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## Chapter II - Out there

It was a cool spring evening in the woodland territories of the mid-continent. The void of its natural silence was filled with the singing of cicadas and other manner of crickets, forming a symphony of effervescent clicks. Due to its distance from civilization, spots like these were usually avoided in favor of established roads. Yet this isolation also attracted a population of its own; trackers, travelers, outlaws, and the odd people who chose to leave the world to its own devices.

Coop contemplated the nature of this life as he sat next to a smouldering campfire. His eyes glistened in the presence of the flame. They were getting a bit tired though. He would have to lay himself to rest soon. The fire itself was not helping too much, he thought. *I oughta put it out soon. Don't wanna attract attention.* Wolves were not too common in these parts, but he heard rumors of encroaching savages who were migrating from the south. He didn't see any of them with his own eyes, but the tales of cannibal feasts and heads on pikes did not inspire confidence in him, as good of a shot as he may be.

Before he put out the fire, he took a leg of a bird he was roasting over it. He dissapointedly took a bite out of it. *This was not worth the bullet.* His salt ran out three weeks ago, and he had no herbs in the area to spice the meat with. *Maybe I should return, just for a while.* Coop thought about how far it may be. He couldn't say exactly, but it must have been pretty far. *Maybe that settlement southwest yonder has salt.* They lived closer to the sea after all.

Coop's thoughts about salt were suddenly interrupted by a sound coming from the near bushes. Turning around, he unholstered his revolver and quickly pulled the hammer back. As he tensed his brow, he saw a figure emerge from the shadow and begin bathing in the light of the flame. A woman, slightly older than him, with bronzed skin and raven-black hair. For a moment, Coop thought she was one of the savages, until he noticed her clothes; a white sombrero, a shrug, and leather pants. He was in the middle of mentally reprimanding himself when she finally spoke.

"Can you help me?"

Coop finally noticed that she was clutching her thigh, and that her pant leg was stained with blood.

His brow loosened and his eyes opened wide. "Howdy. Sure, just come sit over here." Standing up, he pointed at the stump he was just sitting on and went to search his tent for medical supplies. The woman limped to the stump and nearly collapsed on it with a whince. Sure enough, Coop pulled a small case and a bottle of vodka from a bag in his tent and returned to the woman. He put the supplies next to the stump and pulled a small knife from his belt. Out of reflex, the woman tried to get further from it.

"I need to tear that pant leg to get a clear angle at the wound. That okay with ya?"

"Sure." The tone of her voice was underlined with a slight annoyance at the thought of sacrificing the leather pants. Coop carefully made a tear in the pant leg, exposing a gunshot wound in the woman's left thigh. He clutched the leg in an effort to take a look at the other side, making her wince in pain again. "Well, the bullet made it through. Means I won't have to pull anythin' out. But I'll have to do double the stitchin'."

"Yeah, just my luck." the woman replied as she averted her gaze.

"I need ya to put your leg horizontally so I can disinfect it." Carefully, the woman extended her leg and tried to let it lay across. Coop grabbed the bottle of vodka and opened it, eliciting another annoyed response.

"Vodka? Seriously?"

Coop's tone of voice lightened up. "What's wrong, missy? You ain't in Baikai country no more." Carefully, he poured a bit of the vodka in both sides of the wound, causing the woman to whimper. "I'm gonna stitch it up now. Hold tight." Coop pulled a needle and a thread, attempting to get it into the eye, but he had trouble doing so in the increasing darkness. "Sorry, I just..." After the fourth or fifth try, the woman spoke, this time with less frustration in her voice. "Let me try."

Coop handed the thread and needle over to the woman, who managed to put it in on the first try and handed it back over to him. In the meantime, he finally got a closer look at her clothes. They were quite nice clothes for someone he thought a savage; a pretty wine blouse, shrug made of quality wool, a silver bolo tie, and badge of a rank he did not recognize. Her feet were covered by leather riding shoes, though there was no horse in sight. He swiftly went to suturing the wounds before more blood started flowing. After he was done with the first side of the hole, he decided to make conversation.

"You have a name?" he asked.

The woman, despite still wincing from the suturing decided to put up a facade of apathy. "What's it to ya?"

"Well, I just wanna know who I'm helpin' is all." A faint smile lightened up the mood.

"I'm Alex Cooper. But friends call me Coop."

"Synth."

"That's a pretty name. Where're you from?"

"Up north." Synth diverted her gaze again as if trying to search for an opening.

"Up north where?"

She thought for a bit. "East of Lake Baikai. Somewhere out there."

"Red Hill?"

"None of your business." she retorted.

"Alright, just askin'." He finished stitching the other side of the bullet wound, and was now bandaging it with a small grey cloth. "Wound wasn't too bad, I reckon it missed the bone. Could have been right deadly if left untreated like that though. What shot ya?"

She tensed her brow and put on a frustrated tone again. "I said it's none of your business."

"Missy, if whoever shot ya is still followin ya out here, it is my business. Need to be quick on your feet over here."

Synth got up from the stump she was sitting on. "Well, you won't have to-- ou." She began limping away into the darkness, but Coop grabbed her arm.

"Hey, what are you doin'?"

"I need to be quick on my feet, just like you said."

Coop exhaled in disbelief. "Well you ain't gonna be quick on your feet with a bullet wound in your leg. It needs time to heal."

"I don't have that option."

"Humor me. I got supplies, I got food, and I got a tent you can rest in. Synth drew her gaze to the tent and contemplated whether she should take the offer or go out on her own. Her choice was eventually decided by a feeling of pain in her abdomen and the smell of roasting meat.

"Can I have some of that bird?"

Coop and Synth spent the rest of the evening quietly sitting around the campfire and eating. Synth was still hesitant to talk about why she was out in the wilderness with a bullet wound, but the sated hunger cleared her mind and made her more sociable.

"So," she started "what are *you* doing out here in the wild?"

"I thought we wasn't talkin' about that."

She shrugged. "Just askin'."

"Well," he sighed "I used to be a contract miner, but the pay wasn't worth it. And neither was the hassle of bein' in a city."

Synth chuckled. "So what, are you some sort of luddite?"

"I wouldn't say that." The thought brought a smirk on his scruffy face. "I just like when everythin's quiet. Couldn't get that in a city. Always someone botherin' me."

"What city are you from?" she inquired.

"Caholdera."

Synth's brow tensed as she tried to think of where Caholdera could be. "And that's in..."

"Billa Country."

Her brow shot up. "Wow, that's really far. I would have guessed you to be a Red Hill."

"I thought Red Hills were dark like you." He cut a piece of meat from the roasting bird.

"Naw, most of them aren't. I'm an outlier."

"Y'know, before I took a look at your clothes, I reckoned you was a savage."

"Well, my mother was, if that's any consolation." She swallowed a bite of the meat.

"The bird really needs some salt by the way."

Coop shrugged. "Ran out. Was hopin' you had some on you."

"You don't visit the settlements...?" She was somewhat confused by this.

"I dunno anyone here. I just keep to myself." This seemed to silence the conversation for a bit until Coop picked it back up.

"So, what did *you* do for a job? Can I at least ask that?"

Synth tilted her head. "Well... I was a textile producer."

"Oh, I reckon. You don't see clothes like these every day."

"To be fair," she made eye contact with Coop "those were my good clothes."

"The pants too?"

She chortled. "No, those were my brother's. "Still, they are useful."

"I still have some normal thread in the tent if you wanna fix those. I think you're probably better with the needle than me, bein' a textile producer 'n all."

"Hey, you didn't do that bad with the stitches. Not good, but not bad." She finished the last of the bird. "Those weren't our last supplies, right? I'm not very stocked right now."

Coop's hand swept the air away. "I have plenty, don't worry about it. Try to get some rest, and I'll show ya the hunting grounds tomorrow."

With that, they went to rest in the tent, falling asleep to the song of the cicadas.

By the time Coop woke up, the cacophony of cicadas gave away to the gentle whistling of birds. The air carried with it the cold humidity of morning mist. He turned around and saw Synth was still laying next to him. He wasn't particularly mistrustful of her, but he was glad he woke up without a slit throat regardless. With those thoughts, he left the tent and started a small fire.

Synth woke up a little while later. In the meantime, Coop had prepared a kettle of soup from yesterday's leftovers and root vegetables which grew in the wild. As the two ate again, he made conversation.

"How's your leg?"

Synth paused her eating for a second to check. "It doesn't bleed anymore."

"Well, I'm gonna need to check if it's infected later."

The mention of infection brought upon a concerned look in her eyes. "And if it is?"

She made eye contact with Coop as if to plead.

"Then I'm gonna take you to a doctor."

Synth broke eye contact and sighed. "I can't see a doctor."

"Yeah, I figured. You're a nicely-dressed woman in the wilderness with a bullet wound."

She didn't respond to that, but they both knew what the implication was. They sat there and ate the soup in silence while Coop thought about the situation again. *She ain't respondin'. That's an admission of guilt. But maybe it don't have to end with her crossin' me.* He finished the meal and went to the tent to bring the bottle of vodka again. *She don't look dangerous. But that don't mean nothin'.* Returning to Synth with the disinfection, he started pulling off her bandage. Seeing the wound already beginning to heal, he smiled.

Synth asked "Well, what do you say?"

"Considerin' I've been disinfectin' you with vodka? I'd say it's lookin' pretty good. I'll give you some more just in case." He poured a little bit of the alcohol into the wounds and bandaged the leg again.

"There's a place I put traps in a mile or two away. I'm gonna go see if somethin' got

caught. Wanna stay here?"

Synth finished the soup and put it away. "Yeah, knock yourself out. I think I'm gonna fix those pants. You said the thread was in the bag, right?"

"Left lower pocket. The needle is in the box. Pocket above that." He packed his revolver and put an empty bag over his shoulder. "I'll be back in an hour. Two if I find something bigger."

And with that done and said, he made his way south towards the spot where he placed his traps. The lowland plain's short menagerie of young trees and bushes gave him both cover and sight. In the distance, he saw a forest patch higher than the surrounding trees. This was where he had placed his traps. Being so far from civilization, the plains south of Lake Baikai still hosted enough wildlife to sustain a person. *Wonder if it has a name.* Coop genuinely didn't know, as he had seldom visited the settlements near. *What would I call it? Can't be somethin' tacky. It's south of Baikai, so maybe... sub-Baikai?* He was sure Red Hills had some sort of name for it though. *Speakin' of Red Hills...* He wasn't sure what to make of Synth yet, if that even was her real name. He wasn't scared of her robbing him. *She ain't gettin' nowhere with that leg.* But the fact that she was seemingly an outlaw and being actively hunted didn't put his mind at ease. He considered this a bit more. *What if they're still out here lookin' for her?* He could be implicated for helping her if that was the case. Even if he pretended not to know she was an outlaw, it could end up being trouble for him.

Coop finished those thoughts as he entered the forest patch. The high teaks gave some protection to the orchard of apple trees spruced along the forest. Apples weren't what Coop was looking for, though. He was only there for his traps. Recalling his steps from the previous visit, he quickly found his first trap at the edge of the forest patch. To his satisfaction, he was greeted to the sight of a rabbit dangling by his feet. *That oughta cover lunch.* He put the rabbit in his bag and went on to search for the next trap. This one, a few dozen meters away was found empty. *No bother, maybe next time.* He found the third trap a bit deeper into the forest, but was dissapointed to find the rabbit was too small. He released him into the wild and set the trap once again. In the fourth one, located at the southern edge of the patch, Coop found another nice rabbit, even bigger than the one he had. *And that's dinner too.* Satisfied, he put it in his bag and rearmed the trap, ready to head back to the camp. *Still haven't got salt yet.* He started considering whether not to visit a settlement west of the plain that he heard of. They were not as advanced as the Red Hills, but they were closer to the sea. *Maybe they do have some salt after all. Don't have anythin' to pay with though. Loose change just don't feed ya out here.*

His train of thought was interrupted by the sudden sound of footsteps nearby. He cursed under his breath, blaming himself for being so careless as to not notice before. Listening closely, he was able to determine where the steps were coming from. *Right behind those bushes.* He placed the bag of rabbits down and pulled the revolver from his belt. Adrenaline began pumping through his veins. Coop became a changed man in the heat of the moment, his peacable nature giving away to the instinct of a hunter. In the next few moments, he would have to determine if the

person on the other side was hostile or friendly, and the decision he would have would have ramifications. *If I don't shoot first, I will die. But if I shoot someone innocent, that's on me.* The bushes started rustling. Whatever was on the other side was getting closer. *To be or not to be?* Coop could feel his heart painfully beating, and there was no way to stop it. He stepped closer to the rustling bushes.

*Hasta la vista.*

A short figure weakly stepped out of the bushes. They and Coop made eye contact and examined each other. The sight was bizzare. A little girl, not even five feet tall, covered from neck to toe in a ghillie suit. Her face was covered by a cyan mask in the shape of a human face. The expression in her green eyes seemed to be a mix of panic and pain.

Before they could say anything to each other, the little girl vomited in her mask. Puke splashed out of the bottom of her mask and on the ground as she collapsed in pain.

"Fuck, are you okay?" Coop quickly deduced that the person writhing in pain in front of him was not a threat. *Dang rabbit, is she sick? I hope it ain't contagious.* A moan of pain took him out of his contemplation. He noticed that she was holding her abdomen, and deduced that she might have food poisoning. Sure enough, a look into her pouch revealed rotten apples. *Can't she tell the difference?* Adrenaline was still rushing through him, but he no longer felt threatened. He didn't know if he should try to treat her on the spot, leave her there, look for more people or bring her back to the camp. He kneeled next to her and tried to inquire.

"Little girl, are your folk nearby?"

No response. The girl made brief eye contact before puking again.

"Look, I'm gonna take you back to my camp and we'll treat you there, alright?"

Taking the silence as a yes, Coop tied the bag of rabbits to his belt and grabbed the girl with his arms.

"Try not to puke on me, will ya?"

Deciding not to spare any more time, he headed back to camp with the half-conscious girl.

Not even a full hour later, Coop turned up at his campsite. He was winded and dehydrated from the running, heat, and the weight of the girl in his arms. Synth was quick to notice something was wrong.

"Coop, what's happened?" Her brow was raised, but also tense. Her eyes were locked on the girl.

He took a second to catch his breath.

"Some girl's... collapsed over there! I-I reckon she's been poisoned!"

"Wha- wait, what do you mean poisoned?"

"She's in pain" he placed his hand on her temple. "And she's burnin' up. Damn near vomited all over me. Get me a flask of water."

Synth's eyes raced across the campsite. "Where is--"

"You're sittin' next to it!"

Synth sheepishly grabbed the flask of water as Coop carried the girl to the tent. As

he was laying her on the sleeping mat, she began mumbling what he could only interpret as nonsense.

*"Let me... let me speak to High Command..."*

Coop touched her burning temples again and concluded she was hallucinating.

"Little girl, there is no 'High Command' here."

*"I can fix... I can fix this... please give... give me another chance."*

The smell of residue puke in her mask was getting on Coop's nerves. He poured a little water on a piece of cloth and carefully tried removing her mask, but was met with immediate resistance once the girl realized what he was doing.

*"N-no..."*

She buried her nails into his hand. Coop was surprised how lucid she suddenly became. *She's actin' like I just threatened her life!* The girl began kicking all around, forcing Coop to take his hand off her mask and back off. This made her calm down a little, and the two stared into each other's eyes in the tent's shade. Her youthful eyes pierced Coop like a bullet with guilt. He stared at the strange girl. She couldn't have been more than twelve.

"Please, clean yourself up." He handed her the wet towel, as a twinkle of trust flashed in her stare. She meekly grabbed the towel and turned away from Coop so he could not see her face. Having cleaned her face and the inside of her mask, she put it back on and handed the towel back to Coop. He handed her the flask of water so she could drink the taste away just a little bit. When she was done, he tried to speak to her again.

"Little girl, what's your name?"

The girl squinted. *"I am deaf... I can't see what you're saying... Could you... speak more clearly..?"*

Taken back by the realization, Coop looked directly into her face and tried mouthing his words as clearly as possible.

"Sorry, little girl. What is your name?"

*"I can't give my name to you..."*

"Well, why not?"

"We don't give our names to anyone..."

*Ain't this a bizzare conversation.*

"Well, what if I give you *my* name first? I'm Alex Cooper, but friends call me Coop."

Still, he was met with nothing but silence from the strange girl.

"Can't you at least give me a nickname?"

The girl thought for a few seconds before giving her answer.

*"Alex..."*

Coop laughed. "But that's my name."

*"You asked..."*

"So, Alex. Where are your parents?"

*"I don't have parents..."*

That one got to Coop a little. He knew what that felt like. "I'm sorry about that. Well, if you're not here with parents, who are you with?"

*"No one..."*

"So you're just out here on your own?"

*"I slept for a long time... and then I woke up. Someone... burned down my vault..."*

*A vault...? What's she on about?*

"What did you have in the vault?"

"I... lived in the vault..."

Coop pictured Alex sleeping in a bank vault. The thought made him smile. "That must have been a big vault."

"I need to contact... High Command... and explain why I did what I did..."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I... opened it... the vault."

"What's wrong with that? Vaults are meant to be opened."

"They told me not to... they said there would be punishment..."

Coop was starting to see a bigger picture and piecing things together. Alex was running away from someone because she opened a vault she wasn't meant to. He still had questions he needed answering, such as why the vault being burned had any significance or why she was so adamant about wearing the strange mask. He decided that would be the next part of his interrogation.

"Why did you scratch me when I tried to pull off your mask?"

*"We are not supposed to show our faces to anyone..."*

"Not even people you know?"

*"No one..."*

Coop could not recall any cultures he heard about that mandated wearing masks. Then again, he was new in these parts. *Maybe Synth would know.* As he thought, his gaze turned lower, on her exposed left arm, and Coop saw that she had a horrible scars running from the back of her hand, so long he couldn't even see the end as the scars hid under her shirt. He instinctively touched them, but Alex pulled her arm away.

"Who did that to you?"

"My father..."

His thoughts turned for the worst in disbelief. *What kind of father does that to a child?* His own father may have pulled the belt on him a few times, but he could never imagine mutilating him to the extent Alex was. *I thought he said she doesn't have parents.*

"Your father scarred you like this? Why?"

"Pain is a virtue."

The words turned Coop with an unexplainable dread. *What the hell is this kid? Is she from a cult? No wonder she ran away from home,* he thought. *They probably would have damn near killed her.* He had decided he knew enough, and decided to end the interrogation there.

"Look, try to get some sleep, okay? You damn near vomited your stomach out, so most of that nasty gunk's outta your system. I'll come check on you in a bit." Leaving her to herself, he stepped out of the tent and was immediately met with the rightfully concerned Synth.

"So, what's she lookin' like?"



"Ate some rotten apples off the ground. Puked up most of it, she should handle it fine. Might make some herb tea for her just in case though."

Synth looked a little relieved. Coop was not.

"Something's... wrong though."

"What is it?"

"I... think she's from some kinda cult."

Synth tensed her brow in confusion. "You think so?"

"She keeps ramblin' about some 'High Command' that's comin' to punish her. For burnin' down a vault or somethin'. She's... got scars all over her, and really nasty ones too. Said her father did that to her. I think she's runnin' away from him and whoever else is with him."

"So... you reckon they might be out here lookin' for her?"

"Yeah, and I have a feelin' they ain't very nice people."

They exchanged sighs of worry. Synth, her hands on her hips, looked down at Coop's belt and pointed at the strapped revolver. "You can use that if it comes to it, can ya?"

"Against one man, maybe." Coop likewise put his hands on his hips. "But if all of 'em come here guns'a blazin', that revolver won't do nothin' for us."

A sardonic smile crept up Synth's face. "No good deed goes unpunished."

"Don't say that." Coop opened his mouth, but could not bring himself to say anything. His facade of confidence fell to a display of genuine fear and concern. "It just ain't right, you know. You try to help people, and this is where you end up. My pops... He had a beggar come to him one day. Gave 'em food, water, let 'em sleep in the damn house. And when he woke up the next day, he found the beggar robbed him of his money and valuables. Even took the ol' kettle. Never trusted people after that."

Synth nodded. "Tough. Just how the world is, I guess."

"Not if I have anythin' to say about it. We're movin' camp tomorrow."

"You ain't serious." she retorted. "My leg's still mangled and that girl could be in any condition."

Coop sighed. He knew she was right, but didn't want to stay there. "Well you give me a better idea. I can't fight what's comin'. Not for you, not for her. I've got this here one gun" he placed his hand on the revolver. "and not that many bullets. Spent most of 'em huntin'. I'm a pilgrim, not some goddamn sherrif."

They broke eye contact as he finished. Synth contemplated her answer carefully.

"Look, we'll see tomorrow if we're in a state to move. It's been a day, I can't judge this yet." The two established eye contact again. "You're right in that movin's probably the right choice, it's just that..." She paused for a moment. "I'm not here on my own volition. You know that. The leg's keepin' me here. When I can walk again I'll have to go my own way." She was met with a somewhat confounded stare.

"But what about the kid?"

"What about the kid?"

"She needs someone to care fo--"

"Look, cowboy, I ain't a surrogate mom. I don't know you or the girl. And if you've

got a brain in that headcase, you'll give that girl over to her parents." The pretense of comradery was dropped instantly.

"I'm not askin' you to be her mom!"

"Well, then we're in agreement." Synth began walking away much to Coop's confusion.

"Where are you goin'?"

Synth picked up a wood pile on the edge of the camp and turned around. "Nowhere, idiot. It's lunch time." They started a fire to cook the rabbits Coop caught that day.

Coop returned to the tent with a bowl of rabbit for Alex. He was afraid he would wake her up, but saw that she was still mostly awake as she looked in his direction. Wordlessly, she took the bowl from his hands and began eating, clearly not having seen good food in days. Coop took the opportunity to examine her once more. Under her ghillie suit, she wore tight-fitting bright blue clothes of make unfamiliar to him. Her pants were a bit torn, *probably from some nasty underbush*. He touched the fabric, looked and felt unlike anything he had seen before. Quietly, he tore away a little bit of the fabric around her right ankle and hid it away in his pocket. To his dismay, this also exposed his eyes to another nasty scar. Despite her weakened state, it only took Alex a few minutes to finish her meal, likely on account of her hunger. Coop decided to try to question her some more, gently signaling with his hands.

"Alex, I need you to answer me a few more questions." Alex didn't respond, resorting to just staring into his face.

"The people you live with... do you think they are lookin' for you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

This was the armor piercing question for Alex. She stayed silent and slowly strayed her gaze to the ground. Coop could not see any part of her face as the eyes, which had been visible through the mask bathed in the tent's shadow. She could not hear herself, but Coop could. The air was filled with the subdued sounds of childish whimpering escaping Alex's lips. A single teardrop fell on the fabric that she lay on. Coop decided to leave her to it and left the tent with the bowl.

Synth was still sitting next to the campfire, having finished her meal as well. Coop handed her the piece of cloth he had procured, much to her confusion.

"What's that?"

"It's a piece of her clothes. Could you take a look at it?" Synth grabbed the cloth and began examining it. Coop continued his evaluation.

"She's got even more scars than I thought. Don't wanna know how many. Says her family is apparently not lookin' for her. Leastways she doesn't think they are. Either way, somethin' ain't right with her. Doesn't wanna talk about it."

"Mhm..." Synth's brow was tensed in concentration as she studied the little piece of cloth, which did not go unnoticed by Coop.

"So, what do you got?"

"I've never seen anythin' like this before for sure. The material... I can't describe it..."

It's like... fiber made of human nails."

"I didn't need to hear *that* analogy."

A chortle escaped Synth. "Well, one thing's certain. Human hands didn't make these. It was made with some sorta loom. A damn good one. I'd kill to have a loom that made this."

*Clothes... made of human nails. I don't know what to make of this.* Each time he tried to get answers from Alex, he only had more questions. *What's the deal with her family? Did they kick her out? Why's she scared of punishment if that's the case, though? And where did she get those clothes?* How did she not tell the difference between ripe and rotten apples? I should have asked her if she knew the directions she came from. Or how long she's been runnin'.

"Y'know," Synth started, bringing Coop out of thinking. "if I had to guess, I'd say she's a daughter of some reeeally rich magnate that ran away from home."

"Why's that?"

"Well," she crossed her legs. "she's wearin' expensive clothes, and can't tell an apple from a donkey's ass." That much was true. "But she doesn't want anyone to know her identity, so she hides her face under that creepy mask." Her eyes twinkled. "Y'know what happens when a rich guy's kid goes missin'? He sets up a ransom to whoever finds her first. We could take her to her pops and split the money fifty-fifty."

Coop pondered. What Synth was saying was right, but he still sympathized with Alex.

"If we take her back to her pops, he's gonna do somethin' horrible to her!"

They locked eyes. Coop's tensed and somewhat angered gaze met Synth's completely apathetic stare. "Look, if they find you and think you abducted her, you're gonna get the noose."

Coop turned his gaze to the tent. "No good deed goes unpunished."

"I know it ain't how you'd like it. But you gotta be pragmatic about these things. You think you could take care of a kid out here? You live from day to day eating rabbits and whatever else you come across. You don't even have salt. She'll be better off wherever she's from."

*She's right.*

"Well," Coop laid on the ground and put his hat over his face. "I'm gonna take guard duty this night. Wake me up in the evening."

The all too familiar song of cicadas rang in his ears. Synth was indeed standing over him as he requested.

"Is it time already?" The ground's surprising comfort made him want to lay there a bit longer. He felt the heat of the campfire which Synth made to cook the other rabbit.

"You're gonna get a spider crawlin' into your mouth if you stay like this."

Coop retorted. "I've slept like this plenty and never had one crawl into my mouth."

"How would you know?" Synth asked. "You weren't awake to see it."

"I'm awake now." Coop mused and sat up. "That a rabbit you're boilin'?" He pointed

to the cauldron set above the flame.

"Yep." Synth stirred the pot. "Found more herbs 'round the camp. Perk up, you've got a woman cookin'."

"I know how to cook too, you know." Coop stretched and got up.

Synth chuckled to herself. "Yeah, that's why you don't have any salt."

"What's that gotta do with cookin'?"

"You see," Synth started "when people don't know how to cook, they use somethin' to mask the taste. Spice. Syrup. Salt. If you wanna know how good your neighbour cooks, ask 'em if they have any of these. Hundred percent of the time it works all the time."

*It does smell good.* Coop was beginning to feel a bit hungry. He noticed that Alex wasn't anywhere in sight.

"Is Alex still in the tent?"

"Who is--"

"The girl."

Synth looked towards the tent. "Yeah, she hasn't come out."

"Right, I'll go bring her food once it's done."

"Actually," Synth started "why don't I try it this time? Might be better if it's me."

"Why's that?"

"You're a big scary man with a beard. She's probably afraid of you. Didn't you say her father beat her?"

Coop hadn't considered it, but he couldn't not agree with Synth. *Damn, she probably is scared. I haven't shaved in a month, I probably look like the devil's mare.* "Alright. Have at it." He turned his face away from her, which didn't go unnoticed by Synth.

"Hey, what's with that stare?"

"What stare?"

"I dunno, just looks like you've got somethin' on your mind."

"You're not just tryin' to figure out where she lives, do you?"

"Best thing I can do for her." Synth poured some of the soup into a bowl. "Dinner's ready." Having said that, she walked away towards the tent. *This is what I get for tryin' to help people.* He poured himself a bit of the soup as he waited for it to cool down. *Guess pops was right in the end. Ain't nothin' else to it.* He sat silently as he ate the soup. *It still needs some salt.*

Coop sat around the waning campfire, keeping watch over Synth and Alex. He knew he would soon see them both leave. *I gotta come to terms with it. Synth's right, it just wouldn't work. I can barely take care of myself out here. Just wish I could give that girl a little more than what she's runnin' away from. She deserves that much at least.* He opened his flask to drink only to find it empty. *Damn. That was the last of the water.* The sun was briefly beginning to rise as the skies turned from black to a greyish shade of blue. Sighing to himself, he got up and returned to the tent, picking a large water bag from the supplies. A river nearby would provide the water necessary. It was only some half a mile away.

Coop arrived at the river. It was getting easier to see as the night slowly receded to the dawn. The shallow river's fizzing mixed with the song of the cicadas and created a chilling yet relaxing choral of nature. Coop devoted his senses to this choral as he filled the water bag, so much so that by the time he noticed moving figures on the other side of the river, it was already too late. He turned his head to behold the two horsemen riding in the dawn's shade. They turned their sights against him as his heart began beating. *Oh, fuck. Fuck. Didn't notice them in time.* Seeing as he had already lost his advantage, he decided to attempt negotiating with them. The two horsemen crossed the shallow water and stopped next to Coop.

"Howdy!" One of them greeted.

*Alright, they seem friendly.* "Well, bless your heart. Didn't see ya there."

The other horseman joined in. "Likewise, pardner." Coop briefly examined the two of them. They were cloaked in the shadow of the night and their hats, but one of them was an older man with a moustache and the other was somewhat younger, with a cleaned shave and a mullet. Both sported badges which Coop didn't recognize, riding shoes, and revolvers strapped to their belts.

"Say," Coop began "ain't this a strange time of day to be meetin' out here in the backwater."

"Couldn't have said it better myself." the older man answered. "Though, at is stands, we're out here under strange circumstances." Coop already knew what he was talking about, but decided to divert more.

"Yeah, seems about right. It's a strange, strange land, this valley here. Earlier I found a duck with the tail of a beaver. And a beaver with the nails of a woman."

Both men chuckled. The older quickly got the conversation back on track.

"You didn't happen to come across a woman with the head of a snake too, did you?"  
*Here it is.*

"I don't believe so."

The younger man pulled a piece of paper out of his bag and handed it over to Coop. On it was an ink drawing of a dark-skinned woman he recognized too well.

**WANTED  
DEAD OR ALIVE**

The poster proudly displayed her face below these words.

**Miss Synth Kimmel**

**Wanted for theft, forgery, operation of illegal drug ring, money  
laundering, drug abuse and defamation.**

**2500 SC REWARD for ARREST and CONVICTION of Miss Kimmel, and 200 SC  
for any associate. This notice takes place of all previous reward notices.**

"I apologize," said Coop "but I haven't seen a woman like this 'round here."

"So you're saying you have seen a woman." the younger man inquired.

Coop smiled. "Didn't say that either." He looked at the poster again. "Say, why a defamation charge? Isn't all of this other stuff enough to warrant the arrest?"

"You see," the older man started "Miss Kimmel is the sister of Luke Kimmel, the

Grand Marshal of the Red Hills nation. I know that's hard to believe." A smile appeared on his face "I mean, just look at her. You'd reckon she was a wild woman from the south. Understandably, havin' his last name posted all over the nation on a Wanted poster isn't in the Marshal's best interest. So we're doin' what's in our power to find that woman and bring her to justice."

*Damnit, Synth.* Coop's facade was faltering despite his best efforts.

"Why do you reckon she's out here?"

The older man responded. "We shot her horse... about what, two days ago? Max here claims he managed to shoot her as well, but we couldn't confirm for ourselves. We reckoned she must have went this way based on her tracks, but they keep gettin' fewer and fewer."

Coop filled the water bag up fully. "Well, ain't that unfortunate. If I see her out here, I'll bring 'er north. I gotta get back to my camp, so I'm gonna leave you folks to it."

"You have a camp out here?" Max perked up.

*Ah, shut up, you nosy prick.* "Just a tent and a fireplace. Nothin' much."

"Ain't this a weird place to camp." The older man gave Coop a suspicious look "Are you from Woodward?"

"Caholdera."

The older man laughed. "Caholdera?! Man, that's pretty far away. What's a man from Caholdera doin' out here in savage land?"

Coop considered his words carefully. *They might think I'm an outlaw.* "The thing of the matter is... I'm doin' this recreationally."

"Now that's the way I like it! Man of the land, huh?" A jovial smile spread on the older man's face. "Well, here's an idea. We escort you to your camp and give you some supplies for your troubles. How 'bout it?"

*No. Shut up.* "Ah, thanks, but I don't really need anythin'."

"Nonsense! We have plenty. Besides, there's rumors goin' around of savages roamin' these parts. Best to stick together. Three's company, as they say."

Unbenownst to the two men, their new acquaintance in the morning shadow was sweating profusely. *If I refuse them here, they'll think I'm suspicious. But when they find Synth sleeping in the tent, they'll know I was lyin' to them. But if I don't let them look in the tent...* Coop put on a fake smile to let them know he was in agreement. "Be my guests, then. The campsite's about half a mile this way."

The three of them went on their way to the camp, with Coop leading. He thought about what he needed to say in a case of contingency. *I can afford getting defensive over the tent, I have all of my supplies in there. What will I say if they find Synth, though? That I didn't recognize her poster in the dark? That could work. Wait, did I say that I haven't seen that woman, or that I hadn't seen any woman? Can I gaslight them without them noticing?*

The campfire was still faintly smouldering enough for its burning charcoal to be seen in the dark, but not from afar as the dawn slowly came. "Cozy", Max remarked.

"So, this is the famous place?" the older man remarked. "Man, forgive me for gettin' so giddy over this. I just haven't got a time for campin' in a long time. Use to looove

campin'. Would do it every year with my old man, bless his soul."

*Old man. Yeah, miss you too, dad.*

"You didn't go campin' with your son?" Coop asked. The smile on the older man's face disappeared and was replaced with a blank expression. *I shouldn't have said that.*

"Sorry."

The man was woken from his trance. "It's okay. I was just thinkin'..."

Max suddenly made his presence known. "Hey, do you want me to put the supplies here?" He reached out for the curtain of the tent. Coop felt a shiver on his spine when he turned his head towards him. "Hey, don't touch tha--"

Too late. Max opened the curtain and looked inside. Coop ran towards him, but he was too late to stop him. "Look, I don't want people to--" Before he could finish the sentence, he too looked into the tent and saw that Synth was gone. The only thing inside were the supplies and a sleeping Alex. Max recognized that something was wrong in Coop's expression and began apologizing. "Ah, shit. My bad, should have just asked."

The older man pushed Max out of the way and closed the curtain. He looked into Coop's eyes and likewise apologized. "Sorry, man. We didn't mean to disturb your daughter, we just didn't know." He placed the supplies next to the tent. "I just remembered, we haven't even introduced each other. I'm Hayes. Wellon Hayes. And this is Max Dylan."

"Alex Cooper."

Hayes shook hands with Coop. "Mr. Cooper, it's been a pleasure to meet you. Good luck out here."

"Bless your heart." Coop replied. A mixture of relief and concern washed over him as the two men rode away. Synth was gone. She went out on her own. *She's not my problem anymore. But she won't get anywhere with that leg of hers.* He considered what would happen if the two men caught her now. *She might spill the means on me.* Once again, he had a dilemma to solve. He had no way to get out of the situation without somebody dying. Either Synth or the men. *I could take Alex and run. They won't catch me.* However, he quickly remembered just how pointless that would be with Alex still recovering. Even if they didn't find them, they wouldn't make it far on their own without starving. *If I make a choice, I'll have to go against the two of them either way. They'll come back for me if Synth talks and they'll come after me if I try to stop them.* Therefore, the only logical choice was to go after the men and confront them. That is if he would be able to find them. He looked around the campsite for any tracks. Luckily, the horseshoes left nice and clear footsteps in the morning mud. He didn't know if he would be able to find Synth before them, but he had to try. In a few minutes, he was up on his feet and following their tracks, which led south.

As he went, the promise of a bright dawn was subdued by the grey clouds hovering over the plain. It did not get as much sunlight as it should have at that time of the day. *Hope I don't get soaked.*, he thought. Despite the continuing darkness, he

quickly found both the footsteps of Synth and the two horses following her. He quickened his pace. *If I'm too late, I'm done.* He now saw that the tracks lead to the patch of forest he hid his rabbit traps in. *She must have remembered which way I went. Probably followed my tracks too.* Neither cicadas not birds were singing, putting the plain to an eerie silence. The forest patch seemed to be getting further away with each step. In his hurry, he tripped over a rock, planting his face right into the moist dirt. *Fuck's sake.* He got up and began running again. The faceplant seemed to have thrown him out of his hypnosis, and the forest was finally getting closer.

He saw the silhouettes of the men and their horses right away. Running up to them, he saw that Max's horse got his leg caught in one of Coop's rabbit traps.

"Dang rabbit, this thing ain't comin' off!" He yelled in frustration.

Hayes wasn't as impressed. "Well, cut it off then. It ain't a beartrap, just some rope."

"Fine, gimme a knife."

"I don't have a knife." Hayes replied. Max was in disbelief.

"What do you mean you don't have a knife?"

"I lost it." He broke eye contact. "Had it on me on Tuesday mornin'. Must have fell out when we was crossin' the marshland. Maybe you could find a sharp rock 'round here..." He turned his head just in time to see Coop arrive on the scene. A faint smile was his greetings.

"Well, I'll be damned. It's Cooper! How fast was you runnin'? That was a good two miles!"

Max wasn't in the mood for greetings. "Was this trap yours?" He pointed at the rope that his horse was tangled in.

Coop was still a bit out of breath. He was glad that they haven't found Synth yet.

"That... was my trap... Sorry about that..."

"Wanna help get my horse out of it?" Max replied.

Coop decided to stall for time a bit. "Yeah, just have somethin' to get off my chest first." He placed his hands on his hips only to find his revolver was missing. *Damnit, I must have dropped it along the way. At least I'll appear harmless.*

"Well, what is it?" Hayes was looked with interest, but his hand placed on his hip and apprehensive look gave away feelings of suspicion.

Coop decided he was going to be honest, but also mislead them. "I... I met the woman you're lookin' for. She was at my camp before you was there."

A moment of silence ensued before being broken by Hayes. "I assume you had a good reason to hide it." The trust which Coop built in the previous hours was broken in an instant.

"I know which way she went. I can point you her wa--"

He was interrupted by Max. "Woah there, cowboy. We have no reason to trust ya."

Hayes looked around. He pulled the revolver from his waist and cocked the hammer, causing Coop to instinctively raise his hands and make a "stop" gesture.

"Cooper, I don't have you for an outlaw." Hayes' brow was tensed to its limit, his eyes a mix of anger and disappointment. "But you should understand that Miss



Kimmel ain't what she makes herself out to be. The wounded pretty young lady you saw ain't some poor soul runnin' away from harm. She singlehandedly caused an *unprecedented* drug epidemic in the Red Hill settlements. Lotta men died. *Good* men. She don't care. She's just runnin' because she knows it's the only option she's got." He raised his gun and pointed it at Coop.

"Wait, don't shoo--"

Coop did not get to finish that sentence as Hayes was shot in the head. His dead hand dispatched a shot that flew into the air, causing both his and Max's horse to be spooked. Max's horse kicked him in the head and ran away with the other horse as he broke free from the trap. In under ten seconds, both men were dead. Assuming Synth was the one who fired the shot, Coop decided to thank her.

"Thanks, Synth. That was a..."

He turned around and saw Synth, with wide open eyes and a half opened mouth. *Wait, but the bullet came from the right, not from behind me...* He looked in the direction of the shot. Alex was standing there with his revolver. She hasn't heard Coop thanking Synth. Neither Coop nor Synth were sure what to do, or if they were in danger. Deciding to risk it, Coop slowly approached Alex as if trying to court a hungry lion. To his relief, she pointed the revolver at the ground.

"Alex...?"

Alex noticed the fearful expressions on Coop and Synth's faces. "It's okay." She said as she looked around the scene. "I've eliminated the threat." She seemed to have recovered from her poisoning remarkably well, and was now able to speak clearly. Her sudden lucidity did not inspire comfort.

*She has a gun. She has a gun and knows how to use it.*

Synth soon joined Coop and slowly got closer to Alex. "Alex, are you alright?"

"No, and I won't be until I find what I'm looking for."

"And what is that?" Synth asked.

Alex looked around the forest and took it in. A grey dawn finally came, and threatened to bring down a storm any minute.

"Nothing is the same. I was asleep. I don't even know for how long. I only woke up a year ago. I was meant to watch over everyone else while they slept, but..." She looked them both dead in the eyes. "...someone came. She wanted to destroy everything that was in the vault. And she succeeded. I thought I would find help out here. But everything's different. No one honors the gods anymore."

The trio stood there in silence trying to piece the situation out. *Sleepin'... What is she, some sorta sleepin' princess?* "Alex, how long was you asleep?"

Alex thought deeply before finally giving him the answer to all of his questions.

"10.000 years."

Synth was in shock. "10.000?!"

"Give or take." Alex continued. "We were sent to the vaults during the war with mechanoids. The war was meant to be over in a few hundred years, and then we would all get to leave." She paused. "But we didn't." The last part was said with surprising dexterity in her voice.

*Mechanoids.* "You were at war with machines?"

"We won." She turned her head around to scout her surroundings again. "I haven't seen an of them since I left the vault. But I came too late." She shuddered.

"Everyone I knew is gone. No one even remembers what came before. It's like the world ended and started anew." She was now on the verge of crying like she was back in the tent. Her eyes glistened through the mask.

"Alex," coop inquired "you said you were asleep in a vault. Do you remember where the vault is?"

"I can lead you to it." she replied.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Two days later, Coop, Synth and Alex arrived at the cliffside where Alex claimed to have come from. They could see immediately that she wasn't lying. The semi-collapsed cliff revealed an opening from which smoke was fleeing like a flock of birds. The fire seemed to have been mostly gone, but the fumes made it unsafe to enter. Regardless, the trio could see that everything inside the metal tomb was burnt to ash and unusable.

"They all burned in their sleep. My people." Synth tried to hug Alex to comfort her, but she instinctively rejected the gesture and instead stared into the vault which was now a tomb.

"You know," Coop began, "there could still be other vaults out there."

"You think so?" Alex was not a believer.

"My pops always told me there ain't nothin' on earth that's there only once. If there's one vault, there's gotta be at least one more like yours."