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*Weird Western Quarterly*

Issue 2: "Death And Gunsmoke, Part 2: Into the Wilderness"

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**1851:**

In Woodson Hex's opinion, the situation was getting out of hand. It had been two years since Jonah had dared to pull a gun on his own father, and in that time, the boy had grown even more rebellious. Talking back, trying to run away (one time he made it as far as his Aunt Aretha's house, but his older cousins soon dragged him all the way back to Haverville), even trading blows with his old man without the slightest hint of fear. Every one of those offenses earned Jonah a beat-down, but that still wasn't enough to deter him. In fact, as the boy neared his thirteenth birthday, Woodson was discovering that his son had become a real threat to him — more often than not lately, the elder Hex was walking away from those little spats with a black eye or bloody lip. Jonah had fast hands, blurry-fast, and Woodson was only getting slower as old age crept up on him. It was conceivable that there might come a day when the boy would finally overpower him, and the thought of being bested by someone as mule-stupid as Jonah, only son or no, was too much to take. Yessir, the situation was definitely getting out of hand.

The problem weighed on the man's mind for quite some time with no foreseeable solution. He damned Ginny every day for bearing him such a disrespectful child, then up and leaving that hellion with him. If he ever saw her again, he'd make that whore pay for forcing him to shoulder the burden all these years. He had no convenient escape from his fatherly duties, no one to dump Jonah on like she'd done...

Or did he? He remembered a conversation he'd had with one of the Apache elders he sold his moonshine to not long ago, about how there were fewer young ones in their tribe now than in earlier years. Their numbers were thinning, but the work to be done had not decreased.

A wicked grin spread across Woodson Hex's face. Once again, he'd amazed himself with his craftiness. Yes indeed, this had to be his craftiest plan yet!

Jonah was quite agreeable with this — the thought of getting away from Haverville, even if it was with his father, excited him. In fact, the idea seemed to have an effect on his father's attitude as well: the man became less overbearing, and barely laid a hand on Jonah as they worked together on selling off as many household goods as they could, sacking the money away for a new life in California. Woodson even managed to talk the town bank into buying their shack and the few acres of land it sat on. Once that deal was complete, the two of them loaded up the wagon with the few possessions they'd decided to haul across country with them, and bid Haverville a fond farewell. But before they could get underway proper, they had to make one last stop: Woodson had squeezed the final few drops out of his still, bottled them up, and planned on selling them to a tribe of Apache who were camped out along the route he and his son would be following. When he told Jonah this, the boy tried to hide his nervousness — while he'd seen natives from time to time in town, he'd never really been exposed to them en masse. His father always told him that they were all childlike savages, eager to trade their pelts and hand-made crafts for shiny baubles and booze. He also said that they had no qualms about gutting white folks if they felt so inclined, but Woodson was so fearless that they wouldn't dare touch him. Smart-mouthed little boys, however, was a whole 'nother story.

A couple days out from Haverville, they reached the encampment, which was set up near a small river. The boy rubbernecked as they rode past a few natives, who barely paid him a glance. They were dressed mostly in buckskin, though some had on store-bought cotton shirts and trousers like Jonah and his father wore. At the man's insistence, Jonah stayed on the wagon while Woodson climbed down and approached the Indians walking towards them, including an older-looking man with graying hair and an air of authority about him. "How do there, chief!" the elder Hex called out. "Well, it took a mite longer than Ah thought, but Ah finally got here with the goods." As he said this, he hitched a thumb back towards the wagon and chuckled.

The chief looked past him, fixing his dark-eyed gaze on Jonah and the wagon itself in a way that made the boy self-conscious. It certainly wasn't the look of a "childlike savage", that was for sure. "Just as you promised," he said in a softly-accented voice, "though your reasons for doing so are still unclear."

"Fella's got tuh do whut he has tuh do if'n he wants tuh get ahead in this world. 'Sides, Ah look at this as a mutual favor." He and the chief walked away and out of earshot, but before doing so, the chief spoke to one of the Indians beside him in their native tongue, and he and two others came closer to the wagon. The two moved to the back of the wagon and unloaded the crates of moonshine, but the one the chief spoke to approached Jonah as he sat in the driver's seat, and gestured for the boy to get down.

"Nuh-uh, Pa said tuh stay put," Jonah said, but the Apache didn't seem to understand, and tried to grab the boy's wrist. He backed away, shouting, "Quit thet! Ah ain't movin'!" The Indian didn't stop, though, going so far as to climb partly onto the wagon to reach him. Jonah kicked at him when he did so, yelling for his father, and after a couple of whacks, the Indian took hold of Jonah's leg and pulled him off the wagon. "Let go of me!" the boy yelled. "Pa! Pa, help me!" The man didn't even look in Jonah's direction as the boy struggled in his captor's grasp before finally managing to twist free. He ran across the encampment towards his father, but was soon tackled by another native before reaching him. He called out for help again as his new opponent tried to hold him down, and this time, his cries seemed to catch Woodson's attention.

"Boy, whut in the blue Hell are yuh doin'?" His father walked over to where Jonah lay pinned, the chief right behind him. "Yuh'd best stop thet tomfoolery right quick, these folks won't put up with it like Ah do." He turned to the chief, hat in hand, and said, "Ah apologize fer this, Ah really do... but at least now yuh see whut Ah've been tellin' yuh: he's a damn hard worker, and fast too, but don't yuh dare turn yer back on him, 'cause Lord knows whut sort of trouble he'll get into."

The chief nodded. "It may take some time, but I'm sure he will soon learn how to behave properly."

"Pa, whut's he talkin' 'bout?" Jonah asked, doing his best to lift his head

off the ground.

"He's talkin' 'bout how he's gonna whup yuh into shape, yuh ungrateful little brat! Ah'm sick of yer sass and yer scrappin'... if'n yuh ain't willin' tuh give me an ounce of respect, then Ah'm cuttin' yuh loose." He tilted his head towards the chief. "Maybe a few years with these folk'll show yuh just how good yuh really had it." Jonah could only gape at his father as the man finished his business with the Apache leader, arguing that a healthy white boy like him was surely worth more than the chief was offering. They soon reached an agreement, and the chief ordered that the appropriate amount of goods and supplies be loaded onto Woodson's wagon. "Don't worry, son," he told Jonah as he readied to leave, "when Ah strike it rich, Ah'll come on back tuh see if'n yuh improved any, an if'n Ah like whut Ah see... well, Ah'm sure me an' the chief kin work out some sort of arrangement." He laughed as he climbed into the driver's seat.

"Yuh cain't do this tuh me!" Jonah cried, and beat against the Indian restraining him until he let go. The boy ran to the wagon and began to climb on board beside his father. "Don't leave me here, Pa! Ah swear, Ah'll be good, Ah'll do whutever yuh say, just don't..."

"Yuh had yer chance, an' yuh made a mess of it. Time tuh deal with the consequences!" Woodson lifted his foot and kicked Jonah square in the face, knocking him backwards off the wagon. "Always remember, son: y'all may be the fastest Hex, but Ah'm the craftiest Hex!"

Jonah lay on his back in the dirt as he heard the wagon roll away, his father's laughter fading along with it. "Don't leave me here, Pa..." he said weakly, his vision going black around the edges from the blow to the head. Before he fell unconscious, he could see some of the natives gather around him, looking down upon the newcomer to their tribe.

When Jonah came to, he found himself kneeling near one of the many tipis in the encampment, his hands lashed behind him to a pole. The left side of his face felt swollen, and his arms ached from the awkward position. He lifted his head and peered around him — there were some Apache women preparing food nearby, but none of them appeared to pay him any mind. "Hey... hey there," he called out, "cut me loose... please..." One of the women looked his way, then went back to work.

"Don't ignore me! Cut me loose! Ah didn't do nothin' tuh y'all!" The woman glanced at him again, then turned to a young girl and spoke in Apache. The girl stood up and came over to where Jonah was bound. "Please, cut me loose," he said. "Ah don't want no trouble, Ah just want tuh go home." It didn't occur to Jonah that he really didn't have a home anymore, but that was beside the point.

She regarded Jonah for a moment, then went back to the other women and retrieved a small clay pot filled with water. "Ah don't want a drink, Ah want tuh get outta here!" he snapped, but she ignored his protest and knelt beside him. She then reached behind him, pulled out a bandana sticking out of Jonah's back pocket, and dipped one end into the water. Carefully, she began to daub at the swelling on his cheek, and he could tell by the way it stung that his face must have been badly cut. She was just trying to clean him up. "Thanks," he muttered as she finished, and looked her over. The girl appeared to be a little younger than him, with long black hair plaited down her back. "Too bad yuh don't know English, 'cause Ah don't know a lick of Apache."

"I know... small," she said. "Know better when not loud."

Jonah's eyebrows shot up. "Oh. Sorry, but... yuh didn't say nothin'." He tilted his head towards the group of women. "How 'bout them?"

"Some. High Cloud speaks most with the whites. He knows your words well."

"Who's High Cloud?" he asked. She pointed across the encampment to the chief, and Jonah nodded. "Good, maybe Ah kin talk him into lettin' me go."

She shook her head, saying, "You stay, help in camp, after High Cloud show you."

"Show me whut?"

"Your proper place," a voice behind him said. A barechested boy about Jonah's age stepped into his view, a look of contempt on the young Indian's face. He gestured to Jonah's bindings and said, "This is a good start, I think."

Jonah was about spit out a rather nasty epithet, but the girl pressed the bandana against his face like she was still cleaning the wound, her palm covering his mouth. "High Cloud show what you help with," she told him, then looked up at the other boy and said something in Apache. The two of them went back and forth a few times, Jonah oblivious to what was being said, then the other boy made a noise of disgust and walked away. Only after he was gone did the girl remove her hand from Jonah's mouth. "Forgive... afraid you would be loud again," she explained.

"Who was that charmer?" he asked her.

"High Cloud's son... " She stopped with a frown. "I do not have the words for name."

"Well, reckon Ah'll have tuh pick up some Apache sooner or later. How do y'all say it?"

"Noh-Tante."

He nodded again. "Seems Noh-Tante ain't too thrilled with me hangin' 'bout, or do all white folks get that warm reception from him?"

She didn't understand all the words, but she got the gist of what he'd said. "He say... he say whites only know how to hurt. I say you are young, and can learn good ways like we know, but he does not hear. He say... " One of the women called to the girl, breaking her off mid-sentence. "My mother needs me," she told him, and stood up.

"Wait... yuh told me everybody else's name, but Ah don't know yers."

The girl hesitated, then said, "White Fawn."

"Pleased tuh meet yuh, White Fawn. Muh name's Jonah." The girl then returned to her mother's side, leaving Jonah to contemplate his new situation.

Despite the warning, Jonah did try and escape at the first opportunity, when the tribe broke camp a few months after he joined — the Mes-calero, which was the branch of Apache Jonah now belonged to, were nomadic and would move all across the Southwest so as to better make use of the land's resources. He earned himself a sound beating for that stunt. Afterward, High Cloud gave him the same speech again, and he did so the second and third time Jonah had to be disciplined as well. He never yelled at the boy despite this, talking instead in the same soft-spoken manner that he always used. Slowly, Jonah began to trust the chief in a way that he never trusted his father — while the boy was a second-class citizen in the tribe, and forced to work at menial, sometimes back-breaking tasks day in and day out, High Cloud would never let the other Apache mistreat Jonah or deny him basic comforts, something Pa would do to him for no other reason than the man was in a bad mood. For Jonah, a simple thing like knowing that the chief wouldn't let him go hungry meant a lot.

He received no such kindness from Noh-Tante, however. As High Cloud's son, he carried some weight of his own, and liked to use it to make Jonah's life harder than it already was — if there was a particularly disgusting or humiliating chore to be done, Noh-Tante did his best to make sure Jonah was stuck with it. The young Indian's behavior reminded the boy of the bullies he'd endured at school, only now any sort of retaliation was out of the question, lest he wanted to risk something far worse than a whipping. Complaining to High Cloud didn't do any good, as it seemed his son could do no wrong in his eyes. The only person that Jonah could vent his frustrations to was White Fawn, who had become a great help to him as he coped with his new life among the Apache. She taught him how to speak her language, as well as all the small, unseen rules embedded in every culture. In turn, he helped her improve her English and told her about how white people lived and worked, though when she asked about his family, Jonah would usually fall silent. He thought of White Fawn as a friend, probably the first true friend he'd ever had in his short life, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about his mother and father with her.

There were nights when he'd dream about his parents, and where they might be. Pa was usually in some California saloon, drunk as a skunk and whooping it up, gold nuggets bursting out of his coat pockets. His Ma was in a fine parlor with plush furniture and flowers everywhere,

wearing that lovely new dress he'd last seen her in, with Preston W. Dazzleby, seller of Fine Dry Goods & Sundries, fawning over her and draping a sparkling necklace around her neck. And unseen in both tableaux would be Jonah, crying out at the realization that his parents had each gained the life they really wanted... one without him in it.

Eventually, he would wake up, and spend the rest of the night staring into the darkness, the blankets pulled tight around him and a hollow ache in his chest.

### 1853:

It was late summer when the Indian messenger came to their camp, telling High Cloud that a meeting of chiefs was being called — the white soldiers were chipping away at the tribes on the plains, and steps needed to be taken lest the children of the Great Spirit be wiped out. High Cloud told the messenger that he would join his fellow leaders at the gathering place, then chose three of his finest warriors to accompany him on the journey, as well as his son — there would come a day when Noh-Tante would succeed his father, so the sooner he became familiar with the other chiefs, the better. He also decided to bring Jonah along to act as servant to him and the others while they were at the gathering. During the time the boy had lived among the Apache, he'd learned to control much of his anger, and when left alone to do his work, his face was placid and his body relaxed... but if he was provoked into fighting, it was like watching a snake strike out of the grass: fast, vicious, and over in seconds. Such actions would still earn Jonah a beating, but some in the tribe respected him for that ability to go from absolute calm to full battle-readiness in the blink of an eye. High Cloud himself was impressed more by how much this white child had changed from the one that had been brought to his camp two years before, and wondered if Jonah's father would even recognize him beneath the buckskin clothes and shoulder-length hair.

Leaving the rest of the band at their current encampment, High Cloud and his group set out for the meeting deep in the Kansas territory. Representatives from many tribal branches were present: Mescalero and

Chiracahua Apache, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, and Arapaho all coming together under a flag of truce in order to address their common dilemma. For many days the elders argued about how to handle the problem — some called for all-out war on the whites, slaughtering any who tread through their lands just as surely as the whites had been doing to them, while others still believed that a peace could be achieved. High Cloud stood with the latter, but his position was drastically outnumbered by those who had lost too much over the years.

Not every moment was spent in conference. When their respective chiefs had no need for their counsel, the warriors would meet for games of chance or sport. One of the more popular challenges was wrestling, with the two opponents grappling unarmed until one or the other emerged victorious. Noh-Tante took great delight in this, until he ran into a Kiowa brave that he simply couldn't overpower. After two resounding defeats by his hand, Noh-Tante decided to best him another way. "You are quite strong, I will admit," he told his opponent in the common language of the plains, "but I know of one in my party who you cannot stop."

"Who is he?" the Kiowa answered. "I have taken on all who came with you."

"Not all." He gestured to his friend Black Raven, who pulled Jonah into the fighting circle. The boy kicked and beat at him until he was tossed at the feet of the Kiowa. "Surely you can defeat a harmless white child," Noh-Tante said, smiling. He figured that either Jonah's fast hands would land enough blows to humiliate the other warrior, or the boy would be beaten senseless and the Apache could have a good laugh over it.

Jonah climbed to his feet, glaring at the chief's son. He took offense to the "child" comment more than anything else — he was just a few months shy of fifteen, same as the Noh-Tante — but the laughter of the other Indians didn't help much. "This one hardly seems worth the trouble," the Kiowa declared, doing his best to save face, "but I think I have a more worthy foe for him." He called to some friends of his own, and they soon dragged another teenaged boy into the circle. Though his hair was dark and his skin tanned, Jonah could tell that his opponent was actually white — he must have been a slave brought by the Kiowa, just as Jonah was enslaved to the Apache. "I think this is better," the warrior said, "let the two white dogs tear each other apart!"

The boys faced each other as the Indians goaded them into fighting, neither wanting any part of the nonsense, but having no choice. They took hold of each other's arms and circled for a moment, then the Kiowa slave forced Jonah down, trying to bend one of his arms behind his back. He worked his way loose and punched the other boy in the jaw, knocking him for a loop before Jonah rolled on top of him. The boy grunted and began to force him off, but Jonah dug in and leaned close to his ear — from his vantage point, Jonah could see an odd strawberry-colored mark on the side of the boy's neck. "Quit strugglin'," he told him in English, "Ah don't want tuh hurt yuh."

"Then... get off me... can't breathe." The boy pushed Jonah off with a strength that surprised him, then jumped on him and wrapped an arm around Jonah's neck, causing him to gasp for breath now. "I don't want to hurt you, either," the boy whispered to him, "but you can't imagine what they might do to me if I let you win."

Jonah slammed an elbow into the boy's gut until he loosened his grip, then twisted away before the boy could grab hold of him again. "Yuh think they'll let me off easy?" he said, his voice lost amongst the shouts from the spectators. "Thet smug sonovabitch over there's gonna rub it in muh face fer weeks if'n yuh knock me out."

The Kiowa slave looked at him through a tangle of long black hair. "Then you understand why I have to do this," he said, then ran at him. Jonah barely managed to sidestep out of the way and grab hold of the boy's wrist with both hands. Using the boy's own momentum against him, Jonah yanked back on his opponent's arm, letting go when he heard it dislocate from his shoulder. The boy howled in pain and went down in a heap, his arm twisted at an odd angle. His fellow Kiowa came forward, one of them trying to get the boy to his feet, but it was obvious that he was in no shape to continue. Many of the Indians cried foul because the fight had been so short, but Jonah didn't care, he was just worried that he'd done the other boy serious damage.

"You did well," Noh-Tante told Jonah with a note of reluctance in his voice, "though I would have preferred to see you go up against the other Kiowa."

Still angry over being forced to fight, he answered, "An' Ah would've preferred tuh pull yer arm outta the socket instead."

A hand came up and slapped him across the mouth. Nothing serious to Jonah, his father had given him worse licks on a daily basis, but it was the look of superiority on the Apache's face when he did it that stung the most. "You had best watch your tongue. My father may think you're a good little slave, but I know better." He then gave the white boy a shove back towards their tipi, saying, "Go and prepare me some food, child, I grow hungry." The knot of Indians began to break up after that, with two of the Kiowa holding up the injured boy between them. The Kiowa brave walked alongside, yelling at him — Jonah didn't know much of that tribe's language, but he knew enough to pick out one phrase that was said over and over: "Ke-Woh-No-Tay"... or in English, "He who is less than human" — it appeared that they didn't even think of their white slave as a person.

Jonah shook his head before walking away. *Ah'm sorry*, he thought. *Ah know it don't help yer situation or muh own one damn bit, but Ah'm sorry.*

One night, while camped out in a low valley, High Cloud was unable to sleep soundly. He lay beneath his blankets and stared at the dwindling fire, wondering if his descendants would be fighting the same battle as him, or would this all be over someday, for good or ill. With a sigh, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the stars, then he heard someone speak his name. High Cloud turned his head and saw Jonah sitting up on his bedroll and looking at him — the boy was a light sleeper, and had been listening to the chief's restless tossing and turning. "You seem troubled. Is something wrong?" Jonah asked in Apache, his Southern accent falling away as it always did when he spoke the chief's native tongue.

"Nothing that you can help with," he answered, "though I wish you could." He then got up, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, and walked over to Jonah. The boy gazed up at him silently, his blue eyes giving no hint as to what thoughts lay behind them. "Get some sleep, we still have much traveling to do," High Cloud said, and turned away from

him. There was a small lake near their campsite, and he settled down by the edge of the water to think.

Jonah laid back down, but he didn't sleep. Instead, he watched High Cloud as he sat hunched over by the water. Though he hadn't been present when the chief spoke with the other Indian leaders, he knew what most of the talk centered around: killing white folks. From High Cloud's attitude during the whole thing, he figured the man wasn't exactly for it, though after two years of living amongst them, Jonah understood what the other Indians were in a snit about. Hell, they only wanted to live and work the same way they had been for God knows how long, and not be pushed around by a bunch of lyin' paleface jackasses. Unfortunately, to the Indians, he looked just like the lyin' paleface jackasses, so saying he understood their problems wouldn't mean a damn thing to them. He supposed that was the reason why the Kiowa treated that one white boy so badly: they'd gotten so fed up with the situation that they'd made him their own personal whipping-boy. Jonah counted himself lucky that High Cloud hadn't let the Apache do the same with him... though Noh-Tante came damn close some days. The way he'd been suckered into fighting still stuck in his craw, and Jonah wished he could get that skunk back for it, but a lowly slave goin' up against the chief's son? May as well put a gun to his own head and...

Out of the corner of his eye, Jonah caught movement on an outcropping of rock near the lake. Most of the valley gently sloped down towards their campsite, but there was an edifice of solid stone nearly twenty feet tall that jutted into the valley, creating a perfect overlook for anyone standing upon it. High Cloud's back was turned toward it, and he didn't notice anything amiss. Jonah, however, could see both him and the outcropping in profile, and as he stared up at the thin brush covering the topmost portion of the rock face, he spotted something crawling slowly towards the edge closest to the water... something large. "High Cloud," Jonah hissed, not wanting to alert whomever or whatever was up there, but unfortunately, he was too far away to be heard by the chief as well. Staying low to the ground himself, Jonah began to approach him, doing his best to get the man's attention. As he got closer, so did the unknown intruder, and Jonah soon realized it was a puma, at least as large as himself... and judging by how it was approaching the area above the chief, he also realized that it meant to pounce any second now! *Tuh Hell with bein' sneaky, he thought*, and broke into a run, yelling in Apache, "High

Cloud! Get away from there!"

The chief whipped his head around and stared at Jonah in confusion, then he heard something growl above him. He began to get to his feet just as the puma leapt down from its perch, but before the animal could reach him, Jonah dove at him and pushed him out of harm's way. Unfortunately, that left the boy in the path of 200 pounds of hungry mountain lion, which knocked him straight into the lake on impact. Undaunted by the change in the menu, the animal tried to sink its teeth into Jonah's neck as he fought to keep from drowning. In fact, the water had the boy in more of a panic than the puma: for as long as he could remember, he hated going in the water, and if he went into it deeper than waist-level, he'd get this crushing feeling in his chest like he couldn't breathe, so he avoided it whenever he could. Right now, however, that feeling was mostly caused by the big cat attempting to tear out his throat. With one hand wedged between himself and the puma to keep it at a distance, Jonah groped around the lakebed with the other in hopes that he could find something to use as a weapon. Luckily, he came across a good-sized rock and bashed the puma in the head with it, briefly stunning the animal. He then tried to scramble out of the water, but the puma recovered quickly and jumped onto his bare back, its claws tearing his exposed flesh to ribbons.

By now, Noh-Tante and the other Apache had been awakened by all the commotion, and stood at the water's edge with High Cloud. "We have to do something," one of the braves exclaimed, and began to step into the water.

Noh-Tante held him back, saying, "Why should you risk your life for him? Better his white blood spills than yours."

The brave hesitated, then withdrew a knife from his belt and tossed it in Jonah's direction, calling the boy's name as he did so. It landed not far from Jonah's outstretched hand, and he snatched it up, twisted around, and drove it into the puma's side. The big cat let out a screech as the boy plunged the knife in again and again, the water turning red from the blood pumping out of both of them. Moments later, the animal slumped down, and the boy soon followed. High Cloud himself entered the water and gathered Jonah up into his arms — the boy was slipping into shock, but he somehow mustered the strength to ask the chief in English,

"Yuh... are yuh okay?"

In answer, High Cloud let out a short laugh — what manner of person was Jonah, that he could go through such a trial and still be more concerned about someone else? "I'm fine, thanks to you," he said, then carried the boy back to camp, while two of the braves went into the water and dragged out the dead puma — they would later skin the carcass and give the pelt to Jonah as a trophy after he'd recovered from his wounds.

After they returned to the rest of their tribe, word of Jonah's battle with the animal spread quickly, and many were impressed with the feat. Weeks later, when Jonah was mostly healed, the chief called his people together and declared that the boy would no longer be held as a slave — his willingness to give his life to save those who oppressed him showed a spirit unlike any High Cloud had ever seen. "When he came to us, we saw only a white child, and judged him by the actions of his people," the chief said, "but we cannot be blind to his true heart anymore. He is a warrior, as fearless as any Apache, and the scars he bears are proof of that." He laid a hand on Jonah's shoulder. "From this day forward, the boy known as Jonah Hex is gone, and in his place will stand a young man named Mark of the Puma!"

A cheer went up amongst those gathered, and many of the braves came forward to welcome their new brother into their number. Jonah was overwhelmed by how openly the Apache accepted him as one of their own after years of slavery, and for the first time in what seemed like forever, he felt like he had a family again, one that loved him even more than his birth family.

Unseen by all present, however, was the icy glare of Noh-Tante.

**1854:**

The stream ran through a thick copse of trees, the leaves just beginning to turn their autumn palette. The midday sun sparkled on the water as a young buck made its way to the edge of the stream and paused to take a drink. All was silent save for the gentle rustling of foliage in the breeze,

then suddenly, a low *thwip* could be heard in the underbrush, and an arrow buried itself between the buck's shoulderblades. With a choked bleat, the animal turned to run, and another arrow struck it behind the ear, piercing the brain. Moments later, the buck collapsed, and Jonah stepped out from his hiding place, shouldering his bow as he did so. He'd been waiting there patiently for hours, biding his time until the quarry he desired came along. After pulling it away from the stream, he produced his knife and began to dress his kill, his face virtually without expression as always. It was one of the few things about him that hadn't changed since his days as a slave — in the past year, he'd grown much, both in physical stature and ability. Many of his fellow Apache agreed that Mark of the Puma possessed a fine eye for the hunt, and his riding skills were without equal. In battle, he was fierce and swift, though High Cloud was hesitant to send him on raids where he may have to fight other whites, fearing Jonah's people might single him out as a traitor. The young man didn't share his chief's concerns, however, and was willing to defend his adopted family from all aggressors, red or white.

Once he'd finished his bloody task, Jonah loaded the kill onto his horse and returned to the encampment. More than a few young women smiled at him when he rode past, but he paid them no mind — there was only one girl in camp that truly caught his attention, and it was to her that he steered his mount. "White Fawn!" he called out in Apache as he neared her. "I brought some more game to prepare."

"I was beginning to think you might come back empty-handed," she replied as he dismounted, "you were gone much longer than usual."

"The deer were not cooperating today." He flashed her a smile. "I tried to tell them about the beautiful girl waiting for me, but they would not listen."

White Fawn blushed a little, but only a little. From the first day they'd met, she'd been there for him as a friend, and after he'd been made a full member of the tribe, they had become even closer, their feelings growing stronger as they neared adulthood. They were always flirting with each other, teasing at how they felt... and for Jonah at least, it was becoming less of a tease and more of a serious thought. Some nights he would dream about White Fawn, about holding her in his arms and kissing her and... well, things he certainly wasn't comfortable talking to White Fawn

about yet. Soon, perhaps, but not yet.

Jonah unloaded the bundle of venison and handed it to her. In return, she stepped close and gave him a peck on the cheek — now it was his turn to blush. "I was thinking," she said, "that it would be nice to spend some time together tomorrow, just the two of us. You have been so busy lately, I have barely seen you."

"I have much to do," he started to say, then caught the hurt look in her eyes. "But I suppose the other men would not be too angry if I took just one day for myself," he finished.

Her expression brightened. "I look forward to tomorrow, then, Mark of the Puma," she said, then turned to take the venison over to the cooking fires. Jonah watched her go, wondering if he could ever work up the courage to express himself to her. It wasn't his way to talk about how he felt, or to even acknowledge that he ever felt *anything* — on the battlefield, he was daring and fearless, but when it came to his own heart, that was territory he had difficulty treading.

Leading his horse by the reins, he walked over to the tipi he shared with High Cloud and Noh-Tante — since giving Jonah his freedom, the chief treated him like a second son, which Noh-Tante took surprisingly well. While they still sometimes had disagreements, the young Apache seemed to bear him no ill will, and Jonah decided to hold no grudge against him either, preferring to let the past remain in the past. *Whut's done is done*, as his Pa used to say. After hitching his mount to a post outside, Jonah entered the tipi and found the chief and his son deep in discussion. "The game in this area is just too thin," Noh-Tante was saying. "We have only been here two months, and already the hunts become longer each day, with little to show for it."

"I agree, but it seems too soon to move on," High Cloud answered. "If we go to our winter lodgings now, we may use up all the game there before spring comes... and if we do that, then the difficulties we face now will seem small." The chief turned to Jonah as he sat down beside him. "Mark of the Puma, do you agree with your brother? Should we move on early?"

The young man sat quietly for a few minutes. "The pickings are

becoming scarce," he said finally, "but not so much that we are desperate yet. If we step up our hunting for a few days, stock up as much as we can before striking camp, it should help us from overusing our winter hunting grounds. Also, no one said we had to head straight for there from here. Perhaps we should make another camp in-between, until the cold weather gets closer."

"That is very wise," High Cloud said, and patted Jonah on the shoulder. "I trust I can count on you to oversee the extra hunting?"

"Of course... but..." He looked down sheepishly. "I was... I was hoping to spend tomorrow with White Fawn." Once again, he felt himself blush.

The chief laughed. "The day *after* tomorrow for you, then," he said, then stood up. "In the meantime, I shall speak with some of the others, have them begin preparations." He exited the tipi, leaving the two young men alone.

"The old man is too set in his ways," Noh-Tante said as Jonah moved over to his bedroll.

"He is just thinking ahead, that is all. Nothing wrong with that." He laid down and stretched out, his muscles stiff from being out on the hunt all day. "There are times to act quickly, and times to consider options. I gave him options."

"And he listened to you," the Apache muttered, but Jonah didn't hear. Slightly louder, he said, "So, how long until you take White Fawn as your own?" Jonah turned his head toward him, an eyebrow raised, but said nothing. "Everyone knows you have your eye on her," Noh-Tante continued, "and she certainly does not seem to shy away from you..."

"None of yer goddam business," Jonah replied, lapsing back into English for a moment.

Noh-Tante ignored the comment. "Of course, it is ultimately up to her father, and I do not think you will succeed there. Brave warrior you may be, but you own little more than your horse and your rifle. He will not let a daughter as fine as White Fawn go to someone so poor, even if the chief does look favorably upon that person."

Jonah scowled, but he had to admit the young man was right: while he had counted coup on many raids over the past year, he hadn't accumulated much in the way of worldly possessions. Jonah just never saw a point in owning more than he could carry — he had a fast horse, a strong bow, a fine rifle and knife, warm blankets for his bed... what more did he need?

He needed White Fawn, that's what. The thought that she might slip out of his grasp because of something so trivial wasn't something he wanted to contemplate. "Do you have a solution," Jonah asked, "or are you too busy running your mouth?"

"There is a Kiowa encampment not far from here... if we leave after dusk, we can still reach it long before the sun rises. Then we slip in, swipe some horses, and head back here. I will tell all that the raid was your idea, and hold no claim to the animals... they will be your property. It may not be enough at first, but it is a start." He smiled and spread his hands wide. "We will need more horses for when we relocate anyway, why not use the situation to your advantage?"

Jonah lay there for a while, mulling it over, and by the time High Cloud returned to the tipi, the young man had already agreed to Noh-Tante's plan.

Under a moonless night sky, Mark of the Puma and Noh-Tante peered over a ridge near the Kiowa camp. They'd traveled there on foot, armed only with knives so as not to be weighed down. Below them, they could see a few low-burning fires, as well as a couple of Indians moving about, though neither was discouraged — they spied a group of four horses tethered at the far end of the encampment, with no one nearby. Silently, Noh-Tante indicated a path down to the area, and the two of them headed that way, staying low and sticking to the shadows. Once they neared the horses, they unsheathed their knives and began to cut the animals free. They had almost finished when Jonah saw a solitary Kiowa coming their way. Nothing about him indicated that they had been spotted, so he froze in place among the horses and waited for him to pass.

Noh-Tante, however, crept away from their hiding place and, once the Kiowa's back was to them, threw an arm around the unsuspecting Indian's neck and drove a knife between his ribs.

"Whut the Hell are yuh *doin'*?!?" Jonah hissed in English, running up as the Kiowa slumped to the ground. "Yuh didn't have tuh kill him, he didn't even..." But his protest was quickly cut off when Noh-Tante back-handed him. Falling to the ground beside the dead Indian, Jonah barely had time to register what happened before the young Apache kicked him in the stomach, sending his breath whooshing out of his lungs. Noh-Tante bent down and punched him a couple more times in the face, then once the young man was sufficiently dazed, he slapped the bloody knife into Jonah's hand. "Whuh... whut are yuh..." he sputtered.

"Did you really think I would help you win White Fawn?" Noh-Tante spat. "*You?* A lowly, white-skinned *dog*? It sickens me that my own people think you're *better* than me... that *my own father* respects *you* more than his own flesh and blood." He wrapped a hand around Jonah's throat and pulled him close, fingernails digging into the soft flesh. "It was bad enough that he coddled you all those years, but when he turned around and declared you an *equal*... do you know how hard it's been to not slit your throat every night since then? I had to wait for the right moment, like a hunter stalking its prey. And now, 'brother', that time has come. My only regret is that I cannot witness what the Kiowa will do to your filthy white carcass." He spat in Jonah's face, slammed the young man's head onto the ground, then walked over to the horses and gathered up the reins. Climbing onto one of them, Noh-Tante reared his head back and let out an Apache war cry that echoed all through the encampment, then rode away with the other animals in tow.

*Gotta get up, Jonah thought groggily, them Kiowa is gonna come a-runnin' any second now. But he couldn't do it, his legs felt like jelly. Dropping the knife, he rolled onto his stomach and tried to push himself up on all fours. He could hear footsteps rapidly coming his way, and he somehow managed to get to a standing position. He swayed in place, staring at the body laying before him, at the blood smeared on his own hands... Run... run, yuh good-fer-nothin' sonovabitch! They ain't gonna listen tuh any half-assed excuses yuh give 'em! RUN!*

And he did run, stiffly at first, then increasing his speed as voices began to cry out. He recalled the white boy he'd met the year before, and how that band of Kiowa treated him — Jonah doubted this was the same band, but he knew what that white slave endured would be nothing compared to the long, slow torture Jonah would probably receive for presumably killing one of their number. Frantic, he searched the dark plain for a hiding place, then remembered a creekbed surrounded by thick underbrush they'd passed on the way to the Kiowa camp — if he could reach it, he might be able to hide there for the night.

Chest burning, legs aching, Jonah pushed himself ever faster, the sound of horse hooves slapping the ground joining the shouts behind him. At one point, he felt a sharp pain in his back and nearly fell, but he regained his footing and pressed on. Soon the creek was in view, and he slid down the bank. Hoping the Kiowa hadn't seen him dive for cover in the darkness, he huddled behind a tangle of bushes and dead leaves, doing his best to stay small and quiet. From his hiding spot, he saw some of the Indians follow the creek in either direction, and one even lingered a few feet away from him, but none spotted him. After what seemed like forever, the shouts faded away. When he was absolutely certain the coast was clear, Jonah began crawl out from the underbrush, but stopped when a wave of pain ripped through his back — simply taking a breath made the pain worse. *Must've twisted something when Ah was runnin'*, he thought, and pressed a hand to his breastbone.

That was when he felt the head of an arrow protruding out of his chest, just scraping the bottom of his ribcage on his left side. Blood was streaked all the way down his torso, soaking his buckskin breeches. "Not good," he said aloud, and tried to stand. Exhausted, his head still spinning from the blows he'd received earlier, Jonah didn't even make it to his feet before passing out cold.

Windy Taylor, riding shotgun beside the driver up on the buckboard, cocked his hat back on his graying head and peered at the ground. "Naw, these tracks look a mite old... from last night, probably, maybe

early this morning. Reckon we missed all the fun." He gave a chuckle and settled back in his seat — ol' Windy had an odd sense of humor. "I'll mention it to the commander when we get in, though," he said as they picked up the pace again, "they might want... hold on a minute, now." He hopped off the wagon before the driver could bring it to a full stop and began to make his way down to the water. "I think there's somebody down there."

"So? You collectin' dead Injuns or something?"

Instead of answering, Windy continued on towards what looked like a bloody arm sticking out of the shrubbery on the far bank of the creek. *Just hope it's still attached to somebody*, he thought, crossing over the water. As he neared it, he could see an equally-bloody torso through the foliage, as well as a few locks of red hair — he'd heard stories about a redheaded Blackfoot warrior named Firehair, but they were a long way from Blackfoot territory. *'Course, that don't mean the fella ain't well-traveled... Hell, Windy, find out if'n the fella's dead first afore you worry 'bout who he is.* Pushing the shrubs aside, he saw a teenaged boy dressed in Indian garb caked with mud and dried blood, his face badly bruised and an arrow run straight through his middle. "Christ," he whispered, then yelled to the driver, "I got a dead body alright... but he's white!"

The driver swore himself. "You need help gettin' him outta there?"

"No, but fetch that blanket outta the back of the wagon so's we can wrap him up." Windy knelt down and slipped his arms beneath the cold body, but when he lifted up, he heard something quite unexpected: a shallow, reedy intake of breath. "Holy Hannah!" he exclaimed, then leaned close to make sure he hadn't been hearing things. Sure enough, after a few seconds, he saw the young man's lips move slightly, and another tortured breath came wheezing out of his lungs. Turning towards the driver again, Windy hollered, "Get that blanket down here on the double! This ornery bastard's still *alive!*"

Fort Hastings was a good eight miles away from the creek, but they made it there in record time, the driver whipping the horses 'til they were fit to drop, and Windy sitting in the back of the wagon, doing his best to keep the unconscious young man from bouncing around too much. Every once in a while, he'd put an ear to the boy's lips just to see if

he was truly breathing — it just didn't seem possible, especially if he was correct in assuming that the poor soul may have been laying out there all night. But he was breathing, albeit labored, and he was alive... though Windy had his doubts as to how long that would last. The doctor at the fort had the same opinion after examining the young man — the arrow had torn up his insides pretty badly, not to mention the fact that he'd nearly bled dry. Despite how futile it seemed, they patched him up and put him in the infirmary, figuring they could at least make his last hours as comfortable as possible.

To everyone's surprise, the young man hung on for a week... then another week... then a month, but never fully regained consciousness. There were times when he'd begin talking, sometimes in English, other times in Apache, but it was never anything coherent, just the disjointed babble of a mind lost in a feverish haze. Whenever Windy was at the fort, he would stop by to see how the boy was coming along, and was constantly amazed to find him still hanging on — in all his forty-five years on this Earth, more than half of them spent out West as a trapper and scout, Windy had never seen someone in such a state fight to live for so long. Then one day, he entered the infirmary and saw something even more amazing: the young man was sitting up in bed, talking to the fort commander. "Ah, speak of the Devil," the commander said when he spotted Windy in the doorway, and waved him over to the bedside. "Mr. Hex, this is Winfred Taylor... he's the one that found you and brought you in."

"Reckon Ah owe him muh life, then," Hex replied. His voice was weak, but the Texas drawl came through loud and clear. Sticking out his hand, he said, "Thank yuh kindly, Mr. Taylor."

"No thanks needed... an' call me Windy." He shook the hand that was offered. "I gotta say, for somebody so young, you sure are a tough little critter. How the Hell did you wind up in such a fix, anyhow?"

The look in Hex's eyes went cold. "Rather not talk 'bout thet right now," he said. "Not tuh seem ungrateful an' all, but Ah'd rather just get on a horse an' go on muh merry way."

"Not until the doc clears you," the commander answered, "I don't want you riding out of here too soon and passing out on the trail

somewheres."

"Ah'll take the risk. Ah've already lost more'n a month, Ah cain't wait around fer... " He started to swing his legs out of bed, but stopped and clutched at the bandage around his chest, his teeth gritted. "Ah need... Ah need tuh... "

"You need to rest, Mr. Hex." The commander turned to Windy and said, "I've got other duties to attend to. Make sure he doesn't try anything stupid." He then left the two of them alone in the infirmary. Windy made the young man lie down again, but it wasn't easy.

"Y'all don't understand," Hex said, sweat breaking out on his forehead, "they might already be gone, Ah gotta catch up afore... "

"Catch up with who? Look, I want to help, but you've gotta tell me what's going on."

The young man fell quiet, closing his eyes. Windy was afraid he'd passed out again, then slowly, he began to tell the scout about White Fawn, and about Noh-Tante's betrayal. "They's probably already on their way tuh the winter camp," he told Windy, "or maybe someplace else along the line, dependin' on whut High Cloud decided. If'n Ah waste any more time, Ah'll never be able tuh find 'em."

"I understand, but you're in no shape to do that much ridin'." The man paused, then said, "If'n I give you a map, can you show me the trails they might take? I'll head on out an' see if'n I can locate them before they get too far away."

The relief was plain to see on the young man's face. He did as Windy asked, pointing out a few paths that the scout wasn't even aware of. Once that was done, Jonah said, "There should be a deerskin pouch attached tuh the belt Ah was wearin'... White Fawn made thet fer me. Y'all take it along, so's they know yo're tellin' the truth."

"I will... and I'll be back as soon as I can." He set out that afternoon, riding for days across the plains, searching high and low for any sign of the tribe's passing. But after two weeks and hundreds of miles, Windy realized that it was a futile effort: too much time had passed between the

Apaches' departure from their last camp and the beginning of his search. When he finally returned to Fort Hastings and told Jonah the bad news, the young man was no longer bedridden, and Windy thought for sure that he'd jump on the nearest horse and ride out of there like the Devil was after him. Instead, Jonah quietly took back the pouch and reattached it to the back of his belt. "I'm sorry, son," Windy told him, meaning every word. "I did everything I could, but... "

"It's alright, ain't yer fault." He barely knew the young man, but Windy could still hear the pain in Jonah's voice when he said the words, though none of it showed on his face. "Whut's done is done."

**1855:**

*Click... BAM!* "Dammit." *Click... BAM!* "Dammit!" *Click... BAM!* "Dammit tuh Hell!"

"Boy, you hold onto that gun any tighter, you'll choke it to death." Windy walked over to the row of targets — three old glass canning jars lined up on a sawed-down tree stump — and checked out where the bullets had ended up. Two were embedded in the stump, and the third had gone completely wild and disappeared. "Well, the good news is you're gettin' closer. Bad news is it ain't close enough."

Jonah shook his head, his long red hair brushing against his shoulders — though his clothes were now the same as any typical white man's, he refused to cut his hair to a more respectable length. "Ah'm doin' muh best. Ah swear, 'tween the time Ah aim an' the time Ah pull the trigger, they jump outta the way." He cracked open the cylinder on the Colt Navy he was firing and began to reload it, saying, "Why cain't Ah just stick with rifles? Ah'm a dead shot with them."

"Cause if'n you're gonna ride with me, you're gonna have to be prepared for anything," he answered, his breath turning to little white puffs in the cold January air, "an' there may come a time when you're in a tight spot an' you ain't got no rifle with you. So you're gonna practice with them blasted irons 'til y'all can do it in your sleep!"

The young man sighed and continued reloading, fitting on fresh percussion caps to ignite the powder in the chambers. When Windy took him on as a partner last autumn, the man was quickly impressed with the skills Jonah already possessed at such a young age — his years with the Apache had made him knowledgeable in many of the things a frontiersman needed to survive. But when Jonah admitted that he'd used a handgun only once in his life, and nearly six years ago at that, Windy decided that a little more education was in order. So as the first snows began to fall, the two of them headed for Windy's little plot of land further up north, where the man's wife and son lived. Jonah was surprised to learn that Windy hadn't been home to see either of them in over a year, but he supposed that the life of an Army scout kept the man too busy to stop by more often than that. To be sure, the odd arrangement made Windy's son Tod seem distant from his father, but considering the sort of home life Jonah had growing up, he decided things could be worse in the Taylor household. Personally, Hex felt a bit awkward during their stay, having spent such a long time away from "civilized" life — he remembered what it was like, but the quality of the memories was so poor that returning to that sort of environment made him uncomfortable, and he was anxious to head back to the trails and open spaces to which he'd grown accustomed. Windy quickly picked up on this, and after the holidays passed, he stepped up his efforts to teach Jonah the fundamentals of handling a sixgun.

Having finished reloading, Hex took aim once again, holding the pistol in a two-fisted grip. "Hold on, son," Windy said before the young man could even begin shooting, "let's try something else." He came up beside his student and took the gun from him, then turned Jonah sideways and put the gun into his right hand, pointing directly at the targets. "I want you to try it one-handed. Just pretend..."

"Thet's muh dumb hand," Jonah interrupted.

"Well, it's time for the dumb hand to get a mite smarter." He stood behind the young man, sighting down the length of his extended arm. "When you fire a rifle, you brace the stock against your shoulder, but you ain't got no stock on a sixgun." He braced his own hands on Hex's arm and said, "*This* is your stock... don't even think of it as bein' separate from the gun. As soon as that pistol drops into your hand, it's a part

of you. You point your arm, not the gun... pretend them irons don't even exist 'til y'all pull the trigger. Got that?"

"Yeah, sure." In all honesty, Jonah thought what Windy was saying was pure hogwash, but he was so frustrated with his lack of progress so far, he was willing to try anything. *Point muh arm*, he thought, *not the gun*. Amazingly, as he lined up one of the jars, Jonah could swear that for a moment, there was no gun, only himself and his desire to destroy the object before him. He'd felt the sensation in the past, while on the hunt with bow or rifle at the ready, or in the heat of battle as the enemy came into view — a moment when the weapon is forgotten, when all that remains is hand and eye and target and...

"Pa! Hey, Pa! I wanna try, too!"

The child's shouts broke the spell, and Jonah's finger twitched on he trigger, sending the bullet flying. Once again, it was a clean miss, and he swore to high Heaven about it. He turned and glared at Tod, who was running at them from the house, his mother at the door yelling for him to come back.

"Dammit, Bess, I told you to keep him inside 'til we're done!" Windy hollered at his wife. "All's it takes is one stray shot to..."

"I tried," Bess answered, "but he snuck by me before I realized it."

The boy looked up at his father, saying, "I wanna learn to shoot, too, Pa! You said you'd teach me."

"An' I will, but you ain't even turned eight yet. Soon's you're older, I'll..."

"I'm *nine*! You forgot *again*!" The boy pouted out his lip. "I don't wanna wait, I wanna learn now!" Tod tried to grab the pistol out of Jonah's hand, but he wisely held it out of reach.

Windy took hold of the boy's arm and pulled him away, saying, "Stop that, dammit! I ain't gonna teach you nothin' if'n you keep doin' fool things like that!" Tod fought against him, and his father slapped him across the face. "You'd best learn to listen, boy, or else..." Windy made

to slap him again, but before he could, Jonah grabbed the man's wrist with his free left hand.

"Once is enough," the young man said, a cold, hard look in his eyes.

"You don't know nothin' 'bout raisin' kids, Hex," Windy told him, "you gotta be firm with 'em. Hell, you're still a kid yourself."

"Once is enough," he repeated, and looked down at Tod. "Yuh learned yer lesson, right?" The boy nodded, and Hex returned the gesture. "Alright then, y'all stay in the house a bit longer, an' yer pa will let yuh have a go at it later." Tod hesitated, looking from Jonah to his father, then turned around and walked back to the house, his mother ushering him back inside. Still holding Windy by the wrist, Jonah said to him, "Ah don't ever want tuh see yuh hit him again."

"What's your damn problem? He's my boy, an' if'n I think he needs to be disciplined... "

Jonah glared at him coldly for a moment longer, then turned his anger-filled gaze on the targets. With barely a thought, the gun in his right hand came up and sounded out three times. The first bullet sank into the stump, the second clipped the rim of the centermost jar, and the third hit the jar on the right dead-on, glass exploding everywhere.

Windy gulped, then said, "Better... that's a lot better, son."

By springtime, Jonah's skill with a handgun was up to Windy's satisfaction, though the older scout was still just a shade better than his pupil. It was plain to anyone who saw the young man handle his weapon, however, that the gap was closing fast. When the two of them returned to the more southern territories and resumed their work as trackers and guides at the various posts across the frontier, Jonah quickly gained a reputation as one of the best... and considering he was nearly half the age of many of his colleagues, the reputation became that much harder to live up to. Some of the other scouts resented this young pup who just appeared out of nowhere, and despite having an established tracker like Windy Taylor backing him up, Hex sometimes found himself duking it out with grizzled old mountain men that thought he was nothing but hot

air. Lucky for him, it usually didn't take more than cracking a few ribs or, in a couple extreme cases, a nimble swipe of his Bowie knife to convince the naysayers that he was up to snuff.

All in all, it was a good life, but deep in his heart, Jonah knew something was missing. Windy knew as well, though he pretended not to notice that, whenever they passed near an Indian encampment or ran across a native guide at a fort or trading post, the young man would take a moment to speak privately with them. And each time, whomever he spoke with would shake their head, and Jonah would walk away, his head hanging a little lower, his fingers idly brushing over the deerskin pouch that lay against his right hip.

**1858:**

The door to the barracks banged open, and Private Hays stuck his head inside. "Everybody fall in! The new commander's a-ridin' up!" he said, then popped back out to continue passing the message along to all those residing in the fort.

"Hell, I don't see what the big fuss is about," Rod Webster muttered, not moving from his bunk, "they probably sent us another no-account saber-rattler that Washington wants to lose out here in the middle of nowhere."

Walt Barstow nodded in agreement. "Sides that, we ain't enlisted men anyhow... why we gotta line up?"

"Cause the U.S. Army is payin' your room an' board." Windy hitched up his galluses, then grabbed his cowhide jacket as he headed for the door. "Y'all may be big-shot scouts when we's out on the trail, but when you're within these walls, the cavalry calls the tune, so get off your ass an' start dancin'." He stepped outside, leaving his fellow trackers to make themselves as presentable as trail-blasted hardcases like them could get, and walked across the compound to the open area before the front gate. Hex

was already there amongst the soldiers, which the older man was glad to see — unlike the other scouts, Jonah understood well that whomever was paying for his services was the one in charge, and if he was taking their money, he'd damn well better deliver what they asked for.

"So, whut yuh think, Windy?" Hex asked as his mentor fell into line beside him. "Reckon maybe we drew a commander whut ain't got all his frontier knowledge outta *Harper's Monthly*?"

"You want a sucker bet, talk to Croy," he replied. "Let's give this fella a few weeks afore we decide how useless he is." As he said this, the rest of the scouts came up, taking their places just as the soldiers at the gate made ready to open it for the incoming party. At the signal from a sentry in the watchtower, they threw the wooden gate wide, allowing passage for a white-haired colonel and a few mounted cavalrymen, along with a covered Conestoga wagon trundling along in the center of the group.

Major Franklin, who was currently in charge of the fort, called the assembled men to attention, then stepped forward and snapped off a brisk salute to the new C.O. "Sir! Welcome to Fort Andrews, Colonel Wainwright. All the men are present and accounted for, and awaiting your inspection."

"At ease, Major... and that goes for the rest of you, as well. I'll get around to shaking you boys down soon enough." The colonel dismounted and walked over to the wagon, offering a hand to a bonneted young lady sitting next to the driver.

Ernest Daniels, standing in line with the other scouts, whispered, "Who do you suppose that is? His wife?"

"Awful young for a wife," Webster said.

Another scout, Farrell Kincaid, added, "That don't stop most fellas... I know it wouldn't stop me." White Claw, a Shoshone who was close friends with Kincaid, stifled a laugh.

Hex ignored the chatter and watched as the colonel introduced the lady to the major. Unfortunately, the conversation was too low for him to make out. The three of them then began to make their way down the

line, Wainwright occasionally stopping to comment about one of the soldiers. The closer they came to Jonah, the more he couldn't help but stare at the young lady. She looked to be about the same age as himself, with shining blue eyes and soft curls of blond hair peeking out from beneath her bonnet. When he caught his gaze lingering along the curve of her body beneath her calico dress, he suddenly looked down at the ground, embarrassed — he didn't feel it was right to ogle another man's wife, no matter how pretty she was.

"And here we have our current compliment of scouts," Major Franklin said as the group approached Hex and the others, "probably the finest team we've ever had."

"They all look well-seasoned," the colonel replied, then stopped in front of Jonah and gave him a once-over. "You there... how long have you been out on the trails?"

Jonah lifted his head, but he was still so flustered from seeing the girl, he couldn't put together a decent response. Lucky for him, Windy chimed in with, "Hex here may be young, but he's got more experience under his belt than most scouts you may've run into."

Wainwright cocked an eyebrow. "Are you his father?"

"Me? Oh, no sir... but I couldn't be more proud of him if'n I was."

"Mr. Taylor and Mr. Hex here have been with us for going on five months now," Franklin interjected. "They're kind of a package deal."

"I see... well, I trust your judgment that the Army got their money's worth with these two, Major," the colonel said, then looked over the men one last time and nodded. "Everything appears to be in order. I look forward to seeing these boys in action." Pointing to some of the soldiers in line, he said, "You two men... I want you to start unloading the baggage from the wagon and moving it to my quarters — my daughter will tell you what's what with that. The rest of you men can fall out and return to your duties, the major and I will be in the main office."

*Daughter?* The thought barely had time to form in Jonah's head before the grounds became a tangle of soldiers once again, going about the tasks

that kept Fort Andrews running smoothly on a daily basis. The other scouts returned to their business as well, leaving Jonah and Windy on their own. "You all right, son?" the older man asked. "I know you ain't much of a talker, but the way you acted in front of the colonel... Hell, I thought you was gonna faint."

"Ah'm fine, it's just... " He paused, looking across the grounds at the girl standing by the wagon as the two soldiers unloaded it. "Did he say that's his daughter?"

Windy followed his gaze, then let out a laugh and clapped him on the back. "Lordy, Jonah boy, you sure can pick 'em! Ain't no way you're gonna be able to get a colonel's daughter."

"Ah never said nothin' bout gettin' her," he replied, going on the defensive, "Ah'm just makin' sure Ah heard the man right. It's important tuh know things like that."

"Sure thing, son. Just make sure the colonel don't catch you knowin'." He clapped Jonah on the back again, then turned to walk back to the barracks, leaving the young man to himself as he watched the girl from afar.

Her name was Cassandra, though most folks called her Cassie. That was the first thing Jonah found out about her in the weeks that followed. Her mother had died six years before, and she'd accompanied her father as he moved from one assignment to the next ever since. She seemed well-suited to Army life, and didn't fuss against stodgy military procedure like Jonah had seen other women do. He also noted that her presence affected more than just Hex: all the men appeared to be a bit more self-conscious when she walked into a room, standing a little straighter and watching their tongues so as not to cuss. He didn't know what it was about Cassie, but he couldn't stop thinking about her — it wasn't the first time he'd found himself daydreaming about a girl since losing White Fawn, though Cassie was certainly the first to hold his attention so completely that he had a hard time focusing on anything else. He'd remind himself that the colonel would probably boot him right out of the fort — or worse — if he tried anything, but the thoughts still surfaced. Jonah eventually decided that *thinking* about her wasn't bad, so long as he

didn't *act* on it.

That idea seemed to work well, until about a month after the Wainwrights arrived at the fort. Hex was in the stables brushing down his horse when he heard someone nearby clear their throat. He turned and saw the young lady standing outside the stall. "Cass... um, Ah mean... hello, Miss Wainwright," he said, fumbling with his hat as he spoke, "kin Ah help yuh with something?"

"Can you go on a ride with me?" The moment she said it, Jonah felt himself turn redder than his hair. "I don't think I can stand another day cooped up in this place," she continued, oblivious to his distress, "but Father insists that it's too dangerous to go out riding alone."

It took a moment for him to recover his voice, finally saying, "Yer father's right, ma'am. We's right up against Comanche territory out here, an' yo're... well, yo're just a little slip of a thing... "

"I'm eighteen, Mr. Hex, and quite capable of handling myself. Father's just being overprotective, that's all." She stepped into the stall proper. "But he can't object if one of his scouts accompanies me. So, is it possible that you could... "

He tried to say no, tried with all his might, but his heart sent a different message to his mouth before his brain could override it. "Sure... j-just let me saddle up a horse fer yuh."

Jonah picked out a mare with a gentle temperament, and after readying his own horse, the two of them rode out the main gate, more than a few soldiers watching them as they went. He did his best to not look guilty, though he certainly felt so. Here he was, riding alongside the colonel's daughter all by his lonesome, staring at the bit of leg showing on her as she rode sidesaddle instead of keeping an eye out for trouble. *Yo're a real skunk, Jonah boy*, he said to himself. *This gal asks a favor of yuh, an' y'all cain't quit gawkin' fer five goddam seconds*. He tried to keep his mind on the task at hand as they rode further away from the fort, the grassy plain sloping down towards a wooded grove.

"The countryside out here certainly is beautiful, don't you think, Mr. Hex?" Cassie said after a while. "The land just seems to go on forever."

"Huh?" Jonah snapped to attention at the sound of her voice. "Oh... yes'm, it's real nice. Frankly, Ah don't see how some folks kin stand bein' all closed up in them big towns like Ah hear they have back east."

"You've never been east, Mr. Hex?"

"No ma'am, Ah'm a Texas boy, born an' bred... ain't never even been close enough tuh the Mississippi tuh spit in it." He immediately regretted saying such a vulgar thing in front of her, but when she began to laugh, it put him at ease. "Ah take it yuh is an Easterner, ma'am?"

She nodded, saying, "My family comes from Virginia, though it's been quite a few years since I've seen it. The Army has been moving Father around so much lately... "

"Yuh miss it?"

"Sometimes. Mostly I miss Jeb."

Jonah's heart sank. "Oh... Ah'm sorry, Ah didn't know yuh had a sweet-heart back home."

"No, Jeb's my cousin," Cassie explained, laughing again. "We grew up together, but after Mother died, I began to see him less and less. We still keep in touch through the post, though."

"Good," he said a bit too quickly, then eased off. "Ah mean it's good thet y'all write an' such." Hex tried to recall the last time he'd seen his own cousins — before Pa dumped him with the Apache, to be sure, but beyond that, he couldn't remember.

They fell silent for a while as their path took them under the trees, Cassie turning her face up towards the dappled sunlight, admiring the woodland and listening to birdsong. Once again, Jonah found himself focusing more on her than the land around them. Her head was uncovered today, and her blonde hair seemed to shine in the sun. He wondered if she had any clue about the sort of effect she had on him. *Probably wouldn't give a fella like me a second thought... a gal like her's more'n likely had all sorts of officers an' such tryin' tuh spark up with her.* Jonah shook his head slightly to

clear it, and fixed his eyes on the trail. *Just quit it, boy, an' do yer job.*

Soon after, the path opened up on a small spring, and they dismounted so the horses could rest and take a drink. "My goodness," Cassie breathed, "this place looks so... unspoiled, like no one's ever been here before."

"Ah'm sure thet ain't true, Miss Wainwright. Like Ah said afore, this here's Comanche territory." Jonah turned his back to her and hunkered down, inspecting one of the horse's hooves — the shoe appeared to be loosening, and he made a mental note to fix that once they got back. "Ah'm sure if'n yuh look close enough," he continued, "yuh'll see signs of 'em passin' on through here. Best stay close by, just in case they's out an' about." He then got an odd feeling crawling up the back of his neck. He turned around, and Cassie was nowhere in sight. *Oh Lord*, he thought, then called out, "Miss Wainwright?" but there was no answer. Jonah dashed over to where he last saw her standing, and found the faint depressions of her low-heeled boots in the earth at the water's edge — they led off into the wood, away from the path they'd rode in on. *Don't panic, Jonah, yuh only looked away fer a moment. She couldn't have gotten far.* He headed in the direction of the footprints, looking for bent grass and other indicators that he was on the right track. Lucky for him, Cassie had made no attempt to hide her passing, and he soon found her standing beside a tree, looking out on another opening in the woodland... where a group of four Comanche warriors had gathered, all of them armed.

The young man froze. The Comanche didn't appear to have noticed her yet, thank God, but if they did... Jonah's mind suddenly fled back to that meeting of chiefs five years before, and how the Comanche leaders present had lobbied hardest for vengeance against the whites. Having fought both with and against Indians, he knew very well what could possibly happen. Taking great care, he crept up behind Cassie, and when she was within reach, he grabbed her from behind and clamped a hand over her mouth. She tried to scream, and he held her even tighter, whispering in her ear, "Back up slowly, little girl, or else we's in a world of trouble." Jonah then began to walk backward, the young lady pressed close to him as he did so, and his eyes glued on the braves in the clearing. So far, the Comanche hadn't even looked in their direction — judging from what Jonah could make out of their conversation, they appeared to be tracking a wounded deer they'd shot at. *Just so long as it*

*didn't run off the way we came, Ah reckon we'll be alright*, he thought. Then his boot caught on a fallen tree branch, giving way with a dry snap.

From behind Hex's hand, a small squeak escaped Cassie's mouth as one of the Indians turned their way. "Pick up yer feet," Jonah whispered to her and, not giving a damn about decorum, wrapped his other arm around her belly to lift her up. Still stepping backwards, he quickly carried her behind a stout tree and shoved her down onto the ground, then got on top of her, hoping that his dark buckskin coat would disguise them amongst the dead leaves and other detritus on the forest floor. He looked directly into Cassie's frightened eyes and mouthed, "Be still," then as slowly as he could, he reached down and unholstered one of his Colts, holding it close to his body to hide the glint of metal.

Jonah could hear the Comanches entering the wood, their moccasin-clad feet barely disturbing the ground cover. They spoke in low voices, unaware that what they searched for could understand every word. Thumb resting on the hammer of his gun, Hex waited for one to come into view, praying to God that he wouldn't have to kill anyone today, not with this poor girl laying here beneath him. He saw a dark-haired head begin to peek around the tree trunk, pausing to listen, his rifle held before him. While Cassie couldn't see what Jonah saw from her position, she could feel the young man's body tense, his eyes growing cold and dark.

Then a voice called out in Comanche from the other end of the wood: the quarry had been spotted, and was floundering as it tried to escape the hunters. The brave backed away from their hiding place, joining his companions in pursuit of the deer. Jonah remained in position until he was sure the Indians were well out of earshot, then holstered his iron and rolled off of her. "Forgive me, Miss Wainwright," he said, "but if'n they'd spotted us... "

Cassie said nothing, simply reached out with trembling hands and took hold of his shirt and pulled herself close. Soon, her whole body was shaking as she sobbed against his chest. Jonah didn't move, unsure of just what to do at first, then folded his arms around her, holding her much more gently than he'd done just moments before. "It's alright, little girl, they're gone," he told her. "Ah swear, Ah never would've let 'em hurt yuh."

"Oh God, I was suh... s-so scared. When I saw them, I didn't... I didn't know if I... "

"Yuh did fine. Yuh stayed quiet, an' yuh listened good tuh me. If'n Ah hadn't misstepped, we would've gotten away clean." He stroked her hair, brushing away bits of leaves stuck to the back of her head. Then, before he even realized he was doing it, he pushed aside the locks of hair hanging over her forehead and kissed her there. Cassie's breath hitched as the tears slowed down, and Jonah tilted her face up towards his and kissed away the few that remained on her cheeks. In the back of his mind, a voice told him to stop, he shouldn't do this, but he ignored it, heeding instead the heat growing in his chest and belly, the fire he'd been trying in vain to snuff ever since he first laid eyes on Cassie.

She looked upon him, blue eyes framed by a smooth creamy complexion, soft pink lips forming his name: "Hex... "

"Jonah," he replied, "call me Jonah."

A smile, so demure but speaking volumes. "Only if you call me Cassie."

"Yes'm." A smile of his own, feeling unfamiliar on his face — he hadn't smiled at any girl like that since White Fawn. But she was gone, lost somewhere out on the frontier, and Cassie was before him, laying back beneath the tree, pulling him down with her. He pressed his mouth over hers, kissing long and deep, not caring about the consequences anymore, just focusing on that one perfect moment, and the perfect woman he was sharing it with.

When they returned to Fort Andrews an hour later, none of the men outwardly suspected anything was amiss, but many noticed the odd smile that refused to leave Jonah's lips for the rest of the day.

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Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 1 (of 4): Once Upon a Time in Texas.

The origin of Jonah Hex begins here! Before he could become the most feared bounty hunter in the Old West, he had to survive childhood. You're guaranteed to never look at the man the same way again!

Weird Western Quarterly #3 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 3 (of 4): Life During Wartime.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! He's finally got the life he wants, but will Jonah be able to keep it when war breaks out between North and South? Sides are taken, choices are made, and Hex dons a familiar-looking uniform for the first time!

Weird Western Quarterly #4 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 4 (of 4): When Jonah Comes Marching Home.

The final chapter in the origin of Jonah Hex! As the Civil War ends, Hex's new life begins, but first he faces an old enemy for the last time. It's the moment you've all been waiting for, and it ain't pretty! Don't say we didn't warn you!

Weird Western Quarterly #5 (2007)

Nighthawk: 'Til Things Are Brighter.

The soul of the Egyptian prince known as Khufu has passed through many lives, and, in each one, he's been a force for good... or has he? For the first time anywhere, it's the untold origin of Nighthawk!

Weird Western Quarterly #6 (2007)

The Vigilante: A Lonely Soldier Away From Home

Weird Western Quarterly #7 (2007)

## Bat Lash: In for a Penny, In for a Pounding

Weird Western Quarterly #8 (2007)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind, Part 1 (of 2) - Secrets.

Before Barry Allen, before Jay Garrick, another man had been granted the power of the Speed Force. But who he was before he'd obtained those powers has always been a mystery...until now. A young man's quest for answers becomes entangled in magic and riddles in the first half of this 2-part tale!

Weird Western Quarterly #12 (2008)

It's the first annual Christmas issue of Weird Western Quarterly featuring a holiday tale with the Old West speedster, Windrunner as well as a Jonah Hex vignette, "Prelude to a Reckoning."

Weird Western Quarterly #9 (2008)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind Part 2 (of 2) - Revelations.

Special extra-large issue! Torn between civilization and the wilderness, Chris Maxwell tries to find out where he fits...but when a strange old Indian shaman enters his life, he finds himself thrust into a power struggle beyond anything he can imagine, and a new legend of the West is born in a flash!

Justice League #15 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 1 (of 3).

What starts as a typical day for a group of Leaguers turns deadly as they are attacked by an unknown enemy. Who is the Lord of Time, and what diabolical scheme does he have that threatens both the past and the present with destruction? You won't want to miss what happens at the end of this issue!

Weird Western Quarterly #10 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 2 (of 3).

It's 1878: Do you know where your heroes are? Lost in time, their memories gone, four members of the Justice League have been marked for death by the Lord of Time. And if they want to make it out of this one alive, they're gonna have to rely on the kindness of strangers...namely Jonah Hex, Scalphunter, Bat Lash, and making her DC2 debut, Cinnamon!

Justice League #16 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 3 (of 3).

It's past and present versus the future as the Justice League teams up with some of the greatest heroes of the Old West to take down the Lord of Time! Can they stop his scheme before it's too late, or will Arizona be blown right off the map?

Weird Western Quarterly #13 (2009)

Jonah Hex: Children of Heaven

When Jonah Hex gets caught up in a fight between Chinese railroad workers and their white bosses, he thinks it's a pretty straightforward affair. But after meeting a young Chinese woman named Mei Ling, his life gets more complicated than he likes.

Weird Western Quarterly #16 (2009)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Better Part of Valor.

Rogues Gallery #17 (2009)

Rogues Gallery: El Diablo.

Legends of the Old West still resonate even today. One of the most persistent legends is of El Diablo and Lazarus Lane.

Journey with us back in time to the yesteryear of the Old West... as Rogues Gallery continues to put its spotlight on our guest writers...

This time by the acclaimed Susan Hillwig.

Weird Western Quarterly #20 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Reckoning.

Driven to the brink by the events of the previous issue, Jonah Hex goes on the warpath...but at what cost?

Weird Western Quarterly #19 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: Domestic Disturbance.

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #1 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: The First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

The Blackest Night is over, and the Brightest Day has begun for twelve newly-resurrected people...but unbeknownst to all, there's a thirteenth person that got brought back as well. A hero to some,

a villain to others, Jonah Hex once again walks amongst the living, and Death itself is a closer companion than ever!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #2 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: Back In Black.

Wait a minute, how in blazes can we have a second issue if Hex was killed in the first? Well, y'see, that's the funny thing...

What, you think we're gonna spoil the surprise here? Go read the issue and find out for yourself!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #3 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray.

What started out as a quiet visit to Paradise Corners has turned into a big mess, and now Jonah has to decide between running for his life or making up for past mistakes.

Weird Western Quarterly #21 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: Brothers in Arms.

In the midst of the Civil War, Scalphunter and Matt Savage try to help a mysterious black woman ferrying slaves out of the South, while circumstances beyond their control threaten to drive the brothers apart.

Weird Western Quarterly #22 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?

Bat Lash once again crosses paths with Penny "Dreadful" Dreasney. Has the gambler learned his lesson from their last encounter? Yeah, I don't think so either.

Weird Western Quarterly #23 (2012)

Weird Western Quarterly: At War With the Devil, Part One.

As the North and the South begin to clash, Windrunner finds himself on the front lines of a different, more personal war. When the smoke clears at the end of this issue, you'll know this is only the beginning of a battle that's been a long time coming.



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