

In the dark of the desert moon, a still, cold wind blows. The young girl, optimism fading in her eyes resigned herself that the grand adventure had come to a slow, drawn out, dreary end. Nightmares of bandits sticking her up for valuables had kept her awake the first night as she rumbled through the desert aboard her father's mechanized horse. The second night into her quest, she had found shelter huddled under its composite legs. Now, in the third darkness, she truly understood the dangers that the villagers warned her of.

Alone, she pulled her food and water out of the sack on the makeshift saddle. That was one thing she had been prepared for. Most children would not have been so prepared, but since her mother died, she had been in charge of the family home and supplies, even at thirteen. Food and water wouldn't matter, as she was lost. She huddled in her blankets to keep out the sand and the wind, trying not to cry. Even though she knew the area was barren, masked men with cold guns and steel danced in her mind.

She let her mind drift; sleep came in snatches. It was sad to have failed in such a boring way. She thought to be turned away or fail some test – be shot dead by roving marauders at the least, her father's revolver dramatically cocked in her hand. But to die, a long way from home, because she was lost, cold and maybe getting sick had not ever entered her mind. Dreamers often fear the worst, which leaves them unprepared for the most likely. She sobbed openly, crumbling her cornbread into her mouth.

All in all, she felt it was a really pathetic way to die.

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Dana Littleton is an optimistic, bright eyed young girl, striking out on a quest. When the village doctor, a kindly elderly man named Mel, had whispered in the darkness with her father about her baby brother Beau, she had crept to her door and put her ear to the keyhole to listen. She had heard words she didn't fully understand, but she also heard words that life on the frontier taught children even at a young age. Words like death, consumption and inevitable.

Dana couldn't be sure if it was that night that she decided to go on her quest, or if it was the next day when she picked up supplies from the general store run by the Major. He had been a member of the town's long patrol before he lost his leg in a skirmish with some bandits. Everyone still called him the Major though, and she had asked him where he got his medicine. That's when she learned about the Lyceum where the Hermit lived. She had heard about the Hermit before, of course, but she never really learned what he did.

So, she asked. The old Major told her about the Hermit. He had been a silversmith when he lived in a town across the canyon. He had been a drifter and a doctor. Years ago, he had found an abandoned library that he now called the Lyceum; his dew collectors and garden provided him with more than enough food, but he did a brisk trade in medicine and jewelry with the surrounding towns and outposts. Not too many people still traveled, the Major had said wistfully,

remembering his own stage coach heroics.

She had asked her father about the Hermit when she was home. He mentioned that the Hermit was the one who had shown him some of the finer points of his trade as a blacksmith. He had bought the schematic for the revolver he and his wife had used when they were still healthy enough to have been in the long patrol. The revolvers, Dana believed, were the finest side arms in the town. Silver plated, embossed with a horse's head on the pistol grip, they weighed nearly seven pounds each. The heft made them somewhat unwieldy, but they provided significantly more shots than their smaller cousins. Unique, specially-designed speed loaders were cast to be compatible with the larger chambers, and the Hermit and Papa Littleton had worked long hours to elongate the barrels for a range advantage over the snub-nosed and smaller pistols favored by men who did not want to announce their evil intentions.

Papa Littleton was a dead shot with his revolver, drilling targets at nearly 60 paces, before his eyes started to go. When his wife died, he hung up their revolvers and retired to his life in the smithy. He polished them daily while he watched the sun set. He had told Dana that the Hermit was a good man who knew a little of everything. For young Dana, the Hermit became something of a talisman. This wise man, who knew technology and traded in medicine, was her last, best hope for her little brother.

When she slipped out on her quest to find the Hermit, she took her mother's revolver. She didn't think it was stealing; it was hers as soon as she was big enough to carry it Papa Littleton had told her. The speed loader and extra bullets though probably were stealing. She didn't think about it too much.

You couldn't go on a quest without a proper weapon, after all.

But now, as she sat in the dark, she also realized you should not go on a quest without a proper map either.

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The other problem with being alone and cold is that she had not really put too much thought into her quest. She needed to find the Hermit, who would give her the medicine her brother needed to live. Now, while she sat huddled next to her mechanized horse (She had decided to name it Rodney), she realized that medicine didn't work like that. That's why doctor Mel had had to make a diagnosis. She tried really hard to remember what Mel had told her dad, it was some special kind of consumption.

So, she wrote it in the sand with the barrel of her revolver, spelling it "consumpshun."

She screamed and dropped the gun when she heard someone speaking over the ridge to her. The friendly, genial, Southern voice said simply, "That's a good way to ruin the rifling in the

barrel, kid."

She scrambled to grab the gun and spun around, pointing it with a shaking pair of hands towards the voice. There, squatting in the desert was a sun-tanned man with a gentleman's mustache, oily black hair pulled tight into a pony tail that wrapped around his left shoulder. He wore leather boots and workman's jeans like her father, and a dark blue poncho emblazoned with a golden hawk. Over his shoulder was a long rifle, the kind that her father had promised to teach her to shoot once she was old enough.

Strapped to his thigh was a hunting knife, rounds circled his waist hung to a simple leather belt, buckled with copper. He raised his hands comically to the sky as her nervous hands tried to keep the revolver's sight on him.

"Stay back!"

"If that's what you want kid," he said, standing up. "I heard your horse,"

"His name is Rodney."

"Right, I heard it chugging over, and my wife, name of Rose, asked me to go check if it was safe for her to cook some beans, and I said, sure, because a man can't go to bed hungry," he reached up and tipped his fedora. "But, I suppose neither can a little girl. What say you come back with me, we've got a fire and food enough for three."

"I'm not stupid! I'm not going anywhere with you! You're... you're a highwayman!"

"I was, once. Then I joined the army; that made it all official like."

"The army?" Dana Littleton kept her revolver on the man.

"Well, then I left them. Army life is no life for a married man, yeah?"

Dana shook her head. "Go away!"

"Ok, ok. I'll just tell Rose that I found a lost little girl and left her in the desert-"

"I'm not lost!" Dana shouted, more to drive away her own fears than his.

"Right, right. Look, since you're not lost, you know how much farther to the Lyceum?"

The little girl gasped, "You're going to find the Hermit?"

The man winked at her, and gave her a thumb's up. "Sure am little miss; Rose is in... a delicate

way, as my sainted mother used to say."

"She's going to have a baby!"

The man, his shining eyes and smile flickered for a second, before reappearing. "God willing, kid, God willing. But, you see, we're a little lost. You look like a regular desert ranger out here with Rodney, you said his name was?"

The mechanized horse whinnied; Papa Littleton had programmed it to recognize Dana's pet name for it. Dana looked at the horse and then the stranger. Cautiously she returned the revolver to her holster. The stranger tsk'ed at her.

"Yes. Rodney."

"Little miss, you may be a regular desert ranger, but you ain't got a clue how to treat that piece, do you?"

"Papa said I couldn't have it till I was older, but I needed it. So I borrowed it! It isn't stealing if it is mine, right mister?"

"Little miss, I'm firmly of the belief it isn't stealing if no one stops you."

Dana did not like this answer, and folded her arms as she glared at him in her thirteen year old rage. "I'm not a thief."

"Rose won't let me be one either, so we're even. But, kid, you can't go keeping a loaded pistol on your hip like that. Pop it open, yeah, just like that. See that first-" The man stopped and whistled in awe at the revolver. He took a few steps and kneeled to get a better look at it. Dana held it out gingerly for his inspection. He doffed his hat to her, whistled again and replaced his hat.

"That's a Littleton, isn't it? You can tell by the horse head and the engraving," The man said in awe. "Davey Littleton is probably the best damn, pardon my language, gunsmith in the Wild Desert."

"I know!" Dana said excitedly. "He's my papa!"

The man removed his hat again and offered out his hand. "Well, Miss Littleton, my name is Ambrose Ramirez Sareola; it is an honor to meet such a fine young lady."

Dana hesitated and then shook his hand, balancing the revolver in her left hand. When they released each other's hands, he pointed to her revolver. "Now, where were we? Right, pop out that first bullet, just like that. Let the hammer rest on the empty chamber, good. This keeps you

from blowing your own leg off. I knew a man who got drunk as a judge one night and blew off his... leg, little miss."

Ambrose stood up, and he looked to the stars. Dana could see the path he had taken when he crept up on her, suddenly chilled realizing that had he been an actual villain, she would have been dead. She pulled her belongings together and threw them aboard Rodney, jumping up herself last. Then, the two lost travelers slowly made their way along his path back to where Rose Sareola was cooking some of her meager supplies at a small campfire, with a pot for beans and a kettle for coffee.

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Rose Sareola was showing her pregnancy, yet her movements retained a lithe, girlish charm. She oohed and ahed over Dana after Ambrose introduced the two, insisting that the little girl eat and warm up. She shared a blanket with the girl and used a finely crafted bone comb to straighten out the knots that had snuck their way into Dana's blonde hair since she had started her adventure.

Ambrose drank his coffee black, but Rose refused to let Dana engage in similar barbarism. "Men drink their coffee black to prove something; women are too smart to drink something so disgusting little Dana," she shared, as she rationed a spoonful of sugar and some sticky syrup into the mug and stirred.

Dana had a lot of questions, and Rose answered them patiently. Yes, they were indeed going to the Lyceum. No, she didn't know if the baby would be a boy or a girl (she shared secretly with Dana that she was pulling for a little girl "with eyes just like yours!") Dana had just gotten comfortable when Rose felt that the comb ran neatly enough through the little girl's hair to pack it away.

"Now, we can't just leave your hair blowing in the wind like this," Rose said. Like her husband, her thick, dark hair was tightly braided, though hers came all the way to her waist. Where Ambrose was swarthy and predatory in his complexion, Rose was bronzed and her arms toned. She was dressed in the weaves and leathers of the nomads of the Western Wilds, though Dana had not had the courage to ask her if she was a tribeswoman.

Her mother had once been friends with one of the migratory tribes. One summer, when Dana was too young to recall, the outpost settlement had waited throughout the season for them to arrive. They never returned, and the Major said that this happened sometimes. Maybe they had found a pass across the gorge to the promised land, or perhaps an oasis. But, Dana knew that the adults all thought it was more likely disease or starvation. Dana did remember every summer that her mother spent a few extra minutes straining her eyes to the horizon, hoping the tribe would return. Since her death, Dana had taken up the vigil, when she remembered.

Dana fished through her bag and found the only truly feminine keepsake of her mother's. It was a brilliant scarlet ribbon, a fine silk that glistened in the moonlight. It was something else she had taken on her adventure. She showed it to Rose, a little embarrassed.

"I have this ribbon, but... I don't know how to tie it."

Rose smiled and took the ribbon, "Then, I suppose I will have to teach you. Watch carefully."

And so the night passed quietly, as Dana and Rose talked and played together.

"When I was a little girl, before bed, we would tell stories as the fire died. My people believed that it would keep the evil spirits away if we reminded them of the powerful good spirits that watched over our tribe."

"My mother always told me stories."

"Then let me tell you a story tonight, about the Mahitican belief in the creation of the Wild Desert. In the time before, the world was verdant and green, like an oasis that stretched for miles. The good spirits of the world lived in the water and the trees and the air, and they watched over the many good creatures. The spirits gave the creatures voices, and together with man they existed in harmony. One day, mouse warned man that a great calamity would come upon the land, and that man must remain on guard. During the night, coyote, enticed by evil spirits, snuck into the never-ending oasis to steal water, but man drove him away.

"The next night, coyote returned, but a little later. Each night, man drove him away. One night, mouse warned man again to remain on guard, like every other night. Coyote was wily, and it did not come that night. Or the next, or the night after. Soon, man became complacent. While man was on guard, coyote hid the sun, during which man grew tired and slept. While man slept, coyote came and stole the water from the never-ending oasis, and with it, the life-giving spirits.

"When the water had been taken, and the good spirits dispersed through the air, coyote returned the sun to the sky. Man awoke to find the water dry, and the ground dying. The spirits chastised him for not guarding them from coyote. Each day, the oasis grew drier and harsher, and the good spirits faded without water. The ground turned to sand, and evil spirits tormented the good creatures.

"They gave snake his poison to strike back at man who had failed them; they taught coyote to hunt as a pack. Each manner of beast they corrupted to survive in the Wild Desert that grew to replace the never-ending oasis. Only mouse remained uncorrupted, for it was too wily for the evil spirits to catch. It hid in the deep, with pockets of water, protecting what remains of the good spirits from coyote and the evil spirits that laid waste to our world.

"That was thousands of years ago, and if it is true, I do not know. It is the story my mother told

me, but it is only one. But, in the dark of night, I hear the wind howl, and all who walk the desert know to follow the mice and other good creatures which lead us to the life-giving spirits and water. The spirits no longer speak to man, for we have forsaken them, but they cannot abandon us. If this is true, I do not know. But it is the story of my people, and I share it with you."

As she spoke, she stroked Dana's hair until the little girl slipped into a peaceful slumber.

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The next day the small party began making their way further into the desert. Ambrose regaled the two women with stories of his time in the army. He had been a member of what Dana would have considered an extremely well disciplined long patrol.

"At the time, I was Corporal Ambrose Sareola; I never got my officer commission because I was too good with my gun and not good enough with my head."

"It was shooting your mouth off that got you in trouble, not your gun," Rose said. Dana let Rose ride Rodney, and Dana trudged through the desert sand. Ambrose had slowed his gait to keep from pressing Dana too heavily in the march. He thought of it as a march, but it was more of a mad dash against time. He had a rough idea of when Rose was due, and the sooner she was in the capable medicinal hands of the Lyceum the better. Back home, deaths during childbirth were not common, but Ambrose's own mother had died when he was born.

One man had joked that she was the first person Ambrose had killed; that man had been the fifth. Ambrose was close to the double digits now, which was one of the reasons he had left the army. The order had come to drive Rose and her people away from the small patch of arable land they called home. At first Ambrose thought it was a bluff to get a better bargaining position, but when the second patrol had arrived, with one of the baron's cannon loaded with grapeshot, he realized that he was not cut out for war and murder.

He had befriended the tribe long before anyone had learned that their land could be farmed. The night he left camp, he slit the captain's throat and spiked the cannon. But, more men and cannon would be arriving within days. The tribe chose to flee instead of fight; that was almost a year ago. Today, Rose and his child were all that remained of the tribe of Mahitican Hill.

As he crested another dune, straining his eyes to see the horizon, he remembered promising her father that he would protect her. Sometimes, he thought that her father knew about the affair, but said nothing to keep the peace. Some never truly accepted Ambrose within the Mahiticans, but that was then.

This was now.

And, somewhere in the distance, he could see the desert breaking into low grass and the dying

brush. Loping toward them from that once green villa was a robotic, wire-frame hound, with a heavy metallic hide, which encased what Ambrose knew to be a small computer and camera/audio link. It was an ancient model, which the baron had called "Big Dog," a networked pack used to secure and scout into desolate wastes where men could be risked. Some had been salvaged, and like Rodney, fitted with solar and hydraulics to remain sustainable, but these did not have the small shawl that the baron wrapped around his dogs, the blue and golden hawk that branded you both as a made man and property all the same.

Plus, Ambrose knew that these could not be a part of the baron's pack. Those were across the gorge, gone and lost forever to the Sareola family since they crossed the ancient land bridge known only to the Mahitican chief, who had entrusted its location to Ambrose in his dying breath to lead the last of his people from the eastern desolation.

Now, standing in what he learned from Dana was known as the Western Wilds (as opposed to "across the gorge," where they were convinced no man had walked since "The glacier or earthquake or meteorite or whatever it is made the big hole," as she put it), Ambrose knew that someone else, at some time, had crossed that bridge. News had come from the west to the baron's people, he had after all seen Littleton rifles before. People came from the west to the east, but as far as he knew, none went back west. Ambrose wondered how many others knew the secret of the Mahitican's land bridge.

The similar languages and technology, such as the Big Dog and Rodney, made Ambrose think that there was more shared history than the people would believe. Ambrose was not a great thinker, and so he pushed those historical concerns from his mind. Because he was suddenly running forward to try and keep his newest, tiny blonde ward from running forward to greet the Big Dog.

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The standard Big Dog unit comes in two varieties. The Rover unit, known for its lighter frame and enhanced optics and audio systems, provides a larger presence, but it only has a short range heat pulse as a self defense mechanism. The Scout unit was heavier and operated within a much smaller zone. It benefitted from having a set of small caliber machine pistols mounted on its head to supplement the heat pulse. It could be remote controlled from a console of up to about 25 miles away, whereas the Rover was an autonomous unit, effective up to 100 miles.

As Ambrose's boots flew forward, he slung his rifle from his shoulder and popped open the breech. His second step he pulled the shell free from his bandolier, he heard the slow whirl of the belt feed. Dana had slowed down, staring at the Scout unaware of exactly what she saw, but a child's instinct of fear paralyzing her in place.

Ambrose snapped the rifle shut as he fell to one knee and shouldered it. His sight rested first on the Big Dog's robotic leg, and then he adjusted. The Scout's first pistol shots clicked wildly off

target, Ambrose's mind recognized the off-arc of the shot; it was sand in the lens disrupting the aim program; a common enough error that the baron's dogs had a subroutine to correct for the error if it did not register a hit. Ambrose also knew it took about four seconds to make the correction; four seconds was more than enough time for the marksman. The bullets slowly swung towards Dana's paralyzed form.

The shift in his arms was slight, and he waited for his body to be still. The thunderous crack from his rifle caused Dana to scream and throw herself into the sand, awakened from the flying, enthralling lead from the Big Dog's head. The shell flew true, striking the Big Dog square in the face, exploding out parts and sparks as the machine pistols sputtered off a few rounds as it struggled to remain upright. The second shot slung the robot to the ground.

"Dana! Are you alright?" Ambrose instinctively returned his rifle to his shoulder, knowing never to be careless with his tools in the sand. His left hand pulled his sidearm, a simple six-shooter that jammed on him on almost every other shot; he had learned never to rely on it. As he approached, he casually revolved from his empty chamber to a loaded one and put a final shot into the Scout's cranium.

He watched as the robot's electronic eyes dulled into silence, and then turned his eyes back to the terrified little girl.

"From now on, little miss, you stay behind me. I want to protect you, but you sure are going to make that hard on me," Ambrose said as he pulled her to her feet. He popped the remaining bullets from his six-shooter and let them intermingle with their partners in his side satchel.

"Your daddy ever teach you to clean one of these?"

"No, sir," Dana said, fear draining from her eyes as she watched him expertly pull apart his gun in his cleaning ritual.

"Well then, if you're going to go building sand castles, you're going to need to learn to clean that cannon of yours," Ambrose said as Rodney and Rose caught up with them. "Sun's at its highest, let's pitch camp here. I'll show you how to get all the sand out of your piece while Rose cooks us up some grub."

"Ambrose, I'm going to see if there's any parts we can salvage from the Big Dog," Rose said, gently dismounting from Rodney.

Ambrose tipped his hat to his wife, and pitched a quick tent, slightly expanded for the three of them. Dana positioned Rodney sunside; the mechanized horse shifted its solar panels like a plant leaning towards the sun. It cast a bit of shade behind them and powered up for the next leg of its journey.

The afternoon left slowly, Rose salvaged a few circuit boards and one of the machine pistols, which she left in Rodney's saddle bag. Dana learned the bristle to clean sand from the barrel and pins, and how each piece clicked together. For two more days they journeyed; each afternoon rest Ambrose showed her how to maintain her gun and treat it with respect. Each night, Rose told her stories of her tribe and showed the desert scraps she had scavenged to augment their dwindling rations.

After the two days, Ambrose began to give Dana shooting lessons; the first shot from her cannon almost broke her wrist, and so Ambrose gave her the light machine pistol from the Big Dog to practice with. It was the report of the Littleton Special and the rat-a-tat-tat of the machine pistol that caught the ears of another. On the third night of joining the Sareola party, Dana would face her first true challenge.

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"The most important thing for you to remember Dana," Ambrose said as he shouldered his rifle and peered into the distance. "Is that all strangers are suspect and dangerous. Even those who appear friendly are not."

As they approached the signal fire, Dana watched as Ambrose removed his poncho and stuffed it into Rose's bag.

The smoke signal that had attracted Rose's attention in the sky had pulsed quickly, a distress signal. In the distance, Ambrose could make out another Big Dog that had been put down. Two men, dressed in indelible leathers and ponchos huddled around a third as a fourth manipulated the fire to send up the distress signal. The man by the fire had a musket by his side, and the two men rustling near the downed one openly wore revolvers on their side. The downed man's hand twitched, his rifle laying in the sand next to him, the breech half open.

"We have to help them Ambrose," Rose said. "This is the second Big Dog we've seen that has attacked. It isn't safe here."

"That, dear woman, is what makes me suspicious. Tell me Dana, what do you see?" The three approached, Rose sitting side-saddle on Rodney.

"It looks like one of the men is hurt."

"We didn't hear any gun fire this morning," Ambrose said. "The only smoke is from the signal fire; we should skirt around them and ignore them."

"We cannot leave an injured man when we might be able to help," Rose said. Ambrose struggled to convince his wife that this was dangerous. She was stubborn still.

"You will help little girls, but not grown men? Has my husband become a coward?"

Ambrose's hands itched, as they always did when he walked into danger, but his pride was injured, so he kept moving forward. Dana gasped as she looked at the Big Dog and the men. The sun was setting, and she could not see things clearly. Dana skipped up in front of Rodney to take his reins and walk him, she feared that they were highwaymen.

"Do you have any bandages? Our man is hit!" The man tending the fire asked. Dana looked to Ambrose.

Dana looked to Ambrose, who frowned and wiped a hand across his sweaty brow. He glanced, in turn, to Rose, who looked away regally.

"We've got some cloth; little miss, you come with me. This is as important a lesson as any if you want to keep to the dunes," Ambrose reached and shifted through the saddle bags, pulling out a spare, dirty brown shirt.

Dana tugged on his sleeve when he walked forward, when he turned to her, for the first time angry with her, he asked icily: "What?"

"We should use something clean. Mel said that keeps infection away,"

"Who the- who is Mel?"

"He's the doctor back at Paladin's Flats," Dana said, as Ambrose pulled his arm free and trudged back to Rodney. Rose smiled at him, but he didn't meet her eye. He shifted through the bag again. Rose began looking through a second bag and pulled something out:

"Here. Use your poncho if you're not going to wear it," Rose said.

Maybe one of the men heard her, maybe they thought that their ruse was not as clever as it seemed. Or, maybe one of them saw the blue poncho with the hawk embroidery, but the man by the fire gave a signal and were upon the hapless party in seconds.

"Holy shit, that's Ace Sareola," one of the men called out.

The two men with their revolvers, one took to a knee while the second rolled behind the collapsed big dog. The signalman tossed his rifle to the downed man with one motion, and sprang at Dana when she screamed, scooping her up in his right arm.

She hung by his waist, the air knocked out of her by the savagery of the tackle. Her scream cut off when the bone knife the man produced from his boot flashed in front of her eyes. Ambrose pushed Rose into safety behind Rodney, and took a position behind the horse as well.

"This is our chance to go home again heroes instead of deserters," another man called out to the knifeman. "Don't mess it up!"

"Listen here Ace , unless you want me to gut this kid like a desert mole, you'll throw down your rifle and come with me back to Baron Hawkson," The knifeman cried out. "There's a pretty penny for the butcher of Captain Levi, and an extra bonus if we bring the scalp of the Mahitican woman as well. I hear you took her for a wife, so if you come without a fight, I'll let her and your little girl here go in peace. You won't get a better deal than this Ace; I'm going to count to ten, then this little girl dies."

Ace Sareola cursed under his breath and looked to the fading sun for guidance.

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Dana dangled, feeling the air squeezed out of her as the man's arm pinned her against his side. The bone knife pressed against her neck, and she felt like she was about to cry. She closed her eyes to chase away the fear and then strained her arm to reach to her holster. She couldn't squeeze her hand between her side and his, and he pressed her tighter while she squirmed.

"Stop wiggling around kid," The man said, smacking the side of her head. She yelped in pain as her head rocked back and forth from the sting. Her free hand checked her scalp; she felt blood and could see as her ribbon flapped, having come partially undone. She almost lost it and started bawling right there. She bit her knuckles and scrunched her eyes up to focus on anything besides how much it hurt.

Through her nascent tears she tried to see Ambrose, but Rodney was in the way. She didn't dare try and reach for her Littleton special again; even if she did, she remembered shooting it last time. She wasn't ready for that. She looked to the ground, watching as droplets of blood splattered on the sand. Besides, Dana thought feeling the weight of her revolver resting against her thigh, even if I got it, I'd have to turn the chamber to shoot. There's no way I'm faster than him. He's ready. He's going to kill me. I'm never going to save Beau.

Her thoughts skipped back through, and she tried to twist her head to see the revolver on the man's belt. She bent her knees to pick her feet up out of the way and looked behind them. She saw the one man on his knees, the other man still on his belly trying to sight the rifle as close to the ground as possible. A third man she knew was behind the Big Dog's corpse (as she thought of the robotic husks). While her revolver had been digging into one side, there was a sharp pain in her other side. The shape was familiar enough; it was his gun. And it was loaded.

She was clumsy; she was weak. She had never harmed so much as a fly in her life, but she resolved that she would not die. Not without saving her brother; and so wriggled a bit, and while the man tried to struggle with her, she shot her hand back and triggered the hammer on his

revolver.

The bang rocked the man, and Dana felt the ground come at her. She rolled away, not looking up. Ambrose's rifle cracked twice from behind Rodney. There was a commotion of gunfire, followed by the sudden popping from the machine pistol. After a few brief seconds, Dana looked up. The kneeling man was keeled over, and the man who had been behind the Big Dog was slumped over it, bleeding from his head.

Pockets of kicked up sand and dirt marked where the rifleman had gone to ground. His back and arms lay perforated by the small caliber rounds. The final man who had held Dana clapped one hand over his bleeding leg, while the other swung his revolver free and aimed it unsteadily towards Dana.

"You little-"

Ambrose's rifle silenced him; Dana fainted when she saw his face cave in and his feet fly up into the air.

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Ambrose calmly looted through the corpses, pulling the weapons and extra bullets free, along with the other supplies that they carried. He traded his blue poncho for one of their nondescript ones, and dropped his outdated rifle for the newer bolt action model the men had carried.

As he cleaned his new rifle, Rose carefully dabbed at Dana's head wound. The little girl was a fountain of tears and inconsolable. She had understood that her quest would be dangerous; the reality that people may die (indeed, that her side might kill them) had never hit her as a reality.

"We need to move along," Ambrose finally said. "We've been here long enough."

"Just give Dana a few more minutes."

Ambrose sighed and went back to looking over the destroyed Big Dog. They had shot it to hell, but he pried a few of the undamaged solar panels free to replace Rodney's damaged ones. Once that was done, he looked at Rose, who glared at him silently, as she rocked Dana. He decided not to press his luck, returning to salvage a few more pieces of the robot. It was at times like this, he wished that he had been more of a mechanic. When he was training for the baron's army, they said he had a knack for technology. Being barely literate, though, he failed the introduction to the course. He passed the sharpshooting exam and desert survival courses. With flying colors.

"Hello," a voice called through the Big Dog's damaged head piece. "My name is Morton Rennard, Lyceum Curator; I am the owner and operator of these Big Dog units. I want to

apologize for any harm that they have caused. I have shut down their self-defense routines, which appear to have become corrupted. I will rebroadcast this message every two minutes. If you hear this message, please use the Big Dog's camera to indicate that you have received this message. The audio receptors are on the fritz."

It was the first good news Ambrose had received all day. He picked up the Big Dog and carried it over to where Dana and Rose sat in Rodney's shade.

"Little miss," Ambrose said, as he dropped the battered robot in the sun, "I believe our prayers have been answered."

* * *

Rennard's message looped five times before he noticed Ambrose's little group. Even though he knew it couldn't hear him, he had tried a variety of shouts to get its attention. They had hooked a small sled to the Big Dog and dragged it away from the dead men, who Dana had said a silent prayer over. She had wanted to leave some sort of marker, but Ambrose refused. He also wanted to move along before coyotes came along. One wild dog may stay away, but a pack would be a viable threat. Especially since Ambrose did not think that Dana could shoot a dog.

After all, she couldn't bring herself to shoot the metal ones. The ones that yelped in pain were right out. After the fifth loop, Ambrose kicked the stupid metal husk. Dana knelt down in front of it and wiped her nose on her dirty sleeve. She waved at the eyes. Rose, still riding on Rodney, glared disapprovingly at Ambrose. There would be talking to.

"Excuse me, ma'am," The voice in the dog said. "I did hear the gunfire, and I can see your head has been bandaged. Are you hurt seriously?"

Dana said, "No." Then, remembering she couldn't be heard, she shook her head, bloody, sandy blonde hair swooshing back and forth.

"Good. I am sorry for what happened; my eyes in the sky and Big Dogs normally do much better keeping dangerous men away. You seem to be lost. If you are trying to get back to the nearest outpost, you need to go back the way you came."

Dana shook her head furiously. Ambrose looked at Rose again, as if asking, "What did you want me to do? They had guns!"

"Then where are you trying to go?"

Dana was about to speak, and then took her hand and began to write in the sand.

"Little Dana could have been killed!" Rose said. The two had paced far enough away to leave

Dana with the Big Dog.

"Those men weren't-"

"They wanted to kill you. Who was Captain Levi?"

"That was before we met Rose," Ambrose said. "He would have led the purge on your people."

She was a bit silent. Her and Ambrose turned to look as Dana spun the broken Big Dog around in a circle to the opposite side of where it had been. It was strange, child behavior, Rose thought. She blushed, wondering if her baby would recover as quickly as Dana had. She had never seen Ambrose kill so efficiently; she had seen firefights during their mad escape from the Baron and his men. But, they had never been so close quarters, so fierce. She was not a stranger to death; she had earned her freedom with a knife.

Poor Dana had perhaps seen more than she ever should have. Dana had cried for what seemed like an eternity about "shooting that man." It was a child's innocence.

Dana clapped, breaking Rose from her thoughts. Dana pointed south, then corrected a little bit west.

"It is that way! The Lyceum is that way!"

Ambrose turned and looked, but he saw nothing. "What makes you so sure, little miss?"

"Rennard says so," Dana said. "Can we bring Horace with us? Rennie says he can fix him."

Horace was her name for the damaged Big Dog. Ambrose was about to say no, when Rose elbowed him.

"Of course we'll take Horace with us, Ambrose was just getting ready to offer to carry him the rest of the way."

"Thank you Mr. Ambrose!"

Ambrose, who had no intention to have offered such a thing, resigned himself as he picked up the robot. He looked in the sand and saw, written in a careful, tutored handwriting: "LI C UM."

It was another day and a half before the party saw the Lyceum. Dana's dreams were haunted by dead men's screams. She woke up in tears, snuck over to sleep next to Rose and curled up, sucking her thumb.

* * *

A blonde, mustached man met them at the crest of a dune. He wore the soft leather boots of a workman, he wore his dusty brown long coat open, revealing a shining revolver, carefully strapped to his rawhide belt. His wide brimmed hat did little to dim the friendly green eyes. Opposite his revolver was an elegant golden pommel with an intricate handguard. The attached blade was sheathed in a simple leather blade, running about three feet long and sturdy.

He tipped his hat and made his way down the dune, calling out to them, "Hello, my name is Morton Rennard. I apologize for the trouble that my Big Dogs caused. There was quite a sandstorm up north, I think it got into some of their circuits and caused some damage."

Ambrose looked at him warily, and offered his hand. Rose watched from on top Rodney with less concern. Dana, however, came rushing up and crashed into Rennard, clinging to his waist and looking up at him, forcing herself between the men's handshake.

"Mr. Rennard, are you the Hermit who runs the Lyceum?"

"I suppose that's one way to put it," He said. He looked down into her eyes and the little girl pulled on his coat. He pulled himself free and shook her hand, then Rennard effortlessly took the Big Dog's remains from Ambrose and carried it on his back. "You look like the young lady I can thank for helping to salvage one of my Big Dogs."

"His name is Horace," Dana said.

"Horace. That's a good name for a Big Dog," Rennard said. ""This is probably not the best place to talk though; come with me inside, let's get out of the sun. You all look like you could use it."

Ambrose and Rose had been used to traveling in the sun, but Dana had never spent so much time in the wide outdoors. Her paler skin had taken quite a burn. They powered Rodney down outside a building. For the fabled Lyceum, Dana did not think it was particularly impressive. The building was clay and ancient, a code protected the only front door that they could see, a small dish receptor sat at the top of the building. Later, Rennard would explain that that was how he kept in touch with his eyes in the sky and Big Dogs.

Only a few vents near the top let in any natural light; solar panels along the top and sides provided power for the generators, ("Along with the occasional human power," Rennard told them. Four hours a day he would pedal on a generator to help keep the power flow positive. Some days, he pedaled for five or six hours if he had a particularly difficult power need in the next few days.) Inside, the building was dark and cool. The lights were not particularly bright, but they were motion sensitive, allowing Rennard to keep the minimum amount of power as needed. A very small mushroom garden and other vegetables grew in one corner of the main floor; the sun had long become too harsh for large above ground farming operations. The lack of natural light limited the options, leading to the creation of dark rooms, which were outdoor

greenhouses with specially formulated glass to reduce the harshest of the sun's light.

The first place on the tour was into the basement, which was even cooler, and where Rennard normally slept. Here he also kept several rabbit warrens, which amazed Dana as she had never seen a live rabbit. She cooed over one as she reached through the wire to pet it, but it kept away from her inquisitive fingers.

"Mr. Mel believes they've all gone extinct in the wild," she said absentmindedly, as she looked at the desert cottontail.

"They probably have," Rennard said. "This may be the largest warren of living rabbits left in the world."

"Can I have one to bring back and show everyone?"

"They're not pets Dana," Ambrose chided her.

"I know that, sir," Dana said, a little sadly. "But, I'd like it if just one could be my pet!"

Rennard shook his head. "For now, I'm going to say no. Because, take a look at them. They have not adapted for the more harsh desert out there. When we get you home though, I'll see if there's a good place where one could live. If there is, then I'll bring you one the next time I am out to see Mr. Littleton about some silversmithing. For now though, before I find out what brings you all out here, rest and wash up. I'll go get dinner ready."

But, the most important part, was the fresh water well and purifier that Rennard kept here. He took Ambrose and Rose aside, leaving Dana with a few aloe and herbs to help reduce the itching and pain from the sunburns.

Dana didn't know what they talked about while she bathed, but the cool water refreshed her, and the lotions soothed her hurts. The blood that had caked around her wound cleaned off easily enough, and in about half an hour (she had always been forced to take fast showers before, a real bath was a luxury), she wandered upstairs to try and find Rennard. She was caught by surprise when, at the top of the stairs, she saw a smaller variant of the Big Dog (which she decided were Puppies) had been stationed there waiting for her.

"Hello Ms. Dana Littleton," It said in Rennard's voice. "If you would follow this unit, it will take you to dinner."

Dana was more than happy to follow the Puppy.

* * *

Morton Rennard had been the curator of the Lyceum for about 25 years now. He was probably in his forties, yet he had soaked up knowledge from the musty tomes and antiquated server. He never had explained, back when he made regular circuits through the outlying towns and territories, how he had learned the access codes to the Lyceum. And, over dinner, he gave no clear idea. His story, when asked, was that he had been in the right place at the right time for a curious young man seeking a purpose in life.

They dined on mushrooms and rabbit flank stewed with cornmeal muffins. Rennard asked a few questions about when Rose was due, and he said it did not look like it would be a difficult birth.

"But, she's not going to be fit for travel in another week or so, and my supplies here aren't really stocked up to take care of this many people this long," he said.

"We aren't going to impose; Ambrose just wants the best to take care of me."

Ambrose nodded, "I was hoping we could find some way to convince you to come to the nearest homestead or town, where I could hire on. I can't pay in cash, but I've got spare supplies and a few fine goods in barter."

"I don't really have any need for finery here," Rennard said with a chuckle. "We'll work out payment at a later date."

"Mr. Sareola is really good in the desert," Dana said, kicking her bare feet under the table. She had thrown her dress back on, but decided that there was no need for stockings or shoes; the cool floor felt nice on her bare feet. "Maybe he could be a long patrol captain! The Major always made a lot with hazard pay."

"That's a good idea Dana. My Ambrose is not really cut out for farming," Rose said, gently pushing her husband's shoulder as she ate. He grunted, unamused.

"Well, with Rodney and my horse, we should be able to take the little miss home. If I'm right, you're from Paladin's Flats," Rennard said. "I know your father well; great smith. It'll be an honor to deliver you safe and sound to him."

"We can't leave yet!" Dana said. "I can't pay either, but I need your help too!"

The rest of the dinner passed quickly, as Rennard drew out a few tentative explanations of the symptoms plaguing Dana's brother. He asked her what treatments had been tried, and she did her best to remember and explain. He took careful notes on the Puppy's heads-up display while she talked, cross-referencing it with the Lyceum's local server.

"I'm afraid that's not enough for me to make a diagnosis," Rennard said. "I'll just have to bring my entire bag with me."

"Then you'll help?"

"Yes, but I want to speak with you in private before we go. For now, everyone should get some sleep. I'll be packing for our trip tomorrow and bringing Rodney inside, please make yourself at home," Rennard said.

During the evening, Ambrose slept heavily and fitfully. Rose relaxed on the roof once the sun was gone, staring at the stars and dreaming of a home she could never go back to and a baby who would soon be in her arms. Rennard spent the day preparing the generator and server to shut off and recalling his eyes in the sky and Big Dogs.

Dana spent the evening in the Lyceum's library reading from a book on the habitats and diets of the common desert cottontail, just in case Ambrose and Rennard changed their minds and let her have a rabbit. She fell asleep in the library, with her head resting on her folded arms, surrounded by books on the desert wildlife.

* * *

Dana was shaken awake at what felt like well passed midnight. It was a gentle nudge of her shoulder, and she spun around to see Morton Rennard, his hat in hand. In his other, he held one of the books she had fallen asleep on.

"It's good for you to read," He said. "It's a dying art in these parts."

"My mom used to read to me all the time. I learned so I could read to Beau."

"That's right decent of you. I talked with Ambrose about your trip here, he told me about the men who damaged my dog." Rennard paused there, leaving silence in the air. Seeing that Dana was not going to engage him, he pressed on. "The point is, I wanted to make sure you are alright. I remember the first time I shot someone; it was rattling."

Dana nodded, pulling her knees up to her chest. "I didn't want to hurt him, but I didn't want to get hurt either. I don't think I could shoot someone for real though."

"It's important that you think that, but it is equally important that you know the right reasons for drawing that weapon of yours," Rennard sat on the table, flipping idly through the book. "Some men wander through life blessedly unaware of the violence that they can cause."

"But, it wasn't wrong, was it? I don't want to be bad."

"That's a question I ask myself a lot. I remember I used to be a bit of a drifter. I was the fastest gun on the circuit back then," Rennard said. He shut the book, propping it on his knee. "But

each showdown, each frantic brawl, just left me a bit emptier. I met a woman. She said to me, 'Mortie, when you pull that trigger, you're shooting a bit of your heart away.' I think she was a beautiful romantic. You stay your hand when you can, Ms. Littleton. But, when the chips are down, you have to know yourself enough to fire away without losing yourself."

"Did you ever lose yourself Mr. Rennard?"

"Some men do."

"Like Mr. Sareola?"

"I think we've talked enough. This is well past your bedtime. Go on, the dog outside will show you to your room. We want to leave before the sun gets too high."

She hopped off the chair and was a few steps away when he whistled. She turned to him, and squeaked in surprise as he tossed the book her way. She barely caught it before it landed on the ground near her feet.

"You better learn that backwards and forwards if you ever want a pet rabbit, Ms. Littleton."

* * *

Well before dawn broke, Dana Littleton was standing at the ready with Rodney. Rodney had been her horse; she had been enamored with the fairytales her mother read her. She had set off on a quest to help her brother, and victory was now in sight. During the trial, though, she had felt useless. She had thought about what Rennard had told her, and she wanted to get to know herself well enough to not lose her way.

To do that, though, she knew she would need to learn the desert. Her father had prepared her with a curious mind, healthy living and an education that left her literate and savvy. When the adults came to wake her, they found her ready, boots on.

"Mr. Ambrose, Mr. Rennard, can you teach me?"

"Teach you what, little miss?" Ambrose asked; Rennard only smiled.

"I want to learn to... to be like a desert knight, like my mother and my father are."

"I'm not teaching a little girl how to use a gun. Killing ain't for kids."

"But, what if there are more men in the desert! I need to protect myself... and I need to protect Beau."

"Two rules," Rennard said. "First, you agree to keep training until I tell you are ready. Two, you do not complain."

"I promise!"

Ambrose tried to protest, but Rose silenced him. "I learned to shoot when I was younger than her Ambrose."

"Fine," Ambrose said to his wife. He turned to Dana, "I don't want to hear any whining. It is going to be hard; you are going to ache. If you are unlucky, clumsy or sloppy, you are going to get hurt. I had the meanest son of a bitch drill me. There's your first lesson; you want to shoot like a man, you best learn to hear a cuss like a man."

* * *

Powering down the Lyceum was a long affair, made quicker by helping hands; Rennard added a book on electricity and a chapter on modifying solar arrays as part of her assigned reading for their journey back to her home. He had also packed several speed loaders and targets, which he and Ambrose would use to help teach her the control she would need to use a gun like her mother's. It was still too large for her, so Rennard also brought along his old hold out pistol. The sun was still low when they set out back to Paladin's Flats. Rennard and Ambrose walked the horses as Dana and Rose rode along in the rising sun.

The curator had a variety of facts ready for pointing out. From the direction of the sun to the smallest insect, he read the trails and the signs like a seasoned long patrolmen. If it weren't for the blonde hair, Ambrose would have thought he had been a tribesman before his self-exile. Dana rattled off questions about snakes and the various features of the robot horses as she rode.

During the day, Rennard and Rose drilled her on desert survival, medicines and other trivia to help pass the time. It helped to keep her mind off of Beau, and it helped the adults get to know each other. Rennard learned new words for roots and lizards, Rose learned about the mechanical knack that Rennard had but Ambrose never could master. Ambrose, on the other hand, took control in the evenings. His military background showed as he walked her through drawing and holstering her weapon. Before he would let her have dinner the first night, he made her draw and holster 20 times. He would have gone for 100 if Rose did not intervene.

It was in this way that Dana Littleton became more and more accustomed to the rigors of desert life. On the third night of their departure, Ambrose tried his hand at cooking while he watched her draw and aim. After the first fifteen repetitions, he prodded the fire, deep in thought.

"Ok. Now, switch hands."

"But, I don't use my other arm."

"Is that what you're going to say if you take a bullet in your good arm? Maybe take a spill from your horse and call the fight on account of broken arm? You said you wanted to learn, you're going to learn," Ambrose said.

As she was removing the holster she felt a small rock thunk off her leg. She looked at Ambrose, shocked and angry.

"What are you doing little miss?"

"I'm moving my gun to the other side!"

"Why?"

"You wanted me to practice drawing with my other hand."

"You're not some fancy pants sharpshooter like Rennard, are you? You got one gun. You wear it on one side, now, draw."

Ambrose was a taskmaster, having her go through a variety of drills backwards and forwards, her good arm and her bad arm, blindfolded, facing the sun, with one hand tied behind her back. Rose said it was cruel; Rennard withheld judgment. While not a taskmaster like Ambrose, he was equally as hard on Dana during their return trip. On the fourth night, he begged Ambrose off for half the night. Ambrose consented, only when Rose's glare become impossible to avoid.

"Alright Ms. Littleton, Ambrose has shown you some gunplay, he is a good teacher, stand about here," Rennard said, marking an X in the sand with his boot. He took about a dozen steps away. "Now, your chamber is empty still, right? Good. I want you to draw and aim, fast as you can. On three. One, two, three."

Dana pulled her gun free, it was still a choppy motion, but the muscle memory was starting to kick in. The gun was half-way to level, a few seconds at most, when she saw Rennard flashing forward over the sand in a leap, the golden pommel of his blade gracefully passing through the night. The folded steel clashed with her gun pushing it aside.

"Not fast enough," He said, as he sprung back to his mark. "Again. Again."

"You're too fast!"

"Think faster then. Again!"

On the twenty-fourth repetition, Dana threw her gun into the sand in despair. Ambrose made her

clean her gun, take it apart and put it back together again as punishment for mistreating her weapon so. "I'm never going to learn if you don't teach me! What am I supposed to do?"

"Think fast. Ambrose has taught you the techniques, but we've been giving you knowledge too. There's more to gunplay than fast fingers and proper stances. Again."

The fourth and fifth nights passed with more training. Ambrose walked her through the steps to draw her revolver. Rennard pushed it aside like a play thing. On the sixth night, she was practicing with her mother's gun to get a better feel for the weight. The first time Rennard knocked it aside, she almost went flying.

A week passed in the desert, and Paladin's Flats was still another week away. Dana, a stubborn and willful child, could feel the muscles in her arms and legs ache each morning, but she had asked to learn to protect herself after the experience with the men. On the eighth night, Rennard began to show her ways to escape holds. She learned things about leverage and where a little pressure moved mountains; but she still could not hope to match his speed. He shouted at her: "Think fast. No, faster. Again."

The clang of his sword against her gun echoed through the ninth night. She listened to the creation myths of the Mahiticans that Rose spun as she drifted off to sleep; she learned to match the pace of the robotic horses and conserve her energy. Rennard taught her to tap the cacti for water. The tenth afternoon, while they took camp, Ambrose and Rennard talked about the proper maintenance of the robotic horses. Rodney's solar panels needed cleaning, and they made Dana do it, correcting her at each step.

"In the desert, small mistakes can kill," Rennard said, guiding her hands with the tools to replace the damaged panel. The second panel she replaced herself. As she was removing the third, Ambrose whistled twice.

"Someone's coming," Dana said. "Let's go see!"

* * *

Slowly approaching Rennard's camp was a two by two caravan of six camels. Dana had never seen such creatures, and gasped in joy when she saw them. Rennard had read of them, and Ambrose and Rose had become intimately familiar with the beasts of burden, which were common across the land bridge to the east. Ambrose busied himself with one of the robotic horses as Rennard hailed the approaching men.

The two lead men of the caravan nodded, the taller tipping his hat in response. He held up his hand for the rest of the men to hold position and trotted his camel forward. Along the creature's flanks were mounted a fine hunting rifle on the left and a pike on the right, about five foot in length. The taller man was dressed in an elegant blue and gold trimmed coat, a gold colored

band across his fedora. He had a distinguished, well kept, graying beard. His eyes were tired, old and sharp.

His second was a rat-faced younger man, already balding beneath his sombrero. He too kept a well-manicured beard, but his beady eyes and the darker stubble gave him a more ominous air. His weapons were less well maintained, his saddle seemed a bit less polished. He spat off to the side, and rubbed a gloved hand against his running nose.

"We don't have time to waste, let's just move on Lloyd."

The older man merely rolled his eyes to the man, and raised an eyebrow. "When I give you permission to speak, lieutenant, you will begin with sir, end with sir, and somewhere, in the middle, fit in sir. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir." The lieutenant said, with contempt.

Dana followed tentatively a few steps behind Rennard. The long patrols at the Flats had never used a formal rank structure. At most, there was a patrol master, who made sure everyone's gear was checked and supplies were safe. He would sometimes have a scoutmaster, who double checked progress and was the best land navigator in the group. But, the older gentleman's fine clothes and bearing struck her as the raiments of command. Rennard, more experienced in the martial tradition, removed his hat with one hand.

"Good morning, we want no trouble."

"We intend to give you none. My name is General Lloyd Palzo, Hawkson First Cavalry," Here the general nodded to his lieutenant, and motioned to the men behind him. "These men are under my command. A few days ago, some of our number left their post."

"I've never heard of Hawkson; is that a new settlement?" Rennard asked.

"Lloyd, the rubes don't know anything-"

"Lieutenant, the gentleman and his daughter are doing us the honor of speaking with us. Do not disrespect them or try my patience."

"Sir, yes, sir."

"I apologize for my subordinate's outburst. We're, from the east, shall we say?"

"Near the great divide?"

"Ah, yes. Close, to that. But, as I was saying, some of our number have chosen to go their own

path. I have been tasked with bringing those deserters back to our Baron for trial," Here he seemed distracted by that thought, but then continued. "You wouldn't happen to know what settlement here has access to the data feeds for the Big Dogs or the eyes in the sky my men and I have seen? That sort of data would be invaluable for tracking them."

Dana tugged at Rennard's coat, "Mr. Rennard, do you think he means those men back in the desert?"

"Well I'll be. The little kid knows something," The lieutenant leered towards Dana. "So, tell us what you know."

The general cleared his throat, and the lieutenant shifted back in his saddle. "My companion is a bit eager, but if you tell us what you know, we can spare something for your time."

Rennard whistled for his horse, which ambled along towards them, much to Ambrose's chagrin. He busied himself caring for Rodney instead, careful to keep his back to the general.

"As Ms. Littleton here was saying, she and her friends back there did have a run in with some men. I am afraid the men are dead," Rennard said, as he opened his coat to remove his toolkit. He opened the horse's head and snaked out a small wire. He looked up to the general. "The coordinates are in my robot's computer here; if you have a map or an L-to-L Tracker, I can upload to it."

"Just give us the horse," The lieutenant said. "We'll make it worth your while."

"As you can see back there, we have a pregnant woman and a young girl. We need both of our horses, I am afraid."

"Our tech, I am afraid, is not compatible with your hardware," The general said. "We had the same issue at the homestead two day's behind us."

"You were at the flats! Did you like it? That's where we're going!" Dana said.

"It was a charming place," The general said. "If you give me the rough coordinates, we can work from that."

Rennard produced the data, using the readout in his horse's brain to provide the longitude and latitude. He also pulled up a star chart, which the lieutenant copied expertly onto a piece of trace paper. While the general continued talking, the lieutenant busily worked the L-to-L Tracker and plotted the caravan's route.

"Thank you for your assistance, we will be on our way. Lieutenant, see what supplies we can spare for their help. Take it out of your bonus," With that, General Lloyd turned his camel around

and ambled to his men.

"Knowing that bastard, he'll have one of the men search my bags to make sure I gave you something too." The lieutenant pulled up his saddlebag and rustled around in it. "Hey, little girl, you like fruit? Here, have a peach."

Fresh fruit was a rarity in the desert, and when the lieutenant tossed it in her direction, she jumped forward to catch it before it hit the ground. She looked at it, held it one hand to remove her glove and feel its soft fuzz. She was in awe of it; it was still cool to the touch. She showed it to Rennard, asking him how could it still be fresh if those men had been in the desert so long.

"Probably some absorbent fibers and temperature regulating device on the bag," Rennard said, also in awe of the peach. "It is fairly theoretical, but I guess you've got it working. Hey, lieutenant, I'd like to buy that bag from you. We've got some supplies, and I have a few silver bracelets that the ladies back home will just adore."

"General'd have my head for hocking military tech to a civilian. But, if he weren't watching, I'd take you up on that deal. I just have to give it back when we debrief anyway." The lieutenant turned his camel around as well, but paused as he stared at the Sareola's. "Something wrong with your other horse? Your friend there's been fussing with it. We got a tech-head could look at it for you."

"No, we're ok, he's just not a people person," Rennard said. The lieutenant squinted, and Rennard stepped forward to block his line of sight, offering his hand. "Thank you again, lieutenant. Have a good day."

"Well, thanks to you too. I'm just glad we won't have to hump around this desert any longer than we absolutely have to. Look, that man that's with you, you know him long?"

Dana felt Rennard's hand squeeze hard on her shoulder, as he said simply, "Man's my cousin, I practically grew up with him."

"Really. Well, enjoy your peach kid."

The rat-faced lieutenant returned to his general. But, for the life of him, he would almost swear that behind the kindly gentleman and little girl, was the greatest desert wolf Baron Hawkson ever trained, Ace Sareola.

* * *

When Rennard, the Sareolas and Dana arrived at Paladin's Flats, one of the long patrol sent up the "all's OK" signal to recall the extra patrols that had been sent out to try and find Dana. Her father, came running to meet her, while Rennard negotiated a place to stay for the Sareolas.

Davey Littleton had always been a thick, strong man. But, between his wife's passing and the sickness that gripped at his son, he had started to thin, bald and gray. When he scooped up Dana in a giant bear hug, he openly wept.

He was at a loss for words when he put her down and tried to squat at eye level. He was debating between a fierce chewing out and hugging her again, when Rennard intervened.

"Dave, my friend, I found something that belongs to you wandering in the desert, so I thought I would return it."

Davey looked up, squinted and let out a hoot, "My stars, if it isn't Morton Rennard, back from the musty depths! Come here you big lug."

The two men embraced quickly, and Dave whispered a quiet thank you.

"Your young lady here asked me to come take a look at your son; if I had known he was ill, I would have come sooner."

"We've had Mel look at him, and the medicine woman from the Eagle tribe that settled down near the cliffs," Dave said, sliding an arm around Morton's shoulders and grabbing Dana's hand to lead them both home. "If I knew where you had settled down, I'd've sent straight to you."

"He's in the Lyceum!"

"Actually, that reminds me," Morton stopped. He shifted into his pack and removed a small drone, about the size of a baseball. Several buttons were lined up on the seem; one was blinking a gentle green. "I call this a homing pigeon. I modified one of my eyes with an L-to-L tracker and better visual recognition routines at the expense of radio and wavelength transmission. If I did it right, this little beauty will find its way back to the Lyceum. Won't know until I get back though. If it works, though, I've programmed Paladin's Flats into its memory, so we'll be able to communicate more reliably. It can carry a small payload, up to three pounds."

He tapped one of the buttons and the ball unfolded, its wings taking expanding. Morton put it on the ground and the three of them watched as it built up speed to take off. They watched it disappear into the horizon, and then Dana clapped with joy.

"It is going in the right direction! It works!"

"That's my friend Morton, Dana. Best tinker, thinker and doctor I ever met. Second best gunman I ever knew too, after your mother."

"You're a better shot than me, old man."

"Not any more. My eyes are going soft. Who were the other two folks who came into town with you?"

"Ambrose and Rose Sareola. He's looking to hire on somewhere, handy with a gun and knows the desert. Not much of a talker or a farmer though; you got any stagecoach or merchant runs could make an honest man out of him?"

"Please papa! He helped me in the desert, and Rose is going to have a baby! We have to help them."

"Well, I know Mel's been looking for someone to handle some of the external trading. He's getting along in years too, Mort. You should swing by and see him before you leave. How long you planning on staying?"

"Matters."

"Matters on what?"

"It matters on the diagnosis for your son," Rennard said. "I brought some of the more common cures and remedies that would keep in the desert with me. If he has something I can't cure with what I've got, I'll need to go back and get it. But, let's not worry about that for now."

It was a short ten minute walk to the Littleton's smithy. The two men talked a little about the desert, and Davey talked about the time since Morton had returned. Within the living space, Rennard had Dana and her father wait outside Beau's room while he attended to his patient. Davey took his wife's revolver and began to lovingly restore and shine it. When Rennard came out and said it would be a while longer, Davey sent Dana to go find the Sareolas and invite them for dinner.

While Dana was out, Davey and Morton discussed more serious matters.

* * *

Before dinner, Dana had slipped into Beau's room to share her peach with him. He was thankful, but he still had a raspy cough. He said that Mr. Rennard hadn't said anything new. He asked about Dana's adventures, and she told him with all the relish and embellishment of a child.

During dinner she helped him with his food and half-listened as Ambrose and Rose shared stories of their time in the desert; Rennard ate silently. It was the quietest that Dana had seen Rennard in days, which made her worry about Beau. It was the kind of quiet that old Mel had had when talking about her mother and after his last diagnosis with Beau. It was the sombre quiet of death.

After dinner, Beau was put to bed, and Davey was about to send Dana off to when Rennard shook his head.

"She's just going to listen at the door, we might as well let her sit at the table and have coffee with us."

Davey and Ambrose laughed at this, and Papa Littleton began to prepare the coffee. Dana took her seat and began to nervously kick her feet in the air.

"Is Beau going to die?"

"Maybe." Rennard said flatly. "I believe I know what the cure is, but there is a snag."

Davey served the coffee; Dana was too occupied to notice that she barely got any. "Do you need blood? I read that in a book somewhere. You can have some of mine."

"It's not quite that Dana. No, what we need is a rare, nearly impossible to grow root, along with some of the supplies I brought with me," Rennard said. Here he looked at Ambrose. "I was hoping, you might know where I could find this root. It's not native to the Western Wilds any more."

Ambrose shifted uneasily. "Lay it out, what are you looking for?"

"The root of a rare plant, called a vulture cactus. It has a black flower. I don't believe anyone can grow it any more, due to the harsh sun. Unless they have access to a dark room."

"Like the baron," Rose said. Rennard nodded.

"When I saw the environ-satchel on the one soldier and the peach he produced, I thought it was possible that this baron across the land bridge might have the technology for a functioning large scale dark room."

"I was posted there as a guard during my tour," Ambrose said. "I saw inside once or twice. I only remember a few flowering plants. None were black though. One was kind of purple though. Four leafed, the baron had it brewed in tea to break up his congestion. That the thing you're looking for?"

"We won't know until I see it. Which is what I wished to ask you here for," Rennard pulled out a bag and removed a small silver ring, which he slid across the table to the Sareolas. "That is half your pay to be our guide to the baron's territory. From there, we'll work to acquire the roots we need, meet up with you, and come back here."

Davey looked to Ambrose, pleadingly, "Please, help Mort. I'll look after Rose like my own

daughter; you won't have to pay for lodging, and I'll even have a new rifle made by the time you get back as my part of the fee. Help save my son."

"If you're making the rifle, who else is going to be working with Rennard? I'm not welcome at the baron's, if you didn't know."

"We'll also be taking Ms. Littleton with us. We can't interrupt her training, and I believe seeing across the land bridge will be useful for her education."

Dana gasped. "I'll be coming! I won't slow you down! Can we bring Rodney?"

"We'll almost have to. I've also arranged to buy us a third horse, so we'll be moving much faster going than coming."

"And this vulture plant will save Beau?"

"I only have the vaguest notes about its effectiveness, so I cannot promise. I plan to leave before first light tomorrow."

Ambrose thanked Davey and promised Rose that he would be back as fast as he could. He also promised to bring something nice home for the baby. Dana told Beau she would be leaving on another adventure.

* * *

Rennard and Davey stood outside, looking into the night sky.

"How can I ever repay you for everything you've done for me Mort?"

"Don't ask that right now, old friend. You focus on keeping Beau as healthy as you can. When I come back, I'll tell you what needs to be done."

"I'll pay anything to save him, you know that, don't you?"

"You and Serena saved me back then. I owe you more than I can possibly imagine."

"I miss her. I miss her every day."

"I know. I've missed both of you and Mel. And all the rest. When I left to find the Lyceum, I thought it was the biggest mistake in my life. Separated from all of you for so long. But, I think I found that lost treasure to save Serena's child."

"If over the gorge is like it was before, it is going to be dangerous. Can you trust Ambrose?"

"He saved Dana, and he could have let her die. Love has redemptive qualities."

"Mort, always an old romantic philosopher."

"We weren't much different before Serena and Julia," Rennard said, taking off his hat. "Do you remember what Julia said the night before we drove off those bandits?"

"Those sisters rubbed off on us," Davey said. "My leg still aches from where that ball shattered it that day."

"I've been thinking about it ever since. It's why I gave up the guns for the solitude of the Lyceum. But, now with all that knowledge, I think I figured out what she meant. I'm not afraid any more Dave. I think I can keep myself this time. Thanks to her."

"You're always welcome back in the Flats. You should move back."

"Let's worry about saving your and Serena's boy. I'm going to bed. The last thing I need is to oversleep my own casting off."

* * *

Days passed; Rennard and Ambrose agreed that traveling to the gorge and following it to the land bridge was the safest plan. During the trip, they taught Dana how to use the L-to-L equipment, and Rennard showed her how to read the stars at night. "Because equipment can be faulty, but your eyes will never lie."

It was Dana's first time seeing the gorge when they arrived. Like all children, she cautiously peered over the side, kicking a small rock to watch it fall. Ambrose and Morton looked across to, though the other side was almost impossibly far away. Ambrose whistled softly.

"It takes my breath away every time I see it."

"A woman I used to know told me that it used to be a river."

"That's what Rose's people said."

"Do you think anyone has ever climbed to the bottom?"

"They haven't made it back up if they have."

Morton kneeled down as he reached into his pack. He retrieved a second pigeon, which immediately unfurled its wings and tiny legs. He carefully punched a few buttons and cleaned

the camera lens on its underside.

"That's because they couldn't fly Ambrose." Rennard tossed the small robot into the air, they watched as it fell quickly through the air down the gorge. As it picked up speed, the wings straightened. Slowly, it shifted from freefall to a gentle, circling glide.

"Like the other one, that one's going to return to the Lyceum when it finishes its scouting job. For us, we follow this gorge north to the land bridge, if I'm not mistaken."

"What if it doesn't come back up Mort?" Dana had tried calling him Mort like her father had; he seemed indifferent to the name, so she kept it.

"Be glad I built one of those instead of glider wings."

"Glider wings wouldn't work Mort. People are too heavy."

"Adults are too heavy; children aren't. Saddle up, kid." Dana did not always appreciate his humor.

* * *

Dana balanced various textbooks on Rodney's head and thumbed through the careworn pages. Science, math, flora and fauna were her breakfast and lunch. Ambrose taught her how to skin and prepare a desert creature he managed to capture. Lessons on tapping cacti continued whenever they found one, with Morton chastising her for doing it wrong.

"You're not the only one in the desert; killing this plant may kill your fellow travelers some day," He said, taking over the duty from her. At night, Ambrose continued the gun drills, with Rennard weaving in foot work and strikes. Ambrose had tried to give her a knife one evening, but she refused it initially.

"You won't always be able to use a gun Dannie," Ambrose had taken to calling her Dannie for reasons she couldn't fathom. She liked the nickname, even if it was odd. "Besides, it is a good tool to have, even if you never get it bloody. Rose wanted me to give it to you, so go ahead and take it."

He also presented her a rabbit skin sheath for the knife, and then immediately added knife drills to her evening homework. She had built up some muscle and lost much of the baby features on her face and arms. She wore a straw hat, with her blond hair tucked up inside it and held in place firmly in a bow, like Rose had shown her. Before she had left, Mel had arrived with a set of traveling clothes for her, new slacks and a rough shirt and bulky vest, with a plain checkered poncho tied neatly over her shoulder. She had normally worn skirts and dresses around town, because she had wanted to be a proper lady like her mother, but Rennard had scoffed at the

idea of wearing a dress into the desert.

"Last time you did it, it was an innocent mistake. Pants and boots are the way to go. Pants with pockets and a strong belt."

She had insisted, and they had reluctantly packed a dress for her in her bag. She was made to carry it, along with all of the other minor essentials she claimed to absolutely need. By the third day, she learned to travel light.

Finally, in the distance, Ambrose spotted the land bridge, guarded by three figures and their camels, with two tents pitched along with a well constructed fire pit.

"Rennard, there's a small problem. Some of the Baron's men are watching the bridge."

"Well, then, let's go ask what the bridge toll is."

"I don't think it is going to be that simple."

"Trust me Ambrose, even if there isn't normally a toll, I think there will be one, if we insist."

* * *

"No one gets by. The border is closed," came the crisp response from the dark eyed woman manning the bridge. She was perhaps in her mid-twenties, her skin was tanned from the desert. She kept her hat low, and her arms were folded defiantly under her chest. Her jaw clenched, her green eyes rolling to observe her two male compatriots. They absentmindedly sized up Rennard and Ambrose, then returned to their dice. The three camels had hunkered down, looking across the gorge.

"We're just traveling; there's never been a border at this bridge before." Morton had never crossed the bridge before, but his Big Dogs never saw any people here.

"There is now, sir."

"Surely, there must be toll of some sort we can pay," Rennard said, shuffling through his pack. He looked up, his wrinkled, sun-worn brow seemed almost charming above his roguish grin.

"For the third time, there is no toll. There is no tax. There is no fee," she said. Suddenly, a light bulb clicked, and her face grew stormy with anger. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"We were just moving on, come on Rennard, let's go." Ambrose tipped his hat and took his friend by the arm. The woman fumed at them, cutting them off, thrusting her finger into Rennard's chest.

"I'll have you know, that unlike some members of the baron's battalion, I take my duties seriously. Some of these cads might take a powder, but I am the daughter of Lloyd Palzo," Her fierce eyes shot at Rennard. "Do not ever insult me like this again. Get out of here. Now."

Ambrose muttered an apology and led Rennard away. Dana looked up, waiting. She had learned that they sometimes stood in silence for a very long time contemplating. She assumed it was something you just learned to do in the desert. Probably to do with the sand, since they always looked at their feet.

"Ambrose, tell me about this General Lloyd Palzo," Rennard asked. "Did you ever meet him while you were in the Baron's army?"

"He's possibly the only man in the entire contingent we called honest unironically," Ambrose casually leaned against his horse, sizing up the three figures in the distance. The woman, arms folded, hat pulled low, still glared suspiciously at them. "Never knew he had daughter. Did meet him once. He threw me in the stockades for gambling. Well, for cheating at gambling."

"How are we going to get across Mort?" Dana asked from Rodney.

"We could blast through. There's only three; the second checkpoint is probably across the bridge. We'd be able to set up a defensive position while they come to check. We'd have the bridge covered."

"No. I'm not killing one of the two honest people in your army."

"They're not my army, Rennard."

"No killing."

"You and I are good enough shots, we could just shoot out their legs."

"Let me revise my statement, no shooting."

While they were talking, Dana kicked Rodney into drive and moved briskly toward the checkpoint, waving her hat. She was smiling, her red ribbon bobbing in the wind. Lloyd's daughter at first looked perplexed at the figure on the horse bobbing her way, and then, she cautiously waved back, smiling too. She looked a bit askance at Rennard and Ambrose, who both looked on impassively.

"Well, little lady, aren't you adorable? How can I help you?" The woman asked, hands on her hips.

Dana had a way with people, the disarming nature of a child, combined with the earnest charisma of a leader. She was honest in an unassuming way, as though deception were as alien to her as an ocean. "I need to get across the bridge with my friends, ma'am."

The woman laughed. "'Ma'am' is my mother, angel. I'm Corporal Rebecca Palzo, you can call me Becky. It's like I told your friends, I can't let anyone by."

"Miss Becky, my name is Dana Littleton. My brother is Beau Littleton, and he lives back in Paladin's Flats."

"I don't know where that is angel." Becky didn't have the extensive knowledge of weapons that Ambrose had; Littleton didn't mean anything special to her.

"You have to let us by, because Beau is dying. Mort back there is a doctor, and he thinks that he can find what he's looking for across the gap."

The corporal's eyes softened. She snapped to the men at the dice game and motioned for paper and pencil. She stuck the paper in her mouth, pulled a small knife and sharpened the pencil. She spoke, the paper flapping gently between the corner of her lips. "Let me send a runner. What did you say your doctor friend's name was again?"

"Mort Rennard, and I'm Dana Littleton."

"So, I'll be asking for a special dispensation and pass for a Ms. Dana Littleton, a Dr. Mort Rennard, and who is the third name I'll need to fill out?"

That's when everything went wrong.

* * *

The two men at their dice game's ears perked up. Becky was faster, but she wasn't sure she could believe what Dana had just told her. The two men however had more experience, as well as a thirst for blood and reward. Bagging Ace Sareola was sure to get them off bridge duty.

Dana screamed, which snapped the corporal back to reality. Her pencil was still in her hand as she saw one of her men reaching for his revolver. She dropped what she was carrying and tried to stop him from drawing. The second man's pistol came free just as easily; Morton pushed Ambrose to the ground and threw himself in the opposite direction as the gunshot reported through the air. At about 60 yards the bullet still fell short.

Dana fumbled off of Rodney, pulling her hat tight over her head, looking for advice from Rennard or Ambrose.

"Stop shooting! What are you doing?"

"I'm going to bag us an early retirement, corporal."

"You're going to bag yourself a month in the stockade if you don't put your gun down this second."

The first man ducked behind one of the camels, while the one arguing with Rebecca took a knee behind the firepit. The corporal, at a loss for words stood between the two groups.

"This is an order, private. Drop your gun."

"Do you even know who Ace Sareola is?"

"He's a dangerous criminal who is to be brought in for justice. Alive," Rebecca said. Rennard motioned for Dana to hold her position. She could see him and Ambrose making hand gestures to each other from behind their horses.

"He's worth just as much alive as dead."

"This isn't about a bounty."

"Don't be naive, corp," The man said. "Now get out of the line of fire."

Rebecca tried to tell him to hold his fire, when the second man took a shot at Rennard's position, the bullet striking into his horse, cracking a solar panel. Ambrose tried to turn his horse around to grab his rifle, but another bullet from the first man kept his horse from turning.

"That's enough! You might hit the little girl!"

"Not if she stays down, I won't."

Dana fumbled with her revolver, thought about drawing it, and then let it slide back into its holster. She didn't think she could bring herself to shoot Miss Becky. The next shot came from Rennard; he dove between the two horses, a single bullet flying wide. One of the camels startled, and dashed free, the stake holding it in place shot free from its moorings leaving the second man exposed.

Becky turned in a flourish, pulling one revolver to level at Rennard's position, while her free hand pulled a sawed off Winchester from the inside of her coat, leveled at the man behind the fire pit. The first man's pistol shook for a second, and drew a bead on Sareola, who Rennard had pulled to his feet, his sword at Ace's throat. Rennard's pistol calmly moved from the second man to Becky, when Dana popped over Rodney, leveling her revolver squarely at the now

camel-less man.

Ambrose spit into the sand, and rubbed it in with his boot. He cast a look of hate first at the woman, then at Rennard. His hand twitched, deciding if he should try and draw anyway. Becky's eyes flitted between her two targets, her finger easing around the trigger.

"Ambrose, trust me," Rennard whispered. "And put your hands up like a real hostage."

* * *

Corporal Rebecca Palzo had been in shootouts before. She had earned her first medal for being wounded in action while apprehending bandits trying to break into the baron's mansion with explosives. It was the first of many murder attempts, and her father, the General, had seen to it that she went through the dangerous assignments just like the rest of the men. She had earned her first citation for bravery protecting the outlying water wells against dissidents.

Her father, thinking she had had enough of such an exciting life (or, more likely, he having had enough of her exciting life), reassigned her to bridge duty. Where nothing was ever supposed to happen.

"Drop your weapons. Both of you," Rebecca said. "This doesn't have to get hot."

She hazarded a quick glance to Dana, who had a shaking pair of hands clutched professionally around her pistol grip, glaring at the second man. For all her trembling, Dana was using Rodney to help steady and balance her aim.

"I was thinking the same thing corporal," Rennard said, moving slightly to position himself better to cover Ambrose.

"Me too." Dana said meekly.

"First things first, you lower your weapons and put your hands up."

"Not going to happen, I'm afraid," Rennard said. "Well, my hands. His are already up, you'll notice."

Ambrose looked over at Rennard, then down at the blade, which hovered innocently near his neck. He looked at his rifle, so far away, and kept his hands in the air.

"I have to bring the man with you in. He's wanted for murder."

"That's exactly why you can't bring him in," Rennard said. "I'm not handing him over when I went through all the trouble to get him to cooperate with me. The reward's ours."

Dana turned her head to look at Rennard, speaking quietly so the others couldn't hear.
"Reward? I don't want to hand him over."

"Dana, just hunker down behind Rodney, and holster your weapon" Rennard said.

"I see no reason for us to let you go by when you drew on us," Becky said.

"In all technicality, ma'am, your men drew on us first. I just want to turn in what I hear is the biggest bounty in the Eastern Wilds," Rennard said. "Maybe collect some supplies, then go home."

"Who exactly are you that you've got Ace there coming along to hang?"

"I'm Morton Rennard, curator of the Lyceum," He waited for some response from the soldiers. Getting none, he continued. "I cut a deal; his wife got to walk. Love redeems, you know. Now, let's come to an amicable agreement."

"You drop your weapons, and my men and I bring you to the baron to collect your bounty under our charge," Becky said. "In addition, I'll disarm my over zealous men here as well."

"What are you talking about corp? I'm not surrendering my weapons."

"Then we can all stand around here pointing weapons at each other and you can surrender them when our relief comes," the corporal said. "I'll send you up to the review board for insubordination if it comes to that. I told you not to draw."

The exposed man unclipped his holster and dropped his weapons, putting his hands in the air. "I trust you ma'am, look, no gun." Besides, he thought to himself, he didn't want to shoot a kid.

"Sounds unfair letting you keep all the weapons, ma'am," Rennard said. He looked at his gun, and was about to throw it aside, when he added: "Leave Dana armed, and we've got a deal."

Becky looked at where Dana was huddled. She whistled, and Dana's head popped over the horse. She gave a thumbs up to the corporal. "You have yourself a deal then, doc."

It took Becky and Dana about ten minutes to collect all of the weapons on a single camel and Rodney. Rodney listed a bit to one side, so Dana leaned in the other direction to compensate. Becky had her two soldiers clean up their camp; one stayed behind until relief arrived, Becky arranged to leave his rifle at the bridge's midpoint with orders for him to retrieve it after they were had gone.

Dana took the lead, with Becky in the rear on her camel. The remaining three men rode in

silence between them, looking over the gorge and down to the depths below. Ambrose glared at Rennard. Ambrose respected quick thinking and guile; he was just used to being on the other side. But his eyes were inscrutable as he looked into the sun.

"Over all, doc," he said as they neared the end of the land bridge, "I think you're a right bastard."

"Really? I thought it went rather well."

* * *

That estimate quietly changed when the corporal added two more (armed) guards to their entourage at the far end of the bridge. After another hour into the desert, she trotted her camel up to Rennard and Ambrose, pulling a pair of handcuffs from her jacket.

"Cuff him. I don't want him getting up to any trouble when we stop to get out of the sun."

"I don't think we need to do that," Rennard said. "He's been entirely cooperative."

"You can cuff him, or we can cuff both of you."

"You heard the lady with the guns," Rennard said taking the cuffs. "I'll be gentle."

During the afternoon rest, Dana helped Ambrose drink some water. The desert across the gorge felt more arid than home; the sun a bit fiercer. The entire march they were under Rebecca's harsh eyes. It was another five days before they reached the primary city, which no one really referred to as the capital city.

The baron had set up his tiny fiefdom using force of arms, persuasion and mercantile cruelty. He had cut off the surrounding city states from viable sources of water and technology, making a brisk trade in tribute for necessities. After the initial crackdown, he had begun to slacken his hold. As the small party passed through the wall, Corporal Palzo registered the members of her party and ordered her men to begin back to their posts in the morning. She tried to keep people from staring, but people gawked at the strange company.

The walled city of Hawkson was several miles wide, having taken over a small oasis and its surrounding tributaries. Aqueducts had slowly developed, thanks to Hawkson's engines and dedicated non-military engineers. One of the benefits of his large, nearly thousand man military, was that it allowed several hundred men to specialize in fields such as agriculture, knowing that the might of Hawkson protected them from bandits and murderers.

As the seat of power, as far as anyone on the east of the gorge knew, Hawkson citadel served as the beginning and end to circuit judges routes. The Hawkson court was known throughout its eight tributary cities as a hanging court, so the smaller cities attempted to handle as much of the

minor crime as they could on their own. This was much to Baron Hawkson's preference, as he did not want to start a small war hanging a village girl for "Whoring around with some army John."

Where Hawkson was strict in his moralizing, he was more relaxed in his pursuit of science. Weapons had earned him his initial place as a bandit leader, which evolved eventually into his gang, to a horde, to an army, to what he hoped would be a rebuilt empire, uniting with the green fields and pastures of the far west. To do that required transportation and logistics.

"Lloyd," he had said, "What's the difference between marching my army across the land bridge and when Levi, Georgie and us used to knock over a stage coach?"

"We're better men now, baron."

"Scale, general. Scale," he said, overlooking their, at the time, small empire of three rickety clay buildings and a herd of dying camels. "Bringing Eden to us is no different than convincing a well-heeled woman to part with her pocket book. We'd never think of tackling a camp site without our Big Dogs or equines, God help us we're stuck with camels till Welch gets those fixed. So, we need to find the armory."

Like the Lyceum, the armory was every bandit's dream. A centuries old military base with still working tech allegedly buried somewhere in the sand. Ten years ago, when George Sareola had died from alcohol and his son was on trajectory to kill Captain Levi, the other founding member of Hawkson's fledgling empire, General Palzo and Baron Hawkson found Benning. Inside, they found vehicles, schematics, working computers and solar panels. An operation was started swiftly, with General Alissa Welch, Hawkson's lead science officer, taking over command of the derelict base.

Now, overlooking his walled city, the baron was content. The land bridge was secure, his people safe, his two generals loyal to the end. Even the rat-faced lieutenant who served as his personal manservant was pleasant to deal with lately. Only one problem weighed heavily on his mind, which he rarely spoke of, but everyone knew.

His second and youngest son, Ben, named after the fort they found days before his birth, lay dying from a mysterious, racking cough. His older son, fifteen and old enough to have been learning to shoot, had taken to melancholy since his mother died. Peter rarely left Ben's side, even at the Baron's insistence. The only thing that took him away was holding court with visiting doctors and his shooting lessons. While not a prodigy like his father had been, Peter was doing serviceable enough, the baron thought. Enough to inspire loyalty in better men, as the Baron had in Levi and Palzo.

Peter had a legalistic, efficient mind. The Baron could respect that. But, even that part of his personality had drained since the last doctor left in shame. The depression had been so deep,

the Baron took Peter's guns away, afraid of the darkness behind his eyes.

Now, though, even the darkness on the Baron's family could not dampen his mood. On his desk was a report from General Welch about the synthetic fuels to man the desert troop carriers her scientists had been building. He loved his children, but he had grown to love his people. He had grown as a leader, from a mercenary leech to a kindly despot. He felt a responsibility to them, and these tools would be his way to bring them what they needed to turn their meager existence into one befitting a barony of this stature. Their loyalty would be rewarded.

* * *

"Synthetic fuels are a perhaps the only way we'll ever mobilize a force as large as you want to show our arms across the land bridge," Welch had said during the meeting before Levi went to secure the bridge and scatter the migrants; it was the last time the four founders of Hawkson were together. Lloyd, the Baron, Levi and Welch lounged around the Baron's dinner table. They were too familiar to stand on ceremony. "That, of course, also requires us to create a supply train long and secure enough to keep them fighting. Like you said, logistics is going to kill us faster than bullets."

"There's not much land to live off of out there," Lloyd had mentioned. His daughter was still young and innocent; he himself was getting tired.

"We can take what we need. We always have before," Levi had said. He was a ruddy, older man. Scarred, missing a finger and perverse. He had raped his first victim when he was barely a teenager; only Lloyd's temper and the Baron's direction kept him from wasting away. Being a quick draw had saved him in plenty of skirmishes over other people's daughters and wives.

"When it was just us and a few of the older boys, yeah, you're right," The Baron said. "But, there isn't enough out there for a full army to make off with. We'll need to carry what we need. Rotate out supplies and people on the lines, like when you cased a joint in shifts."

Levi nodded. Welch had been a natural with machines, and she gravitated to any position that made her secure enough in the Baron's influence to keep her far away from Levi. Lloyd mourned for his comrade when he was buried; Welch got drunk with happiness. That was years ago, and Welch was probably drunk again, judging by the glowing report. Synthetic fuels were a possibility. That breakthrough was huge; quantity was still a limiting factor.

What they needed, she had said, was the moss that grew on the face of the gorge. It was green, grew fast, and could be synthesized into a high-yield fuel source. The only problem was that the Mahiticans used it for a food source during the harshest of the summer. The Baron had sent Levi to negotiate; no one was under any illusion as to his real intent. Least of all Ace Sareola, who slit his throat to attempt to preserve the doomed tribe. It was during that campaign that the Baron decided to speed up his time table and established his border post on his side of the

bridge.

It wasn't until Palzo returned to report and return the deserter's belongings that the Baron committed to an aggressive border posture. The foray had gone well, but the information was invaluable.

Rat face had stayed behind, and he provided a more detailed report. "The area across the gorge is not much different from here. If there is an Eden, it is further west. There are farms though. Townships, efficient and backwater. The nearest one has maybe twenty able-bodied men."

The Baron had done the mental math already; he had two-hundred robotic equines and three dozen battle-ready camels. A strong enough contingent to begin to build a friendly foothold. With enough fire power, he could even come in as a conquering hero. His lieutenant confided in him reports of bandits and other gangs. Armed guards for each stage coach, a rapid response force set up at daily check points -- the Baron thought that these would be his way to form an alliance with the people across the gap.

He had turned his misfits and rogues into a working, if militant civilization. He saw his gift to the people of Paladin's Flats and beyond a martial, working civilization, where the only thing people had to fear was disrupting that efficiency.

"We could over run them with maybe thirty men, less if we strike at night."

"No," the Baron said. "Force of arms is our last resort, but we shall let them know it is a resort. Go report out to General Welch. I want her to prepare for me enough synthetic fuel for travel in one of the armored carriers. I want to arrive in style when I go to visit our vassals."

The Baron would never see Paladin's Flats.

* * *

Dana's desert education did not take a break while Ace was in cuffs and Rennard was disarmed. The corporal had taken a liking to the girl, and also wished to keep a close eye on the armed child. Each night when Rebecca inspected her men's equipment, she made a point to also inspect Dana's weaponry to ensure that she had been keeping proper care of it. At first the men were amused, but when she gave Dana ditch duty for letting dust into Rodney's sensors, the men realized that it wasn't just playing with the child.

The first night, after digging the ditch, Rebecca also informed Dana she was on first watch. Watch was one of the few duties that Rennard and Ace had never forced her to do. While the rest of the men slept, Rebecca sat up with her. In the evening, Rebecca let her hair down, both literally and figuratively.

"Dana, you're good with your equipment, but you're lacking focus."

"Thanks, ma'am."

"Right now, you call me corporal. Discipline is important, you've got some, good enough for a village kid. Not enough for a desert ranger," she said. "Not too many people take up the dedication to stay good with their guns. Those who do do it out of necessity or because they want something, that's what my dad told me."

"What did you want, corporal?"

Rebecca smiled, leaned back against her camel, and pointed to the stars. "I wanted to go. Across the bridge, into the desert. I just wanted to go. What about you?"

"I want to make my brother get better."

"That's a better goal. You're not going to do that with a bullet."

"That's what Mort says. It's why he has me reading all these books."

"You trust him?"

"Yes. He's a great doctor, and he's a good teacher."

"Once your brother is better, what are you going to do?"

"Make sure that he never gets sick again," Dana said, taking a seat next to the corporal and leaning back on the camel too, with her arms folded behind her head.

"Good cause."

"When are you going to go?"

"Probably never," the corporal said, sadly.

While Dana and Rebecca talked about potential futures, the Baron read reports about accelerating the growth of the Mahitican moss. In the morning, when the corporal drilled her men into formation and rode next to Dana, with Rennard at her side, pointing out the landmarks, the Baron was dashing off a note for his lieutenant to take to General Welch, for her eyes only.

"The key, Dana, to travel is to pace yourself. As your group grows larger, you need to keep an eye on everyone for signs of dehydration," the corporal said.

Once, your group gets large enough to be an army, though, you have logisticians for that. Which is what the rat-faced lieutenant was for the Baron. His orders were to take two squads, three of Welch's best scientists, and begin transplanting the moss to multiple areas along the gorge. In a few month's time, they would have moss farms set up to begin feeding the Baron's war machine.

At night, while the lieutenant was rehearsing how he would pitch this to Welch, the corporal was confiscating gambling dice from her men.

"You'll get them back when we're back home, now get back to your duties."

After her drills and readings, Ambrose taught Dana how to play desert dice games. "As part of your education," Ace said. The corporal had eased on him now that she felt safer and allowed him to go uncuffed with an armed escort during breaks. "I'm also going to teach you how to cheat."

"To spot cheating," Dana said.

"They're one in the same," he said.

Dana learned fast, though Ace didn't teach her all of his tricks.

* * *

"Take five, then I'm going to take you to collect your reward," the corporal told Rennard and Dana at the wall's checkpoint. Inside these walls was the closest thing to a bustling metropolis left on either side of the desert. She stepped outside to debrief her men and handle paperwork. Inside, Ambrose slumped into one of the hard clay chairs.

The one soldier watched them from behind safety glass, and only gave them the most cursory of pleasantries. It was a pleasure to be completely out of the sun for the first time in weeks. Ambrose and Rennard were tanned and swarthy, while Dana was starting to add some color to her face.

"I trust, Doc, that you've got a plan to get me out of this mess."

"I was thinking you would escape when you were good and ready," Rennard said quietly. He and Dana took seats opposite of him. "I can't really give you a helping hand without endangering the whole operation."

"Did you really kill that man like they said you did?"

"Don't you worry about that little miss." That was enough to convince Dana the answer was yes. "Think there's roof access?"

"You'd have to get behind the safety glass, but there were reservoirs up there, so there has to be."

"Why don't we just break his cuffs?" Dana asked. Rennard arched an eyebrow at her.

"Because his cuffs have been open since the corporal left. It would be a waste of perfectly good cuffs."

Dana looked down and saw that they were indeed looser, just barely hanging around Ambrose's wrists. Ambrose looked at the soldier, but he had not moved much. He idled there, seeming to be waiting for relief or an excuse to do anything more interesting.

"Waiting for me to escape, eh? Could've clued me in that was the plan," Ambrose said under his breath. "You still carrying a second pistol on you Rennard?"

"Why, yes, I am. It is in my left-hand pocket, in fact."

"Good, good. Hey, little miss, why don't you go take a walk outside for a minute?"

"I can help."

"The best way you can help, is to go outside and make sure that corporal and the other men don't come this way."

Dana got up from her chair, pulled her hat down low over her eyes and walked outside, her boots clacking on the clay ground as she walked out, leaving the door swinging behind her as she left.

"Try not to hurt the soldier too badly Ambrose, just enough to give me a reason not to chase you," Rennard said. "Make it look convincing though."

"Sounds simple," Ambrose nodded. He felt his muscles tighten. There was one path to the stairs going up. The door between him and it was probably locked, but the glass and the guard were a second route. When he had been younger, he had been one of the fastest knives and guns in the army. He had gotten rusty after spending so much time with Rose with no one actively trying to kill him.

"How'll we know to meet up?"

"Steal Rodney. I'll think of something."

Ambrose turned to smile at Rennard and the cuffs slipped from his wrists. He decked the doctor as hard as he could before jumping him to take the gun. He'd wanted to punch him since the bridge.

* * *

"Get me eyes in the sky, now!" She shouted on her way down, drawing her revolver without rotating to a loaded chamber. At the bottom of the stairs she pressed to the wall and peered around the door frame. The walk way was clear; Dana was visibly shaken and hiding behind the camels. A soldier with a rifle covered the way into town, taut and nervous, ready to bolt, holding fast only because the cry of alarm meant help was coming.

The door to the other guard post remained tightly shut.

"Corporal; it's a no go. One of our satellites is down."

"It's the one on the primary watch wall, isn't it?" Rebecca said.

"Yes, sir," The secondary guard team had made its way downstairs. One man had gone to try and operate the eyes, while the other two had retrieved their weapons and joined the corporal.

"Fine, I want a clean sweep of the room. Do not fire unless you confirm the suspect is armed. There may be hostages. On my count."

On three, the two guards split through the door, spreading to either side. Each slid into position; Rebecca followed with her gun raised, crouching low. She turned at an angle, keeping the door in her sights. Once she cleared its arc of fire, she counted off on her fingers. The first guard threw the door open and covered the room as his companion and the corporal secured each corner.

In the center of the room, the guard, dazed and surrounded by broken glass, applied as much pressure as he could muster on Rennard's left arm. Ace's bullet had passed clean through, missing bone. The soldier himself had a bruising face, and his clothes and skin were cut where he had been thrown through the broken glass. Rennard's eye was starting to swell as well.

"He's been shot! I think he's bleeding out."

Rebecca and her men spun around when they heard Dana scream and a pair of gunshots fire off. A robotic horse whirled to life, more gunfire was exchanged; one of the men was about to rush the door when Rebecca pulled him back.

"Do not run between a gunfight private!" Rebecca crept to the still open door, and carefully

peered down towards the entrance to the city. The soldier there had taken cover behind the wall, but he was unhurt. Rebecca let out a breath and forced the door off its hinges with one hard shove, covering the desert with her free hand, but Ace was already out of range.

She knew she'd never catch him; his bullets had hit their marks perfectly. The lead camel's hump was wounded, and the rest were in a panic and would not ride. The other mechanical horses besides Rodney, had been hobbled as well by his shots. It would be at least half an hour to rally materiel to give chase, and longer to calm the herd. She swore, and returned the empty chamber to its proper position.

"On the bright side," Rennard thought, as his vision wobbled. "This was very convincing."

* * *

It was years ago. Rennard's mustache had not yet grown in, and he still shot from the hip like a young gun. For the first time in his life, his choices echoed back on him. His eyes burned with tears, his hands sopping in Dave's blood as he applied pressure to the shattered leg.

A woman hastily removed her brown kerchief, she wore it to protect her face from the sun and the sand. Her skin was smooth, and at any other time, Rennard would have been mesmerized by her deep eyes. But now, he ripped the kerchief from her hand and tried to staunch the wound.

The world bobbed in and out, he felt for a minute like he was the one ready to pass out.

"Mort, listen to me Mort, you have to tie it tight!"

"Dave! God, Dave! I'm sorry, I thought we had gotten them all."

His face stung; it took him a moment to realize one of the sisters had slapped him. His memory was fuzzy, and his vision seemed to blur even more. Memories slipped in and out of his mind; he remembered being at the same bridge across the gorge more than a decade ago, before Dave and Serena married and before Julia had been killed.

Dave had settled down at the Flats with Serena, who always had been more ladylike than her younger sister. Julia had yearned for adventure; in part because fear and love hurled her forward. Love for her sister, burning passion for Rennard. Fear of the small groups of bandits that had come from across the gorge.

Laying naked with Rennard, staring across the bridge with the stars above, he remembered her plan. Carefully, she had tied a rope. Together, they had swung beneath the bridge. She had lined it with explosives, hoping to forever separate the relative calm of the flats from the bandits and warlords her and Serena had escaped from.

Now, he felt her breathing against his neck, relaxed and sleeping. He turned the trigger device over in his hand. But, he couldn't bring himself to trigger it. He never could. It was in part a childish notion that the bridge itself was a miracle, and in part because he knew that Julia yearned to cross the bridge into her home again. Sometimes, she would. When she came back, she'd come to him, either in the Flats or contacting him via one of his growing pile of Big Dogs or eyes.

For days, sometimes weeks, he went without her, learning. Mapping, searching for the hidden depths of knowledge that would become his home.

She never did decide to stop wandering. When he held her dying body, his sword gored with her murderer's blood, she begged him to do it. He had tried, but the trigger would not ignite. Maybe the explosives had fallen off, or sand had gotten into them. He never knew. But, he remembered holding her as she died.

It felt a lot like he felt right now; drained, alone and unable to see straight. He had stayed in the desert for days until Dave and Serena found him and took him home with them. He packed his weapons and left into the desert to find the Lyceum or die trying. Julia had loved technology and the robots (she had called her horse Henrietta), it had been what drew them together.

This age old, mechanical mysticism sparked love between the two of them. When he found the Lyceum, powered on the system and was prompted to name the computer and file system, he entered "Julia" without a moment's hesitation. Whenever he went into the desert, the systems protected his home and awaited his return.

In a way, he felt she was always watching over him.

As he fought to regain consciousness, he felt a warm hand on his cheek, and heard her voice. "Mort, please be OK. I miss you, but you have to, wake up."

For a moment, he did not want to wake up. He knew once he did, she would be gone again. But then, it didn't matter, because his mind was an ocean of darkness again. In the small hospital, Dana gripped his wrist and felt his face for a fever, while the corporal and two other soldiers looked on stoically.

"Mort, honey, that little girl needs you. My nephew needs you. I did not love a gold bricking loafer."

Dana was the only one who heard him whisper Julia's name, and she was startled with how quickly he sat up. His arm was in a sling, he felt it pressed tightly against his bare chest. He squinted, turned to Dana, and smiled through the pain.

“Hey there. Everything is going to be alright.”

“Maybe not doctor,” the corporal said. “You’re to come with me. The Baron wants to see you.”

* * *

“You shouldn’t trust them, Baron,” the rat-faced lieutenant said into his radio. His men had hunkered down to get out of the afternoon sun. He took these quiet opportunities to communicate back with the Baron. He never wanted to be forgotten

“I don’t intend to. But this Dr. Rennard, have you heard of him?”

“Some technologist or witch doctor from the deep desert the rubes in the settlement traded with.”

“His reputation a good one?”

“They said he is the best doctor in more than a year’s travel in any direction, if not anywhere.”

“Dismissed, lieutenant.”

With that, the Baron was again alone in his chambers. Since the more recent attempts on his life, he had bricked over his windows and sat in the darkness. Palzo had been drifting away from him over the last few days, talking about retirement. Welch, too, was drifting away from him. She had served him well, but now she felt as though she had wasted her life; she had confided in her most recent letter that she wished she had had a child when she was able.

The Baron felt he was the only one still grasping at the few straws to hold onto something for his people. They had originally been sources of tribute, but now, he felt a sort of kinship with them. They were in this together, and he wanted Peter to have a peaceful transition. He had lowered their tributes, and he had asked Palzo to be his spokesperson. Yet, still, rogue elements planned rebellion, and those within his army were barely being controlled by his general’s force of will and arms.

He stood to his feet, clasping his hands behind his back as he awaited the arrival of his guests.

* * *

“Alright men,” the lieutenant said as he emerged from his tent. He wrapped a dark red sash around his face, leaving only a slit for his eyes. “I just got off the bird with the Baron.”

His small, rag-tag bunch of men fell into line. These were hand picked; adventurous, greedy and amoral – in wilder times, they would have been bandits. Under the Baron’s eye, they had turned

into a loyal band of soldiers. The kind of soldiers that an ambitious lieutenant looking to become a general might have a use for.

Ambition, the lieutenant thought, as he sized up his men, was what divided men from boys. "Palzo's cavalry has been recalled to reinforce the capitol and to begin to look for the fugitive Sareola."

"Boss, you want us to find him first?"

"Sareola's a small fish. He's just one guy; catching him doesn't mean anything," the lieutenant said, as he shouldered his rifle. "The Baron, you see, he does not believe the reports that there has been an increase in rebel activity. He does not believe that his outlying towns need a new division – a new, well-paid division."

His men chuckled, as they donned their multi-colored scarves and face coverings.

"My friends, we pushed hard and are about two days ahead of schedule to put in at the small settlement of Yumi's Vineyard. However, I have received a terrible report."

"What is the report, lieutenant?" One of the men asked, mounting his equine.

"It appears the settlement of twenty people has been sacked. There were no survivors," the lieutenant said mournfully. "We will have to see to it."

He fired his rifle into the air, let loose a war cry, and turned his men towards the doomed, desolate Vineyard.

* * *

Baron Hawkson still stood to his full six feet in height. His bald head stood out in the dark room. His eyes pierced Rennard as they met eyes. The doctor reached up with his good arm and tipped his hat; Dana gave an awkward curtsy. The corporal saluted.

"Your guests, sir."

"Dismissed. Find me Ace, dead or alive." He motioned to the chairs and waited for his guests to sit before taking his. He steepled his fingers in front of his face, pressing his thumbs to his jaw and his index fingers on his nose. "I hope you have found my country to your liking."

"It has been enlightening," Rennard said.

"And you, miss?"

"I haven't really looked around a lot."

"You should. You'll see how far we have come. I was briefed about the settlements across the gorge. You can see that we have industry, agriculture and military might here," Here he paused and closed his eyes. "But, you haven't come to listen to an old braggart. I clearly cannot pay out on Sareola's bounty, but I will ensure you get your stolen equine if he has it when captured."

"I came for another reason," Dana said. "We're looking for a vulture cactus."

The Baron turned his gaze to Rennard. "What is this?"

"It is a rare plant; it requires a dark room—"

"We do have one of those here; Alissa Welch, her name probably means nothing to you, designed it. We've been using it to produce rare medicines. I do have several vulture cacti."

"I will buy it from you, as well as one of the bags I saw the lieutenant with to preserve it."

"What do you need it for?"

"My brother is dying."

There was silence. The Baron nodded. "I will consider; here is what I want from you doctor. My son, too, is dying. Heal him, and I will give you all that you have asked for."

"I cannot promise to heal anyone, until I see him."

"I am not a generous man. I do not give charity."

Rennard nodded and slid his chair back. He stood and tipped his hat again. "Then, let me get my bag, and I will see him at once."

* * *

Morton liked to work alone, whenever possible. Much to both Dana and the other child in Ben's room distress, the doctor dumped them out unceremoniously. Dana had been reluctant to leave, but Morton did more than insist, he pushed her right out. Now, both her and the boy stood in the hallway, nervously looking at the door, and then each other.

The boy clasped his hands behind his back, in mimicry of his father, and looked down his nose at Dana. "Introduce yourself."

Dana looked at him, removed her desert fedora that Rennard had given her, and bobbed a

curtsy, which felt odd in her riding clothes. "Dana Littleton, pleased to meet you."

"I have a gun too. I have to use a practice rifle until I'm older," the boy said. "I think I'm big enough."

"What's your name?"

"Peter Hawkson." He turned and began to walk down the hallway, Dana jogged at a steady step to catch him.

"I'm sorry about your brother."

"He will be fine."

"My brother is sick too," Dana said, turning and walking backwards to face him as they talked.

"Pity." He stopped, cocked his head and gave her a half smile. "Not many children are allowed up here. I don't even have classes with other children in the schools."

He slid past her, reached out and gave her a pinch on the cheek. "Because I prefer not to deal with other kids and their kid problems. So, now sweetie, you go wait for the doctor. I have things to attend to."

Dana slapped his hand off her. "Don't touch me!"

"Don't hit me," He responded calmly, with a resounding slap across Dana's face. She looked at him stunned. "Apologize."

"You hit me!"

He sighed, and brought his hand back. Dana's arm was up, catching his wrist. Unphased, Peter's free hand shot forward, catching Dana in the gut. She collapsed to one knee. He kneeled, using his index finger to lift her chin up so he could look her in the eyes.

"Never touch me again while you are here," He said, grabbing her face roughly. "Now, apologize."

"Ren-" Her yell was cut off when Peter's hand slid to her throat, slamming her against the wall.

"Listen, Dana, you want to stay here, you follow my rules."

Both of their heads turned when the door to Ben's room swung open, with Rennard coming out, his arm out of his sling.

"Get back in there doctor, if you know what's good for the both of you."

"I have no intention of intervening. Dana has a handle on this situation quite fine. However, if you want him to understand, you'll need to press harder."

Peter felt the barrel of Dana's gun press lightly against his stomach.

"Don't touch me."

"You wouldn't dare," Her arm shook, and he pulled away. "I will tell my father."

"Let him know a girl two years younger than you got the drop on you, while you were roughing her up," Rennard said. "Now, let's lay out some ground rules. You will not so much as look at Dana without her or my say-so. You will go and wait until I send someone for you and your father."

Peter turned his back to Rennard. "I don't need to listen to you."

Dana stood, leaned against the wall and put her revolver back in its holster. She was shaken, and Rennard came to see if she was hurt. Peter walked away, slowly in control. When he disappeared from view, Dana threw her arms around Rennard's neck and cried.

* * *

"Patrol Squad A to Welch Labs," a voice crackled over the speakers. Welch, who kept the pulse of her men clicked the radio.

"Read you clear," She said. Her voice was tired and old. Of the Baron's generals, she had aged the worst of them. Her hair was already thinning and gray, her eyes were starting to dim. Each year, her lenses got thicker.

"We're pinned down at the Vineyard, requesting immediate back up."

"Pinned down by who?"

"Raiders, heavily armed. About a dozen men."

"Protect the civilians at all costs, bunker down, it will be a few days before I can get men to your location."

"Negative on that General. We've lost three of our patrol, my second-in-command is wounded bad; I've only got two more besides myself able to stand, we are falling back to a rendezvous."

"If you abandon that town, I'll see you in the stockades."

"If we don't, we're all dead."

"That's what you signed up for. Hold that town. Welch out."

It took Welch forty-five minutes to rally a rescue squad of two dozen men. She took the lead, but they knew that they would never reach the Vineyard in time.

* * *

"Very well done," The rat-faced raider said to the patrol captain. A small jar of liquor and a precious jewel passed into the captain's greedy hands. "Show me again on this map where the rendezvous point is that you mentioned. There's a cache there, isn't there?"

"Yeah, lieutenant. Weapons and some dry goods. Buried in a lock box to keep the desert varmints out," The captain marked the spot on the map with an X. "West side of the cactus, ten paces."

More gunfire sounded in the background. The captain took a seat and uncorked his bottle. He took a deep swig. "So, I did what you asked, am I in your gang?"

"The men you brought on this patrol, are they all solid?"

"Yeah. They practically jumped at the chance for a little extra cash and to get out from under Welch's thumb."

"Very smart of them," The lieutenant looked into the street, listened to the gunfire. He spun on his heel, drawing his pistol in a smooth motion, fanning the hammer and pulling the trigger three times. The bullets ripped through the patrol captain's chest and face, the third bullet destroyed the small radio on the table inside the mud hut. The previous occupants lay outside, shot execution style by the captain.

The lieutenant calmly returned his pistol to his holster, ripped the wiring from the radio and pushed the captain's body to the ground. He kneeled down and retrieved his gem.

"I don't like allying with smart, treacherous men." He crushed the bottle with his heel and left the scene. He blew a whistle with three quick signals. If his men moved quickly, they would be able to finally create an avenue for his promotion. Which was fine by him; he never liked General Welch. If Palzo had been as careless and predictable as she was, he would have gone for him instead. He did not dislike Welch, she was merely in his way. Palzo, though, had been a negative influence on the Baron for years.

But, two more steps and he would be a general. Three of his men met him, one had a lusty smile on his face.

"Hey, Ratty, we got time for another go at the broads?"

"No. Kill them and get ready to march. No survivors. Burn it all." The three men turned around, and the lieutenant calmly removed his pistol and shot the loud mouth in the back of the head. The other two men spun around, about to draw. "Let that be a warning. No one calls me that to my face again."

The two men nodded and started back towards the bordello. The lieutenant shouted after them: "And remember, we're professionals."

* * *

"Ben, can you hear me?"

The boy stirred and looked around; he coughed once. "Where's Peter?"

"I asked him to step outside for a moment."

"I don't want any more doctors."

"I'm hoping to make that wish come true," Rennard took off his jacket, and hung it and his sword at the foot of the bed. He knew that the boy was gazing at both the sword and revolver, but he paid it no mind. He knelt by the bed to take Ben's pulse. "How long have you been sick?"

"Forever."

"That's what I was told. Do you feel good enough to be up and about?"

"Not without Peter."

"Well, let's go find him."

Ben sat up, and that's when he saw Dana. He looked at Rennard and then her. He waved from the bed. "Is she your daughter?"

"No. Dana, say hello, and then go check on our rooms."

"Pleased to meet you. I hope you feel better soon," Dana bobbed her head and looked at the door hesitantly.

"You'll be fine, go on now, I've got to talk with Ben."

Once Dana left, Rennard helped Ben into his boots and jacket. He had a crisp clean white handkerchief, which Rennard showed him how to fold to put in his breast pocket. Rennard armed himself, took a look at both of them in the mirror, nodded approvingly, and opened the door.

They walked the hallway, slowly at first. Rennard went through the boy's habits and life. He had been a shut in since he was young; he ate sparingly and was sick afterward frequently. Rennard allowed Ben to lean on him as they climbed down the stairs. At the bottom, he smiled at Ben.

"You seem to be doing quite a bit better than I was led to believe."

"Some days are better than others."

"Have they ruled out allergens?"

"I think so." Ben explained the varieties of tests. The itchy blotches, the chaffing skin. But he remembered the runny eyes and nose the most as they exposed him to various natural plants and fibers. They had changed up his diet and tried to get him exercise before he fell too sick.

"I learned to ride a camel with Peter," Ben said. "Radigan said I was better, but don't tell Peter."

"Well, would you like to see if you've gotten rusty?"

"Can I? All the other doctors said I shouldn't be out in the sun too long."

Rennard smiled. "I agree with the other doctors. And, I believe I have an idea. You'll have to promise not to tell anyone though."

Paying the guards to keep quiet was more difficult, which amused Rennard. One would think that convincing a child to lie to their parents would be hard, but children love conspiracies. Especially conspiracies that let them engage in a favorite past time in a forbidden way. Their love of secrets and men's love of fine things combined to allow Rennard to requisition a camel and a brief window to take the camel and the boy into the citadel's dark room.

Ben was a natural, and even managed to get the camel to kneel and rise on command. He leaned near its ears and whispered childish things in its ears about watching out for desert monsters, promising to protect it from the dark. Rennard watched as the boy held the reins and guided with his knees.

"I think you've still got it lad."

"I am a natural," Ben said. "I wish Peter were here to see me."

"Just one lap, then we should get you back inside."

"Two laps, please?"

Rennard was more than happy to oblige. It gave him a second pass through the room to memorize the position of each plant. He had begun to formulate a diagnosis, but once he gave it, he knew that the baron would not keep his end of the bargain. Rennard would not lie; he had known after hearing about the previous doctor's failures that there was nothing to be done. His library was not more expansive and his knowledge was not more complete than theirs. If anything, by being so far away, he even lacked some of their specialized knowledge of local diseases and ailments.

But, it had been the yellowing around the boy's nails and eyes that convinced him. Ben would die. Maybe in a few weeks, maybe in a few months. The thinning hair and raspy cough were early signs that the cancer had finally settled in for the kill. When he had helped Ben with his boots, he noted the boy's toenails were brittle like his fingernails. New teeth had been slow in replacing lost baby teeth. His growth had been stunted.

In part, Rennard felt dirty for using him to get a look inside the dark room. But, another part of Rennard was happy to have given the boy a little pleasure riding a camel before the pain set in and kept him bedridden until his body failed. Rennard's eyes teared a little, but before they left he had centered himself.

When he opened the door, he found Corporal Rebecca Palzo leaning against the black glass, her arms folded, with an unamused look on her face.

"Young Master Peter went to try and find his brother. When he didn't see him, he almost raised an alarm. Imagine my surprise when I radioed this position and found it empty."

"It seemed like a good place to keep him out of the sun while he got some exercise."

"Very likely," she said. She snapped to two men with her. "Escort the young man and his camel back inside. I want to have some words with the doctor."

Ben said hello to Becky and then goodbye to the doctor. Once he was safely out of earshot, Rennard removed his hat and waited.

"I don't plan to tell Peter where I found him. He's been on a tear for the last few hours. You wouldn't know anything about that?"

“He and Dana got into a bit of a scuffle.”

“Keep Peter away from her,” the corporal said lightly. “He may be the future of our little settlement, but he’s had too much training with Radigan and not enough with my father.”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that name. Who is Radigan?”

“A snot-nosed lieutenant,” Becky said. She crossed her arms and looked Rennard over. “We haven’t found Ace yet either. Try to act less suspicious, doctor. I like that little girl that’s with you, and if you do anything stupid, I can’t protect her.”

“You won’t have to, corporal,” Rennard said, putting his hat back on.

“Peter is dangerous, doctor. So is the Baron. Especially when it comes to Ben.”

“How will they handle the news that he is going to die?”

Becky shook her head as she escorted him back inside the citadel. “Telling them that? That would be stupid.”

* * *

“The Vineyard has probably fallen, but we need to cut off the raiders,” She said. Her aide offered his canteen; she took it.

“If it was a raid, they’ll be long gone. The men are tired, we’ve pushed as hard as we can. They may be in no shape to fight when we get there.”

“The civilians are in no shape to fight either.”

“With all due respect general, the civilians are probably dead.”

Welch shoved the aide’s canteen back into his hand. She dismissed him with a look. She returned to the map, plotting with a piece of charcoal her force’s deployment. “Riton, take another and two of the equines and move forward, relieve the other two scouts.”

“Yes sir!”

“Move fast, check your radio batteries before moving out.”

Riton, a small, chubby man in his forties tagged a young private to be his second. He swapped radios with the previous scouts, gave a check, and then tied his scarf around his mouth. He mounted his equine, and looked at the cache.

“Hey, Skan,” He called to the other scout. “Do a better job when you bury the cache or the general’ll have your hide.”

“Whoever buried it last time made that mess, not us. It was like that when we got here.”

Riton shrugged; it was no skin off his nose if people did not properly secure the cache. He couldn't be blamed for hit. He gave his companion the order and set out at the fastest speed setting, leaving cactus and cache behind them.

Welch didn't notice it at first; she was busy trying to determine the most likely retreat path for the bandits when she heard the first sign that something had gone wrong. Her aide, who had been standing silently behind her, began to gurgle. She tried to ignore him; soldiers had all sorts of weird noises while marching.

Then he fell to his knees retching. She turned to try and catch him, and saw the sticky red water stream from his nose and mouth. She was not a doctor, but she saw him heave another puddle, before he had to hold himself up with his hands. He gasped for breath, his beard gooey with blood and vomit. Welch called for a doctor, and braced his body. She felt him spasm and begin to choke.

She called again for help, and when she turned to look, she saw two more of her men collapsed. One had a young female sergeant trying to hold him steady. Welch's aide belched, let out another stream of blood and water and went limp after a cold shudder.

Welch dropped him and tried to make it to the sergeant, who was pounding on the soldier's back to clear his air. Welch was two steps forward when she felt her balance give. Her vision went blurry and she collapsed over. In the distance, she heard gunshots, the sergeant, one of the people who Welch had kept too busy to use the cache yet, fumbled for her gun as she made her way over to Welch.

Welch was dead before she was able to identify the soldiers coming to her aid.

* * *

There was enough there that his instincts told him to hold up a moment, before riding forward. But, Riton was dull. All of the obvious danger signs were pushed down with one simple presumed fact: “Lieutenant Miguel Radigan is on our side.”

That fatal mistake brought him and the private into the middle of a firing squad. As he lay dying, he went through in his head everything that he had seen, and tried to call out. But it was too late, and Riton died believing that Radigan and his men had mistaken him for a bandit.

* * *

Dana made it a point to remain outside, surrounded by other people during her day. She wanted to explore and avoid any run ins with Peter. She tied her jacket closed, despite the heat and the sun. She wasn't sure about Hawkson, but back at the Flats, a little girl wandering around with a pistol was just not done.

She spent the day observing the efficient system in place that kept the city running. While she had seen the military precision that the Palzo family had tuned the city, she saw agriculture workers, dew collectors and even a slowly expanding irrigation canal. Progress was the city's motto.

When she finally met up with Rennard in the evening, he seemed disturbed and aloof.

"Clean up quick, the baron wants us for dinner."

"I don't want to see Peter."

"Adults have to do things they don't want to do all the time. Get used to it."

"Have you heard from Ambrose?"

Rennard shook his head. They had been placed in a small room in the main citadel, and he carefully hung his weapons on the bedpost. He looked to Dana, who was standing near the door.

"Leave the gun."

"No."

"Now's not the time to argue. Stay with me and you will be perfectly safe. Leave the gun here."

Dana reluctantly removed her revolver and slid it under the bed. Rennard sighed. Close enough to what he intended, no reason to argue, he decided while he removed his coat. He patted it once and hung it over his weapons. He held the door for Dana and shut it behind them as they entered the hallway. He stopped, reopened the door and tossed his hat into the room. Dana did the same, her hat landing short of the bed. When he closed the door again, he knocked on it once.

"I thought you always wore your hat."

"We're staying inside, thought it might be rude."

"We wouldn't want to be rude," Dana said. "He only hit me."

"Learn to put things like that behind you," Rennard said. "Ambrose shot me, but if we're going to pull this off, we need to trust him."

Dana followed silently. She knew something was happening, and she knew that it was probably dangerous. But, she also knew Rennard had no intention of spilling the beans. Which was fine. Dana tried to focus on that bright side. Becky had told her that the Baron often entertained guests with a sweet drink, a kind of chocolate coffee.

Peter and General Palzo met them at the base of the stairs.

"I am sorry to interrupt you before dinner, but I do have news about Ace," the general said. "And young Peter here has something to say as well."

Peter looked at his feet, mumbled an apology, and then stalked off towards the dining hall. Lloyd sighed.

"He doesn't mean it," Dana said.

"It's the best he can do. He really is a nice boy, just this thing with his brother is putting a lot of pressure on him."

"Nice boys don't slap girls," Dana said. She folded her arms and looked away.

"There was a raid on a town a few days away," Lloyd said, turning to Rennard. "My second, Radigan, has not reported in yet, but he was heading in that direction. Likewise, we've lost contact with our commanding officer out that way."

"You think Ace had something to do with this," Rennard asked, shifting his tone to try and sound neutral.

"The Baron does."

Dana picked up on the hesitation, and said: "But you don't. Why?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

"Because he could never have gotten there in time. Not while also rallying up a band to actually do a raid," Rennard said. "Ace may have killed the man he is accused of killing, but you and I know he could not have done that raid."

"Listen, I am setting out to cut off any escape across the bridge," Lloyd said. He looked about to

make sure no one was watching. "I understand that things aren't always what they appear. But, no matter about the raid. He killed Captain Levi. Levi had his faults, but he was my comrade. I can't let him go unavenged. Do you understand?"

Rennard nodded, but Dana shook her head. Lloyd reached out and clasped Rennard's hand. He bent at the knees and offered his hand to Dana, who shook it. She recoiled at the callouses and scratchiness of his hand. He smiled.

"Brawler's hands. They get like that after you've been in as many scraps as I have," he said. "Now, have a good night, and I hope to see the two of you across the landbridge with God's speed to save your little brother."

When Lloyd left, Dana wanted to ask Rennard what was going on, but he motioned her to be silent. Dana had the feeling that Lloyd had told them more than he was supposed to, for reasons she didn't understand. But Rennard understood it all too well.

It was a promise: "Leave alone, and you're free to go." But, it was also a threat, as Rennard saw it. "Leave with Ambrose, and I will have to stop you." Which complicated everything.

* * *

"More settlements join our little federation every month," He said. "These chickens we're dining on? They come from three months away, a small farm community called Lansing."

"They don't know where that is, father."

"How far into the deep desert does your federation extend?"

"By equine? Maybe half a year. Those outermost settlements aren't fortified well. Suffer from raiders."

"And savages."

"Don't interrupt adults Peter."

"Yes, sir."

"What about your settlements? How far west does it extend," the Baron asked.

Rennard looked at his napkin and turned it over. He pulled his charcoal out from a pocket and drew. "Here, is where we are. You know about the landbridge, about a week or so west. From there, you have the Flats, which I'm sure the general told you about."

He drew a few more haphazard settlements. "We have a few in each direction, but directly west, after about two weeks, nothing that we know of."

"That's impossible," Peter said. "We know there's water there. And gardens rich and green and beautiful. Mother told me so."

The Baron was less phased. "Finish your meal in your room if you cannot mind your manners. The same north and south?"

Rennard nodded. They ate in silence until dessert, fresh cut peaches and Dana's chocolate coffee, was served.

"Children, I want to speak to the doctor alone. Go converse outside with your sweets."

Dana looked to Rennard, who nodded to her to go. The two children made their way out the door, with Peter in the lead, making a point to let the door swing back into Dana's face. The Baron paid this no notice.

"Do you have stories of Eden spreading our way as well doctor?"

Rennard nodded.

"Then, you and I, we have come to the same conclusion?"

"I think so."

"It is best not to tell the children, or the peasants. Let them have their hopes," the Baron asked. "Now, feel free to crush my hopes, if needed."

Rennard looked down into his lap and leaned his chair back. "I believe it is a cancer. Maybe something else. All I know is that it is beyond treatment. It was always beyond treatment."

The Baron stood up, and rang a bell for some of his men to come to the room to begin clearing their dinner. "It has only been one day. Diagnosis takes time. Make yourself at home doctor."

Rennard stood and walked out with the Baron. "Your son is not the only sick child in the world, we need to return to Dana's brother with his cure."

"He is the only sick child in the world I care about," the Baron said. "Make yourself at home; you can elect to live here comfortably as my guest, or indentured as my servant. This matter is closed. One more thing, if your girl disrespects my son again, for any cause, she will learn respect. Good night, doctor."

Rennard said nothing and let the Baron retire. His thoughts turned to Dana and to the things he had learned tonight. While Riton was being gunned down by his old comrades, Rennard turned the knob to his room, annoyed to find it unlocked as he had expected. Inside, his weapons had been removed from the bedpost. With his second pistol with Ace, he closed the door behind him. After checking under the bed, he saw Dana's revolver still there.

He left it and sat on the edge of the bed in the darkness, waiting for Dana's return.

* * *

Peter had no love for the girl, but if his father said she came with him, she came with him. He decided he did not need or want the stumbling, awkward apology she gave as she held her chocolate. He made his way Ben's room, letting her wander away. He knocked on his brother's door meekly, the anger gone from him. He waited about half a minute, then knocked again. He heard some shuffling under the covers, then Ben weakly called out, "Come in."

Peter opened the door, shutting it behind him. Ben's voice cheered up on sight.

"Petey! It is you; I thought you might not come tonight."

"I can't forget you little brother," Peter said sitting on the bed next to Ben. "Are you feeling well enough for something sweet? I saved you my dessert."

"Dad doesn't let me have any without the doctor's permission."

"That's why we won't tell the Baron," Peter said. "Here, let's share."

He handed the peach to Ben, who reached on to his nightstand to pull out a small fighting knife that Peter had smuggled him. While the Baron felt his staff were trustworthy, Peter saw assassins in every shadow. Some nights, he stood guard while Ben slept. The knife was a final layer of protection.

Ben sliced the peach in half, clumsily, but well enough. He held out both halves for Peter. "I cut it, you pick it. Those are the rules."

Peter laughed and took the smaller half. "I don't have much of an appetite tonight little brother."

"Have you had a chance to talk with that girl?" Ben asked after taking a bite of his peach.

"I don't want to talk about her."

"She's pretty. I think she likes you."

Peter laughed again. "Little brother, you don't know anything about girls."

"Alissa-

"General Welch," Peter corrected.

"General Welch said I was good at reading people."

"Girls aren't people." Peter and Ben both laughed. Sometimes, though, Ben thought, when you say things like that Peter I don't think you're joking. Ben started to cough, and Peter clapped him on the back in a friendly way. "Breathe air, not your food."

"She seemed nice."

"She's a bitch."

"You shouldn't swear Petey, dad won't like it."

"The Baron can fuck off."

"I'm sorry; I didn't meant to put you in a bad mood."

Peter's eyes softened, and he gave his brother a one-armed hug around the shoulders. "It's not your fault Ben. Now, you try and get some sleep. Tomorrow, if I can, I'll smuggle you some chocolate."

"Don't risk getting in trouble because of me."

"It is no risk, little brother," Peter said. And, if it were, I would risk everything for you, the only truly kind person I know.

When Peter shut the door behind him, he made sure it was locked. You could never be too careful with strange people in the city.

* * *

Ambrose – or Ace as he used to be called – had gotten used to being on the move through the desert. This night was like any other. In some ways, being back on the run from the Baron was putting life into perspective. It had been mildly vindictive to shoot Rennard, but it wasn't too serious an injury.

"Plus, he did put a sword on me," Ambrose mused to Rodney. "It squares us up."

He felt Rodney looking at him disapprovingly. To counter this, he hung his poncho across its robotic eyes. He stared up at the stars, wishing to be away from here and back with Rose. Suddenly, riding shotgun on a mail coach, or whatever it was they were offering him, didn't seem like such a bad job. Honest work, and you had a stage coach to sleep on or under.

There was just one problem; getting back across the bridge was going to be next to impossible. He might be able, in the dead of night, to kill the men on his side. But there was no silent way passed the rest of them. Especially not now, he thought, since the Baron was doing everything he could to plug up the one sure-fire escape hatch. The deserters were a problem, but tipping off the people on the other side had probably been seen as a bigger one.

During the night, Ace slept in fits. Finally, he begrudgingly removed the poncho from Rodney's eyes and looked into their hazy glow.

"Alright, but look, we're not going back for him," he told the robot horse. "You and I, we just think Rennard's got a plan to get us all back to the other side. We don't want that little girl stuck here."

He mounted Rodney in one smooth motion and turned the equine around to take a new course back towards the citadel.

* * *

Radigan surveyed his handiwork with a mixture of pride and dignity. It was a job well done. They had arrived after the scavengers, but the beasts seemed smart enough to avoid the poisoned meat. A few of the soldiers had not been exposed, and Radigan's men dispatched them with relative ease. His men only suffered a single casualty.

"Sir, I've found Welch. She's dead, over this way."

Radigan followed the man, who pointed to the dead general. Radigan calmly flipped the body face down, drew his gun, and planted two bullets in the general's back.

"It's a shame, private. That some people would mutiny against their commanding officer like this. Shot in the back. Terrible, really."

The soldier laughed, until Radigan raised an eyebrow. "I don't think treason is particularly funny. Neither should you, if we're going to make a convincing scene."

"Oh, I thought you were joking."

"No. I'm deadly serious. You should be too. Find me her radio; I have to make a call."

* * *

"Yes, Baron," The voice on the radio crackled. "It looks like a mutiny. You can see on the image I'm transmitting; General Welch was shot twice in the back."

The Baron nodded in his quiet study. Peter and Lloyd's daughter joined him. Peter had taken an unhealthy liking to the woman, who was definitely too old, and too rough, for him. But the Baron did not have the energy to fight with him, and it was good to groom the girl to rise through the ranks quickly.

Especially with Welch dead. He would need capable commanders.

"Any survivors?"

"No, sir. I think there was an ambush; I can see at least one raider's body."

"I need you to come back here, Radigan."

There was a pause on the other side of the radio. "Baron, are you sure? I should go reinforce Welch's command."

"No. I'm sending Corporal Palzo to take command."

"What?" The voice was indignant. "You'll waste days—"

"Don't question my command again. My last general has been sent to the land bridge, I need a capable hand here. Bury Welch and her men and double time it back here."

"Yes sir."

The Baron clicked off the radio. He looked at Rebecca. "Gather twenty of your most reliable men. I'm giving you a field promotion to... let's say major."

The rank structure within the barony was, more or less, informal. Rebecca stood, saluted and exited. Peter watched her leave with wolfish eyes. The Baron snapped to get the boy's attention.

"Peter, I need you to keep a close eye on the doctor and his girl," the Baron said. "I am not a believer in coincidences."

Peter shook his head. "I don't want to deal with them. We should just throw them into a cell or hang them."

"The brutal option should never be your first option. You will need to learn that if you are to rule. Now go to bed."

* * *

"Burn the bodies," Radigan said to his men after he snapped the radio off. "If you take any valuables, make sure they can't be identified. Make sure you burn the general the brightest."

Radigan began mapping his route back to the citadel.

* * *

Rennard kept to himself more and more, but Dana had taken a shine to Ben. She had taken to sitting with the younger brother whenever possible. Peter, though was still cold and contemptuous to her, and avoided them both. The third afternoon of their captivity, Dana had convinced Ben to go for a walk. Rennard agreed that it might do him some good, if he didn't push himself too hard.

Along with Peter and Rennard, the two gently strolled through the citadel. Two sharp-eyed guards followed at a respectable distance. They had been quiet, constant companions since after their dinner with the Baron. Rennard had left the room to find them stationed outside. Both were tall, at least six feet, with one three or four inches taller than that. He was plumper in the face, though still muscular.

He had introduced himself as Wayne. "The other one, he don't need a name," Wayne had said, laughing through some crooked teeth.

"They call me Paulie."

"Morton Rennard, at your service. What's your business this morning?"

Wayne smiled. "Now doctor, we ain't got no business if we're all lucky. Just, you know, here to watch over you and that little angel."

"By order of the Baron," Paulie said.

"Who ain't no angel,"

"And neither are we."

"If you get our drift," Wayne finished, resting his hand on his knife hilt, his other on his hip. "But, we sure are lazy devils, aren't we Paulie?"

"Laziest ever, I'd say."

"So, don't give us no cause, and we'll stay out your way."

They seemed stupid, but Rennard knew an act when he saw one. They were cunning, of a dangerous, criminal variety. They also seemed to be on friendly terms with Peter, and they in turn must have been among his favorites. They patted him on the back and ruffled his hair like giant, malevolent uncles. Much to Rennard's displeasure, their constant watching meant that he did not dare remove Dana's revolver from under the bed.

Which proved wise, when they insisted on patting them both down before leaving. "For a precaution," Wayne had said.

"To make sure you haven't misplaced anything you might want to find later," Paulie had finished.

And now, they were walking through the citadel, free but chained. Because Rennard was pretty sure that these were the sort of men who took their orders to shoot to kill to heart. He watched as Ben walked, slowly, with a cane, sometimes leaning on Dana or Peter support. Peter glared at Dana full of jealous rage whenever she lent his brother a shoulder.

"Lean on me Ben," He finally snapped. "You're going to exhaust her."

"Sorry Peter, you're right. I don't mean to be rude Dana."

"Don't apologize to her. She's just here because the Baron hasn't decided what to do with them yet."

Dana looked to Ben, ignoring the older sibling. "It's alright. I've been training, learning to shoot and stuff. They even made me march sometimes."

Peter scoffed. "Oh, I suppose the doctor is a real slave driver."

"He is unfair." Dana confided in the two boys.

"Please, you want unfair? I still have the scar where Paulie got me showing me a knife defense."

"He would attack me with a sword!"

"And never hit you. He coddled you, because you're just a whiny little girl playing dress-up."

"You take that back!" Dana shouted, stepping around Ben and looking Peter in the face. "I don't have to take this from you."

“Peter, let's not be mean to Dana; she's just—”

“Just a peasant girl with a pretty smile.” Peter stepped toward Dana and balled his fists. “My teachers taught me to fight to win.”

He cocked his fist back, Dana sprang away from his first punch. The second she pushed aside, turning to prepare to block again. Peter was fast, spinning to counter her motion. His leg was swinging wildly, but it was also arcing under her defense. Then, he felt the world reorient itself.

The doctor had closed the distance quickly, faster than Wayne or Paulie could even react. Peter felt the world spin, his legs tangled with another, and then he felt the hard mud smack into his back. He took the fall as the Baron had taught him, rolling with it and springing to his feet.

This time, when he attacked Rennard, he had palmed his knife. He screamed in incoherent rage, but Rennard was stronger, bigger, wiser and better trained. Peter felt the world swing around again, pain sung through his arm. He felt his palm open against his will and heard the knife clink on the ground.

“That's enough,” the doctor said.

Ben gasped, and took a knee to try and check on Peter, who pushed him away. Ben fell on his rump speechless, tears brimming in his eyes.

“I'll kill you!”

This time, Peter was restrained by Paulie and Wayne. Paulie locked his arm and whispered something in the boy's ear. He went limp, whimpered, and allowed Paulie to drag him away. Wayne bent down, retrieved Peter's knife, and stuck it in his belt.

“Why didn't you search him for weapons?” Dana asked, getting her breath back. Wayne looked at her casually, then laughed.

“Because I don't care if he kills you,” Wayne said. “Now, the doc on the other hand? Baron wants him alive.”

Wayne returned to silently watch them, as Dana helped a crying Ben to his feet. She hugged him and whispered that it would be OK. But, Ben knew that it wouldn't be. He leaned on her the rest of the way home.

* * *

Dinner passed silently. The Baron asked Rennard and Dana to join Peter for dinner. The children glared daggers at each other, while the Baron and the doctor picked at their food.

Wayne and Paulie shoveled cold bread and soup into their mouths while standing watch at the door.

“Now, I want to let you know that tomorrow I will be unavailable. Lieutenant Radigan will be arriving, and I plan to debrief him personally.”

Peter perked up, paying attention for the first time.

“Do we have any news on Ben's condition?”

“He is still ill; there is still nothing I can do.”

The Baron sighed, “Then there is still nothing I can do for you. Your esteemed guards will see you to your room.”

Being dismissed had never been such a relief. Dana grabbed onto Rennard's hand as they walked in front of the two tall men. Under their escorts watchful eyes, they retired their room, and heard the two bar the door. They settled down outside, belching and flipping cards between each other. Inside Rennard carefully scanned the room, while Dana stepped behind the closet to change. Seeing nothing out of place, Rennard checked under the bed to ensure her pistol was still there.

He unloaded it, returned it to its holster and handed it to her when she came back out.

“We're drilling again,” Rennard whispered. “Keep it quiet, I need you to practice, I need to think.”

Dana complied, moving through the motions that Ambrose and Rennard had taught her. Rennard, meanwhile, sketched the layout of the citadel that he had seen so far. He compiled that with the bits and pieces he had picked up – judging by the time it took to serve them the second course he guessed how far the kitchen was from the dining hall, for example.

“Mort,” Dana asked between draws. “You haven't been coddling me, have you?”

“No.”

“Peter said that Paulie taught him to use a knife.”

“That's not all he's been taught.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm giving you the most important lessons, and they have nothing to do with knives or weapons. Those are just tools to keep you alive,” Rennard said.

Dana returned to her footwork in silence for a minute. She checked to see her pistol was unloaded, something that Mort and Ambrose had taught her to do religiously. "I don't care if you saw me unload it," Ambrose had said, giving her a gentle smack on the back of the head. "It's loaded until you see it is unloaded in your own two hands."

She snapped the chamber closed and laid it on the table, sitting across from Rennard. She cocked her head and watched him draw.

"Mort," She paused. "Is Ben really going to die?"

Rennard nodded.

"Can't you help him?"

"No."

Dana put her head down on her folded arms, looking at the door. A thought tried to sneak into her mind, but she pushed it away. "I want to go home. I want to get back to Beau."

Rennard rolled up his map and handed it over to Dana. "Keep this safe, I've got it memorized. When you see a chance, on that map I've drawn where the vulture cactus is."

"Is everything going to be OK, Mort?"

"No, Dana," he said. "Now go to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

She did sleep, for a little while. But, she had a dream, where she asked Mort: "Mort, is Beau really going to die?" She woke up before the dream doctor could answer her.

* * *

Dana shifted to look at the ceiling. She heard Rennard's boots drop onto the floor and the chair slide back. He had taken to sleeping against the wall, glaring at the door. In a few minutes, Dana could hear him start to snore. Outside, the laughing had died down, and she heard one of the men get up and walk away. She slid out of the bed quietly and moved slowly to the door.

Rennard didn't move, and she peered through the keyhole, seeing Paulie swigging down something from a mug. His knife was still on his hip, and he had a revolver as well. Wayne was nowhere to be seen.

Dana wasn't exactly sure what her plan was, as she dressed in her jacket and riding slacks. But, she knew that she wanted to help Rennard find a way out. So, she waited for Paulie to drift off to

sleep, then cracked the door open just slightly and slipped out. When she passed by him, she noticed the stench of a heavy alcohol. She clicked the door shut behind her and crept down the hall, rounding the corner after making sure no one else was about.

Her first instinct was to go find the plant Rennard had told her about, but then she thought about Ben. She remembered how Beau must feel without his big sister. Before Beau was as sick as he was, they would sneak out at night to play with Rodney and look at the desert. With a brother like Peter, she doubted Ben received any sort of attention. So, first, Dana decided, she would check in on Ben.

While she was sneaking toward his room, Lieutenant Radigan's forces were reporting in at the gate. Radigan reported that he was returning with a lighter than normal patrol. When the deputy counted heads, he did come up light, sixteen total.

"Your men are free to go in, once I process their orders."

"My boys are tired private. Long day, you know how it is. There's a nice bottle of spiced wine if you can process the paperwork without them so they can get home to their wives or whores," Radigan said, pulling a still chilled bottle from his saddlebag. The soldier nodded and winked.

"Right you are lieutenant. You've always done right by us, I don't need to waste time with the details. You, uh, can account for all your men, can't you?"

"I know there looks like there are only fifteen of us," Radigan said. "But, it is dark, so you know, you might have miscounted. Why not make it an even twenty, so that there's no discrepancies?"

"Right as always, sir. I'll have the paperwork ready for the morning report, right as rain." The private said, opening the gate. He counted again as they went in, and could swear there were sixteen. But, as he sat down with the wine and shared it with the other soldier on duty, they both agreed that, surely, there had been twenty coming in, just as there had been twenty going out.

* * *

Ambrose Sareola drifted away from the back of the patrol as it made its way into the citadel. He dropped into the first bar he came across and paid for a private room upstairs. He had been tracking the lieutenant for about a day, but when he saw the direction he was heading, he had hoped to find some way in. The lieutenant was not as disciplined as the general or corporal; had he been, Ace could not have infiltrated his ranks in the cover of dark so easily. A shave, haircut and a change of clothes would not have fooled the others. For Radigan, the men were just background noise to his next stepping stone, and so, he didn't care how many there were.

None of the men seemed to like talking with each other too much that close to the citadel either, which had been fine by Ace. But, now that he was here, he did not know what to do. Getting into

the city was one thing, getting into the actual Citadel would be another.

He went downstairs to have what he thought would be a cold-soup, but was pleasantly surprised that the barkeep kept a fire burning all night to warm it up by. Ambrose listened to the conversations around him, but there were no good rumors. He knew that the general and corporal were both gone, which meant that he was relatively safe.

Ambrose was about to go back to his room when a tall, yellow-toothed muscle-bound man swaggered into the bar.

"Looking for any of the men that came in with Lieutenant Radigan," Wayne shouted. He showed his gun with one hand, and a seal of the Baron with the other.

"This man's a soldier," The barkeep said, pointing to Ambrose. "I saw him come in with a patrol."

"Who was your officer?" Wayne asked, tucking his gun and seal away.

"Who wants to know?"

"Look, friend, we're on the same side here, OK?" Wayne said, leaning in, his hot breath in Ambrose's face. "Just want to make sure he got the job done, get me?"

Ambrose wasn't sure what was going on, but he sensed more than knew that this man and the lieutenant had some understanding. He also knew, that he didn't have a clue what the man wanted. Ambrose thought to bluff him, but then he thought about all of the good things he could use the Baron's seal for. So, instead he leaned in, whispering.

"This isn't the right place to talk about those sorts of jobs, friend."

Wayne laughed, blowing hot spittle into Ambrose's face. "Right you are, right you are. You got a room here, yeah? Let's talk business there. After you."

Ambrose settled up for his dinner and led the way to his room. He took each step gingerly, listening for the draw of a knife or the uneven step that came before a sucker punch. Neither came as he opened the door and Wayne breezed in. The simple room was furnished with a hard wooden chair, nightstand and a rickety bed. A simple chest lay at the foot of the bed.

Wayne whistled as he picked up the rifle that Ambrose had left here. "Normally, you know, you're supposed to return your guns. But, I guess, this is a little keepsake, eh?"

"That's mine. I don't like to use communal weapons," Ambrose said, gently taking it from Wayne's large hands. "You never know when some klutz has let sand build up in the firing mechanisms."

Wayne nodded. "I agree, I agree. Always more of a knife and bayonet man myself when I was a ground pounder."

"You look the type."

"Anyway, friend. Radigan's little job. It done?"

"Not the sort of thing I think we'd talk with the Baron's man, yeah?"

"Don't yank me around. I got duties I need to get back to. Did you do it?"

"It's done," Ambrose said, opening the door. "So are we."

"I like you, soldier," Wayne said. "Shut the door."

Ambrose tapped his foot, looked at the door wistfully, and kicked it shut.

"What's your name?"

Ambrose paused; normally he was quicker on his feet, but he had not even come up with a cover. Instead, he tried a different approach. "Please, friend, like we're going to be that familiar."

Wayne got up and rested his hands on his hips, sizing up Ambrose. "Yeah, friend. We are."

"Let me show you the door, one more time," Ambrose reached out for the door, resting his other hand on his knife hilt. Wayne smiled, letting his fingers wrap around his.

"No need to get so angry, friend." Wayne made a gentle half circle toward the door. He reached up with his free hand and tipped an imaginary hat. "We've got no quarrel."

Wayne was still smiling when Ambrose shut the door. Since no one was suicidal enough to question Wayne's authority when he returned to the Baron's compound, he never needed to produce the seal to gain admittance. Wayne never realized that Ambrose had picked it cleanly from his pocket.

* * *

"Peter?"

"No, it's me. Dana."

"You should go back to your room. You'll get in trouble wandering around."

"I wanted to come and see how you were doing. I couldn't sleep," Dana said. She waited a moment, then added, "May I come in? I don't like standing out here. Please?"

Ben opened the door and Dana practically jumped inside, pulling off her hat and setting it in her lap as she sat on the floor. Ben sat on his bed, looking at Dana with a confused expression. The two sat in silence for a little while.

Ben finally asked, "What's up Dana?"

"Are you feeling OK?"

"Right as rain," Ben said with a smile.

"We're going to find a way to make you better, I promise."

"Are you a doctor now too?"

Dana leaned against the wall and stretched. "I could be a doctor. Mort's a good teacher."

"You'd like Welch then. She's our top scientist. If you're still visiting when she comes back, I'll try and get Peter to introduce you."

"I'd rather you do it."

"You and Peter should try and get along and stop fighting." Ben said.

Dana changed the subject and asked him about his father.

"He's a father, y'know. He's got lots of responsibilities. What does your father do? Is he a doctor too?"

"He's a blacksmith." Dana pulled out her revolver, checked to make sure it was unloaded, and offered it to Ben. "He made this for my mother."

"I really don't know anything about guns. Peter might be able to appreciate it more," Ben said, handing it back. She carefully tucked it back into its holster. She leaned her head against the wall and stared at the ceiling, trying to think of more things to say to help Ben.

* * *

The Baron met Radigan in his private chambers. He had dismissed Peter, sending the boy to bed. He offered his lieutenant some wine; Radigan demurred.

"I never drink on duty."

Here he and the Baron smiled slightly as the Baron poured him a glass and slid it across the table to him. Radigan lifted it to his nose, swirled it and took a sip. The two men laughed nervously as the Baron poured himself a glass and then the two toasted.

"To Welch, damn her stubborn pride," the Baron said. Radigan nodded in silence as the two finished their drinks.

"Now, to business," Radigan said, pulling his data pad from his satchel. He opened a small map of the area and began to take the Baron through the possible raiding routes that the bandits were using. The Baron listened, halfheartedly.

"Radigan, I am going to trust your judgment on this. Tomorrow, take some of our best men and go string up those bandits."

"I'll need Wayne and Petey for this then, the men listen to them."

The Baron shook his head. "They have a special assignment."

"Is there trouble, Baron? I may be a better asset here than in the field."

"No, I just have them watching over this new doctor. His traveling companion has been getting into fights with Peter."

Radigan saw the Baron's frown. "I take it that Peter and this boy aren't getting along then?"

"That's the thing, Peter's always been badly behaved, but I've never seen him be this cruel. Or pick fights with girls."

"Peter is beating up on little girls?" Radigan asked. "I could talk to him if you want."

"No, that's not what I want at all. I'll just keep him away from Dr. Rennard."

Now, it was Radigan's turn to frown. "This Dr. Rennard... is the girl's name Dana?"

"Yes, yes. I take it someone briefed you on your way in?"

"No. I ran into him, his cousin and Dana while looking for the deserters with General Palzo. Is his cousin causing any trouble?"

"It is just the two of them," The Baron said. The two men looked at each other, their inner wheels

turning. "The third man was –"

"Ace Sareola."

"Who we tried to apprehend, but he escaped."

"Dramatically," Radigan said, angrily. On the one hand, this was terrible news, as Sareola was a wild card. On the other hand, there was now someone to blame.

"To throw suspicion off them," the Baron said, standing to his full height and grabbing his radio. It crackled to life, with Paulie sleepily answering. "I want you and Wayne to detain the doctor. Now. Find Wayne and wake him up if he's not there. I'll be there shortly."

"Radigan, I'm putting Peter and Ben under your charge."

The Baron stormed out in anger, stopping only to grab his revolver. Radigan removed his radio once the Baron was gone. He clicked it on:

"Wayne, I know I said we were going to wait to make our move. But, opportunity strikes. I'll go find our young heir, you deal with the little brother."

The Baron, Radigan thought as he calmly aligned his belt and meandered slowly out the door, may have no intention of giving me my promotion. But, Peter. Peter will need a regent. A trusted, loving regent. Who better than the man who captured and executed his little brother's assassin?

Radigan rarely deviated from his previous plans. But, he also believed one never looked a gift horse in the mouth. And, in this little barony, real horses were extinct. Gift horses, less so.

* * *

Wayne kicked Paulie as he passed through the hallway. Paulie stirred awake and stood to attention. He noticed quickly that Wayne was wearing the doctor's sword and revolver. Paulie rubbed the sleep from his eyes and lowered his voice.

"Wayne, the Baron called, he's on his way here."

"Good. Look, Radigan said now's the time to make our move."

"I don't like it Wayne."

"Look, I got to be quick."

“Why do we got to kill the kids too?”

“Because that way the people turn to Radigan,” Wayne said. Paulie was always so slow on the uptake, but he was reliable.

Paulie cocked his head. “That don’t sound right. The people hate Radigan. Wouldn’t they fall in after the general?”

“Why would they do that Paulie?”

“Because they like him?”

Wayne paused. That was a good point, actually. “Look, Radigan’s smart, yeah? I’m sure he’s got a plan. Probably going to set up the general too, right?”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No,” Wayne gripped the hilt and drummed his fingers. “Look, we ain’t got time for this. Deal with the Baron, leave the rest to Radigan, just like the plan said, yeah?”

Paulie nodded.

“Radigan’s a smart bastard,” Wayne said, clapping his friend on the shoulder as he made his way to Ben’s room. “He’s probably already got some dumb patsies lined up to take the fall. Wouldn’t be surprised if it was this doctor and the general, yeah?”

“Yeah. Some dumb patsies,” Paulie turned that thought over in his head as Wayne entered the stairwell.

* * *

Getting into the actual citadel was easy. Ace had flashed the seal at the guard, and when questioned asked if he wanted him to call out Radigan. That straightened the guard out quickly, especially once Ace leaned in, and whispered in a deep, icy, threatening voice:

“Do we really need to do that, friend?”

But, now that he was in, he wasn’t sure what his plan would be. He had a vague idea where the dark room was, and with it, the flower, or root, or whatever it was the doctor needed. He tried to remember exactly what it looked like, but figured there would be labels. Finding his way to the armory was relatively easy.

He peered around the corner and saw a young woman yawning at the front gate, with it locked.

Behind her, Ambrose imagined rooms of equipment. Guns, knives, spare equine parts. Everything he could possibly want, but only one thing he actually needed. He had hoped that the guard would be some rough and tumble rowdy soldier, someone he'd have no quarrel with gutting if things got ugly, but the woman was, at best a clerk.

She was probably still a teenager, he swore under his breath and leaned against the wall, contemplating his next course of action as the light flickered. Ace looked at his bag and then his knife. He pulled out his few meager belongings and tied them up in his poncho. Taking his knife, he cut a deep cash through bottom of his bag, then, on thinking again, cut it across the side.

He slicked back his hair, and shook his hair out, and limped into the armory. The woman looked up at him, at first disinterestedly, but then with concern.

"Sir, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I know I'm late," Ambrose said, tossing his now destroyed bag onto the window ledge between them. She looked through a slightly off-color glass, with a small revolving door for returns and pick ups. There was a single, locked door, that led to the storage area.

"Are you hurt? Do you need me to call medical?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I was with Lieutenant Radigan's patrol."

The woman gasped, and Ambrose soldiered on. "Things didn't go so well, as you can see. They need me to pull a double, some dumbass private got his hand blown off."

"Do you know who it was?" She asked worried. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and her lips were pursed. Ambrose could see her hands clenched together as if in prayer. Suddenly, Ambrose realized his lie could unravel very quickly if he wasn't careful. There was a soldier boy she waiting for, and now he had her worried about him.

"Dunno. Radigan took him to his wife," Ace could see the relief wash over her. "I got lucky, this thing took the knife for me."

"Are you sure you're not hurt? That looks deep."

"Positive, or they wouldn't be telling me to come down here and grab one of those, what do you call them? Long patrol satchels?"

"Refrigeration satchels? Do you have your requisition paperwork?"

Ambrose sighed, "I'm sorry, they didn't give me any. They just gave me this," Here he flashed the Baron's seal, "And said that if anyone had any problems, to have them report to Radigan,

personally.”

The young woman was extremely cooperative. Radigan, Ambrose came to realize, was something like a boogie man for the low-level staff. He thanked the girl, asked her to dinner when he got back, and smiled when she demurred and said that she was taken.

“An honest woman's hard to find, your boy's a lucky one.”

“Yes, yes he is,” She said with a smile, relieved. She decided to simply not check out the satchel; when the nice man with the intense eyes returned, she'd check it back in like nothing happened. Best to have all the paperwork synch up, after all.

* * *

At first, Dana heard someone walking by in the hall, so she lowered her voice. Then, when the footsteps paused outside, she was afraid she had been found. She was prepared to have to listen to Peter rant and rave, and maybe even have to run past him to get to Mort.

But what happened next put her on edge. The door knob turned ever so slightly, and the jingle it made sent a cold shiver down Dana's spine. Ben looked at the door and called out:

“Who's there?”

The door knob stilled. Dana instinctively slid under the bed to hide. Ben, amused at Dana's flight called out again, but still received no answer. Ben dangled his feet off the bed, about to go to the door, when they both heard the sound of metal scraping against metal. Dana thought the sound was familiar, but Ben didn't recognize it.

He reached on to his nightstand and let his hand rest on the knife. Peter had always been paranoid, but maybe Peter had also been right. He hesitated and pulled his feet back onto the bed, waiting.

The door did not open slowly. It exploded, once the lock was cleared. The ferocity of the initial lunge caught Ben off guard; he fell back, pressing his back against the wall, barely avoiding the flash of the sword. Wayne rebalanced and prepared to bring another strike around, when he felt his feet fly out from under him. He fell, face first, into Ben's bed, the sword scattering off to the side.

He rolled, swatting Ben away from the nightstand with one arm while pulling his knife. Dana had put space between them. Wayne looked at her and smirked.

“I hope I didn't interrupt,” he said. He lunged forward when he saw Dana's hand go for her gun. Her motion was amateurish, untested and clumsy. He overtook her speed easily, his knife

cutting into her left arm as she tried to protect herself. She screamed in pain when she felt the blood flow. She kicked out manically, striking Wayne in the knee, staggering him backwards.

She winced and yanked her revolver out, leveling it at Wayne.

“Freeze!”

Wayne did not. He had been shot, stabbed and battered. He knew he would not survive being hung. But, unless she was a good shot with a steady hand, his next stab would strike home.

While under the bed, Dana had thought about loading her gun, but she hadn't. When the door flew open, she had clumsily tried to slide several bullets into the chamber, but Wayne had been moving too fast. Under the bed were a handful of spilled bullets. She had a plan for if Wayne had frozen, and one for if he had not.

She ducked low and rolled under his stab. He turned with a surprising agility for such a big man. Still rolling, Dana grabbed a single bullet, while snapping the revolver open. As Wayne charged again, she hammered the bullet into the chamber and put the bedpost between her and Wayne's next slash.

She clicked the chamber shut as Wayne turned on his heel and brought his closed fist smashing into her face. As she collapsed stunned, she focused through her blurry vision and leveled the revolver as he pushed forward with his knife hand.

The shot echoed, muting Wayne's loud swear when his knife arm exploded in bone and blood as the bullet ripped through it and embedded itself into the door. The knife fell harmlessly to the ground, and Wayne paused for a second.

“You bitch,” He whined through the pain. He steadied himself, grasping at his mutilated arm. Staggering forward, he glared at her. “I am going to kill you.”

Wayne was only a few steps away, when Ben screamed a blood-curdling scream and launched himself from the bed. Wayne, his face in pain and surprise turned to try and deflect Ben's attack. But his good arm was useless, and he could not stop as Ben leaped from the bed and buried the knife Peter had given him in Wayne's throat.

Wayne gurgled as Ben, holding on to the taller man with his knees and left arm, ripped the knife out his throat and jammed it between the collar bone, where Peter had showed him was a “killing blow.” Wayne's knees buckled as he fell backwards. Ben, covered in his blood, ripped the knife out and threw it aside, panting and wheezing heavily.

He turned and went to kneel by Dana, cradling her bloodied head in his hands asking her to be ok.

* * *

“Out of my way, now!”

“Young master, you have to calm yourself.”

“That was Ben! Move aside,” Peter tried to push Radigan aside, and found himself rebuffed. The older man pushed him back, gently.

“Which is why I have come here; something is a-foot and you need to mind your safety.”

Radigan was looking down the barrel of Peter's hold out pistol. He had learned to draw from the best of them, and Radigan suddenly felt that he had miscalculated how free of a hand he had with the boy.

“Move aside,” Peter said.

Radigan did so. “Now, young master, I think you should at least stay behind me. It may be dangerous.”

Radigan matched him step for step, trying to understand the anger that had boiled over in Peter's eyes. When they reached the wing with Ben's room, Peter saw and recognized that there were no guards and the door was open. His mind leaped to treachery, and he was almost the first into the room, when Radigan grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“I'll go in first.”

He drew his gun, breathed once and tried to envision Ben's room. He had not anticipated that Peter would come screaming so fast. Radigan took in the possibility that Wayne was still there, and mentally shrugged. One less liability if he hadn't.

The plan had expected a few more minutes for response. The gunshot also had not been part of the plan. But, Wayne was excitable. If Wayne had gotten away and was already in hiding, eliminating him might be harder, Radigan thought as he breathed again. Radigan thought he should have picked someone more stable and predictable, but they don't tend to agree to kill kids. But, the gunshot? That worried him.

If he was in the room still, Radigan would simply put one between his eyes. He pivoted to slice the room with his gun, but his plan very nearly fell apart in front of him.

* * *

Captain Levi and Sareola had been two of his most likely candidates for promotions, more Levi than Sareola. Ace was a wild card and unpredictable, his desertion had proven that. Levi had Radigan's cruel efficiency combined with the flair of a well-loved hero. Levi had been the second most beloved man in the barony; the Baron and Palzo had joked that the man never slept alone if he didn't want to. Losing him had been a great blow.

Men like Wayne and Paulie were a dime a dozen; you could find someone to break arms for you for a pittance. Some of them turned out to be very, very good at breaking arms. But, the Baron had learned, you could not build an organization on raw force. You could run a small band with the fear of a knife in someone's back as the only thing binding them together. A country, though, needed figureheads.

It was at this point that the Baron's thought process was interrupted by the report of Dana's gun. He paused for a moment and made towards the doctor's room. As he was coming up on it, he saw Paulie, with a sad expression on his face drawing his pistol. He looked at the door, leaned back and was about to kick it in when the Baron reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"No. I have the key," the Baron said. "What were you about to do?"

"I heard the gunshot, and I thought... maybe that the doctor was responsible?"

The Baron shook his head. That was the other problem. People who were good at breaking arms were often not very good at anything else.

"We can't go shooting up the citadel," the Baron said. "Put that thing away; we're going to check on the doctor. Where is Wayne?"

"Taking a piss."

"I want us to get the doctor in case someone has been hurt; I don't hear any more gunshots."

Paulie grunted and stepped away from the door. The Baron pulled his keyring out, turned to put the key in the door, and then fell forward as his ears rang with an explosion of sound. He felt the force of the bullet knock him forward; he felt it smash into his back and catch on his body armor.

He tried to regain his footing, but before he could turn around, a second shot thundered into his back. The door swung open, as Morton Rennard swung it open. The Baron fell in, drawing his revolver as the doctor slammed the door shut. Another bullet ripped through the air, shattering the door.

"Are you hit?"

"Twice, but it didn't break my vest," the Baron turned the chamber to a live round. "Funny, I had

thought you'd be the one to take a potshot at me.”

“You took my gun.”

“But not the girl's,” the Baron said. “I figured she wouldn't use it, and I didn't trust Wayne and Paulie with a little girl, to be totally honest.”

“Yes, well, I'm afraid she's not here.”

“Not here?”

“No,” another bullet smashed into the door. “Which one is out there?”

“Paulie,” the Baron said. “Wayne's smart enough to shoot someone in the head.”

“That's comforting. Here's the plan; on three, I'm going to swing this door open. You're going to have to plug him quick. He can be anywhere, but you've got to get in the frame. So stay low and aim quick.”

“After, you tell me how you know Ace Sareola.”

Rennard grabbed the doorknob. “One.”

* * *

Radigan swore. Barely above a whisper, but he swore. His gun lowered as he looked into the room. Huddled by the foot of the bed, Ben was looking into Dana's eyes as he pressed his blanket against the side of her head. It was stained red, and beginning to stick to her hair. Her gun had been haphazardly returned to her holster, and she was blinking back tears.

Ben coughed into his elbow when Radigan took in the mutilated, bleeding body on the floor. Wayne's eyes had glazed over, blood pooling out of his wounds under him. The bullet had passed through his arm and still stuck in the wall. The sword, bloodied in the growing pool, taunted Radigan.

Peter peered through the door as Radigan tried to respond. Peter's temper got the best of him; he roared into the room screaming in inarticulate rage. He stepped through the blood and pulled Dana to her feet.

“Stay away from my brother!” He threw her aside, kneeling to grab hold of Ben's shoulders as another coughing fit shook him.

“Ben, Ben; did she hurt you? It's OK, Radigan and I are here. We'll protect you.”

"It's not like that," Ben said between coughs. Peter turned, coolly drawing his knife.

"I'll be your shield, Ben," He said. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

Dana, still unsteady on her feet saw Rennard's sword on the ground. Her head was still spinning, but she saw that Radigan's gun was still pointing to the ground. Peter armed himself with his knife and lunged across Wayne's body. Ben cried out for him to stop; Dana rolled across the bed, bent down and retrieved the bloody sword.

Peter made another pass; Dana circled him pushing his knife aside as she put herself between him and Radigan. Peter reared back to charge again, but Ben grabbed his brother's shoulders.

"Peter, stop! Listen to me!" Peter pushed his brother back and heard him thump onto the ground.

"Stand down brother; it is for your own good!"

He roared and charged at Dana. She lunged backwards, letting Peter over extend, as he always had. She brought the hilt of the sword down on the back of his head, heard him grunt and collapse.

She turned pulling her still-empty gun and leveling it at Radigan. "Move!"

Radigan tried to raise his gun, but Dana pointed her sword at Peter. "Let me leave!"

Radigan nodded and holstered his gun. Dana walked slowly out of the room, grabbed Mort's gun from Wayne, and watched Radigan carefully. As she reached the end of the hall, she darted around the corner and disappeared. Ben sat up and saw Peter motionless on the ground.

"Peter!"

"Stay there Ben," Radigan said, as he walked over. He paused to check on Peter. "He's out, but he'll live. Still yourself till I can check your injuries."

"Where's Dana?"

"The young lady and the young master had a disagreement," Radigan said. "Let me check you for any injuries."

Radigan knelt next to Ben. "Were you injured in the fight with this man?"

"No, sir. Dana saved me."

Radigan nodded, he spread open Ben's eyes, looking at them. "When you fell, did you hurt yourself?"

"No, sir. Peter is always a little rough, but I can take a fall."

Radigan nodded. He turned back to Ben, his mind calculating as Peter lay unmoving on the floor. "Tell me, Ben, do you think this can be salvaged?"

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"I do," Radigan said, sadly. "I truly liked both of you. It's why I hoped someone else could do this part."

"What are you talking about?"

Radigan grabbed Ben's shoulder in one hand, and clamped his other over Ben's mouth. Ben screamed and kicked, but in one smooth motion Radigan pitched Ben's head back and smashed it open on the ground. He turned the body ever so slightly, so it lay directly behind where Peter had been standing.

He exhaled, and began to shake Peter, crying out: "Young master! You must wake up; young master!"

* * *

"Gunfire in the Baron's guest quarters," the man said. He wore his embroidered poncho openly, along with impeccably maintained equipment and clothing. Ambrose made him for a professional soldier, an image man. His left leg was still wrapped and roughly splinted; the walking wounded.

"Secure that goddamn floor soldier," Ambrose said. "Give me your radio, I want to stay in the loop."

"We're not supposed to give away our tech during an emergency," the soldier began.

"Do you want to quote the goddamn regs and get thrown in the brig for insubordination, or do you want to get through this night without Radigan knowing your name?"

The soldier turned on Ambrose with fire in his eyes. "I don't take orders from Radigan – or threats from his lackeys."

Ambrose waved the man off. "Name and rank, now."

"I'm Private Samuel Paulson, sir," the soldier said. "Palzo's cavalry, first unit."

"Well, private, the general will hear about this."

"And he'll be goddamn proud at least one of us is following the regulations," Paulson said. "What about you? Name and rank, so I can let the general know what mid-level prick is wasting my time during an alarm."

"Dismissed, soldier," Ambrose said turning to leave. He was about a step away when he heard the soldier following him. Ambrose waited, expecting everything to fall apart around him in a moment. But the second soldier finally spoke up:

"Sammy, he's still an officer, not worth it. We've got to get to our posts; not worth it buddy."

Ambrose continued to walk away and heard the soldiers double timing it in the other direction. He was contemplating his next move when he heard another pair of gunshots; he knew the reports to come too close to be a single gun. He followed his instincts and ran in the opposite direction.

* * *

The Baron collapsed against the door, heaving deep breaths. He coughed and felt the broken ribs and bruises. His vest had stopped the bullets, but it still hurt. His gun was cooling. The doctor had swung the door open on call, and the Baron had moved like he was clearing the vault of a bank. Low, inside and clean. Paulie's shot had gone high and wide, while the Baron's struck home.

Paulie had pinwheeled over, the left half of his face collapsing in gore. The bullet punched out the back of his skull as his feet flopped into the air. He hit the ground dead. The doctor came around the door; he acknowledged the dead body with a glance, then turned to the Baron.

"You're hit, I need to check you for wounds."

The Baron calmly leveled his gun at Rennard. "This is not personal, but I am going to have to say that I am suspicious."

"I'm unarmed."

"The bullets didn't puncture; I can wait for a doctor I trust."

Rennard put his hands behind his head and waited. It was two minutes before Radigan and Peter arrived. Peter was covered in blood, his eyes red. They had picked up two soldiers with

them. Peter turned to Radigan, then cast his eyes down.

"That's Paulie, isn't it?"

The Baron nodded. "He drew on me."

"As you say," Radigan said, retrieving the gun from the dead man's hand and emptying it.

"What happened to you Peter?"

"Tell him lieutenant."

"Ah, yes, young master," Radigan said. He turned his eyes to the Baron, then to the doctor. "As you probably know, Dana is missing. We found her in Ben's room."

Peter choked back a sob.

"She and Peter came to blows again, and, in the scuffle," Radigan's voice trailed off. He looked at the Baron, then at Peter.

"She killed him!" Peter blurted out. "She killed Ben!"

"That's ridiculous," Rennard said. Radigan held Peter back as he charged at the doctor, tears streaming down his face.

"She killed Ben!"

"Radigan, is this true?" The Baron looked to the man, but his eyes were empty. He seemed to already know the truth. Radigan nodded.

"It... it is as Peter says."

"You two men, take the doctor to a prison cell,"

"Kill him Baron!" Peter cried out. "Kill him!"

The two soldiers each grabbed one of Rennard's arms, and looked to the Baron. One had started to pull his pistol from its holster. The Baron shook his head.

"No. I will get to the bottom of this before we act rashly," The Baron said. "I want to see my son."

"Sir, I advise against that," Radigan said.

The Baron stumbled along towards Ben's room. Radigan started to follow him, pleading for the Baron to spare himself the sight. Peter stood over Paulie's body as both groups of men went in opposite directions from him. He fell to his knees and punched the ground. Radigan had told him what had happened; that during the fight, when he had thrown Ben off him... but he could not believe that. He would never hurt Ben.

But, he saw the room when Radigan had roused him. He hadn't known what to do. He had held Ben's lifeless body in his arms and sobbed as the blood stained Peter's shirt. Radigan had looked away. When the first shots echoed in the hall, Radigan had shut the door and sat with him, his gun at the ready, glaring at the door suspiciously.

"Young master, it was an accident," Radigan said.

"I would never hurt him!"

"Deliberately, no, you would not."

"It is all her fault! She's the reason!"

"It is as you say. But, you did push him back. You heard him fall, didn't you?"

Peter sobbed in response.

"Come now, young master, trust in me. I can help you."

"Ben is dead! I killed my own brother! I would die for him! I take it back!"

Radigan felt a stabbing pain in his heart as he put his free hand on Peter's shoulder. "There will be an inquiry; the Baron will want to know what happened."

Peter looked at Radigan, then his eyes opened wide in terror. It was understood; had Ben been healthy, he would have been the Baron's favorite. He was of a more even temperament. If he learned what Peter had done – if Peter had to admit what he had done – Peter didn't think he could live with it.

"You won't tell, will you Radigan?"

Radigan looked shock: "You want me to lie to the Baron?"

"You're my friend! You were Ben's friend! I never would hurt him!"

"Well then, what should you say? If it is a bad lie, the Baron will make my life unpleasant."

"It was Dana! Dana did it!" Peter had jumped to that. "It must have been after she hit me. That's why I don't remember. Dana did it. I would never hurt Ben."

"It is as you say, young master," Radigan had said to him, while pulling him to his feet. "Let us go see if we can catch that murderous bitch."

* * *

"That's a nasty bump, are you alright?"

"Don't touch me!" Dana tried to steady the sword in front of her, and the soldier gently pushed the sword aside.

"I won't hurt you; you are bleeding," He looked up to his partner. "Go on ahead, I'll take care of her and catch you up."

The second soldier nodded and moved forward. Dana eyed the man warily and lowered the sword. She leaned against the wall and panted, interrupting now and again to cough. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief, he dabbed it carefully at her bleeding head. She winced away.

"Here, you can keep this. Apply pressure," Another set of gunshots ripped through the air. "Get downstairs and out of the citadel. Something is going on, and it isn't safe. I have a duty to go attend to. Go to your parents."

He saluted her, winked, pushed himself painfully to his feet and limped down the corridor. Once he got moving, he started to run at a gentle jog. Dana called a weak thank you after him, and pressed the handkerchief to her open wound. There was still something she needed.

The exit to the inner courtyard was unguarded in the chaos, and she made a break for the dark room at top speed, tucking the sword clumsily across her back and between her belt and shoulder bag. As she ran, she loaded her pistol with five rounds, letting the hammer rest on an empty chamber.

Seeing no guards around the dark room, she turned over the chamber, looked away and felt the revolver kick back in her hands. She felt the recoil and heard the shattering of the glass. The dark of night was broken with the shot and sound; but soon, another burst of gunfire erupted from inside the citadel. Dana did not wait; she stole inside the dark room with a singular purpose.

* * *

Radigan wasn't sure exactly when they had lost Peter. But, he could not say that it was

unfortunate. The Baron had grabbed three of the soldiers who were looking for the murderous little girl, barked out orders on the radio, and then drafted them to come with him to Ben's room.

That had been unfortunate.

The Baron left Radigan and one soldier, a young, but scarred man, who smoked incessantly, at the end of the hallway. The other two took opposite sides at the door. Radigan heard the Baron cry out in anguish. The door shut, and the four men in the hallway looked at the ground stoically.

The smoker offered Radigan a cigarette. He turned it down.

"Bad luck, tonight. News on the wire was we got some raiders up near the vineyard and the armory, you hear that lieutenant?"

"Not at liberty to say."

"That's officer talk for 'yes,'" He took a deep drag. "Bad luck. The little boy's dead, ain't he?"

Radigan appraised the distance between him and the door. Great opportunities only came with great risks. He had played his cards as they were dealt; but fate seemed to have thwarted him at the last step. First, Wayne fouls up with Ben. Then, Paulie can't even kill a man from behind right – probably the only time in his miserable existence he didn't kill with ease. Now, the Baron is right within reach, but there was no way to rid himself of the Baron. Not without great risk.

"Hey, you hear me?"

Radigan snapped back to the scarred man. "What did you say?"

"Said shame about the boy."

Opportunity knocked. A single gunshot rang out from inside the compound. Radigan drew his in a smooth motion, and aimed down the hall, his back to the other two men. The scarred soldier followed his lead, leveling his pistol toward the noise. Radigan heard the men behind him reacting as well; one had gone into a crouch the other was calling to the Baron that there was more gunfire.

Radigan waited for the scarred man to relax and take a drag of his cigarette before moving. The pivot was slow, but the weight of the revolver shifted from Radigan's right to his left hand as his body turned. His right leg snapped wide; a sickening crack echoed through the hall as he squeezed off the first round.

It took the crouching man in the eye; his second shot went wide, but the soldier's responding shot whizzed near Radigan's ear. He squeezed off a third shot, catching the man in the chest.

He stumbled back, dropping his revolver and turning to flee down the hallway.

Radigan turned calmly to the scarred man, who was trying to crawl away as the compound fracture in his leg bled onto the ground. Radigan kicked the man's gun away and snapped his neck with a single kick. He squeezed off the rest of his bullets at the fleeing man and picked up the fallen guard's gun. He pulled the dead man up as a shield and made his way to the door, cautiously.

He waited, but when no one came, he dropped the scarred body and kicked open the door. The Baron sat in the corner, near where Radigan had sat with Peter. Like Peter, he cradled Ben's ruined head in his lap. Radigan raised his gun to the crying Baron.

"Baron, I'm sorry."

"We were going to rule Radigan; we were friends."

"No. You were going to rule. I was going to serve, unrecognized."

"I had my suspicions, but all those years? We bled for each other."

"Then why did you never reward me? Welch? You promoted Welch to general! Palzo doesn't have the stomach for what needs to be done."

"You were my right arm; you never left my side."

"You never let me go; you smothered me," Radigan said raising his gun.

"I have one favor to ask," the Baron said. "Let Peter live. Run him out of town if you must ruin everything we've worked for. But please, let my son live."

"I will Baron," Radigan said, placing the muzzle of his gun at the base of the Baron's skull. "Now, bleed for me. One last time."

He watched as the once proud man slumped dead across his son's lifeless body. He stayed only a moment, because he then heard the report of the pistol from the courtyard, and he knew where he could find Dana. He stepped into the hallway and looked at the dead men.

"Great risks, great rewards," He said as he relieved them of their guns. "Sorry friends, you'll be remembered for your brave service in attempting to save the Baron."

* * *

The moment when Morton realized he was being saved was also the moment the guard on his

right died as Ace swung out from a room and slit his throat. He was on top of the second in an instant, and Rennard grabbed his arm to keep him from dealing a killing blow.

"You killed that man!"

"Saving you," Ace pulled free and kicked the living soldier in the stomach while he was on the ground. The man curled into a ball coughing.

"You realize they were going to shoot you?"

"The Baron said –"

"The Baron is not running this rodeo," Ambrose relieved both men of their guns, handing them to Rennard. "That gunfire wasn't you. Where's Dana?"

"The Baron went looking for her, I think," Rennard said as he and Ace made their way down the hall. The soldier, once they were a few paces away, screamed for help. Rennard pressed against the wall, and Ambrose covered the turn.

"That's why you kill guards," Ambrose said. Soldiers were appearing at each end of the T intersection. Rennard chose to barrel forward.

"We need to get to Dana, no matter what."

Ambrose nodded as the two raised their guns. They traded shots with the men down the hall, striking home as the bullets behind them ricocheted off the walls and floor. Ambrose had been looking for windows or some sort of escape, but none had presented itself. Rennard, likewise, knew there was only one way out. They traded fire down the hall and withdrew. Ambrose reloaded as they moved. He removed his new satchel and handed it to Rennard.

"I'm going to run interference Mort," He said. "You've got a good chance of getting out of here."

"We'll get out together, trust me."

"You need to find Dana; I can get you time."

"I know where she'll have gone," Rennard said. The sound of a gunshot and breaking glass caused him to smile. "We're going in."

Ambrose sighed, checked that the next hall was clear and jogged forward with Rennard covering the rear.

"She's crazy," Ambrose said.

Rennard's smile didn't fade: "It was crazy of her to risk going back in there. But, the right kind of crazy."

Rennard thumped Ambrose on the back with a brotherly smack, took point and scanned the next room. The door to the interior corridor was guarded, but Ambrose and Rennard swiftly overpowered the lone man. When the door opened into the dark of night, a sudden muzzle flash followed by the boom of a shotgun emanated from the dark room.

The two men broke into a run when they heard Dana scream, followed by the flash and boom of gunfire lighting it up the inside.

* * *

She tried to take her steps slowly, feeling along the ground with her toes while her eyes tried to pick out movement in the dark room.

She almost screamed when the first shot rang out, a single revolver shot that whipped through the air where she had been standing moments ago. She got down and scurried a few feet before getting her nerves back together. She popped her head ever so slightly above the troughs, which ran in rows, with small breaks every twenty feet wide enough to let a man move between them with ease. The dark room itself was maybe a three hundred feet long and wide, with tall ceilings where vines hung down almost to the floor in some areas. She thought about breaking her way out like she broke in, but the noise would give her position away. She would have to fight.

Instead, she tried to circle back around and get a visual on who else was in here.

"I know you're here Dana," Peter called out from the darkness. She heard the click of the revolver falling into its resting place, as well as a metallic whoosh through the air. "I knew where you would go. You'll pay for killing him!"

"Wayne attacked Ben," Dana called back, rolling to another aisle after calling out. She heard Peter hop onto the troughs and trample on the flowers there.

"I don't care about Wayne!"

He fired off a shotgun blast; Dana ducked and skirted around another aisle. She saw him buck backwards, unprepared for the weight and kick. He swung around again, resettling the gun into his stance. The second shot did not off balance him.

Dana steadied her arm along the dirt and clay trough. Before she could squeeze off a shot, the shotgun swung towards her. She barely dropped to the ground before the shot kicked up the dirt

and smacked into the clay.

"I care about my brother," Peter said, calmly sliding more shot into the gun.

"I protected Ben!"

"Don't you even talk about him!"

She heard him jump down and fire off another round. She popped off to squeeze off a shot at random, dropped low and moved to keep as many rows between them as possible. Peter's movements were becoming more controlled and harder to follow. Whatever fury had animated him was dissipating. His training was coming back to him, and Dana was trying to remember hers. Every sound she made echoed in her own ears; her very breath seemed to thunder.

The fall of his boots onto the clay as he jumped up onto one of the troughs was faint. Dana cautiously looked over and saw him kneeling and scanning in the darkness. She squeezed off a shot, but it went wide. She was about to duck down, thinking that he would withdraw.

Instead, he swiveled his head and shotgun, sending a spray of shot. She dropped down. She heard a second blast rip through the air, and heard him jump, from one trough of dirt and flowers to the next. She was about to stand to run, but another volley exploded, punctuated with him landing on one foot, while taking to the air again.

She heard the final volley and gripped her revolver. The shotgun clanked to the ground, and Peter's revolver whistled out of its holster. She heard him land only one trough away.

His leap into the air was swift, and she knew she could not run. She turned, kicked off the trough to propel herself into the air and backwards. She felt the air rush through her bloody hair and felt her hands shake. Peter's revolver was not leveled, and his first shot struck the ground in front of her.

"I'm not a killer," Dana thought to herself, as she felt the trough fly underneath her. She repositioned her gun, gripped hard and fired once. The kick of the gun knocked her around in midair, and she squeezed off several more shots in a panicked flurry.

Peter, for his part, re-centered his aim and sent lead flying. Dana's first shot struck him in the elbow, and he roared in pain. He was further away than Wayne had been, but Dana was not ready for the gore. Peter's limb was strong, but he was still young and small. His right arm was severed at the joint, and the remaining shots of his went wide. He hit the ground, convulsing in shock as he grabbed at his bloody stump.

Dana felt the earth knock the wind out of her as she landed. She stood up, reloaded, and rounded the corner to see Peter twitching, trying to stop the flow of blood. She carefully

holstered her gun and watched as Peter slipped into unconsciousness. She heard men rushing into the dark room, but she knew without action, Peter would die.

Knowing that the soldiers would most likely shoot her on sight, she knelt down by Peter, removed her hair ribbon, and tied a tourniquet as quickly, tightly and neatly as she could through her tears. The blood flow stopped, and she stood up, putting her hands in the air.

"Please, don't shoot! I surrender," She said through sobs. "I didn't want to hurt anyone."

"Surrender," Ace called, lowering his gun when he saw her. He tossed her the satchel, which fell at her feet as she stared at him stunned. "That's the damned fooliest thing you could do, little miss."

"Ambrose, it's a no go. The cactus is gone. We've got to move."

"Dana's got it here; she looks a wreck, but nothing a hot bath won't fix."

Dana carefully placed the cactus into the satchel as Ambrose and Rennard joined up with her. Ambrose checked her eyes and her head, while Rennard knelt by Peter. He relieved the unconscious boy of his gun and knife and checked the tourniquet.

"That's the prettiest bow I think I've ever seen," Rennard said, hugging her around the shoulders. She numbly offered him his sword, and he took it. "We've got to move."

"Stay behind us little lady, and try not to surrender to any more strange men before the night's out."

Dana clutched onto Rennard's free hand as they made their way out of the dark room together. Dana wasn't sure how it had happened, but the night had seemed to go on for ages. But, for the first time in those ages, she thought that they were going to succeed and that Beau was going to be alright.

But, she could not get the image of the muzzle flashes in the darkness from her mind, and the explosion of red gore and the severed forearm flung aside by the force of her bullet.

* * *

Leaving the Citadel was significantly easier than getting in. Ambrose showed the Baron's seal to the gate guard and said he needed to escort the child back to her home. The guard had asked what the girl was doing in the Citadel to begin with, and Ambrose gave him a soft look and whispered something in his ear. The guard's face blanched as he moved aside.

"I trust you understand this shouldn't go in the official papers," Ambrose said, placing several

large, clinking coins into the man's hands. There was a brief nod of understanding, followed by him astutely looking away.

The three did their best to not attract attention, though they could already feel their good luck slipping away. Rennard regained his equine, and Dana obediently saddled behind him as Ambrose guided Rodney to the lone exit to the desert. It was barricaded shut, and there were only two guards remaining, drinking the remains of the gift Radigan had left with them earlier that evening. One got up drunkenly and held up his hand for Ambrose to halt.

"Whoa there, friend. It's long past curfew," Here he hiccuped and balanced himself between the doorway.

Ambrose removed his seal and flashed it. "Orders from the Baron. Move aside."

The guard rolled his eyes, chuckled and leaned against the wall to right himself. "You haven't heard?"

"I have orders."

"The Baron's dead," the guard said, flatly. "No one is leaving until his murderers are found."

"By whose orders," Rennard asked from behind.

"Lieutenant Radigan's orders," the guard said. He turned, with an unsure sway. He never saw Ambrose leap from the equine, and Rennard clamped his hand to stifle Dana's shout of surprise. Inside, the bullet proof glass had yet to be replaced, a dereliction in duty that cost the soldier his life.

Ace wasted no time, his knife neatly slicing through the man's neck, shattering the bone. The second guard on the inside reached for the radio, but Ace was faster on the draw. He pushed the dead man to the ground and launched the knife through the air. It arced perfectly, slamming its point into the guard's eye. He fell back, taking the bottle, chair and card game with him.

It was only a moment before Ambrose had the gate opened. He left his knife where it lay. Dana refused to go inside, and so Ambrose took the few supplies he could find worth scavenging. He flipped through the code book the drunk guards had left on the table, which was now on the floor to find the night's all clear signal. He sent it out; one post responded he was five minutes early.

He sent a short response: "Will re-synchronize clock with next shift."

It was the best response he could think of on his feet. He pushed out, leaped onto Rodney at a run and made his way into the desert, with Rennard and Dana behind him, the Citadel fading

into the darkness.

* * *

"Let them go?" Samuel Paulson shouted at Radigan, who bent over the unconscious, shivering Peter. "They killed the Baron and very likely both of his sons, and you want to let them go?"

"Yes. We must collect our strength here. Find me the best doctors we still have for Peter," Radigan said, looking down at the boy. "I will set out with hand picked men. They left in haste. They do not have supplies, and we know where they head. We do this smart."

Paulson saluted and hobbled to find a doctor. Radigan sat down heavily on one of the damaged mud troughs. He looked at where the severed arm had been moments ago. They had been too late to save it, and if it were not for the tourniquet, Peter would be dead. The red silk enraged him. Why would she have stopped to save the boy?

It was fortunate, because without him, the power vacuum would have overwhelmed him. As it was, Radigan was only getting deference because the general was at the land bridge. He knew that he needed to kill all of them before they reached the general. It would solidify his position as Peter's right hand. He was planning how to do this as he helped load the boy onto the gurney and roll him to the hospital. The doctor asked Radigan questions, he mumbled answers.

He placed Paulson as the door guard. That was something about stubborn men like Paulson. You could trust them not to stab you in the back. If they ever knew they had cause to, they were too honorable to do it the easy way. Radigan walked out, his guns low in his belt. He stared into the darkness above the citadel. Then, he put out the call for his men.

A dozen assembled, and they prepared for the trip in silence. They went armed, equipped and light. They posted the new guards at the entrance. "No one leaves," Radigan said. "Unless it is over your dead bodies."

* * *

The sprint through the desert began a-pace. With only a few hours head start, Ace pushed the equines as hard as he could. He knew stopping would be a fatal error. Crossing the land bridge was most likely suicidal as well. But, as Rennard had said, it was only "Potentially fatal."

Radigan's reputation led Ambrose to believe that he would run them down at the first chance. He wasn't sure how long of a head start they had, but he finally did slow a little to try and talk with Rennard about their next move.

"We aren't blasting our way past the landbridge."

"Not with the general there," Rennard said.

Ambrose winced. "Do you have a plan?"

"I am going to tell him the truth. The Baron is dead; his sons are most likely dead too. The citadel needs him, and we need to get home. We can pass like two ships in the dark."

"He won't go for it."

"You have a plan?"

"It's the same as yours," Ambrose said, as he ratcheted the equine back to full speed. "But with a lot more praying."

The first night of the chase, Ambrose and Rennard did not sleep. Dana slept fitfully as the equines trotted forward. When the two men saw that there was no smoke behind them, they thought that either their pursuers were still giving chase or were going without fires. As the oppressive sun rose, they took a brief shelter in the shade of a dune. Two more days passed as they took short breaks, leap frogging from dune to dune. Rodney's map soon began to show the edge of the canyon ahead.

The smoke behind them was starting to be visible, and the gap ahead was fast on the horizon. Ambrose slowed his equine.

"From what you tell me, Mort, the general'll turn a blind eye to you and the kid."

"That's what he tells me."

"Then go on ahead without me."

"We can't do that," Dana said.

"She's right. You stay on this side, you're good as dead."

"Look, do you have a better idea?"

Rennard removed his hat and brushed sand and sweat from his face. He set it back on his head and gave Rodney the order to move forward. Ambrose fell solemnly into line behind him. As they moved forward, Rennard carefully removed his jacket, hanging it over Rodney's neck. He unbuttoned his dirty white shirt, stripped it off. He was beginning to get thin, his skin was freckled with dust and sweat. He pulled his jacket back on, buttoning it tight.

He then took his sword, stabbed it through the white shirt and held it above his head in the wind.

Ambrose cursed. This was not a better idea. "This is where she gets it," he said to no one in particular. "The surrendering to strangers."

* * *

Palzo did not think that Paulson's report had been manipulated; Paulson was an honest, straight-shooter. The report, in so far as the facts were concerned, were undoubtedly accurate. The Baron and his son were dead; Peter was in critical condition. Several guards were dead. Some of Radigan's chief enforcers had been killed trying to defend the Baron.

That's where things broke down for Palzo. Wayne and Paulie were not men that the Baron trusted with a lot. The general could not imagine him placing the lives of his sons in their hands, not when Radigan or Rebecca were available. He also did not trust the conclusions that Paulson had been given about the attack.

"What does the lieutenant say, man?"

"He says Ace Sareola is behind the attacks."

"The same Ace Sareola that led the raid on the vineyard?"

"Yes sir," the radio had crackled.

"The one who, as of only a few weeks ago, was a ghost and absent from the barony?"

"I see what you're implying sir, but I can only relay what I've been told."

"Where is Sareola now?"

"He and his co-conspirators are making a break for the landbridge."

"Who are his co-conspirators?"

"Dr. Rennard and Dana Littleton, sir."

"Dana Littleton? Radigan expects me to believe that little girl conspired to kill the Baron?"

"I didn't realize she was a little girl, sir." The general was about to dismiss him, when the radio popped to life again. "Sir, is she a little blonde girl? With a red ribbon and riding clothes? Expensive looking sidearm?"

"Yes. That's her."

"I did see her. She was wounded about the head, sir."

"The man that was with her, was it the doctor?"

"She was alone."

"I want you to keep an eye on any of the lieutenant's less savory hangers on. I believe I will have a conversation with Ms. Littleton and her guardian."

That conversation played through the general's head as he saw the two equines gently lope forward, the flag of surrender waving high. The men looked to him, and he looked at them. He nodded grimly.

"Sanna, cross this bridge and bring West and Piven back here, double time. There's no need to guard the other end right now," he ordered to a bright eyed red-head on her first duty outside the citadel. "Hopkins, Unora, safeties off, but weapons in holsters unless I say otherwise. Kline, be my second."

Hopkins and Unora, two grizzled veterans under the general's command prepared their weapons. Unora spit his tobacco out down the canyon and took a swig of water to wash away the taste. Kline retrieved the general's blade from the camel and handed it to him. The hilt was ornate, but the steel was tempered for war. Kline fell in a few paces behind the general, who marched out to meet the exhausted travelers.

* * *

"That's far enough, doctor."

"Palzo, you know what's been happening at the Citadel," Rennard called out.

"The report is Dana murdered the Baron's youngest son and crippled the oldest."

"I never harmed Ben!"

"Quiet Dana. Peter attacked her; it was self-defense."

"That's not for me to decide," the General said. "But, little girls all look the same to me. Leave Ace; he's still wanted for the murder of Captain Levi. That's the best I can offer."

"Make the deal," Ambrose said. Rennard shook his head.

"I can't leave a man behind."

"I shot you!"

"He makes a compelling point, doctor," the general's second said. "No one here wants any more bloodshed."

"Quiet Kline. Speak when spoken to. Doctor, I'm bargaining with you because I believe you and Dana would not engage in the heinous actions that Radigan accused you of. But, Ace has confessed to the murder of Captain Levi."

"Ambrose is a good man!" Dana said.

Rennard nodded, "He could have ran out on us many times now, but he's risked his life for us."

"It will reflect well on him in the next world then," the General said. "Levi does not have the option to change, neither do the men that he killed to help you escape."

"Take the deal, Mort."

"I can't. I won't try to explain to Rose why I didn't bring you back safe and sound," Rennard looked at the general. "I can't accept that deal."

"Then we can't let you pass," Kline said.

"Unless, you have a counter offer?"

Ambrose shook his head. "No, they're going to make the deal." He raised his hands to dismount, "Whether they like it or not."

"General, you seem to be up to speed on your ancient history," Rennard said. "How up are you on the early romances?"

"The livery is probably a give away, I'd say."

"Then, my counter offer is this. You object that we need to sentence Ambrose for his crimes; I can understand and even agree with that."

Kline looked to the general, who was already sharing a half-smile with Rennard. "Good. You understand how we can't allow an admitted murderer to go free without proper sentencing."

"Then, I suggest something quaint and old-fashioned, that I'm sure a Baron would have approved of: trial by combat."

The general nodded. "I will admit that the Baron had allowed that in a few extreme cases. I don't

know if he believed God or some force picked the just winner, so much as he thought it was somewhat more final. No arguments if at least one party is dead.”

Ambrose rested his hand on his knife hilt. “I don’t see how this helps us Mort.”

“Did you bring your blade general?”

“Kline, my sword. Thank you.”

“This is stupid! We don’t need to fight,” Dana yelled as Rennard dismounted his equine and wiped down his sword.

“I’ll prefer my knife, thanks,” Ambrose said.

“Stand down Ambrose, I’m your champion,” Rennard said. “The men, I imagine, would not let you go if you harm their general.”

Kline nodded grimly. “General, I don’t like this. We’ve got them out gunned, and Radigan is-”

“Behind us, maybe a few hours,” Rennard said. “We haven’t the time, general, to first blood?”

The general nodded, but then Kline spoke up. “General, I do know that we’ve never had a gentleman’s duel. That’s one thing the Baron was always clear about. No one played with each other; to the death or nothing at all.”

“Be quiet Kline.”

“Sir, I’ll back you on this decision. I’ve rode with you since Levi was killed, but the others? Radigan? West and Piven, we don’t know their loyalties either. They’re not going to accept if you lose over a cut lip or bit of a scratch.”

“Then what do you propose Kline?”

Kline drew his own blade and stepped forward in a single motion, saluting as he took a fencer’s stance. “Dr. Morton Rennard, my name is Emmanuel Kline, the general’s second. To the death, and for Captain Levi.”

Before the general could stop him, Kline’s sword clashed with Rennard’s.

* * *

Freida West and Carter Piven were still crossing the bridge when Kline’s blade sang out against Rennard’s. Sanna fell in behind them, shouting for them to put their weapons away until the

general called for shots. Piven tried to draw a bead, but Sanna pushed his gun wide as the trigger pulled.

"What's your problem Sanna?"

"The general's not armed! We don't know what's going on, you don't just shoot first."

"Mind your rank," West said. "Tony, what's going on here?"

Anthony Unora spat out another wad of tobacco. "Kline called out the swordsman, it looks to me."

"Aren't you going to step in?"

"Never liked Kline much," Hopkins observed.

"He could get killed," Sanna said.

"Yes, yes, he could," Unora said. West and Piven shouldered their rifles as they moved closer to where the two swordsmen circled and parried. West called out to the general, with Sanna trailing a bit behind. She had tried one more time to convince Hopkins and Unora to step in and stop the duel.

Hopkins had just shrugged and said: "Never liked Kline much."

* * *

"Weapons at ease," Palzo said. "This is trial by combat."

"That's not how we handle things, sir," Piven said.

"It is how I handle things."

Piven shook his head, and turned back to where Unora and Hopkins were standing, lazily, leaning on their rifles and swapping uneasy stares. Sanna stood next to the general, looking at him with her confused eyes. West reached into her vest pocket and pulled a cigarette. She lit it absentmindedly, watching as Kline's stab was turned aside. The stranger with the sword seemed in total command; Kline's attacks were random and focused on heavy cuts and hacks. The stranger was finesse and footwork.

As Kline's next chop came in low, West watched impassively as Rennard slid his sword under Kline's. He went low and raised his arm, sending the blade wide above his head. Rennard's pivot put him behind Kline, and his sword came ripping up, halting as it clipped Kline's neck,

drawing a single thin slice of blood, the sort of cut Kline could have made from a bad shave.

"Let this end here," Rennard said.

Palzo clapped his hands together. "I agree. There's no need for this to go any further Kline."

"Only if the stranger is conceding," West said as she puffed out a smoke cloud. "The Baron's rules have always been clear about... extra judicial judgments."

"Those are the old rules," Palzo said. "We do not need to sacrifice a good man."

West looked to Piven, who shook his head and looked at his feet. "General Palzo, I trust you aren't planning to change anything without the young baron's permission?"

"We're not barbarians West."

"No, we're soldiers, general," West reached into her chest pocket and produced one of the Baron's seals. "And this, is the authority we're under. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were planning to let Ace Sareola slip through our fingers."

Piven's head shot towards the general, as fury overtook his eyes. "I thought I recognized that man. Dead or alive general, preferably dead."

Piven hesitated just a second, but it was long enough for Sanna. Her rifle came to bear faster than his.

"The general has said to leave your weapons down, Piven."

"Lower your weapon, Sanna, unless you want to hang with the general," West said. She dropped the cigarette and crushed it with her boot. She snapped, and Hopkins and Unora raised their weapons as well.

Palzo ducked for cover as he tried to draw his pistols. Rennard and Ambrose took to the ground; Sanna tried to retrain her gun on the two further gunmen, but their fire took her down before she could. Kline dropped his sword and went for his gun, but West was faster, dropping him with two shots from the hip. Piven's rifle came to bear, yet fired high.

West and Piven doubled back towards the barricades on the edge of the land bridge. West called for covering fire; Unora and Hopkins sprayed it.

"And remember, Radigan doesn't plan to bring any of them back alive, so shoot to kill!"

* * *

Ambrose made himself cozy against his equine, listening as bullets thunked into it and flew wild. He heard Dana shout as she was pulled into the sand and safety. He checked his rifle to make sure no sand had gotten in, and then he closed his eyes to visualize the placement. Unora and Hopkins were well entrenched, he had no shot. West and Piven, though, he had seen them back pedaling to reach the barricades. He might have a shot there.

“Ambrose, covering fire! The general's exposed.”

“Tough,” Ace said under his breath. He heard Rennard squeeze off some shots, and he took to his knee and lined up a shot carefully. One arm was barely exposed, and he took an extra second to line up his shot as Rennard's revolver clicked over; Rennard called out that he was reloading, and Ace squeezed the trigger. He saw the elbow pop into bone and gore.

The person behind the barricade, he couldn't tell who it was, buckled and pulled inside. He fired off the second round, which smacked into the barricade. He fired off a few more shots, feeling wasteful at the ammunition, then ducked down, “Reloading!”

The next shots that Ambrose heard fired roared compared to Rennard's revolver. He looked over and saw Dana lining up her second shot with the barricade and pulling. She squeezed off two more shots, ducked down, and poked Rennard. Rennard took his turn covering the general while Dana reloaded. She was slow, but she had plenty of time as Rennard spaced out his shots.

Palzo managed to stay low and press himself up against a small rock near the edge of the gap. Ace thought about squeezing off a shot at the exposed general, but he couldn't justify it to himself. The general had been doing his job, and Ambrose had come to peace that he would hang eventually.

He mechanically took his position when Rennard's last bullet fired off. With everyone in position, Ambrose held his fire and let out his breath. Stray looks came over the barricade, but nothing that he could take advantage of. He heard the general whistle.

Letting his eye wander over, he muttered out loud: “That crazy bastard. Mort! Covering fire.”

Much to his displeasure Ambrose dashed from his safe equine as Dana's revolver echoed, sliding through the dust to grab hold of a length of rope from Palzo's bag. The general passed one of his revolvers to Ambrose, pulled the knot around his waist tight, and slid over the gap, and slowly began to scale along the side, with a knife in his teeth and a gun in his belt.

* * *

“Shit,” Hopkins said as the fire boomed. “That's a good hit.”

Piven whined in pain, grasping at his arm with his good hand. Hopkins pulled off his kerchief and tossed it to Piven, who grabbed it thankfully and used it to try and staunch the bleeding.

"West, we got to move. Piven's bleeding bad."

Unora fired off a shot, trying to catch Ace as he dove from behind his equine toward the rock. His first shot was wild, and his second was more so as he dropped quick to avoid the little girl's bullets. West fired off several shots, dropped her revolver and kicked it over to Hopkins and Piven.

"Get him reloading, make him useful."

"I can't find Palzo."

"Just keep firing. Those equines can't hold up forever."

Unora thought he heard something between rounds. He tried to pinpoint the sound, but gunfire (he wasn't even sure who fired) covered up whatever he was listening for. He turned to fire at the equine's legs, and Rodney buckled. He was about to take a second shot when his head burned and went black.

* * *

"You're a crazy bastard," West said, ducking low and firing. Somehow, the general had swung up behind them and taken Unora out quickly. A knife had flashed across Piven's throat; West could have sworn that one of her men had taken the general down in the opening salvo. She fired again, but instead of letting the dying Piven fall, Palzo pulled him up as a human shield.

West's bullet ripped through Piven's stomach and Palzo felt it enter his gut. Palzo's revolver cracked off three rounds. Hopkins stumbled back and fell, a single shot ripping forward before the gun fell from his hands; West was hit in the leg.

Undeterred, she lunged forward to tackle the general and Piven. She shoved her gun deep into Piven's bloody stomach and pulled the trigger. Her wrist popped with the kick back, but she pulled again. Palzo jumped, and he tried to push her off. West slammed one knee down firmly on the general's gun hand. They wrestled with Piven's body, Palzo trying to keep it as a shield while she tried to find an opening to finish him.

Piven's slack head whipped aside, but before West could take advantage, the wind rushed out of her. A rough hand yanked her back and away, while a forearm locked around neck. She tried to break free. Her assailant was too strong, and she was losing strength. Air whooshed by as she was struck on the back of the head.

Ace hit her one more time in the back, and she lost her balance. Her damaged leg gave out, and she felt a push from behind. She slipped, screaming, into the canyon.

* * *

"Gunfire sir, by the land bridge," one of Radigan's men said. They increased speed.

Radigan clicked his radio; he had been hailing for the last few minutes, since the first echoes reached him. "West, report. Piven? General?" Getting no answer, he casually dropped the radio back into his bag.

"There's no answer from the land bridge men; we must assume it has been compromised," Radigan said, as he slowly shifted the equine to its highest speed. "I want there to be no survivors. No stories back to the young master, am I clear?"

"Yes sir," came a chorus of voices.

"This is our chance to stamp out the last man standing in our unit's way," Radigan said, as the equines began to kick up dust and noise. "We will be the new Baron's right arm, and we will live like kings."

The men's cheers were drowned out as the equines whirled to life; they pulled their kerchiefs and masks down low to keep the dust from their nose and mouths. Radigan and his most loyal dozen rode hard towards the land bridge.

* * *

"Hey, you there? You're hit bad."

"It's fatal," Palzo said, coughing blood. Rennard came over the barricade and landed next to Ambrose.

Ace cut open the general's shirt while Mort pressed down on the injuries, trying to staunch the blood.

"Dana, go get the equines, on the double," Ace barked at the girl. She looked at the general, shocked. Ace snapped in front of her face with his free hand. "Go, now."

"I need you to breathe slowly,"

"It's no good doctor. You don't have time, and even if you did, I need blood. We don't have any here."

"I'm sorry that we can't do more," Rennard said, relaxing a little. He remembered caring for patients in their last moments, the pain and the shock that they were dying. It was always easier when they were unconscious or, like the general, accepting of their fate.

While Ace propped his head up, the general coughed and waved Rennard away, "Go help the girl. I need to talk with Ace."

Rennard nodded, clasped the general's other hand one last time, then made his way to help Dana repair Rodney's damaged leg. Ambrose shifted uncomfortably under the general's gaze, then finally met his eyes.

"You're a lucky man to get a second chance," Palzo said.

"Levi was a bastard, I don't regret what I did."

"Don't waste this chance. Soon, Radigan and the young master are going to implement the Baron's plan to cross this land bridge," Palzo paused to cough; Ace wiped the blood from the general's mouth with his poncho.

"Rest easy, general, don't strain yourself."

"But, the Baron had a plan, for if the other side proved stronger. When we found the bridge, we found it wired."

"Wired?" Ambrose whistled. Someone had planned ahead.

"Explosives, Ace. Someone must have thought the same thing we did, that blowing it up would separate us forever, and that that might be a good thing." Palzo tried to sit up, and Ace leaned him against the barricade. "It took us a few weeks, but we restored the wiring and the dynamite. When you get to the other side, buried by the camel station, is the detonator."

"We blow that bridge, there's no coming home."

"I somehow doubt you want to come back."

"That'd be the truth Lloyd; you always spoke the truth."

"I only wish that Becky were able to go with you. This place isn't going to be a nice place for much longer."

"She's a good woman and a good soldier. You did right by her."

Lloyd smiled, "The hell'd you know."

"If I can be half the father to my kid as you are, you crazy old goat, I'll be glad. You're a good man, and I'm sorry."

Lloyd nodded, coughed and leaned against the barricade, looking across the gap and into the sky. He stared for a few more seconds before it all went dark.

* * *

"Mort, is he going to die?" Dana asked Rennard. She had tied her hair back and tucked her hat into her belt. She was carefully trying to realign Rodney's leg, but the casing was shattered.

"Yes, Dana, he is." Rennard removed the saddle bags and threw them over his shoulder. He retrieved Kline's weapons and holstered an extra pistol and shouldered the rifle over his other arm.

"We have to move."

"I still need to fix Rodney," Dana said. She looked at the ground. "I don't want to leave him behind too."

"There's no time, grab his computer, we can plug him into a different equine back at the Flats."

"It's not fair! We just wanted to go home and help Beau. We didn't want to shoot anyone! Why couldn't he just let us go?"

"He was doing what he thought was right, just like us."

"I wasn't going to kill anyone though."

"Sometimes, good people just end up on different sides of things," Rennard said, as he pulled Dana to her feet. "We've got to move though."

Dana carefully, almost reverently, opened up the front port on Rodney's head to remove his data storage unit. She pulled it free and wrapped it in a handkerchief to keep the sand out. She placed it inside her bag and tucked her hair up into her hat. Mort patted her on the head, and shooed her forward.

Ambrose stood up, wiping his hands on his pants. He nodded when Rennard and Dana walked by. He and Rennard removed their hats and bowed their heads over the general, while Dana buried her head into Rennard's sleeve. They stood quietly, before Rennard placed his hat back on and took a step towards the bridge.

He heard the sounds of the approaching equines first, and he gave Dana a hard shove towards the land bridge. He pulled his rifle and sighted down the riders. Ambrose smacked his gun down.

"There's too many, we can't hold the barricade. Run."

Rennard nodded and dropped the rifle; it was just going to get in his way. Dana had already started running across the land bridge, her head almost comically tilted upwards to keep from looking down. Rennard made it a few steps before he paused to look back.

Ace had picked up the rifle and ducked behind the barricade.

"Mort, by the camel station, you'll find a detonator. Run. Tell Rose I love her. Get Dana home safe and sound."

"Get moving Ambrose."

"We'll be sitting ducks on that bridge. Get moving, I'll buy you time. Don't make me shoot you again."

"Don't be an idiot,"

Dana had stopped on the bridge to look back. "Mort, Ambrose! Come on!"

Both turned to her and shouted at her to keep running. She hesitated, reached for her revolver and took a hesitant step away, then turned and began jogging back. "I'm not leaving anyone, ever."

It wasn't a shout, or even a statement. It was an oath, solemn and severe. The kind that only a child can utter, because she means it with the fullness of her soul.

Ambrose squeezed a shot, well out of range, towards Radigan's riders. They didn't even slow down or swerve; they knew the range on their weapons.

Rennard grabbed Dana by the shoulder, "You have to get out of here,"

"Not without Ambrose. Not without you."

Ace stood up, firing off until the rifle was empty. He dropped it, picking up another. "Don't be stupid Dana, get across and get home to Beau."

"Don't be stupid Ambrose! Get across and get home to your baby."

Rennard grabbed Dana's free hand and Ambrose's shoulder. He tugged on both as he began across the land bridge. Dana raised her revolver with one hand, hesitated, pulled her other hand free to steady it, and shot towards the oncoming riders. Then, once she saw that Ambrose had given up and was emptying another futile rifle volley while backing up, she tucked it into its holster, turned and ran.

Ambrose finished emptying his rifle, turned and followed. As he was running he pulled out a clip to slam into place. He heard the empty one hit the bridge with a clink. Rennard grabbed him again when he turned to fire again.

"Save your shots for when we get to the other side."

* * *

Radigan pulled his men to a stop at the barricade. He had seen the bodies on his way up, and now he saw the pile by the land bridge. He hopped off of his equine for a closer look at Palzo's body. Two men chased across the gap; Radigan ignored them, puzzling over the general's final moments. His injuries were received in close quarters, and his bloody knife was at his side.

He had seen no other bodies from Rennard's party, and he hesitated as his men started to rush across the land bridge to overtake the doctor. One of his men, the youngest, stopped at his side, and whistled.

"Lieutenant, we can over take them. Their equines were damaged,"

"Palzo died fighting his own men."

"Can't be sir, he was a good soldier."

"We're not though," Radigan said standing up. "It wasn't a quick death either."

"We're going to fall behind lieutenant."

"Let them go."

"You said no survivors,"

"Now I'm saying let them go," Radigan said. "Secure this side of the bridge. I want everyone back; get on the radio."

He looked across the bridge, as Ambrose (or maybe Rennard, he couldn't tell from this distance), turned to fire a few shots. The men in front slowed down to take cover behind their

robotic horses and fire back. They were still too far for precision shooting, but close enough that hits were possible.

Radigan looked out from under the brim of his hat as his junior man rode forward on his radio, calling for the men to withdraw. Some received the order, and began to turn and head back. The two furthest forward began walking forward under the cover of their equines, shouting back into their radios.

"We'll know once they reach the other side general," Radigan said to the corpse. "I suspect they know about the Baron's final gambit. If they keep running, I'll hunt them down. We're on their heels; let's not risk it all for nothing, right general?"

His men began falling back, except the two in the lead. Their advance was slow, but steady. Radigan folded his arms across his chest and watched.

* * *

"Cover him, now Dana!"

She popped up and fired down the land bridge; her aim was shaken. The adrenaline and blood was starting to blur her vision. Her hands shook violently, the bullets went wild. On the third, the kickback was too much. As she hit the sand, Rennard took his position and fired the rifle. He barely ducked before a return salvo came.

"Mort, I think I broke my wrist."

"Fine, reload me."

His rifle kicked up sand when it hit the ground next to her. She scrambled through his bag with one hand, loading rounds as his revolver responded to Radigan's riflemen. He had crippled their equines, so they were now at a stand off.

"Why aren't the rest coming Mort?"

He ducked and traded his revolver for the rifle. He waited to hear the sound of a clip dropping, shifted some to the left and took his low firing position. He didn't know; it didn't matter. He held his fire, hoping to make his shots count for more now that he had them stalled. They held tight, and Rennard pulled himself behind the barricade again.

"They're waiting for help," he said.

"No one's coming. The rest of them are waiting on the other side," Dana said. She was tying the strap of her bag into a makeshift sling for her wrist.

“Ambrose, I don't know how much time we have, whatever you're doing, do it fast!”

* * *

Ace felt the burning in his legs and shoulders. He pushed a camel over, heard it whinny, or chomp, or whatever it is that camels do, in disapproval. He dug; first with the butt of his rifle, then with his hands. He heard the gunfire and felt the heat coming off the sand. His eyes stung from the sweat, and his hands grew thick with the fine sand. It slid between his fingernails and the creases of his skin.

But he kept digging. Part of him knew this was their best hope, but another part of him wanted to move back to the barricade, to be the one trading shots with Radigan's bastards. His fingernail tore on hard metal box; he pressed his belly to the ground to rip the box up. A button was encased in glass, which he broke with his rifle.

The wire ran through the sand, but he didn't take the time to see where it led. He shouted for Rennard and Dana to cover their ears, and pressed the button, while burying his head in the sand.

* * *

Radigan winced as the chain reaction along the bridge started. He saw as the two men at the far end disappeared in the blooming smoke. The land bridge tore itself apart, falling away. Dust and sand kicked up at either end; his men looked away as chunks of rocks and sand rained on them.

He turned on his horse, whistled, and gave the order to fall back. The land bridge was gone, and with it, Hawkson's dreams of conquest. That was fine by Radigan; the boy needed to recover. He would need to rebuild; he would need a man like Radigan at his side to protect him from the whisper campaign and the political fallout.

“Connor,” He called out to the young man who had rescued his squad from their mad rush across the bridge. “Send the other men forward, I want to talk with you.”

Connor gave the orders, while Radigan looked over the dead bodies. Connor approached him, saluted and waited. Radigan spent a few minutes examining the bodies; he had Connor help him with identifications. Once he looked up and saw that his riders were gone, he spoke again.

“Connor, anyone else see the corpses?”

“Not closely, sir.”

"They were preoccupied with the chase."

"Couldn't say."

Radigan nodded; he poked the general's dead body with his boot. He looked across the chasm, unable to tell what the figures on the other side were doing. Besides stealing the camels. An acceptable loss; as was Connor. Radigan stood and lunged, clamping a hand around Connor's throat to cut his scream. His knife slid easily between the young man's ribs. He twisted it, and took the man to the ground, choking him till his eyes glazed over. He pulled his knife out, already moving on to the next step of his plan. He retrieved the general's sword and jammed it into Connor's open wound. He lodged it in, making sure it would not pull out clean. Then, picked up the general's body.

He looked at the dead face, smiled and pushed it off the chasm.

"Goodbye, General Palzo. Your loyalty to the old baron will be remembered," He said.

He looked in the direction his men had disappeared. He mounted his equine, and turned on his radio.

"Connor's going to stay on guard duty. We'll send a relief squad once we get back to the citadel."

The radio returned, a soft, easy voice: "Copy that lieutenant; should someone stay with him?"

"No. The bridge is gone; it is completely safe. Move on, pitch a tent at the normal hour. I'll catch up."

Radigan pocketed his radio and began the easy ride back home. He looked at the setting sun as he rode, gently bobbing in the sand. Then, he smiled. "We are going to live like kings."

* * *

"Ambrose, you're bleeding," Rennard said, after he had finished tying a proper splint around Dana's wrist. Ambrose leaned against the camel, his hands pressed against his leg.

"No bone damage. They got a lucky shot, went clean through."

"Dana, prep us some rides, let me take a look at Ambrose's leg."

Dana nodded; she was tired and parched. She had drank greedily from the guard post's supplies until Rennard had told her to pace herself. Now, she was taking stock of everything that could fit in their bags, some guns and the saddlebags for the camels. She had already decided

that her camel would be named Leon.

She tried not to think about the general or Ben. The explosions had terrified her; she hadn't been able to look up until Rennard shook her gently. It had been so loud. Louder than any gunfire she had ever heard. It was impossible, but she had even thought she had heard the men's screams when the explosion engulfed them. There had been nothing left when she looked up.

Only the cold gaze from across the chasm. She had seen the figure in the distance stab his friend, and throw the general's body into the chasm. He had even tipped his hat to them as he began to ride off. She clutched the satchel close to her chest as she loaded the other bags. She wasn't sure how she had ended up with it, but it meant one thing: Beau would live.

Part of her wanted to say it would all be worth it; that she could now go back to normal. She looked at the men, as Mort bandaged Ambrose's leg; they had risked their lives for her. Even though they did not have to, they had. Ambrose had come back for them; Rennard had given her everything he could and more.

She thought about that, even as Mort helped her onto Leon. Ambrose managed to swing himself up, though he grimaced in pain. Mort was the last one to hop up. He kicked the camel's flank, like an old hand. They rode three abreast, with Rennard in the middle. They went at a slow pace.

Dana broke the silence: "Mort, after you help Beau, what are you going to do?"

"Go back to the Lyceum and study."

"Let me come with you," Dana said. "I want to learn to be like you and Ambrose. I want to be a hero, like you two."

"We're not heroes," Ambrose said. "Just men."

"Then I want to be a man, like you two."

Mort raised an eyebrow and cracked a smile. "Do you now? Want to be a man, you say."

Dana looked at him, almost astonished that he would be holding in a laugh. "That's not funny!"

"Oh, yes it is little lady," Ambrose said. "Yes it sure is."

"We'll ask your father, first. See if it is OK with him that we make a man out of his little girl."

"You know what I meant," Dana said, with a bit of hurt pride. "Fine! Make me a woman!"

Rennard and Ambrose looked at each other again. This time, they couldn't hold in their laughs. Ambrose cried so hard his eyes teared. Dana didn't get the joke.

* * *

Beau's recovery was slow, but steady. He would never be as vibrant as his sister, but he would live a full life. Ambrose and Rose had a little baby girl, which they named Serena. Dana, the baby's godmother, doted on little Serena and spoiled her rotten when she could. When she couldn't, she was off in the Lyceum with Morton Rennard, who spent the days reviewing what his eyes in the sky reported and teaching her to use the equipment and draw her weapons. She learned how to heal wounds and ride, though she never did completely get over her desire to look like a perfect lady.

Davey Littleton presented Ambrose with the finest rifle ever created in the Flats. Ambrose joined the long patrol, becoming a captain in short order. He was an indispensable man, who though taciturn, eventually softened once Serena called him papa.

Across the chasm, Radigan's silk voice lured the young Peter deeper into his personal hell and rage. The rumors burned that General Palzo had aided the criminal Dana Littleton in her escape, killing Connor Golin in the process. The new baron was prone to anger and rash, calling for the general's head.

The general's daughter and a small group of General Palzo's most loyal men, disappeared into the desert before Radigan could muster men to march on Benning. With the corporal in hiding, Radigan moved freely between the baron's holdings. The engineers and scientists found themselves faced with a new, secret task, that even Radigan could not unravel. For now, the chasm between the two wastelands spread ever further, and the Flats continued to exist in relative peace.

Now, in the bright desert sun, on the roof of the Lyceum, a young woman, blonde hair tied up in a soft, red ribbon, looked out over the expanse, fully aware of the dangers that lurked in the sands. Dreamers rarely see the exact path to their goals, but they can still achieve them. Dana Littleton, all in all, felt it was a really amazing way to live.