JOHN JAKES

SIX-GUN PLANET

A western of the twenty-third century from the great historical novelist of the twentieth.



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ZAK RANDOLF HATED NEARLY EVERYTHING ABOUT THE PLANET MISSOURI.

He hated the Old West atmosphere fostered so carefully by the revolutionaries and their descendants. Maybe *they* thought being quick on the draw was a manly virtue, but Zak was more civilized than that.

Or was he?

Because the time came when Zak was forced into a showdown with the legendary gunslinger, Buffalo Yung. Just the two of them at sundown on a dusty frontier street. One of them would be a killer, the other dead.

And Zak didn't want to die. . . .

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SIX-GUN PLANET

By John Jakes

WARNER BOOKS

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Member, Science Fiction Writers of America

ISBN 0-446-84721-6

Cover art by David Plourde

To J. G. and K. M.,
WHO LIKED THE IDEA.

Warner Books, Inc., 75 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10019

A Warner Communications Company

Printed in the United States of America

Not associated with Warner Press, Inc. of Anderson, Indiana

First Printing: April, 1970

Reissued: August, 1978

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

There is a literary conceit, to wit: if something dreadful happens, bombs, gas, people on the planet affected are going to be revolted and wind the clock back to the Terrafirmic Middle Ages. You know, ride around on plasto armored warhorses spouting poetry from inside casques produced by tubercular oppressed serfs on a guildlike assembly line? Piffle! That was a bestial epoch. Men died early and girls had bad breath from decayed teeth on their wedding nights. People who want to wind the clock back are crazy but I hardly believe they are that crazy. Yet the little sword-waving fictions keep coming on, which merely demonstrates the sterility of our authors. They have completely overlooked the most shining of all archetypical mythopoetic visions which early Terrafirm delivered to its planetery descendants as part of their heritage. It is universal to this day, pardner. *(Pulls .45 caliber revolver, shoots audience six times.)*

Professor Wookey
612th Lecture

Chapter One

The moon was down. Zak Randolf noted that first, blearily, when something unnatural in the silence of the night wakened him.

He sat up from the waist. Kicked and wiggled his boots so that they were free down in the bedroll. Now he could move fast if necessary. And it might be necessary. The darkness tingled the insides of his nostrils and his ears.

He lifted the right side of his buttocks enough to pull his holster out from underneath. He settled his weight, re-tied the thong around his right leg. Now the butt of his six-shot stuck free in the air. The whole despicable rig felt awkward, uncomfortable. But at least he had it in a convenient position.

Out in the darkness there was movement. He separated the sounds of the hooves of more than one pony. Perhaps as many as a half dozen. Distance? Impossible to make out, even though he was downwind of them.

A sharp spring breeze scoured the rough land tonight. He felt inexperienced, forlorn, resentful. Various stars glittered overhead. But panic drove all their names clean out of his head.

The stars shed a light sufficient for visibility, now that his eyes were adjusting. He listened a minute longer to the rocky click-clacking of that passage of night riders. Southwestward, he figured it was. There where a carapace of shadow positioned the foothills of those wild, haunted, sawtoothy mountains called the Geronimos.

He was by himself. He hated this journey which circumstance had forced him to take. And now—damn, *now*—he had company.

He pulled his legs all the way out of the bedroll and stood up. He was a man well short of six feet, looking neither very

strong nor especially weak. He turned his face up to the stars and wind. A blur of skin was bisected by a drooping mustache, his sop to the sick convention of this miserable place. He uncrumpled the battered black flat-crowned hat he'd been using for a pillow. Tugged it down on his long uncut hair. He wore tight old check trousers that looked more black than gray in the shadowless dark, and boots that continually hurt his feet—(two socks on each foot mitigated the blister pain a little)—and a fancy neckerchief and a short jacket of genuine imported buckskin.

Genuine—a present from Belle.

Set her back half a month's cartwheels, that jacket. The beautiful, silly woman. The neckerchief and the jacket fringe danced in the night breeze. From the horizon the sound of mounted passage continued.

Whoever was out there wasn't bothering to conceal it. Did that mean they knew he was alone?

Too bad Belle wasn't here, he thought, standing immobilized by his predicament. You had to give Belle some things. For one, she could shoot. She'd been raised in this godforsaken place.

He felt damply ashamed. But he couldn't help it. She would be much better equipped to handle such a situation. Sharp's Brand Six-Shot was a troubling, forlorn weight on his hip.

All right now, he said to himself. Calm down and calculate. Who could it be out there?

He could hardly concentrate. He was gripped by another infuriating spasm of hate. Hate of his own inadequacy. Hate of the necessity to make this long overnight ride if he were to meet his contact at the Fort. Hate of a society in which a man was forced to strap a gun on his hip when he didn't know how to use it. He fulminated that way in silence for about a minute more. He was jarred out of the mood by his mind registering what his eyeballs already had.

A faint orange glow still emanated from the ashes of his campfire. For the first time he moved with some decisiveness. He stamped and tramped the ashes. As fast as possible, and without silence. Out there, on the ridgelines of the lower Geronimos, they knew where he was.

He walked across the hard ground to his pinto. The pinto

stood motionless. It made no sound. Zak stroked its neck. Humiliating action. Showed how much control he'd lost, this going through the patterns as the natives did. He left the mount, stepped across the campfire and returned to douse the last embers with the water remaining in his canteen. The embers released squiggles of bittersweet smoke, quickly blown away by the breeze. He dropped to his knees and began to roll and tie his sleeping gear.

He lashed the gear to the pinto behind his saddle and, just to be on the safe side, opened one saddlebag. From this he took loads for his Sharp's Six-Shot. He fed them one at a time to the chamber while his mind twisted the problem of the identity of the stalkers.

Feed—then a click against the dull whine of the dusty-smelling wind. Just ordinary pilgrims heading for the Fort? He rejected that idea. He knew schedules well enough. You didn't have to push all night; there were few early departures. Moreover, if you had sense, you didn't push all night even if you had a good reason.

Towns like Zak's, Shane, were far apart. There was no overland transportation. Distance plus geography limited travel sharply. Anybody with sense didn't make a trip that involved a campsite. Most especially you didn't do it alone. That didn't prove Zak was a fool, though often he suspected he was. It only proved he was in a serious spot; one which made a speedy trip to the Fort mandatory.

His fingers moved clumsily as he worked in another load. *Feed*. For a second he toyed with the notion that it might be that ghostly gunfighter who lived up in the Geronimos, Buffalo Yung, and his cronies, moving out there. But Zak didn't really believe in the fearsome pistoleer, though many said they'd seen Yung here or there in the tiny, drying towns. He was too intelligent for that. *Feed*.

Another click on the wind and he'd run out of possibilities. Except one. He'd known he'd end up facing it, but had tried to put it off as long as possible. He damn near wanted to weep. This was the real reason travel was so limited. A band of Savages was onto him.

He felt sweat on his scalp under his hat at the very thought. They'd take his hair if they caught him. He had no more time to waste. Deciding that, he grew flustered. He spilled

the rest of the loads on the ground. Grumbling, he picked them up. Everything was bothering him, including the fact that possession of the loads was illegal. He'd scrounged them through one of his Tip Top connections. After all, a man among armed apes required some protection. Especially a man who couldn't—who wouldn't—fight by the rules of the apes.

At last he finished loading the Six-Shot. He rammed it in his holster, swung up into the saddle, lowered his hind end. It was still numb from the day's riding. The pinto, standing like a monument till it felt his full weight, started forward at brisk speed.

Zak's face was a semicircle of white under his hat brim. He looked around thirty, but felt far older than his youthful seventy-two as he let the pinto have its head.

The mount picked its way along a gully, emerged from the end, passed around two immense spiked throne kakti, practically the only vegetation which grew out here. Zak reined in, listened. Yes. The soft hoofthuddings continued out there. The Savages had keener eyes for night tracking than he did. All attempts to re-civilize them had failed. If you could call life as it was lived out here civilized. He kicked his knees against the pinto's spongy sides. It bolted ahead.

The wind rushing against Zak's cheeks cleared his mind of some other panic-blocks that had prevented him from remembering an essential fact. Because of some ancestral superstition, the Savages never struck in the hours of dark. Track the quarry, yes. Butcher it, no. That meant he had a slight margin. How far to the Fort? He calculated perhaps twenty miles. God damn. There he went again, letting the sweat under his arms drive him to translating into the local measurement. He recalculated in official zoogs.

He couldn't possibly make it by false dawn. That was less than two hours following moonset. He'd get a head start, though. Perhaps if his pinto were of superior stuff— he'd paid enough for it at the Shane Livery!—that difference might tell. He let out a wild, whooping holler, just like the kind one heard when the hardcases were raising hell at the Last Chance, and kicked the pinto hard.

Its mane stood out straight as it unlimbered and ran.

Zak clenched his teeth and hung on, bouncing up and down, up and down, bam, bam, bam, till his butt ached for mercy. There wasn't any. The pinto was moving fast, a phantom flickering over the rocky landscape with Zak clinging atop it, his long hair standing out too, and his mustache points flapping. Occasionally, in a beam of starlight coming in at just the right angle, the plating on his now-loaded Six-Shot flared in a white burst.

Yellowhair was down. He felt himself the loneliest, most persecuted man on the whole world as he let the pinto run. Could he make it? Could he?

Shortly, accelerated hoofbeats told him the Savages were onto his strategy. Guttural cries now and again pierced the dark behind. Dirty sods. Trying to soften him up psychologically. He clung to the horn with both hands, bouncing and banging up and down. But after a while it seemed that he was out-distancing them.

The mount was sure-footed, ran smoothly, its hoofbeats a rhythm, flecks of foam wind-washed off its flanks like jewels that quickly blew apart. Foam. A pretty touch. Zak never ceased to marvel at the level to which things had risen. Or from which they had fallen.

Yes, the warcries were farther behind. He and the pinto were winning. Enough distance might separate him from the Savages at dawn's light so that he could race the rest of the way to the sanctuary of the Fort in comparative safety. He began to be conscious, really conscious, of the eerie, abstract beauty of the night passing in a starlit blur: the imperious push of throne kakti at the cold stars; the ever-present ridge of the Geronimos away in the distance, unlit by distantly flaming suns; the puff and bob and burst of some kind of jackrabbity animal darting out from under the pinto's chopping hooves, tiny cobalt eyes glimmering, then gone. Accomplishment, accomplishment! The pinto's hoof-hammer spoke of it.

Zak felt afraid, yes. Still afraid. But no longer so deeply. In fact the fear was rather like a shave with a straight razor in the Ace High Barber Shop back in Shane. Bracing. Creating manliness. Or—sour thought—the illusion—

With a flash and flare the sun began to shine behind the northern ridgeline.

Benumbed by the ride and his sense of triumph, he'd completely overlooked the brief false dawn, and here it was coming full light. All the throne kakti looked bleak gray-green and spiny across the tumbled landscape. The pinto trailed foam from its flanks while Zak hoisted around in the saddle and squinted back through the dust.

That sight, some two mil—*zoogs;* irritation—behind him cancelled all the bracing effects of his dash. He counted five Savages, brandishing lances and warknives as they charged their painted ponies after him at frightening speed. Their long, lean torsos were sunblacked. Their feather bonnets snapped in the wind. Their hideous warpaint matched the glare of first light leaking under the clouds, all orange and vermilion and yellow. So far as he could tell, the Savages weren't armed with firing weapons. Just those wicked lances and knives. But they yowled and shook the lances up and down with ferocity. Zak turned in the saddle. Leaned over the pinto's neck and forgetting himself, stroked it.

"Come on, boy. Come on, pardner, you can do it. For Christ's sake, pard, run!" Too bad the pinto couldn't hear him. Too bad he'd never given the mount a name to replace its official serial.

Suddenly all this sentiment about the mount vanished, seen for what it was. Gluey. Zak felt something wrong. Felt the insides of his legs hot through the check trousers. The pinto was overheating! God, of all times—

Suddenly the pinto's eyes began to rotate crazily in the sockets. Smoke poured from its nostrils. It stopped dead in its tracks, shooting Zak out over its head. He landed on tail and elbows with a bad neck snap. His palms bled from contact with the sharp shale into which he'd fallen.

When he looked around he saw the pinto kneeling. Its left foreleg had snapped in half, all the artful metal and gel sheathing ruptured and the colored wires were hanging out. Several were parted, spitting sparks.

The pinto's flanks gave off a noise like bolts rattled in a bucket. Smoke squirted from its madly rotating eyeballs as well as from its nostrils. The smoke trailed like flags, acrid, chemometallic.

In another moment the robot pinto dropped over, clashed its artfully yellowed teeth, and stopped vibrating and clanking.

Its tail switched once in the mechanical socket. The expensive mount, bought months ago, might have been faster than the cheaper constructs of the Savages, but these last were at least in one piece, and coming on fast through the color-slashed dawn.

The tips of Zak's mustaches dripped sweat as he faced the approaching war party. In the sudden stillness after the pinto's expiration, the yells of the Savages were quite loud.

Chapter Two

Few people in Shane visited the Shane Free Library. Zak, being an outsider, did. Some laggard braincells now called up a memory of the faded chromo on one wall. *The Plainsman,* he believed it titled.

An heroic sharpshooter was depicted crouching behind a real, genuine, dead horse, using it as screen and cover while he aimed his circa Terrafirmic 1880's pistol at a horde of circling Terrafirmic Savages. Zak dropped into this position, banging his knees and cursing as he unlimbered the Sharp's Six-Shot.

God, he was no gunman. He felt clumsy trying to steady the revolver, an immense, silvery thing with a long, long, long barrel. He used two hands.

In another moment the first Savage came clattering up out of a gully. Zak clenched his ears against the shrieks of the attackers, fired once.

The dart trailed smoke as it sped to the Savage's shoulder. The Savage sailed his lance. Its wicked point took Zak's hat off. The lance clashed in the shale behind him. A rotten rubbery reek rose from the pinto's injured mechanism. The smell sickened him, blurred his vision. He blinked. When he looked again, the Savage whom his dart had struck was still mounted but sitting rigid. As the Savage's pony came charging past Zak's outpost, the Savage began to topple.

Zak missed seeing the actual fall, busy trying to steady his hands for another shot. The remaining four Savages rode all in a bunch, shoulder to shoulder. Zak risked everything, fired the remaining five darts in a fusillade.

Two hit, three missed. That was all he could tell from the smoketrails before he put his head down under his arms.

A throwing knife gashed the back of one of his hands. The earth shook as the Savages raced by and, *clang*, another lance was hurled. When he dared peek out again he saw that the two Savages who remained on their mounts had retreated to a ridge against the sunrise for a hasty conference.

Zak plowed into his saddlebags for additional loads for the Six-Shot. He had the chamber half filled by the time the murderous pair galloped back again. One tossed his knife. Zak fired. His hand was trembling so violently that the smoketrail shot up into the sky at a forty-five degree angle.

The Savages, however, didn't miss the stiff forms of their compatriots lying in awkward positions on the rough tan ground. The pair thundered by, gesturing to one another and making ghastly faces over the plight of their fallen brothers. Zak jumped up, brandished his revolver. One of the Savages in turn clenched his fist, grimaced hatefully. It was a dark face, standing out for a moment bright as a medallion. A heavy-lipped face, with a broken bow of a nose. Zak continued to brandish the revolver wildly. Its big silver barrel flashed in the new sunlight.

The Savages reined in on another ridge a short distance away. Zak realized he'd been standing full in the open. He crouched down again, squinted. Would they ride back? Two on one, they still might disarm and murder him. Fear made his bowels gurgle. It was hateful, unthinkable, unimaginable, that in less than three generations, such a reversion could take place!

The primitive standards of the isolated little towns such as Shane were bad enough. But in the great overthrowing, certain groups had gone all the way back. Gone to the earth. Native, as it were. Opted for wigwams rather than false front villages, exemplifying the misbegotten ideals of the revolution—they thought—utterly. And out there on the ridge sat the results. Mindless, uneducated barbarians waving their arms and howling epithets.

But maybe—*maybe*—they were unfamiliar with and therefore afraid of such a simple device as a tranquilizing gun.

Minutes went by. Sweat dripped off the tip of Zak's nose while more collected on the bridge. His cheeks, reddened by yesterday's sunlight, tingled again now that the sun was risen. His skin was on the pale side. Unlike most of the native-born yahoos on Missouri, he burned and blistered rather than turning a leathery dark brown. He itched his left cheek with his free hand. The skin smarted fiercely.

His right hand dripped blood onto the reeking flank of the mechanical pinto. On and on the minutes crawled. The Savages continued to regard him from the ridge. Then, finally, with more yells, they turned their mounts and jogged off.

Their feather bonnets twisted in the breeze, all white and red and black plumes. The Savages dwindled away toward the misty Geronimos. Somewhere in the waste a varmint barked. No telling whether it was real or a robot.

Zak shoved the impossibly big, unwieldy revolver back into its holster. He freed his saddlebags from the useless robot pinto. Hell with the bedroll. He'd work Tip Top or maybe Cosfed itself for an advance and buy another.

Inside the bags he located his small first aid kit. He sprayed fast-hardening dressing onto the back of his wounded hand. Then he slung the saddle-bags over his shoulder and began tramping rapidly in the direction of the Fort. The effects of the darts wouldn't last all that long. Already one slumbering Savage breathed in a fast, raspy way. Zak's legs felt gelatinous as he hurried along. His weak ankles made him falter often. His boots chafed, starting new blisters.

He was genuinely shaken by the events just concluded. Particularly by the pinto's failure. He thought the artificial mounts which everyone rode were built to last. He had never really done enough riding before this to find out. But supposedly the predecessors of the horse robots, the biped models from the time before the trouble, had worked sturdily and long in the mines, doing drudge work unfailingly day after day, year after year. Those biped models had all been retired when the mines became so crucial to the revolutionary economy. Zak couldn't remember ever having seen one, in fact. But contemporary robot dogs and cats—pets—were

supposed to last a long time too. So he'd presumed the robot pinto was equally strong. He'd certainly learned otherwise. God, how had he gotten trapped here on this windswept, forbidding world where the clock had been twisted back to this moronic duplication of Terrafirmic cowboys and injuns?

It was imbecilic in this advanced era of the human race for a man to have to face death damn near every day. But that was the way the people had wanted it. *That* was the damn near unswallowable part. If it weren't for certain small things—Belle; the hot, abrasive climate that provided ideal growing conditions for the phorospores—he'd have blown his own brains out properly a long time ago.

As it was, he limped along from day to day, indrawn, bitter, laughing in black rage at the ridiculous comedy all around. He hated Missouri. He hated the fighting. Wasn't trained for it; didn't believe in it; refused to participate in it. But just now he had. The shock effect got to him at last, and he perspired and trembled.

He ate some imitation jerky out of his saddlebags. He couldn't keep it on his stomach. After vomiting he trudged on. The orange sun grew hotter.

Hours later, baked out, bloody-footed inside the boots, he clambered down a shale-strewn hillside. Like a hard blue shoulder, the curve of some long-buried piece of industrial equipment thrust up from the slope. As nearly as he could tell it was part of a gigantic turbine. One of the old cities buried here? He wondered which city. He'd read about them in the few spools and reels on the subject at the Shane Free Library.

Christ, it was incomprehensible, a whole planet throwing out modern technology and a high standard of living in exchange for a bitch ideal that had long since proved false and rotten to men like Zak—what few there were on Missouri! Imported men. Men who hadn't been born on the planet.

A lizard peered at him from behind the glinting turbine. The corners of his mouth twitched in panic and he rushed on.

At the bottom of the slope he came to a dusty track which led into the distance. A short way beyond, another track

coming in from the right intersected. A rickety signboard on a post informed him, *FORT PROPULSION 3 mis.*

On the horizon in the heat haze he saw the rocket gantries. Cursing and stumbling at every other step, he made his way ahead.

Chapter Three

A mile this side of the Fort gate a flaking signboard of more modern design clarified matters for any who happened to be interested. The sign identified the sprawling facility as Cosmic Confederation Commercial Freeport Number 1127, (renamed Fort Propulsion at the insistence of the locals).

There were three such ports on the north continent of Missouri, all widely separated by a lot of forlorn geography. The official re-naming—the date on the board showed it had happened over eighty years earlier, in the first decade of the twenty-third century—was just another indication of the way in which the galaxy's far-off central administrative structure bemusedly let the natives of Missouri go their own way, indulging in their aberrative antics unmolested because Cosfed did not consider the antics a menace to the rest of the galactic structure. Zak had long concluded that had the economic value of Missouri been of significance, Cosfed would have had a far stronger hand in matters. But the mines were nearly worthless. The value of the planet had become negligible in the galactic scheme now that the clock was firmly set back.

Little remained in the way of interplanetary commerce. There were occasional carefully guided tours. Off-worlders who wanted to visit a litle town like Shane could see, from behind protective invisibility shields, what they presumed was an authentic gunsmoke adjudication of a local dispute. And then there was the anemic souvenir trade. Hokey pseudo-

frontier items were manufactured by old-fashioned methods in a clutch of seedy factory buildings at the edges of some of the little towns. Somewhere in the galaxy a market for that kind of dreck existed, Zak knew. And Shane had such a clutch of facilities. He turned his main cartwheels by handling the town's dribble of souvenir trade. His was a minor civil service post, humiliating in its way. He often wondered whether events had conspired to end him up here on Missouri, or whether he had simply found his own level.

The cartwheels from his job, together with the extra ones he turned guiding groups through Shane for Tip Top Tours, helped him scrape along. An occasional Living Antique deal helped out too. It was one of those which had, by going sour, forced him to make the perilous overland journey to the Fort just ahead.

A long ocher plume drifted upward at one side of the rocket facility. A gantry was being slowlly rolled back. Zak noted the position of the orange sun. Realized it was later in the day than he'd imagined. That must be the twice monthly freight packet to Zapoleon fueling.

Save for that rusty rocket, the freeport seemed barren of activity. Few vessels called at Missouri. She was a remote world, both in terms of galactic location and the larger pattern of galactic life. *Damn* but he'd love to dance with a clean woman, ride up in a tower to the two-hundredth story, watch a government-inducted multimedia sunset on one of the really civilized worlds. But even Zapoleon, the closest, was a month's hop, and he didn't have nearly enough for fare, wouldn't be entitled to paid sabbatical holiday for another three years—

Trapped, his boots crunched at him as he trudged to the Fort's gate. *Trapped.* Four years on Missouri already and three more to go before Cosfed gave him leave—*trapped.*

"Howdy, pardner." The gate guard tipped his sombrero. "Lose your cayuse?"

"Cut the crap," Zak growled, fumbling for his ident. "I'm no local."

The guard wore electric blue chaps and a chartreuse neckerchief. He examined the ident. "Randolf. Resident Economic Agent. Ain't seen you around these parts lately, pilgrim."

Christ, they all did it, even the Cosfed employees stand-

ing guard. Zak thought of launching into a diatribe about whether it was truly necessary to humor the misbegotten non-society of the north continent so completely. Other concerns nagged him away from it. He glanced at the sleepy launch-yard with its single plume of smoke.

"Where's the *Bulawayo Express?* I'm here to meet her. She was due in after sundown last night, wasn't she?"

"Believe that's correct. Don't see her, though. You better ask."

Suffering in silence, Zak passed through the gate and across the empty esplanade. In its center a brackish fountain trickled. Centerpiece of the fountain was a plastic imitation of a bronze, a powerful arrangement of charging longhorn cattle. The nameplate mentioned the sculptor: a Remington of old Terrafirma. Had to be Terrafirmic. Cattle didn't survive on Missouri. It had been tried, along with everything else glorious and Terrafirmic Western, right after the trouble. Bacteriological forms native to Missouri had killed all the experimental herds.

Zak hurried past the fountain, worrying. His Living Antique contract was in trouble. Nothing save the prospect of a small profit fading away could have made him agree, in reply to Safrun's expensive ethergram, to come all this way to meet Safrun personally. And now where was Safrun?

He passed a freight dock piled with crates. He saw, with no satisfaction, that the crates were one of his shipments: packing boxes nailed together by hand—when Missouri went back, she went all the way. Each box was crudely painted with the legend, *CONTENTS: Olde Weste Brand Miniature Freight Wagons. Hand-crafted by Citizens at Shane, North Continent, Missouri. "IN THE PIONEER TRADITION."* Below this, his own initials and official stamp, dated. The shipment had left Shane by wagon six weeks earlier. Zak's mouth quirked as he moved on into the shadow thrown by the canopy of the square, colorless, one-story foamed concrete passenger building.

The schedule board confirmed the alarming news given him by his eyes and the gate guard. Along side the name *Bulawayo Express*, a ninety-tonner of a private line, electronic letters glowed. (Each Fort had its own internal generating station. Missouri north continent current custom did not pro-

vide for the production of power except at Cosfed installations.) The letters spelled out the gloomy message in the *Landings* column—*SCRUBBED, PLEASE INQUIRE.*

Zak did, of a young woman in gingham blouse of a shade contrasting horribly with her aquamarine skin. A Talavian girl, if he remembered. Civil service too, no doubt. The pout of her extra-wide mouth made it clear that she could hardly wait to fill out her term on Missouri and go on to a nicer assignment.

"Something I can do you for, amigo?" the girl inquired.

Zak flashed his ident. "*Bulawayo Express.* She didn't land."

"We had trouble in the receiving pit. She was re-routed last night to Fort Liftoff."

"Drat." Zak used the localism without even thinking. "I was supposed to meet an incoming passenger. In person. Mr. Micolas Safrun." His stomach ached from the new mess.

"You will find Mr. Safrun at Fort Liftoff, sir," the girl explained, as if he were a clod.

"But that's over four hundred miles away!" He couldn't ride all that distance. Not and risk encountering Savages again. The trip from Shane had wrung him out. But if he didn't get in touch with Safrun—

Something in Zak's wretched demeanor must have jogged a memory in the mind of the Talavian girl. She offered a communichit. "Oh, yes. *Randolf.* Sorry, pilgrim. The name didn't register right off. Dial these coordinates from that booth over there. Mr. Safrun—" She peered at the slip upside down. "—he's paying for the connection. You're to contact him as soon as you arrive." A blue-tinged horny substance, more or less like a nail on the end of one of her three fingers, ticked the chit. "It does say urgent."

Zak took the communichit. Feeling worse by the second, he dragged his saddlebags to the vis booth.

Chapter Four

"I am here," said Mickolas Safrun out of the screen. "You are there. But I don't see Bonn."

"Uh." Zag shifted in the cup chair. "That's right, Mr. Safrun."

Intimidating, Safrun's large, round head seemed to quiver. Safrun appeared to be about sixty. That meant he was probably in middle-prime, one hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy-five. Affecting the current mode of his home planet—Jenny's, the same world where his firm was headquartered—he wore two tiny pieces of refracting jewelry in his earlobes and beauty winkers on each eyelid. All those cosmetic touches couldn't offset Safrun's shovel chin and blade nose which, together with his Mohoc hairdo, made him look like a fourth cousin to a Savage.

"I expected you to have that wretch in your hands, Mr. Randolf. In your hands and ready to turn over to me. That's why I demanded that you meet me at Fort Propulsion. I don't run around half the galaxy on pinchpenny contracts, I don't mind telling you. Mickolas Safrun acting the bounty-hunter? Not every day, Mr. Randolf, not every day by a parsec! Eye-eye is much too big and active for that sort of trivia." His scathing glance indicated that if Interfed Importers was too big for grubby detail, Zak Randolf was not.

In his belly Zak felt one of those seething, consuming tremors he got occasionally when his contemplative nature was disturbed by an unexpected urge to kill. Such urges frightened him. This morning the urge was quite intense because of the truth of everything Mickolas Safrun was saying, and its possible impact on his future. He fended. "Mr. Safrun, I realize your ethergram asked me to have Hansi Bonn here, but—"

"Not asked," Safrun interrupted. "Ordered." The truculent head shot forward to the lens. Zak sweated. Even here, in the aircooled noiseproofed booth, he seemed to smell the offal and dust of Missouri. "There is a misunderstanding, yes? You're having Bonn guarded in protective custody elsewhere at the facility."

Zak tugged his mustache. "Uh. No, sir, I—just haven't got him. Yet."

"What, what? You haven't got him yet? At *all?*"

"No, sir. I know he's back. Back in Shane, his home town—"

"Where *you* live, Randolf, where *you* operate, I might remind you, as agent for select Living Antique contracts with the most enterprising human novelty traders in the galaxy! Don't forget you're dealing with Eye-eye, not some slipshod second rate firm. You're dealing with the biggest! The very finest! Safrun expects results, demands results, gets results!" A sidelong leer, the blade nose in profile. "Are you not devoting full attention to the job, Mr. Randolf? It *is* a sideline for you, isn't it? Technically prohibited by your Cosfed contract? That shouldn't make any difference. Out here—" A disdainful glance at the furnishings of the vis booth from which he was talking at distant Fort Liftoff.

"Cosfed—civilization!—is asleep. Yes. Now. If you don't find our arrangement profitable enough to suit you, Mr. Randolf, I presume I can find another agent willing to arrange shipment of these queer, primitive, ill-tempered individuals my clients find so quaint. Please tell me, Mr. Randolf. Do you wish to renege on your agreement with Eye-eye the way that Bonn fellow did?"

Panic. Calamity. Zak saw cartwheels disappearing. He blurted, "Not at all, Mr. Safrun! I sincerely—"

"Then what's the matter with you? Where is Bonn? You seem like a clever fellow. A distinct cut above the gargoyles on your planet who run around—my God, I can hardly countenance it—settling their disputes with *firearms?*"

"Yes, sir. It's the mode the people of Missouri chose after the trouble. Their ideal." Or had shoved on them, Zak amended silently. Some were willing, swept up by the idealism of the concept. But others—well, why distract Safrun with historical quibblings?

"We've never met in person before, have we, Mr. Randolf?" Safrun was wheedling, smooth, baiting a trap. "I've found your ethergrams models of brevity, clarity, business-like competence. Liked doing business with you! Could definitely tell you were several cuts above the others on this bastard planet. Several cuts." He paused. "It's a smooth arrangement we have, you know; those churlish locals thinking they want to see a few other planets for six months or a year. It's all claptrap, that regalia they wear—live ammunition-bearing guns indeed!—but my clients find it charming. They simply delight in having those fellows roam their estates as living ornaments for the agreed-upon time. No harm done, is there? The local fellow gets a bit of traveling, earns a few —cartwheels I believe you call them. The client enjoys a unique, ornamental conversation piece upon his premises—and pays handsomely, handsomely! You've handled it all splendidly thus far. But I don't mind telling you, this last one you sent me—the one under discussion—was an absolute bitch."

In his mind Zak saw Hansi Bonn's face. The memory brought a twinge of fear. He said, "You have to understand, Mr. Safrun, life on Missouri is considerably more violent than it is on, say, Jenny's. Hansi Bonn hangs around with a bad crowd in Shane. He's the equivalent of an outlaw of the old Terrafirmic west. I can't just"—a helpless gesture—"collar him."

"Oh? And why not, may I ask?"

"Because he carries a gun, Mr. Safrun. I don't. I'm a peaceful man."

"That," said Safrun with absolute contempt, "is no excuse."

Zak felt murderous. A moment later, though, he was ashamed of the hot, soupy emotions that had overwhelmed him against his will. The silence lengthened. Mickolas Safrun continued to stare, demanding, super-confident, until that stare forced Zak to come up with some kind of excuse.

"Hansi Bonn apparently didn't like his contract. I know he caught a ship back here to Missouri and came back to Shane, but I can't find him. His friends are hiding him. They're dangerous men."

"You keep emphasizing the element of danger as if that is an explanation, Mr. Randolph."

"It is! It is!" Zak cried. "Look. Can't we just cancel this contract? I'd be willing—glad—to forfeit my commission."

Safrun studied Zak's image on the screen at his end for some time.

"Are you a coward, Mr. Randolf?"

Stung, Zak fought the seething pain of the truth the man might be probing. Finally, with conviction, he managed to say, "I don't think so, sir. Every man's a little bit of a coward. But it is true that I despise everything this planet stands for. Everything that's come about as a result of the social changes after the trouble."

Safrun began to appear cross-eyed with indifference. Stupid man, Zak thought. Stupid as most—insensitive to fundamental questions of law. Reason. Man's nature and fate. The law of the gun was wrong but Safrun wouldn't understand. His contract mattered most.

"I'm afraid there is no chance of forfeiture, Mr. Randolph. Living Antique Bonn was contracted for one year to one of my most valuable and influential clients, J. Amaryx Peytonitis on Butler's Belt. I can't simply ring up a trillionaire like Peytonitis and say casually, Sorry, old fellow, but Eye-eye let you down. Peytonitis and his circle were charmed by that lout Bonn. Principally, I gather, for the very reason Bonn repels you. His snake-like temper and inclination to settle trifling arguments by violent means. Bonn served almost six months but you contracted him—on a face-to-face agreement, wasn't it?"

Miserable nod from Zak.

"You contracted him for a full term. You also guaranteed his full compliance with the contract. Do you really conceive that I would subject myself to the discomforts of visiting a wretched, out-of-the-way world such as Missouri for just any customer's contract? We can't even speak in person because the antiquated docking facilities at your Fort." Safrun made a nasty joke of the word. "Caused me to end up here, zoogs from where you are, with Peytonitis angry at me. Mr. Randolf, you will bring me Hansi Bonn in person."

"Bring you—?" Zak nearly strangled on the words. "To Fort Liftoff?"

"Bonn will certainly do me no good if you return him to the Fort where you are. Mr. Randolf?"

"Yes?"

"Does the climate of Missouri agree with you? You're acting addled."

"That's because I was damn near killed getting here, and—"

Zak stopped. Safrun was busy with an attractive feminine traveling companion. She was blurred at the edge of the screen, but Safrun was clearly fondling her and muttered something about being finished very shortly. The female blur vanished. With superb indifference Safrun blinked twice. "You were saying, Mr. Randolf?"

"Never mind."

Zak stared miserably at the cracked, dusty toes of his boots. His feet burned and ached. He thought of the distance between Shane and Fort Liftoff; thought of Hansi Bonn's pinched, arrogant, snake-eyed face; thought of the obscene, hearty laughter of the crowd with whom Hansi hung out at the Last Chance; thought ultimately of the walled garden of his little house in Shane; of the phorospores tinkling and growing; of Leester Kiln where the crystals began their transformation into strangely beautiful jewelry. His mind wandered, indulging in a reverie of forgetfulness—

Ought to be planning a new lot of jewelry. It means more cartwheels. His fingers itched at the thought of the jewels. Their beauty meant more, much more, to him than cartwheels. At times he was vaguely ashamed of his interest, especially in the context of life on Missouri. But mostly he was defiantly proud of it. The phorospores were a mockery and condemnation of all that mindless whelps like gun-toting Hansi Bonn represented.

"—sacked."

The word penetrated Zak's daze. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Safrun?"

"I said," Safrun repeated while the refracting jewels in his earlobes sprayed rainbows into the vis lens, "I can get you sacked if you bungle this contract retrieval. Yes, Mr. Randolf, well you might turn pale. I have friends in high places in Cosfed." Smugly, now. "Coordinator Valneshkov? Director General Flude? Yes! I thought those names might register! They're but two of many. If I don't have that young Living Antique in my possession, suitably tranquilized for

travel, by the time my agenda and impatience take me off Missouri—I can wait a week, Randolf; two at most; does *that* tell you how influential Peytonitis is? If I don't have Bonn, I say, I'll pull strings. Fair warning, eh? You'll be sacked. Not only thrown off Missouri but thrown out of Cosfed. You petty bureaucrats are all alike. You pretend to look on your career with loathing and contempt, but I know it's a sinecure. That will come to an end unless I get results, and Hansi Bonn complete with pistols. Good morning."

Jaggedy color lines signalled the break of the connection. Zak remained seated a moment longer, suffering a poleaxed ache between his eyes.

He wandered to the Fort restaurant. He ordered something to eat but tasted none of it. Finallly the gingham-dressed waitress asked him whether he was through.

He raised his head. His eyeballs hurt.

"I think there's a good possibility."

The waitress started to remove the mealware. She paused to turn up the music system. An electrochorus wailed an ancient Terrafirmic folk ballad about Ole Paint. Zak didn't hear a note, which was probably just as well.

Chapter Five

Before the waitress could finish clearing, Zak roused himself and snatched the last half of what appeared to be a Bison-wich. It was thoroughly synthetic and flat but he forced it down his—as the locals said—craw because he needed energy. His sinecure, characterized by Safrun so accurately, was despicable in many ways. But it offered certain attractions too. Any threat to it put him in a hyperreactive state.

With one of his last cartwheels he rented a rest booth on the terminal's subground level. Then he sought out the Public Information Station, right between the vis booths and

the Traveler's Aid sphere. On credit he programmed a request to the proper administrative unit of Cosfed, on the planet Hephestus. He waited nearly half an hour for the transmission to travel through space and bear him back an answer. To his carefully worded plea for additional funds to be charged against his future salary, Cosfed replied in the affirmative.

Sector Superintendent Noglesby (Zak suspected there was no such person, merely another machine) added a sympathetic note to the effect that it was certainly too bad rowdies in Shane had completely burned and gutted Zak's home. Naturally funds were available for new furnishings. Zak eyed the balance flashed on the reception plate, waited for the message deduction to be figured in, then programmed a certified punch card showing his credit balance. He left the Station and hurried out into the orange glare. He really didn't need the credit. He just wanted to satisfy himself that Safrun hadn't already started wrecking his career.

At the Applejack Korral, a tourist trap if ever there was one, Zak haggled with the operator and finally arrived at a price. At first old Applejack didn't want to sell one of his sway-backed robot ponies. They were often used to take tourist parties into the countryside. Zak had to throw in a few extra cartwheels, and denigrate the workmanship of the four-legged robots as well, before Applejack agreed to part with the worst of the lot. When Zak said he'd pick the mount up at dawn, the oldster hawked and squinted at the orange sun.

"You wouldn't be so plain afraid of the Savages, pardner, iffen you toted a hogleg."

"Up yours, pardner, and scuttle the dialect. You're a Boskorian. I see the tattoo."

Leaving Applejack chagrined, Zak departed from the tourist trap and walked six paces to Cosfed property. The orange sun steamed, raising a heat haze. He hurried to the subground, locked himself in his rest booth. He unpacked his saddlebags, stripped, showered, and lay down to attempt to relax.

He dipped into his much-thumbed copy of Snef's *Principles of the Leester Kiln*. But his mind wandered. He dialed bed agitation and lowered the light level even further. No go. He spent an extra cartwheel to suffuse the chamber with tranquilizing spray. That didn't put him out completely,

merely rendered him vaporish. Took the edge off his predicament but didn't remove it.

At least he could think about his predicament now, sans panic. The lemon-scented spray did that much. He drifted.

Leave Missouri? No, he couldn't. Where would he go? What would he do? Especially if he was booted from Cosfed? He'd been a minor civil servant all his days.

Of course life had left him skimpily endowed. Yet he had pretty well managed to get over his bitterness on that score. His father, Jorge Randolf, had been a holographic copy products salesman, and a poor performing one at that. Consequently his mother, Waanda, had been forced to supplement the family income by working as a frozen dietetics tester on their overcrowded home world, Pelzhill Green. A shy, introspective child, Zak had early conceived the notion of becoming an artist. Unfortunately his family lacked funds to educate even an only child. When Zak failed the Assistance Placement Examinations, he was blocked forever from the necessary formal training.

After a succession of menial jobs he managed to pass the lowest grade Cosfed examination. From then on he was fairly well set. At least his employers had a splendid benefit program, including the aerosol treatments which kept him outwardly young. (In the lemon dim Zak remembered he was overdue. He broke open one of the year's supply of jectophials, applied the pressure end to his arm. A sting; the vial discarded; he felt more youthful once more.)

Assignment on Missouri had been, and was, a paradox: a heaven-hell combination he couldn't separate even now.

Basically Zak hated the planet's society. He was—or liked to think he was—a man of contemplation, reason, sensibilities. True, he was not a highly paid artist. He had adjusted at a relatively young age to the second-rate life status into which circumstances had forced him. But much as he loathed the way the revolutionary cadre had re-organized the planet some two old-style "generations" earlier—about 140 years—he liked Missouri because the climate, a breathable type but with odd elements, was exactly right for cultivating the queer, breathtakingly beautiful phorospore crystals.

His tinkling walled garden was his private preserve. His retreat. There he harvested the crystals and turned them

into wild jewelry in the Leester Kiln. How the hardcases laughed at him! Even Belle sniggered at his peculiar avocation. But he loved it, and did not consider it unmanly.

Now, that, however, was definitely over unless he brought in the runaway Hansi Bonn.

The pinched, vicious, whining face haunted even his tranquilized lethargy. Hansi was one of the notorious Bonn Boys, hardcases who hung around the saloon in Shane raising hell. Zak abominated all that Hansi and the rest stood for: right belonging to the strongest; to the birdbrain with the fastest live ammunition-bearing revolver. Hansi and Fritzi Bonn, strutting in their old Terrafirmic togs with massive phallic pistols on their hips, were no worse than the rest of the hardcases, but no better. Beasts. They'd invite you to draw if they didn't like your smile. They'd shoot to settle any disagreement. As a result, Shane quaked in fear of them.

It was the same in all the tiny, isolated towns on the north continent. The hardcases called the tune, and justified their behavior by the old, rebellion-born mystique of individualism. Individualism, crap, Zak thought, floating bemused but unable to sleep while the bed rocked him fruitlessly. Turning the clock back had only led to a worse situation on the planet. Away from Missouri's few Cosfed facilities, there was but a single law, and it was spelled gun.

What a hateful farce. Yet the native-born citizens—most of all of middle- and south-European origin, descendants of the early Terrafirmic colonization waves—believed it!

Missouri had been discovered and mapped by a Terrafirmic American space captain. Hence the name, about all that remained of the planet that once was. Because of Missouri's generous deposits of minerals such as hacanth, rhoom and Flukey's Iron, the first colonies quickly swelled in size. Missouri fast became a highly organized, relatively sophisticated world.

But in the quick-changing cycles of post-atomic history, a hundred years after Missouri's first settlement its cities were already overcrowded and financially strained. Population increased. The government bureaucracy, originally patterned on Cosfed's early federalistic form, became more centralized; grew to monstrous size; acquired overwhelming power. A socialized welfare state was instituted.

The government was overthrown in bloody fighting led by a reactio-revolutionary cadre preaching a return to the ideals and values of a simpler, more moral time when right belonged not to the large, fat bureaus, but to the lone individual with the strength to seize power. Unfortunately, the mode which fascinated the European-descended citizens in the cadre was that of the long, tall, tight-lipped, gun-bearing avenger. The strength-figure of the ancient spools and reel fictions of the longlost mythic Terrafirmic frontier.

The cadre destroyed the cities in order to rebuild them along different lines. Decentralizing of population by fiat followed mass upheaval and bloodshed. Through its temporary committees the cadre decreed that the mode to be emulated was that of the Early Terrafirmic American West. Here and there in obscure histories Zak had read that a few scientists and educators tried to stop the madness of some one hundred and forty years ago. Unsuccessfully, apparently. The resistance was liquidated.

So the towns were settled; the small, seedy, false front towns; names, images, unbelievable ethics re-created with deliberate care from the old spools and reels. It made no difference that the contents of the spools and reels were primarily fictions. The myth bore the aura of idealized truth: in the ancestral long ago men were free and strong—freer and stronger—because they openly challenged other men and nature, and only the fittest survived.

The cadre re-settled the small towns near the mine sites. Ordered phase-out of the biped robots that did the drudge work in order to give the human citizens work. All but the most basic service occupations had been eliminated in the great purge and city-smashing. Bewildered people, seeking simple answers to what had become complex problems, eagerly responded to and supported the cadre's plan. Certainly the dream must have been easy to believe in the complexities that were the cities of Missouri with their bulging populations and overtaxed economic systems. Zak, a self-taught man, knew some history. He knew that, while aberrations in a mass psyche usually looked incomprehensible at a distance of years, up close, happening, they seemed perfectly natural. In the hundreds upon hundreds of antique spool and reel fictions so popular among the old Missourians and among

their European Terrafirmic ancestors there was a shining answer to social chaos: rebuild the present into the best possible past.

Well, reality had proved a somewhat different matter.

The mines were petering out, owing to a lack of proper application of technology. Modern mining methods were forbidden, along with much else considered by the long-gone cadre to be newfangled. With the pattern set, the little isolated towns found themselves becoming more Westernfied; forced into that in an attempt to lure more tourists. But the tourists grew steadily fewer because the purpose of the cadre was largely forgotten, and only the results remained. Missouri was a dangerous place to visit. Hansi Bonn was about as noble as an old Terrafirmic bull maddened in rut. Gone the ideal.

It made Zak shiver in his cool tranquilized cell merely to think of it. Gone was the ideal. Still present was the abominable gun. The clock was back, right enough. Stopped dead. If only the phorospores didn't bloom so tinkling bright in the hot orange air, he wouldn't mind leaving. Ah, God, not at all.

He managed to wiggle at last into a fetid sleep, drug-soothed. He woke to the chime at dawn. He trudged with his saddlebags to the Applejack Korral, there to mount his sway-backed robot pony and turn his face away from Fort Propulsion with the awful recurring feeling that he was not only riding back into a squalid mess put into the past. And he was.

Chapter Six

Sundown that same day.

The eerie sawtoothed shadows of the Geronimos lengthened across the land. The sinister spiked shadows of the throne kakti was equally forbidding. Zak kept an eye on the horizon, watching for Savages. The Savages were worse than

the hardcases who ran the towns. At least the hardcases spoke the lingua franca.

Zak thought he saw purplish smoke moving over the mountain foothills. He shuddered. Then he realized the smoke was actually rising in the nearer distance. It trailed out from a brushwood fire hidden down in a wash. Zak gigged his robot horse. Somewhere within it, gears squealed and clashed, but it quickened its pace. He dropped the reins, reached around to his saddlebags for the last tranquilizing loads for his Sharp's Six-Shot.

Unnecessary. He breathed out.

Down in the dusk of the wash he saw a rickety multicolor peddler's wagon hung with bright lanterns at either end. Two robot horses stood head down beyond the wagon. The gently swaying lights illuminated the wagon's rococo legend of yellow and fiery green. DR. BUSTER'S PERIPATETIC EMPORIUM. With a whoop Zak rode toward the campsite.

The old, hide-faced gentleman who emerged from the wagon pulled his revolver. He was a tall, spare, bitter-thin old gentleman, wearing dark trousers and boots, a white swallowtail coat, a dirty conical hat, a string tie and a colorful vest decorated with beads and anachronistic sequins.

Zak waved his hat, riding down into the wash. "Put that shooter away, Buster! It's me! Zak Randolf."

"Zak Randolf? Damn if it isn't! Haven't seen you in a Kiowa moon. Light down!"

The old man's eyes, so slanted and harshly wise, remained empty of a smile, though there was a smile on his mouth. The smile revealed discolored teeth. It was genuine enough for this kind of open-country meeting.

Zak picketed his robot horse and turned it off. He dragged his bags toward the sweet fire, where Buster Levinsohn clapped a hard hand across his shoulderblades.

"How be you, boy? How be things in Shane? Haven't laid eyes on you since I called there six months ago." The old man squatted by his battered coffee pot in the coals. A wolf looked out from under his frosty brows. "Everything same as ever, I suppose? The crapheads shooting up things and swaggering their weight around?"

"Same as ever." Zak grinned, nearly relaxed. "Nothing changes in Shane, except for the worse."

"True, true. It's no market for culture. No market for the books I carry." He said a sad, obscene word. "As usual I'll jest have to figure a way to sell them more needles and pots and lard. One thing I will say for Shane and the rest of those burgs. It's easier to fraud a dumb man than a wise one. Tell me, though. What brings you back in this direction? You're coming from the Fort if I make your track right."

"I am." Zak evaded the old man's eyes. "Business. Setting up a shipment."

Buster Levinsohn spat. "Don't believe it. Not you, mister peaceful. Riding along in Savage country. 'Cause of a shipment? Well, I won't push. One of the virtues of this way of life it says here is that a man's allowed privacy. Puncture it and you maybe get shot. I'll allow you yours same as I allow any man his, for safety's sake. Have some coffee and beans, boy. I'll tell you the news of my travels and you tell me yours."

Squatting at the fire, Zak dug in to the offered food. The smell of the sugar substitute-dressed beans was thick, sweet. He relished the clean, open tang of the settling night air. It was a feeling about the countryside he did not have often.

He washed down his meal with the black acid from Dr. Buster's blue synthometal pot. He even went so far as to accept a cigar from the peddler. On Dr. Buster's hip the butt of his revolver winked in the popping orange embers. The old man grinned, puffed up a storm of blue smoke, said, "All right, now, Zak. Let's have your tidings."

"I told you—nothing much. Except the hardcases do grow a little more brazen every day."

Buster spat in a slow, metaphysical way. "What else you expect in this phony no-account culture, boy? Where isn't there a town where the hardcases are getting more brazen, shooting innocent citizens and feeling their hands all over decent women's bodies?"

Time out for a quick sales preview of a semi-pornographic holo album Dr. Buster had imported in a case lot. He snapped it shut when Zak said he wasn't interested.

"Yes, boy, I forget you've got that nifty little dancehall girl. Why she takes up with you when she had all those handsome, dashing fellows grabbing her leg at the Last Chance puzzled me considerably." But he was still smiling.

"Belle has thank God some intelligence left," Zak bristled. But sometimes, in the dark of a cowering night, he wondered how long he could hold her.

"Strange doings in Shatterhand," remarked Dr. Buster. "Speaking of lawlessness, that is."

Zak nodded. He knew the distant town by name. He squatted closer to the fire for warmth as the old man continued. "Just got shed of the town, actually. The tales they told me there—whoo!"

"What happened?"

"A while ago, it seems, the citizens decided it was time for a return to a little law and order. Things were really getting too bold and sassy. So the citizens clamped down on the hardcases some. Whereupon one of the hardcases up and slew the marshal with his gun. Dullard name of Brown. All the marshals in these towns round here are dullards, don't it seem like?"

Zak allowed as it did.

"Odd. Anyway, this killing was about as far as the citizens of Shatterhand would allow their gorge to rise. They formed a vigilante committee. Hanged the offending hardcase the night after the marshal got killed, for more'n one reason. That town was spooked proper. Marshal's body disappeared, pop"—Buster clapped his hands—"from the funeral home just hours after he was ventilated. No one ever found it. Hence the hardcase hanging. The other leading hardcases promptly hightailed up to the Geronimos on a night ride. Guess who they brung back."

Against all reason, Zak's neck hairs prickled. "Not Buffalo Yung."

"I'm cosmologically damned if they didn't."

"But there isn't any such person, Buster. It's a legend."

"You tell the folks in Shatterhand. You tell them and they'll tell you in return that there he was, ornery as an historical twister and twice as tall. The meanest, filthiest, cussedest, fastest gun engineer as ever walked Missouri since the troubling. There he was, followed by those three cronies of his all dressed in black, like outriders of the Great Shade himself. They say it was Buffalo Yung hisself—fringed jacket, rotten teeth, whiskey gut out to here, those long mustaches." Buster pantomimed, his hand trailing smoke. In the blue Zak

saw the horrid phantom leer. "He was spoutin' his ornery grammar and carrying those twin pearlhandled beauties of revolvers. The town had selected one poor but honest simp to replace the marshal. He faced off with Yung in the street. Yung splatter his brains to breakfast with three shots. The hardcases whooped and carried on worse than ever. So the scared folk chose a second simp and by a miracle of strange grace, he was a fraction of a second faster. Buffalo Yung died with his boots on. They buried him in Shatterhand's boot hill." Dr. Buster sniffed the burning leaf in his cigar, adding, "I saw the grave but not the remains."

"Have things settled down any since?"

"Outwardly, outwardly. Some of the red light places are shut up. The saloon's open shorter hours. But near as I could tell, the vigilante committee is calling the shots 'stead of the hardcases. And guess who's the number one chief caller? Why, the poor simp who by the grace of God beat Buffalo Yung, and he, I was informed, has turned into a real swaggering horn-toad. Nigh as bad as the hardcases themselves." Dr. Buster sighed elaborately. "Most curious. Happened about four months ago. Possibly the facts are already colored."

"I don't believe Buffalo Yung exists, Buster. It's wish fulfillment. An apotheosis. What the damn social reformation was supposed to be about. Only to some of us, it's a vile jest."

Dr. Buster shrugged. "Might be so. On the subject of Yung's reality I've never been satisfied one way or the next."

Zak pressed now; something uncomfortable demanded it. "You ever *seen* this Yung?"

"Wouldn't I of told you if I had, boy? On the other hand, I have encountered, in addition to the good souls of Shatterhand who swear he was gunned down and laid out there, a number of wanderers of the plains such as yourself who also swear they have laid eyes on Yung and his three black-clad cronies riding. Since the shoot-out at Shatterhand."

Slowly, imperceptibly, a trace of haunting stole into the eyes the old man turned out to the dark.

"I will say it gives a man pause on lonely nights like this. It's a big planet. This is a mighty small fire."

For a moment the spell lingered. With a shudder, Zak fought it off, arguing his way to sanity again. "Come on, Bus-

ter. You know how legends are. Perpetuated willy-nilly. Why, I heard the Yung story the second day I arrived in Shane. I heard it from an old grandmother—she's dead now—who vowed she talked to him when he came to the door in a thunderstorm asking for food. I can still recall how she described the lightning flashing on those pearlhandled guns." He could, icily. "I'll wager the real answer to the story lies in just this—more than one man's taken that fictitious name, and used it as his own."

Buster chewed the end of his cigar, making wet sounds. "Possible. Possible."

"I can't convince you?"

"You could, except—the descriptions."

"Descriptions?"

Yellowhair was up now, casting strange moon shadows from the horizon. "The descriptions jibe every time, boy. Every single time, down to the mustaches and the bad teeth and the guns. I can't explain that by mass wish fulfillment in reverse. No, nothing in my extensive education—"

"Non-existent," Zak laughed. "Doctor."

"Be civil and hold your sass. I say, I cannot explain such continual continuity, to use a rolling phrase, of pregnant detail. The whiskey belly. The pearl handles. The three ghastly harbingers. Three sallow-faced hardcases always following him everywhere. What if he does ride, boy?"

For an instant Buster's ridged and weary face quivered with the signs of a terror that went soul-deep. It was the pull of Missouri, the awesome ubiquitous presence of life as it was lived cheap. And it struck to the root of man's old fears: the gun, life; the gun, death.

In the dark beyond the colorfully painted wagon Zak could almost hear hoofbeats.

Finally Dr. Buster shrugged. He rose with kneejoints popping under his old faded trousers.

"Probably it is just folk-prattle, as you say. Care for a mite more coffee before we jaw some more? I venture you need it. You're much more peaked than you were on the occasion of my last commercial visit to Shane. Sure there's nothing in your craw?"

Thrusting down thoughts of Mickolas Safrun, Hansi Bonn,

all the tangle of events awaiting him, Zak replied in a hard, choppy way, "Nothing."

"Ahhhmph." Dr. Buster poured coffee for them both. His grunt said he neither believed nor disbelieved. His terrier eyes said he disbelieved, but he kept silent.

Chapter Seven

Through the heat of the next day they proceeded at a leisurely pace to Shane. Zak was content to amble his sway-backed pony at the relaxed speed beside the creaking, clattering wagon. He had slept deeply, thickly, without dreams.

The land lay stark, empty of life. At noon in the shade of a kakti Dr. Buster rustled up an order of instant ersatz flapjacks. They ate inside, in the cooler, spicy gloom of the wagon. There Zak rummaged through Dr. Buster's dusty collection of microbook reels. After haggling he bought two, both nonfiction, Terrafirmic historical gems. One was by the ancient Gibbon, the other by the less ancient Jobaby Kikiyu-bloodyhands. These he stowed outside in his saddlebags while Dr. Buster picked at the flap of the carry-carton.

"Sure I can't interest you in the largest part of my stock? Genuine Terrafirmic Western novels? *Avenger's Moon? My Guns Bring Justice? Pistol-Packin' Hombre?*"

Zak returned a sour grin. "You know my reaction to that pap. Gibbon and Jobaby will be adequate."

The old peddler sighed, fanning his perspiring face. He pointed to a queer metal instrument with earphones and numerous dial controls. The device was wedged in among packets of needles, cook pots, sacks or synthoflour, boxes of bullets, bolts of imported DuPont Brand Calico and Denim.

"Then how about a quick hypnolearning course on bee keeping? Or homemaking? For a modest fee I can make you an expert at most any skill practically overnight. Archery? Interpretative dance? Stability necessary for spelunking?"

Zak said he wasn't interested in cramming new information into his head or new skills into re-educated muscles and nerves. His eye kept wandering out the oblong of the wagon door to the harsh, bursting glare of the landscape. In a perverse way he would be glad to reach Shane. There he could retreat behind his walls to the tinkling phorospores. And unstrap the phony gunbelt with the tranquilizing weapon.

He loathed himself for making such a false display. The dart-firer was neceessary for solitary traveling, as events had shown. But he didn't want anyone to think that he would ever carry the real item. Besides, he couldn't handle one. The Sharp's Six-Shot was fairly easy to use because you could land a dart anyplace on the body with full effect. He hated the symbolism all the same; would be thankful to remove the weight from his hip.

"No hypnolearning, eh, boy?" Dr. Buster was a born salesman. He couldn't give up easily. "No fictive Western romances?"

"Romance my gonads, you old con man. Lies that glorify killing is a better description."

"How you remain alive and breathing in this particular culture is a fact I can't fathom. But you do, so I guess that means you're clever. I know you're clever. You're about my only customer for Gibbon and Kikiyubloodyhands. I carry those as a sop to culture and guilt. Because my sainted mother did teach me right. She was a school marm over at Johnwayne Junction."

"I remember," Zak growled.

Dr. Buster slapped dust from his trousers, wedged around Zak and left the wagon. "I only twit you because I like you, boy. And obviously I've turned my best possible profit today. What say we throw the plates in that can of detergo latched to the back of the wagon and mosey."

They moseyed, the hooves a soporific rhythm in the dusty afternoon. Right before dusk they topped a rise and, had Zak not been expecting it, he would have been startled by the quick, stark thrust of about two hundred frame buildings nestled down at the bottom of a long, gradual slope.

Shane was situated on the bend of a creek whose bed was still cut deep. The water was no more than a putrid, algae-slimed trickle now. The town looked pretty and dusty and

quaint in the glow of early evening, with splashes of lamplight here and there. The breeze carried the mournful notes of a harmonica. A robot dog yapped a long way off. Over all, the player piano in the Last Chance Saloon clanged a long ago folk melody. Against the background of the sawtoothed Geronimos it looked, Zak thought, gentle. Deceptive as hell.

The peddler on his high wagon seat, the slender mustached man in his saddle, they wended down a slope past Shane's boot hill. Automatically Zak counted crosses, came up with a new total, picked out the new one at last. The crosspiece showed the white splintery ends of artfully formed synthetic wood.

Dr. Buster didn't miss Zak's troubled scrutiny,

"New one dead?"

"Yes. Since I felt."

As if for emphasis, the night breeze boomed the laughter of men from the Last Chance. Even from this distance, Zak had no trouble making out the clutch of horses hitched to the rail in front of the town's sole saloon midway down the long, dusty ruts of Main Street.

Shane's other two streets were laid out parallel to the longer one. Off at the farthest end of the farthest of the three streets Zak glimpsed his little house with its walled garden, a familiar shape of shadow under the lowering sky. Most of the citizens were indoors for the evening meal. What few were abroad noted Zak's return with a stare or at best a nod. No one greeted him with warmth.

Dr. Buster braked his wagon where a cross street cut ofl to the right, leading eventually to the bank of the dry creek.

"Believe I'll make my campsite down there, boy, then repair to the Chance for a libation. Care to join me? Treat's mine. From the profit I made off you, of course."

"No thanks. Things to do." Things he didn't relish doing.

Dr. Buster waved. "Well, another time. I plan to stay a spell. Come see me."

Man and wagon creaked and melted into the blue shadows of the side street. Zak rode on, his palm tickling as he approached the Last Chance.

He recognized many of the horses standing switched off in front. The din from inside—player piano, clomping feet pounding out a dance rhythm, squealing female voices, male

laughter—made him wince. All the Chance's windows, leaded into many small translucent multicolored panes, writhed with shadow-patterns. Like a vision of the pit, thought Zak. And Belle was in there. Working. *Working*, by God, in such an environment!

He wanted to see her. That she took pleasure in his company fascinated him and—at base—warmed him too. She was Missouri-born. She didn't understand many of the ideas Zak espoused or refused to, but he was grateful, coming home in the twilight like this, that she was mesmerized in her fashion by his second-rate set of brains. She could shoot but he could read. Relativity had its virtues on occasion.

He sat on his horse for a long moment, screwing up courage to go into the din and say hello. A portly figure came reeling along the sidewalk.

"Goshen! Look who's back. Mr. Highpockets Bigbrains himself indeed."

The man executed a nasty bow, almost losing his old ratty plug hat. A shaking hand retrieved it in time. Zak swallowed a ball of spit, said slowly, "Evening, Philemon."

He could never decide whether he hated or simply disliked the man. Philemon Rasmussen was a bottle-shaped old wreck with gray-shot straw hair. Clothes always filthy, he smelled like a sty, and his small eyes in his fat face were mean when he was sober, meaner when he was drunk. As far as Zak could deduce, although Philemon gripped the Chance's porch rail to keep from falling, he was sober.

Zak took a long breath. "Would you mind dropping inside and informing Belle that I'm back."

Philemon sneered. "Why that sweet little whore bothers herself with *you*—"

"Watch your mouth, you old drunk."

Philemon hadn't even heard. "—is a complete and utter mystery. Must be you let her know how smart you are. Like you do everybody else round town, you being the Cosfed agent and all."

Brazen-eyed, he spat, "For a man reputed to have some education himself, reputed in fact to have been a fine surgeon before he started sucking on the tit of a bottle."

"I've suffered!" Philemon shrieked. " 'Tis nobler that way!" He postured. "The slings and arrows of outrageous for-

tune—through it all I remain captain of my soul, the master—"

A cartwheel spun contemptuously from Zak's hand. It caught the last orange of sundown, plopped in the dust, lay shining. Philemon Rasmussen wiped a disgraceful sleeve on his mouth. "Go tell her I'm back and that I'll see her here when the Chance closes down."

Philemon made a mean, pugnacious face. "All you can do is bribe an old drunk, you yellowbelly. One of these days one of the boys"—jerk of thumb at the racket inside—"they'll call you out. Then we'll watch the yellowbelly juice run down your leg, yes we will!"

With maximum effort Zak restrained his temper. He said, "By the way, who got killed?"

Philemon's little eyes struggled with that. "Oh? You mean yesterday. Widow Ead's older lad. Too smart for his jeans. He wouldn't get out o' the Kid's way on the sidewalk."

"Wouldn't get out—" A gasp masked the rest. "The boy wasn't twenty!"

"The boy was a smartass, you offworld yellowbelly. What do you say to that?"

Disgusted, Zak started the robot pony forward while the bottle-man kept spitting and blubbering. Zak glanced back once. The star-eye of the cartwheel had vanished from the dust. A new, plug-hatted gargoyle's shadow cavorted behind the leaded windows.

Chapter Eight

The last building at the far end of Main Street had two rooms —one room jail, one room marshal's office. The cramped space, plus the structure's location in town, suggested the stature of the law-keeping apparatus in Shane.

Zak called there shortly before midnight, having changed

clothes at home, made a decent meal, looked to his tinkling phorospore garden, then set out along streets which he sensibly disliked walking at night.

A drunk snored in the tank. Marshal Luke Smith, burly, tough-looking, now looked perfectly relaxed. He sat with his boot heels on the edge of his roll-top desk, reading the weekly issue of the Shane *Pioneer-Advocate*. As Zak walked in Luke rolled a plug in his jaw and turned his phlegmatic yellow eyes. "Evening, Zak. Back so soon?"

It was flatly said, without interest. The marshal removed his feet from the desk. Set them on the floor. It seemed to take forever. He folded the *Pioneer-Advocate*, whose lead headline, in barnum type, referred to the shooting of the Ead boy.

"I guess there was another killing while I was gone," Zak said.

"Yes there was." Luke coughed, stared at the floor. "Mighty tragic."

"Mighty tragic that the hardcase who shot him is running around free."

Luke Smith raised his massive head, a somehow turgid movement. "No evidence."

"No evidence! You mean nobody saw the shooting? Philemon talks as if he did."

"Mebbe some saw." Luke rolled his chew. "None's talking."

"Christ, Luke, Shane's running in blood and you just sit there nodding."

"I'll take action," Luke returned in a heavy voice. "In good time. Yes, we'll get the evidence and something'll be done. In good time."

Frustrated, Zak wondered whether to prod further. He decided against it. He needed the help of this stolid, apparently unfeeling creature. But he remained furious. *In good time* was the catchphrase, the slogan, of Luke Smith's tenure in office. Nothing seemed to anger the burly, slow-moving man.

Luke appeared capable enough, with his deepset eyes and his rough, planed face shining in the glow of the solitary green-chimneyed lamp. Yet the marshal seemed temperamentally unable to check even the most flagrant excesses of

the town's rough element. The Ead death was simply one more proof. All this, however, went unsaid, in the hope of winning Luke Smith's cooperation on the larger issue.

"Luke, I've an honest to God problem. You know my last Living Antique contract?"

Luke rolled his chew left to right. "Yup."

"He reneged. Came back here. I tried to talk my client out of the contract at Fort Propulsion but it's no game. He insists I bring Hansi in, so I've got to locate him. He's here in town."

Luke rolled the chew right to left. "Yup."

"He's here, Belle knows he is, Philemon knows he is, everybody knows he is, including you, but I don't know where to find him." Zak leaned forward. "There aren't many people in Shane I can trust but I think I can trust you. Do you know where Hansi's hiding out?"

Luke ceased chewing. "Nope."

"Have you seen him?"

Luke peered in a vague, lost way at the smoking lamp chimney. "Nope."

"Damn it, Luke, if all you can say is yup and nope!"

"I'll keep my eye peeled. Best I can do, Zak. You'll find him." The marshal's hand twitched like a live, separate thing, in the direction of the folded newspaper. The right toe of his boot began to tap. Zak was conscious of the loud ticking of an ornamental clock on the wall. "In good time, Zak, you'll turn him up. Yes, I'll bet you will. I'll keep my eye peeled, though."

"Thanks a lot for all your cooperation," Zak said, already turned and marching out.

The jibe didn't appear to rattle Luke Smith one bit. From the office came the ca-*lumph* of boots back on desk. Zak strolled on down Main Street, raising dust that glowed in the light of Yellowhair.

He simply couldn't figure Luke out. Tough-looking but syrup-slow to anger. Ineffective. And that peculiar last name of his. Smith. Like most natives of Missouri, Luke should have borne some trace of an old Terrafirmic European name. It was one enigma on top of the more baffling one of the marshal's almost hypnotized behavior. One thing certain, Luke Smith had been Zak's prime hope for gathering infor-

mation on Hansi Bonn. Thinking of the curt, fruitless interview made him burn inside.

Thinking of the next step made the burning worse. He kept walking, though, down past the Mercantile, Rapoport the Gunsmith's, Delahanty's Dry Goods, the Ace High Barber Shop. Fully half the shops had one or more broken windows.

Inside the Last Chance, lamps were being blown out. Zak thought he saw the light through the batwings glint on Belle's fair, sweet hair. He hurried a little faster.

Chapter Nine

The closer Zak drew to the Last Chance Saloon, the more he realized how much he detested each and every occasion on which he was forced to bring himself to the vicinity of the place. Simple terror? He admitted to some of that. But the revulsion went further. It was almost as if he could pretend that the social system he loathed on Missouri did not exist, as long, that is, as he remained away from the Chance. Draw near and his belly began flopping over and over, acknowledging in mute wet obeisance that twisted truths could sway, and rule, a long long time.

Not that there was much of a philosophical nature happening right now. Inside the batwings, much cursing of the most obscene sort arose, together with voices in harangue. There was a sudden shatter of glass, an aural waterfall of tinkling and clattering. On the porch, half hidden by the tethered robot horses, Belle Nowack turned her attention from Zak's approach, faced about to the doors, cried in a fishwife voice: "God damn your puking hide, Fritzi, that's the second mirror you busted in a week!"

A bawdy voice responded, "Come on back in here and say that, Belle. I'll rip your drawers off and carry you upstairs and—"

"I'm a lady and don't you forget it, you smelly varmint!"

Zak paused in the shadows, awestruck and revolted both. Belle could certainly turn on the toughness when it was time. He supposed what she'd often told him was true. In her trade, which she'd taken up sometime shortly after puberty because a pretty girl in Shane could do little else, it was either learn to shoot, punch, laugh and defend yourself with all those mixed skills, or get raped, beaten up, abused, humiliated, or all four simultaneously. Yet Zak seethed when Belle found it necessary to coarsen her pretty features and hoarsen her voice to make her point with the toughs.

For a moment she was turned in defiant profile, saloon light spilling down the low bustline of her cheap spangled dress—a bustline amply full. Belle was on the short side, tending to be stocky, with a hardy build but a sweet face whose lines didn't show up in soft lighting. Her brown eyes and fair hair glistened. Her posture was wrathful, fists on hips.

There was more cacophony indoors. Then laughter. Belle yelled, "You heard right! You smell, smell, smell!"

"Ah, go kiss a heifer," Fritzi Bonn hollered back. "I'd come out there and stomp your poxy face 'cept we got to make a point with the barkeep, don't we, boys?"

Shouts of assent; oaths; sounds of furniture breaking. Zak's palms grew chillier.

"We're all still thirsty. We don't aim to let the sonofabitch close up. Why, we're just exercisin' our individual freedom, like the feller says."

"Barkeep!" That was a strident, archly precise female voice in there. "We are all free souls, while you are one of those whom our revolutionary forefathers considered dangerous. One of those who would impede the personal freedom of others. You're a boondoggler—" The speaker threw something, to cheering and applause. "—a theoretician—" More huzzahs. "—social thinker-tinker—" The approval grew to thunder. "—pinhead! And if you don't keep this goddam saloon open, I'll blow your privates off!"

Amidst howls of glee, there were cries of encouragement. "You tell the turtle-tail, Calamity!"

"She knows all about the pointy-heads and them theo-wrecktickans."

"Hurrah for Calamity, she kin read!"

With that the last shouter, a pinched, arrogant-mouthed, snake-eyed young tough hurled himself out the batwings, leaped on his mount, turned it on, and kneed the robot animal over the porch. Belle jumped back to keep from being trampled. For an instant Zak thought he was watching Hansi. But as the rider ducked his head so the top of the saloon door wouldn't knock it off, a vivid scar on the rider's cheek was washed by light. Only by that scar could Zak tell the twin Bonn boys apart.

Fritzi Bonn rode inside the Chance and began discharging his revolver. Several lamps were shot out, heightening the weirdness of the long shadows moving on the insides of the leaded glass.

Zak sprinted the last steps to Belle, whiffing the lilac perfume which she usually wore too much of. Normally it titillated him with its cheapness. Tonight it did not. He was full of contemptuous anger.

"Belle—"

"Zak, honey! I'm purely glad to see you."

"Let's get out of this rotten neighborhood. Did you hear—did you *hear* those fools in there?"

"Are you joshing me? Hear now with them yelling? They want the saloon to stay open," she said with ingenuousness so genuine that, as always, he couldn't bear to snicker.

Waving his arms, he exclaimed, "That bunch of strutting ignoramuses! Talking about social tinkers and the revolution on Missouri and not a one of the dumb pad-heads knows thing one about history. Not thing one! They just take some silly slogans everybody's been repeating for years and use them as excuses—"

Belle's bosoms seemed to press Zak's chest with odd urgency. Was she welcoming him back with her customary warmth? He thought so as she pushed at him, teased his chin with her fingers, laughed in a strained little way. His intemperate oration continued for a few more sentences. He was vaguely conscious of shadows moving at the saloon doors, of fluctuations of light added to the stomping of hooves, shouts, jeers from within. Belle kept laughing, thrusting at his chest.

"Sure, Zak sweetie, let's stroll. Yes, just the way you say. It's awfully noisy around here. I'm all knocked out on my

feet." Now she tugged, trying to physically remove him from the porch. Lamplight reflected from her cheeks, where a light sweat began to bead up beneath the dusting of lilac powder.

Zak pulled back rebelliously. "Trying to shut me up! This kind of animal behavior makes me sick." He was whirling to gesture as he spat the *k* in sick, turning with his hand high-flung in temper to accuse the pandemonium inside the saloon. A thumb kicked a match head alight in the dark.

A match lifted to a face that materialized all at once like something Satanic. The owner of the face lolled with deadly casualness against the front of the Chance. He applied the match to his long cheroot, then flicked the match away. It stung Zak's cheek as it glanced off.

Oh my God, Zak thought. He realized the source of the flurry of shadows. The owner of the match and cheroot had strolled outside during Zak's harangue. Zak grabbed up absolutely all the courage he had left and faced the lounging man.

"Evening, Kid."

"Evening, Zak," said the Arrivederci Kid.

The Kid was tall, and mean, and waxed his mustaches and wore silver spurs that jingled as he shifted his weight. The Kid's gunbelt slashed down across his crotch, ending at his full holster, old, worn, used, lashed down tight to his right leg. The Kid's eyes glittered as he sucked hard on his cheroot. There was a smear of what looked like spaghetti sauce at one corner of his mouth.

"So you doin' a little bit of name callin' behind our backs, eh, Zak? You don't think us free men of Missouri got the right to stand up on our hind legs to sons of bitches who got the same kind o' minds as the pinheads throwed out when the people set things right? I'd be obliged," said the Kid, now beginning to smile with a nasty laziness that looked ahead to a spot of cruelty, "if you didn't cast no more aspersions on us free, democratic, citizens."

Prudence dictated Zak say nothing. Belle tugged his sleeve again. He threw off the hand, shook his head more in rage at himself than at the Kid. To argue with this overgrown troll would get him nowhere, except in a jam. Yet retorts bubbled, unstoppable:

"That's all a lot of slop, Kid. You don't even understand what the revolution was about."

"So I'm dumb too, huh? Well. You are certainly making big pointers with us gentlemen of the town, Mr. Randolf. But we'll look over that a minute, because you're such a dumb sod, yourself, you don't know it don't make no difference I don't know how to read history and that bullcrap. I still know what the big trouble was all about, yes, I purely do."

He inhaled luxuriously. His eyes were merry, flecked with orange cigar-lights. "I still know the revolution said a man could howl all he wanted an' nobody could touch him. Because those smart fellers way back then, they bleeved there was just one test of who was fit to tell another what to do. The thinker-tinkers ain't fit." The Kid reached down, smiled, stroked his gun. "Another kind of laddy-buck. The one what can make things happen by his lonesome, just by saying *dance*."

The revolver blurred up in a clawed hand.

The Kid's roar of laughter boomed simultaneously with the revolver's report. Belle shrieked. Zak jumped high in the air to avoid the bullet aimed between his toes. Only when he landed, ker-*lump*, and saw the Kid's lips purse to blow smoke from his muzzle did he realize that he'd been a stooge for the oldest form of Terrafirmic Western badgering: dance, dude, dance.

Zak writhed. His fists balled up at his sides. Belle stepped halfway between them, her brown eyes honest and afraid:

"Leave him alone, Kid. You know he lives different than the rest of you boys."

"He surely does. He reads all them pinhead spools. Don't you, Mr. Zakky Randolf?"

Belle laughed, too high, too shrill. "Fellers, a joke's a joke."

"Those wasn't jokes he was spoutin'," insisted the Kid. "Those was insults."

"Fellers," Belle said in some desperation, "we can break it clean right here."

"Sure enough," said the Kid, reaching over with his left hand to stroke the glittering muzzle of his revolver. "If Zakky says out loud he's a pinhead."

By now the din inside had diminished. Voices called at-

tention to some kind of interesting development on the porch signalled by a shot. A sinister-looking, toad-like fellow poked his derby-hatted head outside, elevated his eyebrows. He came through the batwings preceded by a rotgut smell. He was bowlegged and dressed in a dandified way. The edges of his frock coat were cut specially short, to allow free play to a pair of revolvers holstered low, but forward.

"I'm not saying anything," Zak snorted. "I won't even dignify you with an answer, except to tell you that you're a murdering animal. You shot the Widow Ead's boy."

The Arrivederci Kid shrugged. "That puking whippersnapper. He got sassy."

"*Sassy—!*" Zak couldn't go on. He was fuming and quaking with fright all at once, for things were getting out of hand. In addition to the derby-hatted tough, others were crowding through the batwings, most visible of all Fritzi Bonn on horseback. Those men were unthinkable! Couldn't be real!

Ah, but they were.

Heavily armed nightmares formed a semicircle to confront him. The gent with the derby hat flicked at his gun butts and remarked, "So it's Randolf, is it? Always playing the high-pockets role. Appears to me, Randolf, you've got a passel of nerve insulting my friend the Kid that way, especially since you're not packing iron. You're either nervy or crazy."

"He ain't dangerous crazy, Wild Bill," said the Kid. "He's just a pinhead. I'm about to make him admit it, soon as all you good friends of mine get yourselves settled for the show."

Wild Bill Korzybski allowed as how that was a top idea. He began bringing the new arrivals up to date. The porch buzzed. That gave Belle the opportunity to jump up on tiptoes and talk in Zak's ear. "*I* tried to ease you out of it, you poor sweet dummy. I can't do any more and keep my job."

He spun on her, about to shout that he didn't want her to do any more. He didn't shout. There was an odd, almost angry light in her brown eyes. Her cleavage moved fast as she whispered, "Now you either got to apologize to him or fight."

Absolutely beyond rational belief! Merely by speaking his mind in what would have been an intellectual discussion on

any other planet in the entire galaxy, he'd landed in a tight of awful proportions.

The shadows buzzed and jostled on the porch. The night was thick with the simulated sweat smell of Fritzi Bonn's horse. To Belle he hissed, "I refuse to do either one."

"You damn fool!" Belle cried low, near to tears. Zak wondered just what he was going to do.

Chapter Ten

The group on the porch of the Last Chance Saloon went through final anticipatory shiftings. A scarecrow, overweight and wearing a plug hat, came shinnying somehow down one of the uprights supporting the porch roof, while from the second floor, a couple of the out and out whores who hung around the Chance testily demanded to know what was happening. As the last ripple of talk died away Zak saw that it was Philemon clinging to the upright, heels braced on the rail. Their eyes met. Philemon tipped his plugged hat and began to hum the old, old Funeral March.

"So!"

The coarse-voiced woman who had come outside thrust forward. She was a stout horror wearing shortened chaps, a filthy blouse and a vest. Her eyes were puffed as a frog's. Her dirty hat hung down her back by a thong. Her hair was butch cut, completely masculine, and she had a faint mustache. Only the chopped chaps and her bosom declared she was, technically, a female.

"So it's the little Cosfed chap, is it? Cocking around telling us we're all a pack of dog-ohs?" Calamity Fotheryngayle's voice was rough and startling, because of the highfaluting diction she tried to affect. "I have never cared for your uppity ways, Randolf, and that is the Good Lord's truth. Belle, you're shaming yourself and your womanhood keeping

company with such a specimen. Are you still fooling with that sissy jewelry, Randolph?"

Wild Bill Korzybski spat between the tips of his boots. "She's hot as a pepper for him because he can read and spout pinhead theories. Also he isn't from Missouri. Furriner."

"Talked my brother into one of the lousy contracks," Fritzi Bonn growled, bent low on horseback to keep from banging his head on the porch roof.

Zak couldn't let it pass.

"Yeh, and he ran out and came back here and I'm going to find him and see that he makes right on the deal."

"Just choice!" Calamity squealed. "You and which troop of armed horse-guards, Mr. Uppity?"

The crowd registered approval with handclapping and hurrahs. Zak had a wild impulse to cut and run. He stifled it with a maximum effort, even though his bowels were already watery with fear. The jocular cruelty of the porch standees could turn instantly and at any moment into a trap absolutely inescapable. Belle sensed this too. She pulled on his coattail while half hiding behind him.

There followed several vocal, vulgar suggestions about the next step, including arson on Zak's person and castration with a dull-edged pseudobowie. To this the Arrivederci Kid gave a negative response, waving the long muzzle of his revolver almost casually back and forth in front of his face. "Naw—" The Kid stroked one wax mustache. "I just want him to say out loud he's a pinhead."

Zak took a breath. "I won't admit a damn thing like that."

"Leave me drag him behind my hoss—" began scar-faced Fritzi. This time the Kid's hand whipped up a mite faster, like a knife opening, and Zak knew the game had become totally serious, totally without mercy. These people really believed this was the free and honorable way to prove the right of any dispute.

The Kid's gun quivered at face level. Very softly he said, "Naw. This is my hand of tickets. Randolf?"

"I've nothing to say to a man like you."

"Then," said the Kid, turning pale, "I'm calling you out."

Applause.

Philemon Rasmussen joined in, wildly, lost his grip and

fell in the dust, still clapping in drunken glee. The applause pattered on. Fritzi Bonn wrenched his revolver free of its holster, threw it, spinning, flashing light from Yellowhair, toward Zak. Instead of jabbing out his hands to catch it Zak let it fall.

The noise seemed extremely loud. It was followed by silence, then a soft roaring gasp from all throats except Zak's. He felt Belle trembling behind him.

The Kid took one long stride forward. His silver spurs flashed. His teeth were clenched, and his eyes were poisonous. He said, "I said I'm calling you out."

Heavily, Zak shook his head. He forced his eyes to remain on the Kid's, *forced* them, because it took all his conviction, every smattering, to maintain control. "No. I don't believe killing settles or proves anything."

Stunned gasps. Calamity Fotheryngayle made obscene references to his manhood. Zak flushed. Fritzi Bonn called him a whore's child and worse things too. Now Belle wasn't even bothering to whisper, chivvying his arm, her voice as enraged as any of theirs: "Don't let them call you names like that, Zak. Don't stand for it!"

"Cheap words, Belle. They mean nothing."

"You can't let them humiliate you, Zak!" Belle sounded almost on the point of tears.

"Apparently he can and will," Calamity said. She wondered aloud at Zak's gender.

His cheeks turned from chilly to smarting hot. His nails dug hard into his palms. But he held on, refusing to let the filthy, abusive words snarled from every direction drive him into the red of utter insanity. While he was thus struggling, the Kid stepped up to him with one smart pace. His eyes were like small furnaces reflecting Yellowhair in the sky.

"Pick up the iron, Randolf."

Zak's jawbone ached. His insteps burned. "No."

"You—" The Kid was beyond control. "I said pick up the gun."

"You pick it up, Kid. You need it more than I do. You need it to prove something."

"I'm warnin' you—" The Kid's words seethed from lower notes to high ones, whistling at the last as he began to shake,

white-faced. "I'm purely warning you that *unless you pick up that gun—*"

"Nothing," Zak cut in. "I don't play by your rules." He turned away.

Belle's stricken face flashed by. He strode straight out into the street and turned in the direction of his house while the shock of what had happened held those on the porch silent a moment more. Zak was a block away, walking fast in the moonlight when the oaths, jeers and yells of disbelief broke out at the Chance.

Belle was running alongside him now. She was crying.

He wouldn't turn his head to her because he didn't want to show her the immense, perspiring relief on his face. He had to go to the bathroom in the most painful way.

"Zak, Zak, you should have stood up to them! You have to fight or you can't hold your head up in this town."

He stared straight ahead, walking. "Who says?"

"They insulted you! Called your mother a pimpled old slut! Said you didn't have any bal—"

He swung, angrier than he expected himself to be as he seized her shoulders.

"Belle, you were born on this sick, backward goddam world, but I wasn't. And I don't buy the premise of it, or the sick, rotten values it's perpetuated, not one jot of it do I buy! I don't have to play by their rules because for civilized people, their kind of philosophy means noth—"

"Oh," she stamped her feet, weeping. "You're always reading and talking that philosophy thing at me. I don't know about that, I don't care about that. They shoved horse chips in your mouth and made you eat them, Zak Randolf. Doesn't that mean anything to you 'side from that philosophy stuff? Doesn't it, doesn't it?" The moon made jewels in her wet eyes. She shook from her high-piled hairdo to her cheap pumps. "Doesn't it mean a single thing to you as a man?"

"N-no," he lied. "On the other planets, civilization is above that kind of carrying on."

He sounded fatuous even to himself. Deceitful. He wished his own certainty weren't crumbling so. Did Belle see the crevices? She saw something. It enraged her. "I could of handled those hardcases better'n you if I'd just had my gun."

"Belle, the only way to handle them is to ignore them."

"Not n' live with yourself, Zak Randolf. Not n' call yourself a man."

"I'm a man because I think. Because I abide by the rule of reason, of law—" Wasted words. He spit out an exhalation, tried a new, sharp-voiced tack. "You've called me a man as long as we've known each other. What's changed all of a sudden?"

"There's never been a scene like tonight, that's what. Maybe we've known each other too long."

"Yeh, maybe we have."

"Some nice damn homecoming!" Weeping profusely, she jumped up on tiptoes and gave him a derisive swiping kiss. "That's all you get tonight and maybe all you get ever, till I decide—"

Zak went rigid. "Till you decide what?"

"Whether the boys are right and I am just a poor dumb slut, fancied and took in by your books and your big stories of all those other planets. Maybe you just turned my head, Zak Randolf. Maybe now it's time to turn it back the other way. Oh how I wish you weren't such an allfired sinful good lover!"

Ending on a wailing high note, she turned and plunged away up a narrow black run between two stores with a stocky, swift stride that gave away her tough Missouri upbringing.

Zack stood dumbfounded. Hurt. Angry. He smelled her lilac scent long after her physical presence was gone. Hell's fire, he shouldn't be affected by her stinging words, the same way he shouldn't be affected gut deep by what had happened on the Chance porch. Then why was he?

Back along Main Street dark riders saddled up and began milling in a circle. They howled and tossed their hats in the air. Revolvers exploded. Windows shattered. Bottles flashed, tilted. Then the company of hardcases roared up the dusty street toward him, thundered by.

From the hiding shadows of Rapoport the Gunsmith's porch he saw naked white flesh. One of the Chance girls was being carried bare-bottomed and squealing on the Kid's pony. There was a cry of "Yellowbelly!" as the dark troupe thundered hellforleather away. Someone had seen him. Seen him cowering. The hoofbeats drummed the ground and died.

Shortly, Marshal Luke Smith came riding in the moonlight to the glass-littered street. Too late as usual.

For a minute Zak stared at the revolvers displayed in Rapoport's window. Then he turned his back and walked on home.

Chapter Eleven

The gate closed. Zak reached up behind him and by feel alone dropped the bar into the splintery L-bracket that shut out the world.

Then he leaned back. With an almost lascivious smile he let his eye rove across the garden.

A pleasing soprano tinkling teased his ears. Soft patterns of colored lights drifted across his cheeks as the phorospores moved in their own rhythm, stirred by the gentlest tremors of the night breeze coming over the garden's mud brick walls. He sucked in the smells and the queer light patterns with heavy breaths and lip smackings. In regard to these strange lifeforms that grew wild—and unappreciated!—on Missouri, he was a total voluptuary.

Here in the shifting dapples of pastel blues and vermilion and yellow, he could be his own man, and damn that pack of apes to eternity if they said he had no balls because of it. This was beauty. Order. Rationality.

The garden was small. Walls higher than Zak's head surrounded it on three sides, creating natural screens upon which the rooted crystals spread their patterns. The fourth wall of the garden was the outer wall of his cottage. A carefully dug path led straight from the gate to the door. Zak drifted down this path, taking extreme care where he stepped. The phorospore branches spread from each central root at ankle height. One glacially blue formation at the end of a branch overhung the path. Its light was particularly appealing.

He knelt, breathing lightly. He took a small instrument of

silver metal out of his pocket. The tool resembled a type of cigar-snipper used by some of the locals. Carefully he cut the blue formation away from the end of the branch.

At the moment the blades met there was a quick, flurrying tinkle. All the phorospores grew agitated, reacting to the message from their common root system. Zak lifted the formation away from the branch he felt again that quaint pain; he was injuring a living thing.

Actually the phorospores were plant life of a sort. They were mineral as well, and not truly sentient. Still, he always felt a little like a sadist when he cut one loose. Which in his view just went to show that, all reason to the contrary, man believed his belly more often than he believed his head.

He rose, holding the formation gently, enjoying the opalescent way it lit his hand. He carried it into the first of the three rooms of his cottage, traveling in the dark by feel alone.

The phorospore's zone of illumination only extended to the edge of his palm. He set the formation on the edge of a box. Then he walked the other way. His boot came down on wood objects. They broke with a cheap, matchsticky sound. Drat and blast.

The miserable place was so crammed, he'd completely forgotten piling up another batch of novelties just there. He wiggled a match out of his pants, struck it, reached across, got the gas lamp on the wall going.

Souvenirs stacked to the ceiling, ready for packing, leaped into sight: miniature freight wagons, crudely carved revolvers, a tottering tower of little wooden outhouses, several of which had fallen. These he had stepped on. Looking down, he felt something strange and red move in his stomach.

The sensation passed, though it left him troubled by its immediacy. He scooped up the remains of the half dozen souvenirs, threw the pieces in a packing box used for litter and he was his commercial self again. Six gone. That would reduce his profit on the lot by one and two-tenths cartwheels. Always grubbing, he thought bitterly as the last fumes of the sulphur match dissipated. But then he had to; he was a second-class man.

He picked up the phorospore, carried it on to the second room. This was little more than a wide hallway, windowless

and lined by benches he'd built himself. On one bench, next to all his melting and mounting tools, his pincers and probes, his benders and flexers, his costly flasks of finishing chemicals and abrasives, rested two shallow boxes like plant flats. The bottoms were filled with packing material he'd scrounged from the local stores.

On this material lay his latest collection of pieces. A series of brooches and belt buckles with carefully microtomed crystals inset into mounts shaped like throne kakti. The faraway firms who bought his small lots of jewelry—each lot took about five to six months to finish, from crystal-plucking to final setting—were always demanding motifs more typical of Missouri. They wanted revolvers and horses, endlessly. He preferred the natural shapes of the planet, and did the other things only when he was absolutely desperate for cartwheels.

Across the aisle his Leester Kiln stood beside his precious, expensive microtome. He opened the latch of the kiln's treatment chamber. Laid the glacial blue formation inside. Closed the latch and set the modified low laser to the proper position. Satisfied by the glowing dial that the kiln was operating properly, he surveyed the room again, his face having finally smoothed out.

Presently he went on to the third, last room. Largest of all, it was squalid because of his untidy personal habits. He lit one of the three lamps, checked the chute where the mail came through the outer wall, found nothing but another obnoxious note in Delahanty's crabbed handwriting and illiterate grammar saying he was now sixty days overdue on rent.

Well, Delahanty would wait ninety days or more, simply because of Zak's Cosfed connection. As soon as that shipment of Olde West Brand Miniature Freight Wagons as Fort Propulsion was exported, Zak would have a voucher, originating in the office of his superior on a remote planet, Superintendent Noglesby, and delivered to Shane in a drop from the mail drone.

Zak sniffed at the sour, unmade bed. He upended a packing case *(Wee Hombre Brand Authentic Early West Comfort Stations, 3 doz. asstd. colors)* and reached for the jug on the shelf. The jug label was colorfully printed. It showed a Savage belching fire from his mouth, and carried an official registry number from Cosfed's Spiritous Beverage Bureau.

The S.B.B. controlled traffic in liquor the way the Artifact Bureau controlled trade in novelties. Zak didn't bother with a glass, just helped himself to a slug straight. He sat down on the packing case, taking a grim pleasure in thinking of how the inhabitants of Shane looked with fear and loathing at such instruments of galactic civilizations as did, by Cosfed's will, exist: the droning robot mail that flew over twice a week, for instance. He was lucky to be affiliated with Cosfed, lucky to have even a tenuous connection with rationality and order as it existed on worlds where time hadn't been stopped.

With the first raw gush of the liquor—it was a cheap grade, he couldn't afford better—he realized with rage and terror that his mind had been playing tricks. Blotting out all the objectionable happenings of the past couple of days. Well, that was the effect of his little house and garden. They were meant to be a barrier to keep out the ugliness. For a few minutes he'd completely forgotten that he would have no Cosfed connection whatever unless he located Hansi Bonn for Mickolas Safrun.

Rather than soothing his alarm, the liquor now seemed to intensify it. He sat with the jug in both hands and watched a roach-like insect with lime antennae wander across the mildewed plank floor. Vivid images of the baiting at the Chance returned. Belle was right. He'd been treated no better than a cur. And he had submitted. Humiliation. His brain began to glitter with laces of red and black lightning. *Humiliation.*

Another drink. Hot. Raw. *Straighten up. Cool. Rational. Reflective.*

Rut that. He didn't feel reflective. He felt dirty, downgraded, and, not incidentally, further humiliated because one of his benchmarks of manhood, Belle's affection, was now jeopardized.

His mind fought his belly while he muttered aloud. The syllables grew less coherent by the moment. Fighting. *How can what happened possibly be humiliating when you absolutely refuse to accept the rules of this society?*

To a man who believed that the turnback of the clock on Missouri represented a return to a perfect ideal, what had happened *would* have been humiliating. But the hoped-for society of free, strong men had turned out to be an obscene

ironic failure. It was a crumbling philosophic false front behind which a handful of psychotics indulged in glandular excesses unchecked, while the balance of the citizenry refused to question openly, either through ignorance or because the reactiorevolutionary cadre had accidentally structured a society in which the ordinary man was truly helpless, cowed to silence by the savagery of the very strong men who were supposed to represent the ideal.

"Crud and crap!" Zak gargled around the jug mouth, spilling liquor onto his chest and not giving a damn. "These arrogant, rotten sons of bitches." His teeth glistened like fangs, wet with spit. He closed his eyes and went under into a red reverie in which he saw himself with a whip in his hands.

The whip was the kind one found at the Shane Livery corral. The Arrivederci Kid lay belly down and naked on the ground. He was spread-eagled, hands and feet lashed and pegged. Calamity Fotheryngale lay beside him, similarly positioned, stripped, restrained.

Zak raised the horsewhip and cracked it down. A red ditch opened on the Kid's back. The Kid whimpered.

Zak horsewhipped the Kid until he shrieked for mercy. Then he turned his attentions to Calamity. The lash threw off little droplets as it popped high over his head, high over his sweating, muscle-bunched arm, popped and cracked down.

Zak opened his eyes.

Across the room he saw his distorted face in a cheap shaving-glass. Sweat sprinkled his mustaches. He looked at the utterly brutal face and said, "Oh, Jesus." He turned his head quickly and drank.

Shortly he blew out the lamp and crawled into his sour bed. But sleep was refused for a long time. The horsewhipping dream had left him shaken.

No vision of that sort had ever come to him before. Did he really have that kind of capacity for cruelty? No!

He might be a second-rate man. But he was no animal; he was not like them. To dream of whippings was to play their game. Accept their standards. How could it happen, even in reverie?

Forget it. A natural reaction. Guts and glands are part

of you but they don't run you. You're not like that, you're not like the rest of them.

But he had piercing new doubts.

At last a troubled rest came. It lasted but an hour, and ended in dull awareness of shouting outside his garden gate. Fists beat there.

He pulled on his shirt. He loaded three tranquilizing darts into his Sharp's Six-Shot. Barefoot, he went to answer. The silver gun barrel shone in his hand, its reflected light clashing with all the softer light in the garden.

Chapter Twelve

The ranting on the other side of the gate became intelligible, if not sensible: "Sorely 'bused, I wax wroth! Call down the furies 'pon thy servitors! In my pain, I rage 'gainst heaven which o'er my humble head hath cast this shadow of ill providence."

"Philemon?" Zak called. "What the hell do you want?"

"Unfeeling rains down its torments! Lifts blinded eyes 'mongst starry—"

"Philemon, stow the poetry and tell me what you want or I'm going back to bed."

A phlegmy coughing through the thickness of the gate. A low groan. A scrabble of fingernails.

"Open up, Randolf. Open up, I plead with you." The old hoochhead sounded ready to weep. All at once his burbling woke Zak up. "I know where Hansi's hiding."

With a less than steady hand Zak lifted the bar. Philemon Rasmussen nearly tumbled into his arms. Zak leaped back. Philemon's plug hat fell off. Philemon lunged forward after it, nearly crushing a phorospore at the edge of the path when he landed on his knees.

Zak's mouth wrenched. He lifted his feet to kick the other man. Then he saw that no damage was done.

Philemon came wobbling to his feet. He was even more pitifully disarrayed than usual. He belched, fingered a tear in his sleeve, blinked, tried to focus. Zak gnawed his underlip.

"You're drunk as an owl, Philemon."

"Not so drunk I can't pass on a valuable titbit. Be heaven I can."

"You're no friend of mine. Why should you do that?"

"'Cause!" Philemon's fat face convulsed. "Those cruel drunken sods came back to the Chance after riding around raising hell. They tol' me to recite for them. When I wouldn't, that dirty Fritzi—" Philemon thrust up his chin. There was something resembling a large puckered scar on the underside. "—burned me with his seegar while Wild Bill and the Kid held my arms. Then they threw me out in the street. But I heard 'em bragging while I lay there. They said you'd never find Hansi because he's hiding out over in Cooper."

Zak's mind darted toward suspicion, rushed back to the tantalizing statement. "Cooper?"

"I was half passed out but I heard the name clear. I owe those yellow dogs absolutely nothin' for what they did, 'specially that highbinder Fritzi." Philemon belched, then raised one finger. "Thus the 'venging lord smites those—"

Zak pulled the prating drunk down the path. "Come on in and I'll give you one drink," he said. "I want to hear more about this."

He turned Philemon out after about an hour. He loaded his saddlebags with all the darts he had left, roused the man at the Shane Livery, and set out at first light to ride the hundred miles to Cooper.

Chapter Thirteen

Sundown again.

Long beams of orange light fell through the two high oblong windows, into the pine-walled room with the green-rimed copper floor. Zak lay submerged all except for his head in the sunken tub. A cigar was tilted up in his mouth.

The hot water and yellow soap had removed most of the grime of his trip. But no bath would remove his aching, galling sense of emptiness, and an insidious shame.

The door to the bath of the suite in the Dobbs Hotel was open. Occasionally a shadow fell onto the copper floor from out there. Someone rattled a bottle and glasses, fixing a drink.

"I hustled right over," said a deep, rather tired voice in the parlor. Lip-smacking. A sigh. More clinks of the bottle. "The man I appointed deputy told me why you were here. I must say Cooper's a far piece from Shane for a fellow to ride by himself."

The man came to lounge in the doorway. He was tall, lean, tired-eyed, with dusty clothes, an olive face. A big gun was lashed low on his right leg. On his old leather vest hung a cheap tin star.

"I'm right sorry the outcome's what it was, Mr. Randolf. I trust the trip wasn't too arduous."

"No, Mr. Odopulous," Zak said as he climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel, "it wasn't too arduous." Just damn near three days of constant nervous scrutiny of the horizon, and no sleep when the stars came out and Yellowhair rose. "Fortunately I saw no Savages."

Remington Odopulous stepped back out of the way. Zak trailed water into the parlor, then into the adjoining bedroom. Counting on success, he'd rented the biggest suite in the

Dobbs House, to treat himself. He felt exhausted as he dragged on his clothing. He spoke to his visitor through the door. "I do appreciate your interest, Mr. Odopulous."

"Call me Rem, Randolf. We don't often get visitors with a Cosfed connection. Don't have any factories here 'cept one that makes those toy saddles. The agent from over Green River way handles all the shipments."

Zak finished dressing while the visitor sprawled in an imitation mohair chair and drank moodily. He went into the parlor, joined Odopulous in pouring himself one, and tried to figure what he made of his guest.

An ordinary man, by all appearance. Yet the gun on Odopulous' thigh was huge—or looked so—and was worn with a casual authority. Odopulous' wavy brown hair gleamed and smelled of macassar oil. And his brown eyes were unusual. Strangely amused, yet really unreadable. Not like the rest of him. Not commonplace.

Zak sat down, trying to push his frustaration out of mind. The drink helped. "You been the marshal around here long, Rem?"

"No, merely about six weeks. Make that five." A moody smile. "I kind of had the job thrust on me. I'm a produce merchant by trade. Synthetic vegetables. I'm Greek, you know. My daddy opened a little store here after migrating to Missouri. I guess you could really describe me as a plain, ordinary citizen who was sort of elected to take charge when things got out of hand. I guess you could say I'm really marshal because I shot Buffalo Yung and lived to tell the tale."

A cold itch began on Zak's scalp. "I beg your pardon?"

That strange, moody stare again. "I said I shot Buffalo Yung and lived to tell of it."

"I thought there—" Zak nearly spilled his whiskey.

"—wasn't any—"

"—person? I know." Odopulous chuckled. "I heard all those stories myself, before he came to town. I know they all say he's a fancy. Just something people dream up. But I can show you the grave where I buried him up in boot hill, Randolf. If I didn't shoot down Buffalo Yung in that very street out there five weeks ago, then I surely shot somebody else with a big belly and twin pearlhandled guns and three

friends in black standing by, and I gulled the whole town."

Odopulous chuckled again to show that he was only teasing. Then he continued soberly,

"It was him, all right. Big as life and twice as terrible. I didn't want to do it. He called me out because I was the man elected by the committee. Somehow, by God's mercy, I was a mite faster."

Odopulous returned his gaze to the depth of his whiskey glass. The parlor sunlight seemed to wane.

Zak continued to have difficulty swallowing. "I'd—like to see that grave and hear about it."

"Why surely. Why don't we stroll up before I buy your dinner?"

They took a sidestreet, bent against the dust blowing in the muddled and faintly sinister evening light. High at the street's end Zak glimpsed wood crosses stark against the sky. Odopulous tipped his hat to ladies who passed. Zak noted that there were more ordinary citizens abroad than you found in Shane at a comparable hour. He could only deduce that law and order had, at last, come to Cooper.

Evidence of this could be seen in a boarded-up saloon they passed. Then in a ramshackle residence whose window lights were broken out, fresh yellow-white planks were nailed across the entrance. Odopulous lifted a hand to point.

"That was Chink Sally's, where all the hardcases hung out getting likkered. I closed it up."

Zak murmured. As they moved on he noted a small sign tacked to the barred door. *Temporarily Closed, By Order of the Marshal.*

Odopulous stared at a couple of men approaching along the sidewalk. They very nearly flattened themselves against the wall of the building as they tipped their hats.

The marshal barely acknowledged the greeting, continuing to explain to Zak in a low, friendly voice.

"We really had a terrible situation here. Nobody was safe. Not my wife, not my children, nobody. I often wondered why that was, but I never had time to puzzle it out. I was too busy keeping shotguns loaded so I wouldn't get all my windows shot out at the store when the hardcases went on a toot."

Zak's mind hummed with contrary and confusing thoughts.

I'll tell you why the town of Cooper, not to mention every other town on Missouri, gets in such a fix. Because you didn't —or your daddy didn't—trouble to peel off the coat of the sugar pill when the cadre said swallow. But, you're lying to me, Odopulous. There's something funny about the way you smile, and I wish I could figure it out, because the story you're telling about Cooper is the Story of Shatterhand I heard from Dr. Buster Levinsohn.

"—altogether out of hand," Odopulous was saying. "The regular marshal just couldn't seem to do a blame thing about it."

"What sort of man was he?"

"Tom Brown? Sleepy, like. Slow as 'lasses in winter. He finally caught up to the hardcases one night, though. They were raping the parson's wife in an alley."

In the grip of this upsetting *déjà vu,* Zak spoke rather loudly. "It's getting almost that bad in Shane. Somebody'll have to do something."

Odopulous gave him a peculiar, sidewise stare. "You, maybe?"

"No, definitely not me. I didn't mean to interrupt. Go on."

"The hardcases gunned Marshal Brown in that very alley. Things really began to ripsnort for the next day or so. They tore the town to pieces. The general mood wasn't helped any by the fact that the marshal's body was stolen by some ghouls while he lay in the mortuary the very night he was shot, God rest his soul."

Again Zak swallowed. "The marshal disappeared?"

"Gone without a trace. No windows broken at the funeral parlor, nothing. But the slab was as empty as an old maid's dance program when the two embalming helpers opened up next morning."

"So Cooper had no marshal."

"That's right. The hardcases really cut loose. We took it long as we could. Then we held a citizen's meeting. Drew lots. I was elected by chance. I posted a notice that the hardcases had to get out of town in twenty-four hours. Believe me, I was plenty scared."

But he didn't seem so now. He strolled in a relaxed way, leading Zak past the last of the buildings and up the slight

rise toward the crosses. The wind whistled low in the twilight.

"What happened then, Rem?"

"The hardcases left, all right. But they came right back in two days. Went to the Geronimos to fetch help. They brought Buffalo Yung."

There was a trace of awful memory in Odopulous' eyes at last. "Yung holed up in the saloon with those cronies of his for a day or so before he called me out. I'm no gunslinger, mind. But my daddy did teach me to use one of these things." He touched the big butt of his revolver. "I kissed my wife goodbye and went down to meet Yung. I recollect he walked out of the Nugget and he looked tall as the sky. The fringe on his jacket was waving in the wind. The sunlight was behind him and he seemed like one of those pictures of the Prophets in the Holy Writ, only an evil prophet. And I'd never seen mustaches on a man that looked as fierce as his. His guns—I could see those shining a block off, silver spangles, silver motherlodes of light."

Odopulous paused. He indicated a crude earth mound and stick cross, and there was terror around Zak, compounded of the sullen sunset and the death-markers and the wind and Odopulous' lantern eyes.

"I don't recollect much of the actual shooting," Odopulous said. "I must have been a second or so faster on the draw, is all. Or maybe he was slowed by the redeye he'd been swilling at the Nugget. He toppled like a tree, I remember. Those three cronies of his, spooky sorts, all in black hats and boots, dragged him up here and buried him while I sort of supervised. Then they rode out of town, just sort of shaking their heads. Right after I saw him lying dead with the blood all over his big fat belly, it came to me."

Odopulous turned in the wind, giving Zak a curious kind of stare; a stare full of calm and a peculiar, almost ruthless frankness. A power settled over Odopulous, or was it only Zak's imagination? Odopulous' voice seemed lower, more firm:

"It came to me that I was a very big man. Almost without me wanting it. But I am. Here's the proof."

Odopulous' boot raised dust as he scraped the grave. Zak wondered how Buffalo Yung could die in Shatterhand and Cooper too. One town or the other town surely had rid itself

an imposter. They drifted down the slope again in the lamplit dusk. Cooper lay peaceful. A supper bell clanged. A lonesome guitar drifted its music over the shingle roofs. Odopulous chuckled to himself a couple of times, slyly, as if remembering the shoot-out gave him pleasure. Probably it would give pleasure to a native of Missouri who had never thought much about why his town had needed a convulsion to re-establish law and order.

"Care for a bite of supper and a drink at the Nugget?" Odopulous asked as they strolled up the main street. "I've allowed that place to stay open, just so the folks don't go wild craving liquor."

"I don't want to keep you from going home to supper, Marshal."

"Oh," Odopulous said, "I'm not living at home any more. I've got a room at the Dobbs House. Me'n my wife had a disagree—well, I just had to pack up." He clapped a familiar arm on Zak's shoulder and grinned, showing gold teeth. "You don't want to hear about family squabbles."

After the windy eeriness of the graveside, Zak found the yellow lamps of the Nugget a cheery relief. The long oak bar overlooked by a florid painting of a fulsome nude was packed with a noisy crowd. For the most part the drinkers seemed solid citizens. All guns were racked at the entrance. *By Order of the Marshal,* a small sign said.

A player piano hammered by a ratty fellow in a red and white stripe shirt heightened the din. The saloon smelled of sawdust, beer, broiled meat, perfume. People greeted Odopulous boisterously, but from a distance.

The marshal headed for the largest table, a round one in the rear corner. A poker game was in progress there. The five poker players folded their hands, collected their cartwheels and left, tipping their hats.

Odopulous nodded to acknowledge the courtesy. Then he exchanged some kind of surreptitious hand signal with one of the hostesses, a big, buxom girl with lewd eyes and a beauty spot on her cheek. Odopulous' long brown eyelashes dropped over his pupils a moment. The girl smiled in a smoky way, disengaging from the man who was trying to paw her. She climbed the stairs to the saloon balcony and disappeared through a curtain of golden beads.

Odopulous took a chair. He hoisted his spurred boots up on another, careless of the scars he made in the wood. He brushed a menu off the table after glancing at it. "The fake bison's mighty tasty, Randolf. A little ouzo goes good with it. I—" Abruptly he frowned. A shadow had fallen over his arm.

A colorless man in a shabby suit stood several steps away, looking hesitant.

"What is it, Billy?" Odopulous said.

"Uh—Marshal. Uh—I was talkin' to some of the fellows on the committee. They wanted me to mention that the town council election is—uh—overdue. We agreed there'd be a new council. We're—uh—wonderin' when—"

"Why," said Odopulous, unsmiling but with that strange, secret mirth in his eyes, "we'll have the election, just the way we agreed, when I suggest it's time. Right now, though"—a flicker of a scowl—"can't you see I got a visitor from out of town?"

"Okay, sure," said the man, and shuffled away. "Good evening, Marshal."

"Good evening, Mayor." Odopulous rapped his hand for service.

Zak wished he could decide which was Odopulous—the ordinary citizen with new and unwanted responsibility, or that other, curious, secretly smiling individual who peeked out from behind the liquid brown eyes once in a while. Zak pinched his nose. Maybe he was just tired and mad at the outcome.

Odopulous grew chatty again. "I really am right sorry I couldn't help you with your problem, Randolf. Shame you rode all that way here for nothing. But like I told you, that fellow you're hunting isn't here and never has been here, not in the last month, anyway. And if anybody in town would know, I certainly would. Sorry to say it, but I guess somebody pulled a mean skunking trick on you."

Zak rubbed his eyeballs with his palms. "Yes, I guess somebody did. Can I get a beer?"

Chapter Fourteen

At twilight on the second day of his return ride to Shane, Zak pulled up sharp and let the dust of his mount's hoofs blow past his head and clear away. He wrapped one hand around the horn of his saddle. Then he wrapped the other hand on top of the first.

Both hands gripped so tightly that all the color drained out of them. He placed his teeth together and held them that way until his jaw muscles hurt. He thought wildly of climbing down, hunkering, hiding, but that seemed rash, and certain to focus attention on himself. He hoped that the patchy interplay of kakti shadows cast across the washboard landscape by the setting sun would hide him sufficiently.

There were riders moving at a canter along a sharp sky-etched ridgeline no more than three zoogs distant.

The wind blew the wrong way for him to pick up the noise of their passage but he saw them clearly. Great slow-rolling clouds of dust turned in their wake, illuminated from behind —from within, it almost seemed—with a demoniac light. Sweat ran down both sides of Zak's nose. He began to wiggle his underlip back and forth beneath the biting edge of his upper teeth. There was pain, but only half experienced.

Four riders in silhouette and single file passed there. Not Savages. Men in the garb of the towns. Despite the flare of light behind them, certain details were sharp.

The last three might have been cut from black paper with one pattern, so little did their physiques and postures vary. Rifles jutted from their saddle boots. The man at the head of the column sat much taller, even though he slouched down as he rode. His height had to be impressive. His whole figure suggested lazily administered power.

The man's silhouette was all flaccid curves: bowed

shoulders and a series of bulges from his neck region downward, each one larger than the one above, the largest of all an immense paunch. The edges of the man's sleeves were indistinct, suggesting jacket fringe.

Just as the file of riders reached ridge's end and turned to the left down the far side of the hill, the orange sunrays from under racing clouds struck the leader's figure exactly so and lit silver fires on his hips.

The halations around the guns vanished almost as fast as they appeared. In a moment the last of the black figures was gone except for a switching horsetail. Then that went too in luminous dust.

Zak waited half an hour before he started to ride again. When he did, he altered his route, swinging wide to avoid any possible encounter with the horsemen.

His mind boggled and refused to believe. Hallucination from tiredness. That had to be it. But his eyes said he'd seen Buffalo Yung.

Next afternoon, riding tailbone-sore, Zak was distracted by another sudden dust plume on the horizon ahead. It quickly blew away, as though a rider were making tracks for the town.

Had someone been on lookout? Watching for him?

Curiosity dulled his exhaustion for the next half hour. When he was within sight of Shane, suspicion jelled. A portly man on horseback appeared on the outskirts, clinging unsteadily to his saddle while his mount carried him in Zak's direction at breakneck speed.

Zak made a face and waited with a certain fatalism, slowing his horse to a walk. The plug-hatted horseman reached him circled around and lurched up alongside, hiccoughing and weeping with laughter. "—have—have—a pleasant little journey, Mister Highpockets? Oh sweet angels, what a jest!"

"Philemon, you dirty sod." An explosive breath. *"Who put you up to it, goddam it?* The Kid? That filthy bunch of—?"

"You fell! Oh my mercy, how you did! Why, yes, Zak my lad, it was all made up, the whole thing, my tale, my cleverly contrived appearance o' disarray. Eh, it's rare, rare, indeed it is!" Weeping and whooping and trailing an effluvium

of whiskey fumes, Philemon kicked his mount and went racing back to town.

In the street down which he must ride to reach his house, Zak saw riders gathering. The drowsy afternoon carried their laughter. Zak turned aside, planning to take the parallel street so he would not have to travel along Main. Philemon reached his friends, led them at a quick trot over one block. They were waiting to close around Zak as soon as he reached the first buildings.

All of them were there, the Kid, Wild Bill, Fritzi, Calamity, galloping up and down beside him, fanning their hats in his face, shouting obscenities, caterwauling with laughter. They'd sent him riding six days as a joke. A joke. Their hoorahing fairly shook the sky.

Mercifully Zak's mind clouded into a kind of daze, outside of which the riders moved as specters, sun-radiant, indistinct. He clutched the reins and simply endured those blocks to home.

"Little cocker! Thinks he's such a brainy one. This shows you, eh, eh?"

"Now he's sitting, all humpy and full of boils on his arse—"

"Chasin' the goosey, Zakky? Chasin' the wild goosey, pardner?"

The insults built to a din. The faces fragmented as Zak's reason and reserve all but crumbled completely. He rode the last block to his house with his head down and his underlip bit so hard he could feel blood in the cracks opened by the long hours in the sun. Somebody flung a gob of garbage. He wiped it dripping from his cheek.

He had planned to drop his mount at the Shane Livery. He couldn't ride that far now. No, not without going berserk. It was all he could do to repeat to himself, *Show them once, once that you're feeling it and they'll laugh to eternity.*

After all, the success of the joke was nobody's fault but his. He should have been less foolish; less quick to trust the plug-hatted capering clown who hated him. In a more critical mood he would have suspected Philemon right off. He'd been blinded by his need to find Hansi Bonn. So all he could do now was endure the last half square to the gate in his wall and scream to himself that *IT DIDN'T MATTER,*

MADE NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE, YOU'RE ABOVE THEIR RULES—

He climbed down at the gate, stumbled toward it while they rode back and forth raising dust. Someone began to discharge a revolver. Someone else joined in. Zak's ears ached. He swallowed a blood taste in his mouth. Philemon, a hell-figure in the blur of sun and dust and pistol-winks, somehow insinuated himself between Zak and the gate. Bowed in another filthy parody of courtesy he scraped the dust with his hat.

"Come on, Mr. Highpockets Bigbrains! Here's the door! Run inside and hide, yellowbelly!"

Wild Bill shouted, "Go think some mighty big thought an' hurry it up!" Another revolver discharged. The bullet tore by Zak's shoulder, plunked the gate, splintered it. He nearly took a splinter in the eye.

He shoved Philemon out of the way, twisting the old drunk's ear so he hopped back, howling. Zak closed quaking hands on the gate handle. Calamity galloped up behind him, made her robot stallion paw for heaven. Zak winced, cringed aside without thinking.

"Going to play with your pretty little jewelry pieces, chappy?" Calamity shrieked. "Going to hide out and sniffle with your toys, you slimy little faggot?"

Turning, teeth bared and wet with pink slaver, Zak bayed, "You—"

His response was what they wanted.

Discharging revolvers, they rode away at full gallop. The street rang with their delighted yells.

He tore the gate open. He rushed in without glancing at the phorospores. In the house he found his bottle. For the next hour he lay in bed swigging and shaking from unnatural visions—dismembering Philemon, mutilating the Kid, gunning Wild Bill. The sickness of the visions appalled him and filled him with ecstasy.

There was a distant drone in the sky.

Much later, a noise in the mail chute indicated a message.

Still drunk he shook free of the last of the visions. He wasn't as barbarous as they? Was he?

Zak groped for the chute. He picked up the message tube.

Nothing much. Just more trouble.

Chapter Fifteen

By the light of Yellowhair he found his way to the cottage at the other end of town.

It was well on toward morning. The town dozed, undisturbed by gunfire or raucous voices for a change. Zak opened the little gate in the white pickets. He walked up the flagstone walk with a certain hesitancy. All the windows were open. Frowsy curtains blew in and out in the breeze.

He knocked four times, two times sharp and fast, twice slow and soft. Finally he heard sounds of a body moving inside. Light of a pink cast glowed behind the curtains and the leaded glass of the front door. In a moment the lamp itself became visible, its chimneys cheaply hand-painted with roses.

The door opened. There was a whiteness, and fair hair untidied by sleep.

Even warm and just roused, Belle smelled of lilac. "Well," she said. "I didn't expect I'd be seeing you any more, Mr. Randolf."

"I don't know why not," he said. He jerked his eyes from the cleft of her bosom which her gaudy wrapper didn't quite cover. "You were the one sore about what happened at the Chance. It made no difference to me." He enunciated the lie less easily every time.

Belle sniffed. "That's what I can't understand about you, Zak Randolf. Why doesn't it make any difference? Listen, it's chilly. Do—" All at once she made up her mind. "—you want to come in or is this a business call? I'm not in that business, you know."

"It is business, rather," he answered, moving into the doorway so that, apparently by accident, his forearm touched her body. He shivered. There were certain elements of animal

man that even he with all his self-imposed rationality didn't care to put down. Touching Belle reminded him that he was tight and feeling lonesome for more than one reason.

Belle clicked the door shut, backed off a step. Her lacquered toes shone like dark mirrors. She stared at him, as if about to reprove him. Then her brown eyes went soft. In the ball of light from the rose lamp, all the lines around her eyes smoothed out.

"I wish you weren't so damn—oh, I can't rightly put it to words. Like a story prince? You move all differently than anybody in town, do you know that? Zak, I heard they made a big nasty scene when you rode in tonight. Philemon and the rest, they've been hoorahing you up one side and down the other ever since you lit out for Cooper, all hoaxed."

"That," he said with reasonable control, "was my own blasted fault. You got any coffee?"

"I think. Come on." Her compact rear moved suggestively under the wrapper. She and the light led him to a small, tidy kitchen with a window box of plastic blooms nodding in the night breeze. She fed the stove, started the wood with paper while he sat down at the table under a framed motto. Sequins spelled out, *God Bless This Home*.

Zak reached into his coat pocket. Withdrew the message strip he'd unrolled from the tube dropped into his chute.

"The drone brought this on the afternoon run. It's from the Tip Top agent at Fort Countdown."

Her hair shone with reddish gleams as she set the coffee pot on the top of the stove. "'Nother bunch of these gawky tourists comin' around?"

He nodded. "The tour rocket will put down next Tuesday at noon. They'll be staying only half a day. But they've paid for a full tour. You know what that means."

The rich coffee smell mingled with the odor of night dust coming in the window. Belle sat down opposite him, chin on her palms. The wrapper fell even more revealingly. Zak tried to concentrate on her brown eyes instead.

"They want to see an old shoot-out?"

"Right," he said.

"Sure. So they can tell their friends back home how wild and woolly it is on Missouri. Why do you mess with that tour bunch, Zak? It's dishonest as hell."

"What's the harm? It's no more fraudulent than anything else on this planet. Why not let the tourists think they've stumbled into a genuine gundown and seen a little phony history re-created? Nobody gets hurt with the blanks. The locals"—sour smirk—"pick up a few cartwheels. The tourists go home raving about Tip Top, Tip Top gets peak business, and I get the cartwheels I need for the jewelry chemicals and abrasives. I couldn't afford to import them otherwise. Drone freight's expensive."

"You shouldn't import them anyway," Belle said firmly, pouring two cups. "You wouldn't be hoorahed and mocked so much if you stopped fooling with those queer old stones."

"They're not stones, they're crystals. I like them."

"But it just don't make you out a man somehow."

"Belle, for God's sake—not again."

She pouted. "I wish I understood you better."

"You never will because you're from Missouri. That's also why you like me." The hot coffee, her nearness, the silence of the cottage all produced a relaxation foreign to him for days now. So he smiled. But what he'd said was the truth.

"You're too deep, Zak. Like, if you hate all this gunplay—"

"I do. It's an abomination in this civilized century."

"Then why will you line up the boys to fake a fight?"

"To repeat—one, I need the cartwheels. Two, I think it serves the dimwitted tourists right, expecting to see blood spilled when they come here. All right, they see it. But it's bogus. That's a private joke I can appreciate, Belle. You wouldn't understand." So saying, he hugged the hot cup and watched her breast.

"There's one subject I do understand, Zak."

"What's that?"

"Things are coming to a head 'tween you and the Kid and that crowd. You'll have to stand or hightail one day soon. There's only one thing I think you can do, and that's stand."

"Honey," he laughed, "if I could shoot as well as you, I would."

Up leaped her eyebrows. There was joy on her face. "You serious?"

"Of course I'm not serious. I'll have no part of this town's perverted mystique, can't you understand that?"

"What did you say? I wish you wouldn't—"

"Never mind. Now listen. I've got to set up a shoot-out for the tour even though"—evasive, his eyes slid elsewhere—"I don't relish dealing with that miserable bunch at the Chance. If the tour doesn't see a bloodbath, my stock with Tip Top will go down. I don't want that. So—" He touched her hand. Heat sprang unbidden into his fingers and loins. "—will you negotiate with them? I want to use the Kid and Wild Bill."

Very softly, Belle said, "You tellin' me you're too scared to talk to them yourself?"

He didn't know how to answer truthfully. "I just don't want to give them the satisfaction. You can present it to them flat and cold. A business deal, take it or else. The usual rates apply."

"Zak, I kinda think you're more desperate than you want to let on. Why?"

"Forget it."

"But—all right."

For a long moment he watched her. "You're not as dumb as you act, honey."

"I still wish I could figure out all the deep things rooting around down inside you, Zak." Her voice was lower. The imitation flowers in the window box moved ever so gently. Yellowhair gilded the dancing curtains. "You're a handsome man in a way. But all on the outside, and I never see past that. It's the outside I do like, though. Did from the first time you walked in the Chance. What's going to become of you an' me, Zak? After the other night, I swore I was all through unless you stood up on your hind legs. Now I look at you and wonder, am I just too dumb to see that you really could be right in the way you treat the Kid and the rest? Guess you really did get around me this time. I'll talk to them for you. But you show me something."

With a curious grace she rose, releasing the tie of her wrapper. Her skin and hair glowed.

"You're not against provin' you're a man this way, are you, Zak Randolf?"

He wasn't.

By next evening she'd secured his answer. "They'll do it. But the fee's twice per usual."

"Son of a maverick bitch," he said, because he had no choice whatsoever.

Chapter Sixteen

"Oh-oh, folks, it looks like trouble. Against the wall, up on the sidewalk and over please. Sammy, you keep your thumb on that peak control. We don't want to lose that invisibility shield one minute. If they saw us they might turn on us. They're like wild beasts when there's trouble. Step lively, folks, keep moving—madam, will you please *hurry?*"

"I'm moving as fast as I can, young man!"

The woman was a crone in robes and scintillating, expensive moire-stars. She looked blue in the cheeks, and frail, as if the rejuvenating aerosols could no longer slow the ravaging of age. The old wreck's spouse, equally antique and pretentiously dressed, coughed in the dust and said to Zak, "The Duchess Pentcaster is on her fifth cardiac replacement. Is there any danger, laddie?"

"Not a whit, sir," Zak replied with sour, evil amusement at the way he spieled. "We're perfectly safe back of the shield. We'll place your wife right here, behind this apple barrel."

He shoved the crone up on the walk in front of Garlikov's Produce, nudged her into position behind the barrel mentioned. He handled her more gingerly when she gasped.

"There, that's plenty of extra protection. Hot lead will be flying thick and fast in a couple of moments, folks, so if any of you want to leave, feel free. Tip Top Tours hasn't lost a single guest in all the time that Shane's been part of the itinerary. But there's no doubt that we're going to have trouble. Sam, keep your finger right on that old button."

Sam Schloglarf had been through on prior tours. He

carried the shield generating pack on his back, and his natty tunic bore the triple T logo on the breast pocket.

A thick cable curled from the pack to a thumb control in Sam's right hand. By means of this control he maintained the shield at maximum intensity, and at approximately a six-foot height in front of the half dozen tourists. The party thus hidden included the Duke and Duchess Pentcaster, two Terrafirmic-stock teachers of indeterminate sex, and a pair of traveling Tlivoii, large aquamarine creatures with insect-like heads and translators strapped to their thoraxes.

"Sssssavage place, this. Sssssavage world, this," rasped one of the Tlivoii with feeling.

"But very hissssstorical," said the other.

"Yes, indeed, sir, passions run high on the frontier," Zak agreed. He wanted a new supply of chemicals and abrasives. Sam Schloglarf's broad wink indicated that the tour guide believed Zak was doing an especially good job this trip. Zak would probably be rewarded with a generous tip in addition to the regular fee of eighteen cartwheels.

It was late afternoon in Shane. The orange sun cast long, spectacular shadows. Zak adjusted the tight chin thong of his sombrero, turned his head and formed words with his throat and lips, silently. The transmitter in the thong picked up the patterns—*"Wind machines."*

All at once, fat, dramatic clouds of dust blew along the street where only a few puffs had stirred before. Out of sight in alleys and in runways between buildings along Main Street, some of the younger local boys would be furiously pumping the handles of the windwheels. The resulting clouds were fanning up nicely.

The clouds added a certain cheap theatricalism to the scene, Zak had to admit. Ideally the fight should have taken place at sunset. But this tour was on a tight schedule.

More people, Belle among them, poured out of the door of the Last Chance Saloon. Philemon Rasmussen shinnied up a rain pipe to the roof of the porch. Calamity shoved two of the saloon whores out of the way at a second floor window and leaned her elbows on the sill. All along the street, decent citizens ran for cover.

Store owner Garlikov tore off his apron, rolled down his awnings, rushed back inside and locked the door. Zak always

marvelled at the way the townsfolk cooperated for a tour. Word spread that one or two of the hardcases had been hired, and soon everyone was playing a part, as if they were all eager to play roles they, and their ancestors, had seen in countless cheap spool and reel dramas. Did the role-playing ease any doubts they had about the propriety of their society? Or was it simply a cheap thrill?

"All right!" shrieked the Arrivederci Kid, who had taken up a defiant stance in the dust outside the Chance. "I'm calling you out, you bandy-legged, hoss-thieving, whore-kissing son of a squaw!"

With dramatic force the batwings crashed back. There, grim-visaged under his derby, Wild Bill advanced across the porch. He stopped, and delicately fanned back the edges of his specially cut coat. The forward-facing butts of his revolvers jutted.

Wild Bill tugged his derby down hard over his eyes. "Kid, this town is too big for both of us."

"Then," said the Kid, "you better count ten and draw."

"They're going for it!" Zak cried with phony excitement.

The two men faced one another in the center of Main Street, just six doors from where the tourists huddled behind the invisibility curtain at Garlikov's. The curtain was no more than a faint shimmer in the air. Silently Zak said, *"Pour on the wind, you greedy sods."*

Immediately the dust clouds roiled with increased speed.

Wild Bill and the Kid stepped close to one another. Face to face, they exchanged what appeared to be vile insults. The Kid spun on one high boot heel, Wild Bill did the same. Back to back, they began to pace in opposite directions down the center of Main Street.

The crowd on the Chance porch strained forward. Zak began to count the paces just barely out loud.

"One."

He flicked a glance at Sam Schloglarf. Good. The tour guide had his thumb securely on the shield control.

"Two."

A last overweight woman in a poke bonnet ran from one side of the street to the other, holding up her cotton skirts as she fled.

"Three."

The two men in the slanting light cast immense shadows as they separated, walked apart in preparation for turning, for firing.

"Four."

Suddenly Zak was sick again. He was ashamed of himself for the way he *whored*. Yes, there was no other word. He was a despicable liar, feigning excitement when he should have told the tourists, *You're being taken. This is an imitation of ugliness. You're wrong to want to see it. You pretend to be horrified but you really enjoy it.*

"Five."

But the phorospores tinkled and glowed. The chemicals and abrasives came all the way from Kolering's Star. The duty—astronomical. Zak began to perspire. He knew the scene was staged—the two men walking with measure, doom-filled steps. Yet it worked its eerie power on him as it always did, and it churned his bowels.

"Six."

He slid his eyes to the Tlivoii. They worked their mandibles furiously in anticipation.

Duke Pentcaster stood on tiptoes, wringing his hands. His wife, Zak was alarmed to notice, was squatting in a near-fetal position behind the apple barrel, her eyes covered. Her cheeks shone unnaturally pink.

"Seven."

He definitely didn't like the looks of the old woman. He liked her wheezy breathing even less.

The Kid's silver spurs flashed. Wild Bill's gun butts bobbed at his hips. Wild Bill was nearest the tourists, marching past them with his small eyes set and ugly. His hands crept down near his hips like sentient claws.

"Eight."

Zak scanned the crowd at the Chance. Suddenly half a face leaped out, the rest hidden. The half he saw was pinched, arrogant, snake-lidded.

He looked away, looked back, started to say, "Nine," lost the count completely.

It wasn't Fritzi Bonn half concealed among the saloon onlookers. No livid scar tracked down the young man's face.

"Hansi!"

Zak lunged forward, not thinking.

"My God, Randolf, you—" Sam Schloglarf was bowled over by Zak's charge. He lost his grip on the shield control, dropped control and cable. The air ceased wavering simultaneously, the two long shadows stilled.

The Duchess Pentcaster exclaimed like a stricken bird. There was the noise of boots pivoting in the street. Wild Bill and the Kid slapped leather. The dust roared with gunfire.

Chapter Seventeen

Ever afterward, Zak blamed the Duke Pentcaster for the fatal turning of events.

Even though there were many gaps, bits and snippets remained indelible in his mind.

How he nearly got half way across Main Street, before the fusillade began, he never recalled. But there he was, driven out into the open by the sight of Hansi Bonn among the riffraff. As the pistols of the Kid and Wild Bill belched smoke and fire, the young hardcase saw Zak, lit out for better cover. The crowd pressing forward hid him utterly.

Then the far side of the street itself went, vanishing behind a reeking bluegray pall. Zak stood halfwitted. He was petrified by what he'd done.

Confused yelling behind him among the tourists. A frantic clack-clack from the Tlivolii. Through the still-rolling echoes of the guns, the Arrivederci Kid shrieked as though in unmerciful agony. His spindly, immense shadow jigged in the dust. With convulsing hands he clutched at his belly.

A concealed bladder—only that! said Zak's frantic mind, only that!—oozed its mixture of soyflour, for thickness, and ketsup, for color, through the fabric of the Kid's clothing. Appearing to bleed his guts away, the Kid toppled on his back.

He drummed his boots in a prolonged imitation of death-agonies. He shrieked again, arching his back.

"Mama!" he wailed. "Where are you, mama?"

Nearly blinded by his own sweat, Zak saw confused images in front of Garlikov's—Sam Schloglarf desperately trying to retrieve the shield control unit; the Duke Pentcaster mad-eyed with fright, plucking Sam's triple-T blazer and crying, "The shield's down, the shield's down, do something."

Determined to give a first-rate show, Wild Bill advanced to the twitching body of his victim. Zak didn't want to return to the Tip Top group. He wanted to go after Hansi. But he'd blundered inexcusably. Had to rectify that—

Somehow his steps were slow. The Duke Pentcaster kept crying, "The shield is down, do something!" while hammering Sam's head and shoulders. The latter raised his arms for protection.

"You zothead, take your hands off me!" Sam yelled. "The guns are blank-firing. Blanks, I tell you!"

It made no difference. The Duke continued his assault. Zak seemed to be dragging his boots through a glutinous sea. He twisted around. Hansi was utterly gone in the smoke in front of the Chance.

With superb cruelty Wild Bill kicked the Kid's ribs and belly. He loaded three shells into his revolver and emptied the gun—it seemed—into the already scarlet area above the Kid's waist. In response the Kid gave a few more antic wiggles. Wild Bill spat on the Kid's face and pivoted.

Zak thought the Kid raised his head a mite, and swore at the ultra-realism. He didn't waste time making sure. He slogged on toward the tourists.

Like a ram, an impression hit him. The Tlivoii no longer clashed their mandibles. Their postures denoted dignity and injury.

Sam Schloglarf hollered at them past the waving, punching fists of the old Duke. "Some error. You didn't hear me say—"

"Sssssimulation," rasped one of the Tlivoii, rattling its thorax. "Dessssseption."

"No, no, Tip Top would never—God damn it, stop, you silly old hunk of—"

"The shield is down, you must—oh."

As if by a miracle, the Duke Pentcaster obeyed Sam's order. But for a terrifying reason.

The Duke's eyes were fixed on his wife. She was rising straight up from behind Garlikov's apple barrel. Her arms were extended at her sides, pumping feebly. Her eyes protruded from her head. Her cosmeticized cheeks turned a deep red. From her mouth issues a strange, mechanical voice.

"Emergency, emergency. This unit is failing, this unit is failing. Emergency, emergency."

Zak grabbed a hitch rail for support. Duke Pentcaster grabbed his own bosom. "God's mercy! Her cardiac apparatus!"

With one murderous glare at Zak, Sam Schloglarf screamed, "Help me! Somebody fetch the Doc. God damn it, Randolf, don't stand there like a polled sow."

Fighting the strange, dizzying weakness, Zak pushed himself by will. He caught Duchess Pentcaster's slippery garments as she fell.

The expensive ripplecloth tore. Tinkling winking moire-stars rolled off the edge of the porch into the dirt. The mechanical voice from her mouth kept repeating its infernal message, which was blurred now because her dental replacements had slipped. Her eyelids fluttered like fans.

Zak lifted the old woman by the ankles. Schloglarf had her head. The Duke kept bumping into them. Zak dropped his end. Schloglarf cursed him.

Somehow they managed to get the old woman into the street. They carried her toward the frame building Zak indicated. As they passed the Kid, Sam Schloglarf growled, "You can get up, ringer. Randolf blew the bit."

The Kid wiped his nose, blinked. The back of his hand glared with the ersatz blood. The Kid shrugged, climbed to his feet and dusted himself off. On the sidelines Wild Bill removed his derby and scratched his spitcurls, dislodging his beaver-colored hairpiece.

Zak and Sam kept moving. The two teachers and the Tlivoii formed the end of the macabre procession. Side by side the aliens marched, tall, strangely threatening as they hissed at one another:

"Sssssimulation of the cheapessst sssort."

"Dessssseption not to be brooked—not to go unreported."

"Yessss."

Just then Marshal Luke Smith ambled into sight, late as usual.

The two-story wall of Doc Polakow's office cast a hot, mote-filled shadow over the side street. Here, barred from within by the feisty physician, Zak lingered, consoled only by a cheroot offered by Dr. Buster, who had appeared in the crowd.

The teachers fussed. The Tlivoii hissed. Perhaps fifty townspeople had gathered. Here and there Zak saw ugly glances shot his way. Most of the hardcases hadn't bothered to tag along, except for Calamity Fotheryngayle. Arms folded across her gargantuan bosom, she eyed Zak with horsy smugness.

Zak spun to the closed, curtained door. "Wish to God he wouldn't take so long. Dammit, I'm going in."

Dr. Buster stayed him with a strong grip. "Keep puffing that seegar, boy. Don't do one more blessed thing you'll regret."

Sweating, Zak eased off. Dr. Buster released him a moment later. By then Zak realized that the old peddler had given him wise counsel. He needed to regroup, needed to prepare for the trouble this development would surely bring down. If that imbecilic Duke hadn't caterwauled about the shield!

The door bearing the words, A. Polakow, M.D. in flaky gold leaf opened. There stood Doc, a microedge cutter in his hand, a weed in his underslung jaw, a smear of red on his surgeon's apron, a scowl on his face.

"I'm sorry, folks, but there's nothing more to see. The lady is deceased."

He let the murmur ripple out and fade. Then he continued, "An unfortunate combination of our Type C-beta atmosphere —a mix slightly different than that of her home world—and the excitement and confusion—it placed an undue strain on the circuits of the device. Her fifth, I'm told. There were some other complications too." His glance in Zak's direction was pointed.

Weeping with fury, Duke Pentcaster shoved outside. "If

you had proper and decent parts replacement depots on this accursed world—"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the Doc, meaning it. He rubbed at gray around his ears. "My inventory doesn't contain that replacement model, which happens to be a somewhat exotic modification of a standard unit. I'm afraid it wouldn't have done any good to send a message to the big depot at Blackfoot City either. We could have used the Library's computer to transmit on an emergency basis. But no robot delivery would have reached us till nightfall at the earliest."

He laid a heavy hand on the weeping man's shoulder.

"Her life systems failed three minutes after I opened her up, sir. The cardiac simulator was still going. Feebly, but going. She was just a very old lady, sir." He tucked the cutter into his apron and, placing his hands together, made a gesture curiously like dry-washing.

As the doctor turned to re-enter his office, Sam Schloglarf appeared. His glance at Zak was even more withering. But he addressed the Duke.

"Naturally, Duke, Tip Top Tours is fully indemnified. There will be handsome reparations—"

"Go away," sobbed the old man. "Go away, won't you?" Pathetic in his misery, he drifted into the crowd.

As if ashamed to be near such cloying grief, individuals in the crowd began to drift as well, blending into the dust and evening glare leaking from Main Street. Luke Smith took his leave that way too, like an ordinary citizen in silence.

Zak watched the shuffling specters go. Sam Schloglarf closed on him. Beyond the harried tour guide, Dr. Buster Levinsohn leaned against the wall of Polakow's office, puffing his own cigar with an expression that might have been sympathetic or amused.

Schloglarf's bottom lip was absolutely white. "You dumb son of a bitch. What were you after on the other side of the street?"

"Nothing, I—" Zak brushed at imaginary flies. With effort, he said, "I didn't kill her."

"Not directly. Not chargeably. No, that's clear. But you certainly ruined it for—"

"You're the one who yelled about the goddam blanks!"

"You're the one who got me all rattled and started it!"

Schloglarf shouted back. "You can just cross Tip Top Tours off your list, Randolf. There may be legal proceedings. But even if there aren't you'll never work for the triple T again. Or any other guide service. And thanks to you"—he raised his voice, hoping others would hear— "Shane is off our list. Blackmarked. Zilch. No longer on the roll of Missouri attractions, that I guarantee!"

And off he stormed.

Even Dr. Buster seemed incapable of saying anything to comfort Zak. The old peddler slipped into the evening, shaking his head. One remaining watcher stepped up to Zak smartly.

"The town will certainly be pleased to hear that latest tidbit, cocker."

Calamity Fotheryngayle. Her frog eyes revelled. "Yes, you've certainly helped Shane's economic situation this time." Grinning, she waddled away. The noise of her chaps scraping lingered long after.

Zak stared into the blaze of light where she'd vanished. He didn't see her. He saw visions of his hands seizing her head, then squeezing it until her eyes bulged even more than normal, and blood squirted out of her eardrums.

Chapter Eighteen

As if to compound Zak's grief, after the incident not even the commonest citizen deigned to speak to him when he walked down the street. The next robot mail brought an intemperate message from Mickolas Safrun.

The message said that Safrun's patience was not indefinite. The meager amusements for tourists staying over at Fort Liftoff had already palled. Safrun either wanted his Living Antique within half a fortnight, or Z. Randolf, Cosfed economic agent, would shortly receive a communication from

his superiors relieving him of duty and cancelling each and every one of his accured benefits.

Desperate, sleepless an entire night, Zak lurched next morning to the Shane Free Library.

An old man in imitation denims dozed in the sun between the commanding plasto gryphons that flanked the steps. Mine dust glittered under the man's cracked nails.

Tilting up his head, the old man recognized Zak. He released a big, juicy drop of yellow-brown spit from his lips. It went *plop* between his toeless shoes, fitting punctuation to Zak's misery and fear.

The white-haired, vinegary woman who tended the desk in the deserted little library usually greeted him with some friendliness. He and Doc Polakow, plus Buster Levinsohn when he was in town, were the only patrons who ever asked for anything besides fictive Terrafirmic Westerns. This morning, however, she positioned herself so that her prince-nez reflected the sun through the filthy windows. He missed her eyes, saw her lips compact.

"Yes, Mister Randolf? Is there something?"

"The computer, Miss Virginia. May I—?"

She pointed to the musty steps to the cellar. "You know the way. There is nothing I can do legally to prevent you from using the facilities installed in this Free Library by Cosfed in order to fulfill minimum educational requirements for our children."

Baffled, Zak forced a smile. "Miss Virginia, that's strange talk. You know me. I'm—"

"I know you, you, you"—she blew out air—"varmint."

For one of her age and education, it was an obscenity.

"You've ruined this town. Ruined it! Destroyed one of its few economic mainstays! There's even talk that Tip Top Tours—so influential, those people—will try to get Cosfed to refuse any further souvenir shipments for a year. You go use that computer if you wish. But don't you dare call on me for any repairs. And turn on the lights yourself."

Anguished, Zak fled from the mirrors of her eyes.

He went down the stairs. A fat insect buzzed his cheek, then paddled away in the stale, soupy air. He found the lights, lit them. He walked to the left, to the Microbook Callup, rather than the Central Message Station. He wanted

to handle the texts himself, seated in the reader next to the callup bin, rather than question the central computer aloud. Oral questioning had been his original intent. But Miss Virginia's attitude made it clear that he dared not reveal a single secret ploy. The whole town was against him.

Not that he cared. *I wouldn't give a fake cartwheel if the entire town of Shane sank into Missouri and interred every last citizen,* he thought as he switched on the callup. A simulation of a mustached face done in green lines, very crude, appeared on the screen.

"Howdy, pardner, whut kin I do yuh fer?"

Christ, he thought, how cheaply even Cosfed pandered.

"Law."

"Yessir, ole saddlemate. What classy-fee-cation?"

"Will you please not—"

He rubbed his forehead. He leaned forward, a driven, almost demented expression in his eyes. He was convinced that unless he found out his answer here, buried in some obscure datacard, he was destroyed. He wouldn't let them destroy him that easily. No. He wouldn't. He leaned further into the green glare, his face a strange distortion of itself.

"Criminal, please. I want everything you have pertaining to Missouri criminal statutes."

Relays clicked. The green-line face frowned. "That's a mighty tall order, pard."

"I don't give a damn. I want every last card."

"Don't get salty, waddy, don't get salty! Hang on to yer powder horn, I'll handle it."

A moment later the slot began to chuckle and disgorge microbooks.

Each card was a volume. Zak rubbed his eyes. They ached already. He swiveled the squealing chair.

Miss Virginia hollered from upstairs. Didn't he remember that this was a library? Quiet *please*.

With a filthy oath he set the card into the aperture of the reader. He programmed the controls, waited for the first wan, ancient page to flick onto the groundglass.

He didn't care at all what happened to Shane. In fact he was beginning to form definite plans concerning his future relationship to the bestial place. But his main challenge here, even if it killed him, was Mickolas Safrun.

For three days, ignoring Miss Virginia's increasingly biting remarks from the head of the stairs, he read law. Read and read until, near exhaustion, he came upon it. By moonlight, feeling feverish, he called at Belle's cottage.

She hushed him and hurried him inside. Another proof of his high status! He was too worn to feel more than a sullen red disgust.

He spelled out his need, aware of the way his voice whined as he begged her for assistance. So what.

Belle studied him like a specimen. "I don't 'xactly cotton to this, Zak. It's funny. You don't care which one of the boys you talk to?"

"No, I don't care, just so long as it's one and no more. Tell whichever one you choose that he'd better dance my tune this round."

Did she almost dimple? "That sounds like a threat!"

"Why," he said through a yawn, "I guess maybe it does."

Her teeth shone in the gloom. "Bet they—he'll come, too. To call your bluff."

"Of course he will. Why shouldn't he? Anybody you pick will know I won't be armed."

Down went the corners of her mouth. "You won't?"

"No."

"You aren't plannin' a bushwhack?"

"No, Belle, I'm not. I don't do that sort of thing."

Abruptly and keenly, he found himself almost wishing he did. It troubled him. But less than it would have a week ago. He sat on her parlor couch, numb legs stretched out. He yawned repeatedly. Finally he sopped her wide-eyed puzzlement. "Belle, you just lay it on thick the way I've already explained—three times. If those thugs at the Chance know what's good for them, they'll send a spokesman to talk. And quick. Tomorrow evening."

He really wanted to make it sooner. But he was spent from the bleary hours in front of the groundglass. Shots rang out from Main Street, followed by yelling. The cuckoo in Belle's bedroom chirruped the hour of four.

Belle rustled in her wrapper, gliding to sit by him. She contrived to let her wrapper fall away from her thigh. Yellowhair illuminated the lilac-scented skin along the inside of her leg. She teased his hair with one hand.

"Zak, Zak, why don't you do somethin' straight out to take the curse off yourself? That tour business—"

"A fiasco. I agree. But it doesn't concern me. This town can fry."

"Fight the Kid, Zak darlin'." She leaned in with her breasts, licked his ear. "Fight any one of them, that'll do it. The whole town'd forget the past."

"But I want them to remember what's going to happen next," he said to the hair teasing his nose.

At base, his plan was a desperate move pertaining to his problem with Hansi. Still, it could tree the town too. That amused him.

The moonlight through the curtains tangled in Belle's hair. All at once he felt rankly. He roughed up her hair.

"You do what I tell you, Belle. Then we'll talk about fighting."

"If that's a promise—" Her words ended in a wet gurgle, her mouth on his.

Unfortunately he fell asleep in her bed with his shirt only half removed. Zak dreamed she threw a powder pot at his head and wept over her helpless hunger for him.

Or maybe he didn't dream?

Chapter Nineteen

For an hour Zak had been puttering in the work room of his house. He made motions but no progress, not even on one piece of jewelry.

The outer door was ajar. In the dark garden the phorospores scintillated and clashed together to create soft, glittering sounds. All at once a new, harsher jinglejangle drifted over the wall.

Zak checked his pocket for the reader prints, hastily dialled down the chemical lantern. He carried the lantern out ahead

of him. He was half way to the gate when the raucous knock sounded.

Up with the bar. Gate opened. Zak retreated quickly, a long pace back. The Arrivederci Kid lounged there, picking his teeth with a little gold pick. He reeked of garlic.

The Kid's spurs and mustaches picked up the faraway gleam of lamps. His face was hidden beneath his hat brim. But Zak knew the Kid's eyes were moving.

"How long this gonna take, Randolf?" The Kid was blustery, to get Zak on the defensive.

"Not long. Come on inside. We can talk in the house."

The Kid loped into the garden with a long, careless stride. A delicate cinnamon-shaded phorospore over hung the path. The Kid would have rammed his boot right down on it had Zak not shoved him.

The Kid slapped at his gun butt. Zak reacted by jumping down the path. The anger that had sparked his reaction turned to fear. He raised a quick hand. "Hang on, Kid. I just didn't want you to mash one of the crystals. They're alive, in their own way."

At length, with loud sniffs, the Kid glanced down. "Oh yeah, your jool stuff." He sounded faintly disgusted. He really didn't comprehend. His unseen eyes kept turning, watching.

Zak managed to keep an even tone. "Let's go in the house, Kid. We can sit down and—"

"No sir. Don't believe in goin' indoors in a place like this. Never know when you'll be bushwhacked by yellowbelly law-dogs. We'll talk right here. And make it snappy, because I got me a touch of fluff waitin' back at the Chance, and her bloomers are hotter'n a stove lid."

Filthy chuckle. It made Zak crawl.

The Kid explained gratuitously. "I wouldn't even bother comin' to see a slug like you 'cept as a favor to little ole Belle. I kinda like to keep on her good side. She's a pretty thing. I'll get you in my sights good one of these days, and then I'm gonna take me a little feel of Belle's elbow and diverse other parts, as that booby Philemon'd say. What you got to tell me and the rest of the laddy-bucks at the Chance that's so dogfired urgent?"

Out of Zak's pocket came the crumpled reader prints. "This. Or can't you read?"

A seethe of breath; a rattle of sucked-up saliva in the dark under the Kid's hatbrim. Finally, finally—ha!—Zak had scored. The Kid's posture became more menacing. He snatched the sheets in a way that bruised the back of Zak's hand. The Kid pretended to examine the repros while Zak chuckled deep inside.

He let the charade continue just long enough. Then he said, "I'll save you the trouble. That's a printout of the Cosfed Standard Planetary Criminal Codifications. In one word, laws. Laws that govern even a backward, hagridden world like Missouri. That's Section 12578 point 2 in your hand. Obscure, I'll admit. Seldom enforced." The sweat popped and cooled on his cheeks. A dangerous game, this. Already the Kid's breathing was heavier. "But it's still on the books."

Reptilian, the Kid seemed to ooze his way toward Zak. His voice was low. "I don't catch your drift completely, Randolf. But the part I do catch I don't like."

"That's your problem," replied Zak with a shrug more casual than his churned-up state might have warranted. "The gist of the law, Kid, is this. When civil disorder impairs interplanetary commerce, all such commerce shall cease."

The Kid's fingers made a dry, unsettling sound as he rubbed the tips together. He only rubbed with his gun hand. "What's that commerce stuff?"

"Any exchange of goods for goods, or cartwheels for goods. Or services. The souvenir trade. The tourist trade."

A biting obscenity from the Kid. "You already queered the tourist trade, Zakky. If that Schloghead has his way, the Olde Weste Brand factory will be in a fix mighty soon too. I don't see—"

"Well," said Zak almost airily, "there is an arrangement by means of which certain of the fees Cosfed collects on the souvenirs are set aside to pay duty on all the liquor imported into Shane. Cosfed's S.B.B. raises a lot of revenue handling the alcohol trade all over the galaxy. Technically, Kid, if commerce were to come to a halt in Shane, there'd be nothing to drink.

For the first time the Kid's aplomb, such as it was, vanished utterly. He hauled up tall, fanning his hat back so that his

face shone in the multicolor dapple from the phorospores. He glared at Zak as though the latter were foulness itself.

"You purely wouldn't—"

"Yes, I damn well may." Zak said it loudly, to conceal the sudden clicking of his teeth. "That phony gunfight impaired interplanetary commerce. There's one less tourist travelling the galaxy now, Kid. That's impairment if ever I heard it."

"But. But." The Kid's lips dotted up with spittle. "*But*—"

Zak felt a touch of macabre mirth. Only here, in circumlocutions the Kid couldn't begin to understand, did he have an edge. For effect he waved the reader prints under the Kid's nose.

"You're the one caused the trouble in the first place!" the Kid yelled. "You're responsible for that old bat bein' dead! You set up the fight! What's old Cosfed gonna say when—?"

"Kid. Kid." Zak managed a moment of massive contempt. He was bluffing and—how seldom he felt this proud!—doing it superbly. "Your head isn't geared to understand a bureaucracy as highly organized and complex as Cosfed. You sneer at me for reading, but I understand those things. Get this straight. As an official Cosfed economic agent"—tenure uncertain; but the Kid knew nothing of that—"I can predict exactly how Cosfed will behave in such a case. If I file a complaint, they'll enforce the law first, then worry about the circumstances of the complaint later. Much later. Weeks later. Months later. All during that time, there won't be any souvenirs going out. By the same token, there won't be a single drone coming in with booze."

The Kid clutched his Adam's apple. "Sweet and merciful God."

"It's going to happen, Kid. Unless."

"I think you'll do it. 'Less"—a lizardy chuckle; a tensed hand—" 'less maybe I shoot you first."

"Forget it. I've already drafted the complaint. And put it on the computer at the Free Library. Unless I give a countermand, in person, the message will be transmitted first thing tomorrow morning. And don't try shooting up the library basement, either. The computer housing is impervious. That means bullets won't hurt it."

With each sentence the Kid gasped or grunted. Keep run-

ning, you bastard, a cruel imp in Zak's mind squealed. He thrust another crumpled printout into the Kid's trembling hand. Like the rest of his recent lies—message already on computer; necessity for personal countermand—this last chit was a lie too. But his voice remained loud. "That's a copy of my message, Kid. Read it."

Pathetically, the Kid turned the printout to the blank side, then to the print side again. "Goddam. Should of listened to the schoolmarm like Mama said." He raised his head. The crystals waving at his feet made his eyes lime green and pink. "Wait a minute here. You said there wouldn't be a drop."

"Not a drop, I swear. Not one."

"Not a drop unless. What's the unless?"

"Unless you apes at the Chance decide that you like your liquor better than you like Hansi Bonn."

"Ahhhh." The sigh was long and malicious. "That's the deal, then. We turn over Hansi, you don't call in the lawdogs, and the redeye keeps flowin'."

Zak nodded.

"I dunno what kind o' poker player you are, Randolf. But I bet you're no good. I bet you're fakin'."

With a smile held forcefully in place, Zak answered, "If you're willing to take the responsibility for the longest dry spell you and your pals have ever sat through, Kid, call the hand. Isn't that what you boys say down at the Chance when you're sitting there playing cards and sopping up sauce by the hour?"

The Kid swallowed audibly. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess, we do have a mighty keen thirst, come to think of it."

"Remember, Kid, the message is already on the computer. Set to go. One complaint and the inspectors from the Spirituous Beverage Bureau will be pouring in. Why, they might even cut off the whole continent's supply of synthetic hooch. You sure Hansi means that much to you, all you boys? Maybe he means quite a bit to Fritzi, but Fritzi's just one vote."

"Naw, naw! Fritzi don't like his brother much, confidentially. I can't stand him neither. You bastard! We're smack over the ole barrel, ain't we? To think o' you pullin' this kind of stunt purely fries my eyeballs. Why, I ought to ventilate

you on the spot. Can't do it!" Again he clawed at his throat. "Not and take a chance like that! No drinks for a *year?*"

"I want an answer tomorrow," Zak rasped. "At the same time you boys can tell me when and where you'll deliver Hansi. Send Belle with the message."

"You're mighty sure."

"That's right, I am."

The Kid fondled his holster. "You got a mite more intestinal fortitude than I give you credit for, Zak Randolf."

"I'm learning."

"Gonna hand me that much more pleasure to send you to boot hill one of these days."

"Not till I get Hansi, Kid, or you get your daily ration of gut poison cut off. Isn't that one of the things that helps you feel like a man?"

Before the Kid could answer, Zak hooked a thumb at the gate.

The Kid's mustache points were shiny as swords in the starlight. Zak thumbed again, wondering how he had the gall. Inside he was all jelly.

The Kid said something else obscene, spun and clomped down the path. His left boot squashed the overhanging cinnamon phorospore. Its delicate light went out in a high, impacted tinkling of shards. The garden began to wave. Zak rushed forward.

"You clumsy ass!"

His mad, raw cry got lost in the Kid's grumbling. The thud of the gate dropped the guard bar back into the bracket. Ting-tang, the Kid's spurs jingled away. The rhythm was angry.

Zak turned up his chemical lantern. His shadow tilted crazily along one garden wall as he stooped to handle the flaked and powdered remains of the crystal. The crystals in the garden continued to tinkle in great agitation.

Zak poured flakes and powder from hand to hand and back again. His shoulders shook as he sobbed. Apelike Kid. Ignoramus. Strutting bully. Hand to hand Zak poured the remains, experiencing the birth of a genuine and quite consuming hate.

Only when he took up the lantern and stumbled to the

house did he realize that he had hated without amazement, disgust, or the slightest regret. He didn't even doubt his own capacity for such irrational emotion any longer. In fact he'd rather enjoyed the whole experience.

When he realized that, he poured a drink three times larger than his usual. Minutes later, he passed out.

Chapter Twenty

It seldom rained on Missouri, but the following afternoon was one of those seldoms.

Zak's hat dripped when he met Belle. She carried a parasol. The rendezvous took place on a safe corner on the far side of town.

Lilac powder ran down Belle's cheeks in the damp. Her face looked ugly, like a cracked doll head. Off across the Geronimos, thunder pealed. Spectacular lightnings containing all the colors of the visible spectrum ran down the sky in web patterns.

Zak huddled under the parasol as fat drops began to fall. A boy in a ragged shirt ran for home, rolling his hoop, yelling at his robot dog, Rover, to hurry up.

"The Kid said to tell you yes," Belle informed him.

"When do I get Hansi?"

"Tonight, after dark. At the Livery."

Zak's belly muscles tightened. "The Livery." He didn't like that. Too remote. Too deserted after sundown. He said, "That'll do, I guess."

"I don't understand why you have to go through all these silly contortions of laws and things," Belle exclaimed above the sudden noisy downpour that tore past the rim of the parasol. "Why not just tote a gun and stand up to 'em proper?" Before he could retort—he was tired; nervous—she rushed on, "I'm not sure you're dagblamed smart doin'

this. The Kid and Wild Bill and Fritzi, they've had their heads together all afternoon at the Chance, thick as thieves an' lookin' twice as wicked."

"Don't worry, I'll be all right."

He was beginning to have doubts, though. And second thoughts in another direction. Why not carry indemnity, in case? How did he get into this? That rotten Safrun. That miserable Living Antique Contract.

"You packin' a gun tonight, Zak?"

"Probably my gun full of darts."

"You should carry a real one, Zak. You go buy one at Rapoport's!"

"Why the hell?" he snarled. "To protect myself? Or prove myself to you?"

Instantly sorry for the hurt on her face, he cuddled her with one arm for a moment. Her body felt lifeless. The barriers of their damp clothing spoiled what little emotion there might have been.

He patted her arm, muttered a thanks, ducked into the rain. Thunder hammered. The spectrum lightnings sizzled and crisscrossed the Missouri sky like grids. He heard her call:

"You be careful, Zak. You be careful down there! It could be a—"

Thunder.

Genuinely worried that maybe his bluff hadn't been successful after all, Zak laid out the facts after dark.

"Seeing as how I'm not much with a gun, and they could be planning a doublecross, I wonder if you'd go down there with me? Shouldn't take too long." He glanced out the window of the combination jail and office. Lamplight gleamed on raindrops still clinging to the dirty glass. "They ought to be at the Livery anytime now, Luke. Will you go?"

With elaborate motions the marshal re-folded his *Pioneer-Advocate*. He removed his spurs from the desk, stood up. He twisted down the wick of the green chimney lamp and said, "Yup."

"Don't sound so damn eager!" Zak sneered. "It's your job, you know. Protecting citizens."

"Yup," Luke agreed. He set his battered hat on his head. "'Tis. Don't blow a gasket, Randolf."

But his steps to the door were ponderous. Zak was almost driven to screaming by the utterly phlegmatic face of the peace officer, and by the way he marched in silence down the muddy street at Zak's shoulder.

The rain was over. Neither stars nor Yellowhair shone through the cloud cover. A trace of ground fog clung. Zak's Six-Shot was a clumsy weight on his hip.

The walk down the deserted street to the last ramshackle barn and the empty corral seemed to take forever. As they approached, Zak saw no one. The Livery sign creaked on an iron rod jutting from the barn.

He mistook an overturned barrel in the corral for a man. Then he saw his error. While Luke Smith waited, Zak edged to the barn door.

"Anyone?"

A man rose from behind the barrel.

"Randolf?"

Zak spun. The Kid? Hard to tell—

A revolver exploded. The bullet riffled Zak's shirt. He dropped on his face in the mud as someone hidden up in the hayloft opening shot again, and Luke Smith cried belatedly, *"Watch out!"*

Chapter Twenty-One

The mud splattered when Zak fell. It adhered to his eyelids, making vision doubly difficult. Somehow his fingers became smeared with it too. His hand slipped when he tried to haul the Sharp's Six-Shot from the holster.

A moment of pure panic made him totally helpless. The first revolver blasting from up in the hayloft was joined by others, a rattling crossfire.

The noise surrounded him. Assassins in the dark were shooting from all save the street side of the corral. Zak howled between his teeth and rolled. He tasted mud on the backsides of his teeth.

The baroom-baroom-baroom of the guns seemed to set up sympathetic echoes that grew and grew. Yellow-red muzzle light streaked the corral. Bullets plipped in the mud all around him. There were strange after-noises as the mud seized the slugs and sucked them under.

Zak kept rolling. Only the light ground fog, in turmoil now, hid him and saved him. But he couldn't pull the Sharp's from the hip rig! His hand slid off the butt repeatedly.

"You all hold on there!"

The voice had a weird, sepulchral quality. Zak twisted his head around, whimpered.

Luke Smith had spoken the words with his customary lack of rancor. The marshal was on his knees. His genuine revolver fell into the mud. He raised an admonishing finger to the rickety wall of the barn. A patch of shadow shifted up in the loft. Then another gunshot scored a direct hit on Luke Smith's belly.

It wasn't the first hit. The marshal's burly chest was pitted by black wounds. Evidently the lawman hadn't drawn fast enough; had been caught standing phlegmatically between the muzzles of the crossfiring guns—

Mouth open, the marshal plopped face first into the mud right near Zak.

In the dark out beyond the corral's split-pole fence, a voice he recognized as Fritzi Bonn's chuckled, "You ain't gettin' my brother back, Zakky. All you're gettin' is a dirt cot."

"Aw, come on, fellers," responded another. Wild Bill? "Let's have a little sport, at least. What say we count five and leave him run?"

"You hear that?" Fritzi hollered. He was moving out there in the ground fog. "You're gonna get a sportin' chance."

Zak bayed, "You unspeakable, barbaric—"

"Land to goshen!" That was the Kid, all lachrymose mockery. "Listen to him clack."

"I think we ought to pull him apart bare handed for that," Fritzi allowed.

General agreement, with chuckles of bestial good humor.

Shadows began to stir again. Fritzi Bonn put a boot between fence rails. Zak dragged himself to his feet.

By dumb luck his contortions knocked the Sharp's out of his mud-covered holster. He picked it up. The shadows kept shifting, male shadows, hatted shimmering and sliding toward him with a hideous unreality. He could make out almost no detail because of the depth of the night, the ground fog rolling, his own drenched forehead trickling sweat into his eyesockets. No light reached the Livery corral save for faint halated rays from a lamp burning behind curtains in a cottage across the street.

The shadow-men glided forward. Their boots gurgled in the mud. A window crashed up in the cottage acros the way. An old man quavered, "Keep still, Abigail. It's them terrible saloon outlaws raising a ruckus."

Help me, Zak thought. Help me, old people. But his help lay dead face down in mud. The window shut, crash.

The shadow gunmen chuckled. They exchanged lewd jests at his expense as they tightened their circle around him.

"I—I—I—I—" Zak began.

"He's singin' ole Mexey music!" cried the Kid with a loud hee-haw.

"I've got a gun—" Zak trembled.

"Sleepy-darts, that's all," Fritzi Bonn sneered. "You ain't got balls for anything else."

"While ours, old cocker—" Spinning, Zak saw with horror that Calamity was behind him, moving in from the street. She carried a sawed-off. "—ours are frightfully potent. This of mine can slice your belly into navel-size pieces with two tugs of this trigger."

They had him ringed.

He could never take all of them. Probably couldn't even take two with the Sharp's. Calamity, Wild Bill, the Kid and Fritzi shaped their loose ring to a square around him, then started to close it.

Wild Bill extended both his guns like sticks prodding a mongrel. He began to chant, "Yah! Yah! Yah! Yah!"

All thrust their gun muzzles at him, so long, so black, and they closed. "Yah! Yah! Yah!"

Maddened, Zak whipped up the Sharp's. "Watch it, boys!"

Calamity howled. Another gun racketed. One shot, two, spanging, whining. The hardcases yelled.

Zak had sense enough to fall back in the mud as the fusillade continued. With additional cries of alarm the hardcases scattered for various sides of the corral. Someone was pumping rifle shots from the cover of the cottage across the way.

Up went the window, bang. "Who's out there?"

"Abigail, come in!" Down went the window, bang.

"Doublecrossing, hornswoggling, drygulching—" The Kid's strangled cry of rage died away. His lanky body was gone in the dark. In fact all the hardcases had cut for it.

The withering fire of the sharpshooter stopped. An unnatural silence gripped the corral. The cottage window banged up a final time, and stayed up. Abigail began to scream blue murder. Very shortly too Zak caught the sound of running from down the street.

He lay spitting mud from his tongue and picking it from his nostrils. His first reaction was a joy akin to sexual release. Help was coming. Abigail was wailing. Good old Abigail. Feet were rushing toward him. He was saved.

Suddenly this almost feminine relief filled him with loathing. *Yellowbelly*. How richly he deserved that term.

He couldn't fight. He couldn't defend himself. He had to let an unknown benefactor with a rifle—*and who could that be?*

Confused, his overmind barely listened to something else that said, *You aren't playing by their rules, remember? Pay attention to me, Zak Randolf. You aren't playing by—hey. Hey, listen—*

The faint inner voice went to oblivion. Glutinous clouds of self-disgust wrapped heavier around him. How he wished he could teach those bullying, tormenting—

All at once he saw the thing at which he had been staring for several moments. His brain re-meshed.

Luke Smith's nose and chin had plowed troughs in the mud. Luke's neckerchief had come unfastened. His topple to death had pulled his shirt collar awry. In the uncertain light Zak saw a thin, straight black line that cut across the side of the marshal's neck as though a razor had opened the skin bloodlessly. Zak only noticed it because he was

lying on the ground close to the dead man who had tried to help him.

Zak's tongue crawled with insects. Who had cut the marshal? Zak had seen no knives at all.

He slushed to Luke on hands and knees. He stretched his right hand to the slit. Touched.

No blood.

Zak bent closer. Dug his fingers into a layer of what felt like flesh. Then he contacted a hard, hidden, internal edge. The slit was not wide. It would never be seen except on the closest examination.

"Oh my God," he said matter-of-factly.

If he were truly losing his mind, at least he had the presence to tug up Luke Smith's collar and tighten the neckerchief so that the strange gash was covered. *Covered and gone. I've covered it. Therefore it isn't there any longer.* Did Doc Polakow know psyching? Zak was certain he needed treatment.

He half heard a small crowd arrive. The crowd grew larger. Among the arrivals was Fergus O'Moriarty, faultlessly attired in black frock coat and flowing tie and carrying a lantern.

O'Moriarty set the lantern alongside the marshal's remains. He clucked his tongue but did not kneel.

"Sweet and peaceful Virgin! They've gunned poor Luke."

O'Moriarty continued to glance distastefully at the mud. "Someone kindly see if he's still living?"

A couple of burly citizens obliged. They turned Luke Smith over. The wounds—Zak counted fourteen—looked perfectly normal. Nice, normal bullet holes, powder-black at the edges. Luke's shirt was twisted into the opening where blood bubbled.

At least it looked like blood.

Zak stood dumbfounded, ignoring loud speculations about himself. People asked questions he didn't answer or even acknowledge.

"What happened?"

"Who did it?"

"Randolf, did you gun him?"

"Naw. He only carries that kiddy-toy loaded with them dart things."

With obscure satisfaction Zak noted that he'd tightened Smith's neckerchief so hard it cut the—*flesh?* The strange, terrifying gash didn't show. O'Moriarty clucked his tongue, scratched a russet eyebrow.

"Wal, boys, nothing for it but to ask a couple o' you to carry him down to the Rugged Cross Funeral Home. I'll pack him good in ice so he keeps till mornin' when I can do the embalming and make the necessary arrangements." O'Moriarty was dour in the flickering glow of his lantern. "Plainly this is some more work o' them sinful hellraisers from the Chance."

"Yes," said Zak, and began walking.

Faces pushed at him, demanding answers. He shook his head. Again. Again. Wild shadows twisted up over the barn wall as O'Moriarty's helpers lifted the corpse.

The mortician intoned, "We'll be having a real troubling now. Our good shield is dead, and we've no law atall, atall, in Shane. I fear the red day o' ruin is at hand."

"There'll be no stopping those hardcases!" a man shrieked.

"They'll rape every woman in sight!" old Abigail exclaimed, clutching her nightdress almost hopefully.

The crowd murmured the dire speculations, making Zak a forgotten man instantly. He stumbled against someone at the corral entrance, blundered by.

"Zak?"

He turned. It was Belle, in a strange costume—coarse shirt; tight man's trousers tucked into boots; half a stocking in one hand—a face mask? In her other hand she held a brightly coppered Buffalo Billyboy Brand Repeater.

There was a scratch on Belle's cheek, as though a rose thorn had scratched her. Roses suggested shrubbery. Shrubbery suggested hiding. Hiding suggested—

The rifle.

He ran down into the dark night. She ran after him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Belle turned the lamp up to maximum. Perhaps deliberately. It left very few shadows in the kitchen, and gave Zak no hiding place.

The lamp illuminated every wrinkle on Belle's face. She had no makeup on. Her fair hair was messed from the stocking. She had indeed used it as a mask to blur her features.

Zak sat on a chair holding a shot of redeye in a large glass. Both hands were required to keep the glass halfway steady, for hammering aftermath shock had set in.

Belle paced. Hammered too. "Didn't I prove something to you? You answer me, Zak."

"You—proved you were a damn good shot. I always knew that."

"I proved"—smack, she hit the table for emphasis—"there's only one kind of talkin' impresses those varmints and that's gun talkin'. I knew there was goin' to be a bushwhack. I could smell it. You wouldn't listen. I knew if somebody wasn't there to help you, they'd kill you for sure. Hell, I was safer than you by a Montana mile." Her hand closed round his arm. "You gotta get yourself a gun and learn how to use it!"

Her cheeks shone, unpowdered, raw. He was conscious of her age as well as of his own.

Alternately she tried to tease him with a smile and wheedle with a glare. "Zak, do you know what those hardcases did tonight? They rode out of town. Yes! Half Shane saw them! After the shooting at the corral, they rode out bold as brass. Rode out toward the Geronimos. They're probably goin' up there to drink for a few days an' get all hellfire mad, and then they'll come back. When they do they'll be aiming to peel your hide."

On her knees, she shook him hard. Liquor spilled from his glass. "Please, sweetie. I can't help carin' for you. I tried to stop. I'm not smart enough to know how. But you're killing me. You're ripping me up inside. You—just"—huge, glittering-wet eyes sucked at his soul— "can't—keep—letting a woman—"

He knocked her over. "Who asked you to shoot from cover? I didn't. Goddam it, no." He hurled the glass out the open window. Heard it shatter in the yard.

"Well, now." Belle patted her bosom. Stood up, breathing hard. "At least you got some gumption left."

In his mind he saw the bloodless gash. "Belle—" His expression grew vague. "You simply don't understand."

"I understand, sweet man." She insinuated her body, her breasts, against him. "You need help. Well"—her eyes glowed like a happy child's—"That's just 'xactly the ticket I've got! Today"—she grew all breathy, working her body close up against his ribs—"today I happened to fall into conversation with that Dr. Buster feller. Do you know what he has got in his wagon? This wonderful machine. He explained it to me. He said it can teach a person how to dance a reel or understand the King's lingua-franc." She clapped her hands. "That is, right while he's sleeping! Isn't that a wonderful new invention?"

Tiredly Zak said, "It's a hypnolearner. It's about one hundred years old."

"That true?" Pout. "Well even so I got to wondering. Why couldn't that little old machine teach you how to be a real fast-draw artist? As good as the Kid or any of 'em. Better! Dr. Buster said he could implant most any set of mental and physical 'bilities. Those were his very words. Implant most any—"

"You're not serious."

"Never been more so. What's so wrong?"

His mouth wrenched. "Even if Buster Levinsohn's machine could give me the right mental and physical conditioning—"

"You sound dog damn sure it couldn't. You never know till you ask him."

"But that—" He raked his hair. "Belle, it would violate everything I believe in. There's not much of that left these days. I won't let the last of it go. I won't. I can't. Just

then he recalled the crushed cinnamon phorospore. Waves of hate tossed him up and down. He struggled through them, putting away visions of revenge and murder. In a tight voice he repeated, "I won't. I can't. I know a way to fix their clocks that's just as good. By messaging Cosfed—"

"That law stuff. Book stuff." She spat, weeping now.

"Belle, please. A man has to live by what—"

"I give you help. I save your hide with my rifle. I plead, I beg, you ungrateful, I'm through with—"

"You go to hell." He screamed it, out of control, one arm extended, finger pointed, shaking. "You go to hell, you hear? You didn't understand it before and you still don't. Now it's even worse because—"

He stopped.

She wiped her cheeks. Her palms came away faintly white with lilac powder. She backed off a step, nearly upsetting the lamp.

"Are you a crazy man, Zak Randolf? You look so strange. Your eyes are—"

"Let me alone!" he shouted.

He battered through the parlor and out into the dark. There, impotent with rage, he turned to shake a fist at the house. Then he lunged on.

How in Christ's name could he tell her that he had discovered Marshal Luke Smith was a robot?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Presently the town settled down, though it took longer than usual because of the fracas at the Livery. Zak took to the streets and prowled.

No use even trying to court sleep with the help of his last bottle. Too many shattering things had happened in the last few hours, leaving too many questions. Questions about him-

self, the very nature of his being and whether he knew it at all. There were questions about Belle and Hansi Bonn. And especially—horrifyingly—about Marshal Luke Smith.

Sour, unreasonable speculations filled his mind regarding Smith. He decided not to answer any of them until he knew whether the evidence of his fingers and his eyes was false evidence. He didn't think so. But conceivably, in the traumatic noise of the ambuscade, his whole brain might have rewired itself in panic; showed him a reality and substance that only existed for a man scared out of his wits.

Over and over, with moronic monotony, he found himself cursing the Kid and the rest of the hardcases who'd pulled out for the Geronimos. Every time he confronted them, they figuratively castrated him in front of others. Each brutal denial of his manhood loomed larger than the one before. As a result, he wasn't half resisting the fevered visions of torture and revenge. Either he was succumbing to the Missouri mystique because he had no strength to resist.

Or.

Terrified, he heard a robot dog yap somewhere beneath the cool, remote stars.

Or.

Had that vile streak, the one responsible for notions of murdering the hardcases in the filthiest possible ways, been there all along? Was his rationality a mere veneer? Philosophers, men and not-men also, who speculated on ultimate life agreed that Terrafirmic man was, at base, ferocious. He kept his red streak hidden but it was ever present, staining at least ever so little every last member of the Terrafirmic kind. Aways, Zak had denied the very existence of such a streak within himself.

He was breathing hard as he lifted the gate latch and stole silently into the immense, warped shadows of the mortuary's roofline. The yard was of generous size, superbly kept. Shrub plantings afforded easy cover. He glided from black to black. In cottages on either side of the four story edifice, and across the dusty street as well, only dimmed parlor lamps shone. No human silhouettes moved behind any of the blinds or curtains.

Was he beast, like the rest of them? He didn't know. He did not. But he was beginning to feel a keen moral terror,

submerged but constant. The breathing, walking, dry-tongued part of him, the part of him which faced Missouri, was thinking less and less of objections to visions of revenge. Instead, it was nourishing, fondling those visions with greater and greater—

Christ. He had to escape this place before the red was smeared all over him. For oh, oh, how he'd enjoy taking a hooligan like Fritzi Bonn and strapping his boots to two pony saddles as he'd seen done in a Terrafirmic fiction reel. *Smack the horses! Stereo brass and tympani sound the doom motif—*

Quick cut: Low lens, near the ground, catching the rumps of the ponies as they take off.

Quick cut: overhead shot of the ponies with manes streaming down the plain.

Quick cut: the Bonn hooligan's face, an unsteady image because the back of his head is dragging, crash-bump-bounce over—the ground. Smeary eyes reflect a coming horror.

Quick cut: the maddened animals at full gallop, straining to tear the bond that holds them together. Eight tracks carry Fritzi Bonn's amplified shriek as the horses separate. Fritzi Bonn is sundered upward from the crotch.

Zak opened his eyes. He rubbed his face with wet palms. At least he could still feel some revulsion. He squatted behind a spirea, squinted at the building.

The Rugged Cross Funeral Home was a huge, rambling old Terrafirmic Gothic horror with porches, balconies, turrets, even a widow's walk. O'Moriarty had once boasted that it was an exact replica of a set featured in a long ago spool titled *Topless Gun*. Zak loathed the cheapness of the place, its phony sanctified air. A plasto Jesus on a pedestal stood with widespread arms beside the broad front steps. The Christ's head was of some less opaque plasto, and was equipped with an internal gas device which gave Him a weird bluish halo and intensified the fanatic cast of His clumsily painted eyes. The gas lamp was kept burning night and day. "The beacon o' my constant faith," to quote O'Moriarty.

Zak spat to clear the brown taste from the back of his teeth. No need for O'Moriarty to keep the faith. He'd always

have a steady stream of customers. In a pit of animals such as Shane, it was virtually guaranteed.

Zak hurried through the weak light that the Christ image cast on the grass. He padded to the side of the building. He tested a window on the cellar level. He tested another further on. Both were latched.

He believed he could snap the latch if he tried. As he wondered about the noise, his eye wandered up to a first floor window just above his head. Behind the glass a lamp glowed fitfully, its beam filtered by lacework curtains. Except for the mortuary's front hallway, the room was the only part of the building so lighted.

Zak gripped the sill. By straining on tiptoe he managed to peer in.

A parlor. A visitation parlor, done in subdued velvet. Not one lamp but two tapers provided the illumination. Marshal Luke Smith lay on a deal table without so much as a sheet to cover him. Blocks of ice cast back the candle flames. The blocks were wedged against both sides of the marshal's head, completely hiding it.

The marshal's hands were folded on his bosom. A block of ice rested on his belly, another between his legs, and several smaller ones had been placed up against his lower limbs. A series of pails under the table caught the drips.

"Luke," Zak said aloud. Why did he persist in using that name? He was convinced he'd touched something other than a man.

He dropped back to the ground to ease the strain on the fingers with which he'd been gripping the sill. One thing for damn certain—that room above was the one to get into.

He tried reaching the catch of the parlor window. Unreachable. He avoided the sight of the robot's—*corpse?* Did a robot that ceased to function properly have one of those?

A *robot?* Crazy.

But not impossible, he reminded himself with a cool start. The biped models phased out of the mines after the troubling had been, by all accounts, faithful replicas of men. Nothing said a robot couldn't be fitted with thin bladders under its dermis; bladders to leak fluid resembling blood when punctured. He shouldn't think of old Missouri as incapable as

that. Robots in many configurations including the unmistakably human, were still common on other planets.

Thus puzzling, he dropped to his knees to hack and push at the latch of one of the cellar windows. He hadn't been at it more than five minutes when a soft kuh-whump jarred him.

And explosion? Certainly it had the sound, though muffled. It seemed to come from somewhere over his head. He stood, glanced up.

The parlor!

The candle flames were jumping wildly, to judge from the motion on the curtains. Luminous smoke crawled inside the glass. Zak grabbed the sill, raised himself, gave a soft cry, fell dismayed, alarmed.

He tumbled backwards in the grass. At once he ran back to the window, jumping up and holding fast this time.

The turning smoke filled the parlor. The cakes of ice glistened and dripped, their position unchanged. But no body was enclosed by the ice. The deal table was completely empty.

There was not so much as a trace of ash or residue so far as he could tell. His scalp began to itch. The muscles at the back of his knees ached. But he didn't let go.

The smoke continued to turn against the inner surface of the glass. The candle flames came to rest. Drops of water falling to the pails sparkled like gems. Somber velvet hangings framed the table bier in the manner of the curtains on a theatrical set.

A thought impacted Zak's stunned mind. Self-destruct.

Given a robot to start with, what had happened could have no other explanation. He recalled the shot-down marshal of Shatterhand. Oh, God, and the story told by Odopulous. Both lawmen had been held overnight in ice at their respective town funeral parlors, for there was no other means on Missouri to retard decay. The marshals with the non-Euro names as bland as Luke's vanished. One vanish, two vanishes, three vanishes—

One robot, two robots, three?

With a guttural gasp, Zak regressed into child's terror. He fled from the dark old gargoyle of a house; fled from the pleading arm-spread Christ with the glaze eyes and burning

blue head; fled to the street that suddenly seemed a haven rather than perilous; then fled on to his house and began drinking among the phorospores.

This was too much. This was a personal Pandora's box about which he dared say nothing.

If Marshal Luke Smith had been a self-destructing robot, who created him—it? And why self-destruction? Had the ones at Shatterhand and Cooper been self-desructing robots also? Who made them? Why did they all self-destruct? Why self-destructing? Why robots? He swigged four fingers right out of the bottle. *You won't be here that long. Forget it.*

The candles; the ice; water; kuh-whump. He couldn't sleep and he couldn't forget it either.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Around sunup he managed to put his brains back on the track again. He didn't know whether he stood a single chance of recovering Hansi Bonn when the hardcases returned from the Geronimos. But he had to presume that he did. He had no plan save his original one. If, in the long run, it turned out that his scheme served as nothing more than legalistic spite, at least he could point to the record and say to Safrun, "I tried." If Safrun intervened anyway. Zak's effort might get him a busting to an inferior, a really inferior post, rather than outright dismissal from Cosfed. He hoped.

At five past nine he showed up at the Free Library, having passed many groups of people on the sidewalks. The people conversed in soft, spooked voices. Miss Virginia forgot her spleen, waved her lavender sachet under her nose and whispered, Had he heard the awful news that a bodysnatcher had been at work during the night at O'Moriarty's? And left all the windows and doors locked as O'Moriarty had locked them, what did Zak think of that?

He said nothing, tromping down to the cellar and into the Central Message Station. He hooked in, got GO AHEAD PLS from Cosfed's isolated Administrative Central on the southern continent and punched:

WISH TO REPORT SUSPICION VIOLATION C.S.P.C.C. SEC. 12578.2 RE INTERRUPTION OF COMMERCE DUE TO CIVIL DISORDER. REQUEST IMMEDIATE REPEAT INVESTIGATON SIGNED RANDOLF RES ECON AGENT.

Out of the south, under the cloud bellies, the two patrols from Cosfed's Administrative Central Base came in at sunset streaming silver trails from their afterburners. Zak conferred at his house for an hour with one of the half dozen arrivals.

The chief of the Spiritous Beverage Bureau team was a terse, capable younger man with one decorative artificial eye. Like his mates, he wore a purple jumpsuit whose only mark was the Cosfed emblem at the shoulder. Zak talked fast and persuasively. He omitted little of the truth. But he colored the story so that death of Duchess Pentcaster really seemed directly attributable to the refusal of the hardcases to stop the simulated gunfight the moment Zak requested it. Since the hardcases were not in town to corroborate the careful lie, and since Zak had official status—(thank God; Safrun hadn't filed any beefs so far)—the crew chief, in customary Cosfed fashion, pursued a policy of act first, investigate later.

By midnight, using griphammers that blasted concentrated air, the S.B.B. crew had smashed every last repository of genuine and synthesized spirits in Shane. The streets ran with it, stank with it, one vast whiskey-vat reek. Not even Zak's tiny hoard was spared.

Next morning the crew chief led his men to close and seal all the souvenir factories. Then the S.B.B. agents programmed a small, cylinder-shaped robot liquor sensor to fly a buzzing elliptical path above town.

Around ten, the sensor emitted a wild gonging noise. The crewmen poured from the parked patrols where they had been writing their prelim reports. They searched out a hoard —a hidden cache in the basement of the Rugged Cross Funeral Home, as it turned out. O'Moriarty had made the

mistake of trying to move it, and dropped one bottle. They smashed it all.

Finding himself out of provisions, Zak went out at noon. He passed groups of citizens who scowled his way. Garlikov was barely civil, selling him groceries and snatching his cartwheel away with a snarl. On the sidewalk Zak encountered Dr. Buster.

The lean old man tugged Zag into the shade. He regarded Zak with amused and bitter eyes.

"One cautious word, my boy. I've been moving about this morning. The good folks are upset. First by the disappearance—curious coincidence, that. Reminds me of Shatterhand. But they're spooked worse by the redeye clampdown. I'd avoid any and all gatherings of men, women, or children, stick to the alleys, and take a fast shank's mare home."

"What the hell are they so mad about? I did it because the hardcases—"

"Life gets powerful monotonous and heartsick on Missouri, my boy. You ought to understand that. You took away, albeit only temporarily, their solace." Dr. Buster's eyes hopped along the street. Several groups were glancing Zak's way. Buster whispered, "Trust me, my boy. In my profession I'm attuned to the masses. I've heard an unpleasant word. Lynching."

That did it. Zak clutched his groceries and rushed down the nearest alley.

Damn them every one! The people of Shane were as bad as the gun-toting thugs. The people loved vice, corruption, the vicarious thrill of killing as much as the hardcases enjoyed the killing itself. Their pratings about law and order were mere surface dressing, and this proved it. Whatever slight regard he'd harbored for most of the abused citizenry vanished altogether. Sympathy for the downtrodden? A bookish idiocy vanished now as so much was vanishing for him in the back alleys of Shane.

A long shadow interrupted the fall of sun across an open space alongside the alley. Zak raised his head to see Philemon.

Philemon was weaving. He looked absolutely horrible: eyes like sand; straw hair filthy, fingers twitching. Philemon lurched in front of him.

"You did this, you double-damned—"

With a shove Zak spilled the drunk against a building. "Go cry in an empty beer glass. It's about time you dried out."

Sticking out his hideously yellow tongue, Philemon ran after him. "They'll fix yer clock! Wait till they git back from the mountains! Wait till Wild Bill can't get his glass o' slivovitz with supper, and Calamity her gin!"

Zak pivoted. Unbidden, the decision came. The quaking of his limbs said it was right and overdue. He squinted into the orange sun falling through a ratty backyard where long scarlet underwear tossed in the breeze. To the plug-hatted demon he shouted, "It doesn't make a bit of difference to me what those thugs think. When they get back I'll be gone. You get me, Philemon? I've had my belly full of this sewer. I'm pulling out." He could only think of a localism. "Pronto."

For a moment Philemon was nonplused. Then he shook his stovepipe in the air. "Oh, so you are, hey? Tail 'tween your hind legs? Goin' to sneak out, too, most like. Well, well." He scratched his belly, shuddered. "I'm sure the Kid and the rest o' the lads will be interested to hear that."

And off he ran, banging into a rain barrel, tumbling, rising to run again.

Zak shielded his eyes. A moment ago he'd savored the cool relief of decision. Now there was new turmoil. *Where's he off to, the mad old sod? All the way up to the Geronimos just to tell the Kid I'm leaving? Impossible!*

Zak started off again, whistling. Then gulped. It occurred to him that Philemon just might go after all. He probably thought the Kid and the others had taken some redeye along to their powwow.

Oh God.

They probably had.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In his workroom that day Zak tried to summon the old joy through his hands.

The glacial blue phorospore formation had been lying on a wad of packing material ever since he removed it from the Leester Kiln. He sat on a stool with the blue formation directly under his nose. He had to move the packing material often, because drops of his sweat fell onto the crystal and turned the surface milky for half an hour where ever they touched.

And he had trouble manipulating his tools with the roughened fingertips of his tight work gloves. Quite without being conscious of it, he kept turning his head left.

Outside the door of the outer room orange sunlight dazzled on the tinkling phorospores. The garden seemed secure. But he kept looking.

His head was inclined to the left too, as though he had hurt a neck muscle. He sat an hour that way. Two. Now and then he heard voices outside his wall. Some belonged to adults, some to youngsters. He stole to the garden to eavesdrop. So many people on his street at this hour of the morning was unusual.

"Not a blessed drop."

"Those highbinders from Cosfed said the factories wouldn't open again till—" "Necktie party's too good." The brumblers passed on. Zak went back inside feeling sweated out, short for breath, full of tics and twitchings.

At the bench he attempted to dial up the tiny wall-mounted worklight. The light consisted of a chimney lamp plus a series of scrap metal reflectors rigged to concentrate the wick's brilliance on the area where he was working. He discovered

that he'd already dialed the wick up to full. Funny. He wiped his eyes. Things remained dim.

He brought a second lamp from his sleeping room, lit it. Still dim. The fault lay in his mind.

Gnawing a corner of his mouth, he re-positioned the blue chunk on the packing material. His tight hands shook a little as he reached for the flask of fixing material. The phorospore had to be bathed before he started cutting. He halted his right hand in mid air. The hand vanished. His vision enlarged. He blew up all of Shane with explosives; he butchered every first-born; he committed crimes against nature with Miss Virginia while dozens watched—

Groaning, he willed the hand back into sight. Into motion, to complete the action of grasping the flask. He drew the flask up and away from similar ones. The level in the flask was dismayingly low; less than two fingers of the smoky liquid remained.

The flask bore a seal from a firm of chemexporters on a remote planet. He reckoned the cost of a replacement with some agony. Out of the question. He relied on his accumulated Tip Top earnings for this particular material. It was all coming to an end—Tip Top, the garden, perhaps even the spongy mess of his mind.

At least he could finish the blue piece. He had to work on something or he would indeed go mad.

Meticulously, he set the flask down. He used his thumbnail to trigger the time release cap. It began to make a clockwork sound. He peered at the blue phorospore to avoid the sight of his own haggard face in the jerryrigged reflectors. There lived a series of Randolfs, all pulled out of shape, tin-eyed, horrible.

The flask cap released. With extreme care he lifted the cap, set it aside. He managed to concentrate creatively on the crystal again.

Clouds drifted through his thoughts. They became a single large blue cloud. Thus he'd shape the crystal, then microtome it to sections, each with the cloud shape. He'd patina the lower edge of each with a semi-orange lac to give the effect of a cloud pulled right from the sky at Missouri sunset. He reckoned he could get ten, perhaps twelve sections in all.

He watched the chunk, noting the fadeaway of the last of

the milky sweatmarks. The next operation was critical. He had to apply precisely the right amount of fixative so that, when the microblade first buzzed against the chunk's surface, the surface would retain proper tensility. Too much fix and the cutter would blunt, warp out of true ever so slightly, fail to slice into uniform sections. Too little, and sympathetic vibrations starting at the surface of the phorospore would shatter it.

Critical.

On his right hand he fitted a second barrier glove on top of the first. Thát required all of fifteen minutes. Then, selecting the proper-sized piece of wadding from a storage box, he held wadding in the right hand, slowly began to tilt the flask in his left. Smoke coiled and ran down toward the flask mouth.

Critical.

His face felt stiff, locked into a concentration of desperation. His upper arms ached from controlling the tremoring of his own fingers.

Critical.

Suddenly it became a merciless compulsion. He must finish this phorospore into a dozen mounted slices of sky. If he did not—

Something spitting, racheting, fuming, sparking, sailed over the garden wall.

Zak's head jerked. His left hand jerked sympathetically. The mangled robot cat hit the garden path, smoking and shooting off sparks and rotating its ruined artificial eyes in opposite directions. From the cat's head came a corkscrew kind of sound. Zak felt the flask fall, strike the bench.

He dared not look. He lunged off the stool with a demented yell. He ran into the garden. The mangled cat lay flexing its wrenched extremities at violent speed. Its head was twisted completely around so that its rotating eyes looked down its own artfully furred spine. Out in the street there was boyish sniggering. Catcalls. He gave another guttural yell. The boys ran, a waning patter.

He reached down to touch the wheezing, sparking animal. He drew back. Around the robots neck the boys had tied a rag. On the rag, in paint or some other red substance, were letters spelling *Randolf*.

All the phorospores were tinkling in agitation. Zak glared up at the orange sky full of happy-looking clouds. Then he went indoors and forced himself to examine the phorospore.

All the smoky liquid had spilled out onto the chunk. Its surface was only feebly blue; the excess liquid left a tacky residue. He could never cut it now. Never.

He saw visions for quite some time.

He didn't bother to bury the robot cat. When he got around to thinking about it seriously in the late afternoon, more and more objects had begun to accumulate in the garden, tossed over the wall with ever-increasing boldness. Rocks—one broke a particularly brilliant vermilion cluster; the garden sighed its agitation for the better part of an hour. Pieces of cooking utensils. A big produce bag with a crude caricature of himself scrawled on it. The bag contained warm excrement.

At sunset a notice was sneaked into his mail chute. From Delahant. Eviction. He tore it up.

Not long after, someone knocked. He ignored it. The knock was repeated several times. A lynch party? Terrified, he crouched in the garden with his Sharp's Six-Shot at the ready. But he heard no voices in the lowering evening. Finally a woman spoke raucously:

"Come on, Randolf, answer. Everybody in town knows you're snivelin' in there."

"Clara Sue? That you?" He was astounded at the hoarseness of his voice. There was a buzz overhead. A shadow disturbed the sullen undersides of the clouds. He thought it was the robot liquor sensor circling, then realized this buzz was deeper. The mail drone, late.

Outside, Clara Sue snorted. "It ain't one of those Cosfed faggys, that's for damn sure. Listen, I got a message from Belle."

Clara Sue. He formed a picture. Young. Obese. Ugly. Constantly in rut. She worked at the Chance. He leaned on the gate, weary.

"Why didn't she bring the message herself?"

"'Cause she nigh pukes when she thinks about you, just like the rest of us. You jinxed us, Zak Randolf. You closed the factories, you shut off the redeye, I'll bet you even had suthin to do with poor ole Luke's body bein' gone. You prob-

ably got it inside there right this minute and that's why you won't open up. You and your eddication, you're probably foolin' with that poor man's body, doin' all kinds of kinked-up, crawly things with his—"

"You unspeakably stupid whore, shut up."

"You don't have to get—"

"What's your goddam message?"

A prim sniff. "Miss Belle says to tell you that your relationship is all over, and that she regrets dirtyin' herself with you long as she did. That's the message."

Rubbing his eyes, Zak stared at the clouds. "Yeah. That's about what I guessed."

The late drone delivery brought him a final, wordy and intemperate message from Mickolas Safrun.

The entrepreneur's patience had run out. Safrun was departing from Fort Liftoff on the Ho Than Minh, a commercial vessel with limited passenger facilities. Zak squinted at the time line on the machine-lettered roll. By now the ship had blasted free of the planet's atmosphere.

With angry redundance several concluding paragraphs stated that Safrun's influential contacts would be used immediately upon reaching a more civilized world. Zak could anticipate a communication from his Superintendent requesting his presence for dismissal proceedings. He was, having failed, through in Cosfed.

Zak was certain Safrun could deliver on the threat, too. He shredded the message roll into bits as Yellowhair peeped over the garden wall. More boys ran by baying his name in a rhyme. *"Randolf, Randolf, bang, bang, bang! Randolf, Randolf, you oughta hang!"*

He went inside and set about smashing every last item in the workroom.

Chapter Twenty-Six

His semi-madness continued through a haunted night, an equally bedeviled morning. He ate nothing. He drank nothing. He wandered from room to room, touching the air absently, blinking often, kicking through the clash and rattle of the wreckage in the work area. He stepped over the bashed-in remains of the Leester Kiln and experienced no emotion.

Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, the crew chief of the S.B.B. team knocked at his gate. Eventually Zak went to answer.

The young crew chief's good eye expressed shock at Zak's appearance and smell. Zak tried to focus on the Cosfed emblem on the man's purple jump suit. Then he tried focusing on the decorative artificial eye. He could do neither. He leaned on the gate while the crew chief ran on.

"We're pulling out in about an hour. I say, we're—Randolf? You all right?"

Zak touched the air. "Pulling out. Yes."

A look askance. The crew chief retreated from Zak's odor. "Some of townsfolk still act a little hot over the matter. They should settle down. You did the right thing."

"Oh?" Zak scratched hair down over his forehead. He smiled in a peculiar way. "Yes?"

The chief's anxiety to be away showed suddenly. "You'll cooperate with the investigation team when it arrives? Should be in about ninety days. We're backlogged."

"Of course I'll cooperate. As long as I'm a member of Cosfed, I'll cooperate." Feeling giddy, he slapped his palm over his heart. "Cooperation with Cosfed guaranteed."

"You're a loyal employee, Randolf. The Cosmic Confederation depends upon loyal individuals like yourself to maintain control. Without—" He caught another whiff, backed off

another step, looked as if he regretted his little oration. "The sensor will stay over the town at least through the investigation, and will handle any violations." Once more he retreated from the odor, bemused absently plucking his mustaches in the garden gate. "Good evening, Randolf," said the chief, and marched off smartly, his purple boots raising dust.

Zak wiggled his fingers in a goodbye the chief never saw. Then, sticking out his tongue, he retreated into the garden and dropped the bar. Soon after, the two patrols circled above Shane once and silverfished into the south, half their hulls in darkness, half orange. Their running lights were already burning.

Sometime in the darkest part of the night, while he lay on his cot fully clothed, forearm across his forehead, the trauma came to an end. The semi-madness cooled away. All he had left was reality, with no aberrational nerves, eyes, hands, ears, body to protect him.

Fortunately the cat- and crap- throwing campaign had petered out during the day. The house was silent, and dark save for the phorospores. That made it easier to think. At intervals the robot liquor sensor buzzed over the roof, but that sound had a surprisingly soothing effect.

In the dark his mind drifted over to the enigma of Luke Smith. Until now the puzzle had been shorted out of his thoughts by other, more emotional events. He wondered about his terrifying discovery. Recalled that other lawmen, killed by other hardcases in other, equally barbaric towns, had been reputed to be much like Luke. Quiet. Slow. Methodical. As a robot would be. And they all had nondescript names. Could it be—the cool insight was suddenly there—that the robot marshals were more than robots. Social forces in themselves? Social forces deliberately engineered?

Was it possible that those who resisted the clock-turning on Missouri so long ago had, in their desperate final hours of resistance, intuitively glimpsed the future the reactio-revolutionaries were creating? As he recalled from his reading, a few scientists and educators had fought back here and there, though without visible effect. Perhaps they'd meant their efforts to be invisible, at least to an extent.

Certainly the creation of mechanical peace-keepers posed

no technological problems. Similar simulacrums had labored realistically in the Missouri mines until after the troubling. Suppose that the resistance had seen a frightful apocalypse: concepts of freedom of individualism warped to condone irresponsible behavior; warped to create a society imitating an ideal that never even existed, except in fictions. Suppose the resistance saw that eventually rule would be accomplished in the bogus Western towns not with minds meeting in high-principled discussion of the common good, but in the blaze of revolver fire. Power to the strong, to those with the fastest guns. Perhaps, in a bold secret attempt to counter this apocalypse insofar as possible, the resistance had created an opening symbol of its social philosophy: a series of robots capable of assuming a peace-keeping role and if not preventing, then at least stemming, lawlessness.

Too much was lost in Missouri's history for anyone to be absolutely certain. In truth he didn't care a whit about proof. The feel of it was right: it would be logical for synthetic marshals to be engineered by those who hoped to promote law and order in a simplistic society gone savage.

Since the creators of the marshals were the outs during the upheaval, perhaps it was also logical to assume that their creations would be hit-or-miss affairs. Constructed in secret. Of circuits and materials in short supply. Inferior models to an extent. That could account for Luke Smith's phlegm; for his failure to respond with speed to any emergency. Another explanation: being of inferior materials or workmanship or both, the robot marshals simply wore out, slowed down, faster. Zak would never know. Nor would he ever learn the answers to scores of other tantalizing questions. Where were the robots constructed? How were they placed—insinuated—into the society of mad-dog towns like Shatterhand, Cooper, Shane?

His general thesis did, however, lead to a logical assumption about another maddening set of coincidental circumstances.

Naturally the resistance wouldn't want its ploy to be discovered. Perhaps the skill and emotion circuits of a Luke Smith were deliberately neglected, at the expense of building in a capability for self-destruction in the event of serious injury. Bullet puncture of the exoshell, for example. He'd never know that either. But it made sense. He conceived a

wild admiration for the resistance fighters, whoever they had been. He felt a comradeship with those scattered, faceless, on-the-run traitors to the revolutionary establishment who had, perhaps, dragged their toolkits into the wilderness in order to stand fast, in their own way, against the ideal that was so rotten underneath.

Comradeship. Yes. It buoyed him. He closed the mental hand that held his last, best intangible possession. The gun law of Missouri was beyond the toleration of a reasonable man. He did not have to bow to it. He could snatch a pyrrhic victory from all the other defeats he'd suffered. Yes, he had discovered a red streak within himself. But he need not succumb to its domination.

Thus, rather peacefully, he reached the conclusion that he must leave Shane.

Nothing was left except a record of failure anyway. It was more than simple personal failure because his value system had come very close to being defeated as well. If he got out soon—if by turning his back on the town he said in effect, You never reached me—he would have salvaged a jewel from the rubble. He knew it would be hard going out there on the civilized planets. He'd be minus the benefits and perquisities provided even the lowest employee of Cosfed. But if he left with reasoned convictions intact, he'd have *something*.

His mood remaining calm, he packed a valise shortly before dawn. Just a few necessary items to get him overland to Fort Propulsion. Despite possible danger from Savages on the journey, departure was necessary at once if he were to achieve his phoenix victory.

He stood for a time in the garden. The phorospore lights shone on tears on his cheeks. The crystals waved and tinkled, not injured, simply knowing he was going. He bent to handle one a moment. Then he lugged his valise to the gate. He was turning back to shut the gate when he heard the horses.

He made a little humming noise under his breath. The riders were two squares away, crossing his street in single file as they headed for Main Street. Light ground fog hid the lower legs of the animals.

A window clattered up. Someone yelled a greeting. A mounted man turned, waved. Someone else ran out on a

porch, lifted a lamp. Silver spurs burned briefly as another rider went by.

The third passed through the lamplight. Zak's teeth began to click. There was no mistaking the toad-like physique and derby hat of Wild Bill.

The hoofbeats sounded slow, almost sleepy. Zak's hand crawled up to clutch the gate. The distant lamp-carrier went back inside. The riders fell into darkness.

The sound of their passage dwindled. Presently there came yelling, followed by the saloon piano pedalled at maniacal speed.

Now that the hardcases were back from the Geronimos, it was as if his night's reason had never been.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After he fought down initial hysteria, Zak put himself in a mood to take necessary action. *Just keep remembering it can be your life now. Your life.*

He stayed in the gloom beside the garden gate while he estimated time from the condition of the sky. Yellowhair was down. The stars were growing feeble. The grace of darkness would last about an hour. It was imperative that he reach the Shane Livery and steal a mount during that time.

He gripped the handle of his valise and crept along the wall. Paused. Listened. Darted to the cover of shadow in front of the property adjoining. Here he was crawling again. He didn't care.

He concentrated every mental faculty on planning his route down alleys and through back yards. In some fifteen minutes he reached a vantage point across the street from the Livery. He crouched behind a bush in the side yard of the house next to old Abigail's. A night lamp shone in Abigail's parlor. Its light didn't reach the Livery corral. But he

was accustomed to the dark by now, and could pick out details: the corral fence; the adjacent barn with its door and hayloft openings.

Zak's valise slipped out of his damp hand. He picked it up, hunched over, crossed the street in a speedy duckwalk. He hung on the corral fence and listened. Nothing, save for the piston-like rhythm of the faraway piano.

Cool air from the open waste teased his cheeks. He opened the gate, hurried toward the barn.

A man walked his horse out of the back door and came to a stop. He seemed gigantic, seated on his saddle away up there. The horseman rested a rifle across his thighs.

With easy grace the man shifted the rifle into firing position. He worked the lever. The load sliding into the chamber clicked like doom.

"Morning, Randolf, Ole Philemon, he said you might be plannin' a trip."

"Fritzi?"

"Aw naw," came the reply as the rider lifted his head so that the wedge of his face became discernible. He lifted one hand to stroke a scarless cheek. "It's Hansi, can't you tell?" He smiled a snaky smile. His horse blew streamers of condensing moisture from its artfully crafted mechanical nostrils.

"I—" Zak began. "I only—"

"Now Randolf, listen. All the horses in here, they're all spoke for. Your little trip's been cancelled, looks like. You better just go home and catch some shuteye, Mister Zakky, cause I have a sneakin' feeling today's gonna be a mighty big day around Shane." He sniffed. "Yes sir, a mighty big day."

All at once Hansi began to chuckle. It built to a roar. Zak wheeled and ran. He fell as he left the corral. Hansi's voice became a thunder that chased after him as he got up and ran on.

He was less cautious now, speeding back several blocks, then cutting left along a cross street that took him away from Main. He reached open country quickly, dashed straight for the bend of the creek that bordered the town. Far down on his right, one glowing lantern guarded Dr. Buster's Emporium.

Zak stumbled down the side of the creek bed, panting, slob-

bering. He tripped, landed on his face in the stinking algae-slimed water. He crawled to the opposite bank on hands and knees. He was half way to the top when he heard a horse cantering in. He raised his head, screeched.

A sentry rider had been waiting out there. Now the rider was jogging toward him. The darkness was failing. The horizon was glowing. Silver spurs flashed. There was a greasy glare, as of mustache-wax, across the middle of the rider's face.

Mumbling, Zak turned and ran back across the creek.

He fled to his house. He shut the garden gate and barred it. He stood staring at the phorospores while the breath raced in and out of his lungs.

A rider loped by outside. Zak thought he heard a chuckle. He ran headlong into the house, hid on the cot. His mind grayed out for hours.

When he awoke, it was to the blattery-bang of a hand beating on the gate.

He dragged the smelly coverlet over his head. The knocking continued. Finally an unfamiliar, stentorian voice exclaimed, "We know you're in there, Randolf. You better come read this here note."

"Note?" Zak screamed, staggering to the garden. "Note?"

He hauled the gate open, tore down the scrap nailed there. The street was empty. He blinked rapidly, trying to decipher the almost illegible scrawl.

I HEAR TELL FROM MY FRENS YOU BEEN RUBBING THER NOSES IN IT A LONG SPELL NOW WHICH IS WHY THEY FETCHED ME FOR HELP AND I HAVE CUM DOWN FROM THE GERONMOS TO DO SAME. THEREFOR I BELEVE IT IS TIME I CALL YOU OUT, THEREFOR I WILL BE WAITING FOR YOU RIGHT OUTSIDE THE LAST CHANCE SALOON ON MAIN STREET RIGHT AROUND SUNSET. YOU BETTER COME OR ILL COME FOR YOU.

Not happening, cried Zak's mind. *Not happening. Not happening to me.*

The note was signed SINCERELY YOURS BUFFALO YUNG.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

At mid-morning, before the orange sun peaked. Shane was never particularly noisy. By then most of the hardcases had spent themselves and retired to sleep it off in preparation for hurrahing the town again that night. This morning, though, the quiet was wider and deeper than at any other time Zak could remember. A pall of silence. All passion damped.

Zak cringed his way along the alley behind the buildings that faced the Chance across Main Street. An old yellow hound—a real one, to judge from the sickly mange sores running with pus—cast a veined brown eye at him and slunk off, whining. He was marked. Marked.

He trembled behind the ramshackle building to which he'd come by stealth. He took the scrawled paper from his jacket, examined it once again. The paper rattled in the coo of the wind soft around corners. A stiff breeze had come up. It blew dust in slow, mote-filled clouds. Zak was still not quite able to believe the note was real.

He started as a shadow leaped along the wall of the abandoned building where he leaned. He whipped his head around.

Only a woman. A bent, burned-out woman of the abandoned building where he leaned. Lyesoap had long ago washed all the color from the daisy pattern. The woman's eyes met his. She released the hand of the drippy-nosed boy she was dragging, rushed up to him, hesitated as uncertain about touching him.

"Oh," she said in a groping voice. "Oh, Mr. Randolf."

Zak managed a polite, "Good morning, Widow Ead."

The boy, no more than eight, watched Zak keenly. "Momma, is he the one gonna get kilt by—?

"You shut your mouth, Lucifer!" the spare woman said,

pinching her boy's shoulder until he shrieked. "You just keep shed of talk like that!"

Then, turning back, she shook like a tree in a storm. She searched Zak's eyes long and deeply. She grabbed one of his hands with both of hers. Tears ran down out of her eyes into the dried crevices of her skin. "Oh, Mr. Randolf, I—"

Suddenly she seized her boy's hand and ran along into the blowing dust, sobbing her pity and fear.

Zak itched his mustache. He felt curiously lifeless inside. It gave him no comfort to know that there was at least one person in town who didn't wish him dead. He still considered the whole business of the note an hallucination or joke. He'd come here to prove it.

With a swipe at his mouth he walked to the rainpipe on the back of the abandoned one-story shop abutting the Mercantile. He tested the pipe with both hands. He jumped, kicking the heels of his boots against the unpainted clapboard. He hung onto the pipe and shimmied up to the roof.

The roof was flat, with a narrow plasto coping all around. The plasto was cut to resemble old-fashioned gingerbread decoration. Up here in the hot sun Zak distinctly heard the voices from the Chance, as well as the player piano going at top speed, as the mechanic was pedalling to save his life. Zak crawled to the front of the roof on his belly. He put one eye against a cutout in the scroll work.

A number of horses he recognized as belonging to the hardcases stood still with their heads down at the rack in front of the Chance. In addition, four strange horses were tied up: a pinto, a strawberry mare, a gray, and one larger and much more powerful than the others; a roan stallion.

Someone threw a spitoon out through the batwings. A naked girl—he should not have been shocked to recognize Clara Sue but he was—ran outside to retrieve it. Her hair unbound hung to her waist. Screaming with laughter, she rushed back inside.

Zak couldn't figure out the nature of the game. But Clara Sue's return produced much additional merriment. Over the other women-squeals and man-bellows Zak heard one voice booming heavier than all.

Something in a second floor window above the saloon distracted his attention. A curtain blew in the stiff breeze. The

shifting curtain revealed a glitter of fair hair being let down inside the room. Then a man with a pale, vicious young-old face stepped to the opening. The man surveyed the street in both directions. With one hand he tugged at the black neckerchief tucked into the bosom of his dusty black shirt. With the other he pulled the shade. Just before the shade touched the sill, Zak recognized the face back in the gloom.

"Belle—!"

His eyes were wet. He crawled back across the roof, feeling its heat against his belly as the player piano rammed on and on, doing *Buffalo Gals* at speed. A gun went off inside the Chance. Another. More laughter—

The noise unsteadied him. When he was half way down the rain pipe he lost control and fell the rest of the way. No mistake. No jest. No hallucination. The three unfamiliar robot horses surely belonged to the three men in black who always rode with Buffalo Yung. The roan stallion—oh. *Oh.*

Reeling through the sun back to his house, he remembered Odopulous: *And I'd never seen mustaches on a man that looked as fierce as his. His guns—I could see those shining a block off, silver spangles, silver motherlodes of light—*

Can't be, Zak tried to tell himself as he reeled down a cross alley. Buffalo Yung has died. Buffalo Yung died in Shatterhand. Buffalo Yung died in Cooper.

But I saw him riding on the ridge after Cooper.

Had those other Yungs been impostors, trading on the legendary name? No matter. The *real* one was here. Zak found his mouth babbling, "I am the resurrection and the death, I am the resurrection and the death, saith Buffalo—"

"Yahoo, yahoo!" CRASH!

The bottle, flung from a packing-slat hovel wedged between a seamy back yard and a small deserted barn, struck the board fence Zak was passing. Several of the boards were long gone. Bits of the shattered glass got through, ticked his face, drew blood.

He peered through one of the openings and recognized the portly, bloated figure that capered in front of the Hovel. Philemon's hovel.

The old drunk bent down, searching for another object to throw. He came up with a rusty bean can, flung it. Zak ducked, started on.

"Hoo, there, Mr. Highpockets! I see you sneakin' away! You wait!" He reeled forward. Never had Zak seen the old drunk's straw-and-gray hair so matted and wild, nor his face so blotched and ashen at the same time.

"Yung's here, himself. Yes, Yung, nobody else. You know that? You're sneakin' for that reason!" Philemon shook a finger in the air. "Lo! Looms the visage of the darkling prince of night. He cometh with his eyes sore vexed an'—an'—" Philemon stopped. He peered at Zak as though he no longer knew him. He threw his head back and screamed and covered his face with his hands, as though the thought of Yung was too terrible to bear.

"He's here," Zak said, "because you and the hardcases fetched him back. Didn't you?"

Philemon's tremors passed, leaving him horror-eyed but moderately lucid. "We did! An he's called you out and you'll have to go. Else he'll come get you. Well, let me say one more thing." A finger shaken. "You're finished. I know. I seen him. I been this goddam close to him." Philemon brought two yellow fingernails close together. Then he began to shudder and moan again. He beat his eyesockets with his palms.

Zak thought about stepping through the fence and strangling him. He didn't because Philemon was in a really pathetic state. The old drunk tottered back to his packingcase shanty, talking to himself, shaking his head, trembling.

But at the hovel entrance, Philemon turned. "You're finished. I seen him. I know." He began to weep.

Zak hurried away. Never before had he seen Old Philemon with such a case of the liquor frights. But Philemon's warning had a persistent potency. It lingered with him all the way to his cottage.

You're finished. I seen him. I know.

Zak entered his garden. He barred the gate. He leaned his head back and gasped like an aquatic creature suddenly flung onto land. Overhead the orange sun flared with enormous heat. Distantly the schoolhouse bell tolled noon.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

With the ringing of the bell, he grew oddly calm. There was simply no evading circumstances any longer.

Buffalo Yung, real or an imposter, had arrived and would kill him at sunset. He couldn't escape from Shane. So if he wanted to live—and my God he did—then he had to do something other than just pant here in this sillly, useless garden. There had to be some kind of answer. If he didn't search it out, he'd be shot down like a dog.

A vision overwhelmed him. He stood in deep shade with a cool glass of lemonade in his hand. The lemonade was delicious and tart on his parched lips. Nightingales sang in the glade. Belle moved toward him unclothed, lovely, her hair flowing and floating in slow motion behind her. She raised her arms and spread them, her smile enticing. The nightingales rilled—

He woke up with the answer.

At first he was hesitant. Could he really violate all his principles? Overturn reason and—

Crap. Piles of crap. This was his life. He kicked the reluctance to death with surprising promptness. He tugged his hat brim down and left the garden, walking fast to the creek where algae turned the water to silver slime in the sun.

"Buster?" He rapped on the wagon steps a second time. "You in there?"

"Zak my boy? Step right up! Come on in, if you please!" There was a sound of cook pots being rummaged aside as Zak climbed into the dark interior of the wagon. The tall, spare, hide-faced old gentleman regarded Zak impassively while fanning himself with his dirty conical white hat. Ran-

dom sunbeams lit the sequins on his vest like twinkling magical mirrors. Zak got immediately to the point. "Buster, maybe you've heard that Buffalo Yung is in town."

Dr. Buster Levinsohn nodded. "I have not heard, my boy, I have seen. I ventured into the Last Chance this morning, after the news reached me as I made my toilette at the public bath. Yes, Buffalo Yung. From all I have heard in my journeyings, the genuine article. Atrocious grammar. Mustaches to here. Plus those pearl handled beauties he carries. And those hovering black harpies of the Pit; those three easy riders who follow him everywhere to scrape up his victims." Dr. Buster nodded again, and sighed. "I also understand he's called you out."

"Yes."

Dr. Buster took out a cheroot and fired it. The match lent his features a devilish cast. "As a matter of fact I rather expected you might show up. Somebody had to be clever enough to show up one of these days." With graceful steps for one of his years, Dr. Buster glided to the queer metal instrument half submerged in litter. He pulled out an earphone on a cable, dangled it. "I take it this is what you want?"

Blinking, Zak was still a couple of steps behind. "You expected me?"

"Half." Dr. Buster rotated his free hand. "And half. Though Miss Belle and I did not directly discuss the kind of hypnolearning for which I assume you've come, I had a feeling you—or she—would ask if it were possible if things ever got tight. I know you as well or better than you know yourself, my boy."

Ignoring the opacity of that, Zak blurted, "What can you teach me about gunslinging with that machine? Can it really help me draw? Help me eye? Help me gauge distance? Improve my timing?"

"The answers are as follows. Plenty, yes, yes, yes, yes. However—ahem." The old fox waved the earphone. "It really all depends on what you can pay."

"All my Cosfed wages for a year," Zak said instantly, hoping the deception would work. There were no wages that could be extrapolated into the future, but Dr. Buster didn't know that. For sweetening, he added, "Plus I'll sign over my accrued benefits to you as beneficiary."

"Make that three years," Dr. Buster replied. "Don't look so shocked, boy. I am a businessman, you know."

Silence, Zak peered out the door at the changed slant of the orange sun. He swallowed.

"All right. But are you sure you can do it?"

"I am reasonably sure I can do it," Buster said, rummaging in his effects.

"Are you sure it'll work? That is—"

"Hellsfire, boy! Hypnolearning isn't precisely a new technique. Except in this spatio-temporal backwater."

"Didn't anybody on Missouri ever ask you to teach them gunfighting skills before?"

Buster spat out a flake of tobacco. "No, they did not." He produced a paper from the mess in the wagon, and a quill. "Ninety-nine point nine percent of the residents of this planet are too dumb for the idea ever to occur to them."

"Belle's the one who actually suggested it."

"Why, yes," Buster said. "Though no match for you—ah—intellectually she is a cut above the rest of the women in town. I took the liberty of planting the concept of hypnolearning in her pretty head that day we fell into conversation. As I already remarked, I figured things were going badly for you; figured she might mention my machine; figured one of you might reach the conclusion that I could help. Roundabout I'm a sound marketing strategist. Things have worked out nicely."

"Christ. Nothing's worked out. I'll probably be dead by tonight."

"No sir! Not with Dr. Buster handling the reins!" The old rascal smoothed the paper. "That Belle. She's a clever fox. And warm for you. Very strong for you. It's because you're an educated man. Illiterate women are often fatally attracted to men who reek faintly of the corrupted idealism which education invariably produces. Sign here. I'll fill in the terms later."

"Let's fill in the terms now."

"But, my boy! Hypnolearning takes time! A couple of hours at least. And that sun is falling like the wrath of God. Will you higgle and haggle with your very life?"

Buster smiled obliquely as Zak got busy and signed.

Quick as that, the old man pocketed the paper. With sly

glee he materialized a frayed paper box between the fingers of each hand. He dumped the spools out of both boxes, thumbed the spools into apertures of the queer machine, began to flick switches, flick-flack, flick-flack.

"I took the liberty of selecting the proper tapes a day or two ago, Zak. The moment the hardcases lit out for the Geronimos, in fact. Most men, you see"—flick-flack-flick—"when backed to the wall exhibit a perverse, you might even say animalistic, urge to survive. This sweeps away old shibboleths, old notions of restraint. I have no specific gunfighting course, by the way. You're getting a custom-tailored session carefully pieced together by me from—"

"God damn you, you mouthy old man, get on with it. I don't like doing this. I have no choice."

"Yes—ah—of course. Sorry." Dr. Buster cleared his throat. Flick-flack, hummm. The dials began to shine, the needles to vibrate under dusty transparent plates. "Well, now. I'm giving you two at once this first round, in the interests of time. That's no problem because the learning capacity of the human mind is nearly infinite. On bank one we have coefficient timing acceleration via the musculature. On bank two you'll be jazzed full of depth perception enforcement. You just lie right down there on those sacks, my boy. Up with the sleeve."

Jab; a needle pierced Zak's bicep. Jab, another pierced his thigh. A third went into his buttocks. Dr. Buster whipped electrode pads around his chest, braced his knee on Zak's belly, lashed the pads into place. He jammed earphones on Zak's head while Zak sweated and stared. His muscles began to tingle and quiver.

He heard a voice talking to him. The voice was counting off numerals backwards from 1000.

Dr. Buster loomed, a lantern-eyed shadow. His voice battled a high-gain hum:

"I was indeed ready for you, my boy. Within—"

988. 987. 986.

"—a matter of hours—"

982. 981. 980.

"—we'll have you ready for—"

Zak slipped off into a sleep. Many voices spoke to him, incomprehensibly.

At a quarter of four in the afternoon, exhausted, exhilarated, Zak entered the shop of Rapoport the Gunsmith.

His lips tasted of dust. Clouds of it rolled in the sullen sunlight of the street. The shop's bell tinkled. An old codger lounging on a crate woke up, gave Zak the fisheye, spat out a gooey gob. Zak walked to the counter, waited.

"Rapoport?"

He waited. He hit his knuckles on the counter. "Rapoport."

Small, wry, suspicious, Rapoport came from the back room. "Yes? What is it?"

Zak looked at him steadily while dumping cartwheels on the counter. "These are all I have left. But I'll sign for a credit balance. I want the very best gun you have in the place." Zak swung his hand to arc the air along the hanging rows of oiled holsters on pegs, leather-smelling, then along the flyblown counter where the huge silver-muzzled revolvers rested in rows on green cloth. Zak looked at Rapoport. "The very best."

Rapoport was utterly stunned. He fingered his sleeve garter. Then, all at once, as if smelling a street spectacle in the making, "Yes *sir!*"

"Mercy to God and Custer," muttered the old codger. He tottered up from the crate and limped out to tell the town.

The wind whistled. Dust clouds blew along the alley behind Rapoports. The Colt's Heirs Corporation, Repeater Model No. 7 sat low and heavy on Zak's rather thin leg. Even lashed tight, the holster did not feel particularly uncomfortable.

He flexed his right hand, liking the sensation. He brushed fingertips on the intricately grained gunbutt, and experienced a lascivious revulsion. But only briefly.

He wiped his forehead. Hell, he was simply too busy to screw around with philosophic niceties.

"Throw the bottle," he said.

Rapoport let fly. Zak crouched and slapped leather, his hand moving so swiftly that he lost all conscious control. The Model 7 barrel flashed. The gunfire rolled. Green glass rained in the dust.

Rapoport's false teeth clicked in excitement. Smoke drifted from Zak's muzzle.

"All right, now. One of those cartwheels I gave you."

Rapoport hesitated. "Do it."

The cartwheel flipflopped high, flashing. Zak slapped leather. The gunfire rolled, booming and rebooming away into the distances. The cartwheel went tang up in the sky and dropped.

Rapoport scuttled to reclaim it. "Pierced clean through, Randolf. A dead center hit."

Zak's body felt good. No extra flesh; capable. "Throw the bottle cap."

The cap spiralled up, a speck over the sun-limned rooflines. Zak slapped leather. The Model No. 7 bucked in his hand, a hot, venomous animal. The gunfire rolled.

Capering, Rapoport cried, "You hit 'er, Randolf, you purely did. Blew her into little pieces. Yes, sir! You're gonna give him a run, ain't you? An honest-to-Baptist run! I never thought you had it in you. I never imagined."

Zak turned and walked off.

Miracle of miracles. He was fast. It came naturally, too. Without strain. He noted with one corner of an ear that the player piano had stopped over at the Chance. He half smiled. He went into a crouch, slapped leather, targeting a rock lying at the end of the alley. The gunfire rolled.

He missed.

He started sweating all over again. Clouds on the sun darkened his face. How had he gotten into all this, anyway?

Chapter Thirty

On the street his shadow stretched long and undernourished ahead. The shadow reached toward his gate.

The wind blew hard. Pieces of throne kakti, great spike clumps, went by occasionally. The sky was growing progressively more sullen. He almost laughed. If ever there was a fit

setting for a shootout, this evening was it. Wind a-whine and no machines necessary, and the very rooftops tinged with fire, like a picture from an artist's vision of the old-time theological Hell.

He reckoned he had an hour or a little more. He hurried to his gate, subvocalizing the desire that had popped into his mind the moment he missed the stone.

He didn't feel he was changed. But he knew he was changed. The question was, how *much* was he changed?

That doubtful margin abraded his throat, scalded his lips. Now that he had agreed to accept the stakes of the table—revolvers in the bad evening light—he wanted to go all the way and wake in the morning. But Buffalo Yung was the best, a legend of power and prowess. *I told you so,* squeaked a voice in his under-consciousness.

Angrily he kicked the resistance dead again. He wet his lips, reached for the the handle of the gate.

He held his hand. Glanced down at the dust. Saw signs of disturbance. He listened, heard only the tinkle of phorospores over the wall. He eased the Model No. 7 from the big, satisfyingly heavy holster. With the powerful weight in his gun hand he pulled the gate open and leaped inside.

He crouched, ready to shoot. Belle took a single look and rushed him. Oh, *sweetie."*

He stepped on a phorospore while avoiding her charge. "You scared hell out of me, woman."

In the garden gloom her face was luminous with lilac powder. She wore her finest: bottle green synthovelvet, the skirt long and belling, the bodice low and tight on her corseted breasts. Her vast floppy hat framed her brown eyes magnificently. A waterfall of pale green feathers streamed down the left side of her face.

Belle's breasts squeezed in and out with a speed that led Zak to think she was afraid. Then he realized that the luminosity in her eyes was a creation of joy. "Zak, I had to come right on over. When I heard you went to Rapoport's."

"I went to Dr. Buster first," he said, without much expression.

"Just like I suggested?"

"Yes."

She rushed and crushed him again, wiggling to let him feel

the excitement of her body. Her hands tickled at the back of his neck. "Did it work, sweetheart? Was the doctor able to help? I mean—that is—" Flushing, she looked at the massive machine of metal jutting from his right hand.

Zak extended his arm. She shivered as he touched the barrel to her velvet shoulder. Then he pushed her gently aside.

He pointed to the remains of his Leester Kiln visible through the open door of the house. A little twist of metal stuck up from one corner of the kiln. He squeezed —the trigger. The gunfire rolled. The metal twist vanished.

"You can shoot! Oh my God, Zak, this is wonderful! You got a chance!"

He shrugged. "I don't know. A better chance than I had before, but—I don't know."

His eyes crawled the garden, moving over the phorospores without pause. He was vaguely aware of her hands doing intimate, personal uncontrolled things here and there on his person, as if she could only express her joy in that fashion. Though he experienced a remote pleasure in her paintings and touchings, he stepped away. Something else was on his mind. He was thirsty.

Belle trailed him up the path. "Zak, the whole town's heard by now. Yung's a mean son of a bitch. Horn toad ornery. Crude; not educated like you. The whole town'll be there to see." She caught him, turned him, gave him a wild, smeary kiss, then clung. "Take him, Zak darling. You can. You can."

"I can't unless I get a drink first." He disengaged, started on.

"But there isn't any," she cried. "Not a drop in town. You are excited."

He turned, frowning. Then he remembered. He listened for the buzz of the liquor sensor patrolling its path above town. There it was. He pinched his eyes. Damn.

He couldn't go down to the Chance this mutton-headed. But of course there wasn't a drop. In the sea-change of the afternoon it had escaped him completely.

Still frowning, he said, "That's funny. I saw Philemon this morning and he was drunk as a skunk."

Or was he?

Philemon could have fetched liquor back from the Geroni-

mos. Had he? Zak remembered smelling nothing except bad breath. No whiskey reek; no wine scent; nothing.

"Philemon was sober," Zak breathed. "By God. He was judge-sober."

Then why did he scream if he wasn't on a jag?

Belle watched, eyes huge. Something clicked over just once for Zak, click, and he dared to laugh in the remote, silent part of his head. It was a *whatif* laugh, cryongenically cold.

Saying nothing, Zak pushed Belle aside and went out into the dust, moving fast.

Chapter Thirty-One

In the blowing afternoon Zak approached the rickety board fence quietly. He listened. Shane's silence had, if anything, intensified while the sunlight was changing its slant.

The wind moved the dust around corners. Clouds of it were diffused with low-angled light. In the distance a slat shutter banged. A dog yapped, then was stilled after three yaps.

Zak made sure he wasn't being observed. Then he turned sideways to slide through one of the openings in the fence.

In the miserable yard in front of the hovel, he ticked his toe against the rusty bean can Philemon had hurled at him earlier. He smiled, a curiously empty smile.

He inspected the deserted barn next door. Then he studied the backyard of the house on the other side. The yard trailed off into weeds at the invisible property line that separated it from the patch belonging to Philemon. Zak heard a singsong muttering inside the hovel. Very low, he was counterpointed suddenly by a rickety noise, as of someone's bumping the hovel's wall. The entire structure swayed. Zak's odd smile returned.

He picked up the bean can, heaved hard.

The can struck the back porch of the nearby house, rolled.

It dropped out of sight in a clump of tiger petunias growing in the porch's lee. Zak continued to watch the screen door. He counted twenty.

The singsong continued. Philemon reciting more poetry? Zak counted up to forty. Still the can produced no response. Satisfied, he glided toward the hovel.

He avoided stepping on large cinders mixed with garbage and offal. The hovel yard had been used for many burnings. A raw, smoky smell rose from the ground.

A cluster of five-petalled flowers had managed to sprout from the burned ground near the hovel. Zak stepped on them as he lifted the rag that served as a door.

Disgusting fumes, half sweat, half urine, hit his nose as he let the rag door drop behind him. Immediately the muttering ceased. There was a sound as of varmints moving by stealth.

"Who's that? I see somebody."

"Of course you do, Philemon." Zak's voice was quiet. He identified himself by name.

"A shud'dring ghost!" the old drunk wheezed. "Fresh sprung from out of the dreadful—"

"Crap on that verse, Philemon. Make it light. I'm here on a friendly visit."

More scrabbling; clumsy sounds. A match whicked; yellow light spurted. A sulphurous smell suffused the incredibly congested place. Fortunately the match and the candle stub to which Philemon applied it did not cast sufficient light to reveal the exact nature of the accumulated mess. Zak lounged with arms folded over his chest. He didn't feel as relaxed as he looked. But he managed to keep Philemon from being aware of that.

"Better," Zak said, smiling. "I figured that out of all the people in this whole town, Philemon, you'd have a drop hidden away. And if there's one thing I need before I go out in that street and say hello to Buffalo Yung, it's a drink."

This took effort. Zak couldn't maintain his bogus calm without effort. The mere mention of the confrontation awaiting him within the hour set the needles to pricking his palms, and made the organs in his lower belly give forth bubbly, watery noises. He could not let Philemon know.

Philemon backed into a corner formed by two packing case walls. The old man looked ghastly. His hands twitched

the air, feeling something and nothing at the same time. His teeth gave off the dreadful odor of rot. The pores in his pink nose were large and gray.

"I got no drinks here, Mr. Highpockets Randolf."

"Oh," replied Zak, "that's a shame." He didn't seem inclined to pursue it.

Philemon's eyes watered. He was vibrating all over. But in his reddened eyes, a pig nastiness tried to struggle out. Zak saw it. Recognized he was the object. He thought, *That part's done. Don't let it rile you. Something else here is more important than his cheap anger.*

"You—you get your tail off o' my property!" Philemon waved. "You stay sober, Mr. Bigwords Randolf. That way you'll feel it worse when Yung fills you full of hot lead."

Zak kept his voice quiet, so the sod wouldn't go on guard against him, "Why, Philemon, if that's really the way you feel, I'm sorry I bothered you. We're not friends, are we? We should have been. We're men of education, you and I."

Philemon blinked, clearly uncertain about how to react. Zak laid a hand on Philemon's shoulder. For the first time the older man spied the butt of the Model No. 7 jutting off Zak's hip.

"You're goin' to give him a run." Philemon belched, shook his head. Rheum oozed from under his eyelids. He plucked at his matted hair in a half-mad way. "Never thought I'd see it."

"A lot of people didn't, including me." He didn't release Philemon's shoulder. He tightened his fingers. "You're acting mighty peculiar for a man who hasn't had a drink. Who says he hasn't had a drink." Zak squeezed. "Are you sure?" Philemon's eyes actually appeared to pop. *"Owww!"*

He dropped to his knees. The candle flame danced back and forth, casting uneasy shadows. Philemon began to wrench back and forth. Zak held the grip.

"Owww, Randolf, quit that! I'm an old man! Sick!" From his position on the floor he cast a disbelieving glance at his tormenter. "You aren't Zak Randolf."

Applying pressure, Zak smiled. "You've been drinking, haven't you? Confess."

Philemon jammed his palms against his cheeks. "Wish I had been drinkin'. O immortal Furies, I wish I had indeed. The

torments of the soul, endured past all remem'bring—" *"Past all remembering*—ow!"

Zak had hold of the old man's matted hair. He jerked Philemon's head back. A few strands of gray-and-straw hair came loose in his fingers.

"If you didn't have a drink," said Zak, "how come you know so much about Buffalo Yung, Philemon? Most particularly, how do you know for certain that he'll kill me?"

Philemon tried to bite Zak's wrist. One stiff tug from Zak brought another yowl of agony. Philemon's teeth clashed empty air.

"I want you to tell me a little bit about this Mr. Buffalo Yung," Zak said. "I have a funny feeling that the two of you got pretty chummy when you went to the Geronimos to fetch the others. Maybe you can tell where Buffalo Yung is weak, Philemon." Zak slammed Philemon's head against a rusty nailhead protruding from the wall. "Can't you, Philemon?"

Blood appeared, seeping at the roots of Philemon's hair. He whimpered.

"Achilles heel," Zak said. "You remember what that means, don't you, Philemon? Your poor old brain hasn't rotted that much, has it?" He hit Philemon's head on the wall again. "Has it?"

Suddenly he saw what he wanted—a little touch of the old, wild mockery of the morning. Philemon's eyes grew larger. White showed all the way around the pupils. "You can't take him."

"I know. You told me that once today."

"It's true as the Rivers of Jordan roll! True as the blessed Rivers—"

"Will you quit the goddam allusions, Philemon?" Zak demanded, giving the old man a really good stiff jerk by the hair this time. He thought actually he heard Philemon's scalp rip on the nailhead. Imagination, probably.

"I know you want to see me shot down by that trigger artist, Philemon. But I'd like to know why you're so certain he can do it." Zak released Philemon. The old man slumped on the base of his spine. Zak wiped a drip of sweat off his nose. He spread his hands in the air, smiling. "Is that such a tremendous request?" he asked. "To know why you're so sure I'll wind up in boot hill?"

Scrabbling away on one hip, his feet pushing at the dirt floor, Philemon simply muttered over again, "You can't take him. Jesus, Zak, you can't! Don't try."

"Come on, now." Zak sounded gentle, as with an idiot child. "Why not?"

Philemon plucked his own face, bit his tongue. Foam curled up at the corners of his mouth. Tears rolled out of his eyes. "You can't. You can't, Zak, just leave it there, won't you? Just leave it there, huh?"

Slowly Zak curled his fingers around the grained butt of his Model No. 7. He drew the gun. All trace of that flat smile disappeared. His skin shone with little eruptions of sweat.

"Come on now, Philemon, tell me. Tell me why not. Come on, Philemon—" Speaking as he moved; speaking as he kicked the candle aside. "Come on, Philemon. Come on." He raised the Model No. 7 up high before his chest, where Philemon could watch it catch the candle's gleam and flash like a sword. "Come on, Philemon. You just come on."

The gun was moving in the air.

Anyone standing outside the hovel during the next few minutes would have heard, at intervals, a quick sound like muffled screaming.

At last Zak emerged from behind the rag door. He stood a moment staring at his surroundings, as if he had found himself suddenly upon a strange and unfamiliar world. Which indeed, in a way he had.

He turned, caught up the door hanging to wipe the muzzle of his Model No. 7 before slipping the huge revolver back into the holster. Then, walking fast, he left the yard. He didn't glance back. He walked toward his house, with a terrible expression on his face.

Chapter Thirty-Two

When the blue shadows began to dapple among the stalks of the phorospores, Zak decided it was time.

He dipped a rag in a basin. He washed the dust off his face. He scrubbed his hands hard, rubbing the knuckles and palms long after they had come clean. He tossed the filthy water out the door.

The massive revolver and holster lay among his clothing. He drew his trousers over his underwear. He tucked in his shirt, selected the fanciest neckerchief he owned, cinched up the wood ring and stuffed the neckerchief ends between two shirt buttons.

From a hook he took the short fringed jacket of genuine buckskin which Belle had lavished on him. The fringe on the sleeves swayed as he stuck his arms in. He snugged the jacket forward for comfort. A man could at least be clean when he died.

The notion that he, Zak Randolf, might die with boots on was incredible. But it was happening, all the same. He tried to stay calm.

He picked up the huge holster. It seemed to weigh a great deal now. He strapped the belt around his hips. Tightened the buckle. Tied the thong tight to his leg. Then he checked the revolver carefully to make certain all the loads were in the cylinder.

He experimented with the hammer gently a couple of times. Odd how he could tell without so much as a second thought that the Model No. 7 was paragon of machine-tooled efficiency. And in top operating condition as well. Good old Dr. Buster, Zak thought wistfully. Dr. Buster's hypnolearner had made him keen and critical in half an afternoon.

He snugged the revolver down in the holster, not tightly.

He noted the way the butt hung free, unimpeded thanks to the shortness of the jacket.

He set his flat-crowned black hat on his head. He smoothed a few stray hairs in his mustache. With a last glance at the stranger in the little oval mirror hanging on the wall, he left the cottage.

He closed the cottage door. Walked through the garden. Closed the garden gate. He was unable to escape the morbid idea that he was performing each of these small actions for the last time.

He walked neither fast nor slow, just drifting; drifting inexorably toward Main Street. He passed a home. Parlor lamps had already been lit. It was time.

The dust-driven wind gave it the quality of a dream. He heard someone yelling at him. Behind the dust he glimpsed a boy in antique-style overalls. The boy waved.

"You can kill that Buff'lo Yung, Mr. Randolf! You can kill him! You can do it!"

Zak got off a listless wave as the boy's mother appeared, boxed his ears, dragged him back in the house. The screen shut. Then the inner door, with the finality of a barricade going up. Zak moved dreamily through a cross alley. At the end burned the light of Main Street, blazing furnace light that shot through the dust almost at the horizontal.

Several dim figures clustered up there at the alley's end. The men exclaimed to one another the moment Zak appeared. Well, they would be interested to spy of his coming, he supposed. They'd be interested in the show.

The men ran off in different directions. Zak kept on without breaking stride. It was only within that he was crumbling.

Confused memories—the phorospore light; the twinkle of the Kid's silver spurs; Belle pushing her body against him; the cry of the boy on the porch in the dust. Plaintive, hadn't it sounded? *You can kill that Buff'lo Yung, Mr. Randolf.*

A sop to a loser.

His mind screamed to be let out of the trap of his body. He willed it silent. Tried to concentrate on the single fact of the remarkable chemo-neurologic achievements Dr. Buster's hypnolearner had wrought within his muscles and his mind.

Were the changes of an order to give him a chance?

That was, after all, the line of demarcation. On one side

lay hope. On the other, fear. He drifted along in the dust with forlorn harmonica music tingling at his ears. Which way would he fall? Which way?

He recalled the incredible time at Philemon's hovel. He regretted that now. It tended to shove him over the wrong side of the line, to dementia. He wiped his palms down his trousers as he reached the end of the alley.

He stopped for a breath. The air wasn't good. It was sultry, as from an oven. The dust settled in his ears like the weight of eternity. Furious wheel-thunder—

A man, clutching his sombrero with one hand, his reins with the other, hurled his buckboard by to get out of the way of the coming fracas.

Zak's eye ran up along the rooflines on the opposite side on Main. Heads there, dim as the figures that had crouched at the corner. Waiting. Watching. He hitched up his gun-belt and stepped out into the center of the street and faced right.

Sundown.

It smashed his eyes with dazzling light. Up at the street's end, up there where the perspective lines didn't quite meet, a radiant ball whirled behind the dust and flung off rays. Zak was absolutely panic-stricken. Then his eyesight adjusted.

The batwings of the Last Chance opened outward two blocks away. A man emerged.

At first Zak decided it must be Yung. Then he saw how relatively slight the man was, and how he established himself out by the hitchrack, among the still-standing robot horses. The man turned his face to the street. He was a silhouette: wholly black.

The dust blew from behind Zak's back. He would see Buffalo Yung against the blazing sun. A clear target, provided Zak could see at all. Yung would be forced to peer into the dust. How fine the edge became; how significant.

The batwings slapped a second time. Another of Yung's cronies, black-shirted, black-booted, black-hatted like the first, came out to lounge against one of the uprights supporting the roof of the porch. Zak halted.

A third crony joined his companions. The front of the Saloon became a set-piece: three black figures with their

silhouette faces all turned to watch for his coming. Heads popped up along every roofline, but no one was in the open except the trio in black. He couldn't laugh; he only grunted.

Plug hat and all, Philemon clung precariously from one of the porch uprights.

Under the porch roof all was blue dark. The lamps were lit inside the saloon, but there was neither piano nor laughter, only a long silence under the wind.

Zak's mind tended to wander again. Was Belle one of the faces in a window on the second floor? Wouldn't Tip Top Tours love this sundown, with no wind machines required? Did he really have only three or four minutes left to li—?

The batwings flapped, flip-flap, flip-flap, flip.

Flap.

Buffalo Yung walked into the street.

Sun behind him, his shadow reached nearly half way to Zak's feet. His great hat had a soft shape, like an immense loaf of sugar. He was half-turned toward his adversary. The curves of shoulder and paunch suggested awful size, lazy power. The edges of his sleeves blurred. Long fringe, much longer than Zak's, waved in the wind. The butts of his pearl-handled revolvers sparked off radials of light. One of his mustaches stuck out from the side of his face hit and lit by the sun. On that side too his eye shone like a nova.

Buffalo Yung raised his right hand and lowered it, acknowledging Zak's presence. The two men began walking toward one another.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Evil Prophet of Holy Writ. So Remington Odopoulous spoke of Yung. How right, Zak dreamed as he walked. How specter-like and wrathful was the tall shadowman who seemed to rise from the fire of the setting sun.

Zak passed the Ace High Barber Shop. He glimpsed smeared ovals behind the plate window. One face was lathered, hungry-eyed, greedy for the killing. The dust came clouding past his shoulders, hid the phantoms, hid the ghouls who watched his march down Main Street.

How he hated those faces behind the windows, on the roof-lines. He was aware of them; unusually sensitive and aware as though, through the facilities of Dr. Buster's hypnolearner, his mind had expanded to simultaneous operation on several levels.

The shadow of Buffalo Yung drew nearer, moving by Jerky stages down the surface of the street. Zak's right hand dropped a little closer to his holster.

On one level Zak was remote, resigned, sick to death and weeping for himself. On another, he took satisfaction from his almost total awareness of his whole body. He saw, as it were, his own eyes. How wary they were, keeping track of Buffalo Yung's slow, steady pace; of Yung's pendant arms, right-hand fingertips subtly curled, left-hand fingers falling into that position too. From Yung's fingertips would come the only second's warning Zak would get—

He kept walking, not fast, but steadily. He was aware of the steadiness of that stride. Of the peculiar sensitivity of his hands. The condition of his skin: warmer than blood-hot, but cool at the same time. Viscera: knotted. Nose: itching. Groin: full of ache.

The symptoms of the man about to perish?

A block and a half remained between Zak and Buffalo Yung. The butts of Yung's pearlhandled guns lit again, struck just so in the sundown. Long spears of light starburst from the four quarters of each butt. Simian and moving, Yung's hands dropped lower.

At this distance Yung's glaring eyes showed nothing but contempt. His vast coarse face and ropy mustaches began to be discernible.

The dust blew and fumed. Zak wanted to wipe his nose, didn't dare. Nerves in bundles all through his body, nerves feeding signals, pouring signals to his head, warned without words that a tremor of one hand at the wrong time might tip everything.

Buffalo Yung strode a little faster, confidently. He chopped

distance with his long legs. The fringe on his jacket danced.

Control, Zak said to himself. *Control,* for there was hell and meanness in that tall, prophetic figure of judgment toward which he walked. His hands smarted, feeling suddenly large, digitless, like melons below his wrists. Sweat began to pop and slick his armpits.

Death-visions projected themselves upon the back of his mind. Buffalo Yung's eyesockets ringed with fangs and snapping; Buffalo Yung's jacket fringe turning to serpents that hissed of ruin; Buffalo Yung's facial flesh fading so that nothing remained save a translucent skull through which poured Missouri's apocalyptic light.

He never took his eyes from Yung's flexed gunhands. Yet he saw the shining, slack-mouthed face of a woman on the Chance porch. Saw Philemon, hanging from the upright that connected porch rail to roof. Philemon waved his plug hat, his ruined old face vile as he screamed abuse. Zak heard nothing except a high, constant whistling and ringing in his ears. The wind, singing of mortality.

His eyes weighed in his head. He focused them on Buffalo Yung's hands, those hands that were barely separated from the pearlhandled gunbutts. Yung's mouth widened his smile. Zak saw stained, crooked teeth, an immense mouthful of them all glistening with saliva. Many of the teeth were oddly shaped from breakage. Zak saw the teeth. The eyes. And never ceased watching Yung's hands.

A block divided them.

Zak's right foot went forward, finishing a stride. The toe of his boot touched the shadow of the crown of Yung's immense hat. Zak took another step onto the shadow of Yung's head. He walked down Yung's black chest to his belly. His eyes received a signal. His eyes zoomed Yung's hands up to fill his mind.

Hands dropping—

Curling—

Seizing pearlfire gunbutts—

Simultaneously, Buffalo Yung yelled, a foul, guttural, defiant, ugly cry. He crouched, hands making audible sounds as they hit and clenched on his gunbutts.

Zak's mind blanked.

His right arm moved. He caught the butt of Model No. 7

in a suspended instant of time, drew, fired, kept on firing, the gunfire rolling, the dust, glare, noise imploding novas of sensation.

Death tickled his cheek as it went by. Zak shifted his aim and the gunfire rolled.

His hand shook like a tree in a storm. He wanted to release the hot, heavy, smoking thing he held. It was fused to him by the terrible tremors coursing up his arm to make his right shoulder ache.

Shafts of light began to separate. A powdersmell gagged him. He controlled his trembling. Some yet-rational center in him said, *Don't quake so much. You'll ruin the whole effect.*

What effect? he wondered, still shaking. He reached up to touch the place where a bullet had nicked his cheek. His fingers came away red.

The Model No. 7 was scorching-hot. He wanted to drop it. He tried to focus his eyes further than the muzzle of the gun. *What effect?*

He checked the cylinder of the revolver. He discovered it totally empty. He could not recall having fired one single shot, let alone all of them. *What effect? What effect?*

Every breath in Shane was held: he felt that through his skin. There was a total absence of breathing behind the monotone of the wind.

Slowly he scanned the rooflines. Outlines of heads, unmoving. Unmoving and waiting for—

My God.

He was alive. That was the significance of the tremor in his arm. That was the meaning of the raw pain running all the way up over his shoulder and down to the blade. He was alive. And the effect—

Faster. I was FASTER—

All at once his eyes latched back into connection with his brain and he saw the effect in its aesthetic perfection. The entire town, behind plate glass, on the rooftops, stuffed a half dozen each open window, was waiting for *him.*

Slowly he lowered the hot, smoking revolver. He slid it back into his holster. He sniffed the holster as the overheated cylinder and muzzle scorched it. Picking at the blood

on his cheek, he began to walk through the dust to the point up the street where the effect had its focus.

He still didn't know how many shots he'd fired. He had to rely on the evidence of the empty cylinder. Equally, he didn't know how many shots Buffalo Yung had fired. Possibly only one. It had sounded like two thousand.

In the dust on his back, Buffalo Yung formed a slovenly X. One pearlhandled revolver lay quite close to his left hand. The other had been flung a good distance away from his right. As he walked, Zak studied the mound of Yung's paunch, in which there was a rather large and messy hole where cloth and gristle had been woven together by a bullet's force.

Blood seeped out of the hole.

Buffalo Yung's hat had fallen off. His long, greasy hair was thick with dust. His eyes glared at the sky of Missouri. His mouth was open. A beetle negotiated its way up over his chin, gained his mouth and stood waving its tiny feelers as it perched on the slimy crag of the most protuberant tooth.

Zak's loins began to quiver with a totally familiar, not unpleasant violence.

He stepped on Buffalo Yung's hat as he leaned down. He tugged the right eyelid shut. Then the left. He stood up. He nearly vomited, he was that sick with joy.

A hundred faces all around impinged, waiting. Zak wiped his mouth.

"He's dead," he said.

The roofs and the windows and the porch sighed with a single voice.

Chapter Thirty-Four

They descended on him like happy carrion, beating him, pounding him, pouring off the roofs and out of the windows to touch and jostle him:

"You done it, Randolf! Sweet God if you didn't!" "Did you see him slap leather, did you see him?" "I seen it, I purely did, but I still don't believe it." "That Yung was fast. But Randolf was faster." "Greased lightning, they useta say. That's what my Granpap called it, greased lightning—" "Buy you a drink, Zak."

"Zak, how's it feel to outgun the meanest, toughest, ornriest—?"

"Look over this way, Mr. Randolf, my little boy—"

"Christ, he's a fighting catamount. A regular goldam fighting catamount. And we always thought—" "You horny, Zak? My crib just anytime. Just anything—"

In the pandemonium, a high-pitched yell cut high and clear. Everyone surrounding Zak and the corpse of Buffalo Yung grew still. Inside the Chance, someone shushed the piano player who had been madly beating his rhythms again. A last jangly note drifted away in the deepening dusk.

Zak thought he spied Belle back in the press, back near the harlequin windows shining with light from within. Her face was sweaty, radiant. She waved, licked her lips, looking hot and vaguely unbalanced.

Zak had no more time for her. He turned to look down the human aisle that widened away to the hitchrack. Half under one of the motionless horses, another man lay in the dust with the lower half of his face blown away.

Zak wiped the back of his hand across his lips. Let his eye jump from face to face in the crowd where he saw a certain nervousness in the eyes watching him. He discovered

the cause when he met the glance of the first of the three black-clad young men who had ridden with Yung.

The smooth, absolutely expressionless face started fear thudding in his belly again. *Will I have to deal with them too?*

He stifled his fright. Hid it. Right now the crowd pressing in from all sides was his, allied. They were drinking his victory while wondering if they'd be forced to spit it out. He called them all an unspeakably filthy name in his mind as he walked around the nearest horse to approach the horror of a corpse sprawled half under the robot animal.

Zak picked up a plug hat from the ground, dusted it off. Someone said, "Philemon was right out there in the open. Hangin' on that very post."

"He should of knowed better," said someone else. "Wasn't Randolf's fault."

A murmur of assent. This was followed by another partisan cry. Buffalo Yung had fired three times himself.

"That's right! That's right!" they chorused.

"No way of telling."

"No way to be sure who winged ole Philemon!"

"He should of knowed better!"

"That's right!"

A derby-hatted man waddled to Zak's side. His forward-facing gunbutts shimmered in the play of colored lights from the saloon. Wild Bill seemed to sidle the last couple of steps, though he did squeeze Zak's elbow and grin oafishly.

"You went to see the elephant and you came back again, Randolf. That's something to tell."

A nervous tic beat briefly in Wild Bill's jaw. His smile kept sliding off his face. As yet Zak couldn't isolate the cause of that expression. It amused him, though.

Wild Bill grew more serious, leaning close. "Don't feel—" His breath was so bad that Zak hauled back, waved a hand in front of his face. Wild Bill started.

The crowd hoo-hawed. Angry, Wild Bill clenched his teeth. A moment later, with a sickly smile, he stepped back a pace.

He said in a confidential tone, "Don't feel bad about what happened to Philemon. We'll never know which bullet had his name on it, yours or Yung's. I'd be right proud to buy you—"

"I'm sorry he's dead." Zak was pleased at how he controlled his voice. "I'm not thirsty."

The crowd hissed behind him. Zak spun, dropping into a crouch without thinking. The crowd pulled back, sighing with a fearful delight, more entertainment.

Out from the hitch rack walked one of the black-clad cronies. His hat was low over his black brows. His face was a triangular wedge cut off at the nose by his hatbrim. Zak's hand hovered near his holster. Someone shushed the piano player again.

The man in black leaned down to wave his hand over Buffalo Yung's mouth. That scared the preening beetle away. The man in black hooked thumbs in his gunbelt.

"I got to hand it to you," he said in a tight, toneless voice that could be the harbinger of a vendetta right on the spot. Zak's wrist ached from holding his hand near his gun butt.

The black-shirted man slowly lifted his right hand and eased his hat back. Multicolored light from the saloon fell athwart his face. His eyes were young, old, inhuman.

"Yes, sir, I got to hand it to you. You killed Buffalo Yung. Do you understand, that, mister? Do you understand who he was? What he was? We rode with him, mister. He was a goddam legend." With reverence, "A fugging giant."

Zak swallowed. "He called me out."

"So he did. He heard you weren't too much. Well—" The man's tension broke in the shrug. "He never hid. He went to see the elephant every time. With dumb luck you killed him."

One of the other cronies scraped a match, fired up a hand-rolled cigarette. The paper twist and the match lit his face with twin fires. "Naw, don't say that. This man's a fast gun. This man is one very fast gun. Maybe the fastest. He had to be to kill Buffalo."

"And," said the third figure in black, "he killed Buffalo fair and square."

That appeased the crowd; let them relax. But it disappointed them a little, too. Zak saw that by the smeary shine of lamps people were carrying out of the saloon.

The orange sun had set. Night was closing fast. Zak wasn't sure the trouble was over, though.

The crowd strained forward, perspiring. He could smell

their common stink. The three men in black drifted together until they stood shoulder to shoulder. Said the first, "Buffalo, he had no proper home 'cept at our camps here and there." A wave in the direction of the Geronimos. "Before we ride we ought to bury him. I figure Buffalo would want to rest where he died with his boots on. In your boot hill." The man turned his vicious eyes slowly past the nearer faces. "Unless somebody objects real strong?"

A dead silence.

Zak said, "No objections."

Six lizard eyes watched Zak for the longest time, as if undecided. Then the leader gave one quick nod.

"That's white of you." He touched his hatbrim. "Obliged."

Zak started to leave. He wished that there were indeed liquor in the Chance so that Wild Bill might buy him a drink. Now that the fever had passed out of the scene, the townspeople were beginning to wake up and realize that though they wanted to celebrate, they would have to remain cold sober. There was grumbling.

A man raced forward. A pair of shears flashed. The man kneeled beside Yung's corpse, intent on snipping off part of the dead gunslinger's mustache. With a terrifying sense of *déjà vu,* Zak watched one of the cronies lift his boot and kick the man under the chin.

The souvenir hunter squealed and sprawled. The man in black turned and raked the crowd with his eyes.

"Don't nobody else touch our friend or there will be trouble."

Mutterings. But no one moved.

In a moment the trio in black relaxed. They lifted Yung's corpse, flung him mealsack fashion over the saddle of his stallion. Two of the men mounted up. People started toward Zak again. They fell back when the third crony walked up to Zak, gave him a searching glance, then bent to whisper, "We'll bury him."

"Yes, you already said—"

"As soon as it's pitch dark you come up to boot hill and dig him up. By yourself, hear? We'll leave the shovel." Zak could only goggle.

The man straightened away from Zak's ear. He repeated

that strange, penetrating glance and added, "You do it. It's important." With that he mounted.

Riding abreast, the trio headed up the street and the slope to the burying ground. The stallion bearing the body of Buffalo Yung followed slowly, its head down, its hoofs barely disturbing the dust. In the Chance the piano began to clang.

Chapter Thirty-Five

For the better part of an hour Zak hung around in front of the Chance, accepting the praise of individuals in the crowd with little more than an indifferent nod, an occasional smile. Belle in her best green literally hung on his side. She squeezed his ribs, whispered warm, lewd things in his ear when she had the opportunity. She told him frequently how fine he was.

Through it all Zak remained curiously not himself. Somehow he had no real connection with the cheap accolades, the fawning praise. Maybe it was because he didn't know yet what to make of it. The gun duel had left him stricken with a case of dry-mouthed semi-chock, from which he only gradually emerged.

He noted details such as the renewed laughter in the Chance with a kind of sly wonderment. *Why, I'm here to hear it after all.*

Belle's upturned face gleamed. "Oh, Zak, darlin', I was so blamed, cussed wrong about you." She squealed it like a ninny; like a school girl; pressing her breasts against his ribs while she cuddled him right there in the street.

The townspeople walked all around him, nodding, speaking of his feat. He wanted to tell Belle to stop being a cheap slut in public. He didn't. Gradually lamps splashed the dusk all over town. A rowdy carnival mood prevailed.

O'Moriarty brought his hearse to collect Philemon's body.

Zak watched it being loaded into the black vehicle and never batted an eye. The hearse moved off. He noticed a change at the high end of the street.

Up on boot hill, a lantern had been extinguished.

"Let go, Belle." He pried her fingers from his belt. "I want to walk a while."

She clapped her hands, doing a little pirouette to bell her skirt and reveal her pantaloons. Men laughed, applauded. Zak glanced their way. They shut up and drifted.

"You go on and walk, Mister Hero," she said. "You just take the air till you feel all calmed down. Then you come right back to me. You've got a right to a little privacy after what you did. Yes, *sir!*"

She spun to the Chance porch to face the Arrivederci Kid, who stood in curious disarray. He stroked one ear while he watched Zak with a keen wariness.

To the Kid Belle cried, "Hasn't he got a right, Kid?"

"I guess so, honey." Zak stared. The Kid added, "Yeah. Sure."

"Be back," Zak said over his shoulder, not liking this.

He didn't want to mosey up there. He didn't want to leave the friendly lamplight, the aroma of seegars and lilac powder. He moved slowly from the aura of the twilight lamps to the dark between closed stores.

He heard hoofbeats behind him.

Turning, he waited with thumbs in his gunbelt as Fritzi Bonn rode up. Fritzi hauled the reins on his pony so that he stopped well back from Zak. The pony shied, danced side to side. Half a dozen townsmen were hurrying along on foot to catch up with the young hardcase. Fritzi smiled in a cockeyed way.

"Zak—hi, ole pard! We wondered where you was headin'."

Instantly Zak's belly went taut.

False alarm. Fritzi held the reins in both hands. He acted as unsettled as his mount.

Zak replied, "I wanted to take a stroll up the hill, is all. To see Yung's grave." A thin smile, rationed for them. "To be sure about it, you know?"

The townsmen on shank's mare slapped each other's shoulders and allowed as how Zak's humor was rich, just rich. Zak wanted to gag.

"We thought that's where you were aimin'," Fritzi said with a nod. "Hell, that's a sight a man don't see every night, old Buffalo Yung's mound. We'd all like to see—"

"I want to go up alone," Zak never took his eyes off Fritzi. "By the way, what happened to your brother? I didn't see him around back there."

"Oh—" Fritzi's glance shifted to the dark storefronts. "Oh, oh, I guess he lit out."

All Zak said was, "That's good," not fully knowing why. But the remark satisfied him.

The townsmen grumbled about Zak's decision. Suddenly Fritzi yanked his quirt off the saddle thong and began to lash their shoulders like a demon. "You goddam dung-birds! Can't you respect no man's privacy? He don't want no company and that's that."

Still berating the townsmen, Fritzi drove them back toward the Chance. He twisted in his saddle, whipped his quirt high over his head and flashed his teeth at Zak in salutation. Then he rode on. *I don't believe this is happening,* thought Zak.

He ascended the slope to the level area where a fresh-cut cross stood slightly canted in a crumbly mound of soil. Although Yellowhair had not yet risen, there was illumination enough from the stars. They shone crystalline in the clear air.

Old, cold tremors raced up and down Zak's palms. He peered and deciphered the letters crudely knifed into the thickest part of the cross's cross-members.

Here lies B. Yung, a great man.

Zak thought he heard traces jangling. He walked a bit further up the slope. The wind was whistling in his ears.

Sure enough, up there near the summit, three ponies stood with heads down, motionless. The three cronies squatted on their haunches near their mounts. A smoke put light on one man's chin. Otherwise there was nothing to indicate the three were more than black basalt monuments.

Waiting.

Well—get on.

True to their word, the hardcases had left a shovel. A chemical lantern too. Zak dialed up the lantern to the low level, so that the glow spread only to edges of the mound. Then he studied the town twinkling down along the creek bed.

He calculated angles. He decided that any townsman trying to look up the hill and see what he was doing would have a hard time, provided Zak dialed the lamp no higher. Its yellow flame was barely alive; it looked tiny in the huge looming night of stars.

Zak swallowed twice. He picked up the shovel and began to dig.

The three men had not tamped the soil. Before long he excavated down about the length of his calf bone. The lamplight jumped in the stiff wind scouring the ground around the crosses. *Crunch,* Zak tossed a shovelful of earth aside. *Crunch,* another.

He began to sweat profusely again. He knew what he'd find. But that made the digging not one whit easier.

As if he were dogged all at once by a macabre bad luck, he first exposed the highest part of Buffalo Yung: his paunch. Zak saw the black, tangled hole where the slug had entered. He put the shovel aside, squatted, stared at the portion of Buffalo Yung's shirt which he had uncovered. After a second he believed he could see signs of machined intricacy, down there past the edges of the thumb-ball-size opening.

He retrieved the shovel. Poked carefully at the earth alongside Yung's belly. Instantly a loud clockwork whirring began. Just as abruptly it ceased. With gasping, gallumphing noises, Buffalo Yung sat up in his grave.

The dirt poured out of his eyesockets, streamed from his ears, trickled off his shoulders, dropped in clots from his long hair. Zak stared in horrid fascination at the belly-wound where the blood had dried black.

Blood?

Buffalo Yung sat straight up. His teeth erupted between his lips, a huge smile. The teeth were bright as old mirrors.

Buffalo Yung pulled his right hand up out of the dirt, shoved it forward. Zak had dropped the shovel. Yung's paw closed on his.

"You're quite a feller," said Buffalo Yung. "Yessiree damn —congratulations!"

Chapter Thirty-Six

Zak didn't know whether to scream or simply stand dumb accepting the handshake of the creature sitting up in the grave. Yung's eyes glared with a wicked good cheer.

"What you starin' at so all-fired curious, Randolf?"

"That hole in your belly. The bullet hole. It looks perfect."

"'Tis perfect, ain't no fourteen ways 'bout that." Yung inserted a finger in the hole, widened it. Inserted two fingers, bending up the edges of the opening to expose a gray sac hidden beneath the laminated outer layer. This layer was highly realistic: it looked hairy, unwashed.

"Little bladder in there. Got'm all over this hulkin' ole carcass of mine. A hit in this zone—" He indicated his thoracic and abdominal regions with his free hand. "Opens her up. The red stuff runs through these here little tubules." He squinted. "Iffen you wanta crawl down here by my belly-button, you can see 'em better."

Ashen, Zak answered, "No—thanks. I take your word, Yung."

"Call me Buffla. Goddam, you're a big man, Randolf. Gonna be a bigger one 'fore we're through here, that's a promise. I seen it happen a hundred times." His lewd chuckle both repelled and fascinated Zak. Yung brushed the shirt back into place. "Hell and horntoads, I don't know *really* how she works. They made me smart but not that smart, y'see. All I know is, if I get shot in one special area, a little ole bladder busts loose and the fake blood wells out just where she should. Looks pretty fierce, don't it?"

That amused him.

Or it.

It caught Zak's shoulder. Powerful grit-nailed hands squeezed.

"Oh yes, pretty fierce. Makes the ladies faint an' clutch the

salts. It's been known to make some fellars who dig me up pass out too. I—hey." Coarse brows scrunched together. "What's up?"

Gargling for air, Zak waved a hand past his own face. "I—Jesus! Is there any way you could do something about that breath? I mean—"

"Turn it off? Certainly, ole pard. They made me realistic down to the last ship-pickin' detail. You ought so see my ole—" While reaching for his belt, he thought better of it. "But that's not your style, I bet. You got that sweet little Belle ripplin' your hide, ain't you? I could tell right away when I laid eyes on her that she was a reg'lar ole pepper-pot."

Chuckling, Yung reached in its pocket.

"Wrong one."

The other.

"Damn switch is tricky sometimes. They was all laughin' up a storm at you in the Chance today, by the bye. I love to hand real folks a real tail-twistin' surprise. "Come on, you lil ole sum bitch switch, where are you? So I was actually hopin' real keen that you'd take me. And by damn you did. There she be."

Boyishly delighted, Yung reared its head back. It opened its mouth so its molars flashed light, blowing twice outward, "*Hah-haaaah.*" Zak thought he heard a little sound, as of a tiny fan stopping at the back of Yung's mouth. He felt so green all over, he only bubbled in his throat to indicate Yung's breath no longer stank.

"Waaal!" Yung slapped its thighs, then leaned back in the grave, elbows resting at ground level. "You'n me best palaver quick, Randolf. Sometimes the townsfolk do get curious and come a-sneakin', spite of the warnin' of my laddy-bucks." Horny thumbnail jerked at the basalt figures at the hill's crest.

Yung rotated one hand from level to tilted and back. "Not often. Not real often, I say. But it happens. 'Sides, I got to light out for my camp in the Geronimos. That's where we keep all the spare parts. Got to have the boys screw me in a new belly and fill up that little ole bladder with red juice so's I can ride on and take care o' my business in the next town. Just where the wind blows, that's where I go. Waaal, not 'zactly, that." Its eyes flashed, brilliant silver light for an instant. Yung was obviously tickled when Zak started.

"Here's how it is, Randolf. I'm programmed pretty good. When I get kilt, I got to leave town and never come back. But there's always theo-reck-tickyans and social thinker-tinkers and pointy-heads in some other town tryin' to upset things by jammerin' about law'n order."

"How—" Zak swallowed. A lump big as a fist blocked his craw. "How old are you?"

Yung picked its nose absently. It peered at the little dirt clump which fell out of one nostril, tossed it away. "Oh, 'bout as old as the revolution, so my innards tell me. But I was only programmed to start up 'bout thirty—make that forty—years ago. Been ridin' hard ever since, spreadin' fear into the hearts o' yellow dawgs. When I'm lucky, I make some waddy rear up on his hind legs an' kill me." Yung squinted in a cheerfully malevolent way. "How'd you do it, Randolf? The boys at the Chance who fetched me down from the Geronimos—that kind of summons is a natural-born call for me to do my duty, by the bye. Crapheads like that always come howlin' for help. They told me you couldn't shoot worth a pee. You tell ole Buffla." A nudge in the ribs. "How'd you pull it off?"

"Lucky," Zak said. "I practiced on the sly."

"They said you was a yellow dawg. Said I'd win for sure." He scraped dirt from one pearlhandled gun butt. "There's live goods in them cylinders, y'know. I mean, if I was to carve notches—which I wouldn't an' ruin that pretty pearl—they'd be real. Yessir, those fellers said you was strickly no contest. That's why I was so keen to have you take me." Again that lewd, confidential chuckle. "Say, now. How's it feel?"

"How does what feel?"

"Inside, inside! You know. Don't you feel like a real big man all of a sudden?"

"Maybe a little," Zak admitted.

"Waaal—" An expansive wave at the far lights of Shane, "I can guarantee you plugged nickles to spitoons they feel different about you. That's what counts, don't it? That's the very reason I was rigged up this way, and that's what I got to 'splain to you 'fore I light out yet tonight. You're a big man, Randolf." The hand, metal-strong, seized Zak's shoulder. "You're a bigger man than Buffla Yung in that little ole town,

and that's 'zactly the way it's sposed to be from now on. Why, I bet those folks down there—I bet you my scalps on it, Randolf!—they been doin' some fancy palaverin' of late, ain't they?" A mocking posture. Pushed-out lips; goggled eyes; a faggoty voice. *"This here town, she's gettin' too wild. This here town, she's full o' highpockets hardcases struttin' their stuff and rapin' our daughters. What we need's a good dose of law 'n order!"*

At the peak of the falsetto, Yung hunched forward in the grave. He beetled. "Ain't they been sayin' that?"

Zak decided to refrain from admitting that he'd held that view also. "Some," he said.

"Sure! That's always how it happens! You set up somethin' good like this here Missouri and pretty soon the pointy-heads want to tinker around with it. Destroy a man's freedom! His individualism! Where'd I be 'thout my individualism, Randolf? Noplace! Everythin' else, all that democracy an' peace bullcrap is just that. Bullcrap! The only society's the strong society, Randolf. An' the only strong society's the one where one man makes it strong. With rules."

Yung hit the dirt with its fist. "Rules, I say. Know what kind o' man's fit to make rules? The kind who's got the power. The balls, the rest—the ones whinin' for law. Why, they got nothin' 'twixt their legs 'cept suds. All that socializing bullcrap—all that welfare bullcrap—all that bullcrap which the boys who made me threw out—" It snapped its fingers. "Not worth so much. No! One man makes a society strong, not a committee or a be-you-row. That's what the troubling was all about, right? T' create a fit society again. A strong society! Let the man with the power and balls to made the rules make 'em. That's the only way a man's a man! That's the only way things get done without a lot of be-you-rows protectin' weak sisters!" Spittle on its lips, it looked so real that Zak was mortally terrified. Yung scrabbled one of its pearlhandled revolvers loose and held it high. "This is the best law! This!"

The wind dropped off. Yung relaxed, softening its countenance with another sly smile.

"'Scuse me. It's plain they made me mighty enthusiastic for my work. I don't understand all the words I always say

to you fellers what kill me. But I believe 'em, because I was made right." It tapped its forehead, the universal sign. "Smart waddies, those fellers what whomped me together. Guess you do know what I am, don't you?"

A nod from Zak. "A robot."

"Must say you didn't act too damn surprised about it. Like I told you—sometimes they pass clean out."

"I guessed," Zak lied.

Buffalo Yung digested this. Then its right shoulder went up, down. "Yeah, you're the type who might. Those loud-mouths at the Chance kept talkin' about how you was an offworld smartass. Kept sayin' you hated ole Missouri clean through."

On the point of saying do, Zak replied, "Did."

"Did, huh." Yung grew stark. "Then why'd you come out when I called you out?"

Zak's throat felt fiery. "Christ—I wanted to live! Is that so weird?"

"Hot damn! I knew you was the right stuff!"

Yung clapped Zak's shoulder again. "A big man. A real big man candidate. All the time you just thought you was hatin' the way things was. Down deep you was just keen mad because you was on the bottom and they was on the top. Table's turned now, ain't it? Yessiree! Bet you feel different jig-quick. Hell—" Another comradely slap. "Don't you get it, Randolf. That's why I'm here! That's why I roam the land, boy, with those hardcases o' my own and my ready guns to find the right man. A man who can take me. It don't matter a damn what his reason is, just so he can take me."

Pleading, the robot leaned forward. This time its touch was surprisingly gentle, almost supplicating.

"The man who can take me is the kind o' man who can bring back the good ole times if the good ole times are startin' to slip away because of all that law n' order bullcrap. The kind o' man who can take Buffla Yung—he'll keep the revolutionary spirit alive. He won't let them theo-reck-ticky-ans get a toe in the goddam door! You understand that, Randolf? You got to. You're top waddy now. Top gun."

In a bemused way, Zak realized he was. The robot misconstrued his silence.

"You don't understand cause you're still spooked over

findin' out I'm all wires an' cells an' such. Always happens." A scowl at the stars. An' the night's rushin' on—"

Yung drove its hands like tines through its filthy hair. More tiny dirt-clots pattered down. Some caught in its mustache, jiggling there as it talked. "The boys who threw out the *old* Missouri were mighty smart. They knew what kind of world they wanted, all right. But they figured it was only a matter o' time until the thinker-tinkers began fixin' and messin' and muckin' again. The thinker-tinkers would try to put Missouri back like she was before. Law 'n order, 'stead of law of the strongest and fittest. So my boys whomped me together, and fixed up plenty of spare pieces, so I could get repaired when somebody gunned me fair and square. Somebody faster. Somebody—wal, what I said. Fit to run things. Fit, Randolf. That's the word. You're fit now. You're the spittin' spirit o' the revolution 'cause you killed the toughest gunslinger who ever throwed a leg over a hoss. You're gonna take over your town, mind? You're gonna take it over. 'Cause you already did—tonight! An' you'll send those law 'n order crapheads packin'. It always happens that way. I seen it happen in every town where I been killed. And I been killed—"

It counted with mumbling lips and ticking fingers for some length of time; Zak reflected on the irony of revolutionaries as well as counterrevolutionaries seizing on Missouri's robot technology for perpetuation of their thrust and counter-thrust. There was no question as to which group had access to the best resources and raw materials, however. In Buffalo Yung, the group riding to power had built a model infinitely superior to poor failure-prone Luke Smith and his ineffectual, self-destructing kin. The irony was also, in the long view, both logical and pathetic.

"Been killed eighty-seven times now," Buffalo Yung declared. "Left a strong man in charge each an' every time." Sly smile. "Sometimes the feller was stronger than he thought."

"Do you always talk to them like this afterward?"

"Yep. I have 'em dig me up just like you did. How else?"

"No way else, I guess." At last Zak understood the odd smile of Remington Odopulous.

"Waaal, now, I hope you're understanding all the rest too,

'cause the time, she is a-runnin'. Shane's all secure, get me? Secure. I won't ride this way again, ole pard. Can't, actually. Couldn't if I hankered to. That's the way I'm programmed. My job now is to find me another town where the pointy-heads are talkin' law 'n order. Sometimes it gets tedious. Sometimes I got to ride back to one town three, four, five times 'fore I find somebody fast enough to kill me."

And now Zak understood old Dr. Buster's tale of how Yung had died in Shatterhand. One man had attempted to kill Yung and failed. The second had succeeded, and seized the power, and Yung had presumably gone to lie in that town's burying-place for eternity, while in truth it had been riding the land again, leaving the town that was secure to hunt for the next that was not; haunting ridgelines at dusk in a hundred places; carrying its legend like one of its spare belly parts; spreading the legend as it rode where its program directed.

"It ain't all loaded in my favor, you know," Yung admitted. "I'm rigged to be fast. But not that fast. Just fast enough so somebody desperate can be faster. The boys who whomped me up wasn't so dumb. Didn't want me. What's the word? Inwincible?" It rolled its eyes, comically. Then it winked.

"Interesting thing, too. It's never one o' the regular hard-cases who kills me. They're good for hurrahin' a town in a pack. But mostly they're yellow. They tree the town in a pack and the town never knows that one by one they're dirty dawgs. It's always some little feller—uh, beg pardon—" Yung began to rise from the dirt as it spoke, a leviathan, a fat phoenix, dirt cascading, rolling, crunching while the lamp-flame fluttered. "—who really has that nasty ole red streak in him. Wants to be the big man, way deep down. Wants it in the worst way an' don't even know it."

Once more its hand came to rest on Zak's shoulder. Silver light flashed from its eyesockets for an instant.

"That's the kind o' man it takes to keep the spirit o' the revolution alive, Randolf. That's the kind we want to make ole Shane secure, pard."

The eyes loomed. The voice was husky, seductive in its whiskey coarseness. "Yes, sir! It takes a real twisty, mean, deep kind of sumbitch to kill Buffla Yung. I can tell I sure found me one this time!"

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tall and grinning like a fiend, Buffalo Yung stood beside the grave. Its thumbs were stuck in its gunbelt. Its mouth under the fierce false mustaches was all wet slab teeth. Zak stared and stared.

For a long, swirling moment he knew horror. As he peered into Yung's pupils, he saw their artificiality; they were no more than mirrors in which he detected lamplit images of himself.

He knows me better than I have ever known myself.

Before.

It was appalling.

On the other hand, it was rather magnificent.

"Say now," Yung grumbled, rapidly losing its cheer. "Did I lay her all out?"

Zak nodded. "The town is secure. I'm in charge whether I realize it or not. You've got to ride on to do it all over again someplace else."

"Kee-rect. I'll go wherever the hardcases call me 'cause the vigilantes are gettin' feisty. Or, if I ain't called for direct, I'll just wander into some town where my program lets me go, an' sooner 'r later, some feller'll try his hand at me. For his wife's sake. Or his balls' sake—waaal, you get the idea."

Yung surveyed the stars. Down in Shane, a harmonica began again, suitable for this moment of the dead.

God, Zak thought, *no more morbidity. Be glad. Be cheerful. Laugh. Aren't you new?*

I am, he wondered. I am.

"You laid it all out very fine, Buffalo," Zak said, with the beginning of a smile.

The robot spat a great gob of spit on its hands, flashing silver from its eyes. "Then you all help me fix up this mound quick so they'll think I'm still buried. I want to get back to

the Geronimos 'fore dawn and get my belly changed. Here—" With great paunchy grace it picked up the shovel, began to grunt and sling dirt. "I'll spell you an' you spell me an' that's the way two ringtailed bastards like us get along." *Grunt.*

The dirt cascaded, filling the hole where the pseudo-corpse had been. Zak turned to stare into the night. He thought he could decipher the black sawtoothing of the Geronimos against the horizon. He thought of Philemon then.

He was interested in how Philemon's tale validated all that the incredible sowbellied robot slinging the dirt had told him.

In a rock room inside the Geronimos, Philemon Rasmussen had discovered a large supply of Buffalo Yung spare parts, not to mention a lesser supply of parts that could repair any of the three black-clad cronies, models apparently inferior to Yung and about on a par with the marshals.

Taking his turn at the shovel, Zak heaved earth while Yung snorted and pulled at its crotch. It wiped away simulated sweat that stank. Zak recalled the turning point. It was the moment he knew Philemon was spooked out of his mind, but could not be spooked from liquor because there was none in town.

Philemon knew something significant about Buffalo Yung, Zak decided. Since he was desperate for any bit of knowledge that would help save his life, he went to Philemon's hovel and beat the true tale out of him.

Afterward, having left Philemon bleeding and emotionally destroyed. Zak didn't actually know what to do with the demoralizing information. Perhaps, he reflected now, it had still managed to armor him with the last fractional piece of armor he needed to walk into Main Street instead of running away. Somewhere in his bowels the hypnolearning and Philemon's secrets—A man *should* be able to out draw a robot. Shouldn't he?—had mingled in a wild chemistry, and begotten a little courage.

Maybe.

Or maybe it was merely that he was a loco wolf with fangs, and only a Yung could grapple the animal and drag it from its den into the light.

He certainly didn't hate what he had become. He wasn't sure whether he liked it. But he certainly didn't hate it.

At some point, Zak reflected as he dug, he might have made the intuitive leap himself. He couldn't remember actually guessing that Yung was a simulated human too, since that alone could explain his legendary appearances in so many places. He remembered being not overly surprised by the revelations of the reasons behind Philemon's mockery of his chances.

Philemon's mockery and Philemon's wailing fright. Philemon found them both in the Geronimos.

The old drunk had gone to the mountains to tell the hardcases that Zak was planning to leave Shane. He found them at length after a search. So he blubbered when Zak beat it out of him—that the hardcases were having a palaver outside the mouth of a cave. They were talking to Buffalo Yung himself. Yung's three black-clad cronies were positioned to prevent anyone from going into the cave proper.

Now the trip up into the mountains, and the wandering until he spied the campfire far off, and spent miles reaching it, had driven Philemon mad with thirst. Being a clever man, educated, he figured a hardcase like Yung surely would have some redeye hidden around his camp somewhere. The problem was, how to find it.

Then it struck him that any smart hardcase would also have a back door to his hideout.

Philemon sneaked off and discovered it: a rock chimney-hole down which, his nerves being strained, he accidentally tumbled—

Into a weird room full of stacked Yung limbs, Yung torsos, Yung legs. Crony legs too. Black-tight pants; black boots.

He wandered horrified through the bins. Repair benches were crowded with curious needle-tipped sealing and burning instruments. The vast, obviously manmade bunker was literally tiered to the roof with boxes of eyeballs, small motors, whole Yung heads that leered.

How the old wretch had wept, telling it to Zak while Zak beat him. How his shrieking delirium tremens had made his pores exude a filthy smell.

Philemon accidentally bumped a duplicate crony unit, arms and torso, lying on a repair bench under the cool quartz lights recessed into the smooth gray ceiling. The arms began to wave, touching his throat. He sat on the robot chest until he rendered it ineffective by smashing it with his buttocks. He wept the while.

Presently, in a continuing state of high bewilderment and fright, Philemon located the tunnel which led back to the mouth of the cave. He crawled that way. From the cave's dark he saw the backs of the three cronies on guard. And there in the mouldy damp inside the Geronimos, he realized fully for the very first time, that he was staring at the backs of artificial men.

Between blows to his nose from Zak's revolver muzzle, he wailed of his craven return the way he'd come. Quietly. So quietly through the bunker, careful to touch nothing. Up the chimney-rock hole, knuckles bleeding, teeth clattering. Robot or not, Buffalo Yung could kill men. Had! Right then, Philemon decided to say nothing.

He carried his hideous burden back to the campfire. Calamity Fotheryngayle was clapping her hands. She kept repeating, "Oh, top hole, top hole!" because Yung had agreed to return to Shane and help them eradicate the varmint who'd bedeviled Hansi, put them fresh out of synthetic redeye, and otherwise grown far too cocky.

Not that the hardcases couldn't handle Randolf themselves, mind. It was just that Yung was their kind. That little cocker deserved to be killed by the best. With *flourish.*

So said Philemon, while he wept and bled.

Also, it did come clear that Zak and the pitiful old drunk were the only ones who shared the secret of the robot gunslinger. Philemon wanted to keep the secret in the worst way. He was afraid that if he told the hardcases, for example, they'd either think him madder than usual and beat him up for sport, or they'd kill him for proving their idol false. His exact thoughts were muddy; Zak had beaten him pretty stiffly by then.

The beating led to a satisfactory explanation of Philemon's puzzling behavior, however. Mockery one moment, abject fear the next.

Philemon wanted to taunt Zak because he really believed

no man could possibly be fast enough to beat what appeared to be an inhumanly perfect device. Philemon hated Zak. He let his hate overmaster him, thus producing the taunts which got Zak wondering in the first place. The result was literally mortifying. Philemon ended up a sniveling wreck when Zak left the hovel.

Only two of us knew, Zak thought, turning a last shovelful. He handed the tool to Buffalo Yung, who fell to humming an off-key version of the old Terrafirmic tune called *Lone Prayree. Only two of us and now Philemon's dead. Too late for him to tell anyone. Too bad. Yes.*

Relatively soon, the work was completed. Zak held up the lantern to inspect.

The grave was a bit shallow in the middle. A few last loads filched from surrounding plots helped alleviate the problem. Perfect. Looked like the natural sinking of the earth. He flung the shovel down.

Buffalo Yung washed the bottom of its nose with its sleeve and glanced at the stars. Then it put on its most cheerful and prong-toothed grin yet. Its voice was brotherly. "Got to keep movin', Randolf. To the repair shop. Then foller the wind. Ain't no rest."

"But you never tire, do you?"

"Waaal, some of my replacement parts wear out quicker'n others. I can feel that." The tall robot flung wide its arms, tossed back its head and let out a wild, "Hooo-haw! Zak glanced nervously down at the lights of Shane. He hoped any listeners would think it was a varmint.

"HOO-*HAWWW!*"

Yung leaped in the air, slapped its palms together, dusted one knee with an exaggerated slap, then wrapped Zak in a bear hug and lifted him high. The robot's nose was very close. The eyes were merry as a demon's. Suddenly they flooded Zak's face with a glare like silver baptismal water. The flashes were repeated, as if the robot couldn't contain itself. "I never get tired out when I win the game." *Flash.* " 'Cause that's why I was made." *Flash.* "You'll do fine, just so long's you remember what killin' me means." *Flash, FLASH.*

The final flash was almost unbearably bright. The robot

deposited him on the ground, cast its eye to the starry crest of the slope, muttered a sentence that included the word *mosey*. With perhaps the greatest honesty he'd shown to the construct thus far, Zak said, "I believe I'll remember."

It was cool up here. The wind was gusting hard. Zak dialed the lantern out as Buffalo Yung retrieved its sugar-loaf hat, slapped dust from the brim, waved and started off to the top of the rise.

Zak tossed the shovel down into a gully where it wouldn't be easily seen. Yung hesitated, turned a huge and slovenly figure all black against the stars.

"You 'member now, Randolf. Twist their tails real good. Deep down they love it. Helps them keep from thinkin', don't you see? Also convinces 'em, I'm instructed to remind you, that every other man's just like they know they are: mean an' rotten as a polecat upon which somebody's done a halfassed job o' gelding. They look at you an' they sleep comfortable as sweet little babes, never havin' to think, secure in the warm an' comfortin' assurance that every man's a sonofabitch but some are worse. Waaal—" And it waved its hat and flashed its silver eyes twice. "So long, pard."

Up the slope went Buffalo Yung, rejoining its cronies. The four conferred a short time. Then they mounted. Yung was the last out of sight, saddle-hunched, his pearlhandled gun butts twinkling until they became lost in the stars.

Zak stared a long time at the empty crest. He'd gotten to like the robot with a damn solid, manly affection. Yes, quite an hombre, legend or not, construct or not, engineered social force or not. And full of sensible ideas. In fact—Zak began to drift down the slope to town—he was wryly puzzled at how he'd ever acquired some of his earlier ideas.

Certainly was fortunate that he'd had presence of mind to shift his aim during the gunfight and direct a bullet Philemon's way. Maybe then, right then, when he fired that bullet, be began to know himself. He kind of liked himself, too.

He began whistling.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

As he strolled on down to the buildings, his merry whistling belied the quite orderly, quite brisk and businlesslike turn his mind had taken.

Certainly the citizens would look to him to restore a measure of peace and respectability to Shane. He'd be required to control the hardcases. Impose a ban on prostitution. Even install a curfew. Those, of course, could be merely temporary. He'd want to take the hardcases into his confidence and tell them it wouldn't last forever.

Don't want to get too clubby with that bunch, he thought. *That's the whole point of all Yung said. Smart damn robot. He decided to model his actions upon those of say, Remington Odopulous.*

Zak wanted to kick up his heels, he felt so utterly liberated and strong. Why, he was a damn little king!

Why leave Missouri? Why fret about Cosfed? He was certain he could find a lucrative occupation right here. Such as making an arrangement with the souvenir factories when they re-opened. He'd accept a given percent of the receipts in return for a guarantee that no workers would be molested.

He'd certainly have to locate a larger, more imposing house. Hell, you couldn't ask a hot squaw like Belle to muck around a ridiculous little place like the one he occupied now. She'd want a monster bed and she'd have one, for rumpusing, for sporting, for showing off her position as the king's consort.

He'd move carefully. Make sure that any law and order was, in essence, his kind of law and order. The townspeople could get down to worrying about courts and things long after he was dead. With frequent aerosol treatments plus his reputation for killing Buffalo Yung, that would be a long time coming.

Zak Randolf, he said to himself, *I don't know where you have been hiding, but you are a hell of a man.*

In the first darkened storefront he passed, he paused to speculate on his own countenance. Far back in his mind there sounded a vague squeaking, as of some nocturnal creature begging to be loosed from a trap. He didn't listen. He preferred to dwell on his own changed looks. The power was on him; the power of the Model No. 7 riding his hip. It made his face a trifle rigid but, all in all, the effect was quite fine. *Damn if I won't have this whole town dancing to my music for a change.* He passed on.

As he approached the Last Chance he stretched his shoulders taller, and ever so lightly placed his right thumb on the top of his gunbelt. The old smoke, the old sawdust and sweat fumes rolled out of the saloon to swallow him. He loved the aromas; loved the patterns of multicolored light falling through the windows onto the dust.

Most of the crowd had dispersed. Just a few townsfolk sat around along the street, talking in low tone. He knew they were discussing him.

He started toward the batwings of the Chance, perceived two men talking on the porch where the particolored light didn't reach. His neck itched. He dropped into partial crouch.

"Just us, Zak," said Dr. Buster Levinsohn, puffing up his cheroot. "Your little baggage is scampering around inside waiting for you. My, you're her mobile shrine all at once." The old rascal chuckled but Zak thought it sounded humorless. He said nothing.

Dr. Buster took a few more puffs. "That was mighty fancy shooting you did."

Was that mockery overlaying old Buster's words? Zak's ears grew warm. He held his face firm, replying in a courteous voice, "Yes. Thanks."

"Oh, you're welcome." returned Dr. Buster, as if the courtesy meant nothing. The decision was made. Dr. Buster would have to be the victim of an accident. Soon. Afterward, Zak could slip to the wagon and smash the hypnolearner. No sense having anyone else in a position to learn how to beat him. No, sir. No sense whatsoever.

He felt rather sorry for Dr. Buster, who was standing there

like a fool puffing his cheroot. But of course, necessity was necessity.

Zak smiled, indicating he'd see the old peddler inside. He hitched up his gunbelt, moved forward. With a cough, the second person on the porch sidled into the multiple light from the windows.

The Arrivederci Kid's spurs didn't even clink, he moved that carefully. He stroked his waxed mustaches furiously, grinning all over the place.

"Sure sorry there ain't any likker. Wish there was so I could buy you one."

"We'll have likker again, Kid. I'll see to that."

"Yeah, but I'd sure be proud to buy you one tonight, Zak."

"Randolf."

It took the Kid a gulping, blinking moment to comprehend. "Uh—oh, sure. Randolf."

"Mister Randolf."

The Kid's teeth hid, mirth gone. His eyes flickered wildly.

"Mister Randolf."

Lizard-eyed, Zak watched him a second. A minute. *Squirm.*

The Kid fussed; hopped from boot to boot; broke wind. Zak said pleasantly, "One more thing. Smile when you say that, pardner."

Dr. Buster almost laughed. He choked it off. The whiteness on the lower portion of the Kid's face re-appeared slowly, like a Cheshire grin in reverse. The moment Zak caught the smile's full glistening brilliance, he acknowledged it with a nod, turned his back, hit the batwings a hard slap with both hands and stepped inside to wait for the cheering.

It took about three seconds to begin.

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