

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER ONE

“Hey Johnny, it’s your turn to go first.”

His face caked with dust, Johnny Lancer tugged his sweat-dampened hat down more snugly with a disgusted snort and checked the rope wrapped around his saddle horn. “You be sure to keep your line taut, Boston! If he so much as touches Barranca with those horns, I’ll shoot him!”

Scott Lancer’s frown was barely visible from under the layers of dirt that caked his face, too. “Don’t worry, Brother, I got him!”

“That’s what you said last time!” The younger Lancer tugged experimentally on the rope that led from his saddle horn to the bull between him and his brother. The older Lancer also had a rope from his saddle to the bull, keeping the annoyed and powerful creature suspended between them. The bull shook his head in frustration. “All he needs is a little slack, and he’s gonna be at me.”

“I know, Johnny, I know!” Scott snapped. “Barranca’s unscathed so far so don’t be so grouchy!”

The bull had come close to injuring the shiny palomino at the last narrowing of the path. It was so much easier to ride side by side with the angry animal between them, but sometimes the trail narrowed and forced them to go in line, nose to tail. This was one of those times, and if the ropes weren’t kept taut the feisty bull would take advantage of the momentary freedom. “And you can’t shoot him. First off, Murdoch would not be very happy, and second, I’m in your line of fire!”

The glance Johnny gave his brother in response revealed eyes sparkling with evil humor. “I know,” he admitted slowly.

Scott tugged at his rope and made it snug, refusing to rise to the comment. “Then you’d have to explain to your father why you came back home alone.”

“Well, that’s a good point. Maybe I’d just head to Mexico instead.” Johnny sighed then shuddered dramatically at the imagined fury of their father. Then he gave the bull an ‘I dare you’ look through narrowed eyes. “Just keep the cranky old man off my tail, all right?” he growled.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Scott waited a beat. "Are we talking about the bull or Murdoch?"

The brothers' moods shifted instantly with the sound of Johnny's laugh.

Working smoothly together they got the little group safely through the narrow section. Since they were tossed off the train before their scheduled San Fernando stop, humor had been scarce. The range-bred bull had had enough of the boxcar and his irritation caused the group of them to be asked to leave the train miles from where they wanted to be. They had been making their way through the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains for four days now and were finally rewarded with a sweeping view of the valley below as the trail began a long, downward curve toward their destination.

"I'll be happy when this crabby old bull is delivered." Johnny took a moment to swipe his gloved hand across his forehead. "It's been a long five days."

"It's only been five days? It feels like a month!" Scott shifted in his saddle, automatically using one leg to move Charlemagne aside to keep the rope taut on the bull.

"A night in town's soundin' awfully good," Johnny said with a grin. "I know a little place west of here, just an hour or so away. The beds are soft and the beer real cold."

"And I suppose the women are as pretty as angels." The older Lancer liked to see the kid-like excitement his half-brother displayed more often these days. When he and Johnny first arrived at Murdoch Lancer's ranch just over a year ago they were all somewhat guarded. With time had come trust, and with trust and a feeling of family, a glimmer of personality that Johnny had kept under wraps for most of his life. It was like the younger Lancer was finally letting the long repressed boy inside out for a romp which was usually infectious. Scott's returning grin was tinged in the same delighted expectation.

"Angels? I don't think I'd call them that . . ." Dark blue eyes still reflected that evil humor as Johnny straightened to stretch his back. "Did Murdoch say we had to stay at Rivera's ranch? We can go into town instead, right?"

Scott barked a laugh. "When did you care about not getting in trouble?"

"Well, mostly since he an' I haven't had an argument in nearly a week. I'd like to think we're getting somewhere."

"Johnny, you've been with me on the trail for five days!"

"Yeah, so? A week's a week!" He nudged the palomino into a faster walk. "Come on, Brother, let's get this over with."

The testy bull resisted them all the way up the road and under the arch that announced the arrival at Rivera Ranch. Roberto Rivera, alerted to their arrival as soon as they were in sight, greeted them politely as his eyes roamed over the impressive bull. "Your father was right. He's a handsome one, isn't he?" Rivera

turned his eyes to the boys. His inspection grazed over Johnny in a dismissive manner, his focus pointed on Scott.

“He sure is, Mr. Rivera,” Scott responded, intent on keeping the bull away from his flank. “I’ve got his papers tracing his lineage back for several generations. We’re sure you’ll do as well with him as we have.” Scott handed his rope over to one of the hands that appeared at his side and pulled a large envelope from his saddle bag as the brothers dismounted. Scott didn’t see how Rivera’s eyes returned to, and rested on, his dark-haired brother, causing Johnny to clear his throat uncomfortably and drop his eyes to brush the dust from his pants.

Relieved of the bull by the ranch hands, the brothers tied their horses to a hitching rail before following Rivera into the humble hacienda. Shouts intermingled with the bull’s bold bellows faded in the distance.

The hacienda was modest compared to the Lancer main house, but it was clean, neat and richly appointed. Senor Rivera was obviously a successful man. It didn’t take long for Scott to close the deal and accept an invitation to lunch.

“I will have Elena show you where to wash up. Join me in the parlor for a drink before lunch,” the hacienda patron said with a sweep of his hand.

Scott led the way. Senor Rivera let the older brother pass and fell in next to Johnny. They were met at the end of the hall by a stout Mexican woman in servant’s dress.

“Please follow Elena and she will show you where to clean up,” Rivera said to Scott. “Go ahead while I speak with your brother for a moment.” Scott nodded, wondering what was going on, and then followed the maid. After a few minutes, Johnny came into the spare room where Scott was washing. The younger Lancer was very subdued.

“What was that all about?” Scott asked as he washed.

“Nothin’,” Johnny said in a tone that meant the opposite. He was quiet as he prepared to wash.

Scott, reading the closed face, decided to let the subject lie. “Okay, then. I’ll see you in the parlor.”

Johnny gave him a sharp nod, his eyes on the floor. Scott paused, considering pushing the subject, but again decided against it. He left the room and easily found the parlor. There, Senor Rivera offered a drink. By the time Johnny showed up, lunch was ready. The fair-haired brother chatted amiably through the meal as Rivera asked several questions about Lancer holdings and possible future dealings while Johnny ate quietly.

After lunch Scott knew by this point that it was probably best to leave right away so he thanked Rivera for his hospitality and headed outside with Johnny on his heels. He politely turned down Rivera’s suggestion to stay overnight, feeling

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

that the offer was made as a formality only. It was clear that Johnny was not welcome here. They mounted quickly and jogged away from the dwelling.

When the ranch was out of sight behind them, Scott tilted his head in Johnny's direction. His younger brother's expression was hard. "Just what was all that about?" he asked casually.

"Like I said, nothin. Let's get to town. I hear a beer callin' my name."

"Don't tell me it's nothing. What did Rivera say to you?"

"Scott . . ." Johnny looked heavenward with a sigh.

"It was obvious he didn't like you. What did he say?"

"It doesn't matter. Can we drop it, please?"

Scott pushed Charlie closer to the palomino. "I won't drop it. Tell me."

Johnny stared straight ahead for a moment, then said tightly, "Rivera said he knew who I was, and I was allowed in his house only because of his friendship with Murdoch. Then he said he expected me to behave."

"Behave? Are you serious?"

"Very. This ain't northern California, Scott. People know me down here."

"They know you personally?"

"No – I mean most of 'em had heard of Madrid. We're getting' closer to Mexico with each step, remember. And I'm tired and just want to get home. Can we drop this now?"

"Sure, sure," Scott agreed. He wanted to get home himself. "My own bed's sounding better each day, too. Let's get moving, then, shall we?" He lifted his hand and Charlie's pace quickened.

Whatever dark thought he'd had seemed to be gone in an instant as Johnny's indigo eyes gleamed. "Barranca's itchin' for a run. He's been toleratin' that nasty bull for five long days!" With a single nudge the powerful horse leaped away.

Scott grinned crazily and followed suit and soon the boys were racing into town side by side.

## CHAPTER TWO

The town of Newhall was nestled at the mouth of two canyons that ran eastward into rugged foothills. The area was thick with life and a promising gateway to the growing city of Los Angeles. The late afternoon sun made everything golden; the lack of heat in the sun's rays promised a cool night.

Scott and Johnny reined in their mounts well outside of town so the horses were cool and breathing evenly by the time they rode down the main street. Wagons headed out of town, their drivers' business done for the day and on their way home to their families. A cluster of horses tied in front of a small building near the other end of the street told the boys where the other working men were ending their day.

"There it is. Cold beer!" Johnny announced happily.

"And a decent meal, I hope," the older brother sighed. "I'm real tired of jerky."

"What's the matter, Boston? Didn't we pack the right wine to have with beef?"

Scott snorted at the teasing reference to his Eastern upbringing. They reined to a stop between the saloon and the livery, first looking at one, then the other. After a moment, Johnny leaned over and slapped Scott's shoulder.

"Flip ya. Loser takes the horses to the livery." The bright smile on the dark skinned face was infectious.

Scott grinned back, straightening slightly at the challenge. "Go," he said with a nod of his head.

Johnny fished out a coin from a hip pocket. "Call it," he said as the silver flashed in an elegant arc with the waning golden light.

"Heads."

Johnny's hand easily slipped under the coin and stopped its flight. He slapped his other hand over the top and two sets of blue eyes focused on the dusty hands. Johnny slowly exposed the coin. A hearty laugh burst from his lips.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“I knew I felt lucky!” Scott groaned as Johnny happily vaulted from the golden horse and flipped the reins to him. “Double oats for him, brother. He deserves it after putting up with that beast. And for me, a double shot of mother’s milk while I wait for you.” Johnny winked and gave Barranca an affectionate pat on the neck.

Scott frowned at the barely camouflaged insult but before he could protest, Johnny was bounding up the saloon stairs.

While Scott turned wearily toward the livery, Johnny slipped in the saloon door and slowed his step to allow his eyes time to adjust to the darkness. It was an automatic action for him to sweep the room with his gaze and make mental notes on the crowd. By the time he’d ambled his way to the bar, the ex-gunslinger knew exactly where he wanted to be. He stopped at the end farthest from the poker tables with his back to the wall. Something at the tables had triggered an inner warning and he wanted time to track down the source.

“Beer,” he said lowly to the stout bartender, “and a shot of tequila.” A quick nod, a flip of his lucky coin, and the order was filled without further conversation. The barkeep was drawn back to the opposite end of the bar where he hovered with a watchful eye on the poker players. Johnny noted that his instincts had been right - something was awry at the tables. The shotgun tucked under the bar very near the barkeep’s hands made that clear. He was glad that the attention was drawn elsewhere.

Johnny slipped his hat backward off his head and let it hang from the stamper strings as he shot down the tequila and sipped the beer. He watched the players with apparent casual interest. His steely eyes, however, were taking in the details of each player’s face.

Although he saw a pair of men sitting beyond the card table deep in a corner, the details of their faces were veiled by the smoky darkness of the room. Since their distance and relaxed posture didn’t mark them as an immediate threat, Johnny mentally placed them aside and concentrated on the card players nearer to him.



The pair of men in the shadowed corner had been watching the game, too, but their focus was not so much on all the players, but specifically, where the winnings were going.

“He’s got near two hundred dollars now,” the smaller of the two whispered in excitement, focusing on the growing pile of poker winnings at the nearby table. When he didn’t get a response from his partner, he turned to see that the larger

man's eyes were watching something else across the room. "What?" the smaller one questioned quietly.

The larger man unconsciously stroked his lengthy moustache with the fingertips of his left hand while his right hand crept toward the gun on his hip. "Do you know who that is, Ramon?"

Ramon had a pinched face and long teeth that gave him a ferret-like appearance. The quick movement of his head from his partner to the far end of the bar and back again only added to the illusion. "The pistolero?" Johnny's low-slung holster wasn't hard to miss even in the dark, smoky room.

"Si, the pistolero." The mustached man leaned in to his partner and lowered his voice. "Recognize him from Tecate? About four years ago?"

Ferret Ramon's forehead frowned in thought as he unobtrusively studied the man at the bar. After a moment, his eyes widened and he sat up straight. "Johnny Madrid!" he whispered.

"Shhh, Ramon. I do not want him to notice us. Yet." The mustached one turned his back to the bar and continued to stroke the whiskers thoughtfully.

"But I heard Madrid was killed about a year ago down in Mexico," the ferret said lowly.

It took a moment for the bigger man to reply. "That's what I heard, too. But that doesn't seem to be true, does it? Hm. This may be very lucky for us. Let me think a minute."



Scott brushed the loose hay off his shirt sleeve as he walked toward the saloon. When he stopped and slapped his hat against his thigh to dislodge the major portions of dust clinging there, sudden shouting caused his blond head to jerk up.

A woman screamed and the snap of breaking furniture erupted from the saloon, immediately followed by the cracking noise of fists hitting flesh. There was more shouting, more banging, and then a gunshot. Scott jumped and had to keep himself from racing to the source of the noise emitting from the bar where he'd left Johnny. Suddenly, several men spilled from the batwing doors onto the boardwalk as a pair of men rolled between them and then down the stairs to the street.

"An' stay out! Pfeiffer, you owe me for the tables!" A portly man in a barkeeper's apron shouted from the top of the stairs with a shotgun propped firmly on his hip, pointed skyward.

Scott was relieved to see that his brother wasn't among the spectators laughing on the boardwalk or one of the pair crawling in the street, and then felt slightly ashamed for expecting to see the familiar dark hair in either of those

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

places. Then again, he realized it wasn't that long ago that his baby brother was probably a regular participant in such actions. Of course, the Eastern-raised Lancer could only imagine what the gunfighter's life had been like - Johnny wasn't apt to tell the family anything about it.

When the shouting and laughter faded away and the last spectator disappeared back inside, Scott mounted the steps to the saloon. He'd just landed a foot onto the boardwalk when Johnny stepped through the swinging doors. If Scott hadn't been looking directly at the doors when his brother stepped through them, he would have missed the dark expression Johnny immediately wiped from his face upon seeing his older brother.

"What's wrong?" Scott asked instantly. Johnny grinned crookedly but humor did not reflect in his eyes. Scott could tell that he was about to get yet another brush-off.

Look, the beer's not as cold as I remember." The way the younger Lancer dropped his head and fidgeted with his belt buckle told the older one that he wasn't hearing the full truth. "Let's see what the hotel has and maybe get a steak to go with it. I'm starvin'."

"No, Johnny, what . . ."

Johnny dismissed the protest by starting to move down the stairs past Scott.

"Hey!" Scott cut to his right and stopped his brother's retreat. "What happened in there? You weren't involved with that . . ." he waved his hand at the street where the fighting pair had wound up.

"I can have a drink in a saloon without getting into a fight, Scott." Johnny's voice was low with an edge of angry hurt.

"I know, I know." Scott put up his hands in an 'I surrender' motion and decided to change tactics. "But I am thirsty and this is the closest place at the moment!"

Johnny glanced back over his shoulder at the saloon and bit his lower lip in thought. "Then go have a beer, brother. I'll get us a room for the night." He clapped Scott's shoulder. "Meet me for dinner in about a half hour?"

Perplexed, Scott nodded dumbly and Johnny walked briskly up the street toward the hotel. The fair haired brother wondered if he would ever be able to fully understand Johnny Lancer; just when he thought the man was over his past and doing fine, some incident would glaringly suggest the opposite.

"I'd love to peek into his head sometime," Scott grumbled as he entered the saloon.





## LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

When the fight had broken out at the poker tables, Johnny wasn't surprised in the least. His position at the other end of the bar was safe haven from the whole affair and he mentally tried to pick who the winner would be. As soon as the barkeep had reached for the shotgun under the bar, Johnny knew who would end up on top.

When the crowd dove to the floor in response to the shot in the ceiling, Johnny couldn't stifle his short laugh. Leaning on the bar, unmoved by the explosion, he'd looked around in amusement and was completely shocked to see a familiar face tucked in the far, dark corner, cowering from the flying bits of ceiling. Johnny hid his surprise automatically as his mind raced. Had the man seen him? Could he take the chance?

Suddenly, the place didn't seem as inviting anymore. Unrushed, but with his hat back on his head and pulled low over his eyes, Johnny finished his drink and left the bar as the dust settled.

*"Why do I stumble across dirty reminders every time I turn around?"* Johnny thought as he walked down the street. Wearily, he wiped the dust from his eyes as he entered the hotel, regretting his shortness to his brother. *"First, Rivera judges me and now an old acquaintance appears in the dark. The closer I get to Mexico, the more Johnny Madrid comes alive."*

He sighed and then glanced down at the name he'd automatically signed on the hotel register - 'Johnny Lancer.' That made him smile; at least he knew who he was. And tomorrow they could leave this all behind and get back to his new life.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER THREE

Scott entered their hotel room a little later to find Johnny washed up and in cleaner clothes. He tossed his hat on the bed and started to roll up his sleeves to take his turn at the wash basin.

“You could have sprung for two rooms,” he complained. “That bed doesn’t look big enough.”

Johnny brushed his hat with a flick of his hand and looked at his brother in a sly sideways glance. “Yeah, well, that’s all they had.” Blue eyes sparked again. “We can always flip to see which of us can sleep on the floor.”

Scott raised an eyebrow and hooked a towel around his neck. “Deal. This time I toss the coin.”

“Fine.” Johnny settled the hat on his head as Scott pulled out a coin. With a toss, the silver disc flashed and arced in the air. “Tails!”

They leaned in as one to look at the coin, and Scott groaned. Johnny slapped his brother’s back playfully, a cocky grin on his lips as he moved to the door. “Looks like I’m on a roll, brother! Tell ya what, I’ll pick up dinner.”

“Fine.” Scott tugged his shirt from his pants in disgust.

“I’m gonna wire Murdoch and let him know we’re runnin’ late, then I’ll meet ya in the dining room.”

The elder brother poured the water from the pitcher in to the wash basin. “Are you going to tell him about the damage that bull did to the railroad car?”

“Not on your life,” Johnny laughed as he shook his head and pulled open the door. “We’ll save that little surprise for when we get home. Maybe we should flip to see who tells him.” Scott’s hat winged off the door as Johnny made a quick exit.

His spirits raised, Johnny hopped happily down the stairs to the hotel lobby and got the location of the wire office. He hurried outside, knowing he didn’t have much time until the office closed, but was careful enough to check the street first. Relieved, he didn’t see anyone he recognized and made his way to the telegraph.

Johnny arrived as the clerk was preparing to lock the door and was able to charm his way in, where he got off the wire in short time.

The clerk was right on Johnny's heels as he left the wire office. He bid the young clerk good night then Johnny turned on his heel and started back to the hotel.

Darkness was just starting to fall and the nooks and alleys of the main street were draped in shadow. Out of habit, Johnny walked on the outer edge of the boardwalk and eyed each building corner before he passed. He was almost to the hotel when he heard a voice that made a chill run up his spine.

"Johnny Madrid."

The voice carried from deep in the alleyway next to the hotel like a winter wind. Gunfighter instincts made Johnny's hand rest instantly on his weapon as he froze. Slowly, he turned, balanced and ready to defend himself by the time he located the form in the alley seconds later.

The face he saw in the poor light didn't surprise him. "Barrajas," he said flatly.

"Ah, you remember! It was so long ago. Tecate, si?"

Johnny nodded slightly.

Barrajas continued. "I heard you were dead."

Johnny regarded the man with a cool expression. "Looks like you heard wrong, then, doesn't it?" he replied icily.

There was a long collection of seconds as the pair surveyed each other through narrowed eyes.

"What are you doing in town?" Barrajas leaned lazily against the wall, his thumbs hooked on his gun belt.

"That's none of your business." Johnny's frame rounded a bit as he put on a façade of relaxation, but the stance was purposely deceptive. His grin was wolfish and his eyes steel-hard.

Barrajas laughed lowly. "I was just wondering, old friend, because I have a job for you if you want it."

Johnny ran that through his mind knowing any job Barrajas had to offer would involve nothing good. The ex-gunfighter's expression didn't change as he quickly tried to decide how to best get away from this man. There had to be a lookout nearby; it was Barrajas's style. Johnny felt itchy at the thought of being in someone's gun sights right at this moment but he didn't dare take his eyes from the speaker to find the threat.

Still grinning mirthlessly, Johnny answered. "I didn't realize we were friends, Barrajas. Besides, I got a job already." He dropped his hand from his gun belt and turned to go, his senses on full alert.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“Hired out, huh? And what would someone in Newhall want with a gun hawk?”

Johnny paused and cocked his head as he replied. “Again, Barrajas, you’re puttin’ your nose where it don’t belong. *Buenos noches.*” As he walked away, Barrajas’s parting words, low and threatening, hit him like an arrow to his heart.

“Whatever it is, Madrid, your reputation guarantees there’s lots of money involved. I plan on getting’ some of it, compadre.”

Self-control was difficult but Johnny carried the aura of Madrid well as he kept walking and refused to rise to the bait. His mind, however, was whirling.

Barrajas was known to deal with what Johnny considered ‘dirty money’. Even among gunfighters there was a certain code of ethics that separated the truly talented from the criminals. True, Johnny basically had earned his livelihood by killing, but at least there were two sides to his jobs - there were people that would back him for what he did. In Barrajas’s case, he was simply a criminal that worked for himself, alone. Robberies, stealing, kidnapping and straight out murder were the techniques he used. Barrajas and his ilk were in it for the money, pure and simple.

The idea of running away didn’t set well with the younger Lancer. He’d only seen that worm Ramon with Barrajas so far but knew there had to be more, somewhere, like rats in a pantry. Johnny was glad they were leaving the next morning. Staying out of sight in the hotel and an early morning departure would be the simple way to deal with it.

The Madrid façade surrounded him like a cloak until he stepped into the hotel. Johnny paused just inside the door, taking a moment to let the Lancer part of him take over. He dropped his head and sighed as he hung his thumbs on his gun belt. Would this game ever be over? Would he ever get far enough from his past to live the normal a life?



Johnny didn’t know that he was being watched. Scott had just entered the dining area when he’d heard the footsteps enter the hotel. Expecting to see his cocky brother, Scott was momentarily stunned to see Madrid step through the hotel doors instead. In the time they had been together, Scott had quickly learned to recognize the dangerous persona that made up another part of his brother. He hadn’t seen it for a while - there hadn’t been a need - so it was a shock to see it now.

As Scott watched from the dining room, hidden in a group of patrons milling about, a transformation occurred before him. Whatever it was that defined Madrid - an expression, a certain body carriage - dissolved and fell away, leaving a

weary looking Lancer in its wake. Scott frowned. He knew whatever reason it was that had caused Madrid to appear would remain stubbornly inside his dark-haired brother's head. It was an ongoing battle trying to get Johnny to realize he wasn't alone anymore and that one Lancer's problem was all Lancers' problem.

A wry smile curled one corner of his mouth. At least there would be lively dinner conversation. Stepping back out of Johnny's field of vision, Scott separated himself from the small crowd and settled on a table. He sat down and flagged his brother over as soon as he stepped into the dining room. Johnny sauntered over and sat with a sigh, then studied his silverware. Scott wasn't surprised by his brother's choice to sit with his back against the wall, facing the dining room doorway.

"Well?" Scott started as he mentally went through his choices on how to proceed: Direct questions or veiled comments?

Johnny threw him a wary glance at the tone. "Well what?" he said tiredly.

"Who did you see out there?" Direct questions it was, the decision taken on total instinct. The fact that Johnny's hackles didn't immediately raise in anger confirmed Scott's assessment of his brother's weariness. Six months ago, his younger brother would have bristled in instant anger at being read so easily.

Johnny didn't respond right away and instead picked at his napkin. A lopsided grin pulled one corner of his mouth upward. "What makes you think I saw someone?" He turned his attention to twirling a spoon in his fingers.

Scott snorted. "Living with someone for over a year does that. So, who did you see?"

Johnny studied the spoon closely. His concentration was broken by the waiter, and the brothers ordered steak dinners. When the order was complete, Johnny put the spoon down with a small sigh. He took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"Scott, how long does it take for a man to change? I mean, to someone else."

Scott frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

Johnny leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out under the table. With his elbow on the chair arm, he rested a thumb under his jaw and tapped his index finger on his chin. "I mean, how long does it take for someone to prove they've changed? I'm getting kinda tired of this."

Although Scott wasn't exactly sure what Johnny meant by 'this', he had a fair idea of what he meant. When were people going to forget Madrid and see Lancer? "Well, people can have long memories, Johnny. I hate to say it, but I don't think your prior lifestyle will ever be forgotten. You have to admit; it is rather colorful." A look that Scott could only define as regret passed through his brother's eyes as he nodded his head. Then the blond brother realized something. "You didn't answer my question." He forced Johnny to hold his eyes.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

The familiar sparkle returned to the tired blue eyes. "I know," he acknowledged with no indication of continuing.

After several long seconds, Scott shook his head in frustration. "Well? Do I have to watch your back, or what?"

Johnny simply looked wearier. He rubbed his eyes. "Scott, can we drop this? It's not important. We're leaving in the morning and then it won't matter. I just want to get home, all right?"

Scott quelled the spark of anger he felt at being dismissed. He knew how hard his brother had worked in the past year to shed the Madrid lifestyle and be accepted as Murdoch Lancer's son and heir. It had been a long year, and it was truly amazing what he had accomplished in that time. The feeling of family was strong between them – Murdoch, Johnny, Scott and Teresa were an unconventional family, but they had melded into a very united front. Ignoring the whispered rumors and stories in Morro Coyo and letting Johnny simply prove himself had worked there. The rest of the state would simply take time.

"All right. But I don't appreciate being left in the dark if you're in danger. Keep that in mind." Scott was disappointed at his brother's placid responses as he tried to converse on other subjects. "*He must be as tired as he looks,*" the older brother thought toward the end of the meal. Scott decided not to pursue his curiosity as to what had happened outside the hotel, and ceased trying to engage Johnny into conversation.

The rest of the meal passed quietly. Scott noticed Johnny keeping a careful eye on the hotel doors, but didn't push for information. The younger Lancer excused himself and headed to bed right after finishing his dinner and Scott followed him shortly thereafter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The morning dawned bright and clear, pleasantly warming away the cool of the night as the brothers paid their bill and walked to the livery. Scott was a little stiff from sleeping on the floor and hoped they'd make it to the train station by noon the next day. He sighed; one more day on the trail. The bedroom waiting for him at Lancer was sounding pretty good right now, not to mention Maria's cooking. The Easterner thought he'd even enjoy that tamale dish with those hot peppers Johnny liked so much.

Walking on the street instead of the sidewalk, Scott noticed Johnny's quick step and alert eye. The elder man could tell it wasn't over by his brother's aloof manner. Johnny's senses were on full alert as they retrieved their horses from the livery and rode out of town.

At first Scott tried to keep alongside his wary brother but eventually realized that Johnny was more comfortable lagging slightly behind, allowing his older brother to lead the way. Scott knew his sibling was well aware of everything around them; Johnny's gun hand looked relaxed, but it was never far from the butt of his weapon. His whole frame had a deceptively casual slump, but Scott knew his brother was on edge. Even the hairs on the nape of Scott's neck tingled. The air was charged with tension and the cause of it well hidden.

Scott decided he needed some indication of what was in his brother's head. He kept his voice low and glanced back at his brother as he asked, "How many are you expecting?"

Johnny didn't deny the suggestion. "At least four," he said lowly, his eyes barely visible from beneath the rim of his hat with the downward tilt of his head. "If anything happens."

"Where do you think, if anything is going to happen?"

Johnny looked thoughtful. "The trail follows the edge of a canyon about three miles out of town. There's not much cover and steep, rocky slope on two sides."

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“One way in, one way out,” the ex-military man summed up.

“More or less.”

Johnny’s tone caused Scott’s eyebrow to arch in suspicion. “You have a plan? Do I get to hear it?”

A small smile played on Johnny’s mouth. “Let’s see how things go. I didn’t see anyone in town I knew when we left. Nothin’ at all may happen.”

Scott snorted shortly. “Yeah. Right.” He shortened his reins in preparation.

“Just keep a little ahead of me, Boston, and listen carefully when the time comes.”

The fact that Johnny said “when” instead of “if” wasn’t lost on Scott. “Why do I feel like I’m the bait?” the older Lancer grumbled.

Johnny quietly continued to unobtrusively scan their surroundings, a smile hanging on his lips like a shadow at his brother’s astute observation.

They rode along in silence for a while when Scott saw that Johnny was right about the trail. The flat, open space on either side of them had gradually narrowed to a rising foothill to their left and a sharp down slope to their right as the trail cut across the face of a foothill. The foothill rose to a steep, rocky face that would be impossible to scale, whereas the down slope, although steep and treacherously slippery, wasn’t impossible to tread but the idea of it made Scott’s palms sweat. The deepening canyon cradled a ribbon of water that lazily twisted back into a narrow green valley with nearly vertical walls. Going up was impossible, and if he didn’t know Charlemagne so well, he would not consider the route down the canyon wall viable, either. He swallowed hard and focused on the narrowing trail and where it disappeared around the curve of the rising hillside. Maybe there wouldn’t be a necessary escape after all. . .

“We’re bein’ followed,” Johnny said quietly.

Scott threw a glance to Johnny and instantly realized that his hope was wasted. His brother’s hand now rested heavily on the butt of his sidearm as he sat up straighter, his eyes scanning high on the foothill next to them. Hardly surprised, Scott heard a voice from above.

“*Hola Madrid!*”

Barranca bumped Charlemagne’s hip as Scott pulled his bay to a sudden stop. A motion in front of them caught had his attention. Looking forward to the curve of the trail again, he saw a dirty man on a flea-bitten grey amble from around a curve and block their way. The stranger’s face was smug as he fingered the gun on his hip. Scott turned back to his brother. “Friends of yours?” he asked lowly.

Johnny’s hand hung heavily on his holstered pistol as he met his brother’s eyes momentarily and his mouth turned in a crooked smirk. “Not really,” he replied with an apology in his eyes. Slowly, he turned to find the speaker above and behind them.



Barrajas and the ferret Ramon stepped out from a large boulder high up on the hillside. They could see the barrel of a rifle pointed at them from another boulder above the grinning pair. A fifth man trotted up behind them on the trail holding the reins to three skinny horses.

“You left town so fast we didn’t have time for introductions.” Barrajas’s eyes moved from Johnny to Scott. “Who is your traveling compadre?”

Johnny’s relaxed posture didn’t change as he lifted his chin to find Barrajas’s eyes. After a moment, Johnny replied. “My boss. Told ya I had a job.”

Scott wisely kept his mouth shut and surveyed their surroundings. His eyes were drawn to the treacherous downhill slope and a feeling of dread made his stomach flip as he turned his attention back to Barrajas. He was amazed at his brother’s apparent calm and managed to keep his own face impassive as the apparition of Madrid settled on his brother’s frame.

“Your boss, huh? That’s why we haven’t heard from ya for the past year?” Barrajas nodded toward the Lancer horses. “When I saw you ridin’ outta town, I recognized the brand your leather carries; Lancers are big shots up north, I hear.”

Johnny’s reply was a slow drawl. “Keeps me in drinkin’ cash.”

Barrajas’s tone was casually chatty, but his eyes were snake-like beads. “Heard they had some trouble last year ‘bout the time Day Pardee made a run up yonder. Haven’t seen ol’ Day since then.”

Johnny kept quiet for several long seconds. “So?” he finally asked. His tone made the tingling hairs on Scott’s neck leap to attention.

Barrajas laughed shortly but his eyes burned with something else, something bad. Scott felt his muscles tense in preparation. Barrajas and the ferret man made their way down the hill and took their time mounting up, but the rifle high on the hill remained trained on the pair. Finally settled on a small, dull-coated bay behind them, Barrajas continued.

“I guess I just don’t understand why you’re not sharing with old compadres, Madrid! From what I hear, the Lancers have plenty for all of us.” Barrajas’s predator eyes left Johnny and rested on Scott. The bandit’s smile revealed rotten yellow teeth and dangerous humor. “I think old man Lancer’d gladly pay to see his boy safely home.”

The next action happened so quickly that Scott didn’t have time to react; it was totally unexpected. Between one heartbeat and the next he saw blinding motion then felt cold steel pressed hard into the soft area under his chin. Scott froze, and heard the click of weapons as Barrajas’s men reacted. Scott’s skin tingled in anticipation of bullets piercing his body in numerous places. His brother’s Colt poked deeper under his jaw as Johnny pulled Scott tight against his side with his other arm.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Johnny's voice was low and menacing, and fear zinged up Scott's spine. "Well, Barrajas," the Madrid aura drawled slowly. "That may be true, but what it really means is that it's less money for me. Back off. This is my deal." Johnny's voice was very loud in Scott's ear and he looked properly surprised without much effort.

"Hey!" The elder Lancer yelped. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up," Johnny growled, pushing his gun harder into Scott's jaw. "And I advise you to keep still if ya wanna keep your head." Scott's and Johnny's heads were side by side as Johnny held his hostage tightly to his side. Their eyes were mere inches apart; Scott twisted his head slightly to look at his brother. In that second, he saw a flick of Johnny's dark blues as his brother indicated the downward slope to their right.

Scott acknowledged the plan with a careful reply. "I understand," he gasped, the gun pressing painfully against him.

"Aw, Madrid, don't be so greedy!" Barrajas protested, trying not to look worried. He'd obviously not expected this turn of events. "I always thought we'd work well together."

"I work alone. Sorry to disappoint y'all." Johnny used his legs alone to maneuver Barranca snugly next to Charlemagne and therefore keeping Scott between himself and Barrajas. Both horses were now angled toward the down slope, but not enough to give away their intention. To Barrajas, it looked like Johnny was protecting himself by using Scott as a barrier.

Scott felt like a sitting duck. He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs, and took a deep breath to prepare for action he felt would come any second. Scott could tell by the way his brother was placing himself that the rifleman above Barrajas was Johnny's first target.

Johnny continued to speak to cover his movement. "I was hopin' to milk this protection gig a little longer but it looks like you've ruined that plan, Barrajas. I have to keep any ransom all to myself now to make up for those wages I planned on makin'. You understand. Business, an' all."

Barrajas lost his sickly smile as he adjusted the aim of his handgun on Johnny. Now he was angry. "Well, I was hoping to work this out in a business like way, amigo, but I guess we cannot. I just hope the goods do not get damaged in the crossfire. Live hostages are so much more valuable."

Johnny tilted his chin up and grinned wolfishly; a sideways glance at his brother made Scott's blood run cold.

"Well," Johnny grinned. "That's one thing we agree on!"

A blur of motion preceded the sound of Johnny's gun exploding next to Scott's ear, deafening him. Scott instantly spurred Charlemagne, who leaped forward without hesitation. Several more shots from Johnny's gun sounded as Barranca followed the Lancer bay.

The pair of horses plunged over the lip of the canyon as several shots flew over their heads. Scott felt his stomach leap into his throat; he could see the palomino's head next to him in his peripheral vision, but didn't dare take his eyes from the terrifying path before him to see if Johnny was still aboard. A gunshot next to him confirmed his brother's presence.

The pair of horses sat back firmly, their front legs outstretched and dancing to find a safe track. Rocks and loose dirt followed them like an ocean swell as they plunged onward, weaving between huge boulders that dotted the hillside. Scott's quick glance backward revealed grim concentration on Johnny's face as he watched their backs and left the retreat to Scott and the horses. A riderless flea-bitten grey followed them downward; Scott saw the thrown rider's slide abruptly stopped by a boulder. The body hit with a sickening jerk.

Scott refocused his attention ahead. He gave Charlemagne his head and concentrated on keeping balanced in the saddle. The bottom of the canyon was approaching quickly and he glanced around for the best direction to go once they got there. A stand of cottonwood to their left caught his eye, but he couldn't see beyond it. He assumed the trees followed the river as cottonwood usually did, and he prayed there was somewhere to go beyond them.

Just before they hit bottom, Scott felt the zing of a bullet uncomfortably close to his ear. Knowing Johnny would need to reload he pulled the pistol from his holster and twisted around to cover their escape.

Charlemagne pushed off the hillside in a final jump for the canyon floor. Scott fired off a couple rounds up the hill as Barranca followed them along the canyon floor. The riderless grey swerved away from the noise and galloped off in the opposite direction once it hit bottom. Barrajas was just starting his skinny bay down the slope, and the ferret was trying to convince his sorrel to follow. A glance higher up told him Johnny's first shot had met its mark - the rifleman behind the bolder was splayed out flat and still, but Barrajas was trying to level his pistol as his horse slipped downward.

A motion behind Barrajas caught Scott's attention; the fifth man was leveling a rifle in their direction - they had to find cover quickly. Leading the way, Scott looked ahead again.

"Johnny! Look out!" Scott hollered as they plunged through a tangle of wild roses. Pink blossoms sprayed everywhere in their leap through the stinging vines, the cover of cottonwood just beyond. Scott barely heard the rifle report when his face was slapped by leaves and thin cottonwood branches. He covered his face with his gun arm and lifted the reins to slow down his charge through the trees.

He was completely unprepared for what happened next.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER FIVE

Charlemagne leaped again and there was a long, heart-stopping moment of silence. Scott grabbed the saddle horn at the unexpected jump and dropped his arm from his face just as they splashed down.

Scott managed a surprised gasp before he was dunked completely under very cold water. His mount quickly pushed off the bottom of the pond, and in an instant they bobbed at the surface. Charlemagne paddled strongly toward the shore, his drenched ears flat against his crest and his face just out of the water as he sneezed a stream from his nostrils. Scott, hanging desperately on to the saddle horn, was finally able to twist around to see if Barranca had followed.

A sodden golden head snorted at Scott's hip. Johnny's arm was around the horse's neck like a life preserver, his gun tangled in the silver mane as Barranca gamely pulled his unseated rider alongside. Johnny managed to maneuver his way back into the saddle before the horses clambered from the water.

The horses clattered to a stop on the rocky shore and shook their heads to empty their ears. Johnny immediately began the process of reloading his gun, shivering from the unexpected dunking. Scott holstered his weapon and noted the numerous nicks and tears, edged in pink, diluted blood, scattered across his shirt. He picked spiny bits of wild rose vine from Charlie's mane and noted the red scratches on his skin and the stinging of several more on his arms, face and body. He urged the wet bay closer to the dripping palomino.

"You look like you tangled with a string of barbed wire and lost," Scott panted when he took a moment to survey his brother. Johnny's shirt was in a similarly ravaged state, and the elder brother received a wry grin in return as Johnny dropped a round into his gun and flipped the cylinder shut with a snap.

"That's what happens when ya don't go around a rose bush, Brother." As Johnny slipped his well-worn pistol back into his wet holster, Scott noticed a twitch in his face.

“Are you all right, otherwise?” Slipping into big brother mode, Scott reined the dripping bay around to circle the palomino and eyed the faded red shirt more closely. The tears in the shirt were minor, and several were tinged pink just like his own, but there was one spot that seemed to be bleeding more freely and the hole, bigger. “Here,” Scott said briskly, legging Charley in close enough to pick at Johnny’s shirt near his left shoulder blade. “There’s a hole back here, still bleeding. Let me look . . .” He grabbed the collar of the worn shirt and pulled it back to see underneath.

“We don’t have time for this, Scott,” Johnny protested, nudging Barranca forward. “I think it’s from a ricochet. A chunk a rock hit me part way down. Ain’t nothin’. We gotta keep movin’.” Barranca broke into a jog with little urging and shook his head a few more times to release the water in his blond mane and ears.

The shirt collar jerked from Scott’s hand, but not before he saw the small hole in his brother’s skin, between the left shoulder blade and spine. He shook his head, and urged his bay to follow the palomino. “It didn’t look too big, but you do have a hole back there. And it’s still bleeding.” As Johnny rode off, Scott could see a bright red blossom of blood staining the shirt; the red tone was much darker than the diluted pink spots caused by rose vines. Persistent nudges extended the bay’s trot to pull up alongside Barranca. “Does it hurt much? We should wrap it.”

“I’m fine, but we’ll both be in a heap a trouble if we don’t put some distance between us ‘n Barrajas before they regroup. I just hope our ammo ain’t too wet to shoot.”

The pair broke into a slow lope. Scott’s saddle and reins felt slippery so he adjusted his grip and seat several times as they weaved their way up the rocky valley to follow the river. The desert air was cool against their wet skin, and when they entered the shade of the valley, they both shivered. “I don’t think Barrajas’s horse can keep up with us. It didn’t look in as good a shape as ours.”

“Don’t let looks fool ya, brother. That was a range smart mustang he was on, as sure-footed and full of stamina as they come. But he does need to wait for his boys.” Johnny threw his brother an amused grin that lit up his indigo eyes. “I don’t think the rest of ‘em were too keen on makin’ that first jump.”

Scott snorted. “I wasn’t too keen about that jump!” After a short laugh together, he asked, “So, Brother, when are you going to tell me why we had to take that particular choice of action?” He tried to sound light, but the question came out a little flatter than the older Lancer wanted.

The tone wasn’t lost on Johnny. With a sly tilt of his head and a sideways grin, he said, “What you really want to know is why I stuck my gun in your face, isn’t it?”

Scott had to grin in response. “Well, yeah. I’m obviously missing something.”

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

The canyon opened up into a flat plain and, with a nod of his head, Johnny indicated the direction they should take. Beyond the plane were foothills and the choice of several valleys to follow. The pair loped across the open area then reined in on Johnny's cue at the mouth of the northwestern-most trail. Slowing to a welcome walk, the horses dropped their heads and blew hard as the brothers talked.

Johnny glanced back. "I think we're all right now. Let's let them catch their breath."

The blond head nodded shortly in agreement then he caught his brother's eyes. "Well? What am I missing? About Barrajas?"

After pulling his hat back to his head, Johnny let out a sigh and absently rubbed his left hand with his right as he spoke. "Barrajas has a certain talent he's known for. I never rode with the man, but I've been invited. I didn't really take to his way of earnin' cash." The ex-gunfighter shifted slightly in an uncomfortable manner the way he always did when the subject of his old lifestyle came up. "Barrajas has had a lot of success south of the border with kidnapping. When he's not hiring out his little group as guns, he finds the richest landowner in the area and grabs a relative and holds 'em for ransom."

Two blond eyebrows rose in surprise. After a moment's reflection he said, "So what you're saying is, for once you weren't the target."

"Nope," Johnny grinned. "You were."

"So, you were pretending to be in my employment as, what, a bodyguard?"

"Don't matter what he thought I was just as long as he didn't find out you were my brother. Otherwise we both would have been targets, and one of us would be dead as a warning to Murdoch."

After a moment of thought, Scott's eyes sparked in humor. "I hope you don't expect me to pay you for your body guarding services."

Johnny barked a short laugh. "Fine, but I may ask for reimbursement for ruinin' my favorite shirt. Couldn't you have gone around them thorns?" Johnny rubbed his left forearm as he complained.

"Sorry, but that shirt needs to be put to rest!" Scott looked at the trail ahead of them. "So where are we going now?"

Johnny followed his brother's gaze. "Well, the shortest way to get to the train is back the way we came, so instead we're headin' through the Tejon pass and catch the train on the other side. It's the only way unless you want to go back . . ."

Scott shook his head. "Not really." He patted his shirt pocket. "I would like to use these tickets instead of riding all the way back to Morro Coyo. No sense in wasting train fare. How far, you think?"

"Oh," Johnny tilted his head back in thought and surveyed the hills in front of him. "It's about 20 miles, I guess. Mostly up."

Scott snorted again, and tapped Charlemagne into a jog. “Well, I certainly have had enough of ‘down’ for a while. We need to stop and wrap that shoulder, too.”

Johnny shook his head and tried to rub away the coldness of his arms. “I’ll be fine, Boston. We need to keep movin’.”

Not surprised by that response, Scott’s mouth twisted into a disgusted frown. “Fine. Just don’t come crying to me when you drop dead from blood loss.” He kicked Charlemagne into a trot and took the lead.

“Hey!” Johnny exclaimed as he urged Barranca to follow. “Have I come cryin’ to you for anything before?” he protested indignantly. “Have I?”

“There’s always a first time!” Scott yelled over his shoulder as he led the way up the pass.



The pass was grueling. At some points, the brothers had to dismount and lead their mounts up certain areas. Frequent breaks were necessary for the panting horses – and often, brothers – to catch their breath. By late afternoon, the animals were covered with sticky foam and slick sweat. The muscles in the animals’ haunches quivered with exhaustion. They’d topped the steep and rocky canyon wall and now stood at a boulder strewn lip. Before them the ground sloped gently upward. It seemed practically flat compared to what they’d gone over so far.

“You think we’ve put enough distance between us and them?” Scott panted, running his fingers down his bay’s legs yet again. “These horses are spent, as are my legs.”

“Barrajas’ll be hard pressed to regroup and follow, especially with night comin’.” After checking Barranca’s feet, Johnny absently rubbed his hands together then moved to rubbing his arms. The nagging tingling that had plagued his arms since their escape was getting worse and extending down the back of his legs. “*I’ve probably pulled every muscle in my body,*” he thought, rolling back his shoulders and stretching the small of his back. “*A train ride’s never sounded so good.*”

The men loosened the saddle cinches of their heavily panting horses.

“Isn’t there an army base ahead somewhere?” Scott asked as he started leading his tired horse north.

Johnny shook out his hands and followed his brother’s lead. “Yeah. Fort Tejon. But it’s mostly closed now.”

“Fort Tejon,” Scott said thoughtfully. “Isn’t that the place that experimented with using camels?”

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Glad for the distraction, Johnny laughed shortly. "Yeah, I heard that too. I also heard that some of 'em got loose and run around wild. I haven't ever seen any, though."

"Well, that would be something to see. A herd of wild camels," Scott chuckled and shook his head. "Guess we'd better be looking for a campsite. How much farther to the train, do you think?"

"Not far. Just gotta go down the other side. I'd say we'll be there by mid-afternoon tomorrow. Should be easier goin'. I figure we can make camp for the night over there." Johnny nodded toward a distant stand of trees. "And there's Indians around here, too, but they're pretty friendly. They rely a lot on trade at the old fort."

Scott nodded mutely and started in the direction of the trees. Johnny fell in behind, commanding his tingling legs to keep moving.

The brothers walked in silence a little longer until their mounts' breathing was steady and their coats a bit drier. When it came time to mount up, Johnny's fingers fumbled with the cinch, but he managed to eventually get it snug. I need some rest, he thought grimly. Eventually successful, he tossed the reins over Barranca's neck a little less gracefully than usual and positioned himself to mount up. He found it difficult to raise his arms to grab the saddle but finally crawled into place, annoyed at his growing weakness.

A muffled groan from his brother caught Johnny's attention and he grinned tiredly.

"Almost there, Boston," he said.

"Don't patronize me. You're as sore as I am."

"Well, well. Aren't we cranky," Johnny chuckled. "And I will admit I'm lookin' forward to a decent bed."

"The taming of Johnny Madrid, huh?" Scott teased.

The pair moved toward the distant trees, riding in relative silence until they arrived in the welcome shade a couple of hours later. A small creek crawled lazily around muddy rocks as the brothers slid from their saddles. Both horses pulled anxiously on their reins toward the cool water.

"Hold on, let me get the saddle off," Scott chastised his leggy bay.

Leaning against Barranca's shoulder, Johnny eventually took a step back and swayed for balance. He went to raise his arms and grab the saddle for support, but found he couldn't raise his arms above the height of his shoulders. Instead, he again leaned on the palomino and worked his fingers, puzzled. His hands felt numb and his arms heavy.

Scott began to loosen the cinch. "We still need to catch some dinner." He glanced Johnny's way.



Drawn from his thoughts, Johnny shoved aside the unease he suddenly felt and straightened, then stepped toward Barranca's head. His legs wobbled dangerously, and he lurched into the horse's side. He grabbed the stirrup to steady himself.

Scott laughed shortly and turned back to unsaddling. "Me too. My legs feel like overcooked string beans right now."

Johnny knew this was more than that. He'd been physically exhausted before where every part of him hurt, but this was very different. He couldn't feel anything in his arms or legs except the nagging tingling that had been steadily growing worse.

Quietly fumbling his way along Barranca's side, Johnny concentrated on unsaddling his horse and ignoring the odd sensations in his limbs. His arms didn't want to obey. He heard Scott's saddle hit the ground with a dull thump and then heard his brother lead Charlie toward the creek. The sound of metal bumping tooth marked the removal of Charlie's bridle. "There ya go, boy," Scott said lowly.

Johnny's grip on the stirrup turned desperate as he felt his knees quiver. "*What's wrong with me?*" He thought as standing became nearly impossible. Then he staggered.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER SIX

“I’ll gather some. . .” Scott began from the creek bank, turning to his brother.

From across Barranca’s back, Scott saw the deep furrow of Johnny’s brow as he lurched against his horse and began to fall. Scott crossed the distance between them in a heartbeat, thankful that Johnny’s stalwart horse had the sense to keep still; the way Johnny hung onto the saddle, Scott was sure the horse was the only thing holding his brother up.

“What happened?” Scott asked as he reached his brother’s side. He moved in close behind and cradled Johnny’s elbows in his hands.

“I don’t know,” Johnny mumbled as he slowly sank to the ground, dead weight in Scott’s arms. “I can’t feel anything . . .”

Scott struggled to keep Johnny from hitting the ground hard, and soon had him laid flat on the ground as Barranca shifted his feet nervously. Next, Scott moved the horse, quickly unsaddling him and releasing the bridle. In the bare minutes it took him to return, Johnny’s voice had gone from puzzlement to near panic.

“Scott, I can’t move. I can’t feel anything!”

Gathering Johnny up in his arms was not an easy task. Johnny was smaller in stature, but thicker in frame and very solid. Scott finally managed to get Johnny into the shade and arranged on a sandy part of the ground. “Take it easy, let me look at you.”

Johnny’s eyes were wide and alive with fright, his breathing short and choppy. “What’s wrong with me? What happened?”

Scott checked his brother’s hands and arms, and then moved to his legs. All he found was non responsive muscles. Next, Scott quickly removed the gun belt and loosened the waist of Johnny’s pants. Unbuttoning the shirt with shaky hands, he found it difficult to remove with the dead weight of Johnny’s arms. Finally, he had the damaged shirt off and he gently rolled Johnny onto his side. The small hole he’d noticed earlier was angry red and swollen. He bit his lip in worry.

"I think you may have something in your back pressing on your spine, but I'm not sure."

"Get it out," Johnny begged.

"I don't dare try that, Johnny! It'll be dark soon and my knife is way too big and . . . and . . . well, I just can't do it! I may hurt you more!"

"I don't care," Johnny snapped, the fear quickly turning to anger. "You have to try, Scott, I'm a sitting duck like this. Do it."

Scott rolled Johnny flat to the ground again. "You need a doctor, Johnny. I can't do it. Let's get you settled . . ."

"We're in the open and I can't defend myself," Johnny growled, sweat coming alive on his skin. "By the time you get doc, I'll be dead anyway. Take it out!"

"I won't leave you. I'm taking you with me." Ignoring Johnny's virulent protests Scott began to collect what he thought he would need before it was too dark.

Soon he had a small fire going, a pair of rabbits turning on a makeshift spit, and the parts for a travois gathered and shaped. Johnny's angry protests had finally died off and his younger brother's eyes reflected the firelight as he glared at Scott through the darkness. Using a saddle, Scott propped Johnny up as best he could and tried to feed him bits of the cooked rabbit.

"Here." He held the meat aloft. "Take it."

"Ain't hungry."

"Just take it, will you? I don't think I can handle the silence if you pass out from hunger."

"I said I'm not hungry!" Scott gave up and instead offered water, which Johnny sipped without complaint.

"I'm thinking that we'll try for Fort Tejon. You said some people are there." Johnny didn't answer. He'd turned his head to face the darkness beyond the trees, frightening thoughts surely stampeding through his mind. "We'll start at first light." He lightly brushed Johnny's forehead and felt new heat of an expected fever.

When Johnny spoke, his voice was barely audible. "You have to leave me, Scott. Just go. I can't make it."

"That's ridiculous. I can't leave you."

"You have to."

"I won't." Scott's voice was firm, but his resolve wavered when Johnny turned back to face him. His brother's expression was that of fear and sadness and complete agony. "I won't," Scott repeated more for himself. "So don't ask me again."

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Huskily, Johnny replied, his woeful eyes glittering in the firelight, "I can't let anyone see me, Scott, don't you understand? I won't allow it. I can't allow it. No one can see weakness. It will be the death of me. Please. Leave me here."

Scott started to reply, but found his throat too constricted. He bowed his head, taking a moment to better organize his thoughts. Then he cleared his throat and spoke. "You're not Madrid anymore, Johnny, and you need help. Everyone does sometime. I understand your trepidation, but I have to get you home. Can't you see that? Can't you see that I can't go home without you? You belong at Lancer with Murdoch, Teresa and me. And if I have to fight off half of Southern California to get you there, I will. Now shut up and get with the plan. You really have no choice in the matter."

A spark of anger lit Johnny's eyes momentarily, hardening the fear into an unreadable mask. He turned away again and did not respond. Scott knew there wasn't much more that made Johnny angrier than having the fact pointed out to him that he was helpless, and Scott wasn't fool enough to think his independent little brother was accepting his argument lock, stock and barrel. This was not going to be an easy venture for either of them.

The terrain itself was difficult. Thankfully, they were out of the steepest hills but the ground was littered with rocks, boulders and brush. Dragging a travois would be difficult; Johnny couldn't feel anything and that was a blessing, but each bump and knock could move whatever it was under Johnny's skin and make the injury worse. Or even permanent. His brother's words about not wanting to be seen chilled him; that point Scott could understand, and he vowed to keep his thoughts positive.

Then there was Barrajas. Had he broken off the pursuit? Scott figured he was down at least two men. Would he – or could he – regroup? The train was a half-day away. Would it be worth it to the man to try?

And now that he'd been indoctrinated into the ways of the West Scott also knew that those were only two concerns in a long list, but he couldn't think of that right now. At this moment all he could afford to think about was the next step.



The breaking dawn was just another event in a less than restful night. Johnny's fever had worsened by midnight and showed no signs of abatement. Between keeping him cool with creek water and forcing water down Johnny's throat, Scott managed to assemble the travois and hitch it up to Barranca. He decided to ride the palomino as well; the horse's shorter stature would hold the

## LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

makeshift device at a less severe angle and Scott felt he would have more control from the palomino's back.

Johnny was barely conscious and mumbling incoherently as Scott loaded him up and secured him in the sling. The new day's light was still feeble by the time Scott choked down the last of the cooked rabbit and hit the trail. Scott knew the night had been long; he also realized the day would be even longer. The horses fell into their new roles without much complaint, but Scott could feel the palomino's frustration at being held to such a slow pace. Always obedient, however, Barranca reduced his annoyance to an occasional head-toss.

The morning wore on, burning into midday. Scott stopped frequently to force water into Johnny and wipe him down, and soon realized that it was going to take much longer to get to the train or a doctor at this rate; he began to toy with the idea that they just may not make it.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Johnny's delirious ramblings became a welcome distraction from Scott's negative thoughts, and he felt guilty about it. By the time the sun started to drop from its zenith, Scott was exhausted, both physically and mentally. The lack of sleep was beginning to take its toll as well as the roughness of the terrain. Making a decision against the urgency driving him onward was not easy, but the lure of a cluster of shady oak near the creek was too much. He reined in the horses and dismounted, unhitching the travois before allowing the animals to drink.

Ominous noises shrouded the travois. Scott could both see and hear that Johnny's breathing was becoming short and labored; a sense of foreboding niggled his thoughts. In an effort to ignore the feeling, he set his jaw and kneeled to check his brother more closely.

Johnny's face had a shiny flush and his eyes were dull. His lips moved occasionally, his foreign words aimed at someone Scott could not see. Limp limbs were becoming less alarming; it was his brother's breathing that heightened Scott's concern now.

"Come on, little brother," Scott said lowly as he once again ran the cool, wet bandanna over Johnny's skin. "Hang on. We're almost there." Other lies about their progress followed, the noise of his own voice covering the sound of that awful breathing. Scott struggled against collapse.

His eyes felt hot, gritty and dry, the lids fighting to close down. Scott lost track of time. His thoughts began to center on the fragment in Johnny's back. Should he try to get it out? Was the risk worth it? What were their chances otherwise? With an angry expletive, Scott threw the bandanna down in frustration and rubbed his eyes. Who was he kidding? It didn't look like Johnny was going to make it any further than this desolate spot and it was about time he accepted that.

With arms crossed angrily across his chest and his attention solely focused on his situation, Scott didn't notice the horses. It was the sudden and dead silence

when they stopped grazing that finally caught his attention. Even the birds were quiet – something was out there.

Torn from his misery, Scott quickly moved forward and slipped his rifle from the sheath on Charlie's saddle. Both horses were looking back where they had come from, giving Scott his only clue as to where the danger was. He whispered a curse then glanced around to see what he could use. Fortunately, the trees hung low and the trunks were thick. Between that and the one heavy branch that had recently torn itself free of its mother trunk, they were under some cover and concealment. Forcing the cobwebs from his mind, Scott quietly brought the horses in and tied them in the thicker part of the stand. After stuffing extra rounds in his pockets, Scott silently worked his way back up the trail and took refuge behind a sizeable boulder. Cautiously, he peeked around the gray mass.

What he saw made him curse again. Barrajas and two others apparently had decided to take the risk and follow after all. Scott knew he'd left an easy trail to follow and it was only a matter of minutes until the trio would be on them. Scott leveled the rifle and took careful aim.

His first shot found its mark. The outlaw leading Barrajas flew backward from his saddle and spooked the following horses. Scott's second shot just nicked Barrajas as he and the remaining man broke for cover. The third shot brought Barrajas' horse down, throwing the scruffy man hard to the ground. Barrajas scrambled out from under the writing animal, and then turned and used it as cover as he pulled out his handgun.

The return fire was more accurate than he'd hoped for and Scott had to move if he wanted to keep between the two outlaws and Johnny.

"Lancer!" Barrajas yelled. "I know you're the only one out there! I know Madrid's hurt! You don't have a chance!"

Scott didn't answer as he dashed to a new position and topped off the rifle's load. He knew Barrajas was working to distract him; the second man was probably moving into a position to pin him down. Scott knew he had to find him and take him out quickly. Crouching amidst rocks and thick brush, Scott carefully scanned the direction the missing man had taken and ignored Barrajas' comments.

"Lancer! Come on out! My men have you surrounded!"

"Men?" Scott thought. Were there more than just the two of them or was it a ploy to distract? Instantly, Scott's neck began to tingle with the thought of it being in someone's sights. He tried to order his tired and frazzled thoughts and glanced nervously around.

"No," he said aloud to himself from between gritted teeth, refusing to doubt himself. He returned his attention to the area he last saw the second rider. "There's only one other out there, I'm sure."

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“Guess again,” said a low voice from behind. Scott froze. “Drop the rifle.” A series of desperate moves ran through his mind. “Try anything and your shoulder is gone.” Scott dropped the rifle and slowly turned to see a yellow toothed face grinning at him and two pistols pointed in his direction. A third man had crept up on him from a dry culvert.

Raising his hands in the air, Scott blinked in confusion when he saw two other men in the brush behind his captor. What was odd was that the two men’s stealthy movements and manner of dress indicated that they weren’t with Barrajas’ gang. Hands in the air, Scott cocked his head in wonder at this bizarre turn of events and wondered if he was actually asleep and dreaming all of this.

“Barrajas! I got ‘em!” Scott’s captor yelled, standing clear of the brush. The two oddly dressed men behind the gunman silently closed in.

“Ah,” Scott started, still trying to figure out what was going on. Gut instinct told him to stand fast as the stealthy pair crept forward. Then Scott recognized that they were Indians when they broke from the cover of the brush. They were almost on the gunman, knives drawn, when Scott realized that his captor needed to be momentarily distracted for the Indians’ attack to be successful. He said the first thing that came to mind. “You may want to look behind you . . .”

The gunman glared at his captive. “Just how stupid do you think I am?” he spat. They were his last spoken words as the pair of Indians dropped on him and cut his throat.

Scott’s stomach lurched at the bloody sight, but he took advantage of the action and recovered his rifle. He spun around and brought up the rifle. The outlaw and his second were striding confidently toward him then a look of surprise crossed their faces when they saw Scott’s rifle aimed at them. Barrajas’ companion died with a shocked expression on his face and his horse leaped away. Barrajas regrouped more quickly and was drew his gun. Scott was only able to wing him and the wounded man dashed into the brush. Before Scott could move to follow the outlaw, the two Indians raced past him in pursuit. Scott stood motionless, his mouth hanging open with this new turn of events.

Completely perplexed, Scott watched them disappear into the brush. Deciding that Barrajas was more than likely out of the picture, Scott turned and ran back to where he’d left his brother. He was stopped just short of his goal by four knife-wielding Indians just under the canopy of oak. Scott dropped his rifle and raised his hands, heart pounding. Beyond the line of men, he could see that several more were huddled over his brother’s still form.

“Leave him alone!” Scott demanded, still unsure of what was going on or exactly where he stood with this bunch.



The braves in front of him were unmoved by his demand, but one of the Indians standing by Johnny stood up straight and appraised Scott across the short distance. Scott could feel the man's penetrating gaze as he was being sized up.

"Don't hurt him," Scott said in the same tone, holding the Indian's eyes in defiance. The Indian held the stare for a moment, then turned and spoke lowly to a man squatting next to him. Scott couldn't hear the words, but they caused the squatting man to slowly rise. As the figure turned, Scott noticed the jewelry that adorned the man's neck. He also appeared older than the rest so Scott assumed he held some rank. The Elder spoke shortly to the brave next to him, and the brave abruptly turned away and disappeared silently into the brush.

The Elder pointed at Johnny as he addressed Scott. "You are with this one," he said rather than asked. Scott found the words had an odd and unique accent, a mix of Spanish and something unidentifiable.

"Yes," Scott replied with a nod.

"Come." The Elder invited Scott over with a wave of his hand. The line of braves parted to let him pass.

Scott moved cautiously, keeping his hands in sight until he reached Johnny's side. Once there, he dropped to his knees and turned his attention to his brother. He laid his palm on Johnny's hot forehead and frowned at the labored breathing.

"He is not well," the Elder said softly. "We can help."

"How?" Scott snapped, wetting the bandana and tending to Johnny. "But mostly, why? What do you want?"

"This is Madrid," the man said, as if that was answer enough.

"He goes by Lancer now," Scott snapped, despair and fatigue shortening his patience. "And that doesn't answer my question."

"Our people owe Madrid. Let us take him to our shaman. They are acquainted and Madrid is welcome."

Scott's beleaguered mind whirled tiredly. Admittedly, he had no options left. They hadn't hurt Johnny so far, so he acquiesced with a silent nod. The group quietly and quickly surrounded the supine form, gently forcing Scott to step back. They lifted Johnny effortlessly, using the travois as a stretcher. As they withdrew rapidly into the brush Scott and another brave gathered and saddled the horses. Bone tired, Scott collected the reins and noticed that the Elder had waited for him. Thinking it would be impolite to ride he walked to the older man and fell in beside him as they trailed the others.

"You are Madrid's friend, then?" the Elder asked in his peculiarly accented English.

"I'm his brother," Scott corrected. The Elder turned his head and examined every portion of Scott's outer and inner self and, strangely, Scott did not feel invaded.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“I see it in your eyes,” the Indian leader said softly. “I am Hyahesh.”

“Scott Lancer.” This was all beginning to feel like some surreal dream. They walked a few steps in silence before Scott asked, “How did my brother help you?”

Hyahesh ducked his head a moment then looked heavenward as he spoke. “He took this land from the white man’s army and gave it to us,” he said. When he turned and saw Scott’s surprised expression, a mischievous sparkle shined in the old man’s eyes. “Does that surprise you?”

Recovering from his shock, Scott laughed shortly and rubbed his eyes tiredly. After a moment he sighed. “Actually, nothing my brother does anymore surprises me,” he said. “When was this?”

“Two full turns of season and eight moons. Not that long ago,” Hyahesh said with prideful certainty.

Scott quickly thought back. “He must have been on his way home,” he realized, speaking out loud. “Before he knew about his family at Lancer.”

The aged Indian nodded as if that made sense. “He said he had no home. We invited him to stay with us. He said he was on a different path, and that we may not want him living with us after he did what he had to do. I told him that the gods would make it clear what the best course would be.”

“He wanted to kill our father,” Scott said quietly. Every muscle in Scott’s body screamed for rest, but he carried on, anxious to help Johnny and see him through this. He locked his eyes on the group ahead gathered around Johnny. “Things didn’t go the way he expected. Didn’t go the way I expected, either. Neither of us knew we had a brother. It’s been an interesting and fulfilling time for both of us.”

“And what of your father?” Hyahesh asked as he touched an icon hanging from his neck.

Scott grinned weakly. “He’s still alive. Murdoch wasn’t the man Johnny thought he was.”

Hyahesh bowed his head as he replied. “I told him the gods would show him the truth. He only had to listen.”

Not sure how to reply, Scott instead moved closer to the men carrying his disturbingly still brother. When he was sure he couldn’t take another step, Scott heard voices relaying greetings up a green valley which announced their arrival at Hyahesh’s camp.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The next hours passed quickly, a blur in Scott's eyes. Bone weary and still unable to convince himself that these people could help his brother Scott found it harder and harder to hold off total resignation and embrace hope. When they arrived in the main camp, Hyahesh issued orders in a rapid manner and the residents obeyed without question. Scott could feel the examinations from curious, yet cautious, eyes as he led the horses into camp in Hyahesh's wake. Seeming to appear from nowhere, a young boy ran to him and took the horses, enabling Scott to move in closer to Johnny.

The camp consisted of a circle of small, cozy huts made with branches lashed together to form the walls and roof. Outside the circle, Scott saw groups of women around scattered fires cooking as their children clutched their skirts. Their big, brown eyes followed Scott with intense silence. Hides hung on racks, drying in the sun. Something roasted on a spit, the smell making Scott's stomach growl as a young girl tended the fire below. Scott shook his head, realizing how tired he was by the way his mind wandered.

Johnny was taken into a hut set off from the rest. Scott entered just as the braves were lowering his brother to the ground. Hyahesh spoke to an ancient, stooped man with silver hair who oversaw the placement of the patient. The old man gently placed his palm on Johnny's forehead and gazed into the fevered eyes. The light was poor in the hut so Scott moved in close enough to get a good look at the weathered Indian, finally realizing that this must be the shaman. Scott saw that the shaman's forearms were stacked with silver bracelets, and his face painted with bright colored lines. One long braid ran down his back nearly to his waist and his thin frame was wrapped in an intricately beaded tunic. It was obvious that this man was revered by his people, but Scott seriously doubted his ability to help his brother.

"He was shot in the back," Scott said. "He can't move." Hyahesh spoke rapidly to the shaman, who nodded but did not acknowledge Scott's presence.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Scott pushed his way to his brother's side, across from Hyahesh and the shaman. "I need water to cool him down." He knelt.

The shaman placed his palm flat on Johnny's chest and frowned, his dry, weathered voice whispering observations in an ancient language. "His energy is blocked," Hyahesh translated quietly. "Like a river blocked by debris. The flow needs to be established again."

A young man stepped from the shadows, his head bowed in respect as stood next to the shaman. He, too, was painted and had some jewelry, but wasn't nearly as decorated as the shaman. Scott couldn't figure out how they were communicating, but the young man seemed to know what to do without the old man asking. Scott realized that he must be the shaman's replacement in training. Together, they assembled a collection of items as another pair of boys began stripping Johnny and washing him down.

"Wait a minute," Scott blurted out after watching the preparations for longer than he intended. He blinked hard, realizing he'd been in some sort of trance watching it all. His head felt light. "*I'm a lot more tired than I thought; I have to pay attention,*" he scolded himself. He shook his head to clear it. "Hold on!"

The others ignored him until he pushed one of the helpers aside and took his place. Scott picked up a cloth and dipped in the water bowl. The ancient shaman paused over the bowl where several dried herbs had been mixed and turned his head, taking in the tall blond from head to toe. Scott scowled at him and began wiping Johnny's bare chest down with a wet cloth. The shaman's face remained impassive.

Hyahesh gently put his hand on Scott's shoulder. "He can help. Let him."

"I don't know what he's doing, but Johnny needs a doctor."

"The nearest town is days away. Madrid does not have the time."

"What about Fort Tejon?" Scott asked as he continued to try and cool his brother's raging fever.

"It is mostly abandoned now. No doctor."

Scott felt backed into a corner. He glanced at the herbs, knowing that some of them were for lowering fever. The others he couldn't identify, but he didn't recognize them as any poison he knew. He hesitated, damning the whole situation. The shaman went back to what he was doing, chanting in his feathery voice as his assistant began to burn something in another bowl.

"We know you are concerned. Our holy man has magical powers, I have seen it. You have no other recourse."

Biting his lower lip, Scott finally gave in. In his exhausted state, he knew he wouldn't be able to keep going much longer. He needed help. Allowing himself to be pulled away, Scott, in essence, gave permission for the shaman to move in again where he began to work in earnest. The old man's wrinkled hands flew over

Johnny in a complicated pattern, the bracelets clinking gently and flashing with the sparse light.

Scott sagged to the ground and leaned back against the wall of the hut, his head spinning. There was a strange feeling of physical numbness as he mentally surrendered his brother to the shaman. As his gaze locked onto the slack features of Johnny's face, he realized that the shaman was chanting, the rhythm hypnotic. Scott's eyes were on his brother but it seemed that everything else around him faded away. Strangely unable to move, Scott noticed how the air seemed to become energized, reminding him of how it felt to stand in the path of a fast moving thunderstorm. His eyes stung and felt dry, but he was unable to blink. A peculiar, sweet, smoky smell touched his nose and lulled him deeper into himself. The constant song of the shaman became a buzz in his ears and soon Scott found that he was unable to move. His sight had narrowed to a small frame, his brother's profile the very center of everything.

Before he lost himself completely to the hypnotic cadence and embracing warmth, Scott's last plea was that they help Johnny because he knew he couldn't even help himself at this moment.



Scott was awakened by a breath of cool, fresh air on his face and the sound of something rustling. He seemed to awaken slowly, his head taking a few long moments to clear. An odd whispering noise made him frown. Piece by piece, the memories fell in place.

"Johnny!" he gasped, the picture falling together in his mind. Scott snapped up into a sitting position and looked around wildly. The hut was dark, a small pile of embers in the very center the only color in the dark. The whispering came from a hunched form sitting on the floor facing Scott, and he realized the dark shadow on the floor between them was Johnny. They were the only other occupants of the hut. Scott scrambled to them on his hands and knees.

"How is he?" Scott panted. He hadn't remembered falling asleep, but the cobwebs of his mind told him he'd done exactly that. His brother was lying on his side, facing him. Gently, Scott felt Johnny's rough cheek. "He's still hot."

The shaman continued to whisper, his upper body rocking ever so slightly as he chanted, completely ignoring Scott. Scott noticed that the old man's eyes looked glazed.

Another rustling noise drew Scott's attention as someone entered the hut. As the hanging hide that was the door fell back into place, Scott had a brief

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

glimpse of the outside and saw that it was either dusk or dawn. By the chill of the puff of air that came in with Hyahesh, Scott figured it was dawn.

“I slept the whole night?” he said, astonished. “What happened? Where is everyone?”

Hyahesh settled in next to Scott and set a bowl on the floor. “You slept as long as you needed. We have done what we could, and now it is up to Madrid. This is for him.” The Elder pulled a small, drawstring bag from inside his tunic. It had been hanging around his neck, and now he pulled it over his head and gave it to Scott. “It is said that if you keep that which is a danger to you close, you may use its power.”

Scott opened the bag and emptied the contents in his palm. It was a disfigured lump of metal. He looked at it closely. “It’s a bullet,” he said softly. “You took it out?” Scott’s voice rose in alarm as he dropped the slug back in the bag. Leaning over Johnny’s still body, Scott tried to see what they had done to his back. In the darkness, it was hard to see but Scott didn’t feel any bandages on Johnny’s bare back. “Is he going to be all right? Shouldn’t there be stitches or bandages?”

Hyahesh’s voice was low and calm. “The path must be left open. The energy needs to connect with the outside again, and then it will heal the opening.”

Scott frowned and leaned over Johnny to inspect his back. The heat emanating from his brother’s dry skin was disturbing, but Scott realized it wasn’t as hot as it had been. “Give me a torch,” he asked Hyahesh sharply. The Elder pulled a glowing stick from the fire. The shaman continued to chant, seemingly oblivious to the actions around him.

With the red ember close to Johnny’s back, Scott was able to examine the area. There were caricatures of some sort drawn on the skin around the injured area and some kind of salve packed in the wound, but the hole he had seen previously did not seem a whole lot bigger than he remembered. The area was red and raw, but not as infected looking as he’d last seen it. Looking closer, he had to admire the work. Scott knew if he’d had to use his knife, there would be a bigger wound than this. He wondered how the shaman removed the bullet with so little damage; Sam couldn’t have done a better job.

Carefully, he probed the skin around the hole with his fingertips in amazement. He traced one of the drawn figures, realizing the designs incorporated many of the old scars that dotted Johnny’s back.

“The energy that healed the old wounds is being called upon to heal this new one. The chant is asking the gods to direct the energy.” Hyahesh’s explanation was voiced in a near whisper. “We must leave and let the gods work through our Holy One.”

Feeling slightly numb, Scott nodded. He ran his fingers quickly over Johnny’s temple, and backed away. Whatever they were doing was working. Or it

was a coincidence. He felt the small bag still clenched in his fist and unfolded his fingers, exposing the small pouch. In the poor light, he could see a pattern on the soft leather and could feel the solid mass inside. Proof of the surgeon's skill was right here in his palm; maybe what they were doing wasn't chance and coincidence after all. He wrapped his long fingers around the pouch and rose to his feet.

"Come," Hyahesh said as he pulled the hide door aside. "Come with me and I'll tell you the story of Madrid and our people."

Scott didn't want to leave his brother, but between the Elder's tempting offer and Scott's protesting bladder, he couldn't help but step through the doorway into the dawn.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER NINE

Fog draped the trees surrounding the encampment, dulling sound and teasing Scott's bare skin with a kiss of wetness. As he walked from the shaman's hut away from the camp to relieve himself, the mist encircled him and made him feel strangely alone. By the time he was finished a general unease made him quicken his pace. He hurried toward the camp and felt his tenseness lessen when he could see people again.

Scott stopped by the creek, kneeled down and threw water on his face to try and completely dispel the feeling. The water was cold and he exhaled sharply from the shock, but it did not help the heaviness on his mind. He decided that it just must be worry for Johnny.

Footsteps caused Scott to stand and turn. "Try this," Hyahesh said gently, handing Scott a small bowl that was wonderfully warm to the touch. "It will comfort and fill you."

Accepting the bowl of steaming mush, it took Scott a moment to figure out that he had to use two fingers to scoop the food into his mouth. He was hungrier than he realized and the gruel was surprisingly palatable, and even had a sweet, nutty flavor.

"I have bad news. The last surviving man that attacked you cannot be found. He managed get away on a horse," Hyahesh said softly.

Scott's head jerked up and the vague unease blew up into full alarm. He glanced around, noticing now the braves gliding in and out of the fog surrounding the encampment and more noticeably around the shaman's hut. He gulped down the last mouthful of gruel and squatted to rinse his hands in the creek. "Barrajas," Scott said out loud. "He was the last one left standing. I wounded him," Scott said. "Maybe he's unable to fight."

"I do not know another man's mind," Hyahesh said. "All I know is the power of revenge."



“Surely he wouldn’t try anything here.” Scott again swept his gaze over the fog shrouded camp. The fact that he couldn’t see beyond the hazy trees now made him nervous. “There are too many people. Do you know what he’s armed with? All I saw was a handgun.”

“The braves saw a long gun with the saddle as he escaped,” Hyahesh answered.

“Barrajas didn’t shoot at your braves?” Hyahesh shook his head. Scott ran his wet fingers through his hair and stood, drying his hands on his pants. “Since he didn’t shoot at them, then he’s either hurt worse than I thought or he’s fallen back to regroup.” Scott felt a chill down his spine caused by the idea of being shot in the back where he stood. Scott spun on his heel and started walking back to Johnny’s hut. He still felt fairly confident that Barrajas wouldn’t come into the camp, but wondered about the man himself. How vengeful was he? Would he take the time to wait for another opportunity or simply go home? Scott realized that his brother was the only one who could possibly predict Barrajas, as Johnny was the only one who knew the outlaw.

Scott paused at the shaman’s door. Whispery chanting floated from inside oddly giving him a slight measure of peace. With a deep sigh, Scott pulled the hide back and slipped inside with Hyahesh close behind. The shaman was crumbling something into a small, colorfully decorated clay bowl as he sang softly. Scott’s thought that the man had to be hoarse by now was interrupted by a groan.

“Johnny?” Scott’s heart leaped and he quickly dropped to his knees next to his brother. He carefully cradled Johnny’s face between his hands and leaned in as close as he could. Johnny still lay on his left side, his back exposed to the shaman. His face felt too hot on Scott’s palms and his breathing too rough. Scott’s examination was interrupted when Johnny’s eyelids fluttered.

“Johnny?” Scott called. “Can you hear me?”

Scott heard the hide door rustle and Hyahesh speaking lowly but rapidly to someone outside. Almost immediately, Scott heard soft footfall in the hut. He glanced up to see that the shaman’s apprentice and two stout braves now stood by him. The apprentice spoke rapidly to Scott, but the blond had no idea what the man was saying. He spoke the same language as the shaman.

“Wait a minute. I think he’s coming around.” Scott turned his attention back to his brother. Johnny’s eyes were open, but Scott could tell it was a struggle to keep them that way. “Johnny!” he called again, trying to see some kind of focus in the indigo eyes.

“He has to be turned,” Hyahesh said. “So the energy flows smoothly.”

Scott brushed them off, intent on Johnny’s eyes as he looked for any sign of recognition. “Johnny? Can you move? Johnny, are you awake?”

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

There was some sort of battle going on inside his little brother that was beginning to show in his eyes. Johnny blinked a little faster and his breathing became rough and rapid. He began to gasp, but his body was weirdly limp. Scott knew he must be frightened when he realized he still couldn't move, but there was something else there. With horror, Scott realized his brother was suffocating when he saw panic in Johnny's expression coupled with dry gasps that were becoming more desperate.

"He can't breathe!"

Hyahesh spoke rapidly. The two braves parted and regrouped with Johnny between them. The shaman's chanting didn't break cadence, but the Holy One's voice became a bit louder. Scott held Johnny's head between his hands and locked eyes with him. Scott didn't know what Hyahesh was saying to the braves; his total concentration was on trying to drive the fear from Johnny's eyes by keeping the same fear from his own.

"Johnny, listen to me. Relax. Breathe in through your nose and out of your mouth, you hear me? In through your nose . . ." The idea came to Scott in an instant. Specific instructions gave his brother something to concentrate on other than his panic. Scott got in close, finding it tricky to keep the eye connection as Johnny's body was propped up and turned. He could see Johnny struggling to pay attention to his words with all the distractions going on around him. Finally, Scott could see Johnny making the effort to breathe as instructed. "That's it, Brother, in through your nose, out through your mouth. You're doing fine."

And odd odor surrounded them and Scott's attention was drawn aside. The apprentice was holding the clay bowl close to their faces, the smoke from a smoldering collection of dried herbs curling around their heads. It was an oddly sweet smell, and Scott felt a growing feeling of detachment after inhaling the pungent cloud. He turned again to Johnny's eyes and kept instructing him to breathe, his own voice sounding more and more distant to his own ears. Ever so slowly, Johnny's breathing became even. His eyes softened as the fear retreated. He mumbled something that sounded like "Tired," but his voice was so soft Scott wasn't sure what the word was. Then Johnny's eyelids drooped in surrender.

Scott relaxed his hold and the braves were able to position Johnny into a more upright position on his other side. Scott shook his head to try and clear it, the feeling of detachment refusing to disperse. When he saw Johnny's eyes fully close and was sure his breathing was eased, he allowed himself to be led away as Hyahesh tugged on his arm.

"Sit here," the Elder said, settling Scott down on the other side of the hut. From there, Scott could see his brother, the chanting shaman and his apprentice. The two stout men had disappeared, quiet as shadows. The apprentice sat and waved the smoking clay bowl under Johnny's nose. Scott blinked slowly and

realized he felt drunk. He frowned suspiciously at the burning concoction in the apprentice's hand, but was not compelled to move anywhere at the moment.

"What's in that bowl?" Scott heard himself ask in a faraway voice.

"Medicines that help direct energy upward where Madrid can face the malevolent spirits that threaten him."

"Upward?" Scott asked dully. He noticed that he could see the caricatures drawn on Johnny's back now that his brother was turned away from him and the fire was stoked. They were intricate and interlaced and gave the impression of water – or even smoke – flowing upward toward Johnny's head. Scott found that the more he stared, the more the drawings seemed to be actually moving up Johnny's spine, throbbing to the cadence of the shaman's chant.

Feeling dazed and unable to move, Scott stared at the phenomenon, completely fascinated. Hyahesh continued to speak, his voice low in Scott's ear while the shaman's song painted the background. Colors began to invade the pulsating flow up Johnny's skin.

"We have seen and heard that Madrid prefers to face his enemies," Hyahesh said. "I promised to tell the story of Madrid and our people. Let me do that now. It will help him in this fight to remember who he is."

Scott, rooted in place, nodded dumbly. As Hyahesh began to tell Madrid's story the colorful caricatures came alive on his brother's back.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER TEN

Hyahesh began. “Once, our tribe was vast, reaching from desert to sea, through high mountains and up wondrous valleys. We lived in peace and plentitude, the land rich and giving. Then people from the South arrived. They were small in number at first and we welcomed them; they did not threaten us and the land provided for all of us. We learned from these people, and they from us. They were gentle and wanted what we wanted – to live in peace. We did just that, sharing, for many seasons. More came from the South, and we still lived in peace, together. Inevitably, our tribes mixed. It was as natural as the seasons. We are still in the process of blending, as once it starts, it cannot be stopped. The gods have always known this. It is how to adapt and grow strong.”

‘That explains the strange language,’ Scott realized. ‘It’s a blend of Spanish and Indian.’ For a moment he was surprised at the clarity of thought with the sweet chaos of color that surrounded him. He could no longer feel his physical body, but he could definitely feel and think, and it was like nothing else he’d experienced before. It was interesting and did not worry him in the slightest as his attention was still on the story playing out before his eyes on his brother’s recumbent body.

“Then the military men arrived from the East. We welcomed them as we did the others, but they refused to share and kept to themselves, isolated. There was still plenty for all, so we were not concerned. Then the East men began to push us away, to claim this land as theirs. Naturally, we disagreed, but being peaceful people, we simply avoided them. That, however, was not enough. They began to hunt us down.”

The story was alive before Scott’s eyes, vibrating in vivid color on his brother’s skin. His total focus was on the history in front of him and around him, the shaman’s song painting the very air in soft colors. He felt oddly disconnected from his physical body, yet was not afraid. Instead, he was invigorated, his mind alive. Vaguely, he recalled hearing that specialized army patrols had been sent to

California to purge the Indian tribes so whites could settle here. Was that what Hyahesh referred to? If it was, it sickened him.

“For many seasons our tribe kept hidden by keeping in motion. The hunters could not track us down but they were always out there. Our shaman saw two visions: In one, our tribe disappeared completely. The other showed us established and great in number. The Holy One realized that we were being offered a choice, that the future of our peoples could go either way and it depended on us making a single decision. For a long time, our shaman searched for the decision we were supposed to make.

“Then Madrid came to us.”

When those words were spoken the flowing design in front of Scott’s eyes became bolder and brighter, the force of his brother’s nature making itself visible right before his eyes.

“Madrid came from the south. We could see that he was like us and not like us at the same time. He was blended, but his blending was of the South tribe and the East tribe. His eyes told us that.”

‘Murdoch’s blue eyes and Maria’s dark skin - blended,’ Scott realized. ‘Like them and yet not like them.’

“Madrid was the link. He connected our people with those of the East through those of the South. We had seen mixed blood like his before, but Madrid was different. He chose to stay with us and learn of us, and we of him. The shaman told us it was imperative that we connect with Madrid, that he would shape our destiny. He saw it in a vision.

“Madrid was injured when he came to our camp. Not injured physically, but inside here.” Scott felt Hyahesh touch a spot over his heart. The momentary physical connection rang out in bright red coupled with the sound of a heartbeat and disappeared when the elder removed his hand. The interpretation was so natural and clear that Scott didn’t think it odd at all that he’d just visualized a touch. “He was on a journey to heal himself.”

‘He was coming home,’ Scott remembered.

“It was late summer when Madrid arrived here. We needed a place to settle for the upcoming winter. There was no way for our people to survive a winter if we had to keep moving; the past snows had shown us that. Our numbers had reduced greatly between the cold and the mercenary soldiers. Our shaman befriended Madrid after he determined that this man was important to our survival. The Holy One told Madrid our story, and he understood our story. He took it into his own heart.”

‘Johnny joins the underdog once again,’ Scott thought. It was so true to his brother’s nature, an honesty that showed itself clearly in the story parading before Scott’s eyes.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“After coming to know us, Madrid left and began to know the enemy. The shaman said that although Madrid was a man of war on the outside, he was a man of peace on the inside. It was a conflict that Madrid had come to master, and that was exactly what we needed – a man of our blood and the enemy’s blood that could master them both to show us the way.

“That’s when the Holy One realized the choice we had to make: Either blend with the East or be forever separate from them. Madrid would tell us which it would be. He was peace and war, South and East, all together. He was our messenger.”

The enormity of the role was clear to Scott. He wondered if Johnny knew of the part he played at the time, or even realized it now. Somehow, he doubted it.

“Then, as the air began to cool in preparation for the snows, Madrid returned after being gone for almost a full cycle of the moon. He told us that the Eastern men were leaving, and would be gone by the first snow.

“So, the choice had been made for us by Madrid, as the Holy One had predicted. He had reclaimed our land. Immediately, we moved to a proper winter location and made our encampment. The Easterners left their stronghold, and we never saw the mercenary soldiers again. Madrid had chosen which destiny was ours and separated us. Madrid gave us back our land. Now it is our turn to give to Madrid and choose his destiny.”

The simplicity of the story was easy to accept, but Scott had many questions. Right now, though, he had no desire to ask them. He was content to sit and watch Johnny’s healing energy flow and eddy on his skin, and marvel at the shaman’s song that colored the air. Scott could feel the shades and hues on his skin and he pulled off his shirt to enhance the sensation. Drawn into the very heart of the event, he could feel the strength and faith that surrounded him could not walk away.

At one point Scott found himself next the recumbent form, the heat emanating from Johnny stoking his own skin to higher sensations. Scott saw his hands reach out and touch the kaleidoscope of color that danced on his brother; amazingly, he felt and saw his own colors flow from his fingertips and join the current. It was weirdly mesmerizing and he could not tear his eyes away. Scott was transfixed – at this moment in time he and his brother were one entity and he never felt so fulfilled.



A clamor of sound seemed to come at him all at once. Dull at first, then growing rapidly until it was nearly unbearable. Johnny gasped and tried to open his eyes. He could feel the jerky spasms of his eyelids as they fought against his

will, and it took all his meager concentration to force them open. Finally, he blinked.

He could feel that his eyes were open, but all he saw was black; not entirely black, he realized, as there were lines of light . . . and a feeling of pressure on his forehead. He rolled his head aside and whatever it was that had blocked his vision fell away. Johnny blinked more rapidly, awareness coming slowly. He wanted to rub his eyes, but it wasn't happening, and he couldn't seem to keep his thoughts in order. Johnny fought to stay alert. Mentally, he ordered his hand to his face but found his concentration waning.

Johnny's head felt stuffed with muck and twice it's normal size. It throbbed, and the pain was becoming more pronounced. He'd had worse headaches, but he couldn't recall exactly why he had this one in particular or any other details of anything at the moment. He rolled his head back and saw a face close to his, eyes shut.

"Scott?" he rasped, blinking hard to clear his vision. He wasn't sure the word was audible, and he drifted away before any reply registered.

Another voice wended its way into his consciousness, urging his senses awake again. The voice was speaking odd and familiar words that made no sense at all. With more effort than he thought should have been necessary, Johnny rolled his pounding head and saw an old man with a nearly toothless smile staring at him. The sight of the man filled Johnny with a sense of well-being. The old man placed his palm on Johnny's forehead, the touch feathery soft and warm, and he drifted off again.

It was the nagging feeling of something forgotten that dragged him from the grayness this time and refused to let him rest. He felt wrung out and annoyingly exhausted. When his eyelids finally dragged open, he saw a familiar face lying next to his, eyes closed.

"Scott?" he thought he said aloud, this whole scenario seeming familiar. The word brought some animation in his brother's face – a twitch, and then a frown. Scott's hand came up and rubbed his eyes, and then he uttered a small groan.

"You all right?" Johnny wasn't sure what he was saying actually matched what he thought he was saying because it sure didn't sound right to his own ears. In fact, he wasn't even sure his mouth was moving; everything seemed wrapped in fog. After a moment, though, Scott's eyes snapped open, wide and wild, and he quickly sat up. Then, he found Johnny's eyes with his own.

"Johnny! You're awake!"

Johnny wanted to chuckle, but it was too much of an effort. He went to rub the sleep from his eyes but nothing happened. He couldn't feel his hands. Completely weary, he simply let his eyes drift closed again, the energy needed to keep them open sapped. "*I wish they'd untie me,*" Johnny thought fuzzily.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Scott's voice was the only clear thing in his mind. "Johnny? You need to drink some water." Scott said softly. Johnny felt his brother's hand rest lightly on his cheek. "Johnny? Can you do that before you go back to sleep?"

The touch was welcome and soothing. "Yeah," Johnny sighed.

Something scraped against a rough surface, the sound followed quickly by the sweet tinkling sound of water being poured. Johnny felt a hand on the back of his neck then he felt a pleasant coolness on his lips. He drank, feeling the fine trace of liquid run down his chin and neck, inside and out. The water tasted like honey and it was taken away much too soon. A few seconds later he felt his cheek on something soft and the world faded away again.

When he woke next, it was with a fuzzy start and he knew immediately that something wasn't right.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You’re all right, Johnny. You’re safe.” The words finally sank in and he worked to focus his eyes on the speaker.

“Scott?” he guessed, his senses not yet separated into a coherent form. Everything was tilted chaos to his eyes and ears.

“Yeah, Brother, it’s me. It’s sure good to hear your voice.”

Johnny finally found his brother with his eyes and concentrated on getting his voice to work. “Yours too,” he finally mumbled, his mouth feeling as dry as his eyeballs. He moaned and attempted to shift his weight.

Immediately, Scott was at his side, his hands helping his brother to find an acceptable position. Johnny looked blearily around, not quite settled. “Where are we?” he breathed, trying to get his arms to work and not quite figuring out why they wouldn’t. “Why ‘m I tied up? Untie me, will ya, so I c’n sit up?” Scott captured Johnny’s face between his palms. “I c’n do it. Lemme go.”

“Johnny, wait a second.”

The edge of Scott’s tone caught Johnny’s attention and he instantly went on the defensive. “No,” he demanded weakly. “Lemme sit up.” Ever so slowly, things fell back in place in the clutter of his mind, and it was a dark picture. The ugly feeling of panic began to ignite deep within. Johnny rolled his head in an effort to break away from the confining hands of his brother. Suddenly, he felt crushing claustrophobia. “GET AWAY!” he rasped, still trying to deny his condition as his awareness snapped into clarity.

Instead, Scott’s embrace tightened. Johnny felt his brother’s hand on the back of his neck supporting his head. He could tell by his brother’s posture that Scott’s other arm encircled his shoulders – but he couldn’t feel it. At that moment, memory crashed down.

“Dios, Scott, let me die. Just let me die!” Johnny gasped. His grip on any kind of self-control slipped horribly.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“You are going to do no such thing, Brother. Look at me! Johnny! I said look at me!” Scott leaned in until he was nose to nose with his panicked sibling.

The urge to break away overwhelmed him but Johnny instinctively knew it was an impossible task. Fighting to control his breathing, he managed to press the panic down and forced himself to look into Scott’s eyes. His teeth ground together in the effort to keep this tenuous grip of control.

“Johnny, listen to me. The bullet is out and your fever is down. You will recover, you hear? Give it time. You have to give yourself a little time. Look at me!”

Johnny managed to hold Scott’s stern stare, although part of him wanted to crawl away and hide somewhere.

“The bullet is out. You’ll get better. You hear me?”

The words, repeated in a soothing tone, got through Johnny’s considerable defenses as he allowed himself to believe. The initial panic receded, but he remained guarded to the possibilities his brother suggested. Now uncomfortable with Scott’s close proximity, Johnny’s eyes broke contact when he turned his head aside.

Scott identified the nuance and sat back to watch his brother.

For the first time, Johnny realized they were no longer on the trail. “Where are we?” he rasped as he crinkled his nose at the lingering smokiness that seemed to cloak everything. It was a familiar scent. Then his gaze fell on a weathered slip of a man lying near them and he knew instantly where he was.

“It seems we were found by some friends of yours,” Scott said softly.

The shaman began to rouse from his well-deserved sleep and pushed himself to a sitting position. The younger assistant appeared from nowhere, murmuring quietly and offering sustenance. As the apprentice began to assemble a meal, the Holy One found Johnny’s eyes with his own.

The shaman then began to speak in a hushed tone as he held Johnny’s gaze. Ancient hands weaved the air between them as he spoke directly to Madrid, and Johnny fought to give the old man his full attention. His swimming head made it difficult, but he managed.

The Holy One explained in his own way what had happened to him and Johnny appreciated the honesty. It was a colorful explanation, which came to no surprise for Johnny, but he now had a clear picture of their situation. Once finished and obviously spent, the ancient Indian grew quiet and seemed to fold in on himself as he began to eat. His hand trembled and the apprentice hovered closely.

“He’s been chanting for . . . I don’t even know how long we’ve been here,” Scott said quietly.

“Three days,” Johnny rasped. Scott shot him a surprised glance. “He told me.”

"You can understand him?"

Johnny nodded once. "Most of it. He makes sure I understand."

"He told you everything?" Scott said as he wearily scrubbed his temples. "Good. Then maybe you can tell me what that stuff was they burned in here for so long."

"The strong stuff," Johnny said distractedly. He'd recognized the scent as soon as it had touched his nose and suspected that it was the reason for his confused thoughts. Its use also told him that things were – or had been – very bad. Now that his panic was somewhat reined in, Johnny began an earnest self-exam as Scott told him about the weird encounter with the smoky medicine. Johnny eyes tried to close against his will. When he heard his own voice, Johnny was alarmed at its weakness. It was also becoming difficult to take stock of his condition with Scott's voice distracting him.

"My shoulders," Johnny blurted, abruptly interrupting Scott.

Scott straightened and leaned in excitedly. "What about your shoulders?"

"They – ache. They hurt, Scott. Like I've been lyin' down too much."

Scott gently took Johnny's shoulders in his hands. "Do you feel that?" The sensation was odd and disquieting.

Johnny knew Scott's hands were on him, but the feeling was dull and incomplete. "Yeah, I do," he said as his heart leaped.

Smiling hugely, Scott sat back and for the first time, noticed Hyahesh standing just inside the doorway. "He's getting better!"

The Elder smiled then glanced at the shaman. "We are pleased," he said softly. Taking a position opposite Scott, he indicated with a nod that Scott help resettle Johnny. They did so in quiet efficiency, and once finished, Johnny found his eyelids sliding closed against his will. Inwardly he cursed his physical weakness; when gone, the short-lived elation left him incredibly drained.

"*I'm walkin' out of here,*" he swore to himself as he drifted away.

Seeing that his brother was asleep, Scott rose to his feet and stretched. "I think I'll go outside and clean up," he said quietly. Hyahesh nodded and settled between the gunfighter and the shaman.

"I will stay," he said.

Scott nodded and stumbled toward the door, his legs cramped from inaction. An odd fuzziness still cloaked his thoughts, but it began to clear as he breathed fresh air. He stood just outside the hut for a few minutes enjoying the knowledge that his brother would be all right. He ran his hand over his eyes and started planning their departure. "*Murdoch's probably worried by now,*" he thought as he tried to figure out exactly how late they were in returning home. He shook his head. Whatever that stuff was that he'd been inhaling made it difficult to keep track of passing time.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Deciding that walking around could help to clear his head Scott headed toward the horses to check on Charlie and Barranca and planning on washing up at the creek. The early morning air was cool and refreshing to his throat and lungs as he walked, and the smell of cooking food soon set his stomach growling. Scott added eating to his list of things to do. The fact that Johnny was on the mend made everything look brighter.



From his perch high on the side of the valley wall Barrajas cursed the light fog as it swirled around his head. The mist had lifted from the valley floor and now clung to the trees around him. The sun would soon banish it completely.

His arm throbbed and burned, but he continued to work his hand against the ache. Barrajas knew that he was much better off than Madrid, and that thought made him smile. That interfering bastard wouldn't foil him again.

Hunkering down into the rocks he peered around the largest one and scanned the encampment below. He'd been watching the tribe for nearly two days now and had a good idea of their routine. Early on he'd noticed the showy palomino in the remuda and knew that Madrid and Lancer's son had to be in one of the huts.

When the tall blond eventually stumbled from the one hut that was set off from the rest, Barrajas grinned and flexed his wounded hand in earnest.

"I'll get a payoff out of this after all," he mused. He'd had two days now to figure out his next step and everything depended on Lancer's actions; whatever the rich gringo did, Barrajas had a plan to cover it. There was no way in hell Barrajas was leaving this valley alone and without reward, and with Madrid out of the way, things were much easier than he could have hoped for.

Barrajas then began to think about what he would do with all the money he would be getting soon. Very soon.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sun was at its peak in the sky when Scott, shaken awake, saw the intrusive golden ball through the smoke hole in the hut's roof. A woman's voice was low and her words rapid and Scott didn't understand one word she said. He did, however, understand the urgency of her actions as she pulled on his arm and shoved his gun belt into his hands. If his calculations were correct, he'd not only slept through the night, but through the morning, too. Where Johnny had slept the previous day away, Scott made busy around the camp and took care of Barranca and Charlie. As soon as Johnny was able, they could leave.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming." Scott made her wait until he secured the weapon and then followed her outside where he blinked away the fog in his head. The woman hurried along the path to the shaman's hut with Scott close behind, and he became alarmed when their destination became clear. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Is Johnny all right?" The incomprehensible reply ended when they arrived at the heavy hide doorway. The woman stood aside and Scott pushed his way inside.

"Johnny?" He called, trying to find his brother before his eyes adjusted to the dimness.

"Here."

Relief sagged Scott's shoulders. When he could make out forms in the dark interior, he saw that the Elder squatted next to Johnny. When Johnny waved him over, Scott brightened. "You can move your arm!"

The crooked grin was just as welcome. "I'm gettin' there," Johnny said. "Hyahesh has some news."

"News?" Scott dropped onto a folded deerskin beside his brother.

"They've spotted Barrajas in the hills. He is watching the camp."

"Where?" Scott gave the doorway a sideways glance.

"High up on the hillside. He's got a long gun with him."

"They can't get to him?" Scott tilted his head, indicating Hyahesh.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“Too steep. They can’t get behind ‘em. Besides, I don’t want these people takin’ on my fight.”

Hyahesh frowned at that and launched into a rapid reply in his tribe’s language. The words caused Johnny’s eyes to register disapproval.

“Looks like I should be agreeing with him,” Scott said. “This is my fight, Johnny. He wants me.”

“After he goes through me.”

Scott snorted and shook his head. He caught Hyahesh’s dark gaze and Scott tilted his head toward the door. The Elder seemed to read Scott’s thoughts for a moment before departing. Then, Scott studied Johnny for a few long seconds before speaking. “Quite a reputation you’ve got around these parts.”

Johnny frowned and turned his attention to his struggle to sit up. Scott didn’t offer to help him.

“Is that why you think you need to take this on alone? Your reputation?”

Johnny’s face was shiny with his efforts. Finally, upright and breathing hard, he dragged a trembling hand through his hair. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth.”

The brothers glared at each other until Johnny’s furious brow suddenly smoothed and he unleashed a cocky grin. Scott’s frown deepened. He’d seen that smile before – it was one his brother used just before laying out one of his many outlandish proposals.

“Well, there is one point we agree on – we don’t want Hyahesh’s people involved, right?”

The question seemed innocent enough but Scott looked at it from all angles before replying with suspicious caution. “Right.”

“Then we need to take a stand away from here.”

Again, Scott tried to figure where this was going before agreeing.

“We need to bring Barrajas in closer. If we’re out of the village and he thinks I’m hurt . . .”

“You are hurt.”

Johnny rolled his eyes in exasperation. “If ya ain’t gonna listen . . .”

Scott crossed his arms. His mouth twitched. He smelled a swindle but was unable to guess Johnny’s plan. He needed more information. He also knew that he’d more than likely be lured into agreeing to something he didn’t want to do if he didn’t pay close attention to what Johnny *wasn’t* saying. It had happened before. “I’m listening,” he said with reluctance.

“I know just the place. Hyahesh can get me there. Once Barrajas is in close to take me out, I’ll be ready.”

Scott blinked. “What?” He ran Johnny’s words through his head again. “Ready? Ready for what?”

Johnny reached under a folded skin and pulled out his gun belt. His body twitched and shook to keep balanced as he buckled it on over the soft buckskin pants he wore. Next, he grabbed his shirt and shook it open. He teetered sideways with the motion, but caught himself before toppling over.

“You’re kidding me, right? A gunfight? You think you’re going to take him in a gunfight in your condition?”

“course not,” Johnny snorted as he pulled on the shirt with shaky arms. “He ain’t gonna play fair. I’ll be waitin’ for him. ‘sides, he ain’t gonna know.”

“He ain’t gonna . . .” Scott repeated, incredulous, before correcting himself. “He’s not going to know what? That you can’t walk? That you can barely hold up your gun? Just how are you going to hide that?”

“That’s the beauty of it, Scott. I ain’t gonna hide it. He’s gonna think I’m worse off than I really am.” Johnny finally got the shirt on, but gave up on the buttons after seconds of fumbling. He smiled that irritating, triumphant smile. “That’s the beauty of it!”

“The beauty . . .” Scott repeated, throwing his arms up in exasperation.

Johnny yelled for Hyahesh, his voice sounding breathless. The Elder slipped inside a moment later and Scott realized he must have been listening outside. Johnny rattled off what suspiciously sounded like orders in the People’s tongue. There was a brief conversation between the pair before Hyahesh left the hut. The Elder looked happy to Scott, which set off more alarms in his head.

“What fairy tale did you just tell him?”

Johnny settled back with a smug expression. “What makes you say that?”

Scott rolled his eyes. “If it wasn’t a fairy tale, you would have spoken in English. I will be part of what you’re thinking of doing, like it or not.”

Johnny’s expression turned hard. “No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will.”

“No.”

“Johnny . . .”

“No, Scott, and that’s final!”

Scott jabbed the air with an accusing finger in his brother’s direction. “Don’t you lay down any rules for me, boy,” he growled. “We’re in this together and we will get out of this together! Understand?”

“It’s you that doesn’t understand, Scott. It’s me he wants dead to get to you. I can’t take the chance of you or these people gettin’ in the middle! Barrajas knows he has to come through me to get to you. With me gone, you are easy pickin’s. I’ll handle it.”

Scott swept his arm in an arc that encompassed Johnny’s seated form. “And just how are you going to handle this, huh? You can’t even stand. You want to keep these people safe? The only way is for all of us to work together. You aren’t alone

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

anymore.” Then something struck him and Scott took steps to reach Johnny’s side. From there, he glared down. “Hyahesh doesn’t know you’re keeping him out of the plan, does he? He doesn’t know you plan on going this alone?”

Johnny’s silence was Scott’s answer. Scott aborted the motion to grab his brother’s shoulders to shake some sense into him. Instead, he let out an explosive breath and paced a small, frustrated circle.

After all this time, the concept of family still seemed to escape Johnny. Scott continued to pace and counted to ten before speaking. The only way was to show Johnny what they had to work with. Then he would have no choice but to see the truth of it all.

“Fine,” he snapped, planting himself right in front of Johnny. “You walk out of here on your own, right now, and I’ll consider it.” He locked his gaze on Johnny’s smoldering blue eyes.

“When I walk out of here, right now,” Johnny’s low voice said with pointed determination. “I’m on my own.” The brothers locked heated glares. “Deal?”

Scott nodded once and took a few steps back, well out of the area he needed to catch his brother when he fell. He pinned Johnny with an expectant stare. “Deal.”

Johnny didn’t answer. Instead, he set his jaw and scooted his back to the flimsy wall, getting himself into a position to stand. Scott squelched an overwhelming desire to help him – Johnny had to fail all by himself. Scott crossed his arms over his chest, clenching his fists in his own struggle to withhold assistance.

It was agonizing to watch Johnny fight so hard. The hut framework, not meant to support the full weight of a man, bowed and shuddered causing the structure to shake and the bindings to groan. Johnny’s face was a mask of sweat and determination, his breathing labored. Pain arrowed lines from the corners of his eyes and mouth that deepened with Johnny’s intense effort. His breath, forced between locked jaws, escaped as animalistic grunts sharp hisses.

Scott’s heart ached, but he didn’t budge. He heard voices outside and took steps to block the door. Johnny’s narrowed eyes followed him but his effort did not lessen. Johnny’s legs trembled and moved without their usual grace, each demanded inch equally resistant. Every move was earned with strain and pain and the horror that it may be his last – who knew what permanent this was doing to his body?

At first, Scott cursed Johnny’s stubbornness, but with each terrible, passing minute, Scott’s curses faded in the light of admiration as he realized that every piece of Johnny Madrid Lancer’s reputation was rightfully earned with blood, sweat and tears. The proof was right in front of him. By the time Johnny stood across from him on legs as wobbly as a newborn colt’s, his bare, shiny chest



## LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

heaving beneath the unbuttoned shirt as if he'd run a rough mile and wearing a defiant expression that hid his exhaustion, Scott knew he was beaten.

Scott held Johnny's glare for a few heartbeats before he ducked his head and stepped aside, accepting the defeat. He allowed Johnny to pass through the doorway without further challenge and marveled at the man's power, physical and mental.

Still, Scott knew that under the storied reputation and all the consequence it brought, Johnny Madrid Lancer was still a flesh and bone man and that every man had a limit. He prayed Johnny hadn't just reached his.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Johnny kept a sharp eye on his brother as Hyahesh and the shaman prepared for the next step in his plan. Scott had given in too easily, but from what he saw, his brother was keeping his word to stay clear. It was a good thing because it was taking entirely too much of Johnny's energy to get his body to cooperate.

When he first strapped on his beloved Colt in the healing tent, Johnny felt only slight pressure from the leather. Getting to his feet was harder than he'd imagined; everything from the waist down was irritating tingle and numbness. When he pushed aside the hide door, he hoped he wouldn't fall into an embarrassing heap at the threshold.

Now, his hands were free of the annoying tingle and only his fingertips lacked feeling. He didn't dare try to button his shirt because he did not want to fumble in front of Hyahesh's people or Scott, so it hung open like a forgotten detail. It worked with what he had in mind, anyway. He'd rolled the rest of his clothes and tied them to his back in a sling; there would be time to dress when he was alone.

"You can walk there yourself?" Hyahesh asked.

"Yes," Johnny answered. The place he'd asked Hyahesh to take him was perfect. It would force Barrajas to come in close – close enough that Johnny couldn't miss.

"Then let us go." Hyahesh turned and the Shaman led the way out of camp.

Johnny, surrounded by a small number of warriors, frowned when Scott joined the gathering. "We had a deal," he growled.

"I said I'd leave you alone. I didn't say I'd let you get there by yourself."

Johnny didn't have time to argue. He needed to get to the spot he had in mind fast in case his body staged a mutiny and became useless once again. The zing of fear that raced up his spine charged a tight smile – the rare feeling was welcome for once.

The small troop started their slow climb into the hill in a bunch. Before long, they strung out into a single file line as they weaved along the tight space the rocks allowed. The path wended deep into a narrow cut in the hills. Johnny used the boulders to bear some of his weight as he passed. His legs still felt clumsy and it took more concentration than he'd hoped to lift each step.

Although it was full daytime, the growing walls of the cut blocked the sunlight and they crossed a shadow line into cold shade. The rock face felt clammy at first, but that changed as the slope increased. The path was just as Johnny remembered.

He could hear Scott asking questions but the warriors did not answer and Johnny smirked at the growing tone of irritation in his brother's voice. If it didn't take so much of his wind, Johnny would reply. For the immediate moment, he had to concentrate or risk falling on his face.

The atmosphere of the shadows changed with the next turn. When the strong smell of sulfur hit him, Johnny knew they'd arrived. His face, already damp with exertion, blushed with the rock's moist heat. A final turn around a large boulder exposed the open grotto he remembered and his body drooped from both relief and exhaustion.

"What on Earth . . ." Scott started as he stepped into view. Breathless, he scanned the grotto before he crooked a curious eyebrow at the clear, sulfurous pond bubbling at his feet. "Wow."

"Careful, Boston," Johnny panted. "It's hot enough to boil the meat off your bones." The steam that rolled up the grotto's curved wall made him dizzy. They trailed along a curved path that traced the edge of the steaming, natural well just before the abrupt slope to a lower pool.

Here, below the moist grotto, the walls danced with etchings painted by natural minerals. Horses, hunters and game decorated the lower sections while celestial bodies and gods dominated the rocky, upper canvas. The walls concave shape created an open feeling, but the walls curved inward as they rose, allowing a narrow, eye-shaped opening at the top that framed the vivid blue sky. Scott felt like he was in a tropical fish bowl complete with water and God's eye hovering above.

Johnny sat on a flat rock at the edge of the lower pool, put down the rolled bundle he'd strapped across his back and started to remove his boots in a clumsy fashion. The shaman chanted.

"This pool has a cold spring that mixes with the hot water from up there," Johnny said, pointing to the mineral hot spring above them. As he spoke, the warriors started to leave in single file. "It's a holy place of healing to them. It makes sense for me to be here."

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“I see,” Scott said as he eyed the area with suspicion. “One way in, one way out.”

“Yup.” Johnny didn’t say anymore. He rolled up the thin buckskin pants to his knees and put his feet in the hot spring as he spoke with Hyahesh. The Shaman made a few motions then placed a necklace over Johnny’s head. A small bag hung against Johnny’s bare chest.

Then the shaman removed a leafy substance from his own neck back and crumbled it in a shallow *mortero* of a nearby boulder. Chanting all the while, he scraped some minerals from the wall and sprinkled it over dried leaves. He lit the pile with a flint which caught and smoked. Then, he turned to leave and Hyahesh helped him up the steep path. When they drew abreast of Scott, the Shaman placed an ancient, boney hand on his forearm and looked into his face.

“I hope that isn’t the same stuff that burned in the hut,” Scott said, holding the shaman’s gaze. The words, though, were meant for his brother.

“It’s not.” Johnny’s voice was a church whisper but the solid walls carried the words with ease. “He wants you to go. This cleansing ritual is done alone.”

Scott’s expression was unreadable as he turned and gave Johnny a long look. Then, at the shaman’s instance, he turned and followed the last of the clan from the grotto.

Johnny knew he had a very short time to regain his strength. With the afternoon wearing away, Barrajas would waste no time getting here. For now, Scott was safe with the warriors around him in the village.

Once Scott and the others were out of sight, Johnny moved to dry land and started the arduous task of changing his clothes. He unbuckled his gun belt after removing the gun and placing it close by. The buckskin pants skinned off without much problem, but Johnny’s fingers and limbs felt like fat sausages. He unrolled the pack and was glad for the large Conchos on his pant legs. They were easy for his uncooperative fingers to manipulate. Next, he pulled on his boots. His feet tingled.

Johnny, panting, felt like he’d climbed the Rocky Mountains. He took a deep breath and pushed to his feet, leaning against one of the nearby boulders for balance. Blaming the shaman’s smoke for his dizziness, Johnny tried to button his shirt but abandoned the effort after a short battle. Instead, he tucked it in all around leaving the front to gap open. After strapping the gun belt back on and settling the Colt home, he took the opportunity to rest.



From his perch high above the village, Barrajas saw everything. When he spotted Lancer’s golden hair among the returning warriors, a predatory grin

started. Realizing Madrid was unaccounted for brought him to his feet. He'd heard rumors of mystical healing rituals and the hard smile grew – Madrid was alone.

Careful to keep out of sight, Barrajas moved with awkward stealth. The tight bandage around his wounds had done its job to stop the bleeding but did nothing to cut the pain. A growing excitement did that job and he made his way across the face of the cliff at a quick clip.

Using the natural swells of the land, boulders and abundant growth, Barrajas stayed hidden from the tribe and found the serpentine path into the valley he sought. A quick check of the sun confirmed he had time to complete his task and steal away, but he had to be very quiet – the walls would echo. Barrajas paused and stowed the long rifle behind a tombstone-shaped rock before he pulled a long knife from his boot. He checked the security of his grip and started up the narrow path.

Soon he would be a rich man.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER FORTEEN

Damp heat made the air heavy in the rocky cocoon. Johnny allowed his eyes to close as he evaluated the rest of his senses and if he could count on them as he'd hoped. A sheath of cold sweat clung to his skin and because of it, mapping the numb areas was easy. Feeling returned to his torso after the itchy tingling dissipated, but he still had the disturbing sense that he lacked fingertips. He wiggled his fingers and felt where they rested on his thighs, taking it as a good sign that he could pull a trigger.

As for his legs, Johnny could trace the clinginess of his pants down to his boots. Below that was a mat of numbness intertwined with spidery tingles. Inside his boots, he worked his toes and frowned at the pain that shot up the back of his calf. One at a time, he dug his feet into the fine layer of dirt that cloaked the ground, pleased that he could detect the firm rock beneath with the balls of his feet.

The scent of damp rock reminded him of a summer storm. He could feel where a slight breeze from the valley cut across his cheek and heard the faint muttering of the bubbling pond. He sat as still as the boulders and waited to hear the interruption of the natural rhythm that would warn of Barrajas' arrival.

Time slowed to the point of becoming hypnotic as Johnny allowed the atmosphere to envelop him. He was unable to realize the actual amount of passed time when he heard the faint, soft sound of leather brushing stone. Inwardly, Johnny smiled in satisfaction.

"It's about time," he said aloud as his hand trailed up his thigh and his thumb hooked over the back of his holster. His finger tapped the hard leather, but the fingertip was still numb and all he felt was a nudge of the holster against his thigh. Ignoring the weird lack of sensation, Johnny turned his head in the direction of his target and opened his eyes.

The wavering vision that greeted him took him by complete surprise. The walls expanded and fell as if they were breathing. Johnny's stomach rolled.

“You don’t look so good, Madrid.”

Johnny’s eyes tracked in jarring jumps and fed his growing alarm. Barrajas was out of focus when Johnny found him among the breathing rock of the upper pool. His eyes refused to lock on target and he heard a short, raspy laugh when he pushed off from the boulder to stand. He bobbed a step before gaining precarious balance.

“Ya look drunk, compadre. Holdin’ out on me again, are ya?”

The wavering figure slithered around the last turn that separated them and Barrajas stood at the top of the steep rise. Johnny blinked hard and quickly shook his head to clear his vision. He finally made out Barrajas’ arms held out to the side of his body. The knife was large enough see through the fog and became Johnny’s sole focus as his enemy raised his arm to throw it.

Johnny knew his opponent’s accurate skill with the weapon and his inner sense of timing told him he was in trouble. Even as his traitorous hand finally obeyed and gripped his gun he knew he was too late. Instinct took over and he cleared leather as his body thrust forward to meet the expected blade on his own terms. His arm jerked when he shot, and his ears rang with an echoed report followed by a splash.

Off balance, he fell to his hands and knees and his brain screamed to roll aside and take aim again. He heard a gasp followed by splashing and a gargled scream. His own actions clumsy and awkward, Johnny finally got the Colt pointed in the right direction. Barrajas, however, was gone and the grotto silent except for his own hard breathing.

The Colt trembled in Johnny’s tingling grip. He blinked again and caught his breath, but his gun sights remained clear. Johnny allowed his gaze to wander. There was no sign of his adversary. Spent, Johnny’s arm dropped to the earth.

“You okay, Brother?”

Johnny frowned and rolled to his back. Looking up, his uncertain vision made out Scott’s head and shoulders hovering from the edge of the eye-shaped hole above. He could barely make out the rifle barrel’s long outline next to him. Johnny chuffed a short laugh, and then swallowed hard to keep his stomach in place. The unfocused scenery did not sit well so he squeezed his eyes shut to block it out.

“You don’t follow orders very well,” he croaked.

“Must run in the family. Don’t move. I’ll be right down.”

“Sure, sure.” The words whispered past Johnny’s dry lips and he allowed darkness to take over.



## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Wakefulness teased Johnny with soft conversation and the distant sound of feminine laughter. Recalling past queasiness, he opened his eyes with caution, pleased that the branches of the ancient mesquite tree above him swayed in time with the cool breeze that caressed his face. The prior fog and undulating landscape were gone. He took in a deep, grateful breath and turned his head to look around.

“Well, look who decided to join the rest of us.” Scott and one of the tribe’s women parted. She walked toward the collection of huts and Scott, carrying a bowl, came to Johnny’s side and squatted. He put the bowl down and helped Johnny to sit up. “Here, you need this.” Scott offered the bowl. “It’s water.”

Suddenly, Johnny noticed the dry tickle in his throat and accepted the bowl, drinking the cool, refreshing water without pause. Finished, he sighed and looked at the bowl. He realized that he could feel the smooth wood on every part of his hands and grinned.

“How are you feeling?” Scott asked.

“Great,” Johnny replied as he put the bowl down. Memory flashed and he frowned. “What happened?”

“You passed out. Dehydration.”

Johnny saw vague pictures in his mind. He rubbed his stomach in memory. “Barrajas is dead?”

Scott frowned with distaste. “Yeah. You were right about the hot spring. Not a pretty sight.”

“How long . . . ?”

“You’ve been out since yesterday afternoon. Hungry?” Johnny’s stomach chose that time to demand sustenance and Scott laughed. “Guess so. You can start with this.”

Johnny accepted the odd biscuit his brother handed him and examined it with raised brow. “You make this?”

“Don’t judge. I had to use what I could find. Or would you rather have the mush they made for you?”

“I’d rather have a steak,” Johnny griped as he took a bite and chewed.

“Stew’s as close as you’ll get and it’s on the fire. Eat that first. It’s easier on the stomach.”

Johnny remained silent and finished the biscuit, which agreed with his gut and tasted pretty good, but Scott didn’t need to know the latter. He brushed the crumbs from his shirt. “Well, Teresa’s job is safe.”

Scott snorted and sat down beside him. Johnny began a self-examination that started with his fingers.

“Still numb?” Scott asked.



“Nope. I c’n feel all the way to the tips.” He wiggled his fingers and then stretched his legs out in front of him. “Toes, too.”

“That’s a relief,” Scott breathed, ending with a short laugh. He put his arm around Johnny and gave him an affectionate shake. “I wasn’t looking forward to explaining any of this to Murdoch.”

“Help me up.”

Scott helped Johnny to his feet, but Johnny shouldered him away when he started brushing him off. “I can do it.” Scott stepped back and crossed his arms, surveying his stubborn sibling with sparkling eyes. Johnny shot him a sideways look. “Quit starin’. I ain’t gonna fall down.”

Scott just laughed again and ignored the order. When Johnny straightened, he patted his hips and glanced at his brother, but Scott silently pointed to the base of the mesquite before Johnny could ask. He retrieved his gun belt and strapped it on, then checked the Colt. Satisfied, he gave it a cocky spin before shoving it home and smiled crookedly at his singular audience.

“We can leave as soon as you eat,” Scott said, again before Johnny could speak. Then he turned and moved off.

Johnny followed, still grinning. “You a mind reader now, Boston?”

“I just know you too well. Especially after this trip.”

Johnny pondered if that statement bothered him or not. Unable to decide, he just stayed quiet and followed his brother’s lead. Soon, the tantalizing smell of venison stew washed all negative thoughts away.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The brothers said goodbye to the tribe and finished crossing the Tejon pass with little fanfare, which satisfied the both of them to the bone. Moving along at a slow but steady pace, it took a pair of days for Johnny's strength to return. Atop the final slope that marked the south end of the San Joaquin Valley, they pulled their horses to a stop and surveyed the area side by side.

"I suppose the first thing we should do is wire Murdoch. We're over a week late." Tipping his hat back on his head, Scott swiped his wrist across his hairline, squinted, and then readjusted his hat.

Beside him, Johnny leaned on arms crossed over his saddle horn as Barranca shifted and shook his golden neck. "Yeah, that's a good idea. He may not show it for Teresa's sake, but I'm sure he's on the worry."

A faint whistle caught their attention and the men turned to locate the distant train, crawling along the edge of the valley like a line of ants. Scott tipped his head in its direction. "Do you think they'll remember that our bull tore up the cattle car?"

"I hope not." Johnny sat up and reset his hat. "Otherwise, those tickets you got are gonna get a whole lot more expensive."

In an automatic reaction to the mention of the tickets, Scott patted his pocket. "They're a bit worn and torn but they can't charge us more if we've already paid." He narrowed his eyes in a sidelong glance. "If they try, we'll just give 'em Barranca in trade."

"Oh, I don't think so." Johnny fired back with a laugh. He nudged the horse in question forward. "They'll just have to hold you hostage at the other end until I come up with the cash. Barrajas had a good idea there after all."

Scott chuffed and trailed along behind Johnny. "Speaking of cash, we don't have much left. When we wire Murdoch, we could ask for more but we won't get it until the next stop at the earliest. It'll depend on when he gets the wire. We may not get any at all." When Johnny didn't reply or make comment on the situation,

Scott jogged his horse to Barranca's side. "Did you hear me? Don't plan on any drinks or big meals for now."

"I heard ya."

Johnny didn't look at his brother but Scott identified his devious expression quicker than a sportin' gal spots lonely cowboys. "I don't like what you're thinking."

That netted a glance. "You don't know what I'm thinking."

"Then I don't like the *idea* of what you're thinking."

When Johnny snorted and settled into the saddle, Scott recognized the motion and shortened his reins in preparation to chase the palomino. Then Johnny gave him the familiar, brilliant smile that always got him what he wanted and said, "I do have a plan, but you gotta keep up."

Barranca sprang away with Scott a curse behind and the Lancers galloped toward the tiny collection of buildings that marked the train stop. When they arrived at the edge of what could loosely be called a town, they slowed to a walk to cool the horses down.

Scott checked his pocket watch. "Let's find the train schedule first." After a moment, he added, "I'll need to know the earliest we can escape from this plan of yours." He then looked at Johnny studying the town. "You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll wait outside."

They reined to a stop next to the train platform and dismounted. Scott tried to hand off his reins for Johnny to hold but noted that his brother was absorbed in studying the town and its sparse population traveling the boardwalks, so he tied them to the nearby hitch rail instead. It didn't take long to find and consult the schedule tacked to the wall in a once garish frame now covered with dust and ash. When he returned to the horses, Scott paused to give the street a look-over, especially since it still held Johnny's full attention.

"The next train's in about an hour," he said as his gaze swept the area.

Since it was late in the day, Scott wasn't surprised to see the largest collection of horses tethered in front of a two-storied building where piano music tinkled from the inside. The worn sign perched on the edge of the building displayed faded lettering labeling it "Kitt's Sal n". A ragged hole carved by bullets replaced the double o's that would make it a saloon.

"Kind of quiet for the number of horses outside," Scott realized aloud.

"Locals. Not much else around."

"So what do the locals do? Those aren't cow ponies. Farmers? Miners?" Scott turned to his brother to continue his train of thought but Johnny's calculating expression and suspicious grin derailed it.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

Any chance of an innocent track vanished when he thumped Scott's chest with the back of his hand and said, "It's perfect." Johnny spoke with a sure finality that gave Scott pause.

"It is?"

"Yup. Let's go." Johnny started walking with determination with Barranca following like the obedient horse he occasionally was.

Scott took a moment to corral any rebuttals, tugged his reins loose from the rail and followed, feeling that this might be his final glimpse of daylight. His mount must have had a smidgen of good sense left because he seemed to drag his heels as Scott pulled him along. Meanwhile, Johnny secured Barranca to an empty hitching rail away from the equine gathering, mounted the boardwalk and positioned himself to one side of the saloon doors. From there, he peered inside the oddly subdued business for some purpose only Johnny knew.

By the time Scott reached his side, Johnny had the calmness of a kid promised candy and a gleam in his eyes that raised Scott's reluctance to a new level of alarming. He didn't have a chance to voice his unease because Johnny grabbed his elbow and steered him to the adjoining alley. Once there, Johnny unbuckled his gun belt and hiked it up high on his hips.

"Just follow my lead, okay? This'll work. Just let me know when it's time to go."

"What? Go? You mean to the train?"

Johnny rolled his eyes and shoved his hat off his head so it dangled down his back by the stampede string. "Just . . . come on. And don't call me by name. Trust me."

Before Scott could interject his ideas on trust, Johnny ducked his head and shook it, fluffing his hair with his fingers and pulling some of it to fall over his forehead. Scott blinked as the dangerous gunfighter transformed before his eyes into a youthful, green cowboy.

Scott wasn't able to comment on the visual trick because Johnny then dragged him around the corner and through the saloon's swinging doors into a thick cloud of cigar smoke and sweat-dried bodies. Scott had time to pull his arm free and tug his cuff into place before Johnny nudged him into motion. As they maneuvered to the edge of the crowded room, Scott knew his sibling read the bunch like Murdoch read a book – each character scrutinized and dissected, their place in the story precisely defined in his mind's plan. Normally, Scott enjoyed watching the exercise but this time he was too busy contemplating the dire possibilities in his headlong path into the unknown.

Their entry didn't go unnoticed and although Scott knew it was Johnny's intention, he still didn't like it. He felt the suspicious curiosity following them as they crashed the private affair, and that's when it hit him - this *was* a private affair.

These dirt grubbing locals worked side by side on a daily basis and this was their time and place to unwind. Their sizes varied but they all had a common lean-muscled physique with large, thick hands and skin leathered by the sun. Even the piano player possessed ham-sized hands and Scott marveled at his talent; the man's fingers were thicker than the keys.

One man, however, stood out in the crowd and Scott didn't notice him until Johnny tugged him to a stop at the bar. Seated at the poker table farthest from the door and just off Scott's elbow, the large man held a smoldering cigar in one hand and a fan of cards in the other. He was clean, older than the rest and his clothes fussy neat. A black jacket hung on the back of his chair. His wolf-like eyes were narrow with displeasure. This was a man of station, unused to challenge

The man's quiet scrutiny burned. And then there was Johnny.

Johnny made no effort to stay in the shadows and with the youthful ignorance he projected, he looked as harmless as a day-old calf. He looked . . . innocent. Somehow, his brother managed to look as much like Madrid as baby resembled the bartender. This bunch had no inkling of who had just entered their midst. At the moment, Scott couldn't decide if that was good thing or bad thing.

Then Johnny shoved him between two bar patrons, forcing them to shift apart. Scowls greeted them, but Johnny seemed oblivious. Scott's evaluation fell to the bad side of things.

"scuze me, friend," Johnny all but hollered. "We need somethin' to wash the dust down." He wrinkled his nose at the shot glass in the hand of one of the displaced men. "Whoowee, I hope the whiskey ain't all gone, 'cos I can't stomach that stuff. Tequila, right?" He wagged a finger at the liquid. "Boy, you musta got a gut a iron to take that poison. One shot knocks me on my ass, I gotta tell ya, but I got no problem with whiskey. Barkeep? A couple of beers and whiskies over here!"

Wondering what scheme could possibly get Johnny to bad mouth what he usually called his "mother's milk", Scott made the wise decision to keep his mouth shut. He gave the other displaced patron to his left a weak smile of apology.

Johnny poked him with an elbow. "Heya, pard, let's get ta drinkin'! Pay the man!" Although the bartender produced the drinks, he held them back until he saw money. Scott obliged by digging from some coins and then tossed them on the bar. Johnny snatched the drinks. "Just a mite protective there, aren't ya, buster? He always like that?" Johnny asked his perturbed-and-growing-more-so neighbor.

Scott let out a nervous lap and raised his glass to the scowling men. The good intention ignored, he downed the shot and hunched his shoulder in hopes of appearing smaller or at least unconnected to the loud-mouthed stranger in his brother's skin.

Johnny continued his roll. "Never been to this part of the state. We're from Arizona." He turned around and leaned back against the bar to survey the poker

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

games in progress and whistle at the saloon girls. "Hey," he nudged his annoyed neighbor. "That all ya got here? Ain't much for pretty, are they? This place sure ain't very busy, either. This is like a Sunday afternoon where I come from."

"Why don't you go back there?" his new non-friend snarled.

"Uh," Scott started, straightening a little. The plan wasn't going very well. Or was it?

Johnny elbowed Scott into silence and downed his beer, and then threw back the whiskey. "Aw, is this what you call whiskey?" Johnny said with a shudder. "Arizona water's stronger than this!"

As Johnny carried on, Scott saw that many in the room glancing at the well-dressed man, now paused in his poker game and nailing Johnny with a stern glare. As Johnny's insulting tirade expanded, men inched aside until a path cleared, leading right to the gentleman's table.

"If this is all you got, then I'm feelin' sorry for everyone here." Johnny waved an arm and took a noisy sip of beer.

Scott winced and tried to map a route for retreat. There wasn't one. Then Johnny ratcheted his anxiety up to an unspeakable level with his next insult.

"In fact, this whiskey's so paltry, I bet I can out drink anyone here!" Johnny threw out an arm to indicate the room's occupants and knocked the hat from one of the poker player's head. The man shot to his feet, his chair scraping a chill across Scott's stomach.

Scott swallowed hard and tensed to fight but the gentleman stayed his tablemate with a soft word and a subtle nod.

"Are ya takin' me up on my offer, mister?" Johnny challenged, his eyes on the poker player standing inches from him. The man's hands tightened into fists but Scott was surprised when he didn't take a swing. Johnny maintained the open, loose stance of an easy target.

What on Earth was Johnny thinking? The thick silence that followed Johnny's question expanded outward. The only person moving was Johnny's neighbor. He shuffled sideways to the poker table that was now the center of everyone's attention and stopped beside the gentleman. Then he leaned down said something too soft for anyone else to hear. After delivering his message, the gentleman shoved him away and into a passing saloon girl. The girl squealed as they both landed in a heap. Under the natty clothes was a strong man, Scott realized.

No one moved and the air of tension rose, but oblivious to it all, Johnny chuckled the laugh of the mentally deranged and hitched his elbows back on the bar. The man he challenged clenched his hands and opened his mouth to reply, but the gentleman spoke first.

"I'm a gambling man." He laid his cards on the table with an air of shrewd calculation. His calm tone spawned troubled expression on his tablemate's faces. Scott stiffened instinctively.

"What's that?" Johnny chirped, switching his attention from the worker in front of him as if he'd just noticed the gentleman. "Wasn't talkin' to you, mister." Johnny cocked his head aside at the new curiosity. "But money's money and you do look like you got more of it than this galoot." He raked the man in front of him with a quick head to toe glance.

The gentleman chuckled, a sound that didn't help Scott to relax. He picked up his beer and tried to force it down his dry throat.

"You may be a fool, but your instinct is correct." The man crossed his arms on the poker table. "These men work for me."

"No kiddin'?" Johnny straightened and hung his hands on his hips. "Well, then, Mr . . .?"

"Steele. Robert Steele."

"Well, Mr. Steele, nice ta meet ya. You c'n call me Murdoch."

Scott choked on beer.

"So, what horse ya bettin' on, then?" He nodded to the hatless employee in front of him. "Him or me?" Johnny asked.

"Well, Murdoch, I'm going to challenge you myself, but I'd like to make it more interesting, if you don't mind."

"Interesting?" Johnny said with a slight frown.

"Yes. Two conditions. First, when I win, I get to kick your boorish ass out of my town."

The men at the table chuckled but Johnny looked thoughtful for a second before he nodded with a huge, condescending smile. "Like that's gonna happen, but sure," he said, yanking the chair out from under the man across from Steele. The dislodged player thumped to the floor with a squawk as Johnny took his seat. Steele spoke again.

"Second, I get to pick the poison." The big man leveled a hunter's stare at Johnny that made Scott's heart race.

Johnny laughed as he replied, oblivious to the fact that he was viewed as prey. "Sure, Bob, but you ain't got much to pick from what I've tasted."

"You can call me Mr. Steele," the gentleman corrected as he signaled the bartender with a single flick of his wrist. "Glasses and tequila, Mikey."

"What?" Johnny yelped as if poked with a sharp stick. "It's supposed to be whiskey! That's what I was drinkin'!"

Scott covered his short laugh with a cough when Johnny's intentional set up became clear. He regarded his boot tips until his smile was under control and when just managing to do so, he felt an elbow jab his side.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

“Well?” His previously surly neighbor’s smile was predatory in nature. “You backin’ your friend?”

“Oh,” Scott started. “Uh . . .” he glanced at the hostile eyes locked on him and feigned looking trapped. “Ah . . . sure, sure.” He patted his pockets nervously before fishing out some coins. “I have a couple dollars here . . .”

The bet - taken faster than a snake strike - caused spirits to soar at the bar and the patrons broke into excited chatter. Scott, surprised with the crowd’s sudden rowdiness, tucked his bill fold away and made sure his elbow held it close to his body. When he finally looked to Johnny, the twinkle in his brother’s eyes amidst the growing chaos assured him that, in his mind at least, his fabled sibling had things well in hand.

Typical Madrid, he realized. Scott was now on a runaway horse and all he could do was hang on - not an unfamiliar feeling these past weeks.

The first five shots went down in quick succession. Johnny grumbled after each one, his tense face showing traces of fear that became more obvious as minutes passed. After the sixth shot, the empty glass shot out of his hand when he slammed it down for a refill. The crowd’s energy, swelling with each shot, spiked with the fumble and there was a sideways shuffle of hands to enhance wagers.

Busy with the increased number of bets coming his way, Scott didn’t really look at his brother until several minutes passed. By now, the ring of men surrounding Johnny’s table was a half-dozen men thick and Scott had to duck and bob to get a line of sight.

At first glance Johnny looked awful. His face, pinched in distress and clammy with sweat, caused Scott alarm - until he watched his brother move. To the uninitiated, Johnny looked in distress but Scott saw that his brother’s hands still had the calculated and precise grace a dancer would envy. His grip was firm.

Across the table and after another pair of shots, Steele’s took on a glassy sheen and his hands groped for the next shot as if he were blind. Or seeing double at the least. Scott surmised that the next shot rising probably looked like triplets to the staunch competitor.

The following shot took several stabs to find his lips. Johnny countered the move by missing his mouth entirely. The crowd roared.

Assailed by the instant and numerous offers to up the stakes, Scott covered what bets he could while keeping an eye on Johnny. Although he’d missed his lips, nary a drop of his mother’s milk spilled and he downed the drink just as Scott ran out of cash.

Johnny swayed in his seat. The odds upped. Behind Steele, hands flashed as coin passed. Steele eyed Johnny with concentrated determination, smirking when Johnny lurched sideways after downing the subsequent shot. Once upright, his



body rotated in a tight circle and across the table, Scott could see the finish line in Steele's bloodshot eyes.

Johnny poured the next shot, most of the liquor missing each glass and adding to the alcoholic pool in the center of the table. The bottle slipped from his grip as he put it down, causing a small splash. Steele grinned with satisfaction and found his glass after three tries. Johnny fumbled for his shot and groaned.

"Well, boy," Steele slurred with bravado as he waved his glass in front of him, sloshing part of it into the tequila lake. "You done?"

Johnny shook his head and nearly lost his seat. The crowd cackled. Johnny finally found his glass and it trembled as he raised it high in response.

Steele mirrored the motion and looked irritated. "You're an insolent pup," he snarled. Or at least, that's what Scott interpreted. It sounded like more like "Urine upchuck," but that didn't make any sense at all.

Johnny held his glass to his lips and took two deep, quivering breaths which caused a ripple effect of odds-making. He touched the glass to his lower lip, squeezed his eyes shut . . . and paused.

The audience crowed and Steele grinned victoriously. He raised his glass, threw back the amber liquid - and promptly tipped backwards and crashed to the floor. The massive, well-dressed form was utterly still, resting peacefully in his overturned chair and surrounded by surprised employees.

Meanwhile, at the table, Johnny knocked back the final shot, slapped down the empty glass and rose to his feet, suddenly solid as stone. Scott scooped the piles of cash from the bar, stuffed it into every niche and pocket and acknowledged the cue to leave. Johnny met him halfway and they pushed to the door. Almost there, an angry worker grabbed Scott's arm and pulled him to a stop.

"Where do you think you're goin' with m' money?" He yelled with warm beer breath. Scott opened his mouth to speak but Johnny pushed the guy hard before anything more was said. The drunk fell into another group and a fight erupted. Between that and the attention focused on their fallen leader, the brothers made it outside unscathed. A train whistle greeted them.

"Your timing is impeccable," Scott commented when they hit the boardwalk running. Behind them, the ruckus from the saloon grew louder.

Johnny grinned as he patted his bulging pockets and untied Barranca. "Just like I planned, Brother."

Scott rolled his eyes and jogged behind his brother toward the waiting train.

## REPUTATION & CONSEQUENCE

### EPILOGUE

With a full stomach and the horses safely tucked away in the stock car, Scott stretched his legs with a sigh and settled back into his seat. Next to him, he marveled at how loose-limbed and relaxed his brother appeared, leaning back against the small window with his hat tipped over his face and arms crossed over his chest. In actuality, he knew his sibling was well aware of his surroundings.

As Scott watched Johnny's chest rise and fall, he thought about all he'd learned on this trip. He'd learned more about Johnny's past from the others they'd crossed paths with than Johnny ever spoke of himself. Madrid's reputation carried with it a weight Scott now understood a little better. He also knew that the consequences of his background have been, and could be, as varied as Madrid's colorful history.

"What're ya starin' at me for?" Johnny grumbled from under the hat.

"I'm not staring. I'm examining."

"Oh, like that's better."

"Fine. Call it thinking."

"Well, you're thinkin's keepin' me awake." After a few seconds he asked, "What are y' thinkin'?"

Scott grinned, expecting the query. "First, I was thinking about when we first bumped into each other."

Johnny chuckled.

"Then I thought about what I knew about you before this trip and how much I know about you now."

Johnny grew still, and then tipped his head just enough to reveal one blue eye, which was narrowed at his brother and colored with suspicion. Scott faked a yawn and reached up, pulling his hat down to cover his face as he slouched in relaxation. He felt Johnny's evaluating stare for at least a full minute before speaking again.

## LANCER FANFIC BY AJB

“Now I’m wondering how much I should tell Murdoch and Teresa about our time away.”

Several long moments passed where just the hypnotic song of the rails and the shimmy of the car dictated the mood.

“You don’t need to tell ‘em about Barrajas. Or me getting’ shot. I sure don’t need Sam or Teresa’s fussin’. Or what Rivera thought about me. The ranch needs the business.” Pause. “An’ it’s probably not a good idea to tell ‘em I used Murdoch’s name. Other than that, tell ‘em what you want.”

Still smiling, Scott let the train rock a bit before responding. “Well, that certainly doesn’t leave much to tell. How are we going to explain our lateness?”

“You went to that fancy school. You’re smart enough to come up with somethin’.”

“No, no I don’t think I can.”

“Sure you can.”

“Let me rephrase that. I don’t think I want to.”

Scott felt the stare again and let a good amount of time pass before peeking out from under his hat. Johnny’s suspicious stare was now an irritated glare.

“What do you want?”

“Want?”

“Yeah, want. Me doin’ your chores, buyin’ drinks? What?”

“Oh, I think the winnings from your impressive acting gig should suffice.”

“All of it? But that’s close to seventy dollars!”

Scott laughed and reset his hat becoming a picture of contentment. “Well, that sounds about the right amount to cover the consequences of your reputation, don’t you think?”

Johnny muttered something too soft to hear.

“Excuse me?” Scott said. “I’m sorry, was that a ‘yes’ I heard?”

“I will get you back. You know that, don’t you?”

Chuckling, Scott said, “I have no doubt about that, Brother, and honestly? I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Me ‘neither, Brother,” Johnny finally replied, his tone soft with affection. Scott heard him settle against the wall once again. “Me ‘neither.”

THE END