

## Solia's Revenge

By Anna Lugthart

With a buzz and a click, the cell door opened. Two guards led Solia Abrahmson down a long corridor to the discharge terminal, where she waited in line for a change of clothes, two liters of water and 30 hours worth of ration. The linen was rough, made with waste plant fibers, no doubt, and the ration looked even worse than the chow they got on the inside, but she took both eagerly. After a few hours a shuttle docked and, sporting their new freedom clothes, the group finally left that dreaded moon.

After three connecting flights to O'fiver and an intraplanetary hop to Rexionville, Solia found herself as close to home as public infrastructure could take her. With most of her ration spent and no one on the outside to pick her up, she started down the long desert road in search of a ride. By and large, people knew the sight of freedom clothes and Solia carried on South for several hours unsuccessfully, passed up by each rig, cruiser, and wingbike. Finally, a rusty pickup stopped a ways ahead and an old, sand-weathered man hobbled out.

"I've been keeping an eye out for you, Solia Abrahmson. I heard they finally turned you loose."

"Shakey? Is that you? Hell you look old." The old cowpoke chuckled heartily.

"You don't look so good yourself, young lady."

"I can't say I follow you, Shakey. My mouth's a bit dry and these paper clothes are starting to rub me wrong, but besides that I've never felt better."

"Goddamnit you're unbreakable. Now come on, get in. We've got ground to cover."

The old beater sputtered and moaned, lurching up and to the side with a worrying creak before righting itself in the air and continuing on down the road. After leaving a few miles behind them, Shakey picked up the conversation again.

"I still remember the day they took you away. We lost two good Abrahmsons, and so close together too."

Solia set down Shakey's canteen and wiped off her lips.

"That we did. Speaking of, how's the ranch? Has *he* run it into the ground yet?"

"Damn nearly. I quit after the roundup that year, but word is it ain't been the same since. Little Jake doesn't know shit about raising cattle—everybody knew that. He's been selling off the whole herd piece by piece, at least what hasn't been picked over by rustlers. They left us alone for a minute, but then they just came right back meaner and angrier."

"That's worse than I expected."

The old cowboy's eyes lit up. "There is some good news, though."

"What's that?"

"Word is, Jake cut and run for the dead lands when he heard you caught the chain. Meaning apart from Becca, you've got the place to yourself."

"Oh he'll be back. Just got yellow is all, probably. Besides, I couldn't touch a steer or dime on that property unless it was over Becca's dead body. This was her making, you know."

“Maybe. Wait and see, though. You might just be surprised.”

Descending into the valley of trees, they could finally see the ranch in the distance. Shakey pulled up to a derelict cabin overgrown with switchgrass.

“Looks like you’ve got some housekeeping to do. I can stick around and help, if you’d like.”

Solia heaved herself out of the truck on uneasy feet. “No thanks, Shakey. I’m heading after Little Jake.”

Shakey leaned out the window and spoke quietly. “You gonna kill him this time?”

“We’ll see. I messed this up once and I won’t do it again.”

“Alright then. Just make sure you don’t end up back in the can. It’s not worth it.” Shakey patted the side of his truck, gave a nod, and glided off the way he came.

The dust lay thick inside the cabin and sunlight peeped through exposed wattle in the walls. Finding her box of possessions sent from prison, Solia eagerly undressed from her freedom clothes. She slipped on her old dura-denim jeans, shirt, jacket, and at long last, smiling at the old familiar feeling, she stepped into her genuine leather boots. Wasting no time, she gathered her go-packs, filled a few jugs of water from the well, and threw her trusty coil rifle over her shoulder.

Opening the shed door, Solia took a moment to admire her most prized possession of all: her 3437 McKenzie Condor, just as beautiful as it was six years ago, though probably in need of some work. Straddling the wingbike, she fired up its engines and lowered her goggles.

Before heading back into the desert, she had one more stop to make. Warily approaching Abrahmson Manor, Solia despaired at the ranch’s decline. The place was eerily quiet. Normally droves of cattle roamed the fields, flanked by yipping ranch hands on wingbikes. But not a living person could be seen nor heard here, and just a handful of bulls roamed aimlessly about the property.

Solia parked at the gateway and approached the house. Not a doorman or guard stopped her, and the door was even unlocked. It was only as she walked down the empty hall that the nurse, Pat, came running to meet her.

“Solia, is that you?”

“As ever I was. How are you, Pat? I haven’t seen you since, well, my father.”

“I’m fine. Your mother, Solia. She’s not been well.”

“She’s sick?”

“Well, in a way. Her body is healthy enough, but her memory is fading. She isn’t the woman you knew when—you left.”

Solia followed him down a corridor to the parlor.

“You’re not the one I wanted to see.” Becca folded her arms and scowled.

“She still seems sharp as a tack to me,” Solia whispered.

“Becca, your daughter is finally home and she’s come to see you.

“Where’s my Jake? I want to see my son.”

“Mrs. Abrahamson, Jake is on a very important trip, and he’ll be home, in time. Wouldn’t you like to see your daughter, Solia?”

Becca looked like she’d tasted vinegar. “No. When will my Jake be home?” Pat set a hand on Solia’s shoulder.

“It might not be the best time right now.” They headed back down the hallway. “She gets like this sometimes, but if you come by later, it might be better. I think she does want to see you, deep down.”

“Don’t worry about it too much, Pat. She always liked Little Jake better. Speaking of, where exactly did he go on his—trip?” The nurse frowned and led her further away from the room.

“He set off for the dead lands, not long after I got here. Took a ranch hand with him. I think he’s near a town called Butte but that’s all I know. By the way, don’t let anyone know I told you. No thanks to Jake you’ve acquired something of a bad reputation around here.”

“Thanks, and I’ll keep quiet. See you around, Pat.”

Solia hurried back to her wingbike. Butte. That was enough of a lead for now.

Everyone on O’fiver called them the dead lands, though they weren’t truly dead, rather yet to be alive. In some hundred years time, Solia was told, they’d be sprawling with rivers, lakes, and forests, greener even than the valley of trees. Of course, she’d be dead by then, but she liked to imagine that one day another Abrahamson would ride over these lands and see

lush green meadows, the kind she’d only seen in the old pictures of Earth.

In the time of her own ancestors, the whole planet was nothing but a barren rock. 500 years the scientists had predicted before terraforming could make it livable, but people were not so patient. Scarcely after the first shoot of lyme grass had peeped its head out the ground, people were clambering over each other to stake their claim on the land. And there, in the thin air of a young world, Solia’s great-great grandfather established a homestead in what would one day become the valley of trees.

Leaving that place behind, Solia began the three day journey by wingbike to Butte. Riding over cracked earth and meager tufts of grass, Solia’s mind drifted to her own past.

Hat pulled low over his brow, old Isaac Abrahamson sat under a great bur oak beside his daughter, watching the cattle graze. She thought he looked very peaceful then, arms folded over his knees and a wry smile hiding under his curly gray beard. Suddenly, they heard a distant ranch hand holler, and a moment later coil rifles boomed and echoed. Without a word, the old man heaved himself onto his wingbike and took off towards the sound, Solia following close behind.

A posse of rustlers were engaging the ranch hands while others rounded up cattle into a truck. Several steer were already down in the crossfire and the rustlers were using them for cover, but the ranch hands were left out in the open save for a few thick old trees. One was already nursing a shot to the leg. Wasting no time, Isaac and Solia flew swiftly over the rustlers,

taking out three with their own guns before hurriedly riding up beside the others. Already spooked, the remaining rustlers retreated to the rig as Isaac yelled “Git!” and led the ranch hands in a charge.

And just like that, it happened. Turning, one of the rustlers fired before jumping into the back of the truck. Isaac stopped short. The ranch hands kept running, hooting and hollering as the rig drove up towards the ridge. Isaac felt the bloody hole in his belly, then fell into the dry earth with a thud. He lasted one night in the infirmary, and then, clutching his weeping daughter’s hand, passed away at first light.

What happened afterwards was hazy in her memory. She remembered being very angry. Gathering her own posse of ranch hands and a few hired guns from town, they’d tracked the rustlers to their hideout. Storming the building at night, they killed dozens before leveling the building with explosives. It was a rash decision. Many of her own died, and she remembered thinking afterwards that her father wouldn’t have been proud.

Then, adding insult to injury, Little Jake had claimed ownership of the ranch. Little Jake, the college boy who hadn’t worked a day of his life on the ranch, who had never been so much as ten paces from a steer, had claimed it. And Becca backed him up. Isaac had said a thousand times the ranch would go to her, but when it came time to split up the property, the will mysteriously disappeared.

And for as useless as he was on the ranch, Little Jake knew about the law, and with that knowledge he’d robbed her

of every steer and dime of her father’s, no less with full approval of the colonial government.

It was her lowest moment. There, in the courtroom, in front of judge, jury, and a hundred witnesses, she had decked him so hard he didn’t walk for a week. That was the end of Solia’s free life. They gave her six years for assault and battery on the moon prison of Themis.

She missed her father dearly. He was the only one who ever understood her, and though he was a man of few words, she felt like he had guided her through life. Out of all the horrible things that had happened, she wished that he hadn’t died. Prison she could do again. Hell, she’d do twenty years if it brought him back. But without him she just felt so lost.

At sundown on the third day Solia caught a glimpse of Butte, a tiny glowing ember on the rocky horizon. She stopped and settled in for the night. Her anger having cooled somewhat on the long ride, she started to wonder who it was directed at in the first place.

Little Jake didn’t want the ranch. He never had any passions or ambitions to speak of and wanted nothing more than a portion of his father’s wealth to live a cozy life on some other planet. Somewhere with “culture,” as he said. All that would’ve been given to him and he could’ve been on his way. That would’ve been that, but the damn fool had no backbone. So here he was on a planet he despised, fleeing from his own blood to this place. She was almost surprised he hadn’t left O’fiver outright, but it likely had something to do with Becca. Long before either of them were alive, their parents had waged

this war. Now, even with one dead and the other fading it raged on. She almost pitied him. But still, he had done the deed, and for that he was accountable.

She awoke the next morning with unresolved intentions. Riding into Butte at daybreak, the town was still quiet. Locking up her wingbike and exploring on foot, she soon found there wasn't much to see. The little town lay at the bottom of a wide canyon, its topographical namesake looming a quarter mile or so ahead. Nine adobe buildings around a dirt track made up the main drag, and a sickly stream ran nearby, but otherwise, the town was flanked by nothing but dust and rock. Solia had a hard time imagining Little Jake in this setting, and she wondered for a moment if Pat had misled her.

After a short walk down the road, Solia located a general store that seemed to be open. After replenishing her supply of food and water, Solia inquired with the little old woman at the counter about any new faces in town. She said a young man, broad shoulders but kind of wiry, passed through with a child a few days back. He'd come and gone from the North. Thanking the woman, Solia paid and left.

Broad shoulders and wiry. That certainly didn't describe Little Jake. It could have been the ranch hand, though the child didn't make any sense. Still, it was her only trail. Solia rode North, past the butte where the canyon spilled out into a wasteland of open desert. She thought she noticed a dark speck in the East, and sure enough, looking through her binoculars she found a tiny homestead, or rather a makeshift shack, huddled against the wall. She approached carefully, eventually concealing the wingbike in a ravine to go on foot.

When Solia was still about a half-mile away, a figure emerged, and hugging the rock wall, she took another look through her binoculars. There he was, the bastard, the coward Little Jake himself. He looked oddly peaceful, if a bit tired. For a moment, he watched the horizon while smoking a pen, then hustled back inside.

Now was her chance. Quickening her pace, Solia closed the remaining distance. She stood outside the door for a moment, red and panting, then kicked it open with rifle in hand.

There were four of them. The ranch hand and an older child of maybe ten were standing by a pot on the stove. Little Jake held a little one, who began to cry. She recognized a dread in her brother's eyes, as if he'd been expecting this moment for a long time. The ranch hand reached for a pistol at his hip, but Little Jake stopped him. Without taking his eyes off Solia, he passed the child to his partner and stood, arms raised.

"I know you're angry." His voice faltered. "You've got a right. But the ranch is yours. Everything is. I transferred it over before leaving. I know it can't change the past, but please, Solly, don't hurt my family. This is between us."

Solia was shaking. Sweat streamed into her collar. She gripped the gun tight, but said nothing.

"Let's do this out back, ok? For their sake. Don't make 'em watch." Little Jake shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other.

After a cautious moment, he inched to the door and gingerly pushed it open. Solia followed close behind, averting her eyes from the children in the corner. Little Jake made his

way around back and stopped beside the rock wall, clutching his heart and looking to the sky. After nearly thirty years he'd finally caught himself thinking O'fiver was beautiful. Warily, his gaze drifted down to his sister, ten paces away with her finger on the trigger.

Solia was still. Memories flashed by her like she was riding past them on a wingbike. Isaac bleeding out, rustlers laughing. The horror in Becca's eyes as Little Jake lay on the courtroom floor begging, "Please, Solly, please Solly, no!"

Under witness of the vast orange desert and the scorching hot alien sun, Solia dropped her coil rifle and turned away. Jake's heart fluttered as the gun hit the dust. Blood rushed violently to his head and his legs gave out. Not knowing if he'd been shot or spared, he watched his sister going off.

Refusing to look back, Solia ran away from the little shack and its inhabitants. There was a happiness they had that she could never find, not through revenge, likely never at all. Tears fell off her chin and evaporated on the dry sand as she made her way back to the bike.