

The Moon Panther
2019
From the Collection "The Moon Panther"

Note:

This is the fourth and final novella in my collection, *The Moon Panther: And 3 Other Stories of The Mongolian Book of the Sky*. It follows George Deerborne, vigilante assassin who takes out corrupt officials, criminals, and the like. Here, he's going after the biggest criminal of them all – Pedro Kimbers, bandit kingpin in the deep deserts of Western Australia. Actually, Kimbers is most certainly dead, and instead, George is going after the kingpin's successor, a Mongol bandit named Aybars (AKA the Moon Panther).

This excerpt is the opening scene, taking place in the hayloft of Luther Cobie, a longtime friend of George and local community leader near Leinster, WA.

The Moon Panther is ~70,000 words, and follows George through the remote communities of Western Australia, on his hunt for the most notorious criminal kingpin on the continent.

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"Pedro Kimbers is dead."

"We don't know that for certain," argued Aaron.

"I've read so many military reports," Josephine replied, "I'm halfway cross-eyed."

George sighed. He and Luther were the only old-timers left here in this hayloft. Everyone else gathered around them was twenty years their junior. They were young, dumb and crotch-hungry, hopped up on hormones and caffeine, ready to loose arrows at the first jackass to look at them cockeyed.

And they were bickering like children.

"Sixteen months ago," she argued, laying out her case, "banditry dropped like it fell off a cliff. No more heavily militarized phantoms that could make whole trains disappear – we were back to skinny boys looking to eat and get grabby with girls. Sec firms have *cut* staff and pay because the threat declined so much."

Aaron, the muscle-bound jock with a heart of gold, had a stack of papers ready, but he wasn't consulting them, just arguing from memory. "What's happening out there isn't orphan pickpocketing," he said, "and it's hardly teen boys looking to cop a feel. We have munitions going off in the dunes every other week, and that massive budget surplus for the prefecture last year is expected to be in deficit by the end of this year. Bloody hell, look at what happened with the Humberton sheila. She won't leave her damned house—"

"I'm well aware of Ms Humberton's situation, Aaron," Josephine replied. "But – even take that as an example. They couldn't disappear her like they could have two years before. The train didn't vanish. They couldn't finish off ten bloody carts. They are weak. Brigandage is a shell of what it once was."

Kellan spoke next, quick to add his two cents. "I've got publications from six different universities," he interjected, his own stack of papers in hand, "that argue Kimbers is largely a *fiction*. We're talking about an area twice the size of Queensland. Ivy league consensus is that we're dealing with a hundred different gangs. One paper out of UIK, they argue that an 'Outlaw X', some time ago, may have had the name Kimbers – but they're speculating his death was more than eighteen years ago. His name lends credence to upstarts. Banditry never organizes beyond a half-dozen, maybe ten riders."

Ah, yes. Kellan was almost naive in that. 'Barbarians,' he'd say, 'are like feral animals. And rabid dogs don't coordinate.' While it may be true that Kimbers' particular brand of insidiousness was fairly unique here in Australia, the notion of a moral and legal renegade swaying others to his cause, ruthlessly crushing dissent, generously rewarding with booty – the idea that this sort of thing was an aberration, it was just silly. The Siberian Rogue Territories had been little more than organized banditry – yes, there was a rebellion aspect to it, and paid protection rackets and so forth, but at its heart, it was essentially a couple of strongmen like Kimbers hiding from the law in the back of beyond and wreaking havoc in the process. The Congolese Powder Keg that sparked the African Civil War had been a militia gang that were little different from out-and-out bandits. Even in their own history, after Mount Zeil, order completely broke down – what remained that could be called order were militia groups preying on whoever they could.

In truth, George believed this khanate was lucky to have had its underbelly dominated largely by brigands in small, disorganized units.

"All right, all right," he interjected before the two of them ripped each other to pieces. He swore; how do killings get done these days? "Kelly," he said, turning the floor to her, "what did you pick up from the... uh, survivor?"

Emmanuelleine, young, ashen blonde, waifish, drew in a sharp breath. She was so innocent, so sweet. She didn't belong up here in this hayloft, discussing horrible crimes and the steps that needed taking because of them.

This young woman – Payne, she was now calling herself – had come from the desert, allegedly from Kimbers' and later Aybars' own bed, had endured a brutal, decade-long ordeal of rape and sexual enslavement. Her rescue had occurred because of the courage of Ms Penelope Humberton some eight months before, a Leinster local who many here tonight knew personally. Kelly had just returned that day from Midland, where she was to interview that poor woman, gather intel now that these raids have been increasing.

"Couldn't even get through the door," Kelly reported, deflated.

"Couldn't even get through the door?" Luther asked, perplexed. Kelly would have gone in a full state deal, forged

paperwork, D.Psych written behind her name. “Was the forgery—”

“Court order,” Kelly cut in. “Lockdown. No one talks to her. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve moved her to a different facility.”

“Court order?” asked Kellan.

Troy snapped his fingers then. Leaning forward on his bale of hay, he cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him. “I bet it’s this prosecutor out of Perth.” He eyed Jess. “It was Perth, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t remember,” Jessica answered, “but he’s some prefectural big shot.”

“Back up, back up,” George cut in, bringing the conversation back around. “What do you know, Troy?”

“There’s a trial going on up in Carnarvon. Some kid, arraigned last month—”

“Kangaroo court,” spat Adam, interrupting. “He’ll be back on the street forty-five minutes after the bailiff walks him in.”

George raised a hand. Troy continued, “Anyway, a special prosecutor is assigned to the case. Making a big hullabaloo about the breakdown of law along the prefectural border.”

George was half inclined to agree with Adam on this one. Prefectural special prosecutor from Perth or no, north of the 123 was a legal badlands, corruption rife, convictions low. George took a breath. “So the kid gets a five hundred dollar fine and four months community service—”

Now it was Troy’s turn to interrupt. “Initially charged with petty theft. This guy from Perth gets involved, he’s arraigned three weeks ago on more than a hundred charges ranging from grand larceny all the way up to insurrection.”

“Insurrection?” coughed Moxie. “Umai’s womb, they couldn’t find a way to get concubine fondling in there?”

Josephine took a breath. “Okay, so some prosecutor wants to make a name for himself,” she said. “Good for him. I hope he doesn’t have an unfortunate accident with a carriage bomb. We still haven’t addressed the fundamental question: Is Pedro Kimbers alive or dead? And if he’s dead, as I content, then who do we have to worry about next?”

Jessica, wide-shouldered, light brunette, red-rimmed glasses, cleared her throat. “I’d like to back up for a second.” The floor was hers. “You said earlier that sec firms have had layoffs because of the surplus.” Josephine nodded. “That’s true,” Jess agreed. “Desert Security Forces has let go fifteen of their contractors and capped pay with the union. But I think they’re merely being undercut. Sec firms are strictly *defensive*. There’s a new non-union industry cropping up. They might call themselves... proactive security.”

“Mercenaries?” Moxie concluded.

George shifted then, went for their stack of newspapers. Yes, he did recall having read something about this. Digging through the stack for no more than thirty seconds, he found what he was looking for, a newspaper out of Perth from a little over a month back. “Here it is. Minister Irving of Saint Nicholas’ Anglican in Perth. His and forty-seven other churches across the prefecture have founded an aid group working with retired servicemen, security contractors and long-range merchants—”

“Mercenaries,” Jess said, confirming Moxie’s statement.

He let his finger slip down the paragraphs of the article. “Says here the good minister was inspired by the young woman recovered from the bed of the Panther.”

“He doesn’t give her name, does he?” asked Kelly.

“No, he’s tactful enough not to name her in the press. But apparently he had access to Ms Payne before these court orders came about. Quote, ‘The brutality this young woman endured, and the tyranny under which she lived, is a fate worse than the imagination can command. Her sisters, as she contends, are even now out there, enduring this still, as are dozens, perhaps hundreds of other women and girls. It is a reality that we, as men and women of justice and law, cannot and will not allow to exist for a single instant beyond our ability to bring it to an end, and bring their tormenters to the khan’s, and the Lord’s, justice.’ End quote.”

“Calls it Citizens for the Immediate Rescue of the Survivors,” Jess added.

“So churches are now forming militias to go out and kill bandits?” Kelly stated. She shrugged. “Should we apply? Do you get dental?”

“How many we talking here?” This from Luther, who was trying to get things back on track.

“Bandits?” asked Troy. “Three, maybe four hundred,” he stated flatly.

“Is this pre- or post-Kimbers?” asked Adam.

“Pre-” Troy replied.

“Don’t even give me that,” said Moxie, adding in her own two cents. “Not a chance a psychopath like that can organize more than... I’ll say fifty riders, just ’cause I know what he can do.”

George just let them speak.

“He has a reputation,” conceded Troy, “but I don’t think he’s a ne’er-do-well sadist out there blowing up kangaroos for shits and giggles.”

“He had his own harem of slaves,” Moxie retorted.

“And that’s all the proof I need right there,” Josephine said, her voice rising above the din. “We now have one of those slaves, a broken woman in a mental hospital – and she says Kimbers is dead.”

Yes, a broken woman in a hospital on suicide watch. George had read the reports, the news articles. This had been something of a local news story that wouldn’t die some months ago. Her name hadn’t been given, out of respect for the young woman’s privacy, but Kelly and Josephine had gotten certain details from the train, the sec men, and Ms Humberton, the local hero who’d left a bloodbath of bandit bodies out there in the sand. Payne had shared a bed with Mr Kimbers, had been at the centre of the power mix up, whatever it was, that happened a year and a bit ago.

Personally, George wasn't entirely sure what to believe about the infamous Mr Kimbers, though he did tend to lean towards Josephine's notion that the man was dead.

Thank God.

"She says the Panther stormed into the harem tent one day and rounded up all the girls he could get his hands on and rode off," argued Aaron. "That doesn't mean Kimbers has kicked the bucket. It just means the Panther has made his power play."

"And now we need to make ours," declared Luther. All voices went quiet and eyes went to their leader. "Aaron," Luther began, "your opinion on the health of Mr Kimbers is noted. Kellan, your summary of the opinions of academia is also noted. Is there anyone else besides Aaron that believes that Mr Kimbers is alive?"

No one spoke, including George.

"Neither do I," Luther continued. "Ms Payne is saying, in effect, that the Kimbers network underwent a coup d'état sixteen months ago. Or that he's dead. It's the same difference. We were working on preliminary plans some eighteen months back to neutralize Mr Kimbers. The reason why I sent Kelly to interview Ms Payne, the reason I've called this session tonight, is that those plans are back on the table. Only we're going to replace Mr Kimbers' name with that of Mr Aybars."

Silence. Everyone pretty much knew this was the agenda for the night weeks ago. There *was* a changing environment in these parts with regards to desert brigandage – church mercenary groups, sec firm restructuring, a dozen news stories on Payne – and when Luther had asked Kelly to pay a visit to Perth, everyone here could have figured out the target.

"What do we know, people?" Luther asked after a long moment of quiet.

Kelly cleared her throat. "Mr Aybars," she began, and spent a good ten minutes laying out everything they knew about him. It was fairly exhaustive, a detailed list of military campaigns against him, townships and communities that had previously been ravaged by his people, protection rackets, names of associated figures like the Prophet, Umberto, Lucky Carmine – and yet, at the same time, told them virtually nothing new. She told them about munitions, about the numbers of horses, of camels – of people – that had been reported taken in the previous year. It all painted a horrible picture of organized crime, murder, and human trafficking, but they'd seen all these details before.

"We're given other names from the north," Moxie said, being diligent. "Former allies, now competitors to the Panther: Wormslayer and... I don't speak Spanish – El Draque; is that how you pronounce it?"

"I wouldn't go hitting on Hector Gonzales next time you're in town," Kelly replied. "But yeah, El Draque." Her own Spanish lilt was much better. "As well as a figure called the Sandstorm. We do have a few names..." she said, going to her notes, "they come from Payne and different military... yes, Abu. We have someone named Andrean – not sure if that's female or not."

"You're not going to tell me," Moxie cut in, "that one of the greatest warlord rapists in the hemisphere is a woman."

"Why not?" asked Troy. "Equal opportunity, new century and all..."

Moxie cast him a wan smile.

"El Draque?" asked Emmanuelleine (her pronunciation about as good as Moxie's). "Where do they get these names?"

She was so innocent.

"You have to command fear when you're an outlaw kingpin," George replied. "You think Señor El Draque would be feared across half the khanate with a moniker like the Kitten Cuddler?"

Emmanuelleine visibly shuddered.

He sighed. "Emma my dear, you're watching history in the making. These are the events that shape our time, that shape your generation. Why, in twenty years, you'll be teaching Moxie's daughters about Kimbers the bandit emperor and the havoc he wreaked. These are the events that teach you you're living *in* history."

"Yeah..." Moxie drawled, "something tells me I'm going to remain barren for a while."

He could sympathize with that. George himself had never married, didn't have any young ones running around. This line of work... it isn't exactly conducive to a family life, as he'd discovered directly.

"Are any of these figures on a level playing field with the Panther?" Moxie asked.

"Difficult to ascertain," replied Kelly. "Whatever power mix up happened with Kimbers last year may or may not have seen the demise of one or more of these other kingpins. Their names still drift about up north, but who can say what their status is. Military reports are in the dark on this. We can't even pair up names like Andrean and Abu with their more recognizable *noms de guerre*."

"Sure would have been nice to speak to the woman about this," Moxie grunted.

"Sorry, I didn't have a fucking warrant," Kelly responded. "Fake paperwork only gets you so far."

George sighed. They were dancing around it. Normally once Luther lays out their target, it becomes almost a bidding war. Now, these women were bickering, buying for time, stalling. He knew what that meant.

"The question is," continued Moxie, "are any of these other figures *aligned* with the Panther?"

"Couldn't tell you," Kelly replied. "On a cross section of reports from the last year, where witnesses or survivors did get a name, that name was the Panther fifty-nine percent of the time."

An uneasy silence descended on the hayloft. It lasted only a few seconds before Moxie chimed in again. "What about Kimbers' children? That woman said he had kids, right? Had women for breeding? He could have sons, eighteen, twenty years old by now. Maybe older. They could just as easily be out there trying to take up the mantle of the Ghost of the Pedro Kimbers."

“There’s a half-dozen reports of people calling themselves Kimbers,” Kelly quipped, “but none of them are anything more than some shit-for-brains camel fucker that controls anything more than five riders. You know as well as I do that we’d have no way of authenticating any claimants. For now, it seems as though the Panther’s only competition is the other lieutenants, and he seems to be winning.”

That silence descended upon them again. This time it lasted nearly ten whole seconds, no one really making eye contact. Finally, Luther cleared his throat, said, “Do we have any volunteers?”

George looked around. Eight master assassins, each having proven themselves with bow and blade. Not one of them truly wanted to go after Aybars. Each and every one of them, he knew, had felt the toll this job takes – in one form or another. Moxie drank. Troy had poached opium from their cargo before. Adam spent more time in the strip club in Leinster than he did with his own kid. Kellan was master of the meaningless shag. You hit some young, thin boy coming at you for your horse, and you feel it. The only thing any of them would feel after burying the Moon Panther was regret it hadn’t been done sooner.¹

“This will be,” Luther added, “the most challenging assignment anyone who’s ever sat in this hayloft has ever undertaken.”

“At least,” Kelly replied snidely under her breath, “until my girl Jo does in this bastard–”

“Hey,” Moxie cut in, “if we’re aiming for next year’s business gala, *I’m* the one icing that son of a whore. Sorry Jo, I’ve got this thing for fine red wine and–”

“You can have him,” Josephine replied. “You think I want to take on that sort of a risk? Royal security? I’m not mad as a cut snake.”

“One hit at a time, people,” insisted Jess. She sighed. “I’ll do it.”

“No,” George declared. “I’ll do it.”

He’d known he’d be the one to volunteer. Knew right from the moment Moxie started asking way too many questions. Nobody wanted to do it. Nobody else would risk... what had that priest called it – a fate worse than the imagination can command. And that fate would hit Jess worse than it would hit him. Perhaps it was chauvinistic, but the worst they would do to him is just kill him; he wouldn’t let Jessica take this on.

“You sure you want this, George?” Moxie asked.

“What, you think an old bloke can’t handle some upstart savage?”

“We’ve got far less information on the Panther than any other hit we’ve gone after,” said Aaron. “I move we table this. Wait for this trial in Carnarvon to finish, court orders on Payne are rescinded–”

“I don’t particularly feel,” George interrupted, “like traumatizing that girl any more so than she already has been. No offence to Kelly, but none of us here actually are mental health professionals, and I wouldn’t have the first clue as to how to ask that girl to elaborate on details as to what happened to her.”

“A trial with a special prosecutor and a hundred charges could go on for months,” Kelly said. “Years perhaps, by the time evidence discovery and appeals and everything goes through.” He could tell she didn’t particularly like the idea of donning that state deel again and trying to bluff her way past hospital security.

“You could be out in the desert for weeks, George,” Aaron replied. “Months.”

Troy said, “I’m inclined to agree with Aaron. We essentially have no lead.”

“I was a subsistence trader in those parts for years before settling down here,” he replied. “I still have contacts, mates. I have a trial I can monitor. By Kelly’s math, forty-one percent of bandits out there do not owe their allegiance to Mr Aybars – and I imagine some of them would like to see him gone. And if we sit on our hands waiting to interrogate a bandit survivor, more people will die, and the women that she shared her servitude with will suffer that much longer. No, we’re not waiting,” he said conclusively. “This has to end. Now.”

There were hesitant nods around the room.

“All right, so are we all agreed?” he asked.

“Is my dissent noted?” Jess forced herself to say, formally.

“Noted,” said Luther, “but outvoted. Aaron, Troy, your motion is observed. Anyone else want to add to that?”

No one did.

Luther brought his hand out in front of him. George also reached in, put his hand on top. This was followed by Kellan, by Josephine, by Kelly, and so on, excluding the dissenters until a majority was reached.

“I shall leave tomorrow,” George decreed.

There were pleasantries, all the appropriate good lucks and other platitudes to stay safe, and everyone emerged from their seats and began to stretch their legs, their backs.

“One last thing,” voiced Emmanuelleine with her mousy voice. “Uh... unrelated to the... guild of assassins, but um...” She fumbled a little bit, couldn’t make eye contact. “With this syllabus you’ve got set up for me...”

“Oh, right,” said Luther, taking his seat once more. “Tomorrow’s the day you begin *that* subject, isn’t it? Is this about the Wang girl? We’ve kind of bumped her ahead to the senior class because of her grades – do you think she’s too young?”

“She’s got to learn sooner or later,” interjected Josephine.

1 Indeed, Emmanuelleine, who was always the calm one, the voice of mercy (she’d talked them out of hits before, in fact), he could tell would sleep soundly even if she drove the blade home into the bastard’s throat – and she wasn’t a killer. She’d never even gutted a sheep. She was only here because she found out a little too much about these little planning sessions from her on-again-off-again boyfriend.

“Bloody hell,” replied Jess. “She’s like ten. Give her a free afternoon.”

“She’s eleven,” Luther clarified. “Birthday was last week.”

“You didn’t tell me?” squawked Kellan. “Did you have a cake for her?”

“Of course there was cake,” replied Adam.

“Anyway,” enunciated Luther. “She’s without parents, so I guess the decision should be ours. Emmanuelleine, you see her everyday. Do you think she should have a... free afternoon.”

“No,” the teacher replied, about as firmly as you might ever expect from her. “She’s... it’s not going to hurt her, and... I think she should learn it—”

“Agreed,” George chimed in. “Jessica, would you like to voice a case against?”

“No,” Jess sighed. “I retract that.”

“So there’s no argument?” asked Aaron.

“Well,” squeaked Emmanuelleine, “it’s just that...”

“I see,” George said. “You should have a male presence there – not for Miss Wang obviously, but for the boys.” He turned to Emmanuelleine. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Well... yes, certainly. The boys should get a male perspective on these things. Actually, the girls should get a male perspective on these things, too. But, um...”

Josephine stepped in. “Em, this will be your first time teaching sex ed. Is it going to embarrass you too much to talk about it?”

Emmanuelleine went bright red.

“Oh, come on,” said Jess. “You don’t need to get into talking about blowup dolls and the concubines’ bath. You have a diagram of the fallopian tubes and you just talk about it plainly—”

“Let me stop you right there, Jessica,” Luther said. He sighed. Presently he said, “I’ve been meaning to reform this for a while now. This shouldn’t just be an afternoon. This should be a comprehensive topic, just like anything else. They should know about trimesters, menstruation, testicular cancer.... They shouldn’t just have diagrams of fallopian tubes that mean nothing to them, but... well hell, with what they’re exposed to just in town—”

“We’ll continue keeping our eyes open for more medical charts,” Moxie cut in. “But in the meantime, the fallopian diagram and the testes diagram are all we’ve got – unless you want to be showing them porn.”

“That might not be such a bad idea,” said Kelly.

“Leaving aside girls like Miss Wang,” Moxie was quick to respond, “think about some of the other students, who actually have parents. You think handing out skin mags is a good idea? ‘What did you learn in school today, Little Casey?’ ‘Well, I learned what a DP is – look, here’s the textbook I have to study for the night.’”

“All right, all right, all right,” George cut in, raising his voice over the din. He waited, just that half second, to see who would take the bait.

It was Kellan. He thought it might have been Adam, but no, Kellan was first to fill the silence. “Perhaps if one of our own wasn’t *in* porn—”

“Congratulations, Mr Kirkland,” George bellowed as Moxie turned just slightly pink, “you get the honour of writing our new syllabus on sexual education.”

“Wha—”

“Consult all the biology textbooks and come up with a week-long course outline for Ms Weirzebowski to follow going forward. Emmanuelleine, I’ll join you tomorrow before I set out. I’ll let you run the show, and I’ll just interject with things here or there, or talk about boys’ issues when they come up. Does that work for everyone?”

“Well...” Emmanuelleine cut in once more. “Um... a male presence is nice – uh, certainly needed, I’d say, but... I was almost hoping for... some female assistance as well?”

“Ah, Em, you really are too embarrassed to talk about this, aren’t you?” said Kelly with a smile.

“All right, all right,” said Luther. “It’s her first year teaching. It’s not the easiest subject, and we can’t have her turning red and stuttering if one of the kids asks about something like masturbation or oral sex. Em, you are going to lead the course, but we’ll give you some... specialists to help you through this first run-through, okay? Do I have a volunteer? Ms Carver?”

Moxie cast him a sidelong look. “There’s a reason I’m out there killing collectors and not teaching. I don’t have the tact to be around kids. You think it’s a good idea to send me in there to tell them the proper way to fingerbang a woman’s—”

“I’ll do it,” Kelly interjected.

“Great,” drawled Troy. “Replace one dirty mouth with another. How about a woman who’s actually spoken the word *vagina* more than once in her life?”

“Hey,” snapped Kelly. “Listen here you... loose vagina – I can be tactful. And I don’t get embarrassed by these things. What could go wrong?”

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“Um, I have a question,” interrupted Casey Lennox. Kelly and George had been going for about forty-five minutes or so now; Kelly just had a detailed drawing of a breast on the marker board.²

² Kelly was actually a really detailed artist. She sometimes painted.

Emmanuelleine rose from her desk, where she'd observed this lesson largely in silence since introducing the subject and her 'specialists'. "Uh, Miss Lennox, let Ms Conlon finish talking about nursing and then she'll get to you. It's rude to interrupt."

"That's all right, Ms Weirzebowski," said Kelly, keeping things formal with surnames. "Curiosity is a good thing. Yes, Miss Lennox? Do you have a question about breastfeeding?"

"What do you use olive oil for?"

Emmanuelleine was right; she'd never be able to teach this without some help. The teacher turned bright red as she sat back down. George put his hand to his mouth to cover his expression. Kelly looked to the older man, half for sympathy, half for guidance. George, unfortunately, offered neither just then.

Kelly floundered for a second. "Olive oil is...." Then she bit her lip and put her hand to her mouth. Casey was young – and moreover, she had a fairly overbearing mother. George could just imagine what that woman would say if Kelly answered that question.

Kelly, however, after only a second of hesitation, gave a half-shrug. "Well, we're trying to reform the syllabus, aren't we? Okay, Miss Lennox, well, when a man and a woman *really* love each other...."

"Ew," snorted Eunice Dillashaw.

"That's not a real thing, is it?" interjected Elise Buckley. "I thought that was made up."

"Of course it's real," said Buck Deacon. "If a girl wants to sign her name and suck the khan's dick, she's got to be down for a tour of the Greek islands. I heard that."

"One more reason why I'm never signing up for the whorehouse," declared Emily St Croix, crossing her arms.

"Don't say whorehouse," dictated Emmanuelleine, trying to maintain some order.

"Awesome," said Hawk Stains with a grin. "When I go to Ella Humphrey's prom, I'm totally taking some olive oil."

"And condoms," clarified Kelly. "I'll get to condoms in a minute. Where's that banana?"

Emily was sneering at Hawk now, her nose recoiled in disgust. "Like, why would a bloke want to do that when there's a perfectly good other hole...?"

"Okay, okay," piped Emmanuelleine. "Let's set this subject aside. Ladies, you don't *have* to do this. It's not a normal part of sex—"

"Well it's not an *abnormal* part of sex," Kelly retorted.

Kurt Rockford leaned over and elbowed Buck. "Hey, I wonder if Samantha McDermitt at Leinster High has ever gone there? I mean, she screwed the whole soccer team in one night, right? You think the one hole would get sore, no?"

"That's an ugly rumour about her," said Eunice.

Emmanuelleine was really flustered now, her face beet red. "Okay everyone... uh, calm down, calm down."

Petra Howlett put up her hand somewhat cautiously, but Emmanuelleine was already waving her arms. "That's it, no more of this. Ms Conlon, back to nursing please."

Huxley Parker shot up her hand and blurred out, "Like, does it feel... better that way?"

George looked to Kelly. He still had no desire to interject himself in this. Don't answer that, Kelly, he thought. Don't answer that.

Afterwards, outside the classroom, as he and Kelly watched the students filing out, Kelly kept herself quiet. To her credit, she never got embarrassed, hadn't turned pink or stumbled. Whispering, she said to him, "I have to admit, I didn't really expect it to go to buttsex quite as quickly as it did."

He was rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I might suggest, if you thought it would get there *at all*, perhaps you shouldn't have volunteered." He couldn't keep himself from grinning.

She said, "I just got the ball rolling for Kellan. I hope he has fun with his little project."

Emmanuelleine stepped out, pinched the bridge of her nose. "Kelly," she said, "I love you, dear, but..."

"I'll bit you adieu, ladies," he whispered, bowing out and turning the other way.

He walked round the corner and down the hall. He already had his saddlebags packed, out by the barn. He put on his sun hat, shades, and headed out there. Allen Helmuth was there, brushing down Ulysses. As soon as Allen saw George coming, he set his brush down and went for the saddle, which was already prepped.

Lake Darlot was essentially desert, yet the residence didn't keep any camels. Almost none of their trade ran straight through the desert. Therefore, his trusty steed Ulysses would have to see him through these next few weeks.

"You take good care of this one," Allen said, patting the horse on the nose.

"Always do," George replied, tightening up a strap on the saddle Allen had left a little loose. Indeed, this horse, nine years old now, was perhaps his closest companion.

He adjusted the clips on the saddlebags, double checked that all his canteens were full, then went to put his foot in the stirrup.

Kelly's voice came out of nowhere. "Itugen's tits, that woman can lay into you when she wants to."

George took his foot out of the stirrup.

"Allen," Kelly said, "could you give us a minute, mate?"

The coach graciously bowed out.

Kelly waited until he was well out of earshot to look back to George, smiled. "So, where you headed? I'll leave in two days, rendezvous—"

"No," he declared.

She stared at him knowingly. "You're not going after that cunt alone."

"Watch your mouth," he snapped, instinctually. Winced a little. She wasn't fifteen anymore, he had to remind

himself. “You could have volunteered,” he said.

“And you and your patriarchal women and children instinct would have shot me down just as readily as you did with Jess. No, don’t look at me like that – it’s endearing, most of the time. But right now, you’re about to go into what is practically its own khanate and all you have is a name.”

“Kelly,” he sighed, “I knew from the moment Luther called that meeting exactly who he was proposing, and I knew it would be me doing it. This is not a woman thing – I’d have insisted it be me if Troy or Kellan wanted it too,” he lied. “Bandits are simply a different beast than Ministry of Recovery bureaucrats that skim a little on the take.”

“Do I need to mention XK?” she snorted.

He *knew* she was going to go there. Of all the stupid things she’d done in her life – and there had been a few – none were worse than that. It had been almost exactly three years before. Kelly had been hardly twenty-two at the time.

A similar bandit menace had arisen in the desert wastes of South Australia by the name of Xander Koba. He wasn’t at the same scale or severity as the Panther, but he was menacing enough that a single hitter from Cobie’s hayloft was an unmatched fight. Or, at least until more information came in. And that’s what they’d voted on: postpone the assassination, gather more intelligence, let the bastard live for perhaps one more year. All of Cobie’s assassinations require meticulous planning and extreme patience.

Kelly hadn’t liked that plan, had devised her own secret agenda. And he’d known she was going to do it, known she’d sneak out that night to steal a horse. Knowing her, like that, it’s what had allowed him to follow, to pull her out of that goddamned mess – and it was that that proved to him the Moon Panther was not for her. She wasn’t ready.

“Xander Koba was not the Panther,” he replied.

Kelly didn’t blink. “He had about a hundred, maybe upwards of one fifty men,” she replied. “You think the Panther’s worse than that?”

“Could well be,” he said neutrally.

“I had a special talent to get me into Koba’s inner circle. You’ve got... mates from seventeen years ago you’re going to track down in dive bars?”

“I think I know what I’m doing.” He was getting a little defensive now.

Don’t do it, Kelly, he thought. Don’t... don’t you even think–

“Koba could eat a good t–”

He jabbed his arm out, clamped his palm down over her mouth.

For fuck’s sake, she was just trying to mess with him now, get under his skin.

He sighed. “I don’t need to know this,” he snarled.

She put her hand on his wrist, gently. In a softer voice now, she said, “You helped me back then – *saved* me, I’ll admit. Let me help you now.”

He sighed. She’d spent the better part of the year mucking out the stables for the Xander Koba stunt. Could have been worse, had he not argued mercy behind closed doors.

“They wanted you excommunicated,” he said. “Gone, told to pack your bags and get out. I did you two favours with Mr Koba. You owe me big time, kid. And you can repay me by staying the fuck out of this one,” he enunciated (using language she’d appreciate). “I mean it, Kelly. I love you, I really do – do *not* disappoint me here.”

She stared him down for a long moment, like a cat. Finally she let out her breath, broke eye contact. “I’ll never forgive myself if–”

“I need to hear that even less,” he cut in. A sigh. “Listen, trust me on this. There are some things a man just needs to do, and for me, this is one of those things.”

“I am disgusted by the things–”

“I need to do this,” he emphasized. “Trust me.” Leaned in, kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll be fine, kid. Don’t ever think otherwise.”

Without waiting for a retort, he spun, stepped into the stirrup, heaved himself up onto Ulysses. “Besides,” he said, swinging the animal around, “can’t have you hampering my style. I’m thinking I’ll track down Ms Andrean and turn on the charm. Mr Koba’s not the only one that knows how to use his tongue.”

“Don’t give me that shit, old man. Everyone knows my generation invented sex.”

“Keep yourself out of trouble while I’m gone.” Then he flicked the reins, and Ulysses started moving. He left Kelly standing there by the horse pen. He prayed to God he’d see her again.

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