

No Tells

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From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

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New beginnings, huh. Brutal stuff—you have my sympathies. Never saw a new beginning that didn't involve burning something down, and if that metaphor sounds cute to you, I invite you to smell the wet ashes of a day-old fire, and know that it's *changed* everything you loved, better than magic ever could. This particular new beginning, this particular bright and shiny sunrise, involved a dame walking into my bar with literal fire in her hands. You can guess how it went from there, and the place wasn't even open yet.

I knew her, of course. We were friends once, Elnor and me. But it was complicated, and I wasn't up to thinking about complications when she showed up in that gorgeous burgundy New Capennan tailor-made, a snake demon as thick as a sailor's rope twined around her arm, and aimed her hand at me. The snake was gorgeous, a bright, new-shed green. Set off the suit like a treat. The thing shot a jet of flame from its mouth, hot as a cremation in winter. With me caught unawares, she couldn't miss—it was a warning shot.

"Lady!" I said. I talk better when I'm telling a story. Best I could say about that line is that I accurately identified her as a lady. The flame hadn't caught, just hit some glasses hanging behind the bar and melted them. I had my thunder bow in front of me, but I'd been tinkering with it. It was in no condition to draw on anything.

Fortunately, Elnor wanted to talk, although the only sweet memory she wanted to jaw over was, "Where did the money go, Yuma?"

"It went where money goes," I snapped at her. "*Where's the money?* Where are the old kings and the dead gods? What are you *doing* here?"

Elnor and I were broke when we met. The two of us teamed up with some friends—her girlfriend Shadress and some other nice folks now dead or in jail—because we had dreams, gods help us. Seven different dreams, maybe, but we pooled them and averaged them out, and what we came up with was this. We would leave the Riveteers, where we'd all spent our youth. Then we would *build* something. The Riveteers are supposed to be builders, blacksmiths, carpenters, right? That used to mean something, before this gang of laborers that banded together against the bosses became just another set of bosses. So me and my friends, we would start over, do it right. We found an empty warehouse to squat in and wrote a manifesto. We had all the skills we needed. I was a weaponsmith, Shadress was a tailor, Elnor looked cute. The money we earned would be shared. We'd recruit other people and so on, and so on, and so on to utopia.

But every family has drama, and this one also had rent. The owner of the squat showed up with thugs and impounded all our gear, so we couldn't make a living. He said he'd give it back if we paid the back rent, but we didn't have that kind of money. So, obviously, it would have to be crime, the main industry in New Capenna. Top import, top export. We knew how to steal, too, and the equipment for *that* was cheaper. If you do it right, you don't even need weapons, although I'll be honest: we did it wrong.

Elnor was amazing back then. It was cheap of me to say she just looked cute. She had charm, and if you think that's nothing, you've never been charmless. I'm charmless myself. They like me here in Thunder Junction because I introduced cocktails to the desert. They don't like me for my class.

She could drink. She could gamble. She could flirt. She was a perfect distraction, and since she could do makeup and dress with style, she was good at disguising herself, too. You don't need to glam yourself up with magic, or even use the normal boring tricks of disguise—cotton in your cheeks, change your glasses, ill-fitting clothes. You can do it all with acting and makeup. They expect one kind of girl, but here comes another.

Trust me, I tried hard to be a girl for a certain number of years. It takes skill. You have to function through the pressure of all that being looked at—the way people look at women, assessing, selecting, all without regard to whether you're selecting back. It's not why I had to remake myself as a man, but I have to admit, I was also bad at it. Elnor was a genius, a natural. Function through being looked at? Put her in a room full of crime bosses, and she could win a poker game naked.

So, while Elnor chatted up guards and croupiers and bank clerks, we blew safes and teased open vaults, we muscled our way through trains on rickety bridges. Those were the days! I remember them in lights and sights. The sawdust on our workshop floor, how the sunlight made it sparkle. The stained velvets in a maestro's darkened parlor, as my hand learned how heavy gold is. New Capenna was a ruined town. Even new things were ruined there. I know because we were new, and ruined.

This went on for a couple of years. Oh, we got the rent money pretty quick, but then we decided it would be safer and cheaper to own a building. That was Shadress's idea—Shadress who was the exact opposite of Elnor, and the exact opposite of me. Figure *that* out, if you can, but you'd need more advanced math than the Riveteers ever taught me. She only wore rusty black, with two crossed pins in her collar. She had a tailor's trick of talking with her mouth closed, because they keep pins in there, too, and when she talked, it was never direct. It wasn't, "We'll be stronger if we stick together." It was, "The two sides of an arch are always falling toward each other. That's why it's strong. If we can be like that, we'll be all right." See what I mean? We were all disasters; we couldn't have stuck together if we tried. But we could try to fall toward each other, and we did. For a bit.

Anyway, that building was the worst call Shadress ever made. We borrowed the money to buy it. You can guess what happened next. Debt comes down on you in layers. And funding your debts with theft, you make twice the enemies. I won't trouble you with the whole boring story, except that I took off eventually. Just ran off down the Omenpaths, not knowing where I was going. Everyone who stayed was going to die, go to jail, or go back to being a foot soldier in one of the gangs. Back to being the lowest iron-chewer in the Riveteers? No. I wanted a *new* life.

Justifying myself? Of course I'm justifying myself. But I'm right, too. I could die with my friends or live alone. What I took wouldn't have paid a month's interest, and I kept it out of the hands of our enemies, didn't I?

I threw a bottle. My virtue in a fight is that I'm fast. And I had another worry, too, besides Elnor and the disassembled crossbow. Kirri was there on the bar, in the basket where he likes to curl up. He can stay as still as a rock, so it just looked like I had an ordinary potted cactus, a bit of décor—but she was pointing that snake uncomfortably close to him, and even if I didn't make it out of here, I had to give him a shot at escape. That little guy has saved my life twice. You'll hear about both, in five minutes and ten.

I'm fast, like I said. And though Elnor's fast, too, boy, I can surprise you. It's about keeping your muscles relaxed until the last-possible moment. No twitches, no tells. She hadn't told me to keep my hands

where she could see them, but I kept them there anyway, right on the cool stone top of the bar. I could feel the shallow places in the stone where the mason didn't scrape it all the way clean. Then I threw myself to the side, grabbed the bottle, hurled it end over end. She shot and ducked at the same time, but I'd anticipated that, and the bottle shattered against the creature, making its jet of fire blue for a second. It melted a hole in the stone wall behind the bar, and her velvet arm was glittering with fragments of glass. Now the snake was stunned—hate to do that to a demon who didn't ask to be summoned, but better than Kirri. He was still in his basket, still not moving. I never know what he's thinking. He's smart, but he's not what you'd call emotive.

I had a couple of seconds. I used them to get my thunder bow back together and in my hand. It's a heavy, well-balanced crossbow with a stock polished bright, and it can channel lightning, hard, crackling bolts of it. Besides hunting, I mostly use it to kick people out of the bar, so it's bigger and more complicated looking than it needs to be.

"I don't get it, Yuma," said Elnor. She was cool for a woman with thunder pointed at her; I could smell the power, like the smell of rain coming to the desert. "Weren't we good to you? Didn't we accept you when nobody else did? Didn't we hook you up with the best body-man in the city to change your humors, to make you a fella?"

I said, "I didn't think I had to pay for your acceptance."

"You don't think you have to pay for *anything* of mine."

"I take your point. I—"

"I just told you, you've taken enough."

"Walked into that," I told her. "Listen. The money's gone. I spent it. There's nothing here to get back, and I don't believe you even want to. How long have you been looking for me? A year? That's plenty of time to forget why you're doing something."

Her hand flexed. The snake was looking better; as I watched, it coiled tighter around her arm, digging into the fabric, and its head reared higher. It breathed red flame, not at me, but just into the air, warming it. It's cold in the desert in the morning, and this creature was far from home.

"Don't patronize me," Elnor said. "Don't try to talk me down. You always thought you could talk your way out of trouble, but all you can do is tell a story. And that's not a story about me."

"Sure. Well, what is, then?"

"I know a story about me," she said slowly, "and it's very painful, but I'll tell if you'd like. In honor of our old friendship."

"Yeah?"

"It's called *Where's the Money?*"

I had all the money sewn up into the lining of my suit when I came to Thunder Junction a year ago. It was heavy, all in tens and fives, lead and bronze coins, and it really ruined the drape.

Omenport is the first city you see here, a friendly place, all wooden spires and sheltering cliffs, but it was the first place anyone who came after me would see. I knew I had to beat tracks out of there. What I didn't know was how to beat tracks, if you follow me. No idea how to survive in the desert. What passes for wilderness in New Capenna is just ruined suburbs. And it had to be on foot. I didn't trust the trains—obvious New Capennan creation, people from home would use them. And what did I

know about riding? I'm a city boy. I hadn't even ridden a bicycle. So, I set off walking on the Thunder Junction road.

The suit was new. Clothes matter back in New Capenna, even more than here, and I had it all custom-made by Shadress. Black wool, black velvet, pinstripes dripping from hip to hem, and I must've looked like a million bucks as I was dying. Heat exhaustion comes up on you unawares is what I've learned since then. First sign of it: you don't think clearly. Call me what you want, maybe I should've known better, but I grew up in a city where everyone always looks fantastic—not just because of the tailoring, but because the clouds and smog and the shadows of the buildings make everything dim and glamorous. I wasn't used to that big, full sun. Anyway, there I was, sitting on a rock with my sleeves rolled up and my jacket draped over my arm and making it sweat-slick, and there was this little. I mean. There was this little *guy*.

A sturdy little cactus, a toddler in shape and size, with six stumpy arms. Not much of a face, but I somehow knew he was well disposed to me. I put my jacket around him to keep from being hurt by the spines and picked him up.



Art by: Matt Stewart

I've seen a lot of things in my time. Humans, demons, great machines, revolutions, tragedies. A plane coming to an end, like New Capenna—it has a lot of things happening. Like how a broken bottle shatters into tiny pieces. The more shattered it is, the more pieces there are to catch the light. Thunder Junction's a new plane, one that's still beginning. It's still whole. So, when I say I hadn't seen anything like a baby cactusfolk, I mean it. There wasn't *room* for something like him back home.

He didn't lead me to water or anything like that. He'd just awakened a few minutes before. Didn't know how to do anything. But he took this shine to me, and being looked at in a friendly way made

me see myself from the outside, and asked what I needed. I figured water flowed down, so I looked for low ground. Low ground turned out to be a dry riverbed, cool water under the sand. So, I lived.

“I told you, the money’s gone,” I said. Kirri’d had plenty of opportunities to run during that first little fracas, but he didn’t run, of course; he doesn’t do what he doesn’t care to do, even if it was making me sweat with nerves.

“Still don’t believe you.”

“Fine. I lied. It’s not gone. You’re standing in it.”

“This is your bar?”

“It’s our bar,” I said. “Me and the other bartenders, the piano player and the dancers. The cleaner, the cook. We run it together. We divvy the proceeds. It’s just like we dreamed of back home.”

“But you own it.”

“Sure I do.”

“So you’re not just a thief. You’re a boss.”

“If you want to put it like that, yes, I am.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know which one I hate more.”

“I’m guessing thief, but you’re a thief, too.”

She snapped her fingers; the snake came to attention. I dove behind the bar, heard her running over to me. Cover is a trap if you’re not nimble. I jumped up, hurled blurry lightning at her, and she drenched the air with flame back at me: both missed. She hit some more bottles behind the bar, though, vaporized what was inside. I was diving out of the way on a floor covered in glass and slag, hollering, “Do you have any idea what those bottles cost?”

She’d taken cover behind some of the gaming tables. My bar’s got two levels, floor and mezzanine. There are some bedrooms up there, empty now. Card and dice tables in back. I introduced those to Thunder Junction, too, made a fortune on ‘em. I cringed at the thought of burned holes in those acres of felt, so I stayed down, didn’t shoot till I heard her move.

We traded shots. All of mine went high because of the damn tables. She was creeping around fast and silent, trying to come at me from unexpected places, mostly succeeding. I knew the longer this went on, the worse my odds were—she had the whole room to maneuver in, and she didn’t care what state she left it in—so I crawled the length of the bar and leaped over it suddenly, feeling the freedom of the room opening up, bolting for the staircase—and away from Kirri, who still wasn’t moving. Away, away, up, up! There goes Yuma, certified genius, heading for the high ground. I caught a look at her stunned face, pointed my bow as I ran, and then, just as I came to the top step, she aimed calm as you please and set the stairs on fire behind me.

I had carpet on the stairs, another of my classy ideas, and now yet another one that’s backfired on me because the fire fed on it like a starving beast. It was blue-hot, fast, and dangerous, surging up toward the mezzanine and cutting off my escape. I saw everything from above: the bar with the melted bottles, the hole letting in a round shaft of morning sun, Kirri in his basket, his snappy little movement as he looked up at me; Elnor, pale, standing still with the snake twining around and around her arm.

I realized then that she *probably* didn’t really want to kill me. Her aim’s not that bad. But if I were waving a stack of soft paper money at one of our craps tables, I wouldn’t have bet on that number, so

I darted back into one of the bedrooms. A roar of fire punched a hole right through the door, the angle sending it through the ceiling, too.

“Stop setting fire to my bar!” I hollered through the hole.

“Step toward the light, and I won’t have to!”

So here, again, is Yuma, certified and celebrated genius, the man on the cover of all the papers. The rooms on the second floor are all connected, right? That way you can make them into suites. Since they were all vacant, the doors were open for airing, meaning I could run soundlessly to another room and burst out the door, getting one good shot in. I ran, threw the door open, and there she was, standing on the bar in her filthy boots, aiming right at me.

I raised my forearm instinctively against the jet of flame, felt the fire hit it, and screamed in pain. It was an ugly burn, and it left an ugly scar, but it was nothing like it should have been. It should have gone straight through me. She still didn’t want to kill me—but she sure was psyching herself up to.

Behind her, I could see Kirri perched in the new hole in the wall. I tried to signal with my eyes, then with my face, then with my head, that he should go, hop out, get away, but he wouldn’t move, just stood there watching me. Like he was trying to convey something I wasn’t cactus-like enough to understand. I’d been worried about drawing Elnor’s attention to him, but she was just looking at me, puzzled. Flames were all around her now—the furniture was going up, the stairs were charcoal, and the tumbleweed thatch of the roof was half-gone. In another few minutes, the place would be one big chimney. And still there was Kirri, sitting in that hole in the wall like it was a window seat I’d just built for him.

“I’m not going to turn around,” she told me patiently. “I know you’re trying to fake me out. If someone’s back there, they can’t save you.”

Remember how I told you that it’s funny, the thoughts that come to you in a fight? With my flesh singed, the little hairs burned away, my new friend patiently waiting for me to understand something, my old friend with her hair singed and wild, the snake rearing back from her arm—all I could think about was that train heist, back home in New Capenna.

It was the beginning of the end for us, but it was a proud hour while it lasted. We were surrounded on all sides by Brokers muscle—they were flooding in from the car ahead and the car behind. All we had was speed and unpredictability, but that was Elnor’s forte. She was dancing around them, using every part of that grimy third-class car. Seats were cover; the bars of the luggage shelves were for pulling herself up into the air; light fixtures were for rebounding bolts of magic like trick shots in pool. Nobody knew what she’d do next, and that was how we beat the odds for one more day.

Real fights are all about rhythm. You try to anticipate your opponent’s rhythm. You try not to fall into one yourself. It’s that simple. The thing was, she could read my mind, because I had the same rhythm I always had. She *knew* me. Oh, we’d never been that close. In our old group, I was always better friends with other people—Elnor was too good a time for me. But intimacy doesn’t take love, it just takes practice.

I wasn’t familiar with her anymore, though. She was fighting like someone else. She was fighting like *Shadress*. Calm, careful, waiting, and thinking. And that meant that *Shadress* was dead, because you don’t calm down that much, that fast, unless by way of honoring someone’s memory.

Shadress was the best of us. I never believed in moral authority until I met her. Well, I never believed in either one—morals or authority. She got depressed after the train job, and kind of faded away, and we all started squabbling then. Fell in separate directions. I think she knew that we’d all lost sight of the

goal, when the goal was far away and the money was right there. But she really was the best person I ever knew.

All this went through my head in thirty seconds, which is a long time. Elnor was just watching me figure it all out. She was giving me the time for that, because revenge isn't any good if the person doesn't know why it's happening. But she *was* here for revenge, and I knew she wouldn't hold the next shot back.

So, I did something she couldn't predict. I fired my thunder bow at the long mirror behind the bar. It shattered into a shower of lost money, raining down a curtain of shattered glass. Kirri was watching me through it, and I could tell that, in his quiet little way, he approved of whatever I was doing. Elnor really did turn and look at that; she couldn't believe I'd wreck my own place, even after she'd already wrecked it so thoroughly herself. Then, among the brightness and the noise, and the choking thick smoke of my investment, I leaped down and went after her hand to hand, attacking not with thunder or any kind of magic, but with my burned fist and my undamaged one.

We rolled around on the floor, grappling. With both hands I wrestled the snake demon off her and hurled it across the room; it was muscular and strong, but no more than any other animal. Same trick as with the bottle. Funny how these magical creatures sometimes only have defenses against magic. They're shocked by simple force, and Elnor was the same.

Well, yes, of course I could have just killed her.

I didn't want to, that's all. And I was sure of that. It's the only way to *guarantee* you'll lose a fight: go into it without knowing what you want out of it. I knew what I wanted, and Elnor didn't, and that's not why I won, but it's why she lost.

The room was almost silent suddenly, no more big dramatic moves, just two people, tired, breathing heavy among the crackle of sparks. Elnor knows how to fight with her hands, too, but it was my specialty when I was a kid. When other kids were training in summoning and lockpicking and all the different kinds of magic, I was out on the street with my fists. A little rebellion against my dad. So there we were, going at it, me slowly winning but both of us about to choke on the smoke, when suddenly the rain hit.

In Thunder Junction, the desert rain is hard and sudden. It comes clap out of a blue sky; the clouds rush up on you like a train, and then you're soaked to the pores, with impossible little flowers coming out all around you. It was winter then, thunderstorm season, but still I didn't expect it. In an instant, the fires were out, and the whole place was black and acrid like a candle wick that's just been snuffed. With the water and all that char, you could have dipped a pen in the puddles on the floor and written a poem, if you had a mind to write a poem, which just then I did not. I was still coughing out the smoke from a fire that no longer existed. She was coughing, too. And then I knelt on her sternum, grabbed her wrists, and it was done.

I told her what I'm telling you now, what I tell every stranger who wanders into my bar in clean tight clothes and new boots. You say you're here for a new beginning? Fine—but that means giving up on the past. On pretending that you can still change it. "The past is dead," I said. "It's over. You're in a new place, and that means starting from nothing."

"You're so wise, Yuma." Her face was slick with rain; she kept having to blink it out of her eyes, shaking her head around. "And it sure is convenient—how your wisdom means I have to forgive you."

"I don't expect you to forgive me," I said. "I'm ashamed of what I did. I'd do it again, and I'd be ashamed of it again. But this is Thunder Junction—people are *different* here. They're here to invent themselves."

"Reinvent, you mean."

"Invent . Like a piece of machinery. Riveteers are good at tinkering, but it's all ready-made parts, ideas someone else built and broke. Here, you can forge yourself in a new fire."

"Haven't you had enough of fire?" She coughed one final time. "You want me to be your friend? Team up with you? Maybe you'll give me some more life lessons like this one?"

"Nope. That door's closed. I don't want to see you again. You don't want to see me. But you can start a new life. Or I guess I can kill you, if you insist, or you can kill me—and what? Take over the bar? Take over the mortgage? Pay to repair all the damage we just did? Look, either you're gonna be in the red or I am."

She smiled a little, and for a moment, it was just like old times, in the way your reflection in a mirror is just like you—you can't hear it or smell it, it's got no warmth, but you feel something anyway. I knew I'd gotten through to her, and it's not because I had my lines straight, but just because she'd lapsed back into seeing me as a person. It's easy to stay mad at a phantom, or to flee one, too, but a person has got to be reckoned with.

And that's when Kirri had his say. The rain all around us was gone all of a sudden, and there was a different feeling to the air. We both noticed it, and I finally let go of her wrists—my burned hand was in agony, a sharp, hot, smooth pain—and we looked around to see what had happened.

Well, you've seen what the place is like now, but imagine what it was like to watch it happen. The whole inside of the room was alive with vines. They were running up the walls like water runs down—quick and flowing, massive red flowers dropping open like bells, filling up the massive holes in the ceiling. Weaving themselves together, fanciful patterns, knots, curlicues. And there was Kirri floating an inch in the air above the bar, hardly moving, just floating there serenely as the room filled up with life. I've had all sorts of great minds come in here, try to make sense of it. Apparently these vines are like no species seen anywhere, on any plane, or any plane that people've come back from. Kirri just invented them. They make the air so humid, even with the desert outside, that people stand there in the doorway and suck it in like a cool drink.

The vines stopped moving finally, and Kirri dropped back down to the surface of the bar, sat down on it, and went cactus-still again.

Elnor didn't do anything much. She just got up, shook out her arms, gazed up around her. Finally, she said, "Where'd he come from?"

"He's been here the whole time."

She kind of snorted. "Well. Let's call it. Because you're not wrong."

"No."

"I still hate that you spent our money on this place. Congratulations. You turned something into nothing."

"We all turned a lot of something into nothing, back on New Capenna. The love was real, though."

"All right," she said and whistled softly. The little snake was draped over a vine nearby; it slid down to the floor—maybe a little reluctantly—she picked it up and draped it around her shoulders. She walked out without looking back.