

Poker With a Squirrel

"Turn em' over!"

A red fox called out, his voice husky and commanding. His name was Maverick, he owned the flimsy, yet oddly cozy, tavern in which they played. He had won it sometime ago from the previous owner who is now, unfortunately, deceased. The game they played consisted of two swords, a lot of seaweed grog, and a very sore loser. The old proprietor of the fine establishment was a Ferret, his name unimportant, and rather disgusting. He had lived by the grog, and died by the sword. Fitting for a vermin such as himself. Maverick, however, lived well past the life expectancy for a Fox in his particular occupation. His greying muzzle shone in the candlelight that flickered lazily on the table in front of him. His wizened appearance radiated a confidence once thought impossible for a vermin, let alone one so old.

Across from Maverick sat a weasel that went by the name of Thistle. The weasel quickly flipped his cards, a large goofy smile spread across his lips.

"Aye! I has a pair! See!"

He pointed gleefully at the 5 of hearts he had flipped, and the 5 of spades that lay out along the face up cards in the middle of the table.

"I'd like to see anybeast of yours beat that!"

He was a very curious weasel, who suffered from a form of severe brain damage. The last few seasons having taken quite the toll on the middle aged vermin. He was, and still is, a feared warlord, one with such murderous intent that his stare was said to be enough to kill a mouse. Some of the weaker vermin that roamed the bar have been taking it upon themselves to never look him in the eyes. Dumb or not, he still had power. That hidden ferocity happened to slip the bounds of his new found intelligence every so often. Which, unfortunately, allowed him to lapse back to his old sinister self. Much to the displeasure of the entire vermin community. It only lasts mere moments, but it's enough to ensure the old weasel warlord was able to retire in peace.

His twin brother, the luckily level-headed of the two, swiftly turned his cards over to reveal his own pair he had hidden away against the table.

"That you do, brother! But I have a pair of 8's! That beats a pair of 5's!"

He laughed joyously as his younger brother slouched against the table, defeated.

His name was Birch, the largest of the two twins, standing nearly a head taller than his little brother. He wasn't nearly as strong, fast, or quick witted as his "little" brother had been in his prime. It was often said he was ignored as the rightful successor to his father's hordes because he could not compete with his sibling, Thistle. Always coming second place in anything they did. Although they grew up together, in a somewhat loving family environment, he harbored contempt for his younger brother. For many seasons he sat in his shadow, but now he had the chance to finally be better. He took it upon himself to take care of him after his brain went to mush, possibly out of love he had hidden deep within his heart, but it was mostly for the chance to finally feel superior.

His paw immediately went to his twin's back, patting him happily.

"Don't you worry! I'll buy ya a round tonight!"

That perked Thistle up, his loss completely forgotten.

"Not if I steal all of your booty away tonight, mate!"

Across the table, a silver fox sat eyeing the two brothers, a toothy grin plastered against his face. His name was Juno, a fox from the lands far to the north. He had an interesting way of speaking, mostly forcing a pirate accent, which led to him breaking character often. Some of the creatures around the bar whispered about him being an outcast of the Marlfoxes. Others say he was born from the ash of a lightning strike during a full moon. Many more would say he's a dirty, cheating fox. At least one of them was true, but he liked to keep everybeast guessing.

"You should save the rest of your goods. I'll be winning the lot!"

The silver fox flipped his cards revealing a rather excellent paw. He held the 10 of spades and the Jack of diamonds, easily overthrowing Birch's pair.

"A pair of Jacks! Beats your shit paws any day!"

Birch slammed his head against the oak table, determined to become as dumb as his brother. Thistle patted his back lovingly.

"There there, Birch. There's always next time."

His brother merely replied with a muffled grunt of sadness.

A maniacal high pitched laugh emanated from within a slightly smaller than average rat. He had been sitting quietly directly across the table from Maverick. He wore the skull of another (much larger) rat, which regally adorned his head. His face was covered in tribal markings, painted in either the blood of his enemies, or from the dye of the wild Choki plant that grew abundantly in the warm climate that surrounded the bar. Hog was his name, and he would deny anybeast that accused him of using the dye, but words only go so far, and many would believe otherwise due to his small stature.

"Hog has the mostest powerful paw of them all! Truly Hog be the strongest of beasts!"

He flipped his cards, earning him no applause. All he carried was an Ace of hearts, and a solid 4 of clubs. Neither made any pairing on the board.

Many of the creatures that surrounded the table were less than impressed with the display, voicing their concerns with heartfelt and encouraging words.

"Ye got shit, mate!"

"Learn ta play, ya dumb rat!"

"Get him a taller log to sit on! He can't see his cards!"

Hog looked around the room with fire in his eyes and his fists clenched.

"Hog has the mighty Ace! You dare deny the power held within'?!"

Maverick snorted, holding nothing but disdain for the rat. His words powerful and confident.

"Give it up, rat, or I'll show you what being mighty really is."

"You dare threaten the mighty Hog?!"

"I dare!"

Maverick flipped his cards revealing an astounding two pairs. He held the Jack of Clubs and the 8 of spades. With one more 8 of Diamonds and Jack of Hearts resting among the board.

"You're all beat! I have two pairs!"

Hog's breath quickened, violence brewing in his eyes. Maverick matched his stares, downing a quick swig of bitter seaweed grog without breaking eye contact.

The swiping of flint against steel had all eyes turn to the final contestant who sat shrouded in shadows. The strikes illuminated her face, the small sparks dancing across the leaf wrapping that held her pipe weed.

With a long drag of the tight bundle, she pushed forward out of the shadows, allowing for the small amount of candle light to illuminate her. A devious grin spread across her lips as she exhaled slowly from her nose. With bated breath the crowd watched as she slowly flipped her cards revealing a 3 of a kind, winning the paw.

The bar erupted into chaos, creatures and players alike arguing and fighting, fists flying, and bottles smashing.

She licked her index finger and her thumb, casually pressing them both down against the still burning bundle of pipe weed. The flight of a rogue bottle had the squirrel swiftly duck, a smile spreading across her lips as her arms extended to the small pile of various junk and goods that made up the pot. She made it a point to quickly claim any treasures that were bet, her trust for playmates only went as far as she could toss them. Although the rat might fair better in that regard, not that she would ever try, let alone touch the unwashed heathen.

The squirrel sat comfortably away from the main bustle of the bar. She sat on a stool, not very comfortable, but it was more than she was expecting from the lot of vermin. Her name was Juske, a cheeky young thing that had a knack for games and gambling. It usually got her into a lot of trouble, but this time she really hit her monthly quota.

She wore a pretty dark green tunic, with a purple undershirt that seemed much too large for the young squirrel. It rested far below the bottom of the tunic, pushing down past her waist. Her fur was cut into a short and spiky mohawk. Four large golden earrings sat tightly together in each fluffy ear. They were quite impractical, weighing them down enough to fold over. Her eyes were a deep shade of purple, rare to be sure, a beauty not often seen. Light brown fur covered her body and tail, her belly a creamy white. The rest of her being was adorned with various other knick knacks that she had picked up through the seasons, mostly from gambling. Her fingers were decorated with rings won from vermin and woodlanders alike. She was proud of her junk, and wore them without falter, even if her peers didn't approve.

The hullabaloo was nowhere near close to calming down. The squirrel not being a very patient beast, especially if there was treasure to win. She took it upon herself to try to ease the crowd.

"Boys! Boys! Calm your snouts! It was just one paw of cards!"

"She's cheating! Check under her shirt!"

There was a murmuring of agreement from the crowd, mostly from the males. Typical, not that it bothered her greatly.

"Whoa now," Juske said as she leaned her chair against the wall, her paws resting behind her head.

"We're not playing strip poker tonight. Besides, we will all be laughing at your naked bodies long before you get to gawk at mine."

Juno snorted, replying hotly. "We should just make you play naked, I'm sure the whole bar would be pleased with that! Isn't that right, mates?"

The crowd cheered in unison, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"An honest squirrel never cheats! What a rude way to treat a guest, I say!"

Maverick banged his fist against the table, silencing players and crowd alike.

"She's a guest. We treat guests fairly in my bar! Anybeast disagree?"

Silence reigned supreme, nothing but the awkward shuffling of those that felt it would be in their best interests to be far away from an angry Maverick.

"Excellent. I believe it is my turn to deal."

After a second of hesitation, the players began collecting their cards and passing them neatly to Maverick, who accepted them with a toothy smile.

He expertly shuffled the deck, something someone with many years of card games could only muster. His paws were a blur, the cards seemingly flying paw to paw in even unending lines of black and white. Of course he kept the blank sides of the cards face up throughout his spectacle, allowing no sneak peeks. Juske couldn't help but smile, she was certainly impressed by the older foxes display of his sleight of paw skills. It just means she'll have to outdo him come her turn to deal. She looked forward to it.

With a flash of his paw, he sent each player a card, carefully gliding them around the table keeping them well hidden from any prying eyes. He went around the table twice before slapping 5 cards face down in the middle of the table.

"Ante in!"

The players moved to obey, tossing something of value into the pot, usually a small knick knack or precious item. Juske decided to throw a piece of jewelry she had won some time ago. It was a strange weave of odd fabric, with multicolored stones hanging freely. It bounced once into the middle, adding to the rapidly growing pile as the others all did the same.

Each of the players eyed each other suspiciously as they peeled back their cards, each looking for any sort of weakness. Not that the group of them would dare show it. Thistle was too dumb to know what was at stake. He just sat there, his cards in his paw, smiling ear to ear joyfully. Some would say the inner good within had taken over his mind when he finally succumbed to his injuries, but that was purely speculation.

After a few moments the players all turned their gazes towards Juske, she was to the left of Maverick, allowing her the grace of the first move. Her paw wasn't great, but it wasn't bad either, a paw is only as good as the player who holds them. Good thing she was the best.

She held the 4 of Hearts and the 8 of Hearts. Taking a moment to ponder, mostly because she liked making her opponents stew, but she quickly decided it was in bad taste, especially since they were all prone to extreme violence.

"Check."

The words turned the game towards Birch, who sat staring at his cards intently. He looked up upon hearing her start the game. With all eyes turned to him, all waiting on his next move, he swiftly ended his turn by passing it onto his brother. The strange weasel's silly grin stayed upon his features, and not much more besides that.

"Get on with it!"

His smile faltered slightly, and his demeanour taking a dramatic turn. The room seemed to grow darker, and the air grew cold. The weasel twitched once, sending the heckler pushing back through the crowd screaming bloody murder.

Juno slowly began to rise from his seat, fully primed and ready to leave the bar and never come back. Maverick just shook his head, placing a heavy paw against the silver fox and pushing him back into his seat without muttering a word.

Juske swallowed nervously, unsure if she too should fear the usually happy and goofy weasel. She concluded that everybeast else was safe, save for the poor soul who insulted him.

Thistle's smile returned and he happily ended his turn, with no cases of spinal cord removal this time around. This was of course a relief, especially for Maverick, who would have had to clean the awful mess.

Hog chuckled darkly, as he tended to do. Perhaps he thought it was menacing, but he was clearly outclassed by nearly every single beast that resided within the bar. Though he thought differently. Who were they to challenge the mighty Hog, chief of the tree rats?

"My paw is powerful! Submit now and Hog might show you mercy!"

"Shove a rock in it, shrimp."

Hog immediately jumped up onto his log, balancing neatly as he scanned the crowd for the one who dared mock him.

"Hog will show you power, scum! Fight him if you dare!"

Juno took it upon himself to take his turn while the rat was preoccupied. He wasn't overly impressed with his paw, but it would have to do, as he aimed to up the ante. He tossed a colourful stone into the pot, casting the first bet of the game. The other players swiftly followed, save for Hog who was still yelling out into the crowd.

Maverick cast his gaze over each of the remaining players before flipping the first of five, signaling the end of his turn. The flop revealed a 6 of hearts, perking Juno right up, his first clear pair of the paw. He held the 6 of clubs and the king of diamonds, he was confident, a sure victory in his mind.

Maverick flipped two more cards, ending with two still face down. The jack of clubs, the 9 of hearts, and the 6 of hearts occupied the middle of the table.

Juske showed no weakness, but silently cursed her paw. It didn't make any sort of pairing on the board. It seems her luck was finally running out.

Birch sat eyeing his opponents, scanning for signs of slipping strength. He held the ace of clubs, and the 4 of diamonds. A paw that held no value, and one he definitely wasn't going to bet on.

"I fold."

Birch tossed his cards in front of him, sending the turn onto his brother, who was concentrating on his own cards, wholly unsure of what to make of them. His paw consisted of the 3 of diamonds, and the queen of clubs. You could practically see the smoke billowing from his ears as he tried to make some sort of pairing on the board. The poor weasel had never seen a paw of his own without a pair, he had never even considered the possibility.

"Uh.. uhhh, hey, Birch? I doesn't have pairs on the board, see?"

He flipped his cards over for his brother, who immediately pressed his paws against his forehead.

"You idjit! You're not supposed to tell anybeast what you have in your paw!"

"Oh lay off em! He's rich! Let him have his fun."

Birch sighed inwardly, his paws sliding down against his cheeks.

Thistle just shrugged, taking his brothers resignation as a sign to continue.

"I'll check!"

The collective gazes of the players fell to the dwarf rat that had stayed balanced upon the small log in which he had previously sat. He still taunted and hissed at the crowd, unable to back down from his imaginary foes. Maverick rolled his eyes, the old fox getting rather bored with the many headaches the tribal rat had graciously given him.

"Hog! Do yer turn or lose your winnings!"

The rat immediately spun around, the log clutched tightly in his clawed foot paws.

"Hog shall never lose his winnings!"

"Then take your bloody turn!"

The young rat sat back down, his tail swishing side to side as he grabbed his face down cards. He stared at them for an uncomfortably long moment, his whiskers twitching in frustration. He held no aces, which happened to be the only card he actually understood. The rest held no actual meaning to him.

Juno couldn't hold back a snicker, as he watched the rat struggle.

"Having some problems there, mate?"

Hog slapped his cards down onto the table, his attention turned to Juno, his eyes fiery and fierce.

"Hog is always powerful! His cards are the best!"

"Oh? Ya better bet something valuable! I'm sure we'd all be happy to lose to you, bucko!"

The rat burst into maniacal laughter, his earlier hesitation disappearing as Juno reassured him. Hog's overconfidence and blaring ignorance forced his paw. Perhaps there was unwillingness somewhere deep within his psyche, but the persistent stares from the crowd pushed any competent thoughts deep within him.

"You will all suffer at the mighty paw of Hog!"

His paw pushed into a small pouch that hung from his waist, pulling from it a very decorative stone. It was turquoise, smoothly polished by the sea. It looked as if it were glass, but held no opaque features.

The rock was merely aesthetic in nature and held no real worth, but it was enough to continue the game. It was dropped into the ever growing pot.

Maverick threw his cards down, his head resting upon his paw in defeat. Juske followed suit, tossing her cards in a huff, her paws going back behind her head. Of course she couldn't afford to pursue a win for every game, that would be too risky, especially with the wonderfully civil beasts she was currently dealing with.

Thistle reached down into his pockets, trying to find something to add to the pot, but his brother grabbed his paw.

"Don't bet! You're only going to lose more of our grog money!"

"Oh, good idea, Birch! Hey! Gimme and my brother another tankard of grog!"

His cards forgotten, they fell from his paws and back onto the table.

Juno matched the bet, tossing in a random piece of his treasure.

"I'll call you on that, mate! No self respecting beast like myself will ever back down to a disgusting tribal rat!"

"The fox dares to mock the mighty Hog and his people!"

Maverick chuckled darkly as he flipped over the fourth flop card revealing the 5 of diamonds.

Juno's face lit up with a devious smirk, a rotten plan formulating in his mind.

"I do as I please, for a pirate is always free! Go on and bet your most valuable booty! I'm sure the mighty Hog will be able to beat my measly paw!"

Hog's face turned a dark shade of red as his breathing became livid and deep. His jaw snapped shut, biting down hard as his tail whipped back and forth in rage. His paw moved down under the shoddy tabletop, pulling a gold toe ring from his foot paw.

Betting ones most valuable treasure during a game of cards was a call to end all betting. A house rule honored by the vermin population of the prestigious institution in which they drank and bickered. It signifies that the player is raising the stakes to their fullest potential, one that can't be matched any other way, save for the equal betting of one's own most valuable possession.

Juno did just that, tossing in a silver locket that had hung from a breast pocket on his tunic.

Maverick raised a brow as the locket bounced into the pot.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Juno? It would be unfortunate if the rat got a hold of it."

"Aye!"

Maverick shrugged, flipping over the last of the five cards. The 2 of clubs shone with all its glory, not that it made much of a difference to the outcome.

"Flip em'!"

Juno held the 6 of clubs and the king of diamonds, netting himself only one pair and no other combinations. A risky paw to bet all in on, but it was one that the fox was overly confident on pulling through with a win.

Hog, however, also had one pair, but this held very little meaning to him. It also would mean a loss. The rat was oblivious to this, as he was to most everything. His bravado hadn't failed to kick in, it being fuelled by his oversized ego. He jumped up onto his skinny stump, balancing skillfully as it wobbled underneath. His paws flashed his cards around the table, making sure everybeast could see.

"Hog wins! Hog is powerful! Bow before him!"

The crowd burst into hysterical laughter, with the lot of them throwing as many insults as they could at the poor rat. Which was slowly becoming a new tradition at the quaint vermin bar, not that the rat would ever agree with it.

"You'll be the only one bowing tonight!"

"Go on, Juno! Show this disgusting rat how to beat a dinky pair of 2's!"

Juno slammed his cards onto the table top, revealing his pair of 6's. His ivory white teeth shone in the candlelight as his lips parted for a manic laugh.

"That's a good one, mate! Haahaha! I'm sure those weak cards of yours would get me to bow! You're beat!"

Hog stood upon his log, his eyes staring daggers into the silver fox.

"You dare defy the great and powerful Hog?!"

"Oh shut up, before I make ya!"

The silver fox wrapped his arms around the pot of various treasures, pulling them over to his side of the table. Hog wasn't having any of that. He bounded onto the table top, the candle being quickly and expertly snatched up by Birch as the rat's paws sent rotting flakes of old oak wood flying into the crowd. The rat's powerful arms wrapped around a surprised Juno, pulling him to the dirt floor below.

Maverick acted swiftly, his footpaw pushed heavily against Juno, sending him and the rat tumbling away from him and his squirrel guest. The old fox quickly pushed his chair closer to Juske, wrapping his forearm around her shoulder, pulling her in close.

"See that, Missy? The excitement of a vermin bar! I love every minute of it!"

Juske wanted to bolt for the door as soon as the rat hit the dirt, but the old fox was fast and clever. His grip tight and unfaltering, but not exactly unpleasant either. She bore it with dignity, having no other option, especially since struggling might insult her wonderful host. She swallowed her fear, replying to the old fox rather nervously.

"It's... certainly quite the spectacle!"

Her eyes were locked on to the two struggling forms rolling about in the dirt. Their paws battered each other mercilessly, their teeth bared and their throats filled with vicious growling. The rat's large front teeth finally found their mark, biting down hard onto Juno's arm. He howled in pain, his free paw punching the rat repeatedly in the head, trying to dislodge the vice like grip. The fox's fists punched down with such ferocity that he created hairline fractures into the skull that covered the rats head. Blood dribbled down the rats chin, his bite held resolutely despite the savage beating his head was receiving. The skull proved to be more than just decoration, it was a formidable piece of armour, one that Juno will never forget.

The crowd cheered the two fighters on, urging them to do unspeakable things to each other. Most of the crowd wanted the fox to win, but the few rats that dotted the crowd couldn't help but side with Hog. Even if they didn't much like him either.

The rat finally faltered, releasing Juno's arm. The fox's silver fur was now tinged crimson, much to the dismay of Juno. He was proud of his fur, and no beast would ever get away with defiling it. Juno jumped onto the rat, sending them both tumbling to the feet of Juske and Maverick. The squirrel tried pushing away from the melee, but Maverick held her still.

"Don't you worry yourself, cutie. You're safe as long as I'm with you!"

He laughed happily as he kicked the two fighters away from his chair.

"Go on, Juno! Beat that shrimp! Our guest is getting antsy!"

Juske cursed herself for getting into this situation. She closed her eyes, sighing inwardly. If it weren't for the constant fear that came with the vermin and their prone to violence, she would actually enjoy their company. She couldn't deny how exciting the environment was, but for a maiden, a squirrel maiden no less, it was slightly terrifying. She was no warrior, there would be nothing she could do, besides run away.

The two weasels sat in their wooden chairs uninterested in the conflict between the rat and fox. They were experienced warriors, one being the chieftain of a grand horde, and the other having been second in command. They witnessed plenty of brawls during their campaigns, most of them infighting such as this, but to them these fights were contests of might and power. The winner taking all, and rising through the ranks.

Thistle, being retired and rather brain dead as it were, couldn't care less about the scrapping duo. He only wanted to play a simple game of cards. He was having fun before the rat ruined it, but that joy was quickly slipping away as the game was halted by a meaningless fight. Something malevolent within him whispered thoughts of violence and strife, a desire to get up and snap the rat's neck burned within him. Though it was ultimately ignored.

Juno soon had the upper paw. With his superior strength, he lifted the struggling rat clear off the ground spinning him around and around before releasing his hold, sending him flying against a large wooden beam. The rat's head smacked against it with a loud thud, sending an icy chill up Juske's spine as the rats limp body slumped to the ground. The skull the rat wore fractured in the place of his own upon impact, protecting what little brains he might have had.

"Looks like Hog decided to go to bed early, mateys!"

Members from the cheering crowd immediately jumped upon the still form of the tribal rat. Pushing and biting each other for the chance at some easy plunder.

Maverick was unimpressed with the display, having trained the lot better than that. He hollered out to the law breakers, making them freeze in their tracks. His forepaw still wrapped snugly around Juske.

"No looting in my bar! How many times do I have to say it? We're civilized beasts! Take him outside first!"

The looting party stopped their bickering just long enough for them to work together.

"Go on, grab his legs!"

"I has his head!"

"His head doesn't matter you idiot!"

Thistle thought it would be in good taste to wave to the rat as he was carried off, calling out to him in a friendly manner.

"G'night little Hog!"

The weasel caught sight of his brother and the lack of waving he was doing, which wasn't going to sit well with the happy go lucky creature. He twitched once, his smile disappearing as he reverted back to his old destructive self.

"Wave good night to that poor rat!" He said, as he roughly elbowed his brother in his rib cage, making sure to dig under the bones.

Birch flinched, but dared not hesitate. His paw flashed upwards, waving to the now vanished rat. It was enough to satisfy Thistle, his arm lowering and his smile returned to his lips. Birch sighed in relief, there was nothing more terrifying to him than the mood swings that plagued his twin.

The group of beasts soon shambled out of the bar, taking the rat and the rest of whatever was left of his valuables. Not that he had much left.

Juno had retaken his seat, his arm was being tended to by a young vixen that took quite the shining to him. She washed the wound with warm water before wrapping it carefully with some old cloth.

"Thanks, girly. How about you find me later tonight, eh?"

She giggled as she walked back into the crowd her tail swaying more than it had to. Juno slowly whistled as his eyes trailed down to her swishing rump.

Maverick rolled his eyes, his paw gently playing with Juske's mohawk. Much to her dismay, but she kept it hidden. The older fox wasn't unpleasant in the slightest, he had a wonderful aroma about him, burly yet clean. She even found him attractive in a way, but she tried keeping those feelings far in the back of her mind. The only off putting thing about him was the fact that he was a fox, a scary one at that. She couldn't defend herself against anybeast within the bar, let alone one so experienced. With the players distracted, she decided it was in her best interest to save some face. She didn't want to appear weak in front of creatures that would not hesitate to take advantage of it.

"Well, now that that's over. How about we all get back into the game? I'm sure you all still have trinkets and treasure to lose to me!"

"A squirrel after my own heart!"

Maverick couldn't stop a smile from spreading across his lips. The squirrel was awfully interesting to Maverick. In all his days he had never once met a woodlander brave enough (or perhaps stupid enough) to try their paw in a vermin filled environment. He was impressed, and was secretly hoping she wouldn't just take off and never come back. He soon caught himself staring at the maiden far longer than socially

acceptable, causing him to jolt himself back to reality before any beast could call him out on it.

"Right then, I believe it's our fair maidens turn to deal."

Maverick took it upon himself to gather the scattered cards. His eyes boring malice into Juno as the silver fox sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, his grin unwavering. With the cards gathered, the old fox offered the deck to the squirrel.

"There you are, miss."

Juske gently grabbed the pile, smiling sweetly.

"A real gentlebeast for sure. Never took you lot for having any manners!"

"Don't expect it from any other beast in here, little miss. I run a business, see? Gotta keep up good appearances!"

Juno failed to suppress a squealing giggle, his paw immediately pushing against his maw in a terrible effort to keep himself gathered. Maverick's ears twitched in annoyance. Usually he would cuff the disrespectful fox a few times to set him straight, but he swallowed those bitter feelings as not to terrify his new squirrel friend.

Juske quickly stole the spotlight. Cards floated around her fingers in a stunning display of dexterity. The previous fight all but completely forgotten as the crowd stood mesmerized. She might not have been able to wield a weapon, but her skill with a deck of cards was unmatched by anybeast. The vermin throughout the bar had no idea a simple woodlander could be as interesting as the squirrel that graced them with her company.

Juske scanned the audience, making sure all eyes were on her wild display. It was nothing more than a trick, a clever deception. Something she found to be a lot easier against a table full of vermin. With her opponents focused on the cards twirling about her paws, her tail softly flicked a card she had hidden within her fluff. It spun through the air towards the ceiling, hidden by the darkness that surrounded them. The card, driven by gravity, gently fell into the shuffling deck between her fingers. Then, just as swiftly, she dropped a random card between her legs, her tail nimbly catching it.

No beast caught wind of the blatant treachery, save for Maverick who stared at her with a dumbfounded expression. He barely caught on, just seeing the extra card fall into her fingers. He looked around, expecting at least half the bar to charge at her with murderous intent. Not that he could do anything about that, he wouldn't risk his life over some squirrel, pretty or not. He could only protect her from so much after all.

But nothing happened.

Maverick had now found respect for the squirrel. Her bravery seemed to know no bounds at all. His maw opened wide in a toothy smile as she finished her extravagant act. The first card dealt landed face down beside Maverick's paws, the others spun expertly through the air, landing in front of the remaining players twice around.

This seemed to snap the players out of their daze, finally escaping the hypnotic shuffling. Thistle was none the wiser to the squirrels attempt at cheating him out of his prized possessions. Not that he would have cared or realized it was cheating in the first place. He was more impressed with the magnificent display of what he thought to be pure magic.

"So yous a magic squirrel then! How'd you do it?"

Thistle, back in his prime, used to collect all sorts of mystical artifacts. Just like his mother before him. He even included seers and other "Magical" beasts in that collection. He mostly demanded them to perform great feats of wizardry. Ones that would spur his armies to great plunder and many victories. Most of them created all sorts of colourful and dazzling performances to try get into his good graces, but nothing was concrete. Their little facades were always doomed to fail, and when they did, he had every single one of them brutally executed.

Birch of course didn't understand what he had just witnessed either, but he concluded it to be mere trickery at best.

"Don't go grovelling to that squirrel. That was no magic, just some clever trick. Like the rest of those pathetic seers you used to keep around. I don't think Maverick would appreciate you ripping out another spine in his bar, especially over something as silly as your magic escapades! It doesn't exist, end of story!"

"Magic is real! One day I'll prove it to you! Just because one silly stoat was a fake doesn't mean I should be at fault for their spine loss."

"You're the one that tore it out!"

"It was a few vertebrae at best!"

"Part of her skull was still attached to the end of it!"

"Don't you know what ma used to say? Life is to be experienced, not remembered!"

Birch slammed his head against the shabby oak table (something he had become accustomed these last few seasons), sending his cards up into the air, flashing their hidden contents.

"Hey, you has a pair birch!"

The poor weasel could only muster a halfhearted groan as a response.

Juske sat wide eyed, her words caught in the back of her throat bringing forth a tiny squeak. Eternally thankful that Birch barged in when he did. Her magic paws routine wasn't going to score her any points within these walls.

"I assure you that my card trick was just that, a trick. No magic here, no sirs. Just a lot of practice!"

Thistle hung his head in defeat. He would not find magic that night.

Maverick sighed, the night growing far too old for the fox. But he managed a smile nonetheless, joining the waves of voices that showered the squirrel in praise.

"It might have no been real magic, but it was magical to my eyes, lassie!"

Juno found himself shaking his head a few times, not used to seeing such sensational performances among the vermin he regularly found himself mingled.

"Aye, it was a fine little show our guest showed us this evening, ain't the right, mateys?"

A roar of approval flooded the bar, tankards bashed together in the squirrels honour, which were quickly drained afterwards.

"Ante in!"

Thistle was the first to toss in his own bet, Birch on the other paw, tossed his cards to the side.

"I fold, no use playing a paw everyone else has seen."

He pushed away from his chair, grumpily slumping off through the crowd. He soon perked up at the sight of fresh barrel of seaweed grog that had been hoisted up from the dirt cellars just moments before.

The remaining players (which consisted of Juske, Maverick, Thistle, and Juno) all added to the newest pot. Juno was the first to grab his cards, casually peeking at them before laying them flat against the table once more. He cursed his bad luck, and his lack of liquid to drown his sorrows away. His paw shot up, his fingers snapping once, summoning a bar paw Maverick kept around. His name was Shurik, a young fox apprenticing under Maverick's wing. Maverick was a master brewer, a job that was rare, and incredibly difficult to master. Shurik quickly filled Juno's empty tankard, adding a tally to a small notebook attached to his side. Tabs were a rarity around the bar, and only the most trusted of beasts gained one.

Shurik soon had every other beats tankards and cups filled to the brim with thirst quenching water, ale, or the vermin favorite, grog. He melted back into the crowd just as fast as he had appeared, tending to his other duties.

Juske silently sipped at a fresh cup of water as she took a sly glance at her cards. Her trick had worked, the many seasons of tireless practice had paid off. The cheated card was a king of spades, it sat snugly against the queen of diamonds in her paw. It wasn't a fool proof tactic of course, there was a chance that she could still get nothing, but a king was a king, and would help her win in many situations.

Thistle was starting to get a hang of the game, or perhaps he was having a strangely calm relapse. He began and ended his turn in timely fashion, tossing in one piece of treasure with the others following suit.

Juno lifted the edges of his cards, carefully covering them with a paw as he stole a glimpse.

"Check."

Maverick had a menacing paw, the king of hearts and the king of spades rested neatly in his paw. It was one that he would normally bet continuously on, but he thought better of it, knowing what the squirrel was up to.

He nodded to the squirrel, allowing her to play the first flop.

It consisted of the 10 of diamonds, the queen of hearts, and the 6 of hearts. A pair right off for Juske, who couldn't contain a slight grin. Displaying any sort of emotion or facial expression was, of course, a double edged sword. Another player could see her confidence as a ruse and continue betting, or they would just fold, making her lose out on valuable trinkets. It was a risk she was willing to make, especially on a loaded paw.

"What do you think boys? Should I stir the pot a bit, hmm?" She asked in an almost intoxicatingly sweet voice. One that disguised her menacing betrayal.

Juno snorted, bluffing his way through her challenge.

"Do what ya want, miss. I have a paw you can't beat!"

"Is that so? How about I bet five more pieces of loot? If you have a paw that can't be beat, I'm sure you

won't hesitate to match it!"

Juske made good on her word, casting five pieces of her various junk into the pot.

Juno threw his cards to the side with a loud sigh, his paw moving to his cheek, resting his head in defeat.

"Damn! Strong-arming a poor fox? Never thought I'd see the day! I'll be callin' it a night, this squirrel will steal all me hard earned treasure! She's more of a crook than any of us are!"

Juske smile bashfully at him, her head turning to the side in mock embarrassment.

"Aww, shucks. That's one of the nicest things I've been told in my whole life."

The silver fox winked at her as he drained his tankard, looking at the bottom with sullen sadness, but he knew exactly how to fix that.

"Shurik! Another round! This fox is a thirsty beast!"

Maverick held a paw up, stopping the hurrying fox in his tracks.

"If you're gonna have another, I suggest you take it to you room. I don't want anymore fights tonight, your fault or not."

Juno knew better than to go against his old friend's wishes. He begrudgingly turned Shurik away, wanting to see how the night wore on.

Maverick smiled, satisfied with Juno's choice. His attention went back to Juske's large bet. He could afford to call it, but then he would only be feeding the squirrel. Instead, he decided to bet a wager, considering it was only really himself and the squirrel in play. Thistle was not a problem, he never won past blind luck. Maverick knew the squirrel was going to win, she cheated after all.

"How about I call your miserable little bet with a wager?"

This excited the young squirrel, her tail easily giving her away as it brushed against the palm wood walls.

"A wager! Now we're talking! What do you have in mind, Mr. Fox?"

"I was thinking if by some miracle I win this paw, that you and I could share a dance together this fine evening."

Juske's eyes widened, her face flushing a deep crimson. She wasn't expecting any sort of flirting in a place such as this. Especially since she, and her people, always held contempt for the vermin community. She never once thought beasts such as these would be interested in a squirrel, let alone any other woodlander.

"What? Fox got your tongue?"

"N-no, I just never thought..."

"That a fox, a ruffian like myself, would have any sort of manners? Or that I have some sort of deep seeded obligation to hate woodlanders such as yourself?"

The squirrel was at a loss for words for the first time in her life. She just stared awkwardly at Maverick, and he stared right back. Juno was enjoying every minute of it, his eyes glued to the duo, his mouth

agape in a toothy smile. Thistle had tossed his cards aside some time ago, not wanting to match Juske's bet. He had wandered off to find his brother, taking more than half the crowd with him. The rest merely mingled and spread out amongst their friends, leaving the squirrel alone with the two foxes. The female squirrel managed a few shaky words, her voice squeaky and quiet.

"Alright, I'll bite."

The fox was overjoyed, even if his chances at winning against a loaded paw were slim, he still wanted to make the point that she was indeed worth his time.

"Shake on it?"

Juske bit her lower lip, a nervous shiver running up her tail, shaking it slightly. Her paw moved slowly to meet his, grasping at it gently. His paw was muscular and firm, yet gentle. His fur softly rubbing against hers, unexpectedly silky and smooth.

"But what if I win?"

"It's an all in scenario, my dear. Or perhaps you would prefer your own side of the wager for winning the paw?"

"Heh, all your treasure will be good enough for me. A drink on you sounds nice, maybe if you're lucky you'll buy one for yourself too."

She winked at the old fox, giving him a sweet smile. He couldn't have been happier, she was real treat, the most excitement he's had in many a season. A challenge in way, a unique opportunity, one he wouldn't find in his vermin community.

"Your confidence is stunning, miss. It's almost like you know you're going to win the paw, perhaps you are cheating?"

Juske choked on the water she had been drinking, spraying what little water that didn't end up in the wrong place. Maverick filled the bar with a booming laugh, patting the squirrel on the back as she coughed the invading water from her lungs.

"I'm just messing with you! An honest squirrel never cheats, isn't that right, lass?"

She tried to manage a response through her coughing fits, but soon gave up.

"I'm going to take that as a yes. What do you think Juno?"

"Aye, I don't think she would cheat you out of a fair game. She's supposed to be an honest guest."

"That settles it, then! We'll continue our little wager. Go ahead and flip the cards, miss."

The squirrel pounded her chest, trying to recover from her sudden water logging. She shivered in disgust, trying to compose herself, allowing a moment for the sickening feeling to pass.

"Right you are, gents. I am always an honest squirrel, unwavering in my duty. I'm honour bound by the squirrel creed, you see."

"That you are, miss."

Juske proceeded with the second flop, exposing the fourth card on the table. It was the king of diamonds.

This was far better than Maverick had initially hoped for, securing him a powerful three of a kind. The squirrel found herself in a favorable position, having acquired two pairs.

"Things aren't looking too good for you, Mave~. Perhaps you should just give up while you still can!"

"Nay, I'll see this through! Flip the last card, squirrel, I'm not afraid!"

Juske rolled her eyes at the dramatic fox, trying her best to hide a smile as she flipped the last card. It fatefully revealed the king of clubs, the last of the kings in play. Her smile took a dangerously smug turn, her eyes blazing with confidence.

"Sorry, Maverick. But it looks like the drinks are on you tonight! I've got myself a full house!"

She slammed her cards face up on the table, showing off what she thought was a sure victory. Her arms extended to the pile, only to be stopped by the gentle paw of Maverick.

"Not so fast miss, you seem to forget that I'm still in play!"

He flipped his cards face up, flooding the squirrel with absolute horror. There sitting in his paws were the other two kings. Five kings were present on the table, with the total of four in the deck. Her cheated card came back around to bite her in the rump. Maverick moved his paw, scaring the unfortunate squirrel into closing her eyes, her breath catching as she braced for an attack that would never come.

"I should give you two for flinching!"

Juske slowly opened her eyes, expecting the worst, but she found Maverick dangling her bets a few inches from her face.

"I win!"

He let out another booming laugh, adding the winnings to his moderate stash.

"B-but!"

"But what? You cheated, big deal. Everybeast that ever steps paw in here is some sort of villain. Sure, I'm the only one in here that wouldn't have stuck you through with a blade, but that's beside the point, lass. You owe me a dance, cheat or not."

Juno was completely lost, he was only there to enjoy the delightful flirting between the squirrel and fox, he thought it was absolutely adorable. He was a hardened pirate at heart, but he had quite the soft spot for mushy romantic things.

"How'd the girlie cheat?"

He took a moment to think about it, his eyes nearly going cross with the effort, but the how's were quickly forgotten when he realized she had lied.

"Hey! What happened to your squirrel honour?!"

"She added a king, you idiot. There's five on the table right now."

Juno merely shrugged, it wasn't like he lost anything. She didn't win the paw, his initial bet now sits with Maverick. No real loss to him.

"Have fun with your squirrel, I'm off to find myself something even better."

Maverick waved him off, turning to offer a paw to the bewildered squirrel. Her eyes met his as she gingerly met his grasp.

"You really aren't gonna hurt me, are you?"

"No, but I might make you die of laughter. I'm not a very good dancer."

Maverick led her to a secluded part of the now dying bar. What little beasts were left were drooling against tables, or face first against the dirt floor.

The duo casually stepped over a fat sleeping ferret, his half empty tankard still clutched in his paw. They stopped near a deserted corner, set up as an impromptu dance floor. It wasn't much, and was clearly not a planned part of the bar, but Maverick kept it around for occasions such as this.

The fox stood a head taller than the squirrel, which was what he preferred. It made slow dancing all the more intimate to him, and that was what he wanted. He faced her with a grin, his arms wrapping around her waist. She took a deep breath before slowly following his lead. Her paws resting just above his tail.

"How does a fox like you end up in a place like this?"

"Well, you see, lass. I may have some manners, but I'm far from being a righteous beast."

As if to prove a point, his paw squeezed down on the base of her tail, prompting a loud chittering from the squirrel.

"You brute!"

"Hey, you agreed to this. Don't be a sore loser!"

He silenced any rebuttal by taking the opportunity to rest his chin against Juske's soft head, which had the added benefit of pushing the squirrel's face into his chest fluff. She resigned to her fate, sighing in delight, holding no ill feelings for the night she had endured. She secretly enjoyed having his soft fur pressed against her face, not that she was going to tell Maverick that. With their dance continuing, and his paws roaming around her back, she chose to enjoy the intimacy while it lasted. It wasn't everyday she had a fantasy fulfilled after all.

End.

A/N: Thank you for reading. It warms my heart.