

## Dragon Ball Daybreakers

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# Dragon Ball Daybreakers

by [zennagreenwitch](#)

## Summary

Inspired by Louis L'Amour's "The Daybreakers"

Goku and Vegeta are childhood friends from the sticks, specifically the Sadala hills in Tennessee, who leave home after Vegeta kills someone. Western, no powers, human.

## Notes

I'll be updating characters, tags, relationships as we go. I'll be following the plot of The Daybreakers pretty loosely and changing it when I feel like it.

# Chapter 1

Me and Kakarot grew up together like brothers in the Sadala hills of Tennessee. After both our pa's died in the war, my ma gave up on raising me and his ma just about took me in. Gine's a good woman, for we was surely a heap of trouble, me, Kakarot, and Kakarot's big brother Raditz. Raditz left when we was kids, seeking fame an' fortune an' glory. We ain't heard from him since, but he probably ain't dead. Sadala hill folk are tough bastards, hard to kill.

Kakarot is the bigger and stronger of us two, for all that I'm older. We scrapped constantly as kids, and still do. And he's charming. He can sing, he can brawl, he's a damn good shot with any gun you care to shoot, and he always gets the girls wrapped round his fingers. Not that he pays them mind- he's had a special gal since he was knee high to a grasshopper. Him and Chichi have been planning to get married since they could talk. I don't know if Kakarot knew what that meant back then, but he figured it out along the way. And he's got me.

Me? My name's Vegeta, and I'll live in Kakarot's shadow any day. People don't like me as much. I like people just fine, so long as they aren't bothering me, but something about me turns them away, I guess. I never had a special gal- besides a few tumbles in the bushes- an' no real friends but Kakarot.

Kakarot might be the big strong one, but people cut shy of me come fighting time. I overheard my ma once telling Gine that she couldn't stand my eyes, that I got mean eyes. Like my pa, she said.

Makes sense. I'm named for him, I got the same looks as him, I probably got the same evil in my heart.

Kakarot says I don't. He says I might look like my pa- not that he would know- but that I got a good soul.

I have my doubts, but I let him think he's convinced me. He's the one with the good soul. I'm the killer.

It was Kakarot's wedding day that one of the Tuffle boys came to town an' changed everything.

Here in the Sadala hills, Saiyans- that's my folk, and Kakarot's- don't like the Tuffles. I don't know what happened, but we never have got along. Maybe a Tuffle killed one of ours, maybe it was the other way around, but we been feuding for as long as anyone knows. Me and Kakarot especially have whupped more than our fair share, and I reckon Bebi Tuffle thought to have himself some revenge. Kakarot coulda handled him, wedding day or no, but he wasn't thinking about Tuffle boys. He was thinking about Chichi, looking like an angel in her mama's dress, carrying violets and peeking out from under her veil on her daddy's arm. I stood next to my best friend, listened to him vow to love and cherish her as if he hadn't always done that, and listened to Chichi, that little spitfire, promise to obey him like god intended. I could hardly keep a straight face.

If god intended Chichi to obey anyone, he wouldn't have made her the way she is.

Chichi could scrap and shoot like one of the boys. Her daddy raised her like a princess, but

she was always out with us an' Raditz, scaring up squirrels for the stew pot and building castles in the clouds.

When it was time for the party, I made myself scarce. This was Kakarot's day; I'd done my part in it by standing next to him in these stuffy clothes. Besides, I'm no fun at a party unless you want to scrap, which, this bein' a wedding, should wait til sundown at least. Girls don't like me, with my mean eyes. And I'm short. When there's a man like Kakarot around, I'm invisible.

Which means I see what he doesn't. Like Bebi Tuffle prowling around the edges of the churchyard, gun in his hand.

I slipped my gun out of my holster. I'd set it aside for the ceremony, but I don't feel quite dressed without my Colt. Bullets cost money, so I don't shoot if I don't have to, but I like having it with me. Kakarot had laughed at me for bringing it.

"Who brings a gun to a weddin'?" he'd asked, pushing my shoulder.

"Me," I had snapped. "And anyone who jus' went down the valley an' whupped some Tuffles in their own bar last week, that's who."

"Sheesh! No Tuffles are comin' to the wedding, everyone knows they ain't welcome this side of the mountain," Kakarot said with a chuckle.

I wasn't so sure, which is why I was ready when I saw Bebi.

But I was across the road, and a cart went through, too slow and tall for me to see. By the time I caught up, Kakarot was giving a toast, Bebi was taking aim, I had my gun out but weren't fast enough. Chichi shouted "Goku!" and pushed Kakarot out of the way. Saved his life, an' not for the first time. She was a sharp one.

Too bad she fell right into the bullet meant for Kakarot.

"Tuffle!" I shouted, voice like death. His head turned before his body did an' I shuddered at his cold eyes. I aimed while he turned, his gun still smoking, and by the time he was facing me, he was dead. I put another round in him, just to make sure. Bullets cost money, but finishing Bebi off was worth the expense.

Up at the big table, it was chaos. I could tell Kakarot was alive, but by the sound of it, Chichi wasn't. Or wouldn't be for long. Kakarot and her daddy shouted, begged, pleaded with her.

And I had just killed a man in broad daylight, at a wedding the county sheriff was attending. Sheriff Krillin was one of Kakarot's best friends that wasn't me, but he'd be obligated by the law to take me in. I didn't intend to hang for murder, or kill Krillin, so I ran.

I ran straight back to Gine's house, but she beat me there.

"You can't stay here, boy," she said, halfway through packing a rucksack. "Was you lookin' him in the face when you did it? I heard two shots."

"I was," I replied. "And he ain't getting back up."

"Good," Gine said with such fierceness that I was a little scared. "Take Dapple. I'd tell ya to take Kinto, but you know he's a right bastard. Besides him, Dapple's the runningest horse in these hills. He'll get ya to the plains."

"Gine, I-"

"Hush, boy. Take the horse, an' find me a new place to rest my old bones. Someplace warm,

without the memories. Ka can bring me out when ya write,” Gine said briskly, handing me the rucksack and my rifle.

My throat closed and tears trickled down my face.

“Thanks, Gine,” I managed, wishing I could say how much she meant to me. “I’ll find you a good place, don’t you worry. Tell ‘im I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

“Don’t you get killed out there, ya hear? It ain’t like the hills. Don’t start no fights ya can’t finish,” Gine lectured, pushing me out the door. “You promise me, Vegeta.”

“I promise, Gine. I’ll write ya,” I said, convinced that I’d never see her again. Me, not get myself killed? Hah! I’d come to a bad end sooner or later, especially without Kakarot to help me mind my temper.

Riding through the beautiful Tennessee mountains when you’re pretty sure a posse’ll come after you any minute is no fun, I’ll tell you that much. Fortunately Dapple was a good horse, kept to his feet and didn’t tire. A few days without seeing another soul and I cleared out of the hills and the state. Sheriff Krillin wouldn’t follow me this far, not for a Tuffle. Not for a Tuffle who just killed his best friend’s bride.

I could breathe easier on the plains. The sky reached forever, and I felt like I’d found freedom. A man could ride for days out here.

I couldn’t. Dapple coulda done it, but I was low on supplies. Gine had tossed a little food, a camp bowl, and a canteen in my rucksack, and I was having trouble not eating it all in one go. And I missed my coffee.

That’s why I followed the smell of smoke that night. Smoke meant people, and people meant food. No one would turn away a traveler who didn’t cause trouble. They might rob me in my sleep, but at least I’d have a full belly.

“Hello the fire!” I called, well before I could actually see anyone. Best to be obvious and not get shot. Besides, I really wasn’t planning any trouble. Cattle surrounded the camp on three sides, so I knew they were watchin’ for visitors.

“Come ahead if yer friendly,” a voice answered. I had no doubt there was a gun pointed at me from somewhere, but my stomach rumbled and I decided to take my chances.

“Thank you kindly,” I called back. Once I could see the group round the fire, I dismounted. One of the men guffawed- probably at my height. It’s no secret I’m a short man, but it ain’t polite to laugh like that. I glared at him, made a note of him. He’d be trouble. Or I would be. Sooner or later, one way or another, a man who laughs at me always brings trouble.

“What’s your name, stranger?” asked the voice that had welcomed me to the fire. It belonged to a friendly-looking fellow with white hair, sitting next to an old man who seemed to be made out of leather. A long rifle sat across his knees. Next to him, a damn giant with a mop of brown hair grinned at me.

“Vegeta, recently from the hills,” I said. No sense inviting too many questions. “I’m hopin’ to share your fire tonight, if it ain’t too much trouble.”

“No trouble,” he said. “Tie up yer horse, Mr Vegeta, an’ sit a spell. We got beans, or, iff’n you don’t like beans, we got nothing.”

“How do we know he ain’t one a’ them rustlers?” the man who’d laughed at me argued. I glared at him. If I was a thief, would I announce myself? No. I’d wait for the fire to die down, creep in silently the way Kakarot and I learned as kids, and cut their throats in their sleep. Or, if I wanted the herd, I’d slip in an’ cut a few head in the dark. I would not come gab at the fire.

I kept my thoughts to myself. Telling people that you could kill ‘em more efficiently never made a bad situation better.

“Well, kid?” the leader asked. I bristled. I weren’t no kid- I was twenty, a grown man. Not the time. I pushed the lid down on my temper. First people I meet out of the hills an’ I’m already itching for a fight.

“If I were rustlin’ do ya think I’d just waltz right up to yer fire?” I demanded. “I’m tired an’ hungry is all. I’ll work for my supper like anyone, jus’ need a place to rest for the night.”

The leader slapped the ground.

“I like this kid. Mr Vegeta, tie up yer horse. Eat. I never turned away a hungry man, an’ we got enough guns to put ya down if ya ain’t friendly.”

I stalked into the darkness, leading Dapple. I’d almost forgotten how tiring people were. Always with the questions, the suspicion, the quick, fearful glances at my permanent scowl.

“Another gun never hurt a cattle drive, not with rustlers around,” the giant was saying. “I dunno, boss, I think he’s alright. Got a feeling.”

“We don’t need his kind, he’s just some hick! Prolly can’t even shoot that hand cannon he’s packin’,” the laughing man contended.

“I shoot jus’ fine,” I said coolly, returning to the circle of firelight. “Happy to show ya come daylight.”

“Huh,” the man sniffed. Yeah, he’d be trouble alright. Already was. “Big talk from a small man. I betcha can’t even stay upright when ya fire that thing.”

I ground my teeth and clenched my fists tight. This wasn’t time to lose my temper. I’d whupped half the mountain back home an’ no one but the Tuffles tried to needle me about my height no more, but it seemed I’d hafta learn this damn fool some manners.

“Oh, he stays upright,” a pleasant voice said. “An’ I’ll thank ya to mind yer manners, mister.”

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Vegeta gets help from an unexpected source

Kakarot?

“That you, ya damn fool?” I called. “What the hell ya doin’ out here?”

“Couldn’t let ya have an adventure without me,” Kakarot chuckled, riding into the light with Kinto. Made sense. Kakarot was the only one who ever got that damn horse to mind, an’ Gine woulda wanted him to get Kinto off her hands. “Sides, ya ain’t no good at introductions. Obviously,” Kakarot continued.

“Shut up,” I snapped. “I get along fine.”

“Yeah, sure, you ain’t about to throw fists, an’ the sun comes out at night. Didn’t ya promise Ma to go easy?”

I ground my teeth harder. “Yer ma made me promise to finish my fights,” I gritted out. The laughing man was laughing at me again, no thanks to Kakarot. “Which I woulda done iff’n you hadn’t barged in.”

“Who’re you?” the boss called. “We ain’t gonna hurt yer friend. Come and set. Plenty o’ food.”

“Name’s Goku,” Kakarot said, and my chest tightened. Goku was what Chichi always called him. Why the hell was he chasin’ me across the horizon when he should be grieving? He just buried his bride, on his wedding day barely a week ago, an’ I knew him. He was runnin’ from his feelings- jus’ about the only thing he ran from. We were the same that way, an’ I knew I’d rather face a wild hog with nothin’ but a pea shooter than my feelings.

Kakarot immediately befriended everyone in the camp. He always did, and these folks were no exception. He sang in that fine voice of his, put everyone at ease, an’ before long the only one who didn’t love him was that laughing man, the one who thought he was so tall.

Much as I hate to admit it, it was a good thing Kakarot had come up when he did. I’d been in a pickle, an’ I was no good at getting out of those without my fists.

“How’d you boys both find our camp?” the giant asked. “It’s long odds that you were traveling alone and both wound up here.”

“We learn to track before we learn to walk in the hills,” I chuckled. “Goku here’s one a the best trackers I ever met, ‘cept maybe his brother.”

“S’right,” Kakarot replied between mouthfuls of beans. “An’ Raditz learned from my pa. Never seen a critter get away from him, an’ Vegeta weren’t exactly hidin’ his trail.”

I rolled my eyes at Kakarot’s sly jab, but the giant winked at me. For once in my life, strangers were taking a liking to me. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

“You boys do much fightin’ up in the hills?” the old man asked. “Goku, ya look like a born brawler.”

“Yeah! But Vegeta’s the one to watch out for,” Kakarot said. “Have ta show ya sometime.” The jackass who kept laughing at me scoffed. Kakarot and I both stared at him, an’ I dunno about Kakarot, but there was murder in my eyes. “Tiny little thing like him?” he said, shaking his head. “Naw, yer just trying to make your pal seem bigger’n he is.” I took a deep breath. No fights I couldn’t finish. Much as Kakarot had befriended everyone here, I couldn’t jus’ tackle one of ‘em for talkin’ shit. Not yet. If these folks were as friendly as they seemed, they’d let me take care of my business when the time came.

In fact, Kakarot charmed his way into getting us jobs on the cattle drive. I’d been thinking along those lines, ‘cause it surely is easier to travel in a group in this lonely country, but it woulda been hard going for me. With Kakarot there, all I had to do was sit quiet while he told ‘em about growin’ up on the hills and lookin’ fer a new place for Gine out west. By the time he wrapped up his yarnin’, we was hired as cowhands on a drive to Abilene. I learned some names- the giant who’d taken a liking to us was Nappa, an’ he’d been educated. The stringy old man with the big buffalo gun was Roshi. The boss was just the boss. I purposely avoided learning the laughing bastard’s name as long as possible.

Kakarot didn’t mention Chichi once. Not even when he laid out his blanket next to mine and held me tight like we was little kids again, sneakin’ into each other’s beds. We had stopped when Raditz told us we was too big, wanting to impress the big brother, but a couple years ago, when Kakarot was round about sixteen, an’ I were eighteen, he came back.

I don’t sleep easy, never have, so I was starin’ at the ceiling, tryin’ ta wear myself out enough to sleep. Me an’ him’d both been with girls- me with some gals here an’ there who’d come to meeting an’ left with me for reasons I ain’t about to understand, an’ him with Chichi, but there was no denyin’ that I wondered what it would be like to tumble with Kakarot in the bushes, sheets, wherever, now that he was grown. Would he be like the girls, all giggling an’ soft? I reckoned he’d be quieter, or at least giggle less, an’ I knew he weren’t soft anywhere, but I also reckoned I’d never find out firsthand. Bein’ the older of us, I didn’t want to push him. Especially didn’t want ta push him away.

But that night, he crept into my bed, slipped his work-rough hand around my hard length, pressed his mouth over mine.

Kakarot was nothin’ like the girls. He were much better. Afterwards, he fell asleep curled around me.

The next mornin’, Kakarot had seemed shy.

“Should- do ya think I should tell Chichi?” he asked, watching me move about the tiny room.

“What for?” I asked, tossing a shirt at him.

“Well, y’know. I told you, first time I were with her,” he said, holding the shirt carefully. I snorted.

“Ya ain’t marryin’ me,” I replied, thinking to myself that it was a damn shame. I mean, neither of us’d make a decent wife, not even both of us put together, but I wouldn’t mind more nights like that, more mornings like this. More of Kakarot’s eager mouth and firm manhood, his lust-filled eyes tracking my every move.

In the end, I never found out if he told Chichi. If he did, she didn’t mind, cause that weren’t our last time. An’ it’s not like I can ask now.



But nothin' like that happened tonight, our first night together out under the stars on the wide-open prairie. I didn't offer, an' Kakarot didn't ask. I knew that he jus' needed someone to hold, the warmth and weight of somebody he knew beside him.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

Vegeta and Goku learn how to drive cattle. Vegeta encounters some familiar faces from the hills.

## Chapter Notes

All I know about cattle drives comes from reading and watching westerns. Apologies to anyone who actually works with cattle.

Content note: brief reference to conflicts between Indigenous North Americans and white settlers.

Next mornin' me an' Kakarot rode with Nappa an' Roshi so's they could show us the ropes. We was used to hard work, just not this kind. Cattle are bastards. Big, stubborn, bastards. Luckily, Dapple an' Kinto turned out to be fine stock horses. They could keep up with the pace, they weren't scared of them cows, an' they took commands fast. At least, Dapple did. Kinto only took commands from Kakarot.

By nightfall, we was covered in dust and sweat, an' them campfire beans tasted mighty fine. "Seems like ya can work as hard as ya eat!" the boss said, clapping one hand on my shoulder and one on Kakarot's. We both grunted. Food were serious business. "Nappa and Roshi tell me the two of you are mighty quick learners. Keep it up, boys!"

"Thank you kindly," Kakarot said, rubbing the back of his head. "Ain't no place back home for slow learnin' an I guess it's the same out here!"

I chased the last few beans around my camp bowl with a piece of hard bread, then nodded to the boss. He didn't seem offended by my silence, which was nice. The laughing man - proper name of Appule - was on night watch, thank god, so I had a moment of peace in the camp. Still, I'd have to deal with him eventually.

I was havin' the strangest time. Nappa seemed to've taken a real liking to me, took me under his wing. He even let me ride by him when Kakarot weren't nearby, sit by him round the fire when Kakarot was singin' the herd to sleep. He showed me how to look for water in the dry country, how to loop the rope jus' so over the pommel so's it didn't catch, what to do iff'n I caught my foot in the stirrup an' fell. I learned to feel the mood of the herd, an' he also helped me with some book learnin'. I already knew my letters an' my name, like jus' about everyone at home, but not much else. I couldn't read handwriting worth a damn, neither. Took me hours to trace out my own name, an' I were gonna need to write iff'n I wanted ta keep my promise to Gine.

Gine were the one as taught me an' Kakarot our letters, but we didn't mind her when she wanted us to keep learning. What was the point? 'Sides, the forest were more fun. Chores were more fun than sittin' and poking bits of chalk at a slate.

Nappa started me on the readin' part. He was packin' books for some ungodly reason, but it surely was nice to have somethin' to do on them long nights. Started me off on some philosophy book or other, so I was bothering him every five minutes about what another word meant. Took me three days to get through the first page.

Kakarot begged Nappa for a book, too, til Nappa told him to share with me an' not to get his dirty fingerprints on the pages.

Before Nappa, no one but Kakarot had ever jus' plain liked me. As a person, I mean. Gine saw me as a son, but that were different.

Maybe I was bein' seen as myself for the first time, not my past an' not my pa.

I liked it.

I was off by myself at the head of the herd when I saw the riders approaching. They were comin' in fast, an' not likely to be friendly. Instead of waiting for them to come to me, I rode to meet them, rifle across my lap.

"We're cuttin' yer herd!" the leader barked.

"I reckon not," I said, making sure he could see the rifle pointed at his belly.

He blustered, called me "boy" and tried to talk down to me, but I wasn't havin' it. I had a gun on him, an' I was ready to kill him if I needed.

I hoped not to, since his little gang would definitely be able to finish me off afore I finished them all, but I'd do it. Us Sadala folk, we got no give to us at all.

"This here gun ain't no boy," I said, "so why don't you ride off?"

The crowd shifted and I saw a familiar face. It was Tao, from the Crane family. Me an' Kakarot had run them out of the hills for stealin' hogs.

"Tao, mighty fine day," I called, and he went pale like he seen a ghost. "Why doncha introduce me to yer new friends?"

"Hey, boss? That's one a them Saiyans I tole ya about," Tao said nervously.

The leader's face took on that same sickly look that Tao had on.

"Oh, that so?" he managed, eyes darting around. "Well, I had no idea you boys was friends. Come on!"

He jerked his horse around and I watched the rustlers ride off.

Whistling to myself, I turned back to the herd, only to see riders from my own camp galloping up like they expected trouble. Nappa, Roshi, the boss, an' Appule ringed around me, eyes dartin' and lookin' for danger.

"Vegeta, what did those men want?" the boss asked, so I told the truth.

"They figured to cut the herd," I said simply.

"Well, what happened?" Nappa demanded.

"They decided not ta," I told them. "I gotta watch the herd. Boss." I tipped my hat to him and got back to work.

"Wasn't that Vodka?" the boss asked, "I coulda swore that was Vodka!"

"Sure looked to be," Roshi agreed, "but that Vegeta there's quite a man."

I set a little straighter in my saddle when I heard that. I hadn't done much, just what anybody would do- kept a cool head without backin' down- but it surely was nice of Roshi to say that.

“Geta, I heard ya had some company,” Kakarot said as we crouched at the fire that evening.

“Tao was there,” was all I said.

Appule butted in. “Tao? Who’s Tao?”

“We had some trouble with his people back in the hills,” Kakarot said. “I guess some people don’t change. Hog thievin’ to cattle rustlin’.” He shook his head sadly. Kakarot hadn’t wanted to run them out, but the Cranes hadn’t been receptive ta his near to polite requests that they stop thieving, an’ he’d given Pa Crane a bum wing on their way out. What I mean is, Kakarot’s a reasonable fella, but he don’t got no give in him, neither, and he’ll break a man’s arm iff’n there’s no other way. He’s a fighter, an’ a damn good one.

Later, I saw Appule lookin’ at me all considering, like I wasn’t a kid. Damn right I weren’t.

One night, Roshi tole me about the wild cattle over Colorado way. Seemed there were good money to be made, an’ nobody owned them cows. A small outfit, say, four men, could spend some time roundin’ ‘em up, fattenin’ ‘em up, an’ avoidin’ the natives. They weren’t interested in the cows less’n they was starvin’, but they didn’t cotton to folks traipsin’ around on their land any more’n we did back home.

“Sounds like a fine plan. I’ll come along with ya, iff’n Goku wants to,” I said. “An’ maybe... maybe Nappa? He knows cattle.”

“Well now, I was just talkin’ ta Nappa about this very same ideer, an’ he’s the one mentioned you an’ Goku,” Roshi said in his reedy voice, hunching his scrawny shoulders. He always put me to mind of rawhide an’ bobwire. That old man might look old, but I’d put money I ain’t got against him outlivin’ us all.

So that was that. We would finish the drive an’ make for the wild cattle- an’, hopefully, our fortunes.

## Chapter 4

Abilene weren't much of a city, but me an' Kakarot hadn't seen more of a town than a general store an' a church. It surely felt like a big city to us. They had a Main Street, two hotels, a bank, an' a saloon. One hotel, it had two stories, but the other had three. I heard tell of buildings as tall as trees, but I always figured it were made up, like dragons an' demons an' such. Seeing that building keep goin' up an' up, I wondered what else was true. I hated feeling like a country hick jus' gapin' at the town, but I couldn't help it. At least Kakarot were doing the same thing- he looked like his eyes'd fall out iff'n he opened 'em any wider.

First thing anybody does after a trek like that is get a bath. In Abilene, for a buncha cowhands, that meant the barrels out back at the saloon. There was only two, so Nappa an' Kakarot went first while I checked the dusty yard for snakes. I had heard a big rattler got somebody the other day.

I hate snakes. Where are their legs? They always move too quick for a critter with no legs, an' I don't trust 'em. 'Sides, was a serpent caused the fall of man, or that's what I heard at meeting once.

Nappa finished first an' headed into the saloon fer a drink- to "wet his whistle" as he put it. By the time I was just about soaped up, Kakarot finished an' followed Nappa, double checking his boots fer snakes afore he stomped into 'em.

"With yer stinky feet, no critter'd go near yer boots," I told 'im, just to hear him laugh.

I was enjoyin' gettin' clean- it ain't nothing like a nice bath to home, but I had dirt in places I'd rather not. An' my hair? The rinse water were like mud!

That was when Appule stepped out the back of the saloon.

Seein' how I was naked an' soapy in a barrel with my gun outta reach, I hoped he'd come out fer a bath. Not to mention, he needed a bath. I could smell him from my barrel.

No such luck.

"Goku's left fer the hotel," Appule said, an unpleasant grin on his face.

God, I wished I had my gun. And my pants.

"Goku handles his business. I handle mine," I said, carefully sloshing some water over my face. Soap in yer eyes is bad at the best of times, an' this? This was not the best of times. The thing to do was act like I didn't care. If I went for my gun, he'd drop me. I had that rinse bucket, though.

Appule was closin' in on me, an' he had a mean look in his eyes.

"Been wonderin' about that. What'll ya do if he ain't there ta save ya?"

His hand dropped toward his gun, and I raised the rinse bucket like I didn't notice. Just a little closer, ya ornery son of a bitch.

"Fact is, I don't like ya, Vegeta, not you or that Goku--"

I threw the rinse water in his face.

While Appule spluttered an' cussed an' grabbed for his gun, I scrambled out of the barrel and closed the distance between us, felt the bullet miss me, and knocked him clean out with the

bucket. It felt like oak, an' it hit like it too.

Then I got myself into my pants, dripping wet as I was.

Nothin' worse than bein' naked as a jaybird when trouble comes a'callin', an' I felt a sight better with my pants on and my gun to hand. I was stompin' into my boots when three more crashed outta the saloon, actin' like they expected trouble.

Tch. More'n likely, they expected my corpse. But by then I had my gun an' I faced 'em down real cool.

"Here fer a bath, gentlemen?" I said, an' they looked between me an' Appule, him lyin' on the ground.

"What happened?" asked a man with the longest hair I ever seen on a white man. He looked ready to fight, too.

"Appule here thought he could get the jump on me," I said, gesturing down at him. "Bought himself more'n he could pay fer."

The fella with the hair looked mad as hell, but I was pointin' a gun at him, half-naked an' lookin' like a wet rat or no.

"You need any help, Vegeta?" Roshi asked from behind Long Hair, an' I could jus' see him pullin' in his horns. He'd been pawin' an' snortin' like a mad bull, but now he looked calm as a kitten.

He'd be trouble, alright.

"Nah, jus' havin' a little chat with these fine fellas," I said, then nodded at Nappa, standing in the door.

"You best clear outta here, boy," the man with the hair said in a pleasant voice. "He'll kill you for sure."

"You tell him he can try. I ain't lookin' fer trouble but he's mighty pushing," I said, holstering my gun an' tugging my shirt over my head. "Like I told 'im, I handle my business."

I shouldered past the man with the hair- later found out his name was Zarbon- an' went with Nappa an' Roshi to the hotel dining room, which is where Kakarot had gone off to, no surprise there.

Kakarot waved us over to the table he was sittin' at with a slim, bald fella an' a few others.

"Heya, boys! Mr Frieza here was jus' tellin' me 'bout the homesteads he aims to open up in New Mexico!" Kakarot said with a broad grin on his face.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

Goku and Vegeta have one of their first disagreements

I dunno what it was, but I took an immediate dislike ta that Frieza fella. Somethin' in his eyes, maybe? He made me feel like we was all beneath him, that he was doin' Kakarot a great favor by even lookin' at him.

"Gentlemen, Goku was just telling me that you four are striking out for wild cattle," Frieza said, and my dislike went all solid. His voice sent shivers up my spine, an' not in the good way. He put me in mind of a snake. "Perhaps you'd consider joining my venture? We are always looking for good men. Those Mexicans have been hogging that land for far too long, and it's high time they realized that they live on American soil now."

"I gotta wash up," I said abruptly, afore I punched this Mr Frieza. He didn't look like a man who could fight his own battles, but looks could be deceivin', on top a the fact he had an outfit with him. They all looked like fightin' men.

By the time I got back, Nappa an' Roshi had herded Kakarot away from his new friend an' sat him down at a table a good ways away.

I felt awkward as all get-out, sittin' at that table with a nice white cloth on it in my wet clothes. No one else seemed to mind, but, then again, they was all dried off. Eatin' at a table was strange for all of us, after months on the drive. On the range, you scoop beans with bread an' pray for meat. Kakarot didn't know what to do with his hands, kept scratchin' the back of his head til Roshi asked if he had fleas.

Kakarot chattered about that Frieza man til Nappa tole him to stop. He was some big man back east, an' he was openin' up the land for settlers, which was me an' Kakarot, technically. I mean, we was lookin' to set down roots fer Gine, after all.

The stories Kakarot was tellin' about Frieza didn't quite add up. I ain't much for sums, but I can put two an' two together.

"If Frieza were such a big man back east, what in the hell is he doin' out here?" I asked, but Kakarot just bounced in his seat a little.

"He says it's his patriotic duty ta help open up the country," Kakarot replied. "Manifest destiny, ya know?"

Roshi made a sour face. "Goku, you know people already live on the land, right?"

"Yeah, but not Americans. Mr Frieza says they gotta share," Kakarot parroted.

"Enough about this Frieza," Nappa said. "Our food is coming."

Kakarot an' I was back at camp, gettin' ready ta help the boss move the herd ta the buyer's pens.

"Geta, I dun see why ya don't like Mr Frieza," Kakarot said. "He weren't nothin' but pleasant an' you were mighty rude, don't think I didn't notice you runnin' out. An' sayin' he ain't tellin' the truth about himself-"

“Look,” I said, not wanting to get into it. “I jus’ plain don’t like him. Makes me feel like he’s lookin’ down his nose at us common folk. An’ openin’ up the land fer settlers? It don’t seem right.” Looked like I actually did wanna get into it. “People already live there, Ka- Goku. What iff’n a buncha city folk wanted ta “open up” Sadala fer theirselves?”

“That’s different,” Kakarot protested. “Our people been there for generations!”

“Uh huh, but there ain’t no big towns. No, whatsit, commerce er nothin’,” I argued.

Kakarot’s brows crumpled an’ I could tell he were thinkin’ hard. Me, I’d said as much as I wanted ta say on the matter.

“Maybe so, but that don’t mean there ain’t room fer more people,” Kakarot argued back.

“Sides, I think you jus’ like seein’ the bad in everyone. I think Mr Frieza’s a decent guy, he don’t seem snooty ta me!”

“Tch. I ain’t dealin’ with that Frieza, no matter what. Somethin’ ain’t right ‘bout him. Ya always think the best a people, right up til they spit in yer eye. Ya prolly woulda sat Bebi Tuffle right down at yer weddin’ table,” I snapped, too angry ta mind myself.

I wished I coulda took them words right back outta the air, jus’ snatched ‘em back so’s they never happened, so’s Kakarot never heard ‘em an’ never made that face.

Kakarot’s a natural smiler. Most people, they got a restin’ face that ain’t smilin’ nor frownin’. Me, I frown in my sleep, least that’s what Kakarot tells me, but not Kakarot. Kakarot smiles at most everything he faces. Only times he frowns are right afore a fight- a real fight, not a scrap or a tussle- or when he’s tryin’ real hard ta think of somethin’. Ever since the weddin’, the smile don’t always reach his eyes, but ya can’t see that less’n yer lookin’ for it.

He weren’t smiling at all after what I said. His eyes were cold, mouth set in a grim line, an’ the worst of it was, he didn’t say nothin’ back. I knew he was really, truly mad when he didn’t even yell at me.

I trust my gut, an’ my gut knew there weren’t nothin’ I could do right then. I ain’t the kinda person builds things, fixes things. I bust things up, I break ‘em, an’ that was just what I’d done ta Kakarot. Fer nigh on two months he’d been pretendin’ that nothing had happened, an’ here I’d gone an’ ripped the wound open, shoved his face in the shit.

I bit my lip, hard, hopin’ that he’d lash out, hit me, somethin’, anythin’ but turn away from me an’ keep on about his business. But that’s just what he did. The whole rest a the day, he were grim an’ quiet, not lookin’ at me nor sayin’ nothin’ unnecessary.

I didn’t know what ta do, so I did nothin’ asides my work.

That night, I was sat on my bedroll starin’ up at the sky, listenin’ to the yarin’ round the fire. Boots rustled the grass on their way over ta me, but I let whoever it was come without lookin’. I had a pretty good idea who it was, an’ I knew I was right when Kakarot’s voice cut through the darkness.

“Stand up, Vegeta,” he said, low an’ dangerous.

Finally.

I stood. We faced each other fer a minute, an’ I could feel my heart thumpin’ away like a drum. I knew damn well that I’d pushed Kakarot too far, an’, frankly, he’d been excused fer killin’ me. I sure as hell wouldn’t blame him, an’ I wouldn’t fight back, neither. We was closer’n any brothers or lovers I’d ever knowed, trusted each other with anythin’ an’ everythin’, an’ I’d as good as stabbed him in the heart.



Kakarot's fist caught me by surprise, right on the mouth, an' he knocked me down. I lay on my back, sprawled in the grass, an' felt fer missin' teeth.

"Get up," Kakarot growled. I spat out some blood - no teeth, though, to my surprise - an' stood. The next punch landed in my gut, but didn't knock me down.

Mainly, it didn't knock me down on accounta it bent me double, an' it was actually Kakarot's foot in my middle not a moment later that knocked me down.

"Git up an' fight me!" Kakarot shouted, so I did.

Kakarot liked ta talk when he fought. I reckon it was good fer him, this time.

It weren't good fer me, though.

"Why would ya say that?" he grunted, taking a hit to the ribs. "I ain't never complained about you seein' the worst in people. Ain't never told ya that everyone says yer ma went crazy cause'a you, ain't never complained when ya ate all'a the food an' said mean things."

At least he weren't sayin' anything I ain't heard before. Still hurt more'n the blows.

I fought back, but I weren't fightin' ta win. It was like a conversation fer us. All them things we could never say, leastaways, that I could never say, they didn't matter so much when we was brawlin'. We'd been doin' this fer so long, since Kakarot was old enough to throw a punch, that it were better than talkin' fer me.

Finally, Kakarot had me pinned an' I could see the sweat gleamin' on him in the moonlight, where he crouched over me. Finally, I knew what I had ta say. Wouldn't fix anythin', nor right the wrong, but it had ta be said.

"It weren't yer fault," I said.

Kakarot's face crumpled an' he collapsed ontta my chest, shaking. I wrapped my arms around him.

"You were tellin' me that very mornin'," Kakarot whimpered into my shirt. "We'd jus' given them Tuffles some grief, an' a weddin' is big news. I was stupid not ta worry!"

Christ, I wished he'd'a got this out back to home. Gine were much better at handlin' this kinda thing. An' it all came out, like my anger had lanced a boil. Jus' so much sadness an' guilt an' anger, all gushin' outta him after bein' pent up fer so long.

"It ain't yer fault," I repeated, holding him close while he shook.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

Goku and Vegeta meet some folks headed down to New Mexico.

Next day, I woke up with my head on Kakarot 's chest. His fingers was still tangled in my hair, an' we'd made it onto to my bedroll at some point. I pressed a kiss ta his bare skin, careful cause'a the split lip Kakarot had give me the night before, an' felt more'n heard a content rumble from Kakarot.

"What happened to you two?" Nappa asked, a knowing glint in his eye. I didn't care fer it, but weren't nothin' I could do without makin' the whole thing worse.

"Oh, me an' Geta had a lil talk," Kakarot said easily.

"You talk with your fists?" Nappa snorted.

"Yeah," I said, "wanna try it?" Kakarot picked up on my mood an' bounced on the balls of his feet, holding his hands up like a prizefighter, big ol' grin on his face. It surely was good to see.

Nappa guffawed, slapped his knee an' everythin'. I weren't too sure about bein' laughed at, but Kakarot laughed too an' I wouldn'ta cared if Frieza an' my dead Pa was laughin'.

The cattle sold fer a good price, an' we all got our wages. Boss gave me a bonus for keeping the herd when that Vodka fella tried to cut it, so I had more money'n I'd ever seen, probly more'n the entire community back home'd ever had put together. It makes a man nervous, havin' somethin' ta lose.

Loafin' around town, we saw a whole posse of riders kitted out in the smartest outfits I ever seen. Instead of shapeless homespun, like me an' Kakarot, or even denim like Nappa an' Roshi, they had tight buckskin trousers an' jackets that showed off their legs an' shoulders, with big ol' spurs that jangled when they walked. And they had fine, fine horses. Kakarot strolled on over an' made friends, like he does, an' I tagged along.

They was Mexican, the first I'd ever seen, an' they was headin' back home to their land in what was jus' recently the American territory of New Mexico.

Frieza's face flashed into my mind, but I kept my mouth shut. Kakarot tried ta make friends with their boss, Guru, but I guess he was too big a muckity muck to get outta his carriage. I understood the feelin'. He looked old, an' not all that well from what I seen through the little window.

The riders were decent folk, though. All'a them were fighters, vaqueros, they called themselves. Most of 'em had worked for Guru since they could set a horse, and their parents an' grandparents, too. Me, I respected any man who took good care of his horses an' worked a family business. Matter of fact, I were thinkin' about askin' if we could ride along with them, seein' as we was headin' the same way til we reached Fort Dodge.

The foreman, a tall, serious man called Nail, took my request to Guru.

“My apologies, gentlemen, but Guru is wary of outsiders. We have reason to believe we will be attacked, and while the additional guns would be useful, we have no way of knowing your intentions and character,” Nail said seriously.

Made sense.

“Well, that’s a shame,” Kakarot said breezily. “Sure woulda been nice. I been hopin’ you boys might learn me some-a yer language.”

“Yer still learnin’ ta read our own language,” I protested, “an’ now you wanna pick up another one?”

“Why sure! Iff’n I’m learnin’ one, my head’ll be ready to take in more stuff!” Kakarot explained earnestly.

“Tch. Iff’n yer crammin’ new stuff inta yer head, there’s no room for more!” I argued.

Nail laughed an’ we both looked at him, a little startled.

“I am sorry for laughing, Goku, Vegeta, but I do hope we meet again as friends. I would be pleased to teach you some of the Spanish language,” he said.

Well, makin’ nice with Nail’s folks give me an idea ‘bout how ta spend my cash. I got me a whole new outfit. Bought it offa one a them Mexican riders, an’ took it to the general store to trim up the legs. I’m a mite shorter than the man I bought it off. My clothes were plain wore out. Fact was, I was surprised the seat of my pants held together as long as it had. Not to mention, the Sadala hills ain’t exactly a center of fashion. Our clothes covered our bodies, an’ that were about it.

Kakarot whistled at me when I walked outta the store, an’ I went red.

“Damn, I gotta get me some new duds, too!” he said, circling me.

“Go on, then, ya clown,” I grumbled, secretly pleased by the attention. I yelped when he pinched my behind- an’ the cheeky bastard jus’ winked at me! Right on the Main Street!

“Think I will. They surely do make ya look good, Vegeta,” he said with a promise in his eyes. I blushed.

“Y’know, Geta, Frieza offered us a job with ‘im,” Kakarot said as we approached the porch of the hotel, where Nappa and Roshi were sat down enjoyin’ the chairs an’ real glasses of water.

“That so?” I said, not looking at him. “What about goin’ out an’ catchin’ them wild cattle, like we was planning?”

I heard him scratch the back of his head.

“Weeeellll,” he said, drawin’ out the word like Gine drew out wool fer spinnin’. “It’s good pay. An’ I met some-a his men, an’ they seem like decent folks ta me. Foreman’s called Zarbon, he were pretty pleasant.”

“Did any of ‘em have real long hair?” I asked. I didn’t want ta work fer Frieza, nohow, but I needed a better excuse than jus’ my gut.

“Well sure,” he said. “That’s Zarbon, actually.”

I drew Kakarot into the shade between two buildings for a minute an’ tole him about my little showdown with Appule the day before.

“Well, that don’t sound good. I dun think Mr Frieza’d hire somebody like that iff’n he knew about it, but yer right. Let’s go round up them cattle,” Kakarot said, pulling me back into the street. “Sides, we hill folk gotta stick together.”

I was glad fer that. Kakarot had always been there, trailin’ after me when we was small an’ standin’ beside me when we grew up- him more up than me. I never woulda told a soul back

then, but I needed him. Losin' Kakarot woulda been like losin' a leg, but worse. My leg couldn't sing or weave stories or brawl or have my back or hold me close at night.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

Appule gets the showdown he's been itching after

We was settin' on the porch at the hotel, me'n Kakarot'm Roshi'n Nappa, jus' yarnin' an' bellyachin' an' such when Roshi's eyes sharpened on something behind me.

"Best look sharp," he said, "Appule looks ta be huntin' yer hide, Vegeta."

Well, that's something no man wants ta hear. Kakarot stood an' moved next to me, but I put a hand in fronta him.

"No. This is my business," I said, checking my gun an' holstering it.

Kakarot grumbled but let Nappa pull him away. I knew they'd have my back, no funny business, jus' me an' Appule, the way Appule thought he wanted.

"Vegeta! Come on out, less'n yer a coward!" Appule shouted, standing in the street with Zarbon an' some other fella backin' him up.

It were a long walk down those steps to the street. Not the longest of my life, but nearly so, an' that walk weren't for years yet. An' I'd have more showdowns like that, with long walks a their own, but they was different. This were the first. It felt sacred, like when Gine made me take communion at meetin', like it were somethin' I couldn't come back from.

I knew I was fast, an' probably fast enough to beat Appule, but a lot can happen out there on the street, sun beating' down, jus' you an' him an' the guns.

And, I realized, I didn't want to kill 'im if I could avoid it.

Sure, I'd killed Bebi Tuffle, but he'd just taken a shot at Kakarot. I hadn't'a knowed it at the time, but he'd just killed Chichi. That killin' had been right, what was the word from Napp's book, justified.

This?

Appule had got it into his fool head that he wanted ta kill me. We rubbed each other the wrong way, I don't know, an' now someone was gonna die. He was gonna get himself killed, all cause he didn't like me. I felt somethin' deep inside me, like this was what I was born ta do, an' I felt a little sad. Would this be my life? Dusty streets an' guns, an' men who thought they could kill me?

I'd been standin' at the foot of the stairs, watchin' Appule walk toward me an' thinkin', but now I started walkin'.

Appule stopped. Seems he didn't expect me to meet him, jus' figured I'd shake like a rabbit while he swaggered on down the street.

I didn't look away from his face. I knew my boys would keep things fair, no interference from Appule's boys.

Appule's face was interestin' ta watch. He started out confident, proud, an' passed through

shock an' anger afore settlin' on fear.

He didn't want ta kill me, he wanted to be the man that killed me. Now that it came down to the killin', he weren't so sure he'd win.

Lucky for him, I wasn't awful sure I wanted ta be the man that killed Appule. If he pushed me, sure. Ain't no way I'd let him kill me.

But as I closed in on him, close enough ta see the whites of his eyes, smell the stink of terror on him, I knew what to do.

He wanted a shootout, an' he wanted ta win, but I was gonna ruin all his plans today.

I'm ornery like that.

"I'd kill ya, Appule," I said, my voice loud in the silent afternoon. The hotel porch creaked, a dog barked, but fer me, it was just me an' him.

Appule gasped a little. I kept walkin' in on him until he had to step back.

One thing I'd learned from Nappa on the drive was once ya start backin', it's awful hard to stop, an' that's true for men as much as cows. The sweat was runnin' down Appule's face an' he looked scared. He looked like he wanted to draw, like he planned to draw, but he didn't.

"What, ya thought I'd jus' roll over? It's like ya don't know me a'tall," I said, moving in until our chests woulda bumped iff'n I were taller.

Appule panted, and I knew right then--

I knew that it was over. Alls I had ta do was convince him of that.

"Drop yer gun!" I shouted, making Appule flinch. He froze for an instant, an' I knew he was thinkin' about going for it—

An' then, he breathed out like I'd punched him in the gut, an' he fumbled at his belt for a moment afore it dropped to the ground.

I hadn't even drawn my gun.

Appule started shakin' and stumbled back a few more steps, then turned an' fairly ran.

That Zarbon was lookin' at me like he wanted to pick up where Appule left off, so I glared at him til he saw the light an' turned away, along with that other man with them. 'Sides, I had backup.

When I glanced back over my shoulder, Kakarot, Nappa, an' Roshi were watchin' Zarbon an' that other fella like a wolf watches sheep, an' Roshi had his big ol' buffalo gun just restin' casually on the railing.

I figured I'd shake after my first showdown, but no. I were still calm an' cool, like there weren't at least two men wanted me dead, like I hadn't jus' stared Death in the face an' tole him ta step off.

Nail stepped down from the porch an' waved for me to come close.

"Guru was most impressed with how you handled that situation, Mr Vegeta. He has extended you and your colleagues an invitation to join our party as we head southwest," Nail said.

I glanced at Nappa, Roshi, an' Kakarot. Nappa an' Roshi nodded, an' Kakarot stuck his thumb up.

"Well, tell Mr Guru he got himself four more riders, leastaways until we make Fort Dodge," I said, shaking Nail's outstretched hand.

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

On the trail with Guru's people, Vegeta meets Cui at Pawnee Rock

It was a long ride through hot, dusty country. More'n once, we run outta water, 'cept what were left in the canteens, an' we had ta use that to water the horses. A horse needs a lot more water than a man. One time, we left a waterin' hole practically dry.

We was all gettin' along with mosta the Mexicans, though. Mr Guru never talked ta me, but Kakarot managed to weasel his way into a conversation or two. Damn, but he were charming when he wanted ta be. Roshi got along with 'im just fine, too. Maybe it's somethin' about bein' a old man, jus' bein' comfortable in yer own skin an' havin' seen a whole lotta things. Maybe there jus' ain't that many people what remember the old days an' it's comfortin' to sit together.

I don't reckon I'll ever find out about that, myself. Man like me don't reach old age, not without a whole lotta luck, an' I don't trust my luck that far. Fact is, the only things I trust with my life are my gut an' my trigger finger, an' Kakarot, a course. Hell, I were already older'n I ever shoulda been, by rights. Someone ornery as me, shoulda been killed over somethin' small years before, probly by Kakarot or Gine.

Anyhow, Nail was good people. He were kinda uptight, but maybe that's what havin' family does to ya. Still, he showed me an' Kakarot how ta actually use them big spurs we got with our outfits, leastaways without cuttin' into the horses so bad. An' he let Kakarot ask him all the questions he wanted, all about his family an' the land they was goin' home to, an' such. Seemed Mr Guru had a mighty tidy operation down on the Namek land grant, with mines an' ranches an' even a little farmland. That country was lousy for farming, accordin' ta Nail, but they had some corn an' beans an' whatnot.

Dapple's hooves kicked up dust as we trudged down the trail, eyes open fer trouble. We was always ready fer trouble; Nail said that Guru figured some land-grabbers'd try an' stop them from goin' home, an we was passin' through Comanche lands. They might not tangle with us iff'n we didn't tangle with them, but, then again, maybe not. We seen some groups ride on past without sparin' us a second glance, but others took a little more persuasion of the lead variety.

We was comin' up on Pawnee Rock, but Nail didn't want ta go too close. It bein' a major landmark on the trail, he figured to fight shy of any troublemakers there.

"Aw, man! I always wanted ta see it!" Kakarot protested. I shook my head but privately agreed.

"I am sorry, Goku, but Guru wishes to avoid the trouble."

“How’s about we go on our own?” Roshi said. He was a right soft touch for Kakarot. “We’ll meet back up with the group after we see it. Sides, iff’n there’s trouble, we kin handle ourselves.”

Nail nodded thoughtfully. “I trust you will find us on the other side, gentlemen. Enjoy the sights.”

“Hoo boy!” Kakarot crowed. “Geta, we’re gonna see it! I heard, Kit Carson been there!”

”Story goes, it got named because Carson was just a kid, shot his mule thinking it was a Pawnee brave,” Nappa added.

I snorted a laugh. Kit Carson, the legendary tracker and explorer, had shot his own animal? Kakarot was bent double laughing. “Ha! Even when we was kids, wouldn’t a done that, huh Geta!”

“Damn straight, even though you was a kid last year,” I said with a chuckle. “Even when ya could barely hold a gun, ya weren’t that dumb.”

So, the riders an’ the carriages took the long way ‘round while Nappa, Roshi, Kakarot, an’ me went ta see the rock.

It was a damn big rock, is what it was. I seen big rocks. I grew up in the Appalachian mountains. It were impressive, how it stuck out of the prairie, but, like I said. Damn big rock.

More interestin’, to someone like me, at least, was the crowd of troublemakers all camped around it. The camp, if ya could call it that, it was just a buncha guys layin’ around a buncha fires. No wagons, no kids, an iff’n there was women, they was hidin’ or dressed like men. This wasn’t no group of settlers.

I recognized some of the boys who’d been with Vodka, an’ the other guy who’d backed Appule up. Didn’t see Zarbon. There were empty bottles scattered around, an’ they looked to be waiting for something.

Kakarot was lookin’ around like he recognized some of ‘em, too, an’ like he planned on recognizin’ more of ‘em.

When the crowd moved around us, I didn’t much care for that, so I turned Dapple to face ‘em.

The other fella who’d backed Appule up didn’t much care for that himself.

“What’s the matter, you afraid or somethin’?” he called. Someone in the crowd laughed an’ encouraged him, an’ I thought they called ‘im Cui.

I been afraid lotsa times. Facin’ down a bear or a panther, runnin’ from the Tuffles when me an’ Kakarot’s prank didn’t go off the way we planned, waitin’ fer the cart to pull out of the way when Bebi Tuffle came to Kakarot’s weddin’, runnin’ through the hills from Sheriff Krillin, standin’ in that bath barrel with Appule movin’ in on me, walkin’ up the street to face Appule again, hidin’ in a grassy hollow on the prairie from Comanche braves... the list’ll go on long as I live. Ain’t nobody but an insane person never been afraid.

Right now at Pawnee Rock, surrounded by Frieza’s rough riders, called a coward by this Cui fella, I weren’t afraid. I were mad. Four men against a big crowd like that, we weren’t the ones who was afraid, but iff’n it came ta shootin’, we were goners. We wouldn’t get nowhere talkin’ nor runnin’, but we needed ta, how did Nappa say it when he were drunk, “impress upon these fine gentlemen that we intended to travel unmolested.”

I pointed Dapple right at Cui, an’ that horse knew what ta do. Cui started to sidestep, but Dapple had turned to a damn fine stock horse, so he jus’ turned to follow Cui.



It's mighty hard to stop backing an' come forward once you've started backin'. My hand was inches from my pistol, but I didn't want ta use it iff'n I could avoid it. Like I said, lead in the atmosphere is bad fer the health. Cui started ta get flustered an' grabbed fer his own gun, but I spurred Dapple just a touch an' he jus' knocked Cui clean on his ass.

Cui was in the dirt, his gun was off outta reach, an' I hadn't even said a word, nor touched my gun. I glanced back at the others, an' they all had guns to ready- Kakarot's pistol was in his lap, an' Nappa an' Roshi had their rifles out.

"We're jus' passin' through, boys," Roshi said in that reedy voice, only there were steel in it now.

Cui shifted his weight like he were gettin' up, an' Dapple shifted right back at 'im. Cui eased back to the ground, an' I smiled at him with all my teeth.

"Stay still a little while, fella. Yer in too much of a sweat ta get killed," I said.

"Doin' okay, Vegeta?" Kakarot called.

"Let's go," I replied, an' you better believe me when I say we lit out.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

The gang reaches Fort Dodge and enjoys some of the finer things in life.

We didn't meet up with Guru's people til Fort Dodge, an' that was jus' enough time ta say goodbye. They was goin' south, an' Nail offered us fightin' wages to join up, but we was goin' west, after them wild cows.

"That is truly a shame, gentlemen," Nail said. "If you come to Santa Fe, do stray a bit south to Namek and pay us a visit. I am sure Mr Guru would enjoy your tales of the prairies."

"You betcha!" Kakarot said, holdin' out his hand to Nail, who shook it solemnly.

"Pleasure," was all I said, but I think it were enough.

We all got a couple rooms at a hotel, so's we could sleep easy one night afore headin' out into the wild country- Nappa an' Roshi shared one, an' I bunked with Kakarot, of course. We all took baths, an' washed our clothes an' blankets, too. There was a real mirror, as big as the door, an' the baths were indoors!

Bathin' without snakes an' ruffians tryin' ta kill ya surely was nice. Me an' Kakarot washed each other's backs, an' quite a bit of each other's fronts, as well.

Dinner in the dinin' room was so fancy I was nervous. Sure, they was used to rough men, bein' a frontier fort, but there was women with their hair all piled atop their heads wearin' big fancy dresses, an' men in broadcloth suits an' tophats, not jus' range gear an' uniforms. I felt like everyone were starin' at me, with my buckskin gear.

Kakarot didn't seem ta mind. He fit in anywhere. 'Sides, once we sat down and set to eatin', it weren't our clothes people stared at. We could put away a whole heap'a food, an' this were some top rate stuff. Way better'n even good range food, an' near as good as I recollected Gine's food bein'.

Kakarot shrugged off some mighty fancy gals' attention on our way up to our room after dinner. They turned ta me next, but I could tell they was jus' hopin' I'd pay 'em, given that I were short an' not as good lookin' as Kakarot. I pointed 'em ta Roshi, an' last I saw of that old coot, he had two pretty girls on his lap an' rather less money in his pockets.

"Those gals were mighty interested in ya," I said, tryin' not ta sound jealous, an' Kakarot shrugged.

"They was jus' doin' their jobs," he said. "'Sides, they was lookin' at you just as much as at me."

"Tch. Don't try ta butter me up," I scoffed, shrugging outta my jacket an' kickin' off my boots. "Everyone knows I'm too mean fer pretty girls."

It was true. All the gals I'd been with back home hadn't exactly been beauties. Fair enough fer me, ta be sure, but they wasn't nothin' on Chichi, even.

“Don’t sell yerself short, Geta,” Kakarot said, wriggling out of his trousers.

Very funny.

I was down to my smallclothes, so I sat on the edge of the bed like it were gonna swallow me up. It jus’ mighta- it were so soft, I reckoned it was like sittin’ on a cloud.

“Oh, Lord, Geta,” Kakarot groaned, flopping down behind me. “You ever felt anythin’ this soft?”

“I seen a brand new down pillow once, at a general store,” I said. “Clerk touched it an’ it sank down like this.”

I sank back an’ rested my head on Kakarot’s middle.

“This is gonna ruin me fer sleepin’ rough,” I commented, an’ Kakarot’s belly shook with his laughter.

“Don’t be stupid, Geta, one night ain’t gonna ruin ya. Why can’t ya just enjoy things?”

Kakarot asked, sitting up enough to look down at me. I made a face at him.

“Iff’n I start enjoyin’ things, I’ll only be sad when they’re gone,” I said, a little too seriously.

Kakarot frowned.

“Some things stay with ya,” he insisted. “I’ll always stay with ya.”

I didn’t say that Chichi woulda stayed with him if that kinda promise was something a person could make. I just frowned back at him til he hauled me up an’ kissed the frown away.

We surely didn’t get much sleep, but I felt more refreshed in the mornin’ than I had in a long time. Maybe it was all that good food, bein’ indoors.

More likely it were Kakarot.

Anyhow, we ate the hotel outta business an’ headed west, to the wild cattle, hope in our hearts an’ all that.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

On their way to round up wild cattle, our four cowboys come across a gruesome scene.

## Chapter Notes

Content warning: period-typical anti-indigenous racism, description of "indian raid" on a wagon train, mentioned sexual assault and desecration of corpses, including children

The racist part is pretty much done when you get to "I blinked" after which there's just casual references to dead bodies.

Trouble struck afore we even reached the cattle land. Ridin' along, we come across some burnt-out wagons surrounded by dead pioneers. Men, women, children, all tore up an' scalped, an' it looked like the killers spent some with the bodies, from the ripped clothing an' exposed breasts an' genitals. Even the children hadn't been spared the disgusting treatment. Kakarot threw up, an' I felt sick to my stomach.

"Indians," Nappa spat, but Roshi shook his head.

"Meant ta look like Injuns, I'd reckon," the old man said. The rest of us, we jus' looked at 'im an' waited fer an explanation. He hunched his shoulders an' pointed at a feathered arrow. "Ain't no brave attackin' a wagon train uses arrows this day'n age. Mebbe fer huntin', but not like this. 'Sides, this is Ute country, an' they ain't knowed fer this kinda thing."

Nappa snorted. "No Indian will pass up the chance to mutilate his enemy. Those savages believe it keeps them from being attacked in the afterlife," he said, disgust heavy in his voice. "Ah, mebbe so, but not like this, I dun reckon," Roshi insisted. "Any Injun that does that ta children, he ain't a honorable warrior, won't get into the good afterlife. Probly get kilt by his own tribe. I spent time with more'n a few Injuns. They're as different from each other as from us, but some things jus' ain't allowed. 'Sides, they wouldn'ta took the oxen, they'd'a left 'em or kilt 'em."

I blinked. The wagons had yokes more suited for oxen than for horses. Made sense, with all the heavy supplies a wagon train needed, but, like Roshi said, there weren't no oxen there.

"Anyway, we oughta put them poor folks under the ground," Roshi continued. "Goku, ya got a good strong back, why dun you set ta digging?"

Kakarot nodded and turned away from the carnage.

The rest of us moved the bodies an' looked fer anythin' we could use. The dead didn't need their things no more, but they might have somethin' that'd keep us alive another day. Nappa

was peerin' at one wagon, thumpin' his hand on the side, an' I took a break from haulin' bodies to see what he were doin'.

"Mighty fine wagon," I said. "Hardly burnt a'tall."

"Hmm," Nappa grunted. "Seems like it might have a false bottom. Here, help me out."

Roshi an' Kakarot came over ta watch, but there weren't four men's worth of work.

"Woo-ee, lookit that!" Kakarot cheered when Nappa an' me hauled some bags of gold outta that wagon. There was a whole heap'a letters, too, but we was all a little enchanted by that gold.

"This could set each of us up quite nicely," Nappa said, hefting a bag. "Why, there must be a thousand dollars here!"

"We could set up with a patch a land fer Gine," I said, nudging Kakarot, an' he nodded, eyes wide. We hadn't ever seen that much money in our entire lives, not even put together. Probly nobody in the hills had, certainly not all to once like this.

But then Kakarot frowned and looked back over at the gravesite.

"What iff'n they was plannin' to send it ta someone who needs it?" Kakarot asked, an' I frowned, too. Trust Kakarot ta think about other folks at a time like this. We needed it, an' *we was right here.*

*"You can send your quarter along, Goku," Nappa said, "but I have plans for mine. Nobody would have found this if we hadn't happened along."*

*"I jus' keep thinkin', what iff'n it were me an' Geta lyin' dead, an' nobody to tell Ma what happened?" Kakarot said.*

*My eyes met Roshi's, but I had no idea what that ol' coot was thinkin'. He did look mighty thoughtful, like he seen something in Kakarot he ain't expected.*

*"I'd want somebody ta at least send on any letters we had," Kakarot continued seriously. "I mean, I ain't tellin' ya what ya can an' can't do, Nappa, but I'd surely appreciate your help findin' out who these folks were."*

*Damn it, iff'n we found out who the gold belonged ta, I'd hafta send mine along with Kakarot's. He's the one with the moral compass, an' I jus' knew he'd look at me all reproachful an' disappointed an' ask "but what if it were Ma?" in that sad li'l voice he used when he wanted somethin' an' I'd just crumble. No matter that we was plannin' on usin' the gold fer Gine, who was actually his Ma.*

*Round the fire that night, well away from the wagons, we was all readin' in the light, 'cept Roshi, who were on watch. He didn't never watch the fire, not wantin' ta be night-blind. Kakarot kept tryin' ta lean on me, but I were in a sour mood. Readin' books an' printing were easy enough fer us, but handwritin' were a mess. The letters were all smushed together an' twistin' every which way, an' no two people wrote the same, so's ya had ta figure out what each letter looked like each time ya read a new person's writin'. Aside from that, I hated knowin' who these folks had been. Their hopes an' dreams, an' everything... I'd rather we'd just sent the letters along an' never opened 'em. Made a man consider his mortality, more'n facin' down mad bulls an' men with guns.*

*"Ha!" Kakarot shouted, startlin' me. "I think I got it! Geta, lookit this!"*

*I looked over at the letter in Kakarot's hand. Sure enough, the gold was meant fer a young lady stayin' with friends in New York City, an' it were meant ta pay her passage out west an' -I squinted at the page- reimburse the folks she were stayin' with.*

*"Nappa, what's raym-burse mean?" I called, an' Nappa tossed down his own letter an'*

*rubbed his eyes.*

*"Re-im-burse. It means to pay someone back for money they've already spent," Nappa said.*

*"I take it that gold was meant to reimburse someone?"*

*I nodded an' handed him the letter.*

*"It's a gal that needs it," Kakarot explained. "I'm sendin' mine. What about you, Geta?" he asked, turning his sad eyes on me.*

*Damn it, damn it, damn it. There weren't nothin' I could do against that face, an' that voice. He were right, of course, but that didn't mean I weren't feelin' a mite possessive over that gold.*

*"Fine, sure," I grunted. "It weren't ours ta begin with."*

*Kakarot beamed at me. God, I was a fool.*

*"Now hold on," Nappa interrupted. "If we hadn't come along, this gold would never have found its way back to her. The letters wouldn't have, either - they'd have rotted faster than those bodies we just buried. We're under no obligation to give this young lady anything."*

*"I kin see yer point," Kakarot said reasonably, "but it's jus' the right thing ta do. Think about it, that girl ain't livin' with her folks. What'll they do when they find out the money's never comin'? Young lady, all alone in a big city like that?" Kakarot shook his head seriously. "It don't bear thinkin' about."*

*"Goku's right. I'll send mine back," Roshi interrupted, an' me an Kakarot turned ta look at Nappa.*

*He scowled at us. "Fine! I won't let you upstarts show me up. We'll send the gold back next time we're near a post office. Damn fools," he grumbled, tossing the letter back at Kakarot.*

*I reckon that was where it all started. Maybe it really all started back when they first laid eyes on each other, Kakarot an' Nappa, but this were the ember that caught the fire, so t'speak.*

*"Come on, now, we're off to make our fortunes in cattle!" Roshi cackled, an' I helped Kakarot gather up the letters. The gold an' letters, we put in the bottom of a pack an' tried ta forget about it.*

*Not that so much gold can ever be forgotten, not really, but we surely tried. Never talked about it or nothin'.*

*But Roshi was right, we was after cattle, an' a man needed his wits about him fer that kinda work.*

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Roshi, Nappa, Goku, and Vegeta get down to the brass tacks of rounding up feral cattle

Goin' after wild cows is no joke, let me tell ya that much. First off, we had ta get into the wild ranges, an' Nappa an' Roshi bickered over whether it were a drought or not. For me an' Kakarot, it surely felt like a drought. Hot, dry, no water for days, but we finally found a little box canyon that had some water an' figured to set it up like a corral.

The next problem was the cows theirselves. Now, I've said that cows are big stubborn bastards, an' that were cows with a vested interest in stayin' with the herd. Wild cows? They've had a taste of freedom and ain't overly eager ta be driven. Far as they're concerned, we was just ruinin' the good thing they had goin'. An' it weren't consistent work. One day we caught nine, another fifteen, the next, three, an' some days, none a'tall.

Me an' Kakarot were ridin' up on a pack of seven longhorns- looked to be a bull an' his little harem. The ladies, they didn't mind us circlin' around, so long as we didn't get too close, but that bull were eyeballin' us like he wanted ta drive those big ol' horns a' his through each of us an' haul our corpses around as decoration. Iff'n I squinted, I reckoned he had a couple coyote skulls on there already.

"Whaddaya think, Geta?" Kakarot asked when we dismounted fer some lunch, let the horses browse without us on their backs.

"Tch. That bull is a right pain in the ass," I grumbled. "He ain't goin' easy on us."

"Yeah, but what iff'n we scared 'im real good? Think he'd run fer the canyon?" Kakarot asked, mouth full of jerked meat.

"Close yer damn mouth when yer eatin'," I said, feeling like Gine, "an' I reckon he'd charge us, not bolt. You seen them skulls on his horns?"

"What? Naw, he ain't got bones on his horns, yer jus' - jus', what's that word, paranoid!" Kakarot laughed.

"Oh, yeah? You get close to 'im as I have, an' you'll see. He's a killer, that one," I insisted.

"Ya gotta have respeck fer a beast like that."

In the end, Kakarot convinced me ta let him bait the bull whilst I made some noise from behind. That damn fool was convinced that Nimbus could outrun a mad bull. Maybe I were the damn fool fer lettin' him convince me. I never woulda admitted it back then, but I was mighty worried about Kakarot. He was all I had.

Perhaps all young men are fools, each in 'is own way.

Anyway, I hid behind a little hill an' waited for Kakarot's signal. When he had the bull's attention, he whistled real loud, started ridin' at the bull, actin' like he wanted ta fight. I come out from behind the hill an' crept up, close as I could, an' fired three times into the ground as near them cow's feet as I could.

Well! That started 'em, an' a little better'n me an' Kakarot reckoned on. That damn bull were so focused on Kakarot's antics that he just lit out when my second shot sprayed dirt onto his flanks. The cows followed their fella when I fired again, an' Kakarot turned Nimbus an' went like a bat outta hell.

That bull was fast, faster'n we thought he'd be. Didn't take more'n a moment before I lost sight a' them both.

I surely hoped Nimbus were as fast as Kakarot always said he was, an' that he didn't put his foot in a gopher hole or nothin'.

Me an' Dapple had the easy job, jus' keeping the cows moving. They didn't much like their bull lightin' out like that, so it weren't too much work. I kept expectin' ta see the bull come back, or ta see Kakarot's trampled body along the trail.

Lucky for me, Kakarot had the fool's luck. I drove them cows into the canyon an' there was that bull trottin' over to see his gals like a big ol' puppy dog, an' there was Kakarot feedin' Nimbus a lump'a sugar. Don't ask me where he stashed it, but he always had a lil something fer Nimbus. Come ta think about it, maybe that's why that damn horse liked him so much. 'Cept I used ta give 'im carrots an' apples jus' as much as Kakarot did. More likely, it's jus' a damn contrary horse.

"Damn, Geta, nice a you ta join us!" Kakarot called, and I grimaced at him.

"Nice ta see yer still kickin', ya crazy bastard," I replied. An' would you believe it, that damn Nimbus laid his ears back at me when I climbed down offa Dapple.

I shoved a gentle punch against Kakarot's shoulder on my way past him to the cookfire, but he pulled me into a hug and knocked my hat off.

"Were ya worried about me?" he asked into my hair

"Tch. You wish I was worried about ya," I grumbled into his chest. He smelled like sweat an' horse an' dirt, an' right then, it was the best thing I ever smelled. "Iff'n you'd'a died, the rest a us'd be eatin' horse steaks."

"Aw, Geta, you gotta promise me ta keep Nimbus around iff'n I get kilt," Kakarot laughed.

"He's part a' the family now, y'know?"

"Fine, fine," I grumbled, "but you tell 'im not ta lay his ears back at me no more."

Kakarot squeezed me tight, an' I wondered if maybe it had been a close thing, but I knew better than ta ask. He'd bluster an' brag an' insist that I had the hard job. He always was terrible at acceptin' compliments, an' he hated fer folks ta worry over him.

"Danm Goku, that was one hell of a stunt you pulled!" Nappa chuckled. It was his turn ta cook, an I were mighty pleased. Nappa knew a lotta things, not jus' book learnin'. One a those things included makin' beans taste good even after eatin' just about nothin' but beans an' game an' camp bread fer nigh on two months. I never did manage ta figure out how he did it.

Anyhow, Kakarot regaled us all with his version of how he let a mad bull chase 'im across the plains.

"Well, we was ridin' out west a lil ways, an' we found these seven cows," Kakarot began, "an' Geta were afeared of the bull-"

"Hey!" I squawked indignantly around a mouthful of beans, "I weren't! I had a healthy respeck fer-"

"Aw, hush, Vegeta, let 'im tell the story," Roshi said, waving his hand at me, an' I settled



back down with a grumble.

Even as much as Kakarot made me look a mite silly, I surely enjoyed hearin' the story. He made it sound excitin', like a real adventure. There ain't nothin' ta do but sing an' yarn an' bellyache, once the sun's gone down, an' I prefer Kakarot's voice to the others'. Even if their stories don't make me out ta be a worried hen.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

Vegeta, Goku, Roshi, and Nappa make it to Santa Fe with their rounded up wild cattle, so they seek out the comforts of civilization.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Well, we all almost all got kilt one time or another- Roshi's horse tossed him an' his foot got caught in the stirrup, Nappa swapped a few bullets with the locals, an' me an' Kakarot got into a few more scrapes, but we headed south to Santa Fe with a mighty fine herd. There was plenty of unbranded stock, but we wrote down the brands we seen, probly from runaways an' such, but no sense gettin' accused of rustlin'. Them cows had been gettin' fat on the grass in the lil canyon we used as a pasture, an' we let 'em stay fat by movin' slow. We weren't in no hurry; the grass was green an' we had beans enough fer a year.

Well. Considerin' how me an' Kakarot ate, more like half a year. Still, there was plenty for the journey we were makin'. We made it to Santa Fe with lots of beans ta spare and nice, fat cattle that sold for top dollar.

Me and Kakarot decided to bank our share, 'cept fer some spending cash, an' I went to look fer a bath while Kakarot made friendly with the locals at the saloon.

I found a long, low building full of basins an' pumps, with soap at every basin. There weren't no signs in english, but it looked like a bathhouse ta me, so I went on in an' shucked my clothes. I had just about finished soapin' up my nethers when the door opened.

A whole gaggle of womenfolk came through the door, every one of 'em hauling a big ol' load of laundry. They stopped an' stared at me. Me, but mostly my privates, with naught but soap to proteck my modesty.

Well, I let out a holler. What were women with laundry doin' in a bathhouse? I expected 'em to turn an' run on out, but I ain't so good at predictin' women's ways. They dropped their laundry an' *laughed*.

At *me* !

I crouched into my basin an' sloshed water over myself, tryin' to get the soap off fast as possible, but those damn women kep' right on starin' an' laughin'!

“Go on, git!” I shouted, waving my hand. “Can’t a man take a bath in peace?”

Still giggling, the women turned and left the building, an' I never got dressed so fast in all my born days. Not even when Appule tried ta jump me in Abilene. While I dressed, I tried ta figure what kinda folks would laugh at a man in the bath 'stead of lettin' him get clean. Then I looked at the washboard leaning against my pump an' put it together.

This weren't a bathhouse, this were a goddamn laundry! An' they'd found a naked man takin' a bath in the laundry!

No wonder the damn hussies was laughin', they'd probly tell this to their grandbabies.

"Aw, hell," I grumbled, trying to sneak out of the building. "Ladies, afternoon."

The women giggled behind their hands an' I made myself walk slow an' easy to the saloon where I'd left Kakarot. Every damn woman I saw that day blushed or laughed at me. A few gave me bold looks, teasing winks, or swished their hips a little more'n they had before they saw me.

"Heya, Geta," Kakarot said. He was drinkin' with some men I recognized from Guru's party. I nodded to them, then grunted at Kakarot and stole his drink. I deserved it, after the bath fiasco.

"You get that bath ya wanted? Oh, ya smell better, ya musta had a bath," Goku rambled, pressing his nose into my barely-washed hair. "Still smell like cow, though. These fellas was sayin' we should head out to Guru's place an' say hello, whaddaya think?"

I was just grateful that Goku's train of thought had carried him past the bath issue. For now, at least. I weren't at all keen on tellin' anyone what had happened durin' my bath.

Not telling turned out ta be harder than I expected when near every woman in that godforsaken town gawked at me like schoolgirls. Kakarot gave me a few puzzled looks but didn't ask about it, but Nappa an' Roshi seemed a mite put out, ribbing me every time a local gal saw me and giggled- one of 'em even went an' got her friends to come look at me! Another winked at me and sashayed off like she wanted me ta follow her, an' I was sorely tempted, if only to shake these assholes.

"Vegeta's quite the ladies man today, hey, Nappa?" Roshi wheezed, an' I gave those round hips a last look before giving Roshi a scowl.

"Yes, he seems very popular. What did you do, kid, flash some money around? Announce your intentions to marry the best girl in town?" Nappa laughed, and I scowled at him, too.

"Aw, shut up. You know I didn't do nothin' like that," I grumbled. "Anyhow, I'm gonna see iff'n they got a decent gunsmith in this town."

"Huh? I didn't know yer gun was actin' up," Kakarot said, surprise written across his face.

"It ain't, but that don't mean it won't start," I replied. "You comin'?" Kakarot shook his head. "Suit yerself."

The gal watchin' the forge winked at me an' I glared at her.

"You got a gunsmith round these parts?" I snapped, none too kindly. I'd had just about enough of bein' stared at by the women in this damn town.

"That'd be me," she replied, an' it were my turn to gawk at her. She was a pretty little thing with fierce blue eyes, wearin' a man's shirt and trousers an' a big ol' smith's apron, but she didn't look nearly strong enough to do smithing work.

"Ain't no way," I insisted. "Jus' tell me when the gunsmith should get back an' I'll come around."

"You want that Colt serviced, right? Looks like it's about twenty years old, give or take. Firing mechanism giving you trouble? They tend to do that," she said, undeterred by my rudeness. Then, the hussy walked right up to me an' took the gun outta my holster!

"Hey!" I protested, but she retreated to a workbench and expertly dismantled my gun. "Hey, girl, stop that! Quit playin' with it, it's not a toy!"

"The name's Bulma," the girl snapped, peering down the barrel before using a tiny pair of tongs to remove the firing pin. "And your Colt here needs some care. God, do you ever clean it?"

I gaped at her like a fish. "I clean it plenty!" I snapped back. Of course, I'd never taken it completely apart like this. "You better be able ta put it back together!"

"Oh, please, cowboy," the girl- Bulma- huffed, putting on a pair of spectacles without ever looking up from my gun. "I'm the best goddamn gunsmith this side of the Mississippi. When I'm done, your weapon here will work like a dream. No more trigger catching, and if you have a misfire I will personally apologize. Of course," she said thoughtfully, looking up at me for the first time since she'd absconded with my piece, "you gotta clean it regularly."

My cheeks burned an' I spat in the dust. That trigger had caught since afore I could remember, an' I'd just like ta see some gal fix it. "Fine. Seein' how you've already taken it to bits, I s'pose I'll let ya put it back together," I grumbled. "How much an' how long?"

"Oh, I'll be done faster'n you can take a bath," she said with a laugh, and I stomped away.

"I'll be back in two minutes, then," I yelled over my shoulder, and the woman gunsmith's laughter followed me down the street.

The bath/laundry scene is lifted almost straight from L'Amour. Love it.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

The boys ride out to visit Guru's ranch; Vegeta gets himself into a bit of a pickle.

## Chapter Notes

CW: period-typical anti-Mexican slur, blood, gun violence

"I'll be damned," I muttered, lowering my gun. "She really did fix the trigger."

"Geta, you done yet?" Kakarot grumbled. "We gotta hurry if we want ta make lunch at Guru's place, the, whatsit, the hacienda."

"Yeah, I'm done," I snorted. "Pardon me fer wantin' ta check my weapon afore I gotta use it."

Kakarot frowned at me. "Ain't no way you'll need ta use it at lunch," he said disapprovingly, and I glared back at him.

"Oh yeah? So Frieza's men ain't just itchin' ta run Guru's people outta the country an' off their land?" I retorted, an' Kakarot ducked his head. "S'what I thought."

Nappa chuckled an' Roshi just hunched his shoulders, but we rode on. It were hot an' dry, an' Kakarot wasn't the only one looking forward to lunch.

Lunch at Guru's place, the hacienda, were pretty nice. The home-cooked food was better'n the hotel food we'd been eatin' an' heaps better than range beans, even Nappa's beans. And boy howdy did we eat! Tamales was the main food, these little packets of corn meal with meat an' beans an' such cooked in corn husks, an' the sauces! I tell you what, I ain't never tasted food like that.

"So, you gentlemen had a successful cattle drive?" Nail asked. Me an' Kakarot nodded, but Nappa was the one who answered. Roshi was shootin' the shit with Guru, or whatever old men do when they sit next ta each other an' watch the sky.

“Yes, there were lots of free-ranging cattle. Fat and strong, every one of them,” Nappa boasted.

“Indeed? Perhaps you could drive cattle for Mr Guru, Mr Nappa,” Nail said thoughtfully, but Nappa shook his head.

“I appreciate the offer, I truly do, but I plan to run my own ranch, maybe hold office in the town,” he said. I nodded thoughtfully. Nappa would be a mighty fine sheriff. He had all the book learnin’ an’ he were good at dealin’ with people. Not ta mention he was a damn fine shot an’ could handle himself in a fight.

“Ah, yes, we are very interested to see who becomes the sheriff,” Nail said. “A Mexican sheriff would be rejected by your people, but we can hope that the one chosen is a just and fair man.”

“How’s things with that Frieza fella?” Kakarot asked, and Nail frowned.

“Things are not good,” he said with a sigh. “His men try to camp on our land, establishing their presence, and resist being driven away. Our people are harassed off the ranch, so much so that I fear lives may be lost before long. In fact, I have hired a gunfighter from Mexico to help protect my people. He should be arriving within the week.”

Me an’ Kakarot nodded seriously. Protectin’ yer family by any means necessary was somethin’ we hillfolk understood.

“In addition, they are bringing in a surveyor to reassess the boundaries of the original grant. It was written out long ago, and the boundaries are assigned by mountain peaks and rivers, so this new surveyor will likely strip us of nearly all our lands,” Nail continued, and Kakarot jumped to his feet.

“That ain’t fair! This has been in the family for years, right? They can’t just take it away? Y’all been workin’ it an’ carin’ for it fer, fer generations!” Kakarot darn near yelled, pacing an’ wavin’ his hands.

“I tole you, Ka- Goku,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. “That Frieza don’t care about people. All that talk about “the interests of the people” were just that, talk.”

Kakarot, Nappa, and Roshi went back to town, but I’d seen a nice patch of land that might just be a good home fer Gine, so I split off to check it out. Kakarot said he’d come back on out afore dark. Sides, I were missin’ the outdoors. All the talk of land bein’ in the family made me miss the hills somethin’ fierce. I made camp by a lil stream, prob’ly dried up come high summer, but fer now it watered me an’ Dapple jus’ fine.

Kakarot were late. The sun had jus’ about gone down an’ there weren’t no sign of that oaf, so I built up a fire an’ had myself some leftover tamales. By God, they was good. But, they wasn’t enough ta fill me up, so I made some beans, an’ enough for Kakarot- if he ever showed up.

Finally, I heard someone approaching an' stood to greet Kakarot, ask him why he was afoot, but he weren't nowhere to be seen.

"Please... help," a weak voice called from the grass, an' I looked around fer a trap before rushin' on over. It was one of Nail's men, a youngster called Dende, an' he were hurt bad.

"What the hell, kid?" I asked, hauling him to his feet so's we could make it to my fire.

"Someone use ya fer target practice? An' where's yer horse?"

"You might say that," he answered between grunts of pain. "Ah- I was delivering parcels for - nng- for Senor Nail when three men surrounded me. I believe- I believe they are-"

I felt his whole body clench in pain an' put the pieces together my own self.

"Frieza's men, huh? Yeah, that sounds right," I grunted. "Shit. How'd ya get all the way out here?" He moaned in pain again and I decided ta focus on gettin' him comfortable. I could feel blood seeping through my clothes. I ain't a physician, but that much blood was never a good sign.

Well, I patched Dende up best I could in the dark with no supplies. He had more'n a few bullets in him, including one that had gone clean through his side. I were pretty worried about that one. The ones I pulled outta his arms and legs would heal up eventually, but a gut shot was more dangerous. He passed out not long after we reached my fire, an' I marveled at his toughness. Takes a lot to keep goin' when ya got even one bullet in ya, much less five.

I was washin' my hands in the stream when I heard horses. Now, unless Kakarot brought Nappa an' Roshi back out to camp with us, weren't no reason for more'n one person ta be approachin' my fire, an' I knew fer a fact that Nappa an' Roshi preferred ta sleep indoors.

"Hello the fire!" called an unfamiliar voice.

"Come ahead iff'n yer comin'," I called back, hurrying over to my injured friend.

Three men rode in, one in back with a rifle... pointed at me. Now, I might be able to take down the rifleman afore he took me, but there was the other two ta consider.

"We're huntin' a messed up greaser, thought he mighta come this way," said the leader. I narrowed my eyes at the slur. Doesn't sit right with me, callin' people names like that.

Callin' somebody a no-good low-down dirty son of a bitch is fine on accounta it ain't based on where he was born or what language he speaks.

"Looks like ya found him fer us," added the third man, pointing at Dende with a smirk.

"We'll take him off yer hands, an' apologize for the trouble."

I glanced back at Dende. His breaths were shallow an' I could see the sweat glistenin' in the firelight. He might not make it even if I managed to keep him outta these bastards' hands.



“Oh, him? That’s my friend, seems to’ve run into a bit of trouble. He ain’t your man,” I said firmly, keeping my hand away from my gun. That rifleman was making' me sweat; he'd drop me afore I cleared leather. “Been with me all night. Now, you are welcome to set a spell, water yer horses, but you *will not* take this man.” The book learnin’ Nappa’d been tryin’ ta drill into my head came out when I was mad, it seemed. “I only have enough beans for two, but if ya want to wait, I can make up some more.”

My hand itched to draw, but it was the wrong decision, I just knowed it.

“It’s that Vegeta kid, the one they say’s a gunfighter,” the rifleman said, an’ I started sweatin’. Best way ta make a name fer yourself is ta kill folks already done made names fer theirselves.

“So what? That jus’ makes it a fair fight,” the leader said with a nasty laugh, an’ I tell you what, were I a bettin’ man, I wouldn’t’a bet on me right about then.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

The exciting conclusion\*! How will Vegeta escape certain doom?

CW: Murder, gun violence.

\*of last chapter's cliffhanger. The story's barely half-done.

Well, there I was, caught dead to rights with an injured man an' no backup. I needed a plan, an' fast.

The best thing I had goin' for me was time. Ya stand around an' jabber an' pretty soon, yer reflexes start ta dull. Yer finger on the trigger ain't so touchy, an' the longer ya sit, the slower ya get. 'Sides, there was three of them an' one of me, an only a fool'd buck those odds.

I always was a damn fool. I thought about a trick Raditz tol' me an' Kakarot about, back when we was little things, an' pulled the makin's of a cigarette outta my pocket. I don't hardly smoke, but now seemed like a damn good time to indulge. The men flinched, but I held up the paper.

"Do ya mind?" I asked, and they relaxed slightly. Now, the hardest part'a my plan was ta talk on like I weren't scared outta my wits an' terrible at conversatin' ta boot. It were time to think like Kakarot.

As I rolled the cigarette, I decided ta talk about home.

"Y'know, me an' Goku, we come from Tennessee," I began. "I dunno iff'n ya heard of a family called the Tuffles? No? Well, Tennessee folk understand feuds, believe you me, we really do. An' I wouldn't interfere in another man's fight, but Dende here is wounded, an' I ain't about ta see a wounded man shot in my camp, it jus' ain't fair."

"We don't care about fair," sneered the leader. I licked the paper an' sealed up the cig, held it gently ta let it dry. "We're runnin' those Mexicans outta here."

My talk about Kakarot made the rifleman nervous, though, an' he glanced around.

"Say, ya think that Goku fella-" he began, but the leader cut him off.

"Nah, only one bed. This one's alone, he ain't got backup," the leader said with a nasty smirk. He wanted ta kill me so's he could talk about it later. Could make it sound mighty fine, rather'n shootin' a man alone while his buddies pointed guns at 'im.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said. “Me an’ my outfit, the four of us ain’t never too far apart. We work together, we fight together, an’ we win together.”

I bent and snagged a burnin’ twig outta the fire. While I held it up to the cigarette in my mouth, I kept talkin’.

“Y’know, Goku’s got a brother named Raditz, he’s the one taught us ta shoot, y’know. Did ya say you’d never heard of the Tuffles? Well, they say a Tuffle kilt a Saiyan way back, an’, well, there’s a reason ya ain’t heard of those no-account bastards.” I looked the leader right in the eyes an’ hoped he could see his death. “The reason is, me an’ my folks wiped ‘em out. We done kilt nineteen Tuffles in sixteen years, an’ we’re jus’ about outta Tuffles these days. It don’t pay ta cross us.”

I was takin’ a little liberty with the story, but they didn’t need ta know that. In any case, my plan was jus’ about ready. The twig had burned down jus’ about to my fingers, an’ the third man noticed.

“Hey, yer gonna burn yer fingers!” he shouted, an’, well, that’s exactly what happened. I yelped an’ dropped the twig, swinging my arm down, an’ drew.

First man I shot was the rifleman, right outta the saddle. By the time he was down, that mouthy leader was grabbin’ iron, so I swung my gun on him and thumbed the hammer twice, so’s it sounded like one gunshot. But when I turned ta the third man, he was clutchin’ his belly, an’ Nappa come outta the darkness with his own gun smokin’.

“You picked a damn good time ta show up,” I said, replacing the spent bullets in my Colt. That woman gunsmith really did a damn fine job of fixin’ it up. No catch on the trigger at all.

“I’ve been watching for a while. Goku got caught up in town so I decided to come see Miss Gine’s future home,” Nappa explained. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to help you without starting them shooting, but you took care of it. That was a damn clever play, boy.”

I preened a little at the compliment. Nappa were the smartest person I knew, an’ I surely set a high store in his opinion of me. There was some noise from a ways out, so me an’ Nappa stepped away from the fire back with Dende, in case it was more of Frieza’s men, but we heard Nail call out.

“Come ahead,” I called, “your man’s in bad shape.”

Nail hurried in and knelt beside Dende, but I was distracted by one of the men with him. I didn’t recognize him, and believe me, I’d’a remembered seein’ him before. He was a big, lean bastard, all done up in braided black leather. He was the most duded-up man I ever saw, but his pearl-handled guns were hung for business.

His name was Piccolo.

Piccolo strolled over to the bodies and crouched to inspect them while one of Nail’s other men, Tanissh, helped Nail with Dende.

“Who?” Piccolo asked, gesturing to the dead men, and Nappa launched into the tale of how I’d shot the two men. He left out the part about the burning twig and made that rifleman sound mighty jumpy, but I reckon I appreciated it. Never hurts to keep a trick to yourself.

Piccolo pulled out a silver dollar and placed it over the two bullet holes in the leader’s chest, hummed to himself, then pocketed the coin with a grunt. He looked at me carefully, and I got the feeling that he was a man who liked killing. He was the gunman Nail had been waiting for, and, much as I understood the need for him, I got the feeling that he would bring trouble for Guru’s ranch family.

While I helped Nail an’ Tanissh get Dende into a saddle, I asked about Piccolo.

“Yes, he’s the one,” Nail said. “He has killed many times, and I am paying him to kill in Mr Guru’s service.”

“Puts me ta mind of a prairie rattler,” I said. “Fast an’ mean. Don’t turn your back on him, hey?”

Nail fixed me with a serious look and Tanissh outright chuckled.

“I am not a fool, Mr Vegeta. But I appreciate your concern,” he said, and I blushed. I was just a kid, it wasn’t my place to be giving the foreman of the biggest ranch in the area advice.

Back at the fire, Piccolo had poured himself a cup of coffee. Hell, I’d forgotten I even made a pot of coffee. It musta been sitting on the fire since I made camp, but the gunfighter seemed to like it.

“That was good shooting,” he said when I sat down, “but I can shoot better.”

I’m not a bragging man, but how much better can you get? Instead of blustering, I shrugged.

“Maybe,” was all I said. Piccolo rolled himself a cigarette and took a few puffs on it before he spoke again.

“I think we will shoot together someday,” Piccolo said, looking at me with that careful gaze, the smoke of his cigarette drifting between us.

“Maybe someday,” I agreed. It did seem likely. We was both mean an’ deadly, an’ sooner or later, a reputation puts a man in places he’d rather not be.

“I will look forward to it,” he said with a deaths’ head grin, and I smirked.

“Well, then,” I chuckled, “*I* will look back on it.”

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

The boys get some company from home.

CW: mentioned gun violence and death, and, I don't know, gun violence apologia?

The four of us had just about built a house fer Gine. Kakarot had sent a letter back home tellin' her ta come west, an we'd had a letter back sayin' that she was a'comin'. The letter also praised Kakarot's writing skills an' practically pinched our cheeks. Anyhow, by the time she got out to us, we'd figured to have a house built for her.

Well, she beat us to the punch. I was in town fer supplies when I saw a familiar face.

"Krillin?" I said, hardly able to believe my eyes. What in the Sam hell was he doin' out here?

"Oh, Vegeta! I'm so glad ta find ya!" Krillin called, hurrying across the street. "I come out with Gine when I heard you two had found a place. I'm keen to see the new country out here, an' maybe get involved in the politics of a whole new state!" he said, and I nodded absently. I was more'n a little nervous about that time I kilt a man in broad daylight in his jurisdiction.

"What're you so- oh, right, Bebi Tuffle," Krillin said with a laugh. "Don't worry, I mighta had to arrest you for the shooting, but you woulda been out the same day. Hundred witnesses saw him shoot first, and saw him face you before you shot."

A weight dropped from my chest. I didn't even know I'd been carryin' it this whole time. So I wasn't wanted fer murder in my hometown, that was good.

"Well, is Gine here?" I asked, brushing past my first killing. It weren't important anymore.

"Sure is! Come on, she'll be glad to see you!" Krillin laughed. Mebbe she would be, but I wanted ta fetch Kakarot afore meetin' her again. After all, I was the reason she hadn't seen Kakarot in so long.

"Kakarot!" I called, riding up on the homestead. "Kakarot! She's in town!"

Kakarot poked his head up out of a ditch he was workin' on.

"Who?" he asked, brushin' dirt off his face.

“Who do ya think? Yer ma! Gine’s here, with Krillin!” I hollered, considering iff’n I could saddle Kinto from Dapple’s back. That damn horse still didn’t like me much.

“Ma’s here? Already?” Kakarot yelped, and he took over the job of saddling his ornery horse afore I could really even make a start.

I tried ta give Kakarot an’ Gine a moment ta reunite alone, but Kakarot hauled me into the middle of their hug.

“Oh, boys, it’s so good to see you,” Gine murmured, an’ I mumbled a reply in kind. It truly was good ta see her, even if I was feelin’ a mite bashful.

Me an’ Kakarot tole Gine an’ Krillin all about the cattle drive to Abilene, the journey west with Guru’s folks, the wild cattle roundup, an’ the house we was buildin’ with Roshi an’ Nappa. As if speakin’ his name summoned him, Roshi showed up an’ started flirtin’ with Gine, who laughed and threatened him with a pistol.

It was good to see that some things jus’ don’t change.

“I been thinkin’ about that sheriff job,” Kakarot said over breakfast about a week after Gine made it into town. My gaze darted between him an’ Nappa. Kakarot’d been up all night frettin’ over it. He knew Nappa wanted the job, but Kakarot’d been talkin’ ta Krillin an’ felt he’d do just as good a job. I agreed, but I was cautious. It’s a touchy thing, goin’ after the same thing as a friend. Still. Us an’ Nappa was close as kin, an’ he was the only reason we could even read. Hell, he was the only reason I was alive. It were his books that put them ideas of civic duty in Kakarot’s head, anyway. ‘Sides, iff’n Kakarot lost, he’d just help Nappa out, an’ we figgered- hoped, more like- that Nappa’d do the same.

Nappa’s mouth stiffened under his big mustache, but he laughed and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Well, why not? The county needs a sheriff,” he said. “You’d do a good job, if you get it.”

“I know yer thinkin’ about it-” Kakarot continued, but Nappa waved a hand.

“May the best man win. If I get it and you don’t, you can lend a hand, and I’ll do the same if you win. That’s a promise,” Nappa said.

Kakarot relaxed immediately, grinning at Nappa, but I saw Roshi narrow his eyes. Roshi’s seen an awful lot, an’ he knew Nappa before me an’ Kakarot did.

“It’s a deal!” Kakarot laughed, holding his hand out, and I don’t reckon he noticed how Nappa hesitated.

I noticed, an’ it worried me.

Krillin came out to the house while Nappa was off huntin' his own place, an' I couldn't help but wonder if he'd planned it that way. I shared around mugs of coffee an' we sat a spell on the half-finished porch. Krillin had been tryin' to make a bit of a name fer himself, havin' been sheriff back in Sadala an' all, so he'd taken over runnin' a general store, tryin' ta make it a place fer folks to congregate.

"Goku, you got to come to the store for a few days. Things are comin' to a head, an' there ain't no way there won't be a sheriff in town by the end of the week. Someone shot a Mexican right in the middle of town just yesterday," Krillin said.

"Who?" I demanded, Kakarot echoing me a second later.

"Heck, I'm no good at them foreign names, but I think his name was Tan-somethin'," Krillin said.

"Tanissh?" Kakarot demanded, and I clenched my fists when Krillin nodded. Tanissh was a good man, damnit! He didn't deserve to die like that!

"You get to town an' you find out who dun it," I snarled to Kakarot, and he nodded sharply.

"Easy, boys, we can't do nothin' until someone's actually the sheriff," Krillin soothed, an' I snorted. I guess I kinda got used ta frontier justice. Besides, I knowed who dun it, it were Frieza's folks, sure as shootin'. Frieza might not'a pulled the trigger, but he killed Tanissh, sure as shootin'.

"Like I was sayin'," Krillin said, "Goku, just come to town. People are mighty impressed with how Vegeta handled those boys last month."

"That was Vegeta, not me," Kakarot said. "What's that got ta do with me bein' sheriff?"

"People say yer two of a kind, only, well, they don't figure yer as mean as Vegeta," Krillin said, with an apologetic nod to me. I snorted again. That was fer damn sure, but, then again, those folks ain't seen Kakarot get truly angry.

"Why not have Vegeta be the sheriff?" Kakarot asked, and I spat out a mouthful of coffee.

"No!" I snapped, an' Krillin chuckled.

"That's the main reason," he said, then shook his head. "The world's a'changin', an' these folks don't want a killer fer a sheriff."

Goku scowled an' put his coffee down. "There weren't a thing Vegeta coulda done different an' you know it, Krillin," he said, arms folded across his chest. "An' mighty few people who coulda done what he did."

Krillin shook his head. "I know it, an' you know it, an' anyone that's ever held a gun knows it. But the townfolks, they want justice without violence. I been talkin' to everyone, an' the Mexicans get it. They know a man with a gun ain't gonna put it down if ya hand him roses, but the white folks, they want the law enforced against killers without killing. Ain't no way a gunfighter'd get the job, not these days."

“I done my fair share of shootin’,” Kakarot argued, but Krillin shook his head.

“Ya ain’t a stone cold son of a bitch, Goku. Again, no offense, Vegeta,” he said, and I jus’ shook my head. That was the second time someone called me a “gunfighter” to my face. I didn’t quite know what ta think about that.

I didn’t think of myself as a gunfighter, I was jus’ a sumbitch tryin’ ta stay alive, an’ too mean to die. Hell, my first real “gunfight,” I didn’t even draw. Well, I suppose Bebi Tuffle were my first gunfight, but it weren’t much of a fight, since he was so focused on Kakarot.

Point is, I didn’t make a habit of bein’ in showdowns in the middle of the street, or put myself in situations where I had ta use my gun to stay alive, an’ I wasn’t so sure I wanted ta be known as a gunfighter.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

While Krillin tries to get Goku the sheriff's job, Vegeta works on the house.

CW: gun violence, minor character death

## Chapter Notes

Wow! Last update was in july, and now it's september!  
Sorry for the wait!

Well, Kakarot went with Krillin into town fer a few days, an' fer a few days I stayed around Gine's house, finishin' up the porch, haulin' rocks outta the garden, diggin' fence posts. I tole Nappa what was what was goin' on when he stopped by later that same day, an' he hightailed it ta town soon's he heard that Kakarot was there.

"That damn interfering hillbilly sheriff," Nappa growled, knocking over his chair as he stood. "Say," he swung to face me, and I raised an eyebrow, "why're you telling me? I'd have thought you'd try to keep me out of Goku's way."

I shrugged. "Seems ya don't know me or Goku that well. Either one of you'd be a damn fine sheriff, to my mind. And I know Goku wouldn't mind losin' ta you. 'Sides, you'll both be workin' to clean up the town no matter what, right?" I asked, a little miffed that he'd called Krillin a hillbilly. Krillin were a sight more educated than me an' Kakarot; was that how Nappa saw us?

"Heh. I suppose you're right. Still, I'm off. I need to make up for lost campaigning time," Nappa said, and I followed him out to the gate.

The way he'd hesitated before shakin' Kakarot's hand that day had me worried. I thought mighty highly of Nappa, an' I know Kakarot did too, an' I didn't want ta see us pushed apart over somethin' like this. Hell, if Krillin weren't around ta encourage Kakarot, I'd'a tole him to leave it be. Nappa'd be a fine sheriff.

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"Well, Vegeta, I'd say this house is jus' about ready ta be a home," Roshi said, inspecting my work. "Yep, that pretty Miss Gine should be mighty happy here. Say, she wouldn't be

interested in a husband, would she?"

"No," I said firmly. "No, an' especially not iff'n it's you." Roshi cackled good-naturedly, an' I shook my head. Old reprobate.

"I'm a mite worried about Nappa," Roshi said. "You keep an eye on Goku, ya hear? Nappa's mighty proud an' I don't reckon he'll take as well ta losin' as Goku would."

"We don't know who'll get the job," I protested, but Roshi shook his head knowingly.

"Goku's got a way with folks, same way's you got a way with a gun. People jus' ... like him," Roshi said, an' I grunted at him.

"Same way's people don't like me, huh?" I grumbled, an' Roshi laughed again.

"I wouldn't say that, boy, you have a way of findin' good people," he insisted. "But Goku... he could go far, Vegeta. He's gonna be a great man."

That night, I lay on my blanket roll on the floor of the new house an' felt lonelier than in all my born days. Even hoofin' it through the hills after killin' Bebi Tuffle, runnin' from the only world I knew, I hadn't felt this lonely.

Nappa was jealous of Kakarot. Kakarot was going to make a name fer himself, a good name, unlike my own self. I was a gunfighter, an' he was goin' places. The only places I was goin' was a shallow grave, I reckoned. Shallow grave first, then the insides of about ten coyotes. Not elected office, for damn sure. Maybe it was time for a change in scenery. But first, I had ta get Gine settled. I had a debt to her, fer raisin' me an' Kakarot, an' fer helpin' me after the weddin'.

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The house was done, an' it was time to get furniture, a mattress fer Gine, pots an' pans an' suchlike, so I went into town. I sent word ta Guru's folks that there was to be a housewarmin', an' that I'd be mighty appreciative iff'n they could help make Goku's mama feel at home. I seen Piccolo loungin' outside the Mexican saloon, but he just glanced at me an' went back ta smokin' without a word. Sittin' in the sun, all relaxed in all his black leather, he looked like a drawin' of a jungle snake I'd seen, one'a the real deadly ones. Mamba, I think it was called. Yeah. Black Mamba. Ready ta strike even while he relaxed.

"Howdy, stranger," a woman called, and I turned a full circle afore I caught sight of that woman gunsmith.

"Mornin', Miss Bulma," I said. "Gun works good."

She tossed her head an' smiled. "I told you it would, didn't I? And I hear you used it to deal with some miscreants, too."

I shrugged. "I did what I had ta do. 'S'been a while, would ya mind givin' it another cleanin'? I ain't too sure about takin' it apart like you done out on the range. Might lose a piece or make it dustier'n before," I said.

That Miss Bulma sure could talk. She jus' about talked my ear off about guns an' technology an' all kindsa things I never heard of. She'd done a sight of traveling, goin' to the big cities an' such. Biggest city I ever seen was still Fort Dodge, an' she laughed at that. But, she said my company was enough payment fer the cleanin', so long as I tole anyone who asked that she was the best gunsmith I ever seen. That, I could do. 'Sides, she tole me 'bout some mighty fine things. Candles that didn't need flame, lights that didn't need gas, wagons that didn't need horses or rails... I didn't like the sound of them folks that wanted ta put outhouses inside. They're called out-houses fer a reason, to my mind. Takin' baths inside is all well and good, but doin' yer business? Seems mighty unsan- insum- aw, hell, dirty.

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After Miss Bulma finished with the Colt, I walked ta Krillin's store. It being a general store, he should have some of the house things I was huntin'. To my surprise, there was quite a crowd gathered 'round.

".. and it's getting so a decent person can't walk down the street," Krillin said. Kakarot was nowhere to be seen; I reckoned he was in the store chattin' with folks, the way he liked ta do. "Seems to me, we need a sheriff who'll run those Las Vegas degenerates right out of town, make this a nice place to live again."

The crowd murmured agreement, and Krillin kept going, but I decided to head on into the saloon. I could get pans an' such later, when the storefront weren't a grandstand. It was dark an' relatively cool in the saloon, but I spotted Nappa's bald head right away. He had more'n a few glasses in front of him, like he'd been there a while.

"Sit," he grumbled, waving a hand, when he noticed me hangin' back.

"Wasn't sure you'd want my company," I explained, then gestured to the bartender. "I'm buying the next one."

"Making up for that stunt Goku's little friend from back east pulled?" Nappa snorted, and I shrugged. Wasn't much I could say. "I had that job in the bag before that bald runt came out here and put ideas in Goku's head."

"Tch," I spat, accepting my drink from the barkeep. "You put that idea in both of our heads. Readin', civic duty, ethics, all that bullshit. We'd jus' be illiterate cow hands, probly dead on the prairie by now."

"Nah, you're too mean to die. Goku, on the other hand," Nappa said, then tossed back his whisky, "would have made friends with the wrong person and wound up dead, most likely stabbed in the back. Or shot in the front for being too sanctimonious."

"He's apt ta see the best in folks, even when it ain't there," I agreed. He'd been keen on what that Frieza bastard said, up till he found out that all that "free land" talk really meant kickin' people offa their homes. "Say. We're movin' Miss Gine into the house come Sunday, an' I know she'd like to see ya there. S'posed to be a real fandango, Guru's folk say they're a-comin', an' bringin' some'a that good food."

“Hnn, they’re bringing food?” Nappa asked, inspecting the bottom of his glass. “I might just have time to stop by. Of course, I’ll probably be too busy sherifffing.”

He waved at the bartender, who set a fresh drink in front of him like he’d been waiting.

“Course,” I agreed, “but maybe ya don’t need another? They ain’t in the habit of makin’ drunks the sheriff.”

I regretted it as soon as I said it. A proud man like Nappa don’t ‘preciate a kid like me tellin’ him what ta do, especially when he’s a bit worked up.

“Hah! Look here, kid, I like you, but when I want your advice, I’ll ask for it,” Nappa growled, slamming the now-empty glass back on the bar. “I’ll see you around, Vegeta. Tell Miss Gine that I wish her happiness.”

With that, Nappa spun and strode outta the saloon, leaving me standing by the bar. I hoped he’d head on out to his own claim an’ sleep it off, but I didn’t figure on what happened next.

It was a funny thing. Krillin worked so hard ta clear the way fer Kakarot to be sheriff, an’ Kakarot was a mighty friendly man with a gift fer makin’ people like him, but in the end, it weren’t neither of them that got Kakarot elected sheriff.

Funny thing. Nappa wanted that job, probly more’n Kakarot did, but he was the one who got Kakarot elected.

It coulda been anyone, but Recoome was on the front porch when Nappa stepped out into the sunlight. Recoome and Guldo, two of Frieza’s top troublemakers, an a whole passel of no-accounts with ‘em. Recoome were a big man, nasty bastard, with a reputation fer bein’ meaner’n a bear with a sore tooth. That Guldo never went anywhere by himself, but he were mean too, so long as he had someone ta back him up.

Honestly, it coulda been anyone. But Recoome knew Nappa’d been drinking, an’ I guess he figured that gave him an edge. He didn’t know Nappa like I did.

“He wants ta be sheriff,” Recoome said, “I’d like ta see that.”

Guldo snickered. “Like ta see that!”

Nappa was a tall man, dignified. He drew himself up and faced Recoome, and I wouldn’t’a liked to see his face right then. I was still in the bar, an’ I still wish I’d’a hung on Nappa’s arm, followed him closer instead of watchin’ him walk away mad.

It were true that he’d had a mite too much, an’ who could blame ‘im? A kid that he’d taught ta read was fixin’ ta snatch a job out from under him, as far as he could see. An’ now a smalltime tough like Recoome, just a kid not much older’n me huntin’ notches fer his gun, challenged him?

Well. There weren’t no doubts in my mind about how this would go- bad. Somebody were gonna get hurt, an’ it probly weren’t Nappa.

“If the good people of this town elect me sheriff, I shall begin by arresting you,” Nappa said, coolly an’ distinctly. Mebbe that’s where I got the way of speakin’ when I were angry, all distinguished an’ educated-like. Heh. Jus’ another thing Nappa taught me.

“Hah! What fer?” Recoome said, an’ then he laughed.

“You are a murderer and a thief, but I would arrest you for the murder of Tannish and see you hanged for it,” Nappa said, an’ you coulda heard a pin drop across the street.

Now, I don’t know how Nappa knew that. When I heard it, I didn’t even know iff’n it was true, but one look at Recoome’s face gave it away. Rage and fear twisted his features, an’ then he grabbed iron.

“You’re a liar!” Recoome shouted, an’ Nappa killed him.

I’d never seen Nappa draw before. He was fast, damn fast. Faster’n me, for certain. By the time Recoome’s gun cleared leather, the big man was dead, three bullets in his chest. He staggered back against the railing, toppled into the water trough. Guldo turned sharply, and Nappa shot him, too.

Problem was, Guldo didn’t reach fer his gun. But he was a known associate of the man Nappa jus’ killed, an’ Nappa was deadly. He caught Guldo’s movement out the corner of his eye, an’ Guldo took a bullet in his belly.

I ain’t sayin’ I mightn’t have done the same thing. I mean, I don’t think I woulda, but I can’t say I wouldn’t’a. Things’re different when yer in the middle of ‘em. A time like that, a quick movement... who can say? But the whole crowd over to Krillin’s store saw it. All them good, decent folk, all worried about gunfights in the street... well, Nappa shot himself right out of the sheriff’s job when he shot Guldo.

Recoome had it comin’, everybody in town knew it, even all them folks as didn’t want killin’ in town. He drew on Nappa first. But Guldo didn’t draw, an’ everyone saw it, an’ it turned people against Nappa.

It shouldn’t have. There probly wasn’t a man in town mightn’t have done the same thing in Nappa’s place. Hell, I had a better head fer gunfights than them townfolks, an’ I might’ve done the same. But one of Nappa’s friends turned his back and said, loud enough fer me ta hear, “Let’s talk to that Goku fellow about the sheriff’s job.”

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

Gine's housewarming party

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Are ya sure Nappa won’t come?” Kakarot asked, sweeping the floor. Again. I just swept it spotless not ten minutes before, but the both of us were cleaning like the president himself was comin’ to call.

“Kakarot, you didn’t see him. He ain’t comin’. His pride’s mighty hurt,” I explained again. I couldn’t really judge him fer sweepin’ after I just swept, seein’ as how I was polishin’ the goldurned silver an’ fluffin’ the curtains. The silver weren’t even silver, jus’ nickel, but, well, we only had one chance ta do it right.

“Hello the house!” Nail called, and I poked my head out the door to wave him in.

“Holy hells,” I said, frozen in the doorway. Kakarot bumped into me an’ we stumbled out onto the porch.

I expected Nail to come, maybe with Guru an’ a couple’a hands, but the yard was full like he brought the whole hacienda!

“Oh, wow! Hey, everyone! Hola!” Kakarot shouted, pushing past me to go greet Gine’s guests. “Wow, look at everybody! Yer all dressed up, too!”

“Si, Señor Goku,” Nail said, reaching out to return Kakarot’s offered handshake, “or should I say, Señor Sheriff?”

Kakarot’s shoulders straightened proudly, but then I saw him duck his head an’ rub the back of his neck. I could practically feel the heat on his face, an’ I were standin’ behind him.

“Yeah, well, it was a vote, an’ I guess I won,” Kakarot stammered. He was still a little shocked, an’ with Nappa an’ the housewarming an’ all, I don’t think it had sunk in.

“We were not included in the vote, but we are pleased that you have won,” Nail said, an’ I stepped up beside Kakarot. “You will be fair, I think.”

“Of course I’ll be fair!” Kakarot said hotly, “that’s the whole point! Nappa woulda too, he-“

“I think,” I interrupted, “that the point is that you’ll be a mighty fine sheriff. Nobody’s sayin’ Nappa wouldn’t’a been a fine sheriff in his own right.”

Nail nodded to me. “Yes, exactly that. Señor Nappa would have done an admirable job as well, were it not for that unfortunate matter. When you see him, do please give him our thanks for bringing justice to Tannish’s murderer.”

Kakarot slumped unhappily. Truth was, we didn’t know iff’n we’d be seeing Nappa at all after the sheriff business.

“I still dunno how he knew, but Recoome was the man fer shore,” I said. “I think justice was served. I jus’ wish-“

I glanced up at Kakarot with a sigh. We was feelin’ Nappa’s absence, that was fer sure.

“Well, the sun is high, gentlemen. You must get ready, or Señora Gine will find you in your shirtsleeves,” Nail said, obviously picking up on the mood.

“Oh, shit,” Kakarot yelped, then hauled me into the house so’s we could get all cleaned up.

—

“You really think she’ll like it?” Kakarot asked for the hundredth time while he soaped my back.

“Yes, I really do,” I said, an’ tipped my head forward so he could get at my hair. It don’t seem right, how dirty of a job cleanin’ is. Still, his fingers felt mighty good, diggin’ through my scalp. Water sloshed over my back and head and I scrubbed the soap out before it spilled into my eyes. Then I turned to do Kakarot’s back, but he stopped me with his arms around my middle and rested his chin on my shoulder.

“Everythin’s changin’, Geta. I miss the hills,” he said softly, and I leaned my head against his. “Nappa was our first friend, along with Roshi, an’ it jus’ feels wrong. I miss...” he trailed off, and I knew he was missin’ his Chichi.

Kakarot’s chin hairs tickled my chest an’ I took the chance ta change the subject. “Ugh, you gotta shave. Ain’t fit ta welcome yer ma home like this,” I grumbled. “Turn around, lemme do yer back, an’ then we’ll shave.”

Kakarot squeezed me just a little more, then turned around.

—

Krillin drove Gine from town, right up to the front porch, where Kakarot an’ me were waitin’ in our best clothes, freshly shaved, hair slicked back in the new style. Kakarot’s chest puffed out jus’ a little more when Nail helped Gine down from Krillin’s wagon, like she was a queen from a story, an’ we opened the door.

“Oh, boys,” Gine gasped, looking around. When I glanced at Kakarot, he was chewing his thumbnail like he used to as a kid.

“Do... do ya like it, Ma?” he asked in a small voice, and Gine turned around and pulled us both into the biggest hug I’d ever had.

“My boys, this is wonderful! The only thing missing is Raditz, but there’s no helpin’ that. Ahh, this is perfect, jus’ perfect!” Gine sobbed. I weren’t sure why she was cryin’, but she seemed happy.

“Ma, Ma, don’t cry!” Kakarot said frantically, unwilling to stand up and break from her hug. “Geta, tell ‘er she dun need ta cry!”

“Miss Gine’s jus’ happy,” I said, an’ Gine nodded.

“Tha’s right, Ka, I ain’t sad a’tall,” Gine managed, an’ Kakarot gave a relieved sigh.

—

After Gine had inspected the house- she even said we done a fine job cleaning it up- we all went back outside an’ joined the party. Guru’s people had brought all kindsa food that Gine had never seen, an’ she spent half her time talkin’ to the ladies about how ta make it. They also brought a buncha things like blankets an’ food an’ big pots ta make soups an’ such. And, even better, they brought some guitars an’ other musical things! I ain’t one for dancin’, but I surely do like watchin’ other people, especially them Mexicans in their colorful clothes. It was like watchin’ a garden fulla wildflowers spinnin’ around. But yes, I did dance with Miss Gine, an’ so did Kakarot an’ jus’ about everyone else. An’ I even danced with that Miss Bulma, with Kakarot laughin’ at me the whole time. Finally, I was free to jus’ watch.

I leaned on the porch an’ looked around, thinkin’ about the last party I went to. So much had changed since then- we could read, Kakarot was sheriff, I was a notorious gunfighter through no fault of my own... Speakin’ of that, I nodded at Dende, who was propped up in a chair on the porch.

“Hello, Señor,” the boy said softly. “Do not worry, we have men on watch. Señor Krillin told us of the wedding. It will not happen here.” Even though he was wrapped in a blanket an’ lookin’ pale as anything, there was somethin’ fierce about his face.

We surely had made good friends here. I relaxed an’ watched Kakarot spin Miss Bulma around, an easy smile on his face. This was a good place fer him.

Which is why I felt so guilty when I realized I wanted ta leave.

Krillin leaned against the porch next ta me, his eyes fixed on a tall Mexican gal. Iff’n I recalled correctly, he’d danced with her a couple times.

“Pretty lady,” I said, an’ Krillin chuckled.

“Her name’s Lazuli,” he said wistfully. “I think she might be with that tall fella, but, damn, she’s a handful.”

I squinted at the tall man standing next to her. His hair was long an’ straight, an’ they smiled at each other while they danced, but there was somethin’ about the shape of their faces.



“Krillin, fer a man who grew up in the mountains, yer terrible at recognizin’ relations,” I said. “I bet ya Kakarot’s breakfast that they’re cousins, at least. Maybe brother an’ sister.”

Krillin waved a hand, but I could see he was plannin’ to ask some questions around the bonfire about that very thing.

“I wanted ta talk to you about the deputy job,” Krillin said. I glared at him, an’ he laughed. “I ain’t offerin’ it to ya. Fact is, Goku wants to, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea.”

My frown deepened. “I ain’t good enough?” I asked, insulted in spite of myself. I didn’t want the job, not really, but I didn’t like it that Krillin didn’t want me to take it.

“It ain’t that!” Krillin said, soundin’ mighty exasperated. “I mean, yer a known man! People favor Goku on account’a he ain’t known fer violence. Hell, it’s likely the only reason that he won over Nappa!”

“Kakarot ain’t some tenderfoot,” I argued, but Krillin shook his head fiercely.

“That ain’t what I’m sayin’. The folks in town, they know Goku won’t back up if he’s pushed, but they don’t reckon he’d draw first,” Krillin explained. I chewed on my lip an’ considered it.

“So... yer sayin’ I make people nervous an’ that’s not what Kakarot needs, is that it?” I asked. Krillin nodded. “I get it.”

“Thanks Vegeta,” Krillin said, obviously relieved. “I’m gonna go... check on that food. Looks like a barrel of beer, too.”

I chuckled to myself as he set off for the food, his eyes still on that Lazuli gal.

“Ya look like a man about to set out on a journey,” Roshi said from behind me, an’ I jumped afore I could stop myself.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, ya old coot,” I snapped. “Got tired of bein’ slapped by pretty women or somethin’?”

“Heh heh, never,” Roshi cackled. “But you’re itchin’ fer the road, Vegeta. Yer not the kind ta settle down, an’ I heard what Krillin was sayin’. Ya really gonna tell Goku “no” about that job an’ jus’ hang around town with nothin’ ta do?”

“I got things ta do!” I protested. “I’m gonna- well, I wanted ta get my own ranch.”

“Uh huh. An’ ya ain’t gonna hang around this place an’ face Kakarot’s badgerin’ every day?” Roshi said, an’ I glared at him. Still, the old bastard had a point. Kakarot’s laugh cut through the music an’ I scowled at him over the crowd. I could just hear it, his big eyes an’ his sad voice, askin’ me iff’n I was suuuuure I didn’t wanna try my hand as a deputy, tellin’ me how much fun he was havin’, how much he could use my help...

Damnit, I was gonna have ta leave town.

“I’m thinkin’ of goin’ prospectin’,” Roshi said, and I looked at him. “Could use a partner. Someone I kin trust, good with a gun, solid worker, won’t compete with me fer the ladies...”

“How long?” I cut in. “I ain’t intendin’ ta leave fer good. Jus’ long enough ta stretch my legs.”

“Oh, jus’ until we get a little yellow. Enough ta buy yer own ranch, iff’n that’s what ya really want,” Roshi said with a knowing smirk. He was right, I was gonna live here with Kakarot until someone put me in the ground, but I liked ta think I might have my own place.

“One last question. Where?” I asked, an’ Roshi cackled again.

“Montana, Vegeta. Waddaya say, boy?” he asked, holding his hand out, an’ I glared at him for a moment before giving in.

“It’s a deal,” I said, putting my hand in his, an’ my heart felt light fer the first time since the business with Nappa.

Only problem was, I’d hafta tell Kakarot.

## Chapter End Notes

For the three of you subscribed, thanks for still being subscribed! Unfortunately, I am experiencing life harder than usual right now. Another update will probably take about the same amount of time, ie, several months. Have a good winter holiday season, unless you're in the southern hemisphere, in which case, have a lovely summer, you lucky bastards.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

Vegeta and Roshi go prospecting.

“Yer leavin’?” Kakarot asked softly, an’ I rolled over to make room for him in the bed. He had his own bed, but, well, he obviously didn’t care about that.

“I’m leavin’,” I said, once Kakarot was curled up behind me, chest pressed against my back. “I got the itch. An’ this time, I ain’t bein’ run out. I’ll be back.”

“I could really use yer help,” Kakarot said, a wheedling tone to his voice, an’ I groaned. “I mean it, Geta! You’d be a real great deputy!”

“No, no, no,” I said, “I wouldn’t neither! We been over this, I ain’t cut out fer that kinda thing. C’mon, me, a public servant?”

“Ya wouldn’t hafta be polite *all* the time,” Kakarot begged. “Please, Geta? I’d let ya go on all the posses!”

“Kakarot, iff’n you ask me one more time, I’m kickin’ ya out of this bunk, an’ you can explain to yer ma why ya woke her up, thumpin’ around on the floor at this time’a night,” I threatened. Kakarot grumbled, but he rested his chin on my head instead of saying anything more. “Thank ya. Lord a’mighty, lemme rest. I got a long ride with no one but Roshi fer company comin’ up.”

“Well, I better give ya somethin’ to come back to,” Kakarot murmured, teasing his hands lower down my belly, an’ I tell you what, I almost changed my mind about leaving three times before the sun rose.

—

“I’ll be back, don’t you worry, Miss Gine,” I said, but Gine threw her arms around me an’ gritted her teeth.

“You take care, y’here?” she ordered, an’ I nodded.

“Don’t you worry,” I repeated. “I’m not in the habit of gettin’ kilt. Besides, Roshi’s a vile ol’ lecher, but I don’t reckon there’s anything he can’t handle, neither.”

“I suppose. Here, take this- I know you’ll be cookin’ rough, but ya should start out with some wholesome food,” Gine said, thrusting a bundle into my hands. It smelled good.

“Aww, Miss Gine-” I started, but she shook her head.

“Ka already said goodbye?” she asked, an’ I nodded.

“He ain’t one fer long farewells,” I said. “We said what needed said. You keep an eye on him, don’t let him get too big fer his britches,” I added. Gine laughed; we both knew that Kakarot would never be conceited. He was a humble man, perhaps too humble fer his own good.

“I been keeping that boy outta trouble since before you knew him,” Gine chuckled. I nodded, an’ that was that.

I was settin’ out fer parts unknown once again.

This time really was different, though. I had someplace to go home to. I had Roshi with me, too; fer all his faults, he really was a fine outdoorsman. He’d fergot more about the west than most folk ever knew.

—

We took the stage north; Dapple stayed safely home with Miss Gine to do ranch work. Roshi had Montana country in mind, an’ I had no objections, so we got ourselves jobs as stagecoach drivers. Roshi took the ribbons an’ I took shotgun, an’ I don’t mind sayin’ that we made a bit of a name fer ourselves. I got a reputation as a marksman fer leaping off the coach an’ shootin’ a fellow’s gun out of his hand. That weren’t actually what I did, mind; I was aimin’ to kill when I fell off the coach. Shootin’ the gun outta his hand was pure luck.

Honestly, driving the coach weren’t much better than ridin’ ourselves. It were bumpy and dusty, an’ I earned my pay many a time. Stagecoaches were big, fat targets fer robbers, but I put more’n a few in the ground. Safe to say, none of our passengers ever had more’n a bad fright.

—

When we got as far north as the stage would go, me an’ Roshi got ourselves a prospecting outfit. Horses to ride, but also couple of pans, pickaxes and shovels, an’ the stuff to make a sluice box. Panning fer gold is a good start, but it don’t get you the real profits.

We rode into the ambitiously-named town of Perfection having spent all our driving earnings on the outfit. We had ta at least break even, make enough to make it worth comin’ up here. Still, we stopped into the saloon, which were just about the only building in the town, an’ bought us a couple of drinks. Never hurts to have a chat with the barman; he’s usually the one with a real eye on the town.

“Evening, gentlemen,” the tall, gangly barkeeper said. He was polishing a glass, an’ something about that smooth tone of his put my teeth on edge. ‘Sides, he looked a mite too fancy fer a town like Perfection; I thought I saw a gold watch chain on his vest. “Passing through? Or do you plan to stay a while?”

“We’re stayin’ long enough to make back what we spent on our outfit,” Roshi said. “Name’s Roshi, an’ this young buck is Vegeta.”

“That’s very ambitious of you,” the barman said. I nodded politely. “You can call me Seru. This is my establishment, and as long as you don’t cause trouble, you’re welcome in my town. Most prospectors are setting up on the north side, by the creek.” He set two glasses with what smelled like the worst whiskey I ever smelled in my life on the bar. I grimaced and took a sip, then grimaced harder. It was vile stuff. No way this Seru was drinkin’ this swill; he had ta have a stash of somethin’ actually drinkable somewhere.

Roshi nodded amiably, not seeming to notice how bad the whiskey was. Mebbe his taste was gone, along with his shame. “We’ll take a look-see, don’t ya worry. Say, any ladies in this town?”

I rolled my eyes and took another sip while I looked around the saloon. It were pretty empty, an’ the other patrons looked to be minding their own business.

Seru seemed like he thought his little town would wind up bein’ a bustlin’ center of commerce someday, but I’d driven through enough minin’ towns on the stage to know the feel of one that wouldn’t make it. Soon as the gold ran out, this place would die.

I left my half-finished drink on the bar, nodded to Seru again, an’ left Roshi chatting with him while I took a walk about.

Perfection was as small as I’d thought. There were a general store an’ not much else- looked like the only place to eat was the saloon, an’ I couldn’t make out a bank, post office, nor even a church or hotel. The only reason to be here was to fill up on necessities afore headin’ back to the claim.

—

Well, me an’ Roshi found ourselves a little claim on the creek with a few flakes of gold in the pan after just a few days’ lookin’, an’ got to the business of mining. I won’t bore ya with the details, but it was surely hard work. Frankly, Roshi was the one who knew what we was doin’; I jus’ dug where he tol’ me. We got to know the neighbors- a man called Yamcha an’ his wife an’ another called Tien an’ his brother, or nephew, or some such, came ta see Roshi on the regular. I went into town a few times a month fer supplies an’ a little gamblin’. The fella who run the general store was called Satan, an’ I didn’t like him.

Oh, Satan weren’t like Seru, I jus’ didn’t enjoy listenin’ to him bluster and brag. But I can’t deny he ran a fine store, such as it was. Always kept stocked up on the essentials, an’ always letcha know when the coffee was s’posed to come in. An’ he was more or less the postmaster, seein’ as he was the only one who had regular traffic. I sent Kakarot an’ Gine a letter to let ‘em know we was settlin’ down fer a minute. But I didn’t spend much time in the store. When I was in town, once I’d taken care of my business, loaded up the saddlebags with vittles, I’d set up in the saloon an’ play cards.

Normally, gamblin’ ain’t my thing, but there weren’t nothing else to do. Most days, I stayed with the claim an’ worked through a big ol’ philosophy book of Nappa’s that I’d hauled up,

but some days, I jus' had ta get out. An' there weren't nothin' to do but go to the store, which I didn't like, or go to the saloon. An' if I were at the saloon, I might as well take a bit of gold an' play some cards.

I started ta notice somethin', asides how Seru served his whiskey from different bottles fer different people. Prospectors who came fer one last hurrah before ridin' out with their poke tended ta lose a lotta gold; it seemed to me that most of that gold ended up going to the house. To Seru, that was. Certainly explained the gold pocket watch I seen him flaunting about.

Now, I never brought enough ta hurt when I lost it- an' I did lose most of it, I ain't much fer gamblin'. An' Roshi did the same, although he tended ta win more'n me. Iff'n there weren't pretty ladies around ta distract him, he were a bit of a card shark. But many a miner got excited by a fat poke an' brought it all in, expectin' ta double it. Never did, though.

I said Seru was fancy, but I didn't say he was weak. Somethin' about the man said that he knew how to fight, an' the gun on his hip didn't look to be fer show. I never saw him fight myself; his regulars seemed ta do most of the work for him. I never bothered learnin' anyone's name, 'sides the folks who came to visit Roshi. I jus' played my cards, lost my gold, an' drank my river water whiskey, then went back to the claim. An' Roshi's snores.

Anyway, we was there about half a year afore any real trouble started.

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