

# WASTELAND™

RANGERS & RAIDERS

TM



GHOST BOOK I

## The Earth Transformed

MIKE STACKPOLE AND NATHAN LONG

**GHOST BOOK ONE: The Earth Transformed**

**Mike Stackpole and Nathan Long**

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# **GHOST BOOK ONE**

**– The Earth Transformed –**

By

**Mike Stackpole and Nathan Long**

## – Chapter One –

Floating.

Lighter than a feather on a warm spring breeze. Just hanging there.

Blue and green. The colors of life.

Peaceful.

Then, clouds. Terrible clouds.

I didn't see them — didn't hear any thunder — but they had to be there. There could be no other explanation for the lightning that shot through me. One bolt, straight down from the top of my skull and out through my soles, splintering as it went, stabbing out through every neuron, every pore.

My body tensed, muscles spasming, back arching almost to the breaking point. My bones burned. I tried to breathe, but something sour filled my mouth. Nettles dragged across my tongue. I jackknifed up, liquid splashing around me, metallic air cold on my skin.

It didn't quench the fire in my cells.

I flailed for balance as the world moved under me, then I fell to a freezing floor, all metal and slippery with viscous glop. I tried to get up, but my hands slid away. I coughed up a throatful of something foul, then swiped a hand over my face, clearing thick gel from my eyes. I had to squeeze it out of my hair.

That exhausted me, so I lay there for a bit, just breathing, eyes closed against the bright light. My mouth tasted like I'd drunk from a spittoon. I couldn't remember how I knew to make that comparison.

Finally I opened my eyes. One at a time. For a few unfocused moments everything was green, a glowing pond-scum green. I lay in a puddle of it. A stronger, deeper green rimmed a glass door just past my head. A green button pulsed, set waist-high in the wall beside that door. The glass tank I'd fallen from glowed green too. It was about the size of a casket, and had green fluid in it — a shade never seen in nature. A curved glass lid had split in the middle and fallen back on each side. The fluid had stopped sloshing and the conveyor belt that had risen and dumped me out of there had sunk back beneath the surface.

I had no idea what the tank was, but I didn't like it.

I didn't like that I was buck naked and unarmed either.

That unarmed part really bothered me.

Being naked made taking a survey easier, though. I appeared to have all my parts. Fingers, toes, other extremities, all in the right places, and in the right number. Nothing missing, and no spares either.

Why would I have expected otherwise?

Vague memories were starting to form in the back of my head, but I couldn't bring them into focus. It was like the two halves of my brain were trying to talk to each other in the middle of a noisy bar.

Being careful not to slide around, I got to my feet and pressed my back to the cold steel wall. It was a wonder to behold. No rust. No dents. No grime. Like no human had ever touched it.

It creeped me out.

I hit the green button.

The glass door retracted. Hot air rushed in at me like an assault team, drying my skin. I stayed where I was, listened for trouble. Didn't hear anything — nor see, nor smell. The door closed again with a whoosh of air. I waited, listening.

Still nothing.

Time to make a move.

I hit the button and dodged out and left.

And tripped over my own feet.

Literally.

No, not the feet at the ends of my legs. The feet at the end of the legs of a body that looked just like the guy I usually saw in the mirror. He lay stretched out in the dark corridor just out of sight of the doorway. He'd been shot, chopped up, and gnawed on. Even so, I recognized the face.

My knees took a time out and I slid down the opposite wall. Pieces of things started to come back, but not many. That dent in the dead guy's skull, the one that had been bound up with soiled rags, might have been the reason why.

I knew I was in some place called Sleeper Base One, and I knew somebody had told me and my... my friends? gang? squad? to find it for a very important reason, but I couldn't remember the reason. I also knew that something had gone wrong for us — maybe not here, but somewhere — and I had hurried back here to clone myself so I could finish the mission. Whatever the mission was supposed to—

Wait.

Quick rewind.

Clone myself?

I looked back through the glass door into the room with the glass tank.

Cloning chamber.

I'd cloned myself.

How did I know how to do that?

More memory lost to that dent in my head.

Er, my former head.

I — I mean he — must have died while waiting for my current self to decant out of the green goo.

Poor bastard.

Still, he had clothes and I didn't, so...

I peeled him, starting with his boots. Can't go anywhere without boots. Then the jeans and shirt. I didn't take his socks or shorts. I think I was more uneasy about leaving him utterly naked than I was about corpse cooties. His body armor was worse for wear but better than nothing.

I wondered why he didn't have anything more lethal than a combat knife on him. Wasn't like he'd been looted. *Everything* would have been gone if he had. A few choice cuts of meat likely would have been gone too. Maybe I'd shucked all that stuff on the way here from wherever I'd come from. Maybe I'd been too weak to carry it all.

He still wore a battered star-shaped badge on the sheath of his knife. The star of a Desert Ranger. My star. I flicked dried blood off it as I slid the sheath onto my belt, then I froze.

I didn't know who I was.

My mind could see a man with sergeant's stripes shouting my name, but I couldn't hear him. I could feel the lips of a redheaded woman whispering it in my ear, but I couldn't hear her.

I looked at the back of the star. That's where Desert Rangers usually scratched their names. Nothing but the pin. It was blank.

I fought down panic. I told myself my name didn't matter. Who I was didn't matter. The badge told me *what* I was, and that's what mattered.

I was a Desert Ranger.

Now all I had to do was figure out what my mission had been, and how to complete it.

Then a woman screamed, and I moved “figuring out my mission” down to number two on the list.

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The metal corridors of the base made tracking the shouts and crashes a bit tricky, but I got there in the end. Four mutants had the woman surrounded. They looked like shaggy dogs wearing ragged clothes — growled a lot too — but no dog in the world ever smelled that bad.

First one I reached had ten fingers, seven on one hand, three on the other. Lots of space where the spares had been manicured down to the knuckle. Maybe he needed the extra fingers for picking all three of his nostrils. They ran like a sewer all down into his beard.

I grabbed a handful of matted hair and yanked back, then pulled the combat knife across his throat. Apparently old me was diligent about honing his knife to a razor’s edge. Blood jetted and his head almost came clean off. Well, I say clean, but nothing about that lice rancher was anything but foul.

The spray of blood turned the second one toward me. I wished it hadn’t. He had skin like a shedding rattlesnake and something had taken his right eye, leaving just a tangle of scars. He’d wired a bayonet to the open end of a sawed-off shotgun. It was swinging in my direction.

I stepped into him. Caught the muzzle on my left hip. He stumbled back, trying to buy himself enough room to stab me. I got there first. Eight inches of steel right between ribs. Hot backslash told me I’d found one of the big arteries. He was out before he fell, dead before the second bounce.

The third guy charged me empty-handed. He’d been making grabs at the woman. Apparently he had plans for her that required her to have a pulse. Big man with bigger fists. Each one was the size of a small-block engine.

I flipped my knife around so the blade lay back against my left forearm, where he couldn’t see it or grab for it. He roared in swinging. There was no blocking a punch like that, and if I’d ducked it, the rest of him was right behind it, all four hundred pounds of him. I would have been road kill. Instead I spun to my right, outside his roundhouse, and stuck my knife out as he went past. Opened up his leathers like paper and left the rags underneath dripping red.

I stopped and turned, thinking I had all the time in the world, but he was faster than I expected. Before I was halfway around, he had me up off the ground with his arms pinning my elbows to my sides and his biceps tightening for a bear hug. I could hear my bones creaking, and suddenly breathing was no longer an in-out-in-out process. There was no in. There was only out.

I twisted my knife around and felt it cutting through more leather, but without leverage I was never going to reach anything vital.

“You fucking musk-ox!” I growled. “I didn’t come back from the dead to die like this!”

He just laughed.

And then he stopped laughing and started toppling forward.

I rolled free as his arms went loose, and just managed to get clear as he crashed to the ground, stone dead.

That was a murder mystery I didn’t have time to ponder at that moment. I rolled up, knife out, back to the wall, knowing there was one more I had to deal with.

But there wasn’t.

The last guy lay on his back, his neck bent at an angle that made me queasy to look at. I glanced back at the musk-

ox. Strangely, he had died in exactly the same way.

I raised my eyes. The woman who had screamed stood in a picture-perfect fighting stance, fists cocked, and fire in her monitor-blue eyes. I couldn't see much of her beneath the grey robe she wore, but her face was lean and her expression defiant. There were two more dead mutants behind her.

I lowered the knife a little and raised the other hand, showing her it was empty. "Did you really punch those guys hard enough to break their—?"

"Kick." She said. "I kicked them. Steel-toed boots."

I shook my head. "And here I thought you were in trouble."

"They surprised me."

"I bet you surprised them too. Damn." I edged back. She hadn't relaxed her stance. "Uh, are we cool?"

She gave me a quick once over — checking for extra fingers maybe? — then dropped her fists and stood, nodding. "We're cool. Sorry. Can't be too careful."

I dropped to a knee and began to strip weapons and satchels off the mutants, but I still kept an eye on her. Cool or not, she was obviously lethal, and I didn't know what she was doing in a place most people didn't even know existed. Time to use some subtlety and find out.

"So," I said, upending a dusty courier bag and pawing through the contents. "Why are you here?"

She shrugged and joined me in looting the dead. "Same reason as you, probably. Hunting for relics to help combat the robot menace. My order learned of this location and sent me to scout it out."

A plug fit into a socket in my brain. A light came on. Flickering, but there. Was *that* my mission? "Robot... Menace... Yeah. Death machines, coming out of the desert. A never-ending army."

"That's the one."

I glanced up at her, took another look at her duds. "You're a novice with the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud, right?"

"Right. From Vegas." She pried the bayonet-shotgun from the little guy's hands and cracked it. No shells. No wonder he hadn't fired. "Things are pretty bad there. Robots in the sewers. More surrounding the walls. The Church is doing what we can to help out."

"And so you just happened to find this place the same time I did."

"Actually, I probably wouldn't have found it at all except I came across a trail of blood and limping boot prints. I tracked it back to here, hoping to help."

I nodded toward the dead mutants. "Guess they tracked it too."

"Guess so," she said. "But what about you? I only saw one set of recent boot prints going into this place, and you're not limping or bleeding."

"I, uh..." I looked away. I hardly wanted to admit to *myself* that I was a clone, let alone tell anyone else. "I heal fast."

She gave me a long look at that, then extended a hand. "Remarkably so, it seems. Athalia. Sister Athalia."

I shook, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out.

"You aren't afraid of telling me your name, are you, Mr. "I didn't come back from the dead to die like this?""

So she'd heard that. Great.

She smiled. "I could always call you Ghost, I guess."

"I prefer Revenant. It's a better fit."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

I looked at what I had pulled off the corpses. A few shells for the shotgun, a nine millimeter pistol with a couple of clips, three dull knives and, surprisingly, a half-dozen red sticks of TNT. That last discovery caused me to take another look at the room. Three of the walls were made of a translucent crystal, and beyond the southern panel lurked a handful of silhouettes that appeared to be full suits of some kind of high-tech armor. Whatever it was, it was sure to beat the shit out of the flea-infested leathers the mutants had been wearing.

“I don’t know if that will work,” said Athalia as I hefted the dynamite. “The Church told me that according to their scouts the only way to get through that glass is with a security card. Maybe we should see if we can find one.”

Another plug and socket. I started slapping the pockets of the jacket and pants I had taken off the previous me. “I... I have one, I think. Here it... no, that’s a map. Wait. Here!”

I dug out the card and we spent a minute searching the room for the slot we were supposed to stick it in. Athalia found it in the molding that framed the glass panel. Not a slot — just a black plastic box with the icon of a card on it. I placed the card on the box. A red light came on. Nothing happened.

Well, almost nothing. Another light came on in my head too.

“Wait. I’ve done this before. It didn’t work that time either. In the end we found a note in a desk — it said the key cards that opened this door were actually in some place called Project Darwin.”

Athalia frowned. “Why would the key for a door in this facility be in a different facility?”

“That was in the note too,” I said. “The guy with the key went to Darwin for some emergency and didn’t make it back before the bombs fell.”

She sighed and turned towards the door. “Well, that’s that then. I guess we’re going to Project Darwin — wherever that is.”

“It’s right here on this map, but not yet. We haven’t tried Plan A yet.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And what’s Plan A?”

I waggled the dynamite at her and grinned.

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Plan A went over like a wet fart. Athalia had been right. Blowing the dynamite didn’t do anything to that glass wall except change its description from frosted to smoked. But the plan did reveal something else. A couple things, actually.

At my insistence we had dragged the mutants out of the room, not because I was worried about damaging their already damaged corpses, but because cleaning a thin, red paste off all that lovely armor wasn’t my idea of a good time. And while we were looking for a place to dump them, Athalia went right when I told her to go left and ended up looking down at my body — my former body, that is.

She gave him the once over twice, then slid a look over at me. “Twin brother?”

“Something like that.”

She looked into the room with the glass casket. “So, it’s not a fairy tale after all. The ancients really could clone themselves.”

“Based on personal experience, I’d say yes.”

“I understand Revenant now.” She looked at his wounds. “And the bloody footprints.”

“I don’t suppose you understand why he died?”

She looked around at me. “You don’t remember?”

I pointed at the dent in his head. “Corrupted data.”



“Maybe it will come back to you.”

I looked again at the battered, bloodied corpse that had once been me. “I don’t know if I want it to.”

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Five minutes later I was sure I didn’t want to.

Oh well, too late.

In the fourth room we searched we found the remnants of another fight — a jumbled pile of dead bodies and broken robots — and I found another little chunk of my memory — a hard, black, bitter chunk.

The bodies were all Desert Rangers, and every face I looked at lit up another corner of my mind and opened another chamber in my heart. Franny, Brockleman, Spider. The names and faces hurt — like a flood of jagged knives, like salt in wounds. And the worst part was, I knew this was the second time I’d grieved over these people — these friends — because when I looked at the robots, another memory opened up, red and white and bright with the strobe of muzzle flash.

I had been here when these rangers had died. I’d fought alongside them. Stood back to back with them, blasting and hacking at that tide of relentless killing machines as they poured out from the depths of the facility.

I’d been the only one who hadn’t died.

The memory was clear, but I couldn’t place it in time. Had this just happened? Was this where my former self had been cut to pieces? No, his wounds were fresh. The blood here was dry, the bodies decaying. They had been dead for days.

Athalia had tried to comfort me, but what was there to say? I collected their stars to bring back to Ranger Center, and then we found someplace else to dump the bodies of the mutants.

And in the end, like I said, it was all pointless. All firing off that TNT did was choke us with smoke and make our ears ring.

“Okay, okay,” I said, as we surveyed the undamaged wall. “You win. I guess we go to Darwin after all. “

Athalia blinked at me and put a hand to her ear. “Huh? I can’t hear a thing you’re saying.”

## – Chapter Two –

As soon as we stepped outside of Sleeper One my radio started hissing and squawking.

“— hear me? This is — argas, from ra — er — eam Alpha. — operated fro — team and — rounded. Nee — ack—up.”

I got on the horn. “Vargas, is that you? This is—” I stopped. I still couldn’t remember my name. I couldn’t even remember my Team’s call sign. “This is... a friend of the rangers. We’re reading you. What’s your twenty?”

“— ank — od! I — tlement of Whi — esa. I repe — te Mesa. Do — copy?”

I wasn’t sure I did. “Did you say White Mesa? Where’s that?”

“— oger! — ite — esa! Three — ks due so — I—70 — idge. Wes — ide — river. — ook for a — ig white — ock!”

I looked at Athalia. “Did you catch any of that? My ears are still ringing. I don’t know if I got it.”

“Three clicks due south of the I-70—something, on the west side of the river.” She grimaced. “As for that last part, I sincerely hope he said ‘Look for a big white rock.’”

“Me too. And it’s the I-70 bridge. Okay.” I closed my eyes and pictured the map in my head. Yeah, I could remember the map, but not my name. Maybe I could only remember the important stuff. Then I clicked in again. “We copy, Vargas. We’re on the other side of the river, about five clicks southeast of you. On our way.”

“Ten—F — be — areful. I — surroun — There are mult — stiles in — rea. I — peat, — ultiple hosti — the area.”

“We read you. We’ll keep our eyes open.” I stood and shrugged into my pack. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

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My old self might have grown up in what used to be Arizona, but my new self’s pink—and-newly-minted ass wasn’t ready for the reality of the Wasteland. Seeing it for the first time, laying down fresh memories over his old and faded ones, it took my breath away.

My first impression was red, everywhere. Halfway between blood and rust — from dust to rocks to mountains to sky. In a few places it trended toward blood-clot purple or corpse grey, but overwhelmingly it was red.

Then came the heat. It wasn’t just the sun baking me, but the rocks around me shedding heat as fast as they could. There wasn’t any getting away from it. The prickle of sweat would ooze out of me, then a hot wind would come and the moisture would vanish, leaving me no cooler. The world was sucking me dry and turning my newborn skin neon pink.

I did see some green here and there, but aside from verdigris stains on rocks where water had seeped out through a copper deposit, if it was green, it had spikes. Big nasty thorns longer than my thumb, and that wasn’t even the cactuses. Even the twisted old willows that whispered over our heads when we crossed the shriveled river had thorns.

Most creatures we saw as we walked north moved as little as possible. Rattlesnakes coiled in shadows. Lizards skittered up rocks, then froze. They raised and lowered themselves as if catching their breath, then moved on in another burst. Birds — buzzards and vultures — circled lazily overhead.

Athalia turned out to be a good traveling companion. She spotted trouble before we tripped over it, and found us

some hidden pools where we were able to drink and refill our canteens.

As we were taking a sip and a breather in the shade of a tilted red boulder, Athalia wiped her lips and looked over at me.

“So, how much do you remember from before you, uh...”

“Before I died?” I shrugged. “Tiny bits of things. I remember I was a ranger. I remember the robot menace you mentioned. Death machines coming out of the desert, intent on wiping out everything that lives. Don’t remember if I ever knew why they were doing it, but I’m guessin’ I was probably on a mission to stop them.”

Athalia nodded and we started walking again. “Maybe you were. Before I left Vegas, I heard rumor of rangers meeting with Faran Brygo, helping him fight the robots in the sewers. Maybe that was you and your team.”

I frowned. It sounded familiar, but I didn’t get any flashes about it like I had in the room with all my dead friends. It didn’t feel like I’d experienced it firsthand. “Maybe so. I don’t know.”

“And this Vargas you talked to on the Radio? You seemed to remember him.”

A flash of a ranger with a black beard, laughing, stumbling out of a roadhouse with a bottle in his hand. There was a woman too, a redhead, reaching for me, grinning from ear to ear. I remembered I liked that grin, but I couldn’t remember the name of the woman it belonged to.

“He... he’s another ranger. I think we were friends. Not from my squad though. My squad is....”

“Back in the base, with the robots.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I changed the subject.

“So, seeing as you’ve got a functioning memory, what’s your story?”

She shrugged. “Not much to it. Miner’s daughter. Grew up near Kingman. Started looking for answers and ended up finding the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud.”

“Uh—huh. And did you find any answers? Do they have an explanation for how the world got like this?”

“Uh, the bombs fell and the souls of the good were consumed by the great glow. The bad were left behind and must work to purify ourselves so that we may be worthy of being consumed by the glow when it is once again ignited. Or... something like that.”

“So, you’re fairly new to the church?”

She looked around. “It shows?”

I pointed to her forearms, exposed where she had rolled up the sleeves of her habit. “Your tattoos. They didn’t look very religious. Or very old. Guessing there was a phase between “miner’s daughter” and “Sister Athalia.”

She folded her arms like she could hide the skulls and tigers and dragons. “There were a lot of wrong answers before I found the right one. It took a while, but now I walk the path of righteousness. I’m as new to the world spiritually as you are physically.”

“Well then, happy birthday to us.”

Despite my flip answer, what she’d said started me thinking. From what few memories I had to go on, my former self wasn’t a church-going man. I remembered enough about religion, though, to know that most godly folks believed that people had souls, and that souls entered the body somewhere between conception and birth. At death, the soul was supposed to sail off again, either to heaven, hell, the happy hunting grounds, or whatever.

So what did that mean for a man who had died and been born again? Where was my soul now, if I’d ever had one?

The only other story I knew about a guy who’d managed to get himself resurrected didn’t have a happy ending — and he’d been the son of God.

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Just before dusk, Athalia brought me out of my pondering by stopping dead in front of me and squatting to look at the ground. I pulled up short, then stepped around beside her.

“What’s up?”

“Tracks. And if this one is your friend, then it looks like the hostiles he was talking about might have caught up with him.”

I knelt beside her and had a look. A half-dozen or so people had come up from the southeast, then headed off west, but one of them hadn’t been walking. A long, thin channel came off the toes of the set of boot prints she had pointed to, suggesting the person wearing them had been dragged along. More importantly, though, the heel had wedges cut out of it on the inside and back. Most people would have put those notches down to wear and tear, but the boots on my feet had similar modifications, and seeing them now lit up another corner of my brain. They were deliberate markings, a way rangers could let others rangers read their trail. I looked in the direction the ranger had been dragged. A tall, flat-topped rock jutted up from behind the intervening hills. It glowed pink in the setting sun, but the stone it was made of was as pale as beach sand.

“That look like a big white rock to you?”

She nodded. “White Mesa.”

“Looks like they headed that way, and you’re right. They’ve got one of mine.” I stood again. “How long do you reckon before we get there?”

“Maybe an hour if we walk straight in, two if we’re safe about it and reconnoiter as we go.”

I grunted. “Might not be anyone left to save if we’re safe about it.”

“Might not live long enough to save anyone if we aren’t.”

She had a point, and the first rule of ranger training was to take care of yourself so that you can take care of others, but somehow self-preservation didn’t feel like a priority just then.

“Sorry, I gotta go with my gut. I’m going straight in. No obligation for you to follow, though. You already saved my life once today.”

She shrugged. “And maybe I’ll save it again. Lead on.

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Just as the sun was bisected by the horizon, the trail came out on an overlook that gave us a clean view of the settlement — a dozen shacks huddled in the lee of the mesa, all cobbled together out of car parts, mobile home pieces, recovered lumber and scrap metal that had been welded, riveted and hammered together into rusty sheets. The shacks surrounded a big lozenge-shaped depression that served as both communal garden toward the back where it butted up against the towering white rock and town square on the end closer to us.

And it looked like I had been right to hurry, because things were looking pretty fatal in the town square area as we watched from cover. Torches were lit all around, and three ten-foot-tall posts had recently been sunk into the ground in the center. Three men, their hands tied over their heads, were bound one to a post while a laughing pack of raiders circled them menacingly. Hanging from the center post was my old pal Vargas — well, my former self’s old pal — a lean young ranger with long black hair and blood from a battered nose and a cut on his cheek glistening in his scruffy beard. From the way the crowd of townsfolk who huddled at the edges of the square called their names, I guessed the

two men who hung on either side of him were local boys. They seemed barely conscious, but Vargas was still struggling.

I counted eight raiders in the pack. Five with shotguns, working crowd control, while the others, a trio of shave-skulled muscle-heads, put on a show, pacing around the posts, taunting their victims, screaming in their faces, punching them as hard as they could in the stomachs and ribs. The victims all puked and groaned and shouted, which the raiders seemed to think was the funniest thing in the world.

Athalia looked at me. “Why aren’t they looting the village?”

“They’ll get around to it.” I swallowed, recollecting things I’d learned long ago. “They gotta prove they’re men first, and let the rest of the village know what happens when anyone tries to fight back. Once Vargas and the other two are dead, then they’ll start pillaging.”

“Any idea how to stop them?”

Again, I should have been cautious, thinking about plans of attack and exit strategies and who to attack first, but looking at those men bleeding and broken on those posts and the terrified townsfolk looking on, none of those things seemed to matter. For an answer I started down the hill.

Athalia hissed behind me. “Ghost! Revenant! Wait! I... Shit. Okay.”

I heard her start after me.

The torchlight made it easy to spot the path into the settlement. I brought us in between a gap between two shacks, then stepped through the ranks of petrified villagers with Athalia following uneasily after me. At the edge of the circle I whistled loud and high, like I was calling a dog. The guys watching the crowd all whipped around and leveled their shotguns at me, while the three in the middle turned to stare.

I held my hands up. “I see you’re playing who can punch the hardest. You let anybody in the game?”

The three contestants looked at me like somehow a cow flop had grown a mouth and started talking. The guy on the left had one eye, the guy on the right had one ear, and it looked like the guy in the middle had probably eaten the eye and ear they were missing. He was enormous, twice as wide as me and a head and a half taller, and he smiled when he looked at me. I wished he hadn’t. Filing piss-yellow teeth to points doesn’t make them look any better. “You think you can punch harder than me?”

“Me? Nope.” I jerked a thumb at a surprised Athalia. “But her, she’s going to clean your clock.”

Pointy Teeth looked past me, then smirked. “That true, nun? You gonna give me a beating? Put the fear of god in me?”

Athalia shot me a “what the fuck are you doing” look, but stepped forward and faced the big man. “My god is a nuclear bomb, so you should already be afraid, but no, I... I’m just going to offer you a wager. If I can knock you down, you take your friends out of here and leave these people alone. If not, you can put me on one of those posts and use me for round two. What do you say?”

The other raiders laughed.

“Come on, Viper! You ain’t gonna back down from a church lady, are you?” said One-Eye.

“Put her on the ground, Viper,” said One-Ear.

Viper looked from Athalia to me and back, angry and suspicious. “If this is a trick, you’re both dead, and not the easy way.”

Athalia gave me another dirty look, then dropped into her stance and raised her fists. “If it’s a trick, it’s on both of us.”

Viper squared up with her. “Alright, sister. Fine. You think you got god on your side. Prove i—”

She moved while he was still talking — a blur of grey robes — and caught him with a roundhouse kick that snapped his head around and sent a rope of spittle halfway across the settlement. Two teeth followed, but didn’t make it quite

that far. Viper spun, his face bouncing off Vargas's knees where he hung from the post, and almost went down then and there, but at the last second he caught himself and reset, fists balled. His pals hooted and hollered all around him, laughing at his pain and questioning his manhood, while the villagers backed away uneasily from the swirl of violence.

Which was just what I'd hoped would happen.

I looked around. Absolutely no one — not the villagers, not the raiders, not even the guys on the posts — was paying any attention to me. I edged back until I was out of the circle and drew the nine I'd taken off one of the dead thugs in Sleeper One.

I was almost tempted to let Athalia finish her fight with Viper, because it was a thing of beauty to watch her. The big man's punches were like freight trains, there was no denying it, but Athalia was never at the station when they pulled in. A punch would arc for her head and she'd sidestep it or duck it and nail him as he stumbled past. Sure, her fists weren't the cinderblocks of bone and scar that his were, but when one shot out, it hit him in his weak spots — throat, solar plexus, floating ribs. Her kicks caught his thighs and his knees, buckling them and making him bellow in pain. He was a mountain of muscle and fury. She was a grey cloud swirling around him, and I could see the lightning building up in her. But I couldn't wait for the strike, because I knew we wouldn't live long after he fell, no matter what Viper had promised.

I was between and behind two of the shotgun boys now, and had clean shots on two more. I raised the nine and fired, once to the left, once to the right, tight and controlled, like snapping my fingers. A nine mil may not be the biggest bullet in the world, but when it travels less than six feet to enter the back of a head, it makes a hell of a mess coming out the face. They both dropped to their knees, gobbling their own blood.

The rest were turning now, but still unsure what was happening.

I popped my third target as clean as the first two, then swung and fired at the fourth — and the old nine jammed.

"Shit!"

The last two shotgun boys raised their weapons at me. One-Eye and One-Ear drew their pistols. I cursed myself for not cleaning the gun more thoroughly before we'd set out. Of course those filthy mutants had shit quality weapons. Of course!

But just as all those street sweepers and automatics started pointing my way, Athalia leapt high and delivered a snap-kick to Viper's ear that plucked him up off the ground and dumped him flat on his back ten feet away. The impact was enough to distract the others, and I racked the slide and cleared the round just as Athalia landed and charged One-Eye, shrieking like a banshee.

"Shoot her!" shouted One-Eye.

"Shoot the shooter!" shouted One-Ear.

I dodged left as gun barrels criss-crossed in confusion. Athalia corkscrewed down and swept the legs out from under One-Eye, taking them both below the line of fire as the guys with shotguns opened up on her. One blast blew over her head and cut One-Ear in half. His killer's guilty look lasted for less than a second before I drilled his skull. It exploded like a blood sausage.

Another load of shot blasted my way and I threw myself down, but not before I caught a pellet or two. I ignored that shooter, since he was already digging in a pocket for another shell, and rolled up aiming at One Ear. I pulled the trigger.

Again, nothing.

Another misfire.

It would take me all of two seconds to clear that dud round, but that was about 1.75 seconds more than I had to live. Athalia was grappling on the ground with One-Eye. She couldn't save me, and One-Ear had me in his sights, gloating at me with a smile that was more gums than teeth.

And then he just went away.

It wasn't poof, vanish, like in a traveling magician's show. No puff of smoke. Just a little red mist, and One-Ear folded in around his middle and flew sideways behind a rock. I cleared the bad round from my gun, stepped around the rock and shot him in the face, just to be sure, then turned to help Athalia finish off One-Eye. He was already finished. Athalia had him in an arm bar and was driving his nose out through the back of his skull with the heel of her steel-shod boot. One-Eye spasmed once, then lay there like wet laundry.

Then I remembered there was still one more guy with a shotgun, but as I turned to face him, he was done too.

Funny thing about bullets, especially when they're traveling at mach something or other — the crack you hear isn't the gunshot. That's the noise they make breaking the sound barrier. The actual gunshot, it comes along slowly by comparison, about as fast as a little boy tracking a caterpillar. So I didn't hear the gunshot that killed the shotgunner until the he was already on the ground with his jaw missing.

Athalia rolled behind one of the posts that held the raiders' victims and peered anxiously in the direction the mysterious shots had come from. She looked at me.

"Friend of yours?"

I step behind the post that held Vargas. "I hope so, but I'm not going smile and wave until I find out for sure. Maybe they're just a terrible shot."

"Don't worry," croaked Vargas. "I'd know that shootin' anywhere. That's Angie."

I froze.

Angie.

The name plucked my heart like a guitar string.

## – Chapter Three –

I holstered my pistol and drew my knife, then cut Vargas loose as Athalia did the same for the villagers on the other two posts.

Vargas slumped to the ground, hugging his ribs and wheezing like a concertina. “Thanks, buddy... I—”

He stopped as he looked up at me, frowning. Then he called me by a name I recognized, but which fit me the way a grown man’s boots fit his five year old son.

“Was... was that you on the radio a few hours back?”

“Yup. Why?”

“‘Cause we heard you were dead. You and your whole team. Killed by mutants.”

“Mutants? No. It was robots. I... Who told you that?”

“You did. ‘Bout three days ago. Your dying words.”

Now I was really confused. I didn’t remember that at all. And the bodies in Sleeper One had been dead a week at least. Why would I have called in about it two days ago?

“I’m sorry. Got some gaps in my memory. I—”

“Forget it. Who am I to look a last minute rescue in the mouth? You’re here and you saved my sorry ass. That’s what counts.”

I slid the knife back in its sheath and knelt to check his wounds, which were many. I got out my first aid kit. “How’d you get yourself in such a mess in the first place?”

“Heh.” His laugh sounded like dry sticks rubbing together. I gave him some water from my canteen, and he continued. “Me and Angie and Ace were lookin’ for Sleeper Base One like General Surgue ordered, just like you and your team were, and we split up to cover more ground.”

“We found it,” I said. “The base, I mean.”

“Glad to hear it. Wish to hell I had. I...” He winced as I got to work with the peroxide and the bandages. “I found these jackasses instead. I was so busy scannin’ the horizon for that damn bunker I tripped over ‘em campin’ in a ravine. They was lickin’ their lips as soon as they saw all my gear, and they lit out after me like a pack of dogs. Still woulda’ given ‘em the slip, but I got snake bit and had to stop and bleed myself.”

He looked around at the shacks and the townsfolk who were gradually drifting back to the square now that the killing was done. “I was headin’ for here when I called. These folk coulda given them pricks a warm welcome if they’d had any warning. I didn’t make it. Finally got jumped near the river.”

“Yeah, we saw the marks where they’d dragged you off.”

“Dalton’s boot heel trick saves the day again.” Vargas chuckled, but then looked at Athalia again and frowned. “When you say ‘we,’ you mean you and her? You’re really the only one left of Team Foxtrot?”

Foxtrot. So that had been the name of my unit. Good to know. I nodded and pulled the ranger stars I’d found on the bodies in Sleeper One from my pocket. He stared.

“Jesus. I... I can’t believe it. I’m sorry.” He called me the same name again, and again it didn’t feel right. I held up my hand.

“Don’t call me that. I... that guy died there, with the rest of them. I’m... I feel like some kind of a revenant. Call me that instead.”



“Revenant?” He shrugged. “Kind of a mouthful, but if that’s what you want. So, did you find the high-tech gear we —”

“Snake!”

Vargas and I looked up. A woman was running across the square toward us with a shaggy-headed guy in mechanic’s overalls jogging along behind her. I gave the woman all my attention. She was a redhead, whip thin and freckled, with a ranger’s star on her cowboy hat, a pistol on each hip, and a long gun on a strap bouncing on her shoulder. She dropped to her knees beside Vargas without even a sidelong glance at me and started checking his wounds.

“How bad are you? Can you walk? Do you need a drink?”

He laughed. “Stop fussin’, Angie. I’m fine, thanks to your old friend here.”

“Old friend?” Angie turned as he nodded in my direction. “I...”

And all of a sudden she yelped, looped her arms around my neck, and hauled me in close for a kiss.

I was less than a day old, and I’d killed more folks than I’d kissed, but truth be told I can’t believe there’s ever been a better first kiss in the history of mankind. It was firm, sweet, wet, and warm in all the right ways, not to mention shy and brazenly familiar at the same time. My surprise melted into hunger, but before I could slip my arms around her and go back for seconds, she backed off just as abruptly and slapped me clean across the face.

“W—who the hell are you?”

“Another kiss like that and I’ll be anyone you want me to be.”

Anger blossomed in her eyes and I realized I’d said that out loud. I quickly brought my hands up. “Wait, listen. I—”

Her green eyes tightened. She cut me off. “You look like him, but no suntan, no scar on your forehead. And apparently your finger grew back.”

I glanced at my hands. So did Vargas. He gawked.

“Well I’ll be damned. I shoulda noticed that.”

She pointed at the offending digit. “Little one, right hand. You got bit by a gila monitor. I took its head and your finger off with the same swipe of my knife.” She brushed her long red hair off her shoulders. “Saved your life, then you saved mine, which is why I ain’t shooting you right now. But if you don’t tell me who you are, that may change.”

Athalia came to my rescue. “He can’t tell you. He’s a clone of whoever you knew.”

Angie made a sound like cat with a hairball. “A... a clone?”

“Yes. There is a cloning chamber in Sleeper One. He used it. I call him Ghost because of it. Who are you?”

Angie pulled her eyes away from me reluctantly. “I... Uh, Angie. Angela Deth.” She took a slow gander at Athalia. “And who are you?”

Athalia bowed her head. “Sister Athalia of the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud, at your—”

A new voice broke in from behind me. “Wait. Who is this guy again?”

I raised my head. It was the guy who had been following Angie — clean shaven, mop of curly hair, Las Vegas gang tattoo on his neck, sub-machine gun slung under one arm. He was standing stiffly behind Vargas, hard eyes giving me a pretty cool once over. Angie looked at him and got a look on her face like she’d run over somebody’s cat and didn’t feel so good about it.

“Uh, Ace, remember the guy who died? The one you wanted to help me forget?”

Ace looked pretty sick too. “He’s not dead after all?”

Angie looked back at me, frowning. “I... it... it’s more complicated than that.”

“Seems pretty simple to me.” He turned and walked away.

Angie called after him. "Ace!"

He didn't look back, just went to one of the other poles and started helping with the wounded. She cursed under her breath.

"So who's Ace?" I asked.

She looked unhappy. "A mechanic we saved in Quartz. We..." She looked unhappier. "I'm sorry. I thought you were dead."

"So," I said. "That means we, uh... You and me were...?"

Angie shot me a look. "You don't remember?"

Images of rolling around in an army cot with a redheaded wildcat flashed around in my brain, mixed in with snapshots of walking and laughing with her, drinking and talking with her. They didn't fold together into a full memory, but there was enough to get a pretty good picture.

"Some," I said. "My former self's brain-box got pretty badly cracked before he managed to clone me. I think a lot got lost in translation."

She smirked. "Well, I hope you remember the good bits."

I smirked back. "I hope there's more to come."

Her smirk died, but a shy-eyed young woman joined us before she could speak again. The young woman bowed her head to us.

"Greetings, rangers. I'm Kate, apprentice to our village healer. The village would like to offer you a meal for saving us from those men, and our healer and I can help with your wounded. If you can walk, it is this way. If you can't, I can call men to carry you."

Angie and I helped Vargas to his feet. We exchanged glances over his head as we walked him to the healer's shack, but we didn't speak.

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While the healer and his young apprentice got to work on Vargas and the other two human punching bags, the townsfolk dragged the bodies of the raiders off and burned them, then got to work on preparing a celebratory meal, which wasn't exactly a feast, even by wasteland standards, but looked to be all they could manage.

Vargas was all bandaged up by the time it was ready. He, Angie, Athalia and I sat down for a chat with the village mayor as we ate. Ace was there too, but he ate by himself off to one side and contented himself with shooting longing looks at Angie.

"These ain't the first raiders to come through," his honor told us. "Been more than usual lately, all comin' out of the north. First bunch took near to everything we had, and all the others that followed beat on us 'cause we didn't have nothin' left."

Vargas nodded. "From what those boys were saying as they were draggin' me along, they got chased out of their usual stompin' grounds by robots. Happenin' to everybody up there."

"More robots," said Angie. "Robots attacking Vegas. Robots rousting raiders. Robots killin' farmers. Every other S.O.S. we get at Ranger Central is about robots these days. Seems impossible they're all comin' from this Base Cochise. How can one place hold 'em all?"

"And where is Base Cochise?" I asked. "Do we know that?"

Vargas gave me a look. "Guess your memory *is* messed up. You got the location from us when we radioed for help

lookin' for Sleeper Base One. A fella name of Max told us it's northwest of Vegas, but we already kinda figured that out from all the reports coming from up that way."

"Gettin' there ain't the problem," said Angie. "Apparently there's so many robots around it we'll never fight our way through. At least not without that robot-proof gear Max told us about. We'll be ground hamburger without it."

She turned to me. "Did you find it? Max said it was supposed to be in Sleeper One."

I didn't know who Max was, but the gear I knew about. "It's there, but we couldn't get to it. It's in a locked room, bombproof glass. Need a sec pass. Apparently there's one in some place called Project Darwin. Another old facility, I think. Got a map to it right here. Athalia and I were about to head there when we got Vargas' distress call."

"What?" Vargas was laughing. "Why the hell would the key to get into a room in one base be in another—"

I held up a hand. "Athalia asked the same thing. Found a note at Sleeper One that said the guy who had the key went to Darwin because of some problem and never came back."

Vargas growled. "Buncha bullshit. Alright, gimme that map, and I'll see if I can get Thrasher and Hell Razor on the horn and give 'em directions to meet us there."

"You might want to call the general too," said Angie. "Keep the ol' bear in the loop."

"Haven't been able to raise Ranger Center for days. Robots must have downed one of our relay towers." He turned away from the fire and pulled his radio from his pack while the rest of us finished our meal. "Vargas calling Razor. Vargas calling Razor. Come in?"

A scratchy voice answered Vargas through the static. "This is Hell Razor, good buddy. Go ahead."

"Hmmm," said Angie, staring into the fire as Vargas continued his call. "A Sleeper Base guy going to Darwin? Makes you wonder if these places — Darwin, Cochise, Sleeper One — were all part of the same thing. Some old pre-apocalypse government organization? A military thing?"

"Could be," said Athalia. "Makes sense."

"But what was it all for?" I asked.

Nobody had an answer, and by then we were all fading faster than the last red of the sunset.

I turned to the Mayor. "Any place we can sleep for the night?"

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There was a small room in the mayor's shack and a stable out behind it, but the healer insisted that Vargas spend the night in his surgery where he could keep an eye on his bandages, and Athalia said she would spend the night off in the desert somewhere communing with her god, so that left Angie, Ace and me to figure out how to split up the two rooms. Ace didn't seem interested in sharing with me, and I agreed with him — that was an awkward conversation I would be happy to avoid — which put Angie in the spot of having to pick between us. Ace didn't let her.

"I ain't gonna play kiddie games. When you know your mind, let me know." And with that he walked out to the stable.

I looked after him, then back to her. "You can send me after him. It'll be a bit uncomfortable out there, but who cares? I know I'm not the man you knew."

"No," she said. "You're not. And I been thinking on whether or not that matters."

I nodded. "Me too."

She laughed. "You sound like you, you look like you — a younger you, which has its merits — but you're not you. It's very weird."

It *was* weird. I certainly thought I felt like me. But then what else was I going to feel like? The question was, did I feel like him? And I had no idea about that. There didn't seem to be any way of ever knowing.

Angie sighed. "Alright. You can stay."

I blinked, heart thumping. "Really?"

"Yeah. You hit the sack while I stand first watch, and I'll wake you up in three hours."

She laughed at my expression. "Oh, come on. You didn't really think...?"

"No, no, I guess not." I shrugged. "But then why didn't you go after Ace?"

"Because I'd never cheat on the man you were. And if you're not the man you were, well, Ace is a good enough guy that he won't mind waiting a bit."

"So... you're givin' me a test drive? Is that it?"

She stepped to the door and unslung her long gun. "I'm givin' you the chance to show me who you are. Sleep tight, Ghost."

My fists clenched as she pushed through the curtain and vanished. I got the feeling that the old me might have gone after her and given her a piece of my mind for saying what she had, and I was definitely a little hot under the collar, but at the same time I saw her point. I was the new kid — literally. I had to prove myself.

I hung my gunbelt on a peg and kicked off my boots, then sat down on the narrow wooden bunk, pulled off my shirt and wadded it up for a pillow. Stripping down completely would have made sleeping easier, but if trouble arrived in the night, I didn't want to die getting dressed.

The aches of the day's exertions and the sting of my sunburn made me groan as I lay back, but it felt good to stretch, and pretty soon I crashed and crashed hard. I don't remember dreaming, but I must have because I woke up sweating, the memory of the gun battle with the eight raiders fresh in my head again like it had just happened, and my heart pounding with horror at what I'd done back there.

Not only had I pulled Athalia into a dangerous situation without bothering to give her any explanation or get her consent, I'd also thought drawing on five men with shotguns was a good idea — a plan, even. What had I been thinking? Even if my gun hadn't jammed, I would probably still have been dead without the timely intervention of Angie and her long gun. Yes, I'd evaluated my enemies, figured out who was the most dangerous, and picked my targets accordingly, and I could tell myself that I'd made my choice because it was the one with the greatest chance of saving the most people, but part of me wondered if I had been that careless because I was a clone. It wasn't my life, after all. How, though, did I explain being careless with Athalia's life too? Was that something the guy lying dead outside the cloning chamber would have done? Was he rash like this? Or was that me?

And now that I mentioned it, was even *he* the man I was?

Angie's comment about my loss of a finger and a scar on my forehead hadn't penetrated when she'd said it, but now that I was thinking back to my former self, I remembered that the dead body at the base had all its fingers and toes. Was I the clone of a clone? Did it stop there? Maybe I was the clone of a clone of a clone. I had no way of knowing how far removed I was from the original.

Thinking on that was the kind of thing that could keep a man awake for days. I wondered for a bit if I was the sort of man who would worry on that. Or if I *had been* the kind of man who would. I decided, either way, it didn't matter. *I* wasn't going to be the kind of guy who worried about it.

Life — no matter which life it was — was just too damned short.

## – Chapter Four –

A half hour out of White Mesa the next morning and Kate, the doctor's apprentice, caught up to us. She had a pack on her back almost as big as she was.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

Vargas shook his head. "Go home, little darlin'. It's likely to be pretty deadly where we're goin', and none of us is gonna want your death on our conscience."

The girl was small and young and wore her hair in sun-streaked pigtails, but her eyes were as hard and sharp as a basalt knife. She crossed her arms. "I'm not your little darling, I'm your medic, and if I don't come, your deaths are going to be on *my* conscience. Besides, if you don't stop these death machines, sooner or later it will be pretty deadly back in White Mesa too. Either those robots will kill us, or the raiders they're chasing out of the north will."

"So move your people to Vegas," said Angie. "Get 'em to safety. That's your better bet."

"I hear Vegas is under attack too." Kate raised her chin. "These things have to be stopped at the source, and you'll all have a much better chance of stopping them if I'm there helping you keep your blood on the inside where it belongs."

Vargas glanced around at the rest of us, looking for support.

I just shrugged. It made sense to me to bring her. We could definitely use a medic, but thinking back to how casually I'd put Athalia at risk the night before, I wasn't sure I could trust my judgment anymore.

"Sorry," said Ace. "You ain't seen enough of life yet. You need to live a little before you die. Go on home and find somebody to dance and kiss and climb trees with. Death'll still be waitin' after you've had your fun."

Athalia nodded in agreement. "We might need you, but you shouldn't—"

"You all don't seem to understand," said Kate. "I'm not asking your permission. I'm coming no matter what you say."

We all looked at each other. Finally Angie turned away from the girl. "Well, since it seems like the only way to stop her would be to kneecap her, I guess she's coming."

"Fine," said Vargas. "But she gets the next piece of body armor we find."

"Agreed," said everybody in unison, and then we started south again with Kate panting after us, that huge pack on her back looking like it was going to topple her over and squash her like a bug.

After a while Vargas looked back at her, then grinned at Angie. "Reminds me of that little gal who showed up at Ranger Center 'bout a year back, all full of piss and vinegar. Didn't let nobody tell her she couldn't be a ranger. What was her name? Gave herself a real mean one, something to scare raiders with — Angel something."

"Fuck you, Vargas," said Angie. "Least I didn't go calling myself Snake."

"Hey, I didn't pick that name. Folks started callin' me that after I got bit that third time."

Athalia blinked. "You've been bit by snakes three times?"

Vargas looked embarrassed. "Uh, five now, counting the time just now that got me caught by those raiders back there."

"Five?" I stared. "How the hell does that happen?"

Vargas shrugged. "Snakes just like me, I guess. I don't know."

"Well I guess we do need a medic after all," I said. "Just to take care of you."

Everybody laughed, even Ace, even though it wasn't that funny. I think we were all just trying to forget that letting that little girl come with us was pretty much signing her death warrant. I mean, we were signing our own too, but walking into the grinder was our job. We were resigned to it. Letting civilians die was precisely what a ranger wasn't supposed to do.

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We headed south through the mountains, moving higher in altitude. That cooled things off a bit, brought a little green to the red and rust of the wastes. It should have been comforting, but it just meant that the things that wanted to kill us had better hiding places.

It took us a day and a half to get to the pass that opened on the valley that the map I'd found in my old self's pocket said should contain Darwin Village. It was a strange trip, at least for me. Each new turn in the trail brought back a vivid but useless flash of déjà-vu. I'd definitely been this way before, at least my former self — sorry, *one* of my former selves — had been, and maybe more than once. Some of the flashes were calm, just walking along, looking at the scenery. Some were nightmarish and filled with pain, like I had been running from something on a broken leg. I did my best to keep these flashes at bay and concentrate on finding any sign of where my predecessor had been attacked. Either I missed them, they weren't there, or someone had done a hell of a job covering them up.

Another day on and we found Darwin. It wasn't quite what we'd expected.

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Based on the note about the missing sec pass, I'd thought Project Darwin was going to be another military facility, but what we found was a village. I also confirmed that I'd been there before, or at least an earlier me had. The déjà-vu that had been jerking my head around the whole long march continued as we wandered through the outskirts toward the town center. Again, it was like I was seeing the place through two dreams, one calm and bright — a daydream — the other dark and terrifying — a nightmare.

The daydream was just a repetition of what I was seeing now, a sense of having passed this shack before, of having seen that dog in that yard before. The nightmare was the same scenes against a red sky, with the dog barking and people slamming the door of the shack as I stumbled by, bleeding and broken. Were both visions true? Only one? Which one?

There was also the sensation of walking backwards through time as we got closer to the center of the village. At the edges the scene was typical wasteland — ramshackle farms with fields of stunted crops and cattle, cobbled-together shacks made of bits of old billboards, tin sheeting, car parts and tarps, but as we moved on, the buildings started to get older, but at the same time better-constructed and better-maintained, until finally we found ourselves in an area where all the houses were set on a grid of paved streets with trim lawns and white picket fences.

It creeped me out.

These weren't the first buildings I'd seen that had been built before the bombs flew. Ranger Center had once been a prison complex which the first rangers had put to a new purpose. But even Ranger Center showed wear and tear. Sharp edges had weathered, paint peeled, the odd discolored shingle hinted at repairs. Here there was none of that. Everything looked as clean and new as the day it had been built. It seemed as if time and the nuclear holocaust hadn't touched the town of Darwin.

But something had. We could tell that right away.

I'd have put the population of the town at around three hundred, which was enough to support a bar, a cat house, a clinic, a general store, and a building that advertised itself as the Darwin Village Free Library, but a good percentage of that population seemed to be sick. We could hear moans and retching from some of the houses, and saw other people stumbling around the streets like zombies, shivering and red-eyed.

The library and the general store were deserted when we poked our heads in, so we headed for the bar, which went by the name of the Black Gila.

The sounds of fighting coming from the place could be heard from a block away — a symphony of shattering glassware, splintering furniture, and the roaring of angry voices.

"Come on, you tongue-tied dummy! Do that again! I dare you!"

Angie raised her head. "That's Hell Razor's voice!"

An inarticulate bellow nearly drowned her out.

"And that's Thrasher," said Vargas. "I'd recognize that howl anywhere. Come on!"

We ran for the swinging doors, Vargas limping, Kate supporting him, and pushed through into a rustic-looking saloon with weary men and women slumped at trestle tables and the bar, all staring dully at two khaki-clad hellions who were rolling on the floor next to the pool table and beating the living shit out of each other.

"Razor!" shouted Angie.

"Thrasher!" barked Vargas.

The two men halted their combat and looked up. Both were sporting black eyes and bloody lips and noses. One was lean and wiry, with limp black hair and a face like the joker in a pack of cards. He had a buck knife the size of a machete strapped to his leg and a pistol holstered under his arm. The other was enormous — tall, wide and padded out like a sofa with too much stuffing — with a stubbly shaved head and an utterly blank expression on his broad brown face.

He gave a small nod of greeting, while the joker-faced guy grinned a grin that made him look even more like a cartoon devil.

"Hey, all," he said. "Where the hell have you been?"

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Angie stepped toward the two men like an angry mom. "Never mind where we've been, Razor! Why are you two fighting?"

They untangled themselves and stood, looking sheepish. Razor, the smaller, harder one, shrugged. "Well, we got bored waitin', and everybody else around here is too weak to put up a good fight, so..."

"So you fought each other?" Vargas rolled his eyes. "You numbskulls deserve each other."

A man in an apron stood up from behind the bar, his face red with fury. "You know these two clowns? They owe me for the furnishings."

"Don't worry," said Angie. "We'll drink enough to make it right. In fact, set us up right now. A drink for everybody, yourself included." She shot a glance at Kate. "Uh, but a sarsaparilla for the young 'un."

Kate's head came up. "I drink beer!"

Vargas chuckled. "How you going to take care of us drunk, huh?"

The girl made a face, then snorted. "Fine. But I don't want sarsaparilla. Sarsaparilla tastes terrible. I like ginger ale."

"Ginger ale it is, then."

“And one plain water,” said Athalia.

Angie tossed some scrap on the bar and took the corner seat. The rest of us filled in around her while the bartender got busy filling jars and mugs with home brew, his earlier anger gone like someone had flicked a switch.

“Mighty kind of you,” he said. “Mighty kind.”

There was a moment of silence as everybody took a long slow pull, then a chorus of “Ahhhs” as we set our mugs down. As this was the first beer this body had had in its life, I wasn’t exactly qualified to judge, but I had to say, it seemed like a pretty damned good beer to me.

“So,” said Angie after we’d all had another sip or two. “You two learn anything since you been here? Or have you just been fighting the whole time.”

The big bruiser — Thrasher, I assumed — just grunted and stared down into his beer.

Hell Razor shrugged. “We learned that the people around here are a bunch of weak-ass limp-dicks who can’t find the energy to get up out of their seats, let alone swing a fist.”

Vargas sighed. “Did you learn why?”

Hell Razor sneered in the bartender’s direction. “Our host here said it was because they were all sick. I say it’s because *they’re all pussies!*”

He raised his voice for that last bit and looked around hopefully, but the other patrons were still slumped in the same positions they had been when we came in. Only now they were studiously avoiding looking in our direction.

Hell Razor snorted, disgusted, and went back to his beer.

Athalia turned toward the bartender and asked the obvious question. “So *why* is everybody sick? What’s going on?”

“Somethin’ up at the lab,” he said. “A flu maybe? Everybody who worked up there comes down with it eventually. Been goin’ on for over a month. ‘Bout two weeks ago it got so bad, the boss collected all our security passes and told us not to come back until he could figure out a cure. We’re still waitin’, and folks are still gettin’ sicker. Dyin’ too, every now and then.”

“What lab is this?” asked Ace.

“Dr. Finster’s lab,” said the Bartender. “He’s been doin’ his experiments up there since as long as anyone can remember. Breedin’ strange animals. Makin’ cures for diseases. That kind of thing.”

Kate frowned. “But no cure for *this* disease?”

The bartender shook his head. “Like I said, Finster says he’s workin’ on it, but so far, nothin’. And what with his best researchers dead, I’m wonderin’ if he’ll ever find it.”

“All the researchers are dead?” I asked. That seemed strange.

“Well, we sure ain’t seen ‘em since everything started. Don’t know what else to think. And they was all the folks that worked closest with him too — all the ones he trained up since they was babies. Really seems to have taken it out of the old man, them dyin’. He ain’t left the lab since he closed it. Doesn’t talk to no-one except through the PA system, and then all he says is stay away.”

Everybody looked at each other. Even Hell Razor and Thrasher seemed interested. They paused in their drinking for nearly twenty seconds.

Kate cleared her throat. “So, what are the symptoms of this flu?”

The bartender shook his head. “It’s really odd. Starts off with the victims getting all red-faced and delirious.” He motioned around at the other patrons. “Then it’s pretty much what you see. They’re tired all the time, vomiting and shivering, maybe the screaming shits. Folks that’ve had it the longest tend to lose their appetite and sometimes their hair, then sometimes they die. It’s made a ghost town out of Darwin, even though most everybody’s still alive.”



“So,” asked Vargas. “What kinda work did the people do up there? The, uh, non-researchers, I mean.”

A voice came from the back of the room. “You all are some nosy motherfuckers.”

Another voice joined the first. “Yeah. What the hell do you want to know all this stuff for?”

The bartender got a frightened look on his face. “Come on, Metal, don’t start nothin’. And keep a leash on Mad Dog. These folks are already crazy enough to fight themselves if there’s no-one else handy. Don’t go gettin’ ‘em riled up.”

Me and the others turned. Two men, one big and paunchy, the other smaller and wild-eyed, were leaning in a doorway that led to a back room. The big one had long greasy hair and wore a ragged black t-shirt with the words Quiet Riot printed on it in spiky letters, so maybe he was Metal. The smaller one wore a dirty dress shirt and black leather gloves and twitched when he talked, so maybe he was Mad Dog. They certainly both looked as *sick* as dogs.

Hell Razor jumped up from his stool. “We wanna know ‘cause we wanna know. You got a problem with that?”

The two men looked him up and down, sneering, but then Metal shook his head. “On one of my good days I shit bigger than you, sonny. But I ain’t been havin’ so many good days lately.”

Mad Dog nodded in agreement. “Ain’t felt like gettin’ in a fight for months. My gut ain’t right.”

Angie elbowed Hell Razor back to his stool and stepped forward. “And maybe we’re askin’ ‘cause we’re lookin’ to find a cure for what’s ailin’ you.”

The two men laughed, but their laughter quickly turned into coughing fits, and they were both doubled up in the door, red-faced and weaving.

Metal recovered first. “How’s a bunch of gunslingers like you gonna find a cure when old Doc Finster can’t find one?”

“Yeah,” said Mad Dog. There was blood on his lips. “He’s the smartest man in the world. You ain’t but raiders with badges. What do you know?”

“I know I’d rather try something than just sit around waiting to die,” said Athalia.

I stood. “Answer the man’s question. What did everybody do up there?”

The two men looked like they wanted to sass me, but then they looked too tired.

“Mostly farm-type work,” said Metal. “Tendin’ Finster’s weird animals — feedin’ ‘em, breedin’ ‘em’, makin’ sure the litters didn’t die.”

“We grew his weird plants too,” said Mad Dog. “Fruits and veggies that only the weird animals can eat. Stuff that would make normal animals sick to eat it.”

Kate perked up at that. “And do you ever eat those plants?”

“Hell no,” said Mad Dog. “We gotta wear special suits just to be around ‘em.”

“And the animals,” agreed Metal.

I looked at the others. “Any ideas?”

Everyone shook their heads, except Kate. She turned to the bartender. “You still have books in your library?”

“Yes indeed,” he said. “Finster never let us throw ‘em out. Said he needed ‘em to make future researchers.”

“Fine.” She hopped off her stool. “I’m going to the library, if anybody else wants to come.”

Hell Razor wrinkled his nose like she’d farted as she walked out the door.

“Libraries. Right.” He swiveled around on his stool and pointed at the guys in the back room door. “We need any security passes to get into that lab?”

The big man shrugged. “You can get in, but you won’t get far. Most places are employee only.”

“We’ll see about that.” Razor downed his beer in one gulp. “Come on, Thrasher. Come on Snake. Let’s go kick in

some doors.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Athalia. “I want to see inside that place.”

They shrugged as she joined them, but Angie held up a hand. “One second. Might save you some searchin’ around.” She gave Metal and Mad Dog a smile. “Don’t suppose you’ve ever seen a security pass for another facility lyin’ around in there anywhere. Place called Sleeper One?”

The men looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“Never seen nothin’ like that,” said Mad Dog. “But then, we just shovel shit. We never been into the high security areas. Could be anything in there.”

The bartender spoke up. “I know something that might help you, though it might not be current anymore. When I worked in subject holding the password to the cell block was Proteus.”

Angie nodded. “Not exactly what we were looking for, but thanks.”

She turned back to Razor, Thrasher, Vargas and Athalia. “All right, on your way, then. I’m gonna keep canvasin’ the locals.”

“You’re gonna keep drinkin’, you mean,” laughed Vargas.

Angie chuckled as the three rangers swaggered out, the sister following.

“That too.”

I kinda wanted to do a little more drinking myself, then take Angie into a quiet corner for a private heart to heart, but she didn’t look like she was going to budge from the bar, and neither did Ace, so I downed my dregs and headed out too.

“Gonna go make sure Kate’s okay.”

That got a look from Angie, and also Ace, which is probably why I said it, but neither of them said anything, so I kept walking.

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I’d seen libraries before. Ranger Center had a good one, one of the best in Arizona. Darwin Village’s library took up two classrooms in an old school building. Everything looked neat and orderly, with the books shelved properly. I checked out the criminal sciences section and was pleased to see they had near a complete set of the Hardy Boys Case Studies. Wasn’t a ranger alive didn’t hope to do the memories of Frank and Joe proud.

The most fun, however, was watching Kate. From the sheer, astonished joy on her face, I figured her home village had fewer books than people, and most volumes were likely Bibles. She looked like she was in hog heaven. I, not needing to be any smarter, just followed my nose, pulling out books at random—mostly the picture books.

Kate on the other hand, after spending a while just soaking it all in, buried herself in a section called reference and began pulling out books as big as tombstones and flipping through them like she was in a fever. After an hour of that, I was beginning to regret leaving the bar, but finally she raised her head from yet another dusty volume and looked up at me.

“I don’t think they’ve got a disease at all.” She said. “They were dyin’, no doubt about it, but they’re dyin’ so slow and in such a particular way that I’m thinkin’ poison—radiation most likely. The question is, was it deliberate? Or was it some accidental exposure?”

I scratched my chin. “Well, it’s mighty peculiar that the folks that died first were the most educated folks, the ones who might realize quickest what was going on. Maybe they were gotten out of the way.”

“Maybe,” said Kate. “But it could also be that there was some accident in the research lab and the researchers took the biggest hit, while the support staff just got residual radiation.”

I frowned. “But if that’s the case, then how is Doctor Finster still alive?”

“Are you sure he is?”

That stopped me. “What. You think he’s dead in there? And the voice the townsfolk have been hearin’ on the PA system is just a recording?”

She shrugged.

I sighed, then gestured at the books. “Well, I guess all that is kinda beside the point. What’s more important is, did any of those books tell you a cure for radiation poisoning?”

“They did,” she said, then sighed louder than I had. “But the chances we’re going to find what we need to make it around here are about a million to one.”

## – Chapter Five –

“Prussian Blue?” The bartender’s forehead furrowed in the middle like a rumpled blanket. “Hell yeah, we’ve got some Prussian Blue. Dave Cretian at the Black Market has barrels of the stuff. Never could find anybody to take it off his hands. Never knew anybody who knew what it was for except to use it as paint. Fact, he painted his house with some of it a few years back, but there’s plenty left over.”

“There better be,” said Kate. “Because it cures radiation sickness, and I’m pretty sure that’s what everybody here has got.”

“Wait a minute,” said Vargas. “House paint that cures radiation sickness? Did somebody spike your ginger ale?”

Kate shrugged. “I know it sounds crazy but it’s true. I read it in one of the books in the library. This guy in Germany found out that if you ate the pigment it sucked out the radiation as it moved through your system, and when you pissed it out again, the radiation went with it. It’s like an antitoxin. It removes the toxic waste from your body.”

Ace snorted in disbelief. “And what are the odds that the exact thing you need to cure this disease is right here where you need it?”

“Pretty good, actually, now that I think about it.” Angie swung around on her bar stool. “If the experiments up at the facility involved a lot of radiation, then they’d likely have kept plenty of stuff that cured it around in case of an accident, right?”

“But if that’s the case,” I said. “Why didn’t Finster tell all his employees to take it?”

“Maybe he doesn’t know,” said Ace. “A lotta jerks who call themselves scientists these days are only fools who found a book or two, and don’t know much more than normal folks.”

“Or maybe it’s what I said,” said Kate.

I looked around at her. “That he’s dead? Maybe so.”

The others turned — even the locals.

“You think the boss is dead?” asked Metal, who had joined Angie and Ace at the bar, along with his friend Mad Dog.

“How can he be dead?” asked Mad Dog. “We hear him on the PA system all the time.”

“Thought that might be a recording,” said Kate.

“Who cares if the boss is dead or not?” snapped Angie. “The important thing is keepin’ everybody else alive.” She turned to the bartender. “So where’s this black market place? We gotta get down there and get this Prussian Blue stuff.”

The bartender held up his hands. “Hang on, now. You ain’t gonna be able to just take it. Cretian is gonna want to be paid for anything he gives you, and he’s got the muscle to keep you from stealing it.”

Angie’s voice rose. “He’s gonna charge for the cure when the whole town is dying? What kind of monster is he?”

“The worst kind,” said Metal. “He’s a business man.”

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“Absolutely,” said Cretian. “Got all the Prussian Blue you want. Four hundred scrap a barrel and it’s yours. Got at

least twenty of ‘em if you need that much.”

Angie, Ace, and me were standing behind Kate, who was on her tip-toes at the service window of the Black Market talking to Cretian, a burly redheaded man with mean eyes and a big-bore hog leg tucked into a leather shoulder holster under his arm. The gun was overkill, really, considering he was sitting behind a reinforced steel door inset with a sheet of one inch plexi closing off all but two inches of the window. There were also two well-armed security guards standing behind us on either side of the exit.

Metal and Mad Dog were there too, sitting on a bench by the wall, looking like the walk over from the bar had completely pulled the stuffing out of them. And now Cretian’s price seemed to have ripped out their hearts. They slumped even lower on the bench. Mad Dog groaned.

“F—four... hundred?” Kate stuttered. “Uh, how much is in a barrel?” “Fifty five gallons or so.”

Kate looked relieved. “Oh, well, I don’t need that much. Probably not more than a gallon for the whole village. How much would that be? Uh... eight scrap, right?”

Cretian gave her a nasty smile. “Sorry. Can’t sell it any smaller than by the barrel. It’s four hundred or nothing.”

“Are you kidding me?” I stepped up beside Kate. “Don’t you understand people are going to die without this stuff? Your whole damned village. You’re probably sick too. And you’re gonna be a dick about a gallon?”

“Who else are you going to sell it to anyway?” asked Angie, joining me. “The guy at the bar said you haven’t been able to give the stuff away. He said you’ve been sitting on it for years.”

Cretian spread his hands. He didn’t seem the least bit angry at our outbursts. “Exactly. I’ve been sitting on it because there hasn’t been a buyer. Now there’s a buyer, so I gotta get the best I can for it, right? Simple economics. Supply and demand.”

“And you’d let your friends and neighbors die for supply and demand?” Angie asked.

“Of course not.” Cretian smiled again. “I know they got more scrap than they let on. If the community bands together, they’ll come up with the four hundred easy.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it, Cretian,” said Metal. “With everyone sick and not getting paid for weeks, we got nothing. It all went into your shop when we bought supplies from you.”

Cretian shrugged. “Well, then maybe you should go up to the lab and get an advance from Finster. Or better yet, maybe you can convince these rangers to part with some of their equipment. I can see from here they’re carryin’ a good hundred scrap worth of weapons and armor between ‘em, and I hear there’s three more of ‘em runnin’ around someplace. Get ‘em drunk, steal their equipment, and we got a deal.”

Mad Dog shot up from the bench, twitching and shaking. “Goddamn it, Dave! You’re gonna pull this shit when we’re practically brothers? We went to the schoolhouse together. You married my goddamn sister, for Christ’s sake!”

Cretian held up his hands, his face as untroubled as a preacher’s. “Sorry, Fist. It’s not my fault you went to work at the lab like every other fool in this town. If you had done what I did and started your own business, you wouldn’t be sick. None of you would. Why should I have to pay for your bad decisions?”

Mad Dog’s shoulders sagged. “I... I don’t know what to—”

I don’t know where it came from, but all of a sudden a towering rage blazed up in me and I pulled my pistol and jammed it into the gap at the bottom of the reinforced window.

“I’m sick of this shit! Just give us the fucking cure!”

Cretian yelped and dove aside, out of my line of sight, screaming for his guards. “Kill them! Kill them!”

I whipped around, shredding my knuckles as I jerked my gun free of the window slot and swung it at the goons. I was way too late. They had me beat by seconds, the barrels of their shotguns perfect black circles aiming right at my head. Fortunately, Ace had them beat by *half* a second. His machine gun burped twice, “Brip. Brip,” and they were

screaming and falling and shooting.

A shotgun blast shredded the ceiling over my head and my ears rang liked they'd been punched by brass knuckles, then I was on the floor with everybody else, covering up and looking around in the smoke and falling plaster.

One of the security guards was past fighting, his hands pressing futilely at his throat as it gushed red all over the linoleum. The other guy had been luckier — if that's the word — and had taken Ace's rounds in the belly. He was still looking for a target with his second barrel — and aiming my way.

I beat him to the punch this time and fired over the prone bodies of my friends to put one through his nose and out the back of his head.

It got real quiet after that. Just the sound of Kate sobbing under the counter and the ringing in my ears. Then Angie rolled on top of me and started punching me in the face as hard as she could.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she screamed. "You fucking lunatic! Are you trying to get us all killed?"

I shoved her off and Ace grabbed her, holding her back. I looked around, nose and mouth throbbing and bleeding, and saw everyone staring at me — Kate, Mad Dog, Metal, Ace, Angie — and I swear to you, that was the first second since I'd pulled my gun that it occurred to me that I had put everybody in danger. Up until that point my entire world had been me, Cretian, and my rage. There had been no other factors in the equation.

I stared, blank and numb, at the shotguns lying near the dead guards, the shotguns that could have turned my friends into hamburger if Ace had been one second later on the trigger.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know."

"Bullshit, you don't know!" shouted Angie. "You must know! You—"

A noise from above me brought my head up. Cretian was feeding the barrel of an automatic rifle through the slot, looking for a shot. I snapped my hand up and caught the barrel, then pulled hard. He tried to hold onto it and his hands came with it. One got pinched in the slot, pinned between the plexi and the body of the gun, and he was trapped and howling in pain.

Angie's rage cleared enough for her to see the opportunity, and she stuck her pistol through the slot too, and aimed it at his belly.

"Put your key through the gap. We're coming in."

Mewling with pain, Cretian did as he was told, and passed a big old skeleton key under the plexi. I kept his fingers trapped until Angie opened the door and went in around him to take the gun from him.

"Now," she said, when we were face to face with the man. "You are gonna measure out a gallon of Prussian Blue, and Kate is going to pay you your price for it — eight scrap."

"And what are you going to pay me for my roof?" Cretian whined. "And my guards?"

Angie flicked a cold look at me, then gave him a dazzling smile. "Sorry, cretin, you're just gonna have to eat those costs. Asshole tax."

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The whole bar crowded around as Kate and the bartender mixed up some Prussian Blue cocktails using the powder from Cretian's barrels, some juice squeezed from cantaloupes we bought at the local market, and a shitload of booze to kill the taste. Finally they had a few pitchers of the stuff, which ended up a disturbing sea green color, and the bartender set up every jam jar and mug he had in the place.

"Alright," said Kate. "Line up and drink it down, then go get everyone else in town and have them come drink some

too. It isn't gonna work immediately, and some folks are gonna be too far gone for it to have any effect, but once you start pissing it out again, you should start getting better."

She turned to the bartender. "Keep makin' this stuff for as long as people keep having the symptoms, and give them a drink a day."

He nodded, then turned to the crowd. "Got it. Blue drinks on the house for as long as it takes!"

The crowd cheered and started knocking back their blue booze, then heading out to round up their friends and family.

Metal wiped his mouth as he finished his, then turned to Kate. "Any long term effects from this poisoning that we should know about?"

Kate frowned, uncomfortable. "Uh, you should, uh, probably think twice about having children."

Mad Dog barked at that. "What? Why?"

"Well," said Kate. "The radiation has, uh, probably mutated some of your DNA. That shouldn't be a problem for *you*, but any children you have after this, particularly with a woman who has also been irradiated, might be—"

Angie's walkie squawked, interrupting her. "Angie, it's Vargas! Got us some nasties up here. Need some back-up. Get up here ASA—" Gunfire through the radio drowned him out for a second, then he was back. "ASAP I said. Copy?"

Angie snatched the walkie off her belt. "Copy, Snake. On our way!"

She hopped off her stool and beckoned to me and Ace. "Come on. Let's vamoose."

We ran after her as she bolted out of the bar. And even though she hadn't been asked, Kate came too.

## – Chapter Six –

We followed the echoes of gunfire down into the earth.

The facility didn't look like anything from the outside, just a featureless gray brick block house, hardly bigger than a garage. That was just a stairhead, though, and we charged down six flights before we got to the first level. The gunfire was louder as soon as we kicked open the door. It rang in our ears as we paced through a maze of featureless white hallways. The sound was so fractured that I stopped being able to tell which direction it was coming from, and would have got totally lost except that our fellow rangers weren't stupid. One of them, Vargas, Hell Razor, Thrasher — hell, maybe it was Athalia — had jammed open every door they'd gone through, so once we found their trail it was easy to follow.

The facility reminded me of Sleeper Base One in terms of construction, all blank walls, stainless steel, and frosted glass doors, chrome trim and softly glowing lights that illuminated the baseboards whenever we got within a dozen feet. It didn't feel real. It wasn't part of the decaying world six flights above us, and not just because it was separated by technology and style. It literally felt like we'd gone back through time to the golden age before the bombs — back when everything was clean and new.

We moved through those glowing halls in good order. Angie, Ace and me trading point and cover at the corners like a seasoned squad and Kate following a cautious distance behind. Ace's movements were so professional that it reminded me of how neatly he'd dealt with the goons at the Black Market, and that made me wonder about his background.

"Angie said you were a mechanic," I said as we covered her advance. "Handle yourself pretty well for a grease monkey."

"I used to work for Faran Brygo." He shrugged. "And mechanic sometimes has more than one meaning."

"Ah," I said. "As in you *fix* things."

He nodded. "Whatever's broke."

We ran on, following the scent of cordite and the sounds of mayhem.

I'd never been in a more antiseptic place in my life. The walls and floors and ceilings weren't just white, there wasn't any dust on them at all. There weren't any boot scuffs on the floor. There weren't any thumb prints on the chrome. We pushed through a kitchen and it had been cleaned to the point where we couldn't tell if anything in there had been used. Ever.

That was weird. Creepy. We knew people worked here. We'd just talked to a bunch of 'em. And people have to *eat*. And people eating means there will, at some point, be bacon. Civilization might have crumbled, but God wasn't so cruel he would let knowledge of how to make bacon vanish. And bacon meant bacon grease, and unless your cleaners went about their task with a superhumanly tight focus and mindless devotion, there'd be a trace of it somewhere.

We saw nothing.

Angie whistled as we hurried past the stove tops and dish sink. "Back at Ranger Center, even the infirmary isn't this clean."

"It's not the clean that unnerves me," I said. "There's no dust. That means the cleaning has been recent, but the staff has been gone for a while. Who did this cleaning?"

"Elves?" suggested Ace. "Pixies?"



We pushed into another hall and heard the chatter of an SMG coming from a stairwell in the far wall. The sound was raw and unmuffled. There were no more doors between us and the action. Whatever was happening was right at the bottom of those stairs.

“Come on,” I said, and pushed ahead, ready to charge down with guns blazing.

Angie caught me by my backpack and hauled me back.

“Not this time, ghost boy.” She stepped ahead of me and started down at a more measured pace. “You’ve already gone off half-cocked once today. This time you’re gonna follow my lead.”

“Sure, sure.”

I followed her down with Ace at my heels and Kate a flight back, and I gotta say, I was actually relieved. Now that I had a second to think about it, charging down into a firefight without taking a look-see first seemed like the stupidest idea in the world, but I’d been ready to jump in with both feet — just like back at the Black Market, just like at White Mesa. What the hell? What was going on with my brain?

At the bottom of the stairs a haze of gun smoke drifted through an open door and we could hear strange grinding noises and stranger voices coming from the room beyond. They were tinny, mechanical voices, like the kind of thing you’d occasionally hear on salvaged pre-war answering machines.

“Employees are not to interfere with custodial staff in the performance of their duties. Any employee who interferes with custodial staff in the performance of their duties will be removed from the premises.”

We crept down to the bottom and peeked through, Kate hovering behind us, half way down the last flight of steps. Right inside the door was a small room that looked like some kind of security checkpoint, barred doors on either end and a window on one side made out of inch-thick bulletproof glass. Both the security doors were jammed open, however, and we could see through them to a larger room that seemed to be filled with old-fashioned barred jail cells. There was also something moving in there, but the smoke was so thick we couldn’t tell what it was.

At least there was no gunfire anymore, just the strange grinding noise, the weird voice, and underneath both of those the soft sobbing of terrified people.

Angie ran back up to the first landing and grabbed her walkie. “Vargas. You still alive in there? Whatta we got?”

“Angie!” Vargas’s voice sounded rough and tired. “Good to hear you. We’re still alive. Holed up in an old guard room with robots out in the cell block, pinning us down. We can’t get out and they can’t get in. If you’re in the stairwell you’ll get the jump on ‘em easy, but be careful. Got friendlies in the cells. We were breakin’ ‘em out when the cleaning crew showed up.”

“Armed?”

“Oh yeah.” Vargas laughed through the radio. “Mops, brooms and machine guns. They’re ready to blast those dust bunnies back to the stone age.”

“Alright,” said Angie. “Hang tight.”

She came back down the stairs and pointed straight at me. “Okay, Kami-Crazy. You wanna go hog wild again, then listen up. Somebody’s gotta go in there and tell those friendlies to lay flat on the ground, if they aren’t already. Of course as soon as you start shouting, those pepper-pots on wheels are gonna come for you like a tin-can stampede.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “I’m not feeling this plan.”

“It’ll be fine — I hope. When they swing around toward you, we’ve got ‘em flanked. We’ll gun ‘em down before they can get a bead on you, see?”

I gave her a cold look. “I see you’ve decided who you want to spend the rest of your life with. And it ain’t gonna be the guy with all the bullets in him.”

She hung her head, embarrassed. “Sorry, but you been playin’ it so balls-out lately, I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

I was hurt, I'll admit that. When your former lover all but comes out and tells you you're expendable, it kinda stings a little. But she was right too. When I went looking for the cold dread that should have been turning my insides into knotted ice snakes at the prospect of being robot fodder, it wasn't there. I wasn't happy about going into that room and shouting "Olly olly oxen free," but I wasn't scared either. I didn't really feel anything at all.

I took off my pack and checked my pistol. Full clip and one in the chamber. Ready as I'd ever be.

"Fine," I said. "But I better get one hell of a retirement party."

She squeezed my hand. It almost made me have second thoughts, but then I took a deep breath and edged through the door into the checkpoint cage. The bulletproof window looked through into a closet with a chair and a door-buzzer. The far door opened into the smoke-choked cell block and I started to understand the layout a little better. It was laid out more like a kennel than a jail, a grid with two clusters of free-standing cells on either side of a central corridor, and more cells surrounding the clusters.

I dropped into a squat and found I could see further into the smoke closer to the ground. Straight ahead of me, at the far end of the cell block, were the bottom halves of three robots. They were outside an open door, tooling around on tank treads, and Vargas had not been lying. The mechanical arms sprouting from their torsos were rigged with mops, brooms and cleaning brushes, but higher up, where the smoke partially hid them, I saw more ominous silhouettes swinging about. And between me and them, huddling in the cages, I saw the friendlies.

They were all dressed in service overalls and hospital scrubs that had the word DARWIN printed in large black letters on the back, and they looked tired, terrified, hungry, and most of all sick as irradiated dogs. They were also all sitting on the floor to keep their heads below the smoke, but that wasn't quite low enough for what was coming.

I slipped through the second security door and then ducked into the left-hand corridor, which ran around all four sides of the cages on the left. I held my breath but heard nothing from the robots. They were still milling around the guardroom door, trying to get an angle on the rangers inside. I hadn't gone completely unnoticed, however. I could see the folks inside the cells looking up and staring at me.

I shushed them with a finger to my lips and kept crawling around the cages on my hands and knees until I was at the left-forward corner of the corridor.

Showtime.

I took out my pistol, sucked in a deep breath of the smoke-free air near the floor, then stood up and raised my voice.

"Prisoners in the cages! Listen up! We are here to rescue you! Lie flat on the floor and don't get up until we give the all clear! I repeat! Lie flat on—!"

I didn't have time to repeat. With a whirring of servos and a rumble of treads, the cleaning crew came to investigate my noise. And they didn't wait to see the whites of my eyes. They were already firing as they came around the cages — a barrage of bullets and sizzling beams of light all blasting my way.

"Unauthorized personnel will be removed from the premises. Cleanliness must be maintained."

I dove right, not even bothering to fire back, and landed on the floor with a hot pain searing my left forearm. There was blood and the smell of burning hair. That was no gun! It was some kind of laser!

As I rolled to my feet I saw that the people in the cells had followed my orders. They were hugging the ground like it was a lover.

Now I fired, through the bars and high over the heads of the prisoners. "Come on, you metal maids! Come get me."

They came, and I had to hit the floor again as lasers and bullets ricocheted off the bars all around me. Then the firing wasn't just coming from the robots. From behind them and beside them came the howls of the rangers and the clatter of their guns. Angie and Ace were flanking them from the stairwell while Vargas and his crew unloaded on them from the safety of the guardroom door.

The robots squawked and ground their gears as they tried to turn toward these threats, but there was too much lead coming their way.

“All employees are... unauthorized personnel... From the premises. Cleanliness will... be removed. Interfere... with custodial staff in the... must be maintained. Any employee who... must be maintained... must be maintained... must be maintained... must be—”

When the last shot echoed away I heard Angie calling from somewhere in the smoke. “Are they all dead?”

Vargas answered her. “All dead.”

“Any casualties from the prisoners? Ghost, you okay?”

“I’m gonna have a new scar,” I called back.

“I... I think Cindy is hurt,” said a voice I didn’t know.

“Damnit,” Vargas raised his voice. “Thrasher, where are those keys? Come on, move it.”

By the time Thrasher had found the keys and we’d opened all the cells, the smoke had cleared enough that we could see our friends, the folks we had saved — and what we had killed.

Vargas, Thrasher and Hell Razor were bruised and bloodied from head to toe, and Hell Razor had a laser burn to match mine across his left thigh. Athalia on the other hand was as clean and untouched as she always seemed to be. She gave me a little nod of greeting as she entered a cell to help the occupants. I gave her a smirk and a salute.

Survivors again. Woo.

The three robots were as big and clunky as their treads had indicated — vaguely humanoid torsos with gun and mop and broom arms sticking out all over the place and cyclopic pinheads, each with a laser gun for an eye. Their metal skins were covered in an acne of bullet holes, and they were leaking fluids all over the floors they had worked so tirelessly to keep clean.

The people in the cages looked worse up close than they had from a distance. About half of them were too sick to stand. We had to carry them out. One guy my height felt like he weighed about eighty pounds, and looked it too. His cheekbones were poking through his skin like knife blades. Some of them had died before we got there, rolled into corners and covered with blankets by their friends.

Two of them had taken wounds — not bullets, but concrete shrapnel from where the robots had shot up the walls over their heads — and as Kate was patching them up, Metal and Mad Dog poked their heads in and stared around wide-eyed.

“Whoa,” said Metal.

Mad Dog agreed with him. “Seriously.”

One of the former prisoners sat up, a woman who might have been a looker once, before she’d lost half her hair and wasted away to seventy pounds. “Maniac. Mad Dog.” Her voice was a ragged whisper. “You’re... safe. I thought he... might’ve got you too.”

I put two and two together as the two men crossed to her, and guessed the guy she called Maniac must be the guy I’d been calling Metal. So... Metal Maniac. Sure. Seemed to fit him.

“Liz!” Metal knelt beside her as Mad Dog stared. “What the hell happened to you? We thought you’d died in the leak.”

“There was no leak,” breathed Liz. “At least not an... accidental one. Finster did it... deliberately.”

“What?” asked Mad Dog. “But he told us to stay away. Every day on the PA. “Don’t come near the facility!””

“I know.” Liz nodded. “We heard him too. But he’s been... experimenting on us in the next room. Exposing us to rads, then... cutting us open.”

“But why?” Metal was in tears. “Why?”

Liz shook her head. "He's crazy, Maniac. Who knows why?"

I joined them. "Are there any other prisoners anywhere? Is there anybody else we need to rescue?"

Liz looked around, then stared at me. "You again."

I frowned. I'd never seen her before in my life. "Uh, what about me?"

"You were here before. A few days ago. You and your... twin brother promised us you were going to get us out of here. I... I thought you'd died, or given up or something, but you... did it. Thank you."

I blinked. "My... twin brother?"

"Yes. Is he okay? Did he come back with you? He looked pretty hurt last time."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out and before I could try again Vargas came and stood by Metal and Mad Dog. "Hey listen, can we leave it to you two to get these people out of here and dose them with the Prussian Blue? We're gonna keep looking for Finster and the sec pass."

"We got it," said Mad Dog.

Metal pulled Liz gently up into his big arms. "You find him, you bring him out to us. We wanna give him what he deserves."

Vargas shrugged. "If we can, we will. But if it gets messy? Well, no guarantees."

The two men nodded, then got to work.

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The room beyond the cell block was a lab as spotless and bright as the rest of the facility. Everything shined, the dissection tables with their channels for blood drainage shined, the trays full of knives and saws and retractors and other implements I had no idea about shined, and the wall at the end of the room that had a four-by-three grid of square steel doors set into it shined.

Me, Kate, Athalia, Ace, and the rangers moved through the room like hungry coyotes, looting the scalpels and other things that could be used as weapons and ransacking closets and drawers full of bandages, splints, trauma packs, and antiseptic creams. Kate was practically giddy at the sight of it all. I stuffed my pack.

"Hey."

We all turned. Thrasher was looking at a cluster of photos on the wall by the far door. Had he spoken? I'd never heard him speak before. He must have, because he tapped on a photo and waved us over.

Athalia was busy looking into the ranks of the square steel doors on the end wall, but the rest of us gathered around the big man. He pointed to one of the photos. It was a framed pre-war pic of a bunch of people in white lab coats standing outside the facility, smiling and squinting in the bright sunshine another guy in a lab coat shook hands with a fat man in a military uniform in front of them.

Hell Razor scowled. "Scientists. So?"

Thrasher tapped the glass again. Beneath it was a strip of paper with typed words on it, fixed to the photo with yellowing tape. "Read that."

Who knew he could read? Hidden depths.

Angie leaned in. "General Wade Huntsinger congratulates Dr. Irwin John Finster on his appointment as project director of the DOD's newest research facility, Project Darwin, which will study biological solutions to various hypothetical national security scenarios."

Ace grunted. Vargas frowned.

“Can’t be the same guy, can it?”

I laughed. “From back before the bombs fell? Not a chance. He’d be what? A hundred and fifty years old? He’d be the oldest man in the world.”

“Maybe our guy is his son,” said Kate. “He could be Irwin John Finster Junior. Or the third, even.”

“Could be,” said Vargas. “Though none of the townies mentioned anything like that.”

“Might be a clone,” I said.

Angie shot me a look, then cleared her throat. “Well, we’ll ask him when we find him. I’ve got a list of questions for that son-of-a-bitch, as a matter of—”

“Ghost.” Athalia was looking up from one of the open steel doors in the back wall. “You better look at this. I found something else.”

She stepped back as I approached. Apparently the steel doors were connected to some kind of refrigeration unit, because a cold mist drifted out from the open one. Inside the door was a long metal tray on rollers, and on the tray lay a big rubberized bag with a zipper down the front. Athalia had unzipped the bag half-way and pulled it open.

There was a body inside, pretty cut up — like there had been an autopsy or maybe more experiments — and at first I didn’t recognize it. Then I noticed the missing finger and the scar on the forehead. The body had other scars — beyond the incisions made during its recent dissection — that kindled a few ancient memories in my head.

“Hello, ‘twin brother,’” I said.

## – Chapter Seven –

Angie sobbed, and I looked around to see that the others had followed me.

Ace put a hand on Angie's shoulder to comfort her, but she squirmed out from under, still sobbing, still looking at the old, dead me. "I... I'm sorry. I guess I was still hoping that you were... That he was still..."

I nodded. I knew just how she felt. "I guess I was too."

Yeah, I should have known. I *did* know, basically, but there's still a difference between being pretty damn sure somebody's dead and seeing their corpse with your own eyes. I was dead. The original "I" — the guy I was trying so desperately to remember how to be.

I zipped the zipper all the way down and peeled back the bag to take a better look at my corpse. It turned my stomach. The only fatal wounds on my body had been made with a scalpel, and the bruising at my ankles and wrists suggested that those wounds had been made while I was alive and conscious.

"Looks like you fought like hell," said Vargas.

"Yeah."

Kate, who'd never been brought up to speed on my history, looked confused. "So, this *isn't* your twin brother?"

I shook my head. "I cloned myself at Sleeper One. Twice, I think."

Athalia crossed her arms. "The part I don't understand is how you — I mean he — are — uh, is — here. How did one of your bodies end up here, and the other in Sleeper One?"

"I think I've got that figured out." I turned to face them. "I think I'm doing this all over again, like the world's worst case of déjà-vu."

"How do you mean?" asked Angie.

I pointed east — at least I thought it was east. "I'm not the only dead body in Sleeper One. My whole squad died there, fighting killer robots. We'd come there on your orders, hunting that advanced armor, and we got slaughtered, but not before we found the note about the sec pass that would open the door to the armor being here in Darwin. So, my guess is I — he — was the only survivor of the fight, and he was pretty badly wounded, so he used the cloning machine to make a copy of himself. Then together he and the clone came here to look for the sec pass."

Vargas nodded. "Unfortunately, there was a fight here too, and Finster got ahold of him."

"Right" said Angie. "But the clone got away. He was half dead, but he was free, so he went back to Sleeper One to make *another* copy of himself..."

"And he died while he was waiting for the second clone to come out of the oven," I said. "Which is where I found him when I woke up, on the floor outside the cloning chamber."

Hell Razor laughed. "Gotta hand it to you for tenacity, brother. Seriously."

I laughed too, then the laughter drained away, and all I could see was the brutalized face of the man who had traveled across half of Arizona with his head caved in to try to save the man on the metal tray in front of me, who had died by vivisection and lost a chance at a life of love and laughter with the woman who was dripping tears on his battered leather jacket.

"Looks like I'm going to be the first guy in the world to take revenge on the guy that killed him — twice."

Vargas cleared his throat. "You got a whole village out there wants this guy. And they got a lot more bodies to avenge than you do."

“Well, they can get in line.”

Angie raised a hand. “Hey. We can fight over who gets to kill him later. We still gotta find him first. Now let’s go.”

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As soon as we exited the dissection lab, an elevator door opened up on the far wall of the corridor we were in. We all stopped and pointed our weapons at it, but it was empty and the door remained open.

Kate cocked her head. “Does that look like an invitation to you?”

“Or a death trap,” growled Vargas.

Nobody was moving.

I sighed and stepped forward. “Fine, fine. Let the clone do it. He’s the only one with death experience on his resume.”

“Ghost, wait.”

I looked back. Angie was giving me a weird look.

“What?” I asked. “I’m expendable. You said so yourself.”

“But you’re not. Not anymore. You’re the last one of you left.”

I stopped and turned around. “Wait. So now that you know the “original” me is dead, you’re going to change your mind about “now” me?”

She chewed her lip. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Ace was about as happy about that as you’d expect. I didn’t blame him.

“Listen, Angie,” I said. “I can see you’re having trouble making up your mind, so I’ll do it for you. I’m gonna get on the elevator and go see what’s what. If I come back, you can play eenie–meenie–mynie–mo with me and Ace to your heart’s content. If I don’t, I... I wish you all the best. I really—”

“Nobody’s getting on that elevator,” said Vargas. “We’d be like sheep walking into a slaughterhouse, and the rangers don’t breed no sheep. Not even cloned ones.” He motioned us on down the corridor. “Now come on. We’ll find another way, and for fuck’s sake keep the goddamn soap opera to yourselves. Some of us have sensitive stomachs.”

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After following the corridor around a few more corners and searching a few more spotless and shiny rooms, we entered a room unlike any of the others. For one thing, it had a slanted ceiling like in the attic of a house with a pitched roof. For another thing, it was dirty. There was a fine layer of grit on the floor, the exposed steel beams of that slanted ceiling were spotted with rust, and the whole place smelled like raw, freshly–turned earth. There were also pipes and valves running under the beams, lockers, and benches along the walls, and machines that might have been air–conditioners or heaters cluttering up the floor. Strangest of all there was a door in the slanted ceiling — a heavy, air–lock–looking beast with steps leading up to it. The dirt on the floor was thickest under it.

“So,” said Angie, drawing in the dirt with her toe, “does it go outside?”

“Let’s find out,” said Hell Razor, and pushed a button near the door.

“Guns up!” barked Vargas.

We aimed our guns at the door and it began to groan and hiss like a waking monster. Finally, with a gasp of escaping pressure, a seal broke and it raised up and split in the middle to swing wide open onto what did indeed appear to be the night-time sky.

My first thought was, “It was mid-afternoon when we entered the facility. Have we really been down here that long?” My second thought was, “Holy fucking hell, I’m choking to death!”

All around me the others were choking and retching just like I was. It was like there wasn’t enough air, and at the same time like there was too much of something else, something sharp and stinging. It smelled like cat piss and hot rocks. My eyes teared up.

“Close the door!” Vargas shouted. “Close the fucking door!”

Hell Razor jammed his finger down on the button again, but nothing happened. The door didn’t even groan.

“Fuck! Back into the hall! Quick!”

Thrasher led the way, slamming into the hall door with a heavy shoulder. It didn’t budge. He tried the door handle. Nothing. It just rattled uselessly.

With a grunt he stepped back and kicked the lock with a sasquatch-sized boot. The door boomed like it had been hit with a mortar round, but it still didn’t move.

“Here!” shouted Kate.

We all looked around. She was at one of the lockers, holding a gas mask of some kind. She threw it to Vargas, then tore open another locker. The rest of us followed suit, charging over and pulling out masks in a panicked frenzy.

I tugged one over my head, tightened the straps, and inhaled. It was like trying to breathe through a plastic bag, and the “not enough air” sensation hardly went away at all. Really the only difference was that that burning and the cat-piss smell was gone. Mostly.

“What the fuck,” snarled Hell Razor. “Do these things even fucking work?”

“I still can’t breathe,” said Athalia. “What is—?”

A metallic voice interrupted her. It was coming from a speaker bolted to the ceiling beams. There was a camera next to it. “Welcome to the next world, volunteers. And thank you for participating. Please step through the slanted door to begin the test.”

We all looked up.

“Who the fuck is that?” said Hell Razor.

“Finster?” called Angie. “Is that you?”

Vargas stepped toward the camera. “Let us out of here, asswipe!”

“The exit is beyond the slanted door,” said the metallic voice. “Find it and you are free.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I shouted. “We’re all gonna choke to death before we get five feet!”

“You will not,” said the voice. “The air you are breathing has considerably less oxygen than you are used to, but now that you are wearing the masks, the toxins that otherwise would have killed you have been filtered out. You may pass out if you exert yourselves too much, but you will not die. Not from lack of oxygen.”

“So what is this?” asked Angie, sucking in a big breath. “We’re rats in some maze you made up, looking for the cheese?”

“No no. Not at all. You’re not the rats.” A laugh came over the speakers. It sounded even more metallic than the voice. “You are the cheese.”

Everybody looked at the open door all at the same time. Suddenly the darkness beyond seemed to be staring at us.

“Indeed,” continued the voice. “It would make things more even if you were to keep moving, please. I have had such difficulty getting the parameters of this test balanced correctly. It has been frustrating.”



The voice was right. We were bottled up in a dead end. There was no way out except the door ahead of us, and anything that blocked it could box us in easy as pie. We'd be fish in a barrel. Around me, the others were coming to the same conclusion.

"Right," said Vargas. "Out we go. Eyes in every direction, and stick together."

We formed up in a rough circle with Kate in the center and walked up the stairs and out the door into...

I honestly couldn't tell what it was at first. It looked like we had stepped out into a walled-in nature preserve on the night-time surface of another planet. The moon and stars glowed red above us in a purple sky while all around us were strange plants and stranger animal shapes slinking through the shadows cast by massive red rock outcroppings. There was also a high brick wall at the top of the hill behind us, and the door we had come out of was built into the side of that hill, which was actually a room with a slanted ceiling. Made me wonder if all the hills and outcroppings around us were fake too. And of course we couldn't be outside, could we? The air outside wasn't poisonous, and this was.

Hell Razor didn't like it. "What the fuck is this shit?"

He raised his pistol and squeezed off three rounds straight up. High above us we heard the tinkling of glass and some of the stars went out. A few seconds later the glass rained down on us along with a dusting of plaster.

"Well, that answers that question," said Angie.

"Not entirely," said the metallic voice. Now it was coming from a nearby bush. "This facility was created in order to develop new breeds of humans, animals, and plants able to thrive on an earth where unforeseen circumstances had drastically changed the air and environment for the worse. It was one of a number of contingency plans for the continued survival of the human race enacted before the apocalypse."

Angie sneered. "Looks like the apocalypse beat you to the punch."

"There were some set-backs, yes," said the bush, "but we're back on track now. This artificial biome, for example, which I use to test how well various subjects survive in various conditions, is state of the art. With the twist of one knob I can change the chemical mixture of the air to simulate any number of different environmental parameters — nuclear winter, ozone depletion, global warming, rainforest die-off. With the twist of another knob I can change the radiation level from pre-war normal, to current levels, to instantly fatal. You're getting a fairly elevated dose right now, by the way. Another reason you should continue looking for the exit."

"And have you had any actual success?" asked Kate. "Have you actually bred humans or animals that can thrive on an earth where the air and the environment have been drastically changed for the worse?"

The bush sounded disappointed. "Progress with humans has been less than satisfactory, as you will see. We are such complex creatures. But with the lower orders, yes. We have had great success — particularly with our alpha predators."

As if on cue, somewhere out in the darkness, something howled.

Vargas cursed and turned back to the hill with the square hole in it. The brick wall at the top ran into the darkness in either direction farther than the eye could see. The "sky" arced over the wall, giving it the illusion of going on forever, like a real sky would.

"Alright," he said, "Enough gabbing. We gotta find that door, pronto. First things first. We need to peek over that wall and see what's on the other side. Ghost, Hell Razor, Ace, and Athalia — keep an eye out for whatever's making that noise. Thrasher, give Kate a boost up to the top of that wall. Angie and I will help."

We trudged to the top of the hill and watched Thrasher's back as he picked Kate up and put her on his shoulders as easy as putting on a hat. Even on her tip-toes however, she could barely see over the wall, and she couldn't see much.

"It's too dark," she said.

Vargas handed a flashlight up to her and she shined it around then shook her head. "The ceiling just curves down to

the floor about ten feet back from the wall. It's all dusty in there, but I don't see any door."

"Hmfmf," said Vargas. He grimaced. "Uh, how are you with heights, Kate?"

"Um... fine, I guess. Why?"

"Because I was thinkin', the best way to find this door might be to have you walk along the top of that wall all the way around the perimeter."

"And what if she fell off on the other side?" asked Angie. "Be a hell of a sweat climbing over and getting her out again."

"Not to mention I might break my leg," said Kate.

"Yeah," said Vargas. "That too. Hmmm."

Hell Razor dropped his pack on the ground and undid the buckle, then pulled out a neat bundle of rope and held it up. "How about we put a leash on her?"

Vargas looked up to Kate. "You okay with that?"

She gave a weak laugh. "As long as it doesn't go around my neck."

Thrasher swung her down again and Hell Razor tied the rope around her waist, then Thrasher picked her back up, put her feet in his hands, and pressed her almost to the top of the wall. She clambered on and they started moving along the wall — Kate shining the flashlight down into the far side while Thrasher walked along on the ground beside her, holding the rope and looking for all the world like a giant kid with a Kate-shaped balloon.

"Awww," said Angie, "ain't that sweet?"

Thrasher just grunted and kept walking. We walked with him, moving in a semi-circle around him, looking out into the dark landscape with guns at the ready, waiting for whatever had howled. The anticipation was killing me.

"Why aren't they coming?"

Angie gave me a sidelong glance. "You want them to come?"

"I just want to get it over with."

Athalia snorted. "I just want it to never happen."

Angie grinned. "Amen, sister."

As we walked we were constantly jumping and swinging our guns around as little half-seen creatures rustled through the underbrush, but nothing big came at us.

A little later, in a patch of fake moonlight I saw what looked like a squirrel, except that it was the size of a small dog and had a prehensile tail, hanging from a branch over a trickling stream and stretching its neck for a drink. Then a fish that looked like a brook trout except with the wide smile of a shark leapt up and bit the creature's head off in one bite. Blood jetted from the severed neck as the tail slowly uncurled and the body plopped into the water.

Angie shivered. "Isn't nature wonderful?"

"This is nature?" I asked.

After a few minutes of following the wall down the line of fake hills and valleys, we came to a corner. It was so filled with weird plants and mutant cacti that Thrasher couldn't stick close to the wall, so he paid out the rope in order to edge around the mess without pulling Kate off the wall.

And that's when the thing attacked.

I'm gonna call it a Night Screamer because, well, it was night — or a reasonable facsimile thereof — when it attacked, and it screamed. Boy did it scream. It stumbled out of the scrub, flailing at Thrasher with something it held in both hands, and shrieking like a tea-kettle.

Thrasher flinched. I mean, I don't blame him. We all flinched. That fucker was loud! But Thrasher was holding the

end of Kate's rope, and you can guess what happened next. One twitch and she toppled off the wall, right into the cacti.

"Fuck!"

"Goddamn it!"

"What is it?"

"Kill it!"

"Kate, are you all right?"

Thrasher backhanded the thing as it pitter-patted him with weak hits, and it went down sobbing at his feet. I aimed at it with my pistol and got my first good look at it. I almost lost my lunch.

It looked like something that had tried to be human, but then given up halfway. It had a basic human shape — hands, feet, arms, legs, but they were all twisted and scrawny, and covered in infected sores. Its head was a horror, a pulpy green mass with a mouth like a hole in a rotting pumpkin. But the worst thing was the weapon it had attacked Thrasher with. It was a raggedy little baby doll, and the Screamer was clutching it to its concave chest and weeping like it was four years old.

I winced and eased up on the trigger. "Aw, hell. How do you kill something like that?"

Athalia shot it through the forehead. "Think of it as mercy."

I blinked at her. "Man, you are pretty damn cold for a servant of—"

"Incoming!"

We whipped around. Angie was firing into the darkness, and in the bursts of her muzzle flash, I saw shapes bounding towards us — long, low and lean, with narrow snouts full of yellow teeth and eyes that mirrored red.

Hell Razor laughed as he blasted at them. "Wolves! Finally something I understand in this goddamn mad house!"

But they weren't wolves. Not quite. Our bullets just sparked off their hides — didn't slow them down, didn't even make them stumble. And as they got closer, we saw why. Their fur wasn't fur. It was like porcupine quills made out of ten-penny nails. Bullets slid off 'em like water off a thatched roof.

"Jesus!" I choked. "We can't hurt 'em! Jesus!"

Athalia proved me wrong by shooting one straight through the eye and dropping it like a sack of meat, but then the rest were on us and we were fighting for our lives.

A big gray bastard put me flat on my back in the middle of the cacti, and I only kept its teeth from my neck by jamming my forearm against its windpipe and pushing back as hard as I could. Its jaws snapped shut an inch from my nose and its claws tore through my leathers and my shirt and ripped into my chest.

Hissing with agony, I jammed my pistol into its flank with my free hand, pushing the nose of it through the porcupine spines until it touched flesh. "Shrug this off, you son-of-a-bitch!"

The wolf yelped as the bullet smashed through its ribs. I sat up and drilled a second shot through its forehead as it flopped around on the ground.

Around me, everything was chaos. Thrasher was caving in the skull of a wolf with the yard-long piece of two-inch rebar he called his billy club. Angie was shooting point blank at a wolf that had Ace on the ground. Athalia was standing over a dead wolf and kicking another in the chops. Vargas and Hell Razor were back to back, blasting away at three circling wolves and, believe it or not, laughing.

I ran to Angie and Ace and did my trick again, stuffing the muzzle of my gun through the fur of their wolf before pulling the trigger. The three of us went and helped the others, and it was over in less than a minute.

Well, almost over.

All the wolves we'd been fighting were lying dead around us, but we were still hearing growling and snarling.

"Where the hell is that coming from?" asked Angie.

Then we saw it. A commotion in the patch of scrub behind us.

“No!” shouted Vargas, and he plunged through the cacti, stumbling and getting caught on the needles.

The rest of us charged in after him and saw a last wolf tearing at something near the wall.

“Goddamn it! Get off of her!”

Vargas blasted at the wolf and got its attention. It whipped around, snarling, and tried to launch itself at him, but Thrasher’s rebar took it in the mouth before it could jump, and turned its head to red pulp. It sank down with a whimper and revealed the body that lay behind it.

Poor Kate’s throat was open from chin to clavicle, and all her blood spilling out on the dry yellow ground. Her arms had been trapped in a bed of cacti. She hadn’t even been able to defend herself — not that it would have helped. Still, what a way to go. It was so pitiful I felt like crying.

Vargas did. He dropped down on his knees beside her, weeping and shaking. “I told you not to come. Didn’t I tell you? Goddamn it, I told you!”

A cactus off to our left spoke up. “Congratulations, volunteers. I am impressed. You are the first subjects to survive their first encounter with any of my progeny, and—”

Vargas bolted up and shot the cactus. “Congratulations? You son-of-a-bitch! You just killed a little girl!”

A rock in the other direction continued. “I’d still call that a victory. Only one casualty, and the weakest, least effective one at—”

Vargas shot the rock. “You heartless, soulless motherfucker!”

He started shooting at random — sky, walls, plants, rocks — his eyes crazed with grief and rage.

“We are not some goddamn experiment, you invisible asshole!”

BLAM!

“We are people!”

BLAM!

“And you killed the best of us!”

BLAM!

“Ain’t no research worth a dead little girl!”

BLAM!

CLASH!

We looked up. Vargas’s last bullet had whistled over the wall about twenty yards down. That area had been black and full of stars just like the rest of the “sky,” but now, as we watched, big jagged pieces of that black were falling away, and light was showing through from behind it. A one-way window.

Three more huge shards spun down and shattered on the wall below, and we could see a wood-paneled room through it, and also the silhouette of a man watching us.

Vargas raised his gun and fired and the silhouette stepped away, out of our line of sight.

“Come on,” said Vargas, starting forward and reloading. “We gotta get through that window.”

“Damn straight,” I said.

We filed in behind him and...

...that’s when the other Night Screemers started screaming.

## – Chapter Eight –

There were three of them this time, shrieking and flailing towards us from three different directions, and behind their high pitched wails, the lower howls of armored wolves.

“They’re like fucking alarms!” shouted Hell Razor as he blew a screamer’s head off. “They let everything with teeth know where we are!”

“Is it on purpose?” Angie gut-shot another screamer and it collapsed in a mewling heap. “Are they working together? Is Finster signaling them?”

Vargas and I finished off the last mutant together, then he motioned us all back the way we’d come.

“Back to the corner,” he said. “We can’t let ‘em get around behind us.”

We ran back and faced out, guns ready. They didn’t keep us waiting. Wolves were loping in from all over, twice as many as before. There was no escape from death this time, and part of me, the same part that had earlier said, “I just want to get it over with,” the same part that had jumped into the fight at White Mesa without thinking twice, the same part that had started the ruckus at the Black Market, was excited by the idea. I didn’t understand it. I should have been pissing my pants, but instead my heart was pounding like I was on a first date. I was having a hard time keeping myself from laughing out loud. The only thing that kinda killed the buzz a little was knowing that my all my friends were going to die too, but even that wasn’t enough to keep my blood from singing.

On either side of me Angie and Athalia were squeezing off head-shots as calm and easy as if they were at target practice. Two wolves dropped. Then another two. Vargas, Ace and Hell Razor weren’t snipers like that, and were holding their fire until the wolves got closer, while Thrasher had put his guns away entirely, and was rolling his shoulders and limbering up with his rebar. Me, I knew I had to get close — under that metal fur — to do anything, so I was wading out through the dead grass with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other, howling answers to the wolves’ challenges as I went.

We were all going to die, and it was going to be glorious.

But then, just as the wolves were close enough to see the glow of their eyes, Angie and Athalia’s guns developed a weird echo that didn’t quite match the shots they’d fired. Then a wolf they hadn’t shot stumbled sideways and I realized I wasn’t hearing echoes. I was hearing more guns.

“Watch your fire!” Vargas pointed beyond the wolves. “There’s people coming!”

It was hard to see who they were in the dark, but I could see the flashes of their guns just fine and, wonder of wonders, they weren’t aiming at us. All over Finster’s indoor outdoors wolves were yipping and turning as bullets caught them in the flanks. The shots weren’t doing much damage, but they brought the wolves’ charge to a standstill as they tried to face two threats at once.

We fanned out and moved to enclose them, and the people who had come to our rescue — whoever they were — did the same. Pretty soon, what had looked like it was going to be a dead ranger bloodbath turned into a dead wolf massacre. The ring closed and the wolves turned and lunged, bloodying up a few of us, but we knew what we were dealing with now, and we made our shots count. A few minutes later it was all over — no casualties on our side, high fives all around.

“You all okay, rangers?”

A handful of the folks who had rescued us stepped forward and we whooped when we finally recognized them behind their gas masks. It was Metal Maniac, Mad Dog, and a bunch of the other townies.

Vargas shook his head. “What the hell are you doing back here — aside from saving our asses?”

Metal shrugged. “After all you done for us, we couldn’t just stand by. We all worked here, remember? We knew the kind of craziness you might find.”

Mad Dog laughed. “Good thing some of us know secret ways to get into the garden or we woulda all been on the outside watchin’ you die on the security monitors.”

There were tears in Angie’s eyes. “This is why the rangers succeed. Not because we have the biggest guns, or the best armor. But because, when we do good by the people, the people do good by us. Thank you, friends. Thank you.”

The townsfolk cheered, but Vargas held up a hand.

“Yes, thank you, but now that you’ve saved us you gotta get the hell out again. We know where Finster is now, and hunting him would get awful crowded with you and your army tagging along.”

“Not to mention you’re all still sick as dogs,” said Angie. “You should all be in bed.”

Metal looked stubborn. “We told you, we want to be in on the kill.”

“And I told you, we’ll bring him out for you if we can, but we need to do this part alone.” He cleared his throat. “There are a few things you can do, though.”

“Name ‘em,” said Mad Dog.

Vargas ticked them off on his fingers. “One, find us a ladder. Two, carry out the body of our medic, Kate, who... who didn’t make it.”

“Aw shit,” said Metal. “I’m sorry.”

“Me... too,” said Vargas, then cleared his throat again and continued. “And three, post a guard on all the exits of the base so Finster doesn’t slip out and hightail it out of here.”

Metal saluted. “On it. Thanks.” He spun and called to one of his fellow townies.

“Hey, Owen! Bring the ladder from Storage Bay Six! The big one!”

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Ten minutes later we propped a long ladder against the broken window in the roof, shooed Metal Maniac and Mad Dog back toward the exits with their friends, and I started up the rungs with Ace, Athalia, and the rangers covering me from the ground. It was a strange sensation. I knew I was heading for a slanted window in a curved ceiling, but the illusion of the night and the stars was so strong that I felt like I was climbing a ladder through the sky.

As my head came even with the bottom of the window, I drew my pistol and peered in, scanning for threats. Inside was a large, wood-paneled office. Again, everything appeared clean enough to be sterile, and that thought made me think that the whole facility was like a body keeping itself clean to protect itself against infection — and we were that infection. Gave me the shivers.

All that wood paneling should have made the office feel warm and inviting, but it failed. Maybe it was because, while it had more shelving than the town library, there wasn’t a single thing on those shelves — no books, no trophies, no curios, no dust. Likewise there were no pictures, maps, or paintings on the open walls. The room had all the personality of cardboard box, like an office ready for its first occupant, not an office that had been in use for over a hundred years.

And for a full thirty seconds I thought it was empty too. Then I noticed the slender man sitting at the large mahogany desk right in front of me. Noticing him freaked me out so much I almost fell off the ladder. Why hadn’t I seen him? He’d been there the whole time, but I’d looked right past him like he was part of the furniture. Maybe because he was so still? He hadn’t looked up, or shifted, or even seemed to take a breath the whole time I’d been looking through with

window. Why wasn't he moving? Was he dead? He must have known we were coming for him. He'd been there when Vargas had shot out his window, but he just sat there, staring blankly.

I trained my gun on him and took another step up the ladder. "Irwin John Finster?"

It took him a moment to react to his name. I'd have held that against him, but I was the same way. Hardly knew my own anymore. Maybe he *was* a clone like I'd said before — the last of a long line. Then he faced me — but just his head. His shoulders didn't turn at all, his chair didn't swivel. His eyes were bright blue.

"You are the clone," he said. "You found your progenitor in the lab."

His voice was weird. I'd thought it had sounded metallic because we were hearing it through the PA system, but it sounded the same in person.

"My progenitor's progenitor," I said.

I kept my gun on him as I climbed the rest of the way through the window, then beckoned to the others waiting below me. "He's here! I got him covered! Come on up!"

I heard the ladder creak behind me, but didn't look around. Neither did Finster. He sat there looking at me, face as blank as a dead TV screen as one by one Angie, Ace, Athalia, Hell Razor, Thrasher, and Vargas came up through the window and put their guns on him too. It took two minutes. I didn't see him blink once.

Once they were all in, Vargas spoke. "So... we have some questions."

"Very likely."

Vargas opened his mouth to continue, but Angie butted in first. "You can't be the same man who was in charge of this place when it opened, can you? You're a clone, right? Like Ghost here."

"I would not say that clone was quite the right term," He turned his head toward her — again, just his head. The rest of his body stayed in exactly the same position it had been in when I first noticed it. "But, yes, I am not quite the same Irwin John Finster that founded this facility. When important work needs to be done, that which is necessary for its completion must be created. That is what I did, though the sacrifice was great."

He stood, and it was such an abrupt change from sitting to standing that we all stepped back and raised our weapons. He didn't seem to notice.

"So," he said. "Your questions."

"Yeah, okay," said Vargas. "First one. What the fuck are you doing? I mean, I think I understand the original reason for this place. Trying to find ways to help humanity adapt to harsh conditions in the event of the apocalypse and so on, but the apocalypse happened and we're not doin' too bad — physically at least. We don't need fancy new lungs to survive. We don't need steel porcupine quills covering our bodies. So why are you tryin' to make animals that can live in conditions that don't exist?"

Finster's head descended into what should have been a curt nod, but never rose again. He just froze like that, with his chin tucked to his chest.

"They do exist," he said. "How big is the area of Arizona in which you can survive without the aid of a rad-suit or a breathing mask? Two hundred square miles? Three hundred? Four? Now, how much of the Earth is covered by clouds of toxic radiation? How much of the Earth will you never be able to explore because you can only go so far before your rad suit fails or you run out of filters."

His head rose again and those motionless blue eyes fixed on Vargas. "If we could breathe that air, if we could thrive in that radiation, the whole world could be ours."

I glanced at the others to see if that had sounded as sane to them as it had to me. They were frowning and nodding, so I guess I wasn't alone.

"Okay, fine," said Angie. "You've got a point there, but what's with irradiating everybody who worked for you?"

And don't tell me it was an accident, 'cause I'm not buying it."

Finster's eyes switched to her. "It was not an accident. As you saw out there, I had reached a dead end with my human experiments. With each generation they became more infantile and weak. Then, when my lead researchers rebelled against me and tried to stage a coup, I realized that the fault was not with my experiments. Instead it was inherent in mankind's internal makeup, a fatal flaw that would always make them destroy themselves and the world around them. For the world to live and grow and again be returned to the pristine paradise it once was, mankind cannot be a part of it. The species must be eradicated, and a new breed of sentient being allowed to evolve to take its place."

There it was! There was the crazy! Suddenly it was as clear as day that we were all closer to the moon than Finster was to sanity.

"Wait," said Angie, "you just said, 'If we could thrive in that radiation the whole world could be ours.' What happened to 'we' all of a sudden?"

"We as in my family," said Finster. "The world will be ours, not yours."

Vargas choked, then laughed. "Okay, putting aside the fact that you're calling for the death of all mankind, evolution takes a long damn time, doesn't it? It would still take thousands and thousands of generations before those porcupine wolves out there started rubbing sticks together and making fire — maybe millions. You'd be long dead before you got what you wanted, and I have serious doubts any sane person would want to continue the process after you died. It just ain't gonna work."

Finster smiled. At least the corners of his mouth went up. It still didn't look like a smile. "It will work, because I will not die. I have left the human lifecycle behind. I can wait as long as it takes. Then my children, who will grow and thrive under my care, will repopulate the earth, making it again the Eden God intended. What foolish human wars destroyed, I and my guided-evolution family will make anew."

"Sounds quite cozy and megalomaniacal," said Athalia, "but what about the robots coming from Base Cochise? They're going to roll over this place long before your 'children' have evolved the defenses to protect themselves. Your plan won't last *this* generation, let alone a thousand."

Finster's eyes flicked to her. "Yes. The robots." His face made the non-smiling smile motion again. "The robots are the reason I have let you live this long, and have patiently answered your questions."

"Gee, thanks," said Hell Razor.

Finster kept talking like Hell Razor hadn't spoken. "The robots must be dealt with — as must the computer that is creating them — and you 'rangers' have the skills and firepower to deal with them, while I, currently, do not. This is why I want you to become part of Project Darwin — my security team, if you will. In exchange you will have the pick of the housing in Darwin Village and any mate you want from my pool human test subjects. Also, I have a security pass for Sleeper Base One which will give you access to advanced armor to help you win the fight."

Angie laughed like a hyena. "Join you after you just told us that you're planning to wipe out the whole human race? Are you out of your ever-lovin'—"

"Angie!" Vargas cut her off with a chop gesture and a roll of the eyes.

She glared at him. "What?"

"Just... shhh."

He turned back to Finster and cleared his throat. "Despite my colleague's hesitation, you're making a lot of sense. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and all that stuff. If you're willing to give us the sec pass that gets us that armor, then we're willing to put aside our differences and go after the robots which are a threat to us both. Sound like a deal?"

"Very good," said Finster. "I will give you the security pass as soon as you allow me to inject you with a disease of my own invention, the antidote for which only I possess. Once you successfully defeat the robots, return here and I will give you the antidote. Understood?"



We all blinked at him.

“You what now?” I said.

“So,” Vargas growled. “You’re saying you don’t trust us.”

Finster’s face was blank. “As much as you trust me.”

“Well—”

“Well in that case,” growled Hell Razor. “Fuck you!”

And with that he shot Finster in the knee caps with a blast from his shotgun, then aimed the second barrel at his head as he crashed to the floor.

“Now give us the fucking sec pass before I spray your fucked up brain all over this nice clean room.”

Finster hadn’t made a sound when his knees got turned into hamburger, and he didn’t make a sound now. He just lay there for a long moment, staring — at least as far as I could tell — at the droplets of blood that were dotting his hardwood floor. Then, incredibly, too easily, he pushed himself up and faced us again. I didn’t know how he was standing. His legs should have been a shattered mess.

“If you do not want the security pass,” he said, like nothing had happened, “then I’m afraid I must ask you to leave. If you do not want to go, well, we are not without means to deal with even the likes of the dreaded Desert Rangers.”

Hell Razor stared, incredulous. “You *are* crazy! Only a fucking mad man talks shit to the guy with the shotgun in his face! Now where is that fucking—”

“I’m not mad.” Finster shook violently. “And I’m not a man.”

His body started jerking and spasming in time with a series of metallic clicks, snaps and clanks.

Vargas stared. “What the...?”

We all stepped back as the fingers of Finster’s right hand ratcheted down and stretched out to equal length.

“What is happening to him?” asked Angie.

“Shit is freaking me out,” said Hell Razor.

The skin of Finster’s fingers split, revealing hollow steel tubes that began to spin as if his hand was a Gatling cannon.

Vargas shoved at the rest of us and dove for the floor. “Down! Down!”

I hit the dirt behind Finster’s desk as flame and metal spat from his hand and chewed up the pristine oak top. My heart was pounding from shock and confusion. What the fuck was that? A mechanical gun hand? Where the fuck did he get that?

I rolled to the far end of the desk and leaned out to fire, and saw that it wasn’t just Finster’s hand that was mechanical. In the second and a half it had taken me to get from one end of the desk to the other, Finster had transformed himself from a slender man to a looming metal android thing. Hooks and blades on his shoulders and elbows had shredded through what was left of his human flesh and clothing, and around his piercing blue eyes his cheeks and brow had split, revealing sharp chrome bones and hydraulic muscles.

I pulled the trigger at him as fast as I could, pumping round after round into his torso. Angie and Athalia’s pistols blazed at him too, as Ace, Vargas, and Hell Razor emptied shotguns and SMGs into him. Finster jerked and staggered under the deafening barrage, armor plating denting, sparks jetting from his torso, but he never lost his balance, and his gun-hand was swinging around toward where Angie and Athalia lay together behind the flimsy cover of a fancy wooden chair.

“No!”

Thrasher roared up out of cover and smashed his rebar billy club down on Finster’s forearm with all his might. The stream of lead zigged past the women and ate up the floor instead, then sputtered out as the bent and broken gun whined to a stop.

Thrasher swung the billy club again, aiming for Finster's head, but the android's other hand snapped out and caught his wrist and stopped him cold. It was eerie to look at. Thrasher was a foot taller and two hundred pounds heavier, yet the whip-thin metal skeleton was muscling him back, crushing his wrist in its grip as it raised its mangled gun-hand at him like a club.

"Hey asshole," snarled Vargas. "Nobody thrashes Thrasher."

Vargas and Hell Razor stepped in on either side of their comrade and fired at Finster from point blank range. Vargas's SMG hammered the android, bouncing him back a couple of steps and forcing him to let go. Hell Razor's shotgun spun him around and dropped him flat on his back on the floor.

I stood to deliver the coup de grace, but Athalia beat me to it. She knelt down beside Finster and put her pistol to his metal sternum, right where his heart should have been, and pulled the trigger three times.

Finster spasmed and kicked and tried raise the gun again as his blue eyes began to darken, but I stepped on the barrel and gave him a smile.

He looked up at me. "You were easier to... kill last... time."

"I was alone last time."

Angie dropped beside him. "Never mind that shit! Where is the sec pass?"

Finster chuckled. It sounded like a broken fan blade spinning down. "You will... never find it."

Angie shook him. "Come on, you bastard! Give!"

"It is... in... my memory."

His blue eyes went black.

## – Chapter Nine –

“So,” asked Angie. “When do you think he went around the bend?”

“Who, me? Oh, you mean Finster.” I scratched my chin. “Coulda been a long time ago. I mean, it woulda had to be frustrating for a guy who’s trying to discover ways to survive the apocalypse to have his research interrupted by the apocalypse. And maybe this killer robot business made things worse. Like he felt he had to speed up evolution before Cochise’s machines steamrolled his operation.”

“I got another question,” said Vargas. “When did he become an android? Before the apocalypse? After? Was he always like that? And if he wasn’t, why did he do it? Just to prolong his life? Or was there some other reason?”

“How about, *how* did he become an android?” I added.

“Maybe we’ll find out when we get in his head,” said Ace.

“If we get in his head,” said Hell Razor, glaring at Athalia. “Seems like some unlikely–ass shit to me. How do you know how to do this stuff anyway?”

Athalia looked up from trying to hook Finster’s head up to the computer we’d found in a little room off his office. “The Church of the Mushroom Cloud teaches its children well — especially those trained to fight androids and robots.”

Angie waved a hand. “Ignore him. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Athalia nodded and bent her head to her work again as we all watched. This was our last chance. We’d searched the whole damn facility from top to bottom for that sec pass and come up with nothing. It had been an easy — but frustrating — search, since there was nothing on any of the shelves or in any of the closets. The place was so clean and neat that there was nowhere to hide anything.

It had been when Hell Razor had suggested we start kicking in the walls and seeing what was behind them that I had a brilliant inspiration.

“Wait!” I’d said. “Finster’s memory! What if he was talking about the pictures of back when he founded this place?”

Well, it was brilliant, but wrong. We’d run down to the lab again and broke open the frames of all those old photos. There was nothing inside. Still, it wasn’t a completely wasted effort, because it in turn inspired Athalia.

“Hang on,” she’d said as we’d stared at the empty picture frames. “Finster was an android. He had a computer for a brain. What if the answer is in his *memory*? His *RAM*?”

Fortunately, she knew about this kind of stuff, because the rest of us didn’t, and we followed her back up to Finster’s office, detached his head, and then got to work trying to hook it up to the weird computer console in the closet.

Hell Razor growled and spit on the spotless floor. “Can’t we just hook him up to a battery, wake his ass up, then slap him around until he tells us?”

Vargas shook his head. “Sounds like fun, but what’s to stop him from lying? This way we get at the actual info... if we can get in.”

Athalia put down a pair of needle nose pliers and looked up. “It’s ready. I hope.”

Everybody turned around.

“Okay,” said Angie. “So how does it work?”

Athalia held up a weird headset that looked like a cross between a pair of headphones and a salad strainer.

“Wearing this hooks you into Finster’s brain, and you should be able to walk around inside the file structures like it was a library. At least I hope that’s what it’s like. He got banged around a lot in that last fight. Things might be a little jumbled up in there.” She cleared her throat. “Which is why I’d like to volunteer to be the one to go in. I’ve got a lot of experience with computers and artificial intelligence. I know what to expect.”

Vargas and Angie frowned and exchanged a look, then Vargas shook his head.

“Mighty nice of you, sister,” he said, “and what you say makes a lot of sense, but... well, we don’t really know you from Adam. I mean, you’ve been real helpful and all, and you’ve certainly held up your end in combat, but I can’t say I actually know why you’re along for this ride, and that makes me a little nervous about what you might do with the info you find in there. So, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather have a ranger put that rig on.”

Athalia pursed her lips, disappointed, but then shrugged. “If that’s the way you want to do it, fine. I’ll just say that it might be dangerous for someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing. There could be built in biofeedback mechanisms that could send a shock down the wire and leave you brain-dead.”

“Gotcha. Thanks,” said Vargas, then looked around at the rest of us. “So, any volunteers?”

I sighed and raised my hand. “It’s fine. Let the clone do it.”

Angie managed to look relieved and guilty at the same time. “Ghost, are you sure?”

I spread my hands. “Hey, I oughta be used to weird, disorienting experiences by now. I’m the only one here who’s woken up in a cloning chamber with somebody else’s memories in his head, right?”

The other rangers looked around at each other, then shrugged.

“Okay,” said Vargas. “You’re our man.”

“The Ghost in the machine,” said Angie.

I laughed at that, though my stomach was busy tying itself in knots. Athalia put a hand on my shoulder and motioned me to a chair.

“Have a seat,” she said. “I’ll get you hooked up.”

I swallowed. “Can’t wait.”

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I cringed as my eyes were burned with a searing yellow light.

Wait, were my eyes even open? It was hard to tell. The colors around me kind of looked like the fireworks that happen if you close your eyes and press your knuckles into your eyelids for too long — yellow, green, red, blue.

I stumbled forward, hands out. Was I walking? Floating? That was hard to tell too. I stubbed my fingers against a vibrating wall. It looked exactly like the floor.

“How do I even move around in here?”

And where was here, anyway? I was sitting in a chair in front of a computer, wasn’t I?

I couldn’t see anything but the crazy colors, couldn’t feel anything but the pulsing walls and floors around me. Was I in my head? No. This was Finster’s head. It didn’t look like I’d imagined it. Like a library or the inside of a computer. It was just this weird yellow brightness.

I started feeling my way around the space and noticed that weird thoughts and random phrases were popping into my head with each touch. It was like I was overhearing snippets of conversations.

“Research and education will be Project Darwin’s highest priority. I assure you, Commander.”

“No! No area of research can be considered off limits! Not when the future of humanity is at stake!”

“We will prepare our citizens in case the worst happens. They will be modified to survive under any conditions.”

“Dammit! We are not playing god just for the sake of it! We produce only useful life!”

“I swear, John. You’ll get the Nobel Prize for this.”

This snippet came with visuals. A dark-haired woman — I remembered her from the faded photos in the lab downstairs — wrapped in my arms, looking lovingly into my eyes. I answered her.

“Really? When we’re not even allowed to tell anyone what we’re doing?”

The scene vanished. A mechanical voice cut in.

“Complete the sequence — four, two, eight, four, thirty-two, sixteen...”

There was a barrier in front of me. It looked like everything else in this place, but somehow I could tell that there was another room behind it. I pushed at it.

“Complete the sequence — four, two, eight, four, thirty-two, sixteen...”

This voice was different than the others. It was talking directly to me.

“Huh? I don’t understand.”

“Complete the sequence — four, two, eight, four, thirty-two, sixteen...”

Shit. I’d never been any good at this kind of stuff. I had no idea. I repeated it out loud, hoping that would help.

“Complete the sequence? What was it again? Four, two, eight, four, thirty-two, sixteen...?”

A new voice came into my head, this one was muffled and far far away, but somehow more real than the other ones. “It’s five-hundred and twelve, Ghost. That’s the next number.”

That was Athalia. Was she in here with me? Had I actually spoken out loud, in the real world.

I looked around the blinding space, “Uh... is the answer five-hundred and twelve?”

The barrier dissolved. I stepped forward into another space that looked exactly like the one I’d just left.

“Who’s there?”

I recognized the voice. It was Finster.

“Who entered that security code?”

I waved at the ceiling — which made about as much sense as waving at the floor, but whatever. “Hiya, Finster.”

“Who is that? Who is in my mind? How did you...?” There was a long pause. “I am dead, yes?”

“Pretty much, yeah. But with your dying breath you told us the sec pass for Sleeper One was in here, so... here I am. Want to tell me where to look?”

There was no answer.

“Uh, hello?”

Still nothing. I moved around the space, bumping into the walls.

“Hello?”

“Who is that? Who is in my mind? How did you...?” Again a long pause. “I am dead, yes?”

“Uh... we just went over this. Yes. You’re dead. I’m looking for the sec pass.”

Another long pause. “I am dead, yes?”

“Yeah. We just—”

“I am dead, yes?”

“Oh boy.”

Finster didn’t appear to be doing very well. He seemed like a dying light bulb, flickering and dimming before finally going dark forever. Understandable, considering he was on life support and all, but selfishly I was a little more

concerned about me. Was this going to make the inside of his head harder to navigate? Would I be able to find what I was looking for? What happened if he died completely while I was in here? Would I just get kicked out back into my own head, or would I be trapped in here when it all went dark? Whatever happened, getting out fast was probably the best option.

“Daddy!”

The shriek brought me up short. I looked around. Though I hadn’t seen anybody before, suddenly I was not alone. There was a misshapen form in the corner, weeping and feeling at the walls like it was blind.

“I’m sorry, daddy! I’m sorry I wasn’t born right!”

I edged closer and saw that it was one of the night screamers, like the ones we’d fought in Finster’s wild animal park. Only this one looked huge — twice as big as me, with a head the size of a beer keg hanging from a neck too weak to hold it upright.

“Don’t leave me in here, daddy! I’m scared!”

Did the thing mean Finster was its father? Did it mean it literally? The images that brought up in my mind were so disturbing that I just wanted to get out of there. I tip-toed behind the creature’s back and reached another barrier.

“Complete the sequence — four, six, eight, twelve....”

“Shhh!”

I shot a look back at the screamer. It was too busy crying.

“Complete the sequence — four, six, eight, twelve....”

I repeated it out loud again — but softly. “Uh, another sequence. Four, six, eight, twelve....”

There was no response from Athalia.

I tried again. “Four, six, eight—”

“I heard you, Ghost. I just... I have no idea. Uh, just start at thirteen and go up.”

I started to say ‘thirteen’ but then another vision took me over — a bunch of kids sitting around a table playing some kind of game with little tin figures of knights and dragons, funny shaped dice, and lots of books. One of the kids looked at me.

“Okay, Irwin, I pick the lock. What happens?”

I picked a die that was practically round and rolled it behind a screen so the other kids couldn’t see. Yes! The thief was doomed.

“Twenty!” I shouted. “Twenty!”

The barrier dissolved.

From outside my head I heard Athalia. “Twenty? And that worked? Oooo—kay.”

I stepped into the next room, then blinked. I’d only taken a step, but already I was halfway to the far wall. I stepped back, surprised, and was in a corner. I stopped and looked around, trying to figure out what was wrong. I couldn’t see anything different about this place. Crazy walls, crazy floor, just like the others, a barrier in the far corner.

I started toward it and ended up off to one side again. Some kind of glitch? Was I losing my connection? I stepped toward the barrier again and again ended up facing the wrong way in the middle of the room. I turned and ran toward it as fast as I could and ended up smashing my face into the wall behind me.

I picked myself up, frowning. Maybe there was a pattern to where the room moved you. If I could figure out the pattern...

I stepped forward — and ended up right where I’d started. And—

“Kibbles and bits. Kibbles and bits. I’m gonna carve you into kibbles and bits.”

I whipped around. “Who said that?”

It hadn’t sounded like Finster, but it hadn’t sounded like the Night Screamer either. It had sounded completely deranged. There was no one there. Had I imagined it?

I tried another direction — and ended up right where I’d started. And—

“Kibbles and bits. Kibbles and bits. I’m gonna carve you into kibbles and bits.”

Goddamn it! I was trapped in this corner with the crazy voice jabbering at me. What the hell? Was this a security measure? Was it Finster’s brain falling apart? Was there some kind of invisible monster in the room with me?

Maybe I was getting bad signals from my eyes. I closed them and instead pictured walking to the barrier. I took a step. I couldn’t tell if I’d been teleported or not, but in my mind I was a step closer. Another step, and another.

After ten steps it felt like I was at the barrier. I opened my eyes. To my utter amazement, I really *was* at the barrier, and it was open.

“Well, how about that.”

I entered the next room. The far wall was partially obscured by weird, grayish strands. I couldn’t tell if they were some kind of visual glitch or if they were actually there. I stepped toward them. A thing that looked a lot like a giant spider dropped down in front of it and wagged its mandibles at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Really? A giant spider? Come on!”

Finster’s voice spoke in my head again. “There is no spider. There are no webs. There is nothing behind them. You should turn around and go back.”

“I didn’t mention any webs,” I said. “How do you know I’m seeing webs if they’re not there?”

“Because I am in your mind as much as you’re in mine.”

I hesitated. I guessed that could be true.

“Well, we’ll see.”

I started for the webs, keeping as far away from the spider as possible. It charged, crossing the space between us in the blink of an eye, and swiped a foreleg at me. I reeled back, cursing. That had hurt!

“You’re a goddamn liar, Finster!”

He tittered. “It was just a little white lie.”

I reached for my pistol, then stared at it as I drew and aimed at the spider. Why the hell did I have my gun in here? I wasn’t really here. Not physically. But now that I looked down at myself I saw I was dressed like me. All my cuts and bruises were where they were supposed to be. My boots were still covered in dust from Finster’s fake landscape. But that was all just me remembering what I looked like and transplanting it into this artificial reality because I desperately needed a point of reference, right? None of my gear would actually work.

The spider swiped at me again and I jumped back just in time.

Time to find out.

I dodged another claw and fired. The space echoed with the shot, and a hole appeared between the spider’s eight eyes. It sank to the ground, dead.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” I said. “That shouldn’t be possible. This isn’t reality. That wasn’t a real bullet.”

“Neither was the spider,” said Finster. “I told you.”

I stepped up the webs. “So these aren’t real either?”

“Of course not.”

I pushed against them. They flexed, but didn’t break. “Feel real to me.”

“That’s because you aren’t real either.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

I pushed against the webs with all my might, and with a sudden twang they broke apart and I was in.

I stepped through the next opening, shaking my head and thinking how crazy it all was, then knocked the dirt from my cleats with the tip of my bat and crossed to home plate. I looked out toward the pitcher’s mound and saw my old foe, Christy Matthews, grinning at me. I gave him a nod back. It was always a battle when old Matty and I crossed paths. The home run king versus the strikeout king. The bleachers cheered us both. Equally divided.

I raised my bat.



## – Chapter Ten –

Matty leaned in, watching past me as the catcher gave his signals behind my back. Finally he stood, threw his arms over his head, twisted almost completely away, then turned and fired his first pitch like a cannonball.

I swung at the white blur but missed by a mile and heard the slap of leather on leather as the catcher caught it.

“Strike one!” called the ump.

“You feelin’ okay, slugger?” asked the catcher. “You don’t usually miss by that much.”

“Just warming up,” I said.

But the next pitch was just as fast, and I swung just as poorly.

“Strike two!”

Sweat started to trickle out from under the brim of my cap, and it wasn’t from exertion. I was letting down the side. I was losing the game.

I spat tobacco juice into the dirt beside the plate, then squared up again, trying to shake off the jitters. I was the best there was. There was no reason I should be choking like this. What was wrong?

As Matty went into his windup I suddenly noticed that the bleachers were empty. Somehow, between that first pitch and this one, the stands had cleared. Was I that bad? Where had everybody gone? Why had the light changed color? What was that roaring sound?

A white blip flashed past me and then a smack.

“Strike three!”

I hadn’t even swung.

“What the hell got into you, son?”

I slumped on the bench in the locker room as Joe gave me a hiding.

“It was like you weren’t even there!”

“I’m sorry, coach. Something... I saw something in the stands. I got distracted. Give me another chance.”

“Another chance? You cost us the inning there, boy! We had bases loaded!”

“I know, I know, but you gotta let me make it up. I got my head on straight now, coach. I can win this game. I promise.”

Joe folded his arms and gave me a hard look, then sighed and shrugged. “All right, all right. But you better not let me down. A lot’s riding on this game, son. We lose and robots kill everybody and take over the world.”

I stood, grinning. “I know, coach. Don’t worry. You can count on me.”

He chuckled and held the door open for me and I walked out into a room filled with more spider webs.

It wasn’t until I was halfway to the webs that what had just happened hit me. I’d been playing... what was it called? Baseball? In a pre-apocalypse stadium. Were those Finster’s memories? I doubted it. What were the odds he’d played professional sports and had also been a world-renowned scientist? Maybe I’d somehow stumbled the fantasy portion of his brain. Bizarre.

I pushed through another screen of webs and kept going. There were more ahead of me, but before I could reach them, someone said, “There you are!”

It sounded like Finster, but it looked like some kind of android. It was also shooting at me. I dodged behind the

screen of webs and fired back.

“Come on, Finster! I thought we agreed none of this was real. Just let me through.”

“There you are!” He fired again.

I sighed. How was I supposed to talk sense into this guy when half the time he wasn’t even there?

I leaned out and squeezed off three shots. One glanced off the android’s noggin, but the other two found his torso and it started to smoke and hiss.

“You are! There...”

It was crawling now. An easy shot. I fired and it toppled onto its back.

“Are you... there...”

It died.

I stepped over its body and explored the rest of the space. I didn’t see a door anywhere. Maybe it was behind the webs. I leaned on them and eventually they gave way. Nothing. The area behind them was empty. Dammit! After all this craziness, had I reached a dead end?

I turned, disgusted, and found myself face to face with another Finster, this one holding the biggest pistol I’d ever seen.

“Wait!” I shouted, and dove to the side as he fired.

I heard a barrier open somewhere behind him as I rolled to my knees and fired back. The bullets tore his flesh, revealing him to be an android too.

“Poor Irwin J. Finster,” said Finster. “Made a deal with the devil.”

It fired again, but my bullets seemed to have ruined its aim, and the shot went wide.

“What devil?” I asked, still firing. “What deal?”

“Eternal life.” The android slumped to the ground, black fluids spilling from its guts. “But Finster voided the contract.”

The pistol slipped from its fingers. “Now he is void.”

None of that made any kind of sense to me, but that pistol looked like a logical thing to take. I picked it up with my left hand and kept going.

Finster was waiting for me again in the next room. He looked like shit this time, nearly as bad as one of the Night Screemers.

He held pleading hands out to me. “Please, I beg of you, kill me. I cannot live insane in my own mind!”

By now the weirdness of it all was wearing thin and I just wanted to get to the part where I found the sec pass.

“Happy to.”

I shot him through the forehead and stepped through the next barrier. Two more Finsters stood there. These looked a lot more like Finster after he had transformed into the android — metal spikes and spines and guns sticking through their tattered flesh.

They spoke in unison. “I begged you to kill me! Now you create us!”

I didn’t slow down. My stolen hand-howitzer spoke twice and they flew back with craters the size of dinner plates in their chests. One of them hit the floor so hard his head broke off. There was no way a pistol — not even one as humongous as the hoss I was holding — should have been able to make holes that big, but maybe I was getting the hang of this whole “nothing is real” thing. The guns shot bullets that big because I thought they should. It wasn’t gun against gun, it was mind against mind, and from the easy way Finster’s creations were toppling, his mind seemed to be getting weaker while mine was getting stronger.

I reached the barrier at the end of the room. It didn't open. I pushed on it. It didn't budge. So much for my mighty mind.

The decapitated robot head at my feet spoke up. "April fifteenth, nineteen twelve. I killed a ship. What am I?"

"What?"

"April fifteenth, nineteen twelve. I killed a ship. What am I?"

"Wait. Is that the question that gets me through this door?"

"April fifteenth, nineteen twelve. I killed a ship. What am I?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? You're asking me about something that happened ninety years before the apocalypse? How the hell am I supposed to know that?"

"April fifteenth, nineteen twelve. I killed a ship. What am I?"

I picked up the head and shook it. "Would you—"

A cold wind hit me as I shook the bell rope, sounding the alarm. Something huge and white glinted in the dark night ahead of the ship. I grabbed the receiver of the telephone.

"—pick up you bastards!"

There was no answer. "Goddamn it, is there anyone there?"

Finally, the wheelhouse picked up. "Yes? What do you see?"

"Iceberg! Right ahead!"

The barrier dissolved and I was back shaking the robot head. Another vision of Finster's past? No. He couldn't be that old. Another fantasy, then? Who would fantasize about being on a sinking boat? Every time I thought I was getting a handle on what was happening in this place, it threw me another curve.

I looked at the head, utterly baffled. "What the hell was that? Did you just tell me the answer? Why would you do that? I thought you were trying to kill me."

The head said nothing. I dropped it and stepped through into the next space. Immediately a voice popped into my head.

"I am impressed, ranger. You have come further than anyone before you, including my creator. You are a noble foe. However, you are only human. I offer a choice. Your life for those of your comrades. Right for you, left to kill them."

This was not Finster's voice. It was colder. Cooler. Where did it come from? Was Finster sharing his brain with somebody else? Besides me, I mean? And was the voice serious about killing my friends?

I looked around the new space. There were indeed two doors in front of me. I glared at them.

"Is this a trick? How would you kill my friends? They're not hooked up to this machine."

The voice didn't speak again. I was tempted to go through the left door, just to show the voice I didn't believe its crazy threats, but what if it was true? What if it could make Finster's head blow up or something? I couldn't risk the life of my friends. My life, on the other hand...

"You obviously haven't been reading my mind lately," I said, and strode through the right door.

Pain dropped me to my knees. I clutched my chest as my heart lurched and thudded with all the rhythm of a drunk toddler banging pots and pans. I turned and crawled back toward the door, fully prepared to go back and take the left hand door and kill all my friends if only the pain would stop.

There was no door. Anywhere. I was in a tiny empty space with no exit, and I was going to die here. I lay down, unable to do anything else, while hissing voices whispered nonsense all around me.

"Know thyself."

"Each step from birth is toward death."

“Cogito ergo sum.”

“What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

“What is the difference between a duck?”

I groaned. “You’re killing me, and now you’re feeding me this pseudo–intellectual bullshit? Please, just get it over with.”

Then I started hearing other voices behind the whispers.

“Shit! He’s flatlining!”

“The machine is killing him!”

“Unhook him! He’s dying!”

“No! The shock might finish him off.” This was Athalia. “Come on, Ghost. Pull out of it! Fight it! Remember, everything in there is just an illusion!”

How did she know that? I wondered. But it was good advice. Everything that was happening to me was just a constructed reality that Finster was showing me and I was going along with. It was a hard illusion to break, but I’d done it before, hadn’t I? I’d closed my eyes in order to walk across the room that had jerked me all over the place, right?

I closed my eyes again. I wasn’t in this room with no doors. I was in the room I’d seen through the right hand door.

“He’s coming back,” said Athalia. “His pulse is strengthening.”

“Come on, Ghost!” That was Angie.

Thinking about Angie I almost slipped back, but I pulled it together and kept building the other room with my mind, block by crazy-colored block.

“Yes! He’s stabilizing. Stay strong, ranger!”

I could see the other room around me now, so I stepped forward and opened my eyes — and I was in it. I let out a relieved breath, and heard cheering outside my head.

The voice that wasn’t Finster wasn’t too happy about it though. “Pah! I tire of you. Be gone!”

Then, on my very next step, Finster’s voice was back, panicked and screaming. “No! You cannot be here still. Stay back, get out, leave! Or I’ll sear the flesh from your bones!”

Was he talking to me or the other voice? I couldn’t tell. Did he have multiple personalities? What was going on?

The floor around me erupted into flames. Shit! I dived out of the circle of fire and ran, afraid the rest of the place was going to catch on fire. There was a click from above me and a storm of knives shot out of the ceiling. I zigged left and only a few caught me, opening up the sleeve of my leather jacket and the flesh underneath.

“You’re crazy!” I shouted.

Finster’s laughter followed me down the hall and around the corner. “Do you hear me, ranger? This is the end. I will finish you. I will crush you. You, too, will die!”

I skidded to a stop as I saw what lay before me. It was Finster again, but this time it was mega-Finster — a twisted metal monstrosity twice as tall and twice as wide as I was. I groaned. First he tells me to leave, then he says he’s going to kill me, then he blocks the exit. What the hell?

Well, at least I knew how this worked now. I closed my eyes and charged forward, *seeing* myself wielding an even bigger gun than before, *knowing* that I was wearing armor that could stop whatever the Finster-Leviathan could throw at me. And as I saw it and knew it, I was.

I blazed away at the big bastard with a gun the size of a rocket launcher and shrugged off his return fire in the armor I had seen behind the glass walls at Sleeper One. Nothing could hurt me, and I was bringing the hurt in a major way. It didn’t take more than six or seven shots before the giant was a smoking ruin on the floor.

I stepped to it and stuck my uber-gun in its metal face. “Are we done? Can I have the sec pass now?”

It raised its shattered head and smiled through broken lips. “You killed it.”

“It? I killed *you*.”

“Yes... me as well, but also... it. Now we can talk... privately.”

“Huh? What do you mean? What *it* are we talking about?”

“Co...chise...” It was having a hard time talking now. “It is... eliminating all... threats. Sent its assassin to... kill me. Now I’m... dead.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “We killed you. The Desert Rangers. And we’re nobody’s assassins.”

Its huge hand lifted up and opened, revealing a plastic card with a black stripe in its palm — the sec pass. “It... knows you are... coming. Without... armor, it will destroy you. Use it... well. Prepare... your... selffff...”

The head slumped back and the hand dropped. The mega-Finster was dead.

I scooped up the sec pass and kissed it. “Fucking finally!”

There was a door behind the leviathan’s body. I stepped through it...

... and was suddenly falling down a bottomless pit.

“Godddddammmmmm itttttttt...!”

## – Chapter Eleven –

“Fuck!”

“What’s happening to him?”

“Pull him outta that thing!”

“Hurry up!”

“Grab his arms before he hurts himself!”

“It’s killing him!”

“I think he’s coming out by himself. Hang on, hang on.”

My eyes opened to blurry figures moving between me and the light. A weight lifted from my head. My heart was racing like I’d just run up a mountain in cement shoes, and my brain and nerves were all shouting, “Danger! Danger! Danger!” in my ears.

“Ghost,” said a voice. “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

For a second I didn’t know who Ghost was, but then it all came back, and my brain started to calm down as everything dialed into focus. Athalia was holding the headphone/helmet thingy and everyone else was staring at me with looks of worry, uneasiness, and anticipation.

“You alright, brother?” asked Vargas.

It was a little too early to answer that, but I didn’t want to disappoint anybody, so I gave it a shot. “I... I think so.”

“And...?” asked Angie.

I frowned. “And what?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you remember what this all about? You went in there to figure out where Finster hid the sec pass. Did you find out?”

“I...” My mind flashed back to what I had been through. The puzzles, the night screamer, the spider, the fighting multiple Finsters, the *baseball game* for Christ’s sake. Then, at the end... Yes! “Yeah yeah, it’s fine. He handed it to me.” I opened the hand that had been holding the sec-pass. “It’s right—”

Of course there was nothing in my hand. If I hadn’t been so disoriented I would have known it before I spoke. Everything in the maze had been an illusion. Why should the card have been any different?

Angie groaned. “Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“I—”

A strange clicking noise interrupted me. Everybody turned around. The sound was coming from Finster’s head, which was still connected to the console. It was vibrating slightly and the eyes were flashing on and off.

“What the hell?” said Vargas.

“Ain’t gonna blow up, is it?” asked Hell Razor.

Finally, with a ping and whirr, the metal dome of Finster’s head split open and folded back on itself, revealing the innards of his electronic brain — basically just a bunch of wires and transistors and other stuff I didn’t understand.

Athalia did, however, and noticed right away that something didn’t belong. She frowned and reached her long fingers toward the open head. “What is...?”

She plucked something out from between two thick black plastic cards that slotted into some kind of circuit board.

It was the sec pass. She laughed. “He was telling the truth. The pass was in his memory! Right in the middle of it!”

I didn’t get the joke, and I don’t think the others did either. We did get, though, that we’d finally found the thing we’d come here to get in the first place.

Angie snatched it out of Athalia’s fingers. “All right! Finally!”

Hell Razor spat on the floor again. “Now we can get out of this mad house.”

“But what the hell was it doing in there in the first place?” asked Vargas.

“He probably put it there once he overheard us saying we were looking for it,” said Ace. “He wanted to use it as a bargaining chip, remember? And he wouldn’t have wanted us to find it before we’d made a deal with him.”

“Why ask why?” said Angie. “I’m just glad we’ve got it.”

Vargas stood and stretched. The others did too. “Alright, let’s get out of here. We gotta get ourselves dosed with Prussian Blue before we—”

“Wait,” I said. “One thing.”

They looked back at me.

“While I was in there, in Finster’s head, he told me that Base Cochise was after him, and us too. It was eliminating all threats, he said.”

Angie frowned. “So he’s saying the killer robots aren’t just some weird glitch? The base is actively sending them out to kill people?”

I shrugged. “Finster seemed to think so. He said Cochise knew we were coming, and that it would destroy us, then he gave me the sec pass and told us to use the armor to protect ourselves.”

“Sounds like more of Finster’s paranoia,” said Athalia.

“Could be,” said Vargas. “Guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

Metal Maniac poked his head in the door and gave us a salute. “Uh, hate to interrupt, but we’re puttin’ the bodies of Finster’s victims in the ground, and some of ‘em are your people. Thought you might want to come send ‘em off.”

Everybody was quiet at that, but at last Vargas nodded. “We do indeed, friend. We do indeed. Lead on.”

\*\*\*

You know that old gag about wanting to live long enough to go to your own funeral?

Well, you don’t.

Really.

A guy never feels quite so much like a fifth wheel than when his friends are standing around the grave of his former self, passing around a bottle and talking about what a great guy he was and how much they’re going to miss him.

Hell Razor’s eulogy was short and sweet. “He was a good drinkin’ buddy, and he had your back in a fight.” He took a slug for himself, then poured some down into the open grave. “Kick ass in Hell, brother.”

Thrasher’s was even shorter. “Good friend. Great ranger.”

He poured some out too, drank, and passed the bottle to Vargas.

Vargas took a swig, then cleared his throat. “I didn’t know him as well as the rest of you, but that he died twice in the pursuit of his duties and never gave up trying to stop the enemies of man speaks volumes about his loyalty to the Desert Rangers and his commitment to building a better world. Here’s to him.” He splashed some booze into the grave then passed the bottle to Angie.

She wiped her eyes and nose, knocked back a swallow, and then spat it down at my old self's burlap-wrapped corpse.

"I'm mad at you, you bastard," she hissed. "You shouldn't have died. You shouldn't have left me! You should have said goodbye! But..." She hiccupped. "But I guess being' mad ain't gonna bring you back, so..." She snorfed on the sleeve of her leather jacket. "Well, wherever you went, I hope there's a big nasty redhead there waiting for you, and a world without walls where you can ride forever and ever and never find the edge of the map."

She blew a kiss down into the hole. "Happy trails, you glorious son-of-a-bitch."

Her eyes were blurry as she swung around, holding out the bottle for the next person, but they focused when she realized the next person was me. At least she had the decency to look embarrassed as she turned away.

I took the bottle and gulped a swallow. It burned all the way down, or maybe that was something else. I raised the bottle.

"Sounds like a hell of a guy. I wish I'd known him."

Everybody looked uncomfortable at that.

Athalia broke the silence by taking the bottle from me and having a genteel sip. "I didn't know him either, but here's hoping his memory lives on long after he's gone."

I burped. "Thanks. I'm doing my best."

Everyone just kind of stared at the grave until Athalia set the bottle down and cleared her throat.

"Er, If you will allow me, I'd like to offer a prayer?"

Angie and the rangers shrugged.

"Do your worst, sister," said Vargas.

"Thank you."

She closed her eyes and folded her hands. "As the mighty fire of the atom once consumed the Earth, so its legacy has consumed you. In its heat you are purified and made righteous. May the Great Glow look upon you and smile, welcoming you into its warm embrace. And may it think on us all mercifully, giving us solace and comfort in our times of need, and know that it inspires us. Amen."

The rangers mumbled a few half-hearted *amens*, then turned and shuffled off toward Cecil's tavern where all the townies were already several drinks into the wake for their dead. Ace, as the guy who knew the old me even less well than I did, had been standing off at a respectful distance and staying out of the last toast, but now he fell in beside Angie, and as they walked, she reached out an arm and hooked it around his waist. He put his arm over her shoulder and they continued on like that, heads together.

Athalia and I stayed at the grave, though I hardly noticed she was there. I just kept staring at the little stone they'd set at the head of the plot, the one with the name on it that didn't fit me in the slightest, but which eclipsed the one I'd been given like the Earth stepping in front of a candle. I felt stranger than I'd felt in my strange, short life, and if you've been following along, you gotta admit, that had to be pretty strange.

I added it all up in my head: my girlfriend once removed — or was that twice — didn't even want me as a shoulder to cry on, probably because it reminded her too much of the shoulder of the dead guy she actually loved, my friends had all just toasted my former self like I wasn't standing right there next to them hearing every word they were saying, I was having trouble caring about self-preservation or physical danger, and I was having a hard time telling which memories were mine and which belonged to my other iterations. Maybe these were all signs that I wasn't supposed to be here. Maybe cloning messed with the natural balance of things, and this constant feeling I had that my life was disposable was the world trying to get me to fix the situation. Maybe I wasn't actually alive at all.

The more I thought about it, the more it felt like the truth. I was already gone, a memory of a better man that had



lived on beyond his death. If I stuck around any longer I'd just end up being an embarrassment to myself and everybody who had known the old me. It was time to go.

"Yeah," I took out my gun. "Somebody already dug my grave. Might as well fill it."

I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until Athalia stopped my hand as I was putting the gun to my head.

"Don't," she said.

"Why not?" I asked. "Everybody's already said goodbye to me."

"Because it would be selfish. Because the rangers need all the guns they can get to go against Base Cochise." She smiled and squeezed my wrist. "Because I would miss you."

I laughed. Or maybe choked. "Ha! You'd be the only one."

She shrugged. "One's enough, isn't it?"

I lowered the gun and looked her in the eye. Funny I hadn't noticed until now that she was the only one who talked to me like I was real.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is."

I stroked her cheek and leaned in to kiss her, but she smiled and backed away, tugging me toward the bar.

"Come on. Let's join the others."

I groaned. "Do we have to? They'll be telling stories about me by now — and I won't remember any of them."

"I need a drink to knock myself out," she said. "We're heading out early for Sleeper One tomorrow, and I'm still too keyed up to sleep. Besides, we both need another shot of Prussian Blue."

I sighed and started down the hill with her, holding her hand. As we got closer to the tavern, I could hear people talking and laughing, and I could pick out individual laughs, some bright, some harsh, some tinged with sadness. Each voice was different, loud or soft, sharp or mellow, but each one unique, and each one human.

I didn't know any more if I fit that description, and I didn't know how I felt about that, but at least I was holding someone's hand.

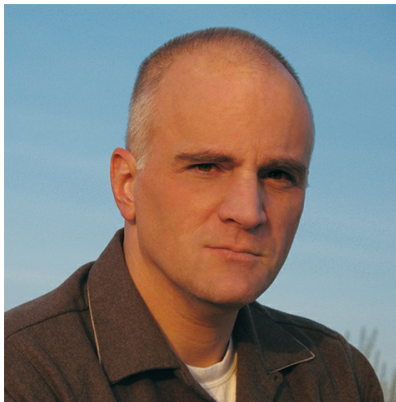
At least I wasn't alone.

– ABOUT THE AUTHORS –



Michael A. Stackpole is an award-winning game designer, computer game designer and novelist in the science fiction and fantasy field. He is best known for his work in FASA's BattleTech® universe and for his Star Wars® X-wing comics (from Dark Horse Comics) and bestselling Star Wars® novels from Bantam Books.

Photo by Heather Hill



Nathan Long is a screen and prose writer, with two movies, one Saturday-morning adventure series, and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes to his name, as well as eleven fantasy novels and several award-winning short stories. He hails from Pennsylvania, where he grew up, went to school, and played in various punk and rock-a-billy bands, before following his writing dreams to Hollywood, where he now writes full time — and still occasionally plays in bands.

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