



WHEN LEGENDS LIVED

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Excerpt

Prologue

IT'D BEEN JUST PAST noon on their second day out when the searchers found the drover's body. The thing they talked about for years afterward was how it'd been left in exactly the same place as the last one — almost six years earlier. Normally, they would've stopped sooner, it being the hottest part of the day. But they'd wanted to reach the King Tree first, because it was the only substantial shade within twenty-five miles. The King Tree was a giant old oak, the kind usually found a lot farther north. As far back as any of them could recall, it'd marked the four major trails intersecting the region, and provided weary travelers a brief respite during the hot siesta hours.

As they topped the ridge, the rare old tree dominated the parched landscape for as far as the eye could see; its prominence and grandeur unmatched amid the low-growing brush and dwarfed trees. A hard day's ride in any direction would not find another of its kind. Like a majestic ruler, it resided over the arid kingdom, woody arms spread widely as if basking in adoration from lesser, bowing wind-whipped subjects.

Local lore speculated on its origin; perhaps one of the infrequent strong winds out of the Panhandle had carried it there when but a twig or seedling. The constantly shifting grainy soil had probably covered it over during an uncommonly wet season, allowing it to take root despite the intense heat and drought-like conditions that might've killed it altogether. There had been conjecture that an underground stream or spring lay near the surface in that particular spot, allowing a particularly deep tap root to suck life-giving moisture from the crusty earth for more than two hundred years. Disease and termites had taken their toll in recent years and limbs now littered the ground under the once magnificent tree. Black cancerous areas of decay on many of the remaining

appendages indicated that more discards would soon follow. Weakened though it was, the old tree was still strong enough to hold the heavy weight that swayed gently in the slight breeze on one of its lower limbs.

From where the horsemen paused on the distant ridge, the swaying object appeared smaller than it actually was; perhaps it was a flag of some sort – or maybe a shirt hung out to air. As the riders slowly approached and the object became more vivid, the impression was that game had recently been dressed-out and hung, out of reach of small animals, to cure. Once closer, what it was suddenly became sickeningly clear.

It was a man. Or once had been.

Hanging up-side down by one foot tied to the low limb, the area of his genitals left an ugly wound where they'd been savagely removed. Nearly all of the body's skin had been peeled away, muscles and sinew left exposed to the elements. Angry clouds of black flies swarmed the quickly crusting blood. A gentle breeze caused the butchered remains to slowly turn, twisting the rope taut, and then reaching its limit, reversing, to slowly unwind. As the corpse turned, empty eye sockets searched the surrounding landscape for rescuers who would arrive too late.

Reaching the tree, the riders formed a semicircle beneath the gruesome sight, sitting in uncomfortably embarrassed silence, each trying to avoid looking into the empty accusing eye-sockets. What couldn't be ignored was the jagged wound slashed along the entire right side of the dead man's face from eye to chin. It had been almost six years to the day since the last body had been found with that mark. Only two of the older riders had ever seen it, but the others had heard stories through the years. Several riders shifted uncomfortably in their saddles, gazing anxiously at the surrounding landscape, and nervously fingering the triggers of their Winchesters.

Foreboding hung heavily in the air and each of them read it in the other's faces. To a man, they all knew who'd done this terrible thing, and they knew with certainty why he'd placed the mutilated body in the old tree where the four trails came together.

He was back – and he'd wanted it found!