

Author's Note:

*These following chapters were ultimately removed from the final book after mutual agreement with the editor and author (me). While I really enjoyed Joshua's adventures here, these 60 pages were pulling attention away from the main story-line (and Delin) - and in the end they didn't add anything further. So sadly, I consolidated this section and had Joshua learn of Caroline's death right away, back in San Francisco. And I had him meet Matsui Xien directly in Alaska after his exile from the Civil War, rather than forming their partnership as described below...*

*I hope you enjoy this little addition, this peek into the past. Consider it another one of Joshua's tales told to Delin under the Northern Lights.*

**Panama / January, 1850**

**SHANGHAIED**

The tavern was one of three newly-constructed buildings in the square. The other ancient native structures were moss-covered and crumbling, losing the battle with the encroaching jungle. Inside the tavern, a group of rough-looking men with wide leather hats sat in the corner and sang a song that Joshua had heard already in San Francisco.

*"Then blow, ye breezes, blow!*

*We're off the Californi-o*

*There's plenty of gold,*

*So I've been told,*

*On the banks of the Sacramento!"*

He shook his head, and would have smiled at their undaunted enthusiasm if he hadn't spent the past six hours in the grueling

heat. He had left his crew to guard the ship and had set off alone through the crowds of goldseekers who had been stuck here for months after making the perilous trip across the Isthmus only to find no ships available to take them north. Tempers were flaring, and desperation made men do vile things.

One of the first men to make it here was William Ralston. He and his partners had designs to create a bank and a steamboat charter company in San Francisco, but while in Panama they saw an opportunity too good to pass up. If anyone could help Joshua, it was Ralston.

He stepped up to the bar, nudging between two foul-smelling men. The proprietor behind the counter, a bald man built like a boulder and missing one arm, nodded to him and poured a double shot of rum into a dirty metal cup. Joshua took it, assuming there was no alternative. "Ralston?" he yelled.

The bartender nodded to the far corner where three men sat by an open window, looking over a thick, leather-bound book. Joshua dropped a twenty-five cent piece on the counter, slapped at a pesky mosquito, then made his way to the corner.

Outside, the light was dwindling, and a cacophony of unfamiliar insect noises sprouted into the heavy air. Joshua approached the closest man, the one who wore a faded brown suit and had long, stringy blond hair. "Mister Ralston?"

"You found him."

Joshua felt uncomfortable in his tattered black boots and

stained cotton shirt. Tucked around his waist in their leather holsters were his prized Dragoons. He cleared his throat. "I understand you've been running a steamboat charter here since 'forty-eight."

Ralston nodded. "With my partners, yes. This is Mister Kretz and Mister Garrison."

"Pleasure," said Joshua, shaking their hands. "I'm Joshua Wetherwax. I've come from San Francisco, and I'm looking for..."

"Someone from the steamship, California." Ralston rubbed his hands together. "Yes, one of Garrison's mates came up here about an hour ago, saying a miner had come back down the coast looking for his girlfriend."

"Fiancee," Joshua corrected.

Ralston smiled. "You do realize the rest of the Earth's human population is trying to go in the opposite direction?"

"I am aware of that, yes." He was weary, exhausted from several storms along the way that had sent them off course and left them low on provisions, and he just wanted to move on.

"Very well, sir. I will tell you what I can." Ralston pointed to a chair and had Joshua sit. They both took a sip of the rum. "Although," said Ralston, "if I am of help to you, I would appreciate some reciprocation."

"I have some gold," Joshua said. He would part with all he had left if that's what it took, but he had to be prudent about it.

Ralston waved the offer away. "No, I was hoping you would point me in the right direction once I get to San Francisco. See, my partners and I are hoping to open a bank there. A huge bank, financing the mines and issuing construction loans."

Joshua smiled. "Others are there already, with the same thoughts. Ever met a man named Norton?"

"Heard of him. Have to look him up. Anyone else?"

"Benjamin Quitch," Joshua offered, smiling a little.

"Great miner, something of a political power in the fields."

"Interesting! How do you know this?"

"I'm his partner."

"Ah," said Ralston. "Then I am indeed fortunate to meet you. Perhaps even a touch of destiny."

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Now you even sound like Quitch."

"And you, sir?" Ralston took another sip. "What if you cannot find your fiancée? Will you return to your partnership?"

Joshua shrugged. "I suppose I would," he said, although he shuddered to imagine returning in defeat like the Prodigal Son.

Ralston poured another shot for Joshua. "All right, then. I can tell you the steamer docked here for near two weeks. The riots were intense, as you may have heard. Passengers fifty deep waited on the shore, demanding passage."

"And," said Joshua, "I hear they picked up some gold-seekers from Peru on the way."

"Exactly. The American Consul here, man named Nelson, got

a letter from your Military Commander - General Persifor Smith, claiming he would set it right up in California, and fix it so only Americans get to keep gold found in their earth. That letter basically spelled out that we should stop the foreigners from even getting there."

Joshua lowered his eyes, unsure how Ralston felt about that, but he sensed the man had a streak of goodness in him.

"Anyway," said Ralston, "the captain of the California finally relented and let in as many passengers as could fit, but refused to back down on the Peruvians - they could stay, but they had to give up their berths to U.S. citizens."

Joshua nodded. He'd heard most of this before. "Right, but what about those already on board? Did any disembark?"

"No. You would think so, after so terrible a journey, but they feared their spots would be taken if they left."

Joshua's hopes fell. "So, you don't know if..."

"Now I didn't say that." Ralston took a deep swig from the bottle, and the fading sunlight made his eyes twinkle. "Some of the men aboard actually sold their seats for a tidy sum, and chose to either wait for another craft, or to give up and head back home."

Joshua looked up. "And..."

"And one of these men, a fellow named Armstrong, told me of a lovely lady on board. Said she was a perfect dear to everyone, always in good spirits. Lovely singing voice, and she

would read to them, Americans and Peruvians alike."

Joshua's heart soared. "That's Caroline! Has to be!"

Ralston raised his glass. "Armstrong said that she was heading to find her lover in the gold fields. He told me if that fellow was so lucky to find a lass such as her, probably he was equally damned lucky at finding gold, too."

Joshua's breath left in a gasp. "But what else? Did he mention her plans, or her health?"

"Ah," said Ralston. "That's the rub, as I can tell. He said she'd come down with a fierce sting of the flu. Just in the past week, once they were past Patagonia."

His mouth dry, Joshua cringed as he imagined her pale, sweaty figure under layers of blankets. He scratched at a string of red welts behind his neck as his mind raced. She was ill, and she continued on. "When was the California here?"

"January... seventeenth, if I recall correct."

"A little more than a month, then, until it reached San Francisco." Joshua took a deep breath. "Could it have stopped again after Panama?"

"No need to. It was clear sailing, and they made good time." Ralston rose from his chair, and extended his hand. "I believe you have your answer, sir. And I am sorry you had to come all the way down here to get it, but I must say that your fiancée, possibly ill, made it to San Francisco. Return there and seek for her at the hospitals, or charities."

Joshua rose slowly. He feared the worst now, but at least he had something - he knew he could get closure by returning to San Francisco and finding out for sure. "Many thanks, sir, for this information, and I wish you luck with that bank."

"Thank you, Mr. Wetherwax. And perhaps we'll meet again if I ever catch up with that partner of yours."

# # #

When Joshua returned to the harbor, night had fallen, but the smoke rising from his burning schooner obscured the normally brilliant constellations.

Joshua stopped on the sandy beach, open-mouthed as he stared incomprehensibly at the flames dancing about the masts, consuming the canvass sails and roaring across the deck. Instinctively, his hands went for the pistols around his waist, and he drew the Dragoons even as men closed in from his right.

"Don't try it!" one of them hissed, and a gun point jabbed at his spine.

Joshua lowered his revolvers, but kept his fingers on the triggers. "What is this?" In the shadows and firelight, he made out the faces of several of his crew, plus a few new ones.

"Sorry, friend," said a man in a white hat and white suit. He strode out from the dozen men. "Didn't mean for your schooner to burn, but you had a couple rather loyal men back there."

"Jacobs and Miller," said a man to his right. Joshua

recognized him as Devon Jones, another conscript from San Francisco. "Shame about them. Knocked over an oil lamp in the scuffle, then up in flames she went."

"What do you want?" asked Joshua, tightening his grip on the revolvers. "You obviously are not getting my boat, and my gold is on board."

"Oh, we got that first," said the man in white.

The crunching of boots over the seashells brought the man in front of Joshua. His eyes were bright blue, and his face a perfect bronze. Wisps of blond hair peeked from under his hat.

The man said, "Allow me to make your acquaintance. Malcolm Morrigan's the name. Rushed here from Australia in desperate need of a crew." He pointed to a tiny island just outside the harbor. "I've got a Yankee Clipper out there. Damned fast."

"What of it?" Joshua hissed. "Why take my crew and burn my vessel, when any dozen men here could learn to sail and take you up north?"

"But I am not going north." Malcolm folded his arms. "I skipped the part about why we're going back to Australia."

"We?" Joshua's mind was reeling. His boat had just sunk, and with it burnt his dream of swiftly returning to Caroline. "Listen, take my men, but let me out of this farce. I'll earn passage back, and..."

"You're coming with us, mate. Sorry about that, but in addition to a very competent crew, I can't be passing up the

chance to bring along a skilled prospector such as yourself."

"Prospector?" Joshua lowered his pistols, genuinely confused. "What for?"

Malcolm pulled out a rock the size of his fist from inside his coat. It glittered from the shadows, and everyone stretched to get a look at it. "Did I mention that I'm a geologist? Did a little surveying in the Badlands outside of Sydney after I got word about your little discovery in the Sierras. Figured, parts of Australia got the same topography, same potential."

Joshua shook his head. "You're mad!"

Malcolm leaned in and held the chunk of yellow rock up to his face. "Gold pried right from a riverbank in the wilderness. Nothing around for miles, and no one's heard of it yet."

Joshua's mouth went dry as he stared in the man's blue eyes. There was madness there, greed too. Joshua's hopes for release sank. By whatever ill providence tossed him into this madman's path, he was doomed to be pulled away from his quest again. He could see it, but could not accept it yet.

In one swift motion he lifted the revolvers, slipped under Malcolm's arm and aimed both guns at his forehead. "Release me," he started to say when the blow struck the base of his skull, and the world turned black.

# # #

When he awoke, he was dizzy, his head ached, and the ocean wind tore at his clothes. He stumbled to his feet and looked

out over the vast, unbroken sea under a brilliant sky of azure.

"Welcome aboard," said the man in white behind the wheel.

### Australia - February, 1851

#### DOWN UNDER

The dust storm raged. Swirling red sand blotted out the sun and choked his lungs, and after an eternity, visions appeared in the tempest.

A man in a filthy suit and tattered white hat grinned down at him, seeming to take great delight in his condition. Time shifted, Joshua stumbled through the dust and looked out over a vast field of acacia trees; he breathed in sweet orange scents under a surprising cobalt sky.

Then the sky darkened and the dust rolled over all. In the agony of choking sand, he looked through the stormy haze. That man in the white hat again. Folding his arms and whispering to black-garbed minions. Shaking his head.

And the dust swirled over them as well.

He called for Caroline, again and again, but the dust strangled his words and mocked his efforts. Once, the dust cleared and revealed someone in the shadows. Long hair, braided. Bending over him and placing a cool cloth on his face while murmuring unintelligible syllables.

Dreams came and went: wild fabrications of a deluded mind, vast trips across treacherous seas and through desolate canyons;

fierce battles with marauders; the roar of fiery weapons, blood and pain; and great picks slamming at the earth, carving tunnels while pale mountains trembled.

"Caroline?" he whispered, this time in a voice he recognized. And something replied, in words that again made no sense. That soothing remedy once more poured across his tongue and burned away the eons of dust.

The storm settled, the wind died, and the world reappeared.

# # #

And two days later, on a scorching day in a month without rain, Joshua awoke and sat up on his cot. He felt as if he should cough and expel a mountain of dust; his lips were parched and when he looked down through the buttons of an enormous shirt, he barely recognized the gaunt chest.

It took another minute to get his bearings. He was in a tent. On a table rested several jade-colored bottles, a small bowl, a frying pan and a teapot. In the corner stood an open trunk.

Unconsciously, his hand moved to his neck and closed around the gold cross still fastened there. Flies buzzed somewhere overhead and the smell of decaying orange blossoms hung in the air. The tent flap opened, slid apart gracefully by long-fingered tan hands. A short man entered, dressed in a white cotton shirt, dark wool pants and leather shoes. A pointed hat concealed his head, and a red silk scarf encircled his neck.

The hat came off, and the oriental man gave a wide smile. He had long hair, pulled tightly back across his spherical skull and tied in a braid that hung almost to his waist. His cheeks were red and a scar ran up from his chin to his left eye.

"Welcome back," he said in a voice as soothing as the spring breeze back in Virginia. Joshua struggled to form a word, but the newcomer held up a hand. Every step was a gliding movement from some exotic dance, every motion deft and silent - sweeping up the teapot and cup, pouring the still-steaming liquid, then turning and offering it to Joshua.

After Joshua took a sip, the man gave a curious bow. "My name is Matsei Xien."

Joshua gulped down the rest of the tea. "Jen?"

"Xien, yes."

"And this?" Joshua raised the empty cup.

"Herbal remedy. Ancient cure for cholera and fever."

Joshua's heart lurched. "When- how long was I...?"

"Almost four months," Xien said. "Although you nearly departed this world before Morrigan brought me to you."

"Morrigan!" Joshua hissed. "Was he here? I recall..."

"He looked in on you every day, every hour sometimes."

Xien sighed. "Cared only that you get back on your feet and help. Desperate he is, especially now that Rush is starting."

"What?"

"Yes, in New South Wales, far to the east of here."

"Where's here?" Joshua asked, squinting and trying to sit up. "What day is this?"

Xien turned and began preparing something on the table. The smell of dried fruit and fried meat perked up his senses. "February twentieth. We're in Geelong, Victoria, on Bendigo Creek. Seventy miles from Melbourne."

"That doesn't help me," Joshua said, his mouth salivating. He knew he needed to eat, and it would still be some time before he regained his strength. "I recall... digging beneath some cliffs. And thieves! We were attacked."

Xien sliced up some fruit and added it to a plate with the fried meat. "Very bad men - ex-convicts - roam the wild lands." He set the food before Joshua, then backed away and sat cross-legged on the floor. "Eat, now. And I will talk quickly."

Joshua barely heard him, but he was mildly curious at the Asian's deft use of the English language. He would have expected a much rougher pronunciation and worse grammar. He rifled the food into his mouth, shoveling the odd-tasting fruit and pungent meat down his throat in huge gulps, nearly choking.

"Seven men are with Morrigan," Xien continued. "I hear three were killed in raid on the way from Melbourne. Another two died going for supplies."

"Sure they didn't just run off?" Joshua asked, thinking of what he would do.

Xien shook his head and closed his eyes as if warding off

the image. "Their bodies were found, tied to trees in the desert. Flies and rodents eating their flesh."

Joshua lowered the hunk of meat he was about to chew. He muttered a quick prayer, then took another bite. He asked, "And what about you?"

"Another band of bushrangers killed all of my party except me. Gave me this scar," he said, pointing to his cheek, "just before I killed the last of them."

Joshua raised his eyebrows. "Impressive. So you and your party came here for the gold?"

"Last year," he said, "an Australian trader passed through our village in Tianjin, and told us that he met a man, Edward Hargraves, who was determined to duplicate America's finds. And now we have word he succeeded."

"Where?"

"A place called Bathurst, on the Macquarie River, far away. But, instead of joining the thousands going there, I came to this region, feeling the spirits calling me here."

Joshua looked up. "Spirits?"

"My ancestors," Xien said, folding his hands and lowering his head. "They speak to me through dreams. "West, they tell me, and so I came, and I began to dig, and to pan."

"And then I found him," said a new voice, and a shadow fell across the floor. Malcolm Morrigan pushed his way into the tent. "And this little Celestial has more than filled your

shoes while you were off napping."

Joshua tried to rise, feeling a surge of pure hatred. Xien must have seen the look in his eyes because he kept a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Rest," he whispered.

"Yes," said Morrigan, entering and shaking the dust off his hat. "But hurry, both of you. That little twit Hargrave has his victory - a small find, but already Melbourne's streets are deserted, and people are heading for the fields." He lifted a small gold-colored rock. "Found this beauty last week. Right where you were prospecting before you got sick, Wetherwax."

Joshua's stomach turned and his vision clouded.

"Lots more where this came from. Think we'll have something big soon, eh mates?"

Xien stood. "You already take much. And tempt the fates too long out here."

Morrigan laughed. "Nonsense, pigtail."

Joshua coughed and tried to haul himself out of bed. His eye had caught the glitter of something thrown carelessly in the chest - his Dragoons, covered with dust, beckoning to him.

"Still the fight in you, mate?" Morrigan stood over Joshua and shook his head. "Your guns will not help you here, boy. Please, I am not the monster you believe me to be. Help me find the motherlode I know exists, and then we can all get off this blasted island!"

Joshua struggled against the sickness crawling up his

throat. Strong hands eased him back into bed, and in the next moment his meal burst back out his throat and a tidal wave of nausea demolished his thoughts.

And the dust roared back over his soul.

# # #

Only, this time it was different. No burning red sand, but something even worse. An icy blizzard, an epic snowstorm heaping mountains of frost upon the world. He battled the drifts, unable to take a single step. His eyes burned with the whipping snow and his flesh seared in the unimaginable cold.

And yet, something moved in that blizzard, some sluggish form tracking him across the drifts, emerging finally from the deeper shadows. A grizzled, toothless old woman in ragged clothes and old scarves. She lifted a frostbitten hand and held before her a single Tarot Card, its edges glowing a soft golden hue.

A whisper floated over the arctic silence, and the words flowed, seemingly from the card itself: "*The Knight of Wands*".

An avalanche rolled over the image and buried the world once more. He drowned in jagged ice and choked on frozen mouthfuls until the winds whipped him free, lifted him high into the storm, and then dashed his body against the permafrost.

And something else came lumbering out from the darkness, and the blizzard parted around its massive form. Its footfalls cracked the ice for miles and shook the highest mountains. Its

foul breath melted the glaciers. A strange, high-pitched whistle came before it, heralding the monstrous white form as it shambled ever closer.

Joshua crept to his knees and quivered, dwarfed by the sinister, nameless creature. Enormous talons covered with frozen white fur grasped Joshua's skull and forced him to look: to see what it held in its other massive hand.

A newborn baby struggled in its grasp, kicking out with tiny legs while jagged talons encircled the naked form and gripped it tight, just pricking the skin enough to draw blood.

Joshua found himself suddenly on his feet, all the numbness and cold shaken free in a warm gust; and then he was reaching, grasping across vast expanses as the storm dissolved in the suddenly warming temperatures. Behind him, a colossal river churned, collecting the melting runoff from the mountains; its currents dashed against the cliffs and the sound of rapids roared in his skull.

The baby let out a piercing scream as Joshua's hand came closer. Before he could touch the infant, its eyes flew open - and instead of frightened, dark orbs floating in a sea of white, what looked out at him were two solid, unblinking spheres of polished gold.

And the tiny mouth roared a silent scream just as the fist clenched, and Joshua's own cry echoed across the void.

# # #

He jolted back to reality, sat up in bed and heard the unmistakable sound of gunshots. Before he knew it, he was at the trunk. He found the Dragoons, inspected them to be sure they were loaded, put on his shoes, and slipped out of the tent.

Twilight spread from the east, and long shadows played on the tops of hills while a serene crimson sunset carved into the forest. Positioned nearby were six other tents, dark brown, caked with dust. One on his left appeared unusual: with sharp downward-sloping edges that curled magically skyward. Four red scarves flew in a breeze, attached to each corner.

Matsei Xien stood outside of this one. When he noticed Joshua he glided over quickly. "Do not fear," he whispered and pointed to the nearest batch of gum trees where a half-dozen men stood, aiming rifles down into the valley. "They are just scaring off some predators."

Joshua tried to focus. "What kind of predators?"

"Boar, sheep, kangaroo."

Joshua frowned at him. "Sheep aren't predators."

Xien laughed. "True, but to Morrigan, anything that moves is a threat. Do you know why the kangaroo has its name?"

Tucking away his Dragoons, Joshua shook his head.

"The story goes that British explorers, nearing Australia's shore, pointed to a strange creature and asked one of the aborigines what it was." Xien took out an orange and began peeling its skin. "The native had no idea either, and answered

in his language the words for 'I do not know' - *Kan-ga-roo*."

Uncertain whether to laugh or nod in amused curiosity, Joshua asked, "What was in that tea you gave me?"

Xien smiled. "Something to bring deep and revitalizing sleep. And sometimes - visions."

Joshua fought back a chill. He opened his mouth.

"Do not speak of them," Xien told him, splitting the orange and offering Joshua half. "Your dreams are your own to interpret. The spirits speak to us in strange riddles. They show us the past, the future, and sometimes they just like to have fun with our minds."

"I don't believe in spirits," Joshua said. "God alone has that kind of power." Even as he said it, and before Xien gave him an unreadable look, he felt humbled, like the first missionaries coming upon an ancient, advanced culture.

But Xien only smiled. "You may be right, and perhaps it is your God speaking to you through my tea."

Joshua nodded and followed him down to the creek, beside an abandoned pair of shovels, a pickax, and a hastily-fashioned rocker. "God does work in mysterious ways. Although, someone else does as well - your handiwork?" Joshua pointed to the almost perfectly round, man-sized hole at his feet.

"Yes," Xien said, picking up an oil lamp and striking the flame. "We Chinese use different digging methods. We design out of cultural and spiritual ideas. You see - rounded edges

leave no grasp-hold for mischievous spirits."

Joshua followed Xien down the wooden ladder into the hole, smiling. He had to admit he liked that idea; and scaling down the twelve feet to the bottom, he noted that the construction seemed sturdier and less prone to collapse.

At the bottom, the lamp threw Xien's shadow back over their path, and they stepped along the uneven ground for ten more feet before reached the terminus. "Here," said Xien, reaching down. He came up with a handful of rocks. "Been saving these."

Joshua took them in his hands and raised them to the light, whistling appreciatively. He dug a nail into the soft side of one nugget. "Good find," he said, then approached the wall, running his fingers along the dirt, roots and rocks. Different levels of sediment were visible at the top until about chest-high, where the quartz vein began.

"Must be about fifty pounds in this vein."

"Plus what I have in three buckskin sacks over there," Xien said. He shined a light behind Joshua - who now realized that the tunnel actually continued sharply to the left, and he felt a cool breeze from that direction.

"You've been busy during my illness." Joshua turned and faced Xien. "How much have you shown to Morrigan?"

"Only as much as necessary."

"Why not take what you have and run?" Joshua asked. "I'm assuming this side tunnel can get you out past the camp?"

"It can, and I am saving it for that purpose." Xien closed his eyes, then opened them and stared ahead, through Joshua, and toward a place far, far away. "But I am not going alone. In your fever you called out many times, thinking I was someone else. Someone you need to find."

Joshua slowly nodded. "Caroline. My fiancée."

"I believe," said Xien, "that my own visions did not bring me here to find that which you hold in your hands." He reached out and clasped Joshua's arm. "I was meant to find you."

"But..."

"And I saw more." Xien clasped his hands together as if in earnest prayer. "I saw a long journey, a strange land of ice and snow, and a fresh start far from here. Visions I cannot yet fathom, but I know I am to head there with you."

Joshua bit his lip.

Xien looked down. "So, will you accept a lowly 'pigtail' such as myself? Allow me to accompany you back to California? Escape this filthy place with its stench of evil?"

"Gladly," said Joshua. "But there is much more gold here. We could continue mining, and grow our secret pile while giving the dregs to Morrigan."

Xien took a deep breath. "The man I cared for in that fever is not one to wait, no matter what the gain."

"You're right," Joshua said, ashamed he had let his greed momentarily get the better of him. "Every day counts," he said,

just as the sound of muffled gunshots reached their ears.

"What - are they at it again?"

Xien raised the lamp, frowning. "I do not like the urgency of those shots, or their quantity."

Joshua headed back the way they came. He drew one Dragoon and cautiously climbed up the shaft with his free hand.

No sooner did his head clear the surface than a huge hand grasped his arm, and another hauled him out from the earth. A fist pounded into his stomach and his breath left in a rush as the revolver was ripped from his grasp. He fell face down and someone jumped on his back. A shout, and more gunfire.

Laughter, then a firm grip lifted his hand to a burning torch. Joshua was about to scream when the flames stopped short, and the filthy bearded man on his back turned Joshua's hand painfully around.

"Gold!" he shouted. "On yer hands! It's down there!"

"Listen," coughed Joshua, "just let me up, I'll..."

"You'll do nothin' mate!" From the shadows Joshua saw an unfamiliar face grinning down on him. "What have we here?"

Joshua saw the man snatch up the fallen Dragoon. *Where was Xien?* Hopefully he had the sense to stay down in the tunnel. And Joshua hoped he was armed with more than just the knife. He had noticed several packs of blasting powder down there, but he hadn't seen any rifles.

He looked around quickly, grunting with pain but trying to

assess the situation. Five bandits were running about with rifles, long machetes and pistols. Of Morrigan's men, none were moving. Three were in a heap beside the trees, and two others, members of his original crew, were slumped over crates. And Morrigan - there he was, strapped to the nearest tree, with his wrists secured to the trunk. The entire front of his suit was red, drenched from a deep cut across his upper chest.

"What else you got down in that hole, mate?" asked the man who held one of the Dragoons. Fortunately, in the dim light, the bandit hadn't noticed the value of what he was holding. And perhaps the only other blessing - he didn't notice that its twin was still tucked in Joshua's side pocket.

"Just a bit of fool's gold," Joshua said. "Lousy pyrite."

The man gripped Joshua's hand again, brought it to his face, and in a quick, revolting motion, licked his palm. "Best-tastin' pyrite I ever had!" He shouted over his shoulder, "Come on, boys! Jump into this here hole and get the rest!"

Joshua moved his free hand toward his pocket. "Wait! Send me down there. I'll get it for you. I never liked that man you've got tied to the tree, and you can have his gold." Partly the truth, Joshua thought. Just not the bit about coming back out with the gold. *Come on, accept the offer.* He'd be out with Xien through the other tunnel before they knew it.

The man cursed and threw Joshua down to the ground in disgust. "No, no! What do you think, mate, we're that daft?"

What you got down there - rifle maybe?" He clapped his hands. "Jacko, Billy and Iggs - get in there and bring out anything that glitters!"

The three men fought amongst themselves to get down the hole first. Morrigan's cries weakened, and Joshua thought he heard the man calling for God. Darkness spread over the land, and the last vestige of red stubbornly clung to the far hills.

The men climbed down the hole, and the bandit leader shoved Joshua away, but lazily kept the gun pointed in his direction.

Joshua's anger smoldered as he looked at his Dragoon clutched in the man's dirty hand. He slowly reached into his pocket. Now was his chance - it was only the leader and two other men who were rummaging through Xien's tent. If he moved fast enough, he could surprise this man, cover the hole and pick off the other two as they approached. He only hoped Xien had been smart and fled.

Joshua took a deep breath and gripped the Dragoon's handle; it seemed to jolt in his grasp, awakened to the purpose of liberating its twin. But when he tensed and looked up, he saw an expression of utter dismay on the bandit's face. It took several seconds to register - a muffled explosion rocked the ground; chunks of dirt, rocks and gravel rained down on them, and the earth violently trembled.

The bandit ran to where the entrance had been just moments before. He threw himself on the jumbled indentation in the

earth and began clawing at the rocks and smoking dirt even as the expelled ground continued to fall. "What did you do!" he roared, sitting up and pointing the gun at Joshua.

His own revolver partially retrieved from his pocket, Joshua could only stare, open-mouthed. *Cave-in!* An explosion - it had to have been Xien. A shadow flitted across the creek as the bandit stood with fury in his eyes and advanced on Joshua, muttering about vile tricks and revenge.

Joshua started to draw his weapon, even though he knew it would be too late - unless this thug was a horrible shot - but then something whistled through the air. The bandit grunted, his eyes rolled up in his skull, and he toppled over. A foot-long blade protruded from just under his shoulderblade.

Joshua finished drawing his gun. He didn't need to see the shadow come closer to know who cast it. He quickly retrieved the Dragoon from the dead man's grasp, turned, and raised both weapons. He aimed steadily with arms extended as the two other ruffians ran towards him.

One had a rifle out, the other an ax. Joshua calmly stood his ground. The ground at his feet coughed, and another shell whistled past his head. Joshua fired with his left hand, and before the rolling cloud of smoke obscured his view, he squeezed off a round with his right.

When the smoke cleared, both bandits were flat on their backs, with most of their faces shot off. "Tell me," said

Joshua, hearing the footsteps behind him, "that you got some of the gold out of the tunnel before you blew it up?"

"Half, I would say." Matsei Xien stood at his side after retrieving his knife from the dead man's back.

"Want to go digging for the rest?" Joshua asked, feeling no guilt for the rhetorical question.

Xien shook his head. "Those men earned it."

Joshua turned suddenly. His jaw clenched, and he raced over to the nearest tree, to the man still barely alive, struggling against the ropes.

Joshua stuck one Dragoon's barrel against Morrigan's temple. "I would say God has granted what you deserve, but I hope there is more pain awaiting you in the next world."

Morrigan whimpered through a mouthful of blood. He looked like a tangled marionette dipped in red paint. Joshua's rage swelled in one enormous breath, ready to expel with just the pull of a trigger -

But a hand gently pulled away his arm, and his anger subsided. "No," Xien said. "Do not kill out of hatred."

Joshua's mouth went dry; he backed up a step, and lowered the Dragoon. And before he could think of anything to say, Xien placed a hand over Morrigan's eyes, whispered something that sounded like "Rest" in his ear, then slid his blade through the man's heart in one swift motion.

Dumbfounded, Joshua watched as Xien retrieved and cleaned

his knife. He cut Morrigan's ropes and allowed the corpse to lie flat. Xien walked by Joshua, heading back to the tents. "Mercy is another thing, my friend."

Joshua followed, glancing back only once. He caught up quickly. "Thank you. For stopping me back there."

Xien nodded. "We must be on our way. Gather only what is necessary. It will be a four-day ride to Melbourne."

Joshua closed his eyes. "When we get there let's buy a ship and raise a crew - if we have enough gold."

"Probably just enough," said Xien, "but not much more for when we arrive in Gum Shan."

"In what?"

"Our name for California. It means Gold Mountain."

"Well-put," said Joshua. "Just pray there's some of that mountain left when we get there, or that my old business partner is still apt to share some of his."

They finished packing, selected the best horses, and began the trip home, in the dark under unfamiliar constellations, heading toward the Southern Cross, and to freedom.

### **San Francisco - June 22, 1851**

#### **REUNION**

They sailed into the Bay on an unusually cloudy night, while thick smoke filled the harbor. As the ship passed the

cliffs and the natural entrance to the bay, Joshua took Xien to the prow. They stepped away from the unsavory crew of convicts and shady ruffians who were only too eager, after three months at sea, to take a share of their gold and join their Australian brethren at the Barbary Coast.

Joshua cleared his throat. "This entranceway was prophetically named the 'Golden Gate' even before the discovery of gold here - by Colonel Fremont in 1846." Joshua tried to show off some of his own wisdom now that they were on his turf. "He was impressed with the way the setting sun glittered off the distant hills."

Xien nodded thoughtfully, but scratched at his thin mustache. "I thought perhaps it was because of Constantinople's legend of the Golden Gate."

The smell of burning wood stung his eyes as Joshua grimaced. "What legend?"

Xien grinned and folded his arms; he stared ahead at the slowly-appearing shorefront. "A massive arch in the wall of Theodosius, between two enormous marble white towers. It was walled up, and only the future emperor was destined to enter."

They sailed on through Gate and Joshua stood up straight, feeling the wind whip at his hair and ruffle his coat. The smell of smoke intensified, as if a great feast had been started in his honor. Bells were ringing.

Within minutes they sailed through the smoke and viewed the

city. Amazed as he was by the expansion of streets in every direction, enormous hotels and lines of canvass buildings and wood and brick structures, he was shocked to see much of the city in flames.

# # #

They disembarked with the crew and soon arrived on the muddy waterfront. They hauled out what little supplies they had left and made their way to a nearby stretch of shanty homes with oddly-slanted rooftops and rickety canvass walls.

"This section seems untouched by the fire," said Joshua, fixing his coat and squinting against the heat from the west, where great clouds of smoke twisted over the hills and smothered the valley. A blanket of flame covered entire sections of the city; men were fleeing while others rushed about, throwing pails of water and dragging valuables from the smoking wreckage.

Xien sniffed the air, then looked up the hill to the northeast. "Wind comes from there," he pointed, and together he and Joshua took notice of the grimy-looking men running about this place. The whole area seemed drenched in wickedness and depravity, with surly harlots standing outside doorways, old men lying about the street, and mangy dogs prowling the alleys.

Quickly after leaving the boat, their crew ran off in that direction. Still more bands of men came running up the slopes from the south, dashing out of the shadows. A few were grinning, holding items tucked to their breasts. Soon, Joshua

and Xien stood alone in the center of a dirt-caked street while crooked three story buildings cast deep, flickering shadows across their backs.

"Perhaps we should flee here as well," Xien whispered, but too late - in the next moment, a surging crowd appeared before them, rushing with torches held high, screaming in pursuit of thieves. Suddenly Joshua understood - and the fear struck him like a thunderbolt. This crowd had to be a vigilante committee, and that fire - these buildings behind him untouched, and all the Australian thugs rushing about... And here stood Joshua and Xien, fresh off the boat in this quarter, with sacks of valuables in their possession -

The crowd bore down upon them with vengeance in their eyes.

# # #

They were spared only by a few cooler heads that actually paused to question why a red-headed man and a celestial stood in the midst of all this chaos. And, by the fact they refused to fight back, Joshua and Xien only received minor bruises, and all in all, their predicament could have been much worse.

As it was, they were locked in a dingy room on the Euphemia, a deserted brig that had been dragged ashore and converted to a prison barge.

Joshua rubbed his head and stood by the door, beating on it. "Listen to me!" he shouted. "Let me talk to your commander. I can prove who I am!"

"Joshua," said Xien, sitting cross-legged in the corner.  
"Be patient."

Fuming, he kicked the door. They had taken his ten remaining ounces of gold, all their food, and of course - his Dragoons. The revolvers drew quite a few whistles among the vigilantes, and Joshua recalled one man took a look at them, then ran off, wide-eyed.

Joshua was about to turn and pound the door some more when it opened with a grating sound. Three men stood in the doorway, all taller than Joshua, and all faces from his past.

"Jackson!" he shouted, with his arms raised. "Mooney and Schmidt!"

The men grinned. Robert Jackson stepped forward. "Heard about your Dragoons back in the city while we were helping to hold off the fire."

"Only the man who got them off of Sam Colt himself would still have 'em," said Schmidt.

"Unless the rumors of his death were true," Mooney added.

Joshua smiled at his old army mates. "The Mexican Army couldn't take me down. A bunch of Australian thugs weren't about to either."

They came forward and vigorously took turns shaking his hand. Jackson motioned to Xien, who stood with his head bowed. "This pigtail steal from you?"

Joshua's smile vanished. "This man saved my life, and he

is here as my friend."

"Fine," said Mooney. "Strange, but fine. Come on out of there, both of you. Sorry you got caught up in that mob - the Sydney Ducks have started their last fire, though, I'll tell you that. We hanged a couple of their gang after the last fire, back in May."

"Yeah," said Jackson. "You wouldn't know it, but the city has just been rebuilt after that one, which was much worse."

They climbed down a gangplank as dawn groggily pulled itself over the Sierras and surveyed the smoking remnants of the night's fires. They followed the ex-soldiers into a square building across the plaza.

Joshua skipped ahead, across uneven wooden planks and muddy ground, and just before they reached the door he asked, "Is there any word from..."

"Your dear friend, Quitch?" said the man who yanked the door open from the inside. Dressed in a fine blue suit, a gold pocketwatch in his inside vest pocket, Benjamin Quitch removed his tophat and embraced Joshua. "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

Joshua clasped him back, then looked into his face, frowning. "I see you've picked up a few gold teeth in my absence," he said, noting the symmetrically placed upper canines in his friend's grin.

Quitch shrugged. "Lost the real ones in a fight, so I

figured, why not?" He led Joshua and the others inside.

"Listen, I was here visiting my wife and was all set to return to the Carson Hill operations when the fire broke out. And then, of course, hearing that you had been thrown in jail... well, this was an opportunity I couldn't resist."

"Glad I can still entertain you," said Joshua. "But did you mention something about a wife?"

Quitich waved away the question. "Yes, yes. Got married. Fine businesswoman, one of a few around here. Looks and smarts - runs the Alhambra now. So, I hitched up. Nothing to be concerned about." He strode over to a counter, picked up a bottle of whiskey, took a swig and passed it over to Joshua.

Joshua held it and looked at the men. Xien had taken a step back and seemed oddly quiet, waiting for some inevitable announcement. Joshua's smile faded; he swallowed a heavy sip of whiskey, then pointed to Quitich. "You giving me this because I'm going to need it?"

Quitich closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He nodded slowly. "Sorry, old friend. After you left, I continued searching for her. Nothing turned up, but then a man you met down in Panama arrived."

"Ralston," Joshua said.

"Yes, fine chap. We talked at length about business opportunities - and I won't bore you with that - but it was he who told me of your ship's burning and your disappearance."

"We feared you dead," said Jackson.

"They did," Quitch added. "But I knew you better. You ain't one to be taken down so easily, not while you got things left to do. And so - hold on, who is this?"

Joshua glanced in the Xien's direction. "I'm sorry. This is Matsei Xien, a man who saved my life in Australia - through his medicine, and again in battle against bandits."

Quitch frowned at the Chinaman.

"And," said Joshua, "he's the best damned prospector I've ever worked with."

Quitch grinned. "Now you're talking my language. Very well, Xien, I'll assume you can rise above your twenty-five thousand brethren out there and be of some use to us."

Joshua opened his mouth, but Quitch continued: "In any case, I'm afraid that after speaking of Panama, Ralston told me what he told you - that your Caroline had been on the initial visit of the California. So I checked, as I assume you would have done, had you not first gone off gold-digging in Victoria."

Too scared to breathe, much less divert Quitch from his narrative, Joshua let the jab pass.

"So I asked around out at the fields. At Ophir, and Mariposa. Inquired about passengers on that ship."

"And?" Joshua's throat was dry, and he desperately tried not to look at the faces of the men in a semicircle around him, men who were staring down at their shoes.

Quitich offered Joshua another drink. He slowly shook his head. "There was bad news. From a digger at Angel's camp. Said a woman had passed during a fever, on the last leg of the trip, after Panama."

Joshua let the bottle slip from his fingers, and he barely heard the shattering glass. Quitich continued talking, speaking of the quiet on-board service the men had for her, and how they all pitched in to send her body back to Virginia when they arrived in port.

Joshua tuned him out and simply imagined one last embrace, one last chaste kiss in the sun. The rustle of vines along her father's house, and the buzzing of fireflies. He held her fiercely until the tears threatened, then he released the image and took a deep breath.

"I am deeply sorry," Xien whispered at his side, and all the others joined in offering their condolences. Joshua lifted his chin and stared at Quitich. He would not show any more weakness, although a void had opened at his feet, and his future teetered on uncertainty and hopelessness.

"Come," said Quitich, "perhaps it is fate that I was here to be the one to tell you. As now I can be the one to offer an immediate change of scenery. Get you out of this cesspool, and back out to the mountains and streams you love so well."

Joshua tried to steady himself, taking deep breaths. Quitich was right. He had to move on, and he had Xien to watch

out for. "What are you proposing?" he asked. And for the first time he wondered how extensive Quitch's operations had become.

Quitch clapped his hands. "Ah, together again, Wetherwax! I propose, simply, that you - and your little Asian friend here of course - accompany me on a tour of my minefields. Come and see what our investments have produced, my friend. Spend a year or so learning the business and seeing the new techniques. I know you'll marvel at what a little ingenuity, a thousand tons of water and some nitroglycerin can accomplish!" The sparkle in his eyes matched those on his new teeth, and a devilish grin seemed to pull at his cheeks.

Joshua glanced at Xien, then nodded. "Fine. What then?"

Quitch shrugged. "Anything you wish. I've kept a nice little gold pile for you, Joshua, in remembrance of how we started on this adventure. You can keep it and work with me - or you and Xien here can be my scouts if that suits you better. Run out into the deeper hills, prospect new sites, and do what you do best. I hear rumors of dust found in the mountains far to the north, and even in Montana and Colorado. The whole region is open to you, my friend."

Joshua pictured it, and sighed. "That sounds perfect." He regarded Quitch quietly, then said, "It seems that in my absence you've found everything I have lost. A wife and a treasure."

Quitch slid up close and slipped his arm around Joshua's back. "You can get those things back. And I'll be here to help

you along."

As they made to leave, Quitch pointed to something on the furthest table, beside a couple boxes and sacks - items taken from them at the waterfront.

But it was one specific box that drew Joshua's attention, and when he rushed over and opened it, his smile was one of comfortable acceptance. His fingers lovingly traced the outlines of the chambers, the cool ivory grips, and the polished silver barrels. He allowed himself one last fantasy - and imagined for one final moment - a caress just as soft against his love's cheek.

And then he let the vision fade, so that only silver and gold - tangible and undying - remained to accept his touch.

### The Comstock Lode, Nevada / 1861

#### **SILVER AND GOLD**

Xien and Joshua arrived by stagecoach in the heat of the mid-day August sun. In pursuit behind them, along the newly-completed road, came a sluggish but formidable armada - enormous wagons hauling an endless forest of timber hacked from the Sierras and destined to feed the ravenous appetite of the mines.

It all started only a year ago, with a few prospectors eking a living from the placer gold that was plentiful, but difficult to separate from the oddly-tinged blue earth. When

one digger finally took an entire sack of the blue stuff to Grass Valley, California to get it assayed, the shock was too great to contain. The sample held nearly \$1,000 in gold - but \$4,000 in silver, which was indistinguishable from other worthless rock until tested with nitric or hydrochloric acid.

In months, Mount Davidson was staked out, along with all the creek beds and foothills for thousands of feet in all directions. A group of men, including the colorful Henry Comstock, started a mine and called it Ophir, following the tradition of paying homage to Solomon. George Hearst moved in and bought a stake, worked it and sold out for a huge profit. He moved on, allowing others to come in and start the real work.

Men like Benjamin Quitich, who wrote, This is it, in a letter to Joshua two months ago, just as Joshua and Xien were finishing up some diggings up in the Cascades. They sold out their claims and bought passage to Virginia City, Nevada, along with thousands of others - mostly desperate old Forty-Niners. Some three hundred and fifty thousand men had made their attempt at fortune in the great California Gold Rush, and most had failed. Now, the only profits went to men of Quitich's ilk, those who had the foresight and the capital to literally move mountains. To divert rivers and blast away hillsides, to pulverize the rock and stamp out the ore from the depths.

So, unnumbered thousands, undisciplined in any other profession, headed off to new frontiers, seeking to duplicate

the life of the gold seeker, if not the fortunes they had imagined. New songs even emerged, like the popular:

*"Farewell old California,  
I'm going far away,  
Where gold is found more plenty  
And in larger lumps they say."*

Many raced here, as soon as word got out. They were soon joined by a wave of emigration from the east: the financial panic of '57 left great numbers without work, and many up and left, heading west for the promise of wealth.

Virginia City was booming, and Joshua and Xien could scarcely believe that this area had held nothing but cattle just two years earlier. Now there were dirt streets bisecting a metropolis of twenty thousand people; tram cars rode into the heart of the town carrying supplies and ore; and huge hoists unloaded more trees off floating barges from Lake Tahoe.

Xien stared open-mouthed at the warehouses. Great smokestacks churned out steam and obscured the hills with a pall of thick smoke. A series of tracks crisscrossed the mountainside and stitched down to trestles above numerous factories, while cars sped along, dumping their cargo of precious ore into chutes and holding bins. Everywhere men scuttled about, working the trams, pulling teams of mules and wagons, and carrying supplies.

"Yin Shan," said Xien as his vision swept the panorama, and

a touch of sadness swam in his wrinkle-framed eyes. His skin had toughened with the harsh winters in the Cascades, and his hair was thinning, and slightly gray at his temples.

Joshua, his own head still brandishing its fiery mane of thick hair and his beard neatly trimmed, looked radiant, if exhausted from their three day trip. "Let me guess," he said. "Silver Mountain?"

Xien laughed as they left the wagon. "Very good. You are learning after all."

Joshua slung a pack on his shoulder and muscled through a crowd on the street. "No, just getting better at word associations for your indecipherable language." They headed up what seemed like a main street, steeply graded and rising toward the factories on the hillside.

As they walked closer to an intersection, a loud boom rocked the town; the people winced, shaded their eyes, then looked to a rocky point east of Gold Hill.

A group of miners, their clothes filthy and their eyes bloodshot, emerged from a storefront with bottles in their hands. Joshua took a look at their faces, and his misgivings grew. Their expressions were ones of disillusionment. Whatever dreams brought these men here, now most of them were working for only a modest wage, just four dollars a day.

"What's going on?" he asked one of them.

A muscular man, stooped slightly with a limp, waved to the

nearby hill. "Cannon's announcing another Union victory. War's in full steam, we hear."

"Yup," said another man. The heavy scent of whiskey hung in the air as he released a low belch. "Lincoln just sent James Nye as new gov'nor of this territory, and he's makin' sure we know about all the glorious Yankee triumphs."

Joshua understood. Nevada had been part of the Utah Territory until only recently, but with the wealth this area presented to the Union, the drive toward statehood had begun. As such, Lincoln wanted a strong Union supporter in here to protect the Federal interests.

"Nye's a tough one, so watch out," the first man said. "Or y'all might wind up in confinement."

Joshua felt a flash of panic suddenly for Quitch. They were both admirers of Lee during the Mexican War, and they had many good friends in the Confederacy. Under different circumstances, or if the unimaginable happened and this insane War actually dragged on, he could see both of them suiting up for their home state. He thanked the men and asked directions to the Dante Mine, and then he and Xien proceeded through town on their way to see Quitch.

# # #

On the factory floor, surrounded by enormous vats and equally colossal stamping machines, one of the superintendents told Joshua that Quitch could be found up at the mine entrance.

So they were herded together with a group of six miners about to begin their shift, led to the top level and into a waiting mining car, where they began to ascend High Cedar Hill.

The air grew cooler and clearer as they rose. Glancing over the descending hills and the town far below, Joshua felt envious of the men who had prospected here first and found the initial ore deposits - even though he knew that in such a magnificent lode as this, much more remained undiscovered. It was for that reason primarily that he was here. His soul yearned to leap from this cart, grab a pick and a washing pan, and go prospecting. He felt the ground quiver in anticipation of his approach, and he imagined the rocks beckoning to him, whispering of treasured secrets.

Near the top he looked down the sheer cliff and felt an indescribable dread, as if something down in that abyss whispered sweetly to him.

Then the cart squealed to a halt and everyone leapt out. Two well-dressed men stood in the darkness under the mine-shaft entranceway, allowing the incoming workers to shuffle past with their tools and supplies. Joshua approached the dark shaft; something flickered, and the inky darkness seemed to slide unwillingly off the two men as they turned to greet him.

"My dear Joshua," said Quitch, holding out his arms. He was dressed in a finer suit than Joshua had ever seen. His hair was cropped and slicked back with oil, and his skin was rough

and tanned like the hide of some beast out roasting in the sun.  
"It's been far too long."

Joshua embraced him, then stepped away. "Seems like just yesterday I was watching you set up a much smaller operation at the Carson Hill Mine."

"Bigger and better things, my friend," Quitch said with a grin. "Come, meet my new advisor, someone who's worth more than all the gold we've mined yet - Dr. Hermann Dreggel. Master of Alchemy!"

The figure that emerged from the shadows seemed more wraith than man, uncommonly thin and pale, in stark contrast to Quitch's vitality. He seemed to will himself across the ground, taking shuffling steps, and when he raised his hand it looked like he fought a losing battle with gravity. But his green eyes blazed with an intensity that made up for his physical shortcomings.

"Came over from Berlin with Phillip Deidesheimer last year," Quitch said. "And both have proven invaluable - Phillip designed a new timber arch called the square set, kind of like a honeycomb structure that prevents most cave-ins."

"Amazing," said Joshua. "Can we see one?"

"Yes, let's go in," Quitch motioned to the entrance. "But we're only starting to implement this new structure, and only on the more recent tunnels."

They started inside the chamber, and in moments Joshua's

eyes adjusted to the gloom. He could just make out heaps of rocks and loose earth that lay about a pit beside an enormous scaffold. A thick hemp rope descended from the top beam and coiled around a massive spool.

Joshua had a fleeting image of a different scaffold, and of torches and an angry mob. Ages ago. Now, a similarly-dressed Quitch stood before it and pointed suddenly to Xien. "I'm sorry. But the men around here... they're, well, a little indisposed toward any Chinese working in the mines, so I'm afraid I cannot allow you down there."

Joshua glanced at Xien and started to argue that they were not going down to work, it was only a tour, but Quitch stopped him. "Bad precedent and all. Your brothers are all toplanders - working the soil."

"I understand," said Xien and gave a modest bow.

An elevator car appeared, hauled up from the scaffold. It came to a sudden, jarring stop and five men and a cart of ore exited. The men were covered in grime and sweat, and smelled of explosives and singed hair.

Quitch led the way into the car - a metal, grated open-air box secured on its top plate by the thick rope. "Grab on to something," he said and motioned to the engineer at the switch.

The car lurched and dropped like a stone.

"Thousand feet per minute!" Quitch shouted, grinning as the room disappeared and they were thrust into darkness. "They're

working on a more durable rope, but haven't made one yet."

Joshua glanced up at the shaking, vibrating rope. "Why is the rope a problem?"

"Such high speeds, and great depths - dangerous flaying. Dozens of cars lost over the past year."

Joshua swallowed hard and gripped the bar even tighter.

Dreggel cleared his throat, and in the glimpses that came and went with intermittently-placed lamps, an unsettling smile appeared on his face. "After falling two thousand feet and bouncing off jagged rocks and timbers, we've had to fish out men's shredded bodies from the depths. With grappling hooks."

Joshua tried not to be intimidated. The heat was rising, and he broke out in a heavy sweat.

"Come on, Doctor," Quitch shouted over grinding descent. "Let's not scare our guest. We'll be fine."

The car came to a sudden stop, and Quitch raised the bar and let them step out beside a pair of burgeoning mine cars waiting for passage up. With Joshua following along, they began a quick tour of this, the lowest section of the mine. "Can't stay down here long," Quitch said. "Unless we want to carry our own fifty pound supply of ice with us. The men only work in twenty minute shifts each hour - any more and they start dropping dead from heat and exhaustion."

As he put on his mining cap and fastened the head-lamp, Joshua asked: "Do you have German engineers working on that

problem as well?"

"Don't get touchy, Joshua." Quitch jabbed him in the arm. "If you'll notice, the heat down here has intensified."

"Yes, why? Usually it gets cooler as you dig."

"Not in this hellhole. The internal heat is a remnant of the intense forces that created all this wealth ages ago - or that's what the geologists tell me." He snapped his head around to Joshua. "And don't go arguing that bull about God placing all this wealth as is when he took a week to build the world a few thousand years ago."

"Believe what you need to," Joshua replied. "My faith is not in jeopardy from a few inconsistencies like this."

Dr. Dreggel chuckled from a few steps behind, but Quitch kept walking. "In any case, you will also notice the steam down here and I'm sure you saw the great pipes back there."

"You hit a water line?"

"Unfortunately, yes. This land has not made it easy for us, but human ingenuity has prevailed again, although it is a constant battle to pump out the water we release as we blast our way, following the veins deeper and deeper."

As they talked, they passed through a chamber with seven other branching tunnels, all connected by cart tracks, and fiery glows appeared in six of them, pulsing like the blinking of hellish eyes. Steam poured from the seventh shaft, and the air heated up another few degrees.

Quitich led them through the cloud and into the easternmost tunnel, which descended at a sharp angle. Up ahead, voices came back to them, and the sound of heavy hammering rattled the roughly-hewn walls. A trio of enormous rats scurried by.

Joshua watched them go, narrowing his eyes. He tried to recall hearing something about rats and mines... but it escaped him for the moment. A few more steps, and the heat became too intense, and his mouth dried up.

"You see why I rarely come down here," said Quitich. "But it's good to view the veins first-hand every now and then."

Joshua motioned to the alchemist a few steps back. "What's with him? He doesn't sweat?"

Quitich shrugged. "He doesn't do a lot of things. All I know is that he's a genius at extracting ninety-eight per cent of all the gold and silver we bring up. No other mine can even manage eighty per cent, and we actually buy up a lot of their waste and process that as well."

"Impressive," Joshua admitted. "Should we go back up?"

"Not yet. I want you to see the blasting process. And here," he pointed to a timber frame above them, glowing in scarlet hues. "Old frame structure. The new square set is much sturdier - we'll take a look at one on the return trip."

Joshua glanced at the timber logs wedged above them and secured in straight fashion on the sides. He walked gingerly, then paused - remembering suddenly about the rats. He opened

his mouth - even as another flood of rats, garbling and clawing at one another, came racing around the bend. Quitch just turned the corner and motioned ahead where three men worked with sledge hammers and long metal pikes.

"We have to get out," Joshua whispered, eyes widening. The ground rumbled gently, almost imperceptibly, but Quitch didn't notice. He pointed and was about to describe the blasting process when he noticed Joshua and Dreggel backing away.

"The rats," Joshua said, recalling what Indians had told him last year while prospecting in the Cascades. "They can sense cave-ins. Get your men out, now!"

Quitch spun around, saw the men hammering away and creating new holes for the nitroglycerin, shouted something, then turned and fled. He gripped Joshua's arm and hauled the near-weightless doctor along.

Joshua struggled and pulled free, starting back into the tunnel with the men, even as dust shook free from the ceiling, small rocks fell and the timber frame shuddered. A strong hand gripped his jacket and hauled him back, just as the passageway disappeared in a roar and a cloud of black dust.

They raced back to the central chamber, coughing and doubled over, even as men flooded the room from the other passages, hoping to save their trapped coworkers.

Quitch coughed fiercely then shook himself off. "Now you see the need for those new frames."

Joshua tried to curse back at him. "Should... have had those in place everywhere... before sending men in there."

Quitich shrugged and dusted off Dreggel's coat as more men raced into the deadly passage. "You take some chances in this business. The men know the risks."

He pulled Joshua ahead, and they started to make their way back to the elevator car. "All right, tour's over." Quitich grinned from ear to ear as they approached the waiting car. "William Ralston arrived last week and started buying up shares in most of the mines. There's a great little financial market springing up in the streets of town, and spreading all the way back to San Francisco. Shares are raging on speculation."

Joshua barely heard what he was saying, focused for the moment with stepping onto the floating deathtrap, and praying to God that they made it back up.

"Ralston's making out like a thief," Quitich said, gripping on tight after ringing the bell to alert the engineer above. "And he's bringing us along. Investing in our factory, adding machines and tracks and cars. As we succeed, so does his stake in the company. It's a beautiful thing, my friend."

Joshua could only grunt his approval as they soared higher, and his breath returned in clearer gasps. But the memory of men buried alive lingered on.

# # #

"Where is this wife of yours?" Joshua asked, after several

weeks had passed. They were seated in the Tableau Restaurant on Exchange Street, sipping wine and carving into roast venison while a downpour raged against the window.

He had spent the morning with Xien prospecting the west face of Cedar Hill until the sky erupted into a heavy storm. The weather had been fluctuating intensely here since last year, he had been told. The deforestation wreaked havoc on drainage, and altered the wind and even the temperature for the whole region. They had come inside, along with most of those not already deep underground, and everyone nervously waited out the rains, hoping to be spared a repeat of last year's flooding.

While they waited, Quitch caught up with them, and he brought a photographer with him. The man set up his equipment under the awning of the Tableau, and Quitch insisted that Joshua pose with him. The man took two shots of them standing before the rainy backdrop of the mountains, the ore hills and the mining plants. He promised to return to his studio and create duplicate stereographs for them both.

"Just a little something to commemorate our reunion," Quitch had said.

Now, inside the restaurant, he waved a fork with a hunk of meat stuck on it. "My wife? She detests the country. Came for a visit last spring, and left in a fortnight." He chewed sloppily while a waiter refilled their glasses.

"Sounds like a strong relationship you've got there, "

Joshua smirked, glancing around at the fine chandeliers, elegant table settings, and general high-standing of everyone seated in this great room. "When are the little ones coming?"

Quitich's grin faded. "We are both too busy for that. She's running one of the finest hotels in San Francisco - and it is about to become finer now that Ralston's taking an interest. He plans on enhancing several of the resorts there while he constructs his new bank."

Quitich gave a little smirk. "Besides, without her here I am free to roam the gambling resorts, and indulge myself in the pleasures of the French Quarter."

Joshua took a sip of wine, and nodded absently. He wondered how Xien was faring - his friend had been set up in a decent superintendent's home a block south from his own modest residence on Baker's Street. Xien did his share of prospecting as well, but lately he had been spending more time with a group of Cantonese laborers in the east quarry. He assisted them with their English, and encouraged the retention of their home culture.

"Anyway," Quitich continued, "didn't some poet or other say something about absence and the heart?"

"Thomas Bayley," Joshua said at once, surprising even himself. In response to Quitich's amused stare, he said, "the rewards of a prospector unwilling to lose his findings on gambling and drunkenness. No alternative but volumes of

literature and poetry."

Quitich laughed. "It's no wonder you never found a wife."

"Haven't looked again," said Joshua, his voice dropping.

"Of course not," Quitich said, meeting his stare. "You still wear her cross, and carry that dagger, do you not?"

Joshua nodded, and stared at the golden liquid swirling in his wineglass as soft violin music started up. At a table beside them a man with a thick mustache and a large thatch of curly hair sat with a notebook in hand, interviewing two superintendents from the Ophir Mine.

Catching bits of that conversation, Joshua had a hard time focusing on Quitich's new topic - something about the chemical shipment Dr. Dreggel had received from overseas.

Finally, Quitich took notice of Joshua's attention. He leaned over and motioned toward the reporter. "Man named Clemens. Samuel, I think - from the *Territorial Enterprise* - Virginia City's largest newspaper. His articles have been talking up the shares of certain mines." Quitich gave him a wink. "I drop him a mysterious quote every so often, just to keep him writing about us. And if we need some extra money, I sometimes give him some fake news so he drums up business in our shares, and then we sell out at a high."

Joshua gave a slight sigh. "Whatever happened to those down-on-their luck soldiers, running about with wash pans and finding their fortunes down in the creek-bed?"

Quitich drank his wine. "Innocence lost, my friend." He dragged a piece of crust through barely-cooked venison juices as he cleaned his plate. "Take young Clemens there. Failed as a prospector a couple years back, so he turned his focus to other talents. Hell of a writer." Quitich smirked. "Maybe one day you'll be reading his books in your little prospector's tent."

"Maybe," Joshua admitted. He was about to ask when Quitich thought the storm might end, when a man in a gray suit sauntered past and bumped against Quitich's chair. "Sorry," the man said, giving Quitich's shoulder a strange squeeze and double pat.

Quitich immediately glanced up, then looked quickly back down at his plate, as if hoping no one caught his interest.

But Joshua leaned in and whispered, "What was that?"

Quitich held up a finger. "Just wait," he whispered, glancing around. "It's a signal. Act naturally for another minute, then follow me to the kitchen. There's a side door that leads down to the cellar and a large converted space."

"Converted into what?"

"A secret meeting room."

Joshua swallowed hard. He imagined visions of Quitich in red robes performing dark ceremonies and vile sacrifices.

"It's time," Quitich whispered, "we lent some aid to our old friends Davis and Lee."

# # #

It was a moment Joshua had feared for close to six months

now. Largely isolated from the vagaries of sweeping political change and volatile social concerns, Joshua had stayed informed but uninvolved as the country became divided, threatening to collapse the unified power he had fought for years ago.

Events across the country had built up to this moment for decades, careening to this stormy night and to this darkly lit chamber thick with pipe smoke and illuminated by soft gas lamps. Two dozen men, many of them the wealthiest in town, sat around a long wooden table in the undecorated room. They had warily accepted Joshua only after Quitch vouched for him.

Quitch stood at the head of the table and took a deep breath. "Up until now, we have all contributed as much as we dared to the cause, helping our home states where possible. The fight goes on, and it looks like it will not be over soon. Lincoln has fed his treasury with the gold from California, and now with Governor Nye in place here, he takes our wealth to fund the death of our brothers!"

Angry murmurs of agreement sounded in the room. "It's time," continued Quitch, "to go a step further. The Union Army is here, recruiting down in the square."

Around the table, men shook their heads. Joshua's lips felt parched and his palms began to sweat. Quitch gave Joshua a brief glance. "I have received word that a small convoy outside the city is run by loyalists to Davis; they are heading to Tennessee to join up with General Albert Johnston there against

Grant's advancing forces. Anyone interested in signing on can do so tonight. You will head out under nightfall. God-willing, you will be at the battlefield in less than two months."

Amid further murmurs and some discussion, Quitch said, "That is all." He looked to Joshua, then took a seat beside him. "You have a decision to make."

Before Joshua could finish shaking his head, Quitch put a hand on his arm and tightened his grip. "I have secretly contacted officers by telegraph, and have been assured that we would be brought on with an upgrade to our previous rank. And I have inquired about positions as marksmen."

A glint appeared in his eye. "Come, Joshua. It will be like blasting Mexicans off the walls at Veracruz!"

Joshua looked away, smelling gunpowder and flinching with echoes of cannon blasts. "I did not enjoy it then," he said. "And this time we would be killing our own countrymen."

"Not Virginians!" Quitch sneered. "And need I remind you of our debt to Lee? To Davis?"

"We deserted them back in San Francisco - or have you forgotten?"

Quitch's expression darkened. He slammed his palm against the table. "I am going! I leave it to you whether you will be at my side. But know this - no more will I let you back in after losing your way. My generosity is at an end."

Joshua hung his head. Guilt tormented his soul - torn

first in loyalty to Caroline, whom he failed, and then to Quitch, whom he deserted, now he had a chance to make up for those choices. "Can I have time to think on it?"

A smile broke through Quitch's sneer. "Of course. And I apologize for the threat. But if that weasel Nye actually believes he can dictate our loyalties - it is too much to bear!"

"I understand," Joshua said. "I'll walk back to your office after I've thought on this."

"There is one other point you may wish to consider," said Quitch. "You and I have a considerable stake in the outcome of this conflict."

Joshua raised an eyebrow. "What have you done?"

"Invested. Quite a sum, too. An investment, however, that will pay huge dividends should we succeed." Quitch stood, smiling. "Always bet on the proven winners. Lee and Davis will not fail us. And we should not fail them."

# # #

He found Xien alone, cleaning up after entertaining visitors at a card game. When Xien cleared the table, he took a seat across from Joshua.

"So, my friend. You brave the storm and arrive with a look of desperate sadness." He poured a glass of whiskey for each of them. "What has happened?"

Joshua took a sip. "I must make a difficult choice."

"I see." Xien set his drink down, untouched. He looked

away, toward a stark wall and a simple shrine set before a floormat, a meditation place of comfort and prayer. Joshua found himself envious of his friend's dedication to his beliefs - even while his had diminished, if not crumbled, in the wake of his own loss.

"Quitich is going to fight in the War," Joshua said. "He has asked me to join him."

Xien said nothing.

"It will be a long trip," Joshua said. "And I might not come back." He waited for Xien to say something, then continued. "We would leave the mine in charge of the superintendents - and that frightening Doctor Dreggel. We would be officers, and not on the front lines at least. It's what I had always hoped for."

He looked down into his half-full glass. "But I have no one to impress with such a thing anymore." He sighed. "And I do not know if I believe in this cause. I have lived so long away from Virginia. I have no one left there that I care for, and the South's insistence on the servitude of other human beings I find deplorable and always have."

Joshua cleared his throat. "What should I do?"

Not getting an answer quickly, he continued: "But there is the matter of loyalty. And guilt. I deserted the army for greed years ago. And shortly after, I left my friend for a woman, taking up a quest I knew to be fruitless."

He finished the drink. "Now I can at least maintain my bond with Quitch, and perhaps renew the friendship we once had, before our interests diverged. Perhaps I am being given a chance to lead him back away from this current darkness."

Joshua set the glass down with a bang. He moved his head into Xien's field of vision. "Never have I heard you refrain from offering an opinion!"

Xien focused his eyes on Joshua's. "You came seeking advice from one not qualified to offer it. So I allowed you to talk, to reason through the decision for yourself."

"And what have I decided?" Joshua asked, throwing up his arms. "I am still conflicted, and I see the value in both choices."

Xien reached for the deck of cards and began to shuffle. "If you truly cannot decide, and have reasoned through the solutions, then may I suggest allowing fate to guide you?"

Joshua frowned, watching him shuffle. He recalled another deck of cards, a crowded San Francisco street. A woman muttering about a 'Dangerous Rival'. Another fragment of a dream swam by, but he shook free and focused on the present. "What are you doing?"

"Red or black?" asked Xien, sliding the cards together and placing the deck in the center of the table. "I will turn over the top card, and you will abide its choice."

Joshua took a deep breath, then agreed. "Red, and I will

go to War. Black, and I stay behind."

"No second guesses," said Xien. "The cards will speak, and I, too, will abide their decision, waiting for your return on the one hand, or staying here by your side on the other."

Joshua nodded, and held his breath as Xien flipped the card.