

The Lessons of the Gun

By

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The soft sound of cards being shuffled and the creak of leather and wood filled the Constantinople. It was almost enough to put Barnabas to sleep. He'd spent the last few weeks on the trail seeking new Acolytes, eating beans, and getting far too little sleep. All that effort and he had come up empty. There were no shortage of candidates, but they all wanted to learn the Way of the Gun for the wrong reasons. These days the path could bring power, money, and prestige. Things were different forty years ago when he had first been approached by Ranger Wise. You did it because it was the right thing to do. The Way brought order to the Wildlands in a fashion that followers of the Clockworker had never managed to.

He pulled the mug of tea closer to him and breathed deep. Steam and the dusky smell of brewed leaves, with an undertone of the dollop of whiskey Zeph added to his cup, sharpened his mind. He sipped and thought about what to do. His time on Earth was short. He had already outlived the score of years most Rangers served. In his time he'd trained fifteen men and three women in the Way. Mayhap it was time to hang up his guns.

His musings were interrupted by the purposeful clop of wooden heels coming up the steps to the bar's second floor. He knew the rhythm of that gate. It once seemed to beat in time with his heart. He turned in the rush bottom seat and saw Abby as she mounted the top step. She was every bit as beautiful when she was angry as she was when she was happy, perhaps more so. Age hadn't changed that, even though she must be nearly as old as he was.

He knew that the plain homespun dress she wore concealed many pockets in the pleats of its skirt. Under that would be a pair of trousers with even more. They held the tools of a healer's trade, as well as that of a tinker. She rattled as she walked and he knew that if he listened closely, he'd hear the movement of gears coming from her kid-gloved right hand.

She scanned the upper room with hardened brown eyes. When they alighted on Barnabas they narrowed. She closed the distance and stood over him. "You have work to do, Ranger."

"Good morning to you too, Sister." He sipped at the tea.

"Nearly good afternoon." She pointed out the bar's window. "Bobby Joe is in trouble."

Barnabas groaned under his breath. "I regret the day I ever took that boy on. What's he done now?" He had trained Bobby Joe Morales in the Way only after two years of begging. Finally, the old man relented after realizing that the boy might go on ahead and teach himself. That way lay certain death.

"There are bandits in town. I think he may be asking them to move on."

Barnabas stood. Law enforcement wasn't the responsibility of a Ranger, or his Acolyte. In a pinch they did have some of the powers possessed by the Marital Order but not all. Once the training was done a new Martial was created, provided they passed

the tests. That Martial was what passed for the Law in these distant settlements. Bobby Joe hadn't gotten that far and might not if what Abby said was true.

He moved to the bar's window and looked out to the dusty street below. What he saw made him swear under his breath. That fool kid was going to mess with the wrong people one day and get his head shot clean off. Today wouldn't be the day, not if he had anything to say about it. His fingers checked to ensure that all of the Elements were present.

The hardware was all old so he still carried percussion caps, loose powder, and lead balls. While he didn't hold with some of his brethren that the new cartridges and double action revolvers were sacrilege there was something to be said for the old ways. Loading the guns' cylinders was meditative and allowed him to recite the Prayer.

As he prayed, he moved towards the steps. "The Gun is my Protector, I shall not Fear." He drew one pistol with his right hand and moved the hammer to half cock. With his left hand he pulled the lever that ran the length of the pistol's barrel into the position that allowed him to load a cylinder. He slipped the already prepared cylinder from its harness near his left holster. Each of the cylinder's six tubes held powder, wadding, and a lead ball and was topped with grease to keep water out. The back end was tipped with six percussion caps.

He took the next step. "It makes the crooked path straight and levels the field." He slipped the prepared cylinder into the revolver's left side and snapped the loading lever

back into place. With practiced care he eased the hammer down over a loaded cylinder. Too much of a jolt and the gun would go off.

“It rights wrongs and commands respect. Yeah though I walk through the valley of darkness I will not quaver.” The right gun ready, he moved to the left. Hands and arms remembered movements repeated thousands of times. Mirrored movements insured that it too was loaded and ready.

“Its metal and its fire will save me. I shall not use The Gun to wrong others and will protect and avenge those wronged. Surely Justice and Respect will follow us so long as we keep to these. And may I dwell not as the cowards do. Amen.” By the time he stepped to the ground floor both guns were loaded and ready to be fired.

Weathered hands settled on the ivory butts of the two six shooters, and he moved through the bat wing doors. His broad brimmed hat, as much a part of his uniform as the rust colored serape, kept the sun out of his eyes. Down the windblown street he could see Bobby Joe step into the Circle as a gathering crowd looked on. He was actually going to call someone out.

A barely used double action hung heavy from the ginger haired lad’s belt. The new leather and shiny metal cartridge casings shone in the sun. His jaw was set with determination and Barnabas could see his lips moving even from here. He was old, but his eyesight was the envy of eagles.

Unfortunately, Bobby Joe turned out to be something of a zealot. There was a place for that, certainly. Zeal needed to be tempered with some good sense and there was a shortage of that in these parts. The zeal bore skill, without question. Bobby was fast, damn fast. His hands danced and his aim was true as any acolyte could ask for. His brain soaked up all the knowledge of the workings of the Gun and all of the traditions. There was talk that he would be going out further into the Wild next year. Most of that talk came from Bobby Jo.

Now the Wild had come to them in the form of the Cowboys and the Oklahombres. The two groups controlled most of the territory for a month's ride in any given direction. They were here for a parley, to see if combining their resources could expand their power base. A treaty between the two gangs would be bad news indeed and no one official would stop them. The Martials in these parts were every bit as corrupt as Bobby Joe believed. Despite the lavish rewards offered on the gang leaders, the officers had done and would do nothing about it.

As a Ranger it was Barnabas' job to travel abroad to find and train new recruits and feed the machine that the Martial Order had become. He was good at it. As a result, Barnabas felt no small amount of shame at the state of the Martials. All of that guilt needed to be left behind for now though. Arkansas Tom and John Ringo broke off from their groups and began the slow amble towards the Circle and that was Bobby Jo's death warrant. Either man by himself was enough, but the two together represented a challenge that only the most talented and experienced could face.

“Well, well, let’s see what we have here.” Ringo drawled. “Looks like this boy wants somethin’.” The tall man walked with crossed arms. His fingers weren’t far from a unique looking sawed off shotgun. The over/under barrel was something Barnabas had seen more than once, but he could make out a lever action and double trigger. The whole affair was held to the left side of his belt on a peg swivel that would allow it to be swung up quickly. A normal enough looking horse pistol hung from his right hip in a slanted quick draw rig. Either one could be out and blazing death in a heartbeat. The red sash of the Cowboys seemed to connect the two weapons across his narrow waist.

Arkansas Tom nodded, “Looks like.” His long dirty dishwater hair moved as a mass. Barnabas could see that his forty-five hogleg was in a swivel holster. The gun didn’t even need to come out to be used. Dirty trick. “You issuing a formal challenge boy? Or you just drawing water?” He jutted his chin towards the well behind Bobby Jo.

Bobby Joe stood his ground. “I hereby challenge the leaders of the Cowboys and the Oklahombres to a draw down. Losers goes to Boot Hill, winner gets control of the two gangs.” His voice was rock solid, though barely into its adult register.

Barnabas nodded. That would be the only way. That was if there were any chance in Hell of the leaders of the two gangs honoring such an agreement, assuming they accepted it and assuming Bobby Joe won. Then again, if they did that would mean one person would control the gangs and that would appeal to them both.

The two gang leaders looked at one another. Arkansas Tom nodded to his counterpart. "You game?"

"I reckon." Ringo drew the horse pistol and rotated the cylinder, checking to make sure it worked smoothly. "Let's do it."

They moved together like wolves flanking a wounded sheep. Barnabas couldn't stand it any longer. "By the power vested in me, I demand that you halt." There was no quaver in his voice, though it was reedier than it had once been. His finger caressed the ivory at his hip.

Arkansas Tom stopped first and turned. "Well I'll be damned. I thought you's up there on Boot Hill already Ranger. You gotta be older than the dust on your boots."

"Not yet and not today. You'll do well to keep your hands free." Barnabas saw that Ringo had started to move off to the right. "And Ringo you just stand still there. All of you, just wait." He looked meaningfully at Bobby Joe who had his hand on the butt of the forty-five. The Circle is holy and allows for any man to have a second."

Bobby Joe started to shake his head.

Arkansas Tom just laughed, a dry crackling cackle. "Ain't no such thing as holy no more, Ranger. Why don't you go water your horse and let us handle this dispute?"

“If you elect not to follow the true path then I am empowered to send you to your maker. I’ll kill you where you stand, and don’t think I can’t. All I ask is that you let me check his gun and ease his soul before you enter. It’s that or eat grave dirt.”

Arkansas Tom’s eyes flicked towards Ringo. Everything Barnabas had said was true. The question was, would they take the risk and honor tradition, rapidly weakening though it was, or would they take even the ultimate laws into their own hands?

Ringo leered. “Okay Barnabas, but this here’s a matter of honor. You can’t draw down.” That too was the Way. The Circle demanded that only the Challenger and the Challenged could use their weapons once the gauntlet was flung.

Barnabas knew more than these boys did of the Way and intended to use it though no one here would like it. He crossed into the Circle and extended a hand. Bobby Joe looked at the ground and drew his weapon. Barnabas examined it closely and spoke between gritted teeth. “You’re a damn fool, boy. You’ll bleed into the dirt.”

Bobby Joe shrugged. “Someone’s gotta bring back respect for the Way.” He took the inspected weapon back and holstered it.

“I’m proud of your courage and how you’ve taken care of that gun, my boy. Don’t get me wrong, I think you’re a fool, but your heart’s in the right place.” He held out his hands, palms up.

Bobby Joe placed his on top and the two men stared at one another. Gray eyes surrounded by wrinkles stared deeply into innocent green. There was fear in the boy,

but no reluctance. He was sharp and had kept up his routines. Another few years and he'd be able to best both of the men facing him. Today he was likely good enough to take out one. He smiled at his mentor.

Barnabas could hear the squeak of leather and the cry of a horse in the distance. There was a loud cracking sound as flesh met flesh. He held the boy's right palm in between his own two hands. This test of reflexes was supposed to tell a Ranger a lot about the prospective duelist's soul. Few could best him at it. Bobby Joe had nearly done so. The boy's smile turned to anguish as the tiny bones his hand were dislocated under the powerful grip of Barnabas.

"I can't let you die today." He released Bobby Jo's hand.

The boy cradled it in his arm, tears threatening to run down his cheeks. Most other boys his age would be on their knees weeping. The respect in his eyes turned to anger and frustration.

Barnabas turned his hands behind his back, under the serape. "He's not fit for the Challenge."

"Hell, I coulda told you that." Ringo's trailmates laughed at their leader's joke.

"What I mean, Outlanders, is that he is not able to use his weapon due to an injury. I will pick up the challenge as his second. The Circle allows for this." His eyes seemed to bore into each bandit leader individually. Now would be the time when either they ignored tradition, if they even believed his words, or decided to break from it.

Seconds crawled by. Arkansas Tom hooked his thumbs on the broad leather gun belt. He ground his teeth and squinted.

Ringo's arms were crossed over his chest. He spat a stream of coca juice into the dirt. "You did it."

Barnabas nodded. "So you say. The challenge is there, nonetheless. Accept it, or lose face." He stood as a shield before Bobby Jo. The boy sniffed, but hadn't moved or otherwise made a sound.

Arkansas Tom spoke after a few more seconds of tense silence. "The boy can leave the circle." He tried to look around Barnabas. "When we win, boy, there'll be another challenge in this street. One you won't be able to crawl out of."

Barnabas looked over his shoulder at his charge. "You go on now. Your hand will heal. Abby'll see to it. You'll draw and fire again. I promise."

Bobby Joe nodded and made his way out of the Circle. The pain had cleared his head and if the Ranger was any judge of the boy, there was a mix of shame and relief working him over right now. As he passed by Barnabas the words "I hate you." floated through the air from him.

Barnabas nodded, "I know." He watched ever so closely as the two men nodded at Bobby Jo. Sweat trickled down his ribs. He was nervous, certainly. Any man about to draw down would be, whether they admitted it or not. The Prayer whispered between leathery lips. His fellow combatants entered the Circle.

The three men stood roughly equidistant from one another, roughly fifteen feet apart. Barnabas grabbed the front of his serape, palming the three-quarter inch ball bearings hidden in pouches at each corner as he did. He then threw the front of his serape over his left shoulder. His guns were clear of obstruction and shone dully in the sunlight. He looked from one opponent to the other, gauging their readiness and doing his level best to get a feel for how they would begin their attack.

One thing he knew about the Cowboys and the Oklahombres was that this partnership was new. He could only hope that the temptation for one of the bandit leaders to take out the other has taken root from the time the challenge was offered til now. Neither man would be unaware of the possibility. It would be the one way to assume power that their men would recognize as semi-official.

He tracked Arkansas Tom's hand moving towards his gun. The swivel holster would let him fire without drawing, but it would be awkward to fire on a second person. He'd need to clear leather or turn his whole body. The way he stood made it clear that either way the elderly gunslinger was his first target.

Ringo had two weapons and could realistically take them both out with one draw. His weapons were heavier though and if Barnabas were in his shoes he would chose the street sweeper. It could put his first target on their ass in a way that no pistol would. The double barrel meant he could fill the air with shot or slugs in two directions with great speed. Barnabas couldn't help but notice that he stood in such a way that it meant

either man could be the first to come under the onslaught of buck shot. At this range shot would be ineffective, but he could have big slugs of lead loaded instead.

Barnabas slid his hands away from the guns on his hips, to his belt buckle. The shiny steel balls that rested in his palms had warmed to skin temperature. It wasn't a display of bravado, no matter how it looked. He nodded towards Arkansas Tom, "So, Ringo you'll be taking out Tom then me, eh?"

Tom's eyes darted to his partner.

Ringo chuckled. "No idea what you're going on about, old man."

He smiled and calculated the distance between them. "You draw that scattergun, and Tom here could have a big damn hole in him before his little trick holster makes it past my waist. Good plan." He was pleased to see Tom shift his stance.

Tom squinted. "Yeah, Ringo would never shoot a friend. Well except maybe a coyote like Murphy." His eyes shifted back and forth between his two opponents.

Ringo's hand was now firmly around the butt of the shotgun. "He had it coming. Talk about your back stabbing..." The bandit didn't finish the statement as he saw Barnabas drop to one knee and bring his hands forward in a blur. Both ambush hunters flinched at the quick motion, giving the Ranger an edge. The ball bearings flew from his fingers and sliced through the air with a whisper. They weren't halfway to their targets before he had his guns drawn.

By the time they were two thirds of the way across the circle Tom had his gun level with where Barnabas' head had been and snapped off a shot. Before the bullet split the air a yard from its barrel, the nearly invisible projectile caught Tom high on his cheek bone. The loud crack of bone was followed by a womanish scream. If Barnabas had the strength of youth or had been a few feet closer the Arkansan would be lying dead.

Its mate caught Ringo near the join of his thighs as he moved to the right and put the sawed off to use against his partner. He squealed like a piglet, but pulled the front trigger just the same falling as he did. All three combatants had assumed an attitude of prayer in the space of seconds, willingly or not.

Arkansas Tom screamed in rage. The pain from a split cheek, broken facial bones, and a chest and belly full of shot hadn't slowed him down yet. He moved to return fire at Ringo and caught two bullets from Barnabas' ancient handguns for his trouble.

The Ranger rolled to his left, cocking the guns' hammers and snapping off two more shots in Ringo's direction. The sawed off hand cannon fired again. The slug hit the hard packed dirt covered stone of the circle a yard in front of where he had been kneeling. It fragmented on impact, and a far-off part of Barnabas' brain registered the pieces of lead that now found a home in his shoulder. His conscious mind was too busy making sure that he came up on his knees again, gun sights tracked on Ringo.

The Texican bandit leader worked the lever on the shotgun, chambering another slug. He grunted as one of Tom's bullets tore a hunk from his calf. All three men were

bloodied and the smell of cordite and iron filled the air along with the smoky mist of blood and gun smoke.

Ringo didn't get his parallel with the ground before Barnabas fired both guns at once for the third time. One of the shots missed, but its twin found a home just above Ringo's breast bone. The jet of blood fountained from his back and took bits of spine with it. Taking the time to make the shot would cost the Ranger, dearly.

None of the damage done to Arkansas Tom had affected his gun hand. With the last bit of consciousness he had, he drew the pistol and took careful aim. Barnabas didn't have the time or energy to drop or duck. The bullet caught him in the left hip, chipping bone from the ball and socket and rending flesh as the fragments of lead mushroomed outwards.

Barnabas dropped prone, blessedly free of pain for the moment. It was a distant ocean wave that would sweep him away soon enough. He dragged his guns to the left, thumbing back the hammers and letting off shot after shot. The sound of the hammers falling on spent cartridges fell on deafened ears and he didn't see Arkansas Tom fall under the fusillade. All he saw was the blackness that came for him.

When he opened his eyes he wasn't sure it was to view what lay beyond the lead-bound doors that all gunslingers would face on the other side of boot hill, or if he was still on Earth. When he saw Abby's face come into view, he knew that he had survived the conflict, but now wasn't sure he wanted to.

With consciousness came pain and no small amount of it. He could tell that Abby had dosed him up on a combination of the poppy and a local cactus juice. Still, vicious teeth ground at the flesh in his hip and shoulder. His whole body ached like a bad tooth.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Barnabas. I almost got to throw grave dirt in your face and I wouldn’t have shed a tear. I have my own work to do though, and my own beliefs about what awaits a man like you after he’s dead. I can’t ignore either and thank the Clockworker that you’re still here. It means that my hands still know how to heal as well as yours know how to kill.”

“Better maybe.” Barnabas wheezed. He looked down and could see that there wasn’t much left under the blanket where his left leg should be. He had both arms, though moving his right made the pain exceed the medicine’s bounds. He embraced the sharpness of the pain and the clarity it brought. “Still, you couldn’t have saved the leg?”

She shook her head and not for the first time he saw a tenderness in her brown eyes. There may have even been traces of a love he thought long gone. “There was too much damage to the bone. If I had managed to keep any of it, it wouldn’t have been a use to you. It may have even gone septic.”

He nodded. “Probably would have, even under your care. How long?”

“You’ve been under for almost three days.”

He thought about making a crack about Yeshu, but even his sacrilege knew some bounds.

No doubt she saw it in his eyes and snorted in derision. "You managed to send Tom and Ringo to Boot Hill."

"Town's still standing? What about the gangs?"

"They took their leaders' bodies after a lot of male posturing. Bobby Joe picked up your mantle and reminded them that you were their leader and that wasn't up for grabs as long as you lived."

Barnabas tried to sit up. "So I... I'm the leader of the gangs?"

"That was your plan wasn't it?"

He tried to shrug, but couldn't. "Didn't have much of a plan beyond making sure Bobby Joe lived." He thought. If they had paid attention to the rules so far that didn't mean a whole lot, but it meant something. Maybe he could take command, at least long enough to get them to the next territory. Then he could give up the ghost.

She tsked at him. "Don't get any ideas dumber than the ones you already had. I got together with Bobby Joe yesterday. He went and talked with the gangs and told them you were dead." She placed a firm right hand over Barnabas' mouth and pushed him back. Her strength surprised him, but then he remembered this wasn't the flesh and blood hand she'd been born with.

"As your acolyte he told them that the mantle fell to him. Even with that bone you dislocated, he was faster than any of them. It only took sending two of them down to

Boot Hill to convince them that he was a 'worthy successor'." She turned her head and spit the words out of her mouth.

He slapped at her hand. When she removed it he could finally breathe and speak. A string of curses flew like sleet from his mouth. His ear rang as she returned his slap with one of her own, this one to the side of his head.

"I won't have you talk like that. Not in this place of healing. He took those men east of here, and I care not what they do."

He ran his hand over the warm spot where she had struck him. "What's that boy gonna do?"

"He told me that your 'success' as a teacher and Ranger told him all he needed to know about the state of things. With no Martials or Rangers worth a spit, he's taking the teachings and rebuilding the Order. Says he's gonna start with these men."

Barnabas had no words for the emotions that welled up in him. Sacrilege didn't even begin to describe it. As quickly as those emotions rose, they subsided. Maybe the boy was right. Barnabas could do little but lay here as a broken man. He knew that Bobby Joe wasn't far off in his assessment of the Martial Order or of the pitiful few Rangers in this territory. A house cleaning may be in order. Bobby Joe had the fire to do it. Done wrong it couldn't go much worse.

He looked around the room and saw that his guns hung just below the gear of the Clockworker, displayed prominently on one wall. The clashing ideals, order through

strength of arms and order through the patience of water eating at stone, both lead to the same place if he understood it right. It was time for him to change.

“Abby, I’d like to walk again, even if it’s with a crutch.” He shushed her with a hand. “I know it’ll take time, maybe more time that your god has given me. I want to put away my guns and see if your peace is any better than mine was. I’ve done what I set out to do. Bobby Jo’s safe and I’m alive. The town’s in one piece and the gangs are gone. I ain’t ready to die, but I can’t go on like I done before. Will you have me?”

Abby set her jaw. “I believe you’re telling the truth. Well I can get you a leg built and you can learn to walk on it in a year or so. ‘Til then a crutch is what you’ll need. I can give you a better place to live than a flop above a bar and things to think about.” She crossed her arms. “One thing’s clear you old fool; we won’t be what we could have been once. I can be your friend and your teacher though.”

“More’n I have a right to.” He settled back in the bed and looked at the guns. He’d live and learn to walk. Maybe he didn’t have more than another year in him, but he promised any gods that were looking on that he’d live long enough to see what Bobby Joe did with the Way of the Gun. He prayed that he wouldn’t have to wear his irons again to set the boy straight, but he would if he had to.

He woke later that night to a dimly lit room. He knew from having visited Abby’s house before that his room was on the second floor as was hers. This was where her long term care patients who had no room or family of their room would convalesce at

least until other arrangements could be made. A few minutes of quiet listening told him that she was in bed or out of the house completely. If the blackness outside and his own internal clock was any indication, it was easily three hours before sunrise.

He moved back the cover and looked at what lay underneath for the first time. The flesh of his left leg was pale in the lamplight. It was disconcerting to say the least to see nothing beside it. The long shirt he wore covered his hips and would have gone down to mid-thigh. Self-conscious even without anyone else in the room he pulled the shirt back. The amount of damage he saw there was shocking. He'd seen worse things on the streets, but that was other people. He'd been shot up more than once, but nothing like this.

A sudden wave of nausea overtook him. He was able to grab the nearby bedpan and empty what little was in his stomach into it rather than all over his bedclothes. Once he stopped heaving, Barnabas covered the damage with the shirt. The image stuck with him though. Bless her, Abby knew her work. The stitches were neat on the flap of skin she'd used to cover where his leg had been. He was no student of the human body, but he knew what his looked like and could tell there were chunks of bone missing from his pelvis.

His curiosity satisfied, he flipped the sheet back over his lower body. The bottle of "cactus juice" called to him from the table. If there was any sleep to be had the rest of the, he'd need it. He reached over and grabbed the bottle. Unfortunately he misjudged his balance thanks to the missing limb and toppled out of bed. Any concept of

manageable pain flew from his mind as every fiber of his being screamed at being jostled. The bottle hit the floor and shattered and he gave voice to his pain.

What could have been seconds or hours later, his door opened under Abby's assault. She was a hurricane of calico and barely restrained hair. "By His Works, what happened?" A gentle hand probed him. "You're going to be okay. What were you trying to do, walk?"

When he got his breath back, he tried to smile. "Your bedside manner hasn't improved."

"Hush. Between my missing hand and your missing leg, getting you on the bed is going to be hard enough. I'm tempted to leave you here." They worked together, and it was difficult, but she got him up and onto the feather mattress. "Now stay here, you've left me something of a mess to clean up." She turned up the lamp, revealing broken glass and a small puddle of bile colored liquid. Thankfully neither of them had touched the broken glass.

Abby left and came back a few minutes later with some towels and a leather bag. One of the towels went over the spill. Satisfied with that, she ran a hand under his night shirt. He flinched at the touch anticipating the pain more than potential embarrassment.

She smiled briefly. "At least you didn't tear your stitches." Her other hand moved across his chest.

He felt a trail of fire as she touched where the pellets had gone in.

“Your bandage there has torn loose. I need you to lift your shirt.” She helped him as best she could. After a moment he sat in front of her naked. She found the square of linen bunched up in his shirt and examined it. “No more discharge.” She looked him squarely in the eye. “No more foolishness and you can leave this off. It will sting if you get anything in the wound, but it won’t fester.”

Her eyes moved over the rest of his body. “You should have been a farmer or joined me in His service. You’d have come away with fewer scars.”

He knew without looking that his body looked like a long stretch of bad desert hardpan. Scars, pockmarks, and a large burn mark from being trapped in a burn fire all told their tales. He let her look. His body was no stranger to her. “Satisfied?”

She looked him in the eyes again and he could swear she was blushing like she had as a girl. “Put your shirt on you old fool.” She smiled as she said it.

“Yes ma’am.” He pulled it on over his head and settled in place, restoring what little modesty he needed.

She reached into the bag again and pulled out another glass bottle. She pulled the stopper from it and handed it over.

He took a short pull at it. It was harsh, but he knew that he’d be in a healing sleep in a half hour. This concoction she put together sped up the healing process in addition to killing the pain. She never had told him if she created it or if it was a trade secret, and he

had asked a dozen times over the years. He put the bottle on his bedside table, mindful now of his balance. "Thank you."

She patted him in his only leg. "'You're welcome. Now get some sleep.'" She stood and covered him back up.

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