

The Adventures of Tequila Kitty: Chapter One - by Christopher Chik

by Darren Cormier

The Tequila-Mockingbird Incident

We were in a Geo Metro convertible somewhere outside the Barstow freeway when the catnip started to hit.

“Birds, birds everywhere.” My companion was pawing at the sky in fits, claws extended.

I had told him not to open the bag with the top down. The stash had blown across the freeway into the setting sun, a puffy trail of green leaves and stems spattering the trailing cars with the mess. He was relegated to huffing what he could out of a stitched up tie-dyed mouse.

“Caught the bastard trying to steal my sand.” He had the mouse between his paws, back legs kicking and pushing, trying anything to get at the catnip.

Poor bastard, I thought, but I had my own problems. He'd put all my weed in the trunk with my bong and suitcase. In his haste to get at the catnip, my companion only thought to throw my rolling papers in the glove box. Not sure how he planned to roll joints with those paws of his—at least not without shredding the papers to bits. Without my grinder, all he was good for was dicing up the nugs anyway. We would need to pull over; I needed my weed, and if I didn't get to a pet store before they closed, this hip cat would start clawing at more than a stuffed mouse. Say what you want about a Geo Metro, but it was mine and got fifty miles to the gallon at a time before they'd invented hybrids.

I took the next exit into a little patch of concrete, just outside the true desert of Joshua Tree.

“Coronas, they've got Coronas!” he said.

"Corona's the town you idiot," I said.

"Well, every town's got Coronas." He was huffing at the stuffed mouse and reeking of desperation.

I pulled into a gas station to ask where the nearest pet store was. The sun was nearly gone and with it had to be most of the store clerks around town as well. Inside the station's little convenience store, the lone attendant fussed with dispensing cigarettes and one person who still paid cash for gas. He didn't seem too interested in my questions at first.

"We don't need your kind around here."

"Just trying to find a pet shop, man," I said.

"Everyone comes through here on the way to Vegas; stuck in traffic; just want to use the bathroom or get directions."

"Relax, meow." My companion tipped his sombrero forward on his furry head with his free paw, the other clutched to a case of Coronas; I hadn't even heard him come in.

"No pets," the cashier said.

"Name's Tequila, but you can call me Teqs," he said, flashing his fangs.

"There's a pet shop two blocks over." The cashier rang him up.

"Told you they had Coronas." Teqs winked at me and smoothed his whiskers.

He slinked through the doors and left me to settle the tab. When I got outside the crazy feline was already six beers deep into the case. Since I'd met him, he'd been into something: booze, catnip, empty boxes. More than anything, he loved getting waist deep in people's dirty laundry. Spend your days in the desert scratching in the sand, and you'll dig up all kinds of dirt.

The pet store was just as run down as the rest of town. Before I could even pull into a space, he'd leapt over the side. I managed to make half a loop around the aisle when he burst through the door with cans and bags of catnip clutched to his chest, a bird between his teeth. I wished so hard for a string to be attached to the feathered mass, but when he loosed his fanged grip from it, I could

see the blood trickle out. I gunned the engine when I saw the store clerk running through the door behind Teqs.

"Get back here you furry little drunk," he said.

Teqs leapt up toward the car as I sped past. His front paws tumbled his swag into the passenger's seat, but his legs weren't strong enough to get him over the edge. He latched onto the top of the door with his claws, and with him hanging from the Geo we escaped into the night.

"What'd you go and do that for?" I asked.

"He was mocking me, dude."

"The clerk? I mean, you are wearing a sombrero, man."

"The bird." He sat there batting at it.

I looked down to see a gray-white bird with soft orange and baby blue patches.

"We've got to make a run for it, ditch the body somewhere. I can't take another murder rap."

"Petty theft. Birds aren't people."

"Next you'll tell me cats aren't people." He hissed and arched his back.

"I've probably got the only yellow Geo in Corona, you know."

"Maybe we should ditch the car, too."

"You buying me a new one?" I asked.

"Suggestions?"

"Lay low for a while, then book it to the Nevada border."

I drove until I found a quiet, dark neighborhood and packed a bowl. Excitement was well and good, but if you weren't paying for it up front, with cash, you'd get billed for it in the end. Nothing calmed me quite like smoking a fat one. Why he couldn't just wait for me to park and go in with him is beyond me. Maybe he'd thought every second counted, that they'd close before I could park and get in. He never did have much sense of time; maybe that's why I understood him better stoned—that total imperceptibility of the passing minutes. In the seat next to me he'd shredded open a pilfered bag of catnip and dumped it all over the seat.

"This is enough to last me a lifetime." Teqs was writhing around in the seat, purring and rubbing his cheeks into the folds of the cushioned surface.

"Oh yeah, you're really rolling in it now," I said.

When we got back on the road, the sun was completely gone and my sense of direction failed. We drove around for blocks and blocks looking for the freeway. Teqs seemed more docile by then, just batting at the bird and muttering about getting locked up. He had a bad experience with a cage once and some folks in the Deep South who didn't take well to his kind, but it wasn't something he made a habit of talking about. The thought of answering for his crime of haste had him stuck back in that place, like a hairball he just couldn't cough up. I'd have done anything to drag him out of that funk.

We passed a parking lot I'd seen a few times before. How long had we been dancing circles in the Corona concrete? The lot had been empty the first couple times we passed, but this time was filled with cars and a smattering of people; a number of them had mohawks and looked to be rather crusty—our sort of folk. Teqs was coming out of his comatose state by then and was burying his face in a fresh can of the 'nip.

"Think you ought to slow down there, Teqs?" I asked.

He was oblivious.

"Wouldn't want you so out of it you couldn't run the hustle with me."

His ears perked up and he quit wriggling in the passenger's seat.

That's how I'd met him really: drinking games. We'd both been at the local watering hole, challenging the other patrons to drunken games of chance and making a clean sweep of it. A few guys figured themselves for alpha dogs had Teqs cornered after he'd taken them for about a grand combined. I grabbed up a bottle and got ready for some smashing action, when a few ladies diffused the situation with their, "Aw, but he's so cute," and, "look at his little sombrero." Before the petting turned heavy, he bolted out the door with his winnings.

I followed him down to a dive bar just outside Hollywood. Inside, I spotted him paying his tab with the misfortunes of others. He was so skilled he'd almost never taken a sip, while his opponents grew wearier with each slug. After I'd watched for a while, I made my challenge.

"Bet you can't even hold your liquor," I said.

"How's that, meow?"

"Haven't even seen you take but two drinks, man."

"How's about a drinking match, straight up?" Teqs asked.

"Name your poison."

"Patrón." He smoothed his whiskers. "Stakes?"

"Everything you've won tonight."

Teqs slid his pile of cash across the bar.

"From before, too."

"Meow, that's my kind of scalawag."

Saying Tequila was half my size would be generous, and still he had me beat. I'd had to stop somewhere after the first bottle, but he kept going. He'd spent my money on three more bottles before he finally passed out. Part of me wanted to take my money back, like there was no way anyone could drink that much and not pull a John Bonham. I'd thought about it for a few minutes, standing over him laying there on his back, all four appendages up in the air and kicking at dreams. He awoke with a fit, though. Seeing me standing over him, I expected Teqs to tear me a new one.

"How'd you do it?" he asked.

In his celebration, he'd drunken himself clean of the memory of his victory. I thought about claiming otherwise, telling him the truth of the situation, but before I had time to weigh on it, he made me an offer.

"Meow, I tell you what, we could clean up on a drinking game hustle; never met a man could outlast me."

After we'd cleaned up from the Patrón binge, we went to a little coffee shop down the street. It was a lot like a first date, learning

what my new skill was like. As partners go, this guy had a puss could squeeze a dime out of a miser and get him to smile while he did it.

"Name's Tequila," he said.

"How's a guy come upon that name?"

"I guess since we're partners, meow, I can tell you."

I wondered if he thought I was a fink; I mean, he'd caught me standing over him at the bar and all.

"Tequila's the only drink gets me fuzzy anymore."

"So you're a ringer?" I'd wanted to tell him he'd beaten me at the bar, but that early on, our partnership hinged on my established mythos.

"My kind is everywhere on the internet; I made my fortune there; CERN, DARPA net, videos of me in different hats, that sort of thing."

"Guess the sombrero stuck."

"Blew it all on catnip, the good stuff, imported straight from Colombia, dude," he said.

I started to think about all the greens I could buy with that kind of Silicon Valley dough.

"When I snapped out of the haze—"

"When you went broke," I said.

"I tried to drown myself in bottle after bottle of booze, but nothing got me drunk anymore, except tequila."

"Tequila—"

"Call me Teqs."

By the time we'd hit Corona, our game was on point. Teqs was like a walking Konami code for the drinking hustle. Corona was just a detour along our path to Vegas drinking glory. We wouldn't have been stuck there waiting out the heat if Teqs could go an hour without a sniff or wait two minutes for me to put the top back up. He was a cool cat, but I'm almost certain he had an attention disorder. He thought the world owed him something, too.

The kids in mohawks were starting to line up around a small brick building at the end of the shopping center. Some had wild liberty

spikes; a number had patches sewn into denim jackets or jeans; a few had leather jackets; a couple even looked more like greasers. The music pouring out the double door entrance had an edge to it, the kind of rock that wouldn't just cut the powder, but the mirror underneath it, too. A punk club with a live band was just what we needed.

I pulled into a space and started rolling some joints for the show. Teqs managed to stop rubbing his face around inside the catnip jar long enough to stash some in a baggie for inside. No one seemed to mind when we played a game of puff-puff pass with a few crusty kids ahead of us in line outside the club.

"We been squatting this trailer in the desert," one of the kids said.

"Yeah, I came down from Fresno; met this guy at a show, he said he was squatting this place, and I could stay there too," the other said.

"I love a good squat out in the sand," Teqs said.

"Where you guys from?"

"L.A.," I said.

"Come out here for shows a lot?"

I looked down and realized I'd worn my Leftover Crack t-shirt.

Teqs tugged at the stash he'd tucked away in his sombrero, but didn't take a sniff just yet.

"Well, hey, thanks for the rips," one of them said.

"Say meow, you fellows happen to have some extra space out there, I could do some scratching maybe?" Teqs asked.

I elbowed him a little.

If Teqs would keep his cool, we could make some real scratch and be on our way to Vegas without any guff over the pet store mockingbird. Inside the club, a mosh pit was raging in front of the stage and the bar was stacked three people deep. Somehow, Teqs always managed to wriggle his way up to the bar and set up shop. Once I'd even seen him hang onto the bar top with one paw while dropping shot after shot with the other. He got us in at the bar next to a shapely blonde in a studded jacket and ripped jeans. He had a way with the ladies I never did. The guy could just rub up against a

girl and she'd just nuzzle him right back. That sort of thing would get me slapped for sure.

After a few drinks we'd found our mark. Some fish with short spiky hair, the kind has those frosted blonde tips—Zach Morris of the punk scene. Teqs put him away with a game of one-man relay flip cup. They threw the kid out when he puked along the side of the bar somewhere after beer eleven, but not before Teqs relieved him of his cash.

“Nine hundred bucks will get us a great start in Vegas.” Teqs slapped a stack of bills into my hand.

Before I could say anything, he was on top of the railing between the bar and the dance floor mosh pit with one paw in the air. He did a back-flip into the pit and floated around on top of the crowd, once in a while getting tossed up into the air some. At one point, he was pushed onto the stage. Security tried to grab him and throw him back in, but he darted every which way across. When they had him cornered, he leapt atop one of their heads and back into the pit. Through it all, he managed to keep the sombrero on his head.

When the band was called back for an encore, we decided to make our run for it. Cops would be lurking everywhere when the club let out after the show. Getting pinched now was the last thing we needed. I'd just gotten Teqs back in a more stable frame of mind—a scary enough proposition itself. At the door, the blonde in the studded jacket stopped us.

“I like your style,” she said.

“That a fact, meow?” Teqs asked.

“I got an empty box just for you.” She smoothed Teqs' ruffled fur with an outstretched hand.

As I leaned against the brick wall watching them, I sparked up my last joint.

“Like to come back to my place?” she asked.

Women always wanted to take care of him. I could be eating soup with the broth dribbling down my chin and a waitress wouldn't bother to say a word to me. They'd brush the burrs out of his fur, bathe him, or even pick up his tabs, though. For a guy who'd blown

his bankroll on Colombian green, he lived pretty well between his hustle and the love of women. Could be that meal ticket puss of his kept me from coming clean that day at the bar.

"We're headed to Vegas," Teqs said.

"Oh, that's too bad." She leaned on a black Corvette.

"Nice 'vette. Yours?" Teqs smoothed his whiskers.

The blonde beeped the alarm; the doors popped open and the engine started.

"How's about a ride to the strip?" Teqs asked.

She got in the car but only closed her door.

I grabbed the suitcase, bong, and what was left of the Coronas, while I let Teqs handle the rest of our gear. It was a gamble, but the encore was tapering off and the cops would show up any minute. A safe getaway trumped ensuring that daffy tabby remembered everything I didn't. I stowed what I was carrying in the trunk, except for the bong, and told Teqs to make sure he had both our stashes up front this time. With me sitting shotgun, Teqs circled around himself in indecision. The blonde noticed and tapped her thigh.

"You can ride in my lap," she said.

I decided to take a little nap since I didn't have to drive. When I woke up, I saw the approaching sign for Vegas zip by. I looked around, but the blonde wasn't in the car. Teqs was behind the wheel, doing something like one-thirty, though.

"Where's the blonde?" I asked.

"Got off in Barstow."

"The car, though."

I still don't know how he did it, but he talked that blonde right out of her car. My bong was behind my seat, so I hoped this time the silly bastard remembered to pack my weed in the glove box like I'd asked. When I opened it, my stash was there and right next to it that damn bird.

"The hell is this here for?" I asked.

"Lot of sand out here, dude." With one paw on the wheel, Teqs flashed a set of claws.

