

Rough Draft from 'Frozen Dreams'

Gonzalez Farm

The Gonzalez family worked a farm over at Cottonton, right up against the Enchanted Mountains. Cottonton was pretty enough, if you like crowded rural. They crowd 'em in pretty tight between Cin City and the mountains; the farther west from the city you get, the more it rains. And the more it rains, the more likely there's going to be somebody there with a pot, to catch it.

It was starting to rain now, in fact. But I had a rented tricycle that some magical delinquent had 'vandalized' into pedaling itself, so I wouldn't be caught outside for too long. Of course, the trike wasn't much faster than a horse, but at least I wouldn't get there tired. Another perk of clearing a Case for the Castle; and if I didn't solve this one I'd be answering a lot of pointed questions about the expenses I was racking up. This would bother me more, except that my clients did the same thing when I cleared a Case and hadn't bought anything besides a pack of gum. Everybody loves to second-guess the Shamus when the bill's due.

I got the trike to the Gonzalez homestead before the mountain cried too much on me. It was a neat, tidy place,

without being packed. Clean gutters and fresh paint on the walls at the house; the fields of corn looked like... corn. Everything looked like it was doing well, at least. That included the workers, some of whom were looking at me with interest as they did farm things. Chores. Work. Look, I'm a City boy at heart, and especially hands.

I parked the trike under an awning that looked and smelled like it usually entertained visiting horses and climbed the steps to knock on the door. When the door opened, I knew it was Elizabeth's mother answering it even before I saw her. And that she already knew who I was, even if the suit and hat didn't give it away.

I took off my hat anyway. "Good morning, ma'am. I'm Shamus Tom Vargas. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your daughter's death."

This isn't the easiest life. You see a lot of hard things, and sometimes they stick to your sleeves. But the hardest thing of all is sitting down with a couple after they've been told that their daughter isn't coming home. The worst is when they don't even blame you for it. "Elizabeth was a good girl, Shamus," George Gonzalez assured me. "She wouldn't have gotten mixed up in something bad."

When I talk to a parent who's lost a kid, the kid's always one of three kinds. There's the Good Girl (or Boy), and the parents always say that they wouldn't have gotten mixed up in something bad. They say it loudest when it's obviously not true. Then there's the ones who were Good, But A Little Wild; there's usually a story behind that that's full of private pain. But the worst ones of all were the Bad Seeds Who Got What They Had Coming To Them; even then, if the parents had a ounce of love in them, they'd still want justice for their wayward kids. But they'd always think that they couldn't just ask for it.

That's why I could usually get parents to talk to me. They knew that, to a Shamus, the Case was the Case. I wasn't there to judge the victim, only the person who put her in the ground.

Still, I thought that maybe George was right and his daughter was one of the Good Girls. He and his wife Diane Hernandez had almost fallen over themselves to make me comfortable as I asked them questions. It could have been worse: at least a flunky from the city government had been sent out to give them the news the day before (I didn't tell them how unusual this was, but I think that they knew anyway), so they were ready for my visit. I wished that I was.

The details of Elizabeth Gonzalez Hernandez's life were straightforward enough: born and raised in Cottonton, had three siblings (a smallish family, but not as unusual as it used to be). Her brothers and sister were all older than her; the oldest would of course inherit the family farm, while the other two were set up on their own homesteads with their spouses. Elizabeth had gone to the local school, where she was a good enough student to get a scholarship to the University. She had no husband and no steady boyfriends; she would talk about dates she had (usually only with her mother or sister), but they just stayed dates. Elizabeth wrote regularly back home and visited several times a year, and always during the December holidays.

“So, George, Diane, I have to ask. What did you and Elizabeth fight over?” Because there ain't a family in the world that doesn't squabble with each other.

“We didn't fight!” said George.

“We didn't fight about bad things,” corrected Diane. I had her pegged as the parent more eager for this Case to end with the villain's blood on the floor. “I wanted her to think about finding a nice person, to settle down. She said that

she had too many books to read first. I told her, then marry a librarian! And then we both laughed.” Diane blinked away a tear. “She was loved in this house, Shamus. I know that you must ask these things, but this was Elizabeth’s home. She did not flee to Cinderella; she went there to learn the things that she needed to know.”

“And which things were that, Diane?” My voice was calm. The parents looked at each other; then George went to a cabinet, and pulled out a music box. He wound it carefully, and started to play.

I recognized the tune, of course: *La Guadalupana*. Christian New Californians believed that if someone sang the song or played the music, any spell used to spy on them would hear the music instead. Would it? Well, I’ve never seen it not work.

As the music played, George murmured “You know that our Elizabeth, she was one of the mages, yes?” At my nod, he smiled, shyly. “We first knew when she was a small child. She whistled for the clouds one day, and they came to her! And rained where she asked.” His face became set. “But those magos in the north would have come for her, so we had to be careful. She studied at

night, with the music boxes playing. Not a paper left the room where she read her special books.”

“She loved the clouds,” said Diane. “She would look at them through the window when she was studying. Soon Elizabeth wanted to learn nothing but the weather-magic. We spoke with the mayor, and she spoke to someone, and soon we were given books for our daughter to read. And when she was a woman grown, there was a place for her at the University. We were proud. And sad. But Elizabeth would return, if even only to visit. And if she could not come, she would send the rain-clouds in her place. But now only her body will come back to us.”

The music box stuttered to a stop in the room. Before the silence could get too heavy, I stood. “I thank you for your trust. May I look through Elizabeth’s room and study? I don’t need to see anything private or intimate, just what she liked and thought about.” I didn’t add that those two things could be the most private and intimate things of all.

“Of course, Shamus,” said George. “I can show you.” Diane stood up with the jerky movements of a woman who wanted to go somewhere else to cry, nodded sharply, and left. The look she gave me on the way out almost made me feel bad for the poor murdering bastard it was actually

aimed at; it was a stare that promised stone knives and blood grooves for the wicked. Then again, I was safe from that pitiless stare, so the murderer would just have to hope that I found him before Diane Hernandez did.

Elizabeth's old room and study were connected to each other, and had the feeling of being gradually taken over by the people still living in the house. But there was still her bed, dresser, and -- most importantly -- her old books. I looked over at George. "If you'd like to stay, go ahead and sit down, sir."

"That's all right, Shamus." replied George. "I have work around the house to do. You ask me if you have any questions, please?"

"Of course, George."

"Thank you. Also, Shamus? I have something that needs saying." He gestured me in to come closer; I obliged. In a low tone, he continued, "I have two sons, another daughter, eleven nephews and nieces. Every single one of them is going to try to find you and convince you to let them help get a bloody revenge."

He raised a hand to stop me as I opened my mouth. “I know you wouldn’t. But they’re young. And we live outside of Cinderella, so they don’t see what Shamuses do every day. What the kids here know about you they know from the Lore. So I’m not worried that you’ll let these kids be fools.” George’s mouth set, hard and angry. “But if you do need somebody, you will damned well take **me**. Not somebody else just starting their lives.”

I nodded, but felt compelled to point out, “Of course I’m not going to let a bunch of kids walk all over an uncleared Case. But if it did come down to revenge; you understand that your wife might disagree with you on who got to go?”

“That’s my worry, Shamus. She’s a good woman. Too good for me. But she can’t understand this.” He stepped back. “Thank you for taking this Case, Mr. Vargas.”

“You can call me Tom, George. I’m here for her, after all.” George nodded, and left the room.

That happens, too. When a man -- or woman -- gets angry enough over the hole that somebody just punched in their nice, rule-following lives, they’ll start thinking about punching some holes of their own. Most won’t. They still believe in the rules, even torn and tattered ones. But a

few will get mad, and then they'll get mean. And when it's all over, they'll have to face what they did when they were mean. Some can't, and *you* can't know who will snap under all that pressure.

So George was wrong: it wasn't his worry, in the end. It was always going to be mine. All part of being a Shamus, friends.

Looked one way, there wasn't any reason for me to look through the things of Elizabeth that she had abandoned; the girl who lived here had been discarded by the woman who left, and who only came back to visit. But the girl and the woman had parted on good terms, and that doesn't always happen. Elizabeth wasn't running away from home, or herself -- and I could use that.

So: first, the room itself. Sunny by the window, with plants on the window sill. Some stray hairs on the bed hinted of a cat around the place. The dresser was larger than it should have been -- the Gonzalezes were prosperous farmers, but not nobility -- but it was clearly of modern make. There were a few ornaments on the walls and the dresser, including a music box, but it was mostly honest wood and plaster. The room was also a bit big for one child. The Gonzalezes had put up a new wall to make a

study, but it was still a size you'd expect for an adult's bedroom, not a child's -- and if Elizabeth shared this room with her sister, it didn't show.

The study was a little dark, too. No windows -- and no candle marks on the walls, either. The books on the shelves were the kind you'd expect of a studious kid; some modern stuff, some obviously assigned by school and kept, and a couple of classic texts. I opened up one of the last at random, and raised an eyebrow. It wasn't a translation: apparently Elizabeth could read CS Lewis in his original Old American.

I went back to the main bedroom and looked at the walls there. There were a couple of candle sconces, of course. We were out in the countryside, after all. But there was something about the light that still bugged me, until I figured it out: the window was smaller than normal. It didn't seem all that odd, since sheet glass isn't the cheapest thing in the world, but then I saw it. You couldn't see inside the room from outside. I took a closer look at the plants. Yeah, those pots were glued to the sill.

There wasn't a closet, and a peek under the bed just showed a forlorn dust cabra, hiding from vigilant brooms. No suspicious boxes, no hidden caches under

floorboards; so I looked at the dresser again. Only this time I really looked at it, in that special way.

I'm a Shamus, not a mage. I don't cast spells, I don't brew potions, and I don't enchant items. But magic -- like, say, a distraction spell -- leaves tracks in the real world you can see, if you know how. It helps if the spell is old, of course. But a teenager wouldn't know that, and I felt bad about how nobody would ever be able to tell Elizabeth that as I opened the bottom dresser drawer.

Inside, of course, was Elizabeth's childhood mage gear. Robe, wand, wooden athame, chalk and sand; the throw rug in the study looked like it could both be drawn on for a protective circle and be easily shaken out afterwards. A bunch of things that I assumed were spell components. A collection of Elizabeth's real textbooks. Again, I'm no mage, but these were serious texts, full of charts and diagrams and explanations of weather spells. A set of diaries that I contemplated for a moment, then decided weren't actually my business -- and a bag that gave off a faint glow from inside.

I opened up the bag and shook out the contents; a half dozen or so lightstones fell into my hands. I whistled, low. Lightstones are a hot item in Cin City; seems like every

month somebody's 'bringing in' a shipment that some adventurers 'found' in a ruin somewhere. These were obviously homemade, and they flickered and flashed a little -- but if Elizabeth was making them as a teenager, then she had talent. I had the mental image of a young girl, studying during the day for as long as the sun and chores would let her; and then, when it got too dark to read, going to her wizardly cache and carefully extracting a lightstone, hiding its brightness until it couldn't be seen from the outside. Just to get a few more hours of learning in.

This is why I had asked to look at the room. I mean, I knew Elizabeth was a mage. I knew that her parents also knew, and that they supported her. But that could have meant anything. But, seeing this, I now knew that Elizabeth kept long hours learning, and that her parents did everything they could to keep her safe while she did it. That told me a lot about her motivations. Elizabeth was used to being determined to do something.

She was also used to hating the Universal Dominion. I mean, you could tell that right away. This room was a refuge, with a bunch of subtle protections; but if a Dominion snatch squad had ever tracked her down, they'd have just burned through the roof, grabbed her away, and

then burned the farm down to the bedrock as a warning to the next ten generations about the price of not giving up a mage-child to the Dominion.

That hasn't happened in three hundred years, of course. Because *New California doesn't have any mages*. Just ask anybody in Cin City, from the King on down; they'll all tell you. The Dominion knows it's a lie, but we're far away, and they're still trying to keep down all those hunks of Deseret that they ripped away and ate a few generations ago. And maybe because the Dominion doesn't understand why a girl like Elizabeth won't come to them on her own. A lot of mages do, I hear. Guess there are places where being a slave with a full belly and a whip to use on 'mundanes' doesn't sound like a bad deal.

I looked around the room again. How many times in here did she stop and start at a sudden sound, or even a sudden silence? Some kids would think of it like a game, but I knew that Elizabeth wouldn't. You can't make a kid have this much discipline. And she'd be scared for her family, not just for her. And that would make her afraid and angry. And that made me angry, too. I felt myself getting hot under the collar, which is a bad thing for a Shamus to feel. But somebody had murdered a smart and skilled mage, and then turned her into a thing for some

sick display. You'd have to be made of rock to not be upset about it.

And, dammit, whoever murdered Elizabeth wasn't from the Dominion. This farm would be a burned-out cinder otherwise. Wolfie wouldn't care if Elizabeth was dead. If he had killed her, he would have also killed her family as a reflex. Which told me something: Wolfie didn't know who killed Elizabeth, either. That was keeping her parents alive. And it also gave me another time limit; eventually that bastard would get bored of waiting for me to solve the case and start amusing himself.

So, hey, nothing to worry about.

With the Gonzalezes permission, I took one of Elizabeth's lightstones. I told them that it was for having a sample of her 'special' work, which was true (I also told them that they might want to think about visiting their families for a couple of weeks, which I knew that they'd refuse to do). But I also wanted something of hers. Call it an instinct; I was sure that I'd find a use for it, somehow. If nothing else, I could shove it down the murderer's throat.

And yeah, before I left: I did get visited by every relative within fast walking distance of the Gonzalez farm. They

were eager, and angry, and very lucky that they could trust me not to throw their lives away. The last one to approach me was Elizabeth's mother, which surprised me a little. I mean, I thought that she knew that I already knew what she wanted.

But she didn't hiss a rash promise in my ear, like the rest. Instead, she looked out at the lengthening shadows of afternoon, and said, "You ever hear of a woman called Leila Cordova Parsons?" When I carefully replied that, yes, I had heard of the most notorious 'cleaning lady' in Cin City, Diane looked at me with those pitiless eyes and said "When you need to, you go to her and you tell her that you hold the debt that she owes me. You will know when to do this, Shamus."

I must have flicked my eyes towards the house, because Diane shook his head. "George does not know. He is too good a man to know -- and you will not bring him with you when you make an end of this, either."

"He told me the same thing about you, ma'am." I might have been startled that this kindly farm wife was on calling-in-a-marker terms with Cin City's foremost witch, but the Case is the Case. Diane smiled, bleakly.

“Of course. Did I not say he was a good man? Too good for me. But he cannot understand this.”

As I said: this happens.

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