

When Coyote Comes to Play

By: Cat Reece ([the unicoroner](#))

“She’s beautiful,” Brandon whispered in hushed tones. “Just look at that deep coppery glow...the smoothness of her.”

“Makes a man want to run his hands over her.” Josh’s gaze was positively lustful.

“You keep your greasy mitts off my game table!” Brandon hovered protectively over the wooden surface. “Your hands are covered in churro sugar and oil, you need to wash up if you want to even THINK about touching the table.”

Josh grumbled under his breath, but made his way toward the sink.

“African Mahogany, every inch of her...” Brandon just couldn’t keep his eyes off the new table.

“She sure is a beauty,” Josh agreed, now inspecting her with his freshly washed hands. “I would offer to give you some time alone with her, but we’ve got a show to record.” He started heading towards the WarRoom. They spent a few hours reviewing the week’s play-throughs, and discussed the local Escape Room’s new Halloween challenge room before finally wrapping up the episode.

As soon as they finished recording, Brandon’s phone beeped with an alert.

“Facebook message on the Brawling Brother’s page,” he said to Josh, opening it up to take a quick look. “Uncanny timing.”

<hello. My name is Kye. I am a big fan of The Brawling Brothers.>

“Huh. That’s...cool? And random?” Josh was already taking his headphones off and putting cords away.

“I mean, it’s nice to hear from fans.” Brandon shrugged, and replied to the message:

<Thanks, Kye, we always appreciate the support from our listeners, it’s why we do what we do!>

<I like games>

“Oh, a poet.” Josh was snide when Brandon shared the message with him. He grabbed the phone from Brandon and replied back, but without the sarcasm.

<That’s great. Thanks for reaching out, we appreciate hearing from you!>

<I like games>

“What a weirdo...” Brandon said as he snatched back his phone in annoyance.

<Us too! Great to talk to you, buddy, keep listening and have a great day!>

<You like games>

“I seriously do not know what to say to this dude. I’m gonna go grab a scotch.” Josh headed out toward the kitchen.

Brandon also found himself at a loss as to how he should reply to such an awkward message, but received another message before he could start to struggle through a response.

<You will play my game>

It certainly wasn't the first time a listener had asked them to play a homebrewed game, but usually those games had a tendency to...well...suck. And badly.

"He wants us to play his game," he called out to Josh, who responded with a noise that was somewhere between the scoff of a disgusted teenager girl and the sound a dog makes when it throws up.

"I'm going to try to be nice, but I won't agree to anything," Brandon assured him.

<That's really cool that you made a game. We don't really play homemade games on the show, though. We try to play things people have access to, so they can try them out themselves.>

<Why won't you play>

Brandon felt pretty confident that he had explained himself on that point already. Then it occurred to him -- this was probably a kid. That would explain the lack of eloquence in the responses. It was probably the child of one of their listeners. The profile it led back to was pretty much blank, but it certainly seemed like the logical explanation. He certainly didn't want to crush a little kid's hopes- this kid probably looked up to them!

<Tell you what- if you send it our way, we can take a look at it. We won't be able to play it on the show, but we can send you a message with some feedback. Then we can send the game back, safe and sound.>

<You will play my game>

<Sure thing. Just have someone help you send it.>

He waited a while for a reply, but they seemed to have signed out. The parent probably discovered the kid using the computer and took it away. Kye was probably getting a stern lecture about chatting with strangers online, right at that moment. He headed back out to the kitchen. Josh mixed the drink while Brandon meticulously assembled components for a quick game.

"I made some felt-bottomed coasters for the table." He handed one to Josh. "I don't want the finish getting scratched. And if you drip any drink condensation on my table, I swear to you that I will smother you in your sleep. I know where you live!"

"Whoa, man, I think a little bit of calm may be in order." Josh handed Brandon a whiskey and Coke. "I'd never dream of doing anything to bring harm to your true love." He covered his heart with his hand overdramatically. "Her honor and safety will be preserved."

"Ha freaking HA. I know I seem intense, but this table cost me more than a black market kidney."

"Well you can sell mine if I ruin it."

"How *incredibly* magnanimous of you. Don't think I won't take you up on that."

A small voice interrupted their banter.

"Daddy?"

His young daughter, Kaylie, stood in the living room, holding a long rope. At the end of it was the most bedraggled and mangy creature either of them had ever seen.

"I...um...found her." Her eyes were imploring and hopeful. "She was wandering around all alone, and she looked so skinny and hungry...I couldn't just leave her there!"

The animal certainly did look starved. Its ribs were visible even through the scraggly brownish grey coat that covered her in matted patches. The pointy ears looked like they had seen their fair share of battles, and her tail looked very much like a maid's duster that had been used a few decades past its prime.

"That thing looks like it could host an entire colony of fleas and long-extinct diseases," Brandon began, hesitantly.

Kaylie's lower lip began to quiver in anticipated disappointment. Brandon felt guilty, but he just couldn't picture letting such forlorn and dirty creature into his family's home. Plus, it looked hungry enough to eat the dog they already had. He didn't really want to think of his chihuahua as potential snack food.

But those eyes....Man, Kaylie really could work up the sad-eyed hopeful look when she wanted.

Someone should give this kid an Academy Award, he thought to himself, before answering with a resigned "Fine, you can let her stay here until your mom gets home, then we'll talk about it more. I'm not saying YES, though. I'm just not saying no."

Kaylie let out a squeal of delight. "THANK YOU DADDY! Come on, Princess Unicorn, let's go get you into a bubble bath!" She led the scrawny creature away by the rope, and it trotted willingly after.

"Princess Unicorn?" Josh was chuckling. "Way to stay strong, man. You rule with an iron fist."

"She caught me at the right time." Brandon eyed his table happily. "The key to getting what you want is asking when I'm in a good mood. Even if what you want is another dog. Besides, we've thought for a while about getting a bigger dog, to watch the house"

"I'm not entirely convinced it's a dog, dude. Looked more like a coyote or something."

"Probably just a New Mexico mutt. They all have that wild look," Brandon said, brushing off the concern.

Josh shrugged in response, but didn't argue. There were more important things to focus on, like kicking Brandon's metaphorical ass. "Ready to lose pathetically?" He rolled the dice and the game began.

That night, they held a family meeting was held, and it was decided the stray dog-

At the family meeting that night, it was decided that the dog, 'Princess Unicorn', would be allowed to stay on a two-week probationary status, given that she and the other canine resident, Sophie, got along.

Sophie appeared less than thrilled at this decision. The chihuahua was perched on the arm of the couch looking with suspicion (or whatever the dog version of suspicion is) at the furry intruder. She had been keeping her distance all day, and did not seem thrilled at the prospect of a new sister. When the decision was made, Sophie had leapt of the couch with a huff, and trotted by with her muzzle held high in disgust.

Late that night, Brandon was trying to get some editing done for that week's podcast. Distracted and tired, he logged into the Brawling Brother's Facebook page to try to refocus himself. There was a new message- it was from Kye. It had come a few minutes after he had logged out that afternoon.

<I will see you soon>

What a weirdo. Brandon shook his head, glad that they were careful not to give away any information on the show that might lead to his house. It was just a kid, he was sure of it, but still...just a little creepy.

At two in the morning, he finally decided to turn in. He passed Kaylie's room, where she and her new-found pet were slumbering soundly, and noticed Sophie pacing at the door. She looked like she was on high alert.

"Sophie, it's just a new dog." He scratched her small ears affectionately, but she didn't seem to be soothed. "You'll get used to her."

She didn't, at least not over the next week. Sophie continued in her disdain and distrust of the new animal. She kept her distance, but managed to still track her from room to room, always keeping a watchful gaze. Brandon, however, had to admit that he was pleasantly surprised by the Princess Unicorn's good behavior. He didn't even mind watching the dog while Jenn, his wife, and Kaylie were on a girl's weekend away.

"I still don't think it's a dog," Josh said, settling into a chair at the end of the table. He and Brandon were planning some epic game time while the girls were away- an all-nighter of head-to-head competition, riddled with whiskey and trash-talk.

"Don't be an idiot- if she was a wild animal she would have trashed the house. She's actually been a perfect angel, truth be told. We'll probably end up keeping her. See? She just sits there, calmly."

"Calmly?" Josh looked over at the animal. "Sure, calm but...I swear she's been staring at me like a creeper all night."

"What the hell do you mean 'staring'? She's a dog."

"Look!"

"You're insane." But Brandon looked, and sure enough- the animal's gaze was transfixed on them. She sat up, still and straight, her green eyes hyper-focused on what they were doing. "She just wants a snack. She's begging."

Josh tested Brandon's theory by tossing a pretzel in her direction.

"Don't feed the dog from the table!" Brandon snapped at him.

But she didn't turn her head toward the morsel, didn't even wiggle her nose at the smell. She just sat and stared. Even Brandon had to admit it was creepy.

Ugh, now he was letting Josh's paranoia get the better of him. He wasn't about to get pulled into that ridiculous mindset. "Just focus on the game. I don't want beating you to be easier than it has to be just because you're afraid of a dog."

Brando began to shuffle a deck of game cards, when a loud thump came from the back office.

"What the hell was that?" He looked around, sure that one of the dogs would be out of sight and creating mayhem in the office, but neither of them had moved.

He got up to investigate, brushing off his feeling of foreboding as the ridiculous remnants of Josh's nervousness about the dog.

The office was closed, and when he reached for the door, he recoiled as his hand touched a cold sticky substance.

"Why is there snot on the-" A swift and sudden migraine brought him to his knees, and he cradled his head in his hands. Visions swarmed across his closed eyelids.

A rat scampers in front of a yellowed skull...a hooded figure stands in a dead garden and reaches toward a branch covered in impossible red blooms...cannon fire pierces a gray night sky...a lone wheel

travels along a thin wooden scaffold...a pile of rusting metal- nails, screws, cogs, springs....a rush of color.....there is a syringe and a knife and a pool of water and reaching vines and he knows there is a body lying somewhere but the attic is too dark to see if only he could-

“What’s wrong? Should I call an ambulance?” Josh knelt beside him. The visions and the headaches disappeared. A damp, chilly sweat clung to his brow.

“I’m fine..I think.” He stood to his feet, shaky but stable. “ I don’t really know what just happened.”

Before he could start to work through what had just happened, the windows and doors around them began to rattle.

Josh dashed toward a window.

“Ummmm...zombies....” His voice was full of confusion and dread.

“Are you kidding me?!” There was no time to wonder- only time to act. Brandon ran for the kitchen and grabbed a knife from a drawer. Josh frantically opened a drawer to procure a weapon and managed to grab-

“A spatula? How the hell are we going to defend ourselves with a spatula?!”

“I don’t know where you keep your knives!” Josh spat at Brandon, as he started to look for a better tool.

He hardly had time to find a knife before the first of the undead crashed into the house.

“There’s a whole horde!” Brandon shrieked. “There’s no way we can take them! Run to the bathroom, there are no windows in there!”

They were tripping over each other in a mad dash to reach the safety of the bathroom. By some divine miracle, they had managed not to stab each other in the fray.

“We can call 9-1-1 from here.” Josh reached for his phone, only to find dismay. “I left my phone out there...”

“Don’t worry, I can use my smart watch,” but his face fell as he saw that it was smashed; it had been crushed in their chaotic dash for safety.

Josh groaned in despair as he sank to a seat on the bathtub ledge.

There was a rustling behind him. He jumped up, ready to defend himself from certain zombification. “One of them is in here with us!”

In a reflex of pure terror and desperation, they leapt into each other’s arms.

“Brandon, I....I have something to tell you before we’re eaten.”

“Me too. This might be our last moment, I want to die with a clean conscience.”

“Let’s say it at the same time....we may not have long left to speak.”

A nervous gulp. A brief pause.

Josh shouted, “I told a girl at Gen Con that you had irreparable brain damage and I was your caretaker so she’d admire me. It was right after you spilled your drink and then choked on a pretzel! That’s why she let you win so much that day!”

At that same moment, Brandon cried out “That time I gave you a really nice bottle of scotch, it was really just blended Canadian whiskey but I thought you were being pretentious about scotch so I wanted to see if you could really tell the difference, and you couldn’t.”

Brandon’s face was pressed tightly against Josh’s chest. It felt warm and safe, despite the terrifying fate that was about to extinguish their lives. Josh held him closer, then with quick squeeze, they released each other and leapt simultaneously toward the hidden zombie, to die battling like men.

The knives pierced the curtain, and the rod broke and fell to the floor to reveal-

“DUDE, why is there a Storm Trooper in your shower?!” Josh barely had time to duck as a badly-aimed blaster bolt shot by.

“Don’t worry, they can’t really hit anything!” Suddenly, Brandon had an idea. “Josh, move away from the door!” Josh did, and Brandon swung the door open. Zombies began pouring in, and blaster bolts began taking them down one by one.

The guys scrambled quickly over the growing pile of bodies. “Well, apparently the only way they *can* hit anything is if there’s no possible way to miss! That horde was just a wall of meat!” Josh wiped his brow.

“DO YOU NOT KNOW WHO HAS SLAIN ME?!” A booming tortured voice rang out all around them, as if emanating from the very walls. “I WILL HAUNT THESE HALLS UNTIL I HAVE FOUND PEACE THROUGH JUSTICE!”

“So....zombies, Storm Troopers, angry ghosts..” Josh was listing the nightmares using his fingers as counters. “You’ve got yourself one hell of an infestation.”

“The ghost...that must have been what caused those visions.” Brandon’s head still throbbed with the memory of all the pain and confusion

“Ghostly visions? It’s like a real life Mysterium...” Josh looked as though an idea was dawning. Suddenly, quiet fell like a blanket enveloping everything around them.

“So you like the game?” A female voice slithered through the quiet, and they both turned to see where it had come from.

No one but Princess Unicorn sat behind them, her tail wagging softly.

“Is someone there?” Brandon called out.

“It’s that creepy dog!” Josh was eyeing her, looking both horrified and vindicated of his previous paranoia. “I told you something was wrong with her!”

But then, she wasn’t a dog. Slowly, a female figure arose from the dog’s form, as if stretching from a shadow. Fur melted into flesh, and she stretched until she stood only slightly shorter than either of them. Her frame was draped in a body-hugging outfit of tight furs, animal skins, in, incongruous with the rest of the get-up, a pink feather boa.

“I’m so glad you’ve enjoyed it so far. Shall I unpause it?” Her hair was a mottled brown and red with a pale silver streak, much the same color her fur had been. It hung in wild waves down to her waist. Pointed ears stood up atop her head, and her eyes had an animalistic tilt, and burning yellow hue. She wore a smirk on her lips, and laughter tugged at her cheeks.

“Game? What the hell is going on?!” Brandon had reached the limit of his comprehension, and he felt furious at the lunacy of the entire situation. He was talking to his daughter’s new dog while zombies and a Storm Trooper stood frozen, mid battle, all around him. It was too much to handle.

Josh chose this moment to lean in a whisper loudly to Brandon “Whoa...Princess Unicorn is kinda hot, in a weird way. Am I right?” He elbowed Brandon in the side.

“Actually....it’s Just Coyote. You can call me Kye.” She held out a hand towards them. The nails were short but sharp, and deep black. Neither of them would want to be on the receiving end if they were to be used in anger. Hesitantly, Brandon reached forward to reciprocate the greeting with a handshake.

“So...this is a game?” He tried to neutralize and fear or incredulity in his voice. He wanted to be all business with this...coyote, or whatever she was. When all rationality failed, he thought to himself, he at least knew how to conduct himself professionally.

“Yes, of course.” She spoke as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I asked if you’d play. You said yes. So here I am.” She shrugged, seeming confused as to his lack of understanding. “Mind if I grab a drink?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but waltzed into the kitchen. Brandon had to hold back a gag reflex as he watch her mix beer, tabasco, some Nesquik powder, and a shot of whiskey into a glass of ice cubes. “So.” Her grin was wicked and wide as she turned back to them. Her teeth were quite pointed, and her grin stretched farther side to side than any human grin would have. “What do you think so far?” She sauntered to the table, and took a seat at the end, stretch her long legs across an empty chair and leaning lazily against the backrest.

“It’s...” Brandon certainly didn’t want to piss her off. If she could summon zombies, Storm Troopers, and ghosts when she wasn’t even irritated, then he certainly didn’t want to get on her *bad* side.

“So derivative.” Josh drawled with disgust.

Brandon whirled around in disbelief, and whispered harshly at him. “You shut your damn mouth, JOSH!”

“Derivative?!” Uh oh. She sounded irritated. “What do you mean ‘derivative’?!” She was using air quotes and a cutting inflection to accentuate the word.

Brandon was furiously pantomiming a cut-off gesture to Josh and whispering desperately. “Dammit, just shut the f-”

“Well it’s like the worst parts of Jumanji brought to life.” Josh was barging forward in the conversation unabated by Brandon’s pleas for cessation. “And on top of that, you didn’t even have the decency to create your own game to center it on! You just borrowed elements from other games.”

She stood up and strode towards Josh with fury in her yellow eyes. Brandon ducked out of the way as she zeroed in on her critic. “I was TRYING to be NICE and incorporate your favorite games, you ungrateful space-wasting fopdoodle!” She was growling as she spoke, and her lips were raised in a snarl.

“Oh yeah, Coyote? Why don’t you go find a corner to clean your own butt, you filthy animal!”

“You want originality? I’ll give you originality!” She snapped her claws. The zombies disappeared. “Choose your beast and I’ll choose mine,” she commanded.

“Ok, let’s all just calm down.” Brandon was quickly losing his ability to be the voice of reason. “We can maybe just sit down and-”

“MAN BEAR PIG, I CHOOSE YOU!” Josh’s bellow cut Brandon off.

Another snap of Coyote’s claws produced a truly horrific sight beside Josh. The creature stood so tall, it had to crouch just to fit. It’s pig snout glistened with moisture, wriggling and searching the air for scent. It’s bear teeth bore red foamy flecks that threatened to drip onto Brandon’s clean kitchen floor. Burly furry arms hung at the creature’s side, flexing as if poised for action. A bare human-like chest was hidden by a stained tank top, giving the appearance of some sort of WereRedneck beast. The only think it was missing was a red trucker cap.

“Excellent choice.” Coyote’s smirk was extremely disconcerting. “It may even offer a challenge for me. Somehow though....I doubt it.” A gigantic shape was taking form beside her. “Prepare to face my undead UniDragon!”

It was fully formed, and terrifying to look at. Scales covered it’s flanks, but the flesh was peeling and rotting away in most places. Exposed vertebrae made it looks as though it would be very uncomfortable to ride. A long coiled tail stretched out behind it, shimmering green, covered in deadly looking spikes. Brandon couldn’t understand how it’s empty eye sockets could possibly see anything at all, but it moved it’s head side to side, surveying the scene like a predator about to pounce. It’s purple horn seemed to be dripping with an acidic substance that sizzled when it hit the floor. The equine muzzle

ended in what would have been a normal horse-like mouth, were it not for the jagged fangs that it bared when it roared in the ManBearPigs direction.

“Roll the die,” Coyote said smugly, and a giant ruby-red d20 appeared to hover in mid air. Josh tapped it’s side and it began to tumble and float, finally settling on a 3.

“Bum roll,” she said, shrugging. “That’s a total miss.”

Her roll was much better.

The UniDragon crouch and prepared to pounce, as Josh shouted “I am activating my immediate reaction move, Burly Bear Defense Punch!” The Man Bear Pig also wound up for an attack.

In a flash of horrified realization, Brandon realized that the battle would inevitably end up pushing the beast into-

“MY TABLE!” He leapt toward it without even thinking, attempting to shield it with his own body.

Time began to creep with an achingly slow progression, each moment dilated to painful length. Brandon soared toward his prized possession, completely airborne. The beasts were on a trajectory towards each other, claws and horns and teeth at the ready.

It seemed as if all would be well, for a moment. Brandon had passed the grasping claws of the ManBearPig without a scratch. Just as it he was sure he was in the clear, the UniDragon reared its head, and the horn grazed Brandon’s side, ripping through flesh, piercing him and burning him.

Time returned to it’s usual feverish progression as Brandon hit the floor with a thud, writhing in pain.

“STOP!!!!!!” Josh screamed at the top of his lungs and rushed to Brandon’s fallen form.

The beasts froze. The ManBearPig’s jaws were around the UniDragon’s throat, and the UniDragon’s spike tail was about to smash into the face of its captor, but they were perfectly still, caught in a moment.

Josh cradled Brandon’s head. “Talk to me buddy! You’re going to be fine.”

It did not seem as though it could be so. Blood was seeping from the wound, and the edges of the jagged cut were curling into themselves, burned by the searing acid.

“I...I...” Brandon’s words were strained; each breath was laborious and full of agony.

“Shhhh...shhh. “Josh pressed his finger to Brandon’s lips. “You don’t need to say anything. I’m here.”

“Oh BROTHER.” Coyote’s voice shattered their moment. “He’s gonna be FINE.”

“JUST LOOK AT HIM! HE’S DYING!” Josh’s voice broke with sobs.

Coyote snapped her claws again. The beasts disappeared. The kitchen righted itself. Then, before Josh’s very eyes, Brandon’s side was healed. There was no trace of any injury.

“Are you sure you’re just friends?” Coyote’s eyebrows were quizzically raised.

A rumble of thunder made them all look up.

Uh-oh...More of the game? Brandon wondered.

Coyote swore under her breath. “I uh—I gotta run.” She was eyeing the sky nervously.

“Looks like your puppy is afraid of a thunderstorm.” Josh was not subtle in hiding his chuckle.

Coyote seemed to be irritated. “No..I’m in a race...I got distracted. As usual...Damn.”

Josh was helping Brandon to his feet. Brandon was relieved to find that there truly was no more pain, not even a twinge, where he had just moments ago been torn apart.

“Sorry to dash away so quickly.” Coyote was already standing by the front door. “It was fun, boys, but I gotta run.” She winked, and then her humanoid form melted and collapsed into its canine body. She leapt forward into the streets, and they could hear a howling as she ran. For a moment, it sounded as if it were directly overhead, in the sky, arching over the house into the night storm.

“Never, EVER, speak of this.” Brandon warned Josh.

“Oh, obviously. We’d be committed for sure...”

Copious amounts of whiskey and coke zero helped Brandon and Josh cope with the incredulity of the evening’s fantastic and horrifying events. They awoke the next morning, sprawled across the couches in the living room, hungover and still in disbelief.

A notification lit up Brandon’s smart watch, which had been miraculously restored along with the rest of the house.

It was for the Brawling Brothers Page.

<Thanks for the feedback, boys. I’ll let you know when the second version is ready to play.>