



Weird Western Quarterly #4
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1863:

Captain Bates hadn't been asleep more than a few hours when there was a knock on the door to his quarters. He tried to ignore it, pulling the quilt over his head, but whomever was making that racket wouldn't let up. "For God's sake," he growled, "can't you morons do anything by yourselves around here?" The captain had been in charge of Fort Charlotte since the death of the former C.O. a month before, and he soon realized that running this hellhole was possibly the worst job a soldier could get. Calling it a fort was almost a joke: a ramshackle collection of buildings surrounded by high walls made of split logs, Fort Charlotte had been hastily built by the Union forces when it began to gain a foothold in the area. Unfortunately, as often happens in war, the battlefields slowly moved away from there, but the encampment remained. As a result, the Federals simply didn't have the means to keep the place up to snuff like the posts closer to the fighting (and therefore the Union supply lines) so the troops still stationed there were virtually on their own. This made things especially hard on the captain, who soon found that, just as the fort got the worst in supplies, it also got some of the least-disciplined men in the whole Army. Within the first week, Captain Bates decided that someone in Washington must truly hate him.

The knocking continued. Conceding defeat, the captain tossed back the covers and, clad in nothing but a nightshirt, he yanked open the door leading out to the compound. A few choice curses were about to fly from his lips at whomever dared to interrupt what little rest he got around here when he realized that the man before him was wearing Confederate gray. The captain clutched at his chest, his eyes wide, and gasped, "Good Lord, we've been overrun."

"You all right, sir?" the Yankee private standing beside the Rebel asked, then looked at the "invader", saying, "Told you wakin' him up was a bad

idea."

Bates gawked at the two of them for a moment. "W-what's going on around here? I didn't hear any shots... how many are inside the fort?"

"Just him, sir. He done rode right up to the front gate an' asked to see the commanding officer. Said he was surrendering."

"Thet's right, sir... Lt. Jonah Hex, 7th Virginia Cavalry," the Confederate soldier added, snapping off a salute as he did so. "Figured it weren't right tuh turn muhself over tuh yer subordinates, so Ah requested thet they bring me tuh y'all." He gave the captain a quick once-over. "Sorry Ah didn't give yuh more warnin'."

The private stifled a laugh, and Bates glared at him. He then noticed that many of the soldiers walking the perimeter that night were looking in his direction, and some of them weren't as subdued as the private before him. "If you two could give me a moment?" the captain said, then shut the door. When it reopened a few minutes later, he stepped out into the compound fully dressed, though a button or two had been missed in his haste. Doing to his best to recover his dignity, he turned to the Reb and said, "Now then, Lieutenant... Hex, was it? I believe you said you wish to surrender."

Hex nodded, and removed both the sidearm and officer's sword from his belt, handing them over to the captain. He then took a step back, placed his hat over his chest in a submissive gesture, and said with a note of reluctance, "Ah'm at yer mercy, sir... an' Ah hope yuh'll remember thet Ah came here of muh own free will."

"Of course... though exactly why you did is a bit of a puzzler to me. I've heard about you boys in the 7th — you fight like hellcats. You don't strike me as someone who'd give up so easily."

"Ah've got muh reasons." The man's tone of voice didn't invite discussion.

"And what of the others in your unit? Can I expect any of them to come knocking on my door as well?" The captain smirked. "Or perhaps you'd be willing to point me their direction so I can beat them to it?"

Hex's gaze went as cold as his voice. "Sir, Ah may be willin' tuh turn muhself in, but Ah ain't about tuh betray muh friends, no matter whut Ah may think of this damn war."

"A man of principles, eh? Not surprising: you Southern boys are nothing if not stubborn." He looked to the private, saying, "Lock him up for the night. When morning comes, we'll figure out what to do with him." With a nod, the soldier did as he was ordered and led Hex away. Trying to ignore the stares still coming from the guards on the perimeter, the captain returned to his quarters. *Hell of a night*, he thought as he laid down the Confederate's weapons — they'd make fine souvenirs when this whole mess was over with — and began to remove his uniform. He'd just finished pulling off his boots when someone knocked on his door once again. Cursing, he threw his uniform jacket back on and answered the door barefoot. "Now what?" he snapped at the sergeant before him.

"Sorry, sir, but we may have found something that'll help us track down that Reb's regiment." He stepped aside, revealing a colored man standing behind him — since the Proclamation went into effect two weeks before, more than a few Negroes had shown up on their doorstep, asking to be taken in. Bates, while a Northerner, couldn't abide colored folk, and managed to ship off most of them to encampments that could spare the rations to feed them, but some that displayed useful skills were allowed to remain at Fort Charlotte, performing the same menial tasks as "free men" that they spent their whole lives doing as slaves. The sergeant grabbed the man by the arm and yanked him forward, saying, "Tell him."

The former slave cast his eyes to the ground as he said, "I was bunkin' out over by the corral when that johnny-reb came in, so's they brung me that hoss he rode in on. They said, 'Strip the saddle an' rub 'im down,' so's I did that... "

"Is there a damn point to this?" Bates snapped.

The colored man flinched, but managed to continue. "I was cleanin' off the hoss's hooves, suh, an' I saw a lot of red clay mashed in 'tween the shoes an' splashed up the legs. That Reb had rode through a mess of it, an' recent too. I don't know how it is up North, suh, but red clay's pretty

common down South... 'cept 'round these parts. Nearest place I can figure for him tuh have rode through tuh get so much on his hoss is Henderson Plateau. That's a marshy patch of land less'n thirty miles south of here, suh."

The captain's expression brightened — there had been a skirmish not far from there yesterday. "Are you suggesting that he and his men might have been camped out around there?"

"It's possible, suh, that's why I told the sergeant 'bout it."

"With your permission, sir," the sergeant said, "I'd like to take some men out that way under cover of darkness. If we're lucky, they might still be in the area, and we'll able to get the jump on them before they even know we're there."

"Granted." Bates started to grin. "Seems only fair that we rouse them out of bed as well."

Don't seem tuh matter which side yo're fightin' on, Jonah thought as he looked at the sorry excuse for breakfast before him, *neither one of us is exactly eatin' like kings.* He was sitting on a crate outside the building the Union boys used for their mess hall, trying to choke down a bowlful of some sort of boiled grain — the guard who gave it to him called it "bully soup," and Jonah hoped that the godawful mush wasn't standard camp fare. He really didn't have much appetite anyways, being too tired to think about eating. While they'd provided him with a place to bunk down the night before, he'd laid awake most of the time, thinking of what might happen to him now. He'd heard a lot a things about the prisoner of war camps, both Union and Confederate, and none of them pleasant. Of course, it was a bit late to be having second thoughts now, so he'd just have to stick it out no matter what.

If nothing else, his short time in Fort Charlotte so far was proving educational. Though he was under constant watch by an armed guard, he was given the freedom to move around the compound, and he'd quickly noticed the Negroes working here and there. He also noticed that the majority of these billy-yanks had no qualms about talking just as harshly to them as any Southern overseer would. One soldier even went so far as to strike a colored woman across the face for some unknown offense — the

sight of that made Hex tense up, and it was an effort to hold himself in check and not run over to belt the Yankee in return. *Ain't it funny*, he said to himself, *thet the same damn folks whut is fightin' tuh free these folk kin be just as cruel as us Southerners is said tuh be. Makes yuh wonder just how free they's really gonna be if'n the North wins.* Those sort of things, however, were no longer his concern: he'd taken himself out of the fight, and it was now up to the thousands of other soldiers slogging through the endless battles to decide the collective fate of the Negro in America.

Hex was about to give up on eating when he saw Captain Bates walking his way, a smile on his face and two tin cups in his hands. "Take a break, Corporal," he said to the guard, "I want to speak to the lieutenant in private." The guard ducked into the mess hall, and Bates handed Jonah one of the cups. "Here, this'll make that slop go down easier."

Jonah took a sip, then pulled the cup away, staring at it. "This is coffee... *real* coffee..." He and his men had drank nothing but chicory during the whole war, and there was no mistaking one for the other. "Damn, Ah think Ah'm gonna enjoy bein' a prisoner," he said.

"Don't get too used to it," Bates replied. "This is from my own personal stash, and it cost me dear to get it." He took a sip from his own cup. "But I figured I could spare a little for a fellow officer... especially one that's helped out the Union in such a big way." His smile got a bit wider.

Hex gave the man a sideways glance as he drank his coffee — what in tarnation was *that* supposed to mean? He then heard a commotion from the direction of the front gates. "Well, I wonder what that could be... shall we go have a look?" the captain said, and slipped a hand under Hex's armpit and pulled him to his feet. The two of them walked across the compound, nearly arm-in-arm, until the gates came into view. The sight before them made Jonah gawk: both his and Jeb's platoons were being marched into the fort, many of them barefoot or missing parts of their uniform — they hadn't even the time to get fully dressed before the enemy had swooped down upon their camp. The mounted Federals surrounding them took swipes at the unarmed men with their rifle butts or the flat of their cavalry swords as they herded them through the gate like sheep.

A Union officer rode up beside the two of them, grinning just as much as

Bates was. "It worked, sir! We managed to round up the whole lot of them without firing a shot!"

"Good work, Sergeant. Of course, I can't give you all the credit." The captain then turned to Hex, saying in a loud voice, "I really must thank you, Lieutenant. If it wasn't for you, we never would have even known about all you Rebs hiding out there in the marsh. You've done a great service to the Union, and I'll see that you're aptly rewarded."

"Yuh two-faced sonovabitch," Hex growled, "Ah didn't do a damn thing fer yuh!" He shook loose from the captain's grip and made to strike him, but the sergeant intervened, pointing the barrel of his rifle directly at Jonah's face. He backed up, glaring at the two Federals, and suddenly found himself grabbed from behind by his own men.

"Goddam traitor!" one of them yelled, and punched Jonah in the stomach. Another struck him from behind, and a third blow skirted across his jaw, all the while men screamed at him, spat on him. Hex fought back, of course, fists connecting with whomever dared come near him — he had the advantage of a few hours rest, while the other soldiers had spent hours in a forced march, but he was soon overwhelmed by sheer numbers and fell to the ground. That didn't discourage the men from taking out their frustrations on him, kicking and pummeling and not giving a damn that they were willing to follow Hex into battle barely a day before. He was no longer a superior officer to them, no longer a countryman... he was a turncoat, a Yankee boot-licker, and they weren't about to let him get away with his betrayal.

The Union men broke it up after a few minutes, forcing the angry Rebs off of him. They continued to hurl epithets at Jonah as he lay there, his uniform torn and blood dripping from his nose and mouth. Captain Bates came over to him and knelt down, the smile on his face now quite humorless. "That's what you get for embarrassing me in front of my own men, you stinking grayback," he whispered, then stood up and said to the sergeant, "Let's get these men under lock and key — there's an empty barracks on the east side of the compound that'll work just fine for that. As for our dear lieutenant... make sure he gets the finest accommodations we have to offer."

As the Confederates were moved to their new quarters, two Yankees

dragged Hex to an old storage shed not much bigger than an outhouse — it had been used in the past as solitary confinement for unruly soldiers, and the captain felt it would serve just fine to hold Jonah until they could transfer him and the others to a proper prisoner of war camp. They tossed him in like he was a sack of potatoes, and Hex landed with all the grace of one. "Hey, don't forget your hat, johnny!" one of the soldiers cackled, and threw it in his face before shutting the door and latching it tight.

Slowly, Jonah pushed himself up to a sitting position — every inch of his body was wracked with pain, but worst of all was the pain in his mind. He'd come to Fort Charlotte in the hopes that he could do the honorable thing, and it had all blown up in his face. It was bad enough to discover that the Yankee soldiers cared as little about the promises Lincoln made in the Proclamation as his fellow Southerners did, but the notion that his surrender might have inadvertently caused his men to be captured was something he didn't wish to linger on. *How the Hell did Ah manage tuh get muhself into such a mess?* he thought. *There's got tuh be a way tuh fix this, but damned if Ah know whut it is.* He wrapped a moth-eaten blanket around his shoulders to shield himself from the cold and leaned back against the wall. There was nothing he could do now but wait and hope a solution would present it self.

Hours passed, and Jonah fell into a sort of half-sleep as exhaustion began to overtake him. His mind drifted to places far from the battlefield, all the way back to the West — it seemed like another life now. Somewhere between a dream and a memory, he rode his horse across wide open plains, under skies unclouded by gunsmoke. The wind blowing past him smelled fresh, not tainted by blood and sweat. He turned his face up to the sun and felt its warmth, and he began to reach a hand up towards it, as if he could pluck it out of the sky and keep it in his pocket...

Then there was pain, a gnawing pain in his fingers. He jerked awake, back to the reality of imprisonment, and saw a rat beside his hand resting on the ground — it was nibbling at the tips of his fingers. With a grunt, he took a swipe at the rat, and it backed up, staring at him with beady eyes. "Beat it!" he said, and tried to kick the pest. It finally took the hint and scurried away to the back wall of the shed and slipped though with no hesitation. To Jonah, it didn't look like there was enough room to do such a thing, rat or no. Having nothing better to occupy his time, he

laid flat against the shed's earthen floor to give it a closer look, expecting to see a gap in the boards making up the wall. Instead, he found that the ground there wasn't hard-packed like in the rest of the shed, making it easy for a little rat to burrow through so it could slip under the wall. In fact, at ground level, he could plainly see the hole the rat's passing had left — he could also see the perimeter fence not more than two feet away from the shed. Tired and hurting though he was, the wheels in Jonah's head began to turn. *Ain't gonna be easy, he thought, but the ground here's so loose, Ah think Ah kin manage tuh dig right underneath this here wall. An' the backside of this is so close tuh the fence, ain't nobody gonna notice whut Ah'm doin' less'n they're standin' right on top of it.* A smile played across his lips. *Thet damn captain thinks he's so smart... wonder how smart he'll feel when he finds out me an' the boys done lit outta here when he wasn't lookin.'*

Jonah had begun to push as much loose earth away from the wall as he could when he heard the latch on the door rattle. He spun around and saw the shadow of a man through the cracks in the boards. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed the blanket and tossed it over the hole just as the guard opened the door, a bowl in his hand. "Suppertime," he said.

"Thanks," Hex mumbled, trying his best to not move from his spot on the floor. The soldier handed the bowl over, hesitating for just a moment before letting go, then stepped back out of the shed. Jonah looked in the bowl and made a face — more bully soup. *Good thing Ah ain't stickin' 'round,* he thought as he put the food aside, *a man could starve tuh death in this here place.*

"What?"

"He's digging his way out, I swear to God," the guard said as he stood before Captain Bates' desk. "You may not believe it, but we had something like this happen a couple months before you arrived. There was this big fella named Luke... used to get drunk a lot, and he'd get kind of crazy, so we'd toss him in there 'til he got sober. Last time we did, Luke went and dug right under the damn shed so's he could get out, but he was so big, his shoulders got stuck." The soldier paused, laughing. "We found him the next morning chewing on the wall to make more room. After that, we said to Hell with him and shipped him out."

"And what does a ridiculous story like that have to do with our current prisoner?"

The guard stopped laughing. "Um... well, sir, I noticed that he had his blanket wadded up in the same place where Luke had dug out. I mean, we filled in the hole right after, but maybe we didn't do as good a job as we thought."

That wouldn't be the first time for you men, Bates silently mused, then said to the guard, "Do you think there's a chance the Reb can get out like that?"

"Well, he's skinner than Luke was... plus he's sober... so he's got better odds. You want me to move him in with the other prisoners to be sure?"

"Of course I want you to..." The captain stopped as he was struck by an idea. "Actually, Corporal, leave him be. In fact, cancel the night watch for both him and the others."

"But, sir, if he gets out, he'll probably head straight for his men and..."

"I know that, and I *want* him to do so. We have enough problems around this fort that we shouldn't have to deal with feeding and housing a bunch of unruly Rebels. The War Department says we have to, of course, but it also says that we can take necessary action if they try to escape. So, if Lieutenant Hex manages to break himself and his fellow prisoners out... we'd simply have no choice but to shoot them all."

The guard's eyes widened. "Sir, you're talking about a slaughter!"

"This is a *war*, Corporal, and they are the *enemy*. Do you suddenly have a problem with shooting the enemy?" The soldier said nothing, and Bates nodded. "Good. Now let's go and arrange a little surprise for our departing guests."

That should do fine, he thought, and decided it was time to try it out. He lay on his back inside the shallow trench, his head pointing at the way out, then braced his hands on the underside of the wall and began to pull himself through. Slowly, he inched his way through the trench, first his

head, then his shoulders... then he was stuck, his arms pinned to his chest.

Not enough room... aw no, Lord, don't let this happen tuh me! He kicked his legs, trying to gain leverage against the shed floor, until he popped out like a cork from a bottle. Unfortunately, he also rammed his head against one of the logs making up the perimeter fence — Jonah lay on his side for a few minutes, doing his best not to groan out loud. Once he stopped seeing stars, he reached back through the hole, grabbed his hat, and began to move through the shadows. The captain had told the Union men to move the prisoners to a barracks on the east end, but Hex had no idea which building that was, and he really wasn't in a position to just poke his head through every door. Carefully, he made his way across the compound, until he found a long, windowless building with a wooden bar bracing the entrance on the outside. It seemed the most likely place he'd come across so far, but he was surprised to find no guard. In fact, he hadn't spotted a single Yankee the entire time. Shrugging it off as dumb luck, Jonah knelt down beside the door for a moment to listen — though muffled, he recognized the voices within as belonging to his men. *Alright, Jonah boy,* he thought as he began to lift the bar, *time tuh straighten this mess out.*

To their credit, the Rebs didn't jump on top of Hex the second they saw him, but the tension in the room certainly went way up. Every man looked haggard, their tattered uniforms not helping the image, and Jonah noticed that even the injured men had been tossed in there — the Yankees didn't seem to care that they needed medical attention. "What the Hell are you doing in here?" one of the soldiers nearby growled at him. "You decide to stop by and gloat?"

"Maybe he wants a little more of what we gave 'im out in the yard," said another, cracking his knuckles and advancing on Hex. "An' I'll be happy to oblige 'im."

"That's enough, Rufe." Jeb stepped forward and laid a hand on the man's shoulder to restrain him. "Nobody is going to touch him without my say-so." He turned to his friend, and Jonah could see the hurt in his eyes as he said, "Please tell me you've got a good explanation for this."

"Ah wish Ah had one. Truth tuh tell, Ah ain't got the foggiest notion how

they found yuh. Ah swear on Cassie's grave, Ah didn't tell these cussed bluebellies anything more'n muh name an' rank." He looked past Jeb to the other men. "Ah ain't no traitor, despite how things look. Hell, Ah didn't even know y'all was bein' brought in 'til they marched yuh on through the gate."

"Bullshit!" a man near the back yelled. "You an' that Yankee captain was practically holdin' hands when we came in!" A chorus of voices rose up in agreement.

"Button it, all of ya!" Jeb ordered. "If Jonah says he didn't sell us out, then I believe him."

"Fat lot of good that does us," Rufe muttered, "we're still stuck in here."

"No yuh ain't. We's breakin' out of here, right this minute." The Rebs stared at Hex as he said, "Ah dug muh way outta where they was holdin' me, an' Ah crossed over half this compound all by muh lonesome, without so much as one Yank jumpin' out tuh say boo." He jerked a thumb at the closed door behind him. "These idiots ain't even got a guard on duty out here! All's we have tuh do is get through the fence, an' we're home free!"

A murmur of disbelief ran through the men — it couldn't be that easy, could it? — but Jonah soon swayed them. The two lieutenants split them into groups of five, each containing one of the wounded men so none would be left behind, then they headed out across the compound to the perimeter fence. Jonah led the first group to an area he'd noticed while looking for the barracks: a few of the wall's split logs had begun to rot, and the Union soldiers had made a poor attempt at patching up the damage with boards and nails. "Grab hold an' pull like Hell," Jonah told the men, "while Ah go get the next group." He retraced his steps, ducking from the shadow of one building to the next, until the others came into view — he waved them over and led them to the same spot, then began the process all over again. By the time the third group made it over, the men had worked most of the boards free, and they squeezed through the narrow opening one at a time.

Finally, the last group made the journey, Jeb taking up the rear. Once all the enlisted men were safely on the other side, the two lieutenants

passed through the gap in the fence themselves. Beyond it lay an open field with a line of trees in the distance — the Rebels were making a beeline for it as quickly as they could. “We’re not in the clear yet,” Jeb said to his friend as they began to run towards the woods. “We still have to find our regiment.”

“We will,” Hex replied, “but the important thing right now is that we...” His words were cut off as a bell sounded out in the fort behind them. He stopped and turned towards it, seeing a Union man in a lookout tower ringing away. *Where in the blue Hell did he come from?* Jonah thought — the whole time, he’d kept an eye on the towers, and there hadn’t been any soldiers in sight. Even worse than the bell were the words the Yankee was calling out:

“Here they come! Open fire!”

All around them, the night lit up with muzzle flashes, followed by the deadly din on gunfire. The Southern boys closest to the woods were hit first, twisting in mid-stride and falling to the ground as the Yankees hidden there unloaded on them. Along the walls of Fort Charlotte, riflemen popped up and took care of those still near the fence — Hex threw himself to the ground, bullets whizzing past his head. Not far away, another soldier saw him laying there and temporarily forgot their peril, yelling, “You bastard, you set us up! I’m gonna...” He never got to finish his threat: one of the riflemen had zeroed in on his voice and sent a ball of lead through his skull.

Gotta keep movin’, he thought. Slowly, he began to crawl along the ground in the direction of the trees, past the bodies of fallen comrades, some of whom were still alive and screaming. One of the screams sounded too familiar to ignore, and he turned towards it to find Jeb curled in a fetal position only a few feet away. Hex scrambled over to his side, not caring if he attracted attention to himself. The young man had caught a bullet in the stomach, and the front of his uniform looked black in the moonlight. “No,” Jonah gasped as he knelt in the grass and lifted his friend’s trembling body into his arms. “Please, Lord, no, not him...”

“Why... why...” Jeb asked weakly, tears in his eyes.

“It ain’t muh fault, Ah swear tuh God Almighty it ain’t. Tell me yuh

believe me... please... " But his friend just kept on asking "Why?" It seemed all he was capable of saying.

The gunshots died down, the intervals between becoming longer as the targets became fewer, but Jonah paid little attention to them — his focus was on Jeb, on the blood seeping from between his friend's lips and rolling down his chin. It wasn't until he heard the sound of horses that he lifted his head and saw Captain Bates before him, sitting tall in the saddle beside three other cavalymen. "Once again, I have you to thank, Lieutenant," Bates said to him as they dismounted. "Because of your escape attempt, the Federals now have three dozen less prisoners to worry about, and yet I still get the credit for capturing all of them. Of course, I wouldn't dream of not giving you a proper reward for your assistance in all this." He smiled and drew his sidearm.

From somewhere deep within Hex, a growl rose up, a purely animalistic noise unlike anything they'd ever heard before. He let go of Jeb, then leapt up and grabbed the captain's gun hand with his right, pointing it at the ground as he slid neatly behind him, his left arm wrapping around the Union officer's throat. The other soldiers raised their weapons, but before they could do anything more, Hex forced the pistol up and took aim, his own nimble fingers pushing the captain's aside as he cocked and fired three times — all the bullets struck home, and the cavalymen fell to the earth.

"Oh, dear God," Bates moaned. The speed at which Hex had moved didn't seem humanly possible, but the proof was laying at his feet. The gunshots had caught the attention of the other soldiers, but they were too far away, and the Confederate still had him in his grip. "Please, I'm begging you, don't kill me."

Jonah leaned close to the captain's ear — the way he was holding the man from behind, they looked like lovers performing a particularly salacious dance move. "Reckon that depends."

"D-depends on what?"

He moved the gun, still held within their mutual grip, towards Bates' stomach and jammed the barrel into the man's crotch. "On whether or not yuh bleed tuh death."

Bates started howling before Hex even pulled the trigger, and it only got worse afterward. The Rebel let him drop to the ground, then grabbed one of the horses and propped Jeb up on it before climbing into the saddle himself. The Union soldiers were within firing range now, and let out a barrage as the two of them rode away at top speed towards the woods. Jonah felt a bullet slam into his shoulder, but he paid it no mind as they galloped past trees and jumped deadfalls. Jeb sat in front of him, his head sagging to his chest, and Jonah had to keep an arm wrapped tightly around him so he'd stay upright. "C'mon, cousin, stay with me," Jonah said, "we're gonna get outta this, yuh'll see, just *hold on*."

On they rode, darkness fading to gray winter dawn. By that time, Jonah had come across a dirt road, and he'd decided to risk following it, as they'd lost sight of the Federals hours before. The horse, nearing the point of exhaustion, moved at a slow, staggering pace down the road, and Jonah himself struggled to stay conscious — he occasionally managed a word or two of encouragement for Jeb, but even that soon tapered off to nothing. Not long after the sun had fully risen, however, Jonah beheld a glorious sight: a band of Confederates on the march towards them. "Look, Jeb," he croaked, jostling his friend a bit, "we're gonna be alright." Jeb didn't respond, just as he hadn't all the other times Hex had spoken on their journey.

Jonah somehow managed to salute when one of the officers came into view. Unfortunately, that act seemed to drain the last of his strength, and he began to slide out of the saddle, pulling his friend with him. Some of the enlisted men rushed forward to help as they hit the ground — one of the soldiers propped Jonah up in the middle of the road, but he tried to push the man away, saying, "Jeb... take care of Jeb... he needs a doctor..."

"If Jeb's the other fella, he ain't gonna need no doctor," he replied. "He's stone dead."

"No... no, he's not... he's just tired, that's all..." As he said the words, he reached over to his friend, laying on the ground just a few feet away, and shook his arm. "Wake up, Jeb... show these fellas yo're alright..." But Jeb continued to lay there, his face like alabaster and eyes rolled up to the whites. After a few moments, the truth began to sink in, and he let his

hand drop away. Deep down, Jonah felt like he should be screaming, railing at the injustice of his friend's death, of yet another person he cared about being taken from him for no good reason. But outwardly, he was as quiet and unmoving as Jeb's corpse, unable to even find the strength to weep.

When questioned later about what happened to his platoon, Hex would only say that they had been captured, then killed during an escape attempt. He never made mention of trying to surrender, or that he may have been responsible for their capture — better to let that horrible mistake be buried along with all those poor men. If anything, the massacre at Fort Charlotte had shown Jonah how wrong he'd been in thinking that perhaps the North had the better intentions. There were no good guys in this war, no room for altruistic actions or notions of honor, just thousands of men on either side butchering each other, and gallons of blood being spilled on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. No matter who won, Jonah realized, nothing would change: the dead would still be dead, the Negro would still be under the thumb of the white man, and both North and South would still each hold the other in the lowest regard.

Despite these revelations, he fought on. After being reunited with his regiment, he went right back into battle, fighting with even more abandon than he'd shown before, taking risks that would make other men quail at the thought of them. The majority of Hex's fellow soldiers in the 7th thought his new attitude was due to the nightmare he'd survived, and that he now fought purely to avenge the deaths of those who fell at Fort Charlotte. They were partly right: in his conscious mind, he did indeed push himself harder to make up for the thirty-six men who could no longer fight...

... but unconsciously, in a corner of his soul he refused to admit existed, Jonah hoped that he would one day come across a Yankee soldier who was a mite faster on the draw than him, just so he wouldn't have to face the pain of living anymore.

1865:

Hunkered down inside an abandoned farmhouse, Lieutenant Hex and five others from the 7th Cavalry traded shots with a group of Union soldiers outside. They'd been on the run from the Yankees for over two weeks, ever since a third of General Lee's forces fell into enemy hands at Saylor's Creek. The remains of the Army of Northern Virginia retreated to the west, but soon found themselves hemmed in once again — despite the odds, a handful of boys from the 7th somehow managed to slip past the opposing forces and hide in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, taking out any billy-yanks that dared follow them. That afternoon, however, their luck appeared to have run out, as was their ammunition.

"I'm busted!" A corporal by the name of Eddie Cantwell, who'd been with the 7th almost as long as Hex, scrambled away from his firing position by the front door. "Anybody got a spare iron?"

"Ain't nothin' left tuh spare," Hex replied as he fired his own weapon out a nearby window. "Three more shots an' Ah'm dry. We'd best start makin' a run fer it out the back way."

"No good," another Reb answered — he was helping tie a bandage around a fellow soldier's arm. "We already checked, an' they've got men coverin' it. That's how they got Dominic here."

A barrage of gunfire caused everyone to hit the floor — what little glass was left in the windows rained down on them. Jonah looked from one man to the next, saying, "Then Ah reckon y'all better start prayin', if'n yo're so inclined." The men gathered blanched at the words. They'd survived four long, hard years of war, and had watched more people die than they cared to think about. Could this really be the end for them? Once Hex fired the last bullet from his gun, they waited for the inevitable.

But nothing happened — not long after they stopped shooting, so had the Yankees. Cantwell risked a peek over the windowsill, but he couldn't see anything. "The Hell they waitin' for? Did they run outta ammo, too?"

Then a voice came from the direction of a barn on the far end of the yard:

"Hey, johnnies! Any of ye still breathin' in there?"

"More'n enough to handle you empty-headed sons of bitches!" Cantwell yelled back — with the possibility of death so close, he figured one last spark of defiance couldn't hurt.

The unseen Federal paid the insult no mind and continued, "Why don't y'boys give it up already? The war's over, and ye lost! The sooner ye face up to that, the sooner things can get back to normal around 'ere!"

Cantwell was about to hurl another, more colorful epithet out the window, but Jonah stopped him, asking the Federal, "Wait just a minute... did yuh say *the war's over*?"

"Damn straight. Lee surrendered to Grant o'er in Appomattox — ye been fightin' a lost cause since Palm Sunday."

Within the farmhouse, all the soldiers fell silent, staring at each other in disbelief. Marse Robert *surrendered*?!? Everyone in the Confederate Army figured the Yankees would have to kill him a thousand times over before he gave up. "Y'all got any proof of that on yuh?" Hex asked.

"Fraid not, son, ye just gonna have to take me at my word."

"He's bluffing!" Cantwell hissed. "They just want us to stick our heads out the door so's they can blow 'em off!" A couple others nodded in assent.

Jonah hung his head low for a moment, thinking, then looked back up at the starving, exhausted, disheveled troops before him — as the highest-ranking officer present, these men were his responsibility, and he certainly wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. "If'n we give up," he told them, "it's got tuh be unanimous. Either we all walk outta here an' surrender as one, or we all stay in here an' die as one. So... whut's it gonna be?"

It took them almost twenty minutes to reach a decision. When they did, Hex called out to the Yankees that they were surrendering, then led his men out the front door of the farmhouse. As he did so, a big Irishman with lieutenant stripes of his own came out from behind the barn,

followed by a platoon of soldiers. The Rebels eyed the Union men with suspicion, and vice versa, with little wonder: after fighting each other for so long, getting used to peace again was going to be tough.

The Irishman approached them, his revolver at the ready, and Hex tried to not let the tension in his body show. He was waiting for the double-cross, though this time he was a bit more prepared: after the incident at Fort Charlotte, he'd made the decision to never be caught unarmed again, and had carefully attached a knife sheath to the inside lining of his uniform jacket so that it lay between his shoulderblades. As Jonah stood there with his hands behind his head, the fingers of his left hand were creeping down to his collar, ready to grab the knife hiding beneath and drive it into the Yankee's heart if need be. But to his surprise, the other officer flipped the gun back into its holster, stuck out his hand, and said to Hex, "Ye fought good, johnny, but I'm glad 'tis finally o'er."

He stared at the man for a moment, then relaxed his posture and shook hands with him. "Yuh didn't do so bad yerself, billy... though Ah'll admit, Ah wish y'all was surrenderin' tuh me."

Their horses long gone, the defeated cavalrymen set out on foot with their captors for Lynchburg — the Federals had built a stockade there, and were now using it to process all the Rebels captured in the area. Countless Southerners milled about the grounds, some waiting for word from the C.O. that they were free to return home, others unsure if they even had a home to return to. Once they arrived, Hex and his men were made to sign an oath of loyalty to the Union, swearing to never take up arms against it again. A few Confederates refused to do such a thing, and cries of "*Long live the Cause! Long live Jefferson Davis!*" occasionally sprang up amongst the dissenters. Some of them also crowed about how they hoped Abraham Lincoln was burning in Hell, which took some time for Jonah to understand: not only had they missed the collapse of the Confederacy while hiding in the foothills, but apparently Lincoln had been fatally shot a scant five days after Lee's surrender. When one of the other Rebs told him that the famous actor John Wilkes Booth did the deed, Hex thought for sure the whole thing was a hoax.

After a few days at the stockade, the remaining men of the 7th Virginia Cavalry were finally released on their own recognizance, and for the first time in four years, Hex found himself without a purpose. No men to

lead, no enemy to fight... even the uniform he wore ceased to have meaning, at least to the world at large — he still held a measure of pride over the fact that a barely-educated country boy like himself had managed to reach the rank of lieutenant. Eddie Cantwell, on the other hand, had shed what was left of his Rebel-gray togs in favor of civilian clothes the first chance he got. “You really ought to ditch that thing,” he told his former superior officer as they walked out the main gate, the road beyond leading to Lynchburg proper. “It’s probably crawlin’ with lice.”

“Like Hell Ah will,” Jonah snapped. “Ah earned this thing, an’ Ah ain’t givin’ it up just ‘cause some sass-talkin’ jackass like yerself says Ah should... an’ Ah ain’t got no lice!”

Cantwell brayed with laughter. “Same old Hex! I can’t imagine how you’re gonna handle being a civilian again. Myself, I’m gonna bed down with every woman that comes across my path ‘til I think of something better to do with my life... an’ I hope I never do.”

“Them’s lofty ambitions. Wish Ah had some tuh match.”

“Why don’t you travel with me for a spell? Never hurts to have someone watchin’ your back, even in peacetime.”

Hex shook his head, saying, “No, Ah reckon that Ah’d like tuh be on muh own fer a while. Been so long since Ah had no one tuh fret over but muhself... it’ll be a nice change of pace.”

“Suit yourself.” The sound of horses came at them from behind, and they saw a supply wagon departing the stockade. Cantwell whistled to the driver and asked for a ride to town, then said to Hex, “Well, I reckon this is good-bye, then. You take care now.”

“Ah do muh best,” he replied, and tipped his hat as the wagon trundled away, Cantwell waving to him from beside the driver. As they disappeared from sight, Hex considered what the ex-corporal had said: just how was he going to handle being a civilian again? He didn’t even know where to start...

Then he remembered the promise he’d made to Jeb the night before he died — though his friend was gone, it still seemed the proper thing to

do. Jonah started walking down the road again, his mind focused on the long journey ahead of him.

The graying houseboy's eyes widened, and he replied in a frantic whisper, "I don't know why you come back here, Mistuh Hex, but you'd best move on afore... "

"Who is it, Solomon?" Turnbull called out from somewhere behind him.

"Just a poor Reb who done got lost, suh." He began to close the door. "I gave him proper directions an' sent him off."

"Nonsense. Who knows how far he's traveled already? Let him inside so he can rest a while before heading out once again." The master of the house caught the edge of the door and pulled it open, but once he saw who was standing there, any sense of hospitality he'd had evaporated. "You... how *dare* you set foot on my property!" he spat at Hex.

Though taken aback by their reaction, Jonah pressed on. "Ah'm sorry tuh just show up like this, Mr. Turnbull, but now thet the war's over, Ah couldn't think of no other place tuh go, an' Ah promised Jeb... "

With a quickness that surprised Hex, Turnbull slapped him across the face, cutting him off mid-sentence. "A traitor like you isn't fit to speak my boy's name," the older man told him evenly, "much less wear that uniform, not after the way you betrayed everything the South stands for." Jonah opened his mouth to object, but Turnbull wouldn't let him, saying, "You thought you'd gotten away with it, didn't you? You thought that every one of those patriots had been cut down outside Fort Charlotte, but you were wrong: a few managed to escape, only to be recaptured later by more of those damn Yankees. Now those prisoners are coming home, and they've been coming to *me*, telling me of your betrayal." He stepped forward, making Jonah backpedal on the porch. "How many pieces of silver did the Union give you for the lives of your men? How much was your loyalty to the Confederacy worth? *How much was my son worth?*"

Jonah's foot hit empty air as he reached the edge of the porch, and he pitched backward, his hat flying away as he landed flat at the bottom of the steps. Pushing himself up on his elbows, he looked up at Turnbull, saying, "Yo're wrong... they've got it all wrong. Please, yuh got tuh believe me. Ah tried tuh save them all, Jeb included, but them Yankees done tricked all of us."

Turnbull wasn't hearing it. "You've brought nothing but death to this family. First my niece Cassie, now Jeb... you're a walking pestilence, and you need to be wiped out." He turned to Solomon, who stood beside him on the porch. "Go fetch my gun," he ordered.

"Mastuh Turnbull, maybe you should let him speak his piece," the servant replied. "Mistuh Hex always seemed like a good man... maybe he's tellin' the truth."

"No, he's not, he's a traitor and a murderer, and I'm not going to let him get away with it. Now do as I say!"

Jonah climbed back to his feet and glared at the man. "Yuh ain't got no right tuh speak tuh Solomon like that no more: he's a free man now, same as every Negro. As fer yerself... yo're just an old man who's too damn blind from grief tuh see anything but whut y'all want tuh see." He scooped up his hat from the ground and put it back on, running his fingers along the brim with a snap. "No matter whut them fellas told yuh 'bout Fort Charlotte, *Ah ain't no traitor*. Ah loved Jeb like he was muh own brother, an' if'n muh death could bring him back, Ah'd gladly lay it down fer him. *But it won't*, an' Ah sure as Hell ain't gonna stand around here an' let yuh shoot me like dog fer something Ah didn't do." Spinning on his heel, he began to walk back to the road without another word.

"Come back here, damn you!" Turnbull yelled, and started to follow Hex, finally stopping in the middle of the yard, leaning heavily on the eagle-headed cane he'd been given four Christmases ago, before his world had fallen apart. "Don't think this is the end, Jonah Hex!" he called out as the young man made his way down the road, never looking back once. "I swear, if it takes the rest of my life, I'll make you pay for what you've done to my family! And when I do, I'm going to dance on your grave! Do you hear me? *Someday, I'm going to dance on your grave!*"

1866:

The hot summer sun beat down upon Jonah as he rode along the dusty trail, occasionally pulling off his hat to try and wave a cool breeze across his face. His horse wasn't faring much better, but at least he had something to ride. The last thing he wanted to do was take the ankle express across Texas. Not that he was in any big hurry: he'd done more than his share of wandering over the past year, drifting from one town to the next with no destination in mind, only the desire to put as much distance between himself and Quentin Turnbull as possible. After his confrontation with the man on the old plantation, Hex left Richmond behind, and soon Virginia itself as he made his way across the South, taking in the damage the war had wrought and earning his keep doing odd jobs on ranches and farms — anything to put food in his stomach and a couple dollars in his pocket. By the time winter set in, Jonah had reached the Mississippi, and with it the inevitable question: should he stay in the South, or cross the river and head back to the West? The decision came to him surprisingly easy, and he spent New Year's in a Louisiana shanty town on the western bank of Ole Miss.

It wasn't long after that he found himself brushing up against his home state, though it seemed strange to call it such, seeing as how he hadn't set foot in it for over a decade. Nevertheless, he continued on his westward path, with no more concrete plans in his mind than when he first started his journey. But on that scorching summer's day, his wanderings had unknowingly brought him into familiar territory: the trail before him eventually branched off in two directions, with a sand-blasted signpost between them. Many of wooden markers nailed to it were nearly illegible due to abuse from the elements, and as Jonah sat on his mount trying to decipher them, one in particular jumped out at him:

HAVERVILLE - 5 MILES

Well, Ah'll be damned... Ah never thought Ah'd end up back here. He looked off in the direction the sign pointed — a few buildings were visible through the haze in the air. It had been fifteen long years since his Pa had taken him away from Haverville and sold him to the Apache, and in

that time, he'd thought of the place very little — there was never any longing to see it again, not after the way the townsfolk had treated Jonah and his parents when they lived there. But now that it lay so close, curiosity was taking hold of him: he'd changed so much since he last walked those streets, he wondered what changes had come to the town itself. "Only one way tuh find out," he said aloud, and turned his mount down the right fork.

To his surprise, Haverville looked relatively the same — aside from some new buildings on the outskirts, the town appeared to have been frozen in time. As he rode down the main street, the people he passed barely gave him a second look, which wasn't surprising: he doubted that anyone remembered him, or even cared to. When he passed an alleyway near the town bank, he slowed his horse and lingered for a moment. In his mind's eye, he could see his young self and Bart Mallory standing there, the man tousling Jonah's hair and telling him he was a natural with a gun. The thought that he'd once admired that outlaw pained him — for all his charisma, Mallory had still been a cold-blooded killer and thief — folks like that were the reason Cassie was dead. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all*, Hex thought, and spurred his horse on towards the old dirt road that led to his childhood home.

As he neared it, he saw that, unlike the town, time had taken its toll on the homeplace: the roof of the shack sagged inward, with a gaping hole right in the middle of it, and the stable at the edge of the yard had collapsed completely, the ruins mostly covered by buffalo grass. Hex stopped short at the remains of the fence surrounding the property, gazing upon the place from a distance. Despite its dilapidated appearance, the sight it made his stomach flutter — he half-expected his father to come storming out the front door, drunk as a skunk and screaming at him for letting the house get in such a state, then taking off his belt and wrapping the end of it around his fist...

Jonah shook his head with a grunt — after everything he'd been through, the thought of his Pa could still make him cringe sometimes. For the first time in years, he wondered whatever happened to his father and mother, and if they ever thought of him. Did they ever regret abandoning him, or did they simply pretend that they never had a son? "Don't matter either way," he muttered, "they's long gone, an' they ain't never comin' back." Hex raised his voice and yelled at the shack, "Matter of fact, Ah'm damn

glad y'all done run off! Y'all was too wrapped up in yerselves tuh care 'bout me anyways! But Ah turned out just fine despite yuh... see?" His fingers plucked at the fabric of his officer's coat. "Ah went out into the world an' made something of muhself, an' y'all cain't take an ounce of credit fer it, 'cause yuh weren't there!" Jonah's voice broke on the last words, and he turned away from the shack — his face felt hot, but not from the weather. "Stupid... hollerin' at a pile of kindling," he said under his breath, then flicked the horse's reins. "C'mon, let's get away from this damn place afore Ah decide tuh sell yuh fer glue."

A few days after leaving Haverville, his path took him alongside a small river — there was an Indian encampment on the other side, and some women and children were gathered on the far bank collecting water. Keeping a respectful distance, Jonah led his horse to the bank on his side of the river for a drink, then knelt down and began to refill his canteens. All the while, he watched the Indians from the corner of his eye, and he saw a few watching him as well, but none seemed to mind his presence. From what he could tell, they appeared to be Apache, and Mescalero at that. *Makes sense*, he thought, taking a drink from one of the canteens, *reckon this is roundabout where me an' Pa met up with...*

Jonah froze, his eyes wide, then turned his attention directly at the Apache women across the river. To most white men, they probably all looked alike, but one of the women had a certain look about her, one that had never fully left Hex's mind after all these years.

"White Fawn," he whispered, and his canteen dropped from his hand and into the river. Seconds later, he was in the river himself, wading across the shallow water to the other bank, calling her name in Apache the entire time. The women let out a cry of fright as he did so, thinking him some sort of madman, and many ran back to camp, but White Fawn stood her ground.

"Who are you?" she asked him in Apache as she pushed one of the children behind her. "How do you know my name?"

"Do you not recognize me?" He took off his hat so as to better show his

face, then got another idea: he reached beneath his uniform and removed the deerskin pouch that still hung from the back of his belt. "Perhaps you might recognize this."

She stared at him in disbelief. "No... no, you are dead... "

Hex closed the distance between them, saying, "Not so long as I have you to come back to." He then picked her up and kissed her, putting into it over twelve years of unsaid passion and regret, his heart filling with emotions that he thought had died along with Cassie, but instead were reborn at the sight of White Fawn. To his surprise, though, White Fawn tried to push away from him. "What is wrong?" he asked. "Do you not love me anymore?"

"I do, Mark of the Puma," she said, calling him by his Apache name, "but my love is no longer mine to give." Jonah was about to ask what she meant by that, then saw the child standing behind her: a little girl who bore striking resemblance to White Fawn when she was younger.

Crestfallen, he let go of her — it had been foolish to think that she was unmarried after all this time. "Kin Ah at least meet the lucky man?" Jonah asked in English. Before White Fawn could respond, however, he noticed some of the Apache men coming his way from camp... and in the lead was Noh-Tante.

Hex left White Fawn's side and approached him. "Yuh backstabbin' sonovabitch," he snarled, "bet yuh never thought yuh'd see me again!" Without further preamble, he jumped on Noh-Tante and began to pummel him, the shock on the Apache warrior's face plain to see. The others quickly pulled Jonah off, though he fought against them every step of the way. "Let go of me, dammit! Ah'm gonna make him pay fer whut he did tuh me!"

At that moment, High Cloud joined the group at the riverbank. "What is happening? Who are you?" he asked Hex, then turned to White Fawn. "Why did this stranger attack your husband?"

"Hus... *husband*?!?" Jonah felt all the blood drain from his face as he stared at White Fawn. "Yuh married *Noh-Tante*?!?! How could yuh do such a thing?"

"He began courting me not long after you... " She hesitated, still in shock over her lost love's sudden return. "He said you were *dead*, that the Kiowa had killed you before his eyes while you were raiding their camp." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she asked him, "If you were not dead, then where have you been all these years?"

"That is a very good question." The chief approached Jonah, recognition suddenly coming to his eyes, and motioned for the Apaches to let the young man go. "It has been twelve years since you disappeared, Mark of the Puma... why did you wait until now to come back to us?"

So Jonah told them, starting with how Noh-Tante double-crossed him that night at the Kiowa encampment, then about his miraculous escape and the months spent recovering from his wounds, while his friend Windy Taylor tried to track down the Apache tribe to no avail. "Ah tried tuh find yuh muhself after thet," he said to High Cloud in English, "but it was like y'all vanished into thin air, an' then... then other things happened, an' the War... it was dumb luck thet brought me here today." Jonah then looked over to where Noh-Tante stood, saying, "But thet don't mean Ah'm about tuh let yuh get away with stealin' White Fawn from me. Ah've lost too damn much these last few years tuh let thet slide."

"And I am not about to let you get away with saying such lies about me." Noh-Tante waved a hand at Hex's Confederate uniform. "It's obvious that you reverted back to the ways of the whites the moment you were taken from us. *That's* why you never returned to our tribe: you were ashamed of turning your back on everything we taught you."

"Yo're the one thet ought tuh be ashamed, yuh yellowbellied... " He began to move towards the Apache, fists clenched, but High Cloud stepped between them.

"I have heard both your tales, and while each of you told them with conviction, both cannot be true. There is only one way to settle this: a trial by combat, with the accuser facing the accused. The victor shall be the one who fights honorably, for he who speaks the truth has nothing to fear." He looked to his son, saying, "As the accused, you have the right to choose the weapon."

Noh-Tante glanced over to the crowd of Apache gathered around them, then said, "I choose the tomahawk... we shall see how much my white brother remembers of his adopted heritage."

"More than y'all ever did," Jonah answered. As High Cloud led them to the fighting circle, Hex stripped off his gunbelt and handed it to White Fawn in a show of fair play. When she took it, she pleaded with him to not go through with the fight. "Ah have tuh, darlin'," he told her, "Ah'm sick tuh death of folks thinkin' they kin walk all over me with no consequence. Thet man done me wrong, an' Ah aim tuh show him that he cain't get away with it." Jonah then nodded towards White Fawn's daughter, following close behind. "Ah'll understand if'n yuh still want tuh stay with Noh-Tante when this is all over, though. Ah won't like it, but Ah'll understand why."

Black Raven was waiting for them in the fighting circle, a pair of stone-headed tomahawks in his hands. He gave one to each of the opponents, then stepped back to join the other Indians bordering the circle. Jonah hefted the weapon, reacquainting himself with the feel, then noticed that there was an unusual amount of rawhide wrapped around the handle. Upon closer examination, he saw that the wood beneath was badly cracked — chances were that it would snap in half after a few heavy blows. Jonah started to say something, but before the words left his mouth, the chief called for the combat to begin, and Noh-Tante rushed forward, his tomahawk raised to strike. *Ain't got no choice now*, Hex thought, and blocked the oncoming blow, hooking the head of the weapon with his and using the Apache's momentum to fling him to the ground.

Noh-Tante landed hard, and Jonah swung his tomahawk at the prone man's arm, hoping to end this quickly. Unfortunately, Noh-Tante rolled out of the way, and Hex struck the ground instead — he could feel the wood begin to splinter as he tumbled forward off-balance. To make matters worse, his opponent took advantage of the blunder and sunk his weapon into the back of Hex's calf, and he went down in a heap. "First blood is mine," Noh-Tante said, and moved in for another blow.

"An' thet's all yo're gettin'," Jonah growled. He brought up his uninjured leg and kicked Noh-Tante in the gut, making him step back a few feet.

Blood trickled into Hex's boot as he stood up, gritting his teeth and advancing on his opponent. The two of them locked together, glaring at each other from behind crossed tomahawks. "Ah know whut Black Raven did," Hex said to him. "The two of yuh have always been thick as thieves... he slipped me a busted weapon so's yuh couldn't lose." He pushed his tomahawk against Noh-Tante's ever harder, trying to ignore to slow cracking noise coming from the handle. "Whut's the matter, were yuh afraid yuh couldn't beat a white man?"

"You forget your place... *slave!*" Noh-Tante shoved him backwards with all his might, and Jonah's wounded leg crumpled beneath the strain. He tried to catch himself as he went down, but his efforts were only met with a final snap from the wood handle when his tomahawk struck the ground. Then Noh-Tante was upon him, one hand around Hex's throat as he pinned him to the ground, the other holding his sturdy weapon high above the white man's head. Jonah braced his own hand against Noh-Tante's wrist so as to keep the weapon as far from his skull as possible, but his strength was flagging, and the chiseled stone edge was inching closer. "I should thank you, 'brother', for coming back so I could kill you myself," the Apache said. "I will remember this day fondly... especially whenever I take White Fawn to my bed." He leaned close, a manic look of glee on his face. "It's a shame you were never able to do so yourself... her skin tastes so sweet... "

That was the final straw. Blind rage enveloped Jonah's brain, devouring any sense of civility he still possessed. The man before him was void of honor, so why should he fight honorably? With barely a thought, Jonah reached behind his neck with his free hand and unsheathed the knife he still kept beneath his coat, then drove it between Noh-Tante's ribs, twisting and jerking the blade to the side as he did so. The Apache's expression didn't change right away — he kept on leering at Hex, tomahawk raised — then realization crept across his features as blood began to seep out of the corner of his mouth from his punctured lung. Jonah pushed him aside with no trouble now and stood up as High Cloud came forward, falling to his knees beside his dying son. "He cheated," Jonah said, "he an' Black Raven rigged muh tomahawk so's it would break."

"The only evidence I see of cheating is in your bloodied hands," the chief replied, never taking his eyes from Noh-Tante. "You fought like a white man, with cowardice and deception, while my son fought with nothing

but honor till his final breath... I declare him the victor." He looked over to the braves standing nearby and nodded towards Hex. "Seize him."

They did as their chief ordered, grabbing Jonah by the arms and forcing the knife from his hand. He struggled to free himself, calling out to White Fawn that this wasn't what it looked like, but she turned away from him, afraid to show any sympathy in front of her people. Taking the tomahawk from Noh-Tante's hand, High Cloud walked over to one of the cooking fires, gesturing to the Apaches holding Jonah to follow him. "Long ago, you saved my life at the risk of your own, and I made you part of my family because of that," the chief said as he knelt down in front of the fire, sticking the stone blade deep into the embers. "I thought you were different from the other whites, and that perhaps our two people could truly learn to live together... but now I see that the evil I have witnessed in your people dwells within you as well, though it lies much deeper. Perhaps if you had never left us, we could have fully driven the spirit of the white devil from your heart, but it's too late for such things now. The most I can do is send a warning to anyone else who crosses your path, so they will not be fooled as I was." He pulled the tomahawk from the fire and approached Hex, grabbing hold of his red hair and tilting his head up. "From this day forward, the name of Mark of the Puma shall never be spoken again — you are dead to my tribe, and are forbidden to ever return here. The shame of what you did shall remain with you for the rest of your life, and all who look upon you will know your true name: Mark of the Demon!"

With that, High Cloud pressed the red-hot tomahawk to the right side of Jonah's face. He tried to hold in the scream, but it was impossible as the skin beneath the blade burned away, the pain shooting through his head like a bullet — he'd been burned before, but never like this, never with such intensity. He squirmed in the grip of the Apaches, wanting to turn his face away, to escape the agony for even a moment, but it was no use, it went on and on, the smell of his own seared flesh filling his nostrils, coating the inside of his mouth. Mercifully, shock began to overtake his senses, shutting down his awareness of what was happening to him... until he screamed anew as High Cloud finally pulled the tomahawk away, the burned flesh sticking momentarily to the blade before tearing free. Only then did the men holding Jonah let go, letting him fall bonelessly to the ground. He never felt the impact, though: to Hex, it seemed

like he fell straight through the earth, sinking like a stone into black, unknown depths as consciousness left him completely.

"Well, good morning," a man's voice said. "Can you hear me? Give me a sign if you can."

Jonah tried to speak, but as his mouth formed the words, a sudden pain flared up across the right side of his face, and the best he could manage was a rusty squeak. "Don't try to talk just yet," the man told him a bit too late, "just nod or shake your head... gently." The tickling returned, and Jonah realized that the man was removing a bandage over his face. "I want you to try opening your eyes in a moment, all right?" Hex managed a nod, and the man pulled away the last of the bandage, saying, "Okay... open them slowly."

Everything was a blur at first, and much too bright — he immediately tried to shut them again, but like speaking, the action brought pain. After a moment, his eyes adjusted, and he saw that he was lying in bed in a sparsely-decorated room. A chair sat in the corner with his uniform and other possessions draped over it. Standing beside the bed was a man with dark curly hair and glasses, his crisp white shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows. Jonah's brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"I'm Dr. Fleisher... you're in the back room of my office," he said, reading the unspoken question on his patient's face. "An Indian woman brought you into town three days ago — she said she'd found you passed out beside your horse in the desert." The doctor raised an eyebrow. "She also claimed that she didn't know you, but judging by the way she acted before she left, I'm thinking that wasn't true." He waved off his own speculation, saying, "No matter what the circumstance, she got you here just in time: if your injuries had gone untreated any longer, I don't think I could have..." The doctor stopped as someone called his name from behind the closed door to the room. "If you'll excuse me, it sounds like I've got another patient. Be back in just a moment."

He stepped out, leaving Jonah alone to stare at the ceiling. The woman that Fleisher spoke of had to have been White Fawn — the Apaches had

probably tossed his unconscious body over his saddle and drove the horse off, and she'd risked exile from her tribe just to make sure that he was safe. One last act of love, despite what he'd done, and one he'd never be able to thank her for — if he dared to return to the tribe, they would kill him. *Ah'm so sorry, darlin',* Jonah thought, *this ain't how Ah intended fer things tuh turn out.* He groaned as he pushed himself upright, then reached over to the bedside table for the pitcher of water sitting there. His throat was terribly dry for some reason, probably from sleeping with his mouth hanging open. *Reckon thet's why muh jaw hurts so bad,* he said to himself as he poured a glass. *Been knocked out fer three days, sawin' logs... bet Ah drove the doc crazy.* He brought the glass to his lips and took a long drink...

... then stopped as the water ran out the right side of his face and down the front of his longjohns. He stared at the wet streak on his chest, unable to comprehend what caused it, then slowly, he reached up and touched his cheek. What he felt put a cold lump of fear in his gut. *Oh no... oh dear God no no no no...* Though slightly hobbled by his leg injury, Hex got out of bed and made his way across the room to a small mirror hanging on the wall. The sight before him looked even worse than it felt: the entire right side of his face, from just above his jawbone to the edge of his eyebrow, was nothing but a twisted mass of scar tissue. The tender flesh around his eyelid was crimped and pulled taut so that he couldn't close it completely without pain, and his cheek had been ripped wide open, the edges of the wound cauterized and stretching the corner of his mouth into a permanent sneer. He could see the stitch marks where the doctor had tried to repair the damage, reconnecting a single strip of flesh over the remains of his upper and lower lip in an effort to give his visage some semblance of normalcy, but there just wasn't enough tissue left to work with.

They took muh face, Jonah thought as he stared at the nightmare before him, salty tears burning like fire as they rolled down what was left of his cheek. *Weren't bad enough thet Noh-Tante took White Fawn from me, his pa had tuh go an' take muh goddam face!* He wanted to curse them aloud, but the still-healing scars hurt too damn much for him to open his mouth more than a crack. Instead, he clenched his jaw tight and let out a guttural noise, slamming his fist against the mirror until it shattered. The commotion caught the attention of Dr. Fleisher, who reentered the room to

find Jonah sitting on the floor sobbing, bloody hands covering his ruined face.

"You might want to check on the Reb in the corner," she said to the owner as he reloaded her tray, "he ain't moved in a couple hours."

"Why don't you? That's what I pay you for."

She shook her head. "I ain't superstitious or nothin', but he gives me the shivers something awful, especially on a night like this."

"Fine, fine." He left the bar and walked to the back of the saloon. A man dressed in Confederate gray was slumped over a table there, an empty bottle laying next to his hand. "Hey you, wake up," he said, shaking the man. "If'n you ain't buyin' no more, you gotta get out."

The Reb stirred, then slowly sat up — as always, the owner tried not to react when he saw the horrid scars on the man's face. Jonah had first stumbled into town two days before, and had proceeded to get sloshed in this particular saloon ever since, much to the owner's chagrin. A moment passed by as the message filtered through Hex's pickled brain, then he reached into the deerskin pouch on his belt. The owner figured the guy must have a couple dollars still stashed in there, but instead of money, he tossed a tarnished gold ring onto the tabletop without a word.

"What the Hell do you think this is, a pawn shop? Cough up some money or I'm tossin' your sorry butt out the door!" But Hex didn't move, he just sat there, his bloodshot eyes fixed on his old wedding band. "That's it... *adios*, rummy!" The owner grabbed Hex by the collar and dragged him to the door, the other patrons whooping as the former Confederate was shoved out into the street. "An' don't forget your cheap jewelry, too!" the owner said, and threw the ring out after him.

Jonah lay in the mud for a few minutes, not paying any heed to the people staring at him as they passed by on the boardwalk. Then he sat up, reaching over to pluck the ring out of the mud. He carefully wiped it clean before slipping it back in his pouch, though he couldn't think of

why he was bothering: it was worthless, just like him, not even enough value to it to buy him a drink. And he needed one so badly, just a little one to stop the pain for a while — the scars didn't ache so bad now, except in wet weather, but the ache in his soul never went away. He had nothing left to live for, nothing to fight for, all he had to look forward to every day was his next belt of whiskey... and now that the money had run out, that was gone as well. He rested a hand against the gun on his hip, thinking of what the saloon owner had said about pawn shops. *A fine pistol like this should fetch a few dollars, Jonah thought, an' the ring might get me a few more, maybe enough tuh hold me 'til Christmas.* He staggered to his feet and began to walk to an alleyway near the saloon — he'd find a place to curl up for the night, then try to sell off what little he had left in the morning.

As he approached the mouth of the alley, Hex thought he heard a woman crying. He stopped, cocking his head to listen, then he heard a man's voice say, "Don't lie tuh me! Ah know whut yuh been doin' behind muh back! Did yuh think Ah wouldn't find out, yuh damn whore?" followed by the sound of someone getting slapped.

Hex froze, the familiarity of the words striking home. Slowly, he crept over to the alley and saw a grizzled man holding a woman against the wall, her blonde hair in disarray. She was begging him to stop, but the man wasn't listening, he just kept on hitting her, cursing her. Jonah pressed himself against the wall, arms hugging his chest, all the old fears coming back to him. *It cain't be them... it's been so long...* But despite the fog of alcohol on his brain, he knew what he saw. He also knew that he wasn't a little boy anymore. With a conviction that he hadn't felt in months, Jonah strode up to the man and grabbed him, throwing him against the opposite wall of the alley. "Ah ain't gonna let yuh hurt her no more, Pa," he growled.

"Whut the Hell are yuh talkin' about? Who the Hell are yuh?"

"Yuh forgot all 'bout me, didn't yuh? Well, Ah didn't forget yuh, Pa, an' Ah sure as Hell didn't forget all the grief yuh used tuh give me an' Ma." Hex pointed at the woman behind him, still crying as she crumpled to the ground. "Ah swore Ah'd show yuh someday how wrong yuh was, an' today's the day!"

The man scoffed and pushed Hex away. "Yuh damn crazy drunk," he said as he reached down to draw his gun, "yuh picked the wrong night tuh go pickin' fights." He pulled leather, but before he could even clear the holster, Jonah drew his own and blasted a hole in the man's chest, the gunshot echoing all though the alleyway. The ex-soldier had done so more out of instinct than thought, and now that the deed was done, he felt no remorse — he'd threatened to shoot his father once before, this was just the culmination of that earlier attempt.

"It's all over, Ma," Jonah said, and knelt beside the woman, putting his arms around her. "He's finally dead, yuh don't have tuh run away now. We kin go home an'..."

She slapped Jonah across the face, screaming, "Get away from me, you freak! Help, somebody help me!" Hex couldn't understand why his mother was reacting that way, then the truth began to sink in: aside from the blonde hair, this woman didn't look anything like his mother. A chill went down his spine as he turned to look at the man he'd just shot — despite the similar twang in his voice, that was most certainly not his father. *Good Lord*, he thought, *whut have Ah done?*

People began to gather at the mouth of the alley, attracted by the shouts and gunplay. The woman wrenched free of Jonah's weakening grip and ran to them, falling into the arms of a deputy just arriving on the scene. "He's crazy... he just came up and started shooting!" she said, pointing at Hex. The deputy drew his gun and ordered him to put his hands up. Jonah did as he was told, too much in shock to offer any resistance.

The night he spent in jail was the longest of his life: he lay awake on the tiny bunk in his cell, staring at the wall and replaying the incident in his head. He'd killed a total stranger in cold blood for no reason other than he was too blind drunk to distinguish between reality and memory — had he really sunk that low? The morning brought no relief, only a terrible hangover to go with his guilt, and to top it off, he suddenly remembered what day it was: November first... his birthday. *Yo're a real piece of work, Jonah boy*, he thought as he sat up, trying to hold his head together with both hands. *Here yuh are, just turned twenty-eight, an' whut do yuh got tuh show fer it? Nothin' but empty pockets an' a splittin' headache.* He thought back on all the Hell he'd been through over the years, all the attempts he'd made to lead at a good life... why did it always go so

terribly wrong for him? Why did he always become the scapegoat? There was only one person he could think to ask, but it had never been in Jonah's nature to do so, having been raised by a father who valued the belt over the Bible. At that moment, however, sitting in a jail cell with no hope of a future, it seemed like the best thing to do. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and clasped his hands before him.

Lord, Yuh know Ah ain't muh of a prayin' man, but Ah ain't got nowhere else tuh turn. Ah ain't gonna ask Yer forgiveness fer killin' thet man, 'cause thet ain't right — murder is murder, there ain't no excuse fer it, an' Ah'll do muh time fer it when the time comes. All's Ah'm askin' is fer Y'all tuh show me whut Ah'm supposed tuh do with muh life. Ah hear-tell thet Y'all put everybody on this here Earth fer a purpose, but Ah cain't seem tuh figure out whut mine is. Ah've failed at everything Ah've ever done, an' Ah've lost everybody thet ever showed me an ounce of love or respect... Ah'm tired of sufferin'. Ah ain't askin' fer much, just show me whut purpose Yuh done put me here fer. If'n it's so folks kin keep spittin' on me... well, just let these lawmen hang me, 'cause Ah don't want thet job no more. But if'n Yuh got something else in mind, show me whut it is...

"You know, when I saw your name on the blotter this morning, I could hardly believe it."

Jonah looked up to see a Tejano man standing at the cell door. He appeared to be in his fifties, his long salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a ponytail, and a pair of Walker Colts holstered on a belt strapped across his chest, a sheriff's badge pinned above them. Something about his appearance plucked at Jonah's memory, and when he finally put his finger on it, he could only think of one thing to say: "Ah thought yuh was a Ranger."

Antonio Ramirez couldn't help but smile. "Back when we first met, yeah, but I retired from the Texas Rangers a few years before the War. That's a game for younger men, not old fools like me." He leaned against the bars. "So, you want to explain what happened last night?" Hex didn't respond, casting his eyes down to the floor instead. "It's alright, doesn't matter anyhow." Ramirez unlocked the cell door. "Whether it was intentional or not, you'll still get what's coming to you."

Jonah didn't like the sound of that. Despite the ominous implications, he

followed the former Ranger into the front office. When they got there, he saw his gunbelt laying on the desk, along with a small stack of money. To Hex's surprise, Ramirez picked up the money and handed it right over to him. He stared at the wad of bills for a moment, then said, "Whut the Hell's this fer?"

"That man you killed was 'Mad Dog' Lucas McGill, wanted for murder in five states and at least as many territories — Bart Mallory was a choirboy compared to him." He scooped up a wanted poster off the desk and showed it to Jonah. "From what I can piece together, he'd rode into town yesterday and tried to get an old girlfriend of his to hide him... that was the young lady you found him with last night. Unfortunately, she'd been seeing another man, and McGill wasn't very happy about it — matter of fact, if you hadn't butted in and shot him, he may've very likely killed her too." The older man shook his head, saying, "If I hadn't been out of town last night when my deputy arrested you, we could've straightened out this whole mess then, and you could've used that bounty money to sleep in a nice hotel room instead of a cell."

"Bounty?" Jonah looked at the poster and noted the thousand dollar reward printed on it, the same as what he now held in his hand. "Ah cain't take this, Ah ain't no bounty hunter... "

"You don't have to be: a bounty goes to whomever captures... or kills... the person in question. You killed McGill, so you get the money. And I've gotta say, you really earned it: the reason the bounty's so high is because so many professional bounty hunters have died trying to bring him in. Somebody up there was keeping a close eye on you, Jonah."

"Reckon maybe they was," he said quietly. He looked at the wall behind Ramirez, at all the other posters there — some of the rewards on them were as much as McGill's, others just a few hundred. "Whut do yuh got tuh do anyhow? Tuh be a bounty hunter, Ah mean."

"Same as you did last night, basically: be faster on the draw than whomever you're tracking down." He saw where Hex was looking, and pointed a finger at him. "You get that damn fool idea outta your head right now, though, it's a dangerous way for young man like yourself to make a living. Most bounty hunters I know ain't much better than the men they chase... some end up becoming criminals themselves. They

drift along from one job to the next, no home, no friends or family, no one caring if they live or die... all they've got to depend on in life is their guns and their wits. The only good thing I can say about them is that they make my job a mite easier. They're willing to ride a lot further and put up with a lot more grief than most lawmen just to make a few extra dollars."

"So they do some good, then. Maybe not all the time, but they serve a purpose." Hex unbuttoned his coat enough to slip the money inside, then picked up his gunbelt from the desk and buckled it back into place. "Ain't glamorous work, but it's something thet needs tuh be done."

Ramirez put a hand on Jonah's shoulder and said, "Listen, son, I can tell that you've been through a lot since we last saw each other, and maybe you think you can handle that sort of life, but you've got to believe me: right now, it might seem like there's nothing wrong with hunting people down for a living... Hell, it might even seem like fun... but there might come a day ten or twenty years down the line when you look in the mirror and you don't like what's looking back. So before you do anything foolish, promise me that you'll take a day to think about what I said. Think about it real long and real hard."

Jonah looked Ramirez straight in the eye and said, "Yuh have muh word, sir."

She could still see the bruises. The woman had spent all morning layering powder over them, but the purplish marks on her face were too dark to hide. Frustrated, she knocked the makeup off the vanity and began to sob — she felt like she hadn't stopped since last night, not since Lucas showed up for the first time in years. He'd always been the jealous type, but the way he'd acted last night... had he expected her to wait forever? And then that man... that horribly ugly man coming out of nowhere and killing Lucas, then grabbing her and babbling about taking her home. The whole ordeal had left her so shaken she'd barely slept that night. *But it's all over now*, the woman thought. *Lucas is dead, that madman is in jail, and the bruises will go away. You can't keep falling apart like this...*

There was a knock at the door to her room, and she let out a sharp

shriek, then got a hold of herself. "J-just a minute!" she said, and daubed her cheeks with a handkerchief before answering the door — it was Mrs. Carmichael, the owner of the boardinghouse where the woman lived. "I'm sorry, I... I don't have the rent just yet. I know it's the first of the month, but... "

"But ye want another extension," Mrs. Carmichael finished for her, "same as last time." She clucked her tongue. "Always ready with the excuses, ye are. Lucky for ye, that's not why I'm knockin'. A rather... severe-looking man came by, asked me to give ye this," she said, and handed the woman an envelope. "Ye can do better, I think... what happened to that lovely gent that was stoppin' by for ye a few weeks back?"

The woman ignored her landlady's nosiness and opened the envelope — it was unmarked, and she couldn't think of who might drop off something for her. To her shock, she saw that it was filled with money... about nine hundred dollars by her quick count. "Who did you say left this?" she somehow managed to ask.

"He didn't leave a name, he just said to be sure ye got it." But the woman was already running to the stairs before Mrs. Carmichael could finish. She took the steps two at a time, almost tumbling to the bottom in her rush, but it was all for naught: by the time she got to the front porch of the boardinghouse, the man in question was already halfway down the road. She called out to him, but he never turned around, and the only thing about him she could make out through the dust kicked up by his horse was his Confederate-gray coat.

EPILOGUE

1878:

All was quiet in El Gato Negro, the steady tick-tock of the clock in the saloon being the only sound heard. Those renting rooms for the night had turned in hours ago, and the elderly couple that owned the place had followed them upstairs not long after. But not long before midnight, a new sound could be heard: footsteps in the hall leading to the rooms. They fell softly, haltingly, until the shadowed figure taking those steps

stopped in front of one of the closed doors. A hand reached out for the knob, giving it a turn and opening the door — moonlight coming through the window gave the room beyond a silvery glow, outlining the sleeping form of Jonah Hex on the bed. The figure stepped inside, paused to take note of the gun in its holster hanging from the bedpost, then drew his own and advanced on Hex. The bounty hunter was turned towards the wall, the scarred side of his face pressed hard into the pillow as the figure crept up, pointing the gun at his temple...

... then Hex's left hand shot up, grabbing the pistol and forcing it down to the bed, while his right hand came out from beneath the pillow and pointed a gun identical to the one in his holster at the would-be assassin. Jonah glared at the figure, trying to discern in the dim moonlight who he had in his grip, then saw that it was the young man from the poker table earlier in the evening. Not easing up in the least, he said, "Huh... thought fer sure yuh was thet big Mexican."

The young man was breathing hard, his eyes focused on the ivory-handled Dragoon just inches from his face, then flicking briefly over to the other pistol still holstered on the bedpost. "Wuh... w-where did... how did you... "

"Yuh know, if'n yo're aimin' tuh kill a man, yuh should pay closer attention tuh how many guns he's carryin'. Might live longer." Hex pulled the young man a little closer. "While we're on the subject... why *are* yuh tryin' tuh kill me?"

"I know... I know why you're here. I saw the way you looked at me downstairs."

Hex cocked an eyebrow. "An how was thet, boy?"

"You knew my face... not like we've met before, but like you've seen my picture. An' you bein' who you are — a bounty hunter, that is — you probably have." He tried to put some steel into his voice, but it was no good. "I ain't ashamed of what I did over in Casa Verde, but I ain't about to hang for it neither. I've killed every lawman that's tried to drag me back there, an' I knew it was only a matter of time before they posted a bounty. Just never figured it would be big enough to attract *your* attention." Hex said nothing, just regarded his late-night visitor with cold blue

eyes. The young man swallowed hard and continued, "I've heard about you... more'n what those fellas downstairs said, I mean. There's folks that say you can't be stopped, that you've been killed an' buried a hundred times but you just crawl right outta the ground without a scratch on ya. Some folks say you weren't never human, you're... you're some sort of demon that pretends to be a man, an' you go about collectin' sinners. I don't think none of that's true, I think you're just an ugly old man that enjoys killin' a bit too much... but I ain't stupid enough to take any chances."

"So yuh thought yuh'd come up here an' kill me in muh sleep like the brave soul yuh are," Jonah said mockingly. "Yuh could've just walked away the moment Ah went upstairs, just rode off into the night an' been long gone by the time Ah woke up... but skunks like yerself just don't know when tuh stop, do yuh?" He jabbed the barrel of the gun under the young man's chin. "Yuh cain't let a man have even one day of peace."

"Y-you don't have to do this! I swear, if you let me go, I'll never hurt anyone again..." He fell to his knees, his gun hand still pinned to the bed by Hex.

"Thet a fact? Whut about the next fella thet comes along lookin' fer yuh? Ah reckon yuh'll forget all about yer promises right quick, an' maybe he won't be as light a sleeper as Ah am." Jonah cocked the hammer. "Best thet we wrap up the problem right here an' now."

The sound made the young man's eyes widen. "Wait... you said you wouldn't kill anybody tonight!" he blurted out in desperation. "You can't..." But as he said the words, the clock downstairs began to buzz and whine, the inner workings threatening to break down completely, until the chime started to mark off the final seconds 'til midnight. Panic overtook the young man, and he began to beat at Hex with his free hand, but the bounty hunter had a grip like iron, and the Dragoon never wavered. The young man begged, cried, bargained, cursed, but it didn't make any difference as the clock labored to sound out the hour: seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

Everyone woke up when the gun went off. The elderly couple was the first to come out of their room, with the cowboy and the salesman putting in an appearance not long after. They all stood in the hallway,

staring at the closed door to Hex's room, none of them daring to approach. Then, nearly five minutes after the gunshot, the door opened, and Jonah Hex stepped out, fully dressed and a grim look on his face. In one hand was his saddlebag, and tossed over his shoulder was the body of the young man, his head and upper torso wrapped in a bloody sheet. Hex paid his audience no attention as he walked to the stairs, heading down to the saloon proper.

Enrique was the only one who dared follow, though his wife bade him not to. He stood on the porch outside the saloon, watching as Hex went into the livery next door. A few minutes later, he heard a yelp come from inside the building, then the two other men who'd been playing poker that night ran out, the sight of the bounty hunter with his grisly bundle scaring them right out of their bedrolls — they hadn't met the young man before that night, and they certainly didn't want Hex to think that they knew anything about him now that he was dead.

When Hex emerged once again, he was leading two horses, the young man's body tossed over the back of one of them. He walked them over to the porch, looked up to Enrique, and asked, "How far is it tuh Casa Verde from here?"

"Three days east, *senor*." The bounty hunter nodded thanks, then tethered the other horse to his own and mounted up. As he did so, Enrique said, "Pardon me, *senor*, but I must know: is that why you came here tonight? To kill that man?"

"Nope. Ah was just lookin' fer some decent food an' a warm bed." Jonah glanced back at the corpse on the horse behind him. "Ah ain't got the foggiest notion who he was, but he thought Ah did, an' that was enough tuh make him act a fool. Figure Ah'll take him back tuh Casa Verde, try an' get some answers there." He waved a hand towards the upper floor of the saloon, saying, "Sorry fer the mess... Ah left some money upstairs tuh help cover it."

"*Gracias, senor... and vaya con Dios.*"

Hex merely grunted at the blessing, and spurred his horse into motion. The trail before him was long, but no different than the countless others he'd traveled over the years — there seemed to be no end to his

wanderings since he'd decided to become a bounty hunter. Sometimes he felt like he'd been tricked by God, and that the path he'd been directed to was the wrong one. That was why he always set aside that one day for himself, to reconsider the decision he'd made, just as he'd done for Ramirez so long ago. And every time, something would happen to let him know that, no matter what society thought of him, he was still needed, and the best he could hope for in life was that he would someday be able to lay down his guns with the confidence that his job was done.

But today was most certainly not that day.

*He was a hero to some, a villain to others, and wherever he rode
people spoke his name in whispers. He had no friends, this Jonah Hex,
but he did have two companions: one was death itself...
the other... the acrid smell of gunsmoke...*

THE END

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Weird Western Quarterly #0 (2005)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Prologue

Weird Western Quarterly #1 (2006)

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 #2 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 2 (of 4): Into the Wilderness.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! Just when it seems things can't get any worse, Jonah's father makes a fateful decision, and the path of the boy's life takes an unexpected turn. It's frontier action at its finest as Hex moves closer to his destiny!

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 #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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