

The Coyote: Emptiness

by Cerine Hero

The plains were said to inspire madness.

There was something about the emptiness and the few, if any, defining features across the landscape. Even the slight undulations in the land, visible for miles to the horizon, seemed impossible to discern from one another. Many stretches across the high plains were so bereft of landmarks that there was no way to tell them apart. Legends began to swirl that the plains were actually endless, folding in on themselves like paper wrapped for a cigarette. To enter them was to court insanity into the mind, and only the rare few truly ever escaped its ever-changing borders. But the image of trackless emptiness never left one's dreams, and the victims of the eternal plains would return to the intractable wilderness every night to uselessly wander its unbound nothingness.

She thought it was hogwash. The coyote placed her cigarette – with its very real, finite, and measurable roll of paper around the smoking herbs – to her muzzle and inhaled. The wind snatched the smoke from her fangs as she let it go, carrying it off to nowhere.

But there was some truth to the legends. Settlers in these lands who struck out to form their own homesteads far from their neighbors soon found the isolating loneliness too much to bear. To have the world reduced to a flat line on the horizon, with no one to talk to but the same people day in and day out, toiling in the bleak emptiness – that was difficult, even for the hardest folk. So many houses and farms sat abandoned, their bones occasionally peeking out of the earth to form the very landmarks their owners desperately needed in their lives. Folk collected in towns and cities again, and worked with each other. And all that was before many of the other problems in the region began to rear their horned heads, like the Black Wind and the Deadherd.

Then the idea of living alone in this wilderness truly did become the realm of madness.

But the rider wasn't so easily frightened. She'd traveled this way many times, and while she felt the itch of weirdness in the back of her mind after a day or two, she knew that life existed at the end of the road to the north. Pretty soon the land would slope gently downwards, reaching a low, wide expanse before coming to the bay. Trees would appear in force again, and plainsflowers would paint the earth with beautiful, though muted, colors. Out there were the lands owned by the Loyalists, patrolled still by lancers in their gleaming bronze breastplates, spears tucked high against shoulders or low beneath elbows. They sat high on their purebred granraptors and waited the day their precious Empire would open its arms to embrace them again. But the wolves weren't coming to the rescue. There was no emperor – least as far as anyone down here still knew – and the Empire saw fit to leave the wealthy and refugees alike crying for salvation from the coast and behind the wall.

The coyote pulled her hat lower against the reddish sun and pat her free paw against the neck of her own Imperial Lancer. Kip trilled happily at the attention and kept trotting, kicking up small puffs of dust with his clawed feet. The breeze ruffled his white and black plumage and tousled his bouncing tail feathers. The granraptor was getting slower, getting tired after the day's ride. He may have been getting bored, too. The bird wasn't immune to the mind-wrenching emptiness of the plains, either. But the coyote had her eyes on something in the distance. An island of reality amidst the ocean of trackless grass.

So they rode on a little longer, their shadows stretching longer on their right. The sky was steadily darkening, turning a pale purple in the east as fire erupted in the west. Stars were sparkling above them as the Mother moon drifted over the horizon, chasing after the much faster Wanderer as it sped across the sky. As they rode closer, the dead branches of an old tree became visible in the distance. Silhouetted against the sky, the tree's bare, twisted arms plaintively begged the sky for relief, but if any ever came, it was far too late. The tree rest a ways back from the road, and it was as good as anywhere else to stop and rest. The coyote gave Kip's reins a gentle tug and gave him a little nudge with her left ankle, guiding him off the road and into the grasses.

The granraptor perked up at the change of pace, and together they found a place to settle as the light waned. Smothering the end of her cigarette, the coyote pitched it over her shoulder and hopped down from the saddle. It was a slow process to unburden her mount, taking off his saddle and tack. Once she had him fully unburdened, she gave the raptor a pat on his flank and let him wander off to dig up dinner. She couldn't possibly lose him out here. The coyote then took off her hat and red riding cloak, letting cooler air wash over her fur. It felt pleasant right now, though she was sure she'd wrap herself in her cloak when night fell fully and the wind whisked unbroken across the plain.

To that end, the coyote headed over to the tree. It was in remarkably good shape for being dead, and she found little in the way of fallen wood at its roots. She climbed it and grasped a couple near-at-paw and relatively thin and brittle branches to break off. With a bundle tucked beneath one arm, the coyote climbed back down and returned to her little makeshift camp. A few minutes to arrange some loose stones into a circle, piling her sticks together in the center, and a struck match against some tinder and the campfire was alight, just as the darkness began to fall deeply over the plains.

Before she completely lost the sunlight, the coyote removed her gun belt, laying it in the dirt beside her spot by the fire where she'd be able to easily reach it if she needed it. Her bronze sword hung from its place on the saddle along with her longarm. As the light vanished beneath the horizon, Kip wandered back closer to the fire, staying within its reach and warmth. He found himself somewhere to settle down and perched, fluffing out his feathers to surround himself with a cushion of air. The coyote sat down in the dark, listening to the crackle of embers as she ate a rationed dinner. Wind rustled the grasses around her and tousled her blonde hair, blowing it into her eyes.

The night was quiet. Few animals lived out here. The ones that did were mostly grazers, like ruffali and larger raptors which would be bedding down to sleep by now, too. There were few trees to support bird life, and lizards burrowed into holes to avoid the chilly nighttime wind. But, as the coyote strained her ears in the moonlit dark, she noticed she couldn't hear any insects. There should have been a disorganized orchestra of strings rasping in the night as the crickets came out to practice their music. Setting down her can and spoon, the coyote looked up into the sky to search for the Mother moon.

It was gone.

Empty black stared back at the rider from above. The Wanderer moon was nowhere to be seen, either. It ran fast across the sky but not *that* fast. As the coyote's brow furrowed in confusion, she watched as the last stars in the sky disappeared, winking out one by one, until the whole firmament was cast away into nothing. The faint, bluish light from above disappeared, and all around her little camp, the plains faded away. The horizon became indistinguishable from the darkness around it, and the faintest outline of the tree in the distance disappeared. All the world collapsed around her and her granraptor, until there was nothing beyond the reach of the flickering, meager light of the campfire. A lonely beacon amidst the emptiness.

The coyote felt a sensation against her skin. Her fur stood on end, ruffled by the wind blowing in from the east. Outside the reach of the light, the air itself seemed to buffet against the warmth of the fire. Tiny flecks of shadow floated into the reach of the campfire, only to be smothered by the light. Slowly, she reached for the gun laying beside her, and she began to rise.

The Black Wind was blowing.

But before she could stand, she heard a noise. Spinning about, the woman saw Kip creeping in closer towards the fire light, crawling along on his belly with his legs folded beneath him. The granraptor was instinctively trying to avoid the darkness. She reached out and pet her companion on the beak before turning her gaze back to the fire – and the figure almost imperceptibly lit by its meager glow.

Opposite her, at the far edge of the camp, a silhouette barely caved out of the darkness by the orange light stood uncannily still, unmoving. The edges of a longcoat were lit up by the flickering flame, and the glow reached a pair of horns arching upwards into the dark. The figure carried something large, long and heavy in their hand, but that was all the coyote could make out.

She was transfixed, her knuckles squeezing tight around the handle of her revolver while her trigger finger curled tight around the trigger guard. The coyote pulled the gun closer to herself, other paw grasping the holster and beginning to pull it off, but despite her threatening posture, the figure approached the camp. Firelight washed over him, revealing a bearded goat, his fur graying around his eyes and nose. The old man sat down, cross-legged, in front of the fire without waiting for an invitation, then hefted up his burden and set it across his lap. It was a rifle with a very long barrel, a few inches longer than the hunting rifle the coyote kept in a saddle holster. But it did not reflect the light in the wiry, stretched way bronze did. The dull, matte reflection of the metal told her everything: cold iron. He was another ironrunner.

Tension crackled like the fire between them. At the coyote's side, Kip tucked his beak underneath one wing and curled into a tight ball of feathers. She couldn't make out much of the goat's face in the dark, but his head was lowered, presenting his curving horns in her direction. His hands weren't on the rifle in his lap, instead tucked over his chins, the worn-out gloves lacking several of the fingertips. He looked wizened and weary. Slowly, the coyote released her grip from her gun's holster and sat herself upright, but she held her grip firm around the handle of her revolver.

"The wind howls," he said eventually. He didn't look up. His voice cracked and popped like a machine that hadn't been used in ages and its first rotation had to dislodge grit and dust and cobwebs. "The east sends its unwelcome regards."

Hair blew into the coyote's face. She didn't budge a muscle, continuing to watch the old goat across from her. He looked weary and weathered, like a rock left to stem a tide all on its own and then forgotten.

"Not much out here that's dead," the goat continued. "No bones in the dust. No cows lurking deep under the soil. Mmph. Maybe some raptors; mind your tail when you sleep. Won't want something to nibble. But that's all. It's good. Peaceful. No need to do any killing."

"That piece there, in your grip." The goat wasn't even looking at it. "Fine gun. I saw it before; a long time ago. Sad to see it change hands. But that's our lot – we kill or we die. It's the iron that stays behind. Another hand holds the grip. And more things die. Done a lot of killing with it, haven't you?"

The coyote didn't answer.

"Lotta cows? The Herd?"

She said nothing.

"Wolves? Lions? Foxes?"

The coyote winced.

"Mmmph." The goat shifted uneasily, still with his head hanging down low. He shook his chin from side to side and his horns reflected the firelight in weird ways. "No guilt in killing the dead, is there? Putting them back where they belong. Reduce their skulls to ash, bury their bones, walk on their graves. What difference does it make for a fox, then? Does a bullet kill them any less? When you look down those sights and see eyes looking back at you, is it harder to pull the trigger than if it were dead bone and a hole where sympathy might have been?"

Silence stretched above the crackle of the campfire. The coyote had no words to give the traveler.

"I tired of killing. Killing cows. Killing folk. It all became the same. I was given this gun and a good purpose, but money aimed my barrel. What else could I do? I'd have starved alone." The goat's muscles began to tense in agitation. Across from him, the coyote squeezed the oak handle of her revolver into her palm. "You think they see a difference between cows and folk? That paying an ironrunner to end an Imperial dog is any different from destroying bone and flame? All just problems they want rid of, and they see us as the ones to do it. Rack them up, gun them down. Take the coin and do it again. They'll never run out of things they want gone. All the bullets we shoot, the bullets we take, our holy purpose squandered and used for base interests... and they care not a bit. Where is the glory? Where is the respect? Are we not noble warriors? Guardians? Are we not to shepherd the sheep with

crooks of iron, to keep the dead in their graves while the dark wind blows?!”

A sudden gust ripped across the camp, bringing with it flecks of shadow. The fire was almost smothered and put out. The coyote raised her arm across her face to shield her eyes, her fingers tightening around her gun. On the other side, the goat only budged to curl himself tighter. His fingers were digging into the worn, aged wooden stock of his longrifle. He held it against his chest like a mother clutching a child, but something in his motions betrayed a sense of resentment for the very same thing he kept so dear.

“And what is it all for?!” he snarled. “How many of them can we even kill? How many bullets would it take to stem the Herd? And for what? Could there ever be a day that the wind ceased to blow? The wind whips and rages from the east as it pleases, spewing curses and benighting the land. Everywhere it touches, it drags the bones back from the earth and darkens the doors of good folk. Are we to shoot the damnable clouds? And for who? People who would rather see us kill each other than save them? Our purpose is eternal, but the gratitude of fools is not. We will fight and bleed for them and they will ask us to kill their neighbors just to die when the wind blows its curses upon them!”

The goat exhaled. He seemed to shrink. Between them, the fire ceased its guttering and flickering after the wind washed across it, and the flames stood high and bright again. Motes of darkness in the air caught light and burned, and the edges of the camp spread out wider into the emptiness again.

“Bitterness eats me,” he admitted. “Hollowed me to nothing but bone. Out here, there is no killing. Nothing. The Herd keeps away. And folk stay far from here now. But it wasn't always like this. There used to be farms and families. They did their best. There was a farm once that I saw as I passed along. The Black Wind had come and left its mark upon the living. So I did the duty asked of me.” He rapped his fingers against the iron barrel of his gun. “The inside of the house was ruined. Torn asunder. The people, driven to madness. Curses had taken them, and they lost themselves.” He was quiet for a long time, and the coyote watched him, eyes squinted. “I did what I could for them.”

The goat unfurled his legs. He stood up with the slow, deliberate pace of an old man, careful to mind his bones and his muscles. As he rose up onto his hooves, his face and horns disappeared from the reach of the firelight. He dragged his gun along the earth beside him and looked out into the emptiness beyond the fire.

“They had a girl,” he said. “I found her curled up by the tree out back behind the house. I could only ask myself how much more I could've done. If I could've killed a few more of the dead. Maybe that would have pushed the wind away. Maybe nothing could be done.”

He walked to the edge of the firelight, facing into the oblivion. “And that's all there is to us, isn't it? The guns ask us to kill, and so do folk, and we have no way of knowing what good we're doing. Maybe it's none.” His horns twisted and finally she saw a flicker of fire reflect in one of the goat's eyes. “Good luck, girl. I hope that gun never feels too heavy on your hip. Mine feels like a weight keeping me down...”

The goat stepped outside the reach of the light and ceased to be part of the coyote's tiny world.

It was hours before the first glow of dawn began to crack over the horizon like a lid being pulled away from a crate. The darkness was impermeable all night, especially as the fire died down to nothing. As light flowed down to warm her, the coyote opened her eyes. She hadn't budged all night, keeping herself as still as possible. But now she moved, flexing her fingers and toes to bring life back into her tired limbs.

Still gripping her irongun, the coyote climbed to her feet and searched her camp. She brushed her fingers across the earth where the goat had been sitting, but there wasn't a trace of him to be found. The dirt was undisturbed, and no hoofmarks were left in the earth coming or going from the camp. Pushing the grasses aside, the coyote made her way all the way back to the road, kneeling down and searching the bare earth for anything at all. She ran her fingers along the clawmarks of a ridden

granraptor and many random and meandering prints left by roaming ruffali, but nothing that could have been left by a goat. She stood and looked down the road in both directions, seeing nothing but the trackless plains in the pre-dawn gray.

Behind her, Kip let out a warbling noise. The coyote turned her gaze around back towards the camp, and her jaw fell open as she beheld what was awaiting her.

It was a house. A ruined, decaying, old farmhouse, set back some distance from the plains highway. Kip seemed startled by it and jumped up to put some distance between him and it. Once he was on the opposite side of the road, he calmed down, beginning to wander and scratch at the earth for a breakfast of worms and lizards. The coyote felt something sink in her stomach as she looked across the house's wreckage.

She stepped across the grasses and passed her makeshift camp to approach the door. It was laying in the earth in front of her, leaving an empty maw in the front of the house. Inside she stepped, looking upwards at holes in the ceiling that shafts of the morning glow were creeping through. What she found inside was exactly what she feared: furniture torn to pieces by bare paws, left as ruined trash across the floor. The paper on the walls was ripped apart by claws, and pieces of broken glass lay strewn in the dull light, waiting to catch one of her toes. The coyote picked her way carefully across the foyer and into the dwelling space. In her paw, her revolver felt like lead. She held it, but it wouldn't do any good here. Not now. The wind had already done its work, and like the goat said, iron couldn't stop the wind from blowing.

There was an upstairs to the house, but the coyote ignored the stairwell, not trusting the wood to hold her weight. Instead, she turned her gaze around the walls. Opposite the front door was hung a banner of the Empire, its edges fraying and its colors faded. Underneath the pieces of a broken chest of drawers she found a daguerrotype case, laying open in the trash and splinters. She picked it up and looked at it. A stern-looking family of wolves stared back at her, fixed onto metal covered in silver splotches and flecks. On the left side of the hinged case was a mostly-intact photograph of a haggard-looking wolf beside his wife, their faces grimly set as they posed for the picture. The edges of the silvered copper plate were corroded, but the damage was minimal compared to the plate on the right, where the glass cover had been cracked. Air had tarnished the image underneath so badly that it was all but indistinct. She could only barely make out the figure of a child sitting upon a stool, stiff and uncomfortable during the long photographing process.

The coyote closed the daguerrotype case and set it back down in the wreckage.

She walked into the rear of the house, where the kitchen was, and found it in far worse shape. A fire had broken out from the brass stove, burning a sizable hole in the wall. Empty cans and torn bags of flour and sugar covered the floor while cabinet doors hung from their hinges. Through the ruined wall, the coyote could see the tree where she'd pulled off some branches the evening before standing in the distance, quietly observing the ruin in front of it.

Her foot knocked over a tin can, and it rolled underneath the broken table, where it abruptly stopped, having bumped into something soft. The coyote's ears perked in curiosity and she walked over to the table, gripping its corner with her free paw and tilting it aside. Underneath, she uncovered her missing can as well as a forgotten toy – a small fabric doll with lonely button eyes looking back up at her.

There was a twitch in the coyote's heart. She bent over and scooped up the doll in her free paw. It was a quaint facsimile of a little wolfess, wearing a knitted dress with a big pocket in the front. Parts of the fabric had been worn down from use, especially around the shoulders and hips, where the threading had been re-sewn with different colors and weights. The eyes were different sizes and colors. The coyote gently ran her thumb across one of the buttons and gave the tightly-sewn point of the muzzle a little tap with her claw. She had one like this when she was small. It was a fox, though, because it wasn't made for her. But it was close enough to a coyote to be fine.

A beam of warm sunshine broke through a hole in the ruined house, falling onto her paw and

the stuffed doll. She looked up, following the path of the light across the kitchen, out the broken wall, across the field, and to the old, dead tree beyond.

The goat's words rang in her ears.

Holding the doll against her chest, the coyote picked her way across the kitchen and pushed the rear door the rest of the way out of its door frame. It clattered to the ground behind the house, kicking up dust. She strode across the field, looking up as the gnarled branches of the tree spread out above her. A long time ago this tree would've given shade and relief to anyone beneath it. A safe place. The coyote looked down at the tree's thick roots, stretching from its trunk into the golden earth around it. She knelt down and gently placed the doll so it was sitting against the tree, watching the morning sun rise over the plains.

With that done and her curiosity sated, the coyote pushed herself back to her feet and turned back towards the house. Day was getting on, and she needed to saddle Kip and-

There was a rustle of noise behind her. The coyote stopped and twisted about, looking back towards the tree. A little wolfess was kneeling down in the dirt in front of the roots, reaching out with her arms and scooping up the doll left in front of the tree. She hugged it tightly to her chest and stood up, looking back over her shoulder at the coyote. The gunslinger, knowing she was holding her revolver low in her grip, tried to raise her free paw in greeting, but the wolfess turned and ran. She got four paces across the grass before she skidded to a stop, her long, plain dress catching the breeze and ruffling around her shins. The wolfess looked back towards the coyote, clutching the smaller version of herself in her arms.

The wind swayed the grasses between them as they stared at each other. Then, the wolfess ran back, opening her arms and wrapping them tight around the coyote's middle. She clutched the taller woman tight, burying the side of her muzzle against her stomach. The coyote grunted softly, not expecting the hug. Tightening her muzzle, she delicately laid her paw atop the wolfess's head, feeling her soft hair beneath her fingertips. Arms squeezed tighter around her middle.

After a moment, the wolfess let go. Looking up at the coyote with her green eyes, she offered the stranger a small smile and then held her doll tight again, turning and running away. The wolfess sprinted across the plains towards nowhere at all, her outline blurring the further she ran until she vanished completely from view like a mirage in the desert. The coyote continued watching the place where she disappeared, thinking she may show again, but she didn't. She'd gone someplace else. Slowly exhaling, the rider raised her knuckles up to her face and brushed a tear from her fur.

Distressed creaking and the sounds of wood popping and breaking drew her attention back towards the house. To her surprise, the building was beginning to collapse, almost like an invisible paw had wrapped its fingers around the walls from the inside out and was beginning to squeeze. The roof caved in completely, taking the walls down with it. Dust plumed from the remaining holes in the building as floorboards bent upwards and snapped in half, folding over each other until the whole building was compressed into a small pile of rubble. Then, even that began to vanish, sinking into the earth. The lingering ruin disappeared, the last few pieces of ruined wood turning into dust and scattering on the wind, taking with it a wisp of shadow that scattered and burned in the sunlight. Once all was said and done, there was no sign at all that the house had ever stood there. The coyote could see across the empty field to her campsite, and beyond that, to where Kip was still hunting for breakfast.

She inhaled deep, offering the lonely tree one last look over her shoulder before heading back towards her camp. As she exhaled, the coyote felt a weight lift off her shoulders. An aura of lingering resentment and pain had left this place.

It took a few minutes to round up Kip, get his saddle on him, and to put all her gear back on. With her riding cloak hanging on one shoulder and her revolver's weight against her hip, the coyote placed her hat on her head and climbed into the saddle.

"Come on," she sighed, brushing her paw down the granraptor's neck. "I'm ready to be gone from here."

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