



By Matthew C. Brown

When Klint Pepperdam went to take a drink from his canteen and realized all the water had leaked out of a bullet hole, he was mighty pissed for more than one reason.

The beat-to-shit steel canteen was stamped with his great-grandpa's initials which, incidentally, had also been "K.P.", for Kevin Pepperdam. It was only fitting that the canteen had been handed down to Klint, and it quickly became his most prized possession. He'd taken it everywhere, even as a boy. Out here, in the middle of the dry, desolate wilderness of the Barren Expanse, the canteen was indispensable.

Except when it was empty.

He turned the canteen upside down and opened his mouth wide, hoping that at least one measly drop of water had survived the leak and would quench his budding thirst.

"Oh, come on."

No dice. Great. Now he was raptorless *and* waterless.

His shoulders sagged under his frayed brown coat.

The signature Pepperdam luck, he thought bitterly.

The day had started out bad. So bad that if bad was a person, bad would have taken one look at the day and stayed the fuck in bed.

First, he'd woken up late—in the wrong bed, no less—and with a splitting headache courtesy of some shitty whisky Jimbo had swiped in Drick. He'd planned to make his getaway early in the morning, but Jimbo, the only gang member he actually liked, had convinced him to have a drink or four, so he'd overslept big time.

Second, the first person to greet him had been Darden. With a gun. Two guns, actually. And a really angry face. Darden had accused Klint of cheating at cards the night before. And the night before *that*. And the night before *that* night before.

Darden had been right, of course. The only thing Klint was really good at was cheating at cards. Not indefinitely apparently, but enough to rake in three nights' worth of redolls. But Klint wasn't gonna admit to that. And even if he did, they were in a *gang* for god's sake. If they were gonna cheat and steal from other people, what was stopping them from doing it to each other? Besides, it wasn't Klint's fault that it had taken Darden and the rest of the gang three whole days to figure out that they were being cheated and that they were all idiots.

So, Klint had made a break for it. Somehow, he'd escaped the hideout without a scratch. Well, except on his goddamn canteen.

The third, final, and potentially most fatal bit of bad luck to occur this morning was that the ensuing gunfire had spooked his raptor, Alinza. Poor girl had let out a shriek and bolted before Klint had a chance to mount her. He'd watched her dash into the desert, reptilian tail whipping every which way, screeching her little lizard head off.

So, instead of getting shot, Klint was gonna die of thirst in the middle of the Barren Expanse. But at least he'd die with a sack full of redolls.

Klint sighed, let his canteen hang at his side, and continued his trudge through the desert. The rock and dirt that crunched beneath his boots sounded as dry as his mouth felt. He tried to whistle for Alinza, but it came out as a feeble hiss. It didn't matter anyway; the raptor was nowhere in sight.

He passed by a patch of night cacti, all caked in gray ash from their nightly burning. Using a small knife and his coat sleeve to protect his hand, Klint hacked off a piece off the stalk and tossed it in his rucksack. At nightfall, the cacti chunk would ignite, and then Klint would have a nice fire to cook food and keep him warm in the dark desert.

Assuming he found food. And assuming he lived to see the sunset and good ol' Arko Moon No. 29 shining its purple light. *And* assuming his night under the stars wouldn't end with Darden waking him up with a gun barrel shoved up his nose. For Klint, that was three assumptions too many.

Above all else, he needed his raptor back.

He tried to whistle again. It was just as pitiful the second time.

"Alinza! Come on back now, girl!"

Nothing.

Who am I kidding, Klint thought. She's gone. Pepperdam luck, Klint. You always forget.

...

Klint did in fact live to see the sunset. The starry night sky draped itself over the desert. He found a nice, harmless looking rock that he could put his back to so that no one could sneak up behind him, and huddled beside the flaming chunk of night cacti. He'd found a few beetles idling on the rock, and he'd immediately snatched them up and shoved them in his mouth. They were crunchy and full of protein, but they weren't real food, and his stomach growled at the paltry, possibly offensive offering.

He instinctively went to unpack his bedroll until he realized it was on his saddle, which was on his raptor's back, and that raptor was somewhere very far away by now.

Klint inspected his treasured canteen. He traced his finger around the bullet hole. Maybe he could repair it somehow.

And fill it with what, Klint? Rocks?

Though the heat of the desert had departed with the sun, he was still parched, and his throat felt like it was lined with gravel. He almost wished he was back at the hideout. He had no love for Darden's gang, otherwise he wouldn't have tried to cheat them out of their money. But at least he'd had a bed, food, and drink. Now he had a rock, a small fire, and some money that would make his dried up corpse look extra appealing when he finally kicked it from dehydration.

*I wonder what part of my face the drillcrows will go for first. My eyes? My tongue?
Maybe my—*

Something broke the delicate silence of the desert.

Klint perked up. Was that the wind? No, it wasn't even a little windy out tonight, but it sounded just like a whistling wind.

Klint craned his neck. Now that he was focused on it, the whistling actually sounded...musical? What the hell *was* that?

Then he spotted it: Out in the distance, a tiny flicker of orange firelight in the sea of shadowy desert.

Someone is out there.

But who the hell was out here in the middle of the desert? Some other gang? Travelers? Cannibals? Normally, Klint would have advised himself to mind his own business but...

His stomach roared and he licked his chapped lips. Yes, they presented a compelling argument. This might be his only chance at food between here and Drick.

He left his fire and ventured out into the desert, focused on the neighboring firelight and the whistling. He shivered and pulled his coat tight around himself as he walked. His eyes eventually acclimated to the dark and the purple moonlight lit the way just enough that he managed to avoid tripping over a coiled barrensake.

It was a slow walk. His feet ached, he was cold, and his body pleaded for nourishment. Eventually, he could actually see flames from the camp, and the whistling was louder. Melodic.

Almost lulling. It made him think of his mama, Jen Pepperdam, singing him to sleep as a boy. As he got closer, something metal and shiny reflected in the firelight. An instrument?

Klint's spirits lifted slightly. A guy playing music in the middle of the desert couldn't be all bad, right? Most of the musicians he'd met had been nice people. Well, except for Brinly, he was an asshole, but he'd also spent more time strangling people with piano wire than actually playing piano, so maybe he didn't count as a real musician.

Klint quickened his pace, desperate to hail the camper and offer up his hard earned redolls in exchange for something, *anything* to eat. He wasn't picky. He'd just eaten beetles only a few hours ago. And if the camper didn't offer anything up, well, Klint also had a gun, and that often proved as persuasive as money, if not moreso.

He slowed his pace and frowned at the peculiar campsite.

Four raptors sat around the fire, all settled down and sleeping. Among them, sitting with his back to a medium-sized striped raptor, was a lone man with a short wispy beard, wearing a poncho and a floppy wide-brimmed hat. And he was playing the flute. The silvery instrument gleamed in the light of the flames.

Is he a ranch hand or something?

Klint didn't know of any raptor ranches nearby. Then again, he wasn't a rancher himself, so what the hell did he know?

The man ended his playing with a whimsical flourish, then lowered the flute. He looked right at Klint as he stood on the fringe of the firelight.

"Good evening, my friend!"

He smiled broadly. Klint wasn't sure if the grin made him want to sit by the fire or haul ass back the way he came.

"I...uh..." he mumbled. "I saw your fire. Well, rather, I heard you play *and* saw your fire, so—"

"Ah, my apologies." The man bowed his head. "You heard a piece that is...not quite ready for the masses yet. I am still trying to smooth out the many little creases that remain. And yet I find more. A song is never truly finished, some say."

Klint didn't know shit about writing songs, but he nodded anyway.

The man tucked his flute away beneath his poncho. "But you didn't come for the music. You look like the sort of man in need of some sustenance. A moment."

The man reached into the saddle of the raptor he was leaning against. That was when Klint saw the mark on his left cheek: a red zig-zag with four marks on either side.

Klint's breath caught.

Vilaxxon.

There it was again. The goddamn Pepperdam luck. He'd taken a chance at trying to get some food only to run into a member of the Vilaxxon gang. Or was he an ex-member? Klint couldn't remember what the tattoo was supposed to represent, but he knew one thing for certain: anyone associated with the Vilaxxon, current or former, was not to be fucked with.

Klint's hand moved to the revolver strapped to his thigh, prepared for the remote possibility that this man was a cannibal about to pull out a very human looking haunch to share.

Or he could be grabbing a gun, too.

Klint's heart slammed against his chest.

Now or never, Klint.

The man held out half a loaf of bread.

Klint stared, finger just grazing his holster.

"Go ahead," the man said, still grinning. "I've already supped and had my fill."

Klint's first thought was that there had to be something wrong with the bread, or that this guy might kill him while he was eating. But his stomach won him over. If he was gonna die, might as well have something in his stomach.

Klint reached slowly for the bread and took it. He stood awkwardly for a moment, not sure if he should sprint back to his fire or if he'd have a bullet in the back before he got two steps away.

"You need not stand." The man beckoned to his own flaming stalk of night cacti. "Sit and eat, please."

Klint sat next to the fire as if he were under a spell. Then he ripped into the bread like a raptor starved. He'd expected it to be stale, but it was still soft and sweet.

"Thank you," he said through a muffled mouth.

"Of course. Now, I wonder what brings one such as yourself out in the middle of the Barren Expanse at such an hour?"

"I—"

"Oh, don't tell me! I am keen to guess."

Klint blinked. “Um. Okay.”

The man stroked his beard. “Well, you’re clearly on the run, that much is apparent—”

“It is?”

“—only I’m not certain if you are running from the law or the lawless.”

Klint swallowed a mouthful of bread. “Does it matter?”

“Not really. But I am interested all the same.”

Weird guy.

Klint chewed. The raisins were sweet on his tongue. And the apricot was...

He stopped chewing and looked at the bread again. It wasn’t from a can; he could tell by its shape. And it wasn’t stale because it had been baked only yesterday. And this far out into the Barren Expanse, there weren’t many places you could get fresh baked bread, or at least none with both raisins and apricots. That is, unless you lived at Darden’s hideout, where Barbara “Mitts” Mittster made a loaf a day. Klint swiped yesterday’s loaf in preparation for his getaway and stored it in a provisions bag on his saddle.

Only then did Klint take a closer look at the raptor the strange man was leaning against. Her bright green skin with blue feathers and stripes were hard to make out in the dark, but he knew now that he was looking right at Alinza.

So. Not only had he chosen to waltz up to a Vilaxxon’s campfire, but the same Vilaxxon had stolen his raptor.

Klint imagined his grandpa grinning a crooked grin while chuckling about the unpredictable chaos that was the Pepperdam family’s luck. If grandpa were in front of him right now—and not dead—Klint would have punched those crooked teeth right out of his skull.

The man craned his head. “Something amiss, friend?”

Klint jolted out of his thoughts. “Nope.”

He stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth to buy some time. Okay, so the guy had his raptor. And he was a current or former member of the most dangerous gang on the planet. Still, he was a man, and all men on all sides of the law loved the same thing.

“You’ve got a lot of raptors,” Klint offered.

The man spread his arms. “Fine beasts, are they not? And you know, no two raptors ride the same. Each one has its own cadence, all different as you sit atop them.”

Klint wasn't sure about that, but he also hadn't ridden a raptor besides Alinza for at least six years.

"Do you work for a ranch?"

The man tilted his head from side to side. "In a manner of speaking."

"Well, you must have guessed I don't have a mount."

"I assumed."

"You also guessed I'm on the run. And you were right."

"Oh, I *know* I was right."

"Then you can understand that I'm looking to get away from here. Quickly."

"And where is it you are headed?"

"Why do you care?"

"I am merely curious."

"Rodim," Klint lied. If this all went south, he didn't want this Vilaxxon following him back to Drick.

The man nodded sagely. "Ah. Quite the distance. A raptor would surely help."

"It surely would." He nodded casually at Alinza. "How willing would you be to part with one of your raptors? Like that one? For two hundred redolls?"

The man put a protective hand on Alinza's neck like she was his own. Bastard.

"I understand your predicament, but I'm afraid I'm reluctant to part with any of these raptors. I only just acquired this one earlier today." He patted Alinza. "I couldn't bear to part with her, not even for such a sum."

Klint resisted the urge to draw his gun and shoot. But the guy could have a gun under his poncho for all Klint knew.

"Then again," the man said, leaning forward. "Maybe there's a way I'd be willing to part with her. We could make this more interesting. Pass the time, so to speak."

"I'm listenin'."

The man flashed a grin. "How about a wager? A simple one, to determine whether you're worthy enough to take possession of this raptor."

Klint stared for a moment, then said slowly, "A wager on what?"

"How about...a game of Edge Poker?"

It took Klint an exceptional amount of willpower not to grin. “Okay. I’ve played before, but I don’t really remember the rules.”

“I shall explain then,” the man said, pulling a tattered pack of playing cards—Klint’s, actually—from Alinza’s saddlebag. “It’s quite simple.”

Klint nodded absently as the man explained the rules of Edge Poker, the very same game Klint had played to cheat Darden out of his money.

Finally, the ol’ Pepperdam luck is turning a corner.

...

Klint’s father had taught him how to play Edge Poker. Klint had taught himself how to cheat.

As a teenager, he’d tried almost every technique he could think of from hiding cards up his sleeve to marking the deck. He’d gotten his share of black eyes and bloody lips after pulling those tricks. But now he’d perfected his technique, and he knew exactly how to control the game: fake tells, false shuffling, bottom dealing if necessary. The trick with a two-player game was that, depending on his opponent’s skill and perceptiveness, he could figure out right quick if Klint was cheating.

But Klint feigned ignorance at the game and threw the first round even though he had the winning hand. It was the perfect beginning to a game with a stranger that had never played him before.

By the fifth and final round, the Vilaxxon man was sitting pretty with fifty redolls—about a quarter of Klint’s score from his prior games. Klint still had a sackful of one-hundred fifty redolls.

If the man was tense, he didn’t show it. He smiled throughout the entire game, never once betraying his hand. It was a solid poker face, but it didn’t bother Klint. This was *his* game. By the time this guy figured out he’d been cheated—if he ever did—Klint would be long gone.

Klint held two moons in his hand and wore a serious face, one that told his opponent he wasn’t sure if his cards were good or not. Except, Klint knew this guy had nothing in his hand that could beat him. The other two moons sat amongst the five cards lined up between them.

The tattooed Vilaxxon pondered his cards with that same smile he’d worn all game and looked up at Klint. “What say you, friend?”

Klint feigned indecisiveness by biting his lip, then drew himself up.

“How about this?” He tossed his whole sack of redolls between them. “You keep the fifty you won, but I go all in against your raptor.”

To his opponent, this looked like a clumsy bluff and a desperate attempt to get a raptor. In reality, since he was about to win, letting the man keep his winnings would dull the pain of losing and hopefully lessen the chance of Klint getting a gun pulled on him.

The man raised his eyebrows. “Bold. But, very well.”

The man laid down his hand: four of a kind, tens. It would have been a solid winning hand in any other game.

Klint nodded. “Well, now. I reckon I can beat that.”

He laid down his two moons, looked up at the man expectantly. “That’s game, right?”

Without betraying his body language, he shifted his hand closer to his gun. This was always the part where his opponent stood up and stormed away, swore at him, threw his cards, or even tried to shoot him. And since this guy was either current or former Vilaxxon, Klint expected a certain level of hostility.

Instead, the man clapped and grinned.

That’s...different.

“Bravo, my friend! A game well played for an amateur.”

“Thanks,” Klint said. “You, er, seem mighty gracious for a guy who just lost.”

The man spread his arms. “That is the nature of the game, is it not? Show me a man who has never lost, and I’ll show you a life without risk. And a life without risk is practically sinful.”

Considering Klint made it his business *not* to lose, he wasn’t sure he could completely agree.

“So,” he said, getting to his feet. “Can I have her, then? Long road ahead and all.”

The man stood up as well. “She’s all yours. I warn you though, she may not wish to part with me. She can get a bit nippy.”

Klint could have pistol-whipped the man right there. It was his fucking raptor in the first place!

No sense stirring up trouble. Just take Alinza and go before he turns you into a human poncho, or whatever Vilaxxon do.

Sure, he'd lost a little money, but he could easily make that up when he got to Drick. He could set himself up at Marleen's and gamble until he decided what to do next. Hell, maybe Marleen would give him a job watching over the tables. It took a cheat to catch a cheat, after all.

The man stepped away from the snoozing raptor and beckoned Klint over. Klint crouched beside Alinza and scratched under her chin the way she liked. She opened her eyes: they were like glowing orbs of amber in the firelight. She recognized him and let out an affectionate chirp, which Klint hoped wouldn't give him away.

"Before you leave," the man said. "Perhaps I can interest you in a song? Call it a parting gift."

Klint didn't really want to stay any longer than he had to. Then again, what harm was there? The guy could obviously play, and Klint didn't want to risk pissing him off.

"Sure, why not?" Klint said, still scratching Alinza's chin.

The man bowed low, produced his flute with a spinning flourish, then snapped it up to his lips and began to play.

The tune started as a low, dangerous sounding trill. Klint felt a strange tingle go down his back, like when someone was sneaking up on him in the dark. A few short, piercing notes broke up the melody before dipping back down to that trill.

Strange song.

He turned back to Alinza. "Come on, girl. Let's get—"

A low growl rumbled through the raptor's throat. Klint jerked back.

What the hell?

The raptor slowly rose to her feet. The deep growl in her throat grew louder. Angrier. Dangerous. The black pupils of her amber eyes were reduced to paper thin slits.

"Hey, uh, mister?" Klint said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I think that song of yours is upsettin' her."

The man paused his playing, eyes glittering beneath that large hat. "Oh, I think she likes it just fine."

He put the mouthpiece up to his lips again and continued that trill, alternating with the high piercing notes that made Klint wince.

Alinza took a step toward him, head held low, eying him like he was a freshly slaughtered cattalo corpse. Klint swore the growling was louder now, if that was somehow possible.

She bared her razor-sharp jaws and snapped at him.

Klint stumbled back and bumped into something large. And growling. He turned to see one of the other raptors—a big dark blue one—with teeth bared. The other two raptors were on their feet as well, no longer sleeping but stalking towards him, heads bent forward like they were hunting, thin-slitted eyes glowing in the light of the fire.

Enough of this.

Klint ripped his gun from his holster and aimed it at the man.

“Stop playin’. *Now.*”

The man did as requested, though he kept the flute close to his lips.

“Good. Now toss that flute over—”

Alinza lunged. Klint reflexively jerked his hand back, but she snatched the gun right out of his hand and nicked his finger in the process. He stumbled back, heart jangling like a minecart off the rails, clutching his bloodied hand to his chest.

The man stuck out his chin. He was still smiling, but there was no hint of joviality to it. Klint knew that kind of grin. He’d seen it at one too many card tables. That was the look of a man with the perfect hand, the perfect bet, set to win.

“I did tell you,” the man said in a low voice, “that she could get a bit nippy.”

Now Klint really was trembling, shrinking as the four raptors eyed him hungrily. He’d seen men ripped apart by raptors before, but it was usually their own damn fault: pulling on tails or trying to jump onto the raptor while it was eating. But this wasn’t that. These raptors were in full blown kill mode. As if the music had awakened that deadly kill instinct they were known and feared for. And Klint was on the receiving end of it.

He saw Grandpa Pepperdam’s crooked smile and heard his old cackle.

Klint broke into a run. He knew it was pointless. The raptors would catch up to him in no time, snatch him by each limb and tear him apart. A pretty shitty way to die, overall.

His labored breathing filled his ears, the sound of his feet on the hard dirt crushing with each step.

He tripped over a rock in the dark and fell on his bad hand. He groaned, his bloodied finger stinging from the addition of dirt into the wound.

That’s it. I’m fucking dead. That’s all my luck has gotten me. Eaten by my own raptor and—

Nothing. No thudding raptor feet. No shrieks. No sharp tiny teeth tearing through his flesh. He sat up and looked behind him, panting and frowning.

The raptors remained by the fire. The man with the flute waved at him and called, "*I did so enjoy our little game!*"

It took Klint Pepperdam a moment to realize he was not about to be tomorrow's pile of raptor shit after all. It took him yet another moment to make his legs move again before the raptors changed their mind.

...

He wasn't sure when exactly he'd passed out. Sometime after dawn, his body, shocked from last night's scare and deprived of sleep, had just given the fuck up. The last thing he remembered was falling to his knees and making a mound of dirt his pillow.

When he came to, he was no longer resting on his dirt pillow. He blinked the dust and sunlight from his eyes, realized his arms and legs were bound and that he was in the shade of a large boulder.

He spotted a raptor out of the corner of his eye, and he nearly jumped right out of his skin.

But it wasn't one of the raptors from last night. Their owners were all here. Unfortunately.

The five members of Darden's gang surrounded him. The one right in front of him was Darden himself. He was shuffling a deck of cards and he was not smiling.

"Mornin', Darden," Klint rasped.

"You hungry, Pepperdam?" Darden asked, still shuffling the cards.

It wasn't the first thing Klint had expected to hear out of Darden's mouth, but he played along.

"Starvin'."

"Here then."

He shoved a four of dusk into Klint's mouth.

Klint choked, tried to spit it out. It tasted faintly of Darden's tobacco stained fingers.

"Hold his mouth shut," Darden said to Jimbo. "See that he swallows his breakfast."

Jimbo looked at Klint apologetically, then forced his jaw shut with a pair of meaty hands. He had no saliva to break apart the paper, so he restored to grinding between his teeth. Eventually, he choked the pulpy mass down, like overly thick oatmeal down his dry throat.

That's going to be a nice stomach cramp later.

Jimbo released his jaw. Darden continued to shuffle the deck, his eyes never leaving Klint's own.

"You like that? There's a whole lot more where that came from. Fifty-one helpings to be exact."

"I think I'm good," Klint muttered.

"You're good when I say your good," Darden snapped. "You've no right to be choosy, Pepperdam. But, if you tell me where my money is, maybe we'll still have a few cards left over for a game. A *fair* game."

Klint suspected that even if he'd beaten Darden at a fair game he'd be in more or less the same spot he was in now, but that was beside the point.

Am I really going to give this asshole his money back?

Only a few hours ago, Klint Pepperdam had learned that there were way more terrifying things in the Barren Expanse than Darden and his gang. But Klint also knew that if you got caught cheating and had no way out, the easiest thing to do was to just give the money back, beg pardon profusely, and live to cheat another day.

Klint nodded at his bag. "It's all in there."

Darden whistled at Frany and pointed to the bag. She sauntered over, rummaged through it, then looked up at Darden and shook her head.

Darden turned back to Klint. "Try again."

Klint blinked. "I—"

Then he remembered. Amidst the adrenaline-fueled terror of the night before, as the tattooed Vilaxxon played his flute and riled up the raptors—and just *how* the fuck had he done that anyhow?—Klint recalled the sack of redolls, left behind amongst the playing cards.

Klint opened his mouth to explain.

Darden shoved a ten of dawn in his mouth.

"You're not fucking me over this time, Pepperdam," he growled. "I am *literally* holding all the cards. So tell me where my money is—"

He stuck a three of dreams in Klint's mouth.

“—or I'll shove every last one of these down your goddamn throat until you choke to death.”

Klint spat out the cards then smacked his lips to get the taste out. “Darden, you know I'm a cheat at cards, but I don't do much lyin' otherwise. You wanna know where your money is? Trust me when I say you wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

Darden pulled a moon of dusk from the deck and pressed the edge against Klint's chin. “Tell me anyway.”

Well, what the hell?

“A flute-playin' Vilaxxon with four killer raptors has it.”

Darden stared at Klint like he'd just snorted a line of beetles. Then he shoved the card in his mouth.

“Why do you continue to dick around with me?” Darden said.

He shoved another card in. And another. Klint tried to spit them out, but Darden stuffed a fourth card in.

“You already fucked around with me once, and look where that got you.”

Klint tried to speak through the card but gagged.

“Oh, I know what you're gonna say. The Pepperdam luck, right? You're always bitching about it. You think luck is the reason you're sitting here getting a—let's see, what's this one?—a three of day playing card shoved in your mouth?”

The card joined the wad of paper playing cards in his mouth. Klint's eyes watered, his throat bobbed. If Darden put any more in there he was gonna start choking to death on the cards. He could almost appreciate the irony.

“This ain't luck's fault, Klint,” Darden growled. “It's *your* fault. Because you're an asshole cheat. And nobody likes—”

“Good morning, friends!”

Everyone stopped. Darden held a four of day halfway up to Klint's mouth. Klint took the opportunity to hawk up a card or two.

“Over here! Yes, good morning!”

I know that voice.

He looked to his left and in his shock nearly swallowed the remaining cards in his mouth.

The Vilaxxon man rode Alinza sidesaddle towards Darden's gang, waving like it was the most beautiful day to ever grace the Barren Expanse. He was flanked by the three other raptors from last night.

Klint spat out another card. "Darden, that's—"

Darden shoved another card in his mouth to gag him, then stood up and approached the newcomer. The Vilaxxon slid off his saddle and walked up Darden, who fixed him with one of his signature scowls.

The Vilaxxon grinned. "Is something the matter, Mister...?"

"Darden. And that depends. This cheating sack of shit over here says you have my money. That true?"

The Vilaxxon glanced in Klint's direction, then screwed his face up in thought. "Money. Money, money...oh, yes! We did play a little game last night, though I was not aware it was *your* money."

"It is." Darden drew a gun. The other four members followed suit. "And I want it back. Now."

The Vilaxxon grinned. "Oh come now, there's no need to resort to firearms so quickly."

Klint finally spat the last of the cards out of his mouth. "Darden, for fuck's sake listen—"

Darden fired off a round that struck the boulder a foot above Klint's head. A trickle of gravel fell into his hair. He snapped his mouth shut. He had a feeling the next shot would hit something more vital.

"Here's the deal, *friend*," Darden said. "You say you didn't know whose money it was. I believe you. That's why I'm willing to let you and your raptors walk back to whatever far-flung ranch you come from. All you have to do is give me the money back. No harm, no foul."

The Vilaxxon tilted his head from side to side. "Hm. Hmm hmm hmm. I must admit, I am a bit reluctant to give up the money. I did win it fair and square off this gentleman last night."

Klint perked up. "*What?* No you didn't!"

"*Shut the fuck up, Kint!*" Darden roared. He rounded on the Vilaxxon man, gun raised. "I don't care how you got the money. It's *mine*. Hand it over before I put another mark on your face."

The Vilaxxon man sighed, completely unperturbed by the gun barrel that was getting intimate with his left eyeball. "Your argument is a...persuasive one. Very well."

He produced the sack of redolls from beneath his poncho and handed it to Darden. Darden hefted the sack, then tossed it to Frany. “Count it up. I want to make sure every last coin is in there.”

Frany beckoned Jimbo over to help count up the redolls.

“Well, then,” the Vilaxxon said. “How about we put this whole misunderstanding behind us once and for all?”

He whipped his flute out from beneath his poncho. The mere sight of it made Klint’s heart hammer against his chest so hard he might as well have pulled out an Arko-issued flame thrower.

“Allow me the privilege of playing you a little tune while you count out your wares.”

Darden frowned and turned away. “Whatever you say. Fuckin’ weirdo.”

The Vilaxxon began to play. It was that same low tone again. In the stark light of day, the music was no less foreboding, especially now that Klint knew what it could do.

As soon as he heard the chorus of growling raptors, Klint turned away and shut his eyes. He didn’t want to see what happened next. But he heard it all. Every last scream, crunch, and splatter.

...

He pissed himself at some point. He didn’t realize it because the rest of his faculties were focused on shutting out the sights and sounds of the slaughter. Now, he heard a different sound; heavy raptor footsteps. Trembling, Klint made himself look up.

Alinza’s bright green snout stared back at him. Her breath was sickly warm and her chops were slicked red from a fresh kill. Klint tried to brace himself as best he could for what had to be coming.

I’m next. I’ve gotta be next. That’s just how all this would end: eaten by my own fucking raptor.

Alinza nuzzled him. Klint gaped, only half aware that the raptor had just smudged whatever was left of Darden onto his face.

“The raptor is fond of you.”

The Vilaxxon man stepped out from behind the raptor. He looked down on Klint like he was a boy who’d fallen over and scraped his knees.

“Uh. Yeah. I guess so.”

“She’s yours.”

Klint nodded.

The man held up the sack of redolls. It was redder than when Klint had last seen it.

“I count two-hundred redolls exactly,” the man said. “What say I keep the money and you have your raptor back. Yes?”

Klint stared at the man then looked down at his bonds. “Since I’m in no position to negotiate, I’d say that sounds fair.”

The man threw back his head and laughed. “Well said, friend!”

After his bonds were undone, Klint caught sight of Darden’s remains. It looked like he’d been turned inside out. Klint’s empty stomach threatened to heave, and he had to turn away, hand clutched over his face to stave off the smell.

“So, why leave me alive?” Klint asked when they’d walked some distance away from the Darden gang’s final resting place. Five new raptors, bereft of their owners, followed the man’s growing pack. “I did cheat you last night, after all, you realize that.”

“Cheating is just another way to win and nothing more,” the man said simply. “And anyway, the game was still good fun, and I can’t in good faith kill you over a bit of fun. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess.” Klint eyed the man as he climbed into the saddle of a large dark blue raptor. “You’re no raptor rancher, are you?”

The man eyed him with a suddenly cool gaze. “Let’s just say you should count yourself extremely lucky that I’m letting you walk away with your raptor.”

Klint almost snorted with laughter. Yep, it was luck all right.

He pulled himself up into Alinza’s saddle. The familiarity of the seat beneath him felt good.

“One more thing,” the man said. “You said you were headed for…Rodim, was it?”

“Drick, actually,” Klint said. There was no reason to lie now. He was almost afraid to.

“Ah. Well, I tell you this as one last favor, from one cheat to another: be sure that you move on from Drick in the next two months or so. I’d hate for you to get caught up in all of it.”

Klint frowned. “All of what?”

The man grinned. “You’ll see.”

Klint suppressed a shiver.

As he watched the Vilaxxon and his raptor pack ride away, his hand wandered to his empty canteen at his side. It was still empty, and now he didn't have a single redoll to his name.

But he had a raptor. And the gambling tables of Drick were waiting for him at the end of the day's ride. More importantly, he wasn't dead. With that in mind, Klint Pepperdam couldn't shake the feeling his luck had just turned a corner.

Acknowledgements

First of all, thank you for reading “Pepperdam Luck: Tales from Eckus VI”. I appreciate you taking the time to read this little story. This project was a lot of fun, and although it’s only a short story, I did have some help getting it out there.

Thank you to my friends and family that read the story in its initial drafts and for your feedback. I know I make you all read my work all the time and your feedback is always appreciated.

Thank you to my agent John Baker who managed to poke his head out from under a pile of full-length manuscripts to read this story and encouraged me to put it out for people to read.

Thank you to my wife Lizzy for not only reading and providing feedback, but for painting the artwork that accompanied the story. Your support is as steady and unwavering as your brush.