

"You are . . . a fool!"

"Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black. Seems to me if it was me, Loveless had caught you'd have done the same thing."

"Doesn't matter. Johnny," Reaching out Scott grabbed his brother's hand. "I'm not . . . that strong. I can't . . . watch them do the same thing . . . to you! What, what they've begun already!"

He stared in horror at the whip marks on the younger man's shoulders.

"You are that strong!" Johnny took both of Scott's hands and held them, gazing deeply into the beloved slate eyes. "You're the strongest man I've ever known. And the bravest and the most honest, and let's not forget the most foolhardy. But most of all, you're the most honorable man I've ever known. West said hundreds of thousands." Johnny glanced quickly at Artie and back at his brother. "That's Artie's friend. I believe him. You won't let hundreds of thousands die!"

Tears welled out of the gray-blue eyes. Scott's face twisted once more, but this time with another kind of pain. "I don't know if I can do that. The price . . ."

"Ain't too steep. I'm just one man."

"You're my brother!"

"I know, Boston, I know."

Abruptly the body on the bed began to shake. Immediately, Johnny bent over him, enfolding the sick man into his arms. Soon both men were shaking with almost silent sobs.

Artie stepped back, giving the brothers the only privacy he could. Tears welled under his own eyes, seeping out on his face. Clenching his fists, he whispered. "Damn you Loveless, damn you to hell!"



Once more he floated in comfortable nothingness. He could hear voices.

"We must be quiet, John."

"I will be Victoria. Did you return the pony, Vaquero?"

"Sí."

"What have you found out?"

"Naiche was waiting where Manolito said, señor."

"Will he help us?"

“He says he will only contend with Manolito. I am sorry señor Cannon.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry about, Vaquero. It could have been very dangerous, going out there. Thank you.”

“It had to be done. How is Manolito?”

“He sleeps.” Victoria’s voice held worry. “The best thing for him.”

‘Sleep? No, no my sister. I cannot remain like this! Buck needs me.’ His fear giving him strength, Manolito wrenched through the barrier of darkness. Light formed above him. Pain came with the light, but he welcomed it. With a final burst of effort, he opened his eyes. Shapes blurred and finally coalesced into faces leaning over him.

“Manolo, Manolo. My brother. How do you feel?”

“I do not . . . think . . . you want me to answer . . . that.” A weak grin creased Montoya’s face.

“Drink this, Manolo.”

Victoria held a mug to his mouth. Gratefully the sick man drank. He was relieved when this stomach failed to react and the liquid stayed down. “Sweet nectar, my sister.”

“Then drink more.”

“Yes, Victoria.” Dutifully he complied. While he slowly sipped, he studied the others in the room. Both John Cannon and Vaquero looked tired. The ranch hand was dusty, but John seemed almost as disheveled. With a soft sigh, he put down the cup and began to stand.

“Mano, don’t do that.” Both Cannon and Victoria reached forward to stop him.

“I must. I heard Vaquero. Naiche is waiting for me.”

“Now you’re not going anywhere.”

“Yes, John, I am.” Sitting up, Manolito was grateful when the room remained steady. Damning the weakness in his body, he stood up.

“Manolo!”

Firm hands pushed him down. “No!” Just as firmly he stood again, ignoring the fact that he was not wearing anything. “What time of day is it, John?”

“Almost evening”

“Aii! I have been sleep so long. We must leave.”

“Mano, you’re in no condition to go anywhere.” Cannon said firmly.

Anger bubbled up, giving the sick man strength. “My condition does not matter. What matters . . . is my friends. I cannot allow myself to remain in bed when they are in danger!”

“So, you can’t allow yourself to be sick. You can’t allow yourself to get too much sun, to lose too much blood.”

“No, Big John.” Quiet determination filled Manolito’s voice. “I cannot allow it. Every moment I waste . . . could be . . . his last.”

“Buck?” Victoria asked.

“Perhaps . . . although I do not speak of him.” Montoya took a deep breath and then another sip of water. His body was mending, Manolito could feel it. He no longer felt as hot and though his injury still hurt, it was but a dull roar—easily ignored. The ache in his head was only a distant echo. Yes, he was well enough to do what he must, what was long past doing.

“John, with or without your help I am going to leave this room, find a horse—and leave. Listen to me. A monster in the shape of a dwarf has hurt Scott. He’s . . . “

“You don’t have to tell us.” John’s voice was suddenly rough with emotion. “You said a lot while you were delirious. A madman called Miguelito Loveless has Buck, West and both Lancers captive. That’s why I sent Vaquero to the meeting place.”

“Then you know how important it is for me to go.”

For a long moment, John studied his brother-in-law. Finally he nodded. “I know. But are you able? You’ve been very ill.”

“I will go because I must. Enough time has been lost. Dear sister, please bring me my clothes.” This time it was Victoria who studied her brother. Finally she nodded as well. “Yes, Manolo. Bring home Buck, the agents and those two poor brothers.”

“I have sworn to.” He smiled. “So I will.”



“He’s sleeping naturally. You should as well.”

Very slowly Johnny raised his body from its uncomfortable position over the bed, wincing at unhappy muscles. He gazed down at his unconscious brother. Scott’s cheeks were still damp from his tears. He should do something about that. If Scott woke up in his right mind he’d be mortified at his emotional outburst. But he wasn’t going to, he was fighting for his life. Convulsively, Lancer clutched at Scott’s hands, gaining a restless moan from the sick man. With a soft sigh, Johnny released the appendages.

“He’s all right. He’s over the worst. Probably be better by . . .” Gordon cut off his words. Glancing quickly at the older, man Johnny sighed again. “He’ll be better. That’s all that matters.” Standing up, the younger Lancer took up one of the cloths, rung it out and used it to gently clean his brother’s face. Finishing, Johnny began to twist the material in his hands. “He looks so peaceful.” Suddenly he turned to Gordon. “He almost died, didn’t he?”

Artemus glanced upward, before finally meeting Lancer’s gaze. “I think so, yes. But I’m no doctor. I’ve had some training. Better than nothing. But I’m not a doctor.”

“You did the best you could, like Jim said. Don’t think even Doc Jenkins could have done better,” Johnny said softly. “Can’t ask for anything else. You saved him.” He gazed at the obviously exhausted agent.

“He saved himself. And you helped, I believe. You gave him hope.”

“And I’m gonna take it away.” Bitterness ate at the words.

“Not you! Loveless! Not you.”

“I know, in here,” Johnny pointed to his head. “But not in here.” He pointed at mid-chest.

“That’s a dilemma most men face.”

“What about you and Jim?” Johnny asked curiously, anxious to keep the conversation going. Talking was a way of not thinking, and thinking was getting painful. “Have you faced the same . . . difficulty?”

“We’re agents of the U.S. Secret Service. We work for President Grant for the greater good of everyone who lives in this country. We don’t have time for sentiment, or for that matter, petty morality. We do our job.”

“Ha! And I was raised in Boston.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe everything you tell me.” Johnny’s cheeky grin was ruined by a yawn that almost cracked his jaw.

“Get some sleep, I’ll watch Scott.”

“You can watch him, but I’m gonna also. Besides, too wound up to sleep.”

“Yes, well. At least sit in the settee. You can keep an eye on Scott and not be in my way.”

“When are you gonna sleep?”

"On assignments Jim and I often go days without sleep. Don't worry about me, son. Here, drink some more water." He reached for a mug sitting on the table. "I put a little wine in it, for flavor. Not enough to affect you I should think." Artemus thrust the cup into Johnny's hands.

"Sure." Lancer drank deeply. "Tastes good. Loveless knows his wines." Finishing the drink, he went back to the head of Scott's bed. "Sleep well, mi hermano." Leaning over he whispered, "Sleep well. Nothing will touch us this night. This I swear!"

With a sigh, Johnny walked over to the chair and sat down.

Artie ignored him while he continued to change the compresses. About fifteen minutes later he heard a soft snore emanating from the vicinity of the chair. Turning his head, he saw Johnny fast asleep. Opening up one of the chests, he drew out another blanket and laid it over him. For a moment he gazed at the sleeping man. "Thank God for small blessings. Sleep Johnny. You will need your strength soon enough."



The nearer the group of riders came to the appointed meeting place, the more anxious Blue Cannon became. Three people behind Manolito, the young man could easily study his brother-in-law. Mano was hurting, anyone who knew him could see that. He kept himself upright and steady in the saddle by sheer will power and grit alone.

Everything depended on Manolito's ability to keep on going. They already knew that the Apache waiting for them would only help Mano. If he collapsed, allowing the effects of his wounds and illness to affect him, all would be lost. All would be lost for Buck.

A wave of pain washed over the young man. His Uncle Buck was in big trouble. The wisecracking, sometimes bullheaded, sometimes fool-hearted, but always caring older man had become one of his mentors. Often, if there was a conflict between Blue and his pa, it was Buck who understood his position. It was he who would act as an intermediary between the sometimes volatile father and son. Buck had to be found, alive!

Then there was Manolito himself. The brother of his father's replacement bride had proven to be as much of a friend to Blue, as the sister had proven to be the perfect balm for a family in mourning. Blue understood his father's love for this country now, and while he continued to grieve for his mother, he accepted his new life and the good friends it had brought him.

Lastly there were the two missing brothers. Blue had met Scott. He remembered a courteous, well-spoken man with a smile that had seemingly affected all the women of the High Chaparral. A man who had taken the time to talk to Blue about art and painting as soon as he'd found out Blue's interest in the subject. A man who had spoken with obvious happiness about his newfound brother.

Blue shuddered at the tortured image of Scott that Mano's delirium induced words had invoked. Now both men were in the hands of a madman. Somehow they had to free them. Somehow they would.

Abruptly, Manolito raised his hand, and the group of ranch hands and relatives stopped. They had reached a tall outcropping of rock. They were actually at the beginning of the Rincon mountain foothills. Blue glanced around, seeing no one but the High Chaparral men. Nevertheless, Blue was not surprised when a lone Apache rode out of a hidden crevice from almost directly in front of Mano.

Both Manolito and the Indian dismounted, walking ahead of the group. They talked for several minutes, Mano gesturing sometimes to his friends and sometimes to the mountain. Finally he grimaced and nodded. With a final word, he walked back to the waiting men.

When he saw that his brother-in-law was going to remain standing, John Cannon dismounted. His son and the others followed. "Well?" John asked impatiently.

Mano closed his eyes and sighed. "Naiche will take me, and only two others. And we must wait for dawn."

"What?"

"Why only two?" Blue's query was spoken with his father's.

"He says we have almost no chance of remaining undiscovered, but if we can, it will only be because we are few. He also says," here Manolito grinned slightly, "if we are caught, some can be more easily passed off as new recruits. You," he pointed at Joe, "and you," he pointed at Pedro.

He also says," here Manolito looked seriously at both Cannons, "that he will not let John Cannon and his only son go into certain death. Something to do with his father, I think."

"Wait just a minute," John growled.

"It's my choice!" Blue said.

"Those are his conditions. I am willing to accept them."

"And if we're not?" Sam ventured.

"He will not guide us. This I will not allow. One way or another, I am returning to help Buck and the others. If this means I will go to my death by riding up to their main entrance, I will do so, alone!"

"Certain death," Pedro said softly. The tall, thin, naturally good-humored ranch hand suddenly matched Mano's grin. "Then we should go quickly, I do not want to keep el diablo waiting."

"You said something about holding off," the darker, smaller of the two Butler brothers asked.

“Why?”

Again Mano sighed. “This part I also find hard to accept, Joe. Very soon it will be dark. Naiche can guide us part of the way tonight but he is unsure if he can find the correct opening without the light of day. So we must wait in the hills. John, Sam, Blue, you others that have come.” Manolito gazed at each of his friends, and felt a surge of camaraderie. All these companions were so willing to face death for Buck and men they didn’t even know. “You must all leave, now. Naiche says it is not likely the Little Giant will have sentries this far, but it is possible. Please, I beg of you. Do not question this. Go, return to Tucson.”

“What if only two men stay here?” Sam interrupted. “Then if you come back needin’ help or some word of you comes,” he glanced at the Indians, “we’ll know.”

“Sí.” Vaquero agreed. “We can stay. We will not be seen.”

Shaking his head, Manolito walked back to Naiche. After several minutes he returned. “He has agreed to it. But only two.”

Sam and Vaquero nodded vigorously.

“Do you trust this Naiche, Mano?” John asked.

Mano smiled. “Sí, I trust him. Now go.”

“We’ll leave you our water and food.” John said. “Mano.” Now it was John’s turn to grimace. “Bring my brother back--if you can.”

“This I have sworn.”



Two figures sat huddled against the low-lying stone formation in the cavern. Nearly an hour ago they had been allowed to stop. Since then, the older one had been trying to rest with little success. He finally sighed and opened his eyes.

“Can’t sleep.”

Buck turned his head to face the younger man, fully expecting to see the same worry in his face that Cannon was feeling. What he saw drove all thoughts of sleep from his mind. In the light of the strange fixtures, West’s blue eyes twinkled with a mixture of concern, reflection and avid anticipation. Buck sucked in his breath. “Damn! Ya like being in danger, don’t ya? It’s what makes ya wanna live. You’re as loco as Mano!”

The smile left West’s face. “You’re smarter than you look.”

“Comes from having Manolito Montoya as a brother-in-law!” Buck’s words abruptly cut off. After a space he whispered, “Do ya think he’s alive?”

“I hope he is. He fell on purpose.”

“But they went after him.” Buck sighed again when Jim remained silent. “Ain’t never seen such things done to a man. That Scott, he’s some hombre!”

“I have.” West’s tone sent a chill through Buck. “I once rescued Artie His captors wanted information.” For a long moment Buck thought West had said all he was going to. When he did continue, Canon was actually startled, although the agent’s whisper barely made any sound. “I know exactly how Johnny feels.”

“Was they gonna do the same thing to ya, like they mean to do ta Johnny?”

“They never had the chance.”

A shiver rippled through Buck at the cold words. He had no doubt what had happened to the people who had hurt Gordon. Buck chewed at his lower lip, wondering how much more West would say. “Do ya think Artie could have watched them do the same ta you?”

“It’s our job.” West’s voice had lost all of its emotion.

Once more Cannon shivered. *‘Ya didn’t answer the question,’* he thought. But all he said aloud was, “Yeah.”

“Es bien hombre, es mucho hombre.”

Once more Buck was startled, this time to hear West mouth words very similar to ones he had used to describe Manolito after the incident with the two white captives. *‘Just how much do ya know about me and Mano?’* On the heels of that thought came another. *‘An’ just who are ya talkin’ about?’*

As if both men were uncomfortable with the preceding conversation, they leaned against the rock and lapsed into silence. Finally, after an interminable time, Buck shifted again. “Dang it. I can’t just sit here. What time do ya think it is? Can’t tell anything in this place.”

“Several hours after midnight.”

“How can you tell?”

What ever answers Jim might have given were interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps.

Both man scrambled up and faced the corridor. Pushing past the two Indians already there, a tall white man spoke. “Come with us!”

“Where to?” Buck asked worriedly.

“Does it matter?” West said.

“Don’t suppose it does.” Both men followed the guards out.



Buck studied the rock formations in the stone above him, idly wondering how they had been formed. The prisoners were not blindfolded this time. Whether Loveless believed they posed no threat or the guards made a mistake, it made no difference to Buck. Some of the paths he remembered by how they had felt, but for the most part he was lost. West was not. From the way he surreptitiously watched where they were going, Buck was sure he could find his way within the seeming maze of tunnels and caverns.

When they finally reached a wooden barrier Cannon was beginning to hope they were being brought to the others. One guard took a key, unlocked the door and yanked it open. As soon as there was space enough, West entered without hesitation. The guard pushed Buck in and shut the door behind him. Blinking in wonder at the plush furniture, his eyes were nevertheless drawn to the bed and the still figure under the silk sheets and thin blanket.

The man Gordon raised his head, his hand resting on the patient’s forehead. Immediately he removed his appendage and shuffled over to West and Cannon. “Jim! Now Loveless has astonished me.”

“You forget how his mind works,” West frowned. “He wants us to see the power he has over all of us up close. How is Scott?”

Turning toward the figure on the bed, Artemus’ tired face brightened. “Better. I wasn’t sure I could save him. He was so far gone. I truly believe Johnny made the difference as well as the grace of the Grand Architect.”

“Where’s Johnny?” Buck asked.

“There.” Artemus pointed at a cushioned chair a few steps in front of them. Buck could see an arm lying on the side.

“Shouldn’t be talking so loud,” Buck whispered.

Chuckling, Artie said. “You’re probably right, but don’t worry about waking Johnny. I gave him enough laudanum to make him sleep until morning. Scott as well. I wasn’t sure what else to do. If I could get away with it,” his voice became even quieter. “I’d give Johnny some to deaden him later, but . . .”

“Loveless would notice.”

Artie nodded, his face a study in pain.

His gut twisting, Buck walked closer to the man on the bed and gazed down at him. "Johnny will be taken come morning, won't he?"

Once more Artemus nodded. "If Scott continues to recover, I expect so. He will be weak, still sick from the sun and the trauma but, yes, I don't think our Miguelito will wait any longer."

"Artie," Jim stepped up to his friend and held his arm. For the first time Buck noticed the other man's glazed eyes, pallor and the way he swayed slightly. "You haven't slept since you were brought here."

He made it a statement. Smiling at his friend, Gordon said, "James my boy, what makes you think that?"

"From the way you can barely stand. Come on, since Johnny has the chair you're going to share Scott's bed. It's big enough."

"James, I don't think Johnny will approve."

"He's not going to be happy when he wakes up with a drug-hazed mind. He can only kill you once."

"Very funny. Listen Jim, I have to watch Scott."

"I'm here. You need to rest." As he spoke West gently pushed his friend to the bed and sat him down.

"Very well, but only for a minute. Oh, if you need them, there are two blankets in the chest at the foot of the bed." Artie's words were interrupted by a yawn. Closing his mouth, he looked up at his friend. "Loveless is going to destroy two good men."

"No, Artie. We're going to stop him before he can."

"I'm not so sure this time."

"You need to sleep." West raised one side of the coverings and pushed Artemus onto the bed. Scott shifted slightly but remained unconscious. Laying the material over his friend, he said, "You're worn out. Come morning you'll be more sensible."

"Sure, Jim." To Buck's surprise, Gordon closed his eyes and almost immediately his chest began to rise and fall evenly.

"You said ya would save both brothers." Buck spokes very softly, gazing at Johnny before turning his face toward West. "Do you really think you can?"

"No matter what, I'm going to stop Loveless. Beyond that . . ."

"Yeah, I understand."

“Try to sleep some,” West said. “Find a comfortable spot on the floor. Wait!” He walked to a chest Artemus had pointed out before. Pulling out a blanket with a colorful red and yellow design he handed it to Buck. “Might as well be comfortable. Don’t worry about me. You’re right. I live for this kind of thing. I couldn’t sleep if I tried.”

“Yeah,” Buck muttered softly as he settled onto the floor where he could still see the bed, settee and a portion of the door. He wrapped the thick cloth around himself. “You’re plum loco. And it scares me as much as Loveless.”



Slowly, he rose through the hazy clouds. The air was close and heavy around him, a dense vapor that was keeping him away from something important. As the haze began to clear, he began to feel discomfort. Hot, he felt hot, and a burning pain that seemed to be everywhere. He thought he might have whimpered, all he wanted was to fall back into the nothingness.

But he couldn’t. He saw a face, dark hair, deep blue eyes, a smile that could brighten the most dreary day. Johnny, if he pushed himself upward, he would see his brother. He had to see his brother!

With renewed effort he forced his eyes open but the face that hovered above him belonged to a stranger’s. The man was tall with a wiry, athletic build and dark hair. His clothes, although torn and dirty, were, in their cut and style, almost Spanish. But this man was no dandy, his eyes were as cold and calculating as Johnny Madrid’s.

The stranger also exuded something else, a strength of purpose that radiated out from him like a mist. Drinking it in, Scott took a deep breath. “You must be James West.” His voice sounded as dry as sandpaper as did his throat.

“Have some of this.” West produced a glass. Despite his thirst, Scott took a small sip, waiting to see how his stomach would react. Pleased when it remained calm, he took another, long drink, before scanning the room. He let out an audible sigh of relief when he saw his brother. It was only then that he seemed to notice the sleeping man next to him.

Scott smiled faintly. “Did you drug him too?”

“I told him to sleep.”

“He trusts you.” Scott’s smile softened.

“You knew he gave you laudanum?”

“I recognize its taste. He must have given it to Johnny as well.”

“He thought it was the only way he’d get him to sleep.”

“He was probably right, but Johnny is going to be angry.”

West snorted. However, he made no comment as he gave the glass once more to the younger man. Scott drank most of its contents then carefully sat it down on the side table. West stood up.

“Do you want more?”

“Not at the moment, thank you.” Scott stretched slowly, wincing at the torment the movement awoke. Cautiously, he lifted himself up, not surprised when he had trouble staying erect. Sweat broke out on his face. Ignoring the pain and his weakness, he swung his legs around until he sat at the edge of the bed.

West watched him impassively, allowing him to discover his own limits. Finally the younger man sat still, both hands splayed out, supporting his weight. Tilting his head slightly, he gazed at the stranger on the stone floor.

“Who’s our other guest?” Scott was breathing heavily, but his voice was pitched softly enough to reach only the man near him.

“Buck Cannon. He and Manolito Montoya joined us in the search.”

“John Cannon’s brother and brother-in-law. Where is Manolito?”

“He fell off the cliff when we found you. I presume he was killed.”

Scott frowned as he tried to read the agent. Finally he nodded. “I would have liked to meet him. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

Now it was West’s turn to frown. “A few hours until dawn. You know what that means?”

“You are a cold-blooded bastard, aren’t you?”

“I am what I am.”

Scott sighed, his hands trembling slightly. “It’s not your fault. Nothing could have stopped Johnny from coming after me. He’s too bullheaded!”

“He came with a very good idea of what might happen to him.”

“I know.” A spasm of pain passed over Scott’s face that had nothing to do with his wounds. “I can’t give in. I can’t let Loveless have the use of the artifact.”

“It works?” West was truly curious.

Scott glanced around, nodded and dropped his voice further. “Professor Sibley and I tested it.”

“I know you’ll do the right thing.”

"You have more confidence in me than I have."

"No," he shook his head, "I don't."

Scott gazed at the agent accepting his judgment for the moment. As he sat collecting his thoughts, he felt a stir of recognition. "I've met you before, Mr. West, haven't I? Something to do with the prison camp . . ."

"I was wondering if you'd remember. I was brought to Salisbury four months before the treaty was signed, just after your escape attempt. We were in the infirmary together."

"You were a major."

"A lifetime ago."

"So it was." Scott's gaze shifted to his brother.

"You should rest while you can."

"Help me, please. Our luggage is in that corner." Scott motioned with his head. "The darker one is mine. I need some trousers. Can't walk around like this."

Grinning, Jim nodded. Jumping up, he found the valise and brought it over. Pulling out a pair of pants, he handed them to Scott. He watched the younger man struggle to pull them on, the effort bringing out more sweat. Finally Scott finished and sighed.

"I think I need more help."

What he meant became apparent as he stood up. Shifting quickly, Jim leaned into him, lending his support as the weak man fought to remain upright. Scott began to move determinedly toward his brother. West continued to assist him as unobtrusively as possible. When he reached the settee, Scott allowed himself to be lowered to the ground. Johnny sighed, shifting slightly but remaining unconscious. Resting his head against the younger man's lap, the blond lifted his right hand and held his brother's. Within minutes, his breath evened out as he fell into an exhausted sleep. After watching for another minute, Jim went back to the chest and removed the last blanket. He draped it over Scott.

Very carefully, West sat against a wall where he could see everyone in the room and the door. Leaning his head back, against the wall, he waited.



His body hurt everywhere but Manolito rose determinedly the moment he felt the hand upon his shoulder. He nodded at Pedro, at an outline in the near dark. Truthfully, he had mostly been dozing. Whether their guide had slept at all, Mano couldn't tell. But he had no doubt that Indian would be ready to leave before them.

He glanced where he knew Joe had been lying. He could see Sam's brother rolling out of his bedroll, shivering slightly in the still, cold air. The first light of dawn was glimmering behind the mountains. The three Chaparral men had traveled with Naiche for several miles the previous night before he had finally motioned them to stop. The friends had pulled out their bedrolls and eaten some hardtack before splitting up the watches and pretending to rest. Now Manolito waited for their guide to speak.

"From here we go on foot," Naiche announced. "My friend will keep the horses safe."

Manolito realized Lochi was mounted and held the remaining horses' reins. He shrugged. If they were able to escape from Loveless, then they would worry about the animals. He met the other's gaze and they nodded.

Mano was anxious to be gone. The hardtack was hard to swallow, and even water rested uneasily on his stomach. That any of his discomfort might be caused by his previous illness he dismissed as unimportant. All that mattered was reaching Loveless.

It seemed that Joe and Pedro shared his feelings. None of them spoke unless it was necessary. When Naiche motioned for them to leave, all three were ready.



One moment he was dreaming of a particularly pleasant afternoon and evening in New Orleans, and in the next Artemus found himself sitting up, sporting a pounding headache caused, he knew, from insufficient sleep and unresolved issues. Glancing around the chamber, he saw the two brothers and Cannon, all asleep. Shifting his head, he met Jim's calm gaze.

Stretching slowly, Artie worked at the kinks in his body. Finally, he went over to the pitcher on the bureau and filled a glass. Taking a long drink, he walked back to West and sat next to him. Both men remained silent for some time.

Finally Artie sighed. When he spoke, his voice was pitched only to reach West's ears. "Do we have a plan?"

"We have to see if the sphere works."

Artie looked up at a stalagmite above him before answering. "Then what?"

"We do what we have to do. What we know we can do if nothing else works."

The other man nodded slowly then twisted his head to look at the brothers. "Without destroying two good men?"

"That remains to be seen." West turned to his friend and the look of distress on his face would have surprised anyone but Artie. He whispered softly. "Somehow I'm going to stop Loveless, before he can do that. Somehow, I've got to get Scott to trust me like he did a lifetime ago."

"Somehow," Artie agreed. "Of course then, he didn't know he had a brother." With another sigh, Artemus leaned back against the stone and closed his eyes. Within moments he was asleep again.



He must be walking on a desert hill, on those sand dunes that can drag a man down. His legs felt so heavy, and his head, heavy, and thick—like he'd been drugged. As soon as that thought clarified in Johnny Lancer's mind, he opened his eyes and began to shift forward. But the weight on his legs and lap, along with some sixth-sense, stopped the movement cold. Blearily, he glanced down to see his brother's blond head, resting against his legs, one arm flung up, a hand lightly closed above his.

Shifting his other hand, Johnny unconsciously began to caress the sweat-soaked hair. An instant later he sensed he was being watched and he lifted his own eyes to meet the inscrutable visage of James West. Artemus Gordon was sitting next to him, his head back and his eyes closed. Further along the same wall, Buck was snoring softly.

Johnny's hand tightened ever so slightly on Scott's head, and the blond stirred but remained asleep. Something the other was grateful for. His gaze shifted back to Gordon.

"The conniving bastard drugged me." He spoke in a voice pitched to just reach West. Scott moved again, but once more settled back.

"He thought it was the only way to keep you down."

"Probably right. Did you drug him?"

"No, I just told him to sleep."

Johnny nodded and glanced around the room. Finally he looked at West again. "How soon?"

"I'd say it was dawn. Any time now."

Once more Johnny nodded. "That's what I figured." His eyes fell, and he studied his brother, a fond grin forming on his face. "Maybe you could sleep through this, Boston." Abruptly the smile died. "Mi dios! Why can't you sleep through this coming day?"

As if in response to the words, Scott suddenly twitched and lifted his head. He rubbed at his eyes and sighed. "No chance of that, little brother." His voice was slurred from sleep, but determined. "I need to be awake. I need to see what I'm going to let happen!" Slowly he raised his body, the only sign of the cost a slight compression of his lips until he was on the same level as the younger man. "I need to see everything."

Johnny's mouth tightened but he met Scott's scrutiny unflinchingly. "I know."

Abruptly, Artemus raised his head, unconsciously copying Scott when he scrubbed at his eyes. The two agents shared a cryptic glance. From his place closer to the brothers, Buck shifted, coming awake much slower.

It was Johnny who broke the silence first. His face was calm, with a hint of a smile. "I'm real glad I got to know you, Scott Lancer."

"Same here, Johnny Madrid Lancer. I've had no better friend and teacher in my life."

"Same here. Boston . . . Tell Murdoch, tell the old man . . ."

"If I see him again, I'll tell him you love him."

Johnny nodded. An almost sob escaped his throat but his face remained unchanged. "Hold tight to that fool sense of honor you have."

His mouth trembling, Scott nodded. Slowly he lifted his hand until he partially cradled the side of his brother's face. "I will thank God each day I remain alive for the gift I received when you came into my life, that day you hitched a ride in a stagecoach, and I'll curse him in the same breath for taking you away!"

"Not God, Boston."

"No, more like the devil. A short devil. But I'll curse God nevertheless."

"Oh, bravo, Mr. Lancer." As one, the prisoners all jerked their heads toward the door in time to see Miguelito Loveless enter. He was followed by Voltaire, Santos, Roberto and several other men. The room suddenly seemed very crowded. Loveless grinned as he stepped closer to the prisoners. "Such theatrics, Scott! And you," he glanced at Johnny, "you almost sounded poetic. Saying your goodbyes. So touching. I nearly forgot the time listening to you."

"It's bad enough we have to be in the same room with him, Artie, but must we listen to him as well."

"James, my boy," responding in the same, bored tone, the agent stood with West, "some burdens must be endured." In twin motions, they folded their arms and smirked.

"You would think he'd get tired of hearing his own voice."

"Now Jim, credit where credit is due, he does have a lovely singing voice."

Miguelito swung to face the agents, stomping his feet. "Do you think I don't know what you are trying to do? Your trying to shift my attention to the both of you. Well, it won't work. If Scott Lancer doesn't work that sphere, then Santos will finish on his brother what he started on Scott! Well?" he wagged his finger at the blond. "What's your answer now?"

Very carefully, Scott stood up. No hint of weakness marred his movement. Johnny rose at the same time. Once more both brothers studied each other. Finally Scott faced the dwarf. "My answer has not changed. Nothing can compel me to help you!"

"Well, we shall see. Voltaire, I believe Mr. Lancer has several spare shirts in his luggage. Get one."

Without any change in expression, the giant went to the alcove that held the luggage. Opening one he pulled out a blue shirt and brought it back. Loveless took it.

"This will do nicely. Put it on." He shoved it at Scott.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will be baked by the sun again. I would have thought you'd had enough of that."

"Put it on, Boston. You'll need it."

Responding to the soft but earnest words, Scott gazed at his brother. Finally his mouth twitched upward. "All right, little brother. What ever you say." Taking the shirt, he donned it carefully over the bandages that covered his torso and arms. When he finished he continued to look at Johnny.

Loveless chuckled. "Take the brothers up. This time, Santos, I give you leave to try any method you choose." He gestured at the Indian. "Just make it slow, very slow."

Nodding, Santos gestured to Voltaire and Roberto. The giant seized Johnny, picking him up bodily. Lancer had no chance to resist. In the big man's hand he could only squirm. Roberto and another man grabbed Scott and began to push him from the room. Buck came to his feet in an instant, only to face Roberto's gun.

"No, you will stay down here a while longer, I think." Loveless grinned. "For now this will be a command performance for Scott only. Come my friends. The dawn is breaking." He laughed as he and his henchmen left the room with the two Lancers. Buck dropped back to the floor, his face crumbling.



"Here." Naiche pointed to a crevice in the irregular stone facing.

For at least an hour the four men had been traversing a slow and tortuous path through the foothills and then the mountains. Manolito estimated they were some two miles away from the entrance he was familiar with. Now Montoya gazed at the supposed opening and willed his body not to collapse where he stood.

"Mano!" The soft cry came from Joe.

"I am fine."

“No, mi amigo, you are not,” Pedro said. “But we will pretend otherwise.”

“We should rest a spell, Mano.”

“We do not have time.”

“It seems to me,” Pedro said nonchalantly, “that we must think before we enter the pit.”

“If you are having second thoughts . . .”

“That’s not what Pedro means, and you know it. We gotta have a plan.” Joe looked over at their impassive guide. “An’ you might as well sit while we talk. Cause we ain’t going anywhere until we do!”

Manolito looked from one friend to the other before sighing and carefully lowering himself to the ground. “You are right, of course.” He lifted his canteen and took a long sip of water, before looking at their guide. “Naiche, what can you tell us of this place?”

“Can you draw a map?” Joe asked, glancing down at the sandy ground. “Give us some idea of the layout?” Naiche frowned, obviously not understanding all the words.

Manolito rubbed at his eyes. “Let me speak to him.” With that he lapsed into Apache. The Indian thought a moment then nodded. Bending down on his haunches, he began to draw lines and to speak in Apache. What followed was a surprisingly detailed map. Manolito broke in with questions and translated into English for his friends.

“The tunnel we will take leads here, to the main passageway. Many corridors lead into it, but few go far. Most are dead-ends used for storage. The right passage will take us either to the mines, or, if I understand correctly, to underground gardens and where the food is prepared. Left will lead eventually to the guard room. From there, one can go down to where the Little Giant lives, or up to where I saw Scott tortured. Also, there is a chamber Naiche calls the guestroom. He thinks the prisoners might be there if they are not above. It is here,” Manolito pointed. “Or they might be forced to work in the mines. Apparently, that is one of Loveless’ favorite punishments for misbehavior. That, and being dropped into an underground stream with or without a rope.”

“And they still follow him?” Pedro asked.

“Discipline needed.” Naiche spoke quietly in English. “His people understand.”

“Ya, expect they do,” Joe said. “Mano, you don’t know what this West had planned on doing?”

“No, he never said. Except he said he must stop Loveless. And I know he will do anything to achieve that goal.”

“Will he blow the mine?”

Manolito looked at Pedro and frowned. “Sí. I think he will.”

"If there is mining, there will be explosives." Pedro continued. "I have worked in mines, with explosives. I can make sure that part of his hideout will blow."

"An' perhaps us as well," Joe said.

Pedro shrugged. "Sí. Perhaps."

Manolito snorted then asked another question in Apache. Naiche thought, and then lapsed into a long explanation. Manolito sighed again then turned back to the others. "I asked if we can infiltrate Loveless' gang. He said you might if you wear proper colors." He pointed to the Indian's braid. "Not me, however. Too many saw me. Someone will probably recognize me. He says those that work below are stupid, but those that work above, he means those in the guardroom, are not. Especially Loveless. He notices all."

Naiche nodded and spoke in English. "He clever. Roberto and Santos clever. They know the Little Giant for many years."

"Can you get us braids?"

"If we get in."

"When we get in," Mano said determinedly. "I will find this guestroom. Pedro, you and Joe find the mines. Beyond that, only God knows."

"As long as he tells us when the time is right," Pedro said with a grin.

"So, we go?" Naiche motioned toward the opening.

"Sí. We go." Manolito agreed.

"There will be no light."

"We brought torches." Joe said.

"There will be no light." The three friends waited for the Indian to continue. "A light can be seen, and, something in the air burns. We cannot have fire."

"Methane. From the mining. Should have realized that," Joe said softly.

"Sí," Pedro said, leaning into the opening. "I can smell it."

"He," Naiche pointed at Mano, "will lay his hand on my shoulders. The others will do the same.

I will lead you in. No light. Will you come now?" He gazed at each man in turn.

Manolito grinned suddenly. "Before we enter into the pit, I must thank you."

“Do not thank me for leading you into death.”

“Nevertheless, I shall.”

“Let us hurry. El diablo is impatient.”

“Yeah,” Joe agreed. “Let’s stop jabbering.”

For a final time, the Indian studied each man. Then he nodded. “Come.” He ducked inside the crevice. Manolito, Joe and Pedro followed without hesitation.



Deja vu. Hadn’t Scott just told him about that word not so long ago? Johnny Lancer had a strong sense that he finally understood the meaning as he was dragged outside the cave and up to the same crossbeam structure that had held his brother not two days ago.

This time it was he who was roughly thrown against it. He closed his eyes briefly as the ropes were tightened around his elbows, wrists, knees and ankles. He could feel the heat of the fire near his feet. Opening his eyes, he gazed contemptuously at Santos, knowing he already had his tools ready. Shifting, Johnny searched for Scott.

He found his brother about ten yards away. A canopy large enough for several men to stand under had been set up. Under its cover, they had deposited Scott. He knelt on the hard ground, his eyes gazing straight at Johnny. Loveless was sitting next to him on a comfortable-looking plush chair. Voltaire stood by his side.

“Well, boy. Will you work the sphere?”

“Go to hell!” Scott’s eyes never left his brother.

“No, señor,” Santos purred. “It is not the patrón who will go there.”

With those words he drew out his whip and flicked it nonchalantly at Johnny. The leather landed against his pants and the material parted, leaving a large tear in the fabric. Again he flicked the whip, this time opening a large rip in Johnny’s tattered shirt. Both times, Lancer’s skin remained unblemished.

Johnny gazed at his brother, never flinching while Santos continued his macabre game. Again and again he struck until all of Johnny’s clothes were no more than tatters of material hanging from various ropes. Throughout it all, the Indian never touched skin.

By now the sun had risen enough to heat the air. Santos studied his handiwork for so long Johnny’s skin began to warm. Abruptly, the Indian grinned and swung again, twisting the whip slightly. This time the leather landed sharply against Johnny’s chest, opening a deep gash.

Lancer gasped, arching slightly. The pain was pure and powerful. It evoked memories from his childhood, but those memories were faded, dull. This pain was sharp, and was followed by another blow that twisted around his hips, bringing discomfort to a part of his anatomy that had never felt such agony.

Biting his lip, Johnny swallowed his cries. Desperately, he locked gazes once more with Scott. A tear had fallen unnoticed from the blond's eyes. With no other recourse but to keep looking at his brother or closing his eyes, Johnny stared at the blond. He felt the burning discomfort moments after he smelled roasting flesh.

Sweat dripped from Johnny's face and body. Slowly, deliberately, Santos continued to cut at Johnny's skin, sometimes cauterizing the wound as he went, sometimes not. Johnny found himself scrunching his eyes closed, praying incoherently for strength, for himself, for his brother. He had a fairly good idea what Santos could and might do to him. And he knew he had the strength to suffer this death. But he could not without crying out, or perhaps even screaming for mercy in the end. He was strong, but not strong enough to endure silently what he was facing.

Already, the agony was nearly intolerable.

'Dios, let my voice die first. Don't make Scott listen to me and watch as well.' Once more Santos's knife bit into him and Johnny moaned. So far this day, it seemed God was not listening.

He thought he heard a voice ordering something imperiously. Through tearing eyes, he saw Santos step back. Someone put a canteen to his lips, allowing the fluid to drip into his throat. Johnny found himself sucking at the warm liquid even though he was aware of why they were giving him water. He was to die slowly, allowing Scott ample time to change his mind. But Scott was strong, he would not give in. He was strong.

Abruptly, Johnny realized Santos was speaking to him. The words were distorted by pain but understandable. "We wait. The Little Giant wants others to witness my work. Do not worry. We will start again soon enough." The voice chuckled.

Johnny had a wild urge to laugh. Instead he looked straight into Santos' face and grinned.

"Ain't goin' . . . anywhere . . . anyway. Got a date . . . with my maker."



He was walking through the bowels of the earth. Around him the darkness pressed, almost as tangible as the stone he sometimes bumped painfully into. In this narrow tunnel he felt like he was suffocating, the earth was ready to bury him and he wasn't even dead yet.

Manolito fought his fear silently. His hand was damp with sweat and pressed, despite his best intentions, with more force than was needed against Naiche's shoulder. A hand he could not even see in the inky blackness. Sweat also drenched his shirt despite the cool air. His various aches were almost forgotten in his single-minded focus on following the guide.

They had been under the mountain for what seemed like hours and Mano was ready to never step a foot inside another cave for however long God would grant his life to be. He could hear Joe's step behind him, feel the hand pressed forcefully against his own shoulder. Strangely, that appendage acted like an anchor, keeping him grounded in the reality of life at High Chaparral, of the good times and bad, all had shared.

Concentrating on a particularly fond memory of a saloon fight in Tucson, he was startled when he could suddenly discern the Indian's silhouette, missing the transition from complete darkness to some light. His hand slipped and as he automatically pushed it back, he realized he no longer needed the guide.

Gratefully, he allowed his arm to drop, his aching muscles protesting the change of position. He felt his companions behind him doing the same.

For long minutes Naiche paused, then he motioned for the others to follow. They drew near the light. As his eyes adjusted, Mano realized the illumination came from globes of opaque glass. The globes were at regular intervals and attached somehow to a wooden board that ran the visible length of the cross-tunnel they approached.

Naiche reached the opening and paused, glancing both ways. He gestured for them to follow. To their right, the smell of methane was stronger. Without hesitating, Naiche headed to the left. The passageway ran for some forty yards and then turned. Although the walls appeared natural, even Manolito could tell the irregular surface they walked upon that is was not. A very pebbly concrete lined the ground. They passed several openings on both sides that proved to be more tunnels.

They were just nearing the bend in the shaft when Naiche gestured for them to follow him into a side tunnel. The alcove led some five feet in, ending in a rounded cull-de-sac filled with neatly stacked boxes. Fishing into one, he pulled out two brown braids and a box of pins. He offered them to Pedro and Joe. Both men nodded and pinned them on. Naiche walked to the front and pointed to the right.

Before either ranch hand could exit, the sound of footsteps echoed down the tunnel and, moments later, a man rounded the corner. Manolito found himself being violently pushed back against the wall before Naiche stepped out and nodded at the new arrival. The man stopped and stared curiously at the two Cannon ranch-hands and the Indian.

'Dios mío!' Frozen against the irregular stone, Mano willed himself to be part of the shadows. He could just see the new arrival. The man was tall, dressed in reasonably clean clothes, except that he wore an apron spotted with unknown stains. His braid was green. Manolito could see the play of emotions on the other's face, the gradual shift from puzzlement and unease to, finally, relieved recognition.

"I know ya. Your part of the doc's group. Haven't seen ya in awhile," the stranger spoke, displaying rotting teeth. "These other fellers with you?"

"I brought them."

"New guys. Good. You'll like it here. The doc pays good. An' when he gets power, woowee! We are gonna have fun! Speakin' of power, how 'bout that hullabaloo?" The speaker shook his head. "I jus' took a look. Wouldn't want ta be in that feller's boots. Santos is one crazy bastard. Heard tell he can keep a man alive for days, killin' him slowly. Nah, I sure wouldn't want ta be in that feller's boots, not that he's wearin' any." The speaker chuckled at his own joke. "Wouldn't want ta be that brother, neither. It's a great show. Expect ya was part of it. Catchin' them. Ya guys up top git all the fun. All ah do is tend the gardens an' help the cooks. Course I did git ta go on that side trip last week ta Mexico. Got some nice vittles for the doc an' helped bring back some mirrors. Don't know why the doc wanted all those mirrors, but I knowed what the cooks do with the vittles. Woowee! Had some fun while we was gone too."

'Madre de Dios! He speaks of Johnny.' Manolito's imagination began to paint a very ugly picture. He was so wrapped in his thoughts he missed part of the conversation.

"He sure don't pay me ta think but he pays me enough ta follow orders. The other fellers are in the guestroom, don't know why. Well, gotta git back ta work."

Chuckling to himself, the man continued walking down the tunnel. When the sound of his last footfalls had died, Naiche ducked back into the alcove, followed quickly by Joe and Pedro. Both ranch-hands finally allowed their emotions to show as they took in great gulps of air.

The Indian watched impassively then finally whispered. "What will you do?"

"If God is willing, save our friends," Mano said, remembering himself how to breathe.

"Don't see how we can help the two Lancer brothers." Joe frowned, whispering like his companions. "Kills me ta know what's happening, but . . ." He shook his head. "Best you try to reach that guestroom the cook was talkin' about, Mano."

"We will join you when we can," Pedro said lightly.

"Wait." Naiche went back to the boxes and found three red braids. He handed one each to Pedro and Joe, then the third to Mano. "For when you leave mines." He nodded to the ranch hands. To Manolito he said something in Apache.

Mano laughed soundlessly. "He thinks with this I might reach the guestroom before I become one of the guests." Reading the expressions of his companions, he said softly. "Go, my friends. It has been good to know you."

Joe and Pedro just nodded. Joe glanced at the red braid and said softly. "Never wanted so much ta be lost in a crowd."



Buck had never felt so heartsick in his life. Even when he had witnessed the Apache whipping Mano, he had not felt so despondent. At least his friend had chosen to accept the ordeal, the Lancer brothers had chosen nothing.

He had sat back down. The blanket he had used earlier lay near him, forgotten. The two agents had returned to the bed, sitting side by side. For several minutes they looked at each other and Buck would almost swear they were communicating somehow. Then Artemus abruptly stood.

West continued to sit, his face thoughtful while Artemus busied himself cleaning up what was left behind after treating Scott. When he carried the basin filled with soiled water to the alcove that held the curious water closet, he dumped the water down the bowl, flushed it and turned on the spigot.

At the loud noise, West turned his head sharply. Then just as sharply, he turned back to Buck. "I expect you want to deck someone for what's happening above us."

"The man I wanna hit ain't here."

"But wouldn't you like a substitute?"

"You were pretty quick ta let that poor boy let himself be killed."

"Then aren't you angry enough to hit me?" West stood up. Artie paused at the sink, and then allowed the water to swish the basin clean. The soft noise of the water on the china echoed throughout the chamber.

"Come on, take a swing."

His helpless anger finally exploding, Buck swung and found himself caught in West's strong hands and dragged toward the alcove. Surprised, Buck allowed the movement until they reached the sink and he pulled himself free. He realized both West and Artie had squeezed into the small space formed by the irregular stone walls and the screen. West motioned for him to join them and the cowboy stepped forward without hesitation.

Artie positioned the basin so it continued to fill and drain into the sink. It finally dawned on Buck that the agent was making noise on purpose.

"That Loveless feller can't be listening now," Buck whispered.

"I'm sure he has someone filling in," West replied just as softly.

"So, are ya gonna let Johnny die?"

"It's not my choice."

"Bull! If ya had told Scott ta tell, he would have."

"I think you are underestimating that young man," Artemus said. "I think it will prove very difficult to change his mind. If we get the chance."

"What?" Buck stared in confusion at the two agents. "Ya said he can't give in."

"I did say that."

"But, ya can't let Loveless have what he wants. Ya gotta stop him."

"I've had the means to stop him ever since I was reunited with Artie."

"Don't understand. Oh." Realization flooded Buck. "But ya woulda had ta kill all of us."

"A choice we still might have to make." Artie said.

"I know Miguelito," West said. "He loves a good show. He'll have me brought up at least."

"The pressing question is, James my boy, once he gets what he wants, how long will he keep you alive?"

The other agent shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

"It does a little."

"No, Artie, it doesn't. Do you have the timers?"

"Of course." Gordon's face was inscrutable.

"Why didn't ya stop Scott before? Why let Johnny be tortured at all?"

"Because Miguelito expected Scott to resist," Artemus said. "He would have been suspicions of anything else. Besides, we hadn't figured out a way of explaining any of this to him and Scott had already decided what he had to do from the first."

"Both of you are loco."

Artemus shrugged. "We have to be a little in this business."

"We can't afford to waste time. Soon they might come . . ." West froze, then pushed at Buck. Hastily getting the message, the other man backed out. He was barely three steps away when the door was shoved open. Roberto stepped in, along with three other henchmen. All were smiling.

"The patrón wants you."

"I was getting bored," West said, sauntering up to the Mexican. "What are we waiting for?"

"All of you."

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Artemus smiled.

Glancing at the three men, Roberto grunted. He motioned once more and the guards raised their guns. Shrugging, Buck stepped forward out of the room. He was not surprised to see more guards outside. But the next person he glimpsed sent a shock of wild joy through him that he had difficulty hiding. There, leaning against a far stone wall in the shadows, was Manolito.

He had no more time to think about it, as a blindfold was tied around his eyes and he was pushed forward. But he was sure West and Artie saw Mano as well. Thoughts about how tired, hurt and just plain alive his friend looked consumed him as he and the others were led upward. After an interminable time he felt the ground change and the air grow warmer. He was outside.

When the blindfold was pulled away, Buck blinked in the bright sunlight. What he saw horrified him. Under a gray canopy, Scott was kneeling, his face wet with tears. Loveless sat in a chair near him, studying the blond. On the same rack that had held Scott, Johnny was now tied. And his body, although not as damaged as his brother’s had been, was well on its way. Crisscrossed with welts, cuts and burns, he was breathing heavily, his eyes locked onto his brother’s.

Buck felt someone shove him hard and he had trouble staying on his feet as he stumbled toward the canopy. Once underneath, he was pushed down. He hardly noticed the other prisoners as they were forced next to him.

“How good of you to join me, West, Gordon.”

“You sent an invitation we were hard-pressed to ignore.”

“I wouldn’t want you to miss all the show. Things are getting interesting. From what I understand, Santos can keep his victim alive for hours longer. Maybe even into tomorrow. Although, by then he will die no matter what dear Scott decides to do.” Loveless chuckled, prodding at the blond.

Ignoring the dwarf completely, Scott’s eyes never left his brother’s face. He was totally focused on Johnny.

Loveless laughed. “Carry on, Santos.”

The Indian nodded. Buck glanced around cautiously, not expecting to see Manolito but hoping nevertheless. Then he glanced at the agents. Gordon was staring at West and Jim was studying Scott.

Buck tore his gaze back to Johnny. Santos grasped a large knife, its blade red-hot in his gloved hand. Holding it no more than an inch from Johnny’s chest, he waited. Slowly the skin underneath began to redden and finally blister. New sweat broke out on Johnny’s face and his mouth tightened. Then, Santos suddenly pushed the blade down. A gurgled scream broke from the bound man’s lips. He began to pant, attempting uselessly to twist his body away from the source of pain.

A small moan sounded near Buck, and his eyes were torn from the one brother to the other. Scott's fists were bunched so tightly his knuckles were white and his face was distorted in horror. Tears streamed in dirty rivulets down his cheeks. But his lips were tightly pressed together.

"Scott, don't let your brother die."

Abruptly, Buck realized West had moved next to the blond.

"I was wrong. I can't let you do this. Please, Scott, don't let Johnny die."

"He must." The voice was only a thread of sound, but there was steel in it nevertheless. "I have to let him go."

"Listen to what I am saying." West allowed a note of desperation to seep into his words.

Peripherally, Buck realized Loveless was looking at West, avidly

"We can find another way. We will find another way. You don't have to sacrifice Johnny."

"So I sacrifice untold innocents instead?" Finally Scott looked at West.

"No we wait and find another way."

"You don't have to do this, Scott. Believe us!" Artie's soft but urgent voice joined in.

"Believe? I am prepared. I understand what I must do. Why are you making an intolerable situation worse?"

"Listen, Scott," West pressed his mouth to the blond's ear and whispered. "Trust me. I swear, one way or another, you will not have to watch Johnny die slowly. Trust me!"

Scott pulled away, his face crumpling. "I was ready. I would have. Why do you offer me hope, when there is none? Now . . . ! God forgive me . . . I can't!" He turned his face toward Loveless. "I'll do it! Call Santos off!"

Deep loathing filled his voice. Buck couldn't help but think it was directed as much against himself as against Loveless.

"Stop what you are doing, Santos. Cut the him down."

Buck twisted toward the other brother. Santos and another man were already slicing the ropes that held Johnny to the rack. The young man was clearly confused. He twisted away from the hands. "No, Scott. What are you doin'? You can't help him. Scott! Don't!" The last cry, ended in gurgle of pain as the last of his bonds were cut and he began to fall. Catching him, Santos carried him toward the opening.

Whirling around, Buck stared at Scott. The blond was watching his brother and the look on his face confirmed Cannon's fears. No matter what had been said to him, Scott hated himself for what he perceived as weakness. Buck looked at Artie and saw the same misery in his face. Whatever the outcome, Buck wondered if the Lancer brothers were not already destroyed.



Once more Artemus found himself in Loveless' parlor, or what he had mentally christened as his parlor, the great stone chamber that he so obviously lived in. The spider inviting the flies to enter, he thought grimly. And the gang was all here. The prisoners stood in a cluster, himself, Jim, Buck. A little to the side, Santos had deposited Johnny on the rug-covered floor. He had said something to Voltaire and the giant had gone to a chest and removed a thick, woolen robe that might have been his. Returning to wounded man, he had wrapped it around him. Clutching at the robe, Johnny had slowly sat up, resting his weight on one arm. Finding his brother, he had not taken his eyes off him.

The last prisoner had been deposited in a chair, also Voltaire's, Artie guessed. His eyes were glazed, his face blank. Feeling another's scrutiny, Artie looked over and met West's gaze. His friend flicked his hand imperceptibly. The signal to wait. It seemed that all they had done was wait while others acted. He thought about the glimpse he'd had of the man in the tunnel. Both West and Cannon had recognized him. Artie guessed he was the ever resourceful, supposedly dead Manolito. Or he prayed he was. They needed a miracle. He and West had persuaded Scott to give in. Now they could only hope they had made the correct choice.

Miguelito giggled, bringing all eyes back to him but the Lancers'. The dwarf practically jumped up and down while he spoke. "Voltaire, bring the valise."

"Wait," Gordon cried out. "At least let them have some water."

Miguelito raised his eyes but nodded. "Voltaire, bring them both water. Then the case."

The giant nodded. Going to a cabinet near the library area, he opened it up and removed a crystal decanter and two crystal glasses from a set of six. He carefully filled both glasses with the contents of the decanter and carried them first to Scott, setting it next to him, and then handed the other to Johnny.

The younger Lancer took the glass automatically, but though Artie could see his need for fluid in his face, he held the crystal away from his mouth with hands that trembled slightly. "Scott. Scott." His voice was dry, raspy, and painful to hear. "Drink it, please."

The blond continued to gaze at nothing, his face devoid of emotion, but he picked up the glass, and drained it all in one gulp. Johnny's mouth twitched, but he finally drank his.

Voltaire took both containers back to the cabinet and then turned to a bureau next to it. Opening it up, he removed the familiar carrying case. West and Buck watched in fascination as it was given to Loveless and he removed the sphere. Loveless sauntered over to Scott and held it out. The blond's eyes shifted, but his face remained unchanged.

A low moan sounded and Scott's head whipped around as he locked gazes with his brother. Johnny was shaking his head. "No, Scott. Don't do it. Not for me. Please."

"We can start again," Loveless said blandly. "Santos will be quite pleased."

"I'm ready." Scott's voice was devoid of emotion. "Give it to me."

Gleefully, Loveless handed the sphere to the blond. Scott gazed at it for several minutes, finally he sighed, deeply. Standing carefully, he stepped away from the chair. Holding the sphere within both hands, he lifted it up to chest level. Then he closed his eyes.

Once more Johnny gurgled out a soft denial, but all eyes were on his brother.

Scott stood, motionless, his brows furrowed in deep concentration. Abruptly sweat broke out on his face. Artie waited with the others, the only one with the exception of Loveless and Scott who had any idea what was about to happen.

The deep blue surface of the large gourd sized sphere began to glow. The white etchings, representing the outlines of continents and islands brightened until they were ribbons of light, and the blue lines showing rivers and lakes shifted into a beautiful iridescent shade that was painful to look at.

All the time Scott remained unmoving, but those that knew him could see the strain of what he was doing in his stance. For the last time Johnny called out softly, "No, Boston. Don't!"

But it was already too late. Suddenly the sphere seemed to expand, growing to twice its size. Scott's hands moved outward with it. Then, a shining black line appeared in the space that corresponded with the part of Arizona they were in. The black ribbon went west, almost unerringly toward where the modern city of Sacramento stood. More lines appeared, streaking out from where Scott's fingers rested until the globe was covered in shiny black ribbons. Artie could see lines under every major city, New York, St Louis, Boston, and Washington DC.

Obviously, Loveless could see the locations also. Clapping his hands together, he almost screamed, "Yes, as I knew! I'll have this wretched world on its knees!"

As if his words were a signal, Scott abruptly lurched forward, losing his grip on the sphere. Loveless jumped over and grabbed the globe, almost colliding with Artie who had dashed forward to catch Scott. By the time the orb reached the dwarf's hands it was normal again. Carefully Artemus sat Scott back down. The blond was breathing heavily; sweat dripping from a body that trembled in Artie's grip.

"Do it again. I must have the locations mapped."

Scott's eyes darted toward Loveless, then toward his brother. Accompanied by an almost silent sigh, they suddenly rolled up and he collapsed.

"Scott!"

Sparing no time to look at Johnny, Artemus silently examined the blond. He turned to his nemesis, his face tight with anger. "I'm afraid Scott will not be activating the sphere for a while yet."

"Take him back to the room, see to him and the brother. I want Scott fit enough to use my sphere this afternoon."

"He might be unable to keep to your timetable, Loveless."

"Well," the dwarf smiled, "then he would miss the spectacle I have planned. We wouldn't want that, would we?"

"Spectacle?"

"Why yes, staring my good friend James West." Miguelito turned to the other agent, who returned his gaze impassively. "Now that I have in my grasp the fulfillment of one dream, I must make another a reality."

"No." Artie's soft denial was barely audible.

Loveless giggled and clapped his hands. "Oh, yes, we shall have so much fun later. I must prepare. We can use the chain from the lift. The angle is off, but that can be overcome. So much to do. Santos, Roberto, take them to their quarters."

"All of them?"

"Yes," Miguelito nodded to Roberto. "All of them. Let them plan their useless plans and understand their true inability to win. And don't forget the other, the interloper found earlier."

Buck jerked at the mention of another prisoner.

"Put them all together. Make sure they are fed. Make them feel at home. And in three hours precisely, bring them all back here for our little surprise."

"We do not know how the one got in."

"Well, find out. Have Santos question him first. Now, take everyone out. I must prepare for this afternoon. Voltaire, we have work to do. Go, Santos, Roberto, go!"

The two hirelings nodded. They, and the other guards, pointed their guns at the prisoners. Artemus reached down to take Scott, but Buck was there first. With a soft grunt, he picked up the unconscious man. Artemus followed, assisting him. West knelt next to Johnny. The younger man started to pull away but grudgingly allowed the other to help him. Slowly they filed out under the watchful gaze of the guards.



'Have Santos question him.' The phrase ran over and over again in Buck's mind. Who was he talking about?

Slowly, Buck paced the stone bedroom, the space seemingly shrinking each time he circled it. Both Lancers had been put on the bed. Artemus, with help from West, had bandaged the worst of Johnny's wounds and changed the dressings on Scott. Predictably from what Buck knew of the younger Lancer, he had insisted Scott be treated first. Artie had ignored him. Throughout the whole procedure, the blond had remained unconscious.

As soon as Johnny had been treated, Artemus had walked over to the wall near the toilet and picked up one of the three traveling bags, bringing it back to the bed. Johnny looked down at his bandaged-covered body and shrugged. Quickly he had pulled out the first shirt and pants he touched and donned them. Then he had turned back to his brother, effectively shutting out everybody else. Now both agents were standing near the door, talking softly.

And Cannon paced.

As he shuffled past the bed, Buck glanced at its inhabitants. Johnny was leaning up on one arm, the other hand resting on Scott's shoulder. There was a hardness in his face and a touch of sadness that sent Buck's gut twisting. But even as the older man watched, the face grew softer, welcoming. Buck was not surprised when Scott began to turn his head from side to side, mumbling softly.

Johnny grinned and it was as if someone had lit one of the globes. Keeping his voice as light as his face, he said. "Hey, Boston. Gonna sleep all day?"

At the soft drawl, the blond's eyes flew open. He took in the chamber and all its inhabitants in one sweep, then he looked at his brother. Instantly he drew back as if the younger man's touch burned him.

"Johnny, no! Oh, God forgive me."

"Scott?"

Whatever else the brother meant to say was interrupted by several guards. They brought two covered platters and a bottle of wine. Without a word they left. The tantalizing smells emanating from the trays reminded Buck how long it had been since he had eaten.

Artie was the first to walk to the tray and pick up the lid. Two large bowls along with some cornmeal cakes lay on the surface. He picked up the other and looked in. "Tamales for those who are healthier. These are for you," he pointedly gazed at the brothers. "Our dear Loveless is being the good host again. And he's right about one thing, both of you must eat."

"Scott?" Johnny's voice was soft, sad, but a thread of steel ran through it. "Look at me Scott. I'll eat if you do."

"Why should I?"

“Why?” Johnny’s mouth twitched. “Because a wise man once told me, I should never give up hope. He said you would agree.”

“He was wrong.”

“Maybe. Maybe there ain’t any real hope. But I’m not gonna let you bury yourself until the devil spits in your eye. An’ since ya already spat in his eye, you’re ahead of the game.”

“What?” A smile twisted Scott’s face. “Johnny, you’re not making any sense.”

“Cause I’m hungry. Come on, Scott, drink the soup with me. Smells real good. Someone in the godforsaken place knows how to cook. Artie? Can you bring it over?” he glanced over the agent.

“Of course. Here.” Artemus carefully placed the tray on the mattress. “Eat it while it’s still warm.”

“Sure.” Johnny picked up the large bowl with one hand, but quickly added the other when it began to shake. Suddenly, two more appendages appeared as Scott wrapped his hands around his brother’s. When Johnny was done, he put the bowl down and immediately pushed the other toward Scott. He waited until his brother began to drink the soup.

As if that was a signal Artemus, West and Buck started picking at the food although, Buck, for one, had no interest in eating. He kept on hearing Loveless’ comment.

‘Have Santos question him’. *Dang, Mano, is he talkin’ about you?*

Despite his troubled stomach, Buck was on his second tamale when he heard the door move. He reached the entry before it was completely open. Two guards held a limp body between them. With twin grins, they threw the man toward Buck. Catching him instinctively, recognition flooded Cannon a moment later.

“Mano! Doggone it. Not again!” He cradled the bloody, half nude form. Manolito’s torso was covered with welts and a few burns. “Ah, hell!”

“Sometimes I feel I have missed my calling.” Artie said, kneeling next to Buck. With a gentle touch, he turned the wounded man over. “It seems I’ve done nothing this trip but patch people up.”

“You can help Mano, right?”

Artemus glanced up from his examination and frowned. Despite looking like a feather would knock him over, Johnny had left the bed and was now hovering above him. In both hands he carefully clutched a mug.

“Well, our friend Santos was not as thorough with this gentleman as he was with you and your brother. He is bloody, but not bowed, I think.”

As if he was responding to the comment, Manolito lifted his head with a jerk. “Madre e Dios!” A moment later he groaned at the too abrupt movement.

"Here," Johnny bent down carefully and held out the cup. "Thought you might want some of this. Tastes strange, but it's water."

"Gracias." Mano drank the contents gratefully before handing the mug back. Glancing around, his mouth twisted into a grin, although his words held no strength. "Hola, Buck. Hola . . . señor West. Johnny. Someone must . . . teach . . . that man . . . a lesson . . . I am thinking." The words were quiet, pain-filled, but clear.

"That would be me!"

"No, little brother." With slow steps, Scott came to stand next to Johnny. "He's mine."

"Not if I get there first."

"Not this time."

"We'll see."

Scott frowned. "I guess we will." He looked at the newest arrival. "Shouldn't we get this man to the bed?"

"You must be . . . Scott." Raising his head, Manolito grinned and held out his hand. "I am Manolito Montoya, Mano . . . to those . . . I . . . face death with."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around here these past few days." Scott took the hand. "Pleased to finally meet you, I think."

"And you . . . must be . . . the partner . . . Señor Artemus Gordon."

"That I am. But call me Artie"

"What about the bed?"

"You need it . . . more than me," Mano said. "You and Johnny."

"I'm fine."

"I'm fine." Both brothers spoke at the same time then glared at each other.

"I hope we don't look like that," Artemus said softly, glancing at West who had joined the small huddle. Instead of answering, he looked beyond his friend. Artie nodded, before speaking again. "Much less mess if I clean you up near the water. You can even sit on the commode."

"The what?"

"Something ya won't believe. Come on Mano." With surprising gentleness, Buck began to pull his friend up.

Once Manolito was settled on the closed porcelain lid, he frowned. "I have heard of such things. Our Little Giant is eccentric. lieel!" He hissed as Artemus gently touched his shoulder.

"Stay still." Shifting slightly, Artemus twisted the spigot full on and started to leave.

"I have it." West blocked his way, clutching one of the dinner trays on which he had stacked a collection of bandages, a bottle of carbolic and the wine with a glass. He nodded at Buck who filled the cup halfway.

"Here, Mano. Drink this."

Nodding, the injured man took the wine and drank almost the whole amount. "That is good, ah!" His words ended in another hiss, as Artemus began to clean the wounds.

West abruptly pulled the chain, the noise momentarily startling the other men. It was Buck who recovered first. "Mano, how did ya get away and how'd ya get caught again?"

"A story for another day," he grimaced. Visibly gathering his strength, he continued. "I gather . . . we are being listened to somehow. Is it safe to speak?"

"We hope so."

"Ah, that is not very encouraging, Señor West." He chewed his lip a moment before shrugging. "I came back with Joe, Pedro . . . and," his voice softened even more, "a son of our good friend, chief Morales."

"Who? How'd ya manage that?"

"No time, Buck. He is wearing a tan shirt and a belt made of several colors of rope. His name is Naiche. Please," Mano looked at West. "Try not to kill him if you see him."

The agent snorted then raised his hand. Once more he flushed the commode.

"Wait, got a better idea." Jumping up, Buck hurried over to the desk where one of the china basins sat and carried it back to the sink. West nodded in approval as the older man put in under the spigot. Quickly, the sound of water on porcelain filled that part of the chamber.

Mano breathed deeply, his eyes cloudy with pain. But his voice, when he spoke, was clear and steady. "I pray they remain free. Listen, Naiche said there were other ways in. So, after much groaning, I told Santos I found such an entrance and that I managed to sneak inside. That I stole the red braid I had from the dead body of one of my pursuers. In turn, Santos spoke of the Little Giant. How he is preparing a special end for señor West. Something to do with the sun and mirrors. Before that, in the tunnels, we also overheard a worker speak of a shipment of mirrors from Mexico."

"Mirrors? Good God! Jim, I think I know what he's planning."

"Just stop him from using that sphere, Artie." West spoke calmly.

“Mirrors and the sun,” Johnny said. “You talked about bringing the sun underground in the stagecoach. Can he do that?”

“My God!” Artemus met Scott’s horrified stare, then looked at Johnny. “It’s possible. Isn’t it Scott?”

The blond nodded, his expression bleak.

“We got Joe and Pedro,” Buck interposed. Confused at what the others were talking about. “And this Naiche.”

“Even if they’re able to help, we can’t count on it.” West said quietly, his voice reminding all the men to whisper.

“They will stay close to us,” Manolito commented, “if they are able to leave the mines.”

“Loveless is going to be busy with me. That should give you opportunity”

“We go back to our original plan,” Artemus said. “Blow up the complex as soon as we can.”

A short silence followed. Buck’s throat tightened. Everyone in the room understood the implications of Artie’s words. *‘God! I wanna feel the desert night one more time!’* He thought.

“If we set off an explosion in this part of this complex,” Artemus said without emotion, “the fire will likely ignite the methane gas without any help from us. Although it would be good to know everything was destroyed.”

“So how do we do that?” Buck asked.

“It seems to me we need a diversion. Other than Mr. West.” All eyes turned to the blond. “And I think I can provide one.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

Scott gazed at his brother a moment, before turning to Artemus. “Loveless keeps the artifact in the same place. I should be able to retrieve it.”

“You won’t have to. Our Miguelito has commanded that you activate it again while he is . . . fulfilling his other . . . dream.”

Scott smiled slowly, a cold, hard smile that sent a shiver through Buck. Madrid wasn’t the only Lancer who could kill, he thought.

“Then I’ll give him a command performance he won’t forget.”

“What are you planning, Scott?”

“Better you don’t know.” He studied his brother again. “Just be ready to act. How are you . . .”

Scott grimaced. "Really?"

"Well enough to do anything I have to. Just don't go doing anything' foolish, Boston."

"I assure you, Johnny, I'm acting completely rationally."

"Are you?" At Artemus' words Scott faced the agent again. "You still have a mild fever, some of your wounds are infected and you can barely stand. You don't have enough strength for what you're planning!"

"How would . . . you know?!!"

"I have a pretty good idea what you're going to try, and . . ."

"And what?" Johnny's gaze raked both men. "What?"

"Good God!" Ignoring his brother, Scott stared at Artemus. "You knew all about the artifact. You lied from the beginning!"

Artemus shrugged. "No. I guessed correctly. I did my job."

"You and West are two of a kind, cold-blooded bastards!"

"I am what I am," Artie said quietly, unconsciously quoting his partner. He looked at West and a ghost of a smile touched his face. Turning back to the blond he said, "But I think you're going to need me, nevertheless."

For a long moment, both men glared at each other, then Scott shrugged. "We'll see."

"See what? Scott. See what?"

"Let it rest, Johnny!"

For a moment a crack appeared in the younger brother's composure. He touched the blond's shoulder. "Scott?" As if he read something in the blue eyes, his face abruptly became as detached as Scott's. "Sure."

"We've already talked too much," West interrupted. "You'll get the job done, right, Artie?"

"One way or another," the older agent agreed, turning away quickly.

But not before Buck had a glimpse of his eyes. Cannon shivered again. *'Yeah, you'll do what ya half ta, won't ya. But it's killin you inside. Like its killing Scott.'* What ever the blond was planning, from Johnny's reaction, it must have changed him. *'Damn ya Loveless! Damn ya ta hell!'* His mental tirade was interrupted when he realized West had asked a question.

At the other's blank look, Jim shook his head and repeated his question. "Is everything else still in place?" He pointed at Cannon's wrist and Manolito's waist.

"Sí. I have it all."

Buck nodded sheepishly as he removed the dirty cloth from around his wrist. Fingering the leather strap and gun he'd had all this time, he sighed. "I near died from the heat always keeping ma shirt on. I'd like ta be able ta use this"

"We can only hope," West replied with a slight grin. He studied all the prisoners. We have about another hour, I'd say. Enough time for Artie to finish with Manolito, and for us . . ."

"To make our peace," Buck interrupted.

"If that's what you want."

"Come on, Scott. If ya ain't gonna talk to me at least pretend to rest. You need to get into that bed."

The blond's hollow gaze touched his brother's earnest one and a ghost of a smile appeared on his face. "Only if you join me."

"I'm never gonna let you out of my sight, ever again, Boston. Let's go." Draping his arm over his brother, Johnny shuffled back toward the bed.

"We need ta get these irons off." Buck whispered.

Johnny paused, turning his head so he could look back at Cannon. "Voltaire has the keys. Felt them in his pocket when he picked me up."

"Makes sense," West agreed. "That will be your job, Buck, if you're able."

"Right." Cannon smiled grimly. He knew full well West believed they would die, and perhaps they would. He glanced again at Mano, not surprised when the man grinned back. Buck felt his mouth twitch. *Naw. I'm not given up 'til I spit in the devil's eyes. One way or another, we're gonna stop ya, Loveless. We're gonna stop ya.*



When the guards finally came for the prisoners, it was almost a relief. Whatever was going to happen couldn't happen soon enough for them all. Artemus had offered Manolito one of his shirts, which the other had gratefully accepted after chuckling, "It is always better to face the devil looking your best."

When Mano had left the bath area for the chair, the Lancers had risen as one. Without comment they had washed and combed their hair. Once they were done, West and Artie had taken their places. Finally, even Buck had washed. Somehow, it seemed the right thing to do. Then they had

consumed what food was left. No one pretended they could rest. Now they followed the guards in pairs, the two Lancers, Buck and Manolito and lastly, Jim with Artemus.

Shuffling beside his brother, Scott felt numb. His constant discomfort, the slight flush he knew was a fever, his chronic weakness all seemed far away, as if they belonged to some stranger. No, he amended dispassionately. He felt dead. Dead and already buried, ever since he's stopped Santos from killing Johnny, ever since he'd used the artifact. He'd persuaded himself he could do it, could endure the pain of watching his brother die. But deep inside he wondered. Had he used West's appeal as a convenient excuse? Would he have succumbed to his despondency and allowed his sentiment rule his mind without the prompting? *'Oh God, Johnny. I'm not sure. I'm tired, Johnny, so tired.'*

As if he'd spoken his thoughts aloud, Johnny whispered into his ears. "Remember. You spat in the devil's eye once. I know you can do it again."

The remark brought a momentary grin to Scott's face. "I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"No way you can, Boston. No way on earth you can."

Breathing deeply, Scott took in his brother's words, using them as an anchor. Calling on all his reserves, he nodded. "Thanks." He felt someone shove at his back, at the same time he felt Johnny jerk forward.

"Dios!"

The sharply returning pain and his brother's soft cry cleared his brain instantly. Scanning the room, he realized they had reached Loveless' lair. Along with the prisoners, Scott counted four guards next to the lift with Santos, Roberto and Voltaire standing near the dwarf. Miguelito was adjusting a concave mirror almost as large as he was. The glass sat on a base that pivoted, and after one final push, he turned to the new arrivals.

With a start, the blond realized he'd seen other specially prepared mirrors in the corridor above and in the elevator shaft. Glancing back, he checked the angle of the glass. It was then that he saw the chains of the lift had been altered with two sets of manacles added. Two?

"Oh, yes, my dear Scott, you do notice everything, don't you?" Miguelito grinned as he almost skipped toward the group.

"They won't be necessary."

"I felt it was better to be prepared. So, Mr. West. Have you figured out what's about to happen to you? Has Gordon explained it to you?"

"I like to be surprised."

Clapping his hands, Miguelito nodded. "Yes, you do, you do! Santos, Roberto, Voltaire, you know what to do. Remember, be gentle."

Without any preamble, the henchmen grabbed West, carefully removing his shirt without tearing it or the buttons. Artie lurched forward, his face white. His eyes met Jim's and he froze. West allowed himself to be manhandled over to the lift. Not that he had any choice, Scott thought dispassionately. Fighting that many men would have been a useless exercise.

Once at the lift, they clamped the manacles around his wrists. Allowing a slight grin to crease his face, Santos went to the controls and moved the lever slightly. Slowly, West's arms were lifted, and then his body, until he finally hung, several feet above them. The Indian stopped the mechanism. Scott winced inside. The thought of how the sharp metal must be digging into Jim's wrists brought back echoes of memories he'd rather remain buried.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. West?" Miguelito purred. When the agent failed to respond, he stomped his foot. "You'll like what happens next. Moving over to the speaking tube, he picked it and whistled. After a moment a mumbled voice could be heard. Loveless responded. "Now, move the mirrors as I instructed."

A minute passed, and then a bright light came shooting down the lift shaft to be reflected onto the large mirror in a tight, thin beam. The light splashed against the wall, near West's face. Clapping his hands, Loveless went to the glass and began to shift it, until the beam rested on Jim's chest. Almost immediately, West's body tensed, but he made no other move. Artie hissed, mumbling inarticulately, but his gaze never left his friend.

"I wonder how long before the blood boils in the heart," Loveless said conversationally. "I've always wondered. Well," he turned to Scott abruptly, "it's your turn. Voltaire, the sphere!" At the mention of his name, Scott tensed. All of his carefully detached emotions had shattered when the beam of light had touched West. Bile rose in his throat and he suddenly wished he'd hadn't eaten anything. He felt something get pushed into his hands and he looked down. The blue ball seemed to wink at him.

Abruptly he was enveloped in a memory.

The warehouse was deserted. Doctor Sibley had chosen it very carefully. He wanted no prying eyes. Scott smiled at his professor. He could hardly wait to activate the strange artifact. He had played with it before and knew what it could do. But this was the first time he would be able to test how far he could control it.

Taking it up carefully, he held it, cupped slightly, with both hands as Sibley had always instructed. Breathing deeply, he cleared his mind of thoughts about assignments, friends, his Grandfather, women. Nothing, a void. Into that emptiness, he let the image of the sphere enter. Centering on it, he concentrated on what he knew it could do. He imagined it increasing in size, the lines representing continents, islands and rivers growing alive. He imagined lines, and an ebony network of underground tunnels appeared. Then his mind shifted and mountains formed, like a strange three dimensional simulacra on the globe.

He had no need to open his eyes to know what he willed had become reality. He could feel his energy feeding into the globe. Taking another deep breath, he continued. Now he willed to show their tiny planet, next it would display the glorious universe they were part of. He smiled, willing the ancient artifact to greater efforts. Stars, he was lost in the great beauty.

“Scott, stop Scott! You’re not strong enough. Scott, stop!”

With a wrench that hurt physically, the student was abruptly returned to the present. He blinked at his teacher, wondering why the man’s body wavered so much. He hardly heard Sibley’s words. “Very good. Very good. Only one other student has ever gone that far. Besides me of course. Very good.”

A sharp pain flared, the sound of the whip registering a moment after the discomfort. Scott’s eyes flew open at the same time he heard his brother call his name. Then the whip sounded again, this time connecting with a different target. Turning, Scott saw the new bloody strip on Johnny’s shoulder, knowing he had one like it.

He shot a look of contempt and loathing at Santos before twisting to face Miguelito. “I told you not to hurt him!”

“What kind of treatment he receives is entirely up to you. Remember, I can put your brother with Mr. West, and don’t think I won’t. How are we doing, Mr. West? Oh, I don’t think he’s enjoying his experience. What do you think?”

Scott’s gaze shifted. The skin of Jim’s chest, illuminated by the spot of light, had turned red. Now that he noticed, Lancer could smell something sweet. The agent’s eyes were shut, sweat dripped from his face and chest but no sound issued from his lips. Dear God! No, Johnny would never experience that, Scott vowed.

“Hmm,” Loveless mused. “It’s not centered right. It should be higher.” He played with the mirror, moving the light until it hit West’s forehead. “I wonder how long it will take to boil a brain? Hm, no, I don’t want to blind Mr. West. We’ll keep it lower.” Grinning, he pivoted the mirror again until a section of skin just above the first area was lit.

Scott shuddered. He felt Artemus’ gaze. A tortured plea filled the older man’s eyes, as loud as any shout. Lancer nodded. It was time to end this.

“Show me what I want to see!”

“I’ll do it. But you have the wrong idea of this artifact’s purpose. It has other properties you haven’t imagined.”

“Just do it!”

“All right.” *‘Beware of what you ask for, little man.’* He thought grimly. Taking a firm grip on the artifact, Scott closed his eyes. Opening his mind, he let the sphere fill his being. He knew when the lines showing the tunnels appeared again. He heard Loveless order Roberto to start mapping them. He grinned, knowing only Artemus would understand.

Calling upon all his reserves of strength, he commanded the artifact to perform. Faintly, he heard Loveless cry out a denial, then exclaim in surprise. “It’s projecting the bodies in the sky.”

Behind his closed eyes, Scott clearly saw what the others viewed. From a representation of the earth, the sphere unexpectedly reversed, shooting out pictures that floated around the now almost white globe. First it displayed an incandescent ball, bright enough to hurt the eyes of all who watched. Then, as if the watchers were moving away from the yellow ball, it began to dim and a small, gray, hot orb came into view. On its strange surface could be seen craters and mountains. In a dizzying swoop, another orb came into view, yellow, with gray striations that shifted. For a moment they dipped and the watchers saw rolling lava fields, then the view moved away, into space, before a green globe with vivid blue patches and white swirling clouds came into view.

“That must be the earth.” Loveless whispered in awe. “Our home.”

For a tantalizing second more, the blue orb was visible, then it grew tiny and immediately another planet appeared. Reddish, yellow, with darker shaded areas, the perspective swooped down, as though dropping, before running above craters, ridges and huge canyons. Ice caps became visible, just before the view jumped up, into space once more, and a huge ball, with four smaller balls circling it came into view. Faint but bright blue rings circled it. Clouds swirled turbulently below them, in shades of blue, browns and reds.

Then that globe faded away and another appeared with rings around the equator. In shades of yellow, tan, brown and gray, the colors seemed to move and shift. The view plummeted down and then up, through the rings of particles and outward. Suddenly a cold, blue orb appeared, followed quickly by a small, gray ball.

Unexpectedly, the room was plunged into darkness, as the planets disappeared. Just as quickly, images reappeared, moving too swiftly to comprehend. Swirling around the white orb in the man's hands were misty trails in brilliant colors, a swirling mass of star stuff.

Scott felt his concentration waver. He was empty, consumed. The artifact had drained him, and still it wanted more. He could do it. He must! Suddenly he felt another's presence. Hands around his. Did he still have hands, a body? Strength poured into him, a burst of energy immediately swallowed by the artifact. It began to glow, brighter and brighter, blinding all who looked upon it. For the first time he felt heat from it. As the sphere's light intensified, it grew correspondingly hotter, burning his hands. He felt the other presence slip something between himself and the heat. He could smell burning flesh, but he felt nothing. They felt nothing. They were unimportant, a vessel. Nothing existed but that which consumed them. They were the artifact.

When the globe in Scott's hands had begun to change, Johnny was as transfixed at everyone else in the room. He marveled at the display, wondering what it meant. Scott had talked about the stars, shown him planets, Venus, Mars. By the time Loveless whispered, he understood what he must be seeing even as his mind screamed at the impossibility. But still he was fascinated, enthralled.

When swirling, dizzying bits of colors and shapes formed, a kernel of fear began to grow in Johnny's mind. He tore his eyes from the spectacle and looked at the man holding the sphere. What he saw shocked him. Scott was glassy-eyed, pale, nearly, the brother could have sworn, translucent. When he saw Artemus jump forward and cover the blond's hands, they both appeared to waver then Artie went from pink to white in almost an instant. Neither man moved, except when Artie's hands suddenly slipped into the blond's.

“Dios!” As if his oath had been a signal, Johnny’s mind cleared. He must act. He must not waste Scott’s sacrifice! Shifting slightly, he caught the eyes of Manolito and Buck. Mano nodded, pivoting slightly while working at his belt. Buck pointed his arm at Voltaire and flicked his wrist.

Without waiting, Johnny dove toward one of the guards near the lift. Out of his peripheral vision he saw the giant freeze, then he slowly began to collapse. Painfully, Johnny jumped up from the man he had knocked out and heard the derringer discharge a second time. Another shot rang out, and the man Mano was choking suddenly stiffened. Grabbing the gun off the man he had hit, Johnny pointed it at Loveless and shouted. “Call your men ta heel, Loveless, or I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

Johnny smiled. “Try me!” He pointed toward the dwarf’s gut. “I’m gonna enjoy seeing you die, slowly.”

Loveless blanched and hastily called out. “Stand down, men.” He looked over at Voltaire, and his face grew pleading. “Let me see to my friend.”

Johnny’s smile grew colder but he nodded. “Buck, Mano, get Jim.”

Neither man needed any other urging. Hurrying over to the mirror, Buck batted it away, before moving the lever to lower the chains. Grabbing West’s shirt from where it had been tossed on the ground, he hurried over to Jim and held the half-conscious agent.

Manolito stepped up to the fallen Voltaire. “Back,” he ordered. Miguelito glared at him, but obediently moved away.

“Look in his right, waistcoat pocket,” Johnny directed without taking his eyes off his prisoners. After searching a moment, Manolito lifted the keys triumphantly. He joined an anxious Buck. No one paid any attention to Miguelito as he scuttled back to the fallen giant. Manolito tested several keys before finding one that turned the locks. Abruptly, the manacles opened and West crumbled into Cannon’s arms. Next they worked on his leg irons.

“Got it,” Buck hissed. “Let me get yours, Mano.”

After several moments, Johnny felt a presence at his side. “I will take the gun,” Manolito whispered. “You must find which key unlocks your irons.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Carefully, they exchanged items. Kneeling, Johnny tried one key and then another. Swearing softly, he found the right one. Just as the hated leg-irons opened, he heard a soft groan. Stuffing the keys in his pocket, he looked over.

West was twisting in Buck’s arms. The older man had draped Jim’s shirt over his shoulders. The agent’s body was damp with sweat and he looked terrible. The portions of his body where the light had burned were blistered and ugly. He moaned again, and then with a suddenness that wasn’t surprising, jerked up and opened his eyes. Johnny saw the awareness return to Jim’s face as he took

in the dead and fallen guards, his methodical mind assessing their situation quickly. Briefly, his gaze rested on Loveless and Voltaire as he began to stand. Then West's gaze was drawn beyond Johnny to the unaccounted members of their party.

"My God! Artie!" At the sharp exclamation, Johnny spun around to face the direction the agent was staring at.

"Sonafabitch! What color there was in Johnny's face drained away. He stared transfixed in horror. In the few minutes since he'd last looked at Scott and Artemus, everything had changed. The men were little more than dark outlines within glittering, growing whiteness that hovered around them like some impossible giant globe. He could only see their faces with any clarity. Whirling, writhing star stuff continued to swirl around them, but the men in the center were motionless, their faces frozen in rictus.

"Scott! Don't you dare!" Screaming his defiance, Johnny dove into the light. He felt resistance, like he was moving through water, then he had his hands on his brother. Up close both his face and Artie's were white, dead, as cold as the hands Johnny pulled at. Cursing in two languages, he pried at the fingers. "This thing ain't gonna kill you!" He hissed. Faintly, he thought he heard shouting. He ignored it.

Gripping the two sets of hands, he pulled, elated when the globe shifted. Straining, Johnny felt scabbed over wounds, open, and warm liquid run down his back. Ignoring everything but his need, he worked harder.

Something brushed against his mind, a cold, ominous and demanding presence. Within it was another he craved. Ignoring all the warnings his rational mind screamed, Johnny allowed himself to be enveloped. Abruptly, with an even brighter flash, the hands came apart, and Johnny's body was enveloped by blinding pain. Even as darkness claimed him, somewhere, glass shattered.

When he opened his eyes, Jim was aware of the pain in his body, something easily ignored, and a profound relief that he could see. He knew if Loveless had kept the beam on his forehead, he would have been blinded. As it was, his eyes had to adjust to the relative darkness after facing the light

However, any consideration of himself faded, when he realized their precarious position.

Manolito held a gun on Roberto, Santos and one other guard. But, although Mano stood rock still West recognized by his pallor and the sheen of sweat on his face, how much pain he was in. And Johnny, Johnny still looked like he'd fall over in a mild breeze. West sat up carefully, accepting Buck's help grudgingly. Fleeting, he wondered if Voltaire was alive or merely injured before his gaze was drawn to the light at the other end of the chamber. Even as he watched, the brightness began to rival, and then surpass, the illumination from the mirrors. Squinting, he just could see two figures within the whirlpool of color.

"My God! Artie!"

As if his exclamation were a trigger, Johnny turned and dove toward the impossible glow. West shouted, but the sound was swallowed in a burst of sound that hurt his ears. He could see the

younger Lancer inside the strange ball-like glow, saw his body turn white as he touched Scott and Artie's hands. The only color besides the swirling hues was the red that slowly stained his coral shirt.

What happened next he was never sure of, but suddenly a loud roar filled the room corresponding with a brilliant flash, and abruptly, the light was gone and the sphere lay shattered on the ground-- along with three bodies. One of those bodies was Artie!

"Mano!" Buck called out.

West's half-formed intentions and speculations vanished as Santos took the opportunity to lunge at Manolito. Montoya and the Indian went crashing to the ground.

West jumped upward, tackling the remaining guard just as he heard the lift rising and the sound of angry voices. Then the lift started down with a load of men and the chamber dissolved into general chaos.

Swinging his arm, West took out his opponent and looked for another. There were enough to go around. He saw Manolito and Buck fighting, and then saw Cannon interrupt a swing in full motion and then push his adversary away. "Joel! Am I glad ta see ya. Where's Pedro?"

The dark-haired ranch-hand pointed at another man fighting one of the guards. Then West was too involved with his own battle to notice what his allies were doing. He threw punch after punch, collecting a few in return. His body ached from the punishment but focused as he was on winning, he barely noticed. This was the part of every assignment he relished, where he could take out his frustrations, anxieties and fears on the bodies of those who were trying to kill him.

Then, suddenly, it was over. Only allies remained standing, or nearly standing. But with a clarity of mind that had saved his life many times, West realized four major characters were missing.

"Where are Loveless and Voltaire?"

"And our friends, Santos and Roberto?" Manolito was leaning heavily against a bureau.

"Don't know?" Buck glanced around blearily.

"You mean the little man?"

All eyes turned to Pedro and he shrugged. "I saw the giant rise, he picked up the dwarf and they headed up to the bed. Some others followed, I think? I was busy you see."

"But ah shot him?"

Even as Buck was speaking West vaulted up the short stairs and darted to the back wall. Shoving aside a tapestry, he looked down and swore. "It's a tunnel. Just large enough for Voltaire." Twirling angrily, he returned to the others. As he jumped down, he glanced around.

“Is this everyone or should I expect more allies to show up?”

“If ya mean Naiche, he disappeared.” Joe said. “Before we got here.”

“But ah shot him.” Buck was staring at the derringer.

“I’m sure you did. But my derringer is a low caliber weapon,” Jim said, sighing. “I thought I shot him once myself. He’s hard to kill. It’s even more important now that we blow this place up.”

“What about all the men, Loveless has workin’ for him?” Buck asked plaintively. “They’re innocent.”

“Do you really think anyone who works for Loveless in this place is innocent?” West responded.

“He’s right,” Buck.” Pedro said softly, Joe nodding his agreement. “Todo mal hombres.”

“We fixed the mines.” Joe said softly. “Any spark and they’ll blow.”

“I think we can provide that. Do you know how many horses are in the holding pens near the entrance?”

“Never was up there.”

While Joe was talking West reluctantly walked over to the three motionless bodies and knelt down. With equal reluctance, the others joined them. The faces of all three were frozen with the same expression of pain and effort. Their eyes were wide open, as if staring into the unknown. Buck shuddered. “They’re dead, ain’t they?”

Slowly, West touched Artie’s chest. “He’s breathing!” The words were between a hiss and a cry.

Falling to his knees, Manolito examined Scott then Johnny. “Sí, alive.”

Rubbing at his chest absently, West sighed. All three men were deeply unconscious although they appeared to have sustained no damage unrelated to earlier wounds. Somehow they had to get three casualties out while setting off explosives, and do it quickly. There was no telling what Loveless was planning.

West leaned over, gently trying to close Artie’s eyes. They would not move. Quickly, he pulled off his shirt and tore a strip from it and donned it again, not bothering to button it. Understanding his intent, Pedro pulled off his shirt and tore two strips from it. Gently, Jim tied the material over Artie’s eyes. Pedro and Manolito used the other bandages over the brother’s eyes.

“We’ll get these two.” Joe knelt by Scott and Artemus. Pedro nodded, reaching for Artie.

Fishing in his pocket, Buck pulled out two ovals, “Do ya need these?”

“I’ll put them to good use.”

“That’s all I wanna know.” Buck bent down to lift Johnny.

“Wait!” Jim motioned to Pedro. Carefully, Jim removed Artie’s cufflinks before motioning for the ranch-hand to continue. Straightening, he looked at Manolito. “Help me.”

“Sí,” Montoya grinned.

Returning the smile West snapped both cufflinks apart and held out his hand.

Nodding his understanding, Mano fished in his pocket for his pieces. “Like Buck, I was hoping to use these.”

“You’ll get your chance.” Pausing, he waited until Buck, Pedro and Joe reached the lift before turning back to Manolito. “Do you see these grooves? At the other’s nod, he continued. “The two pieces fit together that way. When the small dots you see here are side by side, the fuses are primed. Don’t let them near each other until we’re ready to get out.” He glanced over at the lift. Everyone was in place but Buck, who was waiting at the controls. “Take the others up, don’t wait for us. Just hope no one is waiting for you.”

Buck snorted, but obediently pulled the lift lever and jumped on the platform.

By unspoken accord, Manolito and Jim waited until the lift had risen out of sight and the mechanism had stopped making noise before turning to each other. “Put one by Miguelito’s escape route. I’ll put the other at the other end of the room.” The Mexican nodded, and moved toward the stairs. As West bent to place his explosive and the timer, his shoes crunched on shards of glass. Idly, he wondered why none of the men exposed to the globe appeared to have been cut by the glass then a profound sense of sadness enveloped him. The sphere had been an object of wonder, beauty and knowledge. But now it was gone, lost to the world, because of one mad little man.

The sound of the lift returning galvanized West. The last thing he had time to do was concern himself with what no longer existed. He turned to Manolito, finding the other waiting.

“How long will we have?” Mano asked calmly.

“Artie has the timer set for five minutes.”

“Plenty of time, mi amigo.”

“Are you ready?”

“Always.”

“Go!” As he pushed the cufflinks together, he jumped up and dashed for the lift. He saw Manolito pull the lever as he passed and dived for the platform. Jim reached it as it was rising and leapt upward, vaulting onto the lift. He felt Manolito steady him. As the mechanism rose into the guard room both tensed, but found the room deserted. Even before they were level with the floor the two

men dashed toward the outer passageways. Just before they left the guardroom, West twisted around and threw a detonator behind him.

“Do you know the way out, Jim?”

In answer, Jim took the lead, dashing down a corridor ending in a tunnel that led upward with a ladder. He looked up and grimaced. He could see that Buck was supporting Artie’s lower body while someone else apparently pulled him up. They must have found rope. He chewed his lip, counting seconds. Very soon they would find out how big an explosion, they had made.

“Move faster, mi amigo.” Manolito urged.

No one bothered answering him. Finally the obstruction was gone and Jim motioned for Manolito to go up. The other did not hesitate, but climbed with a speed that denied his many injuries. Jim followed quickly. When he reached the top, Jim saw Manolito disappearing down another sloping tunnel and ran after him.

Happily, this passage led them up to a large chamber containing a corralled area with some fifteen horses. Four of them West recognized as the ones they had rode out on from Tucson. Light came from a short, wide tunnel, opposite the passageway leading down. To one side was a neatly stacked pile of saddles, in another corner were two buckboards and a carriage.

The three unconscious men had been dragged to the now open pen gate. Buck had knelt and was fishing through one of Johnny’s pockets. As West watched, he pulled out the keys and immediately began working on unlocking Scott and Artie’s leg irons.

Joe was adjusting the straps on one of the High Chaparral horses and Pedro was working on another. One was already saddled. Quickly, Manolito grabbed a saddle and threw it over the back of an animal. Counting still under his breath, Jim reached for one as well. But when Joe reached for his third, Jim stopped him. “No time. Try to get Scott, Johnny and Artie on the horses. We’ll have to tie them on. I gather you found rope.”

“There was rope in the guardroom and some here.” Joe commented.

“Lucky for us. Mano, give me the last explosive.”

“Here.” Tossing it to the agent, Manolito led a horse over to Scott. He and Joe manhandled the unresponsive blond up on the saddle. By now, Pedro and Buck were grappling with Johnny.

Jim began to lift Artie. For a moment he felt the pull of exhaustion and pain, and then another pair of hands was helping him. “Thanks, Joe. Now get moving. We’re out of time,” he yelled. Jumping up, he mounted behind Artemus. He saw Mano grab another horse and vault onto it bare back. The others mounted more conventionally.

Twisting his horse around, West headed first for the tunnel leading inward and threw his remaining explosive down the passage before swinging back and yelling at the top of his lungs. Startled, the

remaining animals ran for the exit, followed closely by Mano leading Scott, Joe with Artie and Buck with Johnny. Pedro went next with West close on his heels.

As the agent passed the fence of the pen, he felt a rumble which grew as the ground beneath him rose slightly. Now he could hear a series of detonations, followed by violent crashing and faintly, underneath that noise, what sounded like screaming. Ignoring all of it, he dashed out just as the cavern erupted toward him.

Desperately holding a slipping Artie, he hunched over and urged his horse on. Even as they came out into the late afternoon sun, a blast of air raining debris nearly bowled him over his horse. Something sharp cut into him painfully. With a loud noise, the mouth of the cave collapsed, sending more shards of stone into the air.

None of the party even spared a glance for the stark reminder of the grisly torture inflicted on two of the unconscious men. Riding past the stakes, canopy and chair, they kept on going.



The remainder of the escape was something of a blur for Buck. He knew they were riding toward Tucson, he knew they rode fast to avoid any possible pursuit. He knew he had to periodically check the ropes binding Johnny to the saddle. When they stopped briefly, allowing Jim time to safely secure Artemus, Buck was aware of what was happening but in a distant sort of way. He felt light-headed, sick. But he hadn't been hurt, had he? His shoulder ached, but it was nothing. A strange lethargy began to creep over him, he felt so tired, so numb. All he wanted to do was lay down on the sandy ground and sleep.

"Look. It is Señor Cannon!" At Pedro's shout, Buck's head jerked upward. Riding toward them was a party of men led by Big John himself. Buck was never so glad to see anyone in his life. The rescue party surrounded them. They were talking to him, to each other, a babble of voices. John was giving orders.

"Reno, Sam, get a couple of buckboards from Tucson. And tell Doctor Reynolds to set up a floor of the Grand Hotel as an infirmary. Tell him he's got eight patients!"

What was Big John talking about? Buck could count. Only three men were sick. Buck's vision blurred, the desert suddenly fading completely before returning into focus. *'Feel like ah do the morning after payday. Don't remember drinkin', though.'* He glanced around, carefully, and met the concerned eyes of Blue.

The young man's expressive face was twisted in horror. He reached out, calling, "Uncle Buck! You're hurt. What happened?"

"It's a long story, Blue boy." The words felt like they were being spoken by another person. "It's a gosh darned . . . long story."

Buck blinked as his vision clouded once more. Then it went black. He never felt himself being caught by Blue Cannon.



The stagecoach rumbled into Tucson on time. The early afternoon sun beat down on the older man waiting by the station. As the stage came to a stop, Big John frowned. He wasn't sure he was ready to meet the one passenger he was expecting. He had no good news and very few answers.

As soon as the stage stopped an arm reached out and opened the door before one of the drivers could jump down. Immediately, a man in his fifties with white hair and strong features climbed out. He turned back to help a very young and pretty brunette exit. Both wore twin expressions of worry and fear.

Stepping forward quickly, the waiting man spoke. "Hello. I'm John Cannon." He held out his hand. "You must be Murdoch Lancer."

"Yes." After returning the grip, Lancer turned to the lady. "This is my ward, Teresa O'Brien." Murdoch glanced around as if he was hoping to see familiar faces. "How are they?"

"I think you'd better come see," John sighed. "I wish I had better news. This isn't the way I wanted to meet you."

"Nor I, you. When I received your wire, I made arrangements immediately to come. But you were vague as to the details. Where are my boys?"

Everyone's at the Grand Hotel, right over there," Cannon pointed to an imposing structure across the street. "I'll take you to Doctor Reynolds first. He's a good man, but a little out of his depth, here. As we all are, I fear." Seeing the irritation build in the other man, John raised his hand. "First I'll explain what little I know."



"So we left Vaquero and Sam at the box canyon. I don't think I could have made Sam return if I tried," John grimaced. By now they had climbed the stairway to the second floor and Cannon lowered his voice. "Sometime in the early afternoon, the Apache, Lochi just reappeared. He had the horses Manolito, Joe and Pedro had been riding. I don't know if the Indian knew they were escaping or just figured he might as well tell us where to look, but I'll be forever grateful for his actions. Sam came back to Tucson for us and we rode out. By the grace of God, we found them. I don't think any of them would have made it to town on their own. We got them back here. My people will be fine, but . . . I'll let Doctor Reynolds tell you about your sons."

"Where they shot? Johnny's had more than his share of injuries."

"No, not shot." John looked uncomfortable. "Something much worse. And, well, you'll see."

Quickly, Cannon led the way to the room the doctor had commandeered so he could be close to his patients. Inwardly, John sighed. *‘How do I put into words what I know? How do I tell you that things were done to your sons worse than anything I’ve ever seen, but they’re not dying from the torture? And how do I tell you that none of us, including Doctor Reynolds, has any idea how to save them?’*



Jim glanced up when he heard Mano enter the room.

“The stage is arriving.”

West nodded. Manolito was haggard, flushed, still hurting, but he was definitely mending as was West himself. The injuries he’d sustained from the beamed light still burned all the time and now had begun to itch annoyingly. He also had a laceration on his back, maybe from debris from the cave, West couldn’t remember. But he, like Manolito, Buck and the others, Joe and Pedro, were recovered or healing. Unfortunately, three of their members were not.

Once again, he turned his attention to the three cots in front of him. It had been decided after the first day, to put Scott, Johnny and Artie together. After all, they shared the same symptoms. Each lay on the bed, their eyes still opened, their faces and bodies frozen into a deathlike rictus.

Except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of their chests, they might as well be dead. Clean linen bandages now covered their eyes. The doctor had treated their wounds. Of the three, Artie was the least hurt, physically, and he had been nursed mostly by Reynold’s assistant and Victoria Cannon, John’s very beautiful and very capable wife.

Scott was the worst and Johnny was nearly as bad. The evidence of torture was brutally apparent on both young men. Reynolds had clucked in worry over their injuries, although he had pointed out that some of Scott’s more serious wounds were already healing. Then he had very capably treated them for their physical ailments. When he was completely done, including instructing Victoria and his nurse, he had returned to his room. Jim had not been surprised when he’d heard the sound of retching from behind closed doors. Somehow, Jim could not fault him for reacting badly to his first taste of how inhumane man could be to man.

Now all three lay bandaged, clean, mending physically but dying nevertheless. They weren’t drinking any fluids. A man could only survive so long without water, especially with the added trauma they had suffered. Almost two days had gone by with no change. If they remained in this state, it was only a matter of time.

“Scott, Johnny!”

At the soft, feminine voice, Jim looked up again. Standing in the doorway was a very pretty brunette and an older man.

"Oh my God, Scott, Johnny!" The older man took a step then stopped. It was the girl who walked forward, laying one hand each on both brothers before turning to the agent. Normally, West would have reacted to the girl's charms, now, he felt hollow, lost.

"Doctor Reynolds spoke to us," she said quietly. "And Mr. Cannon. Are you James West?"

Jim looked up dully, but it was John Cannon who spoke. "Miss Teresa O'Brien, Murdoch Lancer's ward. This is Manolito Montoya, my brother-in-law, and this is James West. The other man in bed is his partner, Artemus Gordon."

Ignoring the introductions, Murdoch Lancer sided past his ward, knelt down between his sons and touched each face in turn. Finally he sighed. "Can you tell us what really happened in that place?"

"I fear, Mr. Lancer, none of us truly know that," Manolito spoke up. He glanced over at Buck who had just entered the room, then at West. "But we will tell you what we can."



Manolito sat quietly, gazing at nothing in particular. The darkness was lit by gas lamps on either side of the door but they were turned low, leaving most of the room in shadows. It was his turn to sit with the sick, though he knew none of the others were far. West was sleeping in the next room over and only that because the doctor had threatened him with laudanum. Teresa shared a room with Victoria, leaving Murdoch and John to share another. Buck was with him. Manolito grimaced. Two days had gone by since Murdoch had arrived with his lovely ward. Two more days of waiting, watching and dying a little inside as the three patients died.

Rubbing at his face, Mano resisted his urge to shake them, to shake them awake. Surely God did not intend for them to remain sleeping until death claimed them?

When the soft groan came, Manolito almost missed it, but not the movement that went with it. "Dios mío!" Leaning forward, he watched Johnny stir. Very slowly, the younger man shifted, his hand reaching up and pulling roughly at the covering over his eyes. As it came off, the blue orbs looked around in confusion. Immediately, Montoya jumped up and grabbed the pitcher kept nearby. Pouring water into it, he stepped over to the bed.

"Here, drink this, mi amigo."

Glancing up in confusion, Johnny frowned, but nevertheless obediently drank. After a moment he pushed the glass away. Leaning over on one arm, he stared at the two beds next to him. Rising slowly, he reached until he could touch the bandage on his brother's eyes. "Take them both off, please."

"The doctor was worried your eyes might be hurt, but I will remove them." Gently, Manolito untied the coverings and waited.

Johnny stared at both faces in turn. Swallowing, he mumbled. "Didn't . . . come back!"

“What?”

“Still there, Scott and Artie. I . . . I gotta go back!”

“Johnny, listen to me. Your father is here, and Teresa.”

“Murdoch, Teresa?”

“Yes, they will want to see you.”

“No!” With a surprisingly strong grip, Johnny clutched at Manolito’s shirt. “Can’t, can’t see them. Scott, Scott’s not . . . back. I gotta go back for him!”

“What do you mean?”

Both Manolito and Johnny looked up to see West standing by the door. With several quick strides he came to stand between the younger Lancer’s bed and his brothers. “Where are Scott and Artie?”

“Trapped or hidin’. I’m,” he shook his head, visibly wincing at the movement. “Not sure which. You know where, I felt you.”

“In my dreams.” West was looking inward, frowning. “A house with many rooms. Cool breezes. People I should recognize.”

“No, you can’t look at them or you might never want to leave.”

“I do not understand you,” Manolito whispered. “But your words fill me with fear, somehow.”

Very slowly, Johnny rose and twisted his body until he was sitting on the side of the bed facing his brother. “Can I . . . have some more water?”

“Of course.” Manolito filled the mug once more

Johnny drank the water with as much care as he had risen. Handing the empty cup back, he looked up at the motionless West. “I’m going back. Now.”

Bonelessly, Jim sat on Artemus’ bed. He studied his friend before turning his head to face Johnny. “I know. I want to come with you.”

“Don’t think you can.”

“It’s that sphere, isn’t it?” Manolito spoke with awe. “You were all part of it together.”

“I suppose. Scott and Artie . . . had the real connection. I think they both could equally control it. Whatever . . . it was.”

“But you went in with them,” West said softly. “I only have a connection with Artie because . . .” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Can you put the beds closer?” Johnny asked.

“Sí. I do not understand, but I will do what I can. What about your father?”

“No, please. He’ll only . . . try to stop me. And I can’t let . . . anyone stop me.”

“Even if it kills you?”

“Yeah,” Johnny nodded at Mano. “Even if it kills me. They’re gonna die if I don’t.”

“I will do as you ask.”

“And Mano, is Buck around?”

“He is sleeping. But only down the hall.”

“Can you bring him?” Johnny rubbed at his face absently. “Have any . . . tequila hidden around here?”

West snorted. “Not likely, except in the doctor’s room maybe.”

“I could get some from the saloon downstairs, but it will take time.”

“No, gotta do this . . . now.”

I will bring Buck. He will want to be here. Let us move the beds first.”

With some maneuvering, the beds were put together. Johnny lay down on his brother’s, with one arm lightly resting on Artemus. Jim sat on the other side of Artie.

“Put your hand over ours.”

“Will it make a difference?”

“Don’t know, just feels right.”

Jim shrugged. “If you say so.”

At that moment, Buck and Manolito entered the room. The older man had a cautious grin.

“Mano said you was awake. Now why don’t my gut feel any better?”

“You’re hurt?” Johnny pointed at Buck’s shoulder, encased in a sling.

“Ain’t nothin’. I was hit by a piece of rock, the doc figures. When the cave blew. It bled some.”

Manolito snorted. Johnny smiled faintly. “Sure.” He took a deep breath. “I wanted you here so I can say somethin’, in case . . . Well, I just wanna say it. Thanks, friend. For everything.” The smile on the younger Lancer lit up his face. “Whatever happens. I owe both of you more than I can ever repay.” He looked at West. “You, too.” As quickly as the smile appeared, it faded. “All of you . . . gotta promise me . . . somethin’. No matter what happens, don’t mess with me, don’t mess with Scott. Promise me!”

Buck, Manolito and West nodded reluctantly.

“Thanks.” With a sigh, Johnny closed his eyes and began the process of shutting all of them out.

After taking several deep breaths, he felt everything begin to fade, his misgivings, his worry for his father, Teresa. Even his fear for his brother. He cleared his mind and then began to picture the place West had seen, where he had been before. A place full of rooms.

Suddenly, he was there, seemingly walking from one room to another. Light filled each chamber, a part of it emanating from large windows with billowing curtains. Through the openings he could see green, tree-filled lands or gray water and white beaches with gulls flying. Still others displayed rows of neat homes. He jerked his eyes from the intriguing vistas. Some of the illumination came from a glow which seemed to radiate from the white walls themselves. Each room was filled with people, a few of whom he knew he might recognize if he lingered but a second.

No! He had to find the right room. Only two people mattered to him. Then, he was there and he felt the change in atmosphere immediately. The air became thick, forcing him to fight his way through to the other side.

The blond was staring out the window at a vista of majestic mountains, a small smile on his face. The other was nearby, looking intently at the blond.

“Johnny! I’m glad you came back.” He spoke without turning his head, without any emotion.

“Had to . . . brother. You didn’t follow me.”

“Did I say I would?” A puzzled expression rested on the blond’s brow.

“No.” Johnny glanced down and smiled. “But I kinda expected you to.”

“It’s so beautiful here. Have you ever wanted to just stand and drink in the marvel of creation? Let others worry about running the world.”

A frown creased Johnny’s face. “Sounds like running away to me. I ain’t never run away from anythin’ in my life. And neither have you, Scott. Look at me Scott. Look at me!”

After a long pause, the older Lancer finally turned. His voice, though, remained as void of emotion as his visage. “All right, Johnny.”

The younger man gazed at the lax, passionless face and felt a stab of fear. Swallowing, he shifted toward the other occupant. "What about you, Artie? Why are you still here?"

"Me?" The older man was clearly puzzled. "I'm waiting for him. We came together."

"You got a friend, a friend who's dying inside cause you're here! Jim deserves better!"

"Jim? Jim. He's a good man. Was a good friend, the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Is. Is a good friend! Can't you feel him? He can't get in here like us, but he's here. Dios! I don't understand, but you can't tell me you don't feel him!"

Artemus cocked his head and closed his eyes. After an interminable time, he smiled. "James my boy, nice to have you."

"You gotta go back to him, Artie."

Artemus opened his eyes and looked at Johnny. "Not without Scott. I let him take all the punishment. I let him take all the risks. It's not fair he suffers for it alone."

"I made my own choice." Scott said softly, with the first hint of emotion Johnny had heard.

"You made your choice. I made mine. I did what had to be done. Like you, Johnny. You came willing to die because you trusted no one to save me but yourself. You're doing it again, now."

"I won't leave this place without you, whatever this place is."

"Purgatory, perhaps. The pause before the . . ."

". . . leap into the unknown. Dios! I don't understand what's happening to us." Johnny shook his head. "It's like we all can see inside each other's head. The artifact was alive in a way. It grabbed all of our minds and put them together, didn't it? I'm getting a headache thinking about it."

"Then don't think about it, Johnny. Lay down your fears and burdens, welcome the peace we can have."

"Scott, this isn't like you. You're a fighter, have been all your life. Shit! I understand. You think you gave in, don't you? You think because you told them to stop hurting me that you're shamed somehow. Dios! You think I'm shamed by you! That's why you're hiding here. That's why you're letting this place leach your humanity from you. I've never felt anything but love and admiration for you. You would have allowed me to die, and I would have died, but Artie and Jim gave you another choice. And you took it. We might still have died, but not strung up on a sadist's rack! You're not dead yet, brother! I won't let you bury yourself! You're coming back with me. We're going to face the world with all its pain, together! You and me, we are going to face whatever the universe can throw at us, together!" Reaching forward, Johnny grabbed at Scott, pulling him toward his breast. He was crying, but he didn't care. All that mattered was reaching his brother.

He almost missed the spark of humanity that flashed in the blue eyes. He almost missed, the grateful relief as life came flooding back into Scott's face. The blond clutched at his brother's shoulders, staring at Johnny as if he could not see enough of him.

"My God! I was almost lost." He shook his head. "I couldn't find my way back. I was at an abyss, with only the chasm before me. But your voice, it was a bridge, a lifeline."

"So, are we ready to leave this place?" Artie's voice spoke lightly. I knew you were only partially here, that your soul was poised at another place. But I couldn't bring you back. I'm glad I won't have to follow you now."

"Johnny, more than anything in this universe, I want to return with you."

"Yeah." Johnny smiled. "Sounds good to me. Let's go." He hugged Scott tightly, feeling the reassuring pressure of his brother's arms. Then another hand touched them, and the world changed.



Time dragged on. Manolito grimaced and rubbed at his head where a persistent ache remained. Although he was recuperating physically, mentally he was drained. He glanced at Buck and realized his friend felt the same. At least an hour had passed since Johnny had closed his eyes and entered into whatever realm the others were lost in. All that time West had not moved. None of them had moved. They should get the father, Manolito thought, should tell him that his one son had awoken, but neither watcher left. Manolito felt a great sadness fill him. For one of the few times in his life, he feared the worst. He feared all were lost.

"Mano, he moved, Scott moved!"

Nearly bowling over Buck, Manolito rushed to the bed. With an almost explosion of sound, Scott took a long, deep breath, before lapsing into normal ones. His eyes closed. With a soft sigh, West opened his eyes wider. He looked down at Artemus. At almost the same instant, his friend closed his eyes, and then opened them, slowly moving his head. "Why can't . . . I . . . ever . . . remember . . . the good . . . parties . . ."

". . . you attend? I'll give you a hint. It was wild," West said softly. "But in other ways, it was very forgettable."

"I'll . . . take your . . . word for it . . . Jim, I could sure use . . ."

". . . a drink. Finest water Tucson can offer." West grinned as he filled another cup. He lifted Artie's head and put the glass to his mouth. "Drink it slowly."

"Good idea, James my boy." He took a long sip. "It's your turn." West smiled but drank.

"You're back, what of the brothers?" Buck asked.

“They’re following.” Artemus grinned. “You’ll see.”

Manolito and Buck looked at the other bed. One moment the Lancer’s were breathing normally, but seemingly asleep, and the next both opened their eyes. Johnny rubbed at his head while Scott looked around in confusion.

Johnny spied Mano and grinned tiredly. “Good to see both of you. Can I have some water for Scott?”

“Of course.” Manolito quickly complied. He handed it to Johnny.

“Hey, Boston, want some . . .”

“ . . . water?” Scott’s voice was hoarse and strained. “Can’t think of anything . . . I’d want more.”

With Johnny’s help, he managed to sip most of the fluid. Finally he pushed it away. “I’m so tired.” He looked at everyone in confusion. “But I’ve been asleep?”

“The doctor said you were unconscious. Not the same thing.” Murdoch came sweeping into the room. “I heard whispering.” He glared at Manolito and Buck. “Why didn’t you tell me my sons were awake?” He turned to Scott and Johnny, a wide grin threatening to break his face. “How are both of you? What happened? Why were you unconscious?”

“Well,” Johnny said softly. “That’s a whole lot of questions . . .”

“ . . . that I’m far too sleepy to answer.” Scott finished. “Besides, I don’t remember . . .”

“ . . . much of anything.” Johnny said.

“But I’m glad . . .” Scott said

“ . . . to be back.” Artie finished. “Wake me next . . .”

“ . . . year,” both Lancers echoed. Without any more words, all three men closed their eyes and slept.

“What was that about?” Murdoch glared at each man in the room, daring any of them to give him an explanation.

“I don’t know,” West said softly. “But I hope it doesn’t last. I won’t understand half of what Artie says if he’s finishing the conversation of one of your boys.” He yawned widely. “What was that about sleeping till next year? I think I’ll join them.” Lying down next to Artie, West was asleep in moments.

“What is going on here?”

“I do not know, Señor Lancer,” Mano said, chuckling softly. “But whatever it is, it is good.”

“Yeah.” Buck’s smile was as broad as his face. “It is good.”



The riders approached the too familiar terrain. Eight men rode up the trail silently, not stopping until they reached the hillside where only a pile of rubble marked the once entrance to Miguelito Loveless’ underground kingdom. Two of the men kept their eyes averted from the spot where a canopy, chair and other items had stood.

All traces of what had happened here had been removed by the diligent Cannon ranch hands within days of the rescue. They had also, to a man, decided never to talk about what any of them had seen to any outsider, including the inquisitive citizens of Tucson. Even before the official response from Washington had ordered silence, the men had closed ranks around their own and those they considered friends in order to protect them. Only those representatives of the law who had a need to know were told. Which was just as well. This wasn’t the kind of incident the town officials wanted to become common gossip.

Scott dismounted carefully, his body complaining loudly. The ride had reminded him, with a vengeance that Doctor Reynolds had been right. He wasn’t fully healed. The layer of bandages under his borrowed shirt contributed to his too warm body, but thankfully only because they added bulk. His fever was gone.

Ignoring his discomfort, he stepped up to the rubble pile that had been the door into his own personal hell and couldn’t stop the shudder of revulsion and pain that gripped him. When he felt the feather light, familiar touch on his arm, a rush of euphoria swept over him bringing the sting of tears.

“Hey Scott, want some water?”

The blond turned, grateful beyond words that he had a brother who understood him so well. “Yes, I believe I do.” Johnny also wore borrowed clothes with added layers of bandaging. And like his brother, he was also was healing and still in pain. Whether Scott’s awareness of his brother’s health was because of their connection through the artifact or because Scott could read Johnny, he could not have said. To the great relief of them and their friends they no longer finished each other’s sentences. Thankfully, the strange, mind state they had shared with Artie that first day had slowly faded, leaving only a kind of shadowy remnant of each within the other. What that boded for the future was something each of them was willing to ignore for now, and as long as they could.

“You know, you shouldn’t be out so soon.”

“I had to see it again.”

“Yeah. Me too.” They stood in companionable silence. Finally Johnny said. “As much as I love and respect you, Boston, I’m real glad not to be in your head anymore.”

“I understand we sounded like some kind of freak show. And I felt like some kind of freak show.”

Once more silence fell among the group of men, finally Johnny asked softly. "Are you sure everything's gone?"

"I don't even think Loveless' army could dig out that entrance." West walked slowly up to the brothers. "And I'm willing to wager the caverns are completely destroyed."

"Pedro is sure the mines are destroyed," Manolito said, turning back from the lip of the cliff where he had been standing.

"Still, some coulda got out. There were lots of tunnels."

West turned to Buck. "Actually, more than I would have thought. Fifteen escaped by the last count and were picked up by the army. They are on their way to jail."

"Can't say I'm sorry about that. And Loveless?"

The army is keeping an eye out for him. They're looking from here to Sacramento."

"He might have been killed," Johnny said.

"He could have been."

"Did anyone check the entrance Mano and Joe and Pedro used?" Buck asked.

"Joe and I did," Jim said quietly. "The entrance is still there, but about half a mile in, it's blocked. There are other tunnels, leading roughly back the way we came, but nothing that extends anywhere near Loveless' little empire."

"This whole region is full of caves, I would think." Artemus said thoughtfully. "Someone will probably find another portion of the same caverns and never know what our dear Miguelito had set up."

Manolito shuddered. "I am glad you did not ask me to come. I am quite sure I could not have gone in."

The words, spoken without any apology, brought only nods from the companions. "Glad, ah didn't get in that way." Buck said.

"So am I," Artemus smiled.

"So everything's gone, destroyed." Scott said. "Everything that little man spent so much time, effort and money on."

"Along with the man himself, Boston. Only we don't know if he's dead. Or his friends"

"I remember that all the time, little brother. All the time."

"Does he always plan an escape route, just in case?" Johnny asked.

"That has been our experience," Artemus answered. "Much to our chagrin. He mentioned a tunnel going toward Sacramento. He probably had it laid with track. I've known Voltaire once before to power a two-man car."

"Ah did shoot that giant."

"Of course you did," Artemus chuckled. "Jim shot him once with a normal caliber weapon. I think it would take a bullet between his eyes to kill him."

"You forget how thick his head is," West corrected. "I think it will take a cannon."

"Or a Gattling gun," Artie added.

"Quiet, mi amigos," Manolito's words stopped the banter. "We are not alone."

Immediately the other men stopped talking and looked at the Mexican. Manolito was staring at the lip of rock, his head tilted. Finally he walked over to where the four of them had originally entered the game. From around the corner appeared Naiche.

Manolito held up his hand in greeting. "I offer thanks from all my friends. We are in your debt." He lapsed into Apache.

Naiche listened, then nodded. Speaking in English he held out his hand. "I came to bring this. For the brothers." In his hand was a scalp with long, dark hair.

Scott and Johnny both took an involuntary step forward, stopping just behind Manolito. "Did that belong to who I think it did?" Johnny said, his air of nonchalance fooling no one.

"How did you get this?" Manolito said, repeating the question in Apache."

Naiche responded in the same language. Manolito nodded and turned back to the others. "All he will say is that he found Santos in the desert. That he killed him."

"Bad man." Naiche spoke in English. "I give for peace."

"Peace of mind," Scott said softly. "For our peace of mind."

"Yes."

"What about Loveless, or Roberto?" West asked.

Manolito repeated the question. Naiche shook his head. "They had way out. I found Santos, alone. Bad man."

Johnny stepped closer. "I gotta thank you, myself." He glanced back at Scott with lowered eyes. "Because of you, I have my brother back."

"So do I. Thank you." Scott smiled.

Naiche nodded. "We will remember you." With a final glance at everyone, the Apache disappeared the way he had come.

No one moved for long moments then Johnny said. "I feel kinda cheated. Funny, that."

"You and me both, little brother. Let's go back to Tucson. I could use a drink."

"I think that's a great idea," Jim agreed.

"I know of the perfect cantina." Manolito grinned. "The good doctor will not find us disobeying his instructions."

"I know just the place you're talkin' about," Buck said.

"Long as they have tequila."

"And scotch."

"You will love this place." Buck placed his arms around the brothers. "Best watering hole in Tucson."



Johnny let the sounds of the noisy cantina wash over him from his table near the back. The general din, a mixture of words and laughter, came from men who had become his friends—the people he had come to trust with his life, and the life of his brother. Friends like that were a precious commodity. They created safe havens; this saloon and the Cannon ranch, places he could fully relax. He smiled to himself. He was lucky indeed.

A yawn began to rise, which Johnny suppressed. Dios! The night was young, yet. He glanced toward the bar. He had been talking to Buck. The other older man had jumped up suddenly, saying he had to ask Sam something and had not returned. Now, he and the foreman were sharing some joke with Scott. The blond was laughing, but Johnny saw a hint of reticence in the laughter. He was tired, Johnny decided. Perhaps it was time to put his older sibling to bed.

Just as he came to that conclusion, Manolito Montoya, with a rush of fresh energy, sat on the chair recently abandoned by Buck.

"I have a problem," Manolito grinned, waving a bottle and a glass. "An open bottle of tequila I cannot finish myself. Will you help me solve this problem?"

Johnny returned the grin. "Seems I might." He pushed forward his empty glass. "You boys sure know how to have a good time."

"Oh, yes. We work very hard at it."

"I'm sure you do."

"It is an art one must cultivate." Very carefully, Manolito divided the remaining liquor into the two glasses. Holding up his own, he said, "To family, friends and old debts."

Johnny raised his glass in response and drank. But when he finished, a contemplative smile played at his mouth "Old debts? Your father, he seemed mighty familiar."

"You might have heard of him by a different title. The Lion of Senora."

Johnny's eyes lit up. "That was a long time ago and I was very young. I dealt mostly with his Segundo. I was, after all, just another hired gun."

"Your actions helped save his life—and mine, although I was in no condition to notice. For that I will always be grateful. I feel, in some small way, I have helped repay that debt."

"There was no debt. I was doing a job."

"A job, sí. However, perhaps, a reminder that a good action in the past echoes on through the present, will bring some satisfaction."

Johnny grinned. "Perhaps."

Scott glanced over at his brother. He and Mano were smiling about something. Scott let the laughter of Buck's joke wash over him while he suppressed another yawn. The night was still young, why was he so tired? Suddenly, the room began to close around him, the noisy crowd growing louder. Shaking his head, he realized he needed fresh air and a measure of quiet.

Smiling at Buck and Sam, he made the excuse that he had to make an urgent trip, and left. Outside, he found more people, talking near the door, or on their way home. Quickly he walked to the back, where a large corral belonging to the livery beckoned. The horses were all in their stalls and no one was about. Leaning against the railing, he tilted his head back and looked upward at the sky. The heavens above were clear, awash in stars that twinkled like so many diamonds. So different from the way he knew they really looked.

With a blissful sigh, he let the peace of the night air enfold him. When he heard the quiet footfalls, he ignored them.

"They are somewhat boisterous, aren't they?"

At the familiar voice, Scott turned, suppressing another sigh. "They are that, Artie."

“You left for other reasons.”

Scott raised his brows at the statement, but made no attempt to refute it.

Artemus gazed up at the sky. For several minutes both men were silent. Finally Artemus spoke.

“I wonder what the chemical composition of the stars truly is.”

“The same chemicals that make our planet. It’s all the same star stuff.”

“The artifact could have told us, exactly. I remember once, attempting to manipulate that aspect of its abilities.”

“Which I sensed years later. I believe the artifact held the essence of anyone who used it, especially who pushed his limits. I felt you, even before I knew who you were.”

“I regret what happened to you, but I am not sorry for what I kept hidden. I couldn’t give Loveless any more information or ammunition.”

“You are a very good agent, Mr. Artemus Gordon. You and Jim make quite a team.”

“Is that a complement?”

“Oh, yes.” Scott folded his arms. “Definitely a complement. I remember you from Salisbury.”

“I know.”

“You were working in the infirmary. But I can’t remember much else.”

“You sustained a very serious head wound. I’m not surprised your memory is fuzzy. As for me, it was better than sitting around feeling sorry for myself. And I was helping my fellow soldiers.”

“Were you and Jim working together then?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Well, I suppose that’s all the answer I’m going to get.”

“I suppose.” Artie smiled, and then grew sober again. “I find myself missing that thing. I want to hold it, explore its capabilities. It was almost like a drug. Now it’s gone.”

“The artifact had many uses. We’d just begun to discover them. Loveless was criminally short-sighted.”

“I wonder if Loveless had made his perfect world, would he have then studied the artifact’s other virtues?”

“Thankfully, we’ll never know,” Scott said dryly.

“Yes,” Artemus said wistfully. “Because of him, we’ll never know.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best. That thing has only wrought tragedy.”

“Man has wrought the tragedy. The artifact was only an instrument.”

“But the cause, nevertheless.”

“I knew if I rambled enough, we’d hit upon the root of the problem.”

“What are you talking about?” Scott rounded on the agent again.

“It killed him, didn’t it? He tried to see how far he could work it and his heart gave out.”

Scott’s face crumbled. With a sharp, jerking motion he stepped away. Artie made no move to follow. After a few minutes, the blond returned. Gazing at Artemus steadily, he said, “I sensed something, wrong. So I went looking—and found him. He’d only been dead a few minutes, I think. Dear God! The way he looked. The blood!”

Once more Scott paused, his eyes reflecting remembered horror. When he continued, his voice was somber. “Professor Sibley was so excited that night. He had finally decided to show the university committee the artifact. And, as you know, when Professor Sibley set his mind on something, he had to do it sooner rather than later. So he had set up the presentation for the very next day. He wanted to map all of the sphere’s capabilities before the meeting.”

A rueful smile touched Scott’s face. “But that was not how I had planned on spending that particular night. I told him I was busy studying with my fraternity brothers. I was with them, but we were surely not studying.”

“And you think you could have saved him if you’d been there? You’ve blamed yourself all these years. Scott, it took the combined strength of you, me and your brother to separate our minds from that thing. What could you have done but die with him?”

“I know that now, yet then . . .” Scott grimaced. “It wasn’t just how he died, but how the university officials reacted. All they could think of was trying to lay blame.”

“I’m not condoning their actions. But I can understand. They were looking for explanations. And you were a convenient scapegoat. You were with the body and obviously not sober.”

“My grandfather’s connections helped smooth their ruffled feathers.” Scott laughed mirthlessly. “They even offered to make me the valedictorian speaker, belatedly trying to make amends. But they wouldn’t let me have Professor Sibley’s notes, they wouldn’t tell me where the . . .” Scott’s words trailed off.

“Now we know where it went,” Artemus sighed.

“I just couldn’t face graduation. I had to leave. I don’t think grandfather ever forgave me.”

“You never tried to explain it to him?”

“Grandfather would never understand.”

Artie nodded. “But your brother would.” At Scott’s sharp intake of breath, he raised his hand. “No other living soul will hear of it from my lips. Trust me.”

“I do.” Scott sighed. “I do. And I trust Jim. If you feel you should, you can tell him.”

“Hey Scott, where are you?”

At the raised voice and approaching footsteps, the blond shifted. “I’m here.” He quickly stepped toward his brother, a wide grin on his face. “Just clearing my head a little.”

Johnny came around the corner, his quizzical gaze taking in both men. A smile replaced the frown. “Well, Scott, I was thinkin’ I should get you to bed. You need your beauty sleep.”

“Me, what about you? How many shots of tequila have you consumed?”

“Not as many as I’d like, but I know my body will kill me if I have more. So . . .” he wrapped his arm around his brother. “Let’s go to bed, Scott.”

“A capital idea.”

“Well, before you do that,” Artemus smiled, holding out his hand. “I’d like to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” Scott said.

“Yes, we have to leave in the morning. At first light.” Jim walked up to the men. “Orders from Washington.”

“And one must obey orders.” Artemus said.

“So this is goodbye,” Scot said. “I must say I have mixed emotions.”

“Well, mine aren’t mixed at all,” Johnny said with a grin. “Thanks for what you did for me and Scott, Jim–Artie.” He held out his hand. “Can’t say I’m happy with why we met, but I’m kinda glad we did get to know each other.”

“I agree.” West smiled, taking the offered hand.

“This has been an interesting interlude,” Artemus said, shaking Johnny’s hand. “I am glad I have had a chance to get to know you.”

“Scott, goodbye,” Jim turned to the blond. “I hope you will remember me fondly.”

“Oh, I remember you and I’ll never forget everything we’ve done together.” Ignoring his brother’s curious eyes, Scott faced Artemus. “I won’t forget what we’ve shared, either, Artie.”

“Somehow, I don’t think you, Johnny or I will have a choice. Although I am ecstatic, I can no longer hear two other voices in my head.” Artemus smiled.

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Scott grinned. He took Artie’s hand, then pulled him forward to grip his shoulder, surprised as much by his own actions as he could sense the agent was. Stepping back, he spoke again. “Thanks for giving me my brother.”

“Anytime,” Artemus said.

“Okay,” Johnny suppressed a yawn. “I’m getting Scott to bed.”

“Before you collapse, little brother?”

“Before we all collapse. Come on, Boston.” Grabbing his brother’s shoulder, the two men began walking to the hotel.



The day of departure finally came. Both brothers were healed. They would have scars, but most of the pain had faded. The business of forming a new bank had been carried out, with the younger Lancers attending with their father. They had all made new, lasting friends, but both Scott and Johnny wanted to be home. A little peace and quiet with a liberal sprinkling of hard, satisfying ranch work was what the brothers craved.

They were all in the Congress Hall Saloon, even Teresa and Victoria, waiting for the stage to leave. Scott and Johnny stood leaning against the ornate, wooden rail, between the Cannon ranch hands. Every man had a drink of some sort. At the shout of the drivers outside the door, Scott contemplated his glass. “Well, I might as well finish this.”

“I’m with you, brother.” Both men put the glasses to their lips, drank the liquid and lowered their cups at the same moment. Neither seemed to notice the quickly averted gazes they received from everyone who knew them.

The brothers also turned in unison and began walking toward the door. Their father followed, talking with John Cannon. “I’m grateful beyond words for everything you’ve done for us. Actually, this whole town, but especially you and your gracious wife.”

“It’s the least I could do. I know Loveless would have found another way to carry out his plans, whether your sons came to Tucson or not, but our business dealings did make it easier.”

“Well, that may be true, but members of your family were instrumental in saving the lives of my boys. So I’m glad that if it had to happen, it happened here.”

"I just wanted to say how beautiful your ranch is. I'm glad I had a chance to stay there," Teresa said softly to Victoria. "It is a home because you have made it one."

"Thank you my dear. But I cannot take all the credit. My husband, John, his son and brother, my brother and even, in a way, all those who work for John, all together, have made High Chaparral, a home to be proud of."

Manolito, hearing some of what his sister said, smiled contentedly. Turning to Johnny, he said. "So this is adios. I am glad I have met you."

"I can say the same." Johnny smiled. "Someone once said to me that beauty was everywhere. You live in a beautiful country, but I'm glad I live in California."

"You said somethin' about this land, Mano." Buck said quietly. He had been standing back from his friend and the younger Lancer. Now he stepped forward. "A saying from the Apache about the savage land."

"Sí." Manolito nodded. "It is said by the Apache, when you ride the savage land, you are a part of it, and it is a part of you."

"Well, I do feel like part of this land," Scott said softly, his gaze locking with his brother's. "We're certainly leaving our share of blood behind."

"And friends we will always trust."

"Like I said," Johnny smiled and bowed to Victoria. "Beauty everywhere, some obvious, some hidden."

"But we're both glad to see the beauty in our own backyard."

"The sooner the better, Scott."

"Well, the sooner we board this stagecoach, the sooner we'll get home to Lancer," Murdoch said.

"Lancer, what a lovely sound."

"I'm with you, little brother, I'm with you. No word has ever sounded better."



Above him the stars shone in the sky, brilliant points of light, but all Scott could think of was some food and his bed. He'd been on the range all day stringing fence and he was exhausted. Come to think of it, maybe he didn't even want to eat.

As he entered the darkened house, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Bout time you got home, Boston. Just put your gun and hat down and come upstairs. I got somethin' to show you."

“What are you carrying on about? I need to grab something to eat and find my bed, nothing else.”

“I already took care of that.” As he spoke, Johnny began to drag Scott upstairs. “Maria and Teresa fixed a basket. We even have Scotch and tequila. We’re gonna have a picnic.”

“A picnic? It must be almost eleven. At night! What are you babbling about?”

“Now don’t get so excited, Boston. It’s all set up. Murdoch helped, though he said you might want to adjust it.”

“What is set up? What is this?” Scott’s words died as Johnny dragged him up all the way up and onto the flat portion of the roof near the guard house. There, set up on a small platform, was a large telescope.

“Oh my God! Where did that come from?”

“Well, I think it came from back east. Here, this came with it.”

Johnny lit a small candle and held it to a letter. Taking the letter numbly, Scott opened the seal, pulled out the paper and began to read aloud.

“Dear Scott and Johnny. I hope you enjoy our little present. Enjoy the wonders of the universe, from the safety of your home. Artie and Jim.”

“How did he know?”

“Well, besides the fact we kinda shared minds for a space, and I, for one, remember a few things, I might have let on to Jim how much you talked about getting a telescope.”

Scott’s face grew serious. “There’s a lot we haven’t talked about.”

“And we don’t have to, unless you want it.”

Scott glanced down, seeing the basket, two bottles and glasses. “Is that why Murdoch and Teresa are conspicuously absent?”

“They went to visit Mr. Walker and his missus. Teresa’s good friends with their daughter.”

“Good timing.”

“Yeah, well.” Johnny grinned. “Don’t you want to look out it?”

“Yes, little brother, I do.”

Grinning widely, Scott lay on the roof and squinted through the view finder. After much tinkering, he called Johnny down and told him to look through the glass. Time passed, the brothers talked, ate, drank, and gazed at the heavens. Finally, Scott lay back with his arms folded under his neck.

Johnny was right beside him. Several minutes went by. Suddenly a blaze of light streamed across the sky.

“Could that be from beyond our solar system?” Johnny asked. “Beyond that last blue planet we saw?”

“Could be. We have no way of knowing. But it ended its life in our atmosphere.”

“Do you think men like us will figure out a way of getting to them, those planets and stars and things out there?”

“Maybe. But even if we could do it today, I’ll stay home, thank you very much. I’ll keep my feet firmly planted in terra firma.”

“I’d kinda like to see them. Wouldn’t that be a grand adventure, Scott, to travel in some kind of ship to the stars?”

“It would be an adventure I’d leave to you, little brother. I’m perfectly happy to contemplate the heavens from the earth.”

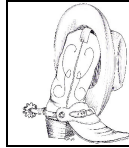
“All right, Boston. I’ll stay here with you.”

Scott turned his head and grinned, then his smile faded. “Johnny, there’s things I’ve never told you about, things that have to do with the artifact.”

“You don’t have to.” Johnny turned his head toward his brother and grinned. “But I’m happy to listen.”

“I think it’s about time I told you everything.” Scott gazed up in the sky at the line of diamonds that spread across the darkness. “I remember my first meeting with Professor Sibley.”





AJ's Top Ten List

The top ten Lancer quotes that sound obscene but aren't :

10. "I'm trying to conclude!"
Johnny in Buscaderos
9. "Oh boy! You welcome everybody like this?"
Johnny in Shadow of a Dead Man
8. "Get yourself out of those jeans!"
Johnny in To Chase A Wild Horse
7. "I've never seen anybody so fast!"
Todd in Measure of a Man
6. "Think you can take both of us, friend?"
Harris Taylor in Blood Rock
5. "Slow, Johnny Madrid!"
Isham in Warburton's Edge
4. "Some days it don't pay to get up!"
Jelly in Splinter Group
3. "I know what you're thinking, but it shouldn't take that long."
Scott in To Chase A Wild Horse
2. "A man in mortal pain's got a right to have some pleasures on his death bed."
Jelly in Jelly

And the number one quote from Lancer that sounds obscene, but isn't :

1. "And you stick it in here."
Johnny to Tallie in Warburton's Edge on how to eat a tortilla with salsa.





QUIZ: Who Said It & When? By The Lancer Ranch Hands

ANSWERS FROM QUIZ ON PAGE 53

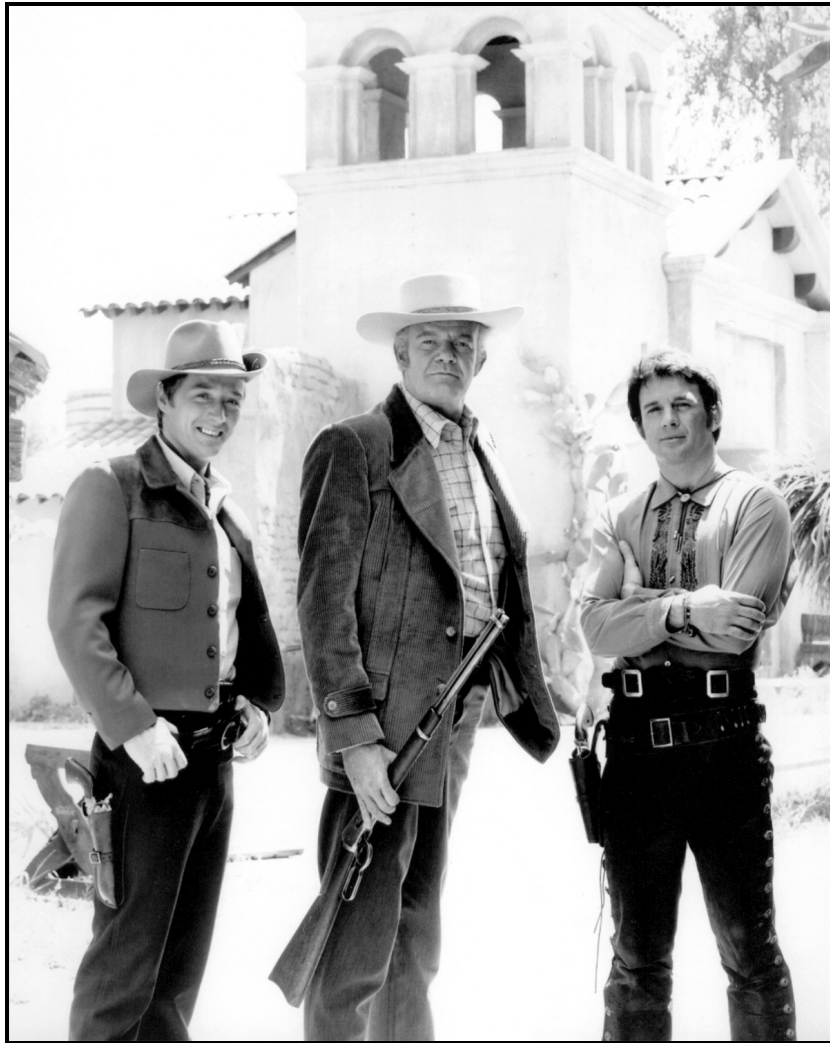
1. "I never did like my fun organized." – Johnny, Blind Man's Bluff
2. "I could use that drink now." – Scott, Buscaderos
3. "Elegant. Breathtaking. You are pretty!" – Johnny, Legacy
4. "Noblesse oblige, huh?" – Scott, Blind Man's Bluff
5. "How'd you like to be dead?" – Johnny, Measure of a Man
6. "Why, you're a girl!" – Scott, Zee
7. "There's a lot of back shooting going on around here." – Scott, High Riders
8. "Oooh, boy, does that stink! That'd make a skunk sit down and cry!" – Johnny, Black Angel
9. "Well, I'm just wonderful!" – Scott, Goodbye, Lizzie
10. "And get six bolts of cloth." – Teresa, To Chase a Wild Horse
11. "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen anyone thrown *into* a bar?" – Johnny, Cut the Wolf Loose
12. "He mashed my ribs clean to my gizzard." – Zee, Zee
13. "Never underestimate an accountant." – Harlan Garrett, Legacy
14. "Uh, Murdoch, I hate to tell you this but you lost by three vertebrae." – Johnny, Blue Skies For Willie Sharpe
15. "Nobody takes Teresa out of here. Not unless she wants to go." – Scott, Angel Day and Her Sunshine Girls
16. "I believe you have an honest face." – Moira, Black McGloins
17. "Do you think Johnny's in a jam?" – Scott, Blind Man's Bluff
18. "Are ya gonna shoot me dead, tie me up and break my arms?" – Grady, Shadow of a Dead Man

19. “Well, I’m not so sure we should be hauling him off to the ranch, anyhow.” – Scott, Jelly
20. “Technically speaking, Mr. Lancer, I’m under arrest for practicing medicine without a license.” – Dr. Banning, Welcome to Genesis
21. “You’re not going to take the easy way out and drown.” – Scott, Blue Skies for Willie Sharpe
22. “And don’t forget I got some change comin’ out! Don’t go runnin’ off to ‘Frisco!” – Jelly, Warburton’s Edge
23. “Cut the head off a snake and the rest of it will wiggle right out of town.” - Kansas Bill Sharpe, Blue Skies for Willie Sharpe
24. “Kinda hard to forget a man that’s gonna hang, right? That begs for your help?” – Johnny, The Lawman
25. “It wouldn’t work without Johnny.” – Murdoch, The Lawman
26. “He may not always be right but he’s never wrong.” – Scott, Shadow of a Dead Man
27. “Dad blamed it if he don’t end up with a busted neck!” – Barber, The Kid
28. “Maybe she’ll throw up.” – Penny Rose, Little Darling of the Sierras
29. “We were just admiring you!” – Teresa, Black Angel
30. “I’m a Special Person.” – Penny Rose, Little Darling of the Sierras (*yeah, sweetie, you are!*)

BONUS (TRICK) QUOTE: “That went well!” - No one in any episode anyone can find, although it is frequently attributed to Scott.

112 - 125 points = Rancher
 100 – 124 points = Cowboy
 87 – 99 points = Cook
 75 – 86 points = Swamper
 Below 75 points = City Slicker

The Lancer Ranch Hands are Buttercup, Stinky, Fay, Janet and AJ!



Hope you enjoyed your Lancer adventures!

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