

*The
Curse
of
Guadalajara
Rose*©

part 4 of 5

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Part Four- The Hand Trembler

The storm blew in during the night, the rain full of ash and ice. The horses panicked when the thunder struck the tree near where they rested, but Long Rifle whistled them back before they went too far. All except Emilio's horse, a spavined old mare who just watched the weather with a tired face, put her head down and tried to chew on a creosote bush.

Billy Steel held his hands out, captured some of the rain and tasted it, then spit it out. "I think Del Torro's place has burned, and the rain is carrying the ash. We need to get gone. I can feel trouble heading this way."

They saddled up in the dark, and the boys rode together on Emilio's mare. Long Rifle put a blanket around their shoulders to keep them warm. The wind was blowing cold, spitting sleet out of a charcoal-gray sky.

“Do we know where we’re going? Up clear to Navajo country? That’s gonna take weeks.”

Emilio spoke up. “Cunish, he comes from the border country. Where the Tohono O’odham live. His grandfather is the hand trembler. He was a slave in Mexico when he was a boy, too, and he escaped. And now Cunish was taken as a slave, and his sister.”

Justice looked around in surprise. “His sister? Did we leave somebody behind?”

Emilio shook his head. “She died. It’s her chindi that has caused his sickness. The Hand Trembler will know what to do. That’s what Cunish has told me. He needs a ceremony to cure him of the ghost sickness. Otherwise he will die.”

“Maybe he won’t die,” Billy Steel said. “But the world will die around him. The ghost sickness, it blows evil through him to everyone around him. We’ll get the boy the ceremony he needs.”

Emilio looked at Billy Steel, his face hard with judgment. “Do

you mean Cunish, his ghost sickness, is the reason you killed the woman? It wasn't your hand on the gun? It wasn't your fault?"

Billy shook his head, turned and rode away without another word.

By sunup they had crossed into the Arizona territory. Long Rifle lead the silent horses to the spring at Quitobaquito, and Justice climbed down and filled the water skins. He looked up at Billy Steel, weaving in the saddle. "You want to climb down? Maybe a soak in the springs will help your back."

Billy Steel shook his head. "I get down, I might not be able to get back up."

The boys clamored down off the horse, ran to the springs and splashed into the water. Justice watched Emilio Francisco throw a handful of water in Cunish's face. The boy laughed with delight, his voice a rough hoarse croak, but the pleasure on his face was unmis-

takable. Justice was watching them play in the water, saw Cunish's face change to blank shock. He turned, saw three men on horseback, guns drawn. One had a rifle on Billy Steel, and the other two had their weapons on him. They were riding bareback, and Justice recognized one of them, a man with a thick black moustache and a missing front tooth. They were the hands from Cristobal Del Torro's ranch.

“We came for the Gudalajara Rose.” The man nodded toward Billy Steel. “And we'll take your horse, too, my friend.”

Billy slid down to the ground, landed on his hands and knees. Didn't look to Justice like he could move much, but you never could tell with Billy Steel. The men whistled to the horse, the wild black stallion Billy had chased down and caught on the Colorado Plateau, and only half-tamed. They were a matched pair, both so wild and beautiful it gave people the urge to put chains on them, try to own them. The horse took a couple of smart prancing steps forward, his

silver bridle gleaming in the sun. The man with the moustache lowered his rifle, slid off his horse and reached out for the stallion.

The horse reared, his iron-shod hooves flashing in the air, and he came down with his weight on the man's chest. Billy Steel was up and moving, had the man's rifle out of his holster and trained on his head. No need. The horse had turned his chest into a bloody pulp, and the bright tang of copper filled the air. Justice swung around, his gun in his hand. One of the three men was riding away as fast as he could go, his horse's tail standing out stiff and straight from the spurs being applied to his tender belly. The third had his gun out and leveled. Justice circled until they were five feet from each other, guns rock steady in their hands. "You're not going to make it out of here alive. Your friend had the right idea."

The man spit into the dirt without moving his eyes from Justice. His face was streaked with soot, black hair tangled under a dirty black felt hat. "I don't want that horse. He's a monster. All I want is

the Guadalajara Rose.”

Billy Steel shook his head, the rifle up and leveled on the man’s chest. “No you don’t, friend. That gun is sorrow. Don’t you know about the curse?”

“It’s bullshit, smoke and dust. I don’t believe in curses. That’s for fools like you who chase after pretty silver toys. I’m going to sell it for enough to feed my family. That’s all. It’s just a gun.”

“Turn around now, go back home or your sons are going to grow up without a father. The curse is real. I know it. The gun only kills the people you love. You want to take the chance? You know I’m speaking the truth about the Guadalajara Rose.”

The man reached up, scratched his forehead under the dirty brim of his hat, his fingernails rimmed in grime. He looked from the rifle in Billy Steel’s hand to the pistol in Justice’s, sighed and nodded. “Yeah, o...”

The shot came from behind Justice, plugged the man in the

middle of his forehead. Justice wheeled around. Emilio Francisco had slipped out of the water, gotten a gun out of his horse's saddle-bag. "What did you do? Put that gun down." The boy's face fell, and he dropped his eyes.

Justice turned back to the bandito. A line of dark blood was trickling down from the hole in his forehead, slid down to the end of his nose. He leaned forward, fell off his horse as if in slow motion and lay crumpled and still on the ground.

Billy Steel had swung around, stared at the boy. "Boy, why did you do that? Didn't you see he was about to turn around and go?"

Emilio ignored him, turned to Justice. "His gun was pointed right at you. I thought he was going to kill you! I was trying to save you!" His voice was shading to hysteria. Justice climbed down off his horse, went to the boy.

"Settle down. I know you were just doing what you thought was right, Emilio Francisco." He took the gun. "Let's put this back in

the saddlebag, and why don't we leave it there. The three of us will do any gun fighting that needs to be done."

Emilio looked up at Justice, his eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry. I thought I was saving you."

Justice ran his hand over the boy's hair. "Settle down, now. Climb back up on that horse, let's get gone."

Long Rifle was at the far edge of the spring, and he had Cunish in his arms, the boy's head pressed tightly into his shoulder, legs wrapped around his waist. Long Rifle shook his head, his face dark and troubled.

They rode into Cunish's village at sunset. The villagers seemed desolate, as if sorrow was a leaden weight that kept their backs bent under burdens too great to name. They rode two abreast down the dusty main street, and Long Rifle kept the Henry out and propped on his thigh. Justice rode behind with the boys. Emilio looked around with eyes as dark and bright as a bird's, trying to take every-

thing in. Cunish had his eyes closed, his head leaning against Emilio's shoulder. He must have been taken from here, out herding sheep with his young sister, the two of them snatched up by slavers riding in like death on horseback. Had the girl fought, bit someone, kicked a shin? Maybe that's why they dragged the boy behind one of the horses with a rope around his neck. You could control children by hurting someone they loved.

Justice pulled up, touched the boy on the shoulder. "We need to know where to go."

Emilio spoke to Cunish, and the Navajo boy turned his face away, tears streaking the dust on his face to mud.

"What is it, boy? What's wrong?"

Billy Steel had turned his horse. "He doesn't want to have to tell his grandfather his sister is dead. That he failed to protect her, to keep her from being taken, to keep her alive. He's ashamed of the ghost sickness, because...because he loves his sister, and he's

afraid to lose this last link to her. He doesn't want to lose her again."

The horses rode down into a narrow arroyo outside of town, red sandstone layered with ivory gypsum higher than their heads, and they came out on the other end into a small green valley. There must be a natural spring here. The hogan was made out of logs, eight sides, with an earthen roof of vermillion clay. The old man was out in the pen with the sheep, feeding the lambs by hand. He looked up, then stood and came to the fence.

Billy said something in Navajo to the boy, and Cunish raised both fists to his eyes, wiped hard down over his cheeks, then nodded.

"What did you say, Billy?"

"I asked him if he would choose good over evil, if he had the choice. He'll do the right thing, Justice. The boy is strong."

The Hand Trembler was ancient, his frame tall and lanky, long, steel gray hair tied up in a bun under a silver felt Stetson. Justice

could see that his eyes were milky. Was he blind? He turned toward them as they rode up, but he might have been listening to the sounds of the horses.

Billy Steel spoke to him. “We brought your grandson Cunish back from Mexico. He’s been sick, old man. With Ghost Sickness.”

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