

The Coyote: Home

by Cerine Hero

She watched the wind through the hair blowing across her sights. Wisps of dry dust kicked up leagues away across the field, matching the sway of blonde strands in front of her eye. The air was blowing to the south, so she shifted her aim slightly north. Tiny bronze tabs along the barrel pointed like an arrow at the wild raptors scratching and pecking at the ground.

They didn't see her. The coyote had lain motionless on the rock for so long that her joints were stiff. Her back was sun-baked, and only the shade of her hat kept her face cool. The breeze gently tousled at her tail and the trim of her riding cloak. Her fingers, gripping the wood frame under the bronze barrel, were locked into place from tension.

A raptor slowly waddled in front of her rifle, looking down and scratching at the dirt for bugs. Its feathers ruffled in the wind, and the coyote slowly tilted her aim to compensate. She inhaled slowly and held it, bringing herself perfectly still. Her trigger finger slowly closed around the thin hook of bronze...

Boom!

Gunsmoke flooded her view. She waited, her heart beating again after the sudden sound and the violent shockwave through her tired body. The breeze blew away the white smoke, and in the distance she saw the flock of raptors scampering and capering away from the noise, squawking in alarm. White feathers fluttered in the wind, laying scattered around the place where her shot had just barely missed her target. Dinner was somewhere in the middle of the flock, running away in a panic.

"Shit," she grumbled, pushing herself onto her feet with a grunt. Her body protested the long hunt and she didn't even have anything to show for it. The coyote stretched her shoulders and hips and then flicked open the breach on her bronzework rifle. The spent metal casing sprang loose and fell into the dirt beside her gray-furred foot and she kicked a thin layer of dust over it. A spare bullet weighed down her shirt pocket, but the raptors were already fluttering away into the distance.

She left her rifle hanging unhinged at her hip, wisps of smoke trailing from the open breach. With her other paw, she reached beneath her cloak and grabbed her packet of cigarettes. Two left. She thought about it for three seconds and then pulled one from the pack, lighting it with her pocket lighter. The herbs within the paper smoldered, and she happily placed the cigarette in her muzzle.

With that taken care of, the coyote looked up and skimmed her surroundings for her own raptor. The lonely ridge behind her stared back with its blank, stony face. Where'd had that bird gone? She had taken her eyes off him for far too long; even knowing he had a habit of wandering off. The shot wouldn't have spooked him, so he must have been looking for something to eat, himself. The coyote took a draw from her cigarette and then retrieved the spare shot from her pocket, sliding it into the breach of her rifle and then snapping it shut. With no sense in calling for the granraptor, she rest the gun over her shoulder and set off to go find him.

Granraptors were large and fairly heavy animals, and one looking for supper was certain to leave a trace. The coyote found his talon scratches in the dirt and followed him uphill, leaving puffs of white smoke in her wake as the wind died down to near nothing. The sun overhead was beating down but beginning to fall, meaning she wouldn't have much time left to find something palatable for dinner tonight. Campfire beans and hardtack again, it seemed.

She climbed up onto the rise behind her and found a craggy, broken expanse. Why on earth was he looking for something to eat up here, she growled. Dark, upright stones intermingled with the odd, half-dead tree as she kept following the granraptor's scratchings in the dirt. Some of the old rocks stood half-again taller than her, if they were upright. Others were leaning over or fallen from the ages of erosion and ground-shifting beneath them. Between some of the tall stones, she saw the bleached bones of a ruffali laying in perfect arrangement. The coyote could only wonder if it died of sickness or age decades back or caught in black rain and left that way. Regardless, just something to bounce around the

back of her brain and not an important issue. As she walked past, weathered etchings in the standing stones glimmered with green light, almost in spite.

The coyote climbed over a fallen stone and found her raptor. Kip was standing underneath an old, dry tree, kicking at its roots and leaning down with his beak to feast on the termites he unearthed. But beside the mottled white-and-black raptor was an imposing structure, made of the same black rocks she'd been passing through. A yawning, dark arch lay hanging open, its doors of carved stone broken or laying half-sunken into the earth in the garden at the center of the site. Only in hindsight did the coyote realize she'd been meandering up a spiral pattern in the disrupted stones, and this was its terminus. She'd seen the old cattle ruins a few times from a distance and only rarely had need to ever approach them.

Her fur stood up on the end of her neck. Shifting her rifle from one shoulder to the other, she reached with her paw down to the holster on her hip. The iron gun resting there was warm to the touch after laying in the sun. She left her fingers around the oak handle and crossed the garden to where Kip was hunting. The coyote approached him from the front, setting down her rifle against the tree, reaching out, and laying her paw on his plumage to get his attention. Ruffling, the bird looked up at her and clicked his beak. He nuzzled against her muzzle and gave his short wings a quick flap.

The coyote sighed and pet his beak. "Why did you come up here?" she muttered under her breath. "At least it's daylight still." Shaking her head, she scooped up the long arm and placed it on its rack on the side of the granraptor's saddle, belting it down. Kip watched her work, and she took the opportunity to tighten the saddlebags and straps on the granraptor's harness while she was at it.

But that eerie feeling tickled her spine even more. It was like that tingle after touching metal and getting a jolt, but it wouldn't simply go away. The air around her was becoming charged. Grabbing Kip's reins tight so he wouldn't bolt, she tugged her iron pistol from its holster as she fixed her green-eyed gaze on the old ruins' open doorway, half expecting some undead monstrosity to come charging forth, horns first.

What happened instead was a green shimmer flickered in the sky. It flew in from the northwest, streaking like a shooting star across the heavens, and it came right towards the ruins. The coyote braced when it struck, but nothing happened. The green bolt simply disappeared into the ruins, out of sight, and a ripple of green light rolled across the stones, highlighting what was left of the weathered and illegible etchings carved into the stones. The wave of occultic energy rolled into the open doorway, flowing down steep stairs leading into the dark. And then everything was quiet and still again.

It was a moment before the coyote released her grip on Kip's reins. Slowly, she stalked to the doorway and thrust her iron gun into the dark below. Nothing down there made a sound. The eerie glow of the stones burned down to nothing, and the old, dark tomb went back to sleep. But as she stood, waiting, straining her gray ears forward to listen, she thought she heard a voice. The coyote knelt down and removed her hat, setting it on the earth beside her knee. A slow hiss of breath rattled through her still-burning cigarette as she focused her attention downwards. She heard it again, a faint and plaintive cry. At first, she wanted to dismiss it. The spirits and abominations lurking within these old stones, or drawn to life when the Black Wind blew, could be insidious and wretched. Sighing slowly, the coyote let smoke puff between her fangs. Curiosity was getting the better of her.

And if an iron gunner wouldn't take a peek, who else would?

The coyote returned to Kip and fetched the lantern hanging from the saddlebag. She flicked the window open and used her cigarette to light the wick before tossing it away and turning her attention to her gun. Rotating it with her thumb and finger, she checked the cylinder in her revolver. Two... three.. four... four bullets. The fifth chamber lay empty, and she reached into her bullet pouch for a replacement. As much as she rooted around, none magically sprang into her paw. The coyote swore and rotated the cylinder so the first loaded bullet would pull into alignment when she cocked the gun and then flicked the loading gate closed. She'd need to get more. It was always a choice between food and bullets, wasn't it?

The air inside of the old cattle barrow was choking and stiff. Each step down the old, uneven steps, built for people with longer legs than a coyote, took her further from the waning sunlight and deeper into the smothering darkness. The ancient cattle were giants, that much she'd seen from their walking bones, and it was easy to tell that they had built this place. The ceilings were high enough that her lantern didn't light them, and she kept her shoulder against the wall as she crept around the dark stones in search of whatever might be down here.

There were alcoves in the walls where art or sculptures might have once stood, but they were long gone. Taken by the owners or lost to thieves over centuries. The barrow seemed to be little more than a narrow passage leading down to an arched doorway, its slab-like doors hanging just barely ajar. The coyote squeezed through the passageway gun-first, lantern-second, and muzzle-third. Beyond was a large, round room, complete with an elevated dais etched with strange runes that continued to glow with a barely-luminous green glow. The coyote opted not to step up onto the raised platform, but wondered what it could be for.

Scratching sounds echoed around the room from the far side, beyond the reach of her lantern. The coyote froze, slowly placing her thumb over the hammer of her revolver. She pulled it back to half-cocked as she began to step forward, gun and lantern both raised. The light slowly curled its way around the raised platform with each step, until finally, the soft golden glow fell across a leg.

A leg that then scurried away.

Adrenaline jolted through the coyote, and the muscles in her shooting paw clamped in tension, but discipline won out over shock. She released the hammer on the revolver to rest and pointed the barrel up as she stepped forward further. Her lanternlight fell into one of the alcoves along the wall, where a small bundle of fur, shivering in terror, lay as tucked into a ball as possible. A red fox boy, in dusty shirt and trousers, peeked back at her with wet, brown eyes, his muzzle tucked down between his arms. As the coyote came closer, and the fox's eyes adjusted to the light, his gaze snapped upwards to the revolver in her paw, and he whimpered. Deliberately, she lowered it down to her side but did not put it into its holster.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, holding up her lantern and taking a closer look. The fox didn't look injured at all, unless he was hiding it from her. Nor did he look malnourished. When he didn't answer her, the coyote turned her head and cocked an eyebrow. "Do you hear me?"

"I was playing," the fox replied, quietly. The timidity in his voice made it hard to hear even in the dull silence of this dead place.

The coyote squinted. "Playing? We're in the wilds, boy. There's no town for miles in any direction. Who were you with? Did you stray from a caravan?"

"Um... I stayed where the fieldhands could see..." He looked on the verge of tears, and he'd clearly already been crying. "I was drawing in the dirt and found a big, flat rock. It had writing on it, and when I touched it, everything got dark."

"Where are you from?"

"Tolt's Crossing, ma'am," he answered.

She knew the town well. It was northwest of here – the same direction the bolt of light had come from. The coyote didn't make any claim to know much about the old cattle or their bizarre ways; she just put them back in the ground where they belonged. But judging by the dimly-glowing slab behind her, she made a guess he'd been teleported. He was lucky to be intact, then. Toying with the dead things' relics, unintentionally or otherwise, was for the mad.

"At least you're polite," the coyote muttered, standing up. She turned and glanced around the round room one more time, squinting against the darkness beyond the edge of her lantern light. Every dark patch in the walls could be another alcove, or it could be a passageway leading further underground, with all kinds of aberrant things sleeping in the dark. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Outside, at least."

The fox kit slowly untangled himself from the alcove and followed behind the coyote as they ascended back to the surface and its afternoon light. The child stepped out onto the central garden at the heart of the spiral stones and looked around like he'd never seen anything like it in his life. He probably hadn't. In the light, the coyote looked down at the boy's face, her gaze lingering on the red color in his fur and brown eyes. He couldn't be much older than four winters. Young, lost, defenseless.

She closed her eyes and massaged her thumb and finger across her forehead. Tolt's Crossing, huh...

"Um... is that your raptor?" the boy asked, pointing at Kip. The coyote didn't answer, walking over to the granraptor and replacing the lantern on its loop. Kip had dug himself a deeper hole now, and was pulling worms from the earth. The fox swallowed and looked around before taking a step closer, his stance guarded and scared. He eyed the bronze longarm and sword hanging on the granraptor's saddle anxiously. "What's their name?"

"Kip," she answered.

"Hi, Kip," the boy said quietly. The bird didn't react. "My name is Dally. I have raptors at home, but they're all a lot smaller than you." The fox looked around again and took a step towards his rescuer as she scooped up her hat and put it on. "Um... miss coyote? Which way is home?"

The coyote pointed northwest without looking back. Behind her, the fox looked in that direction, but saw only tall, black standing stones looming above him. He whimpered and moved closer to her again, practically bumping against her leg. The coyote grasped the saddle, giving Kip a tug to make him duck down, and she climbed up into the seat. She rest her feet in the stirrups and Kip instinctively stood up to his full height again.

The fox kit looked like he was going to cry. "Um... ma'am... could you please...? I don't know how to get home and... and, um... I don't."

Before he could finish, the coyote leaned over in her saddle and grabbed him by the arm and his shirt. She hauled him up and set him on the saddle in front of her. It was a snug fit for the two of them, and going to be annoying for the next day. But she couldn't just leave the kid here. Reaching past him, she grabbed Kip's reins and gave him a gentle nudge with her ankles to get him moving. The granraptor squawked and ruffled his plumage before setting off, working his way out of the spiral.

"Um... how far is it to home?" the fox asked, holding tight on the pommel of the saddle between his legs.

"Stop saying *um*," the coyote chided, already annoyed. She let it linger for a moment and adjusted her hat. "A day's ride. Just be quiet and don't pull any of Kip's feathers."

"U-um... I mean- Yes, ma'am."

The sun sank deeper into the sky, turning a darker shade of orange. The shadows cast by the standing stones drew long, overlapping and covering the small garden at the heart of the spiral and the entrance to the teleportation barrow. But all was not still or silent.

Four shadows disconnected themselves from the rest, and six feet and two hooves crept warily, in awe, into the open. They centered on the old, dying tree in the heart of the garden. The figures were strange folk, living far from the townships and farms that dotted the desert. Their clothes were patched and ragged, held together by effort more than care. A cougar stood tall above the bunch, his head crowned with the skull and horns of a dead cattle. He was stripped to his waist, and some kind of green substance was smeared into his fur across his chest and in the shape of the archaic runes still etched on the flat slab down in the dark. Behind him, a female javelina, barely fitting in her patchwork robes, snorted and poked her fingers at the hole dug in the roots.

"Someone was here," she muttered under her breath. "Mounted. Very large raptor. An Imperial? The Touched One is not here!" The javelina squealed in frustration. "Were they waiting for them?"

Near them, a swift fox, with his face caked in green and his eyes wild and golden, ran his paws across the earth at the front step of the barrow. He traced footprints with his fingers. "A tall one. And

small. Herrmmm..." The fox rolled over onto his butt and twisted himself into a pretzel, pulling his foot around unnaturally up to his nose so he could look at the pads underneath. "Fox-child! Touched One is a fox-child! Fox-child was taken by mounted lancer."

The cougar nodded solemnly, brushing his paws across the standing stones. He could still *feel* the surge of energy that had rippled through these rocks ever-so-recently. Someone had been touched by the Old Ones. Touched like them. The Old Ones had brought the child to this place, to him, to be taught. They needed to be rescued from this intervener and shown the truth!

"Come," the cougar ordered his companions, "they have too much lead already. Go find the bird's tracks."

The fox untangled himself and scampered away out of the spiral, following the traces left by the granraptor. He passed by the fourth member of the group, a short jackrabbit. She kept her distance at the back of the garden, not debasing herself by sticking her nose into the dirt because old whispers told her there might be secrets there. She held her bow low across her lap and eyed the cougar. He moved, dangerously, like the predator he was, stepping over her and motioning for her to follow. The javelina squealed right behind her and she squinted, falling into step with the rest.

The falling afternoon sun was in Dally's eyes as they rode. Kip maintained a steady but easy pace, bobbing along the dusty road to the northwest. The ancient ruins were far behind them now, and they were crossing a wide expanse of plains, with scrub-grass growing on the sides of the road and in thickets here and there across the wilds. Somewhere, far off to the left, the ground would flatten out even more, and eventually lead to the sea. But that was a long journey by raptor. On their right, jagged mountains rose above the horizon, also a long and forbidding trip, to say nothing of tempting the Black Wind's blessing on that path.

"Ma'am..." Dally said, making a verbally-significant effort not to say '*um*' again, "can we take a break? My legs hurt."

"No."

"But--"

"As long as there's light, we ride," the coyote explained, her face shaded underneath the brim of her hat, pulled down low. "There will be plenty of time to rest at night."

"Where will we sleep?"

"On rocks."

"Really?" The fox looked up at her and realized she wasn't joking. He frowned and turned away, looking at the plumage bobbing on the back of Kip's head and neck. Flexing his dark-furred toes, he asked, "Where are you from?"

The coyote didn't answer at first. She inhaled deeply and sighed, thinking about that one last cigarette in her pack. Finally, she answered, "Nowhere."

"Nobody is from nowhere!"

"Nowhere that matters now."

"Oh." The kit went quiet for a while, kicking his legs over the sides of the saddle to try to work some of the stiffness from them and get blood flowing in his toes again. "One of our fieldhands lost his home, too. So mommy let him come and work and have a job. He's still very sad, but he's nice, and he tells me stories sometimes. Maybe you could come work on the farm, too, if you don't have a home!"

The coyote was quiet.

"Do you know any stories?" Dally asked.

"No."

"Is that because you don't talk a lot?"

"Yes."

"How come--"

The coyote hissed through her fangs. "Just... be quiet for a while. Look at the country or count

your numbers or something.”

Dally snapped his muzzle closed and sat tight, his paws gripping the saddle pommel in front of him. He turned his head away from the sun and looked out across the wide country. There was... dirt. Lots of it. And patches of scrub, which seemed to get thicker and denser the further away from the road, but it was an illusion. Every here and there a tree stood tall and lonely, some of them alive and spreading their canopies wide over the land to catch more rain, and others dead, petrified relics of the past, their branches reaching towards the sky in either desperation or anger.

As Kip bobbed along, the young fox watched as a flock of raptors came fluttering around the side of a large thicket in the distance. They were large, with red feathers and black crests on their heads. For raptors, they had large, folded wings, with claws on their front, which they used to dig and claw at the ground. Not like the little raptors at home, or even a big one like Kip. There were six of them, and they swarmed over one spot as one of them dug the ground and found something.

“Hey, look, there's raptors over there,” the fox said, pointing. “They're looking at us!”

The coyote stiffened. She sat upright in the saddle. Her gaze followed his arm out into the wild and she saw the flock of raptors sixty yards away across the desert. Instantly, she recognized the red and black markings and the curved foretalons on the wings.

Hellraptors.

“Be quiet,” the coyote hissed, her knuckles tightening on Kip's reins.

“But why-”

She grabbed the fox's muzzle and pinned it shut. The hellraptors were watching them curiously now, eyeing them up from a distance and fluffing their plumage. They began to advance, slowly, fanning out into a line. A couple of them hissed, opening serrated beaks meant to tear flesh from bone. The coyote let Kip continue steady for now, gripping the reins with her right paw. They were in a balancing act. Run, and the hellraptors would give chase. Stay, and they'd slowly approach. Kip was bigger and had longer legs, but he was also laden by riders and luggage. Chancing a sprint could be a fatal mistake.

So the coyote slowly let go of Dally's muzzle. The boy kept quiet, realizing the raptors squawking and hissing at them as they followed weren't friends. He found the coyote's paw pressing against his chest, with the reins held in her fingers.

“Hold this,” she whispered. “Don't pull on them. Just hold them tight.”

“Yes, ma'am,” the fox said, taking the reins and wrapping his small paws around the leather.

Putting her weight into the stirrups, the coyote reached her right arm down to her holster and drew out her iron revolver. The dark, matte metal was warm in her paw. In front of the fox's wide eyes, she passed the gun from her right paw to her left. The hellraptors were increasing speed, outpacing Kip now, and the granraptor still hadn't noticed them as they approached from the side and behind. The predators spread out wider, intending to encircle their prey if they decided to attack.

The coyote stretched out her arm, looking down the barrel of the revolver. She wasn't left-pawed, but she wasn't trying to hit anything, either. “Cover your ears,” she told the fox, squinting her right eye closed.

“What about Kip?”

“*Cover your ears!*”

Dally did as she ordered, and even still, the sound of the gunshot made him jump in the saddle. Gunsmoke blew from the barrel and around the cylinder of the gun, and a blast of dust erupted from the middle of the line of hellraptors. But instead of causing them to scatter, the startled birds charged, hissing and squawling. They leapt the brush straddling the side of the road and raised their wings with talons outstretched.

For the second time today, the coyote cursed a flock of birds. She pried the reins from Dally's paws and gave Kip a firm squeeze with her legs, because the granraptor wouldn't notice the flock of hellraptors until they were biting his ankles. Kip chirped and broke into a run, kicking up dust in his

tracks as he ran down the road. Behind them, the hellraptors were sprinting after their prey, gaining ground. The coyote gave her mount a few more thumps against his flanks as encouragement, and Kip sped up to his full power. It became a bouncy ride, and the coyote struggled to hold both the reins and the fox in front of her.

But like she feared, Kip couldn't outrun the hungry raptors like this. They were fanning to either side of the granraptor, and now Kip finally noticed them. He squawked and pushed himself harder in panic, jostling his riders up and down in the saddle. The coyote tried to tug the reins, but he was beyond discipline now. So she fumbled awkwardly with the hammer on the revolver, cocking it and spinning the cylinder to a fresh round, but she couldn't get a bead on the dashing hellraptors at her side with Kip sprinting like wild. In front of her, Dally cried and panicked, holding fistfuls of feathers to keep his balance.

The hellraptor on their right leapt upwards, dangerous wings flapping and fluttering. It came across towards them, and the coyote instinctively swung her left arm across in an attempt to whip the bird with her gun. A keen foretalon slashed her arm and tore her sleeve, with blood flowing down her wrist. The hellraptor crashed into them regardless before she could shove it away, and Kip reared in fright.

Dally, unused to riding in a saddle, lost his balance and slid sideways, rolling over the coyote and tumbling to the ground with a fistful of white and black feathers. The coyote tried to reach for him, but her arms were tangled, and she was fighting with the hellraptor. Her revolver slid from her blood-slicked grip and fell into the dirt amidst the fluttering, squawking, fighting birds. Kip kept running, breaking loose from the flock and running down the road and leaving the small fox and the irongun behind.

The coyote grabbed his reins and pulled, bringing his head and neck back against her chest. Reluctantly, the granraptor stopped, but he kicked and clawed the ground and spun in circles. The coyote looked back. Dally was surrounded by the hellraptors, all fluffed up and shrieking at him as they pressed in closer. If she didn't do something, there would be nothing but ripped clothes and bones to take home to Tolt's Crossing. And she spied her irongun, her most important possession, laying in the dirt next to the flock...

Dally screamed and kicked at the raptors circling him in the road. He was surrounded and couldn't run anywhere, even if he could manage to get on his feet. The raptors formed a ring of feathers, talons, and jagged beaks, shrieking at him and keeping their distance as he kicked and flailed, driving dust up in a whirling cloud. They were waiting for him to tire. One of the larger birds surged forward, sweeping its talons. Dally tried to kick at it, but the talon slashed his leg, cutting through his pant leg like it was paper. The young fox cried out in pain and rolled onto his back.

Another gunshot rang out, and the raptor in front of him suddenly exploded into feathers. This time, the coyote's aim was true. She threw down her smoking rifle and ran towards the confused and scattering flock of raptors, bronze sword flashing in the afternoon sunlight. Some of the birds held their ground, but fluttered and flew as she swung the blade in wild, sweeping arcs, intent more on forcing them to flee rather than bisecting any of them.

Scattered, the surviving hellraptors decided to seek easier prey and unhappily withdrew from their would-be vulpine meal. They ran off down the road, angrily shrieking and hissing at one another. The coyote let her bronze sword hang down limp at her side, panting hard. At her feet, Dally whimpered, clutching his leg tight against himself. Flipping her sword under-paw, the coyote knelt down and scooped up her revolver. She quickly opened the loading gate and rammed the ejection rod, pushing the spent case out of the chamber. It landed in the dirt and she ground it down into the dust.

Replacing the revolver in its holster, she knelt down beside Dally. "Come on," she told him, snaking her free paw underneath his arm. "Before they change their mind." She tried to get him on his feet, but his injured leg wouldn't support him – or he wouldn't put weight on it. Gritting her fangs against the sharp pain in her bloody forearm, she hauled him up, tucking him tight against her side and

holding him against her.

Before she left, she reached out with her sword paw and grabbed a leg on the hellraptor she shot, dragging it with her back towards where Kip was waiting.

The hellraptor lay beside the small campfire, waiting to be plucked and cooked. The moons were out tonight, with the larger of the two hanging high overhead and the other racing towards the horizon. Before nightfall, the coyote urged Kip to put distance between them and the hellraptors, and once the granraptor began to tire and the sun sank below the horizon, they started to search for a place to rest and see to their wounds. They'd found a sheltered gap in a cliff near the road, and it had been used by travelers before, judging by the surroundings. The coyote shored up the fire pit and lit a fresh fire, conjuring shadows that danced upwards along the walls framing their little camp.

With the fire burning, the coyote tended to Kip first, taking him to the side of the camp and making him settle before taking off his tack and burdens. Then she dug in the saddlebags with her right arm, keeping her left tucked against her side. She reached into her medicals and withdrew a pouch of poultice cream, and a rolled bandage. No expensive healing potions for them tonight. Dally sat on a flat stone by the fire. He'd run out of tears an hour ago, but he occasionally kept whining and whimpering. The coyote walked over to him and settled down on her knees. She opened the pouch of medicated cream and used a wooden shim to scoop some out.

"Is that going to hurt?" Dally asked as she pulled his pant leg back above the gash left by the hellraptor. His fur around the cut was matted and clumped with dry blood.

The coyote opened her waterskin and poured some over the wound. "Yes," she said, a little too late to be of much use. The fox cried and pulled his leg against the coyote's grip. "It will sting and itch, but otherwise you'll get an infection and die of fever in a fortnight. So be strong."

"O-okay," the kit replied, seizing on the imperative to be strong. The coyote used the wood shim to cover the cut with the poultice cream, and then she unwrapped the bandage, winding it round and round his shin. Dally watched her, his eyes squinting and wincing as she pulled tight.

"You saved me," he told her.

"I just wanted my gun."

"That's not true."

The coyote kept her eyes on her work. "Believe what you want," she demurred, tying the fox's bandage and then moving to work on her own cut one-armed. Dally picked up the waterskin for her and held it out, but the coyote just looked at him. Reluctantly, she rolled up her bloodied sleeve and let him pour the water over the wound. The coyote handled the rest, applying the poultice and then wrapping her arm in a bandage.

With their injuries taken care of, the coyote wandered out of the camp to collect some small branches and sticks to build a rough cooking rack. She stepped beyond the edge of the firelight into a copse of trees on the side of the road. The moonlight above was enough for her to see and scoop up enough to work with. She piled a small bundle in her right arm and turned to head back.

But something made her pause. It was a tickle on the back of her neck, making her hackles tense and rise up. Turning slightly, she peered through fallen strands of blonde hair into the dark around her. Beyond the copse of trees, there was the road, and then a wide stretch of plain before the foothills began to rise, miles and miles away. On her other side, the buckled cliffside rose in a sharp incline against the road, but along its ridge she could see nothing moving among the twinkling stars. At her hip, the iron revolver began to feel heavy in its holster, like it was begging to be drawn. But even if she couldn't spot anything watching her, the creeping feeling continued to eat at her.

The coyote brought the sticks back to the camp and sat where she could see out from the crevice. She pulled the revolver from her hip and laid it at the ready beside her thigh as she quickly assembled a small cooking rack, cutting down branches and sticks with a small hatchet, its bronze edge glinting dully in the firelight. Dally sat on his rock and just quietly watched in curiosity. Once the rack

was made, the coyote grabbed dinner and plucked it. Dally covered his face in his paws as she dressed the hellraptor, giving some parts to Kip to eat and placing the rest on the rack to roast.

“Are we going to eat that?” the fox asked, cringing.

“It hurt you; don't you want to eat it?”

Dally swallowed and tightened up into a ball. “No,” he said quietly.

The coyote slumped her shoulders and sighed. She thought for a moment and then got up, returning to her saddlebags and taking out a tin can of beans. Opening the lid with a can opener, she set the can into the ashes of the campfire, right next to the burning branches.

“There's yours,” she said, tossing the boy a tin spoon. Dally looked at the spoon in his paws, then at the raptor, and pulled the warm can over to himself.

They ate in silence. The coyote had her fill of raptor. Crows and vultures could have the rest. Dally ate as much of the beans as he could stand and then sat with the can between his knees. He looked up at the coyote, noticing she was staring off into the night range beyond their hiding place. Nothing out there was moving, no lights or sounds, but the traveler had her ears up and focused, and she laid her paw down beside her thigh.

Dally turned back from the dark, tightening up more. “What is it?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing.”

“Is it the mean raptors?”

“No.”

“Then what-”

The coyote fixed him with a glare that froze the beans in his belly. Dally shrank and went quiet. She turned her gaze back towards the night beyond the fire. The rock walls on either side of them, while masking much of the light from their fire, now felt imprisoning. Something was watching them, she was sure of it. They probably knew she was watching back. She stood up, watching the darkness, and kicked the makeshift cooking rack aside before smothering the small fire. Their little island of light diminished and faded into dirt-covered embers. The coyote watched the wilderness again, her eyes adjusting to the dark. The stars and moons above brightened in her view and shadows among the grass and occasional tree became visible. And yet she saw nothing. Still convinced there was *something* out there, even if nothing justified her worries, the coyote sat back down in her place.

“Go to sleep,” she told Dally before he could bother asking what to do. She settled back, laying her head on her left arm so she could keep her eyes trained on the expanse outside their nook. In the dark, she heard Kip settle and fluff himself as he bedded down, and Dally struggled to find a way to get comfortable.

She didn't sleep. The coyote kept her right paw on the oak handle of her revolver. Her eyes watched the biggest moon drift across the sky. A third moon, small and shy, could just barely be seen behind its horizon. Eventually the second moon, the fast one that had long vanished under the horizon, would rise again and show itself. The coyote's ears were trained on every sound around her, from the cooing of the granraptor behind her head to the soft breathing of the child on the side of the camp to the crick of insects in the field outside their hiding place.

And yet she didn't hear the sound of someone creeping up on her. The coyote twitched, realizing she'd fallen asleep at some point. Her fingers tightened around her revolver's grip, but as she looked down, she saw a shock of red fur pressing against her middle. Dally was cuddled against her, arms wrapped around her and his head snuggled against her stomach.

She opened her paw and moved to shove him off of her, but halted herself with her fingers hanging just a couple inches from his head. The child was sleeping, tense, with his fingers gripping tightly into her shirt. His eyes were squeezed shut and glittered wet in the moonlight. The coyote sighed, rubbing her paw over her face. Letting go of her revolver, she ran her fingertips across the fox's scalp and then set her paw on his shoulder, holding him close to her until sunrise.

They broke camp shortly after the sun rose, before the grayness of night was fully shaken off the land. The road left the open prairie behind and wound its way into a forest. Tolt's Crossing was on the other side of the woodland, only a few more hours by foot. Occasional traffic kept the road through the forest fairly maintained, but the occasional root and dislodged rock made the path treacherous for a granraptor, so the coyote elected to go on foot, holding Kip's reins and serving as his guide through the forest. Her left arm throbbed as she kept it elevated beside her, but she could ignore the pain. Dally, on the other paw, couldn't, so both to keep him from whining and making his injury any worse, he got to ride in the saddle by himself, pretending he was a northern lancer in burnished bronze and carrying a towering spear.

Fog still clung to the low brush in the forest, encroaching on the road whenever the path narrowed and grasses and shrubs closed in around the coyote's ankles. Gray morning light shimmered between the trunks on their right, filtered by the high branches and doing more to illuminate the fog than dispel it. Crepuscular animals scattered away from the travelers, and the coyote kept her grip on Kip's reins even when he wanted to go chase salamanders.

The coyote still couldn't shake the prickle at the base of her skull. The same creeping feeling that had pestered her since the night before continued to eat at her, drawing her attention. Something was pursuing them, and it certainly wasn't hellraptors. She glanced backwards over her shoulder but saw nothing, just trees and fog.

Ahead of them, the road twisted in the forest, following the natural flow of the land. But it created a natural break in the line of sight and a choke point. The coyote came to a stop, and tugged on Kip's reins to bring him to a halt, too. Dally lurched forward in the far-too-big-for-him saddle. Everything was quiet in the woodlands save for the chirping of songbugs on leaves. Her instincts were telling her to pause. They were also telling her there was someone behind. It was a feeling in her gut, a scent on the wind, and a strangeness in the noise around them. If she truly had noticed someone last night, they'd have all the opportunity to break ahead on the road and wait.

The coyote turned towards the granraptor and reached her arms up. She grabbed Dally around the waist and helped him down to the ground, where the fox favored his left leg.

"Ma'am?" he asked, confused and concerned. "What are we doing?"

"Be quiet," she explained. She pulled her revolver from its holster and opened the loading gate. "Just do exactly what I say."

A few minutes later, a figure did step around the fog-covered bend ahead of them. The cougar was tall, stripped to his waist, and wearing the horned skull of a deadherd cattle as a mask. Green paint was smeared into his fur in bizarre, nonsense patterns down his belly and along his arms. He didn't carry a weapon, but his aura of threat was dense in the way he walked and carried himself. Through the empty sockets in the skull, blue eyes stared with powerful intensity.

He found the coyote and the young fox standing alone in the center of the road. The boy was huddled tight with his back against the woman's stomach, arms crossed snug around his chest. He tightened and recoiled as he looked up at the frightening cat, pulling himself deeper into the safety afforded by his guardian and the bronzework rifle she held ready in her paws.

The coyote squinted underneath her hat as she took the cougar's measure. An occultist; the devotees of the dead. A few were arrogant, stupid, or mad enough to try to seek the supposed powers of the dead cattle, and this one looked like all three in equal measures. The cougar stopped ten yards ahead of them, stretching out his arms and gesturing towards them with green-stained paws.

"Salutations," he said. His accent was strange, hailing from somewhere the coyote didn't know. It added to the bizarre mystery of the man. "You may lower your gun. There is no need for it."

The coyote pulled back the hammer.

Across from her, the cougar grinned under his mask. He gestured towards the woods and the underbrush began to shake. Without fully pulling her gaze off the big cat, the coyote watched as a swift fox with wild eyes and a bronze blunderbuss emerged from the mist, standing between two tall trunks.

Behind her, a javelina stepped out onto the road, snorting and fiddling with an old, tape-covered, tarnished rifle. And on the coyote's rear and left, the bare silhouette of jackrabbit ears emerged from the undergrowth, the short figure holding a bow but not yet ready to draw the string.

The coyote flicked her eyes back to the cougar in front of her. He seemed to puff up more as he sprang his snare, inclining his head and thrusting out his powerful chest.

"You were there at the ancient place, weren't you?" the cat asked, looking down the sleek bone of his mask at her. He pointed a finger at Dally. "And there you found this child, didn't you? He is not your burden to bear or your mouth to feed." Taking a step, he gestured at the wrapped bandages on the coyote's arm. "Do not throw your life at his feet. Just stand back, and give him to us. Go on with your day, and live. He is one of you no longer. He has been touched by the Old Ones now."

"Touched!" the swift fox blurted out, waving his black-tipped tail wildly behind him. "The child is touched! He will hear the whispers!"

The cougar raised his arms up above his head. "The Old Ones summoned him! I felt their call from afar and came to find him. The voices of the past have given him to me. To teach him. He will know the ways of the First. So give him to--"

There was a burst of movement as the coyote leveled her rifle on the cat's heart. Behind her, the javelina squealed, readying her own gun. Her left ear pivoted towards the sound of a bowstring tightening. The swift fox jabbered incoherently to himself. But no one fired a shot. Everyone stood, muscles tensed, waiting and watching one another. On the coyote's left, the jackrabbit lined up her bow, drawing on center mass. A breeze kicked up, rustling the canopy above and causing the coyote's red riding cloak to flutter aside. The rabbit's eyes flicked towards the motion, noticing the empty holster on the woman's hip.

The cougar remained unfazed, straightening himself more, offering his paws out towards the fox like a father wanting to embrace his son.

"Kill me, then," he offered. "If the boy means so much to you, then strike me dead. Use your one bullet to spite me. And then we will both lay dead here on this red trail, and the child will--"

The coyote fired. The bullet sank into the cougar's chest, leaving a tiny pinhole in his paint-smearred fur, and a cloud of blood erupted from his back. The sure-pawed look on his face melted even as he tottered on his feet.

As the sound of the first shot still echoed from the trees, the coyote let go of her grip on the rifle. Dally, screwing his eyes shut and flattening his ears, unfolded his arms and held out the coyote's revolver handle-first. She grabbed it in her right paw and slung her other arm around him, gripping him tight as she spun to her right in a single motion. In the mist, the fox was still reacting to the falling cougar, his blunderbuss loose in his paws. He turned his gaze towards her, golden eyes wide and wild, as she pulled the trigger, putting a bullet through his lung.

The coyote was still turning as she heard another gunshot behind her. Still spinning, falling, clutching the small fox to her belly, she felt the breeze of a passing bullet against the fur of her neck. She pulled back the hammer on her revolver as she tumbled down, landing on her back with Dally on top of her. The javelina was half-observed in gun smoke, but she fired through it, and the occultist let out a squeal as she fell.

One left. The coyote pulled the hammer on her revolver again and pointed the gun at the brush on her right, where she'd heard the bowstring. But she found nothing but the sway of grass and the tall ears of the jackrabbit retreating backwards into the forest. The occultist paused, looked back over her shoulder, and regarded the coyote and her irongun curiously. And then she vanished into the fog.

The coyote kept the barrel trained on the spot for a while, breathing heavily as adrenaline scoured her veins. Slowly, she inhaled deep and let the tension flow out with her breath. She let her arm go slack, paw and revolver laying in the dirt beside her. The gun felt light; it was out of bullets. She'd taken one of them out to put into her rifle.

Groaning, she sat up and laid her free paw on the bundle of fox curled against her. "Are you

alright?" she asked him, quietly.

"Y-yes," the boy answered, beginning to open his eyes, but the coyote put her paw over his face.

"Keep your eyes closed," she ordered. "Just stay here."

The coyote climbed to her feet, running her eyes across the dead occultists. Revolver in her paw, she walked backed towards the javelina and stooped down, finding where she'd been fumbling to reload her rifle. In a pouch were three bullets. Not quality make, but usable. The coyote scooped them up. As she walked back down the road, she opened the loading gate on her gun and slotted one bullet into an empty chamber.

The cougar was laying dead on the ground as she approached. His mask had tumbled off his head when he fell to his back, arms outstretched at his sides and his expression frozen as one of disbelief. The skull rest on the dirt beside him, seething with an aura of fell temptation. Whispered promises of power and knowledge flitted against the coyote's ears, threatening to lure her down into the same pits of madness that had ensnared the cougar.

She pointed the gun and fired. Pieces of undead bone were blasted in every direction, catching light with green fire and burning to ash before they even reached the ground. Behind her, Dally whined. The coyote holstered her gun and went to find where she had hidden Kip.

They reached Tolt's Crossing at noon, putting the forest and thoughts of violence and death behind them. When the woodlands thinned and the road grew clear and wide again, the coyote hopped back onto Kip with the fox and they trotted into the village. There was a growing pit in the coyote's stomach as they rode along the outskirts of the village and she began to notice the familiar sights.

"My farm is on this road," Dally told her, pointing. "It's this way."

"I know," she answered, guiding Kip to turn.

The fox blinked and then twisted about to look up at her. "Huh? How do you know?"

She didn't answer, but she led Kip down a familiar path on the outside of the Crossing. Out here were farms, wide open space, and houses surrounded by wooden fences to keep their raptors penned in. As the sun began to fall once more in the sky, they approached a farmhouse near the edge of the woods, modest farmland stretching out behind it. There were fieldhands hard at work, sowing the next crop and tilling the earth. The coyote climbed down from Kip and tied his reins to a lantern post beside the white-painted gate. Then she helped a visibly excited Dally down to the ground.

The young fox pulled open the gate, hobbling on his leg despite the injury. "Mommy! Mommy! I'm home!"

It wasn't a moment before the farmhouse's front door flew open and a vixen stepped out onto the front porch. She was young and too thin, swimming in her long dress. When she saw her son limping towards her, she rushed out to meet him. The vixen dropped to her knees and pulled the kit against her breast, clutching him as tight as a babe. Dally wrapped his arms around her neck and cried, finally letting out his exhaustion.

"Dallis!" the mother fox cried. "What happened to you? When we couldn't find you, I- No. No. Come here. I love you..."

The vixen held her son and looked up towards the gate in front of the house. Her ears perked high when she saw the coyote turning away and beginning to saddle the white and black granraptor behind her.

The coyote adjusted her hat, putting one foot in the stirrup and reaching for the pommel of the saddle to pull herself up. Behind her, the gate creaked noisily, and she felt paws grasp her arm and elbow, claws digging through her shirt sleeve and into her fur. The vixen pulled her down and turned her to face nose-to-nose. She removed the coyote's hat, tossing it to the ground beside them and placed her paws on the other woman's muzzle. The coyote looked back at the vixen. Red fur. Brown eyes. Her features were a little older, a little more drawn from hunger, but it was her.

"My son goes missing," Vania said, tears running down her cheeks, "and of all the people in the

world, *you* bring him back to me.”

The vixen threw her arms around the coyote's neck, hugging her tight and sobbing into her neck. The coyote placed her paws on Vania's sides, holding her gently. Her scent took her back to laying in bed by candlelight, fur against fur, lips pressing together. They were younger then. More hopeful. But the memories felt, to her, like through cloth, muffled and muddled by everything that had happened between. The cold iron on the coyote's hip felt deathly heavy.

Vania took a step back. She held the coyote's bandaged arm in one paw gently. “I don't know what happened, but... thank you.”

“You're welcome,” the coyote told her, grabbing the pommel on Kip's saddle again.

“Don't!” the vixen pleaded. “Don't run. Please? Talk to me.”

The coyote sighed and reluctantly turned back. She looked past her old flame towards the farmhouse, and the fox kit sitting on the porch steps. “You got married.”

“I did,” she replied, nodding. The fox fiddled with a bronze ring on her finger. It was loose and rolled easily under her touch. “I had to. I couldn't leave; not like you. I had to have someone.”

“Where is he?”

“He was killed by highwaymen on a trip to Talto two summers ago,” she replied.

The coyote looked away. “Sorry.”

“No, it's...” She gathered herself. “It's okay. I have Dallis. It's been hard with the farm, but I have help.” Her neck muscles worked as she pieced her words together, shaking her head. “But if you just stay-”

Dally hobbled over to them. He knelt down and picked up the coyote's hat, holding it out to her. She took it with a nod and set it on her brow. She turned her eyes back to Vania and shook her head.

“She's really mean, mommy,” Dally told her, “but also really nice.”

“Don't worry, dear,” the vixen replied, running a paw over his head, “I know.”

When she looked up again, the coyote was settling into Kip's saddle. The rider looked down at the vixen one more time, feeling her heart twist. Then she gave the granraptor a gentle nudge with her ankles, and set off down the road.

She took her memories with her and left the prospect of a normal life behind her once again.

* * * * *

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