

As soon as I topped the ridge, I knew something was seriously wrong. Instead of that warm, homey feeling, I was getting something else, a feeling of unease, that I now realized had been slowly building the closer I got to home.

Midnight felt it too. I didn't have to pull back on the reins to bring the old horse to a stop in the middle of the trail, ears laid back.

Closing my eyes, I let the sensations wash over me. Summer was definitely past, and there was a coolness to the air that promised of sterner stuff to come. The leaves were turning bronze and gold, but had not yet begun to fall. There was an unnatural quiet and stillness that was out of place on the normally breeze swept rise.

Spread out in the small valley below, was the small compound that was my home, I felt a growing darkness... a violent spreading stain filled with anguish, pain, and anger. And the burnt ember fading residues of something else.

Magic.

I knew instantly that the darkness was emanating from my son-in-law. Even though I had never felt this in him before, it matched too perfectly the description of what my daughter had felt upon their first meeting.

What horrific events in his past had contributed to craft this monster, I had never discovered. Not really my business, so I had never inquired.

But up until my daughter and he had met, 'Diablo Deke' Thornton was feared and reviled across the Southwest. Twisted, dark, ugly, deadly with a firearm, he was an indiscriminate killer. Followed by a swath of death and destruction where ever he went. To this blight upon the landscape was my daughter drawn.

From miles away she felt his pain, a blot on the horizon, and went to him. Met him. And by her presence, calmed him, soothed him, eased his anguish, washed away his anger. Reawakened the man that lay buried within the storm.

And brought home a fairly presentable young man. Quiet, thoughtful, considerate, helpful... not cheerful, no. Too much on his conscience, maybe. Solemn, but polite. Unrecognizable as the monster he had been before.

My daughter has a talent for such things.

But now, below, in my own home, the monster had returned. I could feel it. Clearly something had happened to my daughter.

I gave Midnight his head, and despite the weight of the rendered deer carcass strapped over his withers, he stepped lightly enough for such an old horse. Slowly smoked and jerked, the meat would a luxurious addition to our simple diet when the cold set in. But I mentally kicked myself for leaving for so long, anyway. I had grown complacent.

We moved at a slow walk into the compound. The wise old horse knew as well as I did that it would be dangerous to come in fast. To surprise the killer was to invite a hail of lead.

Better to mosey in slowly, taking careful stock of the situation, letting everyone get a good look at who was coming. No surprises.

As we approached, the taint of lingering magic burned my nostrils.

Home. A rough enclosure of stripped saplings covered with adobe, a scattering of small storage sheds, several hogans. An ancient weathered structure for me, a newer, more elaborate structure for the young couple.

A dusty, dark figure, Deke, stood in the exact center of the courtyard.

A darkness streamed from him in waves, almost overpowering. His face was twisted, drawn, pale. Flaxen hair plastered to his skull with sweat. Eyes glittering with barely controlled madness. Although he stood very still, his body, whipsaw thin, seemed to be vibrating with tension, his posture awkward and strained. His hands were claws, twitching longingly just centimeters from the wickedly gleaming butts of the matched pistols on his belt.

"Jess?" I asked softly.

"She's gone", the dreaded reply, in a voice raw with fury. "He took her."

I didn't ask who. I knew. My enemy. He had my daughter.