

Bearded

by Raian

Follows “Unbelievable”

beard : boldly confront or challenge

When a resolute young fellow steps up to the great bully, the world, and takes him boldly by the beard, he is often surprised to find it comes off in his hand, and that it was only tied on to scare away the timid adventurers.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Prologue

I'm Scott Lancer.

More relentless than any Williams gun, the Gatling spewed death. If he could swallow – if he could breathe – he'd choke on dust thrown by impacting bullets.

Arms stiffened across his chest. Shot's echoes punched his gut. He clamped mouth shut, keeping in screams from past battlefields.

Silence.

Scott sagged against the wall. He managed to say something to Drago. Drago's leering, mocking look had vanished to be replaced by... regret? Sympathy?

Stop doing this. You've made your point and so have I.

Drago – and Chapel – had other things in mind.



As killing shots went, it was one for the books.

Johnny caught the man dressed in black somewhere vital. The shot pulled the rug out from under him better than a sideshow artist with hands on a slick sheet under dishes. The return shots missed, stopped by Great Room wall and ceiling – more bullets to add to the collection put there since he and Scott got home.

He brought the tax money to Lancer thinking he'd have to shoot Drago but that hadn't happened. Johnny ran eyes over his brother crouched on the other side of the dead man. "Who was he?"

"Chapel."

Johnny ran a hand over his mouth. He owed Drago. The man slumped on the floor could have shot him in the back. There had been plenty of time for him to pull the trigger before Drago shouted.

Scott had a strange look on his face. Johnny couldn't tell from it what Scott thought of the dead man. No point asking questions. Scott would tell him what happened later... or, based on that look, maybe never. "He could've shot before I turned."

“He wasn't used to retaliation.”

That explained Scott's bruises. He wasn't one to take things lying down.

A man in black. Johnny picked up Chapel's gun and checked the rounds. “What I thought. He shot twice after I shot him.” He pushed the gun into Chapel's holster.

“They must have come close.”

Johnny buzzed like a bullet and swept fingers past his head. “Close only counts in horseshoes.”

They put Chapel in an empty wagon by the barn and covered him with canvas. One less gunman – a fate Johnny had avoided for himself by coming to Lancer. Chapel lay there in the morning sun, dead in a stranger's yard while his former buddies rode away, leaving no one to care who he'd been. “I need coffee.”

The Lancer way said go back to work. They had a ranch to run. They had womenfolk coming home who'd swoon if they saw the wreck in the hacienda.

Despite being dragged through a wringer and still not quite himself, Scott lent a hand. Murdoch let him, settling for Scott's *I'm fine*. Johnny watched his brother: the burn mark on Scott's hand couldn't be overlooked; his bruises couldn't be missed.

There's a mighty big ranch around here we gotta take care of. Johnny shook his head as he tipped another load of broken glass into the trash wagon. Scott wouldn't let himself be taken care of this time. Wouldn't sit still long enough for Johnny to find out what happened besides those hints dropped while they arm wrestled.

Guess he shouldn't worry about Scott too much. He might be moving stiff but his arm sure hadn't suffered any.

Murdoch totted up losses. It could've been worse. The real marvel stood on the side table: Murdoch's toy boat, tilted on its side but otherwise OK.

They sure made a poor kind of outlaw these days.

Johnny watched Scott and wondered.

Why did Scott want to arm wrestle?

Chapel had him dead to rights after the hand-over of the tax money. Why had Drago warned him?

If this was all about Madrid, why had Drago holstered his gun? Why hadn't he ordered his rifleman to shoot?

Johnny ran fingers over the butt of his gun. He couldn't imagine what Scott had done to earn Drago's

respect. It must have been something to see because Scott looked worn down to the size of a pinto bean.

Murdoch told Scott to take the trash wagon to the south sinkhole. Shoveling trash into the earth was a chore nobody liked but it was a good way to burn away the trials of a day.

By the way Scott had smiled at Drago, Johnny had thought Drago was a friendly who'd tried to help Scott. Johnny had done the same for people on jobs in the past when he could save someone without the rest of the gang finding out. That's why he'd turned when Drago shouted a warning.

There's somebody behind you: it was the oldest trick in the book. He'd been sure no one saw him when he snuck in through the back after seeing a bunch of toughs in front of the hacienda loading a wagon and saddling horses. When he'd spun around and seen the gun pointed at him, he was sure the man in black was Drago. Except he wasn't.

Maria found what they'd missed when she got home late that night, including that somebody had run paws through Teresa's things. Maria kept him and Murdoch tagging along 'til small hours as she pointed out her discoveries. Murdoch added more to his sums of damages.

Scott had gone to bed before Maria arrived. If she'd seen Scott, she'd have known it had been worse than Murdoch made it out to be. As it was, she had trouble keeping her voice down when they found the broken window in Johnny's room. Nothing missing in the room far as he could see. Murdoch said the window must have been broken by a chunk of rock tossed up when the dynamite exploded.

Next morning, Johnny peeked in Scott's room but Scott had already gotten up and gone. Johnny pulled on clothes and went downstairs. As he reached the kitchen, Maria's voice came from the pantry. Her swearing brought a smile. She switched words to be more polite but the meaning came through clear. Those outlaws' ears must be burning.

The kitchen smelled like varnish. Somebody had finished sanding burn marks from the table and it looked like new. Johnny downed a cup of lukewarm coffee from the almost-empty coffee pot on the sideboard and with a handful of biscuits went looking for Murdoch.

Murdoch stood with hands on hips, glowering at the hole blown in the outer wall near the front door.

Johnny shoved a bite of biscuit to the side of his mouth. "Mornin'"

"Good morning, Johnny. Did you sleep well?"

Johnny smirked and took another bite. "I always sleep well."

"You can sleep in a guest room 'til your window's fixed, you know."

"It's OK, Murdoch. I leave it open at night for the breeze."

"I suppose we should be happy the damage wasn't worse." Murdoch pointed toward the Great Room. "It looks like they sprayed the side of the hacienda with that infernal gun of theirs." His mouth creased. "Wanton destruction. I can't understand what brings a man to it."

"Money." Best not to say the dynamite had been Murdoch's idea. "Where's Scott?"

"Gone to check on cattle and grass as he was supposed to do before the outlaws came."

"Yeah." Johnny swallowed the last of his biscuits. "Too bad he got himself beat up instead."

Murdoch grabbed Johnny's shoulder. "That's not what I meant, son. I'm sorry." A squeeze and the big hand dropped to Murdoch's side. "I can tell you it threw me for a loop when Scott said he was you. I'm still not sure what went on here or what your brother went through."

"That makes two of us." Sometimes it took more than questions to pry things from that stubborn Yankee's head.

"Well... Scott isn't one to share unless he wants to." Murdoch pulled his hat down tight and hoofed it toward the barn, leaving Johnny trotting to keep up.

"Where you going?"

"Taking that body to the sheriff. I want to hear what the posse found."

"Want me to come?"

"No, you stay. I also have to buy everything on Maria's list, put in an order to replenish the losses to wine cellar and pantry, and schedule the glazier to fix your window before picking up Teresa tomorrow morning." Murdoch pulled himself onto the wagon and picked up the reins. "I'll be gone overnight and you're needed here. Jelly and de Vega will help you fix the walls."

Right on cue, Jelly came 'round the side of the barn pushing a wheelbarrow with shovel and rake in it. "Well, don't just stand there, boy. You heard yer pa. Let's go."

Johnny left Murdoch to his errands. He couldn't buy back Scott's good humor or fix his bruises as easy as replacing a few panes of glass. "The old man's sure worried about his walls and things."

"Ya didn't see his face when I told him they'd taken Scott pris'ner." Jelly parked the wheelbarrow, changed his mind and moved it two feet to the left. "They thought Scott was you, ya know. He surely paid for that mistake."

"I know, Jelly." Murdoch's broad back headed down the road atop the wagon. Stiff-backed: something Murdoch shared with Scott. "Is this all that's busted out here?"

"Seems to be. This and those holes in the side wall. De Vega'll mend those while we pick up this. Blame outlaws forgot 'bout lootin' 'n' shootin' once they found Scott and the booze."

Johnny swept fingers through his hair as Jelly rattled on about the damage to the hacienda. From the size of holes in the side wall, they had to have been made by the Gatling gun. Johnny grimaced,

imagining that much firepower in hand. From what he could see, every single pot still hung where they'd always been. He put a hand on hip and pointed. "I'd have taken potshots at those."

Jelly stopped mid-sentence. "Ha ha. Aren't you a card. You'd make a dead man whistle in his grave."

"You would've said it first if you'd thought of it first."

"Harrumph. You oughta be glad they missed those pots. Woulda been one more thing fer yer pa ta have ta buy. 'Sides, it takes more'n a handful a bullets to knock down a Lancer wall." Jelly puffed up like a banty rooster. "My dynamite scared 'em away from doing worse."

"More like they were busy filling their bellies with Lancer food and wine." And bullying Scott.

Jelly pushed a shovel against Johnny's chest. "Here. Hold this steady while I fill 'er."

Jelly droned on about something. Johnny let the voice get lost in the clang of rocks on metal as Jelly raked pieces onto the shovel and Johnny dropped loads into the wheelbarrow. Nobody could know-it-all like Jelly.

De Vega walked by. One thing about adobe: it fixed easy and de Vega had the job down pat. One arm cradled a flat board holding mud mortar and the other worked a flat triangle piece of metal to scoop and push mud into holes. By the time Jelly decided rakeable pieces of exploded wall were all in the wheelbarrow, de Vega had finished.

Johnny put hands in the small of his back and twisted side to side 'til his spine quit cracking. "That wall looks good as new."

"Oh, sure it does. This one'll soon be fit as a fiddle too. When Teresa 'n' Maria" – Jelly used thumbs to pull suspenders outward and raised his chest to fill the space – "'n' I'm 'round, you can be dern sure a mess won't last."

Making a sweep of high pastures took more than a day and Johnny wished he'd woken up in time to go along with Scott. The more Johnny thought about what happened after he'd handed over the tax money, the more he realized he had no clue about what had gone on between Scott and the outlaws.

Jelly wasn't a help. He told and retold the story of being carried to town in the Gatling gun wagon, adding to it 'til it was him and the dynamite that had driven Drago away and saved Scott. The lies that built a gunman's reputation had nothing on Jelly.

In bed that night, Johnny couldn't drive arm wrestling with Scott from mind. *Seems to me she mentioned something about Johnny Madrid.*

Shadows haunted his dreams.

After breakfast the next morning, Johnny helped fix the gap in the wall.

Cipriano and a dozen ranch hands rode in after noon, home from the big drive up north. Johnny listened

to Cip's report and made notes – the cattle delivery went off without problems. Tongue tip clamped in the side of his mouth, Johnny printed neat so Murdoch or Scott could put ledgers up to date without complaints about handwriting.

Scott had stood in for Madrid – the thought made Johnny's fingers itch. Scott's *I'm fine* and *It's hard to figure Drago* rankled. What was the real story?

Johnny saddled Barranca and rode to catch his brother on the trail. Away from the hacienda and the others, Scott might tell him what had happened and how anybody could be so stupid as to mistake Scott for Madrid.

He'd tried to make a quick end to the arm wrestling by throwing hard shoves. Being fastest and first on the mark was the way to win in a head-to-head fight. The pushes rocked Scott sideways but Johnny couldn't keep up the effort. His brother was like one of those trees which bent and twisted no matter how strong the wind, returning to its original place unbroken, despite the dancing it had done.

Riding across Lancer calmed Johnny's soul. He'd bucked and kicked against authority all his life, but since he'd come home... he'd come to understand what it meant to have men he could look up to because of the stoutness of their hearts... not for heart's blackness.

Lancer ways made him feel good and strong. He didn't have to pretend he liked what he was doing. He didn't feel sick inside and he could sleep at night – most nights. These days, Johnny used the name Madrid when he had to lie to somebody. Madrid was nothing but a dead-end: a box canyon, a sheer cliff face.

Scott appeared in the distance, riding home alongside the big lake. Johnny halted Barranca and waited.

His brother looked less peaked but still had smudges under his eyes and he rode less upright than usual. The burn on his hand stayed hidden by a glove. Bruises on his face were all sorts of colors, much like those the gals wanted for their fancy silk dresses.

Scott greeted him with a smile. "If you're here to help check on pasture grass you're too late."

Scott shouldn't be happy. "Not here for that." Johnny dismounted and moved closer to the lake. "I want to know what's been going on here."

Scott shaded his eyes but still squinted as he scanned along the lakeshore. "Nothing's wrong from where I sit."

"You're wrong." That shadow from the past. *Just going to kill time, amongst other things*. He'd once tried to leave Lancer and being a gunfighter was all he had to return to. Scott brought him back. Now that shadow had almost killed his brother.

Scott raised reins up, looked toward home then dismounted and came to stand in front of him. "Well? What is it?"

Johnny shoved a hand against Scott's chest.

Scott wrapped an arm around himself. "What was that for?"

Johnny pushed him again. "I want to know what happened."

"What happened with what?"

"You know what." Johnny thrust with both hands and Scott staggered back.

"Stop it!" Scott's eyebrows dropped and his mouth thinned. "You're not making sense."

Johnny strode closer and poked Scott's shoulder. "That's what I'm saying. You should be mad at me for what happened."

"What? Wait." Scott held up a hand. Johnny reached around it to poke Scott's other shoulder. "I told you to stop it! What happened wasn't your fault."

"Oh, yeah?" Shove. "Then why were they calling you Madrid?"

"Mistaken identity. They knew they were wrong from the start."

"Murdoch said you called yourself Madrid."

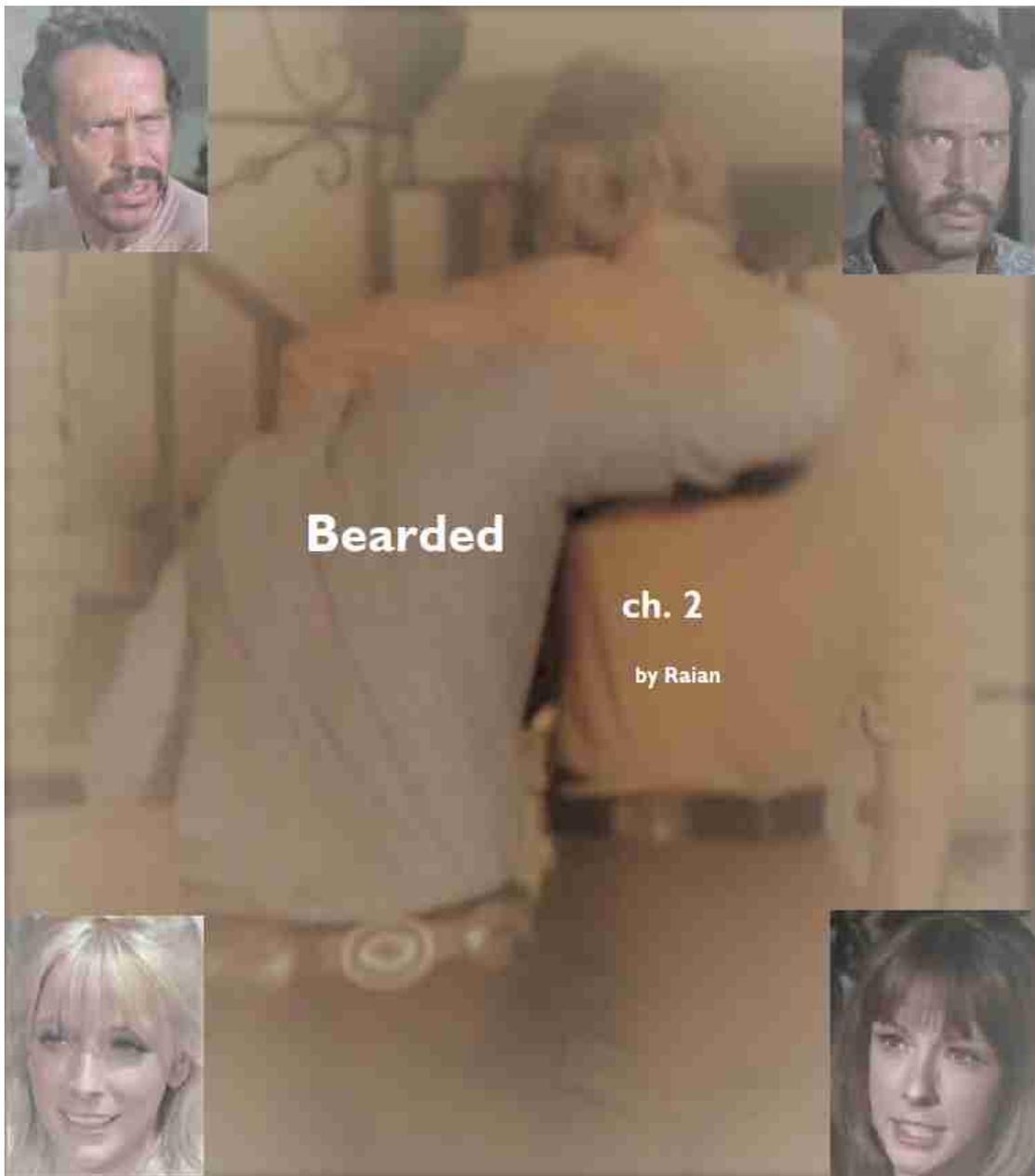
"Well..." Scott put one hand on hip and the other waved through the air. "Doesn't everyone think it would be wonderful to be a gunfighter?"

The smart ones did not. "Try again." He raised his arms toward Scott.

"You heard me, Johnny" Scott lifted a hand. "Stop it or I'll –"

He hated it when Scott shook a finger in his face. Johnny stepped past Scott's arm and stiffened fingers to deliver another jab.

He didn't see that right fist coming even though he'd expected Scott to bust – had thought he'd talk longer before striking back. Johnny rode the punch to the right but lost his balance. He rolled and his hat fell off, getting mashed under him as he spun past where the lakeshore went downhill. He put arms out to stop himself but hands felt nothing but air.



Splat!

Mud. Deep, sticky, sucking, stinking, dammit-all slop.

Johnny tried to push himself up but only sank deeper. He twisted and pulled his left arm free. The movement pushed his right side deeper into the muck. Trying to free his right arm sent feet farther under.

His brother appeared over the edge of the bank. "I didn't want to hit you, but —"

"Not now, Scott!" He held his free hand, dripping clods of mud, toward Scott. "Pull me out."

Scott blinked and swept eyes over the mud flats, pursing his lips.

“Scott!” Johnny waved his arm and turned his head to spit mud.

“I don't think so, brother. Not that way.” Scott turned and strode away, disappearing from view.

No. He couldn't leave. Johnny tipped head back to look over his shoulder. “Scott?” No answer. A few choice swear words for uncooperative older brothers followed another piece of mud out of his mouth. “Scott!” Scott wouldn't leave him here... would he? Sure, thoughts of pulling Scott into the mud had crossed his mind but... Johnny wiggled but he stayed stuck fast. Damn it and damn the drought.

“Scott!” His voice sounded desperate. He couldn't draw his gun and shoot to attract attention. Even if he could there were no guarantees anybody would be close enough to hear. By the time somebody came by, he might have sunk in over his head.

Hoofbeats sounded from above and behind. “Scott?”

A whir and a rope slapped down 'round him. On the bank stood a serious big brother mounted on Boots, ready to pull slack and take a dally. Johnny put head and free arm through the noose.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” Scott backed with care. The rope tightened slowly. Mud made nasty sounds as it let go its grip. Johnny wrinkled his nose at the smell of rot though it could be worse – they could've been across the lake where cattle came to drink.

The stuck arm popped free. “Stop!” Through the collar of his shirt, the rope cut into the side of his neck. “Gimme slack!” He loosened the loop and brought his right arm through it. “OK. Take it slow!” Bent knees straightened as his butt slid then lifted toward the bank. Feet moved – “Whoa!”

Slack plopped him into the slop. Scott's voice floated over the bank. “What's wrong?”

“My boots're comin' off.” To himself, he grumbled, “I'm not gonna lose these boots.” Louder, he directed, “More slack.” Johnny leaned forward, glopped hands into the mud and found the tops of his boots. He hooked fingers around the pulls. “OK! Let 'er buck!”

The rope slid him to shore. Fingers almost pulled loose but boots came along for the ride. He kept hold 'til both feet were well free even though the bent-over position made a wide rut through the mud. Scott kept backing and lifted him up the bank. Dirt pattered down as he scrambled for solid ground.

He made it over the edge of the drop-off and stayed flat on the grass.

At the other end of the rope, Scott halted Boots and undid the dally.

“Keep pulling!”

“But you're out.”

“Wipe this off.” Scott dragged him up and down the edge of the lake. Feeling like a fish on a line,

Johnny rolled to avoid rocks and let grass scrape away the largest chunks of lake bottom. "OK!" Pressure eased and he shrugged off the noose. It would leave marks.

Scott coiled his rope and tied it to the saddle before dismounting. He ran reins through gloved fingers. "Look, Johnny, I'm sorry. I – "

"Forget it. I asked for it." He wiped palms on the grass, stood up and found his hat, bending down to pick it up.

"Hands up."

Johnny turned fast and slipped, toppling onto his butt. "Damn it, Scott! Don't sneak up on me and say that."

Scott held canteens. "I'll pour." He dribbled water 'til Johnny rubbed hands clean, then handed over a shirt.

Johnny dried his hands and used the shirt to wipe mud from spurs and boots. A towel dropped next to his leg. "What's that for?"

"Your gun."

His holster had sunk deep under his thigh. "I can't clean it with that."

Scott waved toward the towel. "Wipe off the worst of it."

Johnny swiped mud from the buckle and took off his rig before drawing the gun.

Scott lifted the rig and sat near him, sniffed the air and moved farther away. Using pieces of reed, he scraped mud off the gunbelt and from between and in bullet loops. He wrinkled his nose. "*Wildflowers in Spring for the Complete Gentleman.*"

"Yeah." Johnny flapped the front of his shirt and had to turn his face away from the rank wet smell. "I could make a skunk sit down and cry." Johnny scrubbed his gun and wiped it dry. Wasn't the first time things had been dunked or mudded. This time, though, he understood what stuck steers went through. He threw his head back and bawled, making Scott jump. Steers across the lake echoed the call.

Scott raised eyebrows and smiled. "You speak steer quite well."

Johnny grinned. When steers answered, you knew you had it right. In the past, he won beer money betting he could do it during long, boring days guarding other people's ranch hands and cattle. He inspected his gun. It needed a proper cleaning. He swiped the towel over mud-streaked pants. "You going to tell me what happened?"

"The men have things well in hand up there. Grass looks good and – " Johnny flicked Scott's arm with the towel. "Ouch!"

"That's not what I meant." Scott stayed silent. "Jelly said Murdoch looked gutshot when he heard you were a hostage."

Scott raised an eyebrow.

“Don't say that. Sometimes Jelly tells the truth.”

“Forget it, Johnny. We have people depending on us. We need to get back to normal quick as we can.”
Scott bent over the gunbelt.

“I still want to know what happened with Drago.”

“There's nothing to tell.”

“You could've been killed because of me.”

Scott stopped scraping and stared at him. “No. Not because of you.”

“Why'd you call yourself Madrid?”

“To make Murdoch leave – he was outnumbered. To keep them focused on me.”

Johnny dipped his head. “How do you figure a man like that Drago character?” He held the towel ready to snap if Scott replied with the same *It's hard to figure him* as before.

The reed in Scott's hand broke. He threw it toward the lake and picked up another one. “He wanted to be good enough for Violet. He listened to lies built on lies and she raised the bar 'til there was no chance for any man to reach it.”

That shadow Scott had mentioned. “Why'd he keep trying?”

“Love.” Johnny peeked at Scott who looked dead serious. “He thought he had to, to keep her. She thought she had to make him jealous to keep him. In reality, Violet didn't care... she loved him for himself but once they got started they got trapped in lies.”

Drago had found the wrong man to pick on. Scott was stubborn. Even if Drago had taken Scott apart hair by hair and bone by bone, Scott would have found a way to outlast him to the end. That scene in the Great Room proved it – Scott shaking Drago's hand and Drago saying *You done yourself real proud*.

A stone wall with Lancer written all over it – just like Murdoch. One Johnny could lean on. He ground his jaw. If Drago had taken Scott away from them... tapping fingers released the anger.

Air rushed from his chest. Hate and the burning need to be better than the rest were all too familiar. Hate and anger had fed him through long years of trying to prove himself to... to who? To others who fired themselves up with the same emotions. Fighting, killing and doing whatever it took to stand out, stake out and defend their own spot on a pile which turned out to be made of shit.

Nothing felt as good as letting all that go.

Scott prodded a reed through a bullet loop. The reed snapped and he selected another piece from the

pile beside him. "I've been thinking about Violet. She claimed to know you but I don't think she did. She must have listened to stories and made up new ones. She needed fantasies to escape her own life and then used them to taunt Drago, pushing him to compete with a man who didn't exist except in her imagination."

That's how it went. There were always stories. If you killed a man where folks could see, soon that one became three, then ten. No one stopped to ask how that many could get shot when there had been no time to reload.

People sure loved to fool themselves. The fatter the story, the more they liked it. Their lies were how reputations were built. "You hear lies often enough, you think they're truth."

"Indeed. Drago finally had enough and set out to destroy his make-believe rival."

"Could be a dime novel."

Scott snorted and his lips curved up. "Except this time it became real. He gathered a gang with promises of a share of tax money. They lost it all when Drago turned the job into a personal vendetta." Scott held the rig up and looked at it with a critical eye. He flipped the dirtied shirt around, found a clean spot and wiped down the rig and buckle. "No one's been irreparably harmed except Chapel, and he was a grade A candidate for the hangman."

"Where did Violet say she knew me from?"

"Where were you eight years ago?"

Johnny huffed and shook his head. "In Mexico someplace." He would've been what? Fourteen? He couldn't remember much from eight years back – not separate from years before or after. They blurred together like looking through a window hid by a curtain billowing red, filled with mind-numbing days of finding and trying to fit in with a gang – and the harsh joy of learning to use a gun.

"Violet said she met Johnny Madrid back then."

"Don't think so." There had been no reason to pay close attention to girls who drifted in and out, let alone ones he passed on the street. They weren't trying to shoot him, usually. Why they wanted that kind of life with the kind of people who flocked to gangs he'd never understand. Those gals burned out and were used up quick, ending up in the gutter.

Besides, back then he'd been Juan, same as however many thousands of other boys in Mexico. He hadn't used the name Madrid – and then Johnny Madrid – 'til years later.

Scott looked for remaining pieces of mud on the gunbelt. "She couldn't have recognized you from eight years ago." His face cleared like it did when he solved a math problem. "If she saw you at all, it must have been no more than a glimpse when you were an adult. However she described the way you looked to Drago, it wasn't accurate."

Johnny studied hands resting on muddy pants legs. He'd been upset when Cassidy came to Lancer... *Madrid* had come close to bringing ruin to Lancer and the threat of the same to many lives in the area. "I should've been here."

Scott half-closed his eyes. “You and Murdoch tried to help.”

Johnny chuffed. “Didn't look like you needed help, there at the end.” That was his brother: unarmed but still dangerous.

“You arrived in time to stop a shootout between Drago and Chapel.”

Outlaws turning on each other – nothing new there. “Chapel wanted to take over the gang?”

“Possibly.” The dark look on Scott's face put a chill down Johnny's spine. “He wanted to kill Violet at least.”

Shooting and killing – the first things a gunman thought of to fix his problems. “She can't have loved Drago.”

“She did. Truly. And he loved her.”

Didn't that beat all. Johnny flicked mud from his calzoneras and clenched a fist, thinking of the way Violet looked at Drago before they left the Great Room. “I know why she looked familiar to me.”

Scott's hands on the gunbelt stopped moving.

Johnny bit back a smile. He could shoot Scott's conclusions all to hell by lying, but told the truth. “Glory. She was Glory but with dark hair.”

Scott's smile bared his teeth. “That's what I thought when I first saw her – Glory with a new con, come back to Lancer.” He buckled the rig and handed it over. Johnny holstered the gun. “Not to mention Drago as Val's twin.”

Johnny barked out a laugh. “He did look like Val.” He'd give a year's wages to see the look on Val's face if he ever had a clear view of Drago. “You liked Drago?”

“We reached an understanding.”

“Not with Chapel?”

Scott lost his smile. “Had you seen him before?”

Johnny pursed lips and shook his head. “Nope. Did he say he was a gunfighter?”

“He liked to play with knives.”

Johnny's heart skipped a beat. No, it couldn't be. Could it? “Tri-D.”

“Who?” Scott blinked. “Oh. The knifeman you mentioned the night I met Val.”

“Yeah. Maybe Chapel was him.”

Scott ran fingers over the left pocket of his shirt. "You think so?"

Johnny shrugged. "I'd never seen Drago or Chapel. Or heard their names. I never met Tri-D but heard lots of stories. They got bigger through the years."

Scott smiled. "What about The Man in Black?"

"Seen at least four of 'em, not counting Chapel. There has to be more than four using or been given that name for all the stories floating around." Scott's grin grew and became a chuckle. "Well, there's one fewer Men in Black now. Anyway, you know what they say."

"What do they say?"

"Don't bring a knife to a gunfight."

Scott laughed. The sound pulled Johnny's mouth wide. Scott kept laughing. He tipped over backwards with knees bent and wrapped arms 'round his chest. When he started making squeaky noises, Johnny couldn't help but join in.

Nothing better than a gut-stomping laugh to make you feel better.

Scott wiped his eyes and sat up to snort into a hanky. As Scott wound down, a wagon rattled toward them – Murdoch back from town with a heap of supplies in back and Teresa beside him on the wagon seat.

Murdoch looked at them with a crooked smile and halted the horses. "I'm glad to see my sons working hard."

Johnny almost said *Hi, Pa*.

Scott tucked his hanky in a pocket and grabbed the dirty shirt and towel. He climbed to his feet and held a hand down to Johnny.

Johnny gripped his brother's wrist, not wanting to touch that burn mark. Scott pulled him to his feet.

Scott tucked the shirt and towel under his bedroll. "Welcome home, Teresa."

"Thanks. I hear you had quite a time while I was gone."

Scott flashed a smile. "It's done with. What's the news from town, Murdoch?"

"They still haven't caught Drago and the girl. The wagon and Gatling gun were found abandoned along with the tax money. Some was missing but not enough for the sheriff to keep the posse going. Those two can't outrun the telegraph."

Murdoch hadn't spent time on the run. They could get away and might. From where Murdoch sat, he couldn't see Scott's little smirk. Looked like Scott had the same thought in mind and didn't care if they escaped.

Murdoch swung his head away from Scott. “What happened to you, Johnny?”

Johnny stopped himself from wiping a hand down his shirt. He shrugged. “Got muddy.”

“I can see that. How?”

Thinking of Scott laughing his guts out while flat on his back in the dirt made Johnny grin at his father. “Prodding a bull that got the better of me.”

Murdoch turned his attention to Scott who shared a smile with Teresa. “It appears you find it amusing to see your brother in such a state.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Scott swung onto Boots.

“I don't suppose either of you will tell me what really happened.”

“Nope.”

“No, sir.”

“Well, then.” Murdoch gathered up the reins. “Come on, boys. If we hurry we'll be in time for supper. Maria and Teresa are home and we'll eat well tonight.”

“Anything other than Jelly's *réchauffé* will be welcome.”

Johnny agreed with that, whatever the hell dish it was. He hung his rig on the saddle horn and climbed on Barranca, catching up to ride beside his brother. They followed Murdoch and Teresa toward the road leading to the Lancer arch.

Johnny looked sideways at Scott who looked back with a gleam in his eye and the same smile as when he'd asked to arm wrestle. Tightness melted away – his brother accepted him for who he'd been and for who he'd become.

Normal men didn't burn through life on a short fuse. At Lancer, he had a family and a future to look forward to. Someday, Scott might tell him all that went on with Drago but if not it didn't matter. Some of the past should stay in the past.

No part of his old shadows had better touch his family again. If Drago ever came back to Lancer, Johnny would tell him the truth.

I'm Johnny Lancer.

THE END Jan, April 2020