

A RIVER WEST

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May 2017

The air up here wasn't enough to nurture a man, Phillip thought, his feet unsteady on the rough trail beneath him. They'd been traveling steadily uphill for the last three days, a sudden departure from the rolling, but forgivingly low hills of the plains.

It wasn't the quality of the air, he figured. In the plains the air was hot and dry, and the brown grasses and thin dirt had his lungs dusty. Here in the foothills, the air smelled like it was alive. Green plants, tiny pastel wildflowers, and the small creek they'd stopped at for water gave the air an invigorating feel to it. He'd known people to say the air out west was different, more lively. So far, Philip thought, it had lived up to those claims.

And yet it seemed like every breath pulled didn't quite fill his lungs. An invisible chain wrapped itself around his midsection and constricted every time he inhaled, keeping him from taking his fill of the mountain air. Gritting his teeth at the thought, Philip stepped lightly around a loose rock in the sloping path. He'd had enough chains for a lifetime.

Looking ahead, the trail wound further and further up, the white peaks of the Argent range promising only thinner air ahead.

"*Aqui*" the man at the head of their party said, tugging his mule to a halt.

Phillip had come to think of their guide's mule as less of an animal, and more of a reanimated skeleton, held together by skin and the bottomless stoic will of its rider. At the beginning of their journey he'd been silently envious of his companion's seat atop the emaciated creature, but the further they traveled, the less he was afflicted by the idea. Between the mule's frequent stops, which were inevitably encouraged to end through no small amount of shouting and slapping, and its stumbling, unsteady gait, the stout man was spending no less energy ascending the foothills than anyone else in their makeshift convoy. The mule's name, he'd determined, was something like "Tropayso", since it was the one word in the guide's many outbursts of Spanish insults that repeated itself with regularity. The fact that he recognized so little else of the man's exclamations was, he could only assume, a testament to

their color and creativity. No one else in their party spoke more than a few words of Spanish, however, and so whatever originality they carried fell upon deaf ears. Except, maybe, and Phillip suppressed a smile at the thought, those of the mule.

"Here what?" came the response to the guide's announcement. The guide, whose name was Emilio, spoke with a heavy accent that turned his English into a lilting drawl.

"We camp here." Emilio clarified, dismounting the mule, which stretched and stepped side-to-side in relief.

"Now?"

The man interrogating Emilio was Mister Hurst. If Mister Hurst had a first name that wasn't "mister", he had made no indication of it. "We've got hours of sunlight left."

"Sí. We will cross the mountains next. There is a pass, but is no good for stopping. Too narrow, too steep. We camp now, *iremos mañana*- tomorrow."

Emilio's eyes, during this conversation, seemed to not leave the holster at Hurst's thigh. The revolver there had weighed conspicuously heavy on the group, even when Emilio, and some of the other travelers, carried battered rifles on their backs. Philip had never heard of someone hunting game with a pistol.

Hurst finished inspected Emilio, and turned his eyes to the mountain range ahead of them. Apparently placated, he turned away and began walking the perimeter of the clearing they'd stopped at, poking his foot at bushes and eyeing them with roughly the same expression he'd made while speaking with Emilio.

Philip took a moment to take his own appraisal of the space they'd stopped in.

It was wide, and the first area they'd passed through not choked with the yellow-brown pine needles that collected in bales beneath the evergreen trees that blanketed the foothills. The grass was also taller, almost to Philip's thighs in places, with a wider variety of ferns and dusty green stalks overburdened with flowers.

The party was only a dozen men and women, and they had all already begun unpacking their packs and saddlebags, laying out the beginnings of a campsite. A

mother with a rough-looking rifle slung across her back lifted her youngest off the back of their mule. As she set him down to explore the tall blades of grass and gnats flitting from flower to flower, her two elder daughters began dutifully unpacking blankets and gathering branches for a fire pit. A man and woman, husband and wife, Philip assumed, were speaking quietly to each other, watching Emilio wrestle with his mule. A man in a crumpled waistcoat, his once-white shirt stained sickly yellow from dirt and sweat, leaned against the salt-and-pepper stone of the cliff that walled off one side of the clearing, catching his breath for the hundredth time today. His black briefcase, hilariously out of place amongst the other traveller's cloth bundles, was coated in a layer of dirt and dust. Outcroppings of the same black and white mineral, each one a miniature monolith, dotted the area. The last member of their party, a boy who couldn't have been older than fifteen, had perched himself atop the tallest one he could find. Squinting out from underneath his crumpled and threadbare hat, the boy seemed to have found the challenge of scrambling up the squat pillar of rock unsatisfying.

Philip knew none of their names, and none of them knew his. This was entirely how, he imagined, everyone here preferred it. Mister Hurst was the one exception to this rule, and had announced his preferred method of being addressed before they'd set off through the mountains.

Taking a deep breath, and then another, Philip silently cursed the altitude. Turning back in the direction they'd came, he could see through the branches to the plains behind them.

A winding string of overturned dirt and stone wove its way through the golden yellow grasses there, a spark of white sunlight reflecting up off of it wherever the line swooped in towards them. Train tracks, continuing their march across the country. Standing in a neat row parallel to the rails were tiny vertical lines, pointing straight out of the earth like so many swords planted in the ground. He considered them for a moment before he realized that they must be telegraph lines, ferrying messages to and fro across the continent. Invisible to him, but doubtless strung between the posts, was a thick rope of iron that buzzed and clicked with electric messages, bound for one coast or the other.

Turning back to the clearing, everyone else was tamping the grass down in small circles, or setting up near patches of dirt. There was, apparently, not going to be a central campfire.

Keeping a respectful distance from the other travellers, Philip inspected one patch of ground after another, not content to simply lay out his kit where it seemed convenient. A pyramid shaped outcropping of rock exploded out of the ground near the cliff wall, creating what could almost be mistaken for a closed off area. Unlike much of the meadow, the tall grasses thinned out there, leaving behind bare dirt and a few small patches of scrub. Satisfied with the location, he rolled out his bedroll, and began gathering branches to start a fire.

* * * * *

That night, Phillip dreamt of home. He dreamt the smell of the river. Not the narrow canyon rapids out here in the West, but the river of his childhood. Implacably rolling by, so wide you can't even see the other side of it in the morning mist. He dreamt of his family. Floating down the river, a flat raft underneath them. He tried to call out to them, but his voice didn't come, or it was lost in the fog, or they were too far away to hear him. Ropes floated behind them, black and sodden with the murky water, one end tied to their makeshift boat, the other writhing on the banks. Philip tried to take hold of them, but they squirmed and crackled with white light, evading his grasp.

Walking past him on the bank of the river were strangers, or maybe men and women he'd known and then forgotten. As they moved around him, they whispered words he couldn't understand, and when he held his hand out to them, they suddenly were too far away to touch. Their voices wormed their way to him through the fog, mumbling and droning, until he reached out too far—

And slipped out of the dream.

Stumbling into wakefulness, Philip kept his eyes closed. The voices speaking didn't stop. Hoarse, hushed whispers prodded his ears, and it occurred to him that he still couldn't understand them. Blinking the prickling sleep from his eyes, he found himself staring up at a blue-black sky, lit by a sun just below the horizon. Both the voices were speaking in Spanish.

At first this didn't concern him. He rolled onto his other side, wrapping the threadbare blanket around his head. Emilio was likely planning their next route with someone they'd brought with.

Except...

Philip froze. No one they'd brought could speak more than a few words of Spanish. It had almost caused a fight when they'd set off, before Emilio begrudgingly admitted to speaking enough English to communicate the path they were taking.

A few more moments passed. Philip listened to the conversation. One of the voices, he figured, was Emilio. The other, the stranger, he didn't recognize.

Every other sentence a word would slip through that he understood. *Dinero*, money. *Burro*, the mule. The two men agreed on something. Then-

"¿Y el negro?"

Some statements, apparently, didn't need much translation at all.

The voice that Philip suspected was Emilio said something in Spanish that he didn't understand. Then the other voice spoke again, and then there was silence.

Then the soft rustling of grass as someone started moving towards his bedroll.

Philip froze, a cold sweat breaking out on his hands. He became suddenly aware of the smell of his campfire, and the small, muted sound of unextinguished embers clicking and popping.

They shuffled along through the grass, footsteps getting closer and closer. Philip's eyes were clenched shut, willing his body into stillness even as his heart was beginning to beat so hard he could feel it in his throat.

He started considering his odds if he were to leap up and strike one or both of the men while they rifled through his meager belongings, when he realized their steps weren't getting any closer. Boots crunching in the loose dirt, they passed him by without stopping. He let thin trickle of relief start to form in his chest.

Then a *CRACK* exploded it out of him.

Two more explosions of sound ricocheted through the clearing, and Philip threw off his blanket, only to have a body tumble onto the ground next to him.

"Get down GET DOWN!"

Mr. Hurst, it seemed, had taken a liking to the spot Philip had chosen to sleep in. Now sitting up, Philip pushed himself away from the new body in his camp until there was enough space between them that an outstretched arm couldn't span the gap.

Hurst rolled onto his back, chest still heaving. In one hand he gripped the revolver he'd been toting at his side the last several days.

"You're lucky these fellas don't think too much of your folk," he said, between gasps of breath. In his other hand, he held a rifle by the barrel. Philip tried to figure where it'd come from. Had it been resting in the saddlebag of Emilio's mule? Or was it the aging weapon he'd seen strapped to the back of the mother of the three children?

Hurst held out the rifle towards Philip. "Take it. You're gonna need it."

Philip took the rifle, cradling it without putting his hand on the grip. "Why? This ain't my fight."

As if in disagreement, a bullet caromed against the rock they were hidden behind.

Philip had been shot at before, once. He had been in a forest, and the bullets that whipped by him either embedded themselves in the ground, where they kicked up a small geyser of dirt, or tumbled through branches, tearing up leaves and twigs. Here, surrounded by brittle outcroppings of rock, he had discovered a way to make being shot at even worse.

As more bullets smacked against the stone behind and in front of them, they created tiny explosions that sent shards of rock and bullet flying in every direction. The flecks that flew in his direction were, to his concern, quite dangerous. A tremendous POP erupted from the stone beside his hand, and he jerked it away from where he'd been resting it. Pain, crackling up his arm, made him think he'd been shot- but feeling his arm up and down, he concluded that he'd been struck by nothing but shards of rock.

"They see one inch of you and they'll shoot, I guarantee you that." Hurst had raised himself to a low crouch, keeping himself out of sight.

"They'll shoot? Who's shooting at us? Emilio?" Philip tossed the rifle aside so it landed on his blanket, and inched his way across their patch of cover until he was beside Hurst.

"The guide? I suppose, him and his new friend. I'm more concerned about the lady o'er that direction." Hurst nodded his head towards the opposite side of the clearing.

"The mother?" Philip asked, risking a glance across the clearing.

"Moth- No, no the *lady*. Ms. Tracey."

"*Who?*" Philip's question was drowned out by six ringing *POPs* as Hurst leapt up and fired over their cover.

"Jane Tracey, famed outlaw, is wanted in seven states for a list of crimes as long as your arm," Hurst explained, crouching again and fumbling with several rounds he'd pulled from a pouch on his belt. "I heard the Enochites out west aren't fond of her, either. And she's been travelling with us the last three days."

"You *knew* this?" Philip flinched as another gunshot shattered the rock behind them.

"Course I did. I'm a big admirer of her work, myself." Hurst was chambering the bullets into his revolver, now. "I suppose that our faithful guide knew too, and determined that the bounty on her head is worth more than his reputation. Not sure who her man is, but I'd bet you he's got a fair price on his head, too."

Hurst peeked his head over their boulder, then ducked back down and blindly fired his revolver in the direction he'd looked, plunging Philip's hearing into ringing again.

More gunshots came echoing through the clearing in response, higher pitched than Hurst's handgun, and less rapid, but this time no bullets struck the rock around them. Emilio and his companion were exchanging fire with Tracey's side of the meadow, giving Hurst and Philip a brief moment of respite.

"Can you use that rifle?" Hurst's words came through a haze of gunsmoke and the ringing in Philip's ears. The rifle was still laying where he'd tossed it, nestled in the

peaks and valleys of his threadbare blanket. Philip picked it back up, this time wrapping his hand around the grip.

"I shot at vermin, some."

"Same thing then. 'Cept these are bigger."

Above them the sky was getting brighter, but in the clearing, behind the cover of the forest, it was still dark. Philip could barely make out the difference between trees, stones, and bodies.

Hurst tugged at Philip's shirt, and pointed past their cover towards another pile of stone.

"I'm gonna make a run for those rocks, see if I can't get a clear shot at Tracey and her man. You're gonna need to make sure they don't try and wing me while I'm on the move."

"And how you expect me to do that?" Philip asked. Extending the lever of the rifle, he inspected the chamber. The rifle was loaded, but he had no way of knowing with how many shots. Hurst was not paying attention to him, peering over their cover.

"Shoot in that general direction, keep their heads down. Hell, shoot *them*, if you can."

"Fine," Philip said, hoisting the rifle. "Tell me—"

"Now!" Hurst exploded all at once, leaping up and sprinting away from their cover. Fumbling, Philip didn't bother to look down the sights of the rifle before he began pulling the trigger. The first shot pulled his arm in an unnatural angle, sending a spike of pain into his shoulder. Readjusting the butt so that it fit more firmly against his body, he yanked the lever forward sending a bullet casing spinning past his ear, and he fired again. And again. Every *crack* of a bullet firing reflected noise off the stone behind him, deafening him further, so much that he didn't realize he was being shot *at* until a bullet struck near enough to send a stone the size of his thumbnail flying past his vision. Before long, the rifle clicked unsatisfyingly when Philip pulled the trigger, and he dropped back down into his camp. He had lost count of how many shots he'd fired.

He lay there, back against the stone, and waited. Hurst hadn't left him any spare bullets, so he set the rifle down and did his best to cover his face as a ricocheting bullet spiralled into the dirt near him.

Before long, the sound of gunshots stopped, but the acrid smell of gunsmoke so thick in the air he could almost taste it. Hurst's voice was the first sound Philip heard, once the ringing in his ears began to fade. He was swearing, and loudly.

Daring to raise his head above his rock, Philip was conspicuously not shot at. He stood fully, and cautiously moved into the clearing. Hurst was pacing in a circle of flattened grass, still shouting.

"All that work, and this *pendejo* and his friend have to go and ruin it all by trying to double cross us all!" He kicked at the dirt, sending a spray of plant matter tumbling through the air. "And what did it get him? A bullet in the chest and nothing to show for it."

Sure as Hurst said, Emilio was lying dead on the earth, a hole in his shirt betraying where he'd been shot. His front was otherwise undisturbed, but underneath him, a black pool of blood had formed in the dirt. To the east, the sun was beginning to rise, casting warm curtains of light between the trees, but the blood seemed to devour any light that struck it.

"Five hundred shares in JDSF Railways! Do you have any idea what that could've bought me?"

Philip said nothing, but motioned to express his lack of understanding.

"I was going to steal it right out from under Tracey's nose, no less!" He pointed at Philip. "No one would've known! Instead all of this happened. Stupid sons of bitches."

The man in the suit was propped up against one of the many rocks in the clearing, the blood on his shirt drowning out the sickly yellow sweat stains. Clearly missing was his briefcase, both it and its contents now absconded with.

Philip looked around the clearing. There was no sign of the mother and her children, their camp abandoned. The boy who'd he'd seen perching on a stone a few hours earlier was gone as well, but his hat, a neat bullet hole torn in it, was resting

at the base of one of the many stones in the clearing. Philip went back to his camp to pack it up while Hurst continued to rant.

Wrapping up his bedroll, his eyes lingered on the rifle he'd been handed by Hurst. When he finished strapping his meager belongings to his back, he bent to pick it up. A leather strap hung underneath it, and he raised it to drape it over his shoulder. It fit snugly against the rest of his kit.

Moving to the narrow path at the edge of the meadow, Phillip rested down on his haunches, and looked across the plains to the railroad below. In the morning sun, it was glittering with orange and yellow light.

"Th' hell you trying to find out here, anyway?"

Philip looked up and saw Hurst, standing next to him.

"Freedom."

Hurst snorted. "Ain't that always the case. You oughtta aim higher, boy. Freedom ain't much use 'less you got something to do with it."

Philip stood, pulling up his full height against Hurst. Somewhat to Phillip's surprise, Hurst came only up to his mid chest, and was forced to crane his neck for them to meet eyes.

"Not mine."

"What?"

"Not my freedom. I've already got mine."

Hurst turned away from Philip to look out at the plains, already in the process of wrapping a pinch of tobacco into a cigarillo. Philip hadn't seen him procure either the leaf or the paper. He held the roll to his mouth and inhaled, apparently unconcerned by the thin air. At no point had Philip seen him light a match, but the tip smoldered red and black nonetheless, trailing gray smoke.

"Come on, then." He waved the cigarillo, motioning for Philip to follow. "Emilio was lying about how far we had to go. Should make it to town by nightfall, if we start now."

"You're going to bring me with, then? Just like that?"

"Sure. You're handy enough with the rifle." Hurst gestured towards the new addition to Philip's kit. "And travelling alone out here is a sure way to die from a tumble into a ravine."

Philip contemplated this for a moment.

"Can you use a telegraph?"

"A tele-? Naw, but I know a fella in Silver Springs who makes a fair day's work at one." Hurst said, only somewhat caught off guard by the question.

Philip thought for a moment, then nodded. Muttering something about mountain lions, Hurst started up the path, now lit with warm light. Philip took a deep breath of the morning air. The chains around his chest were still there, but this time they seemed to be a little looser, his lungs a little fuller. Following Hurst, he adjusted his kit and started walking.