

Hardboiled Eggs

A Slim & Anci Tussle

By

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“Come again?”

“Chickens, Slim. You know? Like yardbirds.”

“I know what chickens are, Foghat. I thought I’d misheard you is all.”

We were at Indian Vale. My daughter Anci was reading a book for school and sipping one of those orange sodas. The chicken man, and prospective client, was my old work buddy Foghat. He didn’t have an orange soda. He wasn’t allowed. I was barely allowed and I paid the bills and bought the sodas. I tell you, it was a raw deal. Other than that, it was a fine fall evening. The cool breeze whispered through the grasses and the leaves of the shingle oaks. The skies were clear and freckled with stars and the moon was out and smiling.

Foghat wasn’t smiling. He was about my age, early forties, with a long face and the disposition of a nervous housecat. He said, “All kinds of chickens, too. Got into the exotic game couple years back. Belgian d’Uccle, aracauna, welssummer, cochin, salmon faverolle, cuckoo marans, modern BB red game. You name it. Even got me some of those white sultans brand new. Amazing birds.”

“What do you do with them all?”

“Well, they’re pets mostly. I don’t know. I favor them,” he said. “Course, I also sell the eggs. Folks like that these days. Exotic bird eggs. They’re more flavorful than store-bought and got better nutrition.”

Anci looked up from her book. She said, “You don’t say?”

“Oh, yeah. There’s science about it and everything.”

Anci looked back at her book. “Well, as long as there’s science.”

I said, “Okay. So you got yourself some fancy chickens. Pets and egg-layers both. What’s any of it have to do with me?”

Foghat frowned a little more. Back when we’d worked together, his kip was as onsite safety inspector so frowning was basically his job. It showed, too, I tell you what. His frowns were professional frowns. They spanked your frowns on the hiney and sent them to bed without supper.

He scratched his nose with one of his bony fingers. He said, “I was kind of hoping you’d get them back for me.”

“You lost your chickens?”

“Manner of speaking.” His throat cleared a couple times. Anci smiled a little behind her book. She knew and I knew what this was. We’d seen it on a number of occasions now. Sometimes clients hold back the real story of a case on you. It’s a little dance they do. You let them dance because you want what’s inside their wallet and the dance is part of the deal, but you always know what it is. They’ll give you the sugar first, so you get to hear a little about the exciting world of exotic chickens and what not, and then you finally get down to the bad stuff. That’s what we were doing here now with Foghat.

Finally he said, “Another manner of speaking, they were taken from me.”

“Taken? Taken by who?”

Anci said, "Whom."

"Taken by whom?" I corrected. We nodded at each other. I looked at Foghat again.

"Taken by whom? Some kind of chicken enthusiast gone outlaw?"

Foghat said, "No, not some kind of chicken enthusiast gone outlaw, Slim. What happened was, a couple years back, well, I got divorced again. Not divorced again from another wife. I mean from the same one. Me and Cheryl been hitched and unhitched three times now."

"Sounds a little rocky."

He shrugged. "Can be. Some good times mixed in there, too, though, so you want to maybe give it another go. I don't know. Anyway, this time she says it's for keeps. We're bust. I think maybe at first I didn't believe her, but then there was another fellah. So that was that. We were bust. I guess I took it kinda hard."

"Easy to do."

"Or not so easy," he said. "I got to where I was slacking at work. Just couldn't focus. Missed time I couldn't afford missing and ended up getting fired by the old man. Fell behind on my bills some. You know how it is. Eventually, I reached out to some folks for a little help. You know, financial."

"Family?"

Foghat said, "No. Ain't got no family to speak of. What I mean is loan people. Like, private loan people."

"Oh, Hell."

"I know. But I was fixing to lose my house, and I guess I got desperate. Anyway, I went to a guy and ended up making a deal with the Devil. You remember when we were up

to that PelCo mine together?”

“Sure.”

“You recall a guy back then went by the name of Bandit?”

I said, “Big Bandit or Little Bandit?”

“Little Bandit.”

“Oh, Hell,” I said again.

Anci said, “You’d be happier it was Big Bandit?”

I nodded. “Little Bandit is bigger than Big Bandit. A lot bigger. They came from different mines, and at the one Little Bandit was littler than the other Bandit they had, I guess. That other Big Bandit must have been a damn mountain. Anyway, eventually Little Bandit and our Big Bandit ended up working the same boodle but by that time their names were set in stone, even if they didn’t make sense anymore.”

Anci shook her head and said, “You guys and those damn nicknames. You need a computer to keep track of it all.”

Foghat said, “Big Bandit ain’t never let that go, either. He’s still as mad as a wet hen over it, you’ll pardon the expression.”

“Well, I can see that,” I said. “I mean, what if there was another Slim?”

“Two times the headaches, for starters,” Anci said.

Foghat pressed on. “Anyway, that’s what happened. I got in with Little Bandit and, of course, right away I fell behind. Way these guys got it rigged, you almost can’t help but fall behind.”

“That’s kind of what it’s all about.”

“Hell, I know. Know it now, anyway. Know it all personal,” he said. “One night few weeks into this thing, Little Bandit and some boys showed up at my place. Things got a little

rough. No lasting scars or anything, but it wasn't exactly a dance at the VFW either, I tell you that. In the end, they used me to mop my kitchen floor and then they run off with my birds. I could hardly believe it. But that's what they done. Said I'd get them back soon as I paid."

"Damnation, Foghat. I hate it for you. I do. I hate it for your birds. But I can't really get involved between you and Little Bandit, you owe him legitimate money."

"That's the thing though, Slim. I don't owe him. Not anymore. I paid him. Every penny plus interest. Took me a little while and hurt like Hell, but I did it. Sold my truck. Sold off a little piece of land I'd been holding back, dad's old hunting spot up there to Olney. Cleared the ledger. But no chickens were returned to me. Little Bandit says he's keeping them. Some kind of lesson, he says. Warning to others. Says he might..." He looked away suddenly at the wall. His throat got thick. "Says he might butcher them, fry them up in a skillet. Little butter. Tarragon. Maybe a squeeze of lemon juice."

"He was awfully specific about it."

"You should have seen him," Foghat said. "He enjoyed it. Watching me twist like that. Suffer. Plus, way I hear he really does know his way around a kitchen."

"Kinda unusual for a thug."

Foghat said, "Slim, I'm begging you. Maybe just run out there to his place, have a word. Way I hear tell, you got a knack for this kind of thing."

"Finding lost chickens?"

"Helping folks in need. Getting things done need doing."

Before I could reply, Anci hopped down from the couch and closed her book with a thump. She had that look about her makes me want to climb under a bed.

She said, "He'll do it."

Foghat and I said, "He will?"

“We will, I mean. I don’t like bullies and I don’t like assholes, and this Bandit...”

I said, “Little Bandit.”

Foghat said, “Big Bandit is just as sweet a little old thing as you’ll ever meet.”

Anci said, “I don’t like bullies and I don’t like assholes or bad men run off with people’s pets. And this Little Bandit sounds like all three.”

Foghat smiled at her. I think there was tear in his eye. I admit, I was kinda proud too. It was quite a speech and this was quite a kid. Foghat seized my hand and shook it.

“Thank you. Thank you both.”

“All respect to your current situation, we can’t do it for free, though.” I said.

Foghat showed us his frown. It was a frown to beat all frowns. He looked at the floor some. He said something I didn’t quite catch.

“Well, I missed that,” I said.

Anci said, “He said he thought he might pay us in eggs.”

Little Bandit lived in the sprawling woodlands south of the Vale off Hick’s Branch near Goose Creek and the Kaskaskia Experimental Forest. You might imagine, there’s not much in the way of human development out that way. Few small farms. A rural school or two and a white water tower peeking over the treeline. If nothing else, it’s a pretty car ride. The black gum lean against the narrow car-paths, and the yellow popular rattle their brilliant branches from the stream bottoms like rooster tails. The little coves are tangles of chestnut oaks and black haw, now reddening with the turn of the season. The forest was on fire and autumn had struck the match. Ancie slipped on her shades. We were in the truck. Lovely day like that, we’d ordinarily have taken my bike, but there were chickens to rescue maybe, and I didn’t have that many little helmets at my disposal.

Along the way, Anci turned to me and said, “So...Luke Skywalker.”

“What?”

“I said Luke Skywalker.”

“I heard you,” I said.

“Then why did you say what?”

I said, “I guess I was taken by surprise. Why are you asking about Luke Skywalker?”

“On account of I watched Star Wars for the first time the other day, and now I want to discuss it.”

“I was kinda hoping we’d look at that together one day.”

“Well, you’ve been pretty busy lately, what with playing consulting detective and all, and I just felt it was time.”

“Oh.”

“So this galaxy he’s in.”

“Uh huh?”

“You’d say it’s pretty big?”

“I don’t know. I guess that’s the idea. It’s a galaxy, after all.”

She nodded. “That’s what I think, too. Big old galaxy with more planets than you can shake a ray gun at...”

“Blaster.”

Anci ignored me. “More planets than you can shake a ray gun at and every kind of alien race you can think of. And yet somehow the bad guy is his dad?”

“That’s how it goes, yeah.”

“And the princess...the one he kisses...she’s his sister?”

I said, “You said you watched Star Wars. Those other things happen in the other movies. The sister thing and the dad thing.”

“I know,” she said. “I watched the one, looked the others up on Wikipedia.”

“That’s cheating.”

“How you figure?”

“Reading ahead of the next movie. It’s cheating.”

She said, “So someone just wrote it all up online as a cheat? That what you’re saying?”

“Well...”

“You know what, I was reading about World War II for history class the other night. Found out who won and everything. I reckon I might get expelled now, not having gone back to fight the Hitlers myself.”

I sighed. There was some things you’d just never get across to the younger set.

I said, “Okay, fine. It’s not cheating. It’s a personal life-choice that I have made about movies. So what about Luke and Vader and Leia?”

“Kind of a coincidence, don’t you think?” she said. “Them all being in one place at one time, big old galaxy like that. I guess we’re lucky Chewbacca didn’t turn out to be the long-lost family dog.”

“I think it’s the Force brought them together, like with magic.”

“You mean the midi-chlorians.”

“And *that’s* in the dang prequels. How much Wikipedia did you do?”

“I did it all,” she said. She was pleased with herself. She looked out the window, all satisfied. “I am now done with the Star Wars.”

“No, you’re not,” I said. I was smarting and determined to be cussed about it.

“Okay, not the Force or midi-chlorians or whatever then. How about fate? That’s a thing happens in stories. Fate brought them together.”

“Like us and the chickens.”

“No, not like that.”

“More like it was shoddy screenwriting.”

I was grumpy. Damn kids and their damn Hunger Games and whatever. I said, “You know, that movie was a big deal when I was a boy. People lined up around the block to see it. I lined up around the block, too. Few times, in fact. Spent eight hours in the blazing heat one summer to see the re-release and didn’t even get a ticket.”

“Waited long enough, you coulda just watched it at home on your couch.”

“Well, we didn’t have that then. Home movies, I mean. We had couches. And where the heck did you get a copy anyway? We don’t own one.”

“Found one on the Internet,” she said.

“Found one or swiped one?”

She looked at me. I looked at her. She leaned forward and turned on the radio and that was the last we talked about Star Wars for a while.

Finally we arrived at Little Bandit’s place. Way it was, you had to leave the main road and trace a gravel path up a gentle slope and into the woods where the green ash were as big as hot-air balloons and a fingering stream was nearly choked with browning canarygrass. There weren’t any chickens in evidence.

I stopped the truck and got out and said, “Wait here with your phone, will you? I don’t think Little Bandit will want any trouble over this thing, but there’s no reason for you to go up there just yet.”

Anci looked dubious. Truth was, I was dubious, too. Wanting trouble and getting trouble were two different things. She knew it and I knew it. But finally she nodded and said, “Fair enough. Try not to get your thumb pecked, though. Chickens can be pretty mean, you get in their way.”

“Okay.”

“And you’ll get in their way.”

“Unkind.”

“And try not to get into a fight.”

“I’ll try.”

“Text me the poopy emoticon if you get into a jam.”

I said, “Do I have that one?”

“Just watch yourself, man.”

I promised to watch myself. I promised to text the poopy emoticon. I closed the door and climbed the rest of the drive on foot and walked up to the house. It was a modest little frame house, probably built in the 1920s, painted white but dulled some by time and patches of moss from the encroaching woodland. There was a pig-belly stove rusting in the yard and the door of the stove was open and a cat curled up inside asleep. There was a brown El Camino in the drive, but it was on blocks and it was the only vehicle in sight, so I thanked the midi-chlorians and walked around back of the house hoping to steal some chickens all easy like.

The back property was more woodland, spotted with young persimmon trees and sloping further upward until maybe two hundred yards on it was braced by a hogback of red sandstone. But no chickens. Not even a feather. I went to the back door and took out my tools but you could tell just by looking I wasn't going to need them. I hesitated a moment. This was getting into a whole other thing here. Breaking and entering. Plus, there might be someone inside. It didn't look like there was, but you never knew. Regardless, I'd promised to get those birds, and Anci wanted to try the eggs. Truth was, I wanted them too. They had nutrition and there was science to back it up. I stole myself for the rough work ahead. I pushed gently against the knob with one hand and the bolt pressed against its strikeplate and loosed its screws from rotten wood and the door receded with a sigh. I went inside and closed the door behind me and my eyes began to adjust to the dimmer light. When they did, I froze and my mouth dropped open and I think I might have even said a bad word.

The kitchen was gorgeous. The stove probably cost more than my car, one of those restaurant-grade things with eight-burner things and the separate warmer pad and a ventilation hood as big as a coffin. The counters were poured concrete and a steel-frame island was topped with what must have been a quarter-ton of butcher block and a brace of professional-looking knives. What I at first took to be an oddly placed gun cabinet instead held maybe two dozen glass jars filled with dried spices and a mad-scientist's collection of salts and seasonings.

“Day-yum.”

I turned. Anci, of course, standing in the doorway and gawking like I was gawking.

I said, “Dang it all, I told you to wait in the car.”

“You ran off without your phone, genius,” she said. I had. She handed it to me. She lifted her nose toward the room. “This is quite a sight. How come our kitchen isn’t this nice?”

“How come our anything isn’t this nice?” I said. “Besides, I wouldn’t have any idea what to do with half of this stuff. This thing, for instance.”

“Ravioli maker,” Anci said.

“Really?”

“There’s a breadmaker over there, too. But more to the point, I think I hear chickens.”

I did, too. A muffled clucking, somewhere nearby. We walked through the rest of the house—which looked more like a regular house—and to a doorway beneath a set of stairs leading upward to what I took to be a small loft. We opened the door and walked down some steps into a cellar where Foghat’s chickens were clucking away inside their cages: Belgian d’Uccle, aracauna, welssummer, cochin, salmon faverolle, cuckoo marans, modern BB red game. You name it. Even some of those white sultans. Their feathers were all colors or else they were spotted or striped and sometimes they were both. They were kind of beautiful, I’ll be honest.

Anci said, “You think this is them?”

“Funny,” I said. “Let’s get them and get out of here before the chef comes home.”

East wall, there were double cellar doors such that you could walk up and out onto that side of the property, you wanted, but when we tried them they were locked from the other side with a shank through the loop handles and a pretty good padlock and chain securing the shank.

“Guess we’ll have to carry them through the house,” I said.

“Everything has to be the hard way,” Anci said.

I brought down a cage from the top of the stack. Best to get started. A brilliant green bird looked at me with those dark eyes that are so much like a doll’s eyes.

“Don’t worry, little lady,” I said. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

A voice said, “That’s a rooster, dumbshit.”

And with that, a shadow draped itself over the room. It was like the light bulb had sparked out and the little cellar windows had blinked their lids.

Behind me, Anci’s voice was impressed. “That’s no moon. It’s a space station,” she said.

I turned and looked. It wasn’t a space station. It wasn’t even a moon. It was bigger than a moon. It was Little Bandit.

He said, “Well, well, looks like we got us a couple chicken-nappers here.”

I tell you, this was a glacier of a man, so wide he filled the cellar door stop-to-stop and so tall he had to tilt his neck slightly to avoid notching his cleanly shave head on the top of the frame. His eyes were too small for his face and his mouth and lips too wide for it, like they couldn’t figure out how to manage that enormous head. His arms and hands looked like two industrial shop-vac hoses were trying, unsuccessfully, to suck up a pair of giant, uncooked hams.

I reached back and pressed Anci a little further behind me. I was cussing myself for bringing her along and I was cussing myself again for forgetting my phone in the truck. I was cussing myself for taking this ridiculous job in the first place, and cussing chickens and other birds of all kinds everywhere and at any altitude. Mostly, though, I was cussing Little Bandit.

I said, “I was about to say the same thing. Except there’s just one of you.”

“How do you figure?”

“Figure the first thing or figure the second thing?”

“The first one.”

I said, “Well, you did take them, didn’t you?”

Little Bandit shrugged.

I said, “Took them and refused to return them, once the terms of your agreement with Foghat were met?”

Little Bandit shrugged.

I said, “That true? ‘Cause if it’s not—if Foghat still owes you, I mean—we will walk out of here right now without fuss.”

Little Bandit said, “It’s true, but as far as you walking out of here that is another story entirely. Foghat eventually gave me what he owed me, sure, but he made me work double for it. Had to chase him, on the phone, on the computer, on foot. Even had to hire out a little help.”

“Yeah, we heard some about that, too,” I said. “Goons aren’t cheap these days, are they?”

He took that with another shrug. “Cousins of mine, actually. Plus one buddy of the cousins. Nice fella. Lost his job recently and needed some work.”

“I don’t care.”

He said, “So, yeah, I got my money, but I got it and I’m not too happy, you understand? Usually, I get paid back with a little sugar on top, I’m happy. But the way this thing went down, way Foghat made me wait and work and sweat, I ain’t exactly throwing a party. So I decided to keep his birds. Teach him a little lesson. Plus maybe the next guy hears the word doesn’t make me sweat so much.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “Let me take this kid out of here, drive her home, then I’ll come back and you and I can talk some more or dance or whatever it is you want to do.”

Anci said, “Over my dead body.”

“Hush.”

Little Bandit said, “Sorry, Slim. Like to help you. Really would. But you pretty much fucked the monkey coming out here like this, breaking into my house and trying to make off with my things.”

“That last business is still under dispute.”

He nodded. “Okay, I’ll give you that one. That last one. The other things, though, there ain’t no dispute about it. Unless you just somehow materialized down here in my basement.”

Anci said, “Could have been the midi-chlorians.”

“I don’t exactly follow that,” said Little Bandit. “Though having that business thrown in my face don’t make this any more pleasant. The midi-chlorians. They damn near ruined the franchise with that nonsense.”

“That’s how I feel about it,” Anci said.

“What was the matter with just the Force?” said Little Bandit. He made an exasperated gesture with his hands. “It was a perfectly elegant explanation for the universe’s supernatural cosmology. I just don’t get it.”

Anci shook her head. “Shoddy screenwriting.”

Little Bandit looked at Anci. Anci looked at Little Bandit. Both of them nodded. Agreement had been reached.

“Little miss,” he said, “I like you. Like your handle on things. Might even like to get your thoughts on the expanded universe one day, but right now I got to take care of

business with your dad. You ain't got nothing to worry about. I'd never hurt a kid, and I ain't even gonna hurt your daddy too bad. Just shove him around a little, put a foot up his ass to teach him a lesson about sticking his nose in."

"We could call the police," Anci said.

Little Bandit nodded. "Could at that. Can't even say I'd blame you, really. 'Course it'll take them an hour or more to get out here, and once they do I'll just have you arrested for breaking in. Man's got a right to protect his home, disputed chickens or no."

I said, "That's the way it is, let's stop talking and start punching."

Little Bandit came down the stairs. He came down like a locomotive. Anci leapt out of the way and hugged the wall. The chickens clucked in alarm. Somewhere, a bolt of lightning knocked a bald eagle out of the sky.

For a big man, Little Bandit was surprisingly fast. He came in low and grabbed me around the waist and tossed me backward hard and to the ground. I rolled out of the way of the aforementioned foot-in-ass and sprang upright just as one of those giant paws of his cut the air mere inches from my head. I rolled left, stopped, and pivoted back into him with the full force of my elbow, but I might as well have been trying to knock down a schoolhouse. He grinned and thumbed a loop of blood from the end of his nose and came in again, circling right this time. I circled left, put my right foot back and assumed the fighting stance. Then we stopped, the both of us.

Anci had stepped between us with her phone to her ear.

Little Bandit said, "Little miss, please."

I said, "Darlin', get out of the way."

Anci ignored us. She was making a call.

Little Bandit looked at me. He said, “She’s calling the cops. I told you what’ll happen.”

Anci shook her head. She said, “Not the cops. Animal control and the Illinois Department of Public Health.”

“Come again?”

“You got yourself a mess of exotic animals stored down here in your basement without any of the proper permits, inspection stamps, or immunization records.”

Little Bandit looked at me, confused.

“What the Hell she talking about, Slim?”

“She’s talking about these just aren’t regular yardbirds. You can’t just keep them in your private residence like this without the proper paperwork and an inspector’s okay.”

Anci looked up. “Time the IDPH and the animal control people climb out of your asshole, you’ll wish I’d just called the cops. You’ll wish I’d called the cops, SWAT, and the dang Avengers.”

Little Bandit took a step back. He raised his hands and opened his palms and showed us his lifeline. “Okay, okay. Hold up a minute here. I don’t want any truck with any of that.”

Anci said, “That’s assuming they crawl out of your asshole in the first place. They might want to quarantine your entire property, keep you under observation for a week or two. Maybe longer. Maybe a lot longer. Never know what kind of germs these birds are carrying around. You heard about this business in China? It’s horrible.”

Little Bandit had started to sweat now. His upper lip winked at us from across the room. He said, “I’m sure Foghat had all that looked after.”

“Foghat? The guy that’s divorced the same woman three times? The guy who made you sweat and dance and work for your lousy vig? The guy who had to sell his truck to pay you off? That Foghat?”

Little Bandit was practically quaking now. His eyes went this way and that. His tongue came out of his mouth with a dry sound.

Anci said into her phone, “Oh, hey, Janet. It’s me, Anci...”

Little Bandit looked at me. He croaked, “She knows the Department of Health people?”

“Oh, Anci knows everybody.”

Little Bandit lurched forward and snatched the phone from Anci’s hand. He said “Sorry, Janet” into the mic and used his big thumb to cancel the call and handed Anci back the cell with an apologetic face.

He said, “Guess what?”

“Chicken butt.”

He ignored Anci. He said, “Guess what? I’ve changed my mind about this whole thing. Got an idea. Why don’t y’all take those birds and move on along. Right now. This instant. Hell, I’ll even help you load them up, you give me a minute to tie something over my mouth.”

Anci thought about it a little. She appeared dubious at first but then she warmed some to the idea. Finally, she nodded seriously and said, “Well...okay. I guess that’s okay. I was you, I’d still see a doctor, though, quick as you can.”

“Thanks. I will. Got that Obamacare now. Frankly, though, I just want them out of here. And you. Both of you. No offense.”

“None taken,” she said. She smiled suddenly. “Hey, by the way, that is one Hell of a goddamn kitchen you got up there.”

‘Nother little while, we were on our way, back north past the Experimental Forest and the curve of the Goose Creek. The light was going down and the day had turned cool, the way it does that time of year. The chickens were in their cages in the bed of the truck, neatly secured under a new tarp, courtesy of Little Bandit. Anci had phoned Foghat, who was one his way from Olney to meet us, recover his pets.

After a while, I said, “Can’t say I’m precisely happy about what happened back there, but I have to admit, you did good, kiddo.”

“Well, I just figured someone needed to rescue us.”

“I think I could have taken him, darlin’.”

“Uh huh,” she said. “Hey, why do you keep making that face?”

“What face? What do you mean?”

“Face like you swallowed a mouse. You’re hurting and I can tell. What is it? I didn’t think Little Bandit laid much of a glove on you.”

“He didn’t,” I said. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”

I said, “It’s just, while we were loading up the birds, one of them pecked me pretty good on the thumb. Cuckoo maran, I think it was. Real sassy little bastard.”

Anci stared at me.

I said, “Hey, it hurts.”

Anci stared at me.

“Bled a little even. Might have to have it cut off maybe. Amputated. You never know.”

Anci stopped staring at me. She shook her head. She reached forward and switched on the radio.

The End