

La Loca

Sparks whirled like a dancer's skirts and then leaped toward December stars. The fire, manzanita below and oak on top, burned blue at its heart. Joaquin Murrieta extended his hands gratefully toward its fierce heat. His sixty-two years gave him appreciation for a good fire.

"Senor Murrieta, supper is ready."

Joaquin turned.

"Will you join me?" The speaker, a trim, bearded man in his middle years, gestured toward a long table beneath the portico of Dutton's Hotel. The table was laden with barbecued steaks and roasts of beef, roasted chickens, tortillas, preserves of apricots and plums, dishes of steamed squash and corn, jalapenos, cut lemons, pies and cakes. A black iron pot of beans squatted at the table's far end.

Joaquin smiled, "I would be honored, Captain Dutton."

"Cigar?" Captain Dutton inclined his head.

Joaquin smiled. "Thank-you, no."

"You enjoyed our modest feast?"

"Very much so. I cannot resist roasted corn with butter and chile."

Dutton waved expansively. "There is more!"

Now Joaquin laughed, "No! My horse must be able to carry me tomorrow!"

Dutton shrugged, plucked a cigar from his vest pocket, cut off its end with his penknife and lit it with a match. Once its end was glowing, he said, "I would very much like you to extend your visit, sir. It will be calmer once the fiesta ends." He gestured to the star-filled sky

with his cigar. "And before the rains come, I promise you more California evenings such as this one."

A woman's scream, sharp as broken glass, suddenly rent the air. Figures struggled in darkness beyond the fire. The woman screamed again.

Joaquin and Dutton rose from their seats. Dutton lifted a lantern from the table's end and they strode swiftly toward the disturbance. The lantern in Dutton's left hand made a swaying circle of yellow light on dry grass. He raised it and revealed a woman slumped on the ground. A compact, work-hardened man stood above her. Dutton said, "What's the matter here?"

The man looked up. "This is none of your business, Captain."

Dutton's eyes glinted. "Michelson, isn't it"

Michelson grunted, "What's it to you?"

Dutton continued in an even tone. "This is my property. Everything that happens here is my business."

"This woman gave me guff. I don't take guff from Mexicans. Or women." The man gripped a fistful of the woman's long, grey-streaked hair and pulled her face toward the light. The face was round, middle-aged and tear-stained.

The woman sobbed, "Help me, Captain!"

"Shut up, bitch!" Michelson slapped her with his open right hand. Her head snapped to the side and she whimpered.

Dutton shouted, "Unhand that woman!"

Michelson balled his hand into a fist, drew it back to punch her in earnest. Faster than a stooping hawk, Joaquin stepped forward and gripped the fist with his left hand. Michelson's muscles bulged beneath his shirt as he strained against the old man's grip, but his hand didn't

move. Anger replaced surprise on his face and then fear froze his features into a snarl.

Joaquin nodded. "You had best do as Captain Dutton says."

Michelson released the woman's hair. Lantern light gleamed from Joaquin's neatly trimmed silver beard and from the silver blade he pressed into Michelson's armpit. A coin-sized patch of blood stained the man's shirt around the knife's tip.

Dutton smiled. "I want you off my property. Now."

Michelson glared at Dutton and then at Joaquin. Joaquin released Michelson's fist and stepped swiftly back, keeping his knife leveled before him. Michelson whirled and stalked into the darkness.

Dutton patted the crying woman's shoulder and offered her his other hand. "You are Senora Morales, no?"

"Yes, Senor Dutton." She took his hand and struggled to her feet.

"May we help you?"

Senora Morales smoothed her black skirt. "That man is after my niece, Rosinda." She looked down. "Perhaps Rosinda flirted with him, but she is only sixteen. She knows no better."

Dutton smiled grimly. "Do not fear, Senora Morales. Both you and your niece will be guarded tonight."

Joaquin asked, "Your niece is beautiful, Senora?"

Senora Morales looked at Joaquin. "As a flame, Senor."

Joaquin awoke suddenly. He felt for his boots with his left hand, found them. Sometimes, though with secret guilt, he slept with them on, even in a warm room, adobe walls awash in amber candlelight. Years of hunting and being hunted made his sleep a fragile cup, less

than half full. Footsteps approached. They'd awakened him. A knock rattled his door.

"Mr. Murrieta?" Dutton's voice was hoarse.

"I'm here."

"There's trouble in the fiesta camp."

"I'm coming."

They walked beneath early winter stars, points of frozen blue fire, Dutton slightly ahead of Joaquin. A boy carrying a lantern walked ahead of him. Dutton spoke over his shoulder. "I posted two sentries tonight. Manuel here is only fourteen, but he's responsible. He woke me."

Manuel stopped abruptly and held the lantern low. Dutton and Joaquin stepped to either side of him. A dead man lay at their feet. His eyes were wide with surprise and his mouth was open. Blood seeped into dust from a wound in the back of his head.

Joaquin asked, "Who is this man?"

"Clinton Burke, the other sentry." Dutton paused and then said, "He served with me in the war."

"Michelson?"

Dutton nodded, "Michelson."

"He came for the girl?"

Dutton nodded again. "He has her."

"We ride?" Joaquin asked.

Dutton straightened, looked at the sky. "It is several hours until dawn. We can gather men and follow him then."

Manuel dropped the lantern. It shattered on a rock and went out. "Senor!" he gasped,

"Look!" The boy's shaking finger pointed into the darkness.

A tall woman approached from the river. Her face was pale and luminous. Her blue gown and shawl shone like moonlit ice. Her hair was midnight black. Dutton whispered, "La Loca."

Joaquin glanced at him. "La Loca?"

Manuel uttered a strangled cry and ran.

Dutton took a deep breath. "Do you fear ghosts, Mr. Murrieta?"

"I fear the evil which spawns them."

Dutton nodded, "Much evil created La Loca."

Joaquin remained silent.

Dutton continued, "She lived near Mission San Antonio when I first arrived in this territory. She was a beauty. All of the men in this valley, young and old, were drawn to her. She dallied with some of them. Her husband caught her with a young man. Though he had many lovers himself, he was jealous. When he accused her, she laughed at him. He squeezed her throat so hard that the prints of his fingers were branded into her flesh. Then he cut off her head."

Joaquin looked at Dutton. "Why?"

"He buried it in a hidden place so that her spirit could not rest."

"And?"

Dutton sighed. "Her spirit did not rest. She appeared first on the night after her Mass of burial. We found her husband's body the next day in front of his cabin."

Joaquin waited for Dutton to finish.

"His body was torn to pieces. This Indians say that monsters do her bidding." Dutton

looked at Joaquin. "When La Loca appears, someone dies. Always."

La Loca stopped and looked directly at them. Her eyes were black pits in which embers gleamed. She raised her right hand and pointed toward the northwest.

Joaquin said, "We have a guide."

Dutton's voice quavered, "Will you ride with me?"

"Let us get our horses."

They rode up the old cattle trail toward Reliz Canyon, Joaquin slightly ahead of Dutton. La Loca drifted far ahead, but neither man sat easily in his saddle. An hour before dawn the ghost vanished. Joaquin smelled wood smoke and held up his hand.

Dutton reined his horse in and leaned close to Joaquin. "What is it?"

"A campfire. You said Michelson has a gang. How many?"

"Six, perhaps seven."

Joaquin nodded. "We'll tie our horses here and approach them from below. The air is cold and flows downhill. Their horses will not smell us. The darkness will help us, too."

Dutton whispered, "There will be a sentry?"

Joaquin pulled out his knife. "Always."

The sentry's fingers quivered, but he no longer breathed. Joaquin wiped his knife upon the man's wool jacket and sheathed it.

Dutton asked, "What now?"

"We find the girl and take her." Joaquin smiled. "If we can."

A rifle shot crashed from the left. Dutton cried out and fell to the ground. More shots

sounded and small flashes of gunpowder lightning lit the campground. A bullet sizzled past Joaquin's right ear. He fired his pistol at the flashes and dove to the ground near Dutton. The firing ceased.

Dutton gripped his leg and writhed in pain. Joaquin hissed, "Hold still!"

Dutton took a shuddering breath and froze.

Michelson shouted from above. "Garcia, around to the left! Thompson, hold where you are!"

Joaquin asked, "Are you badly hurt?"

Dutton snarled, "Yes, damn it!"

Joaquin grinned. "But not dying, I think. There was a second sentry."

"Obviously." Dutton wadded up a kerchief and bound it to his thigh with his belt.

"Can you shoot?"

Dutton grimaced. "I can shoot."

"Good. I'll move. When they fire at me, take them."

Dutton gripped his pistol. "Right."

Joaquin scrambled six steps to his left and dove into the shadow of a chamisa bush.

Rifles crashed and bullets nipped at his heels. Dutton fired. One of Michelson's men cried out in agony.

Michelson rose and shouted, "Rush them now! Get them!"

Strands of white light flared and swirled next to Michelson, became La Loca. Her long fingers reached for him. He gasped and emptied his gun into her face, the heavy crashes rolling down the valley.

She smiled and caressed his cheek once. Then she seized him, held him fast and bent

down until her lips nearly touched his.

Michelson screamed as he looked into her eyes. His scream tore his vocal chords to bloody rags, but he screamed again. La Loca released him. He fell to the ground, curled up, covered his eyes with both hands and rolled from side to side, frothing and gurgling.

Rosinda moaned. She lay wrapped in blankets close to the fire. La Loca walked to her, bent down and caressed the girl's hair. She whispered into Rosinda's ear and then straightened.

Snarls suddenly ripped the night. Great cats, tigers from a different age, stepped from between boulders and approached the camp. Fangs longer than daggers distended their jaws, curved wickedly below their muzzles and shone with a silvery light of their own.

Joaquin murmured, "What are they?"

Dutton muttered, "Tigers. They lived here long ago."

La Loca pointed toward Michelson's men. Eyes bulging, the gang members turned and ran. The tigers leapt after them. Howls of terror and pain sounded in the near darkness.

After a few moments, the tigers appeared again, heads swaying and fangs dripping. The ghost then turned toward Dutton and Joaquin. Joaquin held his breath. She smiled at them, gestured again and the tigers paced away. Still smiling, La Loca became a fountain of silver light and disappeared.

Joaquin rose and walked warily to Rosinda. He reached the girl and asked, "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

Joaquin knelt beside her. "La Loca spoke to you. What did she say?"

Rosinda whispered, "Justice."

Joaquin leaned forward. "Justice?"

"All women hope for justice." Rosinda looked up and smiled suddenly. "La Loca requires it."

Joaquin stared down the frosted vale. The Saber-tooth tigers paced toward distant trees. Moonlight silvered rippling muscles. The last and greatest tiger turned, looked at Joaquin and then stepped beneath oak shadows.