

Chapter One

The man walked down the cracked pavement of the desert road, leaving the corpse in the ditch for the buzzards and crows. He crossed himself, his fingers tapping his forehead, his breast, his left shoulder, and right shoulder before tearing a length of cloth from the bottom of his poncho. Quickening his pace, the man wiped the blood from his hands threw the cloth to the ground. The man had the information he needed, and with it, a newfound determination to bring Red Jake to justice. Behind him, the birds were already cawing and circling.

Some fifty feet in front of the man was a small boy, barely more than a toddler, sitting on the hood of a rusted-out sedan, headphones covering his ears and a small device in his hands. The man closed the gap and crouched in front of the child, smiling. The boy took off his headphones and looked at the man wordlessly, his brown eyes drilling holes into the man's own light blue orbs.

"Come on, AJ, we've got to get moving," the man said, holding out a hand for the child to take.

They continued their journey, the man leading and the child following. For every step the man took, the boy was forced to take six. From time to time the man would pause and wait for the child to catch up before continuing along on their path. He wanted to find Red Jake, but he wouldn't leave the boy behind to do it.

The sun beat down on them, oppressive and overbearing, but they both wore wide-brimmed hats, tinted goggles, and ponchos to shield

themselves from the worst of the sun's assault. Occasionally, the man would have to pull the brim of his hat down further across his eyes, but it was a mild inconvenience at worst.

He was a handsome sort, if not a little rugged and worn. His features were sharp and held a countenance that looked as though someone had carved them from wood. The man's eyes were a pale blue and his hair was a thick, messy mane of muddy auburn locks. A ragged mess of a beard in severe need of a shave crept across his face. Three scars, the parting gift from an angry bear, ran from his jaw line across his left cheek, nearly reaching his eye. Beneath his shirt was a mass of scar tissue covering his right shoulder, the memento of a burning barn crashing on his head.

Tattoos covered the man's left arm, starting with the four-leaf clover and crossed guns of his home. Flowing cursive script formed the words "Further Up and Further In" on a pair of dog tags hanging from the clover. Beneath the guns and clover ran a broken chain cloaked in flame and between each link was a different icon or image that formed a portrait to chaos and fury. All of this led to an angry C-shaped scar just over the words "Remember why you're here." Three items on a steel chain hung from his neck: a set of dog tags bearing the name "James Flynn," a silver crucifix, and a small gold locket shaped like a heart. On his hip he carried a revolver he called "the Iron," and across his back were a rifle and a long-bladed machete.

The child had a round face with skin like brass and rosy cheeks hidden beneath layers of dirt and grime. His hair was dark brown, bordering on black, and in greasy strings – the result of life spent on the road. He was scrawny, but not unhealthy, and his soft brown eyes held an intelligence of sorts, though he did not utter a sound. While the child kept his eyes to the ground most of the time, there were occasions where he would peek out at the world around him. No matter where he looked, however, his feet remained forward and he followed the man without delay or deviation.

All around them, the drone of cicadas hummed in their ears, interrupted only by the jingle-jangle of the iron skillet and tin cups hanging from the man's rucksack and the regular patter of feet on broken pavement. The highway stretched out from beneath their feet, paving the way west until it disappeared into the horizon, fading and fusing with the unbroken blue of the sky marking the end of the world. Rusted skeletons of trucks and cars dotted the road. Some called it the Devil's Highway. Others called it the Long Road. The man didn't call it anything, but instead chose to walk its length in near silence.

They walked for hours, stopping to rest only when the sun ended its dance across the heavens. The man led the child off the road to set up a camp, and within minutes a fire danced and crackled to life, its light warding off the encroaching darkness.

The sounds of the desert shifted as the cicadas drifted off to sleep and the cabras rose from their slumber. A howl echoed in the distance, fading for only a moment before it was taken up by another beast, and another, and another until the cries came from all directions.

The child shuddered and moved in closer to the man, who wrapped an arm around him in response.

"Shh... don't worry AJ, they aren't going to come any closer," the man whispered.

The words and gesture proved to be the panacea the child needed. The shaking gave way to steady breathing, which in turn became the slow, rhythmic sounds of a dreamless sleep. There would be no monsters haunting the child tonight.

The man shifted and laid the child to rest in a sleeping bag. He stepped away from the camp to relieve himself, then returned to take inventory of their supplies. There was food and water enough for three more days, at least. The man released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. They were fortunate and making good time.

He laid his rifle across his crossed legs and took it apart to clean as he did every night, his hands moving across the weapon without waiting for commands from his brain. It was as much a ritual to him as it was a routine. To him, it was more than a mere firearm. It was something akin to Excalibur, a legendary relic of a time long since passed. The rifle was one of the few functioning firearms in the wastes, and the fact that he had ammunition to shoot only made it more valuable. In a world of slings and arrows, the rifle reigned supreme, allowing its wielder to lord over man.

It had been a gift from Elizabeth, the only woman he had ever truly loved. Ruger action, bolt lugs lapped for uniformity, a Timney trigger with a one pound, eight ounce pull weight – perhaps a tenth of an ounce more. Wood stock, laminated to resist weathering.

“Twenty-five-and-a-half-inch varmint contour barrel,” the man said quietly, speaking with an almost religious reverence, turning the words into a mantra, a creed. “Free-floated with a custom muzzle brake, helical fluting to reduce weight. Six-point-five millimeter round with a one hundred and forty grain bullet.”

He reached into his rucksack and pulled out a beaten-up cardboard box. He opened it slowly and watched as the fire’s reflection danced along the brass hulls of the eleven bullets still in the box. With the six resting in the rifle, including two tracer rounds, the man had seventeen rounds for the rifle, and another fourteen for the revolver on his hip.

The man looked out over the vast, unbroken, and seemingly endless desert. He knew better, however. He had seen the far end of the desert, where ruined cities crumbled in silence. The place most only called “the East.” He had been born there in the land of the Forefathers on the outskirts of the City of Stone Idols. He had grown up along the banks of a great river that emptied into the sea. It was there his father had taught him the lore of the bygone scholars, and it was there his grandfather had taught him the ways of the world.

Violence had descended upon that land, tearing it apart, and when the man had ended it, he chose to go west rather than stay and rebuild. He was a warrior, not a builder. His hands could not remain idle. Violence was in his blood – had been for generations. The sound of gunfire was like music to his ears, a lullaby that would one day shepherd him into the Last Sleep.

But that had changed three years ago when he arrived on the farm. When he had met Elizabeth. He had put away his guns and taken up the implements of a farmer – hoe, trowel, scythe, and shovel. Each day he would head out to the fields to reap what he had sown, and each night he would return to the arms of the woman he had grown to love. It had been a good life, an honest life, and a life far more fulfilling than his days spent fighting his way across the desert. But it did not last. Mere minutes of blood and gunfire had taken that life from him.

His eyes grew heavy, but he forced himself to stay awake, as he often did. In truth, the man required little sleep anymore. He could work tirelessly for days on end; traveling, hunting, keeping watch. His body didn't need as much rest as it used to.

The man put a metal cup on the edge of the fire, half buried in coals and filled it part way with water before mixing in the last of his coffee grinds. The smell of coffee quickly overpowered the combined scents of the desert air and the smoke from the fire. The man inhaled, letting the air fill him up like a meal. When he could take the tantalizing odor no longer, the man grabbed the cup's handle, grimacing slightly at the heat against his skin, and pulled the coffee from the flames. He brought the cup beneath his nose and breathed in once more. His eyes rolled back and his eyelids shuttered in ecstasy.

The can, filled with more air than actual coffee, cost him half a dozen bullets and four dollars, but it had been worth every round and cent. He took a sip from the mug. The hot coffee scalded the inside of his mouth,

but the man didn't care. Tonight, he was a king, a god among men, because he had in his hands a treasure that most could only dream of.

His senses sharpened as the caffeine kicked in. The fatigue was banished from his bones, and the sandman no longer offered him the seductive velvet of sleep.

The man leaned back against a rock, pulled the locket from beneath his shirt, and opened it. On the left was a picture of AJ, smiling and happy. On the right was Elizabeth, with her mousey brown hair in its messy bun and the smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose. He closed his eyes and imagined she was there with him in the desert. The man could almost smell her – desert willows, dirt, and rain.

He opened his eyes and looked up into the night. Stars filled it, as if thrown from the hand of a god attempting to seed the sky. In many places there was more light than darkness, but along the edge of the sky, where heaven met earth, the night was so black it almost appeared purple.

The man blinked, a slow, lazy motion, and the stars blurred together. He closed his eyes again and when they reopened the man found himself staring into the light blue of the midmorning. He looked over at the child, who was sitting quietly, drawing in the sand. The man looked at the zigzagging lines and soon realized the child was making a map. An X to mark the farm they had come from, and a line snaking through the sand to represent the old highway they followed.

The man smiled as he started up the fire once more. He had promised Elizabeth to take the child to safety, to find a home where his old life of blood and violence would not follow them. While he wasn't sure if such a world existed, the man had given his word and if he couldn't find that world, he would make it.

Breakfast was humble: a fried mash of salt, meat, fat, and cornmeal. They ate in silence, as they always did, while the man looked over his map. When breakfast was done, they wordlessly rose to continue their journey.

The sun spent the morning chasing them across the wastes, and the man and the child spent the afternoon chasing it across the sky, stopping only when they needed to get off their feet or empty their bladders.

The man made sure the child remained hydrated. He did not fear the men or beasts that called the desert home, for they bled, and all things that bleed can die. He feared only his own weakness, and the weakness of the child. Too long without food or water or rest and the boy would soon be picked clean by the buzzards circling ever above them, leaving the man alone.

He looked up and considered bringing a bird low, but decided against it. The buzzards were too lean, too small, and wouldn't be worth the price of the lead needed to clip the wings. No, the birds would live, but only because their death would not serve a more worthwhile purpose.

“Look.”

The word – one syllable, four letters – hit him like a galloping horse. It was one of perhaps one hundred words the child had uttered in the months since they had left the farm. The man looked over his shoulder to see AJ pointing across the highway to the red-brown skeletons that clogged the ramps leading to the eastbound lanes. The man reached under his poncho and retrieved a set of binoculars.

Though the lenses were dirty and cracked, they still worked well enough, and allowed the man to look more closely at the wrecked, rusted remains of the trucks and cars. He soaked in the details, like the noon sand soaked up a stream of piss. Grains of rust, spider-webbed cracks in the windshields, and the symbols of those who crafted these beasts of steel and glass, all noted and filed away.

The man knelt next to the child and held the binoculars up so he could look for himself. Whether the boy understood what he was looking at or not, the man could not know. It had been too long since he had been the child's age, and the ways the child thought were as alien to the man as

the thoughts of a buzzard or cabra – perhaps even more so. To view the world with such innocence and curiosity was not something the man could do anymore. He had seen too much, experienced too many things, and committed too many deeds.

They continued walking west, keeping the cars on their left as they passed. Occasionally, they would search a promising vehicle, but each time they walked away with nothing but wasted time.

Finally, the child's legs could carry him no more, and so they made camp beneath an old bridge spanning the highway. The man set up another fire, using his body to shield it from the wind. Sand and grit assaulted them, but the man had chosen a spot behind one of the great concrete monoliths holding the bridge aloft. The pillar protected them from the worst of the winds, though the bridge itself amplified the howling until it cut straight through to the man's bones.

The man turned his back to the wind as he looked over his map again, following a hand-drawn blue line across the battered paper. It began in a place called "New Kingston" and ended in another called "Paradiso." He looked down the highway – the Long Road – and then back to the map. A bear trap smile crept across his face.

"I've almost got you," he said quietly as he folded the map.

He put it away and pulled a book out of his bag and read while the child slept. He poured over the pages of the old book from a lost time, a tome of gods and mortals. His eyes tore apart the words and rebuilt them in his mind as images and sounds. An entire world formed around the man, fueled by ink and paper. The book grew heavy in the man's hands as time passed, and the pages turned slower and slower until finally they stopped turning altogether and the book slid from the man's grasp and on to the cracked cement of the highway.

The book hit the road with a dull thud and the man found himself once again in the waking world, his hand reaching out to grasp nothing but air. The child sat upright, calmly watching the man with his soft eyes.

Embarrassed, the man lowered his hand and quickly packed their things.

“Come on, AJ,” he said. “We’ve got to keep moving.”

Wordlessly, the child rose to follow the man. They walked for miles in silence, stopping only when their stomach gurgled and growled. The man handed the child a piece of hard bread and a canteen.

“Eat,” he said. “Drink. You’ve got to stay strong.”

The man often worried about the boy. Worried about how Elizabeth’s death would impact him. While it had been years since the man had seen another child, he felt as though at this age, AJ should be laughing, smiling, and playing and not marching in somber silence across an unforgiving desert.

They passed a sign, once pristine and white, shaped like a shield and eroded by the sands of time. The faded outline of the number six could still be seen, just barely, but it was the crudely scrawled words caught the man’s eye: “Pump Station, 10 miles ahead.” At their current pace, it would take them another four hours to get there. The town would have the supplies, and hopefully the information, the man needed to continue his hunt – both for home and for revenge.

The man shouldered his rucksack, took the child’s hand in his own, and continued walking. Occasionally, the man would stop and scan the area with his binoculars to ensure the surrounding region was safe. Each time, his search turned up exactly what he wanted – nothing.

They paused around midday for a lunch of dried pork and water. The wasteland heat grew to sweltering levels and the man poured almost as much water on his face as he did down his throat. His head pounded in

the heat and the song of the cicadas thrummed in his ears, drowning out everything else.

The blast of a horn interrupted the song – not a bugle or war horn signaling the ride of an army, but that of an Old World machine. The man turned around and his eyes widened as the big rig barreled down the opposite lane, smashing wrecks and rubble aside with the patchwork plow welded to its front. The headlights flashed in the wasteland sun as the truck threw wreckage to the edges of the highway.

The truck turned toward the man and child, smashing the old dividers separating the east – and west-bound lanes. The man grabbed AJ and sprinted toward the rusted guard rail at the edge of the highway, vaulting over it and sprinting up the embankment to avoid being run down.

Air blasted from the truck as the driver engaged the breaks. The massive machine shuddered as its momentum arrested and it slowed to a crawl, then finally to a complete stop. The trailer was covered in metal plates, spikes, and barbed wire. The man never considered himself a gambler, but he bet this rig was operated by an entire crew. The passenger side window slowly rolled down and a large man leaned his head out. One hand was on the truck's steering wheel while the other remained hidden behind the door, no doubt holding a weapon.

“What a sight,” the driver said in a booming baritone. His hair was thin, although he boasted an impressive beard that grew into a mustache, leaving his chin exposed to the wasteland air. The man had a swollen nose that looked as though it had been broken several times. What skin wasn't covered by dirt or hair was covered in pockmarks. The driver took off his mirrored sunglasses to get a closer look at the duo before him, revealing surprisingly small eyes set back in his skull. “A man walking the wastes, with a child to boot. What's your name, stranger?”

The man slowly removed his goggles and looked up at the big rig driver. The harsh light of the unfiltered sun forced him to squint. "My name is Locke. And you?"

"Driver Spence, but everyone calls me 'the Driver,'" the trucker responded. "Pleased to meet your acquaintance, Locksley."

The man's eye twitched.

"Locke."

"Locke..." the Driver said quietly. "And what about the boy there?" His eyes lingered on the child for a moment before returning to Locke.

"His name is AJ," the man replied.

There were a few moments of silence. Sweat beaded along the man's forehead and ran into his eye.

"So, where you headin'?" the Driver asked.

Locke looked down the highway, his eyes westward bound. "Pump Station. After that, Paradiso."

The Driver nodded his head knowingly.

"What's your business in Pump Station?" the Driver asked. "It's a bit out of the way for Paradiso."

"Looking for someone," Locke replied evenly.

"Who're you lookin' for Locksley?" the Driver said. "Been travelin' through these parts for years. Know every settlement between here and Flagg's Staff and know most of the major movers an' shakers in each of them. Maybe I can help."

Locke's eye twitched again. "I'm looking for Red Jake Mathers. Last I heard he was in Pump Station."

The Driver's eyes widened slightly. "I don't know if you're a brave man, or a stupid one, Locksley. Either way, Pump Station is just another three miles," he said. "Maybe I can give you and AJ there a lift. If Red Jake ain't there, I can take you as far as Flagg's Staff. But I won't drive into Mesa territory. You hear about that warlord there? The Phoenix?"

“Can’t say that I have,” Locke replied. He looked down the highway, first west, then east, then back to the Driver. “So, you want bullets or water or something?”

The man looked back and forth between Locke and AJ. “Somethin’,” he said slowly. The Driver flashed a toothy grin. “Just the company of a nice man and boy.”

Locke’s eyes narrowed and his hand reflexively drifted toward his gun. His every nerve screamed at him to draw the Iron and put a bullet between the Driver’s eyes, but the man ignored the demands and suggestions in his head, as enticing as they were.

“I think we’ll keep walking, thanks,” Locke said curtly through clenched teeth. “Really, though, it was a generous offer.”

The Driver’s expression shifted suddenly, from congenial to stone-faced serious. His hidden hand revealed itself, and the loaded sawed-off with it. The weapon was made from scrap and just as likely to explode in the Driver’s hand as it was to properly fire, but it wasn’t a risk Locke wanted to take.

“Let’s say I weren’t offerin’,” the Driver said coldly. “Let’s say it weren’t a suggestion, eh?”

“Were that the case I’d ask you to reconsider,” Locke replied as calmly as he could.

With one hand, the Driver waggled the sawed-off in Locke’s general direction. With the other hand he blasted the horn on his diesel rig. From the rear of the truck came the screeching sound of rusty metal on rusty metal as the bar to the rig’s trailer door lifted. Locke saw the doors open in the corner of his eye, and three men – one short, one fat, and one lean – clambered out with more homemade shotguns in their hands.

“Listen, Locksley,” he said. “A man has needs. I think we can all agree on that. You need to get to Paradiso. Me? I need some pleasant

company from that pretty young boy for a few minutes. I'll be gentle, promise."

The Driver blinked lazily, only to find himself staring down the barrel of Locke's revolver when his eyes reopened. He flashed his toothy grin once more and lowered his gun slightly. Locke's face remained set in stone and his revolver stayed steady.

"AJ, music," Locke said calmly. Behind him, the child immediately placed his headphones over his ears and looked down at the small screen.

To his credit, the Driver's smarmy grin didn't falter. "Now, now, Locksley, be reasonable," he said. "After all, if you make a move, my boys back there will pump shells into your body so fast you'll be shaking hands with Saint Peter before you know it."

"Won't change the fact that you'll die with me," Locke said calmly. "Besides, they've got shotguns – slugtossers looks like, not even proper guns – aimed at me from fifty feet away and I've got a revolver – an honest-to-God gun – pointed right between your eyes from fifteen. I feel pretty good about my chances."

The three men at the end of the trailer took a step forward, prompting Locke to pull back on the hammer of his revolver. An unnecessary gesture as the weapon was a double action, but the sound made it increasingly clear that Locke was serious. The Driver waved his free hand, shooing the men back.

"Think of the boy, Locksley," he said. There was a slight quiver to his voice. Most would have missed it, but Locke possessed exceedingly keen ears.

"Always do," the man replied in a tone that cut off any possible argument. "Now why don't you call off your boys before I decide that it'd be best for all of us to lodge a bullet in your skull?"

The Driver's smile finally died. "You know, I thought I recognized you... 'The Minuteman,' they call you – the bounty hunter who always takes

‘em dead. Now I know why you’re after Red Jake,” he said, his voice cracking only ever so slightly. “I’m sure we can come to an agreement of sorts. Perhaps me and my boys can drive off, and you and *your* boy there can simply keep walkin’. No one has to get hurt, eh?”

“Sounds reasonable,” Locke said.

“Alright then,” the Driver said as the truck’s engine roared back to life. He blasted his horn and his goons climbed back into the trailer.

Locke kept his revolver trained on the Driver until the vehicle lurched forward. The Driver leaned out the window and shouted over the roar of the engine: “You’d better hope that we don’t run into each other on the road again, Minuteman Locksley!”

The man didn’t bother to respond as he watched the massive rig pick up speed and barrel down the highway once more. The truck knocked debris out of the way and cleared a path for anyone that would follow.

Locke stood still as a statue, waiting until the Driver and his rig disappeared from sight before taking a step. He pulled his goggles back over his face, stepped off the embankment and back on to the highway to continue his walk across the desert. AJ followed.

Chapter Two

The sun began its retreat behind the western horizon as Locke and AJ first made out the silhouette of Pump Station in the distance. While the Driver had cleared the wreckage on the Long Road, Locke felt it wise to remain conservative in their pacing, in case the Driver decided to lurk along the highway.

Part of Locke regretted not putting the half ounce of lead in the Driver's gray matter. The world would move on just fine without someone like that man in it. In fact, it'd probably move along quite nicely. But at the same time, he was glad AJ didn't have to watch the man die. The child had been through enough in his four short years, and Locke didn't need to add to the trauma.

A searchlight hummed to life in Pump Station as the sun descended beyond sight, its great beam sweeping to and from across the coarse sand and broken concrete of the wasteland. The man and the child approached the light cautiously, doing everything in their power to appear harmless, or at least peaceful. Locke stood upright, abandoning the crouching, predatory lean he adopted in the wastes. The child mimicked Locke's change in stride, straightening his back and shifting his weight to the heels of his feet.

Town. A safe haven. A community of like-minded individuals working together to create a safer future. A *better* future. They were almost as rare as bullets and gasoline. But here they stood, not more than two hundred feet away from one such place. A town.

“Halt, strangers!” a woman’s voice cried out in the night’s sky. “Step into the light so we can get a good look at’cha!”

We, Locke thought as he took AJ’s hand and with the child stepped forward into the luminescent disk hovering over the desert sand. His eyes narrowed, out of reflex, not conscious thought. The light was far brighter than expected.

“State your name and business here at Pump Station,” the woman continued.

While Locke couldn’t make out any details, her silhouette revealed she was tall, broad shouldered, and carried a weapon in her hands. Possibly a rifle, but more than likely a crossbow or some sort of air gun.

“My name’s Locke,” the man replied. “And the child is Alejandro. AJ for short. We’re looking for a place to spend the night, get some food and water, and get any information we can on Red Jake Mathers.”

Locke heard snippets of a brief, whispered conversation. *A child? He brings a child through the wasteland? Should we let him in? Do you think he’s dangerous? If he’s hunting Red Jake he has to be! We can’t turn him away; he has a child with him!*

The light lowered until it was below Locke and AJ’s faces. Locke was grateful for the reprieve. It took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the sudden change in light, precious seconds that would have killed him a few years ago.

There was a hushed exchange of words followed by the shifting of the light to scan other parts of the desert. As his eyes adjusted more completely to the blackness, Locke could see the walls, made from old shipping containers and reinforced with highway dividers and old tires, surrounding Pump Station. Sturdy enough to repel an attack from even the most dedicated raider gang or mutant pack.

The gate – thick slabs of rusting steel welded to what appeared to be old train wheels – opened slowly and a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat

not unlike Locke's own and a jean jacket stood on the other side. He had a silver star pinned to his chest while a black bandana and pair of goggles hung from his neck. The man kept his sleeves rolled up, revealing tanned, well-muscled forearms and he held a homemade air rifle complete with a hand pump on the front.

"What ammunition do you use?" Locke asked casually as the man walked closer.

"Nineteen-millimeter smooth bore round," the guard replied, echoing the conversational tone. "We make some, scavenge others. Pretty easy to keep our stockpiles replenished."

The man's eyes flicked up and down as he scanned Locke. His lip curled and his nose wrinkled ever so slightly. Locke knew he was a sight to behold having marched through the wastes for days on end.

"You look like you've been through hell," the guard said finally.

"That just about does it justice," Locke replied, a smile flickering across his lips. "Came from Silver Run."

"That's quite a hike," the guard said as he stepped aside and motioned for Locke and AJ to pass through the gate. Locke looked around as he entered the town, taking in the layout and doing his best to commit it to memory. Knowledge was a valuable commodity; each word or image was a bullet chambered in his mind. Used properly and at the correct moment, a piece of information could save a life, or end another.

Immediately to the left of him stood a quartet of circular clarifiers and next to them sat a small cluster of buildings. A pair of aerated lagoons stood on the far side of the cracked macadam road dividing the town, and behind them was a cluster of pipes descending beneath the surface of the earth. More buildings, an even mix of modern scrap and ancient concrete, were scattered about the premise. Most appeared residential, although an older building with a scrap metal addition dominated the skyline, leading Locke to believe it was a town hall of sorts.

Guards patrolled Pump Station's walls, each of them carrying crossbows or pump-action air rifles. One or two of the guards paused their patrols to take a look at the newcomers, most of them paying more attention to AJ than to Locke. Men were common. Children less so.

"So, this is Pump Station?" Locke asked.

The guard nodded. "It's not much, but it's our little oasis in the wasteland," he said. The man pointed off to a small building along the western wall. "We've got a line running down there to an aquifer that draws up water and enough purifiers to make sure it's drinkable. We do some trading with the Metal Heads over in Flagg's Staff and we would occasionally send a caravan as far south as Mesa."

"Would?" Locke echoed.

"We don't send caravans there anymore," the guard said curtly.

"So where would a man looking for information and supplies for the road go?" Locke asked.

The guard pointed over Locke's shoulder toward a cluster of stalls built mostly from old wood and scrap metal. "Over there is the Bazaar, but it won't open up again until tomorrow morning. If water's what you're looking for, you'll either need to talk to the water merchants – if you hate yourself – or with Sheriff Thurgood. He's a retired ranger out of San Californio. Runs the town."

"That's a bit far," Locke said after a beat.

"Heh, you've never met one of the Ah Toys, have you?" the guard asked. "They think it's their destiny to 'bring civilization' to these lands."

Locke had crawled out of the tunnels forming the underworld in the land of the Forefathers and witnessed firsthand what men could do to one another when pushed too hard – when forced to choose between death and survival. He had worked in Nueva Zeta, a land of violent fiefs involved in a never-ending war, where the weak were chewed up, spit out, and dashed against the rocks. He had passed through the lands of the Great Vallahs, a

land ruled by lords of war fielding armies of slaves. Locke didn't know much about this San Californio, but if it was anything like the lands he had seen, it was far from civilized.

"I heard you were looking for Red Jake..." the guard continued, his tone making it clear that he thought Locke might be insane. "If you're after information, you'll want to head to DJ's Saloon. The caravanners and occasional bounty hunters that come through Pump Station tend to hang out there. Usually a bit of gossip floating around."

The guard turned to walk away, but Locke placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

"One last thing," he said in a more reserved tone. "AJ and I need a place to rest. Is there a..." he paused, trying to find the right word. "A bunkhouse or barracks? Any place with a bed, really."

The guard pointed at the large building Locke had seen before, the one he thought was the town hall. He supposed he couldn't be right all the time.

"We don't get too many visitors," the man said. "But there are some bunks in there, in the newer part. The old building is the sheriff's quarters, and he's not to be disturbed before morning."

The guard turned to return to his post, but paused and looked back over his shoulder at Locke. "There's also a shower. You may want to use it."

Locke looked down at the ragged remains of his poncho and jeans. Both were more patches than actual clothes and threatening to fall off his body at the slightest provocation. His skin was caked with dirt, and when he looked at AJ he found the child's condition was little better.

"Point taken," Locke said quietly to no one in particular as he took AJ's hand and led him to the guest quarters.

The building was quaint in a ramshackle sort of way, with an eclectic mixture of metal sheets welded and nailed together. The interior was maybe

thirty, thirty-five feet wide by forty feet long. In each corner sat beds with buckling wooden frames, mattresses akin to stacks of cardboard, and sheets that were more hole than cloth. Against the far wall stood a row of lockers no doubt salvaged from the ruins of an old police station.

AJ wrinkled his nose, and Locke chuckled quietly. It wasn't much, but it was a palace when compared to sleeping next to the highway. Locke was grateful for the promise of a full night's sleep without having to leave one eye open. Vigilance was the price of safety, but two weeks put a strain on the body and mind, even those as durable as his. Hell, just last night he had slipped up...

The scar on Locke's left forearm itched at the thought, and he scratched at it absently.

A door on the far side of the room led deeper into the building. Locke hesitated, as he didn't want to disturb Pump Station's sheriff, but the guard had also mentioned showers.

"Fuck it," he mumbled to himself as he turned the brass handle and opened the door.

The next room was a surprisingly clean alcove lined with off-white tiles and lit by a pair of fluorescent bulbs running the length of the ceiling. A full-body mirror hung from the far wall next to a sink. Opposite the sink was a stand-in shower, and next to the shower was a toilet. The fact that this place had running water and proper plumbing was impressive. Or, it would have been, had a closer inspection of the toilet not revealed pipes filled with cement.

"Well that's just cruel," Locke mumbled.

The sound of pattering feet on the linoleum floor caused Locke to turn around. AJ stood in the doorway, quietly watching him. Under the sterile light of the bathroom, Locke could see just how dirty AJ had become. The child's skin could barely be seen under the layers of dirt. His hair was

a stringy mess, and his clothes probably held enough sand to double the child's weight.

"Let's get you cleaned off, buddy," Locke said as he kneeled to AJ's level. "Sound good?"

The child took a tentative step toward Locke, then another. After a deep breath, AJ took the last six steps to clear the gap between himself and the man. Locke helped the child remove his faded zip-up hoodie, but otherwise let AJ undress himself. The child always preferred doing things on his own, and Locke wasn't about to impede upon the sense of independence. It showed strength, something that would serve him well in coming years.

Locke turned the water on while AJ untied his shoes and threw them across the room. The child hated the damn things, but Locke wasn't going to let him walk barefoot through the wasteland with God-only-knew-what lurking behind each wreck and dune.

The water came out thick and tinged with brown, but after a minute of sputtering, it turned clear as glass and maintained its steady rain. Locke ran a hand through the water. Cold, but not unbearably so. Definitely not heated, but the tanks were probably warmed by the sun during the day.

"Go ahead and splash around a little," Locke told AJ.

The child smiled and raced into the shower stall. He started spinning around and stomping in the water, even kicking some into Locke's face. The child always loved the rain – the rare times he had been able to experience it. Laughter and screeches of joy echoed around the bathroom.

The man let AJ play for a few minutes before washing him down. They didn't have any soap, so Locke was forced to resort to scrubbing with a washcloth. AJ squirmed and tried his best to escape Locke's clutches, but the man managed to rid the boy of all but the most stubborn particles of dust and sand.

Locke put AJ to bed, tucking him in and reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* until he fell asleep. Normally AJ could stay up through the entire book, but the day had been long and Locke had only made it to page four before AJ's soft snores filled the room. Locke smiled, closed the book, and walked back to the shower to clean himself off.

He quickly stripped down to nothing, tossed the clothes in a pile on the floor, and placed his revolver next to the sink – within easy reach. Locke knew he was safe. He understood that Pump Station wasn't a place where he'd need his gun, but he couldn't bring himself to leave it too far from his side. Those same instincts that had screamed at him to kill the Driver were telling him to carry the weapon, and this time they were winning.

Locke stepped into the shower and turned the handle to the right, bringing it around in nearly a full circle. The shower head sputtered for a second before unleashing a steady stream. The water felt like rain against his bare skin, reminding him of the years spent back home in the Land of the Forefathers.

Potomac, it had been called, named for the great river. His village had been built near the water, just outside of the tunnels that wound through the earth, leading back to the capital of the Old World. It had been a peaceful village and he had lived a quiet life until an army had marched down from the north and tried to conquer river lands. Some of the villagers resisted and fought back, but it didn't take long for most to fall in line.

The man pushed the thoughts from his mind. There was no use dwelling on the past. He couldn't go back and change it.

Locke turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. He reached for his towel, which hung from the lip of the sink, when he noticed a man move just out of his line of sight. Locke quickly grabbed his revolver, spun around, and looked at the intruder.

A dull click echoed throughout the bathroom as Locke pulled the trigger. He blinked and found himself staring at his reflection in the mirror. He blinked again and saw Red Jake's face staring back at him. A third blink, and the man was gone, replaced by Locke once more. His mouth went dry. His heart pounded in his ears. Locke stared at his reflection, his eyes barely registering what they saw.

A line of raised scar tissue bisected his torso, running from his neck to his stomach. Another one cut ran across his abdomen just above his groin, and while he couldn't see them in the mirror, similar scars ran parallel to his spinal cord. They were mementos from the scalpel wielded by his own father.

Locke stood there, completely still, unblinking, just staring at his reflection for what felt like an eternity until finally he couldn't hold his arm up anymore. The man lowered the limb slowly, as if putting down some great weight. His head pounded and those instincts continued to scream within his mind, yearning for a release.

Locke sank to the floor, let the revolver clatter against the tiles, and clutched his head in his hands. The room spun around him, spiraling until it gave way to darkness.