

Dig Two Graves

I heard her coming up long before she hove into view, of course. And she wanted me to hear her, of course. But that was about her being smart. She had business with me, and I bet that I knew what that business was, and she would get no aid from sneaking up to my campsite like a Bird-Man scout looking for a sack of beans.

I didn't need the campfire, but I had lit one anyway. As she moved into its light, I kept my hands where she could see them, and she showed me the same courtesy. A nod from me was enough for her to sit herself, and then I waited. I had time. More time than her, likely. Besides, the Horsemen themselves hold with working out what you want to say, then saying it. It's a good rule, though one hated by a gossip.

So when she was ready to talk, she talked. "Evening, Homesteader. Look; I bring meat from the hunt." So we were being formal about it, then.

I gravely nodded. "Evening, Wanderer. See; I have beans from the fields." I just as gravely took the dried meat --

griffin, from the smell -- and mixed it in with the beans in my pot. The Horsewoman happily took a bowl of meatless beans in the meantime, of course. Beans always were one of the things that we traded with them. Well. I guess that we still do.

I surveyed the Horsewoman as she ate quickly but with restraint. Young for the fighter's cut of her brown hair and the few scars on her face and hands; and she was dressed out in the lacquered mail that her people wore on long tours of the steppe. But it was the tattoo on her neck that interested me most; a black horse with a red mane. Burning Colt was the warrior society for the Horsemen's womenfolk; and those people didn't lightly go about permanently inscribing their allegiances on their hides. Doubly so when it was on a place where you couldn't remove it without hurting or killing yourself.

The woman let me get a good look before she put down her bowl. Surprisingly, she stood up and curtseyed. "Thankee for the supper. I am Marigold; my Clan is Owlbear, my sept is Anderson. Am I speaking with the illustrious Dead-Eye George?"

I rose myself and gave her a short bow. "The same, Miz Anderson --"

“Mizzy Marigold is fine.”

“Thankee. I have heard of the Andersons of Owlbear; their flocks and riders are known to the Homesteads,” I said politely while my eyes narrowed inside, where this Marigold girl couldn’t see. Because I had heard of the Andersons recently in a much different light. And I suspected I knew why she was at my campfire.

“Flocks and riders and now unclaimed vengeance, Dead-Eye George. You are on the trail of Jack, called the Black Heart, for his crimes against your kin.” She spit a piece of gristle into the fire. “So am I, for his crimes against mine.”

I nodded. “It was your father and brother that he bushwacked?”

“Uncle and cousin, but the one put me on my first pony and the other made sure I knew how to ride it. I will have vengeance for their deaths, and for the broken tears of my aunt. Whatever the cost.”

The coffee chose then to start bubbling, and with a little good will it would stretch to two. I poured her a cup, drank

mine, and winced at the taste. “There’s room on this trail for you and your vengeance both. Just don’t clutch it too close to your, ah, side. Vengeance is a biter, and it doesn’t care who it gnaws on.”

Marigold unstiffened just a bit, with a look in her eye that told me she expected more of an argument from me. Well, maybe I should have given her one. But I was in no the mood to tell anybody else what she needed to do with her life, particularly since I had no strong opinions on the matter. I had my own reckoning with Black-Heart Jack; a reckoning that this Marigold might aid with. So she might as well ride with me on the way.

The Horsewoman could ride, of course. And I let her set the pace as the two of us rode deeper west into the badlands where I knew Black-Heart Jack was now holed up. We wouldn’t be moving quickly, for the sake of our horses; no remounts for us, because out here extra horses meant extra bait for monsters. Two people and two horses could get through places where two and six would just run into a pack of dire wolves. One reason why I had started off on my own, but having Marigold along wouldn’t make things much harder.

She wasn't too much of a talker, but we exchanged enough to be companionable. Marigold was an orphan taken in by relatives after her parents had died in a stampede, only to see her new father and brother shot in the back; she was ready and wild for the sight of Black-Heart Jack's blood, and I took careful note of that in my own head. For my part, I told her the bones of my own quarrel with Jack -- a posse gone wrong, and kinsmen killed before my eyes -- while leaving out the bits that weren't important just at this moment and might never be.

Other than that, we mostly kept a calm but watchful eye on where we were going. It's pretty country, the badlands; shame about all the giant spiders, but they're mostly a problem for cattle. Besides, I knew the way, and the trail was obvious enough that Marigold didn't ask too many questions as to how. Black-Heart Jack had a band, after all. Six men, each with a couple of remounts; that leaves a mark on the countryside, even if you're not me and have to look for trailsigns, instead of just know. We would have no trouble following them.

And then we caught up to Black-Heart Jack's band. In a manner of speaking, that is. As we crested a ridge, our horses suddenly shyed, and balked at moving forward. A sudden whiff of corruption on the breeze told us why.

I will not deny that the scene spread before us as we descended into the slight hollow looked and smelled like something out of Hell. Black-Heart Jack's band was scattered around, up, and in a couple of places through the clearing where they had set up camp -- I assessed the buzzing flies and the state of the corpses -- about three days ago. It wasn't a bad spot to hunker down for the night, and clearly something large and with a taste for meat agreed.

Black-Heart Jack's men died hard, I will give them that; not a one of them died without a gun in their hands, although most of them died without hands on their arms. Blood everywhere, of course, and the ants were busy at it. Not all of it was human or horse blood, though, and none of it was Black-Heart's Jack.

The corpses mostly sported deep slices, as if from a cavalry saber, but there were a lot of thin, huge bone needles driven through the dead men and horses. I carefully tapped one -- with a knife; I'm no fool -- and watched it only gently quiver. "What kind of beast was this?"

“Manticore,” answered Marigold. Her bow was strung, half-drawn in the way the Horsemen have, and she had an arrow nocked. “Looks like a lion, but it’s got a head full of teeth and a tail full of spikes. Don’t touch the quills with your hand; they’re poison.”

“I always guess a creature’s poisoned until I find out it’s not. Think I’ve heard of these, but haven’t never seen one back in the Homesteads.”

“That’s because we kill the damned things whenever we see one,” Marigold explained, her eyes wide in that way that you get when you’re trying to see what doesn’t belong in the landscape. “But seven hard men against one? Even with your guns that should mean a dead manticore, and maybe a couple of horses dead and a man writhing in the dirt. This was a slaughter.”

Speaking of guns, I was quickly pulling revolvers out of dead men’s hands, looking hasty for anything too filthy clogging the barrels, and reloading them from my own ammunition quick as could be. Better now than later, during a gunfight. “They didn’t miss, either. So where’s the manticore?”

A snarl interrupted us. Followed by another snarl, to one side. Marigold and I instinctively went back-to-back at that. Thank God that the sun was high in the sky, because this looked to get real bad, real quick. It wasn't just one manticore we were dealing with, you understand. And it turned out they weren't real friendly.

There were two of the monsters, and they looked half-grown. At least, their paws were a little too big for their legs and their manes weren't in yet. I figured that meant what it would have meant for lions. They looked beaten up, too; Black-Heart Jack's men had gotten their licks in good, if not quite good enough. But if seven humans couldn't fight off two manticores, what could two against two do?

Well, I will tell you.

Manticores are beasts, and the breed apparently isn't much for stalking or fighting together; they'd have been better off fighting us two-on-one, one at a time. But the manticore with the cut-off tail decided to go for Marigold, and the other one went for me. I stepped forward to give my companion more room for her bow, and then I got into shooting.

I was always good at it. Back in the Homesteads I got my monicker from a dozen County and Territorial Fair competitions. I'd quick-shoot so accurate in the showoffs that sometimes I'd finish off my competitor's targets after I was done with mine. Not often, though. Only with people who'd appreciate the joke.

That was then. Now -- after Black-Heart Jack, and what was done for me -- I shot truer than ever; and faster, too. I had nothing in my head to get in my way. I didn't even need to blink away the sweat, or anything else. Which is good, because a sumbitch manticore needs a lot of bullets before it'll die on you.

I had three guns grabbed from the dead men, and every one of them got fired off before my manticore got clear of the treeline. That at least made the critter more thoughtful, not to mention limping on least one leg and bleeding from a dozen places. But not dead, dammit.

It paced a little, and I shifted my stance to keep track. Behind me came a sound like angry wasps as Marigold's fancy bow tossed arrows at the other manticore, which was definitely mostly-crippled instead of maybe half-crippled. "I swear, some of those damned bullets bounced off!" I almost snarled.

“They do that!” yelled Marigold in reply. “Manticore hide’s pretty damn tough. Try for the eyes. Or get a bow and bodkins, next time!”

I risked a quick look at my companion. She looked relaxed enough, but Horsemen are like that. What concerned me was that her neck tattoo was glowing. Burning Colt warriors don’t call on their sigil unless they have to, and I reckoned that if Marigold was worried enough to reach for that power, we were in trouble. So I pulled my own two guns, and started looking for my chance.

And damned if the manticore wasn’t doing the same. I don’t know how smart they are, but this one knew guns, and knew what they couldn’t do. And, dammit, manticores are fast. Not just with their paws; their tails are as fast as a cobra’s, and just as nasty.

It was a sight to see how the manticore could go from circling to charging faster than another man might follow. As it went into striking range I watched that tail, because I suspected that I knew what it planned. And sure enough; the tail’s razor-sharp, spike-covered, ichor-stained tip came down, almost slowly, and aimed right for my side.

I asked Marigold later, and she told me that my instinct was right: the manticore's attack was meant to get me to move, spoil my aim, and let the critter go after my hands with the sharp tip of its tail. Guess that's why all those disarmed guns on the ground in the first place. Clever trick, really. But it was figuring that I'd move out of the way.

God **damn**, but those quills hurt. Burned so hard that I even felt it, too. But I had to laugh when the manticore tried to move, only I wasn't going anywhere and neither was it. They say manticores have a human face and that isn't true, but it had a human look of gape-mouthed confusion, right before I emptied my revolvers right down its throat.

Here's the thing: if the hide's so thick bullets bounce off the outside, it's so thick that bullets bounce off the inside, too. I think that the sumbitch actually crapped one out the other end, which made me start laughing like a loon. I couldn't stop even when the tail popped out from the manticore's death rattle. Must have been the venom, because I was still laughing when I fell down. As the crooners say, I went into an insensible swoon, and I was damned glad to have it. I don't exactly sleep anymore.

And I don't exactly wake up anymore, but when I came to it was closer than I've been for a while. Marigold was working on stitching up my side; which meant that she had gotten some spare leather and tackle together, and was riveting some hide to my flesh in order to cover the exposed ribs and guts. She had a neat hand with it, too. 'Course, the Horsemen know how to work leather.

Behind us were the two manticores, all laid out and with the more useful bits cut out already. Marigold's looked like chopped ground beef, probably from all the arrows she had put into it. Well, nobody ever said that a Horsemen with a bow was less dangerous than a Homesteader with a gun.

Marigold gave me a sidelong look as she tightened the rawhide lacings. "So. You a revenant, then?"

I considered it. "Yup. That a problem?"

Marigold snorted. "It ain't like you're coming after me. Black-Heart Jack do this to you?"

"Yeah. He didn't get saddled with 'Black-Heart' back in the Homesteads because he was mean, although he is. Stories got around that he was trying to bring up devils

and imps to do his bidding, and you can't have that. So me and some fellas I trusted went to go have a look-see. All nice and official, too. We even had a paper signed by Senator Yelling Bertha herself, saying that we were deputized and regulated and the rest of it."

Marigold had finished up; she moved back and offered a hand to help me up. Not being a damned fool that way anymore, I took it. As I said, she had a neat hand; I could feel things settling back in, which was good. I didn't need the distraction. "Turns out that we should have come riding in a month earlier. Or maybe six months. Or, Hell, just shot the sumbitch when he was fifteen.

"He didn't have it easy, mind you. We got some shots in. But he killed us all. Killed me last; the last thing I remember alive was me bleeding to death, down in the hole Black-Heart Jack had blasted out of the ground. He was chanting and carrying on and calling down something, and something came down. I remember Black-Heart Jack laughing at that, low and nasty. And then the sumbitch pissed on my head, just to show me who was boss." I shrugged. "I don't remember what happened after that, and if I did, I'd lie to the living about it.

“But I came to, six months later, with my kinsmen moldering below me and a bunch of boulders pinning me down. Took a while to dig myself out. Took longer to get back to Bertha, and tell her what happened. She almost shot my jaw off when she saw me, which was reasonable, but we soon came to an understanding. I’d go get Black-Heart Jack, and she’d make sure that I got what I needed to get him.” They raise ‘em calm in the Horsemen, I will say. Marigold didn’t even blink at that, although I damned well had. Yelling Bertha hadn’t not shot me; she just missed. To be fair, Bertha calmed down a lot when the walking corpse had sworn at her for that.

“You get that you need me, George?” I considered it, and nodded. She was right, after all, but not for the reasons she thought. “Good, because these weren’t the only manticores.”

I pulled out my tobacco pouch and began rolling up a smoke. “Yup. There’s still their mama, I’d say.” At her look of mild surprise, I nodded at the two dead manticores. “Those two were half-grown, I figure. And they don’t hunt in packs?” When Marigold nodded, I went on. “So there must be a mama manticore around here, somewhere. Probably chasing Black-Heart Jack, who is not here, and he’s got at least three horses with him.” I walked a few

paces, to feel how my gut was fixing itself. It'd do. "In case you haven't gathered yet --"

"-- You can track him," interrupted Marigold. "Fine by me. I still have a score to settle with Black-Heart Jack."

"I'm going to need to be the one to kill him, Marigold."

"We'll discuss that after we catch up with the bastard."

For a miracle, the horses had survived. And even let us ride them, further into the badlands. Now that I didn't have to pretend to be following a visible trail, we could make better time. Marigold fussed a little bit more with her gear as we grew closer (Black-Heart Jack wasn't making as good time as he should have), which I took to be a sign of deep agitation and nervousness for a Horseman. Couldn't tell you, though. The Homesteads and the Horsemen get along, but it's at a distance. Back home, we never really knew what was in their heads. Decent enough, though. Guess they think the same about us.

A few nights in it was me fussing at the campfire. Marigold hooked a glance at me, over the saber edge she was sharpening (there had been a damfool harpy wanting

to dispute its range. Nothing worth fussing over). “You troubled about something, George?”

“Black-Heart Jack. He hasn’t moved all day.” I poked the fire. “He knows I’m after him, of course.”

“Really? You might have said.”

I managed to flush a little. “Sorry,” I said, and meant it. “He knows where I am the same way I know where he is. So if he’s not moving, then he’s waiting for me.”

“You mean us, George.”

“Nope.” Marigold opened her mouth, and I interrupted. “Calm down, Horsewoman. I only mean that Black-Heart Jack doesn’t know you’re here. He can’t see through my eyes or anything. That’s our edge.”

That earned me a nod. “Right. You look like you’re alone -- and of course you would. Who would ride with a revenant?”

“Exactly.”

“And he’ll think that this is just a private haunting,” Marigold continued. “Nobody else invited. You two square off, do whatever it is that you’re supposed to do. And then I put an arrow through his rotten, filthy earhole.” She hooked another glance at me. “You have a problem with that war-plan, Dead-Eye George?”

I considered the coffee. I didn’t need it, and the taste was a little different now, but it was still a comfort on a cold night. “Won’t be that easy, but I did say you and your vengeance could both ride with me. I was already dead when I gave my word, so it ain’t worth anything less now.”

“Fair,” conceded Marigold. She wrapped herself up in the blankets; what sleep I needed I was getting now in the saddle. After a moment, her voice came out of the heap. “I don’t want to ask, if it’d be a torment to you.”

That got a chuckle out of me. “Being dead don’t feel too bad. Kind of restful, even. If that’s what you’re not asking.”

“Good. And good night.”

We caught up with Black-Heart Jack mid-morning the next day. And this time we didn’t even try to ride close. The

stench and the screaming spooked the horses. It did its damndest to spook me.

The original plan was for Marigold to sidle off to the side a bit, creep on in, and wait for a good shot, but we took one look at the blood and guts strewn everywhere -- we had found Black-Heart Jack's horses, at least -- and decided that this was no time to split up. So we scouted our way in. I was in front, but I needn't have bothered. A blind man could have reckoned which way to go. Hell, so could a deaf man, as long as he could still smell.

Black-Heart Jack was on the ground. Mostly. A huge chunk out of his middle was gone, gone down first the gut of the mama manticore that had finally tracked him down -- and then sicked right back up and all over the clearing. Guess she couldn't stomach him any more than the rest of us. Mama didn't look too good, neither. Her head was so puffed up that her teeth bled her cheek every time she breathed in, her feathers were falling out, and when she saw us and charged, it ended in a collapsing heap of legs and tail and howls of pain. And I swear that she almost looked grateful when I took careful aim at one eye and put a bullet through it, and into her brain.

We stepped back until the manticore was done working out that it was dead now, and carefully made our way to the ruin of Black-Heart Jack. Marigold looked down, cold as the wind off the prairie in winter. “He’s still moving,” she said.

“Yup. See his heart? As long as it’s beating, Black-Heart Jack can’t die. He put that spell on himself, the night he killed me and my boys.”

Marigold considered that for a moment, looked over all the scattered parts of Black-Heart Jack for a moment, then smiled like she was the dead one. “Well, that is a shame. Guess he’ll conjure his spells better next time. Let me get our horses, and we’ll be on our way.”

I sighed. “Don’t bother with mine. Just get me the shovel and pick I brought.” At least the ground wasn’t too hard.

“What do you need those for?”

“You know what they’re for, Marigold.”

“You ain’t going to kill him and then dig him his grave, Dead-Eye George.”

“That’s right. I gotta dig the grave first, roll what’s left of the bastard into it, and then kill him. The only way this works.”

I didn’t want to look up, but I did anyway. Marigold had her bow out, and an arrow aimed at my leg. As I expected.

“I said I was here for vengeance, George, and this is better than anything I could do to him. I won’t kill you, but I can put an arrow in each knee and sling you over your horse until we’re well away. Let Black-Heart Jack spend the next hundred years out here, shriveling away, while we ride back to my kin. They won’t fuss over a dead man walking around, as long as he’s civil.”

I kept my hands where she could see them, of course. “You ain’t afraid I’ll shoot you over this?”

“Nope, Dead-Eye George. You ain’t that kind of man, living or dead. But don’t make this go bad for either of us. Let’s just go.”

I considered, and decided that I really was not that kind of man. Or at least, not yet. “Mizzy Marigold, I am going to slowly drop my gun belt on the ground. Once I do, I would appreciate you pointing that arrow somewhere else while I

tell you what you've figured out wrong." I dropped my guns, she kept the arrow nocked but not aimed at me, so I guess she was humoring me well enough.

"Here's the problem, Mizzy Marigold: it's that damned black heart of Jack's. It'll keep him alive. At some point, it'll give him the strength to cram his damned guts back into his body and heal him up. It'll take a damned long while, too. But he'll get back up again, and then Black-Heart Jack will be able to start his mischief again. He's got to be killed. And I'm the only one who can kill him. Just like he's the only one who can kill me. When one of us dies, so does the other. That's why he buried me under all those rocks; he wanted a head start. As much of one as he could get."

"A head start for what?" Marigold asked. She still looked cold, but now she was thinking a little. Good. That was good.

I gave her a horrible smile of my own and pulled out the rawhide lacings that kept steady the hide covering my hide. "This," I said as the covering flopped half down, then turned so she could see inside my gut. Marigold first looked at the black heart pooled underneath Jack's ribs,

and then at the much smaller one sullenly pulsing under my own.

“I bet you wondered why I let you come along,” I said, as I calmly started lacing up the rawhide again. “It wasn’t for your sake, Horsewoman; it was for mine. If it was just me out here, I might have ended up not knowing which of him and me was Dead-Eye George, and which was Black-Heart Jack. But with you along, I could tell us apart.

“You understand, Mizzy Marigold? Your offer to bring me back to your kin was kindly meant, but you would have been bringing him back, as near as made no difference. Only you couldn’t kill me when it did go bad.”

Marigold lowered the bow. “Dammit,” she said, her voice full of fury. Then, quick as lightning, she pulled and shot so hard and fast her tattoo glowed white for a moment. I didn’t look away as, behind me, her arrow went right through the skull of Black-Heart Jack.

“Just to make sure he don’t move,” she muttered as we went to get the pick and shovel. Not that I had any complaints. Wasn’t my head, after all.

We dug two graves, of course. Wasn't safe to bring even my corpse back to civilized lands. I packed everything of mine she might find useful; I didn't ask her to look after my horse, much like I wouldn't ask her to keep breathing. But I kept my boots on. Point of pride, for a Homesteader.

And then it was time. We had shoved Black-Heart Jack into one of the graves, and I had set myself so it wouldn't be too hard for Marigold to muscle me in. I stood there, and I can tell you: I didn't know what to say at that point. I didn't want to cheapen this.

So I looked over at my companion said "Goodbye, Marigold, and thank you kindly," and put two bullets right in Jack's black heart

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