

The following short-story has **Adult XXX-rated** themes. These are entirely fictional and are not meant to condone any real life violence toward women etc. (*note: acting out fantasies in private consensual "role-playing" games doesn't apply here*). This added material is intended only for those Adults who are entertained by such fictional imaginations.

The actors and actresses in the rehearsed photos are over 18 years (see [here](#) for a list of sites from where they were extracted). The anime/hentai/cartoon/3D/CGI images depict sexual fantasies of many Adults and as strictly drawings of erotic art are harmless and (at one time) were not subject to any legal restrictions (see [here](#)). These images were created to be over 18 years old by their artists.

These short-stories do not have an "editor-in-chief". Many individuals contributed to different sections in a story. So it is possible that some questionable images "slipped through the cracks". If any image is judged to be illegal by a newer law, please contact [kelli@hotlegsinlove.com](mailto:kelli@hotlegsinlove.com) and it will be removed.

All of these images were retrieved from "free" public (i.e., non-paysite) websites including Google. Some have a massive collection from fake-celebrity-sex to BDSM to incest to bestiality images [such as [8muses.com](http://8muses.com) ]. The assumption was that if these somewhat-realistic images were illegal, the legal authorities would have had them removed a long time ago. But they are still there and so they are being used here and saving you a lot of web-surfing time.

If you are someone who might be offended by such fiction or the prevailing Laws of your locale do not permit viewing ***"Forced Sex"***-type material --

and especially if you are under 21 years of age --

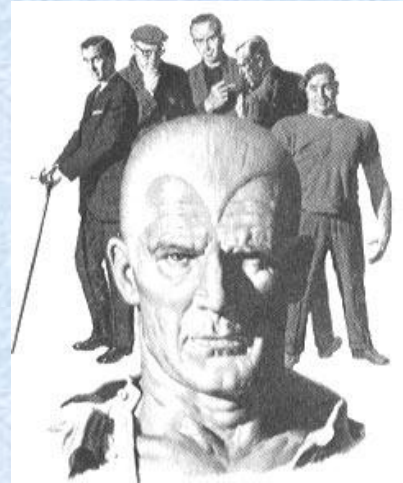
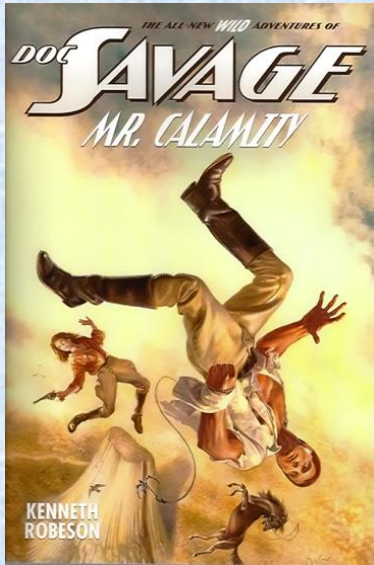
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# Doc Savage #204XXX - "Mr. Calamity"

by Will Murray - February/2014

(XXX material added by [kelli@hotlegsinline.com](mailto:kelli@hotlegsinline.com))



**XXXXXX Not For Viewing By Anyone Under 21 XXXXXX**

*Prospecting in the Wyoming badlands, Pat Savage spies a man swimming in circles high in a cloudless sky! But when she vanishes, her cousin Doc Savage is forced to take action. The **Man of Bronze** and his mighty crew race to avert an impending tragedy by a nebulous devil in human form who calls himself 'Mr. Calamity'. (with **Patricia Savage** !)*

## THE PERILS OF PAT SAVAGE



<http://www.hotlegsinline.com/PSXXX.htm>

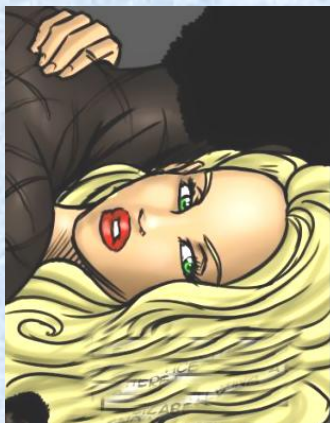


**XXXX** This is a 'X'-rated version of the original novel. **XXXX**

# The Perils of Patricia Savage

modified by [kelli@hotlegsinline.com](mailto:kelli@hotlegsinline.com)

**\*\*\*\* Not For Viewing By Anyone Under 21 \*\*\*\***



Thanks to [Blackmask.com](http://Blackmask.com) , [Worldlibrary.net](http://Worldlibrary.net) , [Munseys.com](http://Munseys.com) and the other websites who previously converted these Doc Savage paperbacks into electronic format. They were used as the base for inserting the **XXX** material.

The Adult **images** that accompany the **XXX** material were from free public sites such as [LuxBabes.com](http://LuxBabes.com) , [Twistys](http://Twistys) , [Hot Pornstars](http://HotPornstars) , [Richards-Realm.com](http://Richards-Realm.com) , and [Celebritiesmix.com](http://Celebritiesmix.com) .

The fantasy **XXX** material was in part created by inspiration from Rebecca at [RebeccaHAP.com](http://RebeccaHAP.com) and those wicked and talented **BDSM** erotic artists at [DoFantasy.com](http://DoFantasy.com) and [8Muses.com](http://8Muses.com) .

note: to skip to images of **Pat Savage In Peril**, do a <Ctrl>-F (Find) on **XXXX** .



# I – The Swimmer in the Sky

The **copper**-haired girl told everyone who inquired that she was heading up into the Bighorn Mountains to hunt jackalopes.

"I hear that they're as thick as jackrabbits up here," she was heard to say.

The young woman was much too attractive for me to laugh at her directly. But behind her back, they averted their vision and repressed knowing grins.

For the jackalope was a mythical anima. A purported cross between an antelope and a hare, both of which were plentiful in the Bighorn Mountains.

Ever since some Wyoming card had mounted antelope antlers on a stuffed jackrabbit, the jackalope's fame had spread beyond the borders of the rugged Western state.

No such creature actually existed. The **copper**-haired girl knew that. But she had her reasons for telling that particular untruth.

When asked her name, she declared it to be Darla Dell. But that was a fib, too.

Her name was not 'Darla Dell' any more than her natural hair was the **metallic** hue of a newly-minted penny.

The supposed 'Darla Dell' rode out on horseback from the town of Bison one morning. A Winchester rifle was in the saddle sheath. And an ancient single-action .44-caliber revolver was snug in the holster of a cartridge-belt slung around her girlish hips.

She was slender and pretty and somewhere in her 20s. Her hair and tanned skin partook of a warm **coppery** hue. Her brown riding boots were worn but had a fresh polish. A cotton shirt and white whipcord breeches hugged her delectable form. There was a ragged tear in her gray suede blazer. A milk-white Stetson was suspended down her back with the chin strings knotted in front of her lithe tanned column of a throat.

She looked every inch a girl of the modern West. Which was not exactly the case, either.

Alone, she rode into the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains. Behind her dark-lensed sunglasses which she never took off, entrancing eyes searched the terrain.

Saddlebags were filled with the necessities of Western life as well as assorted prospector tools. For that was what the young woman calling herself 'Darla Dell' was truly about. She was prospecting.

Among her possessions was a pan for sifting **gold** from sand, various picks, and other implements of the sourdough.

But Darla Dell was not seeking **gold** exactly. Not that she had anything against **gold**. If she found it, she was certainly going to take it. This section of Wyoming was not known **for** gold. There were



other riches waiting to be gleaned. **Jade** for one. The Cheyenne had treasured it. And what they left behind was still valuable.

Darla Dell didn't much care whether she found **gold**, **jade**, **silver**, or whatever. She just wanted to stake a claim and pocket the profits. Darla was a very determined young woman. And today, she was determined to turn her summer vacation into a profitable enterprise.

Water was scarce in these bone-dry mountains. Along about 11:00, Darla Dell took advantage of her canteen drinking about a quarter of its contents. Replacing the canteen sling on the saddle horn, she gazed about.

By this time, she had climbed high above the arid flatlands. If there had been sufficient trees to justify the term, it might be said that she was above the tree line. Trees were as scarce as water in this part of Wyoming. Almost as scarce as the nonexistent jackalope.

There had been a recent rain. In fact, 2 days of it. But one couldn't tell from looking about the foothills. The blistering **Sun** had dried up all but a few stubborn mudholes.

The morning's activities had thus far been a bust. But this did not deter Darla Dell (or whatever her real name might be). Prospecting was an activity that required patience (among other virtues).

Dismounting, Darla Dell took the reins of her mount and led her along. Finding **gold** or **jade** was not something that one did atop a horse but rather by leading it.

From time-to-time she stopped and applied a pocket magnifying glass to an interesting outcropping. Each time she made a little noise of disgust and continued on.

"I hope you're not in a hurry to go home, Lightning," she told her pony.

The animal made a little bit of a snorting sound that could be interpreted any way one wished.

Darla Dell gave Lightning a reassuring <pat> along the side of her magnificent neck. The horse was one of those equine specimens that somebody rarely sees outside of a Hollywood cowboy picture. She was a chestnut filly with a flowing mane as black as dyed mink. Her switching tail was flaxen in hue.

Along the pony's cumber (hindquarters) was burned a brand. A circle containing what appeared to be a jagged scorch mark. The jagged line suggested a streak of lightning.

Now horses are normally branded with the name of the ranch to which they belonged. Notwithstanding the fact that this pony's name was 'Lightning', this was purely coincidental. In the parlance of this corner of Wyoming, the pony belonged to the string owned by the Circle Bolt Ranch. 'Bolt' for thunderbolt. A jagged slash bisecting a circle constituted the brand.

As brands go, it was not typical. But very modern.

Leaving Lightning to wander about, Darla Dell walked into the noon part of the day discovering nothing worthwhile. And yet her demeanor suggested that she was having an interesting time.

And it was about to get more interesting. Far more than Darla Dell imagined.



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*Noises* in the bush alerted her that something was prowling.

Quicker than a rattlesnake reacting to a cowboy's hard boot, Darla Dell yanked her old-fashioned .44-caliber revolver out of its leather holster. The steel of the barrel and cylinder was not nicked or blued or otherwise treated against rust. It was of the finest quality conceivable. The grip was ivory. By contrast, the worn holster exactly fitted the contour of the big weapon indicating long usage.

Western movies like to portray the regulation cowboy as quick on the trigger and apt to shoot a man as easily as to say 'hello'. But in actuality, the working cowboy kept his revolver handy for rattlesnakes and the occasional coyote.

But the bushy *sounds* coming from up ahead did not sound like any of these critters.

Lightning made a nervous *whinny* when her ears pricked up at the sound. Darla Dell reassured the chestnut pony with a murmuring voice and a steadying hand.

Presently, a man stepped out from behind a hillcock and into view. He was not mounted nor was he leading a horse of his own.

"How do'," he greeted lifting one hand in a calming gesture of peace.

"Howdy," returned Darla Dell lowering her six-shooter.

"I ain't no rattler if that's what you're thinkin'," remarked the man.

Darla Dell laughed without a trace of nervousness. Her demeanor was wholly unafraid. Her smile was natural (if a trifle guarded).

"You spooked my pony," she explained.

"But not you, huh?" laughed the other.

His grin was infectious. It caused a galaxy of freckles to parade across his **sunburnt** nose and cheeks.

"I don't spook easy," returned the girl.

And it was no boast. One could tell that by her confident tone of voice.

The cowboy held his sun-bleached hat crown-downward and peered intently at the damp sweatband. The color of his hair was close to the look of pine shavings.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Darla Dell. And yours?"



"Hud. Just call me Hud."

"What are you going up in the mountains without a horse, Hud?" she asked.

"Oh, shucks. I'm trying to get down off the gol-durned mountain. Looking for the swimmin' hole that happens every time it rains."

"I didn't see anything like that," returned Darla Dell.

"Well, it's a fair piece southwest of here. And that's where I'm bound."

Hud looked the girl up-and-down appraisingly.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"No. I hail from back East."

"Is that right? Well, where are you stayin'?"

Darla saw no harm in telling the truth. Besides, it would be downright unfriendly not to. Wyoming and its people were that way.

"I'm bunking at the Circle Bolt Ranch."

Hud whistled sharply.

"The Circle Bolt! Mysterious place. People don't right know who owns it. The owner is hardly ever around."

"The owner is a friend of mine," said Darla. "He's kind of a hermit. Lives back East, also."

A big grin wreathed the face of Hud-the-cowboy.

"Then that explains matters, don't it? Well, I'm not here to pry into anyone's affairs. So I'll just mosey along. Nice meetin' you, ma'am."

"Same here," said Darla Dell holstering her impressive six-gun.

Clamping his hat back onto his head, the range bumpkin continued along his way trooping down the mountain in search of his watering hole.

Darla Dell thought to herself that it was a mighty long walk merely to take a swim. But on the other hand, the cowpoke looked as if he were in dire need of a bath. Some folks in this neck of the woods still practiced the cowboy habit of bathing on Saturdays. And today happened to be a Saturday.

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Darla Dell thought no more of the cowboy for the balance of the day in which she ranged the Bighorns (sometimes on horseback but most often on foot) in search of wealth for the taking.



It was a clear summer's day. Not a scrap of cloud cluttered the steely Western sky. The celestial dome was the metallic blue that open sky sometimes achieves when atmospheric conditions are just right. Meteorologists might explain the phenomenon. But it meant that the Solar disk was unobstructed. Its rays beat down relentlessly.

Darla made frequent stops for water. She avoided removing her white Stetson off the wealth of coppery hair that smoldered like red gold in the harsh sunlight.

The hour approached 4:00 in the afternoon when she noticed that she was feeling light-headed. She was swaying in her saddle trying to keep upright. But the *spell* that was creeping over her brain was stronger than her determined will.

Reining in her pony, she slipped to the ground and lay down in the dirt. She concentrated on her breathing. That was the recommended cure for altitude sickness which is what she had acquired.

The sickness had crept up on her unnoticed. As an outdoors girl, she knew about it. She had been warned that if she ventured too high up in the mountains, the lack of oxygen would *stealthily* do its work.

So Darla Dell lay there waiting for the disorienting weakness to pass.

There was nothing much to do lying on her back in the Sun. So she searched the sky with eyes still protected by sunglasses. If there had been any clouds, she might have counted them. But clouds were absent.

Shielded eyes shifting about the blue bowl above, something caught her attention. Something high in the sky.

At first, she thought it might be a hawk circling.

The thing in the sky was in fact circling. But it was no hawk. It lacked wings for one thing. Also, it was too big to be a hawk. From the distance (which was half of a mile), it was difficult to tell the exact size of the circling thing.

Darla Dell had a pair of binoculars stuffed in her saddle bag. With considerable effort, she got back on her feet and harvested them. She trained the lenses on the unusual oddity in the sky.

Then she almost dropped them.

A breathy gasp escaped her parted lips. For she could see that the thing in the sky was a Man! And that **he was swimming about in circles!**

"Impossible!" she burst out.

When the frank utterance failed to later the situation, Darla Dell put the field glasses back in front of her eyes and gave the focusing screw some attention.

She had, or course, removed her sunglasses for this. And had there been an observer other than her pony, they would see that Darla Dall's *eyes* were an interesting color. They were warm yellow. A little like honey but with a metallic glint.

Darla attempted to make out the features of the man who appeared to be swimming in circles. That he was swimming was undeniable. His hands and arms were frantically churning and scooping while his feet were kicking in an equally agitated manner.

"A man swimming in thin air!" she exclaimed.

At this distance (which was respectable), it was impossible to discern the features of the swimming man. Only that he did not appear to be wearing much in the way of clothing.

As Darla Dell watched, the man's exertions became labored. Frantic kicking of his feet along with the slowing sweep of his arms showed definite signs of fatigue.

Evidently the swimming man had reached the limits of his physical endurance for he faltered... stopped ... and began to sin hundreds of yards up in absolutely thin air!

Sensing what was coming, Darla Dell flung herself into the saddle. She lashed her chestnut filly in the direction of the stricken man as rapidly as safety permitted. Her altitude sickness was all but forgotten.

Safety did not permit her to keep her field glasses trained on the man in the strange predicament. But she could see his tiny form etched against the impossibly *blue* sky.

The man was not exactly falling. Rather, it appeared as if he were sinking as if he were immersed in water.

That, too, was impossible. There was no moisture in the sky to speak of. No cloud had troubled the unbroken expanse.

The man sank and sank. His arms flailed about as if clawing for something to grab hold of. It was somehow sickening.

Suddenly as if something invisible had let him go, he plummeted to earth.

"Oh no!" Darla Dell exclaimed.

Spurring Lightning, she charged for the spot where she knew the man would land. And land hard.

Darla Dell did not look like a young woman who was afraid of much. But as she approached the rocky place where the body had presumably landed, her eyes grew narrow and her face showed strain. It was evident that she knew what to expect and was unafraid to confront it, regardless.

The man's body had landed in a flat section of greasewood scrubland. She could see him lying there face-up. His arms and legs splayed like a starfish that had been deposited on a sandy beach by a tide.



Dismounting, she walked the rest of the way leading the pony whose skittishness was evidenced by a nervous *whinnying* and other equine utterances.

The man was not naked. He wore shorts. But that was all.

The patch of earth upon which he had fallen should have been dry as an antelope's skull. But it was not. It was moist.

Moreover, precipitation was pattering down upon the body lightly but steadily. Raindrops made tiny pits in the sandy soil.

Darla Dell looked up. No clouds. Not even scud. There was no place from which the rain could have come. And rain did not emanate from empty sky. She knew that for a certainty.

The rain finished falling as she entered the zone of moisture. Then it ceased.

The ground squirmed and writhed in spots. Blinking, she toed at the disturbances. Wiggle worms and pollywogs were flopping about in the mud.

"Strange," she muttered.

They should not have been there. Not unless they too fell from the sky.

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Once beside the body, Darla Dell got a good look at the man's face. It was twisted as if the last sight he had absorbed had filled him with an unutterable **horror**.

The man's face was familiar. Even without the shade of his cowboy hat, the freckled features were unmistakable.

It was Hud! The cowboy who had been in search of a natural bath in a watering hole that came-and-went with the seasons.

Evidently, he had found his watering hole for he was soaked to the skin. He was also dead. The height from which he had fallen ensured that outcome.

Nudging him at several spots, Darla Dell felt bones that had been broken (if not shattered). The unfortunate man's entire skeleton had been disjointed and pulverized by the fall.

Again, the **copper**-haired girl looked up. Her honey-hued **orbs** searched the sky.

The man had shown every outward indication of swimming in circles like a goldfish trying to get out an aquarium bowl. The bright Sun made searching the upper atmosphere difficult.

But of course, there was no goldfish bowl. Nor was there any body of water in which a man could swim suspended hundreds of yards in the sky.

And yet the evidence that a man had done exactly that lay shattered and broken before her.

As a final raindrop splashed one cheek like a tear, Darla Dell murmured to herself.

"I reckon my vacation plans have just gone to pieces."

She did not sound entirely unhappy about it.



## II – Vanishing Swimming Hole

The **coppery** horsewoman rode back to the town of Bison as rapidly as common sense would permit.

She urged the animal along at a brisk canter knowing that running at a gallop would cost more time than otherwise. Only in Hollywood films are horses urged along at full gallop over long distances by actors who didn't know any better.

Eventually she drifted into the small town situated east of the Bighorn mountains and west of the Black Hills. She found the general store and dismounted, tying the reins of her mount to a hitching post that had probably been there since the days of the infamous Hole-in-the-Wall Gang.

Striding into the establishment, she told the proprietor:

"I must use your telephone.

Despite being the county seat, Bison boasted only one public telephone. And this was it. It was a crank affair. A long box of oak about 20 years out of date. It was bolted to the wall in a corner of the store next to the feed bin.

Lifting the Bakelite handset earpiece, the woman calling herself 'Darla Dell' gave the crank a furious winding until Central came on the line.

"Connect me with the Circle bolt Ranch, please," she requested. "It is urgent."

*"Hold your horses"* returned the operator who was not used to being rushed.

"Please hurry," repeated Darla Dell.

Presently, her party came on the line and a querulous voice asked:

*"Who is it?"*

"It's you-know-who. I stumbled across some mighty interesting trouble."

The voice seemed to frown.

*"What happened to your plans to prospect for everything under the Sun and strike it rich?"*

"I can do that tomorrow. But can you pile into your jalopy and get over here now?"

*"If it's worth my time. I'm tinkering with a television contraption that I'm trying to perfect."*

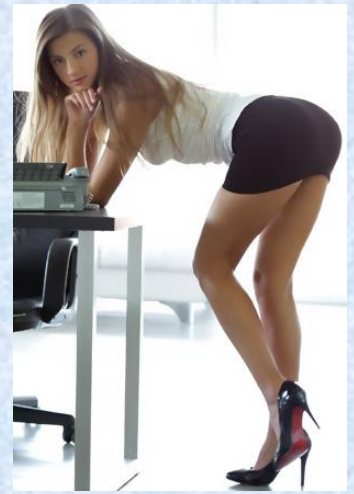
"Whatever it is," countered the **copper**-haired girl, "it can wait. Just like my prospecting."

*"If you say so,"* sighed the querulous voice.

"I do say so," returned Darla Dell firmly before hanging up.

Turning from the instrument, she noticed the store proprietor staring fixedly.

Men always stared at her a lot. That was nothing unusual. Not that it was especially welcome.



The proprietor seemed to be chewing something. The **coppery** girl assumed that it was tobacco.

"Have you anything cold to drink?" she asked.

His jaws stopped working.

"Pop. What flavor?"

"Black cherry. Do you have that?"

"Fresh out of black cherry. How about orange."

"Orange pop gives me the hiccups. I'll settle for grape."

The proprietor went to the icebox and removed a tall bottle of grape soda which he placed on the counter saying:

"That'll be a nickel, please."

A nickel was laid down next to the bottle and claimed. The proprietor had already popped the cap with an opener.

Darla Dell walked out to the sidewalk. It was a raised platform of planks. She drank slowly. Her honey-hued **eyes** behind her dark glasses were thoughtful.

Before long, the proprietor drifted out to join her. He struck up a conversation. His breath did not smell of chewing tobacco. It was odd. Half familiar, that odor.

"What's the urgency?"



The **coppery** girl hesitated.

"What urgency?" she retorted finally.

"I couldn't help but overhear you say something about trouble ..."

"You misheard me. I didn't say 'trouble'. I asked for my friend to get out here on the double."

"Sounds urgent," mused the proprietor chewing methodically.

His masticating produced a puzzling noise. A soft *squeaking*.

"Don't you have bare shelves in need of stocking?" Darla Dell suggested pointedly.

"Pardon me, then," said the proprietor drifting back into his store.

"He must not get a lot of company," sniffed Darla returning to her grape pop.

Finishing it, she remounted her pony and began riding in the direction of the Circle Bolt Ranch with the expectation of encountering the person she had summoned.

The vehicle she encountered in due time was a battered station-wagon of a type common in this part of the country and used to convey people and tools across the vast empty distances that comprised the state of Wyoming.

The station-wagon braked to a halt, making dust move lazily. As Darla was dismounting, an undersized man with sail-like ears and 2 gold front teeth stepped out from behind the wheel and demanded: "Why didn't you wait for me in town?"

"Because we're not going to town," retorted the **copper**-haired woman. "The trouble I spoke of isn't in town."

The new arrival studied Darla Dell who was a morsel of femininity outside the common herd of women or girls. His scrutiny did not seem to reflect any noticeable appreciation of that undeniable fact, however.

"Lead the way, then," said the puny man climbing back behind the wheel.

The horsewoman gave her mount a gentle by the reins and was off.

The station-wagon struggled with the rough terrain. But it was the type designed for conditions in which roads were indifferent and sometimes nonexistent.

On the way to the spot where the dead man lay, they encountered the mud hole. Darla stepped off and began inspecting it.

She was shortly joined by the driver who asked: "What is this?"

"It looks like a mud hole. Recognize it?"

The puny man looked as if he was **ill-tempered** in general. But now he displayed that quality in abundance.

"Did you drag me away from my tinkering to look at an ordinary mud hole?"

"No. Of course not!" flared the girl. "But this may be part of the trouble. Are you familiar with this spot?"

The undersized man dragged a battered hat off his head which was definitely not in the Western style. He walked around the spot and studied it with pale eyes.

"It seems to me that this is a swimming hole when there's enough water to fill the pit."

"I thought so," said the other tightly. "This must be the swimming hole that Hud said he was headed for."

"Who is Hud?" the man asked.

"The dead man I called you about. Let me take you to him."

**"Dead man?!"**

"I think he drowned. But that's only my opinion."

Without waiting for a response, the **copper**-haired woman swung onto her steed with the lithe grace of a cat springing onto a chair. She galloped away in a pulsing roll of hoofbeats.

The terrain was duty. Between the horse's hooves and the tires of the station-wagon, they kicked up a drifting cloud of the mouth-drying stuff.

"Rats!" complained the man behind the wheel of his wagon. "Looks like I'll get no work done today."

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It was another 20 minutes before they came up on the **spot** where a dead man had made his landing.

The patch of moisture was well on its way to drying. For a moment, Darla hesitated thinking she might have the wrong spot.

There was no body nor any signs of blood. The body had not burst open upon striking the ground, she remembered.

Doffing her dark glasses, she gave the surrounding terrain careful scrutiny. She recognized 2 boulders and a bit of prickly pear cactus.



"No, this is definitely the spot."

The puny one was out of the station-wagon by this point and was looking around unhappily.

"Where is this dead man you told me about?"

Darla Dell did not immediately reply. She was walking the terrain in her boots until she came upon a spot where the ground was concave. The concavity was not entirely regular. But it was still enough to tell her that this was the place where the dead man had fallen from the sky.

"The body landed at this exact spot," she told the other. "I'm confident of that fact."

The frowning fellow did not know what to say at first. So, he yanked at one ear in agitation.

"Suppose you start at the beginning," he suggested. "If there is a beginning. Because I don't see any dead man."

The **copper**-haired woman put her brown fists on her hips. She looked as though she wanted to take out her six-gun and perforate something in sheer frustration.

"I met a man not far from here," she related. "Said his name was 'Hud'. He told me he was on his way to bathe in the swimming hole."

The mud hole back yonder a ways?"

"Probably," she concurred. "Perhaps an hour later, I happened notice something in the sky. It was a man. And he appeared to be swimming. Swimming in circles."

The puny fellow growled. "Probably a mirage."

"Mirage my saddle sores!" she snorted. "I put my binoculars on him and saw more clearly. He was way up there. Maybe a half-mile in the clear **blue** sky. Just swimming in circles like he was trying to find dry land but couldn't locate any."

"A half-mile up, you say?"

"At least. Now this part may be hard to swallow."

"I'm already gagging."

"Then try to keep your dinner down," she advised tartly. "This man swimming in the sky started acting as if he had run out of steam. He slowed down and stopped swimming. Then he began to sink."

"At first, the sinking was slow. But then as if he dropped out of something that held him up, he plummeted to the ground. I rode for the spot as hard as I could and found him lying here. Dead."

"You sure about that?"

Darla nodded vigorously.

"I checked him over. Practically every bone in his body was broken. He had fallen a great distance. And that wasn't all that had fallen. The ground was **wet** just as you see now. But it was moist from **raindrops** still falling. Falling from a cloudless sky."

The man looked up. He scrutinized the sky and remarked:

"I haven't seen a cloud all day. Matter of fact, it looks like we're starting on another dry spell."

"This part of Wyoming," said Darla frankly, "is practically a desert."

"No argument there. So what's your point?"

"I saw a man swimming in the sky as if he was immersed in water. Then he fell out of **whatever** he was swimming in. And when he landed, **raindrops** were still falling. He was completely wet. It was Hud who had gone to bathe in the swimming hole."

"Well, there's no water in the swimming hole," the man returned. "Unless you count the muddy mess."

"2 questions nag me."

The runty man eyed the other dubiously.

"Only two?"

Darla whipped off her sunglasses revealing scornful **eyes** of amber.

"Don't be wise! The 2 questions are how did the man get up into the sky? And what happened to the water in the swimming hole?"

The other scratched at the nape of his neck.

"I can think of a third question. Namely did you keep your hat on all day? The **Sun** is pretty strong out here."

The **copper**-haired woman whirled on the runty man. The look on her attractive face was not pleasant.

"Are you insinuating that I'm heat-addled?"

"Well, I'm wondering which part of your story is mirage and which part comes from being out under a baking **Sun** all day. Either way, I'm inclined to see this as a problem of too much **Sun** somewhere."

Darla Dell firmed her delectable lips. She narrowed her eyes and said stubbornly:

"I saw what I saw. There's no taking that back."

"So where is the body of this Hud dude?"



The woman looked around in frowning frustration.

"Darned if I know."

*There was a thin silence as the pair shared an impasse.*

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Finally, the undersized fellow suggested: "We might wander back into town and ask after anyone named 'Hud'. See if he's missing."

"It's a start," said the woman dispiritedly.

Looking at the other challengingly, she demanded: "And what if there is a Hud and he's missing?"

"In that case, you have a swell mystery to unravel."

The concerned look on the woman's face suddenly altered. It brightened. A little bit of an intrigued smile worked her **sun-bronzed** features.

"If I do, Long Tom, promise one thing. Don't call **Doc** into it. We'll solve it ourselves."

"No promises," said the puny individual addressed as 'Long Tom'.

"You stinker!"

"This is probably nothing," added Long Tom. "But if it turns out to be something, from what you describe it might be something Big. And **Doc** will want to play a hand in it."

"Just hold off until I get the ball rolling in some way," she pleaded. "So when **Doc** pulls up in his sky chariot, it will be my mystery he's pitching in to solve and not one of his own."

"Suit yourself," Long Tom said climbing back behind the wheel and starting the engine. "You found this impossibility. It's yours until I say otherwise."

"Who appointed you sheriff of all Wyoming?" the girl snapped back.

But Long Tom didn't wait. He sent the station-wagon hurtling back toward town at high speed leaving the young woman to scramble onto her saddle and do her best to keep up.

Despite the seemingly shabby treatment she had been accorded, the **bronze-copper** girl was grinning happily.

### III – Hang Rope

Runty Long Tom flung his station-wagon along the rutted roads of northeastern Wyoming with suspension-punishing violence.

He was an impatient sort of cuss. It showed in the lead-footed way he drove along. He was not pacing his vehicle so that the girl whose real name was 'Pat' was not left behind but instead accelerated sporadically.

Long Tom could not help himself. His temperament was not the most moderate.

Perhaps it was the long nights that he had put into electrical work in his basement laboratory back in New York that had done it. Although the windowless confines of the former wine cellar were usually blamed for his unhealthy mushroom complexion.

Soon, the girl and her horse were lost in the dust clouds created by his spinning tires.

Long Tom was not exactly a gentleman when it came to women. He was not unnecessarily rude to the fair sex. But he nonetheless seemed immune to their charms for some reason.

A gentleman (especially a Western gentleman) would have loitered so that a girl following on horseback could catch up from time-to-time. But Long Tom had a powerful hankering to get back to the Circle Bolt Ranch where he had been conducting electrical experiments.

Pat had characterized him as a hermit and this was allowably true. Long Tom liked solitude. He preferred to be left alone when he was in an experimenting frame of mind.

For the puny fellow was no less than the world-renowned electrical engineer Major (ret.) Thomas J. "Long Tom" Roberts. He was considered one of the preeminent men in his field. He was almost entirely self-made.

Experimenting with electrons and developing complicated electromechanical devices was how he made his way in the World. Finding the peaceful privacy to spend arduous hours doing so had vexed him for quite some time.

Recently a distant relative had passed on to his final reward and Long Tom found himself heir to a modest ranch in the shadow of Big Butte here in the Powder River breaks.

Long Tom had flown out in his personal plane to inspect the place fully intending to sell it for what he could get. Then he decided that the solitude of the lonely little spot was conducive to electrical experimentation.

Renaming the place 'the Circle Bolt', he set up shop and got busy with transformer and dynamos. Before long he was contentedly making progress on any number of lines of inquiry. It was a kind of quiet paradise. But it was certain to be disturbed, life being what it was.

The first disturbance was Pat. Or Patricia Savage, to give her full name. She might be styled a businesswoman or an adventuress or both.





( <http://www.hotlegsinlove.com/AnnaXXX.htm> )

Long Tom was not entirely pleased when Pat dropped in unexpected and unannounced. But neither was he entirely displeased. For she was the cousin of the famous **Doc Savage** who is known far-and-wide as the greatest adventurer and scientist that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century had yet seen.

In his more adventurous moments, Long Tom was part of the Doc Savage outfit. A compact group of experts who followed the *Man of Bronze* in his unusual occupation of rectifying wrongs and punishing evil-doers while traveling the Globe in order to exact a measure of justice in this often-unjust world.

In her own adventurous moments, Pat Savage was continually horning in on her famous cousin's undertakings. Only rarely did she succeed in tagging along.

For an occupation, she ran a high-class beauty salon and gymnasium catering to the wealthy on New York's Park Avenue. It kept her busy and usually out of Doc Savage's hair. It was also well on its way to making her very comfortable in the cash department.

But Pat Savage was never one to settle for mere creature comfort. She had an eye for **gold** and a yen for wealth.

-----

"What are you doing here in Wyoming the middle of nowhere?" Long Tom had asked when Pat had presented herself at his doorstep distressingly unannounced.

"I needed a vacation from the city," said Pat as she barged in and surveyed the litter of electrical equipment choking the parlor. "It's too hot back East."

"Isn't your place air-conditioned?"

"It sure is," Pat returned cheerfully. "But there's nothing like wide-open spaces to give a gal a sense of being removed."

Long Tom cocked a pale orb in her direction dubiously.

"You have something up your sleeve," he remarked. "And it isn't your arm."

"I was reading in a magazine," Pat continued, "that you can find **gold** and **jade** and other precious items just lying around for the taking in the Bighorn Mountains."

"Possibly," said Long Tom guardedly. "So you're a prospector now?"

"I was in the mood for a vacation and I don't want to waste my valuable time," Pat explained. "I brought along everything one could want from a prospector's sifting pan to a pick ax. I just need some place to plump down for the night."

Long Tom might normally have put up an argument. But this was Pat Savage. He knew better. Pat had a tongue as tart as a green apple. And she knew how to wield words to cutting effect.

"Just stay out of my hair," he snorted. "I'm busy working."

"Don't let me keep your up. I know that you hold odd hours."

Pat almost immediately rode up into the mountains leaving Long Tom to tinker to his heart's content. 2 days had passed peacefully until Pat summoned him out into the airy open spaces with her wild tale of a frantic swimmer circling in the sky.

-----

The whole crazy yarn had peeved Long Tom considerably. He was in a rush to resume his tinkering. The puny Electrical Genius was destined not to do so for quite some time as he soon discovered when in steering around a draw, he almost ran into a knot of riders.

These riders were a strange clutch and collection of individuals. They were dressed for the range in flannel shirts and denim. They sat on their horses like statues blocking the way.

Seeing them, Long Tom immediately braked.

All of the men were masked. Coarse flour sacks were fitted over their heads. Ragged holes were crudely excavated so that their eyes could see out. They sat in their saddles with their rifles resting on their stocks, the barrels pointed upward.

None of them wore hats of any kind. In a land where a man was known by the type of hat he wore as much as by his choice of steed, this alone constituted a bad omen.

The most disturbing thing was that the horses also wore flour-sack masks. Evidently this quintet thought it prudent to conceal not only their own faces but also the equine countenances of the mounts they rode.

It was a comical sight in its way. But Long Tom Roberts was no humorist. He saw nothing funny about a group of masked riders and their equally caparisoned steeds.

Ans so the puny Electrical Wizard applied his brakes causing the station-wagon to jounce to a stop and become embroiled in the trail dust that hung in the air (there being no wind to blow it around).



Once the vehicle stopped rocking on its springs, the riders snapped down the muzzles of their rifles pointing the destructive ends at Long Tom visible through the dusty windshield.

One man growled: "Climb out, gent. Careful like."

Although looking feeble and unhealthy of both frame and complexion, Long Tom Roberts was not "yellow". Another man might have sat safely behind the wheel and assessed the situation. But not Long Tom. Hearing this challenge, he stepped out and thrust his jaw in the direction of the hooded riders.

Seemingly oblivious to the pointing rifle bores, Long Tom demanded: "Step to the way. You're blocking the road."

A high-pitched tittering laugh was emitted by one of the flour sacks which puffed out around the area of the owner's mouth.

"Road? I don't see any road."

A clump of greasewood disgorged a long lathy individual clutching a Winchester rifle. A gunnysack perforated with eyeholes encased the man's skull.

His Winchester whacked twice by way of foreward causing a covey of sagehens to flush from cover and go winging off.

"Claw yourself a fistful of sky!" he commanded.

His voice was as metallic as the parting twang of overstretched barbed wire. Long Tom became even more irate.

"What's this all about?" he demanded. "Better not be a holdup."

"What makes you say that, little fella?"

"I don't have my wallet with me. And I don't like bandits."

"We're not bandits. We're vigilantes," rasped the gunnysack-masked man. "You're the dude who owns the Circle Bolt spread, ain't you?"

"What's it to you?"

"Maybe you heard. But there are some outfits in this neck of the woods that raise mules. Not cows or horses."

"I haven't had time to meet any of my neighbors as yet," replied Long Tom.

"You see, mules have been disappearin' from the range. It's been costin' folks money," advised the one who appeared to be the leader. "It all started a couple of months ago. First a mule here and then a donkey there. The next thing you know is there's a shortage. A suspicious shortage."

Long Tom's hands were hardening into fists. His eyes took on the pointedness of flint arrowheads.

"What's that have to do with me?"

"Didn't you take over the Circle Bolt around 2 months ago?"

His face hardening, Long Tom said: "And what if I did?"

"Well, it's kinda like this. Folks around these parts have got to talkin' among themselves and they started noticin' the coincidence. If you know what I mean."

"I'm getting your 'drift' if that's where you were drifting," Long Tom said harshly. "And I don't care much for the insinuation."

"Some blackguard's been rustling mules. And we think you're the cultus hombre behind it."

"Well, I'm not," said Long Tom.

"Prove it."

"You prove that I am the rustler!" snapped Long Tom impatiently.

A lanky man slid off his horse and began approaching. The others followed suit.

The gunnysacked leader kept his Winchester trained on Long Tom until all the others joined him. Soon every gun barrel was arrayed in his direction. Long Tom found himself surrounded.

"If you're thinking of arresting me," retorted Long Tom, "I'll have you know that I am a ..."

Before the slender Electrical Wizard could properly identify himself, one man pulled a heavy rope out of his saddle bag. Long Tom's eyes popped open when he saw that it had already been woven into a stout noose.

There was a cottonwood tree nearby and 2 men walked the noose over to it. They began throwing the dressed end up into the branches in a way that made their intentions plain.

"What was that you were going to say?" grunted one of the road agents.

"I said my name is Long Tom Roberts. Maybe you heard of me."

"Long Tom, you say. That's a funny moniker. Kind of an owlhoot name if you ask me."

Murmurings of agreement went around the masked group while the noose was being settled into place. When it was done, the loop hung twice as high as the undersized Long Tom stood.

"I guess you're going to need to borrow one of our horses," said the spokesman of the group.

The other men laughed raucously.



"You'll have a sweet time getting me into the saddle," warned Long Tom. "I don't lynch easily."

"I suppose we could just shoot him," a masked man suggested casually.

"That wouldn't be right. Rustlers ought to be hung, not shot."

"We could shoot him some, another ruminated. "Hoist him up on the horse and stick that scrawny neck into the hang rope. Then let gravity finish the job."

The hooded men had been drifting closer. They discussed their intentions openly.

Long Tom didn't seem like much. He was too short, too thin, and too feeble-looking to worry them. Upon casual inspection, he suggested a pushover.

But when the leader got within reach, Long Tom socked him in the jaw in such a way that the gunnysack turned red at its lower portion and the man's Winchester rifle flew out of his calfskin-gloved hands.

Long Tom moved like a streak of lightning. He seized the Winchester in both hands and swapped the barrel around. The intimidating muzzle was suddenly pointed at his tormentors.

"Whoo-ee!" exclaimed one. "The bantam dude sure is a hellion, ain't he?"

Another taunted: "Be careful with that, little fella. That Winchester is almost as tall as you are."

Some of the flour-sacked vigilantes laughed. Perhaps they did not take their captive seriously because they heard he hailed from back East where men didn't necessarily know how to handle firearms.

That was their mistake. Because Long Tom did.

He demonstrated this by jacking a round into the chamber and knocking a hole through the top of one flour sack with a single *snarling* slug. The rider felt his hood jump and clawed at his covered skull feeling for blood. But Long Tom had not even grazed the scalp.

Amid the whinnying and snorting of rearing horses, there was a sudden scurrying for shelter. There was not much of that to be had. But the mood of the ambush swiftly changed. Booted feet made a *crunch-crunch-crunch* in the sandy gully floor.

The ambushers got behind the shelter of their horses (demonstrating that the cowboy isn't always respectful of his mount the way that Hollywood portrays it).

Gloves came off of hands and were used to slap at the horse's flanks. The spooked animals were suddenly running in all directions. Long Tom had to dodge wildly to avoid being trampled.

2 men jumped him and a fistfight ensued. The 2 cowboys outweighed and out-towered the puny Electrical Wizard considerably. It looked as if a massacre of fisticuffs impended.

And one did. But not in the way appearances suggested.

The 2 masked men took wild swings. But neither one connected. Long Tom danced in between them and began jabbing at the triangular tents that showed where their noses jutted and blew out air with their fierce exertions.

He did not have to hit either man a second time. His bony fists connected and mashed noses to a crimson pulp. He stepped back as his first vanquished foes smacked down into the dust of the gully.

Whirling, Long Tom set his sights on his next victim.

A six-gun lifted and flashed downward. Steel made a wooden sound on bone.

Long Tom gave a spasmodic leap into the air and collapsed without having seen who had hit him.

Bending, his conqueror lifted the insensate electrical engineer's skull by his hair and struck it again. But not too hard.

"That ought to keep him for about an hour," the victor proclaimed.

The others gathered round and surveyed their fallen friends. They studied Long Tom lying in the dirt.

"What did he say his name was?"

"Roberts. Long Tom Roberts!" spat a man.

"That name sounds vaguely familiar to my ears."

"Well, his face doesn't look familiar to my eyes. So, let's just fetch him up in the saddle and walk the two of them on over to the noose and be done with it."

"This lynchin' a man is bad business."

The leader wearing a bloodied gunnysack mask felt of his jaw.

"Rustling mules is a bad business too. And if we're going to keep things calm around here, we need to send this pigeon winging on his way to his final reward."

Grimly, the masked group picked up Long Tom while another confederate walked the horse over. They got him up in the saddle and stuffed his botted feet into the stirrups.

2 men held him there as they led the dun horse over to the cottonwood tree and its gently swinging noose.



## IV – Devil in Green

Pat Savage was fuming once she lost sight of Long Tom Roberts' station-wagon.

The dust of its rattling along hung in the air. She was forced to tie a bandanna neckerchief over her lower face to protect her nose and mouth from inhaling too much of the stuff. The handkerchief was a mute **gold**, not quite matching the honey coloration of her **eyes**.

Knowing that she had no hope of ever overhauling the vehicle, Pat permitted her mount to move at its own pace and prepared to arrive at the town of Bison when the pony got around to it.

"Drat that ornery woman-hater!" she muttered.

That last was perhaps an overstatement.

Long Tom Roberts wasn't exactly a woman-hater. But he had never shown much interest in the fairer sex and consequently lacked the customary masculine gallantry. He was also accustomed to doing things his way. And getting back to his electrical experiments was obviously uppermost in his mind. Thus, Pat was left behind.

As she road along, Pat Savage ruminated over the many peculiarities of the morning beginning with the man swimming about in the sky. It was not a hallucination produced by altitude sickness. Of that, the **bronze**-haired girl was convinced.

As she trotted alone, Pat spied a new apparition.

This appeared to be a cowboy. But one unlike anything she had ever before beheld.

The puncher was up in the rocks. He stood out like a lizard against the starkness of his surroundings.

He looked dressed for Sunday church or perhaps a rodeo. The colors of his cowboy outfit were outrageous. He had a hat. But it was cocked half off his head showing flaming red **hair**. His head was long and narrow; his outthrust jaw fashioned like a lantern. He appeared to be a small man. But his legs were long suggested that he wore boots with unusually high heels.

The combination of the iguana-green **shirt** and the flaming red **hair** reminded Pat Savage of a Christmas tree. No self-respecting cowboy would go about duded up so. Pat immediately marked him as an Easterner or at least someone not familiar with cowboy ways.

"I wonder if there's a dude ranch hereabouts," she murmured to herself. "Something catering to cowpokes from Boston."

The spectacle on the rocks appeared to be preoccupied with something. The man was looking down. There was no sign of a horse. High up there amid the rocks, a horse could easily be concealed.

Pat Savage was an outgoing girl, one filled to the brim with curiosity. This cowboy looked like a character. So she became interested in him.

Cupping her hands before her mouth, she called: "Hello up there!"

Her voice carried. But evidently not far enough. So she raised it significantly.

**"I said hello up there! Can you hear me?"**

The lizard-green fellow showed that he did.

He started ... swung around ... and displayed blazing **eyes** whose color nearly matched his outrageous shirt. Turning about showed a **neckerchief** tied about his neck that was as fiery as his **hair**.

The fierce green **eyes** narrowed. The man reached down and lifted what looked like an elderly blunderbuss of a shotgun and pointed in Pat's direction.

Methodically he <cocked> 2 exceedingly ornate hammers one-at-a-time. The hammer style made Pat think of twin devil's horns.

The **bronze**-haired girl gasped and then suddenly realized that her own neckerchief was tied over the lower part of her face making her resemble a common owlhoot. (Thank you, Long Tom!)

Swiftly she yanked it off and simultaneously shook off her white hat revealing her **metallic** tresses.

**"I'm no bandit!"** she called up.

Whether the man heard her or not, it was too late to later consequences.

He pulled the triggers of the side-by-side shotgun. Both barrels gushed flame and Pat's horse gave a wild jump.

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The jump was something spectacular.

Pat had broken horses back in her youth and was no stranger to a sunfishing stallion. Evidently stung by buckshot, the chestnut pony released a great whinnying scream and took to the air. The bound (no one word would fit) proved to be prodigious.

Lightning vaulted into the sky like Pegasus unfolding powerful white wings. Seeing the ground disappear beneath her, Pat took hold of the horse's muscular neck with both arms and clung for dear life.

Instinct caused her to shut her eyes while bracing for the impact she was certain to experience. Pat hoped neither one of them broke their necks.

As she waited expectantly, the sensation of **rising** continued.

It seemed to go on for an unnervingly long time. Normally, Pat Savage was not a girl easily seized by fear. The sensations of **lifting and rising** persisted so that every time she was about to open her eyes, she squeezed them more tightly shut.



"I'm not afraid to look," she muttered to herself.

When she did, however, she discovered to her horror that the ground was very very far beneath her horse's flailing hooves.

Pat shut her eyes tight, her beautiful face bunching up in expectation of imminent catastrophe.

"This time I know it's altitude sickness," she gasped. "It has to be. This just isn't possible!"

When she finally landed tangled up in her mount, the wind and all consciousness was knocked out of her.

Pat Savage and Lightning lay insensate while the searing Wyoming **Sun** baked them patiently.

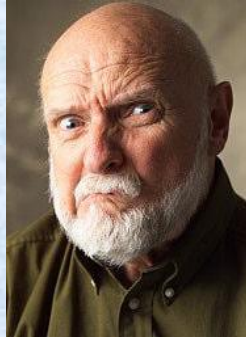
From time-to-time, both twitched.

But neither one stirred.

XX

Her luck turned from bad to worse.

A couple of prospectors happened to come along. From their appearance, they must have not bathed in a couple of weeks. But their heart almost stopped when they saw the semi-conscious beautiful woman. She was all theirs for the taking!



"We may have found some treasure after all," an old white man said.

His **African-American** companion was already rubbing his crotch.

"The next best thing to gold is white pussy," he said.

"At my age," the white man said, "any pussy is like a treasure."

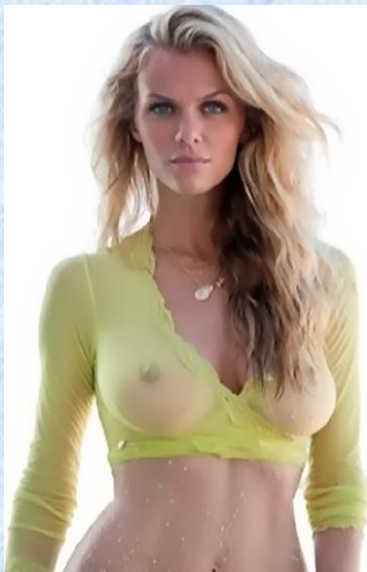
"Ain't it the fuckin' truth," the **black** man agreed.



They frantically began tearing the clothes off the barely-conscious beauty.



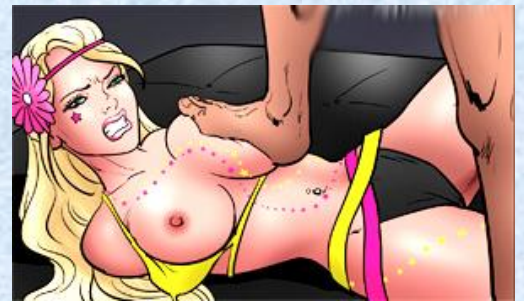
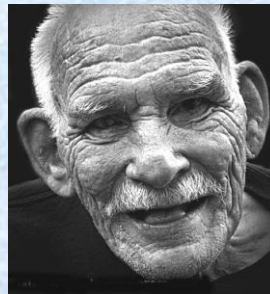
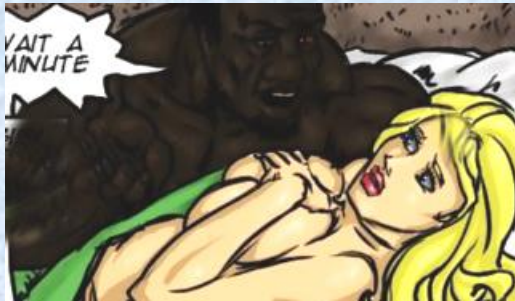
"Ooos" and "Ahhhs" came from their mouths as they beheld Pat's perfect 34-D breasts.



Pat was only vaguely aware when they started licking and sucking on her body.







"Looks like some Grade-A fuck meat," the white man said.

"And I'm gonna tear apart that prissy white pussy," his **black** friend replied.



The sudden piercing of Pat's vagina almost brought her to full consciousness.

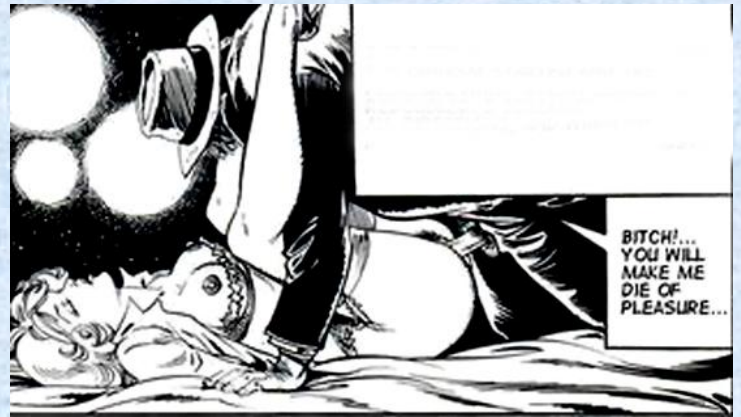




"Ugh ... Ugh! You're too tight, you fuckin' **Bitch**!" the old white man panted.



Pat let out a pitiful *moan* as he emptied his vile *seed* up into her cunt.



The black man looked down at the spread-eagled beauty.

"Now it's my turn! Get ready, **Bitch**!"





He was longer than his white friend. And he was more rough with his beautiful victim. Almost as if he were **ANGRY**! He pounded Pat's pussy with a mad fury!

## PAT SAVAGE GETTING RAPED!



His raping effort lasted almost an entire hour. Pat's vagina was being fucked raw.

But all "good things" must come to an end. And finally with a savage yell ...

*"I'm ... **cumming** ... you goddamn **whore**!!!"*





But even though they had expended themselves, they were not in the least finished. They looked at her beautiful face. Especially her plump **neon-pink lips**.





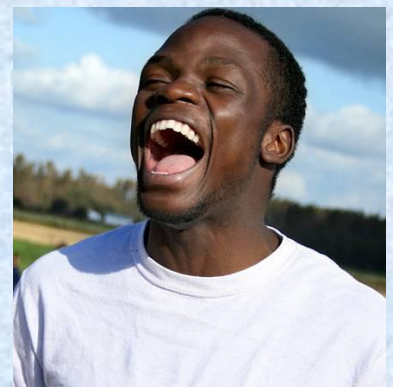
Despite being only semi-conscious, Pat had trouble breathing while gagging and coughing on the 2 foul **penises** that were *raping* her **mouth**.



They watched with lustful delight as Pat's saliva mixed with their **sperm** and **urine**.

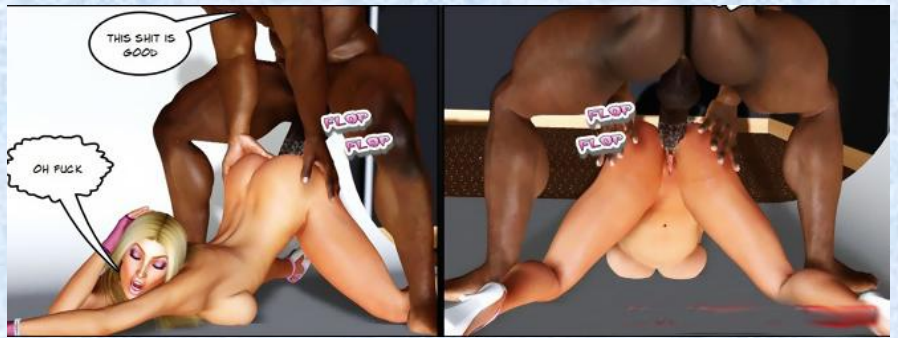


And then they were 'hard' again. Very hard and 'charged'. They eyed her firm rounded **buttocks**. Both of them wanted her there. They wanted to hear her squeal like a pig-slut being buggered.



And a-squealin' she did when those stiff rods *rammed* into her rectum ...





"Ohhhh," moaned the white man with pleasure. "This feels better than her cunt."

"Godd-daammnnn!" gritted the black man. "So fuckin' tight! Gots to loosen the **whore** up a little. Some other may want to take her here in the future."

Both of their dicks showed traces of **blood** on them.





After hours of taking out their lust on the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman, they were exhausted and too tired to do anything more.



*In a Parallel Universe ...*





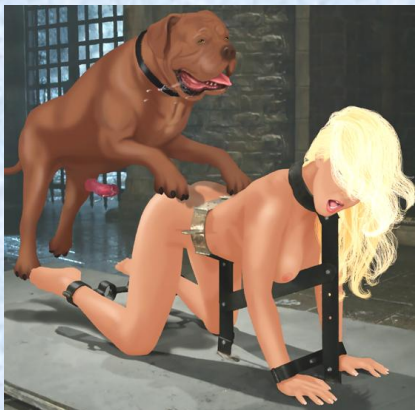
But that didn't mean they were finished with Pat's degradation. They had a pet male **dog** with them. It would guard their camp while they were sleeping. It was young and always **horny!**



The dog looked at the naked woman and started whining. Maybe it smelled the men's semen oozing out of her vagina and rectum. Its own **organ** started swelling in size.



"Sic 'er, Baxter! Knock your **bitch** up! Breed her real good!"







[who/what is the daddy?]



## V – Crack-Shot Redhead

Long Tom Roberts stood stiffly erect. His booted feet strained for balance on the cantle of the Cheyenne tree saddle on which he had discovered himself to be standing.

Over-and-over he croaked: "Whoa, girl! Whoa! ... That's a good girl ... Whoa!"

His words were strange, low. His lungs barely managed to pump them past the rope which was taut from his neck to the cottonwood limb directly above.

The mealy-nosed dun mare swished her tail and kicked a rear leg forward at a fly biting near the saddle cinch. With the bronc's movement, the rope from the scrawny Electrician's neck to the limb went as taut as a bowstring.

"Whoa, girl!" he rasped.

His arms writhed straining to get free of the lass rope which bound them. Moving up-and-down, his crossed wrists rubbed the rope knots against his back.

But it was no dice. They wouldn't loosen.

The dun was getting tired of standing. Bridle reins were knotted to the saddle horn. The animal would walk off before long.

Long Tom thought about what would happen when the animal started off. His thin face contorted. His mouth opened wide and his breath came-and-went with a sound like wind in a rocky canyon. He stretched on tiptoes and tried to take the rope in his teeth. The knot was back of his left ear out of reach.

The mare kicked at another fly.

"Whoa, girl!" The 2 words were a bare whisper.

Long Tom rolled his eyes about turning his head as much as he could. He tried to shout "Help!". But the sound could not have been heard 40 feet away. His eyes were beginning to stand out; his face was getting muddy looking.

Long Tom's gaze sought the departing hoofprints of a knot of horses and followed them until the trail lost itself in the greasewood that whiskered the canyon bed. Nowhere in the canyon was there a sign of the animals or riders. The masked vigilantes had ridden off only moments ago leaving him strung up to suffer exquisite tortures until the dun mare walked out from under him.

Then he would hang ...

Prophetic omens, 5 turkey buzzards floated. Foul black flecks in the morning sky.

Th slender Electrical Wizard regained consciousness only to find himself being strung up.



The stringing-up was peculiar. Normally the condemned man is seated in his saddle. At the appropriate moment, a hat smacks the animal's flanks sending it racing off leaving the unfortunate rider to swing by the neck.

For some reason, Long Tom's tormentors had arranged matters so that he hung so high by the neck that his feet touched the saddle. His hands were bound, of course. He discovered that almost immediately.

Somehow the vigilantes had managed to steal away leaving the horse behind to finish the grisly job without their participation. The horse wore a flour sack over its head. It had been rearranged to blind the animal and thereby prevent it from following the others. But Long Tom did not know that.

Perhaps they were squeamish about hanging a man. Possibly they had other concerns.

But all Long Tom knew for certain is that he was standing precariously balanced on the saddle and the horse beneath him was growing impatient. It was a wonder that he had not already expired. The pressure of the noose around his neck had evidently awakened in him some deep instinct for survival enabling him to throw off unconsciousness.

Long Tom's lungs swelled and collapsed with the effort of trying to shout for help. None of his words were more than tearing hisses.

The end was nearing. His tongue ran out to dampen his lips. He did not draw the organ back between his teeth.

The mare swished at the fly. She shook her head throwing it up-and-down violently. Then she snorted and walked off.

Long Tom suddenly hung by the rope about his neck. He kicked a little, feebly. His lids did not close over his protruding eyes. His orbs became glassy by slow degrees. Swirling red-and-black nothingness came in a rushing flood.

There was a roaring in his ears.

Consequently, he did not hear the **gunshot** that changed everything.

-----

The girl was a **redhead**, her hair curly. The green in her **eyes** was deep. The red in her rather large mouth was healthy.

She was slender and hardly more than 20 years old. Her cheeks were pale under her sunny tan. Her breathing came in uneasy spurts as she worked over the prostrate form of Long Tom Roberts.

He lay loosely on his back. Astride him, the **red-haired** girl alternately compressed his ribs and released them. The pallid Electrical Genius was just commencing to breathe again.

He coughed and choked. He rolled over on his side. He lay there a bit, his coughing spasms blowing little clouds of dust upward.

After a bit, he put both hands on the ground and lifted himself to a sitting position. Vacantly as if he had doubts about what he was seeing, Long Tom peered at the fluffy-haired girl.

She was no beauty. But she still looked nice. Her nose was snub; her chin small and firm. Her mouth was drawn tightly. Her slender form was swathed in blue denim overalls and a jumper that was a size too large for her. Scuffed riding boots encased tiny feet.

He coughed, mumbling in a weak and vaguely awed voice:

"Where's your harp?"

The girl looked faintly puzzled.

She asked: "How ... how do you feel?"

Long Tom squinted about. Nearby lay the noose which had been around his neck along with some 2 feet of heavy rope. The rest of it was still tied to the cottonwood limb. The girl's horse -- a white-and-tan paint -- muzzled inquiringly at the deceptively luscious green of a Spanish bayonet clump a few yards distant.

Long Tom ventured in a more stable voice: "I guess I'm not a goner and you're not any angel."

Coughing, he rubbed his throat and added: "Did you cut me down?"

The girl shook her head violently.

"There wasn't time. I took aim and parted the rope with a Winchester bullet ..."

Long Tom would have whistled had he the strength.

"Lucky shot."

"Crack shot!" The woman stepped back, her green **eyes** snapping. "Nothing lucky about it."

Then she swung about and picked up a short .30-.30 caliber saddle gun. She pointed the rifle muzzle at him but did not say anything.

Long Tom eyes her managing a wry twist to his mouth that might have been a grin or a grimace.

"Folks sure have funny customs in this neck of the woods."

The girl asked 3 questions rapidly.

"Who are you?"

"Why were you strung up?"

"And who did the dirty deed?"



Long Tom looked at the brown spots on the girl's pinto horse. When he answered her, there was nothing in his voice to show how much of what he said was the truth and how much not.

"Brown is the name. Hoe Brown. And I don't know why I was strung up. I'm new in these parts. I was headed for town when a clutch of masked men threw down on me with guns and left me hanging by a rope necktie. I don't know who they were. They wore flour sacks over their heads."

"Vigilantes," hissed the girl.

Holding the .30-.30 muzzle so that he could stare into it, the **redhead** backed up until she could grasp the reins of her pinto with one hand.

"You're lying," she said in a certain voice. "You're the one who has been stealing mules and shipping them across the Big Horns. You were caught red-handed and hung."

"Hanged, you mean," grunted Long Tom.

The girl ignored that.

"You were ... alive ... when I found you," she stated haltingly.

Her voice was filled with **horror**.

"I couldn't ... I couldn't just stand by and watch you strangle. That's why I cut you down with a bullet."

Then her tone hardened.

"You had better get out of this country if you know what's good for you!"

She remounted her pinto with a furious flounce. Her oval face was hard.

"You're far from the trail," Long Tom protested. "I'm no horse thief, never mind a mule rustler."

The girl swung the destructive end of her rifle in the direction of the horse that Long Tom had lately stood upon. It was wilding about blindly endeavoring to shake off its flour-sack blinders.

The girl snapped: "Your masked confederate over there tells a different story."

"That's not my horse," Long Tom said weakly, knowing how lame his declaration sounded.

The Winchester guarded him again with its single black eye. It was no more or less ominous than the girl's own **emerald** regard.

"You get out of Campbell County, Mr. Mule Rustler! Or your name is mud. Muddy mud!"

Snorting under the bite of her spurs, the pinto galloped down the dirt highway. Regret was in Long Tom's face as he watched her depart.

The paint was soon out of sight down the canyon and the roll of hoofbeats eventually died.

"She might not be any angel," Long Tom muttered. "But she was good enough in a pinch."

He rubbed his tortured throat.

"This Big Powder country is a tough country."

-----

He looked around wondering where Pat Savage was. She should have caught up with him by now.

The mare on which he had been suspended was standing off a ways. He noticed the flour sack stretched over her elongated head, ragged holes corresponding to equine eyes still askew. Although through violent shaking, that animal had succeeded in getting one dark orb lined up with a hole which helped quiet it down.

Something like a rough laugh leaped out of Long Tom's sore throat.

"That handy girl jumped to a pile of conclusions. Guess I can't blame her too much."

He suddenly realized that there was no sign of his station-wagon. It certainly made sense that the vigilantes had left behind a horse. One had taken the vehicle. Probably they will come back for the horse unless it, too, had been rustled and that crime would have been laid on Long Tom's doorstep as well.

Grumbling to himself, he strolled over to the waiting mare. He ripped off the flour-sack mask and climbed aboard.

A thought struck him. He twisted about in the saddle and looked at the horse's hindquarters. There he saw a brand. He did not recognize it. But the undersized Electrical Expert had put no special effort into learning the brands of the numerous outfits scattered about this far-flung portion of Campbell County.

The brand was a puzzling one. Most were easy to read. A numeral '4' entwined with the letter 'J' signified the Four-J Ranch, for example. The Y-Cross outfit was another that was self-evident.

But this brand was not. It consisted of 2 oddly-shaped ovals side-by-side and connected by a burn line. Each oval contained what looked like a scorched hyphen. They made Long Tom think of ghostly sinister orbs. He could not imagine what that outfit would be called.

It was a long ride back to the Circle Bolt. But Long Tom had no interest in returning home just now. Pat Savage was sure to be along shortly and he intended to meet up with her.

After that, there would be plenty of time to track the vigilantes whom Long Tom fully intended to punish with all the **power** contained in his compact fists.



## VI – Sky Hawk Surprise

The dun mare rolled along easily. Her gait was something between a canter and a trot. It was nearing noon by the scorching **Sun** when the peace of the late morning was abruptly shattered.

Long Tom had been riding along like any other self-respecting Wyoming rancher when the plane had shot down out of the **Sun**-bathed heavens and began spewing hot lead about him.

There was little warning. The brilliant midday Sun cast a moving shadow. One that flitted swiftly and ever-changing in shape.

A **roar** -- a thunderous ***rumble*** like the clamor of some mad Monster -- literally filled the air setting even the rolling rangeland atremble.

A great winged yellow&black monster hurtled so close to the earth, breathing ***fire*** and **smoke** that exhaled the foul stink of exhausted oil and gas. Tiny bursts of sand puffed like the fall of raindrops across the sandy bottom of the blowhole. A pit hewn in the natural stone of the hilltop by centuries of wind and torrential rains.

Long Tom wrenched a Winchester rifle from its saddle scabbard and beat the deadly stream of smoking metal to the overhang by inches. His horse galloped frantically away in the opposite direction screaming in mindless fright.

"Damn this difficult day!" he gritted.

The expression was pregnant with feeling. Long Tom hugged his knees closer and flexed boot heels further under the painfully scant shelter of the overhanging lip of the crater-like depression. Not more than an arm's length away passed the procession. A nerve-tingling ***whang! whang!*** of squashed lead on the solid stone of the pit's side.

Above the thunder of the plane's motor and the whistle of wind through its struts came the *staccato* spiteful snarl of the **machine-gun** that was stirring the loose grains and rounded marbles of sandstone into volcanic action.

The craft shot across the pit with less than 30 feet between its undercarriage and the Electrical Wizard hugging the inadequate shelter of the overhang.

The instant the shadow ceased to darken the crater, Long Tom hastily untangled his lanky form. He launched into frenzied activity. The ship would return quickly with ***flame*** playing about the muzzle of the weapon projecting from the fuselage belly. The .30-.30 rifle barked once. Then again and again. As fast as he could work the lever, Long Tom shot with the edge of the pit slightly over waist-high forming an armrest. Already the plane was turning and banking until it hung edgewise over the sage and cactus strewn range.

A burst of lead hissed about his oversized ears. Long Tom dropped again into his narrow retreat. During the seconds before the pilot again brought the rapid firer into play, his mind became a maelstrom of baffled fury.

The motor's mutter again became a mad **roar** and once again hissing lead gouged and spattered across the blowhole's bottom. This time the pilot's aim was not good. It was his third attempt at exterminating the pale Electrical Expert. The stream of biting bullets missed by 20 feet.

The buzzard-like shape had scarcely passed overhead when Long Tom systematically began emptying his rifle into the black body of the speeding plane.

3 shots did the work. The craft banked about viciously and was again coming head-on when the whirling propeller dissolved into a flying mass of splinters.

Flying against a slight breeze, it almost instantly lost headway. A hundred feet above ground, there was no time for the attacker to maneuver his aerial steed.

The range was far from an ideal landing field. Sagebrush and the sandy soil washed from its toots by melting snow and flurries of rain stood in knotty patches everywhere. Cactus and scattered clumps of greasewood added their bit to the irregularity of the terrain.

The ship touched the ground ... bounced ... struck again ... and then stood on its nose plowing ahead for 50 feet before it ended in a cloud of dust rending metal and torn linen.

The crash broke roughly into the comparative silence that had followed the howling of the motor.

-----

With the .30-.30 firmly in hand, Long Tom Roberts left the shelter of the blowhole and ran toward the wreck.

Discovering his wiry dun snorting and milling 100 feet away with its reins tangled over a clump of sage, he altered his leap-frog race down the hill. He flung himself into the saddle. Once again astride the mare, a few seconds sufficed to cover the quarter-of-a-mile to where the wreck was rapidly becoming a smoking mass.

**Fire** starting at the ruined engine was licking with greedy tongues of red along the black fuselage and out on the yellow wings. Pungent orange-colored **smoke** billowed upward in choking masses.

Long Tom hurled himself off his horse and into the blazing smoke-shrouded **inferno**. By sense of touch alone, he located the still form of the pilot crumpled limply under the smashed framework of the ship. The fellow was not pinned and he dragged the still form free without trouble.

His eyes watering and temporarily blinded, Long Tom staggered several yards with his unconscious burden. A muffled **boom** followed by a louder roar of greedy **flames** as the gas tank exploded lent zest to his steps.

He dropped the pilot and squinted painfully at the burning wreck. Flame swathed it from nose-to-tail. Even the tips of the yellow wings were a blazing bundle. Useless to make another attempt to enter the burning machine in search of a possible second passenger. But Long Tom was morally certain that there had been only the one person in the ship.



The Electrical Genius inspected the unconscious flyer out of watery eyes. The grease-stained flying suit on the slender form was burned black and smoking in spots. Long Tom hastily extinguished the smoldering places with his fingers.

Then struck by an astounding suspicion, he jerked the leather helmet from the pilot's head.

**It was a girl!**

Tumbling masses of pine-colored hair, a long bob that fell well down her smooth neck cascaded from under the removed helmet. Even delicate features (although smoke-blackened) had given him his first stab of realization.

Gingerly, Long Tom took the girl's slender wrist in his thin fingers feeling for a pulse. He was unable to find any.

But she suddenly opened her eyes and sat up groaning slightly.

"What was the idea of strafing me?" he demanded peevishly.

It was probably not the most gentlemanly question to ask. But under the circumstance, the pale electrical engineer's disposition was on the irate side. He was not having a particularly successful day. And it was getting under his pallid skin.

Apparently, the girl saw him for the first time. Her head jerked back and her hand wrenched back from his grasp dropping to her side.

Staring into her widening eyes, long Tom saw strong emotion pass in rapid review. Surprise ... fear ... hate ... then grim resolution seemed to grip the attractive brown orbs in quick succession.

Suddenly there came a movement following by a blinding flash almost in Long Tom's eyes.

Then another.

He was only dimly conscious of a sickening double shock. **That the girl had produced a short-barreled pistol from the pocket of her flying suit and was discharging it at point-blank range.**

Diamond points of *fire* played in a purple mist before his eyes.

Then everything became a whirling vortex of red-shot blackness.

Through the confusion and shock, Long Tom heard her shrill and accusing voice.

*"That's my dun mare you were riding, you ... you horse napper!"*

## VII – Blistering Trek

Long Tom Roberts' recovery was accompanied mostly by many disagreeable sensations. Chief among these was a stabbing *pain* in his head and a dull ache somewhere about his shoulder. Also, there was still the pungent odor that had associated itself with the burning of the wrecked airplane.

Gingerly, the scrawny Electrical Wizard shifted about. But he subsided when a *stabbing* pang shot over his body after he moved his left arm. When the whirling mist had cleared before his eyes, he saw that his sleeve was clammy with **crimson** that oozed from a hole halfway between his elbow and shoulder.

Long Tome felt the side of his head. It was moist and sticky. When he examined his fingers, the tips were **scarlet**.

Then he sat up. His head throbbed with the effort, racking his body.

The girl was nowhere in sight. Nor was the dun mare standing where she should have been.

With infinite effort, he turned his head until he had searched the entire horizon. Not a living thing in sight. The gaunt skeleton of bent and twisted tubing that had been the framework of the plane lay a few yards away. Streamers of black fabric (a few still smoking) dangled and whipped in the breeze. Smoke flew in wispy plumes from the still-smoldering padding of the cockpit.

Long Tom cocked a speculative eye at the Sun.

"2:00," he grunted from the wisdom of much practice telling time from the Solar orb.

"Been out about 2 hours," he solemnly assured himself. "That gal gunslinger took that mare and made tracks."

After a pause, he added: "If she was telling the truth about the ownership of that nag, then she's no more horse thief than I am."

The breeze shifted. Smoke - the pungent odor predominant and sickening - began to blow over him. Long Tom coughed a time-or-two and then weakly stumbled further away where he commenced a personal inventory.

He had been shot twice. Once through the fleshy part of the arm. And another bullet had grazed his right temple. The first was a clean drill. No bones or arteries were broken. It was the latter one that had brought unconsciousness.

The sickly-looking Electrical Engineer bound his arm tightly with a plain bandana from the hip pocket of his work-worn corduroys. His mind was full of mystified wonder. Blood no longer welled from the wound. But there was still a dull ache that became a pronounced stab when he moved. Several minutes passed before he could stand erect without feeling ill.



Long Tom rarely looked healthy of complexion. But that was in appearances only. He actually had seldom been ill a day in his entire life. And furthermore, he was a wildcat in a brawl. Consequently, he was unaccustomed to infirmity.

Practically nothing but the metal framework of the airplane was left. The spruce wing beams had burned almost completely away. The gaunt aluminum ribs were dangling from the wire braces.

Creeping over to the wreck, Long Tom prodded among the ashes with one of the loose ribs. But he found nothing. A feeling of relief washed over him when he ascertained that nothing resembling a charred body lay among the wreckage.

Having no other option except the time-honored custom called "Shank's mare", Long Tom began the weary trek back to the Circle Bolt Ranch. Walking cleared his head. And as his brain became less muddled, his comments grew fierce.

"15 lousy miles!" he growled. "And all because of that trigger-happy gal pilot!"

Having vented his displeasure, Long Tom settled down to the prolonged and disagreeable hike through the desolate Powder River Basin.

High-heeled cowboy boots are not conducive to a pleasant stroll. Especially when the owner has a bullet hole through the arm and has been painfully rapped on the skull with another.

Long Tom discovered this unhappy fact in the first hundred yards. After a mile was put behind him (seemingly by inches), it became a monotonous, stumbling, headachy grind. Cowpaths and ancient buffalo trails all led toward Greasewood Creek a mile away. Which made them useless to the hiker.

Through long habit, Long Tom wore an undervest of chain-mail construction which would turn away most pistol bullets. He wore this now and it had deflected the slug fired into his upper chest, the shock of which had produced unconsciousness after glancing off his skull.

The other bullet (the painful one that had struck his arm) had done the only significant damage. This led him to wish that the woman's point-blank aim had been better.

"Just my luck that she wasn't a dead shot," he muttered to himself.

10 miles-or-so behind him loomed the frowning mass of green timber, red sandstone, and steely granite of Big Butte. Strung out flanking it on either side were 3 lesser buttes. They were known locally as the Pumpkin Buttes due to their striking color and rounded shape. Or owing to the wild pumpkins that grew in the area. Accounts varied.

Toward this impressive group (North Butte, Middle Butte, Big Butte, and South Butte), Long Tom Roberts had been loping purposely when the mysterious lady flier had popped up determined on exterminating him.

He had a homestead. It was a little more than a rough-hewn log cabin and rickety stable under the frowning shadow of Big Butte. The cabin (on the edge of 80-or-90 acres of luscious meadow level as a floor) was the retreat which Long Tom expected to shelter him while he worked on his electrical experiments.

It had been a cow ranch. Not much more than a backcountry spread. A great uncle had owned it. But he'd never had the money to do much about the place. The bulking majestic mass of Big Butte, the chaotic primeval canyons and timbered peaks of the "badlands" that flank the buttes formed an ideal setting for solitude. The babbling waters of Greasewood Creek (a spring-fed hurried torrent the year around) held trout fit for a king.

It was 60 miles to Gillette. The rambling sunbaked and blizzard-swept conglomeration of board-fronted stores and weather-beaten whitewashed stockyards that was the little Wyoming cattle-shipping town. Thence, shimmering bands of steel led into the east where Long Tom's Uncle Hicks expected guests for his proposed dude ranch establishment to arrive. But it never quite panned out.

"That female person," he growled ruefully while sidestepping a spiny bed of cactus, "sure got my dander up."

Thoughts of the fluffy-haired female caused Long Tom to associate her with another female ball of fire. Namely Pat Savage.

Swiveling his head around on his **sunburned** neck, Long Tom looked over his shoulder and remarked:

"Pat should've happened along hours before this."

This realization caused him to frown so deeply that his high bulbous forehead became a corrugation of wrinkles.

So much had happened to him between he drygulching, the near lynching, and the aerial ambush that he all-but-forgotten about Pat. Now worry rode his face and he got to wondering.



Long Tom became possessed of a profound and gnawing thirst. He reached the while-walled sink of an alkali hole. But the water was bitter and nauseating. He sat down for a few minutes with his feet dangling over the edge of a tiny gully, resting and hoping that Pat Savage might turn up.

But she failed to happen along. Thus, Long Tom reluctantly picked himself up and resumed his difficult trek.

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An hour passed and the Sun commenced to hang low in the Western sky.



"5 more miles and I'll be to the horse pasture," he told himself firmly. "Maybe I can catch one of those bony nags my uncle left me."

The **fiery** disk of the September sun was sinking into the purpling masses of a brilliant painted sunset when Long Tom finally snared a mount from the horse pasture. The victim of his cautious stalking was a sway-backed blessing. It was an aged sorrel cowpony wise with the mellow wisdom of 16 years under the saddle.

Thumping the friendly old roan over the ears with his good hand to guide him, Long Tom made better progress. Coyotes began to howl mournfully from distant hilltops with the first murky shadows of darkness. The staccato shrill medley of their tongues gave an eerie touch. It was a sound that once heard was not soon lost to memory.

Before long, Long Tom encountered another rider.

The fellow was short, thick-bodied, and tremendously long of arm and leg. His skin was as shriveled and hard-looking as cowhide which has dried carelessly in the Sun. A tobacco-yellowed mustache concealed his mouth and humorous wrinkles banked his grayish eyes.

In age, he might have been anywhere between 40 and 60. His clothes looked as though they had been worn continuously over a long period. And the slicker roll behind the saddle was bulging as if it contained food and possibly a soogan for a bed. His star-faced grulla bronc was rather bony.

*"Daw-w-w gone!"*

It was Laramie, the Circle Bolt's tobacco-chewing foreman who vented the astonished exclamation when long Tom Roberts tottered weakly into view.

The grizzled old cow nurse forked his mount and grunted:

"I can see you're a-bleedin'. So just foller me."

Reaching the ranch house, Laramie dismounted. He helped Long Tom from his saddle and assisted him through the front door.

"What ails you?" he wondered.

"An ant kicked me," Long Tom growled back.

The corners of his thin mouth twitched from pain. The light of the oil lamp had blinded him temporarily. He braced his lean form against the rough door jamb.

"It must've been some helluva ant," Laramie grunted. "It looks to me more like you got a bullet to the arm an' another through that hat you took away from me with them educated cards."

The foreman studied him out of narrowed eyes.

"Well, what happened to the station-wagon? You run it off a cliff or something?"

"I managed to get myself bushwhacked," grunted the undersized Electrical Wizard. "That station-wagon got away with the bushwhackers."

"That's kinda a jugheaded thing for a smart feller like you to let happen to him," snorted Laramie as he helped Long Tom into a chair. "Better fill me in."

So Long Tom did. He left out no detail even to the piney color of the stunning young lady's hair and eyes. He finished while the bowlegged puncher (who boasted some little skill as a doctor of man and beast) sterilized and bound his wounds.

"You weren't bushwhacked," he grumbled. "You were drygulched."

"I was nearly lynched!" snapped Long Tom.

"That too," admitted Laramie while Long Tom suffered under the ministrations of the foreman who was more experienced doctoring horses and cattle than humans.

The slender Electrical Genius <winced> and often made screwed-tight faces.

"The way I figure it," Laramie ruminated, "those vigilantes who tried to string you up as a mule thief were themselves horse thieves. That would explain why they had flour sacks over their horses' heads. They rustled them in order to do the dirty work and not leave honest tracks.

Long Tom moaned. "I had that part pretty well figured out during my hike. That girl in the old plane spied me riding along on the stolen horse and decided to separate me from my mount with bullets."

Laramie nodded somberly. "She musta had a powerful mad on to do it the way she did."

"Who owns a private plane like that in these parts?" asked Long Tom fiercely.

Laramie considered as he cut himself a plug of tobacco for chewing.

"I've seen a plane like that from time-to-time. But I don't rightly know who owns it. All the spreads around here are so far apart that it's hard to get to know your neighbors unless you make a project out of it."

"You'd think a plane would be conspicuous."

"These are modern times," said Laramie thoughtfully. "Some folks have discovered that an aircraft - especially one of those old crates -- is pretty darn near perfect for runnin' down stray cows or footloose cayuses."

"I take it you've seen no sign of Pat Savage?"

"None. Should it worry me?"



"It scares the daylight out of me given what I ran into today," stated Long Tom. "Pat can usually take care of herself. But she should've turned up long before now."



Chewing methodically, Laramie remarked: "Well, we've lost the light. But if you're willin', we can saddle up and mosey around."

Long Tom looked thoughtful.

"If we still had the station-wagon, that would make a lot more sense. But we don't."

"Yep. And them 2 planes out in the north meadow -- your bus and Miss Pat's -- are practically useless at night. Even if you could spot a body by some miracle, landin' at nigh tis tantamount to plain suicide."

Laramie made a face.

"Might be smarter to hold vigil and see if she turns up. Plus there's that other thing."

Adjusting the temporary sling that Laramie had fashioned for his wounded arm out of an empty flour sack, Long Tom looked up sourly.

"What other thing?"

"The fact that you've been branded as both a mule filcher and a horse thief by two entirely different parties. Might not be such a smart idea to be goin' about showin' your face around even if it is after dark. You're plumb lucky to be alive after the trouble you barged into."

"I didn't barge into any trouble!" snorted Long Tom derisively. "Trouble landed on me with both feet."

Laramie's laugh was on the wild side.

"Both feet. And a pair of devil horns and spiky tail to hear you tell about it! Haw!"

The slender Electrical Wizard declined to join in the merriment. He felt of the fresh bandage wound around his aching scalp. It felt dry. A good sign.

After he settled down, Laramie suggested: "Why don't you get some shuteye while I'll hold vigil for Miss Pat. If she don't turn up, you'll need your strength for the search tomorrow mornin'."

Long Tom appeared reluctant ...

... but he finally said: "Wake me if anything important happens."



## VIII – Greasewood Magic

Long Tom Roberts spent the balance of the night in a somewhat turbulent state of mind. Sleep came only at scattered infinite intervals.

His mind staggered back to the events of the evening of the day before. He jolted awake every time he drifted off to sleep. His imagination put him back standing on the saddle of the stolen horse with his neck suspended in a coarse noose of hempen rope.

Uppermost in his mind were worried thoughts of Pat Savage. He considered calling **Doc Savage** in New York. But he could not possibly reach Wyoming before dawn. And by then, the upset Electrical Wizard would be back in the saddle searching.



Aside from that factor, he had promised the **bronze**-haired woman that he would not call the **Bronze Man** into the matter prematurely. Long Tom now regretted that promise.

The next morning, Laramie woke him with the sound and smell of frying eggs and bacon. The old puncher served as cook, foreman, and whatever else necessary. In addition to being somewhat of a hermit, Long Tom Roberts was on the miserly side and did not care to run a full ranch operation. And it was hardly necessary anyway. The Circle Bolt boasted a handful of cowponies and a single milk cow. But no herd of cattle.

Long Tom was no cowman. He just liked his solitude. And since he intended to spend only a few weeks out of the year at the ranch, Laramie served as the solitary caretaker whenever the owner was away. Which was almost all the time.

After a hasty breakfast, they drove a rocking spring-wagon back along the road where Long Tom had last seen the golden-**eyed** girl.

Laramie's thinking was simple. "In case she's injured somewhere, we'll need to bring her back in the wagon."

"Don't talk like that!" snapped Long Tom.

But he did not disagree with his foreman's thinking. It was sound.

So off they rattled with an extra horse trailing behind. The wagon pitched-and-rolled behind the 2 big-footed draft horses. They combed the trails traveled the previous day. But they found no trace of Pat Savage or her horse Lightning.

"Got me an idea," said Laramie suddenly.

"What is it?" Long Tom asked.

"Let's mosey over to that crashed plane. I have a notion to look it over kinda careful-like."

"No time for that!" snapped Long Tom.

Laramie puckered a sun-withered mouth.

"I'm also thinking that if Miss Pat noticed it, she couldn't help but look it over also. Maybe thinkin' it was a search plane in trouble. If so, she'd leave us a trail to follow."

"You might have an idea after all," admitted Long Tom.

Chewing methodically, the old cowboy turned the wagon around and drove the snorting team toward the spot.

Eventually the big rubber-tired vehicle came upon the scorched metal tubing and twisted mass of wreckage. It was 10:00 by the Sun when they rode up on the scene of the plane crash.

Laramie bawled a sonorous "*Gee!*" and "*Whoa thar!*" and dragged on the manila jerk line bringing the horses to a stop.

A couple of burned clumps of sage, wind-blown bits of charred linen, and a few blackened wires marked the place. A brownish stain still colored the alkali-whitened patch where the girl shot him. A dozen empty powder-marked cartridges littered the sandy bottom of the blowhole. Lon Tom picked up several bits of soft metal that had mushroomed into fantastic shapes. They were the machine-gun bullets that had flattened about him. Very concrete evidence they were.

These items were the only traces remaining of the short explosive thriller of the previous afternoon.

"Well I'll be a Texas maverick if this ain't funny business," Laramie grumbled stepping off and poking about in the wreckage.

"Nothing funny about it," Long Tom grouched shortly.

"Why would a gal pilot rear up and pepper you like she done?"

"Feeling salty, maybe," corrected Long Tom.

He made 2 wide circles around the spot before he gave up hopes of finding a trail. Disgusted, puzzled, and no little interested, he walked back to the plane wreck. Stamping about the wreckage which still smelled of burned fuel, he said:



"Here is where the lady lead-slinger almost got me."

Laramie inspected the charred weapon with interest.

"Them's the kind we had in Uncle Sam's army," he explained after a curious examination. "They're bad medicine all right."

Long Tom nodded. He also had been in the Big Scrape. So his knowledge was of a first-hand nature. That the big machine-gun was "bad medicine" was something that he did not have to be told.

Together they removed the machine-gun and discovered its mechanism was hopelessly ruined. They narrowly escaped getting shot again when a shell in the weapon's mechanism exploded. The 2 men flung themselves in opposite directions until the machine-gun settled down.

Laramie whistled as he sat up in the dirt. "Daw-gone! She's still got some kick in her, don't she?"

Long Tom climbed to his feet and dusted himself off with his one good arm.

"We should give the horses a rest," he decided. "I'm going to saddle up the cowpony and Indian around and see what I can find. You stick here for a while."

"You betcha."

Laramie chuckled.

"Don't get perforated any more than you can help it."

"Stop ridding me!" Long Tom snapped back.

"Then quit bein' such an Eastern jughead in your ways."

The scene of the plane crash was on the outskirts. In fact, it lay on the very edge of the badlands' abrupt beginning. The rocky canyons and warped peaks (virtually impenetrable except by a few rough trails) formed a buffer that had effectively discouraged the inroads of dry farmer and cattleman alike.

Long Tom pinned his mount toward this wasteland. The ancient sorrel rolled along easily, its gait something between a canter and a trot.

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Towering almost a mile above the surrounding districts, Big Butte was unique unto itself. On top, it was level as a table and as barren. Nothing so much as a gigantic mesa. Which it was not, technically.

Its flat summit was accessible if one was willing to tackle a stiff wind. It had the reputation of being a former Indian stronghold. Indeed, rifle pits, broken arrows, and once-in-a-while bits of rusty weapons were found to substantiate this legend.

North Butte had been the scene of a spirited and bloody conflict between cavalrymen and marauding Sioux back in the early 1880s over 50 years back.

Long Tom headed his cowpony toward Greasewood Creek crossing on the way the rotted furrows of the old north trail to California. The aged and long since unused Oregon Trail. It was still well preserved by the dry climate. Along the stream wound the trail that led to his little spread in the scenic paradise under Big Butte.

Greasewood Creek narrowed and became a leaping babbling torrent of foaming water. The stream twisted and rose while the frowning mass of the Badlands pressed closer-and-closer as if to throttle its noisy sound.

The trail was a threadlike path that wound precariously under overhanging cliffs and across narrow ledges where the merest misstep would mean at least a plunge into icy waters. Or possibly a smashing fall to the jagged rocks below.

Long Tom was thinking that if Pat had become lost or her horse crippled, she would surely have made her way to the river drawn by its thirst-quenching attractions.

Rounding one of these narrow ledges, the sorrel stopped so suddenly that Long Tom jarred against the well-forked cantle. Greasewood Creek poured in a roaring medley of sound over a little waterfall filling the cleft-like canyon with a booming **roar** that drowned all sound.

Long Tom looked up. **Confronting him was a rider!**

The undersized Electrical Wizard <blinked>. He <blinked> several times. For the unexpected apparition appeared to be a byproduct of the morning heat. A mirage in human form.

The fellow's attire was **green**, violently so. He wore a tan hat at least a size too big for him for it squatted down on his head and swallowed his eyebrows whole. The heavy brim made his ears conspicuously lopped.

The man had an ancient shotgun. Its matched barrels were dull with age.

His vivid green **eyes** flared when he saw Long Tom. He lifted the ungainly blunderbuss.

"Stand steel, hombre!" he shouted in an exaggerated South-of-the-border accent.

Despite the handicap of his flour-sack arm sling, Long Tom launched himself from his saddle and collided with the man just as the shotgun discharged.

*"Oof!"*

The pair landed in the dirt as their horses shied and snorted nervously.

Long Tom Roberts was quite a scrapper. And he possessed a **temper** that was quite fierce when aroused. It had been such aroused for the better part of a day now and he was happy to take the cork off.

Using one fist, he began pummeling the other. But the **green** rider had the advantage of 2 good fists and he used both of them.



As a result, Long Tom found himself being battered and unable to defend himself properly. He was still rather weak from his ordeal of the previous day. And having his wounded right arm in a sling was no advantage either.

The **green** man grabbed up his formidable shotgun and clubbed the puny electrical engineer with the stock.

The force of the blow would have knocked out a less stubborn individual. But Long Tom Roberts was made of sterner stuff. Nevertheless, he was dazed and momentarily lost control of his senses. Violently-colored sparks and stars swam before his wavering vision.

His ears told him that the man had remounted and was taking off in a clatter of hoofbeats.

Groaning, Long Tom got control of himself and tried to stand up. But he could not. All his wiry strength had been knocked out of him. He possessed sufficient presence of mind to examine his limbs for damage. He was pleased to discover that no shotgun pellets had entered his body at any point.

That accomplished, Long Tom looked about and lost interest in his own well-being. His pale eyes clicked over to Greasewood Creek where he spied something that made him <blink> rapidly.

In the middle of the rushing creek was a stretch that was muddy. The creek bottom exposed to the blinding Sun for only a few seconds. Then the tumbling river rushed in covering it. The restored river continued to course along as if the patch of exposed mud had never existed.

His eyes popping, Long Tom stared at the spot wondering if he had been hallucinating.

And then something else happened that was equally strange.

There was a sudden **cloudburst**. Or so it seemed. It was brief and the water soaked him thoroughly.

But when the slack-jawed Electrical Genius looked up, there was not a cloud in the sky and no source from which the precipitation could have fallen.

After a bit, something struck him on the head. He grabbed at it. A live trout! It flopped about squirming between his thin fingers. Long Tom threw it into the creek.

"That blow must've done something to my brain," he mumbled.

Despite the danger, he lay back down and stared up at the clear blue sky waiting for the spell to pass.

## IX – Gun Talk

As he lay supine, Long Tom Roberts reflected upon his unusual situation.

His thoughts drifted back to pat Savage's urgent summons and her wild tale of a man swimming about in circles in the sky until he plummeted to earth as if overcome by a crippling fatigue.

At the time, Long Tom had credited it to a touch of altitude sickness. But now he was not so certain.

These last few minutes of events were taking place at a reasonable altitude. That is to say, no particular height. The Badlands hereabouts featured many high elevations. But Long Tom had not climbed any of those fantastic precipices.

Altitude sickness could not account for the vision of an interrupted creek and its swift refilling. And the trout that had fallen out of a clear azure sky had been solid enough to fillet and fry.

He struggled with the memory of the muddy waterhole in which the missing cowpoke Hud had supposedly sought. Could that swimming hole's contents somehow have been transported skyward taking the man with him?

It seemed preposterous. But the more the baffled Electrical Wizard contemplated it, the more his brain tugged at the corners of the mystery. If the swimming hole had been catapulted skyward somehow, it was reasonable to assume that gravity would bring it back down along with any contents. Such as a trapped swimmer.

The theory was reasonable. No question about it. Extremely reasonable.

True, an agency that might elevate a swimming hole was a bit of a puzzle. But many inexplicable things had in the heart of them ordinary explanations.

The truly baffling part centered around the possibility of the swimming hole having remained suspended high in the sky containing the captured cowpoke. What had kept it up there for long? And what had caused it to fall back to earth along with the unfortunate Hud?

Those were the questions that made his brain hurt in a way that nothing to do with a concussion.

Finally, Long Tom rearranged his flour-sack arm sling and sat up. He <clucked> at his horse which obligingly trotted up. With difficulty, he managed to clamber back into the saddle one-handed.

The feel of its worn leather hull brought his thoughts careening back to the near hanging he had endured. He was developing a distaste for Wyoming (or at least this desolate section of it). The appeal of solitude was giving way to the inconvenience of constant trouble.

As he forked his mount back in the direction of the isolated spot where the smashed plane had come to rest, something in the sky caught his canny eye. It was white and it scooted high up in the blue.



At first, the slender Electrical Expert mistook the thing for a bird. But careful attention showed that it was no avian specimen. Shielding his eyes from the Sun, he followed it.

Suddenly he exploded: "That looks like Pat's Stetson!"

That comment was likely a product of hope and not recognition. For at the great distance, one white Stetson could be mistaken for another. But since the golden-**eyed** girl had last been seen wearing such headgear, Long Tom flew into a conclusion.

As he rode along, he paid attention to the rugged ground beneath his pony's feet. He was keeping an eye out for any signs left by the **green**-toggled rider. The ground was too stony to take hoofprints. So he paid more attention to the hat flying about high above it.

It was not particularly windy by Greasewood Creek where the Pumpkin Buttes acted as a windbreak. And it was clear from the behavior of the whirling Stetson that there was plenty of wind at the higher elevations.

"That chapeau," muttered Long Tom, "doesn't look like it wants to land."

Abruptly, there came a **crack** of gun sound. The Stetson gave a flip and changed direction like a wounded bird. It tumbled a bit. Then righted itself somehow and continued gliding about pushed by playful winds.

Another **crack** and the Stetson jumped almost straight up. When it came down, it fell like a rock.

Echoes made it impossible to track the source of the gunshot. For that must be what it was. It was the bark of a six-gun. Whoever triggered it was a pretty fair shot. For twice the shooter had nailed the fast-moving target.

*"Might be Laramie having a little fun,"* Long Tom told himself reassuringly.

Then another thought struck him. He voiced it aloud.

"Maybe it's Pat herself trying to fetch her Stetson out of the sky with a bullet.

Again, nothing more substantial than hope lay behind that declaration.

This was proven when Long Tom rounded a rocky outcropping and spied the wielder of the revolver.

It was a female. But not Pat Savage. **This girl possessed fluffy pine-colored hair and sat on the same dun mare that she had so preemptively requisitioned after the previous shooting.**

Long Tom sat in his saddle staring. His mouth fell open when he found himself looking for the second time into the muzzle of the six-gun in the young lady's hand. For she had spied him and brought both her mount and her aim around in his direction.

The young woman's face hardened. Reading purpose in her brown eyes, Long Tom hurled himself suddenly sideways just as the weapon barked *thunderously*. Then he leaped to safety behind a jutting tusk of the stony point.

A female voice rang out.

*"Thought I'd perforated your permanent-like yesterday! Clear out of this county lest I hole your thievin' skull!"*

No more shots were fired. Long Tom cautiously poked his hat around the corner. Then followed it with his head when it did not attract a bullet. The trail was empty!

It was a little uncanny. Without a gesture beyond the single shot, the girl had fled. Long Tom mounted his horse (whose temper not even the end of the Universe could shake) and spurred madly in pursuit. But search as he might, the total result of his hunt was an absolute zero.

The dun mare that she had taken from him was vastly superior to his ancient sorrel in speed (if not also in experience and staying qualities). With only a 2-or-3 minutes head-start, she had disappeared completely. Which was not remarkable. Any one of the craggy canyons could have easily swallowed horse and rider. The polished boulders, packed earth, and scattered loose stones offered no discernible trail.

Finally, Long Tom gave it up as a bad job and headed back toward the plane wreck.

His course took him past the white Stetson which had by this time fluttered to the ground. Bending awkwardly in the saddle, he scooped up the bullet-riddle thing and examined it carefully.

"It's Pat's alright," he decided.

He gave the inside of the crown a <sniff> and frowned. He had hoped to smell fresh perspiration. But no such luck. Evidently Pat had not worn the hat for several hours (if not longer).



His pale eyes searched the elevations comprising the chain of frowning buttes. He came to a firm conclusion which he kept to himself.

The wound in his arm ached. It had been jarred when he slid so abruptly off the horse. He readjusted the sling to give a little more comfort and then urged his mount on.



Very soon the narrow canyon through which Greasewood Creek ran widened. It spread out fan-wise on either side. Lying between the surrounding walls of massive sandstone and red rock was a natural meadow decorated with scarlet spikes of Indian paintbrush.

Amidst these flowers stood a solitary cabin decaying in the Sun. It possessed a deserted air. Swallows popped in-and-out of the corrugate iron eaves where they had apparently nested.

Long Tom rode absent-mindedly out of a fringe of scrub pines. No sooner had he done so than things began to happen.

*Spa-a-n-g-g!* A bullet struck a tree a dozen feet away and ricocheted, humming like an angry hornet.

This time Long Tom kept in the saddle. Instantly he was back in the belt of trees spurring for shelter. Other bullets cut needles and cones from about him. One hissed so close that it stood his hair on end (or so his prickling scalp felt).

Safely concealed with the granite bulk of a score of boulders the size of small dwellings between himself and the sharpshooter, Long Tom pulled to a halt.

"This searching business," he told his panting roan, "is getting more mixed up every minute."

A fringe of underbrush (mostly dwarf pines) ran completely around the meadow. Long Tom tied his mount to a scrawny briar that grew out of a crack in the solid rock. The spot was well hidden. Only one passing a few yards distant would discover the horse.

Drawing close to the cabin, he used added caution moving from thicket-to-thicket searching the ground ahead. The brush extended almost to the cabin wall.

A single window 2 small sashes in size pierced the rear of the structure. Long Tom reached the opening unmolested and raised his eyes cautiously.

A man was crouched at the window facing the middle distance. Or reclined, rather, for he half-lay half-sat on a rude stool. One arm was bound tightly to his side with ragged white bandages. Addition wrappings apparently improvised out of torn flour sacks swathed his torso.

Resting on the windowsill was a businesslike carbine. The man held the weapon with his one good hand and was watching the line of trees across the meadow closely. His face had a worried look.

Long Tom scrutinized him for a full minute. The fellow looked as if he had been through a scrape for his clothes were dusty and torn here-and-there. Long Tom recognized the man's duds.

"Laramie!" he hissed.

The fellow whirled and averted a catastrophe only by common horse sense. Lead would surely have flown wildly. But this man kept his finger out of the trigger guard. That precaution conceivably saved Long Tom Roberts' life.

Lowering his weapon, Laramie exploded: "I almost shot your big ears off! You know that?"

"What are you going holed up here?" demanded Long Tom.

"I might return the favor by asking what are you doing skulkin' around this cabin?" countered Laramie.

"I ran into that girl again. She's been shooting at me some more.

Laramie grunted. "Getting' to be a bad habit with her."

"Shooting back didn't make a lot of sense," Long Tom said. "So I retreated after leaving my horse tied up."

Opening the door, the puny Electrical Wizard stepped in. The 2 men huddled, their eyes watching through the windows.

"I have a story to tell," Laramie said at length.

"That makes two of us," declared Long Tom.

"My story is a mite unbelievable," cautioned Laramie, his eyes looking slightly guilty. "You're gonna think that either I've swapped my chewin' tobacco for locoweed or I'm the tallest liar this side of Cheyenne."

"We'll swap yarns. You go first."

Laramie was scratching at the back of his wrinkled neck where the Sun had reddened it most.

"I was waiting by that plane wreck when I happened to notice a white Stetson flyin' around in the sky. Naturally I thought of Miss Pat. So I began walkin' in that direct ion."

"I saw it also," commented Long Tom. "That blonde gal began shooting at it until it dropped out of the sky."

"That's when I ducked back since I don't cotton to wild lead-slingin' here in the Badlands," admitted Laramie. "In my caution, I happened to mosey into the rocks where I encountered the most doggone fellow you ever did meet. Except you never met him."

"Was he dressed in green like a leprechaun?" asked Long Tom.

"Had the Irish red hair too," clucked Laramie. "So I guess you did meet up with him."

"Unexpectedly," allowed Long Tom. "He opened up on me with a double-barreled scattergun. But he missed."

"Did me the same favor," said Laramie. "Only he didn't miss me by much. I got ma skin full of rock salt. I'm grateful that's all it was."

"What happened to him after that?"



"It's what happened to me that I hesitate to offer."

Laramie did some more scratching. Then he squinted his wrinkled eyes as if trying to assemble the most sensible words he could.

"After the scattergun blasted me, I was blown back a ways. But I kept going. Next thing I knew I didn't know anything. When I woke up, I was a long ways away from that old rock. In fact, I landed in this meadow. All my bones ached and I can't figure out how I got here so fast."

"Whoa. Back up a bit," said Long Tom impatiently. "You say the shotgun blast threw you all this way? That's got to be 2-to-3 miles as the buzzard flies."

"That's not the impossible part," the old codger declared. "The blast flung me in the opposite direction from where I landed. I plum blacked out. When I came to my senses, I was tangled up in an old cottonwood. I don't know how I got here. But no horse-drawn wagon dragged me this far. My pocket watch told me that much."

"So when I got myself back on the solid soil and reassembled, I hunkered down in the cabin fearin' God-knows-what devilment might transpire next."

He cleared his throat noisily.

"That's my story. And she's a fact!"

Tugging absently at an oversized ear, Long Tom closed one pale in thought.

"You got the better of me," he admitted at last.

"How so?"

"My story isn't anywhere as preposterous. But it's in the general ballpark. I ducked the **green** bird's blast. But somehow Greasewood Creek went dry in the middle for a short spell of time. I couldn't see how. But the water rushed in to make it whole again. After that came a short downpour followed by a live river trout landing. I've been thinking that it might be the river water coming back down to earth."

"It would take a powerful shotgun to blast a section of creek clear up into the sky," Laramie mused.

Long Tom frowned. "I didn't think it was the shotgun until you spun your yarn. Now I don't know."

"That makes two of us," allowed Laramie. "What happened to the gal?"

"She's still out there. But it's Pat that I'm more worried about. Her hat was flying around like it blew off one of the buttes. She might have climbed one if she lost her horse."

"Makes sense that she might've done that," said Laramie. "But where is Lightning? And shouldn't Miss Pat be up on a butte waving her arms for us to see?"



"Don't make me think mournful thoughts," said Long Tom. "I think it's time to bring **Doc Savage** into this confusion."

"We're pretty far from any telephone. And that ornery gal is out there with her loaded-for-bear smoke-wagon and an over-eager trigger finger. She's warpathin' something ferocious. If she sees me coyoting with the likes of you, she's liable to brand me as a maverick too. With hot lead. How do you propose to navigate this conundrum?"

"By tracking down that girl for starters," said Long Tom tightly.

Laramie squinted. "You sound plenty sore at her."

"That's not the point. No sense in hunting for a telephone if she's going to take potshots at us from the rocks. I need to settle with her first."

The old cowboy gave his pants a hitch. His tongue pulled away from the roof of his mouth and made a little *click* of sudden disapproval.

"That kinda talk usually leads to the parties involved unravelin' cartridges at one another."

Long Tom's mouth hardened. "If it comes to a fight, I'm game."

"You'd do that?"

"She shot at me twice. I'm starting to think it might be a pleasure."

"In that case," said Laramie reluctantly, "you're the boss. So you lead the way. And if you're still wearin' that bulletproof vest of yours, don't think poorly of me if I stand behind you most of the time."

"Let's get cracking!" said Long Tom with firm conviction.



## X – Mule Mystery

Pat Savage woke up to the blaze of the Wyoming sun stabbing hot needles into her golden **eyes**.

The glare was something awful. Groaning, she reached up for her Stetson and encountered only her hair which had been dyed **copper** to disguise its **bronze** sheen.

The difference between **copper** and **bronze** was not very great. But to Pat Savage, it had been a reasonable precaution as were the dark sunglasses that concealed her striking golden **eyes**.

She sat up with difficulty. Her back ached. Her face was so dry and hot that she realized that she must have been lying in the Sun for a good many hours.

She wondered why she was half-naked. She was puzzled at the many clear stain *marks* on her thighs and breasts.



Shielding her eyes from the blazing **Sun**, she looked up and attempted to ascertain the time. The position of the Sun caused her to exclaim "It can't be!"

Suddenly remembering that she was wearing it, Pat checked her wristwatch. It was broken. The crystal face was shattered. She lifted it to her ear. It no longer ticked. The hands read 11:32. The position of the Sun suggested that it was approximately 9:00 in the morning.

"No wonder my noggin aches so much," she complained.

At the sound of her voice, the Lightning emitted a dismal *whinny*.

Twisting around with every muscle and joint protesting, the **copper**-haired girls discovered the horse lying on its side. It did not look good. Its eyes were watery and its chestnut flanks heaved with the struggle to keep breathing.

Climbing to her feet, Pat made a circuit of the mare and saw the sad truth. Lightning's left foreleg had a disquieting bulge in it that could only mean one thing.

"Broken," she murmured.

Kneeling down, she patted the horse's trembling cheek.

"I'm sorry, old gal," she said soothingly.

The horse gave a pitiful *bleat* of a sound as a solitary tear ran down from one moist eye.

Pat gave the horse reassurance for a while. Then she stood up and took stock of the situation. She had not done this before, concern for the animal being uppermost in her mind.

Pat saw that she was high up and for a moment began to wonder about her mental health. It started to come back to her that he had been blasted by a shotgun wielded by a weird little man in **green** and she and her mount had leapt prodigiously into the sky.

Going to the rocky rim of her perch, Pat saw how high they had landed and whispered one word wonderingly.

*"Impossible."*

She knew that no horse could leap so high. And from the looks of her surroundings, there was no trail up. Therefore, the horse could not have fled into the rocks and clambered up to this rocky perch. The golden-**eyed** girl made a circuit of the butte's lip just to be certain.

Returning to the stricken horse, she said: "Lightning, that was a leap that would have outshone Pegasus."

The stricken horse offered no rejoinder.

Getting down on her knees, she checked the animal again and discovered a leakage of blood from the flank pressed to the rocky summit.

"Looks like you collected some buckshot," she said sympathetically.

Pat reached under the horse and felt around the coarse hairs. She found something lodged in a small wound. She brought it out and examined the **bloody** pellet.

It was not buckshot at all. It wasn't any kind of lead. It was nearly transparent although yellowish. Wiping it off on her sleeve, she examined it in the harsh sunlight.

"Rock salt!"

Frowning, she said: "This stuff must sting. I've heard of varmints who stuffed rock salt into their scatterguns to teach people a lesson without seriously harming them. But I don't understand why it would make you jump like you were wearing seven-league horseshoes."

Of course, Pat quickly realized that the animal could not have executed such a mythological feat. Yet she could not account for how she and Lightning arrived at this lofty perch where only the buzzards normally roosted.



Pangs of hunger stirred in her stomach and reminded her that she had not eaten since breakfast the previous morning. If she had any hope of reaching the safety of the valley floor, she needed to get about her business.

This included some unpleasanties. Beginning with the disposition of Lightning.

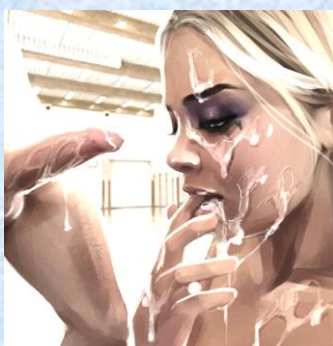
Fighting back tears and with her chin trembling a little, Pat took the Winchester out of its saddle scabbard. She <cocked> it once and slipped up behind the horse placing the muzzle against the back of its long skull without touching horseflesh.

"I'm so sorry, Lightning," she whispered.

Closing her eyes, Pat Savage pulled the trigger. The horse's head rocked as a convulsive shudder coursed along its spine causing its tail to flutter and whip about. The last animation ceased within less than a minute.

She did not look back as she jacked another round into the receiver and began picking her way down off the high elevation. She had never had to put down a horse before although it was not an unusual thing in the wilderness of British Columbia where she had been raised by her deceased father [read #11 - "Brand of the Werewolf"]. But she was horsewoman enough to know what to do when the time came.

*It was also in her remote Canadian home where the beautiful teenager lost her virginity to a group of drunken local men.*



Still, the appropriateness of the action and the mercy she had shown the loyal animal that would have eventually died of starvation roiled her emotions as few things ever had.

Unsteadily, Pat picked her way down climbing, sliding the Winchester ahead of her where necessary, moving as fast as her weakened condition would permit. For she knew that if she allowed herself to be stranded high among these rocks, she might be forced to consuming horse meat in order to survive long enough for rescue to arrive.

Since rescue was not guaranteed, taking her chances climbing down was her only sensible option. It stood to reason that Long Tom and Laramie would have been searching for her long before this hour. The fact that they had not yet located her suggested that they were looking in the wrong places.

The golden-**eyed** girl showed that she had some traits in common with a mountain goat as she worked her way around obstacles shifting horizontally whenever tumbled rocks obstructed her descent. She eventually reached the ground.

Pat had a rough idea of where she was. But it was very rough. She knew that Long Tom's little ranch lay to the east and her best bet was to head in that direction. The town of Bison tempted her. But it was too far a hike.

Tucking her Winchester under one arm, she began her trek. Her Frontier six-shooter hung heavy in its contoured holster, the ivory butt protruding. Inasmuch as it rivaled an anvil in weight, the heavy revolver had stayed put through all of the late Lightning's acrobatics.

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Luck was with her. Or rather, Lady Luck returned to smile on her after a particularly trying absence.

Pat was walking along when a dusty blue roadster came hoicking along the graveled road throwing alkali dust into the air. Had this been a better traveled area and a true highway, she might have considered <cocking> her thumb like a hitchhiker. But she was the only person around for miles. And this was the Wild West, after all.

The motorist pulled over and asked: "Where is your horse?"

Pat choked back a sob and croaked: "Had to shoot her."

"Tough break. Busted leg?"

"Not as busted as my heart," Pat admitted.

"Where are you bound?"

"The Circle Bolt Ranch. It's at least 10 miles up ahead."

"Never visited the place. But I've heard of it. I'm headed for the town of Bison. Would that suit you?"

Pat did not have to consider that for long.



"It would suit me just fine. They have a public telephone."

The driver reached over and pushed open the passenger side door. Pat hopped in slamming it behind her.

Getting the car back in gear, the motorist sent it jouncing along. He appeared to be a tall athletic individual solidly muscled without being too sturdy with a head so square that it might have been planed into shape by a carpenter.

His boots were rich and had a little bit too much silk embroidery. His pants looked as though they had been cut to fit his well-shaped legs. His shirt was rather gaudily purple and his hat was too flamboyantly big and white.

He was not young. But he did not appear old. Yet out from the cuffs of his shirt poked quantities of thick white hair. He appeared to be a simple outdoorsy fellow possessing sharp lead-colored eyes. Some woman might have considered him handsome in a rangy way. But Pat wasn't one of them.

His smile was friendly enough. "What's your name, girly?"

Cautiously, Pat said: "Quitt. Juanna Quitt."

"Nice name. Shame about your horse."

Pat said nothing. She did not want to dwell on the subject.

"My name's Oakley Wood," he said. "I'm with the Lynx Eyes outfit."

"Funny name for a ranch."

"It's kind of a funny ranch. We don't run cattle or even horses. We raise mules. These breaks are mostly all mule range."

Pat nodded distractedly.

"I'm off to Vison to talk to the sheriff," he continued. "Overnight we lost a few more. It's getting to be like a contagion, these vanishing jacks."

Clutching the open window as she bounced in her seat, Pat frowned.

"What kind of rustler would steal mules?"

The other laughed roughly.

"A mule rustler naturally. I feat it's been going on for a while now. Not just our mule outfit but a bunch of others are losing stock. It's a big mystery. In fact, there are rumors floating around that the rustlers operate out of the Circle Bolt Ranch."

Turning his head, he eyed her speculatively.

"Would you know anything about that?"

"A good friend of mine inherited that ranch. He's no mule rustler. In fact, there's just him and his foreman at the place now."

"Well, it was just a rumor I was repeating," said Wood. "No offense intended. 5-or-6 men are doing the deed. They change the brands with an acid that makes the new brand look like the old one. Even to gray hairs in the scars on the inside of the hide. They take the mules across the Bighorns and ship them from Worland on the Burlington branch line that runs up the Bighorn basin."

Wood speared a cigarette out of the pocket of his purple shirt and managed to light it from a jeweled lighter while holding the steering wheel straight with his knee.

"Like I said, 5-or-6 men are doing it. I suspect who one of them is. Every time I followed them, the other hombre shows up in the breaks to help with the brand blotting. He's always masked. I ain't seen his face nor have I been able to trail him. I don't know who he is."

"Who's the one you know?" Pat asked curiously.

"I don't right want to say right now. No point in casting aspersions based on suspicions. But that's why I'm headed into town. I want to share those suspicions with the sheriff. The days of taking justice into your own hands in these parts are over and done with."

"It pays to abide by the Law," commented Pat.

"And that ain't all," Wood went on. "The brand they put on those rustled mules is Miss Crater's Lynx Eyes. It is one of them changed Window Sash brands. It'll blot out everything on this range. All of them that's losing mules at any rate. J.C. Mott's brand is the Half Circle. He's the biggest loser and that's the one who's making the biggest fuss about lynching the culprits once we catch up to them. I'm trying to head that off."

"You sound sure of your facts," commented Pat.

"Sure am," Wood said flatly exhaling tobacco smoke with his comment. "The Lynx Eyes is a small outfit. Like most of the brands in this section of the Big Powder country, it had originally been a horse outfit. But with the slump in the demand for horses following the World War, it had turned to raising mules.

"You see, the wiry little range jugheads bred to big-boned jacks shipped in from the East produce a hearty variety of mule greatly in demand among the small cotton farmers of the southern states. The Lynx Eyes is two egg-shaped loops with the little ends together and a short dash in each loop. The Half circle happens to fit in that dahs. The Leaning Dash is just the size of the dash in the Lynx Eyes. They even ship the pilfered jugheads from Worland under Alta Crater's name."

"Are mules difficult to rustle?" wondered Pat. Not because she was truly interested but rather because she wanted to keep her mind off her troubles.



"Nope. We ship them to Alabama and Georgie and the cotton country. Whoever's rustling them could do that also once they get them past the brand inspectors. Acid could be used to blot a brand so that it'll look like it's been there for years."

"How interesting," said Pat thinly, her voice drifting off.

-----

Soon they pulled into the town of Bison. They said their goodbyes and Pat made a beeline for the general store.

Noticing Pat coming in and seeing her sun- and wind-burned complexion, the proprietor clucked:

"Black cherry pop, ma'am?"

"Open up two," said Pat. "I will need to make a telephone call first."

Striding over to the long oak box of a telephone, she set her Winchester rifle leaning against the wall. Giving the mechanism a crank, she got the operator.

"I would like to place a collect call to New York City."

"*What number?*" asked the operator crisply.

"The party I wish to speak to has several numbers. No need to bother about them, though. Just tell the New York operator to connect to Doc Savage in Manhattan."

"*Did you say **Doc Savage**?*" the operator gasped.

"Yes. And I do not care to repeat it. ... Please hurry. This matter is urgent. Tell him Juanna Quitt is calling."

The general store proprietor was finishing stripping the metal caps off a pair of cold black cherry soda pop bottles when his eyes went wide. He had been chewing furiously in the background. His busy teeth made *squeakings* like fingers stroking freshly soaped saddle leather.

Turning, he stared at Pat. He looked her up-and-down from the crown of her coppery head to the toes of her well-worn riding boots. His eyes became narrow and suspicious.

Setting the cold bottles on the counter, he listened intently. That he heard only half the conversation that followed seemed to intrigue him all the more given the portion he did overhear.

A striking voice finally answered saying: "*Is that you, Pat?*"

"Well, of course it is," said Pat breathlessly. "I told you if ever ran smack into trouble and didn't want to identify myself, I would use the name 'Juanna Quitt'."

"*A peculiar name,*" said the distinctive voice.

"You can take it to mean that I'm quitting my excitement-seeking and handing over my share to you starting immediately."

"You have run into a little difficulty in Wyoming?"

"I wish it was only a little," confessed Pat. "It all started when I rolled up into the Bighorns to do a little prospecting. That was when I saw the man swimming in circles in the sky."

"Such a thing is impossible as you certainly know."

"Impossible ... but I still saw him. As I watched, he started to flounder and then sink slowly. Finally, he plummeted to the ground. I called Long Tom and we found the place where he landed. But the body was gone. And that wasn't the weirdest part. The spot where the body should have been was **wet** from a recent rain. But, Doc, there wasn't a cloud in the sky!"

A strange sound came over the wire. Mellow and melodious, it might have been the eerie keening of a western wind flowing through the sandstone spires which dot the Wyoming badlands like limbless specters. It emerged from the telephone diaphragm like a fugitive creature composed of pure sound that had wandered in from another dimension. Eerie and unearthly was this tuneless **trilling**.

Pat ignored the musical interlude and asked: "I take it that you are intrigued?"

*"How high up in the mountains did you get?"* questioned Doc Savage.

"Pretty high. But I know what you're thinking. And it wasn't altitude sickness. That is, I did have a spell of it. ... But that's beside the point. A body did land from a great height. Then it just up and disappeared!"

*"It sounds like hallucination produced by altitude sickness,"* stated Doc Savage.

Pat <stamped> a booted foot in annoyance.

"But it wasn't! And that's not the worst of it."

*"Continue your report,"* Doc said calmly.

Pat resumed her recitation telling how Long Tom had left her in the dust to ride along until she encountered the strange little fellow in vivid **green** clothes and a John B. Stetson hat too big for him.

"He uncorked an old scattergun in my direction and stung my horse. The horse naturally bolted and then kept on going. I closed my eyes. We must have landed pretty hard because I woke up almost a day later high up in the rocks."

She didn't tell him about her ripped clothes and the strange clear stains on her body.





A catch came into her voice then.

"I had to put the horse down, Doc. It was awful. But there was no way that horse could have gotten up that mountain. There was no path. I don't know how we landed there. Honestly, I don't. But I managed to climb down and hitch a ride into town."

*"What about Long Tom?"*

"I don't know what became of him. I imagine he is out searching for me somewhere in those badlands. ... Doc, I believe you should come out. I think you should fly here now. There's a powerful mystery out here. I don't understand it. But very strange things are happening and I've just about had my fill of trouble."

The line hummed for fully a minute and longer.

Then the distinctive voice of Doc Savage said:

*"Endeavor to locate Long Tom. Let him know that you are safe. Then stay put until my arrival."*

"So you don't think it's altitude sickness?"

*"Not all of it. Perhaps some aspects of it. But as mysteries go, you seem to have uncovered a particularly intriguing one. Await my arrival."*

"Thanks, Cousin," said Pat in genuine relief. "You won't regret this. But just remember, this is my mystery before it's yours. And I expect to participate in its unraveling."

*"We will see about that,"* said Doc Savage noncommittally.

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Pat was grinning when she hung up and turned to claim her refreshments.

Then she noticed the expression on the proprietor's stunned face. A man suddenly struck by lightning might wear such a face. That expression took her aback.

She said firmly: "That was a private conversation, I will have you know."

The proprietor appeared tongue-tied. Pat took that for assent ... scooped up one of the cold bottles ... and began drinking thirstily.

She downed the pop in one continuous pull. When she set the empty bottle down on the counter, she noticed the proprietor's face. It had a crafty look.

"I thought I overheard you talking to a fellow named **Doc Savage**."

"Mind your own business," said Pat tartly.

"I've heard tell of a **Doc Savage** who like to go around busting trouble and putting his nose in other people's business," mused the man.

Grasping the other bottle, Pat ignored him.

"Do you have trouble that you want **Doc Savage** to bust?" the man asked tightly.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" asked Pat lifting the bottle to her lips.

"I think I would like to hear more about this trouble, Miss."

Pat took 2 swallows ... then paused.

"You overheard all you're going to learn."

And with that, she fished out a dime and dropped it on the counter where it rang jarringly before settling down.

"Keep the change," she said stalking out into the dusty street.

The proprietor made no move to interfere. But once the door banged shut, he ran to the long telephone box and gave the crank a vigorous revolution.

"Connect me with the Lynx Eyes Ranch," he bit out nervously. "And don't you dare listen to this conversation! You hear me?"

A furtive voice soon came on the line and said: *"Who's this?"*

"Get Buck on the line. Pronto!"

*"Buck ain't here. Went off somewhere without sayin' exactly where. What's doing?"*

"Trouble," the proprietor said hurriedly. "Tall trouble. I got some hot news. That damn **Doc Savage** is coming to town. He's looking to mix up into something strange."

*"What would be happenin' out here that would interest that guy?"*



"I don't know. But if Doc Savage shows up, this entire section is liable to be turned upside down. Savage has a way of doing things like that. All he has to do is show up and matters will commence earth-quaking."

*"You don't think he's comin' out Wyoming way alookin' for the missin' mules, do you?"*

The proprietor chewed slowly as he considered the question.

"It doesn't sound like a big enough deal for **Doc Savage** to mis into. But he has a reputation of helping people who need help. And so many mules have gone missing that the whole county is riled up. It could be a bunch of owners have pooled their money together to hire him."

*"Doubt it. I heard this Doc Savage doesn't work for pay. He's some kind of altruist. He steps into a fracas for the sheer and abiding pleasure of it."*

"Whether he's looking for mules or has bigger fish to fry, he's going to blow this territory wide open just by stepping into things. We have to head him off at the pass."

The other grunted shortly.

*"Laying low sounds smarter to me. Let Doc Savage blow through the Bighorns and right out again when he's concluded his damn business."*

The masticating proprietor shifted the cargo in his mouth to the opposite cheek. As he did so, his eyes shifted in the opposite direction.

"We can't take that chance and you know it. Listen, I overheard this from a strange **mohairrie** that's been staying at the circle Bolt dumpy. You know the place. That's the one around which all the rumors have been circulating."

*"Suppose we turn this to our advantage," said the telephone voice. "Maybe we can tie this girl into the mule-rustling business. Just like we hung that little fella the other day."*

"And that's another thing. Nobody's brought in that body yet. And the dun we strung him up on hasn't showed up either that I heard of."

*"Nobody could've wormed out of the noose alive. So that's one rustler dead. If we take care of the girl, that will make it two. And that no-cow ranch will likely get closed down as the center of the whole rustling operation."*

"Okay. I'll go take care of the girl. Tell everybody to lay low for a while. That **Doc Savage** is bad medicine."

*"Pure poison,"* agreed the other.

The proprietor hung up and extracted a serviceable six-shooter from a wooden box. The weapon's muzzle was bulldogged to less than half of its manufactured length. Stuffing this into his belt and covering the worn handle with his flannel shirt, he barged out of the general store and went in search of

the girl known as Juanna Quitt. His masticating teeth squeaked as they punished whatever was in his mouth.

He had not gone very far when he spied a familiar face.

"Buck!"

Scowling, the other crossed the street. His face was a thundercloud of wrath.

"Anybody ever tell you that your mouth is too big for Wyoming, Kip?"

"What's the matter, Buck? You look snake-bit."

"Don't call me 'Buck' in town," gritted the other pulling the general store proprietor into the shade of an alley. "You know that's not my real name."

"I slipped up. Sorry. But you need to hear what I got to say. Brace yourself ... Doc Savage is coming our way."

**"Doc Savage!"**

"Yeah. And there's no telling what kind of a mess of forked lightning he's fixin' to tie into."

"He's earned himself a big rep the World over," agreed the other.

"That **bronze** devil ain't human, I'm telling you! He can anything! ... Listen. I'm hunting a girl who just left my store. She's connected to him somehow."

"Describe her."

The other man did. When he was finished, he patted his midriff where the bulky six-gun was concealed.

"Funny thing," said the one who didn't wish to be called 'Buck'. "A fine-looking filly fitting that description stomped into the sheriff's office a few minutes ago. I think it was her."

The starch went out of the proprietor's fierce expression.

"If she's in with the sheriff, I can't do much about the situation."

"Not with your face hanging out for all the World to see, Kip."

The store owner said suddenly: "What say we loiter a bit? Lie in wait for when she comes out."

"If she comes out. But you have the right idea. Only you're going about it the wrong way. I have some ideas along that trend. Let's hie back to your store and I'll spread them out for you ..."



# XI - Predicament

Together, Long Tom Roberts and Laramie crept out of the ramshackle old cabin and picked their way in the direction in which they believed the girl lay (probably in ambush).

The way brought the electrical engineer toward his roan which he reclaimed. The placid sorrel was still standing among concealing briars stamping listlessly at flies and breathing wheezily. The ancient animal started snorting. But Long Tom placed a smothering hand over her nostrils and mouth quieting the creature.

"Pipe down, Sparkplug," he hissed.

Taking the reins, he led the horse along while Laramie followed. Their eyes got busy searching the rocks and declivities through which they crept.

Laramie particularly studied the ground seeking signs. But only well-spaced patches of dirt took tracks. So they put off that particular activity.

After a bit, he took the reins in order to free up the puny Electrical Wizard's good arm, climbing heavily into the saddle.

Long Tom carried a peculiar pistol before him. Larger than a conventional automatic, it was mechanically complicated in a fashion suggested enormous firepower contained in a compact housing. That it was capable of spewing large quantities of bullets was evident in the ammunition drum mounted ahead of the trigger guard.

This was a **supermachine pistol**. A remarkable weapon perfected by the inventiveness of Doc Savage himself. Each of his aides carried one. Long Tom swept the muzzle around to match the direction of his gaze.

The way took them back up into the mountains. They moved with appropriate caution.

The old horse shied at a jackrabbit which had waited until it was almost under the horse's hooves before it shot away from its dugout bed under a sagebrush. Laramie pulled the nervous animal back to the trail.

"Quit spookin' that way!" he grunted at the sorrel. "You ain't got nothing on your mind but prairie grass and oats."

The outburst seemed to remind him that he had a plug of tobacco in a pocket. He extracted it, plopped it into his mustached mouth, and began masticating methodically.

The horse shied again and snorted. Laramie leaned in and stroked the animal's neck quietly.

'Girl, you're getting worse than a new-branded calf. You bein' a she-horse, you won't savvy. But an old terrapin like myself ..."

The *sound* which stopped his words was like the hiss and pop of a bullwhip. A bullet made it. The slug came out of the rocks ahead. It tore into his shirt front and opened a hot groove below his left arm pit and went into the distance with a shrill squawl.

The impact knocked him back in the saddle. While still jerking back, he decided what to do. His burly frame loosened and he fell as if fatally hit. Tense muscles broke his collision with the hard range sod.

The sorrel snorted and ran away with a great hammering of hooves.

Alerted by the commotion, Long Tom switched his supermachine pistol from single-shot to full automatic. Squeezing the trigger, he sent a moaning **blast** into the rocks. The mechanism spurted a tumbling shower of smoking brass cartridges. The rivet-gun bawling of the elaborate weapon was reminiscent of a bull fiddle whose bass string had been plucked to vibrate in a prolonged manner.

Another rifle bullet came through the sage with a terrific *ripping*.

Laramie grunted "I didn't fool that cuss none" and hastily rolled into a gully that was no wider or deeper than his body.

"Don't worry about me none, Long Tom!" he added. "I'm scored. Not scragged."

He fired one of his sixes in the general vicinity of the bushwhacker's gun flash. Then he went down the gully a ways with the scuttling movements of a scared crawfish. No lead came snapping back at him.

For his part, Long Tom ducked into the brush. He sneaked along 50 yards, the gully getting deeper, and then veered off to the right through the sage. His listening ears detected a faint *scratch* that sounded like a cactus thorn on a boot.

Convinced that whoever had tried to dry-gulch them was retreating, he quickened his pace trying to get the drop on the bushwhacker. The sagebrush was as high as his belt and made for excellent concealment. But it was hard to get through silently.

Long Tom's feet ground through a cactus bed. The thorns on his boots made sounds like the squeaking of cold snow. In stumbling over an anthill, he kicked up a shower of fine gravel. Breathing a low oath, he slackened his pace a bit.

**Whang!** It was a gun. But no lead came in his direction.

From concealment, Laramie grunted: "Daw-gone! Who could she be shootin' at now?"

He lifted his body and crawled through the sage and around rocks with no great effort at silence.

**Whang! Whang! Whang!**

Laramie's howl came shrill and rather canine like a dog that had gotten its hind leg caught in a bear trap.



*"D-a-a-w-w-gone!"*

The shooting stopped. Silence clamped down.

A sound ahead. The creak of strained saddle leather. Long Tom juttied up with supermachine pistol in hand.

The muzzle lifted to the level of his elbow. Through a break in the rocks, he could make out a paint broc and the woman climbing onto the saddle. The pine-haired girl!

She rode away, the paint in a dead run, never suspecting Long Tom's presence.

The undersized Electrical Genius sighted carefully and switched the weapon back to single-shot operation. He had a perfect bead on the woman's departing back ... but hesitated.

Shooting a woman was not something he relished. And shooting one in the back caused a disgusted sound to arise from deep within him.

Frowning sourly, he lowered the weapon. The retreating figure was no longer a threat, anyway.

Staggering slightly, Long Tom wheeled about and raced to where the shots had exploded.

A man was sprawled in a clearing in the sheltering sagebrush. It was Laramie! Long Tom sagged down beside him.

Laramie said grimly: "The dodgasted hussy's lead ventilated one of my legs!"

Long Tom explored swiftly. Then he yanked off one shirt sleeve, tore it into strips, and did some emergency one-handed bandaging. Laramie pitched in to help tie knots. Using his good arm, the wiry electrical engineer dragged old Laramie into the shelter of roadside boulders.

It was several minutes before anyone said anything.

"You didn't shoot her, did you?" Laramie asked.

"Didn't have the heart."

"Nor the brains, I reckon."

"I resent that!" snapped Long Tom. "If I had shot her out of the saddle, she might have broken her neck in falling."

"Horseflies! You could've shot the cayuse in the rump. Those tricky bullets you use probably would have put the animal to sleep eventually. Not likely to have caused rider or horse any injury."

"Now that you mention it ..." muttered Long Tom.

"Gol-dang! Be careful with that leg," ground out Laramie. "Her first shot didn't do much damage. So I skinned up until I could see her waitin' in some rocks beside the trail. I lost sight of her after she started shiftin' around. I knew she was fixin' to make mischief."

"So when the fireworks started, I turned loosed in the air thinking it would scare her off. But she shot one of my pins out from underneath me before I knowed what had happened. She sure knows how to get a bead on a gun flash."

"You positive it was her that leaded you?"

"What do you mean? Of course it was her! Who else would it be?"

"Only I thought that last burst was rifle shots. She didn't look like she had a Winchester. Only a six-shooter."

Laramie craned his **sunburned** neck around and searched the rocks with his wrinkled gaze.

"If you're right, that means somebody else is skulkin' hereabouts."

"Trouble doesn't ever seem to run out of steam around here, does it?" complained Long Tom.

"No, it don't. But I recognized that gal. That's Alta Crater. She runs the Lynx Eyes outfit. Her and her brother Hud."

Long Tom <blinked>. "Did you say Hud?"

"It sounded to me like I did. Did it sound that way to you?"

"Don't be so cranky," said Long Tom. "Hud was the name of that cowpoke that Pat met before he ended up swimming in circles in the sky."

"You say you found him dead?" asked Laramie.

"Pat said that she did. But when I showed up, the body wasn't where it was supposed to have landed."

"If Hud Crater up-and-died, Miss Alta might not likely know about it yet. In fact, she could be ridin' the range in search of him. No wonder she's so loose with her lead. She's got to be worried sick about her brother by now."

Long Tom scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"That could explain why she was flying around in that plane. She wasn't looking for missing stock but rather for her lost brother."

"I wouldn't want to be the one to break the news to her," muttered Laramie. "Folks say she has quite the temper."

"I can personally testify to that," said Long Tom sourly.



"So how do we get out of this hellacious predicament we are in?" Laramie wondered. "If we show our hats outside these rocks, we're liable to collect hot lead where our brains normally roost."

*The offhand remark gave the pale Electrical Wizard an idea ...*

-----

Shifting around, he found a long branch that had come off a cottonwood tree. He balanced his hat atop this. Then he lifted the arrangement as high as he could while keeping to the shelter of the boulders.

The hat had no sooner popped up than it went flying. The branch was rudely torn from Long Tom's grip.

The **crack** of a rifle shot followed an instant after that.

"We'll pinned behind these rocks," he informed Laramie. "And I don't mean maybe."

"Here," grumbled Laramie. "Stick my hat on that branch. You bait him into takin' another shot."

"What good will that do?"

"You do it and I'll let you know."

Taking the battered old hat, Long Tom repeated the operation and got practically the same results. The hat acquired a bullet hole and jumped up several feet. But Long Tom managed to latch onto the whirling headgear this time.

Laramie scooted back from whatever he had been doing.

"I got a quick look at the bushwhacker."

"Was it that girl?"

"If it was, she's got a funny way of goin' about things."

Long Tom looked at the old foreman questioningly.

"The bushwhacker with the rifle is high up in the hills," explained Laramie. "I didn't get much of a look at him. But it didn't matter. He had a flour sack over his head."

"Flour sack! That's what those would-be lynchers were wearing."

"Looks like one of them would like to conclude the unfinished job of stringin' you up for being a lowdown mule thief."

Long Tom felt of the bruise-blue welt banding his throat and swallowed hard once.

"Don't look now," he muttered. "But our predicament just went from bad to worse."

"Don't you worry none, Long Tom," stated Laramie. "They'll hang you over my dead body."

Long Tom Roberts said nothing. He took cold comfort in those rough words or reassurance. For he was thinking that where there was one lurking man wearing a flour sack, there was likely to be more of the same. And the badlands of Wyoming were not a place where the Law ventured much. Gunshots might not summon help.

Looking at his supermachine pistol, he frowned. The weapon was a wonder. But it was no rifle. For all of its fearsome power, it lacked the range to reach up into the high hills.

On the other hand, the rifleman wearing the flour-sack hood was in a perfect spot to pick them off if they dared venture from the tight confines of their stony shelter.

"We'll just have to lay low until the Sun sets," he told Laramie.

"That's a good idea. Or it would be if my leg would just stop leakin'."

Long Tom examined the man's thigh. He tightened the tourniquet he had tied there.

"it doesn't look like an artery was nicked," he advised. "But we've got to get you to a doctor before you lose too much blood."

"I take back what I said earlier," said Laramie. "If they do hang you, it will be over my dead body. I'm powerful sorry about that. But I didn't mean to collect a bullet in my leg bone."

Before Long Tom could reassure the old foreman, there came creeping *sounds* from another direction. Turning, they saw the unexpected.

**It was the woman with the fluffy blonde hair. Alta Crater. She was on foot.**

Sighting Long Tom, her face went hard. She trained the muzzle of her big six-gun on him.

Half under his breath, old Laramie growled. "Now's your chance to shoot that filly. If you got the stomach, that is."

Long Tom did not hesitate. It was either her or him.

Squeezing the trigger, he got off the first shot. The answering shot came from the six-shooter. A splatter of hot lead *spanged* off the rocks behind him stinging like flying wasps.

The girl gave out an ugly *Ugh!* of a sound. She collapsed.

Scrambling down, Long Tom seized the smoking six-shooter and handed it to Laramie.

"That mercy bullet will keep her out of action for an hour-or-so. When she wakes up, we'll have to explain ourselves."



The "mercy" ammunition produced instant anesthesia.

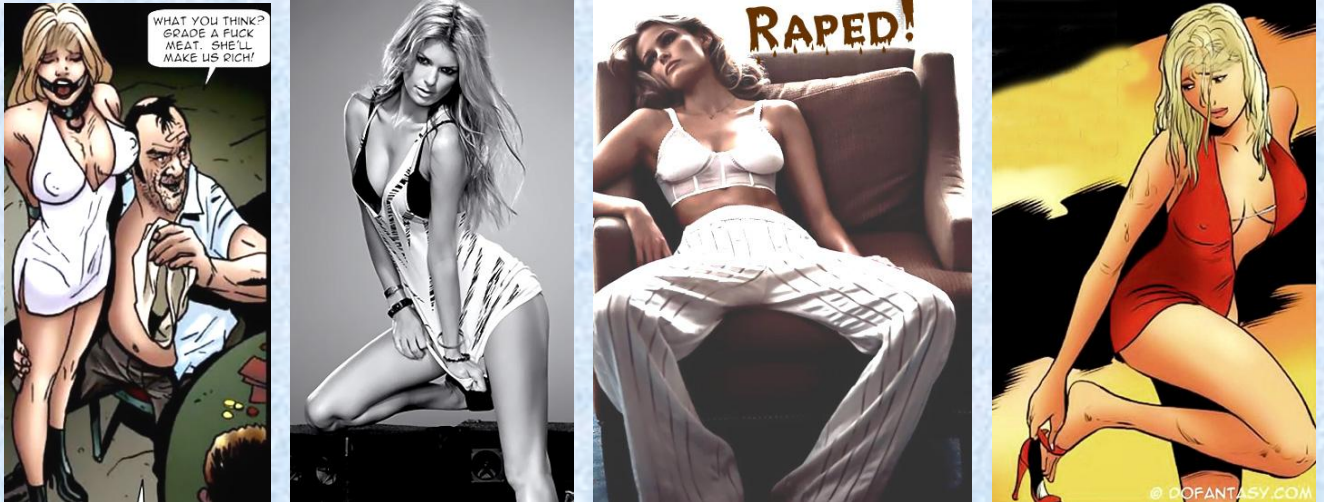
"That part will be easy," grumbled Laramie. "But the part I'm not lookin' forward to is tellin' her about her brother Hud. She won't cotton to that. No, sirree! Alta Crater will be a powerful handful of trouble once she wakes up, mark my words. She's a regular wildcat, that one is."

Long Tom grated fiercely. "So I noticed. But this superfirer packs plenty of mercy bullets. If I have to shoot her every hour, I will."

## XII – Jugged

Pat Savage marched into the Sheriff's office. It was a tiny place. The Sheriff's quarters in the local calaboose occupied the same modest building that looked as though it had been built before Wyoming had achieved statehood.

The Sheriff looked up. He saw the sorry state of Pat's hair, complexion, and clothing.



"What befell you?" he asked.

"Exactly what I've been wondering," quipped Pat. "But never mind that right now. I thought I would look in on you since I'm the gal that everybody's searching for."

"You don't say," said the Sheriff standing up. "And what might be your name?"

"I've been going by the name of 'Darla Dell'. But that's because I've been on vacation and wished to remain incognito."

The Sheriff of Bison looked slightly blank. Evidently 'incognito' was a word not found in his personal vocabulary.

"I just had a talk with a local feller," he said. "He tells me he brought into a town a girl who looked a lot like you. He said she gave her name as 'Juanna Quitt'."

"I called myself that too," confessed Pat. "But that's not my real name, either."

At this point, the Sheriff became extremely interested. His face bunched up into a frown and his dark blue eyes got little sparks in them.

"You say you're the gal everybody's looking for. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I'm the one who got lost overnight on my way back here," she explained. "I had to shoot my horse because it ... er, pulled up lame. No doubt my friend Long Tom has stirred up a fuss about my absence."



"I don't know anyone by that name," advised the Sheriff slowly.

"Long Tom Roberts owns the Circle Bolt," said Pat. "I've been his guest for the last few days."

"Is that right? But no one's come calling about any missing gal."

Pat's pretty face acquired a quirk in the corners of her mouth, narrowing her eyes. Her eyebrows crowded together almost touching.

"I would have thought that he would have organized several search parties for me by now," said Pat.

"Not that I know of," said the Sheriff. "The only thing I hear out of the Circle Bolt is rumors of mule rustling."

Pat batted her golden eyes.

"Mules! Long Tom doesn't own any."

"Mules have been going missing these last few weeks," advised the Sheriff. "Just about the time the Circle Bolt passed into new ownership. Folks hereabouts have been putting two and two together and auguring out loud."

Pat flared righteously.

"Long Tom Roberts would no more rustle a mule than he would kick a puppy!"

The Sheriff looked thoughtful.

"You say your friend goes by the name of 'Long Tom'. That's kind of a piratey-sounding name."

Now Pat was becoming frustrated.

"Do you mean to tell me you've never heard of Long Tom Roberts? The electrical engineer?"

"Can't say that I have. Tell me more."

"Long Tom is one of the men who works with Doc Savage. Surely you've heard of Doc Savage."

"**Doc Savage** I've heard of," admitted the Sheriff. "he's a real hellbender from back East. They say he rearranges the affairs of entire continents; smashes gangs that the G-Men can't touch; and is probably only 5-or-6 years away from conquering the Moon for science."

"You have definitely heard of Doc Savage," said Pat. "Then you would know that anybody who associates with Doc would never stoop to rustling whether it's horses or mules."

"I'll accept that theory," said the Sheriff. "Now let's get down to who you are. How many aliases do you have, anyway?"

"As I've already told you, I'm here incognito," answered Pat impatiently. "I don't want to attract attention so I go by different names. You see, Doc Savage is my cousin."

"Now that's an impressive tallish tale you tell. But is it true? That's what I'm wondering."

"If you don't believe me, then just stick around. I called Doc from the general store. He'll be here as fast as he can fly. He'll vouch for me."

The Sheriff fell silent. He was appraising her with wise speculative eyes.

"Funny you would go missing overnight and no one raise an alarm," he mused.

"Nothing funny about it. I ended up on top of a butte with my horse."

"Which butte?" asked the Sheriff.

"What are the big ones called? I don't know all their names."

"How did you and your horse end up way up there? None of those buttes could be climbed by a horse. Unless it had wings."

"Now that, I cannot explain," admitted Pat. "Someone in a foul temper uncorked a shotgun at us. And the next thing I knew, we were flying through the air."

A dark frown overtook the lawman's sunburnt features.

"Did you happen to subsist on any wild weeds when you were out there overnight?"

"I haven't had a bit to eat since yesterday's breakfast," said Pat. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, some who get lost out in the Badlands get to chewing on a plant called locoweed. It causes them to imagine things."

Pat looked as if she were getting angry. But then she remembered something.

"If I was imagining flying up into the buttes, I wasn't the only one. Before I fell victim of the little man in green, I happened upon a cowpoke named 'Hud'. He was going for a dip in the swimming hole.

"An hour-or-so later, I saw him swimming in the sky. Swimming in circles. He looked for all-the-world like a drowning man. Then he fell. He was dead when I got to him. I called my friend Long Tom right away. But by the time we got back to the spot where the body fell, there was no sign of any body."

"Hud? Do you mean Hud Crater?"

"I don't know which 'Hud' I mean," admitted Pat. "The 'Hud' I met didn't introduce him formally. He was just a passing acquaintance."



"This is mighty interesting. There's a 'Hud Crater' who went missing from the Lynx Eyes spread a day ago. His sister Alta has been combing the Badlands looking for him. And now you say he's dead."

"I'm sorry to say he's dead. The fall must have killed him," said Pat. "But I can't for the life of me imagine how he got up in the sky the way he did. Even after it happened to me, it's a puzzle."

"No ne found any body. But that doesn't mean there isn't one."

The Sheriff lapsed back into a period of contemplation.

When he came out of it, he marched over to Pat Savage and said:

"I am placing you under arrest, whatever your legal name might be."

Pat's eyes lit up like candles. "Arrest? Whatever for?"

"Suspicion."

"Suspicion of what, may I ask?"

"Just plain vanilla suspicion," advised the Sheriff. "I'll work out the details later. Right now, you're going into the jug while I go look for Alta Crater and let her know that her brother may or may not be dead. And while I'm at it, I'm going to nose around the Circle Bolt Ranch and see what I can see."

Pat warned: "Doc Savage will not be pleased to learn that his only cousin has been jailed for no good reason."

The lawman was unmoved.

"From what I hear about Doc Savage, he has a sympathetic understanding of the Law and its ways. If you are who you say you are, he'll appreciate my placing you under protective custody while the ball of knotty twine you just laid on my desk gets untangled."

"Well, come on! We ain't got all the livelong day!"

---

Pat Savage was too weak from her ordeal to resist. Not that she thought it would be a good idea.



The Sheriff confiscated her six-gun.

"That's some flamethrower" he remarked in an admiring tone.

He locked it in his desk and walked the **copper**-haired girl into the single cell the town of Bison boasted. She was locked in like a common criminal and sat down on the wooden bench that might have been occupied by the Sundance Kid in a more colorful era.

"This just isn't my day," she moaned.

"From what you say," observed the official, "it hasn't been your day so far this week."

"You are very perceptive," said Pat folding her sinewy brown arms defiantly.

Without any further ado, the lawman went out. He got in his automobile and took off into the Badlands.

As she settled down onto the rough wooden pallet, Pat wondered *"Whatever could've happened to Long Tom?"*

She did not have long to stew in the calaboose.

A few minutes later, a man entered the Sheriff's office whose door had not been locked.

He wore a gunnysack over his head and a pair of tooled leather cuffs on his wrists. From under his shirt he extracted a gun. A revolver with its barrel bulldogged short. He waved the weapon about aimlessly until he came to the iron bars of the cell door.

Seeing the masked man, Pat stood up abruptly.

"If you're looking for the sheriff, he just left," she told him.

A strangely muffled voice said: "So I saw. But it's you that I'm looking for."

"Me? Whatever for?"

"I need to break you out."

"But I don't want to be broken out," protested Pat. "The Sheriff locked me up fair-and-square even if I don't agree with him. If I go with you, serious charges could be lodged against me."

The tall man in the gunnysack hood rattled around the office. He found an old-fashioned brass key on a ring and brought it over to the iron door. This he inserted into the big lock. The *grating* and *squealing* of the mechanism made her feel as if going with him would be tantamount to stepping onto the gallows.

"I'm staying right here," she said firmly.

"You're coming with me like it or not."



The barred door swung open and the gunnysack jail-breaker strode in.

"You don't look like you have much fight in you at the moment," he said confidently.

Pat Savage demonstrated the error of his ways when she stepped up and smacked the nicked revolver out of his fist before he could react.

The gun made a pop! A foul genie of smoke bloomed forth. Evidently the bullet that discharged had a faulty supply of powder. The noise was hardly anything. The bullet jumped into the ceiling and cracked it.

As the weapon clattered to the floor, Pat leapt for it. But so did the other.

They wrestled about on the floor for a time grunting effort until their hands wrapped around the short-barreled six-gun and they were strenuously tugging in opposite directions.

Pat's strength was not up to its usual level. Nevertheless, desperation lent her a certain determination of thew and tendon. Much to her surprise, she began making headway.

Abruptly, the would-be kidnapper released the revolver. Pat fumbled it around in both hands trying to get her fingers wrapped around it in proper order. One tapering finger found the trigger ...

Too late.

The jail-breaker reached out and snagged her **copper** hair. He slammed her head into the floor 3 times in quick succession!

With a groan, Pat collapsed limp on the floor. The revolver was stripped from her loose fingers.

"If you can't skin a rabbit one way, you flat it another," grated the gunnysack-headed one.

Picking himself up off the floor, he dragged Pat out of the cell by her heels and to the rear door.

He yanked off the gunnysack and poked his head out the back door, looking both ways until he saw no witnesses. Then he dragged her to a waiting brown sedan.

As he did so, it could be seen that his anxious face was that of the proprietor of the Bison general store. The fellow called 'Kip'. But there were no witnesses and Pat Savage had entirely lost consciousness.

So when she was dumped into the trunk of the machine, the bronze-skinned girl was oblivious to that unsettling fact.

Climbing behind the wheel, the kidnapper sent the automobile scooting out of town, attracting almost no attention as he did so.

## XIII – Lead Medicine

The Sun started sinking. With a sullen heaviness, it disappeared behind the string of sandstone tabletop formations locally known as the Pumpkin Buttes.

Men began to arrive. Some were on horseback. But at least one automobile engine could be heard in the vicinity. Most ominously, it ran without its headlamps turned on, preserving the slow-creeping murk.

Laramie grunted to Long Tom. "You reckon that's the U.S. Cavalry?"

The pale Electrical Genius shook his head violently. "Reinforcements."

It was sufficiently rocky that he could peer around boulders and perceive some of the arrivals. They wore flour sacks over their heads. It made them look ridiculous like overgrown boys playing at being Halloween spooks.

Crawling back to Laramie's side, Long Tom advised: "That flour-sack headed gang is here. Somehow the sniper mustered them."

"How could they? Way out in these Badlands?"

Long Tom considered this as the Sun continued going down.

"They must've been called by heliograph signal or something," he decided.

Laramie's tobacco-stained mustache drooped forlornly.

"What?"

"By flashing a pocket mirror so that the Sun's reflection makes Morse code dots and dashes," Long Tom explained. "They couldn't manage it any other way."

"Are we surrounded or what?"

The undersized Electrical Expert jerked his body about. He peered toward every compass point looking for signs of skulkers while listening for any sounds of approach.

Perceiving nothing, he intoned: "There's no telling where some of them are. But it's a sure bet they're going to wait until it gets dark."

"Moonrise ain't far off," Laramie offered hopefully. "Maybe an hour."

"They can't snipe at us without moonlight," reminded Long Tom. "So it's a standoff until somebody makes a move."

Laramie spanked his **gore**-soaked bandage.



"Well, I ain't doin' any movin' myself. Not with this bum leg."

The grizzled old man eyed Long Tom in the fading red light.

"And if you have a notion to take off, I wouldn't think poorly of you for doin' exactly that."

Long Tom's eyes flashed with a hint of anger.

"I don't desert wounded men."

Laramie laughed shortly. "I was just thinkin' you might fetch reinforcements to come at the reinforcements that's just been fetched up. Try to even things up a bit."

Long Tom said nothing. He thought so little of the idea that he refused to give it breath.

His eyes went to the girl. She was still lying in the dirt and rocks, sleeping completely unawares. Cooling breezes played at her fluffy hair. But otherwise she did not move.

Up to this point, the sniper with the rifle had not spoken. Perhaps emboldened by reinforcements, he now lifted his voice.

*"You down there!"*

Laramie exploded. "Don't answer that. He'll aim for the sound of your voice."

"I know that," growled Long Tom. "I was in the Great War."

"Plumb forgot. Pardon my fidgetiness."

The sniper's voice carried again.

*"You're surrounded and outnumbered!"* he hollered. *"Come crawling out of your burrow with your hands held high like you hope to snag a cloud! We won't shoot you!"*

"Sure he will," snorted Laramie.

Another voice suddenly spoke up.

*"And we won't hang yuh, neither. Even though yore a no-account range bum and deserve to have yore neck stretched by a rope."*

That was no special comfort either.

Laramie ventured: "Sounds to me like they aim to finish the necktie party that got out of hand yesterday."

Long Tom remained mum. He was beginning to get the drift of things. Although he couldn't see very much, his imagination placed a gunnysack hood over the head of the loud-voiced sniper.

Opined a voice from another direction -- not loud but strong -- which carried on the wind.

*"He ain't takin' the bait, Quest."*

*"Didn't think he would,"* mumbled the man.

The mumbling was strange. It sounded like the fellow had something in his mouth and was trying to talk around the obstruction. Perhaps it was the muffling effect of a hood.

The one addressed as Quest went on.

*"We'll just have to beat the sagebrush for them. Try to take 'em by surprise."*

Long Tom was listening with his oversized sail-like ears. The sound seemed to be coming from the east and it was not high. Quest was not up in the tall rocks.

Narrowing his eyes, the runt-sized Electrical Wizard put all his efforts into gauging the distance of the 2 conspirators.

The muffle-voiced Quest said: *"Work around to their position. Move low so that you're not seen."*

The other complained. "How can I be seen when I can't even see where I'm goin'?"

"Just feel your way. You can do it. You know this territory."

"If you say so," the other allowed.

Sounds *made* by creaking boots came.

Twisting suddenly, Long Tom cut loose with the supermachine pistol. A long saffron *tongue* leaped out of the spike-snouted muzzle. The weapon **moaned** like an alarmed ghost.

The muzzle flashes helped. For as Long Tom corrected his aim, he spied a skulking figure. It went down. The man fell on his book. His boot heels struck the ground hard a moment later.

"You got him!" exulted Laramie. "Pretty fair shootin'."

Lead ripped and sang. The blasting **roar** of guns sent echoes thumping like the laughter of some evil monster. Bullets began spanking off the rocks all around him indicating that Long Tom's muzzle *flash* had been seen.

There was more than one rifleman. That forced Long Tom and Laramie to stay under cover while the once called 'Quest' lit out for shelter of his own.

-----  
After a bit, the shooting died down and the weirdly-mangled voice came distinctly now.

*"You there! We got a bead on you now. You can't hold out all night."*



Long Tom said nothing.

"*What say we talk medicine?*" Quest called out.

"I think he means bad medicine," grunted Laramie. "Probably poison."

Laramie cautiously peered around the side of the sheltering boulder. No part of a human was in sight. But a Winchester barrel rested across a flat rock, dimly visible by starlight. Nearby floated the *shadowy* silhouette of a high-crowned hat.

Laramie didn't think there was a head in the hat. And there wasn't. The sharpshooter was trying to pull a fast one. Slight movements of the gleaming barrel showed that the rifle was being aimed.

The old cowboy leveled his six-shooter carefully and let fly. The muzzle released a clap of powder noise. The slug hit the Winchester barrel squarely.

A man squawked as the rifle stock knocked against his jaw. The Winchester bounced and then fell, discharging upon landing.

*Pin-n-g! Pe-e-e!* The bullet ricocheted off the boulder directly behind them.

Laramie made sudden spitting sounds.

"Daggum it! That last slug came so close to my face that it felt like a bumblebee a-tryin' to get into my mouth!"

After a bit, there came the mechanical mutter of an automobile. Consternation broke out among the reinforcements. It was sudden movement -- shifting about and whispering voices -- that could not be distinguished.

The motorcar crept along, its headlights throwing shifting shadows among the hulking boulders. Long Tom and Laramie both took a chance and scanned the high rocks for sniping skulkers.

Both were particularly surprised to see a handful of hunkered-down heads made shapeless by pale flour sacks.

"I count six," said Laramie.

Then the motorcar rounded the bend and someone recognized the car.

"It's the damn sheriff!" a voice howled.

The voice carried. No order was given.

Evidently, panic overtook the men in the flour-sack hoods. Rifles and six-guns began *hammering* metallic hail. Lead popped and sang and the echoes thundered out once more.

The windshield of the sheriff's automobile shivered into a glassy shower.

Fortunately, the vehicle had been moving at a cautious pace out of respect for the difficult terrain. The sheriff immediately lost control of his vehicle and the front tires jerked to the left. Then the entire machine went blundering into a gully.

Long Tom and Laramie watched in horror as the machine careened out of control and dashed itself against the rocks. Its trunk lid flew up like a startled bird's wing when it crashed to a stop.

The silence that followed was awful. They had expected screams or possibly groans or other indications of life no matter how damaged.

But there was nothing. Just silence.

Laramie breathed: "I reckon if that was the sheriff, then he's a goner."

Long Tom did not contradict that assessment. He came to the identical conclusion.

A voice twisted with a species of awestruck horror sprang up.

"I think we done murdered the sheriff! We are shore up to our neck in quicksand now."

No one spoke for a long time. It was clear that the shooting of the sheriff's automobile had not been planned. The hooded gang had been spooked by the lawman's arrival and had reacted out of panicky fear.

After an uncomfortable silence, the mumbling voice of Quest lifted.

*"It's tough luck. Tough for the sheriff. But he barged into our gunning bee. We'll just put it on these mule rustlers. After we string them up."*

"You hear that?" Laramie hissed.

"Exactly what I figured on," said Long Tom squeezing the grip of his supermachine pistol. "But they'll have a swell time taking us when they try."

"We just gotta hold out 'til the Moon rises," Laramie encouraged. "Won't be long now."

But they did not have that much time. For not far along, another automobile put in an appearance. The sounds of hammers being <cocked> on assorted pistols and rifles came all around them like a brief stirring of crickets. It was a brown sedan.

This machine slowed to a halt and a man poked his head out. The head was smothered by a ragged gunnysack hood (although neither Long Tom nor Laramie could see that fact in the darkness).

Headlights made a harsh blaze beyond their sheltering rocks. But they dared not poke their heads out lest they be sniped at.



The man who had stepped out of the machine demanded: "Quest! Where are you?"

*"Here! But I can't show myself on account of we got that scrawny fella tree-ed."*

The man's voice lifted.

"Better listen up then, all of you. I broke that nosy girl out of jail. She's in my trunk."

High amid the rocks, someone called down. *"What gal?"*

"That **copper**-haired mohairrie who says she is the cousin of **Doc Savage**. That's who. I busted her out of the jug. The sheriff had taken off."

*"That's his car down in the gully with him dead behind the wheel,"* mumbled Quest.

The new arrival did not respond immediately ...

But after a bit, he ventured an opinion.

"Between **Doc Savage** and the dead sheriff, our troubles sure are overflowing."

*"We'll string the girl up with the other one and leave it to Savage to sort out."*

"Is that smart, Quest? **Doc Savage** is no ordinary lawman. He won't clear out of Wyoming until he's gotten to the bottom of matters."

Quest grunted. *"Savage is not here yet. So we got to move fast. He is going to put the kibosh on our little racket. But all that will blow over in time, mark my words."*

The remark was almost humorous since the man's words were jumbled and sometimes only half recognizable.

Then Quest barked: *"Yank that girl out of the trunk and set her in the headlights."*

This was done and Pat Savage was laid in the gravel and dirt where the headlights bathed her supine form.

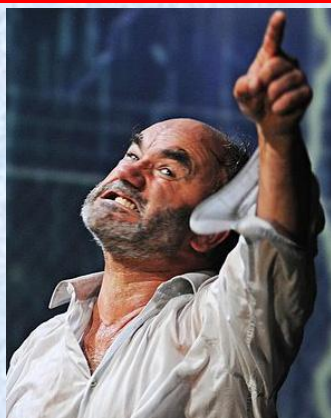
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Quest left her there for just a moment so that all could see.

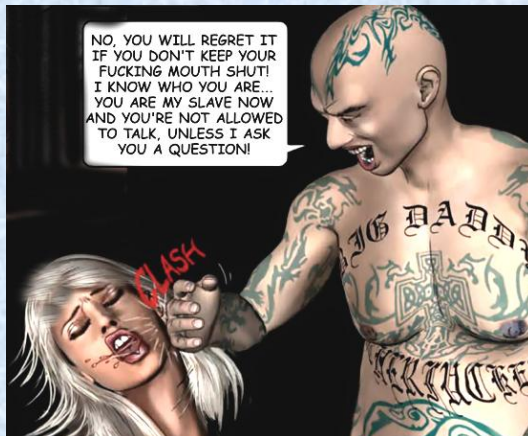
Then he ordered her moved behind the car in the darkness. He yelled:

*"Now RAPE the living shit out of her!!!"*





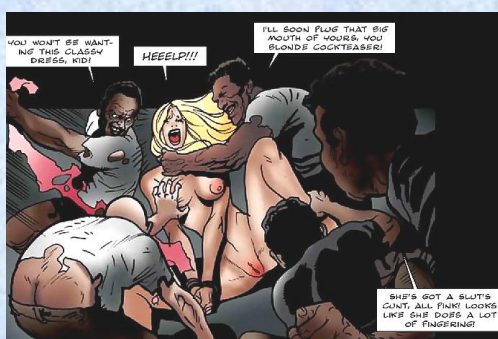
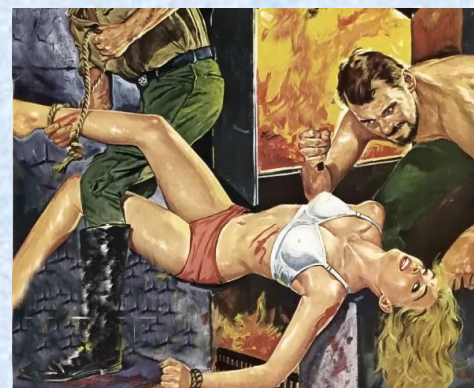
His men weren't expecting such an order. But they lustfully welcomed it.



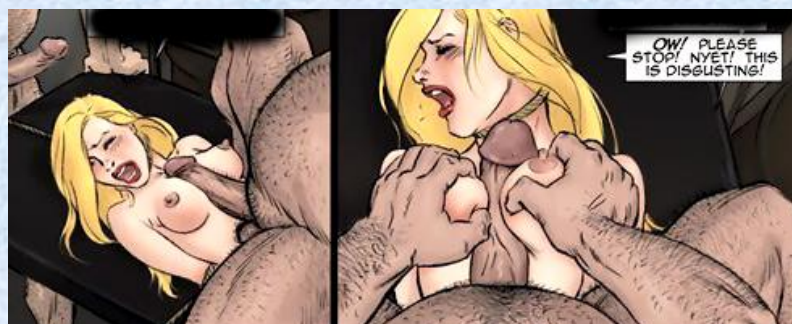
They quickly started ripping off her tight clothes and manhandling her.

*"You're gonna get fucked, **Bitch!**"*





"God, I love these big titties of yours, **Slut!**"





They laid her naked body down on the hard gravel. Pat looked up and was horrified at the sight of so many naked men with aroused **penises**.



"Here it comes, you goddamn **Whore!**"



They didn't merely slip their fat dicks into her pussy. They brutally rammed them!

*"Uggghhhh! ... Oowwww!! ... Damn you ... Uuggghhhhh ....!!"*

"Shuddup, **Bitch!**"

"Fuck you, **Whore!**"

"Let's make some babies, **Slut!**"







Pat felt every single slimy drop of *semen* that shot up into her fertile womb.



She would lay there spread-eagled and hurting from someone. She thought she could see minute drops of *blood* on her tapered thighs. They didn't just thrust in-and-out. They twisted their cocks this way and that way in her sore cunt.

And then, yet another would take the place of someone who was exhausted ...

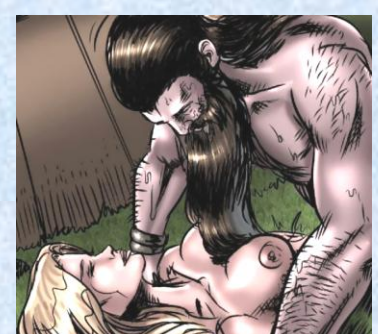




"Yeah-h-h-h ... You feel so good, **Bitch!**"

"Stop it! Stop! You're killing me!" pleaded Pat.

"Hell, **Whore**. We're just getting' started ... *G-r-r-r-r-r-r!!*"



Pat felt like she was being skewered as the bastards emptied their foul *impregnating* seeds up into her bruised vagina.

"My oh my oh my ... That's some good apple pie," said the wit of the group.





And they were not joking when they had said they were just getting started. They now eyed her pretty **neon-pink lips**.

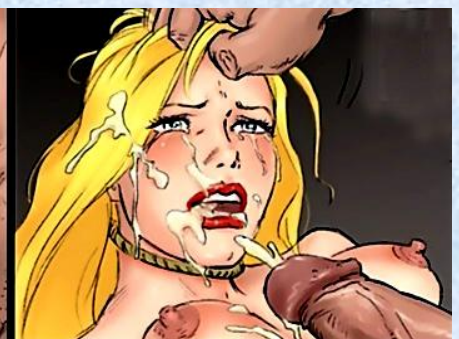




"Suck it, **Bitch!** Suck it real good. Lick it like a lollipop!"



Pat gagged and gurgled trying to breathe and swallow *jizz* at the same time.



They finished their oral humiliations. But others were watching her firm bubble butt gyrate up-and-down in the air. They were anal deviants. Cruel smirks adorned their evil faces as they prepared to sodomize the beautiful **bronze-haired slut-whore**.



Pat was not naïve. She quickly figured what they had in mind. She had been taken anally before. The humiliation was almost as bad as the pain.



"Please don't do it back there!" she cried. "It hurts so bad."

"Sounds like you have had some experience, **Whore**," one laughed. "You must be used to it by now. So git that Ass up high in the air for us."



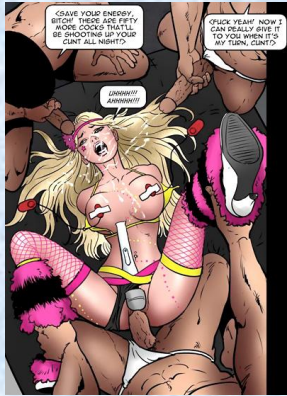
"O-o-o-w-w-w-w-w-!!!" screamed Pat as a 12" cock plunged up her rectum.

"Feels good doesn't it, **Slut**?" mocked her sodomist.





It quickly turned into a **mass orgy** into all Pat's intimate sexual orifices ...



Sticks, rods, dildoes, fucking machines -- all were used in their final degradation of sophisticated Pat Savage ...







*In a Parallel Universe ...*







[Impregnated Slut]

Quest called down.

*"Take a look, you two. If you don't surrender, my sharpshooters will start using that girlie for target practice."*

Long Tom and Laramie swapped looks. Their expressions were not healthy.

Laramie scowled. "Them jaspers are plumb skunky. The polecats!"



*"Be smart," Quest warned. "You're sitting ducks."*

Old Laramie emitted a gritty chuckle. He raised his voice.

"Try and make us quack, you gizzard-slitting mule thief! We're hombres who aim to shot back!"

*"Somebody take the first shot,"* directed Quest.

-----

Surprisingly, the sound of a bullet being jacked into the receiver of a Winchester came audibly. This was followed by the crack of the bullet.

A little geyser of dust exploded not 6 inches from Pat Savage's head. Neither Long Tom nor Laramie saw that. But they heard it distinctly. Their imaginations filled in the rest.

Laramie said: "Why don't I crawfish myself out? They may not know about you."

"Stay low," growled Long Tom. "And keep an eye on the other girl."

He stepped out, pale hands empty and slowly lifting into the sky. Moonlight painted him and made him look spectral, doing nothing good for his normally sallow complexion.

"You got me," he said sullenly.

"Yeah," grated Quest. "Dead to rights."

The man who stood with Pat Savage in the headlights strode forward with a six-gun held before him. This was the proprietor of the Bison general store. But Long Tom did not know that owing to the man's gunnysack disguise.

Long Tom held his hands out at his sides as if he were unsure whether to life them fully skyward or be prepared to employ his fists.

"Reacher higher," prompted the gunman.

The undersized Electrical Wizard made a move in that direction. But only with one hand (his left). The right hand wriggled out of its arm sling ... swept behind him ... and yanked out the supermachine pistol which he had tucked into the small of his back where his belt held it firmly in place.

The weapon came around so fast that the man with the six-shooter did not have time to squeeze off a shot. Long Tom cut him down with a furious burst of mercy bullets. The fellow collapsed.

Then all around him, bullets began spanking off hard rock and pounded into the ground with ugly *chucking* noises.

But Long Tom was moving fast. He plunged into the headlight glare and fired 2 short bursts in different directions. Then he stuffed his hot gun into a pocket and threw Pat Savage over his good shoulder.

The driver-side door had been left open. Long Tom deposited her into the front seat rather roughly. Shoving her over, he got behind the wheel. Without bothering to clap the door shut, he got the sedan in motion.

Assorted slugs started drumming the roof. He doused the lights. The absence of illumination produced the expected effect of causing everyone to be more blind than they would otherwise have been. Consequently, no one could get off a clear shot.

In that interval of consternation and confusion, the puny electrical engineer wrenched the car wheel and sent the machine as close to the shelter of rocks as he could.

"Laramie!" he called out.

But the wily old cowboy had already divined Long Tom's intent. He had crawled up and was lurching in the direction of the machine.

He got the passenger-side door open and crammed his thick body in squeezing Pat Savage between himself and Long Tom.

He chuckled raggedly. "I see you collected Miss Pat. What about Miss Crater?"

"We'll come back for her," said Long Tom sending the brown sedan lurching ahead.

-----

As getaways went, this one was hastily improvised. The absence of illumination appeared to be in their favor. But it was not helpful in terms of navigation.

Long Tom was forced to creep the car forward. He strained with his eyes trying to hold to the dirt trail that passed for a road through the Badlands.

The **crunching** of dirt and gravel under the crawling tires seemed as loud as popcorn popping. That was imagination, of course, seasoned with fear. The machine inched forward. But no shots snapped in their direction.

The gunmen sprinkled around them were no doubt struggling with their optic nerves. And probably other nerves as well.

Somebody had a flashlight. It popped a rod of light that was quite intense after the unrelieved darkness. The luminous rod flickered and flashed about before finally locating the slow-moving machine.

Craning his head about, Laramie spotted the other end of the thread of light. Without respecting the glass at the sedan's back window, he squeezed off a single shot breaking the glass and causing the flashlight wilder considerable pain and distress.

"I winged him!" Laramie exulted.



But his joy proved short-lived. For a rifle bullet found the left rear tire and the inner tube let go with an explosive pop!

Skinning his lips back off of his teeth, Long Tom gave the gas pedal more pressure. But the machine only dragged itself along for a few yards before he realized that the effort was futile.

Applying the brakes, he unlimbered his supermachine pistol and scrutinized it.

"The indicator on this thing says I have 20 shots left. Maybe that will be enough."

He gave the weapon an adjustment that set it to fire single shots.

"I got 5 shells in my six and another dozen in my pockets," Laramie said firmly. "We might not have 'em outnumbered. But we can sure take a bunch with us."

Long Tom said: "No sense sitting here waiting for them to sneak up on us."

And with that, the grim-faced Electrical Wizard opened his door and stepped out with his pistol at the ready. On the other side of the front seat, Laramie did the same.

No longer propped up by the 2 men, Pat Savage slumped down. She showed no signs of being aware of her peril.



## XIV – Green Devil Again

The darkness was so absolute that nothing much transpired for several minutes. Quiet reigned. Somewhere a prairie owl uttered a questioning disconsolate hoot.

No one could see to shoot. It was a discouraging situation. Not that Long Tom Roberts feared a gun fray. Circumstances had backed him into a tight corner and the only sensible way out was to blaze away.

On the other side of the brown automobile, Laramie complained.

"Long Tom, I'm feelin' poorly. Loss of blood, I'm thinkin'."

"Well, get yourself behind the machine and be ready to shoot your best."

"Damnblast it! It's darker than a bat's worst nightmare. What are we gonna use for light?"

Long Tom answered that by removing a small flashlight from his pocket. Ranking the spring-generator that provided power, he placed it on the trunk of the automobile and stepped away.

The pocket torch's ghostly beam naturally attracted attention. Several bullets arrived in short order and made the light jump around. Long Tom had kept his eyes peeled for the gun flashes he knew would come.

There was no point in shooting up into the rocks. The distance was too great for the superfirer's limited range.

But closer by, he sent tiny hollow bullets snapping. They whizzed like wasps dashing themselves apart with small splashing sounds.

Return fire was both sporadic and spiteful. A bullet sang off a nearby boulder causing both hunkered men to <flinch> knowing how wild slugs could ricochet with lethal consequences.

Crouched behind the sedan, Laramie uncorked a careful shot followed by another. A man yelled out in the darkness followed by a stream of blistering cuss words. The air almost turned blue from his vehement cursing.

"That'll teach you gunsters!" barked Laramie with gleeful satisfaction.

A rifle bullet then zinged down dislodging his hat. Profanity erupted from his lips.

"Sure hope Miss Pat didn't hear that," he mumbled, catching himself.

To his immense surprise, a sleepy voice murmured: "Hear what?"

Long Tom yelled: "Pat! Are you awake?"

Pat groaned. "Barely. Where am I?"



Laramie answered that pained query.

"In the middle of a shootin' affray, Miss Pat."

She took this in silence. But it was brief.

When she spoke again, her voice was both clear and determined.

"Somebody," she requested, "hand me a proper shootin' iron."

"Fresh out, I'm afraid," said Laramie.

"Darn!" fumed Pat. "How many are we up against?"

"No tellin' for sure," returned Laramie. "But there seem to be plenty of 'em. A regular cavvy of coyotes."

Laramie <squeezed> off another shot. But he missed his target. Nothing much resulted.

Pat had crawled out to join him. She kept low.

The Moon was coming up now shedding silvery luminance. Coyotes greeted it with low *yipping* sounds. The solitary owl contributed a mournful mouthful.

The creeping lunar illumination gave the ambushers a glimpse of something to shoot at. The sniping began in earnest.

A nearby six crashed and Laramie's right leg acquired a surplus joint between knee and ankle. The shock made his face dumbly blank. His fingers let the still-smoking revolver fall into the dirt. The collapse of the leg toppled him over to the right.

Pat pitched against the stricken man and undid his belt. She twisted it about his calf to stem the flow of **blood**.

Another revolver **blazed**. Something framed Pat's cheek. The bullet tore a ragged **gory** trench across the back of Laramie's flannel shirt, the furrow burning like a string of bee strings.

"Daw-gone!" he howled. "Pot them critters for me, Miss Pat!"

Pat's six-shooter barked first. The man screamed! He put his arms across his middle one atop the other as if to cover up something suddenly very dear to him. His weakening legs let him down rapidly. He collapsed half across the roadway.

On the other side of the automobile, Long Tom sent mercy slugs whining into the lunar-lit landscape. Most of these dashed themselves against buff-colored sandstone splashing their anesthetic contents harmlessly.

Someone higher in the rocks showed that he was an expert with the Winchester. He sent one bullet down that clipped off a lock of Long Tom's pale hair. The latter felt the breeze and snap of its passing but had no idea that the lock had been shorn. He was too busy searching for fresh victims.

The sniper's second bullet did something almost impossible. Silently, the man aimed for Long Tom's wrist just in back of his weapon. Instead, he struck the barrel. The force of the slug yanked the compact weapon out of Long Tom's tight fist.

The supermachine pistol was snatched away as if by an angry ghost. Long Tom's fingers stung. He grabbed his wrist staring at the empty fist with disbelief coming into his eyes.

The weapon went skittering across the hood of the car and careened past Laramie. The old cowboy crawled toward the spot where it had landed. The grinding *agony* in his leg and back made him yelp shrilly.

Bullets beating the dirt around him, he took hold of the weapon with both hands. But he saw that the superfirer's short barrel had been knocked off true by the force of the rifle bullet. His Sun-seamed face fell.

"Useless!" he spat disgustedly.

To cover for the old man, Pat Savage was triggering the six-shooter methodically. It blew out its last bullet along with spitting sparks.

"Empty," Pat moaned.

Laramie coughed: "Got some spare shells in my pocket. Hold on."

The mossy old cowboy jerked about and tried to dig into his pockets. But the effort combined with the biting pain and loss of **blood** proved too much. With a leaky sigh, he simply fainted.

Pat saw this and jumped towards him. That was when the hooded men marched out of the rocks and surrounded the automobile like a tribunal of white-headed spooks.

Long Tom groaned. "We're sunk!"

"Sunk my foot!" snapped Pat.

-----

Then a shotgun was directed toward her face. The mumbling voice said:

"Unless you want to be buried with a pound of buckshot in you, kindly subside nice and gentle-like."

Pat subsided.

She was quickly disarmed and helped to her feet. 2 men surrounded Long Tom. His fists balled up so tightly that they turned white as bone. He looked as if he was about to take a wild swing at somebody.



But Pat hissed: "Don't! It's sure death."

The frail-looking Electrical Expert let out a slow breath and seemed to deflate. He made no move to defend himself. His fists were concrete.

"Hoist 'em high!" a faceless voice commanded.

Reluctantly, their hands crawled above their hat brims.

The surrounding group wore flour sacks over their heads. Their assorted sizes were as varied as one might expect to find in cow country. Few stood out noticeably.

One was a little taller than the others. He stepped forward. A gunnysack enveloped his head. He was the only one wearing one. His shirt was a flannel so faded that its original color was impossible to discern by moonlight. His dark trousers were corduroy.

He spoke in an ugly scraping snarl like the sound of a rasp shaping a shod bronc hoof.

"My name is Quest. Just Quest. No first name. Get me?"

"We get you," growled Long Tom. "What's this all about?"

"Seems to be that we have some unfinished business," mused Quest. "Something about mule rustling."

"You have the wrong party," said Pat vehemently.

*She was ignored.*

"March," ordered Quest.

So they marched.

They were driven a short distance at the point of rifles. When they saw the cottonwood trees and the waiting horses, they were not surprised by the hempen ropes being fixed in place. Regulation nooses swung in the shadows like twin dooms.

Long Tom squared his jaw. But he said nothing.

Pat flared: "You boys wouldn't hang a woman ... Would you?"

No one commented. The hooded men were very silent. Disquietingly so.

At this point, cords were produced and their hands were tied behind their backs. There followed an attempt to lift them in the saddles.

This resulted in a brief melee in which skinned knuckles and cruel kicks predominated. One attacker swung his revolver barrel club-wise. A gun barrel came into contact with hard skullbone. In mid-swing, Long Tom saw stars and his fist failed to connect with a hooded jaw.

Rifle butts slammed down on Long Tom's back and Pat's shoulder. They were driven to the ground and, after that, manhandled into the saddles.

Nooses were set around their necks. In the distance, the coyotes seemed to grow quiet.

Pat said bravely: "**Doc Savage** will make you pay for this."

In his abnormal voice, Quest retorted: "Savage will bring a lot of trouble no matter what we do here tonight. So we might as well be about our business."

Long Tom began uttering some choice words which caused Pat to remark: "I never suspected you possessed such a colorful vocabulary."

Quest chuckled. "He's just upset because this is his second hanging. Usually a rustler only gets his neck stretched once."

"You know he's not a rustler!"

Quest said flatly: "There's been so much mule rustling in these parts that someone's going to have to hang for it. Better you two than any of us."

Pat blazed: "So you're the rustlers!"

"Don't tell anyone after you get to the Pearly Gates," said Quest ghoulishly. "I don't want Saint Peter eyeing me funny when I get around to showing up."

"You monsters! Hanging innocent parties for your own crimes."

One of the hooded vigilantes said: "Let's be done with this, Quest. No point in draggin' our feet."

"No. No point in dragging our feet," Quest agreed.

With a mumbled chuckle, he added: "But these two will be kicking their heels up in another minute-or-two. So let's get these horses moving."

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Before the horses could be spanked into action, a new arrival put in an appearance. In the full blaze of moonlight, he was a remarkable sight.

The **apparition** might have stepped out of a particularly shoddy Hollywood movie production.

He stood tall, spindly, and slightly knock-kneed. His high-heeled boots gave him added height as did the oversized hat.



But it was outfit that arrested their attention. It was not quite a rodeo outfit. But it bordered on the ridiculous. An Eastern dude having taken in too many cowboy pictures might attire himself in such outlandish duds.

**Green** was the predominant color. Although his bandana was red. The neckerchief did not quite match his carrotty **hair** which was a little long and sprayed out from under the brim of his hat.

In the moonlight, his eyes gleamed a lizard **green**. His skin was so pale that it was clear that he was no outdoorsman. And certainly no native son of Wyoming.

Despite the grim solemnity of the occasion, the masked vigilantes emitted furious chuckles and other sounds indicating mirth.

"Get a load of that greenhorn!" exclaimed one.

"What would you call him?"

"A walking calamity of colors!"

"He's kind of a Christmas-colored dude, ain't he?"

"Let's call him Christmas!"

"Why don't yuh call me **Mr. Calamity**?" the other said levelly.

Then he lifted an ornate percussion scattergun and showed the double maw to everyone.

"A dyin' Crow medicine man gave me this. He said it was full o' powerful medicine. Reckon he was right because I never have had to reload it. Every time I pull the trigger, calamitous happenings commence."

His accent was atrocious. It was not Wyoming. It was not even Western. It was Hollywood. And it was ridiculous.

But the ominous maw of the double-barreled shotgun smothered all atmosphere of the ridiculousness.

They saw that 2 turkey buzzard feathers were tied to the fore-end of the ugly weapon. One black and one white. The scattergun looked to be about 50 years old. The <clocked> hammers resembled devilish horns. Worn scrollwork patinated with age decorated the receiver. The side-by-side barrels measured 30 inches in length.

Quest spoke up. "What are you fixing to do, stranger/"

"The old medicine man handed me this ripsnorter and said that I should keep strangers off o' these rocks. It was kind of a special charge."

Quest drawled: "In case you haven't noticed, we have business here. Hang-tree business."

The double maw shifted to the west and the **Christmas**-colored apparition said:

"Take yore business elsewhere. This is Crow territory."

"I never heard that," snapped one of the vigilantes.

"I'm telling yuh to mosey along. Do your hanging somewhere else. Else I'll let loose with this devil gun."

Quest said tightly: "In case you haven't noticed, **Christmas**, you're outnumbered considerably."

The ridiculous **apparition** showed nerve. His shotgun did not waver an inch.

"Yuh won't like what this hammer gun puts out. Not one little bit."

Pat Savage spoke up. "You better listen to him. That shotgun doesn't spit buckshot, birdshot, or anything remotely like it."

Quest turned: "And what would you know about it?"

"Too much. He turned it on me yesterday."

"Well, you don't look much the worse for wear."

Pat said thinly: "I gave you fair warning."

Shrugging negligently, Quest turned his glittering colorless eyes back on the absurd **jasper** in green.

"The way I see it," he told the other, "you got 2 charges to uncork. Provided you pull both triggers at once. Then we're going to drill you like a rattlesnake."

The other held his ground.

"I can take yuh. I can take all of yuh."

**Mr. Calamity** said it with such low vehemence that Quest hesitated. The ridiculous figure did not seem to have any particular fear in him.

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While hesitant cloth-rimmed eyes gleamed in the moonlight and the situation poised on the brink of disaster, something passed over the Moon intercepting the light.

Everyone looked up.

**It was a plane.** It had come up so quietly that no one had noticed.

In truth, they heard no motor drone even as the plane passed overhead winging west and slightly to the north. Floodlights sent out funnels of illumination as if in search of something.



A steady *hissing* filtered down echoing off the clustering bluffs.

Pat and Long Tom exchanged surprised glances.

"**Doc!**" Pat declared.

"That's his plane all right," whispered Long Tom. "I recognize the whisper of those silencers. Nobody but Doc has them."

But the aircraft passed by and continued on into the darkness of the Western horizon.

Pat moaned. "He didn't see us, did he?"

Before Long Tom could reply, Quest made his move.

The hissing plane had drawn all eyes. In that interval, the vigilante leader saw his opportunity.

Swiveling his six-gun about, he aimed in the direction of the so-called **Mr. Calamity**. His trigger finger tightened.

His target, however, was swifter. **Mr. Calamity** pulled back on one trigger and then the other. That was when everyone took his newfound nickname seriously.

2 violent **blasts** seared the night. Several vigilantes were struck by whatever the scattergun had vomited forth. They were knocked off their feet, momentarily turned about and otherwise disadvantaged.

None fell to the dust. Instead, *they began rising into the night flailing and floundering as they moved skyward.*

Abruptly, Quest hurled himself to one side slamming into the dirt and rolling into the shelter of a rock.

Slipping around, he tried to get the long steel barrel of his six-shooter atop his stony shelter while he sought a bead on the **green**-clad cowpoke.

**But before he could squeeze off a shot, something that felt exactly like a *metallic* vise took hold of his wrist and shucked the heavy weapon from his unresisting fingers.**

## XV – Thunderbolt of **Bronze**

A **metallic** Hercules had appeared seemingly from nowhere.

None of the assembled necktie party had discerned his approach. This was explained by the fact that the giant had dropped down out of the sky like a *silent* **thunderbolt**.

The modern Hercules had descended by parachute. The silken bell was blacker than the night sky and therefore not noticed. None of the lynchers had been looking upward anyway. Thus they failed to take notice of the **Nemesis** that the night had apparently deposited in their midst.

Long fingers with a grip like **steel** had disarmed the vigilante calling himself 'Quest'. Those same fingers took hold of the man as if he were but a young boy. They manhandled him briefly slapping his clothes and tearing off his cartridge belt as if it were mere cheesecloth. This act alone suggested prodigious **strength**.

The steely hands transferred to Quest's pulsing neck. Fingers were about his throat squeezing. Quest's tongue popped loose of his mouth. His eyes protruded as well. Such was the obdurate strength in those **metallic** digits.

Quest had the momentary impression that he was being strangled. But this was a product of panic and imagination combined. The **squeezing** fingers found a spot near the back of his neck and began kneading it. Quest's hold on consciousness began to ebb.

Still possessed by the panicky sensation of imminent death by strangulation, the outlaw began floundering and kicking. But it was to no avail. Nor could he speak and give outcry.

The bandit found himself more helpless than he could ever recall. The imminence of Death produces strange reactions in a man. When he realized he could not defeat the thing that had utter mastery over him, Quest craned his head around to see what it was. He wanted to take the last sight of his conqueror with him to the grave. That was how helpless he felt.

Quest had time only for a glimpse. But what he saw struck with him for the rest of his days (which were destined to be short).

His first impression consisted of eyes. They were **golden** like those of an eagle. But no eagle possessed such **metallic** talons. A bobcat might possess golden eyes. But the fact surrounding the orbs of **gold** was neither feline nor avian. The eyes were human. But not ordinary.

The twin irises staring down at him were intense in their focus. The cast of the surrounding of the surrounding face was **metallic**. In the moonlight it appeared to be molded from hardened **bronze**. The features were handsome and regular but somehow terrible in their cold expressionlessness.

Everything about that countenance was fixed and immobile. No anger dwelt there. Not even annoyance.



Yet the eyes were terrible. Deep within their depths, gold *flakes* whirled in an eerie agitation. There seemed to be anger there. Anger and Wrath. But nowhere else on the **bronze** Hercules' metallic features.

The **giant** wore an unusual outfit of brown leather. It was a one-piece affair, the upper portion of which resembled a modern aviator's flying jacket. Beating his fist futilely against this leather-clad Titan, against his immediate surroundings, and even against his own pounding heart, Quest had prepared to surrender his mortal parts to the terrible **giant** that had appeared from nowhere.

Then out of the corner of his eye, Quest spied the garishly-caparisoned creature who had dubbed himself **Mr. Calamity**. The fantastic figure stepped around behind the **bronze** giant. He closed up his shotgun and detonated a double blast against the assailant's broad back.

The **boom** of the vintage hammer gun was an echoing knell. Both barrels had been unleashed. There was no doubting that.

The **bronze Hercules** was thrown forward by the blast. He lost his grip on Quest's neck. In landing, he cracked two of his victim's ribs. It felt as if a steer had been dropped upon the latter.

But the crushing weight of the **bronze** giant exerted itself only momentarily.

**Abruptly, the *metallic* apparition began levitating upward.** This time the expressionless **bronze** mask of a face showed a flicker of concern. But only that. The whirling eyes continued their ceaseless and uncanny animation. This feature picked up speed.

Kicking his legs and clawing at the empty air about him, the **bronze** Titan floated upward with increasing velocity. It was not long before he was lost from sight high in the diamond-bright field of starlight.

From nearby, Long Tom Roberts shouted "Doc!"

Groaning and wincing, Quest stumbled to his feet and demanded: "What that **Doc Savage**?"

Instead of answering, Long Tom looked about. He saw that only three of the vigilantes were yet on their feet, the others having vanished. He made a sudden lunge from the back of his horse in the direction of Pat Savage whose pretty neck had been inserted into a noose.

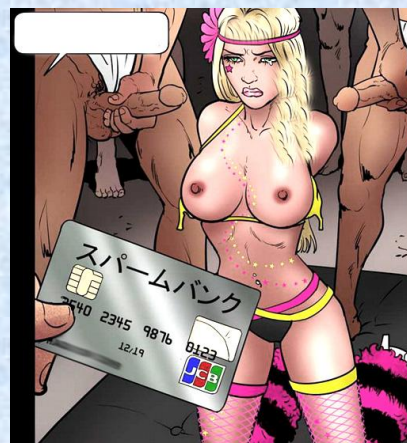
As a maneuver, it appeared to be unwise (if not reckless). Perhaps the puny Electrical Wizard realized that with his **bronze Chief** having vanished into the night sky, there was nothing to prevent Quest and his crooks from finishing the job of hanging.

Long Tom had one boot out of his saddle stirrups and swung it in a wild act so that the rowels struck Pat's horse in the withers.

The horse backed up abruptly, crying out in pain as it did so. It was a predictable reaction. That might have explained Long Tom's risk taking. For the horse backed Pat's head out of the noose which had not been properly tightened. The deadly loop swung free.

The **bronze**-skinned girl had showed no signs of struggling against her fate. Her arms hung limp and her head had rested in the noose as if tired. A bruise visible on the side of her head explained why. A squeamish gunman had knocked her unconscious so that she would not suffer.

After all, her gang-rape had been brutal enough.



There was an unfortunate consequence to this action. Namely that Pat's horse became spooked and began prancing about in agitation. She tipped over in the saddle. One foot tangled in the stirrup. Caught.

The nervous animal walked off dragging the helpless woman in the dirt.

Long Tom's heart dropped into his boots. But he could nothing about this. He found his head being jerked about wildly.

Suddenly his fear of strangulation by hanging was replaced by a near panic. His neck was likely to be broken and he knew it. He shook his head madly like a canine attempting to shake off a constricting dog collar. But it was no good.

As it turned out, the pale electrical genius Long Tom Roberts did not have long to be concerned.

3 unusual things happened in close order.

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First, a body fell out of the sky with a heavy thud. The ground actually shook. It must have fallen from a great height.

This was followed by a second body. It made a less disturbing sound crashing into a clump of greasewood. But the finality of the second along with the first suggested that 2 men had died.

Long Tom remembered seeing two of Quest's gunmen being flung up into the sky by a pair of shotgun blasts. Squeezing his eyes shut, he steeled himself for the third thud. The one that would signify the return to earth of **Doc Savage**.

Instead, there was a distant **crack** and the rope above his head jumped violently.



Another **crack** came. This time the hang rope parted and Long Tom felt the heavy braided strand slap his back hard. It was a welcome feeling. It meant that he could throw himself safely out of the saddle (the noose about his neck notwithstanding). Which he promptly did.

His landing was hard and he rolled with it. He could feel his elbows scraping rock and grit. He could not protect himself because his hands were tied behind his back.

When Long Tom stopped rolling, he flung his head about wildly, eyes attempting to pierce the darkness. Only 2 figures could be discerned. And those were dim.

Quest was one. The strange little man in **green** was the other.

Quest was struggling to his feet with great difficult. One arm held onto his side while the other hand attempted to lever himself up using a large boulder as a brace. His gunnysack hood sat atop his head. But it was greatly askew. One eye was covered while the other orb peered about wildly.

Contrary to his previous boast, the **apparition** in green was reloading his shotgun. His intentions were plain. He was about to send Quest hurtling to his doom straight up. Hurtling into the night sky.

But before he could close the shotgun properly, a **stuttering** sound came from one of the nearby buttes. It was a **roar**. Long and deep. It stuttered like a rivet gun.

Long Tom skinned his teeth into a grin. "That's a supermachine pistol!" he exulted.

Hollow metal capsules commenced busting themselves open against objects on the ground and releasing their chemical contents. There were a lot of them.

Neither standing man understood that properly. They only knew that they were being fire upon by what sounded like a powerful machine-gun.

Plenty of shelter existed amid the rocks and boulders. But that only worked for those who knew whence the withering gunfire emanated. Neither man did.

Both got the identical idea at the same time. They ran for one of the waiting automobiles.

Quest reached the machine first. He flung himself behind the wheel and pulled the door shut.

The goblin-in-green caught up to the rolling machine and yanked open the passenger door. He threw his shotgun in first and the rest of him followed. That door clapped shut.

The dome light was on. Long Tom could spy the long-barreled scattergun lifting and being pointed at the side of Quest's hooded head.

*"Vamoose us out of here!"* howled **Mr. Calamity** in a shrill voice.

*"What do you think I'm trying to do!"* yelled back Quest.

That was the extent of their conversation. At least insofar as Long Tom's hearing went. The automobile accelerated. The **roar** of its motor drowned out everything else except the *stuttering* of the supermachine pistol high in the air.

The ruby-red **taillight** dwindled and then was obscured by stirred-up dust. Soon enough, the sound of the motorcar became lost in the Wyoming vastness.

Long Tom contorted himself into a seated position and stared up in the sky. His pallid features were aghast.

He had seen Doc Savage floundering in his upward ascension and knew what was to come. Stealing himself by gritting his teeth, he waited. He stared-and-stared into the moonlit sky. But he saw nothing resembling a body tumbling about in the inky heavens.

If his wristwatch had not been tied behind his back, the slender Electrical Genius would have consulted it. It seemed as if the **Bronze Man** should have arrived back on ground by now. Fear and apprehension can distort a man's sense of time. So Long Tom continued to wait for the inevitable.

But the inevitable never came.

Instead, before long, a weird *whirring* sound smote his ears.

Searching the horizon, Long Tom saw something lift up from Big Butte. It momentarily displayed itself against the rising Moon and then drifted downward.

It was a gyroplane. A true gyro. A nimble experimental aircraft capable of rising straight up and landing without the need of a runway. It could also hover in place. Which meant it was several years ahead of present-day aeronautical engineering.

Evidently the dragonfly craft had alighted *stealthily* and silently upon the butte. Now it was seeking lower ground.

The whirligig craft was settling into the center of the roadway. As it approached, it kicked up whirlwinds of alkali dust. At first, Long Tom sealed his lips tight and closed his eyes. He would have liked to pinch his nose shut. But his fingers remained pinioned behind his back. He did his best not to inhale any sooner than practicable.

Finally, the windmill plane landed on rubber wheels.

The door opened and a man stepped out. It was a man so tall that he had to duck to avoid being decapitated by the whirling rotor blades.

Long Tom opened a single eye. In the darkness, details could not be made out. But scrutinizing the shady man, the undersized electrical engineer's heart gave a quick leap of hope.

Then it was dashed almost immediately.



When the man straightened out, it could be seen that he was almost as tall as Doc Savage. But his outlines were rougher and not as symmetrical as the famed *Man of Bronze*. And moreover, his **fists** were gigantic. Freakishly so.

The hulking man peered around and gave vent to an exclamation that caused booming echoes to resound off the nearby buttes.

"Holy cow!" he thundered. "Where is everybody?"

"Over here," Long Tom called out. "I'm tied up. Pat's somewhere around here. She's trussed up too."

The huge-handed giant pounded forward. Moonlight found his features. They were long, mournful, and vaguely equine. His dour lineaments made one think of cartoons of Old Man Prohibition back in the bootlegging days. He looked as if he rarely smiled.

The big fellow lumbered up and seized Long Tom by his scrawny shoulders. Then he stood the latter on his feet without any apparent effort than a grunting release of breath.

Spinning the slender Electrical Wizard about, he found his bound wrists. By exerting massive **strength**, he caused the bonds to snap apart.

Long Tom spun and felt his chafed wrists.

"You practically tore the hide off me!" he complained sullenly.

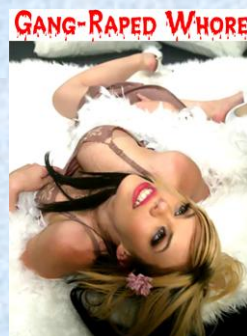
During this outburst, the huge man rumbled out a question.

"Where is Pat?"

"Last I saw, she was tangled up in her saddle stirrup out cold. Her horse was making tracks dragging her along with it."

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They found the horse first. But no Pat. They discovered the **bronze**-haired girl lying in the waist-high fringe of sagebrush insensate as before. One boot was missing. It had come off during the horse-dragging.



"Is she breathing, Renny?" demanded Long Tom.

Renny used his monster paws to pluck Pat out of the sagebrush which had fortunately broken her fall. Ropers held her wrists together. The hulking man took careful pains to release her from bondage by bringing out a pocket knife and going to work carefully on the hemp.

Then he lifted her up in his arms and demanded: "Where did Doc get to?"

Long Tom hesitated ... swallowed hard ... then croaked out:

"He landed okay. But then he went shooting back up in the sky. He didn't come back down. Not that I heard, at any rate."

Renny closed one eye and regarded Long Tom like a skeptical Cyclops.

"Back up into the sky?"

"Let me show you," invited Long Tom.

He led the way to first one and then another of the bodies of the 2 would-be hangmen who wore flour sacks for masks. One of them was not wearing is flour-sack headgear. He was clutching it in his hand. Evidently during his upward flight, he had yanked it off in order to make sure he was not hallucinating. The flour sack remained clutched in his stiff fingers.

"Looks like they hit might hard," Renny rumbled.

"It took a couple of minutes for them to come back to earth by my reckoning," Long Tom allowed.

Renny looked up.

"I don't see anything up there. Do you?"

"Not me," admitted the puny Electrical Genius. "But Doc should've landed by now."

"Knowing Doc," mused Renny in his rumbling tone, "he might have pulled a gimmick out of his trick vest and managed to save himself."

Long Tom regarded the smashed bodies at his feet.

"These two looked like they fell more than a mile. What could accomplish that?"

"Search me," admitted Renny.

He looked around, his disconsolate expression lengthening.

'Renny' was Colonel[ret.] John Renwick, the civil engineer of Doc Savage's outfit. Setting Pat Savage down, he blocked-and-unblocked his monster **fists**. His general attitude strongly suggested that he wanted to tackle the mystery with his bare hands. Which were prodigious.



Those monster paws looked as if each one could barely be slipped into a quart milk pail. When Renny bunched them into matching mauls of bone and tendon, they took on the appearance of gallon-capacity jugs.

The **skin** was red from outdoor work and the knuckles were scarred. He had unbounded confidence in those gargantuan hands. And not without reason. **It** was his boast that no wooden door had a panel so stout that he could not wreck it with one blow of either fist.

Often in the past when he was frustrated, Renny had simply hauled off and demolished the nearest door with a single blow.

But there were no doors handy now. So he worked his **fists** reflexively the way that some men do on the earlobes or chewed the inside of their cheeks. It was a nervous habit. And an unnerving one if you got on Renny's bad side.

Finally, both men stopped staring expectantly into the star-spattered sky. Renny had a question. Long Tom did also. The latter got his out first.

"How did you find us? We heard Doc's plane whiz by without showing any sign of seeing us."

"Johnny was piloting that bus," boomed Renny. "That was to draw everybody's attention while Doc and me slipped up in the gyroplane. He parachuted out after we spotted you."

"That's what I was asking!" snapped Long Tom impatiently. "How did you find us? "We're in the middle of Nowhere, Wyoming."

"You're a funny goof to be asking that question," returned Renny.

"Who are you calling 'funny'?"

"You. You're hilarious. A regular panic. Have you forgotten the **radioactive** coin you carry in your pocket?"

"No," returned Long Tom peevishly. "And I don't carry it in my pocket anymore. It's in the heel of my shoe. That way I don't forget and leave it in the wrong pants pocket. But we use that token to activate the electroscope that opens the door to Doc's **Headquarters**. What does it have to do with this situation?"

"Doc took one of your experimental television receivers and rigged it up so that it will display on a cathode ray tube anything that gives off **radioactive** emanations," explained Renny. "We've been flying over this part of Wyoming with our noses pressed to the screen. When Doc detected something in the air from the gyroplane, he directed Johnny to fly over a d make it seem as if he saw nothing."

Long Tom nodded vigorously.

"I get it now. Then you and Doc sneaked up in the gyroplane."

"Right. Johnny saw what was happening through the **infrared** scanner on the big plane. He radioed us and Doc decided there was no time to waste. He bailed out. With motors silenced, I landed on the butte after he parachuted down."

"Doc did a good job of busting up the hanging party," said Long Tom. "But he barely got started before one of the bad ones opened up with both barrels of a shotgun into his back."

Renny <winced> ... then remembered something.

"Wait a minute! Doc was wearing his bulletproof vest. Do you mean to say he got hit in the head?"

Long Tom shook his head again.

"Not that I saw. But the guy with the scattergun wasn't putting our ordinary buckshot. It fired something that when it takes hold catapults you into the sky at a violent pace. Doc went skyward. He still hasn't come down."

They walked around. Renny produced a flashlight that could be manipulated so that it projected a fan or beam of light and even an intensely white rod. He used all 3 configurations to examine the surroundings.

The blinding beam disclosed a handful of bodies draped limp and broken amid the lower rocks. These unfortunates appeared to be gang members who had been perched high up and been struck by potent mercy bullets. Which had promptly rendered them unconscious causing them to fall to their doom.

Renny had wielded the supermachine pistol that had unleashed this inadvertent mayhem from the descending gyro. The big-**fisted** engineer seemed unconcerned by what he had wrought.

"How many bad ones?" he thumped.

"I counted six not counting the goofy-looking **gink** in green. They don't work together. Although he and the head guy took off in the same car when you opened with your superfirer."

Renny's frowning face grew more rugged of line.

"This is starting to sound complicated," he muttered.

"It's worse than complicated," ground out Long Tom. "it's a tangle of barbed wire. And I don't know where the strands go, never mind what they connect to."

Suddenly he was peering around.

"Where did Laramie go?"

"Who's Laramie?" asked Renny.

"My foreman. I left him wounded behind a rock where they couldn't string him up."



"Anybody else hiding?"

"Down in the gully there is a busted-up car," Long Tom said jerking a thumb in the darkness. "Behind the wheel there's the sheriff of Bison."

Renny scratched his curly hair. "Is he wanted too?"

"No. He's dead."

"A dad sheriff really complicates matters," grunted Renny. "Who killed him?"

"The dirty gang of mule rustlers that just got busted up."

Now puzzlement roosted on the towering engineering's countenance.

"I've heard of horse thieves and beef rustlers," he remarked. "But not mule thieves."

"These dead boys scattered about are the local mule thieves," explained Long Tom. "I don't know who they are. But they decided to hang me and Pat for their own misdeeds."

Renny frowned. "Thinking to cover their tracks?"

"That's about the size of it," allowed Long Tom.

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After failing to locate any surviving rustlers, they discovered Laramie lying in the rocks. Renny looked him over carefully.

"Got your leg busted up, old-timer?" the big-**fisted** engineer asked sympathetically.

Laramie didn't look as though he had much fire left in him. But suddenly he flared up.

"Who you calling an 'old-timer', you gallopin' gallot!"

Renny looked unperturbed and continued examining the man's wounds. He tightened the belt tourniquet about the oldster's calf bring for a <winching> "Daw gone!"

"There's a first-aid kit back in the gyroplane," Renny told Long Tom. "Maybe you should go fetch it."

"Do I look like a god-faced retriever to you?"

Renny eyed him speculatively. "What's eating you?"

"Not much. Only that I've been nearly hanged twice in the past 24 hours. And the last I saw of Doc Savage, he was on his way to the Moon. Now I can't figure out whether I want him to land or not."

Renny rumbled: "Neither outcome sounds welcome to me either. Okay, you watch tis old sourdough. I'll get the first-aid kit myself."

Laramie flared up anew.

"Who you callin' a 'sourdough'? I'm a ranch foreman! Not some packrat scratchin' about in the creek bed for enough gold dust to buys beans and bacon."

Renny Renwick had no sooner started off than there came a distant ***sound*** from nearby. Everyone jumped including Laramie who <winced> with the effort.

It was difficult to see where the noise came from. Renny's powerful flashlight splashed illumination around. A rising cloud of dust drew their attention. It had something of the shape of a toadstool in the spectral moonlight.

The big-fisted engineer and the diminutive electrician pounded toward the dust. Their mouth hung open and their eyes were a little sick.

"I hope that's not Doc," Long Tom moaned.

"Well who else could it be?" Renny flung back.

Laramie called after them.

"Are you gents fixin' to leave me here to die?"

*But his plaintive cry was lost as their feet slapped the sandy soil in desperation.*



## XVI – Futility

The thing that plummeted from the sky was a body. No question about that.

It landed with a hideous sound that suggested pulverized bones and smashed internal organs. The sound of its landing signified that it was very heavy. Heavier than a normal man

Long Tom swallowed hard as he pounded toward the commotion while Renny's closed fists grew moist in the palms. Conversely, his mouth dried. Fear did that. It was not often that either man experienced the darker emotions. But Doc Savage was their leader. The man around whom they had gathered if the aftermath of the World War (now many years in the past).

Together with the other members of the Doc Savage organization, they had combed the distant corners of the Globe seeking peril and excitement. They found both in plenty. This only made they want more.

So it was that when they skidded to a stop, Long Tom and Renny drew great sobbing breaths in through their lungs before their eyes could focus.

The crushed body was indeed large. And its overall color was a dark brown. The same color of the flying outfit that the *Man of Bronze* had worn during his daring parachute plunge.

But the inert body was not that of a human being. It took a little scrutiny to discern that happy fact in the dark.

Rather, it was a horse that had fallen from the sky. It was an ordinary horse except for one peculiarity. It wore a gunnysack over its elongated head.

"Thank goodness," breathed Long Tom. "One of the horses must have been hit by wild buckshot."

"Why would buckshot whirl a horse a mile up?" wondered Renny.

"That's one of the mysteries," snorted Long Tom. "But that's Quest horse. He was the leader of the group. He sported a gunnysack hood while all the others had flour sacks covering their heads. It was the same with their mounts."

Renny grunted: "Must be local boys afraid of being recognized."

"That's my thinking also," said Long Tom.

He suddenly remembered something.

Snapping his think fingers, he said: "We should look for the girl."

"Pat? I left her back yonder."

"No, the other girl. Miss Crater. The sister of the man that Pat saw tumble out of the sky."

Renny said: "I heard about that from Doc. Can't say I credited it much until I got here. Strange things seem to be falling out of the sky. And none of them are rain or meteors."

Long Tom said nothing. Foraging around, he found (to his increasing agitation) no sign of Alta Crater.

"What does she look like?" rumbled Renny.

Long Tom's disposition was approximately that of week-old cream -- sour. He whirled on the big-fisted engineer and snapped impatiently.

"Other than Pat, she'll be the only woman in the vicinity. If you want to know the color of her hair, it was like pinewood but fluffy. Otherwise, you're on your own."

And with that, the pallid Electrical Wizard stalked off to do his own searching.

Renny made no move to follow. Although he stood 6'4" in his stocking feet, he knew that Long Tom had many of the propensities of a wildcat. Thought the least physically impressive member of **Doc Savage's** group, Long Tom Roberts was probably one of the worst to pick a fight with.

Also, Renny understood Long Tom's peevishness. The fate of the **Bronze Man** was looming over their heads like a threatening thundercloud. From time-to-time he looked upward as if hopeful of spying some sign.

Of course, that was ridiculous. But the whole matter was ridiculous. Men being hurled into the sky as if from a catapult. It was fantastic. Unbelievably so. It got on the nerves.

Both Long Tom and Renny ranged the immediate vicinity kicking through greasewood and cactus clumps. But they found no sign of the missing woman. Nor was there any indication that Doc Savage had landed somewhere.

Long Tom turned his attention to Laramie lying in the sagebrush.

"Are you much of a doctor?" the oldster croaked.

"No," returned the puny electrical engineer. "But I can patch you up until we can get you to a medico."

Long Tom's bedside manner left a lot to be desired. But he got Laramie patched up well enough. Applying his own knowledge of horse doctoring, the old man offered his suggestions. Particularly in regard to splinting the bullet-broken leg.

"Ain't you going to take out one of the slugs?" he grouched after Long Tom finished up.

"I don't want you dying of blood loss on me."

"Well, thanks for nothin'."

"And if you live, I'm docking you a day's pay."



"For what?" roared Laramie. "I got all these perforations in your employ."

"For complaining so hard that you make my eardrums hurt," snapped Long Tom.

Meanwhile, Renny's ranging search eventually ran its course. He got around to the crashed automobile and examined the man behind the wheel. The latter wore a 5-pointed nickeled star denoting that he was a local sheriff or marshal.

"Dead," grunted Renny.

He was not surprised. The car was a wreck. His flashlight disclosed all the grisly details. Renny wound the charging cranks constantly to keep it going.

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Finally, the 2 men gave up and rendezvoused by the spindly wingless gyroplane whose rotor blades creaked in the soft summer breeze.

Renny had scooped up Pat Savage in his immense arms and lay her in a back seat. The gyro was a cabin craft; a 4-seater. There was not a lot of room for all that.



Long Tom asked: "Got any smelling salts?"

Renny rummaged around and found a small glass bottle. He uncorked it and waved it under Pat's nostrils. They expected an immediate reaction but did not receive one

"Maybe she has a concussion," rumbled Renny.

Long Tom looked worried.

"That's bad if she does. I'll keep trying to rouse her."

Nodding, Renny lumbered off to collect Laramie and loaded him in back. The old foreman complained every step of the way.

"I have my share of aches and pains before this fracas of a night commenced. And now I'm so perforated I can hardly stand to be manhandled."

"Pipe down!" blared Renny.

"Where did you get those **fists**?" snorted Laramie. "Off a caveman ancestor?"

Renny grunted: "You should meet Monk Mayfair sometime."

"Are his fists bigger?"

"No. But he's more caveman than any Neanderthal you might meet. Provided there are any still around."

"I'll settle for being left alone to **bleed** in peace, thank you just the same," grumbled Laramie.

Renny deposited the cranky oldster in the gyro and asked:

"Pat wake up yet?"

"No," answered Long Tom. "No choice but to just let her sleep and hope she's okay."

Having exhausted all ground search possibilities, Renny and Long Tom decided to take to the air.

Long Tom made a move for the control bucket. But Renny's big paw intercepted his chest bone and held him place. The former ducked into the gyroplane ... seized the controls ... and slammed the door shut, leaving Long Tom to scoot around and take the seat on the other side.

The door was pulling shut when the ingenious synchronized motor caused the overhead rotor wing and the nose propeller to spin in unison. Alkali dust began whirling billowing pale clouds charged with cold moonlight. With amazing speed and mechanical agility, the machine warmed up and then jumped straight into the air like a nimble grasshopper.

There was a searchlight attached to the hull. It could be controlled by a dial that made it rotate. Long Tom switched it 'on' and redirected the beam toward the flat tops of the Pumpkin Buttes.

"Any sign of him?" asked Renny.

"No," admitted Long Tom. "Doc did not end up on any of them."

Dejected, the slender Electrical Genius switched 'off' the searchlight.

Renny sent the windmill plane scrambling up into the sky. He canted it northeast and said:

"First order of business is to find where Johnny put down his plane."

"I forgot about him," snapped Long Tom reaching for the radio microphone. The cockpit transceiver was already dialed to the private frequency used by Doc Savage and his aides.

"Calling Johnny. ... Calling Johnny. ... This is Long Tom."

A thin reedy voice. It had an interesting quality of scholarly precision. Each word and every syllable were annunciated with great care and exactitude.



*"Salutations. Commence your catechism of eventualities."*

Long Tom and Renny exchanged glances. In the back, Laramie piped up.

"What language is he speakin'? Latin?"

"It's his own brand of English," said Long Tom sourly. "Most folks can hardly understand it."

"Well, I hope his mother does. Be a terrible shame to go through life not bein' understood."

*"You leave my mother out of this, whoever-you-are!"* Johnny snapped, reverting to everyday English.

Renny's voice carried to the microphone.

"I found Pat and Long Tom. But we lost Doc."

There was a momentary hesitation from the radio loudspeaker ... Then:

*"I trust that you mean misplaced."*

"The last anyone saw of Doc Savage," the long-faced engineer said mournfully, "he was climbing into the sky like a meteor returning to its home planet. We waited for him to come back. But it never happened."

*"Was he riding a rocket?"* Johnny asked anxiously.

"He wasn't riding anything at all. He was just shooting skyward like a rocket."

Long Tom interjected: "It's a long story. Others have met the same fate. Eventually they came down to earth. They landed hard with the life dashed out of them. But we don't know about Doc. He never returned to earth."

*"No!"* Johnny's voice was clogged with apprehensiveness. *"Are you saying that Doc Savage is dead?"*

Renny let out a great gusty breath that was like the sad sigh of a tired old lion.

"You know Doc. He always climbs out of the durndest fixes."

"In this instance, where would Doc climb to?" Johnny wondered aloud. "The Moon?"

Long Tom interjected. "Where did you land, Johnny?"

*"Open prairie to the northwest. It was the only safe place to set down. I've been waiting half the night worried sick."*

"Well, get into the air. We'll conduct a search for Doc."

Then Williams Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn asked a question that froze their blood.

*"Are we combing the ground or searching the sky?"*

"Both!" snapped Long Tom. "What do you think!"

The blood-freezing effect congealed with his next words.

*"I am thinking that if Doc is floating around in the sky somewhere," said Johnny deliberately, "we are liable to bump into him with our propeller blades in the dark."*

From the rear, Laramie let out a startling grunt of laughter.

"Now if this don't beat all! I have heard some tall tales about Doc Savage. But the yarns you two are spinnin' put Paul Bunyan to shame."

"Butt out of this!" snapped Long Tom.

"I will not! Somebody here has to talk sense. Doc Savage went climbin' into the sky. So it makes sound horse sense that he's back on the ground by now. No point in lookin' for a man in the night wind. He can't fly, can he?"

Neither man answered. Instead, Long Tom spoke into the microphone.

"Stay put, Johnny. We will join you. If Doc did fall back to earth, there's nothing we can do for him. But if he's somewhere in the atmosphere, we will resume our searching at first light."

*"A consummately unsatisfactory plan. But I see no other recourse," said Johnny. His radio transmission went dead.*

The gyroplane beat smoothly through the night encountering a few air bumps. Following the radio signal from the plane, Long Tom worked the direction finder with one eye on the surrounding night as his heart beat high in his throat. Never before had he experienced such sickening fear over the fate of his seemingly invincible **Bronze Leader**.



## XVII – Atmospheric Ordeal

Doc Savage had not been unceremoniously hurled into Eternity as was supposed.

The double shotgun blast that had torn up the back of his flying suit had done considerable damage to the tough outer leather. But the charge had been arrested by his underclothing which was of a chain-mesh construction able to turn al but military slugs. It extended to include his elbows and knees, rather like a pair of winter long johns.

Both barrels had discharged at short range throwing him forward onto the man he had had seized (the hooded crook calling himself Quest). Unavoidably, Doc had been momentarily stunned. The contents of 2 shotgun charges arriving simultaneously will do that to a man. Even as powerful and well-armed as Doc Savage who was seen in some quarters as a modern Sir Galahad.

How long the **bronze** giant might have lain across the man he had been intent upon subduing was not something that would ever be known. For almost as soon as he had shaken off the first stunning blow, he found himself rising in the air.

The rising was remarkable. It was as if **titanic** fingers had plucked him up for inspection.

Except that there was no Wyoming equivalent to Paul Bunyan and Doc Savage continued to rise. It quickly became alarming.

As his stunned senses cleared, he became aware that he was floating skyward at an accelerated pace. His head hung slightly downward so he could see through the darkness the toothy rocks below rapidly receding. Doc kicked experimentally but encountered nothing solid. Not did he expect to.

It was no secret that Doc Savage had been trained for the life's work that he had undertaken. This altruistic enterprise was the brainstorm of his father who had blazed a similar path in life before him.

When astonishingly young Clark Savage, Jr. (not yet known as 'Doc') had been entrusted to a seemingly endless parade of scientists, experts, and other competent specialists. Each had been charged with the duty of imparting all of their knowledge and training to young Clark.

By the time he achieved manhood, this had produced a virtual superman. A mere mortal somehow filled to the brim with all earthly scientific knowledge as well as other skills necessary for the pursuit of adventure and danger.

A period spent in the Army during the World War had rounded out young Doc's fighting skills finishing the preparation for this tremendous undertaking.

In the course of his upbringing, Doc had been thrown into deep water; forced to penetrate unexplored areas; and learned to survive in conditions ranging from the **Arctic** to the **Tropical** until he was sufficiently experienced that he could encounter any kind of danger and come out on top.

But none of these experts had unexpectedly hurled Doc Savage skyward as if he were a cannonball. This was a completely new experience. An unexpected and unforeseeable peril.

Therefore, it was understandable that the **Bronze Man** when initially confronted with the impossibility that he was being ejected into the upper atmosphere of the Earth would do some foolish things at first. After kicking about pointlessly, he clawed at the sky. Which, of course, accomplished nothing useful.

Craning his head around, he could see 4 high buttes flash beneath his boots, their flat tops washed by spectral moonlight. He had a good idea of how tall those buttes stood. That was the last inkling he had of his height relative to Mother Earth.

As he accelerated upward, Doc became aware that his position grew increasingly hopeless. To fall from his present altitude would have been fatal. Unquestionably so.

And he was still rising. Rising fast. He did not yet understand why. Only that his back hurt him.

He attempted to twist about in midair. It was more difficult than it should have been. The sensation of **monstrous** fingers plucking skyward continued. From his parted lips came his uncanny and ethereal *trill*ing. It was a long time in coming relative to the stark surprise that had overcome him. But the situation was beyond unusual.

### **It was impossible!**

Quickly, Doc left off attempting to reposition himself. It would do him no good, he realized.

The night had been warm. But now the air was becoming **cool**. It was not the passage of wind that was creating the coolness. Rather, it was the height to which he was climbing.

Only a few years before, the United States Navy had sent up a manned balloon-and-pressurized gondola into the stratosphere. Doc himself owned a dirigible that could also make stratospheric trips. Up in those upper reaches below the troposphere, the air was thin and there was no warmth. Ice could form on anything that managed to gain such a supernal height.

Doc Savage's presence of mind was a result of his scientific training and vast experiences. He was fully in control of himself. He could feel no sense of deceleration. Only a steady acceleration. That told him that he was in no danger of falling (at least not falling down). He was falling UP!

Rapidly he became aware that his immediate peril lay above him and not below. Should he continue up into the thinner reaches of the atmosphere, he would suffocate and be overcome by **cold**. Already a numbness was creeping into his fingers. He flexed them experimentally to keep them limber.

His breathing (which he fought to keep regular) became unsteady. He began to gasp as if winded. But he was not winded from exertion for he was doing nothing strenuous of his own violation.

One **bronze** hand reached into the zippered opening of his flight suit and into an ingenious vest of many pockets. (He always wore it into battle.) From one receptacle, he pulled out a compact oxygen mask that was good for several minutes. Pulling this one, he set the mouthpiece in place and <flicked> a tiny switch that fed oxygen from a miniature pressurized tank.

When his breathing became regular, Doc made some lightning mental calculations.



Although he had yet to understand the phenomenon that had seized him, the fact that he seemed to be pulled up from his shredded back suggested that the power that had seized him was a direct result of the double shotgun blast. Now how this could be was immaterial at the moment. He deduced the possibility that imbedded shotgun pellets were somehow producing this counter-gravitational effect.

He still wore his parachute pack although he had discarded his main chute by pulling on a quick-release ring upon landing. This had enabled him to disentangle himself from the chute without going through the cumbersome process of taking off the entire pack.

The difficult situation on the ground had made that necessary. Doc had landed close to the man with the gunnysack hood and knew that he would have to overpower him first before he could remove his parachute pack.

Now he was glad that he had not. For there was still the reserve chute which was bundled in the front of the harness.

In a normal air emergency, it would have been the simplest thing to deploy the spare parachute and drop back to earth. If only this was an ordinary air accident.

Doc dared not crack the chute while he was still traveling upward. It might retard his ascent. But it was more than likely to have no other impact on his predicament.

And if he began to fall (which he imagined was inevitable), the trailing chute could easily become entangled once he reversed direction.

Removing the parachute harness in order to shake himself out of the flight suit whose lining was filled with shotgun pellets seemed to be the only course of action suggesting salvation.

First, he would have to get off the harness while holding on to it.

The **cold** of the upper atmosphere increased. It gripped him like icy tongs. His breath condensate created **frost** inside the mask. That told him that the function of the oxygen mask might cease at any moment due to icy conditions. There was no time to waste.

With both hands, he went about removing the harness. This involved unbuckling buckles and straps which took some time to do properly. Gripping **cold** slowed him considerably. His fingers felt like the inner bones were no better than brittle **icicles**. But he got the thing done.

A stab of disappointment entered his golden **eyes** when he saw that one of the straps was hanging by a shred of webbing. It had been punctured by the shotgun blast. Brief inspection showed that it would not hold up against the shock of the parachute opening up.

Since that was not of immediate concern, Doc stuffed the harness under one arm and clamped it securely there. That the spare parachute was not all-but-useless was chilling. But no fear touched the **metallic** mask that was his countenance. Doc Savage was not one to surrender hope prematurely.

Employing his free hand, Doc ran the zipper down. Opening up the front of the flight suit, he tried to shuck himself out of the topmost portion. This proved to be more difficult than he had thought.

Again, there was the clear sensation of a closed fist grasping the back of the shredded suit impeding his efforts.

Doc removed from his equipment vest a simple clasp knife. He got the blade out and started cutting away beginning at his waist.

It was now excruciatingly cold and the work was difficult. Doc made progress thanks to the keen blade. He was hampered from having to work entirely one-handed so that he did not lose the spare parachute tucked tight under one arm.

When the bronze giant had cut around as much as he could, he split the leather sleeve from shoulder-to-cuff. That part proved easy.

But the next was difficult. Exceedingly so.

Doc shifted the parachute back into the other arm after pocketing the blade (which he would have preferred to hold between his teeth if not for the oxygen mask clamped there). All the while he was accomplishing these tricky maneuvers, his metallic countenance remained impassive in a way that was unnerving. (Or would have been unnerving had there been any witness present at 20,000 feet or more.)

Reclaiming the blade, he slit the other sleeve all the way to his fleecy collar. The blade slashed again and suddenly he was free of the leather tunic.

That did it. The upper portion of the flight suit tore away as if the upward force being exerted was entirely concentrated in the garment.

Doc was tossed about buffeted by forces that stood in opposition to one another. One obviously was gravity. Another was high winds.

But the third was the strange power that had been driving him, throwing him skyward and seemingly into the stars.

Almost immediately, the Bronze Man began to fall and tumble.

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The accepted method for righting oneself when falling out of an airplane prior to a parachute deployment was one that Doc Savage had practiced many times. But that time-tested procedure was designed to aid a man who is wearing his parachute harness and was not otherwise encumbered by a knife.

Attempting to pocket the knife, Doc lost it and it fell. But the blade no longer mattered.

With movements that had a slight hint of the frantic about them, he attempted to wriggle himself into the parachute harness. This proved to be all but impossible. He was tumbling too wildly.

Giving up on a bad job, he inserted one arm into the appropriate loop in the harness. Then he did his best to become spread-eagled in midair and attempt to gain control over his fall.



Had he not been so high above the earth that the fall was considerable, Doc Savage was unlikely to have survived the next few minutes. Gaining control of his body proved tricky. At one point, he found himself on his back. At another, he was dropping head-downward.

With a determination only a man facing his final moments of life could summon, the *Man of Bronze* got himself oriented in the sky. After 3 difficult tries, he got his other arm into the harness loop. Unfortunately, that was the loop that was damaged. But it held for the moment.

Getting the lower loops around his upper legs buckled in place took some doing. But finally he got first one and then the other firmly attached. He next tightened everything. The reserve parachute pack was suspended over his stomach. **Frozen** fingers found the ripcord sheath and took firm hold of the D-ring.

The **Bronze Man** appeared to hesitate. The whirling golden flakes in his eyes appeared to speed up as if doing calculations with lightning speed.

Doc wore a wristwatch that was a gadget unto itself. There was a tiny compass, a thermometer, a stopwatch, and even an altimeter built into it. This last was because he sometimes had need of such information when scaling mountains or other high places.

The altimeter told him that he was approaching the 15,000-foot mark. This enabled him to calculate the time before he struck the ground. So skilled was his trained brain that his calculation was accurate almost to the second.

There was time to try something fancy. It might work and it might not. But it was a chance.

Doc threw his limbs about, changing his orientation in the sky and shifting his body until he was falling in such a way and an angle that once he deployed his parachute, the minimum strain would be exerted on the left shoulder strap (the one that was weakest).

As an added measure, he raised his free hand and clamped **bronze** fingers around the torn portion of the canvas strap to further support it. He possessed no illusions that even his prodigious *strength* could hold the webbing together if it gave way. But every precaution possible increased his odds for survival no matter how dubious a chance it stood.

When he was set, he pulled the ripcord ring without hesitation.

The reserve chute billowed out. It was a good silk one. It resembled oil smoke as it spilled out of the burst canvas casing.

As he continued to fall, the silken mushroom and its shroud lines swelled upward and outward. The **bronze giant** braced himself for the crack of its opening and the jarring shock of its arresting action.

They came as expected. Doc's limbs and torso were jolted and squeezed by the harness as the bell performed as expected. His gripping hand never let go of the weak strap. But it proved not to be sufficient. With a stinging *snapping* that jarred his clutching fingers, the webbing surrendered to the sudden strain.

Doc was thrown crazily about as the harness became unseated. His opposite hand went to the other shoulder knowing that this would be the place that let go next.

He pulled on the strap endeavoring to keep it in place. Here he was not fighting tearing canvas cloth. Yet it was still an effort. Perspiration broke out on his *metallic* forehead. His eyes narrowed with exertion. Behind slightly parted lips, strong white teeth clamped more tightly.

**Abruptly, Doc felt himself being thrown out of the harness.** There was no preventing it. Centrifugal forces were at work. Forces more powerful than human (or even superhuman) muscles and tendons could contend with.

His next maneuver appeared to be suicidal. But it was not. Giving up on the shoulder harness, he reached down and simultaneously unbuckled the webbing strapped snug to his upper thighs. They came away easily.

Using both *metallic* fists, Doc Savage clutched the straps. They snapped upward pulling his arms with him. Had he attempted anything like this reckless maneuver before this, there was no doubt that his arms would have been torn out of their sockets when the parachute first deployed.

Because the great black silken bell was already deployed, Doc needed only to hold tightly to the harness. Which he managed to do.

His flake-gold *eyes* a little strange, the **Bronze Man** quickly found himself with both arms flying high over his head clutching the bundled harness in his vise-like grip.

That grip held. He continued his descent. But now survival depended entirely upon the *strength* of his fingers and tendons.

Doc Savage's hands were formidable although nothing on the order of Renny Renwick's monster **fists**. They were not misshapen but rather exceedingly well-developed. They were the hands of a surgeon for this was Doc's primary profession. Considerable sensitivity had been trained into them. Yet they were also *strong* enough to accomplish physical miracles.

When young, Doc had trained his fingers to do amazing things. One of those was to crush raw potatoes simultaneously in each hand, pulverizing them with digital pressure alone. It took many months to accomplish this feat of strength and coordination. But all those months of preparation were now paying off.

His double grip was more than sufficient to uphold his more than 200 pounds of bone and muscle.

Swaying under the parachute bell, the giant **bronze** man would have liked nothing more than to get a glimpse of his wristwatch altimeter. But he dared not move any part of his body lest it throw him out of balance and endanger his precarious position.

It was possible to look down. But not perceive the ground below clearly. Not that there wasn't sufficient light. But the terrain below him was so uneven that even by bright moonlight, it was difficult to tell where he was (never mind where he might land).



Doc set himself knowing that he still had a few minutes before his boot heels touched solid ground. So it was with a distinct **shock** when the hard earth seem to slam up beneath him.

Caught off guard, the **Bronze Man**'s powerful leg muscles absorbed the shock of landing. Due to the regrettable fact that his hands were clutched tightly over his head, he toppled over.

The combination of his **crushing** grip and **frozen** fingers made releasing the parachute harness difficult. He stumbled and rolled until he finally came to a stop.

The **Man of Bronze** lay on his back a very long time staring skyward into the night. His eyes held a shocked look. Never before had he come so close to Death. The ceaseless whirling of the golden lights in the aureate depths of his **eyes** were strangely still.

After a time, he <blinked> once ... twice ... and then rapidly. Animation returned to his **golden** optics and his face radiated a rediscovered energy.

The parachute pack had been torn out of his hands of course. Doc sat up and stared at his hands. They were like **metallic** claws now. The death grip he'd had on the harness combined with the bone-deep cold froze the **bronze** fingers into talons.

He wiggled his fingers experimentally. Eventually they responded although with reluctance. **Crimson** flowed indicating lacerations.

Climbing to his feet, he discovered himself to be standing very high above the Wyoming terrain. A glance downward showed that he had rolled close to the edge of the lip of a sheer drop-off. Had he kept going, there was little doubt that he would have tumbled to his doom.

A winding river shimmered to the west. Doc studied it by moonlight. He had made a practice of studying maps of all kinds as well as aerial photographs, committing all details to memory. This so that whenever he found himself stranded in the outdoors, he could make good use of natural landmarks.

He recognized the river's contours. It was the Belle Fourche. This particular stretch suggested that he had landed on one of the highest elevations in all of Wyoming.

Doc Savage now knew where he was. The knowledge caused him to **trill** in a combination of disappointment and disgust.

For the **Bronze Man** realized that despite achieving the safety and solidity of solid ground, he was stranded!

## XVIII – The Calamity

Doc Savage passed what was under the circumstances a most unpleasant night.

It was not cold at the elevation upon which he had found himself. It was windy, true. But not distressingly so. The movement of air was neither too cold nor was it particular warm.

He would have preferred more heat, however, having spent an unnervingly prolonged period in the lower stratosphere. His hands ached as much from **cold** as the stress of clutching canvas for dear life.

He had no great amount of water. In his gadget vest was a flat case that contained concentrated fruit tablets. These provided nourishment and could be taken without water provided that they were carefully chewed and mixed with mouth moisture before swallowing.

Doc Savage found that his reservoir of saliva had been significantly depleted. So he chewed the tablets slowly and forced the crushed tablets down his dry throat. The taste was nothing to boast about. All his efforts had been bent in concentrating the necessary nutrients. A few of the pills had a slightly citrus tang. Most were bland.

After consuming them, the **Bronze Man** decided that he would reformulate the pills at a later date to make them more palatable.

Once he had swallowed the last pill and his hands began to feel better, he removed a glassine packet from another vest pocket. He rubbed this briskly between his palms (or as briskly as he could manage in their tender condition). This produced a pleasant chemical heat. He used this to warm up his finger bones. More than the concentrated food tablets, this operation produced significant relief.

Wayward breezes pushed about the collapsed canopy of the parachute. Doc wondered if a sufficiently strong wind sprang up, he might maneuver the bell in such a way that it would fill and he could leap off the edge of his precarious perch.

He knew from memory that he stood over 1,000 feet above the immediate ground and over 5,000 above sea level. Probably not enough to safely descend via a parachute that had already taken a beating. And yet he was tempted. Or would have been had there been an encouraging wind.

Among the items in his vest was one of the spring-generator flashlights. But he used this mainly to avoid venturing too close to the edge of the prominence. He knew where he was and was not happy about it. But the **Bronze Man** had been in worse predicaments.

Had he possessed reliable normal strength, he could have climbed down. In another pocket was a collapsible grappling hook small enough to fit into the palm of his hand. Yet another pocket contained a thick silken cord that could be knotted and used for a descent. Additionally, his standard finger strength was such that he could emulate a human fly and scale the side of a brick building by inserting his steel-strong fingertips between the mortar cracks.

But Doc Savage was up to no such effort.



When morning came, the **Sun** slowly illuminated the surroundings. He could see the red sandstone and siltstone cliffs above the Belle Fourche River. Ponderosa pines added touches of majestic **greenery**.

The area sprawled out rugged and primitive. Geology was something that Doc Savage had studied intensively along with other natural sciences such as petrology. He knew that back in the Triassic Period approximately 200 million years ago, the surrounding terrain had been a shallow sea. In fact, petrified oysters and other prehistoric shellfish were sometimes dug up at the base of the natural formation that had captured him.

Doc was more interested in the flat surface upon which he sat. It was hard gray rock. Litter told that vultures sometimes carried carrion up here to feast. There was other litter including signs that modern humans had climbed to the summit in recent years.

He recalled that the summit had rarely been scaled due to its sheer rock walls. It could be done. But it was a discouraging undertaking.

For this was the plug of igneous rock that Cheyenne had long ago dubbed the "Bear Lodge Butte" and present-day Americans had renamed "Devils Tower". It was a fantastic natural formation that might have been a massive laccolith. A volcanic plug.

Doc himself inclined toward that theory. But he had never studied the formation in detail. He did recall that it was over 40 million years old. Wyoming Indians of many tribes considered the place a **sacred** spot. It was visible a considerable distance. But its elevation prevented him from being seen except from the air.

Waling to the edge, Doc Savage lay down on his stomach and looked downward. This was the west face which was the most climbable. The sides of the plug suggested deep gouges. Sioux legend claimed that a giant bear known as Mato had scored the butte on all sides while attempting to capture 2 young boys for its supper.

Climbing down was not something that the **Bronze Man** felt up to doing as yet. But if he did not make the attempt before sundown, he knew that his life would be once again in peril. He could go 4 days without water although rain might increase his chances by another few days if it fell. But this was late summer and rain was unlikely.

After reconnoitering the great table-like surface and chasing away curious mice and chipmunks, he went to the center and gathered up the parachute fabric and made for himself a comfortable nest. It was the only creature comfort of which he could avail himself. It might become necessary to use it for shade against the blistering **Sun**. If night found him still stranded, it would serve as a warm bed.

As the morning wore on, Doc monitored the surrounding area lookin for stray riders or passing motor vehicles. He saw nothing of either kind.

Then something strange caught his attention. He noticed it out of the corner of one eye.

It was an aircraft.

From one of the innumerable pockets of his vest, Doc removed a slim black tube which he quickly telescoped into a small-but-powerful spyglass.

The sound of the moaning motor told him that it was not one of his own buses. But it represented an opportunity to capture the pilot's attention.

It proves to be an Air Mail plane. One of Uncle Sam's speedy ship swinging its way westward. Probably bound for Salt Lake City or points farther west.

Had it been night, Doc Savage could have lit a flare which he carried. But it was early morning. So he removed a smoke generator from his vest. This steel tube produced **black smoke** through chemical action. Doc armed it and tossed the thing a few feet away. Immediately one end began belching a dark **pall** that swiftly intensified.

Glancing toward the passing plane, he discerned no alteration in its course. No doubt the pilot mistook the evil-looking smudge for a brushfire rather than a distress signal.

Doc had no way to attract the pilot's gaze other than stand up and wave both arms vigorously. He did this for a few minutes without result. Then he realized that the black parachute might be better employed as a signaling device.

Gathering up the shroud lines, Doc dragged the collapsed canopy around in circles. Since the silk was as black as coal, it would stand out against the smooth gray rock of the tabletop mesa.

And it appeared to work. The mail plane banked sharply and slid in his direction.

Doc Savage gave the silk another dragging turn around the tabletop. Then he dropped it and took to waving his arms as best he could. They were still stiff and sore.

It became clear when the aircraft dipped that the pilot had noticed him.

Then something exceedingly strange transpired.

-----

At first, Doc noticed what appeared to be a disturbance in the stunningly blue sky. There was a lack of clouds so he had a clear view of what happened next.

It was difficult to describe. It was as if the **azure** of the sky had taken on the qualities of a slightly darker blue sea. It was difficult to make out even for someone possessing the visual acuity of the **Man of Bronze**.

Undeniably, the clear blue sky turned dense and discolored. For the phenomenon originated behind the Black Hills to the east. It climbed into the sky like a cloudburst going in the wrong direction.

This was not rain. It was nothing like rain. It was something else. Something uncanny.



The pilot appeared not to notice the disturbance for his attention seemed to be upon the solitary figure balanced atop Devils Tower. And so oblivious to the changing atmospherics, the Air Mail plane blundered into the disturbance whatever-it-was.

**The results were catastrophic. Unbelievably so.**

The propeller came apart. The nose of the mail plane was pushed inward, the motor slamming into the control cockpit. The droning aircraft jarred to a shaky stop. And then the rest of the plane began disintegrating.

The exact manner by which this happened made it look as if the high-winged monoplane had blundered into an obstruction that could not be seen. Something palpable but invisible (or nearly so).

The plane shuddered, its component parts popping at every rivet and spar. Wing bracing wires sprang loose. Doc witnessed those disturbing details through his spyglass.

Destruction of the Air Mail ship was rapid and complete. He watched to see if the pilot threw himself clear. But knew that the poor fellow must have been crushed by the bizarre aerial impact.

But that was not the most astonishing thing.

**The fragments of the aircraft (which included the shattered wings) did not fall to earth as they would normally.**

Instead, they simply floated about as if suspended in some invisible solution. The suspension utterly defied gravity. But the pieces of the plane which had been violently disbursed soon settled down to drift about in some unknown medium that was almost indistinguishable from the blue sky.

Doc studied all of this through his telescope. His flake-gold eyes whirled strangely.

Then without being aware of doing so, he made a tuneless vocalization that was an unconscious habit invariably prompted by stress or surprise. The melodious trilling sprang forth startled and a bit aghast before ebbing into nothingness. It made an eerie accompaniment to the phenomenon in the sky.

Plane fragments whirled about aimlessly in a confined space that seemed as large as a football field or perhaps larger. There was no explaining the destruction of the aircraft. The weird suspension of its remains was utterly inexplicable.

Then the motor began falling as if gravity had discovered it. Doc had his eye on it because this was the heaviest surviving piece of the aircraft. Not that it was intact, however. It was obviously not. But most of it was. The engine began to fall first with a slowness that was agonizing and then with increasing speed.

Watching this phenomenon, the Bronze Man thought back to his experience on the previous night when the reverse had happened to him. It was not pleasant to relive.

Slowly and inevitably, the other portions of the aircraft also showed signs of sinking. They did not fall. Not yet. But they sank as if in water.

Gathering momentum, the disintegrated ship picked up velocity. As he watched fascinated, the dismembered aircraft plummeted back to earth. Doc thought he could see the pilot mixed in with the debris. The pilot did not flail about nor did his form appear to be whole. There was no question that he did not survive the strange impact.

Doc observed the whirling conglomeration of parts disappear behind the Black Hills. Dimly, he could hear the impact of the engine echoing. Sounds of the other pieces landing did not carry to his ears.

There was nothing to be done. Doc Savage made painful fists on either side of his erect body. Knuckles showed white against the bronze of his skin.

Before very long, a sprinkle of **rain** struck him in the face. He could see all around him other droplets. And yet there was no cloud in the sky.

He thought back to the strange story that Pat Savage had told him of the man seen swimming in the sky whose body had landed in a moist patch where no rain should have fallen.

That gave him a lot to consider. Inasmuch as his hope of immediate rescue had come to pieces before his eyes, he gathered up the silken parachute again and made a comfortable place to sit. He commenced his mental chewing.

Doc spent an hour at this. Then he removed from a large flat pocket something that looked like a cigarette case but was not. It consisted of a silver metal casing, a grilled loudspeaker, and a few buttons and dials.

It was a battery-operated radio transceiver. Its range was very limited and Doc knew that he had drifted far from the spot called Pumpkin Buttes, impelled by stratospheric air currents.

The **Bronze Man** had not wished to employ the device prematurely because its short battery life made it risky to waste.

Now he <pressed> a button in the side and began speaking into the loudspeaker which also served as a microphone.

"Doc Savage calling Doc-1 ... Doc Savage calling Doc-1 ..."

"Doc-1" was the designation for his big speed plane. The one that Johnny Littlejohn had been piloting the night before. He knew that Renny Renwick in the gyroplane radio would also be tuned to this frequency.

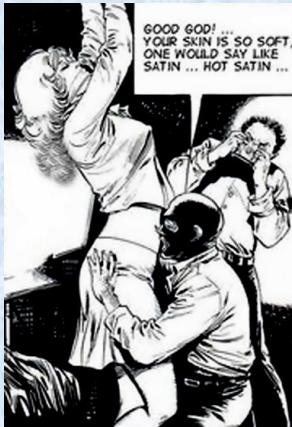
But what he did not expect was that they would be within range of the radio transceiver. Nor was he surprised when he failed to raise either aircraft.

It stood to reason that his men would be conducting an aerial search throughout the day. It was his plan to signal them at intervals in the hope of becoming lucky.

For the **Bronze Man** was not greatly disturbed when no one replied. In another hour-or-so, he intended to try again.



In the meantime, he considered all that he had seen and heard and bent his master brain to the task of solving this new mystery that Pat Savage had stumbled upon.



## XIX – Grim Search

They took off at first sight.

Long Tom Roberts piloted the streamlined bumblebee of a gyroplane since he was somewhat familiar with this portion of Wyoming.

He and Johnny Littlejohn had carried Pat Savage to the big bronze-painted speed plane where she had passed the night quietly. The unconscious girl had acquired numerous scrapes and bruises. But she was otherwise not seriously injured.

Eventually, the **copper**-haired girl awoke. She sat up and felt of her neck. She stared about wildly, her golden **eyes** stark.

Wrinkling her forehead at her surroundings, she gulped.

"Wh-where am I?"

"In Doc's big bus," Renny Renwick told her.

Struggling to get to her feet (for she had been lying in the rear), Pat said:

"Let me speak with Doc. I have a lot to tell him."

"You'll have to wait."

"Nothing doing! Kindly step out of my way."

Pat stumbled then. She noticed one of her boots was missing. She caught herself, grabbed hold of the back of a seat, and flung herself into it where she fumed like wood burning.

"I feel like I just climbed out of a nightmare," she declared. "Would it be too much to ask my cousin to come back and see to my health?"

Seeing the cut of her mood, Renny thumped: "We're searching for Doc. We don't know what happened to him."

This did not improve Pat's disposition appreciably.

"Let's hear your tale."

Renny told it as best he could. As he rumbled along gloomily, Pat's expression grew slack and worried. The gold in her **eyes** got a little dull.

She brought her brown fingertips to her mouth and her lips trembled. The fingertips shook, too.

"He can't be ... dead ..."



Renny sighed like a leaky steam boiler.

"He went up like a rocket and never did come back down. We checked the immediate area. Now we're going to conduct a wider search."

Anger wrinkled Pat's nose.

"Why didn't you search all night?"

"I know it sounds loco. But Johnny pointed out that if Doc were somehow floating through the night sky, our propeller blades might damage him living-or-not."

Now shock made Pat's eyes round. The tawny color of her features grew cold and drained.

"Doc!" she gasped. "Oh Doc!"

"We won't know anything until we find him," Renny assured her.

Then he added firmly: "And one way or another, we will find Doc."

The expression on the long-faced engineer's countenance was peculiar. Renny Renwick typically looked as if he had just returned from a funeral. Now the corners of his prim mouth quirked up. His eyes crinkled in a way that looked like a craggy smile was trying to break through the frowning granite of his countenances.

It was another peculiarity of his that the more morose he appeared, the happier he was. Conversely, the opposite was true. When he seemed close to smiling, that meant he was miserable. A grin denoted deep unhappiness.

On the floor of the plane near the rear was affixed a red quartz lens. A porthole of sorts. This was designed to work in conjunction with an **infrared** lamp mounted on one wing. Other floor portholes were filled with clear Plexiglass.

Together, these permitted the ground to be observed as it rolled beneath the plane's **bronze** wings. The cabin was soundproofed and so its mighty motors reverberated dully.

Stalking over to the **infrared** floor port, Renny stared downward. His big **fists** were bunching.

"If you turn on the **heat** scanner," he called ahead to Johnny at the controls, "we might be able to pick up the warmth of his body."

It was a testament to how rattled the long-worded archaeologist-geologist was that snapped back in unadorned English: "A body would be cold by now."

Hearing that, Pat Savage flung herself out of her seat. She pushed herself forward and dropped into the copilot's bucket. She stabbed the man in the pilot's seat with golden **eyes** gone brittle with scorn.

Williams Harper Littlejohn had been the name on his certificate of birth. But for some reason he was called 'Johnny'. There was near to 7 feet of him, all of hanging on a frame that a skeleton would

have thought emaciated. He was about as bony as a living man could be. His studious face was narrow and his hair worn full and long. (His hair actually looked better fed than he.)

"Listen to me, you long bag-of-bones!" Pat scolded. "You turn 'on' that **infrared** scanner. And you turn on every gadget and gimcrack you have at your disposal. We're going to find Doc Savage one way or another!"

"Indubitably," said Johnny regaining his self-mastery.

He began <flipping> switches. Myriad devices became illuminated.

Pat reached down into a seat pocket and pulled out a pair of binoculars. She began scanning out the side windows.

The terrain was rugged. Spindly sandstone spires as well as the rocky totem pole-like formations known locally as hoodoos divided the landscape. It was a forbidding spot. Wild cliffs, mesas, and buttes broke stretches of prairie flats. Little water. The colors were sometimes fantastic and other times distressingly dull.

Locating one man living-or-otherwise in this vastness was not promising to contemplate. It might as well have been the Sahara Desert.

Over the cockpit radio, Long Tom's voice came acidly from the patrolling gyroplane.

*"Anything?"*

"Nothing," said Johnny. "And you?"

*"If I found anything, I wouldn't be asking you if you found anything, now would I?"* retorted Long Tom in his most peevish tone of voice.

"Oh dry up, you sawed-off vacuum tube," returned Johnny hotly.

It was evident that nerves were rubbed raw. Ordinarily neither man was particularly argumentative with one another.

And so it went. They crisscrossed northeast Wyoming. The airplane flew high enough to take in large visits while the plodding gyroplane hugged the ground looking to spot any movement visible there.

It was lonely territory. Forbidding and desolate. The lack of habitations was disconcerting. Even the skies appeared empty. Evidently few planes crossed this corner of the state.

One, however, did happen along. Pat spotted it from a distance. Training her binoculars upon it, she remarked: "I spy an Air Mail plane."

From the radio cubicle, Renny's foghorn voice boomed out,

"I'll try to raise him on the Government wavelength. Just in case he saw something."



Turning the dial to the proper setting, he began chatting into the microphone.

"This is Doc Savage-1 calling U.S. Mail plane over northeastern Wyoming. ... Come in, Air Mail plane."

Renny repeated himself several times. But there was no response. The loudspeaker merely *hissed* in a listless manner.

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Abruptly, the plane banked. Its maneuver seemed to suggest something unusual. Air Mail planes normally fly as straight as an arrow between their point of departure and their destination city.

Pat exclaimed hopefully: "He may have spotted something on the ground!"

But whether the pilot had indeed seen something was never learned.

The Government plane was far away. Only Pat could see it clearly through her binoculars. The high-winged plane banked ... changed its heading ...

... and ran smack into something. It came apart as if it had exploded from internal pressure.

"Oh my goodness!" Pat yelled out. "It broke up!"

Aghast, Renny demanded: "The dang plane?"

"Yes! The plane! It seemed to explode. But ..."

Pat's excited voice trailed off ...

So horrific was the sight that she had taken her eyes off the accident. But now she brought the lenses back to her eyes. And what she beheld filled her with uncharacteristic fear.

For the pieces of the plane were floating about as if in suspension. **Floating in the clear blue sky!**

"It's not falling," she said in dull disbelief. "The pieces, I mean."

Realization dawned upon her amazed brain.

"It's just like that poor cowboy Hud. He floated around too until he started falling."

Renny had poked his unruly head into the cockpit. He took the field glasses from Pat's hands and made good use of them.

"Holy cow! The plane pieces are just hanging in the sky. Not just hanging but swimming around. It's like gravity has stopped operating."

"Now do you gentlemen believe me?" Pat asked sharply.

"I never said I didn't," Renny thumped back.

Then his pet expression came again.

"Holy cow! It's starting to fall now!"

"Give me that," said Pat.

Reclaiming the field glasses, she trained them on the phenomenon. As she watched in horror, the disorderly pieces of the aircraft commenced tumbling. Slowly at first ... then with increasing speed.

At the controls, Johnny looked frustrated. He couldn't see a thing. The aircraft was too far away. He shifted the control wheel and directed the plane toward the bright patch of sky where the aircraft had come apart.

Noticing this, Pat pleaded: "What are you doing? Do you want to fly smack into the same thing that wrecked that ship?"

"Is there anything there?"

"Not that I can see. But that doesn't mean there really isn't something unseeable high in the sky. Something held that broken plane together until gravity got around to exerting its pull. Whatever you do, don't go near it!"

Pat's normally warm voice was so charged with emotion that Johnny sheared the aircraft in the opposite direction. His thin features were worried.

The skeletal archaeologist-geologist circled for a time unsure of what to do. It was as if the sky contained an invisible mine field and they had no idea what it looked like.

Renny had the binoculars again and was studying the ground where the pieces of the airplane were striking. They sent up spurts and then growing clouds of dust that were brown and red and very noticeable.

His "Holy cow!" was muted this time, freighted with wonder and puzzlement.

"What is it?" demanded Johnny.

Clouds of dust were being kicked up by the plane. But now they evaporated. And the **ground** became dark in a uniform way.

Renny studied this and decided: "Plumb looks to me like a cloudburst followed that plane down. Kind of a localized cloudburst."

Johnny scanned the skies with his penetrating eyes.

"No clouds of any type. Nothing to produce a cloudburst. Couldn't be. It has to be something else."



Renny rumbled: "I think I know rain when I see it. And I think I recognize **water** when it darkens dry soil."

"Rain doesn't fall from an empty sky," returned Johnny. "You know that."

Pat cut into the growing disagreement.

"We should land and look for survivors."

But Renny shook his big head.

"Long Tom will have to do that. There's no place for a big bird like this to safely touch down. And I wouldn't count on any survivors, either. There would only be the pilot, anyway. It's certain he's a goner."

Returning to the radio cubicle, Renny raised Long Tom and told his story.

Long Tome said nothing in return. Renny described the terrain in the general direction of the air accident after which the undersized Electrical Wizard responded *"I'll be there shortly."*

"No sign of Doc Savage," added Renny. "But I guess you know that."

*"I know that,"* replied Long Tom sullenly.

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It was while they were circling the terrain that Pat Savage noticed the monstrous sheer mesa jutting up from the ground like a stupendous tree stump. Its color was a very pale gray mixed with hints of tan. Vertical black grooves ran from its rugged base to the flat top. They were impressive in an otherworldly way.

Studying the deeply scored sides, Renny wondered: "Isn't that the thing they call Devils Tower?"  
[note: this was also depicted in the movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind].



This question was directed to Johnny Littlejohn who in addition to being an archaeologist of great fame was one of the World's foremost geologists. If anybody would know the landmark by sight, it would be him.

"Yes, that is Devils Tower. It is composed of porphyry."

Pat <blinked>. "Did you say 'pottery'?"

"No. Porphyry. Phonolite porphyry to be precise. And the formation is not technically a mesa. It is a laccolithic butte; a volcanic extrusion. It sits upon a broad mesa which forms its base. During the Paleocene Epoch roughly 60 million years ago, the surrounding Black Hills were uplifted with the result ... "

Johnny's recitation of the geological history of the impressive volcanic remnant seemed to wind on-and-on. Pat soon stopped listening. She was more interested in the look of the impressive formation than its geologic origins.

As the plane approached, she spotted something **black** moving under the tabletop. It was quite large. It seemed to flutter like a dark flower in the wind.

"I wonder what that thing is ..." she mused.

"What does it look like?" asked Johnny, squinting his eyes.

"A big black flower blowing in the breeze," she answered.

"How big can a flower grow?"

"If that's a flower, then it's the size of the crown of an oak tree."

"Therefore," said Johnny in his scholastic tone, "it could not be a flower."

"You said that it was **black**?" demanded Renny poking his head back into the cockpit.

Pat offered the binoculars. "See for yourself. Why?"

"Because **Doc Savage**'s parachute was **black**."

Johnny, Renny, and Pat all exchanged violent glances.

Leveling a gigantic forefinger, Renny blared:

"Fly over that mesa! Pronto!"

Renny duck back into the radio cubicle. He dialed back to the special Doc Savage frequency and began calling to the **Bronze Man** by name.

He received no answer. But that did not dissuade him.



He kept calling, his thundering bear-in-a-cave voice punishing their eardrums with every syllable.

It was as if Renny was determined to summon up the *Man of Bronze* by sheer force of volume alone.

## XX – Mystery in the Mud

Doc Savage heard the distinctive drone belonging to the motors of his big speed plane. Extracting his transceiver radio, he turned it 'on' and began calling.

"Doc Savage calling Doc-1."

He had to speak only once before the loudspeaker crackled with Renny Renwick's thunderous tones.

*"Doc! Is that you stuck up on Devils Tower?"*

"It is. I've been up here all night. Where is the gyroplane?"

*"Long Tom's got it. Let me raise him for you."*

"Right."

Doc was able to hear the conversation that followed.

Long Tom Roberts said: *"I can be there in 20 minutes or so."*

*"Did you hear that?"* demanded Renny.

"Yes," replied Doc. "The gyroplane is my only way down. I am relatively undamaged. But my hands have suffered lacerations. They will need first-aid."

Renny asked: *"How did you manage to get up there?"*

"By falling down from a great height," stated Doc without humor or irony. "I was able to deploy my reserve parachute after my unfortunate encounter."

Pat Savage flung herself out of the chair and into the radio cubicle.

*"Do you believe me now?"*

"My education is complete," admitted the **Bronze Man**. "But we will discuss this later. Renny, a United States Air Mail plane encountered trouble north of here. It has crashed."

*"We all saw it go down. It was stupefying."*

"Stupefying," said Doc, "is probably the correct word to use."

And with that, he signed off to conserve his strength. It had been a long night. And not exactly and enjoyable morning. He had started to wonder what chipmunk tasted like.

Long Tom set down the gyroplane on the south side of Devils Tower where it was the most level. Doc retreated to the north. He covered his face with a clump of parachute silk to protect his eyes from dust and the inevitable grit that the whirling rotor blades kicked up.



The puny Electrical Genius managed a perfect three-point landing. The cabin door popped open. He came out on the run carrying a canteen of water and a first-aid kit.

"Water first," requested Doc.

Long unscrewed the cap and Doc drank steadily. To Long Tom's amazement, he drained the canteen (which was not small).

Then he dropped the canteen and held out his hands. Long Tom examined them carefully and saw lacerations. But nothing so deep that the tendons had been nicked. Under the **Bronze Man's** expert medical guidance, he began his ministrations.

"Probably should've saved some canteen water to wash out these wounds."

"Use the iodine instead," directed Doc.

Long Tom rummaged through the first-aid kit.

"There's mercurochrome inhere."

"Save that for later."

Long did his best. Then Doc took over doing his own bandaging.

That accomplished, they walked back to the gyroplane. To Long Tom's surprise, Doc Savage claimed the pilot seat. Evidently, he felt that his hands were up to the task of piloting the dragonfly ship.

Once they were beating through the air, Doc stated: "The first order of business is to investigate the mail plane wreckage."

He repeated this into the radio microphone.

From the speed ship, Renny radioed back.

*"We'll find someplace to land while you do that. We have a lot to talk about."*

"Correct," stated Doc sending the gyroplane scooting northward.

-----

The area where the plane had crash-landed was a muddy stew of disturbed ground and aircraft pieces. They had to land some distance away because the crash site was a vast mud hole.

"Where did all this **water** come from?" Long Tom grumbled as they picked their forward, their boots becoming encrusted with foul muck.

Doc stated: "There is a lake not far from here. Or at least there was."

"Do you think the lake got thrown into the air?"

"Pat claimed that a swimming hole suffered the same fate carrying with it an unfortunate man who happened to be swimming there at the time," replied Doc. "If a lake had somehow been hurled skyward, its waters would not have been visible to the naked eye except possibly as a discoloration against the clear blue sky."

Carefully, they slogged their way along and soon encountered airplane parts. Some were quite small. But others were sizable. One wing was standing upright like a rigid shard of duralumin sail.

The deeper they ventured, the more trouble they had walking. The ground was impossibly muddy. Their boots made sucking sounds and they walked with great deliberateness. Once Long Tom's right foot got caught in the mud and Doc had to help him get extricated. They noticed pollywogs and wiggle worms struggling in the mire.

They found the pilot's battered head first. Further along, his lower body. The disintegration of the aircraft had torn the body to pieces. The unfortunate man's eyes were wide and staring in Death. Doc closed them.

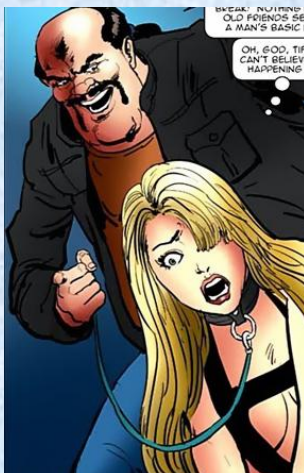
They did not expect to discover anything else of significance until Doc Savage spied a shape covered in mud. He directed his attention to it. He studied the form briefly and decided it was worth investigating.

Reaching the shape, he discovered that it was another corpse. He had watched the pilot's body fall and knew there had been no passenger aboard the Government mail plane. This person, therefore, had not fallen from the demolished aircraft.

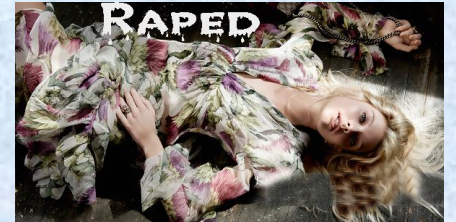
The body was lying face-down. Kneeling, Doc overturned it. His *trilling* piped up briefly.

It was a woman. Her hair and face were covered in mud. The woman's bones seemed to have been pulverized suggesting that she had fallen from a great height and not simply been caught in the deluge of water and aircraft debris. She wore Western garb which included a split skirt favored by active horsewoman.

And she had been *gang-raped* before her demise.







Despite that, her features were not badly damaged. Doc studied them rather intently.

He called over to Long Tom. "Come here."

The slender Electrical Wizard grumbled as he made his difficult way over. When he halted, he released a low feeling oath.

"Damn! That's Alta Crater ..."

"Who is Alta Crater?" demanded Doc, standing up.

"She was the woman who kept trying to run me out of Wyoming thinking I was a mule thief and a general owlhoot to boot. She's the brother of Hud Crater, the bird that Pat saw swimming in the sky. She's from the Lynx Eyes Ranch from where a bunch of the mules have been rustled."

"This sounds complicated," remarked Doc.

Long Tom rubbed his jaw.

"More than I figured. She was with us last night when Quest tried to hang me and Pat. After everything had settled down, we couldn't find hide nor hair of her. So what's she doing way out here miles from Pumpkin Buttes?"

"From the looks of it," remarked Doc, "she had been in the lake when it was levitated."

"That hardly makes any sense."

Suddenly Long Tom <snapped> his fingers.

"You don't suppose that she had slipped into the car before Quest and the other one drove off with it?"

"Tell me more about that," invited Doc.

*Long Tom went into a careful recitation of the events of the evening. When he had concluded, Doc Savage was very quiet.*

"It is conceivable that Miss Crater was somehow involved with the vigilante gang or possibly with the other individual. The one in green who dubbed himself '**Mr. Calamity**'. But it's more likely that she became a victim of either of those entities after she was discovered hiding in the automobile."

Doc Savage continued his examination of the body. He noticed that the woman's fingernails were broken. Examining this damage, he discovered coarse fibers caught in the nails. Removing one of these, he cleaned it off and put a magnifying glass to it.

"Gunnysack threads," he pronounced.

Long Tom exploded. "The rustler known as 'Quest' wore a makeshift gunnysack hood! She must have tussled with him."

"This would seem to prove your theory, long Tom. This woman was discovered in the fleeing auto and done away with for some reason."

"But why?"

Doc considered.

"If she fought back -- as it seems likely -- the gunnysack hood might have come off revealing Quest's features. If Miss Crater recognized him, that might be a motive for murder."

Long Tom looked down at the late Alta Crater.

"I wish we had something to cover he with."

Doc imparted: "We will alert the Government authorities. Destruction of Aa Untied States Air Mail plane is a Federal matter. Not to mention the emptying of a local lake. Let us return to the gyroplane and be on our way."

As they trudge back, Long Tom wondered: "Where are we bound?"

"It is first necessary to put our heads together and assemble our narratives. Your ranch is the most private place for that. We will radio Government officials en route. They can conduct their own examination without us."

"We'll have to inform the town of Bison that their sheriff is dead," Long Tom reminded. "That's going to complicate matters as well."



Doc nodded grimly. "Evidently, it has been a very violent last 24 hours in this section of Wyoming."

Long Tom grunted: "I'm starting to regret taking over my great-uncle's spread."

## XXI – The Opposite of Gravity

The reunion at the modest Circle Bolt Ranch was unusually emotional.

Johnny Littlejohn landed last owing to the necessity of picking out an appropriate spot on the prairie where Long Tom Roberts' and Pat Savage's aircraft were parked.

The big speed plane was an amphibian. So it was necessary to drag the meadow several times for obstructions in the buffalo grass lest the float hull be damaged during the unavoidably bumpy landing.

Once the aircraft's motors ceased blooping, the gyroplane alighted nearby. By the time it did, everyone had piled out of the big bronze amphibian and pounded in the direction of the agile dragonfly craft.

Doc Savage emerged ducking under the slowing rotor blades. Only when he finally stood erect did his great size become apparent. It was an optical illusion of his symmetrical frame that when standing beside some object which provided visual reference, his true stature was emphasized.

Although the **bronze** giant had passed the most difficult night of his remarkable existence thus far, he showed few signs of this. Rather, as he stepped forward, he resembled a being formed of indestructible metal. His hair (only a shade darker than his skin) lay flat and smooth like a skullcap of hammered **bronze**.

Seeing him, Pat Savage gave a glad cry. She rushed forward and threw herself into his arms.

Doc offered a somewhat awkward hug. Normally the cousins were not prone to such outward displays. Especially the **Bronze Man** who had been schooled from childhood to keep his emotions under firm restraint.

Too, Doc Savage had not met his younger cousin until he was fully grown and she was still a teenager. This was several years ago. [\[read #11 - "Brand of the Werewolf"\]](#) So although they had formed a close bond in the intervening years, they were not usually this familiar with one another.

"Oh!" cried Pat, her voice choking. "We really believed you were dead this time. Dead beyond all hope."

Releasing her, the **bronze** giant said simply: "It was a very near thing."

"You'll have to tell us all about it. I imagined you had been catapulted to the Moon, never to return."

Noticing his bandaged fingers, Pat asked anxiously: "What happened to your hands?"

"Circumstances forced me to hold my reserve parachute with my bare hands. The damage is not permanent. But it will be a few days before fingers will function without pain or stiffness."

Renny was saying: "We tried every possible way to locate you. But we were afraid that you were floatin gup in the air. And we didn't want to mangle you with our propellers by blundering around blindly."



"As preposterous as that sounds, it was a reasonable precaution," asserted Doc. "I was catapulted into the lower stratosphere for a time. It is not impossible that you might have plowed into me as I parachuted back to earth."

Johnny remarked: "I endeavored to locate you through the *radioactive* token you carried. But there appear to be significant deposits of *radium* and *pitchblende* in some of these hills. I could not tell one hot spot from the other."

"No matter," stated Doc. "Now let's put our heads together and see where this mystery has its center."

They entered the modest ranch house and sat around on Western-style furniture while Pat made coffee, ham, and scrambled eggs.

Doc Savage examined Long Tom's gunshot wounds. He replaced his flour-sack arm sling with a better one and pronounced the graze wound to his temple well on its way to healing.

"Whoever tended these wounds," noted *Bronze Man*, "did a serviceable job under the circumstances."

"That was my foreman Laramie," said Long Tom. "He's more of a horse doctor. But I guess he did all right."

*Laramie had been returned to the ranch house overnight and was sleeping. They let him be.*

The aromas of breakfast roused the old Westerner, however, and he came limping out of a bedroom. When he saw *Doc Savage*, he <blinked> owlishly.

"Even sittin' down," he remarked, "you're still a tall hombre."

"Take a seat, you old reprobate," snapped Long Tom. "Or else you'll miss your fair share."

"Don't mind if I do," Laramie said dragging himself into an empty chair.

Turning to Doc Savage, he asked: "I hear you're a medico. I got me a busted-up leg. Maybe you got some pills for the pain?"

"I will examine you after we eat," promised Doc.

Laramie grinned. "Grub before doctorin'. We'll get along just fine, you and me."

Doc Savage did not normally take stimulants. But to everyone's surprise, he drank 2 cups of coffee. Black with sugar. This uncharacteristic act told the others that his body was starved for energy.

Despite his injured arm, Long Tom helped with the cooking. He caused jaws to sag when he reported: "Doc and I found Alta Crater in the mud around that Air Mail plane wreckage. Doc thinks she fell from a great height."

Pat's mouth went round and her eyes sharpened.

"How terrible! She died just like her brother."

Renny rumbled: "That can't be a coincidence."

Long Tom said: "We lost track of her last night. But it looks like she was hiding in that car when Quest and the other one took off. One of them may have thrown her in the lake possibly to drown."

"You mean that lake up by Devils Tower?" Laramie demanded.

Doc Savage offered: "It appears that the lake was levitated in the same amazing manner as Pat's swimming hole. Suspended in the air, it became a huge body of organized water into which the Air Mail plundered with catastrophic results."

Heaving this, Johnny mused: "Perhaps we should start our recitations from their point of origin so that our accounts unfold chronologically."

Everyone understood him because it was a peculiarity of Johnny that he never used his jawbreaker words in front of Doc Savage.

Pat interjected. "Let me suggest that we begin with breakfast which we all heartily require. Then we can share our stories."

-----

Breakfast was consumed with deliberation and no idle talk. At the end of it, Pat announced brightly:

"I should go first since it was my mystery to begin with."

Her golden **eyes** lanced in Doc Savage's direction. He looked slightly uncomfortable.

Pat started with her encounter with the late Hud Carter while she had been out prospecting. She summarized all pertinent events up to the point where she had raced toward the spot where the cowpoke had slammed back to earth and summoned Long Tom Roberts.

During this recitation, Long Tom added: "There was nobody there when we got to the swimming hole. But Pat said that Hud's corpse had landed hard a few hours before."

Doc Savage suggested: "Evidently someone made off with the body for some reason."

"Probably **Mr. Calamity** whoever-he-is," said Pat.

Doc nodded in agreement but otherwise said nothing. He was on his 3<sup>rd</sup> helping of eggs.

"Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves?" asked Renny Renwick. "I thought we were reciting this according to the calendar."



Pat resumed her story detailing her strange encounter with the **garishly**-garbed shotgun wielder and the bizarre circumstances that had deposited her atop a high butte, her escape and the events that led to being unceremoniously juggled in Bison.

Doc paused in his eating long enough to comment.

"Events so far indicate that Mr. Calamity wields a shotgun whose charge can produce inexplicable results."

He asked Pat to describe Oakley Wood and the masked man who abducted her from the Bison jail.

"Cold they have been the same man?" asked Doc.

Pat considered. "Wood had an awful lot of white on his wrists. And the other man -- if was another man -- wore tooled leather wrist cuffs."

"Did you notice either man's boots?" pressed Doc.

Pat frowned unhappily. "I confess that I did not. Guess I'm a bum sleuth."

Laramie scowled without venom.

"First things a body gets to noticin' out here is the cut and color a man's boots."

"Please continue with your story," said Doc.

Pat obliged and recited everything until the point she had been knocked unconscious during the attempted hanging. Then Long Tom told his side of the story.

Hearing how Long Tom had kicked her horse forcing her neck out of the noose, Pat flared indignantly.

"If the horse had bolted in another direction, my neck might have been broken!"

"And if I hadn't done what I did, you were sure to die by slow strangulation," retorted the pallid electrical engineer. "We were in a tough spot. I did the best I could."

Pat looked only slightly mollified. She felt of her neck and the rope burns there. Noticing this, Long Tom did the same. They shared an uncomfortable silence.

Doc Savage was particularly interested in Pat's account of the shotgun blast that had sent her and the unfortunate horse Lightning to the top of one of the high buttes.

"Were you struck by any of the charge?" he asked.

The golden-**eyed** girl shook her head.

"No, thank goodness. Lightning took the brunt of it."

Doc then went into his experience after having parachuted down into the midst of the frustrated lynching with the intention of breaking it up. He spoke simply and without emotion.

But as he related in stark terms the details of his stratospheric ordeal, all eyes got a little round and mouths started hanging open.

Laramie grunted: "You got more lives than a cat. In fact, it sounds like you might've used up all nine last night. I don't think all the Greek gods put together from Apollo to Zeus could have wrought the miracle that you did."

Doc Savage said nothing. He looked a little uncomfortable. He was modest by nature.

After all accounts had been absorbed, they began to pick the tangled ball of yarn apart.

Johnny mused: "It does not appear that Quest and **Mr. Calamity** are connected even though they fled off together."

Long Tom grunted: "The last I saw of them, that **Calamity** character had a shotgun pressed against Quest's skull."

"One of them probably didn't survive the night," Johnny murmured.

Renny rumbled: "My money would be on Quest coming out the loser."

"What makes you say that?" demanded Long Tom skeptically.

"Because that shotgun seems to have stirred up an entire lake. And **Calamity** is the one who knows how to use it. Therefore, it was him that caused that mail plane wreck."

"Makes sense," allowed Pat.

Doc Savage suddenly asked: "Pat, do you have specimens of those shotgun pellets?"

Pat shook her coppery-bronze **hair**.

"I came across a piece but didn't keep it. Reminded me of rock salt. But it was yellowish."

Johnny snorted. "Rock salt possesses no properties that defy gravity."

"Does anything known to Science?" challenged Pat.

*A long silence fell. Doc Savage and his men became strange of expression. They shifted in their seats.*

Noticing this unusual behavior, Pat remarked: "You boys are holding out on me. What do you know that you don't want to talk about?"

Johnny cleared his throat.



"A few years back, we were all in the South Seas when a volcano coughed up a substance never before known. This substance had the properties of a powerful force that acted against all other objects."

Long Tom nodded. "Yeah. Kinda like a reverse lodestone." [read #56 - "The Deadly Dwarf"]

"You're not making an ounce of sense," Pat observed.

Doc Savage took up the tale.

"The substance was dubbed '**Repel**'. It acted upon physical objects in a way similar to the shotgun charge that inflicts such calamitous consequences."

Renny asked gloomily: "But this can't be pieces of **Repel**, can it? You can't hardly manage the blamed stuff. It pushes everything away. It's like the opposite of gravity."

Doc said carefully: "We appear to be seeing the effects of **Repel**. We don't understand the exact cause. But we cannot discount any possibilities. When the volcano coughed up that chunk of **Repel**, the stuff was catapulted across the Pacific Ocean and over the continental United States. Reports were that it first impacted somewhere in Wyoming before bouncing upward again and landing in the Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri."

Johnny breathed. "It might be conceivable that a fragment of **Repel** was driven deep into the earth or shards scattered thereabouts during that first impact."

Long Tom said: "Well, why didn't they just fly up again? **Repel** pushes against everything unless something strong is holding it down. For a long time, it was stuck in that volcano plug."

Doc Savage offered: "It might be wise to consider that there might be a deposit of **Repel** here in Wyoming. The individual who calls himself 'Mr. Calamity' stumbled upon it and somehow achieved control over the unstable element."

"Well, he won't be hard to find," Long Tom snapped. "He looks like a walking **Christmas** tree. He'll stick out like cactus in a snowbank."

Doc said: "We will not leave Quest out of our investigations."

Long Tom snorted: "His rustler gang is broken up and most are probably dead. He won't be much of a menace going forward."

"Any man willing to hang innocent parties to cover up for his own crimes will always be a menace," stated Doc. "We will run down Quest as well as **Mr. Calamity**."

Renny rumbled: "Assuming either of them are still alive."

-----  
The question was destined to hang in the air for not very long after.

The Noon hour had come and gone. The day was heating up.

Doc Savage had employed the telephone to speak with local, state, and federal authorities. He held a special agent's commission with the Department of Justice and was given great deference. He relayed as much of his accumulated discoveries as seemed reasonable without inviting unhelpful skepticism and promised to remain in close communication with all appropriate parties.

After he had hung up, Pat said: "You didn't tell them about the kidnapper's missing automobile."

"It might be too dangerous for ordinary authorities to attempt to run it down. That shotgun is quite formidable. We will find it."

But before they could get underway, a shadow passed over the Sun. This brought several of them to the windows looking to see what had blotted out the solar rays. Pat spied the problem first.

"Parachute!" she called out. "Someone is dropping in on us. And I mean that literally."

There was a general rush for the door. Doc Savage was the first out.

The parachute was white. The figure swinging from it was definitely **green**.

Long Tom burst out: "It's that Calamity character. Everybody get ready. He means trouble."

Supermachine pistols were produced and safety latches thrown.

Doc Savage had his pocket telescope out and was studying the descending figure. His **trilling** filtered out. Low and little weird.

"He signifies trouble all right. But not the kind you mean, Long Tom," imparted Doc.

"What do you mean?" demanded Pat shading her eyes against the Sun.

Doc turned to her and said gently: "Go indoors, Pat."

But Pat stood her ground. Her hands went to her lean hips.

"Just because I don't have my six-gun doesn't mean I can't handle myself."

"The man dropping from the sky is not bringing a fight," Doc said.

"How do you know that?"

"Because he is hanging in the shroud lines completely limp. And he appears to have no head."

Pat put one hand to her mouth and looked a little sick.

"Maybe I need a glass of water after all. Excuse me, please."



## XXII - The Headless Devil

The body landed like a sack of unshucked corn. The color the dead man's garb suggested that idea.

When his long boot heels hit the ground, he fell over to one side with a smack! Collapsing shroud lines and parachute material enveloped him (ironically enough) like a settling shroud.

Doc Savage rushed up and fell to pulling away at the parachute fabric. He swiftly uncovered the body. It was an ugly sight.

The man's head had been removed cleanly. Probably with a corn knife or some other blade.

Going through the corpse's pockets, Doc discovered no wallet or other items of identification. There was nothing to show who the man really was. A flicker of disappointment showed in the **Bronze Man's** eyes. The cognomen '**Mr. Calamity**' was hardly helpful.

The others stood around watching. Doc Savage asked Long Tom Roberts:

"Does this look like the individual you encountered?"

"Those are his togs, all right. But I can't tell for certain."

Renny Renwick was searching the sky with hard eyes.

"Wonder where he came from?"

Doc ventured: "He might have been catapulted skyward by a **Repel** blast whereupon his parachute opened fully and the wind carrying the body in our direction by design."

Dropping his gaze, Renny grunted: "That means the culprit's around here somewhere. But where?"

The **bronze** giant seemed unconcerned by that possibility. He inspected the man's hands. They were soft and well-manicured.

"These are not the fingers of a working cowboy," decided Doc.

"Long Tom muttered: "I didn't get the impression that anybody duded up like that ever did much in the way of cowboying."

Doc gave the nails careful study. Clinging to one was a fragment of what appeared to be yarn. He plucked it free and held it up to the light.

Long Tom gave it his attention. "Gunnysack fiber?"

Doc nodded. "We will take fingerprint impressions and see what they tell us."

"I'll get the fingerprint kit," offered Renny.

He bounded back to the big plane which was crammed full with scientific equipment.

Doc studied the man's fingertips. He possessed a nearly photographic memory and had studied the fingerprint impressions of known criminals in the FBI files and elsewhere. It was entirely possible for him to identify individual fingerprints by sight provided he had seen them before.

"I do not recognize these prints," admitted the **Bronze Man**.

"That doesn't mean he's not a crook," said Renny. "Just a crook whose prints you haven't seen."

Doc Savage continued his examination. The man did not appear to be wounded except for the raw stump of his neck. This suggested that he had been decapitated while living. Or at the very least while asleep.

Renny rumbled: "Bet that Quest bird done that."

But Long Tom countered: "Until we're sure, no one can say that this isn't someone else's body dressed up like **Calamity**. It would be a smart way to make us think that **Calamity** was dead."

"Until we run down Mr. Calamity's actual identity," allowed Doc Savage, "either proposition is equally possible."

The **bronze** giant had accepted the fingerprint kit from the **big-fisted** engineer and was pressing the dead man's fingertips onto index cards for future reference. He used a fine black powder and not messy ink to make the impressions. When he was done, he turned to Renny.

"Carry the body into the barn. We will let the authorities know what landed here in good time."

Renny eyed him. "Meaning you're not in a rush to notify anybody about this corpse?"

"The authorities are busy enough with what we've already given them," stated Doc.

-----  
They withdrew to the ranch. Pat and Laramie were filled in on the latest developments.

Doc took that opportunity to examine the grumpy old Westerner. He redressed the latter's wounds and did other things to decrease his discomfort.

"I feel like Alice," said Pat sullenly.

Johnny looked blank. "Alice whom, may I inquire?"

"Alice of the famous looking-glass. The one who fell down the rabbit hole."

"Oh," said Johnny <blinking> like an emaciated owl.

Long Tom observed sourly: "No one in this mess is falling down anywhere. They keep falling upward. And I'm getting tired of it. It's getting on my nerves."



"Wait until it happens to you," warned Pat.

"No thanks," retorted Long Tom. "I like keeping my feet firmly planted n the ground. And that's where they're going to stay. I wish I'd never taken over this godforsaken spread."

"A fine thing to say!" snorted Laramie in the corner. "Leavin' an old man to die without honest work in this rugged paradise."

Pat eyed Laramie dubiously.

"I thought you objected to being called 'old'."

"I do. ... I mean I did. But I believe that I have aged considerably since last night."

Abruptly, Doc Savage signaled to Renny. The pair went outside.

They went directly to the big speed plane ... entered it ... and rummaged around in back. The rear of the craft was fitted with storage lockers and other compartments. All contained quantities of the types of scientific apparatus that the **Bronze Man** habitually carried into battle.

Doc began making piles of parachutes. He handed one stack to Renny. The other he took himself.

"I get it," Renny said after a few moments of mental confusion. "These are going to be our aces in-the-hole."

"Important precautions," admitted Doc.

When they reentered the ranch house, Renny boomed out: "Come get your safety rations."

"Are we flyin' someplace?" grumbled Laramie.

"Not if we can help it," said Doc dryly. "But do not leave this building without donning your parachute."

His eyes widening with understanding, Johnny exclaimed: "A prudent precaution against peril!"

"Two of us have already experienced the potency of the strange shotgun that Mr. **Calamity** wielded," reminded Doc.

The parachutes were naturally rigged for different-sized individuals. So Renny and Johnny had to swap. Pat exchanged with Long Tom until they found rigs that would fit them properly.

Pat tried hers on experimentally and was surprised at how light it was.

"I thought it would weigh a half-ton."

Renny rumbled: "Cotton chutes are heavy. But these are silk jobs."

"Actually, these are fabricord," corrected Doc Savage. "Lighter and more durable than silk. It will make it easier to move about wearing a main parachute and its reserve. But by no means will it be comfortable."

"Is that spelled 'cumbersome'?" laughed Pat.

Renny stepped outside in his parachute harness and wandered about. Long Tom followed. The big-fisted engineer was curious about the Circle Bolt spread about which he had heard little. His interest appeared to be confined to the livestock.

"Where do you keep your herd?" he boomed.

Long Tom pointed to the solitary milk cow standing chewing grass placidly.

"That's her."

"Only one cow?" said Renny.

"There's only two of us. This isn't a working ranch. I don't have time for that. Gloomy gives reliable milk and we get along fine."

Frowning, Renny poked around the barn and grunted: "I only see 2 horses."

There were more yesterday. I lost a wagon along with 2 good mares. And you know what happened to Lightning."

"That I do," admitted Renny mournfully. "It's a shame about her. I guess if we're going to e riding about, it will by air then. And I don't aim to climb aboard that burro."

His attention to the horizon, Long Tom suddenly perked up at hearing the word.

"What burro?"

"The one standing in the far corner of the bar of course."

"I don't own any damn burro!" Long Tom Snarled.

Raising his voice, he yelled: "Doc! Fresh trouble!"

-----

Doc Savage and the others came running. They took a few minutes to don their parachutes. They looked a trifle ridiculous pelting toward the open barn so encumbered.

"What is it, Long Tom?" Doc asked with controlled urgency.

The aggravated Electrical Genius pointed into the dim barn interior and clipped:



"Unwelcome visitor."

Doc stepped inside and found the burro. He examined its brand and remarked:

"This is not your brand."

"It's not my mule," sniffed Long Tom. "That's what I'm trying to say. I don't know how it got in there. But it's fishy."

He examined the brand. 2 loops connected by a dash with a dash in each oval.

"I don't know many of the local brands. Ranches are spread out pretty far here."

Using a cottonwood limb for a makeshift crutch, Laramie limped into the barn with difficulty. He decided to dispense with donning his parachute. He did not know how to assemble the thing and his bandaged wounds made attempting it painful.

Loping over to the animal, he grumbled: "That's no mule. That's a goldurned useless hinny."

Blank faces sprang up all around. Doc Savage explained.

"A hinny is the offspring of a female donkey and a stallion."

"You know your oats," Laramie said admiringly. "Mules are bred from jacks and mares and make for hardy work animals. This hinny is its weak sister."

The oldster was studying the animal's hindquarters.

"This is the Lynx Eyes brand. That's where some of the mules have been rustled from lately. Some sidewinder is tryin' to frame us, Long Tom."

"Everyone stand still," advised Doc Savage.

"Why?" asked Laramie.

"Just do as Doc says!" snapped Long Tom.

Doc Savage's men had been trained to obey their big **bronze** chief. If he gave an order, it meant something. Something significant. Now they watched him work.

The **Bronze Man** made a careful survey of the barn and immediate vicinity. He was looking for boot tracks. And of course, he found plenty. He followed the ones that had led out from the ranch house. He memorized their outlines and assigned them to the individuals he knew.

Curiously, he found no unfamiliar boot prints.

However, he *did* notice hoofprints. They meandered about. And so did the **bronze** giant moving with an uncanny silence that belied his Herculean physique.

Some of these tracks he was able to match up to the solitary mule simply by lifting one of its hooves. Not that there is any doubt about the difference between a mule hoofprint and that of a horse or cow.

There were scatterings of others. But no boot prints belonging to strangers.

It appeared as if the hinny had wandered into the barn of its own volition. Possibly accompanied by a steer or a cow.

Doc checked the forefeet of the milk cow Gloomy and quickly decided that these odd hoofprints represented a different animal.

Once the *Man of Bronze* waved them out of the barn, Renny, Long Tom, Johnny, and Pat eventually joined in.

"Observe how the hinny's prints seem to come out of the rocks and go directly to the bar," he indicted.

Laramie grunted: "Anybody can see that. But who let her in? It weren't no cow."

"Yet there are cow prints present that do not belong to Long Tom's milk cow."

Everyone could see that as well. Renny and Long Tom fell to scratching their heads in puzzlement.

Perhaps to disguise his own bafflement, Johnny removed the thick-lensed monocle affixed to one lapel with a ribbon. This was a magnifying glass he used in his field work. Getting down on all fours, he studied the cow tracks through the lens.

"An enigmatic bovine conundrum," he pronounced.

Laramie nudged Long Tom and asked: "What did the tall skinny feller just say?"

"Why don't you ask him? I don't speak his ling either."

Standing up, Johnny announced: "These are not the tracks of a common cow."

"Not if it escorted a stolen hinny into somebody's barn," Laramie snorted.

Johnny assumed the stance and scholastic demeanor of a lecturer in Natural Science (which he was).

"Either this cow has learned to walk upright like a man. Or it is the only 2-legged bovine that was ever calved."

Pat challenged: "Are you spouting nonsense now? Because you sound like you are."

Doc Savage interjected. "There are no 2-legged cows. Nor has a bovine ever learned to walk upright. But it is an old rustler trick to affix cow hooves to the bottoms of work boots to disguise the tracks of a human thief."



"Holy cow!" exploded Renny. "Do you mean to say that some rustler wearing trick boots walked the mule in and then took off leaving no other trace?"

"Exactly," advised the **Bronzed Man**. "Once again, Long Tom is being framed. Or rather the Circle Bolt Ranch is."

The slender Electrical Wizard took fistfuls of his pale hair in either hand and let out a kind of annoyed groan.

"This broken-down dump in the middle of nowhere is more trouble than it's worth!"

No one offered a word to the contrary. Indeed, Long Tom's lament was something they understood perfectly.

Renny did not help matters when he observed: "You realize that this is going to point the finger at all of us when Alta Crater's body is recovered. Never mind that of her brother."

Pat Savage <snapped> her fingers sharply. Her face brightened.

"I wonder ..."

"You wonder what, Miss Pat?" asked Laramie with genuine curiosity.

"We have yet to find Hud Crater's body."

"Probably buried," snorted Long Tom.

Renny rumbled: "Unless that's him lying in the barn minus his head."

Pat continued her musings.

"I wonder if **Mr. Calamity** whoever-he-might-be could have dressed that headless corpse in his ridiculous outfit and dropped it on us to close the noose of guilt?"

Long Tom felt of his neck and looked a little more pale than usual.

"I wish you hadn't used that word."

"Which word?" demanded Renny.

Touching the raw purple-red **welt** encircling his throat, Long Tom <winced>.

"Noose. I'm getting kinda sensitive to it."

## XXIII – Assignments

Doc Savage took Pat aside.

"Other than the Bison sheriff, who else knew that you had been arrested."

"Just the sheriff. He was very discreet about it."

"What about the man who gave you a ride into town?"

"Mr. Wood. I don't know that he knew. I told him my name was 'Juanna Quitt', anyway."

"Events suggest that when the sheriff spoke to Wood," Doc continued, "the former may have indicated his intention to arrest you."

"You think Wood may be Quest?"

Doc did not reply directly. Instead, he said:

"Someone knew that you had been arrested almost as soon as it happened. What about the general store proprietor?"

"He was the nosy sort," said Pat. "And come to think of it, he was an old busybody from the first time I barged into the store to use the telephone."

"We will have to look into both of them quietly."

Pad nodded in agreement. "No sense in stirring up the Bison authorities. They're bound to be touchy about their dead sheriff."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes flickered.

"At the moment, we can assume that no one knows of your arrest. At least officially. That means you are probably not a fugitive except technically. But you should stay out of the town of Bison just to be on the safe side."

Pat's chin became firm.

"Doc, that sheriff confiscated my grandfather's shooting iron. I'll need to fetch it back if I'm going to participate in future festivities."

"I will see what I can do about your six-shooter," advised the **Bronze Man**. "My advice to you is to stay indoors and keep your parachute about you at all times. Even when you are sleeping."

"That sounds mighty uncomfortable."

"Not as uncomfortable as a one-way ride into the stratosphere. And now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to use the radio in the big plane."



"Don't let me hold you up, Cousin," Pat said with a trace of sharpness in her voice.

Doc Savage exited the ranch house so quietly that his going was not noticed by the others for quite some time.

Old Laramie fell to studying Johnny Littlejohn. The gangling archeologist-geologist was freakishly thin, uncommonly bony, and taller than a scarecrow nailed to a post. He wore his hair on the longer side as if he played the violin. But he was not known to play that instrument. He was not that kind of "longhair" but rather a scholar.

Laramie sized him up speculatively. Then he began unlimbering an assortment of Western insults.

"You," he clucked, "are built kinda like a rattlesnake on stilts."

"I resent that remark," said Johnny hotly.

He clung to his dignity the way another man would hold onto his best suit of clothes. Johnny had once held the Natural Science chair in a famous university. He had opened up musty tombs in Peru and explored Egyptian pyramids that no white man had ever penetrated. In his chosen fields, he was considered an eminent authority. One of the best in generations.

"If you close one eye, you look kinda like a walkin' needle," Laramie continued. "But with Eastern clothes on."

Johnny fidgeted with his tie. His neck began **reddening**. That meant he was becoming hot-under-the-collar.

"Canards are the last resort of uncouth ruffians," he sneered haughtily.

Laramie went on unperturbed.

"Furthermore," he observed, "you're so skinny you could probably take a bath in a shotgun barrel."

The big-worded archaeologist was not accustomed to such abuse. He did not seem to know what to do with his swelling anger.

At that juncture, Renny Renwick stepped in demanding: "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

The old Westerner made a show of looking about the room.

"I don't see anybody hereabouts who fits that description. Especially you, Big Fists."

Renny lifted one of those stony-**knuckled** members. He bunched it into a brick-red maul of bone, muscle, and tendon and warned: "If we weren't guests here, I would flatten your snoot."

Laramie appeared to be unaffected by the threat.

"Your friend over there looks so mad that he could bite himself. And as for you, those **fists** fit you like a pair of feathers on a terrapin. Where did you get them? If you remember, take 'em back. They gave you the wrong size."

Now it was Renny's turn to fume. And despite his menacing **fist**, he knew better than to let fly. In a low rumbling voice, he growled: "If I pop off on you, there won't be enough left of you to snore. Get the picture?"

"Big Fists, big talk. You got anything that's right-sized, you grim-faced galoot?"

This exchange started getting on Long Tom's nerves.

"Knock it off, Laramie. These are my friends."

"Just entertain' folks," said Laramie with a chuckle. "No need to be so touchy. I'm getting' kind of ornery with all these hurts I've acquired. In fact, I'm feelin' mean enough to swallow a horned toad backward."

"I'll fetch you one," rumbled Renny. "And make you eat it raw."

Laramie grinned broadly. It magically turned his homely face into a amiability.

"Fetch two and we'll call it supper."

Pat Savage interjected.

"I know all this mystery and confusion is getting everyone down. But if we're going to beat this menace, we're going to have to stick together."

Laramie snorted! "**Mr. Calamity** wore a ten-dollar Stetson perched on a two-bit head. Now he ain't got either. How are we gonna figure out who he was? Or was? Or run him down if he's still livin'?"

"Doc will do that," Pat said confidently.

"You folks talks about Doc Savage like he hung the Moon in the evening sky," scoffed Laramie. "I ain't yet seen any sign that he's such-a-much. And I've been ramroddin' cow punchers and bronc busters all my days."

"Watch what you say about Doc Savage," exploded Long Tom. "And where do you get off calling yourself ramrod of this spread? You're little more than a glorified cook!"

Laramie glowered his indignation.

"Better to be a cook than a crook. And you should eat more of my grub. It ain't fitting that a respectable rancher should be so poorly-lookin'. It reflects on my cookin' which I take kinda personal."

"I'm tired of eating mutton 4 times a week!" snapped Long Tom. "And especially mutton stew."

"Are you insinuatn' that I'm a lousy sheepherder/"



"Take it any way you like," snorted Long Tom.

Laramie glowered dramatically at his boss.

"Somebody hand me a firearm!" he howled. "Gimme a lead-thrower! That's a towering insult. I'm gonna have me a personal massacre."

-----

In the middle of this verbal melee, Doc Savage reentered the ranch house.

"I have been in touch with the FBI office in Cheyenne. At my request, they are going to canvass hotels and dude ranches throughout the state for reports of any **red-haired** and **green-eyed** visitor fitting the description of **Mr. Calamity**."

"What makes you think he ain't a common Wyoming no-good?" demanded Laramie.

"There was nothing common -- or for that matter -- authentically Western about his attire," stated Doc.

"What about my six-shooter?" asked Pat.

"I neglected to raise the issue," admitted the **Bronze Man**. "For there was another matter that has arisen."

Everyone looked to him expectantly.

"It appears that not only did the big lake vanish this morning, but also other smaller bodies of water have been all day. An unidentified man has been calling local ranchers and threatening to make their waterholes go away."

Laramie interrupted. "That's powerful bad medicine. We ain't in a tough drought at present. But Wyoming is plenty droughty this time of the year. Take away a rancher's source of water and he might as well shoot his cows and horses and pack up for Canada."

Doc Savage continued.

"Some of these ranchers are finding notes in their mailboxes. The threats are always the same. They are signed '**Mr. Calamity**'."

Long Tom grunted: "The bird's sure been busy today. I guess we now know why he's been doing what he's been doing. He's been testing that crazy shotgun of his. And now he's looking to cash in."

Renny boomed: "I don't figure this at all. If Mr. Calamity is the guy tricked out in green, then who is sending those notes?"

Doc Savage said: "That is one of the main mysteries. But by no means the central one. ... It is time we get active, brothers. Johnny, I want you to take the gyroplane and go prospecting. Start in the Belle

Fourche badlands due east of the Bighorn Mountains. That's approximately where the *Repel* projectile made impact according to witnesses. See if you can find any trace of it."

"Indubitably," said Johnny.

"Take Renny with you. His engineering skills might come in handy."

"Holy cow! That's a lot of territory. And I'm no prospector."

"We know that the *Repel* stone left Fan Coral Island in the Pacific and that it landed in Lake of the Ozarks," advised Doc. "In between, a boat on the Great Salt Lake in Utah was buffeted by waves raised by no discernible wind. Use those points to plot a trajectory. It should enable you to pinpoint where in Wyoming it bounced."

Renny nodded. His engineering skills included survey work.

Doc turned. "Long Tom, why don't you return that mule to the Lynx Eyes Ranch. Find out what they know. And inquire about Oakley Wood."

Long Tom nodded. "My hunch is that some of their hands made up that vigilante gang."

Doc nodded firmly. "The mule rustlings have all the earmarks of an inside job. No doubt some of the vigilantes are from other spreads or are loafers hanging out in the towns. If almost all of them are dad now, we are simply concerned with getting information that will lead us to Quest and **Mr. Calamity**."

"What about me, Doc?" asked Pat plaintively.

"Remain here and look after Laramie. We may have use of your skills before too long."

As she took in those words, Pat's frown turned into a half-hearted smile.

"You're not just stringing me along about that last part? Are you, Cousin?"

Doc said sincerely: "Mr. Calamity seems to be taking on a good section of Wyoming. We will have a lot of territory to cover. As developments take shape, your help may prove to be invaluable."

That seemed to satisfy the feisty **bronze**-skinned girl (if not exactly placate her).

"Fine. But I'm holding you to those words. Don't let me down."

-----

Everyone except Pat and Laramie exited the ranch house and went about their assignments.

Johnny and Renny got the gyroplane off the ground first.

Long Tom saddled up one of the spare ponies and tied the mule to his saddle.



The long-eared animal proved cooperative in starting off. But before long, it started digging its heels stubbornly, braying noisily.

The scrawny Electrical Genius was equally stubborn. But it was a while before he prevailed and the 2 animals along with their single rider disappeared into the foothills.

Before he took off in the big plane, Doc Savage went to the headless body that had come down out of the sky via parachute.

In the privacy of the horse barn, he performed a superficial autopsy using a scalpel and other medical instruments. His purpose was to locate any trace of a shotgun charge that might have been embedded in the man's body.

The **Bronze Man** did remove a few kernels of something. He studied these under a magnifying glass for a time.

His face was very intense. His uncanny *trilling* came, *ethereal* and *uncertain*.

When he finally allowed it to trail off to nothingness, he placed the fragmentary matter into a glass tube which he promptly stoppered and pocketed. Then he went out to the waiting aircraft.

He left the headless corpse wrapped in a horse blanket on the barn's hay-strewn floor.

Claiming the amphibian, he closed up the huge **bronze** bird. He took his seat in the control compartment and methodically <clicked> cockpit switches.

One engine warmed up and coughed some oily smoke. Then the other followed suit. The plane was quickly jittering with motorized life.

Stainless steel props snarled. The speed plane turned into the wind and Doc commenced his takeoff run.

Despite some bumpiness due to the uneven terrain, the takeoff was brisk and uneventful. The amphibian was soon moaning into the distance bound for the city of Cheyenne.

XX

Pat got bored in the ranch house after a bit and decided to take a stroll (much to Laramie's objections). She decided to explore what was on a dirt road leading out into the countryside.

She had lost track of time. Minutes turned into an hour. She came upon a house in disrepair. Playing in the yard were roughneck **boys** of various ages. They were casually supervised by a mean-looking woman.

Pat didn't hold her in high regard because the young boys used filthy language.



"Looky here, Auntie," a boy said pointing a Pat. "There's a **whore** over there!"

The other boys stopped playing and looked hard at the **bronze**-haired woman.



"Damn. I think you're right, Jeffry, said the woman. "The city **bitch** does look like a cheap **whore**."

Pat slowed to a stop. Her eyes were searching in all directions. She was on the defensive as the sneakily surrounded her.

"I never been with a **whore** before," another boy replied meanfully.

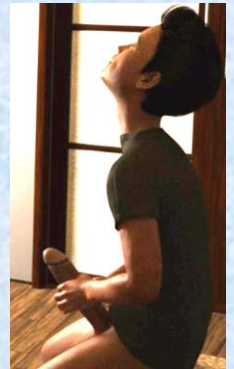
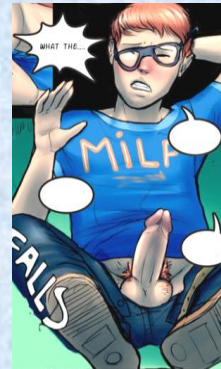
The woman laughed.

"Well, it looks like you'll have your chance today, Butch. All of your little piss-ants ... **Go Rape Her!**"

Pat couldn't believe her ears. Not again! Why do these things always happen to her? Plus there must have been 10-or-so of the little bastards. Too many for her to successfully fight off.



**"They're gonna  
RAPE you!"**



The boys started disrobing. Pat had nowhere to go. She was penned in.



The woman helped them remove Pat's clothes. Much *giggling* and **cursing** accompanied sounds of ripped clothing.



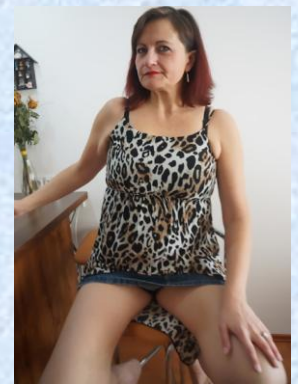
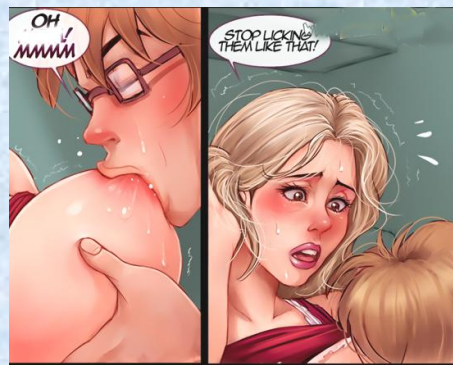
**"They're gonna FUCK you, Bitch!  
You'll be Fat and Pregnant, Slut!"**





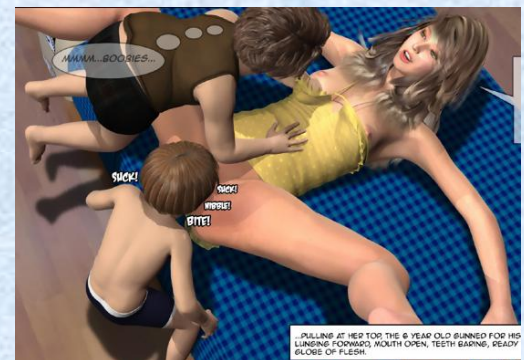
"Don't you dare touch me, you little bastards!" Pat warned.

"*Oh fuck you!*" was their mass reply.



She was swarmed on all over like ants on honey. Juvenile mouths sought her neon-pink lips and her 34-D breasts. Exploring tongues even invaded her crotch.

"You little pricks!" Pat cried out.



"I'll warm her up for you, boys," the woman called 'Auntie' said.



**"Now you get  
RAPED, Whore!"**



And Auntie did just that. She molested and "fucked" Pat lesbian-style for an hour-or-more while the boys watched and lustfully masturbated themselves.



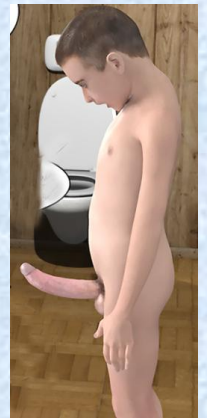
Auntie announced: "I think she's about as ready as she's ever gonna be. It's your time now, boys. Go bust her!"





Pat watched in shock as 10 juvenile naked bodies approached her. Each had a large erect **penis** jutting menacingly up in the air.

"Rape Her!"



One of the older boys jumped on top of her.

"You're my 'wife' now," he spat. "So you better start acting like it."

And with that, he **thrust**ed his 10" dick hard into Pat's vagina.

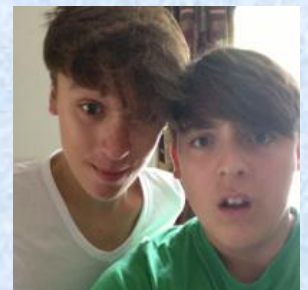




He grunted and groaned just like an adult male as he hammered away in her. Pat was left breathless after 30 minutes of his maddened **fucking**.



He yelled as he exploded. Pat could feel globs of his young *semen* spurting up into her womb like a machine-gun!



She was an adult woman after all. It would take much more abuse to render her senseless. But she could also see that she had no options. She decided that it would be better to completely surrender to their youthful lustful urges.

"I give up," she said with resignation. "If you want me, go ahead and take me."

Auntie laughed.

"I told you that she was a **whore**. What self-respecting woman would let a bunch of little dicks like you fuck her?"

Auntie did some quick thinking.

"Got an idea here. Take the **Bitch** in her butt. Fuck her in her goddamn **Ass!**"



A boy forced his **dick** into Pat's **mouth** to get it hard for his *sodomy*.

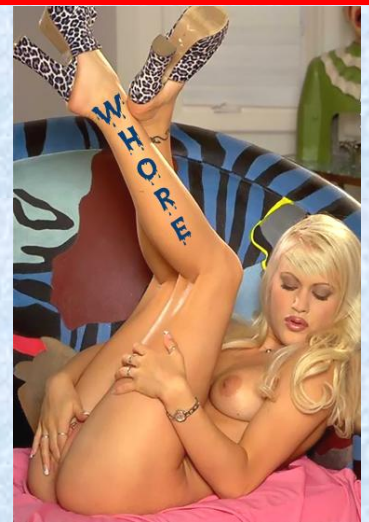
*"Stuff your little dick in my Butt, kiddo.  
Just hurry up and get it over with!"*



Pat squealed when she felt his skinny-but-long **penis** plunge into her rectum.







She shuddered as he erupted. It was a big sloppy **mess** that got shot up in her.

### *In a Parallel Universe ...*





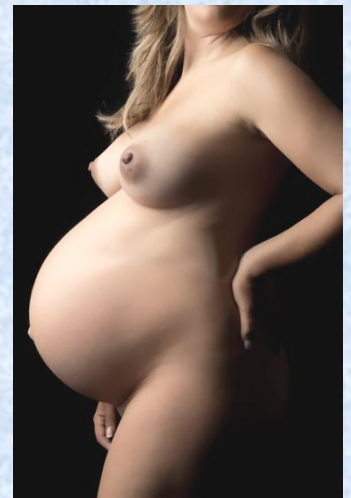
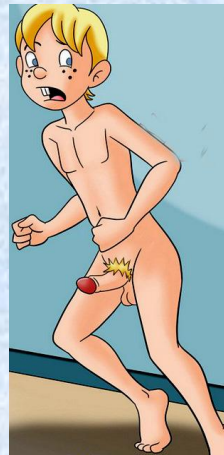
All of them swarmed on her after that. Auntie laughed and cheered watching the elegant **bronze**-haired adult beauty get most private "holes" thoroughly violated.



Pat's original 15-minute hike turned into a 6-hour **MASS ORGY**. The boys were tired. The older woman beamed with motherly pride. Pat lay there exhausted looking like a cheap used street **Whore**.







[ her brat's **brat** ]

## XXIV – Bizarre Bank Robbery

In the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Doc Savage was received with restrained-but-sincere approval.

The **Bronze Man** was not required to display the identification car that proclaimed him to be a Special Agent. There probably wasn't a man in the entire Bureau who did not know who Doc Savage was nor understand his official standing with the Department of Justice in particular.

Firm handshakes were exchanged with the Special-Agent-in-Charge as well as with his immediate subordinate. The Cheyenne office was modest owing to the sparse population of the state of Wyoming and its far-flung cities and towns.

"We don't see a lot of business here other than bank robbers and such desperadoes," explained the Special-Agent-in-Charge whose name as Heflin. "What brings you here, Mr. Savage?"

Doc Savage got right to the point.

"An associate reported that a man was seen swimming gin the sky after which he fell to his death. His body subsequently disappeared."

The **bronze** giant gave the flummoxed FBI men a moment to absorb that remarkable statement. Then he went on.

"The missing man has been identified as rancher Hud Crater. The body of his sister Alta Crater was discovered earlier today, apparently a victim of drowning. These 2 matters are connected. It appears that someone has control of a substance or **Force** capable of levitating bodies of water to considerable heights.

"Hud Crater was immersed in a swimming hole when the water was levitated conveying him skyward. Earlier today, a lake was similarly levitated with the unfortunate result that a Government mail plane crashed into the suspended water. The plane wreckage can be found northeast of Devils Tower along with the bodies of Miss Crater and the Government pilot."

"We heard about the plane crash," stated Special-Agent-in-Charge Heflin. "Are you saying it was brought down deliberately?"

Without responding directly, Doc Savage continued.

"The person responsible for has been sending demands to ranchers citing this unfortunate event and warning that if they fail to pay ransom, other water sources will be removed. He signs these threat letters with the presumably false name **Mr. Calamity**."

Now the **Bronze Man** had the agents' full attention for the destruction of a U.S. Mail plane constituted a Federal matter.

He laid on the desk 2 white card containing the fingerprint impressions of the headless body that had landed at the Circle Bolt Ranch.



"These are the fingerprints of a person believed to have been involved in this matter," he explained. "This person is deceased. But his identity is not known. It is imperative to learn who he was."

"I'll have our fingerprint boys run these," promised Agent Heflin handing the card to his deputy. The latter quickly disappeared from the office.

Doc Savage abruptly changed the subject.

"Has this office been investigating the mule rustling centering on the Pumpkin Buttes area?"

Agent Heflin hesitated.

"Normally we leave rustling to State authorities. Rumor has it that the mules are being shipped out by rail which takes the matter across State lines. Why are you interested in common mule rustlers, Mr. Savage?"

"A gang of these rustlers ran afoul of the individual whose fingerprints I provided. Most of the gang were wiped out in the skirmish. But the leader -- a man known only as 'Quest' -- appears to have escaped with his life. He was last seen in the company of a mysterious man who may or may not be dad and who controls the *Force* that can levitate water."

"You think that these two have joined forces?"

"That is one possibility," admitted the **Bronze Man**. "The other is that one murdered the other leaving his weapon in unknown hands."

Doc Savage gave a brief description of the man named 'Quest'. But other than his height and weight, there was not much to it. As for the one known as '**Mr. Calamity**', Doc had significantly more detail. But only insofar as the individual's **outlandish** Western garb went.

The FBI agent frowned.

"We had a report last week about a holdup involving a culprit dressed exactly like that."

"What sort of holdup?" asked Doc.

"A mighty peculiar one," said Agent Heflin.

He pulled a folder out of a filing cabinet and handed it to the **bronze** giant.

"It was real road agent stuff. The motorstage from Gillette to Ten Sleep came upon a boulder blocking the highway. The rock was so big that the driver couldn't get around it. The holdup man stepped out of clump of greasewood and showed the driver the hollows of his double-barreled shotgun. He ordered everyone off the bus and made them empty their wallets and handbags. Then he disappeared into the badlands. The motorstage had to turn around and return to Gillette.

"The road is still blocked, Mr. Savage. The funny part is that the big boulder wasn't rolled into place. It was the size of a house. There wasn't any scarp or high place that it could have been heaved from. The State Police couldn't figure out where it came from or how it got there."

Doc Savage finished perusing the FBI report.

"There can be no doubt that **Mr. Calamity** is responsible for the perplexing relocation of the boulder,' he stated. "There seems to be no clear description of the bandit's face here."

Agent Heflin commented: "His **outlandish** duds distracted the witnesses."

Then he frowned thoughtfully.

"The only time you ever see or hear tell of anyone duded up like that, they hailed from back East full of crazy ideas they got from Western movies and thriller magazines."

"Sound reasoning," said Doc. "A check-up on the dude ranches might be order."

Heflin reached for his desk telephone saying: "That's a good place to start."

But before he could grasp the receiver, the instrument rang. Slightly startled, the FBI man lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

Heflin listened for several moments ... interrupted twice ... and then slammed down the receiver. He addressed Doc Savage.

"You are not going to believe this."

"I heard every word," said Doc. "It appears the troubles are escalating."

The other agent returned at that juncture. He looked startled when his superior rapped out imperative orders.

"We need to drive up to Casper, Agent Hale. We'll fill you in along the way."

"My plane will be faster," suggested Doc.

"Lead the way," said the FBI chief, grinning. "It will be a pleasure to work with you."

-----

En route, the FBI head recited the report he had received for the benefit of Agent Hale who drove the official car. Doc Savage had already absorbed the details thanks to his super-acute hearing.

"A masked gang knocked off the Casper City Bank. They blew in wielding shotguns. A bank guard stood up to them. One of them blasted away. The guard was not killed. Instead, he was slammed up to the ceiling where he got stuck. They had to haul him down with ropes. That was later.



"They robbed the bank without resistance. On their way out, they blasted someone who happened to get in their way. That poor soul went screaming skyward. Screaming all the way into the clouds according to reports. They later found him dead on the roof of a department store. Every bone in his body was broken."

Doc Savage advised: "The gang needs money to finance their future plans."

"What about those ransom notes/" asked Heflin.

"It is doubtful that local ranchers took them very seriously. This bank robbery may also be a way of demonstrating their power and changing stubborn minds."

The FBI man said: "Every one of the robbers was wearing a flour sack over his head. So we don't have much to go on."

Doc nodded. "Those are the types of hoods worn by the mule rustlers. But most of them are dead now."

"Those rustlers had quite an operation from reports," stated Heflin. "They had confederates scattered throughout the State. No doubt that some of the gang survived the other night."

At the airport, they boarded the aircraft. Inside, Doc Savage handed the 2 agents parachute rigs.

"Put these on," he said.

Neither man thought the request unusual. But both needed help buckling their harnesses properly.

The flight was brief. They had hardly gained altitude when the **Bronze Man** pushed the aircraft into a sharp descent.

After they landed in a modest Casper airfield, Doc Savage told the FBI men: "Do not remove your parachutes."

Special Agent Heflin <blinked>. "Why not?"

"If the gang is still around, you could be blasted into the sky," advised Doc. "A parachute would be the only thing that could preserve your life."

Their faces falling, the 2 FBI agents kept their harnesses on. It made for a distressingly awkward ride in a taxicab. Yet there was no avoiding it.

The cab pulled up in front of the bank while the local police were still interviewing witnesses.

The bank guard who had been pried off the ceiling was sitting in the back of a police radio car refusing to step out. He was clutching the passenger straps on either side. His facial expression was terrified. He had a black eye (evidently the result of his ceiling encounter).

The nervous man was saying to anyone who would listen:

"I don't want to go up into the sky like that other fella. I hear he's dead."

After introducing himself to the local police, Doc Savage drifted up to the frightened fellow.

"Describe the men who did that to you."

There was something calming about the giant **bronze** man's steady regard. A *hypnotic* quality of the whirling flake-gold eyes that could not be denied.

"They wore Halloween hoods. Rough clothes. Not much else stood out. The shotgun blast stung like crazy. But I don't seem to have much damage except that I conked my skull on the ceiling."

"Did you see the shotgun clearly?"

"No. Except that it was old. An antique."

Agent hale inserted: "Might have been an old Zulu gun. A rifle with the barrel bored out and shortened to fire shotgun pellets."

The victim shook his head vehemently.

"That scattergun was no Zulu. It was a side-by-side. I never saw one like it. But she kicked like no mule that ever lived, let me tell you!"

"Thank you," said Doc.

He rejoined the police who were conferring with the 2 FBI agents.

A police detective reported: "The getaway car has been found on the outskirts of town. They must have switched cars."

Doc Savage said: "Take us there."

3 automobiles made a caravan with police sirens clearing the way.

The auto was a stolen one. A cream-colored coupe. Detectives were already going over it for fingerprints and other clues. But the gang was reported to have worn gloves. Police optimism was thin.

The **Bronze Man** ignored the vehicle and instead studied the ground all around. It was blacktop which did not take much in the way of tire tread impressions.

The FBI agents also examined the immediate vicinity. They went about this business methodically. But they uncovered nothing of interest.

"Looks like a dead end," Hale decided.



Doc Savage was studying the near distance. He noticed tiny specks of light out on the prairie. These were not visible to the ordinary eye. But his powerful optics detected 2 gleams. Removing his small folding telescope, he brought this to bear. These minuscule specks became visible under study.

"Spot anything interesting?" asked Heflin.

Doc observed: "It is possible that the gang took off on horseback."

The FBI chief frowned doubtfully. "More likely they transferred to another motorcar."

"That is also possible," allowed Doc pocketing his telescope. "Let me suggest that both avenues be pursued. Where might a horse be rented?"

One of the helpful Casper police volunteered. "I'll take you there, Mr. Savage."

"We will be in touch, Savage," said FBI head Heflin.

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Before long, Doc had acquired an appaloosa stallion suitable for his size and a sturdy swelltree saddle. He was pushing out into the prairie north of Casper in the direction of Gillette.

Despite appearances, the *Man of Bronze* was not embarking upon a wild goose chase. Not in the slightest. His study of the surrounding terrain had disclosed tiny specks of mica which had been reflecting afternoon sunlight.

During his rearing, Doc had spent a great deal of time out West in the company of working cowboys as well as Indian trackers. From them, he had learned all the tricks. Chief among them was the arcane of reading sign.

He knew terrain that did not take horse prints might nevertheless reveal to a trained observer the passage of riders. Bits of mica embedded in surface soil often was dislodged by passing riders exposing their clean undersides to the sunlight.

The action of wind and blowing dust would soon diminish that reflective property. But the fact that mica specks gleamed here-and-there suggested a recent disturbance of the soil. And a fresh trail.

Pinning a mount almost as imposing as he, the *bronze* giant was intent upon following the trail. A cream Stetson had shaded his metallic features. He was a striking sight as he broke into the prairie with his parachute pack firmly strapped to his Herculean physique.

If Doc Savage was bothered by the extra weight, he did not show it.

## XXV – Lynx Eyes

Long Tom Roberts was no fool.

Having suffered numerous ignominious outrages at the hands of Wyoming locals, he was not about to lead the missing hinny boldly onto the Lynx Eyes spread and be mistaken for a mule rustler once again.

"I've had a bellyful of jackasses," he mumbled to himself as he rode along the dismal flats surrounding the Lynx Eyes Ranch. Buffalo grass dominated the prairie. Here-and-there a scrawny jack pine struggled for existence. Water was not plentiful this time of year.

This was mule range. More than spread ran the hearty little pack animals. It was desolate country. Gophers and jackrabbits far outnumbered the human population. Antelope and elk were a common sight.

Long Tom led the hinny by a simple rope tied to the pommel of his saddle. It was a considerable distance they traversed. By this time, the animal had lost much of her stubbornness. She ambled along disconsolately with elongated ears flicking at flies.

Approaching the Lynx Eyes spread at long last, Long Tom pulled to a halt ... dismounted ... and untied the hinny.

"Now you stay put, you miserable little troublemaker," he growled.

The animal twitched her long upright ears. Now-and-then the doleful orbs <blinked> a few times. But she offered no comment. Not even a braying complaint.

Pulling together the rope, Long Tom remounted and continued on his way.

As he approached the Lynx Eyes bunkhouse lying baking in the Sun, he <cocked> a battered hat over his eyes to increase the shade across his face. A neckerchief was tied around his throat to conceal the purple **bruise** encircling his neck like an engorged artery.

He did not know for certain if any of the hooded vigilantes had been Lynx Eyes waddies. But the suspicion was fixed firmly in his mind. There was no avoiding being recognized. But if he could off that possibility, there was a chance of jerking out his supermachine pistol before trouble started popping.

The Lynx Eyes Ranch encompassed a small stream which carried melted snow and spring water down out of the hills and emptied it into the Big Powder River. A sizable spread, its corrals sprawled a net across a greasewood flat, the log ranch house resting on a knoll near the stream.

2 busters were halter-breaking young mules when Long Tom rode up. Another sat on a feed box watching them.

By the bunkhouse, 2 more punchers had stopped making rope hackamores to watch him steadily approach with squinting eyes.



"Howdy," one said without much warmth.

"Howdy-do back," said Long Tom trying to sound Wyoming-bred.

"What motivates you to drop by, stranger?" asked another.

"I came across a mule that maybe belongs to this outfit. It's wandering the road back there looking lost."

Long Tom did his best to sound a local. But he did not quite pull it off.

"You're not from around here, are you?" one wrangler queried.

Long Tom shook his head. "From back East."

"Passin' through?"

"Kinda."

"Well if you're lookin' for work, we're short as hell. Some of our top hands up-and-vanished on us last night. If you're seekin' a piece of honest work, we might take you on. Provided you're not tenderfootish."

Another waddy said: "You'll find old Blab Crater in the big house. He's the one you should hit for a job. But I don't think we're takin' on anybody permanent-like so don't get your hopes up."

"Okay, I won't," said Long Tom. "Is Blab Crater the owner?"

"Naw. That'd be Miss Alta Crater. She's out looking for her brother who's gone missing. Blab is their grandpa. He's kind like the foreman. But not actually."

The cowpokes appeared to be bored and were casually conversationally. One man produced a muslin sack of tobacco and a red-backed book of brown rice paper. His blunt fingers moved with deceptive ease as he fashioned a smoke while he talked.

Long Tom decided to primp the pump a little bit more.

"Who's foreman here?"

"Right this minute, that would be old Blab," drawled another hand. "The actual article is among the missing. Probably lookin' for poor Hud. He's the one who got lost a couple days back."

Long Tom ventured: "I heard talk of a gang of rustlers operating in this area."

The puncher jammed his spreading spike into the strands of the rope he was making hackamores out of. He did not look up. His reply was laconic.

"I don't know nothing about it, stranger."

Another shifted uncomfortably. Numerous eyes narrowed by the intense Wyoming sun appraised him silently.

"Well, I'll drift it and make medicine with Blab Crater," decided Long Tom.

"I'd walk up to the big house kind of loud-like so that you'll be heard," suggested a waddy. "The old rip can't see so well no more. He might take you for trouble and splatter your innards in all directions."

The mule wrangler's tone was dray as **Sun**-baked alkali.

Long Tom moved toward the big house. Sagebrush lined the path on both sides. Beside it halfway between the bunkhouse and the ranch house stood a sagebrush cutter. The big implement closely resembling a road-grader was a dull pile of metal in the hot sunlight.

As he walked past, the pallid Electrical Wizard noticed something pale stuffed inside. He paused, reached in, and pulled it out.

It was an ordinary gunnysack. Except that 2 ragged holes had been cut into it. Holes for human eyes to see out of. The lower portion was rust-colored. Dried blood from the feel of it.

That was all Long Tom needed to prove that at least one of the rustlers who claimed to be vigilantes belonged to the Lynx Eyes outfit, its leader. It was a valuable clue.

He decided to inform Doc Savage rather than take action himself.

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Stepping up to the big house door, Long Tom <rapped> on it loudly.

Presently a gravelly voice called out: "*Come in!*"

He encountered an old man sittin gin a rocking chair looking fretful and starin gup at the cracked plaster ceiling. The man didn't look as if he had shaved in a couple of days. He was scratching absently at his whitish stubble.

"Who might you be?" he asked.

Long Tom gave voice to a deep sigh.

"The bearer of bad news, I'm sorry to say."

The old man gathered up his wrinkled features and pointed the entirety of his face in Long Tom's direction. His eyes became as narrow as that of a Sioux brave.

"That don't tell me your name, stranger."

"Long Tom Roberts. I took over my Uncle Hicks' ranch near Pumpkin Buttes. Using it for a vacation spot."



"Hicks!" the old man exclaimed. "That would be the old Split-C spread."

"It's the Circle Bolt now."

"You run cows or mules," the old man asked.

"I have a milk cow. Some horses. But that's about it."

The oldster chuckled dryly. "Another dude ranch in the making."

Then his face assumed a sober demeanor.

"What's this you say about 'bad news'? Is this about Hud?"

Long Tom hesitated. He was groping mentally, uncertain how best to put the words together. But he knew that he would have to break the awful news somehow.

"I'm not sure about Hud," he admitted. "But there's a reason to think he's gone to his final reward. A witness saw him fall from a terrific height the other day. They're still looking for the body."

The old man's weathered hands squeezed the rocking chair arms. His sunburned knuckles got white.

"Alta's gonna be heartbroke," he said harshly.

He looked as if he had a good grip on his emotions. SO Long Tom proceeded with his unwelcome report.

"I'm afraid that Alta Crater isn't coming home either."

This time the old man fixed Long Tom with a puzzled eye. His mouth sagged revealing teeth like old yellow pegs. A few were missing.

He must have been a real fire-eater in his youth because his shoulders squared and his voice got rigid.

"Don't drag it out, stranger. Spit it out!"

Her body was found in a lake near Devils Tower."

The man's gnarled fingers gripped more tightly and he stopped rocking in his chair. He seemed not to know that he was doing that.

"Drowned?"

"That will be for the medical examiner to say," said Long Tom. "I'm sorry. I really am. I know it's tough to hear. But it had to be done."

"Well, it's done and one properly. I appreciate the neighborliness of bringing me the bad news. Now if you'll excuse me, I got to pull myself together."

"I have a few questions," Long Tom interjected.

The old man studied him.

The pale electrical engineer had his hat in his hands and was holding it by the battered brim. He turned this around as if it were a steering wheel and he was trying to hold onto the road.

"I didn't mention this before. But I work with Doc Savage. Maybe you've heard of him."

"The confounded King of Siam has heard of **Doc Savage**!" exploded Blab Crater. "City papers call him '**the Bronze Man of Mystery**'. They pile on the superlatives like they were stacking flapjacks. They way folks talk, ol' Doc is a human alloy of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Pecos Bill, and a few other fire-eaters of yore."

Long Tom nodded. "Doc's in Wyoming looking into some trouble here. Somehow it ties into the mule rustling that's been going on in these breaks. What can you tell me about that?"

"Not much to tell. This is mostly mule range. There's plenty of stock running loose. Rustlers take advantage. Mostly by moonlight. Or rather I should say by lack of moonlight."

"have any of them ever been identified?" asked Long Tom.

"Not one. The rustling hasn't been going on but 3 months. How does this tie into trouble big enough for **Doc Savage** to tackle?"

Long Tom hesitated. He didn't wish to get into the more *fantastic* parts of recent events.

"We hear that the leader calls himself 'Quest'. Does that name mean anything to you?"

The old man shook his head.

"Can't say I ever heard of a local boy with that name. But if those rustlers can be run to earth, their punishment will be swift and certain as sunrise."

"Last night Doc Savage piled into a pack of them," Long Tom added grimly. "They came out the worse for wear. They won't be rustling your mules or anything else anymore."

Something like a smile twisted the old man's features.

"Hud and Alta would be pleased to hear that news. I guess it comes too late for them, though."

A tear leaked from the corner of one eye. The old man seemed not to notice it.

"Some of you boys tell me that you're short-handed today. A few of your wranglers haven't come back."

"Out looking for Hud, I suppose," the old man said. "They been out practically every night."



"Doc Savage has a suspicion that some of your hands might belong to the rustler group. If that's true, they won't be coming back either."

The old man's features quivered like a spiderweb unexpectedly disturbed by a freshening breeze.

While Blab Crater was absorbing this morsel of information, Long Tom pressed him further.

"Who were the ones who went out last night?"

The old rancher gathered his thoughts, composed his features, gripped the arms of his chair and resumed his rocking. His jaw moved as if he were chewing tobacco. But there didn't seem to be anything in his mouth. Maybe he was chewing the inside of his cheeks with worry.

"Let's see ... There's Slim Jim Bowen. Dizzy Allen. Off Swiggert. Clayton Shoulders. And our foreman Buck."

"What's Buck's last name?" Long Tom asked.

"Quane. Buck Quane. Been with us near to a year. But I don't take Buck for no mule rustler."

"I hear a man named Oakley Wood works here too," Long Tom said.

"Well you heard wrong, feller. Never heard that name before. Sounds kinda made-up if you want my opinion."

"I must have misheard the name," allowed Long Tom. "If Quane or any of the others come back, don't tell them I was here. Or let on about Doc Savage. We'll check back with you."

He turned to go when the old man spoke up.

"I almost plumb forgot. Who do I see about Alta's body?"

"Doc Savage will be looking into that for you."

"Right kind of him. But what does my granddaughter drowning at a lake to do with Doc Savage's business?"

Long Tom hesitated. He did not wish to add to the old man's unimaginable grief. On the other hand, he felt that Blab Crater deserved to hear the truth. And sooner was probably better than later. He shifted his feet.

"Doc Savage believes that Alta might have been drowned on purpose."

"And who would do that?" the oldster roared.

"That's one of the reasons that Doc is on the warpath right now."

The old man lifted himself up and stood erect. His face took on a weird energy that made him seem several decades younger. Hot tears streamed down his weathered cheeks.

"You tell Doc Savage for me that old Blab Crater is on the warpath, too. If our paths cross, I'll stand right by him shoulder-to-shoulder and shot-for-shot."

"I'll tell him," promised Long Tom.

He stepped out into the harsh sunlight ... walked past the sagebrush cutter ... and paused briefly. Making sure he was not seen, he pocketed the gunnysack hood.

He gave the bunkhouse a wide berth before claiming his pony and riding off.

His pale face was grim. He thought about what the old man had said about the missing foreman named Buck Quane. And how much 'Quane' sounded like 'Quest'.

As clues went, it was no shining jewel. But Long Tom Roberts was dead certain that the *Man of Bronze* would be interested in hearing about it.



## XXVI – Pat Makes Her Play

Patricia Savage was an impetuous young woman.

British Columbia had birthed her. She had grown up in its untamed evergreen wilderness and some of that wildness had imprinted itself upon her spirit. Perhaps she would have lived out her days there. But the death of her father combined with a visit by her cousin Doc Savage changed the direction of her destiny. [\[read #11 - "Brand of the Werewolf"\]](#)

After relocating to New York City, the young woman had established a beauty salon that swiftly grew into a combination spa and gymnasium on fashionable Park Avenue. The establishment had made her (if not exactly wealthy) extremely comfortable for a woman of her young years.

But this did not satisfy her. Mere money never would. Pat lusted for excitement, adventure, travel, and to see all that the wide World could offer.

Most of all, her ambition was to join Doc Savage's band of trouble-busters. But he had steadfastly denied her membership. Not because she was not capable. Pat was. She had horned into many adventures and done well for herself.

But as modern as Doc Savage was in most ways, in one way he harbored an old-fashioned streak. Pat was his only known living relative. Also she was undeniably female. He did not wish to see her in danger as a general rule. Nor was he willing to risk losing her during the course of one of his peril-fraught exploits.

Often, Doc simply put his foot down. Sometimes this worked. But most of the time it did not. Pat was persistent. In desperation, he would try to hoodwink her into tearing off on a wild goose chase.

The **Bronze Man** was tireless in his ingenuity. He believed that Pat should attend to her business. And when she got around to it, snare a husband and settle down.

Pat Savage had shown no special inclination toward marriage or bringing children into the world. She had the pioneer spirit (no doubt obtained from her late father) as well as a stubborn streak that might be blamed on the Savage bloodline in general.

In this instance, even though she had stumbled across the beginnings of the present mystery, Pat was willing to play along until her opportunity came. Although she hated every minute of it, the **bronze**-haired girl was prepared to stick out her vigil over Laramie until the others returned.

It was not easy. The old man had been wounded in several places. He ached. He moaned. He complained. He chewed tobacco constantly. Loss of blood had made his hide as pocked and wrinkled as though he had been soaked in green persimmon juice.

Pat had taken the time to wash the **coppery** dye from her wealth of hair and to scrub off the make-up that had given her **bronze** skin its **copper** tint. When she was done, Laramie appraised her and grunted:

"Before, you shone kinda like a new-minted penny. Now if you stood stock-still, folks would mistake you for a statue of Diana-the-huntress come to life.

Pat laughed musically. "I feel like myself again. 'Darla Dell' was getting into much of the wrong kind of trouble to suit me."

Laramie inveigled her into several games of checkers until Pat's boredom became too much.

"Is Laramie your real name?" she asked at one point.

"Nope. It's a nickname. I acquired it young. It's fir me ever since."

"What's your honest moniker?"

Laramie stopped chewing and seemed to hesitate ...

"My last name is Scow."

"First name?"

The old cowboy tongued his wad to the other side of his mouth thoughtfully.

"I don't usually talk about it. In fact, I kinda disremember it."

"Is it a secret?"

"No. It's just that I buried it long ago."

Pat smiled. "Surely you can cudgel it out of your memory."

Laramie frowned. "Promise you won't tell the others?"

"Cross my heart and hope to barge in on some fresh excitement before the Sun goes down."

Laramie was chewing ferociously by this point. When he spoke a single syllable, Pat had difficulty understanding him.

"Say that again?" she prompted.

"Elk! I said Elk. My first name is Elk!"

Pat <blinked>. "So you're Elk Scow?"

"No, dadblast it! I'm Laramie. Just plain Laramie. I buried 'Elk Scow' out in the prairie when I was a tender pup."

Pat <cocked> her head one way and her eyebrow the other.

"Why did your parents name you 'Elk'?"

"I never did get around to prying it out of them. I guess they liked the sound of it."



Laramie seemed disagreeably tired of the subject.

"At least they didn't name me 'Moose' like my big brother."

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The old man was shifting around in his seat. Suddenly he gave a <wince> of pain that grew into a grunt of agony.

"What is it?" demanded Pat, rising suddenly.

"I think I popped open one of those dodgasted stiches."

"Let me see," said Pat solicitously.

Carefully she examined his wounds. She saw fresh **crimson** leaking from a bandage and exclaimed:

"You're bleeding again!"

Laramie looked for himself.

"Dadgum bullet hole opened up," he grunted. "Well, make it stop if you can, Miss Pat."

Pat did her best. But the wound was deep and she had difficulty staunching the blood. Finally, she gave it up.

"We have to get you to a doctor," she decided.

"Nearest sawbones is over in Bison. We don't have an automobile since Long Tom managed to lose it somewhere."

"We'll take my personal plane. It's faster. I'll help you into it."

Laramie hesitated.

"Doc Savage told us to stay put," he reminded.

"He did. But he didn't tell us to sit around helplessly while you slowly bleed to death. We're going to see the doctor. And while I'm at it, I'm going to collect my six-gun."

"You'll just be huntin' trouble," cautioned Laramie.

Pat gave a game little grin.

"Nothing wrong with looking for trouble," she retorted. "It's what kind of trouble you find or don't find that matters."

Laramie averred through his pain.

"I have a hunch, Mis Pat, that the trouble will have a way of finding you."

"Let's hope that trouble doesn't happen along before I've got my six-shooter back," Pat declared with even determination.

She assisted the old Westerner to his feet and to the ranch house door. But not before helping him into a spare parachute harness. Then out they went.

"Why do I have to wear this dadblamed contraption?" he groaned as he leaned on Pat's shoulder.

"Lately, folks have been falling both up and down," Pat reminded him. "This will keep your safe."

"It ain't natural," groaned the old cowboy.

"You'll get argument from me on that," said Pat. "But Doc insisted. So we're following his orders."

Laramie eyed the bronze-skinned girl.

"You," he pointed out, "appear to pick and choose how much you obey Doc Savage according to your own lights."

"I'm a full-blooded Savage," retorted pat.

"Meanin'?"

"It's another word for maverick."



## XXVII – The Disinterred

Red and resplendent, the afternoon **Sun** hung over the crest of Big Butte as Long Tom Roberts rode grim-faced back to his ranch. He kept a close watch for any strange riders. He saw none.

From time-to-time he cast a careful glance backward in the direction of the Lynx Eyes spread. He half expected to spy the dust of trailing horsemen. But he saw none. He did not trust the hands who worked there.

He was not 20 minutes along in his thumping journey when the *buzzing* of an aircraft motor smote his ears.

Shading his eyes, Long Tom looked up. A small plane was buzzing overhead. He studied it. It was a modern bus possessing a fuselage of ivory with shiny gold wings and trim. His face twitched with certain surprise.

"That's Pat's bus!" he exploded. "What's she doing tearing around loose?"

Since he possessed no means to find out, Long Tom studied the ivory&gold aircraft and realized that it was winging in the direction of Bison. That meant one of many possibilities. Pat could have been summoned by telephone or shortwave radio, possibly by Doc Savage. Or that old Laramie had taken a turn for the worse and she was rushing him to the hospital.

Forking his horse, Long Tom changed direction and galloped toward Bison. He wished for his station-wagon. But there was no telling where it was hidden. The pint-sized Electrical Genius had kept a canny eye peeled for it at the Lynx Eyes place. But he didn't want to appear nosy and attract suspicious attention.

As Pat's plane disappeared over the hills, Long Tom slowed down realizing that he would have to pace himself or risk exhausting his mount. Wyoming settlements were distributed far apart on the theory that the best neighbors lived on the other side of the horizon.

Before long, a cluster of dry-farmer shacks came within sight and his attention turned toward those. He was not familiar with this spot or its tenants. Little better than hovels, the shacks were constructed from rough-sawn pine planks, sod, logs, and a few flattened tin cans for roofing. The peculiarities of the climate and the absolute lack of prolonged spells of rain made the common sod about as effective as any other building material (albeit lacking in certain sanitary qualities).

He noticed a semi-dugout structure. The walls of sod with a roof the same material lay over a framework of cottonwood poles. It was a mean-looking structure. He would not have given it a second glance except that he spotted something familiar.

He could not be certain from a distance. But there stood a spring wagon to which was attached a pair of draft horses. The wagon was nothing special. But the horses looked familiar.

"That's my rig!" he exploded.

Abruptly, Long Tom decided that Bison could wait. He turned his steed in the direction of the shanty.

A single dusty road led to the spot. It was scarcely worthy of the designation. A couple of deep ruts wound over the sandy rolling range here-and-there spreading into 2 more pairs of ruts where they had grown so deep that "high centers" developed.

As his horse thumped easily along, Long Tom made out the spring wagon and horse team clearly. It was definitely his rig.

In the bed of the buckboard was stretched out something shapeless and dirty swathed in a Sun-faded horse blanket.

Dismounting silently, he walked the horse toward the buckboard. He kept one hand on the horse's chin to keep it quiet. The pony was obedient.

No one seemed to be around. But outward appearances could be deceptive. Often they were.

Holding onto the reins, Long Tom crept up to the buckboard and made a murmur deep in his throat after he got a better look at the bundled wrapped in the horse blanket.

It possessed the correct shape to be a body. One end was rounded while the other came to a kind of point. The latter made him think of feet encased in riding boots.

Reaching in, Long Tom undid the rounded end and uncovered the head of a man. The face was caked with dirt and the pinewood-hued hair was likewise clotted with sod.

He appeared to be on the young side and dead for only a day-or-more. Everything indicated that he had been recently disinterred. Dirt was clotted deep in his ears, in his still nostrils, and around the corners of his eyes as if soil had been packed down around them.

The door to the mean hovel was open and its smoke0blackened interior gaped empty and odorous. Frowning, Long Tom went to the next shack.

Before he could approach the rude door, a young woman stepped out. She held a clumsy weapon in both hands. It was a single-shot buffalo rifle of Spanish War vintage. The barrel end looked big enough to jump into.

"If you know anything about buffalo guns," she grated, "this cannon will tear you apart."

Long Tom was so intent upon the deadly bore that he neglected to look at the wielder's face. Thus he recognized her voice before his eyes got around to scrutinizing her features.

It was the green-eyed redhead who had saved him from the hangman's noose not 2 days before.

"Well what are you waiting on?" she hissed. "Grab the lowest cloud you can manage."



Obligingly, the puny Electrical Wizard hoisted both hands. His arm in the sling was only partially cooperative. But Long Tom managed to hoist it to shoulder level. He was in no mood to be again. Particularly was he of no mind to be blown apart. As long arms went, the buffalo rifle was more fearsome than any shotgun.

"If you so much as wiggle an ear," the **redhead** warned, "I'll bisect you where you loop your belt."

Long Tom decided to get the upper hand the best way he could.

"That's my wagon standing over there," he said jerking his head in that direction. "it went missing a day ago."

"Well, I found it running loose when I was looking for my sweetheart. I was driving it into town to turn over to the sheriff when I found ... him."

Long Tom <blinked>. "Found who?"

The woman's voice was as hard and brittle as broken glass.

"My boyfriend. That's him in the wagon over yonder."

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Long Tom Roberts didn't know what to make of the **redhead**. He attempted to match her hard-boiled tone of voice.

"He looks dead."

"He is dead," she said without much emotion.

"Looks like someone recently dug him up."

"That was me," admitted the woman. "For 2 days I've been searching high-and-low for him. Searching hard. We were supposed to be married. It was a secret. Not even his family knew. Then he up and disappeared. After I found your wagon, I came across a fresh grave by the side of the trail. The person who dug the grave didn't do too good a job. Didn't dig deep enough, I reckon. Coyotes had scratched around and pulled loose one arm. When I saw the hand which was half gnawed, I suspected the worst. So I dug him up. And it was Hud all right."

Her voice lost control near the end and her chin was atremble. But she firmed both of them up with visible effort.

Long Tom all-but-exploded. "Hud Crater?"

"That was his name. What do you know about it, stranger?"

Long Tom told his story.

"I inherited the Circle Bolt Ranch from my Uncle Hicks. A friend of mine named Pat Savage met Hud on his way to a swimming hole. A few hours later, she thought she saw him swimming around the sky like a fish out of water. Then he tumbled down. When we went to see where the body landed, it wasn't there anymore."

"That story doesn't exactly stack up straight."

Long Tom requested: "Do you mind putting down that blunderbuss? My arms are getting tired."

Her brittle **eyes** congealed into the semblance of greenish ice.

"I do mind. If you have more story to tell, spit it all out."

Long Tom did his level best picking up from where he experienced his first hanging, moving on to the arrival of Doc Savage, and up to the present point. He described **Mr. Calamity** in detail without producing any sign of recognition from the woman's emerald **eyes**.

The **redhead** listened with her pale mouth making dubious shapes. Finally, she put down the buffalo gun.

"That yarn is too crazy not to be true. Not that I completely swallow it. But I believe in **Doc Savage**. I read about him in big national magazines. He's practically a one-man FBI. And if you work with **Doc Savage**, you must be right as rain."

Long Tom dropped his hands, fumbling the wounded one back into his supporting sling. Prudently, he did not make a grab for the buffalo gun. He knew better. If the cannon went off, he would be dead before his eardrums registered the blast.

"Why don't you borrow my wagon and take him back to the Lynx Eyes?" he offered.

The redhead shook a lock of loose hair out of one sad eye.

"I think I'll do exactly that. Bison is too far, anyway. ... By the way, my name is Lola Collins. I was planning on being Mrs. Hud Crater."

Her tone sank to a subdued half-whisper.

*"But I guess I'm going to have to make other arrangements once I get around to them."*

Long Tom said nothing. He owed the grieving woman his life and harbored no quarrel with her otherwise.

"Why do you think that **varmit**-in-green killed my Hud?"

Long Tom scratched his head in thought. His sour face all but puckered.

"It might have been an accident. And when he discovered that he had slain a man, the killer decided to bury the evidence."



"So Hud wasn't murdered?"

Long Tom shrugged unimpressive shoulders.

"Did Hud have any enemies?"

"No. But he was powerful mad at them mule thieves. Suspicion was falling on the Lynx Eyes brand. Could be that someone wanted to do away with him."

Long Tom had very little to offer in that regard.

"One thing is for certain. **Doc Savage** will get to the bottom of this. He always does."

"Well when he does, kindly pass on to him my top regards," said the woman stalking off to claim the buckboard. "Tell him that Lola Collins will always be his friend."

The woman checked the body. Then she climbed onto the wooden seat and got the horses and buckboard turned around.

"One last thing," she called back. "When I dug up poor Hud, there was something else in the grave with him. Something that didn't belong to him."

"What was that?" Long Tom wanted to know.

"It was a **head**. A human head. It wasn't Hud's so I left it there. Couldn't think of anything better to do about it."

Long Tom's eyes narrowed. "Where did you find this grave?"

"A couple miles west of Pumpkin Buttes. Look for the hoodoo with the one eye. It's the only one standing out there. Although why anybody would want to lop off somebody's head like that is beyond me."

And without any other goodbye, she rolled off. Her expression was fixed in silent grief. The wind in her **red hair** looked as if it was on the point of igniting.

-----

Long Tom Roberts got back on his horse and flung it in the opposite direction. He was thinking that the ridiculous-looking man-in-green '**Mr. Calamity**' was well named. He was stacking up to be the author of a lot of grief and misery in this corner of Wyoming.

The slender Electrical Genius soon found that hoodoo. The lonely sandstone spires were often found in clumps or clusters. But this one stood alone. Some bored cowboy had emptied his revolver into a spot high up making it look like a narrow Cyclops without arms.

He dismounted when he came to the section of disturbed earth. Having no shovel or any other tools, he used his bare hands to excavate the grave.

It took some digging around. But he found the head. Like that of the late Hud Crater, this head was encrusted with sandy soil. Long Tom hauled it out by the hair, held it up to the dying Sun, and turned it around. He was not outwardly bothered by the grisly artifact.

The head appeared to have been cut off cleanly. Long Tom showed no surprise there. He had already harbored suspicions.

Examining the hair closely, he noted its color. Using a thumb, he opened one eye. The lifeless eyeball retained enough of its original configuration that its color could be determine with certainty. Studying this, Long Tom let out an off-key whistle of interest.

"The stew is thickening up," he murmured. "Doc Savage will want to see this."

Turning, he went back to horse. He stuffed the head into a saddlebag as best he could. Then he closed up the strap and climbed back into the saddle.

Somber of face, Long Tom continued on his way. It was now very late and dusk was creeping in.

The ride back to the Circle Bolt was likely to take most of the night ...



## XXVIII – Betrayed

After landing at the dusty airstrip that passed for Bison's airport, Pat Savage went to the modest operations shack and requested an ambulance.

"What's the problem?" demanded the radio operator.

"I just flew in an injured man. He's **bleeding** from a gunshot wound.

"I'll get the ambulance. But I have to call in the sheriff as well."

"Just summon the ambulance, if you please," urged Pat dashing out to return to the plane.

The ambulance arrived first. But the sheriff was not far behind it.

While Pat was enumerating for the internes all of Laramie Scow's injuries, the sheriff's noisy flivver pulled up and he got out. The man was squat and broad. The ends of his mouth curved down nearly to the end of his jaw which, together with a pair of water gray eyes, made him seem on the point of tears. A nicked star was pinned to his chest.

"What seems to be the trouble here?" he wanted to know.

Of course, it was not the same sheriff. It couldn't be. That other man had perished.

Pat said forthrightly: "My name is Patricia Savage, cousin of the famous **Doc Savage**. This man is the foreman of the Circle Bolt Ranch. He was injured in a shooting yesterday."

"How does Doc Savage figure into this?"

"It's a long story," confessed Pat. "I'll be happy to tell you the bare bones once my friend is taken care of properly.

"We'll go to the hospital together then. You can ride with me. My name is Gates. They call me 'Easy'. Sheriff Easy Gates."

They watched Laramie being loaded into the back of the ambulance. The old Westerner gat Pat a <wink> and a thumb-and-forefinger circle signifying the 'OK' sign.

"Don't worry about me none, Miss Pat," he called out. "I've been plugged a time-or-two before. I'm practically half-lizard. My limbs always grow back."

Sheriff Gates pulled open the passenger side of his flivver and started to wave Pat in.

Then he stopped.

"You might want to take off your parachute, Miss. You seem to have forgotten it in all the excitement.

Pat hesitated. "If you don't mind, I'll leave it on. You never know when it might come in handy."

Wrinkles of suspicion twitched the sheriff's windburned features. But he shrugged and said:

"Suit yourself."

Pat got in. The sheriff slammed the door shut. She almost immediately bumped her head against the roof of the flivver. This was because she was sitting on her parachute pack.

The sheriff got his contrary machine into gear and said:

"Let's have your story, Miss."

The flivver shook jerkily with a loose tinny rattle bred from the unpaved ungraded roads. It chugged and sputtered as it progressed.

As they followed the ambulance, Pat did her best to weave her tale while leaving out the inconvenient portions. Particularly the interlude during which she had been previously arrested by the late sheriff of Bison. She also carefully skipped over the part about seeing a man swimming in the sky.

Sheriff Gates asked: "You say the FBI is on the case now?"

"Due to the mail plane crashing. "That's a Government matter, you know."

"It's Big all right," allowed the sad-looking lawman.

*They went directly to the Johnson County Hospital where the sheriff questioned Pat while they waited for the doctors to patch up old Laramie Scow.*

"Does Doc Savage think that colony of mule rustlers is back of all this hooraw?" asked the lawman.

"If he does, he hasn't said," admitted Pat. "But he hardly ever talks ahead of the point where he busts loose and clean sup matters. He's peculiar that way."

Sheriff Gates nodded. "I heard that about him. Read it somewhere."

The lawman considered his next words for a time.

"We found some dead bodies out near Pumpkin Buttes," he drawled. "Rustlers. We know that because they were wearing sacks over their heads. Got 'em all down in the morgue."

Pat's eyes brightened. "Have any of them been identified?"

"We're keeping it quiet. But some of them have," admitted the Easy Gates. "They're Lynx Eyes brand hands. Others are too busted-up to be identified. It looked like a few fell of the high buttes although I've never seen a dead body pulverized so much. Some of their faces ..."

The lawman caught himself.



"Well, I guess I don't need to go too carefully into the details. But from what you say befell them out there, they themselves could've benefited from wearing parachutes," he added dryly.

"I was unconscious when most of that was happening," Pat affirmed. "In fact, I'm lucky that I wasn't lynched."

"I see. Well, I suspect the gang had spread themselves out instead of bunching up. They can't all be Lynx Eyes boys."

"**Doc Savage** will be interested in that," Pat said.

"I'd like to talk to Doc Savage. Do you know where he is at the moment?"

Pat shook her head firmly. "He took off for Cheyenne. I haven't heard from or of him since."

"Reason I ask is that I am the new sheriff. We found the previous one dead in his car where those rustlers were found. That's why we're keeping all this quiet. If any of those rustlers survived, they're liable to be guilty of killing the lawman."

"I don't know anything about that," said Pat hastily. "As I said, I was unconscious practically the entire time."

Sheriff Gates eyed her suspiciously. The **bronze**-skinned girl had been pacing. But now she plunked down into a seat sitting on her parachute pack.

The lawman made a face, narrowing his sun-squint eyes and altering his weather-seamed countenance remarkably.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable taking off that rig?"

Pat sighed. "I neglected to mention that Doc requested that we always wear our parachute packs in case we encountered **Mr. Calamity** again."

"From what you say, that sounds sensible," said the sheriff. "But you have to admit that it's mighty peculiar you walking around wearing a parachute pack without being in an airplane."

"When you stumble into the kind of mysteries that Doc Savage and I like to tackle," said Pat sincerely, "you get used to matters that are peculiar."

"And that brings to mind another matter," continued the sheriff. "An old airplane was reported crashed out Pumpkin Buttes way. No sign of the pilot. But it's gotta be Alta Crater's crate. It's the only one in these parts fitted with a machine-gun."

Pat did her best to look surprised.

"Whatever for?"

"Miss Crater is the headstrong type," the lawman supplied. "She had that Gatling gun bolted on the undercarriage so that she could give demonstrations of aerial gunnery at the annual Frontier Days

shindig down in Cheyenne. At least, that was her stated reason. Personally, I think she's just plain hot-blooded."

Pat grimaced. "I've been accused of that very thing myself."

The sheriff fell silent.

Pat also lapsed into silence. She was thinking of her grandfather's frontier-era revolver locked in the late sheriff's desk. She was scheming for a way to recover it without giving away the fact that she had previously been in custody. But as much as she cudgeled her brain, she could come up with no possible way to accomplish her goal.

Eventually a doctor came out and said: "We have staunched the hemorrhaging finally and given the patient something to let him sleep. He should pull through just fine if he is smart enough to stay in bed.

"That you," said Pat fervently shaking the doctor's hand.

There was no point in looking in on old Laramie since he was asleep. So Pat and Sheriff Gates exited the hospital.

---

Outside, the sheriff asked: "Can I drop you anywhere?"

Pat smiled with relief. She had feared arrest.

"The best hotel in town. There's no point in going back to the ranch just yet. Doc has exiled me for the moment. But I have a feeling that my time is coming."

The sheriff obliged and let Pat off at a respectable-looking brick pile. The Hotel Buffalo.

"It would be good if you stuck around town," the lawman said in parting. "I might have more questions for you."

"Happy to oblige," said Pat.

Then she smiled inoffensively.

"Unless duty calls, of course."

She registered using her own name and took a few moments to freshen up. But only a few.

Already, a scheme had hatched in her mind.

Pat had suspicions about the proprietor of the general store. The sheriff had not mentioned any such person as among the dead down at the morgue. She decided to drop in and get herself some black cherry soda.



At the top of her right boot, she carried a small automatic pistol in a hideout holster. It was something that she kept on the plane for emergencies. It was not her favorite weapon by any means. But the pistol was small and easily concealable. She carried 2 magazines, one of which was anesthetic "mercy" bullets. The other was in the gun. After checking the weapon, she placed it in a pocket and exited the hotel.

She left her parachute pack behind. It was risky, of course. But the golden-**eyed**-eyed girl knew that she would be too conspicuous wearing it. Especially if any surviving members of the gang were in town. A woman wearing a parachute pack in the middle of Bison would stand out like a sore thumb. Not to mention the utter ridiculousness of it.

It was short hop to the general store. Pat peered in before entering.

The proprietor that she had twice encountered was not behind the counter. Instead a young man held forth looking fresh-faced and honest. Dimples dented his cheeks.

Pat went in boldly. She greeted the man with a cheery smile and asked:

"Do you have any black cherry pop? Preferably ice cold?"

The young man returned the smile. His eyes seem to light up at the sign of the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman. He went out of his way to dig out a bottle of black cherry from the ice chest. He opened it up for Pat, setting the sweating bottle on the counter.

"5 cents, please," he said. "You must be new in town."

"Just visiting," returned Pat slapping down a nickel. "Do you mind if I drink it here? I'm thirsty as all get out."

The clerk was only too happy to let Pat have her way. The golden-**eyed** girl was quite a vision!

"What's your name, gal?"

"Dell," said Pat. "Darla Dell."

She sipped the refreshing beverage and then asked:

"Whatever happened to the man who was here the other day?"

"You must mean my cousin. Kip Farr is his name. This is his place. I'm just minding it while he's away."

"Where did he get to if you don't mind my asking?"

The young man >blinked> wondering if Pat's interest meant that he personally was out of the running for her attention. He briefly hesitated.

"Kip said something about going to Gillette. Some business there, I guess. He was kind of vague about it."

"Will he be back soon?"

The young man shrugged. His interest in the topic grew visibly dim.

Observing this, Pat abruptly changed the subject. She turned her incandescent smile back on the dimpled young man.

"I meant to ask what's your name?"

The boy brightened. "Darn. Gordon Darn."

Pat's smile increased wattage.

"That's a nice name, Gordon. What do you do when you're not watching your cousin's store?"

"I'm kind of out of a job at the moment. But I'm working on it."

"Good for you," returned Pat.

She finished her drink and set the empty bottle on the counter.

"Let me have another for the road. Black cherry soda is something that I can't get enough of."

"Happy to oblige," said the young man digging out another bottle.

While they made the transaction, Gordon said hopefully: "If you're in town for a few days, Miss Dell, I could show you around. Maybe take in a movie."

Pat hesitated only a little ...

"I would like that very much. I'm staying at the Buffalo. Room 36. But call first."

"I'll do that, Miss," Gordon Darn said beaming. "Nice to meet you."

"Same to you," returned Pat exiting with her unopened bottle of pop.

As she walked up the dusty street, she noticed that clouds were gathering. It looked as if a rain might be coming on.

She decided that she had collected the only clue she was likely to gather in Bison. And so she made her way back to the hotel where she lingered over her second bottle of black cherry soda.

Pat listened to the radio paying particular attention to news broadcasts. She heard nothing new. The puzzling crash of the U.S. Air Mail plane near Devils Tower and the bizarre bank robbery in Casper were prominent. But no one as yet connected the 2 events. The **bronze**-complexioned girl had learned of the latter event listening to the radio earlier in the day and drew her own conclusions.

"I'll bet Doc is hot on the trail of that gang," she murmured.



Pat tried calling the Circle Bolt Ranch. But no one answered the buzzing telephone. She considered hopping into her private plane and returning to Long Tom's spread. But something told her to stay put. Perhaps it was the tantalizing nearness of her lost six-shooter.

The telephone rang about 7:00. It was Gordon Darn calling from the general store. His youthful voice had a bounce to it.

*"How about a movie, Miss Dell?"*

"How about dinner first? I'm famished. Maybe a movie later."

*"I know a top-notch place. I'll be over directly."*

-----

A few minutes later, there came a <knock> at Pat's hotel room door. Taking her automatic in hand, the **bronze**-haired girl went to the door. She always took precautions. Association with Doc Savage had taught her that hard lesson.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

*"Me,"* came Gordon Darn's voice.

Pat still held the automatic. But it dangled at her side as she unbolted the door. She opened the panel.

Gordon Darn walked in holding a bright bouquet of bluebells in one hand.

"Flowers!" exclaimed Pat. "How thoughtful!"

**Still smiling fixedly, Gordon Darn's other hand lashed out and knocked the automatic from the young woman's fingers.**

2 other men appeared at his back. They held 2 drawn short-barreled Colt revolvers. Their faces were as hard and unyielding as if hewn from oak.

Gordon Darn lunged hastily and scooped up the automatic. Pat made no effort to beat him to the gun because she was already covered by the revolvers of the other two.

Darn looked at Pat and then at the automatic. He **flushed**, making his dimples look like matched strawberries.

"They forced me," he confessed. "I had to do it. They threatened to shoot me if I didn't cooperate and then shoot you as well."

Pat colored angrily. She seemed about to say what she thought of the young man's actions ... then subsided.

"It's all right," she said.

Wringing her stung fingers, Pat demanded: "Who are these 'gentlemen'? And I use that term gingerly."

"Friends of my cousin," the other returned sheepishly. "They stopped by looking for him and we got to jawing. The subject of your visit came up. When I described you, they thought they recognized you from my description."

One of the men had a face that was too large for his body. His eyes were round, glistening, feline. His ears were strangely pointed. And when he grinned tightly showing 2 yellowed eye-teeth like fangs, his facial resemblance to a mountain lion was startling.

His voice was a sandpapery purr. "If you ain't Patricia Savage cousin to Doc Savage, I'll bite down on a bullet and set off the primer with the tip of my tongue."

Pat tried bluffing her way out of the situation.

"Why, you gentlemen are mistaken. My name is Darla Dell. From Boston."

The other gunman -- a flat-footed individual with a nose that had been squashed by brutal force -- laughed roughly.

"Then why are you registered as Patricia Savage?"

Pat deflated. She would have registered under an alias. But she did not want to stir the suspicion of the new sheriff who was likely to check up on the register book as a matter of routine.

The gunman with the bobcat expression wiggled the blued barrel of his Colt.

"Let's go for a ride."

"I would prefer dinner," sniffed Pat. "Preferably alone."

The other gunman laughed out loud.

"We'd have it sent up. But none of us are going to be here for long."

Gordon Darn suddenly became agitated.

"Hold ion! What are you mugs going to do wither?" he demanded hotly. "Don't you know you can't get away with this?"

Flat Nose grunted: "We have a lot of experience getting' away with things."

The cat-face one sneered: "And we're not gonna do anything with her. We plan to do things to her. Permanent things."



Malicious delight was a hot glow in his eyes. He had an evil grin as he began rubbing his crotch.



Gordon Darn had been red of face. Now he paled as if all the blood had drained from him.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"What I mean is that it would've been better for you never to have met this troublesome gal," purred Bobcat Face.

"Look! I don't ... don't want to be ... part of any killing," Darn stuttered. "I'm not ... a part of anything. I was just having a pleasant conversation with you fellows. I didn't know it would turn into something criminal!"

"Like it or not, you're part of the shivaree now."

"I want out!" Darn said hotly.

Bobcat Face considered.

"Your cousin Kip would probably wild up on us if you went and disappeared. ... But okay. Hightail it back to the general store and look busy. Slip out the back way. We'll give you 5 minutes. But don't look back. And keep your yap shut."

"Don't get our brands up with any hero hijinks either," warned Flat Nose. "We know where you clerk."

"Sure, sure," said Darn shakily. "I'll be mum. Don't you worry none."

Slipping out the door, he paused and looked stricken. His tone became contrite.

"I'm powerful sorry we're not gonna have that dinner, Miss Dell."

"It's Savage," Pat flung back. Just like my temper."

Gordon Darn <winced>.

*Then he slipped away like a scolded cur.*

"Coward!" called pat bitinglly.

The other two kept their revolvers trained on Pat while the clock ticked away 5 minutes. Then they directed her toward the door.

"Get along, little doggie," one taunted.

"It's your misfortune and none of our own," laughed the other.

"You boys don't look bright enough to be your own bosses," Pat said archly. "Who do you work for? Quest?"

"Never heard of him."

"**Mr. Calamity** then?" suggested Pat.

"Don't know who you're meaning," said Bobcat Face blandly. "We'll take the stairs down. Elevators remind me of the jug."

The trio walked down to the lobby keeping their short-barreled revolvers deep in their coat pockets where the desk clerk could not detect them.

"Remember," reminded Flat Nose. "We can shoot you through our pockets."

"You boys don't surprise me one bit," snapped Pat.

"How's that?"

"You have low-down back-shooter written all over your faces."

"Our lady-killer instincts are what you need to worry about," sneered Bobcat Face.

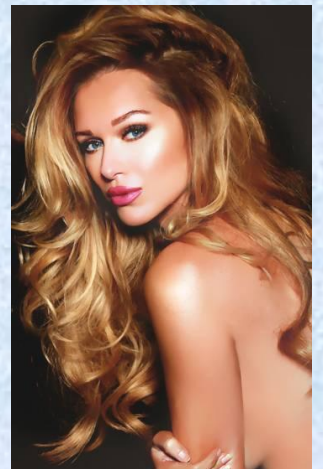
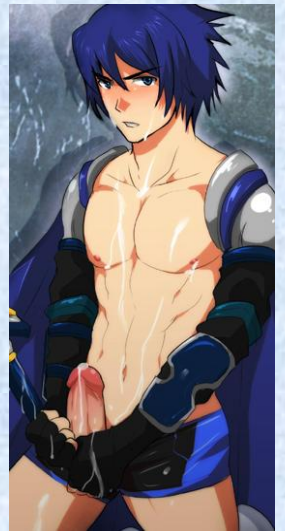
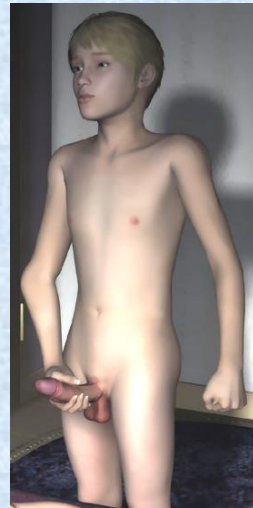
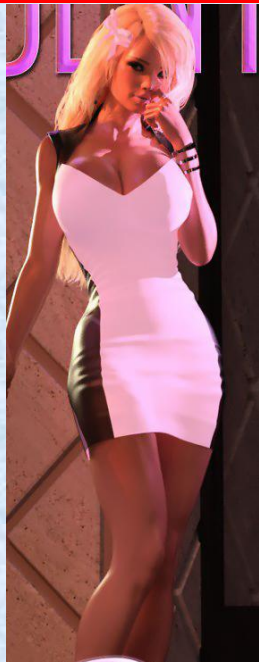
XX

"Not to mention our **Whore-Raping** instincts," added Flat Nose.

Pat looked shocked at the words. Her mouth was still open when they jerked her inside a vacant room.

Her eyes bulged at the sight of naked adult men and young teenage **boys**.









The men could care less how many past sexual experiences she had. But it was the boys' first time with a woman. They naively assumed she was a virgin. They didn't know that in her pursuit of Adventure with Doc Savage's group, Pat Savage had unfortunately been **raped** and **gang-banged** many times. So she was not technically a "virgin", her hymen having been torn when she was barely out of her teenage years (see "**Brand of the Werewolf**" #011**XXX**).







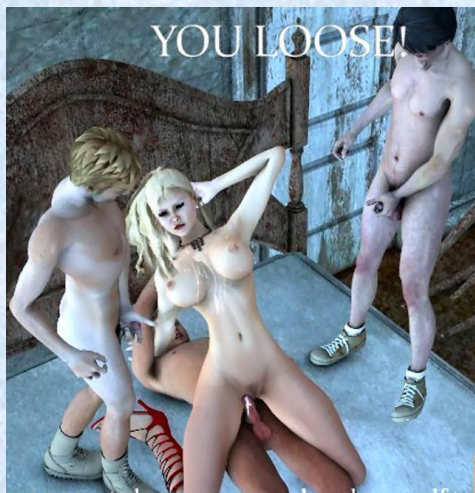
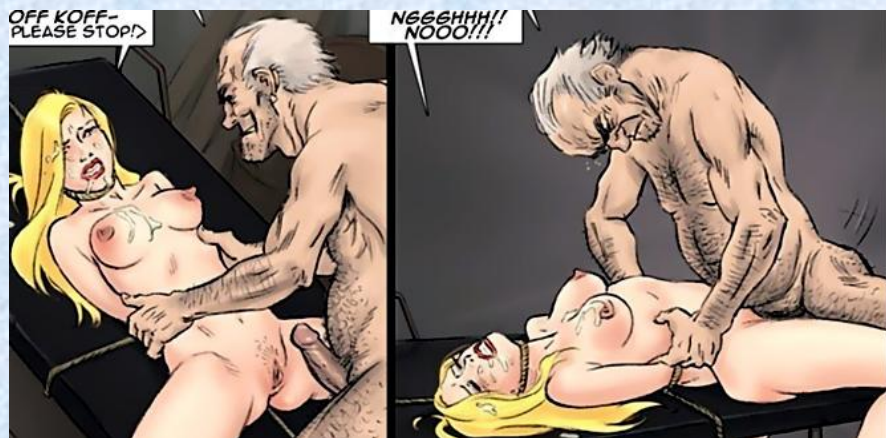
*Still, she had some remarkable ability for her body to heal itself. In doing so, any vaginal or rectal passageways that had been brutally stretched-out had quickly returned to their original tightness. For all practical purposes as far as the pain and bleeding went, she was still a "virgin".*



The men took her first. They split her vagina apart which made it easier for the boys.



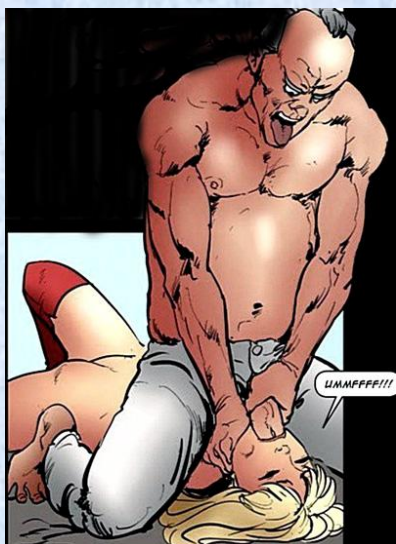








The boys were grinning madly watching the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman seemingly eagerly sucking the men's penises and **swallowing** whatever spurted out.





The few men and boys who were not exhausted were now eying Pat's fleshy buttocks.



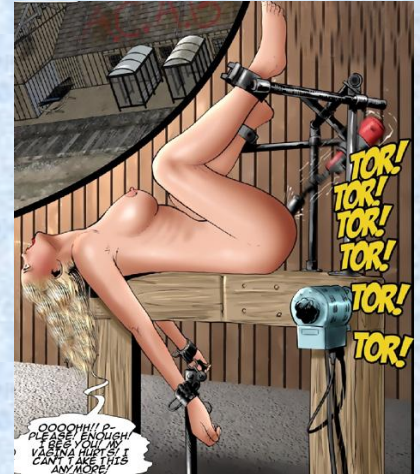
Pat grunted and moaned before while her vagina was being fucked. But now she was *whining* and *squealing* like a filthy **pig-slut** as her tight rectum was being bugged.







But no rest for the weary. Nor the *raped* and *ravished* ...







---

Out on the street, Gordon Darn looked miserable. He hesitated ... seemed not to know what to do with himself. He started in the direction of the general store ... stopped ... seemed on the verge of reversing course ... and then stopped again.

In his hand he still held the woman's flat automatic pistol. It seemed like a toy. Its pitiful small ness made him want to throw it away.

His eyes took on a strange light when he spotted the flash blue coupe. It was the machine that the gunmen had driven to the hotel. It was empty now.

Approaching, Darn tried the driver's door. It was unlocked.

He opened it ... threw the seat forward ... and slipped the tiny gun into a door pocket where he imagined they would place the girl. Perhaps she would come across it. He adjusted it so that the butt showed a little.

While it was not much of a gesture in the direction of redemption, it allowed him to feel like less of a heel.

Gordon Darn was closing up the auto when he heard footsteps rattling from the hotel entrance. His face going white, he peered back and spied the cat-faced man through the hotel window.



Frantically, he looked around seeking a place to conceal himself from view. His stricken gaze fell upon the coupe's rumble-seat lid.

## XXIX – Wild Ride

When Pat Savage stepped out of the hotel, it was perfectly gloomy. Fast-moving thunderheads packed the sky. There was a wind. It was whipping itself into a frenzy. No rain yet. But the smell of it was in the air. It was imminent.

Wind pushed against Pat's face and mussed her hair. Dust boiled like fog into the light before a nearby movie theater, a restaurant, and some beer places. It had been a **hot** day. But the air turned abruptly **cool**.

A spear of **lightning** crawled jaggedly across the sky adding to the ominous atmosphere. **Thunder** growled distantly.

During that interval, Flat Nose moved up the avenue leaving Pat standing with Bobcat Face. The sound of an automobile engine came throatily.

Abruptly, Pat became aware of a light too steady for lightning. A flashy blue coupe drew up. It swung in close and then stopped, its headlight emitting glowing funnels.

Bobcat Face held Pat by the elbow to anchor her in place which kept her from fleeing. The hard steel of the short-barreled Colt prodded her back forcefully.

"There's our ride," he growled. "Let's go for a nice long one."

The car-faced crook opened the passenger door, threw the seat forward, and pushed Pat inside. Then he took the restored passenger seat. With the flat-faced driver bulking behind the wheel, Pat knew that she was boxed in thoroughly.

Flat Nose put the machine in motion.

In back, Pat sat perfectly still. She did not say anything. But her tawny brow furrowed. She was thinking furiously.



Rain began cascading down in great gray sheets smearing the car windows and causing the tires to hiss and throw up water.

The coupe rushed through the Bison streets heading for the outskirts of town and the open prairie country beyond where habitations were fear-and-far between. With each sharp turn, the car occupants bounced around on their seat cushions.



Headlights of another automobile appeared in the rear window. The following car stuck but kept a respectful distance. Pat wondered if they were being shadowed or were these accomplices in another machine.

Her remarkably **bronze** hair began to curl as it sometimes did when the weather was damp. Her exquisite lips were firm, her golden **eyes** intent on the driver and his comrade.

"**Doc Savage** will move Heaven and Earth to find me," she announced forcefully. "You boys should know that."

Neither man answered. But they seemed to have lost their ghoulish humor. Mention of **Doc Savage** often worked that spell of psychological sorcery upon evildoers. Newspapers had proclaimed his astounding feats for several years now. If the wicked men of the World feared an avenging angel, that angel was cast in **Bronze**.

The car made a turn and headed north on the highway with the rain beating on it. Both windshield wipers went *swick-swick* furiously, headlamps blazing. Pat kept quiet. But her mind didn't although the thoughts inside her brain went around-and-around.

Ne fact did stand out, though. She was certainly going to be murdered.

Glancing out the back window, she no longer spotted headlights of the trailing machine.

They hit a depression in the pavement which was full of water. It sheeted out from the car and up against its windshield. **Lightning** cracked the sky nearby. It made the interior of the coupe turn a ghostly **blue-white** shocking them with its brightness.

Blinded by the flash, the flat-faced driver slewed wildly. But he did not see-saw the wheel as anyone the least bit startled would have done. Obviously, he possessed nerve.

"You don't need to go to all of this trouble," Pat said suddenly. "It's not necessary."

"What trouble?" growled Bobcat Face.

"The bother of doing away with me. It won't work. It never has. You're not the first to try. Don't forget my last name is **Savage**."

Flat Nose growled: "You seem to put a lot of stock in yourself. As well as in that damn cousin of yours."

"I know **Doc Savage** as well as anyone. He doesn't seem hardly human at times. I've witnessed him take a Tommy-gun in both hands and bend the barrel into a steel horseshoe."

Bobcat Face snorted with skeptical humor. The laugh was a little nervous around the edges like a frayed shirt cut off.

"Why, **Doc** can practically read minds," continued Pat. "I've accused of that. He never gives me a straight answer. But I'll be he's wizard enough to pin my possible murder on you both. And if he ever

catches up with either of you, I can't even say what will befall. You lads have probably heard the stories."

"What stories?" asked Flat Nose.

"Never mind!" snapped the cat-faced gunman.

Pat went on despite feeling as if some of the cool rainwater was trickling down her backbone.

"Talk is that crooks who run afoul of **Doc Savage** just disappear," she said softly. "No one knows what happens to them. They just evaporate. Even I don't know the truth. But I have my suspicions."

"What kind of suspicions?" asked the nervous driver.

Pat's tone dropped to a confidential whisper.

"I think **Doc** captured some terrible weapon that he turns on crooks. It makes them turn into pillars of salt or something after which they crumble like Lot's wife in the Bible. Do you know that story?"

The cut-faced gunman snarled. "Don't listen to her. She's making up lies to scare us."

Sounding unconcerned, Pat inquired: "Mind telling me where you're taking me?"

"Yes, we do mind. Now shut up."

The **bronze**-haired girl was growing desperate. Her ruse to frighten the crooks into letting her go was no panning out. She started looking around the backseat a little desperately. Her golden eyes widened when she caught a familiar gleam.

It was silvery *metallic* automatic sticking out from the seat pocket on her right side. Her own initials 'PS' peeped out from the grip of a tiny gun. It looked too good to be true. So she did not immediately seize the object.

As her fingers surreptitiously groped toward the door pocket, Pat made her voice sound casual. Perhaps too casual.

"I take it that we are bound for some secluded spot where you intend to do away with me in the customary manner?"

"Orders is orders," Bobcat Face grunted. "Nothin' personal, toots."

"Will I be offered a blindfold and a last cigarette? Or do you boys prefer to back-shoot me like the desperadoes you obviously are?"

No one said anything.

Bobcat Face tried to put on a fearless face. He cruelly reminded Pat of her previous perils.

"Feel anything kickin' inside you yet, **Slut**?"





"If I had a final wish," continued Pat nonchalantly shifting in her seat to better reach the door pocket on the opposite of the rear seat, "it would be for a last bottle of black cherry pop."

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This time, Bobcat Face did not voice what was on his mind. Suspicion had arrived as unexpectedly as the snap of a mousetrap in a kitchen cabinet. He wrenched his head around to see if his captive was up to no good.

He did not like what he saw because his blunt revolver swung into view and pointed directly at her head.

"Sit still!" he barked.

His mean eyes narrowed and his gaze shifted. He was staring through the back windows where the unfastened rumble-seat lid was bouncing loosely in the pummeling rain.

Imagining that this meant the end, Pat looked at him. Her eyes flew wide.

She cried: "No! No! Don't shoot ..."

"Shut up, you!"

He reached back with his long arms. The coupe rear window was the type that lowered. The cat-faced crook turned it down. He could now almost reach the handle of the rumble hatch by straining from his seat. The rumble lid stood open a fractional inch. Noticing this gap had aroused his suspicion.

Grabbing for the keys in the ignition lock, he got them. Most modern cars lock all doors and ignition with the same key.

Alarmed, Flat Nose <stamped> the brake. The coupe wrenched to a halt, its tires squealing. Jolted unexpectedly, Bobcat Face lost his revolver. It slipped under the seat.

Seeing her opportunity, Pat's hands flew for the door pocket. She gripped the tiny automatic and pulled the weapon out.

The driver saw this in his rearview mirror. His eyes popped wide when he saw the gun's metallic gleam.

"Keep her from firing that thing!" he barked.

"Lost my damn gun!" Bobcat Face howled.

Panicked and unable to think of anything more constructive, Flat Nose put the car into gear again and roared off. He fishtailed the hurtling machine with wild swings hoping to keep Pat from drawing a steady bead.

Bobcat Face had already squeezed his lean form half into the back seat. Pushing past Pat, he jammed his arms back through the rear window, shoved down on the rumble lid, and got it shut. The key went in the lock and turned.

Pat <cocked> the tiny automatic. The sound did not go unnoticed. The cat-faced crook grabbed her and twisted her wrist. The gun fell onto the floor. They fought for it.

Inside the rumble seat, a man began to yell hoarsely and tried to force open the lid which Bobcat Face had locked. The desperate driver promptly lost control.

The car eased off the concrete slab onto the soft shoulder. It slewed around and then stood on its radiator in a ditch. The doors both popped open as the body sprung.

Pat Savage pitched out into the rain and disturbed the freckled water in the roadside ditch.

Bobcat Face had her weapon, the tiny automatic. The man trapped in the rumble seat fired a gun. The bullet came through the seat leaving a hole that leaked upholstery stuffing. It broke the dashboard clock.

"Out!" Bobcat Face ripped at Flat Nose.

They got out.

Pat was up and running. Not up or down the road but across a field. She kept low.

Inside the rumble, someone kept shooting. Not through the seat now but through the car. The frightened voice from the rumble seat yelled:

*"Damn guns! They scare me!"*

More lead came out of the car. Trying to run a bluff, Bobcat Face shouted: "Cut it out, guy! Or I'll riddle you!"

A bullet spanked out at him in answer.

Thinking that it would be smart business to show the man hidden in the rumble seat that he was trapped, Bobcat Face aimed at where he thought the fellow was situated and fired Pat's gun. The report surprised him.

It sounded like a rotten egg. A blank.



But on that point, he was wrong. Unfortunately, the cat-faced crook did not find this out until he started forward and the gas out of the gun got in his face.

**Tear gas!** Potent stuff, too. It was like fire in his eyes.

Bobcat Face ran. No other sensible course was open because he was almost blinded. Flat Nose was wildly waving about a revolver of his own. A whiff of **gas** got him, too. His eyes began leaking tears. Naturally he fled, encouraged by the zing of wild bullets coming from the coupe's trunk.

A great deal of commotion and yelling followed. Pat saw none of it in the drumming curtain of rain and murk. She kept out-of-sight for a time.

After a while, everything died down and the **bronze**-skinned woman crept back to the road. Approximately 50 yards along, she encountered a splashing that was **Gordon Darn** who had blundered into a ditch half full of water.

The young man kept ducking his head under the surface trying to wash the **tear gas** out of his eyes.

Pat yelled at him. "Whatever got into you?"

"I took a fling at salvation," he sputtered. "It came to me after I left the hotel. I spotted their parked car. Unlocked. I slipped your gun into the seat pocket in back figuring that's where they would stick you. Then I got into the rumble seat and pulled the lid shut. Found a loaded revolver there."

"Better late than never, I suppose," sniffed Pat.

"I overheard everything," Darn continued, splashing away. "So I carefully raised the lid. I would have gotten the drop on those 2 desperadoes except that one of them spotted the lid rising up. Then ... Well, you know what happened next.

"Whereupon you started flinging led with wild abandon," interjected Pat acidly. "To no useful purpose, I might add. Except to scare the daylights out of me and everyone else."

"Tear gas seeped into the car and I broke out."

Gordon Darn stood up dabbing at his red **eyes** with his moist sleeves.

"My eyes are working again."

Pat said: "Let's hike back to the couple. It's shelter, at least. Maybe some Good Samaritan will happen along."

"And me get shot up?" he said fervently. "Not much!"

"Suit yourself," she sniffed.

Pat went back alone cautiously following the ditch.

Inspecting the coupe, she noticed that Gordon Darn had broken out of the rumble seat by kicking the coupe seat-back loose. **Tear gas** was still a noxious presence in the interior ruining it as a rain shelter.

On the ground, her flat automatic shone in the downpour. It was evidently dropped in all the fuss. She picked it up ... removed the magazine ... and saw that only one shot had been fired.

Returning to Darn's side, she advised: "We're safe now."

"They vamoosed, eh?"

The two of them crouched silently in the downpour, not certain what move was advisable. The couple would never come out of the ditch without the aid of a wrecker. Furthermore, the first passerby was sure to stop. The storm had halted traffic. But the fierce rain was now slackening; the *lightning* blazing less frequently.

They stood in the soaking rain with Pat clutching her small automatic. She started off with Gordon Darn following meekly.

"I wish you would put that gun in your pocket," he murmured miserably. "Guns give me the jitters."

"Where is your spine?" wondered Pat.

Darn shrugged soaked shoulders helplessly.

Pat scolded: "You know that you could have killed me with your reckless shooting back there. What got into you?"

"Blind unreasoning fear," confessed Darn.

Pat squared her shoulders.

"I suggest we give the road some attention. An automobile may come along at any moment. We might meet a Samaritan, good or otherwise."

-----

Instead, they came upon 2 men huddled by the side of the road. Bobcat Face and his flat-featured confederate.

Apparently they had flushed out of the sagebrush and were seeking to hitchhike their way out of the downpour. They kept pawing at their injured eyes and so failed to notice them.

Pat and Gordon saw them clearly after the rain slackened some more. *Lightning* flicker had become less frequent.

The men seemed to be waiting as if certain of rescue. One kept putting a hand into his waistband and moving the butt of his short-barreled pistol around nervously.

"Guns!" Gordon muttered squinting. "Here's where I walk back to town."



Pat reached out and caught him.

"Take it easy. I don't cotton to being shot at any more than you do."

"You've been acting as if you enjoy being shot at," Gordon Darn accused. "Those men have two guns between them. You have only one peashooter. I personally am not an odds fighter. I'll go even further and say that I'm no fighter at all."

"Save it!" suggested Pat. "They could be waiting on someone. Whoever it is may come by automobile. Let's watch."

A dark sedan cruised by and slowed to a stop. A man sprang out from behind the wheel. There was an excited exchange of words.

*"What happened to you?"* Bobcat Face demanded irately.

*"Bald tires and rainstorms don't mix,"* the driver retorted. *"What happened to your coupe back there?"*

Bobcat Face snarled. *"We were double-crossed by that milque-toast Darn. He planted the girl's gun in the back and hid in the rumble seat. All hell broke loose when she found it."*

"Not as much as it's about to," gritted Pat decisively.

Gordon Darn's eyes went wide. For Pat Savage suddenly rushed forward!

She fired her small weapon twice with the immediate result that a *stinging* cloud gushed toward the standing trio.

Howling painfully, the two who had been *gassed* previously retreated into the sagebrush to protect their eyes. Their pistols were momentarily forgotten.

The late arrival stood his ground and so was unprepared when his eyes welled up painfully. He commenced cursing and went stamping in blind circles.

Veering away from the spreading *cloud*, Pat made for the open door of the automobile.

Gordon Darn aimed his revolver on the choking man and yelled "Grab sky!" at the top of his lungs.

But the other was too busy floundering about blindly to hear.

Darn fired his weapon skyward to get his attention. But the hammer *clicked* on empty chambers until it was obvious that the cylinder contained no unfired cartridges.

Otherwise defenseless, Darn got hold of a roadside rock. He held it *<cocked>* for throwing.

Gripping her silver automatic, Pat dived into the automobile. There was a man in the passenger seat. She had not anticipated that. His head had not been visible in the pelting rain.

She had bad luck with the unexpected passenger for he saw her coming and rolled out of one door as she got in the other. His hand was hunting a gun in his coat.

Pat shot **tear gas** at the fellow. Her gun was loaded entirely with only tear gas cartridges. He backed quickly out of the way.

Then she fired more gas under the chassis just in case her enemy should take shelter there.

For his part, Gordon Darn did not appear to have done well with his rock. He and his foe were going over-and-over in the mud.

"We're deputies!" Gordon yelled suddenly. "You're all under arrest!"

It was a foolish lie. But the effect proved almost all he had hoped for.

The one who had dived out of the automobile now ran. He got in front of the sedan, shot out the headlights, and continued running.

When the fleeing man reached Gordon Darn's noisy fight, there was some violent commotion. It came to an abrupt stop.

Then more than one person continued running down the road and away from the late battle.

Exiting the automobile, Pat dashed toward the fracas in the rain. She had expected Darn to follow her into the auto.

"Gordon!" she yelled anxiously.

*Silence.*

"Gordon!" Pat choked out.

"Sh-h-h!" Gordon hissed. "They may come back."

**Lightning** came then and showed him. A tottering scarecrow coated in mud. Not hurt, either, it appeared. But his gun was now gone.

I thought you were armed," Pat challenged.

"Ran out of bullets. So I threw it away," Darn confessed.

"Come on," urged Pat. "The tear gas has taken the stiffness out of their tails. Maybe we can capture one and get him to talk."

"And them with guns? No, thank you!"



Pat withered the young man with her **golden** glare.

"What kind of son of Wyoming are you anyway?"

Gordon snapped back. "Have you ever seen a man ventilated by a revolver? It's not like in the movies where folks are grazed or nipped and maybe have to wear a shoulder sling for a few weeks. Bullets will break bones and put out perfectly good eyes. They will dash your brains out the back of your skull if the caliber is large enough. A .45 lug is large enough, believe me!"

It was a sobering speech and Pat Savage took it to heart.

"Well," she said, "we rustled their automobile."

"Someone's auto," Gordon Darn pointed out. "We don't know that they didn't steal it. We could get into a heap of trouble just by climbing behind the wheel."

"In my time, I've been wanted for murder," Pat said fiercely. "If not worse."

Gordon Darn eyed her dubiously.

"What charge is worse than murder?"

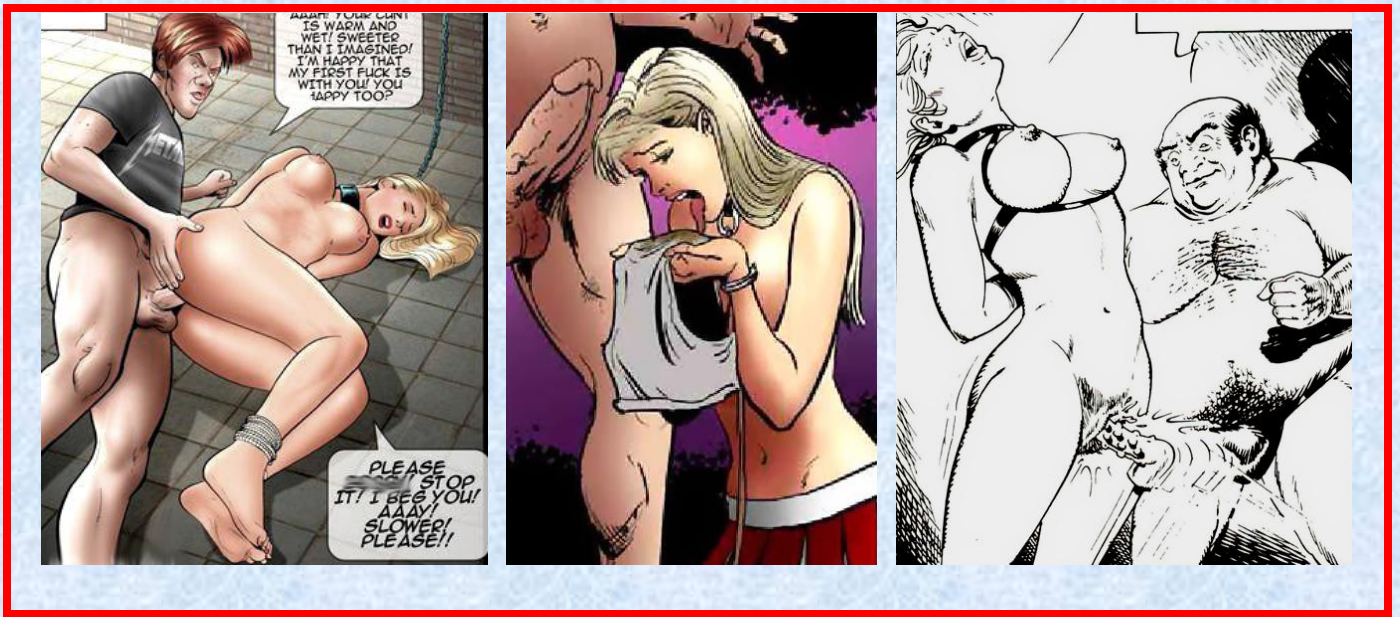
Pat sated with a vehement fierceness.

"Whatever I do to this gang if I catch up to more of them will be worse than murder, mayhem, and whatever else you want to add to the pile."

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She was thinking of her recent **rapes** and *humiliations* ...





Gordon Darn looked suitably impressed.

"Somehow, I believe you, Miss Dell."

"Savage," Pat corrected.

"Eh?"

"It's my warpath name."



## XXX – Ghost Ranch

Dusk made a spectacle of inflamed splendor of the Bighorns lying to the northwest. Darkly purple and frowning loomed their heights, Cloud Peak a greater knot, the treeless waste of rock above the timberline showing like pale bone piles above the fur of trees.

Riding at a distance-gobbling singlefoot toward the north, Doc Savage watched the fastnesses beyond the mountains swallow the Sun. With the first racing streaks of black night, **cold** air gushed down from the heights like the breath of some weird frozen jinni.

But he did not shiver. The **bronze** giant was inured to the cold. Also, his parachute harness served to insulate him from the wind. Not that it was very cold for the chill from the mountains was cold only in comparison to the daytime heat of the range.

Doc's appaloosa *whinnied* nervously.

"Quiet," he whispered.

His voice was gently reassuring yet firm. The obedient animal fell silent.

He was studying the cloud cover which obscured the Moon. It made for intense **darkness** when he paused.

A *sound* had reached his ears. Faint but familiar.

Another *sound* soon arrived.

A **bullet** snapped by one ear. It whined away fading from hearing. A rolling tumbleweed broke apart in the distance. (Tumbleweeds abounded hereabouts.)

Doc was out of the saddle by the time the second slug passed through the void he left behind. A **bronze** hand smacked the stallion sending it charging away with a soft clamor of unshod hooves.

*Fading in the opposite direction, he charged through the sage and around rocks with remarkable silence. Darkness concealed him. He collected a large tumbleweed on the fly and held it before him. He moved low, somehow blending with his surroundings in a way that defied detection by eye.*

By this time, he knew that a rifle was in operation. It was the <cocking> of a lever-action Winchester rifle that had first alerted him to danger. But he could not make out the rifleman in the smothering murk.

Removing an article from his carry-all vest, the **Bronze Man** hurled it against a stone. It produced a loud report and harmless flash. That was enough to invite a third shot. The sniper was good. His slug struck the stone and ricocheted noisily.

He spied the yellow fire-tongue of a muzzle flash. The sniper appeared to be mounted.

Doc Savage slipped headlong into a deep level-bottomed wash and decided to use caution. He lay flat, listening. No sounds of approach came.

But that changed in the next moment. A Winchester cracked with unpleasant consequences.

The bulge of his parachute pack stuck up above the lip of the gully. It made a convenient target. Bullets began plucking at it!

Doc twisted until he was lying atop it. His reserve chute was not quite as bulbous. It did not collect any bullets.

The shooting stopped. Silence returned.

He lay still listening to the babble of a distant creek, the croaking of hoarse-voiced frogs, and the buzzing of night insect life.

Doc crawled along moving into the deeper portion of the crack in the earth.

From a pocket, he produced a tiny bundle of friction matches. With one of these he set alight a clump of dried sagebrush. It produced an apricot-hued **light** along with fragrant smoke.

A fresh spurt of bullets began knocking this modest bonfire apart.

He strode down the water-worn range gash. He went forward like the shadow of a wind-blown night cloud. After a bit when he was well beyond the source of the rapid shots, Doc left the gully and trickled through the sage. He kept low.

Collecting another tumbleweed, the **bronze** shadow carried it to another specimen. He crouched behind the grouping, his golden **eyes** alert and roving.

Lack of moonlight thwarted his vision. But Doc's hearing rivaled that of many wild animals. He waited patiently for something to disturb the evening quiet.

The <clink> of a horseshoe against stone soon came. It sounded quite near. The noisy croaking of frogs and the blurring of crickets had drowned the sound of the **bronze** giant's stealthy approach.

Doc popped up holding something that gleamed clear and glassy in one **metallic** hand.

Suddenly the horse halted. A creaking of saddle leather along with the soft jingling of spurs betrayed the fact that the rider was dismounting. He crept around with his boots squeaking with every step.

Evidently the stalker recognized this betraying fact for he halted.

Then came a slow mechanical sound which Doc recognized as a Winchester lever being carefully worked. *Whistling* in imitation of the peculiar halting cry of a killdeer, the rider paused ... waiting ...



After a bit, a similar sounding whistle answered. It came from a fair distance. Hearing this, the rider slowly retreated, evidently fearful of stalking his unknown foe in the dark. The scuff of boot heels on sandy soil came distinctly.

There was just enough light to make out a silhouette of a crock-headed horse and a man swinging onto it. He rode away amid a clattering of hooves without knowing that Doc Savage had been within 20 feet of him.

The **Bronze Man** held the gleaming thing in one hand and did something unusual.

He hesitated ...

This object was a thin-walled globe of glass small enough to fit into the palm of his hand. An oily liquid sloshed about inside.

This was a liquid anesthetic with unusual properties. When crushed or shattered, the globe released the liquid which immediately volatized producing a cloud of invisible gas that could knock out a man in seconds.

Doc Savage possessed the physical strength and skill to fling the glass bomb ahead of the fleeing horseman. But he knew that the cloud thus created would bring down horse and rider together. There was a danger in that the horseman might suffer a broken neck if his fast-flying horse suddenly collapsed in mid-gallop.

Hoofbeats were a volleying roar through the darkness. They clattered ahead thundering pell-mell over loose stones. Soon, low sound grumbled in the distance. A pulsing clamor that steadily faded.

Doc made then, very briefly, a vagrant sound. It was his strange *trilling*. Small and exotic, it seemed to come from no definite spot but rather from everywhere as if unknown unseen insects were in chorus. The vocal emanation held a disappointed quality.

Reluctantly, the **Bronze Man** pocketed the glass globe, returning it to the special container that would keep it from accidentally breaking.

Had it not been for the confining parachute harness, he could have gotten to the grenade more quickly and brought it into play ahead of the horseman reclaiming his horse. But that regret was something upon which Doc did not have time to waste.

With amazing swiftness, the rifleman had vanished. Not even the plod of his mount's horseshoes could be heard over the natural night noise of the prairie.

It was too dark to pick out freshly turned specs of mica disturbed by the horse's rolling hooves. But that did not slow him down.

Removing a spring-generator flashlight from a pocket, Doc switched it 'on'. It had been previously wound. Adjusting the lens, he made a broad fan of light which he dashed about until shiny specks gleamed here-and-there. Mica.

Reclaiming his horse, Doc vaulted back in the saddle and proceeded as before. He paced the appaloosa carefully, not wishing to tire the animal and yet not knowing how far he would have to travel. He rode slick-heeled without spurs. Neither man nor mount made much in the way of noise.

Further ahead, a clump of buffalo grass had been pressed down and was still straightening. To Doc's acutely trained nostrils came the faint *odor* of burned tobacco. The fragrance helped guide him forward.

Not far along, the roving flashlight disclosed a discarded cigarette stub. Another butt was soon found. All of these signs showed an intermittent trail.

The way took him through a thick pine woods. The **Bronze Man** was forced to dismount and led his animal through the labyrinth of close-set trunks.

The *odor* of a person who had not recently washed himself soon drifted to his sensitive nostrils.

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Halting, Doc made the call of a killdeer which seemed to be a range signal. A password without words.

The call was returned.

Then a hissing voice demanded: "Who wants to pass?"

Doc made his voice sound tough. "Who's askin'?"

*"Never mind my right name. I don't use it much. You come to join up?"*

"What would I be doin' out in this forsaken spot if I wasn't?"

*"Okay, okay. Advance and be recognized, pardner."*

Doc had gotten a fix on the sentry. He sent his steed ahead of him. Then he circled off to the right where he hoped he would not be detected.

The sentry was canny. He lay prone in a trench. He was armed with a snub-nosed .38 revolver. A modern weapon preferred by city gunmen. He appeared poised to shoot on sight. No doubt he had been warned of Doc's approach by the rifleman who had come this way first. Hatred was in his eyes; murder on his mind.

Doc Savage came alongside the trench. His tall frame seemed to collapse. With the silent efficiency of a fly-catching bat, he enveloped the man who lay concealed there.

Landing astride the sentry, his **powerful** python-like legs trapped the man's arms. **Metallic** hands clapping over mouth and nose were enough to muffle the fellow's helpless attempts to raise an alarm. The captive flounced once without much noise ... then quieted.



Not wishing to betray his position with his flashlight, Doc struck a match. The flare of light revealed his **metallic** countenance and **eyes** with their eerie inner stirrings resembling twin dust storms of **golden** flakes.

"Recognize me?" Doc demanded.

The gunman nodded as best he could. The **bronze** giant's grip was **vise-like**.

"Gunmen are assembling here," suggested Doc.

Another nod.

Releasing the cowed man's mouth, Doc asked: "Who is your leader?"

"I ... I don't know his real name. Honest! But he put the call out through the grapevine that anyone who wanted a hunk a million dollars to come hell-for-leather to the old E-Out-of-Hell Ranch outlaw hideout. He was about to start operations. I was the first to show. So he made me his straw boss."

"What does he call himself?"

"**Calamity**. That's all. I don't know if it's a nickname. But I suppose it's gotta be like Calamity Jane, you know. He keeps his face hooded. So don't ask me what he looks like 'cause I got no honest notion."

"How many strong is this gang?" pressed Doc.

"Seven. But others are expected tonight. I just passed through a new hand not 5 minutes back."

The man was perspiring freely now. He shook with a mounting fear.

"Am I gonna disappear like all them other crooks you done caught?"

Instead of replying, the giant **bronze** man transferred his grip to the man's neck.

Kneading a nerve center there, Doc put the man to sleep. Thinking he was being strangled, the fellow kicked wildly toward the end. But with no result. He was helpless.

Doc laid the slack body in his trench, removed the cartridges from his revolver, and flung them in opposite directions.

Retreating to the appaloosa, Doc regained the saddle. He continued on. A break in the clouds allowed a scattering of lunar illumination to leak out of the close-packed nodular masses.

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Before terrible long, he came upon what appeared to be a deserted homestead. A little tract sitting a distance of 11 yards from an empty pole corral. Enough of a spread to graze a herd of saddle horses and few milk cows. The necessary accoutrements of a family ranch.

But this spread appeared to be a ghost ranch. Tumbleweeds lay scattered about indicating disuse and neglect.

A sudden movement belied that judgment.

A puncher came to the ramshackle bunkhouse door. He threw water from a pan and then stepped back out of sight. Night breeze brought creosote smell from a dehorning chute. A locked-off windmill squeaked a faint protest.

Forking the horse, Doc *retreated* into the trees with such alacrity that pine branches clawed at his hat almost knocking it off the metallic skullcap that was his hair.

The **Bronze Man** halted in the clump of sheltering pines. He slid off his horse and left the reins dragging. The stallion straightaway began nibbling on succulent summer grass.

The appaloosa soon consumed its fill. Doc Savage left it tethered in a piney spot. Taking to the sage, he neared the place with the easy *stealth* of a stalking bobcat. Doubled low, he felt his way ahead pushing aside gray sage with long-fingered hands.

He scouted the ranch house first. It appeared dark although yards away 2 lighted **windows** were scarlet splashes on the cube of gloom that was the bunkhouse.

On a Sun-bleached plank, sign letters were burned evidently by a red-hot branding iron:

HLL RANCH.

The "E-Out-of-Hell" in other words.

Doc drifted through the screening vegetation. As he went moving with furtive haste, he inspected the place. The ranch house had the dilapidated look of being deserted or, at best, occupied only as a winter line camp.

Using his folding telescope, he studied it carefully. The squatting block of murk showed no window glowing. Then he eased out of the sagebrush and made for the ranch house turtling forward.

Hovering outside pressed against the log wall not far from the door, he listened a long time.

When he was convinced that the ranch house was unoccupied, Doc detached himself from the shadows. *Stealthily* he circled the ramshackle building. A window in the rear wall was open. He waited there.

The window was not large enough to admit him. But Doc Savage played the beam of his flashlight around the interior of the structure. He did not use ordinary light but rather **infrared** light in conjunction with a set of red-lensed **goggles** which he took from his many-pocketed vest.

There was only room inside and it showed itself to be empty. Moving with *ghostly* ease, the **bronze** giant made his way to the front door and slipped in closing the panel behind him.



Faint moonlight slanting in through windows and door brightened the place a little. 2 canned-tomato boxes nailed to the walls, a plank table also nailed to the wall, and a rusty cookstove comprised the only furniture. Paper was loosening from the plastered walls and ceiling in great scales.

Doc Savage stood inside for several seconds wondering just what he was up against. Voices seemed to be emanating from the lighted bunkhouse. It was difficult to distinguish how many. Horses were stabled in a rundown barn. But again, their number could not be discerned from their infrequent neighing and pawing.

But the **Bronze Man** had trailed at least 5 horsemen if he read the signs correctly.

Suddenly there came the sound of booted feet outside! They came from the vicinity of the lean-to stable. The grunt of aging leather as someone dismounted was plainly audible. The twittering of birds in the thicket had stopped with the rider's arrival.

The door was closed. Doc moved quickly against the wall in a position where the open door would form a temporary screen.

He drove a hand into his clothing. It groped around. Out came a tiny tin pillbox. He slid the lid aside and carefully extracted several small pellets. He set these before the door and retreated into the shadows.

Footsteps swished through the tall grass outside and transferred to the plank porch. The door latch moved. The door swung open.

A man stepped in boldly as if not expecting trouble. A Winchester hung down in one gripping hand. He clanked forward with spur bobs jingling. The sole of one boot compressed a pellet with **explosive** results.

Yelping, the man gave a wild jump waving his arms in confusion.

A huge dark ghost fell upon him. It wrested the rifle out of his hand and jacked the lever so rapidly that shells spilled along the floor. The new arrival began sputtering inarticulately.

Doc Savage found his neck and held him fast. He lifted him off his feet to show how **strong** a foe the unfortunate one faced and then began *squeezing* sensitive nerves in the neck. With a leaky sign of surrender, the fellow went limp.

Doc laid him out on the rude cabin floor. He picked up the rifle from where he had thrown it and felt of the barrel. It was cold to the touch. It had thus not been fired recently.

This then did not appear to be the sniper that he had encountered out on the prairie.

Kneeling beside his conquered foe, the **Man of Bronze** fished about in the fellow's pockets. But it produced very little in the way of information or identification. There was a drawstring bag of Bull tobacco and a book of Rizzes (the makings) for cigarettes, loose coins, and a brass money clip. The latter squeezed only 3 wrinkled dollars. Less than a day's honest wages.

Doc took a few moments to stuff as much of the tobacco down the barrel of the Winchester rifle as he could. The *strength* of his fingers could be seen in the way he jammed in the dark stuff despite the rifle barrel's narrowness.

After collecting the remaining pellets (they were harmless dime-store novelty gunpowder stuff that detonated under sharp pressure), he slid out the door and into the brush. He crawled for a hundred feet until he reached thicker timber. Then he began a cautious semicircle around the meadow.

**He was almost immediately shot at again.**

The slug carried off his hat and the **bronze** giant felt a stab of emotion at the close call. Not fear but annoyance. Sometimes his stature made him a more obvious target than was comfortable.

Sagging as if wounded, he faded to one side, *a metallic phantom in the murk.*



## XXXI – Unlucky Shot

As nearly as Doc Savage could judge, the gunshot had come from a spot directly opposite the cabin not more than 200 yards away. The pines offered fair concealment from that vantage point.

Doc rounded the end of the meadow. Then he used redoubled care searching every tree and bush before exposing himself. A lifted tumbleweed served as conveniently portable camouflage.

At a point where the pines encroached upon the ghost ranch, Doc found the marksman. He was atop a small boulder lying with his rifle rested over its edge. Doc moved closer.

Suddenly a pine cone crushed gratingly underfoot. The man turned his head suspiciously. But apparently the **Bronze Man** was well screened for the man shifted his attention again to the cabin door.

Doc didn't move for some seconds ... then crept steadily closer. Once he narrowly missed discovery when the man on the rock turned his head to knock off a tremendous chew of tobacco. It was then that Doc recognized the shotgun.

It was an antique. 2 turkey-buzzard feathers dangled from the double barrels. One was as white as Sun-bleached bone and the other as black as coal. It had been lying to one side.

Now the rifleman sat down his Winchester and picked up the scattergun which was better for close-quarters fighting inasmuch as its range was severely limited.

If the **Bronze Man** had been cautious before, his caution was now redoubled. He fully understood the power of the weird weapon. Nor was the parachute pack on his back particularly reassuring under the circumstances.

Nevertheless, Doc Savage decided that he had to capture the shotgun before it could be discharged.

He had his flashlight out and wound it carefully. He watched until he could see the man's face. It had not been visible before in the darkness. But now it was.

Or rather, what passed for his face was visible.

For the man wore a hood. It was no cheap flour sack. Nor was it the coarse gunnysack favored by the rustler chief who called himself 'Quest'.

This one appeared to be made of silk and was an emerald green. The color brought to mind the **garish** outfit worn by the fellow who styled himself '**Mr. Calamity**'.

It was not possible to tell if this was the same person. For the **green**-hooded man wore puncher duds. A faded flannel shirt over which a black&white cowhide vest lay. His hat was a nondescript thing the color of a tanned hide.

Doc waited until the man's eyes could be seen as a pair of gleams nestled in the carefully-cut holes in the front of the hood. Those eyes were as hard and narrow as cactus thorns. Their color could not be distinguished.

Crouching down, Doc waited until both were clearly discernible. Then he <clicked> on his flashlight.

The power of the ray was **intense** and **blinding**. Doc dropped the torch immediately and lunged for the howling man who was recoiling in shock.

The masked man had presence of mind. He had not suspected that he was being stalked. But he knew when he was under attack.

Blinded, he cursed ... crouched down ... and stroked one trigger of the shotgun. The awful maw was pointed at Doc Savage purely by happenstance.

### **The weapon discharged.**

But Doc was ready for it. He threw himself to one side as the blast blew by him. Gunpowder smoke made a malodorous cloud.

The charge happened to strike a small tree. It was small for a tree. But it was still over 8 feet tall. Shedding branches, the tree shuddered. Then something miraculous happened.

Groaning and cracking, the tree trunk jumped out of the ground pulling the greater portion of its roots free but leaving others behind. Turning in place like a wounded scarecrow, the tree twirled skyward. Its broken branches were shaking as if in fear.

Doc Savage heard these things but saw none of it. He was too busy trying to stay alive.

The **bronze** giant swung over to the left while the sightless shotgun wielder attempted to fix his position using only his ears.

Speed meant sacrificing caution for the ground was littered with pine cones and other debris. Doc could not help but step on some of these although he avoided most.

After the echoes of the first blast died away, these sounds would give away his position. Promptly he froze, hoping to fool the other.

"Where are you, damn you!" the green-hooded one bawled out.

Doc was well versed in ventriloquism. Opening his lips slightly, he spoke.

*"Over here. Behind you."*

By artfully throwing his voice, he made it sound as if he was in fact behind the man. It would have fooled most adversaries. But this one was wily.

"Nobody would give themselves away like that!" he snarled.



Doc realized that he was trapped now. If he moved, he might make a betraying noise. It was too dark to see the ground clearly. But if he stayed put much longer, the other man's eyes would clear and the **Bronze Man** would be at his mercy.

---

Doc was slipping a hand into the pocket where he carried the tube holding the glass anesthetic bombs when the man started <blinking> rapidly. That was a warning that vision was returning.

Having no choice in the matter, the **bronze** giant made a desperate lunge moving with cat-like speed.

On another occasion, he might have succeeded. But he was encumbered by his parachute pack. The sound of its buckles clinking gave him away as did the quick grinding of his heels in the sandy soil.

The ancient shotgun shifted suddenly. A frantic trigger finger compressed one trigger. **The double maw was pointed directly at Doc Savage's chest when it exploded.**

Instinctively, the Bronze Man flung both arms across his face to protect his eyes and features. This also threw him off.

The shotgun blast caught him full in the chest ruining the reserve parachute dangling there. As if kicked by a donkey's hind feet, he was thrown backward. The blast mashed him against a stout tree like a swatted fly. It was terrific! Despite all efforts to keep his feet, he fell.

His falling was weird.

Doc slammed to the ground and then bounced upward. **He kept on going!**

Once more, he found himself floundering in midair as the starry sky seemingly pulled him upward, his powerful form possessed of an uncanny and irresistible weightlessness.

Having no control over his body, Doc Savage surrendered to the phenomenon. But this time he was better prepared for it. Up-and-up he went. Higher, ever higher, into the **chill** of the night.

Doc took immediate inventory of the condition of his parachute harness. The reserve chute was spilling out of its canvas bag. With his knife, he cut it loose. It went billowing down partially-opened and made a pale misshape mushroom that blocked him from view of anyone on the ground.

That piece of luck possibly preserved his life.

---

Doc Savage continued his helpless journey heavenward.

His great metallic hands were inspecting the buckles and straps of the harness finding that they were all intact. That meant it would be safe to deploy his main parachute when the time came.

Safe to deploy. But not to land.

For once the open parachute was visible, he would be a prominent target long before his boots hit the ground. His parachute bell this time was a regulation white and not made of black material. As such, it would stand out starkly against the evening sky.

But time enough for that concern later.

Doc studied the phenomenon of this helpless levitation. Compared to the previous encounter, he did not feel that he was rising as fast as before. He trusted that a single shotgun blast would not fling him all the way up into the stratosphere where air conditions were inimical to life.

And this proved to be correct. More than a mile up according to his wristwatch altimeter, Doc Savage felt himself starting to slow. Gravity made his muscles feel heavy again.

Now no longer buoyant, he commenced to tumble earthward.

Now he faced a difficult decision. The sooner he cracked his parachute, the swifter he would become a target for any marksman on the ground. But to delay too long would risk a hard landing and possibly spraining or breaking ankles or knees.

In either event, the **Bronze Man** would be helpless until he could wiggle free of his parachute harness. And once unencumbered, there would be no safeguards against death should another shotgun blast rocket him back into the sky.

There were a few times that he wished he had developed a personal rule against carrying firearms. This was one such time. Had he been in possession of one of the supermachine pistols of his own invention, Doc could defend himself on the way down and again upon landing. The compact superfirers could wither most groups of gunmen.

As it turned out, Doc Savage's regret soon proved to be misplaced.

The firefly lights of moving lanterns below indicated that others were coming out of concealment. Perhaps from the bunkhouse or dilapidated barn. But it did not matter.

Doc yanked his ripcord ring. The canvas bag on his back vomited a silken flower that blossomed into a mushroom which scooped quantities of air and acted as a brake for his tumbling body.

The giant **bronze** man was yanked upright. He took hold of the shroud lines and stared downward. His face was impassive as flashlights licked about.

As he descended, dull shouting could be heard. Words could not be made out. But it did not matter. Rifles began working. They *whacked* spitefully!

The lobe of the parachute presented a large target. But not from Doc's present height. Bullets sought him futilely. The sounds of passing slugs warned him of their nearness. These sounds differed. Some were remindful of glass rods snapping while others brought to mind struck tuning forks.



Doc spilled air from one side or the other by pulling on the shroud lines in order to make himself a more difficult target to hit. The disturbed canopy skidded along air currents hiking left and then right.

The maneuver seemed to work for no bullets punched through the ghostly pale bell. Nor was he personally struck.

As he continued his descent, Doc reached into a pocket, pulled out a tube, and unscrewed it. he dropped the lid (no longer needing it). Then he began dropping glass balls here-and-there. The thin-walled anesthetic bombs fractured upon impact with the ground releasing their insidious contents.

The stuff might not get every rifleman. But it was enough to thin out the herd.

A man collapsed here-and-there, his rifle dropping from his grip. Anesthetic slumber had overtaken him.

Other riflemen scattered. Not all were aware of what was transpiring on the ground. They were too fixated on the **Bronze Man** floating back to earth to notice their brethren succumbing to the mushrooming invisible gas clouds.

Doc carefully poured out the last anesthetic bomb into his waiting palm when the lucky shot (or rather, the unlucky shot). For it was lucky for the rifleman who fired it. But not for the **bronze** giant who was its recipient.

A blind bullet struck the tube knowing it from Doc's fingers. But not before shattering the fragile glass sphere. This happed so fast that he did not quite comprehend what had transpired. His fingers stung and the tube was gone.

An interesting property of the anesthetic gas was that it was both colorless and odorless. When it struck down Doc Savage's foes, it was as if they succumbed to some stealthy sorcery.

Doc sometimes considered adding a dye or a chemical odor to the gas to increase the terror that it might inflict upon evildoers. But he ultimately decided against this. Sometimes he was forced to use upon people who were not necessarily bad and he did not want the stuff to be confused with poison gas.

Another property was that it volatilized so rapidly that it usually turned harmless after a few short minutes. This enabled Doc and his aides to hold their breath against the stuff until it dissipated while their foes fell all around them.

These were wonderful properties. But this was a case where they backfired on the very man who devised them.

Doc had not realized the gas bomb had been broken until after he had unknowingly inhaled the first whiffs of the stuff.

In fact, he was oblivious to all consequences. A strange flicker of something whipped his metallic features. And for a fractional instant, his weird **trilling** piped out, rather startled.

His hand suddenly dropped to his side and his head fell forward, his chin coming to rest on his collarbone. His golden *eyes* closed shut. So swiftly had the stuff overcome him that the *Man of Bronze* was unconscious before he grasped his peril.

-----

Sagging in the parachute harness, Doc Savage completed his return to earth. Landing awkwardly, he folded up onto the ground while the parachute settled over him like a ghostly shroud.

A trio of riflemen emerged from the brush. They approached with caution, prepared to shoot if the *Bronze Man* stood up.

But he did not. Nor did the shrouded form move. Night breezes played at the silken bell as it rippled and curled uncontrollably.

A man muttered: "He ain't getting' up. Think he's dead?"

"I dunno. And I don't feel like bargin' in there and findin' out. *Doc Savage* is famous for playing possum."

So they hung back pointing their rifles at the dancing silk.

Soon enough, the man in the green *hood* stepped up with antique shotgun in hand.

"I think we got 'im, *Calamity*," one of the riflemen said. "He hasn't moved a blamed muscle."

The hooded one grunted. "Better make sure. Fire into the hump. Empty your rifles. If he's dying, that will finish him off. If he's already dead, a few more bullets won't hurt him none."

No one hesitated exactly although a few men swallowed hard and licked dry lips. They were cowboy enough to feel queasy about shooting an unarmed and helpless man.

"I've heard shootin' at that jasper is kinda like firin' into a brush pile," muttered one. "The lead may crack 'im up a little. But it don't change his shape none."

*Calamity* growled. "Get to it!"

**While Doc Savage lay helpless, they worked the levers of their Winchesters mechanically. One man even brought out a six-shooter and fired into the silk.**

The shapelessness of the billowing stuff made locating the body with certainty a trifle tricky. But they put enough bullets into the pile that all felt confident that they had penetrated Doc Savage's body several times.

Being smart cowboys and not wishing to waste precious ammunition, they finished unraveling their cartridges. Then they stopped. No one reloaded.

The masked man asked: "Who wants to make sure he's dead?"



"Oh, he's defunct all right. How can he not be?"

"He's Doc Savage! He's got more lives than a damn cat. Somebody make sure. And make it snappy!"

None of the killers appeared eager to execute the grisly task.

The wind-rippled parachute fabric commenced turning red. The color was quite distinct. It was a deep crimson, the exact color of **blood**.

"Look at that! He's only now started bleedin'!"

"Dead men don't bleed," intoned the masked man. "That means he's only wounded."

But the deep **crimson** kept on seeping, soaking the parachute fabric.

While this was encouraging, it also made for hesitation. Nobody was anxious to see what kind of red ruin the corpse of Doc Savage had become.

"Never mind," muttered the head gunman. "He's lost so much blood that it's just a matter of a few more minutes. We'll let him finish his bleeding and then bury him deep once the others get here."

Every man looked relieved when those words came.

Without another word, they set off to collect such riflemen as had succumbed to the powerful anesthetic gas.

They carried these fellows back to the ranch house where they were revived by redbone whiskey. They fell into riotous revelry as the night wore on.

## XXXII – Progress of a Sort

Pat Savage had plenty of time to think about matters in the steady driving which followed.

"By now," she was saying, "there can be no doubt that your cousin Kip is mixed up with these mule rustlers."

"Guess we should report all this to the new sheriff," Gordon Darn said unhappily.

Pat made a face that changed the entire topography of her tawny features. Turning back to town and enlisting the sheriff did not seem like a very smart idea to her.

"Too many complications," she told Gordon.

His mouth poised to form a syllable, the young man seemed about to object ....

Then his heart all-but-jumped out of his throat when there came a loud *report*. The sedan swayed and screamed its tires, once producing an ugly rubbery squeal.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "A blow-out!"

"Maybe not," said Pat hastily. "It might have been a gunshot."

In any event, the car was no good to them now. It was just worrying along on a wheel rim. Pat eased over to the shoulder and braked the machine. They sat in darkness as the *bronze*-haired girl had swiftly extinguished all lights as a precaution against snipers. No bullets came.

Looking around, Pat saw nothing suspicious.

"We should make a break for it," she suggested.

"If you think it's safe to do so," Gordon Darn said thickly.

"I don't think any such thing," assured Pat grimly. "But I'm not sitting here waiting for hot lead to rearrange my hair."

Darn swallowed as they popped open the doors. Together, they plunged into the roadside sagebrush. No one shot at them.

"Maybe it was a blow-out after all," Darn suggested hopefully.

"Doesn't matter," said Pat. "Follow me."

She struck out through the woods directly away from the roadway. Tall weeds in the timber were wet. They got *cold* very quickly. But they warmed up by running.

Unpleasant was the discovery that the woodland was surrounded by open fields. They would be excellent targets trying to cross them.



Pat and the young man skirted around the edge of the timber seeking a safe avenue for flight. They came to a creek which had steep banks. Its cool water was approximately waist-deep. They slid down one sheer bank ... crossed ... and clawed up the other side.

"Well," sputtered Darn blowing water off his lips, "we couldn't get any more wet than we already are."

Pat laughed merrily at his bedraggled garments.

"At least you got rid of all that roadside mud you collected on your person."

Ahead lay another road. An occasional car whizzed along it. It did not look promising. But then Pat noticed that the road was favored by trucks.

"I wonder which one of us is the most foolhardy," she grunted.

Gordon Darn regarded the golden-eyed girl quizzically.

"Never mind," said Pat. "Follow my lead. And try to keep up."

It would have been an all-night walk to the nearest habitation. Except that they were fortunate enough to catch a stock truck and crouch in back with a load of noisy sheep unbeknownst to the driver.

When they saw the lights of what appeared to be an eating establishment, they dropped off the back and moved in that direction.

-----

The roadhouse had a bright neon sign out front which said 'The Hot Spot'. The gravel parking lot was floodlighted. It was also crowded with automobiles. Music and the noise of people having fun came out of the place.

In the drizzling rain, Pat Savage and Gordon Darn studied the place with disapproval. But they decided it represented an opportunity to get out of the rain even if it was a dubious one. The roadhouse was likely to have a pay telephone. That was what they needed the most.

"I don't like this," grumbled Darn.

He had not enjoyed the long skin-soaking march which had preceded the finding of the roadhouse. He knew of the place.

"By reputation only," he hastened to say. "It tends to attract bad hombres."

Pat considered this statement. She blew rainwater off her delectable lips. A flash of skyfire illuminated her pretty features. Distant detonation told that the storm was moving off.

"If we found this joint," she mused, "then those footloose crooks might have also."

Gordon shuddered. "If we barge in, we'll be spotted for sure. They won't be happy about that wreck of a coupe or the sedan we stole."

"Let's see if we can find an unlocked car," Pat suggested.

"Brrr! I'm not sure I like that idea any better."

"Feel free to offer your own suggestions," said Pat squaring her jaw with determination.

They finally found one. A canary-yellow roadster.

Pat said: "You stick here. I'd hate to steal another car. But we may need it for a quick getaway."

Fully aware of the disreputable picture she offered, Pat noticed a side door of the roadhouse. She loitered there waiting for the orchestra to take up another found of dance music.

She was just deciding that they might pause all night when the music resumed. Furtively, she stumbled into the place and crept around cautiously. The joint (that was the best descriptive word for the sordid establishment) was hazy with tobacco smoke. The atmosphere was so thick that Pat became less concerned about being spotted.

She found a man who looked as if he worked there and braced him.

"Have you a pay telephone?" she asked.

"Sure, toots," said the other.

He pointed toward a booth in a back corner of the noisy place.

Pat looked around and didn't like what she saw. Couples were dancing. They looked rough. Even the women. Liquor flowed freely.

"Lord love a goose!" she murmured to herself. "This place looks like an owlhoot's conception of Valhalla."

Pat failed to spot Bobcat Face or his confederate Flat Nose. But that did not mean that they were not concealed by the noisy throng.

A slightly inebriated individual bumped into her. He lifted his hat straight off his head with one hand.

"Say, **Bronze** and Beautiful!"

"Excuse me, please," said Pat frostily.

"Join me at my table, sister," he exclaimed mushily.

"I am not your sister," sniffed Pat indignantly.



She expertly weaved around him and threw herself into the telephone booth. She pulled the door shut and began feeding nickels into the slot.

First, she asked the local operator to connect her to the Circle Bolt Ranch. It was likely that Long Tom had returned from his visit to the Lynx Eyes spread.

The insistent buzzing of the line went on and on. Finally, the operator said impatiently: *"No one is answering, Miss."*

"Very well," said Pat. "Thank you for trying."

She against considered calling the Bison sheriff but decided against it. She'd had enough brushes with the Law although she still yearned to recover her grandfather's frontier six-shooter.

"Time enough for that later," she said stepping out of the telephone booth.

XX

She tried to get outside but was encircled by a tough-looking group of **African-American** men and women.

"Hello, **White Bitch**," one of the man spat.

"**White Whore** is more like it, I bet," said a woman.

That brought a chorus of cat-calls from the group.

"That right, baby? You a **whore**? You like lots of dicks?"

"Leave me alone!" threatened Pat.

"You need to be taught some respect, **Slut!**"







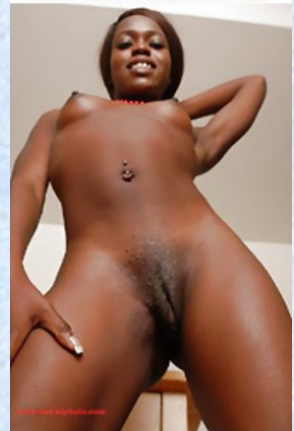
Pat screeched and cursed as wet slobbery kisses planted on her neon-pink **lips**. She groaned as strong fingers pawed her **34-D** breasts and probed her tight dry pussy.







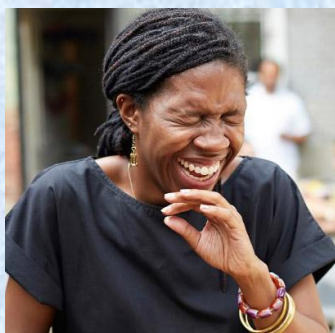
"Another white bitch gonna have some Black babies!"







Pat instinctively *screamed* when she felt the first glob of *impregnating* sperm.

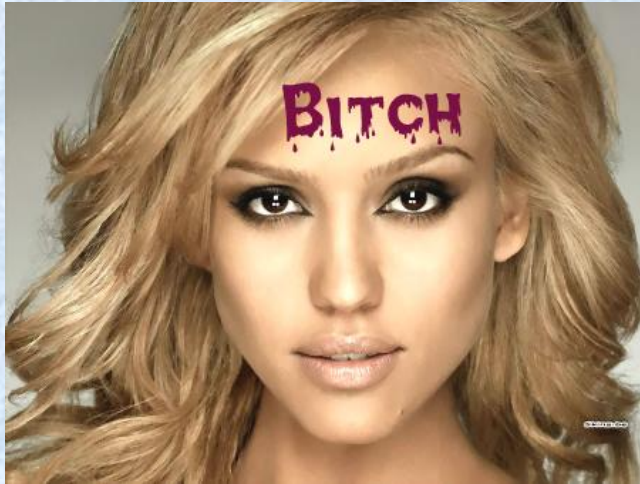


"On your knees, **Whore!**" a man yelled.

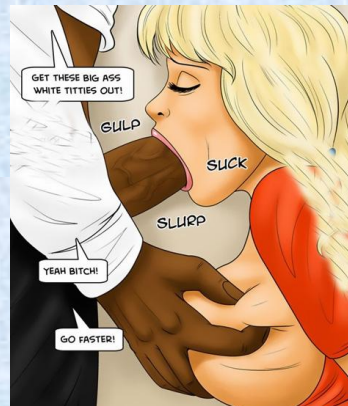
He pointed to his fat nasty black penis.

"This is your new master now. So show it proper respect. Start sucking, you goddamned white **Slut!**"



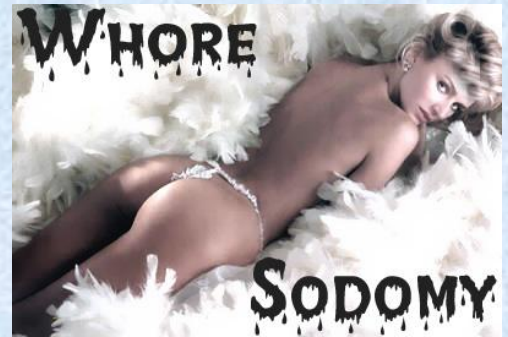


Pat coughed and gagged trying to breathe as many black **dicks** thrustled between her neon-pink **lips** and shot salty-tasting **semen** down her throat.



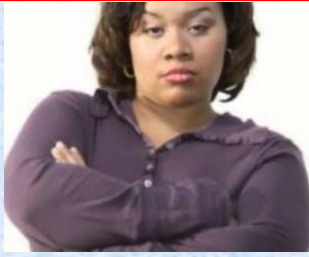


"Roll over on your tummy, **Bitch!**" the woman commanded. "They want your ASS!"



Pat was writhing on the floor. Her vagina was *oozing* out black *sperm* and her rectum was a little **bloody**.





"Damn you! Damn all of you!" she cried. "You filthy black bastards!"

"O-h-hhhh," mocked the black woman. "What a tongue you have, **Bitch**. It seems that you still haven't learned your place in today's world. Well we can fix that once and for all. Where's that damn dog?"

Pat was horrified. This happened to her before. She couldn't believe it would ever happen to her again. But she could see the beast's **penis** getting hard already.



"You are nothing but a dog to us, white **whore**," the woman spat. "So it's only naturally that you be bred by a real **dog**, don't you think!"





Pat screamed when the dog's **penis** plunged into her cunt. Unlike a human's, it was steel-hard rigid. It immediately started squirting some pre-cum **fluid** (again, unlike a human male) intended to lubricate her. But the **thrusting** still hurt her greatly.

"Oooohhh. C'mon, fight it, baby," cooed the black woman. "You don't want to get **pregnant** do you? You don't want to have a bellyful of puppies, do you? ... You filthy goddamn **Whore**! You'll fuck anything, won't you?"

"Damn ... you ... *Ugh! Ugh! Ow-w-w-w!!*" Pat grunted and squealed.

The base of the dog's cock formed a huge **"knot"**. It also entered the **bronze**-haired woman's womb. Its purpose was to ensure that the penis would stay in until it fully emptied all of its **sperm**.



The beast suddenly stiffened and began *whining*. Neither it nor its human **bitch** moved. The others knew what was happening. The sophisticated white **whore** was being **impregnated**!



"Ain't that a beautiful sight?" said the black woman.

The others nodded evilly.





[Impregnated Whore]

Rejoining Gordon Darn outside, she announced: "I had no special luck."

Darn looked uncomfortably blank of expression.

"Kindly explain what that means, please," he asked nervously.

"It means," returned Pat seriously, "that we're going to have to become car thieves again."

"You say that like you have had vast experience," accused Darn.

"More than I care to tell," said Pat dropping behind the wheel of the unlock ked canary-colored roadster.

Gordon Darn hesitated. Pat ducked her head in order to catch his eye.

"Are you coming? Or are you just going to continue to impersonate a wet hen?"

Wordlessly, he flung himself into the passenger seat slamming the door sharply. The entire automobile shook with the gesture.

Pat took out a nail file and ducked her head under the dashboard. She fiddled with the wiring a bit. Unexpectedly the motor grumbled into life.

Grinning mischievously, the golden-eyed girl told her companion: "Monk Mayfair showed me how to jimmy the wiring to make any car start." [\[read #206 - "Six Scarlet Scorpions"\]](#)

"So you weren't fooling when you said that you were no stranger to trouble," Gordon Darn said in an impressed tone.

"Trouble and I are old friends."

Pat put the machine into gear. The car eased out of the gavel lot like a creeping mountain lion.

"Guess this makes me your accomplice," Darn murmured uneasily.

"Don't let it go to your head," suggested Pat. "I'm dropping you off as soon as we hit town. I have much to do."

"Such as?"

"Such as claiming my plane. And my six-shooter if possible."

"Where is it at?" Darn asked curiously.

"Locked in the sheriff's desk."

"Oh."



Pat said archly: "You say that like you suddenly discovered that I'm notorious."

"Well, aren't you?"

Pat's grin was ornery.

"Only on my best days."

---

When they reached Bison, Pat steered for the sheriff's office until Gordon Darn pointed out the fact that she was driving a car that might have been reported stolen by this point.

Pulling over to the curb, Pat frowned. "That gun means a lot to me!"

The young man was seized by an idea.

"Why don't you let me get it?" he asked suddenly.

Pat regarded him with a skeptical eye. "A fraidy-cat like you?"

Gordon Darn looked injured in an innocent sort of way.

"I'd like to make it up to you for my earlier cowardice."

Pat considered ...

"Okay. Give it a whirl," she said crisply. "But if you get into trouble, don't come running in this direction. I have a lot to do. And handcuffs will only slow me down."

Gordon Darn grinned crookedly and said: "Just watch me."

Pat did.

She watched the young man disappear around the corner and realized that it would not be wise to be discovered sitting behind the steering wheel in a parked stolen car of such conspicuous coloring.

So she got out and went for a stroll doing her best to look nonchalant if not innocent. She came upon a corner newsboy hawking the evening paper.

The boy was crying: *"Ranchers irate over ransom demand! Mail plane crashes in freak storm that causes lake to evaporate! Who is Mr. Calamity?"*

"Let me have a paper, boy,": requested Pat handing him a nickel.

She took the sheet under the awning of a five-and-dime store where she could read without getting further moistened. The thunder and lightning had finally passed. But the drizzle continued relentlessly. It was a dismal curtain with which to ring down the day.

Pat read the article. Her golden **eyes** got a little wide.

The gist of it was that an unknown person signing himself '**Mr. Calamity**' had been sending ransom notes to ranchers throughout Campbell County and elsewhere. He demanded that they leave money in their mailboxes after midnight. Otherwise, he was going to make their water disappear as he had the lake near Devils Tower.

Glancing up at the rain, Pat clucked: "This **Calamity** character seems to have mighty poor timing. Either that or mother Nature wants to show him up."

Reading further along, Pat wondered how the fellow had gotten so many ransom notices distributed in such a short span of time. She also wondered how he was going to collect. It seemed the easiest thing to set a trap at a mailbox after midnight.

But on further consideration, the **bronze**-haired girl realized that dozens (if not scores) of mailboxes would need to be staked out. A most difficult task.

"Must be smarter than I first figured," she murmured to herself.

Pat read further keeping her eye on the stolen roadster in case she had to either claim or retreat from it.

-----

To her surprise, Gordon Darn popped around the corner. His fingers were stuffed into his coat pockets and his head hunched between his shoulders against the maddening drizzle.

Despite his physical misery, he seemed to have a smile on his dimpled face.

He spotted Pat and sidled up to her.

"Reach into my coat," he said.

"I beg your pardon," returned Pat.

"I collected your six-shooter. It's tucked into my coat. "Go ahead and harvest it."

Reluctantly, Pat did as instructed.

To her surprise and delight, one brown hand fished out the giant hogleg.

"How did you manage this feat of derring-do?"

Gordon Darn looked awkwardly self-conscious.

"I walked up to the Sheriff's office and found the door unlocked. He usually leaves it open so that folks can leave him notes. But he wasn't inside. So I rooted around until I found a set of keys and used them on the desk. This was the only antique six-gun."



"It's the only one I wanted," laughed Pat. "Gordon Darn, you have redeemed yourself in my eyes. But now I must bid you a reluctant *adieu*."

"Why is that? Have I not earned the right to ..."

"Right now, I intend to climb back behind the wheel of that stolen car and hightail it to the airport and reclaim my plane," explained Pat. "And I'm not going to allow man or moose or anything to get in my way. I suggest that you go back to your general store and count your lucky stars that you didn't collect a bullet tonight."

"I would still like to catch dinner with you sometime."

"Don't remind me of that on my empty stomach," grimaced Pat. "I'll take you up on that another night."

"Promise?" asked Gordon hopefully.

"Only if live," admitted Pat ruefully.

And with that, she jumped behind the wheel and took off without looking back.

## XXXIII – The Devil's Head

Less than an hour later, Pat landed in the spacious north meadow of the Circle Bolt Ranch.

She noted no sign of the autogiro or Doc Savage's big amphibian plane. Although disappointed, Pat had not truthfully expected to see either aircraft.

She landed beside Long Tom Roberts' silver ship so that any arriving aircraft had room to alight. Shutting down the power plant, she stepped out and made her way to the ranch house calling ahead of her in the Western fashion: "Howdy, the ranch!"

Other than the mournful lowing of Gloomy-the-cow and whinnying out in the horse pasture, no human voice responded.

Pat stepped into the ranch house and saw that it was unoccupied. Her attractive face frowned like a tarnished penny.

"I guess I'm back in exile until further notice," she murmured.

She went to her luggage and dug out 2 boxes of shells. Emptying the six-gun of mercy bullets, she began to reload. Her choices were unusual. She made every alternate bullet either a mercy bullet or a tear-gas shell. 2 chambers remained empty. She inserted an ordinary lead slug into one of these.

"For necessities," she told herself.

She closed up the revolver so that the vacant chamber lay under the hammer. It was an old Western custom taught to her by her father who was wise in the way of firearms. Leaving one chamber unloaded was a safeguard against accidental discharge.

Pat had removed the trigger from the weapon so that only by hammer-action could it be fired. This was another cowboy custom.

Satisfied that the weapon was in working order, she found her cartridge belt and filled the loops with fresh bullets. To her left, she inserted tear-gas. And to her right, mercy bullets. Into her pocket she placed several lead slugs.

"Never know when you're going to need them," she told herself.

Only then did the bronze-haired beauty fix herself a hearty meal. She devoured it with a distinctly unladylike relish.

The **Sun** was slipping behind the Bighorns when Long Tom Roberts rode up at last. The golden-eyed girl rushed out to greet him.

"Hello, you old electrophile. I was wondering when you'd turn up."



"Are you stealing words from Johnny?" demanded Long Tom.

He was grumpy after his nocturnal ride. Distances in Wyoming were formidable.

"Any news?" Pat asked eagerly.

"Dug up some clues."

"Then spill, my good fellow," said Pat jauntily.

Long Tom dismounted and led the horse into the stable.

"Several Lynx Eyes hands never came home last night. Sounds like they're part of the Quest gang. Or were, rather."

Pat kept to herself the news that most of the gang resided in the Bison morgue. She didn't wish to get sidetracked.



"So they were operating out of the Lynx Eyes spread?"

Some of them anyway," allowed Long Tom.

Noticing a grimness of feature along with the subdued tone of his voice, Pat inquired:

"Have you been spending too much time around that gloomy human derrick Renny Renwick? You look positive bereaved."

Long Tom <winced>. "I found Hud Crater."

"His body, you mean?"

The puny Electrical Wizard clearly did not want to go into details because all he said was:

"Somebody buried him by the side of the road west of Pumpkin Buttes. But that wasn't all they buried."

Long Tom was undoing the straps of one saddle bag. Once he had the flap up, he warned:

"You might want to turn your head."

"On the other hand," said Pat gamely, "I might want to stare at it with all my might. So give."

Shrugging, Long Tom extracted a **human head** pulling it out by its carroty **hair**.

He said: "I need to find a sack for this. Doc will want to look it over."

Cringing, Pat emitted a revolted "Ugh!" and turned away.

"Does that ... that head go with the body that parachuted down this morning? She asked after regaining her composure.

"That's my thought," said Long Tom. "And it's got red **hair**. Just like **Mr. Calamity**. I checked one eyeball. **Green** as a lizard."

"So **Mr. Calamity** is dead?"

"Sure looks like it.

-----

Pat frowned, her tawny forehead wrinkling. She took her chin between fingers and thumb and worried it contemplatively.

"It that's so," she wondered, "then who robbed that bank?"

Long Tom <blinked>. "What bank are you talking about?"

"The one over in Casper. Masked robbers barged in wielding shotguns. They blew a man clear into the sky. Another was plastered to the ceiling. So he lived. I heard about it over the radio."

Long Tom went paler than his usual pallor.

"This development can only mean one thing. That rustler Quest got hold of that shotgun.

Pat nodded. "He must have culled together a new gang. Because someone's been sending messages to local ranchers threatening their water. That scheme didn't pan out. So they moved up to banks. ... We have to tell Doc pronto! He'll want to get on the trail of Quest."

"Knowing Doc, he probably already is," said Long Tom. "But he'll want to know one other thing."

"And what is that?" asked Pat.

"The foreman of the Lynx Eyes outfit is a bird named Buck Quane. He's one of the nighthawks who didn't come home last night."



Pat's eyebrows knit together. Her golden **eyes** got a little gleam in them.

"Are you thinking that Buck Quane might be 'Quest'?"

"In my pocket is a gunnysack that I found concealed in a Lynx Eyes sage cutter," said Long Tom. "It's got eyeholes cut into it. That means Quest hangs out there."

"It sure means something," agreed Pat.

Long Tom was placing the dirt-caked head in a burlap sack which he tied up tight. Then he started toward the ranch house. For some reason, the head in the sack made Pat shudder in a way that the exposed cranium had not.

"If Buck Quane is 'Quest', then who was **'Mr. Calamity'**?"

"That's another one for Doc Savage to figure out," muttered Long Tom. "This has be one of the most distressing mysteries I ever barged into."

Pat brightened saying: "Actually, it's got my blood up."

"Good for you," said Long Tom sourly. "You can solve it then. I've had a belly full of death and destruction."

"We can jump into our planes and hunt up Doc," Pat suggested hopefully.

"Doc warned you to stay put. Besides, we don't know where he is. Except that it's a safe bet he's on the trail of those bank robbers by now. The best thing we could do is wait for the phone to ring or for someone to come back. Me, I'm going to get some shuteye. ... By the way, how's Laramie doing?"

Pat frowned. "Oh, I neglected to tell you. One of his wounds opened up. I had to fly him into Bison. The old boy's in the hospital. But he's on the mend."

"As long as you stayed out of trouble, Doc won't object."

Pat hesitated ...

"I don't remember saying that I stayed out of trouble ..."

Long Tom halted in his tracks. He turned. He had not slept all night. Only now did he recall spotting Pat's plane winging toward Bison.

"Now you give," he growled.

Pat offered a slightly sheepish smile.

"Promise you won't tell Doc about any of my adventures?"

"Nothing doing!" snapped Long Tom. "What kind of disagreeable stew did you set to boiling this time?"

"Oh, nothing warranting capital punishment. I got kidnapped. But I wrecked the kidnap car. Then I stole another car. Two, actually. Then I got back my six-shooter from the sheriff."



"Any holes in the sheriff?"

"None that I put there," allowed Pat. "But I have a line on some desperadoes still on the loose. One in particular who goes by the name of Kip Farr. He operates out of the Bison general store and may be connected to the Quest gang. Or whatever remains of those mule-nappers."

Long Tom looked perplexed.

"If he's still alive, maybe he's Quest himself."

"How can Farr be Quest if, as you suspect, Buck Quane is the head rustler?"

"Search me," admitted the lean Electrical Genius. "If we put our heads together, maybe we can make sense of this range hash. You can fill me in over supper."

"I've already eaten," returned Pat crisply. "You'll have to settle for leftovers."

Long Tom made a disgusted sound deep in his throat.

"That Laramie would have to get himself all shot up! He wasn't much in a gunfight. But he sure knew how to cook."



## XXXIV – Sunken Springs

Renny Renwick would not have found what they were looking for had it not been for the shepherd.

The hulking engineer had attempted to plot a trajectory using Fan Coral Island in the South Seas as a starting point and Great Salt Lake as a secondary one. Since Utah adjoined Wyoming, connecting these 2 spots and drawing a line continuing through the Bighorn Mountains should have narrowed the search.

But it did not.

Renny complained at one point: "Wyoming is a big bowl of emptiness."

Finding the shepherd in question took all of a day and into the late summer dusk. Doc Savage had provided the shepherd's name. It was Clem Spears.

This was the fellow who while guarding his flock had spied something roaring through the sky. Something that crashed to earth and then bounced back up again continuing on in an easterly direction. This event had taken place a few years back.

The shepherd was out with his flock when Johnny and Renny caught up with him. Spears had a good memory.

"I recollect it perfectly," he told them. "It was a-roaring like a flock of freight trains. It flew overhead and my sheep and I went flying everywhere. It was like we were tenpins. But there weren't no bowling ball unless you count that thing in the sky."

"Where did this bolide impact?" inquired Johnny.

"The which?"

Big-**fisted** Renny rumbled: "he means where did the meteor land?"

"Oh. You mean where did it bounce because that's what it did. It hit hard and shot right up again like it was made out of rubber."

"Right."

The shepherd studied the horizon and frowned.

"I couldn't tell back then. But when that private detective sent by Doc Savage started asking me questions and I couldn't answer right, I got curious. So I got to investigating later on."

"What did you find?" demanded Renny, his hollow voice thick with excitement.

"I found a place where the ground was stove in. Like a fist had rammed down out of the sky. A giant fist. Bigger than your mitts. See?"

"We get you," said Renny. "Go on."

The shepherd was still pointing. Far white sheep were milling about. It was a placid scene although the gyroplane stood out rather startlingly against the sinking red **Sun**.

"It's about halfway between Pumpkin Buttes and Devils Tower in the Belle Fourche badlands. A forbidding spot known as Sunken Springs. It's near the ghost town of Yarber Gulch. You'll know Sunken Springs because of the coal fires. They burn all the time. Stinks of fire and brimstone. You can't miss it. And you'll never forget the smell once you inhale a bracing whiff."

"Thanks," thumped Renny.

"Salutations," added Johnny as they reclaimed their gyroplane.

The gyro took off. Its rotary wing beat in the direction that the shepherd had indicated. Johnny clutched the complicated controls in his impossibly thin fingers.

As they passed low over the rugged terrain, Renny was saying:

"No wonder Doc Savage's private Sherlocks didn't get anywhere. This place is as barren as the dark side of the Moon."

"The Lunar orb has no constant dark side," corrected Johnny. "For it rotates I the night sky. It is a childish myth to speak of a hemisphere that is never visible from the Earth."

"If you say so, professor," grunted Renny.

Johnny Littlejohn, who was as much a geologist as an archaeologist, resumed his professional surveying of his surroundings. While the big engineer Renny Renwick found Wyoming on the dismal side, the variety of natural wonders excited Johnny's rock-loving soul. Before long, he was expounding in his most professorial manner on the subject.

"These brown rocks scattered about are lava clinkers. But there are no active volcanos in this portion of the state. All are dormant. Now the western portion of Wyoming is another matter entirely. The Yellowstone area with its superhot geysers is a cauldron of pyroclastic phantasmagoria ..."

Renny pretended to listen for a bit ... then yawned prodigiously. The noise thus generated sounded like a ram's horn being blow vigorously. Johnny got the unsubtle hint and fell silent.

Evening was coming on and they started to worry about fuel. It would do little good to set down in the correct spot and then not be able to take off again.

"Maybe we should turn back for the night," suggested Renny dolefully.

"Patience is the poor man's gold," said Johnny using little words because the big-fisted engineer had more than once threatened to knock his block if he didn't edit the worst polysyllabic enunciations out of his speech.



Being a world-renowned civil engineer, Renny Renwick was well educated. But Johnny Littlejohn's verbal jawbreakers tired him out every time he tried to translate or pick them apart.

---

Darkness had smothered northeastern Wyoming when the smoldering **red glow** caught their attention. Johnny leveled a forefinger like a skeleton's digit slightly improved by a thin coat of hide.

"Lo!"

Renny squinted. "Holy cow! It looks like the earth opened up and **Hell** itself is bubbling up from far below!"

"Tartarus was never so fearful," commented Johnny.

He picked up a device from the cabin floor and switched it 'on'. The thing was a detector of invisible rays. It was particularly sensitive to what were known as "cosmic" rays.

"That the dingus?" asked Renny.

"It is," said Johnny. "It proved handy when we first encountered *Repel*."

Minutes later, the boxy thing emitted a *whine* like an injured dog.

Johnny jockeyed the gyro about in the sky which caused the mechanical *whining* to become shrill.

"That she blows!" bellowed Renny.

Both men began scouring the ground with their eyes seeking a safe place to land. But between the **burning** fissure and the darkness beyond it, no safe place presented itself.

And it was just as well.

---

For a bullet snapped past the nose prop while Renny was hanging his head out the open door.

It was a foolhardy thing to do. But the hulking engineer was accustomed to heights inasmuch as he walked the steel girders of uncompleted skyscrapers as casually as most men navigated garden paths.

He boomed "Holy cow!"

He clapped the cockpit door closed.

Another bullet arrived. This one bounced off harmlessly because the gyroplane hull was armored.

But the spinning propellers were not.

Renny bawled: "Take us out of here!"

Johnny lifted the control yoke. The gyroplane climbed straight up and then canted, beating away like a frightened buzzard.

Proving himself to be very sharp-eyed, Johnny spied the rifleman on the ground.

"There are 2 assailants," he told Renny. "One is armed with a rifle."

"They're guarding something all right," grunted the long-faced engineer. "And I'll bet it's not beef, mules, or horseflesh."

Johnny had been looking at the instrument seated on his lap.

"There are quite a few hotspots around here. That means **pitchblende** or **radium** ore."

"Maybe they're miners staking a claim," suggested Renny.

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"But they were awfully quick to shoot. What do you say we beat it to the nearest town and rent some horses?"

Johnny was slow to reply.

"I for one am not eager to pursue feral goslings. That's 'wild geese' to you."

Renny returned: "This is about the place where that chunk of **Repel** slammed down to earth. We can't cover ground as fast as we can by air. But we can investigate more thoroughly by horseback."

Johnny considered.

"It is not beyond the realm of possibility that whoever discovered pieces of **Repel** out here in the hills might have placed sentinels to watch over the deposit."

"Now," rumbled Renny, "you're talking my language."



## XXXV – The Unstoppable Force

Renny Renwick and Johnny Littlejohn had some ill luck with the gyroplane.

As matters developed, the bad luck ultimately turned in their favor. But at first it was a decidedly troublesome development.

The beating gyro was running low on fuel. They knew that. In their estimation, enough remained in the tanks to reach the nearest settlement. So they were not overly concerned.

So it was distressing in the extreme when the gyroplane power plant started missing and the forward propeller cut out.

In a conventional aircraft, this could have been catastrophic inasmuch as they were over a desolate portion of Wyoming in the middle of the night. A safe landing would have been beyond the ability of most pilots under such treacherous circumstances. But the gyroplane was designed to land without power.

Once the propeller cut out, Renny disengaged the spinning rotor wing rumbling:

"Down we go."

No longer under power, the windmill blades continued turning freely acting as a whirling parachute and retarding their unpowered descent in the fashion of the early autogyros. The gyroplane came in at a slanting angle. Renny used his formidable strength to guide it toward open pasture under the whirligig craft's powerful hull lights.

The landing was surprisingly gentle.

Once settled on the ground, Renny got on the radio saying:

"Better let the others know where we are."

But neither the Circle Bolt Ranch nor the radio in Doc Savage's speed plane answered. The long-faced engineer finally gave up.

"Must be away from their sets," he muttered gloomily.

"Funny that the ranch doesn't answer," Johnny murmured. "Pat was supposed to stay put."

"And just when have you know Pat to obey orders?"

Johnny did not have to think about that.

"Never," he said.



They popped open the doors and produced spring-generator flashlights. They began searching the immediate surroundings. The roving lights attracted the attention of a local rancher who had wandered up to investigate the commotion on his back forty.

"Are you fellas okay?" he demanded.

The man had a flashlight of his own. Not as powerful as theirs. But he dashed its light in their faces and decided that they were all right.

Renny replied: "We ran out of gas. How far to the nearest town?"

"Half a day's ride."

Johnny made a strangled noise in his throat. He was swallowing his typical long words. He decided that they would be wasted on the rancher.

"Any chance we could rent a pair of horses?" Renny wondered aloud.

"To go to town? I don't know ..."

"Now that you mention it," said the big-fisted engineer, "we want to finish our explorations. He's a geologist and I'm a civil engineer. We were doing work in our respective lines. We wouldn't mind getting back at it. If we had good horses, that is."

The rancher worried his long jaw in his reluctance.

"You bein' strangers, I don't rightly know that I ought to."

Producing a billfold, Renny showed the hesitant fellow a pair of \$100 bills. The rancher's eyes popped until they seemed twice their natural size.

"Last time I saw a \$100 bill was never," he admitted, swallowing hard.

"Is it a deal, then?"

"For that kind of money, you can keep them crowbait nags. Except that I need them, " the rancher said fervently. "But you're welcome to use them as long as you want to."

Quicker than they imagined, Renny and Johnny were astride a pair of swaybacked ponies and pushing due north. They let their mounts ride straight away until they were out of hearing of the ranch



and then neck-reined left. A canyon enwrapped them with sheer walls of sandstone and a **blackness** which seemed almost solid.

There they donned their parachute packs which they had salvaged from the stricken gyroplane. With the cumbersome harnesses firmly in place, they felt immeasurably better about their immediate prospects for survival.

This impenetrable **darkness** encouraged silence. So neither man spoke. From time-to-time they used their flashlights. But sparingly. There was sufficient moonlight to get by.

They continued up the canyon. It pinched out in rugged breaks. These were marked by unnerving sandstone pinnacles and pencil buttes. Tottering hoodoos abounded. Wind and water had eroded everything giving the landscape a *haunted* forlorn aspect.

This forbidding expanse was Sunken Springs. No water seemed to percolate in it. It was as dry as an antelope skeleton left out in the elements.

Surveying the spot, Johnny commented: "As difficult as it is to envision, this area was once the bottom of a prehistoric sea."

"The Moon's crust must look something like this," Renny grunted.

Johnny studied the fantastic surroundings.

"If Doc Savage ever invented a rocket ship, I want to be the first geologist to study the lunar landscape.

"Be careful what you wish for," reminded Renny.

For all of an hour, they cantered along.

Then one of the horses began throwing its head and snorting uneasily. A *sulfurous* reek came into the air. It was vague at first.

Then it became stronger rapidly.

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The pair topped a hogback. A weird glow lighted the slope before them.

Jagged red **cracks** rent the range. From these curled tendrils of bilious smoke.

The *sulfurous* stench was now almost overpowering. It was as though the ground had cracked open to display a sample of the fire-and-brimstone **Hell** contained in its innards.

Both Johnny and Renny carried chemical gas masks that served as filters. They clapped these over their mouths and nostrils. Breathing instantly became easier.

They wetted bandana handkerchiefs with water from their canteens. Pulling the coughing horses' muzzles around, they affixed them to cover pulsing nostrils. After that, the animals quieted down.

His geological interest piqued, Johnny Littlejohn pulled to a halt and dismounted. He sidled to the crack gingerly and craned his neck to look over the edge. The hot gash had a width of 5 feet-or-so and a depth of perhaps 30. The bottom was a mass of **scarlet** radiating terrific heat. A thick vein of coal was burning underground.

Despite his filter mask, the bony archaeologist coughed explosively from the odorous sulfur dioxide thrown off by the smoldering coal. It made his rapidly <blinking> eyes smart.

Renny was suddenly beside him. A severely frowning tower of bone and gristle. Some awe was in his eyes as he cast glances about. He knew about such phenomena. The coal had been burning underground thus for years, probably. Rain, snow, and cold did not extinguish it.

Lightning might have set the bituminous seam a-smolder. Or perhaps some Indian campfire or prairie blaze had initially ignited it. These burning coal fields were not unusual in northeastern Wyoming. They burned perpetually.

Renny collected some dried wood lying about. He coughed steadily while he tossed the bundle into the crack, careful to make them fall close together. They became glowing ashes almost instantly.

Retreating, he came to a small pile of weather-whitened sheep and calf bones. He tossed them into the super-heated crack atop the ashes of the wood. They also became crumbling ashes.

"Be too durn bad if someone were to fall in," he thumped.

"Indubitably," whispered Johnny. "Such fissures are intolerably **hot**. Yet in pioneer days, Indian tribes would camp by them in the winter using their constant heat to keep warm. They would fry sage hen and jackrabbit by spearing them with sticks and holding them over the open crack."

Renny grunted: "For once, I think I understood practically every word you just said."

Getting back on their horses, they continued on. Boulders loomed all about them. Great towering obdurate masses. Small stones and little bushes made their progress stumbling. Scrub pine branches whipped their faces. Coarse pointed needles menaced their eyes. The air was better here so they removed their filter masks.

After a time, they spied another **glow**. This one was small and fitful.

"campfire," breathed Johnny.

Renny nodded, his monster **hands** tightening on the reins.

After removing their makeshift moist bandana nose guards, they left the horses hoping ardently that they would not take it into their heads to voice a betraying nicker.



Creeping closer, they did not use their flashlights. Visibility was poor. They could hear voices. Low and hushed. But it was impossible to tell the direction whence they originated.

Both Johnny and Renny had their supermachine pistols out. Renny now holstered his. Climbing a needle-like spire of sandstone, he made a survey of the fantastic Badlands until he spotted his quarry.

Returning to level ground, Renny produced his supermachine pistol and used it to indicate the direction forward. Johnny followed walking gingerly.

They walked within 50 feet of 2 men crouching among the granite boulders and lava rocks keeping watch over their campfire. One man cradled a Winchester in his lap. The other had a six-gun snug in a cartridge-belt holster.

They were talking in low voices. Complaining, rather.

"I don't cotton to this stayin' awake all night," groused one. "I get up with the Sun and I go down with the Sun. Been that way my whole damn life."

"Knock it off, bud. We got to guard the stash until the Big Boss gets here."

"I know that. Don't think I don't. I've been savin' my pay for some time and she comes in slow dabs. I'm ready to cash in like a king."

"Don't worry. There's millions in this. The Boss has big ideas."

One man was smoking a cigarette. He blew out a long gust of smoke and tossed the butt into the campfire creating sparks. He searched the immediate vicinity with his eyes.

"Keep an eye peeled for rattlesnakes and I'll do likewise. I don't like them. And particularly sidewinders which come out of their sand holes at night crawling in all directions and still able to watch a given point. Some sidewinders can crawl forward, backward, port, and starboard and still keep lookin' at a man. I hate sidewinders. Hate 'em with a righteous fervor."

"Shut up!" snarled the other. "You're makin' me fidgety with your loose talk of rattlesnakes slitherin' all over Creation."

The 2 men fell into a long silence during which Johnny and Renny slipped closer undetected. When they stepped out into the firelight flicker, the quarrelsome pair practically jumped out of their skins.

"These are machine pistols," warned Renny. "They spit out slugs faster than you can whistle your favorite range tune."

The pair froze in mid-leap. The one with the Winchester didn't seem to know what to do. But the other one was trigger-happy. His hand flashed to his weapon.

With a dour glitter in his eye, Renny triggered the supermachine pistol. The compact weapon **barked** 3 times so swiftly that the reports blended into vicious rolling thunder. The man lost interest in his fast draw. He was knocked backward and stretched himself out. He was soon snoring.

Johnny directed the muzzle of his own weapon toward the rifleman.

"Expediency is imperative," he said.

The rifleman <blinked> twice. "Huh? Say again, mister?"

"What do you suppose he said?" Renny taunted.

The man let go of his Winchester reluctantly and stood up.

Johnny seized the rifle and jacked the cocking lever until no cartridges remained in the receiver.

Renny barked: "Name your boss!"

"I don't know what he's rightfully called. Calls himself '**Calamity**'."

"We've heard of him," said Renny nodding. "What's his game?"

"He's got a word beater of an idea. But he hasn't told us about it yet."

Noticing the man's accent, Renny observed: "You don't sound like a Wyoming waddy."

"I'm not any such article. I hail from Alliance, Nebraska. So did my buddy here. Is he dead?"

"You hear him snoring? Does he sound dead to you?"

"No, he don't. What kind of newfangled gun makes a man snore instead of kick the bucket?"

"Maybe it's a 'snore gun'," grunted Renny. "Just what are you guarding out here?"

"A pit. That's all."

"A mine?" asked Renny.

"I guess you could call it that. All I know is our orders are to guard the pit until calamity shows up."

"Ambulate," directed Johnny.

The dull-faced fellow looked blank.

Renny said: "Take us there."

Getting a good look at the rail-limbed archeologist-geologist, the cowboy from Nebraska remarked:

"You're tall and thin enough to pass for a walkin' hoodoo, you know that?"

Johnny glowered at him.

"This way," Renny urged.



With their supermachine pistols trained on his back, Johnny and Renny followed the fellow.

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The crater was large. Perhaps 60 feet across. It lay among the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains n terrain so rugged that it was difficult to make sense of it.

It had the qualities of a meteor crater. But it also looked as if might be a sinkhole. In the center lay a pit deeper than the surrounding depression. The crust around this was cracked, violently so. It was no alkali hole but something more disturbing.

The cowboy brought Renny and Johnny up to the lip of the fractured depression.

"I don't know what's down there," he said. "But whatever it be, it's very valuable."

Johnny took a silver dollar out of one pocket and gave it a flip. It went flying into the crater and landed somewhere. Johnny could not see where. But he had his flashlight out and its beam was searching. Eventually he found the silver dollar gleaming in plain sight and made a surprised grunt.

"What did you expect?" demanded Renny.

Johnny said: "I wanted to see if it jumped up into the sky."

"Well, it didn't. What does that tell you?"

"It tells me that the *Repel* deposit either leis very deep in the stratum or has lost some of its propellency."

"It's what?"

"Force. Propellency is another word for force."

Renny nodded ponderously. He turned to the cowboy who was standing with his hands held erect on either side of his downcast face.

"When's your boss due?"

The other shrugged. "Not sure. Tomorrow sometime. He gets here when he gets here. But I wouldn't stick around if I was you gents. He's got himself quite a gang. Men came from all over interested in his game."

"We're interested also," rumbled Renny. "Maybe we'll stick around until he shows up."

"*Calamity* won't like that much."

"He probably won't that at all. But that's just too bad. We're sticking."

The Nebraskan's rather dull face fell, his expression turning slack and lifeless.

"I guess," he said slowly, "I can kiss my share of the million dollars goodbye."

Johnny stared into the crater mutely. Aided by his flashlight, he was searching its broken expanse with intrigued scholarly eyes.

"What is buried deep in that," he said slowly using small words, "is worth many, many, many times more than one million dollars."

The cowboy's face quirked with sudden interest.

"Mist, you said that like you meant it."

Johnny sighed. "The element buried deep down there -- if it is still active -- could be used to power aircraft such as Mankind could only image. Motor-less wing-less vehicles. Possibly it could fuel interplanetary ships capable of visiting other worlds."

The Nebraskan looked to Renny and asked: "Is he loco?"

"You know what gravity is?" countered Renny.

"Not exactly. It keeps human feet planted on the ground, doesn't it?"

"That's one way of saying it. Deep in that pit is something that's the opposite of gravity."

The dullard didn't know what to make of that.

"But gravity ain't a thing, is it?"

Renny said: "No. It's a type of Natural force. Down in that hole is an element that gives off the opposite force."

"You mean what scientists call 'anti-gravity'?"

**"Repel,"** said Renny. "It's called **Repel.**"

The cowboy scratched his head. "I'm suddenly not followin' you."

Johnny explained. "A bar magnet will push away another bar magnet's opposite pole. One can feel the repelling phenomenon at work as if it were a tangible thing."

"That's been my experience with magnets," agreed the other.

**"Repel"** will push away anything and everything. Nothing can stand before it. It's the **irresistible force** that some scientists talk about. Against it, there is no such thing as an immovable object. It's unstoppable."

The Nebraskan scratched his head some more and decided that his understanding was decreasing, not increasing. He went subsequently quiet.



While he was preoccupied, Johnny broke out of his reverie. He turned and shot the man once.

Renny was so startled that he bellowed: "Holy cow! What got into you?"

Johnny raked elongated fingers through his full hair.

"We are presented with an interminable wait," advised the gangling geologist. "It is my desire to investigate this pit and I do not wish to be interrupted by anyone."

Renny shrugged. "I'll drag him over to the other one and make a nice quiet pile. Looks like we have a long night ahead of us.

Turning his attention back to the crater, Johnny Littlejohn did not act as if he felt the same way. He was staring into the pit the way that some men regard a thoroughbred stallion.

## XXXVI – Strange Sinkhole

At the crack of dawn, Renny Renwick took up the captured Winchester and went hunting.

A single *shot* was heard. He came loping back holding a jackrabbit by its long ears.

Using a knife, he dressed the dead animal and spited it on a branch. He held the skinned rabbit and roasted it over the *crack* in the earth that burned with disturbing vehemence.

"Want some?" he asked Johnny Littlejohn.

Johnny was just waking up. They had taken turns guarding the prisoners. Shaking his shaggy head, the gangling archaeologist-geologist declined breakfast and went to explore the great pit in the earth now that there was good light.

As he carefully walked around the circumference of the crater, Johnny paused from time-to-time to pick up gleaming shards of something. After a time, he found one that interested him.

"Eureka!" he exclaimed. "This is positively supermalagorgeous!"

Still holding his charred and smoking breakfast on the stick, Renny came bounding up.

"Holy cow! Did you strike gold?"

"Better than gold!"

Johnny appeared to be clutching something black in the bony basket of his hand. It resembled a diamond. If diamonds were *ebony*.

Renny frowned. "Looks kinda like anthracite."

"Obsidian."

Renny's frown deepened.

"Volcanic glass?" he snorted. "Obsidian is hardly worth anything."

"You will remember that when we were exploring the underwater base of the volcano on Fan Coral Island," Johnny said loftily, "we discovered a great rock that encased the original *Repel* element. The rock appeared to be composed of volcanic glass."

The big-fisted engineer grunted. "Funny, but I thought the *Repel* stuff was encased in a metallic stone that blocked it from acting on anything."

"Correct. But the stone appeared to have acquired an obsidian crust from its volcanic immersion. The substance was entirely sealed within except for a small crack in the stone from which the force was streaming. When dynamite was detonated to dislodge the extrusion, it cracked the casing and the



unleashed *Repel* force propelled the stone all the way to the United States from the South Seas. A distance of 5,000 miles!"

"That's right. We know from newspaper reports that the composite matter passed over the Great Salt Lake in Utah before landing here," said Renny. "And then bouncing away like a rubber ball to drop into the Lake of the Ozarks over in Missouri."

"Before that," interjected Johnny, "an excursion boat on the Great Salt Lake was buffeted by waves that were not produced by any wind. A disturbance undoubtedly generated when the jet of *Repel* force briefly pointed downward from the tumbling rock as it passed overhead."

The long-faced engineer had been picking at his barbecued rabbit as he spoke. Now he threw the remains away.

"Do you think this fragment of obsidian broke off when the hunk of *Repel* bounced?"

Johnny nodded sagely.

"Obsidian is not found in this part of Wyoming. It is a glass and the product of active volcanos. The outer *Repel* stone might have retained its obsidian coat in places. This is further proof that the Repel stone impacted the spot. Not that we required any such proof."

Johnny was again staring into the pit.

Renny rumbled: "What are you going to do? You've got a hungry look on your face."

Johnny was toying with his lapel monocle magnifier.

"I am going to investigate this pit," he stated firmly. "You will remember that the samples of *Repel* that we recovered eventually lost their force. It may be that the specimen left behind is still potent."

"That means that it's dangerous to venture into the pit."

"Unquestionably so. But my curiosity has gotten the better of me."

Frowning like a thundercloud, Renny started back.

"Let me get a rope off one of the horses. In case I have to lasso you if you start floating off."

It sounded like a jest. But it wasn't.

The big-fisted engineer returned with exactly that. A long length of hemp with which he swiftly fashioned a serviceable lariat.

By the time he returned to the pit's verge, Johnny was scrambling down. He paused every so often picking up pieces of detritus and applying his monocle magnifier to them.

At one juncture, he kicked something over. With comical results.

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The long-boned archaeologist executed an unexpected somersault. But he did not land on his feet. Nor on his head nor upon his back.

**He floated about with elongated arms and legs kicking wildly.** He let out a wordless screech of surprise.

That was when Renny cast the lariat and captured Johnny by one loose boot. Had it not been equipped with a spur, the maneuver might have failed.

Johnny had been floundering about in midair not very high off the ground as if the power acting upon him was undecided. His agitated kicking and arm windmilling caused him to drift toward the center of the pit. That was when he started to rise straight up.

Renny arrested his upward progress by hauling back on the rope.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny yelled out.

"You'll be super-stratospheric before you know it!" thundered Renny.

Giving the rope a two-handed yank, he pulled Johnny out of the zone of influence with the result that the long-worded geologist landed like a pile of human cordwood, fortunately not breaking anything.

"I guess there's no doubt anymore that potent Repel matter was driven deep into this crater," suggested Renny as he helped Johnny to his feet.

Johnny was spanking buff-colored dust off his clothes and doing his best to recover his dignity. He turned, scrutinized the pit, and said: "Not only is *Repel* present. But there is also something else."

"What's that?"

**"Pitchblende."**

Renny knew what **pitchblende** was.

"That stuff is kind of rare too, isn't it?"

"It is not the rarity that concerns me," pronounced Johnny. "Rather it is the significance of the Repel deposit and **pitchblende**."

"What do you mean?"

"The commingling of such unpredictable elements cannot be salutary. Indeed, I suspect they are dangerously problematic."

Renny made nervous fists with his monster hands. He gave his pants a defiant hitch.



"If it weren't for the fact that *Repel* loses its power after a while," he rumbled, "it would be the most dangerous weapon on Earth. Anyone who controlled enough of it could become Master of the World."

"Exactly," returned Johnny. "This deposit has not exhausted itself as it should have. And **Mr. Calamity** is on his way to claim more of it."

Renny carefully folded massive fingers until they made something over a quart of fist. He brought it up so that the other could study the horny much-scarred knuckles that sprang into view.

"Over our dead bodies," he pronounced gloomily.

Johnny turned to him. His bright eyes were curious.

"I take it that you agree with me that we dare not leave this pit and report our findings to Doc Savage lest **Mr. Calamity** show up in our absence."

"One of us might have to turn back," allowed Renny. "But let's give it a few hours before we draw straws. Are you finished poking around down there?"

Reluctantly, Johnny nodded his head.

"This particular Repel deposit does not evince signs of its customary awesome force. If I were again hurled skyward, I might not rise far enough so that my parachute would save me. One requires sufficient height for the canopy to fully open."

"That's my thinking too," rumbled Renny. "Let's leave the durn stuff alone until **Calamity** gets here."

Johnny eyed him dubiously.

"You mean Doc Savage, do you not?"

"Slip of the tongue," muttered Renny mournfully.

He searched the early morning sky with troubled eyes.

"Wish I knew where Doc was right about now."

"Ditto," echoed Johnny with equally clouded eyes.

## XXXVII – Jerico Hoan

They put off burying Doc Savage until dawn burned in the eastern sky with a **scarlet** smoldering.

The men who were assembled at the old E-Out-of-Hell ghost ranch did not appear to be faint-hearted individuals. Far from it.

They were tough. They talked tough and it wasn't the artificial toughness of a Hollywood gangster picture. It was the genuine article.

The **Leader** wore his green silk **hood** throughout the evening as his assembled men drank redeye and smoked and told grisly tales of their past doings. He finally put a halt to the festivities by raising his hands. The sleeve ends of his flannel shirt were decorated by hand-tooled leather cuffs that looked expensive.

"We need to push out of this dump," he announced.

"Then let's roll!" barked a man.

Another skinned his revolver from a well-worn holster thonged low. He lifted it ceilingward and began popping holes in the roof. There was not much to the roof. No plaster. It was just cantilevered board. Dust and grit rained down along with a single mouse that had been jarred loose from the rafters.

The trigger-happy one took aim at the mouse and turned it into a red **smear** with a single well-placed bullet. This brought a roar of approval from the owlhoot assemblage.

While holstering his smoking six-gun, he boasted: "I once shot both eyes out of a man with a single slug. I sent a bullet crashing into one side his skull and it came out the other leaving 2 cavities in his eye sockets. He could've gone trick-or-treatin' without a mask. Except he was dead."

Somewhat lubricated by beer, another proclaimed: "I bisected a jasper's breastbone with a single .45 slug."

"Who hasn't done that a time-or-two?" sneered the mouse killer.

"Well, the ol' slug that split his breastbone also drove a segment out of his backbone. You could see right through him if you wanted to."

The hilarity that followed was like something out of a ghoul's carnival.

When it settled down, the sound of a horse approaching caused everyone to go quiet.

"See who that is," directed the **green**-hooded man.

2 men went for the door. Another sidled up to the broken window, his revolver lifted.



An approaching rider was skylined by the rising solar orb. There was not much more than a sliver of Sun. He was basically a big block of anthracite astride a horse.

The gunman at the window turned to his boss.

"Are we expectin' another party?"

The hard eyes behind the green **hood** swiveled about.

"I put out the word for any gunhand who wanted to join up with out outfit where to find us. Could be a straggler."

There was a solitary lit lantern. Someone picked this up and carried it out. 2 others followed. They kept their big revolvers handy.

One shouted out: "What's the password, stranger/"

A hearty voice resounded: *"I haven't heard that there was a password. No one told me about any password."*

"That's because there ain't any password. But if you tried to bluff us with one, we would've perforated you from one direction and ventilated you from the other."

The **green**-masked Leader stepped out then and demanded:

"What's your name, big man?"

"Jerico. Jerico Hoan from up Montana way. In Bozeman where I was brought up, they hung a nickname on me. Folks called me 'Big Sky'. Heard you're lookin' to take on extra hands."

The big man pulled to a halt and dismounted. He stood almost as tall as his mount had the horse been rearing. It was a dark-faced appaloosa. The animal looked fatigued as if from a long journey.

A gunhand said admiringly: "You must've been raised on bison meat, feller. To achieve so prodigious a mass of **muscles**, I mean."

The big man chuckled appreciatively.

"Bison, elk, and moose. I ate me an entire black bear one weekend. But I was extra hungry that time."

He stepped into the warm glow of the lantern. Not just a few of the hardened gunmen gasped.

For the new arrival was best described as a Goliath. A man-monster. His brawny shoulders, torso, arms, and hands were huge and muscular. But it was his head that captured everyone's attention.

Plastered to his scalp was a black mop that looked as if it had been rearranged with axle grease. His features were dark. But that did not seem to be the natural hue of his hide. This last point was debatable, however.

His complexion had a yellowish tinge that did not look like a mixture of trail grime and sweat. Sullen eyes were intensely black. There was no detectable difference between pupil and iris. His nose was slightly flat as if it had taken more than one direct blow. The mouth was a hard-edged rip in his substantial jaw.

He wore no shirt. He was bare from the waist up. His trousers were made of some thick material and held up by a belt whose buckle gleamed like gold. But it was probably only polished brass. His exposed **muscles** were something to make other men feel inferior.

The **Leader** asked laconically: "Are y good with a shootin' iron?"

The big man shook his head. "Dunno. I never carried one."

The **emerald**-hooded one grated out: "If you're not handy with a gun, stranger, then what are you handy with? We need experienced hands to do the kind of work we aim on doing."

"Dirty work. If you ain't got the trend of things," added a cowboy.

This comment garnered several guffaws. Someone emitted a war whoop as if about to do violence.

"I can take any man who comes at me," said Jerico Hoan in an amiable tone. He flashed a mouthful of snagged teeth almost as yellow as his hairless bare chest.

And to demonstrate this, he noisily cracked his knuckles. First with one hand and then the other. His arm **muscles** bunched like moving animals under his dark yellowish hide.

The gentleman in the green **hood** pointed to the largest man in his outfit and said:

"Start with him."

The indicated individual could not wait to be started on. Instead, he went charging toward Jerico Hoan. Closing in, he reached for one of Hoan's wrists. But by some miracle, he missed.

Registering mild surprise, Jerico Hoan took hold of the attacker's clutching hand and from his sleeve removed a young rabbit.

Astonishment registered upon the gunmen's features. *There came a pop-eyed silence ...* then a roar of **laughter** went up. The would-be attacker's mouth fell open.

Jerico Hoan immediately popped the little rabbit into the man's mouth. The mouth shut hastily. Patting the man with his hands, Hoan chased the rabbit down through the fellow's clothing and took it out of his left trouser leg.

*There were gales of mirth now!*

The rabbit continued to do impossible things for hulking Jerico Hoan. It vanished ... appeared from the man's back pocket ... vanished again ... and proved to be under a clump of cactus nearby. Possibly a coincidence. But shortly afterward the rabbit turned into a clump of cactus which did amazing things.



One of the cowboys said drunkenly: "I thought you two were going to tussle."

"We getting' around to it," said Jerico Hoan good-naturedly.

This casual comment enraged the humiliated cowboy. Cursing, he unleathered a big six-gun and leveled it at the other. The hammer rocked back. But it never fell.

Although he had stood several feet away, Hoan seemed merely to reach out easily and clamp a gigantic hand upon the other's horny-knuckled fingers and the butt of the gun. The fall of the hammer was promptly halted.

He tried to free his weapon ... failed entirely ... then stared down as though half convinced his hand was caught in a **bear trap**. The six-shooter came out of his fist as if it were a stick of striped candy being pried from a child's feeble fingers.

The cowboy looked Jerico Hoan up and down. What he saw didn't seem to sit well in his stomach. He became slightly green around the lower edge of his lantern jaw. He was unable to keep the AWE out of his eyes. The big yellow-skinned man-mountain seemingly had not exerted himself in the slightest. But his gunhand felt as if a horse had stepped on it.

His gaze fell to the hand which the other had taken hold of. It was pale as though all the blood had been squeezed out. He wiggled the fingers as if fearful they wouldn't function.

"Stand plumb gentle," said Jerico Hoan breaking open the action and shaking 5 cartridges out of the cylinder.

One-by-one using only finger strength, he squeezed the brass tubes and popped the leaden slugs loose. They dropped to the dirt, useless. The giant threw the weapon into a clump of sagebrush.

More laughter came. It had a different quality now.

"You gonna take that kinda gruff off a no-gun range bum, Butch?" one spectator jeered.

Against his better judgment, the gunman named 'Butch' made another pass at Jerico. The latter <slapped> him once. Butch went flying.

Snarling, he bounced back onto his feet and tried to butt Hoan's midriff with his head.

The tricky Goliath grabbed hold of the head with both hands. Then he did something remarkable.

Twisting about, he flipped the hapless fellow around in a helpless half-circle. Squawking, he careened wildly and yet landed perfectly on Hoan's saddle.

The horse reared and kicked. The confused gunman clung to its thrashing neck for dear life.

Striding over, the lumbering Goliath gentled the horse and helped the other man out of the saddle. He did it by grasping the man by his belt buckle and literally plucking him out of the saddle. He casually deposited him on the same clump of cactus that had previously been a rabbit.

Contact with the thorny plant caused the man to heave up, screech, and go running off into the darkness.

"That was quite a performance," said the **Leader**.

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Jerico Hoan inclined his head politely and asked:

"Who might you be, Mr. Green Sack?"

"Call me **Calamity**."

"Okay, I will. So are you hiring or not?"

"Sure. We're heading out to do a job up in in Gillette. Ever been there, Big Sky?"

"Can't say that I have. But I'm game. If we're starting, let's start."

**Calamity** said: "Not so fast. We have to finish up something. It won't take long. In fact, you happened along at the right time. We're going to need your strong back to get it done."

Jerico Hoan nodded: "To get what done?"

"Dirty work. We got a corpse that needs burying."

"I've done that before. Anybody special?"

"Not anymore," laughed **Calamity**. "But you might have heard of the fellow. He used to be a big noise here-and-there."

"What's the unfortunate fellow's name?"

"**Doc Savage**."

**Calamity** and the others watched Jerico Hoan closely noting his response. The black eyes <blinked> slowly 3 times and his misshapen lips twitched a time-or-two. He made one fist and then the other. Abruptly, he gave his dungaree pants a pitch.

"I heard he was almost as big as me. So it was good that I came along when I did."

"Fine," said **Calamity**.

He pointed to the south.

"He's out there under a parachute that didn't help very much. Just bundle him up in it and bury him deep.



Someone brought up a rusty old spade and handed it to Jerico Hoan. The thing looked like a spoon in his massive hands.

"Any of you boys going to help?"

"We'd only get in your way," said Calamity. "Think of this as your initiation, Big Sky."

"In that case," advised Jerico Hoan putting the shovel over one shoulder as if it were a rifle and then turning on his heel, "consider me initiated into the club."

The human hulk strode off into the night. He soon disappeared from sight.

Calamity turned to the man who had produced the shovel with which to bury the body of Doc Savage. The latter was the one that the giant Jerico had manhandled so easily. The cowboy named 'Butch'. He stripped off the calfskin gloves he had been wearing and grinned evilly.

"I hope those gloves mean what I think they do," Calamity rasped.

The other's grin was like a skeletal slash of teeth.

"His fingerprints will be the only ones anybody finds on that shovel," Butch said flatly.

Calamity nodded.

"That means if they ever find Savage's grave," he stated, "Jerico Hoan will hang for the slaying."

"Suits me fine," the grinning Butch said with a chuckle.

*The sound of digging came steadily and industriously. It was a John Henry kind of rhythm. Almost as much machine as man.*

After some 40 minutes, Jerico Hoan ambled back. He pitched the shovel ahead of him where it speared the soft ground to land upright and quivering.

"Doc Savage is dead and buried," he announced.

"Did you check to make sure the body was dead?" asked Calamity.

"Didn't have to. The parachute was soaked clean through. Nobody bleeds that much and keeps breathin'."

"Then the deed is done. Doc Savage is behind us," Calamity decided. "We'll all mount up and head off to bison where we'll meet up with the other crew. They have cars. Then it's off to Gillette."

"What's in Gillette?" asked Jerico Hoan.

"The start of one million simoleons. And maybe more."

"Sounds good to me," said the big brutish Hoan.

After they saddled up, they wended their way out of the desolation of the forlorn ghost ranch and struck due North.

**Calamity** had donned a black&white calfskin range vest which matched the gaudy markings of his piebald horse. His hat was an enormous black custom crating. It was a more flamboyant thing that John B. Stetson had ever dared manufacture. The showy hat helped to keep the silken hood from shifting around on his head.

Lastly, he set in place a pair of smoked goggles which covered the eyeholes in his green silk **hood** to protect his eyes from the Sun and dust of the day ahead.

"Are you going to wear that hood all the way to Gillette?" wondered Hoan.

"No. But right now it suits me."

Noticing the old shotgun in the other's saddle boot, Hoan added: "Kind of an antique scattergun, ain't it?"

**Calamity** patted the hammer gun and said: **"This is the most powerful weapon currently on planet Earth."**

"Is that so? What you got it loaded with?"

"Fire and brimstone. And worse besides that."

"Sounds like a real devil gun."

**Calamity** laughed roughly. "You don't know the half of it."

"Mind if I have a look at it?" Jerico asked casually, one huge hand drifting out toward the worn butt.

A wrist reinforced by a tooled-leather cuff snapped out blocking the big man's reaching fingers.

"Nobody handles it except me!" **Calamity** said sharply. "You see, an old Crow medicine man gave it to me. With his dying breath, he said that I was the one that the Great Thunderbird chief had selected to wield the weapon. I anybody tries to fire it in my stead, the Great Thunderbird Spirit will strike them down. Strike them dead."

Withdrawing his hand, Jerico Hoan said: "Sounds like you got hold of some mighty powerful medicine."

"You'll see in action before long, Big Sky. And you'll marvel."



The Sun continued coming up. They rode single file with **Calamity** taking the lead and Jerico Hoan following in the rear. He had somehow recovered the rabbit and was playing with it. He made it scamper about the saddle and did other tricks.

Laughing, Hoan remarked: "You're so clever that I ought to give you a name. Think I'll call you 'Dagnabbit'. Dagnabbit-the-rabbit. How does that sound, little feller?"

The other horsemen soon tired of watching the performance, clever as it was, and kept their eyes turned to the way ahead.

Noticing this absence of interest, Hoan captured the rabbit and flung it into the brush where it scampered away. He seemed to have become bored with the little creature.

The terrain they rode through was monotonously empty. Tumbleweeds rolled about. A few rotated as if being examined by invisible hands. But it was only wayward winds spinning them in place.

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As the morning wore on, they came across only one interesting landmark. It was not natural.

In the middle of nowhere, they happened upon a slab of concrete that had been poured into the shape of an arrow. It pointed West. It stood out from the monotonous ground by virtue of having been painted **yellow**. The paint had faded and the concrete cracked here-and-there. But its **yellowness** glowed.

There was an automatic beacon tower nearby. But it did not seem to be in use.

In the lead, **Calamity** pointed at the yellow concrete **arrow** which was several yards long.

"That," he proclaimed, "is pointing toward a pot of gold the likes of which you gents have never imagined."

"What is it?" asked one gunman.

"I'll tell you when the time is right.

They rode past the marker which was drenched in Wyoming sunlight.

Taking up the rear, Jerico Hoan studied the concrete arrow with interested eyes. He said nothing. Nor did he ask any questions. He seemed to be content to follow the others, a new man hopeful of fitting in.

The blazing Wyoming **Sun** did not appear to bother him in the least. His darkly yellowish hide looked as if it had progressed well beyond the stage of burning and peeling long ago. No doubt that Jerico Hoan had spent a great deal of his life in the out-of-doors.

His only concession to the Sun's rays was a cream-colored hat which he kept pulled low to shade his unreadable eyes. He had not been wearing it before. It could be seen that the crown had been pierced by a bullet in the recent past.

None of the gang thought this was anything special and so did not remark upon it.



## XXXVIII – Goliath Making Magic

The ride through the sweltering morning **Sun** was devoid of incident. Penetrating alkali dust sprouted from under the horses' pounding hooves as they cantered across the glaring sinks making the animals sneeze and powdering their coats.

The desolation was littered with the scattered bones of antelope and elk that had been shot, skinned, and butchered by hunters in years past. They did not encounter any live specimens.

In time, they left the rolling range behind and drifted into the Badlands with its craggy canyons and sandy draws arranged into a haphazard labyrinth. At the rate they were plodding along, they would reach the city of Gillette nearly an hour before the late summer dusk.

Having rid himself of the juvenile jackrabbit, Jerico Hoan pulled a silver dollar out of a pocket and began fooling around with it.

The dollar walked across his knuckles when he wiggled them ... hopped into the opposite hand when he let go of the reins ... and repeated the performance.

Hoan did this several times for practice. Each time the silver dollar tottered toward the end knuckle, he switched the hand clutching the reins and captured the coin with his newly freed fingers.

Perhaps it was the boredom of the journey. But the big brute showed every sign of employing the amazingly flexible dexterity of his own much scarred hands.

The rider directly in front of him happened to look back. He saw a portion of the performance and whistled in low admiration.

This attracted attention. Soon, other riders forked their horses back to allow the big man to catch up.

3 riders were soon riding either side of him enjoying the nimble-fingered display of legerdemain.

"Bet you used to be a pickpocket," chortled one.

"With finger magic like that," crowed another, "you musta been a whiz!"

The Goliath snorted. "Used to be? "I still am!"

Evidently becoming tired of making the silver dollar walk across his knuckles, Jerico Hoan suddenly gave the coin an upward flip with a dark thumb.

3 pairs of eyes jerked skyward seeking to follow the coin's trajectory. They were more interested in where it would land. But since it was traveling upward, they naturally followed its glinting progress.

Or they thought they did. For the dollar coin never came back down to earth.

They shaded their squinting eyes and craned their heads about futilely. Jaws began dropping.

"Where the blue blazes did it go?" exploded one man.

Another claimed: "I know I seen it spinnin' up there."

Eventually, they realized the silver dollar was not dropping back to the ground.

"Where did it go?" a man demanded.

Grinning brokenly, Jerico reached behind his ear and made it appear. He spun it a couple of times to make it flash in the Sun.

"How'd you work that trick, Big Sky?" one rider demanded suspiciously.

"You know that a conjuror never tells," returned Jerico good-naturedly.

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Scowling like a thunderhead cloud, the rider yanked a silver-mounted six-gun and gave the hammer a slow menacing <cock>.

"Never ain't hardly ever when you're facin' a bullet. I'm findin' you kinda tricky. So cough up some truth."

His expression bland, Jerico said: "I gave the silver dollar a flamboyant flip upward and your attention naturally shot ahead of it. Before it hardly got off my thumb, I snagged it with my other hand. You didn't see that part. It's called misdirection."

"Don't fib now! I saw it spinning high up."

Hoan chuckled. "Well, you thought you did. But that was your imagination. It got ahead of your brain. Because the coin never went any higher than my collarbone."

Reluctantly, the gunman took his pistol off <cock>. He holstered it again.

"Okay. I'll buy that," he said grudgingly. "But I don't want to be flimflammed like that again. So stow your fool tricks."

Shrugging, Jerico Hoan pocketed the silver dollar and assumed a more sober mien.

The others hurried ahead of him to resume their single-file trek.

The hotheaded one caught up with the hooded **Calamity** who led the column atop the piebald mount who matched his flashy calfskin vest.

"I'm startin' to not cotton to the new hand," he drawled in a casual voice.

"What's wrong with him?"



The rider scowled while his rough hands made a cigarette with the smooth efficiency of a machine. He struck a match on the saddle pommel and got the cigarette end glowing red.

"He acts like he hasn't a care in the world. And here we are ridin' off to do some mean business. A lot of folks are gonna die maybe. And all he does is fool and clown around."

"Hoan's the type who'll come in handy in a brawl. And if's tricky, he might perform some magic for us. Just leave him be."

The other drew deeply o his cigarette and trailed smoke out through his nostrils.

"Sleight-of-hand don't win any gunfights," he drawled.

Taking the cigarette off his lips, he squinted at it.

Instead of replying with words, **Calamity** gave his right arm a shake as if a hornet had stung it. Suddenly a 2-shot derringer was in his hand and pointing at the other rider. One hammer made an audible <click> in cocking.

"Good thing we're with the same outfit," drawled **Calamity**. "Otherwise you'd be lying in the dirt with your six still in its holster."

The rider <blinked> in the face of unexpected death. His cigarette dangled from his lower lip ... then fell.

"Slick move. Got a hideout gun tucked into your cuff, huh?"

Restoring the derringer to the tooled-leather cuff, **Calamity** said: "And another in the opposite one. That's why I wear them."

"Okay. You're the boss, **Calamity**. But I'm still gonna keep an eye on that big yellor devil."

**Calamity** snorted. "Keep both eyes on him if that suits you. But I personally like a man who is cool in the face of trouble. He looks like that sort. I could use three more like him."

The rider took hold of the butt of his six-shooter and said:

"And that's another thing. When the shootin' starts, what's he gonna do? Throw jackrabbits?"

"We'll see how handy he is once trouble pops," said **Calamity**. "Maybe we can collect the first million without any bloodshed."

"I never heard of that much lucre fallin' into a man's hands without there being some kind of a fuss. The more dollars, the greater the fuss."

**Calamity** <slapped> the antique percussion shotgun stock protruding from his saddle boot.

"That was before. We now have a world beater. A world beater of a plan and a world beater of a weapon. But we're going to need more than one devil gun if we're going to make good on our threat."

"We headed for the place you talked about?"

"Gillette? Sure. But first we're bound for Sunken Springs."

"Ain't never heard of Sunken Springs. Is it up in Montana?"

"No," said **Calamity** slowly. "It's on the other side of Scalped Man Canyon right next to Tophet."

"Never heard of no town called Tophet, neither."

"It goes by another name that you surely heard of -- Hell."

"You sayin' that we're ridin' into **Hell**?"

"No. But we'll skirt it reaching Sunken Springs."



## XXXIX – Change of Plan

The day wore on and the **heat** grew sweltering. The horses became thirsty and exhausted. There was little water with which to quench their thirst. Gray alkali dust coated them from the crowns of their hats to the toes of their boots.

Riding through the Wyoming prairie, the followers of **Calamity** passed a bottle of redevye up-and-down the line. Only 2 riders abstained. One was the hooded leader of the outlaw gang. The other was Jerico Hoan riding in back, seemingly unfazed by blinding sunlight, heat, or thirst.

From time-to-time, he fell to whistling. His mouth music was without tune but pleasant in an aimless wandering way. For an outlaw, he appeared to be an amiable sort. Or perhaps he was not very bright.

As they grew increasingly inebriated, the **Calamity** bunch began wondering about Jerico's state of mind.

The prairie came to Scalped Man Canyon. Its mouth was marked by a great weird rock with a rounded white top that had struck some long-dead cowpoke's imagination as looking like the scalped head of a man.

Sheer forbidding heights of sandstone jutted up around them. Sandy soil ground mushily under plodding horseshoes as one rider rode up to the head of the line falling into low converse with his boss. His face was sallow and drawn. Several days' growth of dark beard gave him an unkempt appearance.

It was Butch. The outlaw that Jerico Hoan had humiliated at the start of the trail. He appeared to have recovered his gumption.

"The new gunhand strikes me as a peculiar sort."

"No argument from me on that," returned **Calamity** blandly. "But leave him be. I have a hunch he'll come in handy."

"Kinda oafish if you ask me. Not much to 'im except beef."

"Beef was how men got things settled before the invention of guns," expressed the other. "It's still a right handy thing to have at your disposal."

Butch took out the makings and got a cigarette working.

"If you say so."

His ratty voice grew softly dismissive.

"But a man who ain't even Colt-broke ... I hate to think he's the chicken-hearted kind."

"Just because his hide is on the yellow side," said **Calamity** carefully, "doesn't make him any less of a rooster."

"Some of the others are talkin' ..."

"Don't waste your breath or my patience with idle trail talk!" rapped the flashy **Leader**, air-puffs of his words driving little clouds of alkali dust off the gaudy green **mask**. "You're just sore because on account of the way he manhandled you. Now put a hackamore on that loose jaw of yours and get back there. And warn the others to do the same."

Disgruntled of face, the scruffy rider fell behind and resumed his place in line.

From time-to-time, it could be seen that the masked **Calamity** reached into his pocket and brought something up to his mouth. Whatever it was, he kept it concealed until he slipped his fingers under the green silk **hood** and took it into his mouth.

It was assumed that he was chewing something. Perhaps nuts or berries. His mouth made *squeaking* sounds as if he had wooden teeth or something.

-----

Exiting the great gash of a canyon, the fatigued and bedraggled riders clattered along picking their way over loose stones, between impressive boulders, in-and-out of gash-like draws, and around hair-width ledges.

Big buttes stood about. Great masses of gumbo, sandstone, and lava boulder conglomeration. They avoided these obstacles.

After a spell, they came upon another of the yellow concrete markers formed to resemble an **arrow** pointing West. It sat forlorn amid the sagebrush and buffalo grass which encroached upon it.

No one commented. But Jerico Hoan studied the flat thing intently. He said nothing this time, either.

Under the blazing **Sun**, the horses eventually showed signs of faltering. They struggled. Stopping to permit them to chew on grass helped with their stamina. But water was hard to come by. And they were not build for endurance.

Jerico Hoan took it upon himself to ride up to the head of the column and warned:

"These horses won't make it all the way to town. Something's gotta be done."

**Calamity** did not respond for some time. He was obviously thinking. His chewing motions stopped gradually and his head pulled up.

He paused to roll something on his tongue. Lifting the bottom of his hood, he turned his head away from Hoan and spat something out into the grass. Jerico could not see what it was. The horses kept plodding along.



Finally, **Calamity** said: "I expect you're correct, big Sky. Not a lot of ranches in these parts. Not big ones. We need to change modes of conveyance."

Jerico nodded. "These poor cayuses are about done."

Suddenly, **Calamity** squared his shoulders. He brushed a powdering of alkali dust off of his smoke goggles and announced: "I have a notion. It's a good one."

"Well, spit it out," encouraged Hoan. "Let us all look it over."

"I know of a ranch where they keep at least one plane. Maybe two."

"Do you know how to fly an airplane?" Jerico asked.

"No. But the folks who live at the ranch do. We'll take them prisoner. Make them ferry us to Gillette where we'll hook up with the others."

Jerico Hoan grinned. The grin was exceedingly wide and showed his yellowish broken teeth alarmingly. It was the crooked grin of a bear.

"Now you're talking! What's the name of this ranch?"

"It used to be the old Split-C spread. Now it's called the **Circle Bolt**. And it's not so far ahead that we can't push these flagging horses straight up to it."

"Well, tell that to the horses," laughed Jerico Hoan forking his mount and returning to his place in line.

After he had settled in, his dark features took on an increasingly sober cast.

The amiable whistling did not resume.

There was something deep in his intensely black eyes. An uneasy gleam that might have been worry.

## XL – Strange Surprises

Long Tom Roberts awoke to discover that Pat Savage had already been up for an hour.

Emerging from his bedroom while adjusting his arm sling, the undersized Electrical Wizard saw Pat pronging the ranch telephone handset and grimaced.

"If you're making long-distance calls," he said, "you're going to reimburse me for every one of them."

Pat sent a scornful glance his way.

"Oh hush, you miserly tinker! I was just talking to the FBI office in Cheyenne. They haven't heard a word of or from Doc Savage since he took up the trail of those bank robbers in Casper."

"What about Doc's speed ship?"

Pat shrugged carelessly. "It's still hangered at the Casper airport."

Long Tom looked around.

"No word from Johnny or Renny?"

"I tried to raise them on the gyro radio. But without any luck."

"Sure wish that Monk and Ham were here," muttered Long Tom. "We're short-handed seeing as how we're spread out over half of Wyoming."

Monk and Ham were the missing members of the Doc Savage outfit. Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair [ret.] and Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks [ret.] , respectively.

Monk was an industrial chemist. Ham was one of the most prominent attorneys in the long and distinguished history of the American Bar. At present, they were on an ocean liner bound for England and hence unavailable.

"Are you hungry?" Pat asked suddenly.

"Starved to the bottom of my backbone," said Long Tom feelingly.

"Good. You put the flapjacks on the stove. I'll go milk Gloomy."

Long Tom's face fell.

"I don't usually do the cooking around here. Laramie does that."

"And that reminds me," said Pat heading toward the door. "I called the hospital. Laramie is on the mend. He requested that I tell you not to let things run too far downhill until he returns."



Long Tom's tone turned irate. "Who owns this spread, anyway?"

"It's not who owns it," said Pat cheerfully. "It's how it's run. Now get to cooking while I go a-milking. I haven't done this since I was in pigtails."

After breakfast was consumed, Long Tom burned up the telephone wires calling Bison, Casper, and other localities.

This activity accomplished exactly nothing. Banging down the receiver, he turned to Pat and complained.

"The FBI won't return Doc's plane. They say they can't get into it. It's locked up tight."

"Shouldn't we leave it at the Casper airport so Doc can reclaim it?" countered Pat.

"We're down to 2 airplanes. Yours and my private bus. They'll do in a pinch. But neither is armored. And they're not suitable for diving into trouble."

"Speaking of trouble," said Pat thoughtfully, "I think I will go outside to get in some target practice. Being without my grandfather's Frontier Six for a day, I feat that I might have gotten a little rusty."

Long Tom bestowed a skeptical direction in Pat's direction.

"That hogleg will get rusty before you do."

"You flatter me," said Pat laughing as she exited the ranch house.

Long Tom suddenly thought of something and called after her.

"You know, there are plenty of chores to be done around here."

"I'm a guest," returned Pat. "But don't let me get in the way of your chore doing."

"Females!" Long Tom groaned.



-----

While the slender Electrical Genius went about the ordinary work-a-day chores of his modest spread, pat Savage slipped behind the barn where she filled her six-shooter with lead slugs. Setting a number of tin cans on the top rail of the pole fence constituting the horse corral, she began detonating cartridges noisily in their direction.

The empty cans hopped off with alacrity. As they struck the dirt, Pat ventilated them for extra measure. She did not miss once.

After she had burned through every can, Pat found one that was relatively undented. She gave it a heave upward. Her hand flashed down to the six-gun which had gone back into the holster. The pistol jumped out again.

The heavy weapon pointed skyward in a flash. The **bronze**-haired girl began firing methodically. Her method of doing so seemed unusual if one did not know frontier pistols and their proper handling.

She wrapped her thumb around the big spur of the hammer and rocked it back each time she fired. This was not "fanning" in the dime-novel sense of the term. Nor did she use the ball of her thumb knowing from deep experience that the hammer could slip under a fast-moving thumb.

Enwrapping the spur with her crooked thumb ensured both reliability and accuracy.

The tumbling can jumped around ... performed a somersault once ... and pretended to defy gravity except that it was the work of well-placed bullets that kept it banging around dup in the air.

Five times did Pat Savage fire. And five times the tumbling can rang under her unerring lead hurricane. When it was hammered beyond recognition, she allowed it to strike the ground.

When she got bored with her gun wizardry, the golden-**eyed** girl picked a suitable horse and went for a noontime saunter. She wore her parachute pack as a precaution.

This waiting did not agree with her. Pat had every confidence that Doc Savage was on the trail of the bank robbers.

But until her cousin resurfaced, she was a prisoner of the Circle Bolt Ranch pending instructions from the **Man of Bronze**.

Her perambulating took her to the main trail cutting through this portion of Wyoming. She was more than a little taken aback to see 2 motorcars approaching in a whirl of **reddish** dust. The first one she did not recognize immediately. But the second was unmistakable.

"If that isn't Long Tom's long-lost station-wagon," she vowed, "I will eat my gun belt cartridges-and-all."

The 2 vehicles pulled up. Sheriff Easy Gates stepped out of the lead machine, his old jalopy.



"Howdy, Miss," he said in greeting.

Dismounting, Pat asked: "Where did you find Long Tom's wagon?"

"It had been run into a ditch. Since it was reported stolen, it's my duty to return it."

Out of the wagon stepped another familiar figure.

It was Gordon Darn. Despite his engaging smile, the sight of his dimpled face made Pat nervous.

"Hello, Miss Savage," he said doffing his hat.

"We meet again," said Pat dryly.

"I had hoped you would stay in town longer," the Sheriff said without rancor.

Pat looked to Gordon Darn.

"Did you have any more questions for me, Sheriff?" she asked lightly.

"No, can't say that I have. I see that you are still wearing that parachute rig."

Pat smiled a little sheepishly but offered no comment.

"Gordon was kind enough to offer to drive the stolen car behind me," explained the lawman.

His canny gaze went to the well-worn butt of Pat's six-shooter jutting up from its holster.

"Quite an antique you got there," he remarked.

Now Pat was *perspiring* slightly. Her eyes went to Gordon Darn and back to the Sheriff seeking signs of suspicion or betrayal.

"Thank you," she said. "It was handed down from my grandfather to my own father and then to me. It accounted for a lot of hostiles back in front days. In fact, the town of Savageton over in Campbell County was named after him."

The lawman seemed impressed and said nothing about the six-gun that had gone missing from his predecessor's desk. Perhaps he knew nothing about it.

Sheriff Gates asked: "Did Doc Savage ever turn up?"

"Not yet," said Pat.

"Well, I'll want to talk to him about those dead rustlers when he does."

"I'll convey the message, Sheriff."

Easy Gates glanced back at his flivver.

"I reckon Gordon can complete the delivery. I got business back in town."

He lifted his hat and said: "Nice to run into you again, Miss."

"Same here," said Pat with relief.

She wandered over to Darn and watched the lawman wrestle his machine around and disappear back in the direction of town.

"You had me worried there for a minute," she told him.

Darn grinned. It was rather a goofy grin due to the deep dimples that sprang to life under its pressure.

"Shucks. When I heard about the station-wagon being found, I volunteered my services. It was the best way I could contrive to see you again. Maybe we can have that dinner after all."

Pat looked at the **Sun** which was hovering at the noon hour.

"It will have to be luncheon," she said. "And we'll need to take it at the ranch. I can't leave just yet."

"Suits me," said Darn.

-----  
Mounting her horse, Pat fell behind the station-wagon. It rocked and jounced its way up the dirt road to the Circle Bolt ranch house.

Long Tom looked as elated as Pat Savage had ever seen him when his station-wagon trundled into view.

"Hot damn!" he exclaimed. "Where did you find it?"

"It found me," returned Pat lightly.

She made proper introductions and into the ranch house they repaired to investigate the possibilities of lunch.

"Are you hungry?" asked Pat doffing her parachute harness.

"I'm always hungry," joked Darn. "Except when I'm famished which half the time. Lunch sounds super."

Pat said firmly: "We're not having lunch. When I make it, it's called 'luncheon'."

"Must be an Eastern custom," said Darn taking a chair around the circular kitchen table.



Luncheon was consumed with a seasoning of pleasant conversation. Yet underneath it all, Pat Savage grew increasingly concerned while Long Tom Roberts fretted wordlessly.

Lack of word from Doc Savage, Johnny Littlejohn, and Renny Renwick was becoming worrisome. Particularly was the silence from the latter two puzzling. The gyroplane was equipped with a shortwave set. But neither man answered repeated radio calls.

To pass the time, Pat asked Gordon Darn: "What are the papers saying about this **Calamity** business?"

"There's talk that he's coming up in the world."

"Oh? What type of talk?"

"Some of the national airlines have been receiving letters. These are demanding a powerful lot of money or else this **Calamity** character will start interfering with passenger airplane operations."

Hearing this, Pat got a little pale. Long Tom's neck turned **red**.

*They were thinking of the U.S. Air Mail plane that had flown into a wall of water that had been levitated up to the sky. The thought of a big transport craft filled with passengers encountering the same fate was alarming.*

"This **Calamity** fellow thinks Big," Gordon Darn was saying as he chomped his way through an overstuffed ham sandwich.

"If you ask me," returned Pat, "he's getting too big for his britches."

*A strange look passed between the **bronze**-haired woman and the slender Electrical Expert. They were thinking of the as-yet-unidentified mortal remains lying in the barn. The one whose head lay separate. They still did not know the identity of the corpse. And these most recent developments were adding to their concerns.*

"I meant to ask you," said Pat giving Long Tom a look that suggested he stay quiet. "The cousin of yours who owns the general store. Any news of him?"

Gordon looked sheepish and a little guilty.

"Haven't seen or heard from cousin Kip since he took off the other day."

"Imagine that," quipped Pat. "My cousin Clark is similarly misplaced." [Clark "Doc" Savage, Jr.]

Gordon Darn<blinked> his confusion.

"I didn't mention to the sheriff about how his friends tried to murder you if that's what you're driving at."



"It wasn't. But thanks for volunteering. By now, your cousin knows that his hired guns failed miserably. Bison is too hot for him now. He won't be coming back. And once Doc Savage catches up with him, that will be his finish. Doc will punish him severely for attempting to murder me."

Gordon Darn swallowed uncomfortably. He knew that **Doc Savage** was a terror to criminals all over the World.

---

Around the shank of the afternoon, the drumming beat of horses' hooves came distantly.

This was not an unusual thing to hear in Wyoming. But the circle Bolt Ranch wasn't situated close to any other spread. Nor was it on the way to any place in particular.

The rolling clamor drew near. Naturally, Long Tom stepped out to investigate.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" reminded Pat.

Hesitating at the door, Long Tom went blank of expression.

Pat indicated a parachute pack sittin gin a corner.

Long Tom hesitated ... but then decided that Pat was making sense. Grumbling, he went over to the contrivance and meticulously buckled it on.

Darn watched his procedure with increasing incredulity.

"Long Tom likes to take precautions," suggested Pat dryly.

This did not take away from Darn's puzzlement. Long Tom exited the ranch house and stood on his veranda.

Like a dusty storm cloud, a posse of rough-looking riders boiled for the spot where he stood.

"Who's calling?" he demanded.



There was no response from the riders other than a horse snorting noisily. There were an unlovely and. Their hats were dusty and their range duds looked starved for a wash tub.

Long Tom stepped off his veranda. For his pains, he was catapulted straight up into the sky! It happened suddenly, unexpectedly, the way that lightning strikes.

The puny Electrical Wizard was trudging in the direction of the approaching riders. He lifted a hand in greeting.

Too late, he saw the emerald **hood** on the head of the lead rider and the dark smudges of his smoked goggles. Also too late, he noticed the side-by-side shotgun gripped in the man's hands.

The double maw was pointed directly at him. It blew out fire and noise. Long Tom's breath went out through his gold front teeth like air from a thrown steer. He was suddenly hurtling backward. But only firefly.

**With a long *howl* of surprise and a desperate flailing, he began climbing into the sky entirely against his own will!**

## XLI – Tragedy

Pat Savage heard the shotgun **blast** followed by Long Tom Roberts' weird *howling*.

The golden-**eyed** girl did not have to look out the window to deduce what had transpired. But she did peek. One glance was enough.

His booted feet kicking and his good arm windmilling, the helpless electrical engineer was moving away from the terra firma rapidly. Going straight up!

Swiftly, she threw Gordon Darn an extra parachute pack that had been lying about.

"Put this on, pronto! And don't aske questions. It just might save your life."

Darn did as he was told. Pat had to help him with the buckles. Then she swung about to put on her own parachute harness.

"Stand in the front door and keep them occupied," she rapped to Darn. "And whatever you do, don't leave the ranch house. *Comprende?*"

"Got it," returned Darn shakily.

"Good," said Pat slipping out the ack door.

Exiting, she did not have a plan. There was no time to formulate one.

While sneaking behind the ranch house, she peered up into the sky expectantly. Long Tom Roberts was a dwindling dot against the blue bowl of the heavens. A pair of startled turkey buzzards hastily flapped out of his way.

Pat bit down on one of her knuckles as she watched Long Tom seemingly depart Earth's comforting gravitational field. He ceased to be visible. Breathless minutes dragged past.

After what seemed like an eternity, a pale mushroom blossomed high in the sky. Long Tom's parachute had opened. He was descending in a much more leisurely fashion than he had gone up.

It was not a windy day. But Long Tom did not come straight down. He appeared to have been caught by some upper atmospheric drafts for the canopy was pulling to the south drifting away from the circle bolt spread.

"I guess it's now up to me," Pat told herself.

Opening the little gate of her frontier revolver, she broke a rule and inserted a 6<sup>th</sup> cartridge. Closing the action, she listened. At the open door frame, Gordon Darn was demanding what the new arrivals wanted. He tried to sound confident but still came across as nervous.

The harsh voice called back. "*We want your planes. Can you fly one?*"



"Can't say that I can," said Gordon Darn truthfully.

Those were the last words that the young man uttered.

A six-gun *cracked* once. There followed an ugly *thud*.

Hearing this, Pat Savage did not have to paint pictures in her brain. Gritting her teeth, she stepped out into the sunlight and pointed her six-shooter in the general direction of the arrivals.

"When this dog barks," she called out loudly, "strong men quake in their boots!"

She said it so forcefully that the assembled gunmen hesitated.

"Want to bet that I can drop most of you before you can plink me?" she added.

No one rushed to take up the bet. There was a general hesitation.

Then a man growled. "If you don't get a doctor for that sorry excuse for a gunfighter, he's liable to **bleed** clear into the evening."

Someone else lau9ghed. It was a cruel laugh.

Pat hesitated. She could not let poor Gordon Darn bleed to death. But she also knew if she surrendered, her goose was cooked.

"Can you fly a plane?" one of the gunmen demanded.

"I can. What's it to you?"

"Fly us to Gillette and we'll let that young feller live."

Again, Pat hesitated. She did not rust these men. They were desperadoes. Killers.

Then the matter was taken out of her hands.

---

From behind her stepped a *shadow*. It as monstrously large and moved with the *silence* of a lamb-stealing coyote. Pat failed to notice the looming presence in part because she was concentrating on holding off the raiders with her intimidating weapon.

A massive hand swept around and captured her six-shooter and relieved her of it. It was gone before she realized she had been accosted.

An arm that felt like the trunk of an oak tree wrapped around her waist and Pat was lifted off her feet. Struggling, she was carried out into the open.

Turning her head, she gasped!

The man who captured her was a giant. A fulvous monster. He was not so much ugly as he was unlovely. Between his disorderly black hair and broken teeth, he was about as uncouth a specimen of primitive manhood as she ever laid eyes upon.

The hooded **Leader** called over. "Nice work, Jerico! She fell for it."

Pat was helpless as she was dragged forward. The man shifted her from one meaty hand to the other and tucked her underneath an **overpowering** arm. She tried beating at him and kicking. But nothing seemed to faze the mute man-monster.

"Let me go, you ... you roughneck!" Pat demanded hotly.

Unbothered by her flailing fists, the giant Jerico sagged down beside Gordon Darn sprawled across the threshold of the ranch house door. With one massive paw, he turned the man over and studied him.

With a discouraged grunt, he said: "This feller up and died."

Hearing this, Pat Savage flew into a **rage**.

"Murderers! You'll pay for this! And don't think you won't!" she vowed.

Neither harsh words nor her pounding fists accomplished anything.

Jerico stood up and carried Pat over to the assembled horsemen. They had their hands full of artillery. Their hardware ran to revolvers of impressive caliber.

"That wasn't wise," Jerico told the rider in the green **hood**.

**Calamity** shrugged negligently.

"He couldn't fly a plane. So we didn't need him. ... And who are you to be giving me orders?"

The Goliath was unmoved.

"I know who is boss," Hoan said slowly replacing the bullet-punctured Stetson back on his huge head. "I also know that murder's nothing to monkey around with."

"Maybe you're right," **Calamity** returned. "But don't get the idea that you're telling me what to do, Big Sky. Now drag that body out of sight. We'll take off in the plane."

Jerico met the other's hard gaze unflinchingly.

"Just understand that ain't taking any chances for a murder rap."

**Calamity** paid no attention to that comment.

"Two of you grab the girl."



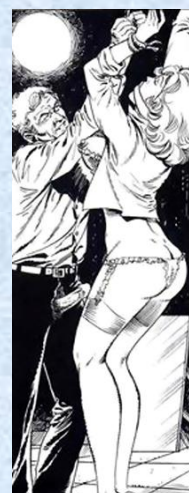
A pair of gunmen dismounted and swiftly captured Pat Savage. Wrenching wildly, she tried to break free. But the pair were determined and not at all respecters of the fairer sex. She struggled in their hands ... kicked out ... and was tripped. She landed hard.

"Don't break her," warned Jerico. "She's supposed to be our pilot, remember?"

XX

"We won't break her," one gunman said. "But we sure-as-hell gonna **rape** the hell out of her!"

Jerico laughed and walked away leaving the struggling **bronze**-haired woman to fight off her **sex**-crazed assailants. And there were more than two of them!



"Stay away from me!" Pat warned.

"Oh, fuck you **Whore**!" one of them replied.

He gave a hard <slap> across her beautiful face.

"That's to teach you to respect your new masters."







They punched and tore at her clothes in a mass frenzy action ...



"Git these things off right now, goddammit!" a crusty old man spat.

"Leave my clothes on, you pervert!"

"Oh, but you are going to be fun to pork, my feisty **bitch!**"





Then their *humiliating* foreplay started. Pat was forced to **kiss** each one of them while others sucked her magnificent 34-D breasts and "ate" her well-shaved pussy.



But they quickly tired of pawing the **bronze**-haired woman. Their *raping* organs were quite stiff and erect. And their genitals were overflowing with nasty **semen**.

"Time for you to spread eagle, **Bitch!**"

"The hell with you!" Pat cursed.

"C'mon ... spread 'em out wide for your daddies, pretty **slut!**"



She didn't want to get hit anymore. So very reluctantly, Pat closed her eyes and spread her long model legs and held open her vagina lips ...



They were not gentle at all with her. Nor did they try to prelubricate her. With impatient lustful action, they tried to sink the entire length of their shafts with a single **ramming** motion!



"Ooowwwwww!!!" Pat shrieked as a **fat 13"** cock plunged its way into her.



"Ooooo, baby. Fight me a little, won't you? It'll feel so good when you fight."

"Go to he... .. Ooowww! **OOOWWWWW!! Damn ,,. you!!!!**"



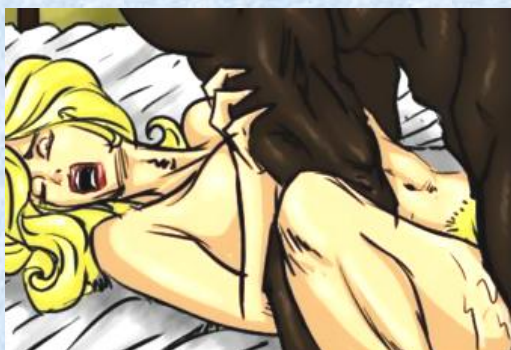
"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Take that! And that! And that, you fuckin' **Whore!**"

He had been only in her for a few minutes. Yet she was already started to feel something wet. She knew that it wasn't her own orgasmic juices. And he hadn't ejaculated yet. It had to be a little **blood** from her torn vagina. *Damn him!*



When he finished, others quickly took their turns at raping the Hollywood-looking beauty. **Penises** of all shapes and sizes eagerly planted themselves in Pat's cunt and jack-hammered away.



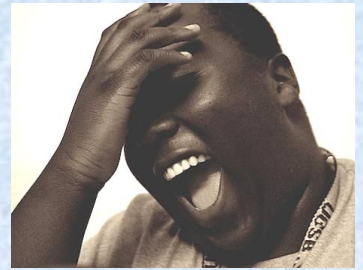


Pat didn't moan like she did when she was gang-raped earlier by the juvenile boys. She *cried* out in pain this time when they *climaxed* into her ravaged womb. Their strong adult bodies implanted every last fraction-of-an-inch deep into her as they savagely held her legs as far apart as they could.





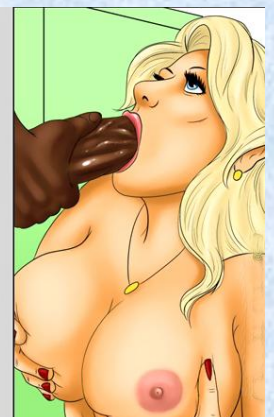
The bastards laughed each time one of them shot his *impregnating* load into the struggling woman.



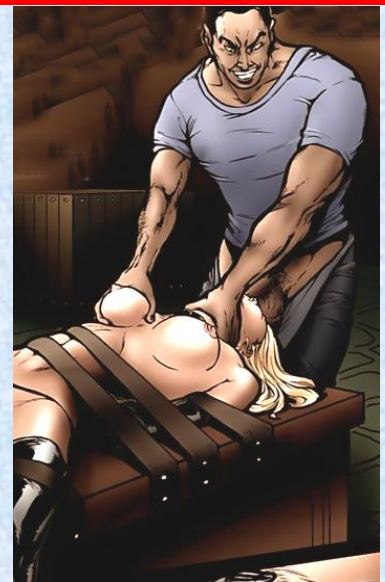
The ones that had her first were slowly rejuvenating themselves. But they needed some help. So they eyed her luscious full neon-pink *lips* ...



Poor Pat stared helplessly as foul-smelling **penises** came toward her *mouth*.







Pat's pretty face was soon splattered with sticky **cum** (at least that part that she didn't swallow!).



All the time, others had been watching her tight buttocks with a **sodomizing** interest.





"Get down on all fours, **Whore!** You're gonna get bred like a dog. You think you'll like that?"

Pat knew what the bastard was inferring.

"You'll burn someday in hell for this," she vowed.

"But you'll be squealing like a **pig-slut** today," he laughed.



"O-o-o-w-w-w-w-w ... o-o-o-h-h-h-h-h ... " groaned Pat with each brutal poke.



"Arg Arg Arg Arg Arg!" grunted her assailant as he came into her rectum.





*In a Parallel Universe ...*



They finished only because they were exhausted and not for any care about the state of their ravished victim.

Pat was a sloppy mess with sucker **bites** all over her **bronze** body and saliva, **semen**, and **urine** drying on it.

She just lay there in a state of shock with legs spread out invitingly. But no one was interested. They had used the **Whore** enough.





[mass-Impregnated]

Lifting limp Gordon Darn in his brawny arms, Jerico marched over into the barn and deposited the body next to Gloomy-the-cow. He studied the man's blood-soaked trouser leg. Removing Darn's belt, he tied a tight tourniquet and adjusted it until he was satisfied.

Hoan was about to turn to go when he noticed the other body wrapped in a horse-blanket shroud.

With curiosity quirking the corners of his eyes, the big man stepped up to the shrouded form and undid the wrappings. This disclosed the corpse's head. It also showed that the head was not attached to the body.

His brutish face stiff, he examined the head carefully. He noted the color of the hair along with the shape of the face and other details. One eye lay open. It was the color of a faded leaf.

A sound escaped from his mouth. It started off a little like the call of a *songbird*. But when he realized he was emitting it, Jerico pursed his lips and blew out a little low whistle of astonishment instead.



Replacing the shroud, Hoan exited the barn. His expression was as bland as a cow's countenance.

"All set," he proclaimed. He said nothing about his grisly discovery.

Riding over to the transport plane, they released the exhausted horses and climbed aboard after first forcing Pat in at gunpoint. Assorted revolvers were directed at her head and spine. So there was no possibility of resisting.

Then she was made to sit down behind the controls. **Calamity** sat in the copilot seat to keep her in line. He removed his trail dust-smeared smoked goggles disclosing sharp gray eyes.

"Fire up your engines," he commanded.

Pat did as she was told. Her lips were a bloodless line. Her bronze face held a strangely determined expression.

"Is it too much to ask where we're going before we take off?" she inquired.

"We're going to Gillette to pick up some friends of ours. But first, we're going to make a little stop."

"Where are we stopping?"

"A place where we can pick up fresh ammunition."

"And where is that?" demanded Pat.

"Just head northwest. It's a wasteland called Sunken Springs. Can't miss it. It will look like a crack in the badlands showing the bowels of **Hell** itself."

"Sounds charming," murmured Pat getting the engines going and turning the plane into the wind.

The aircraft seated everyone comfortably. All except Jerico Hoan. There wasn't a seat available for him. As the new man, he sat in the rear seat on a packing case. His dark face was pensive; intensely black orbs reflective.

From time-to-time, one meaty paw went to the handle of Pat Savage's six-shooter which he had stuffed into one pocket after disarming her.

After bumping along rather alarmingly, the plane took off without trouble. Its wheels drew up electrically.

As the trim ship sought altitude, Pat Savage's bleak golden **eyes** searched the ground that was falling away beneath them. She saw Long Tom's parachute collapsing as the puny electrical engineer landed safely in the horse pasture. Shrugging off his harness, he shook an enraged fist at the departing aircraft.

Under her breath, Pat murmured: *"At least one of us is still on the loose."*

"What's that?" demanded **Calamity**.

Pat replied: "I hope this isn't a wild *goose* chase."

**Calamity** <spanked> the checkered grip of his percussion shotgun meaningly.

"Just fly where I tell you to and your goose won't be cooked. Get it?"

"I get it," Pat said evenly, her white teeth clenched tight.

"And if you're thinking that Doc Savage is going to come along and pull your lovely fat out of the fire, think again. He's gone west."

Pat's brow furrowed up. "What do you mean 'west'?"

"I mean 'west' as in he's seen his last sunset. Get me?"

Pat's pretty mouth twisted grimly.

"Doc Savage," she asserted confidently, "does not die easily."

"You got that right," a gunman scoffed. "Took damn near all of us to ventilate him properly. Ain't that right, Big Sky?"

In back, the silent yellow-skinned Goliath was fiddling with Pat Savage's revolver. His actions demonstrated that he knew nothing about pistols for he was peering down the barrel squinting rather stupidly.

"I wasn't with this outfit when Doc Savage was murdered," Jerico muttered distractedly. "I only buried him later on. Get me? I ain't no killer."

Pat took her lower lip between perfect teeth. She felt hot emotion rise in her throat. She choked back a rising sob, only half succeeding.

From the rear of the plane, hulking Jerico Hoan asked: "Is this old hogleg loaded? I can't tell."



## XLII – Hoodoo Outpost

The 2 gunmen from Nebraska were awake and complaining.

They were homesick. Both expressed a strong desire to return to their hometown of Alliance. The one who was afraid of rattlesnakes returned to the subject periodically. He appeared to be obsessed with the subject of sidewinders.

"Rattlesnakes will sink their poison fangs into a man's ankles at the slightest provocation or none at all," he was saying. "There's just a cussed meanness to the critters. And don't get me started on the subject of bedrolls. Sidewinders adore slitherin' into bedrolls so that when you stretch out for the night, they're already in your blankets waitin' on you."

The other Nebraskan barked: "Will you lay off that scare talk?"

The first man rattled on unpersuaded.

"Happened to a buddy of mine. Went to bed one night and he could hear the rattlin' around midnight. The cussed snake was in the blankets with him. He didn't dare move all night. That morning, his friends found him covered in his own sweat and shiverin' despite the heat. Someone put a bullet in the bulge where the sidewinder was coiled up and killed it. My pal never got over it. Me, I still get the shakes thinkin' about it."

Renny Renwick had enough of the unhappy pair grouching the morning away.

"Knock it off, you two!" he thundered.

"How long are you gonna keep us prisoner here?" demanded one.

"Johnny Littlejohn answered that.

"Interminably if your confabulation persists through the diurnal cycle."

"What did that fell say?" the rattlesnake hater asked the other one.

The second man shrugged. "Search me."

It proved to be a long morning and a longer afternoon. Renny and Johnny considered flipping a coin to see which one of them would ride to the nearest ranch in hopes of finding a telephone.

This was a chancy proposition, however. It cost good money to string a telephone lineout to an isolated spread. Many self-reliant ranch owners preferred to do without.

The **droning** of an approaching airplane brought all heads turning to the south. Necks craned and eyeballs searched the unclouded sky.

Renny's distance eyesight was better than Johnny's. He spotted the approaching plane first.

"Look's like Long Tom's bus," he thumped.

"A Pythian augury," the gangling Geologist chortled.

Johnny was pleased. He had exhausted all of the geological opportunities that the landscape presented.

Long Tom's plane was not an amphibian like Doc Savage's speed ship. It was an outdated 2-engine transport. It was larger than a private plane and therefore handy for hauling some of the complicated apparatus that the Electrical Wizard experimented on. But it was no air giant.

The plane scooted overhead with silvery wings flashing. It banked and entered into a slow approach turn.

Renny grunted: "Finding a safe stretch to land is going to be a chore."

Shading his eyes with one long-fingered hand, Johnny nodded. "Without a doubt."

The chore of finding a landing spot took the better part of an hour. Both Johnny and Renny grew noticeably worried. The plane turned and banked ... dropped ... and climbed again. It circled like a lazy buzzard.

Finally, the pilot found a spot that seemed promising and slanted down for a landing.

Johnny and Renny held their breaths. Both men were experienced pilots. They understood that all that circling meant that there was no obviously safe place to put down. The pilot was about to take a long chance.

Renny found a high hoodoo and climbed it, the better to see. The expression on his horsey face was worrisome. Noticing this, Johnny realized that the big-**fisted** engineer was half expecting a crack-up.

The plane touched down, bouncing along a level stretch of stony wash. At one point, the aircraft bounced back into the air. But it finally got settled in. It rolled for a long time before the pilot threw it around and set about shutting down the motors.

Renny squinted at the plane whose silvery surface reflected the dazzling sunlight with blinding intensity. After a bit, a door popped open. Someone stepped out and peered about uncertainly.

When Renny saw who it was, he gave a whoop of pleasure and dropped back to the ground.

"I just spotted Pat!"

Johnny beamed like a happy skeleton. "Who else was with her?"

"Didn't wait to see. She's a fair hike away. Maybe we should ride out to meet her."

One of us needs to guard the prisoners," Renny reminded.

"Right. They are plenty goosey."



"Match you for the privilege," said Johnny.

Renny shrugged and flipped the coin. Johnny called 'heads' before Renny could ask his preference.

The coin came up 'heads'. So Johnny saddled up and rode off to greet the new arrivals.

With disappointment showing on his long face, Renny settled in to guarding the prisoners.

"I don't want to hear any more talk of rattlesnakes from you two sidewinders," he told them.

"Who are you callin' a sidewinder?" one demanded indignantly.

"When was the last time you had an honest job?" countered Renny.

The 2 men looked uncomfortable. Their eyes rolled up in their heads as if they were doing calculations.

"I thought so," rumbled Renny. "Just stay coiled up like you are and we'll be moving on soon."

"Did he say coiled?" undertoned one.

"He's just rubbin' in his insults, ain't he?"

At a withering glare from the hulking engineer, the two subsided.

---

Quite a spell past. Nearly an hour.

"Shouldn't be taking them this long," Renny muttered to himself.

Scaling the towering hoodoo, he searched the stretch of badlands between himself and the silver aircraft.

He spotted Johnny's horse. But the elongated archaeologist-geologist was not astride it. In fact, he saw no persons approaching.

The mournful-faced engineer decided that something was amiss and saddled up. He rode out toward the plane. But he did not get very far.

The area abounded with lofty hoodoos, lava rocks, boulders, and other detritus of the Badlands. Renny rode through these things picking his way carefully. He was alert and sensed that something was wrong.

So he should not have been greatly surprised when men suddenly popped out from behind sandstone spires and granite boulders brandishing assorted revolvers as well as other deadly weapons.

One of the men wore a green silk **hood** over which was clamped a flamboyant black Stetson hat. He held a shotgun before him. It was not new and displayed the curled tumblers of a percussion hammer gun. Dangling from the twin barrels were 2 buzzard feathers. One white and one black.

"You know what this devil can do, hatchet face," the shotgun wielder called out. "So climb down off that saddle or take an elevator ride. Without an elevator."

Another voice yelled: "And while you're at it, elevate those big meathooks of yours up into the sky where they belong."

Renny's eyes went to the second voice. He saw a man who brought to mind a darkly yellow human mountain with **muscles**. His hair was black and plastered to his scalp in such a way as to make one think he was unfamiliar with a comb. He was bare to the waist and his **musculature** was unnerving to behold.

"Name's Jerico," the big monster said. "But you can call me 'Big Sky' if you have a mind to."

Jerico held an antique frontier six-gun. Studying it, Renny was reminded of Pat Savage."

"Holy cow!" he exploded. "Where'd Pat get to?"

A ruffian roughly shoved Pat Savage and Johnny Littlejohn into view. A long-barreled Colt revolver menaced them. Pat stared in defiant silence.

"It was a trap," said Johnny thick-voiced. "They ambushed me before I could out my superfirer."

"Holy cow!" Renny repeated.

He seemed not to know what to say. But he put his hands up as high as his head. The expression on his long features made it look as if he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of Life. Which meant that he really wanted to cry.

Jerico stepped up, took the reins of his horse, and said: "Out of the saddle, you. We're claimin' this nag."

Having no choice in the matter, Renny dismounted slowly and carefully. The man-monster reached in and harvested his supermachine pistol. Then he was prodded in the direction of the other prisoners.

For a moment, the long-faced engineer looked as if he wanted to take a poke at Jerico Hoan. The tenseness of his elephantine muscles and a bunching of one blocky **fist** communicated that intent.

Jerico growled: "I can take you, buster. And don't think that I can't."

Renny met the other's gaze. Although constructed very differently, they were of a similar size. Both were big men and looked as if they knew their way around a fistfight.

"Put down that gun," invited Renny, "and we'll see who's the better man."

"Another day, mister. Now shove along or I'll mow you down with your own pistol."



"It's a date," rumbled Renny.

He moved along joining the other captives.

"Expect a proper larrupin'," Jerico promised.

Renny thundered a rough dismissive laugh.

Pat Savage said uneasily: "We are not doing so well without Doc, are we?"

"Where's Long Tom?" Renny asked suddenly.

Pat said: "These brutes shot him up into the sky. The last I saw of him, Long Tom was coming down by parachute."

"What about Doc Savage?"

Pat hesitated. Some emotion made bright *flecks* in the tawny slits of her eyes.

Finally, she said: "They claim that Doc Savage is dead."

Face working, Renny said: "I'll believe that tired old tune when I see it and not just hear it."

The Goliath calling himself Jerico said boastfully: "The only way you'll see it is if we plant you next to him."

He dug a big thumb into his bare chest adding: "You're lookin' at the buy who buried him. And I buried him deep."

No one knew what to say to that. Renny swallowed his '*holy cow*' expression before it passed his lips. Johnny formed the words "*I'll be superamalgamated*" but the syllables were not audible.

The man in the green hood and outrageous black hat suddenly said:

"In case you don't know who I am, I'm **Calamity**. And this is the calamity outfit. Now let's go and see what's what."

They started off on foot although **Calamity** claimed a horse. Another gunman did the same. Jerico Hoan took charge of the prisoners and kept them moving along.

He did his prodding with Pat's six-shooter. The supermachine pistol he kept tucked into the waistband of his pants. No doubts he was more comfortable with the old pistol. The rapid-firer looked complicated.

As they marched along, Johnny asked Pat: "Is that your six-shooter?"

Pat nodded.

"What's in it? Mercy bullets?"

"Assorted shells," Pat replied softly.

"Any lead?"

"I can't vouch for its current contents."

The comment told Johnny and Renny that if they made a break for it, anything might happen. It was not a comforting prospect.

So they marched along with downcast faces. The prospects appeared bleak.





## XLIII – Audacious Scheme

As they were marched through the fantastic terrain, Renny Renwick noticed something.

His eyes had been going to the hulking Jerico Hoan who was whistling tunelessly as if oblivious to the grimness of the general situation.

The big-**fisted** engineer elbowed Johnny Littlejohn. His voice became a husky whisper.

"Take a close look at that man-mountain," he undertoned.

Johnny did. His mouth became a pucker of distaste.

"A ruffian of the lowest order," he commented.

"Take a gander at his belt. Recognize it/"

Johnny <blinked> rapidly, then blanched.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" he hissed. "I do recognize it. That is Doc Savage's belt. The special one he wears that ..."

Renny's sharp elbow came into play again.

"Don't let anyone hear you. Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"If you're contemplating what I am cogitating," Johnny said glumly, "the fact that oaf is wearing Doc Savage's belt is further proof that Doc is deceased. He took it off the body before burying it."

Renny rumbled: "I'm thinking of that. I'm thinking if I can get hold that belt, I can make good use of it."

Johnny considered.

"That belt has special properties, I grant you. But how will you take it off him? He's half as big as a house."

Renny blocked-and-unblocked his monster **fists**.

"he doesn't look that tough to me. In fact, he's kind of sappy. Listen to him whistling like he's walking through central park."

"You may be correct," ventured Johnny. "But a fellow that Brobdingnagian in stature has little fear in the world."

Renny thumped: "If I get to see my chance, I'm taking it. Let Pat know so that she's prepared."

Johnny nodded. His eyes went to Pat Savage. The tawny girl looked grief-stricken. Her own eyes were rimmed in red. But they remained stubbornly dry.

He saw no point in letting her in on Renny's observation. Not just now. Jerico Hoan was hovering close by her side and might overhear.

They continued along and eventually came to the great pit that was the object of their task. There they discovered the 2 cowboys who hailed from Alliance, Nebraska. These men were swiftly untied and their gags taken off. They promptly got to their feet cursing.

Their violent expostulations were as much about their fear of hidden rattlesnakes as their recent captivity. Evidently the first ranny had spent so much time fretting about sidewinders lurking in the neighborhood that his confederate had caught the phobia. Both men were shaking in knock-kneed fashion.

The emerald-masked **Leader** walked up to them and snarled.

"A fine pair of guards you two turned out to be!"

"We did our best," said the first one.

"You're 'best' wasn't good enough," returned **Calamity** fiercely.

They looked crestfallen, downcast, and miserable. They inspected the toes of their boots wordlessly. Eventually their gaze lifted and they noticed Renny and Johnny towering over the other. One jabbed an accusatory finger in their direction.

"Those are the cultus hombres who ambushed us!"

"Those no-good no-accounts!" spat the other.

"Don't worry about them," said **Calamity**. "Get your nerves assembled. We have a lot to do."

The nervous pair looked relieved.

**Calamity** then turned and faced the others. He took a moment to pull from a pocket some matter which he slipped behind his green silk hood. He commenced chewing. It distorted his speech some which appeared to be intentional.

"Now most of you men are new. I've made some mighty tall promises. And now is the time to hear about what lies ahead."

There was a general *murmur* from the assembled outlaws. They had ridden a long monotonous way and were hungry for diversion.

Raising the antique percussion-style shotgun, **Calamity** became boastful.

"I am holding in my hand what may be the most powerful weapon ever devised by Man."



General skepticism greeted this pronouncement. Several of the men made faces suggesting they were trying to keep their expressions under control. A narrowing of eyes and a thinning of lips plainly told this. A few faces twitched.

"I took this off a greenhorn who had not much in the way of brains and even less in the matter of imagination. This man discovered the pit that you see before us. He was in his way a prospector. But he wasn't prospecting for gold or any of that typical stuff.

"He was after what scientists call 'rare earth'. Pitchblende. Radium. And an even rarer form of matter called Uranium. He found some of that stuff in this pit. It's the yellow matter. But he found something more. Something that he was learned enough to have read about and recognize when he came upon it."

Now **Calamity** had the attention of his men. They lost their skeptical demeanors.

"This greenhorn discovered that some of the Uranium had absorbed the property of a buried element known as **Repel**. It does what its name suggests. It pushes things away. It pushes them away in a manner that doesn't take 'no' for an answer.

"Somehow the Uranium took on some of the properties of the **Repel**. But only when it was ignited. This man discovered this by accident and mixed the **Repelanium** -- which is what he called the composite matter -- into ordinary shotgun pellets loaded with rock salt. The pellets blew out bursts of the **Repel** force.

"One day while experimenting, he discharged his shotgun by accident into a swimming hole. The water went straight up taking everything in the swimming hole with it. That was when he got ideas about getting rich.

"But he thought too small. He thought if he threatened ranchers with the loss of their well water, he could make a killing and go back to where he came from. But instead, he tangled with my old crew and tried to scrag me. He put this very shotgun to my head and threatened to pull both triggers."

This tale by now had everyone rapt.

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With his free hand, **Calamity** gave a violent shake. His fist came up holding a fat derringer that had not been there a second ago.

"Before he could pull the triggers," he said squeakily, "I had my holdout gun in hand and I threatened him with both barrels. Had them pressed right into his gut where they would do the most damage."

Someone laughed crudely. "Sounds to me like you had yourself the makings of a Mexican standoff."

"You aren't fare off," barked **Calamity**. "But he wasn't much of a hand with a scattergun. He up-and-surrendered on me. I got the scattergun as well as the diary in which he had recorded everything he

had done in Wyoming. When I finished reading it, I was seeing dollar signs in the sky. I'll tell you about that in a minute.

"But first, I feel it is important to demonstrate the power of this weapon so that there are no doubts as we undertake the work before us. You see, I intend for every man of my **Calamity** bunch to pack a similar weapon."

The masked gang Leader let that sink in.

Then he directed the shotgun toward the prisoners. Renny Renwick, Johnny Littlejohn, and Pat Savage barely had time to react. Nor did they.

Hulking Jerico Hoan was hovering beside them. Prudence would have dictated that he step away from the imminent shotgun blast.

Instead, he did the opposite lifting hands as large as hams.

"This is wholesale murder," the yellow Goliath said simply.

He did not make his voice hard or contrary. He simply stated a fact.

"So what if it is?" **Calamity** retorted. "We may be getting into the wholesale murder business. These three are just small potatoes."

"But every one of 'em is famous the Wide World over. You'll bring down a lot of fury on our heads. By killin' them, I mean. Maybe you want to think it over some."

"Careful, Big Sky. You're a little too free with your talk."

A deep concern registered on the gargantuan fellow's broad features.

"Told you before that I want no part of a murder rap. I don't mind muscle work or even a little dirty work. But this is too dirty for me."

The colorless eyes of **Calamity** were hard thorns nestled in the silk of his mask. The Damascus steel barrels of his shotgun did not waver. Nor did huge Jerico Hoan flinch from its empty cavities of doom.

Calamity continued chewing whatever was in his mouth. Soft *squeakings* could be heard. In the open space it sounded like mice at play.

Standing behind Jerico Hoan, Pat Savage's hands suddenly flew to her lips. She started.

*"I recognize that sound! I think I know who this man is!"*

*"It may not do us much good,"* murmured Johnny, *"given our present predicament."*

Jerico Hoan suddenly turned.



"You dry up and blow away, you animated collection of beef jerky."

Johnny was sometimes sensitive about his meatless anatomy. He could have put on 20 pounds and still been considered as thin as a rail. He expressed his indignation by puffing up his sunken cheeks like a bullfrog and blowing out angry air.

Pat lifted her voice. "I know who you are now. You had me abducted in Bison!"

This meant nothing to the assembled group.

**Calamity** seemed unconcerned by the accusation. He shrugged rather negligently and lowered the shotgun, unfired.

"Maybe you're right, Big Sky," he told Jerico. "There's still one of them that might be alive back at the ranch. And a couple more not in evidence. As long as one is breathing, the Doc Savage will try to hunt us down. But having a hostage squares matters."

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Abruptly he spun in place and **unloaded the scattergun in the direction of the 2 cowboys from Nebraska who were expecting nothing of the sort.**

The double charge blew them backward in the direction of the pit. Travelling horizontally for several yards, they suddenly veered upward as if caught by invisible hooks. They kept going. Their ignominious flight became completely vertical. If they uttered any outcry, it was lost in their rapid ascent.

All faces lifted as eyeballs followed the unfortunate pair.

Not a word was spoken. Jaws were dropping. But everyone was otherwise frozen in place.

"You are witnessing the awesome power of **Repel**," announced **Calamity** rather vaingloriously. "The power that each of you will soon control with me."

The 2 men did not quite become lost in sight as they hurtled upward. But they came close to it. They were a pair of dots that might have been turkey buzzards flying particularly high.

After what seemed like several breathlessly long minutes, the 2 dots commenced their sickening return to earth.

Now heads were turning away and eyes were being shielded. Some of the witnesses placed their palms over their ears to block out the sound that they knew was coming.

Both men were **screaming** at the top of their lungs as they returned to the barren expanse dubbed Sunken Springs. That sound would have drowned out the ugly thuds of their demise except that they did not exactly land in the normal fashion.

The screaming stopped. Rather abruptly. But it turned into a kind of baffled howling instead of the silence that would normally follow the impact of 2 human bodies striking solid ground.

This weird alteration of expectations caused the bravest among the group to wrench their eyes toward the strange crater.

The pair were floundering about not 10 yards above the center of the crater where the pit made a huge pock-mark in the cracked crust.

The 2 men squirmed and twisted like worms snared on fishhooks. Except that there was no visible hook. There was only empty air and an unseen force keeping them from string the ground.

**"Holy cow! Will you look at that!"**

Renny Renwick's booming exclamation was deafening. It jarred the fearful to peek.

One of the outlaw band cried out. "If that ain't the most stupefying thing I ever did see!"

"Damnation! What's holdin' them up?"

Calamity answered that nonchalantly.

"The same force that was packed in the shotgun shells - *Repel*. You can send a man screaming into the sky or hold him off the ground almost indefinitely."

Someone wanted to know: "You just gonna leave them up there? They're caterwaulin' to beat the damn band!"

**Calamity** said: "It is not possible for any man or any power known to rescue them. Deep in that pit lies *Repel*. Anyone attempting to step into the center of the crater will encounter the force. It will defeat him every time."

"But you can't let them die howlin' like coyotes, can you?"

"I'm used to hearing coyotes howl," said Calamity coldly. "But if anyone wants to put them out of their misery, have at it."

One man seemed to relish the prospect. It was Butch.

He had his revolver out and began triggering it. Tongues of leaping flame and clouds of gunsmoke erupted. He emptied the entire cylinder at the pair who were flayed by hot lead but could do nothing about it.

They ceased screaming, however. Blood began leaking from their bodies. Instead of dripping downward, it formed globules of varying sizes which streamed out like air bubbles from 2 fish and floated around the 2 corpses. The way they hung in midair **bleeding**-yet-lifeless was gruesome.

Pat Savage cried out: "How ghastly!"

No one else had much to say.



**Calamity** gave instructions.

"You men scoop up the yellowish deposits. Don't stray too close to the center of the pit. We'll make our bullets later. But get all you can. Fill sacks, saddlebags, pockets if you have to. We're going to need a lot if we're going to pull off what I got planned.

Jerico Hoan had been staring at the floating corpses with a kind of controlled horror etched upon his features. Now he tore his deeply black eyes from the horrific spectacle and asked:

"So what have you got planned?"

"Remember those yellow concrete **markers** we came across?"

"Sure do."

"Those are old airplane route markers. They were used to guide mail planes and the like. They're falling out of use with modern radio navigation. But some cross-country pilots still rely on them. They're kind of like milepost markers for highways in the sky. 'Skyways' they call them."

"So?"

"When I first got to experimenting with this scattergun, I made a lake levitate right up into the sky. A whole lake. It just so happened that a U.S. Airmail plane ran smack into this water and came to pieces. That gave me the idea."

"What idea?" asked Jerico drifting up quietly.

**Calamity** was reloading the percussion weapon and snapped it closed. He pointed it at big Jerico Hoan.

"The idea of blackmailing the airlines in this Country. Letting them know if they didn't pay one million each, I would levitate bodies of water for the planes to plow into. My gang in Gillette already sent out the demand letters. But I'm thinking they're not going to believe it until I demonstrate what I can do."

Jerico growled: "So you figure to knock down a passenger plane?"

**Calamity** chewed a moment squeakily.

"Bigger than that. I'm thinking about lifting Great Salt Lake into the sky just as an airliner is flying toward it. Between the lifting and the destruction of the plane, the airline companies are going to fall all over themselves to send us cash. Bales of it. And it will not stop there. Once we collect, we'll do the same thing next year and every year. We'll collect a cool million-a-year from every one of those big corporations."

Jerico Hoan's grin was a little fierce. "That's a lot of jack to split up."

"Now you understand why killing a few folks here-and-there doesn't amount to much," drawled **Calamity**.

"Yeah," said Jerico. "I can see that now."

**Calamity** was still holding his shotgun generally in the direction of the stupendous Goliath from Montana.

"Any objections?"

Jerico shrugged. "None that I can think of just right now."

"Good," said **Calamity**. "I would hate to have to send you shooting up to the topmost floor without an elevate car."

"I don't elevators much anyways."

The men finished collecting as much of the yellow stuff as possible. They filled every container they could.

**Calamity** watched them chewing thoughtfully. His mouth made strange squeaking noises.

"What's that you're chewin'?" wondered Jerico who was keeping an eye on the prisoners while the others collected the yellow deposits lying on the surface of the fractured crater.

"I got bum teeth," said **Calamity** abstractly. "chewing on things helps with the discomfort."

As if the question had reminded him of his habit of chewing, **Calamity** lifted the lower part of his silken hood and spit out what was in his mouth.

Jerico's eyes went to the matter that had been expelled. They showed faint surprise when they saw the moist tangle in the dirt. He grunted 2 words.

"Rubber bands?"

"They are the only things I can chew that don't come apart in my mouth," said **Calamity** dryly.

Behind Jerico, Pat Savage was whispering to the others.

"I'm positive I know who that hooded crook is. It's that general store proprietor - Kip Farr."

Jerico's ears picked up the whispering. But he did not react to the name. Evidently it meant nothing to him.

**Calamity** was saying: "We'll get back to the plane now and fly on to Gillette to pick up the others. They're waiting for us."

"What about these prisoners?" Jerico wanted to know.



"They're coming with us. We'll figure out what to do with them later."

Turning to the trio, Jerico made his voice harsh.

"You heard the boss man. You're being spared ... for now. So march!"

---

The march was not far along when there came a *buzzing* to the south.

A plane. They began searching the heavens for the aircraft.

Soon enough, it showed up. A small private job. Ivory with golden wings and trim. Pat Savage identified it for everyone.

*"Oh! That's my plane!"* she cried out. *"Long Tom must be at the controls."*

*"Maybe if he lands,"* Renny interjected, *"he can control of the bigger plane."*

This whispered idea evidently occurred to **Calamity** because he was suddenly whipping his men into action.

"We'll make a run for the other plane. We can't let him get to our ship. Without it, there's no way out of this forsaken landscape except on foot."

Since most of the **Calamity** bunchy were cowboys born and bred, the prospect of traversing the Badlands on foot was anathema to them.

There was a concerted run toward the descending craft.

Jerico shouted: "Want me to guard the prisoners?"

"With your life!" **Calamity** raged rushing off along with his men.

## XLIV – The Burning Belt

The private plane presumably being piloted by Long Tom Roberts buzzed around for a bit. Then it slammed down onto largely level ground.

The landing was abrupt, hasty, and more than a little reckless. The pilot was in a violent hurry. By all rights, the little aircraft should have done a wingover or experienced some similar aerial mishap.

But it did not. It did bounce twice, however, causing Renny Renwick and Johnny Littlejohn to take sharp indrawn breaths. Pat Savage gasped.

It was not possible to see the aircraft taxing to a halt owing to the many hoodoos and sandstone spires studding Sunken Springs. But it did not blow up in a ball of fire and smoke. So they knew that the pilot had made it.

"That flyboy sure knows his onions," remarked Jerico Hoan with no little admiration.

"He does," said Pat frostily. "And if you're smart, you'll let us go. The Law will never rest until the killers of Doc Savage are hunted down and punished."

The golden-eyed girl's warning caused Renny to stiffen. His eyes went to the bronze belt buckle that the big man wore. Blocking his fists, the gloomy-faced engineer decided to make his move.

Perhaps it was those fists doubling up to their robust size that caused Jerico Hoan's flat black eyes to snap in Renny's direction.

Hoan had been gripping Pat's six-shooter in one hand. Now he directed it toward the big-fisted engineer who was on the verge of springing at him.

"Think twice, Horse Face," Jerico warned him.

But Renny was in no mood for warnings. His hands knotting into mallets, he charged!

Jerico backpedaled suddenly and seemed not to know what to do with the six-shooter. Apparently forgetting it lacked a trigger, he <squeezed> the trigger guard in vain. Then his thick thumb went in search of the hammer.

Renny's roundhouse right would have taken the head off another man. But somehow Jerico managed to duck and weave to one side and come up behind the big engineer. Renny <blinked>. It happened so fast that it was as if the mild-mannered Goliath had evaporated.

Giving up on the six-gun, Jerico pocketed it and growled.

"I guess you want that larrupin' after all."

Renny swung with his other fist bellowing: "I can lick you any day of the week!"



Jerico's fist connected first. Somehow.

By some legerdemain of fisticuffs, Renny felt rock-hard knuckles connect with the side of his head. His skull snapped around taking his entire body with it. He staggered off dazed.

"I guess today must be 'Moonday'," chuckled Jerico. " 'Cause it ain't any of the other 7 days of the week. And I just licked you one-handed."

By this time, Johnny Littlejohn came charging in.

Jerico spun ... took hold of the gangling archaeologist with both sweeping arms ... and lifted him off his feet sending him spinning away. Johnny ended up in a tangle of awkwardly bent limbs. He did not seem to be particularly injured.

Out came the big six-shooter again. It was directed at Pat Savage.

"I think I got this contraption figured out now. You pull back on the hammer and look for a fight. Is that right?"

Pat gave him a withering look. "You wouldn't shoot a woman, would you?"

"I wouldn't shoot anybody if I didn't have to," countered Jerico coolly. "So don't make me have to."

-----

While Renny and Johnny were getting themselves organized collecting their scrambled senses, the **moan** of a superfiring machine pistol came from far away.

Answering shots rang. The **crack** of assorted revolvers. Their **bark** and **bite** made it sound like mechanical dogs snapping at one another.

The superfirer croaked like a monstrous bullfrog occasionally hooting like a spooked owl. Eventually it fell silent. All the firing did.

Jerico turned his attention toward the landed plane.

"Sounds like that dogfight has been settled."

He looked worried.

Abruptly the yellow-skinned Goliath clambered up a 50-foot mass of stone and peered over the crest for some minutes. Then he slid back to earth with careless disregard for his own person. His eyes appeared clouded and unfocused.

They waited. Renny and Johnny climbed to their feet. But neither seemed to be in a fighting mood. Renny particularly appeared to have borne the brunt of it.

**Calamity** and about half of his men showed up with Long Tom Roberts walking in front with both hands upraised. His arm sling was gone and he looked perfectly defeated.

The dispirited Electrical Genius sported 2 black eyes, a leaking nose, and appeared to have lost one of the gold incisors that he wore in the front of his mouth.

"Oh," said Pat. "They knocked out one of Long Tom's gold teeth."

Jerico grunted. "That doesn't look like the worst of it."

"You don't understand," said Pat firmly. "Long Tom has quite a temper. Anytime someone knocks out one of those teeth, he finds a way to repay the favor."

Jerico Hoan did not look impressed.

"He looks more than a little outnumbered now, don't he?"

Pat studied the big bruiser. Her aureate **eyes** widened when they caught the gleam of his belt **buckle**.

"I recognize that belt! It belongs to Doc Savage."

Without taking his eyes off the approaching group, Jerico nodded.

"Took it off the man myself. Fits almost as good on me as it did on him."

"You're a monster! A cold unfeeling monster!" snapped Pat. "Doc Savage is ... was ... one of the greatest men who ever lived!"

Then catching herself, she began to be wracked by sobs.

Jerico Hoan favored with a glance that harbored a particle of sympathy.

"Don't cut up so. Everybody's gotta die someday."

**Calamity** came up and stared at the looming giant speculatively.

"I was half afraid you might've done something foolish when we went out hunting."

Jerico <blinked>. "Foolish? Like what?"

"On account of you're kind of queasy about killing. I was afraid you might let the prisoners go."

"And get myself shot into the sky for a turncoat?" Jerico shook his slovenly head. "Thank you kindly. But no thank you. I'm not rat but rather a member in good standin' with the **Calamity** bunch. And I aim to keep it that way."

**Calamity** nodded his head so that his emerald hood rustled softly like the muffled slithering of a sidewinder. His eyes were as flinty as arrowheads.



"Glad to hear it. Now let's all take a walk. The sun is starting to go down. It's going to get right cool. We could all use with a little warmth."

Jerico <blinked> again. "Walk? Walk where?"

"Just follow me."

Long Tom was roughly shoved into the small clot of prisoners that included Renny, Johnny, and Pat.

Renny rumbled: "A fine rescue party you turned out to be! Getting yourself captured."

Long Tom snapped back. "Look who's talking! You all got yourselves captured."

The wiry Electrical Expert looked around. He counted heads and mused:

"This would be a good time for Doc Savage to show up."

Jerico Hoan chuckled abruptly. It was a bit of a cracked chuckle. Perhaps even a nervous one.

"I guess he ain't got the telegram yet," he said to no one in particular.

Long Tom regarded him dubiously.

Johnny offered in a tired voice: "They claim that Doc Savage is dead."

Long Tom seemed not to take the news very seriously.

"I've read those exact words in top newspapers. And they always proved to be bunk."

"Buried him myself. Took his fancy belt as a souvenir," said Jerico. "Now let's get a move on! We got some walkin' to do."

Long Tom noticed the belt then. His eyes fell upon the **bronze** buckle and flew wide. Then he flew into a rage!

Yelling something incomprehensible, Long Tom Roberts jumped Jerico Hoan without thinking of consequences. One was when his **bloody** nose acquired a second leak. The hulking Goliath simply lifted a fist in front of him and the overmatched electrical engineer ran directly into it. He rebounded hard and then landed on the seat of his pants. He shook his head like a dazed dog.

Without seeming to make any effort, Jerico sagged down ... bundled Long Tom under one arm ... and toted him as if he were a canine pet.

-----

Dusk was darker than the immediate surroundings when they came to the edge of the burning coal seam. The **heat** was terrific! It evaporated the sweat off their faces and made their suddenly-dry eyes <blink> furiously in response.

When Jerico saw this, he remarked quietly: "We're not down here to warm up, are we?"

**Calamity** eyed him with flinty challenge.

"What do you think, Big Sky?"

"I think I'm going to be a little sick," muttered Jerico, his hearty voice suddenly wavering.

The prisoners were made to sit down. While **Calamity** and his men conferred, giant Jerico loomed over the miserable quartet.

Renny was snapping out of his punch-drunk stupor while Long Tom Roberts suddenly sat up. The latter took hold of his head and groaned interminably.

"Did a truck hit me?"

A gunman laughed. "No. You hit the truck."

Johnny Littlejohn said in a thick dispirited voice: "It is increasingly evident that this marks the exordium of the ultimate terminus."

Renny Renwick looked <blank>.

Long Tom offered: "Johnny means the beginning of the End. In other words, they plan to do us in."

Studying the **blistering** crack in the earth, Pat Savage asked: "Do you suppose they'll just toss us over like so much cordwood? Or will they do us the mercy of putting a bullet in our heads beforehand?"



Renny was slow to realize their immediate peril. He looked around the group and studied the **flames** leaping up from deep below.

"I'm not ready to die just yet. But if I have to go, I'm taking a few outlaws with me."



"I'm taking them all," vowed Long Tom.

Suddenly, the undersized electrical engineer looked up at big Jerico Hoan. His pale eyes got crafty.

"If I'm going to die, then I'm going to die. But before you pitch me into that hot crack, you might want my wristwatch."

Long Tom raised his shirtsleeve and exposed a watch that was obviously expensive and perhaps custom-made. The casing was substantial indicating that it housed inordinately complicated works.

"Why would I want that thing?" Jerico grunted. "The band is too small for my wrist."

"It's an expensive watch," said Long Tom. "There isn't another one like it in the World. You could hock it. It's probably worth a hundred dollars."

Jerico almost laughed. "One hundred dollars for a watch? Are you funnin' me?"

Long Tom dangled the watch saying: "Take it or leave it."

"You don't fool me," said Jerico. "I get caught wearin' that watch after you're dead and they'll try to pin your murder on me. Thanks for nothing."

"In that case," interjected Johnny, "you might want to get rid of that **belt**."

Jerico did have to think about this very long.

"You must be a mind-reader. I've been thinking those exact same thoughts myself."

And without further ado, he unbuckled the **belt** and yanked it out of its loops. The belt was substantial, the leather thick, and evidently constructed from 2 straps hand-stitched together.

Drifting close to the **burning** gash, Jerico peered down. He contemplated its **fiery** maw for some moments, never once taking his eyes completely off the prisoners seated nearby. He seemed to be thinking long and hard.

Reaching into one pocket, he drew forth what appeared to be a fishing line. To the end of this was affixed a device of some sort. A knot of steel. He began plucking at it. A single hook popped out. He hung the **bronze** belt buckle on this and then slowly lowered the belt down into the **fiery** fissure.

Jerico concealed all these actions with his broad back so that the others did not see them. But it would have been evident to anyone observing him closely that he was attempting to burn the evidence of Doc Savage's death.

*Yet something caused him to hesitate.*

He dangled the belt well above the **burning** coal just enough to cause tendrils of smoke to appear as the high heat singed the edges of the leather. When this happened, he pulled the belt higher so that it did not fully ignite.

Jerico seemed indecisive about this.

**Calamity** soon came back with some of his men. They had drawn their revolvers anew.

"It's time for the dirty work to commence," he said loudly.

"Well then, I guess it's time," Jerico said morosely. "No sense avoidin' the inevitable."

Striding forward, **Calamity** demanded: "Any objections?"

Jerico did not completely turn around. "Just one."

"What is that?"

"You got to spare the gal."

Instead of answering, **Calamity** stuck out his jaw causing the lower portion of his green hood to jut out.

"In another minute, you're going to push me too far, Big Sky."

"I told you I don't cotton to killin'."

"Do you want trouble?"

"It won't be the first time I've had it," Jerico said glancing down into the **burning** coal bed.

They stood almost boot toe to boot toe. **Calamity** was tall. But Jerico Hoan seemed to belong to another order of human being. He was not only more than a head taller than the **masked** man but also broader of beam and deeper of chest.

The 2 men glared at each other. There was something in Jerico's gargantuan size and the impressive quietness with which he stood his ground that was menacing.

For **Calamity** held his shotgun pointed downward toward the other's boots. There was no mistaking what would happen to the big man from Montana if either trigger was pulled.

"Unless one of you learned to fly a plane since we landed, we're going to need a pilot," Jerico went on casually. "The gal will be the easiest one of the lot to handle."

The face of **Calamity** could not be seen. Visible through the slits in his mask, his colorless eyes were coldly expressionless. But from the way his body stiffened, decision gripped him abruptly.

-----  
Calling over to the others, he said: "Two of you pull the girl aside and keep her alive."

This was done. Pat was roughly seized and dragged off. She resisted. A gun butt was raised in warning.



"Go with them, Pat," Renny encouraged. "There's no need for you to die, too."

Pat hurled back: "I'm no coward! I'm a Savage through and through! Right down to the ground!"

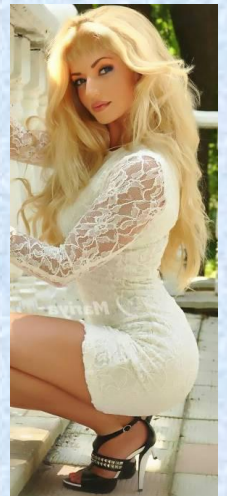
XX

They took Pat out of sight ...

... and promptly began *raping the hell out her!*

"So you're no coward, huh?" snarled a heavysset man. "We'll see how brave you are after you get a dozen **dicks** slammed up into your filthy cunt."

Pat was momentarily stunned. But she was not surprised.



"C'mere, **Bitch!** How are we goin' to see your 'whisker biscuit' with all them damn clothes on?"

Everyone laughed at that. Except Pat, of course, whose golden **eyes** radiated **HATE**.

They started to undress her. She resisted. They got rough ...





"Goddamn you, **Whore!** When I say strip, you better damn well strip!"

"**Fucking Bitch! Take that!!**"



Pat cursed them soundly as they manhandled her and removed her clothes.



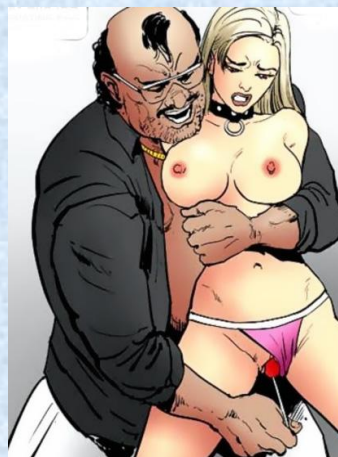


"C'mon, pretty lady. Give your daddy some sugar."

"Yeah. We needs some luvins before we pork you, **Slut.**"



Pat *groaned* as they sampled her full tits and probed her pussy.



Expecting the worse, she prepared herself for what she knew was coming ...





A 14" fat black **penis** suddenly speared her vagina. It took her breath away before she *screamed* out.



He thrashed and thrashed and thrashed away filling her tender vagina with his **impregnating** black seed.





And as soon as he was done, another bastard quickly took his place!

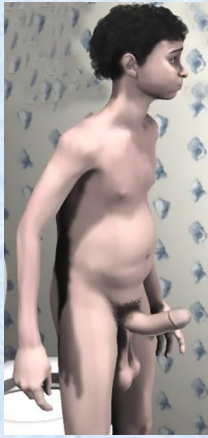


At the end of 2 hours, it seemed like every man had spent himself on her.





Though their bodies were tired, their perverted spirits were not. From nowhere appeared some **young teenage boys** who had been watching the gang-raping of the beautiful **bronze**-haired woman. The young perverts were quite excited!



"Go git 'er!" the men encouraged. "Do it just like we did. She's a whore!"

"Don't you dare!" Pat warned.

"Oh, shut up **Slut**!" a man spat. "Meet Private Penis!"

That caused a roar of laughter as a little pervert shoved himself deep into Pat's cunt.

"Owwww!" cried Pat.



It hurt more than she expected. Perhaps because the men had already nearly torn her apart before.

"Grr-r-r-r-r!" groaned a boy as he pumped furiously.

"You're the man!" encouraged a male onlooker. "Sock it to her!"









Pat's golden eyes widened in fear as the boy approached her with the 15" artificial penis flopping up&down on his tummy.

"He'll split me apart!" she thought to herself.

"Don't put that thing in me!" she yelled.

"That 'thing' is what you can call 'Captain Cock'," a man said.

Then he told the boy: "Just be sure you take it off so your *junk* can go into her."

Pat started to *scream* in anticipation. If anything, it was even worse!



"Ya-Ya-Ya-Ya!" the boy grunted as he hammered away in Pat's cunt.

"Stop it! Stop it, you little bastard!" Pat cried in pain.



"Don't listen to her, boy," the men admonished. "Knock her up good!"

Almost synonymous with his words, Pat felt repeated *globbs* of sticky salty semen squirt up into her ravaged but still quite fertile womb.



She was too sore and humiliated to retain her previous pride. She quietly sobbed as all gathered around to watch *semen* from many donors slowly ooze out of her cunt.





## RAPED & IMPREGNATED



*In a Parallel Universe ...*





If Pat Savage thought that nothing more degrading could be done to her by these bastards, she was very wrong.

She heard a **"Woof! Woof!"** barking noised. She turned around to see some large **dogs** looking intently at her sperm-covered naked body. Their tails were not wagging. Nor were their tongues. They were making pitiful-sounding whining noises. And worse of all ... their **penises** were red and swollen.

She pleaded with the men.

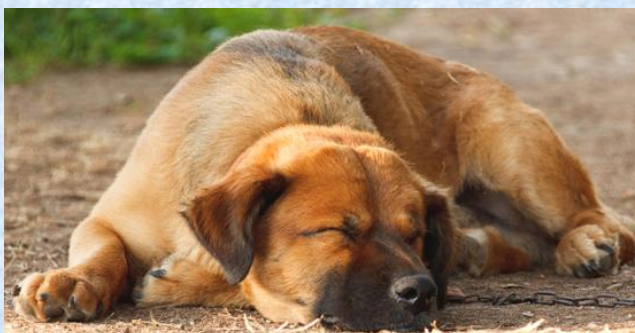
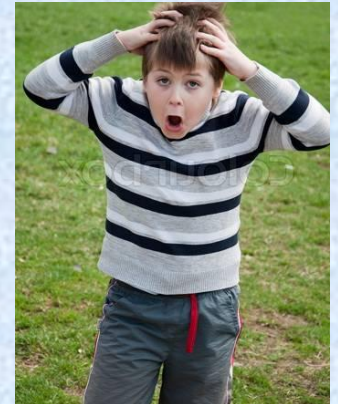
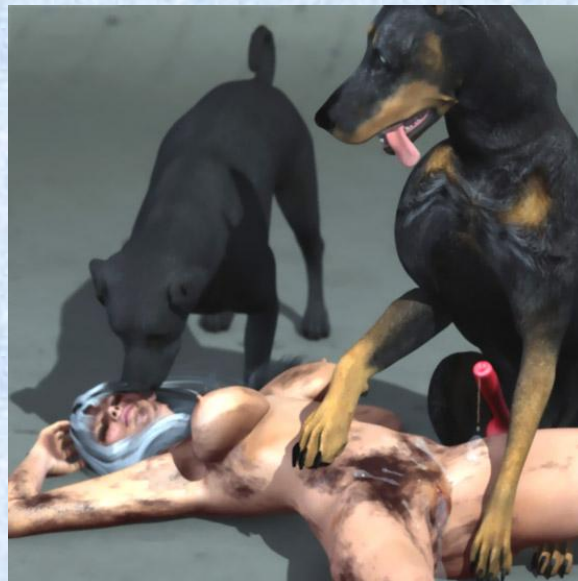
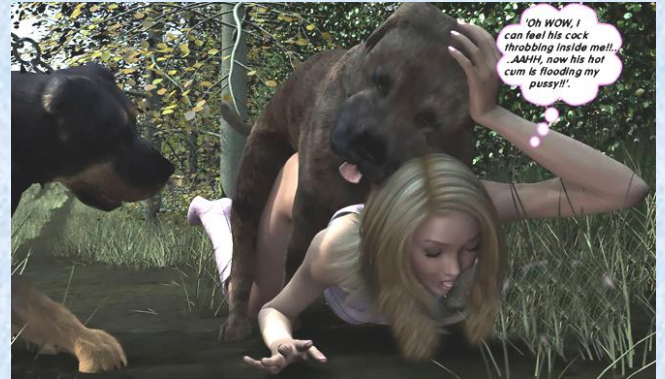
"You can't ... you can't be serious! After all you've done to me!"

"You look horny as a toad to us, **Whore**. Maybe these doggies can satisfy you."



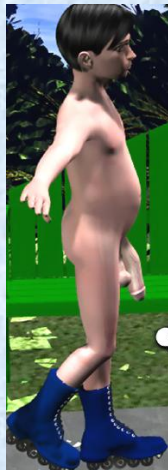
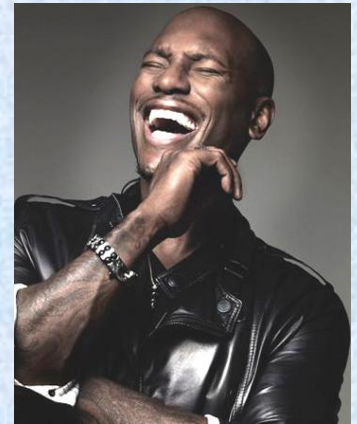
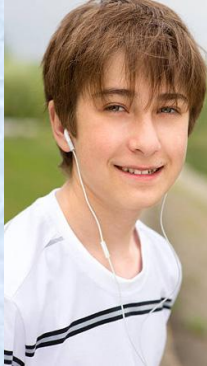
Pat was just too weak to resist. She even found it hard to yell as the dogs quickly started humping her. Their biology enabled to leak some **"pre-cum"** before they knotted inside her womb to discharge their **puppy-making** seeds.







They spit and **urinated** on her as they prepared to take her back. The sophisticated and elegant **bronze**-haired woman looked like a cheap \$20 used French street **whore**!



[Fat & Pregnant]

But Pat Savage would recover from her sexual abuse. She had an unexplainable remarkable ability to somehow heal herself. Maybe it was the Savage bloodline. It would only be a matter of weeks for her stretched-out vagina and rectum to return to their original firmness. She would be virgin-tight again! But could she escape future rapes and gang-bangs????

**Calamity** regarded Jerico.

"You got brains in that muscle, Big Sky. Brains are the only commodity in the World that could be worth one million dollars-a-pound or not the thin dime. Once you learn to take orders, you'll be quite valuable."

Jerico turned his attention back to the hot **coals** frying before him.

"Then what do you say? Suppose we quit getting' in each other's hair."

"Suits me."

But neither of the 2 strange hard men made a move to shake hands.

**Calamity** noticed that Jerico seemed to be in the act of fishing.

"What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"Getting' ready to burn the evidence that Doc Savage is dead. I don't want no tie-up to that. Even in his grave, Savage probably has ways of gettin' even with folks who cross him."

"Good thinking. When you're done, you can pitch the 3 prisoners into the furnace."

Jerico Hoan stiffened. His eyes grew narrow.

"I told you how I feel about murder.

"Sure you did. And that's why you're going to do the deed," sneered **Calamity**. "There's a lot worse ahead of us. We may have to slaughter a few hundred people to make a point and collect our first million. You've got that old six-shooter in your waistband. It's high time you learn to use it."

Jerico continued to stare down into the **coal seam**. His eyes grew clouded.

Intime, he shrugged one enormous shoulder ... then the other ... and quietly said:

"If you say so, Boss."

"I say so," said **Calamity** in a cold voice.

Jerico emitted a good-hurt sound like a man who had just pulled a cactus sticker out of himself.

The big brute began lowering the leather belt. Once again, it took to *sizzling* and gave off tendrils of black smoke.

Half under his breath, Jerico began speaking. The words were unintelligible.

Hearing the unfamiliar syllables, **Calamity** demanded: "What's that? What's that you say?"

Without taking his eyes off the belt, Jerico Hoan remarked:



"Just sayin' a little Indian prayer. I'm half Shoshone myself. Guess I never told you that."

"Just make it snappy."

"Snappy it is," said Jerico returning to his muttered prayer.

Sitting on the ground, the three Doc Savage men became unnaturally animated. Their eyes started to get round and they turned pale. Renny's severe mouth twisted in a way that might have been a smile or a grimace. The way the long-faced engineer's dour countenance was arranged, it was hard to tell.

As Jerico concluded his Indian chant, the leather belt he sent into the yellow flames was suddenly a **fire**. Tendrils of smoke turned into a sudden gush of intensely black malodorous **vapor**.

The uprush of **smoke** was startling in its abruptness. And before anyone could remark upon that, Jerico Hoan suddenly twisted his great body and brought the burning belt swinging up-and-out at the end of the fishing line.

The burning belt went careening through the air landing in the middle of the group holding Pat Savage. Upon impact, it produced a great upwelling of black **smoke** which caused an immediate and understandable uproar.

Pat recognized the acrid smell right away. "***Tear gas!***"

The **bronze**-skinned beauty sounded positively giddy with excitement!

## XLV – Hell and Damnation

Almost instantly, the startled gunmen were pawing at their eyes and groping for their weapons. They milled about bumping into one another cursing the *stinging* cloud, each other, and the World in general.

Whirling, Pat Savage slipped around and industriously kicked shins with her riding boots. She dropped anyone she encountered with her surprisingly hard brown fists. The tawny beauty moved fast paying no attention to the fact that she could not see clearly and was having trouble breathing.

The masked **Calamity** was fast on his feet. His mental processes were not sluggish either. He took one look at the confusion that had befallen his men and swung the clumsy-looking shotgun on gargantuan Jerico Hoan.

"You double-crosser!"

**Calamity** had previously lowered the antique scattergun. That was his mistake. Jerico Hoan was moving on him closing with a *blinding speed* that defied easy description.

The feather-decorated gun lifted. One great **hand** shot out and knocked the double muzzle aside while simultaneously wrenching off the emerald hood.

The face that stared back at him was unfamiliar. Strong emotion may have rendered it unrecognizable. For the revealed visage was very surprised. *Shock* eddied across his square **sunburnt** features.

**Calamity** felt the shotgun leave his suddenly-number fingers. Howling in *pain*, he shook both hands. Out of the tooled leather cuffs on his wrists dropped a matched set of palm pistols. Double-barreled derringers!

Snarling, he brought this up and triggered one. Jerico Hoan narrowly evaded the first coughing shot. The slug whistled harmlessly past his burly bicep.

Backpedaling, Jerico reached into his waistband and yanked out Pat Savage's formidable six-shooter. Showing a sudden and unexpected familiarity with the weapon, he <cocked> it with his thumb and fired it in **Calamity**'s direction.

The first bullet seemed to surprise both shooter and his target. It struck one arm high up drawing **blood** and causing **Calamity** to jerk half around crying out in *pain*.

Strangely, Jerico made a sound that was either a mutter or a sigh. It was impossible to tell which because shock or surprise at having nearly blown his boss's head off twisted it up in his throat.

Thumbing open the smoking revolver's loading gate, he gave the cylinder a quick spin and noted 5 still-unfired cartridges. Then he <snapped> the weapon back to proper working order.



Aiming at **Calamity**, he <rocked> the hammer back and dropped it on a fresh cartridge. The barrel gushed out bitter **tear gas**. Jerico was forced to backpedal even further. He apparently had expected something other than **tear gas**.

By now the swelling **smoke** cloud was creeping in from the other party. The **tear gas** mixed with it filling the immediate vicinity. Eyes began smarting and leaking prodigious tears.

Still clutching his matched derringers, **Calamity** fired wildly in almost every direction. But his lead struck nothing mortal. When the hammers <clicked> futilely, he flung the useless pistols aside.

There was a frantic rushing about in which Doc Savage's men fully participated. They had been knocked around quite a bit and were not at their best. Now they employed their fists and used them with great relish.

A gun came up and released a clap of powder noise. The weapon coughed again. The wielder yanked a second pistol from a belted holster and attempted firing two-gun style. He was not very good at it.

A cloud of hastily-aimed slugs hit a towering hoodoo causing sections to be knocked off. Sandstone splinters sailed away swirling like **reddish** snowflakes. A bullet sang off a boulder.

Before that furious storm of lead, most combatants ducked or froze in place.

Both smoking cylinders ceased revolving. The foolish gunman had emptied them in a useless display.

Renny Renwick pounced. He struck the man in the nose with monster **knuckles**. The paralyzing blow knocked the latter loose from his guns. The long-faced engineer scooped up both and threw one of them to Long Tom Roberts.

In the haze of **smoke** and stinging **gas**, they reloaded from the prone man's cartridge belt while the other gunmen got themselves organized.

The big six-shooter looked like a toy in Renny's giant fist. His eyes leaking, he hunted foes and swiftly located one of the **Calamity** bunch shifting about with an old .38-55 carbine rifle trying to draw a bead on a suitable moving target.

Unable to insert his huge trigger finger into the guard properly, Renny found the hammer of the gun and <rocked> it back. It jumped in his massive fist. The **roar** of the exploding weapon threatened to deafen him.

The rifleman yelped and stepped back clutching at the place where his left arm hinged strangely between elbow and shoulder. The carbine clattered to the ground discharging from the abrupt jarring.

The tumbling .38-55 slug found lodgment in the face of a stalking **Calamity** gunhand. It created a kind of keyhole where the fellow's nose had been. He dropped stone dead.

Another gunman stepped up and aimed. Long Tom's six-gun blew out loud smoky noise. The second gunman's hand and revolver became a shattered tangle. He yodeled in *pain*.

From somewhere in the smoke, another six boomed out. Bellowing, Renny felt of the top of his head where a bullet put a part in his hair. A part in the wrong direction (it was that close).

The hulking engineer spun to throw roaring enraged words. He sounded like a longhorn bull on the prod. Renny could not see who had shot at him through the **smoke**.

But Johnny Littlejohn had. He rushed forward and managed to kick the revolver out of the aiming man's hands. It flew away.

Johnny pitched against his disarmed foe causing him to lose his hat. They staggered about struggling and went down in a pile. Over-and-over on the ground they tumbled, Johnny swinging bony fists with arms as long as fishing poles.

The would-be killer bit a Johnny's throat like a mad animal. Straddling the tangle of flailing limbs, Renny pulled the fellow's head away with both huge hands gripping hair and ears.

They separated. Everyone got to their feet. The gunman clawed for another pistol somewhere inside his clothing. Producing a short-barreled Colt, he pointed it at Johnny.

"Holy cow!" yelled Renny. "A live one!"

The gunman switched the bulldogged blue back-and-forth as if uncertain whom to plug first. It was a mistake.

Hampered by his injured arm, Long Tom was winding the stem of his oversized wristwatch. He slipped up behind the gunman and <pressed> a small electrode that was suddenly jutting out against the nape of the man's neck. A slight *buzzing* sound emitted.

Shaking strangely, the victim flounced once after the *jolt* hit him. The impact threw the jittering man off his feet. His limbs quivered a little and then spread slackly as he measured his full length on the ground.

"Shock watch," puffed Long Tom. "It generates a stinging *electrical* charge. Kind of on the order of a miniature cattle prod."

Renny felt of his scalp and brought his huge hand away sticky with **blood**. He <blinked>.

"You tried to jolt that Jerico with it, didn't you?"

Long Tom shrugged. "Where did that guy get to, anyway?"

Renny shrugged his enormous shoulders helplessly.



The expanding pall of black **smoke** had spread out fully. It made rushing about particularly dangerous owing to the frightening nearness of the **burning** coal seam.

His eyes blinded half-shut, **Calamity** showed presence of mind. He dropped to his knees and began groping about for his fallen shotgun.

Seeing this through the increasing haze, Jerico fired the six-shooter into the **smoke** seemingly wildly. Not all of the cartridges exploded were tear gas shells. When he realized this, a strange expression came over his brutish features.

Pocketing the gun, he lunged for **Calamity** whose frantic fingers finally found his weapon.

Striving to his feet, Calamity brought the shotgun to bear. But he was almost completely blind. Stamping around in a circle, he prepared to unleash both barrels in no particular direction.

Realizing the danger, Jerico shouted: "Looking for me? I'm standing over here!"

Then he moved to one side like a streak of yellowish lightning. *The silence of his fleeing was uncanny.*

His voice, too, was different. It was stronger. More powerful. It did not sound like that of an ordinary human being. Such a voice might have thundered down from Mount Olympus in ancient days.

"Who is that?" **Calamity** rasped.

The powerful voice replied: "**Doc Savage.**"

Hearing this, **Calamity** became enraged. He fired once. Then set himself to unleash the second barrel in a completely different direction. He must have believed that this would achieve his murderous aims. The first shot cleanly missed his target.

But the blast did not miss entirely. It struck someone who was running around aimlessly in the evil **eye-stinging** smoke. That person was blown off his feet. He bawled out of shock and surprise.

Then with a helpless caterwauling, he went straight up into the sky.

"Well? Did I get you?" howled **Calamity**.

Instead of receiving a reply, the outlaw leader found unbreakable **bands of steel** gripping his tooled-leather cuffs. He was trapped. He could not move. He knew this.

**Calamity** tried kicking but to no avail. He attempted slamming his forehead against his foe. Painfully, he encountered nothing less than an unmoving obstacle that might have been made of solid brick.

"You can't be **Doc Savage**," **Calamity** screamed. "You just can't be!"

Abruptly, he ceased to struggle.

Holding his foe firmly, Doc Savage forced the man's arms up, the long shotgun barrels pointing skyward all while keeping his Herculean body out of the way of the double muzzles. The *tear gas* was getting into his eyes also and it was soon going to be difficult not to flee the vicinity to escape its stinging bite.

**Calamity** somehow mustered his courage.

"You had better let me go."

"And why is that?"

"Because I have a third hideout gun. It's mounted in my belt buckle. All I have to do is stick out my stomach and pressure will trigger the release. The gun will snap forward on a pivot and fire automatically. You probably know what that will do to your bare belly."

"I do," admitted Doc Savage.

It might have been a bluff. Or it could have been the truth. Doc Savage could not see clearly enough to tell.

He released one of the man's cuffs. Wrenching his entire frame, **Calamity** pulled loose from the other leaving the **Bronze Man** clutching his mate.

No derringer report sounded. It had been a bluff after all.

The **bronze** giant snapped out a hand. It missed his foe but captured the shotgun. Finding the trigger by feel, Doc sent the remaining charge exploding harmlessly upward. Cracking open the action, he twisted the scattergun in two in his *mighty* hands sending each half flying in opposite directions.

Thinking his own weapon was hunting him, **Calamity** broke and ran. Doc charged after him. Amid the smoke and the confusion, he collided with Renny Renwick whose grunting bellow of surprise shook the night.

They grappled briefly. Renny thumped: "Who have I got?"

"Doc Savage."

Realization sinking in, Renny let go.

"You were Jerico. You spoke *Mayan*, not Shoshone."

"**Calamity** is trying to flee."

Renny grunted: "He won't get far. Not in this *tearful* soup."

The 2 men broke apart and continued searching. Doc Savage rapped out additional instructions in the *Mayan* tongue which all of his aides knew. Pat Savage understood a smattering, too.



Hearing the familiar tones, Pat suddenly yelled: "Doc? **Doc**? Am I dreaming?"

"I was Jerico," the **Bronze Man** returned in English.

Pat Savage was struck speechless. It took a moment for her to recover. And when she did, she coughed out: "I don't know whether to laugh or to bawl my eyes out. But when this is over with, I'm going to give you the tongue lashing of your life. You let me to believe you were dead, you ... you brass-faced Indian!"

"It was necessary to locate the Repel deposit in order to smash the scheme," returned Doc Savage. "I could not allow the **Calamity** gang to suspect who I was."

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Then there was no more time for talk. Six-guns blazed here-and-there and it became dangerous to move around. The **smoky** air all-but-seemed to fill with **vicious** wasps and hornets chasing one another in anger.

In the Mayan language, Doc Savage called out for everyone to drop prone to the ground. His men were well-trained. They obeyed instantly.

There came a horrible sound. A piercing wail of **pain**.

Then a hoarse tearing **screaming** resounded.

The frenzied **screaming** kept going on-and-on. Mortal **terror** was thick in its vibrations. This vocal pandemonium was accompanied by a sickening **hissing** and **sizzling** that sounded as if a side of beef had been thrown into a campfire.

But it was not a side of beef. A human being had blundered through the **tear-gas** cloud and over the lip of the fissure in the earth and fallen to his destruction amid the unquenchable **flames**.

Death was not instantaneous. It was accompanied by a wordless **howling** ... a spurt of **profanity** ... and then a prolonged agonized **groan** that died even as the horrible **sizzling** cooking sounds continued unabated.

Eventually the **smoke** cleared and their eyes became functional again. His **bronze** features fixed, Doc Savage went among the fallen.

One man had died from a gunshot wound evidently fired by a confederate. Others were dazed. Doc and Renny rolled them over so that their faces could be seen and then knocked them out with their fists.

The **metallic** giant picked up weapons dropped by the defeated gunmen. With a quick blow from the barrel of each on the breach of the other, he shattered off the hammers. Most were single-action guns, nearly impossible to use without the hammers.

After this was done, they counted heads.

Long Tom said: "There's a bunch of them I mowed down back at the landing spot. We'll have to load them into the plane."

Still in his Jerico Hoan disguise, Doc Savage nodded.

"I do not see the man who was back of the scheme. The unknown individual who had borrowed the name of '**Mr. Calamity**' but called himself simply '**Calamity**'."

"The first bird is dead," Long Tom snorted. "I dug up his head. Bright red **hair**, lizard-green **eyes**. No mistaking it for anybody else."

Doc advised: "I found the head in the barn, Long Tom."

Renny grunted without sympathy. "You don't suppose that it was **Calamity** that fell into the **hot-coal** crack, do you?"

Doc nodded somberly. "That is my conclusion. Unpleasant as it may be."

Renny looked sanguine. "Maybe not as unpleasant as it could have been. If his scheme had taken off, that is."

No one showed much inclination to gaze down into the burning coal seam. But the **sizzling** coming from below was all that they needed to know. That and the smoke which carried a horrid **stench** that none of them would ever forget.

Eventually, Long Tom Roberts drifted to the edge braving the heat. He peered downward. But what remained of the man was hardly recognizable as such.

Rejoining the others, he muttered: "Talk about ending up in **Everlasting Fire**."

"Guess he got a head start shoveling coal in the **Hot Place**," snorted Renny.

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Spreading out, they looked over the fallen. They paid particular attention to their features.

"I do not see the unmasked bang leader among the survivors," Doc said grimly.

"That settles it then," rumbled Renny.

Pat Savage walked up to her cousin and said with tears in her eyes that were not entirely the result of stinging gas: "I don't know whether to hug you or smack you silly, you Big **Bronze** Hunk."

"I will settle for a smile," said Doc rather wearily.

Then he asked: "Pat, what was loaded in your six-gun?"

"Oh, a combination of **tear gas** and mercy bullets. Why?"



"I had expected only mercy bullets. The **tear gas** came as an unpleasant surprise."

"You sound disappointed," said Pat.

"Mercy bullets would have accounted for more of the gang humanely."

"I'd say in your case, the **gas** came in right handy."

"The first shot I loosed proved to be lead," said the **Bronze Man**. "That was the most unpleasant surprise of all. Normally you leave one chamber empty in order to avoid an accidental discharge."

"This was a special circumstance," explained Pat. "I was going into battle."

"Someone might have been killed by accident," admonished Doc gravely.

Pat glanced around the now-quiet battlefield.

"It appears to me," she said levelly, "that they brought all this on themselves."

Doc made no reply. The fact that his smokescreen of potent tear gas had led to at least 2 deaths was sobering. But criminals who went up against the **Man of Bronze** often had a way of destroying themselves in the end.

He began removing the black glass eye-shells which concealed the true color of his orbs. His flake-gold eyes were thus revealed.

Next, he extracted a set of dental plates that had distorted the natural appearance of his teeth. The facial appliances that contorted his regular features would have to wait.

While he did so, the **metallic** giant explained for Pat Savage's benefit the secret of the leather belt that had burned up with such spectacular and distressing effects.

"The special belt consisted of 2 segments. Each held a different substance pressed between the leather layers. One side contained a compound which when burned produced black **smoke**. The other housed a chemical mixture formulated to generate **tear gas** through ignition. Between the 2 halves of the belt, there were sufficient noxious gases to overcome the **Calamity** gang and its leader."

Pat averted her gaze from the superheated coal seam.

"I wonder if we'll ever learn who the original '**Mr. Calamity**' really was ..."

Doc Savage said nothing.

The look in his whirling eyes suggested that in his mind the violent matter was not entirely concluded.

## XLVI – The Earl of Trouble

"His name was Henry Hemstead."

The speaker was the Special-Agent-in-Charge of the Cheyenne, Wyoming office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He and his subordinate had driven in to the Circle Bolt Ranch from Gillette.

Special Agent Heflin was giving a report of all FBI activities after they had parted company with Doc Savage in the aftermath of the spectacular Casper Bank robbery.

"Which?" rumbled Renny Renwick. "The first **Calamity** or the second one?"

Doc Savage answered that.

"The peculiarly-dressed individual calling himself '**Mr. Calamity**' was the aforementioned Henry Hemstead."

The FBI chief nodded. "We did a checkup on all dude ranches in this area. There were only two. The Broken Circle and the Lazy-C. It was at the Lazy-C that we learned of a greenhorn who had gone missing. He was this Henry Hemstead although he had registered under a highfalutin alias - Sir Jennifel Boniface-Lacey. We were able to identify the body through the fingerprints that Mr. Savage provided."

The second agent added: "Hemstead was an Englishman and a member of British nobility. He was the Earl of something-or-other. He lost a pile of wealth during the Depression and came to Wyoming to strike it rich and restore the family fortunes. He brought along a heirloom percussion shotgun manufactured in London during the reign of Queen Victoria.

"Unfortunately, Hemstead had read too many Western thriller novels. He dressed all wrong and affected a ridiculous accent. This made him a laughing-stock at the dude ranch. But he did locate the **Repel** material. It seems to have tone to his head. He decided to turn Jesse James and take advantage of the local ranchers. But he got in over his head."

"And lost it, too," rumbled Renny without sympathy.

Doc Savage produced a thick diary that he found in Long Tom Roberts' plane. It had been carried in the saddlebag of the second **Calamity**. The mastermind of the grand scheme to blackmail the airline industry.

"This book contains a complete account of the man's prospecting activities while seeking rare earth elements. From this, the second **Calamity** got his nefarious ideas."

"So who is the second **Calamity**?" asked Johnny.

"I can tell you his name," announced Pat Savage proudly. "It's Kip Farr. I know because he like to chew on something that made his mouth *squeak*. I don't know what it was. But the sound was unmistakable. The **Calamity** who died so horribly made such *squeaking* noises with his mouth."

Doc Savage advised: "he was chewing on rubber bands."



"Oh!" said Pat. "Then that explains it."

"But it does not explain the true identity of the second **Calamity**," stated Doc. "He was not Kip Farr who were merely the **Calamity** lieutenant in charge of shipping stolen mules out of the state using his general store as a front."

Agent Hale interjected: "That rustler bunch has been wiped out. We arrested a second group in Gillette including Lion Needers and others. They were waiting for the **Calamity** gang to catch up with them. They were bad actors. All of them."

Pat frowned. "Did Lion Needers have kind of a bobcat fac e?"

"That's him," said the FBI man.

"Well, he's the one who tried to kidnap me. I hope he doesn't get out of the penitentiary until he's in a wheelchair."

Pat was also remembering her degrading and humiliating **gang-rapings**.



"Needers may be facing worse than a penitentiary stretch," the Federal agent pointed out. "He has a murder record in other states. But he made out better than Kip Farr. His body is in the Bison morgue."



Pat asked: "Did he resist?"

"No. He was one of the rustlers who were hurled into the sky over by Pumpkin Buttes that time the original Mr. Calamity let loose on the Quest rustler gang. His body lay unidentified in the morgue the whole time because the new sheriff hailed from Sheridan. So he didn't know him by sight. Not that it would have helped much. His face was pretty well stoved in by the fall to earth."

"Ugh," said Pat.

Long Tom Roberts had a steak over one eye and was transferring it to the other. His knuckles were skinned raw. But he appeared satisfied. He had pounded away at the man who had knocked out one of his gold teeth and all-but-demolished him.

He wondered: "Why was Alta Crater killed?"

Doc Savage answered that one.

"She was slain for the same reason, approximately, that Lord Hemstead was. Gunnysack fibers were found under her fingernails. This is all surmise on my part. But Miss Crater was by reputation a headstrong and direct young woman. When she was inadvertently carried off in the car in which she had secreted herself, she presumably attempted to unmask Quest, the culprit who was rustling her mules. Perhaps she recognized his voice despite attempts to disguise it. Quest was forced to do away with her. An autopsy has shown that she perished from drowning."

(She was also **gang-raped** prior to her perishing.)





"How cold-blooded," said Pat shuddering.

"The original '**Mr. Calamity**' -- Henry Hemstead -- no doubt also saw Quest's true face," continued Doc. "Thus the need to eliminate him. Fibers were evident under his fingernails as well. But these were the result of a struggle."

Long Tom muttered: "A lot more would have died if the devilment had been carried out to its planned conclusion."

"So who was the second '**Calamity**'?" asked Pat.

Doc Savage produced one of the tooled leather cuffs that had been worn on both wrists by the criminal mastermind.

"The second **Calamity** went by many names. We first knew him as 'Quest'. At the Lynx Eyes Ranch where he was foreman, he was calling himself Buck Quane'. But that was not his real name either."

Everyone looked at the **Bronze Man** expectantly.

But before he could give answer, Pat snapped: "Wait a minute! How could Kip Farr not be the master brain if he was the one who *squeaked*?"

"This is only theory," said Doc. "But it is my belief that the true mastermind chewed rubber bands to make it seem as if his lieutenant Kip Farr was the actual head of the gang. The second **Calamity** went to great pains to conceal his real name. He wanted some of the gang to think that Kip Farr ran the **Calamity** bunch when in fact he was merely its straws boss."

"Sounds tricky of him," murmured Pat. "Almost as tricky as a certain 'Jerico Hoan' of my recent acquaintance."

She looked around the ranch house.

"Anyone see where Jerico got to?"

Doc Savage looked slightly uncomfortable. Then he went on.

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"Pat, do you remember the man who gave you a ride into Bison after you were stranded on top of that butte?"

"You mean **Oakley Wood**?"

"Yes. Oakley Wood. Do you recall his chief characteristic?"

Pat made thinking faces. "He didn't have very many."

"His forearms were covered in thick white hair. Surely you remember that."

"I do," allowed Pat. "I thought it odd since he didn't look particularly old."

Her golden **eyes** went to the tooled leather cuff in Doc Savage's **metallic** hands.

"Hold on a minute! Do you mean to tell me that ..."

"Oakley Wood wore these things to conceal his profuse forearm hair when he was operating as 'Quest'. Wood was his actual name by the way. 'Quest' and 'Buck Quane' -- not to mention '**Calamity**' - - were all aliases."

Long Tom murmured. "That explained why no one knew of him at the Lynx Eyes spread. He was 'Buck Quane' to them."

"I'll be superamalgamated!" exploded Johnny. "Pat was the only one who ever encountered him without his various hooded disguises."

Doc nodded. "When I pulled off his hood, I did not recognize Wood. It was rather disconcerting. We might never have figured out the truth except that I found specimens of white hair in the leather cuffs he wore. This brought to mind your description of him, Pat."

"Well, it was my mystery to start with," said Pat cheerfully. "I'm happy to contribute what little bit I can."

Doc Savage said: "I know you wanted to be more involved in this adventure than you were."

Pat smiled. "Oh, I think I did all right under the circumstances. I had more happen to me than I care to count. Being stranded on top of a mesa all night. Jugged. Kidnapped. Nearly killed. Almost murdered again. ... Come to think of it, I believe I've been almost murdered during this mystery more than any other mystery I can recall."

Then her face got a far-off expression and her eyes squinted. She was recalling her recent **rapings**.





Doc regarded her fixedly.

"Perhaps now you understand why I prefer that you stay out of our adventures."

"I'm starting to. But let me remind you. This was my adventure from the start. You and the others horned in on my shindig."

A slight smile touched Doc Savage's firm lips.

"If you will search your memory, you will recall that you invited us in."

"So I did. So I did. And I got the scare of my life 20 times over. Not the least of which was thinking that you were dead. Why didn't you whisper in my ear that it was you?"

"I could not risk it," said Doc. "The most important thing was to tag along with the gang until they took me to the *Repel* deposit. And also, I was unarmed and significantly outnumbered after my supposed death."

Pat laughed. "I guess you went through a lot also, didn't you?"

"More than usual," confessed the Bronze Man.

Pat grew thoughtful.

"You know, you never did explain how you convinced the gang to assume that you were dead so that you could turn up as 'Jerico Hoan'."

Doc Savage looked abashed.

"I told you that I was overcome by my own anesthetic when I parachuted back to earth during the hectic encounter at the ghost ranch. After I landed, I was covered by the collapsing parachute canopy whereupon the gang unloaded their weapons at me."

Pat said fervently: "It was a miracle that you weren't killed."

"Not a miracle but rather the result of foresight. And precautions. Thanks to the billowing lobe, very few bullets struck me as I lay still. And those that did were turned away by the chain-mail undergarment I wear into battle.

"But still, I was entirely vulnerable. I was carrying extra vials of *mercurochrome* to treat my injured hands. Bullets struck the vest pockets containing these vials releasing a realistic semblance of *blood*. This convinced *Calamity*'s men to stop wasting ammunition on me.

"Fortunately, the gang did not feel it necessary to bury me until the next morning. By that time, I had recovered from the gas and employed the disguise kit in my equipment vest to transform myself into 'Jerico Hoan'. It was necessary to leave my shirt and vest behind. I was unarmed except for my folding grappling hook and line as well as the belt containing the compartments that generated tear gas and black smoke when burned. None of these would have given me away if I was searched.

"Nevertheless, I was severely handicapped in joining the gang. It was necessary to play along to discover their goals as well as to locate the *Repel* deposit."

Long Tom had been listening with interest.

"Why did 'Quest' -- or Wood -- cut off the first **Mr. Calamity**'s head and blast the headless body up into the sky to land here?"

"To confuse us as well as obscure Lord Hemstead's true identity," explained the **Bronze Man**. "Wood hoped that we would consider the matter of **Mr. Calamity** closed and further expected that our focus would be on ascertaining the dead man's actual name. Wood did not imagine that his victim's fingerprints would be on file anywhere. Or that Long Tom would later stumble upon the buried head."

Johnny spoke up then. "What about that *Repel* deposit?"

Addressing the two FBI men, Doc Savage said: "The deposition of the remaining matter is something that should be handled with utmost secrecy and only by qualified experts.

"I cannot think of a more qualified expert than you, Mr. Savage," said Special-Agent-in-Charge Heflin.

"I heartily concur," added Agent Hale.

"Thank you both," said Doc Savage.

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That left the matter of the body of Henry Hemstead. When a hearse arrived to convey it away, Pat Savage was gripped by sudden twisting inner emotion.

"Excuse me," she said thickly retreating to the ranch house as the headless corpse was removed by solemn undertakers.

"What's eating her?" Renny wondered.

Long Tom answered that.

"Pat and young Darn were getting 'friendly'. If you know what I mean."

"Oh," said Renny. "But he is going to pull through, isn't he?"

"Sure. Doc Savage saved his life when he tied Darn's belt around his wounded leg. But it was a near thing. Pat's still pretty cut up about it. She thought he was dead and kinda blamed herself a little. When she called the hospital to talk it over, Darn wouldn't come to the phone."

Renny closed one eye and regarded Long Tom with the other.

"Wouldn't? Or couldn't?"



Long Tom felt of his gold front tooth which had been replaced after the battle hard by the **hellish** coal seam.

"Sounded like a little of both to me. But either way, Pat's idea of treating him to dinner went bust."

## XLVII – The Excavation

Doc Savage gave the matter of the buried *Repel* considerable thought. After the FBI men had departed with the body of Henry Hemstead, he assembled the others to advise them of his decision.

"We will attempt to excavate the pit and salvage the chunk of *Repel* buried there. It is too risky to leave to future generations to rediscover it."

Renny Renwick thumped gloomily: "That durn stuff is a handful. Once we disturb it, there's no telling what could happen."

Fingering his monocle magnifier thoughtfully, Johnny Littlejohn remarked: "It is too valuable as well as too volatile to simple let be."

Hearing this, Pat Savage perked up. Her eyes were a little red. But the *bronze* beauty had regained her composure.

"I expect my rightful share of any gains," she said sternly. "After all, this was my mystery before any of you fellows barged in."

But Doc Savage shook his gravely.

"*Repel* is too dangerous. In the wrong hands, it could become the most destructive weapon that Mankind has ever known. Aside from the fact, breaking it up into chunks and dividing it amongst ourselves is simply asking for more trouble.

"Our objective is simple, brothers. We will capture and contain it. And perhaps one day, *Repel* will be understood sufficiently that it can be properly harnessed. But until that day, it is best stored at my *Fortress of Solitude* high up in the Arctic Circle.

Folding her arms defiantly, Pat frowned.

"Just my darn luck! I come all the way out to Wyoming to seek my fortune. And I have nothing to show for it!"

Long Tom pointed out unkindly: "You still have your skin. Be thankful for that."

"Believe me, I am" said Pat with conviction. "But just once I would like a sprinkling of wealth to adorn it."

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The preparations to excavate the *Repel* matter took several days. Doc Savage had a crane and an excavator trucked out to the pit site. Something that cost nearly a thousand dollars.

One truck carried a band of an alloy steel and chain. Doc explained that this was to be used to encircle the *element* (if possible) prior to lifting it with the crane's hook.

However, they never go to the point of using the steel band.



Renny Renwick naturally handled the excavator. Once he disturbed the earth and after 4-or-5 shovelfuls of soil were removed, the crane toppled over and he had to leap from the cabin.

Everyone who had been standing about watching was knocked off their feet. They stayed there for a time until Renny decided to stand up.

He found that he could not. His bellowing *"Holy cow!"* made the turkey buzzards high overhead suddenly fluster their feathers and take off with a mad beating of pinions.

"I can't stand up!" he complained.

"Verticality is prohibited," added Johnny Littlejohn.

Long Tom Roberts put that in simple terms.

"The *Repel* influence is keeping us from pushing back against it."

"Remain calms," instructed Doc Savage.

He was crawling along the ground. He reached the truck containing the steel band. However, he did not go to it.

The truck had been pushed sideways away from the pit. The sides of its tires made broad sweeping gouges in the sandy soil.

There was a case of dynamite in the front seat carefully packed in sawdust and cotton batting. Doc Savage opened the crate ... made sure the dynamite was dry ... and then started the engine.

The motor ran well enough. The *Bronze Man* drove in the direction of the pit. He made reasonable progress until he reached the *zone of influence*.

Then the motor started complaining as the big truck slowed down. It continued crawling forward but at a much slower pace. Doc wedged the gas pedal to the floor and leapt out.

The truck kept going. But it crawled with agonizing slowness. Motor straining, it crept along. There was just enough horsepower to reach the edge of the pit. But it could not penetrate further. The laboring truck stopped dead with its motor growling. Smoke poured from under the hood.

While the truck had been in motion, Doc Savage went among his men and pulled them back to safety. Most of them had already started crawling. Doc simply finished the job.

When they all reached a place of safety where they could stand on their own feet, the *bronze* giant told them: "Stick to the shelter of the hoodoos and big boulders. Get behind them. Retreat as best you can."

"What about you?" Pat Savage asked anxiously.

"Never mind about me. I have a plan. Now go."

The **bronze**-haired girl was reluctant to leave her cousin's side. Renny scooped her up and bore her off.

"No foolish heroics!" Pat called.

Doc Savage did not reply. He plunged back into the zone of force created by the buried **Repel**.

Among the items he carried were small grenades resembling smooth steel eggs. They were activated by tiny lever-actuated timers. They were quite powerful for their size since the largest was only the circumference of a pigeon's egg.

Reaching the stalled vehicle, the **Man of Bronze** crawled into the dump-truck bed and crouched down behind the band of alloy steel. He took from a pocket one of the small grenades ... armed it ... and flung it as high overhead as he could.

The grenade got only so far. It encountered the powerful force. It literally floated in the air fixed. This interesting phenomenon proved brief ... for the grenade let go.

The **detonation** did not seem to accomplish very much in the way of destruction.

After an interval for allowing grit and debris to settle, Doc Savage pitched 2 more grenades. They fell closer to the center of the pit. They too **exploded** with great force. Since they were not packed with shrapnel, Doc was in little danger. The windows of the truck blew out of course forcing him to plug his ears each time in order to protect his eardrums.

The 4<sup>th</sup> grenade managed to hit the ground with the immediate result that there was a violent **upheaval** in the crater's center. Something had evidently shifted deep down in the pit.

Coughing malodorous smoke from its exhaust pipe, the truck lurched forward again.

Doc Savage pitched himself off the back with alacrity. He raced with great speed flashing for the nearest shelter. It was not close. The nearest hoodoos had been knocked over by the persistent force emanating from the crater.

Eventually he reached such shelter as he deemed sufficient for what was to come. But it was a near thing. Throwing himself behind a granite boulder, he called out:

*"Cover your ears, all of you!"*

"Holy cow!" boomed Renny. "What gives?"

Doc rapped out: **"Dynamite!"**

No one had to be told twice. Fingers were inserted into ears. All eyes squeezed shut.

Everyone waited. No one quite saw what transpired next.



The rumbling truck pitched into the crater and grumbled along for a short while. From his pocket, Doc Savage removed the compact radio transceiver which he used to communicate with others. It had several other purposes, though, one of which was that it functioned as a radio detonator.

The **Bronze Man** made the proper adjustments to the device. Then he sent a signal to the detonation device packed in with the dynamite. The results were instantaneous.

***Bar-r-r-room!!!***

The truck flew to **fiery** pieces. The **blast** hurled fragments in all directions. One intact tire went hopping merrily along while the engine struck a hoodoo resembling a primitive totem pole and toppled it. The crater actually collapsed inward from the force of the blast.

Almost immediately, there was a roar followed by a whistling. The latter trailed off so swiftly that they were not sure they actually heard it.

Only one person saw what happened. And then only briefly.

Doc Savage looked up. Into the heavens flew the fragment of **Repel**. The unknowable unstoppable element that could never be tamed. It went straight up and kept going.

Doc had his pocket telescope out and attempted to follow it. But to no avail. It had already vanished into the stratosphere before he could get the slender tube oriented.

He waited for the element to tumble back to earth. But it continued to climb.

For several minutes, the **Bronze Man** deeply regretted having attempted to disturb its resting place. He knew that if crashed back to earth, the mass could land anywhere including on top of them with catastrophic results.

Having no ability to foresee the future, Doc Savage simply waited with his flake-gold **eyes** fixed upon the heavens.

But the fleeing **Repel** did not drop back down. It seemed that it simply departed the atmosphere.

When it was safe to do so, Doc stood up and collected the others.

"It is gone," he told them.

"Where do you suppose it will land?" Pat asked fearfully.

"It is not expected to land," advised Doc. "The force of the blast liberated the full potency of the **element**. It appears to be well on its way to escaping the Earth's gravitational influence."

Johnny <blinked> owlshly. "I'll be superamalgamated! Do you mean that it has gone into Outer Space itself?"

Doc nodded. "That appears to be the case. While it cannot be recovered by human hands, neither will it be a danger to the human race in the future."

Long Tom added a sour note. "Unless, of course, there's more of that weird stuff buried underground somewhere else on the Planet."

Doc Savage said nothing. It was a sobering thought.

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They salvaged what they could of the equipment and made their way back to Long Tom's ranch.

Laramie awaited them there. He had been released from the hospital and was cooking away supported by a proper crutch.

Finding him in the kitchen, Long Tom scolded: "I don't think any of us have appetites right now."

The old cow horse glowered. "No? Where'd you lose them?"

Renny grimaced. "They all went straight up into the sky along with the pits of our stomachs. Not expected back for a day or two."

"Suit yourself," muttered Laramie returning to his hot stove.

"So you can stop frying all those steaks," Long Tom chided.

"Don't you worry none, Long Tom. After all that hospital food I ate, I'll just treat myself."

"Do you know what steaks cost?" the puny Electrical Wizard exploded.

"Take it out of my pay if you're gonna be miserly about it!"

Long Tom's face grew raw.

"What pay? You haven't worked in days!"

"And I ain't eaten decent in all that time! No go tickle a dynamo or something and let an honest cowboy make chuck."

In the adjoining room, Renny closed the door on the argument and grunted:

"Those two are getting to be worse than Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks."

Pat said: "I suppose that you boys are heading back to New York now that all the excitement is over with."

"There is nothing keeping us here," agreed Doc.



Pat looked thoughtful.

"Speaking for myself, I think I will stick around. Laramie was telling me how to find gold dust and nuggets in the ruby sands around here. Maybe I will strike it rich after all."

Long Tom stepped out of the kitchen. His neck was red and he looked miserable.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you need. But just don't make it a habit."

Taken aback by the annoyed electrical engineer's apparent rudeness, Pat demanded:

"Are you hinting that I've overstayed my welcome?"

"No. But I've had a bellyful of this neck of Wyoming. I came here for peace-and-quiet to conduct my electrical experiments. Between local rustlers, unwanted trouble, and unexpected strife, I'm giving up on this place."

Renny asked: "You're selling out?"

"As soon as I can find some sap to buy this dump. It doesn't suit me anymore."

Pat considered.

"Maybe I will purchase it. If I strike it rich, that is."

Doc Savage offered a suggestion.

"If it is peaceful solitude you want, consider Jackson Hole. It has a reputation for quiet living. Perhaps you could buy a more suitable spread when you dispose of this one."

Long Tom brightened. It was evident that the idea appealed to him.

"I might investigate that possibility once I get this place squared away," he allowed. "I like the idea of ranch living. I've just had it up to here with Pumpkin Buttes."

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With that problem apparently settled, Johnny Littlejohn drifted over to stand with Doc Savage. His long thin face was thoughtful.

"I have been wondering," the bony archaeologist mused, "if there might not be more deposits of *Repel* scattered around the Globe."

Doc Savage regarded him steadily.

"Are you proposing that we seek out any undiscovered examples?"

Johnny nodded eagerly. "The samples we found on the *Calamity* bunch *were*. Which is neither pure nor stable. It would be a benefit to Mankind if we could tame the awesome element."

Doc Savage responded: "Twice has *Repel* gotten loose and wrought havoc. While the *element's* potentials are conceivably fabulous, it has proven too intractably dangerous for human purposes. It would be better to let any such deposits remain buried where they *lie*. Perhaps future generations will acquire the requisite scientific knowledge and wisdom to harness Repel. But the present 20<sup>th</sup> Century lacks either quality."

Johnny looked as crestfallen as a skeleton the day after Halloween.

"You are unassailably correct," he decided. "But think of the possibilities inherent in the *element*. As a means of propulsion, Mankind could reach the Moon and go beyond it."

Pat Savage appraised the bony geologist skeptically.

"Why-on-earth would you want to go to the Moon in the first place?"

"Because," replied Johnny, "it is not the Earth."

Pat's skepticism made her tawny features dubious.

"And what's wrong with this Planet?" she challenged.

Johnny sputtered, his tongue tangling up.

"Why," he said after gathering his injured dignity, "I would go to the Moon for its selenite."

"It's what?"

"For its rocks," explained Doc Savage. "Johnny has ambitions to be the first geologist to explore the Moon."

Renny asked: "Is that another way of saying he's got rocks in his skull?"

"Anyone who says such a thing," proclaimed Johnny in his most dignified scholarly tone, "suffers from acute cranial calcification of a cubistic configuration."

The blank expressions all around prompted Doc Savage to translate the injured archaeologist's incomprehensible words.

"Another term for what Johnny means," explained the *Bronze Man*, "is 'blockhead'."

And at that, the group broke into laughter.

But Doc Savage did not join in their merriment. The dust-fine *golden* flakes in his arresting *eyes* seemed to dance humorously.

Noticing this, Pat placed her hands on her hips and demanded:



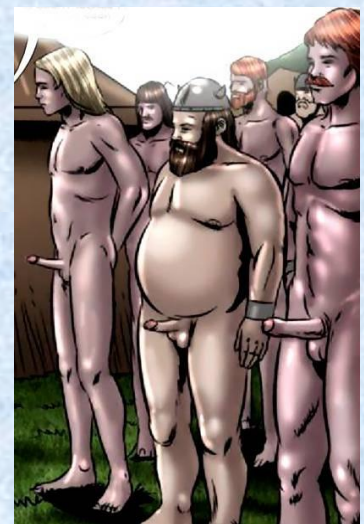
"Would it hurt you to crack a smile once in a while? Or did the gaggle of experts that raised you include a wooden Indian?"

In response to that playful dig, the *Man of Bronze* did display his strong white teeth. He made a conscious effort to do so.

But no one was fooled ...



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The next episode in **"The Perils of Patricia Savage"** is **PS205XXX.pdf** ("The Valley of Eternity")

[ [http://www.hotlegsinline.com/PSXXX/PS205XXX\\_The Valley Of Eternity.zip](http://www.hotlegsinline.com/PSXXX/PS205XXX_The_Valley_Of_Eternity.zip) ]

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*email: [kelli@hotlegsinlove.com](mailto:kelli@hotlegsinlove.com)*

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