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## **Gunhand of Fate Part 2**

by [J.A. Berger](#)

### **IX.**

"Get those blankets spread, I'll help you..."

"No!" Cord's hand tightened about the grip of the .44. "I want you--over by the fire--where I can keep an eye on you."

"Avram, when you get through there, help him. Try to keep his leg..."

"Lillard, now!"

Tommy spread his arms wide, his hands open. "Okay, okay--don't get excited." He eased backward, his hazel eyes intent on the injured man and the deadly weapon he held. Cord made no move to shift onto the bedroll until he had squatted before the cold pit. "Someday you're gonna have to learn who you can trust." His concerned gaze met and held the cold, unreadable one of the gunman. "You're not always gonna be able to handle everything...alone."

Cord eased gratefully onto his blankets, lying where he could see the fire pit and the man who squatted beside it. He motioned the Rabbi toward the fire. "Better get some wood for a fire. Lillard, in my bags is a bottle...get it."

"Please?" Tommy asked curtly.

"Please." Cord snapped, and the .44's hammer strained to full cock.

"You always let that .44 do your talkin' for you?" Tommy growled. He moved to the gunman's gear and found a partially empty whiskey bottle.

"I have fewer misunderstandings, when I do." Cord fenced lightly. "And no arguments."

The Texan cocked his head to one side, his crooked smile touching a sparkle of mischief in his hazel eyes. "Bet you don't." He stepped toward the man the bottle in his right hand, held by the neck.

"Stop right there."

Tommy stopped just out of reach, only steps from the prone man.

"Toss it to me--gently." Cord's voice hardened with suspicion. "Remember a glass bottle won't stop a .44 slug. You will."

The Texan tossed the bottle. Cord caught it left-handed, his eyes never leaving the standing man.

"Very good. Now get a fire started. We'll stay here today and get an early start tomorrow."

"Man, you're crazy!"

"Everyone's entitled to his own opinion," Cord replied. "But careful, Friend, I'm in no mood for arguments."

Reading the pain in the gunman's drawn features, Tommy Lillard swore. "Cord, you're hurtin'. You get up--start moving around too soon and that poison could spread."

The knuckles whitened about the .44. "We'll see, hombre. You may find I'm harder to kill...then two men with their backs to you."

Tommy stiffened; the gunman's words a verbal slap in the face. "You...think I'm a...back-shooter!?" Hazel eyes snapping with wounded indignation, the Texan took a step toward the gunman seemingly unmindful of the huge bore of the .44 that followed his every move.

"Hold it right there, Lillard. Not another step."

"You'd shoot me down? Here? Unarmed? That would make you no better than the man you're after..." Tommy's voice softened with barely contained anger. "The man you think I am."

The .44 roared and a bullet hit the ground in front the Texan's left boot.

"Another step and I'll take that leg out from under you." There was cold purpose in the man's voice.

Hazel eyes met and held with gray-green ones. Silence fell between the two men.

Drawing a deep breath, Tommy stopped. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. Another time...another place...I think we could have been friends." He turned, ignoring the deadly .44 and walked unhurried back to the fire pit. Silently, he sat about rebuilding the dead fire.

Cord watched the Texan closely for several moments than eased the hammer on the .44 and laid back against the hardness of the ground. He sat the battle down and struggled one-handed with the cork, his hand shaking from the effort. The cork popped.

"I don't think that stuff's good mixin' with snake venom," Tommy cautioned without turned from the fire.

Cord's hand hesitated, the bottle half way to his lips. "Keep hoping, Lillard, maybe it'll kill me." He put the bottle to his mouth and took a healthy swig, then another, before he put it down. He fumbled with the cork, then pushed the bottle away, his stomach revolting against the hard liquor. He coughed. Swallowing hard, he tried to force down the bile that rose in his throat.

"Tommy?" Avram's gentle eyes were filled with concern as he watched the gunman lean away from his blankets and retch again and again.

"I know, Cuz," the Texan mumbled, the same concern and pain reflected in his own eyes, but he kept his gaze averted from the sick gunman. "I know."

"Can't we...?"

"Avram, the man doesn't *want* our help!"

"What *kind* of a reason is that?"

"The *kind* that keeps me from trying to breathe through a hole in my gut....44 caliber size!"

Avram glanced from his friend to the man in the blankets. Cord lay on his back, his features pale, pinched with the pain of his illness.

"Is there *nothing* we can do?" The Rabbi looked helplessly back at his friend.

Tommy sighed and urged the struggling flames to life, feeding pieces of deadwood into it slowly. "No."

"We could get the gun away from him. He's sick. It should be easy--then we can help him."

Tommy chuckled. "Yeah, 'bout as easy as takin' hold of a angry snake with your bare hands. If you look real close, Cuz, you'll see he's still holdin' that damned .44 and his finger's still on the hammer."

Avram glanced again at the quiet figure.

"Take it easy," Tommy growled. "There ain't nothing we can do now, if he'd let us, later..." he shrugged. "We'll see."

\* \* \* \*

Long into the night, well after Avram had rolled into his blankets and the gunman had gotten quiet, Tommy Lillard sat before the fire pit nursing a hot cut of coffee, their last, while he contemplated the complexity of their situation. His emotions were torn between wanting to get himself and Avram as far away from the gunman as possible and the nagging suspicion that, if offered the opportunity, he probably would not be able to leave the injured man alone. Even now, he glanced toward the silent blankets, he found himself feeling compassion toward the man and sensing the pain of Cord's lose more than he would have before meeting the Rabbi.

Friendship was something he had always told himself he didn't need. It carried responsibilities he had always shied away from; vulnerabilities that he had told himself he couldn't chance.

All day, as he and Avram had watched Cord struggle with his illness, while attempting to maintain control of his two prisoners, Tommy had pondered the depth of his own feelings toward the Rabbi. Put in Cord's situation, would he be willing to kill in revenge...or friendship?

All too readily his mind went back to a darkened San Francisco street and the final confrontation between Avram and Matthew Diggs. What if he hadn't regained consciousness in time? What if Matt Diggs *had* pushed Avram into drawing against him, killing him?

Tommy shifted uneasily, his jaw line stiffening with the determination of his convictions. Yes, he admitted, if Diggs had killed Avram, he would have followed the man to the very ends of the earth with every intention of doing just what Cord wanted to do...kill for revenge.

Okay, he could understand the man's drives--his motivations--even his right to avenge the death of a friend. But he had the wrong man! And, Tommy doubted, he was any closer to making Cord believe *that* than he'd been the day before.

He drained his cup and got wearily to his feet. He would look in on the gunman, check his leg then get some sleep. Perhaps in the morning, with daylight brightening the world of the California wilderness, his future would look brighter, too.

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"If we could get a doctor.."

Tommy stiffened. "What did you say?"

"A doctor," Avram repeated. "I said if we..."

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy poked absently at the flames, his handsome features drawn in thought. "It I figure right, we're only a hard hour's ride or so from at least a couple of new camps that's sprung up in these parts. Cord's been careful to stay off the main trails, but I know this country pretty well..."

A look of hopefulness crossed the Rabbi's expressive features. "Then we can get help."

The Texan shook his head. "Ain't gonna be no sawbones in any of these camps." He rubbed thoughtfully at the stubble on his jaw. "'Sides a doc can't do no more for him than we've done. I was thinkin'," he paused, watching the hope die in his friend's eyes. "We could get the supplies we're runnin' low on. I'm getting' damned tired of hardtack and he could use some decent grub once he starts recoverin' from that venom. We had enough to get us to the coast when we left Angels Camp, with other camps along the way, I didn't expect to need more. We've about used what we had and Cord was low when he ran into us."

Avram glanced again toward the reclining gunman. "Can't we find anything to help him?"

"Best help we can give him is givin' him no reason to shoot us. He's hurtin', Cuz, but there's been no other symptoms. I figure he's got a good chance of makin' it."

"But h he'll never let us leave. He'll think..."

"Not me," Tommy grinned. "You."

"Me?"

"Sure."

"But," Avram glanced about the quiet camp, "What if I can't find this town?"

"That could be a problem," Lillard agreed, for a moment humor touched his eyes. "We can't have you getting' lost."

"If you give me directions, perhaps..."

Hesitation, mingled with Avram's all consuming willingness to help, pulled the Texan's lips into the crooked smile at the Rabbi's words. "You won't get lost, Pard. You ain't ridden this far with me and not learned a thing or two."

"I will...try."

"Ain't no problem, if you can foller this stream up to the next camp, you ain't gonna have no problem followin' it back down to us."

"That's all?" Avram glanced toward the sounds of the stream beside which they had camped. "Which way is up?"

Tommy chuckled. "Opposite of down. Never mind." He stilled Avram's protest. "The problem now is to clear it with Cord. Stay here...let me do the talkin'."

The Texan got slowly to his feet, moved to his saddle and secured an empty cup before returning to the fire, all the while conscious of the gunman's eyes following his every move. From the freshly filled canteen, he poured the cup full of clear, spring water. Keeping his hands on the cup, he moved toward the reclining man.

The muzzle of the .44 followed him.

Tommy stopped just short of the blankets. "Here. This water'll do more good than that rot-gut whiskey you've been trying to keep down."

"If I'd wanted water...I'd have...asked for it."

The Texan's lips pulled into a thin line with anger. "Then let's pretend you did." He sat the cup down within reach of the injured gunman, and took a step back.

"I've been through our supplies, we're getting' damned low. If we stay here for a couple of days we're gonna need some things..."

"We'll get...by."

"There's camps all up and down the river," Tommy continued, ignoring the gunman's words. "A man could be there and back in half a day."

"And you would be more than willin' to go..." Cord paused, his teeth clamping down on his lips as he tried to talk past the pain. "For...get...it."

"Not me, damn it, the Rabbi!" Tommy drew a deep breath. "He could ride in and out without being noticed. No one will question another foreigner in the fields. They're everywhere. 'Sides he might be able to get something to help with the pain..."

"No..."

"Damn it, Cord, what have you got to lose?" The Texan argued. "You afraid he won't come back? Hell, you didn't want him along in the first place. With you down, it'll be one man less to have to watch."

The strange eyes reflected pain, but Tommy could read nothing else in them. "You're afraid he'll bring back help?" Tommy guessed. Something flickered behind the gray-green eyes. "Hell, these are *gold* camps, man! Ain't nobody got time to listen to another man's troubles and they sure in hell ain't gonna worry themselves 'bout my situation."

"They'd worry plenty....about \$10,000 in Army...greenbacks," Cord reminded him. "If your friend offered 'em...a cut..."

"Je--sus, Man, Avram may be green as these hills, but he ain't crazy! Even hintin' at that payroll would only get the three of us killed. Dead by that .44 of yours or a slug in the back by some worthless camp bum is still dead!" Tommy's voice softened. "I'd like to see the three of us stay alive."

Gray-green, suspicious eyes held to seriously worried hazel ones in steady contemplation. Sweat beaded on the gunman's pale forehead as he struggled with his decision. "Balinsky. Come here."

Avram moved cautiously to the side of his friend.

"You've heard what's been said?"

"Yes." Avram articulated carefully.

"You know what we need?"

"Yes."

"You get what we have to have. Talk to no one. Make no other stops and get back here...quick."

Avram nodded agreement. He shifted a worried glance from one man to the other.

"Here..."

Avram caught the leather thong tossed to him by the gunman. "Tie Lillard's hands behind his back...tight."

Lillard stiffened. "If I'm tied, I can't help you..."

Cord cut the Texan's protest short. "Tie him!" He met Lillard's hard gaze with one of his own. "If he goes for supplies, we do it my way."

Avram stood fingering the leather nervously, the tension between the two men almost palatable in the intensity of their distrust. "Tommy?"

"Do what he says, Cuz."

"Turn your back to us, Lillard. I want to see those knots tied."

Tommy turned slowly, crossing his wrists behind his back.

"Go ahead, Rabbi, remember I'm watching. I want him tied tight."

Avram bound Tommy's wrists tightly together under the gunman's watchful eyes.

"Good." The .44 wavered. Cord eased back spent from his efforts and the after affects of the whisky on his already uneasy stomach. "Saddle up and get going."

Avram glanced helplessly at the bound Texan. "Tommy..."

"I'm all right," the Texan lied, already feeling the numbness of poor circulation creeping into his hands. "Sooner you get there--sooner you get back. You be careful, you hear?"

"Yes," Avram whispered. "I will be careful."

"There's a tent town down stream 'bout 5-6 miles." Cord groaned, then reached for the cup of water and drained it. "I rode through there a couple of days ago--place called Hell Town--supply tent's on the east side."

Avram nodded, glancing again at the bound cowboy.

"Cuz, get goin'. I don't plan on spending any more time than I have to like this."

Avram turned, hurried to his saddle and picked it up. Shouldering it, he moved swiftly to the picketed chestnut.

## X.

The black-frosted figure paused in the doorway of the flimsy lean-to that served as a store, glanced carefully up and down the dusty thoroughfare before cautiously easing out, a canvas bag held firmly to him. He moved to the hitching-rail and the chestnut gelding that stood tied there. He sat the bag down and struggled furtively with the ties on the saddlebags. In all his eagerness to go unobserved, he was closely watched by two men who lounged in half-drunken boldness outside the small tent that proclaimed itself "Hell Town's Largest Watering Hole".

"Hank, that there stranger sure looks to be in a powerful hurry." The taller of the two commented loud enough to carry to the man at the side of the chestnut. "Where do ya suppose he's bound for?"

"Maybe got his 'self a claim and tryin' to keep it secret like, sneakin' in here midday for supplies so as no one will see 'im."

"Stranger to me..."

"'Nother damn foreigner, comin' in here thinkin' they'se good as anyone. Come to take gold from hard workin' 'mericans."

The two men moved away from the tent and toward the black-frosted man who continued to pack his provisions carefully into the empty bags.

"Damned good looking chestnut. Too good for the likes of him," the man called Hank commented begrudgingly.

Avram reached down and pulled a small bag of flour from the canvas bag, the muffled clink of bottles from within brought the two men closer. The Rabbi closed the bag and hurriedly shoving the flour into the saddlebags.

"Zake, I heard bottles. What ya s'pose 'es got in that there bag?"

"What you say we look see," Hank touched the bag with the toe of his boot. Again a clink of bottles was heard.

Avram stiffened. He turned slowly to face his two antagonists.

Hank opened the bag and lifted out a small, green strangely labeled bottle. He held it up where he could study the words on the small glass container.

"What's it say, Hank?"

Hank giggled drunkenly. "Don't know. Can't read. What you say we give it a sample?"

"No!" Avram stepped forward, reaching for the bottle that was suddenly pulled from his reach.

"Well now, Zake. The foreigner don't want to share. Must be good stuff, ya think?"

"Please," Avram sighed as Hank tossed the bottle awkwardly to his friend, who barely managed to catch the small container. "It's for snakebite. Please, you do not want to drink it."

Zake frowned at the wording on the small bottle. "Snakebite? Our snakes got better sense than going 'round bitin' foreigners."

Han laughed. He caught the bottle that was again tossed to him, just out of Avram's reaching hand. "You don't need this, Stranger. You'd more likely get lead poisonin' than snakebite here 'bouts. We'll just take this off your hands for you."

"Please," Avram articulated patiently. "I must have it. A friend of mine has been bitten. It's is for him."

"Hear that, Zake, this here foreigner's got a friend."

"Hard to believe, ain't it?"

Avram reached into the bag and pulled out a full bottle of Kentucky bourbon. The joking subsided as both men looked longingly at the familiar bottle.

"Ah, now *that's* real smooth drinkin'..." Hank reached for the bottle, which Avram quickly pulled out of his reach. "Give me the medicine, then you can have this."

The two men stiffened, all humor leaving their countenances.

"Hear that, Zake? The foreigner here's callin' the shots, like he thinks he's something we ought to listen to."

Zake took a step toward the Rabbi.

Avram quickly backed away still holding the whiskey bottle out of their reach. He stopped when he backed into the chestnut. Cornered.

"Hand it over, Stranger, and maybe, we won't pull that funny beard of yours."

Avram groaned, all too conscious of the fact that he was about to become the center of Hell Town's recreational program for the day. Several men appeared in the opening of the saloon tent watching the confrontation with growing interest. He searched the faces for some sympathy. He could read nothing in the many be-whiskered faced miners, but knew none were likely to enter into the argument. He straightened in determination.

"I must have the bottle," he repeated. "My friend is in pain and in need of it. The whiskey, he does not need. That you can have."

Zake eyed his partner in blurry-eyed speculation. "Hank, give him the bottle. That's free whiskey he's offerin'."

Hank slowly shook his head. "It ain't gonna be that easy. Stranger, you want this here med-E-cine, you're gonna have to take it...fists, guns, or knives, take your pick."

"I have no knife." Avram voiced wearily. "And I carry no gun."

"You got fists?"

"Yes."

"Then use 'em."

Without warning, Hank struck out with a vicious, but alcohol-slowed punch.

Avram stepped easily aside and the momentum of the swing took Zake to the ground at the Rabbi's feet.

A roar of laughter from behind him brought the man to his feet in red-faced fury. He moved toward the uneasy Pole. "That's it." He hissed. "Ain't no foreigner gonna make a laughin' stock of me."

Avram narrowly avoided the next swing, but unable to move away from the hitching rail and the tied chestnut was forced to put his back to Hank, who shoved him brutally into Zake's next swing. Avram took the savage blow on the jaw, stumbled into the chestnut. The animal moved nervously away and the Rabbi fell.

Avram got slowly to his feet, touching his jaw tenderly. "I only want what is mine. Than I will leave."

Zake, who watched his partner with eager anticipation, quickly rescued the bottle of bourbon from under the chestnut's nervous hooves.

"Sure, you can leave." Hank smiled. "I'll even give you the bottle here for your sick friend..."

Avram, surprised, took the offered bottle carefully checking the seal. He looked up at the smiling miner. "Thank you."

"Sure."

Avram turned to the chestnut.

"You can leave," Hank repeated, "shank's mare. I've decided that horse is too good for the likes of you. Here," he reached into his pocket and tossed a two-bit gold piece toward the Rabbi. "I've just bought him off you."

Silence fell over the street as the piece of gold rolled to a stop next to Avram's boot. The Rabbi stared in disbelief at the man before him. "The horse is not for sale."

"Pick it up, Jew Boy."

Avram turned his back and untied the gelding, still holding tight to the small, important container. "No." He mumbled firmly. "The money is not mine. The horse is."

"I said pick it up." Hank pressed, his voice hard.

"We hang horse thieves in these parts, Amigo."

Hank turned at the softly voiced statement, glaring at the man who stood at the edge of the crowd, his back to the saloon tent, a smoke dangling from his lips.

He was a tall, middle-aged man dressed in well worn buckskins liberally adorned with flashing silver conchos. A wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero was pushed back from a round, sun-browned face, which sported a small, neatly trimmed mustache and contrasting, blue-gray eyes.

"And, we shoot greasers who damned well don't mind their own business." Hank snapped in drunken bravado, his hand moving slowly toward the belted weapon at his waist.

"Hank, go slow..." Zake warned, sober enough to notice the professional slant of the belted Colt revolver that rode the pale-eyed Mexican's hip.

Hank laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. He turned away from the soft-spoken Mexican. "Wait your turn, Greaser. Never was a day I couldn't handle a Jew Boy and a Mex breed with one hand tied behind my back."

"Hank, let's take the whiskey and go find us a woman to share it with...they ain't worth..."

"Shut up, Zake. I ain't backing down from the likes of 'em." His hand crept closer to his belted weapon. "I said move away from that horse, Jew Boy. Now!"

Avram stood still, the reins of the chestnut in his hand. Her glanced from first one man than to the other. "No."

Hank's hand encircled the butt of his gun and met the gentle, but firm resolution in the Rabbi's expressive eyes.

"If that gun clears leather, Amigo, you're buyin' trouble."

Hank swore at the soft drawl of the Mexican, the Colt revolver clearing leather as he spun on his heel. Before he could level the .45, two shots rang out; one hitting the ground in front of him, the other tugging savagely at the sleeve of his gun arm. Hank froze.

"I think, Amigo, it would be a good idea if you dropped the gun before it gets you killed."

Hank glanced quickly at his partner, who stood with his hands carefully away from his own gun. "Zake, we can take 'im."

Zake wet dry lips with a nervous tongue, taking a cautious step backwards, before addressing the Mexican. "Not me, friend. I ain't got no argument with you."

The Mexican shrugged wide shoulders, the Colt easy in his hand. He turned back to the miner. "It would seem, Amigo, you are on your own. Would you like to drop that gun now? I have not had to shoot a man for several days. I would hate to dirty my reputation with the likes of you."

Futilely glancing about the silent crowd, Hank swore in murderous anger, no longer drunk enough to push his luck with the unknown qualities of the light-eyed Mexican. "This ain't over, Mex. You and me'll meet again, then we'll see."

The lazy smile broadened. "Any time, Gringo, any time. Now," the Mexican's voice hardened and went strangely cold, the gray eyes settled on the miner. "Drop the gun."

The Colt revolver fell from Hank's fist. He took a reluctant step away from it.

"I want the two of you to get your horses and ride out."

"What the hell?" Hank swore. "We ain't plannin' on leaving!"

"You are now." The Mexican stated firmly.

"Our horses are at the livery." Zake said.

"Get 'em. Your nasty tempered friend will wait here with us."

Zake turned to leave.

"Amigo, the bottle. Return it to its rightful owner. Carefully."

Zake hesitated and then handing the bottle to Avram, he hurried toward a roughly thrown together corral where several saddled horses were tied to its flimsy posts.

The Mexican waited at ease, his eyes never straying far from the unarmed man shifting uneasily before him.

Zake mounted one of the horses, then leading another by its reins, rode cautiously up to the tall Mexican. Pulling the bay to a halt, he handed the reins of raw-boned buckskin to his friend.

"Mount up." The Mexican ordered softly.

"What about my gun?"

"Leave it."

"The hell, I will!"

The Mexican's finger tightened on the trigger of his Colt, the big gun roared. A lead slug hit the revolver lying in the sand sending it spinning crazily away from the startled miner.

"*Now*, you can have it." The Mexican drawled easily. Smoke spiraled lazily from the barrel of his Colt.

Reaching down, Hank retrieved the weapon than flung it from him in anger. "God damn it, you ruined a good gun!"

The Mexican made no comment. He held his Colt in lazy readiness. "Now it won't get you killed, Amigo." He motioned to the saddled horse. "Get movin', Rapido!"

Hank turned, stepped into his saddle and gathered his reins. "You ain't seen the last of me, Mex."

"Perhaps not," the Mexican shrugged. "We shall see. Now ride!"

Hank pulled cruelly at the buckskin's mouth and set spurs to the gelding. Leaving Zake to follow at a slow trot, he headed out of town.

The Mexican stepped away from the saloon and motioned the onlookers away. "The excitement's over, why don't you return to your drinkin'. There is nothing more to be seen."

At the ominous wave of the Colt, the men hastily broke up the gathering and disappeared inside. The Mexican waited until the last man had moved off the street, then released the pressure on the Colt's hammer and holstered it. "I would give them a few minutes to clear out before leaving town."

Avram Balinsky drew a deep breath, than smiled broadly. "I would like to thank you for what you have done. I think--I was in a little trouble."

The tall Mexican threw back his head and laughed, his strong, even teeth flashing white against his sun-darkened complexion. "Si, Amigo, a *little* trouble, I would say covers the situation nicely. It is true that you carry no gun?"

"No," Avram denied softly. "I have no gun."

"Perhaps it is just as well." The man, still smiling, slowly shook his head. "What *were* you gonna do before I stepped in?"

Avram shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know. I think God had to give me a hand."

"In Hell Town?" The Mexican laughed. "I ain't too sure he knows about this place...yet."

Avram's gentle blue eyes softened. "Yes, He knows. He sent you, didn't he?"

"Madre Dios!" The Mexican chuckled again, than grew serious as he read t he look in Avram's eyes. "Si, Amigo, perhaps he did. If he has sent me on a trail to stop one killing--perhaps he also sent me to stop two. I was glad to be of service, Senor."

"My name is Balinsky. Avram Balinsky." The Rabbi extended his hand. The Mexican grasped it in friendly greeting.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Amigo. I am Pico Jose Emanuel Jock Diego Maguire, at your service. The Mexican swept the huge sombrero from his

head and bowed low before the amazed Pole. Then stood tall, replacing the huge hat.

"All that--is your name?!"

The man laughed. "Si. A mouth full, no?"

"No...yes!" Avram remarked chuckling, the carefree humor of the tall man contagious. "Why so many names?"

"It's a long, complicated, very boring story, mi amigo. It is the ways of my mother's people to name their children after departed loved ones. My father, not to be out done, added a few of his own. Being the only child of two such people, I inherited them all."

Avram nodded absently. "But what shall I call you?"

"Take your pick. My friends call me Pico."

"And my friend calls me--well, he calls me many things," Avram stammered with embarrassment, " but mostly he calls me Cuz."

Pico smiled. "I think until I know you at least as well as he, I will call you Avram, if I may?"

"Good." Avram grinned happily. "That is good." A sudden thought sobered him. He tightened his grip on the reins of the chestnut. "I must go."

"It is true then, your friend was bitten...by a rattler?"

"Yesterday...morning."

Pico slowly shook his head. "That stuff you were willing to fight for won't help him, Amigo. If you cut the bite and sucked out the venom, he has a far better chance than that injun juice will give him."

"Yes, yes that was done as soon as he was bitten." Avram assured the Mexican.

"Then, mi amigo, I'd say he's got a good chance of making it without that stuff." He laid a concerned hand on the Rabbi's shoulder. "Them old rattlers are damn smart. They're real quick to warn, hoping they won't have to bite. And when they're forced into it, a lot of the time they won't release all of their poison. If your friend wasn't going into heavy chills and having trouble breathing before you left, I'd say there's a damn good chance he'll be doing a lot better by the time you get back to him."

Avram fell silent as he contemplated his new friend's words carefully. "This is true? But he was in pain when I left." He lifted the whiskey bottle. "He tried to take a drink and vomited a great deal..."

"Don't worry, amigo. If he was well enough to get to a bottle of that stuff, he won't die of snakebite."

"Thank you," Avram turned again. Putting his foot to the stirrup, he pulled himself into the saddle. "I had better get back. I did not mean to be gone so long. He will worry."

"You ride a wide trail, amigo, I don't think those two will give you any more trouble, but be on the look out."

"Yes, I will be careful. Thank you, Pico." Avram hesitated, his blue-eyed gaze locked in puzzlement with the gray ones of the Mexican.

"Amigo? There is something more?"

"My friend once said that your people did not like trouble...why did you step into mine?"

"Si, it is true." Pico agreed laughing easily. "And I am constantly at war with myself. My Mexican half says find a bottle of good tequila and a fine shad tree, but my Irish side loves a good fight. It is a sad thing. I fear, mi amigo, my Irish side has always been the stronger. It is a problem I shall have to work on."

Avram returned the Mexican-Irish's wide grin. He reined the chestnut away from the hitching rail. "If you are ever in San Francisco, please look me up and we can talk about old times."

"I will remember. Vaya con dios, Amigo, and much luck to you and your friend."

"Good-bye, Pico. Good-bye and thank you."

An uneasy smile pulled at the Mexican-Irish's mouth as he watched the black-frosted man ride out of town, reining the gelding into the trail toward the river. "Perhaps," he mumbled to himself. "It would be a nice day for a ride along the river."

## XI.

Tommy Lillard sat cross-legged before the dying fire, pulling half-heartedly at his bound wrists trying to force circulation back into his hands and fingers. He swore at his discomfort and the Rabbi's tardiness, his temper worsening with each

passing moment. A movement from his left pulled his attention from himself and his problems, to the bedroll and the gunman reclining there. Cord was sitting up.

The gunslinger holstered the .44 he had kept drawn since he had lain down and worked slowly at uncovering his wound, carefully untying the bandage and removing it to reveal the reddened fang marks and the knife cuts that crisscrossed the wounds.

"That rot-gut you were trying to drink earlier would do some good on that leg now." Tommy commented dryly, trying to keep the concern from his voice.

Cord glanced at him then back at the exposed bite. He reached for the whiskey bottle and uncorked it. Stretching the leg out straight, he poured a liberal amount of the liquid over the raw wounds. He clinched his teeth against the pain, then closed his eyes to the sharp discomfort, which momentarily left him breathless. He moaned, fighting the pain long enough to pour still another measure of the liquor over the wounds. He corked the bottle and lay down, badly shaken by the experience.

"If you'd untie me I could help you redress that leg."

"I can...do it."

"Sure," Tommy snapped. "You can take on the whole world single-handed! And every man you meet is a personal enemy! Thank god, I don't live in your world. It's too damned lonely."

"I wouldn't...be too worried...bout my problems, Lillard. You have...enough of your...own."

"You're really something', you know that?!" Tommy exploded, the last of his controlled temper evaporating under the cold, unreadable gaze of the gunslinger's strange eyes. "Goddamn it, Man, you don't believe I killed your friend! You haven't believed it since you turned your gun from me to kill that damned snake! And if you believe I didn't kill your friend, than you *have* to believe the rest of it...that I *did* kill the man you want. And *that's* what you can't forgive me for, isn't it?"

Cord made no move to acknowledge he had heard the Texan. His eyes closed as he rested.

"You ain't takin' me back to hang for killin' your friend. You're takin' me back 'cause I killed the man you *wanted* to kill!"

"No." The word was a whisper, barely reaching the bound man.

"Damned..." Tommy moaned. "Get that leg covered before it infects!"

For a moment, the gunman remained motionless, than he slowly sat up.

"There's some strips from the shirt I used in the saddlebags. There, beside your bedroll." Tommy directed.

Cord found the shirt and tightly bound his leg. He lay back spent from his efforts, his breathing labored and loud in the stillness of late afternoon. "Your friend...is over due."

"Yeah, I know." Tommy mumbled uneasily.

"Give any thought to the possibility that he won't be back?"

"No."

"Why should he? Ridin' with you ain't the life for a married man. A sky pilot at that."

Tommy bristled noticeable, "Stop it! You ain't pushin' me into no goddamn gunfight. Not like that."

"You trying to tell me you're worried about him? You?" A brow lifted and a sardonic smile touched the gunman's features.

"Yeah," Tommy snapped the word off short. He saw the disbelief on the gunman's face. "What's the use," he mumbled. "You can't seem to realize you ain't the only man on this earth who has a friend..." Tommy's voice softened with sincere regret. "I'm sorry your friend died, Cord, you need him...bad."

"Yeah." The acknowledgment was a soft whisper, but heavy with a pain Tommy had not heard in the deep voice before.

"Tommy. Cord. Is everything all right?"

Tommy struggled awkwardly to his feet as the shuffle of a horse's hooves broke the silence that had grown heavy between himself and the gunman. "Avram? That you, Cuz?"

"Yes. Yes." The horse broke into the clearing and stopped before the dead fire. Avram scrambled awkwardly from the saddle, dropping the chestnut's reins, ground tying it, while he hurried to his friend's side. He hesitated, than turned to the seated gunman. "Can I untie him?"

"Go ahead. Lillard..."

"I know, I know? I won't try anything. Shee-it, Rabbi, I was getting' worried 'bout you. You're all right, ain't you?"

Avram turned his friend until he could reach the bindings. "I am fine. Hold still while I loosen these knots. Why are they so tight? I can hardly work them...free." Avram struggled with the ropes.

"You *tied* them *that* tight!" Tommy complained. "I ain't had any feeling in my fingers for the last hour."

Avram paused. "Tommy. I am sorry."

"Forget it," Tommy glanced angrily at the silent gunman, "It ain't your fault."

Avram pulled at the final knot and it came free. He stepped away from the Texan, who busied himself rubbing the circulation back into his numbed fingers.

"Okay, Cord, now what?"

"You can unpack the supplies. Rabbi, did you get that bourban I wanted?"

"Yes."

"Bring it here."

"Should he..." Avram questioned hesitantly.

"Sure, what the hell." Tommy swore. "As you can see, he's doing fine. The only way I can figure him recoverin' like that is *his* poison was stronger than the snake's. Probably didn't have to shoot the varmint, likely it would of died anyway, after bittin' him."

Avram smiled happily. "Then he will not need the medicine I brought..."

"What medicine, Pard?"

Avram turned to his saddlebags, found the hard fought for bottle and handed it to the Texan.

The cowboy glanced at the strange label and laughed. "Snake bit elixir! Should have givin' it to the snake!"

Cord got slowly to his feet, loosening the .44 in the cutaway holster; he limped over to the two men. Seeing the bottle, a touch of a smile pulled at his mouth. "I don't think I'll try that stuff. But the bourbon should go down real smooth."

"So would food," Tommy interjected curtly. "You'll put a drunk on real quick with that on an empty stomach."

"I can handle it."

"Avram, unsaddle the chestnut, while I throw something together. Cord can make a mean of that bottle if he wants, but I'm for some good, solid food and a hot cup of java. You did remember the coffee, didn't you?"

"Yes." Avram handed the stuffed bags to his friend, than led the horse toward the picket line. "While you cook, I will water the horses."

Tommy nodded, already working feeble life back into the white coals deep in the fire's ashes. "You'd better get off that leg." He voiced curtly to the gunman.

Cord stood behind the Texan for another moment, the bourbon bottle in his hand unopened. Without comment, the gunman returned to his blankets and sat down. Leaning against his saddle, he watched Lillard. The bottle untouched beside him.

The Texan turned away from the fire. Grabbing up some of the dry kindling he'd stacked there earlier, he slowly fed it to the awakening fire. Rocking back on his heels, he coaxed life into the struggling flames. Reaching for another, larger branch, he hesitated. Cocking his head toward the river, he listened.

"Cord. Horses...at the river."

The gunslinger rolled swiftly into his blankets until only the top of his head showed on the seat of his saddle. The .44 lay nestled close to him, hidden by the blankets.

"Shee-it, Man. If there's trouble...I need a gun!" The Texan hissed.

The dark head motioned the Texan to silence.

Lillard got slowly to his feet, bringing his hand down until it brushed the empty holster at his hip. He swore at his helplessness.

Laughter. Unfamiliar. Threatening. Avram?

Tommy took a step forward, then stopped. The Rabbi stepped awkwardly into the clearing, stumbled, and was shoved brutally to the ground at the Texan's feet.

"Hold it right there, cowboy. Another step and I'll blow you and the Jew to kingdom come."

Tommy stiffened, but stood quiet under the muzzle of the rifle in the hands of a tall, roughly dressed individual with cold, unemotional eyes. Another man stood beside him, a drawn revolver trained on them. "What do you want?"

"A little satisfaction from the Jew boy, here," the man with the rifle stated coldly. "Your horses, guns. Anything else of value you got." He chuckled softly. "If you give us your full cooperation, we might not kill you."

"Hank, there's someone in that bedroll. You there! Get up---real slow..."

"He can't," Tommy snapped, pulling the rifleman's attention away from the quiet figure in the blankets. "He's hurt. Rattler got him."

"Zake check the blankets. I'll watch these two."

Tommy felt his muscles twitch with taut readiness. They would have only one chance. He didn't know what Cord had planned, but he had a pretty good idea what would happen to *any* man foolish enough to face the gunman with a drawn pistol in his hand.

Zake stopped beside the blankets, the muzzle of his Colt trained on the motionless form. "Hey, you!" He prodded the form with the toe of his boot. There was no sign of movement, only a groan issued from the blankets. The muzzle of the Colt dropped and the boot prodded harder. "I said get up! Now!" He reached down and grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled.

The blanket came away and the roar of the big .44 exploded in the silence of surprise. The miner dropped the Colt, clinched wildly at his chest, then pitched forward dead before he hit the ground.

The gunslinger rolled as he fired, gained his feet in one swift, graceful movement, the smoking .44 cocked and moving toward the two men who struggled across the fire from him.

Tommy had kicked out viciously at the rifleman as the roar of the .44 sounded behind him. The rifle wrenched savagely from the surprised miner's hand, exploded harmlessly into the air, then fell, spinning out of the man's reach. Tommy swung a left cross to the man's stubbled face, then moved in with a hard body blow. A short chop to the stunned man's exposed jaw and Hank went down, falling over Avram Balinsky who sat stunned by the swift turn of events.

Tommy reached for the rifle.

"Balinsky, get the hell out of there! Lillard, look out!"

Tommy, halfway to his feet, whirled, his eyes wide with the realization of his danger. A fully cocked revolver wavered in the dawned man's hand, coming to bear on him.

The heavy .44 roared away, the sting of its passing pulling savagely at the Texan's shirt as it passed under his arm, taking the miner high in the left side and throwing him backwards as his finger tightened on the trigger of the Colt. The gun exploded, the lead slug whined past Tommy's ear as the Texan threw himself flat, pulling the surprised Rabbi to the ground with him.

The miner rolled to his side and lay still. His eyes open to a scenario he no longer saw.

Tommy struggled to his feet, shaken from the nearness of death and a growing anger. He wrenched the Colt from the miner's fingers, and then whirled to face the man, who stood in a wide-legged stance before him, the smoking .44 easy in his hand, his dark eyes untroubled by the death around him.

"Goddamn it! You liked to shot me!" Tommy touched the power burned shirt along his ribs.

"You'd rather be dead?" Cord asked. "He carried a belt gun to the left side, for a cross draw. His vest hid the butt, but the barrel showed. If you'd bothered to look."

"What about them!?" Tommy glanced at the two still forms.

"They're dead." Cord commented dryly.

Avram got to his feet, moving quickly from first one downed man to the other. Sadly, he verified the gunman's words. He closed their eyes. "Why?" He whispered. "Why must so many die?"

Tommy drew a deep breath and turned to the gunman. "You answer him."

Cord stiffened, reading the accusation in the Texan's eyes and the sadness in the eyes of the Rabbi.

"Any man pulls a gun, takes his chances." He defended coldly.

"How many graves are there on your back trail, Cord?" Tommy accused softly.

"I didn't make the goddamned rules, Lillard. But if I don't live by them, I *will* doe by them."

"But not every goddamned man that draws a gun has to die!" Tommy swore, unmindful of the Colt he still held in his hand. "Not when a man's as good with a gun as you are! They were camp bullies. You could have wounded the first. The second, once he saw a gun in your hand...he would have folded. You know their kind! They're all talk!"

"And if something had gone wrong?" Cord asked wisely. "Like just now? Do you really think he wasn't going to shoot to kill when he pulled that gun on you? If you'd had a gun in your hand, would you have taken the chance?"

Silence fell over the two men, Avram standing quietly to one side momentarily forgotten.

"No."

The two men turned to face the softly spoken Rabbi.

"He would have killed Tommy. And, after they had what they wanted, they would have killed us."

"Yeah," Tommy whispered softly. "You're right. They would have killed us." He looked down at the Colt revolver in his hand.

"What are you going to do?" There was weariness in the deep voice of the gunslinger. He stood expectantly before the Texan, the .44 still in his hand.

"I don't know." Tommy answered truthfully.

"Why don't you drop it?" Cord suggest softly. "There's been enough killing here today."

"I can't." Tommy voiced in reply. "Not this time."

"You don't have a chance against me, Lillard. You know it...and I know it." There was no boasting in the gunman's words, only regretful certainty.

"Yeah," Tommy looked into the strange gray-green eyes. For a moment, he thought he read remorse in them. He straightened before the tall, unyielding gunman and slowly holstered the strange Colt. "I figure I'll have as good a chance as either of those gents did. At least, I know what...who I'm going up against."

"Do you?" Cord inquired coldly. "Don't make any mistakes, Lillard. Once that Colt clears leather, you're a dead man. Be very sure you know what you're doing."

"Tommy! Don't! Cord, no!"

"Avram, stay out of it! This has gone far enough." The Texan stood determined before the gunslinger. "Damned far enough."

"This time I will *not* stay out of it." Avram stepped between the two men. "Tommy, there *has* been too much killing here. Cord saved your life." Avram turned helplessly toward the unrelenting gunman. "How can you do this? How can you save his life from one man with a gun, only to shoot him yourself with another?"

"It ain't my choice, Rabbi." Cord whispered curtly. "When he touches that gun, it's his."

"Tommy, do you wish to kill this man?" Avram asked, nodding toward the gunman. "To have his blood on your hands?"

Tommy wet suddenly dry lips. "No. No, I don't, Cuz, but I ain't hangin'! Not for another man's killin'...and not just to ease *his* conscious." He glared stubbornly at the gunman.

"So, if you draw your gun, it will be to kill a man you do not wish to kill." Avram spun on his heel to face the gunslinger. "And, with regret you will kill Tommy."

Cord made no reply. He carefully holstered the wicked .44. Standing relaxed, he waited for the proud Texan's next move. "He doesn't have to draw on me, Rabbi."

"Damned!" Tommy spat contemptuously. "That does it! Avram get out of the way! Now!"

Avram stood his ground, his expressive blue eyes locked on the strange gray-green ones of the gunman. "Cord, vengeance is God's right, not yours. HE does not make mistakes." Avram reached deplorably for the gunman's arm, feeling the muscles taut under his fingers. "Can you be *that* sure of Tommy's guilt?"

Cord stared at the Texan who drew himself up straighter, his mouth set in prideful determination. Cord read the decision in the Texan's eyes and stiffened. Lillard was ready to die, but he would not admit his guilt.

"Avram, back out of this." Tommy addressed the gunman. "Cord, I don't want him hurt."

"He won't be."

"Okay, let's get this over with."

"Rabbi, back off." Cord voiced coldly, his eyes remaining hard on the Texan's every move.

"Tommy?" Avram pleaded once more. "Cord! Don't do this thing."

"Sorry, Pard." Tommy whispered, without taking his eyes from the gunman. "Now get out of the way."

Avram backed slowly, helplessly away from the two men. "Tommy," he whispered. "I believe you."

"I know, Cuz." Tommy replied softly. His voice hardened. "Cord, your move."

"Yours, Lillard. You're gonna need the break."

"Yeah," Tommy sighed, "I guess." His right hand fell slowly to his side until his fingers were scant inches from the butt of his Colt revolver. He stared into the unfathomable depths of the strange gray-green eyes. The gunman, inches taller than his own six-foot statue, stood relaxed and easy as he waited.

Tommy's eyes unknowingly signaled his move to the experience gunslinger as his hand sped toward his holstered weapon. The Texan's fingers circled the butt and fully cocked the Colt as he pulled it from leather.

Tommy Lillard was good---very good---and, he realized, as he looked into the muzzle of the fully drawn .44, that it had been his fastest draw ever...but not been good enough.

The .44 roared.

The Colt jerked in the Texan's hand. The hot lead tearing the weapon from him, burning his fingers as he relinquished his hold. He stood, shaken, before the smoking .44.

"End it, damn it! I ain't goin' to admit to a killing I didn't do!"

The hand on the .44 tightened, but something sparked behind the strange eyes. The muzzle slowly dropped.

Tommy stared in disbelief at the indecision in the gunman's cold features. "You...you believe me?"

"I don't...know. I want to," Cord glanced at the black-frosted Rabbi, "for him." A look of obvious pain crossed his sharp features. "Maybe even...for me. But Maguire..." He glanced up and the old hatred flared. "I owe him."

"There are other ways to repay that debt, Cord." Tommy whispered. "His killer is dead. What does it matter how, or why?"

"I *want* to believe you." Cord repeated. The .44 wavered.

Tommy stood very still, reading the conflicting emotions warring with the man before him. Slowly, the .44's muzzle fell. Cord released the pressure on the hammer and slowly holstered the revolver.

Tommy drew a long thankful breath before glancing at his numbed fingers. He carefully worked the life back into them, moving them painfully to reassure himself they had not been permanently damaged. Only then did he realized just how badly he had been beaten. It was an unsettling realization and he quickly forced it into the deepest recesses of his mind. It was something he did not wish to dwell on. He stood awkwardly before the gunman unable to break the uneasy silence between them.

"Cord," Avram moved forward to clasp the gunman's hand, unmindful of the stiffening in the man at the unfamiliar touch to his gun hand. "You are...a good man. Thank you."

Cord hesitantly accepted the Rabbi's hand, than tightened his fingers in acknowledgment of Avram's gratitude.

Cord, I wish I could make it easier for you," Tommy commented softly, feeling the gunman's pain.

"You can't," the pain was there again in his voice. "Just get the hell out of here before I change my mind."

"I hope, Rapido, you do not change it on my account."

The three men whirled at the sound of the strange voice behind them.

"Goddamned, what more can happen?" Tommy swore under his breath, studying the tall Mexican who had ridden in and stopped at the edge of their camp unnoticed. "Who the hell...?"

"Pico!" Avram shouted in gleeful greeting.

"Who?" Tommy asked, glancing from the dismounting Mexican to the gunslinger, who was stumbling forward to meet the new arrival.

"Pico Maguire." Avram smiled. "He is the man who helped me in town." Avram started forward only to be stopped by Tommy's quick hand. "Wait."

Cord had stopped before the Mexican, his arm held out to the tall man in greeting. Cord grasped the other's arm tightly. They stood for several moments neither willing to disturb the moment.

"Rapido, I came as quickly as I could sit a horse. Wingate told me of your plans...his fears." The Mexican glanced with regret at the bodies of the miners. "I am sorry I did not get here sooner."

"But...when I left..." Cord stammered, studying his friend closely. "I saw the wound..."

"Si, it was bad." Maguire agreed. "But it looked worse than it was. The bullet angled up, bounced off a rib, and out. A lot of blood, but---by the saints---it did little damage. Senor Wight is a very good medico. Better, I think, compadre, than you are avenger." He stated affectionately. "He is not the one, Rapido."

"Yeah, I know." Cord breathed wearily. "Now."

"Maguire..." Realization flickered in the Texan's hazel eyes, than amazement. "How did you find us...him?"

Maguire ground-tied his horse, moved to the dying fire and filled a cup with coffee from the pot, which stood forgotten beside the still glowing coals. He turned to face the puzzled Texan. "I have found following Rapito is always easier than one might think. People remember him. They talk about him. He is not easily forgotten. They will talk to strangers about him, much quicker than they will talk to *him* about anyone he seeks. I had made good time until I reached Hell Town. Rapido had been there and I knew I was close to catching up to him. But I had been pushing too hard, my wound forced me to stop, to rest. I was getting ready to ride out when Avram, here, had the run in with these two malos hombres." Maguire shrugged board shoulders. "I saddled up and drifted this way thinking to keep an eye open for anyone trying to follow him. I had lost his trail when I heard shots."

Tommy shook his head slowly in disbelief. "Wish you'd drifted in a couple of days ago. I got damned tired of trying to talk sense to this 'friend' of yours." He turned to the gunslinger. "You're one damned stubborn man!"

An eyebrow rose at Lillard's words. "You didn't have to go for that gun, Lillard. You could have gone back with me and proven your innocence."

"To an Army post who's CO sent you after the man guilty of killing a paymaster and stealin' a payroll? Me ridin' that bay?" Tommy studied Cord closely. "Would I have been believed? With you so damned sure of my guilt, so damned set on revenging his death, would I've had any kind of chance at clearing myself?" Tommy asked honestly.

"Wingate's a fair man. He would have heard you out." Cord stated simply.

"And?" Tommy pressed.

Cord drew a deep breath, but his eyes met and held Tommy's questioning gaze. "He would have hanged you."

"Yeah," Tommy sighed. "That's what I figured. *That's* why I went for the gun....figured it was the *best* chance I had."

"I think, *mi amigo*," Maguire spoken softly to the gunslinger. "That you owe this man an apology, no?"

A twisted smile pulled at the gunslinger's thin lips. "I *have* apologized, Amigo. I didn't kill him."

Pico Maguire laughed. "Si, perhaps, to you that is an apology. To him, I think not. For me, Rapido, apologize."

The strange eyes softened. "For you."

Cord turned and, for the first time since they had met, Tommy Lillard saw something akin to compassion in the gray-green eyes instead of the smoldering anger and the cold desire to kill.

"Lillard, Pico's right, I owe you an apology. It doesn't come easy, I'm not good at this..."

"I can understand that," Tommy replied pleasantly, a sparkle of mischief burned behind the innocent hazel eyes.

Avram groaned, "Tommy...no..." he whispered, closing his eyes to his friend's anticipated action.

Tommy rocked forward on the balls of his feet, than lashed out with a closed fist. The unexpected blow caught the unsuspecting gunman on the point of his chin. He went down hard. The Texan rubbed his fist, fingering the smarting knuckles than stretched out his hand to the seated gunman, who's right hand had coiled about the butt of the deadly .44.

"Apology accepted." Tommy stated easily.

Cord sat still, the gray-green eyes dark, unreadable, his hand on the .44 unmoving. Slowly the hand relaxed, then released the gun. Cord reached out to the offered hand.

Tommy pulled him to his feet. "I figure I owed you that." Tommy explained smiling. "No hard feelings?"

The two men's hands remained tightly clasped for a moment before Cord released his grip. "No. No hard feelings." He gingerly touched his bruised chin. "You throw one goddamned hard punch."

Tommy grinned, pleased when Cord returned it with one of his own.

"You *do* realize I'll be taking that payroll back with me," Cord exclaimed pleasantly.

"And the bay?" Tommy inquired resignedly.

"And the bay." Cord assured him. "Pico, Santee is tied with Streak behind the camp. I'm assuming you'd be wanting' him back."

"Ah, fortune smiles on this most unworthy." Maguire smiled. "Si, Rapido, comono!"

Tommy nodded his acceptance then turned to the silent Rabbi. "Well, you've been damned quiet through all this. Ain't you got nothing to say?"

Avram Balinsky met his friend's questioning gaze forlornly. "I was thinking...today two men have died. For them I have said a prayer of forgiveness. But perhaps we *have* been forgiven...for two men have *not* died. Pico and you. I am truly grateful."

Tommy smiled, his hazel eyes soft with acknowledged pain he read in Avram's gaze. "Cuz, I ain't gonna try to explain any of this. These men came looking for trouble...like Diggs, 'member? Cord did what he had to do...what I would have done."

"Yes," Avram sighed. "Some things can not be helped."

"Look, why don't you help Cord with the horses," Tommy suggested. "Find their's..." he motioned toward the bodies. "Take the best and turn the other one loose. I don't think any of us want to stay here any longer than we have to. Maguire and I'll see to...what has to be done here."

## **XII.**

Tommy gazed down at the riverbank and the fresh slide that covered the bodies of the two men he and Maguire had buried there. He sighed. Turning away from the unmarked graves to look down river, the Texan absorbed the peacefulness of the waning day.

Pico Maguire sat down, his back to a willow that leaned out over the slow moving water. Watching the cowboy, he fashioned a smoke than offered his makings to the silent Texan. Tommy refused with a shake of his head.

"I'm sorry, Amigo, that the two of you had to meet under these circumstances." The Mexican-Irish apologized softly.

Tommy nodded absently, unwilling to break the peacefulness of the wilderness around him and reluctant to trust himself to talk about the tall gunman and their relationship of the last few days.

"He is a good man."

"Yeah," the Texan whispered. "Good at killin'. Damned good at killin'."

Maguire drew a lung full of smoke than slowly exhaled. "Si, he is good at what he does. But you do not understand him, mi amigo."

"Do you?" Lillard inquired, his eyes staying on the glistening highlights of the river's slow wakes.

The Mexican-Irish chuckled. "At times...si. Other times? Quien sabe." He shrugged. "How well can any one man know another? How well do you know Abram? How well does he know you? If the friendship is strong, the weaknesses of one can become the strengths of the other. Our friendship---Rapido's and mine---has been a strength---a need---to us both." He gazed out across the river, his gray-blue eyes dark with memories. "It has not been easy, forging this friendship of ours. Rapito had forgotten how to trust...any man. I had forgotten what it meant to give---as well as take---in a sharing. It is working, Amigo. You fear the man who saw today, no?"

"Yeah," Tommy admitted. "He scares hell out of me."

"Two years ago," Maguire shook his head. "He would have killed you, Senior, the moment your hand touched your gun. He es muy rapido."

"Yeah, I guess."

"No, Senior, there is no guess---only certainty." Maguire smiled at a sudden thought. "You are one very fortunate man to be alive."

"I knew *that* when I looked into the muzzle of that .44 of his." Tommy snapped.

"No, that is not what I was talking about." Maguire shook his head. "To the best of my knowledge, you are the only man who has ever laid a hand on Rapido and

lived to tell about it. Even now, after all this time, I do not think I would ever touch him in anger. Perhaps it *is* working...this friendship of ours."

Tommy glanced sharply at the pondering Mexican, "What the hell are you talking about?" He stared in disbelief. "You mean he would have *killed* me for knockin' him down!?"

"Amigo, have you looked---*looked*---at Rapido's hands? They are not the hands of a brawler. They are the hands of a gunman. Mi compadre is not known for his compassion nor does he have much of a sense of humor." Maguire stared at the Texan's bewildered expression. "Do you know how close to death you were?" He shook his head again in disbelief as Tommy continued to stare. "You do not. Amigo, do you *know* who Rapido is?"

Tommy swore softly. "Of course, I know who he is...I mean," he hedged, meeting Maguire's steady gaze. "I mean, I know *what* he is..."

"You have never *heard* of him?"

Tommy slowly shook his head. "I thought the name had a familiar ring to it...but..."

Maguire threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, the innocence of the ignorant has truly smiled on you today, mi amigo. You have not heard of the man called Cord. Have you not heard of a man called The Gunslinger?"

Tommy's brow wrinkled for a moment before he met the Mexican's inquiring gaze. "The man who carries the 'rep' as the fastest gun in the southwest?" Tommy swore. "You're not serious? Those are stories to scare little boys with...to keep 'em at home."

"Si," Maguire's smile softened. "Stories grow. But to every story there is a basis of truth. You can believe most of what you've heard about Cord, The Gunslinger. I promise you, you *can* believe most of what you've heard."

Tommy Lillard glanced back at the picketed horses. "Cord? Cord is...*is that* gunslinger?!"

"Si."

Tommy slowly shook his head, running nervous fingers through his unruly mop of sun-bleached brown hair. "I must be livin' right. Maybe all that exposure to Avram has put me in Someone's good graces." A sudden thought pulled his gaze back to the smiling Mexican-Irish. "Maybe Cord's mellowing...?"

Pico laughed. "Rapido? Mellowing? Si, now *that* is a thought. Treasure it, Amigo, it will make a fine story to tell your grandchildren."

\* \* \* \*

Tommy Lillard held the strange buckskin on a tight rein as Avram pulled the chestnut along side him on the narrow trail. He watched the Rabbi raise his hand again in farewell to the departing riders who left the trail well ahead of them, headed southward. For several moments, the two men shared the silence of the increasing twilight until the declining daylight swallowed the two riders.

"Do you think they'll ever come to San Francisco? That we will ever see them again?" Avram asked plaintively.

Tommy shrugged. "Who knows, Cuz. Strange circumstances brought the four of us together this time." He chuckled softly. "Next time, I hope it's a friendly chat over a bottle of good drinkin' whiskey instead of over the barrel of his .44. Just the thought of how close I came to buyin' it..." his voice trailed off. "Maguire said it all, that hombre is muy rapido."

"So much has happened since I left Rosalee and San Francisco." The Rabbi pondered thoughtfully. "So many wonderful adventures I have had since coming to this wonderful America. So many wonderful new friends have I met: a bank robber, a Mexican chow boy, and a slinger of guns. Such a wonder place is this American West. Such wonderful people!"

"Yeah, wonderful," Tommy agreed without enthusiasm. "Come on, let's make some time before we have to stop for the night. I've seen enough of this place to last a life time...mine at least."

The buckskin took the free rein eagerly and moved into a gentle trot, keeping pace with the friendly chestnut beside him. "You've got a wife waitin' for you and we're over due. She'll likely have my hide for worrying her."

Avram glanced about the darkening road, the evening sounds pleasant in the growing darkness of coming night. "You *are* sure this is the way to San Francisco?"

Tommy glanced at his friend, the roguish smile pulled at his handsome features. "Trust me."

Avram returned the smile, friendship bright in his expressive eyes.  
"Always...Cuz."

**end**

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