay ahead, could feel the stirring of a crow's wings, remembered too well the look of death coming.

His heart began to beat fast, his breath coming quick and shallow at the choice made, his mind growing sharp in search again of some other trail, his vision seeming to blur, the light fading at the edges and shading into dark. But still no other path could he find. And if that lesser shade of dark was darkness still, it was all he had of victory, all he had besides that bit of bloodied cloth to which he might cling. So he held tight and lowered his head, eyes closing against what was to come. His head came up though when his horse came to a stop a short time later, his eyes opening to take in the scrub and the thin plume of smoke rising above it a hundred feet ahead.

Tomlin slid off his horse and tied its reins to a sturdy bit of brush.

Then slipping his rifle out of its scabbard, he looked to Bliss. "Want me to go check it out?"

Bliss shot a look to Vin, his eyes lit with an excitement that had the tracker turning his head away and his grip tightening on that bit of cloth held fast. Bliss, however, had no intention of allowing him to so easily escape. "You've brought us this far, Mr. Tanner. And I think it only right that you lead us to the final ending of this particular trail."

Vin kept his head turned. But at a tug on the chain from Sully he slid off his horse and walked ahead of the gunmen, Tomlin's rifle cocked and ready, and Bliss bringing up the rear, his cane thumping into the soft earth.

He could hear voices as they drew near to the spot from which the plume of smoke rose, and the others crouched low, Sully pulling Vin down with him. And staying behind the screen of brush, they slowly crept forward, stopping when the ground dropped away to a dry creek bed half a dozen feet below their level. And there, twenty feet ahead, camped two men, a pot of what Vin guessed to be beans set over a small campfire and a bottle of whiskey passing between them.

"An easy enough shot," Tomlin softly declared as he flattened himself on the ground. "I can get them both before they even know what hit them."

"I'm not so sure they're the ones we're after," Sully whispered in turn, shoving Vin down onto his stomach before lying down beside him at the lip of the creek bed. He pointed to a spot above the camp, where four horses stood tied.

Bliss took up a position between Vin and Tomlin, studying the camp and the ground around it as he softly said, "Mr. Tanner?"

Vin hesitated only a moment, then pointed to a fall of rock further down the creek bed, where a boot and part of a leg showed, stretched out on the ground and lying with the stillness of death.

"Guess it's them, all right then," Sully conceded.

"Want me to take them?" Tomlin tried again.

Bliss shook his head. "These particular spoils are for the victor to claim." And reaching out a hand, he said, "Hand me your rifle."

Tomlin looked as if he were inclined to refuse. Then with a curse he did as commanded, jabbing the weapon towards the hand held out.

Vin turned then to watch Bliss, expecting him to make use of the rifle, shutting his mind against it, no matter that the men below were dead by one means or another and death the same in whatever form it arrived.

But the false preacher only held the weapon loosely in front of him, his eyes turning to meet Vin's gaze. "The choice is yours, boy -- whether to do as you have always done and deal death at a distance or to make it a more personal pleasure."

Vin blinked, not at first understanding this latest move in Bliss'

game. Then as he tracked his way to the meaning behind the words, he spat out a curse and started to push himself up. Sully, however, shoved him down again with a none too gentle hand on his back.

"Come, boy," Bliss chided, the rifle held not six inches from Vin's manacled hands. "This is not some tame town and we its sheep wary of too sharp a tooth. There's no need here to hide what you are, to dress the truth up in fine linen. We know that were you alone you would lie here as you now do and put a quick end to those below. Two shots. Two bounties taken. We know, the same as do you, that any attempt to play the hero and take such men alive would be a fool's gambit -- and a fool would never have lasted this long in the game we play. So leave off the pretense and choose."

Vin glared at Bliss for a long moment, anger rising at being trapped there, at being faced with a choice not expected and afraid that it showed some lack in him that at one time he would no doubt have tracked ahead to such a move. Another thing lost and taken. Another trap laid and him fallen into it. A wild need to escape, to regain control of a life too long not his to command, rose in him. He wanted his life back, wanted his freedom. Wanted to be quit of that place and that fear always at the edge of the shadows that he would never be more than he then was, would never have more. And giving into that fear, into need and anger, he let go of the bit of bloodied cloth onto which he'd clung and lunged for the rifle in Bliss' hand, determined in that moment to win free at any cost. Snatching it up, he fumbled to bring it around even as he pushed up to his knees. Before he could find the trigger, though, or even get the weapon aimed, he heard Sully behind him. And twisting, he tried to scramble clear. But he was too late -- as a sharp pain in the back of his head and a descending curtain of darkness attested.

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He awoke to true darkness, stars shining dimly in the clear night sky above attesting to time passed. And after a minute's blinking gaze his mind cleared enough for him to take stock. On his back in the sand, the weight of chains still at his wrists and again at his ankles -- a prisoner still. And searching out his guards, he turned his head towards a small campfire burning a few feet away.

"About time you come to."

Vin looked across the fire to Sully, who sat cleaning his pistol, his gaze on him as he added, "I was beginning to think I was going to have to hightail it out of here for knocking whatever sense you got left out of that thick head of yours."

Vin blinked at him, then shifted his gaze to either side of the gunman, frowning to discover they were alone.

"Bliss and Tomlin have gone to collect on that bounty you weren't too keen on," Sully told him, correctly guessing the reason for the tracker's frown. "Seems Bliss doesn't much care for doing things the easy way."

Said he hadn't had near enough sport, that he'd have to liven things up a little to make it all worth his while."

Vin's frown deepened and Sully shrugged at it. "Don't know what he meant by that and don't want to. Seen men like that before -- in the war and after. Get a taste for killing and after a while, it gets too tame for them. Then they have to find ways to make it more interesting. And the more interesting it gets, the more dangerous they get. So if you got any sense, you'll tread soft around him. Just give him what he wants and soon enough he'll get bored and find some other game to play at. Make it easier on all of us."

Too weary and sore of head to argue the point, Vin turned his head away, his gaze going back to the stars, his mind drifting to some place without chains and crows and darkness.

How long he drifted, he didn't know. But soft sounds stirring in the desert night brought him back to awareness and he turned his head to watch as Tomlin returned to the camp with a torch in hand and Bliss thumping his way behind him. Not a word did either man speak. Tomlin only tossed the torch into the campfire and hunched down beside it, his eyes glittering with more than the firelight, some excitement there tinged with disquiet, his gaze going to Bliss as he lowered himself to his bedroll before the fire, then away again.

Vin's gaze too went to the false preacher sitting before the fire as one contented, flask brought out and bad leg stretched before him, gaze on the fire. Dark against dark he was, his clothes one with the night, his eyes like shadows in his face, only the lighter shade of his skin reflecting the light of the campfire.

For a long moment Bliss sat thus, still and quiet, as if lost in some pleasant reverie, Vin watching just as still and silent. Then a spark leaped from the flames, shooting skyward, and Bliss raised his eyes to meet the gaze fastened on him -- and Vin had a sudden image of a crow having fed on death and sated, perched now in some high place to await the next feast, waiting for death and a wolf to lay it at his feet.

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Chapter note: I checked -- Charles Darwin's Origin of Species, his theory of evolution via what is popularly known as the survival of the fittest, was first published in 1859. And please bear in mind that this is Bliss' own interpretation of that work and hence subject to warping.

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~ CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE ~

Vin slept no more that night, his mind too filled with the nightmare in which he was caught up to court sleep and its own brand of haunted dreams. So he lay on the hard ground, shivering in the cold desert air, listening to the undisturbed rhythms of Bliss' breathing. And as the night hours passed, that soft sound took on the beat of a crow's wings whispering in flight, a harbinger of death inescapable. Yet Vin clung to a

hope that was more determination than belief that he would somehow win free, that he would soon be able to leave behind chains as he'd left behind walls, that he would ride free of that dark shadow of death gliding ahead on the trail on which he was set.

So the night passed and morning came, the camp stirring back to life once again, Tomlin seeing to the horses and Sully to breakfast. Bliss, however, sat silent, as if wrapped up in some pleasant memory, an air of contentment about him that had Vin turning to stare out into the desert, trying to lose himself in colors softly awakening, in the distance of land and sky. And for a time he was able to forget the harshness of the desert, forget how the early morning light dulled the sharp reality of danger in too much heat and not enough water, how it tricked the eye into seeing more than an unforgiving emptiness stretching endlessly away. There in that moment was not death for the unwary, but a beauty of color and freedom.

All too soon though he was jerked back to shadows and chains when Sully shoved a plate of food at him. And raising bound hands to take it, he turned away from what lay beyond to consider what lay before, possibilities once again considered and moves and countermoves plotted and planned. He then settled in to await the next play in the game.

It wasn't long in coming, Tomlin no sooner done with his breakfast than he went to retrieve the men who were now no more than a sum of money to be collected. And while Sully cleaned up the camp and readied the horses, Bliss continued to sit, his gaze on Vin, who studiously ignored him. Then he spoke, his tone soft and distant, as if he gave voice to some inner dialogue.

"It's always best at night, stepping out of the shadows, every child's nightmare of monsters in the dark come true. You can see it in their faces sometimes, that fear of something more than death." He smiled, a slight upturn of the corners of his mouth, his gaze losing its focus in dreamy contemplation -- and Vin turned his gaze to it, drawn by words and tone and knowledge to sit staring with a sick fascination. "That's what it is all about -- that look, that knowledge in the last seconds of their lives when they know they are helpless against you. It is as a drug working its way through your system, that feeling of such power, such utter omnipotence. There's nothing like it in all the world. It's as if you've ascended the heights of Mount Olympus and become god." His tone lowered, became seductive, and his gaze on Vin regained its focus, the dark in his eyes a challenge. "You've felt it too, haven't you, boy? You've been driven nearly mad with that hunger in you, gone wild at the scent of fear. I saw it there in that clearing, with the murdered girl's blood on the ground and torn bits of her clothing scattered about. I saw the look that came into your eyes when you took up that small piece of her death." He leaned forward, his words carrying over the dead campfire as if borne on crow's wings. "It's who you are, boy. It is

everything you are or will ever be. It's all that you know and live and breathe. It's what you dream about when you're alone in the dark. And the sooner you admit it, the sooner you give yourself fully to it, the sooner those chains will come off."

Vin met that gaze squarely, held out against it for a long moment. Then the darkness shadowing there turned knowing, and Bliss softly hissed, "The dead speak your name, Mr. Tanner. Hide from yourself if you will, but they'll know you still."

Vin jerked his head away then and set his gaze once again at a distance, making no move that would stir unwanted whispers, that would chase some shadowed truth into the light. Not then would he give in to doubts and fears. And not there. Not with those eyes upon him.

Bliss, however, seemed unperturbed by his stubborn silence, no answer expected but the one given. And so he sat back again, that knowing smile returned, content to wait and watch and remember.

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When Tomlin returned with two blanket-wrapped bodies draped over their horses and two more horses tied in a line behind them, Vin took one look and one look only. He then returned his gaze to a distance, keeping it there as he was released from his night's anchor and the leg irons, as he was led to his horse and mounted up, and as the chain that had before been attached to Sully's saddle horn was wrapped around his own and padlocked in place. Then Sully kicked his horse forward into the desert, back in the direction from which they had come, Vin's horse forced into line behind the gunman's by the rope tied to its bridle. And still he kept his gaze set far ahead, never once looking back, not at Bliss, or Tomlin, or the horses and their burdens strung behind. Nor did he speak a word or acknowledge the occasional words spoken to him. For three days he rode at a distance, wrapped in silence and seeming not to notice any of what went on around him, not Bliss' eyes upon him or Sully's grudging care, not Tomlin's departure midway in their travels with the four horses and their burdens or his return alone and with a packet of money he split with Sully. He only looked ahead and waited. And he was waiting still when they stopped at a small ranch late that third afternoon, no chance at escape having presented itself nor any hope evident of such being manufactured. He thought at first the stop was for water and stayed at that distance set, until Bliss dismounted at the foot of the steps leading to the porch of the house and handed his reins to Tomlin, saying, "See that Mr. Tanner is situated. Then I'll want to see you inside."

With that he disappeared into the house and Vin refocused his gaze, the trail ahead forgotten and every detail of what lay around him taken in: the main house with a porch running the length of it in the front; an empty corral across from the house and beside a small barn; a smaller bunkhouse beyond that; no sign of life, whether animal or human; an air

of abandonment about the place, but not decay, the ranch not so long ago a working one, if never, apparently, prosperous. And stretching away on all sides was miles of open land, and hills in the far distance to the south and west, with again no sign or life or other habitation.

His new prison, Vin guessed, and waited for walls and locks to come, his gaze turned not to his captors dismounting on either side of him, but to the sky above, sure that if he could only slip free of his chains he would be able to lose himself in the far reach of it. And it was at that distance that he kept his gaze as the gunmen led their horses and his across the yard to the corral, tying them off there.

Neither Tomlin nor Sully spoke, too many long days in the saddle having taken their toll, a weariness about them suggesting that they wanted nothing more than to get through whatever tasks lay ahead so that they might take their ease. Nor would Vin ask anything of them, only removed his gaze from above and slid from his horse when Sully unlocked the chain from around his saddle horn. And when he was shoved towards the open door of the barn, he moved towards it, his eyes squinting against the dark interior as he stepped inside. He then followed Sully's shoving directions to a stall at the far back of the building.

"Get on in there," Sully ordered when he stood uncertainly gazing into the empty box. "This is where you'll be staying."

Vin remained in place, staring into the stall empty of anything but a bucket, a blanket and a thick layer of musty hay.

"Hell," Tomlin grumbled. "He gone deaf as well as dumb?" And with that he gave Vin a hard shove, sending him stumbling into his new quarters. Another shove sent him into the wall at the back of the stall, his manacled arms coming up to cushion the impact. Then a jerk of the chain between the manacles had him spinning around to face his captors, an anger long held back rising in him then. And jaw set, he took hold of the chain in turn and pulled hard, Sully that time stumbling forward. But before Vin could make a move towards him or his gun in its holster, Tomlin had his own weapon out and trained on him.

"That preacher ain't going to squawk about a bullet in the leg now, Dummy," he growled. "Not if you push me to it."

Vin remained unyielding a moment longer, chain still held tight, jaw clenched, breathing fast and hard. Then Tomlin thumbed back the hammer of his gun and the tracker waited only a moment longer before losing hold of the chain.

"Maybe you ain't so dumb after all," Tomlin conceded, a tone almost of disappointment in his voice. Then with a jerk of his gun towards one corner of the stall, he added, "Now you get yourself over there and sit. Then shuck them boots off and toss them over here, nice and easy."

Vin gave a defiant lift of his chin but did as commanded, moving slowly to sit in one corner of the stall. And, his eyes on Sully as he moved to an iron ring set into the wall at the back of the box several feet

above the hay-covered ground, he pulled off his boots and tossed them to land at Tomlin's feet. Sully then padlocked the chain running from the manacles to the ring on the wall and stepped back and away.

"That ought to hold him," he declared. "But just to make sure he doesn't get far if it doesn't...." He moved out of the stall and came back a moment later with the set of leg irons retrieved from his saddlebags.

"Now, don't make this any harder than it needs to be," he warned as he approached Vin in his corner. "Just stick your legs out and let's get this over and done with."

His chance at escape disappearing with every rattle of every chain set to bind him to Bliss' chosen trail, Vin felt a wild urge to rush his captors, even knowing how hopeless it would be, preferring anything for that breath of time to another second of captivity. But as quick as the urge rose, it was overruled, instinct too strong to throw hard-earned years of life away. So he set his gaze at a distance once again and thrust his legs out before him.

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Another three days and he saw nothing of Bliss, saw nothing of anything but the stall in which he was chained and what there was to be seen in the half light filtering through the open doors of the barn beyond that and the horses stabled there. Nor was there anything of any consequence that passed in those three days. He only sat or paced within the narrow confines of the stall, his movements hampered by not only the chain anchored to the wall, but the leg irons about his ankles. And just as restless was his mind, his thoughts, when he could so order them, on escape. But neither chains nor the irons binding him showed promise of giving way, despite long hours spent at the task of trying to weaken both. Nor did Sully or Tomlin provide an opening during their infrequent visits with food, taking care to set the cup and plate down at the limit of his reach and to instruct him to do the same with the bucket used to collect his waste. And so when he grew weary of thoughts leading nowhere, or when they jumbled into a confusion he couldn't untangle, he turned to his harmonica, taking care always to play it softly, notes coming low and mournful and an ear kept out for footsteps heralding the approach of a captor.

It was thus he was occupied on that third day of his captivity in that box, wedged into a corner, hay piled there to make for a comfortable bed. Lunch had been delivered not long before, scattered into the hay of the stall by a jeering Tomlin, bored with his own lack of activity and hoping to relieve it by getting a rise out of the imprisoned tracker. And though Vin only sat unmoving and unmoved, an anger rose in him nonetheless -- an anger at Tomlin and Bliss, at chains and trails not of his own choosing, and at his own treacherous mind lost far too often in chaos or drifting away. He held that anger in, however, letting it out only when Tomlin gave up and muttered his way out of the barn. He then

retrieved his harmonica and blasted a harsh series of rising notes on it. And when one of his stablemates took exception to the discordant sound and kicked out its critique on the half wall between its stall and his, Vin was glad of the accompaniment, delighting in that added expression of resentment. He therefore continued his impromptu concert, searching out those notes that seemed to inflame his equine critic most. Then one particularly strident note evoked an even stronger response and a hoof thudded into the wooden partition, a board there nearly giving way beneath the force of the blow.

Possibilities immediately considered, Vin lowered his harmonica and tucked it in a pocket, sliding over to the battered board, a quick study showing that while it was still in one piece, it had separated slightly from its fellows, the force of the horse's kick having loosened it from its mooring.

Vin tried at first to pry it further loose, but could not get any kind of grip on it. Nor did he have anything to use for leverage to slip into the crack created between boards. He considered then agitating the horse further in the hopes that it would finish the job it had begun, but he feared that it might do too thorough a job of it and leave a gaping hole that would give fair warning to his captors, making any weapon gained of no use. So he tried pounding the board back into place instead, giving a hard whack of his fisted hands at the loose end, praying that the nail would not be pounded back into place along with the board. To his relief, the board alone moved, leaving the two nails holding it in place slightly exposed. Not enough of either showed, however, for him to be able to get grip enough on them to even try to pull them loose. So he gathered the chain binding him to that place and used it as a hammer, banging it against that exposed portion of one of the nails from every angle, hoping to knock it further out and maybe loosen it as well. And when he had accomplished that goal, he hooked the smaller links of the chain between manacles around the nail head and pulled.

His wrists ached with the effort, the metal of the cuffs at his wrists bearing down on bone and cutting into skin already rubbed raw. But slowly the nail gave up its hold on the wood in which it was anchored. Vin then moved to the remaining nail, giving it the same treatment until it too came loose of its anchor and the board pulled free on that end. He gave a chuffing laugh of triumph, then set to work again, that time pulling on the board itself, working the remaining nails loose, but taking care not to rip the board entirely free, leaving it instead loose enough that only one strong jerk would see the job done. And setting the free end of the board carefully back into place, the nails there to serve as an easy grip to pull it loose again, he sat back to wait.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY ~

It was not an easy wait, the hours dragging without benefit of even his

harmonica to ease the strain, too afraid that the notes produced might mask the sounds of approaching footsteps. And an hour into his wait Vin was glad he had replaced the board, as one of his captors entered the barn and went into the stall next to his to collect the horse stabled there, saddling it up before leading it out of the barn. Vin prayed the gunman would stay gone. And to his relief the horse had not been returned to its stall when, hours later, he at last heard another of his captors approaching, sure by the even steps that it wasn't Bliss.

So tightly wound was he, having too long waited for that moment, that when Tomlin showed with dinner plate and coffee cup in hand, his thoughts seemed to trip all over themselves, the ruse he had worked out in those long hours of waiting lost among the chaos. It wasn't until Tomlin had set the plate and cup down and was demanding the bucket sitting in the corner opposite Vin that all became clear again. And climbing slowly to his feet, he shuffled with leg irons jangling over to the bucket. He then picked it up by the handle and carried it towards the gunman, who stood warily waiting for it.

"Now set it down," Tomlin commanded when Vin had reached the end of his chain.

Vin started to do so, knees bending to lower the bucket towards the floor of the barn. Then with a quick jerk, he swung it up and outward, the contents flying out and hitting Tomlin square in the face.

Momentarily blinded, the gunman gave a roar of outrage and staggered back. And in a flash Vin spun to rip the board he'd worked loose free of its remaining anchor. He then moved back towards Tomlin, stopping short of the reach of the chain so that he could swing the board towards his captor, hitting him hard on one shoulder and knocking him to his hands and knees.

Eyes closed still against the muck blinding them, Tomlin reached for his gun, pulling it free of its holster just as Vin swung again, this time connecting with the back of the gunman's head. The gun then flew free as Tomlin collapsed face first into the hay and well within Vin's reach. And when he lay unmoving, Vin cast aside the board he'd wielded in favor of the dropped pistol, snatching it up to hold it steady on the captor turned captive as he warily toed him over onto his back. Then satisfied that he was safely unconscious, he stooped to dig a hand through the fallen man's pockets in search of the keys to the wrist and leg irons. And that done, he set them in the locks and was soon freed.

Casting the cuffs and chains aside, Vin moved swiftly past the unconscious Tomlin and out of the stall, not stopping until he had reached the open barn doors. And pausing in the shadows there, he searched out danger, finding nothing to arouse alarm, the ranch yard empty of life. He debated simply riding out, sure that he could be miles gone before his escape was noted. But there was that in him that resisted the idea of leaving Bliss free and unpunished, the game between them neither won nor

over. So he moved carefully out of the shadows and into the waning light of day, his borrowed gun cocked and ready, his eyes and ears alert for any hint of danger.

Time there was when he would have enjoyed the challenge of slipping up unnoticed on a man as dangerous as the one within that house: his senses straining, heart hammering, that wild in him directing each breath and every footfall, his mind racing with possibilities. He would have been in his element, alive as he never could be while hemmed in by people and their fences and walls thrown up to divide and conquer, to yoke the land and choke the sky, claiming their own small bits of it as if it were theirs to command. He'd never understood that need in men nor cared for those who did. But what had been was not then so, too many fences and walls thrown up around him in the past months, his mind no longer racing ahead but prodded into motion, like a horse with one foot lamed. And not instinct alone was enough to make up for all that had been lost, leaving the challenge now not so much against outside forces but those within.

It wasn't the same as it once had been, just as nothing in his life was as it once had been. He knew that. But one thing remained the same: that determination to move always ahead, no matter how many steps back and sideways needed to be taken first. So ahead he moved, slowly and carefully, his stockinged feet moving soundlessly upon the dusty ground, breaths coming soft and shallow, his gaze darting from shadow to shadow. All that he was gathered into clear focus, every move ahead considered and planned, his movements contained, no spare motion or energy wasted, his breathing soft and shallow, all thoughts narrowly constricted on the goal set. Nothing else existed but this, nothing beyond that bit of ground, beyond that moment in time -- not the sky or distant hills, not the past and not the future, not anything within or without. Instinct then became more than thought and it was that which guided him up onto the porch of the ranch house -- no creaking of boards announcing his presence, a careful study through each window looking out onto the porch before passing, the door reached and the knob turned slowly, no sound giving him away or announcing the presence of anyone within. And when the latch cleared, he pushed the door open slowly, ears alert for some sound within, moving past the barely open door with gun at the ready, senses straining, his breathing caught. No sound though did he hear, no stirring of the air, no feel of another's presence. He knew then that the house was empty, no house occupied being so still and silent. Nonetheless he had to check it, thoroughly and with that same degree of caution. But as expected, Bliss was nowhere to be found, and it was then that Vin suspected that the horse saddled earlier had been ridden not by Sully as he'd thought but by his quarry. He caught his lip, worrying at that move not anticipated and the countermove to be decided. Instinct giving way once again to thought, he

stood for a moment, weighing odds and considering possibilities. Then moving to a window overlooking the yard, he scanned it once again for danger, his gaze settling on the bunkhouse next to the barn when all remained quiet. Sully was no doubt there and his for an easy taking, a quick slip across the yard and inside, the gunman taken before he knew what was happening. And then he had only to wait for Bliss to return.

So decided, Vin did just as he had envisioned, slipping across the yard and to the bunkhouse, easing his way into the one room there to find Sully sprawled on a bunk with his hat tipped over his face and his holster and gun slung over the head rail. Vin had only to make his silent way to his side, slowly lift the holster from its perch and out of the gunman's reach, tip the hat up and then stick his gun in the startled gunman's ear.

When Sully then lifted a wide-eyed gaze to him, he clicked the hammer of his gun back and growled, "Where's Bliss?"

Sully gulped, taking great care not to move or even breathe more than was necessary to say, "He went into town a couple hours ago."

"He coming back?"

Sully started to nod, then thought better of it and instead said, "He should be back any time now."

Vin stepped back. "Get up." And when the gunman complied, he gestured him towards the bunkhouse door.

Sully did as commanded, his hands up in the air as unsteady as his voice as he said, "What did you do with Tomlin?" Vin, however, only waved his captive through the doorway and out into the yard and towards the barn.

Again Sully did as commanded, crossing to the open doors of the barn and past them into the dim interior, waiting only for Vin to wave him towards the stall where he'd been confined before moving in that direction.

"What are you going to do?" he nervously demanded to know.

"Same as you did me."

They moved past the first stall, the horse there milling with a snuffling complaint, its hooves shifting in the hay, its head tossing in the drift of dust and dim light sneaking in through cracks in the barn siding. Vin, however, gave no heed to it, his thoughts focused on trying to remember what he'd done with the keys to the leg and wrist irons when he'd freed himself from them. Then as he moved past the stall and to the next, there was a rush of sound and air behind him and instinct screamed at him too late, something coming down hard on his back even as he began to turn.

He fell on his right side, the gun spinning out of his hold. And pushing instantly to his hands and knees, he scrabbled after it. Before he could lay hold of it though, another blow rained down on his back, knocking him to the ground again and the air out of his lungs.

"Damned dummy!" a voice he recognized as Tomlin's snarled. "I ought to kill you here and now."

Instead he followed the last blow with a kick to Vin's side, the tracker curling in pain away from it, his arms clasped protectively about his middle, his legs drawn up in further protection, his breath coming in a choking gasp -- and a curse forming that he hadn't secured the gunman before exiting the barn, aware that once he would have done so without thought.

"I got him!" Sully cried as he scooped up the fallen gun and held it on the newly regained captive.

"No," Tomlin growled in turn, tossing aside the board that had earlier been used as a weapon against him. Then stooping to drag Vin to his feet, he added, "I got him. And he's going to wish to hell it was anybody but me who had a hold of him by the time I'm done."

He swung one arm hard and fast then, slamming a fist into Vin's jaw and loosing him to fly into the stall from which the gunman had launched his attack, the horse there objecting with dancing feet and a neigh of alarm, its head tossing and only the rope tied to its bridle keeping it there.

"You'd best quit that," Sully warned Tomlin as Vin once again curled into himself in the hay, straining for lost breath. "Bliss won't be any too happy if you lame him up."

Tomlin offered a suggestion as to just what Bliss could do with himself, then moved into the stall after Vin, giving him another kick in the small of his back. "Damned dummy can't even fight like a man," he complained. "Hell, he can't even fight at all. Just curls up like a whipped dog."

"Yeah, well, whipped or not," Sully warned, "that dog's got teeth. So you'd best get him back in chains before he gets breath enough back to use them."

Tomlin turned to his doubting companion. "You think I couldn't take him in a fair fight? You think I can't whup some dummy without even breaking a sweat?"

"You didn't whup him ten minutes ago, else he wouldn't have got loose."

"That weren't no fair fight!"

Sully wrinkled his nose, his gaze pointedly on Tomlin's soiled clothing. "Well it for sure wasn't a clean fight, I'll grant you that. But we don't have time for this. Not unless you want that preacher breathing hellfire when he gets back. So get Tanner up and back in his chains now."

"No. Not until I show this dummy who's boss and put him square in his place again."

Tomlin turned then and drew back a foot. But no sooner did he swing it forward than Vin, breath now found, exploded into action. Kicking out, he landed the heel of one stockinged foot on the leg on which Tomlin stood balanced. And that balance then lost, Tomlin staggered back,

howling in anger and pain. Nor did Vin give him a chance to regain his footing, shooting up from the ground and charging the gunman, knocking him down into the hay of the stall.

Sully cursed behind them, but Vin paid him no heed, only straddled Tomlin and slammed his fist into the gunman's face. But as he drew back his arm again, Tomlin took hold of his shirt and twisted beneath him, throwing him off and to the ground, rolling with him to assume the dominant position. The two then struggled for the upper hand, Sully dancing around them, trying to decide whether or not to interfere. Then Vin got his feet up between them and pushed hard, sending Tomlin sailing out into the passage between stalls. And as Vin regained his feet, so too did Tomlin, wiping wisps of hay from his face, breath coming hard. Then spotting a pitchfork leaning against one of the other stalls, he snatched it up. And holding it out before him, he charged back into the stall in which Vin stood braced and panting. Vin easily dodged, however, the pitchfork slamming instead into the back of the stall and sticking there. Vin was then instantly on his opponent again, slamming into him and carrying him down to the ground, where the struggle continued. It was then Vin who went sailing back, crashing into Sully, both of them falling. And as they fell, the gun went flying again, Sully grabbing for it but Vin laying hold of it first. No sooner though had he tightened his fingers around it than a boot stamped down onto his wrist, pinioning it to the barn floor, the familiar sound of a gun's hammer cocking back assuring that Vin would make no move to wrest free of that weight. "I believe this little exercise in futility is over, gentlemen," a soft voice warned.

Bliss. Vin had known who it was before he spoke. And looking up, his gaze swept past the gun held in Bliss' right hand, that arm now free of its sling, and to the dark eyes unblinking above it.

"A good try, Mr. Tanner," the false preacher acknowledged. "But not, I fear, good enough. So now, if you will be so kind as to release your hold on the weapon you have far too easily appropriated, we can put an end to this foolishness."

Vin was tempted to strike out, to risk that Bliss would not shoot him. But he had only to look into those dark eyes to see death staring back at him. So he conceded that move of the game and loosed his hold on the gun, which Tomlin promptly scooped up.

Bliss turned then to his hired guns. "And now, perhaps you two would care to explain just how it is you are actually earning the salary I have been paying you?"

Tomlin bridled. "It wasn't my fault, Preacher! I never got near the dummy, just like you told us. But the damned little sneak near blinded me. Then he liked to take my head off with a board he somehow got loose." He pointed to the gap in the partition between stalls. "Next thing I know, he was gone and my gun with him."

Bliss pulled a handkerchief out of a pocket and held it to his nose, his gaze, like Sully's before him, going to the gunman's soiled clothing. "I don't believe I need ask how it is Mr. Tanner managed to deprive you of your sight long enough to render you unaware and useless." Tomlin looked down at the collection of dust and hay and muck decorating his shirt and pants and brushed at it with the hand not holding his gun on Vin.

Bliss frowned and waved his handkerchief in the air before his face in a vain attempt to scatter the malodorous molecules stirred into fresh life. Then with a sigh he gave it up and said, "Very well. Collect Mr. Tanner and return him to his... accommodations. And shorten his leash, if you will, lest he be tempted to repeat today's performance. Also, in that regard, you will in future take more care in policing his quarters. And leave the keys to his cuffs in your own quarters from now on." He turned his attention back to Vin then. "And you, sir -- since you are obviously bored, I will see what I can do to arrange another hunt." Vin gave a growl then and twisted from beneath Bliss' foot on his wrist. And heedless of both guns on him, he climbed to his feet and declared, "You can go to Hell, Preacher. And I'll go back to that damned asylum before I go on the hunt for you again. Ain't no one there anywheres near crazy as you!"

Up went one dark eyebrow. "Indeed? Well, perhaps you are right. And if you are crazy enough to prefer that hellhole to your true destiny, I fear I shall have to resort to some other means by which to redeem you." Vin raised a chin. "Ain't nothing you can do will make me play this sick game of yours no more."

Bliss cocked his head, studying his defiant captive. He'd known such a moment would come, however, and was ready with a countermove. "Of that I have no doubt, sir. Men such as yourself are too used to hardship to break beneath its yoke. And you are far too unafraid to die for the threat of an early death to be of any value. But are you as willing to watch another suffer, to allow another to die in your place? Someone like that old woman back in town, perhaps. Wells, I believe her name is. Yes -- Nettie Wells. She seemed a tad attached to you." He held back a smile when Vin bristled with alarm. "And that niece of hers -- a pretty young thing. What is her name? Cassy? No. Casey." He paused a moment then added, "Would you be so willing to sacrifice their lives in place of your own?"

Both fear and fury rising in him, Vin rushed Bliss for an answer, hands reaching for his tormentor's throat. But again Bliss was ready and stepped back, even as Sully grabbed hold of the tracker, Tomlin leaping to his aid, the two of them needed to hold Vin back.

Assured of the success of his move, Bliss loosed that smile held back "I take it then, Mr. Tanner, that you have given further thought to your position?"

Ceasing his useless struggles and holding himself still with an effort, Vin gave warning in a low voice. "You so much as touch a hair on either of their heads and I'll see you dead!"

The smile turned into a grin of triumph. "That, I believe, will suffice as agreement." Bliss slipped his gun back into his pocket then and turned sober. "And to make sure that no harm comes to either of those two lovely ladies, I should perhaps lay out a few ground rules by which this portion of our little game shall be played: No escapes or attempts at such. No refusing to do as you are bid, whether here or on the hunt. No excuses about lost trails. And if you think to bring the game to a premature end with a bullet in my brain, I suggest that you not miss. Likewise, if any mishap should befall you, if an injury keeps you from your set task, such an injury will prove highly fatal to the ladies Wells. And if you manage to get yourself killed by any means fair or foul, you'll pass them both on your way to Hell." He paused, allowing Vin time to digest the warning given, then added, "Do you understand the terms of our agreement?"

When Vin only glared his reply, Tomlin grabbed a handful of his hair and shook his head. "The preacher asked you a question, Dummy. And I suggest you answer him."

His gaze still on Bliss, Vin said only, "It ain't over."

Again that smile appeared, this one of pleasure anticipated. "No, Mr. Tanner," Bliss slowly drawled. "I don't believe it is. But it has just become far more interesting, don't you think? And now I suggest that you return to your quarters and get some rest, as the game resumes in the morning."

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE ~

Returned once again to chains, and his freedom at the end of them now measured by the length of a stride, Vin spent the last hours of light searching out some path leading away from the trail on which he'd been set and found but one -- with death at the end of it. Time and again it came to that and the necessity of it at last accepted, not gladly, but with a resignation long known and hard won that such was sometimes the way of life. What had to be done would be -- and the trail would go on from there. It was settled and accepted and him set upon the trail laid out without regret. Yet when the last of the light faded and the darkness settled about him, Vin sat for long hours staring into it. The moon and the stars came and went unseen. Life stirred in the desert unheard and no soft touch of the night wind did Vin feel. An entire world there was beyond that prison in which he sat and no part did he have in any of it. And not even the occasional stamping of a hoof or a snuffling breath from his equine companions could convince him that he wasn't alone in all the world and kept trapped in the dark by something more than chains and walls. Let the sun rise and fall and rise again, yet

still he would be trapped in that dark and alone. He was lost and never to be found, only one path lying ahead and more dark at the end of it. And nothing was there for him to do but as he had always done -- to accept what was and endure it.

Thus it was he waited for the sun's new rising, waited hours more for Sully to appear with his breakfast. And to his surprise, once that was done, Tomlin joined them with a bucket of water, some clean clothes and Vin's boots.

"Guess the preacher don't want to have to smell you on our little ride today," the gunman offered with a sneer, setting his offerings down on the barn floor and stepping back. He then dug into a pocket and pulled out a key. And drawing his gun, he tossed the key to Vin. "Unlock them wrist cuffs and get cleaned up. And just remember them new rules of the preacher's and don't even think of trying anything -- or you won't be the only one to get a bullet in you."

Sully drew his weapon as well and both stood well back and ready, watching as Vin slowly dug the key out of the hay where it had landed and set it in first one lock of the wrist cuffs then the other.

He moved as slowly as he dared after that, exaggerating the wincing that came with the use of bruised muscles, his face gone slack, his gaze drifting. Yet he was aware of both gunmen at every moment, searching out some weakness, some mistake that would give him the upper hand swift and clean. But the two remained well apart and out of reach, and warily alert to his every move. Still he watched for his chance as he stripped off his shirt and collected the bucket of water, as he scooped up the cool liquid with cupped hands and splashed it on his torso, as he ran his hands over the resulting wet skin and then used the shirt he'd just removed to dry himself.

Neither gunman relaxed in the slightest, both guns and gazes steady on him. So with a frown he shrugged into the clean shirt provided.

Tomlin then jutted his chin towards the wrist irons lying in the hay.

"Put them back on," he snapped.

Vin hesitated a long moment, his mind skipping through the possibilities. None of them, however, were certainties or with even much hope of success. So, accepting that again he must wait, he slowly bent down to retrieve the discarded cuffs.

When he'd then locked them back in place and returned the key, Tomlin dug another key out of his pocket and tossed it to the watching tracker.

"Now finish it up."

Again Vin did as directed, ridding himself of the leg irons and slipping out of the rest of his clothes and into the new.

"That ought to take care of the worst of the smell," Tomlin declared, grinning smugly beneath his captive's unblinking regard. "And that scraggle of a beard he's got going will take care of some of the ugly. So I reckon he's as presentable as he's ever going to get."

Vin ignored him, his attention focused on his boots as he slid into them. And once that was accomplished, Sully handed his gun off to Tomlin then moved warily forward to test the wrist restraints. And finding them secure, he warily bent down to scoop up the leg irons lying in the hay. He then backed away again and collected his gun, saying, "We'd best get to the horses now -- Bliss will be waiting."

Tomlin snorted. "I seen what he's got lined up for today and believe me, there ain't no need to hurry. Olsen's just about as dumb as the dummy here. And as shivery as a dog with its belly up and wetting itself. Wouldn't even take off out of that jail 'til I threatened to shoot him. And then I had to follow to make sure he actually lit out of town." He shook his head. "Damned if I know how he found backbone enough to try to stick up some traveling salesman, but I for sure know how it is he couldn't pull it off. Hell, that salesman probably only had to say 'boo!' to get him to drop his gun and beg to be throwed in jail."

Sully slid his gun into its holster. "You won't be hearing any complaints from me. I'd just as soon track down a rabbit as a grizzly. And I'd just as soon get to it quick rather than have Bliss in here wanting to know what's taking so long. So let's get to it."

"Like either of us got call to worry on what that old man likes or don't like," Tomlin scoffed. Still, he too holstered his gun, then led the way out of stall to see to the saddling of the horses.

Vin watched the gunmen go, then settled into the hay to wait, stretching sore muscles and plotting out moves in the game to come. And twenty minutes later, Sully and Tomlin were back to collect him.

Again he watched carefully as the chain anchoring him in place was loosed. But again he was given no chance to safely overpower his captors. So he allowed himself to be led unresistingly out of the barn and to the waiting horses tied loosely to the corral railing. And his mind fast at work, moves to be plotted still, he took note of the bedrolls in place behind the saddles and the thin saddle bags beneath them -- indicating only a quick jaunt ahead. Too quick, maybe.

Bliss came out of the ranch house then, his cane thumping on the porch boards and down the steps, his movements loose and easy despite the limp. And moving across the dusty yard, he came to a stop before Vin, looking down on him from his greater height with a darkness in his eyes far deeper than the shadows beneath his hat brim. "As promised, sir, the game resumes. But I fear today's hunt will prove far from challenging, the only prey close to hand being a rather inept fellow found languishing in a nearby jail cell. Still, it will serve to stave off boredom until a more suitable prey can be found."

Blue eyes met dark. "Things don't always work out so easy as you plan."

The words were softly uttered, the tone no more than conversational.

Yet warning had been given, the game ahead with but one possible ending -- and the winner not to be so easily decided.

Challenge met and accepted, Bliss gave a warning of his own. "Words well spoken, sir. And for the sake of the ladies' Wells, let us hope that you continue to bear that in mind." He smiled then. "And now, Mr. Tanner, I believe the next move is yours."

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Vin had the trail by noon, fresh tracks telling a tale of a man on foot and panicked, running into the desert with wandering steps. It was an easy trail to read and any posse should have been able to pick it up and follow it. Yet there was no sign of any such pursuit. And hunched over the clear trail, Vin tracked through the possibilities, then squinted up at Bliss. "You head off the posse?"

The tone was one of curiosity only. Bliss, however, responded as if to a compliment. "I couldn't very well have them spoiling our fun, now could I? And they won't, thanks to a little misdirection arranged by Mr. Tomlin."

Vin chuffed out a breath. "You don't need me for this."

"It is not a question of my need, Mr. Tanner, but your own." Bliss threw up a hand in a gesture of restraint. "And please, spare me the protestations. They have grown stale and I weary of them. So let us accept for the sake of argument that you are in your natural element. And as such there are certain talents which must be kept honed regardless of need. Like a cat sated from its dinner toying with a mouse."

He let his hand fall again. And when Vin only continued to look up at him with an unwavering regard, he heaved a sigh. "Come, Mr. Tanner. You and I both know that you will do as you are bid. Let it be for the sake of others if you insist still on this image of yourself as less than you are. Remain in your chains if you will. The day will soon come, however when you will no longer be able to deny what is in you, when you will come face to face with your true nature. And who knows? Perhaps that day is this day."

Vin shifted his gaze to the desert and sat on his heels for a long moment staring into that emptiness, a wild rising in him at being thus trapped -- not one of a raging need to break free of chains, however, but the cool determination of one hunted, instinct above emotion, and everything within focused solely on survival.

He stood then and turned, looking up into dark eyes, shadows met and knowing, a wolf on the hunt and a crow on the wing, and death riding ahead of them. Neither challenge nor promise was offered -- there was then only what would be between them and no escaping it. And that truth acknowledged in a darkness shared, Bliss gave a tilt of his head and smiled.

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The hunt begun, Vin rode with his mind closed to everything but the trail ahead and the men behind. No possibilities did he consider, the game not of thought now but instinct. An hour he rode thus, then another,

and knew by the tracks laid that the one hunted was played out and no match for Bliss. Yet still he moved ahead, stopping only when he came in sight of the one sitting on the ground ahead of them, head down in defeat.

The others drew up as well, Tomlin giving a snort of disgust at sight of their prey. "Hell, I'm surprised he lasted this long."

Bliss, too, was less than impressed. "Surely, Mr. Tomlin, this was not the best you could do."

"It ain't my fault. He's all there was to choose from."

Bliss sighed, the sound that of a man forced to accept far less than the adequate. "Then I suppose we shall have to make do." And with that he kicked his mount back into motion.

The others followed, Vin's horse moving at the end of the rope now. And as they drew near to the man on the ground he looked up, his eyes going from an unfocused stare to confusion and then hope.

"Glory be!" he breathed out as the four horsemen came to a stop before him. "I thought I was a goner for sure. My horse give out on me days ago and I been on foot ever since. Lost my food, canteen -- everything." Tomlin gave another snort of disgust. "Hell, Olsen, you can't even lie worth a damn."

Olsen went back to looking confused. And squinting against the midday sun, he looked up at Tomlin. Then hope rose in him again. "You bring me a horse, mister?"

That time Tomlin only rolled his eyes. And to Sully he said, "I told you he was near as dumb as the dummy here."

Olsen looked from Tomlin to Sully and on to Vin and the iron cuffs about his wrists. Then, eyes widening, he moved on to Bliss, settling on him as the obvious leader of the group. "You a lawman, mister?" He allowed no time to reply, only scrambled to his feet, words tumbling out of him in a rush as he sought to sound his innocence. "Look, Mr. Sheriff, sir. This wasn't my idea! That there deputy of yours made me do it. Told me he'd shoot me dead if I didn't hightail it out of that jail I was in. Run me off out here, he did. Said to keep running if I knew what was good for me. And I'm telling you I didn't want to do it. I was all set to stand trial for what I done and serve out my time. But what choice did I have? He'd have killed me sure as I'm standing here. So what was I supposed to do?"

His gaze darted from man to man looking down on him. And his protestations of innocence having fallen upon apparently deaf ears, he moved next

to surrender, his voice taking on a whining tone. "You going to take me back now? I swear I won't give you no trouble. All's I want is back in my cell." And noting then the lack of a spare horse, he added, "Just please don't make me walk. My feet are all blistered and hurting something fierce. And I'm like to die of thirst -- so maybe one of you could

toss me down a canteen?"

He stood waiting with a hopeful expression and it then was Tomlin's turn to sigh. And slipping his gun out of its holster, he pointed it at the reluctant escapee and said, "What do you say, Preacher? Should I go ahead and put the little weasel out of his misery?"

Olsen's eyes widened into panic and he stumbled back, hands up as if to hold back the threatened bullet. "I'm giving up! I told you that! I ain't even armed!"

Tomlin clicked back the hammer of his gun at that, but Bliss stayed him with a drawled observation. "The man does have a point, Mr. Tomlin."

"So what? You just going to let him go?"

"I did not say that, only that he had a point. He is, after all, unarmed and more than willing to cooperate in a return to jail. So what possible grounds do you have for putting an end to his miserable existence?"

"Do I need one?"

"But of course." Bliss dug a hand beneath his coat and brought out his flask, waving it languidly as he then continued. "What distinguishes man from the animals, sir, is reason. Let animals be guided by some base instinct. We shall be guided by intellect. It is what sets us at the top of the evolutionary scale."

"Evil what?" Tomlin protested with a confused look. And when Bliss seemed ready to launch into more of an explanation than the gunman would no doubt care to hear, he hurriedly cut him off. "Look, Preacher, don't none of that fancy learning of yours matter. All I know or care about is that we come out here to do a job. And now you're saying I got to come up with some reason for doing it?" He let out a snort of disgust.

"Fine, then how about this: The little worm here gets caught and starts flapping them gums of his and we'll have some sheriff on our trail wanting to arrest us same as him."

Bliss gave a small smile of approval. "Excellent, Mr. Tomlin." Then turning his attention back to the object of debate, he took a sip from his flask and said, "And you, sir? Have you any further arguments to advance?"

Olsen took a step forward that time, as if propelled by the force of the words rushing forth. "I won't say a word, mister. I swear! You let me go right now and won't no one ever even see me again. I mean, it's not like I done anything worth anyone coming after me. I'll just slip over the border into Mexico and that'll be the end of it. And no need for anyone to worry about nothing at all."

Bliss nodded switched his attention back to the gunman. "Another excellent point, Mr. Tomlin. And have you a counter argument?"

Tomlin scowled, in both anger and disgust, then uncocked his gun and slammed it back into its holster. "Hell if I've ever sat around jawing on whether or not to kill a man. And damned if I'll do it now. You want me to kill him, just say so. Otherwise let's just get the hell out of

here."

Bliss, however, wasn't ready to bring the game to an end. And turning to the remaining gunman, he solicited another opinion. "And you, Mr. Sully? What do you think?"

"That you aren't paying me to think."

Sully sat at ease on his horse, his expression as noncommittal as his reply. And beside him sat Vin, his expression blank as well but his gaze fixed and hard on the man on the ground.

"Very well," Bliss continued. "One vote for, one against, and one abstention." His gaze shifted to Vin. "That leaves you, Mr. Tanner. So, what say you?"

Vin turned his head slowly, the eyes shifting to the false preacher devoid of light and life. And in a voice as lifeless as his gaze he said, "He's a dead man."

"Indeed? And why is that?"

Not a question but a prompt, the answer known and an acknowledgment of like knowledge demanded. And dully Vin replied. "The game ain't over 'til someone dies."

A correct response, the only one possible. And Bliss nodded approvingly. "Then you agree to this particular conclusion to the game now in session?"

Again not a question but a prompt -- and one Vin refused to heed.

"Ain't my call to make."

Bliss, in turn, refused to accept the evasion. "Come now, Mr. Tanner. No one dragged you into this game. You take part of your own free will."

"Free?" Vin held up his bound arms, anger sparking then in his eyes.

"You call this free?"

The false preacher gave another wave of the flask he held, the gesture one of dismissal. "Freedom of movement does not preclude freedom of choice. No one forced you out of that asylum and into the playing of this game. You knew the rules, as well as the cost of playing. Just as you knew what would be the ending of today's move when you chose to pick up this man's trail and lead us to him."

"It wasn't his death I chose," Vin pointed out, "but Nettie's life."

"Yet you chose the one knowing the other would follow. And why choose as you have done? Because Mrs. Wells is more deserving of life? Or because you consider this man more deserving of death?" Bliss cast a contemptuous look to the one who stood trembling his fear. "Look at him, Mr. Tanner! He is hardly a danger to anyone but himself. And you knew that before you ever set upon his trail." Back went his gaze to Vin. "No, boy. You set yourself up as god over life and death, yours to choose between them -- not because you were forced into it but because you could no more turn your back on the game than you can give up breathing."

"Like hell!"

"Then why are we here?"

Another prompt, that time for an admission that wasn't forthcoming. And after a moment of Vin's stubborn silence, Bliss tucked his flask back into the pocket from he had retrieved it. Then, his gaze on his reluctant pawn, he held out a hand and said, "Mr. Tomlin, your weapon, if you please."

Looking pleased with that particular development, the gunman kicked his horse to Bliss' side and slipped his gun out of its holster and into the waiting hand. Bliss then switched his gaze from one captive to the other, the gun swinging in the same direction. And ignoring Olsen's pleas and panicked promises, he turned his attention back to Vin. "Your choice, Mr. Tanner. You have but to say the word and Mrs. Wells lives." God over life and death, his to choose between them.

A silence descended, all eyes going to Vin. His gaze, however, was fastened on the dark figure who demanded that choice.

A whimpering arose, Olsen appealing then to his fellow captive for mercy. "Please, mister. I ain't done you no harm. Ain't never done no one no harm, not even that fellow I was fool enough to try and rob. I was just hungry and weary to the death of it, of never having nothing in my life that was ever worth the having. And I know it was wrong. I knew it when I done it even. I just didn't know what else to do!"

Vin never shifted his gaze, blue eyes remaining locked with dark, an expectation there, a certainty of victory at hand requiring only an acknowledgment of that choice made. Yet there was that in Vin that refused to give it, that refusal not of thought or emotion but of instinct, a drive in him to survive at whatever cost to heart and years lived, survival more to him than the assurance of breaths drawn in, that still part of him deep within given voice. And thus making the only choice he could, he shut his mind and heart to the cost and softly said, "Let him go."

Bliss held still for a long moment, held Vin's gaze with his, studying the move made, searching out some trick in it, making sure of the moves planned ahead of it. And when he was sure the game was still safely in play if delayed in the closing, he conceded the move and that move only, lowering the gun he held and saying, "Very well then, Mr. Olsen. You are free to go."

Olsen stared in surprise for a moment, not daring to believe in a victory so easily attained. Then he let loose another rush of words. "Thank you, mister. You won't regret this. I swear you won't. I'll keep quiet about everything, just like I said. And I'll never do nothing so foolish again. You got my word on that."

He turned then and stumbled off, as fast as legs weak with fear and exhaustion could carry him, blue eyes shifting to watch him go with an unblinking gaze.

Then a hammer clicked back. And even as Vin registered the move about to be played, Bliss' borrowed gun fired -- and Olsen tumbled to the

ground, to lie there with arms stretched before him as if to reach for that which lay just beyond his grasp.

There was silence for a long moment, the single gunshot seeming to echo across the emptiness of the desert, all eyes on the form lying still in the sand. Then Bliss blandly drawled, "One final vote cast, nature's proxy -- the weak culled so that the strong might survive."

Vin turned to him, blank still of face and eyes. And lowering the gun, Bliss said, "What must be, will be, Mr. Tanner. And not all the stubborn determination to cling to that which never was will alter that. So I advise you to accept what fate and nature have decreed -- before you run out of friends to serve as a prompt."

A warning and a reminder of the cost paid -- and Vin turned from both, his gaze shifting from Bliss and past the one on the ground to the desert beyond, an endless expanse of land and sky in which a man might so far lose himself as to never again be found. And if such was but illusion, it was nonetheless all he had of hope. So he kept himself at that distance as they returned to the trail already traveled -- until the shadows grew long and deceptive.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO ~

Shadows soon gave way to the dark and another night passed without sleep, Vin's waking thoughts more than sufficient nightmare. Back in his stall, with new bruises from desperate attempts to win free of his chains added to the old, he sat in the hay and cursed every wrong choice made, every right one ended badly, every move and thought and moment of his being. Staring into the dark he saw with a clarity long missing. Afraid of falling into the abyss above which he seemed always perched, he'd all but leaped into it, blind in his fear, made reckless by it, thinking himself able to span too large a chasm and over-sure of the ground beckoning beyond. Instead he'd misjudged, had landed in shifting sand, hands clawing in frantic desperation for some hold as he slid towards the abyss. Legs dangling now into the empty reaches of the darkness stretching away beneath him, he scrabbled for some hold, anything to stop that downward slide into nothingness.

He'd failed and failed badly. And in a life filled with misjudgments, wrong turns, and bad choices, that day's failure and all the failures piling up in all the days that had gone before it stood out in stark relief. For it would not be only he who paid the price for this latest failure but Nettie as well. He'd long expected this to be his fate, one leap too many, the ground crumbling away beneath him and a tumble into the abyss. But never had he thought to drag anyone down with him. Never had he allowed himself close enough to another to catch hold of them in some desperate bid to save himself. Another failure among too many weighing him down. It was a wonder he had not fallen into darkness before then under the weight of them.

And fall he would. Of that he was certain. He'd held off the inevitable for longer than even he would have dreamed possible. Rightly or wrongly, he had done it, had survived on a thin edge, had somehow kept his balance there. What he'd long feared had come to pass and that not the darkness below but failing to stand against it, to fail some standard set in some impossible other life, where the ground had been solid and the darkness chased away by each succeeding morning's light. One wrong choice too many made, one set of chains exchanged for ones heavier still and that at too great a cost -- and that cost multiplying until it had become more than he alone could pay. He would fall and that was expected and accepted even. But he would not take anyone into that darkness with him, would throw himself freely into it if that would keep another from that same fate. On that he was determined. And just as determined was he to choose wisely that time, for there was still Casey to consider, and others who would serve as hostages to the right choice made. And so he stared hard into the darkness around and below in search of some small glimmer of light and found it at last as the first faint rays of morning gave hope of a new day.

He waited then, impatient for Sully or Tomlin to appear, turning the possibilities over and over in his mind in search of some overlooked fault. And finding none, he dug fiercely into the shifting sand above the abyss and held on.

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It was Sully who at last appeared hours past the sun's rising, bearing a plate of runny eggs and a cup of already cooled coffee. And no sooner did the gunman step into the stall than Vin was on his feet and demanding an audience with Bliss.

Sully blinked at such an unexpected demand. Then he moved further into the stall and set the plate and cup down in the hay. "Don't know what you've got working in that mind of yours, Tanner, but if I were you, I'd let it be. You've got troubles enough as it is."

Vin, however, was adamant. "I want to see him. Now."

Sully shrugged and stepped back. "Suit yourself. But just so's you know -- he's working now on some telegraph he wants Tomlin to ride into town with soon as he's done. And I don't reckon there's anything you can say that will change that."

"Tell him."

Sully gave another shrug, then backed out of the stall.

Vin slid down the barn wall then to sit in the dusty hay waiting, a fear growing that Bliss might ignore his demand for an audience, might send Tomlin riding off with Nettie's death sentence in hand, setting in motion that which couldn't be undone.

Five minutes passed, then ten, Vin straining to hear the sound of footsteps approaching, willing Bliss to do as he bid, praying that it would not be too late. And when at last footsteps sounded, one fear at least

relaxed at the thumping of Bliss' cane on the soft earth of the barn floor.

A moment later Bliss had limped his way into the stall that served as Vin's prison cell, both Sully and Tomlin at his back, his features schooled into neutrality, but his eyes betraying the curiosity that had brought him there. "You wished to speak with me, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin wasted no time. "You're missing a move."

Said baldly, it was more challenge than Vin had intended. And up went one dark eyebrow in a like challenge. "Indeed, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin had had hours to find the words needed and he offered them with ease. "You hire some killer to go after Nettie and where's it leave you? Sitting out the game instead of taking part in it?"

The eyebrow lowered, Bliss affecting a tone of boredom. "Your concern touches me, but I hardly think I shall remain idle for long."

"Maybe. But why go digging through wanted posters when you got a much more interesting game that can be played out with the pieces already on the board?"

"And that would be...?"

Vin raised his chin slightly, blue eyes watching keen as he elaborated more fully. "You ever pit two players in a game against each other?"

Bliss was silent for a long moment, searching out the meaning behind the words. Then as understanding dawned, he gave a slow smile.

"Excellent, Mr. Tanner. Hunter against hunter. A game worthy of my own invention." He cocked his head. "But while I assume your stake in the game to be the saving of Nettie Wells' life should you prove the victor in this little contest, what am I to gain that is not already mine if you should lose?"

Blue eyes flashed. "What do you want?"

Bliss thought for another moment, then said, "If you should prove to be the lesser man in this move of the game, Mrs. Wells will leave no orphaned niece behind to grieve her passing."

It was Vin's turn to fall silent, life weighed against life and choices that could too easily prove wrong. Yet to risk nothing was to be sure of losing and that a wrong choice made certain. So, his inner vision turned from darkness below and shifting sand above, he agreed to Bliss' terms.

The false preacher, however, wasn't finished. "And if you win, Mr. Tanner? What then is to be my reward for staying Mrs. Wells' execution?"

"Ain't the game enough?"

"In this case, no."

Again Vin fell silent, his jaw working in anger at yet another move unanticipated, too much already at stake and the sand at the edge of the abyss crumbling beneath his unsure grasp. Yet below it was the certainty of the abyss. So he unclenched his jaw enough to snap out: "Name it."

"One clean shot, at the target of my choosing."

Vin grew still. He had known that moment would come, had feared it, had never had any doubt as to what lay at the end of the trail on which he was set. Yet he had hoped to find some path around it, had depended on that. Now he felt the sand shifting, could sense the darkness shadowing at his feet growing, a fall into the abyss made that much more certain. And more determined than ever that such would be his fate alone, fair payment for all the wrong choices made, he raised his chin and brusquely said, "Agreed."

Bliss allowed himself the smallest of smiles. "Very well then. I'll have to make arrangements and that will take some time -- a day or two, possibly more. I must, after all, find someone worthy of your talent. -- and sure enough of his own to agree to such a contest. In the meantime, I suggest you do nothing foolish. It would, after all, be a pity were the lives of both the ladies Wells to be forfeit before the game even begins."

He then inclined his head in dismissal and limped away, Tomlin and Sully shadowing at his back. And long after the sounds of their departing footsteps died away, Vin remained in place, no movement of muscle, no stirring of thought allowed that might loose that uncertain hold on the shifting sand above the abyss.

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Two days passed and a third was more than half gone by the time Bliss put in another appearance, Sully and Tomlin at his back as usual, and a third man at his side. And stopping in the middle of the stall with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes, he pronounced the game ready to begin.

Vin stood at that, his back sliding up the rough boards of the barn wall against which he'd been sitting, his gaze not on Bliss but the man next to him.

And noting the focus of that gaze, Bliss waved a slim hand languidly in Vin's direction, introducing the tracker to his companion. "Mr. Tanner." Then with a graceful sweep of the same hand to indicate the man beside him, but his gaze steady on Vin, he added, "Señor Joaquin." The name might have been Spanish, but the man behind it was as much a mix of Anglo and Indian as the clothing he wore. And Vin noted every item of dress, from the knee length moccasins to the overly large Army jacket and on to the battered felt hat sitting perched on a head of straight dark hair several inches longer than Vin's shortened locks. Neither white nor Indian, but comfortable with either heritage -- and young enough to flaunt both, daring any man to take offense at those badges of a life lived straddled between two worlds. And should any man take such offense, he had a gun at one hip and a large hunting knife strapped to a moccasined leg that would serve as counter arguments in his defense. It wasn't that, however, which warned of danger, but the dark look in his eyes and the hard lines of his face -- a man used to death and

killing and unbothered by either. And that look was centered on Vin and unblinking.

"Señor Joaquin has already agreed to the rules of the game," Bliss continued, his gaze switching between the two men. "It needs then only your agreement, Mr. Tanner, before we can begin."

Vin let his gaze slide to the false preacher, neither voice nor expression giving anything away as he said, "And the rules?"

"Whichever of you is still breathing at the end of three days wins."

"And I," the half breed flatly stated, "will be much richer than I am today."

Back went the tracker's eyes to his opponent, blue eyes meeting dark in a challenge that went beyond either a life or riches to be gained. Both men had been hunted as well as hunter and both were determined not to play the lesser role in the coming game. And sure of that determination, Vin continued to meet that dark gaze and said only, "He's got a gun."

Joaquin's right hand went to the butt of his pistol, as if to deny any attempt to wrest it from him.

Bliss, however, looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, then shifted his attention to the gun's owner. "I fear Mr. Tanner is correct, sir.

There is no sport to be had in so uneven a match." And noting the narrowing of those dark eyes, he smoothly added, "Unless you fear that you would be even more unevenly matched were you to enter into the game unarmed?"

Up went the breed's chin. "I have killed men for less than that, Señor."

"But never, I suspect, a man who was offering you such an inordinate amount of money as I have offered."

Dark eyes held dark, and after a moment's challenge, the breed gave a stiff nod. "It will make no difference whether I kill him with a bullet through the heart or some other way. Dead is dead and your money will spend the same no matter how he dies."

He dropped the hand on his gun butt then to the ties at his leg and unbuckled the belt. He then handed it over to Bliss, who accepted it with a look to Vin, saying, "Are the terms now agreeable to you, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin shifted his gaze from one set of dark eyes to another, then dropped it to the knife strapped to the half breed's leg. "And that?"

Bliss shrugged. "It wouldn't do to pull all of the wolf's teeth, now would it? Keeps the game interesting."

It was all the concession Vin was going to get and he knew it. So he accepted the proffered terms with a clipped: "Who goes first?"

Bliss inclined his head in acknowledgment and said, "Señor Joaquin will depart now. You, in turn, will set out at first light, in company, of course, with me and my associates." He waited for objections to be raised, and when there were none, he gave the slightest of smiles and said,

"Then let the hunt begin."

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE ~

Vin slept that night without dreams, nothing in existence but the hunt to come, all doubts dismissed, the trail laid out and no turning back. And rising with the sun he sat waiting, still and without thought but for the instinct at work in him, his mind clear and focused on the trail ahead, paths considered, traps laid and skirted. No words did he need, no logical progression of thought. There was only that keen insight born in him and honed through years of hunting and being hunted. It was a dance well learned, each movement precise and carefully choreographed, the prey leading the hunter, the hunter matching step for step. Only this time the hunted was hunter as well -- and would have to be led into a dance of Vin's choosing, the steps already choreographed, with no room for a misstep.

He had only to wait while the barn grew gradually light, for Tomlin to bring his breakfast and saddle the horses, for Sully to collect him, and for Bliss to limp out of the house and across the yard to the waiting horses, his manner one of pleasure anticipated. And once Vin was mounted, he had only to search out his opponent's tracks for the dance to begin.

No sooner though had it begun, Vin kicking his horse forward away from the tracks laid down, than Tomlin objected. "That ain't the way the breed went," he pointed out with a scowl aimed at the tracker's back. "What the hell's he think he's doing?"

Vin ignored him, only kept his gaze on the forward path, laying down the steps of the dance. So Bliss replied in his stead. "It would seem that Mr. Tanner has no wish to be the hunter today."

Tomlin snorted. "I knew he was a few bricks shy of a load, but I had no idea his cart was just plain empty."

Bliss eyed him with amusement. "You think he has made a tactical error?"

"Hell, yes! Unless he just wants the breed sneaking up on him from behind. Now me, I'd rather have him where I can see him."

"And you, Mr. Sully? Are you of the same opinion?"

Sully flicked a look over one shoulder. "Reckon Tanner's got the right of it. All that breed has to do is to find him a nice place to lay up 'til Tanner rides right into whatever trap he sets. This way the shoe's on the other foot."

Tomlin snorted. "You don't reckon that breed's smart enough to figure that out for himself?"

When Sully only hitched a shoulder upwards, Bliss said for him, "Many a man has gone knowingly to his death."

"Damn, Preacher." The gunman's tone was one of disgust, as was the look he sent his employer. "You sound like you think the dummy will outsmart

the breed -- not that there's much to choose between them when it comes to brains. But hell, even an Injun has to be smarter than a damned dummy."

"Perhaps. But this is not an intellectual contest. Rather it is instinct pitted against instinct, experience against experience, cunning against cunning. And even the lowest of animals has that instinct strong in it to survive, whether by escaping death or in dealing it."

"So then you reckon Tanner ain't no more than some dumb animal knowing which way to fly for the winter?"

Bliss shook his head. "I give him more credit than that. But in the end, it is instinct which guides him, as a wolf after the sheep. Yet let the sheep learn to outthink the wolf and it is the sheep who will have the wolf at their mercy."

"But you just said this ain't about who's smarter."

"Not in this case, no, for both men are guided by instinct. I made sure of that, for the contest would not otherwise be fairly fought."

"So you reckon someone long on thinking would have Tanner at their mercy?"

Bliss raised one eyebrow. "It is already so, is it not, Mr. Tomlin?"

The gunman stared at the false preacher for a long moment. Then shifting his gaze to the bound tracker, he gave a grin and said, "Damned if it ain't, Preacher."

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Vin rode heedless of the men behind, his gaze kept always ahead, focused on only what was to come. Through the morning he led them and into the afternoon, coming at last to a spring at which they had camped after that first hunt. At the foot of a ragged cliff, it was nestled among large boulders, chunks of the towering wall of stone that had fallen through the millennia -- a perfect place to lay a trap. He made, however, no move to dismount, only sat shifting his gaze from side to side, ignoring Tomlin's grumbled demand to know if that was to be their resting place for the night. Then at last the tracker kicked his horse forward, moving a hundred yards past the spring and behind a collection of tumbled rocks and boulders.

"We'll keep the horses here," he declared, not looking at those gathered behind him, his gaze directed inward, planning out the steps of the dance to come. Then slipping off his horse, he moved back the way they had come, turning to wait impatiently when Sully was too long in loosing the chain running from manacles to saddle horn.

"We setting up camp here too?" Tomlin asked, his tone that of a man not caring to take orders from one deemed his inferior.

Vin only looked at him a spare moment then continued his interrupted trek back towards the spring, Sully now behind him at the end of the chain. Tomlin and Bliss followed as well, Tomlin to water the horses before settling them for the night and Bliss to sit perched on a boulder

beside the spring while Vin searched out a campsite. And soon the tracker had done so, settling on an open area of barren sand behind a grouping of boulders twenty feet from the spring and in clear view of it, the cliff rising behind and above.

That settled, the tracker dropped to the ground, his back to a boulder, leaving Sully to announce the selection of that night's campsite. But when the others joined them, Tomlin immediately declared the spot unfit. "Ain't no way -- there's nothing to wrap the dummy's chain around." Eyeing the site carefully before turning his gaze to the tracker sitting at rest, Bliss considered the possibilities. Then, satisfied with the play made, he assumed a bored look and directed it at the gunman, saying, "We camp here tonight. And just in case Mr. Tanner should prove forgetful of what lies at stake, you and Mr. Sully will stand guard." Vin lifted his eyes to him, the blue there flat and lifeless, as of a man already dead and buried. And taking that look for accusation, Bliss sighed and said, "Some day, my boy, you will thank me for loosing you from the chains you yourself have imposed. You will then know what it is to be truly free."

Vin continued to stare up at him, gaze unblinking, face expressionless, and at last Bliss moved away, finding his own boulder against which to rest.

The long wait then began.

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Again Vin slept well and deep, waking as always with the sun. And ignoring Tomlin on the other side of the fire awake and on guard, he lay watching the play of light and shadow as the sun rose higher in the morning sky. That time though he found no beauty in the scene, his mind its own desert, barren of all thought, only instinct given life, a stunted growth that and well adapted to an arid landscape.

And it was on that inner desert his attention remained as Bliss and Sully awakened and breakfast came and went. Nor did he give acknowledgment to the presence of the others until Tomlin would have broken camp.

"We stay," he then flatly declared.

Tomlin looked to Bliss for confirmation and grumbled his complaints when it was given. He then sat and waited, his patience shrinking with the shade as the sun rode across the morning sky. "That breed ain't going to fall for this," became his set refrain. "Ain't no way he's going to just march in here and let the dummy jump him."

No one paid him any heed, Vin filtering out all that was of no consequence, sitting still and silent, waiting as he had always waited for what was to come. Sully slept or worked at a bridle in need of mending to pass the time. And Bliss watched Vin beneath lowered eyelids, studying him as would a snake its prey before striking.

Then, as the sun reached its zenith, Vin stirred to some semblance of life again. And stretching his legs out before him, the chain between

ankle cuffs rattling, he gruffly said, "Get these things off."

"We finally getting out of here then?" Tomlin asked from the spare patch of shade into which he'd managed to squeeze himself.

Vin only waited, expectant, and Bliss studied him for a moment before saying, "Remove the leg irons, if you will, Mr. Sully."

"He ain't answered my question!" Tomlin snapped out, snatching his hat off to swipe at the sweat beading his forehead.

Vin waited until the leg irons had been removed to make reply. And then he said only: "Get the horses watered and set. And any moving around needs doing, do it now."

He didn't wait to see if his directions would be followed, didn't so much as spare a glance at his captors, only pushed up from the ground, taking up the length of chain attached to the manacles at his wrist. And draping it behind his neck and across his shoulders, he moved in the direction of the spring.

Tomlin pushed up from the ground as well, his gun springing to one hand as he growled, "Where the hell you think you're going, dummy?"

Vin continued ahead unheeding and Bliss gave a sigh. "You grow tiresome, Mr. Tomlin. And I advise you to holster your weapon before I come to the conclusion that your services are, of necessity, dispensable."

Tomlin tightened his grip on the gun. But it was to the false preacher that his attention turned. "You hired me to keep the dummy in line, not to take orders from him. And there ain't no way I'm going to neither."

Dark eyes grew darker. "You will do exactly as I bid," Bliss decreed in a dangerous tone. "No more and no less. And do I tell you to start reciting nursery rhymes while performing an Indian Rain Dance, you will do so. Am I understood?"

"You're understood," Sully supplied when his partner stood defiant, gun clenched nearly as tightly as his jaw, his gaze on Bliss furious. And pushing up from the ground, Sully crossed to Tomlin and pushed him in the direction the tracker had just taken, calmly saying, "Help me with the horses. Then we can get some lunch before Tanner puts the fire out." Tomlin resisted for a moment, then allowed himself to be led away, his glare shifting to Vin, who made for a scrub brush and broke a branch off it.

"What the hell's he going to do?" the gunman grumbled. "Beat the breed to death with a weed?"

"Guess he's going to brush out any tracks that might show we did anything more than pass by here."

Tomlin snorted. "For all the good that will do. I reckon the breed will smell a trap a mile off. And like as not the dummy will have to go hunting him down after all. And then all he'll get for his trouble is a pig sticker in the gut."

"Then you won't have anything left to complain about, will you?" Sully pointed out. "And you'll have proved which of you is smarter, to boot."

So quit your bellyaching and let's get to the horses."

Tomlin smiled. "You know, you're right. That dummy wants to dig his own grave, who am I to complain? And if he wants me to help him dig it, I reckon all's I need to know is how long and how deep." He laughed then. "This is better than a hanging -- and us with front row seats."

They moved off then to fetch the horses, Tomlin's laughter ringing, and Vin kept his back to them, his attention all for the desert stretching away from that place, to the far reaches of the horizon and beyond. And feeling suddenly lost in it he closed his eyes, shutting it out -- to return to that landscape more barren still within.

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Once all had been set, Vin returned to his chosen spot, sitting so that he could keep watch on the spring through a narrow gap between boulders. Still and silent he waited, time passing without notice, sleep coming to him in snatches, storing it up for the night to come. And through it all he was as if alone, the others silent as well, if not always still, Tomlin especially finding it hard to sit with any degree of ease. Yet he never once drew Vin's gaze to him, such sounds of no consequence, the dance set to a different tune still to come. And so hour followed hour, the sun sinking lower in the sky until it at last touched the horizon and was gone.

Vin then spoke for the first time in hours, turning away from his sentry post and saying, "Light the fire."

Tomlin struck a match, grinning above its flickering flame. "Told you the breed wouldn't fall for it." He set the match then to the tinder readied hours earlier. "And you're fast running out of time."

"Perhaps not so fast as you care to think," Bliss softly suggested.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that there is a full moon tonight, just as there was last."

"Yeah. And so? You reckon Tanner is going to ride out of here and go looking for the breed by the light of the moon?"

Bliss dug out his flask and took a slow sip from it before lazily saying, "In truth? No. Such is unnecessary."

"Then what the hell are you talking about?"

"Only this -- there is but a fine line dividing hunter from hunted and it is easily crossed, from either direction."

"That supposed to make some kind of sense?"

"To one familiar with that line, yes."

Tomlin jabbed at the building fire, stoking it to a higher blaze.

"Hell, Preacher, tell me you ain't never gotten up in front of a church full of folk and had them so addled they didn't know which way was Heaven and which Hell."

Bliss smiled. "Another fine line, Mr. Tomlin."

The gunman gave it up then and went to water the horses and bed them down for the night, leaving Sully to prepare that night's meal. And when

that was done, Vin lay down with his back to the fire and his gaze turned to the darkening sky above.

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He took care in the hours that came to keep his gaze turned always from the fire. And as the flames gradually died down to embers, his sight grew keener in the dim light of the moon long since risen. His hearing too became attuned to the night. Near sounds were filtered out: the soft breathing of those sleeping beside the fire, the snapping of the fire itself, and the occasional scuff of a boot on sand as Sully shifted position on guard duty. Those beyond that small camp were then searched out and catalogued: the flight of night birds, the scratching of some small animal hunting a midnight snack, the desert breeze, the distant yip of a coyote. All was as it should be. Yet still he listened for some faint whisper of sound out of place, willing it to come. And when at last it did -- a soft scrape, a fall of loose earth sounding at the limits of his hearing -- he only grew more still, his eyes closing into slits angled upwards.

Then the breeze seemed to shift, a scent drifting on it long familiar, and he braced his hands on the ground, taking care not to disturb the chain stretching between them. Muscles tensing, he took in shallow breaths, keeping them soft and even, wishing for the long hair that might have muffled them.

Another sound came then, from atop the boulder he faced, the barest hint of leather scuffing on stone. Muted breath, cloth against cloth, and metal sliding across leather. And on the other side of the fire, Sully seemed to grow still, no sound of movement heard.

Again Vin wished for the long hair that would have hidden any gleam from eyes opening. And risking it, he slitted his eyes open another fraction, needing to time his step in the dance precisely.

A dark shape took form then, crouched atop the boulder rising six feet and more above him. Long hair and dark, eyes dark as well, only the whites of them shining in the pale light of the moon and the dying fire. And catching that dim light too was a flash of metal, a long length of knife held gripped in the figure's right hand.

Joaquin, come to take his part in the dance.

He seemed to gather within himself, holding still against the night sky. Then his head moved slowly forward, his body following, his feet sliding along stone with a soft scrape of leather. He was falling then, dark against dark, the knife all there was of light. Towards Vin he fell, in a controlled motion, knife raised, the blade aimed downward.

Vin rolled, pushing hard against the ground, not stopping until he came up against stone. Then his hands were beneath him again, levering his body up and forward, his legs drawing up, his feet kicking off the boulder. And no sooner did the dark figure come to earth with a soft thump in the sand than Vin had launched himself across the intervening space

between them, arms reaching out for the deadly knife already coming up. It had barely begun its arc, however, before Vin slammed into the half breed with an explosion of breaths, both his hands taking hold of the wrist above the knife, altering its trajectory to the side and up. They fell then, into what remained of the fire, the crash of bodies sending ash and glowing embers exploding -- and Sully sitting watch on the other side of it scrambling out of the way, his right hand gone to the butt of his gun but stayed there, Bliss' instructions in this game clear.

Then, as soon as they fell into the fire, the combatants had rolled out of it and into Tomlin and away again -- and the rudely awakened gunman scrambled out of his blankets, rising to his feet with gun in hand and blearily seeking a target before his mind had made sense of things. He had no more than aimed at the cause of his confusion, however, than a hand pushed his gun arm down. He was then pulled back and to the far side of the scattered campfire, where Bliss was climbing to his feet with teeth gleaming white in the moonlight.

No heed though did the two combatants give to their audience, all their attention focused on the thin blade clutched in the half breed's hand, each vying for control of it, Vin once again gaining the uppermost position. But with both hands, of necessity -- thanks to the chain stretching between them -- holding tight to the wrist above the knife, Joaquin was free to reach across his body and Vin's to take hold of the weapon in his free hand, slicing into Vin's right arm once he'd gained possession of the blade. And with a cry the tracker fell, his left hand going automatically to the gash in his right arm as he hit on his back. Then Joaquin was up and launching himself upon the wounded tracker, the knife again in his right hand and arcing downwards. Vin, however, brought up both legs and chained arms, pushing and pulling to send the half breed sailing. No sooner did Joaquin hit the ground though than he was on his feet again. And before he could launch another attack, Vin, too, was on his feet, the chain dangling between cuffed wrists held in both hands and swinging to catch the half breed hard on the right arm. Joaquin fell back then, wary, his knife held still at the ready, dark eyes watching steady.

Vin, too, waited, careful of his opponent's deadlier reach, his right arm dripping blood unheeded, breath coming hard and fast.

Then Joaquin stepped forward, his knife flashing, Vin falling back in response and the chain swinging out. A miss and a bruising strike, again and again, the half breed on the attack and Vin taking the defensive, a deadly pas de deux of advance and retreat. Then a feint and Vin responding as before, the chain swinging out. This time, however, it was caught, Joaquin pulling hard with his left hand while his right slashed out with the knife. And twisting even as he stumbled forward, Vin let go of the chain and reached out to once again take hold of the wrist above the knife before it could connect, his back now to his opponent. Then

going to one knee, he pulled the half breed over his shoulder to land hard on his back, the air knocked out of him and the knife tangling in the chain and falling free at Vin's feet. It was then his, scooped up even as he scrambled to pin his opponent down once again, the knife poised at the half breed's throat.

"It's over," Vin hoarsely declared between pants for breath.

Joaquin lay still beneath him, not disputing him, struggling to draw in breaths of his own. It was instead Bliss who spoke, the soft sibilation of his words a reminder then that the two combatants were not alone.

"Still he breathes, Mr. Tanner," the false preacher pointed out, stepping out of the night shadows into the dim light of the moon. "And so long as he continues to do so, the game continues."

The knife wavered for a moment, blood dripping down the arm leaning Vin's weight on the captive's chest, blue eyes locked onto dark

"His life is yours, Mr. Tanner, his heart beating there beneath your hand at your command. A vanquished warrior fallen in battle and you as victor the arbiter of his fate. He has no life but that which you grant him, his death yours to decree."

Bliss stood six feet away, a crow perched and waiting for death below, a hunger in him impatient to be fed. And in Vin was that instinct sure and strong to survive, Nettie not forgotten but the means in hand to avoid that fall into the abyss, one throw of the knife and the game would be at an end. And looking up to meet a different pair of dark eyes, he gripped the knife more tightly still and eased it from Joaquin's throat, the muscles in his left arm tensing, his weight shifting, the threat beneath forgotten in favor of a more dangerous one above. Before he could draw back his right arm, however, the half breed took advantage of his distraction, renewing his attack, twisting and bucking beneath Vin even as his hands come up to grab at the knife. They tangled then in a danse macabre, wrestling for control of the knife, breaths coming in gasps and grunts, bodies twisting, teeth bared. Then one last heave rolled them into the cliff face, Joaquin hitting hard against it, Vin's forward movement continuing, the knife caught between them. All came to a stop then, movement and breaths -- and the game itself. For a minute they lay thus, eyes wide, bodies pressed one to another. Then Vin drew in breath, a bare movement of his chest. And a moment later, Joaquin let out a whisper of sound, mouth opening in surprise, his body seeming to collapse into itself as if all that had lain within seeped out with that departing breath. Then his hands loosed their hold on Vin and fell away.

Another moment Vin waited. Then it was his turn to let go, hands opening to release the knife, blue eyes locked onto sightless ones as he pushed back and away.

For another long moment he sat in the sand beneath the full moon, in a silence marred only by the ragged rhythm of his breaths drawn in and

expelled. Then his gaze shifted from the one lying still in the shadows to the one standing behind, blue eyes meeting black in the soft glow of moonlight, the sifting of the night breeze among the sand a susurrations as of a bird's wings in flight.

"One game ends," Bliss softly pronounced. "And another begins." One life lost. Another saved. And a fall into the abyss too narrowly avoided.

Vin raised his hands, his gaze lowering to them and the blood there glinting dark in the dim light. A god of life and death. His to choose. Another step in the dance, one more play in the game -- and sand drifting between fingers fast losing their anchor.

He considered for a moment letting go, yearned briefly to surrender himself to the darkness waiting. Weary of the struggle, he wanted only to rest. But such a rest would come at too high a cost, Nettie and Casey safe only so long as he continued in the game, but never truly safe until the final card had been played. So he lowered his hands and raised his eyes to the one waiting.

"Someone once told me never to bet against the house," he softly said, tone flat but a note of warning sounding. Then raising his chin, he added, "Not, that is, unless you're the better cheater."

He got stiffly up then, his blood mixing with the fallen half breed's as he clutched at the wound in his arm. And crossing to what remained of the campfire, he lay down beside it and closed his eyes, searching out escape in sleep.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR ~

Ten days Vin then had to consider how he might cheat Bliss of victory -- and ten days for the gash in his arm to heal well enough for Sully to take out the stitches he'd set. Ten days of sitting chained in the barn stall with only his thoughts and the pain in his arm to keep him company. But as the pain of his wound eased, so too did the confusion of thoughts too long disordered. With nothing to serve as distraction, they fell into orderly lines, the progression of them neat and well-defined, remaining in place instead of drifting away as they had been too long wont to do. They then led to but one conclusion and that needing only opportunity to set it into motion. And that opportunity came on the heels of the stitches' removal, when Vin was at last summoned into Bliss' presence.

Escorted in chains to the ranch house by both Tomlin and Sully, the tracker was shoved through the front door and to a chair at the table in one corner where Bliss already sat poring over a number of papers spread on the table's surface. And once Vin had been shoved into his assigned seat, the false preacher looked up at him.

"Now that your wound is sufficiently healed, your payment for Mrs. Wells' life has come due -- one clean shot, at my command, as agreed." And

when Vin only sat watching him with an unblinking gaze, Bliss took his cooperation as assured and looked down at the spread of papers again. He then singled out a map and shoved it across the table. "You are familiar with the area of the Territory marked?"

Vin glanced down at the map and that part of it circled in pencil. "I know it."

"And do you know of a ranch called the Quarter Moon?"

"I do." It was a lie, but one he was determined would go unnoticed.

Bliss nodded, lie accepted as truth. "It seems the owner of that particular piece of ground has proven a tad inconvenient to certain parties. And said parties are willing to pay handsomely to insure that their lives run far more smoothly -- and profitably -- from now on."

"And you figure a sniper's bullet will do the trick?"

"Indubitably."

Vin raised his chin. "Thought you liked getting close."

"Never fear, Mr. Tanner. My pleasure in this case may be vicarious, but it will nonetheless suffice. And there will be, after all, future opportunities."

The matter thus settled, Bliss turned to the two gunmen standing guard.

"We leave at daybreak tomorrow. In the meantime, see to it that Mr. Tanner is made considerably more presentable."

He waved them off then and Sully and Tomlin dutifully did as commanded, returning Vin to the barn where they allowed him to not only bathe but shave. And once he'd dressed in fresh clothes, they left him, once again tethered in his stall.

He had hours then to consider the next day's trail, hours to map out the moves that need be made. Dinner came and went, the dim light of the barn failed, and he settled himself to sleep -- and to dreams of a wolf dining on a feathered carcass.

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"The damned thing's dry!" Tomlin snapped as he kicked a loose stone into the dust-laden depression in the ground at his feet. "Should have known the dummy wouldn't know what he was doing."

Four days out and it had been two since the canteens had last been filled.

"We have water enough to last us another couple of days," Sully pointed out, sitting patient on his horse behind Vin's, the chain stretched between them.

"And how long 'til the next water hole?" Tomlin challenged. He snatched his hat off his head and hit it against one leg, raising a cloud of dust. Then wiping the sleeve of one arm across his forehead, he irritably added, "Assuming, of course, that the dummy can even find another one. And if it ain't just as dry as this one if he does." He slammed the hat back on his head and turned his attention to Bliss, also on his horse and looking unruffled in the heat, dark clothes or no. "I'm telling you,

Preacher, you keep letting that dummy set the trail and there's no telling where we'll end up or how dry we'll be when we get there." Bliss raised one eyebrow. "You feel better qualified then to lead us? You know precisely where water may be found, the shortest routes around obstacles ahead, and how best to wend your way among whatever ranches lie scattered between here and our objective without being seen? If so, then lead on."

Tomlin let out an explosive breath. "Fine. Maybe I don't know all them things. But how can you be sure the dummy does either?"

"Because one dry water hole notwithstanding, he has yet to lead us astray. And should he be inclined to make such an attempt, I feel sure his concern for the welfare of the ladies Wells will serve as sufficient deterrent."

"You can maybe scare him into towing the line," Tomlin conceded. "But you can't scare brains into that thick skull of his. And I ain't so ready as you to go wandering through the desert on his say-so. Not when we got two days' water left and no telling how long it will take the dummy to find more."

Bliss looked to Vin sitting uncaring on his horse, gaze set at a distance far beyond that place. "Mr. Tanner? Do you care to allay Mr. Tomlin's fears?"

Vin brought his gaze slowly back. "Next hole's less than a day ahead." "And you have no doubt as to your ability to locate said supply of water?"

Blue eyes met dark without blinking. "Fine with me if you want to turn back."

It wasn't an answer, but Bliss took it as such. "No need -- we proceed."

"And if he gets us lost?" Tomlin challenged, a scowl weighing down his brows.

"He found this hole, didn't he?" Sully challenged in turn.

"For all the good it did!"

"He found it," Bliss repeated firmly. "The fact that it is dry is unfortunate but in no way an indictment of Mr. Tanner's abilities as guide. So, that being settled, let us then continue onward."

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"Damn!" Tomlin spat out along with a mouthful of water. And wiping his mouth on one shirtsleeve, he pushed back from the edge of the small water hole from which he'd just taken a drink and spun to face the tracker standing at the end of the chain still looped around Sully's saddle horn. "You trying to poison us?"

Sully too sat back from the water's edge, wiping his mouth as well. And looking up to Bliss, who stood waiting behind with canteen in hand, he said, "It's no good. Tastes like something dying in it would be an improvement."

Bliss turned his gaze to the tracker, his eyes narrowing. "A mistake, Mr. Tanner? Or have you decided to sacrifice your pawn to some greater purpose?"

Vin wrinkled his forehead, assuming the look of confusion worn all too frequently in months past. And raising his bound arms to rub a hand against one side of his head, he hesitantly said, "I... I guess I forgot the water ain't no good."

Tomlin let out a curse and aimed a glare at the false preacher. "I told you it was a mistake to trust him! Now we got a day's worth of water left and I'm betting there ain't a town on that map of yours within a three days' ride -- which is exactly how far back the last hole that had water in it is."

"We can stretch the water out that far if we have to," Sully pointed out.

"Not, I am sure," Bliss added, dark eyes still on the tracker, "that such will be necessary. Correct, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin met that look, his expression blank. "There's another hole not far from here. We can get there by nightfall."

"And I assume there will be no confusion this time?"

Worded as a question, it was nevertheless a warning. Vin's expression, however, changed not at all.

"It's there."

Still, dark eyes studied the tracker, with the intensity of a snake none too sure which direction its prey might leap in a desperate bid to escape its fate. "I do indeed hope you are not mistaken this time -- for Mrs. Wells' sake."

"And what about our sake?" Tomlin growled in challenge. "You keep letting that dummy lead us like he's been doing and the buzzards will be picking our bones in another day or two."

"Come, Mr. Tomlin. Whatever Mr. Tanner's failings -- and whatever delaying tactics he might choose to employ -- he is no more immune to thirst than are the rest of us. Nor is he willing to risk the lives of those he holds dear. So I think it safe to presume that his next attempt at finding water will prove far more successful than the previous two."

"And if you ain't as smart as you'd like to think -- or if he's dumber?"

Bliss shrugged, a careless movement. "Then we shall retrace our steps and be little worse off than we are now. With the exception of Mr. Tanner, of course. He, I fear, would, in that case, be minus a loved one." Tomlin remained unmollified, jaw set, glare none diminished. "I don't like it."

"Then how fortunate that your opinion is of no concern to me." Bliss dug out his flask and took a sip from it. Then tipping his hat down onto his forehead to further block out the sun's over-bright rays, he added, "Now, it is far too hot and I too dry to continue with such an annoying

discussion. Let us therefore proceed."

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Vin led them towards towering stone cliffs rising out of the desert floor like sentinels set to stand guard, heading straight to a gap in one section not visible until they were nearly upon it. And beyond that wended a narrow trail bound by sheer walls on either side. Deeper and deeper they rode, through a maze of stone and sand unrelieved by any signs of life. Then, as the light gave way to shadow, Vin reined his horse to a stop at what was little more than a crack in a cliff face.

"In there."

The gap indicated being too narrow to allow the horses' passage, Bliss nodded to Tomlin in silent command.

"Damned dummy had best be right this time," the gunman grumbled as he climbed wearily out of his saddle, unhooking a canteen as he did so. And handing off his reins to Sully, he disappeared into the crack between cliffs.

Vin let his gaze drift then, his mind following suit, a weariness washing over him, knowing what was to come, the move not yet played out, but needing in that moment not to care. Still, it took only the scrape of boot heels on hard ground a few minutes later to draw his attention back to the narrow gap in the stone through which Tomlin stepped, his face red with fury.

"The damned trail don't lead nowhere," the gunman spat out. "And there ain't nothing in there that could ever have held more than a drop or two of water."

Vin wrinkled his brow and looked vaguely around. "Must have counted wrong. Best backtrack a ways and try again."

Tomlin let out a string of curses, but Bliss forestalled whatever complaints would have followed. "It would seem the heat is having a deleterious effect on your wits, Mr. Tanner. Perhaps you should take a moment to bring them to order. After all, you can ill afford to make another mistake."

The warning that time made plain, Vin only blinked at the false preacher -- thus provoking another outburst from Tomlin.

"Hell, that damned dummy look like he can even count to one? And we're supposed to go trailing off after him again?"

Sully shifted in his saddle, his gaze going to Bliss and falling away again. "Doesn't much matter now, I guess. Sun will be setting soon, so we won't be wasting any time letting Tanner try to pick up the right trail. Might as well get to it as stand here bellyaching on it."

Tomlin shot his partner a dark look, but grudgingly conceded the point, snatching the reins from Sully's hand and swinging into his saddle. Vin then led the way back along the trail and through several twists and turns before turning about again. That attempt, however, proved no more successful than had the previous one, nor did each succeeding attempt

thereafter. And as the light all but faded, Tomlin marched out of one last gap in the never-ending walls of stone, his face a mask of fury.

"We been doing nothing but riding in circles -- that's the second damned time, at least, I've been down that trail and there ain't any more water down it this time than last. And it's getting near too dark to see our hands in front of our faces, much less find whatever water there is to be found. Assuming there's any at all."

"Does seem like if there was any, we'd have found it by now," Sully agreed.

Bliss studied the tracker with eyes darker than the shadows shifting into night. "I fear I must agree, gentlemen. Mr. Tanner seems to have switched games on us mid-play. And I am in no small way curious to know just what his preferred game might be."

Vin met that gaze squarely, the look of confusion gone, the blue eyes locked onto dark clear and sharply in focus. And in a voice firm and steady, words flowing easily out of that newfound place of order, he said, "The only game being played is the same as we been playing all along."

Dark eyes narrowed. "And what game would that be, Mr. Tanner?"

Vin cocked his head, assuming a quizzical look. "Now what was it you called it?" He thought a moment, his gaze never leaving the false preacher. "Oh yeah. Survival of the fittest." His eyes grew cold then. "Any bets on which of us is the first to feed the buzzards?"

Bliss sat still on his horse, neither eyes nor face giving any hint of emotion away. Tomlin's reaction, however, was far less subtle. And marching to Vin's horse, he took hold of the tracker and dragged him out of the saddle and to the ground, shaking him and snarling, "What the hell you think you're doing, Dummy? This ain't no kid's game you're playing at here. You're as like to die without water as any of the rest of us. More, if I have my way."

Vin made no attempt to break free of the gunman's rough hold. Instead he held his gaze with dead eyes and said, "You ever seen a man been out in the desert too long without water? Ever seen how deep his eyes can sink into his head, how cracked and blue his lips can get, how big his tongue can swell? Ever heard his heart beating so fast you wonder why it don't just up and explode? Ever feel a body so hot and dry you reckon it'll blow away in the first breeze to come along?"

Tomlin's face paled for a moment, then resumed its look of fury. And shoving Vin back he snatched his gun from its holster and leveled it at the captive tracker. "And what about you?" he growled. "You ever seen a man been shot in the face?"

Vin settled into a comfortable stance, one hip cocked, the thumbs of both hands tucked into the waistband of his pants. And up went one corner of his lips into a small smile of satisfaction.

Back, in turn, went the hammer of Tomlin's gun. "You answer me plain, Dummy, right here and right now: There any water anywheres near here?"

"No."

There followed a long moment of silence, as if to allow more words to come. And when none followed, Tomlin offered a few of his own. "You give me one damned good reason, Dummy, why I shouldn't just blow you way the hell to Kingdom Come."

Another hammer clicked back. And turning his head, Tomlin looked straight into the bore of Bliss' gun.

"Will this serve as sufficient deterrent?" the false preacher inquired, his tone one of curiosity, but the eyes above his weapon dark with warning.

Tomlin's gun remained steady on its target. "Don't be a fool, Preacher. The dummy needs persuading and you ain't never going to do that by throwing them fancy words of yours at him."

"Nonetheless, I suspect they might prove far more effective than a bullet in the face."

"The Reverend's right," Sully joined in. "Like it or not, we need Tanner."

"Why? You said yourself we got water enough to last us 'til we can make it back to the last water hole."

"And you know the way back?"

"All's we got to do is to follow the tracks we made getting here."

"And you're sure you can read trail good enough for that? Certain sure?"

Tomlin continued to hold the gun steady for another moment. Then conceding Sully's point with a curse, he eased the hammer back and stuffed the gun into its holster. "Fine," he snarled. "But needing him alive don't mean he has to stay all in one piece."

Bliss too uncocked the hammer of his gun, stowing it then into some inner pocket. "Have no fear," he softly advised. "Mr. Tanner has no intention of betting more than he is willing to lose. And no matter how strong the urge in him to claim victory in this little contest of ours, stronger still is his desire to survive."

"Then what the hell's he playing at?"

"A very good question, sir. And one I have no doubt upon which Mr. Tanner will now gladly hasten to expound." Bliss cocked his head, his manner that of an indulgent parent giving in to the whims of a precocious child. "So please proceed, sir. Explain to us the rules by which you would now have the game played."

Vin shrugged, careless in his manner but his eyes sharp and never wavering from his opponent's. "Ain't no rules. Never was."

"Indeed?" Still that air of amusement at childish demands. "Then perhaps you would care to share with us just what it is you wish in return for your cooperation?"

"Nothing you'd give up without a fight."

Still that careless manner, but with a hard edge to it now.

"Come, Mr. Tanner. I am not so easily bluffed. We've water still and need only backtrack to the last water hole to find more. And, despite Mr. Sully's reservations to the contrary, I am fully confident we'd be able to manage such well enough. The game would then resume -- much to the detriment of Mrs. Wells."

"Got to get out of here first."

No hesitation, the words flowing sharp and quick. And while Bliss' eyes narrowed at them, he gave a shrug and carelessly said, "Retracing our steps might take a tad longer without your help, but I have every confidence that we shall accomplish it in time."

"Maybe." Still that carelessness of manner, yet with the ease of assurance behind it. "But you got maybe a day's water and, I'm figuring, at least a four day ride 'til you get more."

"Men have survived on shorter rations than that."

"But why go thirsty? Even I can do the math on that one." Vin jerked his chin at Tomlin and Sully. "And I'm betting they can too."

Sully stiffened in his saddle, his gaze darting to Bliss and away again. And more firmly than was required, he declared, "The Preacher's right. There's water enough to get us all to where we're going."

Tomlin's right hand moved to rest on his gun butt, his narrowed gaze on Bliss more open. And sure once again of his own solution to the problem that was Vin Tanner, he growled, saying, "Hell. There's got to be water out here closer than a three days' ride. Why don't you just let me persuade the dummy to lead us to it?"

"And how do you know he would not simply lead us yet further from any hope of water?"

"Then why don't we just do some subtracting? Like say, one from four?"

"And bring the game to so unsatisfying a conclusion?"

Tomlin cursed, his anger flaring. "You think he won't pull another stunt like this if you give him even half a chance?"

"There are ways of bringing him closer to heel."

The gunman's jaw jutted forward. "Damn it, Preacher! Life's too short to put up with a dog that bites. So why don't you just put a bullet in the dummy and have done with it already!"

"Truly, Mr. Tomlin, I might indeed have heard more inane advice given, but when I cannot say."

Tomlin bristled at both insult and the languid tone in which it was offered, his hand no longer at rest on his gun butt but moving to close over it. Before he could follow through, however, on whatever move he might have had in mind, Sully hastened to intervene.

"Now, there's no call for things to get out of hand," he soothed. "It's what Tanner wants -- us fighting each other, doing his work for him."

Vin gave a cocky smile of agreement. Tomlin, however, was too far gone in his anger to notice or care if he had. "You think you're so damned smart, don't you, Preacher? You think all's you got to do is outsmart a

damned dummy and you'll end up with your name in the history books or something. Well, don't go clearing any space on your bookshelves just yet, 'cause from where I'm standing it appears the dummy's the one doing the outsmarting."

It was Bliss' turn to bristle, his indignation more subtly expressed, the chill of his tone sufficient to give warning of the danger in which Tomlin had just thrust himself. "Appearances can, as they say, be deceiving, sir. For instance, it might appear as though I am a man of unlimited patience." His tone chilled another degree. "The truth, however, is far to the contrary."

Again Sully intervened, that time more hastily still. "Don't none of that matter for now. It's too dark already to do any more than bed down for the night. Everything else can wait 'til it's light."

With no lessening of his tone's chill, Bliss agreed. "An admirable suggestion, Mr. Sully. I suspect we could all do with a night's reflection. And on the morrow no doubt we shall all rise with our tempers much improved -- and our thoughts clear."

Tomlin, however, was unwilling to give in that easily. "And if ain't nothing changed?"

"Then we shall call Mr. Tanner's bluff."

Tomlin stared through the gathering darkness at the form darker still, his fury unabated but mixed with an amazed disbelief. "It's still a game to you, ain't it, Preacher? We're smack dab in the middle of some damned desert with nearly empty canteens and no water closer than a three days' ride at best. And to top it all off, we got us an uppity dummy doing his damnedest to see us dead -- and it ain't nothing but a game to you."

"Life is a game, Mr. Tomlin," Bliss softly returned, his tone that of a man speaking of his beloved. "It is but one immense gamble. And you either win at it -- or you lose." He paused then, shifting his gaze to the other player in the game. "Is that not so, Mr. Tanner?"

"I reckon it is, at that." Tone careless still, that of a man with nothing to lose. "And you'd best be keeping an eye out for the ace up the other man's sleeve."

With that Vin moved to the cliff face at the side of the trail and sat down with his back against it, chains rattling and eyes closing, settled already for the night.

"Excellent advice," Bliss murmured, eyeing the one all but lost in shadows. "But there is, after all, more than one ace in a deck."

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE ~

Tempers were little improved the following morning, positions unchanged. And when Tomlin would have continued the previous day's objections,

Bliss was quick to point out that the current equation could swiftly be

altered were he given reason enough to consider the merits of reducing their numbers by one. They ate breakfast then in silence and were soon on their way again, following Bliss' confident lead. Challenge having been offered and met, he was eager to play the game out to his own advantage.

Unimpressed with the man's air of self assurance, Vin, in turn, went silent, granting only the occasional cocky smile when yet another trail on their journey out of the maze of canyons proved fruitless. Nor was he impressed when they came roundabout back to one seemingly promising path's starting point and Bliss at last thought to mark that and all future junctions with coins dug out of a pocket. Instead Vin looked pointedly up at the sun already past its zenith and cheerfully said, "You took longer coming up with that one than I figured, but I still reckon you got a fair chance of finding your way out of here before dark."

Again he let loose that cocky smile and Tomlin took violent exception to it, snatching his gun out of its holster and aiming it at Vin with a growled warning. "I've had it with these damned games of yours, Dummy. I want out of here and I want out of here now!"

Vin only widened his smile another notch and slouched down further into his saddle, as if settling in for a welcome bit of entertainment.

"Patience, Mr. Tomlin," Bliss advised in a softly uttered warning of his own. "All good things come to those who wait."

"Yeah? Well, I ain't never been much good at waiting."

"Perhaps not. But do you desire the chance to improve on that particular fault, I suggest you not dispatch Mr. Tanner just yet."

Bliss sat easily on his horse, no hint of danger in pose or face. Still Sully hurried to avert disaster. "The Reverend's right, Tomlin. If push comes to shove, we just might need Tanner."

"And what makes you think push ain't come to shove yet?"

Sully snaked a look at Bliss, waiting to see if that question would receive a reply obviously not anticipated by the irate gunman. And when the false preacher remained at seeming ease, he turned back to his recklessly unheeding partner and soothingly said, "We still got water enough."

"That why my tongue is sticking to the roof of my mouth?"

Another quick look to Bliss and then: "We're all thirsty. And tired."

"Not him!" Tomlin shoved his gun a hand's length nearer Vin's face.

"Look at him. Acts like he ain't got a care in the world. The preacher too. Ain't neither of them giving an inch. Hell, the only thing that matters to them is winning this stupid game they got going between them."

"That may be. But we still need Tanner."

"Yeah," Tomlin irritably conceded. He then swung his gun towards Bliss.

"But we don't need him."

Sully raised one arm in a gesture of restraint, his uneasy gaze now darting between his partner and their employer. "Now hold on, Tomlin."

Don't go getting crazy."

"I'm not the one's crazy!" the gunman indignantly barked, his eyes never leaving his chosen target. "Don't you get it? This game ain't over 'til the preacher breaks Tanner or Tanner kills him. And we ain't got time enough to wait for the dummy to crack. So -- we give Tanner what he wants and he gives us what we want."

As if bored by the proposed change in the group's equation, Bliss sighed. "Don't be a fool, Mr. Tomlin. A few days of added comfort is hardly worth all that it will cost you."

Tomlin only tightened his grip on his gun. "What good's money if the buzzards pick the meat off your bones before you get a chance to spend it?"

"And you think Mr. Tanner will turn docile once I am gone? That he won't know as well as I that you can subtract one from three as easily as from four once you have made full use of him?"

"I ain't got no call to kill him."

"Perhaps not. But will he return the sentiment in kind?" Bliss sliced his gaze towards Vin. "Look at him. Do you truly believe a man such as he, one born with a killer's instinct, would let live a man who has so humiliated him? That he would not hunt him down and destroy him?"

Tomlin licked dry lips, then sidled a look to the tracker watching with that cocky smile bordering on a grin of triumph. "What do you say, Tanner? You interested in a trade?"

Before Vin could make reply, however, a flash of light announced the loosing of Bliss' knife, the weapon arcing through the air towards Tomlin and landing solidly in his chest. A moment of stillness then followed, all sitting as if frozen, Tomlin included, his eyes gone wide with an amazed surprise, his free hand going to the joining of blade and body. Then his expression turned to one of confusion. And a moment later his eyes lost all focus and he slid from his horse to lie in a lifeless heap upon the hard ground.

The spell that had bound them all thus broken, Bliss gave a shake of his head. "How unfortunate," he drawled. "It would seem that Mr. Tomlin's offer has been withdrawn."

Words and tone spoke of regret, but the dark eyes watching the no-longer smiling tracker were lit with satisfaction. And reaching then into an inner pocket, he withdrew his gun, aiming it at the remaining player in the game, who sat in a stunned stillness on his horse eyeing his partner's fallen form. "And you, Mr. Sully?" Bliss curiously inquired. "Shall I continue my mathematical demonstration? Or would you prefer a return to our lesson in geography?"

Sully blinked, his eyes still on the body on the ground. Then, forcing his gaze away and to Bliss, he took in a shaky breath. And, in a hollow voice, he dully said, "Geography was always my best subject."

Bliss lowered his gun. "Very well. If you would then be so kind as to

retrieve my weapon, we shall proceed."

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The hours that followed passed with no word exchanged between the remaining three men, the only sounds that of the horses' hooves striking the hard ground, the jangle of tack, the occasional creak of saddle leather. No breeze wafted through the narrow passageway and the gradually increasing shade provided little respite from the afternoon's heat. Sweat gathered and fell in rivulets down the men's faces or soaked into dusty clothes. Mouths grew increasingly dry, nasal passages became more and more clogged with dust. Lips showed the first signs of cracking. Yet the men rode easily enough, thoughts focused on the attainment of goals, even if not a common one, rather than on physical discomfort.

Bliss rode still ahead, back straight, never pausing to rest man nor beast, confident enough of Sully's cooperation to keep him at his back, Vin bringing up the rear at the end of rope and chain. And at last that confidence was rewarded, Bliss leading them out of the maze through the same gap by which they had entered, flipping one final coin down to mark the end of the path. Then, taking up his canteen, he raised it in salute to the watchful tracker.

"An admirable start to the game, sir. The next move, in contrast, should prove simple."

He brought the canteen to his lips then and took a sip, savoring the tepid liquid before swallowing.

Vin's only reply was a slow smile, as cocksure as ever. And eyeing that smile, Sully took a swallow from his own supply of water before handing the canteen off to the tracker. He then turned his attention to the false preacher. "There's a hell of a lot of desert between here and that last water hole, Reverend. And I'm betting Tanner wouldn't have been too keen on leaving a nice clear trail back to it. So it might not be so easy as you're supposing to follow it back to where we want to be."

Bliss' confidence, however, went undimmed. "Should such an unlikely scenario come to pass and the game thus no longer prove amusing, I have no doubt but that Mr. Tanner can be persuaded to bring it to a favorable close. In the meantime, there is yet sufficient light to continue. I therefore suggest that we do exactly that."

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Another day they traveled, Sully taking the lead that time, the tracks of their previous passing easily picked out in the sand, only an occasional bit of scouting needed to pick up a trail lost for a short stretch. Bliss, as a result, remained confident, despite the increasing strain of too much heat and too little water. Vin, too, exuded an air of confidence not belied by the physical signs of surrender shared by all. Sweaty, dusty, and tired, they rode low now in their saddles, movements becoming increasingly spare. And as the sun rode higher in the sky and then started its descent, their mouths went past dry, their lips cracked

into bleeding, throats becoming sore enough that they were grateful at the decreased need to swallow.

Then Sully lost the trail.

He knew at once it would not easily be found again, the ground having turned hard, as if scoured by the wind down to bedrock, with but a light scattering of sand to give it an illusion of hope. And what end there might be to it could not be discerned by the naked eye. Nor could Sully even remember having crossed such a length of unforgiving ground during their outward journey.

"Trouble, Mr. Sully?" Bliss asked when the gunman reined his horse in and sat staring ahead.

"You could say that." Sully turned then to fasten a blank look on the tracker behind him, the smile lighting the captive's sunburned face telling him all he needed to know. And shifting his gaze to the false preacher beyond, the gunman kept both expression and tone carefully neutral as he dully reported: "The ground's gone hard and looks to stay that way for some ways ahead. And I'm guessing there'll be no finding the trail again unless Tanner wants it found."

Dark eyes went darker, but Bliss no more than flicked a look to the self-satisfied tracker before moving his horse ahead to study the land stretching away. And a moment later he turned, his gaze on the gunman.

"What do you consider the chances of finding the water hole we seek without benefit of the back trail?"

"Not half as good as a snowball's chance in hell."

Back went Bliss' gaze to the land stretching away before them. Flat and brown, with only the occasional small bit of scrub clinging tenaciously to some wayward drift of sand, it offered no landmarks by which to distinguish the way they had come days before. And even had they the general path along which they need follow, it would be a simple enough matter to miss their target by mere yards and never know it.

A move well played, but the game not yet at a standstill.

Bliss turned then to Vin, his confidence unshaken. "An excellent move, sir. A neatly arranged hand. Yet, as you yourself have pointed out, one need always be wary of an ace tucked up the other player's sleeve."

He collected his canteen then and took a slow drink from it. Then returning it to hang at his horse's side, he refocused his attention on the tracker and languidly said, "What say you, sir? Shall we lay our cards on the table and discover which of us will walk away with the pot?"

Vin cocked his head in a gesture of agreement.

"Very well, then." Bliss rested his left hand on the saddle horn, reins loosely held, his right flourishing in Vin's direction. "In your hand, water is the high card -- and the ace up your sleeve your sole knowledge of where it might be found. Yet said hand cannot be played without considerable risk to yourself. And in my hand we find this --" And so saying, Bliss slipped his right hand into an inner pocket and drew out his

gun, firmly grasped and aimed at his opponent's chest. "Not exactly up my sleeve, I grant you, but an ace nonetheless -- and a highly effective means, I have found, of determining the victor in any game of chance. Indeed, it is surprising, really, how many men choose to fold when so prompted rather than risk having their bluffs prove fatal."

Again the tracker cocked his head, the gesture that time one of puzzlement. "What makes you think I'm bluffing?"

Dark eyes held steady. "Very well. Let us then raise the ante."

Sully started to protest then. But even as the first words left his cracked lips, Bliss swung the gun in his hand slightly to the right and pulled the trigger -- and a line of red appeared instantly along the outer edge of Vin's upper left arm.

"The bid is now to you, Mr. Tanner."

Vin clutched at the wound with his right hand, his left dragged with it, chains rattling, balance kept easily as his startled horse sidled beneath him. And fastening a defiant glare on the false preacher, he hoarsely growled, "Go to hell!"

Challenge met and offered, the game to be played out there and then, the third player dismissed, his protest silenced, his gaze darting back and forth between the two opponents.

"Your bid is met," Bliss declared, dark eyes hard on the defiant tracker. "And raised." He then cocked his gun's hammer again and swung the weapon that time to the left. And as it barked once more to life, a blotch of red appeared on Vin's right arm.

The tracker's face went pale beneath the sunburn and he swayed in his saddle, nearly overbalancing as the nervous horse danced beneath him.

"Damn it, Preacher!" Sully roared, alarm crowding out caution. "Killing the man's a hell of a way to call his bluff!"

"And what if he is, in fact, not bluffing?" Bliss' gaze remained locked with the tracker's. "What if he is fully prepared to refuse us the knowledge we seek? He would then be of no further use. And if such should prove to be the case, better to find it out now. There remains, after all, that pesky little mathematical equation that has been plaguing us -- and I find it far simpler to divide by two."

"Even easier to divide by one though, right?"

The question was one of curiosity, but with a dark knowledge plain behind it. And even as Bliss recognized the danger implied and jerked both head and gun towards the third player in the game, Sully's gun went off with a flash of light and powder.

Bliss instantly tumbled from his saddle, to lie crumpled on the ground, one side of his head giving bloody testament to Sully's aim.

The moment seemed to freeze in time, the only movement that of the horses giving further protest. Then the gun in Sully's hand swung towards the tracker.

"It's your play now, Tanner," the gunman coldly pointed out. "And with

the preacher out of the game, I figure you've got no call to go on with it anymore. Not unless you just want to die. So, what are you going to do -- call or raise?"

Vin studied the gunman for a long moment, blood dripping unheeded down both arms, possibilities considered, odds computed. He then shifted his gaze to the body lying still upon the ground, the gun fallen away and beyond reach of the hand curled limply on hard ground. The game was over -- and another beginning. And the one forgotten in favor of the other, he turned back to the waiting gunman and said, "I call."

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX ~

The next two days Vin was to remember only in nightmares -- his wounded arms throbbing, his mouth dry and little relieved by the occasional swallow of water, his eyes gritty, muscles heavy, and a heat radiating off his sweat-soaked body that made even the cool nights seem unbearable. And always there seemed to be at the edge of his awareness the whispered sound of a crow's wings flapping.

Sully fared little better, the water gleaned from Bliss' canteen not increasing their supply by nearly enough to make the journey anything but a misery. Yet still it was enough to carry them to the water hole at last, the horses' steps picking up before it was in sight, Vin leaning forward in his saddle as if to thereby reach salvation that much sooner. And when they rounded a clump of scrub to find the sunlight glinting off the surface of clear water nestled among exposed rock, Vin forgot the throbbing pain in his arms.

Still, it was almost more than he could do to climb down off his horse when it came to a stop with its muzzle sunk in the small pool. And when he'd staggered to the edge of the water and lowered himself to the ground, Sully was there before him, head down, hands bringing water greedily to his lips.

Vin wasted no time copying him, not caring that the cool liquid seemed to burn its way down his abused throat or that his arms protested their use. Handful after handful he took in until he feared he was in danger of having it all come back up again. So he forced himself to instead lower his head into the water, savoring the feel of it against dry fevered skin, holding it there until he recalled the need for breath. And drawing it up again he lay at the water's edge with the cool liquid dripping off his hair and onto his face and neck, his eyes closed at the pleasure of it.

When Sully had likewise indulged himself, he reluctantly pushed up and away, grabbing at his still-indulging mount's reins as he did so. "Best see to the horses before they drink themselves sick."

He unlooped the length of chain attached to both saddle and the manacles at Vin's wrists, hesitating only a bare moment before letting the end of it drop to the ground. He then collected Vin's horse and moved both

mounts to a patch of scrub twenty feet away. And there he set about stripping them of saddles and supplies.

Vin watched him for a moment, then let his gaze slide to the free end of the chain that had for so long held him prisoner. Not freedom -- not with iron bands binding him still -- but it was one step nearer that goal. And letting that be enough for the moment, he turned back to the spring-fed pool and dipped his cupped hands once more into it, scooping up more of the precious liquid, taking one small sip before splashing the remainder over his face.

Again and again he did so until the throbbing in his arms reminded him that thirst was not his only complaint. And pushing up reluctantly from the water, he sat at its edge with eyes closed for a moment to take measure of his throbbing arms, deciding at last that his left stood most in need of attention. He then worked awkwardly at the knot keeping in place the piece of shirt salvaged from Bliss' saddlebags that served as a bandage. And when it came free, he began to unwrap the cloth, stopping with a sucked-in breath of pain when it stuck to the dried blood binding it to the wound beneath.

Then Sully was there, standing over him. And pulling a bandana out of one pocket, he held it out. "Here," he gruffly offered. "Use this to soak it off."

Vin made no effort to take hold of the proffered cloth, his wary gaze fastened on the gunman, aware that nothing had been settled between them despite the small portion of freedom granted. Shocked by Bliss' death days earlier, he had reacted instinctively to Sully's ultimatum, knowing he was safe until he had made good on his bargain and trusting as he had always trusted that he would somehow manage beyond that point. And now that point had been reached.

Reading that hesitation correctly, Sully continued to hold the bandana out. "Look, Tanner. I don't have anything against you. I was paid to do a job and I did it. And now, as far as I'm concerned, the job is over and what happens to you is none of my concern. So you can take this or leave it. Up to you. But I warn you -- you got any hard feelings, I got no problem taking you down. Understand?"

Not a challenge but warning. Nothing hidden. Simply the terms by which they might both walk away from that place alive and free. And having had to accept terms far less profitable than that in his life, Vin held his hand out for the bandana.

Sully deposited it with a nod, then went back to setting up camp, leaving Vin to tend to his wound on his own. And long used to doing just that, he set to work without complaint, soaking the borrowed bandana in the water beside him and bringing it up again dripping wet. He then squeezed the excess out and onto the makeshift bandage, repeating the whole process again and again until he was at last able to work the cloth free.

The wound thus exposed was not pretty: an angry gouge two inches long, red and swollen, and flesh enough torn away that stitching it closed had never been a possibility. And gritting his teeth, Vin set about cleaning it as best he could, wishing they had thought to relieve Bliss of his flask, in as much need of a drink as of some means by which to more thoroughly cleanse his wounds.

When he'd done as good a job as he was able, he rinsed the makeshift bandage out and replaced it before moving to his other arm. And when the lesser wound there had been cleaned and rewrapped, Vin took a last drink of water and pushed stiffly up. He then crossed to the camp Sully had set up, the length of untethered chain dragging behind him.

Sully looked up from the fire ring he was arranging, his gaze going from the approaching tracker to the sky beyond. "Sun'll be setting soon. Best go scrounge up some of whatever passes for firewood hereabouts while the light's still good." He set one final rock, then got to his feet. And crossing to his bedroll already laid out, he collected the rifle lying there. "Might as well see if I can scare up something better than jerky for dinner while I'm at it."

Trust given, perhaps, but a wary one, no matter the excuse for not leaving a weapon behind. And no less wary, Vin settled himself onto the ground before a particularly dense grouping of scrub, the horses to one side, his position thus somewhat sheltered and a ready means of escape near to hand should such prove necessary.

He waited then, manacled hands resting in his lap, his arms still protesting his rough ministrations to the wounds there, tired and hot and thirsty still -- and wishing he had thought to fill a canteen before settling himself to rest. He debated then getting up, undecided whether he was more tired or thirsty, his eyes casting their vote with a lowering of their lids, muscles going lax as he slid into a dreamy half-sleep, not even the sound of a gunshot some time later rousing him beyond a brief glad realization that dinner would be something more than jerky that night.

Then came the sound of Sully's return a minute later, a crashing in the scrub, footsteps dragging, and the thud of something heavy falling to the ground on the far side of the camp.

Not the usual sounds of a man returning successful from a hunt for small game, that awareness penetrating the fog of Vin's near sleep, something not right and an alarm going off too late. It had been a gunshot he'd heard -- and Sully gone off with a rifle in hand.

Jerking awake, Vin instinctively reached for the long-missing mare's leg, his eyes flashing open, his gaze going first to the figure sprawled on the ground a dozen feet away, details taken in instantly. Sully. Half reclining and both hands clutched to his bloody left thigh, face pale and drawn into an expression of pain. And beyond him, at the edge of the camp in shadows, stood a dark form, a crude bandage wrapped around a

dark-maned head, one slim white hand holding at the ready a sleek pistol, the other resting atop a gold-topped cane.

Bliss.

Returned from the dead but the journey a short one from the look of him -- eyes fever bright and sunk into dark shadows, lips cracked and bloody, face dirty and unshaven and with the pulled look of a man long ill. Then the ghostly apparition smiled, a death's head come to grotesque life, a fresh trail of blood spilling from cracked lips and down his stubbled chin. "Ah, Mr. Tanner," the false preacher drawled, his voice a hoarse whisper, a rattle of dry leaves across a long abandoned grave. "Rumors of my death having been greatly exaggerated, the bet is now to you."

If what had preceded that moment was nightmare, what followed was Vin's worst fears come to life. Unable to move, his mind gone blank, his breathing paralyzed, he sat, gaze fixed and unblinking.

The bloody smile widening at his captive's response, Bliss tucked his cane under one arm and dug into a pocket of his vest, his suit coat having been discarded since last Vin had seen him and one sleeve of his filthy shirt missing and presumably serving as the bandage at his head. Then bringing his hand out again, Bliss displayed the flask that had so recently figured in Vin's thoughts and held it up in a trembling salute. "I would drink to your health, gentlemen, but I seem to have run a bit dry."

And so saying he exchanged flask for cane and limped to the water hole, cane tapping in an unsteady rhythm, gaze hard on Vin and gun at the ready still. And stooping awkwardly at the water's edge, he retrieved the flask, unscrewed the lid and dipped it into the water for a moment before bringing it up again and to his lips, taking a long sip ending with a sigh. He then fixed the captive tracker with a self-satisfied gaze. And in a tone none the less arrogant for his ragged state, he hoarsely said, "I find it truly remarkable how quickly one can adapt to changing circumstances. For instance, when I first deemed it wise to dispose of the previous contents of this flask in favor of a decidedly more bourgeois refreshment, I considered it near sacrilege. Yet I find that in the past few days I have come to appreciate the subtle nuances of such a simple liquid."

Again he dipped the flask into the water, letting it fill completely before raising it once more to his lips and drinking deep. He then assumed a contrite air, as if his reluctant companions had accused him of some inglorious crime, and sadly said, "Alas. You have the right of it -- I did indeed shortchange you gentlemen, reserving an overly large portion of our remaining water supply to my own particular needs. But then, I never was very good at division, preferring to divide by the simplest of numbers -- one."

He set the flask aside then to dig a handkerchief out of a pocket. And

wetting it, he dabbed at his cracked lips -- and at the blood trailing down his chin. Once satisfied with his ablutions, he folded the handkerchief neatly and returned it to his pocket, the flask following an instant later. And pushing up from the water's edge, and leaning heavily on his cane, Bliss limped across the intervening ground to stand at Sully's feet, his expression shifting into one of disappointment.

"It would seem that your mathematical abilities leave something to be desired, sir. But then, I suppose that is only to be expected when one fails to adequately check one's work. That being your second mistake -- with your first, of course, not taking care to aim more precisely."

Bliss shook his head. "I fear such shoddy workmanship will not gain you a letter of reference. Not, mind you, that opportunity for future employment is likely to present itself."

The gunman shot him a look of mixed pain and fear, hands still clutching the wound in his leg. He offered, however, no protest, made no pleas for mercy. And settling himself on a rock in the shade of long shadows -- and well beyond being surprised by any attempts at heroics -- the false preacher continued.

"Your third mistake was leaving me with a ready means of coming up with you again." And giving another shake of his head, he added, "Really, Mr. Sully. Horseflesh is far too valuable a commodity to be so thoughtlessly left behind. As is a weapon of any sort. One never knows, after all, when such might come in handy."

He sighed, his air that of a man wearied by the deficiencies of his inferiors. "I could go on and on, my dear fellow, so uninspired was your handling of this regrettable affair. However, all's well that ends well, I suppose, with us all together again, only slightly the worse for wear. And I am fully confident we can come to some sort of accommodations one with another. Can we not?"

"Before you kill us, you mean?" Sully dully challenged.

"Come, sir! I have no intention of killing either of you gentleman. Unless, of course, it proves necessary."

Death cheated and the game to go on, victory to be his, some need in him to prove his own belief in himself, all else in life bent towards that singular achievement.

And as bent on his own ending to the game, Vin found voice again. "What do you want, Bliss?"

Not a question but challenge, the game taken now to some new level, that much evident by the sparing of Sully's life -- and by the deeper shade of dark shadowing in the false preacher's eyes.

"You know what I want, Mr. Tanner. Nothing in that regard has changed. However, I fear some slight alterations in the playing of our little game will be in order. It seems that I find the wild in you slightly less charming than anticipated. It therefore behooves me to, if not break that spirit in you, at least bring it more to heel."

Vin jerked his head towards Sully. "And him?"

"Never fear. His usefulness is not quite at an end."

The matter settled, Bliss set the flask aside and dug into a pocket.

"And now, Mr. Tanner, I must ask you to -- shall we say -- insure your continued participation in this little game of ours." His hand reappeared then with a small padlock and key. And tossing both onto the ground at the still-bound tracker's feet, he added, "That sturdy bit of brush at your back seems adequate to the task. And -- lest you be tempted -- I will be checking to insure that you have adequately secured your bonds."

Vin sat unmoving, desperately searching out some path -- any path -- leading away from that place. But if any there were, his tired mind couldn't discover them. So with a tightening of his jaw muscles and a glared warning to the false preacher that the game had not yet been played out, he took up the lock and key.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN ~

Bliss' game soon became apparent, neither captive allowed food and only Sully water -- and that only in amounts sufficient to keep him in the game. Bliss, meanwhile, made himself comfortable, content to rest in the shade watching, a crow perched and waiting patiently for its next meal to expire.

Vin, in turn, watched him, searching out the trail ahead and some way around it. But the dark eyes meeting his gave warning that Bliss would be content with nothing less than complete victory. Whatever enjoyment he had found in the anticipation of moves to come, in maneuvering plays toward a desired goal, had fallen beneath a bullet too closely aimed.

He had very nearly lost all and would take no further chances. That Vin knew, knew with a certainty that the game had at last come down to its final play -- and him without a move that would not end badly.

Night came and faded away, the sun rose and fell -- and Vin waited. The previous days' misery soon gave way to a nightmare of thirst: his tongue thickened in a mouth gone painfully dry, the taste of blood constant from lips splitting with each small movement, even that bit of wetness welcome; his throat a razor's edge of pain; nasal passages protesting each breath searing dry membranes; his eyes dry beds of grit and sand. Then as night settled, a heat seemed to blaze from within him, nausea starting, his muscles cramping, those spasms of pain soon rivaling the throbbing of his wounds.

And across the fire, Bliss watched.

Seeking escape at last in sleep, Vin's dreams that night were a nightmarish mix of need and desire, hope and fears. He was lost and sick and searching for something that couldn't be found and holding tight to that which he wouldn't give up. Chased and abandoned, wearied from struggles he couldn't recall on waking, he sought escape from the dark shadow haunting him, a soft whisper of wings never fading. Then he fell, too

played out to rise again, knowing the crow sat perched above him, waiting. And lifting dull eyes to it in defeat he saw instead a distant rise and six still forms shimmering there, a dream haze of some forgotten hope. Then he woke to a new sun rising and dark eyes on him, watching and waiting and sure.

He turned away from both, from the pool of water twenty feet away and far beyond reach, from a dream too well remembered -- the pain of hopes once known and lost worse than the spasms tearing at his gut. And curling into himself, he lay staring off into a distance of land and sky, losing himself there, in a wilderness far tamer than the habitations of man. The sun rose higher in the sky and still he was lost in that place, riding free of chains and choices, the wind in his face and six shimmering forms to either side, constant at the edge of his vision. Without thought or purpose, content in that still place within, he simply was. And all was as it should be, a rightness to it unquestioned.

Then at last he was drawn back and away by soft sounds of distress. And bringing his mind and gaze once more into focus, he turned, chains rattling, towards his fellow captive, Sully making moaning protest to Bliss' less than gentle attempts to rouse him enough to take in water. Not fully conscious, the gunman's bound hands went to his wounded thigh, the bullet still embedded there, the only attention given to it a bit of ragged bandaging.

"If survival is to the fittest," Bliss drawled in a tone of feigned regret, aware of the gaze on them, "then I fear Mr. Sully is not too much longer for this mortal coil."

He cast a look to Vin, eyes gleaming with anticipation. Vin, however, was unaware of it, his gaze gone to the canteen held ready to dispense water, tongue darting out to lick his lips in an unconscious admission of need. And Bliss, noticing the focus of the tracker's gaze, raised one eyebrow.

"Mouth a bit dry, Mr. Tanner?" he silkily asked. "Tongue swollen? Throat feel as if you've swallowed shards of glass, eyes as if scoured by a desert storm of wind and sand? Your head hurt, your muscles cramp? Does the very air about you seem to draw the moisture from you, leaving you to bake in the intensity of the sun's heat?"

All else forgotten, Bliss pulled the canteen away from the gunman's lips and raised his free hand, tilting the canteen so that water trickled into the open palm. Then dark eyes hard on Vin, he cocked his head and said, "Care for a drink, Mr. Tanner?"

Muscles cramping, head spinning, thoughts a jumble of want and need, Vin stared at the water spilling, gaze fixed and unblinking on salvation denied.

Bliss assumed a mystified air, puzzled gaze going to the thin stream trickling into his hand. "Amazing, is it not, that such a simple liquid could be so desired? More precious than gems, more prized than gold --

men have died to protect its source, killed to obtain it, given up all that they have, all that they are, in its favor. Yet it is nothing. Look at it. You can't take hold of it, can't fashion or control it. It holds no beauty, brings no delight to the palate. It falls from the sky and we curse it. It lies between us and our destination and we question its abundance. It is nothing, Mr. Tanner. Yet we are nothing without it." Up went the canteen, the trickle of water cut off, Bliss' gaze shifting back to his captive.

"And therein lies its power. Let mountains dissolve grain by grain at its touch, canyons mark its passage through the eons. Let all that Man can devise be swept away before it. And still it wields a far greater power -- that of life and death. And while I hold it within my grasp, that power is mine. Mine to choose between them. Mine to dispense or to withhold."

Back at an angle went the canteen, a few degrees short of dispensing more water, taunting proof of the power Bliss wielded.

"It is nothing. And it is everything."

A slight movement, then the last of the water poured out, that time onto the ground. And when emptied, Bliss tossed the canteen aside, the hollow sound as it hit the ground seeming to echo within Vin's head, setting off another round of muscle spasms. And curling into them he waited them out, breath panting, heart racing, the world spinning sickeningly about him.

Dark eyes grew darker, Bliss' voice lowering, the tone seductive, Lucifer in the Garden.

"You are dying, Mr. Tanner, your body growing ever weaker. Soon your blood will pump thick in your veins, your heart labor to disperse it, your lungs struggle to draw in breath enough to feed it. Your mind will grow ever more confused, your body rage with an inner fire. Then slowly, one by one, your organs will cease to function. And all for the lack of what lies so near to your reach."

Blue eyes rose to dark, breath still coming in pants, heart racing, body giving testament to the false preacher's words.

Bliss smiled, a knowing look. He then tugged on the golden lion's head of his cane, slipping the concealed knife free. And with a flick of his wrist it went sailing, to bury itself into the ground two feet beyond the reach of Vin's chains. Bliss then leaned over the unconscious Sully and dug into one pocket, collecting the key to the wrist irons. And tossing it so that it hit the prone tracker in the chest before bouncing off into the sand, he offered a taste of forbidden knowledge. "All lies within your reach now, Mr. Tanner. All you need do is take hold of it."

Blue eyes shifted from key to knife. And Bliss lowered his voice further still, into a sibilant whisper.

"Power, Mr. Tanner. That, in the final analysis, is all there is of life that truly matters. Let men delude themselves with the conceit of

philosophy or the false promise of eternal reward. Such are but the trappings of power under the guise of some higher purpose to be obtained. Yet what higher purpose is there than the attainment of the absolute, to stand on the Olympian heights, master over life itself?"

The golden lion's head caught and held the morning light, the glint of it seeming to beckon Vin near. And Bliss' voice whispered still, the soft sound that of a bird's wings in flight. "Few attain such heights," he continued, holding out seductive hope. "Few dare even acknowledge that hunger within much less willingly feed it. They hide it, struggle to deny it, cloak themselves in a piety that despises all that they truly are. And still that hunger demands sustenance. It must be fed, Mr. Tanner. And so men do, a fatted calf served on gold platters and tables draped in fine linen -- killing done in the name of some holy cause. Justice. Patriotism. Defense of Man and God. Call it what you will. Name yourself righteous, the elect of God. Yet it will be your own purpose still which has been served. And the dead will lie no more quietly in their graves."

The voice grew more seductive still, the tone that of one exhorting the abandonment of false pride.

"Give up the charade, Mr. Tanner. Acknowledge that hunger, that thirst in you for the power within reach. Free yourself from all that binds you and take up the knife. Let the wild in you feed." Bliss looked down on the gunman lost again to all hope of consciousness. "Slay the fatted calf and all that you desire is yours."

An anchor onto which to take hold, a hope of salvation, the abyss yawning wide at Vin's feet. Yet he knew the false promise held out, knew that to let go of that to which he had so long clung would be to fall freely into the endless darkness. So while instinct cried out to risk all on the hope of continued existence, from that still place deep within came the certainty that life was sometimes purchased at too high a cost. All the years spent with but one goal, yet it was not death Vin Tanner had so long avoided but a life too wrongly lived to be worthy of his mother's faith in him. Her final words had been not an admonition not to forget, but a call to remember, to hold fast to all that he was and might ever be. And clinging to that, as he had always clung, he raised his eyes to the false preacher waiting.

A clear refusal, yet a move not unanticipated -- and Bliss with a matching play of his own.

"Mrs. Wells life is already forfeit, boy. Deny that hunger in you now and her niece will be sacrificed on the same altar of your pride. Yet do you at last embrace all that you are and both shall be spared. Assume your rightful place on the heights and no chains shall have hold over you. You will at last be free."

"I am free."

Not defiance or challenge, but a simple truth simply stated.

Bliss laughed, a scoffing sound. "Apparently I have let the game go too long -- your mind has become addled to the point of hallucination." Vin gathered words then and breath enough to force them past the razor lodged in his throat, his voice a pained rasp. "You told me a story once, about a wolf some man tried to tame. Remember? You said its true nature couldn't be denied. And you were right. But it was never about killing or even surviving, like you thought. It was only ever about being free. And free ain't something you can wrap a chain around and choke off."

"And the ladies' Wells? Are their lives worth so little to you that you would trade them for an illusionary freedom?"

One last attempt, a fading hope.

"There's worse deaths than dying."

Bliss stared at his uncooperative opponent for a long moment, searching out some means by which to make sense of the nonsensical. And finding an explanation that satisfied him, he slammed his cane onto the ground and levered himself to his feet, eyes darkening then with anger. "You would truly have me believe in this pose of righteousness? You? With the blood of how many men on your hands?" He limped forward, two steps, then three. "This is not about the sanctity of your soul but about winning, as your life has always been. You think to cheat me of victory, to force me into some concession, some admission of defeat. And failing that, to trick me into some false move."

Vin held the false preacher's gaze for a long moment, then broke free of it to search out the key to his cuffs. And picking it up, he threw it at Bliss' feet -- his final move, the game at last at an end.

Bliss stood a full minute looking down on the rejected key. Then with a sigh, he returned his gaze to an opponent proven more worthy than he had supposed. "My apologies, sir. I see now that it was never more than a fool's game to think that that wild in you could be tamed. What is born wild will die so." He limped then to his knife, stooping to retrieve it. "Such is an admirable quality, Mr. Tanner. Regrettable, it is true. But admirable nonetheless."

He crossed the remaining distance to the captive tracker, kneeling in the sand beside him, voice without regret as he said, "A good game, Mr. Tanner -- and I thank you for it. But I fear there is but one play left."

Not afraid to die but far from eager to let go of life, Vin tried to push back, digging one elbow into the ground, his legs coming up, feet scrabbling for purchase. Bliss, however, took hold of him with ease, grabbing one flailing leg and stretching him out to the length of the chain, his arms above his head. He was then upon him, straddling his middle, his greater weight pinning him in place.

Too weak to struggle long, Vin soon gave up to lie with breath coming hard and heart racing, his gaze fast on the knife Bliss twisted in the

light in a fondling admiration of its form and use.

"This is how it all began," the false preacher softly recalled, dark eyes shadowing with the memory of a spring night months past. "And as it should have that night, this is how it shall end."

He grabbed Vin's hair then, pulling his head back to expose his throat. And leaning down, he touched knife to skin, holding it there as his gaze shifted to defiant blue eyes. "You have to get close," he instructed on a whisper of breath, his words an echoing reminder of those once spoken to the flash of lightning and the roar of thunder. "That way you can watch as the light goes out of their eyes, feel the touch of their last breath and the warmth of blood spilling."

He pressed on the knife, the tip biting into skin And with a slow smile of triumph, he declared the game at an end. "Now, Mr. Tanner, you shall truly be free."

Another press of the knife, blood seeping at the edge of it. And memory flashed in Vin -- a scream, a blood-soaked pillow, death and lightning, and a dark crow amid the flames. Then thunder roared and the knife froze, dark eyes going wide as a bloom of red appeared in the center of Bliss' vest.

His smile fading into a look of stunned surprise, the false preacher looked down at the spreading stain of blood on his chest. Then brows knitting in confusion, he slid slowly to one side, his body toppling to the ground, one leg still thrown over Vin's middle.

Reacting on instinct alone, Vin pushed up and away, scrabbling backwards until the scrub at his back forced a halt. He then sat frozen, wide eyes on the still body, his mind uncomprehending and blank of all but the certainty that this was but a vision, some remembered dream of salvation conjured up to ease his passing. And as in all such dreams, another form took shape before him, dark but without the shadow of death about him: Chris Larabee, gun in hand to explain the roar of thunder.

"You all right, pard?" the vision asked.

Vin frowned, something not right, his dreams before always of six, not one.

Then a second vision appeared, Buck moving behind Chris to stare down at the vision body on the ground before looking up again to happily declare, "That's one snake that won't be doing any more slithering."

"Indeed," a third vision declared, Ezra moving out of the scrub on the other side of the camp, Josiah beside him and moving to stoop at the unconscious Sully's side.

"This one's still breathing," that fourth vision announced -- and a fifth vision ignored him, going straight to Vin's side.

"I sure hope you feel better than you look," Nathan said with a frown.

Then tugging on the chain secured to the scrub at Vin's back, he looked over one shoulder and barked out a series of decidedly undreamlike commands. "Someone get him loose of this so we can move him into the shade."

And I'll need my bag and a canteen of water." His hands were on Vin then, checking him with a warmth remembered only in dreams.

Then the last of the visions appeared, J. D. with Nathan's requested supplies and a worried look.

"Six," Vin then hoarsely whispered on a sigh, their number complete.

He closed his eyes then, content to dream, a rightness to this dying business he hadn't expected. His dream, however, proved uncooperative, a hand slapping with force enough at his face to keep him from drifting off and away.

"Not yet, you don't," Nathan commanded. "You got to get some water down you first."

A canteen was then pressed to his lips. And realizing with confusion that his body remained still a mass of pain and need, he opened his eyes with another frown, a fear growing that the dream was no more than nightmare, his portion of Hell to be not salvation but an eternity of such almost in reach and then fading away, the Seven dissolving in vision as they had in life. Then, as if to give truth to that fear, a movement beyond Nathan drew his gaze to Bliss, the false preacher no longer still, the hand clutching the knife rising, drawing back, Bliss' gaze on Chris, the gunman's back to danger and unaware.

Vin sat frozen, watching, waiting for what he knew would come -- the knife sailing through the air to bury itself into Chris Larabee's back. Chris would then be gone and the other five with him -- leaving him alone again, with nothing to keep him from falling into the abyss, an endless descent played out over and over again, the details perhaps varying, but the game ending always the same.

But again the dream played out according to its own vision -- Chris and Nathan spinning, guns in hand and flashing, a roar thundering and echoed instantly by four additional shots, more red blossoming on Bliss' vest, the knife falling, another collapse, the false preacher's body sprawled in lifeless abandon on the sand.

Heaven then, Vin decided with a sigh of contentment, the Seven proof against Hell itself.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT ~

That then was always to be Vin's vision of Heaven: those six men constant by his side, the touch of strong hands offering comfort and protection unbidden, a contentment not known since the earliest days of his youth, an innocence of faith long lost. Through the hours of drifting awareness, he held to that vision, never doubting its truth. But as night settled about the camp and his awareness became more fixed, the soft sounds of breathing around the fire and the complaints of a body badly used told their own truths of a dream deferred. He lay then looking up at the stars, searching out some greater truth and ending lost on trails leading away from it and best left forgotten.

Yet he couldn't forget, couldn't turn from those back trails as if they'd never been traveled. Nor could he reconcile them with the trail upon which he then was set, two paths leading away from that place and him unsure of both.

He let out a sigh then, a long exhalation of breath speaking of wearisome burdens borne and no rest at hand. And as if to offer a shoulder to share that burden, a soft voice sounded out of the night, kept low so as not to waken those lost in sleep.

"You okay, Vin? You want me to get Nathan?"

J. D., set to watch the camp, moved into the light of the fire and to Vin's side, kneeling there with a worry plain, a solid presence and not some hoped-for dream. Yet Vin was not ready to loose his hold of that dream, to accept tarnished truth in its place. So he closed his mind to trails behind and ahead, focusing only on that place. And making sure of one truth proved too often false, he forced out a hoarse whisper, asking, "Bliss still dead?"

J. D. nodded. "Dead and buried." He smiled then. "Buck insisted on making the grave extra deep. Said he wanted to make sure the slither was gone out of that particular snake for sure this time."

It was over then, the game at an end. But at what cost and what victory achieved, Vin had yet to discover. Another truth for which he was unready. So he searched out a safer one. "And Sully?"

"If you mean the fella with the bullet in his leg, he's fine. Nathan got the bullet out okay, but he doesn't want to move him just yet."

Vin nodded, relieved that he would have more time to study the trails ahead before choosing between them. He then turned his head, mind drifting in search of lost visions. But J. D. wasn't finished with him yet.

"What about you, Vin? Are you okay?"

A simple question, but with a wealth of meaning behind it, that Vin knew, read it in the youth's unguarded face when he turned back to him. Was he okay, both in body and mind. Were the Seven okay, their number complete again. Would they ride from that place back to the town that had become something more than a way station between uncharted destinations -- or would they take separate paths away from all that they'd found there. And for none of those questions did Vin have an answer, too many questions of his own he wasn't ready to ask. So again he turned away. And again J. D. refused to allow that escape.

"Nathan said I was to make sure you drank some water next time you woke up," he reported. "So here...." He tucked a hand under Vin's head then, raising him up as he set canteen to lips.

Vin drank willingly, hands coming up to regulate the flow of water, then pushing the canteen away when he'd had enough, giving a hoarse thanks to J. D. as he resettled him onto his bedroll.

That time he didn't turn away, and J. D. hesitated only a moment before coming at his question from another angle. "I saw that place where you

were at, saw some of the people they got locked up there." He lowered his gaze to the hands fiddling with the stopper on the canteen, his voice dropping, a tone of horror sounding. "I've never been to a place so scary in my life. It's like some of those folks are dead and gone and no one thought to send them an invitation to the funeral."

Vin jerked his head away at that, not wanting to go down that trail. But J. D. was too far along it to stop.

"That was never you," he softly declared. "Never."

A trail unexpected -- and Vin turned back to study it, brows knitting in puzzlement.

"Everybody got real quiet after we left that place," J. D. continued.

"It was like that day in the courtroom when they...." He stopped his fiddling with the canteen and looked up, a need in him for assurance that all hadn't been lost. "No one wanted you there, Vin. But no one knew how to stop it. No one knew what to say, not then or later. So no one said anything. It was like we were all waiting on something. And when we heard you'd busted out of that place and came riding after you, I thought maybe that was it, that that was what we'd been waiting on. But when we got there and saw, when we figured out what had happened and knew Bliss wasn't done with you yet, everyone just kind of seemed to get lost inside themselves. It was like we weren't six anymore, like we were together but apart. You know? And I knew then what we'd been waiting on all that time -- for six to be seven again."

Blue eyes held steady, waiting -- and J. D. forged ahead.

"We went looking for you then, no one saying anything more than they needed to. We rode like that for days-- I don't even know how many. Then we tracked Bliss down to that ranch where you'd all been staying and you weren't there. But we found maps and letters and such, so we knew where you'd gone -- and why. And now we're here, we're all together again -- but we're still waiting."

Waiting as he had waited? Vin wondered. Each as alone as he had been? Yet they weren't trapped in chains, weren't locked behind bars and high walls as he had been. They had cast him aside, had watched unprotesting as seven had become six. He'd waited and they hadn't come.

Yet they were there now.

Vin frowned at those two opposing truths, mind too weary to wrap around them or to come at a third to be decided between them. And closing his eyes against them, he turned away and onto his side, welcoming the pain of his arm as he rested his weight on it, needing that distraction from thoughts more painful still.

That time J. D. allowed his escape, moving away, past the fire and to the far side of the camp. But he left Vin with one final thought as he did so, softly saying, "It's funny, but you know -- one bullet alone wasn't enough to bring that preacher down. It took six more."

Vin made no response to that, only lay staring into the fire, that

truth added to all the others reflected in the lowering flames, that flickering light a bastion of hope amid the dark. Yet he remained unready to trust himself to that hope -- and for an hour he lay thus, caught between truths and fears, want and need, in company with men he trusted implicitly -- and not at all. And at last, unable to choose a path leading forward, he gave in to an exhaustion of mind and body, drifting off into sleep.

When the pattern of his breathing then settled into an even rhythm, one across the fire gave up the pretense of sleep -- and Chris Larabee opened his eyes to lay staring into the lowering flames.

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Vin woke to a dead fire, a sun already into its downward path across the sky, and too keen a memory of dreams that offered nothing of hope, only visions of a dark form risen from the dust, wings whispering -- and six shimmering lights died into ashes.

And whether that was fear or truth speaking to him he had yet to decide.

In both dreams and reality he had been alone, that remembered clearly. Yet he was not then alone -- the fire dead but the camp alive with the sounds of men waiting. And he knew he would need only lift his gaze from the ashes gone cold before him to assure himself of that, to prove that despite whatever faith he lacked in their company proving constant, for that moment at least, those six men were real and solid and there. They had stood between him and death, and had this long stayed. So no matter the paths that lay ahead and unchosen, no matter what had been or would be, he was not then alone.

He didn't know how long he lay there, caught between fear and truth, before he felt a touch on one arm and looked up into warm brown eyes. And it was then he noticed the blanket stretched above him in a makeshift screen to shelter him from the sun, Nathan ducking beneath that canopy to lay a hand on his brow.

"Still a mite warm," the healer pronounced. "But another's day rest should take care of that."

It seemed a sign, the previous day's vision become real again, that touch of a strong hand offering comfort and protection, a contentment stealing over him as Nathan continued his ministrations, the others across the fire watching and waiting. He therefore lay quietly when the healer shifted his attention to his arms, inspecting the wounds there and declaring himself satisfied with their progress in healing.

All was as it should be.

Nathan then rewrapped the bandages and levered Vin up with a hand beneath his shoulders. And taking up a cup sitting on the ground beside the dead fire, he raised it to Vin's lips. No sooner though did it touch than instinct kicked in, a stubborn determination strong in Vin to rely on his own strength only, that having kept him alive that long and not

readily forsaken. So, without thought, he took hold of the cup, firmly declaring, "I can do it myself."

Nathan sighed, refusing to relinquish his grip. "Now, how many times we been through this? This ain't about you being able to do for yourself. This is about you letting your friends help you. So don't you even think about acting like no two year old wanting his own way in this. You hear me?"

His tone was chiding, but with an underlying note of gentle concern. Yet Vin reacted not to that but to a vision stirring, of other words that had set him onto wrong paths. And eyes flashing with an anger banked and stoked suddenly into renewed flames, he offered words of his own welling from a place within too long without them.

"Like a seven year old," he tersely corrected, his grip on the cup tightening in opposition to Nathan's own. "Ain't that how old you said I act when you was up on that stand?"

A wary silence fell, Nathan gone still but a stirring from across the fire warning that the hit had been felt by the others as well. Vin, however, focused on the healer alone, this then to be settled between them without help or interference. And shoving away the arm still holding him up, as well as the one holding the cup to his lips, he pushed himself upright, leaning back on hands braced against the ground, blue eyes blazing as he again demanded an accounting. "Ain't that what you said?" He would have an answer, that Nathan knew, knew as well that he deserved one. But it was not an answer he was sure of giving, knowing these men as he did and their pride, that determination in them to give in to no force set against them, no matter how much the greater it might be. Not even death would they give in to willingly, a host of angels no doubt needing to be employed to carry any one of them off when their times came -- and none of those angelic beings likely proof against black eyes and bruised shins in the doing.

And not proof against such himself, Nathan tried for a soothing tone.

"Now, I know how what I said that day must have sounded," he began.

"Like hell, you do!" Vin ground out, not inclined to be soothed.

"Wasn't you made to look like no dummy should be locked up. Wasn't you who was!"

Nathan frowned, this then to be harder than he had feared. "I never said you was a dummy," he indignantly declared. "Only that you wasn't thinking clear. And it wasn't my idea to send you to that asylum. That was --"

"It wasn't your idea?" Vin icily challenged, latching onto that at the expense of whatever defense the healer might have raised. "That ain't what you said on the stand. Said you'd wanted to send me away before."

"Before you got better is what I meant!"

"Cepting, according to you, I wasn't better. I wasn't no more to you than some kid needing to be tied to his mamma's apron strings. Or better

yet -- some dummy needing to be locked up!"

Another stirring across the fire, only Chris Larabee remaining still.

The two antagonists, however, continued to ignore their concerned audience, the truth demanded and that not of words spoken but of faith given and a trust broken.

And knowing what was asked of him, Nathan searched out some means of satisfying that truth. "I ain't no doctor," he softly declared, his words both reminder and regret. "You got a bone broke, I can set it. You got a baby on the way, I can birth it. But you got much more wrong with you than that and you'd probably do just as well asking advice of the fella that sweeps out the stables as coming to me for help. There's just too much I don't know, too much I can do wrong or just not do right." He paused, eyes gone dark with a sorrow for all the wrongs in his life he had failed to set right, not all the wanting in the world sometimes enough. And lowering his voice, that sorrow reflected there, he shook his head and said, "You were hurt, Vin. Hurt bad. And I didn't know how to make it right again. But I thought that maybe there were doctors who did."

There was a silence then, Vin tracking through that flow of words, searching out all that lay behind them. And a sudden fear flaring, he set his jaw and warningly declared, "I ain't going back there."

"No," Nathan firmly agreed, voice steady, gaze unwavering. "You ain't. Not ever again."

Another truth to add to the confusion of truths, that one not mistaken, but Vin not sure what to make of it, too much the ring of a promise to it and that too easily broken. And unable to sort through that tangle, to read trails once clear and now twisting around blind corners, he pushed up, wanting only away.

He had no more than gained his feet, however, than he nearly tumbled face first into the dead fire, only Nathan's hand shooting out to steady him saving him.

"You need your rest, Vin Tanner," the healer firmly diagnosed. "And whatever you got in mind to do, it ain't nothing that can't wait 'til you're steadier on your feet."

Blue eyes favored the healer with a warning glare, but Nathan refused to back down. Then Ezra was there, at Vin's other side, a fox waiting politely at the hen house door.

"Now really, Nathan," he chided. "I must beg to differ with you on that, certain delicate matters having to be dealt with as the need arises, lest they prove an embarrassment." And holding a crooked arm out to Vin in invitation, he cheerily added, "Shall we?"

Vin shifted his glare to him, but the gambler only favored him with his most innocent -- and practiced -- look, saying, "Perhaps you would prefer Buck's assistance? He spins a rather delightful tale of his... acquaintance... with a particularly... energetic... young widow that I don't

believe you have yet heard."

A hand shot out to take hold of the proffered arm. And with a wave of his hand, Ezra breezily said, "After you."

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The gambler proved more of a help than Vin cared to admit, that steadying arm the only thing that kept him upright long enough to attend to his needs. And that once done he expected to be summarily returned to the camp. To his surprise, however, Ezra instead escorted him to a patch of shade and waved him to take a seat against an outcropping of rock rising from the desert floor. And when Vin stood waiting, gaze suspicious, the gambler gazed blandly back.

"Would you prefer to return to Nathan's tender mercies," he asked, "and whatever vile concoction he was attempting to pour down your throat?"

Vin lowered himself to the ground without further ado, only his grip on Ezra's arm keeping him from collapsing into an undignified heap. And once situated, he shifted about until he found a comfortable anchorage, the rock at his back providing a full measure of shade. His gaze then went to the desert stretching away before him, hazy in the afternoon light, a simplicity of design, nothing hidden or confused. And an urge rose in him to lose himself in that simplicity, to leave all the twisting trails of his life behind. Such he had done before, had left behind all the things gone wrong in his life time and again. And he had only to get up and ride away to then effect a like escape.

Instead, he remained in place, Ezra taking root on the rocks above him, a quiet presence for long minutes. Then the gambler spoke, gaze ahead but seeing only what lay behind. "Do you remember Lucius Stutz?" he asked, voice low and without its usual distancing, nothing flippant nor disparaging in words or tone. "Or more precisely, do you recall his satchel of ill gotten gains?" He didn't wait for Vin to respond, only forged ahead as if covering rough ground best traveled with speed. "And do you remember how certain of our comrades refused to allow me to personally safeguard said ill gotten gains?"

Vin frowned, the path down which the gambler was set unclear.

"The general consensus," Ezra continued, his tone slipping into one of pain too well remembered, "was that I was not to be trusted with such a large amount of money. Nor was it a topic in need of discussion. It was instead a generally recognized fact. To wit: Ezra Standish is not to be trusted with money. And that was that."

He flicked a look to Vin sitting waiting, eyes raised to him, a frown of concentration on his face, then returned his gaze back to the desert.

"The thing is, you see, it was not a fact that I myself recognized. I had thought myself proven. I had endured months of privations, risked my life again and again -- and all for a weekly salary that wouldn't stake me to a poker game with Billy Travis and his friends. It was never for the money -- and I thought the others knew that and understood. And

when it seemed that they in fact did not, I was hurt by their lack of faith in me, felt betrayed even. To them I was no more than an unscrupulous con man -- and they weren't exactly shy about making their opinions plain."

Vin jerked his head away, the trail the gambler traveled coming then into focus.

"I wanted to prove them wrong," Ezra softly stated. "But instead I proved them right. I took the money Josiah entrusted to me and would have run if not for that small matter of the attempt on Mary's life."

Sure of that truth long known, Vin was just as certain of another. And looking up again, he firmly declared, "You'd have come back."

Ezra blinked, his own gaze lowering to meet the tracker's. "I'd like to think you're right, Vin, but I confess to having my doubts.

Nonetheless, the point I am endeavoring to make here is that I had a vision of myself that didn't match the reality of who I am. I was blind to the truth, refusing to see what the others saw clearly and accepted in me. They knew who I was and didn't turn away from me, didn't cast me into outer darkness -- although for a time it certainly seemed as if they had. No, it wasn't they who turned from me, but I who turned away from them. And it wasn't until I turned back that things could be made right again."

Ezra fell silent then, green eyes holding steady on blue, another truth offered and added to the tangle of truths through which Vin was not ready to sort, too many yet undiscovered to make sense of any. And turning away, he let his head fall back against the rock and closed his eyes, too lost inside himself to do anything more than wait.

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~ CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE ~

The wait drifted into sleep, Vin waking some time later to a sun well into its downward path and the desert softening into shadow. Then, half asleep still, he sat watching the play of light and dark, mind wandering along gentle paths, back trails and confusing truths nowhere in evidence. Then a stirring beside him brought him to full awareness. And looking up, he was surprised to find not Ezra perched on the rock above him but Chris Larabee.

Blue eyes then held green for a moment, a testing in that look between them, a searching out of the familiar. Then Chris shifted his gaze to the locks still inches above Vin's shoulders and said, "Your hair's shorter."

Three little words, spoken with the gunslinger's usual clipped style, not a comment but a pronouncement, Chris Larabee never one for meaningless exchanges of information. You've changed, was the unspoken meaning

-- and a question behind it, a need in him to know the extent of that change, to determine whether Vin had been lost somewhere along the way, on paths chosen or not and maybe beyond his ability to track. Was he

there with him in that moment or already gone? Would they ride from that place together or alone?

All other truths fell away, that question to be the decider, a need in them both to know what had changed between them. And no more inclined than the taciturn gunman to waste words, Vin bluntly asked, "Why'd you let them take me?"

The words were challenging, the tone one of accusation -- but Chris reacted to neither, a gunman's calm stealing over him, keeping hands and voice steady, no false moves or wrongly spoken words that might set things in motion that couldn't be stopped. "We didn't have a choice," he plainly stated, gaze unwavering. "Bliss knew about you being wanted, said it was either the asylum or he'd make sure you were taken back to Texas for a hanging."

Vin frowned, the truth of Chris' words not doubted, Bliss far too good at the game he'd set in motion to miss so obvious a move. Yet too much went unsaid, Larabee no more inclined than Bliss to miss the obvious. "So you picked the asylum? Why? It's a long way back to Texas. I could have gotten loose."

Not an idle boast but a statement of faith, Vin a man long used to escaping the hangman's noose, his belief strong in that ability to elude traps set, to forge his own paths around those trails laid, to outsmart or outshoot or outrace anything that man or nature might throw at him. That was how he had for so long managed to face each new dawn, to keep moving ahead no matter the number of steps fallen behind. It was simply how he lived his life and no other possibility existed for him.

Chris, however, knew too well the impossible, knew faith was not proof against a well laid trap. And in a voice that gave nothing away, he simply said, "I wasn't willing to take that chance."

Vin stared at him, disbelief plain. "You weren't willing? What the hell makes you think you got any say in what happens to me? It was my decision to make!"

"And you'd have chosen to put your neck in a noose."

Again simply spoken, that gunman's calm still in place and giving no ground before his companion's righteous anger.

"You're so sure it would have played out that way?" Vin challenged, his ire rising at the gunman's overly-controlled response, his words coming with ease, all that was in him focused on searching out the truth.

"You're so sure I wouldn't have proved I was innocent even if I couldn't have gotten loose?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure. No witnesses. Eli Joe dead. And nothing but your word as to what happened -- and it wasn't enough before."

"Before what? Before I turned into some damned dummy?"

They were then on dangerous ground, Chris aware of that pride in Vin, that need in him to believe in his ability to survive by his own wits alone -- and him not a man to strip another of that pride, of whatever

kept his head unbowed and his steps from faltering. So with a hardening of his gaze he warned, "Vin, don't go there."

"Why not? You went there easy enough up on that stand, you and Nathan both."

"It wasn't the way it sounded."

"No? Then what way was it?"

All else was then forgotten, JD's concern, Nathan's promise, Ezra's understanding. It all came down to this, to this man and the faith that had existed between them -- and that not of words or promises given, not of concern even or that understanding of men who recognized the familiar in each other. It was simply a certainty on which they had relied, that one would not fail the other. And no matter that Chris was in that moment there, there had been too many moments in the past two months when he hadn't been. The certain had become uncertain. Yet still Vin was unready to break faith, to turn and walk away as he had too many times walked away from that which had gone wrong in his life.

"What was it Nathan meant when he said I was dumb as some little kid?" he demanded to know. "Or you when you said I wasn't any more than a broken watch? Just what the hell was it you meant when you made me out to be some kind of idiot?"

"Vin, I'm sorry. We tried --"

"Not hard enough! You sat there in front of the whole damned town and said I was nothing! That I had no place in that town or with the Seven! That I was some pitiful excuse for a man that couldn't be trusted. You skinned me and hung me out to dry. You were supposed to watch my back and instead you stabbed me in it!"

"I know it seems that way, but --"

"But what does the damned dummy know?" Vin pushed up from the ground to stand glaring at his companion. "You think I'm too stupid to see what's right in front of my face? You meant every damned word you said up there on that stand. You said exactly what you thought of me!"

That then was fear given a name, that that much had changed between them, that too much had been lost to ever again be found.

"What did you want me to say?" Chris softly challenged, aware of the dangerous ground on which they stood but too long used to facing the truth head on to sidestep it now. "Tell me that. I didn't say nothing that wasn't true. You were hurt, Vin. And you weren't thinking as clear as you should back then. Maybe it wasn't as bad as Bliss' lawyer tried to make out, but it was bad enough and you know it."

Vin shook his head, not yet ready for that truth, to accept that life sometimes depended not on one's skill at survival but on luck -- or on another's willing strength. "I just had trouble getting the words out."

"It was more than that. You know it was."

Too dangerous still by the look in Vin's eyes to run headlong into that particular truth, Chris took a step not around it but back, saying,

"Look, we knew going in that it was a long shot that we'd get a conviction. And maybe we shouldn't have tried, maybe we shouldn't have put you through that. But we thought we were doing the right thing, the only thing we could do and still hold our heads up in town. And we thought it was what you'd want us to do. Were we wrong?"

A safe enough question, Chris sure of that determination in Vin to risk all in the cause of right. And that much unchanged, Vin gruffly conceded the point, saying, "No, you weren't wrong."

That truth accepted, Chris risked another. "I'm sorry, Vin. I hated putting you through that, hated letting Bliss' lawyer do what he did. But it had to be done. The truth had to be told. And the truth was that your mind just wasn't working all that well."

It was said plainly, a statement of fact, no judgment in tone or word. Yet it tore at the center of all that Vin was and had ever been. And needing to deflect that fear of being so lost to himself, he turned to anger, to a hurt remembered. "Is that why you didn't tell me about Bliss holding that murder over my head? Because you thought I was too stupid to make the decision for myself? Too stupid to get away? Too stupid to convince a jury in Tascosa I didn't kill that farmer?"

"I didn't think you'd get a chance to tell a jury anything. Figured they'd string you up as soon as you hit the outskirts of town."

That truth dismissed in favor of another, Vin lowered his voice to a growl. "You ain't answered the question, Larabee. You think I was too stupid to make the decision for myself?"

"Not stupid, Vin. Just not thinking clear enough."

Again a truth plainly spoken -- and that faith between the two straining under the weight of it.

"So you made the decision for me," Vin charged. "Had my life all planned out. Then you didn't have the guts to force me into it, to make sure yourself that I didn't do something stupid on the way to that hellhole. Instead, you tricked me into going. You knew I'd believe anything you said, knew I'd trust you with my life -- and you used that against me, made me think you'd cut me loose. And it worked. Any fool would have figured out what was going on the second you let them haul me out of that courtroom. But not the dummy. No, I trusted you all the way into that damned asylum, believed until the very last second that you'd make good on your promise to me. And, just like you planned, by then it was too damned late." He shook his head, anger giving way to disbelief. "How could you do that to me?"

The words were as much plea as demand, a need in him to believe that faith could be restored.

"I didn't know what else to do to keep you safe."

"Safe? Is that what you call sending me to that hellhole?"

"I didn't think it would be for long. I hoped we could find some way to get you out of there that wouldn't get you hung."

Some way that hadn't included him -- that much the tracker understood. He'd been reduced to a silent spectator of his own life, expected to sit quietly by while others decided his fate for him, giving all his faith to men who had given him none in return. He'd been nothing to them but a problem to be solved, his own wants and needs secondary to theirs. Their decision. Their choice. He'd been left to sit and wait, because they hadn't trusted whatever decision he would have made, whatever choice. And there had been a time when they had looked without thought to him for a way out of trouble, trusting that instinct in him to keep them safe.

He turned away then, gaze going to the desert bathed in shadows. And it was then Chris' turn to demand answers.

"What if you had managed to get free? You'd have been on the run again, always looking over your shoulder, never daring to stay too long in one place, sleeping with one eye open. Would it have been worth it? Would it have been worth what you'd have left behind? Could you have walked away from it all so easy?"

Was that faith between them so easily broken, that bond so easily cast aside?

Gaze still on the desert, Vin dully replied, "What the hell did I have but a town full of folks who thought I was nothing but some damned dummy not fit to live among them?"

"You had a hell of a lot more than that, Vin, and you know it."

"Do I?"

"You don't, and you're a lot dumber than you give yourself credit for."

Vin closed his eyes, held them shut for a long moment. Then with a breath let out, he opened them again to stare back out into the desert.

"It was just going to be for a few months," Chris tried again, that question between them lying still unanswered. "And after you'd have been as free as you'd been for the last few years." His voice grew tight.

"You couldn't have trusted us to make things right for that long?"

His gaze still ahead, it was the trail behind Vin was seeing and that trust so strong that he had gone against every instinct, had allowed himself to be locked away, stood there now with one who had not given the very trust he demanded, trusting that much still. And if that proved him a fool, he would at least not give voice to it, would save his pride by that much.

That silence then its own answer, it was Chris' turn to feel the fool, maybe nothing changed between them, maybe that faith given always wrongly placed. And no stranger to pride himself, he felt an urge to let that silence stand, Vin obviously no longer in need, Bliss dead, his mind back to its stubborn best. They had ridden to that place along separate paths and would likewise ride away. Such was life, even the best of it too soon ended. That he knew. Still he remained in place, gaze hard on the one who seemed already set at a far distance away, a need in him to

know, picking at that question as would a man at a wound fresh made.
"You didn't trust us, Vin. Yet you trusted Bliss."

That a trail Vin had no intention of traveling in that moment, he turned the question back on his companion, saying, "Why'd you come after me? Why didn't you just call it quits once I got loose? It wasn't on you no more."

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Chris made automatic reply. "I was afraid it would all go to hell and you'd be out there alone, with no one to back you up." He paused, then bitterly added, "And I was right."

"And what if Bliss hadn't gotten killed? Would you have sent me back to that place?"

It was a moot question, the matter already settled between them and to neither's satisfaction, needing perhaps only that final nail in its coffin to seal its fate. Chris, however, proved uncooperative, further truths then of little value to him.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what I would have done."

"Yeah," Vin dully corrected. "You do."

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~ CHAPTER FORTY ~

The question lying between them then answered, a silence fell, one not of a familiar ease but of a distance too far to close. Standing three feet apart, they were yet beyond reach. What had been would not again be. It was done and they would ride on, no looks back, no regrets -- just an acceptance of another thing gone wrong in their lives that should have been right.

And that not needing to be voiced between them, Chris slid off the rock on which he was perched, gaze going to the desert as he flatly said, "I'll wire the judge first town we get to, have him make your release from the asylum official."

"Preciate it," was the terse reply, Vin's tone with no more life to it.

Chris gave a nod, the matter settled, life to go on. Then with a jingling of his spurs, he turned and walked away.

Vin remained in place, unmoving but for the rise and fall of his chest, gaze fixed unseeingly on the horizon and the sun lowering to meet it. It was done. Life would go on. That he knew and had long remembered. Yet for that moment he allowed himself to forget.

Another moment, however, brought the sound of light footsteps approaching, the pattern of them uneven, a reluctance to intrude but a determination to fulfill some purpose moving his visitor uncertainly forward.

Vin, however, kept his gaze fixed blindly ahead -- until Buck Wilmington stepped before him, canteen in hand and held out.

"Thought you might could use a drink about now."

Eyes coming back into focus, Vin nodded and took hold of the proffered

canteen. Then, lowering his gaze to it, he pulled the stopper free and took a long swig of the tepid water, savoring the feel of it in his mouth, those days of aching thirst still vivid in memory. Then, that thirst assuaged for the moment, he handed the canteen back to his companion with a hoarse, "Thanks."

Buck nodded and set the stopper back in place. "Bet you must dream about whole rivers of water, about rain pouring down, soaking you." He let the canteen fall to the length of its strap from one hand. "I remember a few years back -- I caught some fever or other and was burning up with it. And I had this one dream about me swimming in an ice cold lake. It was all blue and shining in the sun, and I felt like I was in heaven." He smiled and added, "And damn if there weren't the three loveliest angels you could ever hope to see keeping me company and reminding me of just what reasons I had for living."

He waited then, gaze on Vin expectant, but with a sadness behind it, as if Heaven had gone far out of his reach. And turning from his own bright vision of that place, unseeing gaze gone back to the desert, Vin searched out instead a remembered vision of Hell.

"When I was four or five," he slowly said, words coming harder to him now that his anger had left him, "I used to have this dream every night that my Pa had come home. I didn't know what he looked like, didn't know if he was alive or dead. Didn't even know who he was. But every night for a long while I dreamed about him. And every morning when I woke up, it was just me and my ma, same as always. Then my ma died and I stopped dreaming. Didn't see no use in it no more."

"You don't dream at all?"

"Not anything that has a hope in hell of coming any more true than that dream of my pa ever did. Or any more than your dream of that lake did."

"Now, who says that dream didn't ever come true?"

The ladies' man wagged his eyebrows suggestively, but Vin was determined to make his point. "They're just dreams, Buck. And only a fool would put any store by them."

"Then I guess I must be a fool," Buck softly declared, all hint of amusement gone, Heaven maybe a far reach away but a faith in him strong that he might one day draw near enough to take hold of it. And searching out some measure of that same faith in Vin, he tried again.

"All that time you were in the asylum, all that time Bliss had you in chains -- you never once dreamed of getting free?" He didn't expect an answer, knew the truth of it as well as did Vin. And spreading his arms wide to indicate the desert stretching to the horizon and beyond, he added, "And here you are, free as a bird."

A flutter of wings sounded at the very edge of hearing, a whispered reminder of all that freedom had cost. And feeling suddenly weary, Vin raised his eyes to Buck and dully said, "It wasn't supposed to happen this way."

Too many wrong turns taken, too many dark truths uncovered. And him now set on a trail leading away instead of to.

"You're not five years old anymore," Buck gently pointed out. "You know no one is going to come through a door and make everything that's gone wrong right again."

Knew it maybe, but faith was of the heart and with a knowledge that defied all that the mind could fathom. And it was from that place Vin's next words came, his voice that of a child who had believed in the impossible for wanting it to be so. "He promised me, Buck. Chris promised that everything would be all right."

"And he kept that promise, best as he could. Now maybe not as quick as we all would have liked, but things did turn out all right. We're here. You're here. And Bliss isn't. You're free and clear now, Vin. And there's nothing gone so bad wrong that it can't be fixed."

Vin shook his head. "Ain't none of this can be fixed, Buck."

"You haven't rode out yet -- and Chris hasn't shot nobody. So it's not too late."

A true statement of faith, pride a fool's game and Buck never one to guard his heart from breaking, a greater fear in him of a heart grown hard and cold.

Pride, however, was sometimes all that had kept Vin Tanner going, all that had kept his head held high. And if at times it was but a false pride, it nonetheless served its purpose. So he clung to it still, turning away from hope held out, gaze going back to the desert growing dark with shadows.

And aware of that retreat, Buck swore and said, "You and Larabee are like two cats on the same limb of a tree -- can't get around each other and damned if either of you will back out of the other's way. So you just sit there, him glaring and you licking yourself pretty as you please -- 'til one or the other of you drops. And if that isn't just about the stupidest thing I ever did see!"

Blue eyes returned to him. "Is that what you think, Buck? That I'm stupid? That I ain't nothing but some dummy can't take care of himself?"

There was no anger in Vin's voice, only a weary acceptance of the unacceptable. And caring more for the heart of him than his pride, Buck demanded his own answers.

"You tell me, Vin. You tell me there was never a time when you wouldn't move unless someone took you by the hand, when you couldn't eat unless someone put the food in your mouth. You tell me there was never a time you didn't say a word, didn't seem to know a thing that went on around you. And then you tell me there was never a time when a bent old woman in an invalid chair couldn't have taken you in for that \$500 bounty on your head."

Vin jerked his head away, refusing to acknowledge that truth, even to himself. And turning the question back on Buck, gaze gone distant in

memory and his voice low, he said, "Where were you, Buck? I kept waiting and --" He lost the words then in a tangle of emotion, a taunting reminder of that which he wanted to forget. And gaze going back to Buck, he softly repeated: "Where were you?"

It wasn't an accusation, that Buck knew. Was neither plea nor distraction. It was simply a searching out of what had gone wrong, a need in him to know so that he might avoid such wrong turns on the trail ahead.

"We were in the same place we've always been," Buck told him. "We were right behind you, watching your back. And time was when the fact that you didn't see us there wouldn't have mattered to you. You'd have trusted us to do right by you regardless. You wouldn't even have checked over your shoulder to be sure."

A truth rightly spoken, Vin always before sure of what had been given without question. Yet the time had come when he had turned around to find himself alone. And no matter what then was, he had in that moment been alone, had had no one but himself on which to rely. He had waited, staring at the door of his prison -- and they hadn't come. And years of waiting for what hadn't come rose in him, every disappointment and fear and hurt become that disappointment, that fear and that hurt.

"You weren't there!" he hoarsely accused, voice unsteady, eyes shining with unwilling tears. "You weren't in that place. You didn't have to listen to the screams or see the dead in men's eyes. You weren't treated like an animal, weren't chained to the wall. Didn't have to look in all those faces and wonder if what you saw was what people saw when they looked at you. Didn't have to wonder if you weren't exactly where you belonged." His breath caught, trapped behind the tangle of emotions balling behind his chest. And struggling to get words out past that obstruction, he cried, "Damn it, Buck! You weren't there!"

It was a *cri de coeur*, for something Vin himself couldn't have named. But Buck knew, understood that need in a man to know he wasn't alone, that he hadn't been forgotten, understood that need in Vin to know that he wasn't then alone, despite the presence of six men who had crossed a desert to find him.

"No, we weren't there," he admitted, voice gentle, tone without accusation. "We were in Tascosa trying to clear your name so's Bliss wouldn't have a hold on you. We were riding over half the territory trying to prove that snake of a preacher was sending folks to Hell as well as warning them against it. And we were protecting the town, making sure you had a place to come back to."

Vin stood frozen a moment, Buck's words hitting against the tangle of emotion in him. Then as they worked their way through to some measure of understanding, he blinked and said, "You went to Tascosa?"

"Chris did. Him, Josiah and Ezra. Left the day of the trial. And me and J. D. left the day after to see what we could dig up on Bliss."

A simple truth plainly stated -- and Vin unable to wrap his mind around

it.

"I didn't know," he said, his voice sounding as lost as he felt.

"No. But you did know us. Or at least I thought you did. And so did Chris. In fact, I'd say he was counting on that, counting on you to trust us."

Vin frowned, still unwilling to give what hadn't been given. "He didn't trust me," he dully pointed out.

"Oh, he trusted you, Vin. He trusted you to trust him."

You didn't trust us, Vin. Yet you trusted Bliss.

It was too much to take in, Vin's head hurting from the struggle to understand. So he searched out other answers instead.

"That's why no one came? Why no one even wrote?" He paused, then dully added, "Not that a letter would have done me any good. But at least I would have known you hadn't forgotten me."

"We did write, Vin. But Mary said the letters all came back with some note saying they weren't allowed, that that kind of contact only upset the patients, that they needed to be protected from all the 'wrong influences' that had got them sent to the asylum in the first place. And Travis had some fellow judge he knows stop in on his rounds of the territory, said he talked to the doc there and made sure everything was all right."

They hadn't forgotten, hadn't left him to Bliss' less than tender mercies. He had only had to wait -- and hadn't.

"We never would have left you there," Buck went on, "bounty or no bounty, Bliss or no Bliss, if we hadn't thought you'd be okay. And to make extra sure, Chris sent you Timothy."

"The keeper at the asylum? Chris sent him there?" Vin frowned. "But why didn't he ever tell me?"

"We didn't know what game Bliss might have been playing, didn't want to tip our hand."

Vin nodded, that much easily understood. "In other words, you figured I'd let it slip, ruin things again." The words were bitter and aimed not at Buck, but at himself.

"You never ruined anything, Vin. And don't you go thinking any such a thing."

"I let him get away, Buck. Twice. He killed Amy Callenbeck and walked free 'cause of me. I couldn't stop him. Not that night. And not at the trial. I couldn't --"

The words cut off, the trail of them heading along too dangerous a path. Buck, however, was determined to see them given voice.

"Go on," he urged. "Say it, Vin. You couldn't what?" And when Vin only shook his head in refusal, Buck steeled his voice and said, "I ain't never known you to be a coward, Vin Tanner. And I'll be damned if I know it now. So you tell me and tell me true -- what is it you couldn't do?"

An urge rose in Vin to turn and walk away, to ride off and never look

back, to refuse to accept that life could ever spin so badly out of his control. Yet to do so would be to do as Buck had said, to give in to fear, to turn tail and run as he had never before done. Oh, he had ridden away, had walked away from more things gone wrong than he had wish to remember. But he had never before walked away from himself, had never refused to look squarely at the wrong in him. And to do so then would be to lose himself, perhaps beyond finding. So, instead of turning away, he turned to -- to himself and to the truth of what had been.

"I couldn't think straight," he hoarsely admitted, the words coming hard but coming nonetheless. "Bliss walked out of that courtroom a free man because I couldn't think to say what needed to be said, couldn't think clear enough to make anyone believe me."

"Now that's just not so," Buck firmly declared. "We believed you. The boys and me and others besides. We always believed. And if the others didn't, it wasn't your fault. You did the best you could. And can't no one ask more of a man than that."

"But it wasn't enough." Vin stood still for a moment, searching out truths and the words to give name to them, following the trail of them back through long years of struggle. "All my life, Buck, I've done whatever I needed to do. And if it wasn't never much, it was at least good enough. It kept me going. Kept others going too, sometimes. But it wasn't good enough then."

He floundered, the trail lost. And searching out another, he tried again. "You know why I left, Buck? You know why I had to get out of that place?" He didn't wait for a reply but gave answer himself. "Because I was afraid. Afraid that I was lost past anyone's finding, same as them others there. I could feel it happening, could feel these cracks starting in me. And if I had stayed --"

That time the trail was not lost but abandoned, and another taken up in its place. "I never meant to go with Bliss. I thought I could get away. I thought if I could just get out of that place I could get away from all the things gone so bad wrong. And I tried, Buck. I swear I tried. But I... I couldn't do it. I couldn't stop him. Couldn't get away. Couldn't think and couldn't do." His voice turned hopeless. "Maybe I really am stupid."

"Then I guess the rest of us are stupid too," Buck pointed out. "'Cause there wasn't a one of us who could come up with a way to stop Bliss either -- short of putting seven bullets in him."

Vin stared a moment. Then searching out some other blame, he said, "Was he right about me, Buck? Am I like him?"

"Not even close," Buck forcefully assured him. "There's nothing of him in you."

Vin, however, wasn't convinced, hadn't been since that first day when he and Bliss had sat in the saloon, those dark eyes on him knowing him as maybe no one else ever had. "He killed people, Buck -- and so have I.

He was good at it --" Vin sighed, his voice going low, as if weighed down with the regrets sounding in his tone. "-- and so am I."

"That may be. But there's a world of difference between a man killing 'cause he likes it and one who does it 'cause he's got no other choice."

"Is there, Buck?" A question, not challenge or accusation, Vin unsure as he had never been unsure, always before having done what he had known to be right -- or had thought to be so. "And who says that I never had no choice? Maybe not to pull the trigger when I did most times, but for sure, at least some of those times, to be in a spot where I'd have to make that choice. Wasn't no one forced me into hunting bounty. Wasn't no one forced me to stay and protect that town. So maybe Bliss was right. Maybe there is something in me that likes the killing."

"That why you chose to die out in this damned desert rather than kill an innocent man for money?"

Vin blinked in surprise. "How'd you know about that?"

"Sully told us. Told us what you did and more besides. Not that we needed to hear it to know it, not knowing you like we do."

Another blink. "But there's stuff about me you don't know, stuff that maybe you should."

"No." Voice and tone firm, and not a moment's hesitation, a simple truth served plainly. "A man only needs to know enough sometimes to know a man. And I reckon we know everything we need to know to know you, Vin Tanner. So you let that snake Bliss stay dead -- don't go carrying him around in your head like some cross you got to carry. What he done was his doing and not yours. You just got caught up in it is all, same as the rest of us. But it's over now, dead and buried, just like him. So don't go digging it up like a dog that can't let a bone alone. You hear?"

Vin nodded, that heard and more.

Buck gave a nod in turn, all said and done and life to go on however it would. And taking in a breath to fortify himself, he said, "Reckon I'd best get back to the camp then. It's J. D.'s turn to cook supper tonight and I want to make sure we can actually eat it this time."

He remained in place though, gaze intent on the one before him. Then in a low voice he said, "Life's all about choices, Vin. And sometimes we make the wrong ones. The Good Lord knows I've made more than my share of them and have more regrets than all the poor fools Ezra's ever fleeced at cards have put together. And do you know one of the ones I regret most?" He paused but briefly, then added, "Letting Chris Larabee ride out of my life when he had a mind to."

He gave a final nod, then strode back to camp, his steps long and purposeful -- and Vin turned to watch him go.

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Shadows lay long over the desert, but not so deep that Josiah Sanchez couldn't pick out a dark form hidden among them. And taking a seat on the rock on which the Seven's leader was perched, he looked out at the

darkening desert and said, "You ever been on the ocean, Chris?"

"Took a riverboat down the Mississippi once."

The words were clipped, an anger in them that had been clear when he'd returned to the camp minus Vin, staying only long enough to exchange a few words with Nathan before heading out into the desert again -- and in a direction opposite to that in which Vin could be found. But in speaking at all, Chris gave evidence of his willingness for company. So Josiah continued.

"Being on a river's not the same. There you've always got land in sight. Even at night you can see the lights of towns and farmhouses to let you know where you are. But out there in the middle of the ocean, all you have in every direction for hundreds of miles is water. And one swell looks pretty much like another. It's worse even than a desert for getting lost in -- and a man's plumb out of luck if he doesn't have something to steer by."

"That's what the stars are for."

A simple comment, but with a ring of accusation to it, Chris aware of Josiah's purpose in seeking him out and determined to hold out against him.

"Yeah," Josiah conceded, undaunted by an anger long familiar to him, more familiar still with what lay behind it. "But stars are only of use if you know how to read them. And even if you do, they don't do a man much good if he can't see them. A storm blows up and a ship can get all turned around in a hurry. The same goes for a man. Things can get so dark so fast sometimes that a body don't quite know which direction to head. A man gets lost then and can't find his way home again -- not until the storm passes and the stars come back out."

That truth known, yet Chris held out for another. "It's not that easy, Josiah."

"Oh, it's never that easy -- and rarely as hard as we make it out to be."

Holding out still, Chris grimly offered a truth of his own, saying, "He could have waited."

And to him, it was that easy. Vin could have waited, and hadn't, all other truths giving way to that one. Yet there were other truths known and those of no lesser importance. And it was to those Josiah turned.

"When I was a boy, we lived in San Francisco for a while," he said, gaze still on the darkening desert, voice that low rumble speaking of a wisdom hard won. "And there was this stray dog that used to hang around the neighborhood where we lived. It was bone thin and about the sorriest-looking creature you ever hope to see. Went from house to house scrounging what it could. Never begged though -- wouldn't even go nigh or near any man, much less take anything anyone offered it."

He paused, listening to the wind on the desert and a distant coyote calling. Then, bringing more fully to mind a child's hope of years gone

past, he continued. "One day I decided I was going to tame that dog. Started leaving food out for it. And after a while it came to depend on that food being there. It still wouldn't let me near it though. Oh, it would follow me around the neighborhood after a time, but always at a distance. And if I tried to get close, it would take off. Used to make me feel bad, like there was something wrong with me. Couldn't understand why it wouldn't trust me. Then one day while we were out roaming the neighborhood, I watched a pack of kids go after it just for the fun of it. And I knew then that that dog had never had a reason to trust anyone before. Didn't feel so bad after that."

Other sounds drifted then on the breeze, near voices speaking in low tones, dinner over the fire and advice on its preparation flowing freely. And aware of one voice missing, Josiah softly said, "I realized something else that day: That dog did trust me. Trusted me enough to stay when it would maybe have been smarter to leave, to find some place where there weren't kids chasing him and bigger dogs running him off. I figure that dog had learned the way to keep living was to keep moving, always staying one step ahead of whatever was behind and chasing it. And knowing that, it chose to stay."

He fell silent then, the night sounds taking over, both men sitting quiet listening until at last Chris said, "What happened to the dog?"

"I don't know. We moved a few months later -- and it got left behind."

Again a silence fell between the two, neither gaze wavering from the darkness settling over the desert. Then Chris stirred, saying, "Vin's not some stray dog, Josiah. He's not some dumb animal going on instinct. He had a choice and chose Bliss. Knowing everything he knew, he chose to ride off with that man."

"Instead of waiting," Josiah added. He turned his gaze to his companion then. "And you're thinking it was because he didn't trust us. Didn't trust you."

Chris didn't make reply, only sat still, an air about him of a man firmly planted and not about to be shifted. And sure of faith's ability to move even so immovable an object as that, Josiah said, "How long do you expect someone to wait on you? 'Til the house burns down around them?" Chris jerked, gaze going to Josiah, that anger darkening there known if not seen in shadows. And aware of the rightness of that anger but not sorry for it if it moved the obstinate gunman by so much as an inch in the right direction, Josiah continued.

"He waited, Chris. Vin Tanner's not a man to wait on any man's help, but he waited on yours. Waited for five days crossing the desert. Waited for a month in that asylum, the rafters burning over his head the whole sorry time. And when they started to falling down around his ears, he left. He got out before there was nothing left for you to save. But that doesn't mean he stopped waiting. It only means he found a new place to do it."

Chris turned away, gaze gone back to the darkness. But Josiah had one final truth to offer.

"You think he's been so bad sick that he couldn't have ridden out of here if that is what he was of a mind to do? He's here, Chris. The question now is: Are you?"

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The coyote calling had been joined by a half dozen of its brethren by the time dinner was done and the camp gone quiet, Chris still perched on his rock and staring into the dark with only the night sounds and the stars come out for company. And turning his gaze above, Chris considered all the paths in all the years that had led him to that place, called to mind all the long nights spent waiting for those heavenly beacons to light his way. Too many times had he been lost, sometimes by his own design, life become too hard to keep to trails set. And each time he'd gotten lost, he'd found the trail again -- sometimes guided there by another's hand, sometimes by luck and sometimes by that determination in him to keep going when there seemed to be no true reason to do so. He'd been lost, recognized that searching out of some path leading to the familiar, knew it then when the night grew still and soft notes sounded, drifting from beyond the camp at the far edge of hearing. Not music set in known patterns, but a communion given voice. Vin, sitting on his own in the dark, a bit of tin and wood cradled in his hands, giving breath to what lay beyond words. Long notes and sad, as wind souging through pines in a high pass, the world falling away to either side and barely seen.

It was a calling, that Chris knew, a gathering in of those separated by a far distance -- although he suspected that Vin himself could not have named it so. A wild call sung to the stars, a pause between breaths, waiting for an answering call.

He had waited, was waiting still.

He'd been lost and they'd traveled across a desert to find him -- and he was yet unfound.

A new note sounded then, Chris having to strain to hear it. One note, drawn out into a sound of mourning, a keening after something lost and never to be found again. And recognizing it as the only note Vin had played those long months ago when he'd first begun his long journey back to himself, Chris grew still, listening. Then the coyote chorus took up its song again -- and that long sad note was lost.

Chris pushed off his rock then and marched into the dark, skirting the camp and the glow of its fire, the jingle of his spurs a determined tattoo, something lost now found and damn if it would go missing again. The coyote chorus fell back into silence as he came within sight of the rock against which he knew Vin sat, that keening note sounding still. And slowing his steps, he rounded the outcropping to find Vin as he had imagined him, harmonica cradled in his hands, knees drawn up to support

arms still sore and weak, gaze set at a far distance. He seemed, however, not to notice Chris there, only continued to play that lone note. So Chris stood waiting until at last the harmonica was lowered and Vin turned to look up at him.

"Time was," Chris said without preamble, "that I'd have given any amount of money to get you to play a different tune." And when Vin only looked puzzled, he cocked his head at him. "You don't remember?" The tracker shook his head. "Reckon there's a lot of things I've forgot. But some of them are coming back to me now."

It was an admission of things gone wrong -- and a hope of setting them right again. Not a promise given, not even a return of that certainty once familiar between them. It was instead a willingness to find again what had been lost, to search it out at whatever cost to pride and stubborn independence.

"And the rest?" Chris asked. "You might need some help filling in the blanks."

Not an offer but a statement -- I'm here the unspoken message.

"Could take a while."

"Most likely."

A warning and an acceptance of mistakes to come, of wrong turns and choices badly made. Faith then not broken between them but sorely tried and fragile still, they would ride from that place, not alone as they had arrived, but together, the Seven made whole again.

That then settled, Chris looked up at the stars in the night sky.

"Getting late," he said. Then his gaze gone back to the tracker, he frowned.

"You ain't planning on keeping that noise of yours up, are you?"

Vin gave a shrug of one shoulder. "Thought I might."

"Boys might complain."

"They might."

"They've all got guns and know how to use them."

Vin only raised the harmonica to his lips and blew out a taunting note.

Chris smiled, things not yet right between them and maybe changed in ways they had yet to discover, but the one lost had been found. He had waited. He was there. And if someone didn't shoot him before morning, they would find their way again together, all Seven of them.

He slid his gun out of its holster then and held it out butt first to his friend. "You might be needing this," he warned.

Blue eyes looked up into green and held for a moment. Then lowering the harmonica, Vin raised a hand to take hold of the proffered weapon. And gaze never wavering from the one who had crossed a desert to find him, he softly said, "Thanks, Chris."

"You're welcome."

No more then needing to be said between them, Chris nodded his goodnight and turned back to the camp and the five men waiting there. And from the dark as he walked away came an assurance, laughter sounding in his

voice as he called: "I'll tell the boys you're armed."
Vin's only reply was a set of light high notes -- the sound, Chris
would have sworn, that of stars coming out after a storm.

~ The End ~

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