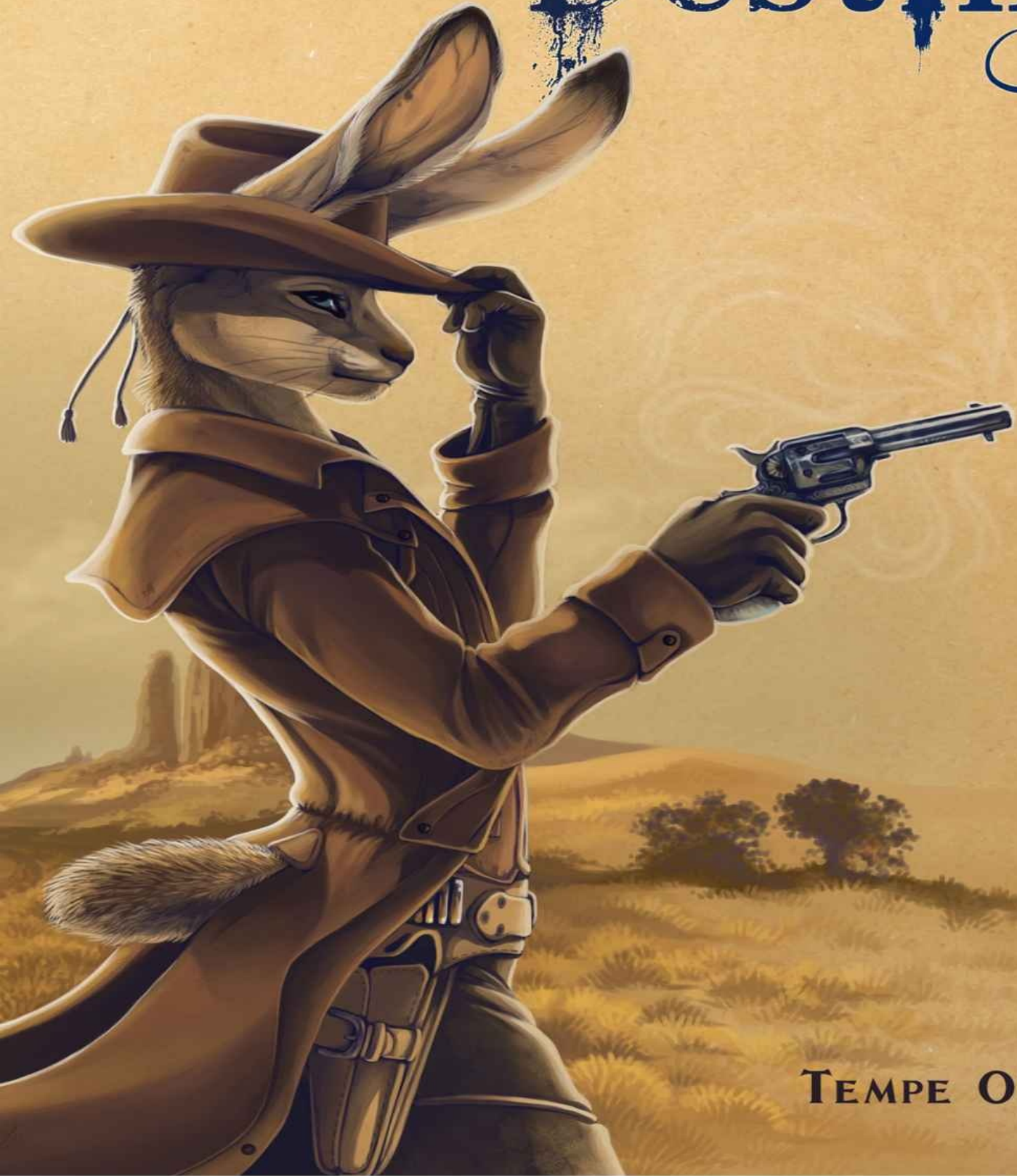


Sixes Wild:

Manifest Destiny



TEMPE O'KUN

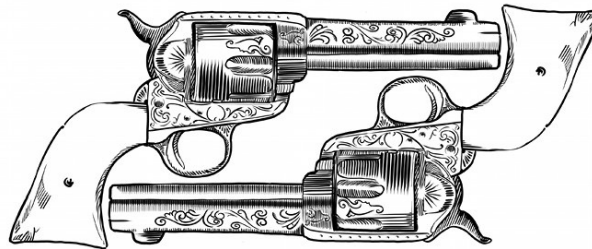
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Sixes Wild: Manifest Destiny



by Tempe O’Kun



Saint Paul, MN

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Furry Writers’ Guild ~ C6yotl Award

Best Mature Novel of 2012

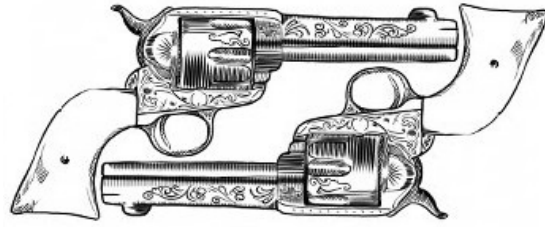
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Prologue

Cooler winds breathe through my fur, calling to mind other breath that's been there.

~~~~~

My name is Six Shooter, and this gun holds half my father's echo.

The other half? Well, this gun's mate now adorns that damnable lion's mantle, just another carnivore trophy. He's past due for a bullet— ah'll be sure to pay him with interest... one of these days.

For the most of folks, echoes just give you an edge, a hint of the skills of somebody you lost, tying you to them across the afterlife. Your frontiersman granddaddy's lucky fire striker might light every time for you, but it that's the sum of it. Once upon a time, that's all the guns were for me...

Paw still lingering on my revolver, I sit in the saddle, watching the Arizona sunset. Cooler winds breathe through my fur, calling to mind other breath that's lingered there. I slip off my pony and tie it to a scrub brush.

I stroll past White Rock's newest landmark — a great washout across the sand. A smile of pride swaggers across my muzzle. I feel like signing my name as I amble through the long shadows the town casts on it.

It'd be reckless, even by a gunslinging hare's standards, to walk into town before dark. Nothing helps folk remember your face like a bounty on your head.

'Yote howls rise and fall a ways off. That would unnerve other folk. Other folk'd also give them trouble, whereas I figure they got no shortage and am keen to leave 'em to it. 'Course, if ya believe a certain bloodhound deputy, my ears are so pricked to echoes now the 'yotes might paint me up and have a dance around me.

I learned more about echoes than I ever cared to, during the business that saw me parted from my other gun. My daddy echoes through his guns— he knew them like the fur of his paws, and I certainly ain't forgetting.

Since I'm here for the time being, I decide to make the time be useful. Reaching into the saddlebags, I pull out my cleaning kit and turn it over in my paws. Leather is soft, new, with a fancy foreign word tooled on the back. Lawbat says it means "freedom." Glad he gets the idea about me.

Inside, there's a couple of little brushes, cleaning rod, little bottle of oil, and a whole mess of flannel scrap. I spread a blanket on the sand, draw, and set down my iron, my back to a rock. I'm accustomed to this with two guns, always having one ready at paw. Walking the world with just the one makes a bun a twitch jumpy. I bite my lip and set myself to patience, if not ease.

Click the hammer back to half-cocked. Swing out the loading gate. Unload with ejector rod. One, two, three, four, five, six. Two's empty— I feel no urge to blast myself in the hind paw.

Chill cuts through my fur, leaves me wanting for something warm wrapped around me. Damn blanket itches. I miss my lawbat... I remind myself I'm cleaning a gun, not sitting around a sewing circle. Hit the catch, pull the base pin, and tuck it in the corner of my mouth. Fix one of the little flannel squares onto the cleaning rod, swabbing out the barrel and chambers. Only when the last one comes out clean do I know I'm done.

Only a fool'd come back here. And yet here I sit...

Light's fading. Could be the iron's clean, but I get finicky with time on my paws. Coat the brush in oil and twirl it through the works of the gun, always pushing clear through before I pull back. Wouldn't do to ruin Blake's fancy present.

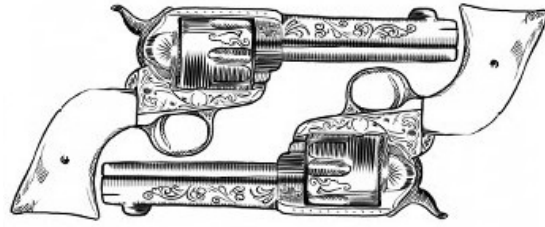
Blake. Who names a kid Blake? Doesn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of criminals. You can tell his parents wanted him to be a fancy lawyer type.

I give the gun another going-over with fresh flannels. Once I'm satisfied, I click the barrel back home and fix the base pin.

Smartest thing would have been never to come here. Second best would be riding out this very instant, never looking back.

Like to think I've got a good down-to-earth sense about me. So what in Sam Hill am I doing here? Not drowning in dinero, that's for damn sure.

I never had this manner of trouble 'til six months ago...



## Chapter 1

*This is my way in the world.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

My paws rest on matched guns, touching the barest hint of an echo. The echoes are nothing direct, mind you, more like feelings, instincts. But I've gone through the mill more than once, and I've learned to trust 'em. I'm faster with this iron than some poor farm bunny ought to be, which is the better part of why I've survived out here on the wilder edge of the world. The other part is being cautious.

Take this town for example. Whenever I decide to hit up a burg, I always like to take some time an' study it first. Watch the here and there of it. This little stop in White Rock'll be no different. Smallish place, maybe a hundred people, maybe two hundred. Most are the decent sort of folk, though there are hard cases aplenty. Rough sort makes all the noise and most of the money, but that's just the nature of the Frontier.

The desert sun bakes my fur. During my little look-see, I catch glimpses of the usual fare of faded wood: general store, city office, and a pawful of saloons. Those last are the real places of business for a bunny of my skills. Pockets get a mite looser when people get drunk. To save them worries, I usually have the decency to rob a game of cards. Besides, I only steal from folk who deserve it, mostly, and it's rare for me to find a saloon without some manner of jackass in need of his wallet being lightened.

I mosey on past the stables, eyes open for a pony I might want on the way out. I've been walking since my last business engagement ended with me getting a hop on before I could get to the stables. Some folk take it so hard when you steal from them.

My paws caress the handles of my guns. I know every angle and groove on them, like they're a part of me. They're ace-high jobs, all silver and finery. Most expensive thing I ever laid paws on— my inheritance in whole and sum. Mother a' pearl handles gleam over etched silver. Some folk get taken by the notion of relieving me of them, a notion that draws bullets. Can't say as I blame 'em entirely; draws the eye when they shine silver as twin moons out the top of my holsters.

I choose a saloon. Doesn't pay to get too particular; good luck and a quick draw can get me in and out of the right sorts of trouble. Breezing in all casual, I order a beer, even though I hate the stuff. Something about the bubbles disagrees with my nose, makes it wiggle something fierce, but folk send hassle your way if ya nurse the same glass of whiskey for an hour. I settle in with my drink and let my ears do the work.

This is my way in the world; I listen. Unlike the most of hares, however, I run toward trouble instead of away. See some shave-tail get roostered and slip on his own spilled booze, then filch his pocket-watch while you help him up. Wait for some brutes to get into a brawl, then steal the purses off their belts as I shove 'em off my table. Hell, once I even palmed the gold tips off a deer's antlers. Cost me a bottle of Kentucky Red-Eye, but the buck kept trying to make a mash on the bardog's daughter, so he had it coming.

Really, it's a good life. Not an excess of comfort, true, but not an excess of rules either. If any real difficulty ever kicks up, I just shin out. Ain't no place like the out of doors for a hare and besides, I look harmless. Just another bunny you'd pass on the road, a little tall maybe, but what's another tall fella to the world?

Settling in casual-like, I take in the bar. Fresh sawdust on worn floorboards. The stench of rotgut whiskey and unwashed bodies soaks the air. I chance a sip of the beer— swill as expected, warm and going flat. Some folks are losing their pay at the poker table, and the saloon girl is making her rounds, conning the menfolk into buying more drinks with winks and charm. The old border collie behind the bar keeps asking the same patrons if they'd like a drink from "genuine echoed" glasses in his breathless, excitable way.

Then I hear it— whispers though the wall. I'm led back by the ears, leaning back 'til they're flat against the wall. I listen. In the back room, I can hear a deal brewing...





## Chapter 2

*I ain't keen on that mine.*

~~~~~

I snarl. We lions aren't known for our patience.

"Let's keep this simple." I interlace my fingers, paws on my chest, feet on the table, like Father so often did. Shows I'm at ease, in control, powerful: everything a lion ought to be. "Since tomorrow's the Fourth, I'm going to be out enjoying the festivities. You go in, rob my store, leave with the cashbox. Got it?"

The lynx takes another gulp of whiskey. No wonder his voice grinds like grit. "I ain't some soft-in-the-brainpan prey, Hayes. I get the plan. When do we get paid?"

To his left, two cats make a show of checking their guns, trying to look tough. To his right, a boar smokes his pipe and doesn't have to make a show of anything.

The shorter of the two cats squirms. "Why're we stealin' from you? Can't ya just give us the money right now?"

"I'm paying out a large amount of cash all at once, enough that it would be noticeable to anyone who looked over the books." I smile. Stealing money from myself is a properly devious plan. That's why I'm the boss: predator cunning. "Now, when Morris meets you out at the old mine, he'll pay you half. When you finish delivering the cash to everybody on the list, you get the other half."

Morris hands the lynx a slip of paper. That dandy rodent's one of the few leaf-munchers I can tolerate. He's local, and showed up around the time I inherited the mine, like he could smell the money. His wits make him damn useful—he even threw a bunch of small bills and cards around the table in case some fool walked in on our little meeting—but his constant twitching and chittering gives me the nerves. Rodents...

The lynx snatches the paper away, making the little marmot jump back and straighten the vest over his wide belly. The feline twitches his tufted ears, scouring the list over. “Blazes! There are damn judges on this list! Even the mayor down in Chance Canyon. You reckon we can just walk in and make a social call?”

I laugh. “They're all expecting you. Just take a bath first, they'll let you in.”

He growls, but stuffs the list in his pocket. That's the way with him: he'll bitch and bellow, but he gets the job done. For close on three years, he's been one of my best and knows it. The boar is for muscle. The two scrawny cats are a fairways useless, but I know where their families live and made it clear living's a precarious thing out here. They're going to make sure nobody gets greedy. Best of all, none of them have been in town much and won't be recognized by the sheriff. Simple.

The lynx leans back, copying my posture. “I ain't keen on that mine.” Years back, a rumor just happened to spring up that the mine was cursed, which keeps folk from pointing their noses where they don't belong.

The other three shift and look at each other, suggesting it's a common sentiment. You'd think they believed the very rumor we spread.

I spread my wide paws, looking all reasonable. “Gentlemen, I have money. I pay you to make things happen. That's life. If you don't like it, find somebody else to pay you. The difference is, it won't be as much.” I lean forward, my claws carving furrows on the table as if it were soft leather. Or their hides. “Now get to work.”

The four of them leave. Even that lynx knows he can only press me so far; the fang marks scarring his spotty throat serve to remind him.

Morris scoops the cards and cash off the table, sorting each with twitchy little paws. Once finished, he gnaws at a blunt claw.

“I tell you, varmint, the wind's blowing my way.” I slap him on the back, knocking him forward. “In six months' time, I'll have all the money I want. And all the manpower to back it up.”

He steadies himself, brushing the reddish dust off his clothes. “Best we don’t get ahead a’ ourselves.”

I ignore him, smiling. “Who would’ve thought I’d dig up something better than gold?”



Chapter 3

I'm a hell of a bunny.

~~~~~

As sheriff, I've never taken to drink much myself. Makes my wings burn and, besides, a lawman needs to maintain a certain command of his faculties. Doesn't seem to stop others. The entire town seems to be out in the street, celebrating the Fourth of July. Rowdy folk, loud for my tender ears, but that's good. Let them get it out now, rather than in the saloon later. The roughness of their voices stirs a longing in me for the nights when my family would sing together after dusk, when the air is clearest. The sweet melodies, too high for other species to hear, permitted us to sing as loud as we wished and not disturb the neighbors.

I buy a sarsaparilla off Doc Richards, and he offers to twist the cap off for me. I politely decline and get it with my hind paw and wing. Most folk never understand why bats don't take issue with having wings in place of arms. Most folk haven't ever flown either. Dangling from a rafter by one leg, I take a swig. Feels good to drink upside down again. Another joy of being a flying fox. Just have to keep it out of my nose.

Doc opens one up as well and sips at it. "Tell me, Blake..." His fine white coat gleams against his auburn fur. I can see how he used to be mayor—he looks the part. "You ever going to take Charlotte and me up on that offer for dinner?"

Fiddling with the badge my uncle gave me, I try to think of a way to decline.

He fluffs his tail, shaking out the dust. "Come on. What's the hitch?"

"I don't know... Don't care to have folks thinking I play favorites."

“Glory be, Sheriff! It’s food, not money. Oh, and on that, I promise we’ll tell you if there’s meat in anything. I know how you fruit bats get.” He nudges me with his elbow.

I smile. Doc means well— I’ve never seen him do anything but good for others since I got here, despite his charming vulpine ways—but if I start getting overly companionable with the locals, where do I stop? As it stands now, nobody can claim I ignore anybody’s offenses. I’d never turn a blind eye, of course, but that wouldn’t stop people from talking. Better to just leave that whole tangle be. Simpler this way.

The fox looks a touch put out at my silence, and again I try to drum up something to say.

Just as I open my muzzle, the sad eyes of my deputy catch me through the crowd. Harding’s a damn good tracker. Could’ve taken the post after Sheriff Collins bit a bullet, but he likes life as a deputy. Can’t blame him. Folks are less likely to shoot you.

“Blake! You’re gonna wanna come see to this.”

I toss Doc the bottle, drop from the rafter, and run through the crowd, following Harding. Already, the hound’s wagging at the excitement of the chase. Once I get up a head of steam, I jump, kicking off his shoulders and taking to the air. Houses and people blur below me, a few merrymakers raising their cups to me in drunken excitement. Few enough bats around here that I’m still something of a novelty. I startle old Harland Myers into spitting out a fresh quid of tobacco as I wing over him.

Harding and I get to Hayes’ General Wares in time to see Tanner Hayes turning all different shades of furious. Hayes is the nephew of an old lion who bought out the mine years ago. Darn fool’s stomping around like his mane’s in a twist, still in his best bib and tucker. His expression is one of shocked disbelief, perhaps that somebody would dare deprive him of money for a change.

I land, stirring up a mess of dust. “What’s the ruckus here?”

“I’ve been robbed!” He bustles toward me, his portly frame pushing onlookers out of the way. Crowds kick up fast when you start yelling in the streets while half the town is out to celebrate.

“When?”

“Just now! I came back to the store and my strongbox is gone!” He roars in frustration. “One of the staff saw a fella run down the alley just before I arrived.”

I hear Harding catch up to me. I turn to him. “Deputy! Head on up to the



stables. Search anybody who could be carrying large amounts of cash.”

Harding pants, jowls drooping more than usual. “W-where are you goin’?”

I jump to the overhang of the general store. “I’m gonna fly the outskirts, see if anybody leaves.” I dive off, pumping my wings and making a mad dash for the edge of town. I needn’t have bothered.

I get within a block of the Town Office when all hell breaks loose.

Gunshots and muzzle flashes. All four ponies in the town stables explode out of their corral. The few townsfolk not at the celebration scream and clamor out of the way. Night is falling fast, but I have good eyes. One of the ponies has a rider. There’s my thief. On my pony. A few fools cheer at the gunfire, thinking it’s the start of the fireworks.

I fly hard, but I can’t catch a pony in the long haul. One chance. I dive.

My paws make contact with the body of the rider, knocking him over. I open my wings, softening my fall. I skid into the side of a house and draw my gun. The rider never falls. I look up just in time to see the scoundrel hauls himself back up, still clinging to the pommel of the saddle. Damn. Must’ve heard me dive.

I get up, dust off, and see about catching one of the ponies. Hell if I’m done with this fool yet.

The fireworks start.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, I’m tracking the trail on a borrowed pony. Harding would’ve been on this trail like a stink on a wet dog, but all the gunpowder mused with his nose something terrible. Never could catch the scent of the fella who broke in. Poor hound can hardly walk straight when his sniffer’s shot, so I left him with Tanner Hayes to take a deposition like the lion wanted. I don’t envy the deputy: Hayes’ tail was already cracking like a whip when I departed.

My lantern bounces. I’ve never been too good with holding objects in my wing thumbs. Now that no one can see, however, I ride sidesaddle. This leaves my paws free to grab my gun, should I find the need.

Soon enough, I do.

I see faint light in the ridge ahead, down by Skull Creek. The creek runs fast, wide, and deep. The shore consists of stones white and round like bleached

skulls. I slip off the pony, douse my lantern, and pick my way through the boulders and scrub brush. Now, either this thief is damned lucky or he heard my wings when I dove on him back in town. Either way, I'm doing my best not to make a sound. I make it to the larger stone nearest to him and just listen, waiting for my heartbeat to come off its roiling boil. The rumble of the rapids in the shallow valley beside us helps hide my footsteps. I keep an eye on my footing — failing light plays off the steep banks of the creek— as well as keeping my ears pricked for any nocturnal creatures drawn to the water.

I hear the sound of exerted breath, only one person, and something else too: digging. The clank of a shovel against stone, the sound of steel biting earth. Now's my chance— he'll be distracted.

I roll over the stone, draw my gun, and yell over the crash of the rapids. "Hands up!"

No sooner have the words left my muzzle than the head of that same shovel cracks me in the hind paw. My gun skitters across the sandy dirt, landing near the strongbox. In front of me, a hare grins. My thief.

I dive toward my gun, but the hare hurls the shovel my way. The handle strikes the tip of my right ear. I see a flicker of movement. He's drawing iron. I forget my own gun and hurl myself at the bunny. He's a head taller than me, but few folks have ever wrestled a fruit bat. We tussle. I grapple him with my paws while my wings sweep his own paws away from his holsters. With any luck, I can grab his gun.

Turns out I haven't a sliver of luck. The holster has some trick to it, the kind that only draws a certain way.

The hare punches me in the ear. I scream.

Neither of us like that too much. Seems he can hear the pitches we bats scream at. Serves him right for hearing me coming.

I twist around and grab his paws with mine. This lands my crotch square center on his chest, but, if we cared much for propriety, we wouldn't be in such a tussle.

I snatch his ear in my jaws and bite hard. Now it's the bunny's turn to holler.

"FAAAHHH!" His voice rings high from panic and pain, audible over the crash of the rapids. "Get off me, ya damn bat!"

I let go of his ear. The meaty taste of hare and the prickle of fur cling to my tongue. "Settle the hell down! This dance is over." My right wing pulls the cuffs from my belt. I struggle to snap them into place. My thief is strong for a bunny.

His fur is soft in my hind paws. He kicks at my back, but I'm far up enough that he can't reach. He growls. Never heard a hare growl before.

With both paws and both wings, I manage to get one of the cuffs on before I hear it. We both do, since the hare freezes as well.

At least three guns cock back. I look around and see steel gleaming in the lantern light. Several dark forms surround us.

I straighten up, still sitting on the hare's chest. "I am Sheriff Jordan Blake. Stand down, boys. I've got this matter handled."

"Actually sheriff..." A new voice grinds like whetstone. "We've got this matter handled." One of the figures steps into the light, leveling his rifle at me. He's a lynx, and he's not in a kind mood, judging by the set of his dagger-tip ears. "Get up. The both of you."

The look on the lynx's face is a spit's distance away from being murder made flesh. He's not on my side. These men are outlaws.

I stand, shuffling back from the bunny, then affirm the distance with a suspicious glance. He stares back, but I can see the unsteadiness in his eyes. Aw hell. He wasn't banking on this either.

As we stand, I grab his other hand, but click the cuff on air. I pass it to him and step away. For all they saw, I finished cuffing him. The hare looks at me, surprised as a bear with a mouthful of bees. He says nothing, though that little puff of a tail twitches.

My eyes find my gun, but one of the outlaws, a boar, already picked it up. Beside me, the rapids roar.

There are at least three of them, likely another few in the shadows, if they're smart. I play dumb. "You boys had best ease up. Wouldn't do to accidentally kill a lawman."

"Then you'd best shut yer hole, bat." The lynx leers. "Otherwise, we might just have an accident."

"Ya might as well drop the act, fellas." The hare grins. "We all know you're working for the lion Hayes."

I turn to the bunny. "We do?!"

He winks. "Ya do now."

The lynx snarls. "The hell makes you think we work for anybody?"

The hare straightens, edging closer to me, adjusting his unlocked cuffs behind his back. He grabs something from behind his belt. Idiot! He's supposed to go

for his guns! Instead, he just flips up one ear and stands all casual. “I heard your grindy ol’ voice yammerin’ on it back a’ that doggery ya call a bar, tufts. That’s how I knew to steal the money ‘fore you.”

“Enough a’ your wild notions, rabbit.” He raises the rifle. His buddies do the same. His finger slips over the trigger. “Now die.”

In a blur of motion, the hare throws a small bundle at the lynx, kicks off the side of a rock, and knocks me hard to the side. Gunshots ring into the night. The bundle explodes into a dusting of paper bills.

I hit the water.

Skull Creek runs right out of the mountains. It is cold. Deathly cold, and my wings do nothing but suck my heat out faster. The gunshots sound funny underwater. I’m occupied with trying to breathe. The bunny is clinging to me like the last shred of hope and his desperation is drowning me. The water’s quick. We crash against the rocks. I scream and swear, losing what little air I have. I’m certain I’m going to die. My mind offers nothing of real value, save the knowledge that at least I caught this idiot bunny. I then realize: he caught me.

A rock hits me in the head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dime novels get two things wrong about a crack to the head: you rarely get knocked out and you always, always wish you had. The world tumbles past me in blasts of pain, rolling water, and finally a strong paw hauling me out of the rapids. I cough and spit to clear the taste of blood from my mouth. I shake the water from my ears just in time to hear a gun being reloaded. I look up. My thief stands over me, out of paw’s reach, with a pistol trained on my chest.

“Hold it there, wings.” Water drips off his muzzle. He’s still shaking, and his ears are too heavy to rise. Those paws keep steady, however. “I’ve got dry rounds in this piece a’ iron, and I don’t got a mind for another wrestling match.”

I roll to my back, cough some more.

He pulls a thin rope from his belt. With the same easy motion I saw him throw that bundle of bills, he chucks the wet rope against my gut. “Tie that ‘round your wings, if you’d be so kind.”

I oblige. Having a bat’s hind paws makes the task easier than it sounds. “I don’t suppose you pulled me out of the drink just to put lead in my chest.”

“I reckon neither of us can afford to go makin’ any more assumptions tonight.” He cocks the hammer back. The cuffs dangle from one paw.

I shiver and finish tying up. My breath comes in clouds in front of me.

After checking that I’m properly trussed, the hare tugs on the other end of the rope. “Come on. They’ll be trackin’ down the banks of the creek.”

I have an itch to ask just how well cats would fare at tracking us, but then I remember which of us has the guns. He leads me on a ways. We’re both stumbling, but manage to put some distance between ourselves and Skull Creek. The boulders run bigger on this part of the valley and there’s enough brush to give cover. His hips move kind of funny, but that could just be the gunbelt. After trekking through the night for a good ways, my mind starts to wander. I’m soaked through the fur and can barely keep one paw in front of the other. I bump right into my thief before I realize he’s stopped. The bunny swears under his breath, but holsters his gun, giving me an appraising glance. I am too cold to care. We fruit bats aren’t the most robust of folk and that dunk in a mountain creek wasn’t the best thing for my constitution. I sit down hard, nearly collapsing. The hare’s still eyeing me up. His ears look a touch soft, even wet. After a spell, he sits, bracing against one of the rocks. Paws still on iron, twitching at every breeze.

I do my best to look abiding.

“That was some quick thinking with the cuffs, lawbat.” He squeezes water from the fur of one ear, then the other. “Course, would’ve been nice had they not got the drop on you in the first place...”

We share an unsteady smile.

Inside a half hour, the outlaws still haven’t shown up to kill us. We’re both shivering something fearsome. Eventually, I speak up. “Say, bunny...”

He jumps, ears trying to rise.

I keep talking, softer. The sound of my own voice had scared me a mite as well. “You never mentioned a name.”

“Don’t reckon I did, Sheriff Jordan Blake.” He puts a bite into each word.

“Care to?”

A pause. One paw twitches on the handle of his gun. “Six.”

“Six?”

“Six.”

“Hell of a name.”



“I’m a hell of a bunny.”

“Can’t argue there.” I laugh just a little. “So I figure fire’s a bad idea, as it’d lead to us being shot by those charming fellas.”

“Suppose I’d have to agree.” He gives me an approving look.

He sits about a yard from me, taking me apart with those big bunny eyes. No movements, except for the slightest twitching of the nose. He is testing me, feeling me out. Finally, he smiles under his drooped and quivering ears. “Tell me, Sheriff. Ya got any ideas about us not freezin’ to death?”

I clear my throat. There’s something to the way he’s looking me over... Something I can’t quite place a paw on... I feel a bit like the candied fruit in a window display at Christmas.

His eyes narrow just a touch, his lips curl a hint upward. “Well, we could see about getting a mite closer...”

I just stare at him. I have a notion, but it could be that rock did me some genuine damage and I just think I have a notion. I try to shrug, but am tied up. “I... Umm...”

He gets up, sets his guns down, and sidles up next to me. Something’s amiss here, and not just the fact that this fellow is getting a trifle too familiar. After a moment of quiet from both of us, he leans in against my shoulder. We’re side by side. His clothes are still wet, even if mine were starting to dry. For once, I’m thankful for my thinner fur. Small blessings, I guess. I start to relax, but he pulls on that rope again and nods to the guns. “You make a move for those pieces and you’ll be spending the night hogtied.”

“Wouldn’t dream of such a thing.”

“See that you don’t.”

We sit that way for a long while. Nothing but the moon and the wind. After a while, he starts to ease up, though the paw holding my rope never relaxes. I lean back against the bunny. Really no time for propriety. The hare shifts, muzzle burying against my neck. I twitch at the cold of his nose pad. Then my own nose catches a hint of something. I’ve smelled this bunny before, of course, but now with most of the grime washed off, he smells softer, warmer, almost like...

I look down to see the hare studying my expression. Looks to be deciding between waiting this out, shooting me right here, or doing something else to me I’d not discuss in mixed company. I bank on it not being the second one and clear my throat. “You—You’re a...”

“...Yeah.” The hare speaks softly, though her voice still holds a grit of smoke,

body still, eyes wide.

“Okay. No need for that look, bunny.” I take a breath. “I don’t exactly blame ya.”

No response. She sits with that perfect stillness only hares seem to possess.

“So, I’m guessing the reason Harding couldn’t track you is because... Well, he was expecting a...”

“Yeah.”

“And I can tell now because...”

“Don’t allow the most of men this close to me.”

I put on a theatrical voice. “Not alive, anyhow.”

She squeaks. Almost a laugh. Maybe she won’t shoot me.

She rolls close, laying between my legs.

I give her a questioning look.

She looks up, ears quivering. “Cold.”

I nod. “Fine by me. I wasn’t keen on freezing either, remember?”

She tugs the rope again, putting pressure on my wing bones. “Don’t get ideas.”

“I’m not! I’m just...adjusting to the facts, is all.”

We lie there, her floppy bunny ears all flopped over my shoulder. I try to relax, move to make the rock dig into my back a little less. She is shivering against me. I decide to keep her talking. “So exactly why were those men so bent on doing us in? Or do you just have that effect on folks?”

“They’re workin’ for that overgrown pussycat, Tanner Hayes.” A quick paw flips a pick from her boot and goes to work on the cuff still clamped on her wrist. She works it partway in, but it takes some doing before it clicks, on account of her shivering. “I suspect he meant for them to steal the cash so he could get his paws on the insurance.”

“But you double-crossed them.”

“The hell I did. Never met them ‘til just this evenin’.”

“So how’d you come to know their plan?”

She flips an ear up. It hits me in the muzzle with a wet smack. “How’d ya think?”

I rub my damp nose on my damp shoulder. “And you stole it first.”

“If they didn’t want me to, they coulda picked a room with thicker walls.”

“...Huh.”

“Yep.”

We sit for a moment. “And now they’re coming to kill us.”

“They’re comin’ to kill you, lawbat. They still need me.”

I look her in the eye; this bunny’s set a real burn to my wings. “The hell for?”

She groans, hanging her head to the side and letting her ears dangle, sending a telegraph tingle up my spine. “To tell ‘em where the money is.”

“But you were burying the strongbox when I caught you.”

“That ah was.”

My ears tuck back against the night’s cold. I cogitate on the new events for a while. It took near to three hours for me to find her, and I was tracking. She could’ve outrun me just fine. So why was she only starting to dig when I found her? The answer hits me like a hoof to the head. “...That strongbox is empty. You already hid most of the money somewhere else.”

The hare gives a shivering laugh. “Hope for you yet, Sheriff.” She is holding me a fair bit closer than is strictly necessary for warmth. I can feel certain lady parts pressed against me in an altogether unladylike manner.

I direct my mind elsewhere and try to be a gentleman. “Won’t they look inside?”

“I fixed ‘em in apple pie order: locked it right back up. They’ll have to take it back to Hayes for the key. I’m sure that kitty’ll be pleased as punch to get back that box chock-full a’ nothin’.” Clearly freezing, she still sounds proud. “Even if they chase us, we got a good half hour’s start for the trail to go cold.”

“How’d you figure?”

“That’s how long it takes to pick up few dozen twenty-dollar bills in the dark.”

“They’ll stop to pick them up?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

I straighten up. “I’d have gotten my man.”

“Well, ya sure did that!” She pulls the rope taut. Her paw shakes. “Play by Hoyle’s rules and ya lose at poker.”

My ears lift. “Hoyle never wrote a word on poker.”

“Bosh! I’ve seen those pretty little rulebooks he puts out.”

“They just use his name to sell it. He was dead a hundred years before

anybody threw a chip in.”

“The hell’d you learn a thing like that? Wait, now...” She quirks an ear. Her gaze is steady. She’s not shivering. “You’re not local. You’ve got Old States schoolin’ written all over you.”

“Gotta come from somewhere.”

“Rich family?”

“Lawmen and lawyers.”

She flips an ear, scoffing. “Figures.”

I expect her to talk on it more, but that’s the sum of it. She lays her head back against my chest, paw still clenched on the rope. There’s nary a move from her, but I don’t figure for a minute she’s asleep. I can’t afford to fall asleep either, but sky’s a heck of a lot brighter when I finish resting my eyes.

Her guns shine in the first light of the morning. Pretty little things, now that I look at them. Matched set too; I wonder how she laid paw on such custom jobs.

The hare’s still not moving. I breathe deeper, steeling myself.

In one tight-sprung leap, I go for her guns.

She gasps as I jump and roll to the side. I get a hind paw under myself, clutching a gun in the other. I train it on her.

The hare yawns and stretches against the boulder. “Wondered when you’d do that.” A wink.

I steady the gun. “Sorry, Six. I’ve gotta take you in.”

She doesn’t move, just grins up at me. That little fluff of a tail bobs.

We stare at each other for a long moment. The cuffs, the river, the freezing night: it all runs through my mind. The pistol lowers. “Aw heck, I can’t prove a darn thing anyhow.” While I could charge her under my own testimony, I don’t see the good it would do. Besides, maybe now she’ll untie me. I toss the pistol back to her.

Catching it with one paw, she laughs. “That’s just as well. I never had any dry rounds in the first place.” She spins the gun into her grip and levels it. “Watch.”

A deafening bang.

The bullet ricochets off a rock beside me, scattering chips of stone against my tender wings. I scowl at her, at myself, at the ropes my wing thumbs can’t untie.

The bunny just stands there, ears back from the noise. “Dang. Who’d a’ thought they’d still work?”

She snags the matching gun, holsters both, and undoes the knot. I flap, helping blood flow back into my wings with a tingle and prickle. My ears ring. Our eyes meet. “Grand. Now what’s the plan?”

“The plan...” A whetstone voice echoes from behind the rocks. “...is to show us where in the hell the cash went.” A lynx steps out. His ears are pinned back and his rifle is cocked.

Six’s paws flash to her iron, but I soon see we’re surrounded. If her shot hadn’t halfway deafened us, we might have heard them coming.

A loud clang. The empty strongbox crashes against a boulder beside us. The lock dangles in pieces, smashed apart. Three more outlaws surround us.

I look over to my thief, wondering how we’re going to deal with this new fix. Her tail twitches.

She levels her iron at me, and next thing I know the world is exploding in a great crash of pain and noise. Flat on my back, it comes to me after a moment. The bunny shot me!





## Chapter 4

*Possession ain't nothin' to a bunny in mah line a' work.*

~~~~~

Morning sun lights a curl of smoke from Six's gun.

The outlaws stand, shocked as all hell. Two of them, cats, tense and look to their leader. The boar bandit's face is like stone. He doesn't move an inch.

The lynx laughs, rasping like a knife on stone. "You just did half our job for us, bunny." He levels his rifle at her. "Now, drop that iron 'fore you get any clever ideas."

Ears high and alert, the hare tosses her pistol at the feet of the fella she just shot.

The lynx jabs her with the barrel of his rifle. "Both guns, rabbit, unless you can't count that far."

Snickering rises from the pair of cats. The boar edges over, his own rifle trained on her too. Eyes on the bunny, he bends down to pick up her gun.

A whisper of leather.

Click.

He has just enough time to register that I snagged the gun from his holster.

Bang.

He squeals and clutches at the thigh I just put a bullet through, dropping to the dirt.

Pain blazes through my wing. It chases through my whole body. She only hit

my wing membrane, but, even if I don't bleed out, that's a serious wound to a bat. I make myself breathe. I'll still fly.

The lynx looks at what he thought was a dead bat. "What in tarnat—aahhh?!"

Six knocks the barrel of his rifle away and cracks him in the skull with a gun I didn't see her draw. Quick little thing. I'd admire her more if she hadn't just shot me.

The lynx snarls, but her arms are already around his neck. The hare's gun is level on his brainpan. She cocks back the hammer and smiles to the cats. "You boys fixin' to see how high I can count?"

With my other hind paw I grab the gun she shot me with, training both weapons on the cats, still flat on my back. Most folk never expect me to use guns like this. Most folk are fools. What am I supposed to use? My wings? Damn it all, my wing hurts. Blood has trailed down the edge of my wing, collecting on my vest and gunbelt. My whole wing feels shattered and torn. Hot goutts of blood soak through my fur. I don't dare look at it.

The first tingle of dizziness finds me, but I shake it off. "You fellas are all under arrest. Drop your guns."

The cats look to each other.

Six shoots them both clean in the shoulder. Frantic yowls fill the night. They go down, clutching their wounds.

I try to call out, but these guns are getting mighty heavy and I'm winded as a frothing horse.

The hare turns and trains her gun on me.

She's going to shoot me. Again. I utter something that would make a weasel blush.

Bang.

I wince. The boar falls on top of me, clutching his rifle. He smells like blood and cheap whiskey.

My thief just grins.

* * * * *

It hurts.

The morning is gray and still. I feel like someone has jammed a hot iron poker

through my wing and let it sit. It burns me something fierce, but the bleeding has stopped. I'll still fly, I keep telling myself. Over and over in time with the mount I'm propped up on. The hoof-beats clack along the packed earth of the trail.

The hare rides beside me. She looks me up and down. Grins like she's having a hog-killing time, regardless of putting a bullet in the boar. And me. I'll still fly.

I toe my pistol, ready to draw, fury igniting in my guts. "You shot me." My chest feels cold. My toes and wingtips are numb. I'll still fly.

"Don't be such an old croaker, lawbat." She hooks a thumb back at the outlaws, trussed up in a row on their ponies, moaning against their gags. "You got your men. What have you got to be sour on?"

"Being shot, for one." I'll still fly.

"Had to make it look real! Weren't for me, you'd be half planted in the bone orchard by now. 'Sides, you stood the gaff fine..." She lowers her hat. "... 'cept when I had to whiskey your wound. Way you holler, folk'd think yer a girl!"

I show all the teeth in my long muzzle. "At least I come as advertised."

She eyes me a moment, then laughs hard. "Rich, lawbat! You are a gentleman a' the first water."

After a tick, I have a chuckle too, then move my wing and about die. Damn this bunny.

* * * * *

Nobody says much as Six helps carry me into Doc Richards' office, not that I can make out anyway. I am in a rough way by this point. That numbness has run from my wings to my legs. Things get a mite sketchy. Somebody shoving a rawhide bit in my mouth so I can't bite my tongue. Paws holding me down as I get stitched back up. And, through it all, Six looking down on me. I start to get worried because, for once, she isn't smiling.

When they're done, they lay me down on a cot so Doc can see to the outlaws. Six is sitting across the room. I'm suspecting that gag was doped with something, since it didn't make me want to vomit like rawhide typically does. Time uncouples from action. She takes hours to roll a cigarette then about a day to smoke it.

She doesn't say anything, just rolls the box of matches over her fingers. I look her over. I'd like to say that I can see now how she's a lady, but the plain truth is

that hares all look a fair ways womanly to me. They're sleek, lean, delicate. This one's not quite so delicate, save for her ears. They dangle down low over the brim of her hat, giving the impression of ease, but from my cot I see her paws never leave her iron. No hint of her scent, just smoke.

Feels like a week passes, but finally I muster the will to speak. "The hell...are you doing here?"

She smiles. That cigarette is all but gone. She crushes the stub of it between her fingers. "Easy, lawbat. That doc stitched ya up. Assured me it'd heal proper."

I take a breath. I hate to admit it, but I had been terrified there was going to be a hole. I'd seen a Secession War scout once whose wings had been shredded by rebel scatterfire. That living tatter still visits me in my less peaceful dreams.

Motivated by instinct, I turn to examine the wound and am rewarded by a fresh plume of pain. I yelp.

"Whoa there." Her paw settles on my shoulder, all light and careful. Her ears sway.

I get lightheaded and hit the pillow smiling. "Heh. You got fancy ears."

She lifts one of them, as if she didn't hear me right. "What?"

A fire blazes in my cheeks, burning away the fog in my brain. "Nothing. Those outlaws..."

"Are bein' seen to by that hound of yours and the doc." Her paw's got more strength than my entire body. I recognize the inside of Doc's office and I hear at least one person groaning. She's telling the truth, least as far as that goes. She pulls a blanket over me, careful of my wound. "Easy, Sheriff. You're goin' to be fine."

"Thank you, ma'— mister." We meet eyes for a minute. Her blue ones widen just a touch. I cough up a laugh. "You're decent for a fella who shot me."

"Aw shucks." She winks, her smile coming back. "Ah am just a fool bunny." Her eyes dart to the window. It's painfully bright out; must be close to noon. The sun shines through the row of elixir bottles on display, lighting her face in the browns and greens of a forest canopy, her eyes glinting crisp blue like water in a mountain creek. Not much color out here in the Frontier, not compared with life back in the East.

I hear a commotion outside. Her ears rise too.

The hare's paws stroke the handles of her guns. "Gotta run, lawbat. Take care now. Don't let nobody else shoot ya."

She tucks the matchbox in her pocket and walks out the back door, casual as you please.

The next moment, Hayes roars into the office: “I demand to see them! Blake, the outlaws, and anybody else I have a mind to. I am within my rights to talk to anybody I please!”

Doc’s wife, Charlotte, accosts him with a yap and a whap. “Get outta my clinic, Mister Hayes, or so help me I’ll find you a way out!”

Hayes towers over the vixen, almost twice her height. His claws extend for an instant, then slip back into his thick paws. “Doctor Richards.” His voice is cordially chilled. “See to your wife.”

Charlotte fumes, her rust-red tail lashing against the back of her old army nurse’s smock.

Doc steps out from the other room, his paws bloody. “My wife isn’t the one who’s out of line.” From my cot, I see his tail brush down hers. “You’d best leave, Hayes.” His teeth bare a little on that last, as if it’s a cuss word. “I have patients to attend to.”

“Every moment we wait, my money could be getting further away!”

“And every moment you delay me, you put my patients at risk.”

Haye’s mane bristles. “They’re outlaws!”

“They’re patients.” Doc snarls, pulling a needle and thread from his apron as he storms back to the triage room, calling to Harding: “Deputy, this lion needs a breath of fresh air. See that he finds it.”

The old bloodhound nods and leads him out, but not before the lion gets a good look around the room I’m in. I lay still, so as not to tip my hand. He’s in a foul temper for a man whose robbers just got bound by law, and gained a few ounces of lead in the process. Unless those robbers were his to begin with. Come to think of it, he took it for granted there were several robbers, though he insisted on only one at the time of the robbery. That bunny might have been telling the truth.

Wait, does that even make sense? Maybe I should hold off on the thinking until I’m less perforated.

After the fuss dies down, Doc Richards comes in and pulls off his bloodied smock, washing his paws in a basin. He checks my bandages with deft paws and smiles a tired vulpine smile. “You’re going to be right as rain, Blake. Good thing that friend of yours got you here when he did.” He looks around, his black ears cupped forward. “Where’d he get to?”

I shrug, then wince. “Had business, I suppose.”

“Well, isn’t that the way of it these days? Isn’t slow like back when I was a kit. Makes a fellow want a smoke.” He pats down the pockets of his vest and trousers. “Say, have you seen my matchbox?”

* * * * *

Just about four weeks, and I’m well enough to sit at my desk, not to mention too stir-crazy to spend one more minute in bed. While I was too busy having been shot, I left the outlaws there under the watchful eyes of a few trusted men and the vigilant nose of Deputy Harding. Doc is good; even the boar lived. Good. They have a long stretch in the lockup to look forward too. Left on the train last week, under armed guard. Doc switched me over to a looser splint— he joked it was mostly to keep me from flying after stray hares. I just grinned and bore it so he’d let me out of bed. My wing looks and feels just fine, aside from itching like a week making hay.

One of the grander things about being out in the middle of nowhere rather than back in law school is the near absence of paperwork. Near. People still file complaints and reports come in the post every few months. I’m sorting through it. Harding is out and about. The office is cool and quiet.

My thief walks in.

“Six?” The pen slips from my hind paw, splattering lakes and rivers of ink across the complaint I was cataloging.

“Sheriff.” She touches the brim of her hat. “Nice to see scuttlebutt’s true. Yer lookin’ right as a trivet, if a touch less steady.”

I swallow. “I didn’t think you were coming back.”

A slight twinkle lights her expression. “You regret it happening?”

“N-no.”

One ear lifts as her eyebrows arch up. “That mean you aren’t fixin’ to arrest me?”

“Have a seat.” I gesture to a chair. “We’ll talk.”

I hear a soft click as she locks the office door. Spurs ringing on the floor, she ambles up and sits, not cross-legged like a lady, but predatory and sly; in control. Right on my desk, close enough that I swear I can make out the curve of her figure though her rough clothes. She leans in and those ears droop. An amused

little smile crosses her muzzle as she breathes down a single word to me: “Talk.”

My heart chugs along like a steam engine. Her voice almost sounds like a girl’s. I freeze.

She blushes, gets abashed for a second, then her face goes unreadable as iron. Once again I could believe I’m looking at a fella, if a tall, scrawny one. She leans back, shifting atop my papers. One of her holsters trails through the wet ink, carving channels through my neat little streams.

“No need to be offish.” I find myself leaning forward just a bit. “I’ve just got some questions, is all.”

“Then shoot, lawbat, or give up the gun.” She laughs roughly. “We both got ears.”

“That we do.” My eyes flash to her ears before I can stop the darn things. I blink, then meet her gaze level and steady. “First off, what do you know about Hayes’ unlawful ties? You can’t expect me to swallow this insurance scam tripe. That’s small potatoes to him. Seems to me he wanted to get that money off the books, more likely.”

She gives me a smirk. “You reckon I care to cross him any more than I already have?”

“I don’t think that’s possible unless you stole his wife.” I settle my wings against the back of my chair, the sling chaffing. “Or his money again.”

“Well, his wife ain’t the breed I’m lookin’ to buy. And I hear tell he’s ponied up the cash for a better safe.” Her eyes dare me to call her on that, then she fiddles with a claw. “I only caught wind of that theft business a day beforehand, most likely fixing to pay some folk off. Isn’t quite simon-pure about how he runs that mining outfit either— Is your wing alright?”



My mind flounders for a second, then catches the trail again. “Near as can be, considering. What’s this have to do with Hayes?”

“Nothing. Ah just thought it fair I get to ask a question too.”

“I see.” I decide not to press her too hard on any one front. “Second, where did you come by such fancy iron?”

“What’s this got to do with the lion Hayes?”

“Nothing.”

The bunny leans in a hair. Her muzzle is not four inches from mine, her paws not an inch from her iron. Her voice is steady, steady as her aim was when dealing with the outlaws. “You lookin’ to return them to their rightful owner?”

“Never said it wasn’t you.”

She breathes. Her scent teases my nose. “They were my daddy’s. The only thing of his I still got.”

I nod. Something about her eyes makes me believe her.

“Can I...” She clears her throat, sounding like a woman for just an instant. “... see your wing?”

“You plan to keep holstered this time?”

Her paws rise. Her voice resumes being low and husky, though still disarming. “Just checkin’ my handiwork.”

I slip the sling off. She gets real close to look. Even on her knees, she’s as tall as I am sitting. I can feel her breathing against the thin fur of my wing. It washes down over my wing like waves, slow and regular.

One paw comes up and she reaches for the pink scar, which is now almost flush against the surface. I wince. She freezes, paw curling back. I breathe and let my wing down in front of her, spreading it the rest of the way. It feels tight and stiff, but that’s to be expected. I know it can carry me.

The wound is close enough to the top of my wing that she is right up against me. Those floppy ears brush the side of my muzzle. Gentle and slow, her paw traces up my wing bones to that scar. Her touch is like a safe air current, smooth and steady. She smooths my fur under her fingertips, feeling along the change in texture. The scar has no fur, naked as her twitching pink nose. “This doesn’t hurt ya?”

“Not a bit.” Her scent is full and close now, heavy and warm like a thick blanket. The bunny turns my way, her blue eyes showing just a hint of regret.

She says “sorry” so soft she starts to sound like a girl again.

Our muzzles bump, softly jostling.

“Ya really ought to arrest me.” Her breath brushes hot against my ear, causing a carnal stir within my trousers.

I do my darrest to ignore it. “Why’s that?”

“I shot you.” Her paw touches my wing, ever so gently.

“And saved me from being shot.”

“Ah am not keen on giving the money back.”

“Six...” I took her by the shoulders. She feels so light in my wings, like she was air. “Bring it back and testify. I can protect you.”

“Those fools weren’t Hayes’ only muscle. Ya can’t keep me safe from every hard case he puts on the dime.”

“I could if you were a deputy.”

She backs up to look me in the eyes. “Deafness don’t run in mah family, Blake, but I think my ears are startin’ to go. Sounded like ya just said I should become a deputy.”

I trace her ear carefully with one wing thumb. “That’s good, because I did.”

“The heck would ah agree to that for? Hayes doesn’t know a blasted thing about me and—” Her ears slip back around the brim of her hat, her face darkening. “—and neither do you. Besides, I’ve got the money. Bully for me. And ya want me to swap it all for the chance to break up tussles between lowlifes? What makes that a square trade?” She has a scoundrel’s smile and an angel’s eyes.

“Because I...” I stammer. I can feel my ears getting hot. I think about her lips, how nice it would feel to...

She kisses me. Just takes me by the ears and plants one on my lips. I ought to have been shocked at such forward action by a lady. But, from the taste of her cigarettes to the way she presses in against me, Six isn’t like any lady I ever knew. I find my wings curling around her.

After a moment, she eases back, leaving me leaning forward just a bit. Her hat is gone, knocked off by the force of the kiss. Her muzzle dips, and she starts blushing again. “Sorry. Ah didn’t mean tah...”

“I-I liked it.” I run a wing thumb under her chin, bringing her eyes level with mine. “Don’t you go bein’ sorry”

The hare narrows her blue eyes, saying silently she didn’t quite believe me.

“Ya look a touch pained.”

I grimace, giving a nervous chuckle. “Your gunbelt is digging into my side.”

“Oh.” And just like that, she straddles my hips. The warmth of her crotch presses against mine. The bunny looks up at me like this is nothing compared to kissing me. “That better?”

“Umm...” I squirm.

Six glances around, skittish like I’ve never seen her. Tensing, her body pulls back against my wings. Her ears dangle free now; they brush against my chest, low as they can get.

I lean against her, nuzzling in close. We touch noses; she gasps. Her muzzle’s shorter than mine, and her fur feels soft as cotton as I brush along her cheek. I want to touch those floppy ears, but if they’re anything like mine they’re delicate and ticklish something fierce. I wrap my wings tight against her back. She gives a quiet squeak. Though the thin fur of her cheeks, she’s blushing. We bump noses again. My lips touch hers. I kiss her.

A sort of shudder runs through her. She hauls me to my feet and suddenly we’re kissing against the wall of my office. Soft quick kisses, long lingering ones; she can’t seem to make up her mind. I play with that little fluff of a tail, feeling the bowie knife she keeps beside it.

Part of me, perhaps the wiser part, demands to know what I’m doing kissing a lady outlaw, one who dresses like a man no less. But the rest of me soon hogties that voice and from there on it’s all kisses and touches and her hips against mine. Our gun handles clatter together as she starts to grind up against me in a most immodest fashion. I shiver, poking out of my sheath a little, rubbing against the inside of my undergarments. She’s so hot against me. Her paws brush across my chest, pinning me against the wall. The rough wood tickles the backs of my ears. I kiss back at her, licking her lips, but she doesn’t open her mouth. Seems nobody ever taught her just what that means. She can’t be much past twenty—hardly an age for a virtuous young lady to be out in the world unescorted.

The kisses fall upon my lips like Arizona rain: rare, precious and sweeping away like a flood all thoughts that came before. The leather of her vest runs smooth against my wings. I breathe harder, pausing in my attentions to recollect myself.

My thief is not to be dissuaded. Her lips find my cheek, my neck, my chest. She starts unbuttoning my vest. Her own breath is hot and fragrant, sweet as cider under the ghost of all that tobacco. That peculiar scent serving to rile a fella, no matter the species. “You— you’re in heat?”

She answers by pulling me toward the cell, out of sight of the small, barred window. I bump against the bars, then she pushes me back against the cot. One bunny paw reaches back around to touch my ears, while the other starts working along the front of my britches. That quick paw digs under my gunbelt, uncinching my regular belt.

I struggle to regain my breath, forcing a cool breeze of sanity into my lungs. “Hold off, Six. That office door doesn’t lock— Those are my trousers!”

“Possession ain’t nothin’ to a bunny in mah line a’ work.”

Her paws slip against the tip of my member. It’s been years since a woman touched me there and even in wilder days they never took to it with such enthusiasm. She grips me like the pommel of a saddle, except I’m the one holding on for the ride. There’s power to her movements, muscle to her frame. Not some delicate debutante then, a farmhand perhaps?

Desire burns in me. She pours kisses onto my lips, feeding the fire. I’m stiff as a railroad spike. Her paw is clumsily squeezing on my fully exposed shaft. I wonder if she’s ever done this before, wonder just how long she’s been playing the part of a man. Meanwhile, I’m squeaking like a prairie dog with each grope and, while I’m not quite jealous of her having paws, it does feel nicer even than rubbing it against my wings— all fuzzy and warm. Her lips plant little panting kisses all over my muzzle, leaving tiny traces of wetness in my thin fur. I’m working up the gumption to call this shindig off when she freezes. Her powerful thighs crush in against me and, were it not for the cot, I believe she could have given me a hell of a bruise.

I brush her with my wing, one hind paw ready to go for my gun. “Six, what —?”

And then she’s gone, springing off me and shutting the cell door behind her. It dawns on me after a heartbeat. She’s got my damn britches in her paw! Before I can get to the bars, she’s tried two keys on my belt and the third one clacks into place. She pulls it from the lock and glances at me, all manner of skittish.

My wings can’t fit through the bars in any meaningful way, so I reach with a hind paw. The chill of iron against my manly bits makes me yelp. “Yikes! What in all hell’re you doing, Six?”

The cell door rattles under my weight, but stays locked. She backpedals. “I’m real sorry, Blake. I-I’m just a mite skittish on these matters.” She adjusts her clothes, snatching her hat from the floor. “I’ll understand if you don’t want nothing to do with—”

“Jordan.”

“What?”

“Call me Jordan.”

“Oh.” She smiles. Her paws wring the leg of my confiscated garment.

I take a steadying breath. “Look, bunny. I’m not fixing to make you do a thing you don’t care to.”

Her eyes slip down. To my horror, I find my erect penis is sticking lewdly through the bars... My ears go down, realizing I’m dreadfully indecent. I cover up with my wings. “Just toss those britches back my way and we’ll sort out the what’s-what here.”

“Honest? You ain’t mad?”

“I am too damn naked to be mad!” It dawns on me that makes no kind of sense, so I add: “Please!”

She presses her lips together like she’s trying not to laugh. Damn this bunny. I give her another desperate look and she balls up the trousers, pulls back to throw them, and—

Footsteps. My office door swings open.

Our gazes meet. The britches drop to the floor. They’re only a few feet away, but they might as well be in a Chinaman’s closet for all the good they do me. Six shoves her way out of the office, galloping down the hall and out the front door. I see her flash by the barred window, hat already on, muzzle grinning under its shadow.

I cuss. Then I look into the somewhat sad, very confused eyes of Deputy Harding.



Chapter 5

Rabbits don't concern me.

~~~~~

The clock ticks. I groom my claws with a small file. “So the money...is where precisely?”

“We don't know just now.” Morris tugs his shirt down over his fuzzy belly, then nibbling a claw. “That bloodhound deputy never did let us slip word to or from the bandits before they were shipped to the county jail.”

My office feels close as a coffin. The money itself was nothing, just enough to hush the right people. What bares my claws is the challenge to my territory—I'm not used to deals going south. Father would say a little competition sharpens your teeth, but if I'd liked the idea of competing I would have stayed back in the East. “Do I have any contacts there?”

“No. I've sent some men and some money. We'll see what we can loosen up.”

I breathe, smoothing out a snarl. “So it'll be weeks, at best, until we know if they talked on where the money was bound for.”

“Reckon so.” The marmot licks his paw and straightens his fur. “And that's assuming they actually found the money and didn't just get stupid and try to shoot Blake. The bunny must have gotten the drop on them in turn, since he took them all out.”

“So he’s sharper than we suspected. Best to get out of his way again; let him think this was an isolated happening.” I sit back in my chair and have another sip of brandy. “Idiots! I go through all the trouble of letting them steal the money and someone steals it first! You’re sure this wasn’t some trick on their part?”

“They ain’t stupid. We ain’t either. We both picked those four because we knew they wouldn’t get greedy.”

“Either way, I now have to get cash into the right paws the old-fashioned way. I’ll get the wife to plan some gala. If that’s all, Morris...” I wave him away. All this yammering on about money gone on the wind fouls my mood something terrible. I ought to take a little trip up to Chance Canyon, visit the nice little bordello there. Locals call it the “cathouse” and a man with dinero can make some fine memories there. I know, I’ve made a few...

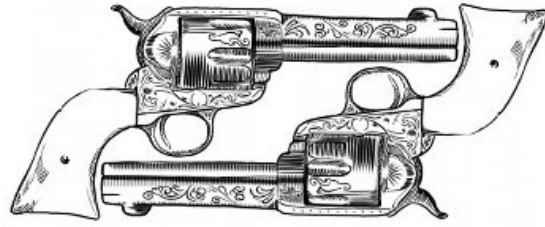
“There is one other thing.” Morris is still here. “Folks saw some bunny riding in with Sheriff Blake.”

“Rabbits don’t concern me.”

He responds with a chattering mutter.

“Now leave— I have a headache.”

“Of course, bossman.” The marmot gets one of his thoughtful looks and leaves to do whatever he does when he’s not a flea in my mane, meeting up with some old rabbit at the door. The rabbit’s face sticks in my mind a moment, like I know him. But then, all meat looks the same.



## Chapter 6

*Steal one fella's trousers, while I'm in heat no less, and all of a sudden I start figuring my plans around him?*

~~~~~

Just me, the moon, and Blake's pony.

I stare into my little campfire. Always helps me think, having a fire. Something about the way it never dances quite the same way twice, the smoke, the hiss and crackle, the heat in my fur.

My first notion is getting the hell out of Dodge. Of course, that'd mean leaving Blake too. Plus, Hayes is liable to catch me. My second notion is to shoot him. That lion though— he's more of a power than I'm accustomed to. No, regular ways of dealing with folk are liable to fetch me a bullet.

Damn me. Steal one fella's trousers, while I'm in heat no less, and all of a sudden I start figuring my plans around him? If that don't sound like a heap of trouble, I'm an Angoran Long-Hair.

Fishing my little pot from my satchel, I rig it up over the fire. Half a canteen's worth of water, plenty of beans, and a few choice roots I dug up along the trail— I'm on my way to decent chow. The smell reminds me of home. Never cared the twitch of a nose for cooking, it being too womanly for me, but long nights along in the desert make a bunny miss strange things.

After dinner, I tap out tobacco and roll a cigarette, lighting it with a twig from the fire. Smoke it clear to the end. I sing my paw fur then flick it into the fire outta spite at my own woolgathering. Sucking my fingers, I lie back on my bedroll and stare at the moon. I get lost tracing the shapes and shadows there, calling to mind old tales I heard as a wide-eared fluffball.

Dreams go drifting over me like clouds across the moon, traced on the edges by velvet wings.

* * * * *

Though the haze of a dream I see my paws, but they ain't mine. I'm perched up on a ledge, overlooking some manner of mine entrance.

Arriving like a gust of wind, a whole mess of 'yotes appear around me. Colorful beads clatter in their fur, bright against the brown of their stern muzzles.

A tilt of the world later, the mine rushes up past us. We fly into its depths. Picks, shovels, carts: at first it's all you'd expect. But then there's a shining that ain't the shine of gold and pictures all around that jumble into bunkum then into nothing.

A voice from the nothing speaks a word I never expected to hear again: "Clarabelle." It's my father's voice.

All the world goes grey, and I get buried into the depths of sleep like a thick blanket.

* * * * *

Morning tills up wakefulness in me and, not long after, a plan. Foolish, I reckon, but I'd better have a look-see into Hayes' affairs, to know how far his paws reach. Fella like that has power, connections; can't hurt to have a little blackmail on him if I can. And if in so doing I see more of Blake, well that's just silver on gold.

I break camp and saddle up. The guns pull me south, away from any of the lion's shady dealings up in Scoria Grove and White Rock. Seems I recall something about him running a mine, though I'm not sure from where...



Chapter 7

I think patience is the way of it.

~~~~~

Folk say we bats don't notice the dark, but I daresay I've started to since Six left. I'm sure there's some manner of metaphor in there about her being my sun, but I'll leave it to the Homers and Emersons of the world.

I have no business feeling this way over a woman, mind you. I'm a professional, a lawman, not some heartsick pup. The people of White Rock deserve better than having me mope around. I shocked my family enough by coming out here in the first place, it might kill them outright to hear of my failing at it. I run a wing over the worn cover of one of my uncle's journals, wishing I felt even a tinge of encouragement seep from it. I don't.

I splash some water on my face, dress, and step out of my room. Harding is already here, of course.

Steady as a stone, that old hound. He never says too much and folks generally think him a simpleton to one degree or another. Wisdom glints in his eyes, though, and he's proven time and again to be a more than capable deputy. What's more, he's yet to mention to a soul having to let me out of the jail cell half-naked and wholly indisposed, a kindness for which I am very grateful.

Damn that bunny.

If it were up to my mind, I'd stop thinking about her. She's probably gone for good anyhow—the most of folk don't come back to a town where they've locked up the sheriff. Unfortunately, and to my ever-growing indignation, other parts of me are involved.

I realize I've been staring at the deputy for nearly a minute. He looks back at me with cool, calm eyes and perhaps a touch of amusement.

"Morning, Harding."

"Blake." He pours me a cup of tea. The man never drinks coffee, just various concoctions of dried plants.

I eye the contents of the cup. Like every morning, I ask: "What is this stuff?"

"Mountain jointfir and green juniper berries."

I take a sip and manage not to make a face. "Either you're making better tea or I'm just getting used to how terrible it is."

He gives that rumbling chuckle canines favor. "I reckon it's both."

We finish our drinks in amiable silence then I head out to make the rounds. Being bare-pawed, I avoid the dark wet spots. Who knows what evil lurks in the puddles I can't identify?

I follow the scent of fresh timber and sawdust to find Morgan repairing his roof. The squirrel's a farrier and had some initial friction with the long-standing solitary blacksmith when he arrived a year ago. That's over now, I'm proud to say, having had my part. I am, however, beginning to think the jitteriness that I attributed to the war of nerves is actually just part and parcel of being a squirrel. He jumps when I say hello, nearly skittering off the edge of his roof before greeting me in return.

The few folks in the street this early stop what they're doing and glance my way like wary wildlife. As day wears to night, more and more of those looks will include bared fangs, perhaps the open fondling of a gun. I sometimes find myself wishing I were more like Collins, my predecessor, whom folk actually liked. Then I remember how he ate a bullet. Guess he wasn't liked quite enough.

Years ago, another Blake was sheriff here—my uncle. His diary drew me here. Some of the old timers like Doc and Charlotte remember him. They sometimes rib me that I'd best start my own journal, just in case I ever have a nephew.

Stepping out of the way of a train of Hayes' mining wagons, I see old Harland Myers sitting on his porch with his rusty sickle. He refuses to take a whetstone to it, fearing he'll wear the echo right off. That's not to say it's any less sharp—I saw him bury it halfway through a table once to make a point about minding the rules in poker. He's never started trouble, though, so I've had no cause to be anything less than cordial to him. I'm glad.

I call out a greeting, raising a wing.

The old raccoon stares into the aether. A distance wells up in eyes. Thin trails

of tobacco drip down the sides of his muzzle. No movement to him at all, save for a gentle stroking of the sickle's handle. I study him closer, maintaining a polite, out-of-reaping distance, so as to not upset the coon when he notices me. A scattering of glittering rock dust lies in front of his rocking chair and dusts his pant legs, catching the light.

A snap of my wing thumbs draws him back to the world of the living.

After an instant of bewilderment, he tips his hat to me and spits an arc of syrupy chaw in a genial manner. I nod back, but don't let my eyes linger too long on that sickle. Haven't known Harland to drift off like that. Could be he's just tired.

Having never heard so much as a cough from the other world, I put stock in echolocation, not echoes. Of course, it's far less typical back east than it is here. I've heard talk that, because death is so much closer out here on the Frontier, the dead are likewise close at hand.

My aunt insists to this day that inheriting my uncle's badge when he died is what drove me to abandon law school and become a sheriff myself. I say it has more to do with reading his diaries when I should have been studying. I'm not one to believe in echoes, but I'd not be opposed to the notion of a good luck charm.

Something about the old raccoon's behavior sticks in my mind, though the place runs so rife with swaying ears and deft paws these days that calm thought seems impossible. If only she weren't so flighty, not to mention a dyed-in-the-wool—

“Thief! Thief!”

A masked form tears out of a house and down the street with an armful of glimmering treasures.

Mrs. Deloris Wiggins scampers out after him in a fit of ferret hysteria, frilly pink dress in disarray. “Get him, Sheriff! He's done stole mah shinies!”

I give chase, flapping to beat the band as I catapult myself over a water cart. The thief, another ferret, ducks down an alley. I turn sharp, kicking off a wall and tackling him. As we collide, his horde of pilfered riches flies into the air. We collapse in a heap, long strands of shiny material raining down around us.

Tinsel.

I've been chasing a tinsel bandit.

Managing not to resort to profanity, I drag the offender back to Deloris's, enlisting her young daughter to reclaim the evidence. I keep ahold of the

miscreant's scruff with one hind paw, and he proceeds into an immediate sulk on her steps.

Her long body swoons over her porch rail at the strain of the ordeal. "I declare, Sheriff! It surely was good of you to return mah shinies. Raymond's taken a shine to that Slippaws girl more 'an we thought, makin' off with mah—"

"Wait." I glance between the ferrets. "You know him?"

"Oh ah most certainly do! He's mah nephew!"

She doesn't press charges, though she invites me in for brunch, which I decline so as to avoid an uncomfortable hour talking about the finer points of sparkle in silverware. She does insist on my taking home some of her famous cricket brittle, which horrifies me only a trifle. No doubt she has confused what kind of bat I am, though it's a nice thought.

It then occurs to me that I flew quite successfully, and for the first time since Six saw fit to put lead through my wing. The relief I feel is worth carrying home any amount of cricket brittle.

The ferret fiasco behind me, I continue on my rounds. The saloon is opening up, taking in a wagon's worth of spirits. The bardog has an echo item too, he claims, though I suspect it's just a gimmick to sell more whiskey out of his "lucky" shot jiggers, which he claims have never spilled. He and I are on good terms, though he doesn't like to spread the fact around. Bad for business, he says. This does not stop him from sending for me every time a fight gets out of paw.

Odder still, the squirrel running the general store keeps the place immaculate, save one for old sea chest on the middle of an aisle, layered in dust. I offered to move it for him once, but he declined with frantic vehemence. Claims that every time he's moved it, the windows rattle in the wind all night with such fury that he's not given a moment's peace. Even Hayes is unwilling to deal with the squirrel's crazed chittering and leaves it be. Everyone else in town avoids it like a weasel's breath.

Hayes. Last year, the deputy and I tracked down another thief who robbed Hayes' store. We found the man in a deep ravine, only a few hours dead. Never could prove Hayes had a paw in the killing, but who else would have? The lion would have us think that he just fell down the canyon and broke his neck.

I stop at the post office and mail a letter to County Records, researching political decisions that went in favor of Hayes. It's a long shot, but it might give me some hints as to just where his crooked dealings lie. I've been trying to track down some of his former cronies, but anyone who falls out of his favor seems to

posses the good sense to leave town. I have Harding on the scent of some leads too. Maybe I'll luck out and find he has history of unsolved robberies, though that seems a bit much to hope for. If Six is right and this was a front for sending bribes around, that money won't be coming up on anybody's books. The lion runs a tight ship, more so than his uncle before him.

Were Hayes a less reputable citizen, I'd ask around town. As it stands, I'd get nothing but looks. What's worse, it would be unprofessional if I just started digging through gossip in the hope of pinning Hayes. Seems likely to earn me a bullet in the guts too.

All in all, I think patience is the way of it. Life's a prickly pear out here— you have to take time to burn off the spines before you can enjoy it.

If only I could stop thinking about that damn bunny.



## Chapter 8

*Sometimes, you just need to crush the life out of something to feel yourself again.*

~~~~~

I've always had a rotten temper, the kind that sears and throbs like a bad tooth. Back east, I was Father's blunt instrument. The family held me back as a threat, setting me loose when somebody challenged the natural order a little too much. The rest of the time, I was just too eager for violence. I see that now. Had I seen it a decade sooner, I might not have slashed out Big Dog Theo's eyes and they might not have sent me out here.

I don't lose control like I used to. Some of it might be age, but I reckon the bulk of it comes from having no one else to stop me. Morris knows I'd relieve him of his lower half if he got in my way. Mary Elizabeth ceased caring what I do long before we came out here, being now much more interested in anyone else's husband but her own. I don't care who she lifts her tail for, so long as word doesn't get around. Challenging a lion's authority like that is often the last thing a fella does. Or a woman.

Life's all about control. Control yourself and you'll stalk down new opportunities. Control your mate and men and they'll raise you up. Control your enemies and you'll come out on top. Control your resources and you'll stay there.

One of the resources I've kept over the years is the cult. They're my blunt

instrument. Like a club, they're unwieldy and destructive, but cheap and ready at hand. For the price of supplies and showmanship and some half-recalled Swahili my grandfather babbled in his toothless years, with a healthy helping of words I made up for good measure, they're truer than a gold bar. All that acting's a bargain. Having a few dozen hired guns backing you is one thing, but having that many crazed followers makes other folks in the business think twice before muscling in on you. I can't count the number of times that hesitation has saved me and mine. All thanks to the ore.

My eyes catch the shine of black lacquer across the red dirt. This is no Wells Fargo coach. I spur my pony around to face it. A team of four sleek ponies pulls the stagecoach into view. A matched set, they're gray on the top and black-belled as storm clouds. Wherever Mei Xiu found them, they must have cost her dear.

The stage pulls up beside me, covered in a fine layer of red dust. The door opens, and silk flows out like a waterfall, taking the form of a tall, powerful tigress. She moves like a statue given breath: graceful in motion and sculpted in posture.

I drop out of the saddle, jostling the Winchester repeater in the boot of it—sometimes prey is out of claw's reach. Almost unloop my satchel from the pommel, but then leave it. Though I'm not in the habit of leaving cash lay out, Mei Xiu takes it as an insult if I don't trust her manservant with my possibles.

Her manservant is a stern-faced Siamese. He's supposed to be some manner of butler, but I've seen him practicing with those funny little daggers of his. He sits there in his tailed coat, derby, and striped trousers. I can feel those steel-blue eyes even when I turn away, as if he's uncomprehending on the fact that I could rip him down the middle if I were inclined.

Mei Xiu snaps her fan closed.

I face her. She's a few inches shorter than me, but I've seen what she can do with those wide paws, with that refined mouth. A shiver runs through me. Reckon it's queer how the both of us came across continents just to find so fine a mirror. Were it not for a little fur, a few stripes, we could be of the same breed. Most folks are too thick to appreciate things like this. We appraise each other for a long while before she speaks.

"Mister Hayes." Her English is clear and sharp as cut glass. To this day, I'm unsure if she's a genuine Chinese or just of the stock. My inquiries find no purchase on her, and like any good predator she melts into the shadows regularly, vanishing until she wants to be found. Took me a month and more than a few bribes to even learn what she went by. Her real name's Soon-Hooey-Zong

or some such, but after I said it wrong for about the twentieth time she told me to just call her Mei Xiu. Not long after, we began these little rendezvous.

“Madam, you are looking radiant as ever.” I take her paw and bow, kissing it all formal-like. Something about her bearing commands such things. Her paw is at once soft and powerful, just like her scent, just like everything else about her.

“I must admit I was surprised when you sent word to me. We were not due for another hunt until the fifteenth.”

“Much obliged.” I stammer a shade then dig my claws into my palm to regain control. “Need to let off some steam, is all.”

She nods. “Then let us commence without delay.” She slips from her silks with liquid grace. They flow to the scrub grass with unearthly slowness, adding to the peculiar perfection of her form. Her body sweeps in muscular curves. Not a wasted ounce on her. Her bare fur shines in desert, burning like a striped sun.

I fumble out of my clothes. Nobody in the vicinity, nobody for miles, just the jagged buttes of the desert and the sway of brittle grass. My claw catches on a buttonhole— I snarl and shred the shirt to tatters. As the strips of ragged cloth fall away, so too does all the tommyrot cowshit we call polite society.

She gets down on all fours. Beside her, I dig my paws into the hot earth. I don’t get too close— a fine lady’s got to be respected, particularly since I’ve seen her claws at work.

I shiver in anticipation. The wind plays over my naked fur, carrying the first hint of our quarry. I dash off on all fours, and she follows with a growl. My pulse gallops.

The hunt begins.

Predators.

Prey.

Not a shred of propriety to get between the two.

Snapping and snarling, we sprint off together. Today it’s one of the man-sized lizards of the wastes. Doesn’t matter. It was just the nearest critter big enough to provide a mouthful. No words are needed. We just know.

We lope along for about a half mile, then come upon it. The scaly beast is near on six feet long. It sees us and lights up a shuck, but we soon catch the fat waddling thing. Mei Xiu dashes through the rocks to trap it.

The great lizard hisses, cornered against a stone face. We have it. We close in. Mei Xiu comes in from the flank, but gets snapped at. Powerful jaws crack

together, spraying spit and perhaps venom at her.

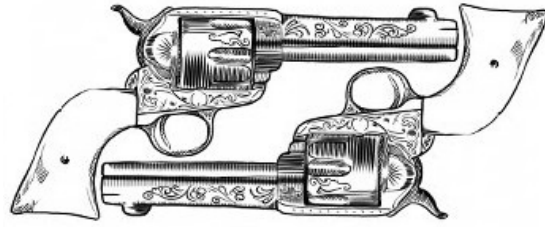
Now!

I leap down between the rocks. My fangs sink deep into the flesh of its neck.

The lizard squawks in terror as it realizes its life will soon end, must soon end. Sometimes, you just need to crush the life out of something to feel yourself again.

Mei Xiu joins me now. Together we bathe in the gore of the beast, ripping its pulsing entrails out and gutting them down like pure animals. Our vivid pelts dye to a gristly rust, a perfect match. In this moment, I can almost forget about that rabbit fouling up my plans again. Again.

I tear into the lizard's flesh, picturing that rabbit in its place.



Chapter 9

You're gonna lick it?!

~~~~~

Wind whips my coat. Night air chills clear through my fur. Loose steps clatter under my boots.

I knock hard, giving the street the old up-down. I reckon nobody should be out to see me at this hour. But then, two months back I never reckoned I'd be back in this burg neither.

I find myself fingering my iron out of habit. Makes me feel better, touching them, these last three days in particular. I'm not easy to rattle, but I've been feeling eyes on my back ever since I snuck back off Hayes' property.

I start to think better of showing up here, but my guns get to whispering again. The echo mutters under every gust of wind, tugging me back whenever I step away.

I knock again. Some minor clamoring, then I hear footsteps inside. Soft, like the fella isn't wearing boots.

Door swings open and who do I see but Sheriff Jordan Blake, wearing long johns, a gunbelt, and not a thread more. Seeing him makes my heart beat a whole different kind of anxious. I let my ears drop and he jumps like he's been struck by lightning.

"Six?"

"Howdy, Sheriff." My eyes trace around the room, then down those long johns. "You alone?"

"Y-yes. What are you doin' here?"

“This.” Before I can think better of it, my paws seize on his chest fur. I pull him into a kiss, one leg kicking the door shut after myself. No sense in making this a public event. Folk might start to talk if the good sheriff was seen associating with bunnies unknown, especially ones looking to be of the coarser sex. Before he knows what’s what, I’ve got him pressed against the wall again. My little heart is racing, just like no time passed at all. My guns hum. We knock a few wanted posters down before I pull back.

Once he can breathe again, he manages to say: “Well, I...umm... Nice to see you too, ma’am.” I’ve got him so flustered he reaches up to tip a hat that isn’t there.

My paws smooth the thin fabric over his chest. “Don’t you go callin’ me ‘ma’am.’” I look up at him all playful-like, but he’s already looking at me. Got a real heart-melter of a look to him too. This balls me up inside and I look back down, blushing. Standing beside the window, his eyes are right lovely in the starlight. Almost make me forget the trouble that drove me here. For the moment, though, I’ve got another sort of trouble in mind.

“What brings you through these parts?”

My muzzle brushes along his long, funny one. The short fuzz there tickles me something fierce. I do my damndest not to think about the mine, but my whole body feels tight as a whip, frozen, and not from the night air. “I don’t care to speak on that just now.”

His wings wrap around me like two soft, living blankets. I am a touch surprised he is willing to let me so close to them. I can’t help but glance at that scar I gave him, though I resist the urge to pester him about it further.

For a spell, we just stand there in the hall, breathing in the night. The hallway is narrow and a dying lantern on a nail is the only light. Now that I am inside, I can smell the sour tang of my own fear. I’m sure he can smell it too because he brushes one of his fancy wing thumbs down my arm and asks all soothing: “You aren’t gonna bolt on me again?”

“Don’t know what I can promise.” My little fluff of tail bounces unbidden against his wings, rascal that it is. “Side from the fact that I like where I’m at.”

“Just so long as you don’t lock me in that cell again.”

I laugh just a little in his embrace. “I’ll do my best.”

We stand a while longer. He shifts, sleep making him a little unsteady. “My legs are getting tired.”

My body is stiff and sore from worry and travel. Not being too clear on the

particulars, I trace my paw down his chest in what I hope is a seductive manner. “Just what are ya suggestin’ we do about that?”

“Well, sitting down would be the reasonable thing.”

“Do ah strike you as the reasonable type?”

“Not sure. You haven’t struck me since I chased you down in the desert.”

I chuckle, knocking a paw to his shoulder. “You just watch it, lawbat. I’m of a fightin’ sort.” One little look, then I have just got to kiss him on the muzzle.

“And what was that for?”

“You’re blushin’.”

He squirms just a little under me. “Ah... Umm... I’m not exactly accustomed to being in this sort of position with a lady.”

“You mind who you’re callin’ a lady, lawbat. With a pretty little muzzle like yours, I ain’t convinced ah am the more womanly one in the room.” I run a finger under his chin, then pull back, ears dropping at how forward I’m being. I’m suddenly real glad that Mama is five states away. Then again, that might not be far enough.

Blake snickers soft-like. “I’ve never had anybody go complimenting my muzzle before either.” He nuzzles in against me. His fur brushes through mine, all light and warm.

Our muzzles dance with feathery affection across each other’s fur. I haven’t been nuzzled since I came back to the West, and never like this. This ain’t no ‘howdy-do’ between you and your mama; this is the entire length of his narrow fox-like muzzle running on mine. I am stunned for a spell, but then figure I’d better get to returning the favor or he might think me ungrateful. I rub my nose into the fur of his cheek, and low and behold if his fur ain’t about the softest thing ever. I’ve got no prior experience in this area, so I start imitating his movements. I drag my shorter muzzle back along his, sort of see-sawing a bit like he’d done, until our nose pads touch.

He strokes one of those big, velvety wings up my back, brushing my neck. I can’t help but smile. He smiles too and it sets off fireworks in my bunny brain. I giggle like a swooning schoolgirl, but say nothing.

“Come on in and sit down.” He laughs just a little as I sway in his wings, my nose never leavin’ his. “You seem inclined to topple over.”

“You’d make a lady sit on the floor?” I give him a teasing look. It feels nice, freeing in a way, to be this easy with him. Damned if it doesn’t feel right somehow too.

“So now you’re a lady?”

My head rests against his wing. My paw reaches up to touch his chest, then jerks back at the last instant like it’s been burned. Come to think of it, it has, though that fine badger James never knew how much I wanted to reach for him... But then a part of me clamps down like an iron lock, and I reply sharper than I mean to: “Finding it has its advantages, time and again.”

Blake just gives me a level glance, keeping his wings around me. Brave little fruit bat. “Well, I was thinking the chairs in my office, seeing as how they are a little more comfy.”

I glance down the hall. My heart’s chugging along like a freight train, and my mind’s gotta jump onboard or be left behind. “That bed comfy?”

This bat’s a thoroughbred gent, so he stammers a while at my suggestion, but he doesn’t protest much as I lead him back there. All in all, he’s taking even strides down this bumpy road.

We are inside his little room before he manages to speak again: “Well, now... if you’d asked me two months back, I couldn’t have told you about that bed. ‘Course that bullet you lent me convinced the doc sleeping upside down would be a bad choice.” He sweeps a wing up at the rafters. The wing I didn’t shoot.

I look up, wondering for an instant what the devil he’s on about, then I see it. One of the beams is covered in scratches. I may be unschooled, but I ain’t slow: those are from him hanging by his hind claws, as bats do when they sleep. A smile runs across my muzzle as I wonder if he would ever take me up there with him.

My paws slide down the insides of his wings, tracing over the membranes to the tips of his wing bones. He shivers, then watches as I slide these paws a’ mine up the edge of his left wing, finding the thumb and leading me to the bed. Not sure what I really plan to do with him; a girl like me don’t get much play. Well, any. But it feels so nice to have his body against mine. I’ve got a touch of the nerves by now and I fear if I stop I’ll freeze up and not be able to start again.

I sit down and he follows suit beside me. He’s got his wings curled across his lap, his ears perked, and looks darling. I lean down and kiss him again, then rest my cheek against his, breathing soft. “Aww, see? Beds ain’t so bad.”

“No, I guess not.” His breath stirs the hair of my ear as he talks. I’m not one to get all namby-pamby over some blowhard beeper, but this pretty little fruit bat is just so sweet. Helps too that he’s half-wise competent with his iron. At present, though, his gun is digging under my ribs, so I slip my paw under his wings to undo the belt. I’ve got it off before I feel the reason he was covering his lap.

“Hey, now!” He sounds a trifle unsteady, wiggling back from me a bit. “You’re disarming a lawman!”

“Feels to me like ya got plenty of iron left down there, Sheriff.” I set his gunbelt on the nightstand, respectfully pointing the grip toward the bed.

Through the dark I see his ears drop, but he gives a little laugh. His wings come up and touch my face on either side. He moves up to kiss me, again all tender and slow. I lean down, kissing back. After a second, his tongue flicks against my lips.

At first I flinch, then I can’t help but chuckle at the feeling. Feeling the need to go a-wandering, my paws rub over his thighs. “Ah do declare, sir, just what kind of lady do you take me for?”

Before he can answer, I find his penis and give it a squeeze. He squeaks in a manner most satisfying. Through the fabric of his long johns, it feels hot and generally pleasing, though not stone hard like you’d hear in your less classy barroom tales. There’s a certain give to it, a vulnerable softness letting you know it’s just flesh, same as you. My fingers dance around the high point in the fabric as I build up my courage. By the way he’s breathing, doesn’t seem he minds.

He’s still busy gasping while I unbutton the long johns. I fish around inside for a moment, feeling the warm fuzz of his sac, then pull him out for a little look-see. It’s dark in his bedroom, so I’ve got to bend down to see much. The first thing I notice is his scent, all warm and musky. I have a bit of sympathy for the good sheriff, cuddling up to me like he did while I was in the middle of heat. I’m feeling about as flustered as he must have been, not to mention getting rather tingly and slick in my personal business.

I’ve seen the equipment under a pony and this isn’t too different. Blessedly smaller, however. Sleek little knob on the end, sort of like a saddle horn, though the neck of it is longer. It’s got a slight damp to it, especially at the tip. The shaft slides smooth under the fur of my fingers. Once I get about three-quarters of the way down the texture changes, gets a bit thicker too. This must be where it retracts to once the fella’s done with it.

Speaking of the man, while I’m figuring through all this, the sheriff is whimpering like a calf just out of teat range. Poor thing. I’ve got him in my paws now and got no clue what to do with him. Sure, I’ve lusted after a fella or two, but it’s never come to anything. How could it? ‘Til now, nobody on this side of the Mississippi knew I was a woman. Nobody alive, anyhow.

I reckon I might as well just play this out on instinct. Caution’s never got me anything but hurt. Gotta take the bull by the horns, gotta grab life—

“Ease off, Six!” He squirms and whimpers, pained. “You’re crushin’ me.”

“Sorry.” I’m glad it’s too dark to see me blush. Makes sense his parts are tender. I try to be more gentle, like I would to my own. I stroke up and down with feathery softness. Saying he relaxed wouldn’t be quite accurate, but he is seeming to enjoy it more. My ears go up, listening to him moan. Funny how when I showed up I was right played out, and now I’ve got more spark than a kettle of java. My heart’s beating against the inside of my chest. And I just can’t seem to sit in a fashion that won’t aggravate my growing fancy for something betwixt my nethers.

He wiggles extra hard as my fingers touch his tip, so I take a moment to give them a proper twirl around the head. This particular maneuver isn’t so dissimilar from clearing the chambers of my guns, so I can do it with a fair bit of speed. I’m thankful my claws aren’t as sharp as most folks’; I’d hate to go damaging the poor lawbat just because it’s my first go. I squeeze my less public muscles at the thought of getting to do this again some time, of doing even more...

“Oh, Six...” He pants, his narrow tongue poking past his little teeth. He tries to speak further on the matter, but instead shudders, wings wrapping tight around me.

“What’s the matter, lawbat? You seem a mite distracted.” I’m mean to tease, but figure I’d better distract him or he’s liable to notice I don’t know the steps to this dance. I speed up, fiddling with that pretty pommel of his.

He squeaks. I move my other paw in and sort of squeeze at his shaft. He’s harder than when I started, the skin of his penis smoother and hotter. I lick my dry lips and kiss him, on the neck this time, since he is breathing pretty hard. I feel I ought to whisper sweet nothings in his ear, but, seeing as how I don’t know any, I just give him a little nuzzle. I feel his bare hind paws brush against my boots.

All of the sudden, his body tenses. He lets out a drawn-out squeak. His hips shift from side to side. His toes grip my boots hard. His penis starts to buck against my paws. Before I can sort out what’s next in this little rodeo, he’s squirting against my palm. It’s wet. Hot. Thick.

I’m taken aback by all this jerking and spurting, so I let go. I hear the soft patter of his cream hitting his wing membranes, each one accompanied by a desperate little eep. He flops down against me, gasping. I freeze, my whole body tense. Pretty soon, he’s done. New as it was to me, I’m a little sad to see this show end.

“Oh... Oh, Six...” He pants against my shoulder for a moment. “That was...”



whew...”

I’m unsure what to do with the slick seed on my palm, so I squish it between my fingers. It’s warm and squishy and smooth; like nothing I’ve touched before. The air is heavy with his musk now.

Once Blake recovers, he starts in on my ears, kissing them up and down. I’m starting to see what all this fuss is about; having a gentleman getting amorous on your ears is enough to put a hop in any bunny, even if he is a bit sticky. He eases me back against the bed. His wings stroke along my sides, making me squirm. I feel his penis graze my wrist, soft now and still wet against my fur. I want to ask him if I did it right, but he seems pretty keen on me at the moment, so I reckon I was leastwise passable.

If Mama knew what her girl was doing, I haven’t a doubt she’d march right across the Frontier, drag me back to the burrow, and see I never set a paw outside it again. Then again, maybe she’s reckon this bat’d settle me down, that I’d just hitch to his wagon and that’d be it. Sorry, Mama, that just ain’t the way of it... Did, after all, warn me about the proclivities of bunnies.

He’s on top of me now. His wing thumbs slip into the collar of my coat, feeling at the tender fur of my neck. With real gentleness, his hind paw slips one of my legs up onto the bed, paying no mind to the dust on my boot. His other one trails up my thigh, brushing against my more vulnerable regions. A chill runs through me, followed by heat. Nobody has ever touched me there. That fancy hind paw grips and slides, and now it’s my turn to whimper. His pressing and stroking is getting to feel awful nice. He’s right impressive with those hind paws. I feel the top button of my trousers come undone, then my belt buckle.

“Jordan?” The name feels natural on my tongue, like I’ve been saying it all my life instead of just these last few months.

He stops, looking down at me like I’m worth more than all the gold in California.

I try to catch my breath. My chest feels tight inside. “Don’t take this as nothin’ but what it is, but I ain’t done this before.”

“Oh.” He backs that hind paw off, bumping my nose with his. Even in the dark, I can see his soft smile. “Well, nothing says we’ve got to.”

I can’t help but smile too. With only a tremble’s worth of caution, I curl a paw around the nape of his neck. “I’m not sayin’ we call this shindig off; just go slow.”

“Okay.” He kisses me tender on the lips. His tongue does that little flickering

trick again, making me laugh outright.

“Hey, now! These lips ain’t sugar candy, lawbat.” I touch a finger to his own lips.

He kisses my fingertip, then smiles.

His hind paws move up my legs, settling on my hips. I scoot back, pulling myself further up on the bed. He finishes unfastening my belt, unfixing the buttons of my fly, and untying the leg straps of my holsters. His wings tighten on my shoulders as his toes grip the top of my pants and push them down. I lift my rear, taking the opportunity to adjust my tail. A bit harder pulling off my boots, but we manage. I silently wish I don’t stink to high heaven, but he’s soon back on top of me. My boots and trousers drop to the floor.

The good sheriff starts undoing my gunbelt.

My heart skips near on three beats. I can’t even call to mind a time when I’ve been without that gunbelt. My paw curls over his own, stopping them. “Reckon I don’t need to be that naked.”

He chuckles against my neck fur. “A gunslinger to the manner born.”

“Glad you understand.” My heart almost beats a steady rhythm again.

His tongue traces up my jawline to my lips. We kiss, and my heart flutters like crops in a stirring wind. He plants kisses back down my chin and throat... between the buttons of my shirt down my breasts and stomach... across the soft fur of my crotch—

My ears spring up. “You’re gonna lick it?!”

He looked up, ears down. “Well, yes.”

I grip great pawfuls of the bed sheets ‘til my knuckles feel cold. “I haven’t exactly had much chance for comparison. What if there’s something off about mine?”

He glances down, then back to me. “Looks just fine to me.” A wing eases onto my hip. “If a tad mussed.”

Heat rushes to my ears. “You’ve been the one rubbin’ at it!”

“Guilty as charged. Allow me to make restitution.” He plants wet kisses down the lips of my nethers. I bite my tongue to keep from crying out. His breath curls over my fur.

I grip right through to the mattress as his tongue enters me. At first, he’s just holding steady. My muscles clench down toward it, though he’s just barely in. Warm. Soft. Wet. Then he starts to lick. Up and down. Glory be, does it feel

grand. His tongue's getting a wiggle on in there like he's eager to explore every little inch. Around the walls of my passage, then back out around the front. The tip of it slips in between those inner and outer lips, lapping at my juices. All the while, his lips are working over my nether regions, his breath chilling the fire his tongue stirs up. I grind my tail against the bed to keep from bucking into his face. He pokes into me, quick and teasing. I'm gripping against him something fierce, trying to catch that rascal of a tongue. It curls up against the top of my sopping wet burrow. Heat and that funny tension are welling up just below my belly, like ya get just before ya go off...

He moves up, fanning my clit like the hammer of a Peacemaker. My hips jerk with every lick. My ears burn. My paws tense.

I squeal.

Every muscle in my body goes wild. My passage ripples in a right delicious way. I squeak and shudder like a cheap door hinge. "Ah! Aaah! AaaAAHHHHh!" I thrust so hard Blake's nose jabs me just above the gunbelt. My toes grip his blankets, twisting them to tangles as my body flails. Even my tail twitches like mad.

I collapse back to the bed. My innards peter off bucking like a bronco. I'm panting. Sheriff's watching me like I might set to flopping around again. He wipes his smiling mouth. "Sheesh, bunny! You always gonna be like that?"

"The heck should I know, lawbat?" My chest rises and falls. "Ya always gonna have a tornado for a tongue?"

"I'm just a fruit bat." The flying fox curls up beside me.

I'm still hot, but the night is cold. Breathing hard, tingly as all get out, I don't mind so much having him next to me, even in my current state of undress and sprawling.

He brushes a wing along my breasts. I give it a playful swat. "Don't you get presumptions. Ah am a lady, after all."

"How could I forget?" He slips a wing over me. It feels like living velvet. "Am I permitted to call you ma'am from here in?"

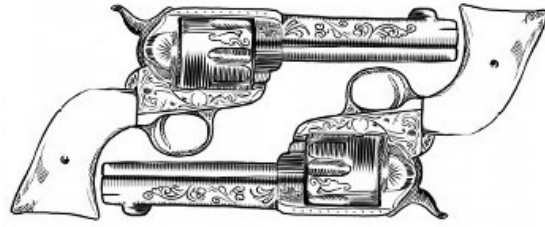
"Permitted for now. You'd best take occasion; won't be happenin' out in public."

"Stars forbid, ma'am." He rubs his manly bits against my back.

I nestle back against him. "A true gentleman."

We rest for a moment, wrapped up in each other's arms. The night is quiet, only the sound of wind and sand against the walls.





## Chapter 10

*Lawbat's got a glass chin.*

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The morning light seeps in through his curtains. I wake up, startled a bit by the wings around me— never woken up in a man's embrace before. Once I get over the shock, I let go of my guns and enjoy it. He's a right pretty bat, now that there's light. Still asleep, his mouth's open just a little ways, showing that pink tongue I'm getting so keen on.

The hell am I doing, getting keen on bits of him? He's just some fella. So happens that he's right nice for a cuddle, sure, but that don't mean a thing. Folk do far more without batting an eye. Besides, the bat's daft. Worse than just going along with the way of things, he's dead set on keeping things as they are, on arresting folk like me. Not someone this bun can afford to cotton to, even if his manly parts were rather diverting to fiddle with. I think back to last night and the gropes and glances I got in the moonlight. Curse me six ways from sorry, but I have always been the curious sort...

I lift up his wing. His penis retracted at some point in the night. Turns out I was right: it does work like a stallion's. I giggle at the thought of saddling my lawbat up for a ride.

He stirs. Those brown eyes open just a bit. He smiles at me. "Morning."

Fur hot at being caught peeking, I touch my nose to his before I can stop myself. "Mornin', lawbat."

"Some'd consider it rude to laugh at a fella when he's not decent."

I make a show of looking down again. "Oh, you look plenty decent to me."

He is right adorable when he blushes.

“So...” I clear my throat. “Are all fellas fitted out like you?”

“Uhh... Well, everybody’s born different, just like with everything. Based on species, of course. But yeah, they all work about the same.”

I laugh at the flustered fruit bat. He does, too, and runs a paw along my neck.

He touches the pin I keep on my vest, an old Army pin that says ‘VI.’ He looks up to me. “This why they call you ‘Six Shooter’?”

I nod. “Somebody very dear to me gave me that pin.”

The flying fox smiles. “I hope, someday, I get to hear that story.”

I meet his eyes, a little dreamy. “Hope, someday, I get to tell it.”

He pulls me in closer.

I blush at the close quarters, my body stiffening even as my brain softens with a case of the lovey-doveies. “Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t ask this too often, but I figure tonight’s got plenty of firsts; what’s one more?”

“Okay.” Sounding uncertain, he tightens his grip on me just a little. I can feel his breath on my neck.

I pause and mull for a bit. I run my fingers through the fur of his chest. “I think I need your help.”

We lie like that for a while, soaking up each other’s warmth. I want it to last forever, but the reason I came here is building up inside me. Once I can’t take any more, I sigh to clear my mind. He makes a little noise of curiosity. Just like Daddy taught, I sort out my thoughts, then talk. “It happened three days ago. I had done some considering on what you said.”

Blake pulls me in with his wing just a bit. “About me keeping you safe?”

“About me keepin’ me safe!” I tap a paw against his chest. “I figure, sooner or later, Hayes is going to get word from his beefers we put in the clink. He’s gonna hear that some tall, scrawny bunny fella made off with his loot. Granted, there’s a mess a’ bunnies out here, but most of ‘em don’t know a pistol from a pine cone.”

“Fair to say you do.”

“Dang right it’s fair. Now hush. I decided the best way to make sure Hayes ain’t wise to me is to get wise to him. More especially, his crooked dealings. That way, if he sees fit to send trouble my way, I can send it right back.”

“Blackmail?”

“Blackmailing Hayes would buy me a bullet in the back. That lion’s yella clear through. I’m talkin’ giving him difficulties bigger than some bunny with his cash. The manner of difficulties that turn deadly if you don’t see to them directly.”

“Ah.”

“Got a tingle in my ears and started pokin’ around at the mine he bought up north of town.”

“I heard about that place.” Blake nods. “Ran dry a dozen years ago. Most folks are glad about him opening it, think it’ll bring money into the town.”

“Well, if he’s pulled a fleck of gold outta the ground, I couldn’t find it.”

He stops stroking my ears for a moment. “I’m sure you looked.”

“A bunny’s gotta live. Besides, if Hayes had his druthers, you’d be feedin’ the wildlife back where they dry-gulched us.” I adjust my ears so I’m not laying on ‘em, and just so happens that this means he can pet them better. “He’s been in there alright. Thing is, he brings in cattle with him.”

“Cattle?”

“As in calves.”

“What’s he need cows in a mine for?”

“Just what I thought. And not just one or two. He’s brought at least a dozen of ‘em down since I’ve been watchin’. Whatever he does, they don’t come back out. Just bones picked clean... Don’t you think that’s a touch odd?”

The lawbat shrugs his wings. “Lions are meat-eaters. They’re given to odd behavior sometimes.”

“Hasn’t taken in any equipment for cooking or mining either. Just a string of little calves.” “And now I start hearing rumors ‘bout folk gone missing.”

“Rumors?” His eyes question me.

“You seen that old raccoon with the sickle lately?”

“Harland Myers? No, come to think of it.”

“Neither has anybody else. Not for near on a week.”

He nods, scratching his chin with a wing thumb. “He’s always seemed a trifle odd, though; caught him staring into nothing the other day. But that doesn’t implicate Hayes at all.”

I glare on him a moment before continuing. “Or that mutt who got in a tussle

with Hayes' goons last night. He's gone too."

"That one's news to me and I'll have to look into it." He set his muzzle in a thoughtful frown. "But folk leave town, Six."

"Folk who don't own a pony? And there hasn't been a stage through in weeks."

He swivels an ear my way. "And you think Hayes chased them off?"

"Ah don't claim to know. All I know is they're gone." I shift again him, wishing he'd wrap my up in his wings a little longer. "And then there's those carts a' ore Hayes' been haulin' straight through town..."

"Ore?"

"As in rocks. No gold."

"Why bother bringing back rocks?"

"Just what I thought. And not just one or two. He's brought half a dozen out of there since I've been watching. Whatever it's for, he hides it at that blasting powder factory of his. Don't you think that's a touch odd?"

The lawbat shrugs his wings. "I'll admit it is peculiar."

"Carts and carts of these shiny rocks just happen to keep heading to his dynamite plant. That ring true to you?"

"No, but there's no reason to believe he's doing anything illegal." He looks up at me, those darling brown eyes dang near driving me to distraction.

"Look, I don't know what I'm gettin' at exactly, but I got a..." I close my eyes. "...feeling about this. 'Specially so when I got close to those carts."

He brushes his muzzle on mine 'til I look down at him. He sits up a bit, ears up. His face is honest. "How do I play in?"

"I don't know... I guess ya come have a look-see."

The bat looks a touch confused. "Look, Six, I trust you, but I can't just leave town for a few days and go trespassing on private property on account of just a feeling. If we were to head up to County Records, take this the official road..."

I look away, feeling stupid I even asked. I scoot back a little from under his wing.

He notices my backing off, but makes no move to keep me there, except with his eyes. "Hey, now..."

I wring my paws. I can shoot the cap off a longneck at twenty yards, but this is tough. "Blake, I know I sound like I'm on a bender, but I ain't really up to my

ears in frien— lawbats.”

“Tell you what, we’ll get some breakfast here and check into what you’ve heard.” He nods toward the door, then noses in against my ear with a little grin. “Disinclined as I am to have us leave where we’re at...”

I blush at that last, but take a breath, steeling up my resolve. “And what if Hayes fixes on blastin’ us all sky high? You willin’ to wait, Sheriff?”

“It’ll only take a day. At most.” His thin, serious muzzle lays against my neck. “I can’t just go traipsing over and arrest a man without cause. We’ve got no evidence yet he’s playing the game crooked. Let me talk to people—”

“Ya wanna talk? You can talk to me, either at the mine or when I get back. I’m finding out what’s this is about ‘fore Hayes decides I’m worth investin’ some bullets in.” I roll back, dropping my hind paws off the side of the bed. My bare legs and the white fur of my more personal areas gives me a touch of embarrassment, but not enough to put the brakes on this train. I’ve got myself riled, and my pride won’t let me turn back. I pull on my britches and am halfway through the left boot when he touches my back. I tense for a moment. Having a man touch me as he pleases is going to take this bunny some getting used to. At least I haven’t shot him yet. Well, except the once. My guns feel cold despite having been under the covers with us all the warm night.

His voice is soft, so is his wing against my back. “Six, you don’t have to do this alone. I’ll help you.”

This damn right boot always fights me when I’m in a hurry. Hot blood runs to my ears. My words have more bite than I mean them to: “Really? For somebody with wings, ya sure are sold on sittin’ still.”

“I give you my word of honor.”

I keep myself from turning around. I don’t care to have him see my face just now. One kind of naked is enough for today. “That don’t mean a lot out here.”

“Does to me.”

I get that right boot on with brute muscle. It hurts my hind paw, but I’m ready to walk. “I’d best be gettin’ a wiggle on.”

Blake’s still getting his long johns in order while I stand up and walk to the door. I catch him giving me a look that darn near draws me back in. I check the chambers on my guns and head out.

* * * * *

It's noon. The sun is hot on my fur. I've been walking up this mountain for hours. I could get up faster, but that would mean taking the road, and I am not keen on being spotted. Don't believe Hayes would be too hesitant to do me in, seeing as how I am far out of town. A quick draw isn't worth a red cent if somebody else has the first shot. Luckily, there's plenty of rock and brush to use as cover. My guns murmur, heavier than usual.

Damn Blake and his rules! That little fruit-munching flutter rat... By my Daddy's ghost, I ought to just drag him hog-tied after me the next time. Ought to not even be a next time. Damned bat's eager as a Lab on lunch break to shove his muzzle in my personal affairs, but then can't even be bothered to have my back the morning after!

What's worse, I'm not just mad at him, like I got every right to be. I'm near on sullen, getting all lovesick over this rule-toting dullard. I haven't been this torn up since I was a teenager and Mama moved me back to the Old States. Mama ran the farm fine for years, but Daddy's coffin wasn't hardly covered in dirt 'fore she had us on a train east, like the Frontier hadn't been the only home I'd ever known. Oh, she fit in fine with the finer sorts, having tea parties and gossiping everything into a scandal. Not me. I'm more suited to kicking up a ruckus at some shindig than prattling away at some gala. If being a busybody what it takes to be a proper lady, I'll be wearing these britches to the grave, thank you kindly.

I'm wanting for a Quirley something terrible, but a dog could smell tobacco smoke from a mile off. I content myself with some of the dried berries I lifted off the Scoria Grove general store for shortchanging me on the guns from Hayes's men. They're bitter. Ain't that just the way of the world?

I make it up the rest of the way without trouble. My little crow's nest is still here. I settle back into the little space in the rock, shaped like it was scooped out just for clever bunnies. Shaded too, which is good since I only have the water I carry up. Overlooks the mouth of the mine. Last time, I hid up here for two days without them seeing me, watching Hayes come and go with his strings of carts. Saw a few others with him, his men no doubt, but none I'd seen before.

As of this moment, there are at least three people down there, ambling near the mine entrance. Too far away to tell species as they're unloading a small wagon of supplies all leisureful. Boss must not be around.

I figure I'll wait 'til nightfall, then weasel my way in. Neither of the air shafts I found are big enough to crawl through— I'll have to go in the main way. I'll slink around until I find just what Hayes has brewing down there, then ask him

to stop real nice. I check my guns. Right in the middle of clearing the dust out of 'em, they take to whispering again. Low and mumbly, the voices set a queer shiver along my hackles. Something's amiss.

Something moves at the corner of my eye. I duck, still as a stone. Moving slow, I tilt my head, looking up around the brim of my hat. I make out a winged shape in the sky. Blake. Darn fool.

I wave as much as I dare. Seems he doesn't see me. I even risk flashing my iron at him. Nothing. I consider hollering, but that's just as likely to bring Hayes' meat-heads up after me as it is to attract Blake. He lands near the mine entrance. I cuss. My left paw snaps the loading gate back in place on one gun as I caress the one at my hip. I start climbing down, quiet-like. If I can get to Blake before the—

Nope.

Four armed men swarm over the rocks, guns aimed at the lawbat.

I draw. At this distance, I could pick off one or two, certainly distract them good, but the minute Blake takes to the air they'll shoot him. At least, if they have any brains.

The good sheriff raises his paws and starts talking. No doubt he is giving them the 'I am a man of the law' bunkum that served us so well last time. One of them walks up and socks him in the muzzle. He goes down. Lawbat's got a glass chin.

Ice travels up my veins, collecting in my gut. I watch them drag Blake off, into the mine. The darkness swallows him up.

I fight with myself a moment— the hell am I thinking, running after this lawbat? This highfaluting sense of honor's gonna get me plugged. Don't folks say desertion is the better part of valor?

In the end, I admit I'm a damn fool. I hop down, skittering along the gravel fast as I dare.

So much for waiting until nightfall.



Chapter 11

He bows like I'm some sort of king. I like that.

~~~~~

“You did what?!”

“We caught him snoopin’ around, so we kicked him around good—”

My claws snap out and I knock the rat over with one paw. He squeals in pain, clutching his bleeding snout. Stupid rodent’s lucky I just got back from hunting, that the instincts have been sated for the day. Otherwise, I’d make a rather messy example of him. I take a breath and my voice cools. Father never lost his temper, and I know it’s my flaw. “Where is he now?”

“In the caves... Eeeek!”

I step on his tail as I walk in. Fool. He could have just told the sheriff that this was private land and to move along. But instead he tried to curry my favor by not only beating up the local sheriff, but by leading him into the deepest, secret part of the mine. By my tail! What do I pay these men for? If I wanted blind brute force, I’d just use the ore-doped miners. “You should’ve stopped them.”

I hear a skittering as Morris hurries after me on his stubby marmot legs. I should have left him in charge, but he likes to come along and talk business. Says I’m much more clear-minded after a hunt. He’s right. He smooths his shirt over his wide belly, grumbling. “Not like they asked for mah permission... What do you plan to do about the sheriff, bossman?”

“Don’t know. Kill him, I guess. Perhaps let the miners at him.”

He chitters and wrings his paws, a little too nervous. “Folk will notice he’s gone.”

“I know that! But he’s seen the caves. I can’t just let him go.”

“Oh? Seems like that’s just what we ought to do.”

A growl rises like bile in my throat. “Why?”

“What has he really seen? A mine, that’s all. Nothing wrong with a mine. Even Whiskers ain’t dumb enough to have stashed him in the temple. I say we get him to see this for the mistake it was. Set him on his way.”

“So...what? We just bring him back to town and buy him some drinks?”

“This sheriff don’t drink, but, yes, that’s the general idea. Set him right and on his way. We’ll just blame Whiskers and offer him up as a scapegoat.”

I consider this, stroking my mane. “You think like a predator, Morris.”

“Thank you, bossman.” He grooms his ears, fat little body bobbing down the stairs after me.

The lower levels of the mine lead to a maze of caves. Uncle Julius found them and spent the rest of his life studying the artifacts and writings here. The natives made them at some point in the forgotten past. If Uncle was right, they tell the secrets of the ore. If I ever manage to make sense of his notes, I’ll know for sure.

In the low light of the lanterns, the veins on the walls look like gold. If it does even half of what Julius speculated, it’s more valuable ten times over. He even thought it would preserve him forever, though a few bullets from some meddling rabbit federale saw to that. One thing we already know it does is turn most folk into dribbling, suggestible fools— with enough exposure. That’s worth more than gold to a man who knows how to use it. I’m lucky to’ve found a number of my men it doesn’t affect; not that they had much brains to begin with.

Uncle Julius had a few of the smaller spaces down here converted into rooms for storage. I found that, with a few padlocks, they make agreeable guest quarters as well. We stop in where they’ve locked up the sheriff, finding him battered and still on the floor.

Morris has a word with that old rabbit from the mine, one of the saner ones.

I extend a single claw and press it into the chest of one of the guards, a panther. “Is he dead?”

“No, Boss. Just out cold.” His name is Harvey Cole and has impressed me in the few months he’s been in my employ. His name isn’t real; you can tell by his

accent he's a Chinacat or some such. Doesn't matter. The panther stands up straight, proud like a cat should be. What's more, the ore doesn't do him a blink of ill. A valuable combination. "Your...associates wanted to beat him further, but I stopped them, figuring you would want to see to this personally, as he is lawman. Also..."

"Yes?"

His left paw fingers a jade worry stone, smoothing it between rough paw pads. He leans in, away from the rabbit chattering with my marmot and purrs a whisper: "We do not know if he is affected by ore. Until we do, best to keep him where he sees nothing incriminating."

"Hmph." I nod and slap the panther on his muscular back. "Morris! Give this cat a bonus."

"Yes, bossman." The marmot fumbles out his wallet and thumbs a dozen bills out for him.

The panther takes them with both paws, nodding all gracious. I continue to be impressed. I'd hire only big cats if the situation allowed, not these rats and other vermin, but we're too uncommon.

I smile at Harvey. "Clean him up, dress his injuries as best you can. Communicate our regrets and let him know I'm on my way here."

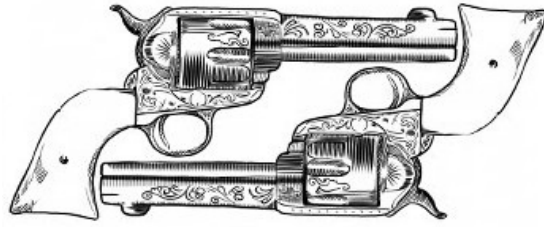
"Yes, Boss." He bows like I'm some sort of king. I like that. Suits a man of my species....

Morris ties the wallet back to his belt as we turn a corner, hitching his pants against his wide gut. "We were lucky today, bossman. Bats are fragile creatures. You remember what happened with the pipistrelle..."

I growl. "Yes, I remember."

He looks back. "You aren't releasing him now?"

"Have them move him to the back offices 'til he recovers. We'll take him back to town after the service. He comes out a' this fine as a new penny. We all come out a' this just fine."



## Chapter 12

*We've got some gone to get.*

~~~~~

The entrance of the mine is a heavy wood frame. Holding steady for a moment, I duck next to the one of the beams.

What in tarnation am I doing? Charging into Hayes' mine runs contrary to my attachment to continued living. Granted, I'm keen to keep him around for a tussle and a tumble, but that's no reason to risk my fluffy tail.

I control my breathing. I hope no one can hear my hammering heart. I'm going to have to move fast. My gun's in my paw. I turn the corner.

Nobody there.

Don't these men have a whit of sense? Who the hell doesn't leave a guard at the only entrance? Unless this ain't the only one...

I walk into the dark. My fur cools in an instant, fluffing out. Air's moist in here. Chilled too. I make my way down the uneven wood steps, walking slow and atop the supports so as not to let it creak. A derelict track runs beside me. Once on the floor of the mine, I pick up speed 'til I'm dang near bounding outta my boots. That feeling I had walking by those ore wagons, but it's brought its five twin sisters. My ears go up. I can hear talk from somewhere down ahead.

It's hard to see, but my eyes adjust enough to keep me from hitting the walls. Helps that they are covered in mushrooms of various sorts, and that some of them glow. As a herbivore who spends more nights outside than in, I know a trifle about them. Some are safe, some are poison, all look to have been gnawed on. I walk on.

The mine gets all twisty, but I manage. I just keep to following the voices.

Can't make out the words, but sure sounds like Hayes. Never thought I'd be thankful for a lion's bluster. I go down another set of rough stairs, then another. I start to wonder if this mine just goes on forever. Or if my ears ain't as good as I supposed.

Then, all of a sudden, the walls change. They aren't chipped out by picks and steam-drills; they're natural. This mine hit a cave. I leap down a little ledge and land on an even stone floor. Room's huge and irregular, folded into sections like a gourd. Those pointy up an down cave bits are spaced throughout and line the floor and ceiling like teeth. They have a fancy name I can never remember. A few of them glitter like gold dust, but I dodge around them. Plenty of gold in this world and few enough lawbats, if you can believe it.

Eyes open, ears searching, I stride through the dark tunnels. Lanterns hang up ahead, splashing light at the end of this murky place. As I get closer, I see there ain't no surface in this cave not written all over with odd scraggly letters. Don't make no sense to me, and they flow like oil when I try too hard to read them. I try not to, lest I go all woozy like when I last neared the mine.

I come upon a space in the cave, partways cut off from the rest. Hayes' voice hits me like a whiskey bottle to the head. I duck back, hiding from view. Damned if my head isn't hurting something fierce.

The room ahead's set up strange. Clearly man-made, it's big and round, perhaps thirty paces across. Shelves all around it, cut right into the stone and covered in jagged shards of pottery and crumbling bones. Rows of crude benches, all filled with seated, restless on-lookers. More than a dozen folk are in here. A half-dozen more mill about the sides of the room, shuffling around, aimless and unsteady. Either they've been passing around the oh-be-joyful or I'm not the only one this mine's run afoul of. Most I can only see by the feeble light on their eyeshine, glimmering dead eyes watching me from shadows deeper than the world ought to know. One of 'em keeps stroking something metal and curved, something that looks to be a sickle.

As my eyes adjust, what I saw as shadows over the benches turn out to be folks swaying on the benches. At least twenty of 'em. All're facing away from me, but I can see they are of assorted species, all sitting, listening to the lion at the front. Hayes, wearing some kind of robe, yammering on to some of his more wakeful cronies, including an old hare. Beside him stands some manner of stone table with a big pit beyond it. The square chasm yawns with a hunger dark and eternal, lurking in the dim floor, waiting for one careless step.

“—and shall come down from the spaces between the stars to bless us. And I

as their conduit to their this earthly plane have received a message from their shining paws. You as my swift claws have done well and thanks to your work and devotions, the Unseen Ones have granted me this vision, this gift which reveals the truth in all things! Do you wish to hear it?"

Murmurs of agreement bubble up from the crowd. A pair of yeses spatter across the room.

"A pathetic response!" He snarls at the crowd, slashing his claws up through the air. "Do you not seek the ultimate truth? The one true glory that only I can deliver?"

"Yes!" Spikes of excitement drive up through the rows of on-lookers. Folk start jumping to their feet. "We want to know!" "Yeah!"

Hayes lifts his great paws into the air, sleeves billowing like sails on the rushing frenzy before him. "If you knew of the vision's meaning you would beg me for this knowledge!" He roars, shaking my very bones.

The crowd whips into a sea of gnashing teeth and flailing limbs. "We do! We do!" The listeners shout, some collapsing, arms raised, some shoving and howling at their neighbors. "Tell us!" "We must know!" "Please, visionary!"

"Very well, my children." He speaks all soothing-like and the howls die down. "But first we must bring in the last of our calves."

The people chatter, all excited, shouting along as Hayes leads them in some gibberish song that catches oddly down the throat of the cave.

I keep real still. Two men come from a side passage I can't see. One's the duded-up marmot, the other some fat boar. They're leading a calf on a rope. It's four little hooves clatter against the stone floor.

Talking cheery blather all the while, Hayes meets the two and they lead the dumb little critter up on top of that table. They're jawin', all smiles, like this is some business deal he's closing.

A hush falls over the listeners.

Calf's just standing there, all placid and witless.

Hayes strokes it along the back.

Then he tears out its throat.

One quick flash of his teeth. That was all it took. Ain't much noise and the poor thing can't really run, seeing as it's slipping on its own blood. Hayes stands there, blood spattering against his fine white shirt, quietly chewing. Watching it die.

The people start to cheer and hoot, but I can't listen. My folks never kept livestock and the gurgling sounds this is making... I cover my ears. Thankfully, the little thing doesn't seem to be lasting too long. It collapses, twitching. All the while, Hayes and the marmot are just looking around, taking in the applause. His marmot pal opens a little golden box he's been carrying, showing off a gleam inside, quieting the fuss. The calf stops moving, then stops making noise. The people listen.

The marmot hands it off to Hayes, who continues his chanting. It's in some language I don't understand. Like no speech I ever heard, all full of sputters and clucks and low choking sounds. Meanwhile, his hired muscle's standing right behind him, watching, paws on their gun. Hayes is dabbing at the gore in his mane with a white kerchief as his voice echoes through room. Beside him, an old, whitening hare in tattered robes is nodding.

The chant gets all low and lyrical. The people rise. They start chanting along, hopping and convulsing in time. Queerest thing I've ever seen.

I reckon I've seen just enough and duck back into the twisty caves. Really ought to find Blake 'fore someone finds me. Ain't certain that they mean him harm, but given the paw to the jaw, they don't seem impressed overly by his lawsome nature.

I listen, fingers caressing my gun grips. The whispers are blathery now, all hot and urgent. I don't like this. My vision blurs. I fight my way on, even as my head brims over with molten lead, painful and thick to think through.

I hear folk talking down the hall and slink further into the caves. I creep along the tunnel. Some folk turn the corner so I freeze, all quiet-like, letting 'em shuffle past me. They're carrying tools, buckets of that metal ore. A peculiar buzzing fills my head, a hundred whispers now. My paws tighten on my iron. They don't take notice of me though— from the distance in their eyes, I'd say they don't take notice of much of anything.

The half-dozen miners pass by. Just about stand up when I hear one more coming. I look up to find a field mouse staggering under a big ol' bucket of shiny rocks. Doesn't seem bothered, just stumbles on, spilling a few of the rocks here or there. His fellows have left him behind.

I figure this'll be my best shot at figuring just what the mine does to folk, and what it's doing to me. I stand up, ready to sock the little fella if he screams.

Like a grazing cow, he stares at me.

I grab the bucket away from him, ignoring how touching it makes my whole arm tingle. I set it down, not careful if I spill half.

No objection, not so much as a squeak.

“What’s yer name, mousy?”

He grunts, stooping to pick up the rocks.

I pull him up, shake him by the shoulders. He’s limp in my paws, flopping him around like a drunk on payday. “I’m talkin’ to you!”

Nothing. Just stares with the same empty eyes. A coldness steals over me, stinging right into my bones.

I let go.

He goes back to picking up the ore. Doesn’t call out, doesn’t complain, just piles it all back in and staggers on.

I run.

A few wrong turns later, I find two guards: a rat and a big ol’ bull of a panther. They’re standing in front of a locked door. Possible it’s not the lawbat, but after what I just saw, I don’t care much what I wreck up for these folk. I ain’t keen to stay here until I turn out like that mousy.

I hop in and sidle against the wall behind the rat. I kick hard as I can against his back. The rat makes a flight Blake’d be proud of, prompted by my boot. Flies square into the panther. I wince as they go down, hollering and hawing; the rat’s head finds the wall with a sick thud. The big panther gets off easier. I spy him struggling from under his deadweight amigo and introduce his face to the butt of my gun. He goes down too.

Snatching the keys from his pocket, along with a surprising wad of cash, I unfix the padlock on the door cemented into the cave wall. Inside the little room, I find Blake, blindfolded and bound, but otherwise pretty as you please. “Howdy, lawbat.”

His bleary eyes set on me. “Sigth? Ow id ooh ind ee?”

I uncork his gag. “Hush now. We’ve got some gone to get.” My knife chews through his bonds. He tries to stand, but gets up too sudden and stumbles into my arms. I heave him over my shoulder.

In the space of a spit, the darkness bares teeth and claws. The panther leaps for my foot. I bounce, hopping outta the way and running out the door. He swears some fancy foreign cussing as I slam the door shut and affix the padlock. Seems this is becoming a habit with men. We vamoose down the hall.

We make good time, though I get a touch woozy whenever I pass a shinier part of the wall. Metal-looking rocks are scattered all over and seep into my

mind with frantic whispers. How or why is well beyond me— I just figure getting out of here is the surest bet for remedying this affliction. I run through the cave, springing over standing stones as best I can see ‘em. Now I know how Hayes got so rich: skimping on lanterns.

A great belling kicks up behind us. Seems the guards found their feet. Hard to tell how close, what with all these damn whispers and natural echoes. I drag Blake with me by the shoulder, heading for the light of the mine proper.

A paw grabs my hip. I pound it, thinking it might be that panther again, only to hear the bat’s muffled yelp. I wonder what Blake is doing, then feel the Bowie knife slip from my belt. Won’t do him much good if he can’t see who to stab. My shins bash into one of the rocks. I holler, hitting the floor. Death stares down at me from the blackness. I catch glimpses of impossible faces, rabbit faces, in the dark. One of ‘em even looked like... No. I’m not seeing my dead daddy’s ghost in this skunkhole of a mine.

A velvet wing sweeps past my ear. Strong hind paws grip my shoulders. Wind whips past my face. I hear Blake grunting, flapping like mad. I’m up. My boots are back under me and I’m running, the bat dragging me. We make it through the larger cave, though I get dragged into a few of those standing stones.

We get to the mine tunnels. Blake somehow knows they are too narrow to fly through. I then realize he’s a bat: he can see. We turn a corner. I slam into somebody who smells like a bunny, knocking the somebody on his ass.

His lantern falls to the floor and the sputtering light gives me one look at the hare’s face. He was the old man standing next to Hayes. I feel a pinch of loyalty to my fellow bunny, but not enough to slow me up as I swing back my leg to give him boot to the head—

“Jasper?!”

I freeze. His voice is reedy and ragged, but the name sucks the breath from my lungs. His wide blue eyes are clouded and bloodshot. I reach down and grab him by the chest fur. How can he know that name?

Blake shoves me past the old hare, hollering for me to move it. Running, stumbling, I try my best to remember which turns I took, but my feet move like they’re in jelly. The bat’s got a wing around me and keeps pulling me onward. My thoughts are still with that old bunny. How could he know that name?

Ahead, I see a square of blinding light; the entrance of the mine. We stumble up the uneven stairs. Blake looks around, ears swiveling. I hear nothing, lost in thoughts and memories. I haven’t heard that name in years. Haven’t said that name in even longer. I lead Blake back to my little crow’s nest and we press

against the back wall, facing the entrance.

Once inside the lookout, his wings wrap 'round me, but to comfort me or prop himself up, I can't say. He sputters, coughs, and in due course gasps "thank you" into the fur of my neck.

I take this tender moment to check my guns, which are covered in the mine's gunk. I'm rattled bad. Can't seem to steady my paws, or my wits. The iron slips from my shaking paws to the dusty grit we sit on.

Blake leans against me, all stunned and silent, panting hard.

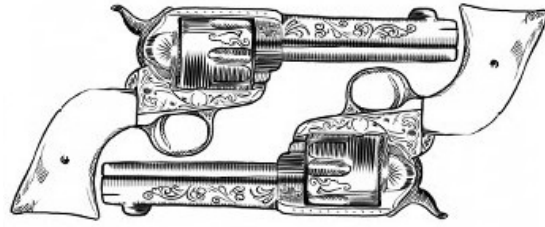
I curse my weakness and snatch the guns up. Most days, the guns are an extension of my paws, something I can count on in dark or light. Not now. Now my fingers don't work right, like they're froze by the same fear chilling my guts. Meanwhile, a wildfire of a headache sears through my brainpan. The hell was in that mine?

On the third try, I manage to get use the ejector rod proper-like, only to knock out all my unused shots like a fool. I cuss. The sheriff tenses against me, giving me cause to hush up. Last thing I need is for anybody who followed us to come charging up here.

I clear the muck off the cylinder, paying no mind to how it sticks to the white fur of my fingers. One by one, I scoop up the bullets, roll the dirt off between my fingers, and ease it back home, keeping a sharp eye on the mouth of the crow's nest. I click the mechanism back together with both paws— ain't got the time or the paws for any fancy tricks at present.

I repeat the process with the other gun, while Blake sets a paw on the cleared one. I don't remark on this, save giving him a little nod. Ain't generally healthy, letting others hold your iron. I try to think on just what it means that I let him do that, but it only kicks up the wind for my headache. I clean the other gun instead.

Darkness comes on swift. Hayes' men scurry over the anthill I've kicked up, but nobody comes looking further up the mountain. Tiredness seeps into my bones and, real slow-like, I find myself settling in against Blake.



Chapter 13

I'm out for answers, not blood.

~~~~~

The sheriff and I have ourselves a good hour of not speaking, with my head swimming most of that time. My whole body feels weak and numb; I swear it's like my spirit's drifted halfway out of it. Right unsettling.

“Six?”

I don't look down at him right away, or even open my eyes, instead listening for any other movement. We should be safe here 'til nightfall. Hard to believe, but we were only in the mine about an hour. By and by, I turn to look at the sheriff. The light blinds me for a spell, but I just keep looking where he ought to be. “Yeah?”

He looks like hell. Blake pants, his narrow tongue wagging just over his teeth. “What'd that bunny say to you back there? The one who got you so—”

I wince at the tenderness of my ears and of the subject. “...Jasper.”

He rubs his cheeks where the gag was tied. Looks up at me with questioning regard. “That a name?”

“Yes.” I tense, checking my guns. My fingers fumble, scarcely able to spin the cylinders. “It's my father's.”

He stares, startled for a moment. “How's some crazy old bunny in a mine know your father's name?”

“Don't know.” I consider helping Blake down a steeper part of the slope with my boot for all his damn questions. I chance a peek down over the edge of the lookout. Night's coming fast. We're probably safe as we're gonna get. I look

back at him and shrug. “I’ve never felt the need to tell anybody about him ‘til this moment.”

He meets my eyes and smiles, rising. “Could be the fact I took a blow to the head today, but I think that’s an awful nice thing you just said.”

My ears feel hot. I want to clutch him close and never let go. I want to strip his britches off and take him in a womanly fashion. I don’t do either of these things. I pull my hat down a little tighter and set to walking, glad it’s dark.

It’s a long ways, but we’ve had an hour’s sit-down to cool off. We make good time back to White Rock township.

We attract a few looks walking back into town, roughed up as we are. At least he isn’t bleeding all over the place this time. We make our way to the City Office.

Once there, Sheriff Blake staggers through the door. “Harding!”

His bloodhound deputy pokes his head around from the office, jowls swinging just a little. “You’re back.” His face is so sad, but his tail is wagging up a breeze. He sniffs at me. “Why do you smell like dry mold?”

I glance down at the stains the hare left me.

The bat waves him back. “Never mind that. Saddle up the ponies and assemble a posse.”

Confusion enters the deputy’s face. He looks to me. I slink back against the wall, eyes down, hoping he won’t recognize me. Getting no answers from me, he turns back to his boss. “A posse? Blake, it’s near on ten at night.”

With one hind paw, the bat pulls a scattergun from the rack by his room and cocks it. “Posse comitatus, Deputy.”

“There’s no need to use French with me.” He puts on his hat. “I’m goin’.” He takes a lantern off a nail on the wall, gives me a nod, and leaves.

Through the window, I watch him go, then saunter up to the sheriff. I tap the front sight of the gun he’s holding. “How’d you figure you’re gonna fire that with one foot?”

“Don’t you go assuming you have me nailed down just yet.” He spins it around into his paw, then holds it level, about belly high. Well, chest high on most folk besides me. He looks like he might even be able to fire it.

After a moment of hesitating, I put a paw on his shoulder. He looks up at me. “Who all is that bloodhound gonna rustle up? Ah’d hate to be the only one at this party.”

He lowers the scattergun. "You're coming?"

I lift an ear, smiling down at him. "Ain't I?"

"You're game as a banty rooster." His voice gets low. "I've never met a woman like you."

My tail bobs. "The most of folk'd say you still haven't." I chuckle.

He interrupts me with a kiss. My mind reels so hard it's a wonder my ears don't stand straight out. My guns tug me forward, into his waiting wings. His fancy lil' tongue starts doing flips around my mouth.

The earth shakes. I don't mean that in some mushy dime novel nonsense way, though that was my first thought, I'm ashamed to admit. The ground shakes under us. We stop kissing. Both of us have our ears up.

He's all business. "You feel that?"

So am I. "Yeah."

"Earthquake?"

"Never heard a' one happenin' in these parts."

"Me neither."

We make our way to the porch. All down the block, people are standing in the street, yammering and looking up.

The sheriff's mare is whinnying and tossing her head, fully saddled. Blake clears his throat and calls to one of the gawkers. "You! What is goin' on out here?"

"Hell if anybody knows, Sheriff!" The deep-voiced mastiff looks around, a touch panicked. "There's talk Hayes's mine just blew sky high!"

\* \* \* \* \*

People clamor for a town meeting. Following Blake there, I walk in as Harding arrives with the halfways-collected posse, though now I doubt we'll be heading up to the mine. Most I don't recognize, though at the tail end I see a pair of red foxes. The doc and his wife, walking close together. The foxes give me little smiles, concerned, but recognizing me. I slip in behind them. The lawbat brushes past me all soft and snakes through the crowd to the front of the hall.

Hayes' eyes go wide when he sees him, but he sweeps a paw over his ears and puts on a face. The lion has cleaned up fine, mane gleaming like a fire. The



metal of my guns runs cold, even through the fur of my fingertips. I could put a bullet between his eyes from here. Could. Won't. But ought to.

I hang around at the back, making a real task of sorting through the bullets in my gunbelt. I keep my head down 'til I can scarcely see over the foxes ears. Back to the wall, just a few steps from the door; it's a good spot. My hind paw thumps as I fight to steel my nerves.

The town council sits along a table at the front of the room. Blake stands at one end, badge glinting in the lantern light. The room buzzes with talk. Not much light; everybody seems to blend together, all species and sorts forming a sitting mob. Seems like half the town's in attendance. Makes sense I guess; good chunk of the mountain just blew up. The sour scent of fear hangs thick in here.

The mayor, an older calico Blake finds a trifle mild for the post, raps his little wooden hammer on the table a few times. "Quiet down, quiet down. I'm calling this meeting to order. The secretary is now taking notes. Clearly, the pressing issue is the explosion that occurred tonight up on Old Camp Mountain, so we'll get down to business. I've been told that the mine's owner, Tanner Hayes, would like to speak. Mister Hayes?"

The lion stands up, brushing down his fine white shirt. "Roughly an hour ago, my newly acquired mine was dynamited... intentionally and maliciously." He waits while everyone takes this in, eyes closed and seeming all sad. "While this is a blow to the community, we can at least be grateful that no one was in the mine at the time. And while there will be a serious delay and loss of revenue to me personally, mine operations will continue. To this end, I'll be hiring extra workers from town here to help with the cleanup."



More than a few hoots of approval rise up from the crowd. Everybody knows

Hayes pays well.

I look to Blake. His muzzle is steady, but those blown eyes flick to me. I see a flicker of concern.

The mayor pushes up his glasses. “Mister Hayes, do you have any idea who might have sabotaged your mine?”

“Well, nothing is set in stone just yet. My men did see a suspicious character nosing around the site just before it was destroyed.” He waves a thick paw through the air like some kind of actor. “A rabbit by the name of Jasper Haus.”

My guts turn to ice. All these years not hearing my father’s name, now twice in the same day. From two different people. This just ain’t possible. Only thing I can figure is that they talked. But Daddy died a hundred miles from that mine, probably never even set a paw in it. Then it hits me like a hoof to the head.

They think I’m my father.

My guns hum under my palms.

I edge to the door. My breath sounds like thunder; my fur tingles like close lightning. I feel eyes on me, but don’t dare check.

“I am personally offering a reward of one hundred-fifty dollars for his capture.” A rush of chatter from the townsfolk. Hayes waits for a little while, soaking up the reaction, before he raises those heavy paws again. The place quiets down. “This reward is forfeit if the rabbit is killed. I’m out for answers, not blood.”

The mayor talks over the newest rumble of chatter. “Your mercy is commendable, Mister Hayes. The sheriff’ll be, of course, ready to assist you in the location and capture of this culprit. Now as for how soon the mine can be back in operation...”

I slip out. I taste bitterness, right on the edge of puking, but swallow it back down. Night’s chill seeps into my fur like icy water. It’s like I’m climbing out of Skull Creek all over again: cold, alone, and wound so tight my innards feel twisted. I’ve got to hit the hills again. Put some miles between me and this town. I’ve done it before. Plenty of places I intend never to go back to. But Blake... I ain’t sure just what Blake is to me, but damned if some fat lion’s gonna take away the one tie I got.

Damn that lawbat. Life was simpler when I was tied to nothing but winds and other folks’ money.

I get the eerie feeling that I’m being tailed. I don’t look back or speed up, just fondle my guns.

I've got to let the lawbat know what kind of gone I'm getting. I pass the City Office. I feel a flush of warmth against the cold, remembering my night there. Reasonable thing to do would be to hit up the public stables downtown and skedaddle. My paws take me toward the office. Guess I'm not the reasonable type.

I pass Blake's bay pony, which gives a low nicker at my passing, stirring at her post. Guess she won't be hitting the trail tonight, leastwise not with Blake.

I give some thought to writing a note, though pretty words were never a suit I ran strong in. I stop for a moment, thinking on how stupid I am. Damn it all, why the hell'd I have to go falling for him? Muddles my brain worse 'an Hayes' mine ever could.

My heart beats a mile a minute and I put a paw over it. I feel something metal. My pin. I take a breath. I'm not swimming in other ideas at the moment, nor in time. It'll have to do. I undo the clip on the back, holding it in my paw a moment. There are all kinds of reasons I should leave something else, but this ain't the moment to argue with my ghosts.

I climb the stairs. Ought to be funny to me that I am sneaking into a place to leave something, rather than take it, but I ain't laughing. Pulling my hat low, I head through the front door. Now, I just have to stash this in Blake's room and find—

Deputy Harding.

My heart about leaps out my mouth. Son of a bitch's lucky my guns stuck fast in their holsters, else I'd of been halfway through emptying my chambers into his person. Having a bounty on my head's made me a mite jumpy.

Standing in the dim lantern light of the office, he tips his hat to me. "Evening, Six."

"What in blue blazes are you doin' here?"

"Waitin' on you." He manages a smile under all those jowls, all peaceable and pleased.

The old dog's sniffing out the future now? I step inside the office so as not to be caught flat-footed by passersby. "Bloodhound, I don't got a mountain a time to jaw with ya, so listen close. Sheriff an' I... I ain't keen to leave on account a'..."

"I know... I'll tell him."

My untrusting nature causes me to pause at this and give him a look-over. Something deep in those puppy-dog eyes of his lets me believe him. I hand him

the pin. “Give him this.”

He nods. “Life ain’t about what we got, but what we got to come back to.” He pats my shoulder and I feel a queer tingle under his paw. “Ride east.”

I swallow and turn around, steeling myself for whatever waits outside that door. After a breath, I marshal my wits and will, taking that first step—

“Oh, and Six?”

I do a bunny-freeze in the Arizona night.

“Blake don’t take to other fellas riding off on his pony.”

I look back. “You tellin’ me not to?”

“I said other fellas.” He winks. “She’s saddled up.”

Crafty old mutt. “Much obliged.”

Ticks of the clock later, I dig my spurs into her flanks and we’re gone. I find the reins and ride hard for anywhere but here. Streets are still pretty clear and I’m gone in a hurry, gone before I can freeze up.

Hooves thunder under me, biting deep into the dirt. I race off into the black without a thought to where I’m going or when I might be back.

That troubles me some. But then, a heart’s a troublesome thing.



## Chapter 14

*Lo and behold, I come out here to find that he's not only honest, he's dead.*

~~~~~

I growl and stroke my mane as the last of my men stop fawning over me and leave me in peace. The useful ones have already headed out to find that damn bunny.

My wife, seated on the divan, watches me enter. She's wearing a modest dress and her fur is pristine. Her countenance the same as it always is: bored. The Frontier holds few diversions for a lady of her class, aside from her being a shameless gossipmonger.

"Welcome home, husband." She turns a page in her dime novel, feigning interest. "I had Edith make beefsteaks."

I growl. The help goes home at sunset. Those steaks'll be cold as a bog rat's teat by now.

Mary Elizabeth's not a bad wife, after a fashion: of good breeding and knows to keep her nose out of the affairs of men. Too bad she's barren as a husk— it'd be a pity for my line to end over something as insignificant as that. We have little reason to associate, aside from living together in blessed matrimony. I'd say she never forgave me for dragging her out here, but that would imply she took a shine to me in the first place.

I pour a glass of bourbon and sit down in one of the other padded chairs.

Tonight went perfectly. I was in town by the time the mine blew, with plenty of impartial witnesses. Everyone applauded my little announcement at the town hall. I hate to throw away money, but I only have to pay if they bring this Jasper idiot in. Once he's here, well... I made sure to spread plenty of rumors that the reward would double if I got the bunny instead of the sheriff getting him.

The sheriff will be easy to control. All it takes is the right words here and there on the city council and he's gone, just another clodhopper with a gun. Half my men are better than he is. What's worse, he's predictable. Not like me. Ask anybody who's muscled in on my territory, or who's tried to hold out on my cut of the banditry. The ones who are still alive still have nightmares about just what a lion might take from them next. Money, mates, body parts: sometimes I've decided on the flip of a coin. I start to think about what parts I should take from that little bat first, showing up at my mine uninvited like he did...

My claws come out. Mary Elizabeth winces as I carve grooves into the varnished wood of the armrest. I ignore her. I could crush the little bat with one paw. Not that I'm likely to get the chance again. Too dangerous, especially if he tries to accuse me. I'll probably have one of the boys do it. Quietly, next time a new fool rides into town alone. I'll get some men to testify against whoever it is and the matter will be over as fast as they can raise a scaffold.

I breathe, cooling my blood. Odds are, the sheriff can be managed. I personally apologized to the man, told him how my idiot workers acted without consulting me. He accepted. The sheriff is, by all accounts, a man of honor, and I'd certainly like to avoid going against the law if I can. Leastwise until my plans for the ore are in place.

I finish my bourbon and undress, getting into bed. The rabbit is more troublesome. In order to kill him, I have to... find him. I'm not eager to just sit waiting until he shows up again to finish me off. At least now I have the whole town out looking for him.

Damn it all. I need to get control, both of myself and the situation. I sent word to Mei Xiu, but it'll be days before she responds. Damnation, do I need to blow off some steam...

Done combing her fur, Mary Elizabeth lays down next to me with a civil, if cold, look. Her scent tingles in my nose and my sheath, but the thought of bedding her disgusts me. Eleven years since she was sent out to me, and she still hasn't produced a cub. Just a waste of seed. I ought to just find another wife, or at least a sweet little mistress, but the odds of that out here are close to nil. Not enough lionesses, and the few who are here are old and worn out by

homesteading. I've developed a fondness for visiting a spicy little lioness at the brothel in Chance Canyon; the family back east says I should continue the Hayes line with her, but no heir of mine is going to be the son of a whore. Not that I'm opposed to a dalliance when I'm passing through. I am only a man, after all, but I take precautions.

I've never believed in the superstitious hogwash like Uncle Julius did. Hell, he'd have let the 'yotes paint him up and dance around him if they'd been so inclined. I, on the other paw, have no need for sorcery or savages, trusting more in the power of good sharp claws.

The family had sent him out here to this little patch of desolation because this mine was small and out of the way. We heard strange things about what he was doing up here. Things about secret meetings and ancient writings. Once the mine ran dry, I didn't really care when he never came back. But Father would have none of that. He was convinced that Uncle Julius was still producing, just holding out. Lo and behold, I come out here to find that he's not only honest, he's dead.

Some bunny had stumbled upon my dear Uncle's dealings and found a means to murder him. How the old fool let that happen, I still can't reckon. Uncle Julius's workers hit the hills, gutless cowards, only to come crawling back once they heard his nephew was in town. They're not very smart, but they have their uses. There are just some things a man won't do for money alone. And now they claimed the very same bunny was back to kill me too.

Uppity little lingo. There was a time, not too long ago, when folk like me ate folk like him. And he thinks he can just get away with killing one of us?!

The fabric rips and tears. Mary Elizabeth jumps. I realize that I have been crushing the edge of the mattress with my paw. Deep furrows spew forth down feathers. Damn it all. It didn't make any sense. I heard tell of that bunny— he was twenty, thirty at most. Uncle Julius got killed twenty-some odd years ago. That puts the lingo in question at close to fifty. I saw that bunny. He was exactly how they described him, right down to those fancy guns and that little sneer. Nobody looks like that at fifty, with not even a hint of grey around the muzzle.

I've never put much stock in Julius's beliefs, but what if there was something to them? Even delusions have an element of truth. What if, buried under all this other nonsense his workers paraded before me, there was something real? And this bunny had found it. I curse myself for indulging in such drivel, but my thoughts are like a mountain, and no matter what road I take, this is the only peak I come to.

What if it keeps you young?

What if that little ligo has figured it out? It would just be a matter of getting my claws on him, squeezing out a little blackmail...

A mad idea enters my head. Who needs an heir if you're going to live forever? I snarl a laugh. A load of mystical 'yote nonsense. Still it's an entertaining notion. I shall have to hunt down the truth to this.

I take Mary Elizabeth in my paws. Before the night is over, I sow my seed in her until she's caterwauling and overflowing. And it doesn't feel like a waste.



Chapter 15

“If it’s not even tea, why’s it have to be tea?”

~~~~~

With my blood still racing from the hunt, sitting and watching Mei Xiu make tea is a mane-rending torture. It’s all I can do to pace rather than run amok. “Why can’t we just make some damn—” I snarl over my coarse words. That’s no way to speak around a true lady. “—some coffee? It’d surely be faster.”

The tigress doesn’t look up, focused on measuring scoops of dead plants into some manner of special kettle with graceful paws. A fine china tea set sits beside us. Flames from a small campfire dance beside her, mingling with her silk-clad pelt. Looking upon her now, you’d never know she was covered in gore not twenty minutes ago.

I look up from my brooding and pacing to meet her gaze.

The tips of white fangs glint from behind her supple lips. “Sit down, little kitten.”

I bristle, then sit, a growl deep in my chest.

She ignores me and pours water from a larger kettle into the smaller kettle then into tiny, fragile cups. I crushed one the first time she insisted on this bizarre oriental ritual. No anger found its way to her face in that moment, she simply poured me another cup and dared me with her eyes to break it.

The desert spills out in all directions. Somewhere out in the wastes, her butler has disposed of our bloodied rags. Presently, the black-suited Siamese kneels at ease beside her, turning a teacup idly in his paws, stopping now and again to polish away some imagined smudge.

“What’s the point in having a butler if he’s not gonna make the tea?”

Her butler’s glance makes it clear as my wife’s fine crystal that he reckons this is a waste of everybody’s time. Were he anyone but her servant, that look’d fetch him claws to the face. Not that I disagree, strictly.

“You misunderstand. This is not tea. This is a process.” Her voice rings like glass, smooth, but with an edge. “This is our coming back from that wild place within ourselves to regain the trappings of the civilized.”

She’s prone to that sort of bunkum. I dig claws into my thigh to keep myself still and sitting. “If it’s not even tea, why’s it have to be tea?”

“Water quenches thirst. Tea lubricates well-mannered discourse.” She sets a tiny cup full of the steaming liquid before me. It has a fancy little scene of trees and farmland on it. My wife would like it. My wife could learn a thing or two from this tigress. I doubt anyone’s ever considered Mei Xiu anything but perfection.

My tail whips against the sand.

“A still tail invites a still mind.”

I seize ahold of enough restraint to keep the offending limb still. “Well, if I hadn’t hunted twenty minutes ago...”

Her body is a picture of stillness. “Twenty minutes ago, I too was on the hunt.”

My legs ache from kneeling, stabbed by every rock under them. I swear her butler gave me the thinnest blanket to kneel on. “These rocks hurt.”

“Rocks can teach you much. Determination. But also the price of being unyielding, for even simple water wears them away. I have spent the better part of my life studying them.”

I bite my tongue, taste a little blood, but I can’t help myself. “I feel like some manner a’ slave, sittin’ like this.”

“That is fitting, then.” She nods, then breathes in the vapors from her own cup of tea. After a spell of her just sitting there, eyes closed, she gives me an appraising look. “You are a slave. A slave to your own primal nature. You must learn to control it, rather than allowing it to control you.”

I grumble, lifting my own cup.

“Your tail is moving.”

I snarl: “I’m damn well trying! Men are supposed to be active, not mindin’ their every poker tell!” Anger lashes down my tail, causing it to crack to the side.

Bone china shatters with jaw-clenching rain of notes. The fancy tea set lies in shambles around my tail.

The tigress lets out an icy breath. “Man or animal; today, with you, there is no difference.” A hint of flame catches in her eyes. She rises in a hiss of silk. After two steps, she turns with all her usual grace. Her frown calls to mind a disappointed schoolteacher as she tosses a napkin at me. It hits my chest. “And clean the blood off your muzzle.”



## Chapter 16

*And you don't find it peculiar that Hayes and I are now finishing our uncles' business, twenty years late?*

~~~~~

I've always done my best thinking upside-down.

Gets the blood rushing to my head, which in law school I certainly needed.

A mistake folks make about bats is that we all hate sunlight. On the contrary, at this moment the sun's warming my wings in a most pleasing manner. Almost as pleasing as a having them wrapped around a certain hare...

I look down from the cliff-side I'm hanging on. Earthbound folks tend to be uneasy by heights. I find them reassuring— if ever I needed to take cover or flee, I could do so in an instant, trading height for speed.

From my perch, I can just make out three glimmering cans set in a row on the desert floor. My wings stroke over my holster, making sure my gun is secure. My hind paws shift, getting a better grip on the rock face. The creak of leather, the scratch of stone, and my own breathing: these are the only sounds on this still cliff face. Morning creeps now into every dry gulch and crevasse. The heat of midday will be on me soon.

Like the scattered clouds, passages from my uncle's journal drift to mind. I'd winged through them, hoping to glean something of use. The references I found to Jasper Haus named him a special agent of the General Land Office. Some manner of land dispute; the details run scant as to what, unusual for my uncle.

Seems whatever business he had here brought him to blows with the elder

Hayes. Both wound up shot. Old Hayes died atop a waste-rock pile, an inglorious end to a glorified bully.

Jasper clutched onto life with prodigious tenacity. Despite grave injuries, he managed to ride back to White Rock and seek aid. He spent more than two weeks in the clinic before word could reach his wife. She came alone, collected her husband, and spirited him forever from the pages of history. Until now.

Still thinking, I release the rock and plummet.

Rocks streak by me, one blurring to the next.

Wind rumbles past my ears, through my fur.

Clothes and wing membranes tremble.

Earth races up.

I unfurl.

In a swooping arc, my body carries itself aloft with the speed I've borrowed. A singular joy wells up in me— what Icarus grasped for a moment is mine by birthright.

My wingbones creak with speed. I stretch them further, gliding to that row of tin cans.

With one hind paw, I snag the gun from my belt. Taking careful aim, I remember to breathe before squeezing off each shot.

Hit.

Miss.

Hit.

Respectable aim for a gentleman on the wing. I circle back around, landing by the line of cans. I dust the sand from my hat, left here for safekeeping. I sit down and reload, musing on just why history has chosen to repeat itself in my little town.

* * * * *

Flying back to town, I loop around in my usual patrol. As the buildings flash below me, thoughts continue to run through my head.

What in the blazes would cause Jasper to get in a shootout with the elder Hayes? General Land Office employs surveyors and lawyers; it isn't known for dispensing justice through promiscuous display of fire arms. But my uncle's

journal makes no mention of him stopping in for help from the sheriff's office. Reckless, even by the standards of someone with Six for progeny.

Red dust billows as I land in front of my office. I dust off, tipping my hat to those few people out in the noontime heat. Even a warmth-loving creature such as myself finds it a touch excessive. I slip into the office.

Harding sits at the desk, writing. Ever since my little encounter there, I've felt vaguely territorial about it. Not overly rational, but the heart seldom is.

"Afternoon, Harding." I amble up to the desk

"Just plain ol' noon, more like." The deputy slides a tied bundle of papers my way.

"What's this? Christmas here early?"

He chuckles, though his bloodhound eyes remain sad. "This mess a' files came for you in the post."

I slip a claw under the twine and slice it open. Country Records came through after all. After paging through the first folder, I decide to settle in. I jump, latching onto a rafter with my wing thumbs. I then swing my body around so I can grab it with my hind paws.

Harding gives me an amused look as he slips from the office.

Dangling over my desk, I begin scouring in earnest. I get through about half the file before coming across some old payrolls. I hear the bloodhound clatter back in with a kettle and some cups. "Says here Jasper Haus really was from the Land Office."

"I coulda told you that, Sheriff."

"How'd you come by that piece of knowledge?"

"I was here, is all."

My ears twitch at this statement. "How old are you, Harding?"

Mischief glints in his eye. "Reckon I was younger then."

"Reckon most folks were." I study him a moment.

He shrugs. "I was workin' as an outrider for stagecoaches."

"A force for law, even then."

"I 'spose." He offers another humble shrug.

"Not even a fella by the last name Hayes would be thick enough to look for a shootout with a federal agent. The lion had to know Jasper'd be missed."

The deputy says nothing, pouring tea and letting me steep. He offers me the

less dented tin cup.

I accept it with a wing thumb, drinking it upside-down with care. Burns the roof of my mouth, so I hold off imbibing further. “I’m just curious how the General Land Office even knew about the mine. Takes them years just to process prospecting claims.”

“Easy. I went and told the Office of Indian Affairs.”

My ears shoot up. “And you never saw fit to mention this?”

“Not somethin’ an old dog blabs about in this town.” He takes a sip of tea. “But his mine is on ‘yote holy land. Reckon nobody was keen on another native fight. Letters from the local chief and the sheriff’ll grab folks’ attention.”

The sheriff: my uncle. “And you don’t find it peculiar that Hayes and I are now finishing our uncles’ business, twenty years late?”

“I would, weren’t it for Jasper Haus’s child having a paw in it too.”

I stare.

He smiles.

The cup slips from my wing thumb. My wings save the records, at the cost of being burnt by tea. “Son of a bitch!”

A gruff chuckle rises from the deputy. “I ain’t contestin’ there.”

“You know about h—him?”

“Sure do. Fella smells just like his father. Caught a good whiff a’ him on the way outta your office that day.”

My ears burn with horror. I might as well be sans trousers again for how naked I feel. “I— Umm... Harding, you see about that—”

He picks my cup off the floor, gesturing with the kettle. “More tea?”

I stammer for a few seconds more, then surrender. “...Please.”



Chapter 17

I'm out of excuses.

~~~~~

What does one buy a half-wild, gunslinging doe hare?

I look over the usual fineries offered at the few stores in town that don't reek of manure or rotgut. Six doesn't seem the type for flowers, and the only jewelry I've ever seen her wear is her namesake pin, the pin I keep fingering in my vest pocket. I consider buying her some finer spirits, but that hardly seems proper for a gentleman to buy for a lady who's shared his bed.

The sun is dipping swiftly toward the horizon and I consider heading back to my bunk and forgoing the whole snipe hunt. Then I see it: a compact, flip-top pouch with holders for two brushes, a cleaning rod, rags, and even a small metal flask for oil. It's a slick little number with elaborate patterning across the front leather. Wouldn't be out of place beside those fancy guns of hers.

"Ya like it?" Rutherford James clops up behind me. He normally confines himself to saddlery, but very occasionally dabbles in smaller items. His backwards name still gives me pause, however. He steeples his thick fingers and inspects me inspecting his wares from his considerable height. "Made the case myself."

I run my paws over the tooled leather. "Eight dollars seems a touch steep."

The horse grins, the hoof-like tips of his fingers clicking together. "Just to ensure a fella appreciates it."

I buy it. It's overpriced, but when has a man ever gotten a bargain on a gift for

a woman? And though I can't be certain I'll have the opportunity to present it to her, she's come back twice, and the old adage says trouble comes in threes.

I scarcely finish tapping what I thought a rather inspired inscription into the back of it when I am accosted from behind.

"Lawman."

My ears go back and I drop from the rafter I'd held with my wing thumbs. I land on the table and turn to see who called out.

A bulky panther stands on the shop floor, his eyes almost level with mine. I swear I've seen him somewhere before, but I can't put my wing on where. I pick up the cleaning kit with one hind paw and slip it onto my belt. "May I help you?"

He offers a polite sneer. "Boss wishes to know how you will find bunny..." His voice rings of the Orient and of marked contempt for me, considering I'm fairly certain we haven't met. "...when wanted posters have wrong name." He presses a pawful of them to the table, almost tipping it with no visible effort.

Figures Hayes'd send a Herculean feline to deliver something so light as a message. "Hayes asked for 'Lester House,' I had them print 'Lester House.'"

He coos like winter wind. "Bunny's name is Jasper Haus. Ja-sper Ha-us."

"I can't be blamed for your boss not writing legibly. Some things are beyond my control."

"Many things, it seems." He crosses his arms to display the thick muscles he isn't using on me.

I couldn't have met this man. I'd have remembered a giant panther, I think. Must just be déjà vu. I glide down from the table and look up at him, not letting my herbivore nerves show. "You have something else to say?"

He towers over me, and I pretend like this wall of black fur doesn't evoke the image of night itself looming over me. The shopkeeper is nowhere to be found, a habit that has probably saved his life in the past. The barest glint of fangs show. "Boss will abide no more failures from you."

"I don't work for him."

"Everyone works for Boss. Some for long time, some for very, very short." He punctuates his sentence like a thump to my breastbone.

I stand my ground. My position grants authority only so long as I keep my claim to it. We glare at each other as ancient fear tingles through me. My right hind paw eases upward. If I need to, I can draw before he notices—

“Why Sheriff Blake, you weren’t considering skipping out on our dinner plans tonight, were you?” Doc pads in from the street, wearing his pristine white coat and babbling in a genial manner. “Charlotte made mincemeat pie, the finest of all meats agreeable to flying foxes.”

“Flying foxes?” The panther repeats it with incredulity, blinking at the silver-tongued red fox suddenly between us.

“Why yes, can’t you see the resemblance? The sheriff and I are practically cousins!” Doc laughs in a disarming, vulpine manner. He aligns his muzzle to mine, gesturing like a professor. “Note the similar facial structure, the distinctive pinnae and proboscis particular to *Vulpes vulpes*.”

The panther’s ears flick, as if to ward off the barrage of unfamiliar words. Again his words cut like chill. “Let us have no more mistaking, Sheriff.” He skulks out the door.

Doc and I watch him melt into the shadows of the evening. The fox lets out a sigh of relief, though that pleased smirk never leaves his graying muzzle.

“Well, I see now why you keep putting Charlotte and me off: you have much more charming folks to speak with.” He sounds a bit hurt. I know it’s a show, just like what he did with the panther, but he’s right. I’m out of excuses. So much for not picking favorites. Might not be a bad idea to have people firmly on my side, it seems. After all, I might have just gotten shot. Again.

Surrendering, I sweep a wing forward. “Lead the way, Cousin.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Does the mincemeat agree with you, Mister Blake?”

I swallow and dab my mouth with the corner of a napkin. It’s tough to hold a fork with my wing thumb, but I manage. Seems the Frontier hasn’t stripped me of all my manners. “It’s delicious, madam.”

Charlotte mouths the word “madam” excitedly to her husband, emphasizing the D, then turns back to me. “I didn’t know if you could tolerate beef suet, so I used honey.” She titters in her seat, tail ruffling. She’s been gracious to the point of doting for the entire evening. I don’t think they get many dinner guests. “That’s why it’s not as firm.”

I crack a smile, flattered that they went through all the effort. “It’s wonderful, really.” I’m not lying. It’s probably the best food I’ve had since I left the Old States.

“I told her she could have just used beeswax.” Doc crosses his arms over his full belly. “A little beeswax would keep it good and firm like suet.”

“You mind who you’re advising or you’ll find yourself eatin’ wax food.” She shakes a finger at him, though not with much austerity. The cactus flower wine has long since brought pink to her ears. “My grandmother would bite her own tail if she heard I served beeswax for dinner. Shows what the good doctor knows.”

Her husband narrows his eyes her way, but she brushes his look off with her tail. She rises and beckons for us to follow her out of the little kitchen to the den. Their house is modest by civilized standards, but civilization is in short supply this far west. Flanking these two rooms are their office and bedroom, with a deep cellar downstairs, hence the wine. Doc carries in the wine and builds up the fire before settling back into a padded chair, his tail shifting out of the way in a gentlemanly curl.

Charlotte offers me a seat on the faded divan, but I make sure to sit on a nearby chest before she can insist. She settles onto the proffered seat instead. “We’ve had Mister Harding over now and again, but he’s a private fella. Seems all the lawmen of White Rock are.”

Doc offers to top off my cup, but I decline that too. I’ve scarcely touched the stuff. Even just a few sips have made my wings start to heat up.

“This is a good one.” He taps a claw on the side of the bottle. “The last one had pollen at the bottom.” This is the first time I’ve seen him without his fine white coat. More and more doctors seem to be wearing them these days, probably to distance themselves from quackery.

“I’m glad to see that wing of yours healed up proper.” The vixen examines my wing over another sip from her clay mug. “Wings can be so finicky, you know.”

I nod, flexing the limb in question. “Yep. You folks did a quality job on it.”

“Would have been a nasty business had that gotten infected.” Doc searches his pockets for his pipe and tobacco pouch. An odd part of me feels I owe him matches. “It’s a good thing that hare came along when he did, Blake.”

Good thing indeed. I might have avoided being shot then.

Her cup emptied, Charlotte interlaces her fingers and places her paws in her lap. “Thing I find interesting is how that Six Shooter fella returned two months later, almost to the day.” A flicker of amusement glints in her eyes. “Funny how things work like that. Regular as the moon.”

I take a breath, wondering what the vixen’s getting at. “That’s the way of

some things.”

“Oh believe me, as a woman, I know.” She tapped her nose. “Regular as the moon. Your friend, though... I must have missed out when you two met on the Fifth of August.”

I cough up a gulp of cactus wine. “What?!” What did Harding tell them?

“Well, he brought you to the clinic on the Fifth of July, then appeared again when Hayes’ mine blew around the Fifth of September. Makes a lady wonder if our mystery hare made an appearance on the Fifth of August as well.”

I stare longer than is strictly polite.

Doc waves an appeasing paw. “You’ll have to excuse my darling wife. I fear the wine’s sent her up the garden path.”

“I’ve got a nose for these things. Rarely does it lead me astray.” She taps her nose again, mischief shining in her vulpine eyes. “This Six Shooter is quite the local mystery. Rescuing sheriffs, fighting outlaws, and now getting a bounty on her head.”

Her husband taps some tobacco from his pouch. “His head.”

“What?”

He lights his pipe with a twig from the fireplace, puffing once before answering. “You said ‘her head,’ darling.”

“Ah. So I did. Well, you know what I meant.” She winks at me.

Oh damn.

Every once in a while, a fella forgets how clever foxes can be— and that’s just how foxes like it. Or women for that matter. I wrack my brain for what she could be gunning for, but I needn’t worry. She clears her throat and the topic.

First Harding, now Charlotte— does everybody in this town know more than I do?

“Ahem. Where was I? Oh yes: the bounty. Hayes certainly seems to have burrs in his mane about that.”

“Yes.” I nod. “In fact, your husband was kind enough to see about rescuing me from one of Hayes’ minions before dinner.”

“Hayes is a bully and blight to the honest folk of White Rock.” Doc’s pipe stays clenched between his sharp teeth as he speaks. “He ferreted out my feelings on him, then saw to it that I wasn’t reelected mayor. Least I can do is make life harder for him and his. I’m sure you feel the same.”

I ponder for a moment then figure there’s no sense in lying. “I do, I’m afraid.”

So much for the law being impartial.

“Good.” He slaps my back. “Glad you’ve joined our conspiracy.”

Don’t I know it. “I’ve seen references to another Hayes, Julius, in my uncle’s journals, a lion who ran the mine before him.”

“His uncle.” The fox gestures with his pipe stem.

“Right.” Lions. Even in my truncated time in law school, I heard of the headaches that came from sorting out lion inheritances. “From what I’ve read, he ran afoul of some hare and got plugged.”

“I’m familiar mostly with the hare part, as we treated him for a gunshot of his own, but that’s the sum of it.”

Of course he did! This would’ve been just after the Southern Rebellion, so the foxes would’ve been fresh from the Union Medical Corps.

Doc leans back in his chair, smoke puffing out the side of his muzzle with each word. “Peculiar goings-on in that mine, I’ll say that much. I’ve lived in White Rock since before it had a name, but nothing I’ve seen was ever as odd as the closing of that mine.”

I cross my wings. “How so?”

“Well, there’s how the mine closed. Normally a mine sort of trickles to a close. This one went bust in a day. One day. Of course, the owner getting shot sped things up, no doubt.”

“I imagine so.”

“And how Hayes bought up the surrounding land was suspicious. Lots of folks got sick out there, so he got it for a song.”

I’d heard only the vaguest rumors of this. “Sick as in nauseated?”

“Nah, sick like in the head.” His black ears swivel, dredging up the memory. “Some would vanish, only to show up days later with patches gone from their fur, not knowing where they’d been. Others just stood, dumbstruck, for hours or days at a stretch.”

“Didn’t they starve?”

Concern darkened his wife’s expression. “Only if no one told them to eat.”

Something in her voice sets my wing hairs on end. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Without some great trauma, neither have I.” A knuckle to his lips, Doc’s mouth forms a black line on his ivory muzzle for a moment. He notices me staring, though, and finds his way out of his thoughts. “What’s more, a number

of the miners were never accounted for. Some think they just took off in a hush, but that doesn't make sense as they never claimed their final week's pay. Others claim they were killed in a cave-in Hayes covered up, but that doesn't sit right either: every one of their rented rooms was emptied bare. Not just robbed, but stripped, as if they'd come back for their possessions."

"Meaning...?"

"Ghosts." Charlotte laughs. "Or some other such malarkey, if you believe the most of folk."

Doc tapped out his pipe in dismissal. "A more reasonable explanation: living miners grabbed up their gear and headed somewhere, somewhere money had little use."

My ears flick up. "The mine."

"Exactly. It all fit once Harding came to summon me for the posse and told me folk were holed up in the old mine." He repacks and tries to relight his pipe, but the twig burns too fast, singing the fur of his fingertips. He yips, startled.

I ignore the smell of burnt hair. "What'd prompt folks to live inside an old mine? From my brief stay there, I can testify to it not being a pleasant place."

"Doubly so for those of us who aren't bats." The vixen lit her glass lantern at the hearth.

I itch my chin with a wing thumb. "Must be quite something to keep them there."

"Stands to reason." Doc sighs like a man who's looked over the same problem a dozen times. "I've heard rumors too, unsubstantiated mind you, that there never was any gold, that the rock they were pulling out had ill effect on some. I'm no geologist, but I wish I could have gotten my paws on a sample of the stuff, see what the properties are." The fox puffs his pipe. "Even heard Julius Hayes ran that mine like a cult, with the miners as followers. Styled himself a prophet or even a god."

"Quite the sensational rumors."

"Most rumors are."

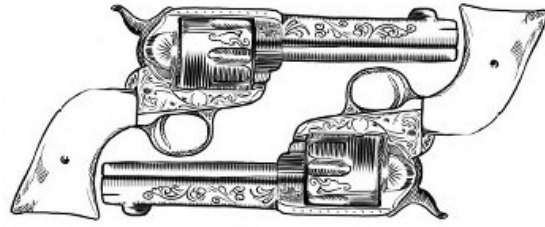
We talk for a while more, but a combination of wine and weariness makes my bed an appealing place, even without a certain outlaw sharing it.

I stand under the stars for a long moment. My hind paw finds its way to the gun cleaning kit I bought today, tracing over the pattern in the leather. I can feel unease tug at my wings like the wind— seems some of Six's restlessness rubbed off on me. I can only hope she doesn't have an unending supply or she'll be a

hundred miles off by now. Figures this'd be the case just as I find myself in need of an escort. Never an easy thing to find a bunny like her.

Luckily, I have a bloodhound. I just hope that means I find her first.





## Chapter 18

*How about a plan where we don't die?*

~~~~~

Either I was a southpaw, or my father was. Carrying his echo so long means I can no longer tell which, and now I've gone and forgot. Dang.

I lift my paws closer to my little campfire. Don't dare build it up much higher or the gully I'm camped in won't hide the thing. Cool desert air seeps into my fur and seems to go straight through me. I'm feeling awful low and lonesome.

I'm sitting on my bedroll, right between nothing and nowhere. My paws rummage my pack until I find my old harmonica. Pretty little thing. Lifted it just last year off a shopkeep who'd hiked his prices higher 'an a tabby's skirt. I play a soft, warbly tune James taught me. I miss him still, after all this time. Why'd I have to leave his pin behind? Why couldn't I have left anything else?

Because nothing else woulda been worth the travel back, 'cept my iron perhaps, but damned if I'm gonna walk the world one step unheeled. My folks didn't raise me up a fool—

A soft rustle. My ears perk.

From nowhere, a voice: "Howdy, bunny."

I jolt to my feet.

A black form explodes into being beside me, scattering dust everywhere.

My body tenses, wanting to freeze, but hard practice puts a pistol in my paw instead. First shot goes wild. I've got the second centered on his head when I recognize that dainty little muzzle. I hang fire. "Blake!"

"Blazes, Six!" He cringes, then straightens up. The lawbat checks his body for

new holes, then fires me a glare. “You fixing to not shoot at me one of these days?!”

“Reckon it’ll be right near the day ya quit droppin’ outta nowhere like a nightmare!” I holster, ears trembling from the bang and the start. “Sides, ain’t like I hit ya.”

His little fruit bat teeth bare. “I’m supposed to bet on you missing me?”

I smile. Mighty good bet. A tongue like his’d make anybody miss him. “Hell’re you doin’ here?”

“I’ve been fixing to speak with you and Harding had a hunch which direction to fly. He’s full of surprises, that old dog.”

My guns give a little shiver.

Blake doesn’t seem to notice. He smiles. “Not so hard as you might think to find a campfire from the air.”

“Suppose not. What’re ya doin’ after me? Don’t you have sheriffing to get to?”

He crosses his wings. Looks funny, but he’s stone serious. “Yeah, and wait for some darn fool to beef me for a pat on the head from Tanner Hayes? Thank you, ma’am, but—”

I give him a look.

His ears drop. “Oh, there’s nobody to hear for miles.”

“That’s just what I’d thought.” The gun I fired at him feels heavy.

He shrugs. “Bats fly pretty quietly. Got a fair look around on my way in, too.”

“Have a sit-down.” I wave at the paw beside me. “You come to get your pony back?”

He glances to the mare with her lead tied to a rock behind me. Old girl had scarcely even woken up after the gunshot.

“By and by.” Wrapping his wings around himself, he crouches down beside me. “You alright?”

“Oh, ah am grand!” I turn to him. “Got a price on my head and a crazy lion after me!” I lean in close, but he doesn’t back off. “Oh, and they think I am mah dead father, so that’s all glory and wonder too!”

Those brown eyes of his go wider in the firelight. Got little flecks of gold to their coffee-brown depths. Never noticed that before.

I find I’ve come real close to him. His breath traces off my muzzle. I kiss him.

He jerks at first, but then settles down into it. It's real nice.

When the kiss ends, he smiles at me. We kiss again. His wings wrap around me, warm and velvety. A few more kisses and he tips me back onto the bedroll I'd laid out. His paws and wings slip around me and mine around him.

All of a sudden, the night's not so cold.

* * * * *

I awake in the softest blankets I've ever felt anywhere. I nuzzle in deeper, hiding my eyes from the morning sun. The instinct to burrow isn't lost on bunnies, 'specially when we find ourselves half buried in a moment full 'a warm and cuddly. Breaths come easy and deep, and, as I find more and more of Blake's scent, it dawns on me that I've got a flying fox as my blanket. I don't find this situation objectionable, though the good sheriff looks a bit pained. I realize my guns are digging into his body again, so I shift around just a trifle. He sighs, relaxing around me. From the set of his ears and the even keel of his breath, I figure he's still dreaming his batty dreams.

At some point during the night, he got us under the blankets. I don't recall when. Most of what I do recall involves warm velvet wings wrapping me in my dreams. Hope we didn't frighten his pony too much. My legs have been sticking out of the bedroll all night, so I kick out of my boots and pull my feet inside. I'm taller than him, so I've got to curl up a little ways to let him warm me, but that ain't all bad. You won't catch me rambling on about it, but having a boy hold ya is far from the worst thing in the world.

After a spell, he stirs, shifting his shoulders and sliding his wings over me. I can't get over the way it ruffles my fur.

His eyes open just a little ways. He smiles. "Morning, Six."

I feel my ears run pink, and I tuck 'em behind my head. "Mornin', Sheriff."

He brushes a wing thumb over my shoulder. "Here we are again."

"Seems so." I nuzzle under his chin. "Best you not grow accustomed to this manner a' closeness. Ah've never been the tamest a' folk."

"That being the case, we had better get to Hayes before you feel the itch to run again."

I fix him in a stare, showing him I ain't playing. "I don't leave business undone, Sheriff."

“Who’m I to disagree with a lady?” He winks. “You figure we ought to have any sort of plan before we do this?”

I snuggle in tight. “Shootin’ him’s a plan.”

“How about a plan where we don’t die?”

I give a deep sigh. “Lion’s got more silk to his mouth than a queen’s wardrobe and you wanna talk him outta killin’ us?”

“No, we need to find evidence of what he’s been up to.”

I stroke the inside of his wing. Warmer blanket than any bedroll. “Won’t be easy gettin’ back into that mine, especially with Hayes blowing the entrance up and all.”

“Ah, my fine lady, but there is one thing we’re overlooking.”

“Oh?”

“While Hayes may be low-down, stupid he’s not. From the air, I saw one or two holes that seemed suited to the purpose of swift withdrawal. I landed to investigate one before they found me.”

I lift my ears, then I shimmy up to look him in the eyes. “You reckon he’s got a bolt-hole.”

“Makes sense. If I ran unsavory activities down in a mine, I’d want a second way out.”

“I like you better savory.” I give him a lick atop the muzzle.

He closes his eyes and smiles. “So all we need do is find this second entrance, assuming the blast didn’t destroy it too, and we can see what the heck Hayes is up to.”

“So you want to go crawlin’ back into that cave an’ just have a look-see?”

“Yes.”

“And you expect a lady to come with you?”

“The kind of lady who spits in public and would just as soon knock a man’s teeth out as look at him.” He reaches into his pocket and presses something glimmering into my paw.

James’s pin.

Warm and heavy in my palm, I curl my fingers over it and hold it to my heart, since that feels right. I rest my forehead against Blake’s, holding him close for a spell. That feels right too.

When I can open my eyes without danger of tears, I fix the pin back on my

vest, which I then button up. “W-well, I’d be the March Hare to argue with that sort of thinkin’. I’m in.”

He laughs just a little. His chest rises and falls against mine as we lie curled up, avoiding the chill of the world outside the blankets.

After enjoying his warmth for just a little while longer, we get up, get dressed. I pack my plunder. We’ve got a lion to catch.

* * * * *

He rides behind me as we cover the miles. I work the reins, since my paws are more suited to it. His wings suit my hips just fine, though I’d never admit it. The desert is wide and flat, but the heat’s more merciful as it’s the morning still. The bay pony, whose name I learn is Pumpernickel, trots evenly onward.

Thick as he is, he listens to me about not flying up there again. Perhaps there’s hope for the boy yet. And he gave me an ace-high little kit for cleaning my guns. Keeping with his usual mushiness, he stamped “libertas” in flowery letters into the leather case, though at least he had the sense to do it on the back. He claims it means “freedom.” Reckon I might keep him around for the time being, just to see if he keeps progressing.

I stow the kit in the saddlebags, and we leave the pony at the foot of the mountain, traveling up the sides in slow sweeps. Once or twice, I darn near unload on some poor varmint for startling me. Recent events have got me hopping four feet at every scrape of gravel. Blake jumps the first time; by the third, he’s just grinning.

After a few hours searching, we find the entrance. It’s hid behind at an angle from the way most reasonable folk would climb this mountain. Then again, I am hard pressed to find a reason reasonable folk would be here at all. Oh well.

The door isn’t very weathered yet, and its padlock shines in the morning sun, having only a thin layer of dust and grime. The lion’s put the hinges on the outside of the door, so I could just knock the pins out and get inside. I figure it’s safer not to go ruining his door, though, and so I pull the lockpick from my boot. Blake scarcely has time for a disapproving grumble before I get it open.

We’re inside. The mineshaft hangs dark around me. It’s well dug. Nothing like what a self-respecting hare would homestead in, but braced enough that it didn’t collapse when Hayes blew the rest of the mine. I notice a scrap of old wire behind the doorframe. “Blake, look.”

“A wire? What’s it for?”

“What do ya think?” I trace a finger up to the ceiling, following the wire to two large boxes fastened there, hid behind a support beam.

His ears lift at this. “TNT?”

“Yep. That’s lion’s a curly one. Probably fixing to blow this half of the mine too, if things go sideways.”

Slicing the wire with a steady claw, he tucks it around a rafter and studies the boxes with golden eyes. “Let’s keep moving...softly.”

We leave the door open, but that only lets light in so far. I didn’t have the time or the wits to get my lantern and other gear from the sheriff’s office when I departed. Before long, I start having to walk with my paw on the wall to keep from bumping into things. Blake steps up from behind me and, without a word, lifts my paw to his shoulder all gentle-like. My ears drop, but I don’t yammer about it, just follow him. If I listen, I can just make out the edge of his eeps and echomahwhatsits. Trusting echoes is one thing, but sound? That’s just reckless.

I can feel the muscles of his neck moving under his fur as he looks around. “These walls have smaller passages running through them. Old ones, by the look of them. From what Harding told me, natives dug this place out long before Hayes ever got his paws on it.”

“That’s mighty interesting, batty, but hush. Sound carries right well down here and ah ain’t keen on having the same manner of difficulty we had last time.”

“Fair enough.”

We continue in silence. The shaft continues a long ways. Must be halfway through the mountain by now. We pass lots of passages, bigger ones, some even with light in the distance. This here’s the mine proper. Never thought I’d believe a bat about a hole in the ground, but the sheriff was right.

Voices. I hear somebody ahead. My paw squeezes Blake’s shoulder and I pull him toward me. I put my muzzle to his soft, perked ear and whisper. “Reckon we’re not alone.”

He nods. The voices get louder, closer. I pull him toward the wall and feel along until I find one of those little passages he was talking about. I have to push him toward it before he gets the idea. He climbs inside. I hear footsteps now. My heart’s thumping fast. I shove Blake the rest of the way in then scramble my bunny body inside. It’s a tight fit. Whatever ‘yote dug this no doubt found it agreeable, but getting a hare and bat into it necessitates some close quarters.

Footsteps get closer. There’s talking, grumbling. At least two or three of them.

They walk right past our hole. I listen, both ears up and still, as they pass.

“This place’s more ‘an a mite unsettling, if ya ask me.”

“Cork it, Lyle. I got a headache.”

“See? I reckon all this shiny rock’s turning our brains to soup.”

“That supposes yours wasn’t that way from the get go. Now shut it ‘fore I shut it for you.”

The footsteps fade.

Once I dare to breathe again, I realize that I’m clutching Blake something fierce. I ease off a bit. He gives a soft little sigh, like I was really crushing him. I stay like that, arms around him, perhaps for a moment longer than is necessary. Just to be sure those fellas are well and truly gone, is all.

I slip out, offering my paw. The sheriff takes it with his wing thumb, letting me pull him to his feet. He doesn’t make any wise comments about what we just had to do, so I don’t see the need to do him some quiet injury.

We get down further into the mine, passing carts full of some kind of ore. It shines, reflecting my eyes back at me no matter how it’s broken, like a thousand tiny diamonds. What could Hayes be digging up down here? I haven’t seen a trace of gold in this place either time I’ve been in here. Just these carts of metal ore, shining away...

I start to hear voices again. At least, I think I do. I freeze, ears swiveling. I hear Blake and I breathing, water dripping somewhere in the distance...

There it is again. My breathing picks up. Where is it coming from? I hear whispers.

Something about the whispers sound familiar.

I try to shrug it off, but shrugging seems beyond my power just now. I slump against a wall, just looking to catch my breath. I really have no business being this tired. Those whispers get louder, sucking the strength right out of me. All of a sudden, I’m falling. Dreadful slow too, like in a dream. I feel something velvety catch me, then hear Blake in the far distance: “Whoa there, Six. You alright?”

I try to answer, but those whispers are just at the edge of deafening now. I can’t even hear myself speak. The voices are quickly becoming a clamor, then a roar. I drop my ears, like I’m standing too close to a train whistle. Thing is, Blake’s are perked right up as if the mine’s dead quiet. His lips are moving, but all I can hear are the voices.

My heart thunders. My ears droop further still. I don't want to hear it anymore. I close my eyes...

I open them to find, not the mine, but a tilled, bare field. It stretches on and on without end, sunlight shining just as cheery as you please, warming my fur. In front of me, a figure is crouched down, inspecting the soil. Dirt runs through his lifted paws like water. I watch him for a moment, drifting closer like a cloud. He's wearing worn-in britches and wide-brimmed hat I know well.

He stands and smiles at me, like he knew I was there all the time. He slides off the hat, letting his ears rise. He's tall, tall as me. He's got the same stormy blue eyes I see in every mirror.

All careful-like, he touches my arm. "Hello, Clarabelle."

I gasp for breath. I feel like I should be confused, shocked, but, my mind is a clear as a cloudless sky and my heart is cool as a wellspring. Like a gust in the desert, all the rules 'a this game just come to me. Everything makes sense here. I know where this is. Home. I know who he is. "Daddy..."

"Well, after a fashion, yes." His smile widens, showing a glimpse of those buck teeth. He wraps those strong paws around, holding me close.

I can smell him, feel him; he's real, of course. Why wouldn't he be? I breathe in his scent for a moment, feeling the texture of his shirt against my nose. My heart beats slow, and I feel safer than I have in years. Nothing can hurt me here.

"Hey there, Cottonpuff." He brushes a paw over my head fur, chuckling all soft. "I rest my eyes a moment and you've gone an' sprung up like a weed."

I giggle and hug him tighter. "I missed you."

"Aww, well, that's mighty nice to hear. I missed you too. Don't get a terrible excess of anything through those guns."



My paws slip down to caress the grips of them. Of course he can feel the world through them.

He steps back and puts a paw on my shoulder. He's one of the few folks tall enough to look me in the eye. "You causin' a ruckus back in the world a' the

living?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s mah girl.” He squeezes my shoulder, smiling all peaceable. Everything’s peaceable here. “Ya always were a bushel more ‘an a pawful. Don’t worry on it none. That’s just the nature a’ some. Now tell me of life and the world.”

“I ran it all afoul.”

“The whole a’ the world? My, you have been keepin’ busy.”

I shake my head, words coming calm and easy as I explain. “Got myself in a tangle with a lion called Hayes— who I understand may sound familiar to ya? What’s more, everyone thinks I’m you.”

“That’s hogwash, Clarabelle. Any fool can see ya got your mother’s ears.” Just smiling, he brushes my cheek with his strong paw. I always remember them being so much bigger than mine, but I now see they’re mirror reflections of mine.

“Some old bun from the mine started it.” And, for once, I feel like minding the rules. “Hayes put a price on your head. Well, mine.”

“Don’t believe anybody’ll be collectin’ that one.”

“How’d the bunny know?”

“His name is Bennet.”

I lift an ear and look at him askew. “Who’s he?”

Daddy pats my arm, his eyes gentle. “My brother who went astray. Tried to steer him right and ran afoul a’ Hayes and got myself shot. Never did manage to blow up the mine like the ‘yotes or that bloodhound wanted me to...” His paw slides to the flank he took a bullet in and a frown slips across his muzzle, until he sees my gunbelt. “James gave ya my guns, I see. How is the ol’ badger?”

“He’s dead.” Never woulda been able to say that so calm outside of this place. “Got shot when some rustlers took an interest in his herd. I killed them.”

“Oh. I see.” His ears droop, for the first time seeming a touch sad. After a spell, he clears his throat just like he always did to keep things rolling on, even manages a chuckle. “Yer mother keen on you dressin’ like a man and laying out lead?”

I laugh, even if it’s half-hearted, wiping a mist from my eyes. “She don’t know.”

“Ah. Ya always were a contrary coney.” His paw fluffs my ears. “I ever tell

you how I came by those guns?”

I shake my head.

“Now, that is a tale...” His ears go up. The land around us starts to burn off like fog in the sun.

I try holding on to him, but it’s like grabbing at smoke. Must have gotten a mite frantic, because I’m clutching at him like a madbunny, but he just slips through my paws.

“Easy there, Cottonpuff.” He eases back. “You’re just leavin’, is all.”

“Leavin’?”

He nods, touching my shoulder one last time. “You’ll always be my pretty girl.” The fur under his eyes darkens with moisture. All the rest of him washes away into the background. “And see that sheriff fella treats my pretty girl right! And tell him I was much obliged to his uncle, once upon a time.” I hug him close. He slips away. I stumble after him. The ground crumbles out from under me, leaving only blackness. I fall.

* * * * *

A velvet wing catches me. The light’s changed, evening now. I’m sitting in a saddle. Blake’s chocolate mare is swaying under me. The sheriff himself is behind me.

“Whoa, Six!” He chuckles, still holding me up. “I’d take it as a kindness if you’d not go diving out of the saddle like that.”

I shake my groggy head, watching my ears sway. “Why aren’t we in the mine?”

“You keeled over. Had to carry you out. That was hours ago. We’re almost back in town.”

“Back in town?” I straighten up, sharpening like steel. My paw clenches his thigh. “You forget who you’ve been printin’ wanted posters of?”

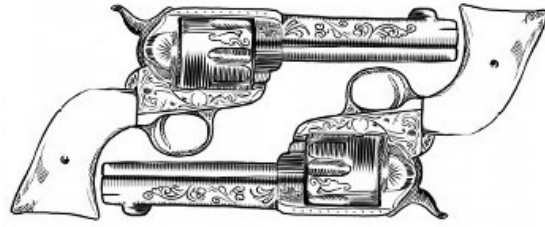
“I was aiming to hide you in a grain sack and bring you down to Doc’s to see about you not dying.” His voice is a touch pained. He works a wing thumb under my paw, prying it a little ways off his thigh before he bruises. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I cuss and shake his wings off me. Bad enough that Hayes is out to kill me without his damn shiny rocks making me as useless as a bat in a cyclone. Well,

maybe a bat would have some use then, but still. Feeling vulnerable like that puts fire in my ears. The sheriff rides on, guiding the pony with his legs. I want to lash out against him, but that ain't fair, so I hang fire, biting my tongue. I can feel his chest rising and falling against my back and that settles me some.

We camp out and eat our food cold. Last thing I need is someone seeing a fire from town and getting curious. Once night falls, we slip back into White Rock.

The guns whisper outright now, babbling to me in a tongue I've never heard. Not sure if that's a lasting thing.



Chapter 19

Oh, hush now. You make a fine lady.

~~~~~

I'm sitting on a squeaky chair with three darn fools fluttering around me: Blake, Doc Richards, and Charlotte Richards. Blake is, of course, upside down.

"I've heard of this mine digging up things that make you lose your wits." The doc touches my forehead, like I'm some kind of infant. "Did you touch the ore itself?"

I glare at the old, smocked fox. "Damn sure I didn't."

Blake crosses his wings, dangling from a rafter. "Now, Six, that's hardly language to use in front of a lady." Smiling, he nods to Charlotte.

I turn my glare to him instead. Little son of a bitch...

"Oh, I've heard it all before." Her tail swishes as she thumbs through an old medical book. "Been living out here for ten years and serving with the Union army before that. Let the rabbit speak as he pleases." She glances my way. Her knowing look unsettles me some, but seeing your dead father'll make a gal worrisome.

Doc brings the lantern closer, studying my eyes, lifting my ears. It's more than a trifle humiliating. He clears his throat as if the topic's something delicate. "You're sure it wasn't just the strain of being labeled an outlaw?"

"Ah was an outlaw long before that lion ever set eyes on me! I'm tellin' you, it was those damn rocks!"

"Must be something poisonous to them." He adjusts his glasses and sighs. "Too bad we don't have a sample of the stuff."

“I was a mite busy passin’ out, Doc.”

“I got a few pieces.” Blake reaches into his pocket, revealing a balled-up scrap of cloth. Hanging by one leg, he unrolls it in his paw, showing off a few chunks of that shiny metal rock. “Took care not to touch them, though.”

“Excellent.” Doc Richards takes them all careful-like, holding on by the corners of the cloth. “Frankly, I’m surprised Hayes is mining the stuff, as it’s clearly dangerous. The first person I heard about it from was Harding. He claims it links us to the ‘spirit world’ and too much exposure to it can sap away your soul. ‘Yote nonsense, I’d say, but I can’t deny it had a devastating effect on you, even if it did nothing to Blake.”

Riles me something fierce that this little slip of a bat just shrugged off whatever laid me low. “I didn’t touch any of those good-for-nothin’ hunks a’ stone, same as him. Why was I the one to get hammered witless?”

“Hard to say. Could be your species.”

“That can’t be it.” I fish out my tobacco pouch and rolling papers. “Ah saw at least one other hare down in the mine back the first time. He wasn’t droppin’ like some road apple.”

Doc winces at my uncouth phrasing. “Well, if not species, what other differences are there between you?”

Blake and I look at each other in an instant. I dare him with my eyes, but he just dangles there and says nothing. Bully for him.

As I tap a line of tobacco onto the square of paper, I go through in my mind all the ways Blake and I are different, aside from the obvious. “He’s from the Old States, been a lawman for some-odd years... and he likes to swoop in on a body in the dead a’ night!”

The lawbat sways on the rafter. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Well, you’d best see to avoidin’ it down the road, unless yer fixin’ for me to dust your muzzle.” I shake a fist, but can’t keep the smile out of my voice.

Blake slants one coy ear. “I’ll bear that in mind. But for now we need hard evidence against Hayes.”

My paws finish rolling the Quirley, all deftness and ease, then I lick it sealed. I flick the little box of matches from pocket to paw and light my new cigarette. Two puffs in, I see the Doc glance at me, fox ears raised. “Something on yer mind, Doc?”

“You use the same brand of matches I do.”

I roll the cigarette to one side of my mouth and wink. “Small world, ain’t it?”

“I wish I could be of more help.” Doc sighs, coughing a little as I blow smoke in his face. “You took quite the risk coming back here. You’re sure no one saw you?”

“Oh, folk saw us...” I blow smoke rings, watching as they break against my drooped ear like waves on a rock. “...just not anybody who seemed sober or wakeful enough to matter.”

Coming up from behind, Charlotte puts a paw on her husband’s shoulder. “Even if you could get answers outta Hayes, you couldn’t do it now. He’s out of town.”

“Where?” Blake and I ask at once. I cock an ear at him. He shrugs.

The vixen looks at each of us. “Up in Scoria Grove— he’s hosting some sort of shindig at his holdings there tomorrow evening.”

I get up. Blake comes down.

Doc places himself between us and the door. “Hold up, fellas. Even if Hayes doesn’t see you, two gunslingers can’t just walk into a party. Hayes’ men are bound to know you’re not one of them. And you’re sure not gonna pass for a party guest looking like that.”

The sheriff looks himself over. “I’ll wear a suit.”

I sigh. I ain’t accustomed to finery, but reckon a suit won’t kill me. Better than standing out like a fifth ace.

Doc Richards taps his muzzle in thought. “Still, there has to be a way to attract less attention at the party.”

Charlotte laughs, fluffing her tail in an overly-pleased manner. “Too bad we can’t get these boys some dates.”

We all three look at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

I hear Blake pacing outside the door. “Come now, Six. It’ll only be for a few hours.”

“Drown in a spittoon, Sheriff.” One paw throttles the clothes Charlotte loaned me while the other clicks the lock.

Blake jiggles the knob from the other side. “Wearing a dress is a trifle next to

—”

“Hell if ah’ll be paraded around and made a fool out of just to get into some party. I’ll stay in here ‘til Arizona frosts clear over.

I hear him whispering to the foxes to find the key. That fuzzy bastard!

I fume, my pride boiling over. Only dresses I ever wore I was gussied into by Grandma, all so she could show off her proper little grandchild. The idea of wearing one again, for Hayes of all folk, rakes my coals. “I won’t abide this!”

“Six...” His voice is muffled by the door. “There’s no other way into the place.”

“I’m clear on that, but you seem to be uncomprehending.” Quick as a draw, I undo the lock and swing the door open. This raises a thump. I stick my head out and find Blake knocked back on his rump, ears down. I throw the clothes at him, my ears red with outrage. “I ain’t wearing a dress!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The dress got put on. We made it to the party. Never thought I’d see the day. His wing on my arm, we make our way through the crowd. Our whispers carry that covert anger that comes with a forced smile.

“I can’t believe I’m wearing this!”

“Oh, hush now. You make a fine lady.”

“I’ll get you for this, Six...”

We slip quietly about the shindig. Must be close to seventy people here. Fills the whole house, which is saying something as Hayes’ house here seems bigger than my Daddy’s farm. Behind it sits the Hayes Munitions Co., big ol’ factory that produces dynamite and gunpowder. Right in the smack dab center of town too, so everybody can fail to compare to it. Worked-bronze lanterns throw light around the inside of his house, setting his fine silver and glassware a-glitter. Damn him and his cold beer... I don’t even like the stuff and I’m jealous.

The dress is dreadful pretty, all lace an’ layers. Blue and white, with a nice fitted waist. Pity Blake resisted so; the lawbat is making a far better lady than I ever would have. By the looks we’re getting, it seems some of the menfolk at the party think so too. We give polite nods to those we pass. I’m just glad Doc found a suit to fit me.

I spy Hayes. His eyes slide over me, slick as oil. He’s too busy having little



meetings in the side rooms, accepting cash envelopes from that little marmot of his while everybody pretends they aren't stuffed with more cash 'an a miser's mattress. I don't stare. We move on.

The crowd thickens around us as we get into the living room. I touch my guns, hid under my fine borrowed coat. The scents of rich foods hang in the air, but are overwhelmed by lots and lots of meat. Cooked meat, raw meat, salted meat: all of it combines to make my stomach slosh like a butter churn. From the looks of things, Blake isn't doing too fine from it either.

"I'm going to...freshen up." Never did anybody say those words with as much venom as Sheriff Jordan Blake.

I pat his wing and let go. "Whatever you say, darlin'."

He doesn't make it too far. About three paces away from me, he gets accosted by a knot of menfolk coming in from the porch. They leer at him. He looks back at me, but I still have that comment about my profanity to get him back for. Figure he can't raise a fuss without blowing the whistle on us, so I hang back, grab something from the buffet that didn't have a mama, and watch a while. Hayes has shipped in ice from who-knows-where. Genuine ice.

The fellas start to get amorous toward Blake. The mutt, who looks to have had a sniff of the oh-be-joyful, paws along Blake's exposed wings. "You got purdy little wings. Awful delicate."

He jerks them back, his voice faltering for an instant before he sounds like a proper woman. "I— I'll thank you to keep your paws off them!"

Another one of the men, a cougar, puts his paw around the bat's waist. "Awww come now, sugar bat. We don't mean no harm."

He blushes, ears dropping. He looks the part down to a stitch. "You'd best let me be."

"Why?" The drunk mutt looks around. "You here with yer man, sweetwings?" I finish nibbling on my apple slice, all casual-like.

The lawbat stands there, helpless for the moment.

The men edge closer, the cougar reaching for Blake's waist again. "Well?"

Blake, surrendering, says with the deepest of blushes: "Yes, I'm here with my man."

I decide the poor boy has learned his lesson. I amble over, slipping a paw down his back and brushing off the cougar's grip. "C'mon, sugar bat. You're lookin' a touch faint. Let's find ourselves a lil' privacy upstairs." I turn back an'

wink at the menfolk, giving the fruit bat's rump a squeeze. Just for their benefit, of course.

This stirs up a little hooting, and the boys get shushed by some of the finer guests. A tiger lady cuts us all a sharp look over her paper fan. With a tip of my hat, I lead Blake upstairs. He leans in against my shoulder, looking for all the world like the doting lady on the verge of a faint. Good thing nobody came too close, else they might've heard him cursing me under his breath all the way up the stairs.

Once on the top floor, I walk Blake down the hall, smiling all cheery at the few other guests who've wandered up here. As an old squirrel passes, Blake stops cussing and darn near melts against my arm. The squirrel and I exchange a tip of the hat, and when we're out of earshot Blake whispers that the squirrel is a county judge and some kind of big bug or other. This don't impress me terribly, but it caused Blake to stop cussing me, so I take it as a kindness.

More of those fine lanterns fill the upstairs with a steady glow. While appearing to the most of folk to be surveying the premises, we look for Hayes' study. Well, Blake does. I am busy palming a few of the more glittery pretties the lion has stacked around: the silver flask of bourbon from the guest room dresser, the ivory-handled knife hung on the wall, and a few odds and ends from his lady's jewelry boxes.

At this, Blake sees and gives me a sour look. "Put that plunder back, Six. We're not here to steal."

"Figure it all evens out, seeing as how he'll never have to pay out that bounty on my head." I restore the flask, knife, and spangles to the dresser. "Hell, from that angle I'm saving him money."

"If you want me to trust you, you can't be thieving whenever I turn around."

"Alight." Once he turns around, I filch that pretty ruby ring again. He can fuss later, while I'm buying him a new lock for his office door.

We come upon Hayes' study. Rich looking as the rest of the place. Big ol' wooden desk, wide enough I could probably raise a herd of cattle on. I light a candle on one of the lanterns, and we get to finding. The lawbat looks through Hayes' files while I set down the candle and poke around. Puttin' my ears to use on the lion's safe, I lean against the metal surface, spinning the knob real slow-like. Newfangled combination locks are just about my favorite thing ever: you don't even need a lockpick to open 'em. There. Now, lets see what he's got squirreled away in here...

I open the door of the squat little safe. First thing I notice is gold. Whole

inside is lined with gold, half an inch thick. Then I see a few cubes of exceptionally shiny metal...

My ears perk up. Whispers. Can't make out quite what they're saying, but they're getting louder. Closer. Familiar...

Wind from no place stirs my fur. Leaves rustle. Birds call. That easy calm steals over me...

A wing slams the safe closed.

In an instant, the world snaps back to drear and dust, life's tensions curling back up my muscles. This ain't the time or place for echoes and visions. Hayes ain't the sort to be stopped by either.

I find myself pitching forward, spilling half the contents of the desk in an effort to right myself. Woulda kept my appointment with the floorboards, had the collar of my shirt not decided to haul me back up. I look back, seeing Blake with his teeth clamped on my shirt, his wings full of papers. I blink and Blake is there. He's dressed like a lady.

I laugh.

"Hush up!" He clamps a hind paw around my muzzle, hopping on the other to keep from tipping over. "Dangit, Six! You had to go straight for the stash of idiot-ore."

Course, this only makes me laugh harder.

A few more things spill off the table. An inkpot shatters. A blotter rolls under the safe. An old brown folder splits open against the floor, maps fan out of it.

"Why, hello..." Blake scoops up the pile. His gold-flecked eyes flicker to a ledger, then to me. "These look pertinent to you?"

I straighten, Blake releasing my shirt from his muzzle. Shaking off a touch of woozies, I snicker and prop up against the desk. "Nope."

"Hayes has been shipping great wagonloads of something out of the mine. According to these dates, he's still shipping things out!"

I paw at the maps, unsure what the lawbat's yammering about. "Ain't none a' that gonna help me shoot Hayes."

He bops me on the snout with the sheaf of papers. "These are records of all the money he's sent out and where it's going. Now we just need to slip back out through the party— we've got him, Six!"



## Chapter 20

*He's trespassing without a warrant. We'll have the boys shoot him.*

~~~~~

Morris follows me up the stairs, stumbling under his own weight. The house is thick with sound and odor. I close my eyes, trying not to think about all the prey I smell in my own house. I was damn ready to rip that squirrel apart like cured beef if he took any longer staring at the money. In my day, you'd leave a man in a room with his bribe on the table and he takes it; all you do is pretend it was never there.

Morris checks another name off his list, nibbling at a claw. The way we're burning through my funds at this event, that list better be getting claw slender. I would have preferred just having the cash show up at their respective offices, but that bunny has decided to make himself a thorn in my paw. Jasper Haus...

"You find anything on that bunny yet?"

"Jasper 'Six Shooter' Haus? No, bossman. I've sent word to our man down at County Records, but he ain't got back to me. These things take time." Morris is lying—he knows things too fast. He knew about me before I arrived and about trouble at the mine before it blew. Either he's got contacts I can't account for, or he's holding an ace. "Haus coulda led a quiet life, or even assumed a false name. There ain't no guarantee we'll find anything on the man."

I snort. Sometimes I wonder if Morris holds out on me, tries to play me. But

that's the way of life: we all play each other for fiddles— the key is to get good enough that nobody hears your sour notes. "And the bribes?"

"Everybody's taken theirs so far, though the sheriff of Chance Canyon declined our invitation again." He straightens his vest. "Seems we ain't high enough company for him."

"Well, I've got half his deputies on payroll, so he doesn't matter terribly." I turn down the hallway, walking past the sitting rooms and guest rooms. All this space I never use, but I could if wanted. It's less for me than it is for passersby. What kind of respect would a lion get if he lived in a shack? A lion needs territory, possessions, enough money that he can throw it around as needed. I pick a little gristle out of my teeth, wiping my claw on my handkerchief. "How is the ore coming?"

"We'll have enough soon to take over three towns, assumin' they're small and our men stick to the plan. After that, we ought to have the manpower to mine all the gold we like." The marmot cleans one claw with another. He's always a bundle of nerves. Makes me suspicious. "A-And Blake did send word to County Records, same as us, looking for things on the mine."

Sure feels like that marmot is playing me somehow. Best to let him think the gold is all I care about, let him think I'm too stupid to see the ore's real potential. "Good. Let him fly in circles. We'll have enough ore to enslave his whole town in a few weeks."

"Yes, sir. And as far as the other plans go—"

I stare at his unexpected pause, wondering if his little rodent brain has snapped like a wagon axle.

His ears twitch. I look where he's looking: my office. He gnaws a claw, glancing to me. "Somebody's in there."

I listen. He's right. I can hear knocking around, the shuffling of papers, male voices... My body slips into a prowl and I creep to the door, silent as the night. The door's open a crack and though it I see the candle-lit form of a shapely fruit bat lady, standing over a passed-out hare. Then the fruit bat talks.

"These are records of all the money he's sent out and where it's going. Now we just need to slip back out through the party— we've got him, Six!"

Six. Six Shooter.

I slink back to Morris, who has taken cover in one of the doorways. His belly sticks out so far it'd be hard for a bullet to miss it. My heart pounding at the hunt, I growl a whisper. "Haus is in there right now with some fruit bat lady."

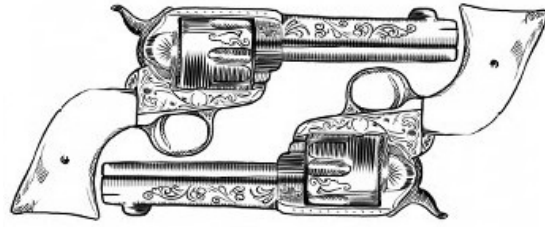
He jumps, clutching his papers.

I clear my throat, letting it rumble into a soft roar.

Inside my office, the voices stop.

His ears flick down. “What’re we gonna do?” He scampers back.

I grab him by the scruff, listening to the frantic movement beyond the door. The clatter of boots on the floor, of paws on paper. I lift his fat little body up until his ear presses to my muzzle. “That’s easy. He’s trespassing without a warrant. We’ll have the boys shoot him.” I snarl a laugh. “Morris, honestly, you have no instincts for this kind of thing...”



Chapter 21

You try running in a dress!

~~~~~

Up to my nose in dizzy, my body goes slumping against the wall. I glance out the window, down at all the pretty little carnivores. Still in a haze from that ore, it crosses my mind that some of that get-up doesn't look all bad. Wonder if the lawbat would like me better dressed in finer ladies' wear. Not that I ever would...

"Six?" Blake turns me toward him. The papers are tucked in his pocket.

"Hmm?" I lift an ear. He always seems mighty interested about anything I do with 'em.

The frilly fruit bat waggles a wing thumb before my eyes. "Are you hearing me? We're going! And leave that damn ring you're stealing!"

"Whatever ya say, ma'am." I make a show of flicking the ring out the window instead of back in the desk. I don't get riled none. Matter of fact, I'm a little proud of him for catching me. Granted, I'm prouder still that he didn't catch me stealing all Hayes' fancy gold pens...

He scowls, hurrying me. "We've got to--" All of a sudden, he looks back at the study door. Ears up, face serious.

Seem like that ore kicks me harder every time I run across it. My head's still full of cotton, but it sounds an awful lot like a door swinging open.

"Get down!" Blake hauls me down behind the heavy desk. The candle gutters. Bullets rip the air.

Splinters and glass rain down.

Occurs to me this deal's gone sour, but I have difficulty taking it serious, what

with Blake reaching around inside his skirt like that. I reach on in too, grabbing a pawful of his rump.

He squawks, but pulls a gun out of the dress. Seems that's what he was after. Trifle disappointing. I roll over to see what's happening.

A whole acre of folk are in the doorway, shooting at us.

Lawbat kicks a leg up higher than a lady should, firing that little Smith & Wesson over the top of the desk. He clips a panther in the ear. The big kitty goes down yowling. Rest of the shots go wild, but the shooting drives the panther's cronies back into the hall for a spell.

Blake's gun clicks to empty. He gives me a desperate look.

A shock of cold hits me.

Gunpowder works wonders for clearing the mind. I roll to my paws, drawing. I drive a shot against a rifle barrel poking through the doorway. Someone cusses. I smile.

"Six!" The lawbat grunts with effort. "The window!"

I spin to my feet, helping Blake lift the window open. I fold the lawbat's wings against him and shove him, squeaking, though. I scramble through after.

We clamor onto the overhang, causing important persons to look up in dismay. Bullets whistle past us.

Taking advantage of the confusion, I hop down, dragging the lawbat with me. Most folk don't realize that bunnies can land as well as we can jump. Leastwise better than Blake, whose dress flies up in his face, giving me an indecent view of his petticoat. A pawful of Hayes' cronies gawk at the sight. I straighten this bat-shaped mess of ruffles and go bounding over the porch rail and into Hayes' party. The lawbat follows me as we shove past a mess of startled carnivores at the door. They make themselves real useful, standing there watching as we turn down a hallway.

"Figure you can fly outta here in that layered cake?"

Shaking out of my grasp, he gives a clap of the wings, lifting off the ground a ways. Impressive for a man in a dress, but not enough to make a getaway. Then it dawns on him: "I'm not leaving you here!"

"Then we gotta get to the stables!" I grab Blake's wing again and haul him past some fine leather furnishings. "You fancy runnin' any quicker, lawbat?"

He grabs awkwardly at the dragging hem with a wing thumb, scowling at me. "You try running in a dress!"



“One a’ the things I aim to avoid in life.” As we hoof it down a hallway, I draw one of my guns from this fine coat, half-cocking it. This won’t be easy. Hayes’ men know the ins and out of the place, plus I’ve got this yammering fool in a dress with me. Come to think of it, they likely can’t tell who Blake is and aren’t likely to gun down some innocent lady.

We turn a corner. Ahead, oil lanterns flood light into the dining room. Various somebodies mill nervous-like, wondering what all the commotion is. Fine-set tables run the room, covered in meat, and with a nice big crystal bowl of blood-red punch at the last one.

My guns rattle. I spin around just in time to see Hayes’ men crash down the stairs in front of us. Before the first one sees me, I crack my pommel between his eyes, knocking him into his compadres.

The big panther and some mutt teeter back, for a moment. Then Hayes bursts into being at the top of the stairs, roaring: “Forget the female! Grab the bunny!”

The other two come leaping over their fallen pal, panther included.

Hayes’ guests look around like panicked prairie dogs. I drag the lawbat through the thick of ‘em. Even Hayes won’t shoot into a crowd of his fellow bigwigs.

The lion roars after us. “Thieves! Grab them!”

A big boar jumps in front of us. Blake snatches a meat tray from a table and wallups the piggy in the temple. The boar goes down, the silver tray clattering, scattering raw fleshy tidbits every which way.

We run past the bar.

The guns tug downward.

I dive, dragging Blake with me. Glass shatters above us, raining down booze. All the ladies scream, lawbat included. I turn to see a scruffy tabby firing at me from near the window. I put a shot in his chest, knocking him backward in a fresh shower of glass.

Fearing more shots, the guests stampede willy-nilly, which does some to hide our escape. I take care not to slip on dropped drinks, blood-red punch staining the floor. Such a waste, and all because Hayes took exception to me.

We come upon some manner of coat room. Last room before the stable. Two feline stable hands stand outside it, guns drawn. The guests cower back, knowing lead is about to fly.

On the last of the tables, the punch bowl gleams at me.

I hop up, landing hard before my target. The crystal bowl soars skyward, twinkling in all the glory of Christmas morning. Cats look on with confusion as the punch bowl sails clear over my head, barreling square down on 'em. They scatter. A flying mess of red punch swoops out, soaking the guests and their fine meats. The bowl shatters in an expensive heap against the floor.

We skedaddle in.

I slam the door after us. The stink of manure hangs thick. The only ponies here are hitched to a wagon in a team of four. They dance, finicky at the loud noise. Can't say I blame 'em.

The guns tug left. I swivel an ear and hear Hayes' men charging down the hall. I jam my bowie knife in the hinge.

Some fool slams into the door, then bounces off. I laugh, holstering for a breath.

The sheriff pants. "Can we outrun them?"

"Not the both of us." I push him against the wagon.

His ears pop up, all ungrateful. "I'm not leaving you here!"

"Hell you ain't." I shove him. He spills backwards into the wagon in a mess of ruffles and lace. I swipe the cuffs out of his pocket and fix his leg to the rail.

He swims through the fabric, hollering: "Damn you, Six!" Don't know how the lawbat expects Charlotte to lend him fine dresses if he musses them up so.

I rip James's pin from my vest and shove it down Blake's bodice. "Sorry, lawbat, but it's better this way." I kick open the stable doors, draw, and fire into the ceiling. One! Two! Three! The ponies scream and scramble, galloping off into the black. Dodging Blake's free hind paw, I hop outta the wagon's path, landing on the hard-packed dirt. The lawbat hollers after me over the pounding of hooves on dirt and shouting from back around the corner. The wagon thunders out into the street. Now, just gotta distract them long enough for Blake to get away.

I draw.

Guns pull left.

The first fool to turn the corner gets a bullet in the arm. He cringes back, clutching it and howling.

Guns pull right.

I take out the rat climbing in through the loft window.

Three shots left. Gotta buy some time.

I grab a lantern off the wall, smashing it against a beam. I draw out those fancy matches I lifted off Doc, striking one and throwing it onto the oil and straw. The whole mess goes up in a pleasing roar.

Manure chokes the flames into billows of smoke. Just what I need. I put the thick of it between me and the door.

I holster one, kicking the spent shells from the other. One! Two! Three! Four! My fingers dance across my gunbelt, flipping fresh bullets into the chambers.

Shots ring out.

I duck behind a beam, letting the varmints empty their iron. Smoke's thick now. Nobody can see. I try not to breathe.

I spin around, letting the guns aim. Gotta be at least a few at the door. Two screams answer that well and true.

A noise above me. Gun yanks upward. All I do is pull the trigger. More hollering.

I catch a fit of coughing. I need to get a way out of this smoke or Hayes' men won't have to shoot me.

I scamper across the breadth of the stable, ignoring the lead splintering timbers around me. One good bounce and I'm up in the loft, running. Sure enough, I trip over the fella who tried getting the drop on me. I crash atop him.

Air's not much cleaner up here and light from the fire downstairs warns me of the hay-chutes, casting a eerie glow, but the moon hangs in an open window, offering escape. I dash through the loose hay, loading my other gun on the way. Gonna want full cylinders when I make my leap. I eject the spent rounds. One! Two! Three—

A screech like all the Earth's hatred fills the loft.

I turn to see a fat boar with a nail through his boot. I spin my near-empty gun around, grip the barrel, and swing to brain him.

He roars at me, causing me to hit his snout instead. Doesn't seem to care for that. Goes for his pistol.

I uppercut him with a Colt pommel.

His fangs clatter together as his head snaps back. Stunned, he pulls free of the nail and staggers backward. His beady eyes focus on me as squeals with fury. He's mighty close to the window, so I help him out with a boot to the chest.

Piggy goes tumbling end over fat end, shattering a wooden trough as he lands.

I pause for the briefest of breaths to reload. Three more bullets make the trip

from belt to paw to gun. Below, folks scatter every which way, including that fat marmot dragging an awful familiar bunny behind him. No time to worry on small fry just now.

I catch a glut of cussing behind me. Seems the Hayes goons have found me.

I get a hop on and take the leap.

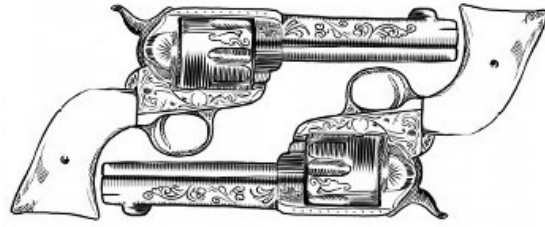
The air outside is crisp and clear, the moon casting a pale light. Crosses my mind this must be what Blake feels whenever he flies. I see why he doesn't resent having wings in place of hands.

My boots bounce off the boar's belly, driving a grunt from his witless body. I scramble on through the mud and dust. Feeling boss as a brass button and fine as cream gravy, I cackle like a hare gone feral. I'm just too quick for these fellas, in all sorts of ways. I turn a corner.

A board wallops me in the gut.

I double over, looking up to see that damn panther again. We have ourselves a little moment. Then he swings the plank around and cracks me in the temple. A sick, heavy thump echoes through my skull.

The world falls to black.



## Chapter 22

*Funny how the world loops around.*

~~~~~

Fields surround me. Green, growing life stretching on in all directions. Green in the desert is always a grayish, dull affair; color this vivid hurts my eyes. At least, it ought to. Not overly sure I'm seeing with 'em presently.

I feel a gentle paw on my shoulder. My father's scent washes over me: warm, powerful, rich in the only way Daddy ever was. I spin on a boot heel and grab ahold a' him.

"Whoa! Easy there, Cottonpuff." He strokes my head fur in fond acceptance. "Yer clingin' on me like a cocklebur gone lonesome."

I can't help but laugh against his chest. He's warm and real. I can feel his chest rise and fall, feel his fur brushing the inside of his vest. "Daddy..."

"Yeah, honey bun, it's me. What're you doin' here?" He brushes one of my ears all gentle-like, same way he did when I was little, looking on what must be a dandy of a bruise where the board hit. "Look like week-old hell, too. Not that I ain't grateful seein' ya again."

I blink back tears, trailing my fingers down the brown fur of his arm. "This ain't by my plannin'."

"Ah. I see." He chuckles, kicking the toe of his boot into the soft black soil. "So you're leavin' about the same?"

I nod. "Well, that assumes I ain't dead...."

"You ain't." He squeezes me a touch tighter. "How's that bat been treatin' ya?" He looks me in the eyes. "You haven't gone an' shot him again, have ya?"

“No!”

“Well, that’s right decent of you. Ah was with your mother near on twenty years without feelin’ need to shoot her.” He smiles, showing me his buck teeth.

The world presses in on my mind. I look around, seeing in the shadows a great shaft down into the earth, lit at one end only. “Daddy! I think... I think I’m still in Hayes’ mine. I can’t stay with you.”

“Hayes? Could have sworn I shot him...” His gaze slips to the distance for a slim moment, then he grips my shoulder. “As for stayin’ with me, see ya don’t chase echoes when you ought to be after real folk. Okay, ‘Puff? Never seen it end well.”

“Yes, Daddy.” I straighten up, looking him right in the eyes. Just when did I get as tall as him? “I need some things explained.”

He twitches his nose at me, like he’s of a teasing mood. “That is what daddies are for.”

“Straightforward and simple-like. None a’ this ghost-riddle business.”

“Contrary to what you may’ve heard, we don’t get our giggles hassling the livin’. It’s just...” He ponders on this for a breath, or would if he were really breathing. “Just that the world makes less sense the longer you leave it. But I’ll do my darnest not to talk bunkum to ya, square?”

“Square.” I feel my guts get tugged toward the real world. I don’t have an excess of time. “How do you tie in to this business with the mine?”

“The mine, the mine... Lemme see...” His claws scratch the back of his neck, like they always did in moments of hard reckoning. “Back durin’ my stint with the Interior Department, this old bloodhound tracked me down. Said he represented a tribe a’ ‘yotes whose land was being mined without their say-so. Nothin’ new under the sun, ah think, though that changed in a hurry once I poked around the place. Ah’d hid TNT to bring down the whole mine. Likely it’s still there in the supports to this day.”

“Hayes? It was his mine?” I look around, but catch only glimpses of railings and supports in the corners of my eyes, the rest looking for all the world like a green paradise. “I’m in it right now! He caught me.”

“Funny how the world loops around.” He nods, then raises a questioning ear. “This is some Hayes other than the one I put in the ground?”

“His nephew.”

“That’s reassurin’.” His fingers trace the brim of his hat. “Like I said, world starts getting funny on a body once time stops the hops.”

I reach for my guns, but find only air. The dank, earthy scent of the mine hangs thick around my nose. “Might not be too long before I join ya.”

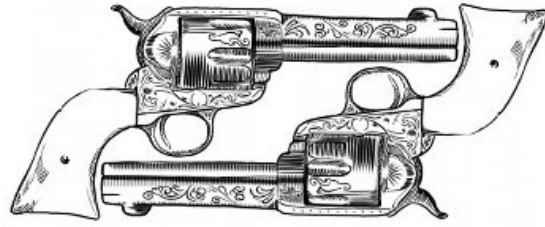
“Ah, see ‘Puff, there’s a world a’ wonder in ‘might.’ So long as your mights don’t change to gonnas, you got life by the ears, your mother would say.” He clears his throat, a shade embarrassed. “’Nuff a’ my philosophyzing, though. You understand your old daddy’s rambles?”

“Reckon so.” I smile, though knowing he could vanish like smoke from between my arms..

“That’s mah girl.” He kisses me ‘tween the ears. “Sly little thing. I got every confidence you’ll be raising rile in my honor ‘til the moon don’t shine.”

My heart thunders like a team of ponies. I grip tight to his shirt, though I can feel it misting away. The darkness of the mine creeps back around me, the edges of my vision filling over with dark, hazy tears. I bury my face in his chest again, though I can see clear on through to the disappearing fields and into the dark of the mineshaft. I’ll figure out something. I am, after all, my father’s daughter.

As he vanishes, he grins, and, for the first time in the whole of my life, I see that look of Haus-brand trouble from the outside.



Chapter 23

The folk rush me, howling like a thousand demons.

~~~~~

I see something. Something important.

My skull's pounding like a 'yote drum. The world is light and dark swinging before me. I squeeze my eyes shut tight, hoping to clear things up a touch. I'm being carried like a bag of potatoes, tied up at either end. On my back over some huge shoulder, I try and lie still, collecting myself for whatever it is I plan to do.

I let my head flop back, gaspin' at the rush a blood to my aching brainpan. I glance around quick-like, frantic to spy what it was I thought so important. The tunnel of a mine leads us down, down, down. Just as the morning light from the entrance cuts off, I see an old wood box, fixed to the ceiling. On it, three glorious letters.

TNT.

"Jasper Haus, I presume."

I struggle against my bonds as Hayes' brutes haul me in. It's cold down here in the mine's center chamber, cold as the lump of fear in my belly. Pain blazes through the side of my head too, right where that panther nailed me with that plank.

A huge pit gapes before the rows of benches. Even with lanterns on every wall, I can't see the bottom. Two of Hayes' men, a rat and a mutt, led me down here and a third, a calico, was waiting here with him. The other dozen waited at the cavern entrance. Hayes wasn't taking any chances with me. My shoulders ache from riding here with my paws tied behind my back, but I wasn't sitting idle. I managed to wear through a bit of the rope against my belt, so it's just a



matter of backing against something sharp to finish the job.

Hayes slinks from where he was sitting on the altar. He walks around me, looking me up and down. I press my wrists together over the rope to keep him from seeing—

“Looks like that rope has seen better days. We’d best get you a new one.”

I cuss.

“You’re a resourceful bunny, Mister Haus. I do enjoy a good rabbit hunt.” He examines his paws one claw at a time as his men tie me up again. They aren’t stupid either; they tie on the new one before removing the old one I had frayed partways through. Damn. Lantern light spills over Hayes’ fine silk shirt and pressed pants, like he’s in some business to-do instead of some filthy old cave. Occurs to me that this is where many of his less honorable dealings might well take place. Even Morris is in attendance, along with that old bunny from the mine.

“Why don’t ya play fair, Hayes?” I can see my guns shining atop that stone table, the same one where they tore apart that calf. If I could just get at them... “Have your boys untie me and we’ll settle this like men.”

“I didn’t get where I am by playing fair, Jasper Haus. Besides, you weren’t so eager to do so with my uncle.”

“Your uncle?” I play the dumb bunny, buying time.

“You don’t see the family resemblance?” He turned his head, stroking his mane. “Not that I was overly upset. I got all his lands. I’ve built myself up quite the little empire out here. I’d hate to see it end.”

“Well, all things do.” I struggle. They tied me up even tighter this time, my paws are getting numb. “Isn’t that the way of it?”

“Not for you, Mister Haus. See, you killed Uncle Julius, oh, twenty-two years ago? And you weren’t a spring chicken at the time. By my counting, you ought to be near on fifty by now, if not older.” He looks me over like meat. “You’re no fifty.”

I say nothing.

A lone lantern flickers beside us, casting tall shadows on shelf after shelf of bones.

The lion continues to pace around me. “One of my men saw you.” He glances to the old bunny. “A fella by the name of Bennet Haus.”

I freeze a moment, choked by my own fear. Fearful notions are closing in on

me awful fast, and a number of those bones look fresh. All I can think about is that little calf's blood spurting over and over down the cold sides a' that stone altar. I fight to keep the trembles from showing.

Hayes looks a little disappointed at my lack of reacting. "That face might win you hands of poker, but I can't believe somebody can forget his own brother."

My mouth goes dry, but I swallow back my words, knowing this lion ain't one to trifle with from this unsafe distance.

"And I've heard tell of these fancy guns you've got." He runs a paw over them. I want to rip it off his arm. "A bunny came riding in... and shot my uncle *like some kind of damned prey!*" He roars, inches from my face. His hot, meaty breath blasts past me, pushing my ears back. Sharp teeth gleam in the lantern light.

I freeze. Wish I could say it was from some inner well of resolve, but really I am shaking inside. The echoes of his roar call from all sides of the cavern, as if he's every place at once.

He straightens his shirt, acting like his little outburst never occurred. "But what really interests me about you is how you've managed to look exactly the same for twenty-two years. Or has it been even longer? How old are you, Mister Haus?"

I really ought to say something to keep him talking, but I can't think of anything he won't know to be an outright lie. Even consider telling the truth, which would be novel to me, but he takes this indecision as something else.

"I asked you a question, bunny." He pulls out a small gold box. His thumb flicks the lid open. Little metal cubes. "Answer me."

The whispers come back. I hear Hayes yammering but it's getting real distant compared to all these whispers. The world starts turning dark...

Snap! The box closes. "Damn. He's a fainter. Looks like we'll have to do this through more... traditional means." He slaps me, hard, on the muzzle. My ears swing back from the blow, and I feel a little warm trickle of blood where his claws caught.



The whispers are gone, and I glare at him, struggling against the mutt and

panther holding my tied arms. “Is that what ya plan to do? Control everybody with those damn rocks?”

Predatory fire lights in his eyes, searing me to the bone. “I’m not telling you anything, meat!”

The lion hits me again, this time in the gut. I double over, hacking and wheezing. He nods to his men. “Hold him still. I want to search him.”

Damn.

The big panther behind me hisses at this, twitching his bandaged ear. “We already took his iron, boss.”

“Yeah, you tied him up too.” He points at the half-cut rope.

The panther says nothing, only pushes me up before Hayes. My brain fumbles for another, better lie, but there ain’t the distance. Can’t have him feeling around my person, for one obvious reason. Well, a pair if you want to get particular. I misbehave, kicking out alike a bronco when he gets near, fetching him a boot to the wrist.

He roars in pain. Glaring and ready to slice my face off, he grabs me by the shirt.

Then he looks *real* surprised.

Comes a time where you know you’re nailed to the counter. For me, that’s now.

I hop for all I’m worth. The panther holds tight to my rope and gets thrown to one side. I spring off his body and jump right over the stunned Hayes. I land by the stone table, twist around, and grope blindly at my guns with my tied hands. I catch one. That’ll have to do.

I spin, running sideways, and shoot the rat in my way as he fumbles his rifle. Hayes cusses up a storm as he ducks behind his mutt underling. The mutt is helping the panther up. I wouldn’t be above gunning down the lot of them, but, seeing as my paws are tied, I can’t aim anywhere but to my left side.

Diving between the benches, I roll to my back and curl my legs up. Pain shoots up my arms and back as I force my tied wrists down around my butt and legs, still holding the gun. “Aw! Damnation!” There! My paws in front of me, I roll to my side, accidentally firing a shot. Glances off the floor and into the shadows. All the while, I gnaw through the ropes. Good ol’ bunny incisors. Haven’t failed me yet.

The mutt fires once, missing, then gets me in his pistol sights. My numb paw closes over the gun again; I shoot his foot from under the benches. He goes

down howling.

The panther jumps up on a bench, both guns trained on me. I roll under another bench, hollering: “You really think Hayes is goin’ to let you out a’ here alive with the secret?”

The panther looks to his boss.

I shoot him.

Before the cat even hits the floor, Hayes unloads at me with my other gun. Scrambling under a couple benches, I come upon the wounded dog again fixing to plug me. I kick him in the head, snatching up his gun with my empty paw. Before I think about it, my paws have snatched six fresh bullets from the mutt’s belt. I load my gun and my new find to the sixth chamber. I’ve had enough of this little song and dance.

I stand. First one to see me is Hayes’ rat, the blood on his ribs not enough to quiet him. He draws. I shoot him in the head.

The sound could’ve deafened the dead. Beside the pit, Hayes’ man hits the floor.

Dead silence.

Hayes looks to the dead man, then to me. I expect him to start blabbering for his life. But that ain’t what occurs. He smiles.

I hear a great bellowing come up from behind me.

I turn and see a whole mess of ragged miners come trampling down the hall, all howls and froth.

Dang.

Hayes chuckles.

They hold up, all species snarling not three feet from me. Their drool gleams in long strands to the floor, slathering from between bared teeth. They gather in a half-circle around me.

I bite my lip to keep from freezing up. My heart’s pounding like gunshots.

Hayes lifts a claw to me. “Kill her.”

The miners hiss. All around me. All at once. Sends a shiver from my tail to my ears. Twenty sets of eyeshine glowing in the lantern light, but they all growl the same.

Damn.

The folk rush me, howling like a thousand demons. I backpedal, planting lead

in the chests of the first three. The rest get tripped up. An old raccoon gets wise and pounces at me, snarling. I twist out of the way of his rusty sickle. My elbow helps his head find the wall.

I run the edge of the room. Two more of the howling fools make it through the benches. I kick one into their knees, knocking them both frontwards. I back up, now at the front of the room.

Old Bennet dives in from the side. I squeeze the trigger. My father's gun jams for the first time in all my born days. Cussing, I crack him in the skull with the pommel of it and feel the cylinder spin free. Some fat marmot grabs the old bunny and hauls him toward the light of the entrance. But I got bigger troubles.

I unload six shots wild on the kind mob following me. Two miss, but the other four bite into flesh, slowing the stampede a pace. Smoke coils 'round my hot iron.

Hayes laughs in triumph, but I can't see him. My boot slips. I shove against the stone table to keep from falling. Pain blazes up my cramped arms. I gasp.

A wolf with patchy fur springs ahead of the pack. Without thinking, I snatch the lone lantern off the table and clobber her with it. It breaks, spilling fire and oil down her. For an instant, the dim room is lit like midday. Those shelves circling the room go all the way to the ceiling, each one lined with white bones. Gleaming fangs snap at me from the flames, splashing my muzzle with foam. I kick the wolf back. She tumbles, howling, into the pit. The light goes with her. We are now in darkness, save for the fire on my boot and the unnatural glow of the miners' mouths.

I run.

I only have one bullet left in my gun, and that mutt's gun's got two, so I jump over the last few benches, sliding along the floor beside the pit to shoot Hayes.

But he's not there.

So much for the bravery of lions.

I make a fool's dash for the only way the little milksop could have gone: out. It's a straight up the ramp to the cavern entrance and I can hear him running. Sunlight, dim but real. Like hope. I reach the bottom of the ramp just in time to see him jump out the entrance, with my own gun, bellowing for his cronies to shoot me when I come out. He has a dozen men out there, all armed, and all will know I'm coming.

I growl. Firing squad ahead 'a me, the dining club behind me. Ain't no way I'm getting out of this, but damned if I'm gonna let Hayes live.

The cavern boils with an unsavory mix of weeping, shrieking, and howled profanity. One of the miners grabs at the mutt's gun, tumbling back when I let go. Lifting my father's gun, I take aim at the TNT box. I've only got one bullet left. But, as I hear the faintest whisper of his voice, I know I only need one. "Alright, lion, let's see who's meat..."

I shoot.

Then comes a noise like all the world's ending.

I'm blown clean outta my boots. Flying backward, I expect to be pulped against the back wall. Instead, I tumble. Back and back, into darkness. And as I fall, my one regret in all my life of trouble is that I didn't ride that lawbat six ways from Sunday...

Splash! I hit water.

I sink in a fair ways, which suits me fine seeing as how a mess of big rocks follow me. One of them cracks me in the arm, hurting something powerful, but I don't let go of Daddy's gun. Damned if I'm losing both today. Stone cracks like lightning around me. Another stone hits me in the belly, knocking precious breath from me, and I sink down fast. The water runs glass-clear this deep in the world, so I can see all the way back up the pit as the mouth of it splits apart. There's a sudden rumble, shocking right through the water. A part of me thinks it's that second box of TNT going off. Then the whole world shatters and falls away and I'm getting hauled out from under this stone like a fish on a line. My head cracks against a wall. I curl into a ball, without a breath and damn near without a wit. I tear along to nowhere, smacking into rocks left and right like I'm back in the rapids of Skull Creek. At long last, I see light. I must be dying. I growl on airless water; at least I took that worthless lion out with me.

I'm not dead, contrary to my expecting. Instead, I'm tumbling and rolling through silt and water, light and dark flashing in front of me as I roll. Presently, it peters out. I am left in dark and dampness. Feels like I'm sealed in stone. Even my eyes won't open. I feel the scratch of sand against my nose and lips. Shoot me dead if I can tell which direction is up, but my body screams for air and I ain't in any position to deny it. With great exertion, I explode out of my curled up bunny-ball. My foot breaks free. I can feel cold against my hind paw. Whether this is cold water below me or air above me, my lungs don't seem to be concerned. I kick my other foot that way, then my left arm. The right one is numb or gone or something. I peel myself up out of the earth and gasp.

Air. Beautiful, grand ol' air. Never thought I would love it so. I suck it in so hard I get silt in my throat, but I don't care. I keep breathing. After a moment, I

wipe my eyes. I rely on my right paw to hold me up and it ain't listening, wherever it is. I look down and find it still fixed to me just fine, gun still clenched in my fist. I sit up again. It hangs limp off my body, but I figure it's staying put.

I cough for a spell and, while it burns like cinders in my lungs, I reckon air's better than water and dirt. I wipe the silt out of my ears. They are caked with the stuff, too heavy to rise.

I stagger to my bare feet. Where in blue blazes did my boots get to? I should have worn Doc's fancy boots, like he offered. Then his would be under a mountain and mine would be back at his place with my hat.

My hat. I'd best go fetch that. What's the way into town? Dirt scratches my eyes when I blink, but I clear things up enough to see a ways. I'm in a shallow gulch, filled with watery mud. Town. Town has to be those buildings yonder. I stumble toward them, my hind paws catching in the mud. Almost fall, but don't. Damn right arm keeps throwing me off, being all dangly like it is. I try putting my gun away, but can't find the holster. Just as well, seeing as how my arm has rebelled. Seems mighty intent on gripping my iron, so I let it be.

Hot sand comes under my feet. I keep walking toward those buildings. Walking.

I go quite a ways in this fashion, walking and breathing, before a shadow flashes over the world. I blink, thinking it's more dirt, then it's gone. I turn my head, looking for whatever made the shadow, but I do it too fast and my right ear flops over my eyes. "Tarnation!" I figure if I can't see, I might as well shoot, so I grab my limp arm and raise my gun. "Who's 'ere?! Ah done just got puked out by a mountain and ah am spittin' mad!"

"Six..."

I feel something peel my wet ear back from over my eyes, all gentle-like. I see a pair of pretty brown eyes, set in a funny foxish face.

"Jordan!" I holler, then laugh like a fool. "You're outta yer dress!"

He grabs me and holds me close in his soft nice wings, like he hadn't figured on seeing me nowhere never again. "Six!" I can hear him, crying as he clutches to me.

"Oh ease off, ya ol' sapskull." I pat him on the shoulder. "Ain't nothin' but a slap a mud."

"You're alive!" He ignores me, talking into my shoulder. Darn fool's gonna get all muddied up too. Feels nice that he missed me though. I only get missed



very occasionally, usually by bullets and chairs and such.

He pulls back and starts taking off his duster coat. His hind paw finds my gun, but doesn't have any better luck getting it free than I did. After a moment, he sighs and does some fancy maneuvers behind me, getting it up my right arm and over my shoulders. I try shaking it off, but I'm weak as a runt kitten and he tucks my right arm into the other sleeve just as easy as you please.

"By the moon, Jordan, what are ya doin'?"

He laughs. "I can't take you back into town just as naked as a jaybird."

I look down and, sure enough, I am wearing nothing but mud. "How in tarnation'd that happen?!" I look up to find him pink to the ears.

He says nothing, but pulls something from his belt. Rope gets looped around my waist and under my breasts.

I squeak as he knots it under my bosom. "You're gettin' a mite fresh out here, bat."

"Stand still." He slips around behind me, then I hear him take a running start.

"What? What for?" I hear flapping and hind paws grip the ropes. The next instant, sand is plowing past my feet. I try running to catch up, but it turns out I'm lifting off the ground. Great gusts of wind sweep past me, scattering mud off my fur. The ground gets awful far below awful fast. I holler as the desert sweeps by under me. "Yeeeeeehaw!"

"Quit moving around!" His hind paws tighten on me.

I look up to see my lawbat, his brown chest fur gleaming copper in the sunlight where it fluffs out of his vest, wings beating like a steam engine as he struggles to keep me aloft. I laugh some more, then pat his foot with my good paw. "Well, if this don't take the rag off the bush. Faster, Jordan! Reckon there's still some mud on mah fur."

"You've gotta hold still, Six, or I'm liable to drop you."

"You will not. You're keen on me. Don't worry. Once I get cleaned up, I'm gonna ride you like an express pony." I tug on his pant leg.

"Six!" He sounds right mortified.

"Oh hush, Jordan, or you'll make me forget which a' us is the lady."

He flies me into town directly. I spy two foxes waiting out of some little house at the edge of town. I call out to them as we land, darn near forgetting to put my feet under me. "Charlotte! Doc! Howdy! Seems we're droppin' in on ya!" I laugh at this a good bit more than they do.

I shrug out of Jordan's grasp before he is ready, and he just about crashes smack into the earth. Doc catches me before I can tip over. He looks me in the eyes, then over to the lawbat. "What happened?"

The flying fox stands up, dusting his wings off. "I think she took a blow to the head."

The Doc looks at him all puzzled. "She?"

His wife clears her throat and points down at my bare lady bits.

"By my tail! She's a woman!"

I shake a paw at him, splattering mud on his white coat. "You mind where you're peepin', Doc!"

Charlotte grabs my good arm and sets it over her shoulders. "Come on now, let's get her inside."

"Where's the fire, foxies? It's a nice day out."

They haul me into the house and lay me out on the long kitchen table. They pull me out of Jordan's coat and Charlotte gasps. "Good heavens! That arm's out of place. Blake, come hold her down."

Jordan comes over to my side and pushes me down with his wings. He leans in all close, so I move up to kiss his cute little muzzle. Just then, the foxes slam my shoulder down. A real loud, sickening pop comes from inside me. It hurts something fierce. Daddy's gun clatters to the floor. My arm works again.

I slap Jordan hard on the ribs.

"Oww! Damnit all, Six!"

"That's for trickin' me. You weren't leanin' in to give me no kiss."

Doc turns my face toward his. I don't want any kisses from him, so I turn away. He snarls. "Look at me."

Jordan's expression is packed full of concern, so I turn.

Doc looks in both my eyes, then nods to his wife. "They're dilated the same."

The vixen starts feeling around my body. "Do you hurt anyplace especially?"

"My damn arm!" I growl at as the pain kicks up like wildfire. "Jordan! See to my gun!"

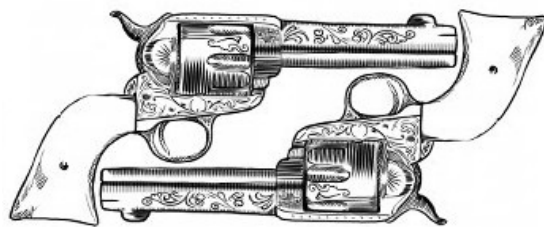
All reassuring, he pats my side. "I've got it. Just take it easy."

The doc straightens. "I'll get some water. Charlotte, the fire?"

She nods. "I've got things here. Go. Blake, hold that arm of hers down like this."

Jordan places his wing where she shows him. The vixen slips further into the house and her husband dashes out the back again. My lawbat stands there and holds my paw with his wing thumb. I grip it back mighty hard, but he doesn't make a fuss. Perhaps there's some mettle to this bat after all.

I smile, naked and muddy. He leans in to kiss me, and he ain't playing this time.



## Chapter 24

*You sure I won't break what's left of you?*

~~~~~

I wake to find my arm in a sling and my body in enough states of hurt to make a Union.

The foxes are gone. Turns out I am really at Deputy Harding's house, not Charlotte and Doc's. They live further into town, but the good sheriff reckoned I'd be less conspicuous here. From the little I've seen of the bloodhound, he seems a fella you can tie to, so I don't fuss. Besides, the hound is scarce. He's been hiding out in his garden since before I woke, but I'm not in a mood to be overly social.

I have some of the cold coffee and biscuits left on the nightstand for me. Must have been the dog who went and left it, since he left bacon there too. I dump it into the empty coffee kettle so I don't have to smell it all day. Leaves me a trifle queasy, but a nice gesture, given how the most of dogs hold their bacon dear as gold.

Not even the twinkle of a bedpost later, the dog himself walks in. He leans against the doorway, all ease and wags. "How're ya makin' out?"

"Sore as a stampeded cactus."

He smiles around those drooping jowls. "Alive though."

"Reckon so." I stretch my paws. "You got s...omething to say?"

"I got things aplenty."

I cross my arms, then am battered by a wince. "Cut across the lots, bloodhound. I ain't long on patience."

“You’ve always heard echoes. I suspect from the ore shards in that gun.”

My eyes flick to the Peacemaker sharing the bed. When I look back, he’s waiting patient-like on his patient.

The deputy brushes dirt from the garden from his fur. “’Spose I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You’re assumin’ a lot there, friend.”

“Not terribly. See, you smell an awful lot like your father.” He taps his nose. “He saw fit to come to town an’ help the natives with a difficulty, but I reckon ya know all that by now.”

I don’t know just how to take that. Still not accustomed to folk mentioning Daddy offhand.

“I can tell ya, you’ll come to hear less from him as time passes on. His business is settled.”

“Bosh.”

“Truth.”

“How’d you come by all this useful truth?”

“Bought an unbroken pony. Got bucked off and broke my leg in the middle a’ nowhere. Woulda died were it not for the ‘yotes.” He taps a boot heel forward, doing a slight jig. “They patched my hurt an’ kept me alive until I could walk back.”

“And they just spilled the beans to you?”

“Not at first, no. Over time, though, they came to see me as tie to the settlers here.” He gestures out the window. “Local tribes and I have a workable relation. It’s on their account I know I’m a Listener.”

“That so? Sure do blabber on for one.”

He chuckles deep in his throat. “I hold my peace, oftentimes, ‘cept when I have somethin’ worth saying. Right now, that somethin’ is that you’re a Listener too.”

“I hear echoes.”

“Yes.”

“Hoo-ee, hound dog!” I slap my thigh, managing to find a place that doesn’t hurt. “Anything else come off the morning telegraph? ‘Cause I was privy to that one a while back.”

“I oughta warn ya too that you’ll be hearin’ more echoes, havin’ more visions,

seeing as how you got lingered in that mine a while. Visions'll be more powerful now, more particular."

"Thought I'd be hearing less of my father— now you're sayin' more?"

"Didn't say it'd be him."

A brambly reply withers on my tongue. A question brews in my mind. I ask, quiet-like. "During the visions, how'd I come to know where I was, what I was there for?"

"That's part a' the process. Got no idea just how or why, it just is."

I ponder on this a while.

"Well, I've said my piece. I'll leave you to yer rest." He touches the brim of his hat. The "ma'am" he doesn't say rings clear as a shot kettle. "I'm due for makin' my rounds."

For a long while, I try to sort out my feelings on all this. That fails. I grumble and set to cleaning my gun. Just as well I got half a mountain's worth of dirt in it; got nothing better to do than clean it with my little kit. The doctoring foxes gave Harding and Blake orders to keep watch and keep me in bed. Charlotte scrubbed my fur to the skin, which I didn't mind much, save for it being mildly humiliating. What I did mind was her dressing me in a lady's slip and dressing gown. I'm too maimed to get out of it and, much as it shames me to say it, I'm starting to take a shine to how soft it feels against me.

I'd feel a complete namby-pamby if Blake hadn't bought me this new gunbelt and a box of bullets. Fancy ones from back East, not the shoddy backwoods reloads I sometimes resort to. They look watertight enough to fire from the bottom of Skull Creek. I fill out the loops of the gunbelt, throw five in my now-clean gun, and even have a few left over. Makes a bunny wish she had another gun to put them in...

Day turns to evening, turning the brasses and browns of Harding's spare room to fires and ambers. Blake comes in, relieving Harding of his watch over me. The bloodhound slips through the house just long enough to give me a tip of the hat and is gone. I figure he's got duty.

I lift my ears to the fruit bat. "What's the scuttlebutt, lawbat? Not often mines explode twice in the space of a month."

Closing the door, he pauses. "I don't suppose you need to hear such things in your condition."

"I do suppose. Tell me."

"You've got to promise me you won't do something foolish."

“Fine.”

“Hayes is alive and has your other gun.”

I snatch my gunbelt off the nightstand and struggle up.

Blake stops me with the tip of one wing. “You doing something foolish?”

I lose my balance and flop back against the pillow, but fight my way back up.
“No.”

He stops me with his wingtip again. “You fixing to go someplace?”

I stay sitting, but am more than a touch precarious. I growl at my own weakness. “Hayes’ place. I reckon to visit all manner a’ unpleasantness on him and his.”

He looks at me steady. “Six, you need to lie low. Right now, Hayes thinks you’re dead. That gives you an advantage. You go in shooting up the place and that’s going to change.”

“The lion has my gun, Blake. That needs seein’ to.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t. But if you go in half-cocked, you’re going to get killed.”

I try crossing arms, but it only halfway takes. “I’d beef Hayes.”

“You might at that. You’re fast. But you’re not up to snuff at the moment, and Hayes has shown he’s inclined to run if things turn south on him.”

“Yellower ‘an a marmot, that’s for sure.”

“You figure you can deal with his men in the middle of my town?”

“Reckon ah might.” I bite my lip a little.

“Seeing as I’m the one who’d have to clean it all up after, I’d take it as a kindness if you didn’t.” His muzzle stays steady, but his voice gets real soft.

“Alright, but only as a kindness to you.” I pat his wing. “And only ‘cause you admitted to those fools ah was your man, sugar bat.”

He stews at this.

“Oh, iron out yer muzzle, batty. I was only joshin’ ya. Does bring up a pressing point, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, lawbat...” I droop my ears, fiddling with the tip of one in what I hope’s an alluring fashion. “You figure ya got a little time to be *my* man?”

“Hmm... maybe.” He picks up my ear and leans in, but stops just before he kisses it. He flashes me a smile with that funny foxy muzzle. “You sure I won’t

break what's left of you?"

My strength goes and I tip forward, burying my muzzle in his chest fur to keep from falling down. "I'm of sterner stuff presently than you'll ever be, lawbat."

Taking me in his wings, he kisses me soft on each flopped ear and lays me back against the bed like I'm something real fragile. Makes a bunny warm under the fur to be handled like that, even if it is wholly unnecessary. He sits back on the bed and I watch, fascinated, as he undresses. First he slips out of his vest, then he sits, legs crossed 'yote style, undoing his belt and gunbelt with those fancy hind paws of his. Here I am laid up, missing the chance to see just how he gets his pants off without a hare's help. I find I can't even sit back up at this particular moment, so I wait for my moment. Once he's got his fly unbuttoned, I snake my hind paw out from under the sheets and into the front of his trousers.

He squeaks in surprise, wings sweeping against my leg. "Six! What are you doing?"

"Oh, quit yer belly-achin'. I'm just checkin' to see everything's where I left it, is all." I wiggle my toes down his fuzzy belly to his sheath and sac before wiggling back up and starting over again. My toes bump along the head of his penis, just poking out of its sheath, then play briefly with his sac, but he squeaks the loudest of all when I get up higher and wiggle my claws against the tender flesh of his belly.

"Stop that!" His wings stroke along my calf, ruffling the fur. "Six, it's tickling me something dreadful!"

"Well, you'd best get those britches off or I'll do it more." I slip down again and grip my toes on his sheath to show I'm serious.

"Ah! Just give me a second, Six." He hooks his wing thumbs into the waist of his trousers and pulls them off. "There."

"Good." I smile at the pink tip I see peeking up from between his legs. "Come on up here, lawbat, and be mindful of my arm."

Climbing up the bed, he eases around my sling, straddling over my chest. His balls rest between my breasts and his half-ways sprung erection bumps me in the nose.

"Oops." His ears drop. "Sorry."

I laugh. "Blake, I got all manner a' plans for this thing, but that wasn't one of 'em." Nonetheless, I nuzzle in against his tip with great vigor. It's real warm and slightly damp. He squeaks.

All the way out of his sheath now, his member bumps against my cheek. I wrap my good paw around it, then start caressing it all gentle. He stiffens up in a hurry, even with me only halfways knowing what I'm doing. My ears drop at how distracted and darling he looks. I want to do something nice for him, like how he always kisses my ears. Then I get a naughty idea...

Without giving him a word of warning, I grab one of my ears and curl it around his shaft. Boy, does that get the ol' boy's attention. Poor thing is just staring down at me with those wide brown eyes as I start to rub. I work my floppy ear over the hard, hot surface, every ridge and bump translating through to my fingers. Feels right funny, and more than a little scandalous. The good sheriff shivers and swoons like he's getting the vapors.

Now that I'm sure the both of us are enjoying this, I get a touch more vigorous. I work the pink of my ear harder against his stiff penis, slipping from head to base, picking up heat as I go. I rub it over the tip as well, slicking myself up with his juices, though it ain't the only place I'm feeling a tad moist presently. I work it like a polishing cloth, pressing his length down against my chest. I even dare give the head a couple kisses when it pokes through. He seems to cotton to this, if his moaning is to be believed and he even squirms a little extra against my bottom lip.

On instinct, I lick the clear droplet off my lip before it can run under my chin and to my fur. It's salty and a touch musky, though mostly it just tastes like Blake.

I lick the head again and he shudders, stroking my head fur with his wings. The soft velvet of their insides brushes my cheeks. Feels right agreeable to this hare.

“Blake?”

Panting, he looks down through the tent of tender wings he's pitched over me. “Yeah?”

I rub a little more at his shaft, working through the words to say. Goes without saying he didn't mind the hold-up. “...’Fraid you'll have to walk me on the lead rope. My tongue ain't traveled the miles yours has.”

His muzzle snaps closed, like he's embarrassed about the tongue he had lolling out like a hound dog's. “Well... I reckon... just lick on it and such... Don't have to do anything too fancy, just be careful about it; it's the only one I got.”

I chuckle on this a bit, then lick him some more. He seems keen on that. I've heard tell of gals sucking on their menfolk, or their menfolk-of-the-moment.

Blake told me to take care, but I reckon, so long as I keep my teeth out of the way, there shouldn't be a problem. Letting my warm, wet ear drop, I kiss the taut surface of his head a little more, then I guide him on in.

First thing I notice is the heat. It was warm against my ear, but it is hot inside my mouth. I feel the weight, the heft of it. I trace my tongue around, feeling every little vein and surface. Hot liquid pools on the back of my tongue and I swallow it before I think about it. Then it hits me: I've actually got a fella's penis in me. Granted it's only in my muzzle, but I intend to see about putting it elsewhere soon enough. The thought makes me giddy.

"Why in blue blazes are you giggling around my...my...?"

I pull him out for a moment, inspecting how he looks with a coat of my saliva. "Could be ya just taste funny."

"Oh, ha-ha. You're an ace-high wit, Six Shooter."

"Hush now. No need to get contrary." I play with his sack of gold nuggets, wishing my other arm didn't hurt so I could explore the lawbat easier. Nothing makes a gal appreciate something like having it wrecked for a while. I don't care to think too much on what this could be likened to, so I return to stroking that fine length of bat in front of me, stroking and kissing it.

This is getting me riled like nobody's business and I start rubbing my thighs together, pressing the lips of my lady bits together. Seeing this, Blake leans back and rubs his wing right under my dressing gown and against my folds. His shifting hurts my shoulder, but it feels right delightful so I get a touch conflicted. He keeps it up and 'fore long I am too distracted to stroke him proper. Pressing my muzzle down on his erection, I moan. "Oh, Jordan... Jordan, please... I need... I mean ah feel..."

He smiles down at me. I see what I was going to ask already in his soft brown eyes. I blush and nod. He climbs off of me, careful and slow. Fading sunlight washes over his fur as he passes the window's light, shimmering each hair in shades of bronze, like a perfect statue. At the foot of the bed, he parts my knees with gentle wings. His muzzle dips down, licking down the insides of my thighs. Real slow and soft. Over and over. Just about when I think I'll go plum crazy, he gives a lick right up my nether lips. I squeak like a prairie dog. My lil' clit's throbbing and my hips keep trying to buck. He licks again and I bite down on my good paw to keep from squealing. Deeper and deeper he's lapping 'til my muscles are clenching and writhing inside my belly.

Then he pulls back, that wondrous pink tongue licking his lips like he just had the juiciest apple of his life. I get cross with him for stopping, scowling for a

spell 'fore I realize why I sent him down there in the first place. I bite a little tighter on my knuckle.

He climbs up between my legs, steadying himself on his wings. Bat ears flop down, all sweet and shy, like he's nervous too. His stiff length is bumping around down there, glancing off my vagina more than once and making me whimper. I try reaching down to sort things out, but wince back as my shoulder pulls. Pain blooms through my arm. I feel a touch on my free paw. I open my eyes to find him holding it gentle-like with his wing thumb. All tender, he slides my paw back up to my tummy, patting it a couple times just to say 'stay put.' Then he moves that same wing down and takes hold 'a his penis, rubbing the head against my entrance. He works a ways inside, spreading me. Can't help but gasp. I feel tingly all over, both from pleasure and nerves. I hear it's supposed to hurt a woman's first time. Setting my teeth, I brace myself.

But it doesn't. It's full-feeling, powerful full, but no pain compared to my damn shoulder. He pushes in, though, and things get a pinch tight. The thin layer of spit on his length gives a touch of chill, but after that it's warm, warm as I am. Looking down, I see he's about halfway in. Feels right nice, though I feel real glad he wasn't a stallion. This is plenty big. I catch a look of his face, his fine-muzzled foxy face, and see him look a touch pained, like I ain't making it too easy for him either. I try to breath deep and ease off with my inner muscles. I haven't done too much with them ever on purpose before, mostly letting them act on their own accord. Even when I take a little time by my lonesome, I mostly work along the outward parts. But, by an' by, my womanly parts and I reach a nice little understanding though, and opt not to crush poor Blake any further. I try and take it easy. Ain't nothing impossible here; other gals get their fields plowed regularly and they seem to fancy it fine. And from the pleasure spreading out from my passage, I'm starting to see why. My eyes close.

Further and further I feel him pushing, to places I wasn't too aware I had, 'til Blake finally stops. I open my eyes again. His hips are pressed flush with mine. My muscles clench in little ripples up his length. My breathing speeds up. The flying fox pulls back just as slow, leaving more and more of me empty. I give a pitiable little squeak and arch up under him, but he just presses down one soft wing on my hip. I ease back down onto the bed. Next time, I am being the rider in this dog and pony show.

Blake works up a rhythm, slow in, slow out. Instinct tells me to hump my hips up at him, but I seem to throw him off when I do this. Seems I'm in need of some practice, 'need' the linchpin there. The bat gets on his wings around me. He slips in and out of me. I ain't never felt so... full in my life. Little wet noises

follow his movements. He speeds up. My breasts bounce like I'm on a galloping pony. I clench harder on him, losing hold of the reins. I can feel my juices seep out into the fur of my rump, even advancing so far as my tail. Blake thrusts harder into me to get past my clutching. His breath washes over me.

I grab him by the chest fur.

I go off like dynamite.

My feet thump against the mattress, kicking up swirls of dust. My passage working over and around his length in wonderful ways, shipping delicious feeling all over my body. After wiggling around like a bunny possessed under his weight, I ease back, catching my breath. Aftershocks rumble through my loins now and again, wringing me like a cloth for pleasure. Once I can do more than squeal and writhe, I let go of the poor fella's chest fur. He gazes down at me. I can see the evening light glow through his thin ears, coloring it with his flesh. Still hard and inside me, his panting lips meet mine. That little sly tongue of his weasels into my mouth. I moan around it as he mines for my pleasure from both angles.

As the kiss trails off, Blake redoubles his efforts, thrusting into me with all his batty might. My lips feel more than a mite tender, swollen with tingly glory and dragged back and forth against the hot texture of his shaft. My hips rock against the bed as his thrusts get all fitful. I rub along his wings and shoulders, breathing his name like air itself. Those gold-flecked eyes meet mine, then squeeze shut as his teeth grit. He shudders deep inside me, and a peculiar warmth builds in spurts within me. The lawbat trembles in my arms. Looks just darling. I cup his cheek in my unsteady paw, feeling it move as he whispers my name in return.

And it's just now I decide this whole having a fella deal might not be so bad.



* * * * *

Blake lies curled up beside me, dreaming his sweet little bat dreams. His

velvety wings feel real nice against me. Between them and the soft sheets and the beat of his heart, wild notions start taking shape. For a moment, I even contemplate staying around and wearing fine things and enjoying the good sheriff's company in a number of ways. But that's all bosh; even if I wanted to stay, Hayes knows I'm a woman. Some feisty bunnygirl shows up on the sheriff's wing, he'd have to be nuttier 'an a squirrel turd not to spot me. No, this ain't the time and I ain't the type.

Nice as it feels, I slip my sore body out from under his wing. Looking back, I see him sleeping there, all wings and ears, his muzzle buried in the pillow where my scent is strongest. If I'm any kind of reasonable, I'll steal a pony and ride until I got to where nobody had ever heard of Tanner Hayes. No way that lion will think to look for a dead bunny in the wild peaks of Montana.

I'm a trifle unsteady, but I find my way around. Despite the bum arm, I get dressed, strap on my boss new gunbelt, and set two pieces of metal and one of paper on the nightstand. I lay a gentle kiss on Blake's fuzzy cheek and then, like the last glint of the moon at daybreak, I'm gone.



Chapter 25

One paw reaches behind me, feeling the silver gun I traded an entire mine for.

~~~~~

I sit.

My claws dig furrows in the dry soil. The desert rolls on in all directions around me. I shake more dust from my mane.

Morris is long gone. So is most of my money. Sources in White Rock saw him and that old hare driving a wagon out with all the ore we'd refined. I sent my few remaining men after them, but I won't be surprised if they desert me entirely. Those two must've been playing me from the start. Did the ore ever do all they said? Would it have gotten me the town, the territory, my rightful empire?

The ore's gone; the mine's gone; my easy road to power is gone.

How'd this all get away from me so fast? Perhaps the ore had more effect on me than I had thought.

Best not to go back to my house or the office too soon. Might be an ambush. Mary Elizabeth's left me anyhow, leaving a hollow I didn't expect. Anger tries to rise there, but it just tumbles back into the depths. Much as I cursed her barrenness, her gossiping, her constant pining for the lost comforts of back east, I never once considered she was in some way dear to me as gold, elevating me above the rabble here in the Frontier since so few manage to procure and keep a

wife. Females get thoughts above their station out here, far from civilization.

I snarl. I'd love to think the bunny is dead, but know better than to hope. Who'd have thought a prey critter, a female to boot, could pass muster? Tough. Single-minded. Almost predatory.

I've lost money, but that's nothing compared to the respect I've had stolen. The law'll be paying me more heed; who knows, maybe the sheriff can even make a few charges stick now?

I need time to think, make a plan. The world's all turned around on me, and I need to reckon with the situation. Figure the safest place to do it is out here in the desert, where no one'd think to look. Even a lion can vanish out here in the wastes.

If my wife leaving is the loss of a precious possession, Morris's betrayal is a tool rising to strike me of its own accord— so unexpected that the shock stings worse than the injury. Where did it all start to slip? How long had he been playing me like a fiddle? Likely I'll never know. Never has anyone pulled the mane over my eyes like that before. At least not that I've known... How many times in my life have I been duped and never known? Perhaps even by my own kin, sending me out here to be rid of me?

What to do now? I'm not crawling back east to the family. I've still got my wits and I've still got my claws. Opportunity will come again, and I'll pounce on it. That's what Father would do.

I see something shiny on a rise. A black carriage— Mei Xiu. What in tarnation is a rich, beautiful tigress doing in my lonely patch of desert? I find my feet and start walking. My paws find every loose spot to slip in on the way. Every step makes me wish the bunny's skull was crunching under my hind paws in place of gravel. Mei Xiu would understand. Come to think of it, she breezed into town just as this ore business started. Maybe she hasn't deserted me.

Walking up the rise toward the silken form of a tigress, I feel ashamed for her to see me as I am. Filthy and powerless, her elegance mocks me. But as I look up at her, I see that feral glint in her eyes, measuring me as always, stripping me to the bone. She'll understand. She'll fix this. She'll come along on a bunny hunt. One paw reaches behind me, feeling the silver gun I traded my entire life for. That bunny's yet to see the last of me.





## Chapter 26

*I am not sad to see his mine destroyed.*

~~~~~

The mind adapts to anything. Like the folding-paper of Japan, it can take any form and yet remain itself. Despite this, it is forever changed, however slightly, by each new fold. So too are we changed by our thoughts.

I watch through my field glasses. The lion walks up the hill. His fur hangs heavy with dust and grime. I slip the glasses back into their case, striped paws folding atop it as one would hold a purse. I pity Hayes. Not because he lost his fortune, but because he feels lost without it. Money is a tool, nothing more. Tools come and go, only useful insofar as they unearth knowledge. Knowledge alone cannot be taken. And though I came here to study the ore, the situation is not a complete loss, but Hayes can see it no other way. I pity his blindness, his lack of self-knowledge, that keeps him from all he could be.

I nod as the lion approaches. “Mister Hayes.”

“Madam.” His posture is proud, but his eyes don’t quite meet my own. I had never seen a lion before leaving the Homeland and finding one here was a rare bloom in this wasteland of prey. This is a harsh, brutish land and those who live here are equally so. It only makes sense that the noble cats would be rougher here, in a land where even the herbivores wield silver claws. Wild though he is, he can be tended.

I will have to keep him from unproductive indulgences, such as revenge. To hunt the constable bat would be injurious. To hunt the rabbit, deadly. The marmot alone concerns me, the one with the ore. He must be our prey, followed by his masters. Only then will I have the ore and the time to study it.

My tail stays in a dignified curl, low but never touching the ground. Wind curls around us. I am reminded of our hunts together, when I have shared his ravenous ferocity. Now, though, he is quiet of word and body. My lips curl in a smile, though not one rude enough to show teeth. Perhaps this scrap of paper might be folded again.

I am not sad to see his mine destroyed. With luck, it will be forgotten so I might return one day and study it without interference. That Hayes' traitorous underlings escaped with the ore is more troubling. Few organizations would have the money and the knowledge to finance such a theft.

I climb into the carriage. Hayes follows. I signal my attendant, and we three ride over the parched, bitter ground.

The battle has been lost, but the war has not ended.



Epilogue

Might as well court the moon.

~~~~~

I wake to Six's smell and an empty bed. I worry for a moment that she might have fallen to the floor, but when I sit up the room looms empty. My ears swivel around, but I hear only Harding's soft snores from the next room. I jump out of bed and search the small house. Gone. Gone seems to be the state of being for hares these days.

Can't say I'm overly surprised. I just wish she would've stayed another day or two. Just to wait for the ruckus to die down.

Morning light shines off something on the nightstand.

My badge.

Six's pin.

And, under them, a note. I pick it up. The heavy paper holds her scent, like the bed, like my fur. I rub my paw pads over the surface of it for a moment, knowing that this will be the only communication I have with her for a long ways down the road. I swallow back my pride, knowing this must be twice as tough on her. This letter no doubt says as much. With tender care, I open it and read.

*I took your pony.*

-S.

I cuss. Loudly.

So loud the deputy comes stumbling in from the next room, bleary-eyed and drooly. "Sun in the sky! What's all the racket, boss?"

Why'd it have to be my pony? "Nothing, Harding. Just bunny trouble." I shake my head, then realize I'm standing around in my skivvies. I look around the little guest room, under the bed and behind the nightstand. "Deputy? You happen to see my pants anywhere?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Months roll past. Never did find those pants, though I have some fine memories of where I know they are.

Half of Scoria Grove saw me hollering in a dress before a blacksmith fetched his hacksaw and freed me from that wagon. I recently sent him a fine bottle of bourbon for his trouble.

Doc testified to the city council that I was fit for duty, that mine gas could make a man do funny things. The jabs at me for being found in a dress continued unabated, but lost their venom, since I was generally believed not to be in a right state of mind. Besides, any bunny wily enough to survive attacking Hayes' factory and blowing up his mine twice must be capable of doping a sheriff.

Hayes vanished after his gossipmonger wife left him, taking with her the bulk of his belongings. I hope she left him his pants. Rumors abound concerning where he fled, though it all rings of idle speculation, since most of the stories claim he wandered into the desert without water or provisions, never returning. If he's still alive, I've not caught wind of his scheming. Nonetheless, I've seen and heard too much in the past months to let my guard down just yet. I've had Harding stash those papers we stole from his office, on the off chance the lion tries putting me to a quiet end.

I ought to tell myself that it's just as well Six's gone, just as well she's never coming back. Not like I could ever court her, even if I was sure I loved her, which I'm not. She's too different, too contrary. Might as well court the moon. It's pretty, sure, but nothing you've got matters a whit to it, and nothing on Earth can buy you more than a night's viewing. Besides, if her heart's as wild as her spirit, she probably left my memory out in the sands on the way out of town. I ought to forget her too. But thoughts of her just keep creeping up like a crescent moon's light.

Since she left, I can't look at the jail cell the same. Or my bed. I sleep there once in a while, instead of on the rafter. Always, my dreams are of soft ears, nimble paws, and her warm, lingering scent...

I shake these thoughts off and keep to my paperwork. Ate up too much of my yearly budget buying a new pony. Now I can't scrap together the funds to fix the office door. I sigh. Some other year, I guess. Gives me a headache. It's well onto midnight now and I'm starting to feel it. Even bats have to sleep sometime. I get up. A good stretch of the wings and I'll be ready for some shut-eye. Just a quick flight on the night air; even in November, the Arizona sky remains inviting to the wing.

I open the front door and glance up at the stars.

A paw grabs my shoulder.

I go for my gun, but feel it get snatched away by another nimble paw. In a moment of panic, I spin and dive at my accoster's legs, causing a tall, wiry form to coming toppling down over me.

Hot breath sweeps over my face.

Soft ears sway against my cheeks.

"This ain't exactly the sort of tumble ah was aiming for, sugar bat."

I stammer. "Si—"

My thief puts a finger to my lips, handing me back the gun.

I take it, holster it, and stare. She leans down and kisses me. For an instant, I'm too stunned to do anything but enjoy it. The kiss ends and I look around. Good. Nobody saw me getting cozy with some tall bunny fella. Scrambling to my hind paws, I guide her into the building with a wing. She shuts the door, the scent of bunny, cigarettes, and gun oil thick in the air. My heart chugs like a speeding train. "Didn't think to see you here again."

"You never do." She laughs.

I don't. My guts are in a twist. "Care to change that?"

She brushes a paw along my muzzle, very soft, and gives me an apologetic look. "I don't put up fences, I just ride 'em. This is just the way of the world right now."

I want to call her on that, but she's kissing me again. Turns out that's the straight route for shutting me up. I can smell her, the scent stronger than I remember. Makes me soft in the knees, and the reverse elsewhere. In fact, the only other time I caught this much of her scent was when we'd just crawled out of the rapids and cuddled up...

I stop the kissing again. "You're in heat."

Blushing, she replies by nibbling along the underside of my muzzle.

Protests wither on my tongue. She's in my wings again. It might only be for a day, might only be for tonight, though that doesn't matter to me. In this moment, I can't conceive of her being anywhere but here, anything but mine.

I don't know what to make of this hare, but I do know one thing: whether she's here or gone, I'll never get much sleep at night.



The development process for *Sixes Wild: Manifest Destiny* started shortly after I’d published “Code Drop” in Sofawolf Press’s *Heat* anthology. They asked if I’d be interested in writing a novel for them and I jumped on the idea—even as a kid, I’d dreamed of being a published author.

Early on, we’d decided that it should probably have a romantic theme, because I’m sappy enough to be really good at that. The specifics of the novel, or even its genre, were tougher to pin down. I’d been developing a few different fantasy and sci-fi settings over the years, but all were projects mired in layers of re-writing. I even toyed with the idea of writing a Victorian-Era detective novel, though that turned out to be gay fiction and, as the Blotch so wisely pointed out to me upon our first meeting, why would Sofawolf have bothered to finally find a straight novelist if I was just going to write more male-male romance?

By this time, it’s worth noting, I’d already started to be recognized at furry conventions such as Midwest Furfest and Anthrocon as “that cowboy at the Sofawolf table.”

Finally, a breakthrough arrived in the form of a conversation with Sofawolf CEO Jeff Eddy. The details of it have faded from my memory, but the following is at least as interesting as the original.

Tempo: “So I’m thinking of writing this sci-fi piece...”

Jeff: “We could do that, sure, but how will we pitch that? What does a cowboy know about sci-fi?”

Tempo: “What, so I should just write a furry western?”

Jeff: “You could.”

Tempo: “We don’t even publish westerns.”

Jeff: “We could.”

Tempo: “I suppose I should just make it about a fruit bat sheriff, and call it ‘Long Tongue of the Law’?”

Jeff: “That’s great! Except the title is horrible. We can change that after you write it.”

Thinking this was some sort of joke, I quickly penned a short story by that title. The response was more or less as follows:

Tempo: “Well, here’s that story.”

Jeff: “I like it. Can’t wait to see it in novel form.”

The rest is fuzzy alternate history.

## **The Process**

I wrote most of the novel in WriteRoom, which is a wonderful little word processor that blacks out the entire screen and just shows you words in green. I’ve used it for years and it’s amazing. This was the first project where I adopted Scrivener, which was designed from the ground up as a novelist’s project-management tool. That’s tech-talk for the closest thing you’ll get to software that builds a novel for you. It’s like a wiki, personal assistant, and the useful parts of Microsoft Word all rolled into one elegant whole.

Usually, I wrote in WriteRoom, then pasted into Scrivener, though when I found myself writing in Scrivener for extended periods, I used an app called Nocturne to invert the screen colors and turn it monochrome. If this seems like overkill, it’s worth keeping in mind that my eyes are usually the first thing to get tired after a half-dozen hours of writing. I strongly encourage anyone who’s serious about writing to look into these apps, especially Scrivener (which is now even available on Windows).

To write Sixes, I stampeded from beginning to end until I had a draft. Then I inflicted this draft on as many hapless friends as I could until they pointed out things they didn’t understand or wanted to see more of. It went from about 30,000 words to about 60,000 by the time it hit print.

In my current projects, I’m trying to do a more modular project setup: building the bare-bones minimum of the story with as few scenes as I could get away with, then plugging in more and more scenes. While I do believe in the



“everything should advance the plot” theory, these scenes are the fat that makes it delicious.

## **The Art**

The illustrations for the novel and the comic book started at the same time, in the hands of Shinigamigirl and Sidian, who were the artists respectively. The three of us kept in communication to make sure we’d have a consistent look for the series. The cover for the novel took the longest of any single piece for this project, but I have to say it was well worth the wait. Sofawolf and I considered some other poses, including Six holding some poker cards, but in the end we decided Shinigamigirl’s simpler profile design was more elegant. I consider the finished piece to be one of the finest images ever to grace a novel and myself to be the most unbiased judge of such things. The internals entailed less deliberation, once Alopex (esteemed editorial fox) and Jeff helped pin down which scenes we’d be using. My favorite is currently a tie between Six and Blake nude in bed or Six reunited with her father for a fleeting instant.

Oh, and while we’re talking about the cover, Ursa Award winner Kyell Gold helped me write the back text.

The comic presented a unique challenge for Sidian and myself. Neither of us had worked on a comic in any serious way before, nor had we read many graphic novels. After a crash course in the medium, we settled on a simple, classic style that fit well with the basic comics of the book’s era. The viewing angle changes only slightly, text at the bottom provides additional context, and the speech bubbles don’t stand out as much as the typical white ones would have. I did the placement of the text, which meant being very choosy with what dialog needed to be in the story, so as not to block the pictures she’d worked for months on. Actually, his wasn’t the first comic script I’d written. During my internship with Sofawolf Press, they had me write an original story in this format. We’ll see if that sees print in some form in the future.

Due the POV switches between four different characters, it was tough for readers of the first drafts to keep track of who had point of view. My aunt Barb pointed out to me that the Wheel of Time series had far more than 4 characters to follow, but overcame this by including icons at the beginning of each chapter. These woodblock-style icons represent who has point-of-view in a particular chapter. So, I scrambled to get ahold of Yuki-chi, who was then able to finish four very elegant woodblocks in time for the layout. An interesting bit of trivia: the originals for these are massive—about 5000 pixels per inch at the size

they're printed. Most high-end printed illustrations run at about 300 ppi.

## **Blake**

Physiologically, Blake was a challenge. Not only had I not written bats before, they're rather rare in furry literature. So I took pains to make sure he acted like a bat: hanging upside-down whenever possible, flying whenever it helped, and having to be careful since he's not the most sturdy of creatures.

Sidian helped a lot with the wing design: two fingers, two wing-fingers, and a thumb. She, Shinigamigirl, and I all adopted this model as soon as we started the comic, which was about halfway through the editing process. I usually call Blake's fingers "wing thumbs" rather than calling them "fingers" because the latter term makes it feel like he has full-fledged hands.

Shooting guns with three fingers hurts, by the way. I tracked down two friends, a history buff and a Chinese-Philosophy major, who owned the Colt Peacemaker and S&W Model 3 that Six and Blake use. Turns out Stephen King knew what he was talking about when his Gunslinger lost two fingers and had real trouble firing a gun properly—normally the ring and pinky finger absorb a lot of the kick from a pistol, so having them out of the equation makes the damn thing try to fly out off like a pinched lawbat.

So Blake fires guns with his feet. This choice drove poor Sidian up the wall a bit, since she is not used to drawing people shooting guns with their feet. No idea why.

For a while, I had concerns about Blake's echolocation. He's a hybrid fruit bat and human-size, so I had no idea if either of those would have impacted his abilities. Turns out I didn't need to worry. A guy named Daniel Kish has been blind most of his life, but learned to echolocate by clicking his tongue. He's apparently taught several hundred other blind people how to do the same.

Also, due to logistics, Blake apparently eats a lot of canned fruit. I assume even the restrained sheriff goes a bit overboard on the fresh fruit when he can get his wings on it.

## **Six**

One concept that didn't make it into the final novel was *The Moon Bunny*. The idea was that each race sees something different in the craters on the moon, so the hares see a bunny stirring a cauldron or pot of medicine. This was dropped because it didn't really tie in anywhere.

The model of Colt Six carries doesn't seem to have been very common in the 1890s, but I really wanted her to have the shorter "gunfighter" barrel lengths. Not only does this have the practical advantage of being faster to draw, it (along with the silver plate and engraving) gives her guns a look historical gun experts refer to as "badass."

Originally, Six was going to have gun handles made from the sign from her parent's homestead. Her parents had a big metal plaque that said Haus House. When her father died, they left it there. When Six snuck back west, however, she found it and made the handles for her guns for it. That was the plan anyway. This was dropped because everything in the Old West is already brown.

The biggest issue I had with art of Six has always been her ears. Desert hares have massive ears and artists almost always try to play it safe and give her reasonable-looking ears their first try. Wrong. Massive ears. Ears that break out of comic panels. Ears that defy the very laws of reason. Those are proper desert hare ears.

As for her voice, I've had fans thank me for having her be from their neck of the woods. The wood has no shortage of necks, it would seem. Since Six was born out west (where lots of different accents would be present), then moved to the the South, then back to the West...she has a complex accent. In the end, I represented this background by giving her a sizzle of southern intonation and a solid helping of phrases from my linguistics research into the time period, all overlaid atop the way my grandmother talks when she's being dramatic. I also tried to include hints that she's smarter than she lets on, especially when this allows her to razz Blake.

Six has a German last name. It's a pun, naturally: Haus (meaning "house") sounds like Häuschen, or bunny. This comes from the extensive knowledge of the German language I've acquired from eating German food. As an added bonus, this means the bronze sign on the door of their frontier home said "House." My brain makes these sorts of connections all the time, so I might as well work them into my writing for readers to unearth.

## **Hayes**

The lion went through several revisions, going from a complete brute to a schemer to a pawn. He ended up with all these as layers. He now thinks he's in charge, but is really just the game piece the three sides are trying to control: Six, Mei Xiu, and the organization Bennet and Morris work for.

What I wasn't expecting was for people to actually like Hayes. Personally, I

find him worthy of contempt, but that's probably just because I know him so well.

Even as I write this, friends continue to talk about how much they like him. Keiron White, one of my editors and animator for the Sixes Wild short, postulates the following: "I'd say the reason people like Hayes is -because- he's so worthy of contempt. That's a sign of a great villain. He's got enough complexity behind him to back it up. His personality is that of a contemptible jerk with a lot of power (both physically and monetarily), and his actions seem to match. The fact that he is also conflicted about many things is what really makes him interesting. His own nature versus his role in civilized society, for example. His nature as a lion aside, he's generally rather wild and aggressive to begin with, but he has to remain calm and civil for the most part and can only really cut loose on rare occasions. The hunts, for example. He's also a lion of much power, but not only is he surrounded by people he finds largely mindless minions or prey - he's also been upstaged by one that he considers himself far superior to, both in status and the implied food chain. The end of Manifest Destiny was a blow to his pride. He got a prize though, so that's some small consolation to his pride, and a fairly good trophy."

Granted, I enjoyed Bester from Babylon 5, so who am I to judge? I would probably like Battlestar Galactica's Baltar too, had he not stolen my hair style.

### **Bennet and Morris**

Awfully chummy, aren't they?

### **Mei Xiu**

Compared to the other three POV characters, Mei Xui was added fairly late to the novel. She serves several purposes: illustrating larger forces are at work here, giving Hayes someone he actually respects and can use as a sounding board, and giving some tidbits about the lore of the ore.

### **Ponies vs. Horses**

What to do with the horses—that became an recurrent tinkering point in the novel. I liked the idea of anthro horses in the Old West, but I also liked the idea that the characters could ride about iconically on the four-legged sort. I toyed with some alternatives, like replacing the quadrupeds with giant lizards, but that was scrapped in favor of the far more elegant solution of just calling the anthros

“horses” and the rideable ones “ponies”. This idea came fairly late in the game, though, as you can see in the older documents like Six’s backstory.

Of course, this book came out just before a certain adorable TV show changed the word “pony” forever.

### **Western Writers of America**

These folks were quite receptive to my writing a furry western. I even ended up joining, thanks to this book.

Knowing this might well be my only chance to meet other heterosexual cowboys, I was eager to attend their convention (hosted in my home city of Bismarck that year!) However, it fell on the same weekend as Anthrocon. In the end, I decided it would be wise to actually release my novel. I printed up some extra copies of the Sixes Wild comic book for them to distribute, however.

I wasn’t sure how a group of people who were so dedicated to the genre would react to furry romance, but the reactions have ranged from bewildered approval to approving bewilderment. Sixes even got nominated for their Spur Award, which is their highest honor.

### **Furry Writers’ Guild**

One thing I certainly didn’t expect was to win the Coyótl Award! The Furry Writer’s Guild was the flip side of the coin from the WWA: the only thing that threw them a bit was that someone would write a western about various species of bipedal talking animal people in fancy hats. If ever I’ve questioned if I’m in the right fandom...

## **Additional Background**

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When I first started the novel, Jeff at Sofawolf Press suggested I write summaries of the story from each of the three main character’s points of view. I’ve also included Six’s original backstory concept. Keep in mind that these are old and some parts don’t reflect the current canon, such as Six’s gun handles.

Six's Story

I don't have a lick a' sense. That's the sum cause of the thing.

Supposin' for a hare's breath that I were a reasonable creature, I'd've run out on that lawbat first chance I got, then seen to putting distance, time, and whiskey between us.

So much for that.

Started out reasonable enough. I breeze into town, hear Hayes (the local lion big bug) staging a robbery on himself, and steal the money first. The only hitch is the Sheriff. Didn't figure he'd luck out and find me 'fore I could even throw Hayes' men off my trail. Lawbat then tussles with me long enough for them to catch us.

The beefers are about to plug us both. I figure I might enjoy a dip in Skull Creek better. I take the lawbat with me because, well, he didn't really earn a bullet.

Once we climb out, we're dying a' cold in the desert night. Comes to pass that the lawbat, Jordan Blake by name, wind up cuddling to keep warm and not die. Entirely practical, given the situation, though not without its enjoyable moments.

Come morning, Sheriff has the bright idea of grabbin' one a' my guns. First he's fixing to bring me into town, but then sees just how charming and upstanding of a bunny I am and can't stand to see me locked away.

Hayes' goons stumble onto us, though, and are fixin' to shoot us. To throw them off, I shoot Blake instead.

My plan works out just dandy, and I manage to detain all the outlaws with only minor injury to the poor lawbat. Still feel a trifle bad about it, but sometimes you've gotta fight a cactus to get the water. I take the lot of them back to Doc in town. He patches them up, and the outlaws get sent upriver. I skedaddle 'fore Hayes gets an eyeful of me.

I come back a month later and do a little conversing on Hayes' plan. I apologize for the business of shooting his wing and make sure it's alright. Then I give a few other parts a' him a close look-see as well. I get a mite nervous, though, and take the precaution of locking him in one of his own cells. He takes it all like a gentleman, leastwise up 'til the point where Deputy Harding walks in on us. Understandable, what with Blake not having any pants on and all.

Anyways, I chalk this up to being in heat and mosey on out a' town.

Ah take off, trying to get back into my usual trouble, but can't shake thoughts a' Blake. Unconcernin' this, I set myself on gathering some leverage on Hayes,

or at least finding what manner a' ruin he's liable to try raining on me. My guns pull me toward the lion's abandoned mining claim, but I find it not so abandoned. He's bringing all sorts a' cattle and foodstuffs down there. After some careful considerin', I drop in on Blake and we do some right nice things for each other, seein' as how we're both a touch lonesome.

The next morning, I try getting a little backing from him for exploring the mine and maybe raising a little hell for Hayes if hell's what's called for. That duded up little squeak-rat claimed he had to get a whole mess a' "evidence" 'fore he could go visiting violence upon any feline bigwigs. I blasted a fitting measure a' steam at him and charge up the mountain to see it all right mahself.

The idiot lawbat comes up after me and gets himself captured. Twice the fool I ever was, I go in and save him. Something in the rocks down there messes with my head, but I shake it off. Odd thing is, an old hare calls out my father's name...

We get back to town and see about collectin' a posse to go arrest some folk for knocking around a lawman.

The mine blows up.

Hayes'd done it just to dupe the town into thinking I'd gone and attacked him and his. I make bunny tracks outta town before he can catch me.

Some weeks later, I'm sitting by my little campfire and Blake drops from the night sky like a terror on wings. Takes considerable restraint to shoot near his head instead a' through it, which he was notably ungrateful for.

We head back to the mine in the morning, finding it not as exploded as Hayes put on. Going in through the back entrance, I get real dizzy this time. I wind up having a talk with my Daddy's ghost. Blake, being the touchy sort, takes my keeling over with womanly panic and hauls my insensible tail back to town.

We meet up with Doc and his wife. Seems Blake has recruited the foxes to assist us against Hayes. First appreciable help he's been. The four of us decide the best way to get hard proof on Hayes is to sneak into his party. After some minor confusion as to how opposed to dresses I am, we stick Blake into one and the two of us head out.

At the shindig, we find iced beer and Hayes' records of taking an amount of strange ore outta the mine. Being duly thorough in my searchin', I come upon a pile a' this ore and start on another dive into the spirit world. Blake seals away the ore just in time for us to almost get caught and have to hop out the window. Hayes' men are on us in a hurry, so I cuff Blake inside a wagon and chase the pony team off. I get conked by a panther and the world goes black.

I have another vision of my father, finding out that he was in this mine years ago and ended up doing in the prior Hayes who ran it. I wake up and Hayes tries to have a little chat with me. In the course of it, he finds I am a woman and I find the need to put a bullet in his skull. Typically yellow, he sends a gaggle a' ore-doped miners after me while he hoofs it outta here. I take issue with this and shoot the TNT box by the entrance by the entrance as he passes by it.

The mine explodes properly this time. I expected to be dead, but am instead puked out the side of it by a big ol' puddle a' water under it. Blake swoops in and carries me to the foxes before anybody feel the brunt a' my displeasure at this. The foxes put my arm back in place and send me to recover at Deputy Harding's house. I never could abide sittin' idle, so after exchanging some pleasantries 'twixt the sheets with Blake, I take my leave.

Few months later, life and my unwiser notions conspire to send me back to White Rock. I wile away some time deciding if I really feel the need to risk hot lead in my tail just to see more a' that dang lawbat. In the end, I slink on into town and find my sweet little fruit bat. Not sure what in the hell mah plan is, but seems Blake's now a part of 'em. As I said, I ain't got a lick of sense.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Blake's Diary

July 5th, 1890 -

Yesterday I had the displeasure of being hurled in a creek, tied up, and shot.

The day had mundane makings— at sunset, I stood watching the festivities with Doc when Deputy Harding pushed through the crowd at a dead run. He informed me that Hayes' General Store had been robbed. I flew down there with all due haste, finding Tanner Hayes already fuming. As we were talking, my thief stole my own pony from the city stables and rode off! I gave chase, but the scoundrel escaped. I found another pony and headed off in pursuit.

I caught up with the thief beside Skull Creek, hours later. Gave the suspect a chance to surrender, the result of which was having the desert hare throw a shovel at me and then knock the gun out of my paw. Attempted to detain suspect physically, but we were that very moment happened upon by a number of ruffians. I announced my title and intent, but they attempted to shoot me. I surely would have taken a bullet, had not the hare knocked us both into the creek.

We emerged far downstream. I had taken a blow to the head and the bunny

had me at a disadvantage— I had lost my pistol. I was tied up, but in the course of the night we were forced to huddle close together for warmth or face hypothermia. It was then that close quarters caused me to make a discovery: this hare was a woman!

I wish at this time to assure you that this close contact was nothing ungentlemanly, just to stop any idle speculation later. Not long after I had assured the lady her secret was safe with me, we were again accosted by desperadoes. Six, my charming thief, claimed they were in the employ of Tanner Hayes himself. They were about to shoot us, but the bunny found a most unusual way to stop them— she shot me!

In the confusion that followed, she was able to shoot the stunned bandits. As they were still intent on shooting me, I decided to throw my lot in with hers, wounding one of the bandits myself.

After she dressed my wounded wing, she loaded all parties involved onto ponies and we headed back to town. She deposited us at Doc's and fled before Hayes could notice her.

As I write this, Hayes has just left, having been met with the fiery mercies of Charlotte. His behavior was strange, demanding to see the wounded men, as if he knew all along there were more men involved.

August 5th, 1890 -

I find myself slowly recovering in strength. Though I don't care much for the sling Doc has placed on my wing, I am even less fond of his continued insistence that I sleep in a bed, rather than hanging properly from a rafter.

Forget all previous complains, as I have had something far more confounding just occur. Six Shooter returned. She checked to make sure I was alright, chatting casually with me. Then, as if drawn together by some strange magnetism, we found ourselves in each other's embrace, getting a trifle amorous. The long and short of it is I ended up locked in one of my own cells when Harding spooked her. Wouldn't have been so bad, save for the fact that I was light a pair of trousers at the time. A wholly mortifying conclusion to the encounter. I'm not sure what I'm thinking, allowing that woman to make inroads on my heart. It isn't as if I could settle down with somebody like her, or rather that she could never settle down with me.

Still, I end up thinking about her. Surely, this will diminish with time.

August 20, 1890 -

I find myself thinking of Six more and more. I have yet to let it interfere with my duties.

September 4, 1890 -

Six arrived at my office late last night and spent the night in my wings. In the morning, she confessed that she wanted me to come with her to investigate Hayes' mine. I said that would, once we had collected some information. This was not good enough for her, and she took off in a huff. After trying to find some information here, I eventually surrendered my better sense and gave chase after her.

I didn't find her on route, but there are many ways up the side of the mountain. Upon seeing some men at Hayes' mine, I landed to ask them some questions. This resulted in one of them taking me unaware and knocking me unconscious. I awoke in a dingy cell with Six hauling me to my feet. We made our escape, though she was affected adversely by something in the mine. We hid on the mountain for a few hours before making our way down. Once back in town, we began organizing a posse to investigate the mine more fully. The mine then exploded.

A town meeting was called. Having been tipped off by a bunny who'd witnessed our escape, Hayes identified "Jasper Haus" as the hare who'd broken into his mine and dynamited it, posting a reward for his arrest. It became clear this "Jasper" was indeed Six. She fled to avoid capture.

September 14, 1890 -

I have been piecing together clues from my uncle's journals. This, combined with some information from Harding, has led me to believe there is more going on here than I at first suspected. Turns out that Harding reported the former Hayes' mining operation to the Office of Indian Affairs, since it cuts in on 'yote holy land. This resulted in Jasper Haus, Six's father being sent out to investigate. Before the investigation was complete, however, Jasper ended up killing the elder Hayes and being wounded himself. I shall have to check into this further.

September 15, 1890 -

Fate has seen to it that I learn more about the Jasper-Hayes affair. One of Hayes' men confronted me for delaying the search for Six yet again, but Doc

smooth-talked him off my case. I was then obliged to accept, at long last, his invitation to dinner. While there, he and the misses informed me further on the subject of Hayes' mine. What's more, it seems Charlotte has known for some time now that Six is a woman! I nearly choked on their fine cactus wine when she hinted at that fact. Does everybody in this town know more than I do?

September 16, 1890 -

I flew out and located Six in the desert, with some aid from Harding. We re-entered the mine, more covertly this time. However, the mine seemed to have an even more detrimental effect on her this time, as she passed out soon after entering. I brought her back to the foxes' place, where we started to formulate a new plan.

Unfortunately for me, this plan entailed me wearing a dress so we could infiltrate a party being held at the Hayes estate in Scoria Grove. After embarrassments I shall not go into here, I managed to find records of the ore Hayes has been digging up. Shortly after, we were found by Hayes and had to flee. His men tried to stop us, but Six handcuffed me to a cart and chased the horse team off!

After being freed from my predicament by the local sheriff, I set off after Six. As I neared White Rock, the mine once more exploded, nearly cracking the mountain in half. I knew instantly that Six had to be involved. I flew with all haste to the washout that had been created by pent-up water inside the mine. I found Six, half-drown and half-deaf, but alive. I managed to fly her to the edge of town, despite some unladylike comments she made. I wish I could say these were brought on by the delirium from the mine collapsing around her.

At Harding's place, the foxes and I managed to put Six's arm back into place, which was the worst of her injuries. We decided it would be for the best if she hid out here for the time being.

September 18, 1890 -

I visited Six today, to see how she was recovering. Being alone and happy to be alive, we became somewhat amorous. I fell fast asleep beside her. To my sorrow, but not to my shock, she was gone when I awoke.

January 4, 1891 -

I had only just now begun to contemplate what life would be like without Six.

She showed up today. I find myself forced now to contemplate life with her.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Hayes' Story

You see, Mei Xiu, it all started when I arranged for some funds to go missing. The intent was for them to end up in the right paws, keep the right eyes looking elsewhere. But somehow that damned bunny found out and managed to steal the cash first!

I know, I know. I have to control myself.

Once I heard tell of the robbery, I summoned the sheriff. I mostly meant it for show; I'd already sent Morris to go round up our would-be thieves and send them after that bunny. The next morning, my men were hauled back into town by the sheriff and here, trussed up like turkeys. I demanded to see them, but the fox and his wife wouldn't hear of it, seeing as how they were wounded. In the end, they were shipped off to prison before I could get anything from them about the money.

No, it wasn't really about the money. You're right. It was about a threat, a threat to what was mine. I can see that now. Too bad I had to lose everything first.

After that, I plotted with Morris on how best to deal with the situation. Luckily for that rabbit, she didn't show her face in town for a while.

Oh, yes. Didn't I mention? She's a woman! Just dresses like a man. Of all the prey debauchery...

I had no real means of getting revenge and had resigned myself to waiting, when the sheriff showed up at my mine unannounced. Some of my men found him, roughed him up (without asking me, mind you), and locked him up in the mine. When I heard about this, I was riled something fierce. I didn't let it affect my judgement, however, instructing the men to clean the lawbat up and bring him to town to recover in the comfort of my offices, the better to explain this as a sad misunderstanding.

But that bunny had to come charging in! She blindsided two of my men, stole the key, and hauled the sheriff out of the cell. I would never have even known who she was, were it not for Bennet, another hare, swearing up and down that she was Jasper Haus, his long lost relation of some sort.

I had to think fast. I knew that once the sheriff got back to town in that

condition, people would be coming up here to see just what I had been doing. I didn't need that manner of attention, so I dynamited the front entrance.

Yes! It was rash. But I needed a plan and that seemed as good as any. Someday, when I'm back on my feet, I'll dig you all the mines you want.

I spent some time stewing in my own juices. This was about the time we had one of our little hunts. You remember: the one where that fat lizard got jammed between the bounders? I knew you wouldn't forget...

The next time I saw the sheriff and hare was at that party I hosted. Yes, that one. I think everyone was having a right lovely time until the fight. But what most folks never realized was that not only was the bunny dressed as a man, but the sheriff was wearin' a dress! The lawbat managed to escape somehow, but my men caught Six Shooter.

No, I assume that's not her real name. She has some connection to Jasper Haus, the bunny who killed my uncle, who had some tie to Bennet, but he's gone and probably still running now, and with no small amount of my money. If I ever get my claws on him or his little marmot friend, I'll—

Oh. Yes. I had them bring her back to the mine, so I could get the truth from her. It was then that I found she was a woman.

It was nothing indecent! She's only prey, madam. Ugh! No, it's just that certain facts came to my awareness in the process of interigatin'.

My finding this out brought forth a fearsome reaction from the bunny. In the twitch of a whisker, she had grabbed one of her guns and was fighting my men.

Of course I had her tied up! I didn't get this far in life taking unneeded chances.

Never in my life had I seen prey put up such a fight. Beautiful, after a fashion. But not so beautiful that I cared to stand around and wait for her to plug me. I took off, one of her guns in paw. I knew that she'd come back that way, and I could have my revenge on her on my own terms.

I had just about made it out of the mine when she did the unthinkable. She somehow managed to shoot our explosives, propelling me out of the entrance like a cork and collapsing the mine completely.

Sometime in the confusion, Bennet and Morris made off with my money and the ore. I sent men after them, but I've not heard so much as a word back.

Now what's this you say about where the ore might be going?

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Six's Past

I grew up poor. Dirt poor on a dirt farm.

Daddy had been an off-and-on lawman. He took a bullet in the gut the year before we homesteaded. Never recovered his full strength. I reckon he was happier farming, even with that lead still in him. Momma was able-bodied enough, but she was doing the work of at least ten people, eleven after that. So it fell to me to fetch things from town.

I was a shy child and even then I had never taken to dressing like a proper girl, so when a few of the folks from town started jawing at me like a boy, I couldn't drum up the sass to tell 'em 'no.' Word got around that the new hares down the road had a darlin' little son. Momma thought this was for the best anyway. Daddy didn't, but he had enough trouble tending to the few cattle we had, let alone trying to check up on my every move.

Helps that I'm taller than the most of folk. My breasts ain't precisely a part of the Rocky Mountains either, but they suit me fine, thank you very much. A good loose shirt and you'd never know I was packin' a cozy little burrow in place of a trouser snake.

Daddy died the winter I turned sixteen. Broke my heart and Momma's spirit. She loved him something fearsome, like I've never seen anybody love anything.

We moved back East, but I found it not to my liking. I had a good bit a' country in my blood by then, and the city wasn't the place for me. Worse, we lived with my Grandma Roslin, and she would not abide her fine young granddaughter gallivanting around dressed as a boy. Before Daddy was gone, when Momma wasn't a three wheeled wagon, she'd have rained hellfire down on ol' Grandma for gussyin' me up against my will. But in the end it fell to me to make my druthers known.

We won't be goin' into the unsavory details to be found there. Suffices to say that for every ladylike word Grandma tried to impress on me, I taught her another one, less ladylike.

One year in, I was goin' feral. I reckon that year put the fight into me, as I've caused no end of mischief since. I told Momma I got a job riding mail routes. I felt a pang for lying, but it was a good one. Mail service likes to employ bunnies. We're small, we're quick, and we don't eat meat. That means we won't be tempted into shooting and cleaning some damn varmint when we should be

riding. Momma believed it. Grandma didn't believe a whit. I was gone and it thereby was nothin' of concern to me.

That great coffin of a dress brought me enough coin for a ticket back to the old Hase homestead. I stepped off the train and walked a day and a night. I suspect nothin' there but Daddy's iron tombstone these days. Wood's scarce on the prairie and even then the outbuildings were gone.

I did take one thing, though. On the door to the house, a bronze plate hung. Had little full moons runnin' across the bottom; hare's moons, my daddy used to call them. It declared "The Warren" to anybody who happened by. Few folk ever did, yet that plate always shone clear and shiny from the hard work and pride of my parents.

I had a few friends back in town. I was a trail hand, a handyman, a stablehand: did everything I could to be the productive type.

Now you might wonder how I kept the more astute of noses from noting my delicate aroma. Those days, as now, I took to wearing more leather than the hide of a summer calf. As to the delicate subject of woman's time, I make it a point to be scarce near enough once a month. I don't mind. Something right peaceable comes to a soul, staring up at the Moon, Old Hare staring back down at you, stirring her medicine pot. Hares have always seen her up there and never mind what other species might find.

Sometimes, though, keener folk may dog me out. But the solution to that is forthright enough: I take to visiting prostitutes. Turns out they're decent enough folk, so long as you bribe and lie to them. I even played a bit with them, but only very occasionally and only on their side of the fence. There are some things a girl best takes care of herself, when she doesn't want the state of her britches widely known. 'Course, these days I ain't opposed to a little tumble with a certain fruit bat Sheriff every now and again, but that is another matter entirely.

Then there was James. James Ray Stoker. He was a friend of the family, tough ol' badger. I worked for him out at his ranch for the better part of two years, workin' his small herd. Probably twice my age, I'm dead certain he knew I wasn't all buck. Never mind all that tobacco burning out his sniffer like a pan a' bacon. He kept his peace on the matter, but gave me a look now and then like he didn't quite know what to think on the matter of me. Got me a taste for a fine smoke now and then, so I have to thank him there.

I didn't know what it was at the time, but I sure do now. I took to fancying on him something fierce. Even I was young and stupid once, but I've long since grown into my ears. Anyhow, I doubt he'd have batted an eye if I'd told him. He

tolerated me fine, but I never heard tell of him bedding anybody. Could've been he cottoned to the menfolk, but I don't think so. I think stayin' out there in the quiet, lonely grasslands dulls the edge of a body's need for that sort of tie. But ah am just some fool bunny, so what do I know?

I learned how to shoot keeping critters away from the herd. Turns out I had a knack for such endeavors. This would come to use sooner than I had reckoned.

Then came that terrible morning I woke up and he wasn't in the cabin. Gone. I went out into the fields and the cattle were gone too. I found him on the fence line. I saw he was clutching his side. When I reached out to touch him, he was cold. I called to him, but he didn't move. Once I got him turned over I saw the blood on his belly. I reckon he'd been dead for the better part of the morning.

James kept a my daddy's old guns in the cabin. A herd of cattle isn't hard to follow. Two of the cattle rustlers died cleanly and the third... The less said about him the better.

I rounded up the herd as best I could. The next day, I rode into town on one of the rustlers' horses; James had friends there and they deserved to know he'd died. The sheriff, a pony with a scar across his right cheek, came out with his sons and helped me bury James. I didn't help them bury the rustlers. We didn't talk much on it.

After the deed was done, the pony pulled me aside. He explained there'd be some manner of legal business and since I had been helpin' James for a long while I'd be entitled. While I could never manage the herd by my lonesome, some of the proceeds were find their way down to me. When all accounts were settled, I had a bag of gold US tender, more money than I and ever seen.

I took to drink. That helped a little, but never for long enough. In remembrance of the old badger, I smoked his brand of tobacco. But in the end, I got restless.

Daddy's paws were a touch bigger than mine, making the guns unbalanced. Darn things halfway knocked my paws off when when I confronted the bandits, so I had the local blacksmith do up a couple a' new weights for 'em. Bronze, with little moons runnin' across the bottom. Made from an old sign that used to hang over an old farmstead. They balance true. They grip steady. And I always keep 'em polished.

(Note: The difference between this version and the original is that her gun handles were made entirely out of bronze, rather than just weighted with it, after being damaged in this original shoot-out.)

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