

Prologue

Ironically enough, when the end came, it wasn't man destroying man as we thought it would be. Judgement and retribution both came raining down from the sky and we could do nothing but take cover and watch. The rocks fell and so did our civilization. Radiation kicked up from the heavenly fire made life on the surface impossible, but some still managed it. Animals mostly, but there were a few men and women who couldn't get underground fast enough and mutated along with the rest of the wild kingdom.

At first, the biggest threats weren't from each other, but from the animals who only did what came naturally to them; surviving. The insects were the worst to deal with. Annoyances like finding a spider on your wall or a scorpion in your boot became deadly situations when spiders started tearing down your walls and scorpions were eating your shoes.

Eventually, mankind started to come back. We were no longer in control of the world as we once thought we were, but that didn't stop some from devouring the weak as best they could. Raiders and scavengers roamed the wastes in packs, taking what they wanted and destroying what they couldn't carry. Education and science became a memory, survival and strength became the new social carpenters. People, as we always do, formed groups. Societies. Cities. Our own indomitable spirit wouldn't let us stay down no matter how hard life kicked us in the guts, but it was a permanent struggle. Some got fat off of the sweat and blood of those not strong enough to flex their muscle, and those on the bottom stayed there unless they fought and killed their ways to the top.

The radiation is still deadly in some places, but in other places, where water is fresh and food could be found, mankind struggles forward, desperately trying to rebuild a world that couldn't hold us all to begin with, but it's all we ever knew. Those born before the fall tried to lead those born after, but they were relics clinging to a forgotten age of man. It was a new world. Mankind was a new race. There was one great divide that prevented us from rebuilding our world in our own eyes...

We are no longer at the top of the food chain.

Roadkill

The story of Abadon

One

You'd think that with a name like Heaven, living there would be easy.

Truth is, hell looked pretty good from time to time, which is exactly why I escaped. But that's getting a bit ahead of myself...

I was born in the back room of a ramshackle hut built of corrugated tin and whatever scraps of wood my family found that would withstand the weather. Ninety percent of the time the weather consisted of one forecast: Day - hot and clear. Night - cool and clear. Occasionally we'd get a dust storm sweeping in from the wastes outside of the city that would take half the slums with it, but mostly it was just heat.

Life growing up those first few years wasn't really any different for us than it was for any family living in the south side of Heaven. We'd rent ourselves out for odd jobs and do whatever we could to earn either money or food. We beg borrow and steal all at the same time just to keep our strength up to keep working. We were running uphill in sand for as long as I could remember until the night my mother died and my brothers became famous.

We had gotten lucky that afternoon. Two merchants got into a fight with each other on one of the main thoroughfares heading into the center of heaven and in the riot that ensued (as they always did), mom was able to pinch a Brahmin (two headed bull) in the confusion. Dad was happier than I'd ever seen him and happily went to work stripping it down and getting the meat ready to cook over our fire pit in the center of the shack we lived in. It was the happiest day I'd known in my five years of life on this world, and I started thinking for the first time that we'd really survive this cursed place we seemed to be condemned to.

Dad portioned out the meat and sent my brothers out to buy some ice so we could keep the rest as long as possible while he started cooking. Before they came back, though, there was a knock on the wall of our shack. Mom got up to see who it was but before she could reach the ragged cloth we used as a door it was tossed open by the

ugliest man I'd ever seen. His nose had been broken more times than I could figure and was permanently twisted sideways from the damage. His bald head shone in the firelight except for his forehead which had scars deep enough to hold coins in them, and his was naked from the waist up except for two leather straps that crossed his chest bandolier style and had knives hanging off of them just below his armpits. He was followed into our shack by three more men, almost as ugly as he but just as big and menacing and they took up positions in all four corners of our one room mansion.

"We smelled the meat," he started, "and thought we'd come have a bite or three." His companions sniggered at this and he smiled himself revealing half a row of teeth with gaping holes where the rest of his teeth should have been.

"You don't mind, do you?" Said one of his companions. His hair was shaved in places so that he had three stripes running down his head and neck all the way to the collar of his shirt and beyond.

"It just smelled so good," said a third. This one cracked his knuckles then and I saw the glint of metal on both of his hands, revealing brass knuckles.

We're so hungry, you see, " started the fourth, "and don't want to trouble you good people any more than necessary..." The last one was cradling a lead pipe in his arms and spinning it with his fingers as he held it.

Mom, Dad and I sat where we were, too afraid to move and hoping that these guys would just go away (foolish thoughts, I know, but when you're five years old you think such things). Mom moved first, bolting for the flap that was our front door, but the leader grabbed her by the back of her hair and threw her back into the hut and into the fire. She rolled out of the coals and started screaming as Dad jumped towards her to try and put out her dress, but he was caught up short by the lead pipe being clanked across the back of his head.

I flew into a rage and launched myself at the leader then, who caught my face in his hand and picked me up until I was eye level with him. I could feel the stink of his breath oozing from between his half missing teeth and he snorted a laugh at me. "Little boy thinks he can take us on!" He shouted to his companions, still holding me up by my face. The others laughed in amusement but stayed where they were while my mother lay wailing on the floor and the meat started to burn in the coals.

The leader tossed me backwards then, slamming me against the back wall of our hut and started walking towards the meat in the fire. I tried to get up and attack him again, but the striped-haired one turned and kicked me in the gut, dropping me in an instant.

When their leader reached the fire pit he grabbed the end of the leg that was sticking out of the fire and picked it up, blowing ash and coals off of it. When it was clean enough for him to eat he held it up in a salute to his companions and bit into it, spilling juice down his nubbly chin and chest. He laughed through bites and his companions started to laugh with him, which just pissed me off more. I tried getting up and lunging at him again, this time getting as far as his legs and wrapping my arms around them, trying to take him down despite the fact that he was roughly three times my size, but the man with the brass knuckles grabbed me by the back of my shirt and lifted me off of his leader easily.

"Knock it off you little fuck!" He shouted and shook me as he said it and I could smell his bad breath as well. Dangling there like that I couldn't think of anything to do, so I spit in his face and he responded by punching me hard enough to throw me all the way back across the shack and into the wall again. I felt my ribs when I landed and was sure that at least one or two were broken and I started to cry then. Just cry at my own impotency as my mother laid smoldering on the ground just a few feet away and my father was probably dead from taking that lead pipe across the back of his head.

Their leader had just put the brahmin leg back in his mouth to take another bite when he was spun around from behind and the leg was pushed all the way back down his throat. He fell over choking, clawing at his face and trying to pull it out of his mouth before suffocating and my brothers all leapt over him to attack the other three in the hut.

My oldest brother, Andrew (who was the one that shoved that leg down the leader's throat), went right for the guy with the lead pipe, who was still standing over our father. Tommy, the next oldest, went for the guy with the brass knuckles, and David, who was only five years older than me, went after the striped-haired one.

Andrew ducked under the lead pipe, grabbing the guy's wrist once it was past him and swung his own hand around to crack the guy in the face with his own weapon. I looked over and saw Tommy dodging the knuckled-one easily for a few seconds before crouching low and shooting his leg out, snapping the knee of his opponent instantly. David, who was still a child himself, had jumped up and around the one with the stripes so that he had one

arm wrapped around his throat in a chokehold and was fishhooking the guy with his other hand.

I watched, dumbstruck, as Andrew wrenched the pipe out of his opponent's hand and started whacking the back of his head with it until cracks became crunches and crunches became a squishing sound. Tommy was putting the boots to his own opponent, now lying on his side and bloody from every hole on his face. I heard a ripping sound and turned to see David actually rip the cheek open on his opponent who screamed louder than mom was when she was burning. He fell then and David sat on his back and pulled up on his chin until the guy just stopped moving.

When all three were dispatched my brothers went over to help my father up as he was just coming around when they were finishing off our attackers. They got him sitting up and started tearing strips off of their shirts to bandage dad's head.

"What... What happened?" Dad stammered as he looked around our poor little hut at the four limp bodies of our attackers. "Oh god, Melissa!" He cried out the name of our mother and went over to her, but she was burned over most of her body and her breathing barely detectable. He started crying over the body, holding her close to his chest and ignoring the smell, and my brothers all went over and huddled around him as well. I went over to join the circle of family but Tommy pushed me back.

"You let them do this to mom!" He cried. "This is your fault that mom's dead! Why didn't you do anything? Why didn't you protect her?" He sobbed at me, but I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say I tried, to tell them that I had bruises of my own, but nothing came out. I just sat there, trying to find the words when we all heard a roar behind us.

As a group we turned to see the leader of our assailants start to come towards us, but his battle cry was cut short by a loud thunking sound and he fell forward into the fire pit dead. A small hand-axe was sticking out of his back.

We looked over at the door to see where it came from and saw Franklin, the head of our local militia standing at the door with another throwing axe in his hand, all ready to throw should anybody else pose a threat. Once he was satisfied that there were no more bad guys to handle, he slipped his axe back into a loop on his belt and went to the fire pit to pull his other axe out of the bad guy's back. After doing so and slotting it back in his belt with the rest of his throwing axes he backed towards the door where we could see a couple of

the other guys in the militia waiting for him.

"Is everybody all right here? Your neighbors heard the commotion and saw one of these guys going into your place here and came to get me. Was anybody hurt?"

My father leaned back a little, revealing the burnt body of my mother to him.

"Oh dear... Richard, I'm truly sorry. Melissa was a wonderful woman and she will be missed by all of us." My father said nothing in return, instead going back to cradling my dying mother close to him. Franklin looked around at the bodies in the hut a little closer, surveying the damage for a moment before approaching my father again. "Richard, how did you fight all of these men off all by yourself? These raiders have been terrorizing the west side of Heaven for months now. I got word just last week from the western militia that they were heading this way, but nobody'd seen them until now. How in the world did you fight off all four all by yourself?"

My father said nothing at first, still cradling my mother to his chest and listening to her ragged breathing. After another moment, her breath slowed even further and then stopped completely. He looked up then, tears rolling down his face and told Franklin, "It wasn't me. It was my boys. I was knocked out right after they threw Melissa into the fire. When I woke up they were all dead and my boys here were helping me up."

"These four did this?"

"No," Andrew said, "Me, Tommy and David did this. Abbie there didn't do anything." He glared at me then, daring me to challenge him or speak up for myself but I didn't dare. He was right. I was useless and I did sit by and watch them kill my mother and nearly kill my father. I'd never been in a fight in my life and was as worthless to the family as the scrap of cloth we used as a door.

"Have you boys ever fought for money?" Franklin asked.

"You mean in the pits? In the center of Heaven?" Tommy asked, drawing looks of astonishment from both Andrew (who was old enough to enter the fights but never went because mom wouldn't let him) and David (who didn't know what he was talking about).

"Yes Tommy, in the pits in the center of Heaven. There are few age restrictions, it's all divided up by weight class. You and Andrew could fight immediately, and I'm sure David here could fight in just a few years if he kept up his training." Franklin said as he ruffled David's hair.

"Sir, we've never trained or practiced at all. Well, nothing more than the scraps we get into around town, but that's no different from any other kids out there," Andrew explained.

"Do you boys win?" Asked Franklin.

"Always." Said all three. "Except for Abbie there, he gets his ass handed to him regularly." Finished David.

"Only because everybody's bigger than me when we fight." I said.

"You need to stop trying to take on guys so much older than you, moron." Said Andrew. "Last week you attacked a guy ten years older than you because he called you a runt." I didn't have anything to say to that. It was true. He called me a runt and I went mad attacking him. I got in a few good hits but ultimately he pummeled me to the point where I couldn't fight back anymore. Before I could try and defend myself, Franklin spoke again.

"I've got a friend who looks for fighters in the outer limits of the city. He'll be passing through the south side here next week. When he does, I'll come get you boys and how about we give him a show?"

All four of us looked at dad for permission who was still in shock from the whole affair. He managed a nod then before going back to holding mom as close to him as he could.

All right then. You boys be ready and I'll come get you when it's time. Should be in about five day's time, ok?"

"All right," we all said. Then Tommy thumped me on the head and said "Not you, you're too small and you suck. Me and Andrew will go and we'll send for you, David, as soon as you're old enough and big enough, we promise."

"What about me?" I asked.

"You'll never be old enough and big enough." Said Andrew with an air of finality that told me I'd better keep my damn fool mouth shut.

Franklin stood up then and left with the other three militia-men he brought with him. When he was gone we went back to tending to dad and mom. Dad we went and laid down in the corner, bringing him some meat later which seemed to help. After we'd all eaten we took mom and buried her in the sand of the wastes outside of town. We'd never been to a funeral and didn't know what to say or do so we all silently said our goodbyes and went home. We never spoke of her or that night ever again.

Two

The next week Andrew and Tommy both went to audition for Franklin's friend and were immediately accepted into the fighting circuit after trouncing their opponents in near record time. They sent money home immediately and David and I helped dad move closer to the center of the city. We found an actual building that had space and we set up our home there. It was a single story building that was divided into five apartment-style rooms, all bigger than our shack on the south side. In a back room of our new home we found some old tools and after some tinkering we discovered that dad had a real knack for making things. Soon we started a real business building things for people; chairs, tables, benches, whatever people wanted and we could scrape together the parts for, dad would make. After four more years David was accepted as the youngest fighter in circuit history and Andrew had already won his first championship. Actual money was still scarce, but because of my brothers's fame we lived far better than our old neighbors in the slums.

I kept getting into fights that were way out of my league, hoping to someday start winning and proving to my brothers that I wasn't worthless, that I could earn their respect, but it never happened. More often than not I'd get dragged home by the militia, bloody broken and beaten to be dropped off after starting a brawl for whatever reason I could find. To try and keep me occupied and out of trouble dad finally let me start playing with his tools and I started learning how to make weapons. They were little more than sticks and rocks tied together, but they were handy in a fight.

Giving me access to weapons like that had the completely opposite effect on me than dad hoped they would. Now that I had something to back up my fists with, I got into more fights than ever, always in the hopes of making a name for myself and getting accepted into the fighting circuits, but that day never came. My brothers continued to fight, and win, and I was all but forgotten about at home. Sometimes I think that the only reason dad knew I was still alive was because I kept getting deposited on his doorstep by the militia after starting a fight somewhere.

When I was twenty, legally an adult by Heaven's standards, I realized that I would never make it in the pits. Andrew, Tommy and David all had their championships and their

fans and their lives on the circuit. Dad had his shop and his business and his three championship-winning boys.

Then there was me.

Try as I might, I couldn't find a single reason to keep going. There was nothing for me in that place aside from a solid roof over my head and food on a daily basis (which is nothing to sneer at, don't misunderstand me), but that just wasn't enough.

I'd been working on a special weapon for myself for weeks. Buying or stealing the best wood I could find, I pieced together a club like none other I'd ever seen. The wood was one solid piece in the handle, about a meter long and widening out towards the end where I split it and lashed a rock. The rock itself was almost a perfect sphere, and it had taken me countless hours to get it just the right shape and size to fit into the end of my masterpiece. There was leather wrapped around the handle so it wouldn't slip out of my hand, and I'd reinforced it with some sap that dad had bought from a traveling merchant. The sap made sure that the handle wouldn't split and the rock-ball wouldn't pop out of the end when I hit something with it.

It was the greatest thing in my life.

For a time, sitting in the dark admiring it when I was finished, I thought that I could actually make a living for myself here in Heaven by making weapons like this one. There were always travelers coming in out of the wastes looking for good tools and weapons to protect them from the dangers that lay beyond... But then I'd see dad. He looked older than he ever did, and aged more and more each day he worked. He looked broken down and worn-out, despite the fact that three of his sons were pit-fighting champions and afforded him a social standing equivalent to that of a local celebrity. He smiled only occasionally, but there was little joy in it. Nobody heard him laugh since mom was killed.

I decided to go out and get a drink or two while I pondered what to do with my life. I had my new club strapped to my side, hanging there by the lanyard I'd tied to it so I could slip my wrist through it (keeping the club close at hand even if I did happen to lose my grip), and I was heading for my favorite water bar when I was grabbed from behind.

At least two pairs of hands dragged me into an alley and I saw flashes of my attackers's faces as they pulled me past torchlights and to the dead-end of the alley. When we reached the end they dropped me against a wall and backed up, blocking my exit.

"So... Abbie has a new toy, does he? What were you planning on doing with that, Abbie?" I recognized the voice immediately. It belonged to a guy named Donnal who had picked on me since we were kids. He was three years older than me and was always far more muscular. Recognizing Donnal I knew that next to him was a guy named Hitsugo, a mute who lost his voice in a brawl with a dog. He won the fight, but the dog mauled his throat to the point that he couldn't speak anymore. Instead of speaking he would usually give out a whispery laugh as Donnal tortured whoever they had cornered at the time.

Once again, as it had been so many times before, it was me.

I tried to stand up and Donnal put his boot against my chest and forced me back down. "I asked you a question, Abbie. Are you going to answer or not?"

I hated being called Abbie. I let my brothers get away with it because they were, well, my brothers. Anybody else though usually got the boot. And usually they'd give it back in kind and then some, but hey, I have my pride.

"Nothing, Donnie. I was just going to get a drink. Can I go now please?" Donnal hated being called Donnie like I hated being called Abbie, and he leaned into my chest then, pinning me to the ground. As he leaned closer I started unstrapping the club from my belt.

"How many times do I have to tell you? My names Donnal. Don-nal. Come on, say it with me, you little shit." He started reaching for my face then, intending to grab my cheeks and squeeze them to make me speak, but I whipped the club up then and caught him across the face with it. There was a satisfying whud when it connected and Donnal fell off of me instantly. I stood up and started advancing on Hitsugo but he took off running as soon as I moved.

I went back over to Donnal and kicked him in the guts then. "Come on Donnie! What do you have to say now? Come on, what's my name? Can you say Abadon? Come on, say it with me..." I reached down to grab his face like he was planning on doing to me and I noticed a trickle of blood running down his nose. Following the trickle with my eyes I saw that there was a small cut in his temple above his left eye where the blood was flowing from. I shook him a little then, trying to wake him up. "Donnie? Come on man, wake up, you aren't hurt that bad..." I slapped him a couple of times and rolled him on his back to try and wake him up but he wasn't moving. I leaned down close and put my ear

against his chest and heard nothing. I reached under his nose with my hand and again felt nothing. He wasn't breathing and his heart wasn't beating. I'd killed him.

The realization hit me hard and I staggered back away from the body, tripping over some garbage and falling back against the wall. I stared at his body for a long time before getting my senses back... I'd never meant to kill him. I didn't think I was strong enough. I never meant for him to die. This wasn't how this was supposed to happen.

I forced myself up and out of the garbage and knew then that I couldn't stay in town. The courts in heaven are a joke and when you're arrested for murder nobody cares what the verdict is. If you're found in the same room as a dead body you're considered guilty, even if it is self-defense.

I wasn't about to wait for the militia to come get me and hang me. My brothers were too important to let this happen to them. My father was broken down enough by life for him to have to face something like this. I knew then that my future lay in the wastes.

Three

The wastes... Where men are made and broken by the whims of the weather, more often than not. I spent three weeks wandering before I made it to a settlement, and that's where my life really changed...

So I wandered into this town carrying only the little bit of water I had left that I pinched from Dad's shop when I left, a knapsack with a few old magazines (something called "National Geographic." The pages were ratted and torn in places, but the pictures were pretty to look at in the hopes of ever finding places that were as colorful as they, so I snagged them when I left), a knife, some sandpaper and other tools that I made my weapon with, and the cudgel I made for myself.

Little did I know how handy it would be in the coming weeks.

Eager to prove myself equal to my brothers I was looking for a fight. I couldn't even land an audition back home in Heaven, so I wanted to find a new place that hadn't heard of me and would guarantee me some respect. Looking around I noticed this pathetic little village hardly had anything to its name; a few stalls lining a main street that ran barely five blocks, a few shanties held up by spit and twine and sheltering the huddled masses

seeking refuge from the elements. Elements you could get away from, but you never got away from whatever bastards were in control no matter what kind of shelter you had.

I was walking down the street when someone jostled me out of the crowd and touched me in a way I didn't like. I'd seen enough pickpockets in Heaven that I knew this guy was feeling me up for something and I wasn't about to lose anything I'd rightfully earned and taken from my father. I shoved him away from me and he acted all upset that I'd caught him.

"Excuse me, dear boy, but I don't think that force like that is necessary. Excuse me for bumping into you though," he said. I looked him up and down for a second and wondered about his clothes; a weird blue-on-blue mix that reminded me of uniforms, although what faction this guy was working for was one I'd never seen or heard of. He had a patch on his shoulder, white background with a blue eagle-looking thing on it and the letters USPS (whatever the hell that means) embroidered on it as well. I didn't like this guy already, uniforms tend to mean trouble, and his black knee-high socks were worthless as protection against anything (calf-high boots are best, for choice), and the look on this guy's face just pissed me off.

"Look pal, say you're sorry and we'll go on our separate ways," I said. I was being nice, this guy was disrespecting me (mistake #2 for blue-boy here) and bothering me with his poor choice of clothing for walking the wastes. Either he was a fancy-boy who'd never faced real trials, or he had the money to hire muscle so that he wouldn't have to. Either way, he was a kind of person I'd learned to hate at a young age.

"I said apologize. I won't ask again."

"Look here son," he started.

"I'm not your son, old man. And I said I want to hear an apology. Next words out of your mouth better be 'I'm sorry' or we'll have to find another way to handle this." I drew back my cloak then and shifted the cudgel hanging from my hip so that he could see it clearly. He drew back his own jacket then (another blue-on-blue monstrosity that didn't even go below his waist and wouldn't protect him from a heavy rain, if it came to that) and displayed a gun. A big one. I hadn't seen many guns in my time, ammo was scarce and hardly anybody had the resources or anything worth trading to make or buy more once they ran out. I didn't know if this guy had rounds for his big gun, but I'd learned from watching the

streets of Heaven not to take my chances.

Still didn't stop me from getting angry.

"You pussy. I pull a proper man-to-man weapon and you want to pull out the heavy arms. You make me sick you fucking wasteland mutie." I wanted to say more, but I'd seen people shot for saying less than that, and I didn't know how far to press my luck.

"I'm sorry for bumping into you, my boy, but I think we'd best just be on our way." He turned without waiting for me to respond and walked off into the marketplace, getting lost in the crowd (luckily for him).

So here I was in Sparx (saw a sign on the way into town) with very little I could barter with and still not getting the respect I should have. I was wandering up the main drag through the city when I heard someone shouting out from one of the carts.

"Security needed! Big chances for success! Be a man and help get vital supplies through the mountains!" The peddler was shouting loud enough to draw a crowd, but all he was drawing was flies. I thought about it for a second and figured a job like this could help me prove myself to the world in general and maybe finally get some real recognition. I headed over to the cart and almost turned right back around. Blue boy was standing there. I tried to ignore him when I got to the cart and started talking to the shouter.

"So what's the deal here, old man?" Blue boy looked a bit miffed that I jumped on the offer while he was just standing there, but if you don't get what you can when you can get it, someone else will.

"Ah, good sir, I'm glad you inquired! My employer needs security for his cargo to get through the mountains to Redding. The journey should only take three to five days total and payment is guaranteed upon receipt of goods."

"What are these goods?" I didn't feel comfortable insuring the safety of god-knows what. I wanted to know what we were moving.

"Dear boy, I don't think that knowing what the cargo is is entirely necessary. The good man here is offering us a job and what's most important is not what we're moving, but whether or not we're willing and brave enough to move it." Blue boy just seemed to know how to piss me off without even trying. I turned to him slowly and threw him a glare I'd seen my brothers use to scare off muggers. He smiled stupidly at me in return.

"First off, don't call me boy. Secondly, I wasn't talking to you." I turned back to the

peddler. "So what's the cargo?"

"I'm sorry sir, my employer insists that you, the security couriers, do not know the nature of the cargo you are carrying, but that you will be guaranteed a portion of it upon arrival at your destination." He looked a bit nervous then, which made me even more nervous. I decided to push it just a bit farther. My own piece of mind was worth more than whatever this guy was offering.

"Look, I'm going to be the best bet this little caravan will have out there. I want to know what I'm pushing through here." He backed down a bit and Blue Boy started looking noble, like he could do anything to me if he wanted.

"Alright, do you agree to sign on for the trip? I can tell you what you'll be moving if you agree to the job."

I nodded my head and he looked relieved. Blue Boy spoke up too. "Good sir, I guarantee you that I will do anything and everything in my power to insure the safe arrival of this cargo."

"Ok. You'll be moving spices. Real spice, and good stuff too, not the kind of stuff they mix with sand to get more money out of it." He motioned behind the cart he was standing at and I noticed another cart parked behind it. It looked like the back-end of an old truck, but with a harness on the front and a tired-looking mule strapped into it. The cart was full of boxes, sealed and partially covered by an old tarp that was tied down on the front two corners of it. Obviously when it was finished being loaded they were going to tie it all the way down to keep it as secret and/or secure as possible. I looked it over and decided, what the hell? May as well go for it. Maybe there'd be better chances for me in Redding, and this was as good a way as any to get there. I extended my hand to the cart-owner.

"Call me Abadon. I'm in." Blue Boy followed suit.

"Felix Maloprop, at your service sir. When do we leave?"

The cart-master shook both of our hands and looked up and down the street. "Apparently you two are the only ones in this town brave enough to take the job, so I suppose we can start immediately. My driver is waiting in the watering-hole behind the cart. I'll go and fetch him." He threw another tarp over his cart and scuttled into a doorway hidden behind the crate-laden half-truck. Blue Boy, Felix, decided to try and get friendly with me. He extended his hand and smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Abby. Felix Maloprop, at your service. I certainly hope that our earlier confrontation won't mar our relationship in this venture."

I glared at him again and he continued to grin stupidly back at me. I shook his hand, squeezing hard to let him know who's boss, but I guess I needed to hit a gym more than I realized because he just squeezed back, grinning still.

"Let's just get this job done. And the name's Abadon. Not Abby. My friends call me Abby, and we ain't that friendly yet. Maybe later, but I'll let you know."

The cart-master came back out with a man a little older than me, but younger than Felix...

Just so whoever reads this knows, Felix was an older guy. I'd guess in his midfifties, but the wastes age you faster than time and it's impossible to tell for sure whenever you meet anybody. He was a bit on the heavy-side to me, but being the runt of the litter made me pretty thin to begin with and most anybody seemed heavy compared to my own small frame. He was clean-shaven and had graying hair, which, coupled with his fancy talk, his pretty uniform and apparent age, gave him a cocky, arrogant air of authority that would rub me the wrong way our entire time together.

Anyway, the cart-master came back and introduced the driver as Jack. After we all were acquainted, the cart-master handed a map to Jack and Felix and I started looking for places to climb onto the back of the cart as Jack finished tying down the tarp. Jack saw us trying to climb up and spoke.

"Sorry men, no room on this thing for riders. You'll have to walk next to it with me. Too much weight for the donkey to pull if we all rode on anyway."

Having walked all the way from Heaven to Sparx, I didn't mind, but the old man Felix didn't seem too thrilled with it. He kept trying to find a place on the cart to ride and Jack kept shuffling him off.

"Well I don't see any reason why at least one of us can't ride at a time. Surely that won't put too much pressure on the mule, and walking for three to five days certainly can't be good for us, should anything happen and we're called into action."

Jack looked at me and I shrugged. He looked back at Felix and tried to explain. "Actually, having anybody ride the cart would put too much strain on the mule, and it would make the trip significantly longer, and we'd miss our deadline and then none of us would get

paid. Anything.”

Felix looked all downtrodden then, but I didn’t care. We were supposed to be on our way and he was holding us up. I figured the sooner we got going, the sooner we’d get there, and the sooner we’d get paid. The longer it takes, the more chances that something can go wrong, and I didn’t want that. I looked over at Felix still trying to climb up on the cart.

“Hey doc, knock it off. We’re not riding the cart, none of us are. We’re hoofing it out there and that’s that. Now can we get going please?” It was as nice as I could be without getting threatening. Unfortunately he wouldn’t go for it.

“I understand that we shouldn’t put that much strain on the mule, but it looks like a healthy animal and I’m sure that a few extra pounds on the cart can’t hurt him too much.”

“Doc, we’re not riding the cart. That’s all there is to it. You wanna hitch a ride, you can hire someone yourself, but that’s not part of this job. This job says we walk, we’re walking. You don’t want to come, you don’t have to, but if you are coming then get your ass off the cart so we can get moving!” Even Jack nodded his head at this, and I think Felix finally got the message because he stopped trying to climb on the cart and moved up towards the head, scratching the mule behind his ears. I nodded at Jack and went around to the back of the cart so I could keep it safe from anybody wanting to sneak up behind us. Jack rubbed the mule for a second and then clicked his tongue, prodding it into action.

We headed towards the gate and I ventured a backwards glance towards the town. If I knew what was laying in wait ahead of us, I may not have taken the job as readily as I did, but I had something to prove. Still do. Someday I’m going back to Heaven and show my brothers, my father, and everybody else who ever kicked me down that I’m just as strong as anybody, and I’ll make them give me the respect I deserve. I’m not afraid of anything, and I’m going to make my way in this world, whatever it takes.

Four

Our journey to Redding was scheduled to take no less than three days, but we weren’t needed there for five days. We were promised a bonus for arriving early, so we were all set to collect as much as they were willing to give. We camped out on the side of the trail that first night, having only walked a few hours before night fell. Felix decided to

build a fire and try cooking up some meat he had with him while Jack was content to chew on some old biscuits he had brought. Unfortunately, I had neither the presence of mind to prepare for a trip like this, nor the foresight to realize that any food I did have on me wouldn't last too long. I checked my knapsack and realized that I only had enough food to last me for two days, and I was already hungry from not eating today. I nibbled a bit at some rations I stole from Heaven and wondered how to make them stretch when I thought to have a look around the campsite. There wasn't much, mostly rocks and scrub brush, but I lucked out and found a small berry bush on the dark side of a boulder about twenty yards from camp. I couldn't see too well by the light of my torch, but I could tell they were berries, and that was enough for me. I picked as many as I could carry and brought them back to camp and offered some to Jack. Felix had enough food for himself and I didn't like him, so no berries for him. Of course, he did have to speak up once he saw the berries.

"Excuse me, Abbie, wherever did you get those berries?"

"I told you once, don't call me Abbie. And I found them over there, behind a rock." I motioned behind me towards where the bush was, hoping he'd take me up on the gesture and go get himself lost somewhere beyond the light from the fire. He didn't.

"But how do you know they are safe? Do you even know honestly what color they are? Please let me see one and I'll tell you if they're edible or not. I'd hate for something to happen to you or Jack only after our first half-day's travels." I saw Jack put down his own stack of berries that I'd given him and wait for the old man's judgement on the berries, but I wasn't buying it. I threw one at his head and kept munching on them one at a time, enjoying the sweet taste (although it had a slightly bitter tang from the juices, but it wasn't enough to keep me from eating). Blue boy checked the berry out, examining it as if he knew how to look at it from different angles and it would magically tell him something like a book or with pictures, but he wasn't finding anything. He nibbled on it then, only taking a small bit of it into his mouth and then spit it out again and swishing his tongue over his teeth, like they could now speak. I rolled my eyes and rolled myself over so I couldn't see him because I just didn't care what he had to say. Finally he must have finished his interpretation because he started talking again.

"Well, I can't see as they're poisonous, at any rate, but still dear boy, you really should check with me before you eat anything you find out here. Who knows what effects

the radiation had on the local flora and fauna?" I looked over at Jack, who was still facing towards the fire and could see Felix and shrugged at him. He picked up his berries and put them in his pocket, saving a few to eat then and there, and then told us that he was going to get some sleep so we could get an early start.

"I'm also going to give some of these berries to Jessie in case he's still hungry. I only brought enough food for him for a few days and I should try to make that last in case we get caught up somewhere and the trip takes longer than we think. Goodnight guys." I heard him get up and walk a little ways away towards the mule. It wasn't terribly cold out, no more so than usual for the wastes, but it must have been warmer up against the animal and I couldn't blame him for wanting to stay close to it. The only people who truly know what roams the wastes at night usually don't live long enough to tell about it, and I was glad to see that Jack was thinking enough to keep as close to the mule as possible so that something wouldn't drag it off in the night without a fight. After another moment's thought I realized that having someone keep an eye on everything throughout the night wouldn't be a bad idea either.

"So who's taking the first watch?" I asked, sitting up. Felix looked at me like I was suddenly speaking another language, and Jack looked at me as well. Nobody had thought of it, and it made me feel a little better being the first to bring it up.

"Why, whatever for? We're obviously alone out here, and we shouldn't have much to fear out here in the middle of nowhere... Should we?" Felix was starting to sound scared, and compared to the pompous air he usually carried with him, it sounded much better. We decided to take the night in three shifts of three hours each with me taking the first watch, Felix having second, and then Jack taking third. Felix and I at least agreed on having Jack take the third watch so he could get the most uninterrupted sleep right away, and I didn't mind waiting to bed down because I knew I was tough enough to handle it. I didn't care about Felix's exhaustion. If the bastard was too lazy to walk for a few days then he could at least learn to toughen up by helping keep watch.

I stayed near the fire for my time awake, thinking that if anything was going to come near, it'd be first drawn to the light of the fire and the smell of Felix's cooking. It was also handy having several flaming sticks at hand to throw at anything that came out of the darkness at us, but nothing came. More than once I felt eyes on me, but the glow of the fire

was dying down with it, and beyond the reach of the flames almost everything was darkness. It was a clear night with a gi-normous moon that was whiter than clean ash, but my night-vision was thrown off by the firelight and all the stars in the universe wouldn't have given me enough light to see by outside of the camp. The three or so hours passed uneventfully, but tense. When it was time to wake up Felix, I went over and kicked him awake. Not hard, but I didn't really care if I left a bruise or three and I'm sure he didn't appreciate it. I smiled at that and felt a little better about myself and told him it was his turn to take watch. He sat up, still groggy and tired from having walked half a day (the pansy), and when I was sure he was awake enough to handle his shift, I decided to turn in for the night.

I went and laid down underneath the truck/cart so that if it started moving at all or if there was any action near it I would be ready and waiting for it. Not to mention the surprise factor of having me pop out from underneath it at whoever would be stupid enough to try stealing it away from over top of me. I balled up my cloak into a makeshift pillow and closed my eyes...

I awoke to a thunderous hammering sound coming from all around me. I sat up immediately and slammed my head right into the underside of the cart. I moaned and tried opening my eyes but all I saw were dancing flashes of light in front of my eyes, but I heard laughter as well and that pissed me off. I pulled myself out from under the truck and saw Jack hitching Jessie up to the wagon again, and Felix was sniggering to himself over by the coals of the fire. Sun was just visible over the tops of the mountains around us, and I was able to get my first good look at the road we were traveling on.

It was an old highway (a word I'd learned from the travelers in Heaven who'd lived before the sky fell and remembered such things) that ran through the mountains. There were some still-green trees higher up on the hillsides and getting closer to the ground the further into the mountains we went, but mostly loose rock from the ground up each side. I found out from Jack that the road was curvy and wound it's way through the mountains for quite a while before coming out onto a flatland that would take us all the way into Redding.

"How many times have you made this trip, Jack?" I asked. He looked up from Jessie's harness and shrugged. "More than a few. We have different security crews every time, both back and forth from one place to the next. Seems like nobody wants to stick

around and make a career of watching this track ‘cept me and Jessie here, but we’re paid good by the company so we don’t complain too much.”

“What happened to the security crews of the past?” Felix asked. I was going to ask the same thing, but the bright blue bastard got it out first.

“Well, some don’t survive, some get too scared after being through this route to want to risk it again, and some are only one-timers like you guys seem to be. Just looking for a way to get from one place to the next with a group so it’s safer.” Felix started to look scared, not sure how to handle the threats of the wastes as well as I could, obviously, but Jack seemed really casual about the whole thing so I didn’t worry. Besides, after getting beat up and kicked down almost every day in Heaven, what worse could the wastes throw at me?

We decided to eat as we walked so we’d be able to save as much time as possible and not slow ourselves down by having to set up a fire every few hours just so we could eat. I still had some berries left from the previous night and I saw Jack feeding berries to Jessie and himself as we walked. I stayed near the back of the truck and Felix walked next to it, grumbling from time to time about not having eaten a proper meal and how this trip would be “so much easier if only we were allowed to ride on the cart.” After a while though, he realized he wasn’t going to get any response from either of us and quieted down.

Having grown up in the city I hadn’t really seen much of the wilderness. Three weeks of walking through the wastes from Heaven to Sparx didn’t afford me much of a view as most of it was desert and rockland, and I found myself getting lost in the scenery more than once. I was watching the treeline as it got closer and closer to ground level for any movement or suspicious looking things, but it all seemed peaceful. If I had been raised in woods like this and knew how to take care of myself out here, I’d have given more thought to living out here where the wind was cool and the air smelled better (Heaven was an industrial town and stank of human smells and acrid stank from the factories that ran there), but I’d be lost in a second if I didn’t know where I was at all times, and that made me a bit nervous to be out here too long. I wanted to get to Redding where I knew how to handle myself in a city, and maybe venture out into the mountains from time to time, should I find someone worth sticking with.

The day wore long with nothing to do but watch the trees, and we walked straight through lunch as well. Jack had another biscuit that he must have pulled out of one of his many pockets, and Felix chewed on a cracker of some sort. I nibbled a bit on one of the rations I had with me, but I had to make them last as long as possible until we were at least within sight of another town where I could get fresh supplies.

When we finally bedded down for the night the fire was comfortable and we set up a watch schedule the same as the previous night (I made sure to call first watch as soon as it was mentioned so I could sleep uninterrupted and Felix would have to go through the hassle of sleeping, waking up, then sleeping again). I wasn't as lucky as the previous night and couldn't find berries or any other kind of food anywhere near the camp, and I didn't feel like wandering off into the forest alone at night. The trees were now on either side of the road and the land had flattened out a bit so that you could walk off the path for a while on either side before you got into the hills, and that made me even more nervous than before.

It was one thing to watch over rocks and open space and another to try and see through trees, and not being able to see something coming worried me.

Luckily, night passed without a hitch (I woke up Felix with a rock this time, tossing it at his head as a way of getting back at him for hammering on the truck to wake me up as he did) and he grumbled himself awake while I went and slid under the truck again. This time, as I slept, I kept my club in hand so that if anyone did attack (or try to be a smart-bugger and wake me up again), I could swing out easily and take care of whatever trouble might come, but nothing did. Felix must have gotten the message because I woke up the next day to a gentle knocking on the truck instead of the thunderous hammering of the previous day.

We ate quickly, using what little coals were left from the fire to cook a little something for ourselves (even my rations tasted better warmed up than stone-cold as I was used to eating them), and then we were on our way again.

As we got deeper and deeper into the forest, the trees thickened significantly on either side and stayed solid all the way up the hilltops. After half the day had passed the trees were so dense you couldn't see more than a few feet in on either side of the track we were on, and my nerves were making me jump at any movement or sound that didn't come from the road we were on.

We decided to bed down for the night and chocked rocks beneath the cart to hold the wheels in place. We decided on taking watch again in the same order we had been with me taking first watch, Felix getting stuck in the middle, and Jack taking third watch and waking us up when it was time to go. We gathered branches from the side of the road and built a fire, starting it with a firestarter I had stashed in my pack (I didn't want to waste them, but after an hour of watching Felix try to light it with his crazy "flint and steel" method, I decided that if I didn't use one we'd all go cold).

My watch went by uninterrupted and Felix must not have seen anything either because I didn't wake up until I heard Jessie braying loud enough to wake the dead.

I sat up quickly at the noise and surprisingly didn't hit my head on the truck...

It was rolling down the road with a large figure at the reins whipping the hell out of Jessie to get him to move.

I kicked Felix to wake him and jumped up, brandishing my club and looking for someone to hit but the cart was rattling it's way off the road into the bushes. I took a couple of steps towards it when three arrows rattled off the pavement at my feet.

"Good heavens, where did those come from?" Felix asked to nobody in particular because I was already ducking and rolling out of the way and Jack was running towards the road and whipping out a crossbow from under his cloak. I was ready to scream at him for obviously falling asleep on his watch, but I didn't have time because another volley of arrows came out of the trees at us. I scanned the trees from the road but it was too dark to see where the arrow might have come from. I turned around and saw Jack running down an overgrown trail just down off the side of the road until he was out of sight. Felix scuttled around to the same side of the road as Jack had ran to and ducked down, and I followed suit and took up a position with my back against a tree and facing away from the road.

"Abbie! Do you have any way of firing back at them?" he whispered to me.

"No, remember? I use this thing," I said and shoved the club at his face. "Why don't you shoot back at them with that big-ass gun of yours? You seemed all to ready to use it against me back in Sparx, do something with it now!"

"Are you insane? We can't even see them, much less which direction they are. Why would I want to waste ammunition firing wildly into the trees?" I was about to respond when I saw Jack spin around and fire an arrow toward the trees.

This guy was just full of surprises.

He spun back behind the tree line on the safe side of the road and ducked behind a new tree as another arrow buried itself into the wood at head-level. Felix followed suit and moved to a better position behind another tree and I ducked and ran to another one myself to try and get a better look at the trees opposite us. Jack rounded his tree and watched the opposite line for a second before firing into it. I didn't see where he fired, but it must have had no real effect because three more arrows came flying back at him, all missing their intended target, but hitting close enough to scare him back behind the tree.

I was peeking around the edge of my cover when another arrow landed in the ground where my foot was and I heard a scream. I looked towards the noise and my heart dropped.

Jack was crouched down behind his tree with an arrow going through his left thigh. The feather-tip was still protruding above his leg, but he was turned so I could see a couple inches of wood and a bloody arrowhead coming out from his leg underneath.

I hefted my club and was ready to run out after the bastards who were doing this when I was hit from behind and knocked down. I rolled over, ready to crush the skull of whoever it was who'd attacked me when I realized it was Felix.

"What the fuck are you doing!?" I asked. "Those bastards have already hit Jack and they're going to make off with our cargo if we don't get out there and do something!"

"My boy if you run out there now you'll end up far worse than Jack. Our best bet now is to wait for them to come get the cart and attack then. Until then we can do nothing but wait for them." He was more serious now than I'd ever seen him before, but it still pissed me off something fierce. I was a grown man already and didn't need this asshole telling me what to do or how to do it.

"Dammit, let me go! I can get 'em!" I was flying into a rage, and if he didn't let me up soon I was going to take it out on him.

"Sit still Abbie!" He shouted at me, but that was the last straw. I'd told him my name and asked him nicely not to call me 'Abbie,' but he wanted to do this the hard way.

I rolled myself then, swinging the club up at his face and he fell off of me before I could connect. I stood up then and backed up against a tree to ready myself for the fight ahead. After a deep breath or two I readied my club and dashed out from behind the tree,

screaming at the world around me...

Only to see the cart disappear into the tree line opposite us.

Five

I started to dart over the road to chase after the cart as it pulled farther into the forest and vanished before our eyes, but a slew of arrows from the treeline forced me back down behind the road. I popped my head up to see where the cart was going and could barely make out a heavily overgrown trail leading off the road. I crawled back to where Jack was leaning against his tree and checked out his leg. It wasn't good. The arrow was still sticking all the way through and he was losing blood from the bottom where the point had gone through.

"Save Jessie," he started. "We'll never make the trip to Redding if they kill Jessie."

"We've got to get you patched up first pal, then we'll worry about Jessie and the cargo. I caught a glimpse of where it went, we'll track it down as soon as you're safe." I grabbed part of his shirt and tore off a strip so I could wrap it around his leg. I didn't know anything about first aid, but I thought I could whip something together to at least stop the bleeding and keep him alive.

"Abbie, we have to get this thing out of his leg first, otherwise he could get infected and no amount of bandages can save him from that." Great, more advice from the bright blue boy. Jack had already cost us the cart, in my opinion, and now Felix was going to try and play doctor on him and help him right out.

"Look, Felix, I knew that. I'm just not sure exactly how to get the arrow out without hurting him more or killing him. Do you have any bright ideas on this one or should I continue?"

"I'd suggest breaking off the back end where the feathers are and pulling the arrow through from the other side and bandaging the wounds as they come open." I hadn't thought of that, but I didn't want him to know that.

"Of course that's what I'd planned on doing. I just... wanted to make sure I did it right and didn't hurt him any."

"At this point, dear boy, hurting him worse is inevitable."

"It's what?" I asked.

"It's inevitable. You can't avoid it. It means that something is going to happen no matter what, so let's just get it over with, shall we?" Felix started to move forward and grasped the feathers on the arrow, causing Jack to writhe and start to scream. I picked up a stick off the ground near my feet and jammed it in his mouth crosswise so he could bite down on it. "Here," I said, "This'll help with the pain," I lied as I unraveled more of the shirt to make a good bandage. Felix looked at me and nodded, and I returned the nod letting him know I was ready with the bandage, and then he broke off the shaft. Jack screamed through the stick in his mouth and I put the bandage on the top of his leg to stave off the bleeding while Felix pulled the rest of the arrow through Jack's leg and I began wrapping the shirt-tail around it to cover both entrance and exit wounds.

As soon as Jack's leg was bandaged he insisted that Felix and I go after the cart. "It's just getting light," he said. "you should be able to follow them easily and if we lose it we'll be in a whole new world of trouble. Help me get some firewood together and I'll make a fire and set up a camp here, you two get up that trail."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I said as I started grabbing up branches and sticks off the ground. I wanted to get after the cart as soon as possible already, but I didn't want to leave Jack to die here. He seemed to be able to handle himself pretty well with that crossbow of his, but in his condition he still wasn't quite up to full strength and he was part of the job. Protecting him was as important to me as protecting that cart.

"Should we really go after that cart without knowing who it was that took it? Perhaps we should investigate before rushing into a situation we don't know enough about..."

God this was getting annoying. His incessant whining was slowing us down beyond a prayer and I wasn't about to take any more of it. "Alright Felix, stay here and I'll go get the cart back. And when we arrive in Redding, I'll be sure to tell our boss that you didn't want to go after it, get it back, or protect the damn thing and you can try explaining that away!"

"Now see here, junior, I don't need to take that from you. And I'm doing everything in my power to protect our cargo and I don't need to hear this sort of shit from the likes of you!" He stood up then and moved chest to chest to me, his breath warming my face uncomfortably. I started reaching for my club and he started going for his gun when Jack saved us both from probably killing each other.

"Alright, both of you guys shut the fuck up for once! My mule is out there somewhere towing our cargo, your payment and all of our lives in that cart and you two are standing here having a pissing contest while they get farther and farther away. If you both don't get your asses over that road and up that trail and find out where the hell our load is then I'm telling our boss that neither of you did anything to stop it and I'll take all the payment for it. Now get your asses moving! I'll be fine here, I've got food and I've got my crossbow in case anybody comes back for me. What I don't have is my cart and my mule and that's where you two come in. Now move!"

Felix and I were both taken aback momentarily. Neither of us could think of what to say next, so I just acted. I spun around and started heading over the road. I made it to the opposite trees and backed up against one, giving myself as much cover as I could. I watched Felix run across the road in a crouch almost too ridiculous to believe, hunched over and trying to run like he was made him look like a duck and it was all I could do to keep from laughing at him as he made his way up against a tree on the other side of the trail from me. I got myself together and peeked my head around the tree and checked out the trail.

It was largely overgrown next to the road. So much so that if you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't find it. I dropped to the ground and crawled under the canopy of brush that blocked the trail from the street, and once I was through it the trail widened to about six feet and was clear all the way up the hill. I whistled to Felix and he clomped through the bushes. So much for sneaking up on the guys who robbed us.

I stood up and shushed him before trotting up the trail. About a mile up the path it curved to the left and fifty yards later it widened into a clearing with two structures. One was a rotting and broken down house, destroyed to the point where only the foundation and some crumbling remains of the walls remained. The other was a garage, separated from the house and remarkably intact for being so deep in the outlands like this. The paint was peeling and stripped in places, but the glass in the windows was unbroken and the roof didn't have visible holes in it. There were large scratches along the walls, but I'd never seen anything with claws big enough to cause those gouges (then again, I grew up in a city where the largest creature I'd seen was a Brahmin being led through the streets by the herders. There was also a garage door that was largely intact, but it looked like someone had tried breaking it in from the outside. It was bent and broken in places, but it was closed

and looked like it couldn't be opened, judging from the amount of damage someone did to it trying to get in.

And there, just outside of the clearing and a few yards down the hill half buried in brush, was our cart.

Empty.

"Dammit," I spat. "Look, the cargo's gone. They've got to have it in that garage, so come on, let's go get it." I said to Felix who was standing next to me by now.

"I would advise running into that place blindly, as you suggest. We don't know how many there are in there or what kind of weapons they have."

"Yes we do. There are a bunch of them and they have crossbows. There, problem solved, let's go beat the shit out of them and take our stuff back." I'll admit I can be a bit hasty at times, but I'm still alive so it can't be all that bad a trait to have.

"Abbie, where's the mule? Where's the cargo? How do we know they have it in that house? Maybe they buried it in the old shack over there," he said as he motioned towards the rubble. "We need to observe and educate ourselves about our situation before we go running in blindly."

"Fine," I said, "You stay and observe, I'll go running in blindly. I'm not afraid of these fuckers so I'll go get our stuff back." I first sprinted over to the cart, where it was buried in the brush. The tarp was still there, but when I pulled it back I found that whoever it was that took it, took it all. I had a clear shot from the cart to that busted-up garage door so I ran like hell over to it and sat down at the corner. Before I could peek around to check out the front of the house a bit closer I noticed Felix was making his way around the clearing through the bushes surrounding it. He was making enough noise to wake the dead, I thought, but no attacks came from the house. Either nobody was home, or they were waiting for something.

I stuck my head around the corner and saw there was a door on the side which was open a crack. It was dark inside the garage and I couldn't see anybody beyond it, so I started to crawl over to the door to get a closer look and hopefully see inside. Suddenly one of the windows opened and an arrow shot out into the woods at Felix. I could have shouted for him to get down, but I didn't want to give away my own position (and part of me really didn't care if he got hit). I scrambled back around to the garage door side and

backed up against it to wait out the attack when I heard a scraping from the other side of the door I was leaning against. I leaned my head in closer to listen better and something hit the door from the inside. The door buckled out but didn't break and I scrambled to the corner of the house. As soon as anything stuck through that door I knew I'd smash it good with my club, and I savored the moment. Whatever it was inside kept hitting the door and pushing on it more and more... And then it stopped.

I leaned in to listen again and heard that scraping sound, as if someone was dragging something on the floor around the inside. I heard a faint clicking as well that I couldn't identify and I leaned my head right against the door, hoping to hear something that would help me identify what it was inside.

Suddenly the garage door flew open and I realized what the scraping and clicking were.

They were claws.

Standing above me was a... creature, of some sort I hadn't seen before. It stood about six feet tall and looked like a dog, but it was holding a club of its own and snarled down at me. Its fur was ratted and tangled around its head, but its snout was full of tangled teeth and dripping spit as it growled. There were claws on its feet and hands, which is where the clicking and scratching came from I realized as it took a step towards me and raised its club above its head.

I ducked and rolled away as it brought the club down, smashing into the corner of the house as I stood up and raked it upside the head with my own club. The crack from the blow was loud, but the beast whipped its head back around to face me with barely a whuff. I backed away from it, remembering my brothers's fights and how they danced around their opponents to stay out of harm's way. The thing lunged at me then unexpectedly and tackled me to the ground. I tried rolling it off of me, but it held on tight with those clawed hands, digging into my sides. I repressed a cry of pain as I brought my club down on its back as hard as I could manage and it loosened up its hold on me. I slid out from underneath it and managed another good swing at its head before it could stand, but this thing was doglike enough to move as well on four feet as two and it shuffled out of the way while my club thumped uselessly on the ground.

I crouched opposite it and we began to circle one another. The beast still had its

club in its right hand as it shuffled around on the ground looking for an opening on me that I wouldn't give him. I feinted left and right, but whenever that club wasn't a danger to me it's mouthful of teeth was. It barked a couple of times and finally lunged at me with a roar, but instead of getting defensive I pressed my own attack, swinging at that huge jaw of his.

With its mouth open I connected with its lower jaw and snapped a few teeth out of its head as it brought its own arm around to hit me. I ducked under its swing, savoring the yelp of pain it cried when I hit, and once it was past me I swung again at its back, hearing it snap. The beast stayed down then, scrabbling at the ground with all four feet, but its back legs weren't working right anymore and it was crying in pain all the while. I walked over to its head and brought my club down again and again, not stopping until well after it stopped moving and my club was covered in matted fur and blood.

When I was sure it was dead, I checked out the club it was carrying. Not bad, I thought, but not very well constructed. I wanted a trophy from this kill, my first real battle since leaving Heaven, but I didn't have time for that because Felix fell through the wall of the half-destroyed house on the other side of the clearing.

"Dammit Felix, can you do anything right?" I asked before several arrows shot through the windows on that side of the house at him. He ducked behind a rock (or maybe it was the remains of the wall) and I looked at the house itself, noticing that the garage door was shut again. Figuring someone shut it while I was fighting off the beast, I ran back to it and backed up against the opposite corner from the front of the house. Felix was still hiding behind a rock and I peeked my head around the corner to see two crossbows actually hanging out of the windows. I grabbed a rock and threw it at the bushes away from Felix and the two crossbows swung around to shoot at the sound when it hit. Luckily Felix was paying attention and he sprinted out from the wreckage farther into the woods away from the house. I heard grunting from the windows and realized that whatever the creature was that I killed, it wasn't one-of-a-kind. Great. More of these monsters. Well, I thought, I killed one already without too much trouble, how bad could they be?

The crossbows withdrew inside the garage and I heard the shuffle-click-scratch as the beasts walked around inside the house. I couldn't figure where they were going, but the sound of breaking glass drew my attention away from them. I turned to look for where the sound was coming from and I saw Felix throwing rocks from the clearing. He'd moved

faster than I thought he could in that brush and he was now at the edge of the clearing opposite the side door of the garage and chucking rocks at the windows. Before I could shout at him to stop I saw two more arrows hit trees on either side of him and I decided to move.

I ran around the back side of the garage and dove through an open window. My landing wasn't nearly as pretty as I'd hoped because I landed on a steel barrel and rolled it over with me. I looked up in time to see two of the creatures turn from the window and start to swing their crossbows at me. One of them was hit in the head with a rock (seemed Felix was good for something after all) and his shot went up into the ceiling, but the other one shot at me head as I tried to get to my feet again. The arrow thunked into the barrel and something started spurting out of it, but I wasn't paying too much attention to it. I was more worried about how to get through these two monsters.

I swung my club wide and broke the crossbow in the hands of the one who fired at me while the other one fired another shot out the window at Felix. The shooter ran out the door at Felix and the other whimpered lightly at its broken hand. The whimper turned into a growl, then a snarl, then a roar as it leapt at me. I tried sidestepping it, but slipped on the wet floor and caught a claw across my chest, tearing through my shirt and across my chest and leaving three wicked-looking cuts. I tried to ignore the pain as I landed hard on my back and brought my club up in front of my face to block the advance of the beast and it bit down on the club. Its teeth sank into the wood and it started shaking its head, thrashing back and forth stripping bits of wood off of my club as it did so. I kicked up with my leg, digging my knee into what I hoped was its ribcage and it yelped a bit, letting go of my club and moving to reposition itself on top of me. The lack of weight on me when me moved allowed me to slide away from it a bit and bring my club down on its head, crushing it between the concrete floor and my club. Or so I thought.

It lashed out at me with its broken hand, catching my left leg but hurting itself worse from the sound it made when it hit. This thing had to be in a rage now if it was forgetting which hand was broken and which one was good, but enraged animals are harder to handle than calm, calculating ones. Frenzied animals didn't stop until they were put down hard, and this guy was getting meaner by the second. I swung my club around again and again, hitting it in the face more than once, but its eyes were red and bloody and its snarl was

getting louder with every swing I made. Not being on my feet, I didn't have the leverage I needed to connect with it's head solidly enough to put it down and I was starting to worry if this thing would go down even if I took it's head right off.

It lunged at me with another roar and I flattened myself against the floor, kicking up with my legs and throwing it against more barrels lined up along the wall inside the house. It tried to disentangle itself from the barrels as I rolled up to my feet and ran at it. Just as it turned to face me I caught it under the jaw with an uppercut-swing that made a crunching sound that I'll remember forever.

I took a second to check out the claw marks across my chest and realized that it had dug into me farther than I thought at first. God bless adrenaline for letting me ignore the pain during the fight, but now that I got a good look at it I could feel the pain ebbing out from each gash and saw blood draining down my shirt. I sank to one knee and put my hand over my chest, trying to apply enough pressure to stop the flow of blood when I heard another growl from behind me. The creature who went after Felix must have come back.

I turned around and raised my club as it dove towards me, and I heard a deafening boom and watched it's face explode all over me as it fell to the ground. Behind where it stood just seconds before was Felix with his gun smoking in his hand.

I tried playing it off, not wanting him to gain anything to lord over me by saving my life like he did. "Thanks man. 'Bout time you got here," I said.

"Please Abbie, don't play like that. I'll take that as a 'thank you' and let's move on, shall we?" He smirked as he holstered his gun, but I was alive for the time being and needed to stop this bleeding. I took a look at the beasts and saw that they were wearing clothing of a sort. More loose rags wrapped around themselves than actual clothing, but they came off easily enough when I pulled and I was able to strap bundles of them to my chest to hold myself together. I wished I had some painkillers, but there wasn't enough time for that now. We were in the garage and whatever it was spilling from that barrel was starting to stink.

That's when I realized it was gasoline.

Six

My firestarters were safely tucked away in my knapsack so I wasn't worried about blowing ourselves up, but I couldn't figure why these dog-men had so much gasoline stashed away in this old garage in the woods. Felix was digging around through the mess in the house when he stood up and sniffed at the air, finally noticing the smell for himself.

"Good lord, is that gasoline?" he asked.

"Yes, doc, it's gas. Don't light it." I replied.

"Then that's what they were doing..." He trailed off, mumbling to himself as he thought out loud.

"Excuse me, bright-boy, but what the hell are you talking about?"

"I found a truck out in the woods, a little ways off the path behind the old brokendown shack out there. I didn't get a chance to investigate it properly, but it appeared to be in good enough physical shape to drive, as long as the engine works properly and we had fuel. Which," he motioned to the barrels lining the walls of the house, "we obviously do."

Felix was finally starting to earn my respect. Granted he's all but worthless in a fight, but he had the brains I was never given the chance to grow while I lived in Heaven. He might just be useful after all.

"All right, so we've got a truck, but nothing to carry in it. Remember our cargo? All that valuable spice? I'm not seeing it anywhere in here." I said, but he was already walking away. He rounded a corner in the house and disappeared. I stood there wondering if he was even listening when he called out to me.

"Abbie! Come look at this!"

"Dammit, doc, I told you my name is Abadon. Not Abbie, not dear boy, just Abadon. Can you please get it right?" I followed the sound of his voice around the corner and found another room. In another time, another age, this might have been a tool shed, but the gaping hole in the floor would have made it a bit hard to put much hardware in here.

The hole in the floor had a ladder leading down into darkness and there was a large sheet-metal panel that was slid aside from the entrance. Obviously, whatever those things were, they lived down that hole and must have carried our spices down there with them. I started to move toward the ladder when Felix put his hand out to stop me.

"We don't know how many more of those things are down there. Please don't go rushing into everything like you do, you are going to get yourself killed one of these days."

"Yeah, someday. But not today. It's obvious that our stuff is down there, so let's go get it. We handled these three up here didn't we?" I didn't like giving him credit for helping me with the beasts, but I was in a good mood after surviving those fights, and knew we were close to getting ourselves back on track.

"Look, you're wounded, we don't know how many more are down there, and it'll be dark soon. Let's just slide this panel over the top of the hole, roll a couple of barrels on top of it so they can't get out and go rest for the night. They're obviously not going anywhere with it if they haven't loaded it on the truck outside yet, and they aren't going to be pulling the cart by themselves nor will they be strapping Jessie up to it again and moving it out that way."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because I found the remains of our faithful Jessie in the woods beyond the clearing. It was obvious from the mangling of the carcass that they ate him. They wouldn't have done that if they were planning on using him to pull that cart, and they wouldn't have ditched the cart if they were planning on using it at all, would they?"

Felix here had the capacity for creative thinking that I could never wrap my mind around, and while it was handy at times, I hated admitting he was right. I thought about what he suggested for a second and had an idea of my own.

"Wait a minute, why don't we just dump some of this gasoline down the hole? They can't breathe through those fumes, nothing could. They'll get all antsy down there and start popping up the ladder, and when they do we crack 'em over the skull and kill them one at a time. Then we'll have nothing left to stand in our way, we can climb down and get our stuff back and everybody wins." It sounded like a good plan in my head, but Felix just shook his head.

"How would we survive down there to get our cargo back if it's flooded with gasoline fumes? We know we can't breathe through those fumes without getting violently ill or possibly even dying, but why does that mean that they can't? Plus, we don't know how many of them are down there. What happens when they just keep coming? What if they have more tunnels down there than we suspect? They could hide in some side-passage, wait out the fumes, then come out and kill us when we finally decide to venture down there ourselves." I hated his attitude, knowing he was right all along, but I hated inaction just as

much. I was tired, hurting, and wanted to finish this whole thing as soon as possible, but I couldn't argue with his logic (which just pissed me off even more).

"Fine, we'll lock them down there and wait. Let's get a couple of these barrels on top of the pit here and we'll head back down and check on Jack. I need to patch myself up properly anyway." I was already moving towards the sheet metal before I even finished talking and slid it over the hole. I grabbed a barrel and tried rolling it on its edge over the hole and noticed that Felix was still just standing there. "Hey, you gonna help me out here or what?" I asked.

"Wait, don't put a barrel right over the hole. Let's just put them over the four corners so that it's still secure. Those barrels could be too heavy for that flimsy piece of metal to hold them up, and we don't want to start dropping gasoline down the hole now, do we?" He grinned as he finished what he was saying and I just about dropped him down the hole, but I bit my tongue and kept manhandling the barrel to one corner of the sheet.

It took us a little while, but nothing came up out of the hole at us while we were working and in the end it seemed pretty secure. My chest was really starting to hurt and I was a little worried about infection, but I learned a nasty trick growing up about taking care of possibly infected wounds that I knew we'd have to do to Jack, and really hoped we wouldn't have to do to me.

We made it back to the road and Jack just as the sun was starting to go down and the light was starting to fade from the sky. Jack had a good fire going and we used it to warm up some food for each of us and ate. As soon as we were done eating I took out my knife and set it in the fire, wedging the handle between two rocks that were part of the ring around it.

"What's that for?" Jack asked.

"We have to take care of that leg of yours so that you don't bleed to death. And I've got some scratches of my own to take care of. Don't worry, it's better than dying." It wasn't much reassurance, but it was true.

When the blade was glowing almost white I looked over at Felix. "I need you to hold him down for me. Get a stick for him to bite down on, would you?" Felix looked shocked at me and then saw the knife I was stirring the coals with.

"Dear god boy, you're not suggesting we..."

"Yes, I am. And I've got to do myself as well after this, so don't get too jumpy or Jack'll never go for it. You're smart, you know that this is the best bet for both of us. Just grab him and gag him." Felix nodded with a grim look on his face and picked up a stick from near the fire. He went over to Jack, who had sat up by now, and put his elbows on Jack's shoulders to pin him down.

"Here, this will hurt quite a bit, my good man, but bite down on this and it will help you deal with the pain. Believe me that yes, this is absolutely necessary, and we will need your help to take care of Abbie when it's all over with you." He fed the stick to Jack and leaned down on his shoulders to hold him down. Jack must have caught the gist of what we were doing because he wasn't kicking, and shot to the top of my respect list for holding still.

I pulled the knife from the fire and untied his bandages with my other hand. In the glow from the knife the hole in his leg looked grimy and sick and I silently hoped we weren't too late in doing this. I used the tip of the knife to cut the pants away from the wounds on both the top and bottom so that I could get to both wounds as quickly as possible. I looked over at Felix, who nodded at me. I looked down at Jack and asked him "Ready for this?"

He squeezed his eyes shut and nodded after a second, and I plunged the knife down.

I heard the sizzle and could smell the burning flesh and hair on his leg and Jack screamed through the stick. I was glad for the gag in his mouth or else everybody on the mountain would know we were there, but I still didn't feel any better for having to do it. After holding the knife on top of his leg for a good ten seconds I switched and slapped it down underneath his thigh, not giving him a chance to breathe in between because every time I'd seen this done before, that makes it worse.

Ten more seconds on the bottom and I pulled the knife back. It had gone cold enough so that it was barely glowing a dull red, but it brought skin and cloth with it and stank like hell. I put it right back in the fire to clean it off and heat it up again and started undressing my own wounds. Jack was lucky... He only had two wounds on a leg where I had three long scratches across my chest. I wasn't looking forward to this, but Jack took it well and I wasn't about to pussy out on him by not subjecting myself to the same thing.

Felix re-wrapped Jack's wounds while I got myself ready and heated up the knife.

Jack pulled bits of the stick out of his mouth (he had bitten right through it on the second go-round) and moaned quietly to himself on the other side of the fire. When the knife was ready I laid down and stretched my arms out, psyching myself up for what I knew was coming.

"Doc, you're going to have to do this. Jack, come on over here and grab my arms so that I don't curl up when the knife hits. Doc, do 'em one right after the other like I did Jack. Believe me, if you let the pain subside at all in between dips it'll just make each one that much more painful." I took a deep breath then, bit down on a stick of my own and put my arms back for Jack to get ahold of. When he had me and I could feel his weight pinning my arms down I mumbled "Ready," through the stick in my mouth.

Seven

I must have passed out from the pain, because I only remember Felix hitting me with the knife the first time. I heard my own screaming and smelled my own flesh burning and the next thing I realized it was completely dark outside and the fire barely consisted of flames still, most of it having burned down to coals. I looked down at my chest and saw wet strips of cloth covering up my wounds. My knife was back in its sheath on my hip, and my cloak was balled up under my head as a makeshift pillow. Felix looked over at me when I sat up, obviously pulling first watch since I was unconscious and couldn't claim it, and nodded at me again.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"Don't mention it, boy. Jack's leg should heal up just fine, but he'll still have to stay off of it for a few days. Your own wounds are sealed up nicely and the bandages are more to prevent further infection than anything. You should be ready for tomorrow by the time the dawn comes, but rest for now. Jack stayed up and kept watch already, and I'll wake you in another couple of hours for yours." He passed me a canteen that he must have been keeping in his own pack then and I sipped a bit of water then, grateful that I didn't have to drink any of my own. I laid my head back and fell asleep before I could even think about it and slept peacefully until Felix shook me awake a few hours later.

I sat by the fire keeping it going just enough so that we could all warm some

breakfast when the time came. We ate quickly and made sure Jack was comfortable before Felix and I went back over the road and headed up the trail until we saw the clearing ahead of us and the garage in the middle.

It looked no different from when we left it the previous night, but that didn't tell us much as there could have been an army marching through this area and we wouldn't have known how to spot it the next day. The door was still closed and the windows were still broken (except the ones we didn't break the previous day) so we figured that was a good sign.

We went in through the side door and found nothing out of place. The barrels were still lined up against the walls where we remembered them to be and the slice of sheet metal over the hole hadn't moved an inch. We listened at the hole for a minute or two and heard faint, distant barking and snarling accompanied by a few yelps, but at least there was nothing directly below us.

We manhandled the barrels off the top of the sheet metal and slid it aside. For the first time we noticed a stink coming from it that we couldn't identify. Either this hole was just a vent and there really were more ways out of the tunnels below, or we somehow locked the stink down there when we covered the hole. I looked at Felix and we nodded to each other, but apparently our nods meant different things. I jumped down the hole and caught the ladder halfway down, but Felix was nowhere near the hole anymore. I felt like calling him down there, but didn't want to make too much noise (besides, I still thought he was just this side of useless in a fight and didn't figure I'd need him). I climbed down the rest of the ladder and pulled my club from where I had it hooked to my belt, holding it in front of me like a lantern.

I saw that there were weak torches set into the walls, but when I tried pulling one out it wouldn't budge. I saw that the torch itself was set into the wall and was supported by a metal bracket just above it. I pulled out my knife and started chipping away at the rock around where the torch went into the wall, freeing it. I pulled the torch out of its bracket and held it in my left hand, keeping my club in my right hand so that I could use it in an instant, should it come to that. The light helped me see where I was a little better than the sporadic torches lining the halls, and having another weapon on hand was always a good thing. The fact that it was on fire was an added bonus, I thought to myself with a dark grin.

The path led away from the hole for about twenty yards before branching out into two forks leading left and right. Being right handed I went down the right path and was all but enveloped in the darkness as there were no more torches down this path. My own torch provided enough light to keep me from tripping on the loose rocks scattered on the floor, but I missed seeing the far wall until I walked into it.

The wall in front of me had a metallic clank when I walked into it, which surprised me more than anything. I felt around on the walls around the door and they were all solid rock, but here, in the darkness, was a metal door half-set into the stone. I held the torch up to it and found no identifying markings of any kind. It was sheer metal, much like the sheet we used to cover up the hole, and when I held the light away from it I could see a faint glow from the edges indicating that the room beyond it was lit. I pushed on the door and it swung inwards, creaking lightly. I winced at the sound but nothing came running, so if there was anything else down here with me, they must not have heard the sound.

Or they were already waiting for me.

Inside the room was circular with bigger brighter torches around the walls making this the most lit space I'd seen in the whole underground. There were two more doors in the wall opposite me, one of which had a bar wedged across it to keep it closed. Since I'd taken the right path at my last choice (and because it was unbarred), I decided to open the left door first.

Inside it was completely dark, no torches or anything. I stepped inside, keeping the torch in front of me and my club behind me ready to swing, but nothing leapt out of the shadows at me. Nothing came at me at all, the room was completely empty.

I went back to the main room and checked out the door with the bar across it. This one had scratches around the edges but I couldn't tell if they were from the creatures's claws or from the door being wedged into the wall. I pulled on the bar and it came loose with barely a tug. I backed up a step and steadied myself before yanking the door open and lunging inside.

There were no more of the dog-people in there, but there was an old man cradling a boy to his chest. I stopped mid-stride and just stared at them as they gazed back at me. The old man found his voice before I did and spoke.

"Are... Are you here to help us?" He asked.

"Um... Yeah. Come on, get up and let's get you out of here before more of those things come back. Who are you?" I asked as I helped him and his boy to their feet.

"My name is Alexander, this is my son Joseph. We were driving through the mountains a week ago I think, time is so hard to keep track of down here, and we stopped to remove a roadblock. Before we could get the tree off the road we were attacked by those... things. They killed..." He trailed off then, fighting off tears before continuing. "They killed my wife Maggie a few days ago... We've been waiting for them to come back for us but so far nothing."

"How have you survived so long without food or water?" I asked.

"They've been leaving bowls of water and we had some morsels when we came down. I don't think those things are too intelligent because they didn't search us when they brought us down here and we've been able to live on some jerky we had in our pockets. We ran out of food last night and have been just waiting for them to come for us when you showed up."

I had to hand it to these guys, they were hearty fellows and instantly earned my respect for surviving this long, especially after watching their wife and mother dragged away like they did. I pulled out my knife and handed it to Alexander.

"Here," I said. "In case we run into any more of those things on our way out of here. Now follow me."

I pushed the door open again and led them into the circular room outside. Joseph grabbed a torch on the wall and wrenched it out of its clamp (little bugger was strong) and followed right behind Alexander. I still had my torch out in front of me and we made it to the door leading out when it flew open and two more of those dog-creatures came through. One was carrying a long stick with a meat cleaver tied to the end of it, and the other had an axe that it must have found in the garage above us because it was solidly made and not thrown together like the rest of the primitive weapons these things were using. They couldn't have known I was down there because they started at the sight of us standing in front of them and I took the opportunity to attack.

I threw my torch at the one in front with the axe, but it went wide and bounced off the wall harmlessly next to it. The dogs split up and tried circling around behind us, but Alexander threw my knife at the one with the spear with crippling accuracy and nailed it right

in the shoulder, causing it to drop its weapon and cower back away from us.

Seeing its companion hurt spurred the other one into action and it threw itself at me with a whuff, swinging the axe sideways at my head. I ducked underneath it and tried an uppercut-swing with my club but it sidestepped and squared itself against me as I did the same. We swung at each other simultaneously then, it for my head again and me for its weapon hand. I connected first and heard a snap as it dropped the axe and I smiled knowing I'd broken its arm.

As before though, this one went feral and lost all control, leaping at me with a gaping, toothy, slobbering maw and its one good paw. I started shucking and jiving backwards away from it, not bothering to try and attack and instead focusing all my energy on just avoiding all those teeth and claws. As I was backing away I threw a glance to the side and saw Alexander hanging onto the back of the other dog-man in a choke hold with one arm and beating on its skull with the other hand. Joseph was faced off against it as well, waving his torch wildly to keep it off-balance while his father kept hammering on the back of its head.

I suddenly found myself with my back against the wall. Literally. I'd misjudged the size of the room and shucked when I should have jived and now this dog-thing had me cornered. It advanced again with a snarl and I was able to just barely turn aside as it went face-first into the wall and I brought my club down on the back of its head as hard as I could, watching teeth snap out of the mouth as its face dragged down the ragged rock wall and when it hit the floor, it stayed there. I heard its ragged breathing but decided against finishing it off in favor of helping Alexander and Joseph take care of the other one.

When I turned my attention towards them I saw Alexander still clutching the creature's head with one arm, but now his other hand was on the handle of my knife, still deep in the thing's shoulder, and he was twisting it. The creature was all but screaming with pain and flailing around madly, but every time it came close to getting its claws into Alexander Joseph was there with his torch and beating its hands away or stabbing at its midsection and burning it. The smell of smoldering hair filled the room now as I tried getting closer to help, but the creature was thrashing around so much that any time I had an opening it would move and keep Joseph between us. I watched as Alexander yanked the knife out of its shoulder then and slashed at the creature's throat, catching part of his own arm in the

process. The creature stiffened, gurgling blood as it tried to breathe, and fell forward almost landing on top of Joseph in doing so. Alexander clambered off the back of the beast and hugged Joseph close to him. I would have been ecstatic at taking down a beast of that size with nothing more than a knife and a torch, but they were both sobbing madly into each other's arms.

I let them have their moment to mourn. I didn't know what to say in this case anyway and finally having their retribution must have opened the floodgates of emotion for them to finally start healing from this ordeal.

Problem was, we weren't out of the woods yet.

After at least a solid minute of just standing there watching them cry all over each other I went over and put my hand on Alexander's shoulder. "Alexander? We have to go. Now. Before more of those things come back for us. Come on." I started walking to the door, picking up my torch on the way and re-lighting it by one of the side-torches in the room, and headed back towards the ladder. We heard more barking and yelping from the caverns, sounding closer now than it did when I came down and I knew that more of these things were coming for us. Since they knew we were here and would obviously follow us I thought it'd be better to sit at the top of the hole and bash them as they came up after us, but I never got the chance.

Just as we reached the ladder I shouted up for Felix, but got no response. I turned around and was about to tell Alexander to go up first with Joseph but saw two more of those dog-things right behind him... The fuckers must have snuck up behind us as we were leaving.

"Down!" I shouted as I flung my club at the dog-men and Alexander hit the ground. This time my throw was a bit more accurate and caught one of the creatures in the face briefly before he could swat it away. I ran towards them just as Alexander was getting up again. He was on all fours and I stepped on his back, using it to get some height as I flew towards the creatures. I brought my club straight down with everything I had on the crown of the beast I hit in the face with the club, taking advantage of its stunned state and heard not just a crack, but a crunch. It dropped immediately, the last of its breath caught in a guttural gurgle as it died. I heard a howling behind me and was afraid that more of these things had come from above at us, but when I turned to face the sound I saw Alexander

screaming and coming towards me with that spear-thing that he must have taken off of the creatures we faced just before. I ducked as he swung around and I heard another yelp.

Looking up I saw that he had caught the other creature in the stomach and was pushing on the spear, trying to force it further into the beast and backing it against the wall.

I got to my feet and was about to join in the fight when I heard what sounded like a sack of flour hit the ground behind me. I spun around towards the hole and the ladder and saw something that made my blood run cold.

There at the base of the ladder was the biggest of these dog-creatures I'd seen yet. It was still crouched down from it's jump, but it's shoulder span alone must have been a good five feet. It stood up, unfolding itself from it's crouch and I heard a faint clanking as it did so. In the faint light from the hole above and the torches in the walls around us I could tell that this one was wearing armor. Not just some leather strips it had strapped on haphazardly, this thing was wearing plates of metal (probably aluminum) that were pieced together to keep it protected. It was carrying a club with sickening looking spikes jutting out of the end in a massive hand that completely enveloped the handle. When it finished unfolding itself upwards it stood a massive seven feet tall and locked it's deep yellow eyes with mine.

I didn't wait for it to snarl, I didn't wait for it to move, I just threw myself at it with a scream and hoped to whatever gods were left that I could survive this.

I whacked it across the face and spun, hoping to catch it in the chest but it's mammoth left hand caught my club mid-swing and stopped me cold. It brought it's own club down and I turned inside of the swing, feeling the wind down my back as it missed. I tried pulling my club free from it's hand and it wasn't coming loose. It must have realized that I had my club strapped to my hand with the lanyard because it threw my club, and me, at the wall.

I hit hard and flat on my back and slid down the wall. I glanced over to check on Alexander and was glad to see that he was holding his own against the other creature still fighting. I felt a little better about that, knowing full well that trying to take on one of these things at a time was hard enough. Two at a time, especially if one was this king, would certainly kill me.

I didn't have time to think much more than that because I heard the king-dog's club whistling towards my head. I rolled out of the way and the club buried itself in the wall

where my head had been instants before. I kicked out with my right leg as I rolled, catching the beast's leg just above the knee but there was no reassuring breaking sound when I hit. Only a mild clink as I connected with the plate of aluminum it had strapped to its thigh. I kicked again and again as the creature tried pulling his club free from the wall, but got nowhere. Finally the beast decided to leave the club and just come at me himself. I tried standing up to face him but couldn't get to my feet. My left leg was still asleep and tingling from my impact with the rock wall.

I swung my club instead at his leg, hoping to cripple it and even the field between us, but I just heard the crunching of metal which let me know that I was at least breaking apart the armor there, but I knew I was still in a world of trouble. I readied myself to swing again, but before I could the beast was on top of me.

I raised my club in front of my face to protect it, but when the creature landed on me its jaws closed around the handle of my club and snapped it into two jagged wooden pieces. I took the remains of the handle in my right hand and stabbed it upwards, hoping to catch the beast in the throat and kill it, but its fur and hide were too thick. It yelped in pain and I felt its blood start to trickle down onto my hand, but I knew that I hadn't stabbed deep enough when the beast locked its claws into my left side and flung me against the wall again.

I had just enough time to register the pain and blood from my side before my head hit the rough rock wall and everything went swimmy. My vision fogged and I could barely make out the cave and the king-dog-beast before he swung at me again, catching my face with his right hand, tearing my cheek open and tossing me towards the ladder.

I hit the ground and slid, face first, in the dirt up to the base of the ladder leading up. Leading away. Leading to safety. I could see the light coming down from above and tried to lift a hand to grab the rungs and pull myself up, but didn't have the strength. I heard faint snarling then, getting closer but quieter at the same time as consciousness slipped away from me. I looked up again and saw another shadow coming down the ladder and knew I was doomed. More of these things would just tear me apart after their king was done with me and I closed my eyes, waiting for the end.

I heard three deafening booms and a scream... And then blackness.

Eight

I awoke, surprised to be doing so, to a gentle rocking and the wind blowing over my face. The ground beneath me was hard and ridged, but my cloak was again balled up under my head and there was another blanket draped over me. I tried sitting up but heard Jack's voice urging me down.

"Stay sleeping, Abadon. You've earned the rest. We'll be in Redding in a few hours." He said. That didn't make sense to me... How could we be in Redding in just a few hours? We were still at least a day's walk away from it, and that was if we still had Jessie to pull the cart. Without Jessie, how the hell were we moving? I tried sitting up and felt my side ache as I did so. The blanket slid off my chest and I saw that I'd been bandaged up, but there was no blood soaking through the cloths holding me together so they must have cauterized my wounds while I was still passed out. I looked at the scars on my chest, which they had taken the bandages off of to cover up the gashes in my side, and the scars were already farther healed than I expected. "What happened?" I asked.

Felix spoke up then and when I looked at him I saw that he was completely unhurt, making my heart sink a little that I barely got out of the situation with my life and he didn't even have a scratch.

"When you jumped down the hole I went and investigated the truck a little further. I found an old toolbox underneath the seat that didn't have much, but it did contain a very handy steel flashlight and two of these things." He held up a syringe with two tubes going from the syringe up to a little dial that looked like a stopwatch.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's called a stimpak. I'd seen them used a few times and was able to figure it out on you. They're a medical device used for quickly curing wounds and boosting the recuperative properties of whoever they're used on. You were on the verge of death when I found you and knew that, valuable as these things are, you were due. As you can see, the scars on your chest are already healing up better than ever and we were able to stop the bleeding on your cheek and from your side, but the trauma of sealing the wounds would have killed you if we hadn't applied the stimpak. You're quite lucky to be alive, considering what you were facing."

I remembered the fight and I remembered blacking out, but up until waking up I was still a blank. I wanted more answers and was wiped out enough from the battles with the dog-men to even listen to Felix talk.

"How'd I get out of there? The last thing I remember was being about to die."

"Well boy, after searching the truck I decided to head back inside and help get the spices out. I heard snarling and fighting coming from the garage when I started back so I decided to hide out in the bombed-out house and see what I could. I watched as the largest of those things came back from the woods with what appeared to be one of Jessie's legs in it's hand. Since this one was wearing armor, of a sort, I figured he must have been the leader and kept a close eye on him as he went towards the garage, but he stopped outside of it and sniffed at the air for quite some time. Undoubtedly he was picking up our scent and I was certainly hoping he hadn't detected me when he let out quite a fierce roar and bolted into the garage. I followed behind him and watched through a window as he tore the garage apart, knocking over barrels and spilling more gasoline in his search for whatever it was that bothered him so. Luckily the gasoline must have covered my own scent since I was just outside of a window and he didn't appear to know I was even there.

Anyway, I watched him tear the place apart before disappearing around the corner to where the manhole was. I must admit, I was quite foolish in following him into the garage, but my curiosity got the better of me and I arrived just in time to see him drop down the manhole. From above I could hear the fight and see some of it when you came close enough, but I really didn't think that you could handle the brute by yourself so I started to climb down. When I saw your unconscious form slide to a halt under the ladder and saw him coming for you I knew I had to act quickly, so I dropped the rest of the way down and opened fire with my trusty .357 here," he patted the gun on his hip then, "and killed it. I only wish I hadn't had to use three shots, but the first one missed completely and the second one hit him in the chest where the armor absorbed most of the damage. Luckily my third shot hit him squarely between the eyes and he dropped like a sack of flour!" He laughed a little at this and despite my hurting pride at having to be saved by this pansy, I smiled as well, knowing that he very well saved my life.

I quickly went over the rest of the details of the fight in my head and remembered

my club... My smashed and shattered club, probably still lying underground back at the site and underground in that cavern. I let out a groan then, thinking that my whole future was wrapped around that club and now that it was gone I was all but defenseless.

"What's wrong, Abadon? You're alive and we're on our way again! Alexander and Joseph are amazing at repairs and Jack and I were able to help them get their truck back in working order in no time. And look!" He pointed behind me then and I turned to see all of the spice was piled up high right behind the cab of the truck. It was strapped in with the tarp so it wouldn't fall over or out, and in front of the boxes of spice were two more barrels that looked completely intact. We had our cargo, we had a car, and we had more than enough gasoline to keep us going for a while.

"We piled up the spice as high as possible so we three could ride in the back here. I'm still in no condition to walk and you were completely out of it so we knew we couldn't expect you to move on your own." Jack pointed to his own leg as he said this and I didn't feel so bad for being the only one of us put out of commission on this journey.

"Make sure Alexander and Joseph keep the truck when we get to Redding. They've earned their right to keep it for all they've been through." Jack and Felix looked a little surprised at this. I couldn't tell if they were surprised at what I said or that it was me saying it. "This was their truck to begin with, they've already lost their wife and mother, we're giving them the truck when we get there."

"My boy, I hardly think they should keep the truck after everything we've all been through. After all, it's just the two of them and there's three of us. Not only that, but we've lost our cart and dear Jessie. What about Jack here?" Felix motioned at Jack, but Jack just shook his head.

"The cart was supplied by the company and Jessie was old anyway. I'll get new equipment when we check in in Redding and be fine. Abadon's right, these guys don't have much, we should let them keep their truck."

Felix looked pouty-faced then, not wanting to believe what he was hearing, but after going back and forth between mine and Jack's face, he let out a huff and subsided. In his anger he kicked a lump covered by a blanket and part of the blanket slid off to reveal spikes and metal.

"What's that?" I asked, sitting up to take a better look.

Jack answered this time since Felix was still brooding about not getting to keep the truck. “It’s some gear we picked up for you. We saw what happened to your club so we decided you’d want that dog-thing’s club to replace it. We had to rip it out of the damn wall, but it’s here for you. We also stripped most of his armor off for you since you seem to need it.” He smiled as he said it, so I knew he was just giving me a little friendly ribbing and I wouldn’t have to beat the smirk off of his face. I smiled back, already feeling better knowing that I now had armor and a better weapon for my troubles, not to mention whatever we were going to get paid when we reached Redding.

I laid back down in the back of the truck bed feeling the cool dawn air blow over me and the gentle rocking of the truck on the road lull me back to sleep. This time I didn’t fight to stay awake. I slipped into a peaceful and calm sleep all the way into Redding.

Nine

We arrived in Redding after dark and had to get in line with a few other caravans to get permission to enter the town. Whatever Redding was before the apocalypse, it was merely a shell of its former glory now. The city consisted of no more than nine square blocks, surrounded by a high wall on all four sides. The wall had searchlights mounted on it at regular intervals, and gunner’s nests in between. I thought it strange that there were as many guns pointed inwards at the city as there were pointed outwards at the wastes, but didn’t think to mention it to anybody. Maybe this was just how they kept the peace in their town, and I didn’t want them turning the guns on me.

Our wait was cut short when I heard one of the gate guards barking at the caravan in front of us. “Dammit, we don’t want no peddlers in here, and I’m sorry but you’re going to have to keep outside the city! Now beat it before I get angry!”

I looked ahead, standing in the truck bed and looking over the cab, and saw that there was a ragged band of nomads being turned away from the city. In the ragged light of the city’s searchlights I could see that most of the people in the tribe were heavily bundled up in rags, but some of them were soaked through with blood. Many of them were being helped by others, and they reminded me of a picture I saw in one of my father’s National Geographics. The caption below the photo had said something about “Serbian Refugees”

(whatever that meant), and these people looked like they came right out of the photo and into life. Probably hit by raiders, I figured, but I didn't have time to go crusading right now. We had our cargo to deliver.

Once we were inside the city (Jack had open clearance to get in and out as he pleased because of his business connection within the city) Jack dropped us off at a watering hole while he went and delivered the rest of the cargo. Felix and I decided to wait inside for him to return, figuring that he was honorable enough to find us and pay us once he concluded the delivery.

We got seats in a corner booth and ordered the house usual, which the bartender informed us was called "beer," and surveyed the room. It was a typical mishmash of whatever people could get into the city, ranging from hulking brutes (raiders, no doubt) to quiet little nomads who were undoubtedly looking for work so they could support a family somewhere else. I saw too much of my old self in most of these people... Frightened, unsure of themselves, alone in a world that could kill you a dozen ways daily, and coming up with more all the time. I was hoping that Jack would return soon when a drunk peddler caught both mine and Felix's attention.

He was sitting at the bar waving around a scrap of paper and telling anybody and everybody who'd listen to him that he knew the way to an old abandoned military base. "S'only a few days walk from here," he slurred between drinks, "an' I'll sell th'map to it to any interested takers! Anybody?" Nobody was paying him much attention, but one of the raiders sitting at the bar was starting to watch him. I felt bad for the poor guy, drunk and spouting off info that could (and would, as it turns out) get him killed.

Jack came into the bar shortly and found Felix and I at our booth and sat down to join us. He told us that the delivery had been made and we were welcome to come out to his new cart and claim our rewards, so we left the bar and went out into the streets.

Jack had acquired a new cart from whoever it was he was delivering this shipment to, and a new mule as well. It was loaded like before, boxes on top of boxes and a canvas tarp on top of it all. He pulled back one corner of the tarp and opened up one of the boxes for us to look in. There were several small tubes of spices in there, as well as two Stim-Paks (a Stim-Pak is a hypodermic needle filled with a mixture of medicines and painkillers. Great for recovering from wounds, but they take a while for the full healing effect to work). I

instantly grabbed the two Stim-Paks before Felix could get his damn hands on them, but, of course, this brought about a whine from the old man.

"I say, dear boy, what makes you think you should get both of those marvelous little healing devices? There are two of them, I'd say there's one for each of us." He started to look smug then, thinking he'd applied some sort of un-debatable logic.

"Really? How many of those creatures did you have to face down in the caves to get our cargo back? Who found and rescued Joe and Alex? Who went headlong into all the mess we've seen and came out of it alive?" He looked a bit stunned then, but I continued, not wanting him to find any holes in my explanation. "I took out most of those creatures, I went into the hole by myself while you went out looking for more stuff in the woods..."

"But I found the truck!" He whined.

"Which we're not even keeping. I'll give you some credit, you did save me from the king-thing, but I've still gone through more hell than you have on this trip, so I'm keeping them both. Besides, you don't like fighting anyway, what would you use them for?"

He couldn't fault my argument and went to mumbling dirty things about me as he pawed through the box and tubes of spices, asking Jack what each one was and pocketing the most valuable ones. I didn't care, I don't really know how to cook anyway and have no idea what the street value of spice is, so I figured I'd just get what I could and leave it at that. To me those Stim-Paks were far more valuable anyway, and they were both now safely tucked away in my knapsack.

I ended up getting a vial of oregano (looked like broken up little leaves to me), two vials of salt, and a vial of pepper (looked like dirt and had about the same consistency and texture). Coupled with the two Stim-Paks, this had turned out to be quite a profitable trip for me, and I was happy with the outcome.

I took my leave of Jack and Felix then and left the city to sleep outside the walls. Jack offered us another job, but I was ready to move on to bigger things, and Felix wanted to talk to the drunk with the map in the bar. On my way out of the city I found an armorer's tent and decided to check it out.

When I got inside the heat was boiling hot from the furnace fire that the blacksmith had going for his trade. He must have felt the breeze from my entry because he stopped

working on the piece of armor he was crafting and turned to greet me.

“Good evening, traveler! What can I do for you?”

I took the club off of my belt and unshouldered the armor I’d been carrying (we had it wrapped up in an old piece of burlap) and dropped them both on his workbench. “I need this armor worked so that it fits me, and I need this club fixed up. It’s cracked in a few places, and I’d like it re-wrapped with fresh leather and then coated in stain so that it won’t break again. Also, if you can add a spike on the end of it, I’d greatly appreciate the work.” He looked at the armor first, then at the club. He set the club down and went back to the armor, holding it up, examining the holes in it, looking at the sizes of the different pieces, checking out how sturdy the leather straps that held it together were. Finally he set the armor back down and spoke again.

“Don’t know much about weapons, so I’m afraid I can’t help you with your club there,” he started. “But the armor I might be able to work with. I can’t re-size it because I don’t have the tools, but I can fix it up for you.”

“What good would that do me? If I can’t wear it, I can’t use it, can I?”

“Well...” He looked around his workshop-tent then and I strained my eyes against the darkness to spot what he was looking for before he could. I didn’t want this guy grabbing a bat from under the table and stealing my stuff, but even as my eyes adjusted to the dim light I couldn’t see any obvious weapons lying around. “Tell you what,” he continued. “I’ll take this armor in on trade. I know a guy who can probably use the metal for scrap, and he’ll be able to do more with it than I can anyway. In exchange, I’ll give you this piece here.” He reached under the workbench then and pulled out a suit of brigandine armor. It was for upper-body only, but wonderfully made stuff comprised of old tire-rubber and wood sewn together and pieced in such a way that it provided far better protection than I could have gotten with that dog-beast’s armor anyway.

But I didn’t want him to know that.

“Tell you what, since you can’t fix this club up for me, why don’t you let me use your tools and equipment here and I’ll fix it up myself. I’ll give you the old armor there, and you give me the new armor and the means to fix this club up myself. Deal?”

He thought about it for a minute, he was smart and knew how to barter. “What else you give me for using my shop and equipment here? What if something breaks while

you're working, you gonna replace it?" I reached into my knapsack and pulled out one of the tubes of salt that I'd gotten in payment from Jack. I couldn't figure out what else I'd use it for, so I dropped it on the table with the rest of the goods and offered it to him as well.

His eyes lit up when he saw the spice and he snatched it up off of the table almost faster than I'd put it down and agreed quickly to the deal. He took a few measurements off of me and started readjusting the brigandine armor to my sizes and fittings and then motioned me back to the rest of his shop and showed me where the tools were.

I did find more than a few cracks in the stem of the club (with pride, as I was sure that they'd been incurred during the battle with me) and the head was pretty useless after being buried in that rock wall in the cave under the garage. I started by soaking straps of leather in water and wrapping them around the handle of the club first to keep a good grip on it. While those were drying I soaked more leather pieces and wrapped them around the stem of the club and let them dry nice and tight. I pulled the head off and replaced it with a new one I was able to fashion from scraps I found in the blacksmith's workshop. Three slender straps of wood coming up off of the stem of the club, held in place by the now-drying leather, and holding a large rock within them. Along one of the straps of wood I was able to carve a notch into it and I slipped a metal spike through it from behind before placing the rock into the head which held it in place. When the whole thing was finished, I found some sap-stain in the back of the workshop and coated the whole club (except the handle) with it and hung it up to dry over one of the furnace fires.

I spoke to the blacksmith again, who'd finished my armor by then, and we agreed that I'd come by again tomorrow to pick up my new club after it had had sufficient time to dry and harden over the fire. I trusted him with this because he was good enough to lend me the use of his tools and his shop, and because I'd obviously paid him enough for his troubles; it wouldn't do for me to go telling everybody in town (especially anybody official) that he was scamming me.

I headed out of the city, checking in with the guards on the way to make sure I'd be let back in when I was ready and decided to check out that camp of nomads who were turned away from the city.

Ten

There were several of them gathered around a fire, but two in particular stood out to me. One was a tall man, more like a boy really, who was wearing actual clothes instead of the rags that the rest of them were wearing. He didn't appear to have any armor or weaponry on him, but in the flickering firelight I caught a glimpse of a large knife strapped to one leg. He moved and acted and spoke with an air of either authority or superiority (I've confused the two quite often), and didn't appear to be an actual part of the tribe. The other was a figure hunched over near the fire and huddled inside of a cloak that covered him completely. He seemed to be just staring at the fire and not interacting with anybody else, so I went and sat by him.

"Nice night," I said.

"Mmph." Okay, I thought, not the talkative type. I didn't have so much of a problem with this as I did with him being too bundled up. It was a warm night so he was probably concealing something under his cloak, and I didn't like that. Even though I had my new armor on, I didn't have any real weapons to speak of, and didn't want to get caught unprepared for action.

"Something wrong, friend?" I asked.

"M'not your friend..." His voice was slightly raspy, sounding like he needed to clear his throat or his throat was really dry. I leaned towards the fire, cocking my head to get a glimpse of his face under the hood and saw that his skin wasn't human. It looked rough, like a hard leather, with bumps and peaks sticking up in places that looked almost like spikes. It reminded me of something I'd seen in one of dad's National Geographics called a "crocodile." He made eye contact with me as I stared at his face and I leaned back quickly, not wanting to start any trouble, but he drew his hood back and I saw that not only was his face coated in that weird skin, but all the skin on his body was like that. His hands, his face, his neck... All of it was ridged and bumpy and rough.

"You got a problem?" He asked. He started to move to get up then, his hands digging into the sand on either side of him as he prepared to stand, but I thought quickly enough to calm him down.

"No problem, pal. Just curious is all. That skin of yours must come in handy out in

the wastes, eh?"

"Yes..." He sat back down then and drew his hands in front of him around his knees. I supposed that most people must think him a freak or a mutie, like those seen wandering lost in the wastes; defects and rejects of society because of what the radiation and ultranitrous had done to them and their bodies. I'd seen a few of them after I'd left Heaven and most of the time they left me alone. On a rare occasion they'd speak with me, surprised at how unafraid I was of them, but I figured that as long as they weren't attacking me, there was no reason for me to attack them. "You... You're not afraid of me then?" He continued.

"Nope. Should I be?"

"Most people are... They think me a freak or a monster and cast me out..."

"No reason for that now, is there? I'm Abadon," I held out my hand. "And you are...?"

"Kilovani," he said. He shook my hand and I could feel the leather skin all but crawl against mine. It wasn't the prettiest sensation, but so much of the world now was ugly, and I'd gotten used to that fact.

"Good to meet you, Kilovani." I said. About that time the tall, strong, stranger came up to us and sat next to the lizard-man. I kept my eye on his knife, but he made no motions towards it and I let my guard relax for the moment. He introduced himself to the both of us and also didn't seem to have any revulsion for Kilovani, which made him OK in my book.

"So what brings you two around these parts?" He asked. Kilovani and I looked at each other, wondering who would go first. I figured none of us knew anything about each other anyway, so I started. I told them about my job for the company, delivering spice through the mountains and how I was just waiting until I could go get my club from the blacksmith before continuing on to bigger and better things. Kilovani didn't say much, only that he was a wanderer in the wastes like the rest of us and Tommy, the tall one with the knife told us his story.

"I grew up in the mountains, where there's still fresh water and green trees. When the blasts hit, I hid out up there surviving on whatever I could get my hands on, and after a few years decided to come down and see what had happened to the world. I joined up with these people as they were on the run from a raider attack that wiped out their village last week and we were hoping to find some help here in Redding, but they won't let us in

the town. Now we don't know what to do or where to go, and our supplies will be used up in just a few days. I don't suppose you boys have any ideas, do you?"

I was about to tell him no, when Felix ran up to me panting and out of breath.

"Abbie! You have to... Come with me quick... There's a gentleman... Map... It's too good to pass up..." Felix was cryptic enough when he could speak normally, now, speaking in between breaths, he was even harder to understand than usual.

"Doc, calm down. What's up? What is so important?" I asked. The word 'map' stuck out in my mind, but I couldn't remember why.

"The gentleman in the bar! The one with the map to the old buried and abandoned military base! He's willing to part with it in trade! Come quickly before somebody else takes him up on his offer!"

I thought for a second about it, and as I turned towards the fire I saw the tribe of people spread out in front of me. A whole village of people who were run out of their homes, on the run from raiders, not a friend in the world and not even allowed inside the town to get fresh supplies. I had an idea, but I didn't want to tell Felix just yet, thinking he'd spoil it before I could even finish saying it.

"All right Doc, we're coming." I motioned to Tommy and Kilovani and said "Come on, you'll want to be in on this, I'd bet." They got up and started coming with us when Felix stopped and blocked their way.

"What do you all think you're doing? I asked Abbie to come with me, not the lot of you! Where do you think you're going?" Before either of them could respond I spoke up.

"Doc, this is Tommy and Kilovani. New friends of mine, and new traveling companions. If you want me in on this little shindig, they're coming too. Any problems with that, guys?" I looked over my shoulder and saw them both shake their heads.

"No problemss from me," said Kilovani.

"I'm in," came the quick reply from Tommy.

"See doc? We're all one big party now. Let's go." Felix looked disgusted, but knew that the odds were even less in his favor now than they were before and didn't put up even the slightest argument. He led us back into the city and back to the watering hole where we first saw the drunk, who was now sitting in the booth Felix and I had shared earlier in the evening. I could tell that Felix had kept him well-juiced up because he was barely

sitting upright in the booth and had several empty bottles in front of him. Felix slid into the booth on one side of him, while Tommy, Kilovani and I sat on his other side.

"You see, sir?" Felix began. "These are the gentlemen I told you about. We're all very interested in this map of yours, if we may see it perhaps?" The drunk took a folded up paper out of his breast pocket and whipped it open with one hand, nearly tearing it at the creases where it was so worn thin you could almost see through it. He laid it out on the table and smoothed it out with his hand.

"Yeah," he started. "You see this here?" He pointed to a random spot on the map that looked like any other part of it to me. I never really learned anything about map reading or what all those squiggly lines on them mean, but Felix knew it right off and stared intently at the spot under his finger. "This is here. This is Redding, where we are now. Currently. This place is this place, where we are."

"Yes yes, we see. Now please continue." Felix didn't even want to put up with this guy's drunken ramblings so I could tell right away that the map was either legit, and Felix just wanted to get it away from him, or the guy was full of shit and Felix wanted something else out of him.

"Well from here, you go down this place here. S'a rock thingie... Like a cut. A river... No, a ravine. Yeah, so you go down this ravine, and you get to this place where you see a cave on the side. Tha's the entransh." He traced the route with his finger as he spoke, but I still had no idea what this map was really telling us. He could have drawn a line through a river or a nest of radscorpions and I wouldn't have known it. Tommy and Kilovani didn't look like they could follow it either, but Felix seemed to know all about it and was following the guy's hand with his eyes.

"And that's where we'll find the abandoned military base?" Felix asked.

"Yeah. S'a redoubt. Readout. Re... Yeah, a base."

"And there are supplies and such there?" Felix was starting to look hungry, and it was making me nervous.

"Hoyeah... Lots and lo'ss of 'em. I'd get 'em myself, but I got no way to get there and no way to get the stuff back to sell it anywhere. I'll sell you the map tho..." He drifted back in his seat and his eyes half-closed. I thought he was going to pass out but Tommy brought him around again.

"So what kind of supplies can we expect to find in this old base?" He was starting to look interested as well, which laid some of my fears to rest about Felix, but the look in his eye was startling to me. Felix looked like a starving man looking at brahmin steaks roasting over a roaring grill... It was out of character for the old man, and it was making me edgier every moment it went on.

"Ho... You can find shtuff like gunsh, and ammununi... Ammunitishi... Bullets. Pro'lly some food in there, that's pro'lly good and worth schecking out..." Kilovani and Tommy both looked over at me, waiting for my next move when Felix spoke up again. "So how much would you like for this map, dear sir? I'm afraid we don't have much to offer you, as we are all simple, weary travelers in this world, much like yourself." He looked at the rest of us with a look that screamed "keep your damn fool mouths shut," but Tommy must have missed it. In fact, he leaned in close to the table and motioned for Kilovani and I to do the same. When we were all huddled close he said what was on his mind.

"Look, this thing is perfect for the tribe out there. We can all go, clean it out of whatever monsters live in there now, grab whatever supplies we want as payment, and then leave them to it. They can set up their homes inside of there, they'll be protected from weather, storms, radiation, and whatever else you can think of. I'm sure there'll be enough supplies in there to last them long enough until they can set up farms or whatever on their own. What do you guys think?"

I was surprised at this because I was thinking the exact same thing. I wasn't ready to settle down yet, but I couldn't resist the appeal of military hardware in good, working condition. There was surely enough in there to even leave some for the tribe so they could defend themselves once they were in and living there... Seemed like the perfect opportunity for all involved (and it never hurt to have a home to go to when you needed a place to rest. Setting up this abandoned base for this tribe would not only win us their respect and eternal love, but also get us all a place to relax and live comfortably whenever we needed it). I nodded in agreement and Kilovani did the same. We leaned back then and Tommy addressed the drunk.

"Tell you what, there's a lot of people in here and we don't want anybody stealing this map from you, so let's go outside and talk about price." Tommy started to get out of

the booth and motioned for the rest of us to do the same.

"Wha' you meen, you want to go outshide?" This guy could probably barely stand, and if Tommy was going where I thought he was going, that was going to make it easy.

"We just don't want anybody around here knowing how much we have on us. You know, we don't want to get robbed ourselves, do we?" He looked at us and Kilovani and I both shook our heads 'no,' but Felix was just staring then. He looked like we were taking his favorite toy away from him, but was still taken aback enough to not speak.

Kilovani and I stood up and slid out of the booth and Kilovani took the drunk by the shoulder and helped him up and out of the booth. Felix finally got up and followed, staying just behind us and glancing around him as if he were expecting us to be followed. We took the drunk into an alley behind the watering hole and when we reached the end of it Tommy took out his knife and held it at the man's chest.

"Now, we'll have that map, if you please." He said.

"What in the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" Shouted Felix. "This isn't part of the arrangement! You're not even a part of our traveling party!"

"You won't be either unless you lower your damn voice and stop drawing attention to us," hissed Kilovani. He unfolded his hands from the recesses of his cloak and revealed a small, but long and wicked looking knife that he pointed at Felix. I found a stick in the alley, probably an old broken chair-leg, and picked it up, just in case...

"No no no... You're shuposed to pay me for thissh map..." The drunk was so far gone he didn't even realize what we were doing.

Until Tommy punched him in the side of the head.

The drunk staggered back against the back-end of the alley and slipped to the ground. Felix started to go for his gun, but Kilovani held the knife even closer and froze him in place. Taken aback by all this, it took me a second to find my voice, but finally I was able to speak.

"What the hell is this?" I hissed. "You plan on killing this guy?"

"Well..." Tommy looked down at the drunk who was trying to get to his feet and failing on every attempt. "Yeah. I mean, who knows how many other people in that watering hole heard him talking about this map? If we let him live, he could tell other people where we are, what we're doing... Do you really want to fight off a band of raiders when we

get there? I don't, and I figure the only way to keep this guy from running his mouth off any more is to just gack him and call it good."

I couldn't argue with his logic, really. I know I sound cold and cruel saying that, but my concern was for the greater good of the tribe. One drunk loudmouth dead in an alley was better than a whole village of families and friends dead out in the wastes in my eyes. Besides, there was the selfish side of it to look at as well... If word did get out (more than it already had) about this place we were fixing to check out, who knows what kinds of problems we'd face once we got there? And I wasn't about to go through all that trouble of getting there and killing whatever creatures had taken up residence, just to hand all the loot over to some jackass who came along after and waited for us to come out.

"Fair enough. Gack him quick and let's get this over with." I reached down and pulled the map out of his hand, kicking his hand away when he reached to take it back from me and Tommy leaned down with his knife to finish the job.

Suddenly I was knocked aside by something heavy, and when I hit the ground I saw Felix standing above me, map in hand (must have grabbed it out of mine when I fell) and with his gun pointed at my face.

Eleven

I hate having guns pointed at my face.

I was about to crack his skull open with my chair-leg when he cocked the gun with his thumb. Tommy stood up and backed away from the drunk then, starting to move towards Felix when he wheeled the gun around and pointed it at Tommy's chest.

"Don't move! I never condoned this course of action and it is hardly in our best interest to murder this man needlessly!" I was surprised that the city guards weren't already on us with Felix shouting like that, but I decided to worry about it when it happened and figure this situation out first. I stood up slowly and Felix whipped the gun back around at me. I saw behind Felix that Kilovani was laid out on the ground groaning and holding the side of his head. His knife was on the ground by his hand and as he picked it up it disappeared back within the folds of his cloak. Felix was now blocking all of our ways out of the alley and holding us at a standstill, waving his gun around at anybody who moved. The

drunk finally stood up and started lurching past us, and Felix let him pass with a stupid “Terribly sorry ‘bout this, old man,” as he passed him by. I looked over at Tommy, who looked at Kilovani and with a slight nod we all moved at once.

I swung my makeshift club around and knocked the gun out of the way, but Felix was holding on to it too tightly for me to knock it from his grip completely. Kilovani caught up to the drunk, grabbed him by the back of his shirt and tossed him back into the alley with the rest of us and Tommy tackled Felix to the ground and tried prying the map out of his hand. Felix was holding on tight and none of us wanted it to rip, which made it just that much harder to get away from him.

The drunk fell into Tommy then and knocked him off of Felix who stood up and ran. I picked up a rock and threw it at him, hitting him in the back of the head (with more luck than anything), but it slowed him down a piece and Kilovani took off out of the alley as well. Tommy rolled over on top of the drunk and stabbed him in the chest, killing him instantly, and less than a second later we were both on our way out of the alley and after Felix.

When we got out into the street we saw Felix about a block away, still running, but Kilovani was nowhere to be found. I picked up another rock and pegged him in the back this time, which made him stop and turn to face us. I still had the chair-leg in my hand, but Tommy had since sheathed his knife. Felix pointed the gun at us and shouted.

“Dammit, this isn’t how it’s supposed to be! You just leave me alone and let me go peacefully and we’ll have no more trouble!” He was clutching the map to his chest and screaming loudly enough that people were starting to come out of their tents and shanties to have a look at us. I didn’t want any local trouble and didn’t think that my connection with the trade company that got us here would get me out of this alive, so I took a more...
Diplomatic route.

“Okay, doc, there’s no need for that here. We’re all going to leave together and settle this outside of town. There’s no need for anybody to get hurt here...”

“You threw rocks at me! My head hurts something fierce!”

“You shoved your gun in my face!”

“You were...” He looked around and realized we had an audience. “You were going to do something absolutely dreadful and I wanted no part in it!”

“Look man,” Tommy started. “You’re either with us or against us. And right now it

looks like you're against us, so let's just take this outside and settle it peacefully now, all right?"

That's when we heard the shotguns cocking.

I looked around and noticed then that the guns along the walls surrounding the city were all pointed inwards... At us. I looked behind me and saw a scruffy-looking man wearing a blue and gray uniform; obviously the captain of the guards. He was holding a shotgun pointed at us, and behind him were four more thugs (also obviously guards) who were also holding assorted guns that were trained on us.

"I don't know what this trouble is, but I don't want it in my city." He said. "You gentlemen can all take it outside of the city walls and finish it there, but you won't continue it here." He waved the gun, motioning for us to leave.

"These men were going to kill me!" Felix shouted.

"You're the one holding the gun!" I countered.

"I don't care who's doing what! All I know is that you're all causing trouble here in my city, and I want it out. Now." He waved the gun towards the gates of the city again and Tommy and I started to leave. Felix was a bit more hesitant.

"I demand that as law officials you do something to these two! They were going to kill me and rob me and... Who knows what else!"

The captain of the guard lowered his voice then, no longer shouting at all. "This is going to be your last warning to leave. If you don't begin proceeding towards the gates of the city, accompanied by my guards here, then we will be forced to take appropriate action to protect the safety and peace of my city." Felix must have seen the look in his eyes, because he finally started trudging towards us and the gates. I took a few more steps towards the exit when I remembered my club, still at the blacksmith's.

"Hey, I don't want any trouble, but can I at least claim my property from the blacksmith? I left something very valuable in his shop and I'd hate to leave it behind..." I was trying to be nice, but the simple truth was that there was no way in hell I was going to leave my club behind. Not after what I'd been through to get that particular weapon, and all the work I'd done on it. They'd have to kill me first (trouble was, I think they would have).

"Here!" I looked towards the voice and the blacksmith was there, standing outside the tent-flaps of his shop with my club in his hand. "We're square now!" He said as he

tossed it to me. I caught it and the guards raised their guns up again, so I quickly hooked it onto my belt and kept walking right out of town. When we'd reached the gates and were through to the outside the captain spoke again.

"You are all hereby banned from the city! My men have all had a good look at you and if you attempt to re-enter you will be shot on sight! If you are seen within the city your life is forfeit immediately." As he said that last bit I noticed the guns up on the wall swiveling towards us and knew what he meant. I headed towards the tribe and their campfires to tell them the good news, with Felix trailing right behind me.

"Just what the hell was the point of that?" He shouted at me, as we arrived at the center fire. I ignored him and looked around for Tommy and Kilovani and found them talking to an old man sitting by a large cart. I walked over to join them with Felix still fuming behind me. As I got closer I could hear Tommy talking to the old man.

"...We'll find this place and clean it out. I'm sure that something nasty has taken up residence in there by now, probably nothing more than some wild dogs and pigrats. A few greater molerats at the most. By the time you and the tribe catch up to us up there we'll have it all ready for you and your people. What do you think?"

"What is this man talking about? Who said that we're going to just give over this treasure-trove of goods to these people?" Felix asked. Tommy stood up then and moved to one side of him, while I moved to his opposite side and unhooked my new club from my belt. It felt good in my hand, slightly heavier than before, but definitely tougher and meaner. Tommy addressed Felix first. I just stood there looking mean.

"These people have been run out of the last three towns they have set up. Their farms have been destroyed, their women and children raped and murdered, their men taken and sold off into slavery. This tribe of people once numbered in the hundreds, and now their down to this handful you see here. You don't need that base, I don't need that base, but if these people don't get safe haven somewhere then their entire fight through life will have been for nothing. We're going to that base. We're going to clean it out and explore it until it's safe to go in. Then we're giving it over to these people." Tommy had a hardness to his voice that I didn't think him capable of, but was glad to hear. He was a bit older than me and must have seen more in life than I'd been through and it showed. Felix picked up on it too and started to shrivel in place.

"But... You're not part of the group! Abbie and I have already been through hell together! We came here together and we're ready to press on to further adventures together! Right Abbie?" He looked at me for support, but I just shook my head.

"I'm with Tommy here, doc. You and I don't need it as we're all obviously capable of taking care of ourselves and finding something else out there to sustain us. These people need this old base more than we need anything else right now, and I'm helping them get it. Like Tommy said before, if you're not with us, you're against us." I hefted my club up onto my shoulder then and Tommy drew his knife out. It made a sound like metal on stone as it slid out of his sheath which scared Felix even more because his eyes got even bigger than they usually were as he stared at the dagger in Tommy's hand.

"Well, how will you get there? Neither of you know how to read a map, do you? I'm the only one with any cartography skills here, and I've got the map!" He reached behind him, patting at his pocket for the map, but it was no longer there. Suddenly Kilovani came out of the shadows towards us holding the map.

"You mean this map? I'm sure we can figure something out on it. At least enough to get us where we're going." He smiled then, and while neither Tommy or myself were bothered by it, something about the way his reptile-like lips parted around his teeth scared Felix even more than he already was.

"Well... Um..." He sputtered. Finally Felix threw up his hands and started backing away from us. "Fine then! If that's the way it's going to be, I'll have no part of it! Good luck finding this place without me! You'll be lost within a day and I hope you all die out there in the wastes!" He stomped off around the side of the city and was lost in the darkness.

Twelve

The remaining three of us sat down then to look at the map that Kilovani had lifted off of Felix. Kilovani opened it up and we stared at it for a few minutes, trying to figure out what all the different-colored lines meant and which direction was up. By the firelight we had we couldn't see very much, and then someone came and stood in front of it, blocking our light.

"Dammit, can you please move?" I said without looking up. "We're trying to figure this thing out." I imagine we must have looked pretty foolish then, three grown men

huddled around a piece of paper on the ground like it was a power-generator or something deep and extensively crafted instead of the wrinkled sheet it was.

"For one thing, you're looking at it upside-down. Once you get that sorted out, the big red dot with the word 'Redding' next to it signifies the town, and I'd imagine that blue triangle a little ways southwest of it is the military base you've all been speaking of."

Tommy, Kilovani and I all turned to see who was doing the talking and it was the old man, elder and leader of the tribe. He was standing tall now, looking little like the withered old man he was just a few minutes ago. This spark of hope for his people was making him strong again, you could just see it in the way he stood there.

"My son Rav will go with you. He too knows how to read maps and knows the area well around here. When will you leave?"

Tommy smiled as I answered him. "We'll leave first thing in the morning. The four of us should be able to reach this place in just a few days, right?"

The old man looked at the map for a second. "Yes, I'd say the four of you, traveling light and with little to no resistance along the way, should be able to reach it in two days if you travel fast, three if you don't push yourselves. The rest of my people and I will begin preparations to follow you tomorrow and we should be on our way by tomorrow evening. Traveling this way, you should all have about a day to clean out the structure of whatever has taken it over by now, and then we will arrive and set up new homes inside. In exchange for your efforts, you will be allowed to take with you whatever you can carry, are we in agreeance?"

I extended my hand to him as I stood up, and he took it and shook it with a strength I didn't think he had. "I'm for you, pops. Tommy? Kilovani? You boys with me?"

Tommy was already nodding his head. "I'll be happy to help you, Rahl." ("So that's what the old man's name is." I thought). Kilovani was standing up as well and extending his leathery hand towards Rahl.

"You have accepted me instead of turning me to the wastess. I am grateful and will gladly lend my strength to this expedition." Rahl shook his hand, not even flinching at the touch. I liked this old man and his newfound conviction, and didn't want to let him down. He had a cool strength to him that could only have come through years of hardship without ever giving up for the count, and that means a lot in this world. When so many things keep

kicking you in the guts out there, my already hard-earned respect goes to those not doing the kicking, but those who keep getting back up after the kick.

We bedded down for the night and gave the map over to Rav, who slept in a wooden cart with his father, two brothers, and a raggedy dog that looked more like a mutierat than anything else. Tommy had some actual rations with him that he split up and shared with as many as could reasonably go around while Kilovani looked like he was cooking some lizards on a stick over the fire. It was then I realized that I probably should have picked up more provisions while I was still allowed in the town, but I've been hungry before. I had plenty of water to last me (at least a week's worth) and food could be come by easily enough (or so I thought).

When Kilovani saw that I wasn't eating he offered me one of his lizards. "Isn't that, like, cannibalism to you?" I said as I took it off the stick. I was just trying to lighten the mood out in the darkness of the wastes, but I guess he missed the joke. As soon as I had pulled the lizard off of the stick, he whipped it up towards my eye, barely missing me.

"Hey!" I said. "Knock it off! You could have put my eye out with that thing!"

"Don't... Don't make fun of the way I am..." He said. "That iss not cool."

"Sorry, mate. Didn't mean anything by it. You're going to have to learn to watch that temper of yours... Might get you into trouble out here." I wasn't looking for trouble with the guy, but we were still far from being what I call 'friends,' and in the meantime I wasn't about to put up with any shit from anybody who wasn't a friend. He hissed at me then (or he might have been just drawing a breath through those leathery lips and reptilian tongue) and rolled over, covering himself with his cloak and falling asleep. I glanced to the other side of the fire and saw Tommy doing the same, wrapping himself in a camouflaged parka and sleeping sitting upright, looking almost like a small tent with his head sticking out the top. Undoubtedly his hand was on the massive knife he had strapped to his leg, but in those days we lived in, that was exactly as it should be.

The morning came faster than I expected. Rav shook me awake gently enough and when I lifted my head I saw that Kilovani and Tommy were already up and packing their things together. I skipped breakfast and went over to the caravan's main cart where I saw they had a water tank on the back and were filling up people's canteens. I took out my water jug and opened it up, hoping to fill it for the trip when the man running the spigot

stopped me.

"And what do you think you're doing?" He asked. Several other people were now gathering in line behind me, holding their small canteens in front of them.

"I'm getting some water for the trip. I'm not going out there without some fresh supplies," I said. The crowd gathered behind me was starting to get antsy.

"We're not filling that thing up for you, we have to ration this out so that everybody gets some."

"Hey, look pal, I'm about to go find you people a fresh place to live where you can have all the water you want," I lied. "Now I'm not stepping one foot into this journey without enough water to last me."

Rav came over then with his father Rahl and stood beside me. They were flanked on both sides by Killovani and Tommy, also holding canteens no bigger than the rest of them.

"Alexander," said Rahl, "These men are to fill up their canteens as they wish from our supplies," he started. I moved up to the tank and held my jug up to the spigot and waited for Alexander to open it up. "Except this man here." Rahl continued, pointing to me.

"What?" I asked. "You're saying you're not going to give me water, but you'll hand it out freely to Tommy and Killovani there?" I couldn't believe it. Once again, here I was about to embark on another quest for someone else and even these poor saps were refusing to lend a hand to their own cause.

"Please understand sir," said Rav, "we're not denying you water. It's just that you can carry so much more with that than the rest of us, and we are unfortunately not in a position to give anyone more than they absolutely need." I looked down at my uncollapsed jug and realized that, at five gallons, it did seem a bit much. My pride was still stinging though.

"Look, fill this up and we'll have more than enough water for everybody on the trip the whole way there. We're going to be three days, four tops right?" Rav and Rahl looked at each other and Rahl nodded. "So there you go! Fill up Tommy and Killovani's little canteens there and when they run out I'll still have some left for all of us to fill from. Sound like a deal to you fellows?" I turned to Tommy and Killovani and they nodded slightly, obviously not wanting to miss out on the trip over a little water issue.

Rahl looked at me and then up at Alexander who was still hovering over the faucet expectantly. "Very well," Rahl said, "we will fill your jug halfway so that you may keep your party in good supply for much of the trip. That is all we can spare, at the moment. You are still welcome to refuse the assignment."

I wasn't about to miss out on the chance to raid an old military base for the reward of "anything I could carry," so I nodded and held my jug up to the tank again, not raising a fuss when it was only half full and Alexander shut off the water.

Tommy and Killovani followed suit, filling their canteens up to the brim and capping them before tucking them away. Tommy carried his on his belt and Killovani deposited his in a knapsack he was carrying over one shoulder. We waited for Rav and Rahl to say their goodbyes and headed off away from the sunrise, traveling west into the unknown.

Thirteen

We walked for a long time in silence, periodically taking lead and following Rav or bringing up the rear and watching the horizon for signs of trouble. The first day passed without anything happening and we stopped when it was well dark out. I offered one of my firestarters up to the cause so we could get some light and cooking going and Tommy was able to scrounge up more firewood than I would have expected he could find in the wastes. Soon enough we had a cozy little fire going and we took up seating on all sides of it. Killovani took another dried lizard out of his pack and skewered it to roast over the fire. Tommy pulled out an opened pack of rations to finish off and Rav had some biscuits that he nibbled on in silence. I went to get my own food and realized that I had little to nothing to eat, having been thrown out of Redding so quickly. I groaned and Rav and Tommy looked up at me.

"What's the matter?" Asked Tommy.

"Just short on food, that's all. I'll have to try and hunt something down," I said standing up. I didn't know what I'd find out here, but I wasn't about to continue on this trip hungry.

"You'll never find anything out there at this hour," Tommy said. "Besides, we need to stick close together and stay by the fire in case anything comes hunting for us. Here," he

said, handing some of his rations over the fire, “chew on this. It’s not tasty, but it’s filling.” I inspected the contents of the pack he handed me and saw that there was half of a can of something resembling meat, and a stale cracker. I spooned some of the ‘meat’ onto the cracker with my finger and tasted it. Not bad, but unidentifiable which was probably for the best. I ate the rest of the cracker, and when that was gone Rav handed me half of a biscuit to put the rest of the ‘meat’ on. The biscuit tasted like it was a thousand years old, but it was soft enough once you sucked on it for a little bit, and with the ‘meat’ on it it tasted no different than I imagined a real biscuit would taste. Killovani said nothing and just waited for his lizard on a stick to finish cooking over the fire. When it was done I reached into my own pack and took out some of the cooking spices I had saved from my last mission and passed them over to him.

“Here man, try these on there. It’ll help the flavor.” I said as I handed the vials of spices to him. He looked at them for a moment before uncapping the first and sniffing at it, getting a noseful of pepper in the process. He sneezed (off to the side, thank gods) and re-capped it, handing it back. “No thank you... Thiss will be jusst ffine...” he said, tearing a leg off of the lizard and eating it straight. I shrugged and tucked the spices back into my pack and laid my head down on it like a pillow.

We sat in silence for a little while, just watching the flames burn and flare into the clear night sky. There wasn’t a cloud in sight (there rarely ever was anymore), and the stars stretched on farther than my mind could comprehend. There was a gentle wind blowing, keeping the night from getting too warm while making the fire seem all the more comfortable as it burned. Nobody was saying anything, just staring into the fire, but I supposed we all had our own things to think about. Personally, I was in it for the goods and the reputation. Bullets and real guns were invaluable in the wastes as the concept of an instant kill was almost unheard of. If I could get my hands on a real gun and some ammunition for it, I’d be able to trade my way onto a mule, or maybe even a horse! Not to mention the stim-paks that would be leftover in the base’s medical bays, or the food from the cafeteria. I figured I could carry out quite a bit and trade my way into some good, long-lasting supplies to keep me going out here. Hell, if word of this whole escapade got out I might just be able to make my way back home to the welcome and treatment I’d always deserved (but inevitably went to my brothers).

Rav was obviously thinking about the future he and his people could set up for themselves in an old base like that. For a hearty tribe of nomads, as they were, I was certain that they could do well in a place like that. Once they found a supply of fresh water, they'd be sheltered against the elements far better than by anything they could construct for themselves, and could probably live for centuries in peace. Should trouble arise, they could always just pull up from outside of the base and retreat within, sealing themselves in until whatever trouble had arisen has passed. I could tell that they weren't warriors or fighters at all, and there's nothing wrong with that (aside from the fact that they would forever be targets to the bullies and raiders that roamed the lands freely and took whatever they could by force). That night I looked at Rav and hoped that I could do that for these people... Give them a home that they could call their own and stay in once and for all without having to constantly fear attack or destruction at the hands of whatever gang was passing through.

I looked over at Tommy then who was staring into the fire as if he were measuring the flames. I wondered about him and where he came from, and mostly how he came to be linked up with the tribe, but we'd only known each other a day or two and I didn't want to seem too invasive by asking a bunch of personal questions. He was younger than me by at least a few years and by the look of him had had an easier time growing up. He really knew what he was doing out in the wastes, and I thought that he may have even spent his entire life on the outside of big cities like Heaven. Living off of the land and learning to do all of the outdoorsy stuff that I never had the luxury of exploring while I was growing up in the slums. With a little luck, Tommy could teach me some of what he knew so that I too could live in the wastes without worrying about how to eat or where I could find a cup of water from time to time.

Killovani was asleep, and wrapped up in his cloak so that he was totally hidden from view. Here was the real riddle... Was he born like that, or did it develop while he grew up? Was it natural or did he just live too close to a rad-site as a child, or did he fall into a glowing pool of bad water (or something else) that caused him to look and talk like the lizards he so readily munched on? I wondered if I'd ever get the chance to find out.

I lay back on my pillow and pulled my own cloak tight around me. I left one hand on my club, clipped to my belt reassuringly, and closed my eyes, still seeing the uncountable

stars in the sky above me.

The fire was down to coals, but still burning, when I awoke in the morning. Tommy was cleaning up the campsite, using his cloak to sweep over the places where he and the other had been laying last night, leaving no trace of how many we were or where we had been. Once I woke up he looked over at me and spoke.

“Need the fire for anything?”

“Nah.” I replied, and instantly he was kicking the coals around and stomping them out. As I got myself together and took a drink from my jug, Rav pissed on the coals that Tommy had missed and scattered them with his foot as well.

I could understand not wanting people to know we were there and how many we were, but the amount of trouble these guys were going through unnerved me a bit. Did they know something I didn’t? Were we being followed already? And where was Killovani? I hadn’t seen him since I woke up.

Almost as if he were reading my mind, Rav spoke up. “We’ve got to clean away as much trace of us as possible, in case someone comes after us. My father was able to study the map and learn the way here so that we could keep the map with us and it wouldn’t fall into anybody else’s hands, but we still must be careful. These lands are notorious for raiders...” I knew he was speaking from experience. “The scaled-one has gone on a little ways ahead. We’ll be entering a canyon soon and he volunteered to go ahead and make sure there wasn’t anything waiting for us. We should catch up with him shortly if we hurry after him.” I nodded and got my stuff together, a relatively short exercise since I had either slept on or was wearing everything I had, and we set off as soon as I was ready.

I felt both peeved and a little sorry that I had slept so late... I didn’t want to be bringing the party down or slowing us up at all, and I also wished that they had woken me up with the rest of them so that I knew what was going on from the start. I decided not to mention it unless they let me sleep late again, and in the meantime we went after Killovani.

He wasn’t far ahead and Rav was right in saying that we’d catch up to him shortly. The three of us jogged up to him and he turned as we approached, waving us down. He was standing at a place where the ground was beginning to separate from the walls of the canyon we’d be entering, the path sloping away at a sharp angle while the rest of the

ground rose up on either side of it. The canyon was about twenty feet across at the start and looked like it stayed fairly wide throughout, although we could only see as far ahead as the first sharp bend in the path.

"Why can't we just walk along the top of the canyon?" I asked.

"Too dangerous. There are many paths through these canyons, and if we're on top we'll never make it in time, we'd have to follow all of them to their ends before getting back on track. Also, in this weather, we're better off in the shade afforded us by the walls." Said Tommy. It was the most I'd ever heard him say in one go, and I was visibly surprised because he saw me and responded. "I heard Rav and Rahl talking about it before we left." He said and grinned. Rav smiled too and threw his head in the direction of the canyon, beckoning us to follow him. Killovani went first after Rav, then Tommy and I walking next to each other.

The canyon walls rose up around us and soon the sun was blocked by them. The shade felt good, but the canyons formed a wind tunnel of sorts and occasionally we were hit by gusts of wind that blew sand and grit into our faces. We walked for half the day this way, and took refuge behind a rocky outcropping when we stopped for lunch. Nobody ate much, but we rested our feet and drank a little bit of water while we hid from the wind and the sand. We only stayed there a few minutes, as we were all anxious to get to the old base as fast as we could, and soon enough we were shielding our faces from the burning of the wind and the dirt.

We traveled slowly for a while, hoping for the wind to die down when we rounded a corner into dead stillness. We all stopped, questioning what it was that killed the wind so fast when Killovani decided to move on.

"I'm not waiting for it to start again..." He said. "Let's get moving before it picks up." He took a few steps forward and I followed. Not out of any burning desire to get moving again, but simply to keep the party as close together as possible. Tommy was right behind me and we'd only taken a few steps when I looked back and saw that Rav hadn't moved, but was waiting at the bend in the canyon where we noticed the wind stopped.

Then Killovani screamed.

Fourteen

I did what was only natural to me when someone starts screaming and tucked and rolled towards the side of the canyon as fast as I could, but mid-roll I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my back and found my movement stopping before I was even halfway through the maneuver. I tried standing up and found myself screaming as I was pulled down again by something in my back. I looked around to see what I was caught on and found a long ropelike vine coming out of the ground and dug under my armor at the small of my back. It burned slightly where it was digging into my skin, but other than that there was nothing. I tried standing again and once it reached the end of its slack it recoiled, as if to pull me into the ground. I screamed in pain and grabbed the tendril close to the ground to try and prevent it from pulling me down further and held it fast. While I had it steadied I took a look around to see how the others were faring.

Killovani looked like he was sawing at his foot with a knife, and Tommy looked like he was digging into his thigh with that massive knife he wore on his hip. Rav, unlike the rest of us, was standing perfectly still, just watching the spectacle unfold in front of him. Without waiting for things to get worse, I reached into my knapsack and tried to find any sort of cutting tool I could and ended up pulling out an awl that I had swiped from my father's shop back when I was on the run from Heaven. I stabbed at the... Thing dug into my back and was able to break it apart with a few good saws at it. The slack from the release felt good, but I still had that thing buried into my spine, it felt. I looked around again and Killovani was laying on the ground, holding his foot but Tommy looked okay, having taken his headband and wrapped it around his wound to staunch the bloodflow. Rav, meanwhile, was hunched down low over the ground, looking at the rocks.

"Hey Rav! What are you doing way the hell over there! Get over and help Killovani!" I shouted at him as I started to walk towards Killovani myself but Rav stood bolt upright and shouted back "Don't move!"

I froze in place, one foot on the ground and the other hovering in the air. "Why am I stopping?" I asked.

"You can't see them, but there's one just beneath your foot. Take one step backwards and wait for me to come get you!"

I looked at the ground beneath my suspended foot and, just for a second, thought I could make out something like a thorn sticking up between the gravel and rocks. I took the one step backwards, painfully, and waited. I still had that thing dangling out the back of me like a tail, but until we were somewhere safe I didn't want to start digging around in my own back with my awl just in the hopes of getting that damn thing out of there.

I watched as Rav carefully made his way to me, stepping around invisible markers that I knew must have been more thorns from whatever it was that was trying to ensnare us. When he made it over to me he took a quick look at my back.

"We have to dig that out as soon as we can."

"Duh." Was all I could think to say.

"No, you don't understand, these things are poisonous. If we don't get it out of your spine in a few minutes you're going to go numb from the waist down as your spine starts to disintegrate. Once it's eaten it's way through the vertebrae it's trying to latch onto right now, it'll eat it's way up your back..."

"Okay! I get the picture! Just get us the hell out of here first!"

Killovani was still curled up on the ground, moaning, and Tommy had to have been listening as Rav and I were shouting at each other because he was holding dead-still. Rav looked around, hunched down and checked out the ground again, then stood up and said "Follow me. Step where I step."

He started tracing his way through the rocks, walking around the thorns that I was sure were there but couldn't pick out from the rest of the ground until we reached Tommy, who was a little closer than Killovani was.

"We've got to get to Kill over there. He's hurtin'."

"How bad?" Rav asked.

"He had to dig one of those things out of his own goddamn foot, how bad do you think it is?"

"Good point." I said.

I'm sure we looked more than a little ridiculous walking through the field that day... Three grown men, two of us strapped and loaded for ultimate survival in the wastes, and there we were tip-toeing through the field like little girls. We reached Killovani and his foot was little more than a bloody mess through the rags that served as shoes out in the wastes.

Tommy heaved him up onto his shoulder and carried him the few more yards until Rav told us it was safe to walk freely again. Tommy immediately set Killovani down and got to work unwrapping his foot and checking the injuries, which were bloody but not as bad as they first appeared. Rav set to work on me and digging that spiny vine out of my back.

“Good, it hasn’t gone too deep. I should be able to get it out pretty easily,” he said as he pulled a small pocket knife out, folded it open and started to lean in.

“Hang on a second! Do you know what you’re doing?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ve had to dig these things out of more than one of my people before. Just hold still though... This is really going to hurt.”

He wasn’t kidding.

Fifteen

Rav dug into my back and I’d like to say I took it like a man, but that just wouldn’t be true. I screamed like... Well, like a man digging into his back with a knife trying to dislodge a poisonous thorny tendril. When he finally got the whole thing out he threw it back towards the field it came from. When it hit the ground, we all saw what happened to us. Three more tendrils shot up out of the ground around it, ensnaring it and pulling it down. The three live shoots fought over the new meat and tore it in three before each one pulled it’s bit o’ meat down with it. The only word that came to our minds was “Eww...”

We tried pressing on further into the day, but Killovani’s foot was slowing us down. Tommy was a trooper, toughing it out on his bad leg and my back wasn’t so bad since the spine was out of it, but Killovani inexpertly carving his own foot up really got to him. After only another hour or so of hiking through the canyons, the walls on either side of us spread out considerably and trees were seen growing in the cracks. By the time Killovani couldn’t walk anymore we were in a wide canyon with trees on either side of us. The rock walls were far enough apart that it didn’t seem like a canyon anymore, but looking up we could still see the top of the bluff above us, which was reassuring. You never knew when a nasty dust storm or firestorm would come rolling in, and we didn’t want to be caught out in the open should that happen. Luckily, the skies were clear, but having the walls around us made us feel just a little more secure.

We set up camp and got a fire started. Tommy pulled a well-sized branch off of one of the trees and lashed his mighty knife to it with one of his boot laces, making quite a serviceable spear to hunt with. He said he'd be back in a little while and disappeared into the trees. Rav checked on Killovani's foot and found that the wound had closed up almost completely, but blood and pus was still oozing out of it.

"Want me to cauterize that for you?" I asked. "I've done it before. Just a quick tap with a hot blade and it'll close up easy."

"No thankss. Part of my... Condition allows me to heal rather quickly. I sshould be fine by morning." He pulled his cloak around him tighter and grabbed his canteen. He unscrewed the cap and put it to his mouth, dripping the last few drops onto his tongue. "Damn..." He hissed. "Doess anybody elsse have any water? I seem to be out."

Rav and I checked our own supplies then and found that we too were short, with only about a half a canteen full between the two of us. The military base was still at least another day away and even if we drank sparingly we'd all be uncomfortably thirsty by the time we got there. "Want me to go scout around for some water," I asked?

"Maybe. Do you know any way to actually find water, or were you just going to go stomping through the brush looking?" Rav replied.

He had me there. I'd heard stories about people using sticks crossed over each other, or something like that, to find water but I had no experience with it, having never even seen it done.

A pair of dead rabbits flew into the light of the fire and landed at Rav's feet then as Tommy came striding through the trees. "Found us some dinner. Anybody know how to cook rabbit?"

Rav laughed and started cleaning the game with his knife. As Tommy joined us around the fire he pulled his own water bottle out and drank from it loudly, gulping down water and spilling a bit around his face.

"Where'd you find the water?" I asked.

"Spring... 'Bout ten minutes walk from here in that direction." he said pointing towards the Northeast. "Not much coming out, barely more than a trickle, but set your canteen underneath it and let it fill for about thirty minutes and it'll be full. The water's clean and cold and crisp. Feels good." He said, gasping between drinks.

I was about to gather up our bottles to go fill up, but Killovani stood up first. "I'll go... Who needsss water?" I handed him my collapsable jug and just told him to fill it for half an hour like Tommy said to, thinking we'd be all set for an hour and a half worth of waiting. "You want to take some of this rabbit with you?" I offered.

"Thankss, but I'll wait until I get back. Don't like raw meat..." He said as he wandered into the woods in the direction Tommy had pointed out.

We sat in silence, watching the dusk fall and the stars come out as night came upon us. We were all tired, I could tell just by looking around. Rav seemed happy enough watching the rabbits cook, but Tommy had sacked out almost as soon as Rav tore into the rabbits to prepare them. He wasn't asleep yet, but his eyes were only half-open as he laid on his pack like a pillow. The pain in my back had subsided a bit and was now just a dull throbbing, but it was enough that I couldn't sit comfortably in any position for more than a few minutes. I tried shifting positions several times, but no matter how many times I thought I'd be comfortable the pain would inevitably creep up from my beltline edging it's way up my spine and focusing on the spot where the barbs had actually gone into my back. Rav must have noticed me squirming because he finally let out a sigh and tore a strip of cloth from his cloak.

He unscrewed the cap from his canteen and poured the rest of his water out on it, probably figuring that Killovani would return soon with enough water for all of us. When the cloth was soaked through, he wrapped most of it around his hand and picked up a coal from the fire and wrapped the rest of the fabric around it. He tossed it back and forth between his hands for a minute until it cooled down and handed it to me.

"Here," he said. "Lay down and put this on your back where the pain is worst. It'll help draw out any infections and ease the pain."

I'd been through enough makeshift medicine so far that I took him at his word and balled up my cloak under my chin, laying flat on my stomach. After hitching up my shirt so that the wound was exposed I laid the hot-pack on the spot where I knew the barbs entered and almost immediately felt better. The heat was almost burning at first, but it soon relaxed and soothed the muscles and the pain started to ebb. I felt a trickling down my sides and as I was about to sit up and take a look Rav spoke up saying "That's just some of the poison that the ground-cactus injects into it's victims. The heat is pulling it to the

surface and it's leaking. Don't worry, it's better to let it seep out than cover it up. Is the pain better?"

"Yeah... Yeah it is. Thanks." I couldn't believe how much this kid knew, but growing up in the wastes, constantly being ravaged or attacked or on the run from slavers and bandits teaches you a lot, I suppose. After all, he spotted that "ground cactus" before the rest of us and got us past it without any more injuries, so he obviously knew how to look out for it. City-folk like me would be lunch for beasts and plants like that if it weren't for the likes of Rav, and I was once again glad to have him traveling with us. "How much longer until the food's ready?" I asked.

"Should be done soon. It has to cook all the way through to burn away any radiation and kill anything living inside the meat."

I closed my eyes, intending to rest for just a moment but found myself being gently shaken awake by Killovani, who was now standing over me.

As much as I don't have a prejudice against the muties wandering the land like I do, seeing his face first thing isn't a nice way to wake up. I slid backwards, startled, and had my hand on my club before I knew it. A reflex action, but unintended for my new friends.

Killovani held up his hands peacefully and after a moment I realized where I was and remembered what was going on. "I have water and Rav ssaysss that the food iss ready." Hissed Killovani, not waiting for me to respond before turning to the fire.

The hot pack had gone cold while I slept but my sides were sticky and when I looked I could see trails of moisture down my sides where the ground-cactus's poison had leaked out of the wound. The hole in my back felt worlds better and before I could even ask I heard Rav say "The infection seems to have all been drawn out. Your wound is not as red and swollen as it was before. How do you feel?"

"Much better," I admitted. "Thanks for the help." I scootched myself back towards the fire and could smell the roasted rabbit. After traveling so hard for the day, the smell was enough to make me realize I'd hardly eaten for a couple of days already. Killovani's mixture of spices that he spread over his own rabbit made it even more irresistible and I remembered that I had a few spices of my own. I'd never cooked before (if you can even call heating something over a fire "cooking") and didn't know what cumin was, but pepper was common enough that'd I'd smelled it in the food stalls back home and knew it would

add to the flavor of the meat quite nicely. I tested out the cumin on a bite of rabbit and tasted it, acknowledging the improved flavor with a heavy sigh. Killovani and I both offered to share our spices and mixes, and Rav took a little from each of us but Tommy was perfectly content to tear into his own rabbit the second it came out of the fire. If a fire was unavailable, I don't doubt that he would have happily eaten it raw and kept it down.

After dinner we quenched our thirst, happily knowing that we could refill our supplies in the morning and all laid down. I was about to fall asleep when Tommy mentioned guard duty and I volunteered to take first watch so I could get the most uninterrupted sleep. Watch passed peacefully, and I was nearly lulled to sleep more than once by the sounds of the forest around me. I'd spent all of my life in between the city and the wastes and wasn't sure what to make of the unfamiliar sounds of the forest around me, but it was soothing in its own way and I wondered how many people must have flocked to areas like this before the destruction. It was quiet, with a few animal noises to keep me company, but very settling. If I were older and ready to settle down for a while, I could see myself living quite happily in an area very much like this, and hoped to find another like it when I was ready to have a place of my own.

When a good enough amount of time passed I went over and woke up Tommy, who had volunteered for second watch. He was awake in an instant, alert and ready. I thought about him as I drifted to sleep, wondering how he felt in an area like this since he grew up in the wilderness as a survivor with his family. This must have been quite familiar to him and I had no doubts that the very same sounds that were singing me to sleep wouldn't have the same effect on him.

Morning came all too soon, but was well-received. Rav checked the map while we broke camp and we knew that we would reach the mouth of the cave in about half a day's worth of hiking. From there on in it should be pretty easy to check the place out and send word back to Rav's people that they could come and set up shop inside the military base we were sure to find.

If only we knew what awaited us, we wouldn't have been so eager to set out.

Sixteen

Tommy showed us where the wellspring was and we filled our water supplies about halfway each, replacing what we drank so easily last night. After that, it was nothing but trail and forest ahead until we reached the cave.

The rest of the walk was uneventful. Occasionally we'd see woodland creatures to one side or the other of us, being pretty tame having lived their whole lives without seeing a single human. They took flight or ran away when we got too close, but Tommy assured us repeatedly we were in no danger from these "deer" creatures (as Tommy called them) we met in the wild, although their horns did worry me a bit.

When we finally reached the mouth of the cave, it was a little more than halfway through the day, as we anticipated. We weren't sure how to proceed at this point... Killovani and I wanted to venture directly into the cave, expecting little resistance, but Tommy and Rav wanted to set up camp just outside the mouth of the cave and wait until first light in the morning to head inside. We compromised and while Rav set up a fire and camp, Tommy, Killovani and I decided to venture inside the cave just to find the door to the base.

Rav had the fire going in no time and we all grabbed a torch from it and went in. I held my club out in my other hand, and Tommy had his knife at the ready, and I noticed for the first time that Killovani was carrying a spear with him now. I asked him where it came from and he told me that he had carved it the night before while he had been off refilling our water supplies.

The cave was cool... Cooler than the land outside the cave because absolutely no sunlight reached into the mouth. The walls were slightly damp, but we heard no water dripping from within. I took the lead with my newly improved club in one hand and the torch in the other. Tommy and Killovani flanked me on either side, ready for anything.

Or so we thought.

We first heard them a few yards into the cave. A scream resonated from within, shaking us all up as none of us knew what could make a sound like that. It couldn't be human... A non-mutie human at least, and we were all wondering what sort of terror was waiting for us.

We didn't have to wait long.

I rounded a corner to the left, about fifty yards into the cave and saw a dead-end.

There were some human remains in the far right corner and I went over to them, hoping to pillage the corpse for whatever goods I imagined a soldier from the old world would have on him, but I should have checked the other end of the room. As soon as I bent down over the corpse I felt a squeeze around my waist and was lifted into the air, almost to the roof of the cave, with another inhuman screech coming from directly behind me. I twisted my head around to get a look at what held me and nearly shit myself.

I'd heard legends in the city from travellers and wanderers who had faced terrors like these in the wastes. It was stupid of me, really, to wander into a cave like this without considering the possibility of these things living inside, and now I'd have to face up and pay the price for my ignorance.

Rad scorpions are mutations. According to the Olders of the city, scorpions were once barely the size of a hand, and only the biggest ones at that. Most were even smaller than that and easily dealt with by simply stepping on them. The poison was deadly even in the beforetimes, and I couldn't imagine how powerful it was now. The Rad Scorpion had grown, fed by the radiation and ultra-nitrous in the air so that they were now roughly six feet long from head to the base of the tail, and their tails were another good six feet culed up over their bodies. They still attacked the same as in the beforetimes, grabbing their prey in their claws and stabbing it with their tails until their meal simply stops fighting. Only problem was that now that they're about twelve feet big, their prey has grown as well, and lonely humans were just the right size for a treat.

I saw this one dropping its tail towards me and swung my club around to hit at the bulbous stinger aimed at my face. I batted it away and saw something start to ooze out of the joint where it connected to the rest of the tail. It wasn't squeezing me too hard to begin with, but once I made contact with that tail-end it squeezed something fierce. It's a miracle my ribs held up, but several layers of clothing and gear were between my body and the pincer holding onto me, cushioning the pain. Were I bare-chested when it grabbed me I might just be cut in half by that massive claw.

Tommy dove into the fray with his knife out, stabbing like mad at any area he could reach, but the skin on those things is like armor-plating and Tommy's knife wasn't doing hardly a thing to it but piss it off, as evidenced by it giving me a squeeze every time he hit.

Killovani was right next to Tommy the whole time, trying to stab underneath the

armor with his spear, but he was too far away to get underneath it, and was obviously afraid to get any closer.

"Dammit Van," I shouted. "Get closer! You'll never get underneath those armorshells from that far away!" I grunted with the pain as the pincer closed on me tighter, and nearly took the stinger in the head, but I was able to swing my club around and bat it away once more. More liquid started to spurt from the joint where the stinger attached to the tail and I could see that it was nearly broken off. One more good bat should do it, if that massive pincer didn't cut me in half or crush my ribcage first.

The rad-scorpion reared back then in pain from my last strike, and Tommy dove in, trying to drive his knife into it's face, but he didn't notice that the tail was long enough to reach all the way over it's head. I shouted to him as the tail dove at him, and suddenly he was shunted aside as Killovani threw himself into the path of the stinger, taking a stab in the shoulder. Killovani screamed and I swung my club as the tail pulled back from the strike, this time blasting the stinger off of the tail and across the cave where it bounced off a wall, but the damage was already done. Killovani sank to his knees and quickly the rad-scorpion scooped him up with it's other pincer.

With both of it's pincers occupied and no more stinging-tail, Tommy dove in again, driving his knife between the armor plates where they jointed up over the rad-scorpion's head. The scorpion screamed again as it's legs went limp and the pincers dropped Killovani and me, and it uttered a gurgle as it finally died.

Tommy and I immediately went over to Killovani and tore his shirt open at the shoulder where he'd been stabbed. The wound was ragged and oozing with a light-green pus that we imagined was the poison from the stinger, and Killovani was barely conscious, his eyes glazing over. Tommy heaved him over his shoulder and we both started making our way back to the mouth of the cave where Rav was waiting anxiously.

"What happened," he asked.

"Rad-scorpion. Took all three of us on and caught Killovani in the shoulder with it's stinger. I think he's poisoned," answered Tommy.

"Then we have no time to lose. Do you have the stinger with you," Rav asked as he started tearing the rest of Killovani's shirt off.

I didn't even wait to answer, but ran back into the cave and found the stinger where it

had bounced against the wall of the cave and landed on the ground. I carried it back out to the camp and saw that Rav had re-stoked the fire up to a good roar and Tommy's knife was resting on a rock in the fire, the blade already glowing red.

I handed the stinger to Rav and heard another scream from behind me...

Tommy and I turned to face the entrance to the cave and saw that another radscorpion had followed us out of the cave, and was staring out of the mouth at our fire. Rav picked up a burning hunk of wood and hurled it at the scorpion. The flaming brand bounced off of it's face and it screamed again, backing a few feet back into the cave. Tommy picked up his knife, the blade now glowing nearly white-hot and leapt at the scorpion again while I pulled my club from my belt again and went for it as well.

Tommy and I fought well together, remembering what had just happened with the first scorpion. Neither of us said a word but went right at it like before. I swung my club at the stinger that was looming over the scorpion's head while Tommy used this distraction to get in close and slide his knife in between the armor plates over the scorpion's head. The scorpion screamed again and tried batting and grabbing at us with it's pincers, but we were expecting this and were able to stay out of it's deadly grasp. The scorpion seemed confused then, backing away and halfheartedly striking out with it's tail, afraid to let me connect with it solidly.

It didn't work.

On one of it's weak attempts to skewer Tommy I was able to club the stinger with a backhanded swing that sent the bulb right off the tip of it's tail and into the woods on the other side of our campsite. As the scorpion screamed and turned to face me, Tommy took the opportunity to slide in and drive his still-glowing knife into the head of the scorpion, killing it.

Tommy slid to his knees in front of the scorpion's corpse, exhausted, while I ran back to the campfire to find Rav boiling something in a tin cup on the fire. Killovani looked worse than I'd ever seen him before, sweating terribly and his scaly skin was turning a light shade of gray. When Rav saw me approach the fire he handed me a handful of burning branches and said "Build up a fire at the mouth of the cave. It'll keep any more scorpions from coming out while we're sleeping tonight."

I took the branches and headed over to the mouth of the cave and started pulling

brush from the sides of the entrance to the front, building a small wall around the mouth and lighting it as I went. I reached the spot where Tommy was still kneeling in front of the scorpion and nudged him with my foot. "Come on," I said. "We've got to get this up before any more decide to come out as well!"

Tommy looked up at me with glazed eyes and after a second or two he came around and started helping out. He pulled his knife out of the scorpion's head and started hacking away at more bushes on either side of the cave and piling the branches around the entrance for me to light.

When we had a decent half-circle surrounding the mouth of the cave, glowing in the darkness with low flames, Tommy slid around the piles and back into the cave entrance.

"What are you doing," I asked. I couldn't see him beyond the glow of the fire, but it sounded like he was dragging something around.

"Come in here and help me out with this," he replied from the darkness. I made it around the fire we'd built and saw that he had a rad-scorpion corpse laid out just inside the ring of fire and was hacking at it with his knife. "I got the idea after we killed this one. I'm going to skin it and see if we can't make ourselves some armor of our own out of its plates."

I couldn't argue with that. My chest was still sore from where the one had grabbed me and I was certain that I had some oddly-shaped bruises already forming. I didn't think that my little pocketknife would cut through the skin, so I just started grabbing plates on its back and yanking, tearing them free with a sickening ripping sound each time. The plates seemed to be attached to the muscles themselves, like skin, and it took some work to rip them free. Tommy, on the other hand, was easily sliding his knife underneath them and cutting them loose.

When we had a small pile of good-sized plates, we carried them outside of the cave and Tommy and I got to work. Tommy tore strips of leather from his cloak and heated up his knife to cut holes in the plates for us to lace up. After several hours we had three sets of serviceable chest plates for ourselves, and Tommy used his knife to cut some of the plates into smaller sections, which we attached as shoulder pads.

Light was starting to creep over the horizon before we realized we'd been working all night while Rav kept watch over Killovani. Rav made Killovani drink the bubbling goo

he'd mixed up in the fire and while Killovani's skin was looking clearer, he was still unconscious and sweating a lot.

"Maybe we'd better sleep before going back in there again," suggested Tommy. He laid his armor out next to himself and rolled over, using the remains of his cloak as a pillow.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said. "Who's going to keep watch?"

"I will. I've got to make sure that the antidote took and he doesn't go into shock from the poison," said Rav. He wetted a cloth, the same one he'd used on my back a few nights previously, and laid it over Killovani's eyes. Killovani groaned for a moment, then seemed to relax and sighed. The cool cloth was working double-duty by keeping his eyes covered so he could sleep in the sun, and obviously to cool his head. It seemed to be working well as I heard him start to snore softly after just a few minutes.

Greatful for the chance to sleep while someone else kept watch, I laid down next to my own set of armor, that I could now see was a greyish color with a blood-red tint. As I drifted off to sleep I remember thinking I would have thought it looked good, had it not come at so perilous a cost.

Seventeen

When I next awoke, it was dark again and the campfire was down to coals. The fire we'd built around the mouth of the cave was still going though, casting frightening shadows across the campsite.

Tommy was still sleeping (or, more likely, had woken up and fallen back asleep), but Killovani was sitting up with his canteen in his hands. He was sipping water carefully, but at least he was up and alert. He must have heard me sit up as he looked over at me and spoke.

"Thanksss for pulling me out of there. Between you and Rav, I owe you all my life..." He looked down then, like he was ashamed to have to say it out loud. I saw that Rav was lying next to Killovani sleeping. Killovani followed my eyes and looked at him as well. "He ssstayed awake and watched over me until I convinced him that I would be all right. When he saw me start to drink and not throw it all up, he ssaid I ssshould be okay and went

to sleep almosst inssstantly.”

“Well, he’s more than earned it on this trip,” I said. “And don’t worry about pulling you out of there, I’m sure there’ll be more than enough opportunity for you to do the same for me before we’re clear of this place.”

He smiled a little at that and nodded.

“You want me to take watch for a while so you can sleep some more,” I offered.

“No thankss. I’ve been asleep for the past day and a half, I’m fine. Get some more resst, I’ll wake you up in a few hoursss to watch the camp again before we go back in there.” He nodded at the cave as he said it, and in the firelight his eyes looked deep. I couldn’t tell if he was afraid to go back in, or more determined than ever to clear out the cave and complete our mission, but I didn’t bother to ask. I laid down again and realized that I hadn’t mentioned the armor that me and Tommy had fashioned for him. As I sat up and reached for the set we’d made for him, Killovani spoke.

“I sssaw it. Thanks. Tommy told me about it while you were sstill asleep. With thiss,” he patted the armor, “it’ll be a whole ‘nother story the next time we go in there, eh?”

I smiled and nodded before laying back down and rolling away from the flames around the cave so I could sleep. For a while I laid there awake with my eyes closed. All was quiet except for the occasional sound of Killovani sipping at his canteen. More than once I heard a quick clicking noise and thought that it might be the footsteps of one of the rad-scorpions coming to the entrance of the cave, but Killovani never said a word and I never heard the rad-scorpion’s scream, so I drifted off to sleep to await Killovani’s wake-up call.

Eighteen

It felt like I’d barely slept a few minutes before Killovani was gently shaking me awake. Knowing that he’d be the one to awake me, his face didn’t scare me like it had before and I told him to rest up a bit, as I’d wake everyone up at the first sign of danger.

The sky was a deep blue, just before sunrise, and I heard the faint sounds of birds around me as I sat in the near-darkness. I stoked up the fire a bit to keep it going and added more brush to the fire in front of the cave to make sure that no more scorpions came

out after us. Once while I was doing this I saw a scorpion coming out of the cave towards me. I almost dropped the clump of brush I was holding and shouted at the others, but it stopped a good fifteen feet away and just gazed out at me (or so it felt). Deterred by the fire, the scorpion headed back into the cave, making the same clicking noise I'd heard before falling asleep as its feet hit the stone floor of the cave. Saying a silent prayer to whatever gods were left for the fire, I dropped the clump of brush onto the pile around the cave and went back to the campsite.

When the sun was a few inches over the horizon I decided to wake Tommy up first. Rav was still asleep and he'd worked his ass off taking care of us and I figured he'd appreciate the extra sleep while we were all here and relatively safe. Tommy woke up Killovani who was obviously back to himself and immediately dove into his pack for food. Tommy and I followed suit, whispering to each other as we ate so as to not wake up Rav.

"So what do you figure," asked Tommy.

"I think we should just head back in like before. Now that we know what's in there, we know what to watch for. And we never got a chance to search that body we found, so we should head in that direction first. With luck that dead scorpion kept the rest of 'em out of that section of the cave and we'll be safe until then."

Killovani mumbled through a mouthful of food in agreement.

We checked to make sure that we had our new armor on right and that it fit nice and snug. I have to admit that I felt a lot better wearing it than before, even though it was strapped on tight enough to hurt, pressing against the bruises on my chest.

We grabbed our weapons then and left most of our extra gear at the campsite, figuring we wouldn't need it as we were just going in to kill the rest of the rad-scorpions (we hoped), and we could come and collect it before heading into the base itself. Finally Tommy shook Rav awake and told him we were going in.

Rav stoked up the fire in the camp a little bit and said he would start mixing up more antidote to the rad-scorpion poison, just in case, and wished us luck.

We went around the smoldering bushes we'd set up as a wall in front of the cave, torches in one hand and weapons in another. The cave seemed colder in the morning air, the walls glistening where trickles of water were running down the sides and more shadows dancing on the walls from our torches.

We didn't hear any trace of the scorpions as we made our way back to the section of the cave where the corpse from our first kill still lay. The soldier's corpse was still in the corner, undisturbed and picked clean of flesh (obviously the scorpions had taken care of any edible parts on the man many years previous). Tommy and Killovani stood at the mouth of the side-passage we were in while I went through the corpse.

There wasn't much in his pockets. A few keys (rusted together), a rectangular piece of plastic with a black stripe on one side (no idea what that could have been for), a picture of a pretty girl wearing a dress with flowers on it (which was ridiculous because I could tell from the picture that the fabric she was wearing would NEVER protect her out in the wastes), and still in its holster, strapped to his waist, a very big gun.

I pulled it from its holster and pushed a button I saw on the side of it and a tube of metal came out of the handle, clattering on the floor. "What was that," asked Tommy. "Great big gun," I replied. I picked up the tube and saw that there were bullets in it. There were only three, but that could make all the difference I thought as I slipped the tube back into the handle and slid the gun into the waist of my pants.

The corpse was laying on its front with the left arm curled underneath it. I went to roll it over and saw that the arm that had been underneath the rest of it still had some decaying flesh on it. There were a series of six numbers tattooed on the inside of its forearm and I wondered at their meaning as I snapped the chain around the neck to look at the two metallic rectangles that hung there. The writing on them made no sense to me, but they were obviously made by an expert craftsman because the writing was carved into the metal and I figured it must have taken ages for someone to print so neatly and so small with just a hammer and chisel.

Failing to find anything else, I stood up and we went deeper into the cave.

The cave was deep, twisting and turning until we could no longer see any light from the entrance and our torches provided little light themselves. The only sounds were the crackling from our torches and our own footsteps, echoing off of the walls around us.

We rounded one more corner and saw, at the end of the hallway before us, a huge metallic door, lit by flickering lights on either side of it. Where they were drawing power from I didn't know, but it was obviously starting to fail. The ground was paved now too, concrete on all sides of us... Unfortunately, between us and the door, our prize, were two more

scorpions.

Killovani screamed and launched himself at the nearest one, still angry over what had happened to him the last time we faced these beasts. I yelled at him to stop, but he wasn't listening. He wanted revenge and he was going to have it, odds be damned.

Tommy followed him, and when I saw the second scorpion scuttle forward to join in the fight I threw myself at it, not thinking how stupid it was to take one of these on all by myself.

The second one didn't see me right away, as it was turned to fight with its brother against Tommy and Killovani. I was able to get in a good swat at its tail and saw that the hit connected hard, blood and pus erupting from the split seams at the joint. It screamed then and reared back on its rear legs, exposing its underbelly, but I was too terrified to take advantage of the situation. It threw itself forward, crashing its legs down on the pavement in front of me, rumbling the cave around us.

The breakup knocked me and Killovani off of our feet, but Tommy somehow stayed upright. I looked up in time to see the stinger driving down at my face and rolled out of the way only to hear Killovani scream again. After rolling up and to my feet I chanced a glance in his direction and saw that the first scorpion had him pinned to the floor while Tommy was digging his knife into the joint where its pincer met its arm. I started to move to help them, but the scorpion I had decided to take on myself didn't afford me the chance.

It turned towards me, completely blocking me off from my friends and scuttled forward, its legs clickering madly on the pavement. I knew how they attacked now and was able to beat away one of its pinchers as it made a grab for me and felt the tail brush my back as it tried to spear me again with that poison-sac on its end but missed. I swung upwards at the retreating tail but hit only air, so I turned my attention back to the claw, hammering as hard as I could and hearing a satisfying crack when I connected. The whole arm containing the pincer I was smashing went limp, but that damned tail swung forward again, missing me by inches. The scorpion tried to circle then, trying to bring me within reach of its other claw, but I kept my distance and my focus to the safe side of it and waited for the chance to take out that tail again. When it struck forward for the third time, I was ready and blasted the end off with a satisfying splutch as the tail began to ooze its goo.

With its defenses largely ruined, I gathered the guts to start fighting back more

offensively and was able to get in close enough to start bashing at it's head with my club, each time hearing a louder crack from the scales that were meant to protect it. But that's when I got sloppy.

When I was just about to shatter it's skull I felt the now-familiar crushing sensation over my chest, digging into the bruises and cracked ribs I'd suffered before. The armor I'd crafted from the scorpion scales of the one's we'd killed the night before held well and while the grip was tight it wasn't pinching or cutting, but that didn't stop it from hurting. It felt like this thing was putting all of it's remaining strength into taking me with it and crushing me to death (since it couldn't cut through it's own scales with it's claw).

And then it did something I didn't expect.

It raised me up off of the ground and slammed me back, hard, into the floor, trying to beat me into submission. I hit the ground feet-first, but the scorpion was too strong and my legs buckled beneath me and pain shot up through my boots. I gritted my teeth and tried not to scream, but didn't have to worry much as it then whipped me sideways into the wall of the cave, knocking the wind out of me and tightening it's grip. It shook me up and down then and I would have dropped my club if it hadn't been tethered to my wrist, but I pulled it into my hand and swung down again at the joint, trying to sever this claw from the arm, or at least cripple it like I had with the other one. When I hit the arm, it raised me up and over it's head, trying to keep me out of reach of it's joint, but that was it's fatal mistake. When it slammed me down again I was in a perfect position to swing with it and brought my club down and into the fleshy mass of it's head. It collapsed instantly and released it's grip, spilling me onto the floor face-to-face with it's remains. I tried to breathe for a second only before dragging myself to my feet and going to help Tommy and Killovani, but I found the other scorpion dead as well with Killovani's spear sticking directly out of it's face and Tommy hunched over Killovani again.

"Come on, we know what we need to do," I said and Tommy again pulled Killovani's limp form over his shoulders and we left the cave.

Another restless night, another dose of the sickly concoction brewed by Rav, another close call for Killovani.

"You know, I'm starting to think that we should just leave you out here and bring Rav with us next time," I said as we sat around the campfire and nibbled at scraps of food.

"Fuck you," Killovani smiled in reply, and we smiled with him. Glad to be alive and glad that he was recovering so quickly.

Night began to fall again and Rav stood up to speak. "So do we have a real plan here or what?"

"With luck I'd say the scorpions are all cleaned out, all we have to do now is figure out what's inside beyond the cave," said Tommy. "That last section we went into had smooth walls and floor, that didn't look natural."

"I agree. I think that whatever we're looking for is just past that last bit of cave. If we can get inside the base soon, we'll have it clear by the time your tribe shows up," I said, nodding to Rav.

"Okay then. Tomorrow we'll all go inside together. When we find the entrance to the base I'll wait there for my people while you three go inside and check it out." We nodded in agreement and started preparing our gear. We'd used up much of our food over the previous three days of travel and mishaps in the cave and were hoping to find something edible inside, but didn't really know what to expect. Our water supply was full and clear as ever, so while we felt the pangs of hunger, we were still fresh-headed - you'd be amazed at how long you can go without food as long as you're not thirsty.

When the time was right we four ventured into the cave again, this time keeping Killovani in the back and repeatedly reminding him to stay there and not just throw himself at whatever monstrosity we'd encounter. We crept through the caves until we reached the smooth-surfaced walls and floor again and shortly after, the door. Ignoring the stink of the dead scorpions we moved in close to try and open it, but the door was steel and didn't budge. On one side, however, was a small black panel with buttons underneath. The numbers one through nine, and a strange pair of symbols that looked like a flash and another that looked like a box, but the lines were too long on all four sides. Tommy moved closer and tapped the black panel and suddenly a green light on it said "Enter Passcode," and ended with a blinking green box.

"What's a passcode," I asked.

"No idea," said Killovani.

Tommy just shrugged and started pressing buttons. After every six numbers the panel would go blank for a second and then read "Incorrect entry. Please try again," always

ending in that blinking green box. Killovani and I were clueless and I went back to the door. I pounded on it, pried at it, kicked it, yelled at it, and even tried hacking at the hard, smooth stone at the floor of it, but nothing helped. Killovani started looking around the cave for another door or some other way in and I warned him not to wander too far, the last thing we needed was him bringing more scorpions down on us, and Rav just stared back and forth between the door and the flickering lights on either side of it. Before anything presented itself, Tommy suddenly jumped back from the door and told us not to go anywhere, he'd be right back.

"But where..." I started, but he had already ran back along the hallway and around the corner.

Killovani, Rav and I only had a chance to stare at each other confused for a second before Tommy came running back around the corner, putting his knife back in its sheath and carrying what looked like a piece of leather in his hand, which was now bloody.

"What the hell did you do?" I asked as Rav and I came in to look at his hand, checking for whatever wound was supplying all the blood. His hands were whole, though, and I could see that it wasn't just a scrap of leather in his hand - it was skin.

Rav pulled away, covering his mouth and nose with one hand and trying not to wretch. I wasn't as weak in the guts as he, though, and just stared at Tommy wondering what he wanted with a patch of skin (and where he got it). Before I could ask though, he held the skin up and I recognized it from the dead body we found earlier. This patch of skin was from his arm and I recognized it by the numbers written on it.

"I have an idea," said Tommy, and he went back to the panel on the wall next to the door. He held the skin up and touched the numbers on the panel that matched the numbers on the skin. We held our breath for a second and then a spinning yellow light above the door lit up, flashing us in yellow and the door started to rumble.

"Praise be to the heavens!" Shouted Rav as the door moved open, splitting down the middle and sliding into the walls. Personally, I'd been in enough bad situations to know that loud noises and flashes never meant anything good, so I grabbed Killovani and threw myself at the floor. Tommy followed suit on the other side of the door, but Rav just spread his arms out and started walking forward through the opening.

"Rav, get down! Don't go in!" I shouted, but my words were drowned out by the

roaring thunder and blast that came out of the wall ahead and Rav was cut in two.

Nineteen

Blood shot everywhere as Rav fell in two, but the thunder and fire didn't stop. I held my ears and tried to cover Killovani's head at the same time, to cover up the noise, but it stopped soon enough. I chanced raising my head up and saw that the fire had stopped shooting from the wall ahead of the door and the noise had stopped. I let go of Killovani and sat up to take a look around.

Tommy had safely gotten out of the way of the door and was sitting up as well. Rav, however, was... I'd never seen someone as dead as Rav. I don't know enough about everything to say what Rav looked like. The only other time I'd seen someone that looked like he did was when I saw a brahmin pushed over a cliff. It fell for a long time and hit the bottom with a splash. That's what Rav looked like - like a bull pushed over a cliff.

"What was that!?" asked Tommy. I couldn't answer - I didn't know how. I'd never seen or even heard of a weapon that had that kind of power, the power to just turn a man into a puddle. I felt Killovani move out from underneath me, but as soon as he sat up and looked at what was left of Rav he hauled himself to the side and I could hear him throwing up in the corner.

"Is it over?" I asked Tommy.

"It sounds like it is, but where did it come from?" He responded.

I looked around the corner of the wall to the room beyond and saw that there was a hole in the wall ahead with smoke coming out of it. Tommy picked up a rock from the side of the cavern and tossed it into the room by Rav's body. We heard a humming noise from the wall ahead, but no fire and thunder followed. When Killovani had finished retching we all three stood up and looked ahead. We saw another door on the side of the room before us, but we were afraid to go on. Finally Tommy made up our mind for us and took a single step forward.

When his foot hit the floor in between the pieces of Rav we heard the humming start again and Killovani and I hit the floor, covering our heads, but Tommy just stood still and no horrors found him. Killovani and I stood up and we all three stepped into the room.

There was a long light above us that gave off a bluish glow and flickered randomly. As we walked ahead I could see a little ways into the hole in the wall and found where the smoke was coming from.

There was a series of metal tubes, held together by another metal band. Smoke was coming out of the ends of the tubes and while I could see that the tubes were black the tips glowed a faint orange color. Suddenly, as I was looking at it, the tubes started spinning and we heard the humming noise again. I stood back and flattened myself against the wall and Tommy did the same opposite me, but again there was no thunder and no fire. As I stood with my back to the wall I saw that Killovani had moved into the center of the room and was standing over Rav's ruined remains. He stood up and moved towards the new door we'd found, and when he got a few paces away from Rav the humming stopped and I saw the tubes slow down and finally, stop.

"Some kind of gun," Tommy said. "It must shoot when you touch the floor somewhere. That's why it hit Rav like that." I couldn't think of a better explanation, and only nodded in agreement.

"Sso... The door? Do we go in?" Asked Killovani, moving towards it. Tommy and I nodded and Killovani took the door handle. Before he could turn it, I reached out and stopped his hand.

"Given your history so far, I think me and Tommy better go through first." I said. He looked at me, unhappy, but stepped back anyway. Not knowing what to expect anymore, I held my club up in a ready position and Tommy pulled his knife again as he reached up and turned the door handle.

Twenty

The door opened easily enough and a wet smell come through as Tommy stepped through. I was right behind him and could see little by the gloom of the small lights that were still in operation, but I saw that the room was enormous. Easily the biggest man-made room I'd ever seen and I figured it would take about fifty-paces to get across it, if it weren't flooded. Just beyond the door was a metal floor that was made of slim bars and stuck out from the wall. It wasn't a solid floor, the bars that it was made of were spaced a couple of

finger-widths apart, but it was solid and held all of our weight. On the right side, there was a staircase made of the same kind of floor that led up, and as I followed it with my eyes I saw that there was a series of these metal-floors at many levels all around the room. There were more doors on every floor, but my attention was drawn to the large opening in the wall to my right. It looked like another tunnel, but it was too dark to see how far it went, and the metal-floors didn't lead down it.

Killovani moved forward then and reached over the side of the floor we were on and stuck his hand in the water. "It'ssss cool," he said. "But it doesn't look ssafe to drink." I started to walk up the stairs to the next level, but Tommy called out and stopped me.

"Abadon, don't," he said. "The grating doesn't look stable up there. This place is old and if it's flooded then there could be water damage in the walls." I stopped and was about to ask him what 'grating' was but the staircase gave out under my feet and I fell straight into the water.

Tommy and Killovani came running to the edge of the 'grating' (I figured out that that must have been the name or word for this kind of floor) and held out their hands for me, but the water wasn't deep and I stood up easily. The overall level of the water only reached to just above my knees and though it wasn't very cold, it wasn't comfortable either. Between not knowing where the water came from and not knowing what was under the surface, I didn't want to stay in it for very long.

"I think we should check out that tunnel first," I said, pointing down to the darkness. "It's the most obvious choice."

"Sounds good. Is it okay to stand in the water?" asked Tommy.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't want to stay in it too long. Think we can walk along that?" I pointed to a lip sticking out from the wall that ran down the length I could see of the corridor ahead. I heard Tommy and Killovani splash into the water behind me and I was able to climb up onto the ledge easily. It wasn't wide, we'd have to stay right up against the wall if we wanted to walk along it, but the stone was the same smooth, gray, flat surface that was in the cave just outside, and like the walls around us. I took a few steps and it held, and Tommy came up right behind me with Kilovanni behind him.

"The concrete seems solid still, this place has held up well." said Tommy.

"What'sss concrete?" asked Killovani.

"This stone - it's not natural it was made by man. My dad told me that it used to be everywhere in the old times. Entire cities were made out of it and on it." He finished and me and Killovani just stared.

"I told you, my dad told me about it." he said and looked down, mumbling. I didn't want to press it, so I just started shuffling along the ledge as best I could, holding my club in my left hand and out over the water, ready to swing.

Every twenty paces or so there was another light giving off a sickly glow. Never enough to see what were were heading for, only enough to show us that we were still inside this man-made concrete cave. I started to hear a skittering ahead and slowed down, and Tommy and Killovani obviously heard it as well because I felt Tommy's hand on my back. "Keep going?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Yes."

"Yesss."

I slipped off of the ledge as easily as I could and got into the water - I wanted some more room to move and that ledge didn't afford me nearly enough stability to swing my club properly. The water gurgled a bit around my legs as I slid forward, but other than that the only sound was the skitches ahead of us, growing louder as we moved ahead.

I saw a light ahead and headed for it, but when we reached it we discovered what the skittering was.

Thousands of rats were along the walls, scrambling over each other on the ledges ahead and pushing each other into the water. Their claws scratched at the smooth walls as they tried to climb back up onto the ledge, but found no footholds as they tried. The tunnel widened here, and branched off to the left and right, with most of the rats to our right. I heard a loud splash then and turned to see Killovani had jumped off of the ledge and was backing up.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Ratssss. I hate ratss." he replied as he shivered, and I knew it wasn't from the cold of the water.

"It's okay man, they're not going to hurt you," I started, but he kept backing up. Tommy jumped down then and went around behind him, blocking his escape.

"We have to keep going, Vani," he said. "For Rav and his people."

Killovani looked at Tommy, and then back at me and nodded slowly. He began to inch forward, but stayed as far away as he could from the sides of the tunnel and the rats. Thinking of his fears, I started to walk down the left side, away from where the rats were coming from.

We went a few steps and saw a door on the ledge to our left with the word "Barracks" printed above it. I climbed up on the ledge and stood to one side of it while Tommy stood on the other side and Killovani stayed in front of the door in the water. I nodded to Tommy and he opened the door.

There was nothing inside to jump out at us and it was deathly quiet, so Tommy and I went in, hearing Killovani come up out of the water behind us. The light inside was faint, but brighter than the lights lining the hallways, and I saw several rows of beds. They were stacked, two high, and there were eight of them from the start of the room to the back. Boxes were on the floor in front of each one, some open and empty, some closed and locked. The three of us split up and started going through the beds and boxes, finding mostly clothes, but in a tall box on the wall at the end Tommy found treasure.

"Armor! And batons! There's even a couple of guns in here!" he shouted, moving things around inside and spilling most of it out on the floor behind him. Indeed there was armor, the kind that I'd seen riot police wear in the big cities, and the same kind of black, short clubs with a handle on the side that the police carried as well. Tommy pulled out a long gun and handed it to me, and then two more small hand-guns. One he handed to Killovani, and the other he checked for bullets by pushing a small switch on the handle and looking at the metal-rectangle that slid out of it. There were indeed bullets in there, and Tommy slid the rectangle back into the handle with a click. I looked at the gun he'd handed me and found a button midway along the barrel and pushed it, spilling the rectangle out of it and saw that there were bullets in mine as well.

"Riot armor, billy clubs, two handguns, an M-16, and all three with full clips," he said. "Good haul. This trip is already worth it!" he said.

"Clipsss?" asked Killovani.

"The metal part that holds the bullets in the gun," Tommy replied.

Killovani nodded and grabbed a piece of armor from the floor and slid it over himself, pulling on the straps and tightening it around his chest. I picked up a piece of it myself and

found that it was flexible and light, but dense and sturdy as well. Still, all things considered, I decided to keep the scorpion armor I'd made for myself, but Tommy dropped his on the floor and took a piece of riot armor as well and put it on.

When we were more suitably equipped, we closed up the boxes behind us and left the room, back into the water in the hallway. We continued to our left, still moving away from the rats until we saw a door on the right side of the hall at it's end. This door said "Lab" above it and we went in as before.

Lights came on as soon as we walked in, fully lighting up the room and making us squint at it's brightness. The floor was metal, and there were many desks around the room with gray boxes on them that had black panels and looked like the key-pad back at the entrance. Only instead of just a bunch of numbers buttons in front of them, these had all the letters and numbers in front of them, but no flashing green boxes on the screens. We started going through all the storage spaces in the room, opening doors and riffling through papers, but only found another pair of stim-paks. I gave them both to Tommy and Killovani, not mentioning the two I had in my knapsack, and they were very thankful to get them.

There was no choice left now, we had to face the rats and explore the rest of the cavern.

We spread ourselves out so that Tommy took the lead this time and I was in the back, keeping Killovani surrounded so that he would feel safer. As we reached the junction where we first turned we saw the rats again and noted that they weren't swimming through the middle of the tunnel for the most part, only one or two would occasionally swim across to the other side and try to climb up the opposite wall, but failed just as well as they had before.