
The Horsemen©

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The old man knelt and washed his hands in the muddy water of Red Horse Springs. It was nearly sundown, and the sandstone walls of Canyon del Muerto glowed vermillion and gold, alive like the beating heart of the land. This was a good place, clean, despite the blood that had soaked into the rocks. Blood from centuries past, and blood from yesterday.

But this new violence, the death of the girl from the school. That death was wrong, and the old man could feel the monsters tremble and wake, tear themselves loose from their mountain prisons, old monsters, hungry for blood, hungry for the children of Dinetah.

He dug a hole, rimed it with sandstone, and set the fire burning deep inside with juniper and cottonwood root. When the coals glowed black and red, the old man said the words that would show him the monster that threatened their people, words that would send him a weapon.

He tended the fire as the night deepened. He could see the image now, burning black and red in the coals, a man on horseback. A dust devil blew up, sucked grit and sand off the canyon floor. The wind whistled through the stumpy, twisted juniper, around the fins and hollows of sandstone, moaning like a woman in the arms of her lover, and the old man smelled something clean and cold, like wind off a snow-covered mountain, something evergreen. The dust devil spat sand in his face, and when he blinked it out of his eyes, he saw three men on horseback.

The fear was cold in his belly. "Are you The Horsemen?"

The man in the middle slung a leg over his saddle, stepped forward like a figure out of an old western, buffalo felt Stetson over flaming curls that hit his shoulders, a long, brown duster and boots. The old man stood up, not sure if he should offer his hand, but feeling like he needed to be on his feet.

The man with the red hair nodded. "My name's Justice." He gestured to his companions, and the old man's stomach twisted with fear. One of the men was Indian, but not Dine. He had a hatchet nose and a sheet of black hair down his back, and was dressed in dusty buckskins. The third man was looking around with a strange, happy grin, his weird eyes the pale blue of ice, his hair like snow under a battered black hat.

The old man took an involuntary step back, pulled a chunk of turquoise the size of a quail's egg from around his neck. "I have an offering..." He held the turquoise out to the man who called himself Justice.

Justice shook his head. "This is Billy Steel," he said, gesturing toward the man with the strange blue eyes. "And this is my brother Long Rifle. We don't require payment."

"We could do with some food, though. I don't suppose you've got any stew?" It was the one he called Billy Steel.

"Yes! Good! Come with me. My hogan is close by, here in Canyon del Muerto. My wife will have mutton stew. She can make fry bread, the best, and coffee."

Billy Steel grinned and rubbed his hands together, looking around. "I knew it! Didn't I tell you? I swear I been smelling stew for days. I love Navajo country."

The old man's hogan was traditional, eight log sides and an earthen roof, the door opening to the east. The wood stove was cast iron, set in the center of the round space, an insulated stove pipe going out the smoke hole. The old woman was up, making fry bread just like he'd said, and there was a pot of mutton stew on top of the stove. A black-haired boy was sleeping in a narrow bed against the wall. The old man shook him awake, and he sat up and stuck his feet into a pair of sneakers.

"Go get May Ellen. Tell her...Just tell her to come."

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Billy Steel could put away some fry-bread, and the old woman kept pulling dough, dipping it into the bubbling lard, then sliding pieces to him on newspaper. She seemed fascinated by his appetite. She was afraid of Long Rifle. Justice could see this in the way her eyes skittered away from him. She handed his bowl of stew to Justice, then jerked her chin for him to pass it on.

Justice glanced at his brothers. Long Rifle was calm and still, eating his stew and waiting to find out why they had been called. It certainly wasn't the first time they'd been in Navajo country, or out on the reservations. The Navajo, especially the old ones,

always looked at him like this, like he was hiding a bloody hatchet in his buckskins. Their memories were long, and they were storytellers. The stories of this place, the land they called Dinetah, were soaked in blood.

Justice shook his head when the old woman offered to refill his bowl. "No, ma'am, but thank you. We don't want to take all your family's breakfast."

Billy Steel stopped, a spoon halfway to his mouth, then he shrugged and let the old woman refill his bowl. Billy was in a good mood. The wild, empty lands always made his blood sing, and Justice could see reckless joy in his eyes.

Justice stepped outside the hogan. The horizon to the east was beginning to brighten. He opened his mind, heard the sounds drifting on the winds, despair, anguish, the blood fury that ended in murder. All the old monsters were here, walking the land, but something new had come, and was waiting for them.

The old man stepped up next to him. "I'm a Hand Trembler," he said. "You know what that is?"

Justice nodded. "What did you see in the fire?"

"I saw you. But before, I saw Leetso, the yellow monster. The people say Leetso was set free with the mining, the uranium." He shrugged. "I don't know. My great-niece, she'll explain. A child has died, a girl from the school, here in Canyon del Muerto."

Justice studied his face, still and dark and seamed from a life lived outdoors. His long gray hair was tied back in a bun. "It was Leetso?"

The old man nodded, studying the sky. Then he pulled his corn pollen pouch from the neck of his shirt, and Justice left him to his morning prayers.

May Ellen came from a traditional Navajo family, but she was a smart modern woman, a teacher, wearing jeans and with her hair cut in a bob. She didn't necessarily believe Leetso was walking around Canyon del Muerto, murdering the children to eat their hearts, but she wasn't prepared to discount that theory, either. Something was wrong, and she was, she explained, happy to take whatever help she could get.

She accepted a bowl of stew with thanks, and sat down at the outside picnic table. Justice and Billy Steel sat opposite her; Long Rifle stood a little distant, looking over

the caves as the sun moved down the canyon walls.

"We were on a field trip for the dorm kids, a trail ride, camp out, traditional stories around the camp fire, like that. The girl was with a group of other teenagers. Sometime during the night she fell off the cliff." May Ellen pointed to the jagged cliff top. "The fall was over a hundred feet, down onto some rocks. The dorm staff, they said the kids were drunk or something. The cops tested them, no alcohol, no drugs. But they were stoned. That's what I'm worried about. The kids are cooking up something new, something we can't test for."

She hesitated, and Long Rifle turned and looked at her. She stared back for a moment, then put her spoon down and pushed the bowl away. "Something else." It sounded like the words were being dragged out of her. "In the high school girl's dorm, something's happening. Bullying, hazing, maybe worse. Some of the girls have been hurt. And nobody's talking."

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"These kids, they're totally out of control! No respect for the elders, no respect for the land, for our traditions...Look at this!" Mr. Benjamin was the traditional counselor, a Navajo man in his fifties, strong and extremely worried. He was showing them the mess inside the men's sweatlodge. "This place, it should be sacred, a place for prayers. You understand?"

Justice nodded. It was dark and cool inside, the walls of the sweat covered in clay. "Whoa, wee! Would you look at this!" Billy Steel was shaking his head. "These boys have been rutting like a bunch of pigs in shit!" The earthen floor was littered with used condoms in candy colors, aluminum cans, torn wrappers from candy bars. Justice picked up one of the cans and smelled beer.

Long Rifle stood outside the sweatlodge with May Ellen. Women were not for this place, and he stayed outside the fence with her. Justice had noticed May Ellen was careful not to look at Long Rifle very closely, or for very long. His brother was strong and brave and beautiful, and he wore traditional buckskins. Women were very often over-

come.

"We're taking them on another trail ride this weekend." Mr. Benjamin pulled a pouch of tobacco out of his pocket, stuck a pinch in his mouth, and offered the pouch. Justice shook his head, but Billy Steel took a bit, smelled it, and stuck it into his mouth. "If anything goes wrong again, another child gets hurt, the kids take their filthy drugs, the school board will close us down." He shook his head sadly. "Maybe we should let them close the school." He scuffed an old cowboy boot in the red dirt. "These children, they don't walk in beauty. We can't reach them with the old ways. They're lost, and I can feel evil here. The skinwalkers, they run at night like dogs, like wolves. I've smelled them, and seen their tracks."

Justice looked up and met Long Rifle's eyes. It didn't matter the name. Leetso, the yellow monster, or skinwalkers running like wolves. Evil rode the earth, and they rode with it. It was a dance across time, and space, and this was their place, the West. The mountains wove down through their land like a sleeping dragon's tail, and they rode this land, the three of them, chased evil down and cut off its serpent head.

That night Billy Steel said what they were all thinking. He shoved a piece of juniper into the campfire, leaned back to study the spread of stars across the night sky. "Ain't this a pisser? This time it's likely to be kids." He spit some tobacco juice into the fire. "Don't bother me none." He scooted the tobacco around in his mouth with his tongue. "These Navajo sure have figured out tobacco. And fry bread."

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There was a dorm-wide meeting about safety the night before the trail ride. The kids sat around on couches or slouched against the walls. Justice and the other men were introduced as riding instructors. This was met with sneers and tough talk from the boys.

Mr. Benjamin apologized. "Most of these kids, they were raised in the traditional places, by their grandparents. Navajo kids start riding and roping before they're old enough to pull up their own Wranglers." He looked away. "I don't know where their

bad manners are coming from."

The boys looked rough, homemade tattoos in dark blue ink on their arms, knife scars, hard faces. Justice asked one of the kids about the circular burn scar on his hand, between the thumb and the first finger. The kid wouldn't talk, but May Ellen leaned over and whispered that it was a bong. The first time a kid smoked a homemade pipe full of dope, he turned the hot metal over and burned the proof into his skin. Justice nodded. He'd seen worse on men, but here the girls all had the round burn marks on their hands, too.

After the meeting, they met at the stables to check the horses and tack. "The girls, they curl their hair, here, in the front." Long Rifle indicated his forehead. "But many of the girls have burns from the hair irons on their arms, on the tenderest skin." He rubbed his fingers along the skin inside his forearm. "One girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen, she has a line of burns, one after the other. Some were older. She has bruises, too, around her wrists, like someone was trying to hold her. Her name's Jenny. She's cousin to the girl who fell."

"I saw this girl," Billy said, "a hard-faced bitch with enough makeup for a whorehouse, hard black eyebrows penciled in. She couldn't be seventeen, name of Harriet. The other girls call her Honey. Honey wants to know if I want to party with them. She asks me in front of the other girls, but when I get her alone she don't have nothing else to say, and wouldn't look me in the eye. That boy with the knife cut on his neck," Billy drew his finger along the side of his neck, "the one with the spider tattoo on his hand. They call him Biscuit. That boy belongs to Honey. Whatever she's doing, he's helping her."

May Ellen sat down at their campfire that night, very close to Long Rifle, though she looked carefully at the fire and not at him. Long Rifle glanced at her. "May Ellen. I feel some concern over the girl, Jenny. She is very angry, and she is afraid."

"Jenny is trying to play detective. Tiffany, the girl who fell, they were best friends, cousins. She's going around asking questions and putting up posters with a picture of Tiffany's face that say, Did you see who killed this girl? I saw Honey screaming at her, tearing up the pictures and flinging the torn paper in her face."

Long Rifle turned and looked at her again, and May Ellen answered as if he had just asked her a question. "Tiffany was with Honey's group when she fell. They were out partying. I think that's why Jenny is...looking at her. See, Tiffany, she was only fourteen. As far as I know, she didn't run with that crowd. Jenny says she's never used drugs, never drank. But Honey is very popular. The other girls think she's tough and cool and strong. They all want to be friends with her. Some of the girls, they've got this tattoo they cut into their arms, HG, for Honey's Girls."

Billy Steel made a rude noise and spit tobacco juice into the fire. May Ellen nodded. "I know, but it's been very rough for Honey. Her mom, I don't know what happened. It was about ten years ago. She was drinking and drugging and she got sent to jail. I think Honey was six or seven. She's been in foster homes, you know, some of them are really bad, and...and, it's just rough! I mean, it takes some kids hard, to not have the tender care of parents."

"Yeah, yeah." Billy Steel's voice was cold. "She didn't choose what happened to her then, but maybe she's choosing now."

"We don't know yet," Justice said. "But I think you do, May Ellen. Our experience has been, when we come into a place that's having trouble, that the people know exactly what's wrong. They know exactly who is doing wrong. But they're afraid to accuse someone without proof. They hope they're wrong, that it's all some big mistake. And they feel like they may not be strong enough for a proper resolution."

May Ellen stared into the fire, not speaking, and they could see the quiet track of tears on her face. Long Rifle sighed. "You are a good woman," he said. "You can trust us to help you, and to do what must be done."

May Ellen tucked her hair behind her ears and cleared her throat, her cheeks flushed in the fire light. "Thank you," she said, getting up. "Thank you all for coming to help. I don't know where you came from..."

Justice shook his head, and she abandoned this unfruitful line of thought.

"Well. I'll leave you then, gentlemen. You'll be ready for the trail ride tomorrow? We leave after breakfast."

"Should be fun," Billy agreed, and she looked carefully at him, not sure if he was

being serious, or having a joke at her expense. After she left, Billy threw a little rock into the campfire. "Every damn time. That's what I don't get. Every time, and the women start sitting closer and closer to him. I don't get it! He's ugly as a stick, he don't talk..."

"I think that's it," Justice said. "Long Rifle doesn't talk, so they get to. Billy, you just can't shut up! Women don't like it when they can't get a word in edgewise." Long Rifle closed his eyes and sighed.

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The horses were rough-coated, full of energy and nearly dancing with excitement to get out of the stables and into the clean, cold air and empty space of Canyon de Chelly. The kids were the same, most of the girls shrieking and giggling with excitement loudly enough the boys and most of the horses shied away from them. Most of the girls, but not all.

Long Rifle helped the girl Jenny onto a prancing Appaloosa, carefully adjusted the length of the stirrups. She was looking grim, and wearing a T-shirt with a little back pack, not even trying to cover up the burn marks on her arm. She lifted her chin proudly when Long Rifle looked at the marks.

"You can ask for help," he said. She turned away, and Justice could see tears standing in her dark eyes.

"This Jenny," Long Rifle said, gesturing toward the girl. "Very young and very proud, a dangerous combination."

Honey had a group of her friends around her, and the boy Biscuit. Her tank top was pale tangerine, cut low, with the edges of a black bra showing. She had makeup around her eyes like an Egyptian sarcophagus, and her hair was elaborately curled, piled on the top of her head with a long tail over one shoulder. Billy Steel led a bay with a white blaze over to her, gave her a leg up. She was staring at Jenny, who had ridden her horse some distance away and was looking out over the trail. "Hey, can I get a horse like that one?"

"No, you can't." Billy had her reins, and he kept them pulled tight. "You can take what I give you."

Her eyes widened and she was breathing fast, her face flushed. He gave her the reins and walked off. Honey's boy Biscuit stared after him, reached up to hold the bridle, but Honey moved the bay out of his reach.

They rode down the canyon, the horses picking their way carefully around tumbled boulders and down narrow sandstone ledges. The twisted junipers on the red rock face gave way to the cottonwoods along the river bank in the canyon bottom, their leaves soft and pale green. They set up camp, and the pickup trucks with the food and cooking gear arrived. The women started unpacking, and the men dragged the big rusting barbeque pits out of the trucks, dumped in bags of charcoal.

A couple of the girls helped the women knead the fry bread, or shape patties of hamburger meat. Most of the boys were climbing into the old ruins, scouting out small caves and crevices big enough to hide from the adults and fire up a smoke. Away from the barbeque pits you could pick up the faint smells of burning tobacco and burning marijuana, the smells of juniper berries and sheep and red sandstone dust.

Mr. Benjamin herded a group of the younger kids up to one of the caves in Canyon del Muerto, the site of the famous massacre. Justice came along. "Some say it was 1599 and some say 1631. The Spanish came up from Mexico looking for slaves. The people knew they were coming, so families brought baskets of peaches and wild onions and corn and hid the food in the caves, and the women and children came to hide from the enemies in the darkness.

"But the Spanish came on horses, very many, very strong, and the horses smelled the corn and found their way to the caves. A brave woman left her baby and her family and climbed out along the cliff edge to try and lead the Spanish away from the people. But a Spanish soldier came, the first one to find the cliff edge, and she ran at him, flung her arms around him and carried them both off the cliff. She was hoping to save her people, her family. She would rather fight, a free Navajo woman, than become a slave."

They climbed up into the cave, and the cool darkness was like a cathedral, a holy place. Mr. Benjamin pointed high on the wall. Pictographs were cut into the surface of

the wall, through the dark canyon varnish, and they told the story: men on horseback chasing the people, the people hiding in the caves, and then a woman alone falling off the cliff, her arms around a Spanish soldier.

Justice watched the children stare up at the pictures. The girl Long Rifle was concerned about, Jenny, she was with them. Her face was as still and quiet as the sandstone cliffs. She had a little silver camera with her, but she left it tucked in her pocket.

Long Rifle woke him late, after midnight. There was no moon, but the starshine lit the canyon with ghostly silver shadow. "Brother. Some of the kids, that girl Honey and her friends, took some horses and went up the canyon. Jenny followed them."

Billy Steel had three horses saddled, and he climbed on the black horse. Long Rifle took the silver, and Justice stroked the soft nose of a bay, her coat the color of old blood in the starlight.

They followed the path made by the hoofprints of the other horses to a cave deep in the canyon. A group of boys huddled together on the ledge, seven or eight, digging in their pockets for money.

Biscuit was holding Jenny with her wrists behind her back. She was struggling, trying to kick him, and Honey backhanded her hard across the face. "Shut up, you stupid bitch! You want to spy on me now? I gave you plenty of warning, but you just would not back off! I knew you'd try and follow me. You want to know what happened to your skank cousin? You're gonna find out tonight." Honey had Jenny's little camera in her hand, threw it down against the rocks.

Biscuit jerked her wrists high between her shoulder blades, and Jenny went up on her toes. "Why don't you take the stuff, little Jenny? Go ahead, have a snort. It'll go easier on you. You won't remember most of it."

Jenny tried to spit at him. "Get your fucking hands off me." Biscuit reached around her shoulder into the neckline of her shirt, ripped it open, then pulled her bra off and threw the clothes into the dirt. Justice could see a line of burns on her breast like the ones on her forearm. She was crying now, furious, gulping back her sobs as two of the boys reached for her arms, pulled them apart and forced her down to the ground inside the cave.

"One time each, twenty bucks," Honey said, collecting cash. The boys were passing a joint back and forth with a high-pitched, nervous giggle.

Jenny let out a shriek. "Get off me, you sick fuck!" Long Rifle spurred his horse into the group of boys, then rode into the cave.

Justice had his blade out, pressed into the tender skin at Honey's throat. "I see you, my old friend, my brother." Her eyes were spinning black like stars sucked into a vortex, teeth bared in a rictus grin, gleaming like tombstones.

Billy Steel climbed off his horse, ambled into the cave after Long Rifle. He came out dragging Biscuit by the hair. The boy's throat was crushed. Billy dropped him in the dirt, and he lay choking and wheezing for a moment, then was still.

Justice stared into Honey's face. He had a thick wad of her hair in his hand and was holding her head pulled back tight, her slender brown throat exposed. "You could be making a mistake." Honey's voice was deeper, hollow. "Poor little girl never had a chance!" Then it was Honey's young voice again. "Get your hands off me! The law can't do nothing to me! You can't touch me, I'm still under age. I'll just go to juvie..."

"I'm not the law, girl."

She started laughing and he thrust the sword blade into her neck, sawed through until her severed head swung free. Her body fell in the dirt, great gouts of dark blood soaking into the sandstone, and a pale horse leapt from her neck, and Death was riding on it. The horse rode into the darkness, hooves sparking on the rocks, and Justice dropped the girl's head on top of her body, wiped his hands down his thighs.

"That girl in there's gonna need a shirt," Billy Steel said. He walked over to one of the boys who were tumbled in a groaning pile near the entrance to the cave, kicked the nearest one in the thigh. "Give me your T-shirt." The boy pulled it off and handed it over without a word. Billy threw the T-shirt to Justice, then he squatted down on his haunches, looked at the gang of boys. "Who wants to die first?" They froze, eyes never leaving his face. Billy pushed back his hat. "No one? Well, I suggest you listen up then. See, what happened here tonight is Honey talked her boys into running off. I heard they was headed to Vegas. Right?"

Justice walked back into the cave. Long Rifle was standing a discrete distance

away from the girl, and she was rocking, her knees drawn up to her chest, eyes tightly shut. Justice threw her the T-shirt. The second boy was crumpled against the wall, not moving.

"Is it done, my brother?"

Justice nodded, and Long Rifle walked over to the girl. "It's time to go. You can ride with me if you are too weak to ride your own horse."

She stared up at him, wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I can ride! Do you mind?" She gestured with the T-shirt. "Can I have a little privacy, please?"

They stepped out of the cave, and Long Rifle seemed to be holding back a grin. He slapped Justice on the back. "Navajo women are strong!"

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Justice handed May Ellen the small, plastic bags of yellow crystals the boys were carrying. "Maybe this is the drug you're looking for."

The boys had been rounded up and were back in camp. Billy Steel spoke a quiet word to Mr. Benjamin. The man glanced at Jenny, his face flushing dark with fury, then he walked back to the circle of boys. "Get your stuff. I'm taking you out of here right now."

"Back to the dorm?" A heavy, sullen-faced boy pushed his hair out of his eyes. "That's fine with me, I never..."

"Not back to the dorm. Home. And don't plan on coming back."

Jenny avoided May Ellen's eyes, ducked into her tent, and a moment later the borrowed T-shirt came flying out the door. The girl didn't come back out.

"Where's Honey?" May Ellen looked steadily at his face. Justice knew he hadn't washed off all the blood.

"She's gone. Biscuit, too. And now it's time for us to go."

She looked stricken for a moment, glanced at Long Rifle. He regarded her steadily. Then she nodded. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you coming to help us, to help that child."

Justice nodded. Jenny was lying on her sleeping bag next to the open door of the tent, her face pressed into the pillow, listening.

Long Rifle stepped up. "Take care of her. She's one of the strong ones, like you. We will always come if she asks for help. Or if you do."

Long Rifle climbed on his horse, and May Ellen held the reins while Justice put his foot in the stirrup and swung a leg over the saddle. Billy Steel was letting his horse prance and dance and rear a bit, and the kids were peeking out of their tents, watching him with laughing dark eyes. The sun was brightening the eastern sky, but they turned their horses west, and rode into the darkness.

It was almost too cold for an old man's bones, to sit up all night and tend the fire. He shook his grandson awake, and the boy climbed off his narrow bed, put on his sneakers, and followed his grandfather into the night. They collected the juniper and cottonwood root and made the fire, and when the wind blew over the coals, and they glowed black and red, like the beating heart of the land, the old man began a story. "The people say that when the uranium mining began, Leetso, the yellow monster, was let loose to roam the land. Some say he still walks, spreading his poison to the children of Dinetah through his filthy drugs. I will tell you a story. I know this to be true..."

The End