

Dragon's Hand

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The Chained King. Flaming Goat. Moon of Day.

Jane pinched the squares of heavy paper hard enough to turn her fingertips white. She'd finally drawn the hand of cards that would end her years of searching.

Or she'd drawn the hand of cards that would damn her to a lifetime of sorrow. She couldn't say which it'd be just yet.

"Make your play, Indian woman," the graying soldier across the table grumbled, just loud enough to be heard above the string quartet playing in one corner of the saloon.

Jane studied the illustrations' hard black lines and whirling brushstrokes of color. Her eye could barely make out all manner of stars and charms that promised fortune but never delivered. That was nothing new to Jane. Fate had dragged her along one dusty horse trail after the next for near on two years,

always whispering that what remained of her tribe was just one more town away, always promising that her daughter was almost within reach.

She placed Moon of Day face down on the table but didn't take her fingers off it just yet. The card was powerful, but mighty unpredictable.

Jane looked up, hoping to read something in the expressions of her opponents. The soldier wore a tattered cavalry jacket and a six-shooter on his hip. His dark eyes darted endlessly around the room and every time the batwing doors thumped open his hand jumped to his gun. To Jane's left was an emaciated man whose slim suit hung loose, as if God forgot to add meat and fat before stretching skin over his bones. He sat still as a corpse. The woman to her right wore a schoolmarm's buttoned-up navy blue dress, her hair in a tight bun. She dabbed tears from her eyes with a lace handkerchief, but smiled relentlessly, like a showgirl on stage. The players' faces gave away nothing.

Jane started to pull back the Moon of Day card, but stopped herself. If she didn't play it, she'd never get a chance this good again. The game was the last hope she had to find her six year-old... No. Her daughter would be seven by now, wouldn't she?

Jane and her three opponents flipped their cards face up. The others eyed Jane with the flat look of practiced gamblers, surely surprised the quiet Indian woman in britches and shirtsleeves was crazy enough to lead with Moon of Day. What did they expect? None sat down for a hand of cards in Gideon's Saloon unless desperation had driven them at least halfway down the road to madness.

The game was seven-card Sorte. The stakes were luck itself.

"You look like you've been on the trails for a long time, dearie," the schoolmarm said, her tone so polite and friendly it was impossible to believe it was sincere. Jane reckoned the woman intended it that way. "What tribe are you?"

"Guachichil," Jane lied with practiced ease. It was an instinct every member of her tribe grew up with. Fortune hunters were always on their tail, looking to cash in on the riches to be had from selling their blood to those who knew the ways of spells and conjuring.

The dealer flicked another card to each player. Their table sat in the middle of a crowded saloon furnished as if it was a betting parlor for European royalty. A score of oil lights shone from each of the chandeliers floating a dozen feet above their heads and plush green velvet cushioned their seats. The décor matched nothing else in the border town of El Perdido, its humble buildings painted burnt red by dust that hung so thick you could taste iron in the air.

Jane picked up her card. Black Flower. Her jaws tightened.

"Guachichil..." The emaciated man's voice was never more than a whisper. "From dead in the center of Mexico, isn't that right?"

Jane nodded. She tilted the brim of her gaucho hat to keep the light off her pupils. If you looked real close, they weren't quite round, weren't quite human. They pointed, ever so slightly, at the top and the bottom, as if she'd had a reptile for a grandmother. And that wasn't too far from the truth.

"Well it is such an unexpected delight to have you join us," the schoolmarm said. "Many saloons don't allow your kind inside." She plucked a card from her hand and placed it face down in front of her.

Jane pulled The Chained King from her hand and laid it face down. The four players flipped over their cards. As the last round was dealt, Jane struggled to sort out the ranks and realms and trumps her opponents might be working toward. Her head swam. There were too many possibilities.

She reached for her final card, praying the fates might smile on her just this once.

A voice like a cannon blast rang out across the saloon.

“You dumb sumbitch!”

Gideon himself, owner of the saloon and just about everything else in El Perdido, held some confused-looking sap by the lapels. A cigarillo bit between his teeth, he stood atop a dais three steps above the rest of the saloon and smashed a handful of cards over the fellow’s head. He wore a red silk shirt, busy with embroidery, over a hairy body thick with muscle and fat. He put Jane to mind of a costumed circus bear she’d seen once. No amount of dressing up would ever rid the beast of the killing instinct coursing through its veins.

Gideon pitched the man backwards, right off the edge of the dais. By all rights, the fellow should have tumbled feet-over-rear and cracked the back of his skull open on the hardwood below. Instead, the fellow’s heels caught each step, then his feet wheeled and danced him across the room, body titled too far to catch his balance. His clumsy jig took him to the far end of the saloon and out the batwing doors.

The dealer and the soldier chuckled in an easy sort of way that told Jane they’d seen this kind of thing before.

“Doesn’t much care for losing, does he?” the emaciated man said.

“Losing ain’t been a problem for him for, oh, going on six years now,” the soldier said. “It’s all the winning that’s made him so ornery.”

“He’d be the first I’ve ever met who grew tired of winning,” Jane said.

“He lived for the thrill of the wager,” the soldier said. “And then he trumped a Thirteenth rank Endeavor set. He won’t never lose another hand of cards so long as he lives. No thrill to be had in that.”

The luck of the Thirteenth rank was powerful and unending. The Endeavor realm ruled over any kind of effort or undertaking. If Jane had that kind of luck, whatever direction she picked to go searching for her daughter would turn out to be the right one, and before she knew it her little girl would all but fall out of the sky into her arms.

She picked up her final card. Dreamer in Mourning. The schoolmarm had played Three-Tailed Fox followed by Half Coin, and looked to be building a mid-rank set in the Opportunity realm. Jane would have to play her Dreamer in Mourning card to win.

In Sorte, the cards were both the game and the wager. If Jane’s set outranked the schoolmarm’s, she’d win that Opportunity luck, and the schoolmarm would lose it in equal measure. It was exactly the kind of luck Jane needed to provide a clue where her tribe had disappeared to. But she’d be laying down high-rank Coincidence set. If the schoolmarm’s third card trumped her, Jane would likely spend years narrowly missing her tribe at every turn.

Jane squeezed her right hand into a fist, trying to fight off the tremble that had overtaken it. She pulled Black Flower from her hand. It stood little chance of winning, but if she lost her bad luck wouldn't be so terrible.

"You know, I heard a number of those poor reds down in Mexico were slaughtered two years back when blood hunters came through those parts," the schoolmarm said, her smile beaming as she played her final card face down. "They were chasing rumors one of the tribes down there were dragons."

Jane froze with Black Flower between her fingers. The woman had seen the shape of her pupils. She knew what Jane was.

The dealer, the soldier, and the emaciated man all studied Jane. Surely, they could hear her heart pounding like the gallop of unbroken horses. Surely, they realized what she was. She had to run, while she still could. The saloon was full of desperate men, and it wouldn't be long until one of them tried to collect her blood.

But wasn't the whole world full of desperate men? If she didn't take this last chance to find her daughter, how long until one of them caught up to her child?

Are you okay, my precious girl? Are you still alive?

I'm okay, Momma. Grandpa's taking care of me. I miss you.

Her daughter's voice in her head was just imagination, nothing more than that. But hearing her daughter say she was alive and unhurt was the only thing that'd kept Jane from losing her mind to madness, even if it was only make believe.

Jane replaced Black Flower in her hand. She drew out Dreamer in Mourning and laid it face down on the table. The schoolmarm watched the change of cards and her tear-strained eye took on a gleam of satisfaction.

The four players flipped their final cards. The schoolmarm had played Cracked Lantern. Jane had her outranked. The schoolmarm's smile twisted into something savage.

"Well..." the schoolmarm said, her voice hollow.

The ink burned off her cards, illustrations disappearing as wisps of colored smoke rose from them and faded into the air. The Opportunity luck Jane took was Fourth rank, which meant her luck would only last until sunrise, but that luck would be powerfully strong.

The schoolmarm stood abruptly, backing into a man walking past. The whiskey he'd been carrying splashed across the front of her dress, his glass clanked across the varnished floor.

"And there I had you figured for a lady who scares easy," the schoolmarm said. She wiped at the whiskey stain with her handkerchief as she strode away. The schoolmarm hadn't figured out what Jane was. She'd just been poking, trying to unnerve her.

"You really Guachichil?" the soldier asked.

"Yeah," Jane said. "Hadn't heard of that trouble the lady was talking about. Was she trying to play me?"

"Probably," the soldier said. "Had other Guachichil come through here some months back."

Every muscle in Jane's body locked up. Her people had come through this very town. It had to have been them. Her newly-won Opportunity luck had struck already. She dug fingernails into her palms to keep tears from pooling in her eyes.

“Haven’t seen another Guachichil since I left home,” Jane said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Happen to know which way they went?”

“Heh.” The man’s eyes landed on her for just a second, then bounded away again. “You just won the strongest set I’ve seen in a while, and you’re looking for a favor from me?”

“All right,” Jane said, in a way she hoped sounded friendly. “We’ll help each other out. What is it I can do for you?”

“Gimme some time to think it over while I try to win some luck of my own,” the man said.

Another gambler slid into the chair the schoolmarm had occupied. The dealer looked at the deck and frowned.

“Only fifteen cards,” he said. “Someone dropping out?”

“I’m done for the night,” Jane said, standing. She looked to the soldier. “I’ll be waiting out front when you’re ready to ask your favor.”

The man met her eyes just long enough to nod. Jane made for the door. She could only hope that whatever the soldier knew, it would finally put an end to her years of searching. She’d grown weary of lying, of stealing, of doing terrible things just to survive.

Pomogi mne.

The voice in Jane’s head wasn’t her daughter this time. It was the voice of a man she’d known two years back. A withered man, his limbs as thin and pale as the branches of a birch sapling in winter. A man she shared no language with, but had been forced to share a cage with. A man whose eyes had begged her for help. A man she had left to die.

She hadn’t had a choice. She had to keep moving until she found her daughter. She’d only done what she had to.

I will find you, my precious girl. I’ve won strong luck to help me. Just stay hid until I get there. Promise me you will.

Okay, Momma. I promise. I’ll hide where the hunters won’t ever find me.

Jane waited outside the saloon for hours, watching stars inch across the sky, too rigid with excitement and fear to sit. The night air returned the heat it had soaked up all day. Sweat and grit lined the cracks of her skin. It seemed nearly every patron stumbled down the saloon’s porch steps before the soldier in the battered cavalry jacket hurried past.

“I know a place we can talk,” he said, with barely a glance in her direction.

She rushed to catch him. “Hold up, now. Where are we going? Do you even know where those Guachichil went?”

The man turned down the alley between Gideon’s saloon and the next building over. As soon as she rounded the corner, Jane knew she was in trouble. The worst kind of trouble.

The soldier stood between two thugs, one holding a pistol, the other a length of iron. Jane faded back. A blow like the kick of a mule stuck her full in the back. She collapsed face down in the dirt, blood rising in the back of her throat. Head dizzy with pain and lungs refusing to draw breath, Jane’s only thought was for regaining her feet. She got no further than hands and knees before the toe of a boot cracked her ribs and she flopped belly down again.

“Stay down,” the soldier commanded. “Ain’t no point in fighting. Told Gideon what you was and he sent us to corral you, and you know Gideon’s endeavors can’t never fail.”

Eyes blurry from tears, Jane could see one thing plainly enough: the thugs coming for her with a rope, like she was runaway cattle. Her only chance was to shift shape.

She never truly felt her body grow, never felt the wings sprout from her shoulder blades or talons rip through the leather of her boots. Instead, it was as if the fangs and red-brown scales and all the rest were always there, only she’d forgotten about them, and now her senses were waking up to them once again. Feeling her weight was like standing up after a long sleep, feeling the power of her muscles was like suddenly waking from a dream.

If the thugs had been able to hold onto their bravado, they would’ve laid into her the second her first scale appeared. But Jane had yet to meet the man who didn’t cower back upon seeing a woman transform into a dragon. A moment later, she’d gained her full height—triple that of the largest quarter horse—and her wingtips scraped the alley walls.

The thug with the pistol fired a shot. It struck her neck, cracking a scale. She howled in pain and lunged forward, swiping at the man with her front claws. The fellow had been smart enough to stay out of reach, but couldn’t help jumping back. Just as he did, the man with the iron bar darted forward. But he didn’t have an iron bar anymore.

The man flung a handful of white powder, fine as flour, up into Jane’s face. She reared back, but not fast enough. Fine-ground salt bit into her eyes. To a human, it would have been irritating, painful even. To a dragon, it was like being splashed with acid. The salt stung her scales and worked its way between them, stabbing her skin. Each draw of breath sucked more of the salt into her lungs, where it tore at her insides like the bites of a thousand tiny spiders.

The salt wouldn’t kill her, but that wasn’t the point. All they were trying to do was get her to shift back to human form. No matter how much she fought the urge, she wouldn’t last but a few seconds until she did just that.

Blinded and panicking, Jane roared and flung her tail about, smashing the man who had snuck up behind her against the saloon wall. She tromped forward, hoping to feel one of the men crushed beneath her claws. Like the inhale of a man who’d been underwater too long, Jane could do nothing to stop her body from shifting and shrinking. With only a second or two left, she drew a lungful of air and exhaled an orange blaze of fire.

Flames crackled up the saloon wall as Jane lay face-down, naked in the dirt, her human body trying to cry the salt out of her eyes. When she managed to look up, all three thugs were closing on her. By the scowls on their faces, she figured they were going to give her some extra bruises before tying her up.

A rapid thumping of boots raced up behind her. Painful as it was, she managed to swing her head around to see a pale man running her way, hauling a bucketful of water. He was aiming to save Gideon’s saloon from going up in flame.

No. His eyes were fixed right on her. The water was meant for her.

Just as he skidded to a stop and reared back to heave that water, the bottom fell out of the bucket and every last drop splashed to the ground.

“Asher, you miserable ol’ loser...” the soldier growled. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The man named Asher stood blinking, a look of shock on his face, as if he’d been sleepwalking and suddenly woke to find he’d stumbled into a wolf’s den. His distraction gave Jane the only chance she was likely to get. Biting her teeth against a cry of pain, she leapt to her feet and ran like the devil himself was just a step behind her.

A gunshot hammered her ears. One stride later, Jane reached the end of the alley and dodged behind the corner of the saloon.

Whatever Asher’s source of water, the trail of spills he’d left were big enough to be seen in the moonlight, she could follow along and find it herself. The thugs wouldn’t be but a few steps behind. As soon as they rounded the corner, they’d have a clear shot at her.

Just as another shot exploded, she saw it, and it was better than she could’ve hoped for. A watering trough. Jane didn’t slow one tick before diving in head-first. The warm water stank of horse hair. She snorted it up her nose, hoping to take in just enough to clear her nostrils. Jane gagged and choked, but the burn left her skin as the salt washed clear.

Bullets thunked into the side of the trough, one after another. It was too late. The trough shattered with a crack like thunder. Jane exploded up into dragon form, waves of water and shards of wood scattering a score of paces in every direction.

If the thugs had any salt left, they’d lost the nerve to give it another try. They turned tail and ran. Jane spit a burst of fire after them to make sure they knew what they’d get if they somehow found that nerve again.

Jane let her dragon body uniform. The sensation of her tail whipping behind her faded into a ghost of itself, then disappeared completely. Bit by bit she lost any sense of touch in her wings and claws, until she dropped into a human body and her mind almost couldn’t imagine the feel of any other.

Dripping wet, she sagged with exhaustion. Only rage kept her on her feet.

Damn those bastards. That was supposed to have been her Opportunity. She’d won the luck, and Sorte cards never failed to deliver luck to the winner.

Pain stabbing her ribs with every movement, Jane pulled the duster off the thug she’d smashed against the wall and tugged it on. She had neither the time nor inclination to check if he was still breathing.

“Who are you?” she demanded, glaring at Asher. “Why’d you try to save me?”

Asher curled in on himself, shoulders hunched and head down, like a dog with a cruel master who expected another blow to come at any second.

“I’m nobody,” he said. He turned to walk away.

Jane caught his arm and spun him around.

“How come roping me didn’t work out for Gideon?” she asked.

“It weren’t him doing the deed,” Asher said. “His luck falls off sharply when it ain’t him actually doing the endeavoring.”

An alarm bell clanged and folks rushed from their homes to see the bright blaze crawling up the side of Gideon’s saloon. Jane slapped her gaucho hat back on her head. She stared at Asher, a deep frown pulling down her mouth.

“This weren’t no business of yours,” she said. “Why’d you go risking your life to help a stranger?”

Dancing firelight lit up one side of Asher’s trembling face. “What’s it matter?” he sputtered in a burst that was a bark of laughter and a cry of anguish both at the same time. “My life ain’t worth living. Only hope I got left is that Gideon’ll get angry enough to shoot me dead.”

Jane stared at him a moment longer while the gears in her mind clicked into place.

“You were on the losing side, weren’t you?” she said. “When Gideon won that Endeavor luck, he won it from you. Now anything you try to do fails. Even when all you’re trying to do is end your own life.”

Asher said nothing, just stood there fighting to hold back tears. And like everything else the man aspired to do, he failed.

For a flash, his eyes were those of another man. A man Jane had left to die in a cage.

Pomogi mne.

They’d been the only words he’d uttered, almost too weak to hear. Though she didn’t speak a word of Russian, there was no mistaking when a man was begging for his life.

Jane turned from Asher and set out walking with purpose. The voice of the Russian followed her.

Pomogi mne.

They’d shipped him across the Atlantic in an iron cage, to sell to the highest bidder. It had been darn near impossible to believe he could turn himself into one of those fearsome dragons they say terrorized the Ural Mountains so many years ago. Frail as a water reed and halfway starved to death, dragging him along would have slowed her down too much. She’d had to leave him behind. Her daughter needed her.

Why’d you leave him to die, Momma?

I only did what I had to, sweet girl. It won’t matter once we’re together again. You’ll never know the horrible things I had to do to get to you.

The townspeople all stood lined up on either side of the road, gawking like Jane was lead horse in a circus caravan parading itself through town. She met the stare of a tall fellow still dressed in his nightclothes.

“Gideon,” she growled.

The man pointed down the road to a castle of a house, so tall and wide it seemed to be pushing the neighboring buildings aside. Jane marched for it. She’d pull her Opportunity right out of Gideon’s hide if that’s what it took.

“Gideon!” she bellowed up at the balcony jutting out from the second floor of Gideon’s mansion. “Come face me yourself, you coward!”

A moment later, Gideon stormed out onto the balcony. He stared into the distance, where men ran in circles around his saloon, shouting and throwing water on the dwindling flames. Gideon’s eyes shifted, glaring down at her as if he couldn’t believe she had the nerve to still be alive.

“You want a real game of cards?” she called out. “I got some Opportunity luck I need to use up before sunrise. Come face me in a game of thirteen-card Sorte.”

Jane turned, then shouted back over her shoulder. "That is, if your place ain't burnt up, yet."

It must have been the whole town that packed in Gideon's saloon, crowded around the playing table, come to see the woman crazy enough to play Gideon in a hand of thirteen-card Sorte. The stakes were higher than seven-card by a mile. And then some. That was the point. Jane was going to use her Opportunity to win enough luck that she couldn't help but find what remained of her tribe. She could only pray her daughter was still alive and with them.

Lingering smoke filled the room, the scent of charred wood thick enough to give Jane a headache. She sat wearing nothing save her hat and the oversized duster, dirt rubbing in the cracks between her bare toes. Gideon stared at her as he lit a cigarillo and blew a cloud of sweet tobacco smoke across the table. He didn't smile, but his eyes shone, wild and alive. The soldier and the other thugs who attacked her stood behind Gideon like he was their shield. Asher hid among the crowd, where Jane wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been looking for him.

The dealer fanned out twenty-six cards into two rows representing the thirteen realms of luck and the thirteen ranks of luck. They were simple, single-color icons, but once the dealer flipped them face down and started shuffling, they mixed like shades of paint. Hidden from every eye in the room, each became a unique combination of realm and rank, 169 different possibilities. Somewhere during the shuffling, it was impossible to watch close enough to say exactly when, the number of cards changed, so the deck wound up with exactly enough cards for everyone at the table.

The dealer flicked three cards to each of them and Jane scooped hers up. The Dancing Madman. Skeleton Knife. Candle of Memory. They didn't add up to much. Skeleton Knife was easily the highest rank, so she played it face-down on the table in front of her. Gideon looked up at her and frowned. Annoyed by how fast she made her decision, she had to guess. What did he expect? She wasn't going to beat him with strategic thinking. Her Opportunity luck was either strong enough to give his Endeavor luck a run for his money or it wasn't.

Gideon laid down his card. They both turned over. He'd played Golden Fish. He had her outranked. But it was only the first card.

The dealer tossed another card to each of them, adding Liar's River to the two cards she still held. What matched up strong with the Skeleton Knife she'd already laid down? It didn't take but a second before the answer hit her.

Gideon had led with Golden Fish. That almost always built a set in the Endeavor realm. She already had a high trump for that realm in her hand. She just had to play Liar's River next, then Candle of Memory the last round.

Was it possible Gideon might draw a combination to come back over the top? Hell, the man was playing with all the luck in the world in his pocket, the long odds against that didn't make a whit of difference. But morning would break soon, and the luck she'd won promised to deliver by sunrise. This had to be her Opportunity. It had to be. Fate was laying it out clear as day right in front of her: he had the beginnings of a high-rank Endeavor set and she had the three best cards in the deck to win it from him.

Gideon laid down his card. Jane played Liar's River face-down behind her Skeleton Knife card. They flipped.

Empty Mirror. He'd played Empty Mirror. It was exactly what she'd hoped for. He was building an Endeavor set and she had him trumped. There was only one card in the whole 169 that could save him now.

Jane's hands shook. Gideon looked up at her with a smirk. He thought she was nervous about the cards. Years of perfect fortune had robbed him of his instincts. He couldn't see she'd already all but won. She wasn't shaking from nerves. She was...

Why exactly was she shaking?

When you come back to me, who will you be, Momma?

Who will I be?

You stole from them that had nothing to spare. You let a man die in his cage.

I only did what I had to. To find you. So I can protect you. When we're together again I won't have to do such things anymore. You'll never have to know what I've done these past couple years.

Life ain't gonna get any easier, Momma, not for us. A time'll come that you'll hurt someone and I'll see it. I'll know what you've become.

No. I..

You can't return to me, Momma. Not like this.

But I have to. This luck will be gone by sunrise. This right here's gotta be my Opportunity. It's gotta be. 'Cause if this ain't it... what is?

The trembling in Jane's hands threatened to shake her cards free. She slapped them face-down on the table and intertwined her fingers, squeezed as hard as she could. The shaking wouldn't stop. She stood, knocking her chair over. The crowd whispered and snickered.

"This ain't poker," Gideon said. He lifted a snifter of whiskey to smiling lips. "Can't fold and walk."

She would play away from the trump. That's what she'd do. Whatever card she drew next, she'd make the lowest set she could, take whatever bad luck was her punishment. She didn't have another choice. She couldn't face her daughter now. Not like she was.

Jane fought to smooth out her lungs' jagged gasps. They stared at her, every last soul in the crowd. Some with amusement, the more kindly folks with sympathy or even horror, guessing from her expression she was about to get loaded down with a terrible affliction of bad luck.

Her eyes stopped when they met Asher's. Though she would have sworn it was impossible, those eyes carried even more sorrow than when she first saw them. This time, the sorrow was not for his own plight. It was for hers.

Pomogi mne.

Fate was offering her an Opportunity all right. But it wasn't the chance to win luck off Gideon.

Jane's hands stopped shaking. The dealer tossed her last card to her, but she didn't pick it up. Still standing, she lifted the Candle of Memory card off the table and held it out, back side facing Gideon.

"I've got the Candle of Memory," she taunted, forcing her smile wide. "And you're working on an Endeavor set. I have you trumped."

Fury wasn't the only emotion that duked it out for control of Gideon's face, but it was the clear winner.

"You're lying, red woman," he said, voice tightly reined in. "Trying to fool me into playing away from the Endeavor realm 'cause you ain't got the cards to beat it."

"Then lay it down if you got the guts. But I know you don't."

Gideon bared teeth bit together in anger.

"Even with more luck than any other man alive, you're too cowardly to play at me. That's why you sent thugs to ambush me, 'cause you were too cowardly to try and rope me yourself."

Gideon's face burned red and his cheeks trembled. Whatever he was itching to say, his temper had boiled the words right out of his mouth.

Jane placed the Candle of Memory card face down on top of her other unplayed cards. She couldn't play it, yet. Not if she wanted her trick to work.

Then she did something she'd never done before, something she'd have no faith in trying if luck weren't on her side. She started a shape shift she had no intention of finishing. Just enough to get scales growing across her chest. Just enough so that her eyes burned bright orange and her pupils melted to black slits and bone fangs snapped inches from Gideon's face when she leaned forward with a wicked smile and whispered, "Your move."

Gideon threw himself back from the table, jumped to his feet, and fired a shot from his six-gun before anyone else in the room had a chance to so much as blink.

The bullet shattered a scale on Jane's chest, a sharp point of pain exploding across her torso. Goading Gideon into firing on her had been Jane's aim, but still the shock swept her legs out from under her. Forehead pressed against the hard varnish of the floor, she fell back into fully-human shape and coughed blood into her hand. Likely as not, she had a fractured rib.

After the screams and gasps faded away, the crowd closed in to see whether Jane was dead. The dealer knelt to speak to her.

"Are you alive?" he asked. "Can you continue?"

Jane groaned and gave a slow, slight shake of her head, made like she was trying to speak but couldn't quite manage. "Asher..." she said.

"Asher?" the dealer asked. With that, every head in the crowd spun about until they locked on Asher. Startled as he was, the man's usual hunched-shoulder posture momentarily disappeared.

"What the hell?" Gideon bellowed.

"A game of Sorte can't be stopped before the final cards are played," the dealer said. "If she can't continue, she's allowed to pick her replacement."

Gideon's face fought with itself again. This time, he wrestled a confident smile into place.

"What's the point in letting him finish her hand?" Gideon laughed. "I can't lose and he can't win."

Asher looked at Jane, unsure. Jane herself wasn't so sure of her plan. She had to trust that this was the moment her Opportunity luck had brought her to.

Asher shambled forward, lowered himself into the seat, and picked up the cards. Jane had to stifle a whimper as a pair of men hooked their arms under hers and hefted her into a chair.

Asher didn't hesitate. He plucked the Candle of Memory card and laid it face down behind the two Jane had already played. Gideon paused just long enough to scowl, caught himself, and smacked his final play card down with a tight-lipped smile. The two players flipped their cards face-up.

Gideon had played Orphan of Night. The overconfident fool had actually completed the Thirteenth rank Endeavor set. The color burned off his cards, turning them white. But not nearly so white as Gideon's face.

The stunned crowd didn't make a sound as Asher stood, plucked a cigarillo from Gideon's shirt pocket, and bounced a match off the table. The match lit when it struck the wood surface and popped right up into Asher's hand. The new king of El Perdido puffed his cigarillo to life.

Gideon yanked his six-gun from its holster and aimed the barrel at his temple. Asher slammed his fist on the table, bouncing the opposite side up and knocking the gun from Gideon's hand.

"Fate ain't gonna let you off that easy," Asher said. "All you woulda done is hurt yourself bad enough to spend the rest of your life regretting the attempt. But thank your lucky cards I'm gonna be a damn sight kinder to you than you ever was to me."

Jane stood, painfully, one hand over her ribs. She limped toward the door.

"Why'd you do that?" Asher called after her.

"Got my reasons," she said without looking back.

Jane stepped out into the night. The first dim hints of dawn lightened the horizon. Asher followed, as did most of the crowd. He hustled to get in front of her.

"I owe you a debt, now," Asher said. "A mighty big one. What is it you're doing here? What is it you want?"

Jane struggled to hold back tears as she met his eyes.

"My people came through here a few months back, with my little girl. All I want is to find them." She nodded toward the soldier. "I think that fella may know something about where they went."

Asher turned his gaze to the soldier, who startled back.

"We gonna do this the hard way, or you gonna tell this lady everything you know?" Asher asked.

"They asked the way to Las Cruces, that's all I know," the soldier said in a rush. From the fear pulling his eyes wide, there was little doubt he was telling the truth.

Jane dropped her gaucho hat in the dirt and let the borrowed duster fall to the ground. She stood naked in the middle of the road, staring over the hilltops to the west, where bright stars sparkled against the indigo sky.

I'm so sorry, my beautiful girl.

It's okay, Momma.

Can you hang on just a little longer?

Yes, Momma, I think I can.

Scales sprouted from Jane's skin. Toenails grew into talons. The ground receded in her view, the crowd gasping and backing away as she gained her full height.

Jane leapt into the air and beat her wings, picking up speed until the ground below became a blur.

I will find you soon. I promise.

