

## The Coyote: Shelter

by Cerine Hero

A shot boomed across the desert.  
It echoed from the high rocks in the distance.  
Another.  
Its echo.  
Quiet.

The tall raptor paid the gunshots no mind. His focus was on a small thing scurrying between the stones, leaving a trail in the sand and dust as it crawled on its belly. Clawed feet gingerly stepped across the ground as the hunter approached from against the sun, so his shadow was cast behind him and wouldn't startle the lizard. White feathers mottled with black ruffled in the breeze as it brought the scent of gun smoke from afar.

Quick as lightning, the granraptor lunged forward, short and feathered wings fanning out to his sides. His beak *clacked* around the lizard and in two quick motions, the treat was gone. The raptor chirped in satisfaction and looked around to see if there were any more little lizards among the stones. Seeing none, he raised his head and skimmed the desert horizon. The ground here was flat, save for the rocky ridge to the east, where the gunshots had come from. The raptor didn't know about that; he only knew the smell of gun smoke, and where the breeze was coming from. A brisk wind blew sand and grit in his direction and he fluffed his feathers as he turned away from the dust.

He'd wandered a fair distance away from his owner on his quest for food. A couple dozen strides to his north, a lone figure stood in the open. A red cloak fluttered from their shoulder in the breeze as they looked off towards the sounds of the gunshots, squinting hard into the wind. The raptor trotted back to his owner and nuzzled his beak against her, knocking her hat from her head. She fixed her hat on her ears with one paw and reached up to grab the granraptor's reins with the other.

Might as well take a look, she supposed.

A mile away, in a ditch beneath one of the red rocks along the tumblestone gully cracked into the side of the stone ridge, two figures were huddled. One was down on his haunches, tucking his frame behind the rock as best he could. The other was reclining against the side of the rock, both paws clutched at his side. Blood caked his fingers from where the bullet had slid under his bronze breastplate. The shot had been pathetic; trigger pulled long before the gun had even been raised all the way. But it was a lucky hit all the same. The bullet skipped off the ground and came tumbling upwards, embedding itself into the wolf's side from below. The fox beside him had fired off a shot in return almost instantly, but it had gone wide. The ruffali attached to the wagon panicked and overturned the cart, sending everyone scattering. It had been all the two of them could do to drag the injured wolf into cover while the frightened animal tore itself loose from its harness and charged off into the wild.

The fox was still trying to reload his rifle despite his trembling paws. He was wearing an Imperial uniform, complete with bronze armor on his chest and shoulders. Beside him, the injured wolf was dressed the same way, save for the blood staining his pant leg. His pistol was laying yards away, dropped into the sand when he had been hit. It was loaded, but the fox didn't dare lunge out of cover to get it.

"You still bleeding?" the fox asked, trying to distract himself as he opened the rifle's breach and fumbled with another bullet, glinting in the sun.

"Yeah," the wolf answered after a moment. He whimpered in pain from the effort of talking.

The fox tried to push a bullet into the breach, but the previous casing was still there. The gun was old and out of maintenance. Swearing, the fox shook the hot casing loose and was about to push the new round into the breach when a shadow fell across their hiding place.

A coyote stood at the top of the ditch, silhouetted by the western sun. She was dressed like a

rider, with a wide-brimmed hat to block the sun and a woven red cloak hung over her right shoulder. A pair of belts criss-crossed her hips, with a sheathed sword hanging near at paw at her left – the other side was covered by the cloak. Behind her, near the remains of the wagon and its goods was a large raptor with a saddle and reins. The bird pecked at one of the lazily rolling wheels in curiosity and flicked its black and white tail plumage.

The fox dropped the bullet from his gloved fingers in surprise as he looked up at the coyote. He reached to get it but then thought better of it when she tilted her head at him. Instead, he dropped the rifle and put his back to the rock. “Get down,” he hissed, waving his paw in the air. “There’s a madman up there in those rocks.”

Despite his warning, the coyote just looked over the rocks in the gully dispassionately. Nothing but red, weathered stones stared back. She squinted her green eyes against the wind and then turned back to face them. She eyed the wounded wolf, who frowned and winced under her gaze. “What are you doing out here?” she asked, eyebrow raised. Her voice was firm, as if it was her business to know. Or she already knew.

“We’re Imperials,” the fox quickly replied, reaching over and grabbing his buddy’s shoulder and shaking it. The wolf barked in pain and the fox let go. “We were hired out by this merchant – small fellow, some kinda cat, but not the, ah, the bigguns – to take him to ah, uh...”

“Talto,” the wolf finished for him.

“Right, Talto. But then the crazy cat pulls a gun on us, he did! Shot my friend here. Started giving some separatist talk. Mad as a miner!”

The coyote’s tail twitched as she listened to his story. Her right arm stirred underneath her cloak and she pushed the fabric back, holding a rolled cigarette between her fingers. She plucked a brass lighter from a pouch on her belt to light the cigarette as she placed it in her muzzle. As she raised her arm, the cloak drifted back, revealing a gun peeking from a leather holster on her hip, the handle a well-worn piece of oak. The cloak dipped back down to cover the firearm as the coyote replaced the lighter and let warm smoke blow between her fangs. A scent of burning herbs filled the air.

While she lit the cigarette, the coyote looked down her muzzle at the two Imperial soldiers. They didn’t look like much. Their uniforms were faded and their bronze armor was scuffed and worn. The rifle laying at the fox’s feet looked like an heirloom and a badly-maintained one at that. The wooden stock holding the bronze barrel was cracked along its length and in need of replacing.

There was also the fact the Empire was hundreds of miles away, on the other side of a thick and fortified wall. And the Imperial people were mostly wolves.

“Long way from home,” the coyote said, pinching her cigarette between her fangs. She looked over at the wrecked wagon and exhaled smoke. “Talto’s south.”

“We were trying to tell the mad cat that!” the fox protested. He’d gotten a glimpse of the coyote’s gun and was cutting his eyes towards his partner. “Told him it was south and he insisted on west, he did. Then he pulled the gun on us. Swear on the, uh, Throne.”

Blowing smoke from her nose, the coyote slid down into the ditch beside the fox. He reached for the rifle with a dark paw, but her foot came down on it, and she pulled it over to herself. The coyote picked it up from the ground and hoisted it onto her shoulder.

“Wait here,” she told them. “I’ll go have a talk with your mad cat.”

Grimacing, the fox nervously licked his nose. “Look, tell you what. You six the cat – that killer, I mean – and he won’t be needing his goods, will he? We’ll split them. You load up your bird, we’ll fix the wagon, go our own ways.”

The coyote gave him a sour look and left with the rifle.

She walked openly up the rocks and scree to where the fox had indicated. There was plenty of space all around her, with the jagged rocks and the sides of the gully rising up on either side. But the coyote took her time, testing her footing with each step. When she was out of earshot of the two “Imperial soldiers” down at the mouth of the gully, she paused on an open, flat rock. She put the rifle

down on a stone next to her and plucked her cigarette from her mouth, exhaling slowly. As she waited, a pair of tufted ears peeked above one of the rocks up the hill. Small bits of shale skittered down the hillside as the figure behind the rock tried – and failed – to move around quietly. The coyote adjusted her hat and looked up.

“Not going to hurt you,” she called, still standing out in the open.

“Like I have a reason to believe that,” replied a deep but anxious voice. “I’m sure you’re a bandit, too, come to help your criminal friends in liberating me of my possessions.”

“Your possessions are at the bottom of the hill,” the coyote pointed out. “They seem rather liberated as-is.” She blew herbal smoke into the wind. “And I know highwaymen when I see them.”

A bobcat crept around the side of the red rock. He was short, coming up to the coyote’s elbows, and his face was graying around his snout from age. In his large, fluffy paw he clutched a bronzework pistol, already reloaded. He wasn’t pointing it at the coyote, but he had it readied by his face. His dust scarf was hanging loose from his neck, and his merchant’s attire was scuffed and worn from his trip up the hill. Or perhaps from being thrown from the wagon. At his side he held a bag of what was likely whatever goods he could keep a paw on before scrambling away from the two Imperials down the hill.

“Why didn’t you shoot them, then, and be done with it?” the merchant asked, furrowing his brow. “Those miscreants told me they were Imperials on a mission, headed to the same town I was.”

“Talto?”

“No, Furrroughdale. Talto’s south of here.” The bobcat’s arm wavered and he looked at the ground as if the sand and rocks would give him answers. “Damn my hide, I never actually said where I was headed. That fox said he ‘overheard my conversation’ and I just bought it like a fish.”

The coyote sucked on her cigarette. “Hm.”

She exhaled and the wind began to change, catching her cloak and tail and tousling them in the breeze. The bobcat’s shaggy fur rippled like wheat where it was loosed from his outfit. Down the hill, the raptor squawked and ruffled his feathers, anxiously eyeing the path of broken stones between him and his owner. He wouldn’t bolt, he was too well-trained for that, but the coyote wondered what had him agitated.

“My damn wagon’s busted, either way,” the bobcat merchant moaned, looking down the hill. “Listen, we can make a deal. Let me ride with you on your beautiful bird with what we can carry to Furrroughdale and I’ll pay you what I was going to pay those scoundrels.”

The coyote turned back to the merchant, but then her gaze tipped upwards as she stared at something beyond him. Confused, the bobcat twisted about where he was standing and looked up at nothing but raw rocks and sand traveling uphill to the shelf of the upper crust above the ridge. There was nothing up there to look at that was of interest, but the wind was blowing in his face. The breeze was strengthening and a pallid chill cut through their clothes as it whipped by. In the sky, billowing clouds were rapidly forming, expanding out of nowhere as a storm formed. They darkened as they filled, soon engulfing the eastern horizon and sweeping fast in their direction.

But they grew darker, and darker still, until the stormy gray clouds became black as night, and the cold wind brought with it drops of rain that stung the skin with icy death.

“The Black Wind,” the merchant gasped in terror. He stumbled backwards, trembling, and fell onto his ass on the rocky earth.

Raindrops pelted the ground around the coyote’s feet, and she began to skim the area around them as her heart raced. They only had minutes at best before the squall would hit them, and they would all be dead. Or worse. The high sides of the gully wouldn’t provide any cover against a downpour, but as the sunlight dimmed, she caught a glimpse of a deep hole in the rocks about midway down the hill. It looked like a cavern, and it would have to do.

She rushed down the hill, sliding and skittering on loose stones and sand. At the bottom, the supposedly-Imperial fox had noticed what was coming, too, and he was up on his feet, trying to grab the granraptor’s reins and mount him to make a run for it. Frightened, the bird flailed its wings and

screached, throwing out a clawed foot and shaving bronze from the fox's breastplate. The bandit fumbled backwards, sprawled on the earth. He was lucky not to be disemboweled by the powerful animal, and if the coyote didn't grasp the raptor's reins herself and calm the bird down, the fox would've been prey for those talons. Still, the coyote offered his ass a sharp kick, rolling him onto his paws and knees as he shot her a mean look. Nearby, the injured wolf cried out, wanting to know what was happening.

“Go help your man,” the coyote told the fox, pointing sharply at the wolf still laying in the ditch. “There's a cave uphill.”

The fox hesitated, as if he was weighing his options. Finally, he got up and pulled the wolf to his feet, acting as a brace so they could hobble together up the hill. They went slow, with the cold rain plinking against their bronze plates, and the coyote and her raptor passed them by. Scowling at her, the fox stooped down to scoop up the wolf's fallen pistol and tucked it into his breastplate, out of sight.

Wet rocks were becoming freezing against her foot pads as she climbed the gully, heading towards the cave. Nearby, the merchant, in a near panic, had noticed where she was leading her granraptor and followed as fast as his legs could carry him and the ground would cooperate. The cave ended up being bigger than anticipated, likely carved by a dry stream over eons. It was dark inside, which was good, because that meant nowhere for the blackened rain to seep in. The coyote pulled her raptor into the shadows with her and led him into the rear of the cave, as far from the rain as possible. There was a flat shelf of rock, moon-shaped, on the ground, and she vaulted up onto it, up high from the entrance. Her raptor dutifully followed her, fluffing his mottled feathers and chirping anxiously. At the back wall, the coyote situated the bird and quietly stroked his beak, calming him and encouraging him to settle down. The raptor sat down like a hen in the corner, cooing softly but keeping his eyes peeled.

In the cave mouth, the merchant stumbled in through the fading light. He tried to scramble up the ledge, feet flailing under him. The coyote grasped his wrist and pulled him up onto the shelf, and the merchant stumbled to the wall and slumped down, gasping for breath. Outside, the rainstorm was beginning to sheet just a mile away from their hiding place, and the fox and wolf in Imperial armor were shambling to safety. The coyote met them at the mouth and helped the wolf up onto the ledge.

“What're you doing?” the merchant hissed, his fur rising around his head and neck in anger. “Why are you letting those thieving bastards into our cave? They should be left to rot for what they did! If the damnable Wind wants to pass its judgment, who are we to say otherwise?”

“Be quiet,” the coyote snapped back at him. The bobcat, rebuked, sank back into his place. With the fox's help, she set the wolf against the wall. The wolf's breath rattled in his ribs and it was beginning to stink. The injury must have been contaminated by the rain. He looked at the coyote and weakly nodded his thanks as the fox sat down beside him.

Outside the cave, the squall hit squarely on the gully, pouring a torrent of rain black as pitch onto the stones and sand. They were soon coated in what looked like dark tar, shimmering with ghost-light despite the sun being blacked out by the thick clouds choked with the eastern wind. There was almost no light left inside the cavern. The coyote flicked her lighter and the tiny flame was just enough to see shadows with. The light glinted dully from the bronze plates on the would-be Imperials and shined inside of everyone's eyes.

The coyote reached up to her muzzle and pulled the cigarette from her lips. It was no surprise she'd managed to hold on to it in all the confusion, but it had smoldered out by now. With the lighter in paw, the coyote thought about relighting it, but the smoke would just collect in the cave. So she flicked the cigarette through the cave mouth to land in the oily, dark water outside. Raindrops immediately stained the paper black and rotted it. The decaying paper peeled back from the burned herbs, and they, too, quickly dissolved into gray ash and vile slime. The coyote idly thought of the merchant's missing pack animal and then decided *not* to continue thinking about it.

She turned towards the merchant and eyed the bag beside him. “What do you have in the bag?”

The bobcat put his paw on the bag. "Just my things I had on me when those criminals decided to show their true colors. Some alchemical goods and coins." He punctuated the last part by putting his paw on his pistol again, eyeing the others on the opposite wall.

"Potions?" the coyote asked.

"Yes, a couple," the merchant replied before realizing why she asked. "Oh, no. I won't be giving one to that bastard."

"I'll buy it." She pulled a gold coin from her pocket and held it out. It glimmered greedily next to her lighter.

"So *you* can turn around and heal him? Think I'm a fool?"

"Do you always question customers on how they use the goods you sell them?"

The bobcat snorted, and after a moment he relented. "Fair enough." He retrieved a thumb-sized glass vial from his bag and exchanged it for the gold coin from the coyote's paw. Then he added, venomously, "A pleasure doing business with you," and slid the coin into his bag.

Popping the cork from the glass, the coyote helped the wolf drink the red liquid inside. It would probably help him beat the infection. The wolf swallowed and laid his head back on the rock while the fox watched, squinting and keeping one eye on the coyote and the other on the merchant. His paw stayed close to the side of his breastplate and he remained tense.

The coyote stood and moved to the back of the cave where the granraptor was huddled. A light breeze ruffled her fur. It was cold, and blowing through a gap in the rocks further back, beyond the reach of her lighter. The cave probably wound backwards quite a bit where it was cut by water's flow over eons. It didn't make sense to go exploring. They were all safe from the blackened rainstorm outside, and that was enough. The coyote unhooked her sword from her belt and laid it against the wall just as voices began to rumble behind her.

"Not sure why you bothered," the bobcat grumbled, shooting a look towards the pair of bandits across the cave. "The hangman's noose will be waiting for him, anyways, if he even makes it that far. Both of them."

"Fat chance, old man," the fox snapped back, baring his teeth. His paw continued to worry at the edge of his oversized breastplate.

"Furroughdale is a loyalist town, tinhead," the merchant explained. "No other towns we can reach on foot from here. So what are you going to do? Tell them you're a deserter? Or you stole the uniforms? Either way, the penalty for impersonating an Imperial is the noose. Hah! And I'll watch."

The fox's muzzle twisted in a sneer and he reached inside his breastplate. He whipped out the wolf's bronze pistol and pointed it at the merchant. "It'll look great when you're missing an eye!"

Crying out in panic, the bobcat grasped his gun and raised it, pointing it back at the fox. "See! Killers, the both of them!"

"Enough!" the coyote barked. She turned on them both, cloak thrown back and paw on the oak handle of her own gun. She didn't draw it from its holster, but the threat was bare. "The first person to fire a shot dies." Her gaze was hard as flint as she looked at the fox and then the bobcat. Their eyes cut in her direction but they didn't waver. "Shoot him, shoot me; won't make a difference. Anyone who pulls a trigger dies where they stand." Her words rang true in the cavern. The bronzeguns held only a single round. Even with a good shot, whoever fired first was a sitting duck for retaliation.

The coyote brought her voice down low. "The only way we all get out of here alive is to sit quiet and tolerate each other until the rain passes. Then we can all go our own ways."

The tension in the cave was as thick as the rainfall outside. The bobcat and fox continued to glare at one another, their eyes meeting through the sights of each others' guns. The cold silence was broken as the wolf moaned and writhed with the healing potion taking effect. He continued clutching his blood-soaked midsection. Slowly, the fox beside him lowered his gun down to the floor. The bobcat's face flickered, but under the coyote's firm stare, he, too, put his gun back down. A ripple in the air shivered like a sigh. Three sets of aching fingers uncurled from gun handles. No one decided killing

was worth dying over.

With that settled, the coyote removed her hat and sat down on the rock shelf in front of the cave mouth. The rainwater was running in streams down the hill outside and pooling slightly just inside the edge of the cave, but the coyote's feet were well above it. She ran a paw through her messy mane of sandy blonde hair and rest her elbows on her knees, looking out into the rain.

A few minutes later, she heard shifting and rustling on her right. The bobcat merchant scooted over to join her, swinging his legs over the ledge, too, where they dangled high above the rock. He was quiet for another couple minutes. In the dark, his breath steamed in the cold as the black rain siphoned the warmth of life away from the world. "So," he said finally, breaking the silence, "it's a lovely animal you have. Only got a glimpse of him before. Beautiful feathers. What breed is he?"

The coyote didn't say anything.

"He's a Lancer," the wolf answered, his voice softened from the pain. The bobcat twisted about to look at him. The skin around his eyes and lips were still ashen, but he was breathing better. Now that eyes were on him, the wolf winced and explained, "My pa ranched granraptors before he died. I saw a couple Lancers before. When I was young."

The merchant looked back at the coyote, head cocked. "Now how in the world did you get your paws on an Imperial Lancer, I wonder?"

The coyote didn't answer.

With the conversation going nowhere, the merchant produced a tin flask from his bag and took a swig of the contents. He held his thick paw out towards the coyote to offer her some. Finally, that got her attention. She leaned up and took the flask, knocking back a sip. The malt whiskey was smoky and burned pleasantly on the way down. The coyote held the flask back to the bobcat, but he grimaced and reluctantly jerked his head towards the others, so she passed the flask over to the fox on her left. The fox refused to take it, so she stretched and gave it to the wolf instead, who accepted it. He needed it.

"I need to ask," the bobcat said, rubbing his paws together. "Are... we safe in here? The things that travel under the Black Wind. The... Stampede. Will they find us?"

"Maybe be quiet so they won't," the fox hissed in the dark.

The bobcat glared back at the fox and then turned away. He glanced nervously into the rain. "I've heard the cursed things – the dead things, they can only be felled with iron." He looked down at the bronze pistol, loaded with a copper bullet, next to him and blanched. Almost as if to calm himself, he laughed. Hollowly. "Seems... preposterous to me, of course. Living bone yields to bronze, why wouldn't dead bone? I bet those blasted occultists are behind such foolish rumors." When he ceased speaking, silence fell in the cave except for the torrential pattering of rain outside and the occasional murmur and groan from the wolf as the healing potion worked on his bullet wound. The bobcat looked out into the rain and his eyes occasionally moved, as if he was seeing things. "I remember hearing that the Black Wind strips souls away. And it carries those souls with it as it blows. Whole towns, taken. Every soul. When it rains, you can see them, yearning for help." He cleared his throat and pat his paws together. "Bah. More... foolishness, of course. I don't believe a word of it. Um, I, ah... sorry, when I am nervous, I talk a lot. Comes with the work. How much longer will the rain be, you think?"

"Go sleep if you need it," the coyote told him by way of an answer, not moving from her spot. "I'll keep watch."

The bobcat nodded reluctantly and pushed himself up to his feet. Brushing himself off, he turned to head back to his part of the cave, but paused and looked back. The coyote was still looking out at the rain beyond the cave mouth, her tail tucked tightly against her left thigh and her cloak around her right side. She looked like a wax figure, cold and distant. The illusion broke only because her breath steamed from her muzzle in the lifeless air. The older bobcat felt compelled for a moment to reach out and touch her shoulder, as if he would reassure her. It was what he was expected to do, wasn't it? But his fingers faltered in mid-air and his knuckles twitched. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the fox watching him, and he scoffed, turning on his heel and returning to the wall of the cave to sit and

tighten himself into a ball. He pulled his bag onto his lap like a makeshift blanket and kept his pistol against his side, where he could get it if he needed it.

Everything in the cavern grew quiet. In the back, the granraptor was tucked into a ball, eyes closed as he slept, ignorant to everything around him. The wolf's head lolled to the side. His cheek was pressed against the bronze pauldron of his armor. In his paw, he held the tin flask, now empty. Beside him, the fox sank deep into his ill-fitting armor, letting his uniform fill with air to keep himself warm with body heat. The bobcat kept one eye open, but the rhythmic sound of pattering rain outside the cave, even cruel blackened rain such as this, and the icy cold lulled him into sleep.

The coyote's eyelids were heavy and she rubbed her face. Shadows were flickering within the rain outside. The rain was still coming down in sheets, coating the rocks in liquid darkness. Slick movement slithered across the stones. The coyote's gaze fell on the slimy mass in the distance, but she didn't move. She sat, frozen, her gaze piercing through the pelting rain. Cold rolled through her veins as the black liquid swelled upward, dripping like wetness from a tall figure. The black sludge tightened into the loose amalgamation of a canine shape, long muzzle sopping with blackened rain, turned thick and viscous as it fell in ropes and drops from the tall shape. The coyote's fingers twitched at her side. She slid her paw backwards, slowly, curling her fingers around worn oak.

A second figure untangled itself from the ground, climbing to its feet beside the first as rain smothered its body from ear to tail, running in oozing waves down its horrific features. Empty eyes peered out from what should have been the face, and flickers of green light reflected into the cave from within the dead sockets. The shining eyes flickered through the falling rain. Then a third shape bubbled out of the rain-slicked stones. It was smaller, shorter. It stood beside the others, dead eyes fixed plaintively on the coyote. Her fingers tightened around the handle and she began to slide the gun from its holster. Plumes of hot breath steamed the air in front of her. Her thumb pressed onto the hammer.

The three beings made no move to approach the cave. They stared, lifelessly, into its cold comfort, a shelter from the dark, black rain. The coyote stared back. Her heartbeat thumped in her ears. The hammer was pulled back halfway. Knuckles ached from the cold and the tension. Then the beings melted, their forms falling apart like snow in summer. They collapsed into shapeless sludge, the ghost-light in their eyes vanishing as they melted into the wet ground again like they were never there.

The coyote blinked. She pushed the gun back into its holster and released the hammer. Her breath ran out through her nose and she closed her eyes.

It was cold and miserable, and the rain seemed to be endless. The fox cursed under his breath in the dark, bemoaning his miserable luck. It didn't occur to him that if his plan had gone the way he wanted, he would be far out into the plains with a wagon of stolen loot and no shelter from the Black Wind or the deadly rainstorm it blew in with it.

On his right, the wolf was in a near catatonic slumber, driven into deep sleep by the healing potion. His breath steamed on the bronze plate under his cheek. Across the cave, the bobcat merchant was a bundle of fur wrapped around his precious bag, also well asleep. The granraptor cooed softly, his eyes closed. By the mouth of the cave, the meddling coyote hadn't budged an inch in a dozen minutes. She was sat upright still, turned towards the pouring rain like she expected to see something out there.

Something tickled the fox's ear. He flicked it and reached up to scratch a claw around the inside. A moment later, it came again. It was a soft whisper touching his eardrum like silk. The fox flitted his eyes around the cave without moving another muscle. No one else noticed. Didn't they hear it, too? The others were asleep, and the mean bitch hadn't moved. The fox kept listening, tuning out the rain and straining his pointy ears. He couldn't make out the words, but the sound was coming from his right. That way was where the granraptor was perched. Now that the fox's eyes had adjusted to the almost total darkness, he could just barely make out the crags and shapes in the stone around him. The cave continued backwards that way, and the whisper floated on a cold wind blowing in from elsewhere. What was it saying? Who was in here with them?

Silently, the fox rolled onto his paws and feet. He was careful not to let the bronze armor he was wearing scrape against the stone as he padded with practice ease to the back of the cave. Not one ear twitched at his passing – not even the quiet coyote at the entrance. The fox passed the sleeping raptor and stepped into the back passage in the cave. It was darker back here, away from what little light was filtering through the rainstorm, but he felt his way along the stones. The whisper in his ears was getting louder. It was a female voice, soft and ethereal, and the sound of it electrified his fur. Where was she? Everything else faded from the fox's mind, and he crept deeper into the darkness.

*Help me...*

A jolt of desire lit up the fox's thoughts. He was going the right way. The voice was getting stronger. Trailing his paw on the rock wall to his left, the fox found himself in another open chamber, where the floor sloped downwards into a shallow basin. The fox stopped, squinting into the darkness in an attempt to see anything around him.

*I'm here...*

He looked towards the sound and saw it: delicate fingers were emerging from around a piece of rock on the far wall. She was pinned in the cave, with nothing but her paw sticking out in a plea for help. A shimmering gleam of green light graced those lovely fingertips as they flexed plaintively in his direction. The fox found himself filled with a strange zeal, and he stepped down into the bowl-shaped hollow in the middle of the chamber.

His foot collided with something hard on the ground, and he clamped his muzzle before he could yelp in fright. Looking down, he untangled his foot from a large, bleached rib cage laying at the bottom of the basin. Other bones surrounded it, and an unsettling bull skull sat atop the pile. Its horns were broken, and the empty sockets bored into the fox's soul. The fox swallowed hard and began to retreat, but the voice grasped his ears and wouldn't let go.

*Help me, please...*

The fox found himself picking his way over the bones, climbing to the other side of the basin. The fingers were close now, reaching for him. The soft glow highlighted soft, warm fur. Grinning from ear to ear, the fox pulled himself up and reached out to the fingers with his paw. He took the woman's hand in his and began to pull. He'd get her loose and she'd love him for it. They'd be together fore-

The hand snapped off the stone wall. The green light flickered and dimmed and a rush of rainwater poured through the crack the fox had just opened. Confused, the fox looked down at his paw and saw he was holding nothing more than a jagged spur of rock. It had been wedged into the crevice, and with it loosed, the rainwater gushed into the chamber, pouring down into the basin at his feet. The voice was gone, and now every ounce of thought he possessed was screaming at him to put the damn rock back where he got it. And he tried, but the flow of water was too great, and it flowed over the rock and onto his paw, making his fur burn and his flesh seize in cold. The fox gasped and dropped the rock, stumbling backwards. He scrambled from the basin and pressed himself against the rock wall of the cavern as something large and terrifying began to stir.

The blackened water rushed around the bones laying in the basin. Green light flickered inside the skull's empty eye sockets, casting flickering shadows around the ancient bones. Creaks and cracks echoed from the walls as the bones untangled themselves, assembling into something vaguely bovine-shaped, towering tall in the chamber as it lifted itself up high like an effigy of death. The fox quailed and screamed as the undead bull turned its burning green gaze onto him.

The scream echoed down the tunnel just moments before the relative serenity of the cave was shattered. Bolting upright, the coyote opened her eyes and spun about. The bobcat and wolf both shrugged their way out of sleep, groaning. The granraptor didn't even budge.

Before they knew what was happening, the fox came scrambling down the tunnel, eyes wide and breath seething from his lungs. He crashed into the coyote and they fell together in a heap underneath the rocky shelf, landing inches from the pooling rainwater just outside. The fox flailed and



kicked and thrashed like a madman, untangling himself from the coyote. In his panic, he looked back down the tunnel behind him and screamed before charging heedless out of the cave and into the rainstorm. He stumbled across the uneven rocks, his clothes immediately soaking through with blackened rain and beginning to rot. The coyote could only watch, mouth agape, as the fox staggered and fell over, laying sprawled on the wet stones just feet from the edge of the cave.

Something large shouldered its way down the dark tunnel, scraping along the narrow rock walls and dragging sharp hooves along the floor. Green eyes burned in the dark before bony claws emerged, gripping the edges of the walls as a skull half-wreathed in green flame emerged into the cavern. Blackened, slimy rain dripped from the bleached bones and hung from its ribs in thick strands like gore. Despite its lack of flesh, the skull reared back and released a horrifying, deep wail that shook the stone around them and filled their bellies with cold dread.

Frightened and sputtering incoherently, the merchant fumbled for his pistol. He raised it in front of himself and squinted his eyes closed, unable to look directly at the undead monstrosity in front of him. He squeezed the trigger and for once, his aim was true. There was a crack and a flash, a plume of gun smoke, and the brass bullet struck the bull in the skull.

The bullet then bounced off the ceiling with a spark and tumbled to the ground, where it skipped and scattered in pieces, and the undead bull was no worse for wear – but its burning gaze swung about to the merchant and it finished dragging its skeletal bulk into the chamber. Lowing again, it lowered its head, pointing the broken horns at the bobcat. The merchant gasped and dropped his empty pistol, praying aloud for mercy.

Paws grasped him by the scarf and jacket and yanked him aside as the undead bull crashed into the wall, shivering the stones of the cave. The injured wolf wrapped an arm around the bobcat and dragged him to safety away from the rampaging bull. But where were they going to go? Behind the wolf, the granraptor fluttered and jumped, running to the opposite end of the cavern from the chaos. He knocked over the coyote's sword as he passed, and the bronze blade fell down towards the wolf's paw. Straining against the pain in his abdomen, the wolf reached his fingers out towards the sword. It was bronze and useless, but he wouldn't just lay down and die.

The undead bull wrenched its broken horn from a crack in the wall and turned towards them again, stamping a hoof on the ground and reaching out with skeletal claws towards the screaming bobcat and the wolf. The green flames in its skull flared and roiled as it came closer, and it loomed above them, dripping wet with deathly water as it outstretched its sharpened talons.

A flash of light illuminated the cavern for an instant and a *bang* echoed in their ears. A bullet hit the bull's reaching claw and split the bone, tearing it from the wrist. Pieces of shattered bone, smoldering in green flame, peppered the cavern floor around the wolf and bobcat. The fragments dissolved into ash as they burned. Howling in pain and confusion, the undead bull reared about.

The gun smoke choking the cavern cleared, revealing the coyote laying against the rocky ledge by the entrance of the cave. In her paw she held a gun made of dark metal, its construction unlike anything the bobcat or wolf had seen before. The coyote cocked the hammer back with her thumb, causing the cylinder in the body of the gun to rotate and click into place.

As the bull charged for her, she fired again – a second shot! – and the bullet pierced the bony skull, blasting it into fragments that scattered across the cavern. The lingering flames guttered free from the confines of the skull and the body of the skeleton conflagrated in sickly, green light, throwing warped and hideous shadows on the cavern walls. The coyote quickly covered her muzzle with her cloak, and the bobcat and wolf did the same, both burying their muzzles into the merchant's dust scarf. On the far wall, the raptor instinctively stuffed his face into his feathers.

The skeleton crumpled to pieces in the center of the cavern, becoming a bonfire of crackling, bilious flame. It belched dark smoke that lingered in the cavern until the fire utterly consumed the bones, leaving nothing more than a pile of blackened ashes where the undead creature once stood. When the smoke finally cleared, the coyote dropped her cloak from her face and slid back to rest her

shoulders against the stone ledge behind her, chest heaving from adrenaline.

“Gold maiden's mercy,” the bobcat gasped, lowering his dust scarf from his mouth, “she's one of the irongunners.”

The wolf just stared in stunned silence.

In time, the rain outside slackened, and the sun broke through the clouds above. The Black Wind passed them by, disappearing to who-knows-where, and the warm sunlight seared the darkness from the rainwater on the ground until it was nothing more than ordinary, harmless liquid. The coyote, bobcat, and wolf gathered at the mouth of the cave and peered outside in morbid stillness.

Bared vulpine bones lay stretched across the rocks of the gully just a few feet ahead of them, partially covered in tarnished bronze plates.

They covered the fox's remains with a small cairn of stones. It was the only decent thing to do. At the bottom of the hill, little of the merchant's goods had survived the rainfall. The wood of the wagon was gone, and what little metal was left of the things he hoped to sell was pitted and tarnished. He called it all cursed and left it there for someone else to pick through if they were so inclined.

On the trek to Furroughdale, the wolf explained that the uniforms belonged to his late father and uncle, who served what passed for the Empire southwest of the wall back in their youth. The fox convinced him that using the old uniforms and armor and weapons was a sure-fire way to trick someone into trusting them, and they could rob them in the wilderness with no trouble at all.

“I'm sorry for what I did,” the wolf told the merchant, who nodded along quietly. He then looked up to the coyote, riding along beside them on her granraptor. “And thank you. You saved my life. Twice.”

The coyote just puffed her cigarette and adjusted her hat.

Two days later, they were walking down the road that wound through Furroughdale's farmland. In the distance, the rooftops of the town were peeking over the horizon. The wolf ditched the scuffed bronze plates of his armor in a cornfield and tore the Imperial insignias from his clothing so he wouldn't be taken for a deserter or an impostor – at least at first sight. Looking up at him, the bobcat nodded approvingly.

The farming and trade town was bustling when they entered it proper, walking down the main street with shops on either side of them. The coyote tugged on the granraptor's reins and slowed him to a stop, gently patting at his beak with one paw. She looked down at the merchant beside her.

“Our deal,” she reminded him, holding down one gloved paw.

The bobcat blinked in confusion for a moment, and then his ears perked up with recollection. “Oh! Yes, I did say that, didn't I...” He reached into his pouch and grabbed a handful of gold and silver coins. He counted out the proper amount and pinched the coins, placing them in the coyote's palm. “As far as I am concerned, ma'am, you deserve all this and more besides.”

The coyote dropped the coins into a shirt pocket and gave the merchant an appreciative nod.

“And as for you,” the merchant said, turning and looking up at the wolf next to him. His features were hard and unreadable, and the wolf's ears tipped low to either side fearfully as he awaited his fate. But the bobcat sighed and shook his head. He reached into his pocket and counted out the same amount of money he gave the coyote. “All things considered, I would say we are even. You're a good lad, I'd say. Just with lousy friends.” He put the money in the wolf's paw, and the younger man blinked tears from his eyes. “Now then. I need to try to salvage this trip as best I can. I need to buy another wagon and check the going rates of corn and wheat flour here if I am to sell it back east. And I need someone to ride shotgun with me. Think you can do that?”

“Yes, sir,” the wolf replied, choking down his relief.

“And I would appreciate the safety of cold iron, if at all possi-” The merchant turned back, but the coyote and her beautiful bird were gone. “Well, where in blazes did she go?”

Far up the street, disappearing into the crowd and the dust, the black and white plumage of an

Imperial Lancer's tail feathers were bobbing along. The bobcat and wolf stood in silence in the street a moment, watching after her.

“Who was she?” the wolf asked, bewildered.

The merchant just shook his head. “I don't know.”

The coyote felt the reassuring jingle of coins in the pocket over her breast. She sat high in her saddle as onlookers admired her proud steed. Ignoring them, she tugged the brim of her hat low to cover her eyes from the sun.

“I need a drink,” she told no one in particular. Reaching down, she pat the flank of the granraptor's neck. “And you need some food. I'm sure that lizard didn't hold you over long, Kip.”

Kip chirped happily at the affection and ruffled his wings, trotting happily towards the sunset.

\* \* \* \* \*

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