

The Hound - Part 2

by Thomas Shaggy

When a sunset, it rose to a new day.

When you spent as many days as I have on a trail of someone or something you start to lose feeling in your own body. Your senses become attached to the world and all you feel is the imperfections of a world that doesn't end. The trip into the Northern Mountains would be treacherous. It was winter there far quicker than here in the lowlands.

I stoked the fire in front of the lean-to. The mountains stood tall behind it. I would move during the night. The clouds from the west suggested some wind and the river would provide some cover for my horse, Strider. There would be lookouts along the way; mobile gangs that patrol the foothills for trespassers.

The cavalry was expecting me. I'm not sure if they knew exactly the beast they'd awoken, but rest assured any man from the Marcy Gang had done their homework before raping and hanging two defenseless women.

The temperature would drop rapidly once the sun hit the horizon. I had about an hour before this would happen. I stood and put on my coat. The fire had gone out. There was no smoke and I wrapped the two oak branches that acted as supports to my tent in the elk skin that was my blanket. I wrapped the leather hide around the elk skin and oak supports and slung it over my back, pulled the knife sheath around my waste and secured it.

The sun dipped below the horizon. The clouds had moved in overhead and brought a heavy breeze along with it.

I secured my hat and mounted my horse. About five hundred paces northwest of my camp was a river crossing; I wasn't the only one looking to pass. Marcy's men patrolled along the Western shore, not one hundred paces from me. My success as a tracker was a factor of quickness, stealth and cunning. If those three didn't fall into place at exactly the right time the hunt was over.

I tied Strider around a nearby tree. The sun still had about forty more minutes before I'd be left in darkness. The closest settlement was a day's ride so the night would be crisp and I'd be well hidden. A banging nearby.

Hunting game is one thing. If my quickness, stealth and cunning fail me then the game runs off into the forest. Hunting a man is something different completely. Perhaps he is ready. Perhaps he is thinking about the tail he scored last night at the brothel. Perhaps he has a family worth fighting for. He has evaded you for a time and you are about to stand toe to toe with him, and unlike the game that ran into the night, the man looks to retire you. Not to your ranch in the Midwest, but to the grave. You just hope that your trigger finger is itchier than his with twice the accuracy.

Another banging. More like a hammering. Quarry nearby. It's coming off the mountainside. With the sun down and wind blowing into our faces they won't be able to hear a thing. The wind howled through the trees and the men stood guard at the edge of the bridge. The ground below suddenly suggested a different story. Eight sets of tracks. I wouldn't know if there were patrols across the bridge until I reached the mouth of the bridge still a good hundred paces ahead.

I mounted my horse again and tipped my hat down into my face and pulled up my collar. I gave him a little kick and we trotted up around the corner.

"Evenin' lads." The bigger one got in my way and held the reigns. The other stood behind with his rifle cocked to his shoulder. Back to the big one he looked me up and down like I was his next piece of tail.

"What can I do you fer ya gents?" I asked them.

The banging continued in the distance. I timed it out in my head.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 BANG.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 BANG.

"Where you comin' from stranger?" The big one asked. Lying was somewhat of a speciality as well.

"The Springs. On my way up to George Lake." The most important thing to remember is to engage in a little conversation as possible so you don't repeat or mix up details of your story.

"What is your business on George Lake?"

Still I timed. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 BANG.

"Sister has TB." I kept it short and sweet. Across the bridge I could see a torch heading this way. I was about to be outnumbered. The group called out to the lookout at the river. I could see them yet.

"TB? Hell is TB? You ever heard of any TB, Gerald?" The big guy snickered back at the little guy. That must be Gerald. "I'm not buying it. Sure the boss won't either."

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 BANG. The light grew brighter. Now or never.

"Why don't you step off that horse stranger and we'll go have a chat. The boss thinks yer tellin' the truth, then on yer way you go." This isn't what I wanted to do. But I agreed.

"Yea, let's talk to the bossman. I stepped off my horse and Biggins I now called him pulled Strider off to the side and commented on what a lovely horse he was. The light was brighter. The team was coming up around the hill on the far bank. Gerald, the sweet little thing that he was nudged me in the back with his rifle butt.

"Move along sonny." I was easily 10 years his senior.

We eased along the side of the river. 1, 2, 3, I reached to scratch my back. Gerald asked me to keep my hands — 4, 5. I unclipped the knife and spun to drag my blade across his neck and splitting any chords allowing him to speak. The force of my spinning body knocked his body into the river below. Biggins felt something behind him.

The count restarted. 1, 2, 3, 4...he turned slowly. I was practically saying the numbers out loud at this point. On 5 my blade punctured straight through his neck and out his spin. He body flopped onto the ground quicker than I could pull out the blade.

If you cut deep enough across any persons neck is severs the vocal chords. I spent two months studying human anatomy with a

doctor during the war. It's a messy cut, but it's the best way to not alert nearby enemies.

I pushed his body into the river, saddled up and took off up towards the quarry. I'd be hunted from here. The patrol would soon discover they aren't at their post. The bodies would be found down river the next morning. Word of the dead travels fast around here.

This forest will echo with the words of the dead. By the right hand of God. By me.

