Up In The Grizzlies

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Summary

Javier gets himself lost in the snow while out looking for John. He is picked up by the Del Lobos.
Frozen

The wind howled and the flakes of snow whistled by Javier’s ears faster than bullets. He was surrounded on all sides by a fog of white, which turned him both sight and sound blind. The sudden storm had caught him and Arthur by surprise, coming down from the high peaks with a frosty vengeance; as if the mountain were offended to find two strangers lolloping about on its slopes.

Javier called for Arthur, once, twice, several times – but he struggled even to hear his own voice. There was a chance he wasn’t too far ahead, so he carried on, urging Boaz foreword. The stallion struggled in the deep snow, head low, panting and shivering.

“Meirda…” He was so cold now that his nose, fingers and ears had gone numb. If he lived through this without getting frostbite, it would be a miracle. Javier couldn’t turn back now. Returning to camp not only without John, but without Arthur too would be beyond shameful. He wouldn’t abandon his friends to the elements, even if it meant freezing to death himself. He wondered if Arthur had any luck finding Marston; maybe they were safe, tucked away somewhere waiting out the storm.

That thought gave Javier a bit of heart, and he pushed on.

But soon enough, fatigue began to take over. He hadn’t had a proper meal in days, and the constant cold made a man not only miserable, but tired. Javier could feel himself nodding off in the saddle, but he fought his body’s instincts for a little while longer.

Boaz whinnied with concern when Javier slipped from his back, landing with a soft thump into the snow. He hopped up and down before settling, nudging at the body of his master with his snout. Javier didn’t respond.

There the horse stood, alone, and being battered by the sleet; his coat slowly being covered in crystal snow.

Then, from the distance, a dim orange light could be seen. It swayed back at forth, flickering uncertainly in the flurry, but slowly getting closer. There were voices, calling to each other in Spanish; each man struggling to make himself heard over the sound of the wind.

Flaco Hernández appeared like a great bear out of the storm. He was trudging through the snow with immense effort; his fur coat ruffled and dusted white, holding a lantern in one outstretched hand. The Del Lobos had the misfortune of getting caught in the squall just as they were returning from a hunt. They had not taken their mounts as they were not that far from camp; before they’d managed to catch anything, the weather had turned.

Flaco was surprised to find a lone horse out in this, and more surprised even to find the body of a man at its feet.

He called for his men to stop, and knelt down to inspect the stranger; fully expecting to find him dead. Putting two fingers to the man’s neck, Flaco not only to felt traces of warmth, but also a pulse. “Not gone yet, eh, friend?”

Flaco turned him over, and although pale, he could see that the young man was Latino; possibly Mexican, like himself. This was puzzling; as the old gunslinger had been sure they were the only Mexicans in these parts.
He was not a man frequently moved to pity. Flaco knew he was not a kind man, and made no pretences. Life was hard up here; there was no time for kindness or softness of any sort. Maybe if this was a white man, Flaco would have left him.

Ramón, his second, trudged over and loomed over Flaco’s shoulder. “Boss? We can’t linger, the weather is getting worse.” He said, and then paused before he spoke again. “We don’t have a lotta spare food, boss, and this one looks half dead already.”

“Yes, half-dead, but not wholly dead yet,” Grunting, Flaco lifted the stranger up and over the back of his horse. He weighed little. The animal nickered, tossing his head back and forth – Flaco soothed him with a hand on the stallion’s muzzle. The man came alive just a bit, mumbling into the flank of the horse; a string of Spanish and English nonsense.

Ramón stewed in resentment at being ignored, his lip twitching, but said nothing. Flaco had no time to worry about him, he had to lead his men back safely, and get the stranger in somewhere warm.

With a whistle, Flaco rallied the Del Lobos and mounted the stallion, slowly turning the grey and white beast in the direction of their camp.

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Javier came around in degrees. First, he was aware that the sound of the harsh wind was muffled. Then, he realised that his body, though shivering, was in fact warming up. He was lying on a cot – one with a lumpy mattress – but it made a better bed than the freezing snow.

Opening his eyes, the four walls of a cabin came into view. It was somewhat rickety, judging from the occasional creaks that he could hear; but for now it seemed to be holding up.

There were a few furnishings, a table piled with some melted candles, empty bottles, some pelts hanging on the wall, and a chest.

Nearby, a log fire was burning and crackling away.

Slowly, Javier rose, a blanket falling from body; someone had carried him here, and put him in this bed. Chances were that the same person was somewhere around. Javier was thankful to still be fully clothed, though he spotted that his poncho and hat and been left at the foot of the cot. More importantly, his knife and pistol had not been taken from him.

Javier thought he detected movement out of the corner of his eye, and he tensed, waiting.

“Awake, at last? Good, good…”

It was not so much a voice, but a rumble. Javier turned his head towards it, and saw a bulky shape sitting in a corner – sipping whiskey, partially obscured darkness.

The huge man had spoken to Javier in Spanish, which was both comforting and somewhat disquieting at the same time. “Where the hell am I?” He asked, throat rough, in English. He was as thirsty as the desert.

“You’re in my camp, I found you out there in the snow-” The chair groaned, almost in relief, as the mountain of a man stood up his full height and approached the cot.

Javier’s hands flew to his pistol, pulling it out quicker than a blink. “That’s far enough.”
The giant looked down at him, and then laughed, his chuckles rolling from his chest like thunder. “Fiery one, eh? I like that.” He sat down on the edge of the cot.

This close, Javier got a good look at him. He was scarred, with deep circles under his eyes, and pitch black hair slicked back and cut short at his neck under a sombrero. “I’m Flaco Hernández.” His eyes were amber, glittering mischievously in the firelight. “Now, you gonna introduce yourself, or you gonna sit there looking pretty?” His accent was thick, thicker than Javier’s, though his grasp on English seemed decent enough.

The name was familiar. “Javier Escuella.” He said, keeping his gun aimed at Flaco’s chest. “You’re the leader of the Del Lobos.”

Flaco smirked. “And you are far from home, amigo. Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of…?” He frowned, seeming to be having trouble finding the right word. “Revolutionary? What are you doing up here?”

Surprised, Javier lowered his weapon. “You’ve heard of me?”

The older man nodded. “Sure, I’ve heard some things. Freedom fighter, trouble maker back home, eh?” He scratched a hand across his face. “Thought you’d be taller though,”

Tired as he was, Javier didn’t have the energy to rise to Flaco’s bait. “I was looking for my friend who’d gotten lost in the snow.”

Flaco seemed amused. “Then you got lost yourself? eso fue estúpido.”

Now bristling, Javier switched to his native tongue to snap back at Flaco, “I would have been fine if not for the storm! Me and my own are loyal to our friends. We don’t abandon each other.”

Flaco looked none the more perturbed by his tone. “And who are these friends of yours, hm?” Something unpleasant flashed across his eyes. “This side of the mountain belongs to the Del Lobos. And we don’t like to share.”

Javier kept his pistol ready; he could probably get a shot at Flaco’s eyeball if he was quick. “We ain’t trying to move in on your turf-” he explained, his heart was pounding. “We fled from the law, had no choice but to come up here.”

The older man looked contemplative, and was about to speak when Javier’s stomach gave an almighty grumble. Instinctively, Javier crossed his arms over himself to muffle the noise; embarrassed heat spread up to his ears. “Ay…”

“Hungry?” Flaco chuckled and got up, going to the chest and pulling out one of what looked like several cans of food – he then went to the table and retrieved a knife, opening the can with ease and putting it in Javier’s hands. “Eat, then.”

The smell of fish wafted up into Javier’s nose, and he began to devour the salty contents with ravenous enthusiasm. Bits of offal got caught up in his facial hair, and a blob even ended up on the bridge of his nose. Before Javier could react, Flaco reached over and flicked it away with his thumb.

Javier startled, freezing like a rabbit, scowling at the man before going back to his food. He even drank the salty water that was left, a spectacle that made Flaco wrinkle his nose. After that, his thirst was even worse, and at that point he was not above asking for water. “Can I… get a drink?”

Flaco handed him the opened bottle of whiskey. “Help yourself, Beba despacio.”
Raising the bottle to his dry, cracked lips, Javier took a long and much needed drink. The burn was good, sending a quake down his spine. However, eating so quickly, combined with the heaviness of the alcohol, all came together; bringing Javier down into tiredness again.

He swayed, and his lids felt heavy. Hands began to guide him back down onto the cot, and then tugged off his boots. Javier sulked a little about that; he could take off his own boots. “Sleep, *amigo*, you are safe here.”

There was talking, but he couldn’t understand much of it; lying on his stomach, Javier was already on his way to dozing. Fingers tugged at his hair, freeing it from its tie and toyed with the free strands.

Then, Javier was asleep.
Firewood

Morning arrived with sheer cold, Javier shivered as he awoke. The cabin was dark, and from what he could judge, empty. The fire had gone out, and Flaco had gone.

Unwilling to get up into the frigid air just yet, Javier curled himself into a ball – trying to conserve as much warmth as he could. He stayed like that for some time, watching his breath escape his nostrils in white puffs. Soon enough, however, his teeth chattered so much that the sound rattled up to his temple and gave him a headache. Cursing, Javier wrapped the blanket around himself and sat up, every bone creaked in protest; he felt like an old man. He wondered how the Del Lobos could bear living up here.

The embers were dead, not a trace of the old fire left inside them. Javier was forced to mooch around for some matches, and when he found some, his hands shook so badly in the cold that he struggled to strike a flame. He sat there before the little fire, poking at it miserably; huddled under the blanket. Outside, the weather was no better, still the wind howled and snow was being whisked about by the powerful gale. Sinking into his chair, Javier wondered how long it would last.

With a clamor, the cabin door flew open.

Javier nearly jumped clean out of skin, but he was unable to untangle himself from his blanket to reach his pistol to aim it at the doorway. Fortunately for him, it was only Flaco returning home.

The big man grumbled under his breath and had to force the door shut with his bulk to get it to close; two rabbits were slung over one shoulder. Javier eyed him with caution, watching him cross the cabin, and feeling his heavy steps through the floor boards.

When at last their eyes met across the chilly room, Flaco smirked. “Buenos dias, how did you sleep?”

Javier rubbed his eyes. “If I sleep anymore I might never wake up.” The wind gave an almighty roar, making the walls rattle. Javier looked around nervously, wondering if the wooden structure would collapse on them both.

Flaco shushed him, taking out a knife and sharpening it. “Calma, calma... the storm won’t get us in here.” With skilled precision he began to skin and gut the two rabbits. The insides were so warm that putrid steam drifted into the air from their slit bellies as Flaco worked. Javier felt hunger knaw at him once more, he was ravenous all of a sudden.

Placing the rabbit innards in a bowl, Flaco glanced up and seemed to read Javier’s expression like an open book. “Would you like some? The meat is good.”

Javier went to accept, but at the same time, he felt shame for being so helpless; more or less at the mercy of a stranger. He hadn’t relied on someone so much since he’d been a starving vagrant; it was pure luck that it was Dutch Van Der Linde that had found him stealing chickens that day. If it had been the farmer, Javier’s journey may have ended there.

Gritting his teeth, Javier forced himself to turn his face away from the appetizing smell. “I don’t need you to feed me.”

Flaco regarded him for a moment, before shrugging his massive shoulders. “Go hungry, then.”

Unable to bare the scent much longer, Javier went to linger by the only window; it was colder
there, and he shivered underneath his blanket. Although he was facing away from Flaco, the visceral sound of the knife searing through soft flesh painted a vivid picture.

“Stubbornness is not a good virtue,” commented the old gunslinger, his tone laced with amusement; Javier could almost hear him grin. He was getting tired of it, and a thought briefly crossed his mind that he wanted to grab his pistol and put it to the old man’s throat, and ask him what the hell was so funny.

Sighing, Javier watched glumly as the flakes battered against the window pane. Being trapped indoors would slowly drive him crazy. His fingers itched to play his guitar, but that, and all his other possessions were with the gang.

He wondered how they were. Did Arthur find John? Did they make it out of the storm?

“This gang of yours-” Flaco drawled, waking Javier from his musings. Clearly he was more comfortable conversing in Spanish. “What are they called?”

Javier tensed, lifting his head up in a show of defiance, “Why are you being nosy?”

Flaco raised a dark eyebrow. “I’m just making conversation, haven’t had a stranger stay in my cabin for a while.”

“Liar.” Javier spat, his hand hovering by his pistol. He let the blanket crumple to the floor. “I ain’t stupid; I’m not telling you anything you don’t need to know.” He slumped back against the window frame with crossed arms, watching Flaco as if he were a sleeping snake. Though dormant, he could still bite.

There was that low rumbling laughter again; Flaco shook his head, as if witnessing the folly of youth and being unimpressed by it. “You got some balls, talking to me like that.” He stood back on his heels, assessing Javier with a crooked smile. “Standing there… acting so big and tough, it’s cute.”

Flushing, it took all of Javier’s strength not to pull out his knife and fling it at Flaco’s head. As it was, his breath was coming out in angry gusts. Gritting his teeth, he managed a few words, “Why don’t you come closer, old man, and I’ll show you how cute I am, eh?”

Flaco let out a bored sounding sigh. “Ay, will you relax? I’m just teasing you-”

Before Javier could respond, Flaco tossed over the familiar bottle of whiskey; it was half empty. He’d obviously helped himself while Javier had been sleeping. The man was a drinker, that much was clear. Maybe there was not much else to do up here.

“Have a drink. Neither of us are going anywhere in this storm.” His tone was almost friendly, jolly even. He could already be half drunk, Javier didn’t know for certain.

“Do you just sit in your cabin and drink all day?” Javier queried.

“You got other plans?” The old gunslinger asked, cleaning his bloody hands on a rag. “There’s the door.”

As if on cue, the gales picked up, and the door rattled on its hinges. It was as if the storm was a fearsome monster, trying to claw its way inside. Javier did not take a drink.

“Go on.” Flaco’s voice dropped to a rich timbre, “It’ll warm you up.”
Javier looked down at the bottle, watching the pale brown liquor sit in his glass vessel. “To hell with it,” Soon enough he forgot the biting cold of the air as the whiskey burned through his veins, taking the melancholy away with it.

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Arthur stared into the meager fire, face set into a permanent expression of discontent. He had not slept at all, his body and mind rejecting the idea. The house was quiet; everyone else had drifted away to rest, leaving him alone.

“Hey, Arthur,” said a voice from behind him.

Almost alone.

Abigail Roberts came to stand beside him, and Arthur would have been lying if he said he didn’t appreciate her company. He’d never ‘had’ her, like Dutch and some of the other boys had done before she settled on John. Their connection was different, a gentler thing, he felt comfortable in her presence.

“Abigail.” He acknowledged her only with a single word, not lifting his gaze to meet her eyes.

“It’s late, everyone else has hunkered down.” She came closer still, placing a hand upon his arm. He could hardly feel it through the thick layers of his coat. “Maybe you should too.”

“Can’t sleep.” Arthur admitted, swallowing a lump forming in his throat. “Not while Javier is out there.”

He’d lost his friend in the eye of the great snow storm, it seemed that Javier had disappeared off the face of the earth. One moment they were riding side by side, then the wind picked up and the snow blew in – and the Mexican was gone, snatched away by the white mist. Arthur searched, and called, he must have gone around in circles looking for him.

He didn’t find Javier, but he did find John, curled up in a wretched heap on the edge of a cliff; frozen and scratched up by wolves. The pack pursued them as Arthur brought him back. One by one he brought them down with his pistol, struggling to keep John from falling out of his saddle.

“Arthur.” Abigail was a stubborn, persistent woman. “You’re gonna make yourself sick, and… we need you strong.”

Arthur brushed her off as best he could, and let out a long exhale. “How is John?” he asked.

“Not great, but he’ll mend if he rests up.” She blew into her palms in an attempt to warm them up, before rubbing them together.

Bitterness, tasting like acid on his tongue, crept up into Arthur’s voice, “Of course. It always turns out right for him.” It was just like John to barely escape by the skin of his teeth, but where did that leave Javier?

Was he even alive?

After the Callander boys and Jenny, the little group had already lost too many of their number. It seemed the world was set to punish them for their misdeeds.

“Javier might be okay. Maybe he just got lost… he’ll join us when he’s ready.” Abigail’s tone had grown soft, as if she were trying to comfort him. Arthur appreciated her effort, but it was wasted, in
his opinion.

“Yeah.” Arthur turned his head to look outside, watching the snow being thrown into the air by the spiteful wind, the evening so dark he could scarcely make out the trees. “Maybe.”
Flaco sat back on his cot, cigarette lazily burning away between his teeth, watching Javier hop and sing around his cabin like little bird. The whiskey had, evidently, hit him with the force of a freight train; then with no prompting he decided to put on a show for his host. Smiling, the old gunslinger simply lay back and enjoyed the sight of the younger man warbling out a fond old tune.

Though without instrument or backing vocals, he kept good rhythm, and had a beautiful, melodic voice.

“De la Sierra Morena  
Cielito lindo, vienen bajando  
Un par de ojitos negros….”

He broke up the song intermittently with giggles and sips from the whiskey bottle; but it did not ruin the spectacle. If Flaco closed his eyes and simply listened, it was almost like being back in Mexico again; the storm had brought him a living piece of home. The old gunslinger hadn’t been this entertained in months.

Between raids and the occasional hunt, there was nothing to do up here, aside from getting blackout drunk and pass out till the next day. On some nights, the loneliness came scratching like a persistent cat, and Flaco considered leaving his cabin and joining his men for supper. He knew they’d all be hunkered down in their tents now, curled up together as warm as rabbits in a burrow; many of them co-slept, to conserve warm and save money on extra tents.

There had to be some distance between him and them, he was their leader, not their friend. At times, Flaco envied his men in that regard; although he had a roof, he lacked real company.

Flaco nearly jumped when Javier dropped the whiskey bottle, it landed with a dull thud on the wooden floor. As he unsteadily went to retrieve it, the younger man ended up falling over. He was about as coordinated as a newborn horse. “Oh man… I can’t remember the words…” he slurred, now on his back.

Taking a final drag of his cigarette, the old gunslinger reluctantly got up and stubbed the little stick out on the table – leaving the smoking nub in a cracked saucer sitting next to one of the melted candles. “You have a beautiful voice.” He did not engage in meaningless flattery, nor could he deny that Javier was a handsome youth. Dare he think it, pretty even.

“Gracias…” Javier struggled to get into one of two the chairs sitting by the table. “I wish I had my guitar.”

Flaco offered out his hand to Javier, clasping it firmly and hoisting him upward. “I bet you play well.” He remarked. “You’ve got the hands for it.”

It was true. Javier’s fingers were long, and calloused at the tips from years of playing. Although the younger man had managed to sit down, he had yet to untangle his hand from Flaco’s. He seemed almost in awe as he stared down at their joined digits, drawing a circle in the centre of the old gunslinger’s palm with his thumb.

Flaco watched, his heartbeat fluttering uneasily, taking a seat opposite. The younger man’s skin
was wonderfully warm.

“Yours…yours are so big…” Javier pondered. “You remind me of Charles, he’s a big guy too.”

“Charles?” asked Flaco.

“Charles Smith… one of the guys I ride with.” Now free from inhibitions, Javier was quite chatty. “He’s huuuuge, Dios Mio, he could choke me with one hand.” He let out a sigh, resting a cheek in one open hand. Flaco thought that his eyes had lost some of their joyous spark. “I miss them… I hope John didn’t die…”

“John?” He wondered how many men were in Javier’s gang. Despite Javier’s assurances that they weren’t looking for trouble, Flaco wouldn’t have survived this long if he wasn’t always somewhat suspicious.

“The man I was looking for, little more than… than a dumb kid really…except we’re the same age.” Javier drawled, his eyelids starting to droop, flicking back to his native tongue. He could switch between Spanish and English without missing a beat.

“Men like us get old before our time, young one.” Flaco stood and rooted around for his spare bottle of whiskey. He wanted to keep Javier up and talking as long as he could, and more alcohol would work in keeping his tongue loose. “We see too much to stay naïve for long.”

He unscrewed the bottle and took a drink before settling it on the table. Javier didn’t take it at first; he stared off into space, captured by an old memory. “Once… I saw my Uncle and some other men killed and fed to pigs…” He said, gaze now slightly glassy. “Because they wanted fair pay… I miss home sometimes, but then I remember… that.”

“Mexico is still good, young one.” Flaco found himself very perturbed by Javier’s change in mood, sorely missing the free spirited boy that had been belting out a song just a moment ago.

“It’s just the men who are bad, but our country? It’s in here-” Flaco pressed his hand over his heart for emphasis. “No one can take that away. Not the government or anybody else.” Some of his own sadness came back then, crawling up from the dark place that the old gunslinger had buried it. He hoped he wouldn’t turn into a bitter old man, but that was easier said than done. “I can’t go back either, had to run, just like you.”

“I killed a man. Over a girl.” Out of nowhere, Javier burst out laughing, as if his statement had been the very height of hilarity. His giggles eventually devolved into hiccups. “Ay…I’m…I need to stop…”

Seizing on the brief distraction, Flaco pushed the whiskey closer. He also needed a second to adjust to the switch back to English. “Tell me about your gang.”

“Sure!” Javier snatched up the bottle and glugged down a mouthful, shuddering before starting to talk freely. “You got big ole’ Dutch Van Der Linde… took me in when I was starving, clothed me… taught me to read… he’s a man I’d follow into death.”

“That so?” Flaco asked. “Do they take care of you?” It was a strange question, why should he care so much? It was not his business how Dutch Van Der Linde treated his men.

“We take care of each other, we’re a family.” Javier replied, his dark eyes sparkling once more. Pleased, Flaco nodded along. “This Dutch sounds like a…an interesting man, eh?”
Javier nodded vehemently, and that action nearly made him pass out. He blinked and clutched the edge of the table, then began a long, passionate ramble. He had the enthusiasm of a school boy with the inflection of a drunk.

“He’s got all these... ideas, y’know? We’re freedom fighters... the government wants us dead because we won’t conform to their rules. They take everything away and... and expect us to just be okay with it? No... not us... fuck them.”

Flaco grabbed the whiskey bottle and raised it in the air, smiling. “I’ll drink to that.” Leaning back, he took a long drink; the liquor churned up a dull fire in his belly.

Hearing a yawn beside him, Flaco stole another glance at Javier. He’d taken his long dark hair out of its tie, and was rubbing the back of his head; stretching out his slender, tan neck. Just below his Adam’s apple, a thin scar ran across his flesh. Flaco pondered it, wondering who had tried to slit Javier’s throat.

He was also flushed, as if he’d been standing out in the cold snow; lovely to look upon.

Flaco leaned forward, reaching over to brush an ebony strand out of Javier’s face. “You’ve gone red, amigo…. Why is that?” His voice had dropped to deep, hushed timbre.

“Too much whiskey I guess.” Javier replied with a shrug. He let out a tired breath, slowly slumping onto the table like a wilting flower; folding his arms on the tabletop and resting his head against them.

The old gunslinger took a moment to study him; the curve of Javier’s shoulders, his skinny wrists, his dark, thick eyelashes and the soft curve of his ear. Though Flaco wasn’t drunk – it would take at least another bottle to achieve that – he was emboldened by the drink, and the knowledge they were very much alone. With a hand, he tugged gently on Javier’s earlobe; the skin was soft there, like velvet.

“This Dutch of yours should keep a closer eye on you.” He mused, almost completely lost in the moment. “Wouldn’t want to lose such a loyal fighter...”

Javier frowned and sat up a little, crossing his eyes as he struggled to form a thought coherent enough to speak. At last, he came out with, “You... are sneaky.”

“Very… sneaky...” He said, pointing an accusatory finger in Flaco’s direction, before promptly flopping back onto the table. He was well and truly done for the night.

Scooping him up, Flaco carried the nearly unconscious young man over to his bed and laid him down. It wasn’t a good bed; with not much support his creaky back; which had been growing worse in the persistent bad weather. So on this occasion, he was content to sleep on the floor.

Before he could move away, Javier’s seized Flaco by the front of his shirt. When Flaco looked down, he saw that the younger man’s eyes were open, but pleading, and a little wet at the corners. “I don’t like sleeping alone.”

Flaco paused, not sure how best to proceed, “Is that wise...? I am sneaky, don’t forget.”

Javier’s grip only tightened. “.....por favor?”

The plea was so quiet, Flaco wasn’t sure if he’d simply imagined it. All the same he stripped off his fur coat, boots, and vest before trying to make himself fit onto the cot next to Javier. In the end, Javier ended up sprawled on top of Flaco’s huge chest; there simply wasn’t room for him to be
anywhere else.

The rasping sounds of Javier’s breathing reminded Flaco of purring. He wrapped an arm around the younger man’s shoulders and brought him close; relishing in the warmth of another body.

He stayed away awhile to simply watch him, smiling fondly. “Goodnight, *Gatito.*”

Chapter End Notes

*Gatito - 'Kitten' :3*
“All of you, we got work to do. Come on.” With a harsh bark, Dutch Van Der Linde roused his cold and ill-tempered troops from the wooden cabin.

Arthur stepped out into the snow, cigarette clenched tightly between his teeth; it was near enough the only thing keeping his lips from freezing. Clouds of white smoke blew back into his face.

“All, can I speak with you?” He asked, waiting for the boys to go to their horses and mount up.

Dutch looked annoyed but acquiesced. “Time is of the essence, Arthur, make it quick.” In the chill his pallor was now almost white; standing out shockingly against his coal black hair.

Drawing the gang leader away, Arthur spoke when they were finally out of ear shot of the others. He kept his voice low. “Do we really need to be robbing a train when we still ain’t found Javier yet?” He hated to question his leader at such a time, but it seemed an odd decision to make when one of their best men had yet to be recovered. “We should be putting our energy into looking for him.”

Something flashed across Dutch’s eyes for a moment, and Arthur was briefly afraid that he’d overstepped, but was reassured when the other man clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Arthur. You know I miss Javier just as much as you.” He said, in a regretful tone. “He is like a son to me. I have not forgotten him.” Dutch’s hand tightened, Arthur could feel it through the layers of his coat. Although now over forty, Dutch was still as strong as a man half his age – not to mention craftier. “But he would want us to carry on fighting in the meantime.”

In his mind, Arthur tried to grasp for a counter argument, but it was always difficult to debate with Dutch. He had this way with people, his words held an unspoken weight – going against him felt too much like forcing your way upstream through churning rapids. “I guess.”

Dutch patted Arthur on the shoulder, as if he were praising an old, loyal hound. “We will keep looking, but if we’re going to get back on our feet, we need some capital.” He promised earnestly, or it sounded so to Arthur’s ears. “The girls and Hosea will keep watch for him in case he comes back.”

That comforted Arthur somewhat. In his heart of hearts he believed Javier was alive. Perhaps for his own sanity he needed to believe it; the fabric of his being recoiled from the idea of another body, another grave.

“Alright.”

Javier was rudely roused by a terrible drumbeat in his head; as if a tiny demon had crawled into his ear and was bashing on the inside of his skull. His mouth was dry, and his tongue was thick. He wondered if he should reach for his knife and slit his throat right there to put himself out of his misery.

He groaned loudly and mournfully. “Ay… Dios mio…” Javier moved around a little, and was puzzled to realize that the bed underneath him was warm, very warm, and seemed to be moving. Then, he caught on to the fact it wasn’t a bed he had been sleeping on, but a chest.

Utterly confused, Javier dared to look up. Flaco Hernandez smiled smugly at him, bright eyed and
well rested; not even slightly disheveled from sleep. “Good morning.” He greeted, his voice a quiet rumble, making his chest vibrate under Javier’s body.

Javier opened his mouth to say something, an insult, a curse maybe, but nothing came. Instead, he was hit with a wave of nausea so powerful that he almost emptied his guts right there. He clutched his stomach, already feeling it turning over.

Flaco guessed what was happening – Javier must have truly looked a sorry state – and was hoisting the younger man up and ushering him towards the door. “Mierda! not on the bed-”

Javier all but kicked the door down and vomited into the snow just outside Flaco’s cabin. The rest of the Del Lobos were already awake, sitting around their campfire having what looked and smelled like breakfast. At Javier’s appearance they whooped and jeered, but Javier was too busy wrenching to pay them much attention.

A warm hand settled on his back, and Javier knew it was Flaco without looking up. “Deep breaths.”

The world was spinning; his insides were on fire, his head thumped. “Fuck….ay…I want to die….?” He muttered, trying to remember the last time he was this hung over.

Suddenly he was being hustled away from the cabin and towards the campfire. One of Flaco’s men had gotten up; he wore a wide brimmed hat, and had a thick beard with a carefully trimmed moustache. “Come, amigo! Let’s go sit by the fire, eh?” Turning slightly, the man waved to Flaco. “It’s okay, Boss. I got it.”

Lead off like a dull sheep, Javier was brought to sit on crate by the flickering flames. A pan of bacon was sizzling over it, cracking and spitting fat into the air.

The man who’d done the leading took a seat by him on half an overturned barrel, poking at the cooking food with a hungry expression.

Javier blinked; the sunlight reflected off the freshly fallen snow and was too bright. Raising his head, his gaze fell on two identical figures standing by the fire, each holding a coffee cup – staring at Javier with focused, catlike eyes.

“Are there really two of you, or am I still drunk?” Javier asked, unnerved, reverting to Spanish; somehow it seemed to make his head hurt less.

The man who’d sat him down next to Javier laughed. “I like this one! Funny guy! This is Juan and Julián, they’re twin brothers.”

“You look like death.” Said one.

“Worse than death.” Added the other.

Javier had no idea which was which.

“Javier Escuella, and I feel like death.” “Wait…where’s my horse?” He looked down at the cooking bacon with mild horror. “You didn’t eat him did you?”

The man at his side chortled again, slapping his knee. “Ha! No, don’t worry. Your little pony is up in the stable with the others.”

“Pony?” Javier questioned, offended on behalf of his stallion. “Boaz is a Mexican mustang.”
He’d caught Boaz wandering the Chihuahuan desert, a filthy vagrant like himself. The nag Javier had stolen to make his flight had gone down when it clipped its leg on a large rock. He was forced to slit its throat, as he needed to save every bullet he had.

It took two days, and what little bread Javier had to spare, before Boaz would come close enough to touch.

“Forgive me, I just assumed, since he’s so small.” The man held out a hand to Javier, grinning good-naturedly. “Martín, nice to meet you.”

Despite still stinging a little from the insult to Boaz, Javier shook the hand that was offered. “How long have you been up here?”

Martín furrowed his brow in thought. “Feels like forever, we got into some trouble in Armadillo, lost a bunch of men and got the Pinkertons on our backs,” He gestured with his hands as he explained. “Finally found somewhere where they won’t follow.”

“Ferdinand lost two fingers to frostbite,” Said either Juan or Julián.

“They went black and fell off.” Chimed in his brother.

It was at that moment that Martín decided now was a good time to offer Javier some of the bacon. “Hungry?”

Turning green, Javier refused; the idea of food made him want to vomit all over again. “I’ll pass… thanks.”

“Suit yourself, eh.” Martín picked up a slice straight from the pan and popped it into his mouth. Javier was amazed that he didn’t scald his tongue. “Where is Ferdinand, anyway?” He asked, mouth full.

“He went to track the traps with Diago,” Replied one of the twins, sipping from his cup.

“Should be back soon,” said the second twin.

In his mind, Javier decided to go check on Boaz. The weather had finally calmed, he could make plans to go in search of the gang. He hoped they’d still be holed up in Colter; although the passing of the storm could mean they were already on the move. Not that would leave without him, of course.

He got up and turned to Martín. “Where do you keep the horses?”

Swallowing, Martín pointed in the direction of the stable, not bothering to get up. “Just beyond the cabin there, behind those trees.”

Javier thanked him and began to make his way through the snow, his body shivering with the cold, his teeth clicking together. The sooner he was away from this place, the better.

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“…Boss.”

Flaco recognised Ramón’s light step, he was not a heavy man, and could be very quiet when he wanted. “Semental.” He greeted, not looking up from his carving. “Do you need something?”

He’d been watching Javier mingle with his men, keeping an eye in case of trouble; he was feeling
oddly… protective. From his position leaning on the cabin’s doorway, he could see everything.

Ramón was clenching and unclenching his fists, a sure sign as any that he was angry. “Don’t you think it’s about time that kid left? The storm has passed, why wait?” He stood almost tow to tow with Flaco, but had to crane his neck in order to meet his boss’s eyes. It took some of the power away from his stance. “And we don’t want another gang sniffing around here.”

Flaco shrugged. “He’s free to go whenever he wants. But he’ll need supplies for the road, and a blanket.” He lightly scratched his chin with the edge of his knife in thought. “Think we could scrape that together?”

The other man gritted his teeth, his moustache twitching above his lips. “We have barely enough to feed and clothe our own men-” He growled, with a low burning rage settling in. “Let alone some stranger.”

It was then that Flaco finally unpeeled himself from the door frame, putting down his knife and his wood and towered over his second – arms folded. He did not like to rule by intimidation, but he would not tolerate such open disrespect. Not even from Ramón, who was like a brother, more, to him.

“Do as I ask, Ramon.” Flaco ordered, dropping his voice to a low rumble of warning. “-and don’t argue with me.”

Hissing like a wet cat, Ramón stormed away, angrily sending the snow up in bursts of white as he walked.

The old gunslinger watched him go with apprehension, this would bring trouble soon.
The stable was in fact little more than a long shack with nothing that resembled separate stalls for the horses, just a few fence posts driven into the ground; which the animals were tethered too. Boaz had been tied up at the far end, past a few skinny, rather cold looking nags. There was one horse, however, that made Javier pause before walking past.

Towering above the others was a gelding so huge he had to be at least part draft. Mottled grey with a proud head and a pale wheaten mane, it looked down at Javier with a quiet dignity. Javier moved out of kicking range, giving the big horse his space. This must be Flaco’s mount, who else would need an animal that size?

Boaz whinnied at his master, tossing his head as if to say: “There you are, fool! What took you so long?”

Javier shushed him gently, stroking his stallion’s neck. “Calma, calma… mi amigo.”

Apparently not satisfied with the apology, Boaz took reparations by taking Javier’s pony tail between his teeth and yanking on it.

“Hey!” Javier yelped, pushing at the horse’s muzzle. When Boaz let go he still had the frayed ribbon that Javier had used to tie up his hair in his mouth “Alright, alright…¡Perdón! Okay? I promise we’ll be joining the others soon.” Javier retrieved the ribbon but decided not to put it back where it been – it was now covered in horse spit.

Now less agitated, Boaz allowed Javier to gently check him over. Despite their misadventure, the stallion seemed as fit as he ever was; only a bit chilly in the drafty stable.

Javier fondly petted Boaz’s white and grey nose. “Do you miss your friends, amigo? So do I.”

He unhitched the stallion from his post and began to walk him out of the stable. The half-draft regarded them with a haughty stare; as if they were rodents scuttling around his feet. Outside, soft flakes of snow had begun to fall from the sky, drifting on the wind like dandelion fluff.

Javier suspected that the break in the bad weather would be short, all the more reason to get moving now; with some luck, he would get ahead of any incoming blizzard. Leading Boaz, Javier trekked through the snow back to the cabin, finding Flaco in the doorway – observing his camp like a hawk perched on a cliff, watching over a warren of rabbits. “Flaco?”

The old gunslinger turned his head, the corners of his mouth twitching up. “Yes?” Javier couldn’t be sure, but it seemed that his devil may care smile dimmed somewhat when his dark eyes settled on Boaz. “You leaving already…?”

He was truly an imposing man, at least fix foot three with shoulders that were wide enough to carry a pony, hands so broad that he could capture the entire width of Javier’s neck in one palm. These sudden, strange thoughts made Javier recoil, mentally slapping himself sensible again.

“I should try to find my gang’s trail now the storm has passed,” said Javier, finding it odd that he should feel the need to explain himself to this man. “Thank you for-” He gestured at the cabin, a roundabout way of saying ‘for taking me in and feeding me’. Perhaps it was his pride that would not allow him to say it all.

Flaco’s eyes seemed to grow darker, focusing on Javier with an intensity that made the younger
man’s stomach flip over; Javier brushed it aside, blaming the feeling on some lingering nausea.

“My pleasure, Gatito.” Flaco drawled, smirking, his gaze simmering away like two black coals.

Javier was stunned, he blinked once, twice, and three times. Surely he misheard. “What did you call me?” He demanded, hackles up, stepping forward into a battle ready position.

Before Flaco could come up with an answer, he suddenly straightened up and looked far into the distance; squinting at something that was emerging from the light fog of snow. Javier turned around and tried to see what Flaco was seeing, and indeed he could just about make up the shape of a man coming back into camp.

Only he seemed to be meandering, not coming at the row of tents with purpose but rather at a confused sway. Once he was close enough that his face could be seen, a chill of horror shivered its way down Javier’s spine.

The man’s left arm had been ripped away at the elbow, leaving a sluggishly bleeding bloody stump. The front of his poncho, pants and shirt was soaked with scarlet. Everything except his face was stained red – that was as pale as a corpse, which no doubt the poor man would soon be.

“It’s Ferdinand!” Someone cried, it sounded like Martín. “Holy shit!”

Ferdinand finally fell, slumping into the snow, his blood leaked out from underneath him in slow, sticky trails. The culprits of the attack were not far behind, they’d been loping after the dying man for some time; but now they had all this fresh meat to hunt and kill, Ferdinand was ignored. Live prey was much preferred.

“Wolves!” Ramón cried, trying to rally the Del Lobos, were in the throes of panic at the sight of the hungry predators. “Everyone get behind some cover!”

Javier wasted no time in drawing his pistol. He wished he had a rifle or even a shot gun handy, so he could blast the wolves into chunks of bone and fur. He felt terribly sorry for Ferdinand, who had inadvertently put his comrades in danger by mindlessly dragging himself back to camp. At least he was dead – the suffering was over, but the end had been drawn out and painful.

“Stick together, if we scatter they’ll pick us off!” Javier ordered, aiming at one black coated wolf and firing when she took a run at him. She yelped and jumped back, but didn’t flee entirely. “Aim for the parents, the pups will lose confidence once they’re dead!”

“Who the hell put you in charge?!” Ramón snapped from behind his cover, a few boxes hastily turned over.

The twins, Martín, and the others were cowering behind whatever they could find, barrels, logs, a wagon, anything that would give them some semblance of protection.

Javier reloaded his pistol and yelled across the camp, “Just shoot things!”

For a while, things were in chaos. Bullets whizzed by and the wolves circled and danced around the cornered men as if it were some terrifying, heinous sport. Javier then remembered about Flaco, and wondered if he’d retreated inside the cabin; not even wolves could open doors, he’d be safe in there. But when he glanced back, he saw that the old gunslinger had not gone inside.

He stood a few feet from the threshold, gun arm outstretched, dispatching any wolves that came near with the precision of a true master of the weapon. The calm in the eye of the storm, he killed a few of the ravenous animals with single shots between their malicious, shining eyes.
But one of the wolves had slunk behind the cabin and was coming out the other side, using Flaco’s
distraction to its advantage. It stalked him, belly low to the snow ground, before running.

Javier had seconds to react; he called across the camp and hoped that Flaco would hear. “Flaco! Look out!”

Snapping around, Flaco put the wolf down just before it was about to spring onto his back. It fell
limp at the huge man’s feet.

The sudden relief did not last long; the last strangler of the pack had turned his attention elsewhere.
In the confusion Javier had forgotten about Boaz, who was now bucking and rearing as the wolf
snapped at his hooves. Javier’s blood went cold, then hot with rage. He dashed over, firing wildly
and passionately. “Go back to hell!”

Then, at the worst possible moment, Javier’s pistol jammed. He fumbled with it desperately, but
was not quick enough to set it to rights before the wolf bit him. With a sickening growl it stood up
on its hind paws, and sank its teeth into Javier’s arm; tearing and ripping.

A scream tore from Javier’s throat as he watched his arm being mangled by the wolf’s teeth. But
even in the burning agony he managed to reach down for his knife. He stabbed the animal too
many times to count, until it let go with one last awful gurgling snarl; flopping dead into the snow.

Javier’s knees turned to jelly, and he went down onto his knee, staring at his own blood as it
dripped from his arm.

Flaco came to stand beside him, his face creased in worry. “Shit.” He said. “Are you alright?”

Turning his head, Javier stung him with a glare, though it was mostly a grimace of pain. “What do
you think?”

With care and gentleness, Flaco took the injured arm and cradled it in one of his massive hands.
Javier’s heart jumped to his throat when their skin made contact. “We need to clean this…”

They were joined then by Ramón, who looked as furious as bear disturbed early from its winter
sleep. His nostrils flared, his fist was clenched so tightly around his shotgun that it was a wonder it
didn’t snap in two. “Those wolves could have been tracking you through the snow.” He growled,
pointing at Javier. “And you lead them right to us!”

Lost in the sea of shock and blood loss, Javier was unable to make much sense of his accusation.
While he was dazed, the old gunslinger actually stepped between him, creating an immovable wall
with his body.

“Ramón.” Flaco sounded worn, but also on the edge of angry. “Save it for when he isn’t bleeding
out.” Javier clung to his voice, using it as an anchor. “Those wolves have been lurking around here
for days. They were waiting for the right moment.”

Ramón bared his teeth, not unlike the wolves they had just slain. “And he gave it to them.”

“Enough!” Flaco’s shout was like thunder, causing both Javier and Ramón to jolt in surprise. He
stepped closer to his second, looming and using his force of will to put the other man back into his
place. “Do not push me, Ramón. Or we’ll both regret it.”

Shrinking, tailed tucked between his legs, Ramón bitterly retreated; having no other choice.
“….I’m going to bury Ferdinand.”
Watching him slink away was only a small satisfaction. Javier began to fall sideways, his head spinning. Before he knew it, he was bracing himself on Flaco – one hand splayed out on the older man’s enormous chest; fingers buried in his furred coat.

The old gunslinger began to herd him inside, letting Javier lean on him if he needed too. He spoke softly, the rumble no longer a threatening roar but a comforting hum. “Easy, you’ll be alright.” Slowly, Javier stumbled inside, Flaco’s breath curling around his ear. “I’ll fix you,”
Arthur gently nudged his pinto mare onward. The snow was up to her knees and she high stepped awkwardly through the slush. It was difficult to keep pace with the man in front, and Arthur had to raise his voice above the whoosh of the freezing wind. “How are you holding up, Charles?” He asked.

Charles turned around a little to answer. “I’m okay, apart from this hand.”

It was a nasty injury, Charles had been unable to do much with it since the accident. He seemed perfectly able to ride though – of course, Taima was so smart a horse that she needed very little direction from her rider. It was like she and Charles could read each other’s minds.

Watching them made Arthur miss Boudicca terribly. This horse wasn’t bad, for now, but she didn’t have the spirit of his old companion. She was… ploddy, and not the sharpest tool in the box; not that Arthur could claim he was any sort of genius himself. Hell, only a stupid man would end up in a mess like this.

Maybe they were meant to be together – a dimwitted steed for a dimwitted knight.

They rode in quiet for a while, Arthur knew Charles was not the chatty type, and his mind was occupied elsewhere. He stole a few hopeful glances up at the trees, searching for the slender frame of their lost friend – waiting for him to pop out from hiding like a gnome in a fairy tale, eyes unnaturally bright with a mischievous, bewitching grin.

The figure in Arthur’s mind seemed to mock him, waggling a finger and tutting. “Haven’t found me yet, have you, amigo?”

Arthur’s response tickled the tip of his tongue, but the Javier in his head disappeared before he could reply. I promise, we will.

Coming out of his daydream, Arthur spurred on his mare to trot alongside Charles and Taima. “… you reckon we might run into Javier?” He wondered, trying not to sound as helpless as he felt.

“Maybe, if he’s still alive.” Charles was not a man who sugar coated anything – a corpse was a corpse, so he must harbor some tiny belief of his own that Javier was still alive. “I’m surprised Dutch hasn’t sent anyone out looking.”

Unease slithered its way down Arthur’s spine and curled up in his gut like a sleeping serpent. He thought back to his conversation with Dutch – not for the first time – and realized he was becoming more and more unsettled by the whole affair. Should he just have rolled over and let Dutch have his way? Perhaps he truly was becoming nothing more than a cart horse. Old and set in his ways, ploughing one end of the field to the other without a single thought in his head.

“He says we shouldn’t risk anymore lives.” Arthur replied, quietly, talking more into the collar of his coat than directly to Charles. “But… it doesn’t feel right to me. Javier went out looking for
John.” The admittance, once released into the world, could not be drawn back – a kite blown away by a strong wind. Arthur knew that things between him and Dutch wouldn’t be quite the same now.

“He did. Then he got lost.” Charles stated, simple, matter of fact. “Maybe Dutch is right. We need all the men we can get right now.”

Arthur set his jaw, clicking his tongue to keep his horse moving. “Well I ain’t giving up just yet.” He said. “Javier is a strong one, he’ll be fine.”

Charles glanced back at him, something, maybe just a touch of pity, glinted in his dark eyes for a passing flicker before going away again. “Sure Arthur.”

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“Stop squirming, Gatito. I’m almost done.” Flaco worked as slowly and as carefully as he could, cleaning and stitching Javier’s arm back together; but it was difficult work when your patient would not sit still.

He’d heated some water in a pot over the fire and added what little wine he had to it, hoping it would be enough to keep any infection at bay. The mouth of a dog was filthy; Flaco could only imagine what diseases their wild cousins carried.

“Don’t fucking call me that, cabrón!” Javier shrilled, full of spite and pain, writhing about in the chair that Flaco had sat him down in. He spat and hissed through his teeth when Flaco dabbed clean the deep incisions made by the wolf’s canines. “Ay, careful with that thing!”

Pausing in his work, Flaco fixed Javier with a stern look, the kind that would silence a yapping dog. “Watch your tongue.”

It seemed to have its effect. Javier restrained himself, but still jerked and grumbled every time Flaco touched him – there was a thin sheen of perspiration coming up on his forehead, a vein near his temple was starting to throb.

The soft hearted fool he was, Flaco put out his hand and smoothed away Javier’s sticky fringe; offering a little bit of comfort. “I know, I know.” He soothed, rumbling in sympathy. “Have some more whiskey.”

Javier snatched the bottle when it was offered and took a long drink, shivering as the fiery liquid disappeared down his throat; Flaco found himself unashamedly eyeing the scarred flesh of Javier’s throat. His teeth itched to nibble sensually at the exposed skin.

“Fuck.” The younger man cursed. “I can’t believe it, this mountain… Wolves… snowstorms…”

Glad Javier had finally stopped wriggling, Flaco was now able to finish up tending to the wound. For bandages he had only strips of cloth – torn from an old shirt of his – but at least they were clean. He poured the wine mixture out into the snow; a bit of a waste, but it was now undrinkable.

“Trouble does seem to follow you, young one.” The old gunslinger chuckled to himself, in his more eloquent mother-tongue, turning Javier’s arm around and tugging on the bandages to see if they were tight enough. “Perhaps you should stay inside till your luck improves.”

He meant it only half seriously, but his mind was suddenly reeled with dangerous, sentimental ideas. What if he could keep Javier here with him? Tucked away safe from the cold weather outside, protected by the elements and the hungry animals.
Javier shook his head, frowning. “Can’t. I have to go back to my family.”

Flaco looked at him quizzically. “Your family?”

With some gusto Javier began to explain. “My gang. We all live together, eat together, and sleep together. We’d die for each other, that’s a family.”

It seemed simple, and his loyalty was touching, but a question slipped itself into Flaco’s mind after the younger man had finished. Why haven’t they come looking for you, then?

For now he kept it tucked away behind his lips, choosing instead to nod along. “I understand. I suppose I’m like a father to my men sometimes.” Flaco leaned back and scratched his chin. “A strict one.”

The door creaked, and Flaco stiffened. But it was just Martín, poking his head inside – a sheepish expression on his face. “Boss?” He said, “We buried Ferdinand. We wanted to ask about his things, he didn’t have much but there was this-” Martín pushed his way fully inside and held up Ferdinand’s vihuela. It was as if he brandished a lingering piece of the man’s soul, Flaco could almost hear faint strumming; Ferdinand’s last farewell before passing to the land of the dead.

“Should we burn it? We could use the wood.” Martín asked, being about as sensitive about such things as a wet sack of rice.

To Flaco’s surprise, it was Javier who jumped up first in horror. “No! That’s disrespectful! Do you want to anger the dead?” He cried, his wild, dark eyes sparking. “If no one wants it, I’ll take it.”

He took the instrument from Martín and cradled it in his hands, running his fingers along the neck – caressing, like you would that of a woman you loved.

Without his consent, Flaco felt fondness settling in his heart for the younger man, and knew it would bring him trouble. With a wave he dismissed his man. “Thank you, Martín. Bring the personal stuff, like photos; I’ll add it to my book.”

After Martín had left, Javier peered at Flaco curiously. “You keep mementos? Of your men?”

Somewhat embarrassed, the old gunslinger dipped his chin, trying to shrug off the feeling. “I’m an old man with lots of memories.” He felt especially old around such youthful exuberance; but rarely did anyone reach the age of forty four completely unscathed by time or regret.

“And if I don’t mourn them, and keep them with me, they will be forgotten forever.” There was no place in the cabin for a shrine, and they had few candles to burn, so Flaco was forced to content himself with what meager offerings could be made.

Javier’s lip quirked upwards, his mustache twitching like the tail of a squirrel. He put the small string instrument over on Flaco’s cot. “Didn’t take you for being superstitious, old man.”

“At my age, you can’t take any chances-” He playfully tapped the end of Javier’s nose with a finger. “Kitten.”

Before Flaco had time to enjoy the look of outrage on Javier’s face, he felt a slim blade being pressed under his jaw. “Say it again, I dare you.”

What Javier didn’t realize was that despite his age, Flaco was still very strong, not to mention faster than a man of his great size had any business being. He seized the younger man’s uninjured arm in one hand, and grasped the back of his neck with the other. With some force he pushed Javier face first into the table. “You were saying?”
Javier growled and thrashed, his feet scraping on the floor. Though he was nimble, Flaco held him firm, “Let me up! You bastard!”

The old gunslinger let out a pleased sound from the back of his throat. “Hm, I actually like you this way.” He said, jabbing at Javier’s roaring ego, “You look good.”

“You old queer!” Javier bellowed, trying to wrench himself free. Perhaps if he had both arms, he would have been able to. “I’ll kill you!”

Flaco looked down on him, eyebrow raised. So it seemed Javier spouted poison when annoyed. “Go ahead. Tell me more.”

The younger man was red-faced, his shoulders going up and down with every sharp intake of his breath. He managed to twist his head up to glare at his captor and bare his teeth. “Let…me… up!”

Deciding to relent, Flaco loosened his grip a little, bending down to talk into Javier’s ear. “Are you going to play nice? Eh?”

Although still furious, Javier nodded tightly, a vein in his neck throbbing angrily.

“Good, good...” Flaco finally let him go, smirking when Javier twisted away and tried to ignite him with his eyes from the opposite end of the cabin. Truly, he had only been teasing – Javier’s pride was a prickly animal – but he needed to learn not to bite quite so hard. Especially not on the hand that fed him.

Javier straightened up and smoothed out the winkled in his coat, skulking away and spitting some fire before he left – using what remained of his dignity as a shield. “Sleep with one eye open, bastardo.” In a show of dramatic temper, Javier left with a slam of the door, making the rickety walls shake.

Amused, Flaco picked up some whittling he’d been toying with over the last few days and sat with it at the table. “I always do, Gatitio.”
Wanting

Javier walked till the black smoke rising from the Del Lobos camp was a thin, dark wisp against the white sky. From where he stood, approaching the crest of a snowy slope, he could see the little figures milling about and hear the faint voices carried on the wind. He didn’t mean to walk so far; he only meant to get completely out of hearing range for what he was going to do next.

Javier was hard as a rock in his trousers. First, he thought maybe he could walk it off. But his need only seemed to grow more and more urgent with each passing second. Soon he had no choice but to find a spot away from the camp to deal with the issue.

It wasn’t the first time he’d gotten hard after a fight; he figured the exhilaration sent hot blood down into weird places, nothing to get upset about. But it had been Flaco who’d done it to him, holding him over a table no less. The strength of his grip had been almost unreal; Javier imagined that the older man could have snapped him in half like a dry twig without much effort. Something about the power, and his apparent helplessness in the wake of it was turning him on.

It was obscene, more than that, it was offensive to him. Once he found a good enough spot, Javier turned his back to the camp and took his hard on out of his pants. It was tricky with one bad arm; it twinged and complained every time Javier used it.

Not even the freezing air did anything to dim his arousal. He neglected to bring any Vaseline, so was force to spit into his hands – something he found disgusting, but there was no other choice.

For a time Javier simply stroked himself slowly, up and down his length. At first he tried to think of a girl – Tilly, and her delicate jaw and sharp tongue. He even called her name, but it did nothing. All he could think about was Flaco, and his rolling thunder voice. Picking up the pace, Javier allowed himself a few soft moans, his breath coming out in urgent puffs of white air.

He wondered how big Flaco was under all his layers, he saw his tanned skin, his frame massive and scarred from years of work. He thought of Flaco’s hands, huge and rough, but warm on his body.

Javier came, and saw sparks flash across his vision. With a groan he pulled himself back together and straightened up, dusting of some snow from his shoulders. His mood no better, Javier slowly walked through the snow and back toward the camp. He suddenly itched for a cigarette, and stopped behind a pile of crates to have a quick smoke.

Again, his hurt arm made it more difficult than it should be; and Javier wished a slow death on all wolves.

He could not deny a faint tremor in his fingers, but he put it down to the cold and nothing else. After he took a few calming drags, he heard voices nearby.

“You need me, Boss?” asked one.

“Come, Ramón, talk to me,” said another, with the unmistakable deep timbre of Flaco. “We could always talk. I do not like to fight with you.”

Keeping quiet, Javier cocked his head to hear better.
“We don’t need to talk; you just need to get rid of that kid.” Growled the first voice, which Javier now recognized as Ramón; also deep, but petulant.

“He’s injured Ramón, he can’t leave yet.” Replied the old gunslinger. “Besides, where is your gratitude? He helped us kill the wolves; we might have lost more men if not for him.”

The praise, a small thing, made something flutter in Javier’s chest. He didn’t move, even kept his breathing shallow. As discreetly as possible, Javier dropped his cigarette and stubbed it out with his toe.

“If not for him those wolves might not have come to our camp in the first place!” Ramón snapped. “He’s bad luck! I can feel it!”

Javier clenched his fists, fighting an urge to round the pile of crates and deliver a punch to Ramón’s face. It would be very satisfying.

“Admit it, Stallion, you’re jealous. That is all.” There was a shift in tone, it became quieter, more intimate, Javier heard the snow crunch as Flaco took a step. “If you want back in my bed, you need only ask. But you are the one that left.”

All of sudden, Javier’s mouth was completely dry, his throat tightened until his breath was nothing but a faint whistle. His heart began to pound a cacophony in his ribs. He should leave now, but his legs wouldn’t move.

“You son of a bitch!” Snow was kicked about, Javier made out the sounds of a foot angrily scuffing the earth. “This isn’t about that! Just...” Ramón lost some angry steam, now more exasperated than enraged. “Don’t get too attached. He is young; he’ll make the mistake of falling in love with you.”

There was a heavy pause, punctuated only by the sound of Javier’s own heartbeat thumping in his ears.

“Ramón...” In Flaco’s voice Javier sensed uncertainty, a small, almost silent note of real wanting; of loneliness. He almost didn’t believe his own ears; he never considered Flaco could be a lonely man.

“If that’s all, there are things to be done.” Ramón’s reply was as frosty as the air, and as sharp as the icicles dangling like frozen knives from the edge of the cabin’s roof.

“For now.” Flaco departed first, his heavy footfalls getting fainter and fainter.

Javier lost his sense of time, waiting till he was sure that neither of them was nearby. He stepped out finally, dazed, wandering toward the campfire as if it were a beacon in a fog. What had he stumbled into?

“Hey, Javier! Come sit down-” Martín was in his usual spot, waving him over with an amicable smile. “We’re telling stories, got any good ones?”

Desperate for a distraction, Javier sat next to him, forcing himself to smile coyly. “Plenty. Depends if you can handle them.”

Bright eyed and flushed from the cold, Martín had the excited look of a child about to tell his friend some brilliant secret. “Lemme tell you one about the boss.” He began, a few of the Del Lobos turned toward them to listen. “It was when he was younger, he was a real tomcat. A different woman every night so they say-”
Javier raised a brow. “Do they?”

Nodding vigorously, Martín continued on with his tale. “No lie! And he didn’t care if they were married either. If they were pretty, he had to have them.”

“Did he?” Javier suspected that Flaco had lived a full life, which naturally meant all the trimmings. However, he personally would not sleep with married women – too much of a risk, especially when running with a gang. You make the wrong man your enemy and your world can be brought down around your head. It was reckless, in his opinion.

“One time- oh man. He was making love to this woman and her husband walks in, he looks like it might be the end for Flaco!” Grinning, Martín left them waiting for a moment in dramatic tension. “Then, I swear, he looks the husband in the eye and says ‘Why don’t you join us?’”

The Del Lobos laughed, and Javier found himself laughing too. Though it was hollow, somehow, more of a dry bark than actual mirth. It caught Javier by surprise, why should he be bothered so much by it?

“He said that she was a better lay than her.” Chirped Juan.

“Their marriage was never the same.” Snorted Julián.

Javier was getting better at telling them apart. The gang continued to titter among themselves, comfortable in their camaraderie – but Javier suddenly wanted to be alone.

“That is quite a story.” He said, rising with a soft grunt. “Excuse me, friends, I gotta piss.”

He walked away, shivering as an icy breeze whipped by. He found himself heading towards the stable, and he decided he would check on Boaz again – he felt guilty for forcing his stallion to remain up here in the cold; but he couldn’t ride with an injured arm.

When he peered around the open door he caught sight of Flaco’s large figure, standing with his back to him, fussing over his gelding. Javier’s first instinct was to walk away, but a mischievous little nerve began to twitch in his mind; and he was still smarting from their previous encounter. Perhaps he could get his own back.

Walking as lightly as he could, Javier approached Flaco from the back, and then waited for the perfect chance to strike. With a cry he jumped onto the bigger man’s back. “Flaco Hernandez!” He yelled. “This is the Pinkertons! Put your hands up.”

Before he knew what was happening, Javier was flying through the air and landed on his back – the straw covering the floor just barely cushioning his fall.

The next thing Javier saw was Flaco hovering over him, a dry and slightly disappointed look on his face. “Mph. Gatito.”

Javier blinked, and kept blinking, until Flaco was no longer blurry around the edges. His back was already aching, and he suspected he’d have bruises for his trouble later. “I…walked into that, didn’t I?” He wheezed, offering a sheepish smile, not sure what the bigger man would do next.

To his relief, Flaco began to chuckle and Javier could feel the sound vibrating through his body like a giant cat’s purr. “You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you,” said the old gunslinger.

Javier expected to be allowed up, but not so. Flaco wasn’t keeping him on the ground per say, but he was fully over the younger man; knees on either side of Javier’s thighs, his hands splayed by
Javier’s ears. He truly was massive, all encompassing, and his gaze hadn’t left Javier once.

Refusing to squirm, Javier growled under his breath.”What are you doing?” he asked in Spanish, so there was no chance of miscommunication.

“Admiring you.” Flaco whispered, unashamedly bearing down on the younger man with a hungry look.

Javier twisted away, kicking himself out from underneath Flaco and stood. He barred his teeth and put a hand to his belt where he kept his knife. “I am not a toy.” His snarled through clenched teeth. “Don’t fuck with me.”

Flaco came closer, the space between them shrank and Javier could faintly smell the other man’s hot, heavy breath. “You sure you don’t want that?” He asked, with lip quirked slightly upwards.

“I don’t owe you anything.” Javier snapped, suddenly irate in order to disguise a strange heat pooling in his loins. “Go and fuck Ramón, since he seems to want it so badly.”

Somehow it became even colder in the stable, Flaco’s face shifting to that of stony disapproval, though his eyes entirely lost their softness. Now Javier saw the man wanted in several states, who’d buried as many men as wicked kings and conquerors, who made lawmen shudder at the mention of his name.

“Careful, Gatito.” Said Flaco, his words rough around the edges. “My patience won’t last forever.”

Javier watched, pinned to the spot, as the bigger man stared him down a little longer before shuffling out of the stable. Once he was gone, Javier found to his dismay that he was half-hard again.
“Bill, you ride ahead and set the charge, at the water tower right before the terminal.”

At his boss’s orders Bill obeyed with the immediate unthinking way of a trained dog, getting ready to climb onto Brown Jack. “Ain’t a problem.” He said. Arthur wondered about him sometimes. Perhaps he was missing life in the military, craved order, craving someone telling him what to do. Thinking for himself was not something that came naturally.

Arthur heard hurried crunching through the snow, and turned to see Hosea running up, desperate to catch them before they rode away. He was hoping the old man would, maybe he’d talk some sense into Dutch.

“Dutch-” Hosea wheezed, clutching his coat around his frail body. “Dutch we shouldn’t be doing this. We’re supposed to be lying low.”

Watching Dutch, Arthur saw his jaw clench with irritation. “We have no choice, Hosea.” He stated, firmly, leaving no wriggle room for negotiation.

“You’re needed here.” Hosea affirmed, not so easily cowed. “We’re gonna say some words for Javier.”

His words hit with the swift sting of a whip lash. Arthur felt a lump jump into his throat. Without meaning to, he rounded on Hosea. “So what, we’ve just decided he’s dead?”

Hosea looked… tired, and cold. Before he could speak, Dutch intervened. “Of course not, Arthur.” He put on a show of kindness and concern, but also steely determination. “We ain’t giving up on him yet, not until we find a body.”

Then why aren’t we looking for one? Arthur’s mind questioned. It seemed an obvious, were they expecting the wind to blow Javier’s corpse back to camp?

“Don’t give him false hope, Dutch.” Hosea chided. “We need to start thinking about leaving. Why exactly are we robbing a train?”

Dutch’s dark eyes narrowed slightly, and he worked his proud, square jaw. “I’m disappointed in you, Hosea.” He said, something that would make Arthur shrink, but seemed to wash over the old man. “You’re giving up too easily. And you know why, we need money. Everything we had is in Blackwater.”

That cursed job continued to hang over like the odor of rotting flesh and sickness, a dark cloud that wouldn’t go away. Arthur stepped back, letting the two men tear chunks out of each other.

“I’m not giving up, but we need to get moving. We can’t wait forever.” Hosea stepped closer, his expression almost pleading with Dutch. “The sooner we bury our dead and get out of here the better.”

Braver than Arthur could ever be, Hosea continued. “And Leviticus Cornwall? Do we really want to be rattling his cage? He’s a powerful man Dutch.”

The air between them crackled like the sky waiting for a thunderstorm.

“So am I, but in a different way.” Dutch growled darkly, then turned his back on Hosea to climb
into the saddle, summoning his men with a cry, “Gentlemen, lets ride!”

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Without Flaco, the cabin was empty, a pile of sticks for some reason spared by the otherwise cruel weather. Javier’s arm was mending, but not as quickly as he wanted. He’d tried to make himself useful around camp – he could never sit idle while others worked – but the old man had stopped him, insisting if he rested he’d be on the trail again sooner.

Javier had been somewhat ashamed to be sent back to the cabin like an escaped house dog, but truly, he’d rather get better quickly. Alone, he became almost maddeningly bored, until finally he picked up Ferdinand’s vihuela. He put it off for a long time, but his fingers itched, his spine was practically curling.

He couldn’t strum properly as his arm was still bandaged and feeling stiff, but he managed an idle tune. A song slowly drifted from his lips when the music filled Javier’s ears.

“Amorcito corazón
You tengo tentación de un beso
Que se prenda en el calor
de nuestro gran amor, mi amor.”

He must have fallen asleep some way into the third verse, because the next thing Javier knew he was in the throes of a nightmare. He was running through the snow barefoot, following the tracks of several wagons and horses. Only, the tracks went in circles, and it was steadily grower darker and darker, the shadows grew claws and teeth. Javier ran, but his feet sank deeper until he was drowning in freezing cold ice-

Javier was startled by a hand on his face, a thumb grazing over his cheekbone. “Shh, gatito-” Someone soothed. “You’re not alone.”

“Mph.” Pushing the hand away, the younger man scowled. “Fuck, how do you manage to be so quiet?”

“Years of practice,” said Flaco, grunting as he sat down on the bed beside Javier, “How is the hand?”

Javier flexed it; it didn’t hurt as much as it had done that morning. “Better, I think tomorrow I’ll be able to ride.”

“You’re very skilled,” Flaco commented, gesturing towards the vihuela lying at Javier’s side. He chuckled quietly. “I was never a musician myself.”

“Can you sing?” Javier asked.

The old gunslinger shook his head. “No.”

Moving, Javier picked up the instrument again. “Have you tried?”

For the first time since they’d met, Javier thought he perceived some nervousness in Flaco – an uncertainty which was quite frankly ridiculous in such a huge man. “Um…”

Before he could answer, or run away, Javier shuffled closer – a grin spreading across his face. “I will show you, it’s easy.”
Flaco leaned slightly away from him, clearing his throat. "I don’t think-"

Javier silenced him with a purposeful chord, fighting to play as best he could despite his injury. The music came naturally, a gentle melody that rang into the quietude of the cabin – almost filling it with a wonderful calm and lightness.

"Yo quiero ser un solo ser
Un ser contigo
Te quiero ver en el querer
Para sonar."

After listening for a time, Flaco began to join in – quietly, so quietly at first Javier couldn’t make out distinct words. He was the base that lifted Javier’s soprano, giving it depth, a delight to the ears. Javier would have told him so, but instead, he found himself distracted by Flaco’s throat. The course hair of his unshaven stubble, the roll of his Adam’s apple as his low voice rumbled from somewhere inside. It was tough skin, worn by the years, lined like the grains of an old tree – filled with wisdom of countless winters.

Wrapping his teeth around Flaco’s jaw, Javier began to nip and tease at the flesh. He tasted faintly salty with his sweat, and his scent was thick and almost over-powering. Flaco let out a low, pleased noise, slowly bringing Javier into his lap and curling around him.

Feeling braver, Javier bit down on Flaco’s neck. The older man’s hand reached up to curl around Javier’s throat, giving it a slight squeeze. "Not too hard, kitten." He ordered.

Javier shivered, and softened his attentions. Using only the hint of his teeth – and this compromise seemed to satisfy the giant man next to him.

"That’s better..." Flaco purred, releasing his grip. His fingers drifted downward instead, under the string instrument and into Javier’s trousers. As if of their own accord, Javier’s hips twitched forward at the touch. He knew his body well enough to know that he’d be growing hard soon.

Exploring further still, Flaco dipped his hand completely past Javier’s waist band – his palm was so large he could capture Javier’s entire member and balls in his grip. He teased the younger man, pressing his own growing arousal into Javier’s back. "You look after Flaco, and Flaco will look after you..." he whispered.

Letting his head drop back, Javier moaned when Flaco squeezed his neck again, and started to stroke him lovingly, tenderly. "You like that?" the old gunslinger asked, pressing his nose into Javier’s hair.

The door flung open and Martín stepped inside. "Boss? We-" He caught sight of Flaco and Javier and let out a strangled cry.

Furious, and suddenly completely not in the mood, Javier threw the first object he could find at Martín’s head. It turned out to be a can. "Get out!"

Martín fled the scene like a startled bird, slamming the door behind him. Javier scrambled off of Flaco’s lap as if it were a hot stove, adjusting himself with a curse. He’d almost let that happen.

"I better go and see what he wanted." Flaco got up and straightened his clothes, turning back to Javier, "Are you coming?"

Martín had no doubt talked to the entire camp by now, so Javier only imagined how they would look if they came out of the cabin together, "No, you go first, I’ll follow after."
He thought surely Flaco would leave then, but he didn’t. Instead, he stayed where he was, talking in a melancholy wisp. “In Mexico… things are different. There are traditions… expectations… of what a man should do.” The floorboards creaked. “Here… the eyes can’t see us.”

Javier locked him with a burning stare, his fists clenched tightly and his shoulders shaking. “Go.” The door didn’t slam this time, but fell shut with a faint squeak.
Bullets

Javier waited for as long as he could, but pacing the cabin only seemed to slip him further into agitation – and there laid the path, he was sure, to madness. So eventually, he was forced to step into the cold, white world of the outside. Immediately he began to shiver, and envied Flaco in his big, furry coat.

He half expected to be greeted with jeering, but the Del Lobos were otherwise occupied. Crowded around an overturned crate – a crude table – they were deep in conversation. Javier wondered over, curious as to see what the fuss was about.

“Hey, what’s going on?” He asked, trying to step into the tight circle.

Almost immediately he was greeted by the snapping jaws of Ramón, rushing out from the gathering like an angry dog under a fence. “This doesn’t concern you, fancy boy.” He growled. “Go and rest your arm.”

Before Javier could summon a comeback, Flaco stepped away from the group to glare his second back into submission. “Enough, Ramón. We might need his help.”

Suitably chastised, Ramón shot a poisonous look over his shoulder before skulking back to his previous position – Javier could have sworn the yellow eyes of the wolves had held more kindness.

“Come.” Flaco motioned Javier over, and he went as he was told. “What are you planning?” He asked, looking down at a large slightly frayed map that was laid out on top of the crate. Several places had been marked with charcoal, some circled, and some crossed out.

“There is a house tucked away north east from here – young couple, they keep a few horses and supplies.” The old gunslinger tapped a spot on the map with his finger. “We only need three men for it.”

Javier frowned, unable to understand why this simple job was causing so much distraction. “What’s the trouble then?”

Ramón perked up again, baring his teeth. “Some goddam gringos robbed a train coming through the mountains.” He ranted, almost frothing. “Big company train, there are agents sniffing about in Colter looking for their trail.”

It had to be them. It had to be. It could be no one else. Who would have the balls to rob a train right after such a disaster?

Javier began to tremble, Dutch and the gang were alive and well, they hadn’t starved and frozen to death – certainly not, if they were robbing trains. He was desperate to know more. “When? How many were there?”

“Yesterday,” Ramón bored into him with his mean, dark eyes. “Why? They friends of yours?”

Swallowing, Javier stared at the map. “Could be.”

“Either way, we need to secure the camp and lay low for as long as possible.” Flaco said, drawing the gang’s attention back to the task at hand. “But we need these supplies first.”

Surprising even himself, Javier spoke up. “I’ll go.”
Flaco frowned at him. “You’re injured.”

Javier brushed him off. “I can handle it. I’ll take two men with me and be back quickly.” And, he thought privately, he might be able to pick up any tracks of Dutch’s boys while he was up there. If he could get a vague sense of which direction they went then he could make an attempt to follow them. Getting out of camp for a while would good for him; keep him from being… distracted, any further. He missed his comrades, Arthur, John, and of course Tilly.

Knowing her, she wouldn’t give up hope, she’d wait for him.

But even that optimistic thought couldn’t chase away an acidic feeling of betrayal beginning to bubble in his gut. They’d left the mountain without him. Surely they must think he was dead, but why assume, with no body? Why hadn’t they waited?

Why hadn’t they come looking?

Juan and Julián were quick to volunteer themselves after Javier, and the two scurried away to mount their horses – a pair of identical bay mustangs – while he followed mutely behind. Before he could get into Boaz’s saddle, Javier felt something squeeze his shoulder.

Flaco had come up behind, and leaned down to speak quietly into his ear – his hot breath wet and strong like that of a great animal. “Don’t strain yourself. I don’t want you hurt again.” He said.

Conscious they were not alone, Javier moved away. “I won’t, I’ve done this before.” “Let’s go.”

The bounded off, Javier letting the twins guide him – as this was unfamiliar country – he just hoped they knew where they were going. Their horses kicked up flurries of porcelain white snow, behind them the camp began to blur into the horizon – until it was consumed by the landscape.

Though Javier wasn’t one inclined to mindless chatter, he was desperate to distract himself from the disloyal ideas squirming like maggots in his mind – eating away at his good sense. “How long you been riding with Flaco?” he asked the brothers.

Juan counted on his fingers. “Three years.”

Julián smirked. “We tried to rob him.”

“How did that go?” Javier inquired, raising an eyebrow at them both.

“He said we could do better, and asked us if we wanted to join.” Juan explained dusting some snow – or possibly dandruff – from his skinny shoulders.

“And that was that.” Julián finished, taking out a carrot from his coat pocket and biting off the end before offering the rest to his horse.

The rest of the ride was spent in not quite silence – there was no talking, but the sounds of the horses panting and the frozen ground crunching followed them as they lumbered on.

Javier brought Boaz to a halt when something caught his eye. “Is that smoke?” It looked like smoke, weak billows curling up to the sky – and, if he wasn’t mistaken, he caught the scent of ash in the air.

The twins glanced nervously at each other, and the three men continued in tense trepidation. Even the horses were quiet.
The smoke led them to a scene of destruction. Where there had once been a homestead now sat a shoulder-heap - a few small, lingering fires still burned in hushed corners. The house had been cruelly gutted by the flames, blackened, and left to rubble.

"Shit! What happened here?" Javier exclaimed, leaving the saddle for a moment to have a better look. He supposed this was the house they were supposed to rob – but now there was nothing left, nothing that wasn't burned anyway. Julián and Juan – perhaps wisely – kept their distance, muttering a prayer among themselves.

He approached the pile cautiously, stepping over what used to be the threshold. A few bricks were all that was left of a chimney, and Javier was startled when something made a sharp crack under his foot. He looked down and saw a photo frame, somehow untouched by the fire, of a man and a woman on their wedding day.

He wondered if his gang was responsible, then shook that thought from his mind. They could have stopped here for food and shelter, but what reason would they have to burn it to the ground? The residents would have been ordinary folk.

Grimacing, Javier explored further, spotting a cart sitting in the snow some distance away. Thinking perhaps something could be salvaged from this trip; he went over and began to pull back the canvas cover. He nearly wretched at what he found.

The corpse of a man, nearly turned to ice by the weather, rigid in death. "There's a body here." He called to the twins, before covering the poor unfortunate once more and turning his back on his grim find. "This place isn't right, we need to-"

From nowhere came the whistle and bang of gunshot and bullets. Javier dove behind the cart for cover, and he was soon joined by Julián and Juan. Their pursuers had snuck up while their backs were turned, five or six men with rifles.

The horses whinnied with fright, rearing and jumping as the attackers descended.

"Who the fuck are they?!" Javier demanded, aiming at the closest one and blowing his eyeball clean out of his skull. But as he fell Javier observed he and the others were wearing long black coats, and green neckerchiefs. He knew straight away whose then men were, he must have personally killed dozens of them over the years.

"O'Driscoll's? Up here?" He said aloud in disbelief, not quite believing that Colm and his gang would be holed up here too. Just how crowded was this mountain? "You gotta be kidding me!"

The twins gave no answer; they were silent in deadly combat – dispatching any O'Driscoll that came close enough. Soon, their bodies lay scattered across the blanket of snow, slowly bleeding out and staining the white underneath them. A few scavengers were already moving in – circling eagles landed from the sky, it was rare such a feast was laid before them.

Javier took the brief reprieve as the gift it was, and ushered them all out of cover and back to their mounts; they were very lucky that none had bolted.

"C'mon, before they regroup!" He told Julián and Juan. "Split up, otherwise we'll lead them back to camp!"

Immediately the brothers got into their saddles and blitzed their way back from where they had come, Juan following the river, and Julián disappearing into the trees.

Leaping up on to an anxious Boaz's back, Javier nudged him into a gallop. His heart thundered and
his blood sizzled as he fled the scene of death and the burning house behind him. He made sure to zig-zag, cross water and undergrowth to throw off any followers.

He could only imagine what Flaco was going to say about this, but right now, his only concern was returning to camp. Despite his efforts, he was no closer to re-joining Dutch.
Boiling

Chapter Notes

SMUT SMUT SMUT AT LAST

Thank you for your patience! this chapter is coming early because I am taking a short trip :) so enjoy!

Flaco watched the snow slopes silently, his keen dark eyes searching for any signs of movement – either approaching friend, or foe. The Del Lobos worked around him, scuttling like rodents preparing for a long winter. And it surely had been a long winter, one of the longest of Flaco’s life. Constant cold did something to a man, slowly stole away his spirit along with any heat there was to spare. His days had been whittled down to simply, eat, sleep, and try to stay warm. If he didn’t have a camp to run, Flaco would happily sleep all day and night; and wake when the spring thaw came around. The bears had the right idea.

That was before Javier came. Now, Flaco had something. The desire, the need to be needed made him weak and he knew it – but he who was he to deny he was but a man?

The terror, they called him. But who were they? They did not know Flaco Hernandez. They saw a poster, a cigarette card made decades ago, not the sad shell he was becoming. Not the slow decay eating at him like rot consuming an ancient tree.

If he could just have Javier for a little while longer, it might slow his decline.

Then, something caught his attention. A rider on a grey and white horse was bursting through the sea of snow, carving through it almost in a desperate attempt to get back to camp. Even in the midst of a fast ride he was stunning, young and infallible, fighting against the elements.

Javier all but fell from Boaz when he reached Flaco, his face red and flushed.

Flaco took him by the shoulders. “What happened? Where are Juan and Julian?”

Panting, the younger man just managed to get his words out. “The house was burned down, O’Driscoll’s were already there. There was a gun fight, but we killed them all. The twins are coming back a different way, they’ll be back soon.”

Hated, icy cold, settled around Flaco’s heart. He’d never met Colm O’Driscoll face to face – he’d been spared that particular displeasure – but had dealt with his bloodthirsty horde before. He’d walked on the charred remained of houses raided by them, and buried the mangled corpses they left behind. The man delighted in the horror he caused, almost fed off it. “Were you followed?”

Javier shook his head. “I don’t think so-”

“You don’t think so?!” Seized by rage, Flaco shook Javier none too gently. “The lives of my men are at risk!”

“This isn’t even my fight!” Javier growled, shoving Flaco away and stepping out of reach. It was then the old gunslinger realised he’d made a mistake. “I shouldn’t even be here!” The younger
man grabbed his mount’s reigns and turned him around, angrily marching towards the stables. Like the old fool he was, Flaco followed.

Inside the long wooden shack, Javier was checking Boaz over for wounds, and giving him a quick rub down; preparation for a hasty departure. Flaco watched him, and fear prickled his spine.

“Javier-”

“Don’t.” Javier growled.

Flaco stepped forward. “At least let me give you some food to take with you.”

“Screw you!” Throwing down the rag in his hand, Javier rounded on Flaco, baring his teeth and snarling. “You’re a selfish tomcat who wants to fuck anything that moves!”

Swallowing the hurt, Flaco took a deep breath to maintain his composure. “You’re angry.” He said, trying to get closer still. “I’m sorry if I upset you.”

Javier shot him a venomous glare, his hand left hand twitching at his holster. “Get lost, or I’ll put a bullet in you.”

It was easy to close the distance between them, just one single step. The air around the two men crackled like clouds ready to burst with lightning. “No, you won’t.”

“You-” Javier let a punch fly, but Flaco had him quickly pinned to the stable wall. They both landed there with a grunt, and before the younger man could say anything more, Flaco pulled him upwards to kiss him.

He tasted of spit, of anger, and of home.

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Javier struggled as he was hauled up by the massive hands of Flaco, letting out a muffled cry when lips found his own. At first, he went rigid, still in both surprise and indignation. Then, his own body betrayed him, flush against the bigger man’s bulk.

He relaxed a little, letting his hands roam across Flaco’s back and into his short black hair that was greasy with sweat. Javier bit down on the older man’s bottom lip, resulting in a hungry growl, and Flaco gripping his thighs hard enough to leave his fingerprints. It was perfect. At the moment, right there, he wanted nothing else.

When Javier needed to breathe, he tugged harshly on Flaco’s hair and the giant man reluctantly pulled back; his pupils blown, his gaze sizzling with need.

Finding his breath again, Javier spoke with a harsh but needy edge to his voice. “Not here.”

Desperate he may be, but he still had enough pride not to let himself be fucked on the floor of a stable like some lusty farm girl. In any case, the smell of horse shit would never come out of his clothes.

Flaco mercifully seemed to understand what he wanted, but let out a huff of impatience all the same. He deposited Javier back onto the ground and swiftly smacked him on the rear. “Cabin. Now.” He ordered, low and throaty.

Javier yipped, not expecting it. “Ay! Alright, I’m going!”
Entirely forgetting his plans to leave, Javier scurried from the stable and sped across to the cabin. Once inside he immediately shed his clothes and began to attend to his throbbing cock. It popped free from his trousers, raw and hard, and Javier stroked it with a moan.

He sat on the bed and waited for Flaco, unable to keep his hands to himself, if the old man didn’t hurry up Javier might end up finishing without him. However, soon enough the door burst open and the older man came in.

Undressing, he looked Javier up and down ravenously. “*Naughty kitten, couldn’t you wait for me?*”

Javier smirked. “*You took too long. And don’t call me that.*”

Now fully naked, Javier could help but admire the entirety of the huge man before him. Aches of brown skin, scarred and marked with a life that had been long and rough. His figure was sculpted with thick muscle, a little wasted here and there with age – but still a powerful image none the less. The hair on his chest was thick and curled slightly, trailing all the way down to his navel. Javier shuddered at the size of his manhood, he expected it to be impressive, but seeing it made it seem almost a daunting prospect.

“*Come here.*” Flaco murmured, making a ‘come hither’ gesture with his fingers.

Javier rose and went to him, and was roughly grabbed by the back of his neck and pushed down over the same table they had bickered over a few days ago. He gasped at the impact, the heat rising to an almost unbearable want in his belly. He squirmed when Flaco leaned over him, taking one of his arms to the small of his back and holding it there.

“So beautiful,” cooed the old gunslinger, laying affectionate kisses onto Javier’s bare neck and shoulders.

“*Stop being sweet.*” Javier demanded, growling under his breath “*And get to it.*”

Flaco chuckled, and the sound vibrated all the way through Javier’s smaller body. “*Patience, little kitten.*”

He pulled Javier’s head back by his hair, sinking his teeth into the flesh of his neck – but paying mind to the long, thin scar. The younger man cried out, high and surprised, knees now shaking. Flaco finally began to grind his large, heavy cock against Javier’s ass – not entering, but letting him now he was there. Truthfully, being taken from behind was not his favourite position, but Javier was too far gone in this to care.

Javier pushed back his hips to meet him, panting, his own dick straining desperately between his belly and the wood of the table. “*Harder.*” He pleaded. “*I want it hard.*”

Flaco chuckled again, but it was a darker, more aroused sound. “*As you wish.*” Javier heard him move about, and turned his head to look over one shoulder. He caught sight of Flaco pouring something into his hands. “*Bossy little thing.*”

The oiled fingers stretched him slowly, carefully, entering with skill. Javier tried his hardest not to cum there and then – a great effort, and he’d given up restraining the whimpering moans that passed his lips. He babbled in a mixture of English and Spanish. “*O-Oh, Dios Mio*- hm, right there.”

It was torture. Glorious torture.
The old gunslinger purred, and lay a few more kisses at the base of Javier’s spine. “Ready for me?”

Javier had to almost twist his neck to bark at Flaco over one shoulder. “If you don’t fuck me right now I’ll kill you!”

Withdrawing his fingers – making a wet pop as the left – Flaco licked his lips before mounting up and pushing inside Javier.

It almost stole away Javier’s breath, but before he even had time to fully adjust to the huge cock inside of him – Flaco began to roll his hips, pounding in and out at a steady pace. It was so good, but Javier needed more. “F-Faster.”

Flaco picked up the pace, moving with the speed and force of a freight train, nearly ripping Javier in two. The younger man began let out intermittent cries, getting higher and higher, his free hand gripped the table so tightly he got splinters. His eyes rolled back. "Oooohhh- hmm- yes-"

They rocked together for a while, almost as one, panting and snarling like animals. Finally, Flaco whispered hotly in Javier’s ear. “Want to cum, kitten?”

Weakly, Javier lifted his lip to show his teeth. “I don’t need your permission.”

“That so?” Flaco gripped the back of Javier’s neck again and squeezed. “Tell me what you want.”

Chest heaving, unable to bare the pressure in his loins much longer, Javier relented. “Want to cum. Now.”

“Well then.” The old gunslinger nibbled Javier’s jaw. “Cum for me, I want to hear you.”

“I hate-” But it was too late, Javier finished with a blinding white flash that sent him near screaming and left him a slumped heap across the table – shaking, covered in sweat, barely awake. Flaco pulled out of him, and Javier felt something drip down his legs.

Groaning, he tried not to think about how sticky he was.

Then, arms were picking him up, cradling him almost, and Javier was carried back to the cot. Flaco tenderly set about cleaning them both, whispering endearments and nuzzling Javier the whole time. “You did so well, Mi Gatito.” He rumbled.

“Fuck you.” Javier spat, but it had no real bite.

Flaco smiled and kissed his damp forehead. “Hm, maybe I’ll let you next time, eh?”

The old gunslinger fell back against the covers, pulling a blanket over them both. Javier curled up on his chest, growing ever more exhausted by the minute. “Smug bastard…”

Drifting off, the last thing he heard was a soft, comforting mumble, and Flaco’s warm hands stroking his hair. “You can sleep, kitten. I’ll be here to protect you.”
The young woman in yellow and blue had her back to Arthur, staring out over the edge of the overlook – at the rising and falling countryside that seemed to sprawl out endlessly. He approached cautiously, unsure whether he would be welcome. “Miss Tilly.”

Tilly glanced back over one shoulder; she’d wrapped her arms around herself almost in an embrace. “Arthur.”

He came to stand by her, admiring the view in silence for a while before speaking again. “How are ya settlin’ in?” He asked.

She shrugged. “Just fine. I think.”

Looking at her, Arthur noticed that her lips were thin and her eyes downcast. “You think?”

Tilly’s jaw tightened, the edges of her dark eyes pinched and she quickly swiped at them with the sleeve of her blouse. It could have been tears, but she wiped them away too quickly for Arthur to see. “It won’t be the same without him.” She admitted quietly. “I miss his music.”

Sighing like an old man, Arthur nodded. “I do too.”

The absence of Javier left not so much a hole as more of a gaping wound right to the throat. The evenings stretched long and silent without his song, and even Uncle went to bed in a solemn mood. Bill, ironically, seemed to have taken the blow heavier than most – his drinking worsened. For the last few days he was rarely sober – chewing on the O’Driscoll whenever he was unfortunate enough cross paths with Bill. Arthur knew it was more than just anger about Javier that fuelled it; the drunk wasn’t exactly subtle with his attentions, and frustrated that the subject of his want feared him.

Camp was a little grim these days.

“What happened on that mountain Arthur?” Tilly gently enquired, pulling Arthur out of his mind’s requiem.

“He just… got lost, the snow, it was impossible to see anything.” The snow itself had been a living thing, and they had been the prey. Maybe Javier would still be here if they’d stuck closer together, maybe if Arthur had not let himself fall behind; a series of wondering maybes filled his head. None were helpful.

Biting her lip, Tilly hugged herself tighter. “When Jenny died… and Davy, it felt like they were gone, y’know?” She shivered a little; perhaps remembering the cold of the mountains. “But Javier… it might sound strange it doesn’t feel like that.”

“I know what you mean.” Arthur confessed, turning towards her so they could not be heard. “I wanted to look further but Dutch had other plans.”

Tilly reached out and touched his arm; Arthur gently laid his rougher, larger palm over it. Sighing, she changed the subject. “…how did your hunting trip with Hosea go?”

Arthur was glad of it, and relaxed. “We tracked down a huge bear, but it got away. I was thinking of going after it myself.”
It took some time for Tilly to reply, she was facing the dipping sun, eyes alight with the last few orange yellow rays before evening came about. Anyone could see that she was thinking, and thinking hard. “You know.” She said. “I always wanted to try hunting. Where did you say you last saw it?”

Frowning, Arthur told her. “North of moonstone pond.” Strange, he thought, that she should suddenly take an interest – she’d been out on a few jobs for Dutch, certainly, but not hunting. Tilly just never seemed like the kind of girl who’d enjoy that sort of thing.

Fiddling with the cuffs of her blouse, Tilly carried on. “Of course… I suppose a big bear like that roams pretty fair. Maybe even into those mountains.”

He understood her then, recognized her meandering around the subject for what it truly was. Arthur’s chest tightened. He could refuse her, he should refuse her – taking her out of camp and back up into the frozen slopes was lunacy. They could both die, and would accomplish nothing.

It would have been a simple matter – if it were anybody else, if they hadn’t already lost so many. Even a frozen corpse would give them some closure at least, allow them to move on.

“Sure.” Arthur muttered, taking a cautious glance at Tilly, making sure he had her intentions correct. “Could take us days to track it, who knows how far we’ll have to go.”

The grip on his arm tightened a little, and the expression in her nearly all black eyes shifted to a silent plea. She was too proud to beg outright.

Cursing himself for a soft-hearted fool, Arthur sighed and rubbed his face with his hand. “I’ll talk to Miss Grimshaw for you.”

Tilly beamed, and threw her arms around Arthur’s middle. “Thank you Arthur.”

This startled him somewhat, and Arthur felt himself blush while he awkwardly patted Tilly on the back. “Don’t thank me yet. I can’t promise nothing.”

“I know.” She finally let him go, taking both of his hands in hers, still smiling. “But at least I’ll be able to sleep better knowing we tried.”

Arthur squeezed her small, delicate hands; her faith in him brought a great wave of fondness he was unfamiliar with. And moreover, a determination started to smolder in the core of his being. “Sure we will, Miss Tilly.”

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Javier cracked open an eye when he felt the huge body underneath him shift about. He was still on top of Flaco’s wide chest, being slowly brought up and down with the other man’s breathing. Javier had curled up to sleep with Boaz once or twice, and it was not dissimilar to that; a warm, secure feeling.

Try as he might to be discreet in his movements, the old gunslinger was awoken anyway. He immediately brought Javier closer and smiled a sleepy smile. “Morning, Gatito.”

Javier scowled at him. “Ay… don’t call me that.” He tried to move again, but his whole body firmly put a stop to that – too sore to rise, Javier slumped against Flaco’s chest. “Shit..”

The bigger man rumbled affectionately, kissing Javier on the forehead. “Did you rest well, hm?” he asked, voice muffled by the smaller man’s hair.
“I slept okay.” Javier replied, after his fog addled mind took a little time to adjust to the switch to Spanish. He slowly unpeeled himself from Flaco’s hold, or tried too. “Let me up.”

“Stay a while.” Flaco purred, lightly nibbling behind the younger man’s ear. “Rest.”

“I don’t need to rest” He growled.

Javier could feel Flaco smirk into his skin. “Stubborn, stubborn.” With deft fingers the old gunslinger began to scratch at the unshaven stubble growing under Javier’s jaw. All the tension in the younger man’s muscles relaxed as he unwillingly became mush under Flaco’s touches; slumping like a pleased cat back against his chest.

Chuckling, the older man swept his hand across Javier’s neck and kneaded skillfully at the skin of his ear lobe. Javier tried to keep his tone level, but he warbled. “Old… man… you are a menace.”

Flaco began to curl around him, dragging Javier back into the warmth and comfort of the covers. “Is that so?”

It would be so easy not to fight, to drift away into the dark and cozy realm of sleep – but Javier knew in his heart that would be a poor choice, a disloyal choice. He untangled himself from Flaco. “Enough now.” He said, voice set and firm, but without looking the older man in the face. “You know I can’t stay.”

“Ah, yes. Your friends.” Flaco mused, somehow sad and far away despite being so close. “I suppose they must be missing you.”

The statement put Javier on the defensive, his hackles raised and his jaw clenched. “Yes, they’re my family.”

He got up fully and picked up his clothes from the neat pile he’d left them in, dressing quickly; wanting to be out of the cabin sooner rather than later. In that time Flaco watched him quietly from the cot, lighting up a cigarette and lazily contemplating him. Javier pretended he wasn’t there.

Stepping out into the cold was worse now, and despite himself he yearned for the toasty cocoon of Flaco’s bed and his arms. Javier shook his head, he was going soft – the old man had tricked him.

“Enjoy your night?” Came a snide hiss from nearby.

Ramón was leaning on the wall of the cabin like a poisonous vine, nose wrinkling at the sight of Javier emerging into the daylight.

Javier stood tall, narrowing his eyes. “Better than yours, I’m guessing?”

The other man spat on the ground, Javier’s hand crawled up his thigh to rest on his pistol. “While you two were fucking I managed to secure the camp.” He leaned into Javier’s space, showing his teeth. “Because I actually care about these men.”

“Why don’t you step off, huh?” Javier warned, lifting his chin and stepping forward himself – pushing Ramón back. “Before you get hurt.”

Then, something in Ramón’s face shifted – a subtle thing, if Javier blinked at the wrong moment he would have missed it. “I used to be exactly where you’re standing.” He sounded tired almost, raw and bitter like old festering hurts. “Take my advice, leave now and don’t look back.” With one last sneer he began to depart in the direction of the campfire, but not before looking over his shoulder to speak one last time. “Don’t do what I did.”
Javier watched him turn and go, his figure blurring as he stepped away into the curtain of lightly falling snow.

The door creaked as Flaco finally appeared, buttoning the front of his coat. He came to stand at Javier’s side, looking down at him with a questioning expression. “You alright?” he asked.

A hard lump, bitter tasting, had formed in Javier’s throat. It was hard to swallow. “It’s time for me to go.”
“For the last time, I don’t need you to follow me!”

If there was one thing Javier could not stand, it was being ignored. It was pitiful, petulant, and he knew it; but nothing got under his skin more than that.

Flaco didn’t look up from adjusting his saddle, tightening it on the huge grey belly of his gelding. “This is not your choice, Gatito.” He said, patting the tall horse on the neck. “I’m going to make sure that you get off the mountain. What you do from there is…” Flaco frowned, as if perplexed by something. Javier suspected he was struggling to find the term he was looking for in English. Sure enough he soon switched to Spanish to continue their debate. “Not my concern. That’s what I meant.”

Javier puffed up like an angry cockerel. “Why do you keep interfering?!” He demanded. “I can manage just fine on my own!”

The old gunslinger looked at him wearily. “Pitch a fit all you want. But you are not in charge here, kitten.”

Infuriated, Javier let out a curse and turned away – lighting a cigarette to distract himself and maybe soothe his temper; deliberately not asking Flaco if he wanted one.

Annoyingly, his companion only seemed to be occupied by their upcoming trek. “We’ll go around Lake Isabella; from there we’ll follow the river to Cattail pond. Valentine is not far away, you can ask about your friends there.” He explained it all with a serine sort of patience, which only grated on Javier further; he refused to let his bad mood go so easily.

“What about your Lobos, don’t they need you here?” Javier inquired, puffing sourly.

Flaco waved away his concern with one hand as if it were a fly. “Ramón can take care of things for a day or two.”

Blowing out smoke, Javier rolled his eyes, imagining what a fuss that wise decision would cause. “He’ll be thrilled.”

Before he could take a second drag, Flaco snatched the stick of his fingers and sank his mouth down onto Javier’s slightly parted lips. He let out a surprised grunt, eyes blowing wide open, as the old gunslingers tongue swept across his teeth.

It lasted for no longer than a minute, and when Flaco was finished he pulled away with a sultry half smile. “Watch your attitude, little kitten.” He inhaled from Javier’s cigarette before handing it back.

Stunned, Javier just stood there for a beat, before deciding to toss the smoking stub into the snow. Then, from nowhere is seemed, a snide little voice wormed its way into Javier’s ear.

“Running off with your boy then? I thought it would happen soon enough.” Ramón was standing a few feet away, radiating resentment toxic enough to almost melt the snow at his feet.

“Ramón. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.” Flaco sighed, an appeal in his tone. “I’ll be back in a few days.”
Javier rounded on the other man, glad he finally had someone he could cut the teeth of his temper on. “And I’m nobody’s boy.” He growled. “So fuck off.”

The punch didn’t exactly blindside him but it did catch Javier’s cheek and send him reeling back a little. He chuckled darkly. “Big mistake.”

Leaping on Ramón, Javier swiftly brought out his blade and pressed it hard against his neck. Ramón struggled underneath him, his eyes widening as he felt the sharp edge so close to his jugular. All it would take was one quick slice and he’d bleed out like a gutted pig.

But before Javier could seriously contemplate killing him, Flaco intervened. He put his hand on Javier’s shoulder and squeezed. “You’ve proved yourself.” He said carefully. “It is enough.”

With a huff, Javier stopped up and let Ramón frantically scoot away and slowly stand up with a visible tremor in his frame.

Flaco reached out a concerned hand towards his second. “Ramón…”

Ramón whirled around with such snapping fury that Flaco was forced to quickly withdraw his hand or risk losing it. “Don’t fucking touch me.” With a final glare he retreated away, muttering to himself things Javier knew could never be spoken again in polite company.

The old gunslinger sagged beside him, his powerful shoulders drooping like those of a weary pack animal coming to the end of his days. A slight sheen had come over his eyes, and Javier felt an urge to say something – and would have done – if the look had not passed and Flaco settled behind his walls again.

He motioned with his head towards the horses, saying nothing. This time Javier knew better than to argue, mounting Boaz and nudging him into a trot.

Flaco’s gelding had a huge stride, leaving massive craters in the white blanket behind him. Clicking his tongue, Javier spurred Boaz on to ride in pace with the older man. It was almost frightening how big both gunslinger and horse seemed; a pair of towering giants.

When Flaco caught Javier looking up at him, his stern expression melted, leaving a tired core exposed. “We’ve been together for over a decade.” He sighed.

“That’s a long time.” Javier replied, the only couple he’d knew that had been together that long were his own mother and father. They were both dead and buried now, of course.

“I found him at a little rat infested saloon in Armadillo. He was counting cards.” Flaco went on, a bit wistful. “He’s a great poker player, he doesn’t even have to cheat – but where’s the fun in that?”

Javier’s mouth quirked up into a mischievous half-smile, “Sure.”

“I caught him at it, and he pulled a gun on me.” The old gunslinger chuckled at the memory, lost in it. “I could see the fire in him; I knew I wanted him by my side.”

Hearing him, how fond he sounded, only made Javier’s dislike for Ramón become more potent. “He doesn’t appreciate the chance you gave you. He’d be nothing without you.”

Flaco shifted in his saddle, frowning down at the smaller man. “Not nothing, Javier. No man is nothing.”
The chat faded for a while as they pushed on. The pale sun dipped behind the crest of the mountain tops, the temperature dropping rapidly. Javier began to shiver; his teeth chattering, he rubbed his arms for warmth.

Noticing this, Flaco looked down at him with a worried crease in his brow. “You are not dressed for this weather, kitten.”

“I’m f-fucking Mexican, w-we don’t m-mix well with s-snow.” Javier stuttered, trying to sound fierce underneath but failing. He was miserable, huddled in his too thin jacket and poncho; his body was just not made for these temperatures. Javier was too occupied by the cold to even complain about the stupid nickname Flaco had christened him with.

The old gunslinger pulled his gelding to a stop, taking a wide sweep of his leg out of the saddle. They had taken a path through a clump of white dusted pine trees, the scent of them rich and thick in the air. But more importantly, the two men were sheltered from the icy wind.

“Come, it is getting dark, let’s make camp.” Flaco said.

Too cold to disagree, Javier slowly dismounted – stiff from the freezing ride – and began to clear the ground.

Conscious of the fading light, they worked swiftly and soon had a tent ready and a campfire going. Javier sat in front it, holding out his hands desperate to try and soak some of the heat into his numb fingers.

Dinner was canned beans, which Javier ate only a few spoonfuls of before giving up. “I would give anything for a good pozole.” He said glumly. He couldn’t remember when he had real Mexican food, must have been as long as he’d been in America. The slop Pearson called stew managed to make him homesick every time he ate. Javier wondered what the gang were doing right about now, they might well be sitting down to dinner themselves.

He almost looked around in the hopes of seeing their faces, but knew they would not be there.

“Maybe if you come visit sometime, I’ll make you some.” Flaco rumbled.

Javier perked up. “Really?”

“Of course.” The old gunslinger glanced toward him, smirking and cupping Javier’s face with one palm. He cooed and made soft kissy noises. “Anything kitten wants.”

Flushing red, Javier snarled and shoved his hand away. “Shut up.”

The old gunslinger persisted, pulling Javier over with an arm around his waist. “Oh stop pretending, you like it.”

Javier hissed and elbowed him in the jaw. “I do NOT!”

Boaz and Felipe looked up from their hitched spot just beyond the camp, ears twitching and nostrils sniffing the air for trouble. They watched their masters do an odd sort of dance around the flickering fire, a can of beans was hurled across the camp and landed against a tree with a dull metal clang. But it was almost entirely drowned out by Flaco’s wheezing laughter and Javier’s furious shrill.

“Fuck you old man! You can sleep in the snow! The tent is mine!”
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