

*The
Curse
of
Guadalajara
Rose*©

part 5 of 5

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Part Five- The Fourth Horseman

The old man staggered back a bit, then he came out the fence, walked toward them with his hand out in front of him and a stick touching the dirt he used to feel his way. Justice felt his stomach drop. The Hand Trembler was blind. How could he study the fire, the coals of the juniper and cottonwood root, and see what he needed to see? Could they find another healer for the boy?

Cunish slid down off his horse, ran to the old man, hugged him around the waist, his arms desperate and a choked, high pitched whistle coming out of his throat. When he tried to speak the old man bent down to hear him more clearly, then he lifted his hand, stroked the skin of the boy's throat. His hand stopped, and he pressed the boy's head into his belly, held him tightly against him.

The boy's grandmother had a pot of mutton stew on the stove, and she dished up bowls and passed them out without once taking her eyes off the boy. Billy Steel ate his stew, then shoved the empty bowl away from him. "Justice, I may need to go. Now we have the boy settled..."

Long Rifle put a hand on his shoulder. "No."

"No? Brother, I can't..."

"Billy Steel, you need to stay with us. Trouble is tracking us like the wind." He looked at Justice, kept his hand planted on Billy Steel's shoulder. "I know this to be

true. I can feel evil drawing closer. We need to stay together.”

Emilio was studying their faces with his bright eyes. He looked at Billy Steel. “Do you have to go back to Nogales to take care of the woman? Who’s going to make sure she gets buried?”

Billy Steel studied his face for a moment. “I don’t know.”

The Hand Trembler sat down with them, folded his gnarled hands together on top of the table. “I need to know what happened. Who can tell me what befell this boy? How did he get infected with the chindi?”

Emilio sat up. “I can tell you, Grandfather. I lived there, in the *Patron’s* house. I saw what happened when the new slaves were brought.”

The old man turned his milky eyes toward the boy.

“Hand Trembler,” Justice said, “can you see into the fire? If you want us to, we can fetch another healer to help the boy.”

The old man shook his head. “When I began to lose my eyes, I learned another way. Now I listen to the Wind People, listen to the spit and fury when the chindi spin themselves into dust devils, screaming for revenge. They are telling me evil has come into this place. Maybe the boy has the Ghost Sickness, and maybe the evil has come with someone else. When I hear what the Wind People have to tell me, I will call the medicine man to do the ceremony. Now tell me what happened in Mexico.”

“The *Patron*, he always wanted young Navajo because they were the best silver-

smiths. When the slaves came he made sure the doctor took care of Cunish, took care of his throat. And he was hurt, his foot was broken and he had cactus spines in his legs that were infected. When the doctor said he was well, he went into the hut with the other silversmiths. The girl, his sister, she was sent to the house, but she missed him, and she was always sneaking out to where he was working. One night she snuck out of the house and slept with him in his bed, and one of the women found her and told the Patron. He had her whipped. The Patron, he was always whipping for punishment, but she was too little, I guess. She was five, wasn't she? Or maybe he made her hang there too long. He stripped her, whipped her back and legs, made her hang there. And when they took her down she was dead.

“The Patron made Cunish watch. When they took the body down, he broke free of the men who were holding him, rushed to her, tried to pick her up. That must be when the chindi infected him. He was crazy after that, the Ghost Sickness made him scream, speak to people who weren't there. He would tear at his throat, tear at his eyes, until they had to tie him up so he wouldn't hurt himself. He would attack any men who came near him, try to claw at their throats. And then after another year had passed, he started to get better, so they untied him and let him go back to work. He was always the most talented silversmith. No one could make what he could make. He was the only smith who was allowed to work gold. *The Patron, he...*”

The Hand Trembler held up a hand. “That's enough.”

Justice spoke. “The boy was making objects that held terrible curses. His pain into the silver. We have one of them with us, a gun called The Guadalajara Rose.”

“Let me see the gun.”

Justice went outside, pulled the gun out of the saddlebag, kept the shirt wrapped around it. Back inside the hogan, he put it in the middle of the table. The old man reached for it.

“Be careful,” Billy Steel said.

The Hand Trembler lifted his head toward Billy’s voice, then he unwrapped the gun, let the Guadalajara Rose tumble out of the cloth and hit the wooden table. His fingers touched it gently, traced the silver design, traced the golden roses falling in the tumbled hair. Cunish stared at it blankly, as if he’d never seen it before. Billy Steel’s face was as pale as buttermilk. The old man jerked his hand away as if the silver was hot to the touch. “Put it somewhere safe until the medicine man comes.”

Justice picked up the gun, stuck it down into his pocket.

“I need Cunish,” he said, his big old hand resting on his grandson’s face. “And I need you.” He pointed across the table to Billy Steel.

Billy Steel stood up. “Old man, you can use me. You can use me to save the boy. You know the ceremony I mean?”

The Hand Trembler flinched, pushed the words away with his hand. “No. We won’t do that. We won’t need to do that.”

“Just listen to me. I’m telling you to do it if the Enemyway fails. I’ll give my life spirit to heal the boy, if that’s what it takes. Justice, tell him he can take me. We need to make sure the boy is healed. I need you to understand how important this is.”

Justice stood up, his hands on his hips. “Well, I don’t think I can go along with you on this, Billy. You had a job already, before you went down to Nogales, got mixed up in this mess. That job still needs doing.”

The old man came next to him, laid his hand on Billy Steel’s face. “I can feel your goodness. The Enemyway, it’s for healing. So you can walk in beauty again. This isn’t a blood sacrifice, to redeem your soul. You’ll have to look somewhere else, if you’re looking for punishment.”

The Enemyway ceremony was in its third day, and Justice thought it might be winding down. The women had stopped cooking, were sitting under the saguaro and fanning themselves in the cool evening light.

They hadn’t seen Billy Steel since The Hand Trembler had pulled him into the sweatlodge. When the old man came out at the end of the second day, he had sat down with Justice and Long Rifle.

“Your brother, he suffers too much for the sins of others.”

Justice nodded. “That he does.”

“His is not the Ghost Sickness. But he suffers still, contamination from the evil

around him. The medicine man is doing the Enemyway for Cunish and your brother. The Enemyway will cleanse him of this poison, set him on the road to hozho. But he must walk down that road on his own feet.” He stood up. “It’s strange, this poison he suffers. He believes he killed his mother and in his heart he waits to be punished. But his mother died many years ago. He knows this. Whatever happened between them, he carries those wounds, that guilt, and they have reared up like a serpent to strike him. The guilt came alive when he wanted the Guadalajara Rose, when he allowed the desire for it, the lust to enter his heart. Guilt, these strange desires, are these the poisons of the white men?”

Justice and Long Rifle stared after him for a long time after he left, not speaking. Then Long Rifle said what they were both thinking. “Billy Steel didn’t kill his mother in Nogales? Did he kill anyone? I wonder if he knows. Justice, he must be here, the fourth Horseman. He must be the one to have planted this idea into Billy’s mind, this desire for the gun.”

“For what possible reason, Long Rifle? Nothing makes any sense.”

“If the story had played out in Nogales, and the curse of the Guadalajara Rose had lead to Billy Steel being beaten to death, or hanged, what would that mean? It would mean we would be down to two.”

Emilio wandered up to them, eating a tortilla grilled over a campfire by one of the women. He squatted down in the dust next to Justice’s foot.

“Boy, are you about ready to head home? We can take you if you want. Your mother must be wondering where you are.”

The boy shook his head. “I told her I was taking Cunish home, so she won’t expect me for a long time. I could ride with you for a few weeks. I’m a good worker, you’ll see, I can take care of the horses and gather plenty of wood for fires and...”

Justice shook his head. “The three of us have some work we need to do. It’s not work for a boy.”

“The three of you? Billy Steel isn’t going to be punished at all for the woman he shot?”

Justice studied his face. “He was whipped near to death, Emilio Francisco. What kind of punishment do you think he deserves?”

“He took a life. He should hang, Justice. That’s the right thing, a life for a life. That’s justice. And he knows it, too. I saw the woman he killed. You and Long Rifle, you are both good. I can see the goodness in you. Billy Steel, he’s corrupt. His heart is corrupt. He shouldn’t be with you.”

Long Rifle stood up. “And you propose to take his place?”

Emilio’s eyes got big, and he took a deep breath and stood tall. “I will live up to what I was born to be. I’ll not let you down, I promise, not through greed or lust or...”

His eyes were black, the light in them spinning like stars in a vortex, and Long Rifle grabbed him by the hair, jerked his head back. “You saw the woman he killed? He

killed no one. Justice, do it.”

And Justice had the gun in his hand, the silver grips heavy and cold against his palm. “I see you, my old friend, my brother. I should have recognized your eyes. The curse on the Guadalajara Rose, that was you? What have you been doing in Nogales? Did you watch, when Cristobal Del Torro whipped that child to death?” Justice could feel the burn, a slug from this gun tearing into his belly. He pressed it over the boy’s thin chest, right over his heart.

Emilio Francisco was laughing now, his eyes full of love. He was so beautiful that Justice felt an ache in his throat, an ache for all the possibility lost, all the good turned to evil, the love turned to hate. “Justice, we could ride, brother, the three of us, just like before, roam these lands, end the bloodshed, end the hatred... I’m just a child. You could teach me, I know you could teach me to be good and strong, like you. That’s what you want, more than anything. I know it. It’s what I want, too.”

And Justice felt desire enter his heart, the desire to have this brother back with them, the four of them together, like they had been before they had been given the choice, and this one turned to evil. He closed his eyes, pulled the trigger, felt the Guadalajara Rose blow a hole through the boy’s chest. The small body fell into the dust. A pale horse leapt out of the blood, and Death was riding upon it.

The hooves struck sparks on the rocks, and the horse shook bloody froth from his nose, his mouth. Death looked at them, raised an arm hung with rotting flesh to his

mouth, blew a kiss. Then the horse wheeled, his mane and tail on fire, and flew into the light.

Justice turned to Long Rifle, sorrow in his heart like a sliver of green wood under a fingernail. Would he never learn to accept, and let it go? Or was this gun's curse, acting on him, on his most quiet desire? "Long Rifle, have you ever felt desire?"

"Many times. I feel a desire for coffee right now. I don't know what these women are boiling up, but it isn't coffee." He reached down for the boy's body, tossed it into the cactus. There were plenty of scavengers in the desert.

"Desire that's dangerous. The kind that corrupts you."

Long Rifle stared down into the dirt, drew the shape of a woman's waist and hip in the sand with the stick he was holding. "Yes." He studied Justice through narrowed eyes. "Maybe you need to come with me up to Blackfoot country, do a sweat. I was thinking about taking some bison up to the reservation when we're done here."

"That's a good idea. Maybe these first years on the reservation won't be so bad if the Blackfoot have some bison."

Long Rifle shook his head. "Nothing is going to make it easier, Justice. Billy Steel needs some time up in the Rockies. So do I. So do you. Mountains should have good deep snow by now. The cold, it's good for problems with desire."

Justice looked over at the sweat. Billy Steel was crawling out of the small entrance hole, and he stood up, wincing when his back stretched. The shirt had dried

bloody, stuck to the wounds on his back. It would have to be cut off.

Justice stood up. “He looks better. I’ll let you tell him about the bison.”

Billy Steel wandered over to them. He was exhausted, his eyes hollow and his face drawn, but he looked better than he had since they saw him in Tombstone, before he went down to Nogales after the gun. He looked down at the splatter of blood in the sand, and the hoof prints leading away from it. “What did I miss?”

Justice shrugged. He was feeling a touch of exhaustion himself, actually. Maybe a trip into the Northern Rockies just as winter was coming on would do him good. “The usual.”

Billy Steel nodded. “Okay. I need the gun. Do you have it, Justice?”

Justice looked at him for a moment, but he only saw Billy in the wild blue eyes. “Yes, I do.” He lifted it out of his pocket, put it in Billy Steel’s hand.

His thumb stroked the grips, slid down over the lines of the woman’s body. He touched the small gold roses falling from her hair. “This reminded me of my mother when I saw it. I’m not sure why. I think once, when I was young, she wore roses in her hair like these. I can’t remember... It was the strangest thing, Justice. I held the gun, stroked it just like this, and I saw her right in front of me. She looked so happy, but she didn’t see me, didn’t turn her face my way. She was dancing, spinning in the street with her arms up, like I remember her doing when I was a boy. I recollected what it had felt like right after she died. How alone I had been. How she’d left me alone, and here she

was, looking so happy, not even glancing my way, like I didn't exist. Like I didn't matter at all. I just wanted her to look at me. And I lifted the gun and shot her. I knew it wasn't real, but it felt real when I did it, and it was my hand that raised the gun and pulled the trigger." He touched the gun again, his fingers tracing the heavy silver, the gold roses. "We need to leave this here. The Hand Trembler, he says it should stay with the boy." He shook his head. "This sure is a pretty thing."

-The end

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