

Slaughter at Stringybark Creek  
Complete Series  
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Silvermane wiped the back of her paw across her dusty forehead, the Palomino Mare's head lifting, as she turned her eyes heavenwards, but only the relentless blue sky shone down unceasingly, the sun baking down on the small homestead and cleared paddocks. A rough slab hut, sheathed on the roof with overlapping wooden shingles, the gaps in the rough hewn logs had been chinked with iron bark and mud, but provided little comfort from the relentless heat in summer, and the bitter cold in winter.

Their selection had been a small one, for as almost penniless, they had been forcibly emigrated here, deemed 'unsuitable' for remaining in England, who had shipped countless convicts here, a few of the landed Gentry and more than a few of people like her – a Widow at an early age, with three sons, she knew without her husband, life was going to be hard – and she started to finally realise just how hard it really was...

Her eldest son had died in a freak accident whilst felling logs to build their single room cottage, her next eldest had been bitten by a Brown Snake last spring – and her sole remaining son, a scrawny, half starved Colt – was her last living family member. He had stepped up remarkably since losing his two siblings, working countless hours beneath the blazing Australian sun. he worked from dawn to dusk, fetching water, chopping firewood, and ploughing and seeding the small adjoining paddock with an old mare who Silvermane despaired wouldn't last the coming winter.

Silvermane was proud of her son – who worked without complaint or bitterness, becoming the 'de-facto husband' for Silvermane. He had filled out remarkably due to the long, backbreaking hours he laboured in the field and around their farmstead, filling his mother with pride and joy at watching the young colt rapidly developing into the stallion he would later become.

As she watched, he dunked his head into the watering trough, throwing his head back and snorting, letting the tepid water run down his sweat lathered neck and shoulders, before he picked up the blunt axe and bent over, picking up another short length of log. Swinging the axe up over his head, Silvermane watched the iron-like muscles bunch and twist beneath his shirtless fur, dark gloved paws gripping the axe and the satisfying clunk as the blade bit deep into the log, it uttering a weak cracking sound.

Despairingly, Silvermane gazed at the wilting wheat sheaf's that she and her son had harvested a week ago – the crop was only a third of what they'd started with, and Silvermane began to fret that they'd receive a pittance for what they could manage to sort from the stalks. Her vegetable crop lay limp and almost dead thanks to the merciless summer heat, and Silvermane truly began to wonder just how they'd survive the coming winter. With only a few months left to lay in winter stores, she had no idea what they were going to do – drought had gripped the land for months, with it showing no signs of relenting any-time soon.

Little did either know, their life was to change – forever -

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Sgt. Eric McGovern sat astride his horse, a beautiful bay coloured gelding who stamped its hooves and snorted, tossing its proud and noble head as it champed on the bit, ears pricked forwards in

anticipation. He reached up and tugged at the tight high collar, then reached across the pommel of the saddle, checking the strap that held the rifle in the polished leather holster. His brass buckles and buttons of his rich navy uniform sparkled and shone, the mid-thigh length boots polished to a blinding intensity.

Coming up behind and slightly to the left, a frightened young kangaroo dressed in similar uniform, his long ears slicked back and thin tail resting uncomfortably on the leather clad rump of the dappled grey mare on which he rode.

"Sargent - " Stammered the timid Kangaroo, as he plucked a thick handkerchief from a saddlebag and wiped his sweat streaked muzzle.

"Constable Josef Clanton! Compose yourself!" Snapped Sargent Eric McGovern, as he twisted in the saddle astride the bay gelding, glaring at the frightened recruit..

"Yes...sir - " Stammered Josef, as he wiped the cloth over his neck. "Sir – is this really necessary, I mean they - "

"We have our orders – *Constable* - " Snarled Sgt. McGovern, as he turned back in the saddle and sank his leather clad heels into the wilting gelding, sending it into an almost instant gallop.

With an exasperated, drawn out sigh, the young Constable stuffed his sweat soaked handkerchief back into the saddlebag and clucked his tongue at the mare, who obediently broke into a light canter.

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Silvermane snorted, hearing the galloping hoof-beats, then hurriedly turned to her son, who came towards her.

"Lachlan, go inside, now!" Silvermane growled at him, waving her paw towards the door.

Obediently, the young Colt entered their slab hut cottage and Silvermane pulled the door firmly closed behind her, standing protectively before the door, her paws resting lightly on her well patched skirt. As the mounted human and kangaroo approached, her ears swept back and she kept her guarded pose, even when the Police reigned their horses in a few feet away.

"What do you want - " Silvermane snorted, eyes narrowing. "Haven't you done enough already Sargent McGovern?"

Sitting astride the snorting gelding, the Sargent looked down disdainfully, at the dusty and dirty Palomino mare who stared up at him.

"Pleasant tidings - " Sneered the man with a barely held back contempt.

Silvermane glanced past the Sargent at the timid looking Kangaroo who sat astride his dappled grey Mare, looking distinctly uncomfortable, the sweat shining on his pale grey fur.

"Got yourself a new pet?" Silvermane snorted. "What happened to the last one? Did you break him?"

"Now listen here - " Squealed Constable Clanton.

At a gloved wave from the Sargent, the kangaroo fell silent and sullen, gripping the reins of the mare in his gloved paws.

“So the Buck has a tongue - “ Silvermane laughed in derision. “So Sargent, what is it this time? Whats dragged your misbegotten carcass all this way, I'm sure it wasn't just a social call...”

“Watch your tongue, Mare - “ Sgt. McGovern growled, his hand straying towards his crop that hung loosely from the saddle. “I'm here on behalf of the Governor, of the Colony of - “

Silvermane snorted through her nostrils and flicked her ears. “You're on no such orders! I know whose pocket you're really in!

“How dare you!” Sgt. McGovern roared.

His hand grasping the crop, and before he or the startled Silvermane knew what was happening, it swished through the air and struck her with a loud crack cross the bridge of her muzzle. Silvermane screamed in fright and pain, as the crop lashed again and again, the man swinging it with such frightful ferocity, bearing an unmistakable look of hatred and disgust on his face.

With a startled squeal, Constable Clanton kicked his mare in the flanks and drove her forward, his left hand flashing out and grasping the Sargent by the wrist.

“Sargent McGovern – Sir, enough!” Cried the Constable in horror.

Without missing a beat, Sargent McGovern's right hand flashed out and struck the Constable on the side of the muzzle, rocking his head back with a sickening snap.

His fury suddenly spent, he rounded on the Constable and glared at him. “Do not ever touch me again Constable – or I'll see you sent to the Stockade...”

Silvermane wept, the tears streaking down her dusty muzzle, as she weakly raised her paws and touched her lashed muzzle, keeping her eyes downcast.

“You got three days - “ Sargent McGovern growled venomously, as he lashed the crop across the Mare's right shoulder. “Three days to get off this land – before we come and evict you – forcibly!”

Whirling his gelding about, the Sargent cruelly drove his boots into the horses' flanks and quickly cantered out of the farmstead. Timidly, Constable Clanton reached out a gloved paw, only to have Silvermane twist away from him and start crying piteously.

“Ma'am - “ Constable Clanton sniffled, feeling hot tears welling in his eyes.

“Just go - “ Silvermane wept. “You two have done enough already?”

With a low whimper, Constable Clanton spun his mare about and clucked at her, lightly shaking the reins and followed his departed Sargent. He had never seen this side of his senior officer – it sickened and terrified him...he began to wonder, just what had happened to the Sargent's previous Constable...

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Lachlan had been out hunting and trapping wild rabbits, their pelts he knew from experience would fetch a few pennies and with their crops withering and dying, he had hoped to be able to supplement their meagre meals and would later salt a few of the carcasses to try and help build up some further supplies to hold them over winter. He had been modestly successful, with a brace of a dozen rabbits, and for good measure he'd even caught a few wild Pheasants. Happy with himself, he wove his way back along the game trails, pale furred ears pricked forwards for the chance of hearing some further chances for adding to his hand stitched bag that lay slung over his shoulder.

His rifle, an old, open sighted gun inherited from his father, was holstered over his shoulder, the hardwood stock in easy reach of his large, work calloused hands. He knew his mother would be proud of him, and as he moved with a surprising stealth – he listened to the calling of the birds in the trees around him, pausing a moment just to appreciate the clear summer air and the scent of the surroundings. Tilting his head back, his large nostrils flared wide and he could vaguely scent the creek not too far away. A cool drink was just what he felt would to off a good day, and he wandered off the game trail and made his way down towards the creek.

Crouching down, his ears flicking forwards, Lachlan watched as a shy young grey kangaroo doe paused at least ten metres back from the edge of the creek, her ears twitching as she listened for anything out of the ordinary that would send her fleeing. From where Lachlan crouched, he could see her perfectly, and watched as the timid Doe slowly crawled closer to the water – just as she dipped her muzzle to drink the cold, clear water – several trout flashing away as her lips touched the water – there came a deafening crack of rifle fire.

All around him, the birds took to the skies screeching and calling in fear, and the Doe's head snapped up and her muscles clenched, as her powerful talons dug into the soft loam and she fled back into the scrub. Lachlan snapped to his full height in a heartbeat, heart thundering and ears swivelling, as he heard more and more gunshots fired – and his blood turned to ice...he knew where those rifle shots were coming from...

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Sargent McGovern had brought a dozen troopers with him; fanned out in a rough semicircle, their horses standing behind them. They had opened fire on the slab hut from close range, peppering it with bullets and even still, the stench of gunpowder still hovered like an inverted cloud just above their heads, the cracks of their rifles still echoing.

“Three days are up Silvermane - “ Sgt. McGovern's voice roared. “You were told to leave – you refused, so we're here too forcibly evict you!”

“Go to hell - “ Silvermane's voice pealed forth from somewhere inside.

Again, the Sargent gave the order, and this time, the barrage of gunfire went on for some time, splinter peeling from the slab hut and bullets ricocheting wildly when they struck metal. For the longest time, they kept up their sustained fire, until an unmistakable shriek of equine agony pealed forth and the Sargent grinned maliciously.

“Come out Mare - “ Yelled Sargent McGovern “You got a choice, come out and be arrested for your crimes – or we'll burn this place to the ground, with you inside! Its your choice – but make it fast, my patience is at an end.”

“We've done nothing wrong! You're just in the pocket of Paterson – he's always wanted my - “ Come the broken, sobbing cry.

“Come out – or we'll burn you out!” Roared Sgt. McGovern “Constable!”

“Sir?” Stammered Constable Clanton, his eyes wide and ears slicked back.

“Take four men, start setting this place alight – I do not care how you do it Constable, I want nothing but ashes!” Sneered the Sargent.

“Sir – surely there is - “ Constable Clanton whimpered. “There must be another way, a way we can peace...”

With a bestial snarl, Sgt. McGovern swung the butt of his rifle, and Constable Clanton shrieked, instinctively raising his right forearm in defence, the thick stock of the rifle crunching down and shattering his forearm, driving the screaming Kangaroo to his knees as he clutched his broken arm. A few sniggers and chuckles come from some of the other human troopers, who made cruel jibes at the Kangaroo's distress.

“Constable Elkhorn!” Sgt. McGovern snarled. “Carry out the order!”

“Sir!” Snapped the raven black furred weasel, his eyes glittering with mischief and cruel intent. Waving his paw, he selected four troopers at random, before pulling a flint and steel from his saddlebags and walking towards the rickety barn. “This dry straw will do well - “

“Sir – please!” Constable Clanton screamed in agony and fear, tears coursing down his muzzle as he tried to protect his shattered forearm.

His temper up, Sargent McGovern rounded in on the screaming, terrified kangaroo and sank his thick leather clad boot into the Constables belly, crushing the wind from his lungs in one violent blow and knocking him onto his back.

“I've told you before - “ Sgt. McGovern growled venomously, his eyes gleaming with a cruelty and malice.

“Sir!” Someone screamed, a second before there was a deafening crack and the black furred weasel staggered, before clutching his paws to his belly, looking at the spreading crimson stain that dyed the front of his uniform black – the burning sheaf of straw he had held, falling from nerveless fingers and striking the ground with incandescent sparks that glimmered and flickered.

“What the - “ Sgt. McGovern roared.

More gunshots rang out, and the Trooper's horses neighed and tossed their heads, their instincts were to run, but their training made them merely prance nervously. Troopers scattered like leaves before a tempest – some escaping unharmed, more than one shrieking and falling, struck down by the bullets that flew from inside the slab hut.

“For the King, get up your cowards and fight – its one - “ Sgt. McGovern's hat flew off as the bullet whistled over his head.

Those who could, raised their rifles and unleashed a withering fire upon the hut, until there was a loud, braying scream and a crash from inside. As the gunfire ended under the Sargent's command, he got up and dusted himself off, completely ignoring the hysterically crying Corporal Clanton who lay crumpled on the ground.

“Come out Mare – you'll be lucky if you don't hang for this!” Sgt. McGovern's voice snapped like a whip.

Weakly, bleeding profusely from a gunshot wound to the thigh, Silvermane staggered out of the slab hut, using the empty rifle as a crutch.

“Hold your fire!” Sgt. McGovern's voice rang out.

Keeping Silvermane covered at all times, the remaining Troopers kept a tight grip on their rifles, watching as Silvermane staggered out and crumpled into the dirt, the rifle falling from her paws and her agonised breathing billowing through her flared nostrils. One of the Troopers advanced, before kicking away the rifle out of Silvermane's reach, then held his gun barrel to his head.

“Well now,” Sgt. McGovern growled, before he stepped closer and un-holstered his pistol. “Isn't this much nicer – you grovelling in the dirt where you belong!”

With a strength she didn't know she possessed, Silvermane forced herself up onto her knees, then glared defiantly up at the man who had tormented and harassed her for years.

“I'm not afraid of you – or your lackeys. You're unfit to wear that uniform – none of you are! How dare you come onto my land, land we earned in the selection lottery, just because some high and mighty - “ Silvermane croaked, her lips coated with the fine powdery dust in which she had lain.

Smiling at her, Sgt. McGovern's gloved paw gently stroked her cheek in a mocking caress, before he savagely backhanded her, snapping her head to the side.

“Speak not with such an uncivil tongue - “ Sgt. McGovern snarled, his rage barely held in check.

Silvermane slowly turned her head back, defiantly staring up at him and forcing herself not to cry – as she locked gazes on the man who had tormented her for years. If anything, her spine became more rigid and she narrowed her already half-lidded eyes into a squint of pure apathy and disgust.

“Nothing you can do to me – will change anything...” Silvermane muttered. “You will get what is coming to you and yours. You act like such big men, parading around in your uniforms – thinking you're cock of the walk and - “

With a snarl, Sgt. McGovern's rifle butt slammed into the side of Silvermane's cheek, the cracking of iron bark stock on cheek unmistakable, and even some of the sniggering Troopers winced as the Mare crumbled to the ground – yet still her spirit remained unbroken, which only infuriated Sgt. McGovern more.

“Trooper Clancy!” Sgt. McGovern snarled, flicking his gaze to a pale faced young Trooper nearby.

“Sir?” Came the response.

“Fetch the rope – we'll save the King the cost of a trial – I think there's enough evidence to convict the prisoner, don't you?” Sgt. McGovern snorted. “Why drag a beast back to the stockade, then spend the money on a trial and...”

“Yes....sir - “ Stammered the Trooper, as he rushed to the horses and quickly retrieved the thick rope.

Silvermane squirmed and bit her tongue, as her paws were roughly clasped in manacles behind her back, her eyes never once leaving those of the Sargent, who dutifully instructed his men to prepare the hangman's noose and sling it over the thick branch of a nearby Ghost gum. Cruelly, Silvermane was dragged to her hooves and forced at rifle point, towards the chestnut mare.

"You won't get away with this Sargent – sooner or later – someone will stand up to you..." Silvermane snarled, as she was forced up onto the Mare's back and the rope slung around her neck.

"Talk all you want – It won't save you. For years, you've been a thorn in my side, as is your kind in general...you're unworthy, your kind are less than the muck I'd scrape off my boots!" Sgt. McGovern sneered disdainfully.

"I'll see you in hell, Sargent - " Silvermane whispered, before she closed her eyes and turned her head forwards, denying him a chance to see the tears that slid down her dusty cheeks.

With a snort, Sgt. McGovern slapped the rump of the Mare, who whinnied and bolted forwards – the noose instinctively tightening around Silvermane's throat and yanking her off the back of the horse. More than one of the troopers gasped, as Silvermane hung, her hooves twitching and convulsing about six inches off the ground, weak choking gurgles coming from her throat as she was strangled.

"You bastard!" Screamed Constable Clanton. "Oh for the love of the King – please...please put her out of her - "

A rifle butt smashed down on the young Kangaroo's head, driving him unconscious, as the remaining Troopers stood around and waited for orders

"You, you and you!" Snarled Sgt. McGovern "Burn this place to the ground – I want nothing but ashes, do you hear me?"

Obediently, the remaining Troopers snapped to attention, fearful of the wrath of their commanding officer, and began gathering straw and sticks, quickly igniting the tinder dry slab hut and small ramshackle stable. As the flame hungrily licked and spread, the Troopers withdrew turning to their horses and mounting, before they followed the Sargent away from the rising conflagration – leaving the unconscious Kangaroo Trooper where he lay – Silvermane continuing to thrash and buck, the noose growing tighter and tighter as she slowly strangled – until at last her convulsions stopped and her lifeless corpse hung suspended from the rope, creaking in the wind.

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Lachlan screamed himself hoarse, as he ran wildly across the stream, water sloshing as high as his hips before he broke into a frantic, flat out run – his hooves thudding against the fallen leaf litter and leaving deep impressions, mane swirling and tail raised and streaming out behind him. As the rifle fire faded away, Lachlan had no doubts as to where it'd come from – he only prayed to whatever Deity was listening – he wouldn't be too late.

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Constable Clanton lay unconscious in the blood spattered dirt of the burning farmstead, oblivious as the fire raged and consumed the slab hut and small stable, smoke curling up into the uncaring late afternoon sky. As a pealing scream of equine anguish shattered split the air, Constable Clanton

grunted groggily and flicked an ear – without warning, he felt himself gripped by his uniform collar and physically slammed against a Ghost Gum, the air crushed from his slender lungs. As he struggled to draw breath, he felt the paws lock like manacles about his throat – then lift him at least a foot off the ground. Choking and gagging, he used his one working paw to claw at the iron-like fingers in a futile gesture.

As spots and jagged lines erupted behind his eyes, the Constable gagged and strangled, his paw instinctively reaching for the pistol holstered at his right hip – only to feel the steel barrel trust up under his chin, forcing his head back and the unmistakable click of the heavy hammer being pulled back.

“You - “ Lachlan roared, tears streaking down his muzzle, as he ground the barrel deeper and with his left hand, tightened his already crushing grip, lifting the choking kangaroo higher.

Constable Clanton thrashed and struggled, his lungs feeling like they were consumed with fire, yet he was powerless to break the strong grip of the enraged and hysterical equine.

“You murdering bastard!” Lachlan shrieked, his voice cracking with emotion. “Give me one damn reason why I should not pull this trigger...”

Despite suffocating, Constable Clanton heard the slight clicking of the revolver chamber turn, his eyes wide and paw flailing ineffectively at Lachlan's wrist. Something – in the terrified, pain riddled Kangaroo's eyes, stayed Lachlan's rage and he released the Constable, who crumpled to the ground and began wheezing, paw splayed against his throat and desperately trying to breath. Lachlan ignored him, as he walked towards where his mother hung, then slumped to his knees and clutched his muzzle in his paws, the revolver falling from his fingers to thud onto the ground.

“I was not here to save you - “ Lachlan sobbed heart-brokenly, as he clung to his mothers calves, his tears running unimpeded down his cheeks and dripping to the ground.

Gagging and retching, Constable Clanton staggered to his feet, then dropped to his knees and continued struggling to draw breath.

“It - “ He rasped.

With frightening speed, Lachlan spun around and his fingers locked around the Constable's throat again and began squeezing inexorably.

“Shut up – just – just – shut up!” Lachlan screamed, giving full voice to his guilt, pain and anger as he began to shake the Constable like a Terrier would shake a rat.

Throwing the Constable to the ground, Lachlan turned his tear streaked face back to his mother, before running to the tree and fumbling at the knots until he finally undone them and carefully lowered her body to the ground. Oblivious of the agonised Trooper laying nearby, Lachlan knelt and cradled his mother to his chest, before tipping back his head and completely surrendering to the conflicting emotions inside him, as Constable Clanton crawled away, using only his one working paw, his feet refusing to work.

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For an hour, Lachlan wept at his mothers side, everything he'd ever known – everything Silvermane had taught him – it all bubbled to the surface in an endless wave of grief and sadness,



before he cried himself out, the unmistakable burning hate and need for revenge mounting his spine like a white-hot flame. As gently as he could, he laid his mother's head on the ground, reaching for the pistol that wasn't there...as he blinked, he heard the hammer pulled back, and he stared in disbelief, as Constable Clanton leaned against the tree, holding the revolver in his shaking paw and pointed at Lachlan.

"Listen to me - " Corporal Clanton gasped, feeling the agony of his shattered forearm nearly send him to his knees.

"You listen to me - Copper - " Lachlan snarled, his rage barely suppressed and ears flat against the back of his head, then slowly touched his chest, then right between his eyes. "Here, or here - anywhere else - I'm going to kill you..."

Constable Clanton managed a weak laugh, his ears twitching backwards. "I'm - the one with the gun. Now...please - just, just listen to me - please?"

Barely reining in his rising anger, Lachlan knelt and placed his interlaced fingers behind his head, in a submissive gesture. Even still Constable Clanton kept a nervous gaze on him, knowing from experience how fast this young Colt was.

"It - it wasn't me, I swear - Sargent McGovern and his - goons, they did this! They did all of this, I tried to stop him and - "

Lachlan trembled, his rage building, yet he remained kneeling.

Constable Clanton swallowed, then tightened his grip on the pistol, his paws sweating profusely.

"I tried to stop him, he - he's mad with his power, he - he is in the pay of powerful men - they wanted your family out of the way and...and...it's no secret. He hates - us - for what we are, in his eyes, we're neither animal nor human and..." Clanton rasped, before his throat locked and he could barely breathe.

"So - " Came the low, venomous hiss from Lachlan. "Why do you stay? Why don't you report him, or something! How - look at you, you're what - barely seventeen? Not even a man yet - "

Constable Clanton's ears flattened, his anger finding an outlet at last.

"You dare criticise me? Do you know half of what I've endured? How I've had to work so very hard, just to get the position I have? How much I've - "

Lachlan merely gestured to his dead mother, then his burned home, everything he'd ever known, taken from him. Constable Clanton swallowed, the formerly rock-steady grip on the pistol wavering slightly. It was at that moment, something touched the Constable deep in his heart, before he took one faltering step, then another, his dark brown eyes locked on Lachlan's - before he realised how close he was, then made the ultimate gesture of faith, he flipped the pistol in his paw, then held it out butt first to the equine.

"You want your revenge - " Constable Clanton whispered, his tears spilling forth, before he slowly knelt and lifted his head. "Then start with me..."

As he squeezed his eyes closed, Constable Clanton prayed silently, waiting for it all to end, when there was nothing - he cracked open his eyelids and stared. Lachlan has stood silently, and turned

his back, the equines broad shoulders trembling as he lowered his paws, the gun once more falling from his nerveless fingers.

“I may be many things - “ Lachlan whispered, his voice choked with sobs. “Yet I'm no cold blooded murderer - “

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Sometime later, Clanton shed his uniform, throwing it on the hot coals and standing beside Lachlan, watching his uniform first smoulder, then catch fire.

“I'm done with that life - “ Clanton whispered. “I can't go back, Sargent McGovern would have me in irons and -”

Lachlan shook his head, turning his back on the smouldering ruin that had been his home, before he walked a short distance and picked up a shovel that had somehow survived the conflagration. Clanton watched him, before he shivered and turned towards his ever patient mare and dragged some rough cloth from his saddlebag and found two tick, yet flexible sticks. Making a rough splint for his broken forearm, he nearly screamed as he bit down on the end of the rough-spun cloth and pulled the knots tight. He felt the pain lancing through his body like a gunshot, and with nothing at hand to ease it, he formed a crude sling from his belt and slipped his wrist through the loop, then clumped against the tree and watched Lachlan as he dug a deep hole, then buried his mother...Lachlan never cried, but the former constable cried enough for both of them...

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Hours later, Clanton rode the mare as Lachlan walked with the reins in his right paw, the revolver tucked into his pants.

“What will become of us?” Clanton asked in confusion.

“I know enough about trapping and hunting – we'll – survive. What we can't catch ourselves, well, there's always...” Lachlan muttered.

Clanton's eyes went wide as the realisation of what Lachlan was insinuating began to sink in.

“NO!” He rasped. “You can not expect me too - “

Lachlan never paused, but moved off the tree lined road and headed through the thick scrub, the mare baulking slightly as she felt the branches slapping against her belly and sides.

“What choice do we have? You're a Copper, I'm – I'm nothing – you at least, could get some supplies to tide us over, I'm sure there's a few, shopkeepers who owe you a favour or two...”

“I - “ Clanton moaned. “I got some of my wages left, I could clear out my barracks chest when Sargent McGovern is out patrolling...it – its not much...”

“Anything is better than what we have – my rifle, “ Lachlan's voice trailed off for a moment, as his ears flicked. “your pistol, the mare on which you're riding...”

“You - “ Clanton whispered fearfully. “You know what you're asking of me – the punishment for...”

“Take my offer, or leave it Buck – its my only option. Who wants me? Nobody, I go to town to trade my meagre goods, to sell the skins – and what do I get? Derision, insults – no, this is the only way. I – I'll be grateful for whatever help you can give – and your silence.”

“I – you could get a job, you're young, fit, healthy - “ Clanton stammered. “There has to be an alternative...”

“What about you? What will you do, Mr. Ex Police Trooper? Think that they'll just forget about you? No, they'll hunt you down as a traitor to the Colony and the King...I've seen the 'justice' – forgive me, if I place no faith in it. You saw what they done – you know – don't you? Just how much of the 'Kings Justice' really rules in this Godless colony! Powerful and influential men with pounds to burn, rule here! Not us mere 'commoners' – even convicts – would receive better treatment than we would around here!” Lachlan's voice was low, filled with a terrible sadness and wisdom, far beyond his own tender years should bring him.

“I - “ Clanton blinked the words suddenly vanishing.

Lachlan uttered a weak, bone weary laugh and nodded his head, before taking a convoluted path through a thick patch of lantana, following an almost invisible game trail. Once again, the mare balked and snorted, but with a forceful tug of the reins, Lachlan made he push through it and Clanton stared in amazement.

They found themselves before a deep cave, the overhanging granite casting the cave mouth in deep cool shadows, the thick scribbly gums, lemon scented melaleuca and other trees providing a thick screen of protective foliage. If one did not know this cave was here, Clanton swore silently, you could walk within fifty paces of it, and never know it existed. Clanton could smell water nearby, and he became aware of just how dry his throat had become. Carefully, using his uninjured paw he slipped from the saddle and stood beside the mare, who nickered quietly in confusion, her head slowly moving from side to side, ears pricked forwards. Clanton soothed his mare with a gentle pet to her sweaty neck, before taking stock of the situation.

“Guess this - “ he whispered, his own long ears twitching back.

“Home - “ Lachlan snorted.

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Weeks passed, as Lachlan and Clanton's uneasy truce held, Lachlan teaching the recuperating Kangaroo how to gut and skin the rabbits and a multitude of other things. Clanton taught Lachlan how to read and write – of a fashion – and other more 'civilised' things. One evening, as Clanton was tending the fire at the mouth of the cave, he heard the rustle of the branches and his head snapped up in alarm.

"You need to be more attentive - " Lachlan snorted, before dropping the gutted carcass of a young Doe wallaby before the fire.

"You can't be serious - " Clanton gagged, staring at the Wallaby's corpse, his ears flattening and eyes going wide.

"Mate, its all I could trap – its either this...or we starve. I don't like it as much as you do," Lachlan sighed. "That flour and such you got for us, there's very little left. I don't know what sort of food you lived on in the Stockade..."

Clanton shook his head violently. "I'll go hungry – I'm – I'm sorry, but there's just no way I can bring myself to eat her – it'd be like eating my own kind, in a way."

Lachlan placed a large paw on the trembling Kangaroo's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze "I know where there's some edible berries and such – sure, it's not much...look, we got to face some harsh realities. We're coming up on winter, we have neither the food reserves nor the clothing to comfortably survive. I won't lie to you Constable - "

Clanton blanched, his ears going flat and he turned away. "Please don't call me that - "

"Sorry - " Lachlan muttered.

\*

Sgt. McGovern reined in his horse outside the Police Barracks and dismounted, the remaining Troopers following suit. As they laughed and joked amongst themselves, none of them paid much attention to the scrawny, half-starved young Lapine girl, her dress more a mix of old patches and threadbare fabric; eyes downcast as she timidly waited.

"Mr. McGovern, message for you sir - " Whispered the young Doe, as she stepped closer, timidly holding a folded piece of paper.

McGovern sneered disdainfully, snatching the note from the Doe's paw, before unfolding it and reading the short sentence written on the paper he nodded once then as the Doe waited patiently, he glared at her, before roughly seizing her by the collar and violently pushing her back against the thick timber wall.

"If you're expecting payment for the letter delivery," He snarled at her, tightening his grip. "Forget it – your filthy kind is a disgrace, you hear me? Now get away from here you Godless whore – before I forget my manners!"

Cruelly throwing her to the ground, he aimed a well placed kick into her rump, sending her sprawling into the dirt. Tears slid down her cheeks as she slowly got to her foot paws, then ran, crying uncontrollably. A few humans and other Anthropomorphic creatures had watched the Sargent, none dared speak up and more than one eye glimmered with cruel pleasure.

"What? What are you all staring at?" Sgt. McGovern snorted, as he wiped his gloved hands on his uniform, like they'd touched something impure.

He stormed back into the Barracks, then sighed and headed back out, once again throwing the reins over his gelding and slipping his foot into the saddle, before twisting the Gelding's neck around savagely and kicking him in the flanks, the eager, headstrong gelding leaping like a whip had been cracked over his rump, scattering people aside as he barrelled his way across the square and down the main road out of town.

\*

"A Sargent McGovern to see you, sir!" Spoke the impeccably dressed Butler, before bowing graciously and leaving the room.

Like a penitent man before his God, Sgt. McGovern swept his hat off, and grasped it between his

hands, keeping his head bowed until the elderly man seated in the leather chair waved a liver spotted hand with a dismissive wave.

“Mister Patterson, Sir - “ Stammered Sgt. McGovern

“Harrison? A Scotch, a drink Sargent?” Come the old man's reply, as he glanced at the Butler, who nodded and moved across the room almost silently.

Sgt. McGovern's eyes trailed around the opulent room, taking in the furnishings, the thick rug and the tasteful sculptures and paintings that adorned the walls.

“A – a scotch would be fine, thank you Sir.” Sgt. McGovern replied, standing formally at attention.

Patterson rose from his couch, huffing slightly as if this exertion tired him. For in his youth, he had worked long and hard to amass his fortune and power, his once short cropped black hair now as wispy silken tendrils that clung to his liver-spotted scalp. His legs were bowed, from a lifetime spent in and out of the saddle, his thick bushy eyebrows hid deeply sunken eyes that missed nothing, as they gleamed with a malicious intelligence that put the cold chill into whoever they fell upon. Power emanated from Patterson like an invisible wave, and he could be urbane, polite and courteous as the finest of Nobility in England, or as cold, cruel and uncouth as the lowliest of the convicts who had been deported to the new colonies.

He dressed in a elegant smoking jacket, beneath which was worn a fine silk shirt, and dark trousers clung to his scarecrow like legs, his feet encased in thin slippers of the finest Marino wool. His frame, withered and bent from age made him look fragile and weak, but he possessed an indomitable will, strength of character and spirit, that made lesser men quail before him.

As quiet as a wraith, the Butler brought over a silver tray, with two glasses sitting on it. Patterson took one, then the Butler turned and held out the tray, as Sgt. McGovern took the other.

“Will that be all, Sir?” Whispered the Butler in an impeccable British accent.

“Yes, thank you Harrison - “ Patterson grunted, then sipped the scotch, feeling the burn of the distilled alcohol.

“Very good, Sir.” Harrison replied, with a formal bow.

After the Butler left and closed the double doors, Patterson grinned and turned on the Sargent, with a chilling stare.

“I trust – the business matter – has been resolved, in my favour?” Patterson chuckled, then downed the scotch in one swallow.

“Yes – Sir,” Sgt. McGovern replied. “It – she refused your most generous offer of three shillings per acre, as you instructed and - “

With a shrug, Patterson waved a hand. “I care not for how it was done, the less I know, the better – now, I trust there will be no – problems – acquiring the now vacant land?”

“No, Sir.” Sgt. McGovern replied submissively. “It defaults back to the Crown, but since I have – forgive me Sir, since – you – have influence, I believe there will be no – inconveniences for you.”

“Remember your place Sargent - “ Patterson spoke slowly, poking a bony finger into the Sargent's chest. “I control what happens, when, how and who. I haven't gotten as wealthy as I have, by not knowing how to cultivate the right – interests. You have proven – adequate so far, some of your methods though...”

“Sir - “ Sgt. McGovern spoke, then shut his mouth with a snap.

“You make your – displeasure – too widely known Sargent, I care not one wit for your own petty issues with the...creatures. Some of them are useful to me, yet overall – your excesses are proving to become – an issue. They will stop, immediately, do I make myself clear?” Patterson growled quietly. “I gave you everything Sargent – I made you the man you are, and this is how you repay my generosity?”

“Yes Sir, it – it won't happen again Sir, I promise - “ Sgt. McGovern whispered, visibly shrinking under Patterson's scathing fury.

“Get out Sargent, and remember – I made you, and I can destroy you – just as easily.” Patterson snorted, turning his back. “Harrison will pay you what you're owed, and this conversation never happened.”

\*

For weeks, Lachlan and Clanton barely survived, their meagre supplies dwindling day by day. Lachlan added a few more thin branches, for without an axe to cut down thicker branches, he had to forage further and further afield for firewood, the bare armload of twigs and sticks wouldn't last them past the night. Clanton helped when he could, but not being thick bodied from a young life spent in the outdoors, he was suffering the most from their poor diet. He pulled the threadbare blanket tighter around his shoulders, and tried not to cough, his eyes sparkling in the flicker of the sparks that rose up to the cold, cloudless night sky.

“We can't go on like this Clanton - “ Lachlan sniffled, as he used a stick to poke the dying embers.

Lachlan looked up, then sighed and poked the embers again, sighing and letting his mind wander as he glanced at their meagre reserves of food that Clanton had begged and borrowed from people he knew in Stringybark Creek.

Clanton shivered, then cupped his paws to his muzzle, a dry, hacking cough torn from his throat. “What choice do we have? I'm a renegade, and you – Sargent McGovern – he'd want both of us dead, to tie up any loose ends.”

Lachlan stood, then gripped Clanton by the back of his neck, feeling the skin easily pulled into a thick scruff, Clanton squirmed in discomfort, rubbing his aching stomach, before twisting his head to glance askance at Lachlan, whose own weak, malnourished body had lost a lot of its former musculature.

“So, we're not living like Kings - “ Clanton murmured, then looked into the charred tin that sat next to the hot coals.

“We're hardly living - “ Lachlan replied miserably, feeling his own hunger pangs. “Hunting has been – difficult. I'm running short of ammunition and...there are alternatives - “ Lachlan began.

Clanton shivered, pulling the blanket closer, before he caught Lachlan eye and his own eyes went

wide, as the realisation sunk in. Clanton croaked, then cupped his paws to his muzzle and coughed again, his ears flattening back against his neck. “No...”

A choking fit seized Clanton and squeezed him tight, the threadbare blanket falling from his shoulders. He slid over onto his side, convulsing and coughing helplessly, before Lachlan came to him, sitting him up and draping his own blanket and the fallen one, around Clanton's shoulders – his fingers brushing across the slender shoulders of the Kangaroo, feeling the dry, brittle fur and the pronounced shoulder bones.

For several agonising minutes, Clanton wheezed and coughed, his back-swept ears trembling as he clutched his paws to his muzzle and the coughing grew worse, before Lachlan forced Clanton to drink some water, the Kangaroo nearly choking on it, before swallowing.

“You're sick - “ Lachlan admonished him.

“I - “ Clanton waved an almost skeletal paw, the black leather pads cracked and dry. “I'm fine - “

Lachlan put the back of his paw against Clanton's forehead, feeling the sweat and warmth. “You're not fine – you've got a fever, I can feel it. I'm going to get you some medicine, whether you like it or not!”

Clanton rolled his eyes to look at Lachlan, then opened his mouth to speak, but Lachlan would hear none of it. Wrapping Clanton in the threadbare blankets, he carried Clanton into the cave, where it was modestly dry and warm, before he started gathering up a few things.

“Promise me - “ Clanton croaked.

Lachlan paused, as he picked up Clanton's revolver, dropping the cylinder out and checking the chambers, before turning away, dropping the pistol into the leather holster. “I promise nothing - “

\*

Riding down old game trails, Lachlan frequently doubled back on the Mare to confuse and bewilder anyone who might be looking for them, concealing the trail from time to time and frequently forcing the mare to go off the game trail and forge her way through the thick scrub. He knew he could not take any chances, so ensured the trail back to where he and Clanton were living, would be as difficult to find as he could manage. A part of him knew it was just paranoia and fear, but another part remembered Clanton's warning to him – that Sgt. McGovern wouldn't rest until Lachlan and quite possibly, Clanton himself, were buried in unmarked graves.

\*

Lachlan left the Mare tethered to a short bush on the outskirts of town, giving her a gentle petting on the neck, to which she replied with a soft nicker.

"Shh" Lachlan whispered, before he double-checked the knot, just in case he needed to make a quick escape.

As quietly as he could, he crouched and moved to the nearest building, flattening himself as best he could against the rough sawn timbers, his blonde ears twitching too and fro. As the adrenaline began to surge through his body, Lachlan's muscles twitched and convulsed, his paws drumming a nervous staccato against his thighs, as he squeezed his fingers into fists and bit his tongue, trying to control

the fear that lanced up his spine and made his nape hairs prickle.

He sighed quietly, heart thudding in his chest, as he swallowed in a dry, constricting throat. He'd never done anything like this in his young life, and his body quivered with apprehension. He glanced fearfully around the corner, before pulling back and crossing to the next building, once again flattening himself against the timber wall, feeling like every eye in the town was suddenly going to be turned on him.

“Steady, Colt - “ Lachlan admonished himself, fighting a losing battle against the fear that began sinking its claws into his heart. “You can do this - “

Moving position once more, Lachlan accidentally bumped the old barrel filled with water, and even the slight slosh of it nearly made him whinny and bolt, so tightly wound were his nerves. For ten minutes, he hid beside the barrel, fully expecting to hear angry voices and the sounds of rifles being cocked, but only a few distant voices reached his twitching ears. Finally, regaining his composure, Lachlan stealthily moved towards the Saddler. All was quiet, as Lachlan slipped in the back, barely enough torchlight outside to offer dim illumination, as he trailed his fingers along various tools and other objects – more going from feel than actual vision.

He found a thick long duffel coat, then slipped it on, thankful for the warmth and relative anonymity it provided. Carefully, he searched more around the back of the shop, finding some leather off-cuts and some thin yet strong rawhide strands – which he knew from experience, would be plaited into whips and such. He felt sickened, taking that which did not belong to him – but necessity drove him, as he knew his hooves would make loud noises on the timber floor, and these items might just muffle them...

Hiding in the bush again, Lachlan busied himself with fashioning some crude hoof-boots – nothing more than leather wrapped around his hooves and tied with knotted rawhide strands to muffle the clapping his hooves would have made if he'd left them unbound. Creeping back to the edge of the buildings, Lachlan had never been so scared in all his life. His heart thundered in his chest and his ears twitched violently, he'd never been so scared in all his life – as he was now. Moving as quietly as he could, Lachlan edged ever closer, his nerves on edge and ears twitching as he listened to the unmistakable clapping of hooves – unsure if it was the Troopers horses, or just a passing stock-man.

“You can do this - “ Lachlan whispered to himself, before unclenching his paws and moving again – finally finding the back door to the Doctors combined shop/home.

Experimentally, Lachlan reached out and his large calloused right hand gripped the crude handle – fully expecting it to be locked, then to his surprise, with only a light twist, the catch disengaged and he carefully cracked the door open – senses on their highest alert, before he pulled the door towards him carefully, finally breathing a sigh as the well oiled hinges didn't squeal and screech as he'd expected. Slipping inside, his leather clad hooves barely making a sound, Lachlan felt his nerves tightening like a spring as he moved carefully through the dimly lit back room. An old saddlebag lay on a chair, and Lachlan's fingers curled around the thick straps before he lifted it up onto his shoulder.

“Steady Colt - “ Lachlan chastised himself, staring at his fingers as they trembled with the repressed fear and nerves. “Clanton needs help, and this is the only way...”

\*



Striding imperiously through the Township, Sgt. McGovern was a man who was a walking, snarling pile of rage and hate. Anyone who saw him coming, made way with hurried steps; mothers clutched their children protectively and hurried out of the way. Sgt. McGovern bristled with rage and seething hate, sneering disdainfully at the Anthro's as he past, then savagely grabbing a young Red Deer buck by the throat and physically slamming the terrified young Stag against the wall of the Pub.

“What the hell are you looking at?” Sgt. McGovern roared at him, the strong scent of alcohol clinging to him.

Whimpering, the terrified young Buck stared into the Sargent's eyes, his basket falling from his fingers.

“Well?” Sgt. McGovern growled like a feral dog. “Answer me!”

With a whimper, the young Stag's eyes widened and he almost imperceptibly shook his head, before a low, gasping croak come from his constricted throat.

“Nothing...sir - “ Wept the Stag, as he wished he was anywhere but here.

With a snarl, Sgt. McGovern released him, then as the Stag tried to scurry away, the Sargent laid into the trouser covered rump of the Stag, sending him sprawling into the mud and manure streaked road, before bellowing in laughter and staggering down the street, glaring insolently at everyone he met – just looking for an excuse to exert his authority – and preferably – to take out his anger and hatred on – but many saw him coming, and fled the narrow street.

\*

Sgt. McGovern looked over the disarrayed containers, tins and shelves, tipping his hat back and scratching his head.

“What else was taken?” He groused at the old man, who was Stringybark's Doctor.

Agitated and still angry, the Doctor snorted. “How do I know? All I saw was my saddlebag over his shoulder, then when I yelled out, he panicked and ran off...but he did drop this - “ Walking away, the old man rummaged around in the back of the shop, before returning and laying a revolver on the counter, holding it like one would a venomous snake. “I don't even know that he dropped it – I shouted, he panicked and fled into the bush...”

Sgt. McGovern raised a single eyebrow, the hangover pounding between his ears like a sledgehammer, as he grunted and snatched the revolver up, not even bothering to look at it and tucking it into his belt.

“I can't help if you don't give me details - “ Sgt. McGovern growled. “What did the thief look like? Human – *animal* – what?”

“I – I don't know!” Exhaled the Doctor. “It was dark...he was wearing some sort of coat – all I saw was his ears, those long ears – the gold colour unmistakable....”

Sgt. McGovern's eyes narrowed, and a cruel, predatory look come over him, which vanished as the Doctor turned to look at him, almost as if it had never existed...

“I'll look into it Doctor...don't worry, the criminal will get caught...and dealt with – soon enough...”

\*

Lachlan's heart thudded, almost as loud as his hooves, as he fled into the bush, sharp branches slapping at him, scratching at the fur and clothes alike, as he kept a tight grip on the overflowing satchel he cradled in his golden arms. He hated himself for resorting to stealing – he had been brought up to respect others, but he knew he couldn't bring Clanton – as sick as he was – to the doctor in Stringybark creek. Desperation drove him – and this called for Lachlan to abandon his previously held convictions...even if he had no idea in reality what he'd taken – or even if it'd work...there was one way to find out – he just hoped he was doing the right thing...Clanton was ill, growing more so with every passing hour – and Lachlan cared for Clanton...and he felt sure, that Clanton would do the same...

\*

A veritable black cloud hovered over Sgt McGovern as he slammed the police station's door open making the wooden door slap back against the wall with a crack like thunder, startling the young Filly Constable who sat at the desk, her ears swishing backwards and flattening, as she visibly trembled and her eyes widened.

“What do you think you're looking at?” Roared the Sargent, before he stormed across the room and slammed the pistol onto the desk. “Well?”

“Nothing - “ Whimpered the filly, as she hung her head, completely cowed and intimidated.

“I despise your kind...any of your kind...” Sgt. McGovern raged, his fists clenching as he felt the rage building within him. “If I had my way, I'd have you all hanging, if your corpses didn't smell so bad...”

Nervously, the filly swallowed, her nostrils flaring and she placed her paws on the table – in preparation to push back, but this only invited the fury of the already dangerously aggressive Sargent. With a sharp crack, he spun sideways, the back of his hand snapping against the Filly's left cheekbone which whipped her head to the side and tears instantly streaked down her cheeks.

“Get out of here...” Sargent McGovern screamed, his rage boiling over like an untended kettle. “I swear, if I find out you're protecting one of your own...you'll wish for a quick death – compared to what I'll do!”

Sobbing heart-brokenly, the filly dashed from the police station, her iron shod hooves clattering again the timber floor, before she vanished out of the Sargent's vision. Disgusted, Sargent McGovern strode with venomous purpose to the nearby tavern, where he burst through the doors like a cyclone – his eyes blazing and general demeanour one of bloodthirsty desire to inflict incomprehensible violence – be it directed at an anthropomorphic, or a human – right now, he didn't care – and knew none of the settlement's population would dare stand up to him, so thoroughly had he enforced his power and authority...

\*

Clanton lay wrapped in the old horse blanket, the fevers and coughing wracking his body, as his tubular ears twitched weakly and he struggled to lift his head off the ground. He coughed and it felt like his lungs were on fire – tears trickling down his muzzle as his blurred vision caught movement

through the trees. As a wracking coughing fit seized him and made him curl up, he heard the unmistakable clop of hooves, then Lachlan rushed to Clanton's side, the satchel falling from his nerveless fingers, as he knelt and pulled Clanton's shivering body close.

"Lach..." Clanton began, then squeezed his eyes closed as another wracking cough seized him in its merciless grip.

Feeling the skin of Clanton burning beneath his fur, Lachlan's ears flattened and he tore open the satchel, then in fear and frustration, he upended it and began fruitlessly searching amongst the vials and small glass bottles.

"Where - " Come Clanton's weak voice, then his eyes widened slightly as it began to sink in. "Lachlan...you shouldn't have - "

"I had no choice!" Lachlan snapped, then turned away and Clanton could hear the sobs that began to consume the young Colt. "You're sick – dying – and..."

Lachlan began crying, great heartbreaking sob's as the emotions overwhelmed him. Clanton coughed and wheezed, then reached out and placed a quivering paw on Lachlan's thigh, trying to give the young Colt strength and compassion.

"I...did it – for you..." Lachlan sobbed, then gestured backwards at the scattered vials.

Clanton coughed again, then weakly began pawing through the contents, holding each one close so he could read its label, then discarding them one at a time.

"I know why – you did what you done, but you do know..." Clanton began, then he squeezed his eyes closed as a wracking cough tore at him.

"Was I supposed to just let you die?" Lachlan snapped, standing up and turning about, to stare down at the kangaroo.

"Stealing..." Clanton sighed, then clutched the water bag and took a deep drink, before continuing. "Stealing is wrong, you know that, as do I – what if the Sargent had caught you? You and I *both* know – he'd kill you without remorse or guilt...now you've only given him..."

Lachlan stood, resolute and shaking with the anger that burned through him like a bushfire.

"I'm going to kill him..." Lachlan snarled, his ears flattening and nostrils flaring.

"No..." Clanton sighed, then struggled to open a bottle containing a white powder, his shaking paws barely able to grip it. "I know why you want him dead..."

"You don't know anything!" Lachlan roared, then with tears running down his cheeks, he stormed off into the bush, leaving Clanton to gaze forlornly, before he finally uncapped the bottle and took a sniff, his muzzle wrinkling.

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Sgt McGovern glared at the assembled people in the bar – those who were near him moved away.

"Anyone – ANYONE..." Roared the Sargent. "Knowingly aiding and abetting a gold furred colt –

who last night, broke into the Doctor's and stole medicines...will suffer as that bastard Colt will, am I clear? I get even a hint one of you - “

Gesturing at a young Fox, who visibly cringed, almost as if he was trying to melt into the wooden floor.

“I don't like your kind...I never have, you're filthy, disease spreading beasts, who have taken the jobs and homes of good, honest working humans - “ Sgt. McGovern kept ranting. “If I had my way, I'd have the lot of you rotting in a unmarked grave. God's know why I got posted to this place – but whilst I'm here – you *will* obey...or I'll take great pleasure in ensuring your last moments on this earth are...well...”

Whispers began spreading amongst the crowd, in low, timid tones. Sgt McGovern waited for someone to speak up, but nobody seemed to know anything about last night, which only infuriated him more. Having thrown his weight around and cowed the anthropomorphic animals, he felt slightly better and strode out of the tavern, intending to visit the other businesses and organza the printer's to start making some reward posters – a reward of course – McGovern had no intention in paying...

\*

Lachlan's ears twitched, as he crouched behind some bushes, his eyes reflecting the moonlight as he swallowed, fear emanating from his pores in an almost perceptible cloud – as he stared at the farmstead that lay in a sheltered clearing. He had been watching for hours – and at a guess, he thought it was roughly about 11pm, due to the position of the moon that shone down so far above. As quietly as he could, he crept closer, moving towards the enclosure that kept the chickens. A soft whinny reached his ears, as a horse snorted and glanced his way – ears pricking forwards and Lachlan froze before the horse merely snorted and began chewing on some hay in its trough. Each step brought Lachlan closer – and his fear rose exponentially. He knew what he was about to do was wrong – but he and Clanton had no food – and without it, they'd both suffer a terrible lingering death. With quivering hands, his hooflets clattering like hail against the timber, his heard hammering in his chest. Lachlan unlatched the crude latch and eased the gate open – his hyper-sensitive hearing dreading the squeal of the hinges, yet it didn't happen.

Swallowing fearfully, he stretched his hands out and probed carefully, feeling straw, timber and other things – before he found the edge of the nesting box and timidly touched the warm feathers of a hen who slept in the box. With care, Lachlan walked his hooflets over the hen, feeling her stir, before he bit his lip and in one swift movement, he felt the hen's neck snap and he snatched the body from the nesting box, as it began flapping its wings wildly. He gripped it close to his chest, adrenaline flooding his body as he squeezed his eyes closed, silently praying for forgiveness for what he had done.

A short, sharp gasp made Lachlan drop the hen, before fear shot through him, chilling his blood. He froze, then heard a whimper – before the high pitched squeal of a frightened young girl pealed forth, before she turned and fled. Lachlan sobbed, burying his hands in his paws as he knew he'd been caught – there was no way out of this – and he glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the pale white tail tip of the little girl, as she fled to the house, her screams quickly waking the farm holders.

Caught between his fear and indecision, Lachlan was paralysed by indecision – then he heard the farmhouse door slam open and he feared the worst, as a lumbering giant's shadow fell over the ground, and the thick, heavy footfalls made Lachlan fear for his very life...

A huge Clyde stallion towered over Lachlan, glaring down at him as Lachlan looked up, the dead hen at his hooves – and the double barrelled shotgun pointed at Lachlan's chest made him freeze.

“You better have a damn good reason...” Growled the Clyde, as it glared at Lachlan. “I don't like strangers – let alone people who kill my daughter's favourite hen...”

“I...” Lachlan stammered, his ears flat against the back of his head. “I - “

“Speak up thief – you got about one second to explain, before I pull both triggers...”

“I – I didn't...my friend and I...” Lachlan stammered, then fell to his knees. “We...he's sick – dying – and we're...”

“Put that away Owen Blacktail!” Snapped a feminine voice, then a cream coloured paw rested on the shotgun and pushed it away. “Look at him? He's hungry, cold, probably hasn't slept in days...”

A young Whitetail stepped in front of the Clydesdale, then crossed her arms in front of her chest, rumpling the homespun nightgown as she stared up at him defiantly.

“He's a thief and a - “ Growled the Clyde, then with a sigh he acquiesced and lowered the shotgun. “It still doesn't mean he can - “

Her eyes narrowing, the Whitetail doe defiantly stared up into the Clydesdale. He lowered his gaze first, then signed and handed over the shotgun.

“I...my friend and I - “ Lachlan wept, overwhelmed by conflicting emotions.

“Owen – take this colt, find his friend and bring them back here – NOW!” Came the sharp voice of the Doe, as she stamped a cloven hoof on the ground.

Owen sighed, then looked at Lachlan, who sniffled and wiped a paw across his nostrils and nervously stood, before Owen glanced sideways at him.

“Well Colt, Feredwyn's spoken...and I don't know about you – but I want to go back to sleep tonight – so where's your friend...”

\*

Clanton moaned and convulsed, the thin blanket over him outlining his sweat soaked form, as Feredwyn placed a damp cloth over Clanton's forehead.

“Gods have mercy - “ Feredwyn sighed. “He's sicker than I thought - “

“Will he - “ Lachlan asked, sitting as close as Feredwyn would allow – whilst not being in her way.

“I won't ask where you got these medicines...most of them are useless for – for whatever he has, I'm not a doctor – but I've seen similar before. I suspect he's got fluid on the lungs – you can hear it when he breathes...that rattle...” Feredwyn sighed. “I don't know – will he live? With what little medicines you have...and what I know – I...I don't know, he's very sick and you obviously both don't have the money to pay for the doctor...”

Wringing out the cloth again, Feredwyn wiped down Clanton's sweat streaked head, then wrung it out yet again. Turning to the crude bedside table, Feredwyn began adding some white powder to a bowl of water, then crumbled some strange scented dried herbs and stirred it until she was satisfied.

“Hold him up, he needs to drink this - “ Feredwyn commanded, and Lachlan moved forwards, lifting Clanton's upper body up off the mattress, then between them, they forced Clanton to swallow the bitter mixture and Lachlan laid him back on the bed.

“That's all we can do for him at the moment – he needs rest – I'll keep a watch on him, but first...you got some explaining to do...” Feredwyn told Lachlan, giving him an intense glance that made Lachlan swallow and nod slowly.

Lachlan rose, then placed a golden furred paw on Clanton, whilst Feredwyn watched with interest, noting the gentleness that Lachlan showed – the genuine love and friendship these two shared – before Lachlan meekly followed Feredwyn out of the bedroom, the door closing behind them.

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Over the course of the next couple of hours, Lachlan told the strangers his whole story – how he'd witnessed his mother's murder, how he met Clanton, and everything – listening attentively, Feredwyn's ears slicked back, and more than once she sympathetically reached over and patted Lachlan's trembling paws, giving him reassurance and comfort, whilst Owen appeared suspicious and standoffish. Every so often, Feredwyn would go to administer more medicine to Clanton, before she returned and poked at the fireplace – a sparkle of hot cinders and ash whirling up the chimney.

“Hell of a story - “ Owen grudgingly growled, as he stood and turned away, then looked back over his shoulder at Lachlan, who slumped in the roughly hewn chair, hanging his head and emotionally spent. “Oh, I don't doubt you at all – I've had my share of...dealings with that man.”

Owen's fists clenched, his hooflets digging into his palms, before Feredwyn stood and placed a comforting paw on the Stallion's shoulder, then lightly squeezed.

“It's not right - “ Owen growled, as he turned about and pulled Feredwyn close to him. “How can he get away with murder – openly – without someone standing up to him? How many of our kind have suffered and continue to suffer – under his cruel attentions? He murdered Penny's family – would have killed her as well - “

Lachlan looked up, a look of confusion on his muzzle, as he frowned.

“Penny is our – daughter...” Feredwyn answered. “Our adopted daughter – obviously, as much as I love Owen, the great big gentle giant he is - “

Feredwyn broke the pall of gloom, by playfully slapping Owen on the chest, he grunted and wrapped his feathered forearms around the slender Whitetail and pulled her close. With that, the mood was broken, and everyone seemed to stop being strangers – and at that moment, they become friends.

“I'm going to kill him - “ Lachlan whispered, as his splayed fingers contracted, the hooflets scratching on the timber.

“You're...” Feredwyn blinked, then disengaged her husbands grasp, turning around then walking

back and leaning on the table, her nose inches from Lachlan's. "You're joking...I know why you want revenge – Goddess knows I'd be the first to understand – but he – he has the entire township under his heel. He has spies everywhere, I'm certain of it – and if what you have said is true - "

Owen began to laugh, but a sharp glance from Feredwyn silenced him.

"He would gun you down in the street the second he got a sniff of you – if – you were lucky...it's obvious, he doesn't care a damn for us – our kind I mean - " Feredwyn sighed. "You go off half-cocked and you'll wind up in an unmarked grave...like so many others. You think you're the first to harbour thoughts of wanting him dead? I'm sure others have tried – but violence isn't always the answer to a question."

"He - " Lachlan roared, standing to his full height and slamming his fist on the table hard enough to rattle the tin dishes.

"*Sit down!*" Feredwyn spoke quietly, barely a whisper, but Lachlan sat as if his knees had been shattered, a stunned look in his eyes.

"Witness the power of a wrathful Doe - " Owen chuckled softly. "Feredwyn may be short – by our standards – but she could make the most ferocious of predators whimper like a puppy. I have no doubt."

"How - " Lachlan began, disbelieving and shocked.

"It's – a gift - " Feredwyn shrugged, then smiled shyly.

Outside, the first chirps of the morning chorus began, and Owen grunted and glanced out the window, where the hint of dawn was just beginning to lighten the dark sky into a faint gold.

"I guess none of us are getting any sleep tonight - " Owen muttered, as he walked over to the door and retrieved a large hat, slapping it onto his head. "Plenty of work to do young Colt, so we best get at it, you look like you know your way around a farm, it'll be nice to have some strong, willing muscles to help out..."

"Clanton - " Lachlan began, torn between his gratefulness at finding acceptance and a place to stay – and his reluctance, fearing he was going to bring them nothing but trouble and suffering.

"I'll look after him – he seems to be resting now, God's know he could use it, go on, he'll be – well – I can't say fine, but I'll look after him."

Placing a paw on Lachlan's shoulder, Owen steered the young Colt out the door, chuckling.

"Finer lady you'll never meet - " Owen's voice trailed back as he pulled the door closed behind him.

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Lachlan soon got back into the swing of it, chopping wood, hauling water and helping out with a multitude of tasks that a farm never seemed to have an end of. Owen was still a little wary of Lachlan, but the younger Equine proved his strength and worth, and by the end of a long, tiring day, Owen had developed a respect for the heart that beat in Lachlan's chest.

“You're almost as strong as I am – and at a guess, about half my age! I'm impressed Colt, truly – you're going to be a strapping stallion one day!” Owen commended him, giving Lachlan a resounding slap on the back, the sweaty fur making a squelching sound.

“Urf...thanks, I think - “ Lachlan grunted, nearly knocked forwards by Owen's strength.

“Ha, we'll make a stallion out of you yet, youngster. You've already got the musculature and stature – now, you need to train the body and strengthen it. Look at me, I used to be such a scrawny weed of a colt, but my father was a Blacksmith – and he made me the stallion I am today!”

With a theatrical pose, paws on hips, Owen flexed and posed, showing off the iron like musculature beneath his paint coat, and Lachlan admitted to himself, Owen was definitely in excellent condition physically.

“Come on, let's get cleaned up – Feredwyn's probably got dinner ready, and I don't know about you – but a hard days work, gives me an appetite – and she can be many things, but a bad cook is not one of them. You've earned your meal this day youngster, I'll give you that!”

Lachlan laughed weakly, feeling the tension in his back and shoulders, but it wasn't unpleasant, and he admitted he would like a nice home cooked meal, and for the first time since his mothers death, he genuinely felt loved and comforted...

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Sgt McGovern reeled out of the tavern, his uniform half unbuttoned and reeking of spilt alcohol. He staggered then clutched at the hitching post, his body weaving and unsteady. Thankfully, those few anthropomorphic townsfolk who might have been on the street, had been forewarned that the Sargent was on a bender – not the first time – and they'd made themselves scarce. Grasping at his pistol holster, the Sargent swore and snarled, before staggering down the street – fuelled with alcohol and rage – and just looking for an excuse to take out his feelings on someone.

Frustrated with the lack of victims to exercise his drunken rage upon, he whirled about and pulled the pistol from his holster, then laughed drunkenly and fired off six shots, still pulling the trigger until the hammer fell on empty cylinders.

“Plenty...” Growled the drunken Sargent. “Where that come from! Come on you...godless beasts – I'll take you all on...all at once, or one at a...”

Staggering, he swore and ranted, then laughed before swaying and crumpling onto the dusty street, unconscious before he hit the ground. Nobody came to his aid, as slowly Stringybark's populace emerged from businesses and their homes – some looking piteously at the passed out Sargent, but most snorting in disgust and apathy – more than one wishing he'd just die of alcoholic abuse...

With a sigh the young Constable Filly stood outside the police station, before she flattened her ears and shook her head, knowing the Sargent would be in an even more foul mood when he woke up. Walking slowly towards him, feeling the eyes both curious and unfriendly in equal numbers, she crouched down and gripped him under the arms and half carried, half dragged, him back to the police station. Here, she unceremoniously dumped him on a crude cot in one of the cells, so he'd sleep off the alcohol binge.

Questioning why she did it, she sighed again and ran a paw over her head. He was hated and feared – but as the Senior Police in this town – it was unbecoming to leave him sprawled in a



drunken state on the streets.

“It'd be so easy...” She whispered, her eyes narrowing in rage, as she suddenly blinked, then seen her paw clutching the cocked police issue pistol, merely inch from the back of the Sargent's head. As a shiver rippled through her paint coloured fur, she swallowed then gently lowered the hammer and then dropped the pistol back into her holster and went back outside, both frightened and aroused at the thought.

As she sat on the chair just outside, she stared down at her paws – one brown and one white like a glove, and found them trembling, before she squeezed them into fists and fought to control her emotions – it took her longer than she had thought, but finally, she opened her eyes and found herself facing and assembled group of nervous townsfolk – both human and anthropomorphic.

“We can't live like this!” Wailed a young Vixen, wringing her black gloved paws.

Murmurs and mutters, some agreeing, some angry, rumbled through the crowd like a midsummer thunderstorm.

“What do you mean?” Inquired the filly, as she tipped her cap back, her own thoughts turned inwards and only half understanding the words and mood of the people.

“We demand you do something – he's getting worse, just yesterday, he assaulted some of us, surely you can send a message to the Capital, get someone to sort this out, it's getting out of control.” Someone else added, their voice rising in anger. “You're the police – you're meant to serve your people, protect us, care for us...”

Quickly, the mood turned from sullen to angry, and the filly found herself in one of her worst nightmares – more and more town people began to arrive, some curious, some emboldened by the veritable wave of anger and resentment that was building. Many of them had suffered at the hands of the Sargent – most of them anthropomorphic people – who were good, kind and gentle, people who had never done a criminal act in their lives.

“What do you think I can do?” Wept the filly, her own emotions overwhelming her, as she clutched her head in her paws and wept. “Do you think I don't know what you suffer? Do you not see me for who I am? *What* I am? I know his anger well – he hates our kind...but if I sent word with the stage coach, it'd be months before we got a reply – if we got one at all! See past the uniform – I'm just like you, just because I'm a police horse – doesn't mean I'm immune to his cruelty and depravity!”

“Do something – or we'll do it for you - “ Snarled a elderly wolf, as he stepped up onto the porch and sized up the diminutive filly.

“Step away!” She snarled, her anger overcoming her fear, as she stood almost nose to nose with the wolf. “By order of the police, step away now!”

“Or what?” Sneered the wolf in contempt. “You'll do what? You're under his jackboot, just like the rest of us...”

Seeing the potential for a flash-over of anger and fear that could result in a riot, the filly stood her ground, drawing on her training to lend strength to her words as she stepped up onto the chair, then raised her voice.

“I am fully comprehending of what we all suffer – be we human or anthropomorphic! I will do

what I can, but my own hands are tied – but I promise, I'll do whatever I can to help, I live here too – I'm one of you – no one should have to live in fear and subject to cruelty and violence such as what he draws on us. I'll send word this very afternoon – *but* – do not expect a reply any time soon. Now, please...step away....go about your business, let us not turn on each other, but let us join together and present a united front, both human and animal, for together we are stronger than alone!"

For nearly ten minutes, the tension held, before one turned and walked away, then another – then two, then a group, then slowly, the situation defused and only the wolf was left, glaring at the filly, who met his predatory gaze and held it, her own icy stare almost daring him to do something. Finally, with a disdainful snort, he turned and began walking away, as the filly watched him, her body quivering with the fear induced adrenaline. A sarcastic clapping was heard, the quiet clap...clap...clap, and she stepped down off her chair and turned, seeing an old man, dressed in fine clothes, a heavy drizabone over this, and kid-skin gloves over his hands, as he looked at her, an unmistakably sarcastic sneer on his face.

"Mr Patterson - " Began the filly, as she smoothed her muzzle fur with her paws, then shuddered.

"Fine - " Patterson spoke his voice soft, but filled with unmistakable menace. "Speech young one...futile, but a fine speech all the same. Come, walk with me..."

Patterson began walking, his body aged and frail, but the strength of his personality like a girding armour around him. Effortlessly, the filly kept pace with him, her curiosity aroused, but she also gazed about, expecting trouble.

"You're a fine police horse - " Patterson grunted, and she thought she detected the hint of sarcasm, but it was well veiled and she couldn't be sure. "Naive, but fine none the less. What do you know about Stringybark?"

"It was founded sixty-two years ago when - " She began, then he waved a gloved hand dismissively, silencing her.

"So you know nothing, what do they teach your – *kind* - " This time, Patterson's veiled sarcasm shone through like a bonfire.

"Sir - " Whispered the filly, her anger flaring. "I am a member of her Majesties Police Force, you *will* treat me as such, and accord me respect and politeness, as becoming one of my status."

With a snort, Patterson spat on the ground, then glanced sideways at her.

"You're an upstart young filly, who thinks because you carry a pistol and wear that uniform – a uniform I might add – that you never earned the right to wear..."

"Sir, I respectfully repeat - " She growled, ears slicking back as he intentionally needled her with his biting words.

"I don't give a fuck what you think!" Patterson snarled. "I built this town, you hear me? I built it from the ground up, with my own blood, sweat and tears. I own this town, not you, not any of you...*freaks*...you live here under my sufferance! This used to be a fine town, growing from a single log cabin I built myself – then becoming a small trading post – then on to what it is now! Then, thirty years ago – your kind – began to come here. I won't lie, I don't like you, and I despise your kind – all of you! You're an abomination against God almighty, and I wish he'd smite you down

where you stand!”

“Your resentment is duly noted, *sir*. ” Replied the filly, making sure her own barb was set deep, and seeing the glare of loathing he shot her, she knew it had. “My people, and were *are* a people – have just as much right as any human, to live here – or anywhere else we choose! My kind evolved just as your own did, for centuries, we existed side by side – I do not doubt there is bad blood between our people, but we worked long and hard to forge bonds of trust, respect and peace between our different people. Why can you not acknowledge such? Are you so bigoted, so filled with hate and loathing? Can not see how your own culture has expanded and been strengthened, as my own has, with our amalgamation?”

“How *dare* you speak to me such, like you're my equal!” Patterson raged, his face turning crimson.

“I *am* your equal – according to the constitution of this country, *we* are to be accorded all rights, privileges and respect due any human – even one as hate filled and racist as you! I do not despise you, I am above such petty emotions – maybe that is one thing, my people have over humans? We grew and evolved, put our hatred and anger behind us – predator and prey alike – learned to live side by side...even marry each other! Some humans have intermarried with us - “

“Abomination! Beast!” Patterson screamed at her, spittle flying from his lips. “If I had a gun I'd - “

“You'd what?” Inquired the filly, one furred eyebrow cocking. “I believe, *sir*, threatening a Police officer is a punishable offence – but I am not a vindictive horse – I'll overlook this, as a heat of the moment outburst... Now, as I was saying, some humans have intermarried with my kind – and have beautiful, healthy relationships. Of course, offspring of such is impossible – yet they live, work and love each other, as the God's themselves intended.”

“There is only one *God*!” Patterson raged, his fists curling at his side, before he stabbed a kid-skin gloved finger at the Filly's chest.

“According to whom? Whilst my people adopted your customs, mannerisms and other things – we have our own beliefs on the God's and Goddesses, and this too, has been the accepted normality for centuries. We do not proselyte to your people – even *if* some of yours do to ours...that is irrelevant to our immediate concern. Now, with due respect Sir, I bid you a good evening, and nothing shall be noted in my logs about the incident today – nor your threats upon my personage.”

Dismissively the filly turned and walked away, leaving Patterson seething with rage and disbelief, even as the sun set over the distant mountains. She had dared shame him in public, and he silently swore, she would live to regret this slight – one way or another...

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Owen woke Lachlan early the next morning, and Lachlan momentarily startled, as he seen the long bore rifle Owen held in one feathered paw.

“Let's go see if you're any good handling one of these – you strike me as having some experience...” Owen chuckled, then turned and walked out, as the sleepy Lachlan rose, doused his muzzle in a dish of cold water, then yawning, followed the Clydesdale. “I still think you've got a death wish – but you seem to have fooled Feredwyn – but I see in your eyes, young colt, you are a horse of honour – and seek revenge...”

“Am I that easily read?” Lachlan laughed weakly, then the stern glance from Owen silenced his

laughter.

With a snort, Owen's usually friendly demeanour turned dark and troubled. "Son...killing a crippled horse? That's one thing, killing another person? That's totally another...I've done it, the God's know I hate myself for it – but I've done it. It was in defence of another, but does that make it any less heinous? No. Taking a life is not something you should ever do lightly...even if that person deserves it. Believe me, I know all I need to know about Sargent McGovern More than enough about him, and I'd not shed any tears, if he were too – meet with an accident. I doubt many in Stringybark would."

Handing Lachlan the rifle, Owen looked down at the trembling younger Colt, then turned him about.

"First, this isn't like some low calibre rifle you'd have used to shoot at foxes and rabbits and such..." Owen admonished him. "This is a heavy calibre .445. It's got a kick like a cranky donkey, and if you're not expecting it – the recoil can almost feel like it'll tear your shoulder off. Now...pull it in tight to the shoulder, sight that ghost gum over there and..."

Lachlan felt the weight, way heavier than he expected, but obediently did as he was told, then squirmed as Owen moved in behind him, then reached around and double checked Lachlan's hold and pose.

"Good, that's right – night and tight against the shoulder, holding it steady, then as Owen stepped back, Lachlan took a few shallow breaths, then held the last and squeezed the trigger gently.

With an ear shattering boom, the rifle kicked up and back, and Lachlan gasped with the force of the recoil, his first shot going wide of the mark and leaving him frustrated.

"Patience Lachlan, you're not used to it, feel the rifle's weight, let it become an extension of your arm, be one with it - "

Again, Lachlan chambered a round and composed himself, feeling his heartbeat slow, before he took a breath and squeezed the trigger – this time it was more controlled and on target, and when they examined the soft wood of the eucalyptus, Lachlan was horrified to see it'd punched straight through a three foot thick ghost gum.

"I told you it has some kick – and some power, this isn't some low calibre plaything, this is the real deal!" Owen chuckled, then took the rifle off Lachlan, ejected the spent cartridge and snapped the bolt back and down, locking it into a safety activation.

Rubbing his shoulder, Lachlan nodded and winced, feeling the ache.

"That's enough for now," Owen told him. "Fun is fun, but there's a lot of work yet – both good, hard physical labor and other things you'll need to learn."

"Won't – won't Feredwyn know?" Lachlan sighed.

"She knows, God's know how she knows - " Owen laughed softly. "I never lie to her – in anything – yet your need for vengeance, if you're impulsive and careless, you'll be hanging by a gallows before your next foaling day..."

Owen sheathed the rifle in the leather sheath on his back, then turned back towards the farmstead.

“Owen - “ Lachlan began, then placed a timid hand on the larger Clydesdale's shoulder. “What aren't you telling me?”

Owen kept walking, then he stopped and sighed, before he stopped and a deep breath.

“I wasn't always a blacksmith, like my sire, and his sire before him and so on – once, I helped out a – well – they were bad people, who did bad things, against people who also did bad things...”  
Owen sat on a fallen log, then pet it beside him.

Intrigued, Lachlan sat, as Owen rubbed his forehead, then sighed through his nostrils.

“This was about...ten years ago - “ Owen began, his voice soft, almost a whisper. “A group of humans I knew, through a friend, of a friend and so on – well – they began to prey upon others...humans and anthropomorphic's alike. I suspect, you've heard of bushrangers and bandits and other such things?”

“Sort of – my education wasn't exactly – well, Clanton would know more about that sort of thing, than I do! Him being Academy trained and so on...”

Owen glanced sideways at Lachlan, then snorted. “I've met more than enough police in my life – there's no way that Kangaroo was trained by any Academy...he's barely got enough training to know how to saddle a horse and not shoot himself in the foot with his pistol! Police out our way, they don't get the luxury that say, those in Melbourne get...now that lot, they're so full of themselves, so human-centrist...”

Lachlan blinked, never realising Clanton, for all his apparent knowledge and skill, had been misleading him. “I never thought - “

Owen laughed weakly. “Oh, don't feel angry with...Clanton did you say? Nice enough name, and a fine looking young Buck – but yeah, Constable's out here, well, they get a crash course, and most of the time, they're the first to be sent into danger as they're classified as expendable. When was the last time you seen the Sargent take charge in a hostile situation? Never? I'm not surprised – the Sargent is a coward, a murderer and – well – his list of charges they'd be able to file against him - “

“He won't live to see a hangman's noose - “ Lachlan growled dangerously, his eyes narrowing in anger and loathing.

“Neither will you, if you don't control that anger Colt – I know, you want revenge, but you go charging into town, filled with rage and desire for revenge, you'll only be fighting yourself, and he will murder you in cold blood and not even give you a decent burial. Get that through your head, you're not indestructible – you're young, headstrong, angry – many traits I too was, when I was your age. Wait. Be patient, learn from me, even Clanton, I'm sure, can help you! He will not like the idea of you becoming a murderer – I don't, and Feredwyn will certainly not like it – but you need a code of honour – such was instilled into me, and I'm going to share it with you...”

Lachlan jumped to his hooves, then paced back and forth, his pale golden fingers clenching and unclenching, as the anger fought with common sense, whilst Owen waited patiently, his ears flicking too and fro, as he watched Lachlan's internal war.

“I never said what I'd be teaching you would be easy – or quick, but if it keeps you alive, isn't it worth it?” Owen asked simply, as he used his hooflets to brush through one of the feathers on his

left wrist, then did the other, until the long hairs were untangled.

Lachlan snarled, then stormed off into the woods, and with a sigh, Owen watched him go, his ears back-swept slightly.

“No one can make you see the path - “ He whispered to himself, then stared down at the trampled ground. “You have to see it for yourself...I just pray you do...”

A mottled shadow stepped from the shade beneath a wattle tree, then pale paws encircled Owen's neck and interlaced over his chest, before the dark nose nuzzled the Clydesdale's left cheek.

“It seems a fault with Stallions - “ Feredwyn whispered, as she kissed her partners cheek. “They're so hot blooded and headstrong – I remember a young Colt, not much older than Lachlan – who would have gotten himself shot and killed, like those other Bushranger's...”

Owen twisted his head to the side, then smiled lopsidedly at Feredwyn.

“How long were you hiding back there, listening in like a sneaky thief?”

“Long enough my love,” Feredwyn smiled, then sat down beside him.

Dressed in a strangely mottled skirt and long robe, Feredwyn had blended into the shadows and been watching for longer than she admitted, but she knew how to meld with the shadows, and her clothing was perfectly coloured and patterned to do just such.

“It never fails to amaze me,” Owen admitted, as he placed a arm over Feredwyn's shoulder, then pulled her close. “How you blend in like that. I've known you could do it for years, yet I never knew *how* you do it. A doe shouldn't be able to just step into the bush and vanish like smoke!”

“Years of practice, love - “ Feredwyn smiled, then rested her head on her lovers shoulder. “I'm just full of surprises – you think you were the only one with a rough childhood? I was orphaned myself, so I can empathise with Lachlan – except I was young. I had to learn how to lie, cheat and steal – just to feed myself. Of course, I learned to be stealthy and make myself unseen, it's really not that hard!”

“Could have fooled me – between us - “ Owen pondered, as he trailed a hooflet lightly across Feredwyn's black cheek stripe. “Think we can help him? I'd hate to see him throw away his life when he has so much to live for! He has friends now, people who will help him, care for him and hopefully – train him...”

“If he is willing to listen, you Stallion's are all alike, strong willed, stubborn to a fault, arrogant and full of your own self importance!” Feredwyn playfully teased.

“You know me too well my love,” Owen chuckled, then glanced towards the path where Lachlan had dissapeared. “I just hope he's not like me – I hope...”

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As days turned to weeks, Clanton slowly recovered under Feredwyn's ministrations, and Lachlan swallowed his pride, and willingly gave himself to Owen and Feredwyn's training. Owen helped him with physical strength training, strapping heavy sacks of sand to Lachlan's back and making him run laps around the clearing, whilst Feredwyn taught Lachlan how to muffle his hoof steps –

often involving a sharp smack with a long willow sapling to the back of the legs if she heard him trying to sneak up on her.

As Clanton convalesced, he lay snuggled up in a rough travois, still weak and sickly, but at least he could be brought outside, as Feredwyn assured him that sunlight would be beneficial and help him heal. Clanton watched with interest as every day, whilst his own illness ravaged body slowly healed, Lachlan grew and grew, his musculature rippling beneath his pale golden coat, as his silvery mane flew behind him as he continued to push himself. Each night, Lachlan could barely stand, so vigorously did he exercise, and it was quickly apparent that he was nearing his physical perfection – that would carry him into adulthood.

Owen had regularly watched, but he disappeared for hours every day, then returned on sundown and the smell of wood smoke and strange burns scarred his forearms and thighs. Sometimes the scent of leather clung to him, but when Lachlan asked about it, Owen remained gruff and tight lipped. Even Feredwyn didn't know – or if she did, she never told, as she vigorously continued to teach Lachlan everything she knew about stealth, theft and subterfuge.

\*

Late one afternoon, Clanton leaned back on his tail, his fur dry and unkempt, but at least he could stand for short time, on his own.

“I don't like this Lachlan - “ Clanton coughed and a rattling cough wracked him. “You know my feelings – I used to be a Policeman...you're talking about murdering a - “

Lachlan glared at Clanton, then snorted and turned away.

“Lachlan, I love you like a brother – almost - “ Clanton sighed, as he reached out and placed a paw on Lachlan's shoulder. “I can not allow you to do this, do you hear me? You're better than this! Yes, you want revenge, I understand that – but murder? You really want to get caught? You *do* know the punishment for murder? It's hanging...”

“Why would you care? Did you watch your mother get murdered in cold blood? You were *THERE* Clanton – and you done nothing to help...”

Clanton flinched under Lachlan's words, they hit him almost like a physical slap.

“That hurt Lachlan - “ Clanton whispered, his eyes widening. “You know I - “

“Hurt? Oh, you don't begin to say you know what I'm going through...” Lachlan snarled, as he rose and began to clench his fists.

“You'd strike a weak, crippled Kangaroo? Is this what your mother would have wanted?” Clanton croaked, then shook his head. “I knew your mother, since I was a joey – you hear me? She was a proud, noble woman! What happened to her, is unforgivable, but she would be horrified, to see her only foal turn to darkness – you're better than this Lachlan, I know you are, please, don't go down this road, as it'll lead to an early grave...”

Lachlan paused mid-step, then his cocked hoof slowly settled to the ground and he froze, his rage barely contained, yet something in the pitying look that Clanton gave him, and the cruel, hurtful words, cut through the rage and smothered it like a bucket of water on a burning fire.

“What...what can I do? I can't let this go unpunished, the Sargent deserves to die - “ Lachlan whispered, then the tears began to slide down his cheeks. “I hate him, I hate all the Police, for what they done - “

“I used to be a police officer - “ Clanton sighed, then coughed and he clutched his chest, as the wracking cough clawed at him, doubling him over and making him gasp for breath. “Not – all of us – were like him. I tried, God's know I tried – to save her!”

Lachlan sank to his knees, then clutched his head in his paws as he wept unashamedly. Clanton cautiously approached, then wrapped his slender arms around Lachlan's firm neck and pulled him close.

“Revenge can be a powerful force – but if you let your anger and your grief control you, you'll find yourself hanging from a gallows! Wait, be patient! Learn what Owen and Feredwyn can teach you...practice, listen and speak little and your moment will come – first – learn something that was taught to me...it could very well save your life. You want revenge, and justifiably so, but do not paint everyone with the same brush.” Clanton's voice cracked, and another convulsive coughing fit tore at his weakened lungs.

It was several minutes before Clanton held up a quivering paw then resumed. “Think of your own upbringing – our people are victimised, persecuted – even killed outright in cold blood. They're crying out for a champion, a protector, someone who will stand for them and protect them! I tried, God's know I tried – but I am not physically strong enough, or mentally strong enough to do it – I tried to work within the system, I tried so hard...and I failed. You, on the other paw – you can be the light in the darkness that our people and other good humans are crying out for. Yes, he deserves to die – I do not argue that, there are others who work with him...they are the one's you should target! Do not hurt those who are innocent, do not steal from those who have little to take. I know schedules of the Police stagecoach – I know wealthy landowners, their movements and so on...these are the people you, if you're going to become what I fear most – these are the people you should steal from, never the innocent, or the weak and the helpless...”

“What would I do if I did steal from them?” Lachlan sniffed, glancing at Clanton. “I've already got a death mark on my head...”

“What would you do? You'd help those like us ,those like Owen and Feredwyn – you'd find others you could trust, get them to divide up the money – give it to struggling farmers and poor townsfolk, there is *so* much you can do, for good, not evil!”

“A Bushranger - “ Lachlan began, then trailed off.

“Lies, all of it – there are many who done exactly what I'm proposing – but what do we hear about them? We hear they're cold blooded murderers, thieves, torturers and worse – who tells us, about them? People like the Sargent, the corrupt, the powerful and the wealthy! Sure, some truth exists – of Bushranger's who do such atrocities, to line their own pockets, and those of their ilk...but you can stand against the corrupt and the powerful – you can be what our kind, and some humans would come to call a hero and a champion of the people...you don't have to walk a dark road Lachlan, don't you see?”

“I'd never have imagined - “ Lachlan whispered, eyes widening as his mind was opened to possibilities he had never considered. “You really think...”

Owen snorted, as he stepped out of the shadows, then placed his paws on his hips and looked



genuinely shocked and impressed. “I’ll be damned, a ex-Copper, turned into a philosopher and preacher!”

Clanton laughed weakly, then wheezed and clutched his chest, as he began coughing again. Within moments, Feredwyn rushed to his side, then she placed her ear against his chest and listened, before frowning and looking down at him, Clanton wiping his muzzle with a old cloth.

“You’re still not well enough to sit out here and lecture...” Feredwyn admonished Clanton.

“I’m fine - “ Clanton croaked, then smiled weakly and again, dissolved into a wracking cough.

“No, you’re not - “ Feredwyn snorted, then looked at Lachlan, who crouched and picked up Clanton, cradling him like a child, Clanton’s black tipped tail hanging down between Lachlan’s strong arms.

“I can walk - “ Clanton protested, then wheezed and shuddered.

“Feredwyn’s right,” Owen snorted, then turned aside, letting Lachlan carry Clanton inside.

Once they had gone, Feredwyn sighed and looked up in Owen’s eyes, then she dropped her gaze and shook her head slowly.

“He’s not ready - “ Feredwyn’s whispered, as she rested her left paw on Owen’s right forearm. “He has trained well – but he is still greener behind the ears, than the forest that surrounds us!”

“I think he’s ready for a trial run, I’ll be watching over him, don’t worry - “ Owen smiled, then kissed the top of Feredwyn’s head, then cuddled her close and stroked her back. “First steps are always the hardest – besides, we’ll be alright – he seems to have matured in the last few weeks, but we can’t keep him sheltered forever – besides...it’s almost done...”

“It...” Feredwyn paused, then looked up into her husband’s eyes. “You think it’ll work? Is it - “

“I learned a lot, from working alongside those humans...I know where we went wrong making it, I’ll not making that mistake again...” Owen sighed, then cuddled the Doe close again.

“I hope so...his life will depend on it...” Sighed Feredwyn, as she lovingly cuddled against her strong, masculine husband. “He shall no longer be called Lachlan, if it goes to plan...he will need a name – to cause fear in those deserving of it...and hope and joy in others...he will be called...Ironclad...”

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Lachlan felt the adrenaline flowing through him, causing his paws to quiver and a cold sweat seep through his paws as he crouched behind an ancient ghost gum, golden ears flicking too and fro. Not too far away, kookaburra’s, disturbed by the equines approach were still raucously cackling and laughing – almost as if trying to ward off the two equines. Lachlan had never experienced such emotions – excitement at his first robbery as a bushranger, conflicted with his fear of failure – a failure he new had two possibilities.

Owen hadn’t hidden the truth from Lachlan – far from it – as what they were about to do had unforeseen consequences and undoubtedly, repercussions if they were caught. One consequence – either of them – or both, could be shot dead on this dusty roadside, their corpses left for the

scavengers. Secondly – they'd be captured and the usual punishment was death by hanging – something Lachlan still bore memories from so long ago, having watched his mother die in such fashion.

A single green-bottle fly landed on Lachlan's pale furred nose and began to crawl, making his eyes narrow in irritation as it tickled the fine hairs and brought him to the brink of a sneeze. Stealth was needed, move silently and cautiously, Feredwyn had reinforced this in him over many practice trials – and his golden coat still bore the scars of more than one failed lesson. He did not begrudge her what she had done – as painful as it was – as each scar he thought of as a lesson and it only encouraged him to try better.

Now, it all come down to this...for he heard the thudding of hoof beats, the creak and rattle of the coach and the team that were being driven by the crack of the whip – and he swallowed and slicked his ears back, waiting for the right moment. On the other side of the road, Lachlan knew Owen was hidden and waiting, for Owen was to be the one who would take lead on this hijacking, Lachlan would back him up and act as a lookout.

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Lachlan watched as the stage drew closer and closer, drawn by two sweat lathered horses. Both their muzzles were foamed with flecks of saliva, and the dappled sunlight that shone down through the overhanging branches, sparkled on the sweat on their bodies. Lachlan's hands tightened on the rifle as he inwardly despised the two humans who sat on the front of the stage, one armed with a long whip that he used to drive the team.

“No horse should be treated like that - “ Lachlan growled, as his eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

An ear shattering crack snapped Lachlan out of his thoughts, before the man with the whip clutched as his chest and gasped, then pitched from the narrow bench seat on the coach then fell to the ground, the crack of his neck almost muffled as the horses screamed and dug their hooves in, panicked and alarmed. Owen wasted no time and stepped out onto the road and held one hand up in a halting gesture, the other clutching a revolver.

“Stand!” Owen snarled, the drizabone coat snapping in the wind and making him look even more imposing.

Lachlan's eyes widened – he had not expected it to turn violent – but he had his orders, and he too stepped out onto the roadway, puffs of dust being disturbed by his leather shod hooves as he brought his rifle up to cover Owen.

“Don't shoot - “ Moaned the man on the coach, as he quickly assessed the situation and dropped the reins and held his hands skywards.

“Nice and easy...friend - “ Owen growled, as he moved sideways and hurriedly snapped a glance at the stage, before walking back to the front and placing a hand on the harnesses which held the team.

Snorting and confused, the two horses stepped from left hoof to right, nostrils flared and flanks heaving as the took deep breaths, still exhausted from their heavy exertion. Lachlan moved closer, then took a glance at the stage, then tried to divide his attentions between Owen and the human who sat trembling on the bench seat.

“That pistol on your hip - “ Owen snorted, then gestured with his own at the human. “Step down –

real careful like...my associate here, will relieve you of it.”

Obediently, the human man stepped off the coach, keeping his hands raised as he watched Lachlan approach. Lachlan's paws were trembling, the rifle he held quivering, but he slipped the pistol out of its holster then stepped back.

“Now...” Owen smiled, but it wasn't the gentle, warm smile Lachlan knew – this was cold, predatory and cruel – he glanced at Lachlan, then gestured with the pistol and turned his attentions back to the human. “Right friend, what do we have here I wonder...”

“I'm just a stage coach driver - “ Stammered the human, as she swallowed, flicking his gaze from Owen, who towered over him, to Lachlan and back again.

“Eyes on me!” Owen snarled, his anger rising as he pulled the hammer back with an unmistakable click. “You just relax...”

With a moan of despair, the humans eyes snapped back to Owen, who snorted and glared as the man trembled, then a growing puddle began to form under his feet as he wet himself from fear. Owen wrinkled his nose, the strong scent unpleasant to his equine nostrils, before he laughed sarcastically.

“How old are you...boy?” Owen spoke, as he looked the quivering man up and down. “Are you a child?”

“Twenty three – sir - “ Stammered the man, as he swallowed and sank to his knees, placing his hands on the back of his head. “Please don't kill me – I just signed on yesterday and - “

Owen shook his head in disgust and apathy. “Humans...well, today's your lucky day son! Ironclad here - “

Gesturing at Lachlan, who kept his head lowered, as if trying to hide his identity, turned away, but not before the human seen that unmistakable golden coloured fur and the silvery mane.

“Ironclad here, it's his first day too – so you two have something in common. Now, enough pleasantries – what's on that stage there, and don't try to be smart...I don't like people who lie to me.” Owen snorted as he stepped forwards, then placed the still hot barrel under the humans chin, forcing his head up.

“It - “ Stammered the man, as he looked downwards, but a snort from Owen made him look back up into the dark eyes of the Clydesdale, who glared back. “It's money for the bank – they needed some cash to pay for - “

“I don't give a tail flick what they wanted it *for* “ Owen groused, as he glanced at Lachlan, then gestured with his free paw, ordering Lachlan to go to the back of the stage. “Now, we can do this two ways – you be a good little boy, sit quietly and don't upset me...or...well, I'm sure you can guess, I'm not a horse you want to play games with...”

Lachlan walked behind the stage, then clumsily pulled the iron bound trunk down off the stage, it falling to the ground with a solid thud. As strong as Lachlan had become, even he struggled to drag the heavy iron bound trunk off to the side of the road and down into a ditch. Sweating, partially from fear, and partially from exertion, Lachlan shouldered his rifle and began climbing back up the ditch wall – when he heard the shriek of the human, followed a second later by the muffled gunshot.

“You killed him!” Lachlan screamed in fear, eyes wide as he scrambled over the edge and stood shaking.

“I did - “ Owen replied, as he holstered his pistol, then turned away, as if killing the unarmed human had been no more violent than swatting away a fly.

“He...” Lachlan began, before he fell to his knees, furred fingers splaying on the ground and he was violently ill.

“He was a hindrance – and he saw your face!” Owen suddenly snarled, as he backhanded Lachlan across the side of the muzzle, knocking him to the ground. “His death is on you Colt! I told you, hide your identity – sure – they’ll see your coat, and your mane...but you have markings that are unique to you! How long before you think he’d have been found – then the whole police force would have been looking for you. This was sloppy work – very sloppy...”

Lachlan lay on the ground, his nostrils flaring in anger, and causing puffs of dust, as he slowly stood up and his fists began clenching, as he lifted his head to glare at Owen, who merely raised an eyebrow and stood his full height – his imposing stature quickly cowing Lachlan.

“Feredwyn was right – you’re not ready for this...life.” Owen snorted, as he turned away and began unharnessing the two horses.

“Not for cold blooded murder - “ Lachlan gasped, as he wiped blood from his muzzle and flicked it away. “There was no need to kill them, we’re not murderers..*I’m* not a murderer!”

With a pause, Owen froze, then looked over his shoulder. “Not yet, no...there might come a day, a night, whatever – where you’ll not be offered a choice. I know these two – well – *did* know them...”

Still angry, Lachlan stamped over, then glared at Owen.

“They’d have shot both of us dead, as soon as they seen us - “ Owen replied simply, one ear flicking. “Go look at them – look closely Colt...”

Sickened, Lachlan reluctantly went and glanced at both, before his stomach flopped over and he turned away from the second one, retching piteously.

“Notice anything?” Owen asked, as he unhitched the team and lead them forwards, before slipping the bridles off, finally releasing them with a light swat on the rump, which caused the two geldings to take off.

“No - “ Lachlan wheezed, as he fought to control the bile that surged up his throat.

“They’re both known killers – of our kind. Look at the marks on their belts, think those are just ornamental? Each of those marks are signs...signs that one like you, me, or even Feredwyn, have been killed by them. They’re lackeys, for lack of a better word – of someone you hate the most – other than me, as of now...”

“I - “ Lachlan blinked, then looked down at the first body, before he saw the notches on the belt – having originally mistaken them for some form of ornamental purpose.

“Still feel bad? You should, as I said – you let them see your face – that white blaze of you, may as

well just walk straight into Stringybark right now as naked as the day you were foaled! Never – ever – let your victim see that! Your coat and your mane? Well, I'm sure there's more than one Palomino...but that blaze with the offset edge, that's a pattern you can't mistake...and those white socks?"

"I never - " Lachlan began, then looked down at himself. "I never thought - "

"That's half the problem – you never thought...it's on you Colt, nobody else, you may as well have pulled the trigger yourself, so this is on you...want to live long enough to become a bushranger? You'd do well to listen – as next time – I might not be around to clean up..."

As Lachlan glanced at the bodies again, he retched and sank to his knees, unmindful of what Owen was doing. With a cruel smile, Owen gripped Lachlan tightly by the mane, then pushed his head forwards and there was the click of the pistol – before Lachlan screamed as a gunshot rang out and a burning fire erupted in his left ear. Screaming, he clutched at his ear, then the pain made him pull his paw away and he saw the blood on the furred fingers.

"You *shot* me!" Lachlan wailed, tears running down his cheeks.

"I did," Owen shrugged, then holstered the pistol. "Now, the story you're going to tell...is they shot at you, clipping your ear, and you returned fire and shot in self defence..."

"I - " Lachlan whimpered, feeling the burning in his wounded ear.

"Better the ear, than the forehead - " Owen snorted, before he released Lachlan and turned his attention to the locked trunk.

"I trusted you!" Lachlan shrieked, as he rose and his knees gave way, making him slump back onto the dusty road.

"First mistake - " Owen laughed sadistically. "Now, practice your story, because if I find out you tell Feredwyn what really happened – next time – it won't be your ear..."

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Sgt McGovern snorted, farted and scratched at his chest, before he sat up and clutched his head in his hands. He'd had hangovers before, but this one felt like a herd of wild horses had used his head for galloping practice and as he staggered out into the main room of the Police Station and looked around through bleary and bloodshot eyes. Finally, he found a bowl of water and splashed some onto his face, before he coughed and slumped into a chair.

"Kelsie, you slut of a foal - " Sgt. McGovern snarled.

With a creak from the wooden door that made the Sargent feel like broken glass was being ground into his skull, the paint filly stepped into the police station, her iron shod hooves clapping against the wooden floorboards.

"Sir?" Kelsie asked, her ears pricking forwards, but inwardly, she recoiled at the stench of sweat and alcohol that clung to the stained uniform he wore.

"Don't get smart - " Growled the Sargent. "Where's that gods damned - "

Quickly assessing the Sargent's mood and from experience, Kelsie knew she had to virtually tap

dance on eggshells – and not break one – so angry and volatile was the Sargent after one of his excessive nights. Without a word, she crept over to the cupboard and produced a old tin cup then a small vial of white powder. Even the clink as she used a spoon to measure out some of the powder, made the Sargent swear up a storm at her. As carefully as she could, she stirred the powder into the water, then timidly placed the cup within range of the Sargent and stepped back. He snatched it up, slopping most of it onto the floor, then he downed what was left and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Kelsie kept her muzzle shut, knowing the Sargent was volatile and violent at the best of times, even more so with a massive hangover. Carefully, she placed the cell door keys on her table and stepped outside, leaving the door open and the vile language that followed her made her shiver.

As she yawned and rubbed her eyes, she glanced out down the main street of Stringybark, before scratching idly at her mane. Pondering, she looked up and down the dirt road, then frowned. Whilst it was about 10am, or so Kelsie thought, it was not uncommon for the morning coach to be late...with the state of the roads – more like goat tracks than roads, really...

Walking down the side of the road, exchanging pleasantries with both human and anthropomorphic alike, Kelsie stopped by the printers where they were finishing up the posters. Taking one, she looked at it, then shook her head, thinking the caricature looked nothing like a horse – but they weren't exactly proficient artists.

“Golden palomino, silver mane, about six feet four...” Kelsie read to herself, as she walked on down the road. “Well, that's wonderful – I know about eight Palomino's that match *that* description!”

One ear flickered, as she snorted and shook herself, before she turned and saw the Doctor making his way towards her. Kelsie paused, her tail swishing slowly from side to side, almost as if it had a mind of its own, before he come closer, then looked down at the poster she had in one paw, then up at her.

“What are the police doing about the burglary?” He asked her, looking impatient and frustrated.

Giving him the poster, she nodded towards it. “Well, this is a start, I was thinking of asking around town, seeing if anyone knows him – questioning the usual suspects, then, expanding the search accordingly. I don't know *why* he broke into your office and ransacked it – have you had time to itemise what was taken? I confess, I don't understand medicine and such..”

“Everything and anything!” Sighed the Doctor. “Aspirin, other drugs – some I'm sure he'd not want to take, as they're solely for easing medical issues with young women...”

With a blush, the filly held up a pale paw and nodded. “I get the idea Doctor... Rest assured, we are doing – well I am doing – what I can, to try and find the person who robbed you. I, well, Sgt McGovern is – indisposed...”

With a disgusted sigh the Doctor looked at the filly, who merely rolled her shoulders and in that subtle gesture, it was understood exactly what she meant, and the Doctor shook his head.

“It's bad enough - “ He sighed piteously. “That he has such ill-feeling towards - “

Raising an eyebrow, the filly drew a breath, as her eyes narrowed. “Please mind yourself Doctor...”

“I was going to say, anthropomorphic people. I'm not insensitive young lady, not like some in

Stringybark. I grew up with both human and anthropomorphic people, I treat them equally, but I confess – anthropomorphism do pose some rather – difficult cases at times. I originally trained as a Doctor of Medicine, but I soon had to study veterinary practices, as there are some physiological differences between our two people.”

With a soft whicker of laughter, the Filly relaxed, the tension visibly sliding from her, as she smiled shyly. “Like how I look like a two legged paint horse? Yet you, are a mostly hairless ape descendant?”

“Well, yes – I don't truly understand the physiological origins of your people, but I'm more than happy to treat you, just as I would be happy to treat a human. Other than subtle things – and not so subtle – I don't discriminate against our two races. I think of us as people, irregardless of physical appearances.” He smiled, then gently reached out and took her left paw in his hand, turning it over and back, then lightly trailing his fingertips over the fine fur. “Take your hand...here. You have less bones than a human hand, but those you do are stronger and slightly different – your nails at the end are like the same material your hooves are, but you have human like hands and fingers, a modest ability and flexibility like my own hands and some things are difficult for your kind – but as our societies grew together, they mostly learned to adapt to our differences, rather than have them as discernible boundaries.”

Releasing her furred paw, he smiled at her, then looked down at the poster and chuckled to himself. “Couldn't they be a little more – descriptive? I know three equines who match this rough description – two of which are mare's!”

With a whicker, the filly chuckled, then nodded. “I know quite a few Palomino's myself – do you remember anything specific? Anything that can help narrow down the herd, as it were? Any distinguishing marking, scars, anything?”

Frowning, the Doctor thought, then sighed and shook his head slowly. “I'm sorry Constable, nothing instantly comes to my mind. It was dark, all I recall was his leather clad hooves, and his golden coat and silvery mane...I know that's not much help.”

“You certain it was a male?” Kelsie asked, raising an eyebrow. “Absolutely certain?”

“Well, modestly certain – body shape and height and musculature...very certain it was a male, yes. I'd definitely say I'm firm in my beliefs on that.”

“Thank you Doctor, you've been an immense help.” Kelsie smiled, and touched his forearm in a friendly gesture.

As she walked off, the Doctor frowned, then shrugged and went his own way, busy with his own life and responsibilities. Kelsie mentally thought over the names and ages of the Palomino's she knew, now she was certain the doctor had seen a male, it narrowed the number of possible suspects immensely. Still, whilst a crime had been omitted, it wasn't exactly like a murder, so it wasn't high on her priorities...

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Lachlan feared Owen now, realising the kind, gentle facade he had portrayed, was a mask – a mask that Owen had torn away with little thought or regard for Lachlan's feelings. He genuinely had developed a friendship with Owen and Feredwyn – now his world was turned upside down, and he did not know what to think. Not to mention, Owen had put the blame of the murders on Lachlan,

something which made the young Colt almost physically sick with stress. His shot ear burned like fire, which kept his mind flaring, but he remained silent as they carried the heavy trunk between them.

"I suppose you're wondering - " Owen snorted, as he rubbed his feathered forearm across his forehead and flicked away a rivulet of sweat.

Lachlan remained silent, each time his injured ear flicked involuntarily, sent a new cascade of pain lancing through him.

"Hmm," Owen grunted, and then grinned. "Maybe you're learning after all – life isn't fields of clover and happiness, you've already seen how cruel it can be, and for what its worth – I'm sorry about what happened to her..."

With a snort through his nostrils, Lachlan bit his tongue, but remained silent.

"Don't take that tone with me Colt, I've broken greater than you'll ever be – as I said, I'm sorry, but life is cruel, harsh and uncaring. I'm not your enemy, but after today, I don't think I'm your friend either – that's fine with me. Today was a lesson in how the life of a bushranger is. You think people – I use both in this reference – think they'd hand over the trunk we've spent the last two hours carrying, if you asked *nicely*? No, we're thieves, and as such, the law would come down on us like a..." Owen trailed off, then snorted. "Well, I don't have a way to explain it. Sometimes, bad things happen – they would have shot us dead and left us to rot in the forest, as soon as looked at us. Remember that, you might think you know people – but I've got more scars from bullets and humans cruel whips and other punishments – than you can begin to imagine. Oh, sure, you look at me, and think I'm some gentle giant – all Clydesdale's have that reputation – but my own early years weren't gentle and kind – learn to read others, it'll do more to keep you alive, than relying on your sense of honour and morality...now, what do you tell Feredwyn?"

With a swallow, Lachlan twitched and glanced sideways, then answered in a short, sullen reply, about how he would lie to Feredwyn.

"I hate you - " Lachlan whispered.

"Good," Owen smiled, genuinely smiled, then patted Lachlan's shoulder. "Now, bury that hatred, learn to use it and control it, never let it control you. Use its power to sharpen your senses and hone your claws on it – "

Lachlan paused, then put down his end of the chest, then turned to face Owen, having to tilt his head back slightly, as Owen towered over him.

"I don't have claws - " Lachlan began, looking confused.

"Figure of speech, as it were. Listen, I'm cruel because I care, you understand? You won't last long as a Bushranger with goodness and morals...you'll have to make hard choices – sometimes without mercy. If it comes down to it, you want to establish your strength and dominance in the first moments – use stealth and subterfuge, get the drop on them – leave them unsettled and unsure, but above all, be certain of your actions! See how I acted at the stage? I surprised them, I saw they didn't have their side-arms on them – first mistake. A stage should always have the other driver armed and watchful..."

"You killed him in cold blood!" Lachlan suddenly screamed, as he struck out at Owen with



clenched fists, his pain, rage and fear overwhelming him.

“I did what needed doing! As I said, I knew who they were, now...” Owen signed, taking Lachlan's strikes against his chest with barely a blink.

Lachlan slumped onto the chest, then began sobbing, clutching his head in his paws. “I – I don't know how you could do that...”

“Are you deaf?” Owen sighed. “They we working with the Sargent – you *know* what he thinks of us! If we let them live, he would have had a mob after us before the sun went down, and probably have us hanging before dawn. If we were lucky. I suspect we'd be caught, taken out into the bush here and if we were *really* fortunate – we'd be shot...trust me – I've had dealings with his kind before. They're *not* nice people, and I have no hesitation in removing such humans from the world.”

“Clanton wouldn't approve...” Lachlan sniffed, as he hung his head, then wiped his paws over his eyes.

“No doubt,” Owen admitted. “Yet how do you know? Has he ever pulled leather in defence of himself – or others? Has he ever been put in a situation, like I have, where your life depended on it? Have you ever asked *him*?”

Lachlan sniffled again, then shuddered and hung his head shamefully, allowing his guilt and sadness to make him insensitive to experiences he knew nothing about – and Owen obviously knew, from cold hearted experience.

“It – still doesn't make it right!” Lachlan sniffled, as he slowly stood up.

“Murder is never, *right*,” Owen admitted. “Try to justify it all you want – but those men would have killed us without a second thought. I did us both a favour. Now, enough wasted time...let's get home – we got a trunk to open and hopefully, some money to make.

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Owen lifted the heavy trunk, hoisting it onto his shoulder as he followed the barely legible path back to their farmstead, Lachlan following like a meek foal. As they returned, Feredwyn blinked and finished hanging up a sheet on the clothes line, then looked from Owen to Lachlan then back again. Owen acted like nothing had happened, as he dropped the heavy trunk on the ground with a resounding thump, then cocked his leg and put his right hoof on it like some theatrical pose.

“We're back,” Owen snorted, flexing his muscles beneath his coat and trying to look all dominant and theatrical.

Feredwyn brushed her paws over her apron, then flicked her glance from Lachlan to Owen and back again, before she sighed and marched over to Owen and stared up at him.

“Are you mad? Bringing that back here, we've discussed this and - “ Feredwyn growled, as she poked a furred finger against Owen's chest, then she paused, her nostrils twitched and she slowly turned to look at Lachlan, who visibly flinched then turned away.

“Well, where was I supposed to put it? I know I'm strong, but that's sealed with an iron padlock and - “ Owen began, then trailed off as he seen Feredwyn's attention turn away from him, then he

snorted, crouched and heaved the heavy trunk up and carried it behind the simple log cottage.

“Oh, Lachlan - “ Feredwyn sighed, as she seen the blood that had run down Lachlan's head and across his shoulder.

“It's – nothing.” Lachlan whispered, as he flinched when she touched his shoulder, his ears slowly flattening. “An – accident, nothing more...I got – careless.”

Sitting Lachlan down, Feredwyn made him strip his heavy patchwork coat off, then the shirt as she fetched a bucket of water and a cloth, before she began washing away the drying blood from his shoulder and neck.

“Doesn't look like an accident to me!” Feredwyn frowned, then lightly cupped the base of Lachlan's injured ear, hearing him draw a sharp inhalation of breath. “Tell me, what happened? I'm going to guess...”

Owen returned, then squatted down nearby, the look he shot Lachlan left the young Colt trembling, which Feredwyn misinterpreted as being pain, rather than fear.

“It didn't go to plan,” Owen grunted, as he stood and began pacing. “Oh, I know what you're going to say, so don't start !”

Turning about, her eyes narrowing as she stared at Owen, Feredwyn marched on him, then her anger rose as her wedge-like tail frizzled.

“Owen Blacktail!” Feredwyn snapped, her tail frizzling wider, as she stamped a cloven hoof in anger. “You mean to tell me -”

“I – took care of them, and before you get your gorgeous tail in a twist,” Owen replied with a light chuckle, trying to defuse her rising anger. “I recognised them – they were two of the ones who orphaned our daughter. So, you just reign in love, as I did the world a favour. Now, there's no one that can identify us...and Lachlan here, he's still green, but he learned a valuable lesson today, didn't you Colt?”

“They - “ Feredwyn began, then her anger drained away like water down a drain. “You certain you weren't seen? Also, you *know* how I feel about you falling back into old habits!”

With a snort, she slapped him across the cheek with enough force, to rock his head to the side, then he winced and touched his cheek. “I deserved that - “

Lachlan watched the interplay between the doe and Clydesdale – realising that Feredwyn loved her equine husband – and genuinely feared for his safety, and surprisingly, his own as well.

“You're sure - “ Feredwyn sighed, then turned back to Lachlan, before pausing and glancing over her shoulder. “That you can't have this tracked back...”

“My love, do you think me a fool?” Owen laughed softly, as he shook his head. “I'm sure, there's nothing that will bring them down on us, now, just settle, and brush down that tail of yours, I know how much you hate it when its all frizzled like that...”

Lachlan winced and continued washing away the blood from his shoulder and ears, before he winced and put the bloodied cloth back into the bucket. He still felt guilt and shame at lying to Feredwyn, but Owen had made it clear – Feredwyn was not to know – or the punishments would be

dire indeed...

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Frustrated, confused and more than a little hot under the high necked collar that felt like her uniform was trying to strangle her. Frustration built on frustration, as she wandered around Stringybark, pondering the theft from the Doctor's business, and the now abnormally late stage. Up to two or three hours, were not unheard of – but as she tilted her hat back, she squinted at the sun and surmised it was closer to late afternoon...and the stage had been due about eleven that morning. Finally, her resolve clarified, and she strode purposefully to the Police station, then walked around behind it to the stables.

Here, she found her favourite mare, a Dappled Grey, and saddled her, before swinging up into the saddle and picking up the reins. With a whicker, the mare stood patiently, her greyish white tail swishing away the flies, and she'd have stood there indefinitely, awaiting her mistress's order.

“Let's go Jess,” Kelsie clucked at the mare, then lightly touched her hooves to the mare's sides. “We got work to do!”

Happily, the mare snorted, then flicked her ears forwards and began trotting down the main road, her head turning slightly from side to side, before Kelsie tapped her sides again and they broke into an easy, distance consuming gallop, soon leaving Stringybark township behind them.

Kelsie loved riding Jess, and as they passed small farm-holds and fields, Kelsie relaxed the grip on the reins and let Jess have her head, for which the patient mare was well accustomed and happily galloped along, her sides billowing as she drew each breath, but from experience, they both knew Jess could maintain her gallop for hours. Birds flew through the late afternoon sky, and a gentle breeze blew, as Kelsie and her mare enjoyed the ride, but all too soon, Kelsie picked up the reins and turned Jess's head.

“This way girl,” Kelsie sighed, as she had enjoyed the freedom of the reckless galloping, but knew she had a job to do.

As they worked together, Kelsie's eyes scanned the sides of the road as she reigned Jess into a slow, steady trot. It wasn't long, before she heard the whicker of curious horses, and she pulled Jess up short, then frowned as she seen two unharnessed horses grazing at the side of the road, a few hundred feet further down the dusty road.

“Jess, walk up,” Kelsie whispered, as she placed a gloved paw on the mare's neck.

Obediently, Jess slowed to a walk, then stopped as the horses lifted their heads and wickered again, and this time, Jess responded in kind. Sliding from her saddle, then approaching carefully, Kelsie moved quietly, so as not to frighten the horses – holding her gloved paw out, then watching as they looked at each other, then one stepped forwards, stretching its neck out and sniffing at the filly's outstretched paw. With a gentle touch, Kelsie stroked the nose and forehead of the horse, before she moved slightly, then her eyes widened as she seen the unmistakable brand on the gelding's shoulder.

“How'd you get here - “ Kelsie frowned, recognising the brand as belonging to the stage company. “No harness, no tack...”

Nuzzling her, Jess placed her head over Kelsie's shoulder, then playfully knocked Kelsie's hat off, which fell to the dust.

“Jess, behave yourself!” Kelsie admonished her mare gently, then stroked her nose. “Now...two stage coach horses – but no stage, no tack..even *if* it got wrecked, there'd still be harnesses and...”

Jess nudged Kelsie again, then Kelsie took the hint and mounted, before giving Jess a light slap on the neck with the reins, coaxing her into a gallop again. Confusion compounded on confusion, until after rounding a bend in the road, Kelsie gasped and involuntarily pulled sharply back on the reins, causing Jess distress, the mare crouching in the haunches and skidding to a halt, stirring up the dirt and dust, whilst Kelsie sat astride her, staring wide-eyed at the wreckage and the corpses that lay before her.

After a dozen moments, she shook herself, and instinctively cursed herself for a fool, as she snatched her pistol from her holster and quickly slipped over the side of Jess, who danced skittishly, sensing her owners distress. Crouching, Kelsie peered at the woods nearest the bodies, using Jess as a shield, before she placed a paw on Jess' belly and stood, holstering her pistol. A murder of crows lit from the wrecked stage and the bodies on which they'd been feeding, before Kelsie pulled a scarf up over her mouth and nostrils, and approached. Several crows remained perched on the still forms, cawing raucously, but as Kelsie un-holstered her pistol and fired off a shot, they took wing and scattered, their unnerving croaks, cries and caws chilling her blood.

“Get out of here, go on, get!” Kelsie screamed at them, as she waved her paws.

Sickened, she dropped the pistol back into her holster and walked closer, cold dread clutching at her entrails as she seen up close, the blood and torn flesh of the two humans who lay sprawled lifelessly. Kelsie didn't need to check for vital signs – she could tell by the glance she spared each corpse, they were well and truly dead. Falling back on her training, she tipped her head back and let her eyes go unfocused as her mind tried to build a chain of events that lead to the murder. Stepping lightly, her hooves clicking on the hard dirt road, she made mental notes about the position of the bodies, empty holster and back rifle sling, the cut and unbuckled harness which had once been affixed to the team who had drawn the now ruined stage... Each thing told a story, and as she began to walk a wider and wider circle, more of the picture began to take shape in her head.

“They were hit hard – taken almost by complete surprise - “ Kelsie spoke, her ears twitching as she knelt in the dust, then picked up a empty shell casing and sniffed at it, before dropping it again.

Jess stepped closer, ears swept back nervously, head held high as if she were guarding her mistress, as Kelsie knelt again and looked at the first human – he had been shot, and the unnatural angle of his neck, made her think he had fallen, possibly been the driver. Feeling the bile rising in her throat, Kelsie gagged and twisted away, dropping to her knees and nostrils flaring as she fought to suppress the urges to vomit. She hated this aspect of her job, it always gave her terrible nightmares for days afterwards, but the Sargent would demand a detailed verbal report from her...and she knew he couldn't be bothered to come out and inspect the scene for himself.

As she knelt on the road, coughing and wheezing, suddenly she screamed in fright as a powerful hand wrapped itself around her mane and yanked her savagely backwards, throwing her onto her back. Ask Kelsie moved to grasp her pistol, a strong furred paw gripped her wrist and bent it backwards, making her cry out in pain and fear. Looking up, blinded by the sun, her eyes streamed tears before they were blocked out by the head of a black furred weasel, who glared down at her through eyes like liquid night, a cruel, predatory smile on his face.

“Fancy meeting you here, filly...” He snorted, then stepped back.

Kelsie mentally chastised herself, for allowing a fellow Constable to get the drop on her, it'd look bad in the report...

“Oh, I *so* enjoy it...when you look angry...” Smirked the Weasel. “You know how to get me excited...”

“Touch me again Sebastian and I'll - “ Kelsie snarled, as she rolled away and leapt to her hooves, shaking with fear and anger.

“You'll what?” Sebastian smiled wider, revealing his sharp teeth. “You're all alone out here little filly...no one is coming to your rescue, I could do whatever I wanted – *whenever* – I wanted...I've wondered, what you'd taste like...”

Kelsie froze in fear, the weasels gaze almost hypnotic, and with extreme effort, she broke the trance and snapped her wrist down then up, her pistol clasped in both paws and pointed straight between Sebastian's eyes.

“Try that again...I dare you - “ Kelsie hissed, her blood pumping and finger a fraction off pulling the trigger.

Sebastian merely grinned, then shrugged and tipped his hat back, dismissing Kelsie's threat as insignificant.

“Quite a party, wasn't it?” He asked, as he looked down, then poked at one of the dead humans with a foot paw. “I knew these men, rough, violent, cruel to a fault...all qualities I admire...”

Kelsie kept her pistol out, as she trusted Sebastian about as far as she could kick him – he'd turn on her in a heartbeat – he made no hesitation, about what he'd like to do to her...and such thoughts chilled Kelsie to her hooves. Out of the three constables – Sebastian was the worst – in personality and general demeanour.

“Put that toy away Filly, before you hurt yourself - “ Sebastian waved a black furred paw at her pistol, then favoured her with a lecherous glare.

“I swear Sebastian - “ Kelsie shuddered in revulsion, then holstered her pistol.

“Oh, promise? Will you scream and plead when I take you? Will you try to fight? Oh please, promise me you'll fight...I find it, *so* arousing...it's making me excited already, so stop teasing!”

“You – *ever* – speak to me like that again...” Kelsie growled, as she flattened her ears and nostrils flared.

“Promises, promises – maybe later, hmm? We got a job to do here - “ Sebastian teased, the menace in his voice all too clear, and once again, he snickered as he seen Kelsie shiver. “So – seems we had a double murder – I assume – you've already checked the stage? If I'm not mistaken, wasn't this one supposedly carrying about ten thousand pounds in gold and bank notes? Oh, wait, that's right – you weren't at that briefing...”

Feeling anger fight with fear, Kelsie stood her ground and placed her paws on her hips.

“I got here, no more than about ten minutes ago – I *had* started my preliminary investigation, then you so *kindly* dropped in...and nearly had your head taken off...”

“Oh, *please!*” Sebastian laughed. “I could have taken you out with ease – did you learn nothing when you were trained? Or are all Equines just – slow learners? Never assume you're alone – how did you know you weren't being watched? How did you know that they weren't lying in wait – waiting to shoot you dead, or...more pleasantly...”

“Finish that thought, and you'll join them in hell, Sebastian - “ Kelsie growled out, her jaws clenching in anger.

“There you go again,” Sebastian purred, favouring her with another lecherous glance. “Getting me all hot and bothered - “

“Go fuck yourself, Sebastian – or better yet – get your stallion to do it...” Kelsie snapped, as she walked behind the coach.

“Would he be better than you, little girl? I haven't had a filly in *so* long...” Sebastian's mocking laugh came to her ears, causing Kelsie to blush.

From above, Sebastian seemed to appear by magic, standing on the slanted ruin of the coach, as he crouched and looked down at her.

“Well, that answers that – the money is gone, as I knew it would be...” He shrugged, seemingly indifferent, more intent on pushing Kelsie to breaking point. “So, way I'm reading this, is we got ourselves a highwayman - “

“What makes you think a female couldn't be a bushranger?” Kelsie shot back, angrily staring at him.

“Oh, please!” Sebastian mocked her. “A female bushranger? Honestly? Your kind wouldn't last ten seconds out here, living rough – killing people in cold blood, enjoying the – *pleasure* – of a woman...”

Kelsie tried to ignore the weasel's cruel words, but the fear rose in her, as she imagined exactly what Sebastian meant. It wasn't a pretty picture...

“So,” Sebastian snickered, as he leapt from the wreckage, landing in a crouched position on the ground, then standing and dusting himself off. “As much as a dalliance with you would be – *entertaining* – we got two dead humans – no loss, am I right? A locked trunk and no idea where it went, or who did it...an interesting mystery, isn't it?”

Kelsie had wandered away, following the iron shod hoof print's on the ground, examining them, but her back-swept ears kept a careful watch on Sebastian.

“Oh, so you're a tracker now? Oh my, you're just *full* of surprises..” Sebastian needled her again.

“I have eyes, and other senses - “Kelsie snarled at him, as she knelt and looked closer at the hoof print. “These shoes are crude – obviously by someone with blacksmith experience, but lacking a proper forge...”

Sebastian walked up beside her, then looked down with disinterest and disdain. “You know this, how?”

Kelsie snorted and stepped out of reach of the weasel whom she hated and despised, before she turned about and cocked a hoof, showing off the well worn iron shoe that was nailed to the underside of her hoof. "This is why, compare that to the hoof print here, the shoe is large – and crudely made at that. Look at the toe of the hoof? It doesn't have the groove for strength and flexibility between the first and second rail, not to mention, the holes in the print, from the nails? They look crude and poorly made. These were definitely not forged properly."

"My, my my," Sebastian grinned at her, once again intentionally showing his sharp teeth. "You might have been paying attention in classes after all! Now, leave the work to a real constable, whilst you go back to playing at being one, shall we?"

He stood and glanced around, then wandered back and forth across the road, muttering to himself as he paused and checked another footprint, then brushed aside some leaves and twigs and picked something up and sniffed at it.

"Perhaps we should bring James in on this - " Kelsie pondered, as she began walking towards her mare.

"That canine couldn't smell his own tail with both hands and a hurricane lamp!" Sebastian laughed condescendingly.

"He's the best tracker we got – longer we wait, the colder the trail gets." Kelsie argued, placing her paws on her hips.

With a snort, Sebastian prowled back and forth, bent over so much, Kelsie wondered how he didn't just get on all his paws and feet and scurry about like one of his ancestors.

"Hmm, yes...yes..." Sebastian muttered, as he followed something, what exactly, Kelsie didn't know, but she was horrified as Sebastian reached out and dipped two fingers into a wet patch of roadway, then sniffed it and licked his fingers, an unmistakable ripple of pleasure running through his sleek, muscular form. "Fresh blood – very fresh..."

"You...you disgust me," Kelsie shuddered, as she retrieved her canteen from the saddle, then took a drink. "That's just – not right!"

"Do not knock something, until you've tried it – I wonder - " Sebastian purred, as he glanced Kelsie's way. "Would your blood taste as sweet?"

Backing away, Kelsie snatched the reins of her mare and moved well out of Sebastian's range – before she mounted and looked down from the back of the Mare, as Sebastian tasted another blood spatter, then like a blood hound, he began to follow the trail unerringly. More here, look – on these lantana leaves – some more...and here, on these thorns – a – now this *is* interesting..."

Against her better judgement, Kelsie tapped Jess's sides, and the mare reluctantly walked forwards, before she stopped and Kelsie looked down at Sebastian, whose dexterous fingers plucked a few silvery hairs from the lantana bush.

"That could belong to anyone!" Kelsie snorted. "How many horses travel this road, how many people like me – we shed our mane and tail hair easily enough, I think you're grasping at straws Sebastian!"

Ignoring her, he picked up a stick and idly pushed back a branch of the spiky lantana, then touched

his fingers to the blood spattered there.

“Maybe yes, maybe no – but explain this – *filly* - “ Sebastian grinned up at her. “Why is there more blood here? I wonder – was one of these bushrangers shot? It *would* explain the blood spray...I don't know what to make of the hairs – you might be right, but if my instincts are correct – I think we have our first true hint of who did this – *or what did this...*”

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As Owen began hammering at the iron padlock that held the trunk closed, occasionally swearing to himself as he worked, Feredwyn returned to bathing Lachlan's ear, much to his protest. Feredwyn ignored Lachlan's whimpers and complaints, as she wrapped a clean cloth around the ear and got him to hold it there as she went back inside. Returning a few moments later, she carried a crude leather satchel with her which she sat on the ground, then flipped it open and started pulling out a variety of jars and pouches.

“Oh, now you're in for it - “ Owen snickered, then picked up a crow bar and began smacking the truck, wedging it deep until he could start levering at the hinges.

“I'm in for - “ Lachlan's eyes widened and he shrieked as Feredwyn pressed a compress against the notch in his ear.

“Two choices Lachlan,” Feredwyn sighed as she held his ear in a tight grasp, keeping the compress tight. “You can suffer a little now, and it'll heal...”

“Or?” Lachlan sobbed.

“Or - “ Owen grunted, then threw down the crowbar in frustration and sat down on the trunk. “Well, you'll not like it if it gets infected – trust me. Let Feredwyn do her magic, sure, it hurts – but I'd rather it hurt, than the consequences...”

With a wracking cough preceding him, Clanton staggered out of the cottage and blinked owlishly, as he shivered and sneezed.

“Oh, you're awake!” Feredwyn smiled, as she dug through her satchel and held out a small pouch towards Clanton. “Here, take this, mix it with some water and drink it, that cough sounds like it's easing at last!”

“Doesn't feel like it - “ Clanton wheezed, as he shivered from ear-tips to foot paws.

Feredwyn chuckled softly, then slapped Lachlan lightly on the nose with her leathery paw pads, as she caught him trying to take the compress off his injured ear.

“Wait...what - “ Clanton wheezed, then he bent over as he began coughing until even Feredwyn thought he'd not stop.

Ignoring Lachlan, Feredwyn ran over to Clanton, then placed the back of her paw against his forehead, feeling the fever which raged through him.

“Owen, help me!” Feredwyn squealed. “Clanton's very sick – he needs to get back to bed, now!”

Grunting, Owen rose, then scooped up Clanton and held him close, carrying the wheezing and



coughing young buck back inside.

“He's very ill - “ Lachlan whispered, as Feredwyn snapped her satchel closed.

“Aye, he is – I don't understand it...I know herbal craft – he should be getting better, not...worse.” Feredwyn sighed, as she retrieved a fresh bucket of water and made her way to Clanton's bedside, Lachlan following.

Lachlan looked down at his friend, then he realised just how ill Clanton looked – his cheeks were hollow, eyes sunken and glassy, even his fur looked dry and brittle again. He gasped and wheezed, as Owen placed him gently on the narrow cot, then Feredwyn placed several blankets over him and began mixing a powder into a enamel cup and holding it up for Clanton to drink the bitter liquid.'

Owen watched, a look of sadness fluttering across his muzzle, before he gestured to Lachlan, and the two of them left the room, Lachlan closing the door quietly behind him.

“It – doesn't look good, does it?” Lachlan asked, as he swallowed and bravely tried to hold back the tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks.

“No, it doesn't - “ Owen admitted, then brushed his large hands across his own eyes. “Feredwyn is an amazing woman – she won't give up without a fight, now, come with me. I think we need to leave her too it.”

Owen led Lachlan out of the cottage, then down a narrow path that led up the hillside, before stepping into another clearing where Lachlan stood amazed and bewildered – for Owen had built himself a rough forge, replete with open fire pit with glowing coals, bellows and other machinery and benches covered with hammers, tongs and some things Lachlan couldn't identify. Owen smiled weakly, then nodded.

“I told you, I was a blacksmith – but this?” Owen gestured at the scene before them. “This is just rough – poor workmanship! This is nothing compared to what I had – once...”

Shaking off his melancholy, Owen walked over to a separate bench, then he threw off the tarpaulin that covered it and Lachlan's eyes narrowed, before he looked at Owen, then back to the bench.

“I told you,” Owen smiled weakly. “I had some experience – with other Bushrangers. Now, this isn't going to be an exact fit you understand...”

Owen threw Lachlan a thick cow hide jerkin, that hung down past Lachlan's knees when he put it on, then he hefted a heavy plate chest piece. Placing it on Lachlan, who grunted and blinked at the heavy weight, Owen tightened the straps on the sides.

“How does that feel?” Owen asked, stepping back and looking at it.

“Heavier than I thought it would be - “ Lachlan admitted, as he twisted himself from side to side, feeling the heavy plate pulling painfully at his shoulders, where a majority of the weight was centred.

“It needs to be – you're not some weak human – you're a stallion – like me, we're naturally stronger than humans would ever be, so I made this armour accordingly. Now, for the rest of it...”

Lachlan grunted as Owen fitted him with crude greaves on his shins, tightening straps here and

there, then added a thick plate over the groin and upper thighs. Once again, Lachlan gasped, feeling like the armour was crushing him, but he stepped out more, trying to distribute the weight.

“How will I be able to fight in this?” Lachlan moaned, as he felt Owen placing heavy epaulettes on his shoulders, affixing them to the chest piece with buckles and straps.

“You'll learn - “ Owen snickered. “Now...”

Lachlan gasped, as his injured ear was rubbed against the edge of the metal helmet that Owen placed over his head – a helmet which covered almost all of his head, except for about four inches just above his nostrils. Peering out through a confining narrow slit in the front of the helmet – Lachlan realised just how stifling and restrictive the armour was.

“There, how's that feel?” Owen asked, as he stepped back and cast a critical eye over his creation.

“Heavy - “ Lachlan grunted, as he experimentally took a step, feeling his body now encased in thick, heavy plate armour. “No doubt about heavy, a bit chafing in places – the vision is terrible – I can only see straight ahead and - “

“Rely on your other senses, your ears I've left uncovered – but they're a small target – most will shoot for your chest area, largest area to hit, so I made sure the armour was thickest there and...”

Without warning, Owen pulled leather, then unloaded all six shots point blank at Lachlan, who screamed in fear with each gunshot, the closeness of the bullets striking him made the armour ring with the impacts and Lachlan gasped, feeling the force of the bullet smacking home against his chest.

“None got through, not surprised - “ Owen nodded in satisfaction, as Lachlan wheezed and gasped, feeling like someone had kicked him in the chest. “Might need some extra padding in the shoulders and chest plate...always room for improvement - “

Lachlan reached up with shaking paws, then pulled the helmet off and dropped it on the ground as he wheezed and gasped for breath.

“You knew...” Lachlan moaned, as he tried to rub his chest, but the thick plate, now dented, prevented it.

“I suspected – I didn't know until I pulled the trigger - “ Owen admitted with a weak smile. “It's not completely bullet proof – there are gaps in the armour, there isn't much I can do about that...maybe some thicker leather, some wool padding...”

Lachlan began fumbling at the buckles and straps, as he began pulling off the armour and dropping it on the ground. Owen watched with interest, then as the last piece clattered to the ground, he shook his head and tsked.

“Nearly fifteen minutes?” Owen snorted. “I counted them, you'll have to be better at this, that's way too long, you should be able to remove the armour in half that time!”

Lachlan stared, then pulled the thick surcoat off and threw it onto the ground, before gently touching his chest, feeling the bruises beneath his fur, and wincing.

“It's my first time wearing it - “ Lachlan sighed, as he winced and touched another sore spot.

“Definitely need some extra padding...”

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When Constable Kelsie returned, she found the Sargent in a vile mood, leaning against the gate to the Police Stockyard.

“Just where do you think *you* have been?” He snarled at her.

“Doing my job, sir - “ Kelsie replied, as she dismounted and led Jess towards the stable.

“Don't get smart with me, Constable – I got a lovely cell in the coldest part of the Stockade – that's going empty, and you keep it up, I'll ensure you find a home there – now – just *what* by your job – were you doing?”

Kelsie paused whilst unbuckling the girth strap, a sigh escaping her muzzle before she could stop it. “I was investigating the robbery to start with, then, in case you hadn't noticed – the stage hasn't arrived! I found what was left of it, about ten miles south west of Stringybark. It'd been hit, the driver and guard were dead and the trunk was stolen. However - “

Marching towards her, the Sargent gripped her painfully by the shoulders and shoving her cruelly against Jess, who wickered in fright and stamped a hoof.

“*However?*” Roared the Sargent, his nose mere inch away from Kelsie's.

“However - “ Kelsie swallowed, then tried to press herself back against Jess, but Jess didn't move. “Constable Sebastian – found a blood spatter. We think – one of the people who hit the stage, might have been wounded, but he isn't sure...”

Releasing Kelsie, the Sargent snorted, then rubbed a hand over his roughly stubbled chin thoughtfully. “Damn fine Constable – that Weasel, loyal, a good man – as far as your kind can be trusted...you'd learn a lot from him...”

“No doubt - “ Kelsie swallowed, then shuddered, knowing the Sargent wouldn't see it, but keeping her true feelings about Sebastian to herself.

“Have him report to me, when he turns up – I got - “ Pausing, the Sargent turned sideways and the look he gave Kelsie, chilled her blood. “...a special assignment for him, and for myself...now, Patterson has requested my time, and it's not wise to keep the old codger waiting...”

“Codger?” Kelsie wondered to herself, wondering what Patterson would think of his lap dog calling him that, but she knew to keep it to herself.

“Yes, Sir - “ Kelsie replied as respectfully as she could, before turning back to Jess and unsaddling her.

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Patterson sat before the crackling fireplace, as he sipped from a wine glass, the faint aroma of wine reaching Sgt. McGovern's nostrils as he was ushered into the dimly lit room. Taking a moment, he let his eyes adjust, before he he moved forwards, then stopped a dozen paces away, his hands clasped behind his back.

“You sent for me, Sir?” McGovern asked, his voice soft and deferential to the old man, who kept him waiting, as he swirled his wine, appreciating how the colour shone through in the light from the fire.

“You're loyal, aren't you?” Patterson began, then before the Sargent could answer, Patterson waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, I'm sure you are, now, as you know – I'm having some – *issues* – with some of the landowners around here. Especially, those Godless animals...I thought my offer was extremely fair...yet they refused.”

Feeling confident, Patterson grinned. “Surrender your farmstead and lands – or - “

“Quite,” Patterson smiled in reply. “Very fair I think, well – I made the offer for a certain farmstead, and I have been refused. Now, it is time to put the collar on these animals – make them bow down to the true power in Stringybark! I will not be defied, not by *them*! Who is your choice, for some rather...”

Patterson left it unsaid, but the Sargent grinned wider, as he stroked the stubble on his chin and thought about it.

“I know some who share your ambitions – *Sir* - “ Sgt. McGovern nodded. “Constable Sebastian for starters, he enjoys this type of work – almost unnaturally so...”

Patterson's eyes narrowed, as he dredged up the name. “You know I despise these – *beasts* – Why you have them as your constables, when we have perfectly fine humans, who would do the job better...”

“With all due respect, Sir, those I interviewed for the position were – unsuitable – They wouldn't obey orders, and these – *beasts* – as you say, they know fear! They work for me, and by proxy, you, out of fear. They know if I desire it – or you order it – I'd kill them in a heartbeat...if they were lucky – if they were not, well...”

Leaving the open ended statement hanging like fire in the air, both men knew exactly what the well meant – more than one anthropomorphic animal had disappeared without a trace, and in the dark of night, it was whispered that they had lingered in suffering for weeks, some even months, before their eventual death..and none of them dared ask what had become of their friends, for fear the Sargent's wrath would descend upon them.

“I do not want any loose ends Sargent – my plans are developing nicely – I have heard that the railway is only two hundred and ninety miles away now...at their estimated work pace, it'll be here at Stringybark within three years! Three short years – and we will finally have a reliable link to the capital, instead of the three month trip on bad roads and with the threat of bushranger's and worse out there! Three years, and as such, my plans need to be – accelerated – accordingly...”

“I understand completely, sir!” Sgt. McGovern nodded. “When do you want the forced evictions to take place? Shall we be more – judicial – in such?”

Patterson thought for a moment, twirling the wine in the glass again, before taking a deep drink and nodding. “I leave such things in your capable hands Sargent...after all, if they come to me and put me on the stand, I can say with all fairness, I knew nothing about what happened – I offered – a fair compensation...they accepted, and left Stringybark...what happened to them after that? I do not know, nor do I care!”

With a sadistic chuckle, Patterson put his empty wine glass down, then nodded. “Of course, there is no chance I would ever be brought up on charges – you'll see to that yourself – *personally* – won't you, Sargent? After all, your man controls the mail in the telegraph office, doesn't he?”

“Yes sir, he does – a good, loyal man – for whom your payments have been – most generous, I'm sure. No word has left via the coaches, implicating you in any wrongdoing – it is as you have asked. You made a generous offer to buy their lands, they accepted and – left – Stringybark. No one knows the truth, and even *if* one of those beasts, made it alive to Melbourne...”

“Indeed,” Patterson nodded. “You have full discretion, Sargent – now, leave me – I want to hear of your success by nightfall tomorrow. Do what you like with them, I don't give a damn...I just don't – want to know exactly *what* you do, just – do it...and no witnesses!”

Feeling like a dog that had been given a treat from his master, Sgt. McGovern snapped his heels together, then saluted Patterson and left his expansive residence, already planning the events that would unfold tomorrow. Indeed, it promised to be a most – exhilarating experience – one Sgt. McGovern enjoyed, and he knew, Constable Sebastian would who heartedly enjoy...

\*

Lachlan adjusted the straps of his armoured suit, then Owen helped him shrug into a drizabone coat. Stepping back, Owen gave Lachlan a stern look over, before adjusting a strap here, moving the armour slightly there, until he frowned and nodded.

“That seems to fit better, and the coat will help muffle the noise – how does it feel?” Owen asked, as he scratched idly at the back of his head.

“Stiffling,” Lachlan laughed weakly, as he stepped forwards and back, then adjusted the armour slightly, tightening some straps and loosening others, until he had finally found the right positioning to make it more comfortable. “It's like wearing a blacksmiths forge!”

“I never said it'd be comfortable,” Owen snickered, then tapped Lachlan's chest plate. “Damn fine craftsmanship if I say so myself...”

Lachlan winced and stared at Owen. “Did you have to test it – whilst I was wearing it?”

With a snort, Owen grinned. “Would you have preferred to find it wasn't as resistant – when you really needed its protection?”

“I - “ Lachlan began, then swallowed and shook his head slowly, mindful of his injured ear.

“I didn't think so...” Owen grunted, then he walked around Lachlan, before nodding in satisfaction. “Well, from now of, you're a bushranger – you'll be feared and respected, and you'll go by the name of Ironclad – fitting I think, don't you?”

“I'm not so sure - “ Lachlan laughed nervously. “I'm sweating up a storm in here!”

“Sweating? Wait until you're facing four armed humans, just you...then you'll know what sweating is Colt, now, go off into the bush and practice what you've learned – I'll see you back here on dark...try not to get yourself into trouble now...alright?”

Lachlan snorted, then double checked the rifle he had in the back holster, before placing it back in its protective leather case and then picked up the heavy helmet, turning it too and fro.

“One last thing - “ Owen smiled, then walked off, returning shortly with a large saddlebag which he handed to Lachlan.

“What’s this?” Lachlan enquired, as he flipped open the saddlebag flap, and looked at the money concealed within.

“Your cut of your first robbery – congratulations Ironclad, you're a modestly wealthy horse now...what are you going to spend it on?” Owen grinned, then shook the stunned Lachlan's paw.

“I - “ Lachlan began, then his ears swept backwards. “How do you expect me to spend this? I've never - “

Owen shrugged, then chuckled good naturedly. “Give it away, burn it, I really don't care – you earned it, its yours. Do with it what you want...”

Lachlan frowned, then shook his head, before slinging the saddle bag over his shoulder and pondering, before he turned and whistled loudly. Obediently, his horse approached and he slung the saddlebag over her withers and took the loose reins in his paw.

“I think its time I began to live up to what my mother wanted of me - “ Lachlan whispered, as he hung his head, a single tear tracking down his snout.

“What was that?” Owen glanced at him, then frowned in confusion.

“My mother – wanted me to be true to myself, good, kind and gentle...I'm not a greedy horse, I've never been such – this money – I can use for good. I'm sure there are people far worse off than me – *maybe* – I can do good with this...”

Owen was moved by the conviction he heard in Lachlan's voice, and he gave a single nod. “It's yours, so do with it as you see fit, just, be careful...you get caught, well – we know what'll happen to you...”

“Clanton - “ Lachlan began, then his throat locked and he turned away.

“We'll do our best, I'll get a friend to ride for town, get the doctor out here, as I fear that young Kangaroo is beyond Feredwyn's skill – we'll look after him, now, you've got a legend to make out of your new name – may the God's ride with you, and keep you safe!”

Lachlan paused, then looked over his shoulder, before he turned back and hugged Owen as best he could, Owen gruffly returning the hug and pushing Lachlan away.

“Tell Feredwyn – I'll come back, I promise!” Lachlan sniffed, then turned back away and took the reins of his mare, leading her away down the narrow game trail and away from the farmstead.

Owen watched Lachlan walk off, the young palomino dressed in his armour, his mare obediently following along behind, and he rubbed a feathered wrists across his eyes.

“Damn dust, gets in the eyes and - “ Owen growled, then turned and walked back towards the farmstead, as an equines job was never done – and there were countless jobs that needed doing...

\*

Sgt McGovern, Sebastian and a few hired help from Stringybark gathered in a loose semi-circle about two miles out, as they went over the plans.

“Standard search and seizure - “ Spoke the Sargent, and as grins broke out amongst the anthropomorphic animals and humans, they all knew the unwritten meaning. “They're to be evicted – permanently. I'm certain nobody here needs to be reminded, on what means?”

“No sir,” Sebastian smirked, a cruel gleam in his eyes. “I for one, am particularly looking forwards to this, I've been wondering when we would move on them – and I for one – well, I've never - “

Sgt. McGovern glared at Sebastian, who visibly shrank back under the humans baleful stare.

“Yes, well, if they resist, and they probably will, I'm authorising deadly force. I want them dead – even if they submit...they're only – animals, and as such, not worth the bullets we'll use...”

Sebastian didn't rise to the Sargent's reference about him and his fellow anthropomorphic animal's as being addressed as animals, he was in it for the mindless cruelty and *other* pleasures that these forced evictions offered him. Sgt. McGovern knew what Sebastian had done in the past, but he overlooked such distasteful actions, as the end result was the same – dead farmstead holders – and a new property for Patterson's growing empire. That's all that mattered – was the end results – and they promised to be profitable results...so he indulged Sebastian and a few others in their vile depravities...

\*

Feredwyn wiped down her flour coated paws, before she stepped outside to fetch a new bucket of rain water, then she frowned and flicked her ears, hearing the galloping of hooves. At first she wasn't too concerned, but as they grew and become more distinct, a cold fear spread through her body, and she screamed for Owen, who come running, his heavy hoof falls thudding on the ground.

“What is - “Owen began, as he skidded to a halt, then his own hearing heard the cavalcade of rushing hooves. “Go inside Feredwyn...now!”

Feredwyn stood her ground, ignoring the Clydesdale orders, as they both glanced down the narrow road that led to their property and saw the rising dust. After a few moments, the dust was blown away, and they saw the unmistakable dark blue of the uniforms, the horses lathered with sweat, and first and foremost, Sargent McGovern who rode at the head of the wedge-like formation.

They reined in, forming a semi-circle before Owen and Feredwyn, who nervously looked from the Sargent to his lackeys, then back to the Sargent.

“Good day,” Owen grunted, as he swept his hat off his head and gave a short, formal bow. “What brings the Stringybark's *finest* -”

Astride their powerfully muscled horses, the police and their assistant's looked intimidating, as they remained silent, until Sebastian grinned and kicked his gelding in the sides, making it step forwards, the large, powerful horse snorting as he come within a hands-breadth of Owen, who stood his ground.

“By order, you are hereby to surrender all rights and privileges over this farmstead - “ Sgt. McGovern began.

“I beg your pardon?” Feredwyn snapped, her eyes narrowing as she stepped forwards. “What right do you - “

“Stand off!” Sebastian snarled, as he glared down at the Doe, who merely glared back at him, her anger rising exponentially.

“I do not have to explain *anything* to the likes of your kind!” Sgt. McGovern growled, as he rested a hand on his pistol in its holster. “I have here written orders, for your forced eviction from this property!”

“Really?” Owen snorted, as he crossed his arms and stared balefully at the Sargent. “Where? I do not see no orders, signed or otherwise and - “

A deafening crack of a gunshot sounded, and Owen blinked, before he reached up and touched his chest, fingers coming away slick with blood, as he stared uncomprehendingly at them, before he frowned in confusion and shock. Feredwyn screamed, a primal, blood chilling squeal of anger, fear and shock, as she ran to Owen's side, then watched as he crumpled to his knees, still staring at the blood on his paws.

Sgt. McGovern spun about in his saddle, glaring at the Fox who sat astride his horse, a grin on the Vulpine face, which was instantly wiped away as the Sargent in one swift movement, un-holstered his own pistol and then the shot rang out and the Vulpine gurgled and toppled to the ground, his convulsions short before his lifeless body stopped twitching. With a snort, he turned the pistol on Feredwyn, pointing it right between her eyes, but Feredwyn ignored it, as she clutched Owen tight to her chest, as he coughed and choked.

“We could have done this the easy way - “ Sgt. McGovern laughed contemptuously. “Now...we're going to do it the *real* easy way...”

“FUCK YOU!” Feredwyn screamed, as she released Owen and turned about, a look of animal ferocity in her eyes, so consumed with hatred and grief, she become irrational.

“Fuck me?” Sgt .McGovern snorted. “I'd never let one of *you* touch me...let alone do *that*!”

With a gesture, Sgt. McGovern grinned as Feredwyn shrieked, as a rope was thrown over her head then snagged tight and she was cruelly pulled backwards until she landed with a thud on the ground, on her back, clawing at the rope that was strangling her. Sebastian cackled, as he clucked at his gelding, pulling the rope tighter and dragging Feredwyn backwards. With another gesture, he ordered his men to dismount and they un-holstered their rifles and pistols and began searching the farmstead.

Sebastian watched with amusement as Feredwyn gasped and clawed at the rope, but every time she tried to stand, he'd back his horse up and pull her onto her back again. As she struggled and gasped for breath, others watched, and the Sargent looked down at Owen, who, to everyone's surprise, rolled over on his belly, then his fingers splayed out and he coughed up blood, before staggering back to his shaking hooves and stood.

“It'll take – more than one bullet - “ Owen gurgled, as he wiped a paw across his mouth and stood swaying.



“If you say so - “ Sgt. McGovern grinned, then there were two loud cracks as he shot Owen twice, once in the thigh, and once in the belly.

Owen staggered and fell, screaming in agony, as Feredwyn continued to struggle, but her breath was being choked from her body and her struggles were growing weaker and weaker.

“I'm...not...” Owen wheezed, as by sheer force of will, he got to his knees and tried to stand, before he collapsed again and began pushing himself back up with his shaking paws.

“Oh, for fucks sake - “ Sgt. McGovern sighed, as he dismounted then walked over and stared down at Owen. “Will you just die already?”

Owen lifted his head defiantly, as he struggled to his knees, then the Sargent sighed in exasperation, before placing his pistol against Owen's sweat drenched forehead..and pulled the trigger... Owen's body was flung backwards, where it lay sprawled on the ground, and Sebastian cackled, watching Owen's cold blooded murder with a look of pleasure on his face.

“Hey boss!” Come a voice from inside the cottage. “We got a..urk!”

There was a crash of a body striking something, the tinkle of glassware and clatter of pans, before one of the humans come staggering out, clutching at his throat from which blood was pouring. He swayed, then fell just outside the doorway, dead before he hit the floor.

“You, and you!” Sgt. McGovern roared, gesturing to two others. “Get in there, and bring out that – *animal* – alive! I want him to hang for what he done...”

Two large, burly humans charged in, ignoring the corpse of their friend who lay sprawled on the ground, as Sebastian giggled in malicious glee as he dismounted and walked over to where Feredwyn lay, barely conscious. He sank his booted foot into her belly, eliciting a choking gasp, before he rolled her over and wrenched her paws behind her back and expertly tied them with a length of rope. More crashes and screams come from inside the cottage, before finally, silence fell and the two humans come out – one with deep slashes across his forearms – but between them they carried the barely conscious Clanton, whose muzzle and chest was streaked with blood. Sgt. McGovern's eyes widened, as he looked at the weak and emaciated kangaroo buck...but recognition didn't sink in with him.

“This little Joey, put up a hell of a fight!” One man snickered, then threw Clanton on the ground, where he lay and shuddered piteously. “Bill here got sliced up pretty good - “

“I'm going make him suffer - “ Snarled the man, who had been attacked.

“No, you're not - “ Sgt. McGovern growled, enforcing his will as he walked over, then gripped Clanton by the ears and cruelly pulled him up, making Clanton scream. “This one is going to the stockade – it's about time we had a hanging...”

Sebastian grinned, as he roughly pulled Feredwyn to her hooves, then leaned in close, and licked her trembling cheek. “You taste wonderful...”

Feredwyn shuddered, the tears streaking down her cheeks, as she glanced at Owen's lifeless body, then hung her head.

“What about the Doe, boss?” Sebastian snickered, then pulled Feredwyn's paws higher, making her kneel and scream in pain.

“Amuse...yourself - “ Sgt. McGovern snorted. “You've earned it, just – make sure she doesn't get away – or survive...”

With a malicious grin, Sebastian caressed Feredwyn's cheek with a paw, making her snuffle and shudder in revulsion. “Oh, this promises to be fun...”

“Rest of you!” Roared the Sargent. “Burn this place to the ground, all of it - and when you're done, we're returning to Stringybark...the celebratory drinks are on me!”

Cheers met this declaration, as Feredwyn wept in fear and trepidation as Sebastian twisted her paws again and force-marched her into the woods...for some pleasures of his own...

\*

Constable Kelsie crouched in the bushes, with a partially visible vision of the entire incident. She wept unashamedly, watching as Owen was murdered in cold blood, Clanton, who she recognised, was clapped in irons and thrown over the rump of a stallion, and then as Sebastian began force marching Feredwyn away, Kelsie's grief and horror turned to a white hot flame of rage and disgust. She watched as others set fire to the farmstead, and within moments flames were licking up through the rough shingles, the smoke rising into the sky – and they'd set off back to the township. As quietly as she could, Kelsie skirted around the burning farmhouse and she paused every so often, her paint ears twitching too and fro as she listened.

A high pitched cervine scream rang forth from the woods about a hundred yards away – then it was cut off and become a choking wail. Kelsie feared the worst and she began forcing her way through the bush, thought of care and stealth driven from her mind – as she un-holstered her pistol and her anger fuelled her convictions...

She froze in horror, as she watched Sebastian torturing Feredwyn – the weasel obviously pleased with what he was doing – and his attention was so fixated on what he was doing – he had no idea that Kelsie was staring wide eyed – less than fifty feet behind him.

“It feels good – doesn't it?” Sebastian murmured, as he pressed closer and Feredwyn shrieked again, before Sebastian smirked and his sharp teeth buried themselves into her throat, as he raped her.

Kelsie never thought, she just acted – and ran the distance between Sebastian and herself, before she gripped him from the nape and savagely pulled him backwards, throwing him into the ground where he hissed and began to stand, his muzzle streaked and a look of feral savagery on his face.

“I'm going to do to you...what I just did to - “ Sebastian hissed, as his eyes narrowed and he glared at her, then he froze and blinked.

Kelsie didn't blink – she stood her ground, ears flat against the back of her skull, nostrils flared...then she pulled the trigger five times at point blank range...

\*

Lachlan crouched as best he could, watching the farmstead, before he was sure it's residents

weren't home, before he crept quietly across to the main building. He carried a small Hessian sack, which he placed next to the front door. Just as he was about to leave, the door opened, and a young Kangaroo Doe stood there, her eyes wide in fear, her muzzle falling open as she stared at the strange, armour clad Palomino. Lachlan stood, then looked down at her – his muzzle giving her a look of compassion and gentleness, before he gestured at the sack.

“This is for you and your parents...” He whispered, then gently stroked her head, ruffling her ears. “Tell them – tell them - “

“Who...are you a bad man?” Asked the Doe, her eyes widening in confusion, bordering in fear.

“No,” Lachlan whispered, as he picked up the sack and gave it to the trembling little girl. “I'm not a bad horse – I'm...Ironclad...I'm a nice horse, now, put this somewhere safe, tell your mother and father...this is for them. Tell them – Ironclad is going to protect our kind...”

Holding the sack, the little Doe blinked, then she dropped it and clung to Ironclad, hugging him as best she could, before he gently made her let go, then winked at her.

“Thank you, Mr. Ironclad - “ She smiled, then picked up the sack and walked back inside, closing the door behind her.

Lachlan returned to his horse, giving her nose a gentle caress, to which she nuzzled his fingers.

“One good deed - “ Lachlan whispered to her. “Many more to come, I'm sure...”

Flicking her ears, the mare seemed disinterested, but her master seemed happy – so she merely nuzzled him again and obediently followed, as Lachlan moved on...fading like a ghost into the underbrush...

\*

Lachlan's mare paused, then she snorted and her ears flattened, forcing Lachlan to come to alert wakefulness. He had been walking along, leading his mare and lost in a world of his own imagining. Unmindful of the branches which slapped at him, the lantana that scrapped and fore at the exposed fur, and the usually joyful raucous of the kookaburra's, the mare dug her front hooves in and refused to move, her eyes starting to show the whites and nostrils flaring.

“Hey, come on – you're - “ Lachlan beseeched the mare, then his own nostrils caught the first faint whiff of wood smoke. “No...”

Lachlan moaned, then dropped the reins and tore through the bush, fear surging through his body in the flood of adrenaline which squirted into his veins.

“No...no...NO!” Lachlan shrieked, as he skidded and fell heavily, the thick chest plate crushing the breath from his lungs, leaving him gasping and coughing, clawing at the leaf litter and loam.

He dragged himself to his hooves, then staggered onward, as the smell of wood smoke grew more and more – then he lunged through a thicket of brambles, before falling to his knees, his ears sweeping back against his neck as he looked at the burning and gutted remains of Feredwyn's and Owen's farmstead. Stumbling through a thickening pall of smoke, Lachlan's eyes welled with tears, before he blinked and seen Owen laying on the ground – it was obvious – even at first glance, what had transpired, and Lachlan spun away and fell to his knees, before he vomited helplessly...

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When he finally regained his composure, he staggered over to the smouldering remains of the cottage, before he squatted as best he could in his armour, looking at the corpse of the human who lay half-charred in the doorway. Not recognising the corpse, Lachlan pulled a bandanna over his nostrils to cover the sickening sweet stench, as he looked about. Here and there were shell casings, and as he walked away from the cottage, he saw more blood spatters, narrow footed prints, and he began to wonder. Had Clanton perished in the fire? Had they taken him away...all the evidence in the churned up dirt sent conflicting thoughts through his mind. He respected Clanton, that respect almost a brotherly like love – but as he searched he became aware of one person who was missing...Feredwyn.

\*

Constable Kelsie rode back to Stringybark creek, but she did not return to the police stables, instead, she went home and tied her mare up to the rail at the back of her small cottage, before she walked inside and quietly closed the door behind her. Once safely inside, she began to tremble, then shake, before her emotions overwhelmed her and she slid down the wall, clutching her head in her paws and sobbing heart brokenly. Never had she suspected a fellow policeman of having such a violent, cruel streak – let alone an anthropomorphic person like herself! Oh, she knew Sebastian was...not right in the head, but he had only ever cruelly teased her and insinuated things – she had no idea he was a – *a* – her mind shied away, as she cried heart brokenly.

Unable to shake the images she had in her mind, Kelsie cried for hours, her body wracked with loathing and fear – knowing Sebastian would have carried out his threat – and done to her, what he had done to that innocent Doe... Again and again, fresh tears flowed down her muzzle, as long, clear strands of snot trickled from her nostrils and stained her uniform. Kelsie couldn't help herself – she had killed Sebastian in self defence – he was going to murder her and – once again, Kelsie's mind shied away from what vile depravities Sebastian would have wrought upon her.

For hours, she cried in great, heartbreaking sobs, before she regained enough self-control to drag herself over to the table, and her shaking paws gripped the bottle that sat on the table. Not caring, just wanting to stop the horrible replay of images and sensations – Kelsie fumbled the top of the bottle and clutched it between her paws, holding it up and gulping down the fiery liquor. It burned her tongue and throat, but she didn't care – she *couldn't* care – she just wanted to drink herself into oblivion...anything...to stop what her mind kept showing her again and again...

\*

Lachlan found the body of Sebastian, then his eyes turned to Feredwyn's lifeless corpse, tied with her paws behind the iron bark, her clothes having been torn from her body and thrown to one side – from the blood that had pooled around her feet, Lachlan didn't need a second thought to work out what had happened – nor see the wound in the Doe's finely furred throat...

“You fucking bastards...” Lachlan swore, his paws contracting into fists, as his eyes narrowed in rage and he shook uncontrollably. “How...how could you...”

He turned, then using his powerful leg muscles and hooves, he took out his rage, hurt and fear on the lifeless corpse of the Weasel – feeling with satisfaction the snap of bones and the sickening thud as he struck again and again and again – until at last, he dropped to his knees, then tore the heavy helm off and dropped it into the dirt. At last, he unsheathed his belt knife, then cut Feredwyn's body

free, holding it in his strong, muscular arms as he gently lay her down on the loamy soil, then knelt painfully beside her body, closing her eyes respectfully.

“I swear, may the God's of our people hear my prayer,” Lachlan whispered, his voice cracking with emotion, as he prayed for the first time in his life. “May they bear witness...to my oath I swear – I will avenge the murder of my mother, of Owen Blackmane – and of Feredwyn the Fawn! Their deaths shall not go unpunished! The guilty shall fear the wrath that I shall bring down upon them, I swear this for my life be forfeit, if I speak mistruth!”

With his paws at first, then using a shovel he found in the ruined blacksmiths forge, he dug two graves at the back of their blackened, ruined cottage. He laid both their corpses to rest, fashioning crude headstones, as he knelt on one knee before the freshly covered graves, his anger burning away and leaving him with a white hot coal of pure hatred, which he nurtured and fanned deep within him.

“No more,” Lachlan breathed, as he bowed his sweat streaked head. “No more, will I allow persecution and harm to befall our people – if I can do anything to help. I swear on your graves, no more shall I be called Lachlan – from now on – let the story go forth, for I am to be known as Ironclad...from this day until my last, may the God's grant your spirits rest – and may they solemnly bear witness to my vows...”

\*

A pretty faced wallaby doe, politely thanked the store-keep, before she struggled with the saddlebag she clutched in her paws, her long green skirt brushing against the dusty floor, the pale tip of her tail peeking from beneath the skirt as she walked carefully, balancing the heavy saddlebag so she wouldn't drop it. Outside, she paused and took a deep breath before stepping over the wooden verandah and down into the dusty street and worked on strapping the bag to the side of her Jenny, who brayed and nipped at her in ill-temper. Ignoring the Jenny's misbehaviour, which wasn't uncommon, the young Doe returned to the store and retrieved her second saddlebag. Once again thanking the store-keep, she walked back outside where she paused and put down the heavy sack, wiping a gloved paw over her forehead as she swallowed and her slender claws plucked at the high, tight fitting collar of her blouse that clung to her furred throat like a second fur. As she sighed and lifted up her skirts, stepping down off the verandah, two humans approached her, and she froze, her long ears twitching, before one smiled at her.

“Good morning Miss,” He said, as he stopped before her. “That seems awfully heavy for such a young lady...”

“It's fine, thank you - “ She timidly replied, keeping her gaze downcast as she brushed past them, an involuntary shiver rippling down her pelt, then affixed the other saddlebag, before gripping the jenny by the mane and clambering up onto the jenny's back and taking the reins.

“Hear the news?” One man said to the other, in a casual voice, exchanging glances with the other one, who winked – both knowing the Doe couldn't see their lecherous glances in her direction.

“Pardon?” Asked the Doe, as she blinked. “What news?”

“Highwaymen waylaid the stage the other day – killed the driver and the guard, stole the money due to be deposited into the bank...” One said, as he leaned back against the wall. “Sargent McGovern's posted up a thousand pound reward...I *do* hope a pretty young lady like yourself doesn't have to go far – sounds like the roads aren't safe any-more for good, law abiding people...”

Visibly distressed, the young Doe smoothed down her skirt, then shivered again as the thought of being waylaid lodged in her mind like a splinter. Her paws trembled as they held the reins, before she began to turn towards them, then turned her head back and lightly clucked at the jenny, who brayed loudly and began clopping off down the road. Exchanging glances, the two humans grinned at each other, one nodded and the other smirked, before they strode purposefully back along the board walk, before unhitching their horses and mounting, breaking into a quick canter and following the Doe.

Little did she realise, but she was being followed, and it wasn't until her left ear snapped back, that she heard the thundering hooves and she glanced over her shoulder, seeing the two humans a fair way off, but how they were cheering and riding their horses – they seemed to be in an awful hurry. Clucking at her Jenny, the Doe walked the jenny sideways, then resumes her attention on the roadway ahead. Thinking the two humans would pass her by, she trembled involuntarily, her instincts causing fear to flood her body – she knew the Sargent and others hated Anthropomorphic people – but these two seemed nice and...

Her revelry was shattered, as they loomed up beside her, one to her left and one to her right, then their larger horses fell into stride with her Jenny.

“Oh - “ Moaned the Doe, as she swallowed then glanced from one human to the other. “Hello again - “

They seemed innocent enough, but slowly and surely, they began to force her off the roadway and away from the potential witnesses.

“We told you it wasn't safe little girl - “ One smiled, but his eyes shone with a malevolence that betrayed his true thoughts.

“Indeed - “ Replied the other, as he reached out and snagged the Jenny's bridle, tearing it from the Doe's paws.

“What – what do you want from me?” Squealed the Pretty Faced Wallaby Doe. “I don't have any money on me - “

“What do we want?” One man asked the other, as he stepped his stallion sideways, causing the Jenny to bray in fear.

“Oh, I can't imagine what we...want...little one - “ His friend smirked, then leered at the Wallaby, whose ears flattened as she realised what they meant.

“No...please...I - “

She leapt as best she could from her Jenny, who snorted and brayed, before one of the men gripped her by the blouse collar, tearing the fine lace-work from her throat as she squealed and fled into the surrounding bushes.

“After you..” Laughed the first man, as he dismounted, then made a mocking bow to his companion.

“Why thank you, don't mind if I do!” His friend replied, as he sneered and they left their horses and the bewildered Jenny, then took off into the bush, yelling, cheering and creating a racket that sent the wildlife scattering and the birds screeching and calling.

Frightened, alone and knowing she was in terrible danger, the Doe fled this way then that, her fear driving her instinctually, before her long thin feet snagged on a tree root and she collided heavily with the tree, collapsing onto her back where she lay momentarily stunned and the breath knocked out of her.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are little one!” One called, his voice heavy with menace and sarcasm.

“We won't hurt you little Doe...you'll like us – it'll be fun, you'll see...let some real men, show you what a Buck can not...”

Struggling back to her foot paws, the Doe shook her head and lightly brushed her leathery paw pads against her nostrils then glanced down at the blood spattered on them. Her muzzle felt like she had been kicked by her Jenny, but this was nothing compared to the instinctual fear and gripped her mind. As she went to lift her skirts, the bushes rustled and first one man stepped out, then the other. She twisted about, pressing her back against the tree, as the tears flowed down her cheeks and she instinctively held her small, ineffective paws up, the sharp claws curled forwards.

“Isn't that cute...she looks like a feral dressed in a blouse and skirt – put those little paws down little girl...or I'll *make* you...” One growled, as he stepped closer.

Unwillingly, her fear broke the paralysis that seized her, and she wailed and tried to run, but one man tripped her and sent her sprawling on her belly, then for good measure, the other one kicked at her slender furred legs, preventing her from rising.

“Look at that!” One snickered. “She's begging for it and - “

A deafening thunder clap split the air, before the man clutched at his throat and his eyes widened, blood spurting and he fell backwards, dead before he hit the ground. From out of the undergrowth, Ironclad stepped into view, the rifle he held in both paws and tucked tight against his shoulder – his helm-less head reflecting the dappled light and his golden coat and silvery mane gleaming.

“Stand up - “ Ironclad snarled, his rifle trained on the human.

Obediently, the man rose, flicking a glance at his companion who gurgled, trembled, then his hands fell to his sides, the blood soaking into the soft loam, before Ironclad cocked the rifle and snapped the man's eyes back to him.

“Good lad - “ Ironclad spoke, as he walked closer, forcing the human backwards, then he crouched on one knee and gently helped the sobbing wallaby to her foot paws.

“I know what you were going to do to her - “ Ironclad snarled, as he gently moved the wallaby behind him. “I've half a mind to cut you down here and now – *except* – I need you...”

“What...whatever you want, its not what you were - “ Stammered the man, then a dark stain appeared on his breeches, as he wet himself from fear.

“*Its exactly what it looked like!*” Come the whip-like snap of Ironclads voice, his eyes narrowing, and if it was at all possible, his white blaze seeming glowing brighter with his rage. “If I didn't need you to deliver a message to your master – I'd – well, you'd never be able to do such to any woman again...I assure you...”

“Who...who are - “ Sniffled the Doe, as she used the wrists of her blouse to wipe at her muzzle.

“I’m – Ironclad, Bushranger, but - “ Ironclad told her, as he handed her his bandanna, to use as a handkerchief. “I’m not like any bushranger you’ve ever met...I’m sworn to protect the innocent – like you little miss...now, you go straight home! I’ve – got a message to deliver – and this human will be my messenger...”

Torn between her fear, and Ironclad’s large, armoured and imposing stature, the doe hesitated, before she fled and Ironclad turned his full rage and apathy on the human, advancing until the rifle barrel was pressed up under the human’s chin – forcing him to stand on tiptoes.

“Heed this warning – and pass it on to your mother – from this day forth, any and all of my people – be they kangaroo, wallaby, deer – *any* – anthropomorphic person – is threatened or harmed by a human – out of cruelty, malice or just because we are viewed as animals... I will make it my life work to hunt down the perpetrator – and what I will do with him - “ Ironclad whispered, his voice heavy with repressed anger. “Now...go – tell your master what I done here – think yourself fortunate, as it was only my compassion – that saved you from a fate like – him...”

Ironclad gestured at the corpse of the wood be rapist, then sneered and waved his rifle at the trembling, ashen faced man he held prisoner.

“Go...*now*!”

\*

Constable Kelsie woke the next morning, then tried to drag her mind out of what felt like the deepest layers of hell as it pounded like the legions of hell were rallying for war. With a weak gurgle, she pressed a paw to her head, as the room spun around, as she pushed herself up off the wooden floor, then even that effort made her nauseous and she collapsed on to the floor again.

“Urrgh - “ Constable Kelsie gurgled, her tongue feeling thickly furred and her head aching.

A sudden hammering at her door felt like the crash of thunder in her ears, making her squeal in agony, as she clutched her paws to her ears and whimpered.

“Constable – are you in there?” Come a frantic, panicked feminine voice.

Coughing and retching, Constable Kelsie dragged herself to the table, then clung to it as a drowning person might a piece of driftwood, as she panted, even this simple movement, leaving her feeling like she had run to Melbourne.

“Constable?” Come the voice again, then the hinges creaked as her cabin door was opened cautiously, a shadow falling over the floorboards.

“Here...” Constable Kelsie moaned piteously, as her hooflets scraped against the table leg as she pulled herself upwards, then clinging to the edge of the table, she stood on shaking hooves and pressed a paw to her forehead.

“Constable, I - “ Spoke the young Whitetail, before she blinked and looked around the corner of the door, feeling guilty and frightened, then seen Kelsie standing and swaying, almost as if she were



drugged.

Kelsie coughed and winced, then nodded and gestured feebly, before she slithered into the single wooden chair which creaked under her weight, making her squeeze her eyes tight and shudder.

“Constable...are you alright?” Asked the Doe, as she timidly crept closer. “Do you need me to go get the Doctor?”

“Water...please - “ Come the feeble response.

Her hooves sounding like a herd of wild horses on the wooden boards, the filly whimpered, before a bowl of cold water was pressed into her shaking paws. Barely able to hold it to her lips, the Doe assisted her and helped Kelsie drink some of the water, before setting the bowl down.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Inquired the Doe, her eyes widening. “You look deathly sick...I can go get the Doctor, he's not too far away and - “

“I'm...fine, thank you - “ Kelsie murmured, as she moaned and buried her head in her paws.

“You don't smell fine – forgive me for saying so!” Snorted the Doe, as she delicately held a paw to her nostrils.

Kelsie had been oblivious, then as her senses cleared a little, she shuddered and wrinkled her own nostrils, smelling the scent of the spilled alcohol and her sweaty uniform and body beneath it.

“I need a bath...” Kelsie muttered, as she rose, her knees trembling.

Gently, the Doe slipped her hands under Kelsie and helped her to stand, before nodding and guiding the weak kneed and very hungover Filly towards the small room in her one bedroom cottage, where Kelsie paused, as her quivering fingers fumbled with the buttons on her uniform.

“Angelica, could you please - “ Kelsie blushed, her ears flattening.

Happily, the Doe turned Kelsie around, then undid the tight buttons and eased the heavy uniform off, then held it at arms length, her muzzle curling as her sensitive nostrils tried to block the stink of sweat, alcohol and other strong scents. Dressed in her undergarments, Kelsie paused, then looked at Angelica, who blushed and turned away, then sat at the table, whilst Kelsie began bathing in cold water, using rough soap to clean her fur.

“You wanted me?” Kelsie mumbled, as she shivered in the cold water, scrubbing at her mane.

“Yes, I – there's a problem - “ Angelica sighed. “A young Vixen, about six years old, was found on the outskirts of town. I – don't know where to take her, she's with my daughter now, but the poor thing was crying and so frightened she said that...bad men...had murdered her family and - “

With a shocked gasp, Kelsie lashed out verbally, making Angelica squeal in fright.

“Don't EVER repeat that – ever...” Kelsie growled.

“I'm - “ Angelica whispered fearfully.

“Angelica – I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap your head off - “ Kelsie shuddered and stepped from

the shower, turning the tap off. “I...you promise you'll never speak a word of what I am about to tell you?”

Angelica settled her nerves, then she frowned and looked at the filly, as if she thought Kelsie was mad.

“It's about...what happened - “ Kelsie stammered, then her own emotions overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears.

Without thinking, Angelica leapt from where she was sitting, then wrapped her arms around the filly's back and held her, hearing the heart breaking sobs from Kelsie.

“Promise me!” Kelsie sobbed. “Your life, the life of your daughter, and that vixen child...depend on your silence!”

“I...promise, I swear it...” Angelica murmured, as she frowned and cuddled the crying Filly.

For nearly fifteen minutes, Kelsie struggled with her emotions, until she finally began to talk...and tell Angelica exactly what she had seen....

\*

Sgt. McGovern flew into a rage, the likes had never been seen, as he gripped the shaking man by the collar then slammed him back against the wall of the police station, hard enough to knock the air from his lungs and leave him gasping.

“HOW did this happen? Where, when? Tell me you miserable wretch, or I'll make you wish that stallion killed BOTH of you!”

Gasping and panting, the man told the Sargent everything he could remember, but he left out the fact he and his companion were going to rape and murder the young Pretty Faced Wallaby – not that he thought, the Sargent would have cared...

“We need to form a militia, hunt this damn murderous bastard and bring him back to be hung...or just kill him, I don't care which! How dare he start murdering innocents, I bet he was responsible for the murders of the driver and guard on the stage...” Sgt. McGovern snarled, as he began pacing back and forth. “I'd love to see him hanging from the gallows and...”

Whilst the Sargent ranted, the man who had delivered Ironclad's warning, made to leave the police station.

“YOU!” Sgt. McGovern snarled. “Find that Filly whore, I don't care if you got to drag her here by her tail! Go round up the other men, you hear me? Everyone of my people...we're going to flush this stallion out, and by God, we'll make him pay for his crimes...”

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Ironclad stood beside his mare, looking down at the sobbing Pretty Faced Wallaby Doe, who dropped to her knees and cried helplessly, the poor girl was so stressed and sickened, having witnessed Ironclad murder the human, yet he stood resolute before her, the rifle slung over his shoulder in its harness, his hands by his sides and his body language held neutrally, so as not to frighten this poor girl anymore than she already was.

“Why did you...he - “ She stammered, her voice wracked with sobs and raw unbridled emotion.

“He was going to rape you – they both were,” Ironclad growled, his hatred for what they were about to do, colouring his voice and making it sound harsher than he meant.

“No, they just wanted too - “ She wept, then rose and beat her fists against his armoured chest, until her anger drained away, then Ironclad gently wrapped his arms around her and held her close, letting her cry all over again.

“Trust me...” Ironclad whispered, his voice more soothing and gentle, as he comforted her. “I know these types of men...they'd have...done unspeakable things to you, hurt you terribly, then killed you and left you here...what would your parents have done? What would your friends say, when one day, you never came back to Stringybark? Think lass, how would YOU feel, being helpless, crying out in pain and fear and...”

Fresh tears welled up within her, and he sighed quietly, then crouched down and picked her up, holding her close as he walked away, his mare obediently following. He found her donkey, who bared her teeth at him and flattened her ears, but he ignored that and set the young Wallaby down and handed her a fresh bandanna to dry her tears and nose. Whilst she was distracted, he slipped a small wad of money from his saddlebag, then put it in hers, all before she seen him do it.

“Go on, you're safe now – I promise you, they'll never hurt you again, because as I told the one I let go, if I ever get a hint – they're trying to hurt my people...I'll hunt them down and make them suffer. For too long, the Anthropomorphic people of Stringybark Creek have suffered under the tyrannical yoke of that Sargent! Well, now there's a new Bushranger in the forests! Let them come, let them try to find me, whilst I stalk them and show them the errors of their ways, they're leaving our kind alone – and for that, I am willing to pay any price, even, if it costs me my life, now, little doe...go home, I'm sure your parents are worried about you, dry those pretty eyes and never, ever, be afraid again...because I swear, I'll be watching, and protecting our people...” Ironclad told her, then gently lifted her up and sat her astride her cantankerous Jenny.

“Thank...you...” She sniffed, then reached out and placed her small paw on his, giving a gentle squeeze.

“You're welcome, you're safe...I swear it...” Ironclad smiled, as he lightly stroked her cheek with the back of his paw.

With that, he took the reigns of his mare, then disappeared back into the bush-land, as she Doe sniffled, dried her eyes, then gently clucked at her Jenny and rode off home.

\*

Angelica sat stunned, her muzzle hanging open, as Constable Kelsie finished her tale, telling Angelica how she had murdered Sebastian in self-defence, as he was going to turn on her, rape her and probably murder her the same way he had Feredwyn.

“I think I'm going to be sick - “ Angelica moaned softly. “I had no idea - “

“Sgt. McGovern is behind it...I know it, Sebastian was many things...cruel, violent...but he'd never do such a thing on his own accord. I know he was also at the murder of that Palomino mare...I can't prove anything, as nothing was logged... How many of our people just...supposedly...left? How

many do you really think, were murdered in cold blood, their lands taken for whatever reason – and buried – if they're lucky – in unmarked graves?” Constable Kelsie snarled, as she beat her left paw against the table with a sickening smack. “I am *certain* he is behind it...but he...he couldn't do it alone, who is pulling his strings? Why? What do they want? Do they want the anthropomorphic people to leave? Why? There are so many questions...and I do not have the answers!”

“Sargent McGovern - “ Angelica whispered, as she blinked, then suddenly things started to make a lot more sense. “I know he hates and despises our people, but – he *is* the lawmaker! How dare we even think of going against him? He could get the soldiers down on us in weeks...we'd all be in the stockade, or worse!”

“I know he's responsible...” Constable Kelsie sighed, as she began pacing, then her ear flicked and she held up a paw, mere seconds before there come a heavy knocking on the door to her cottage.

“Constable Kelsie, Sgt, McGovern wants you, front and centre!” Come a stern voice, that made Kelsie wince and rub her head.

“Fuck off!” Kelsie snarled back. “If you don't have the decency to ask nicely, tell your master, don't send his dog, to do what he wouldn't do himself!”

Angelica stared, her muzzle falling open again, before she stifled her giggles.

“How dare you speak to me in such a tone!” Come the enraged voice.

“How dare *you* Sir!” Constable Kelsie shot back, her fists clenching, as she started towards the door, but Angelica grabbed her and shook her head violently. “Tell him I will be there when it is my shift, not before – I am not his personal servant, to order around! I don't care if he's the Sargent, and I'm only a Constable...”

“Oh, he's going to love that...” Angelica whispered, her voice faint, right beside Constable Kelsie's ear.

Kelsie stood, shaking with anger and hatred, before she slowly unclenched her paws and shuddered, before walking to the crude trunk in which she kept her clean uniforms, then pulled one out and started dressing.

“You remember Constable Clanton?” Kelsie asked Angelica.

“Wasn't he that Kangaroo who - “ Angelica began, then her words trailed off. “I heard he quit the Police force...”

“No,” Kelsie sighed, as she began buttoning the heavy tunic, then strapped her belt on and double checked her holster. “He didn't...he is being held in the Stockade, I saw him – he's sick, half-starved and a shadow of his former self...I didn't let on, that I knew him, when he was dragged in in irons – rumour has it, he is to be executed within the week, but the way he looked? He won't last two days in the stockade...I'm going to go see the Doctor, see if he can't at least make Clanton's last days – well, if he can't, I won't allow the Sargent the satisfaction of hanging an innocent Kangaroo – on some fabricated charges of desertion and others! I've seen the log, I don't believe a word of it, Clanton is a kind, gentle soul – he'd never do what he's charged with, it's all lies – but I don't know how I can exonerate him, when the Sargent will undoubtedly, bring in a Magistrate in the employ, of whoever is pulling the Sargent's strings, to put it bluntly – it'll be a Kangaroo Court...”

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Kelsie carried the tray in her paws, as she set it aside, then unlocked the door to the stockade cell, the Doctor looking at her, then at the thin, coughing Kangaroo who was chained with restraints around his ankles and wrists, then a thick iron collar around his neck. With a disgusted snort, the Doctor pushed past Kelsie, then walked over to where Clanton sprawled, then knelt down and gently lifted Clanton's head and looked into his eyes.

“Dear God,” Grunted the Doctor, as he felt along Clanton's throat, then held his fingers there, counting the heartbeats, before he snapped open his leather case and pulled out a stethoscope and placed it against Clanton's naked chest. “Please, breathe as best as you can, slow, steady...”

Clanton dissolved into a gasping, coughing fit and the Doctor sighed and shook his head. “This is deplorable, this poor creature has pneumonia, I'm sure of it – how can he be kept in such cold, dismal environs?”

“Doctor...” Constable Kelsie sighed. “Its not up to me, sir, Sargent McGovern has the authority and the say...Clanton here - a Constable – has been charged with desertion, dereliction of duty and other charges – I assure you, they're all false...”

Again Clanton coughed, and he imploringly looked at Kelsie, who brushed past the Doctor and set the tray down, but Clanton, in his weakened state, couldn't feed himself, so Kelsie assisted as the Doctor grew increasingly angry.

“Look at this!” He snarled, as he gently pulled Clanton forwards, then pinched up the scruff of Clanton's neck, watching the fur and skin refusing to return to its normal position. “Clanton here, is severely dehydrated, not to mention what other illnesses he has...this is inhumane!”

“May I speak off the record, Doctor?” Kelsie asked, as she gave Clanton a sip of lukewarm tea.

“Of course!” Answered the Doctor, as he looked down at Clanton, who coughed and shivered. “Are these restraints really necessary? This poor Kangaroo, couldn't fight off a cold...”

Kelsie nodded, and quickly unlocked the restraints, ,at least temporarily. “Doctor, off the record – something must be done about the Sargent...he is responsible for all of this – it's no secret, he hates our people - “

Kelsie gestured at Clanton and herself. “How many of my kind, have come to you with excuses for broken bones, cuts and abrasions, injuries which are not consistent with – *accidents* - “

Pausing, the Doctor thought for a moment, then a slow flush crept up his cheeks.

“You *knew*...didn't you...” Constable Kelsie growled, her fingers slowly curling into fists.

“Of course I knew – I've patched up your people for over fifty years, in this Godless, lawless township! I know precisely what the Sargent has done to your people...yet what can we do about it? If we rose up against him...he could call the soldiers in, we'd all be hung as traitors and dissidents, for going against the King's rightfully elected Police! It'd be suicide at best – or outright massacre? Do you realise how many men that bastard has in his pocket? How many secret spies and snitches, who, for any reason, will run to him and implicate one of your kind – who may be solely innocent – just for a few pieces of silver? Hell, half of them would probably turn one of you in, just because he would enjoy watching your people suffer! No, this has to stop...but what can I do? What can any

of us do?” Railed the Doctor, as he turned on Kelsie, his face flushed with his anger and resentment, as he advanced, she backed away, eyes widening in fright at his usual meek, gentle demeanour turning dark and aggressive, this whole new side of him, making Kelsie backpedal until she was pressed against the wall. “So don't lecture me on things I already know, *Constable!*”

“I...had no idea - “ Kelsie stammered, feeling thoroughly chastised. “Doctor, I'm so sorry, I misunderstood...”

“I'm sorry, Constable Kelsie,” He smiled, assuming that kind, gentle demeanour again, turning professional. “I shouldn't have snapped at you like that, it was – unprofessional – of me, please accept my apologies.”

Kelsie leaned against the wall, overcome by this totally unforeseen and unexpected side of the Doctor, as he turned to Clanton, then did various examinations, before he mixed a powder into a cup, then poured it into a bowl.

“Kelsie, come hold his head, he's not going to want to drink this...but it'll help – ease some of his pain anyway”

Kelsie clopped over, then knelt down, placing her paw on Clanton's shoulder. “I'm sorry Clanton, I know this isn't going to feel good – but I promise you, we're doing all we can to help...”

Clanton winced, as he felt Kelsie's strong paws grip him, one under the chin, the other on the bridge of his muzzle and she opened his mouth, as the Doctor began pouring the bitter liquid into Clanton's muzzle, making Clanton choke and gasp.

“Hold his muzzle, quickly!” Spoke the Doctor, as he began rubbing Clanton's throat, Clanton gagging on the bitter medicine, trying to throw up.

Kelsie clamped Clanton's muzzle shut, as the doctor tilted Clanton's head back and continued rubbing, until he felt Clanton convulse and swallow, before he ordered Kelsie to let him go.

“I'm sorry Clanton, I know that doesn't taste at all nice – but it will help you, now, finish your meal, I'll be back in a few hours to give you more medicine.”

Clanton's throat trembled, as he swallowed again and again, but the baleful glare he shot at the Doctor showed his emotional landscape, at the thought of having to endure repeated medications.

“I know you won't like it, I don't like having to do it, but if you don't, you'll only get far worse...and die a slow, horrible death. Trust me, better a little discomfort and pain now – than the alternative...”

“I'm going to die anyway - “ Clanton gasped, as he rubbed at his throat with his leathery paw pads.

Kelsie sniffled and hung her head. “Sargent McGovern has ordered Clanton to die in five days time...”

Kelsie flicked her ears, as a loud shouting, cheering and clapping come faintly through the thick walls of the stockade.

“Doctor, excuse me - “ Constable Kelsie muttered, as she doffed her hat and strode outside, the bright sunlight momentarily blinding her.

“What's going on?” Kelsie snapped at a running human, who cheered and the look of excitement on his face only added to her confusion.

“We got the murdering bastard! - “ Come the breathless response. “They caught him, he's going to hang!”

Kelsie frowned, then she trotted after the man, as the sounds of cheering, shouts of anger and blood-lust rang out. She found the group, primarily human, standing in a large mob, some were shouting vile comments, others were throwing stones, sticks, vegetables, anything they had at hand. Kelsie swore, then began pushing her way through then rioting crowds, being jostled and shoved, as the crescendo of violent anger began to peak.

Finally, she made her way to the front of the crowd, then looked down pitifully at the young Palomino Colt, who had been driven to his knees and hands, and as he crouched in the dust, Kelsie could see the tears that streaked down his muzzle, then he screamed as a whip sliced cruelly across his golden shoulders, flaying open the fur and flesh, blood spraying and the crowd cheering cruelly.

“Hang that fucking bastard!” Come one angry shout.

“Make him suffer – let him suffocate to death!” Come another – this was met with cheers and applause.

“I'm innocent!” Wailed the Colt, as he tried to rise, then he shrieked as the whip lashed him again, tearing at his golden coat.

Kelsie snarled, then un-holstered her pistol, as she strode menacingly towards the man who held the whip, then as he raised it, she-gripped his wrist and flicked her own – there was a sickening snap and he screamed, the whip dropping from his hand as he screamed, as Kelsie tightened her grip, forcing him to his knees.

“You broke my fucking arm!” Shrieked the man, as tears flooded from his eyes, as he stared incredulously up at Kelsie, who glared at him.

“I'd do worse...” Kelsie screamed, as she bent the broken wrist backwards, making the human scream until his voice broke. “How *dare* you! What gave you the right to so cruelly treat another person like this? What evidence did you have? What right do any of you have, to take the law into your own hands like this? We are not - “

One man, braver than the rest, charged at Kelsie, and he was brought up short, as she levelled her pistol at his forehead and cocked it.

“Stand away!” Kelsie snarled, her ears slicking back against her neck. “I won't tolerate cruelty and violence against a prisoner! Nothing, *nothing*, gives you the right to act as a mob and take the King's justice into your own hands! We have courts and laws to protect lives – yours, mine, everyone's! This isn't right and you know it...now, *step away!*”

“Stand down Constable, before I *put* you down!” Come a vicious snarl.

As one, the crowd parted, as Sgt. McGovern stamped through them, his face flushed with anger and hatred, as he stared at her.

“With all due respect, Sargent,” Kelsie spoke, loudly and iron in her voice. “You should know

better than I, the laws we swore to uphold! What evidence is there against this equine? Who dares stand as accuser, that this is the horse who shot that man dead?"

"I won't tell you again, *Constable...*" Growled the Sargent, as he stepped up to her, the barrel of her pistol pointed against his chest, less than a inch away.

Kelsie's resolve faltered, and she dropped the pistol back into the holster, and stepped down, hanging her head.

"You can't do this!" Kelsie wailed, turning to the crowd, looking for someone to back her against the Sargent, but all she saw was looks of hatred and blood-lust.

"Kill that colt, make him dance!" Come a voice, then another, then it become a chant, as the blood-lust of the crowd grew.

"This is wrong!" Kelsie shrieked at the top of her lungs. "He is one of us, until proven guilty, he has the same rights as any of you!"

Jeers and offensive shouts rang out, as Kelsie stamped her hoof and shrieked at them, before she staggered as a fist sized rock bounced off the back of her head, and staggered her, then she rose on shaking knees, grasping for her pistol, but another rock, then another, and she shrieked and fled, her resolve shattered, as the crowd cheered and turned on the colt, who screamed in fright and pain as they seized him, irons were clasped around his wrists and ankles.

"I'm innocent, I swear it!" Wailed the Colt, as he struggled, but the crush of the hate filled humans prevented him from escaping.

"You're going to hang!" One shouted.

"He's a murderer, make him suffer!" Others called.

Force marched, the crying, hysterical Colt dug his hooves in, as they approached the gallows, but forceful hands dragged him as he fought and wept, then the noose was thrown over his head and tightened around his neck.

"This is better than you deserve..." Snarled Sgt. McGovern, as he grinned maliciously, then drive his fist into the Colt's stomach, making him gasp and drop to his knees, the noose tightening around his throat.

Stepping back, the Sargent watched, the look of cruelty and sexual arousal evident in his eyes, as he watched the Colt start to stand, before the Sargent dropped his hand, and the trap door snapped open and the Colt fell...then some in the crowd started cheering, then as the Colt bucked and strangled, the cheers soon turned to gasps, then cries and tears, as they watched the Colt strangling – the Sargent intentionally adjusting the noose – for this very purpose...

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It wasn't quick, it wasn't merciful...and as the screams, tears and gagging noises from the crowd attested, it wasn't what some of them wanted... Some reeled away, vomiting and gagging, others wept unashamedly and some stood, stricken deaf, blind and dumb, by the murder – for that is what it was – of the innocent young Colt who took nearly ten minutes to finally stop twitching and convulsing.



In ones and twos, many of the crowd left, sickened and horrified – yet those same people, had been amongst the rage, hatred infused mob that had watched this colt whipped and shamed publicly. Many of them had never seen this side of the Sargent – him standing there, a cruel, amused expression on his face, as he watched with vile pleasure as the colt strangled at the end of the hangman's rope.

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That night, after sundown, a group of anthropomorphic people cut down the colt, washed his body and paid the funeral director for a casket, before they lit torches and solemnly walked behind the donkey drawn cart, that carried the casket deep into the woods, where they buried the colt on the banks of a waterfall, an elderly Stag, a priest of their religion, delivered a short, sorrowful eulogy, whilst the gathered animals listened on – some wept openly – some, their paws clenched in fists of rage and grief – fought their urges, muzzles wrinkling back in hatred.

“It's not right!” Snarled a Stallion, as he stepped forwards, then the Stag moved away, letting the Stallion give voice to what they all felt.

They all suddenly gasped, as a large, iron clad figure stepped from the woods, the torches reflecting off his golden coat and silvery mane as he ignored them, then walked to the edge of the freshly dug grave and bowed his head.

“You should not have died, for my sake...” Ironclad whispered.

“You!” Shrieked a Kangaroo Doe, as she stepped forwards. “You brought this down on him!”

Ironclad's ears slicked back, as he turned and held his head down, the tears sliding down his muzzle.

“I did not pull the rope, that killed him - “ Ironclad whispered, as he stood like a statue, the freshening breeze swishing his mane and tale. “He did not need to die, that is certain! I swore an oath – I failed to live up to that oath, but I promise – his death – no-one's death – of our people – is on my paws! I never once raised a paw against any of our kind! I know the cruelty of that human – I've seen it and felt it first hand!”

“What do you know of it?” Snarled a Wallaby, as he stepped forwards, then walked up to Ironclad, who looked down at him, then crouched so his nose almost touched that of the enraged Wallaby.

“Sargent McGovern murdered my mother...hung her, just the way he hung that innocent Colt...” Ironclad spoke, his voice quiet, but the steel in it unmistakable, before he rose. “I swear, those responsible, will be dealt with - “

“No court will convict any of them!” One shouted.

“They will side with their own kind!” Others wailed.

Holding up a paw, Ironclad's imposing posture and size brought silence down like a hammer.

“I never said,” He spoke, his voice dripping with menace. “They would face trial...no, they will not face justice..for what justice did they show that colt? *NONE!* I will bestow upon them the justice deserving of their crimes...but I am not a murderer – I will *not* torture them for my own pleasures –

they will die, of that I promise, it will be quick – but they *will* know, at whose hands they met their end...now, go, keep this to yourselves. Identify those humans who caught and hurt that Colt – I want their descriptions – I can't read, so don't write them down – if you must, come here and tell me in person! Let the word go forth amongst our people – but *only* – those we trust...I want their faces detailed to me, I want their names, their locations of where they live – everything...for justice will be brought, but not the humans brand of justice...no...they think themselves protected and safe? I'll bring down a vengeance such as the very God's themselves shall fear, on this, I give my word..."

\*

When the first human turned up, a single gunshot to the back of his head, his hands bound with crude leather bindings, tensions grew in Stringybark Creek. Clanton's execution was postponed, as more and more, other dead humans began to be found – all bound – all shot once through the back of the head...

\*

Days turned to weeks, and slowly but surely, the number of the humans who had captured, imprisoned and tortured the colt reached Ironclad's ears – and as promised – he delivered the justice so deserving upon them...some wept and begged, some spat in his face and some tried to run...but Ironclad's cold, emotionless face betrayed nothing, as he shot each and every one of them dead – leaving their corpses for the scavengers – some were found, and so the tale of the murderous bushranger grew and spread...

\*

Constable Kelsie crept through the brush, her ears twitching too and fro, the pistol clutched in her paw as she shivered, hearing the sounds of others as they swore and blundered through the bush, trying to hunt the Bushranger. A bounty of five thousand pounds was posted on his head – alive – or dead. Every man was out searching the bush – some with no more bush-craft experience than knowing it existed, subsequently, getting lost, bitten by venomous snakes, or just vanishing – some with more experience, and even one or two famed bounty hunters – who sought the golden furred palomino, intending to claim the reward.

As she rounded a thicket, a snap of a twig alerted her to danger, and she squealed as a frightened feral kangaroo burst from the underbrush, skidded and fled the other way. Her heart in her throat, Kelsie shuddered and took another step, before she gasped and froze, the pistol falling from her nerveless furred fingers as she felt the icy cold barrel of a rifle pressed to the back of her head. Instinctively, she lifted her paws up over her head, as she felt a hot, moist breath wash over her neck and she began shaking in terror.

"I'm not a murdering horse - " Come the cold voice behind her. "I do not kill in cold blood, unless those are deserving of it..."

Constable Kelsie thought about screaming for help, but the rifle was pushed further against the back of her head and the idea fled as quickly as it'd come.

"Crouch down, pick up that pistol with two fingers...then hand it by the barrel and pass it back to me..." Come the voice, the icy tone of it sending chills up Kelsie's spine.

Obediently, she done as instructed, and the unseen assailant took the pistol, then holstered it.

"Good, you're obedient...very good - " It spoke.

“You're...him...” Kelsie whispered, eyes wide in terror. “Please don't kill me - “

“You're...” Come the reply, the warmth of the breath ruffling the fine fur of her back-swept ears. “An innocent...yes, you're a Police Horse...but you're innocent, I never harm an innocent – ever – regardless of what you have heard...”

Kelsie wept unashamedly, as she wet herself from fear, the warm urine trickling down her legs and puddling between her hooves. With a snort, the equine who held the rifle on her gasped as he inhaled the scent, then he reached out and laid a golden paw on her left shoulder, then turned her about, as he lowered the rifle.

Kelsie's eyes widened further, showing the white's of the sclera, as her heart thundered in her chest as she found herself nose to chest with Ironclad, the cold iron of his breastplate chilling her sensitive nose. He gently lifted her head, so she was looking into his eyes, then he snorted through his nostrils and she gasped, inhaling his strong musky scent, then involuntarily, she breathed through her own – sharing breath with him – and in that second, a bond of trust was formed between the two equines.

“You...” Kelsie moaned, then timidly lowered her paws.

“Me...” Ironclad whispered, as he stepped back, then un-holstered the pistol, spinning it around and handing it back to her, butt first...a true sign of trust. “Take it...”

Kelsie timidly plucked her pistol from his large paw, then she held it, her paw shaking violently.

“I could - “ Kelsie began.

“You *could* - “ Ironclad sighed, as he reached up and cupped her chin with his paw, then stared into her eyes. “Yet you won't...in your heart, you know I'm telling you the truth! I killed those men, yes, I admit it – but they captured, tortured and aided in murdering an innocent colt! What justice was that? None...so I returned that sense of justice...it *is* our right, as you know...”

“We...we must obey the law - “ Kelsie whimpered, falling back on the training that had been so forcefully imprinted on her mind.

“*Human law!*” Ironclad growled, as his eyes narrowed. “Our laws, our ancestral laws, allow for such, you know it, they haven't undone millennia of our kinds instincts and laws, handed down from generation to generation! Humans force their laws on *us*! Yes, some are beneficial, but most, obviously, do not extend to us, do they? What rights and laws were upheld, when they captured that colt, then...from what I heard...whipped him, then watched him strangle to death at the end of a gallows? What happened to the human belief and law of innocent until proven guilty? He never even received a trial, did he?”

Kelsie backed up, fearful of the rising scent from Ironclad, who followed her, then pinned her against the large iron bark tree, his anger rising quickly.

“Well? Where was your fabled human justice then? There was none, was there?” He hissed, his eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at her.

“I tried...” Kelsie sobbed, her fingers splayed against the bark of the tree.

“I know...little Filly...” Ironclad whispered, his anger draining away like water down a downspout.

“He wants you dead...alive preferably...” Kelsie sniffled, as she shivered with fear.

“Oh, I don't doubt that - “ Ironclad spoke, then with surprising grace, he turned away and paced back and forth – if Kelsie had of wanted, she could have drawn leather and shot him – but the sorrow and grief in Ironclad's voice held her immobilised. “He murdered my mother – did you know that? Hung her like he hung that innocent Colt... I swear, I am going to kill him, maybe not today...maybe not tomorrow....”

Kelsie's eyes widened. “He - “

Ironclad spun around, one paw gripping Kelsie by the throat, as he showed his strength and lifted her easily off her hooves, squeezing her throat and making her choke as she clawed at his forearm.

“He murdered her!” Ironclad raged. “he murdered Feredwyn and Owen – two innocent, kind, gentle people...”

“You're hurting me...” Kelsie managed to choke out, as black spots exploded before her eyes.

Ironclad blinked, then released her and Kelsie crumpled to her knees, her fingers clawing at the loamy soil, as she choked and tried to draw breath into her lungs, her nostrils flaring with each breath.

“I'm...sorry – I never meant to hurt you - “ Ironclad whispered, and as Kelsie's eyes rolled up to look at him, she saw the tears that slid down the exposed part of his muzzle and dripped off his nostrils.

“How many...” Ironclad spoke, as he stood and his ears snapped forwards, and Kelsie seen the notch missing out of one ear.

“Looking - “ Kelsie gasped and wheezed. “All of them I think – our people – are searching, but word of your...oaths, and kindness for the farm holders and that doe you rescued...has spread, quietly, but surely. They think of you as a hero...not as a - “

“A murderer?” Ironclad sighed softly. “I am, I admit it – I'm a thief, a murderer...a monster...”

Kelsie slowly climbed to her hooves, then she placed a quivering paw on Ironclad's left forearm.

“I don't think – you're a murderer...or a monster...” She breathed, then stroked his forearm gently, looking up at him, making him look down at her.

“Over here!” Someone yelled, and there was the sounds of swearing, laughter and snapping branches and twigs.

“I - “ Ironclad began, as he was torn between the emotions he never imagined existed – and the fear of being caught.

“Go!” Kelsie squealed, then slapped at his forearm. “They'll kill you, go...get out of here!”

Ironclad shook, his armour jingling, before common sense won out and he vanished like a wraith into the woods, leaving Kelsie panting and shaking...

\*

Sgt. McGoven was beyond livid, as he stormed back and forth in the tavern, berating the men who had failed him. His vile imprecations against their mothers, and themselves, was truly, something to behold – even the most hardened and cruel wilted like reeds before his tyrannical diatribe.

"What do you mean," He roared, then slammed his hand down on the nearest table, inwardly, he would have preferred to hit *someone* rather than something... "You didn't find him? Did you misbegotten maggot's even try looking?"

None one answered, a few coughed and some shuffled their feet, not wanting to be the centre of the Sargent's wrath.

"Incompetent, absolutely incompetent, get out, the lot of you – if I have to call in the soldiers, there's going to be hell to pay! *How fucking hard is it to find him!*"

Most fled the tavern, falling over reach other and themselves, trying to get out of eyesight of the Sargent. Some merely shrugged and walked up to the bar, ordering assorted drinks, whilst others just stood or sat where they were, stunned and bewildered by the outburst.

"Where's that slut of a foal – I swear, I'll hang her from her hooves if she isn't found!" Sgt. McGoven screamed, his fury rising. "*You!*"

Pointing at a young man who shrank back, trying to make himself look small and insignificant.

"Go find that cocksucker of a Filly, get her front and centre, *right fucking now!*" Sgt. McGovern roared.

Quickly, the man turned and fled, as the Sargent stomped over to the bar, then tankard of ale was put in front of him by an overweight barman, who mopped at his forehead with a rag. As he walked away, moving ponderously under his enormous girth, he served another customer, then made his way back to the Sargent. Wrinkling his nose, the Sargent shot the obese barkeep a scathing glare, as he covered his nose with the sleeve of his uniform.

"Fuck me - " Snorted the Sargent in disgust. "Did you die, or do you usually smell that bad?"

With a grunt, the Barman grinned, revealing black, rotted teeth, as he moved back down the bar, serving other customers.

\*

Kelsie wiped her sweaty forehead and back of her neck with her bandanna as she slid off her mare's back and began unfastening the tight girth straps. Kelsie alone knew how close they had to come to finding Ironclad – and she paused then shivered as her mind replayed that moment again and again in her mind, before a ripple ran from her groin and up her spine like a warm, pleasant tingle before she blushed and moaned, tilting her head back as her mind began to conjure images and feelings she had never dreamed of – and her revelry was shattered as the young man ran up to her, panting and gasping.

"Sargent...wants you – now - " He wheezed, then staggered to the horse watering trough and dipped his head under the water, then lifted it and let the water soak into the rough tunic he wore.

With a sigh, Kelsie nodded, then reached into the small pouch at her belt and flipped him a single silver coin.

"Thank you," Kelsie replied, as she snorted through her nostrils and hurriedly unsaddled her horse. "There's another silver, if you brush down Jess and stable her – I'll be back to check!"

Nodding, the man took the reins Kelsie offered, then led the indignant mare towards the stables.

\*

Kelsie reported as ordered, sweat dribbling down her neck and making her uncomfortable, as the Sargent belittled her and come within a hairs breadth of physically assaulting her – but Kelsie stood her ground, looking alert and attentive, as she smelt the alcohol on his breath in inwardly, she was disgusted and disillusioned with the Sargent drinking on duty.

"Even you, you cock less whore!" Sargent McGovern screamed, as he gripped her collar and pulled her close, so her nostrils were almost touching his mouth, flecks of beer and spittle spattering against her nose.

At that moment, Kelsie would have happily taken her pistol, put it against his belly – and emptied all six chambers...but it was only supreme force of will that stayed her hand.

"I swear, you're protecting that cunt of a foal!" Sgt. McGovern railed at her, as he grew increasingly aggressive. "All you filthy, furry creatures are guarding him, hiding him whilst he picks us off one by fucking one!"

Kelsie neither confirmed nor denied it, knowing when the Sargent was into his cups like this, often, it was safer and wiser to say nothing at all, as irregardless of what was said, he'd take it and twist it to suit his own cruel, depraved purposes...most of which ended up in cruelty or outright death....

"I fucking swear," Sgt. McGovern screamed, his face turning a brilliant puce colour, which Kelsie inwardly found both amusing and surprising. "I find out, *anyone*, has been guarding or aiding him...I'll make them wish they'd never been born! He has killed – how many of us? Answer me you cunt of a Filly!"

Kelsie flicked an ear, having switched off her mind as he ranted and railed at her, then she swallowed nervously, before she frowned and thought.

"Last – estimated count, *Sir*," Kelsie answered, as calmly as she could. "Over thirty dead, restrained with leather thong around their wrists, and shot once in the back of the head."

"You hear me!" Sargent McGovern shrieked, if anything, his voice growing louder.

"Yes, sir..." Kelsie stammered, her fear starting to climb proportionally as the Sargent's rage build like a gathering summer storm.

"Thirty innocent human men – killed by some cock less wonder of a Colt, with ambitions of grandeur and glory! What do we have to show for it? Thirty new graves in the cemetery – and not one confirmed sighting! It's like he's some ghost or something..."

"Ghost of Stringybark...got a ring to it..." Come the drunken, slurred giggle of a man sitting in the

corner.

In the blink of an eye, Sgt. McGovern spun and un-holstered his pistol,. Then there was a deafening crack before the man who had spoken gasped, then slumped over the table, where he gurgled and choked up blood, then slithered to the floor. Kelsie stared wide eyed, the stench of cordite stinging her nostrils and eyes, before she slowly looked from the man to the Sargent, who holstered his pistol and acted as if nothing had happened – despise the deathly silence in the tavern.

"*What the fuck are you all staring at?*" Roared the drunken Sargent, as he glared at the patrons, none of whom dared speak, instead turned en-masse back to their drinks and stared sullenly at them.

Nobody answered...nobody dared...

\*

As the Doctor kept a close eye on Clanton, whose healthy slowly improved under his attentions, Kelsie also regularly kept up the visits, helping the Kangaroo to slowly regain his health and a healthy weight, but there was little she could do to free him, as much as she wanted.

"Thank you - " Clanton whispered one day, as he lay his leathery paw pad on Kelsie's hand and coughed weakly.

"What for?" Kelsie asked, as she wiped at his muzzle with a rag, then held a bowl up for him to drink from.

"For...helping me – for helping...*him!*" Clanton croaked, then he began coughing in great, wracking coughs that Kelsie feared would never end.

"Helping who?" Kelsie asked, as she wiped at Clanton's muzzle, then glanced from the sickly kangaroo, to the doctor and back again. "I'm only here, because the Doctor needed help and - "

"Not..." Clanton wheezed, and he gripped Kelsie's paw with both of his. "...him..."

Realisation slowly spread across Kelsie's muzzle, her ears flashed backwards and she snapped her head to look fearfully at the Doctor, whose own eyes widened.

"No...you're mistaken - " Kelsie began stammering.

"Relax young one," Grunted the Doctor, as he laid a hand on Kelsie's shoulder, then comfortingly squeezed. "Your secret is safe with me – I already knew, one of your people come to me the other night – he had been waylaid and beaten until the poor thing nearly died. He was delirious and babbling when he was brought to me, trust me, I know – your secret shall never leave this room, only I know, and I'm choosing a side – for the first time in my life! I'm siding with your people, I've seen the Sargent's increasingly violent behaviour and outbursts, I'm sick of patching up your people, and I'm particularly sick of him, so I swear, your secret is safe!"

Kelsie didn't know what to say, all she could do was sit there on the crude wooden stool, her muzzle hanging agape, until the Doctor reached out and gently closed it, as he smiled and ruffled her ears tenderly.

"You're welcome..."

\*

Ironclad's reputation grew as more and more, the Anthropomorphic people thought of him as their savior, his generosity from the money he stole from the stage's he held up, was given to the struggling Anthropomorphic farm holders, shopkeepers and even the Doctor, who received a sizeable anonymous gift, which was left in a small hessian sack at his back door. There was no note, just a few hundred pounds, which more than covered the cost of the medicines and other stuff which had been stolen months ago...

\*

As the crimes continued, the assaults, murders and other offences against the anthropomorphic people fell proportionately, which only infuriated the Sargent and exasperated his slide into alcoholic abuse. There was barely a day that passed, six months after Ironclad's last name on his kill list was completed – that the Sargent was sober...

He had deteriorated into abuse of alcohol and it was widely rumoured, other substances, he was dishevelled, unkempt, bordering on overweight as he barely ate, preferring to drink in the tavern until he was carried home by the few of his compatriots – but as the depravity and abuse grew worse and worse – even they abandoned him, so he spent most of his time alone, miserable and ranting at nothing, as the spiral became a headlong plunge towards an early grave.

Kelsie had watched with sadness as he spiralled deeper and deeper into madness, depraved debauchery – when he could get it up – it was widely whispered in quiet voices, that as he turned more to the drink, he became increasingly impotent – which caused more than a few thankful nights for the ladies of the night, who frequented the upstairs in the tavern. Whilst Kelsie hated and loathed the Sargent, she never expected this – this wreck of a man – so consumed with hatred and his desire for revenge, to decline so badly.

Every day, Kelsie falsified the logs, which once a month were sent by courier to the Capital, but the way she wrote the logs, there was nothing untoward's happening – a few localised thefts, the occasional drunken brawl, one or two murders – the criminals caught and punished – but she knew in her heart, if the truth come out, she would spend the rest of her days in the Stockade...if she was lucky...

\*

Late one afternoon, Ironclad was watering his mare, whilst he began counting the latest stagecoach robbery, self-congratulating himself for the calmness and apparent ease, in which he had stolen this months wages that were destined for the Police at Stringybark creek. So intent was he at counting the money, he let his guard down – and it almost proved fatal...

\*

Four quick shots rang out, Ironclad's mare whinnied in fear as Ironclad grunted and gasped, the bullets striking him in the back, hitting with the force of a angry mare's hoof, before he gasped and slumped forwards, the money he was counting falling from his limp hands and falling into the clear, swift running stream, it uncaring as it washed the money away. Two humans stepped from the bush behind him, then one holstered his pistol and walked over, feeling proud of himself he had just back-shot the legendary Ironclad.

As he come right beside Ironclad, the human snorted and looked down in disgust and a cruel,



malicious grin, as he began laughing, wondering how he would split the reward for Ironclad's demise. As he knelt down to claim his prize, Ironclad's mare snapped her ears back, then she spun with frightening speed – both hind hooves lifting off the ground and over Ironclad, catching the human square in the chest.

There was a sickening snap as his ribs shattered, and he tried to scream, but only a choking gurgle came from him, before he was slammed back against the trunk of a scribbly-gum tree, then slithered to the ground, dead before his body rolled over on its side.

“Fuck you – you killed him!” Screamed the other human.

As he went to snatch his own pistol, but Ironclad grunted, then he rolled over as the human stared wide-eyed at the gasping and moaning Stallion, before Ironclad twisted and with a roar of his own pistol, he fired twice in response, both shots striking and sending the human crashing onto his back as he stood on shaking hooves and coughed, before he tore away the drizabone coat, revealing the thick iron plating which had saved him from being killed then and there, as the thick plate had stopped the bullets – but Ironclad knew he'd have bruises for weeks afterwards. Sure, the armour Owen had made him saved him from bullets – but the kinetic impact was not absorbed and it felt to Ironclad, like he'd been stomped on by a herd of wild horses.

Gasping his last, the human's eyes were wide, as Ironclad stumbled and fell to his knees, before he weakly rose and shuddered, then glared down at the human.

“Why did you force my hand - “ Ironclad whispered, still drawing great heaving breaths through his nostrils, as he fought to reinflate his lungs. “You could have dropped your gun – I would have let you walk away...”

Ironclad sighed sadly, then slowly drew back the hammer on his pistol, as the human gasped and choked up blood – then there was a single loud crack and Ironclad hung his head – feeling sadness and pain, but knowing he ended the human's misery – as humanely as he could. Taking what money he could from the broken open iron trunk, he filled the saddlebags and then left the rest – others would find it – or the wind and rain would claim it – Ironclad didn't really care...

\*

Constable Kelsie sat in the Police station, her mind conflicted as equally powerful thoughts and emotions fought a war within her. She felt compelled to uphold the law, to its fullest extent – yet she felt a bond with this Stallion – more than she did naturally, with Anthropomorphic people – more than, as she admitted to herself mentally, than the moment of desire when they had shared breath, as unintentionally as it had been...

Her revelry was smashed, as she snorted and felt someone shaking her gently by the shoulder. Rocking back on the chair, she slammed it back on all four feet, before her hooves slapped against the floor with a loud smack. With a startled gasp, Kelsie came back to her senses, then stared at the Doctor who stood patiently, one hand resting on his heavy satchel that was slung over the opposing shoulder.

“Daydreaming, were we?” Chuckled the Doctor, as he smiled gently at her.

With a snort, Kelsie glared at him, her ears partially folded, before she laughed nervously and nodded. “I was, I admit it - “

Giving Kelsie a sideways glance, he smiled an enigmatic smile, then raised an eyebrow. Kelsie's flattening ears and flaring nostrils told him more from long study of anthropomorphic mannerisms, than any words she could have used.

“Well, yes, that may be so – but we need to talk about Clanton, preferably sooner – rather than later...”

“With the Sargent - “ Kelsie began, then trailed off.

With a disgusted snort, the Doctor helped Kelsie to her hooves, then followed her out the door, Kelsie locking the front door with an old iron key, before they walked along the timber boardwalk. Kelsie realised the Doctor felt the same as she did, the Sargent was still dangerous, but more a nuisance and irritation in her hoof – like a thorn – than real danger.

“I've been meaning to talk to you, I've – just not had the time to spare and - “ Kelsie sighed, then shut her muzzle hard enough for the Doctor to hear the click of her large, blunt teeth.

“You seem to be distracted, my dear Constable – is everything alright? I don't have your senses, or your people's heightened sense of smell and such – sometimes – I wonder how your people manage to put up with humans, I truly do – our stench must make your kind almost physically sick at times!”

Kelsie waved a paw negligently, dismissing the Doctor's courteous, yet pointed commentary, as she led him towards the Stockade, then unlocked the thick padlock at the front door and pulled the iron bound door open.

“After you, after all, I may be many things, but I'm still a gentleman!” Smiled the Doctor, giving Kelsie a slight bow.

With a flush that crept up her cheeks and tinted her inner ears, Kelsie stepped into the Stockade and the Doctor followed – he had noticed her flushing in her ears, and he smiled to himself, noting Kelsie moved with a much freer gait and a distinctive happier movement to her body language. It didn't take much imagination, to realise this young Filly was experiencing love and adoration – as much as she tried to hide it behind her professional veneer.

“Clanton, the Doctor is here...” Kelsie called out, as she unlocked the cell.

From the coughing, then the language that Clanton ground out, Kelsie blinked then looked over her shoulder at the Doctor, who merely chuckled softly.

“I think he's feeling better already, seems the medicines we've been force feeding him are working!” Claimed the Doctor, as he sent Kelsie for a bucket of fresh water. “Now, Clanton, how are you feeling today?”

Clanton lifted his head, then as the wracking cough folded him over and he shuddered, then Doctor knelt down and gently tugged at the scruff on Clanton's neck, watching as it settled back again, then he nodded in satisfaction.

“Good, very good, I know you don't like the medicine Clanton, but its working – now, be strong my young Buck, we're going to get you out of here and - “

Kelsie gasped, the bucket falling from her nerveless hands, splashing its contents across the floor as

it make a thud on the straw.

“You – you're going too - “ She began, then violently shook her head. “You can't - “

Rising, the Doctor turned to Kelsie, looking at the spilled water, then at her, before he raised his eyebrows. “Why can't I take him from this cold, dank stockade? You are, believe it or not, the senior Constable now, you write the logs and whatever else you do, don't you?”

“I - “ Kelsie stammered, as she frowned and thought. “Yes...but I can not - “

“You can, and you *will*,” Spoke the Doctor, as his hand raised and he gently poked her in the velvety nose. “Have you reported that Clanton has been imprisoned? Have you sent off word about the charges arrayed against him?”

“No, but - “ Kelsie flustered, then wrung her paws together. “No...”

Placing both hands on her shoulders, the Doctor looked Kelsie straight in the eyes, then he raised both eyebrows and Kelsie wilted.

“Then there will be – no issue, releasing Clanton into my care, so I can keep him warm and take better care of him, rather than leaving him locked up like a criminal? You and I both know, he's innocent of the charges brought against him, so...I'm not asking Constable, I'm telling you – release Clanton to me, now...” He informed her, calmly, politely, but with determination in his voice.

Kelsie swallowed, then she quickly fumbled at her belt, before she crouched down and unclasped the shackles and collar that bound Clanton. Carefully, the Doctor crouched as well, placing his arms beneath Clanton's legs and upper body before he lifted him with a slight grunt and carried him out of the stockade.

“I could be hung for this - “ Kelsie whispered nervously, wringing her paws.

“You could, but I'm sure you can falsify the logs – after all – you've been doing it for some time, I bet...” Grunted the Doctor, as he began carrying Clanton, who clung to the human weakly, shivering and coughing.

Kelsie watched him, before she hung her head, knowing the Doctor had suspected as much, as Clanton was still alive – sick, weak and in poor spirits, but alive – not hung, dead and buried in Stringybark's graveyard...

\*

“Fuck the lot of you, you feral-cocksuckers!” Raged Sgt. McGovern as he weaved his way down the main thoroughfare, reeking of alcohol and sweat, and those few who caught his scent, could smell the excrement and urine that soaked his uniform. Many – be they human or Anthropomorphic, fled at his approach, not wanting to be the centre of his attentions. “Where's that Mare fucking Stallion?”

No-one answered him, no-one dared, as they melted away, then hid themselves until he passed them by and a few braver souls ventured back out, even fewer shook their heads sadly as they looked at how far the Sargent had fallen from grace. He swigged from a bottle, much of the fiery liquor spilling down his chin and soaking into his already matted and filthy tunic. With a snort, he threw the bottle to the dusty roadway, where it exploded into fragments and he weaved and belched, before scratching at his wattled chin and laughing maniacally as he resumed randomly wandering,

before he staggered and crashed into a hitching rail where he clung to it as his knees buckled and he grumbled and berated the air, carrying on a conversation like he was talking to someone, others could not see.

\*

Ironclad placed a paw against his mare's nose, and she stopped, her ears flicking as she awaited her beloved owners instructions. Ironclad peered through the thick foliage at the old trappers hut, his eyes missing nothing as he scanned the bush-land about his new lair, before he took his fingers off the mare's nose and she lipped at him, before obediently following. After he unsaddled her and brushed her down, he went and slipped his heavy plate helm off, then dunked his head into the horse trough, eliciting a snort from his mare, as she waited patiently for a drink herself. Ironclad chuckled, as he began unbuckling the leather straps that held his armour on, carefully placing each piece on a crude bench before he reached to unclasp the buckles of the chest-plate – before a snort from his mare alerted him and he spun with frightening speed, his paws moving almost faster than vision could track – and he had the pistol in his hand, cocked and pointed in a heartbeat.

With a terrified squeal, the Vixen cowered, cringing piteously as Ironclad blinked and shuddered, then he frowned as he recognised the young Vixen as the child that Owen and Feredwyn were raising. She burst into tears, shaking in sheer fright, before Ironclad cursed and dropped the pistol back into his holster and crouched down, holding his arms out to her.

“Shh...” Ironclad whispered, trying to soothe the hysterically crying Vixen, who trembled and sobbed, before her fear of being alone won out and she ran to him, then cuddled him as best she could. “Hey...shh now, its alright little one, it's alright – I won't hurt you...”

“Uncle...” Sobbed the Vixen, as she shuddered and clung to Ironclad with frightening strength, as her fear slowly began to ease, but the tears kept flowing, as she sniffled and sobbed.

Ironclad's ears flicked and he frowned, before gently enfolding his arms around her and cuddling her closer. “You...you shouldn't be out here, its – dangerous and - “

Looking up at him, with huge, tear filled eyes, she sniffled and quivered, melting Ironclad's heart in seconds, before he scooped her up and swung her up onto his back, then began hobbling around on his paws and knees, giving the Vixen a horseback ride, and before too long, her tears ceased and were soon replaced with timid giggles and finally, a smile. After about ten minutes, Ironclad gasped and wheezed, before he grunted and gently slid her off his back, then again gave her a tender cuddle. Just as he set it back on her black furred foot-paws, Ironclad knelt down and he took her furred cheeks in his large paws, then stared into her eyes.

“How did you find me - “ Ironclad whispered, as he tried to keep his voice gentle and quiet, but the paranoia and fear within him began to make him wonder if finally – he hadn't made a terrible mistake and let his defences down.

“Quite the little tracker, isn't she?” Angelica spoke, as she stepped from the far edge of the clearing, then gasped as Ironclad's paw seemed to magically spawn a pistol, which pointed straight between the now scared Whitetail Doe's breasts.

In a heartbeat, Ironclad had thrust the little Vixen behind him, and as she peered around his broad hips, her eyes widened, then she squealed and ran towards the Doe, who stared at Ironclad like a deer stared transfixed at a predator.

With a visible shiver that ran from his ears to his ankles, Ironclad swallowed and eased off the pressure on the pistol, then his thumb eased the hammer back down.

“Momma Angelica!” Squealed the Vixen, as she ran to the Doe, who shuddered and swallowed, as a realisation sank in, just how damn close she had come to losing her life.

“Do not *ever*...” Ironclad growled softly, as he shuddered. “Surprise me like that...”

As he dropped the pistol back into his holster, he shot the Doe a glare that reinforced what he'd just said, but her fear was quickly forgotten as she knelt and cuddled the Vixen, who wrapped her slender arms around the Doe's neck and cuddled with childish love and affection.

Rising, Ironclad sighed, then leaned back against the roughly cut slab sided wall of his temporary home, as he stared mistrustfully at the Doe, who gently disengaged the Vixen and hung her head.

“What do you want?” Ironclad growled, as he turned about and began removing the last of his armour. “Relax Doe, I can smell your scent from here – I'm not going to harm you, or the child – if you knew even half of what I've done to protect your kind...”

Biting her lip, Angelica swallowed, then she took a timid half-step, her cloven hooves muffled by the thin grass as she reached down to her belt and Ironclad's eyes narrowed, before she splayed her fingers out and shuddered.

“Tell me what it is - “ He hissed at her, his quivering body flooded with adrenaline.

“Constable Kelsie – wanted to arrange a meeting, just you and her – too - “ Angelica stammered.

With a snort, Ironclad relaxed slightly, crossing his arms over his chest, his eyes narrowing. “How do I know this isn't some trap to capture me? I know well there's a fifteen thousand pound bounty on my furred head...”

Angelica shuddered, the wealth beyond her wildest dreams almost tempting her, but her friendship with Kelsie won out over the more human-like emotions of greed and betrayal.

“Constable Kelsie told me, something intimate and close – I will tell you, what you did, when you were alone with her in the woods, when you got the drop on her and could have murdered her in cold blood...”

Ironclad's eyes narrowed more, as he snorted and his paws trembled. “Watch your wording Doe - “ “I'm sorry - “ Angelica admitted, holding her paws out, palms facing him in a gesture of submission. “Kelsie, she told me you had her, you could have – but you didn't, you...did something unexpected, even though she was a Constable, and a Police Horse – she said how your - “

Angelica swallowed and trembled. “You shared breath with her – an intensely and deeply meaningful thing only equines do - “

Ironclad sighed, then his angry facade fell away, before he sighed again and nodded, knowing Kelsie would never have revealed such a deeply personal thing, to a stranger. It had been a compulsion, almost instinctive and feral – something from his deep subconscious – that one moment of perfect trust, an Kelsie hadn't refused him outright – or gunned him down when he showed his trust, and handed her pistol back to her...so he shuddered from ears to ankles, then nodded once.

“Constable Kelsie may come here – but you must promise me – both of you – you will never come here again...as the risk to you both...is a price I can not pay, should something happen. Now, go, tell Kelsie...tell her...I accept...”

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Kelsie was frustrated, her mind conflicted by her duty to uphold the law – and her fantasy about Ironclad's words, that had burned into her mind like a branding iron. Could she believe him, knowing all he had done – the numerous murders he had performed – justified, she forced herself to admit, but murder was still a violation of the law – law she was sworn to uphold...it was an impossible answer to a question that caused conflict and emotional distress in her mind. Arrest him – knowing he would be tried and found guilty – or let him go, but in doing so, she was violating everything she believed in...

her revelry was shattered, as the door opened and Angelica entered, her paws slapping at her trousers and coat, shedding the dust before she wiped her forehead and flicked away the sweat. From the scent of the gelding which clung to her, Kelsie raised an eyebrow at the dishevelled Whitetail Doe, who drew closer, then stopped a few paces away.

“He accepted your invitation - “ Angelica panted, as if she had run all the way home, then she put both paws on her hips and bent over, gasping for breath.

“My – invitation?” Kelsie frowned, her mind still concerned with larger issues, before realisation sunk in. “Oh...how...no, don't tell me, I swear, these walls have ears - “

Kelsie blushed, her inner ears reddening, before she stood and walked over to the sink where she filled a bowl with the cold water then held it out to Angelica, who gratefully took it and quickly drank, before wiping a paw across her muzzle and setting the bowl aside.

“You know, with the – *him* – out of commission, you're the new Acting Senior Constable – effectively, you're the new lawmaker here in Stringybark...” Angelica spoke quietly, as she leaned on Kelsie's desk, then stared into the young Filly's eyes. “With that sort of power, comes great responsibility – you could do such good for all of us – human and Anthropomorphic people...have you considered that?”

Kelsie laughed weakly, then gestured at the pile of paperwork that sat on her desk. “I know – how long I retain my position...I've got to send the logs and reports off on the Police Stage tomorrow – I doubt I'll get to keep my unofficial title for long...a Constable in charge? Unheard of - “

Angelica smiled, then reached out and placed a paw on Kelsie's, then squeezed gently. “I believe in you Kelsie – many of us do – you've suffered, we all have, but now – we have the opportunity for changing our lot in life! Already, you got to admit, things, because of – *someone* – has changed for the better!”

Kelsie knew well, who that *someone* was – but she wisely kept it between Angelica and herself.

“So much to do, so many reports and logs and...” Kelsie sighed in exasperation.

Angelica snorted, then tapped Kelsie lightly on the nose, before leaning close and staring into the young Constable Filly's eyes. “They can wait, you and I both know, where your heart is leading you – and your feelings – you've been offered something wonderful Kelsie, don't be a fool, and let it

slip through your fingers!”

Kelsie snorted, her ears slashing backwards, as she narrowed her eyes. “I’m conflicted! On one hand, I know what my heart wants, but on the other, you...realise the repercussions of my feelings, in following my heart – what would happen? I’m sworn to uphold the law, to protect the innocent, to do right by the King’s Justice and - “

Angelica blinked, then laughed weakly. “What better way than this? We both know what happened to our people, under the merciless yoke of – well – we both know who, now, there’s a chance, a hero for our people – who protects us as best they can, who avenges us for the crimes committed against our kind! How many human’s were charged for what they done to our people – and were convicted? Well?”

Kelsie opened her mouth to reply, before she stammered and shut it with a snap, wilting under Angelica’s stern gaze.

“Precisely...yet how many of our people were fined, jailed...or worse...often on fabricated charges? How many innocents suffered to appease the greed and callousness of some humans? You’re not a fool young Filly, use that brain the Gods gave you, and make a stand for once in your life – you’ve taken the first steps, but you need to harden your resolve and stand as a figure our people can look up too – be fair, impartial and just, uphold the law, but do it even-pawed! Do not side against the humans – not all of them are like...*him*...or his cronies, but I won’t lie – not all of our people are sweet and innocent either! You need to strike a balance, prove yourself to be fair, impartial and incorruptible, make us proud of who you are! Uphold the law, protect those who deserve it, and punish the guilty...but first...someone is waiting to meet you...” Angelica told her, punctuating her lecture with the stern tapping on the wooden floor of a cloven hoof, and a light poke to the velvety nose of the Filly.

With a sigh, Kelsie hung her head, then sank into the hard wooden chair behind her desk.

“Therein lies the problem – uphold the law – means I need to hunt that Stallion – bring him in alive, preferably, for the King’s justice to be served...if I don’t, I’m a mockery of the law, and unfit to hold my position...” Kelsie muttered, then slapped the top of the desk with a fist, before there was a loud click and a hidden panel fell open, the front panel falling onto the floor with a loud slap and dust wafting up. “What the...”

Kelsie frowned, as she seen letters and paper flutter out, before she pushed her chair back and picked them up, after a quick glance, her eyes widened in horror as she read them quickly, the letters fluttering to the desk top from her nerveless fingers.

“Oh my god - “ Kelsie gasped, as her mind began putting together a jigsaw, that she had slowly been trying to assemble mentally ever since she first become a Constable here at Stringybark.

“What is it?” Angelica asked, as she stepped around the desk, then picked up a letter and frowned, her literacy skills not as evolved as Kelsie’s. “What does...forced...”

“Acquisition - “ Kelsie finished for her, as he eyes welled in tears. “Those farm holders didn’t sell up and leave...look at these! They’re logs, detailed reports on the...the...that fucking *bastard*!”

Kelsie wept as the puzzle pieces began to snap together, before her anger took her and she leapt up then paced around the police station, her whole body quivering in rage and grief.

“He murdered them all – dozens of them – then claimed they had sold out their farmsteads an left

the district, but these reports and logs...it's all lies – the Sargent and Sebastian and others – intentionally murdered dozens of land owners for their property for...for...”

Kelsie snatched up the reports, scanning them quickly, but there was no rhyme nor reason, no justification for why so many Anthropomorphic farm holders had been murdered in cold blood – their lands seized under the orders of the Sargent. What didn't help, was the reasons why these forced acquisitions had been done – and by whose orders? Kelsie didn't have the answers, but already, she began formulating a new plan – determined to find out and bring the Sargent up on charges of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and other charges, but she knew in her heart she needed more evidence. So, as much as she desired vengeance, she was adamant she would build an ironclad case to bring before the magistrate, to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt the Sargent was corrupt, had murdered or ordered murdered dozens of innocent's – there would be no chance for him to escape the justice that was so cruelly denied his victims, there would be justice – but it would be by the letter of the law, and this was merely a first step – towards building the compelling case against him...

Kelsie's fingers contracted, scratching across the desk and making Angelica shiver, before Kelsie clenched her teeth and ground them, her anger rising to a boiling pressure within her.

“This explains so much – but still leaves even more – unexplained...” Kelsie ground out, as she snatched up the quill and a piece of paper, intending to start writing down the formal letter that would be presented to the magistrate, requesting his presence.

“Who, I don't understand - “ Angelica whispered, as she frowned. “You mean that - “

“Exactly - “ Kelsie snorted. “I've been wondering for some time, it seemed awfully convenient that only Anthropomorphic people sold out and left...never humans, now I know the truth – the Sargent will hang for his crimes, I swear it! I won't rest until I see him marched to the gallows and hung for his crimes against our kind! This is unforgivable in the extreme, we've been lied too for far too long!”

“What you're proposing - “ Angelica began, then she trailed off. “This? This isn't enough, you need more, it could be claimed that these letters are forgeries and - “

Kelsie slapped the desk hard enough to make Angelica jump in fright and step back. “*This* is his writing – there's no doubt about that, I've read enough reports to know it backwards! It's even his signature at the bottom of some of these letters and logs...”

“Ask yourself, who benefits from the murders?” Angelica spoke quietly, as she scratched the back of her head and frowned, trying to think like a police officer.

“Obviously, the Sargent!” Kelsie growled, as she felt her anger turning white hot within her.

“No, I don't think that's right - “ Angelica pondered, as she sat on the edge of the desk. “He hates our kind, that's no secret – but how does he benefit from the murder and destruction of their farmsteads? He – doesn't seem like the farming type – you need more compelling evidence, as I believe someone used him...he...he doesn't have the brains to pull off some elaborate plan like this himself. He's like a feral dog, trained to attack and kill – but he isn't holding his own leash, someone gives the orders, and he fulfils them, as who better? He was the leading Policeman in Stringybark – his word was law – who would dare speak up against him? Those who do, were brutally assaulted – or met with unfortunate accidents and - “



Angelica's eyes widened, as she suddenly felt pieces drop into place, and she clasped her paws to her muzzle as she moaned in horror and disbelief.

“Those were no accidents - “ Kelsie snorted. “I bet each and every *accident* was disguised to look like just that, to cover the Sargent's hand in it...no, you're right my friend – the Sargent doesn't have the brains to pull something like this off...but I bet I know who does...”

Angelica began swinging a furred leg back and forth, as she thought, the frown creasing her forehead. “I can think of any number of possible people who would stand to benefit from it, just off the top of my head and - “

Realisation spread across Kelsie's muzzle, like the rising dawn, and her mouth fell open, ears flattened and nostrils flared, as the final puzzle piece dropped into place and the whole picture was revealed in her mind.

“No...it can't be – but all the evidence so far, my own experiences...” Kelsie murmured, as her mind reeled with the epiphany that struck her.

“Who?” Angelica asked, as she frowned in confusion.

“Patterson...that cunning bastard...it makes perfect sense now! He has hated our kind for, what feels like eternity...he has the power, the wealth and the influence, with him pulling the strings of the Sargent like a puppet...it all starts making perfect sense! He'd stand to benefit the most with cheap land he could acquire, which would mean people loyal to him, more profits in his pockets...” Kelsie swore as she resumed pacing the Police Station, her conviction growing more and more.

“If that's true...how can you prove it? You have no evidence to convict, the Magistrate would have it thrown out, and you'd be marked for...well...we both know what, the Sargent may be a drunken fool and an idiot and other things – but he still has friends both in Stringybark and in the surrounding districts! Patterson, if what you say is true! - he could put the word out, and you'd meet with an unfortunate accident...with no witnesses to prove otherwise!” Angelica sighed, as she wrung her paws in frustration.

With a snort, Kelsie's eyes narrowed, as she scratched at the back of her head and frowned in consternation.

“I don't know how, but I swear – I'll find the evidence, and it'll be total and complete – but promise me Angelica, not a word of this will be spoken, outside of the Police Station, or in my quarters – I'd – never forgive myself, if something happened to you...” Kelsie whispered, as she turned around then gripped Angelica's paws in her own and squeezed.

“I promise – now – go on, you got a handsome young Stallion waiting for you...he accepted your offer – and agreed to meet. Go to him as a Filly, not as a Constable – oh – one last thing, leave your holster on your horse...he has...quick reflexes and is rather – highly strung...” Angelica giggled, as she licked Kelsie on the forehead, then cuddled her close. “I want to hear all about it, tomorrow – all this – can wait – he will not...”

Kelsie blushed, then loosened her tightly fitting collar, feeling the blush that flowed up her head like a wave, making her inner ears turn crimson.

“Is it that obvious?” Kelsie giggled nervously.

Angelica snorted, then placed her paws on her hips and stared at Kelsie, then took her by the forearm and gently pushed her towards the door.

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Kelsie bit her lower lip, as she clucked gently at her mare, ears twitching too and fro as she paused at the edge of the clearing, the old, dilapidated cabin on the far edge. It didn't show any signs of habitation, and as Kelsie watched, a young Kangaroo and her joey grazed contentedly near the cottage, as if nothing was wrong. Carefully, Kelsie dismounted her mare, who nuzzled at her and snorted softly, before Kelsie remembered the warning and unbuckled her belt, before looping it over the saddle horn on the saddle and timidly stepping out into the open, holding her paws out from her body, then slowly turning around. With a warning grunt, the Doe snorted and her Joey fled to her pouch and tumbled into it, before the Doe stood upright, her ears twitching and staring straight at Kelsie.

“Easy little one,” Come a gruff, stern voice, then the soft thud of hooves against the ground, as Ironclad stepped into view and walked over to the quivering Kangaroo Doe, then rested a pale paw on her shoulder. “I've been expecting this filly...go on, she won't hurt you...”

“You - “ Kelsie stammered, then she blinked as the Doe merely flicked an ear and hopped off, as if Ironclad's words had been understood.

“Pretty young girl, and a great mother too, very – protective – of her Joey...now, nice and easy Filly – oh, rest assured, I've been watching you ever since you entered the bush – I keep an eye on people who enter my territory...”

Kelsie shivered more violently, as she obediently stepped forwards, holding her paws up over her head, as Ironclad roughly patted her down from neck to ankles, then he stepped back, satisfied she was unarmed, and nobody had followed her.

“You can stable your mare out the back, there's fresh hay, water and such for her – you and I – we have a lot talk about – *Constable* - “ Ironclad whispered, but the hint of steel in his voice, heavy on the emphasis of the word Constable.

“I come in good faith – alone, as promised, and unarmed - “ Kelsie stammered, her courage wilting like a freshly plucked flower.

“I wouldn't have let you get as far as you did, if I had any doubts...” Ironclad told her, as he lifted her head with a paw and gazed into her eyes, transfixing them with his intense gaze.

“You - “ Kelsie began, before she visibly swallowed the lump in her throat and her ears flattened in fear, remembering the strength in those paws, and how he could easily snap her neck, if he was so inclined...

“Shh, there's no need to be so afraid young Filly...I won't hurt you...I promise...” Ironclad smiled, then he leaned down and licked her forehead with his long, rough tongue, before he swept her off her hooves and cradled her like she was a newborn, the iron-like muscles beneath his golden coat rippling, as he carried her towards the cottage.

“If you truly love me, the way I think you do - “ Kelsie whispered, gazing up at him. “Then love me...”

With a blush that Kelsie felt, as she caressed his nose, Ironclad smiled and kissed her forehead.

“I will little Filly, on that, I promise...”

Backing through the door, Ironclad kicked it closed with a loud thud, which caused the birds to erupt from the trees with a shrieking cacophony of calls and screeches...

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Kelsie returned to her small, one bedroom cottage early the next morning, her Police Uniform rumpled and in disarray, but even her Mare felt the subtle change in Kelsie's attitude and outlook. After what she had shared with Ironclad the night before – whilst it had been painful, her first lovemaking, he had licked and kissed away her tears, replacing bad feelings with his gentleness, kindness and affection – revealing a side to himself, that Kelsie had never imagined.

She had gone to him, torn with conflicting feelings and emotions – and in one night – he had shattered her conceptions of him, revealing himself as loving, gentle, compassionate, caring and a depth of spirit and romance, she had never imagined. As she began shedding her uniform, she smelt the scent of Ironclad and herself – a mixture of sweat, musk and other scents, that caused her to blush brilliantly and giggle shyly. As much as she did not want to wash herself clean – the scent imprinting the memory of last night into her mind – for the rest of her life – she knew even a human, with their weak sense of smell, would smell it and question it.

With a sigh, she shed the heavy tunic and leggings, then shivered as she slipped into the crude shower and quickly washed herself clean and dressed in a fresh, laundered uniform, before she made her way to the Doctor's home, where she paused and knocked loudly on the door. It took a few moments, whilst Kelsie fidgeted and clawed at the tightly fitting uniform collar. After what felt like an eternity, the Doctor opened the door, and stood aside, allowing Kelsie to enter.

Barely shutting the door, the Doctor blinked, then he frowned, as Kelsie turned and looked up at him.

“How is Clanton, please tell me he is alright – I need desperately to talk to him, can he answer some questions? It's importantly and - “

“Whoa, slow down Constable - “ Chuckled the Doctor, as he gently placed a hand on Kelsie's shoulder, feeling her trembling. “Are you alright? You're trembling and - “

“I'm fine!” Kelsie snapped, as her mind began to boil, questions on questions on questions tumbling over each other in a flood of half-guesses, facts and disjointed theories.

“You're not *fine*...” Growled the Doctor, as he took her quivering paw and led her down the hallway, then sat her down and began making a strong tea. “What's got you so flustered?”

Kelsie rose, then sat, then rose again, before she began pacing back and forth, her words flowing like water from a broken dam as she become frenetic and her words tumbled together, so quickly was she speaking, as she unloaded her whole mind before the Doctor, who took a stunned breath then blinked.

“You mean - “ He began, as he pieced together the pieces as Kelsie knew them.

“It's got to be Patterson, I'm sure of it – I'd – stake my reputation as a Police Horse on it! It fits, it

all fits – but I got no hard evidence, I can't go to the Magistrate with what I have...”

Making the tea, the Doctor set the bowl before her, then he pet her trembling paws comfortingly.

“Drink this, take some deep breaths and calm yourself young Filly, that's an order!”

Abashed and intimidated, knowing the Doctor was in business mentality, Kelsie obediently sat and clutched the bowl of hot tea between her paws, blowing on it and taking a sip. After fifteen minutes, she calmed down and sighed, then rested her head between her paws and leaned on the table.

“It all fits, the murders, the acquisition of their properties and – but I can't convict him, I don't have enough evidence yet...he can't be allowed to get away with this, I don't care how rich and powerful he is – this was cold blooded murder and - “

Kelsie trailed off, as her mind began churning, coming up with ways and means, then just as quickly discarding them in exchange for an even wilder idea and concept, which were just as quickly discarded and abandoned, whilst the Doctor watched her, a bemused expression his face.

“There is a much easier way my dear - “ He told her, as he seen the ideas flickering across her muzzle, the deep frown that creased her forehead as she thought long and hard. “As for Clanton, he is doing much better, when I checked on him an hour ago, he was sleeping – its amazing what a change has come over him, now he's no longer imprisoned and in that cold stockade. Now, you want evidence to convict – well – you come to the right person, after all – I handle everyone's medical issues and as such, I could – well, its unethical to use my training that way - “

Kelsie frowned and sipped at more of her lukewarm tea, the Doctor's implied words going straight over her head. Noticing her confusion, the Doctor smiled nervously, then sat down and pet her paws with his hands.

“I could, purely hypothetically you understand, give Patterson a routine examination, check his blood pressure, general health questions, etc...during which, come up with a reason to give him an injection, once again, purely hypothetically speaking...”

“You - “ Kelsie stammered, her eyes widening.

“I could find a way too, shall we say, make him indisposed for a while – how long would you need?”

Kelsie frowned, and thought. “He wouldn't keep incriminating evidence where someone would easily stumble upon it...if I were him, I'd keep it locked in a safe, only I would know the combination and - “

“Excellent thinking young Constable, you *do* have a smart head on those shoulders! Precisely, now, I can prepare what I need – would you know someone who...well, I won't lie, this is illegal, immoral but – important for the future of Stringybark Creek itself...we can not sit on our hands and let this travesty of injustice go without punishment...” He growled, his own anger rising as he thought over the countless deaths and disappearances, most of which he now come to realise were at the hands of the Sargent and his cronies – orchestrated by Patterson himself. “However – this is conjecture, we do not have solid evidence, he can deny everything, sure, you have the evidence that the Sargent is guilty – but what is there to prove Patterson was the one manipulating these events?”

“What can you do to help me?” Kelsie sighed, as she interlaced her furred fingers together, then rested her paws on the table.

“I'll do anything I can to help – I promise – now, leave this with me, I'll be in touch and work out something, go back to work, act like you've always acted – don't let on you suspect a thing...it'll be safer for you that way, trust me on this – I'm on your side – I've seen the injustice and the hurt and suffering your people have endured, now, it's time to finally make a stand for what's right – and bring equality to Stringybark!”

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After Kelsie left the Doctor's place, her mind was distracted and her eyes glazed, as she pondered what would come of her beloved Stringybark – when suddenly she gasped and snapped back to reality, as she felt herself run into a large, well muscled human male, who snorted, then grinned lecherously at her.

“Well, well well...if its not the little Filly with grandiose ideas...” He smirked, glaring down at her.

“Pardon me, sir - “ Kelsie began, then as she moved to sidestep him, he blocked her and grinned more. “Sir, pardon me, but you're blocking me from going about my business and - “

He pushed her backwards roughly, and Kelsie squealed as she felt firm hands grip her by the forearms and twist her paws up behind her back. As she drew breath to squeal in fright and confusion, she felt a sharp blade pressed against her side, which instantly made her silence herself.

“I - “ Kelsie began, then swallowed as she felt the sharp knife prick her fur and flesh, a small rivulet of blood trickling from the wound.

Kelsie whimpered in fear, as she was roughly forced off the main boulevard and down the back streets – away from any potential witnesses. A crude muzzle was tied over her muzzle – a stinking piece of cloth that was bound beneath her lower jaw, keeping her quiet as she whimpered and trembled helplessly the adrenaline flooding her body. Kelsie didn't know what they had planned for her – but the knife pricking her kidneys gave her plenty of indication that it wasn't going to be something pleasant...

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When a crude sack was dragged over her head, Kelsie squealed in fright, before she felt herself pressed hard against the wooden wall and her belt was unbuckled, the pistol being taken from her, before she was marched on wards, turning left, then stumbling as her hooves clipped the edge of a set of wooden external stairs.

“Fuck you, you useless Filly – lift your fucking feet!” Come a cruel voice behind her head.

Sobbing, frightened and trembling, she timidly lifted one hoof, then another, feeling the stairs creak under her weight as she was marched up them, then against pressed against a wall, held there by the knife against her side, whilst a quick double knock was made on what the blindfolded Kelsie thought was a door.

“Come - “ Answered a voice, that sent fresh adrenaline surging through the Filly's body, as she moaned and shuddered, shaking her head violently as she recognised the voice, but her cries were muffled and indistinct, due to the gag that bound her muzzle closed. Kelsie dug her hooves in, but a

swift punch to her lower back and her knees buckled as she was dragged into the room and unceremoniously dumped on the floor, where she lay sobbing and shaking in fear.

Kelsie gasped as a heavy boot slammed into her soft belly, making her buck and writhe in agony, before she was cruelly pulled back to her hooves by someone grasping her ears and pulling her upright. There was the sound of muffled grunts of appreciation and sadistic pleasure, before she began shaking, as she felt strong hands grip her tunic and tear it open, the brass buttons clattering to the floor.

Muffled cries and pleading mumbles were torn from Kelsie as she fought and struggled, but the hands that gripped her forced her onto her belly and she kicked wildly, trying to escape, but as her paws were wrenched higher, Kelsie shrieked and wept, it feeling like her wrists would surely snap.

“Mmmph!” Kelsie gurgled, tears sliding down her muzzle as she continued to try and struggle against the three men who held her.

“Shut your crying Foal...or I'll give you something to cry about...” One snarled, his breath hot against the hessian sack that covered her head.

Her legs were kicked cruelly apart and her leggings were torn from her body, leaving her dressed only in her undergarments – which elicited cruel jibes and snickers from the unknown men.

“Mmm, wouldn't mind giving her what for, right now...” One chuckled, as he slid a hand up the inside of her thigh, making Kelsie tremble helplessly.

“Yeah...make her cry, real good...she wouldn't walk for a week after we got through with her...not that she'd be walking anyway...”

Kelsie's eyes widened in horror, as she listened, held helpless on the floor, as she bucked as her undergarments were torn away, leaving her as naked as the day she was foaled.

“Fuck, feel that...the slut is in season...you ever had a filly in season? They're so...”

A drunken belch sickened Kelsie to her very core, before she felt iron manacles slapped over her tortured wrists and others were affixed to her ankles, before they were yanked and she shrieked, pulled roughly to her hooves then pushed backwards. Kelsie stumbled then her calves hit the end of something and she fell backwards, landing with a thud on a hard bed, but before she could struggle off it, the human hands gripped her and the hoof-shackles were released, then tied to the bed end, before her paws were likewise restrained.

“Very nicely done men!” Come the sickening chuckle of the Sargent, as Kelsie heard the sound of money changing hands, then the thud of the door. “Now, you little slut of a foal...I'm going to give you a ride – you won't forget...”

Kelsie fought, bucking and struggling, the gag muffling her cries and the restraints binding her, before she tried to scream and she felt the Sargent's hands lock around her throat – a second before he forced himself inside her unwilling body....

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Ironclad stood at the entrance of Stringybark Creek, resplendent in his armour, the ragged drizabone coat clinging to his ankles, as he snorted through his nostrils. He strode with purpose and

without fear, a veritable wave of anger and hatred flowing from him, as he walked, seemingly oblivious to the humans and anthropomorphic people – who stared incredulously at the armoured Stallion, who carried a long rope coiled over one shoulder. No-one dared speak, they merely stared, as Ironclad strode down the main street – completely without fear of being shot – his anger emanating from him in waves, before he turned and sniffed the air, his head slowly turning to stare at a trembling young human man, who pressed himself back against the nearest wall, eyes wide in fear.

“*Where is he?*” Ironclad snarled, as he stepped closer, his heavy hoof-falls clapping like thunder.

“I - “ Stammered the youngster, as he shuddered. “Sir, I don't know who you - “

Six shots rang out, and Ironclad staggered forwards, as his knees turned to jelly and he snorted, slapping hard against the wall with his right paw, before he heard the mocking laughter of two humans a dozen yards behind him.

“Yeah, got him, we're gonna be rich...” One laughed, as Ironclad slowly sank to his knees, gasping and coughing.

Others stood in horror, their hero being shot in the street like a feral wild dog, but the cheers of the humans who shot him, soon turned incredulous, as Ironclad slowly began to stand and turn about – before in the blink of an eye, his paw drew leather and with four loud gunshots, that come so close together – those who heard it, swore to their dying days – it was one shot each – and their bodies were flung backwards and blood sprayed as the slammed into the dusty roadway.

“Please, Sir,” Stammered the human, whom Ironclad had pinned against the wall, as he dropped his smoking revolver into its holster. “Please don't kill me - “

“I'm not a murdering horse - “ Ironclad told him, before sighing softly, then turning away. “I've never killed in cold blood – *do you hear me?* Never! Yes, I've killed – I just demonstrated that – but they shot me first...I have *NEVER* killed anyone in cold blood...every death at my paws, ever one, has been justified! Those I killed, worked for the human I have sworn my revenge upon – or have harmed one of my people, now, I'll ask only once more...*where is the Sargent?*”

“He - “ Stammered someone, then weakly lifted a hand and pointed in the direction of the tavern. “In there, he...he...”

Ironclad's anger boiled over, as he began running towards the tavern, people and animals scattering before him, as no-one wanted to try to stop him, or even get in his way...

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Sargent McGovern grunted, and thrust violently, feeling sick, perverted pleasure as he raped Kelsie repeatedly, feeling her struggles and cries as she tried to fight him, but he just laughed at her feeble efforts, knowing she was bound well, then he snapped his hips forwards and grunted as he reached his climax deep inside her and felt Kelsie writhing helplessly.

“Yeah, you like it you little fucking slut...” Grunted the Sargent, as he squeezed Kelsie's throat tighter, cutting off her breath and feeling her begin to wildly buck as she strangled. “Oh yeah, that...that feels amazing and...”

He gasped, as his head snapped around, as the door he had bolted closed was shattered off its

hinges, falling to the ground with a loud slap and the golden coloured fur of the legs appeared, then he screamed in rage and fright as Ironclad stormed in – then froze – before his eyes narrowed in unmistakable homicidal rage.

“You...” Ironclad began, his voice catching in his throat, as he seen the naked Sargent and Kelsie beneath him, what the human had done to his beloved mate, turning the Stallions blood to ice.

With anger born out of rage, he took a single step, his paw gripping the Sargent by the left ankle then he tore him off Kelsie and threw him across the room, the human smacking against the wall hard enough to crush bones. As the Sargent lay there, coughing up blood and gasping, Ironclad snarled and kicked him with his powerful right hoof, shattering several ribs that snapped like kindling, causing the Sargent to try and scream, but only a bloodied gurgle come from him as Ironclad gripped him by the hair and pulled him up, then threw a noose around his neck and snugged it tight.

“This is better than you deserve, you bastard - “ Ironclad growled at him, as he walked to the balcony door and heaved it open, the door slapping against the wall and the glass shattering.

“Fuck...you...” Gaspd Sargent McGovern, as Ironclad marched him onto the balcony.

With a snort, Ironclad kicked the Sargent in the knees, crushing the cartilage and crippling him, making the Sargent scream in agony before Ironclad pulled him back up again, then bodily slammed him against the wall and left him there, whilst he shortened the rope and tied it to a balcony pillar.

“I've long dreamed of this moment...” Ironclad snarled, as he shattered the railing and forced the screaming Sargent closer and closer to the edge. “I'll give you one last chance – who told you to murder my mother in cold blood – yes, only now, do you remember...answer me!”

Sargent McGovern coughed up blood, as he was held up by Ironclad's iron-like grip on his throat, as Ironclad's anger began to seize him and he began to squeeze.

“Confess you cunt!” Ironclad shrieked, his forearm muscles bulging as he squeezed tighter and tighter. “Who told you, who pulled the strings...who demanded the lives of innocent's, for their own benefit?”

A weak, gasping mumble come from the blood flecked lips of the Sargent, who screamed breathlessly as Ironclad gripped his testicles, then crushed them in one paw, his look of rage and blood-lust there for the assembled crowd who watched on below.

“Patterson...” Come the high pitched shriek of pure agony, wrenched from deep within the Sargent's body. “Oh dear God it hurts it...”

“Fuck you...” Ironclad snarled, before he thrust his powerful forearms forwards and the crowd screamed as they watched the Sargent topple from the second story – then his body began bucking and writhing helplessly, as Ironclad had repaid the cruelty of the Sargent – and intentionally affixed the noose wrong – so he wouldn't snap the Sargent's neck, instead, the crowd screamed in fear – watching as the Sargent slowly but surely, strangled to death, whilst Ironclad looked down at him, his muzzle bereft of any semblance of pity...

After killing the Sargent, Ironclad turned away and unbound Kelsie, then cradled her weak, broken



body close before he made his way down the staircase and fronted the crowd, before gently laying Kelsie on the ground and starting at the shocked and horrified townsfolk.

“I am Ironclad, many of you know me as such - “ He began, then knelt down and gently caressed Kelsie's cheeks, until she awoke and weakly stood, Ironclad holding her until she stood unassisted, then walked away from him as someone handed her her stolen revolver and belt, which she buckled about her waist and turned to look at Ironclad, before she swallowed and un-holstered her pistol, before pointing it between his eyes and pulling the hammer back. “I am Ironclad, murderer, thief, bushranger and...as many of you know...I've done appalling crimes, as of this moment, in front of witnesses, I hereby surrender myself, to suffer the fullest extent of the law of this state...”

Cries and moans rippled through the Anthropomorphic people, as the news of Ironclad surrendering sunk in.

“My decision is final, I make it of my own free will, I, Lachlan Silvermane, have avenged the death of my mother, by the hands of the Sargent McGovern! I hereby relinquish my rights, and my holdings, such as they are, to the law here in Stringybark, and I beg the law to show mercy on those who aided and abetted me, for I can never atone for what I have done, I only ask the law be fair, just, and lenient to those who helped me...”

Slowly, feeling Kelsie's pistol pointed at him, Ironclad carefully unbuckled his belt, then rolled it up and placed it on the ground, before he knelt and slipped his heavy helmet off and let it fall to the ground, as he placed his paws behind his head. Kelsie swallowed, then retrieved the holstered pistol and stepped behind him, before she took each paw in turn and affixed the iron handcuffs tight.

“He saved us!” Someone yelled.

“He's a hero, how many people suffered and died at that bastards hands – he murdered dozens, maybe hundreds of us - “ Another called.

“*Enough!*” Ironclad snapped, his voice ringing like the hammer on a blacksmith's forge. “No more shall our people live in fear and sufferance under the Sargent's cruel yoke! You all heard him, he confessed – and has implicated the true power behind his cruelty and depravity! It is he who is deserving of his fate, and I only ask, humbly, that he be treated as I ask to be treated – given a fair trial, by an outside Magistrate, who will hear the charges and the evidence brought before him – and judge us both fairly and accordingly!”

Some wept, as Ironclad was lead away, before Kelsie returned shortly, and deputised ten men, who marched on Patterson's grand farm stead. They kicked open the door, and Patterson screamed and begged, but the evidence that was found as he was trying to destroy it, convicted him more than his own words ever could.

“You can't judge me!” Patterson snarled, defiant and angry as the crowd became increasingly hostile. “I made this little backwater into what it is today! I did what I did, for our future, the Railway is coming, it'd link us to Melbourne and bring prosperity and wealth - “  
“For who?” Kelsie sighed. “For rich, wealthy landowners like you, who used murder and violence to get your own way? What benefits would the struggling farmers receive from this? Will it bring back the dead, who were murdered in cold blood – at your orders, because they were, as you once said to me, mindless, godless beasts? No, nothing you say will ease your conscience Patterson – you used lies, deception, murder and intimidation to get what you wanted – you had no thought for how the innocent's suffered at your whims! You cared nothing for them, only your own, petty, selfish and greedy goals – indeed – I would hang you myself, but for the eloquent words of that Bushranger –

no, you will face justice, by an outside Magistrate, one your power and influence hasn't corrupted for years..and may the Gods judge your soul..."

As Kelsie waved her paw, Patterson was dragged away to the stockade...and alone, the tears came to Kelsie, as she crumpled to her knees, her strong, dominant demeanour a mask that was torn away, as she fell onto her side and began to cry heart brokenly, the tears running down her muzzle as she wept for the first and only love her heart had known, the Bushranger, Ironclad...

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Almost eight months, Ironclad remained in the stockade, a prisoner, until one day, Kelsie came to his cell, her uniform wet with her tears as she clutched the cap in her trembling paws, her uniform straining as she turned, her belly heavy with child. With a snuffle, she gestured to a severely dressed man, wearing black suit and imposing hat, come and stood before her, before Clanton himself stood beside the man, all of them staring at Ironclad, whose body retained its musculature, but without his imposing armour and helmet – he looked nothing like the Bushranger who had brought both terror and hope to Stringybark.

"Ironclad, I have heard the charges brought against you," Spoke the man in a deep baritone voice. "I am Magistrate Geoffrey, I am here to adjudicate on the circumstances and commit you to trial this day, may whatever God's you worship, grant you strength of character and peace in your heart. First, Constable Kelsie has something she wishes to say, before we commence the proceedings..."

"I, Kelsie the Roan, do hereby relinquish my role as Police Horse of Stringybark Creek, as of this moment, and forever more, I surrender all rights, titles and privileges according to such...as Clanton was the Senior Constable, I relinquish the title to him, and as Magistrate Geoffrey is as witness." Kelsie sobbed, before she unbuckled her belt and handed it to Clanton, who tried bravely, to keep the tears from forming in his eyes, but he gravely accepted Kelsie's resignation, then watched as she walked away, her sobbing cries echoing off the stockade walls.

"Accepted and noted, will be written into the logs," Senior Constable Clanton whispered, his voice bordering on choking up with emotion.

"Witnessed and noted," Spoke the Magistrate, before he gestured at the cell door.

Clanton swallowed, then he reached for the ring of keys on his belt, and unfastened the heavy iron door, throwing it open, before he removed the thick iron collar around Ironclad's neck and began marching him out to where he would face judgement – before the Magistrate...

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As promised, the Magistrate listened to the evidence compiled, listened as Ironclad defended himself, telling the Magistrate all he had done, was not out of selfishness, pride or vindictiveness, but out of his desire for revenge, and as Clanton watched on, the kangaroo felt his heart crushed in his chest and his blood run cold, as Ironclad, calmly and formally, indicted himself of his own free will, never telling a mistruth, or begging for leniency or mercy from the Magistrate.

"You swear, Ironclad, the testimony you have delivered in your own time and words, is the truth, the whole truth and as you know it, without compulsion or force, your own words and feelings?"

"I solemnly swear, this is the truth, your Honour - " Ironclad whispered, as he clasped his paws before him, staring straight ahead and irresolute in his iron-like stance, his gaze steady and straight,

his posture rigid and formal, his paws manacled with thick iron handcuffs.

“Having heard the testimony you spoke, I feel compelled to exonerate you on grounds of compassion and justified manslaughter...” Magistrate Geoffrey began, as he delivered the sentencing.

Cheers and applause broke out from some humans, and all of the Anthropomorphic people, who sat quietly in the galley, watching the trial.

“Your words, your honesty and your motivation for murder of the Sargent – have moved me ironclad, I can not lie, your eloquent words touched me, and on these charges...”

A breathless hush fell over the crowd, some leaning forwards, their muzzles showing their joy and happiness at the expected dismissal of the charges.

“On these charges...you're declared innocent!” Spoke the Magistrate.

Anthropomorphic people rose, cheering and shouting, slapping each other on the back and so on, but the smacking of the gavel silenced them, and a hush fell like a blanket over the crowd.

“On the charges of theft, murder and being a Bushranger...” He intoned, whilst Ironclad remained impassive in the dock, standing at attention.

Whispered murmurs rippled through the crowd, many smiling and some laughing quietly, their spirits buoyed by the Magistrate's words...

“On those charges, I find you...guilty! Crimes of this nature, can not be absolved, even if your intentions were pure and honourable, as the law does not...”

“NO!” Shrieked Angelica, as she rose and moved towards the Magistrate, her muzzle stricken with rage and grief, but two men restrained her and held the irrational Whitetail Doe back.

Smacking his gavel to restore order, there was cries of disbelief and moans from the anthropomorphic people, as the words sunk in – many began standing and screaming in frustration and some in anger, at what they felt was a travesty of justice against one of their kind.

Ironclad blinked then nodded his head in acquiescence as the sentence was passed, before he turned his head towards the judge and raised an eyebrow.

“May I address the crowd, if it please the court?” Ironclad whispered.

With a gesture, the Magistrate nodded, then slammed his gavel on the timber, until they silenced.

“My crimes are inexcusable, unforgivable and of my own accord. I accept my punishment, with grace and humility, for I knew there was only one end to the life I chose...”

His words hit the crowd like lightning from the heavens, some cursed and swore, some openly cried and pleaded for mercy, one or two of the humans laughed, but Ironclad held up a pale furred paw, before he nodded once to the Magistrate.

“There is but one punishment for Bushranger's - “ Spoke the Magistrate calmly, but everyone present heard the emotion in his voice, before he passed the final sentence. “Ironclad, you stand

guilty of these charges, you presented an eloquent defence – but you admitted your guilt before man and God's – for these charges, you are hereby sentenced to death by hanging, to be carried out immediately...”

Ironclad nodded once, his face betraying no hint of the emotions that he must be feeling, before he turned to look at the Magistrate and spoke quietly, but sincerely.

“I thank you, for hearing my case, impartially, and without bias – I accept my fate, willingly, and without begging for mercy, such is what I deserve...”

With that, Ironclad was released from the dock and two guards each took a forearm, and led the proud, noble Stallion towards the gallows. People in the crowd cried and wept unashamedly, but ironclad remained true to his character, his back straight and eyes staring straight ahead, as he willingly let himself be led to his execution.

Senior Constable Clanton stood to one side, immaculate in his uniform, his muzzle and eyes betraying nothing, as he watched Ironclad led in chains to the gallows; yet inside, he was crying for his friend, despairing it had lead to this. As the noose was put around Ironclad's pale furred neck, Clanton shed a single tear - before the constable stepped forwards on the gallows.

"Any last words - Ironclad?" Asked a new human Constable, who double checked the noose and stepped before Ironclad.

Ironclad remained silent, his eyes staring straight ahead in defiance, his proud stance visible for all too see.

"So be it - " Snarled the Constable, as he stepped to one side and gestured.

As the trapdoor dropped open, and Ironclad plummeted to the ground, the unmistakable snap of his neck echoing off the stone walls, Clanton fought to keep back the tears...

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Two weeks later, Patterson stood before the Magistrate, his own trial an open and shut case, as the evidence he had in his own homestead, convicted him beyond any chance of appeal. It was a short trial, Patterson pleading innocence and promising dire retribution, but nobody believed him, and as the sentence was passed – death by hanging – many of the humans and anthropomorphic people jeered and screamed abuse, as Clanton viewed with a calm and clear gaze Patterson, who ascended the steps to the platform with uncanny grace for an old man.

No doubt how he'd held the reigns of power for so long. He was dishevelled, his fine clothes matted with the sweat and grime of his prison stay. The man's looks, gaunt to begin with, hadn't fared well, dark spots under his eyes, and his flesh a shade paler. Clanton strode over to him, taking the bound man's arm, and leading him over to the noose that swayed softly in the small breeze. A judge, new to the seat and appointed not by corruption, but by the public opinion, started rambling to the crowd.

Clanton heard little of it, his voice soft. "This rope has hung three so far. I watched when his mother was cruelly strung up. I watched as he dropped the fat Sergeant from the balcony of the whore house..."

His grip squeezed against Patterson's arm, his gaze shifting over towards the old man. "And I

watched as he swung from the hemp. Fitting, don't you think? You had this beam built so that the necks of those who crossed you and your bid for land and wealth could be snapped upon it. Your lackey hung an innocent mare from the rope I'm about to put over your head. And the floor you stand on will drop you, as it did him."

The judge had concluded, walking over towards Patterson and asking if he had any final words. The old man shook his head, and Clanton released his arm, reaching behind him to draw the length of hemp over his head.

"Do you want to know the difference, Patterson?" The noose was drawn tight. The Kangaroo turning to clasp his arms behind his back, as he turned, faced the crowd then walked back down the stairs, his voice trailing back to Patterson, before the trap door sprung open beneath him. "Yours is the only one I'm not going to watch..."

END