

The sandblown dunes of Ishtar Desert had very few safe havens from the harshness of the sun. In spots where the only water was pooled up rain water in limestone pockets, the mostly quiet village of Hickock Hells sat alone in silence. Gnarled trees, dry grass, dusted paths with clear lines that striped in and out of town, the only other things of note were the sparse wood buildings and lamps that sprinkled themselves near each landmark. The jail sat next to the saloon, which sat adjacent to the steeple, which was square next to the town's small inn. Homes were scarcely in the square, and located far out from behind the hills of the little valley this village sat in. The volo and half-volo that occupied the village could be counted on a few hands at best. This town was small, desolate, and afraid. So much as a horse's hoof clops the wrong way, doors were locked and shutters were pulled. One seemingly bizarre morning had given life to the small town, though not in the way any of its occupants wished.

A set of wheels ripped through the barren streets. A crumbling horse drawn carriage curved around the bend of the natural road so hard it practically flung off! Various holes in the back let the wind whistle clean through the cart, gold coins sprinkled out one of the impact sites. Two panicked bandits did their best to reload their crossbows to take potshots at their assailants. One, a full breed grayish blue felinis, kept his mask pulled up over his muzzle the whole time. His yellow eyes locked on the assailant that kept up to a shocking degree. His partner, a terazi woman whose notable traits were her partially human upper torso, and her orangey-brown serpentine lower torso, panicked while she pulled more coin bags together. Their driver, a sandy-scaled lizard-like terazi, kept her eyes on the road the best she could. These bandits were run-of-the-mill, down to their typical bandanas that covered their faces, coats that covered their sides, long sleeved shirts to protect themselves from the sun, and typical tan clothes.

"Hurry UP already!" gripped the terazi, who took a peek outside, "They could be here any moment!"

"Relax!" the driver yelped back, "That bozo doesn't even know how to ride a horse. Did you see them lose it around the corner?"

"They could just as easily get back on another horse!" the terazi tried to caution her driver, the bumpy road bounced her and her bosom about. "We could still be boned!"

The felinis man blinked his eyes, then glanced at the group. "G...Guys!"

"We're gonna head outta town and lose them." The terazi cracked a whip to jolt the horses along. "Just hold onto something and-"

"THEY'RE FLYING OUR WAY!"

The felinis's words had brought his terazi companion's eyes to the exterior of the vehicle, and much to their horror, their assailant had taken to the skies slightly above. Their silhouette crashed over their view of the afternoon sun, that lanky, tall figure could only be discerned like

an enormous hawk, before they zipped back down to the ground. White hair blocked most of the world from peering at their eyes, most of the top were covered up by their terracotta brown hat, with a bright coffee brown stripe that held a little orange feather. Their black feathered wings made for a grand contrast against their tanned skin, orange bandana, their dark brown wrap with faded white accents, especially their tanned short jacket. The only thing that the gang focused on was a firearm attached to their left arm from their elbow. One fist slam from their right hand cocked the practical cannon back.

“THEY SWAPPED FROM THE GRAPPLING HOOK?!” the felinis slipped back in with a nervous yelp.

“Just fire potshots at them!” demanded the terazi, who curled her tail around the felinis’s feet to push the fuzzy cat close to their side of the window.

Another bend around the curve of sparse buildings made the horse carriage wobble, their pursuer took the curve sharper than expected and grew closer. The felinis’ paw shook and quaked, he launched off a bolt that whizzed a good three feet away from their hunter’s wing. With his tail between his legs, he started to regret his slight against this individual. The sound of a great crashing came before the impact; a round bullet the size of someone’s arm tore through the bottom of their cart. The horse whipped its head and whinnied, the cart finally snapped from the animal as it ran away from the sound. Down came the cart, which toppled over onto its side and screeched to the town’s welcome sign. A large plume of dust followed the trail the cart left behind, all that could be heard were coughs and silence for just a while longer. Eventually, the three occupants struggled to pull themselves out from their wreckage, crossbows drawn to their pursuer.

Down they landed, their thick leather boots *clished* against the sand below them. When they realized this was an impromptu stand-off, one could see their smirk reveal their pearly whites. Those night-black wings of theirs unfurled, then slid beneath their coat and faded blue dress shirt in an impressive feat of size reduction. They were the first to draw and fire their round into the crowd of three, the natural kick back they’ve grown used to aided them in their dodge to the side, able to escape three crossbow bolts in what would’ve been a fatal blow. The round didn’t reach the three in time, it exploded and erupted into smoke. The shrapnel of the bullet was minimal, the heat of the smog that escaped the blast was enough to momentarily melt the metal, yet the air around cooled the blast down enough to not scald the other three. There was a beat of quiet, before the terazi woman started to laugh.

“That’s it?!” she roared, “Your big final shot was just a cloud of smoke?! Here I thought you were some big bad bounty hunter, but you’re really just-”

“U-Um, boss?” the felinis whimpered.

The woman’s voice had powered over the creaking of her outfit. She hadn’t paid attention to the rounding of her face, nor the thickening of her compatriots. When buttons

started to pop off her shirt, and her noodle tail began to thicken, she realized her grave, grave error. Townsfolk peeked from their shutters to watch the spectacle, the three crooks instinctively lifted their now wobbly arms out to their sides like scarecrows. Their chins gained a row or two, their chests, especially the terazi woman's, puffed out to rapid degree, their hips thickened and swelled to the point they pushed against each other, though their bellies were the most damning amount of gains. Their stomachs surged slowly and began to hang from their frames.

"Wh...what've you done?!" the terazi wailed, "What'd you do to our bodies?!"

Their assailant casually swiped their thumb from one side of their chin to the other, a casual grin on their face. "I don't shoot t' kill." they casually remarked. Their voice, while not an embodiment of cowpoke masculinity, definitely had years of training from something higher to reach further down. "Unfortunately for y'all, I planned to make ya easier to transport from the very start."

"You can't do this to us!" whined the terazi, whose shirt finally fully gave out under the pressure of her head-smothering chest. "I'm gonna look like a freak! Shoot them!"

"M-My fingers are too fat..." the felinis whimpered while he stumbled back. He couldn't get a good grip of the crossbow thanks to his pudged up hand, which followed down to his chunky arms.

The terazi tried to regain her footing, though her massive rump had made finding her center of balance impossible. While it tore apart her clothes, she flopped to the ground hard, her scaly stomach next to reveal itself from the rips and tears of fabric. She wiggled her arms furiously, but all that did was further add to the wobble pile she became. The felinis fell to his stomach, ample cushion for the impact he faced. His tail rested against the bloated balloon his stomach was, squishy and soft enough to sink one's hand into for a good couple of inches. His knees touched the ground, before belly mass slipped beneath them and slowly hoisted them up. When he tried to touch the ground with his feet, his belly swept those up too. The terazi woman's golden locks swished in her fattened face while she tumbled to her back, that massive noodle of a lower body squirmed and wriggled around in frustration. She used all her energy to slam and punch the ground beneath her, until even that became difficult to do. Another chin row, another massive amount of arm fat that practically locked her limbs in place. Her tits plopped to the ground and continued to surge quicker than all other parts of her frame. Was this her defeat? It was hard to believe, but she had to face facts.

From their hideaways, handfuls of the bird-like folk swarmed out onto their streets once again. They hollered and cheered, one even went to raise the arm of their sun-tanned hero. Their crows and hooting filled the town's dead air, before business went on like usual. A few assisted their hero to strap down the assailants tight onto packing platforms. They would be hauled off soon to the town they stole from. Their hero was pulled into the saloon for celebrations. They were pulled past the happy faces that resembled ravens, owls, hawks and

doves. The bartender, an aged, olden vulture of a man, lurched his long neck closer to the cowpoke.

“Y’gotta stop savin’ this town,” he joked, “else I’ll never recover from the free drinks I owe ya.”

“You know me, all I ask for is a glass of water.” their hero joked.

“Classic Sol.” the bartender chirped, his wings clasped around a pitcher of slightly cloudy aqua. “Never bourbon, never whiskey, never moonshine, not even a beer. Y’gotta start havin’ fun!”

A chuckle escaped Sol while they watched their glass fill up. “If I asked ya for booze every time I saved this place or the area around it, y’all would be drier than Lazarus’s Limb.”

That place Sol was familiar with, it was a mound of craggy dirt and sand that resembled the severed limb of a giant, the purlicue a perfect place for the cowpoke to have lived once before. A random passerby chuckled behind them at the mention of the locale, a half-volo lad clad in similar leather and fabric attire. “Bet it’s a lot drier now that the Lightning Phoenix rose from its ashes.”

Awkwardly, Sol turned their head over to the commenter and tsked. “You of all folk should know I *hate* that name.” they reminded. “I keep tellin’ you, just call me Sol.”

“Hard not to romanticize the town’s de facto sheriff.” the bartender slipped them their glass. “Especially with that rotating arsenal you got.”

“Eh, only brought my hook and pistol today.” Sol flipped their drape to reveal a grappling hook beneath it, the more complicated system seemed to go up their arm further if the cone past the belt around the middle was any indication. “Those guys were small fry who thought they hit it big.”

“I bet Thornwood will appreciate their money back.” the bartender remarked, “Though if I’d have heard about those crooks, I think I could’ve taken ‘em for once.”

“Can you hit the broad side of a barn now?” Sol teased, before they slugged down their drink.

A raspy cackle left the volo bartender. “Yup, though now it’s what’s in front of the barn you gotta worry about.”

“Then maybe you’re better off with a change of careers.” Sol swished on their stool, eyes focused on the windows of the saloon. “Or, maybe that’s just me hopin’ for an excuse to go chase my wanderlust.”

"Hopin' to find someplace more exciting than here?" Another voice in the crowd called out.

"Excitement ain't what I'm lookin' for." Sol admitted. "I just can't stay in one place for too long, and I think my time here in Hickok's Hells is comin' to an end."

"Well then," one patron of the bar raised up his glass with one eye squinted shut, "three cheers for the scientific wanderer!"

A harmony of 'hee-haw's hollered throughout the establishment, the delightful cheers brought a smile to the town hero's face. Here they were, being congratulated just for standing up for what's right...something like that should be what all people strive for. A momentous occasion like this had them pull their hat down over their bangs to further obscure their eyes, for beneath the fabric shroud hid a frown. Momentary weakness. Upon the last hootin' holler, Sol left a small bit of copper coin on the counter.

"Here's to brighter days, eh?" With that, they slid their hand into their pocket and sauntered out.

Behind the cowpoke, the cheers of those they left behind echoed about. It was easy to walk away from such a dusty town knowing that they'd be better off with their multitasking barkeep, but one couldn't uproot themselves without so much as paying respects to where they came from. The Lightning Phoenix didn't get their alias from sheer speculation alone. Many a-whispers throughout this quiet paradise of a major thunderstorm one night, one that ruptured a building by Lazarus's Limb into pieces. From the ashes of the building, one mighty cowpoke pulled themselves out. One whose left arm was lost to the rubble, one whose sheer stubbornness not to die without a cause got them to the town nurse for treatment. Oh, the tale had spread further than the small town. Criminals who were unfortunate to get caught up in the talons of the Phoenix no doubt spun the yarn better than any excitable bard ever done could. Such a title; it always sent a shiver down Sol's spine. Like a rattlesnake warning not to tread any closer, it was never a compliment to the half-volo.

Dusty as it was, the peculiar hill of rock and sandstone that lay outside town fooled many would-be adventurers to steer clear. Rocks formed into a grasping hand, clawing into the sand in desperation to pull itself out. Lazarus's Limb, where Sol once called home. Evident by the piece of rubble that lined itself between the webbing twixt the middle and ring finger, a smoldering ash heap that could've been called a home, or a lab, or just somewhere to discuss. The remaining bit of wall had been fashioned into a spot to hang a hammock, a place where one could call home. All Sol had left at that point was some alchemical supplies, arm supplements mainly fashioned into various firearms, all of which properly washed and treated, followed by dusty old clothes and smoldered, cindered photographs. All they needed to take was one glance at their photo, before they moved on to pack away other supplies. When they reached over to a cabinet locked away, it was then they took notice of a disturbed spot on the

top. The perfect outline of their firearm. On cue, they could hear the click of the canon behind them. Slowly, the cowpoke slid their head over to the would-be bandito who came in to crash their going away party.

There stood a brown furred soldier, the black-gray of his garb contrasted the white and yellow sands he stood beside. His bulb-like tail was tucked between his legs, eyes pin-sized. Was he scared of the inventor before him? No, he'd been shaking at the knees for far longer than that. The oversized revolver-shaped cannon in his hands clacked and trembled.

"D-Don't, don't...don't move." he waved the firearm around in the air. "I'll shoot, I...I know how to use this!"

Sol stood there in silence, the whipping of the wind commentated the whole standoff. Beneath their boots were the crunching of the grains below, the scraping of miniscule rocks to leather. After moments of silence and pressure, Sol finally spoke. "Go on, soldier boy." They flung their arms to the side. "You can take one good shot at me. Blow me clean through the heart and lungs. Leave me to be picked at by the buzzards. You got every ample opportunity..."

The middle of Sol's chest was pushed into the barrel of the cannon.

"Shoot."

Frantic, the soldier punched the trigger at the top with his eyes closed. He felt his ears ring, the click of the firearm and...no sound of body hitting dirt. He beat the trigger again and again and again, but no satisfying thump. When he opened his eyes, the orange glares of a sunset met his gaze back. Sol confiscated their prototype from the would-have-been murderer and scoffed.

"Did your dumbass not even check to see if it was loaded?" they critiqued. "Pitiful. And you're one of them Kyodanian soldiers? Don't they teach you better than that?"

"L-Look, I'm not a soldier anymore." the would-be bandit defended, hands raised in the air. "I'm just a wanderer now!"

"Wandering the desert without proper travel garb?" Sol shook their head. "Chrimeny, you're a load of work. How about you start yapping about the real reason why you're here?"

With a loud gulp, the soldier furiously nodded. "O-Okay, okay, I got hired by some ex-military lady to come rob a place! That any better?!"

"Keep talkin'..." Sol waved their hand along.

"We were trying to take this real worthwhile gem! Coulda been worth big bucks! But, but, then the whole place started coming down after we bombed some spots open, and-"

"Wait a sec, you BOMBED a place?" Sol glared down at the tanuki. "Where were you at?"

"I dunno! Some temple!"

It was then Sol realized the gravity of what this tanuki had done. They growled, then shook their head. To them, a low-bit opportunistic punk could learn a thing or two from getting spooked. "Get." they waved off. "Unless you wanna be swiss cheese."

"I-I swear, I...I won't do it again!" With that, the tanuki practically tripped on himself to run right out of there.

Before their travels can even begin, Sol knew they had to rush over somewhere important. Now that the interloper was gone, they could properly unlock their cabinet with their deceptively simple key, load up on ammunition, and head slightly up north. How they haven't heard of such pandemonium happening just within a day's worth of travel was bewildering! There was no time to spare for Sol, they made a day's detour to the old draconic temple that lay outside of town. The sun crept down over the blistering sands during their dusty dune travel. Evening hung above the cowpoke's head while they charged along, only to be suckerpunched by the sheer force of reality while they stomped up the hills. The face of a dragon carved into the mountain temple now crumbled into five separate pieces of rubble, scorch marks seared into the sides of the once obscured halls, dribbles of red spread across the sands. The grief overcame Sol. Their knees gave in under the overbearing weight of their body, a temple like this, so sacred and so holy, now nothing more than piles of rock. There were still halls, but the etchings along them were no doubt blown apart and tainted.

These runes were abandoned long ago. Those sand speckled corridors that flickered with dim torchlight were an attraction that pulled in visitors from kingdoms all over the continent of Carrago. To Sol, these runes were what led them to study artificial forms of magic and magical enhancement. Many days of their youthful years were gratefully given to roaming the temple, studying its runes, learning their written language and reciting it aloud. If a fellow historian came along with the language of the ancient dragons memorized, Sol would surprise them by speaking full sentences from what they pieced together. When they grew older, they pondered and puzzled over the magic that lay dormant inside. Those secrets would always bring the cowpoke back, along with...

Sol shook themselves back to the present. They can't be thinking of the past now.

One foot in front, Sol pulled themselves back up to their feet. A part of them regrets letting that tanuki rush off, but the damage was already done. It was a struggle for the half-volo to pull themselves through the halls, their hand brushed against the etchings before. What once sparked a rush of childlike whimsy, only dulled their senses. During their descent downward, their face singed with heat. Tears welled up in their eyes, a burning feeling of despair that cut at

their throat sharper than any blade they felt before. It wasn't fair. Their shelter was taken from them not once, but twice? Those leather boots shuffled along and pushed away little chunks of rubble, before they pressed down on something metallic. One brief pause, a swipe of their forearm against their cheeks, and the poke could see for just a moment. Picking it off the ground, they study a gold hat pin, decorated like a cake. Tightly in their hand, they clutched it and bore their teeth. They had someone to take in for the most inexcusable crime; the erasure of history.