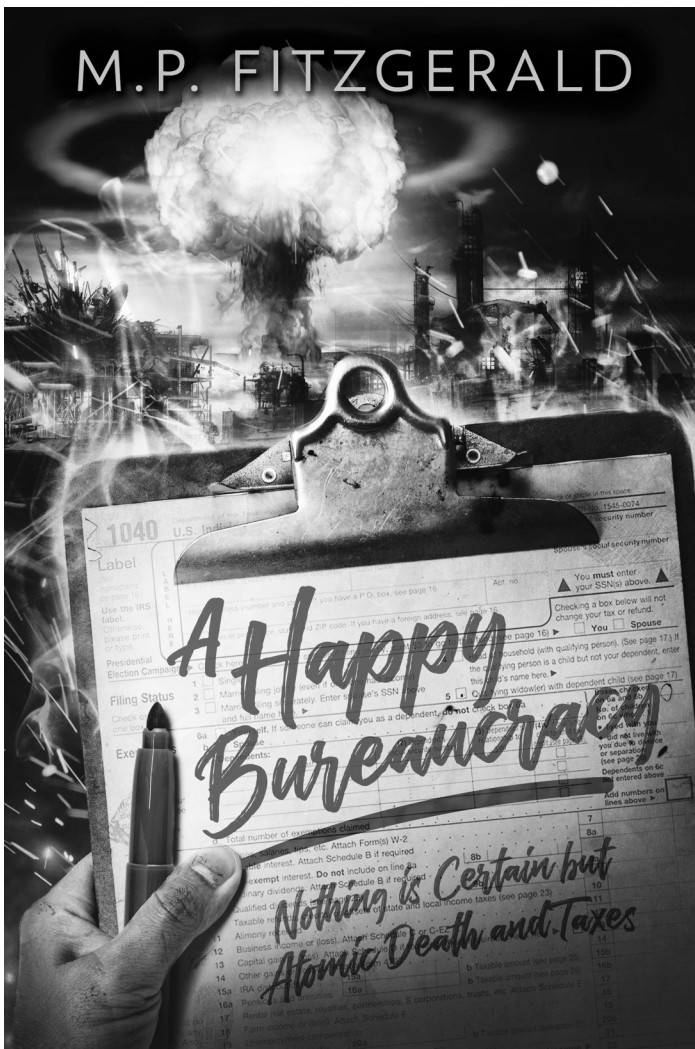

THE HAPPY BUREAUCRACY BOX SET: BOOKS 1-3

A Post-Apocalyptic Tax Return

M.P. FITZGERALD



M.P. FITZGERALD



Copyright © 2019 by M.P. Fitzgerald

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction, names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

First printing, 2019

M.P. Fitzgerald

420 Wall St. #216

Seattle, WA 98121

<https://revfitz.com>

Cover Design by Dan Van Oss, *Covermint Design*

<https://www.covermint.design/>

The author greatly appreciates you taking the time to read his work. Please consider leaving a review wherever you bought the book, or telling your friends about it to help us spread the word.

Thank you for supporting my work.

✧ Created with Vellum

*For my mother, who overpaid her taxes by a dollar so that the IRS
would have to spend more money in postage, labor, and paper to
refund it to her.*

Author's note: Strewn between drug use, groin malice, and cursing on a level tantamount to sacrilege, are gratuitous mentions of bureaucracy. These bureaucratic references may not be for the weak of heart.

PROLOGUE

Stifled breath was held as an offense was made on the door. There was nothing here but dust and radiation, and the cold glare from an uncaring sun. There was supposed to be no one living for miles, he had made sure of that. Yet blows rattled the door in quick succession. The word ‘knocking’ was not in his vocabulary, because no one had knocked since The War. He did not dare let out his breath, but realized a fraction too late that she, the little girl with a knife to her throat, had begun to cry.

Whoever was on the other side of the door would hear her. The option to hide had gone.

“Fuck,” he whispered at the child. Her whimpers were not loud, but when silence is the natural order, even a sneeze from a mouse would sound like blaring klaxons. He put down the butcher’s knife onto his table and the little girl’s eyes spelled relief. He replaced the knife with his rusty hunting rifle. Fight or flight were now having their familiar debate inside of him, and before either could win another blow came at the door.

"Hello?" a meek voice said through the door. "Do you have a moment?"

What is this? the man thought, uncertain if there was any danger. Instinct won over indecisiveness and he loaded an ancient bullet into the gun's chamber.

"Hello?" the little girl whimpered.

"Yes, hello? Do you have time to talk?" the voice asked politely. "It is very important."

Slavers kick in the door; raiders wait until you are outside. This, well, this was confusing. So, with the affront to his brain winning, and the option of surprise gone, the man opened the door.

Outside there was dust, and then there was irradiated dust. What was once a thriving and happy suburb, a perfect portrait of the American dream, was now a dead nightmare. The hydrogen bombs never made it this far, but their wrath spread without impetus. The War had ended modern history, and it started something that would make the dark ages look like a regular renaissance. The houses that were once built for families were now mostly empty, rotting slowly under a cruel sun. The grass that once grew on this house's lawn had dried up decades ago, and then burned for warmth. What were once windows were now a collection of boards nailed into the wall of the house haphazardly, their origin likely from the picket fences of the other houses; the people responsible for nailing them now long dead. What was outside was misery, misery and dust. There should be nothing else...

...Yet, there he was. Standing weaponless, and awkwardly, was a man who was somehow washed and clean shaven. His hair cut short and parted to the right, business like. His skin was somehow fair and not sun damaged to a tan leather. This man, against all odds, was wearing clothes that had not only been washed, but also ironed. His shirt collared and white, his shoes black polished and neatly tied. There was some-

thing around his neck; it should have been the bones of his enemies, strung through their dried tendons; it should have been a makeshift bandolier made of bullets and spikes, but instead it was a tie. A regular black tie, with a Windsor knot. Where there should be a club, a gun, or a spear in hand, was a clipboard and a pen.

The pen was not stabbed into someone's eyes, which was the only use he had ever witnessed seeing someone do with one. He had only ever seen someone who looked like this in photographs, before The War.

Standing in the distance, leaning on what was once a tree, was a man who did look like he belonged. Shotgun in hand, he was dressed in biker leathers and as rugged and miserable as the earth beneath him. This was professional protection. After making eye contact, he lowered his weapon. No one needed to die yet.

"Hello!" The man in the tie said "My name is Arthur McDowell, I am an agent of the Internal Revenue Services. And you are?"

"What?" the man responded.

"I am an agent for the IRS, I am here for an audit."

He had been warned about this. Of all of the gangs in the United Wastes, the IRS was the most powerful. He had never met an agent, but he had met others who had. The last time he had joined a raiding gang, the oldest of the group told him once that "there are only two for sure things in this world, death and taxes. The IRS wants only one of those, but they'll take *both* if you do not cooperate." Everything else he had heard sounded like myth or a horror story.

Arthur McDowell clicked the top of his pen tentatively, as dust from the dead planet beneath him shifted from wind. Arthur was now looking at the man inquisitively, and the man behind him in leather rested a single finger on his trigger. "Is this the residence of the 'Murder-Man?'" Arthur asked.

Someone talked. Someone gave him away. If anybody of his old gang had sold him out to slavers, torture would come before death once he got his paws on them, but if the stories about the IRS were true, he wasn't sure if he could even be mad. Hell, if the stories were true, he'd do the same.

"Yeah, I'm Murder-Man."

"Good," said Arthur, hurriedly writing something on his board. "Mr. Man, it seems that you did not do your taxes this season. Now, as the postal service has not delivered here in a generation we can understand the oversight. As an Auditor I am here to fix that."

"Oh", said Murder-Man, "what ah, what are taxes?"

"That is a surprisingly common question Mr. Man, so no need to be embarrassed."

He wasn't embarrassed at all, he was afraid. "Taxes are a percentage of your income that is mandatorily volunteered to the United States government for the goods and services provided to you, a citizen, and to keep the government running. It is our patriotic duty, and law, to pay them."

"Oh."

"It looks like you have not paid your taxes this season, Mr. Man, and though the IRS understands that this kind of omission is likely given the circumstances..." Arthur swept his hand around him, meaning 'circumstances' to be human holocaust by nuclear fire. "...they still must be paid." The man in the biker leathers stood upright at 'must be paid' and stepped a little closer. Murder-Man had no intention of pissing him off.

"How ah, how ya want me to pay 'em?" Murder-Man asked, not eloquently.

"With United States currency of course!"

"You want old world money?"

"Preferably, yes, but the IRS has positioned itself to work

with today's economy, so for your convenience we are willing to take bullets or calories."

This was the most polite raid Murder-Man had ever experienced.

Keeping his gun low, so as not to piss off the hired help, Murder-Man leaned on his doorframe, eyeing Arthur suspiciously. He was hoping the girl stayed quiet. "How much ya want?" he finally asked, after another moment filled with listless dust passed.

"That is what we are here to find out, Mr. Man, I know that you are unfamiliar with our process; again, nothing to be embarrassed about..." Arthur said to a man who was still not embarrassed. "...we do not take a set amount from everybody; we only take a percentage of your combined income and assets."

Murder-Man knew neither of those words, but it was the one that sounded more sexual that raised his interest. "What's a ass-set?" he asked.

"Oh! Why, those are the things you own! Let's go through those first. You own this house?"

"Yeah."

"Good, good," Arthur said, writing on his clipboard. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Let's see, you are a homeowner, and according to your old gang, you were a raider by profession?" *Someone did talk!* Murder-Man's mind howled with rage. His words were muted, "Yeah. I don' do that no more."

Arthur did not look up at this, and his writing quickened. "Unemployed? That's a shame. Have you been jobless this whole season?" Not sure what Arthur meant by 'season' Murder-Man stared blankly and said "Yeah" just to hurry things along.

"It can be a very hostile job market in today's world that is for sure. Well, judging by the size of your house, and the fact

that it is not radiated, we will classify it as class three. You should be very proud!"

"Uh, thank you?"

"Mmmm Hmmm..." Arthur replied, still laying his attention on the clipboard. "Assuming you can't pay with currency, that would put what you owe to be 80,000 calories, 150 bullets, or a combination of the two." Arthur reached into his pocket and fished out a calculator. "I can, of course, help you with the conversion."

Murder-Man's breathing was thin. Flight or fight had not been resolved.

"I, uh, I don't have that—" he started, before he was quickly interrupted by a now giddy Arthur.

"Wait, we haven't gone over your deductibles! The IRS is no armed robber sir," he declared, despite having an armed man behind him. "Do you have any dependents?"

"What's that?"

Before Arthur could answer the little girl stirred. Murder-Man had no time to retaliate, and before he could make a move to hide her, she was peeking out of the doorway. Her dirty bruised face that had only known fear and hunger looked out and onto Arthur's clean and studious one. It looked like children were not something Arthur saw often. They stared at each other with suspicion and disbelief. Arthur shifted his weight uneasily as his Enforcer, the hired help, moved forward.

"That," Arthur said, pointing at the little girl "is a dependent." He made a little check on his board.

Murder-Man thumbed back at the little girl, and his hanging jaw snapped back into place to speak. "My cow?" he asks.

"My mistake," Arthur replied, sullenly, understanding the term. "She's your calories," he continued, stating, not asking.

"Yeah, was gonna chop her and cook her before you

punched my door all polite like.” A grin crept onto Murder-Man’s face. The little girl had been ‘taught’ not to run, and even now, in the face of death she did not dare. She had been kept alive this long only so that her meat would be fresh when Murder-Man ran out of canned food.

“Can’t say for certain until we get her to the headquarters and weigh her, but she looks to be around 90,000 calories. This would leave you with a refund of 10,000 calories which we’d mail to you within four to five weeks,” Arthur said, hurriedly, still avoiding eye contact. He finished writing and presented the clipboard to Murder-Man. “Sign here.”

Murder-Man did not understand the gesture, nor could he write or read. What he did understand though was that the men in front of him intended to rob him of his meal. A meal he had gone a great length to keeping alive this long and one that was only going to be eaten if he had no other food. The IRS was as confusing and frightening as he had heard. The man in leather could certainly kill him, but if they took his food, well, he would die slowly. The math was simple: starve, or go out fighting.

He cocked his gun.

CHAPTER ONE



Wood splinters flew into the air. Gun smoke ate at Arthur's lungs. Blood turned to mud. Then there was silence.

Arthur did what he always did when the person he was auditing inevitably raised their gun: he fell to the ground and covered his ears. He was incredibly quick at this. The trick was to fall backward, instead of forward or straight down. He learned this by memorizing the graphic they kept at the office next to the one about CPR and the Heimlich maneuver. It read: "Guns go up? Don't frown! Fall down!" and depicted the same placid looking art that all workplace cartoons had settled on. He was quietly repeating this to himself, a sort of mad mantra to ease the sudden trauma.

His Enforcer was a damn good shot and Murder-Man was right to fear him. He was named Murder-Man for a reason, however. There were now three bodies on the ground, but Arthur's was the only one that was going to get up and leave.

Murder-Man had murdered his last man.

The Enforcer had fired off two shots, both hits. The first one to kill Murder-Man, the second a revenge shot for being killed himself. Stray buckshot had nicked the doorframe from

a house that would never be repaired. Murder-Man only fired off one shot, but it counted.

A display of malice splayed gruesomely across the dust. It was a picture of cruelty and indifference. It was the only kind of portrait that was ever painted in the United Wastes. Blood soaked through clothes from cooling bodies, the constant commentary running through their brains finally finished.

Time for paperwork.

Arthur could wait until he was safe at his office to write up a 22-B *Violent Incident in the Workplace* form; there was nothing in the manual that said he had to do it on site. But why put off for later what he can do now? He had the forms with him (this was of course, not the first time this had happened, by any means) and the scene was still fresh in his mind. Taking a moment to dust himself off and straighten his tie, Arthur McDowell started checking off boxes.

"Right," Arthur declared aloud "Two dead, one taxpayer, one Enforcer. Very unfortunate." His handwriting was mindless, the form was being filled out by muscle memory. He drew out a slab of sticky notes from his pants' pocket, placed one on the completed 22-B and wrote *Memo to self, send condolences and flowers to Robert's family*. He hummed as he worked.

When the bombs fell and the weather forecast became permanent nuclear fire, and when flowers of destructive fusion blossomed, leaving death in their wake, the least important question was immediately asked: *Who is going to collect all of the taxes?* It was, without doubt, bureaucracy's greatest triumph, next to the ticketed queue of course.

The Internal Revenue Services were well prepared for The War. Yes, it came as a surprise, but the preparation had been done nearly a generation prior. The National Emergency Operations Manual was updated in the 1980s with a contingency for nuclear war. Taxes were to be collected 30 days after the Holocaust, and that is exactly what happened. Bunkers

were built beneath the surface and the IRS had its own nuclear shelter. They were not the only American institution to have these bunkers - the paranoia of the cold war made sure that they were as standard as electric heating - but they were the only ones to survive. The only people on the planet who took safety drills seriously were fire marshals and bureaucrats. So when the alarms went off, and eyes rolled because of another drill, it was the IRS with their inhuman bureaucratic standards and observation of rules that made it out alive.

To be clear: the newly revised National Emergency Operations Manual that was in circulation when the bombs fell did not contain information on how to rebuild society. It did, however, carry information detailing which institutions should be prioritized in receiving taxes so *they* could rebuild. Frankly, it just wasn't the IRS's department, and it wasn't their fault that the other parts of the government didn't have their shit together. Thirty days after Oppenheimer's gift killed the planet, a census of the immediate population was taken. The manual declared that anyone, no matter their position, rank or function could be reassigned to census taking in an emergency. Once there was a head count, the auditing and the collection of taxes began. So, taxes were collected, and the stores of the IRS grew fat because there was no one for them to distribute to. It was the first time in generations that there was a surplus in the federal budget.

Arthur McDowell was a second generation Auditor.

His father was a janitor before The War and was conscripted into census taking twice. The second census killed him. Now, Arthur McDowell stood in a dead wasteland, the United Wastes of America as the pride and joy of the IRS. He was efficient, did everything by the letter and, most importantly, he was a true believer.

Though the scene around him was grim there was a pep in his step. With the collection of today's audit, Arthur

McDowell was finished with his year's quota, and he was finished early. *They will have to promote me now*, he thought with glee as he sidestepped the mangled flesh of a man named 'Murder'. *I can have my own office, and be safe from all of this. I can finally be safe.*

Standing a few feet away, paralyzed with fear, was the little girl. Once a 'Cow', to be eaten as a last resort, she was now a payment to the IRS. The title made no difference; she had been a commodity her entire life. What she didn't know was that the IRS did not distinguish value from its calorie payments whether it was dead or alive. What she didn't know was that it was within her captor's right to slice off the overpayment of 10,000 calories and keep it. What she didn't know was that Arthur was probably the first man who cared if she died.

He might have been a bureaucrat, and he might have been living in a world where it was every man for himself, where the consequences of failure were often cannibalism, but he was no monster.

Arthur did his best to smile at the little girl, a gesture which did not come off as natural, and too late he realized that the little girl had likely only ever seen a grown man smile when he was doing something violent. She winced, but did not move. Arthur did not have the skills set to talk to children.

"Some ah, some weather we got, don't we?" Arthur stammered. It was a good topic around the water rations, sure to get anyone complaining.

Silence.

Arthur started to fret. *I don't know how to talk to her*, he thought, the bodies below him now as cold as the wind. *I don't want to sound condescending, but I also don't want to pander.* Tears formed in the child's eyes. This just made Arthur fret more.

"You're safe now little girl, I'm from the government. Do

you understand 'safe'?" She shook her head. "Do you understand 'government'?" She shook her head again.

He, like the rest of the country, was used to death. Though he didn't like it, he was accustomed to being around cadavers. Cruelty is so par for the course in the United Wastes, his heart should be calloused. Yet, it was breaking.

Arthur placed his pen under the metal clip on his board, and with his free hand gently held the hand of the little girl. She winced, but made no attempt to fight him. Arthur led her out of the once more abandoned house. Within a few steps, they were past Robert's body. A few more and they were on the cracked pavement of the street.

The road was littered with the remains of panic. Cars that will never run again sat with their doors open, like stranded whales with their flippers splayed out. They were all empty, though they may have been stuffed to the brim before scavengers found them. Suitcases lived on the road, empty like oysters picked clean. The world was a graveyard for all of humankind's now useless things. As Arthur and the silent girl trudged across the street, random bits of plastic, eroded to unrecognizable shapes, crunched beneath their feet.

"Looks like the sanitation department has a lot of work to do," Arthur stated in a half jest, half whine, and without thinking stated the unofficial motto of bureaucracy - "oh well, not my department." The little girl said nothing.

There was no more sanitation department.

The little girl stopped, letting what small weight she had pull against Arthur's stride. When she had his attention, she looked up at him with urgency. "We don' have a gun," she said. She may not know the words 'government' or 'safe' but she knew the rules of the United Wastes: kill or be killed, or kill or be raped, then killed, then partially eaten, then worn as a trophy. Whichever came first, naturally.

"Gun? No-no-no, *he* has the gun," Arthur stated, pointing

at what was once Robert (his Enforcer). "He has the gun so that I can audit." The little girl's worries were clearly not eased, but she pulled out her anchors and continued to walk. The lesson she appeared to have learned from him was that he was *crazy*.

They trekked on.

Arthur led her in silence, four blocks down where the roads were no longer packed with derelict cars. There he took her to the only running vehicle in miles, a government-issued white IRS minivan. Though the undercarriage of the van was as dusty as the earth, the rest of it was spotless, having been washed just before being leased to Arthur and Robert. Painted on one side was a round blue circle encasing a gold badge with a weighing scale and key in the center. The words around the circle read **The Department of the Treasury* Internal Revenue Services*. Arthur had hand washed this part of the van. And so, in the first time in history, a strange man led a little girl to a white van and nothing bad happened to her.

Realizing that the little girl had likely never been inside a vehicle that could run, Arthur buckled her in and started the motor. He adjusted his own seat, checked his mirrors, and turned on his left blinker. Instead of immediately heading to the IRS headquarters, he decided to drive back to Murder-Man's house. The little girl's mood changed slightly as the van moved; she looked unfamiliar with the sensation, though it should never be so foreign to a child. *Had she never experienced fun?* Arthur thought.

"What's, ah, what's your name?" he asked.

"Dinner."

Of course it was.

Arthur slowly weaved the van between the derelict cars, a task that Robert had avoided. It took longer than he had any patience for, but it was something he had to do. Ten minutes passed before he successfully navigated his way the four

blocks to the house. "This will only take a couple minutes. Is there anything you want to get while we are here?" asked Arthur. With determination in her eyes, Dinner nodded, jumped out of the van and ran into the house. With a heavy heart, Arthur left the van and opened its back door. He looked at Robert, now just meat.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Then with much labor, he dragged the heavy body into the back of the van.

Soon, Dinner emerged from the house, clutching the cleaver that was held to her throat only a short time ago. She held its sharp edge at face level. *Is this why she asked if I had a gun?* Arthur panicked. The little girl knelt down to Murder-Man's corpse, and with a single, purposeful motion, she hacked off one of his fingers. It bled very little. Arthur was surprised by her efficiency, as he watched her unthread a shoelace from his boot and tied his finger to it, making a necklace. Arts and crafts.

When she was done, she looked up at Arthur, most of her suspicion appearing gone and asked in kind, innocent earnest, "want one?" Arthur shook his head. They both climbed back into the van.

The rest of their journey was silent.

CHAPTER TWO



The cold, uncaring glow of fluorescent lights. The chilled, stale oxygen of recycled air. Arthur was home, and it felt good. Home was safe. Home was underground in a reinforced bunker made of concrete and steel. The only enemy down here was inefficiency, a specter as rare as a ghost.

As Arthur marched silently down the concrete corridors of the IRS, he was filled with a sense of hope that was usually punished outside these walls. He was going to be promoted, he was sure of it, and with promotion came the guarantee that he would stay indoors. No longer would he have to risk his life in the harsh United Wastes, sticking his neck out for an audit. No longer would he see another Enforcer like Robert die in the line of duty. No longer would he have to be forced to save children who lacked a childhood. He was free. Free to spend the rest of his life in the confines of a concrete, cubicle jungle.

The black and white checkered linoleum floor beneath him: newly waxed. The bare concrete walls around him: cold and without dust. It was perfection. He walked briskly, doing his best not to dance as he did so, to his shared cubicle. He

could not wait to sit, to feel the pleather seat against his back, a seat totally unprepared in design to deal with a human spine. He could not wait to hear the droning clatter of keys being pressed hurriedly as dozens of people typed at the same time. Most of all, he could not wait to gloat, to brag, he could not wait to fly it all into Ralph Siemens' face.

As he turned a corner in the hallway, Arthur was met with a seemingly endless corridor lined with doors on each side. Though the doors were numbered in the dozens, each with their own alphanumeric numbers, they all led to the same room. It was with this design that Arthur could choose any door, including the first one, and find himself in the same large and cluttered space. This, however, was the bureaucracy, the pinnacle of human OCD, and as a breathing bureaucratic prodigy, Arthur had no choice but to walk down the long corridor until he reached the proper door.

He passed a door labeled A13-A14 and he continued forward. He reached door A19-A20 and he gave it no attention. It was not until he was at the very last door, A23-A24 that he stopped. On any normal day, Arthur would not pause outside of this door. He would not consider its steel frame set into a concrete slab. On any normal day, Arthur would simply push the door open. Today, however, was *his* day. Today would be the last day he identified as Auditor #24 and tomorrow there would be a new office drone to fill his pleather seat. Anticipation built inside him, threatening to overtake his calm demeanor with raw joy. With a long, silent breath, Arthur put out his right hand and pushed the door.

The deathly quiet of the hallway was immediately assaulted by a flurry of office noise. Light chatter added to the cacophony of keyboards being pressed madly. A rogue sound of creaking split the air as someone far away adjusted their weight in their seat. He would miss this part of the job, but he wouldn't miss the danger of it. Not all of the cubicles

were filled, either because some of the auditors were out in the wasteland, demanding taxes from people like Murder-Man, or because they were deceased from trying to collect taxes from people exactly like Murder-Man. The desks of the dead did not carry tombstones; instead they held a folded over piece of paper, tiny half pyramids with *unassigned* written in a polite and bold font. The regularity of the signs were such that no one in the IRS used that font for anything but death.

There was only one desk ahead of him that was empty, labeled A24. It was his desk, surrounded by a thick wall of concrete, but not completely, to divide it from the other rows. This concrete cubicle was the standard in the doomsday office workplace. Beside his empty spot was a young man just like Arthur, staring contemplatively at his computer screen. His blond hair was parted to the same side as Arthur's, but it came down in a more stringy fashion. He had a face meant for glasses but wore none, and the stubble of his face threatened to become a beard. Also like Arthur, he wore a white collared shirt and a black tie, his slacks neatly pressed and his shoes shined. On his left breast was his work badge with a photograph of him displaying a more clean-cut face. It read Auditor #23, Ralph Siemens, Internal Revenue Services.

There was a healthy competition among the auditors. There was also a decidedly unhealthy competition between most of the auditors. Ralph Siemens was not just a man with an incredibly unfortunate name. No, Ralph was a cheat. Arthur highly suspected that most, if not all of the revenue that Ralph collected was scavenged. He had the same Enforcer for too long. While Arthur dutifully audited citizens of the waste, who were almost always not happy to see him, Ralph likely headed to abandoned buildings to collect what canned food or bullets were left there. He once came

back with actual money. No one except IRS employees used actual money. They were twenties but the IRS used two dollar bills almost exclusively. Apparently, no one but Arthur was suspicious. It was an insult. Ralph was an insult - to the job, to the Operations Manual, to everything that the IRS stood for.

Ralph Siemens was a cheat, though he would likely tell you he was a survivalist.

Well, today he would be a loser.

Arthur sat down at his desk and opened his palm. Ralph immediately placed five two dollar bills into it, and said "survived another one I see? I'm getting *real* tired of losing this bet." A plastic smile covered the shared contempt they felt for each other.

"You won't be losing anymore," Arthur announced glibly. Ralph shifted uneasily in his chair.

A short silence fell between the men. Normally, Arthur would get to work at this point. He would boot up his computer and hammer away at its keys. Not today. He turned to Ralph and finally let the smile that had been fighting its way through his professional demeanor shine.

"No!" Ralph said in mock delight. Arthur nodded. "You're finished? You made quota?!"

"Finished my last audit today."

"That's wonderful! Congrats!"

Though the conversation was genial, only one of them was truly happy. Arthur watched as Ralph clenched his hand tighter around his mouse.

"Does this mean...?" Ralph fished.

"Promotion?" said Arthur.

"Yes."

Arthur only smiled in return.

Before either could continue their polite charade, a man walked through their door. He was a studious looking twenty

something and was wearing the same office uniform. He marched forward with a clipboard and a mailbag.

"Auditor #A24, Arthur McDowell?" he asked, with a parcel in his hand.

Arthur nodded. The man marked a check on his clipboard and stated: "You have a summons request from the Deputy Commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd."

Ralph no longer hid his misery on hearing this, and Arthur's heart skipped a beat. *This is it* he thought, *this is my promotion.*

"Sign here," the man said. Arthur dutifully signed the release form with a flourish.

The man checked the signature, marked another check on his clipboard and tore out a yellow slip, the carbon copy, and handed it to Arthur.

Then he demanded: "Sign here on this release for confirmation that you have received your carbon copy,"

Arthur complied. The man pulled out another carbon copy and handed it to Arthur and then marked a third check on his clipboard. With his job complete the man left abruptly without another word.

Arthur could feel Ralph's hatred beaming at him like a laser. It was absorbed with another smile.

Arthur folded his release receipt neatly, then folded his receipt's receipt, and opened a drawer beneath his desk and carefully filed it. He then took a moment to log the receipt in his drawer's inventory manifest and marked the date and time filed. His work done, he turned to the summons. He was at once stunned by the typeface and centering of the form and fought an urge to measure the negative space on the page. This was no mere memo, this was art. The page stated no more than it had to:

*To:: Auditor #A24, Arthur T. McDowell, Below Ground Level 4,
Hallway A, Row 23-24, Cubicle #24.*

*You are summoned to see the Deputy Commissioner for Operations
Support, Henry S. Boyd at exactly 2::00 PM Standard Bunker Time.*

Henry S. Boyd

The bottom was a dessert he was unprepared for. It was the name signed, *signed!* Arthur now had the autograph of one of the most respected and high ranking officers in the bunker. Bureaucracy could be kind.

Ralph could wait no longer. "That's it then, isn't it? That's the promotion?"

Arthur had no problem drawing this out. "Let's not assume. It could be for anything."

"Don't be an asshole! We both know what that summons means. The Deputy Commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd does not bring people to his office for chit-chat. You got it, and we both know it."

"It's going to be an honor to meet him," Arthur said, beaming.

Ralph could not help but put away his loathing at hearing this, and his own fandom took over before being replaced with jealousy. "It will probably be the last time anybody gets to meet him from our division," he said. "He could be promoted to full Commissioner any day now!"

The sentiment was deserved, but Arthur balked at this.

"The Commissioner has held that position since before The War, and he has had it our entire lives, I'm starting to think that he will never die. Boyd won't be promoted anytime soon, you'll get your chance."

Arthur wasn't sure if Ralph deserved this kindness. But it was true, as legendary as Henry S. Boyd was, he could not move upward until the spot was vacant, and the full Commissioner, Jack Dewitt, was never likely to retire.

Henry S. Boyd had done much for the agency. He had led the first census, as well as the more tragic second. He had rewritten protocol, allowing auditors to collect revenue used by the new economy. He was not just a good bureaucrat, he was also a maverick. It would not be going too far to say that once Arthur's father died, Boyd became a role model and hero. It was an honor to meet him, let alone receive the accolades of a promotion from him. Accolades that would promise permanent safety for Arthur.

Accolades that his father never received.

God rest his soul.

Ralph muttered something Arthur did not understand, and then declared "Looks like you'll be my new boss! Congrats, Arthur, Congrats! Good thing I've been your cubicle buddy since the beginning, so it's okay with me if you play favorites!" he smiled.

Oh, I'll play favorites, Arthur thought as he quickly considered sending Ralph to the radioactive craters for an audit. It was something he would never do; send a man to his death, but entertaining the thought was still pleasant.

"It's a shame we won't be making any more bets," Arthur replied.

A shrill, soul-shattering buzz went off in the hallway. It was like broken china making love to a kazoo. It brought pleasure and relief to everyone in a cubicle. It signified one o'clock. Lunchtime.

As if the room were a single organism, every auditor raised and filed themselves in a queue to leave for the bunker's commons area. Only Arthur stayed seated.

"It's SPAM and rice, I'm sure of it," Ralph said confidently as he walked out. Arthur was not surprised by Ralph's eagerness to leave. He never worked anyways. Arthur took a minute to read over his summons once more, and once the rest of his peers were out the door, he followed, elated.

He carried the summons with him.

The queue for lunch began in the hallways and then wound its way down to another level, the fifth of eight levels beneath sea level. The line was like a giant millipede, its starched white abdomen held upright by pressed black pants. Lunch breaks lasted for an hour, and the line, from Arthur's position, took thirty minutes to reach the commons. *I think I'll buy myself a coffee* Arthur thought as he pawed his winnings from Ralph.

There was never a need for change, as all rations were a multiple of two, and all notes were two dollars. The two dollar bill was the pride of the IRS. In the 1970s, when the note was first introduced to lackluster success (Americans simply did not want to use it), the IRS played a long game. Not wanting to pulp or waste the money, the government shrink-wrapped most of the bills being rejected by the citizenry and hid them away in a bunker. The money was to be used to boost the economy once the bombs fell, and as a reserve to pay for whatever the government immediately needed. It was fine that the citizens of the United States in the 1970s refused to use them; the future citizens of the United Wastes would have no choice. Of course, there was no government to be fueled by this money, and now the bills were used internally and as refunds for the poor Wastelander not spry enough to check calories or bullets on their tax return.

Arthur, like the rest of the IRS, received his wage through two dollar bills, but he was also lucky enough to win every bet he made with Ralph. It was with this extra income that Arthur was able to buy the eight dollar coffee ration that he enjoyed on a monthly basis. It was the highest treat and social status marker in the Bureau. His lunch was SPAM and rice.

The common halls were a wide open gash in an otherwise solid slab of concrete. Rows of seemingly endless elongated community tables lined parallel to each other. They were filled with the last of the civil. Once Arthur's meal was paid for, an even ten dollars, he received a small mug of black coffee and a tray with two scoops of rice and a grilled brick of uncut SPAM. Arthur never paid the extra two dollars for gravy. Mindlessly, because everything in the IRS has order, he walked over to his assigned seat and sat down. He did not make eye contact with Ralph.

Arthur's cafeteria row was right next to where the janitors ate, and Arthur was faced towards them. Everybody except the highest pay grade and the ration cooks ate here, and all at the same time. The table he faced was where he grew up, seated next to his father. The table behind him, where the Auditor's supervisors were, is where he will sit next. Arthur was moving on up.

He pulled out his summons, to the great annoyance of Ralph, and read it to himself for the third time. He no longer had to worry about the same fate his father met. He no longer had to repeat the phrase *Guns go up? Don't frown! Fall down!* to himself and pray that no violence met him. More importantly: he could now buy coffee once a week. This was sublime.

As he finished reading his summons, but before he gave in to the imperative of eating his rations, he caught something in the corner of his eye at the janitor's table. It was a breakage in uniform height. The row of janitors grew shorter,

and Arthur realized it wasn't *something* he saw, it was *someone*. Dressed in a denim jumpsuit too big for her was the little girl, 'Dinner', he had saved that morning, greedily shoveling food into her mouth. Arthur smiled.

The little girl had already been processed through the revenue storage division. Humans may be considered 'calories' in the new economy, but slavery was illegal in the United States, and the IRS was law abiding. The fact that there was no more United States was one that fell on deaf ears to the IRS. She was now an employee of the Internal Revenue Services, and so long as she did not do too good a job, she would never be promoted. She would be safe.

She was young enough that her PTSD would only be debilitating, and not crippling.

Arthur fought off the desire to talk to her, to see if she understood that so long as she did not stand out, she wouldn't become an auditor, that she would be safe if she slacked. He wanted to tell her these things because it was not advice that he took seriously at her age. He wished that he knew then that once he was promoted, he would have to be promoted again to be safe once more. But Arthur was an orderly man, among many in a closed and ordered society; leaving his table was an insult to the carefully planned layout of the commons. Leaving his table was an insult to the IRS.

He hoped that he would someday meet her in the halls as she mopped a floor that never got dirty. He hoped that he could tell her then to skimp on the walls and to keep her head down.

For now, he was happy to see her safe, and that he shared that status.

CHAPTER THREE



Before Arthur could fully enter the office of Deputy Commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd, he was urgently pushed aside by a man with a hot mug of coffee. Without a word, this man, who looked like everyone else in the bunker, marched toward the steel desk of the Deputy Commissioner. When he reached the desk, he dutifully picked up an identical but empty mug and replaced it with the mug of coffee he was carrying. In a moment, this man pivoted, marched back toward Arthur and left an initial on a clipboard pinned to the inside of the door. Next, he wrote the date and time and was gone as abruptly as he came. He left behind a stunned Arthur and a distracted-looking Deputy Commissioner. Fifteen seconds of silence reigned supreme before the digital readout above the door read 2::00 exactly. Henry S. Boyd looked up at Arthur from his desk and smiled briefly, "Come in come in!" he said. Arthur obliged and moved into the interior of the office.

Henry S. Boyd's office was meticulous beyond reason. It was a full two feet smaller on each side than the emergency fire exit map that was laminated permanently to the outer

hall indicated. This was not a clerical error on the Fire Marshal's part; it only appeared to be smaller because where there should be walls were, in fact, gray steel filing cabinets stacked on top of each other filling every inch from floor to ceiling. There was not a single free millimeter of space between them and the concrete floor and ceiling in which they were contained. If Arthur had not already memorized the fire exit plan from the map and had not seen the dimensions himself, it would be far from a stretch to believe that the walls were the filing cabinets themselves, used as a mad and makeshift bricking substitute.

The only thing that did not appear to be symmetrical in this tomb for files was a single rolling library ladder, which was parked at the back of the office. It occurred to Arthur that had Boyd built this office above ground, any windows that already existed would likely be blocked by the cabinets. It occurred to Arthur that, visually, there would be no difference.

Centered in the the office was Henry S. Boyd himself sitting at his desk. The only blemish in the office was Arthur, still dusty from the audit that morning.

The Deputy Commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd, was a tall man, and it was hard for Arthur to imagine he ever needed to use the ladder to reach what he wanted. Aside from being tall, he was an oddity in the United Wastes as he appeared to be in his late fifties. No one grew old in this new cruel world. His high forehead looked like it was designed to hold a couple extra worry lines than the average man was capable of forming. It was topped with greying, thinning hair that looked as if it had never moved a strand in a decade. He sported a broom-like mustache as equally grey as his hair that had done a considerable job at hiding his upper lip. He stared at Arthur, his brow furrowed,

bringing his starkly black eyebrows closer than they should ever be allowed to go.

This is a face that could sue a grandfather clock for plagiarism.

Henry S. Boyd broke eye contact first, probably because of boredom more than anything else. As Arthur walked towards the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Boyd moved a solitary plastic technical ruler from the left side of his desk and measured the distance between his new coffee mug and his computer monitor. As Arthur found himself at rest, a safe but still intimate four feet from the desk, Mr. Boyd then measured the distance between his monitor and where the ruler used to be and placed the ruler back in its position, contented.

"Mr. Arthur T. McDowell, currently assigned as auditor #A24 reporting on time sir," said Arthur, fighting the urge to salute.

The Deputy Commissioner looked back up at Arthur from his ruler, and the faintest of smiles betrayed the cover of his mustache. "So you are, and *currently* indeed. I have summoned you to my humble office in regards to your current position, my boy, but first I have a question for you," he responded, with no muster.

Arthur McDowell's heart sang in anticipation, *I am being promoted*. "Of course sir, anything!" he said. Henry S. Boyd gulped down half of his coffee, measured it back to its proper spot with his ruler, and then did the same for the ruler. Then, with his hands clasped and his elbows on the table, an eyebrow divorced itself from the other and was raised inquisitively. "What is it that we do here, my boy?" he asked, lips still wet from coffee.

The question was deceptive in how unnecessary it was, and Arthur did not understand why it came across as menacing.

"We audit the populace to collect taxes from individuals, as well as businesses and organizations so that the United States Government can run," Arthur stated, and then hurriedly added "sir".

Neither seemed bothered at that moment that there was no government of any kind left that wasn't smoldering in a crater.

"Indeed, indeed," said Boyd. "That is about two-thirds of what we do, but as you are surely aware, we have taken on additional...*duties* since The War. The Revised National Emergency Operations Manual states that the responsibility of census taking is one of our primary duties. Given your shining accolades here with the IRS, I will assume that this lapse of knowledge is a result of a generation gap instead of willful ignorance, as there has not been a census since your childhood. But our duties have been a cycle of census taking, auditing and collecting. This, of course, brings us to your status as an auditor," He downed the other half of his coffee. A few seconds after the mug hit the desk, and was measured once more, a woman with a black tie and black skirt raced into the office with a full mug of coffee. Like the man before her, she replaced the empty mug with the new one and logged herself and the date on the door's clipboard. As quickly as she entered, she was gone, and Arthur found that a heavy dread had replaced his hopeful anticipation. He could only muster a single "Sir?" before Boyd continued his speech.

"It is an unfortunate reality of our job in this great workplace, my boy, but with the census bureau and much of our government lax..." He used 'lax' as a synonym for 'nuclear cinder' "...we have to take up much of the slack. We cannot audit if we do not know where people live, and we don't know where they live unless we find them. And we *must* find them."

"Am, am I not being promoted, sir?" Arthur asked meekly, his fear manifesting in gooseflesh and cold hands.

Another round of measuring the items on Boyd's desk ensued, the silence from him a solid punctuation mark to Arthur's question. He downed half of his coffee and avoided eye contact.

He could guess what was about to happen, and though he had a mouth, he could not bring himself to scream the vulgarities he needed to at this injustice. He should be wailing at the commissioner, demanding that he change his mind. He should be throwing cabinets open in impotent protest. Instead, he waited quietly.

Like he was supposed to.

The mug measured once more and everything in its proper place, the Deputy Commissioner broke the silence. "Look, I know how you must feel about this. You are one of our greatest agents, and truth be told, if circumstances were different you would probably have my job someday. You deserve a promotion, and I know how terrible not getting that is." His voice was soft and fatherly. "Mr. McDowell, I have been gunning for full Commissioner my whole life, a position that will not be mine until Commissioner Dewitt steps down or retires. Something he is not likely to do. Like you, I don't make the rules. If it were up to me, tomorrow we would both hold the titles we deserve."

Likely intuiting the tears and protest Arthur was keeping at bay, Boyd continued softly, "I know it's not just the promotion, I know that your father died in the last Great Census. Your file says he was killed by a militia of cannibals?"

Arthur nodded.

Instantly, empathy left the Deputy Commissioner's face and a cold business tone was applied to his voice. "You are being assigned a new Enforcer, by the name of Duke. They have been contracted with us for a full tax season."

Arthur's mind swam with emotions. *What is happening?* repeated like a mad mantra. *No promotion and an Enforcer*

contracted from the outside? What is happening? He was not sure which, if any, of the details he should challenge, and so he settled on the last offense "A contracted Enforcer, sir?"

"Yes, it is an unfortunate reality that many of our internal Enforcers have a high mortality rate," Boyd replied. "As of last season we have been contracting outside protection from the United Wastes in the hope to fill their gaps. Enforcer Duke has performed admirably and has been optioned for a permanent position as Enforcer should the census go well. Effective immediately, you are being conscripted as a census taker with the ultimate charge to administer the census in an as of yet unknown territory." The Deputy Commissioner finished the other half of his coffee and fulfilled his measuring ritual while Arthur drowned in desperation.

His dreams of being safe were gone. The last census was one of the most brutal events in the IRS's history. The Revised National Emergency Operations Manual was explicitly clear on the conscripting of an agent. Anyone, no matter their position or current pay grade could be enlisted into census taking if the Deputy Commission of Operations saw it fit. From executive to janitor, any employee of the IRS could be reassigned for essential functions. Census taking was undoubtedly an essential function of the post-war IRS. But in an instant, Henry S. Boyd had not only put Arthur's dreams to death, he had put Arthur to death.

"The IRS needs to expand its reach, Mr. McDowell," Boyd stated. "We have settled on collecting in this single State because our need to survive had to be met first. Now that we are floating in better waters, and now that operations are at their peak since The War, it is our duty to serve the rest of the union. You will be performing a key role in this responsibility. By the end of this meeting, you are to report to Vehicle Bay 13 to collect a van for your journey, the assigned rations, and your new Enforcer. By the end of the day I

expect you to be on your way outside of our known territory and into one of the adjacent states. The details of the area for your census are being shipped to Vehicle Bay 13 as we speak.”

Boyd looked at his coffee. “Upon completion of the census you will return with the supervising position you so deserve. I am sorry, Arthur. This is only a detour in your career, but all detours lead back to your rightful destination.”

Arthur wanted to shout, Arthur should shout, but his sense of duty prevented him.

Mr. Boyd continued: “Personally, I do not expect this to be like last time. We are only being thorough, but the area should be nearly empty. I would not expect anything more dangerous than you have already experienced. If you were any other agent I would be worried, but there should be no more than a few scattered families, at worst a tribe. Raider country is in the opposite direction.”

Arthur felt some relief. Not a lot, but enough to quiet his most dire of fears.

The door opened and a man with red hair holding a replacement mug of coffee rushed in, almost spilling it. He gathered the old mug, and before he could pivot, the Deputy Commissioner yelled “You’re late!” and stamped the word ‘infraction’ on a pink slip from his desk. The man looked sullenly at the floor, took the pink slip from the Deputy Commissioner and filled out his name and time on the door.

Before the red-haired man left, he said in a shaky voice, “It won’t happen again, sir.”

“I know,” the Deputy Commissioner whispered, and the red-haired man left.

Ruler to mug, ruler to an empty spot, and then mug to mouth. Henry S. Boyd drank greedily. It was the most coffee Arthur had ever seen someone consume.

“Honestly, this is good news,” Mr. Boyd reported to Arthur. “With this census, our operation may expand and,

when completed, you will find yourself supervising a new generation of Auditors to the new region! Think of yourself as a pioneer to a new world, my boy. I wouldn't trust this mission to just anybody. You are the most competent Auditor I have seen in years, and once this is done I am sure you will be a competent supervisor!"

Arthur was conflicted in his emotions. Boyd was giving him praise, and a promise for the very job that would help him grow old, but for now he had to work with an outsider on a job that had doomed his father. It was hard to tell how much of this was genuine disdain at his circumstances, and how much was hurt pride. The Deputy Commissioner himself had said that this should not be dangerous. After all, census taking was just filling out a questionnaire; it was not nearly as intense as auditing. He wouldn't be threatening to take from the desperate, only counting the needy. Yes, this was unexpected, but wasn't it an honor to serve the IRS? Wouldn't a last foray into a sparsely populated wasteland to herald a new era in tax collection only cement his legacy and help him move upward from supervisor?

Arthur McDowell looked into the eyes of the Deputy Commissioner whose warm smile now betrayed the cover of his grey mustache once more. "I trust only the best for this mission," he said.

Only the best. This flattery had done it for Arthur. This wasn't what he had wanted, but his hero, the personification of bureaucracy, of civility in a cruel wasteland, had just referred to him as 'the best'. He had to live up to that. He couldn't disappoint the Deputy Commissioner. The fact was that no matter how he felt about it, Arthur had no choice but to do his job. But he could now do it with a little pride. It was a bitter pride, but pride nonetheless.

"You can count on me sir," Arthur reported with half reluctant gusto.

Henry S. Boyd looked down at his desk. "Good," he said, as he signed a white slip of paper, confirming their meeting, and handed it to Arthur for his signature. Arthur clicked his pen and signed his name with a flourish. Seconds later, the Deputy Commissioner peeled out the yellow carbon copy and handed him it.

His second autograph of the day.

"You should find Enforcer Duke waiting for you in Vehicle Bay 13," said Boyd. "The Van Master should have you pumped and ready. Godspeed and good luck, my boy, this time in four days I hope to see you here at my desk again, as a Supervisor to Auditors #A1-#A24."

This would put him in charge of Ralph, and would ensure his safety.

"Thank you, sir," was all Arthur could manage.

His career was stalled, but only temporarily, and for a cause that he believed in. It was hard for him to think that just moments ago he had felt so deflated, and had believed that certain doom was ahead of him.

As Arthur walked out of Henry S. Boyd's office he was met with the tearful sobs of the red-haired man who dared to be late in the Deputy Commissioner's scheduled consumption of coffee. The man was shaking, the pink slip crumpled. Arthur gave him no regard as he left and made the trek back to his desk before heading out to the Vehicle Bay. He was too consumed with his own thoughts to notice that the man with red hair trailed closely behind. Any time Arthur was confronted with disappointment, any time that terrible dread at his new dire chore threatened to surface, he would repeat those three magic words in his head: *only the best*.

CHAPTER FOUR



There are three rules of the road. They aren't particularly hard to remember, nor are they mired in wit. To women like Rabia, they were taught at a young age instead of nursery rhymes. They were taught alongside the Ten Commandments. But the rules of the road had more utility, and they had brevity on their side.

Rule number one: do not drive at night.

Of course, knowing your lessons and learning your lessons are two different things.

Rabia Duke, consummate professional and former Sheriff of one of the largest United Wastes caravans, she learned this lesson early. While Arthur was mopping the floors of the IRS bunker, Rabia rode in a modified big rig with her mother. The truck, which was as much a home as it was transportation, was the only privilege she had growing up. Considering that she was a black girl in the American wasteland, any kind of privilege was held onto with grit and desperation. The United States was a cruel, racist, and misogynistic place *before* the bombs fell. By the time Rabia was riding shotgun in a truck covered in sheet metal armor counting bullets for her mother,

the United Wastes had become a cruel, racist, and misogynistic playground. She was already the least important type of person in America, and that was before she knew that she liked women as much as she liked men.

Most first-generation wasters were illiterate, so Rabia's mother saw to it that her daughter would not be among them. Their caravan, like many other collectives in the post-apocalypse, was run by a 'Shepherd' who had more in common with cult leaders than he did priests. It was important to Rabia's mother that Rabia was able to interpret the bible for herself, instead of relying on the feverish spit that came out of the Shepherd's mouth. This, it would turn out, would be her mother's greatest mistake.

At the age of eleven, when she would learn her first lesson of the road, Rabia Duke discovered the book *Hell's Angels*. The long hours on the road were boring and she'd found the ill-gotten book while she and her mother scavenged for canned food among the rubble of man. It was the only non-fiction book she had ever read that resembled the world around her. She was taught to wield a gun for hunting and protection. She was taught to wield the written word to obey the will of God. But instead, she played with the words of Thompson and Bukowski, and she played with the safety off.

Dr. Thompson was her favorite. He seemed like a perfectly rational and tempered person compared to the savages that roamed the roads. This little girl, her only toys a mixed bag of crayons and a Geiger Counter, related to a Gonzo journalist better than any of God's chosen people. Hell, they even had the same surname half of the time Thompson did something terribly illegal.

It was *Hell's Angels* that she was reading when her mother told her to lock her doors. Some of the men were drinking. Stupid with liquor and emboldened by the full moon, they had decided that it was a perfect time for motorcycle joust-

ing. Rabia protested. Motorcycle jousting was her favorite spectator pastime, why should she miss it just because it was dark out? Her mother told her to watch the horizon.

The sound of motorcycle engines had nothing to compete with during the night, their headlights like miniature suns piercing the darkness. The men had unwittingly announced their presence to predators.

The raiders came with all of Thompson's madness, and all of Old Testament God's fury and cruelty. The consequences of breaking the road's first rule were on full display. It was as if the Hell's Angels had come screaming out of the pages of her book to bring the second apocalypse to the world. Her mother kept her still and quiet. They hid behind the front seats in total darkness. Rabia's mother could cover her daughter's mouth to keep her from crying, but she could not also cover her ears to protect her from the screaming.

The Raiders only tried to get into the heavily armored rig twice, once with brute force, and once with a Molotov cocktail. Neither worked. Rabia survived her first lesson that night without sleep or hope.

Rule number two: you scavenge for yourself.

This was a rule that her mother broke often. It was a simple calculus with no room for empathy. What you found was yours unless you wanted to starve. Like most children of the United Wastes, Rabia learned to scavenge the moment she could walk without falling. It should have been then that her mother stopped providing for her.

When Rabia found no food for herself, but still ate from her mother's bounty, she needed only to see the anguished face of her starving mother. This lesson needed no grand slaughter to make itself clear. Care for others and you will suffer.

Yet the lesson repeated every now and then. Rain fell like murky spit on the irradiated dust the day she got her first

period. This, according to her mother, was lucky. It gave them an excuse to hide inside the rig. The men had begun to notice her. Her pants were ruined and the stain was something that the Shepherd would want to talk about. The Shepherd was always looking for another sister wife. While the hateful rain turned dust into mud, Rabia's mother scavenged for tampons and replacement clothing. Rabia hid in the rig, confused, ashamed, and frightened. Her mother instructed her to read Leviticus, but instead she read *Generation of Swine*. Her childhood had never properly begun in the United Wastes, but now it looked as though it had come to an abrupt end.

Lesson Two was not just a survival calculus. No. Lesson Two was also practical. Her mother came back with tampons, sure, that was not a problem. But she also came back with a dress. Rabia hated dressing girly. That day, Rabia learned that if you want to dress yourself, you scavenge for yourself.

She grew, but she stayed short. While her mother towered above some of the men at six feet, Rabia peaked at five five. She grew in other places though, and her mother told her that she was beautiful. The men said things that would make even Dr Thompson feel violated. Wearing a dress was a bad idea. It was the last nice thing that Rabia let her mother do for her. Well, that was until she met Melody...

Lesson Three: Never trade with slavers. Even though it shouldn't have been, this one was hard learned. Blue eyes and warm smiles can affect a girl's judgment. Rabia didn't like to dress girly, but, well, she liked it when others did, and Melody? Melody wore dresses better than she ever could.

Rabia's mother had been dead two years since that lesson. Rabia had learned to fight better than most men and was quicker to pull the trigger too. Her mother did her best to raise her well, despite the challenges of the United Wastes. She did her best to impart the important lessons. Rabia ignored the ancient texts of Luke and John, and drank,

smoked, and cursed better than the men she killed. She liked her girls as much as she liked her boys, assuming that the boys weren't bleeding psychopaths. There was much about her that disappointed her mother.

Her mother would have preferred a different type of daughter. But at least she imparted the three rules of the road to her before she died. Those rules were now deeply instilled.

CHAPTER FIVE



Arthur's new Enforcer looked like someone who was suspiciously not the best for the job. Oh, she looked like she could handle herself in a fight, so that would not be a problem and, based on her worn, custom gear, it looked like she was definitely not someone to fuck with. But what set off Arthur's internal alarms was the copious amount of cursing and yelling she was doing at the Van Master, along with the two cigarettes she was smoking simultaneously - in a no smoking zone. It was hard to tell from the other side of the van bay, but one of the cigarettes looked like it was filled with something other than tobacco.

Almost silently, Arthur began to cross the bay. The Van Master was cowering at the flying spittle from the Enforcer's yelling. Arthur could not hear what the mouse-like Van Master had just said, but his Enforcer's words were loud and clear.

"You Goddamn swine! You hear me you unconscionable bastard?! Those supplies are necessary, *necessary* for the very survival of our mission! YOU HAVE DOOMED US YOU HATEFUL PIG BASTARD!" The Van Master looked help-

lessly around him, hiding his head behind a clipboard at the abuse being volleyed at him.

Her voice carried and echoed well in Bay 13. It was a cavernous-like enclosure, an area that was likely older than the bunker. This was the underground parking level of the old IRS building, and a generation after the building was mostly leveled it was still full of vehicles. The exception was that the parking lot was now used as a repair shop instead of for parking. There were about a dozen white minivans on this floor, all of them identical to the one leased to Arthur earlier that day, lined up in an orderly fashion. Work should have been done on a few of them now, but the mechanics had paused, all of them looking curiously at the scene Arthur's Enforcer was making.

The Van Master clocked Arthur and beckoned him over with a desperate tone, "Are you Arthur McDowell, Census Taker #A24?"

Arthur winced at his new title. "Yes, that's me," he answered, "What seems to be the problem?" The Enforcer grabbed Arthur's hand, her grip cold and firm. With eye contact, she shook his hand enthusiastically. Her demeanor was as cool now as it was hot just seconds ago. If Arthur hadn't seen it he would not have thought her capable of such white-hot rage.

"Rabia, Rabia Duke, Enforcer," she said. "It's good to see a man who looks reasonable in this godforsaken hellscape." Even *godforsaken hellscape* was said at a level that sounded rational, nothing like the cursing a moment ago.

Rabia released Arthur's hand and lay back against a white van. Her dark brown skin appeared darker than it was in the poor light and, despite the darkness in Bay 13, aviator sunglasses covered her eyes. Her militant clothing was worn and old, likely scavenged, her shorts doing nothing to hide the many scars covering her legs.

Rabia Duke smelled permanently of cigarettes and dust, but the acrid smell of tobacco was stronger due to her lips holding both a cigarette and something else like a cigarette, both in one corner of her mouth. Her thick and kinky hair was stuffed under a military cap, the word PROFESSIONAL written on it in permanent marker. A shotgun, which was almost bigger than her frame was held securely behind her with a strap over her shoulders. It was the only weapon that Arthur could see, though he suspected she had more hidden in her many pockets. It was spray-painted red with the phrase 'Fly Swatter' etched chaotically along its barrel in long scratches.

Though Arthur was a full three inches taller than Rabia, he got the sense that she was looking down at him. He would probably find her attractive if she wasn't so intimidating.

"This weird Nazi car-salesman here wants us dead. He can't be reasoned with, I tried," said Rabia through the two smokes in her mouth.

"She wants some unorthodox equipment that we cannot provide," the Van Master pleaded.

Rabia prodded her finger at the Van Master's chest accusingly. "Unorthodox?" she said. "We are going into unknown territory, you geek! You can't tell us what's unorthodox if you can't tell us what we'll find out there. Good God, man! Have some sympathy for the damned." At that, she drew in a heavy amount of smoke, crossed her arms, and looked away. "These are bad omens on the horizon, cowboy," she said, to no one in particular.

Work in the garage started up again, albeit a bit reluctantly. Eyes still leered at the trio from suspicious corners, but otherwise, Bay 13 was back to its usual heartbeat. The Van Master handed Arthur a clipboard. "This is the manifest for your journey that was obtained from the Deputy Commissioner of Operations' desk. You are to receive a

week's worth of water for two, a week's worth of canned rations and dry rations, mostly spam and instant mashed potatoes, a water recycling kit, two shovels, and camping gear. It says nothing about drugs, sir."

Rabia Duke launched herself off of the van and towards the Van Master, her finger at his chest and her face only a couple inches from his. "You rat bastard! How is a professional supposed to do her job without rum? Without whiskey? Most of what I gave you was a wish list, sure, I can supply my own screamers. And if you don't have the pound of grass in those giant stores of yours, that's fine. Hell, I don't even trust you to know the difference between a psilocybin and a shiitake mushroom, but goddammit man, a professional needs that alcohol!"

The Van Master took a step back, but Rabia quickly closed the gap and pushed her finger into his chest as hard as she could. "AND WE'LL NEED THOSE GRAPEFRUITS FOR THE SCURVY!"

"I-I told you, ma'am, you can buy that alcohol at our wares store if need be, but—"

"Buy? BUY THEM?! I'm a patriot, you swine! These things should come stocked in that Goddamn minivan! There is no way I can afford your wares anyways. You selfish bastards hike up your prices too high for anyone without an 'employee discount' and despite the fact that I have been contracted—"

"*Contracted* ma'am," the Van Master interjected, "the employee discount is for salaried workers only."

This is why we shouldn't hire outsiders Arthur thought. *No respect for the rules.* He had no want for any further confrontation, and if he was to work with this 'professional' and survive, it was better that they leave the bay on good terms. He offered his hand up between the two in peace, "I have an

employee discount, Miss Duke,” he said. “If it is that important—”

“It is a necessity,” she corrected.

“If it is a necessity then you can pay me back, and we can be on our way,” Arthur replied, calmly.

“You see that, you weird Nazi scum?” Rabia spat at the Van Master, smoke billowing out of her mouth. “*That* is what a reasonable, God fearing man looks like!” She jerked the clipboard out of Arthur’s hand and signed the manifest furiously, not waiting to receive her carbon copy. Arthur picked the copy up off of the floor.

She patted Arthur on the back. “Come on now, let me let you buy a girl a drink,” she said, almost flirtatiously.

All eyes of the garage were on them, their suspicion piercing. Only Arthur seemed to mind their judgmental gaze, as Rabia’s walk became brisk, even graceful. He followed behind her, self-conscious. No one shouted in the IRS. This was a place for civility and order, a sanctuary from the heart of darkness that reigned supreme on the outside. Yet, here was an outsider, brought in from necessity, bred in the United Wastes and raised by its callous, cruel hand. What understanding did she have of Arthur’s world?

He had worked with plenty of other Enforcers, and though they were a different breed from the office drones, they sure as hell weren’t as mercurial as Rabia. They, like Arthur, were mostly raised in the cold and safe halls of tax central. It clearly didn’t bother Rabia that their peers were looking disdainfully at them, but that’s what bothered Arthur most of all. What would they think of him, associating with her, even buying what she wanted? What if they had heard he was up for a promotion, but instead was back on the road with that animal? What sort of rumors would be forged in that vacuum of information? What sort of falsities would

they imagine to justify his fall from grace? It was maddening to think about.

You'll have to spend a week with her his mind volunteered as chills and gooseflesh spread across his body.

"I appreciated your assistance there," Rabia said, happily. "I'm sure with a little more abuse that coward would have bent, but you never can be too sure of the iron will of bureaucrats. They are not imaginative; if it doesn't add up on their forms, it just isn't possible."

"I'm a bureaucrat," Arthur replied with a mixture of pride and annoyance.

"I know that, but so far you are willing to buy a professional necessary supplies and a girl a drink, so you are forgiven," Rabia said with jest.

"My last Enforcers didn't need to drink," Arthur replied coldly.

"What of it? Huh? Did them a lot of good. All of them dead."

"They died in the line of duty."

"Bullshit," said Rabia. "They died while you laid on your back trying to rob desperate people. I've been around to see this madness, been on the other side of it too. There is nothing honorable about what we do."

Arthur stopped. *Who does this woman think she is?* he thought, not daring to say it and end this short-lived peace.

"We don't rob people," he said. "We simply remind them of their civic duty—"

"Civic duty?" Rabia interrupted. "My God, man, what civilization do you see out there? Listen, the difference between us and your average raider camp is that the raiders don't have the sense to leave their victims behind. It's a brilliant racket we got here - take enough to make us rich but leave them alive and with enough supplies to get more the next time we come back. It's a winning idea in the United Wastes, I'll give

you that, but let's call it what is. Without a social contract to sign, we are thieves with an ideology."

"I've heard you have been with us for some time," Arthur said to Rabia's back. "What happened to your other Auditor?"

Rabia turned her head to answer but continued forward without missing a step. Smoke covered the parts of her face that her sunglasses didn't hide. "The same thing that happened to your Enforcers. As your new Enforcer, I recommend you stay on my good side."

Arthur did what he had been doing his entire life. He followed. Begrudgingly, which is the first time he had that feeling while doing what he was told, but he followed still. *Only the best* he repeated in his mind, but this time it was far from comforting. It wasn't uncommon for an Enforcer to fail at keeping their Auditor alive. It happened. Yet there was nothing comforting in Rabia, nothing there to calm his fear of dying. The others had been true believers, doing their job for a civil future. In the short time he had talked with her, it was hard to say if Rabia believed in anything. He had a strange feeling that this conviction in believing in nothing meant that she would even balk at nihilism for being too idealistic.

The two, neither happy for the other's company, reached the closest thing the United Wastes had to a convenience store: The IRS Wares Store. In its lowest sub level, the IRS bunker kept the cache of taxes it had collected, along with the massive amount of shrink-wrapped two dollar bills. It was the largest horde in the United Wastes and was by far the most unique. Once the IRS officially recognized the barter system that much of the United Wastes had been using, the store filled with everything from toilet paper to weapons. These wares stores served as a 'currency exchange' for the agents, allowing them to turn in their two dollar bills for

anything their hearts desired. The one on this floor had taken up the space of six parking spaces, with scavenged wood and steel used to partition its goods from the rest of the garage with an orderly wall. Food, feminine hygiene, bullets, and even reading material filled scavenged bookcases wall to wall. All of it guaranteed to be free from radiation.

It was a tiny oasis of plenty in a world without water.

Rabia looked within, lustfully.

After seeing Rabia, and intuiting her order, the clerk, a balding man who had never been outside of the bunker's walls, turned his back on them and gathered supplies. He returned with a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, two handles of Wild Turkey 101 bourbon, three cans of grapefruit and a carton of smokes. All of it was older than Arthur and Rabia.

"You are going to have to be less particular of your bourbon, Miss Duke, we are going to run out of it at some point. There is no one left making it," the clerk said with a wry smile.

"There's still the irradiated stuff," she replied. "And if you think for a moment that it is any more dangerous than the stuff that isn't irradiated then you clearly have never had a drop of Wild Turkey yourself."

A small cloud of smoke caught beneath the brim of her hat. The clerk's smile faded, and a deft hand punched a calculator at the counter.

"That will be two hundred dollars or an equal amount of calories and bullets," the clerk stated, without looking up.

Rabia jabbed Arthur with her elbow, ushering him to fix the situation. Reluctantly, he moved forward.

"It is my buy today," Arthur said. The clerk looked up with muted surprise.

"As a non-outsider, the face value exchange will be one hundred dollars," the clerk stated, without checking his calculator.

Arthur counted out fifty bills and, as he handed them over, Rabia slapped him on the back affectionately. "You're a good man, Charlie Brown," she said.

"Who's Charlie Brown?" Arthur asked, confused.

"No idea, it was something my mother used to say. I think he was a kid who went bald from chemotherapy, back when radiation was good. Anyway, let's get a move on," Rabia said, walking away, leaving Arthur to carry everything. He quickly grabbed the heavy load in a half panic after realizing that he was going to be left behind.

This wasn't fair. They should be counting their inventory, meticulously checking that everything was in its place. This wasn't just because he was orderly, to the point that it was nearly debilitating at times, but because their survival depended on it. They should be on their way to their destination, scouting for a safe camping site. Traveling at night in a vehicle was too dangerous, it made too much noise and the headlights would be like flares leading the cruel to them. Instead, they were buying drugs.

Somehow, Arthur had lost control of the situation, and he was supposed to be in charge.

He should have been barking orders, but instead, he buried his anger. He would straighten things up on the road, where there was no one to judge him for his outburst.

Rabia Duke was the first to their van. After a pause, she slid open the side door with the pomp of a magician, revealing the rations and gear leased to them. Yet that was not all that was there. A gun case of every size filled much of the van's floor, each one of them labeled ESCALATION on strips of duct tape. The only cases without this label instead read TOOLS and MEDICINE. The latter dwarfed the toolbox. Rabia kicked its latches open.

"I suppose you want to count everything," she mumbled, holding up a hand, gesturing for the liquor. Arthur complied

and watched as she stuffed the drinks into the case. Then he saw it: a plethora of drugs old and new. None of them were for illness.

“What is that?” Arthur accused.

“Aside from the guns and a few pipe bombs,” Rabia replied, “we have multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers, and some bits of an unknown purple crystal I jacked from a raider, which I haven't dared to try yet. I don't actually know if you're supposed to smoke it, but judging by his bulging eyes before I killed him I would say it is a safe bet that's what he did with it. There's also some high powered Shaman's Milk in there, I'm sure the curdling doesn't matter. Some pre-war pellets of MDMA and LSD, both pure, I've tested them, some ayahuasca, a six-pack of only the darkest beer, and a brown bottle I found on a dead woman labeled 'no'.”

Before Arthur could protest, and before he could point out that it was all federally illegal (something that apparently mattered), Rabia kicked the latches back down and looked at Arthur with intense regard. Her sunglasses were now slightly down, revealing her brown eyes, Arthur couldn't decide if it was their beauty that was seducing him or their desperate craving for madness that they broadcast. A Cheshire cat grin spread from ear to ear, her cigarette and funny smelling hand-roll still clenched between teeth.

“This is going to be a wild ride,” she said.

CHAPTER SIX



Rabia Duke drove as if she was a kamikaze screaming towards a cliff, yet her demeanor was mostly calm. She kept a vigilant eye on the horizon, which looked murky. This was common in the United Wastes and was nothing to worry about. Not much had been said since they had left the safe confines of the bunker, and she could not yet say if this was because Arthur was not happy to be near her. There was an equal possibility that no words could be heard above the blaring Rock 'n' Roll cassette tape playing over the van's speakers, something labeled *The Doors* that Rabia had been playing nonstop.

This of course was a rational excuse for why he had been silent, but very few words had been exchanged the night before. After setting up camp, and eating separately, she had eaten something from her MEDICINE bag and had taken a bottle of tequila to her burlap tent. She had briefly shaken the bottle at Arthur with kind eyes and said "Want?", but when Arthur shook his head, there was nothing said until morning. Arthur had spent the night alone in his tent, presumably re-reading the old pre-war map given to them, his

area of census measured out in a red ink border. She was disappointed by his distance, but also disappointed that the something from her bag had done very little.

She suspected that Arthur would be entirely content if this lack of communication lasted for the rest of their journey. His trust was probably hard earned, but she could hardly fault him for that. She was the same way. Besides, he had probably never met a woman as kickass as her. Men tend to get pouty when they are around kickass women.

Rabia, however, no matter how callous or mercurial, was more amicable for socialization. She regarded Arthur with the corners of her eyes as she drove, noting that he was wearing a seatbelt, even though there was no more law requiring him to do so. There was no seatbelt around her, and in truth if she was the van's only occupant there wouldn't be any pants either. After a moment of staring at him she turned the volume down and Arthur sat up straight. "What is it? Did you hear something?!" he asked with frightful urgency.

She hadn't noticed before, but Arthur was incredibly tense. His knuckles were white and sharp from his bones, mirroring the pinhole like irises bulging out of his sockets in cold fear. The awkward silence between them was likely this sense of terror eating at his psyche. They had little in common, but Arthur struck Rabia as a people pleaser, so surely those differences would have melted for this man's need for social equilibrium. She was willing to bet on it, and she only bet on sure things. This poor bastard had probably been stressing himself out since they left the safety of the bureaucratic snipers posted throughout the urban wastes. Though Rabia's job was to keep him safe, and not to make him *feel* safe, she supposed that she could do the man a kindness and put the sweating bastard at ease.

"No, nothing aside from the gypsy ramblings from the speakers," she replied. "We are in the dust plains now, there

won't be any land pirates for miles. The only thing we need to look out for is the squealing of our Geiger Counter. Just wanted to have a professional conversation. I know that it's easy to get off on the wrong foot with me, but I promise you I am one of the good guys. You doing okay?" Rabia said all this as sweetly as she was capable, which was at the very least slightly more sugary than a saltine.

Arthur did not answer her immediately, and with the Rock 'n' Roll no longer screeching like a banshee the only noise that could be heard was the labored purr of the engines and the faint blast of sand from the outside.

The dust plains were vast, a picture of infertile sand spanning in every direction. This was once farm country, the heart and soul of America. Corn and wheat once shot up from the ground like harpoons out of a cannon; there was so much of the stuff growing so quickly that only a mechanized nation could even attempt containing it. Now, the only grain that came from this country was of a fine rock, whittled down by wind. Rumor on the caravan said that the whitest grains were the remnants of bone, blown away from the equally deserted city that the dust plains surrounded.

Arthur sighed deeply, and had begun to relax. Rabia was right, he was far too polite to simply ignore her, and so she would have the conversation she wanted. She would never admit it aloud, but she did relish the chance to talk to a civil man. It was a nice change of pace from your common wastelander who was only interested in getting into her pants from conniving or by force.

Arthur's mouth opened to say something, but then closed quickly. He stirred in his seat, shifting his weight awkwardly. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said, "just shaken. The unknown scares me, and I've never been this far from the bunker. I never realized how comforting the IRS border snipers were until today. The furthest away from the bunker I have ever been is just

outside the suburbs, and they're only a day's walk from the bunker and only hours from the safety of the snipers."

"Indeed," Rabia responded, letting the wheel go to light a cigarette. She made no effort to slow down, but kept an eye on the murky horizon.

It took just a few seconds for Arthur to realize that he had only answered her question and had not regarded the rest of her statement. "The IRS wouldn't hire you if you were a bad guy, I suppose. I don't know; I'm just not used to outsiders." More sand blasted the windshield. The mechanical purr of the engines raged on. Arthur found the need to clarify. "Not that there is anything wrong with outsiders..."

The Geiger counter squeaked as quietly as a tamed hamster.

"Holy magnet of destitution!" Rabia cursed as she slammed on the breaks. Arthur's seatbelt tightened and dug firmly into his chest.

Rabia looked down and over her shades, her eyes as bulged as Arthur's just moments ago. Panic rang in her head. The horizon. "Shelter!" she hissed. "My God, man, we need shelter! Do you see that god damn storm brewing?"

Had her eyes not been trained to see it, had she not spent an entire childhood staring off into the distance fearing this very boogeyman, they could have driven into the worst of it. The Geiger Counter chirped once more.

A dust storm.

"What? What's wrong?" Arthur asked, gasping for breath.

"That brown haze in the distance. It's picking up momentum. This van isn't lined with lead, is it?"

Arthur shook his head. "With the scarcity of gas and the rapid increase in its price in the economy, the IRS elected to go without lead plating in our vans to save on weight. It has saved the agency—"

"Black hearted bastards! We need to find the van cover

before this thing picks up some mojo and we get cooked alive in this vicious can!"

They were a day's drive from the city, and structures like barns or farm houses that used to be out in the plains had been sheared away from the earth by the hot, irradiated dust storms that Rabia now feared were ahead of them.

"Wha—" was all Arthur could manage.

"You see that haze out there?" Rabia asked, deciding not to illicit patience. "That haze is probably six hours out, but covers the entire horizon. Those winds blow about as fast as this van goes and they blow with irradiated dust. When that foul thing hits, it will be like a sand blaster having sex with a microwave. *One* of those things is inconvenient, *both* is nuclear castration!"

"Wha—"

"THERE IS NO TIME TO BE VERBOSE! Chug half of your canteen then grab one of the shovels. We are going to dig hatefully, then tip this bastard van on its side and into our hole, and we camp out here until that storm passes or God blinks and forgets we're here!"

"Umm."

"NOW, DAMMIT!"

Rabia leapt from the van, threw the side door open and pawed desperately at their supplies. Arthur was frozen until the urgency finally sunk in. Knowing that their lives depended on his quick action, he unbuckled his seat belt, opened the glove box, and subtracted one full canteen from the inventory list.

"I said NOW!" Rabia screamed from outside.

She said dig hatefully, so hatefully they dug. The Geiger Counter chirped softly with long pauses between each piece of song, but as the hole grew deeper, and the storm closer, the chirps became more elongated and more frequent.

They paused only for water, and only for as long as Rabia let them. Her murderous gaze stopped Arthur from subtracting from the manifest (which was fine, because Arthur had a knack for keeping these things in his head anyway). Rabia was fit, having spent her life fighting off death, but her frame was slender, and not accustomed to the terrible labor. But she was still quicker at digging than Arthur.

It was not that Arthur lacked the work ethic, and although he was a little taller than Rabia, and a little broader, the only labor his body had known was running in fright. This made him terrible at digging.

The day's light had muted, but not from the sun's march forward, but because the storm that once looked like a small haze in the horizon had closed its distance and was now like a mountain, fluid in movement. Hours had gone by. They dug down, then they dug in. Both had become exhausted long ago. They kept digging.

More hours. More digging.

The hole had to be taller than the van. The wind had to blow over it not into it. Rabia sliced at the ground with her shovel, and Arthur did the same.

Their hole was dug.

There was now a deep wedge in the dust plain.

. . .

After Rabia had moved the van closer to the hole, and parallel to its wide berth, she grabbed a jack from the repair kit and moved it upwards from its side as high as it would go. The pair spent what little strength they had left ramming their bodies against the van in quick succession. After their fourth wave, it tipped over and into the hole.

Within a few minutes, they were inside, seated on the walls with their backs against the floor. Rabia wasted no time in getting into the liquor. "Want?" she asked, sweetly. Arthur shook his head, and started subtracting from the manifest. "That storm will be over our heads soon," Rabia continued, "we stay in here until that Geiger Counter is as quiet as a grave." She took a swig of rum, relieved to feel it burn her throat.

"This will hold us up a day," Arthur said, glumly. It was a strange sentiment to hear aloud, and Rabia chuckled woefully at it.

"That is the least of our worries G-Man," she said. "But don't worry, once this clears I'll get you there so you can count your heads.

"How did you learn to do that?" Arthur asked, kindly, the first time his voice sounded sincere in wanting to learn about her. *Nothing cracks nuts like a ball breaking hellstorm*, Rabia thought to herself, glad to finally be speaking on friendly terms.

"I was born into one of the great caravans," she replied. "A large tribe of civilians carrying and scavenging anything they can get their hands on to whatever settlement was willing to trade. My mother kept me on watch on top of her semi-truck's cab." Rabia wiped sweat from her face. She paused to take another swig, the sickly sweet taste of the rum washed out whatever dust was left in her mouth.

"She kept me up there to look out for things like the hell-beast about to be on top of us now, as well as land pirates, raiders and slavers. She trained my eyes for all of these things, but mostly I think she kept me up there because it meant I was out of reach from lustful men. While you were likely learning bureaucratic dogma and why anything but blue and black ink is a sin, I was learning the language of the dead planet we are stuck on."

She did not mean this last part bitterly, but could tell that Arthur picked up on the implication that he was privileged. Before he could say anything, a sound not unlike an avalanche blasted above. The howling fury of the dust storm engulfed their small enclosure. The Geiger Counter clicked off excitedly, and Rabia continued on.

"We had to do this sort of thing often when coming through the dust plains. It is normally no problem anywhere else as there is always a derelict structure to hide under. But out here there is only down for shelter. Don't worry about the noise; it is only as bad as it sounds."

What little light there had been in the overturned van was mostly extinguished. A silent moment passed before either of their eyes had a chance to adjust. The only light source was the burning cherry tip from Rabia's newly lit cigarette. Arthur was close enough that Rabia could feel the warmth from his body. If Arthur didn't enjoy this, then he was too tired to move. Rabia took a swig nervously.

"Give the devil her due when it is deserved," Rabia said. "Only an outsider could have saved you here."

By the expression wrote on his face, Rabia could tell Arthur wanted to rebuke this, but he decided against it and relented.

"I'm just glad I don't have to file a 21B Radiation Sickness form," he said. "The margin on the tables is too wide."

With a lull in the conversation threatening to turn into a

full and awkward silence, Rabia changed the topic after exhaling on her cigarette.

"You have a reputation among the other Enforcers," she said, cleaning her sunglasses with her shirt. "The fact that you have outlived four of them is both incredible and concerning."

"I don't try to get them killed if you are thinking—"

"Not at all, it is as ugly as a whore's knee-sock out there. People die. The other Enforcers are less suspicious about that than you think. Believe me, if I thought you were a back stabber, I wouldn't have taken the job. The reputation is a good one, if not a little baffling."

"Oh?"

"They say that you always bring them back, the dead Enforcers. You always carry their bodies back with you. Why is that?"

Arthur replied with a staggered noise that was not exactly a word. There was another lull, and it definitely became an awkwardness

"It's not something we do in the caravans," Rabia said, breaking the silence. "When someone dies, they are dead weight, so it's important to your survival to leave them where they lay. If you catch someone dragging a corpse, it's because they plan on eating it and not share."

She was answered with the howling blast of sand above them, and for a moment believed that this was the only answer she was going to get. Arthur let out a long lungful of air, and then he broke his silence.

"There is no dignity anymore," he said. No one has it. I don't think it's anyone's fault, given the circumstances, but people deserve to have it. I bring them back so that they can be buried, and so that their families can get whatever peace they can from it. I know that that's next to none, but it's always worth the try." Burying the dead was a foreign idea to

Rabia in practice. People died. But she had heard her mother speaking about the old ways from time to time. Arthur respected the dead. He did what no one asked him to do, and he did it because it was right. Rabia wished that Arthur could change his mind about her.

She rested her hand on Arthur's shoulder and took another swig of rum. "You're a good man Charlie Brown, whatever the rancid hell that means." She looked into his eyes happy to see he looked nervous. She moved closer and parted her lips.

"If I ever die in action, you take my body and you stuff the cold bitch with every lit bomb you can get your hands on and you toss me at the feet of the scumbag's mother who killed me!" she said seriously, and laughed at Arthur's shock.

Arthur nodded in terrified silence, and they split a can of SPAM before succumbing to the warm embrace of sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN



With morning came nature's imperative, and when on a diet of mostly canned meats it is an imperative that must be taken care of immediately. Arthur and Rabia walked out from the back of the van shortly after waking up, too pre-occupied to take heed of the dust that had buried it.

After a light breakfast of instant mashed potatoes (with a large colored pill and whiskey for Rabia), they set out to manage the damage.

The storm had left nothing behind, but only because it had ground everything into nothing. The dust plains were as barren as they had been the day before. A subtle but familiar green sunrise kissed the dead horizon. Arthur thought it was as beautiful as it was somber and terribly morose.

Arthur wasn't sure what to do with his new found trust for Rabia. This was the first morning he had actually seen her without her hat or sunglasses, and though her afro had been squished by her hat, she looked pretty. More so because she radiated a confidence Arthur was envious of and severely lacked. She half smiled at him, then stuffed a cigarette in her mouth and uttered a string of curses that would make even

satan blush and made Arthur queasy. Arthur was *really* not sure of what to do with his new found like or trust.

He had no doubt that Rabia could do her job, and she had already proven to be an asset in their quest to administer a census. But her mood swung to anger quickly, and her appetite for chemicals was hand to mouth. Arthur wasn't sure if he had seen her sober yet. But the most important question had yet to be answered, and it was one that had to be before he could commit to a friendship: would she let him do his job?

Rabia regarded Arthur dully, and stretched her sore muscles. "If we start digging soon, we might be able to get this vicious whale out of the dust before half of the day is gone," she said, dragging two shovels out of the van. She handed one to Arthur then pointed at the van's top. "Once the dust is off, we dig there and get behind it. Getting it upright with just the two of us will be harder than tipping it."

"Do you think we can do it?" Arthur asked.

"If we don't, we have a little under a week's food before we have to play a game of Russian Roulette where the winner eats the loser. After that, pray for the quick death of a raider." Rabia struck ground with her shovel.

Their digging was slower than yesterday, having felt the full burden of it in their tired flesh, but they dug.

The sun hung like a molten disc above the sand-covered plains. Despite the raging ball of fusion that was once worshiped as a god tearing through endless space to reach the earth, it was a cool day. A slight breeze kicked up specks that might once have been the bones of humanity, and tiny whirlwinds danced on the surface of an area that was once pregnant with plenty.

They dug.

Their shadows shrank, and the former god above them followed its clockwork path forward. So much dogma had

been written about man's gods in such a vast amount of time. But in the end man robbed his gods of their final purpose: to end man. And man did it with the same burning fury that fueled their first god, the sun. Maybe the old ways were best, for at least there was without doubt that the sun has no idea of man's plight. It would continue on with or without them.

Still, they dug.

Their shadows started to grow once more. Their first chore done, Rabia jacked the van from its side as far up as it would go, then tied two cords of rope around it. Both man and woman pulled on this cord, laboring to get it back on its tires. When it was finally upright, Rabia patted Arthur on the back, and they collected their gear. Rabia gassed up the van from their supplies, which Arthur made a note of. Soon they would both be inside the van, sipping on precious water and chasing the sun in its constant journey west.

Though the air was heavy with the bodacious madness of Rock 'n' Roll, Rabia kept it at a lower volume, inviting conversation if Arthur felt the need for it. Neither had the strength to talk, but found that sharing silence was no longer awkward. It was, in fact, companionable.

The appetite for socialization was not filled for some time. Rabia drove the lumbering van with the intensity of a banshee. The dust plains eventually gave way to cold scraggly rocks and barren dead trees that splintered upward, now tombstones to their former glory. The van moved up towards a mountain and they climbed in elevation. Light chatter swelled into conversation as the sun slowly dipped into the horizon.

"What exactly is the plan for when we find a poor bastard out here?" Rabia asked.

"You don't know?" Arthur replied, more in annoyance than surprise.

"Forgive me if I have been too busy digging like a lunatic

to do my homework, G-Man. My job is to protect you. I bring you back alive and I don't have to worry about sleeping outside the bunker and wondering where my next meal will come from. What exactly is *your* job?"

Arthur clicked the head of his pen. The mission and its futility weighed on his mind. So far they had survived the cruelties of nature. Man's cruelties were always worse. He repeated the comforting pleasure in his mind, *Only the best*, and honestly tried at that moment to believe that they would make it home.

He licked his dry lips and in no confidence said: "We are going to seek out people, and find out where they live and under what circumstances. The moment we see somebody we are to ask if they have an income and how many people they live with. This will help us ascertain which tax bracket they belong in for collection and auditing purposes."

Rabia put out her cigarette and, because of the dimming light, removed her sunglasses. She looked at Arthur briefly before regarding the road and asked: "What if we don't find anyone?"

"In that case," Arthur replied, "we search until we are halfway through our supplies and then return home".

A mischievous grin crept onto Rabia's face.

"So, let's say we decide to camp out here," she said. "Like the good patriots we are, we decide to take advantage of one of the United Waste's many great national parks." At this she waved a hand towards the corpses of trees and earth that surrounded them. "After a short vacation we return empty handed. No one would be any the wiser."

"Not an option," Arthur said in disdainful impatience. "It is our civic duty and our *job*—"

"Yes, yes," Rabia cut him off. "Dammit, well I tried, you OCD maniac. But finding people means finding trouble. It

was a dog eats dog world out there before the dogs had to contend with us eating them." She lit another cigarette.

"This should be easier than an audit," Arthur said, more to assure himself. "The Deputy Commissioner of Operations said himself that we shouldn't expect more than a handful of people."

They were reaching the zenith of the mountain, and stars had begun to shine through the sky once dominated by the sun's hateful glare. Rabia slowed down for the first time in hours. She regarded Arthur with a glance. "Yeah, well, we will have to go looking for that handful tomorrow. It's getting dark. We should get this whale off the road and out of sight, find a comfortable place to sleep."

She turned the van into a small clearing. Arthur made no objection. He was tired from the day's labor and was happy to be able to stretch his legs and eat before having a well-earned sleep.

The moon, man's other old god, had replaced the sun and taken its turn to reign the sky. The earth that imprisoned it in a gravitational tether finally as barren, almost as dead. The moon's soft glow lit up the clearing, which helped Arthur and Rabia navigate their new campsite. Arthur relished being able to walk, his legs now flowing with newly circulated blood. They came to a large horseshoe of boulders. This had the benefit of keeping them out of sight from the road, but it obscured their view of the land. Before Arthur could regard these boulders, Rabia was already climbing the top of one to scan the horizon. It was hard for Arthur not to admire her under the soft glow of the moon.

In a moment, Rabia had climbed to the top of a boulder, hands on her hips in triumph. But then, rather suddenly, her hips stiffened and her arms dropped to her sides. "Holy soul ripping terror," she uttered, and then with a demented

urgency, she yelled for Arthur. "Get your paper-filing ass up here, G-Man! NOW!"

Arthur was nowhere as skilled at climbing as Rabia, but with a few fumbles and awkward footing he was able to get up the old rock and sit down next to her.

It didn't take long for him to see it.

Out in the distance, miles from the bottom of the other side of the mountain, were lights.

Not just a few, but a couple dozen. They were far off glimmers in a gulf of darkness, but they were there.

Arthur's heart sank faster than a U-boat being spotted by a destroyer.

"Does this look like a handful of people to you?" Rabia said harshly. "My God, man! That is a village, maybe even a city of people down there."

Arthur's gut reaction was to squeal in terror as he was faced with the same fate that killed his father. He was looking down into a valley that would bring only doom for him and his new Enforcer. But they had to go down there. It was their job, their duty. It was what Henry S. Boyd expected of him.

"That is going to be a lot more paperwork than I had hoped." Arthur said, morosely. Rabia mimed choking him with great intensity, but as the realization of what was before them hit her, she crossed her arms and Arthur let out an extensive sigh.

"This might be a good thing," Arthur said, trying it aloud to see if he believed it. "If there are that many of them in a stationary settlement like that, then they are probably organized. If they are organized, they might be more amicable to our survey taking."

"There is nothing good about them being organized. If they are organized, then they are organized to defend, and nothing is more threatening to a stationary people like

outsiders," Rabia said, calmly. "You still hellbent on doing this?" she asked.

"The taxes from a settlement that large are too big to ignore," Arthur replied. "The Revised National Emergency Operations Guide has standards that can forgive their back taxes, but once the IRS is made aware of them they are subject to current taxes."

"Were you beaten with an abacus as a child?! LOOK AT THAT MONSTER! Those people will eat us alive, and that is not hyperbole! This is not a fucking clerical error to fix, this is life and death!"

"I know," said Arthur, terror gripping his heart.

Rabia jumped down from the boulder. The moment her feet made landfall she walked to the van and downed a hefty amount of Wild Turkey. Arthur followed, but, afraid of the height, he worked his way down slowly. Once he was on the ground, Rabia stopped pulling from the bottle, and looked at Arthur with somber eyes.

"I know that there is no stopping you," she said. "And I can't just go back without you. It would look suspicious and, despite your best efforts, you have grown on me." She said this with disdain. Arthur began to smile, but she cut the head off it. "Grown on me like a rash! This is the dumbest god damn thing we could ever die for!" She took another swig and immediately lit a cigarette. "If we go down there for your demented office errand, we go down there under my lead."

Arthur nodded, and a dreadful silence surrounded them. The quiet was interrupted by a sharp succession of pen clicking. Nothing was playing out the way it should. He should be safe in the bunker, running inventory and perfecting spreadsheets. He knew it wasn't fair to blame the Deputy Commissioner; there was no way for him to know there would be an entire civilization to count. Yet... after seeing just how insanely meticulous Henry S. Boyd was, it was hard not to

think that he wasn't capable of an oversight, no matter how small.

Rabia regarded Arthur with a kinder gaze, then took a drag off her cigarette. "We drive halfway down this hateful mountain early tomorrow, at four in the morning, slowly and without headlights. We find a good place to hide the van and then we walk there. Any questions?"

"Why are we walking there?" Arthur said, nearly indignant, his muscles sore from two days of digging.

"Because they'll see us driving from miles away, G-Man, we don't exactly want to sneak up on them, but we don't want to loudly announce that we are coming either. Besides our little federal bunker, no one drives except caravans and land pirates, and *one* of those is enough to get a town locked and loaded. Any more questions?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Good. We bring only the bare essentials and we make no mention of transportation. Under no circumstances do you tell them about our van. If they haven't killed us, and against all odds you count those heads without me having to pull the trigger, then we come back."

Arthur listened studiously. "I think we only have enough forms for that settlement, so we can go home after that," he said.

"YOU GOD DAMN BETTER BELIEVE WE GO HOME AFTER THAT!" Rabia screeched. "Mother of a filthy swine! I don't care if you only fill out half of them, we turn our tails and we run crying *home*. Do you understand?" Arthur smiled, realizing that Rabia's yelling was only theatrics, so long as she didn't have a gun in her hand.

Then she grabbed her shotgun.

"I'm going to check our perimeter. We sleep in the van again tonight. We leave no sign of camp." Rabia said, walking

toward the entrance of the horseshoe, paying no mind to Arthur's pen clicking.

Beneath the dread, and behind the deathly nervousness, there was something brewing within Arthur that only another bureaucrat could understand. This was not something that he could admit to Rabia, and in fact it was hard enough to admit to himself. This feeling, this terrible and almost evil feeling he'd had? Giddiness. Giddiness because there were blank forms to be filled out that would set in motion a new tax era for the United Wastes. It was like a burning sensation, one that would only numb once there were names and numbers written down in official black ink.

Druids of old wrote down sigils that would otherwise devour their psyche. The only difference here is that maybe the sigils were useful.

He and Rabia had more in common than he first suspected. It manifested differently, but without a doubt, they were both driven by a madness. And they both craved more of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The smell of morning dew had mixed with ash, because 'wet dust' was simply not horrifying enough for the United Wastes. Light had started to peek over the mountain, and rays shone through dead branches. The dead woods were like a series of skeleton hands, each reaching out to a sky as barren as they.

Once, the sounds of birds were reassuring. Once, it was a sign of danger if the birds had gone quiet. Now, the sounds of birds would be foreign, even wrong. Now, it was always quiet because there was always danger.

Reaching the very edge of this macabre forest, Arthur McDowell and Rabia Duke walked without uttering a word. They had left the van behind them hours ago. Smoke had begun to rise from the settlement ahead, some lights still flickering in the sleepy morning. Whoever was out there was likely making breakfast. The thought of a warm meal was at once pleasing, but was something that they could not risk. If they made it out alive, they would have to do so without the settlement knowing which direction they had come from. They both settled on a can of grapefruit.

Rabia led, grumpy from a hangover. It swam in her mind with a mixture of shame and anxiety, but not regret. Her shotgun was not slung over her back, and instead found itself held in her hands. It was used to being held in anger, even fear, but this was a new feeling for it: It was being held in uncertainty. This was not a posture Rabia had often.

Arthur was not far behind her. His black tie was neat, his hair combed. Despite two days of digging, he was still the face of the IRS and was as presentable as the United Wastes had let him be. Every agent of the IRS kept this in mind: they were likely the only federal employees that anyone would meet. They were likely the only federal employees left. They were not just representing the IRS; they were representing the United States government. No matter how the denizens of the wastes felt about being taxed, Arthur worked for them. He was, at the end of the day, a civil servant. Today he would meet any unknown terror with a smile, and he would be candid with those who grew up with only a vague understanding of what government looked like. It was his job to.

After clearing the forest, Rabia looked back at Arthur and tossed him a canteen. "Let's take a water break and watch them for a moment," she said. "Our caravan always waited to go into a town until after the smoke settled. We wait 'till they are done eating, they'll probably be in a better mood, and less likely to want to eat us." She sat down on a stump. Arthur walked toward her and thought about sitting on the stump's other edge, but opted to stand instead.

"You remind me of my ex, Melody," Rabia said after watching Arthur's indecisiveness. "She was about as anxious to be near me as you are."

Arthur gave a lighthearted chuckle. "Even your ex-girlfriend was anxious around you?" he smiled.

"Girlfriend? Christ no. Ex sex-slave," Rabia corrected. Arthur looked back in mild terror. "I picked her up at a small slavers' camp, traded an automatic rifle for her."

Arthur responded with silence.

"She left me amicably. Freedom will do that . . . What about you G-Man? You got someone at home?"

Stalling, Arthur drank some water. When this didn't suffice to lengthen his stall, he handed the canteen back to Rabia and waited for her to finish drinking as if it prevented her from hearing him. He could not tell if she was just merely curious, or actually interested. It occurred to him that maybe he was interested in her, and that was surprising to him.

"Office fraternization is frowned upon," Arthur replied, finally, absentmindedly clicking the top of his pen.

"Bummer," Rabia said with a half smile. She turned her gaze towards their destination and frowned sharply at it. "Don't go dying on me today, G-Man, I like working with you. You're polite, and fucking nobody is polite in this world."

Arthur did not know how to reciprocate, so instead he hesitantly patted her back and said nothing.

After a minute's rest, they were both back on their feet, and the distance closed.

As the sun moved higher into the blue sky, the dew began to evaporate, leaving no more moisture anywhere, save the canteens in their gear. The smoke that raged upwards in the village had stopped. There was nothing in the air but dryness. Rocks crunched under their feet, and when Arthur could not bear to look at their destination, he stared down at the ground. It offered him no hope.

They were close enough now to see the giant wall surrounding the settlement. It was a mixture of sheet metal, and cut trees from the forest, circling the perimeter of the area from end to end. There was an entrance wide enough for a four-lane road, which Arthur and Rabia aimed toward. Save

for the occasional shattered looking roof from an old suburban building, there was nothing to see at their level.

It was impossible to see beyond the wall. What it protected, or hid, was anyone's guess.

Despite its unnerving mystery, the wall was a comfort to them. Rabia saw a town that wanted to be protected; walls kept people out, and at the very least that meant that they were not raiders. To Arthur, the wall was exciting, because it meant at least one person in the settlement was employed as a carpenter. His finger itched to write down an official, and normal sounding, position of employment on form D-61.

Neither said a word while they walked, Arthur out of fear of being heard, and Rabia presumably because of a pounding headache from her hangover.

The settlement grew in size as they drew closer. They were now far away enough to see two men, possibly guards, at the entrance. It was a certainty that those men saw them as well. This was it. An Auditor, conscripted into a Census Administrator, and a surly, never-sober Enforcer had come to their first people in the unknown region to which they were assigned. *Only the best* Arthur repeated in his head, and then *Godspeed*.

The men did not look mean; they looked psychotic. The detached look of cruelty crept from the eyes of one, while the cold stare of poor intelligence leapt out of the other. Both of these eyes would be better housed in lizards.

The clothing that wasn't scavenged was instead made from sheet metal and bleached human bones. They looked like they were wearing the feverish carapaces of beetles made from junk. The one with the cruel eyes clutched a rifle covered in duct tape at the grip, almost phallic-like; over his shoulder, the other carried a cricket bat with nails beaten into it. These two looked like the spirit of the post-nuclear apocalypse personified. If man was twisted before the war, it was a

twistedness with a polished veneer that was foreign to these two. Violence was self-expression now, and these two? These two were artists.

“She’s mine!” the one with the bat said, staring lustfully at Rabia. “I like ‘em like I like my water, black and screaming.”

Rabia stared stoically, her sunglasses hiding a gaze more terrifying than either of these men were capable of.

The man with the rifle nudged the other.

“Oi! Remember what the Colonel said, ‘be nice to customers’. Ya can have her if they don’ buy anything,” the one with the rifle said, then looked up at Rabia. “You are gonna buy something, right pretty miss?” His mouth widened not unlike a smile, revealing rotten and missing teeth. The few that were still there had been filed to fangs.

One misstep here meant death. This was a bridge made out of thin china set across a poisonous ravine. This situation called for precision, wit, and a little bit of luck.

So instead Arthur administered the census.

“Yes! Hello! I am an agent of the IRS,” Arthur said, “I am here for a quick census.”

There was a quick look of recognition from the man with the rifle. The man with the cricket bat looked on with an almost violent stupidity.

“Whaz that mean?” the man with the bat said.

“A census probably hasn’t been done in this area in a generation, so no reason to be embarrassed if you have not heard about one,” Arthur said to two men who were not embarrassed. “The IRS is simply counting the populace for tax purposes, I am here to help you fine men fill out a questionnaire about your living conditions.”

Arthur’s nervousness was gone. Rabia looked on, surprised to see a wave of confidence wash over him. It was a

suicidal confidence, but one she admired nonetheless. He was in his element.

The guarded posture of the men had eased. The one with the bat lowered his weapon. "You want to ask us questions?" he said in a childlike tone.

"Yes that's right, just a number of questions for the IRS database. We can start now if you would like?"

Before the man with the bat could answer, a third man, shirtless and covered in poorly drawn tattoos of snakes walked by behind the gate. The man with the rifle called out to him. "Oi! We got 'nother one of them sense-ass guys, see what the Colonel wants!" The man in the snake tattoos, which looked more like garden hoses with eyes, looked back and nodded, then disappeared back behind the gate. Rabia shifted her weight.

She could see better into the settlement now, but much was still obscured. She removed a flask from her back pocket and took a swig, then offered it to the guards as a peace offering. The more casual the guards became the better. The man with the rifle snatched it greedily and drank voraciously, then passed it to the other. They continued to look at Rabia, their gaze lingering on her naked legs with half open mouths, but the alcohol had simmered the intensity. No one here was friends yet, but this was miles better than where they were only a minute ago.

Arthur pulled out his clipboard and, with an official click of his pen, looked at the man with the bat. "Let me get your last name first and your first next with your middle initial last," he said. This was met with silent bewilderment.

"Huh?"

"Ah, what ah, what is your name?"

"Dumb Dick Rick," the man with the bat responded, with a wink at Rabia. She would shoot his dick first if this went

down. *Oh yes*, she thought, *you'll get circumcised with gunpowder you dumb Nazi fuck*. She smiled at him with cruel anticipation.

Arthur filled out the form *Rick, Dumb D.* and was about to move on to the next question when two men carrying a large cage passed by the gate.

Smiling at the men, Rabia placed her hand on Arthur's shoulder. "Allow me a private moment with my colleague. Feel free to finish that whiskey," She gently turned Arthur around. "*Get the fuck over here*," she whispered.

She led him a hundred paces along the side of the wall, then stopped and looked at him with fear. "As your Enforcer, I advise that we *get the fuck out of Dodge*. These men are slavers. We won't die here, Arthur, we will be caught and sold here. That is a future of brutal rape for both of us." She cocked her red shotgun. "We walk along this wall to the corner until we're out of their sight and then take a different route to the van."

Arthur knew she was right. Slavers were worse than raiders, and even land pirates. Raiders would kill you, not always quickly but your pain would end. Slavers bought and sold people as workers, sex objects, and sometimes as food, but your life would go on without freedom and with a lot of agony. It was a future of the worst kind. This was *absolutely* the worse case scenario for their journey, if they went any further it would end here, and a life of random cruelty would be the only forecast ahead of them.

But Arthur's form was not completely filled.

"No," Arthur said. "I am a civil servant and I have a duty—"

"You OCD bastard! Those men were staring at you just as lustfully as they were at me, Pretty-lips! We go, now!"

"I thought you were a professional," Arthur accused with his arms crossed.

"I *am* a professional, a freelance professional, and I intend to stay free."

"The Revised National Emergency Operations guide stipu—"

"To hell with your guide, man!"

"I have to do my job," Arthur finished. Rabia saw a commitment in his eyes; it was the same look she had seen in a wrist cutter a few years ago. Arthur moved past her, clipboard in hand. There was no arguing with a bureaucrat. She followed behind slowly, keeping a substantial distance. Her naked legs, a necessity for the outdoors suddenly made her feel vulnerable. She had grown up with a healthy fear of men and had learned to fight better than any, but when outnumbered by an entire town, well, then vulnerable is exactly as she should feel.

The two guards had multiplied to six.

Arthur's hand began to tremble. Rabia's breath was shallow.

"Sorry for the delay Mr. Rick, my partner and I were discussing how best to proceed to make sure that your experience of the census is a positive one," Arthur said. The four new men looked no less savage. If they were a band, they would be the kind that threw cats at brick walls and insisted it was music.

The man with the snake tattoos was among them.

They spread out slowly, creating a u-shape around Arthur.

There was no time to turn back now. Arthur was at their mercy, and mercy was a strange word never uttered on their tongues.

The confidence that was once at Arthur's command had peed itself.

Arthur clicked his pen and winced at the sound. The men looked hungry, with lust, for violence, and to fill every haunting desire of their id.

"D-Do you all live together? If you all have lived in the same place since before April—"Arthur stammered, his voice now bordering on a squeal.

The man with the snake tattoos cleared his throat, silencing Arthur's ramblings. He slowly pulled a machete from his back and smiled. "Thas 'nuff of your questions. The Colonel wants a private consultation with ya," he said.

The man with the rifle pointed its muzzle at Rabia. "Alone," he added.

Arthur's pen clicked at a rapid-fire rate.

"We are a partnership," Rabia said, shotgun raised. "If he goes, I go."

"Nothin' doin', pretty miss," said the man with the rifle. "The Colonel gets what he wants 'round here in Slaver City, so put down your gun all nice like. The Colonel just wants to talk about your sense-ass."

Rabia expected Arthur to turn around, but instead, pen and clipboard at the ready, he said "The Colonel, he's your head of household, yes?"

Goodbye, you kind, polite, batshit insane bastard, Rabia thought helplessly as she lowered her weapon.

Dumb Dick Rick had a look of brutal confusion. "The Colonel is the colonel of Slaver City!" he barked.

Under NAME Arthur wrote: *Colonel*, under occupation he wrote: *Colonel*. Four of the six men had closed the u-shape, now surrounding him completely and cutting him off from Rabia. The other two stood in front of Rabia. The men behind Arthur pushed him forward ushering him away. He obliged without contest. Looking over his shoulder, Arthur could only see Rabia's hat, the word 'Professional' written across it, through the wall of men behind him. *She let me do my job*, he thought. The phrase *Guns go up? Don't frown! Fall down!*

ran through his head like an endless scrolling marquee, advice that was totally useless now.

The four men pushed Arthur into the city, leaving the remaining two with Rabia. With his view no longer obscured by the walls, Arthur saw a large wooden pole, probably once used to hold up a school crossing sign, but which now had a new purpose. The top of it was sharpened into a spike, and it no longer carried the municipal safety sign it once bore, instead carried a new sign.

Punctured by the spike was the head of a red-haired man, his face frozen in a permanent scream.

It was the head of the agent who had delivered Henry S. Boyd's coffee late.

CHAPTER NINE



It was a grim throne for an even grimmer king.

This was the sort of thing that CEOs before The War could only dream about making for a symbol of power. It was far more effective than a red muscle car and far more perverse than filling that car up with girls barely turned women. It was not something that anyone alive then with power had dared to make because it was simply too honest and overt in its symbolism. These men of power from old would have immediately been ousted as the psychopaths that they were had they sat atop this monster. They did not dare then.

Now? Now was an age where team building exercises meant killing wild dogs with scavenged junk. Now was an age where men literally chained young girls to the hoods of their 'death-mobiles'. Now was an age where power play was simply a pull of the trigger. It was a renaissance for psychopaths, and this throne? Well, this throne was the motherfucking Mona Lisa.

An equal amount of human teeth and spent bullet casings

spiraled up a concrete base. So tightly packed were these teeth and shells that one would assume that there was no concrete behind them holding it together. They would be wrong in this assumption, but only because the smallest amount of concrete that could have possibly shone through had. This base formed into a chariot, with the large molars of men and women and the shells of high caliber bullets at the bottom petering up to the baby teeth of children and smaller casings at the top. Two long and thick chains lay limp at the side, and monster truck wheels that the base of the throne sat on were held in place by cinderblocks. The base was three feet high, and although teeth were easy to find in any of the many cities now turned into a radioactive crater, one got the very distinct feeling that the artist behind this beast had used only the freshest of ingredients.

The cherry on top was not the seat, no, because the artist designed it as a two-piece sculpture, one that could be separated, but needs both halves to bring it all together. The seat was an old leather Cadillac driver's seat, the piece that completed the throne was the man who sat on it: The Colonel.

Overweight, this slug of a man sat on his throne with the bored listlessness reserved for only the most slothful. The lower jaws of men protruded out of the toes of his black boots. Whatever material his pants were, they had tattered to a web-like structure over the metal casings he wore on his hips, culminating into a foul looking codpiece. A white suit jacket, although torn and fringed at the elbows, was actually bleached and sat on top of an equally white vest and collared shirt. A long flab of skin, riddled with tumors fell from his chin, creating a wattle that a chicken would cringe at. It should have obscured the confederate flag bolo tie underneath it, but being the unsightly thing that it was, it was hard not to notice every detail in and around it.

This was The Colonel, a man so cruel that the slavers around him declared him king, without question. His brutal throne and his decaying body on top of the rubble of an old fast food restaurant. He sat there like a plucked and mutilated rooster observing from a roost of madness.

Arthur wanted to ask him about his deductibles. Old habits.

Arthur was pushed toward The Colonel, albeit still around 20 feet away. The men who had 'escorted' him there turned away, either out of fear or disgust. Or both.

A voice like buttered grease boomed from the Colonel "You been asking questions you shoulda been asking me, boy!"

"Definitely, sir. We can start with you and then move on to the others!" Arthur bellowed back.

"What?" The Colonel said.

"Should I come closer?!"

"Yeah, that'd be nice!"

Arthur obliged. The four men who brought him there stayed behind, still avoiding the gaze of the cruel rooster. Once he was within five feet, a terribly close proximity for a smell that was as equally horrid as the throne, Arthur pulled up his clipboard. "You wanted to see me, sir?" Arthur said.

"Yeah, I heard you were goin' 'round taking a sense-ass in my little neighborhood," said The Colonel. "The last two guys, see, one was too quiet, didn't say much I wanted to hear, and the other? Well, he talked right too much for my likin'. One of dem has their head on a pike now, can you guess which one?"

Arthur, confined to his fate, was less scared than he should have been. "Was it the talkative one?" he said with genuine curiosity.

The Colonel laughed at this, a sound that had more wheezing than mirth. "You know, I don't remember! It was

only a couple of days ago, and this 'ol head of mine, well it might as well have been a hundred years!" Arthur expected him to stroke his wattle like it was a long beard. "How you like my shoes, boy?" The Colonel continued. "Made 'em out of the hired guns they brought."

Arthur's heart collapsed into his bowels. The thought of Rabia meeting the same fate threatened tears. He fought them away, trying his best to act professionally.

"I think they are pretty trendy for a man of power in the United Wastes," Arthur said with hollow commitment.

"You think so?" The Colonel sounded surprised. "No one 'round here 'preciates all my efforts." he said, his hand creeping up to his chin.

He's gonna do it, Arthur thought with a dreadfully pleasant expectation.

"I know why you are here, boy, so lemme tell you what..." The Colonel said, now stroking his wattle. *I KNEW IT* Arthur's mind howled in a mix of victory and gross despair. "...For every question you ask me on that there sense-ass, I git to ask you one myself. Does that sound fair to you, boy?" Arthur tried not to gag as The Colonel ran his fingers over a particularly large tumor.

Having conceded he would not be alive to administer the census, Arthur agreed to this proposition enthusiastically. He nodded his head vehemently and clicked his pen. The tables *name* and *occupation* were preemptively filled out, so Arthur moved on to the next question, crossing out *apartment*, *house*, and *mobile home* and updating with what he felt was appropriate.

"Mr. The Colonel, sir, is this 'Terror Throne' A: Owned by you or someone in your Thronehold with a mortgage or loan? B: Owned by you or someone in this Thronehold free and clear? C: Rented, or D: Occupied without payment or rent?" Arthur asked, reading off of his modified form D-61.

The Colonel stroked his flab contemplatively. "You know, before now I jus' called it my sittin' chair, but I reckon I like Terror Throne much better. Good on you, boy! But I own this throne wholesale."

Arthur put a checkmark on B.

"My turn," The Colonel said. "How many of y'all's scouts are there in my neck of the woods?"

Arthur looked up from his clipboard, concerned. "I don't know, but I honestly didn't think two others would make it out here, so at least 3?"

It was hard to tell if this pleased The Colonel.

"Mr. The Colonel," Arthur said, continuing with the task in hand, "were there any additional people staying at your Terror Throne on or before April 1st?" This seemed like an unlikely scenario, and even he would be the first to admit that. It was hard to imagine anyone sitting on top of the throne with The Colonel, but it was also hard for Arthur to imagine that he would be talking to a man with a mutated wattle, so...perspective?

The Colonel's eyes indicated boredom. His hand returned to the top of his chin to begin stroking his unsightly flab again. "You know, I don't think anyone here really knows what month it is. We sold off a woman named April not too long ago, but no, son, I'm the only bastard that sits here."

"No...additional...people..." Arthur read aloud as he marked a check on the form.

"My turn," the Colonel said. "When does your gang of raiders plan on getting at us?"

The question surprised Arthur. He shifted his weight awkwardly, his throat parched more than ever. "Sorry?" was all that he could manage.

Rage filled The Colonel's eyes, a molten hot stare that threatened to lay waste on everything it met, yet the rest of his body remained slothful and relaxed. When he spoke,

Arthur was surprised to find the hideous man's voice steady and calm, which only served to make him all the more terrifying.

"Let's be honest with each other, boy, this here 'sense-ass' is intelligence gatherin', it's a poor attempt, but we all know what the IRS does, they are the Iron Raider's Society, the meanest and largest gang east of here. You're here to count up my men to see how many troops I got. Now, when does your king plan on doing the raidin'?"

"I-I can see why you are confused Mr. The Colonel, sir, but the IRS stands for—"

"I DON'T GIVE A RAT'S ASS WHAT IT STANDS FOR!" he bellowed, his voice borrowing some of the rage from his eyes. Arthur winced. "We know what you do. You steal from job creators, job creators like me. Not enough to ruin me, no, you're smart 'bout that. You know that if I thrive and make calories as a business owner, that you can come back for more! Your army is gonna come to my front door at some point! WHEN?!"

"I-I don't know," Arthur said. Some of the rage subsided in The Colonel's eyes. Arthur wondered if he stored his anger in his wattle.

"I believe you," The Colonel said, "grunt like you shouldn't know anyways. This'll go much quicker if we don't bullshit, son. Now, I think it's your turn for a question."

Arthur looked at his clipboard. The next question said *Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?* but Arthur wasn't sure if he dared to ask that question to a warlord sporting a hate symbol on his bolo tie. Suddenly, and for the first time in Arthur's bureaucratic career, the questionnaire did not seem to matter. Did everyone in the United Wastes feel this way about the IRS? He had heard Rabia say much of the same things (except she wasn't a monster who sold people and claimed to be a "job creator"). Arthur was merely doing his

job, but just how different *was* he to a raider? Also: weren't there more important questions to ask?

"What will happen to my Enforcer?" Arthur asked, his frightened emotions not hidden.

"Lookie here!" The Colonel said, shifting his weight in his morbid throne for the first time. "Now *there's* a question worth askin'! If what my boys are sayin' 'bout her is right, why, I reckon that pretty black thing will sell off right quick!" The Colonel licked his lips. "If she don't fight back, that is."

He had his chance. She had practically begged Arthur to turn around, and begging was something he figured she did not do often. Wouldn't it have been nice to just camp out with a brutal, foul-mouthed, intelligent and beautiful woman? Hell, she had somehow tolerated, and even liked Arthur which was rare. Instead, he had gotten them captured. He had ensured that his new friend's greatest fears would be played out every day. And for what?

A census.

"My turn," The Colonel said, folding his meaty hands over his metal codpiece. "How many of y'all are there? And don't bullshit me."

Arthur could lie, but it occurred to him that he was now the third IRS agent to be interrogated, so his numbers should really match the others. But more importantly, the public did have a right to the number of people the IRS employed, being a federal institution.

"Hundreds," Arthur said, looking down at his feet.

Does person 1 sometimes live or stay somewhere else? His form prompted next. Instead, Arthur asked: "What...what will you do with me?"

"Lookit that!" The Colonel said, slapping his knees. "Now I git to be the one who says I don't know!" Laughter crept out of his mouth, his wattle jiggling. "You been real nice, boy, I'll give you that. I don't think I'm gonna kill you. I reckon I'll do

with you what I did with the old man, it's not often that free inventory walks in here!"

The Colonel stuck two sausage-like fingers in his mouth and whistled shrill and fierce. Arthur was suddenly aware of how much space was around him that he could probably run and not get caught, but could he run and not get shot? And was that better than getting caught?

A man wearing nothing but a loincloth and biker's helmet crawled through one of the fast-food restaurant's windows from a side that had not collapsed. He was emaciated-looking and, like The Colonel, he was also riddled with tumors. A large book was tied to his back with belts. He looked like some sort of mutant turtle.

He climbed up to The Colonel and got down on all fours before him, facing away. It was like the book was a table top and he was the legs. The Colonel rose, with less effort than Arthur would have guessed, opened the book, and removed a pen from his codpiece. "Looks like I git to write something down too!" he said, clicking his pen. He licked a sausage finger on his other hand and rapidly flicked through the pages.

The title of the book read "Inventory and Sales".

Despite the heavy portents of doom weighing down on him, Arthur could not but help feel a little excited to see this book. An insane urge to audit the book itched inside of the lining of his skull. Old habits.

The Colonel found the page that he was looking for. "Day two hundred, admit one slave, free inventory," He said, looking down at Arthur with a cruel smile.

The guards behind him started making their way closer, surrounding him like they had done before.

The man with the rifle was only about five feet away now. Arthur's mind volunteered *Guns go up? Don't frown! Fall down!* But that only worked if there was an Enforcer.

His indecisiveness destroyed what little hope he had in running, in dying quickly. He was now completely surrounded.

The Colonel raised his hand and the guards stopped. With dark mirth, The Colonel looked at Arthur. "I git one more question!" he said, kicking away the emaciated table, the jaw of a dead Enforcer flying off his boot from the force of the kick. "Why do you do what you do, boy?" he asked.

There were a million answers that, just a day ago, Arthur felt passionate about. It was his civic duty, his job; it was something he liked doing; he was born into it; somebody needed to collect taxes. He had done his job without question. He had done everything he was supposed to do and instead of being rewarded with the promotion of safety that was owed to him he was standing at the foot of a psychopath in charge of monsters. He had spent his life counting numbers, and now he would be sold off, and *he would be counted*.

"I don't know," Arthur said.

The Colonel laughed.

"That's what I thought, boy, that's what I thought." The Colonel looked down at his guards. "Take him to the south fields and put him in a cage next to the old one we caught yesterday. You two catch that hired gun of his and bring her to me first." There was lust in his eyes.

The men obliged. Of the four guards that had escorted Arthur earlier, only the man with the poorly drawn tattoos and Dumb Dick Rick remained. Dumb Dick Rick shoved Arthur forward.

He did not fight it. The two men did not have to force Arthur along. Arthur was despondent now that he had a new career of slavery ahead of him, and thought bitterly that he had been one his entire life.

The fast food restaurant behind him grew smaller but the bloated rooster's gaze could still be felt.

At least my father had the sense to die in this world, Arthur thought, soberly. He hugged his clipboard to his chest in despair. Then they took it away from him.

CHAPTER TEN



The setting sun offered great relief to the field of cages. The rage it had been beating into the hot earth was finally subsiding and the blood orange smear across the dead horizon radiated a sense of peace to the slaves. It was the only beautiful thing most of them had seen in months.

The rows of cages were uniform following a strict grid, yet the cages themselves were anything but. Some were the kind of cage one would expect to find holding an animal; professionally built, made of steel bars and definitely from before The War. Some were built from scrap, a mixture of chain link fence welded around rusty car frames. Some were just boxes of sheet metal with penny-sized air holes drilled into them. No matter their shape, they all held living and breathing people, their numbers in the high dozens.

Arthur had been put to work to “earn his keep” before finding himself in the remnants of a van turned cage. He was marched from one side of Slaver City where the slavers’ well had been dug, and forced to carry two five gallon buckets of water across to the cage fields, a good mile away, and dump them into a large trough. He did this over and over as the sun

hammered the earth with cosmic rays. He wasn't allowed a single drop for himself.

The trough of water stood dead center between the rows of cages, and to Arthur's great dismay was not for the slaves. It was for the guards; a place where they could openly drink to diminish the hopes of the men and women they held captive. A slave was only allowed water after they "earned their keep" and when customers arrived.

Arthur sat down in his cage as soon as he was thrown into it. The van that the cage was built out of was cut in half with the back portion stripped of all seats, doors and windows, and then wrapped with a thick chain link. It was directly opposite the front half, made in the same fashion. Despite the setting sun, the cage's metal floor was still hot, but Arthur's tired and aching muscles had voted that the discomfort was worth it to endure.

This was all his fault.

Sure, he was just doing what he was told to do, but at the end of the day, he still chose to do it.

This was going to be his life until he was sold. The frightening part? This was better than being sold. He had already heard rumors from the guards who marched him up and down Slaver City that many buyers bought slaves to dig for food. There was a sort of mad gold rush fever for canned goods that had been buried by the radioactive blasts of fusion bombs. It seemed unlikely to Arthur that anyone would find anything near the craters, and if they did it was probably awash with radioactivity. This did not matter. If the slave found nothing, the hole was usually too deep to get out of, and they would become bait for something else looking for food. If nothing came? If nothing took to the bait, and their masters had nothing to collect from their efforts, well they could always just eat the slave.

A guard came to the trough. He was covered head to toe

in sheet metal armor and was shorter than Arthur. He turned his back, stood at the trough for a stunted moment and then left. Arthur's parched throat made his tongue feel like sandpaper. He turned away from the torturous trough, and that was when he saw him...

Across from him, in the other half of the van, where a steering wheel should be, was an old man. An impossibly old man. He wore a collard white shirt, a black tie, and his badge read: Commissioner for Operations, Jack Dewitt.

Blood flushed to his slugged muscles, adrenaline poured through his heart, and Arthur shot to the edge of his cage closest to the old man. This was his boss; this was Henry Boyd's boss! The highest-ranking IRS official Arthur had ever laid eyes on, now stuck in a cage, like him.

"Sir?" Arthur said. "Commissioner Dewitt!" he yelled, not caring if the guards had heard him.

The commissioner turned his ancient head and met Arthur's eyes with his own tired grey ones. "So," the Commissioner said, "looks like we have another casualty for my trap."

Arthur blinked. Then he blinked again. When he thought of saying something, he elected to blink once more instead. "What?" was the only intelligible thing he could offer.

"What's your name, agent?" Dewitt asked impatiently.

"Arthur McDowell sir, Auditor #A24."

"And now you're a Census Taker I suppose?"

"Yes sir!"

"Me too."

This didn't make sense.

"I've heard of you, seen your file passed around, I'm sorry about that promotion, Mr. McDowell," Dewitt said, moving closer. "We had great hopes for you; it was a shame to see you go off in the first wave. How is it that I have gotten here before you? You left a full 12 hours before me."

"Radioactive sandstorm sir, forced us to dig down and sit

it out for most of the second day,” Arthur said. There were a million questions swimming like caffeinated sharks in his head, but the most selfish one came out first: “You knew of my promotion?”

“Of course,” Dewitt answered. “I personally thought there was no one better for it. After you were chosen in Boyd’s surprise ‘lottery’ for the conscription, the position still had to be filled. Went to a man by the name of Ralph Siemens. It was very unfortunate.” Dewitt clutched at the chain-link fence holding him in. “Not that it matters now.”

It did. He understood Dewitt’s sentiment; there was no future for them now, but it mattered because it was a promise. It mattered because it was the only shred of hope Arthur had held on to going into this mission. If he got back, he was promoted. Period. But to hear that it was immediately awarded to Ralph, no less than 12 hours later (and given the efficiency of the IRS, likely immediately after) was like grinding salt covered glass into an already festering wound.

The two guards that had brought him here, the man with the poorly drawn snake tattoos, and Dumb Dick Rick, were now at the trough. Each stuck their head in and drank voraciously. When they had had their fill, the man in the tattoos pulled out a knife and started to sharpen it with his belt. They clearly intended to stay for a bit, let the slaves know who was in charge.

Dewitt lowered his voice. “I’m sorry you got caught up in this. Boyd wanted me out of the way, always has. There wasn’t anything he was unwilling to do to get my position, but it was mine to have.” His tired eyes met Arthur’s once more. “The Revised National Emergency Operations Guide clearly states that anyone, no matter their pay grade or position, can be reassigned to carry out essential operations. The Guide also states census taking as ‘essential’.”

The rest did not need to be said aloud. Henry S. Boyd had initiated this census to get what he wanted and damn the consequences. The man that Arthur had looked up to, his hero, had purposefully sent an unknown amount of men to their deaths so that he could take advantage of a loophole that would allow him to move up in the agency. The bureaucrat in Arthur respected the calculus, but the man in him wept at the coldness.

"The two of us are finished," Dewitt said, then collapsed to a sitting position in despondent misery and physical pain. "Thank you for your service."

"Keep quiet over there! Don't talk durin' our break!" Dumb Dick Rick yelled. But there was no need. The Commissioner had lost interest in Arthur, now confined to his fate. As for Arthur, well, his existential terror was too deep to move him to words.

The last civil place on the planet, well, it just let psychopaths climb the ladder of authority with a cold distance. The system that he grew up in, that he believed in, truly and without compromise - what difference was there between it and the terrible hierarchy here? Both Henry S. Boyd and The Colonel had killed men to get to where they are, but at least The Colonel had the decency to throttle those men with his own sausage-like fingers. Boyd had just filed a form. He lied to Arthur's face. This was supposed to be easy, there was supposed to be no one here, a tribe at most. Instead there was a death trap, and Arthur had stepped into it, willingly!

"Where'd you git those tats?" Dumb Dick Rick asked the other guard, pointing at the striped garden hoses with poorly drawn circles for eyes. "Those snakes are sick."

"Forced a man at gunpoint to do 'em," the tattooed man replied. "Said it'd take him hours, I told him to do them before I was done eating my breakfast!"

"Alpha male," Dumb Dick Rick approved without emotion, fist bumping the other.

"Alpha male for sure," the tattooed man agreed. "Only took 'bout twenty minutes, but I had been done with my can of beans by then, so I blew his fucking head off once he was done. Probably the best work of his life." He looked at his permanent doodles and smiled with admiration.

More men came to the trough, each with a weapon holstered or slung over their shoulder. A couple of them had slabs of cooked, greasy meat in their hands. There were 11 of them total, gathered around the trough as if it were an office water cooler, and each one took a long drink before leaning against it. The group was testosterone mixed with an ignorance that almost had integrity. Arthur looked on. These men were proud, brutal, stupid and arrogant. Was this what man had reverted to as a result of society collapsing, or had he always been this way, only now he no longer had to hide it?

Dewitt gave Arthur a sidelong look, still sitting in defeat. He recognized the look of disapproval in Arthur's face. "You weren't alive before the bombs fell," Dewitt said in a hushed tone. "We were always like that, only interested in covering our own insecurities with a false sense of superiority. If someone thought you were weak, then you picked on or blamed someone that was different than you: women, different races, different sexualities, hell, anyone and everyone that wasn't close to you. The only difference between them now and then is that then we didn't have an excuse for it, but we did it anyways."

Dewitt raised a hand over his shoulder and clutched the fence. "I saw that in Boyd. The only thing that gives that man pleasure is being above someone else. I kept my position for as long as I did so he wouldn't get that satisfaction."

A few of the guards had spread from the trough, but not far from it. A few of them leaned against the cages, knowing

that the slave within would not dare to grab them. It was like dogs pissing to mark their territory, and now that Arthur thought about it, it wasn't a stretch to see one of them do exactly that. The guard that was head to toe in sheet metal had returned. He leaned casually on Arthur's cage. Dewitt stopped speaking at once, not wanting to push his luck.

Arthur wanted his promotion because it meant safety, and in all honesty he would have been happy to stay there. Or so he thought. He had never been in charge of someone else. Would that power have gone to his head? If he somehow did get home and got the promotion that he deserved, how long would it take before power had poisoned his soul? He had always run fantasies in his mind's eye of sending Ralph's smug face off to his death. Wasn't this what Boyd had done to Dewitt?

Was civility a luxury to mask the rancid monkeys that they truly were?

The sun had almost completely set and a cool breeze washed over the caged people. It was the closest thing they would get to refreshment.

"Anyone else hot?" Dumb Dick Rick boomed at no one in particular. "Why's it still hot out?"

A shiver crept up Arthur's creaky spine.

No one answered Dumb Dick Rick. As one guard leant down to drink some water, another punched him in the groin with precision and speed. The man fell down in agony, immediately in a fetal position, clutching his assaulted balls. Laughter burst out of the other guards, the random act of cruelty on the same level as the finest stand-up comedian. Dumb Dick Rick, with a smile that revealed his rotten teeth, chest-bumped the attacker and shouted "Alpha male, dog! Alpha male!" Then he patted him on the back in affection.

The guard leaning on Arthur's cage spat out a giggle, and smoke poured out from underneath his mask.

Arthur looked on at his captors in disgust, at once not surprised by his own gender, but lacking any understanding in it. If Dewitt was right, if his experience in both worlds had proved a valid theory of man, was there any escaping this? Arthur knew that there was a life of casual violence and indifference to suffering ahead of him. If terrible things were going to happen to him, why not be defiant to it?

The man with the tattoos brought his arm up to show off the snakes to a different guard, but then he froze, looking bewildered. "Di-did my snake just move?" he said with an awe that sat neatly with fear and pleasure.

Arthur looked at the guard near him, the sheet metal armor reflecting what little light was left from the sun. *Fuck the consequences* he thought and moved toward Dewitt. He had questions, questions that his existential crisis demanded answers to, and tomorrow there was no guarantee he would be able to ask them. "Is there no future, sir? If we have always been like this, what can we do to break this cycle?"

Dewitt shuffled, then faced Arthur, his eyes tired and grey, looking as desperate as Arthur felt. "Who knows? Maybe nothing. Maybe we wait out this era of fallout and hatred and try again. Or maybe we just hand the reins to the women, and hope they don't castrate the lot of us."

"Good answer," said the guard in the sheet metal armor, more smoke pouring out of the helmet.

Rabia!

"Probably only castrate the worst of you demented swine and sell the festering genitalia off as power symbols to the other women in charge. So you two will be fine," Rabia whispered. "Also," she continued, "shut the fuck up, we're on break."

Arthur kept quiet. There was so much he wanted to say, and if there were no barriers between them (or madmen around them), he would have rushed in for a hug and

squeezed like a bear. He would then apologize for being a headstrong zealot for a cause that did not share his affection. He would look into her burnt mahogany eyes, steal a glance at her beauty, and brace himself for the ugliest string of words he had ever heard.

The man holding his groin on the floor had rolled over, no longer doubled over in pain. He looked into the sky above, now dotted with a few stray stars and local planets. "It's so big," he said, "It's so fucking big". No one paid him any mind.

Dumb Dick Rick and the tattooed man were too busy gawking at the poorly drawn snakes, their jaws open in disbelief. "They *are* moving!" Dumb Dick Rick said.

The man in the tattoos screamed in terror. "GET THEM OFF! GET THEM OFF!"

Dumb Dick Rick grabbed the man's knife from out of his hands and hacked furiously at the tattooed arm.

Panic. Sheer bloody panic spread through the crowd of guards like a blighted thunderbolt.

"I put something in the water," Rabia said to Arthur, reaching into her pocket.

The sudden violence had stirred something in the guards that was not rational, and each dealt with it with flight or fight. There was laughter, tears, and raw animalistic screaming.

Rabia fished out a lock pick kit. She slid a long, L-shaped piece of metal into the padlock that was holding the door shut, then pulled out a crooked piece of metal and started to rake it towards her.

The guards around them paid them no attention. They were too busy either fighting each other or some invisible thing in the air that only they could see.

"What in god's name did you put in there?" Arthur asked.

"Everything," Rabia said as the padlock came undone. "I

put all of my drugs in there." The door swung open. "Well, except for the good feeling ones."

Dumb Dick Rick was now beating the man with the tattoos with his own severed arm. "It's not working!" he cried "The snakes are everywhere!"

Arthur crawled out of his cage as Rabia moved on to Dewitt's. She worked quickly on his padlock. "This deserves a raise," she said as the old man stumbled out of the cage. "A raise and a room."

"How did you...?" Dewitt tried.

"Easily," Rabia answered, "I'm a god damn professional!"

The two men followed Rabia, who was walking with urgency, but not running, through a path of cages. The men and women (and even a child) within the cages looked out to them in fear and desperation. Arthur met the eyes of each one he passed. *I will get you out*, he thought, *no matter what happens*.

The terrible cacophony of drugged-induced hysteria had reached a crescendo. Guards from all around had gathered to quell, or at least watch, the bedlam that had befallen their peers. Rabia shoved Arthur down behind an empty cage. Dewitt followed suit. Four guards, including the one with the rifle who had greeted them into this cruel hell, ran past them, too busy with the vicious circus ahead of them to notice the wounded bureaucrats being herded by a short, metal guard.

Rabia led Arthur and Dewitt inside the cage. Two more guards ran towards them, a mixture of pleasurable anticipation and fear on their faces. "Over there!" Rabia pointed to the trough. "One of them wants to fuck The Colonel!" she yelled. The moment they were gone, she led Arthur and Dewitt out of the cage.

Save for the endless rows of miserable people incarcerated in rusting boxes, the town was empty. They were soon at the far side of it, nearing a jumble of vehicles, all of them mutated

into something horrible, and each capable of carrying at least one cage. "This is where they ship the slaves in and out," Rabia said, "We get in one of these junk demons while those Nazi cocksuckers are distracted and get the hell out of dodge!" She stopped suddenly and removed her helmet. Her kinky afro burst free from its constraints. Arthur's heart skipped a beat when she looked at him.

Rabia's heart did the same, but for an entirely different reason.

Before them was a rusted Chevrolet Impala convertible. Metal spikes were welded to the front of it and a large cage had taken root in the back seats. This Frankenstein of car and vicious junk had lost most of its red paint, but the large, manic smile of a shark had been painted on the hood of it. Rabia was immediately in love.

"We take this one," she said with awe. "Oh yes."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



At times it felt as though Rabia's driving was like trying to buck a Saturn Five rocket. Knuckle white tension and high octane fuel was the new law for the journey. Consequence could only ever happen if it caught up with you and, with their new ride, this was unlikely.

Truly, this was Rabia Duke, freelance Enforcer, at her best.

Arthur did not vomit, but only because there was no food in his system to purge.

Whether it was out of necessity, or minor revenge against 'the system', Commissioner Dewitt was seated inside the cage that was welded to the back of 'The Shark' (a name Rabia immediately adopted for the car, and enforced almost violently).

No one followed.

By the time the IRS agents had made it back to the van and drove it and The Shark to the horseshoe rock enclosure that Rabia and Arthur had camped out in the night before, a yellow-orange haze had engulfed Slaver City. The darkness of earth's own shadow had engulfed the valley and mountains,

and the inhumane city they left behind had caught fire. Whatever calliope of drugged induced insanity they had left behind them, it had peaked with the wholesale destruction of at least three of the pre-war buildings.

Committing precious water to those buildings would be egregious. Instead, the denizens of Slaver City opted for the more abundant resource of sand, using every free and slave hand available to dig and snuff the fire out. As the fires faded, and much of the chaos had ceased, Rabia, Arthur and the Commissioner sat on top of a boulder, sharing provisions of food, water, and alcohol. They admired Rabia's professional handiwork.

Arthur finally accepted Rabia's offer of whiskey.

The three were in immensely good spirits. Watching the fire had done much for this, but freedom was surely the better opiate. Rabia lit a cigarette and slapped Arthur on the knee. "You are a real bastard," she said, affectionately. Her hand lingered. "You are lucky I'm a god damn professional."

Arthur took a swig of whiskey and then rebounded in horror as its hateful burn assaulted his throat, then numbed his senses. He wasn't quite drunk enough to reply to her with something cheesy like "I'm lucky to have you", but he did have enough courage to scoot closer to his knight in sheet metal, which, for Arthur, was about as suave as he was capable of. He passed the bottle to Dewitt, whose eyes had taken up a fire of their own after a couple of swigs, and no longer looked as tired as they had in his cage.

"How in the hell did you manage that?" Dewitt asked Rabia, passing back the bottle.

Rabia had her share of Wild Turkey, an amount that was alarming, and then turned to look at the old man. "Your employee of the year here had us caught in the 'spider's web', so to speak," she said, referring to Arthur as she slapped him on the back. "Once he was gone, I slit the throat of one of

the guards as he came to drag me, and then shoved my 'Fly Swatter' to the other's dick before he could say anything. I threatened to kill him if he didn't give me his clothes..."

"And you used them as a disguise to sneak in?" Arthur asked intuitively.

"Christ no, he wouldn't hand them over, so I unzipped him with my knife from crotch to belly button," Rabia replied, removing her cigarette contemplatively. Both men stared at her in horror. Arthur moved away from her, just a little.

"I made my way back to the van, taking a different path than we came, had half the urge to drive back home too," she continued. "Spending a couple of days with this do-gooder was enough to guilt me back." She nodded at Arthur with a drunken smile. "So, I did what any God-fearing patriot would do, I packed my pockets with every high powered drug at my disposal and headed back with a cocktail of fear and loathing that would kill any lesser woman."

"*Then* you donned his armor and snuck inside?" Arthur tried again.

"Hell no, had to kill a different man for that. Came around on the backside of town nearest the cages and saw one of them pissing in a corner," Rabia answered, light-heartedly.

Dewitt raised his hand. "I don't need to know what you did to him," he said, half chuckling in fear.

Rabia shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Tomorrow is going to be a big day," Dewitt said.

If Arthur was conflicted about how he felt about Rabia before, he wasn't now. Rabia was brave, or batshit insane, but however she wielded her traits, she did so admirably. Here was a woman who was truly in charge of herself. Oh, she was frightening, and her constant consumption of chemicals was worrying,

but she was everything Arthur was not. She was commanding, decisive, and not bound to petty rules. She had somehow managed to do all of this in the United Wastes without losing her humanity or empathy. She had saved him, and he was man enough to admit that wasn't emasculating at all. Arthur had never been in love, but this felt like the start of it.

"We should leave early," Rabia said, "they should be too busy with damage control to send men out looking for us, but never underestimate the drive of revenge in a stupid man. We head home before dawn and we take both cars."

"We can't go home yet," Dewitt said. "We have a census to take."

Rabia's jaw dropped at this, and for a moment it looked as though her mind was not able to process what she had just heard.

"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR GOD DAMN MIND? Have worms been chewing on your amygdala? I just risked my god damn life to save you two *with* my personal medicine bag, something that I WILL bill you for, and you want to count heads?"

Dewitt nodded.

Rabia looked to Arthur for help.

"I agree. We have to go back," he said.

Dewitt looked at him approvingly. "You make the IRS proud."

Rabia looked as though a vein was about to burst in her head. Arthur could hear the distinct sound of grinding teeth and saw that the butt of her cigarette had been chewed down. She looked at Arthur, and the look of betrayal sunk his heart. He gathered his courage and realized he was likely going to disappoint both of them.

"We don't go back for the census though," Arthur finally managed. "We go back because there are people; helpless,

innocent people, who are locked up in cages and have no future."

Rabia's eyes softened at this, and once more rested her hand on his knee. "You're a good man, Charlie Brown, but freeing those slaves is as suicidal as trying to get those cavemen Nazi bastards to fill out a census. We leave tomorrow."

"The hell we are!" Dewitt blurted, returning Rabia's anger. "I am not exactly happy about Boyd's trap, but we have a duty to fulfill and I am in charge goddammit!"

"THE HELL YOU ARE, YOU PENCIL DICKED BUREAUCRAT! I am a freelance Enforcer; I can terminate my contract whenever I want!" Rabia screamed, standing up and clutching the bottle of Wild Turkey like a throat. She looked down at Arthur pleading. "We would need an army to save those people, G-Man, and there is no pleasing Nowitt and Boyd."

"I think I know how to do both," Arthur said softly. He stood up, between Rabia and Dewitt. "Hear me out," he said.

"Whiskey is getting to your head G-Man," Rabia said, replacing her cigarette with a new one.

"No, maybe, well..." Arthur said, realizing that he had a slight slur. Dewitt rolled his eyes as Rabia sat back down. "The IRS has an army, one of the largest, and one The Colonel is afraid of. He thinks that the agency is going to raid him any day now, so there's no reason why he should be proven wrong."

Dewitt chuckled. "It isn't our department to free slaves or rescue the needy though, we collect taxes."

"Yes," Arthur replied, "and that is precisely what we are going to do. The Colonel has a record of every transaction that they make; he counted me in it before I was enslaved."

Dewitt's old eyes widened at this, and he vibrated with an

enthusiasm unknown to his withered bones in years. "That's genius!" he exclaimed.

"So?" Rabia said, "Who gives a fuck?"

Dewitt chimed in before Arthur had the chance. "We get that book, and the IRS will send out collection efforts en masse! If he's been keeping a record then we can try to collect back taxes!"

Arthur smiled. "The IRS has not been able to collect back taxes since The War. The Revised National Emergency Operations Guide forgives the back taxes of individuals. The Colonel's operation here is an entity large enough that can't be ignored and with that book to audit, we can seize his assets. And because those assets are people, his current inventory also counts as a census."

Smoke poured out from Rabia's lips and a look of terrible mischief lighted her face. "I get you two pencil-necked geeks. People are assets, and that book of his is the holy grail for the tax collector of the Armageddon era."

"You did it once before," Arthur said. "So will you help me sneak back in?"

Rabia took a long drag on her cigarette, then a long pull of whiskey. When that bottle was drained, she opened the tequila. "Why the hell not? No one should be a slave." She regarded Arthur with a warm smile then passed the tequila to Dewitt, who drank from it zealously. "Where is the book?" she asked.

"It's attached to the back of one of The Colonel's personal slaves," Arthur said with a mixture of anxiety, excitement and dread. This was likely suicide and the chances of them coming back from this were small, but his entire week had been filled with suicidal decisions, so what did one more matter? Either he was foolish or suicidal, but he wouldn't have to face which of these poisons of the mind had afflicted him most until after they succeeded or he was dead. "When I

saw him, it looked like he was living under The Colonel's throne inside some ruble."

Dewitt nodded in agreement and then continued to drink the liquor. When Rabia looked at him with contempt, he passed it over to Arthur, his movement sluggish. "We do it in the morning," he said, with the beginnings of a slur softening his consonants. "An old man like me needs rest before he does something stupid," he continued before walking towards the van. "Good night."

Arthur and Rabia watched the ancient man saunter away. Once he was in the van, Arthur moved his attention back to Slaver City in the distance. The yellow-orange glow had dissipated and the glow of the moon had lit a pillar of black smoke. He could feel Rabia's warmth next to him.

Watching slavers die from a distance was so romantic.

"Give it to me straight, G-Man," she said, somber and serious. "Because this detail matters. Are you trying to do the right thing here, or is this a paper filing urge that you have to fill?" Her eyes spelled worry.

The pleading faces of men and women, beaten and bruised and forced into makeshift cages lined his mind. There was nothing he could have done that would not have put himself at risk, and he felt guilty for it. He had chosen, maybe wisely, maybe selfishly, to assure his own survival before their freedom. He had to do something about it. "It's better to die trying to do something that benefits others instead of a bureaucracy," he said, surprising himself. "The IRS can go to hell."

"I knew you were a shithead Boy Scout the minute I laid eyes on you," Rabia said, smiling ear to ear. "I knew you would probably get me killed, but what the hell? Buy the ticket take the ride." She took a swig of tequila, and then grabbed his hand. "You are a polite and kind person in a

world of radioactive, insecure penises trying to fuck everybody over." She looked affectionately at him "It's refreshing."

Arthur wanted to draw her closer, but before he could, she grabbed his hand and abruptly jerked him to his feet. She let him go and fished for something in her pocket. Her hand came out closed, clutching something inside. Her wild eyes flashed with excitement. "Speaking of those racist, misogynistic Nazi swine bastards," she cursed, "remember I gave them all of the drugs *except* the good feeling ones." She opened her hand to reveal a bunch of capsules, which looked like a clutch of eggs held by a black, five tentacled squid. "What do you say, G-Man? We celebrate our freedom tonight, no rest for the wicked and no sympathy for the devil!"

Arthur regarded the capsules as if they were tiny pockets of fire. The little bit of alcohol he had drunk had already clouded his mind, but the call for *carpe diem* from a woman that had just saved his life was one he had to answer. He took a breath for courage and nodded his consent.

"Turn on, tune in, drop out," Rabia said, smiling prettily. She gave Arthur a single pill, then took three of them herself, washed down with tequila. She grabbed Arthur's hand once more.

Arthur looked at the single capsule tentatively. Then swallowed it.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Nothing happened for longer than Arthur was prepared for. The worst part was the anxiety he had, playing the waiting game. He thought perhaps a rabbit hole would open up beneath him, swallowing him whole and that he would be auditing hooka smoking caterpillars in a daze.

"Am I going to see something?" Arthur said, fear creeping into his voice.

"Sacrificed all of that stuff for those undeserving swine barbecuing below," Rabia replied, retrieving blankets, water and an ancient six-pack of beer from the van. "Not enough light to set up the tents," she said, laying the blankets on the ground, and then herself. She patted a space next to her, urging Arthur to join.

He did so, nervously.

"They don't make these anymore," Rabia said, cracking open a beer for herself, and then handing one over to Arthur. "I wasn't going to drink these for a while, but what the hell? We are probably going to die tomorrow anyways."

"You don't have to go," Arthur said.

"The hell I don't. We get that book and we can end some

suffering on a massive scale. That alone is worth the risk, plus someone needs to keep your dumb ass alive.”

The drugs hit hard, and neurons in Arthur's brain fired off a 21 gun salute every half minute. The infinite span of stars shone brighter, and the endless void that they resided in became less monstrous and more wondrous. He was at once aware of how cold he was in the night's air and how vulnerable the earth he lay on was as it hurtled through space.

The feeling was good, but it was incredibly lonely.

His mind reeled back and forth in waves of ecstasy and helplessness, each one cresting higher than the other, and neither was more crushing than the hope he felt. He had been a caged man today. Caged as a slave to be sold, and caged in the routines and rigid structure of the IRS. It had occurred to him that at this moment, for the first time in his life, he was finally free.

The underground concrete hallways of the IRS bunker had been structured to keep him moving upwards in hierarchy, but always at the mercy of it. Freedom was not at the top of this ladder, as he had sorely learned sitting next to Dewitt in the slaver camp. He had said yes to everything that had ever come to him in paper form, while the planet around him whimpered its last breath. How much of his finite time had he traded counting other people's numbers for a note of currency from a dead era?

It wasn't until he was surrounded by a literal cage that it had occurred to him that he was never at the helm of his own life. Sure, a portion of that was mere survival, but that was a charge everyone in the United Wastes had to deal with; and still, there were those who found a way.

Euphoria weighed down on his body, and the 21 gun salute firing off neurons in his brain had become a constant, rapid fire of buckshot.

It was just him and the lonely, far away, dead stars. He

shivered from the cold, even though he was wrapped in a blanket. He was suddenly fully aware of every detail of his tactile senses and found the chill impossible to ignore.

Rabia pressed her warm body against his, which took the nip out of his chill and displaced his sense of being utterly alone.

Rabia.

Somehow free, self-destructive, mad even, but she had retained her humanity. It was hard for him to imagine how he had ever resented her.

He wanted to say everything that was on his mind, the infinite universe, his self-built cage, how much he admired her and how god damn thankful he was. It was hard to push through the drugs to speak, but he had finally found his voice, and once he'd started...

Rabia was straddling him. "Once we get talking with this high powered beast, neither of us is going to want to stop," she said, her warm body pressed against his. "We might not make it past tomorrow, so why don't we save the chit-chat and break some office rules?" There was no thinking here, there was no need to. Arthur reached up and kissed her.

Then with devilish urgency, they shed clothes.

His heart raced. Her skin was soft and warm, her kiss deep and voracious. He could feel her hips pressing greedily on his own...

...But nothing was happening.

Her eyes were still placid with the endorphin rush of the drug, but a tinge of frustrated disappointment was there. She let out a sigh. "You're not going to get hard, are you?"

The question made Arthur bashful, ashamed. He was not able to spit out more than "I uh, I don't, ah..."

"Don't worry about it," Rabia said, climbing off. "That's probably the A in the MDMA, it happens. We'll do the dirty when we are sober."

This didn't do much to assure him, or calm his feelings of being inadequate. Sensing this, she teased, "*if* we live long enough, but you know, whatever." She took a long pull of beer, and then cuddled into him, resting her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry," he said, as every ounce of him except his penis was up for the dirty deed.

"Please be man enough to not make me console your ego right now," Rabia said. "Besides, this," she said, cuddling up tighter "is not overrated".

He held her naked body tight to his own. She was right.

"I'm sorry," he said once more.

"What the hell did I just say, Arthur?" Rabia snapped.

"No, not for that, I'm sorry for today. I'm sorry that we have to go back. I'm sorry for everything."

The waves of euphoria he had felt were now coming in as big combers. The joy of tactile touch and the glitter of stars were overwhelming for a moment but he soon hungered for more.

He was powerless in the face of the monolithic paper shoveling at the IRS. It was the last place on the planet where civility remained, where human decency was a luxury not yet snuffed out by the savagery of the United Wastes. But it still robbed a human of their significance, reducing them to something that could be thrown away. He was reduced, his power as an intelligent being marginalized, he was just a number: A-24.

His mind was easily distracted. Rabbit holes of thoughts could be followed with such ease. He felt Rabia's weight on him, her breath, and her heart beat. He could feel her wool-like hair on his shoulder. Gravity was suddenly so oppressive. Life was so absurd. His mind was easily distracted.

How much time had he spent on this planet? How much time had been wasted? A lot. That was proper, living in the

United Wastes and all. He had been here longer than his father. He had become his father, hadn't he? Gone on the same suicidal quest for reasons that only made sense when you were sober. Fuck being sober.

"Did you say something?" Rabia asked.

He had. He had said something he felt so powerfully, but what was it? How long ago was that? How long had it been since she asked him if he had said anything? Was that a moment ago? She's so soft. How could she be so soft on the outside but be so hard on the outside? Wait. Was that right? It had to be. She was so much braver, but that was good news, wasn't it? If she was braver than he was brave. He was brave. Brave or stupid. Probably stupid. He felt sorry.

!!!!

"I said I'm sorry about tomorrow, I think. I'm sorry I can't let those people suffer."

"Don't be. Don't ever feel sorry about that, G-Man. One of us damned souls has to have a conscience. Sometimes I feel like mine burnt out a long time ago. It's good to have you here to remind me that I still care. For some reason, I still care."

The drug receded, for a moment. Rabia didn't feel so heavy, gravity suddenly felt trivial. Her words were powerful, like they could be sigils. They had power because they were true. His feet were cold. He wanted to kiss her, to try and see if he could make something happen, but the drug crested and rolled down on top of him again, and the energy needed to move felt impossible. He was content to just pass his hands across her thighs. He felt many scars and wondered if she

regretted that they were permanent. She still cared. She had still, somehow, managed to keep a degree of humanity, even though she had murdered two people today.

She moved her fingers across his chest greedily, and then sighed deeply.

“I wish I didn’t get rid of the acid,” she said. “It’s not nearly as fucking cheesy as this.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The quickest way from one place to another is a straight line, but quick did not meet the demands of the insane.

The van roared through the United Wastes near a pace that might shake it apart, its engine screamed in agony. There was no letting up. Hell was going to be kicked in the groin.

Clouds of dust and frightened exhaust pumped out from beneath the van, leaving behind a large tail of toxic grief.

It was not built for this speed. Something had to give.

Nothing did.

It could be spotted from miles away. The guards fired shots into the air, notifying the others that they were under siege.

No one comes at them this fast to talk. It was all hands on deck.

Some of them were bruised, some of them were burnt. All of them were tired.

The rancid, drug-fueled anarchy that reigned supreme the night before, ending in a crescendo of fire and agony had left them weak, suspicious, and stupid. Still, they were The

Colonel's men, and whatever came howling at them now was far less terrifying than the tyrant with the wattle.

They wanted revenge.

And so, every man whose mind was ravaged by a cocktail of vicious, high powered chemicals, and every man that was ravaged by those men, needed to see the van die.

When it was close enough for the guards to notice, it was too late.

The van was on fire.

Impotent shots rang out of rifles, pistols, and the occasional handmade weapon, but the momentum was too strong. Only God himself could slow this white IRS beast down, and God left the premises when the first bomb fell.

Nothing was certain but death and taxes. These two things are not exclusive.

The van exploded forward, easily making it past the four-lane wide gate, and careened into the makeshift city hatefully, never once deviating from its straight line.

Screams of terror were washed out by screams of rage. The slavers were having none of this.

The van rammed into the side of an old concrete building, once used for banking, now used for dog slaughter.

Nothing would have survived that crash.

The guards stepped towards it tentatively.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The IRS always knocked on your front door, but this is Armageddon. While the front was on fire, they snuck in from the back door.

“Do all of your plans involve violent distractions?” Arthur asked Rabia.

“As often as god damn possible. Refuge in audacity,” she replied, getting out of The Shark, but leaving it running.

The large boulder they had placed on the van’s gas pedal had done its work beautifully, but they got the sense it would be the only agent to stay in one piece.

There was no shortage of guns between them. Rabia carried her red shotgun, a machete at her back, and an obscenely large hand cannon with a scope that would look comical had she not had the cold stare emanating from her tired face. Dewitt grabbed a rifle from her weapon cache and met no protests. Rabia handed Arthur a small pistol. “After how you handled your own last night, I don’t really trust you with one of these,” she teased, looking at him affectionately. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

Dewitt and Arthur led the way, feverishly familiar with the city by their water carrying path.

Arthur was burnt out. The potency of the drug had kept him from the release of sleep, and when it had finally weaned, Rabia insisted on pumping Bob Dylan and Jefferson Airplane into the night. He had no idea how she was as ornery as she was today. The crazy bitch never seemed to sleep, and even now, despite being low on drugs, she raced forward without looking back. Her constitution was a gift from the gods, or a sordid deal with the devil. Neither would have surprised him.

They had decided to raid in the morning when the slavers were still cradling their wounds, but why they had decided to do this hungover and burnt out from MDMA was anyone's guess. If that was the good feeling drug, Arthur could not imagine what hell the guards were going through.

They moved quickly and quietly towards The Colonel's roost, but they were only halfway there when a guard yelled out "THERE IS NO ONE INSIDE THE VAN!" So they picked up the pace, clinging to the walls as much as possible. It was only a matter of time before the guards fanned out.

The Terror Throne was just blocks away, a tiny beacon for their journey. The Colonel was not there, so they honed in on it.

The angry yells of pissed off guards grew closer.

Dewitt's age was deceptive to how quickly he could move, but getting him to start was a chore. He held his rifle firm and close, the tip aimed low at all times. It had never occurred to Arthur that he fought in The War before it became an atomic theater, but seeing him now, it was easy to imagine a younger commissioner storming the beaches of a foreign land. Dewitt hugged a wall then peeked out to the side, seeing the old fast food restaurant ahead of them. "We run across one at a time," he said, "when we are all there, we breach."

Arthur clicked his pen.

Dewitt charged across then hugged the restaurant's wall nearest to the window that the emaciated man had climbed out of the day before. He looked out from his spot then signaled that it was clear.

Arthur ran next. Then Rabia.

The shouting drew nearer.

They could see nothing inside from the window, save the bright primary colors of a counter. One by one, they climbed inside.

The interior of the restaurant was mostly empty, the cash register, the gaudy furniture and even most of the kitchen equipment had been pulled out of it, likely scavenged years ago. The little light that there was illuminated thick motes of dust. Only half of the restaurant was intact, the other half caved in, now the makeshift home of The Colonel on top. The centerpiece to this old fast-food dining area was the emaciated man, riddled with tumors, the large book still strapped to his back. He was holding an old, half melted doll and a pink plastic toy brush. His eyes widened, and he clutched the doll close to his chest.

"Hand it over, we are federal agents—" Dewitt started before the screaming began.

"Noooo!" The emaciated man screeched. "You can't have it!"

The three were conscious of how close the guards were. This screaming was not helping.

"Listen up you creepy fuck!" Rabia said through her teeth. "You are gonna hand over what we want or you'll find your teeth splattered on that god damn wall!"

"No! You can't take her!" the man wailed, clutching the doll closer.

"What? No, um sorry," Arthur said. "We want the book, not the doll. Um, give us the book, okay?"

"Oh," the emaciated man said, his sobs shortening, "you can have the book. I hate this book, it's really heavy." And with that, he unstrapped the belts.

Some of the guards could now be heard around the restaurant, but thankfully did not come in. The sound of heavy footsteps drummed on the collapsed ceiling.

"He's here," the emaciated man whispered. "Be quiet, he doesn't know that I have her, he'll be furious," he continued, handing the oversized book to Dewitt.

They were surrounded.

Moving like a lithe express train, Rabia was within inches of the emaciated man in a breath. She pressed her shotgun firmly against the doll and looked over her aviators directly into the man's eyes. "Go outside and lead those swine away from us or the doll gets a hole in its chest large enough to stick your fist through," she whispered.

"Rabia, you can't solve all of your problems with a diversion," Arthur said.

"The hell I can't!" Rabia responded with no love in her eyes. "We start drawing gunfire now and we'll be surrounded before we get anywhere close to The Shark." She turned her attention back to the emaciated man, clutching the doll to his heart. "Do you know what a triple-aught buckshot can do to plastic?"

"I'll do it I'll do it, just don't hurt her!" he said, wild desperation in his eyes. He lowered the doll slowly to the ground and stepped away from it.

"Arthur, get that strapped to your back, we leave on my signal," Rabia ordered. Dewitt held the book to Arthur's back and the two of them worked to get the leather tongue like latches around him. When it was secured, Rabia, with her red shotgun, motioned to the emaciated man to leave from a window.

The agents gathered together near an opposite window.

Arthur and Dewitt tentatively awaited Rabia's command and their chance to flee. The emaciated man climbed out of the same window they had come in and then immediately screamed for help. "There's a bad woman down there!" he shouted "a very bad woman!" The silence that followed was suffocating, and then shuffling feet broke it as guards raced towards the old diner.

Steps hammered above them, drowned out by the booming voice of The Colonel. "Bring me her head so that I may fuck it!"

"We should go now," Rabia said, and then she jumped out of the window.

As soon as they were all out, they ran as fast as they could, legs pumping furiously.

The first guard they saw held a tire iron in his one and only hand. Buckshot erupted from Rabia's shotgun and the tire iron fell to the ground before the body followed. Arthur could hear the bitter spray of bullets from Dewitt's rifle, but he couldn't see their target. He ran without thinking. Soon they were at the corner across from The Colonel's roost and Arthur dared to look behind him. The Colonel was on his throne, his wattle wagging back and forth. "It's the IRS!" he bellowed, pointing his sausage finger at Arthur. "Bring me their heads and I'll share one!"

Arthur was jerked forward. Rabia had grabbed him by the tie, yanking him back into momentum. *We are going to die*, he thought, but followed her as fast as his shoes could kick the ground.

Dewitt turned a corner and was out of sight for a split second. Arthur heard the sharp crack of gunfire and when he turned the corner himself saw a guard clutching his bleeding belly with both hands. They continued to run.

The sound of heavy footsteps thundered behind them.

The further Arthur jammed forward, the closer they seemed to be.

Another corner turned and four guards stood at the ready, each clutching a different firearm. Rabia reeled back and pushed the boys in a different direction. Their cover of old prewar buildings was thinning. Soon they would be in the field of cages, which would present a whole new set of challenges. With Rabia pushing them forward, Arthur was now in the lead. Dewitt began to slow.

Arthur ran to the edge of another building and turned the corner.

A guard greeted him on the other side. His jagged, rotten, fang-like teeth showed from behind an open gash of a mouth. He pointed his rifle directly at Arthur.

Guns go up? Don't frown! Fall down!

As he fell backward, Arthur raised his pistol and squeezed off half a dozen bullets.

To his surprise, one hit the man in the shoulder causing him to shriek with pain. Before he could retaliate, Rabia had turned the corner and shot off a round. The guard's jaw exploded into stains of blood and teeth around him, giving Jackson Pollock a run for his money.

The weight of the book, and its large flat surface prevented Arthur from rolling over. He was like a turtle, vulnerable and belly up towards any birds of prey sharp enough to spot a kill. They were in a narrow alleyway, the decaying walls of old buildings squeezing them in. Dewitt had joined them, a grim look on his face. The old man let his rifle fall to his side, caught by a shoulder strap, and offered his hands to his subordinate.

Arthur was pulled up to the sound of gunfire. Dewitt fell to the ground.

A guard had caught up from behind.

Rabia fired three shots into his chest and he fell to the ground, next to the man he'd just killed in cold blood.

Arthur clicked his pen, expecting form 22-B *Violent Incident in the Workplace* to be on his phantom clipboard.

Blood had swelled out of Dewitt's back, mixing with dirt to form a grim mud. Rabia's cries to move on faded into the background. Arthur was witnessing the death of the highest IRS official he had ever had the pleasure to meet. Dewitt's wrinkled hands drew Arthur close. "Leave, I'm old, we must audit this place; get the book home," and with a labored breath, added "please, file an HR complaint against Boyd for me."

Tears welled in Arthur's eyes, threatening to consume his sight. The sounds of frantic footsteps grew louder and louder.

"I'm sorry, sir," Arthur said, "but I'm an Auditor, that's just not my department."

A smile fanned across the old man's face for the last time, "That-a-boy," Dewitt said with understanding. Then, he had the decency to die.

Rabia spun Arthur about-face, terror dominating her eyes. "Get moving you dirty bastard!" she said.

The pain of a side stitch and lactic acid threatened to slow him, but still he ran. He followed Rabia as the sound of hurried feet clamored behind them.

They were in the field of cages.

Arthur hoped that the guards would not dare fire off shots at them here, that they would not want to risk damaging their 'products', but the contrary was immediately confirmed. Shots rang past Arthur and the slaves around him fell to the floors of their cages in cover.

They weaved between the cages, doing their best to confuse their pursuers and avoid being shot.

Arthur had an irrational fear that turning around to see

how many slavers were in pursuit would somehow bring them closer. They passed his former cage. His legs threatened to shut down. The book behind him weighed on his aching spine. He was dizzy with pain.

But there was no choice but to sprint.

They had cleared the field and were met with the grisly rusted mutant car fleet. The worst feeling in the world had managed to bloom in Arthur's mind: hope.

Rabia rocketed towards The Shark, its engine still pumping out toxic fumes. That's when they saw him. On the hood of the car was Dumb Dick Rick, a cruel smile on his stupid face and a giant shotgun in both his hands. "Lookie here, the pretty black—"

But before Dumb Dick Rick could finish his sentence, Rabia fired two shots, and then Rick had no Dick.

Dumb Rick fell forward and writhed on the ground like a live wire. Rabia booted him in his bloody groin, just for good measure.

"Don't you ever wink at me again, you dumb Nazi fuck!" she yelled, and then promptly got in the car.

As soon as Arthur joined her, she slammed down on the accelerator. Arthur lurched forward, scrambling to unlatch the book so he could put on his seat belt (old habits). They sped backward, wheels screeching, as Arthur managed to remove the book.

There was a single solitary bullet hole in the front of the thick tome.

Arthur opened its pages and found that the bullet had tunneled to a stop at the back cover.

When he looked up, he saw about a dozen slavers, half of them firing madly, the others scrambling to mount mutant cars of their own.

His view quickly changed as Rabia turned the steering

wheel. She switched gears and they roared forward. Arthur clutched the book to his chest at the same time securing his seat belt.

Engines roared. Rabia smiled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Up a god damn mountain, that's where they had to be. It was a tall order, and not just because of the 6000 feet in elevation they had to climb; first they had to survive long enough to get to the base of it.

The Shark jettisoned them forward with erratic force. It had taken them all morning to walk from the base of the mountain to Slaver City the day before, but at the breakneck gonzo crazy speed that Rabia was driving they would likely get there before the hour was done.

An hour is an eternity when you are being chased by testosterone-fueled maniacs, especially when the words 'consent' and 'empathy' are as foreign to them as the Kuiper Belt.

No matter how much distance they made from Slaver City, they couldn't widen the gap between them and the psychopaths behind them.

Truly, things that were far worse than death were only an error away from descending on them with a rabid fury that would make the berserkers of old blush.

Arthur was filling out paperwork.

It was probably not the best thing that he could be doing

with his time, seeing as there were a dozen men behind them that wanted to turn his skull into a sex toy, but what else was he supposed to do? He could barely fire a gun at a stationary person only a few yards away, there was no way he could get a shot off on a moving vehicle going at a rate with no regard to safety. He had a 22-B *Violent Incident in the Workplace* form to fill out, and he had time to do it.

Rabia was inventing new ways to curse at their socio-pathic pursuers.

"You festering shit-buckets!" She yelled behind her.

Name of employee or victim of the violent incident: Jack Dewitt.

The cars behind them had closed some distance. The old Shark's muscle engine, built in the 1970s, was just not able to outperform the newer models.

"You black-hearted used car salesmen Nazi fucktards, I hope you choke on your red pills!" Rabia spat.

Position/Grade of employee/victim: Commissioner of Operations.

The labor of a high-speed chase made the cars behind them whine.

"Pus cunt! PUS. CUNT!" Rabia screamed.

Events leading up to the violent incident as seen by the filler of this form:

"DID YOU HEAR ME, YOU BASTARDS?!"

Arthur looked up at Rabia, the woman that had stolen his heart, with a look of terror. "That one was horrible," he said. She smiled mischievous, smoke pouring out her nostrils like a dragon.

"You killed a man today and witnessed terrible apprehensible violence, yet that word is where you draw the line?" she nipped, gripping the steering wheel as if it were a neck she was trying to strangle.

"*You* killed that man; I could barely hit him in the shoulder!" Arthur retorted. Silence rolled out to a length that was uncomfortable.

"Thank you, by the way, that's the second time you saved me," Arthur said, breaking it.

The screams of raw vocal chords could be heard over the agonized purr of engines.

The slavers were closing the distance. "I'm still saving you!" Rabia said, glancing at him and clocking his clipboard. Her eyes widened. "IS THIS REALLY THE BEST TIME FOR THAT?"

Arthur considered her question. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw a gang of slavers. They were still too far away to shoot, but even in the short time he looked at them, they had got bigger. Arthur's finite life, in just a moment, could be measured rather than guessed.

"Yes," he replied, after considering that form 22-B was 40 lines long.

The mountain ahead of them looked no bigger. It was no guarantee of safety and was an ample reminder of how long they had been chased. What was the plan once they were climbing it? What would happen if they were never able to gain any distance, and their pursuers followed them all the way back to the IRS bunker? The IRS snipers surrounding their borders could drop a few *if they were on foot*, but the rest?

They had transferred their supplies from the van to The Shark, most tightly packed away in the back and some in the steel cage behind them. Seeing that they were in a convertible, it was conceivable that Arthur could climb over and grab whatever they needed, allowing Rabia to continue driving like a drowning bitch, but were they mentally prepared for the long haul? Having dogs biting at your heels for that long was mentally and emotionally exhausting.

Maybe I should wait to finish this form, Arthur thought. *It might give me something to do when the adrenaline is permanently spent and we still have days to go.*

Days to go might be a little too optimistic.

The slavers started firing.

"Son of two whores!" Rabia spat as more shots fired. "Unholster my hand cannon and take a crack at them; and for god sakes, man, try and hit something!"

As Arthur unclipped the top of her holster, he noticed the tendons in her legs were tense like taut ropes as she kept the pedal to the floor. He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned round.

"Pick the bastard you want dead, look down the scope of that monster, and unleash hell," Rabia demanded.

No longer did Arthur want to be the burden to protect. Too many Enforcers had lost their lives and Rabia's was one that he wanted to preserve. He pointed the gun at an old Volkswagen with oversized tires twice the size than what was reasonable and a collection of buzzsaws for a fender. He looked down the scope and sighted a slaver.

Unleash hell.

He pulled the trigger... The recoil startled him so completely that he dropped the gun outside of the car, and to add insult to injury, he missed his target.

"Why are you so fucking useless with phallic symbols?" Rabia yelled, her voice slightly fried from the punishment of anger she had flooded into it. "Do I have to do everything?" She snapped her fingers. "Alright, I've got a plan. Glove compartment, hand me one of my...treats."

Embarrassed and ashamed, Arthur opened the glovebox expecting to find drugs or alcohol, but instead he found four metal pipes capped off on each side. He took one out and found that the end facing away carried a fuse. Pipe bombs.

The blunted sound of a bullet rang off of the back side of The Shark.

Arthur's nerves had cracked. The sound of the bullet connecting had sent him down and behind his seat like a

turtle receding into their shell. He handed the pipe bomb to Rabia. "Is this another distraction?"

Rabia looked at him wickedly. She held the steering wheel in place with her knees, lit the fuse with her cigarette and chucked the pipe bomb out the window hatefully. "Explosions are distracting," she said, sweetly.

It bounced twice on the ancient and beaten pavement before exploding, concussive force and shrapnel tearing and mangling everything near it. All that was left of the Volkswagen and its occupants: modern art.

Rabia cackled. "Take that you god damn swine!" she yelled.

Clearly concerned they might meet the same fate, the cars behind them slammed on the brakes.

"I built these the last time I was paid by the IRS," Rabia said, casually. "So, technically this is our tax-paying dollars hard at work." She motioned for another one. "Keep an eye on them; if they get close again we can toss another."

Arthur handed her another pipe then turned around. They had given them distance, but much of the slaver fleet had caught up with the others. Four Harley Davidson motorcycles, chained together like sled dogs, made their way to the front. From what Arthur understood of the beasts they might have been the only vehicles in the mutant fleet that were heavily modified *before* The War. These bikes, and their riders, were the apocalyptic equivalent of Huns on horseback. Arthur did a double take, taking a moment to register the madness he was witnessing. If the Harley Davidsons were sled dogs, the sled was a familiar grim throne made of teeth and bullets, fashioned into a chariot.

The Colonel.

His hideous wattle blew in the wind.

One of the riders pulled a sawed-off shotgun from his back, holding the pistol grip tightly, and fired at them.

Arthur ducked as hot buckshot licked his earlobe.

"Now!" he yelled, cowering behind his seat.

The pipe bomb flew directly into the path of The Colonel's chariot, but one of the riders was quick off the mark, disconnected from the others, pulled ahead and intercepted it. The bomb ripped him and his metal steed to shreds, painting the pavement with blood. Unaffected by the carnage, The Colonel raged forward.

Arthur desperately wanted to return to his paperwork. He was clicking his pen in a rapid-fire succession. Arthur met Rabia's eyes in the rearview mirror as she gave The Colonel the bird.

The mountain looked to be only slightly closer.

"Will a bomb be enough to stop that thing?" Arthur asked, unable to hide his fear.

"Don't know," Rabia said then held out her hand. A smile crept onto her face. Arthur handed her the third bomb, leaving one left.

Another knee on the wheel, another puff of smoke and the pipe was on its maiden voyage.

Another rider detached and drove towards it, a guttural yell erupting from him. The pipe bounced off of the motorcycle and then splattered it on the road as it exploded.

The Colonel had to swerve only slightly. He was not going to let up, and the loss of two of his sled dogs did nothing to deter him.

"God damn it!" Rabia screamed. "I wanted to set these off to celebrate once we got home. This is a waste of my talent!"

Arthur removed the final pipe from the glove compartment with unease. He thought about praying but was certain that whatever god was left to hear him needed none of this and that praying for a bomb to hit its mark was a decidedly terrible thing to petition a higher power for. Instead, he clicked his pen twice. "You know," he said, "this is technically

work supplies for you, I can help you get this deducted from this year's taxes."

"Stop flirting," Rabia replied to a man who was completely serious "and put that away for now. They have no idea how many of these things we have; let them think we ran out. Take some shots at him instead but don't drop my god damn gun, G-Man." The Colonel had backed off a bit, probably anticipating another of Rabia's 'arts and crafts' to come tumbling towards him. Still, he was close enough that Arthur could see his rancid chin flap.

Arthur pulled out his pistol Rabia gave him earlier.

Arthur knew he couldn't shoot a gun to literally save himself. He knew that he would likely miss and just end up making a lot of noise. He knew it would probably be another exercise in failing to do something that was considered masculine and hoping that his companion would not give him too much shit for it. But that wattle! It would be worth it if he could just shoot that ugly thing.

Arthur laid his gun over the top of his seat, using it to steady his hand. He lined up his sight, took a deep breath, exhaled, and pulled the trigger.

In a universe of chaos and indifference where the absolute worst that can happen does, and without fail, in a world of devastation and atomic annihilation, good things occasionally peek their heads above the parapet. It is these small, often deserved moments that make life worth living. Despite the colossal amount of shit that the universe can fling at you, random chance is sometimes on your side. Sometimes the meek get what is owed to them.

This was decidedly not one of those moments.

Arthur not only missed, but The Shark hit a rough patch of road, projecting the pistol from Arthur's hand out of the window and into oblivion..

...and Rabia had seen *everything*.

"Sorry," Arthur said, embarrassed. He sunk into his seat and fastened his seatbelt to its locked position. Arthur looked directly ahead, doing his best not to meet Rabia's eyes.

"I'm really sorry," Arthur tried, easing the situation, not at all.

Rabia drew a knife and with a quick jerking motion, cut through Arthur's seatbelt.

"Under no circumstances do you get another gun," Rabia spat. "How in god's name are you the only man in the entire godforsaken United Wastes who can't fire a gun? How have you survived this long?"

Not knowing which to answer first, and suspecting he was on a two-word basis with her, he said "Don't know," then continued to look forward, clicking his pen again.

The mountain had finally graced most of the horizon and the dead, skeleton-like trees that lined it and its base were near. Soon they would be back in a forest of hard, dry wood.

"Hand over your shoe," Rabia said, puffing on a cigarette and no longer looking angry.

"What? No. Why?"

Like a rock hitting still water, Rabia's face turned from serene to uncorked anger. "You lost your god damn shoe privilege when you lost *two* of my favorite guns. Did you see how god damn shiny they were? It was obscene how much time I spent polishing them Arthur, *fucking obscene*. Now you hand over your shoe so that I can throw it at these god damn animals!" The shoe was off his foot and in her hands in a moment. He had no want for Rabia's rage, and besides not having a proper toolkit for conflict resolution (save for passively aggressively filing papers to HR), the shoe allowed for equilibrium. If all that those two guns would cost him was a shoe, well, that was a trade he would make.

"Now hand me the pipe," she said.

They had passed the first few trees, and were soon

surrounded by them. Each desolate spire made way for a thicker piece of forest and the deeper they drove, the closer to the road the trees became..

Rabia threw the shoe overboard.

The Colonel gave it a wide berth as if it were another pipe bomb. Not willing to sacrifice themselves, the remaining motorcyclists came to a halt.

It took The Colonel a few seconds to realize what had happened. He fired a shot in the air then commanded his riders to move on forward again. The chariot was slow to accelerate, and was becoming a point on the horizon.

Rabia cackled with delight. They pushed on and made good distance. Arthur let out a relieved laugh.

We are going to make it, Arthur thought to himself, *that witty sexy maniac bought us some space and we are going to make it.*

Rabia threw the last pipe bomb lit and with a panicked fuse at the foot of a tree. The base exploded in a cloud of splinters and the ancient dead thing fell over into the road.

It was magnificent.

It then promptly lit the surrounding dead forest on fire.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Well-earned relief did not find the two for some time. There was simply no room for it. The felled tree was enough to stymie The Colonel and the forest fire would keep him at bay. Away from their pursuers, and with the book they could use to bring freedom to many, they now had to escape an enemy far worse because it was destructive with indifference: the fire.

This was not an immediate concern, as at first it seemed as though The Shark would rally far ahead of it, leaving it as distant smoke on the horizon. But this forest, filled with the bones of trees, was dryer than the surface of mercury. It might as well have been an ocean of kindling because the effect was the same. The fire spread from one tree to the next in a flash, moving in every direction. Only ten minutes had gone since they set it and the air was already thick with oppressive smoke. Then minutes more and ashes would fall like snow. Once they were at the top of the mountain, near where they had set up camp for the past two days, the fire had caught up to them. It had no need to follow the road like they had and it spread furiously. The skeletal spires that

covered the mountain blazed in a hellish inferno. It had become a place Satan himself could easily call home, or at least a place that would make a killer image for a heavy metal album.

Had there been any life in the old grove of dead trees, animals would flee in desperate droves, but man had taken care of them a generation ago. With his adrenaline spent and his nerves raw and tired, Arthur took the inferno that raged around him with a surreal sort of stride. *This is no tragedy*, he thought as Rabia navigated the mountain's windy road, *a forest is something that is alive, maybe this is just tidying up the mountain*.

If it was being tidied, it was being done *feverishly*. The road descended in a zigzag. They were prisoners to the whims of the road, but the fire was not. It looked like the fire was going to overtake them on their right.

The smell of smoke burned their nostrils, and the light around them had taken on an almost urine like quality; urine from a person with dehydration. The Shark gave them no shelter from it and the toxic air easily made its way into the cabin.

Rabia, of course, was still smoking cigarettes. This was stressful, after all.

If God had wanted them to die, then he blinked and lost his place. The fire went in the direction *it* wanted to and was more content to take out the rest of the forest laterally, instead of moving downward. For now anyway. The road's corners were tight. Arthur felt nauseous and Rabia looked exhausted. After an hour's drive, they had made it back to the base of the mountain, leaving hell behind them.

After driving a mile from the mountain's base, Rabia slowed to a stop. Her knuckles eased from the steering wheel. She sighed deeply, releasing some tension and stress. He reached for his seatbelt buckle (forgetting that Rabia had lobbed it off), then got out the car, half fearing the onset of

another crisis. Instead, he found Rabia by his side with two beers and a weary smile. They cheered their libations and drank up, gazing at the burning mountain behind them.

"Staring at massive fires we have caused can totally be our thing," Rabia said, "it is super romantic."

Arthur watched the nightmarish scene unfold, not feeling it to be the least bit romantic. But before he could say anything, Rabia pulled softly on his tie and drew him in for a kiss. Her lips were chapped, the air around them was thick with smoke and the taste of cigarettes on her tongue wasn't particularly appealing, but he embraced her tightly, and his heart sang.

She was right. This was somehow romantic, in a demented, twisted, and gonzo-crazy way, but just the same. They leaned on the hood of the car and swigged their beers. For the first time, the silence that fell between them was not awkward, it was an understanding. Someday, when the fire had eaten all of the wood, they would be back here, and when that happened they would have an army with them.

"I feel like we just stole the plans to the Death Star," Arthur said with a chuckle.

"What in the hell is that?" Rabia asked, a single eyebrow poking above her shades.

"It's from a movie they show in the bunker every Christmas," Arthur replied, now nostalgic for his concrete cubicle and homesick for paperwork. "It's about a farmer and space wizards."

"Indeed."

"It makes more sense when you see it."

With a final, long pull, Rabia emptied her bottle and threw it on the pavement ahead of them, shattering it into dozens of pieces. Arthur was getting used to her sudden bursts of aggression, so he decided to launch his bottle too.

Rabia looked up at Arthur, passed a second beer to him

and lit another cigarette. "What happens now, G-Man? We got your book; was it worth losing some top brass and government property?"

"I don't know," Arthur replied honestly. "With Dewitt dead, that means Boyd has him out the way, like he wanted. The IRS will follow its letter though; those people will be liberated when we collect back taxes. Maybe making the world a little bit less cruel was worth it." He looked at the ground, burdened by recent memories, then glanced up at Rabia. "Hmm, maybe not."

"To hell with that," Rabia said with conviction. "Your goody-two-shoe bullshit is starting to rub off on me, G-Man, but before I met you I didn't think the world could be less cruel. We did good today *and* we taught those Nazi bastards something they will never forget: don't fuck with us."

Arthur contemplated this and relented that they had at the very least achieved the latter. The mountain behind them was testament to it. He started to run the consequences of their journey in his mind and came to a likely path it would lead to. Boyd would be in charge, and it was clear that he was hungry for power, so surely he would take the book as a trophy for his census campaign. Arthur would come home to no promotion and would have to answer to Ralph. Safety had not found him, the thing that he had coveted the most, and the thing he was promised was no longer possible.

But was that so bad? He would be auditing by Rabia's side and he couldn't think of a person he would rather spend hell with. After what they had just done, what was some more audit work in the United Wastes? Further, an institution of slavery was in the crosshairs of the same organization that brought down the mob in the 1930s. Arthur had lost sight of his office dreams, but he had gained a friend and disillusionment from his hero. That last part was bitter, and though he

might have been happier staying in ignorance, he would not have grown.

Arthur wrapped his arm behind Rabia's back and drew the side of her hips to his. She moved her hand up his back, and they drank their beers in a companionable silence. The thing that no one tells you about forest fires is that they produce *the best* sunsets. As the sun slowly dipped toward the horizon, red-streaked like blood on a purple carpet in the sky, the yellow-orange haze of the inferno lit up the mountain. If Arthur's adrenal gland could keep up with the abuse, he very much would have loved to spend his life with Rabia.

"Don't break my heart, G-Man," Rabia said, "or I'll shove an icepick behind your eyes and scramble your frontal lobe."

"You're horrifying," Arthur retorted. "Also after what I've seen you do," he pointed at the mountain with his beer, "if I break your heart, I'm going to eat a bullet before you can get to me."

"Good deal," said Rabia. She took a long pull off of her beer, tossed the bottle to the twisted highway and listened to it shatter. "We need to make some headway before we run out of light."

Arthur finished his beer as Rabia made her way back to The Shark's cabin. He was going to throw his bottle too, and for a brief moment actually craved the chaos from it, but elected to gently place it on the ground instead. He then fought a terrible urge to mark the beers off the manifest.

Once back in The Shark, Rabia steered it back towards their destination: home. The road ahead of them, cracked and ill-gotten, twisted into the horizon like an endless golem turned snake. The Shark, despite whining initially, quickly became hungry for more concrete to tear into. With the immediate danger behind them, Arthur, drunk with love from his kiss with Rabia, allowed his intense curiosity to feed, picking up the giant tome that they had stolen.

Though he had opened it before to examine the bullet hole, he had not drunk in the misery and sorrow that the pages contained. Each page was meticulously written on in a very small and tightly packed margin. There was no date, but there were days, listed from one at the beginning going into the thousands. The sheer amount of people listed on a single page was overwhelming. The volume of human misery was staggering, and it was listed with the same cold-hearted apathy of a tax return. It was as if Arthur was staring into a mirror darkly, the methods of bureaucracy used to its zenith to buy and sell human souls. The man in Arthur wanted to scream while the number cruncher in him wanted to admire the handiwork.

The apathy scrolled across the pages for the crimes committed was more numbing than the number of people listed. There were names, with his own listed as the last, but most of the slaves were referred to as 'man', 'woman' or 'child'. As he looked at the half-empty page that held his name, he realized that he was only a quarter of the way through. The sociopathic ambition! That was the worst part, the fact that there were many, many more pages for The Colonel to fill with anally retentive business keeping.

If God was still alive, this would be the final nihilistic arrow that'd kill him for good.

Overwhelmed with empathy and sorrow, Arthur remembered what Rabia had said the day before.

"You bought a slave once?" he asked her.

"To set her free," Rabia said, defensively, keeping her eyes on the road.

"You helped them profit."

"To SET HER FREE, Arthur!" she repeated, hurt washing over her face.

He wasn't angry at her, he was just angry. He sat quietly for a minute, not daring to say anything more, afraid that he

would say something undeserved. He returned his attention to the morbid book. He had ignored an important margin and was presently giving it the attention it deserved: *Client*. There were names here, but one came up again and again. On every page, *Main Client* appeared without fail. Whoever was buying these people by the bulk, they were responsible for the scale of The Colonel's operation. Somewhere out there, there was somebody *far worse* than the slavers.

Rabia parked the car off the road. Dusk was upon them. They were coming up to the dust plains with nothing on the horizon to hide them. She cleared her throat to get Arthur's attention. He jolted at the sound, coming back into the reality around him. He had become too immersed in the book to notice that they had come to a stop

"We camp here tonight," Rabia said, "we'll rotate sleep. There is nothing to hide us out here and I don't want to risk driving at night." With that, she got out of the car, refusing to look at Arthur.

"Her name was Melody," she said, hurt in her voice.

"You don't have to explain yourself—"

"I do. Please. I have told no one this since I left the caravan. She was beautiful, beautiful and sad. The Shepard forbade us to trade anything with slavers, but half of the cold-hearted bastard's sister wives were bought, so what the hell? I traded a rifle for her."

Rabia removed her sunglasses, revealing the hot tears they hid, swelling in her eyes. "So I brought her home. I don't think she actually liked me, though I hoped she would, I think she just stayed around those first couple of days to repay her freedom. The night she left, someone had caught us as naked as the day God spat us out. They went straight to the Shepard."

Arthur had never seen Rabia so vulnerable. He had hurt her with his accusation; it was just a question, the anger in it

directed at his gruesome reading material, but the underlying message was *how dare you?* He felt like an asshole. "You are a good woman, Charlie Brown," he said, and Rabia smirked.

"The Shepard had never been able to read the bible that he touted at us," she continued, "but he claimed that what I had done was a terrible sin. There was no room in that maggot-infested mind of his for a black bi-sexual woman. Hell, there was no room in his mind for any type of queer-ness. By the time I had got my clothes on, Melody had fled, taking her freedom and my heart with her. By the time I had returned to my mother's rig, a dozen of the caravan's men were there with the caravan's Sheriff. The rules of the caravan were clear, my mother could give me up to them and their hungers, or she could give up her rig.

"A vehicle is everything in a caravan. It is a status symbol, a means of survival, and a home. Many had coveted her truck for as long as she had it. My mother gave it up to protect me, but I had earned her scorn. She never looked at me after that with anything but shame. She had agreed that I had sinned. I had found a new hell in the loss of my mother's affection."

There was distance between them, both physical and emotional. Arthur fought his instilled awkwardness and closed the gap. He embraced Rabia, holding her small frame and felt convulsions of silent crying shaking through it. She took a deep breath.

"One reason you don't trade with slavers," she went on, "besides the fact that no one should own another, is that you could go from customer to product quickly. They raided us in the night, having followed me back to my caravan. They were patient, they waited for days. When the hammer came down, my mother went up against a wall. She fought. The rifle I traded, my rifle, it was the one that did her in. Half of the caravan was taken or killed that night. All of it my fault. All because I was selfish enough to fall in love."

"I'm so sorry," said Arthur softly.

Rabia took a moment to gather her strength. She built up her composure and the serious, wry Rabia reappeared again. "We were too small in numbers to end them like I wanted, but I did the next best thing, I did what any patriot would do: I killed the Sheriff to take his rank, got the ugly swine bastards who took my mother's rig passed out drunk, and then castrated them in the night!"

"You're horrifying" Arthur said with less jest than before. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologize, this was cathartic. I've never had the chance to ravage slavers since then, so your plan to take this book, well, I could never repay you for the hell I got to bring down on them. I trust you, and that is something I felt was impossible in the United Wastes."

He expected her to move away from him, to either set up camp or fish out what little drugs she had left. Instead, her lips found his, and her hips pressed against his feverishly. He drew in her breath and felt her breasts heave on his chest. Her hands pulled his shirt out from his pants and moved their way underneath, finding the skin of his back. He reached for the fly of her shorts and she pushed him away, gently. She ran to The Shark and unpacked some blankets, which she threw to the floor then returned to his embrace.

Arthur moved his mouth over her neck and she wrapped her legs firmly around him. They raced to remove each other's clothes, exposing themselves to the cold temperature which had dropped significantly with the sun's light. But they found warmth in their union.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



If you want to avoid trouble, you don't drive at night.

Nocturnal predators have always been on the prowl.

When you drive at night, in the dead wasteland that sprawls across America, you are broadcasting yourself to every one of those predators. The roar of the engine in the otherwise coffin silence. The bright headlights like a lighthouse in the black of night. Movement, when there should be none. When you drive at night, you are screaming to be attacked. The only things awake at night are predators. *They* drive at night.

They drive at night because they are the ones doing the hunting...

...and there is always more than one way to pass a mountain.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



You can share your vulnerabilities with someone; you can share a sweaty act with them then lie naked and together; you can share this body and somehow walk away from it pleased and happy. But when all you have eaten is pre-war spam and instant mashed potatoes for days? Well, that function you need to do alone.

The drive for the past couple of days had been uneventful. No dust storms; no land pirates; no trouble, only the open road and the comfort of each other's eccentricities. The first day had disappeared behind them as quickly as the road, and the mountain and its inferno had become no more than a whiff of ash in the air. The second day was monotonous; it had felt like they were the last people on the planet as they drove for hours and hours witnessing no other signs of life. Given the death-scape of ruin around them, this may not have been far off.

Arthur knew that uneventful did not mean safe, but this kind of conclusion was all too easy to come to. That is not to say that they had not taken precautions though. Rabia had kept her weapons at the ready and Arthur had kept the book

strapped to his back, just like the emaciated man, to make sure it did not leave their sight.

The abandoned and ruined concrete citadels that were once home to corporate empires rested empty and in view. They were just outside the deceased city's limits, and consequently outside the IRS boarders. Home was near; they only had to push a little bit further. Soon they would be in the safe confines of the bunker; soon they could deliver their bounty and set the monolithic gears of the last tax house into motion. Once this gargantuan beast had momentum behind it, an institution of slavery would crumble. Victory was so very near.

Arthur had to poop, and he had to do it out of view.

Reluctantly, Rabia parked The Shark and Arthur got out in a hurry. They were near an old strip mall, now stripped of its purpose. Rubble and decay had left most of this American staple in ruin, but the sturdy bank, the building nearest to The Shark stood intact.

"Where are you going?" Rabia asked as Arthur marched to the bank's door, its shattered glass no longer a barrier.

"Inside to find a toilet," he said, meekly.

"Just go out here!"

"Where you can see me?"

"I won't look," she said.

Arthur considered this not at all. "I've been going outside for days," Arthur reasoned. "I would like to use a toilet."

"So fucking what, G-Man! I've been going outside my entire life!" Rabia yelled.

Bowels in pain, Arthur ran inside. His movements were quick, but not natural. His legs were stiff and the book on his back forced him to arc forward. His one-shoed foot came with a slight hobble.

The interior of the bank was thick with dust from a generation's worth of no use. It caked off when touched,

leaving a dryness in Arthur's throat and a layer on his shoeless foot. There were surprisingly few fully clothed skeletons, the remains of the pre-war civilians that had died here. Few clues were left to suggest the scavenging that had occurred. Paper money had been scattered about from the opened safe, likely left after the scavengers realized it could no longer feed them.

Arthur flew past the teller's counter and headed to the back. He found a small break room and an even smaller bathroom. Out of instinct, and a bashfulness that was borderline neurotic, Arthur shut the bathroom door behind him to hide his deed. He heard Rabia honk The Shark's horn and rolled his eyes at her impatience.

He flushed; the water went down but did not refill. He removed the toilet paper from its steel holding, knowing it was worth three times its weight in coffee back at the IRS bunker. Toilet paper and feminine hygiene products were like gold in the apocalypse. Before leaving the bathroom, he caught himself in the mirror. His carefully parted hair was tangled, almost matted, his white shirt grey from dirt and soot and blood caked to his skin. He smiled. "You did it," he said aloud. "You survived the suicide mission." Feeling much better having cleared himself out, he opened the bathroom door and walked out with a spring in his step.

But then he saw a pair of boots with decayed jaws on the toes. Something that once resembled pants webbed out from a codpiece. And a white three-piece suit and a hate symbol, not quite hidden by a grotesque, tumorous wattle.

A scornful and frightened Rabia Duke stood in front of The Colonel, her own shotgun digging into her back. The Colonel's sausage-like finger was on the trigger. Behind him stood the emaciated man, a chain and collar keeping him close.

He kept no doll.

"How 'bout you just mosey on over to your boyfriend over

there and I decide which one of you comes out alive and which one of you dies with my cock in their mouth." The Colonel pushed Rabia forward with the red shotgun.

"Try it and you leave without it, you Nazi douchenozzle," Rabia said, under her breath. She walked towards Arthur and stopped beside him. He was depressed to find that he could not see any one of the half-dozen or so weapons she normally kept on her person.

The Colonel pointed the shotgun at Arthur. "That book looks good on you, boy," he said, "How 'bout we keep it on you and you become my new table?" The eyes of the emaciated man grew at this, but he remained silent. The Colonel then pointed the shotgun at Rabia, "Or how 'bout you, missy? I'm sure you can improve my men's 'morale' issues they been havin' with those two pairs of lips of yours!" Rabia said nothing. When neither of the agents volunteered their opinions on their new job prospects, The Colonel licked his sausage of a finger and caressed his festering wattle.

This was it: the end of the line. Arthur had pushed his luck too far. The time he had borrowed now needed to be paid back with interest.

"I know why that book is so important to me," The Colonel said, "But why exactly is it so important to the IRS? It's just book keepin', nothin' inside of there is gonna give them the numbers of my men before they decide to raid." The Colonel blinked then threw the muzzle of the shotgun wildly towards Arthur. "That was *not* rhetorical, WHY IS MY BOOK SO IMPORTANT THAT YOU BURNT DOWN A THIRD OF MY BUSINESS FER IT?"

"Bookkeeping..." Arthur replied, fighting down the raw terror in his voice. "Bookkeeping is *the* most important thing to the IRS. We don't want to raid you; we want you to pay back taxes. You are the first establishment that the Internal Revenue Service has come across that has bothered to keep

track of their sales. With it the first proper audit since The War can begin."

"Stop the horse shittin', boy," The Colonel said, "call it what it is. You plan on usin' it to raid me!"

"WE DON'T RAID!" Arthur yelled, surprising even Rabia. "We don't raid, it's called taxes and it's a good thing, GOD DAMMIT!"

The Colonel relaxed his finger on the trigger. "You know what, I'll bite, we been on the road just as long as you and my table over there ain't exactly the most entertaining man in the world. You convince me why your raiding is good and I'll let ya both go."

There was that terrible thing again: hope. The Colonel wet his fingers, had another quick round on his wattle and then pointed his nubby finger at Arthur. "Of course, if you don't, then you can choose which one of ya dies on your knees pleasin' me."

Rabia bared her teeth and bit the air, then nodded at Arthur, "You have a deal there, tumor dick," she said, nudging Arthur forward.

It looked at last as if everything fell on Arthur. It was up to him to save the day.

They were *fucked*.

"It's not stealing," Arthur began, "you pay a portion of your earnings to the government to keep it working."

"And why should I do that?" The Colonel queried.

"Because it is your duty as a patriot, as a—"

"Bullshit," The Colonel interjected. "I have a duty to myself and my business, so taking money from me keeps it out the pockets of my men."

"No, that's bullshit!" Arthur yelled, forgetting he was the one with the shotgun being pointed at. "You own slaves! Who exactly do you pay? Further, never in the history of ever has

someone at the top shared their wealth, unless they were made to!"

The Colonel shifted his weight. "Hold up!" he said. "I ignored the fact that there was no government to pay these taxes to, I gave you the benefit of the doubt in your argument, so you can do the same for me!"

"Okay," said Arthur "I'll give you that, there being no government is a problem." He fought the urge to rant about how the other agencies of the federal government dropping the ball was not the IRS's fault (or problem), but let it go. "I can give you other reasons."

"Go on," said the Colonel. "Why should I pay taxes?"

"Because it pays for things that benefit you and your neighbor."

"Like what?"

"Like education, that can better the workforce and enlighten the next generation. Like health care that can be used to take care of your..." Arthur thought hard for an alternative to wattle. "...like your affliction. It can help pay for art and infrastructure, things that no one business or person could build on their own."

"Or bombs! Taxes is what paid for all this!" The Colonel said, motioning towards the ruin that was around them. "More than anything else, taxes paid for the bombs that we dropped and got dropped on us!"

"But it doesn't have to!" Arthur said, desperation scratching at his voice. "We can be better than that. Taxes are the cornerstone of a civilized world. We don't have to build bombs. We don't have to kill each other, or enslave each other, or worry about where our next meal will come from! We can all, each and every one of us, decide that the random cruelty we inflict on one another is akin to self-wounding. We can band together, make each other's lives better and pitch in with our wealth, knowing that it is an investment and a

betterment of humanity. We can object to selfishness and personal wealth and instead give a portion of what we don't need to others. And we'd do this because it is right!"

Knees trembling, Arthur was holding back tears. The world had gone mad and no one seemed to care. If he could convince just one man, a leader of cruel men doing cruel things, that there were better things to strive for than their own needs, maybe there could be a change. Maybe it would all be worth it.

"Now why and the hell would I go and do somethin' like that? Did you just try and appeal to a man's moral center who kidnaps people, sells them as slaves, and just threatened to rape you before I killed you?"

"Well, I mean..." Arthur stuttered "Ah, well, when you put it that way, I suppose it was not a good argument."

"No shit, boy! Now, which one of you is going to die today?"

No hope now. Slavery might be worse than death, but Arthur could not bear to send Rabia to the grave. It was possible that she could fight her way out of slavery. Arthur was prepared to do the valiant thing and choose himself to die.

He began to step forward.

"I'll tell him!" Rabia yelled, pointing at the emaciated man. "I'll tell the god damn Colonel what you have been hiding from him you god damn swine bastard!"

"NO!" The emaciated man screamed back "Why would you do that? She's mine! He can't know!"

"I'll do it! I'll tell him what depravity you have been hiding, you god damn animal!"

"Shut up!" The emaciated man protested, rushing forward to silence Rabia. Murder was in his eyes. He was surprisingly fast for what little muscle was left hanging off of his bones. But his movement brought his leash taut and his

momentum jerked The Colonel forward, forcing him to lose his balance. Rabia kicked the emaciated man in the face, sending him flying in another direction. This destroyed what little balance The Colonel still had and he fell to one knee, pinning the shotgun to the floor with his hand to steady himself. Rabia burst forward and leapt at The Colonel, stomping down on the hand over the shotgun, and like a rabid wolf sank her teeth deep into his wattle. The cry of pain from The Colonel was animalistic. As blood spilt onto Rabia's face she cupped The Colonel's balls and squeezed them like lemons. The Colonel opened his mouth as if he need to scream again but no howl came. She backed off quickly, then eyed Arthur and yelled "Run, G-Man! RUN, YOU BASTARD!"

The Colonel lay on the ground, clutching his genitalia as he squirmed like a fish above water. The emaciated man fumbled to his feet and rushed towards Rabia and Arthur as they fled, but clotheslined himself back to the floor once his leash was taut.

The book on Arthur's back made running hard, but he pounded the ground as much as physics would allow, not taking a moment to look back. Their fleeing caused dust to be kicked up into their mouths and Arthur thought that if death had a taste, that was it..

Soon, they were out of the bank and into the wastes once more. Arthur jetted towards The Shark, but Rabia yanked on his arm, pulling him in another direction. "He has the keys!" she said. "The guns too! Run like the bastard you are!"

The emaciated man flew out of the bank without The Colonel tugging at the leash. His chain ran down his neck and bounced on the ground as he fled towards his targets.

The emaciated man was fast for his condition. He scrambled quickly and closed the distance between them. "Wait! Take me with you!" he shouted.

Rabia stomped over and kicked him in the jaw again, sending him to the ground in a cloud of dust.

"What did you do *that* for?" Arthur berated, helping the skinny bastard up.

Rabia shrugged. "Old habits."

"I don't want to go back," the emaciated man said, tears mixing with nose blood. "I hate The Colonel."

"Speak of the devil!" said Rabia as The Colonel ran out the bank with the red shotgun in one hand, and his shattered balls in the other.

Letting go of his wounded jewels, The Colonel fired the gun. He hit nothing but his message was clear. Rabia, Arthur and the emaciated man ran and turned a corner around the bank.

The Colonel hobbled like he had a tunnel vision of thirsty revenge. He was much closer than Arthur was prepared for. The smell of dust and mildew-like aroma of dried bone marrow wafted upwards with each alarmed step. The grayness around them, caused from the years of decay of industrial construction, never meant for color in the first place, reflected light from the sun almost blindingly, as if the dust were newly fallen snow. The sound of pounding feet echoed off of the walls of the abandoned city, sounding like a cacophony of out of sync drums.

This went on for a full city block.

The roar of motorcycles rang against the walls of the ruined buildings. The Colonel's sled dogs were now on the prowl. If The Colonel didn't catch up with them, the motorcycles would.

Arthur's legs burned with lactic acid and his back tightened from the abuse of the giant book slamming into it with each step. He really wished he had both shoes. It looked to Arthur like Rabia was gritting her teeth as she ran.

The emaciated man looked mostly just confused.

The Colonel sprinted after them, not relenting for a moment.

The crunching of gravel and the low but powerful hum of engines grew closer.

All signs pointed to doom, except for one. Spray painted on a large particle board in the middle of the road about thirty yards away was a picture of a badge. A badge surrounding a scale and a solitary key. The official seal of the IRS. Behind that sign was the official border of the IRS, and with it the safety that came with well trained, ever vigilant snipers.

The finish line was well marked and the fanfare for those racing to it would erupt in gunfire. They just had to get there.

One shoe. A giant heavy book. Spent adrenaline. Chased by motorcycles. Yeah, they got this.

Arthur dared to look behind him, an urge that he could no longer fight. The motorcycles had turned the corner and now, with nothing attached to them or chaining them together, the riders moved at a killing speed. The Colonel was smiling.

Rabia picked up speed and raced towards the particle board. Arthur did his best to keep up, but was not nearly the athlete she was, despite her constant smoking.

Twenty yards away.

The sound of engines was excruciating.

Ten yards.

Arthur unfastened his employee badge from his shirt pocket and held it above his head. As they flew past the particle board, the motorcycles overtook them then slowed down and crossed in front, boxing them in.

"I am an IRS agent, Auditor #24, Arthur T. McDowell! Requesting assistance!" Arthur shouted as The Colonel's hand brushed his back.

The crack of gunfire rang out with thunderous authority.

The emaciated man's knee exploded in a mist of blood, and he fell to the ground screaming.

The IRS border snipers. Your taxpayer money hard at work.

"No no no! Not him, he's cool!" Arthur yelled at the hidden snipers. "I think, maybe. Did we decide that yet?" he asked a stunned Rabia, who responded with a shrug.

The Colonel stopped in his tracks as another crack of thunder rang into the air and chunks of pavement exploded up from a shot landing near his feet. His eyes spelt fury, his body sweaty, blood trickling down his horrendous wattle. The tyrant took a step backward.

"Yeah, that's the one!" Arthur yelled.

The electronic cackle of a loudspeaker conquered the air. "You are within IRS borders. Assaulting a federal agent of the United States Department of Treasury is a felony and will be dealt with immediately. Drop your weapon."

The Colonel dropped the shotgun and slowly stepped away.

The motorcycles parted and retreated behind The Colonel.

The emaciated man screamed in agony. Rabia gave The Colonel the bird with a wide, bloodstained smile.

"Listen here, boy," said The Colonel, "I'm not payin' no taxes, and if you come back to my place of business, you better believe that my primary client will be angry..." He instinctively touched his wattle, but winced in pain when he drew his chubby fingers down the hole Rabia had made. "...and my client is a son of a bitch like you have never seen."

"Get the fuck off of my lawn you grotesque chimp fucking bastard!" Rabia said as another warning shot was fired at The Colonel's feet.

The Colonel had been bested. The chase was over, but this? This was not walking away with your tail between your

legs. This was going home to prepare for a bigger fight. The Colonel would no doubt have his revenge. He was patient, and not nearly dumb enough to try and cross the border to have it now. The Colonel stumbled backward then swung his heavy body over the motorcycle closest to him.

Rabia gave them the double bird, she looked over at Arthur with a wicked smile. He dropped his badge and joined her, bringing both of his hands up to join the vulgar gesture party. Watching a hateful bastard saunter off in defeat and not being the better man to him? This was victory.

The Colonel held on to the rider in front of him, and the motorcycles jerked forward before turning around. The slavers were leaving. Arthur was going home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The cold black and white checkered tiles of the bunker were spotless and clean. The concrete walls were without dust or stain.

This was a colossal problem.

As Arthur and Rabia made their way down to the office of Henry S. Boyd, who was now a full commissioner, there was not a single flaw that Arthur could spot on the walls or floor. It had not just been cleaned methodically, but hand scrubbed to the molecule. It was almost beautiful if it did not portend doom for the one cleaning. Whoever had done this job, if they kept it up, was in direct line of sight for a promotion into auditing.

That's when he saw her.

Merely a few yards past the door that Arthur was about to enter was the little girl he had saved from the suburbs and from being eaten by Murder-Man. She was in coveralls that were a size too big for her, pushing along a cart carrying cleaning supplies that were taller than her. It was comical looking at the little one labor to move something that was

never designed with her in mind. Almost. The fact of the matter was this: she was doing her job *too* well.

Arthur and Rabia looked like the hell they had just been through and subsequently waged. The new Commissioner wanted to see them immediately, with an appointment set a mere ten minutes after they had arrived, which was so prompt it was almost unheard of. Arthur's tie and shoe were missing, Rabia's shirt stained in The Colonel's blood; neither looked as professional as the words across Rabia's hat suggested.

Arthur paused at the door.

Protocol had kept him from warning the little girl before. He wanted desperately to tell her days ago that she should slack off, perpetually enjoy her position and never stand out. She was only a table away then, but the social contract of the IRS was clear: eat with your own kind and keep your head down. So he did nothing. He did nothing, and in the span of a week the damage had been done.

Arthur raised his hand to knock on the door, but froze in midair.

Arthur McDowell had followed protocol to the letter his entire life, breaking it only recently to 'fraternize' with Rabia. How important was keeping up with these bureaucratic standards really? At the end of the day, wasn't what the IRS had been trying to accomplish since nuclear annihilation a Sisyphean task? Hadn't the very system he had been championing his entire life purposefully sent him to his death to cover for the throne-taking of the commissioner's office?

Wasn't his warning worth being slightly late for?

Arthur lowered his hand.

She did not see him at first, her line of sight blocked by the cleaning cart that she was pushing. Arthur cleared his throat and she either did not hear him or did not recognize the gesture. It was not until the cart had gently bumped into

Arthur that she looked to see what had blocked its passage. The tiniest, faintest smile graced her face upon recognizing him. It was likely the most she had ever smiled. "Hello," she said, meekly, "can you move?"

"No," said Arthur. "Not yet. There is something important I need to tell you."

The little girl blinked in response.

"You are doing a good job," he said.

"Thank you!" she replied with a smile.

"No. No, that just won't do. You are doing *too* good a job. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Okay, so it's like this: people around here who do well, they get promoted, which means they get to do other jobs, but you don't want those other jobs. Those other jobs are scary and dangerous, and it means you will have to work outside."

After hearing the word 'outside', the little girl's eyes widened in terror, but a lifetime of fear meant that she otherwise kept her composure.

"I did a great job wherever they put me," Arthur said, "and you know what happened? They rewarded people who skated by and my job always got worse. Only those evil enough to want power, or who are lazy enough to not care, excel in this environment. They need those like us to work hard so they have someone to take credit from. Don't get noticed or they'll attach themselves to you, do you understand?"

The little girl nodded.

"This will be the most important advice that you will ever get in an office job like this, and because this is the only office left on the planet I need you to promise me that you will never try hard," Arthur pleaded.

"I promise," the little girl said.

"Good," said Arthur, relieved.

The little girl moved past him now, at a greatly reduced speed. Once she was past him, Arthur checked the time. He was two minutes late.

"That was some good advice, I guess," Rabia said, patting Arthur on the shoulder. "Not sure if I would approve if I hadn't seen this place with my own eyes."

"It's the advice I wish someone gave me after my dad died, but I didn't realize I felt half of what I said until a couple of days ago," he replied.

The two agents, covered in grime, dirt, blood, and unwashed sex, opened the door to Boyd's office. They immediately stood out among the insane order and cleanliness within. All of Boyd's cabinets had been moved to this new larger office, yet because it was twice the size of the old one, they had filled only half the room. The spaces they hadn't filled were measured out in a grid of blue painter's tape, each rectangle that they outlined signifying an exact space for another cabinet to be installed. Through habit and nervousness, Arthur made to straighten his tie but when he was reminded it was no longer there, he awkwardly moved his hand up to his chin and rubbed his newly grown stubble.

The grandfather clock-like face of Mr. Boyd looked more than sullen, it looked offended. There was a ruler in his hand to, as ever, regularly measure out the distance between his monitor and his coffee. The sight of the mug stirred anger inside of Arthur. The image of the red-haired agent decapitated and placed on a pike, who had failed to fill Boyd's cup quickly enough that day, hung in his mind like a terrible hang-over. In the span of their last conversation, Henry S. Boyd had drunk three cups, more than Arthur could afford to have in a month. There was apparently never a shortage of coffee; whatever they had rationed away was plenty to keep those high up nice and happy. But this was no longer a prized status

symbol to Arthur. It was a symbol of greed and abused power.

It also probably had too much sugar in it.

"You're late!" Boyd barked.

"I know," replied Arthur, "and I don't care." Rabia stood to the side, hands behind her back, but with a posture and demeanor too relaxed to be respectful. She smiled at Arthur's rebellion.

Boyd looked at Arthur long and hard. He did not drink down half of his coffee, as he would have done without this offense, nor did he reprimand, because no one had ever been late and not apologized. He simply did not have the toolkit for this. After a pregnant moment of passive aggressiveness between the two men (and stifled giggles from Rabia) Boyd continued.

"That, ah, abomination you are wearing is a current and up to date bookkeeping ledger I hear?" he said, and then downed half of his coffee.

"Yes sir," Arthur said with no love for the man he was speaking to.

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. McDowell, something like this is highly coveted," Boyd said. We have not been able to go over the business records of any organization since the bombs dropped because no one has kept any. With it we can seize back taxes and that is incredibly valuable, but it is not what you were sent out to get. Can I assume that you have your completed census forms?"

"Mr. Boyd, this abomination doubles as my census efforts. I challenge any other agent to supply a census as thoroughly written as this, because the product being sold by the organization that I seized this from is people. It lists their race, age, gender and even the location of their buyers. There is no better record of the population west of here, guaranteed, and it will allow us the opportunity to strengthen the govern-

ment's current surplus once auditing and collection efforts begin." Arthur unbuckled the book from his back, releasing the smell of wet leather. He stepped toward the desk and dropped the tome with no regard for its weight or the sanctity of Boyd's anal measuring. It landed on the desk with thunderous bass. Rabia's smile turned into a Cheshire cat snarl.

Stunned at first, the Commissioner turned the pages of the book slowly. His eyes grew wider with each page. "This is...astounding," he said. He kept turning pages, revealing person after person and asset after asset. Horror did not grace Boyd's face as it had Arthur's when he read it. Alarming, his reactions suggested hunger rather than horror. "Incredible work," he whispered, then met the eyes of Arthur. "I suppose I can forgive lateness for something like this. You have gone above and beyond, like always," Boyd then said something that would have made Arthur's heart sing only days ago, but now filled him with murky contempt: "Good job."

The Commissioner raised his mug to kill the other half of coffee when his door suddenly opened. A woman, white shirt, black tie and black skirt marched into the office with a fresh mug of coffee, but froze mid-stride. Arthur's tardiness had interrupted the schedule of the coffee. She was on time, but without the other mug finished had nothing to carry back. She set the mug on the desk without collecting the one in Boyd's hand. She then pivoted, walked to the door, signed that her job was complete, and then left. Boyd looked somehow wounded.

Rabia cleared her throat in a way that was both vulgar and demanding. Boyd looked up at her, holding his half-empty mug impotently. "Ah, well, yes, a good job to you too," he said. "You kept our man safe, and I am sure that your role in this was substantial."

"I did ninety percent of the work sir," she said in a half-

muffled voice. Arthur did not protest.

"Well ah, good," Boyd replied, still not sure if he should drink both and measure them, or drink one and measure, then drink the other and measure. "This was more than enough to grant you a full-time contract and residence with the IRS. Good work," he said in a near whisper, still deciding how to deal with his chaos.

"Thank you for the promotion sir," Rabia said. "Does this mean that I get the employee discount?"

Boyd nodded his head. He then drank from the mug in his hand and picked up the new mug with his other, electing to just hold both of them.

There was nothing left to be said. Well, at least not by Boyd. Arthur stayed where he was, relishing the wasted time that expired as he refused to leave.

"Sir?" he said.

"Oh ah, yes, that's right," Boyd stumbled, "You were promised a promotion. Ah, well, I am sorry to say that it was filled while you were gone..."

"You gave it to Ralph Siemens," Arthur said.

"Yes, er, that's right. How did you know?"

"Dewitt told me."

Color drained from Boyd's face. He shuffled in his seat and cleared his throat. He sounded scared. Arthur did not think that Henry S. Boyd was capable of guilt, but fear? Oh yes.

Oh yes indeed.

Before Boyd could say anything, the office door opened once more and a man with a white shirt, black tie and black slacks walked in with another mug of coffee. The same snap decision that the woman made was made by him, and he placed the new mug on Boyd's desk, leaving him with three mugs to juggle. Rabia and Arthur took this as an opportunity to leave.

The agents angled towards the door, not wanting to be excused. Boyd was too busy dealing with his coffee nightmare and the knowledge that Arthur knew his predecessor's fate. The book they had delivered put things in motion that even Henry S. Boyd, with all of his new found power was helpless to stop. On paper, it was simple: the IRS was going to audit a business. The reality was far grimmer: the IRS was going to war.

It would be the first one fought since the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles had their day out in the sun.

What Boyd had said to Arthur when all of this began was true, but in a way that neither man could foresee. A new dawn for the IRS had broken.

Rabia left the room, knowing her, eager for a cigarette, and presumably to check out her new accommodations. Arthur was happy for her. Much of what she had just earned he had taken for granted. She was a strong self-made woman, and he was proud to know her.

Arthur paused at the door, and then turned around.

"Sir?" he said.

The Commissioner's eyes were still wide, puppy like. His hands were full, not knowing how to solve his dilemma. He looked up at Arthur, and for the first time he looked vulnerable. "Yes?" he said.

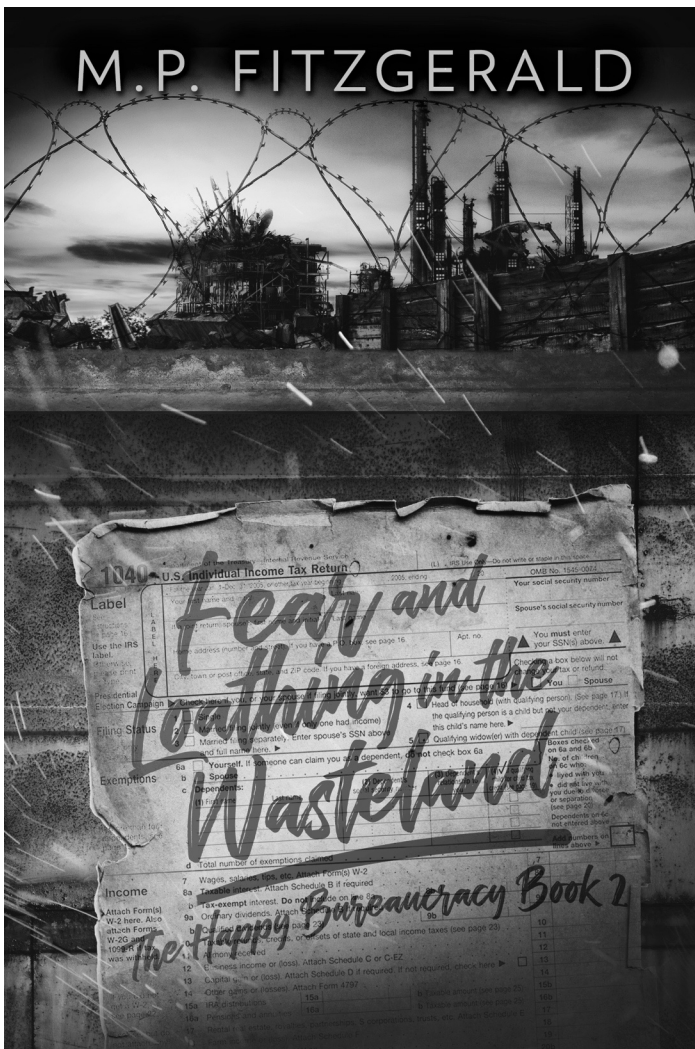
"It can be a secret, you know," Arthur said. "Dewitt asked me to do something, but I would have to go out of my way as it's not my department. I am still at heart a bureaucrat, so I probably won't do it, unless you give me a reason."

The politics had changed. Boyd was unprepared for it.

"Of course, I understand," he uttered with a nod, frantically looking from one coffee mug to the next.

"When you mobilize our efforts to seize The Colonel's assets," Arthur said. "You put me on the front lines."

M.P. FITZGERALD



*For my uncle Jim, who is to blame for all of the madness that I now
crave.*

Author's note: Strewn between drug use, groin malice, and cursing on a level tantamount to sacrilege, are **even more** gratuitous mentions of bureaucracy. These bureaucratic references may not be for the weak of heart.

Also: child endangerment. Did I mention child endangerment?

CHAPTER ONE



The drugs had kicked in as hard as she had stomped in his teeth. This was good. She would need the energy if he wasn't going to talk.

Rabia Duke stood anxiously over the smoldering char of their campfire as she glared down at her would-be assassin. She could not tell if her anxiety came from the uppers or the atrocities against god she was about to perform on the man that just attempted to take her life. She didn't like doing this sort of thing in front of a child. Dinner, of course, was no normal child, she was a child of the United Wastes, whose purpose in life was to be a fresh supply of food before Arthur had rescued her. But she was still a child.

Dusk had settled over the United Wastes hours ago. A dark veil of empty night had covered the dead land like a black body bag, allowing the small campfire light to bleed out like a bright signal flare. It was a long-standing rule amongst the denizens of the United Wastes, at least one for those who knew how to survive into their twenties, that you did not light fires at night, unless you had an army. Campfires were a luxury. They were warm and helped you cook

food, but they also signaled to every would-be attacker crouched in the night that there was a place worth pillaging. You either lit one out of desperation for warmth, out of stupidity, or because you wanted your pursuers to come at you.

Rabia Duke was a consummate professional. She had suspected the dour deed of assassination was ahead of her the moment she and Arthur had met the commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd, and had handed him The Colonel's "inventory" book. Arthur had played a game of "I know you know that I know" with Boyd, and though this new side of him was attractive, she knew that it would get them both killed. Once Boyd had reassigned Rabia, and split the two, well, this all but confirmed her suspicions that they were marked.

Rabia was an Enforcer, a hired gun and muscle for the Internal Revenue Service in their plight to collect taxes in the post nuclear apocalypse. It was her job to keep an Auditor safe while they made the ill-advised decision to collect taxes from the savage and cruel citizens that littered the irradiated landscape. She was good at it. But the unthinkable happened: the little girl that Arthur had saved was promoted, despite his advice to her to prevent it. She was Rabia's new partner.

Dinner huddled behind her knees and sat facing the fire with her back against their white government van, too transfixed at the dancing flames to be paying much attention to Rabia and their severely beaten pursuer. Still, being violent in front of the girl made Rabia uneasy.

She brought her boot down on the face of the assassin like a hammer and ground dirt into his bloody face. It made her uneasy, not hesitant.

Rabia lit a cigarette and puffed on it, doing her best impression of Sherlock Holmes as she held the man's face to the ground with her foot. "You know the best part of this

interrogation?" she asked as a cloud of smoke drifted from out her nostrils.

The man stirred slightly under her, and if he had stirred any more, he would have found the crushing of her boot to intensify. This was no stubborn retaliation on his part, though; he was not struggling, he simply had to shift his jaw away from the dirt so that he could talk. "No," he said with agony.

"The best part of this interrogation, you black-hearted whore bastard," Rabia replied, "is that it hasn't begun yet. All of those bruises and missing teeth, they were just foreplay." At this, Rabia pulled out a dull knife and kicked hard into his side, flipping him over onto his back. As the man writhed in pain, Rabia glanced over at Dinner, who idly stuck her small finger into the dust and started drawing with a soft hum. The man let out a painful groan.

The man, before he became an amalgamation of bruises and cuts, before he was "properly" introduced to Rabia, was a short man not worth looking at. His features were plain, and though Rabia didn't want to seem ignorant, she thought he looked like every other white man that worked in the IRS bunker. Being so able to blend in at the office was surely useful to him as an assassin. Hell, using someone who was just another face in the crowd was the smartest decision you could make when picking a hired killer. That is exactly why it was so bloody fucking daft that they decided to use him out in the wastes. He wore a white shirt that was immaculate before Rabia smeared it with his own blood, and he wore a black tie that was perfectly fitted around his neck before she used it to bind his hands. If he had tried to kill her in the bunker, his clothing would have been an asset, but out here? Out here men wore the bones of their enemies as friendship bracelets. Out here men had no less than six sharpened spikes protruding from their jackets, and a dried scalp turned

codpiece was considered gentlemanly. Either Boyd had hired this man with full confidence that he would never be seen, or he hired him out of stupidity. There was no reason why the two should be exclusive.

Rabia brought her boot down on his neck as she clutched the dull blade in front of his eyes. With her other hand, she reached down and fished in his pants until she found something small, shriveled, and frightened. "I have *never* sharpened this knife, which is completely out of character for me," she said, taking a drag on her cigarette between her lips. "Do you know why?" The man shook his head. "I only use this knife for one thing, and that's cutting peckers. Sharpening it would just mean a quick and clean cut, and when you are cutting peckers, the *last* thing you want is a quick and clean cut." The man struggled suddenly below her. His eyes, though mostly puffed over and hidden behind swollen lids, still managed to go wide with fright. "And you know what else, you dirty swine?" Rabia teased. "This is *still* not a part of the interrogation!"

"Please, no! I'll—"

"What?" Rabia interrupted. "Tell me anything? Save the cliché. I'll tell you what *I* know, and you sit and listen, and hope I know *a lot* because when I am done ranting your pecker comes off!" A malicious smile graced Rabia's dark face. She glanced over at Dinner, still humming to herself. Was the little girl uninterested in what she was doing because she did not understand what was going on, or was she uninterested from years of seeing things crueler? "So, this is what I know," Rabia spat. "Boyd wants me dead, that one is obvious. He split me and Arthur apart because he figured that we work too well together. He knew that we went to hell, stole from the devil, and came back with all of our limbs intact. This scares him. He's afraid that we work too well together and that a single assassination attempt would probably fail. Am I

right?" The man eagerly nodded his head. "So Boyd paired me with the little one on a goose chase, sent us out here to audit a tribe that doesn't exist with the hope that you could handle a short black woman and a scarred little girl, right?" The man nodded once more. "Except the little girl isn't scared, and me, well, *I'm* the reason we made it out of hell."

The fire raged and the flames licked up at the night. Behind it, Dinner looked on, her attention now fully on Rabia.

The whole thing made Rabia sick. Well, not beating and torturing the man who tried to kill her, that was just another day in the United Wastes. It was how fate had treated the poor child before her. After Arthur told her to start slacking to avoid a new pay grade and a promotion to Auditor, Dinner did exactly that. She seemed to understand Arthur perfectly well and had every intention of staying out of sight and safe within the concrete walls of the IRS bunker. But janitor is an entry job, a default assigned to all newcomers without a gun. So when the emaciated man, The Colonel's former slave, was processed and his leg amputated because of sniper fire, when the man who used to be The Colonel's walking table joined the sanitation crew, he set new standards in slack. A one-legged madman who had no concept of "clean" made everybody look like a hard worker by comparison. So, despite her hard effort in putting in no effort, despite her following Arthur's advice to the letter, Dinner was promoted. Now the poor child was back out in the wastes, and whatever was left of her childhood would likely end.

The uppers had made Rabia jittery, had made her finicky. She fiddled with the blunt knife with no patience and greedily sucked at her cigarette. She would have to fight the urge to rant forever, an easy thing to do on the upper, and try to cut to the chase. "I also know that you can't be the only assassin. They sent Arthur out with the Tax Army to attack

Slaver City. You cutting the distance from way out here to kill us both would be egregious. So tell me, how far is the other assassin from my friend?"

The man eyed the knife, then eyed the mischievous drug-fueled grin that cut across Rabia's face. Dinner stared on, and Rabia could feel her impressionable eyes on her. The quick flash of guilt that Rabia did not know she was capable of did not show. "The assassin is not there yet," said the man. "Boyd wants Mr. McDowell near Slaver City before he is killed. No one will question another death amongst hundreds in a war."

"What does he look like, you miserable bastard?" Rabia shouted as she pressed her boot deeper onto his neck, knowing full well that he would not be able to answer until she let it up. She pressed the cold edge of the dull knife to the base of his pelvis, then eased her foot up just enough to allow the man to talk. None of these theatrics were necessary, mind you; the man seemed perfectly willing to talk. But intellectual conversations with a child never got beyond the word "why," and after waiting to ambush her assassin she had gotten bored. This was just a way to kill the time.

"I—I don't know. I just know that if he failed I was supposed to do the job myself and vis versa," the man said, straining to keep the knife in his view. This was probably true. At the end of the day, Rabia had got the jump on the assassin easily, and this man was not good at his job. This was no hardened hit man with a thousand faces; he was a bureaucrat. It made sense that there was a contingency plan.

"So what you're telling me is that if someone else shows up to kill me then Arthur is dead?" Rabia asked between puffs of smoke. The man nodded. Rabia drew her hand cannon from her side and sent a bullet from the front to the back of his skull. She was no sadist, but Dinner had seen the whole thing and did not flinch. Rabia turned to the child. *Whoever ruined this child*, she thought, *should be glad that they are dead.*

She carried the body out of their camp (a tidy camp was a precious thing), then found a seat next to the child that she was now sworn to protect. Dinner wore a white collared shirt that was easily a size too big for her, a clip-on tie, and a face that said, "I grew up on violence." It was an easy one for Rabia to read, for it was the same face she saw in the mirror. There might be only an ounce of blood in Rabia that was maternal, and it was an unpracticed one. She wanted to try and comfort the poor thing but was not exactly sure how to start. Before she could muster the energy to try, and inevitably fail, Dinner spoke up. "Are we going to eat him?" she asked with an innocence that did not mesh well with the question.

"What? No," Rabia answered, her eyebrow cocked.

"Murder Man ate everyone he killt."

"Sounds like a charmer. He named you?" Dinner nodded after a prolonged pause, and did so slowly. "Great, explains a lot. No, we are not going to eat him; the rotten bastard deserves to spoil out here. Why, were you hungry?" Dinner nodded with more enthusiasm. "What happened to that can of dog food I gave you?" Rabia asked with eyebrows lowered and smoke pouring from her lips. No answer. Rabia took another drag on her cigarette, and with no calm asked again, "What about the dog food, Dinner?"

"You got to eat the fruit. I don't want the dog food!" Dinner finally responded, her eyes looking sour at the fire, avoiding Rabia's gaze.

"The canned grapefruit helps metabolize my drugs quicker. Eat your food," said Rabia.

"Do I get to do drugs?"

"Listen, I don't care what you do with your money, kid, but the more people doing drugs the less there is for me. Eat. Your. Food," Rabia said between her teeth. Dinner stood then turned to the van behind them. With great effort she tried to

open the white van's sliding door. After failing at this she elected to open the passenger's front door then crawled inside to the back. Rabia pulled her cigarette from her mouth and cocked her head backward to watch the little girl. "What are you doing in there?" Rabia asked a moment before the girl returned with a tall can of dog food large enough that she had to hold it with both of her hands. The child pushed the can forward and held it out toward Rabia. "I can't open," said the little one.

Rabia grabbed the can quickly, not out of anger or impatience, but because the drug demanded that all actions be quick. Dinner flinched at this, and guilt covered Rabia's being like a heavy and dirty blanket. She could not afford sudden movements like that around the poor thing. She took out a can opener from her pocket and started the task of opening it. "Listen," she said, avoiding the child's gaze. "What I said earlier, ignore it. You don't get to do drugs, okay?" Dinner nodded. "Drugs are, er, *bad*, you get it? If anyone ever offers them to you, don't take them. Instead bring them to me, got it?" Dinner nodded once more, as if what Rabia had said sounded completely reasonable. "Good," continued Rabia. "Here's your dog food." Dinner held the opened can in front of her and her eyes went wide.

"You're not going to eat it first?" she asked meekly. "Murder Man used to let me have whatever was left."

"Yeah, well, he was a dirty prick who wanted to fuck the world. Eat up, I'll have what's left."

No more needed to be said. Dinner dug her tiny hand into the can and began to eat voraciously.

Rabia was always amicable to socializing, but making friends in the United Wastes was always hard. Dinner was easy because she was a child, and any hurdles that got in the way were because of herself and not the child. Getting Arthur to open up was difficult (though getting into his pants was

easy), and she trusted few to actually put in the effort. Arthur was the first man to actually act like any sort of gentleman she had met, and though he was anal, and crazy for paper-work, she genuinely enjoyed his company. Burning things together was fun. But now there was a man after his life on top of a war ahead of him. There was no way he would survive either without her protection. Boyd had done well to split them up, but he made an error by sending a man and not an army to kill her.

"Listen," Rabia said as Dinner shoveled dog food into her mouth. "We have a change of plans."

Dinner paused her consumption and looked up at Rabia. "Are we going back to the bunker?"

"No, we may never be able to go back."

"But I like the bunker."

"Well, it doesn't like us."

"I want to go back to the bunker."

Rabia sighed, then lit another cigarette. There was no reason why she should argue with a child, she was the adult, after all, but that blanket of guilt was still oppressively wrapped around her. "You remember Arthur?" She asked. The little girl nodded her head. A slight smile peeked out from her lips at the mention of his name. Arthur had kept the little girl from fulfilling her namesake. "Well, he's dear to me—don't ever tell him that—and he is in great danger."

"Are we gonna save him?" Dinner asked with childish earnest and a glob of wet dog food in her hand.

"We're not just going to save him," Rabia replied, taking the cigarette from her mouth. "Oh no, we're gonna help the hansom bastard start a revolution."

CHAPTER TWO



Arthur looked at the now ashen mountain with a sense of nostalgia and terror. The nostalgia? Well, that was riding with a beautiful woman in a mutant car as they succeeded in their plans and found the time to be tender to each other. The terror? Well, the mountain looked ghostly.

Few of the dead trees that littered the mountain still stood. Where they were once like bony fingers spreading outward toward the sky, they were now scaly burnt effigies that looked more like ingrown hairs tearing up and out of the mountain. Every inch of the mountain was covered in white ash, the ground was thick with it, and it seemed as if the landscape they were now on was ripped away from the moon. Most of the mountain was now barren, and the road that wound up it was mostly hidden from the burnt remains of the incredible inferno that he and Rabia had left behind.

He had been here less than a week ago, riding shotgun as his maniac partner put the pedal of *The Shark* to the ground and weaved them out from fire to sunset. A week was probably not long enough to feel nostalgic for something, but it

was certainly long enough to feel nostalgic for Rabia. The crazy bitch.

Dozens of white vans, each bearing the IRS shield with key and scale carefully painted on the sides, lay parked in an orderly fashion on the side of the road. Night had fallen, but even in their numbers rules did not allow driving on the road. This was not because there was anyone large enough to challenge them, save for the biggest caravan of land pirates, or the slaver army they intended to face, but because it was past business hours. Though the Enforcers kept watch, the Auditors were off the clock. Even at war, the IRS was still filled with bureaucrats, and the rules that any bureaucrat follows unbending are those that let them off of the clock. This was going to be a very singular war.

So, with free time now in his hands, Arthur opted to do what he loved the most: paperwork.

There was much to fill out. The day's supplies had to be ticked off of the manifest, he had to file a report to his immediate officer signifying that he himself had received a report from him, and he had to preemptively fill out some "Violent Incidents in the Workplace" forms. People were going to die tomorrow, *a lot* of people. It was best to get a head start on it.

He had a stack of copies of the form, all of them fresh, crisp, and untouched. He wanted to sit down near one of the camp's fires, where there was light, and copy down any of his coworkers' name tags that he could see. The date and time would have to be filled out later, but at least he could preemptively assign "Casualty of war" under "Cause of death." This would be fun.

Arthur found himself an open spot with a decent view of his coworkers next to a fire (fires were a luxury you could afford if you had an army to pay for it). This was easily the largest mobilization of Auditors that Arthur had ever seen, and likely the largest since the Second Great Census that had

killed his father. It was composed of mostly Enforcers, nearly a hundred, and a couple dozen Auditors. In truth, one or two Auditors would have sufficed for the job . . . of auditing. But they were at war. These Auditors were conscripted soldiers to bulk up their numbers, and they carried their weapons with no confidence or training. There were only two official Auditors for the operation, himself and his new supervisor, Ralph Siemens. Ralph, who wore a new name tag with his brand-new title and a business jacket (that should be Arthur's business jacket), sighted Arthur sitting near the fire and made his way toward him. Arthur filled out a form with Ralph's name first.

There is a social cue that a percent of the polite population either chooses to ignore or is totally ignorant of. Self-isolation is never an attempt at privacy in these people's eyes. When they see a group of people socializing and being merry, and then see an individual removed from that group sitting alone, but far from depressed or sad, they, for reasons only known to them, take it as an invitation to bother that individual. Sometimes this happens because that person is drunk, or they don't know any better. Ralph, however, was neither. He definitely knew that Arthur was trying to be alone. He just didn't seem to care. He just wanted to gloat.

"Off the clock but always working, eh, old chap?" Ralph asked Arthur, playfully jabbing him in the side with his elbow. Before Arthur could answer, Ralph sat down next to Arthur as if they were friends.

"Ralph," Arthur answered, not looking up from his paperwork. He was tempted to write down "stabbed in the back while sleeping" on the form. He was still sifting his feelings about Ralph's promotion, and much of it was conflicting. It was supposed to be his promotion, but after seeing the cold-hearted calculations of their boss, Henry S. Boyd, it was hard to say if he even wanted the promotion. Moving up in the

bureau obviously did not guarantee safety as he had previously thought, as Ralph was thrust into the war just as he was. Maybe he was just bitter, bitter at an organization that was unfeeling and cold, and he needed someone human to blame. Ralph was an easy person to blame.

After a dense silence between them, Arthur spoke up once more. "Congratulations on the promotion, sir." Ralph smiled as Arthur said that last part.

"Oh, come on now, don't call me 'sir.' I may be your boss and in charge of you, your future prospects, and everything that you do, but I'm still Ralph," he said with a chuckle. Ralph's shoulders deflated, and his hands came together across his knees. He then held them together with an impotent effort and shifted his weight nervously. He turned his gaze toward the fire and, like Arthur, refused to make eye contact. "We are going to war tomorrow, Arthur, can you believe that? *War*. And here I thought that the promotion would have kept me inside." His next chuckle had none of the mirth as the first one. "We'll probably be fine, though, right? I mean, *you* made it out of there, how bad can it be?"

Arthur may have nurtured a lifetime worth of loathing for Ralph, but he was not about to lie to a man facing death. "Bad," Arthur replied. "Worse than bad. The slavers there would probably pull out your teeth because they like the way gums feel on their genitals. The man in charge kept people as living furniture and sat on a throne made of spent bullet shells and spent people. The fact that I am alive is thanks only to a vast amount of high-powered drugs, excessive explosives, and a vast craving for madness. You can make of that however you like." Arthur gazed straight into the fire. He did not care how wide he had just made Ralph's eyes.

"Right," said Ralph, his hands wringing tighter. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter if you got the promotion then, huh?" Weeks ago, Arthur may have taken this as a callous remark.

He knew better now. Ralph was not gloating. Ralph was scared.

"No, I guess not," replied Arthur as he looked on at the frightened face of Ralph. "Not the guarantee of safety we thought it was, right, Ralph?"

Ralph let out a hollow chuckle as his face spelled worry. "Heh, who wanted safety? I just wanted to boss you around."

Bullshit, thought Arthur.

"So, uh, look, I wanted to talk about something," Ralph announced to a man who clearly did not want to talk about anything in the first place. "This is hard to admit, especially to *you*, but I really don't know what I'm doing here."

"No, what?" Arthur replied with little attempt to hide his sarcasm.

"Seriously. Look, I floated by the best that I could as an Auditor. Most of my audits I—"

"Faked?" interrupted Arthur.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I've suspected." This should be a victory, it was a confirmation of what Arthur had always known. Yet, somehow, Arthur felt nothing.

"I *rarely* audited the people I was supposed to. Mostly I just scavenged until I thought I had enough to come back. You, though, you're the real deal, Arthur. You *deserved* the promotion. I have no idea what I am doing. I was just the most senior person in our level to be around when you were declared dead."

"When did they declare me dead?" asked Arthur.

"About a half hour after you left for the census. They figured it was a suicide mission."

Arthur cleared his throat, it was the closest thing he could do to curse Boyd's name while he was surrounded by other IRS agents who likely adored the man. Ralph continued: "If I never did my other job, how can I possibly do *this one*? I don't

even know the first thing about it,” Ralph whispered. “Please, I need your help to do this. I need to know which paperwork to file, I need to know what parameters to work in. I need your help because you are the *real deal* and I’m just a fraud.”

“Why should I help *you*?” Arthur asked. “While I’ve been risking my life and doing my job, you’ve been slacking off *and you were rewarded for it!*” He clenched the form in his hand tightly.

“I was scared, Arthur, scared of dying, scared of being outside!” Ralph said, clenching his hands and looking out toward the ghostly mountain ahead of them. “I didn’t want to die.”

Neither did Arthur, but he did his job anyway. Hell, he worked so hard because he thought that he would be safe if he were promoted. Much of what he had done was out of fear for his life. Was Ralph’s answer to staying alive cowardly or smart? Was Arthur angry because of the injustice of the outcome or because the outcome hadn’t mattered and his hard work amounted to being the same as Ralph’s slacking? What he did know was this: there was hell ahead of them that only he truly knew. As Rabia once said, “Why not have some sympathy for the damned?”

“I’ll help you, Ralph,” Arthur muttered. Ralph’s composure lightened immediately. Before Arthur could continue, before he could lay out the conditions of his charity, the men were interrupted by a tall Enforcer.

The Enforcer wore a mixture of biker’s leathers and old-world military gear. This was not a contracted Enforcer from the outside, like Rabia, but rather was one born and raised in the IRS bunker. A rifle sat at his side and his steely gaze pierced all that it touched. “Commissioner wants to see you,” he said to Ralph, then turned his gaze to Arthur. “Both of you.”

Ralph’s eyes lit up with excitement. Arthur wasn’t sure if

he could hide his fury. Ralph did not know what Arthur knew, had not seen Boyd's cold cruelty masked behind polite civility. As far as Ralph knew, Arthur was still a fanboy, like himself. "Boyd wants to see us!" he exclaimed with a smile. *That's just what the man said, you simpleton*, Arthur thought but did not dare say aloud. Ralph may have confessed his incompetence, but he was still his supervisor. Arthur would have to save his insults for Ralph's deathbed.

The Enforcer led them away from the fire. A mixture of mirth and anxiety that had enveloped the chatting agents around them gave way to the silence of night as they left the campfire behind. The occasional silhouette of an Enforcer dutifully patrolling or standing guard passed them by, but unlike the nervous Auditors turned tin soldiers, few words were spoken by the Enforcers. Row after row of white-van-sandwiched tents and camping gear. Each van was the same, save for the license plate; each tent was the same, save for the precious life that it hid within. If Arthur had not memorized the plate to his van, it was likely that he would not be able to find his way back.

The "control van" was the only one in the fleet that looked different from the rest. Welded to the roof of the van was a metal lawn chair and table with a built-in cup holder. This was the "lookout station," an elevated spot for the commissioner to view the warfront from. The Enforcer knocked on the back door of the van twice. They were met with Boyd's voice telling them to enter. The Enforcer opened the doors and revealed a madness that Arthur was prepared for but was sure Ralph had not seen. The space inside was very tight, and where there should have been supplies of some kind, there were instead two rows of file cabinets, neatly packed inside. Boyd sat inside of his makeshift office in a seat much like the one up top, welded to the floor and facing the agents. Boyd himself, with his grandfather clock

face and meticulously combed hair, sat drinking a thermos of coffee as he held a hardbound book against a knee.

"Ah, gentlemen, we have some things to discuss," said Boyd before sipping on his coffee.

Saying that Arthur was not happy to see Boyd was an understatement. He wanted to see the man give up his position and be banished to live in the suburbs where raiders were starting to retire. Though Arthur and Rabia had been pulled aside for intelligence meetings and debriefings many times before the Tax Army was mobilized, and before they were split up, only the first had included Boyd. The meetings were incredibly thorough, and frankly, Arthur had a blast during each one. Rabia was probably on acid. Every meeting started and ended with paperwork, and when copies of that paperwork were handed to each party, along with a transcript of the meeting, a delivery confirmation receipt for the paperwork, and a delivery confirmation receipt for the transcripts, it was expected of each party member to then file a review of the process with thoughts on how it could be improved. Arthur had rated it five stars (out of five), and for the first time in his life wrote "no notes" for improvements. Rabia rated the process one star, then spent ten minutes throwing office supplies at their interviewers. She was sexy when she was yelling at people who weren't himself.

Given the thoroughness of the debriefings and interviews, it seemed unlikely that Boyd would want to discuss or go over more of what Arthur and Rabia had stated. Though most of his respect for Boyd the human was gone, Arthur still knew that Boyd the bureaucrat was beyond meticulous . . . he was obsessed. There was no doubt in his mind that Boyd had poured over the notes like a monk to a Bible. Whatever Boyd had wanted to discuss, surely it was something new.

Boyd finished sipping his coffee (this was not immediately replaced, likely given that there was an army to feed) and

then stared at Arthur. A devious smile threatened the corner of his lips, but his mouth stayed safely obscured beneath his broom-like mustache. "Good to see you healthy, Arthur. I trust this return journey has treated you well?" Arthur nodded. "Well then, let's cut to the chase, shall we? Tomorrow morning, once business hours officially start, we are to ascend the mountain. Most of the agents in this operation, especially the Enforcers, are reserved in case the business we are about to visit resists our efforts in collecting many years' worth of back taxes." The phrase "in case" might have been enough to send Rabia into a rage. Of course the slavers would resist, but Arthur and Ralph were federal agents, and they had to follow protocol. "As such," continued Boyd, "the majority of this operation will stay seated at the base of the mountain, hidden from the slavers' view, at the ready, should you need help."

"Sir?" Ralph said, his brow tense.

"We will stay at the ready to come in full force, assuming that is even necessary. You will be heading out first with the dozen armed Auditors as a first wave. If things get nasty, and assuming that the right form is filled, you are to radio in for reinforcements. Arthur is to accompany you as he is most familiar with the territory."

A dozen poorly trained office drones up against an army of the cruelest men of the United Wastes. Arthur had seen worse odds, but this reeked of Boyd's sinister machinations. Ralph seemed to be comforted that they were to be escorted by the other Auditors, and Arthur too may have tricked himself into the same comfort weeks ago, but he knew better now. Boyd stared at Arthur, and the grammar of their unsaid, silent conversation grew heavy. Boyd was sending Arthur to his death, but with a dozen armed people around him, no one would accuse Boyd of the deed. Ralph was likely just a sad

casualty in this plan, simply because he was Arthur's immediate superior.

"That will be all, gentlemen. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off the clock and have a very stunning book to finish," Boyd said as the doors to his van were closed by the Enforcer.

Arthur looked at Ralph. He saw the same conflicted man he himself had been before being ordered to go on his *first* suicide mission. He saw a tinge of pride from being chosen for something so important, he saw a stain of worry, and he saw a man who was fighting his inner conflicting feelings about a man whom he respected.

He could not bear to see so much of himself in a rival he still did not respect. So instead he looked out to the ghostly ash-covered mountain. The nostalgia was gone. Now, there was only terror.

CHAPTER THREE



They had to know that they were coming. There was just no way that a whole town of on-edge men who were expecting the Tax Army to show up any day now would not have seen the dozens of white vans descend the mountain. Traveling by motor vehicle kicked up dust in the United Wastes without fail. Add to that, and without hyperbole, an entire mountain's worth of ash, and you got a storm's worth of clouds erupting from the highway. They had to know that they were coming.

This was the second-dumbest thing Arthur had ever done. Seeing that he tried to do this on foot and with only one other person before, this was a vast improvement. But both times he knew that he was marching toward his death. Unlike last time, however, he now had a cause that was worth fighting for.

The Tax Army had descended the mountain after daybreak, and once more filed themselves in a very organized parking grid once at the base. After a breakfast of powdered eggs and Spam, Ralph corralled his assigned troops (rather ineffectively, if you asked Arthur) and sent them out in three vans. This was one van too many, as the dozen agents, and

one Enforcer, could have easily piled into two, but Ralph's ego demanded a "control van" like his hero Boyd, and so he and Arthur were the exclusive occupants of one van. Arthur would soon learn that the real reason for the split was so that Ralph could plead for Arthur's direction away from the eyes of the rest of his troops.

Arthur drove the van with Ralph beside him, the other two vans following obediently behind them.

Last time Arthur was here, he had risked his life to fill out a goddamn census. He had thrown himself, and Rabia, in front of harm's way so that he could do a job. Now? Well, now Arthur had a real purpose, and it filled him with a determination that was foreign to him. Boyd wanted to try and get Arthur out of the way again? Fine. He had asked to be on the front lines anyway. He had only escaped the impossible before so that he could do what he was about to do now, or at least for what he had set in motion.

They passed a mangled wreck of steel, rubber, and dried rotten flesh. The remains of one of The Colonel's "sled dogs," one of the motorcycles that pulled his obscene throne like a chariot, killed by one of Rabia's pipe bombs. The site had quieted Ralph; maybe the reality of the dreadful task at hand was finally sinking in. Arthur looked at it with only a morbid curiosity and an admiration for Rabia's vicious handiwork. Ahead of them was Slaver City, and even from this distance they could see the walls keeping the slaves prisoners within and would-be raiders like themselves out.

Seeing the slaves firsthand, seeing the terrors of the city, and experiencing much of it, had drilled a hole into Arthur's heart that could only be filled with their freedom. He had once devoted his life to his office work and did not once question the decisions of his higher-ups. Now he was devoted to the utter destruction of this godforsaken town and the freedom of its prisoners. Oh, he wanted to live, to make it

out of this alive, but if he died trying, well, he could not think of a better life spent. Ralph, however . . .

"If we are successful, do you think they'll promote us further? I mean, you could probably have my position, but do you think that they would make me upper management?" Ralph asked Arthur from the passenger side. Arthur relished the fact that keeping an eye on the road as he drove gave him a valid excuse not to look at the man beside him.

"I counted two hundred men, women, and children that were not sold off at the time of confiscating their accounting book, *real* people who have no hope tomorrow. Is another promotion *really* what we should be talking about right now?" Arthur said, his hands clutching the wheel as if it could get away from him.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that. We can benefit from doing a good thing, can't we? Boyd handpicked us both for this, surely he has his eyes on us for a reason?"

Oh, you have no idea, Ralph, thought Arthur. The worst part of this journey was that Arthur had agreed to help make Ralph look competent before he could make demands for doing so. Not talking except when necessary would definitely have been one of those demands.

"I mean, they must be right scared of you after what you did to them last time, they'll probably surrender at the sight of us! We'll walk home as heroes!" Ralph said as his hands went up in eager showmanship. When Arthur did not immediately answer, Ralph squirmed in his seat. "Right?"

They passed a second mangled corpse of another motorcycle. Arthur adjusted slightly to pass it. The walls of the city grew as they drove closer.

"No, Ralph, they most certainly will not surrender. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like my last moments on this dead planet to be filled with dignity and not sullied by your petty ignorance and ambitions," Arthur said, surrendering what eye

contact he could spare away from the road to make sure that Ralph saw his contempt.

"HEY! I'm your supervisor, asshole, you can't talk to me like that now!" Ralph shouted.

"Why not? What the hell are you going to do, Ralph? File a complaint? If you want my help to make sure you survive this, *and* look good doing it instead of being the incompetent ass that you are, while we're alone, you'll fucking *deal* with it!" Arthur was met with stunned silence. He was doing his best to channel Rabia, but without the type of profanities that would make God blink.

The veil of niceties and fake politeness that had defined their relationship for their entire working career had just come down like the Berlin Wall. Both men knew that they were not friends, though they acted friendly, but Arthur could tell that Ralph did not know how to proceed now that the obvious was in the open. Without the civil facade to fall back on, the two became silent instead, just like Arthur wanted.

The trio of vans continued forward, slowing down only once when they passed Rabia's first pipe bomb victim: a highly modified Volkswagen. They were growing near, yet there was no one to greet them . . . This worried Arthur the most. He knew of the mutant fleet of cars that Slaver City kept. He knew that they were capable of cutting the vans off now before they got too close. The fact that they hadn't was odd. They had to know that they were coming. They had to.

Despite the bad omens, despite knowing that they were headed to their deaths, and despite being fine with dying for a cause, Arthur still found himself fighting down hope. Maybe the slavers had abandoned ship, maybe they had left town knowing the reckoning that the federal government was capable of (most especially when it was owned money). Maybe the slavers, against all odds would cooperate, and things would go exactly like Ralph's naïve mind had conjured?

He knew that reality would have something abusive to say about this, but that feeling of hope was still there. Hope: it was either his greatest asset or his greatest flaw. Arthur drove on in contemplative quiet.

The walls of the city grew in definition with each mile they got closer. When they were finally close enough to see it, Arthur nearly slammed on the brakes in panic, but because he is the responsible driver that he is, he turned his right blinker on and pulled over to the side instead. The other vans followed suit. He saw cars, *all of the cars*. The entire slaver mutant fleet. But he did not see dust, he did not see exhaust.

"What's happening? Why are we stopped?" Ralph asked with a cracked voice. "Are we in danger or should I yell at you for insubordination?"

"Those cars," Arthur answered pointing toward the city, "they park them on the other side of the city within their walls, but they are facing us and they *aren't moving*."

"So?"

"If they were out and lined up like that I doubt that they are waiting for us before they attack," Arthur said, seeing that Ralph had winced at the word *attack*. "But there is no reason for them to be out like that otherwise. We need to observe them for a minute." Arthur unbuckled his seat belt and exited the van. Ralph followed. A couple of the other agents were already standing outside of their own vans with eyebrows lifted in puzzlement. The lone Enforcer stayed inside. The agents looked expectantly at Ralph, and when he said nothing and failed to take charge, Arthur nudged him in the side with his elbow. Ralph stuttered something incoherent before trying to again.

"We, uh, they are doing something *weird* out there. They shouldn't, ah, have their cars parked like that, we should observe them." Everyone except Arthur pivoted toward the city with their hands shading their eyes and stared at the wall.

Arthur let out a sigh of exasperated impatience at the stupidity of the scene he was now beholding. *This is what every single one of my Enforcers probably felt like around me*, he thought, *including Rabia*.

"Does anyone have any binoculars or a telescope so that we can actually *see* what they are doing from here?" Arthur asked the group, then after seeing a look of concern from Ralph added: "Ralph told me to ask." One of the other agents said that he did, and with a new purpose jogged to his van and returned with some binoculars. The man handed them to Ralph, who then handed them to Arthur.

They were still too far away for the binoculars to make out much more than the eye couldn't, but the extra definition was enough that he could at least see the orientation of the cars. The cars were not facing them, as was expected—they were stacked up on their sides. Further, Arthur could see that the entrance, normally large enough for several lanes of cars, was now barricaded with the slavers' mutant fleet. They had fortified their wall with the cars. They had not "greeted" them, because the slavers were preparing for a full-on siege.

"I don't think they are going to be very welcoming," said Arthur as he passed the binoculars back to the man who had fetched them, then looked on to Ralph for the leadership he did not actually expect. He was not disappointed, Ralph either failed to notice his cue or failed because he did not know what to do. Either way, Ralph failed. Arthur did his best to step in. "They clearly look hostile, sir. Should we call Boyd for reinforcements?"

"Nope," said Ralph. "We don't know that for sure. You are *probably* right, Arthur, but they are citizens, after all, we have to give them the benefit of the doubt. We have to be courageous!"

Ralph's audience nodded in excitement as Arthur palmed his forehead. Ralph ordered the agents back into their vans

and smiled daftly at Arthur as they entered their own. Once inside the van (and once Arthur had meticulously checked his mirrors, tested his blinkers, and buckled his seat belt), Ralph looked expectantly at Arthur. "Well? How'd I do? Good, right?" he smiled profusely.

"No, Ralph, goddammit, that was *not* good," Arthur replied as he turned back into the road.

"What? What are you talking about? I was decisive and brave while you were doing your cowardly bit. The men *loved* it!"

"I wasn't giving you an opportunity to be brave, Ralph. I was giving you an opportunity to do what is smart and make it look like it was your idea."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Probably too late to change my mind, then?" Ralph asked as he blushed.

"Yes, Ralph, not unless you want to look fickle, which is fine by me. I'd rather live," Arthur said as he gazed toward the city he was reluctantly heading to. "But you're in charge."

"Shit," Ralph replied, his eyes growing large as the city neared. "Well, I mean, can we call for backup anyway, like, behind the others' backs?"

"No, Ralph, despite the fact that you dubbed this the 'control van,' the radio is with the others. Plus, I don't even have the right form for that."

Ralph's nervousness was threatening to spread to Arthur, which was not something he was prepared to deal with on top of his own dread.

"You know which, ah, which form that is, in case we need to radio for help?" Ralph asked.

Arthur was the poster boy for an efficient bureaucrat; asking him such a question was insulting. Ralph's oversight in his leadership role annoyed him. He did not attempt to hide

that annoyance. “Yès, Ralph, it’s form 11-99 B, the burgundy one.”

“Good,” Ralph stated, more than replied. “Good, we’ll, ah, probably need that one soon.” Ralph then turned toward Arthur with urgency. “What do we do if they just start shooting at us?” he asked.

Arthur looked on at the wall. His fright turned to anger as he looked on and pictured the slaves held inside. He grit his teeth then said, “We shoot back.”

“When did you become such a badass?” Ralph asked.

“I never did,” said Arthur. “I’m actually really pathetic. I can’t even fire a gun without dropping it. You just suck so hard I look like one in comparison.”

Ralph flipped him the bird. They were close enough to see the silhouettes of figures standing on top of the wall, and close enough to see even more perched behind the barricade of cars.

Arthur slowed down and came to a stop about two hundred yards away from the city entrance. The other vans followed his example. He unbuckled his seat belt and turned to Ralph. “We’re here, Ralph. Do we go and talk to them and get killed, or do we go to the van with the radio and call for help?”

Ralph’s eyes went wide. “We go and talk?” he asked instead of ordered. Arthur sighed deeply and fought back his own terror. Suddenly the idea of dying for a doomed cause seemed foolish. He decided that he would *much rather* live to see it accomplished. “We go and talk,” Ralph stated again with his chin up. It was a poor impersonation of someone being brave. Arthur grabbed his clipboard and adjusted his IRS badge. *Time to go to work*, he thought then stepped outside.

The sun was blinding, and for a moment he could not focus on what was in front of him. Once his eyes adjusted,

and he masked the sun's light with his hand over his brow, Arthur took a reluctant step forward. A week ago he might have marched with purpose, with duty, but he had learned where that got him. It got him captured. Now, it would probably get him killed. The agents and the one Enforcer from the other vans exited as well.

The concussive sound of a bullet rang out into the air by his second step. Half a heartbeat later the shot was followed by a cacophony of more shots.

After hearing the first shot, every single IRS agent did exactly what they had been trained to do when they heard the sound of gunfire during their audits. The mantra was deeply instilled in them: *Gun's go up? Fall down!* They did exactly that. They all fell backward to the ground, save for Arthur. Then, one started screaming in agony, blood pouring down the man's chest.

"Get up!" Arthur shouted and grabbed Ralph by the collar, then turned toward the others as more gunfire rained down at them. "Get up get up *get up!*" he yelled as he ran to the back of the van, looking for cover. The other agents scattered and did the same. Except for three, who were now laying in a pool of their own blood. Crimson bloomed across their bleached shirts and caked into a morbid mud on the wasteland dust.

Arthur pinned himself to the back of the van with his back to it. His stifled breath came out in panicked burst. Bullets ricocheted with steel. Arthur turned to Ralph and saw his face was as white as the ashen mountain behind them.

"I'll call for backup!" Ralph said.

CHAPTER FOUR



The cacophony of bullets that had initially rung out had slowly become a chorus as the slavers behind had found a natural beat to their grisly deed. Arthur's back was wet with sweat from the hot metal of the van, and his jaw clenched in terror. Only a few of the IRS agents were brave enough (or desperate enough) to fire back at the city, but as none of them were trained on how to fire a gun, they were only contributing to the noise of the battle, and nothing else. *Battle* might have been too forgiving of a word, as the IRS agents were far from threatening.

The vans were close enough to each other but far away enough from the city that running from one to the other for cover was a crapshoot. Seeing that the vans were all facing the city, getting to a driver's seat, however, was assured death. To Arthur's shock, Ralph had declared that he would call for backup and lunged toward the nearest van. This act of decisiveness was admirable (if not a bit surprising) and, had he lunged toward the van that actually contained the radio, respectable. It took a full minute of arguing with a subordinate for Ralph to figure it out, and between the shrieking of

gunfire, Arthur sighed with annoyance. Arthur watched Ralph run over to the third van and argue with another subordinate before running back to Arthur unharmed. "Did you do it?" Arthur asked. "Did you call for backup?"

"What? Uh, no. No, I forgot which form to file." Ralph answered not making eye contact. Arthur hoped that Ralph felt perpetually ashamed in his life. It did not matter if they decided to skip the form on their end and just take the radio away from the agent assigned to it. The radio operator on the receiving end would not verify any request without the form's details read back to him. They had to file that form if they wanted reinforcements.

"*Goddamn* it, Ralph, I told you, it's form 11-99 B, the one in burgundy!" Arthur screamed at him. Ralph nodded with wide eyes then rushed over to the other van once more.

Arthur watched as Ralph argued with the same agent as before, then felt a tiny bit of relief when he saw that Ralph was handed a form. This lasted all but a second when Arthur realized that it was not burgundy. Once Ralph was done filling it out, more arguing ensued, and Ralph sprinted back to Arthur. "That wasn't the right one, Arthur, you dipshit. The operator wouldn't validate it!"

"That's not my fault! I told you to get 11-99 B!" Arthur screamed back at him.

"Oh, form 11-99 B. I just asked for form 11-99. I thought it was the right one because it was purple like you said."

"I said *burgundy*, Ralph, burgundy is closer to red than purple. The one you grabbed was obviously maroon."

"You are an anal twat, Arthur!"

The gunshots ceased. The tentative quiet that had taken the place of the gunshots was almost as menacing . . . anything could take its place. Ralph looked at Arthur and his face struggled to find a position between weary optimism and abject terror. Suddenly, the electronic cackle of a megaphone

pierced the air, and a voice like buttered grease boomed out into the wasteland. Arthur did not have to peek behind the van to see him; he recognized the voice instantly. It was The Colonel.

"We don't want y'all near our city, boys, so why don' ya just git back into those vans of yours and skedaddle before we turn 'em into cheese grates!" The Colonel announced. A stillness in movement reflected a stillness in the silence that followed, yet as quickly as the stillness had seized the IRS agents, it was broken. An IRS agent dashed out from cover to the front of the van he was hiding behind. Before he could make three steps, the dirty crack of gunfire reverberated, and the man fell dead to the ground. The electric cackle of the megaphone rang out once more. "I'm just shitin' ya!" The Colonel said, sifting laughter between words. "We stopped firing 'cause we're savin' bullets. You boys move a muscle and we kill you!"

The barrage of bullets they had initially been dealt was reactionary. The city was far more disciplined with The Colonel commanding them. Now, the shots would be purposeful instead of just angry. Running between the vans now was more Whac-A-Mole than crapshoot.

Arthur's back was still soaked in sweat, but now it was definitely from terror. It was hard to believe that he had asked for this just days ago. *Put me on the front lines*, Arthur mocked himself in his head. Boyd had done exactly that, and instead of freeing a city's worth of slaves, Arthur would die unceremoniously next to his cubicle rival. He took a pen from his pocket and started clicking the top of it furiously. It was the only sound being made for a pregnant minute. When the panic would not subside, Arthur turned to Ralph. "Well?"

"Well, *what*?" Ralph replied with stern brow.

"Well, are you going to go file for reinforcements, or what?"

"Are you serious? You heard that man; if we move we die! Boyd has to come eventually. We should just wait and pray!"

"That is the *dumbest* plan you could possibly make!" Arthur said, clenching his pen far too tight. "Boyd is *the embodiment* of our bureaucracy! He is not going to move an inch without the proper paperwork, and when it is apparent that no one else is coming, The Colonel is going to send his men to come out from behind the gates and pick us off one by one! We need to get that form filed!"

Ralph's face tensed, he turned to Arthur and squared his shoulders, then put a firm finger into Arthur's chest. "All right. You do it," he said.

"Why me? You're the leader!"

"That's right, *I* am the leader. You do it. I order you to," Ralph said, lowering his finger then raising a brow. Arthur had pushed too far. Ineffective or not, Ralph had the title, and people with titles demand obedience and respect above all, most especially the ineffective ones.

"What exactly are you going to do if I don't, Ralph?" he asked with clenched teeth.

"I'm going to write you up and put an infraction on your record."

"You wouldn't. You're not that cruel."

"I would."

Faced with a bullet to the brain or a write-up at work, Arthur took a deep breath, then sprang into action. He pushed himself off of the van and began in a sprint. He had taken only four steps when the familiar sound of gunfire thundered in the air. Dirt erupted into the air by his feet as the bullet missed its mark, but before he could register it in his adrenaline-fueled mind, there was another crack of gunfire. Whatever it hit, Arthur did not know, but it did not hit *him*. He reached the van just in time before another shot was fired.

The van Arthur was now behind was crowded, as six IRS-agents-turned-helpless-soldiers struggled for their share of an economy of space. A couple enterprising agents had crawled under the van, but space was still sparse. Another body was clearly not wanted. A sea of eyes looked over at him with a mix of accusing stares and horrified glares. Arthur faced the agent Ralph had argued twice with and clicked his pen nervously. "I want to file form 11-99 B for immediate radio transmission for reinforcements," he said, hearing the beats of his own heart.

The agent blinked. "Oh! 11-99 B. That makes so much more sense than what *he* wanted." He pointed at Ralph. "The maroon one is obviously supposed to be hand delivered."

"Obviously," Arthur agreed, happy to see a sane man. The agent handed Arthur a burgundy form with a clipboard. A bullet hit the ground beside them as an agent temporarily lost his spot in the crowd.

"Hurry up and go back!" someone from behind shouted. The crowd grumbled in agreement.

Arthur knew of the form by protocol, and because he studied his Revised Operations Manual nightly, but he had never actually dealt with the form. It was thirty lines long. Thirty. Lines. *Why in God's name would an emergency request for reinforcements be this long?* Arthur thought before the sentiment was quelled by his ardent professionalism. He began filling it out as fast as he could.

He could feel pairs of eyes trying to burn their rage and impatience through him as he completed the third line on the form. An agent fell to his hands and knees and started scooting himself under the van, the two men that were already under it protested loudly but were in no position to keep him from taking up the empty space. His effort had jostled a man out to the side before he was fully under. Gunfire and screaming paired themselves like old friends, and

the jostled agent pushed his way back into cover with a bullet in the shoulder. Arthur had completed ten lines.

"HURRY UP!" the man with the bullet wound cried as his starched white shirt soaked through with the stain of blood. Arthur diligently pushed through the form. The man with the bullet wound tapped his gun with jittering hands. The gesture was clear: if Arthur did not finish soon, he would push him out by force or end him himself. He was at line twenty.

Though time was never on his side, Arthur had defied the odds before. Just before the man tapping his gun decided to cock it, Arthur finished his form and promptly handed it to the radio operator. The operator looked it over then called the form in. The operator on the receiving end wanted it read line by line, and before Arthur could hear whether or not the request went through, the man with the wound cocked his gun. Arthur's cue to run back to Ralph. Whatever he decided to do, there was a bullet waiting for him. So, he ran.

His feet struck the ground and catapulted him forward. A bullet whizzed past his ear. His legs pumped the ground. Another bullet struck near his feet, throwing debris into the air. He leapt at the van and landed face first next to Ralph's shoes. In seconds he was on his feet and his back was firmly pressed against the van.

An agent from the van he had just came from decided that Arthur's and Ralph's was a greener pasture with more space and tried to follow. He took his odds and the gamble did not pay. A bullet struck him in the leg, and once his face hit the ground, another bullet obliterated his head. The crowded agents were happy to have the extra space and were not marred by the violence.

"Did you do it? Did they send for help?" Ralph asked, not able to hide his desperation. Arthur nodded. "Yeah, didn't hear a confirmation, though."

Ralph turned his attention to the van behind them. "Are they coming?" he shouted. The radio operator shook his head. "It's lunch hour, they are off the clock!"

Of course they are, Arthur thought bitterly, then checked the time. It was twelve fifteen. They would have to wait a whole forty-five minutes like this, plus however long it took them to arrive. "We're *fucked*," he said.

Before Arthur could contemplate his impending doom any further, a roar of motorcycles screamed through the air with a primal bass. This was it. They had decided to send a motorized death squad their way. Soon slavers would ride right up to them and pick off what the barricaded city hadn't already.

But the sound began to fade. The bikes were moving away from them. He could then hear the cheering of a hundred slavers and decided to push his luck and steal a glance from behind the van.

The slavers barricaded behind their mutant cars and atop their wall had guns in the air as they cheered the motorcycles' departure. Then Arthur saw them: moving away from the city, but parallel to the mountain, was a train of motorcycles pulling a throne of teeth like it was a chariot. Atop that throne sat The Colonel, waving both arms back toward the city.

Was The Colonel abandoning ship before the rest of the IRS showed? Could he be going the same way he went around the mountain to catch up with himself and Rabia after they burnt it to a crisp? Could he be trying to flank Boyd?

Arthur gazed at the fleeing train of motorcycles as they became specs on the horizon, and a new kind of dread and fear took over. Wherever The Colonel was going, it was bad, and for the first time, Arthur realized that the Tax Army could fail. It was an odd reassurance that no matter what happened here, with this doomed and poorly trained group of

pencil-pushers-turned-soldiers, Boyd and the rest of his men would clean up and free the men and women inside. If Arthur died, at least it was for a cause. But now? If the cause failed, his death would mean nothing.

Ralph's take on it was far more optimistic and naïve. "They're running away!" he said with guarded glee. "Maybe more will follow, maybe if enough leave we can take the city before Boyd shows!" If he was only trying to convince himself, it looked like he did a poor job at it. Arthur ignored him, then sat down and leaned against the van. No sense in being uncomfortable if you had to wait. Ralph followed his lead.

"I don't get it," Ralph said once he was firmly seated on the ground. "They have us cornered. Why don't they just walk on up and finish the job?"

"They don't have to, they have supplies and are safe inside their walls. It is smarter to just wait us out. If they don't kill us, starvation or dehydration will," Arthur said as he clicked his pen.

The motor of one of the vans came to life. No less than a blink of an eye afterward did a shot ring out from the city. A crack in the windshield spread out like a spider's web, and the would-be escape artist went limp from death.

Arthur weighed his desperation against his fear. At least the outcome of one was now perfectly clear.

"Are we going to make it?" Ralph asked after the senseless murder of one of their peers. It was strange to see Ralph vulnerable like this. The question was a real one from a man at his wit's end who needed comfort. "You've made it out of worse, right, Arthur? This isn't so bad compared to what you've been through. Are we going to make it?" A resounding "no" stamped across Arthur's mind. He looked over at the van that had just been shot—the engine was still running. Toxic fumes pumped out of the van's exhaust and into the

crowd of bookkeepers and cubicle monkeys who were already uncomfortable in their fragile safety. He was about to let Ralph down, let him know that their lives were now in the hands of Henry S. Boyd, and explain to him why that was a very bad thing. He was about to tell the truth, that, no, this was far worse than what he had gone through. Then, his mind volunteered a thought that was at once sobering as it was terrifying: *What would Rabia do?*

"We are going to make it, Ralph," Arthur said, then repeated it to see if he himself believed the madness that had just escaped his mouth.

"Yeah? You really think so?" Ralph asked with shaking hands. *No*, Arthur thought to himself, *we are probably going to die horrifically*, but his idea was worth the try. Ralph shifted in the dirt then turned his body to face Arthur's. "What do we do?" Ralph asked, his eyes pleading.

Arthur looked at Ralph and started clicking the top of his pen in rapid-fire succession. There was no way he could mask his own desperation, there was no way that he could be as confident as Ralph probably needed him to be. But he had to try. "We are going to do something totally inadvisable," Arthur replied. "We are going to do something incredibly stupid and dangerous. We might be able to save everyone who is still alive . . ." He stopped clicking his pen. "I have a plan."

CHAPTER FIVE



Arthur laid out what he planned to do. Ralph hated it.

"Can't we just sit here and wait instead?" Ralph asked with sweaty hands and a fidgety knee. "I mean, a few hours is not *too* bad."

Arthur looked Ralph over with the same disgust he had for years, except now it was not hidden. "Ralph, one of your men pointed a gun at me. These men are not soldiers, and neither are we, what happens when another one of them acts in desperation?"

"I uh—"

"More will die!" Arthur interrupted. "If we wait until Boyd shows up with the Enforcers, there is a strong chance that another one of your men will do something *just as stupid as I have planned*. On a long enough timeline, someone will crack, and that *will* happen."

"How do you know?"

"Because, like them, I would crack too. We are bunker moles, Ralph. Our first instinct when we were shot at was to *fall to the ground*. It is far better that you and I are the ones to

do something stupid, at least then we have a say in the outcome. At least our plan includes the safety of the others.”

Ralph’s eyes shot over to the crowded vans behind them. There were now six men less than they had started with, and the engine of one of the vans was still pumping fumes. After a silent moment of contemplating, or procrastination, Ralph returned his eyes to Arthur’s. “Okay,” he said, “I hate it and think it is a stupid plan and I think we are going to die, but okay. I’m ready when you are.”

At that, Arthur stood up and dusted off the back of his pants. He adjusted his tie and checked to see if his ID badge was still straight. If Arthur was going to die, then he was going to do it looking like the goddamn professional that he was. “Good,” he said, “run the *second* I do it and don’t look back. Get to the van that is running. I’ll get to the one that is not.”

Ralph nodded and clenched his fist as he turned to the van with the running engine. Arthur opened the van’s back doors and climbed inside. He lay low to the van’s floor, nearly crawling. The van was dark and hot from sitting in the sun, and the air inside was a labor to breathe. He crawled up to their supplies and paused at them. He supposed that only the crate of Spam was small and heavy enough. Looking behind him, he saw that the nervous wreck that was Ralph had doubled in tentative fear. Ralph’s normally stringy hair was now clumped to his forehead from sweat. Ralph was ready to go on the drop of a dime.

Arthur picked up the crate. It was heavier than expected, but he moved it along nonetheless. Pushing the crate ahead of him, and through the gap between the front seats, Arthur watched as it tumbled to the base of the seats. Suddenly being able to see daylight through the windshield made him nervous. He had to stay low. If he saw so much as a body part

of one of the slavers then certainly they could see his own. He slowly and carefully crawled to the front, keeping himself below the windshield whenever possible.

What would Rabia do? Distraction. Always distraction. Hell, this was almost plagiarism. Arthur heaved the crate of Spam onto the gas pedal, weighing it down. He took a moment to orient himself and faced the back of the van. *This is so fucking stupid*, he thought before his mind offered: *that's why it is going to work*. He was not convinced. If he did not make it, he hoped at least Ralph would so that Rabia could hear of his stupid plan. She would be proud. Then, without further ado, Arthur speared the ignition crank with his keys and let the engine roar.

Arthur quickly climbed back through the seats. A bullet hit the windshield as he did, and Arthur started running. In a second he was clear of the van and fell face first into the ground beneath him as the van roared forward without him. He scrambled to his feet, surprised to still be alive. The slavers must have taken the bait; hopefully they were not quick learners. Ahead of him, Arthur saw Ralph usher the tightly packed agents into the running van. In a breath Arthur was running. A wave of bullets crashed out at the van behind him. The slavers must have been desperate and hungry for blood. Arthur reached the other van. "Get in! Let's go!" he yelled as he swung the back doors open. By the time half had piled in, Arthur saw Ralph's van squeal in reverse turn, then whip forward in the other direction. Agents scrambled to get in, and the van's engine hummed to life. The tires crunched gravel right as Arthur got in himself and shut the doors behind him.

Arthur looked through a sea of worried faces and out the windshield. He briefly watched as their distraction, now more of a cheese grater than a vehicle (just as The Colonel had

promised), rammed into the barricade of mutant cars. But the ruse had been figured out. The slavers were already firing on Ralph's van, which was quickly gaining distance and speed.

Arthur sat down at the rear right where he was standing as the driver tried to mimic the maneuver that Ralph's van had executed. The van lurched backward, sending a few agents who still stood to the floor, and then the van turned, and the view of the city gave way to that of the mountain. The van lurched forward, sending the occupants in the back stumbling into each other, and Arthur found his face becoming more intimate with someone's rear than he would have liked.

The van gradually became brighter inside as new bullet holes tore into it, leaving piercing beams of sunlight in their wake. A man beside Arthur screamed in agony as he was hit, and blood spread out from the man's shirt at his side. The bullets had an almost musical quality to it.

Disorientation spread like a blighted virus. Panicked men screamed, some from pain, all because of terror. Maybe one or two just for the sake of screaming. Supplies that were no longer tied down moved quickly to the back, threatening to crush Arthur, but instead rammed into someone ahead of him and *they* crushed Arthur. The sudden bursts of light making their way through the bullet holes became fewer and farther apart. If the shooting had ceased, Arthur could not tell, because everyone was still screaming. Hopefully the slavers did not want to waste any more ammo. The screaming died down.

When it was silent enough to hear the van's motor and the pebbles it violently kicked up into itself, they heard one final report from a high-caliber rifle. Suddenly the sound of rubber bursting conquered all else and the van lurched to Arthur's left. The screaming began once more. "What's

happened?" Arthur shouted over the others, but whatever the driver said in reply was lost in the panicked echolalia. They slowed and movement became erratic. The shooter had got one of their tires. Then the driver lost control of the van.

In an instant, Arthur's direction of up became his right. The van flipped to its side and the agents became a human avalanche. Where there was once light on one side peeking through bullet holes, there was now ugly dirt, before it too was covered with the bodies of the van's occupants.

They came to a stop.

Arthur's head throbbed with pain, and his eyesight blurred. He could only hear the guttural groans of his compatriots. Someone asked, "Is everybody all right?" and a few seconds passed before Arthur realized it was himself talking. Someone at the bottom of the human pile answered back with a "Fuck off!" and Arthur's senses gradually came back to him.

To Arthur's relief, the sound of bullets was no more. Either they were too far to be hit, or the slavers were waiting for them to come out of the van. Because of the chaos, Arthur had no idea of just how much distance they had got between them. Though the lesson should not have needed to be taught, Arthur learned that day that he should never ask, "What would Rabia do?" It was a stupid and dangerous question and probably only worked out for Rabia because of dumb luck or a clerical error in the universe. She would be proud, though. Proud and probably stoned.

Arthur was not the first to brave the outside. His mind had not yet figured out that the van's floor was now a wall. The agent who had been shot next to Arthur clutched at his side, his wound apparently not a mortal one (or at least not enough time had passed to find out), and opened the van's side door, which was now above them. The sudden flood of sunlight made the fine beams of the bullet holes (violent as

they were) seem comical, and it took a few heartbeats to pass before Arthur's eyes adjusted to it. Before Arthur could object to the other agent's actions, the man was already climbing outside.

A smarter, or at least a lazier, agent opened the van's back, though awkwardly. A few agents spilled out into the dry and hot ground that was outside, and Arthur followed carefully. The city looked a whole lot smaller. One of the bunker's border snipers might be able to make a shot from this distance, but Arthur doubted that the savage denizens of Slaver City had that sort of training. They were safe, at least as long as the slavers stayed put.

The sun was hot, still not past its noon hour. They had escaped their immediate danger, but now they might have the uncaring wasteland to deal with. The driver was the last to crawl out of the van, his face bruised from the airbag. Everyone in the van made it out alive, if not a little worse off for it. The driver limped up to Arthur. "What now?" he asked.

Arthur froze, then pointed a tentative finger at his own chest. "You're asking me?" he said, suddenly aware that wounded eyes were staring at him. "Yes, *you*, you got us in this. What now?"

Arthur looked to his left, then to his right, hoping somehow that Ralph would be beside him. "Ah, no, uh, Ralph's in charge he—" But Ralph's van was nowhere in sight. They had been left behind.

The eyes that were on Arthur were afraid, no, *terrified*. Whether he liked it or not, they had just elected him leader. The driver spat blood, then winced in pain. "You-you got out of this once, right? What do we do?" the driver asked. Arthur was no natural leader, or any leader at all. He was good at filing paperwork and very little else.

He clicked his pen, surprised to find that it had never left

his hand, then looked out to the mountain. "I'm sure Ralph will turn around," Arthur said, not believing his own garbage. "He'll be back once they realize we haven't followed, but, uh, until then, we should probably get behind cover, just in case they have snipers?" This was not an order, it was asking permission. A few of the agents shuffled in place. "Right, ah, everybody move behind the van!" Arthur said with all the confidence of a middle schooler asking for a dance.

The IRS agents were happy to obey. They moved, some slower than others because of various pains, but all of them followed without objection. Arthur checked the time on his watch. It had been only fifteen minutes since they were rejected reinforcements because of the lunch hour. Given Arthur's own experiences as a bureaucrat, he knew that the "not my job" mentality of the bunker meant that whoever received their message would probably not pass the information on because he too was on break. They would likely have to radio in again. Still not comfortable in his new shoes as an impromptu leader, Arthur fetched the long wave radio from the van himself, then joined the rest of the men behind it.

Their situation was not ideal, but at least their cover was an improvement. Each of the IRS agents could at least fit behind the van comfortably as it lay on its side and faced the city lengthwise. Assuming they had to be out there for hours, once the sun dipped the van might even give them shade. But for now, the ball of fusion above them baked the IRS agents, and the van's undercarriage was hot to the touch.

The men looked at Arthur expectantly, their eyes begging the question, "What now?" This was definitely not Arthur's department. He suddenly became aware of the fact that he was officially denied this position in the IRS when the job was given to Ralph instead, yet he somehow had got the responsibility of it anyways without the pay. If impending

death was not around them, like a noose tightening, this would irk him most of all. At least the minutia of doom always put things into perspective. Arthur faced the expectant eyes and reluctantly did his best impression of a leader. It was a bad one.

"Well, ah, men, we have about thirty minutes before lunch is over, but we're still on the clock. So, get to work?" Arthur stated. No one moved.

"What?" the man with the bleeding side asked. All eyes were still on Arthur.

They could die of dehydration or heat exhaustion. The slavers could hop on one of their mutant cars and take them out. There were too many threats to count. Arthur was only good at doing paperwork, however. So, that's exactly what he intended to do.

Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out a pile of folded "Violent Incident in the Workplace" forms. Each had the name of men involved in the day's disaster, written down the night before. He unfolded them and passed one to each agent, making sure that the form matched with that agent's ID badge. This was not the best plan—hell, it wasn't even a plan, really, but maybe the tedious and hollow work of filling out a form would keep everyone distracted from their own woes.

If this were any other army, if this were not a generation of IRS agents who had grown up in a federal bunker, there might have been a mutiny. These men, however, conditioned to sign forms, then sign the receipts for those forms, then file the receipts for those receipts, barely protested. Only the wounded man hesitated. The agents sat on the ground and then diligently filled out the forms handed to them.

Arthur sat down himself, doing his best to hold back the terrible panic that threatened to overtake him. Personally, he

was relieved to be filling out a form. That is, until he had to think about the details. The person on the form he had kept was not among them. Arthur looked up from his form and asked if anybody recognized the name. The man with the bullet wound did. It was for one of the agents killed when the firing began. The one whose body they left behind.

Arthur had filed more of these forms than he was ready to admit to. Many of them former Enforcers who had worked personally by his side before meeting their untimely death. Senseless death was just a part of living after The War. But the Enforcers were soldiers, men and women who lived and died by the gun. Today a man who was so unprepared for the violence ahead of him that he fell to the ground because of an office limerick died unceremoniously. While the others filled out their forms, Arthur stared at his for minutes at a time. He had only wanted to free those captured, tortured, and sold off by The Colonel as commodities, yet he was not prepared for a civilian's death to get there.

Intellectually, Arthur understood that the price for these people's freedom would be a heavy one. He had seen the brutality of the slavers firsthand. He knew that there was going to be blood. Yet the concept and the reality were two different monsters entirely, like knowing that something is dangerously spicy before you eat it compared to the blood you vomit after hallucinating from it for two hours. Maybe the IRS agent, now dead and cooking under the hot sun, had known what he was getting into. . . But not likely. If he did it was probably a romanticized version of war, the same kind that Ralph kept playing by. He knew that war was bad like he knew that a dish on a menu was spicy because there was a cute picture of a chili next to it. He knew, yet he did not know.

There was still more to come. There was going to be more deaths. Slaver City was fortified, and they were staying put.

The question Arthur had not pondered yet was this: Will it be worth it?

Too occupied with paperwork and their own inner monologues, the IRS agents were oblivious when the Enforcer crept from behind. No one saw him coming.

CHAPTER SIX



The man came out of nowhere, and it was not until he was right behind Arthur that anybody had noticed him.

To give the man credit, he was trained that way. Dealing out death was his profession, and sneaking up on somebody was nearly an essential skill. Arthur was not even the first to know that he was there. The wounded man saw him first and jumped in place from the sudden startling image he saw. Arthur turned around with dumb fright.

Clad in mostly leather, and carrying a shotgun, was a man shorter than Arthur with an IRS badge that read "Enforcer." The single Enforcer assigned to the mission.

Arthur let out a sigh of relief (which is not something he would have done if Rabia were around to warn him of his impending assassination). The Enforcer kept his shotgun lowered.

"Thank God! I thought we lost you. It is good to see an Enforcer out here," Arthur said, looking the Enforcer up and down, "even a, uh, *creepy* one."

The short Enforcer looked up at Arthur with hurt eyes. "Creepy?" he said.

"Yeah, well, um, you *did* just sneak up on me from behind, said *nothing*, and waited until someone noticed you. *That's creepy.*"

"Oh, yeah, that's fair. It's a force of habit, really, after having to kill so many people. Sorry."

Arthur considered this easy to hand wave. Plenty of the Enforcers he had worked with just lacked the normal office etiquette of the Auditors. It was nearly an area of contention in the IRS, as trying to build a single work culture between the two was nearly impossible. The Auditors joked about Enforcers not making good impressions at the bunker's Christmas parties. The Enforcers joked about the Auditor's choking on their own blood when they died. It was a very divided workplace, to say the least.

"How many of us are there left?" the Enforcer asked.

"A baker's dozen," Arthur replied. "Where were you in the firefight?"

The Enforcer looked at Arthur's IRS badge. "You're Arthur McDowell?" Arthur nodded as the Enforcer then looked around at the other agents. "Mind if we, ah, talk *privately*?" the Enforcer asked as he finished scanning the faces of the desperate-looking pencil pushers. Arthur agreed with hesitation, then followed the short man a distance away from the others.

Walking away from the pack felt ominous yet satisfying at the same time. Satisfying because they were walking away from Slaver City, and even the short distance was cathartic, but no one wanted to talk in private if there was something good to say.

After they had walked a distance that the Enforcer seemed comfortable with, he turned to Arthur. "Have you seen Ralph?" he asked.

There were a few answers to that question that popped into Arthur's head. *Who cares?* and, *Why do you want to know*

about that asshole? were of course at the very top. Arthur instead settled on "What?" which helped move the conversation in no direction and was ultimately unproductive.

"Ralph! Have you seen my cousin Ralph? I heard he was working with you," the Enforcer asked urgently.

"Yeah," Arthur replied as he clicked his pen. "Ralph left us behind."

The Enforcer exhaled audibly and his composure lightened. "Was he in that other van? I lost him in the confusion." Arthur said yes and the Enforcer relaxed even more. "Thank God, I'm his cousin and his Enforcer, Richard Siemens."

Of course your name is Richard, Arthur thought. "Well, our fearless leader went on without us with his tail between his legs." The air between the two men was suddenly burdensome with awkwardness. The Enforcer did not meet Arthur's eyes, nor did he seem surprised by Arthur's sentiment. After nothing was said in reply, Arthur continued on. "You never answered my question. Where were you in the firefight?" he said, taking a step closer to Richard.

Richard took a step back, then looked Arthur in the eyes. "I stayed in the van because *technically* I was not assigned this mission. Boyd did not send me." His gaze left Arthur's. "Please don't let anybody know. That's desertion."

Great, Arthur thought, *now I'm keeping secrets for Ralph and his cousin*. Still, the fact that reinforcements were on their way was assuring. Safety aside, it also meant that Arthur did not have to file another 11-99 B. Arthur hated filing twice when he got the first one perfect.

He did not immediately agree to the requested secrecy, and hiding his annoyance was not done well. "Is your whole family cheats and cowards, or is this a generational thing?"

Richard looked hurt, guilty even. He took a step back away from Arthur and looked down at the dead earth beneath them. "Look, I deserve that. I've been getting Ralph

to cut corners with me for years, but *please* never say something like that to Ralph. He looks up to you.”

What? “What?” said Arthur.

“So we scavenged!” Richard said defensively. “It was safer than letting Ralph do his job. If he actually went out to someone’s door and tried to audit, we would both die! I just wanted to keep him safe!”

“No-no-no,” said Arthur, “go back. What was that other thing, he looks up to *me*?”

“Yeah, you didn’t know?”

Arthur shook his head. As long as he had known Ralph he had assumed that they had both shared a relationship of mutual loathing glazed over by superficial niceties. “You are kinda my cousin’s hero,” Richard went on, “so, please, go easy on him.” *Too late for that* . . .

Before Arthur could interrogate Richard any further, they heard a commotion of excitement exhale from the others. “They’re coming!” cheered the man with the wound as he handed a pair of binoculars over to another agent. Richard, his face already a pasty white, somehow grew whiter.

Paying the Enforcer no mind, Arthur ran back over to the rest of the IRS agents and was handed the binoculars. In the distance and under the mountain he saw a great dust cloud on the road being expelled by a fleet of white minivans. The Tax Army was coming. For the first time in days Arthur felt exhilaration and he joined his fellow agents in their cheers. Well, all except for one.

Richard sulked up to Arthur while he passed the binoculars back. Whispering, Richard said: “They can’t know I’m here. Please, you have to hide me. You promised.” With that, Richard killed any excitement Arthur had felt for the reinforcements.

“I did not!” Arthur said, probably louder than Richard

would have liked, but the others were too busy trying to get a glimpse of their salvation, and of the city's doom.

"Please," said Richard, his shoulders limp.

Arthur sighed deep enough to properly convey his disdain. He was going to help him, there was no real doubt about that, Arthur's heart was just too easy to play. But if he was going to do it, he wanted to make sure that Richard knew that it was a *pain in the ass*. While the others' backs were turned and their attention squarely at the base of the mountain, Arthur led Richard into the tipped-over van. "This is pretty much your only option," Arthur said once Richard was inside. "Not exactly sure why you needed help."

"Arthur," Richard said in the dark of the van, "I just wanted to keep my family safe." The beams of light filtering through the van's bullet holes fell across Richard, landing on his face like spots. He looked sullen and desperate. Arthur did not see a cowardly Enforcer clad in leather, he saw a vulnerable man dressed like someone's idea of a cheesy action hero. Arthur entered the van himself.

"I love my cousin," Richard said as Arthur took a tentative step closer, "but he's an idiot. He truly believes in the IRS's efforts, and he wanted nothing more than to go door to door and slowly fix this shattered nation." Richard kept his eyes on the floor. "I was relieved when I got assigned to him, I could watch over him and protect him but . . ." He lowered his shotgun to the floor and held his hands out. "Look at me! I'm no badass wasteland soldier. I grew up in the bunker just like you! I can't protect him! But the bloody idiot wanted to be a hero, he wanted to be like *you*, so I *had* to try."

The gleeful cheers began to subside outside.

"I'm the coward, Arthur. I got Ralph to do the things you despise, and it kept him alive."

Arthur had gone through Enforcers like Rabia goes through cigarettes. The bunker would be much more

crowded had Arthur just done what Richard and Ralph had done. Maybe he should not judge.

"All of the time when I asked Ralph to scavenge in the ruins of a bank or at an old mall I *knew* ahead of time was safe, Ralph would complain. He was always saying that *you* didn't do things that way and that he was not a real Auditor. I think he hated himself for it." Richard's hands went to his face. "When you miraculously came back from Slaver City with a giant book to audit and a war to start, that had been it. He wanted to be a hero too. There was no arguing with him, he was going to do it with or without me." Richard lowered his hands, revealing eyes that were now raw from tears, but none showed.

"I *have* to see that Ralph gets through this," Richard said with steeled eyes yet shaky hands.

Arthur sighed deeply. "Stay in here until you hear the vans arrive," he said. "I'm sure that there will be enough of a commotion that you can crawl out and pretend that you arrived with the Tax Army. I won't say anything."

"Thank you," Richard said, making eye contact for the first time since hiding in the van. After a moment of quiet understanding, Arthur exited the van.

The other agents were no longer looking toward the mountain. All attention was on the city.

"What's happening?" Arthur said. The agent that drove them there handed him back the binoculars.

Arthur was not sure what he was looking at immediately. He swept the binoculars too high at first, missing the city completely, then when he tried to correct it, he swept too low and pointed them at the empty road. "At the wall," the agent beside him said. Arthur corrected his scan. He was half-afraid to see the mutant cars erupting exhaust as they thundered toward them. He was half-expecting to see the slavers, all of them armed, marching toward their tipped-

over van. All of this would have been better than what he saw.

The slavers were chaining the slaves to the front of the walls.

There was a policy that Arthur had always used to his advantage, and it was one that he had passed all of his hope on for the survival of the slaves he intended to free. In the new United Wastes' economy, the IRS recognized that people could be assets. It did not discriminate between those "assets" as being alive or dead upon collection, and Arthur had always omitted that last part to citizens more than once. He let those he was auditing believe that the people they kept had to be taken alive. It was what had saved Dinner from her dire circumstances, after all.

The Commissioner for Operations Support, Henry S. Boyd, would see no difference, dead or alive. They were the same, and now the slavers were using their slaves as human shields. This could all be for naught.

There was no time. The Tax Army was almost on its way. He had to get to Boyd. He had to stop the very army he mobilized from massacring innocent people, and seeing how much of a stickler for details the leader of that army was, there was no doubt that they would do it.

The agents passed the time by passing the binoculars. Within minutes they were overtaken by a motorcade of white vans. Only Arthur's mood stayed sullen. The others cheered as Enforcer after Enforcer exited the vans and stood in formation. Richard successfully crawled out with no notice and joined the formation. Only Arthur had seen him do it.

Van after van pulled up around them, one bullet-ridden among them. Ralph's van. Ralph exited the van with a smile on his face and looked at Arthur with expectant eyes. Just an hour ago Arthur would have read that face for gloat but now knew it for what it really was: the hope of affirmation. Ralph

jogged up to Arthur. "Delivered 11-99 B to Boyd myself and bypassed the radio operator," said Ralph.

He had not deserted them at all. He may have even made the best decision, given the situation.

Arthur faked a smile. "Good job, Ralph," he said, now maybe a little *too* aware of what Richard had told him. Then, after letting Ralph have his moment, he spoke more urgently. "We have to stop the advancement. Innocent people are in danger. Where is Boyd?"

Ralph blinked but found his ground quickly. "He's at the back, I'll show you," he said and led the way.

The Tax Army had filed out of the vans almost completely, and though they were outside, it had become very crowded. The other Auditors were herded into a line between two lines of Enforcers and were ordered to reload their weapons. Only Arthur and Ralph seemed to be going the opposite direction of everybody else, and for a moment it felt as if they were salmon swimming upstream. Those who were not in position were removing equipment from the vans, everything from radios to weapons. Although rifles had outnumbered clipboards, there was still an absurd amount of office supplies in the midst of a deadly army. More than once, Arthur had lost Ralph and had to push through a line of grizzled men clad in leather and gunmetal.

Once they were past the waves of soldiers, they came across an open space on which was quickly being erected a medical tent. Arthur shuddered at the thought of being admitted there; the paperwork was always a headache. You had to sign for every dose of morphine you got, which naturally became harder to sign once you were on the stuff. Once they cleared the tent, they came across the control van. Boyd was seated at the top of it, under a newly erected deck umbrella. One hand held a giant thermos of coffee as the other held binoculars up to his eyes. At that height, Boyd

could better see the battlefield, and at that distance be safe from its ravages. This was good for strategy, but Arthur could not shake the feeling that it was somehow cowardly.

From Boyd's position, and with the high-powered binoculars that he carried, Arthur had no doubt that he would spot the slaves. The question was: would he care? As Arthur ran up to Boyd, following Ralph to a stop, he panted for breath.

Before Arthur could say anything, Boyd looked down his binoculars, took a sip of his coffee, and shouted, "March!"

CHAPTER SEVEN



The machine had begun to turn. The Tax Army was now in full motion. Arthur did not have long until the Enforcers would march close enough to open fire (or be fired upon). Once Boyd had given the order, his personal assistant filled out a form on his clipboard and sprinted off toward the tents behind him. In a couple minutes, Boyd's order was announced over a newly erected loudspeaker at the front of the operations tents. The Tax Army obliged, and they marched forward.

Boyd apparently had not noticed the pair of Auditors looking up at him; his full attention was on what was on the other side of his binoculars . . . and his coffee. The assistant returned to Boyd's side.

Arthur gathered up his courage, which was akin to scraping the bottom of a bowl after a meal: there was just not that much left. Where his courage failed him, his desperation would have to suffice. Arthur walked up to the base of the control van, right up to the shade of the umbrella. "Mr. Boyd, sir! We have to talk!"

Arthur was not summoned. Arthur was not *invited* to the

control van. What had just happened was an affront, an invasion of Boyd's space and authority. The binoculars came down slowly, and Henry S. Boyd turned his head to Arthur just as slow. His eyebrows came close together, almost merging, and a frown spread beneath his broom-like mustache. "What?" Boyd spat, a question that was just as much pointed at what Arthur had to say as it expressed Boyd's perplexity to the skipping of protocol. He did not, however, look surprised to see Arthur alive.

Arthur had faced The Colonel, he had stood up to the powerful and the cold before. But Boyd was not just his boss or his general, no, Boyd was the *IRS*, and that was far more frightening. Arthur placed his hands behind him. He looked at Boyd but did not make eye contact. He saw Ralph look on with wide eyes.

"Sir, the slavers have barricaded their front walls with people!" Arthur shouted.

"I saw. What is your *point*? We do not have an appointment," Boyd said.

"They are in danger of our crossfire!"

"You are reaching the end of my patience my boy. *What is your point?*"

Only a psychopath would need more than what Arthur had just said, a psychopath, or a bureaucracy. Empathy had failed. So, Arthur would have to argue semantics.

"They are assets that we plan on collecting!" tried Arthur.

Boyd's face slackened with boredom, and his eyebrows relaxed. He put the binoculars back up to his face. The conversation was done, as far as he was concerned. "Assets that are as good to the agency dead as they are alive. Either state is perfectly collectible," Boyd stated. "But this is war, and disregarding their safety gives us a tactical advantage."

"But—"

"Excuse me!" Boyd shouted, his binoculars now at his

side, his eyes squinting and his teeth bare beneath his mustache. "If you have more to say, kindly set up an appointment."

The air was filled with the sonorous beat of marching, and still empty from the rage of bullets. This would change very soon.

Ralph grabbed Arthur by the arm, a look of panic and fear in his eyes. "Come on," he said, doing his best to usher Arthur away from any wrath he might incur. Arthur looked at Ralph, a man who had secretly been looking up to him. He knew that he had disappointed Ralph before by putting him down. He was going to have to disappoint the man even further. Arthur gently removed Ralph's hand from his arm, then clenched his own hands into fists.

"NO!" he screamed up at Boyd. "GODDAMN IT, LISTEN TO ME!"

Boyd's jaw slacked in disbelief. He stayed silent, almost stunned in disbelief. There was no appealing to Boyd's humanity; he had none. There was no ethical argument he could make. He had Boyd's attention; if he wanted to change his mind, he would have to argue benefits. "You are throwing away a perfectly good resource and a legacy, sir! Those assets are more important to us alive than they are dead. This seizure of back taxes is the largest in our post-nuclear history, and it could help us grow!" Boyd's eyes were murderous. Arthur was certain that the only reason Henry S. Boyd did not kill him where he stood was because he could still have others do it for him.

"Get on with it," Boyd said in a calm reserved for the most malicious of patience.

"We can easily double our size in Auditors, and therefore in our operations, if you capture those assets alive. Not only can the IRS expand and serve a wider area of the nation, but

you, sir, will be remembered as the man who did it. As the man who saved America."

Gunshots. It did not matter who fired first, there would be nothing but that sound now until one side was dead or had run out of bullets. Arthur's heart broke at the sound of it. If any of the slaves died, it was his doing. He had brought the army here.

Boyd placed his thermos of coffee to his lips, then folded his leg over the other. "You make a fair point," he said. Then he smiled as he placed the binoculars back to his face and said: "Next time, my boy, *set an appointment*." The conversation was over.

Arthur had had enough. Righteous anger, desperation, a sense of self-destruction? It did not matter which. *What would Rabia do?* It was a stupid question, but it was one he was happy to answer. Arthur clenched his fist tighter, squared his shoulder, and walked right up to Boyd's personal assistant. In an instant he hammered his fist into the assistant's testicles and pulled the clipboard away from him. Now it was time to run.

So run is what Arthur did.

"Apprehend and discipline your subordinate!" Boyd yelled, and soon Arthur heard Ralph's footfalls behind him.

Arthur took a glimpse at the clipboard he had stolen as he sprinted toward the operations tents. It was a brick-red form. Red paper stock was only used by the higher-ups. He had never seen it before.

"Arthur!" Ralph yelled between labored breaths. "What are you doing?"

He did not reply. The sound of war raged, and each bullet he heard could mean the death of an innocent he had meant to save. If Ralph was trying to stop him, as Boyd had ordered, he would give him no time. If Ralph wanted to help, well, there was no time to give him. A steel mast held an

array of speakerphones up just ahead of him. Cables had been braided together from the top of the structure and down into a tent nearby. Still more tents and equipment were being carried out of vans to be set up, and more than once Arthur almost ran into a group of men and women during their labors.

He quickly looked behind him. Ralph was still pursuing him. They would both be at the tent soon. He looked down once more. The form was surprisingly simple. A single table read: "Orders to dictate to Enforcers must be written in uppercase. Lowercase and parenthesis are for specific instructions to the operator." The form was already signed by Boyd, likely done ahead of time to speed the process up (yet, enough thought for speed was not given to the distance between Boyd and the operator; this was just standard office fuckery). Arthur pulled out his pen, clicked the top, and heard Ralph gaining.

His writing was messy, it was hurried, but it would have to do. Arthur wrote only two sentences.

TAKE THE SLAVES ALIVE. (All further orders will be in mahogany paper stock only, refuse queries to change).

It took up most of the form. Arthur had reached the tent, in a second he had entered it, and he handed the clipboard to the operator. Ralph entered immediately after.

Ralph was a supervisor. The operator had not yet made the announcement. This could have been for nothing. But Ralph stayed silent.

The operator, a tall and lanky woman, flipped a switch on a large control board, then pulled a microphone up to her mouth. "Take the slaves alive," she said, and her voice

boomed like a bored god above them. "I repeat, take the slaves alive."

There was the slightest pause in gunfire, only noticeable because Arthur was so aware of the noise itself. It, at the very least, suggested that if the army had fired at the slaves, there was maybe one left alive. It was the most comforting pause he had ever heard, but it did not mend his broken heart.

"What the *fuck* just happened?" Ralph said, looking at Arthur as he tried to catch his breath from the sprint. Arthur did not respond. If his plan worked, the operator would ignore any further order given by Boyd, as all of his current forms were still a brick red. Boyd, ignorant of the new stipulation in protocol, would likely send form after form before the situation was rectified. He just hoped that Boyd was not spiteful enough to change the order. He hoped that he would just go with it to save face. Whatever happened, Arthur would face it willingly. He had done his best.

He walked past Ralph, meeting no resistance from the man, and exited the tent. Outside, he was met by two armed Enforcers. One was older than the other, more grizzled and scarred, his companion young and untouched by hardship. The older one spoke, raising a rifle at Arthur. "You are to come with us for disobeying orders and ignoring protocol." These were words Arthur thought he would never hear. They were accusations he thought would never be laid on himself. Yet, here he was, a rebel and a bad employee. Hell must be buying fireplaces.

It was not long before the personal assistant Arthur had assaulted arrived. He hobbled over slowly, but with the stern face of a man who was trying to do so quickly. As he approached, the older Enforcer yanked the clipboard from Arthur's hand and handed it to the assistant. Arthur watched as the assistant entered the tent, and as he was led away, left Ralph behind, stunned and stupefied. He did not look back

again, but saw Ralph step forward, hesitate, then stop again. He did not see the man he had assaulted scream, "What do you mean the wrong form?" at the top of his lungs. No, Arthur saw only that which was ahead of him: a ruined career and uncertainty. Strangely, it was worth it.

The guards did not seem know what to do with him. There was no precedent for what Arthur had done, and therefore the punishment wasn't clear. The two briefly argued on whether or not they should tie him up or lock him up in the back of a van, with the younger one insistent that he knew "a good knot." They settled on both.

Before the slavers started chaining their slaves up as human shields, before Boyd ordered the march with no regard to the safety of innocents, the IRS had prepared to take the slaves back. Originally, they figured that the slaves would be kept safely inside the city and in their cages. A quarter of the vans that they had arrived with were meant to shuttle these assets back to the bunker in waves. Arthur wondered if Boyd had actually planned on taking the slaves back in trips, or if he had only brought enough for the number of slaves he expected to survive. It was one of these vans that the Enforcer had taken him to.

The van was not far from the operations tents. The bottom of it was caked in white ash from the mountain. The younger Enforcer fiddled with some rope for a minute, then two. When he was finished, he unbound Arthur and attempted to try again before the older one interrupted him and bound Arthur in zip ties, then gave a long and disappointed look at the younger one. Arthur did not resist. With his arms and feet bound together with zip ties, they threw him inside and shut the door behind him. Arthur had a smile on his face the entire time.

Arthur was once again held prisoner inside of a van near Slaver City. *Déjà vu* was a cruel bitch.

Outside, the battle raged on. Gunshots were king, occasionally subsiding just long enough so that Arthur could hear the human misery that they were causing. As the time passed, Arthur listened to his surroundings intently. Never once did he hear the loudspeaker again. Hours went by, and only when the air had begun to cool did the sounds of war subside.

The mechanics of siege warfare dictated that this endeavor could last days, which was something the IRS was probably more prepared for than the slavers. When silence fell, Arthur figured that the slavers' morale must have skyrocketed as the IRS retreated back into their nearby camp, yet he knew that the IRS had not given up. It was probably just off time; they were now off the clock. A screeching klaxon, the same the IRS used in the bunker to denote lunch and off time, tolled, confirming Arthur's suspicion, ending the battle but not the war. Tomorrow, it would act as a death knell when it rang for the next work shift to begin.

The IRS would have what it wanted tomorrow, and it wanted death and taxes.

Arthur was grateful when the sun began to set, for the same reasons he was grateful for when it had set the last time he was locked up in a van. The cooling of the van was a relief. Arthur mused that the slavers had at least the decency to not bind him when they had captured him. This was only entertaining to him for the slightest of seconds before the existential dread of it set in.

More hours went by, and the light outside had vanished, leaving Arthur completely in the dark. Sleep had threatened to arrest his conscious mind just before the van's side door slid open.

Ralph and Richard.

"Are you rescuing me?" Arthur asked, fighting through a fog of sleep. Ralph shook his head.

"From who? Yourself? It's off hours and you're an employee. They can't punish you off the clock, idiot," Ralph said, hands on his hips. "I figured after I hadn't seen you for a bit that no one bothered to let you out once they were off the clock."

Richard stepped inside of the van and removed a knife from his belt. In just two quick tugs on it, the zip ties came undone and Arthur was free of his restraints. Moving was both relieving and painful. His body had cramped, and much of it was sore from being in the same position for too long. Arthur stretched his limbs then slowly came up and out of the van, only to meet the very dissatisfied face of Ralph.

"You got me in trouble too, ya know," Ralph said as his cousin returned his knife to his belt. "I got an infraction because of you. That's a permanent mark on my record, asshole! Now Boyd is questioning my leadership." Richard shifted his weight and looked at Ralph with a narrow frown. "I only came, in my own personal free time, might I add, because Rich insisted."

Arthur had no patience for this. A month ago he might have sympathized. Now? He could not summon an ounce of fucks to give. "I'm not apologizing, Ralph," Arthur said as he dusted himself off. When he was satisfied that no further effort would get any cleaner, he straightened his tie and looked in Ralph's eyes. "I did the right thing."

"I agree," Richard said, avoiding his cousin's gaze.

"Well, no shit!" said Ralph. "You did the right thing, but you made the wrong decision! Dammit, Arthur, Richard and I have been mucking up paperwork for years," he added. "Something I am not happy about, by the way," he said, looking squarely at Richard. After a deep breath, he returned his agitated gaze to Arthur. "If you told me what you were planning on doing, we could have done it behind Boyd's back! You didn't have to make anyone infertile!"

"Oh," said Arthur. "Yeah, uh, I suppose that would have been better." Arthur shuffled his feet into the dusty ground beneath him. When no one else seemed like they were going to talk, Arthur looked up at Richard. "How man—" he said, finding that he had to fight to finish it. "How many of the slaves died?"

"Not many," Richard replied. "Most of the slavers were at the top of their wall, so we concentrated fire there."

Not many was a good answer, but it still meant that innocents had died.

"I'm not sure what Boyd plans on doing with you," Ralph said, his tone now more calm than condescending. "He probably wants you dead," he said, laughing.

"You have no idea how true that is," Arthur said, sending the cousins into a fit of laughter. Arthur was serious.

After the laughter passed, Ralph looked Arthur in the eyes. "You saved my life today. Hell, you saved *a lot* of lives today." And with a companionable hand on Arthur's shoulder, he said, "Thank you."

Arthur had no idea how to reciprocate. He should have said something important then, about how no life is more important than another's, but that all life is greatly important. He should have said something about how good deeds need no witness or credit. He should have said what he felt, that Ralph was a friend and that though the road it took to get there was a strange one, it was one that he was glad to have taken. Instead, he cleared his throat and in a small and awkward voice muttered, "No problem," then clicked the top of his pen repeatedly.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Time was of the essence. Arthur's life was in danger. But if Rabia was going to save her friend's life, then, goddammit, she was going to do it in style. Trading out the white van for The Shark was number one on her priority list. Because she was raised in a caravan, and was a natural outsider to the IRS's bunker, she was likely going to stay an outsider, no matter how far up the bureaucratic ladder she ascended. Keeping The Shark and some emergency supplies just outside of the IRS's borders was a precaution she had taken without thinking twice, and now that she had hired guns after her and her friend, well, she was glad that she had.

Their morning was an easy one, though Rabia woke to find that some fingers were missing from the assassin's corpse she had unceremoniously tossed aside. This puzzle was immediately solved when little Dinner scampered up to her with a new necklace around her neck made of the assassin's shoelace and said missing fingers. It was adorable. Seeing the little tyke with a waster's trophy around her neck (and with better craftsmanship than she would have guessed) flooded Rabia with nostalgia for her childhood. Dinner was all right, and

Rabia figured that she could handle the task of babysitting her if it was filled with these occasional gems.

Breakfast was eaten as Rabia drove, and the body of their would-be assassin was left to rot under the indifference of the sun. They needed to burn as much rubber on the road as they could while there was daylight; they had a two-day journey ahead of them at the very least, and there was no telling when Boyd's other man planned on acting. Arthur could very well be dead before she arrived. This was the worst-case scenario, and it was one that filled her with dread, but it would give her the perfect excuse to go on a revenge-fueled rampage, which was something that had been on her bucket list for some time. Keeping this in mind, she only really had to pack the supplies she would need for that rampage, as it would certainly be overkill for the purpose of saving Arthur, which is how she liked to pack her weaponry anyways.

Dinner was a quiet and intense child. She had only spoken once during their trip to The Shark and only to ask if they were still going to find Arthur. When Rabia answered in the affirmative, the child seemed to be happy and fell back into silence. Rabia blasted some music the rest of the way.

Just outside of the ruined city that surrounded the IRS's bunker, they came to an equally decayed suburb. The names of both had been lost to any who were not born before The War, as a raider's favorite material for building armor was street signs. Street signs were all of the rage for the savage apocalypse survivor once wasteland chic dominated fashion trends. So rare were they now that they were easily worth their weight double in calories and bullets. Stripped of its name, this suburb served the living for one purpose now: to hide all of Rabia's shit.

They came to an old mechanic's garage. Rabia parked the van. The garage was one of the few abandoned buildings left that was mostly intact, being made from sturdy cinder block.

The windows were busted, and somebody early into the apocalypse had painted "Help us!" on the side of the building, but aside from the occasional skeleton and normal signs of human suffering, it was immaculate. Fishing out a rake pick and a torsion wrench out of her pocket (she never did find the garage's keys), Rabia unlocked the garage door, revealing the mutant-junk-car beast that was within. She drove the van inside and began transferring supplies to The Shark. Dinner looked up at Rabia with silent eyes and a puzzled face. "Why are we changing cars?" she asked.

Rabia did not stop moving. She was done packing the water, food, and drugs in The Shark and had opened a locker in the back of the garage that was filled with enough weapons to kill a roaming gang of gorillas. "We're marked," Rabia said. "When that assassin is late to report in and those Nazi bastards realize that he failed, they will probably send more after us. Likewise, if they succeed in killing Arthur, we'll be next on the list. No matter what, there is somebody out there that wants us dead. It's best that we ride something *fast* they aren't looking for." Rabia could not decide which of the guns to pack, so she packed all of them and found that she could not fight back a smile as she packed the harpoon gun.

The child's demeanor had not changed. "Why?" she queried once more.

"Goddammit, I just *told* you!" Rabia said as she moved back and forth from The Shark to her weapon's locker. "There are bad guys after us, so we're gonna switch to outrun them and confuse them."

Pause. Silence, then: "Why?"

Rabia shut the trunk of The Shark, then leaned down to be at eye level with the little girl and removed her shades. Rabia was going to try something with the child that she knew she was bad at—patience. "Why are they after us, or

why are we trying to confuse them?" Rabia asked to clarify the child's question.

Dinner shrugged.

Rabia sighed. "The answer to both is because they are bad."

"Why?"

"Mother of a deceased swine! Are you that confused or do you just like asking 'why?'"

"I dunno."

Rabia turned away from the child and lit a cigarette. "Sweet Jesus, you are a natural philosopher, kid," she said.

Dinner's face scrunched up and she asked. "What's a pie-lucifer?"

"No more questions, kid, get in the car."

Dinner obeyed. Rabia followed.

The engine of The Shark purred and its vibration elicited excitement in Rabia's soul. The mutant car had got her and Arthur out of an impossible situation before; hopefully, it would do so again. It took all of her discipline not to peel out of the garage and send The Shark careening into the danger that it craved. Instead, she fought every excited ounce of her body and pulled the car out of the garage. Once they were clear of the garage, she got out, locked her secret stash up and the van inside, then eagerly jogged back to the driver's seat. Rubber ate concrete then spat dust and exhaust.

The journey was silent once more. This was a blessing only in Rabia's perception. With her eyes focused forward, she at first failed to notice that the child beside her was flooded with quiet tears. She only noticed when Dinner unwillingly let out an audible snuffle. The little girl had learned to cry silently after years of captivity, and the sight broke Rabia's heart. "What's wrong, why are you crying?" she said in her most motherly voice, which is to say, not motherly at all.

The little girl sniffled once more. "You don't like me," she said between pitiful breaths filled with tears. "You're gonna eat me."

Rabia's heart was now roommates with her bowels, and that oppressive blanket of guilt she had felt the night before covered her being entirely. "*No no no*," Rabia said, keeping the child in the corner of her eye. "Don't do that, don't cry. I'm not gonna eat you, we have plenty of canned food!" This did not comfort the child *at all*. Dinner erupted into a long and audible wail, no longer able to hold it back. This was going to be a much longer journey than Rabia was prepared for.

"I *knew* you didn't like me!" Dinner wailed.

Rabia fought the sudden urge to drown the child out with the car's stereo. "Hey hey, come on now. Being eaten is far worse, right?"

The sound of weeping grew in pitch and volume. This was not, apparently, what the child wanted to hear.

"I do like you, I do!" Rabia said in a half panic. "I like you, okay? I like that necklace you made. That was cool!"

The wailing subsided—just a little. "You-you do?" Dinner asked with the earnestness of her age.

"Yeah, it's nice, it looks pretty on you and will let people know not to fuck with you!" said Rabia, stealing a glance off the road to smile at the child. The wailing had become sniffles once more.

"I think *you're* pretty," Dinner said, meeting Rabia's eyes. That was too much, too cute, and too heartwarming. Rabia's heart melted and blood rushed to her face, making her blush for the first time in years. This was intolerable. She needed a goddamn drink. With no social toolkit to reciprocate the affection from the child, Rabia elected on, "Duh," and turned The Shark's stereo up.

Dinner, who had quickly recovered from her sorrow, began kicking her feet back and forth. "When I grow up, I

want to be pretty like you.” Rabia could not fight back the smile, so she stuffed a second cigarette in her mouth to occupy it. They drove on in their familiar speechless habit, and Rabia’s inner glee from a child’s approval was quickly replaced with a new kind of guilt.

She was taking this child to the most dangerous place in the United Wastes. It was necessary, she was not going to let the only man she had ever felt affection for die, and if he did, she had no choice but to gut Boyd and light his intestines on fire (which was the only logical course of action she could take), but she was not happy about it. This poor child had been thrust into a chain of events that she did not understand or deserve. If it weren’t for the mercy that they showed the emaciated man, Dinner would still be mopping the floors of the safest place in the now dead world. But maybe not. Maybe Boyd had pulled some strings to make sure that when he split Arthur and herself that he paired her with the weakest agent he had, knowing that only one of them could fight off the assassin. It didn’t matter, though, Rabia was still headed to Slaver City, which meant that Dinner was too.

She could, and absolutely planned to, protect Dinner, but Dinner was also a liability. Rabia would work best on her own; babysitting was not something she was good at. She could barely talk to the child without upsetting her, and protecting the kid would prove to be a hard challenge. She laughed internally then, when she realized that babysitting was exactly what she had done protecting Arthur.

The two rode on for hours, Dinner sleeping most of the time. The ruined and decayed suburbs gave way to ruined and decayed countryside, with the occasional ruined and decayed small town in between. Everything was dead, and if something wasn’t dead then it was hiding—either way, nothing stood in front of them that first day traveling. When daylight had burned out and the void of space taken reign in the sky,

Rabia set up camp away from the road while Dinner entertained herself perfectly by jumping in place.

Rabia found herself jealous of how simply the child could entertain herself so completely as the long hours of driving had already become boring. When the child had settled down and fallen asleep in her adult-sized sleeping bag, Rabia decided that she would regress the best way she knew how and drank a copious amount of rum. With her head slowed and her thoughts swimming in alcohol, she too decided to jump in place, see what it was all about. But this was just a labor and at the end of it was glad that no one was around to see her do it. Afterward, she succumbed to sleep and she dreamed of Arthur dying.

By morning the sky looked ugly with dirty clouds. In her days working the caravan when she was Dinner's age, they would stop their journey for weather like this, and assuming that their Geiger counters didn't click, they would lay out their rain barrels and take the day off. Rabia would stay perched inside her mother's rig and count the tapping of raindrops on the windshield and scribble incoherently with scavenged crayons. There was no time to collect water now (and no need given their supplies), especially as the memory of her dream was still fresh, but The Shark's accordion top had been pulled out to make way for the giant cage that was still welded to it. They would need to find a cover. Driving in the rain in a convertible with no top would only slow them down. They were lucky enough to find an abandoned store before the rain began. After a minute of scavenging (all of the food was long taken), Rabia found a blue plastic tarp, some duct tape, and even some crayons.

With the tarp secure, Rabia dug out the auditing forms that the child had been given for their wild goose chase and handed her the crayons with a warm smile. Rabia was half-afraid that Dinner, who had spent her life towed around as a

spare meal like one keeps a spare tire for their car, would not know what to do with the crayons, but the child took to it naturally, as all children do. So she was bad at babysitting, but she wasn't horrible at it. Once the rain came down and started tapping the windshield and the blue tarp, Rabia's nostalgia peaked pleasantly before simmering down to a slight episode of grief for her mother. Dinner sat happily beside her, busied with the colorful wax she was laying down on tax forms.

Whatever pleasantness the rain had brought was quickly forgotten as they entered the dust plains. The dry blanket of dust that covered the now barren farmland became a miserable mud. The pleasant sound of tapping rain was washed out by the loud clinking of pebbles and dirt that was kicked up from the mud beneath. This mud mixed with boredom—a solution that Rabia found unbearable.

If it were just Rabia, she likely would have fueled herself with uppers and possibly risked driving through the previous night, stopping only to kill anything that stood between her and her friend. If it were just Rabia, she would not have stopped even to eat, letting the drugs push her forward. But it wasn't just herself, and Dinner needed to eat and go to the bathroom almost every three goddamn hours. The second time she pulled over for the child, the rain was in full effect. Though mud was everywhere, it was only a thin layer on the surface, as the dry and sand-like ground beneath them did shit to absorb the water. This made for a very viscous and sticky mud that would cling to you, but not sink you into the ground. Dinner came back from her bathroom break soaked, her feet covered in the vile stuff. Seeing Dinner bring back so much mud was enough to send Rabia in a fit of cursing, but she held her anger back, and when Dinner pulled out one of her hard-worked drawings it subsided completely.

"I wanted to show you earlier, but you were driving,"

Dinner said with wide eyes as she handed Rabia a tax form. "I made it for you," she said with a guarded sweetness. Rabia took the drawing. Though its craftsmanship was crude, and its subject matter objectively horrifying, Rabia found herself holding back a tear as she examined it. Dinner had drawn three figures, the tallest of which was drawn in brown crayon. It stood next to a smaller figure, all yellow and short. Both figures were stabbing the third figure, laid out on the ground with red streaks of crayon for blood. The title of the picture read "Me and Rabya." It was the most precious thing Rabia had ever seen.

"This is fucking great!" Rabia said after clearing her throat, choking back tears. "I love it!" she said, looking into the child's eyes, glad for the aviators she wore to mask the water that had leaked from her own. The picture more than made up for the mud.

They drove on.

Though light began to dwindle as the sun set once more, bright rays of it shone through the murky clouds as they came to the end of the rain. By the time they had come to the mountain, the rain was gone. The soot-covered mountain elicited both hope and dread in Rabia's heart. *We burnt it completely*, she thought, *how romantic*. Arthur was probably on the other side of that mountain. They came across a wide and empty clearing with tire tracks and signs of camping. Whoever was here had been there that day. Only the Tax Army could have left such a large footprint. *Then it's started*, she thought, *the war has started*. She could feel a clock ticking with powerful urgency in her mind.

To her surprise, there was activity near the mountain, at the base of it. Maybe there was still hope? Maybe she could catch up with them. The movement was distant and moved across the base of the mountain instead of up it. One by one the distant movements lit up with pairs of light. Headlights.

Based on the pairs of lights, she counted five cars (or ten motorcycles lined up in two rows of five, which was not impossible given how The Colonel liked to travel). Rabia stopped The Shark and elected to watch the cars for a while, a sleeping Dinner did not notice the stop in momentum. It was not large enough to be the Tax Army, and though they were climbing the mountain now, the direction that they had come from did not make sense. The Tax Army would have come at the mountain straight on like she was. No, these cars had come around the mountain, just to climb it on this side.

Then it hit her like a gift-wrapped brick: whoever they were, they were trying to flank the Tax Army.

Rabia put the pedal to the metal.

CHAPTER NINE



Rabia unlatched the top of her kitbag, after looking for it nearly blind. There was no moon out that night—there was no light. She fished inside of her kitbag until she found a solitary salt shaker filled with cocaine, and she nearly jumped in fright when the quiet voice of Dinner broke the silence. “What’s that?” the child asked. *Of course she was awake.* Children are never asleep when you need them to be.

“Something to keep me awake while I go looking for some *friends*,” Rabia replied without looking at her.

They were parked on the side of the road, having crested the mountain only minutes ago. Driving in the night naturally made Rabia nervous, but given the mysterious cars flanking her employers, and possibly Arthur, she risked the act with abandon. The mountain was empty of trees now, with a thick layer of soot and ash in their stead. The moonless night had darkened the mountain completely, any light made by The Shark past this point would be egregious, especially seeing as Rabia planned to sneak up on whoever was out there. There was little doubt in her mind that the caravan of cars she had seen had cut their lights as well, and there was no use setting

up a surprise attack if you broadcast yourself to everyone around you. The darkness was so complete that Rabia had hoped that if Dinner had woken it would be only briefly and that she would fall back asleep, comforted by the fall of night.

She was wrong.

"Can I have some?" Dinner asked, sweet as honey.

"No, these are drugs and they are mine. We talked about this," Rabia replied, still avoiding the child's glare.

"They can keep you awake?"

"Some of them. Others can help you fall asleep, see the face of God, or the devil, for that matter. All of them are bad. Stay away from them." And with that Rabia latched the drug kit closed and pocketed the salt shaker in her cargo shorts. It was very hard to see the child, but Rabia still felt guilty taking the drugs in front of her. She would have to wait until later.

"They can make you fall asleep?" Dinner asked with an infuriating innocence. "Can I have some of those?"

Rabia considered it. Having her knocked out would make this much easier. There was no way to know if the kid would stay put while Rabia went out on the prowl, and she would be safest here. Half a tranq would probably do it. Hell, most waste kids her age were already addicted to two kinds of drugs. It was actually surprising that Dinner had no habits of her own. This would be an exception anyways, nowhere near enough to make it a habit.

The familiar burden of guilt was almost as complete as the darkness surrounding them. Rabia unlatched her kit once more. "Don't tell Arthur I gave you this," she said as she pulled out a single capsule. "That is, if we ever see him again." Rabia handed her the tranq, finding that the girl's hand was already out and open.

"When do we get to see Arthur?" Dinner said as her little hand clutched the pill.

"Hopefully soon," was all that Rabia answered on the subject, doing her best to keep the worry out of her voice.

Rabia searched The Shark's trunk for weaponry, and after staring at the harpoon gun for an obscene amount of time decided to take a single hand cannon, a much smaller pistol, some grenades, and a knife. The knife was the only thing she planned on using.

"Listen," Rabia said as she closed the trunk. "I'm gonna be out for a bit. I want you to stay here." Dinner stood silently beside her. "Can you shoot?" Rabia asked. It was almost an insult to ask a child of the wastes that question. Anyone past the age of four had likely fired a gun at someone at least once. Dinner nodded, it was too dark for Rabia to see her expression, but she guessed it was probably an indignant one. "Good, I'm leaving a pistol with you just in case, but you probably won't need it. Get comfy and take only half of that pill."

"When will you be back?" Dinner asked. The child had endless questions.

Patience was not a trait Rabia was known for. Going from cold to hot at the drop of a hat? Absolutely, but patience? This was as foreign to her as empathy was to a psychopath. She was doing her best to try for the child, but there would be no "A for effort" here. "When you wake up," Rabia said through clenched teeth. "So the faster you take that pill the faster I'll be back."

Dinner scurried back to The Shark, and the tarp moved with an audible crinkle as she opened the door. When Rabia heard the door close, she headed out.

It could be all night until she had come to the resting place of the caravan. Traversing the mountain by foot and in the dark would take some time. She was already glad for the drug she had yet to take but waited until she was far away enough that her new habit of guilt subsided. It would not just

keep her awake, it would also keep her alert and it would keep the boredom at bay. This last part was most important of all. Though their journey so far had been nerve-wracking because of the urgent nature of it, two days' worth of a drive with a child was not exactly entertaining. If anything, she looked forward to the drug to quell that boredom. So, Rabia Duke walked through the ash, occasionally patting her side pocket to feel for the salt shaker.

Her eyes were finally beginning to adjust. The stillness of the night should have amplified the sound of her footprints, yet she heard none. The mountain's ash beneath her had muted her footsteps. This was both good and bad. Good because it meant she could sneak up on her prey. Bad because it meant that she could be snuck up on. After pondering the ash beneath her, she was suddenly grateful that there was no moon. The light would have been nice, but it was likely that the ash beneath her would act like snow, the sheer amount of white reflecting and enhancing the light. It would probably illuminate the whole mountain, and she would be an easy one to spot.

She kept walking and her guilt had finally started to wane, but it was being replaced by doubt and fear. This wicked mission she was on could be a pointless one if Arthur was already dead, which was a strong possibility. Given the age of the tracks that the Tax Army had left behind, Arthur and the army would likely have been at Slaver City for a whole day. The fact that a fleet of white vans was now climbing the mountain either meant that the battle was yet to be won, or they were all dead. This last part seemed unlikely. The Tax Army would certainly crush the slavers with their superior supplies and firepower, but that did not mean that Arthur could not be a casualty. The fact that the slavers were trying to flank Boyd and his men was a good sign, for at least it meant that Boyd still had men

to flank. Rabia desperately hoped that Arthur was among them.

The task was almost Sisyphean. The odds of Arthur being alive were slim, which was something that Rabia had known even before she set out to try and rescue him. If he did not die by the hand of a slaver, would he not be assassinated by Boyd's lackey? No one had tried to kill her again yet, but hadn't she gone to some length to make sure that tracking her was harder? If Arthur were dead, and she ruined the surprise attack tonight like she planned, what would be the point? She was a marked woman and had very little allegiance to the IRS now that it wanted Arthur and herself dead. Wouldn't it be better to take The Shark and Dinner in the opposite direction and try her luck at finding another caravan that needed a good sheriff? It made much more sense than what she was doing now.

Rabia trekked on, and she did so despite all common sense. She did so because Arthur was her friend, she did so because he was more than just a friend. He was the only person to ever return her affections. Melody, the slave she had freed, certainly faked it for her, but Arthur was the first who seemed to do so genuinely. He was a total dork, probably mad with a specific type of OCD, and incompetent at anything but menial office work, but he was also kind and compassionate and brave. She trekked on because if there was the slightest chance that he was alive, well, she had to take it.

Rabia's hike through the ghostly moonlike mountain swallowed by the dark of night had three beats to it. March, cocaine, rest. The last beat was something that the cocaine was supposed to keep at bay, but the change in altitude had made her weak and dizzy. She had not acclimated, and the hike demanded more oxygen than the thin air would supply. So, it was during a rest when Rabia thought she had heard something behind her. Her hand cannon was out in a flash.

There was nothing. She knew better than to hand wave such a thing and kept her guard up, but when something failed to happen, she went back to that first beat: march. She heard nothing else during her journey. Maybe it was just her raw nerves made more so by the uppers. She sniffled from the drug and decided that the cocaine was probably a big factor.

Rabia was not traveling through the mountain in pursuit of her prey blind. The cars had to follow the road as the rest of the mountain was nearly impassable by anything save for a Unimog. Further, she too had been in a position traveling this mountain where she had to find a place to hide with Arthur during their census foray. She already knew the best place to hide, and if her prey was thinking the same way, then she knew just where to find them.

After an hour's journey, Rabia was within minutes of the horseshoe rock formation that had acted as refuge to her and Arthur not so long ago. It was just enough out of the road's way that one could easily drive past it without a thought, but close enough to make driving to it a breeze. The boulders were tall enough to hide anything save for an eighteen-wheeler, and the clearing wide enough to hide nearly a dozen cars. If the slavers had not chosen this spot then maybe her job would be easier than she thought, because that meant that they were dumb as hell. It would be a hassle to find them if they weren't here, but she did have all night, and a salt shaker's worth of powder.

Rabia avoided the entryway of the rock formation and kept a safe and quiet distance. She listened. She heard nothing. Either they were asleep or not there; both made it safe to approach. Her small frame made her light on her feet, and the ash beneath her muted her steps even more. She walked up to one of the rock walls and slowly began to climb it. Where the ground of the mountain was white with ash, the granite rocks she now climbed were smeared with dark soot.

This made it harder to grip, and more than once her hand slipped, smearing the black soot off to reveal the gray rock beneath. She did not clear the rocks immediately when she got to the top and elected instead to peek just slightly above them. Then, she spotted them.

A diverse fleet of mutated cars was parked in a semicircle, five in total. Whatever make and model of cars they used to be was hard to fathom, as each was now mostly random junk that had been welded onto them. If monster trucks were living creatures, these would be the nightmare children they would spawn. The Shark would fit right in, because not too long ago it was among them. Scattered through the inside of the semicircle were ten sleeping slavers cocooned in tattered sleeping bags. She had her work cut out for her.

Rabia cleared the rocks, then slowly began her decent on the other side.

If Rabia's acts of violence were on a resume, killing men in their sleep would be at the top, just under "burned down a fucking mountain." Her knife found its familiar place in her hand. She stalked silently toward the camp.

She sniffled from the drug. One of the slavers was upright from the noise in an instant. There was nowhere for her to hide.

Shit.

"Who the fuck are you?" the slaver asked, scurrying for his gun. The other slavers roused from their slumbers.

Oh well, Rabia thought, placing her knife back at her side, *I wanted to use the grenades anyway.*

CHAPTER TEN



What is better than a group of men who enslave others waking up to a high-explosive grenade being chucked into one of their laps? Why, that would be *two* high-explosive grenades. Rabia was, after all, an incredibly giving woman.

The grenades were hard workers, sending shrapnel, flesh, and ash upward and outward. The concussive explosions reverberated and echoed through the stone horseshoe. Rabia had her hand cannon out and ready the moment they hit the ground, and her feet carried her behind one of the mutant cars. Those that survived fired wildly. She was still outnumbered, but the blasts had done much to disorient the waking men, and the four that were left without any mortal wounds did not seem to know where she was.

Rabia had unwittingly cornered herself. The remaining slavers were between her and the exit. Climbing would likely get her shot, and she was still outgunned and outnumbered.

It was now or never. She had to take advantage of the slavers' confusion while she could, or else she would have four guns pointed at her at once.

Rabia emerged from her cover and dispatched the slavers

exactly how she read: from left to right and in a rush. Two of her bullets hit their marks, and the slavers she shot fell to the ground, sending clouds of ash into the air as they did so. The third shot missed, and the slaver that it was meant for started firing in her direction. The fourth had disappeared, lost to Rabia sometime between when she found cover and fired her shots.

Rabia crouched down and kept her back to the mutant car. She could probably take out the goon that was shooting at her—she was quick—but the fourth man could be anywhere. Killing nine out of ten was impressive, but it meant little if the tenth got to her in the end. She had to take out the immediate threat first and pray to whatever god that was left that she had not offended that she would find the fourth soon.

She dropped to the ground, rolled to the side, and pulled the trigger. The large hand cannon erupted its payload straight into the man's brain. A look of surprise was the last encore for his face and he fell to his knees as blood leaked from his head.

Rabia sniffled from the cocaine. *Fucking cocaine!* Her heart was beating faster than a heavy metal drummer. It was hard to tell if this was from the drug or from the adrenaline—maybe both. The stillness around her was ominous, and once more the darkness seemed impenetrable. The fourth man was out there, maybe doing what she was now—listening.

Maybe he's a scum-sucking coward, she thought. *Maybe the Nazi swine bastard ran away.* Her instincts told her this was a laughable fantasy. He was out there . . . somewhere. The darkness had suddenly become her greatest asset and her greatest enemy. It would conceal her just as perfectly as it would conceal him.

Rabia let out a long but quiet sigh, sending out a stream of fogged breath. She noticed for the first time since snorting

the drug that it was cold outside. Her march up the mountain had kept her warm, but now, quiet and still, she felt the oppressive chill. She badly wanted a cigarette. Still, she heard nothing.

Cautiously she stalked the grounds of the rock enclosure, grateful that she was already familiar with it. This was no advantage, but an even playing field was almost as good. The stark white of the ash clashed with the crimson of blood in the center of the camp. There were no signs of the fourth man. Either he was behind (or in) a car, or he wasn't in the enclosure at all.

The options narrowed down, Rabia's confidence began to swell. But then she heard the report of a gun. The single shot rang out supreme over the pregnant silence, but the echoes of the enclosure made it impossible to pinpoint. Rabia's fight-or-flight instinct chose flight and she ran to the other side of the outcropping of cars. There, laying dead in a pile of ash, was the fourth man.

She did not immediately see his killer, because his killer was just simply too short. Across from the fourth man's cadaver was the silent and small figure of Dinner, holding the pistol Rabia had given to her for defense.

"What in the name of all that is holy are you doing out here?" Rabia demanded, lowering her pistol. Dinner did the same, and her small face was covered in sadness.

"I got lonely," Dinner pleaded. "I was scared."

So that is what she had heard behind her during her hike. If the ash had muted Rabia's footfalls, it most certainly silenced the light feet of Dinner.

"I told you to stay put, didn't I? This was dangerous, Dinner, you could have died!" Rabia said, surprised to find more worry than anger in her voice. But apparently the child could not tell the difference. Tears threatened the corners of Dinner's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I was scared and you were gone and—"

Rabia interrupted Dinner's plea with something that surprised even herself. She hugged the child tightly. Dinner had probably saved Rabia's life, of which she was grateful, but the harm that could have come to her was not worth it.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Rabia said as Dinner hugged her back. "That was a pretty good shot, though," she said, unable to not admire the handiwork that might have saved her life. Like Rabia, Dinner was born into a world of misery, you had to pick up some unsavory skills and habits to thrive. Rabia just hoped that Dinner would not thrive too well, as she herself had.

No one deserved those memories.

With the remnants of human life strewn across blood-soaked ash and the hours getting late, it was time for that awkward part of post-apocalyptic survival when one has to scavenge through the remains and goods of who they just killed. There was very little dignity in the United Wastes. You didn't just kill, you robbed and you stole so that tomorrow you would have to steal less. This bout of rummaging through dead people's property had more of an added benefit than usual, however, because this was also information gathering. There was still little doubt in Rabia's mind that these slavers were trying to flank the Tax Army and surprise attack, but the small numbers to do so were puzzling.

Her priorities when robbing the dead usually went like this: find water, then food, and then drugs. When she was done searching for those things she would scavenge for ammo or, failing that, scavenge for new weapons, and finally the miscellaneous stuff like toilet paper and tampons. The slavers' canteens were full, but judging by the size of the tumors littering their bodies like cancerous gooseflesh it was probably not potable and definitely irradiated. That was a strike. So, Rabia fished in the pockets of one of the bodies

not mangled by the grenades for car keys. This part was always far more intimate than she liked. If she were British, she would have cleared her throat and looked away. If she were Canadian, she would probably apologize to the corpse. But Rabia was American, so naturally she made a dick joke. "Lot of room in here," she snickered to herself. She did not find keys in the first pocket, but she did find something odd.

Money. Paper money. Five twenties, to be precise. No one, save for the IRS, still dealt with actual money. The official currency of the United Wastes was fear, but slightly below that was a barter system based on calories and bullets. Rabia got paid in dollars, but she was a full-time employee of the IRS, where the money was actually useful and used inside of the bunker. This was, well, baffling. Still, she had used money before working at the IRS, but it was usually to wipe her ass with. This was not an uncommon practice, as there was still a lot of the stuff around the United Wastes (and it had to be used for something).

She let it go. There was always something weird that would pop up when scavenging. Sometimes she would find sex toys, and sometimes she would find Silly Putty; people were unpredictable, and so were the items in their pockets. But when she checked another body and found dollars in his pants as well, she knew that this was not a coincidence. These men were paid this money . . . but who paid them?

The Internal Revenue Services of the United Wastes dealt almost exclusively in two-dollar bills. They had an entire vault of them that was sealed during the cold war. These men had been paid in twenties and fives and singles. The money could conceivably be from the IRS, switching the bills up in a bad attempt to cover their tracks (which, knowing the agency as she did was not that farfetched), but that was almost giving them too much credit. If the IRS was dumb enough to give

them paper money (which she was sure they were) they would probably just give them the standard two-dollar bill.

It wasn't just in their pockets. When Rabia had finally found some keys and opened the trunk of one of their mutant cars, she found more of it. Twenties, hundreds, but no two-dollar bills. Rabia lit a cigarette, letting the calming effects of nicotine clear her mind. Was it possible that these men were not flanking the army, but were actually trying to pay their taxes? Maybe they hoped the IRS would spare them if they got paid and would let them go while the Tax Army laid siege upon their former home? But why be so sneaky about it? No, these men were armed, and the additional high-caliber automatic weapons she found in the trunk with the money was not something you took with you if you planned on surrendering. Through the hustle and fury of her last visit to Slaver City, she never found the time to scavenge those she killed as she did now. Was it possible that they all had money in Slaver City?

A puff of smoke, the taste of tobacco, a stealthy bump of cocaine. Rabia remembered details of the huge book they had stolen. Slaver City dealt with individual buyers, but a good majority of the people listed as sold were bought up by "main client." Could they be infusing an actual and legitimate legal-tender-based economy into Slaver City?

Rabia released smoke from her lungs and felt the end of her shorts tugged by Dinner. The little girl looked up at her with beautiful and pleading eyes. "Can I borrow your knife?" she asked.

"Sure, kid, have fun," Rabia said as she handed the knife over. Dinner scurried off toward the man that she had killed and began hacking off the man's finger to add to her necklace. It was adorable.

Rabia had almost lost her train of thought, and though being interrupted did not help, it was most certainly the fault

of the cocaine that she nearly had. These details were troubling, and not just as a conundrum. Only the IRS was big enough to deal in money. If the slavers thought it was useful, were paid in it, and used it, then something out there was at least as big as the IRS. What would happen if that something showed up?

This was almost not fair. Her mission was simple: save Arthur from assassination and certain death. It was not just her job to keep her partner safe, but her duty to her friend and lover. Yet bigger and bigger things kept threatening to derail that. This was supposed to be simple, yet on the way she had to dispatch a surprise attack, and now she had to deliver intelligence. The surprise attack would have been bad, but whoever paid them was worse. The IRS could deal with the slavers, the Tax Army would certainly lay them to waste, but what if "main client" showed? The list of people and things trying to kill Arthur was being updated by the hour, and Rabia hated it.

Dinner finished her grim arts and crafts. She was definitely a local; the area loved fingers as trophies. Rabia, whose caravan dealt mostly in the north before making their way here, grew up on scalps. That was a real waster's trophy. The fingers were quaint, but why not let the little one have her fun? Dinner retied the necklace before putting it back on. The child was dexterous enough at her age to kill but not to tie something behind her neck. With this done, she looked over at Rabia. "What's wrong?" she asked, and Rabia became suddenly aware that she was wearing her dreads and deductions on the outside.

Rabia took one last puff on her cigarette, then put it out on the side of the mutant car. "Nothing," she said. There was no more time. "Listen," she continued, "how about we break some rules tonight?"

Dinner looked up at Rabia with quizzical eyebrows. "Okay," she replied with a touch of excitement.

This was stupid. This went against everything she was taught. This was dangerous. "Why don't you and I go for a night drive?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Rabia's heart beat as intensely as a line of taiko drums. This could have been the cocaine. This could have been the fact that she had been up for hours with no sleep on said cocaine. Sure, and you know what? There was no way that the cocaine had nothing to do with it. But she knew the real answer: she was driving at night, and every ounce of her body screamed at the idea.

A United Wastes' caravan was one of the last remaining places where rules mattered. They were not as tightly organized as the IRS, but outside of the federal anomaly that she now worked for, caravans were likely the last places for whatever amounted to civility in the irradiated wasteland that America had become. Each caravan was a little different. Some were led by the dizzied minds of cult leaders—would-be shamans, prophets, and preachers. Others were just large family units, and still more were only loosely tied together by everyone's need for another. No matter what, though, all of the caravans followed three rules: don't trade with slavers, you scavenge for yourself, and never drive at night.

Only predators drove at night. If you risked it, you were

the most noticeable thing on the road. Driving at night was painting a target on yourself. Guess this meant that Rabia was the predator tonight.

Though the risk tonight was low, it still went against everything she was taught. With the IRS squaring off against Slaver City, everyone else was as far away as they could get. There was little chance that land pirates would pounce on her while she descended the mountain, but rationality was shit all against her wound-up nerves. Fear and loathing in the wasteland, there was nothing new here.

The ghostly ash illuminated brightly under the electric glare of her headlights. Of course, the one time she decided to drive at night and the conditions made her twice as visible. This did nothing to soothe her nerves.

By the time Rabia and Dinner had walked back to The Shark, hours had passed, leaving Dinner drowsy and exhausted. Dinner needed no help falling asleep when she got into the mutant car, which was all for the better. Rabia did not want the little one to see just how frightened she was. If they were lucky, they would be at the bottom of the mountain just before daybreak.

Bad omens and dark portents were all she saw once on the other side of the mountain. The Tax Army had advanced farther than she had hoped. She saw no lights, and no signs of life at the base of the mountain. Slaver City, however, was lit up like a dried Christmas tree, and the Tax Army appeared to be at its front door. They must have been at each other's throats for the whole day. A whole day where Arthur could have been killed in battle or taken out by one of Boyd's assassins.

Aside from the obvious consequences of the war having started, it also meant that Rabia would have to drive farther than she had planned. She was not sure if she would have the energy for it. She could push herself further with more

cocaine, but it was a greedy habit with a fleeting high. Cocaine always disappeared faster than she planned, and a salt shaker was always smaller than she thought. There were other drugs she could take, of course, but all of them had drawbacks. The LSD could keep her up, but in her state, the paranoia would surely destroy her. There were more uppers, but there was also a full day of war ahead of her. She would burn out sooner or later, why make the end result worse? She would have to ease off of the powder and settle on her coffee rations. This was the last thing she wanted to do, an absolute last resort—a caffeine addiction was a terrible habit, after all.

Dinner slept like an angel, which admittedly was a strange thing for a child to do after she had murdered somebody. It was undoubtedly not her first time.

The Shark weaved down the mountain easily. Even though she had descended this mountain twice before, nothing was familiar except for the horizon. It wasn't until she had descended it completely that she felt confident on the road.

The dark of night was still complete, and the silence that helped shroud the landscape was only kept at bay by the whine of The Shark's engine and Dinner's slight snore. Rabia's nerves were spent, her body ached, and her mind slowed. As she passed the twisted carcass of a motorcycle she had bombed so many days ago, she decided that she could put it off no longer. She needed coffee. The drug had worn off, and she felt her entire being had become sluggish. She gulped down the dark, muddy liquid from her thermos. It was instant coffee, and every bit of it tasted terrible. "Holy mother shit buckets!" she cursed after gulping down the hate-filled liquid.

Dinner stirred and woke from the sudden outburst. She rubbed her eyes sleepily then asked, "Are we there yet? I wanna see Arthur."

Me too, Rabia thought to herself. "Not yet, but we are

close. The sun should be rising soon. We'll see him if he's still alive."

Rabia was unscathed by a second attempt on her life, so the probability that Arthur was still alive was at least that good. Throughout their night drive the possibility of an assassin seeing them teased her mind and worried her psyche. Yet, they never came. Wherever the assassin was, they probably had not got to Arthur yet.

Rabia took another pull off of her wretched coffee and briefly had to convince herself that it was a better alternative to cocaine. Failing this, she knew at least that the last thing she would want to do was snort drugs in front of Dinner.

The sun had not yet peeked out from the horizon, but the sky had grown lighter. No longer was it the haunting pitch black that they had to endure and hunt under. Working hours for the IRS would begin at eight. She had at least until then before the war continued.

Dinner was content to stare out ahead while Rabia drove. They only slowed once to drive around the slaughtered Volkswagen she had destroyed on her last trip here. Once they were past that, the IRS's camp drew closer. By the time she had lit, then finished, a cigarette and taken another swig of coffee, they were practically there.

The camp had seen them. A searchlight mounted on top of a van shone on The Shark, and a warning shot rang past them. Rabia stopped the car, tore down the tarp that had protected them from the ugly rain, and stood up on her seat. After removing her IRS badge, she waved it into the air and prayed to whatever slumbering ancient beast passed for a god that they wouldn't shoot. The searchlight cut out, and Rabia slowly sat back down.

Somehow she had made it, her first night drive, and nothing went wrong. Somehow she knew that was the end of her luck, but what more could she do but go forward?

Rabia eased The Shark forward, careful not to make any sudden movements. There was still time for the other Enforcers to decide that she was the enemy in disguise. Once she came close to the van that had spotted them, she turned off the engine and waited for an Enforcer to approach.

"Are we there yet? Can we go and see Arthur?" Dinner asked.

"Yes, we're here, I just got to talk to these men first and we can be on our way," Rabia said as she drank more coffee, desperately trying to feel the energy it failed to provide to her.

The Enforcer that approached them looked down at Dinner with sad eyes but said nothing. Rabia had only worked for the IRS for a full tax season and had not seen any other children but Dinner, yet the rest of the bunker reacted to her the same way as this Enforcer. They reacted like they had all once been her.

"No one radioed about your arrival, miss. Please step out and state your business."

Rabia sighed, a noise that was mixed with exhaustion and annoyance. She took a parting sip from her coffee then placed it on the dashboard. "You can't have any," Rabia said sternly to the child as she left the car. It was good to stretch her legs, and the morning chill against her skin was refreshing and helped to wake up her tired mind. She handed her badge over to the Enforcer. "I've got special intelligence," she said. "Stopped a surprise attack to get it. *Big* intelligence. I need to talk to some top brass."

The Enforcer looked at the badge with surprised eyes, then met the bloodshot eyes of Rabia. She knew she looked like she had been through hell. There was no reason to doubt her. "It's still off time for most of the camp," the Enforcer said. "Good luck finding an ear to hear you, but you are clear to come in."

Rabia removed her shades from a pocket and placed them over her weathered and tired face. The light was still low, but they comforted her. She gave the other Enforcer a half-assed salute then walked back to the van to retrieve Dinner. The Enforcer marched back to his van, leaving her alone. She was surprised to find that the little girl was already out of The Shark, the pistol she had given her in her hand. "You won't need that here," Rabia said, her heart half-melting to see the young one so attached to the gun. It brought back warm memories of Rabia's own childhood. Rabia grabbed the coffee thermos and finished what was left in it, hoping that it would give her the boost she needed to find Arthur. Dinner watched her drink it with unwavering attention.

"Right," Rabia announced to the little one. "We need to find Arthur and someone in operations to pass on our intelligence, as we are in the operations section of camp—" Something was wrong. Rabia suddenly felt very tired. This in and of itself was not odd—she had been awake for more than twenty-four hours—but this was . . . familiar. Drunk almost. Her mind went from sluggish to slothful, and she felt her aching muscles relax, feeling almost numb.

It felt like one of her tranquilizers.

Rabia felt her legs start to give, and her head felt almost dizzy. All of this would have been pleasant if it was planned. "The . . . fuck? What the fuck?" she muttered as she caught herself from falling by the hood of The Shark. She had to force her own neck to lift her head up, and when she did, Dinner was gone. The little demon must have drugged her coffee with the tranq she was given, then ran off with a pistol.

It hit her like a freight train on rocket boosters: Dinner kept asking about Arthur. The second assassin never hunted down Rabia because she was seated next to her the entire time.

Rabia didn't know how she was paid, or why she would do

it. All she knew was that she was starting to fade and succumb to the drug.

"You Iscariot, black-hearted brat!" Rabia tried to shout but was unable to get her tongue to make any consonants. If she passed out, this was it, Arthur was dead. Good thing she still had some cocaine.

Her body did very little of what she demanded of it. She lacked both time and motor skills to do this well. She pushed herself up and off of the hood then with tremendous effort fished out the salt shaker with numb hands and violently shook the cocaine out of the shaker and onto the hood of the car. An aggressive cloud of white powder spread against the cold steel of the car. She could feel herself fade; there was no time. Rabia fell face forward against the cloud and with her last bit of effort inhaled as deeply as she could.

That did the trick.

With a jolt of energy hitting her mind like a brick through a window, Rabia's senses flooded back. It was a strange high, one that would certainly put a strain on her heart, but these were desperate times. With the edge of her hands, she quickly tried to gather what was left of the powder and had another, more controlled go at it. Her vision in one eye seemed blurred, her hands were still numb, and though her heart was beating like the wings of a hummingbird, her mind was in a fog. An upper never canceled out a depressant; the two always mixed into some unholy chimera. But she could walk now. She could hunt.

The Enforcer she had spoken to earlier came out of his van with hurried urgency, apparently having heard the ruckus she was making. "What's happening?" he asked as Rabia ran to the back of The Shark and opened the trunk.

"Never mind that!" she shouted under a mouth that still spoke in slurs. She grabbed the first weapon she came across, having no time to be picky. "I'm a goddamn *professional*!" She

continued holding the harpoon gun. As soon as the weapon touched her hands, Rabia ran toward the camp. The other Enforcer slowly went back into his van. *Good neighbor*, Rabia thought, *he knows to stay out of other people's business.*

Rabia kicked the ground and blindly set a course ahead, full speed.

This neighborhood is nothing but watch, a neighborhood watch watching the neighborhood watch for neighbors . . . Rabia's mind felt like it was sinking, the tranq had gripped it in a thick mud, and the thoughts that had bubbled up to the surface were through a dirty lens. She relaxed, and besides the sheer bloody panic that kept her running forward, she almost felt euphoric. There was not going to be another pick-me-up. Rabia had emptied the cocaine. *Goddamn coffee*, she thought. *I knew I shouldn't drink coffee. Got to stick to the neighborly drugs. The patriotic ones.* She barreled forward.

There was no sign of Dinner. The child was small, had a head start, and the camp was too big and crowded with too many places to hide. Rabia was traveling blind. She had no idea where her target had gone and had no idea where her target was going. Hell, she didn't even know what she was going to do when she found the child. She didn't want to harm her, but her plan began and ended with two words: harpoon gun. It was a good plan.

Rabia stopped to gather her thoughts, a process harder than she anticipated. At once she stumbled over herself, finding her own momentum to be a force not easily ceased. She felt sort of drunk, no, *belligerent*. Her hands felt suddenly very warm, and Rabia became aware of the pulsing veins in her arms, each twitching as her heart raced to shake itself apart. *Get a hold of yourself!* She thought with every ounce of lucidity that was left in her. *You're a good neighbor, and a goddamn patriot, this town was made for you and . . . WHAT THE FUCK IS WITH THIS NEIGHBOR SHIT?* She shook her

head, hoping that she could right herself with the motion. Her hands felt hot, she could feel the beating of her heart in her ears, half of her vision was still blurred. *You got this.*

Deductive reasoning: out to lunch. Rational thinking: soliciting a party clown for sex. Ability to run and yell: fully functional. "The British are coming!" Rabia screamed as she ran in the direction her head was pointed in. Her voice echoed back to her in angry chops. The weight of the harpoon gun suddenly felt immense and she almost dropped it. Heads peeked out of the side doors of vans and through cracks in tents. She scrambled to keep the gun in her hands as her running became controlled stumbling.

And to think, just an hour ago she was worried about Dinner's safety. Now she could barely keep a device used to murder whales in her hands long enough to use it on her. *There goes the neighborhood*, her mind offered.

The fatal flaw in her current strategy became clear once she got a grip on her weapon and her running (but hardly on herself). *Yelling gives me away.* One of the heads peeking out of a tent, a studious one likely belonging to an Auditor, spoke to her. "Who is coming?" he asked and jumped in a startle as Rabia did the same. "Shhhhhh!" Rabia hissed at him. The head disappeared back into the tent. Rabia marched on.

A lucid part of her knew that this was a doomed effort. She could not think clearly and increasingly did not understand her own motives. Was she trying to save Arthur or kill Dinner? Why were they the same, and why would she want to do harm to the precious child that drew such a beautiful picture of them together? Hadn't she wanted to display that crayon hemorrhage on the wall of her bunker? Hadn't she wanted Arthur to see it? None of it made sense, but her feet kept moving. She only took solace in that finding Arthur was probably as hard for Dinner as it was her. At least a tranqed-up woman was on an even playing field as a child.

She dropped the harpoon gun. Her feet tried to be in the same place. She fell down hard on her hands and felt only the wetness of blood but not pain.

Then she vomited. Whether through instinct, or experience, or both, Rabia pushed herself to the side—away from the vomit so that she would not drown in it.

Then there was nothing.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Dinner was safe. She followed his advice. Then, the one-legged man showed up.

Dinner was working hard that day. The bunker was safe and warm, and no one wanted to eat her. So, when Dinner was given a mop and was taught how to use it, she cleaned like there was no tomorrow. Because to Dinner, tomorrow was the least certain thing in her life. If she did a good job, maybe the adults would want to keep her.

Dinner remembered Arthur's advice well. It was anti-intuitive, it was not at all what she would have expected, but adults often made no sense, so Dinner just adopted his advice and hoped that she would better understand it someday when she grew up. He told her that if she wanted to be safe that working hard was a bad thing. He told her that they would promote her, and that she would have to work outside, where the danger was. She shouldn't be too bad at her job, but just enough that they would keep her there. Arthur seemed to have the best in mind for her. So, she followed his advice.

This was the strangest part, knowing that a man wanted the best for her. Every man she had ever met used women

and little girls. Men of the wastes treated girls like they weren't people, this she knew for a long time. It was easy to think that Arthur had motives, but he disappeared. Her life got better, and when she next saw him, he wanted nothing in return. So, she followed his advice.

She would leave spots untouched in the corners. If there was metal in the hallway, she would not polish it. She would wear her oversized uniform and clean the bunker, but she would not leave it spotless. For a couple of days, there was nothing to worry about. For a couple of days, she could relax, even play.

She could play. This was what was best of all. She did so quietly, as she did most things and had learned from her captors, but she played nonetheless. The adults still frightened her, especially the men, but when she was alone, fear subsided into fun. A woman that she worked with, and ate by (Dinner ate every day now!) gave her a plastic doll during their off time. It was amazing. Dinner had her first toy. She owned something! But then, the one-legged man arrived.

He was skinny, skinnier than anyone else in the bunker. Near death. He was riddled with tumors, and one of his legs was not real. His name was Table.

Table had just lost his leg. He had foolishly run into IRS territory without an escort and had his knee shot off by a sniper. Now he walked on a plastic leg, scavenged from a female mannequin and leather belts and constructed with poor craftsmanship. He was put to work the moment he could open his eyes, and he was *bad at it*.

Table had met Arthur as well. Arthur had taken a book from him, and Table had been captive, like Dinner, to a bad man. She felt sorry for Table . . . until he stole her doll, that is. That's when she started sharpening a butter knife. She would get her doll back.

Dinner had to work the same hours as Table, and occa-

sionally they would cross paths. She would diligently leave a hallway just slightly dirty, as she was told, and then she would see Table's work: wet, sporadic, and still dirty. Table was terrible at his job. Maybe it was the one leg, maybe it was the pain from the missing leg, maybe Table was too old and too crazy to learn his job. It did not matter. Table was the worst, and this, by comparison, made Dinner look like the very best.

She slacked off even more. Un-mopped corners became whole sections of hallways, she polished nothing, and she did her best not to try. She just wanted to be safe. She just wanted to eat. She just wanted to play.

Still, Table's poor work made hers look Olympian. Then she was summoned to Boyd's office.

Boyd, well, Boyd made sense to her. Boyd definitely acted like a man. Boyd wanted something. His mustache was funny, his seriousness almost dour, and his eyes looked like those of a very patient predator. She had seen the same eyes in her captors.

"We are very pleased with your performance. I am happy to announce that we plan on promoting you," Boyd announced to the little girl after drinking half a mug of coffee. The dreaded word, the one that Arthur had warned her about: promotion. She began to cry, and even that, like all things she did, was silent.

"Oh, come on now," Boyd said in a soothing way she did not have a word for, because "father" was not a thing she had ever encountered. "Don't cry, a promotion is a good thing. You'll be paid more, and you'll be an Auditor, just like your friend Arthur."

"I don't want to be like Arthur," she said through hot tears.

"No? And why not?"

Dinner wiped her eyes with a sleeve that swallowed her

hand. "Because . . . because I want to be *safe*," she said. "Please, please don't promotion me!"

Henry S. Boyd smiled then. It was a smile that she understood. It was a bad smile. "Maybe we can make a deal," he said.

Dinner nodded vigorously.

"Do you *like* Arthur?" Boyd asked.

She nodded once more.

"Oh, but Arthur brought in your new friend, Table. Table *is mean*, isn't he?"

"*Very* mean," Dinner said, knowing exactly where she kept her shiv.

"I think it was *pretty mean* of Arthur to bring in Table, but then again, Arthur is kind of mean himself, isn't he?"

She did not know how to answer this. She knew that Boyd was like all of the men she had ever met, she knew that he wanted something, and when men did not get what they wanted . . . She nodded hesitantly.

"I'll tell you what," he said with fingers intertwined in front of his funny mustache. "If you do a favor for me, I'll promote Table instead, and you can keep your job."

Dinner started to feel elated, she started to feel hope. "Okay!" she said, her tears dried, and nodded excitedly.

"Have you killed before?"

Dinner had a new job. It was a dangerous one, but it was a temporary one, and the faster she could get it done, the faster she could be safe once more. She could not sleep that night. She stayed up thinking about Boyd's favor.

Arthur had a mean and clever friend. This friend was sharp, she could see her killers from a mile away, and she was very good at defending herself. She would make sure that no one would kill Arthur. She would be looking for scary men. Like Dinner, she had grown up outside, she knew that men were bad. She would never suspect Dinner.

She would be assigned to Rabia, and Boyd would send a man after them, knowing that Rabia could handle him. This was so that she would suspect Dinner even less. "An outsider has to do it," Boyd had explained, "or else everyone will know that I had something to do with it, and if that happens, I can't give you your job back."

Rabia would take her to Arthur, and she would have to do the rest. She hid her shiv in the side of her boots, but then Rabia handed her a gun. Dinner was much better with a gun; guns were easy.

The hardest part? Dinner liked Rabia. Rabia did not want anything from her. Rabia gave her crayons. Dinner also liked Arthur, but as Boyd had explained to her, she liked her job even more. People died in the United Wastes, that was her first lesson in life. Bad things happened to good people, and the bad people got to live. That's just how things were. The hardest part was that she did not want bad things to happen to good people, but Dinner? Well, she wanted to live.

There was no way for Dinner to know that Boyd had no intentions of holding up on his end of the deal. She could not know that she would be banished the moment she killed another agent. She was just a desperate child who had grown up in the most desperate of all worlds.

Now Dinner was running away from Rabia. The pill did not work as well as she had hoped, but then again, Rabia did a lot of drugs. She should have asked for another one. A part of her hoped that Rabia would never get to Slaver City, a part of her hoped that the car ride would go on forever. But it didn't, and now she was hiding from a woman she had hoped would be her friend.

She had thought that she might have to hide forever, or at the least for a very long time. After breaking the pill into Rabia's coffee, and after Rabia fell down onto the car, she sneaked out and crawled under the first van that she came across. No one saw her do it; Dinner was always quiet. She waited, she held her breath. She closed her eyes. She heard the man walk back into the van above her. She waited. Then she exhaled and opened her eyes. Rabia was gone.

Then she waited some more. She did not just wait in case Rabia was still around, no, she waited because she knew that the very next thing she would have to do was kill Arthur. She waited and pretended that she was back at the bunker. She counted to three, and she scurried out from her hiding place. The motion had undone her clip-on tie. She left it where it lay.

The morning light was still dim and sleepy. The sun had yet to peek over the mountain. When they had arrived, the city ahead of them seemed abandoned, and the IRS camp was still, almost haunted looking. Now that Rabia had stampeded through the operations section of the camp screaming incoherently about "the British" while brandishing a harpoon gun at anyone foolish enough to look her way, the camp had stirred. Tents began to open, agents started to creep out. Dinner had no idea where to start, so she hesitantly went the direction that Rabia had gone.

She walked slowly through the rows of tents and kept a sharp ear for any sounds of the woman she had just drugged. There were none. It wasn't until she saw a group of men huddled around something that she knew why. Dinner was small; this made it easy for her to step through the crowd. If the men were gathered around anything else, the sight of a little girl on the battlefield—unattended, mind you—might have given them pause, but this? Well, this was not "anything else."

Rabia was sprawled across the ground next to a pile of vomit. Cocaine made her normally radiant brown face look ashen, and a harpoon gun as long as she was tall lay parallel to her, looking just as lifeless. A man in leathers, an Enforcer, squatted down beside her, two of his fingers pressed against her neck, just below her ears. His face was sullen, serious, it was the face of a man who knew the score. "Her heart's slow and palpitating," he said, then removed his fingers and lifted Rabia from under her shoulders. "Grab her legs!" he shouted to the man opposite of him.

The crowd dispersed, but not completely. They left just enough room for the two men to navigate themselves, and Rabia, out to one of the medical tents.

Dinner tugged the sides of the nearest agent's pants urgently, a sleepy-looking Auditor whose hair had not yet been combed or settled for the day. When the man looked down to investigate the author of his annoyance, Dinner spoke up the second she caught his eyes.

"What's wrong? What's palpal-tating mean?" she asked, fighting back tears, knowing already that it was bad.

"She's dying," the man said with more surprise than worry.

There were a lot of things in this world that Dinner did not understand. Aside from the fact that she was very young, she was raised to be eaten, then kidnapped from her parents to be eaten by someone else. But death? She understood death perfectly well. She understood death far better and far more intimately than any child her own age should. Her tears could not be held. Rabia was dying, and it was all her fault.

She did not want this to happen. She had hoped that she could skip this part. But it was part of the deal.

What the first assassin said about Arthur's killer coming for Rabia if he failed was perfectly true. He just wasn't aware of the details. Boyd made sure that she understood that she had to take out Rabia next. He even promised that she would

not see it coming, that it would be easy. She could have her job back.

But she did not want to kill Rabia. Agreed to it? Sure, but that was before she had met her, had grown to love her. She wanted to skip this part, she wanted to let Rabia live. The pill was only supposed to put her asleep. The pill was not supposed to do this.

For the first time in her life, Dinner shed tears of sorrow that were not silent. "I-I don't want her to—" she said through her anguish. She could only get a few breaths between each sob. For the first time in her life, she cried and someone could hear it. For the first time, she cried and everyone could hear it.

Rabia was her friend. She loved Rabia. *The pill was supposed to put her asleep!*

She suddenly did not care about her job. She suddenly did not care about what could happen to her if she did not kill Arthur. She only wanted her friend back. She begged.

She begged to anybody, to *everybody* around her. "Please, *please* don't let her die!" she spat out between painful sobs. "She's my friend." *Was.*

The agents around her, her coworkers, stood aghast in silent awkwardness. When no one moved, when no one would allow her simple request, one that should always be fulfilled, she started to run. She darted off in the direction of the medical tent, she wanted to see Rabia, to apologize, to tell her that she loved her and that she was sorry and to please come back, but she was cut short. The agent beside her, the man with the stringy and unkempt hair had grabbed her by the hand. "You don't want to go in there, little girl," he said with the final authority of an adult.

She fought him at first. He couldn't give her what she wanted, and what she wanted was selfish, yes, but it was also somehow not. Why should she listen to him? But like all of

the men she had ever tried to fight, he was stronger than her, and while her face ached with tears and her body exerted more energy than she should have left, he had barely engaged his muscles. For a split second, she contemplated taking out her shiv, but her anguish had won out. Dinner fell limp in his arms, and she cried, helpless to what had happened.

"What the fuck is happening, Ralph?" a man said behind her.

"How am I supposed to know, Rich?" the man holding her said. "Arthur's old Enforcer just ran through the camp screaming about England while on drugs holding a *whale gun* when she suddenly fell over, and now this child is bawling her eyes out!"

Even through her own grieving and pleading, even through her own loud and terrible tears, Dinner heard the only part of what the man said that was important: Arthur.

"Jesus," Richard said, "what the hell?"

"I *said* I don't know, Rich! Open your ears!"

Dinner should have known that she could not have everything that she wanted. She should have learned by now that the world was cruel and that it hated children.

"Damn, Ralph, it's just an expression," said Richard.

Dinner should have known that conniving adults always got what they wanted. She should have known not to get attached to anyone.

"It's not an expression, Richard, it's a question. 'What the hell?' is a *question*!"

Above all, Dinner should have known liking someone, no, *loving* someone, was always a mistake. People died. It was the only thing that she knew for certain about people. She wanted this to be different, she wanted Rabia to live, she wanted her to wake up, to forgive her, and she wanted to be safe. She wanted too much. Now, she could only have one of those things. She could still be safe.

"You're a dick in the morning, Ralph," said Richard.

There was no going back. Dinner had to kill Arthur next. She could at least be safe. Sad, but safe.

She tugged at Ralph's pants once more, her tears subsiding, not because the pain was leaving, but because she was a fucking child of the United Wastes. You learned to do the rest of your crying when you slept. Ralph looked once more at the child beneath him. "You know Arthur?" she asked.

"Ah, yes, I know Arthur," said Ralph.

Her face was red and swollen from tears. Her little fists were clenched tightly. Her friend was dead. She had no more friends. She had one thing left, and it was a job to do.

"Take me to him," she said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



When Arthur opened his eyes that morning, he feared the worst. When the worst did not immediately come and instead was tempered down a few levels, he erroneously let his dread pass. The worst, of course, was only waiting for the right moment. The worst is a total prima donna like that.

He had disobeyed orders, had been out of line with the highest-ranking official of the IRS (as well as the battlefield), and he had created a bureaucratic clusterfuck that prevented said official to run the war or to give orders. The surprising part of it? Arthur regretted none of it. These were not the actions of the IRS poster boy he had once been. No, these were the actions of a rebel, and of a man who made ethical decisions. Neither of those things were traits for the modern-day bureaucrat. Or well, any bureaucrat of any age, honestly.

He was preparing himself for the worst. He knew that Boyd wanted him dead, banishment did not sound out of order, and at the very least a demotion would be on the list. Whatever his punishment for disobeying Boyd and mucking up the system was, he knew that it was going to be horrible.

Richard and Ralph had left the tent to fill their coffee

rations and to stretch their legs before the inevitable hell of battle raged on. The slavers had stayed put, never daring to leave the confines of their walls. They were far more disciplined than Arthur had suspected they would be—he figured that at the very least that they would try to surprise attack them in the night—but the slavers acted as if it were a long game. They only had to protect their walls and to wait out the IRS's rations. What happened if The Colonel returned?

There was no pleasantries, there was no announcement, an Enforcer simply walked through the tent's entrance and stated his case. "Boyd wants to see you," he said, clutching a shotgun. Arthur knew better than to protest. It was off hours, sure, but Arthur had a feeling that this particular Enforcer intended to use his shotgun as soon as possible. Arthur was coming dead or alive.

The Enforcer led Arthur to the control van in silence. This was perfectly fine with Arthur. Awkward conversation with a man that could kill you was not exactly the kind of thing that he looked forward to.

The seat on top of the van was still empty, and the lazy morning light glistened off the layer of dew condensed on the van's walls. The Enforcer knocked at the van's back door. "Just the boy!" Boyd said from the other side. The Enforcer opened the door for Arthur, stepped aside, and closed the door behind Arthur as he entered. Boyd was seated, a clipboard in his hand and his coffee thermos in the other. He held the board outstretched to Arthur tentatively. He did not speak until the footsteps of the Enforcer had faded. "Sign this."

Arthur took an awkward step forward. He had to bend forward because of the low ceiling and found that the rows of filing cabinets that had been cramped inside left just enough space for his hips, but not his elbows. Boyd watched Arthur's every agonized and awkward movement forward with no

humor. Arthur took the clipboard and read the form attached. It was a simple write-up, a disciplinary form that stated that Arthur had done wrong, but with no further consequence except for maybe another write-up written in harsher language, should he do it again. That was it. No banishment, no demotion, just a figurative slap on the wrist.

"Sir?" Arthur exclaimed, unable to hide his surprise and confusion.

"It's a write-up," Boyd responded as he calmly uncapped his thermos. "Sign it."

Arthur did, then he handed the form back. Boyd took out a stamp and set both the clipboard and the stamp on his lap. "This is all that needs to happen," Boyd said with the thermos cap in his hand, "and nothing more, but let us speak frankly." Boyd took a long pull of coffee, then set it on an "x" marked off in tape on the floor. "What do I need to give you in return for the exact order that you gave to the operations manager to halt my ability to command my men and women?"

If there were space, and a way to do so without hurting his neck, Arthur would have taken a step back at this. Was the commissioner actually trying to bargain with him? Had Arthur, in his rash decision making, gotten an upper hand on Boyd that was lasting? Arthur decided that the best possible thing to do in a position like this was to put on his best poker face and act coy. "You, uh, I mean, *you* think I did something to uh, halt your orders?" Arthur said as his eyebrows shifted to find a home on his forehead that was natural. They did not.

Henry S. Boyd gave Arthur a hard blink, and his clasped hands became clenched. "There is less than an hour before the work klaxon sounds. Cut. The. Crap. Mr. McDowell!" Boyd said with unblinking eyes. "Let's get everything on the table. I could have you dead, *have wanted you dead*, if I was feeling nice, *which I never do*, I could have you and your *stupid*

Enforcer friend banished. But if I did those things, I would still have an army that I cannot command, and the biggest tax audit in our post-nuclear history to run without the ability to file paperwork. You want something, I need something. What do you want?" Boyd picked up his thermos and drank through clenched teeth.

"Nothing is off the table," Boyd continued. "Promotion, pay raise, even your bleeding-heart cause. You want something, we find out how best it works for both of us, and you tell me how to get back my army." He returned the thermos back onto its taped-off spot then clasped his hands once more. "What will it be?"

If Arthur had any idea just how badly he had cornered Boyd with his simple paper filing, he would have thought about this all night. Henry S. Boyd, the nefarious chess player from the shadows, was desperate. Arthur had all of the cards; it was time to act like it. "You killed Dewitt," Arthur said, putting his answer off to Boyd's visible annoyance. "Not literally, but you sent him, Rabia, and myself off to die. You sent out a man who delivered your coffee late out to die. You sent innocent men and women to their deaths for a *promotion!*" Arthur's voice was firm but not sturdy. There was no position in the claustrophobic van that could make him look strong, but strong is exactly how he felt. "Why in the hell should I trust that you'll hold your end of the bargain?"

"Dewitt was hardly innocent, Mr. McDowell," Boyd replied. "And I did not do it for a promotion, I did it for *power*. Real men don't kill for petty things like a position, they do it for the position's perks." Boyd straightened his tie to a single degree, then looked Arthur directly in the eyes. "Name your terms, and I'll tell you *exactly* why you can trust me."

Boyd had said that all chips were on the table, yet Arthur did not expect him to admit to his web of deceit and lies so

candidly, almost like he was bored. But Boyd did not blink. He offered no amends or excuses. Boyd had effectively taken out the air to any righteous anger and passionate speeches Arthur had planned on saying.

Arthur's neck began to strain under the odd position. He crouched down on one knee then and found his height now even with Boyd. "I want you to assure me that the slaves will make it out of here alive," said Arthur. "Now, how can I trust you?"

"You can't," Boyd answered, leaning closer, "but you have no choice. Let's say that you don't give me what I want and that I don't figure out how to fix my little paper jam. The Tax Army leaves the slaves alive, but then what? We don't have to take them. I can still order Ralph and the rest of the Auditors to possess The Colonel's mutant car fleet instead, or find the amount of back taxes in bullets or real estate." Arthur could now feel the warm, almost damp breath of Boyd on his nose as the commissioner came closer. "But I can't control the troops effectively, I can't order and react to any hidden aces the slavers might have up their sleeves. And at the end of the day, if you somehow make it out alive, I still have to worry about you complaining to Human Resources about Dewitt's death." Boyd inhaled deeply. "Basically, if you don't trust me, and I don't get what I need, we are both *fucked*, Mr. McDowell. This is the only way the slaves survive. The. Only. One."

Arthur knew that he was about to make a Faustian deal with a man who would rather organize hell than serve in heaven. Arthur knew that it was a bad deal, but he also knew that Boyd was right. The only scenario Arthur could see where the slaves walked away from this like he had hoped was the deal. "Assure me that the slaves will be freed from the slavers and that they will make it out of here alive," Arthur said. "Then leave me and my Enforcer Rabia alone. Do that, and I will fix the paper jam."

Boyd leaned away from Arthur and settled naturally back into his chair. He stamped the clipboard under his lap, then held his hand out to Arthur. "You have my word," he said. "The slaves will go free, and they will be safe. I will halt my assassination attempts on you and Rabia—"

"You are trying to assassinate me and Rabia?" interrupted Arthur.

"Don't be an idiot, Mr. McDowell, of course I do. As I was saying, the slaves will go free, and you will return to your job with only an infraction, of which I just stamped. This all goes away the moment Human Resources hears about my 'ambitions,' are we agreed?"

The work klaxon sounded like an anguished banshee chewing broken china. There was a hurried sound of feet outside. Soon it would be drowned out by the sound of gunfire.

Boyd's hand hovered in front of Arthur.

"Agreed," Arthur said as he clasped Boyd's dry hand and shook it.

"What color of paper stock should I write the orders for the slaves' continued safety on?"

Arthur swallowed a dry mouth. Boyd had somehow narrowed it down to a change of color. He briefly wondered if the operation clerk's face was still intact. "Mahogany," he said.

To Arthur's surprise, Boyd appeared to hold up on the deal, at least immediately. He turned to his left and opened a filing cabinet just enough to pull out a mahogany piece of paper. He wrote:

*ALL SLAVES ARE TO BE CAPTURED ALIVE FOR
COLLECTION (Repeat order on the hour).*

. . .

Then he handed the form and the write-up to Arthur. "File this to the operator, would you? Once done, take the day off. I don't care what you do, just stay out of the way."

Arthur took the form. Though a thousand cynical voices in his head were ready to sound the alarm and be on the lookout, a louder part of him could not help but feel elated. Without machismo, without brute strength, and with only a single piece of paper, Arthur had defeated Henry S. Boyd. And he got to keep his job!

Yes, this last point shouldn't matter. It was dumb, but he was still Arthur McDowell, pencil pusher and number cruncher extraordinaire.

He could have gloated, he should have warned Boyd of the dangers of backstabbing him, but instead, Arthur took his forms and dutifully walked out of the van. He had won, but he had won on uncertain terms. As he walked out of the van, he was happy to discover that his spine was not permanently hunched from the van's low ceiling. He walked briskly to the operator's tent. He could only deliver the form, hold on his end of the truce, and hope that Boyd did the same.

Out in the distance he saw the Tax Army advance on the walls of Slaver City. He was at once grateful that he did not have to partake in the war that day (assuming that the war did not come to him), and cowardly for feeling grateful. The crack of exploding gunpowder and the bellowed screams of a man's last breath helped to ease that guilt, however.

The morning's sun had finally risen over the mountain. Whatever signs of rain existed on the other side of the mountain from the day before had vanished, and the only cloud in the sky worked its way slowly to never touch the sun. Nothing would obscure God's view of the atrocities that would occur today. *They should have paid their taxes*, Arthur thought to himself with an acrid mix of dread and dry humor.

He hoped that his own would not be the only victory of the day.

The tent and the towering loudspeakers were not far away. In just a few steps he was inside the tent to find the same woman as the day before. No scratch or bruise on her. Maybe Boyd was not as bad as Arthur had thought, rampant psychopathy aside. He handed the form to the woman. She took it and relaxed her shoulders. "Finally!" she said. "You would think everyone around here suddenly forgot what a rainbow looked like!" They both laughed at this, neither seeming to think that a rainbow with mahogany red was an irrational expectation of nature. The operator read the form over the loudspeaker, her voice booming over their heads like a bored god. Arthur thanked her for her time and exited the tent. The slaves were safe. They would be collected as back taxes, just as Arthur had intended and hoped.

As he exited the tent, he heard a ruckus of shouting and arguing nearby. Just across from him was one of the medical tents he had seen being built when he decided to confront Boyd the day before. He normally would have ignored it—after all, "not my problem" is a deeply ingrained instinct in every post-nuclear office worker—but there was something especially feral and very familiar with the shouting. In an instant, Rabia flew out of the tent shouting a string of dirty curses behind her at an unseen doctor. Arthur's heart sang at the sight of her; he was almost star struck. But then, of course, he saw the details. She was dragging an IV drip still inserted in her arm behind her and had a very large-looking harpoon gun over her shoulder. She was covered in dirt, ash, and . . . cocaine? It was probably cocaine, this was Rabia. She looked tired, almost drunk. Her hair was nappy and her lips were cracked. She looked like she had just been through hell and stopped to see *all* of the attractions. "Rabia!" Arthur

cried out to her and ran to close the horrible distance between them.

Rabia's head spun right at Arthur's direction, and her rage was washed over by excitement. They embraced, despite the threat of becoming tangled in Rabia's IV bag, and kissed. Of all of the things that had tried to fight to the surface of his mind—*I missed you, I love you, are you okay? Why are you here?*—only, "You've got cocaine all over the lens of your sunglasses," triumphed. It was not the sort of romantic reuniting he imagined.

"Is *that* why one eye is so blurry?" Rabia asked with honest astonishment. "This is *exactly* the kind of romantic moment I imagined," she continued as the tent's doctor rushed out.

"You need to lay down!" said the doctor, an older gentleman aged in liver spots on his head and a jowl that would make a dog envious.

"You need to let a goddamn professional woman do her patriotic duty, you hateful sawbones bastard!" Rabia yelled as she affectionately touched Arthur's hip. Her tone at once dropped to a rational level. "You're alive," she said as a smile graced her face. "She didn't get to you!"

"What? Who?" Arthur stammered.

"Dinner, the crazy hell-larva you saved. Boyd hired her to assassinate you, I thought it was too late, I thought I failed."

"Of *course* Boyd hired a child to kill me," Arthur replied as the doctor pleaded in vain for Rabia to return to the tent. "What happened to you?"

"Later, long story, the brat is still out there hunting for you. I'm okay," she replied.

"YOU ARE NOT OKAY!" the doctor yelled in desperation. Only Arthur made eye contact with him.

"Come on, I need to get something more 'rational' to deal with Dinner," Rabia said, nudging the harpoon gun behind

her, then yanked the IV drip out of her arm with a flinch and let the hose fall to the ground.

"Just promise me you'll keep her hydrated!" the doctor tried one last time. Arthur agreed to ease things over.

"I have a canteen back at our tent," Arthur said.

Arthur grabbed Rabia's hand then, happy to find her squeeze his back affectionately. He led them back to his tent. He tried not to jump to conclusions. Had Boyd already gone back on his promise, or had he not yet had time to rescind the order to Dinner to kill him? Was it better to hold up on his end of the deal in case it was the latter and not give Boyd a reason to break it, or was it better to assume the worst? Arthur elected to at least go back to the tent and confer with Rabia. She would know what to do. She always knew how to handle the situation, even if her solutions were extreme enough that hyperbole fell flat.

The journey to the tent held a companionable silence, broken only by well-founded paranoia and the sounds of violence in the distance.

Arthur parted the opening to the tent. Inside, Arthur was happy to see that Richard and Ralph had returned. She was so small that he did not notice her at first. Dinner stood just beneath him, a gun in her hand and her finger on the trigger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The men did not know what to do with her. They found the tent empty. They led Dinner there, saying that Arthur was there, that he should be around. He was not. This was okay. She was tired, hungry, and *devastated*. She could wait. The men assured her that Arthur would probably be back, so she sat down and cried silently to herself. The men did not notice. When the klaxon rang, Ralph headed to the exit, only to be stopped by his cousin.

“It’s safer to have an army between us and the slavers. We should stay here, they won’t notice the difference,” Richard said to an offended-looking Ralph. If Ralph wanted to protest, he didn’t, and instead turned around and joined the pouting little girl.

Despite her best efforts, she could not get Rabia out of her head. She could see Rabia on the ground in her mind. She still had one of the crayons Rabia gifted to her in her pocket.

What was worse? She now had to kill Arthur, though she didn’t want to. Dinner’s life had improved so much since she met Arthur. Without meeting him, she would not have met Rabia. She didn’t want to lose another person she liked, that

she cared about, but what could she do? Boyd had made things clear, Boyd was an adult, adults ruled the world. She briefly thought of running away, but images of Rabia flooded back to her, and she suddenly found that she was paralyzed with grief.

The cousins, Ralph and Richard, paid her little mind. They argued about duty and pride and safety and, well—Dinner just didn't care. They argued about stupid stuff, and she sat and waited.

It happened sooner than she thought it would. She did not have to wait long. Arthur parted the tent's entrance. He did not see her. Now was her chance! She quickly pulled the gun out aimed it at Arthur but then—Rabia! She was behind Arthur, alive. That was it. The little girl couldn't take any more emotional roller coasters. Her friend was somehow alive and that was all that was important. Her silent crying became thunderous once more and she leapt up shouting, "*Rabia!* I'm sorry!" and every inch of her shook with excitement and sorrow and guilt. She ran past Arthur and jumped straight into Rabia. She clutched her close. She let Rabia's shorts absorb her tears.

Rabia tactfully responded, "What the *fuck?*"

"I thought you were dead," Dinner said through broken sobs. "I thought I killed you and I'm sorry. I'm *really really sorry!*" Rabia did not fight her off. They were opponents just an hour ago, but right now they were just an adult and a child, and one needed comforting. Still, Rabia took the gun from out of Dinner's clutches and eyed Arthur. She let the gun slide out of her hand easily.

Before any of the adults could say anything, Dinner launched herself off of Rabia and around Arthur's legs. Rabia moved to stop her, but Arthur put his hand up. "It's fine," he said, then looked down at her, "she's fine, she's just a child."

"Easy to forget when you are on a drug cocktail trying

your best not to pass out and save your boyfriend,” Rabia said as she wiped cocaine off of her lens.

“Boyfriend?” Arthur asked, smiling before Dinner stabbed him in the fucking leg with her shiv.

Dinner had once been told that the pain that one feels when they have been stabbed is not immediate. That your adrenaline, mixed with shock, do much to temper the pain. She was told that this is the body’s way of allowing you to not focus on what would normally be immediately debilitating to give you the option and the chance to function and escape the situation. She was told that often the pain is dulled until the shock wears out.

This, apparently, was not at all what being stabbed feels like. Arthur looked like he was present and could feel in agonizing detail every centimeter that was pierced. He screamed, and panic erupted in the tent.

Rabia picked Dinner from off of her feet, grabbed the knife from out of her hand, and pulled her away from Arthur as he screamed in terror, pain, and shock. Ralph elected to scream with Arthur, which helped the situation not at all. Then, bravely, heroically even, Richard fled the tent and ran away, leaving the situation of screaming and blood far behind him.

“That was pretty smart,” Rabia said to her as she held her outstretched in her arms.

“Why are you praising her?” Arthur screeched as blood soaked through his pants.

“It’s so the man with the mustache thinks I tried,” Dinner said with an even tone. “I don’t want to kill you anymore.”

Ralph stared at Arthur’s wound and continued to scream.

“Oh, that’s *good*,” Arthur said sarcastically. “I am *sooo glad* you did *this* instead!”

Rabia put her back down on the ground and shrugged.

"It's what I would have done. She's a child, children fail at things all of the time, it's believable," said Rabia.

"Ralph!" Arthur shouted while blood stained his pants. "STOP SCREAMING!"

Ralph complied, but his eyes never left the shiv. He pointed at it silently with a shaking arm.

"I see it, Ralph, *thank you!*" said Arthur as blood ran into his socks. "Can somebody *help* me?" he asked.

"It's not that deep," Rabia replied. "She didn't hit any arteries or organs, just cover it and put down some pressure while I find something to stitch you up with."

"We *just* came from a nearby medical tent," said Arthur. "Let's just go there!"

Ralph stayed silent but let his arm fall to the side. Color began to return to his face, but all in all Dinner thought that he remained utterly useless.

"Why should we go back?" Rabia answered Arthur. "The doctor is a soulless bastard pervert. I'm not going back there!"

"Wait, he's a pervert, what did he do to you?" Arthur asked while he undid his tie.

Rabia shrugged, fished her pockets, pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled. "I don't know, probably."

Ralph came to. "*Probably?*"

"You heard me, pencil pusher! I was passed out, so how would I know? Hand me a sewing kit."

Ralph found a first-aid kit, and after dousing his wound with alcohol (something Arthur was *not* quiet about), she stitched him up while Dinner watched and Ralph pretended to.

"So," Arthur said, whining in pain while Rabia was halfway through, "there aren't going to be any consequences for her stabbing me?"

Dinner's heart sank.

“Nope,” Rabia replied.

Richard came back in the tent, his eyes wide in terror. He parted his lips to say something when the loudspeaker beat him to it. “All Enforcers retreat and regroup. Repeat: all Enforcers retreat and regroup.”

Richard pointed behind him with his thumb. “You guys need to see this,” he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Arthur was the first one out of the tent. The commotion outside immediately distracted him from his blood-soaked sock and the sharp pain in his leg. The camp was flooded with Enforcers and Auditors. Men and women scurried back and forth—like ants after their nest had been kicked in.

“What’s happening?” Rabia shouted to another Enforcer as he hurried by, but no one seemed to know. They were following orders, he said, nothing else. Nearby, the medical tents were being filled with dehydrated and sunburnt slaves, now free. A few men marched bloodied slavers bound in zip ties past Arthur, and the sounds of war had ceased. It looked like they were victorious, it looked like they had just won, but if that were true, why had they been ordered to retreat?

No one had any answers, but everyone was looking for them. The loudspeakers stayed silent.

Six Auditors had spotted Ralph and hustled to him. A few of them eyed Arthur. This made him nervous, but he guessed that the gaze they gave him was a grateful one for saving their lives. They gazed at Rabia too, but this was probably mostly out of curiosity and horror. The six men gathered around

Ralph and one of them spoke. "Reporting for duty, sir!" an Auditor in the crowd said. "We've been looking everywhere for you, sir!"

"Ah yes, ah . . ." Ralph stammered.

"What's happening, sir? Why have we been ordered to retreat? We just breached the walls. The slavers are surrendering!"

This was odd news. Good news, but in context totally alien to common sense. Arthur's elation over the assured victory had no idea what to do with the dread it had to partner with. Regardless, Arthur had promised to help Ralph, to make him look good, and he had mostly failed at it. Well, that wasn't fair. "Failed" was too kind of an assessment. Arthur had completely botched the job. Ralph was not some rival coasting unfairly in the office, he was just a man who looked up to Arthur, and maybe even resented him for being what he could not be. Ralph was just a man who had survived, and though he did so cowardly, he was still one of the very few who did so without harming or taking advantage of other people. That was worth respect. So, Arthur stepped forward. "He was just sending me to find out," he said.

"Yes, ah, go and do that!" Ralph said with little confidence. There was nothing Arthur could do about that.

If no one around them knew what was happening it was because no one else had seen what Boyd had atop his perch. That meant that whatever it was that Boyd had seen to give the order to retreat was far away. "I need binoculars," he said to the group of men that had surrounded them. No one moved.

"Give the fucking man what he wants!" Rabia said, breathing cigarette smoke from out of her nostrils like an angry ebony dragon. Arthur had missed these outbursts from her. Arthur had missed *her*. The moment they were out of the way and safe, he would need to get her alone.

An agent who had kept the binoculars from the day before reached into his mailbag, fished them out, and handed them to Arthur.

Arthur moved to the nearest van, Rabia following just behind him, and left Ralph and his men behind. "I need to get to the top of that van," he said to Rabia. "I have *no idea* how Boyd has been getting atop his."

"Give me the binoculars and boost me up there, I'm lighter than you," said Rabia. Arthur handed them to her then crouched down and intertwined his hands for her to step on. She placed her foot in his hands and he lifted her up with ease. Neither of them said anything about it, but if they were being honest, they were both surprised that Arthur handled it as well as he did. In no time she was on the top of the van. Just that small amount of height had made all the difference. "I can see the whole camp from up here," she said. "Good spot for checking out the horizon too."

Arthur watched as she removed her shades then pressed the binoculars to her face. She looked in the direction of the city. "What do you see?" Arthur cried down from below, hands cupped over his mouth.

"Jesus! I'm *right here*, Arthur!" said Rabia. "I'm not suddenly a million miles away just because I'm above you. No need to yell like a lunatic!"

Arthur suddenly became self-aware of all of the yelling he had done at Boyd just the day prior.

"Some smoke," she said. "No fires as intense as we lit, though. Bodies of the dead, from both sides, mostly theirs. I don't see anything unusual . . ." She took the binoculars off of her face, then scanned the horizon without them for a moment, looking slowly from side to side. "Wait . . ." she said as her head paused at something. She then pressed the binoculars against her eyes once more. "I see dust . . . and exhaust . . ."

"Motorcycles?" he asked.

"Maybe," she replied. "Too far away to tell, but if you think it's The Colonel, the dust cloud is too big for just his psychotic sleigh." She lowered the binoculars and looked at him. "Did he leave?"

"Yeah," Arthur replied. "He left Slaver City yesterday in that same direction. The rest of the slavers stayed put."

"Listen, Arthur, last night I picked off an ambush, killed about ten men."

"You're *horrifying*."

"Thanks, I missed you too, G-Man. This ambush, they snuck around the mountain, I think they were going to come down it behind our army to flank it. While I was sifting through their stuff, I found something unsettling." Rabia climbed down the van and handed the binoculars back to him, then lit a cigarette. "They were paid in money, Arthur, real money."

Arthur clicked the top of his pen and noticed for the first time that his hands were sweaty, then shuffled his feet. "Do you think Boyd paid them?"

"No," she replied. "He's a dumb evil Nazi goat fucker, but I don't see why he would attack his own troops." Arthur looked at her with a cocked eyebrow. Boyd had tried to get them killed twice in as many days, and just the day before was fully prepared to sacrifice twelve Auditors and an Enforcer just to silence him. Rabia rolled her eyes. "At least not at such a large scale. Besides, what would that accomplish? No, I don't think it was Boyd. The slavers were paid in everything except two-dollar bills."

Arthur was not convinced but decided to leave it alone. "So what?" he said. "You think these people in the distance paid them?"

"Yes, I think those people out there may be The Colonel's 'main client.'"

It had been written on every page of The Colonel's business ledger. Without exception, each page simply had the words 'main client' scrawled across it. Whoever they were, they were responsible for purchasing the grand majority of slaves from The Colonel. Whoever they were, they had to be a large organization to need to own that many people.

"How big of a group do you think it is?" Arthur asked.

Rabia took a long drag off of her cigarette, then yawned. Arthur did not know how long she had been passed out for, but it certainly did not count as sleep. "They look at least to be as large as our army, judging by the size of the dust cloud. Hard to tell at that distance."

No sooner was Rabia done talking did the loudspeaker boom into the atmosphere once more. "All Enforcers line up on the north side of camp, defend at all cost." The operator repeated the order twice more, and the camp, which was mostly settling by the time Rabia had jumped down from the van, became a rushed ecosystem once more. Enforcers ran toward the direction of the dust cloud and lined up in a defensive formation. The only ones that did not move were the Auditors and the slaves. Arthur looked at Rabia, hoping that she would not part with him just yet. She smiled. "I'm taking this one out of your own book, but technically this is my day off."

The two returned to the still confused and awkward group of Auditors that they had left behind. Arthur approached Ralph, noting that Richard was nowhere to be seen. Without his cousin whispering in his ear, Ralph might try to do something to prove himself. Arthur was not sure if this was good or bad. They explained what Rabia had seen the night before and what she had seen now. Ralph looked no more confident than he had just minutes ago, before Rabia climbed the van. Arthur was ready to do what he could to help him.

"Everybody listen up!" Ralph cried to the group of men. "Arthur here knows better than I do; most of my decisions have actually been his."

"We know," a man in the crowd exclaimed, "that was pretty obvious!" The rest of the men muttered in agreement, a few of them kicked at the dirt, none of them looked at Ralph.

"Okay," Ralph said, "that's fair, but look, I'm just saying let's cut out the middleman. I know it goes against protocol, but I'm just going to do what Arthur says, so let's all be honest and just listen to Arthur, okay?" Ralph turned to a stunned Arthur. "I don't know what I am doing, I'm pretty sure you don't either, but at least you don't hesitate to do what's right. There is another army coming, what do we do?"

Arthur was not prepared for this. Arthur wasn't even sure if he wanted the responsibility of leading. Sure, he had basically been in charge all along, this only changed the formality of the situation, but he could barely live with himself for the choices he had made already. "That, uh, that is against protocol, sir. You are the manager you—"

"Cut the shit, Arthur!" said Rabia. She looked at the growing dust cloud in the distance, then stomped out her cigarette and stepped toward him. "Your plan worked. It got the slaves freed, got the IRS to do something that was right and just. You're a natural G-Man, but all of your *STUPID FUCKING* decisions are made when you follow protocol." She placed her hand softly on his shoulder. "When you follow orders, when you do as you are told, *shit goes down*. You want to make the right decision? Ignore what the fuck your clipboard tells you and go with what your soul wants."

A single Auditor started slowly clapping at this. "No-no-no!" Arthur yelled at the man. "She's on drugs, please don't clap."

Rabia looked Arthur in the eyes and stood on her toes so

that she was level with him. They were bloodshot from a lack of sleep, dehydration—but they were not lazy, glossed over, or pinholed from drugs. She also did not respond to him with cursing or snark, or even death threats. Rabia was being serious. “This organization could do a lot of good, but good men like you need to step up to get them done.” She removed her hand from his shoulder, then brought it up to the tip of her cap in salute. “What are your orders? What should we do?”

The Colonel had gone to fetch his main client. The slavers knew that they were coming but surrendered and gave up their slaves. Boyd was preparing for an attack and had taken the leash off of the Auditors that now surrounded him. Arthur had the full confidence (however misplaced) of his friends and colleagues. Boyd had promised Arthur that the slaves would be protected but had also forced a little girl to try and kill him. Boyd could not be trusted. All of this, all of these loose ends tied up into . . . what?

Arthur didn’t know. He had no master plan. He just knew that the freed slaves needed to be protected. “Rabia,” he said. “Go tell Boyd about The Colonel’s main client. The bastard needs all the information he can get about who we may be up against.” Rabia smiled wickedly, then ran toward Boyd’s control van. Arthur turned toward Ralph and the others. “Protect the people we freed. That is your only order. They are unarmed bystanders. Keep them safe.” It wasn’t much, but it was all he cared about.

“Ralph,” Arthur continued. “You and I are going to the front lines.”

“What?” Ralph protested. “I know I just said you should be in charge, but we are horrible fighters, Arthur!”

“I know, but there are people here we need to protect. People *I need to protect*. Aside from the hundreds we just freed, there is also your dumb-ass cousin, my girlfriend, and a little girl that I once promised would be safe and now isn’t.”

"Okay, so one," Ralph replied as the others dispersed and headed toward the slaves. "Richard will stay *far away* from danger because he's related to me. Two, Rabia seems like she can protect herself better than any of us ever could. And three, *that little girl stabbed you like ten minutes ago!*"

"Why did you put me in charge if you are just going to argue with me?"

Ralph looked down at the dirt. "Sorry," he said. "Because honestly, you are a better man than me, and I kinda hate it." Ralph sighed, then looked up at Arthur. "I'm not sure if you're a better leader, but you are a better man."

Arthur clicked his pen. "I'm not a better man," he said. "But I am a better bureaucrat." And at that Arthur patted Ralph's back companionably, realizing that this was probably the first time either man had seen each other for what they were, and not as petty rivals, or role models, but as friends.

Only a few Enforcers had failed to make it out to the side facing the advancing threat, and currently Arthur and Ralph followed them to that side. Arthur knew that the Auditors, who could barely fire a gun, would not be much help in the front, and he desperately hoped that none of them would have to protect the freed slaves. Hopefully no one would breach the front line. The men and women ahead of him, however, were different. These were trained fighters, most of them veterans and survivors. They were the IRS's answer to fighting off the madness that the United Wastes bred. Whoever was approaching them, whoever The Colonel had fetched to save his city, they were probably not prepared for the only organized military force still left in America.

Well, that's what he hoped.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Rabia approached Boyd's van like a wolverine approaches anything: in a straight line with no fucks to give. This man used a little girl's fears to try and kill the man she loved. The only reason she did not kill him where he sat was because he commanded the only army keeping the slaves safe. She was livid with hatred, but hers was a cool anger. She knew that killing Boyd would be cutting the head off of the Tax Army. She would have to wait—and wait she would.

Boyd was perched atop the van sipping coffee, his focus squarely on the incoming group on the horizon. Rabia gleefully wondered if she could fire the coffee out of his hand with the harpoon gun. She kept her distance; the man wanted her dead as much as Arthur.

"Hey!" she yelled to get his attention. "You filthy cheap-jack swine! We need to talk!"

At this point, Boyd was not as offended by the sudden interruption in his work. This was the third time that someone had approached him without an appointment, and he was not at all surprised to find that it was Rabia, Arthur's former partner, that was hurtling abuse his way. "What do *you*

want?" he said with binoculars still pressed to his eyes. "I do *not* have time for this."

"I don't give a fuck what you have time for, you grisly soul-ripping geek! I have information that *you* need about *them* out there!"

Boyd lowered his binoculars and said nothing. His eyes widened in impatience. Rabia took her cue.

"Here's the story, you spineless and rotten mouth-breathing fascist! I spent my life reading horizons and their threats. That group out there is at *least* the size of our army and well equipped enough to justify using *actual US currency*! That last part should scare you."

"Why should that be unusual? We live in the United States, after all," Boyd replied before drinking some of his coffee. "At least we can finally audit someone properly. Is that all, Ms. Duke?"

It should have been.

"Fuck *NO*, that's not all!" she said. "That is not my only warning. I have seen some ravenous, puss-filled limp dicks out in the wastes, but you take the goddamn cake!"

Boyd had enough of her abuse. His facade had finally fallen. He stood up from his seat, leaving his coffee at his feet, and towered over her on his pristine white van. "YOU CANNOT SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT!" His voice cracked in anger as spittle sprayed out from beneath his mustache. "I AM YOUR BOSS, YOUR EMPLOYER! I am in charge! I can fire you! WHY DON'T YOU CARE ABOUT THESE THINGS?"

Rabia smiled wickedly at his reaction. *Finally*, she thought, *I was getting tired of talking to a robot*. With lightning-fast reflexes, she cradled the massive harpoon gun and fired it. The harpoon hit the thermos squarely in the center and continued on its path, leaving a tail of rope cord behind it. The impaled thermos arched over the van and landed some-

where out of sight. Boyd's hands shook, his mouth opened but allowed no words or scream. She squared her shoulders. "I said I have a warning for you, tax man," she said with a calm voice. "There is *nothing* you can take away from me that matters except the people I care about. You *will not* find someone who can kill me." She lit a cigarette and let the smoke obscure her face. "If you ever lay a finger on that little girl or Arthur, I will practice trepanation through your goddamn beady hateful eyeballs and scramble your brains with a rusty ice pick! But only *after* I give your urethra five extra exit holes with it."

The back of the van opened, and slowly Boyd's assistant crept out. "GO BACK INSIDE!" she yelled at the man. He did. Boyd slowly sat back down in his chair.

"You want to fire me?" Rabia asked. "Good, do it, I can survive without the bunker. You want to put a hit on me? By all means, I look forward to it, it'll help me kill the time picking off your idiots. But you *do not* touch what is *mine*."

Boyd's voice was low, but calm. "Arthur and I have a deal—"

"I don't give a fuck what you told Arthur!" she interrupted. "This is our deal and it boils down to this: do not fuck with me or mine. Got it?" She did not break eye contact and instead started reeling in the cord from her harpoon. As it traveled across Boyd's feet (who sat paralyzed in his seat), she watched as his eyes followed his impaled thermos and half-expected him to reach down and grab it. He did not.

With all of his power, and his sinister maneuverings, she knew what Boyd really was. He was a coward. He sent people off to their deaths instead of doing it himself. He manipulated children, which wasn't even impressive because they were the easiest people to manipulate. He stayed in the back of his army and couldn't even shout the orders himself. He was always at least one person removed from his dire deeds.

He surrounded himself with a shield of civility, posh rules, and societal expectations. They kept him in power, they allowed him to rule, but that shield also insulated him. He had been in the bunker for far too long. Now, Boyd sat down. "Got it," he replied.

Rabia reeled in the last bit of rope, a chore that at this point she finished to save face, and picked up Boyd's speared thermos. She poured out what little coffee remained out of its new hole. "Coffee is such a filthy habit," she said, still dusted with cocaine.

Boyd stayed completely still, his neck merged with his chin. Rabia did not think it was possible to see the man look any more ridiculous, but, well, there he was, doing exactly that. His knuckles were pressed white against the arms of his seat, and his belly rose as he inhaled deeply. "You're fired," he said simply then exhaled.

"No *shit!*" Rabia said, wondering if it was worth the effort to dislodge the thermos from her harpoon. After some thought, she decided that the harpoon had peaked—she would never fire it again in a more satisfying way. This seemed right, so she dropped the weapon and gave Boyd a wide grin.

It was at this moment that an agent arrived with the same air about him as a man who walked in on his parents having sex. "Um, sir?" the agent said meekly.

Boyd turned his head slowly to the man, his chin still pressed hard into his neck. "Yes?" Boyd said at a level that was barely audible. "Yes?" he tried once more. Rabia crossed her arms and held her cigarette between her lips.

"Uh, we, ah, we just got a radio transmission, sir, from the approachers," the agent said, carrying a clipboard in his hand. "They did not have the right paperwork codes, but I thought you should see it?" He finished with an inflection as if it were a question. The man walked over to Boyd to hand the clip-

board to him, and when he realized that he couldn't reach him (and that Boyd was not about to make it any easier for the lad), he read out loud what he had written down. "They, uh, they said 'good morning, happy to have found you.' That was it, sir, that's all they said."

Curious and curiouser, Rabia thought to herself, not able to parse why The Colonel's clients, *his reinforcements*, would be so friendly. Maybe they were mocking them? Maybe it was a tactic, show them how unworried about their forces they were? Boyd, however, reacted more dramatically. He stood upright at once and turned to Rabia. "You said they had US currency?" he asked her.

"Fuck you, you fired me!" she said, arms still crossed and a smile still cut across her face.

"Then you are unfired!" Boyd blustered.

"What if I don't want to come back?" she teased.

"Did you or *didn't you?*"

Rabia took her time, she took a drag off of her cigarette, then looked up at the paper tiger she had properly tamed. She nodded, and Boyd climbed down with all of the grace of a man who had never stretched in his life. *How does he get up there?* she thought.

Boyd's demeanor had taken a 180. He was elated, giddy even. He walked up to Rabia (who had uncrossed her arms, ready for a fight) and outstretched his arm and offered his hand. "Brilliant!" he said with a genuine smile that gave Rabia the chills. "Brilliant! Well done! You outsiders are crass but worth the dollar!" Rabia suddenly found herself shaking the man's hand. Reality had gone out to lunch. "You are rehired, you are reassigned to Arthur, the child can mop the floors. I don't care! This is historic! Tell whomever you want about Dewitt. No one will care after today!" He let go of her hand. Their roles had suddenly changed. He walked past Rabia and fired a finger straight up into the air. She sincerely believed he

was about to holler "huzzah." But instead he declared, "To the radio!" as the agent with the clipboard rushed behind him.

Just as quickly as the agent had come, Rabia was left alone. There was nothing to keep her company but herself, the corpse of Boyd's coffee thermos and used-up harpoon gun, the cowering agent still hiding in Boyd's van, and the stale, dead wind. "What the fuck?" she said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



A sea of Enforcers lay in front of Arthur and Ralph. Many were shoulder to shoulder, and line after line of men and woman stood in rows, facing the north. Facing the approachers. The Tax Army was sandwiched between newly parked vans on each side, to cap off and wall off the ends. A few vans were scattered in front to prevent (or at least slow) any attempts of their approachers to mow them down with their vehicles. The first row wore ear protection and had settled on crouching on one knee, rifles out and aimed forward. The second row stood behind the others and settled their own rifles on the shoulders of the first row to steady them.

Arthur had immediately doubted his plan the moment that he had ordered it. Arthur and Ralph were not soldiers. They would likely be no help, could actually be detrimental even. Yet, he could not sit idly by when so many people had to be protected. He was ready to die for his cause just the day before while on the way to Slaver City, and that had not changed.

Oh, he didn't want to die for his cause, to be frank, he would much rather live, but dying for the sake of others was

something he was prepared to do. That did not mean that he wasn't about to piss himself out of fear, or that he didn't think that what he was doing was dumb as hell.

The two had opted to stay behind the last line. They were not noticed. It took Arthur a minute to realize that Ralph was looking over the heads of the Enforcers. "Do you see your cousin?" Arthur asked.

Ralph simply shook his head with sunken shoulders. "Wasn't really expecting to," he admitted. "My cousin is a coward."

Chatter was light around them, most of the Enforcers were hyper-focused. This had the effect of making both Ralph and Arthur seem louder than they were and made Arthur extra self-conscious about his words. He thought about what Ralph had just said and edited what he wanted to say out loud in his head, trying to find the best way to say what he felt near a group of people that were professional bodyguards and soldiers. He sighed then realized that it was no use. What could be said now could be the last that was said to each other. Why edit it down? "Your cousin did the things that he did because he loves you," Arthur said finally. "He just wanted to protect you, it's all he cared about, but maybe now he knows that there is nothing he can do. Maybe now he knows that he can't protect you anymore." This was met with a snide snicker from a man ahead of him, but no more. Ralph looked over at Arthur. "Thanks," was all that he said. He did not need to say any more.

Out in the distance they could see squat, but wide trucks. They were traveling in rows, spread wide, ignoring the road. Their vehicles had to be sturdy to handle the United Wastes off road like that.

Ralph fished in his back pocket and pulled out a wad of two-dollar bills. "What do you say, Arthur? One last round?"

Ralph was referring to their bet. When they were cubicle

mates, Ralph would bet ten dollars each time Arthur went out into the United Wastes for an audit and would bet against Arthur's survival. Arthur offered Ralph a wan smile. "Deal," he said, fearing that it would be his last words.

The cloud of dust and exhaust behind their approachers lightened and began to settle. Had they stopped moving? The Enforcers remained alert and tense. A few of them lay belly down on top of some of the vans in pairs, a sniper and his spotter, holding binoculars and scopes up to their faces. "All have stopped except for one!" a spotter announced.

The loudspeaker sputtered to life then, and the crackle of feedback thundered across the dry, windy air. A few Enforcers jumped at the sudden noise, Arthur included. "Hold your fire! Repeat: hold your fire!"

This didn't make any sense. Arthur had to see. He looked at Ralph. "Ready to do something stupid?" he asked.

"Aren't we already?" Ralph retorted.

Arthur grabbed Ralph's shoulders from behind and started pushing him forward. "What are you *doing*?" Ralph said with a scintilla of panic rolling off of his tongue. He resisted, but very little. Arthur ignored him.

"Supervisor coming through!" Arthur yelled as he aimed the two of them forward through the rows of Enforcers. "Coming through, supervisor!" Arthur stopped at the second row, now having a clear view ahead of him. Ralph looked like he needed to scream. The Enforcers beside them, now pushed to the side, looked as annoyed as Ralph looked scared.

The trucks, each a deep green, glistened under the sun. Arthur pulled the binoculars out. The detail that he saw behind his lenses were not much better. But he was able to spot the truck that was moving toward them. It was a green Humvee with a flatbed. The hood of the truck had a single white painted star on the front, and an American flag fluttered in the back.

The US Army. They would have the currency, the resources to match the IRS. But, it couldn't be. The US military could not possibly be The Colonel's main client. It added up, but it did not make any sense. Had the IRS, the last federal agency on the planet, finally made contact with another survivor of the former United States government? No, no that was impossible. It had to be raiders, the Humvees had to be scavenged. The military, just like everyone else, was bombed out of existence during The War.

"Prepare for exchange," the loudspeaker commanded before repeating.

The Enforcers shuffled in place. Arthur was glad to know that he wasn't the only one who didn't know what that meant. "It's . . . It's the Army," Arthur said to Ralph, not sure if he believed what he was saying. He pulled the binoculars up once more and gazed through them. The single Humvee was closer now, he could actually make out the details of figures. Two men sat up front, wearing green fatigues and solemn faces. The truck bed in the back looked empty, except for a single head that looked out to the side. A head with a grotesque wattle.

Arthur watched the truck with his binoculars until it too came to a stop thirty yards away. Close enough to make them nervous, yet far away enough that when the men left their vehicle, pulled The Colonel from the truck, and started walking toward them, it seemed to take forever. The driver, a skinny young man with a crew cut walked behind The Colonel, gun out but pointed down. The Colonel walked forward slowly, his hands and feet in chains. His hateful stare had locked in on Arthur immediately, and once there it never wavered. Beside The Colonel was an older man that looked like he had been the product of a linebacker who had mated with a Viking. He towered over the others with a face like baked Play-Doh. White hair had been shaven down into a

crew cut and made for an awkward backdrop to cauliflower ears. His uniform was neatly pressed, collared, and decorated. He waved to the agents, actually waved in a friendly manner with massive rings on each finger. Then, he smiled.

"Holy *shit*!" the man with cauliflower ears said with smiling eyes as he approached. "The IRS turned into 'this man's army.' Who would have thought?"

The man approached Arthur and Ralph, supposedly because they were the only two wearing ties. He offered his hand to shake, and Arthur suddenly found his own hand engulfed by the man's giant paws. The shake was firm but friendly. "General Franklin Oswald, Army! But, please, call me Franklin," he exclaimed with a wink as he shook his hand enthusiastically.

"Um, uh . . . Arthur McDowell, Internal Revenue Services."

"This is amazing, gentlemen," the man said, his glee suddenly spreading from one Enforcer to the others like a disease. "The IRS, we almost didn't believe him," he said, pointing at The Colonel who remained silent but focused his terrible gaze at Arthur still. "We thought we were the only part of the government left!"

"Us too!" Ralph exclaimed, mirroring Franklin's joyous demeanor.

"*Incredible*," Franklin said. "We put 'The Colonel' over there in custody the minute we found out you fellas were trying to collect back taxes. We respect the workings of government, he's in your guys' jurisdiction, course *the boys* just had to see you all for themselves." He was all smiles. The rows of Enforcers relaxed bit by bit and the collective was almost celebratory. Franklin waved the other man to him and said, "Hand him over, lieutenant!" with the same practiced disposition of a mall Santa giving out gifts. The lieutenant nudged The Colonel forward.

"Take him as a show of faith," Franklin said. "We'd love to share camp with you tonight and celebrate once we get word from your higher-ups. Can you believe it?" Franklin began to chuckle, his face rosy. "Together we can piece this broken country back together!" He raised his hands upward at this, praising the sky.

The lieutenant handed The Colonel over to a couple of Enforcers beside Arthur, then stood at attention beside Franklin. Franklin smiled wide. "We'll wait back with our boys for the official invitation," he said as he took a few casual steps back.

The Colonel spat in Franklin's direction. "Traitor," he said under his breath. Franklin responded with a smile and a wave.

The Enforcers did not need to force The Colonel forward, he complied easily enough. Arthur did not wait for Ralph who seemed content to take part in the group's sudden celebratory mood. He followed the Enforcers to where they were taking The Colonel. Arthur had questions. Questions he feared the answers to.

The Colonel noticed immediately that Arthur was just behind them. "Come to gloat, son?" he said with no humor.

"Why did your men give up?" Arthur said, ignoring the question as they walked.

"I told 'em to the minute they saw our client on the horizon," The Colonel said as they walked past the rows of Enforcers. "Told 'em that they'd sort this all out and free 'em with our products." The Colonel spat again before Arthur was fully caught up. "Fuckin' backstabbers, but I guess ya'll have been in bed together since before The War."

They passed the last row of Enforcers. Seeing The Colonel fall so far from his usual terrifying pomp and elegant cruelty should have been the highlight of his day. They had freed the slaves, shut down Slaver City with little casualties,

hell, they just made contact with whatever was left of the US Army!

"You shouldn't trust 'em," The Colonel said as they moved forward. One of the Enforcers escorting him laughed mockingly at this.

"I don't," Arthur said, and he could feel The Colonel's puzzlement without looking at him.

"Why's that, boy? You finally listening to me?"

He watched as the tyrant moved with labored steps. "No," said Arthur as he stopped in his tracks, "because they buy slaves."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



It was a familiar scene.

While those around him celebrated in mirth and relaxed, Arthur was doing paperwork. The only difference now was that his work was actually urgent.

Once The Colonel was in custody, the rest of the day was spent processing the slavers, counting the slaves as their “assets,” and figuring out what else they had to take from the city to make up the difference in due back taxes. Arthur welcomed the work then; it took his mind off of other dour things that he had no control over. After a few further exchanges over the radio, Franklin and his men approached the camp and set up their own. By sunset, the two remnants of the United States government had mixed and a celebration of sorts started once the IRS was off hours. Fires were built, stories were told. The two groups mingled and freed men and women (and a few children) who didn’t need medical attention danced in their new-found freedom. Night fell. Arthur did his research.

Richard had been found “guarding” their tent while Dinner used every bit of Ralph’s paper stock she could find to

draw the darkest, most grotesque pictures she could scratch out with crayon. It made Rabia melt. Arthur had no idea why.

Rabia, Arthur, Ralph, Richard, and Dinner sat around a fire of Rabia's making just on the outer edge of the camp. Rabia was paranoid that Boyd would change his mind and set the fire up where she did in case they needed to escape. No one objected. Richard sat quietly, his shame visible on sullen eyes and worry lines. Arthur suspected that this was an often-enough occurrence. Ralph, however, smiled and repeated, "Can you believe it? The US Army!" every ten minutes as he and Rabia shared a handle of whiskey. Dinner slept curled up next to Rabia. And Arthur? Paperwork.

Rabia's mood seemed as sour as Arthur's. She passed the whiskey back over to Ralph who was already red in the face from intoxication. "Can you believe it?" he said once more.

"YES, GODDAMN IT!" Rabia shouted. "This is nothing to celebrate!" she continued.

"What are you talking about?" Ralph said through slurred syllables. "The day's been saved! Dinner gets to stay in the bunker, no one here died, you all get to work with each other, *and* we found the US Army!" he moved the bottle abruptly then spilled some out with the quick movement. "What's the problem?"

"The *problem*, you pencil-necked rancid shit . . ." said Rabia. "Is that the army you are so proud to have found was buying up the slaves. You never trade with slavers or those who deal with them. It's one of the only rules of the road that matters."

The two of them had drank equal amounts of liquor but Ralph was far more inebriated than Rabia. She still hadn't slept, had passed out and suffered from heart palpitations, and somehow was still going. Arthur just knew that she made a deal with the devil. It just wasn't possible otherwise. Ralph waved away Rabia's response and then passed the bottle over

to Richard who drank in silence. "The slaves are freed now," Ralph said. "What does it matter? One of the soldiers was telling me that they bought them because they were draft dodgers—"

"*Everyone* is probably draft dodger to them, Ralph," Rabia said, cutting him short.

"Yeah, and everyone to us is guilty of tax evasion," Ralph countered. "They buy up slaves for their draft, and we raid people for a budget no one uses. Just 'cause we are the better of two evils doesn't mean that we aren't evil."

Arthur set his paperwork down and settled closer to Rabia. Richard offered the whiskey to him, but Arthur waved it off. Arthur watched the fire lick at the air, doing his best to parse what he was thinking.

Before they had settled down to the fire, before the army and the IRS mixed with freed slaves as captured slavers sat in their own cages, Arthur had returned to Boyd's van.

It was empty then, as Boyd who was uncharacteristically pleasant was off discussing their future with Franklin. It was off hours, and Boyd's assistant and his personal Enforcers had gone off to join in their share of the party. Arthur snuck into the van, unhappy to find that he had to assume the uncomfortable posture that the van demanded once more, and he opened Boyd's file cabinets. There was much there. Boyd was beyond meticulous and had brought far more documents than he could ever need for the raid. Arthur grabbed what he came for. No one paid him any mind as he traveled the camp with his clipboard full. His clipboard was always full.

Richard handed the bottle to Rabia who drank from it voraciously. She was still dusty and dirty, and under the poor light

of the fire, it became an honest guessing game to tell the difference between cocaine and ash. Unlike Arthur, she was comfortable being dirty, a necessity of surviving the United Wastes. Arthur and Ralph would occasionally adjust their ties or try to brush off something permanent on their shirts. Occasionally he would pick the seam of his pants upward, peeling it off his legs from the dried blood of his stab wound.

Rabia passed the whiskey back to Ralph and cleared her throat from the alcoholic bite. "If you think this 'family reunion' of yours is not going to wake from a dirty hangover, then you're either blind or complacent," she said. "As a supervisor, you are going to have to deal with processing those former slaves, look them in the eyes, and then tell me that our raiding is just as bad."

Arthur debated on whether he should say it then, if he should just come out with his findings, but he waited. He was still not sure if he wanted to hear it aloud.

Arthur was likely the only other person on the planet who thought that Boyd's mobile archive was something that didn't need questioning. Tax law was complicated, you couldn't remember it all—he tried, it was a colossal task. Bringing it with you to reference seemed perfectly rational to him. But the mobile archive was not complete, and Arthur, fearing discovery, took a pile, which he felt was a good approximation of what he was looking for. He was looking for old information, something from before The War. Most of it did not pertain to what he was looking for, unfortunately. It wasn't until he had skimmed half of his pile that he found something close to what he was looking for.

Ralph took a swig of whiskey. The difference from such a

small amount was visibly noticeable on Ralph. His head swayed from side to side and he held the bottle by the neck at an odd angle. "You're a bitch," he slurred at Rabia. Arthur prepared for the worst. He knew that Ralph had never seen her wrath properly, a spectacle that would make Poseidon self-conscious. It usually ended in damaged groins or raging fires.

But Rabia laughed it off. "A bitch who's right!" she said.

Ralph passed the whiskey off to his cousin. When Richard waved it away, Ralph handed it back to Rabia.

She placed the bottle near Arthur's feet and laid a hand on Dinner's sleeping head. "Riddle me this, Ralph," she said as Arthur avoided the group's gaze. "What exactly happens when the army decides that you're a draft dodger? They may not even recognize that The War is over! That's a full and miserable life in their service."

Ralph shrugged.

In the distance, Arthur watched as a man and a woman, both freed from the clutches of The Colonel, danced barefoot around a fire. Auditors, Enforcers, and some of Franklin's men watched them with high spirits. They were skinny, sunburnt, and their faces weathered. Their clothes looked like they may have actually been crafted recently instead of scavenged like the majority around them. Whoever these two were, they were likely self-reliant, maybe tribals. Most tribals only wanted to get through the days ahead of them, surviving and living without creating harm. Now, their self-woven clothing was near tatters, abused from the terrors of slavery. Arthur had only caught a glimpse of their lives in the cages—had only lived a day of it. He could not imagine what abuse and indignity were laid upon them. These two had survived the worst, had not been sold off, and against all odds were now free. The first thing they had decided to do with that freedom? Dance. They decided to dance.

It was beautiful and chaotic and out of sync. It was as free as them. The indomitable human spirit at its most base and brilliant. If there was a slave who was previously bought and conscripted into one of Franklin's soldiers among them in the camp, not a one made it known. It was possible that Franklin had not brought any on purpose. What life would have awaited these two if not for the IRS? What would happen if the army decided to draft them? However dire, these two had dodged it . . . for now.

It took a moment for Arthur to realize that the sight of the two dancing had made him cry. He wiped his tears on his sleeve, grateful that the rest of the camp was as busy watching the two as he was. It was not his masculinity he was protecting or the embarrassment of the tears. If they spotted him, he would have to explain what he had found.

Arthur felt Rabia's afro brush up against his ear as she rested her head on his shoulder. The gesture was so affectionate and warm that it caught him off guard, but he relished it. "I'm glad you're alive, G-Man," she said in a soft tone as she grabbed the middle of his arm. "I've spent the last two days fearing that you were dead. And on cocaine. A lot of cocaine."

Arthur started to say something, stopped, then started again. "You had no idea you were delivering my assassin?" he finally said.

"She spent most of the ride asking 'why' to everything I did and drew pictures, but there were clues. I might have noticed them sober." The freed couple continued to dance. "Or maybe I hadn't done *enough* drugs," she offered belatedly. If it was a joke, neither of them found it funny.

"You worried for no reason," Arthur teased, hoping to offer some jest. "It's not like she could have killed me. She's just a little girl."

Rabia raised her head then and looked directly at him.

"Arthur, listen to me," she said as serious as he had ever seen her. "This is important because I care about you for some foolish reason, and it is something that you need to know if you are going to continue to survive." Arthur said nothing but nodded his head. Rabia continued. "A little girl can *absolutely* kill you. A little girl is not just your match in a fight, you barely match in the same weight class. Do you understand? You are the easiest man in the world to kill and it is *only* because of random chance that you haven't died at the hands of a slight breeze."

"Thanks," Arthur replied with a bruised ego.

Rabia laid her head back down on his shoulders. "Love you," she said then and cleared her throat. "I, uh, I think I love you." Her other hand reached out for his, and he held it tenderly. For a moment, both of their dread and loathing ceased.

Arthur's heart raced—he swallowed hard. "I love you too," he said and felt Rabia's hand squeeze his for just a moment.

"Break my heart and I'll—"

"Do unspeakable violence to my groin and probably lobotomize me. No, I remember. You're *horrifying*."

He wanted the moment to last. It was the first and only positive feeling and relief he'd had in the past two days. Was probably the only positive feeling for Rabia the past two days as well. But he knew that it wouldn't. He knew that he had been putting this off for too long. The couple ceased their dancing.

"I have very bad news," Arthur said, breaking the safety of silence he had coasted on for too long. Richard's head snapped right to attention, and he blinked in a panic. Ralph, drunk and stupid, had to move his own more slowly. In the distance, the sounds of mirth and celebration continued. Arthur had the attention of his friends. He breathed deeply. "I have bad news, and I'm going to need all of your help."

"What is it?" Ralph slurred.

"While Boyd was out, I robbed his van—"

"Don't talk dirty to me in front of the child," Rabia teased with her Cheshire cat grin.

"I stole some old files, dated just before the nukes were dropped during The War. I was originally looking for information on whether federal employees can be drafted, as the draft was reinstated before everything got leveled and destroyed."

"Can we?" Ralph said with wide eyes. "*That's* the bad news, isn't it?"

"I don't know yet," Arthur replied honestly. "But what I *did* find was worse." Arthur paused then to collect his thoughts. No one rushed him. Rabia picked up the bottle of whiskey and took a swig. "I came across documents for the federal budget."

"Oh Jesus, Arthur, you had me scared!" Ralph exclaimed "What? You found some sort of clerical error that nobody's corrected for twenty-six years? Who cares!"

Arthur wanted to yell at Ralph then. He wanted to shame him for never really caring about the job. If he had paid attention, if he had done his work *thoroughly*, Arthur wouldn't need to rely on dramatics to make him frightened. He held it back. Yelling at his cubicle mate would do no good. It would not fix the problem, nor would it make him feel any better. Instead, he looked out at the freed slaves, all of them now considered to be assets and a viable way to pay taxes to the IRS. "What I found was that the federal budget, which makes up what we collect, mind you, was adjusted for wartime. While everyone else was playing nice with Franklin and his men, I went through the laws and procedures that we are still bound to." Arthur stood, trying his best to contain his dread, no, his anger at the situation. He paced then grabbed the bottle from Rabia's hands and drank for the first time himself. The

angry bite of the drink matched his own. If alcohol was supposed to give you courage, he found none then. He pressed on without it.

"The US military was allocated 60 percent of the budget then," Arthur said. "That means that we have to give up 60 percent of all that we have collected to Franklin's army. All of the stored food, weapons, and goods. *He* gets the majority of that!"

Arthur took one final swig of whiskey. "That means that once we process them, 60 percent of those freed slaves are his. He let us collect them so that he didn't have to *buy* them!"

M.P. FITZGERALD



Author's note: Land Pirates. LAND. PIRATES. Strewn
between drug use, groin malice, bureaucratic shenanigans,
and cursing on a level tantamount to sacrilege, are *Land
Pirates*. Oh lord, what have I done?

Dictated, not read -M.P. Fitzgerald

CHAPTER ONE



The car didn't catch fire until they were at a full stop. This was clearly the Witch's doing. Arthur should have known.

His military escorts were afraid, paranoid even. Superstition had spread through their minds with anxious tendrils. The Witch had done her job well, but she could be reeled in *just a tad*. The fire was now a furious blaze.

Arthur had heard of the Witch of the Wasteland. He was surprised how quickly the myth had spread, how deep the urban legend had dug in such a short amount of time. Word of her had started to spread after the first raid, but they were only whispers then. After the third, her malice was the talk of the bunker... and now Arthur's delivery was at her mercy, if mercy was such a thing the Witch was capable of.

This was the fourth delivery. After months of "processing" the slaves that the IRS had "freed" from Slaver City, official delivery of federal funds to the US Army had begun. On paper, this meant that the IRS was simply sending another government agency the taxes that had been collected and allocated for their end of the federal budget. The human element of this, however, was far more heartbreaking.

The “taxes” in question were human slaves, a commodity now recognized under “the new economy” of the United Wastes of America. These people were now officially a part of the federal budget, and now that the IRS had just made contact with the remnants of the US Army, these “funds” were being transferred to them, as per law. Half of this was Arthur’s fault.

When deliveries were not showing up, when reports of a cruel waste witch had returned to the IRS bunker, the US Army got impatient. If raiders or land pirates were stealing their goods, then the Army could do what it did best: kill them all. The IRS had failed to protect its convoy, but there were no salty feelings. They were bureaucrats, after all, the Army was happy to take over security, and the IRS was happy to let them.

The previous deliveries were shipped by an unarmed Auditor and a single Enforcer, the muscle of the IRS. Arthur’s IRS van heading to General Oswald’s base was escorted by a Humvee with two men. During the drive out, dread was the only thing Arthur could feel besides his thunderous heart. He had no idea where the Witch would strike, and the anticipation of the conflict was acidic.

The blanket of night had settled on the road. They did not stop. Oswald’s men had either never learned that driving at night in the wasteland was taboo, or they didn’t care *because no one messed with the Army*. Either way, they trucked on, and despite the ulcer that was building inside of Arthur, he followed.

When they spotted the car blocking the road, the Humvee ahead of Arthur came to a crawl. Arthur parked his government van just behind them. That’s when the car caught fire.

This was the Witch’s doing to the letter. The acrid fumes of smoke snaked upward as flames licked the car. The soldiers

were out and in defensive positions in seconds, two of them to the front while one ran to the side of Arthur's van. The slaves behind Arthur, bound by zip ties and fear, murmured their woes. The sudden brightness from the blaze ahead of them was enough to cause Arthur's sight to suffer from sunspots.

The soldier nearest Arthur pulled the van's passenger door open. "Is it the Witch?" Arthur asked before the soldier could say anything, "is she here?"

The soldier was a young man with pimples spread across his face, marking his early vintage. He wore green fatigues that were older than he was, and likely worn by at least two other soldiers before him. They were big and ill-fitting; the sleeves hid his hands. Arthur noticed his frame was skinny and his body language tense. He seemed to cling on to his rifle as if it was the last bit of rope holding him from a cliff face. He was not entirely wrong about that. The Witch was out there and he knew it.

"There's no such thing," he said to Arthur. Was he trying to convince himself or the bureaucrat? Arthur watched as his hands tensed around his rifle, and his head swiveled to his side quickly from nerves. "It's probably just raiders, sir, I need you to stay inside this van."

"You've heard the stories though?" Arthur asked, "The IRS can handle raiders, you've seen our operations on the field. Do you think we would need your help for simple raiders?"

The boy shook his head. "There's no such thing," he said with little confidence.

The fire ahead of them leapt up into the air with heat and hunger. The car's tires popped as the heat melted their rubber. Ahead of them was an inferno blocking the way, behind them a wall of night as dark as the abyss.

"What have you heard?" Arthur asked.

The boy left Arthur's eye contact, he looked over his shoulder, possibly to check that his commanding officer could not hear them. But the commanding officer was too busy searching for the witch himself to pay them any mind. "I heard that she breathes smoke like a dragon, that she litters the road with the skulls of her victims. I heard that she eats her prey." Saying it out loud made him seem more shaken.

Arthur pulled out a clipboard. He clicked the top of his pen.

"...Eats the living, breathes smoke..." he said as he transcribed it down.

"What are you doing?" the soldier asked.

"I'm being efficient. It's best to get your paperwork done ahead of time. This is a Violent Incident in the Workplace form, the IRS uses it to chronicle things like death. How did you spell your name?"

"Everything will be fine," the boy stated after swallowing his spit. "We're professionals, there is no witch."

The crack of gunfire reverberated the air.

The other soldier fell to the ground, spraying crimson.

"I suppose I should have got *his* name instead," Arthur said.

The boy raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired blindly into the night. Sweat dripped from his head as he swung wildly in random directions. When his clip emptied silence reigned the night.

"It's the witch!" Arthur said as the boy climbed into the van.

The boy slammed the door behind him and locked it. "There-there is no such thing," he said with his eyes closed. Both men ducked down behind the dash.

"Get us out of here," the boy begged.

"I can't do that," Arthur replied.

"What? Why not? Did something happen to the van?"

"No," said Arthur, "we were ordered to deliver these people—" Arthur cleared his throat, "these *funds* to your base. I'm a federal employee and you're a soldier, *we have a duty to perform.*"

"Shit!" the boy cursed, "shit shit shit! She's going to get us, the witch is going to get us!"

The back of the van shook with movement. The slaves had to be restless with fear. "We have people—*funds*, we have U.S. funds to protect," said Arthur.

The boy reloaded his rifle. "Right," he said, "there's two of us and one of her. How are you with a gun?"

"I mostly just drop them," Arthur replied with candid honesty.

"Shit!" the boy cursed once more, "shit shit shit!"

The blaze of the fire had died down but was still far from being extinguished. Night would eventually win out over the light of the fire. Darkness would be complete. The Witch was somewhere out there. The Witch was patient.

Arthur looked down at his clipboard. "Made to watch the others be eaten," he said as he filled out the form, "before being eaten alive himself."

"Will you *stop that?!*" the boy asked.

"What? Stop doing my job?" Arthur said incredulously. "I'll have you know that I very much pride myself in my duty, something that you could learn about. Aren't you supposed to be protecting us?"

They heard footsteps. The ruckus from the slaves in the back died down. Both Arthur and the boy forgot to breathe. She was out there.

The boy gripped his rifle, then slowly unlocked the door. It was now or never. He opened the door and slowly stepped outside, checking his left, then his right. When he turned once more, she was right behind him, her pistol pressed against his temple...

CHAPTER TWO



“Drop the fucking rifle, pimple dick!” said Rabia. The boy did as he was told.

“Please don’t eat me!” the boy pleaded as tears threatened the corners of his eyes.

“Get on your knees!” She screamed back as she kicked-in the back of his leg. Just as quickly as she had appeared, Rabia tied the boy’s hands behind his back as he quietly wept. She cocked her pistol and set it against the back of his head. Then she saw Arthur. “G-Man!” she said with a slight laugh and a wicked grin, “What are you doing here?”

“Are you going to *execute him!*?” Arthur asked with a bluster as he got out of the van.

“What?” replied Rabia as she lowered her pistol, “No! No, I was going to, uh—”

“You totally were!”

“Okay, fine! Yes, I was going to kill the boy, *he's the enemy, Arthur*. Don’t get all attached just because you learned his name.”

Arthur looked down at his clipboard. “Actually I never got

that," he said. Rabia lifted her gun back up. "Can't we just maroon him, Rabia? He's almost as useless as me."

"You— You *know the witch?!?*" The boy cried.

Rabia's eyes lit up at that. Her smile spread across her face and she lowered her gun. "Is *that* what you guys are calling me?" she asked, "I'm flattered." She looked up at Arthur, "Goddammit, the tin soldier can live." She then walked up to Arthur, held the back of his head toward her own and kissed him affectionately. "You're rubbing off on me G-Man," she said still holding his head.

"You're *sleeping with the witch?!?*" the boy declared incredulously. Only a slight wind and the howling of fire answered him.

Leaving Arthur's side, Rabia stepped to the boy and yanked him up on his feet by his bound wrists. "You get to live, pimple dick, now pick a direction and march. Just make sure it isn't the direction I decide to go in!" And with that she kicked him in the ass, launching him forward. The boy ran in the direction he was pointed to. He never looked back.

He was without water. Without food. Without protection and without a map. Mercy did not have to be kind.

"Help me with the slaves," Rabia said as the boy disappeared into the night.

Arthur followed Rabia to the back of the van and unlocked the back doors, revealing the frightened humanity that was locked inside. Seven slaves peered out at the IRS agents with wide eyes. Three men and four women, each of them dressed in khaki jumpsuits. These were the clothes that the IRS had supplied to them, a one-size-fits-all jumper given to them after they had been counted and processed for delivery. They had been zip-tied by the wrists and ankles and seated uncomfortably in the back of a van not meant to be sat in. These people, once slaves, then "taxes", would have been

"reenlisted draft dodgers" for General Oswald's army. All titles meant the same thing.

Rabia holstered her gun, then lit a cigarette and puffed on it greedily. "There are no such things as witches or monsters," she said trying to reassure the silent slaves, "only people, and people are the worst kind of monsters." She stepped into the van and pulled out her knife, a movement that made at least three of the slaves pull backward in fright. She went to work unbinding them.

When she was done cutting the bonds of the slaves, Rabia turned to her partner. "Arthur," she said, "what *the fuck* are you doing out here?"

Not content to see the misery of bondage simply transferred from The Colonel, the tyrannical boss of Slaver City, to General Franklin Oswald, Arthur and Rabia decided it best to free these slaves themselves. A plan was hatched. The IRS could only process and then deliver these slaves seven at a time. This had less to do with transportation and more to do with bureaucratic fuckery. Arthur acted as an inside man and radioed out to Rabia when the slaves were being transported. Rabia would then intercept and free them. It had worked without a hitch.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about the escorts? If they had been better trained..." Rabia asked as she jumped down from the back of Arthur's van.

"No time. The escort arrived only minutes before I was supposed to leave," Arthur replied. "By the time I found out I was ordered to be the delivery person it was already happening." Arthur's eyes darted from the ground and then back up to meet Rabia's. "I was terrified the entire way here that the plan wouldn't work."

The slaves slowly climbed out of the van, following Rabia, yet not quite sure how to proceed. Rabia smiled as a cloud of smoke got caught under the brim of her hat. "So you spread

terror into their paranoid minds with 'the witch' thing," she said.

"I fed into their fears," Arthur replied, "but they already believed in the witch *before* we got here!" He turned his head towards the still burning car that was only a short distance away. "How long have you been doing this?! This is *totally* not what we agreed on. What happened to luring them out with your, uh, *feminine wiles*?"

"Did you actually think I was going to do that?!" Rabia yelled as smoke jetted from her nostrils. "There is no way *in the coldest depths of hell* that I was going to debase myself like that!" The freed slaves behind them took a step back into the van. "This plan is far better than me pretending to be some half-naked damsel to lure them off of the road. I'm a professional, Arthur!"

The fires of the car still burned, the scent of melted rubber and lit gasoline strangled the air. Arthur clicked the top of his pen. "Well, now there's a myth that a powerful witch is preying on the IRS," he said. "You have the agency so spooked that they've escalated their security!" He looked down at his clipboard and read the notes he had taken from the boy. "Have you been littering the streets with skulls?"

The slaves kept as quiet as children watching their parents fight. "So what if I have?" Rabia said with her arms crossed. "It's none of your business what I do with my skulls!" An angry quiet followed. The car still burned. If Arthur was another person, she would have thrown something by now, but she pulled deeply on her cigarette and uncrossed her arms. "It wouldn't have worked long term anyway," she said with an even tone, "either of the plans would have come to this. Oswald will send out even more next time, and Boyd is obviously suspicious if he sent you."

Arthur looked down at his clipboard but read nothing

from it. He clicked the top of his pen twice as his shoulders deflated. "I know," he admitted. "What are we going to do?"

The IRS was too big to fight, especially with just the handful of people resisting them. And now? They had to fight the Army too.

"Excuse me?" a woman said climbing out of the van, "are you going to put that fire out?"

Rabia shrugged, "Why?" she asked.

After the slaves had all walked out of the van, Rabia led the group on foot. Arthur had not seen what Rabia's operation had looked like since they parted, about a week after the war on Slaver City. She was excited to show him what she had been up to. The walk was silent, and as they traveled further away from the glow of the fire only the sound of footsteps could be heard.

They walked for hours before they came across a small clearing. Makeshift tents made of tarps and junk had been set up in a circle, all of them empty. Rabia halted the group. She set about disarming a length of tripwire then turned to the slaves, "Follow me single file into the camp, we're surrounded by claymore mines." She laughed heartily then and turned to Arthur. "Blew up a coyote suffering from radiation poisoning the other night while my brain was soaking in LSD. I was convinced that I had murdered my spirit animal." Arthur apparently failed to see what was funny. "It was hilarious!" she reassured them.

Once they were past Rabia's deathtraps, she led them into the camp proper. Arthur was the last to enter. "Listen up people!" Rabia announced. "This is a temporary stop for the night. Tomorrow you will be back on the road because we do not drive at night. I will take you to a new settlement, whether or not you choose to stay there is your choice, you are free now." The mood amongst the people had lightened dramatically. "There are enough tents here for each person,

how you decide to divide them is up to you but the one in the very back is mine." The freed people thanked Rabia profusely.

Only two of the slaves, both men, had chosen to bunk together. The rest were alone. Rabia grabbed Arthur by the hand and led him to her tent. "I'm surprised you built this many tents," Arthur said before they entered hers.

"A free woman needs solitary walls of her own," she replied simply.

The inside of Rabia's blue tarp tent was exactly what Arthur should have expected, so Rabia stood inside with no shame. There were more guns than comfort, and her mad eccentricities had been peppered in between. Besides the occasional coyote skull and drug kit, there was a taxidermied peacock standing majestically on top of a steamer chest labeled "escalation". It was an organized mess. *Arthur's meticulous brain must be reeling in horror*, she thought.

"Er, uh, where did you find that?" Arthur asked, pointing at the peacock.

Rabia paused and squinted at the bird, "I have no idea..." she said with an ominous tone. "I woke up with it after a bender." She put her cigarette out and removed her boots, moving towards the center of the tent. She then turned around, and her brown eyes softened as she smiled. She grabbed his hand. "Come on," she said sweetly, "share a blanket with me."

There was much to discuss. Their plans were fucked, and she had to think of a way to get Arthur back to the IRS, but there was always tomorrow. At that moment, Rabia could not get his clothes off fast enough.

CHAPTER THREE



It was hard not to think of last night's raid as their last. Arthur knew that their efforts to free the slaves before they made their destination would not be indefinite, something Rabia was more vocal about than he was... Yet neither of them had thought it would have ended so fast. Though the seven freed slaves ate with renewed spirits and relief, Arthur's breakfast was somber and quiet.

The sun rose over the landscape revealing the land's barren and dead nature. Once, the area was covered in trees, the only sign of humankind being the concrete road and the telephone poles that followed it. Once, there was a difference between the trees and the poles. Once, the trees were alive with all the meaning that held, while the poles stood dead—but had utility. Now each was just dead and without purpose. If trees never seeded here again and humans lived on, would they know the difference between the two, beyond a simple aesthetic? Arthur did not know, but the more time he spent outside of the bunker the more concerned he was with the future of his species.

It was easy to get wrapped up in the selfish desires of the

IRS bunker. Promotion, pension, the extra coffee ration, these were as far ahead as anyone thought. But now Arthur stood side by side with people he had helped free not once, but *twice*. Now Arthur worried if his actions mattered. His and Rabia's short resistance to the machinations of the IRS and the US Army had yielded results, but would they be lasting? The only place Arthur knew of with safe walls and lasting food was the IRS, and it had counted these people as an inventory. Would none of this matter if these seven died, or were captured shortly after? It was hard to say.

While this futile thinking was new to Arthur, he knew that it was a form of the abyss that Rabia had grown up with. Once they were done eating directly out of canned goods (everything from corn to dog food) she was all business. Arthur was grateful for her direction.

With the early morning new, Rabia seemed confident that no one was on the road yet. She told him that raiders and land pirates were usually late to rise due to their hangovers from motor rum or rampant cannibalism. Only caravans woke this early, but they were likely to stay away from the area after spotting Rabia's fire the night before. "The IRS and the Army are each a day away in either direction," she said, "We have that much time before either thinks something is up." They made the trek back over to the van the same way that they came: in a single file line and silent.

Once they were back at the van, the sun's rays had turned from blood orange to yellow. The painted sky had settled to a dull blue. The slaves returned to the back of the van and Rabia drove it off the road and in the general direction of their camp— slowly. The van was not equipped for a speedy off-road excursion. She explained to Arthur, who sat up front next to her, that she was using the IRS's vans as a form of payment to the settlement for taking on more souls. The settlement would drain it of whatever gas was left and sell it

to caravans or the more amicable land pirates and would then transform it into a makeshift hut. In exchange, the slaves could stay if they wanted and Rabia would get rations and medicine. The settlement was a small trading hub for those passing by and had a weak farming attempt.

Arthur fought off the urge to audit them; there was no way that they were paying taxes. That was none of his business any more, but still...

"They are a Yesterday's Saints cult," Rabia said keeping an eye on the ground ahead of her. "They always want to talk about the apocalypse like it hasn't happened yet and frown on fun." She took a drag on her cigarette and turned the van to avoid a large rock. "*Fun*, of course, meaning drugs, sex and just about anything I'm passionate about," she said, "*Not* paperwork and line queueing." Arthur did not respond to the light jab at his personality. "Still," she said, "good people, if not a little crazy and prejudiced." Arthur gave a half-hearted laugh, then stared ahead. "You're quiet..." Rabia pointed out.

"Yeah, sorry," said Arthur, "I'm just worried." Worried about their operation, worried about how she would respond. He said none of these things out loud.

Streams of smoke rose into the air just ahead, and the outlines of old vans and cars, now converted into shelters, dotted the horizon. "Don't worry about it, G-Man," said Rabia, "I have a plan. Let's get these people to the settlement first, we'll figure out what's next later." She brought the van to a stop near a rundown cherry picker. The old machine was rusted with the occasional patch of paint still clinging to its metal corpse. The neck of the cherry picker was extended halfway up, and a shoddy handmade ladder ran down against it. It was being used as a watchtower. At the top was a man in a dirty and tattered collared shirt and black necktie carrying a hunting rifle. "Look, Arthur," Rabia said pointing at the guard, "these maniac bastards dress like you!"

The guard descended his post while Rabia rolled down her window. He walked up to Rabia's side with a practiced frown. The sun had aged him ten years older than he was, making his skin leathery and hard. What hair he had left was thin and bleached. "Mornin' heathen, seven more?" he asked.

"Good morning to you, Elder Rose, you pious cheapjack asshole," Rabia replied, "seven more and this van, except this time I'm keeping the gas, both what's in the tank and what's reserved."

Elder Rose leaned against the van, not blinking an eye to Rabia's cursing. "No gas means no rations," he said.

"Fine by me."

"Pull up when you are ready to trade. Say, do you have time to talk about our Lord and—"

"Nope," Rabia said eyes forward as she rolled the window up on Elder Rose and pulled the van closer to the settlement. Once the van came to a halt, she and Arthur exited it and opened the back doors with Elder Rose by their side.

"Welcome to Smithton," said Elder Rose with a smile. "Stay as long as you like, if ya have a workin' hand. No one here will force ya though." And with that, the former slaves stepped out of the van to see freedom for at least another day.

Rabia entered the back of the van and exited with two full containers of gas. "We'll siphon off the rest in a minute," she said as she led him away from the others. Arthur followed her just two steps behind.

"Did he work for the IRS?" Arthur asked.

"No, they all dress like that," Rabia replied, "and they all wear smiles until you do something *fun*." As they passed through the small settlement they were met with suspicious eyes. The townsfolk knew Rabia by sight, and though they had a deal with her, Arthur could tell just by their disposition that it was one that they only tolerated. Rabia smoked

without a care, a habit that likely set these people on edge. More than once a settler turned his back on Rabia and went back inside of his makeshift hut. Before they arrived at whatever destination she was taking them to, a child darted out of a rusty van, surrounded by a white picket fence. The small thing pointed her finger at Rabia accusingly and yelled: "She took our peacock!" before her mother rushed her back inside.

"Don't make eye contact with the little maggot," Rabia said under her breath as she put on her shades.

At the very back of the settlement was *The Shark*, the mutant slaver car they had stolen from Slaver City, resting under the shade of a hand-built canopy made of a tarp and junk. "The best thing about the Yesterday's Saints," Rabia said, "is that you can leave your drugs unlocked around them." She opened the trunk of the car and placed the gasoline canister inside. "Not your guns though," she admitted with a frown. "I think they were crazy for guns even before The War."

Arthur watched as Rabia inspected the old red convertible. It was in better condition than when they had found it. she had polished the buzzsaw teeth in front and had removed the cage. "Let's get to brass tacks here," she said leaning her slim figure against *The Shark*. "Boyd's on to us?"

Arthur had wished that this conversation could have been put off just a little longer, but it was time to face the truth: *they were fucked.*

"Yeah," he said clicking the top of his pen. "I'm pretty sure that's why he sent me on this one. The Army is getting worried about their 'funds' being stolen too, which is why they sent the last minute escort."

"We were lucky that they were greenhorns," Rabia admitted. "They are just going to escalate security from here."

Arthur kicked at the dirt. Every step that they made to do the right thing was somehow getting them further from their

goal. He took a deep breath. "We can't give up," he said aloud, more for himself than for Rabia.

"Hell no," Rabia agreed, "Those swine don't get to own people, not as long as I'm still sucking in smoke."

Arthur blocked the sun with his hand and peered back at the settlement. A woman they had just freed ran to embrace a man from an earlier raid, happy tears running down both of their faces.

"Is there any way the settlers will help?" asked Arthur, "You said they like guns."

Rabia smiled but shook her head, "Those guns are strictly to keep their collection of wives safe from raiders and to keep them in their collection. This is as far as they will help, and as far as I will let them." She stamped out her cigarette on the side of *The Shark* and exhaled a thin ring of smoke. The two stayed silent in contemplation as the smoke ring rose before disappearing into the air. Rabia crossed her arms and grinned, "Besides," she said, "I have a better plan, or at least one with a more long-term solution."

Arthur perked his head up and met Rabia's eyes. "Yeah?" he said.

"If the feds are going to escalate," Rabia said, "then we need to do the same, but tenfold. We need to overreact to such an extreme that it will force them to consider whether it is worth the effort. At some point the resources spent to wage an all-out war will far exceed the value of these slaves." She pulled off her cap and ran her fingers into her wooly 'fro. "We just need to force them to make a practical business decision." Her wicked smile found its familiar place on her face.

"It's a good plan if we had an army," said Arthur with his arms crossed. "General Oswald might pull out if it got too expensive. Him handing The Colonel over for free inventory instead of shoring up his allies tells us he is at least calculated

when it comes to bookkeeping." He cleared his throat, "But the IRS will always follow protocol, even if it is futile." It was hard for him to fight off the misplaced pride in his voice at that last part. "We don't have an army though."

Rabia placed her cap back on her head and pushed herself off *The Shark*. She took a few energized steps towards Arthur. "How do you feel about land pirates?" she asked.

Raiders. Land pirates. They were signifiers of a technicality for the same thing. Arthur's father was murdered by one of these savages, having been sent out to take a census of the anarchy that was now the United Wastes. If he was being honest, *not good at all* is how he felt about them. The IRS had avoided them so far (or been avoided by them), but the rumors of the motorized gangs and their blitzkrieg ravages had preceded them. They were pirates. On land. The positives were hard to find.

"Hear me out first, Charlie Brown!" Rabia said, likely intuiting Arthur's displeasure. It was certainly written on his face. "Most fleets of land pirates used to be caravans," she said, "most of them got into their violent ways as an overreaction to raiders, or went out for revenge against slavers and never stopped their rampage. Don't get me wrong, they aren't your tax-paying patriot, but they go by the same rules as most caravans. *Especially* the not trading with slavers rule. Land pirates *hate* slavers."

Arthur wanted to protest. He wanted to point out that they were drug-fueled, batshit insane murderers. Then he remembered who he had shared a sleeping bag with the night before. Right now, there were no good choices. They could continue doing what they had been doing and get caught or killed. They could give up, which was not an option, or they could befriend some of the most ruthless men and women of the wastes and have a small chance of succeeding. "This is not ideal," he said.

Rabia removed her sunglasses, exposing her almond eyes and grabbed him by the hands. "We are already in league with a polygamist apocalypse cult," she said. "We are already against the last remainders of a legitimate government. You are a good man, Charlie Brown, but *this*," she said motioning toward the world around them, "*this* is not a good world."

Arthur sighed. He knew that she was right. If he wanted the slaves freed, if he wanted to change the IRS from the outside, he needed an army. "Okay," he said, "but for the record I think it'll get us killed."

"Probably," Rabia said with a light shrug, "but the Saint's cult here has been trading with a fleet of pirates for at least a month now. We at least know that they won't kill us on sight." She dropped his hand and walked over to *The Shark* and pulled out a large map of the area. "I've been tracking them when I haven't been patrolling my railroad camp, or when I haven't been freeing the slaves. They have been driving around in a giant circle, as far as I can tell. Elder Rose suspects they'll trade in a day or two. We just need to wait and be buddy-buddy when they show up."

"How do we know they will help us?" Asked Arthur, "What's in it for them?"

"A chance to raid a moving target and spite some slavers should be enough," Rabia said, map still in hand. It was still hard for Arthur to fully accept that that's what the IRS had become: Slavers. "We show up with an offering of gas, tales of Boyd's bullshit, and esperits up to our groins and it should all be groovy." She folded the map back up and fished out a cigarette, "Then we get you home with tales of savage land pirates and continue our operation."

Shit.

He couldn't put it off any longer. "About that..." Arthur said with all of the confidence of a man in front of his noose. "I quit my job, I left the IRS."

"What?!" Rabia said in mid-flick of her lighter. Her cigarette remained unlit.

Arthur did not wait for her mind to catch up. "I couldn't do it, it just wasn't *ethical* Rabia." He said as he started to pace. "Boyd's a hero there, he's claiming that he knew all along that we would make contact with the US Army. Even if I went to HR with proof that he got Dewitt out of his way and *manipulated a child to kill me* they would wave it away! Believing that he can do no harm!" His pacing was frenzied, Rabia's cigarette hung limply in her mouth. "I could justify being there for our cause, but then he assigned me to deliver the slaves personally!" He stopped abruptly and fished for his pen. "That was the last straw. I told them that when the delivery was done that so was I." He took a deep breath and looked Rabia in the eye. "But now I can be out here with you, now we can fight this side by side."

The calm before the storm. Rabia pocketed her lighter, then her loose cigarette. "You quit the IRS?" she asked. "*Ȳou*, you quit?! Cazart! No wonder you've been so quiet!" Arthur nodded. "GODDAMMIT G-MAN!" she screamed. More mothers in the distance ushered their children indoors. "We needed you on the inside, how are we going to get info on the deliveries?!"

"Don't worry," Arthur said with both of his hands up, offering peace. "We still have Ralph on the inside. Ralph will do a fine job."

CHAPTER FOUR



Ralph was doing a terrible job. No—no, that was not harsh enough. Ralph was doing an embarrassingly terrible job of epic proportions.

The IRS bunker was in a flurry, agents darted from one end to the other like angry hornets in a drowning nest. The floors had not been properly cleaned, the concrete walls were wet from perspiration. Paperwork had not been done. Efficiency was a memory.

To be fair, things had been this way since the IRS had brought all of their “collected taxes” back from Slaver City. The addition in population, in a bunker barely meant for its current size, was burdensome. Oh, the IRS had enough resources to feed everybody, having hoarded a generation’s worth of raiding in their surplus, but mid-level management had nowhere to put the slaves. Mid-level management: Ralph Siemens.

Things went better when Arthur was around. He had the demented mind to file, categorize, and keep track of all of the minute and devilish details needed to keep things moving.

Hell, Arthur had done half of the work for Ralph pro bono. But now he was gone, and Ralph was *freaking out*.

The US Army was entitled to sixty percent of the IRS's tax surplus as per wartime emergency budgets passed just before the near-total nuclear annihilation of the planet. Boyd insisted that most of this be delivered to them in the form of "live calories", i.e. people. A single slave's average worth was 126,000 calories. That had to be subtracted from the grand total of their inventory. People ate things, however, which meant that every calorie consumed by a slave had to be subtracted from their worth as that was an overall loss in inventory. This meant that every slave had to be reevaluated after lunchtime and the entire surplus as well. On top of that, Boyd wanted to retain a percentage of slaves to be hired so that the IRS could expand its operations. This meant that each slave's value in calories was measured before they had a job interview. Lunch naturally happened after the interview process. It was maddening.

Oh, also add the bloody sociopathy to it all and you got a job that Ralph was not only bad at, but one that he morally wanted nothing to do with.

...And if things weren't bad enough, the custodial staff had decidedly dropped the goddamn ball and let everything go to shit.

Lunch was an hour away. He had that much time to process as many slaves as he could for the day, knowing that they would all be sent back in line the next day while Operations waited for a confirmation of the last delivery. He had made himself "unavailable" for most of the morning by hiding in one of the men's bathroom stalls. He wanted to claim that this was "his part in the resistance" and that it was a calculated move to throw a wrench in Boyd's grand inhumane machine, but in all honesty, it stemmed mostly from laziness.

Was laziness a virtuous trait if it was done for the good of a revolution? Ralph told himself yes.

The thing that nobody ever gave Ralph credit for, however, was just how good at being lazy he was. Have too much paper work? Ralph used to flub the details on a form by photocopying the original request for a job in different paper stock. He'd turn the photocopy back in when his bosses were angry for the late work, then blame the holdup on receiving the wrong form. Instead of auditing people in the field (and being murdered by them), Ralph would scavenge for an equivalent tax payment and take the rest of the day off drinking with his cousin Richard. The real signifier of a successful slacker in a post-apocalyptic office job, however, was doing *just enough* work. But only when someone was watching. The key was to work your ass off in spurts when the higher-ups were around and then martyr yourself with complaints of your hard work to your peers.

Unfortunately, this was the part of the day where he had to do *just enough* work.

Ralph exited the men's stall and slackened his tie just enough so that it looked like it had come undone itself through a flurry of hard work. He looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, and prepared for the plunge. This was the part he hated the most.

He left the men's room and quickened his pace. Lined against the walls were queues of slaves looking placid and disheveled. Enforcers and the occasional Army grunt walked the corridors with rifles out, keeping the "inventory" orderly. Today's plan was a repeat of yesterday's: blame the hold up on a nonexistent meeting, then threaten a write-up to a random underling for not moving things along.

As Ralph moved his way up the corridor an agent in a white shirt, black tie, and black skirt made eye contact with him. Her blonde hair was frazzled, likely from the stress of

the day, and she clutched a pile of multicolored forms to her breasts. Her eyes went wide when she saw him. "Mr. Siemens!" she yelled as she moved in his direction. Ralph avoided her gaze. "Mr. Siemens, sir!?" she continued, still trying to get his attention. When she was just a foot away, he knew that he didn't have a choice.

"Yes, what is it?" Ralph asked.

"There's a problem, sir," the woman replied.

"There is always a problem, be more specific."

"Yes sir, sorry sir," she said as they continued to walk. "It's the custodial staff, sir!"

Dirt did not hide well under a fluorescent sun. The bunker's concrete walls and chessboard tiling were two shades darker than they should be. They showed the wear of abuse from the constant flow of extra people. Ralph was not the cleanliest of men, but he had never seen this level of sordid grunge growing up in the bunker. It was a constant complaint from the auditors. "What about them?" Ralph asked.

The blonde woman stopped in her tracks, forcing Ralph to turn around to continue the conversation. She lowered her voice, "It's a possible HR complaint, sir."

Shit.

Everybody feared a federal HR worker. Even Boyd, to a certain extent. They were capable of holding sensitivity meetings, blasting the bunker's ethernet with site-wide training materials, and were fully capable of doling out banishments. There had not been a proper banishment in two years. It was a spectacle Ralph wished he had not seen. For most of the bunker's citizens, banishment was a death sentence. Few were capable of surviving in the radioactive wastes outside the walls. *And to think*, Ralph thought, *Arthur chose to go willingly...*

Ralph changed course. He adjusted his tie and fixed it. He forgot to breathe for just a moment. He shared in the blonde woman's terror. "Right then," he said. "What's the problem?"

"He hasn't gone to HR *yet*, the janitor that is," she said, "but it was a violent incident with another custodial worker."

Ralph blinked hard. "Miss, I just came back from a war not too long ago where 'violent incident' meant death. Please be more specific."

She parted her forms just a tad from her chest, and read the top of one of them silently. After a moment she bit her lip and returned her gaze to Ralph. "I think it's just best that I show you," she said.

Ralph did not like the sound of that.

The woman led Ralph to the nearest stairs. They descended into a deeper level of the bunker, both of their movements at a near jog. The queue of slaves wound down to even there. They crossed the large cafeteria hall, came to more stairs, and they descended even further, to the personal quarters. The only area empty of slaves. The problem? Well, it was not hard to miss.

Sprawled out on the floor was a very skinny man, nearly emaciated. Tumors riddled his body, and mop water soaked into his work suit as he lay in a puddle of it. He had one leg, and he was screaming.

"She robbed me!" yelled Table. "She robbed me of my joy!"

"Who?" Ralph said at the spectacle, "took what?"

"The rotten child robbed me!" Table screamed as he writhed legless in a pool of dirty water.

The blonde woman looked down at the scene, "Another janitor, by the name of Dinner cornered him with a makeshift knife," she said, "and robbed him of his prosthetic leg."

Ralph extended his hand to Table and helped the man up. The stench of still water assaulted his nostrils. "I'm so sorry this happened," he said in his most diplomatic tone. Table was an outsider, he likely did not know of the bureaucratic structure that he resided in. It was more than likely that he

did not know what HR was. That was good. "We will get it back to you right away," he said.

"*Her*," Table said with wild eyes, "not *it*, *her*, she took her!"

"What?" the blonde woman said.

"My *dolly*! She took my dolly!"

"Huh?" was all Ralph managed.

"The rotten child, she took my leg, but she really wanted my doll! I know she has her, she had to go straight to her!"

"Calm down," Ralph said as he offered a broom for Table to lean on, "we'll get your doll back, okay?"

Table wheezed, his mad eyes darted between the woman and Ralph, "Promise?" he asked.

"Yeah, of course," Ralph said, "no problem."

There was a problem. Ralph was terrified of Dinner. He had witnessed the feral child stab Arthur, likely with the same knife she had threatened Table with. She was from the outside, she had been hardened by the bedlam that the wastes wrought. A confrontation was the last thing he wanted...

...But he knew that avoiding one was probably not an option.

Table leaned on the broom, his breathing more controlled, and his wild eyes, though still full of intensity, were less wide. Table too was an outsider, and though he was bested by a child this time it was likely that he would take things into his own hands if Ralph did not deliver. HR was probably not something Ralph had to worry about now, but he would definitely have to worry about it when Dinner turned up dead...and if Dinner turned up dead, banishment was a death sentence for sure. He would have to face Rabia's wrath then.

"Take him to his quarters," Ralph said to the woman, "keep him quiet and make sure HR doesn't get wind of this." The woman clutched her forms tighter at the mention of

HR, then nodded. "I'll go find the child," he said, "I know her."

Ralph was grateful that the floor was empty except for them. Word of this would spread quickly if it wasn't. He briefly wondered if Table's howling was loud enough to be heard from above.

He turned around and marched purposefully back upstairs. As far as the woman and Table knew, he was going straight to the problem child that had caused this headache. He would do that eventually. His first stop, however, was his cousin.

Richard was not hard to find, at least not for Ralph. They weren't just cousins, they were partners in crime. Ralph went to the nearest bathroom. It appeared empty, save for one stall.

"Rich?!" he said in a stage whisper, "That you?"

"...Yeah," Richard replied with no confidence.

"Get out here. I have an emergency."

The stall door opened, revealing his cousin, a short man dressed in full leathers and armed to the teeth. He just stared in response.

"I need your protection," Ralph said, "and your discretion."

"Yeah, whatever Ralph, that's what I've been doing my whole life," Richard replied. "What's up?"

Ralph looked his cousin directly in the eyes. "I need you to protect me from a little girl."

"Shut up!" Richard said with the roll of the eyes, "I know I've been shielding you from danger our whole lives, *but grow a spine* Ralph!"

Ralph held the urge to say the same to his cowardly cousin, "I need to take something away from *Dinner*."

"Oh, *that* little girl," said Richard with full understanding. "Do I have to?"

"Yes Rich! It's a whole thing, I don't have time to explain."

He pulled his cousin out of the bathroom and walked at a near jog. It wasn't until he was a good hundred feet from the bathroom that he realized that he didn't know where Dinner was. But he had a guess. Children hid in their rooms when they were in trouble. He could start there.

...And if he was wrong Table could decide to take revenge and find her first. No big deal. He turned and headed toward the stairs. Then there would be a dead child on his hands and HR would banish Table and possibly himself for mishandling the situation. That was a big deal. He started to jog. Then Rabia would hear about it, who had made Ralph swear on his life to keep the little girl safe. He was at a near sprint.

Once a day Ralph checked in on Dinner, which was the bare minimum of his agreement with Rabia. She was a scary child. The lights to her room were usually off when he knocked, and if they weren't then she was usually "playing" by stabbing at the air.

By the time that he had returned to the long corridors of the personal quarters and sleeping barracks, the woman and Table had already departed, leaving the mess of mop water behind. No matter what happened today, it was very unlikely that Ralph was going to get the custodial staff to pick up the slack. He slowed to a light jog and avoided the mop water, mostly oblivious to the fact that Richard was falling behind, and came to an intersection. The IRS loved its organization and divided the living spaces according to job. This meant that the management lived on one side, the Auditors and operations staff lived on another, the Enforcers on yet another, and the custodial and maintenance crews in the last section. There was, of course, another word for this, *segregation*, but as an agent, Ralph usually failed to recognize his post-apocalyptic privilege.

He turned to his left and traveled down the side the

custodial staff lived in, which was located nearest to the bunker's power generators. The lower on the bureaucratic ladder you stood the closer to these noisy machines that you lived. Dinner would be nearly roommates with them.

He smelled it before he saw it.

The acrid stench of burning plastic and lit kerosene dominated the air. Dread kicked him in the chest. A thin plume of black smoke spewed out of the cracks of the last door in the corridor. He ran to her door.

It was locked.

Ralph knocked urgently on the steel door. "Dinner?" he yelled, "Dinner, open up!"

No answer.

He knocked again. "Dinner this is important, *open up!*" Still no answer. Smoke seeped out of the top of the door, pouring upward into the ceiling. He turned to Richard. "*Well?*" he said impatiently.

"Well, *what?*" Richard replied.

"*Open the door, Rich!*"

"What? How?"

"I don't know," Ralph said, his hands clenching air "kick it in, Action Hero, do *something*."

The door opened.

The lights in the room were off, but the familiar orange pulse of a fire glowed within. Dinner stood at the door, her clothing ill-fitting and one size too big. The little girl looked up silently at Ralph, then avoided his gaze. Ralph walked past her.

He saw the source of the smoke.

The room had just a bed and a steel bookcase, filled with

Dinner's rations and personal items. In the middle of her room, Dinner had a large metal wash pan on the floor where the fire had been started. In the center of the washpan was the melting char of a plastic doll.

Ralph ran to the bookcase and grabbed a large plastic jug filled with Dinner's water ration and doused the fire with it. Dinner remained silent at the doorway. Richard refused to enter.

"What are you *doing?*!" Ralph yelled, unable to mask his panic.

"He took her!" she said as her eyes welled with tears. "Table took her away so I burned her so he couldn't have her. I burned her so no one could eat her. Like mommy."

The doll now resembled a burnt Cronenberg horror more than a toy baby.

This was not the worst-case scenario. The worst-case scenario was always death. But the worst-case scenario was now on the horizon.

Before Ralph could ask any further questions, before he could make any decisions, a loud and obnoxious electronic buzzing noise sounded around them.

"Is that what the lunch klaxon sounds like in this corridor?" Richard shouted over the noise.

"No!" yelled Ralph, "*It's the bunker's fire alarm!*"

Water poured like rain from the ceiling's sprinklers.

Ralph was *fucked*.

CHAPTER FIVE



“A couple of days” had turned into four. There was no sign of land pirates or *any kind of trader* for that matter during those four days. This was not entirely unwelcome.

Arthur had been hard at work his entire life. When he wasn’t out in the wastes auditing, he was busy filing paper-work or perfecting spreadsheets. Even during his off times he found himself keeping busy by researching tax law or by getting ahead on the work that he needed to do the next day. This very well may have been the first time that Arthur had any real downtime in his life.

It was driving him a little mad.

Oh, the downtime was not entirely unwelcome, but it was still unwelcome. Arthur found himself with nothing to do in Smithton and every minute that his mind was not occupied with busy work meant that he was inching closer and closer to existential dread. It was nice spending time with Rabia,

and in truth, they had not spent this much time together outside of the Bunker since their original suicide mission to Slaver City, but she wasn't always available to hang out. She had things to do. She had traps to check, and she was often patrolling the area around her railroad camp and Smithton as a way to pay her dues. "When you can hold a gun without dropping it," she replied one morning when he asked to join her. It was obvious that he would just be in the way.

The Yesterday's Saints' Elders were equally excited for Arthur's help. His skin was too pale, too soft from the day to day life of the bunkers. They honestly did not think he was capable of doing any manual labor. Oh, his heart would be in it, but in truth, Arthur could hold a hoe as well as he could hold a gun. This was no tragedy. All the Elders wanted to talk about was their scripture and seeing that each man of the cult was in a race to collect more sister wives than the other, them shunning Arthur was a decision that he could get behind.

The freed slaves, however, were more than happy to give him company. He had little in common with them, most of them had either grown up in a tribe or a caravan, but they were grateful for the risks that he had taken to get them here. It had been an emotional rollercoaster for them, having been freed once during the IRS's raid against Slaver City, only to be locked up again to be shipped to General Oswald, whom they would have been sold to anyway if the IRS had not shown up. The second day in the settlement Arthur had got to know a number of the freed slaves. He shared his rations with them (all meant to be delivered to the Army) and they gave their company and gratitude in return. It was a fair trade.

The man and woman who had been reunited, as well as the couple of men who had shared a tent earlier, were part of the same tribe. They were junk dealers and scavengers. Two of the men were brothers and had even proposed to

their spouses the same day. The older to his wife in the morning, the younger to his husband in the evening. Life was hard, their next meal was never certain, but they had each other.

The slavers came in the night, and nearly beat the younger brother and his husband to death for sharing a bed. Had they been raiders, the men would have surely been killed, after they were humiliated, but Slavers? They had something worse in mind. The family was dragged to Slaver City and then they were separated. They did not speak of their horrors there. Some wounds do not heal.

So on the third day at the settlement Arthur was earnestly disappointed, and worried, when the four of them announced to him that they were leaving. The Saints would not have them so long as the younger brother and his husband "committed evil sodomy against the Lord". Somehow six wives covered in pimples and pigtailed were cool with Him, however. They owned nothing. Had no gear, no weapons, and no known destination. Leaving meant that they were completely at the mercy of the United Wastes.

...And they were fine with that. They knew that they would survive.

Arthur was not sure if he could say the same thing for himself, given those conditions.

They bid Arthur farewell and thanked him one last time before leaving. He watched with deep anxiety as they walked out into the open wastes, chasing an impersonal sun.

The fourth day was miserable.

He was isolated. He was bored. He was up to his ears in a subtle kind of fear that was as numbing as it was constant.

Saying that he was relieved when Rabia came back early was an understatement. He was supremely relieved.

Rabia was covered in sweat, dust, and a slightly less than terrible disposition. They walked under the tarp over *The Shark* (which had become their makeshift home when in the settlement) and Rabia cracked open a warm can of beer, the brand of which having faded off a decade prior. "I was getting impatient tracking the pirate fleet," she said between sips. "I was honestly thinking of making contact when I saw a few of them break away, they should be here sometime soon."

"That's good!" Arthur said with more excitement than either of them was prepared for. "That's good," he repeated once more in an even tone.

"You out of your mind with boredom yet, G-Man?" she asked after a pull of beer.

"What? No, I'm just glad that our plans are coming along." He couldn't give her the satisfaction.

"You're clicking your pen like a maniac, Arthur," Rabia said calmly.

He put the pen in his pocket and found that his hand naturally wanted to fidget without it. "Like I've never been bored in the bunker," said Arthur with a wave of his hand, "this is nothing, I'm fine."

He was met with a raised brow from Rabia. He was thankful when she changed the subject. "The Land Pirates cannot know that we used to work for the IRS," she said not sweetly. "They abhor the idea of government and mistrust the IRS completely. If they ask, you are dressed like that because you are a former Elder."

"Former? Why does that matter?"

Rabia cleared her throat then took a sip of beer. It was hard to tell if she was meeting his eyes under her dark shades. "Yes, *former*," she said when she was done drinking, "don't worry about it."

It was not long after their discussion that the pirates arrived. The thunderous trumpeting of motorcycles shook the ground. Elder Rose, atop his broken down cherry picker yelled the word “friends” down to the other Elders. Still, women and children hid in their junk huts and converted vans. Here the word “friend” simply meant “do not shoot”, it had nothing to do with trust or amicability.

Rabia grabbed two canisters of gasoline out of *The Shark*, “Come on,” she said, “let’s get their attention before they buy and leave.” With that, she led the way to the front of the settlement.

Huns on horseback was a truer statement than riders on bikes. The three motorbikes that approached the quaint settlement were more junk than machine, their original makes and models a mystery now as each had parts from various motorcycles. Each was different in its feverish construction, holding one uniform element between them: various parts from carousel horses had been attached to the chassis. Mangled wooden horse heads clutched headlights without covers in their teeth. Fake horse legs ran down the sides of chopper wheels and at least one rider had fashioned the carousel pole into a makeshift lance. The twisted and whimsical pole had now been sharpened into something sinister.

The riders themselves were no less anachronistic and mad. Street signs had been bent into protective breastplates, leather of different colors and animals had been patched together into ill-fitted pants. The rider up front, holding the lance and a horse chassis the color of blood had a mohawk and lipstick of the same color. She rode beside two other women, one on a green ride with green hair, the other a color that might have been pink once, but now looked like raw flesh, her hair nonexistent. They looked as nightmarish as their rides. These were the riders of a hellish

fever dream. Women who owned the road as much as they abused it. They, simply put, were not people you fucked with.

And Arthur was supposed to talk to them.

Small talk and polite chatter was just not a thing that existed in the United Wastes outside of the IRS. One did not simply bring up the weather to someone who had taken a life for a drop of water. What concept of "the weekend" did an illiterate cannibal really have? The answer, as Arthur would soon find out, was none.

He was especially disadvantaged in that he no longer had tax law to fall back on. Not only because he could no longer audit the denizens of the Wastes, but also because it would blow his cover. As the leather-clad hard-as-nails women dismounted their motorcycles Arthur realized that he had nothing constructive to say.

There was one water cooler topic that had stayed universal, however, if not bent with the times: golf. Golf was still discussed as a common denominator between two people who had nothing else in common, and although much had changed about it since The War its ability to bore anyone who did not partake in it was a constant. The warrior women dismounted their nightmare carnival rides and the mohawked woman swung a five iron behind her neck casually. Arthur watched Rabia's devilish grin spread on seeing it.

"Five iron huh?" she asked. "I bet it has good stopping power, it's unbent though, have you used it?"

The woman with the red mohawk smiled just slightly at the observation. "Yeah," she said with a voice that was more accustomed to screaming than talking, "beat three guys' heads in with it, must be made of titanium or somethin', hasn't bent yet and is light as a feather."

"Bullshit!" Rabia cursed, "there is no god damn way that you crushed more than a skull and kept it that straight."

"It's totally true," the woman said, taking no offense. "What do you like to use?"

"Preferred a nine, but once you get the end of a putter through a bastard's eyehole that's the end of it. I'm never going back, putter all of the way."

"You went for the eye?" the woman exclaimed with respect, "talk about a short game."

Apparently, Arthur was not needed. This might have been for the best.

The others dismounted their rides and soon the chummy conversation between Rabia and their leader had become a circular palaver. It was straight to business from there. The three land pirates asked if there was gas to be had, which on this occasion was not something that Elder Rose could supply. Rabia was right to keep the gas from the vans, it meant that she had all of the bargaining power, and therefore their ears for as long as the situation would stay civil. None of the women paid Arthur any mind. He looked like one of the saints and therefore was more boring than a deep description of another person's dream.

The truth that he was a former IRS agent? Just as boring. If not deadly to him.

"I've got two canisters worth of gas," Rabia said holding the canisters up for all to see, "but I also have a suitcase full of beer and every upper, screamer, and laughter safe to ingest. A lot more that isn't safe if you are brave or suicidal."

The mean-looking women became a lot friendlier after that. "Serious?" the mohawked woman asked, who was apparently their leader, "we thought this town was a loss!"

"Did you think there was no gas?" Arthur asked, braving a sentence for the first time.

"No, you saints are so uptight we thought we would never get to party! Where's the stuff?"

Rabia led the group over to *The Shark*. The land pirates

were fine leaving their rides unattended. This town would not fuck with them. Indeed, as they traveled across the settlement it was apparent that they would be met with no resistance. Everyone was inside.

When they reached *The Shark* Rabia tossed her suitcase on the hood with aggressive showmanship and opened its latches. She pulled out four beers (Arthur had to stay sober for his ruse) and passed them around. "This one is on me," she said. "I'm Rabia Duke, former Sheriff of Shepard Stormwell's Caravan," she said as she leaned against *The Shark* casually and lit a cigarette. "That's just Arthur."

"We," the woman with the mohawk and the golf club said with pride, "are Cap'n Salt's Four Horsecowmen of the Apocalypse." She stood with grandeur and purpose. The other two women puffed their chests out and lifted their chins.

"There are three of you," Rabia said after taking a drag of her cigarette, "what happened to the fourth?"

Their sense of grandeur collapsed into self-awareness. The woman with the mohawk shifted her weight and looked to the side. "Yar, Death died."

"Fitting," said Rabia. The women nodded.

"I'm War," The Woman with the Mohawk said. She pointed to her left at the woman with the green hair, "that's Pestilence," then at the woman with no hair, "and that's Becky."

Becky took a step forward and shook Rabia's hand enthusiastically. "We thought this shit town was dry and boring," she said with a grin, "we keep thinkin' that sending us here is punishment."

Rabia's Cheshire cat grin matched Becky's. Arthur felt terribly out of place. "You gals can take your pick, but the whole lot is not for sale. This is a personal collection, I'm no dealer. Just looking for an ear." While Pestilence and Becky looked on at Rabia's plethora of drugs with hungry eyes,

War looked over *The Shark* with lust. This did not go unnoticed.

“Like the car?” Rabia asked.

“Car is status,” War said, her voice distant. Rabia gave her an understanding nod. Arthur did not particularly understand the hierarchy of a caravan or a land pirate fleet, but he could intuit that the bigger the ride the higher the status. He briefly considered this absurd, until he considered that the amount of coffee consumed at the bunker was a signifier of class.

The Three Horsewomen of the Apocalypse sifted through Rabia’s suitcase, each picking out a substance utterly foreign to Arthur. He did not doubt that what they chose was powerful, however. The mood had been amicable, even relaxed to this point. Arthur was relieved.

But then Rabia got to business.

Rabia cracked open her can of beer. “We want to parley with your Captain.”

A shadow dropped over War’s face. “And why exactly would our Cap’n want to be your audience?”

“Slavers,” Rabia said. “They’re alive when they should be dead. We know their whereabouts and when they can be pounced on.” She looked the other woman in the eyes and sucked down her cigarette to the butt in a single breath. Once a billow of smoke flushed dragon-like out of her nostrils she dropped her cigarette and stamped on it with her boot. She took two steps forward, her short stature coming only inches to War’s chest. The woman was taller than Rabia, but she looked up at the woman with teeth bared. “And because I *fucking* said so.”

Arthur clicked his pen in rapid-fire.

“One rule of the road,” said War, “be free.”

“Groovy,” Rabia said through her teeth before letting her lips spread wide in a smile. “What say you and I discuss the

particulars over there?" she said pointing behind her with her thumb away from the settlement. "Slaver talk freaks out the locals."

War nodded silently.

"Arthur," said Rabia, "take care of our guests while War and I talk shop, will ya?"

Shit. This was it. Arthur had managed to avoid conversation for this long, he was honestly hoping that he would not have to. Before he could protest the two women left and Arthur was alone with Pestilence and Becky. Suddenly self-aware, he pocketed his pen and took a deep breath. *This is just an opportunity to show Rabia that I can make it outside of the bunker,* he thought to himself, trying to frame the situation in the best light possible.

"So uh," Arthur stammered, "who uh, who does your taxes?"

He missed his opportunity.

Pestilence crammed a fist full of pills into her maw without blinking and then chugged the beer that had been given to her. Becky, her mouth not yet occupied, looked like Arthur had just declared the sky green, and said: "What the *fuck* is taxes?"

His plan was not yet completely formalized, but Arthur figured that he could offer his services to the wastes as a freelance tax consultant. "Taxes are offering a portion of your assets, income, or property up to benefit the greater community," he said.

The confusion had now spread to Pestilence, who, now done with her drug consumption, offered a very poignant "Huh?"

"Was that why the black lady gave us drugs?" asked Becky. "Is taxes drugs?"

Though he had left the IRS through disillusionment, Arthur still found himself very eager to talk about tax policy

and at heart, was still a true believer. Before he had the chance to school the two wasteland pirates on the particulars of society building, Rabia and War had come back. Both of them nothing but grins. Arthur was not sure if this was because the deal had gone well, or because the drugs had kicked in.

It was both.

CHAPTER SIX



Her brain felt like it had been beaten in with a baseball bat covered in barnacles. Rabia had never seen a barnacle, but she had a feeling that they were as salty as her attitude.

This, of course, was the best possible condition for her to be driving under.

It wasn't the tab of acid she had taken that left her in this condition. Alcohol was definitely the culprit for the hang-over, but the LSD was the conduit to the drinking. It was the best that she could do to quiet her mind during the introspective stage of the hallucinogen. She should have known better than to take such a high-powered soul searcher the moment after she had decided to keep a soul-wrenching secret from her partner in crime. Frankly, Rabia should know better not to do a lot of things. So far she had succeeded in circumventing all of life's lessons by taking refuge in audacity. One day karma would catch up to her, this she knew, but

until then she could subsist on confusing it with blunt knuckle-white madness.

Before they had packed up for their journey to *The Salty Beard*, before the morning rose and they decided to chase the pirate fleet, Rabia and the Four Horsewomen partied. Hard. Even Arthur cut loose, though only Rabia could recognize his limited effort in doing so as such. The deal had been made, their fate had been sealed, and the guilt had found fertile soil to grip her mind. Arthur did not yet know. No matter what, he would find out. So why was she keeping it from him? She had almost told him, while her mind plummeted to introspective acid depths. It was only thanks to booze that she kept her loathing to herself.

She had to protect him.

Maybe this was going too far. Maybe if he knew ahead of time then he would be safer. But she was charged to keep him alive, and now that he had chewed off his leash he needed her more than ever.

The "Four" Horsewoman consumed their party gifts quickly, and despite their hard appearance were friendly. Long hours on the road had dulled their feelings, the chance to escape through chemicals was a welcome one. Out of necessity, they had to take their party out of the settlement. The locals were too spooked, and if she and Arthur wanted to keep the peace (and make sure that freed slaves had a place to go) they had to take it elsewhere. They led the rowdy road warriors on foot to Rabia's railroad camp. After warning the other girls of the landmines strewn about the perimeter further bottles were opened and guns were fired blindly into the night. Aimless violence against the night sky was committed and blasphemes were spoken like lullabies. It was a good time.

Arthur had more than a drink but this was still not enough to calm his nerves against such wild agency. She

almost told him, almost succumbed to her guilt, but watching Arthur sit on an old steamer trunk wide-eyed as Becky hurled rocks *for the sake of hurling rocks* she got the creeping feeling that in this case, ignorance was bliss. Though maybe he deserved a warning.

Once most of the drugs had peaked, the "Four" Horsewomen openly discussed their pirate fleet. The fleet was captained by a ruthless yet amicable man named Salt. The "flagship": a mutant chimera of two diesel train engines fused side by side and fitted with giant tires for the road named *The Salty Beard*. According to War, who was on three different kinds of uppers that night, *The Salty Beard* was just as much a flagship as it was a shrine. By their own laws, which Rabia gathered were dogmatic by nature, *The Salty Beard* could never rest. Always was it moving forward on the road. This necessitated constant errands by the fleet for more fuel. Being on the lowest rung of the totem pole, it was War and the other Horsewomen's job to fetch gas as often as possible. Whether this was through trade, guile, or force was wholly up to the situation and their moods. To keep the rest of the fleet from losing *The Salty Beard*, Captain Salt followed a circular path.

The party died down just hours before the sun rose. Geometric lines no longer moved like snakes, thoughts were no longer touched by the divine, and ego death had escaped her once more. The high powered acid had leveled out into a mostly sober feeling that was somehow just off. She hoped that with it settled, and combined with Arthur's warm sleeping embrace, she would succumb to sleep. Instead, she lay next to a man who she dared to say that she loved only once wide awake with worry. Worry and guilt.

For most, a large mug of coffee and the chill morning air would be the best stimulants to begin their day. Rabia? She had to feel like she was just on the edge of total annihilation.

Worry and guilt were her cream and sugar. She drove just a car length behind the small biker gang of women, wholly cognizant that War eyed *The Shark* with envy the entire way.

The Shark's engine roared as they drove, hungry for more pavement to eat.

Silence was the rule between her and Arthur for some miles. Arthur broke it.

"That went well," Arthur said with a sigh, referring to the party the night before. He drummed his hands nervously on his thighs. He had been fidgeting more than usual since they had been reunited. It only occurred to Rabia at that moment that now that Arthur didn't have paperwork to busy himself that he didn't know what to do with himself. She knew that Arthur was likely afraid during their entire palaver, but she also knew that he was likely wondering if "Horsewoman Of the Apocalypse" was something that showed up on a W2. How easily he adjusted outside of his job had yet to be seen, but he seemed to be coping. Poorly, but coping still.

They sped along, keeping a distance between them and the bikers. "Don't drink anything they give you by the way," said Rabia, "it's probably spiked with gasoline. The Elders don't drink anyway." Arthur fiddled with his seatbelt. "Jesus's zombie, G-man! What's going on with you?!"

Arthur sighed while his leg hopped in place restlessly. "How many states do you think they cross?" he asked. "I think tax laws on trucker commerce is the only thing that would apply to them, they would have to pay a tax in each state they do business in."

"Goddammit *no*, Arthur!" Rabia yelled with a scowl, "absolutely *do not do any freelance tax work!*"

Arthur tried to rein in the movement of his leg. "I never realized until now how much I loved the distraction of a clipboard," he said. "How do you cope with the constant fear and loathing, Rabia?"

Rabia kept her eyes ahead, watching War for any sudden movements. "I don't," she said, "*I fuel it.*"

Days had passed since Arthur dropped the news of leaving the IRS. The Yesterday's Saints cult got to learn a whole new vocabulary of cursing that day. The problem was that she fully understood his reasons. Hell, a part of her was even happy for him. Arthur was a good man, that was half of the reason she fell for the dorky bastard. So long as Boyd ran the IRS, there was no way Arthur could live with himself and stay in the bunker. If things had been different, if they didn't have a revolution to start, Rabia would have suggested his termination long ago! Boyd had tried to get them killed twice, and the pay was shit.

She just wished that Arthur had considered their movement more. He was a far better leader and saboteur if he was on the inside. Ben Franklin had the decency to stay out of the war. Outside? Outside he could barely fend for himself! That was nothing to be ashamed of, the United Wastes was a demented hellscape where sand was made of crushed bones and where children learned to use a Geiger counter before they learned to tie their shoes. It was okay that Arthur was a bunker mole, she had come to terms with that, had even liked it. At least he knew what human decency was. But now she had to do her old job all of the time: protect him.

The worst part? She couldn't even feel burdened by it. Not with the guilt. She turned on the stereo. Hoped that it would deter further talk. She wanted to put this off for as long as she could.

The drive was boring. She could definitely see why the other women were so eager to abuse whatever substance they could get. Nothing but barren sky and dead land stretched in every direction. The road deviated so little that there were times that Rabia questioned whether she was doing anything at all. Instead of chasing *The Salty Beard* and its pirate fleet

they were driving counter to its circle. When they made contact, they would do so head-on. War was not sure where exactly the fleet would be, they could meet them that day or in two. Regardless, she assured them that this was the fastest route.

Eventually, the light of the sun dimmed as the earth turned its back on it. Ruthless though they may be, their numbers were small enough to necessitate camp and call it a night. Though she would have rather found *The Salty Beard*, Rabia was glad to stretch her legs. While she and Arthur ate SPAM knock-off rations, some horrifying thing named *Klick* that was only ever alive *after* being canned, the Horsewomen ate dog jerky that they kept in leather pouches. It was hard to say which was more repulsive.

The night was low-key. Though rum was shared no drugs were taken. No wild shots were fired. Instead, they drank to slurred stories. Rabia told them of their dramatic suicide mission through The Colonel's slave town and of the turns and twists that they had faced to try and free the slaves. When she was done, Rabia was surprised to see that Arthur had taken some initiative in the conversation. "Why must *The Salty Beard* never stop?" he asked.

War, who was the only Horsewoman awake at that moment (as Pestilence and Becky had succumbed to sleep and booze) told him. "The Eternal Traveler sits on top of her. Never must he rest, he must be in death as he was in life. Free and always moving. We keep him forever forward on the road to honor him."

Arthur nodded, looking as if he was far away from the world and contemplating. "Who was The Eternal Traveler?" he asked in a respectful tone.

"The Eternal Traveler was a great man!" War said with enthusiasm, waking pestilence from her slumber. "He lived by one rule, *be free*. Before the bombs fell, when the earth was

plagued by business and government and people telling you what to do, he rebelled and lived on the road.”

Rabia handed War what was left of the bottle of rum. They needed to run out before reaching *The Salty Beard*. It was just better to share willingly.

War took a swig and continued. “They say that when the bombs fell and sent everyone back to zero that he tried to outrun the blast on his motorcycle *for the fuck of it!* Believe it or not, but it was a different sort of thing that killt him years later. The Eternal Traveler is the father of all pirates.” War drank the rest of the rum and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Even those that don’t know about him.”

To Rabia, this was all hogwash, though the imagery of a man outriding a nuclear blast made her a tiny bit horny. Most caravans and pirate fleets had a superstition. Rabia’s caravan was a version of the bible that focused on hating others that the Shepherd preached in his delirium. She had even traveled with a caravan that was all Yesterday’s Saints and had once met a band of pirates that worshiped—actually worshiped nihilism. She did her best to teach them the meaning of irony but they weren’t having it. To her, superstition was bullshit. It did not matter how you painted it, or what details you scribbled on it, shit was still shit.

Arthur, however, hung on War’s every word. The man was always voracious for information, and without the stringent and ludicrous rules of the IRS to absorb she figured that to him this must be the next best thing.

When War had fallen asleep Rabia and Arthur camped just away from them. As chummy as this short alliance had been, Rabia took precaution. It was not bullets that killed people the most in the United Wastes. It was not radiation or starvation either. It was trust.

When all was quiet, Rabia turned to Arthur in a hushed tone. “Everyone out here is crazy, Arthur,” she said. “We as a

species gravitate towards each other, but do not confuse their madness for civilization.” She was met with silence. She was not telling Arthur anything he did not already know, so what was she really concerned about? Arthur was not going to fall into a wasteland cult. No...

She was worried about his safety.

She wanted to tell him that he should have stayed with the IRS. She wanted to warn him of what was up ahead. Instead, the night remained silent. Then it was morning.

Instead, they were on the road again.

She could ambush a camp of slavers, jailbreak two men, and ride into a burning forest. Right now though, she was a coward.

Luck, it would seem, was on their side that day. Whether or not it was good luck was still up for grabs. The pirate fleet could be seen in the distance only an hour into the drive. This distance closed quickly as they were coming at it head-on. The Four Horsewomen moved ahead of them.

Soon they were knocking on the doors of the mobile pirate fleet. A ravenous motorcade with scrambled and vicious detail. The Four Horsewomen’s forms of transportation were not the exception in the fleet, they were the norm. Ferris wheel cars with bicycle tires were pulled by sedans like chariots. Leather hides were nailed around trucks covered in bones. Motorcycles were held together by zip ties and grit. It was a high octane parade for the mad. Something stirred inside of Rabia, some of it might have been sexual.

Directly ahead of them and centerpiece to the fleet was the unholy chimera of two train engines that was *The Salty Beard*. Captain Salt’s flagship. Sandwiched between the train engines and two oil tankers was a multi-decked car loading trailer facing the wrong direction. In front of this massive

amalgamation of steel and transportation was a great and jagged cowcatcher made entirely of scrap metal. This monstrosity was hurtling straight at them.

Yeah. It was definitely sexual.

Before Rabia could veer out of the way, before she could course correct to a comfortable path, the Horsemwomen drove close to each side of her, with War in the front. If she veered she would crash into them, if she didn't the giant cowcatcher would end them. A split second before she decided that she liked Pestilence less than Becky the giant cowcatcher split down the middle. Great mechanical arms pulled it apart and opened the jagged wedge like an ancient door revealing the empty car trailer within. A ramp fell forward on tiny wheels like a tongue uncurling. They were looking directly in the mouth of *The Salty Beard*.

The Four Horsemwomen broke away, disappearing into the rest of the pirate fleet. Before she could think about it *The Salty Beard* had scooped them up. She kept the wheel straight. It was all that she could do. She hit the brake the very moment that the back tires cleared the ramp and they lurched forward in their seats. Arthur's eyes pin-holed to terror and he let out an involuntary noise not unlike a dying mouse. They were on board. Rabia's heart raced. She loved every second of it.

She killed the engine.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," she said. Arthur answered with a meek sigh and a flurry of pen clicks.

The ground beneath them vibrated as the giant lumbering land whale continued on its journey. Rabia exited *The Shark* before Arthur and took a few steps away from it. They were not stable steps. The inside of the behemoth was hollow and totally enclosed. When Arthur followed he fell to the ground as they hit a bump in the road. Rabia was impressed to see

the men who had surrounded them to be unaffected by the behemoth's jostling.

This group of pirates was not attractive, though very little of the land pirate's aesthetic was. A man of mostly muscle, tattoos, and no teeth leered at Rabia with hungry desire. The bastard had no idea how many men with that same stare had found the terrible violence that Rabia wrought to their groins. She smiled at him, knowing that she still had her dull "pecker killer" knife in her pocket. He misunderstood the gesture. "Well hello pretty lady!" He said then nodded at Arthur with less enthusiasm, "lad," he said acknowledging him. "Welcome to *The Salty Beard*, may I take you to our captain?"

She grinned ear to ear at this with wild eyes. Then the guilt caught up to her.

Arthur did not yet know it but *The Shark* was their payment to get on board.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Ralph sat at the table. Eyes forward. Face like stone.

He was in the Human Resources offices of the bunker. This was where the boogeyman lived.

Human Resources, at its very core, was there to protect the organization. Before The War, this meant that it was there to protect itself from itself. Sexual harassment, misconduct that was suable. HR was the first line in a defense of de-escalation. That was before The War.

Human Resources in the age of nuclear apocalypse was still there to protect the organization from internal threats. It was the threats to the organization that had changed. Things like sexual harassment still concerned HR, but there were no more courts to be sued from unfair employment practices. The bigger threats were to the bunker. HR had a whole new set of problems to adapt to. Agents who grew up in the bunker could develop agoraphobia, and when it was time for them to leave the bunker to audit outsiders this fear could turn violent. The mistreatment of rations, tampering with the water supply, *fires and physical violence*, these things fell under their purview now.

...And a fire had been set. Right after an assault. Ralph was not excited.

Of course, before The War, the greatest punishment that HR could dole out was termination, a word with a wholly different and less honest meaning then. Back then, HR would just fire you. Well, things had not changed. The severity of that action, however, had. Back then a firing meant that you were back on the job market. You lost security, but it was not the end of the world.

Well, the world had ended.

If you were fired now, you were banished. There was nowhere else to work. Nine times out of ten, banishment was a death sentence.

Ralph was an overfilled bucket of dread trying to look like it was still under control. He had been bullshitting the IRS his entire life, now it was time to see if he was skilled enough to do so to the HR department.

The HR office that he sat in was closer to an interrogation room in the old police vids he used to watch from the entertainment libraries than it did a place for workplace arbitration. The table that he sat at was impersonal and cold, made of steel and nothing else. The chair he sat in was built by somebody who had only a vague idea of what humans looked like when they sat. It too was made of steel and folded his spine inward as easily as it was supposed to fold itself up for easy storage. Like the rest of the bunker, the concrete walls and chessboard tile reigned supreme here, but the lighting was somehow more menacing; like it was built to give a shadow an edge. An edge for cutting. He did not have to wait for long before someone joined him in the room, but his jagged anticipation made it feel like an eternity.

When his bucket of dread was just about to spill over, Simon entered the room. Ralph suspected that the man had a natural hunger for human loathing.

Simon was a man who could easily be misidentified for a mole. If the federal government had secretly been tampering with the human genome to produce men best suited to live underground in a bunker, who followed orders completely, Simon from HR would still be somehow better than their efforts. This was a doughy man with plastic glasses and a mustache who, despite his age throughout the years, perpetually looked forty. This was a man who thought that a pocket protector was a birthright and his double chin had an important topography. If he were a spice, he would be expired yeast. He looked like he came from a long line of school guidance counselors and sanitation wipes. Simon from HR scared the living shit out of Ralph.

"Hello, Randy!" Simon said with a smile. Ralph was sure that Simon had practiced it so that he could imitate the living.

"It's Ralph," he replied returning the smile.

"I just have some questions," *It* said. The game had begun.

Simon sat down across from Ralph, set his clipboard on the table and folded his hands. "Tell me about *the incident* from this morning."

Ralph had no idea how much Simon knew. Before the fire squad showed up, before maintenance shut the sprinklers off, Ralph did his best to coach Dinner, knowing then that HR would absolutely be involved. He told her not to say anything about Table, to not even bring him up. He told her to just cry a lot and say that she was sorry. Still, they could have pulled something from her. Children were easy to trick, and Simon? He looked like he tricked children. The stakes here were high. Dinner could be banished for the fire. That was a death sentence to her *and* him if Rabia got the word. He took a deep breath before the plunge.

"The child is new to the bunker," Ralph said. "Whatever

tribe or raider gang she came from burned their dead to keep others from eating their bodies,”

“Sounds like cooking to me!” Simon from HR said jokingly. Ralph mocked a polite laugh.

“It looks like the child thought someone killed her doll,” continued Ralph, “she just did what she had learned to do in that situation.”

“That’s very troubling,” Simon from HR said, “*very* troubling.”

“I agree, it looks like someone dropped the ball there,” said Ralph.

“What do you mean?” Simon said cocking his head back, turning his double chin into a triple.

“It’s feral behavior for sure, but Dinner has been a decent employee up to now. She follows instructions very well,” *like attempting an assassination*, he said in his mind, remembering her attack on Arthur. “I doubt she would have done this if she had known better. It seems to me like this was a failure in *orientation*.” Ralph swallowed hard. This was his only card, *blame it on HR*. Put Simon on the defensive.

Simon blinked, unfolded his hands, then blinked again. “That is a pretty severe accusation,” he said adjusting his glasses.

“I can think of no other reason,” Ralph said. “How thoroughly do we go over fire safety in our orientation processes now?”

“It hasn’t been thought necessary,” Simon from HR said. “We do have fire safety meetings every month.”

“*Exactly!* Dinner has only been an employee for less than a month. If there was nothing in orientation about it how could she know that setting fires inside is bad? It’s not like they have bunkers on the outside.”

“Hmm...”

"We should be happy that this happened," Ralph said while Simon from HR was in mid-thought.

"Why is that?"

"This is a learning opportunity, now we know that we need to do more about fire safety education."

Simon picked up his clipboard and began writing on it. Nothing was said between the two men while he jotted something with great length down. *Probably satanic runes*, thought Ralph, *or evil sigils*. When Simon was done writing he underlined something hard. "You have given me a lot to think about, Randy," Simon from HR said at last. "Fires are a terminable offense, but *if it could have been prevented* that puts the IRS in a sticky situation. A case could be built for a wrongful termination..." Like many in the IRS, the fact that law was a thing of the past was a thought that had never fully taken root in Simon's mind. Ralph was relieved to hear him speak as if Dinner could get a lawyer.

"Exactly," Ralph said, "that would put us *both* in some pretty hot water".

Simon looked behind him, then at Ralph, "Can I be frank?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Ralph said with a hush as he moved conspiratorial toward Simon from HR.

"You're a supervisor, you know as well as I do that this will come down to cost."

"Firing the child could cost us a lot of legal fees in the long run," said Ralph.

"Right," Simon agreed, "but rewriting the orientation process could be costly as well. Not just to produce hourly wise too!"

"I have a solution," Ralph said leaning back in his chair. Bureaucracies loved two things above all: redundancy and meetings. "What if we do our fire safety meetings *twice* a month."

Simon smiled. "That is an easy fix!" Simon said, "We already have the material and procedures in place for it." His demeanor fell in an instant to something dour. "We will, of course, have to write Dinner up for what she did. This still affected the IRS bunker wide."

"Of course," Ralph agreed with relief. He had somehow found a way out of this. "I'll dock her pay for the waste in water, maybe send her back to orientation?"

Simon smiled once more and extended his hand, "That sounds good to me," he said as Ralph shook his hand, "thank you for your time, Randy."

Ralph kept his stone face. Inwardly he was screaming. "No, thank you, I'm glad we found a way to handle this that works best for the IRS." Simon handed him a clipboard, which he signed signifying his attendance in the meeting, and was given a carbon copy. He stood up to leave, seeing freedom from doom just within reach.

"One more thing," said Simon from HR as Ralph grabbed the doorknob. "Why do you think the child thought her doll was dead?"

Shit.

"Who knows," Ralph said with a shrug, "she's a child."

"Right, of course," Simon said returning to his clipboard. Ralph could not get out of there fast enough.

He wanted to hide then. To go back to the men's room for the rest of his shift and slack off. But there were other problems still. Problems that could blossom into disasters. Dinner had completely destroyed her doll, the same doll that Table *would lose his shit over* if it was not returned to him. This was not a matter of damage control any more, this was full out war on the three fates.

Despite the terrible odds against him, some assets were still in Ralph's favor. Table, for one, was wholly ignorant of the HR department. It was entirely likely that he didn't even

know that HR was a thing, let alone a thing that he could go to as a resource for his problems. This was probably Ralph's luckiest gain. Beyond that, he was able to hide Dinner's assault on Table in part because of Table's ignorance, but also because it was overshadowed by the fire alarm. Any decision that HR wanted to pursue that was not banishment would have been the best-case scenario there, so though he left their office in a loathsome hurry, he did so with a great burden lifted from him.

He did not know what came next. Before the fire squad showed, before he and Dinner were cornered by men like Simon from HR, Ralph had sent his cousin out to the Ware's Store to find a replacement doll. There had to be at least *one* doll in the gigantic hoard of goods that the IRS kept secure underground like a greedy dragon. If not? He could always send Richard topside. That wasn't ideal and would take much longer than he would like (and time was of the essence) but the threat of going topside would at least cause his cousin to look more thoroughly and harder in the Wares Store than normal. Anything that could help battle his family's natural penchant for slacking was a good thing in this instance.

He decided that it was best to check in on Dinner before making a decision. He needed to learn what she had told HR so that at the very least he could prepare for any of their surprises. This was good for covering his ass, but it also meant that he could protect Dinner from Table if he showed up before they got him a doll. Ralph knew that his priorities there were a little questionable but it wasn't like he was one of those topside raiders that ate your flesh before turning your bones into makeshift sex toys, you know?

If anyone wanted to guilt him he would quickly point out that he had missed lunch for all of this shit. Not everyone could be Arthur.

He quickened his step back to Dinner's room.

The hallway still had the acrid burnt smell of plastic in the air. Apparently, the bunker's filters and air control had still not pumped all of that out. If the hallways were dirty before, well now they were wet as well. The water from the sprinklers had flooded the living quarter's hallway, *and of course, the custodial staff was nowhere to be found.* Never mind that two of them were wrapped up in this scandal. More than once Ralph had almost lost his footing on the slick wet floor. It would be too much like cruel fate to break his neck right before shit really hit the fan.

He arrived at the steel door and knocked on it lightly. He figured that the little girl had been through enough today, even if she had brought it all on herself and was a frightening wasteland imp. She deserved some form of gentleness. All children do. When no one answered he knocked on it louder and was about to announce his presence verbally when the door was opened by a man not unlike Simon from HR.

"Uh, hello?" Ralph said with his natural total lack of authority. "I came to speak to Dinner about her reprimanding."

"Oh, of course!" the man not unlike Simon from HR said, "the heads at Human Resources wanted me to investigate her possessions. Find out if she still had more kerosene."

This was not good. The bunker was federal property, and though employees were allowed to live in the facility, they did not own, nor had privacy rights to their rooms. You lived on government property, you were subject to the government's rules and policies, never mind that the federal government was now an irradiated cinder. This fact was never important, the IRS was the government. HR was in their full right to search Dinner's room for anything that they may deem harmful to the bunker, or that broke federal law. This was a complication that he simply did not have time to prepare for once the fire safety system was activated.

Who knew what the man not unlike Simon from HR had found?

Dinner was sitting on the edge of her bed with a sullen face and defeated shoulders. The bed was wet, the floor was wet, all of her horrifying doodles and crayon portraits of cruel violence had been turned to moist pulp. The sad part was that she had probably lived in worse conditions. Everything was wet except for her face. Despite the pressure, the child still had not cried. She looked up at Ralph with her normal look of suspicion for him, which Ralph naturally mirrored back to her. He could not go over the details now, he would have to wait for HR to leave. Dinner stayed silent and motionless as the man not unlike Simon from HR stepped aside to let Ralph in.

When the door was closed behind them, the man not unlike Simon cleared his throat. "Say, before you begin, you wouldn't mind helping me with something, would you?" he said. "There are some details that are troubling to me."

"Of course!" Ralph said with more enthusiasm than was necessary. He was on edge. How many lies would he have to keep track of today?

"You were an Auditor, right?" the man asked. "Before you were promoted to supervisor you spent a lot of time topside?"

"That's right," said Ralph.

"Maybe you can put some context to some things then that the little one has had some *trouble* with." The man moved slowly across the floor, splashing puddles in his wake. Dinner stayed motionless. "While searching the room for contraband or more fire starters, I found some things that were *confusing*." He picked up Table's prosthetic leg.

Despite the IRS's grand cache, they did not have an actual prosthetic to give to Table when he was inducted into the bunker. Instead, someone had fashioned a female mannequin leg into a substitute using leather belts to hold it to him.

Through the chaos, and possibly Dinner's assault, the leather bands had been lost. Ralph hoped that the man not unlike Simon (from HR) had simply identified it as junk, instead of the albatross for what it really was.

"Oh, *that*," Ralph said with a wave of his hand. "She probably told you something like 'I don't know', right?"

"That's *exactly* right", the man replied.

"They *all* do that. When you grow up in the ruins of history but with no context to its grandeur, you just assume that *everything* was important. Wasters come across all manner of junk that they assume was vastly important, because why else would they make it, you know? And they just take it home. It's probably that."

The man not unlike Simon chuckled nervously then pulled out a necklace made of dried and rotten fingers from Dinner's shelf. "And these?" he asked.

Ralph was horrified. "Yeah, that's bad. We gotta break her of that habit." He said with wide eyes.

"Okay..." the man said as he scribbled something down on a clipboard. "Thank you for the insights, I'll let you get to it then." The man turned around with a polite smile but wide, frightened eyes. He opened the door to reveal a panting and out of breath Richard, frozen in mid-knock. The man not unlike Simon from HR left the room as Richard entered it.

Richard looked behind him and watched the man leave, when he was a good distance away he shut the door behind him. "We have a problem," he said.

"Jesus! *What now?*" Ralph said with exasperation.

"They don't have any more dolls," said Richard.

"So? *Go topside and find one!*"

"I can't," Richard said, "the bunker's on lockdown, the Army just took control of all of our security."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Arthur and Rabia were led to the upper deck of *The Salty Beard*. While brutal-looking men and women sneered deathly glances at the couple, while they traveled the wastes on a mechanized monstrosity born from mania, Arthur wondered why they didn't have any guard rails.

Sure. There were more immediate things to think about. But safety was important. It also just seemed like an unnecessary risk to the workforce. Why make your worker retention rate lower by not following basic safety procedures?

The fact of the matter was that after standing up to The Colonel and his Terror Throne, after surviving two suicide missions and taking on an entire city with cruelty as its only design aesthetic, it was getting hard to impress Arthur. Oh, *The Salty Beard* and its motorized junk fleet were one of a kind. Credit where credit was due. But sometimes he just felt that the anarchist gangs of the United Wastes were just trying too hard.

It was the non-flashy gangs that were starting to scare him. The IRS, the Army, those were organizations that kept their aesthetics to a bland function. They had nothing to

prove. They didn't care if you were scared of them or not. They were that big.

So, as Arthur and Rabia walked across the deck of *The Salty Beard*, he wondered if the land pirates were even up to the task. They could probably put the delivery of the slaves to a halt, that he agreed with Rabia on. But in the long run, General Oswald would want war and what then? Arthur knew one thing intimately about a bureaucracy that the pirates did not: they were cold. They would be unimpressed by theatrics, and anything but the bottom line was useless.

A suit and tie looking to correct people like numbers were far worse than a barbarian practicing cannibalism.

The deck was flat and open (with no guard rails). The only raised section of the deck was at the bow where an old chopper sat on top of a platform of engines and tires facing toward the road ahead. The sculpture was the only thing polished in the entire fleet, and a charred and twisted skeleton sat perched on top wearing a leather jacket with cut off sleeves, the words "the traveler" embroiled across its back. A red bandana was tied over the eyes of the skull. Dead center on the upper deck was a single sordid looking oil barrel with the top pried off. A figure stood right behind it.

The man with no teeth and all muscle led them to the center of the upper deck, right up to the barrel and the captain. Captain Salt was an intimidating presence, despite being a full foot shorter than everybody else on deck. His kilt had been crudely stitched together from more than one type of hide, human likely being one of them. He, like the man with no teeth, was shirtless, yet every inch of his skin was covered in tattoos. Depictions of predatory animals, monsters and men stretched across his form with cars and naked damsels in pornographic details. He was squat, with a wide frame, short stature and built like a house. As he studied Arthur and Rabia with humored green eyes his long and

dreaded beard parted from the wind. Each dread of his beard was as black as the abyss, and the rancid smell of motor oil told Arthur that they had likely just been soaked in the stuff. His head was bald but not bare as a makeshift hat crafted from a hubcap rested neatly on top of it.

"Welcome aboard!" he said with arms out and a crooked smile. "I be the Cap'n here." Before Arthur or Rabia could respond he put his hands on his hips and said: "Who will take the offering to the traveler?!" Silence, or the closest thing to it on top of a mutant conjoined diesel train screaming across the abused pavement below could get, washed over them.

The man with no teeth and all muscle straightened up. "I will," he bellowed with authority.

"The *fuck* you will!" War's voice cried out from behind them as she ascended from the lower deck of the car loader. "That offering is *mine* by right of discovery! I challenge him for it!"

Captain Salt's crooked smile spread across his face like a disease, his teeth as black as his beard. "I've been lookin' for some entertainment," he said, "prepare the arena."

This is a lot of noise for our two canisters of gas, thought Arthur. He waved it away, maybe that was just his bunker privilege showing.

War nodded solemnly. The man with no teeth sneered viciously. The two turned around and descended to the lower deck, leaving Arthur and Rabia alone with Salt.

They were not alone for long, however, as two women sharing the same biker leather mohawk aesthetic as the Four Horsewomen ascended to the top deck holding giant head-sized steins. "Before we parlay," Salt said, "let us give our sacrifice to the Eternal Traveler!" At this, the mohawked women in biker leathers walked to the oil barrel. The heavy and thunderous sounds of drums beat from just below deck, and the women kneeled in front of the barrel. Arthur

watched as they stood back up and dipped each stein into the barrel, bringing out from it a brown sludge. The women handed a stein to Captain Salt, then one to Rabia and another to himself. The fourth stein was carried over to the chopper at the bow of *The Salty Beard*. The drumming increased to a manic pace and the women poured the contents of this last stein into the chopper's gas tank.

If land pirates had a love for the dramatic, then everything Arthur had seen so far had to be porn to them.

The Captain led Rabia and Arthur to the back of the chopper as the drumming ceased. Captain Salt took a step up onto the chromed platform made of junk and turned to face them. He raised the stein upwards with great showmanship while his dreaded beard flapped in the wind. "May this fuel us ever forward!" he yelled. "The Eternal Traveler leaves his sins behind as new ones are on the road ahead! May he never come to rest on the infinite highways!" Great flames erupted from the chopper's tailpipes and Captain Salt downed the contents of his stein. Rabia was not far behind in the gesture, and with hateful determination rushed to beat the Captain in his chugging. Arthur looked down at his stein. The sludge was an unknown alcohol, thick and brown. The distinct smell of gasoline rose from it. Rabia's warning was sound. He decided to adhere to it and not drink. Not drinking would at least help in his assumed disguise as a Yesterday's Saints Elder. No one seemed to mind, at least not at the moment.

"We have a common enemy and an aligned goal," said Rabia offering the Captain a cigarette.

"No," the captain said refusing the smoke, "had to quit, it's me beard." He removed his hands from their shoulders and took a step backward. "Who's the enemy?"

"Slavers," Arthur said holding his stein away from his nose. "We need your help to free some slaves."

"One rule of the road," Captain Salt said with a stone face

and low voice, "be free." The two mohawked women took the empty steins from Captain Salt and Rabia, then disappeared below deck. "My men have been thirsty for some blood since Death found her namesake, where is their camp?"

This was going way better than Arthur could have anticipated. A part of him felt like they were somehow making a deal with the devil, and he doubted that devil would be won over so easily, but well, here they were! They were already getting into the details.

"No camp," Rabia said, "believe me when I say that the sleaze shit rat-bastards are too big. No, we need you to raid their deliveries. It would be a once a week thing, your fleet comes close to their route already."

"Too big?" Captain Salt said, his pride likely wounded, "Only The Colonel's gang could stand a chance up against us!"

Rabia smiled and patted Arthur on the shoulder, "This bastard here put an end to The Colonel!" she said with genuine admiration. "Believe me when we say that they are too big."

"You?" Captain Salt asked with his hands crossed, "You ended The Colonel's operation?" He eyed Arthur once over. "This Yesterday's Saints Elder? He can't even drink the Traveler's fuel!" Disbelief wrote its mark across the Captain's face. "What's wrong, Elder, your god still not a fan of fun?" he said pointing at the stein.

"What?" Arthur said with his usual lack of elegance.

Salt laughed heartily at Arthur's awkwardness likely taking it as proof that the two of them were messing with him. After wiping a tear from his eye with a dirty motor oil-stained finger he patted Arthur on the back. "Keep a humor like that and you'll fit right in," he said. Arthur's meticulous mind screamed at the idea that Captain Salt had just left an oil stain on his work shirt. "Who's the mark then?" Captain Salt said looking at Rabia.

"The IRS," mumbled Rabia as she cuffed her hands over the end of her cigarette protecting the cherry from the wind.

The sound of motors, the sound of a chassis vibrating from the movement on a road, the sound of wind howling as they sped forward. The Captain, however, was silent, and his silence was a foul omen.

"IRS," Captain Salt parroted. "What is this?!" His once humorous eyes now lit with rage, he stepped forward with squared shoulders, "The IRS is the biggest gang of raiders in the United Wastes! You mean to have us rally against them?" asked Captain Salt. "The Eternal Traveler *must* move forward. The IRS would be our ruin. I won't have it." He turned his back on them and walked away, "No deal," he said, "parlay over."

Arthur had been told "no" before. He was cultivating a bad habit against it. "Be free!" he mocked with a scowl, "*Horse shit!* If you cared about other's freedom you would not hesitate to help, no matter the enemy!" Arthur walked toward the short captain. "We aren't even asking you to attack the bunker, all you have to do is raid them while they ship the slaves away. A motorcade even the eighth of this size could do it!"

The captain froze in mid-step and turned to face Arthur. The hot smell of motor oil wafted in Arthur's face as Captain Salt brought his own an inch from his eyes. "Some moral high ground you got there for a wife collector," he said. "What happens if we free them then? I'll tell you! We'll be on the IRS's radar and the next thing you know they'll be raiding us! I SAID NO!"

Before more could be said the drums below deck began to sound at a slow and steady pace. The captain grinned. "*The Cage*," he said with wild eyes. The drums rang with a cacophonous fever. The crew cheered and vehicles from the fleet sounded their horns. The crew from below deck came

upward and the now jovial captain moved toward the stern. Whatever was happening now put an end to their conversation. Arthur would have to wait until it was over to protest more.

The crew of *The Salty Beard* gathered toward the stern and peered over the ship. Rabia pushed her way through the crowd and made it dangerously close to the edge. Arthur followed with hesitation. She grabbed his hand and pulled him forward. The height made him dizzy and the quick movement of the road below them terrified him. Arthur pulled out one of his pens and in his fervor to click the top of it dropped it overboard.

Behind them was every deranged vehicle in the fleet, raging forward on the road with pumping engines. They started to part, to move to the side. They were making way for *The Cage*.

A rig as wide as *The Salty Beard* lumbered forward. A large platform lay across two flatbeds side by side, towed by a large dirt mover. The platform supported a giant birdcage made of barbed wire. *The Salty Beard's* drumming quickened as it neared.

"They are going to fight *in that?*" Arthur asked no one, "While it's still moving?"

Rabia's smile was ear to ear as she interlocked her arm into his, "Romantic, right?" she asked.

It was not.

The Cage picked up the pace, now just within feet of *The Salty Beard*. Men climbed down from the platform and onto the front of the giant earth mover. Chains were thrown to the men from the bottom deck of *The Salty Beard*. The men on the earthmover caught them and began fastening them to hooks at the top of the loader bucket.

Rabia pushed Arthur backward and away from the edge, the crowd around them did the same. The driver of *The Cage*

cut their engines and the chains' slack was no more. *The Salty Beard* jolted and slowed as it took on the extra weight, now towing *The Cage* behind it. Rabia jumped up and down in glee and fangirl anticipation. Once the moment had settled she dragged Arthur back to the edge.

They watched as War and the man with no teeth climbed upside down across the chains, holding their legs taut around them as they pulled themselves across. Once they were to *The Cage* they swung themselves upward and moved to the inside of the metal cage.

The platform below their feet shuddered and vibrated from the pavement. Barbed wire rose like jagged tentacles above and around them, their knifed edges rusted from blood. The two opponents looked each other up and down and circled each other like nervous wolves.

Arthur had no idea what he was watching. He was happy for the action, now, but it had taken a full ten minutes to get there.

Before War and the man with no teeth started their fight, before the match began proper, the two traded a microphone back and forth, slinging petty insults and revealing a deep drama-filled history between the two. The thing he did not understand as he watched the two wasteland warriors fight for their lives and reputations down below, was that the pirate fleet (Rabia included) seemed way more into the prematch dialog than they were in the actual fight.

The man with no teeth struck first.

He lunged toward the tall woman with his shoulders and head down at a full sprint. Just as he was near she jumped to the side and kicked his leg. The man fell to the ground with a thud. Horns from every nearby vehicle honked in excitement. The man with no teeth picked himself up, a task that was made all the more difficult by their unsteady platform. They were surrounded by razor wire, they were moving at high

speed across the apocalyptic highway, they were thirsty for blood. The man with no teeth landed a blow on War's face with his cinderblock sized fist. Violence at its best.

But the crowd reacted with less fanfare than they had when that same man revealed that he no longer respected War, that he thought she had let Death die on purpose and that she was always jealous of Death's natural swagger. As War lobbed her fist at the tatted brick of muscle that she was fighting, she got fewer cheers than when she had accused the man of pulling out his teeth so that he could give better head.

Oh, they were still reacting, that was a certainty. Rabia yelled with delight as every punch found its target and each blow never failed to solicit a round of honking from the nearby mutant cars. But Rabia literally put both of her hands around her mouth to boo with all of her might when the man had revealed that he was happy to see Death die if it made War and her gang weaker. The reactions of the crowd just seemed phoned in now that the actual fight had started.

Arthur didn't get it. All of this, for *gas*?

Rabia turned to Arthur, a smile still gracing her face. "Worst case scenario," she said, "is that we end up here on this ship forever. That's not so bad, right?" she asked with a playful jab into Arthur's side as War pushed the man hard into the cage's razor wire. Arthur nodded in a horrified agreement only to keep the peace.

With the man's back against the wire, with his arms mangled in it like a spider's web made of teeth, War stomped down on his knees repeatedly with fiery rage. The man struggled to free himself, but every moment dug the razor wire deeper into his flesh. War did not let up. She hit him hard in the stomach, pushing him further into the wire. The brutality continued for another few hits before the man cried out "I yield!" The frenzy of honks rose to a crescendo.

A man handed War the microphone. "What's that?" she

said bringing her hand behind her ear theatrically, "War can't hear you!"

"Oh *shit!*" Rabia laughed, again reacting more to the theatrics than the objectively horrifying violence that preceded it.

"I YIELD!" The man screamed, "The red car is yours!"

What?

Rabia's shoulders fell. She did not join the others in ecstatic cheering.

"What does he mean by that?" Arthur said in a panic. "Rabia? What does he mean by that?"

Arthur felt the cold hand of the captain pat him on the shoulder. Could feel the motor oil staining his shirt. "Quite the gift givin' up that fine car of yours to join the crew," said Salt. "He's disgraced, you can have his old job."

Reality hit hard then. Rabia did not meet his eyes. They were stuck onboard a chimera of steel that never slowed. They were pirates now.

"Welcome aboard!" Captain Salt said.

CHAPTER NINE



Just a day onboard and Arthur McDowell was the new emissary of the Eternal Traveler. The old emissary, the slab of muscle with no teeth, eyed Arthur with the hate of a thousand suns.

Long live Arthur McDowell!

The transition from unemployed bureaucrat to cult shaman had not been an easy one. Nor had it been a pleasant one. Aside from the brooding slab of angry meat that likely wanted Arthur dead, and aside from the fact that this was the last thing that Arthur wanted to do, he felt betrayed. Rabia had gambled on this plan and had omitted important details and their consequences. It hurt that she did not trust him enough to tell him her machinations, and though he was mad at her it hurt even more that she wasn't talking to him now.

That was entirely his fault.

They had fought, not bickered, not had some insignificant tiff, but fought and now that both had been emotionally wounded he was expected to carry on and learn the ropes of his new job.

The "man" in front of Arthur could not be sunburnt, but

that was only because his skin was now leather. He was also a man by title only as his age was closer to that of a boy. His skin, punished from years of a vindictive sun, made him seem older than he was. Yet Arthur could still see that paper-thin mustache that he wore was teenage growth. He wore clothes made of potato sacks, and had covered his knees and shoulders in pieces of tire, bound to him with the dried out ligaments of ... something. He wore glasses over his eyes, though a lens was missing. He spoke with a voice frayed from tobacco, and his breath smelled like rot. The “man” had calluses half the thickness of his thumb all over his hands, making them look bloated and dead. His parents, he said, named him Bently, but the pirates called him Lizard Shits.

It was hard enough pushing his fresh wound out of his mind, but it was made harder when a young boy named “Lizard Shits” talked down to him like he was five.

Lizard Shits dragged Arthur to the top of one of the oil tankers with a rope tied to a stone that looked as much like death as it smelled. “Open- the- top,” Lizard Shits said slowly, pronouncing each syllable as if English were entirely new to Arthur. “We put the rope- in the tanker- to check the gaaas,” Lizard Shits started nodding then, “do you understand?”

Arthur, as he understood it, was technically in charge of Lizard Shits. As Emissary of The Eternal Traveler it was Arthur’s job to monitor the gas level, inventory the sacrificial motor rum, and learn the ways and myths of The Eternal Traveler. He was, effectively, a high priest on a deranged land ship. Lizard Shits was the equivalent of a pallbearer, but Arthur did not get his new job from moving up in the ranks. Arthur was rewarded the job for the high buy-in that he paid (not that he was aware that *The Shark* was his ticket onboard) and because the man with no teeth was disgraced out of it. Arthur had to learn all of the basics, and Lizard Shits made no secret just how much he loathed him for being ignorant.

"I get it," said Arthur with snark. Arthur also made no secret how much he despised Lizard Shits. He took the dour rope from Lizard Shit's ballooned hands and lowered it into the tanker.

"Try not- to get your soft hands- too dirty- okay?" Lizard Shits said with a sneer.

The man with no teeth looked on from across the ship with a frown. Arthur suspected that most of the crew was watching him, pale and soft as he was, with bemusement and without respect. Everyone, that is, except for Rabia, whose back was turned to him.

It did not matter that Rabia was assigned to watch the horizon. Her back would be turned on him if she were not on duty. Her venomous words echoed in his head: *Did you think things would be ideal and family like?*

Arthur hated every minute of this.

He lowered the rope inch by inch as Lizard Shits huffed in impatience. When the rope went slack, when the rock hit the bottom of the tank, Arthur began to reel the rope in, not giving Lizard Shits the chance to instruct him to do so. "The stain on the rope-" the leathery boy said, "tells us the level of gaaaaas-"

Arthur wanted to strangle the boy, and it had just occurred to him that now that he was a pirate that he probably could.

When Arthur had the rope fully out of the tank, Lizard Shits' demeanor went from sass to doom in an instant. "*Shit*," the boy said. "Cap'n isn't gonna like this."

The rope was stained, but the stain only covered forty percent of the length. Before Arthur could say anything Lizard Shits walked with urgency to the other tanker and dropped a separate rope into its hole. While Arthur's movements were careful, Lizard Shits' were quick and confident. He had the rope dipped and out in two seconds.

The second stain was shallower than the first.

"*Shit!*" Lizard Shit cried, "we're gonna need to send somebody to fetch more at Smithton."

"They won't have any more," Arthur said sharing in the boy's gloom for different reasons. "They were getting gas from Rabia's raids on the IRS, we arrived with the last of it. So long as she and I stay here that's it."

"SHIT!"

"What are our other options?"

Arthur's heart was not in this. He did not want to be a pirate. He did not want to be mirroring a pubescent piece of leather and he did not want to be an emissary. They were supposed to ride away from this godforsaken fleet with new allies to help their underground railroad. But Arthur found comfort in work, he always had, and despite his annoyance at his predicament having the chance to problem solve and organize something was in his blood.

Lizard Shits paced between the tankers, looking into each as he passed them, hoping that there was somehow more. "We might have to raid," he said biting his cheek.

Did you think things would be ideal and family like? He didn't answer the question in his head, but he didn't think that he would be a raider.

Their fight the day before was *very* public. He demanded to know why she hadn't told him the price of admission. Frankly, he had a right to be angry. Rabia had tempted War with *The Shark* to get on board *The Salty Beard* the night that they had met the Four Horsewomen, and had said nothing. He wasn't angry that her gamble hadn't paid off, he was angry that he was left out of the loop. After their previous ventures into the United Wastes he may even have agreed to do it.

"I didn't say anything to protect you," she said with the

calm of an eye of the storm. "I thought that this would go down different."

"Protect me?"

"Yes, Arthur! *That's all that I do!* If you hadn't quit, if you had gone back you wouldn't be in this position."

"You know I had to quit."

"But you *shouldn't* have!" she had yelled not looking at him. "Why did you *really* quit?"

He couldn't list off all of the unethical bullshit that the IRS had done to put him over the edge, that would give away his cover. But it didn't matter. She was on to something. He had other reasons. He wanted to spend more time with her, he wanted to prove that he was more than a bunker mole, he wanted to wake up by her side.

None of this was said. It didn't need to be. Rabia crossed her arms while the Captain held back a snicker, totally entertained by the couple's feud. Rabia looked Arthur up and down and before he could say anything she said the words that had been cycling through his head since: "Did you think things would be ideal and family like?"

How did the rest of it go? Well, her back was turned to him. *That's* how it went.

He moved it out of his mind. At least as best as he could. Arthur's best coping mechanism had always been busy work. As much as he loathed his situation, he was half grateful for the distraction. "How much more gas would we go through from a raid?" he asked Lizard Shits. The last thing that he wanted was to be a bystander to wanton destruction and malicious bedlam. He could at least do his best to try and steer the pirates away from raiding while he was on board.

Lizard Shits shook his head and pushed his glasses further up his nose with his middle finger. "Doesn't matter," he said,

“the only ones left to raid are caravans. They will have plenty.”

This surprised Arthur. Rabia had said that caravans and land pirates usually got along. Were supplies so dire that the pirates were willing to cannibalize their spiritual cousins?

“Is it that bad?” Arthur asked.

Lizard Shits looked annoyed. “Yeah. It’s- that- bad- We cleaned out the entire area. There are no more trade stations. The caravans are the only ones left.”

“Why don’t we drive out to a different area then?” Arthur said thinking this to be reasonable, Lizard Shits’ reaction disagreed.

“You don’t know nothin’!” Lizard Shits spat with a roll of his eyes. “This rig is too wide for other roads. The highway is blasted to shit near the ruins and the other roads is too small! The Traveler must move forward. Always.” The leathery boy’s tone dropped at the last word and he looked past Arthur into the distance. “We been trading and raiding in this area for so long that there is nothing left but the caravans. *Shit!*” He refocused on Arthur, his look of disdain replaced with desperation. “The crew won’t have it. I don’t like it neither.”

Arthur looked up to find Rabia’s turned back in the distance. Hurt as he was, he couldn’t let the pirates attack her kind. “How pissed would the crew be?” He asked knowing the answer but needing the reaction.

“*Pissed,*” Lizard Shits said, “Half of us came from a caravan, *I* came from a caravan. We joined when we heard of the *awesome* ways of the Eternal Traveler. There would be mutiny!” He lowered his voice in an instant. “There would be mutiny,” he said again in a hushed tone. *Mutiny* was not a word you said so loud in a pirate fleet, even if you had no plans for one.

Arthur watched Lizard Shits for a moment and waited for more, but then realized the horror of the situation. *He was in*

charge. Even though Lizard Shits was, quite literally, showing him the ropes, at the end of the day Arthur was in charge. The person who had to tell Salt, the person who had to recommend their next course of action, was *him*.

Did he think that things would be ideal? Of course not. But he didn't think that he would be faced with a choice like this.

The day before, when she had asked him that, while the captain was beside himself by their spectacle, Arthur did not know what to say, but his anger wanted to boil over. "You don't respect me!" he said, fist clenched.

The woman who had previously bragged to Captain Salt about Arthur's escapades, the woman who joined the cause without question and was very vocal about Arthur's leadership abilities; she did not like what she heard.

"Fine," she said, "I guess I don't respect you then." She did not make eye contact with him. Instead, she pushed past him, keen to make sure that her shoulders bumped into his on her way past. Nothing else was said. The Captain got each of them working in their new roles, and Rabia slept on the other side of the deck.

So, here he was. His only natural ally kept her back turned on him. The old Emissary, a boulder of muscle and rage, watched him like a predator. A snotty teenager talked down to him, and he had to come up with a solution to the gas shortage.

Maybe quitting was a bad idea.

Technically speaking he did not have to be doing this. The pirate's main rule, *Be Free*, meant that if he wanted to leave, he could. But how? Short of jumping off of the speeding rig there was no way off of *The Salty Beard*. He could

“be free” but his choices were shit and the consequences dire.

No. Arthur would have to find a way out of this. Maybe convincing Salt to join their cause was not out of the question. Salt needed gas to keep this convoy going? Maybe Arthur could leverage that. He was sure that the little amount of gas that they would yield from raiding the IRS deliveries would not be enough to fix the problem, but even a short-term gain would look better than raiding a caravan. The IRS, of course, had an immense supply of gasoline stashed away with the rest of the bunker’s hoard. Ideally getting access to that would be best. Would it be possible to attack the bunker, free the slaves and fuel the fleet in one move?

He shook the idea away. Despite his disillusionment, the bunker was still his home. He also doubted that the pirate fleet would be a match for the IRS at full force.

While Arthur contemplated his options, Lizard Shits shifted his weight nervously and took a step away from him. When Arthur looked up he saw that Lizard Shits had made room for the man with no teeth. The man with no teeth was between Arthur and Lizard Shits faster than Arthur could blink. Lizard Shits was now obscured behind a mass of tattoos and muscle. The man with no teeth turned his back on Arthur and faced Lizard Shits. “Why do you waste time on this unworthy dick hugger?” the man with no teeth demanded from the leathery boy. “He does not know of the ways of the traveler! He cannot be a true emissary!”

Lizard Shits adjusted his glasses nervously. He looked down at the deck, avoiding eye contact. “You were disgraced,” he said. “Cap’n assigned him.”

The wall of tattoos and muscle spun around. The man with no teeth faced Arthur, towering above him. His shoulders squared up, and his predatory eyes caught Arthur’s. “I shall take back my honor,” he mumbled deeply through a

mouth of rot and gums. "I shall take back my job!" The man with no teeth produced a ball-peen hammer from his pocket and swung at Arthur.

The hammer nearly hit its mark, but Arthur pushed himself back and dodged the swing. The man with no teeth would not miss again. He was faster than Arthur. There was no escaping his wrath. The man with no teeth raised the hammer, his face contorted in animalistic rage, but in an instant gunshot erupted and that face relaxed to emptiness as blood exploded out from his ear.

The man with no teeth fell to the deck floor. The deck was as silent as a moving mass of cobbled steel could be. All eyes looked at the source of the gun report: Rabia. Dark sunglasses could not hide the cold anger from her eyes. Smoke rose from the end of her pistol's barrel as more smoke poured out of her nostrils. She stamped out her cigarette and holstered her weapon. "Don't fuck with us you swill drinking swine," she said plainly. Then she turned around and commenced watching the horizon, as she was assigned to do.

Arthur was saved. Hooray. Rabia had protected him, like always. *That's all I do*, she said in his mind.

He was alive, but she was right. He would not make it a day out in the United Wastes without her protection, without her help. The dead man with no teeth at his feet was proof of it.

He should have stayed in the bunker.

CHAPTER TEN



Ralph felt like his talk with Table had gone well.

There was no evidence for this. This was just how he felt about it. Prior to the bunker-wide meeting, Ralph had journeyed to Table's quarters. There he sat the outsider down, gave the man nothing but false reassurances, produced nothing, and then left him to be guarded by his cousin. The point is that nobody died. Well, at least no one that Ralph had witnessed anyway.

The cafeteria where he now sat had been converted into a giant conference room. Where the steel tables used to rest were now rows upon rows of steel fold-up chairs. Where the tables had forced one to face someone while they ate, promoting social contact on at least the most awkward level possible, these rows of chairs were now all faced in one direction. All of them pointed at the podium which now stood at the far end of the cafeteria.

Unlike the tables that they had replaced the chairs were unassigned. Regardless, everyone more or less sat in the area that they would have if the tables were still in place. Ralph, as a supervisor, was just two rows behind first. Still, what lay

ahead of him was a wall of hair as he was forced to stare at the back of everyone's head. Everyone in the bunker was in attendance, that was, except for his cousin and Table.

The podium, which was the center of attention for the sea of bunker dwellers that were crammed into the room, would have been otherwise inconspicuous. Made of particleboard the podium was covered in a thin layer of plastic that had been painted to look like expensive wood. There was a fifty percent chance that this podium was salvaged from a now-abandoned church above ground. The only odd thing about the podium was that it was not naked. An American flag had been draped over the front of it, hiding the plastic veneer and wood facade that otherwise covered it. It, at least for the moment, was alone. Their speaker had just arrived.

The memo that had summoned the whole of the bunker to this meeting said very little about the meeting itself. Never in the bunker's history had something like this happened. Ralph's best guess was that the higher-ups wanted to formally announce the new partnership with the Army, who had arrived en masse and kept Ralph and Richard from scavenging for a replacement doll for Table. With a bureaucratic coldness, Ralph figured that the speaker would announce that the Enforcers no longer had jobs in a manner that sounded like it was for the good of the organization. He expected the meeting to be presented by one of the HR mutants.

Instead, Henry S. Boyd walked into the room. Smiling. The walking grandfather clock was not in his normal collared shirt and tie. Boyd wore a blue suit jacket paired with a red tie *and he was smiling*. He did not arrive alone. Following just behind him were two of Oswald's men, young, crew-cut, and dressed in green fatigues. Boyd stopped just short of the podium as one of the crew-cut men reached for the podium's microphone. "All stand for the pledge of allegiance," the soldier said.

Everyone in attendance stood in unison. The wall of hair that was in front of Ralph had morphed into a taller wall of shirts. The pledge began. The echolalia of the room reverberated through the stale and filtered bunker air. All were facing the podium, including Boyd and the soldiers. It carried the only flag in the room. When they were finished reciting the pledge, Boyd took his place behind the podium. "Thank you," he said. The denizens of the cafeteria sat down in unison.

"Few things cannot be communicated in a memo," Boyd announced through the microphone. "The memo is not just the cornerstone of our bureaucracy, it is our main workhorse. In this bunker, it is used to relay any and all information that is needed to keep the system afloat. It is simple enough that it can deliver a list of office supplies that should be collected during an audit, and it is versatile enough to inform others of a co-worker's untimely death for those same office supplies."

Ralph shifted in his seat uneasily. This was a very strange affair. No less than a million questions were swimming in the collected minds of his peers. Yet they all sat in silence. Boyd looked over at the faces presented to him, each expectant and worried. He continued his speech.

"Memos can only communicate the day-to-day operations. They cannot communicate freedom. They cannot communicate patriotism and hope. For these things, *you need documents*," Boyd's smile widened then. "We are gathered here today to announce a new era for the United States of America. What you see in this room is officially the remnants of the United States government."

The simple, yet pants-shitting ignorant, bureaucratic belief that the rest of the United States government had dropped the ball was not merely entrenched in the IRS psyche, but writ as dogma. A bureaucrat did not go above and beyond his stated job. The fact that the mail was not being delivered was not due to weaponized fusion laying waste

across the civilized world, it was because *the postal service was lazy*. The fact that every law known to man was broken every second of the day was not due to the social contract being vaporized in atomic fury, it was because the judicial system was out to lunch. To be frank, the IRS decided to stick its head in the ground as a coping mechanism. It needed the other houses of the government to exist, if only in their own mind, so that they could power forward and do their jobs. The IRS's stated job once the apocalypse had settled was to rebuild those houses. By officially declaring them dead, Boyd had effectively made it their job to pick up the slack. There was no more passing the buck.

This was not received well.

Not that there was any outward dissent. This was still the IRS. Those attending the speech sat in bitter and astonished silence. Ralph included. Boyd continued.

"The United Postal Service is gone," Boyd said. "The Better Business Bureau is cinder." He was met with bated breath. These things were obvious. Deep down everyone knew these things. Saying it out loud meant that they had to do their jobs. "There is no judiciary branch, there is no legislative branch. There is only the Army and us. We, my fellow Americans, are all that is left of the executive branch."

Ralph tasted bile in his mouth. Just weeks ago this man was his hero. Just weeks ago he was proud to have Boyd's approval, if only so that he could look Arthur in the eyes. Ralph was, without a doubt, the most reluctant member of Arthur and Rabia's resistance. He knew that what they were doing was the right thing, but goddammit, Ralph wanted to live. He wanted to stay comfortable. Yet, he was among slaves. He was safe due to others' suffering. Ralph was no hero, but he was no monster either. He knew what was about to happen. He kept himself from vomiting.

"Memos," Boyd said into his microphone, "are the minu-

tiae of government and business. They keep the day-to-day operations moving forward. Yet they are nothing compared to *documents*.” Boyd paused. Only the soft purr of the bunker heaters and air purifiers could be heard. “*The document, the only document* that matters is vague on the order of succession. The President has been dead for twenty years, so too has the Vice President, so too has the Speaker of the House, so too has the President pro tempore...” Boyd continued. If Ralph had any doubts that Henry S. Boyd had written the speech himself, then they were obliterated during Boyd’s unimaginative list of officials. Only the anal-retentive tyrant that was his boss would list every possible official while skipping none. There was no cutting to the chase here.

“The Secretary of State...” Dead. “The Attorney General...” they too were dead. Boyd went down the list. Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Health...Education, Veteran Affairs, Homeland Security... All dead. “General Oswald, the last leader of our military, has informed me that only he and I are left. We both agree that it is in the best interests of our dear nation that our leaders remain civilian-run.” Boyd cleared his throat. His smile was ear to ear and unburdened or hidden by his broom-like mustache. “It appears that I am the successor to the President of the United States of America.”

Fucking of course he is, thought Ralph as the rest of the cafeteria erupted in ecstatic applause. Suddenly Ralph envied Richard’s job. He would much rather keep watch on Table than have to fake enthusiasm. So he didn’t. Everyone was too busy in their rapture to notice him anyway.

Boyd, well, he was still more bureaucrat than politician. He did not wait for the applause to die down to continue his speech, opting instead to stay on time with his scheduled speech. “The remnants of the United States Military have taken over our security to free up our resources. In the next few days, we will be dissolving our Enforcer program.” There

was a noticeable switch in mood as the Enforcers behind Ralph reacted silently to this news. "Further," said Boyd, "the massive inventory of living calories that we collected in our first major audit will be moved topside where the army waits for them now. Oswald has set up camp just above our bunker to allow them to process their federal funds and to ship them back to the nearest Army base as reenlisted draft dodgers." Ralph swallowed his spit as more bile threatened to force its way up.

The Army was effectively in charge now. There were no more mucking up deliveries. The bunker would be on lockdown with a prison camp on top of it. The resistance that he was so reluctant to be a part of had practically dissolved in a single speech. He had to radio Arthur and Rabia. It would be the first thing he would do once Boyd was done with his theatrics.

Of course, Boyd was far from finished.

"Once the Army has finished their shipment," Boyd continued, "we will take the first real steps to rebuild our once great nation. Until very recently tax collection efforts have been lax and *very* localized. The Revised Emergency Operations manual has done us well, but now, with the authority of *the President*, we can now move forward with *zeal*." The hum of the heaters, the racing heartbeat of fear. Boyd straightened his tie. "The IRS will more aggressively pursue the collection of taxes to best help rebuild America and to assist the US Army's mission to enact martial law until such time when the justice department can be rebuilt. You will only collect the highest yield of payments to speed up this process. This means calories, living or dead." Before the cafeteria had time to process this news Boyd continued: "With the aid of the Army we will be more able to pursue the collection of calories and with the Army we will be bolstered in numbers by this collection. As we speak Oswald and his

men are already hard at work above us to prepare for our new venture. We will begin tomorrow.” Boyd leaned into his microphone to finish his speech which had run to the second of its schedule. “God bless America.”

Few sat in silence. The Enforcers, now unconfident in their future role, stole worried glances at each other. The auditors, however, gave their new President a standing ovation. Ralph was not sure if their feverish response was due to the pomp and prestige that Boyd had recently decided for himself, or if it was simple excitement at the prospect of collecting more taxes at a faster pace. He suspected that had Arthur been here, and without his annoying moral core, that he too would have been excited at the idea of more paperwork and a zealous approach to their collecting efforts. President Boyd walked out the way that he came and was escorted out by the same two soldiers that had escorted him in.

Ralph stayed seated. Stunned in silence. Finding a doll for a lunatic janitor just did not have the urgency that it did only minutes ago. Tomorrow the IRS would prepare itself for more human processing. All taxes would be paid with bodies and those bodies would be fed to the Army. Were there actually plans to rebuild society? Could the United Wastes be tamed? Ralph did not know. Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe Boyd’s plan was a necessary evil to bring back the glory of suburban ideals. But it didn’t feel like it. It felt like things had just been turned up to eleven and that would be the new normal for time immortal.

“I knew that the Post Office was gone all along,” Ralph heard an Auditor say behind him. So this was it. That was the takeaway. Boyd just crowned himself king of the wasteland, declared war on everyone not already in Oswald’s army, *did a decidedly boring job of it*, and the general mood was “yup, I was right all along. God damn Post Office.” Ralph could not

contain his disdain any longer. He turned around to face the owner of the sentiment. He was met with his cousin's face.

"Rich?" Ralph said while his head did its best to make sense of the offense that it was now seeing. "Why *the fuck* are you not guarding Table?"

The cafeteria began to empty. Agents queued up to leave and the chatter around them had grown thick with anxiety. Ralph and Richard were two of the few who remained seated.

Richard shrugged, "I came for the announcement," he said. "Everybody was ordered to, I'm just doing my job."

"Since when did you start doing your job?!" Ralph yelled. The cafeteria's chatter was not oppressive enough to drown him out. Others stared.

"Well it's not like I've got a job now is it?" Richard replied with no love for his cousin. "I've got bigger things to worry about than a crazy cripple, Ralph. If the IRS has no opening for agents then I might have to join the army, and I'm pretty sure that all of the other Enforcers are going to be gunning for the IRS too. That's a lot of competition!"

"If Table gets to that little girl—"

"Who cares?! I've worried about you my entire life and right now I'm *fucked*. Can we give a shit about my well being for once?"

"You were there *to protect a child* you jackass!"

The cafeteria had emptied. They were the last ones still in it, save for two other people. They were the last two people in the agency, save for Boyd himself, that Ralph wanted to see.

Standing at the doorway at the very back of the cafeteria was a man not unlike spoiled play dough. He wore plastic glasses with a contempt for others and looked like the devil himself: Simon from HR.

That alone would have made Ralph bite his tongue and punch Richard's shoulder to follow suit. But standing right

next to him was the blonde woman. The very same woman who had brought Dinner's drama to his attention. The very same blonde woman who had promised to keep everything under wraps. As she stood next to Simon she glanced downward at the floor. She hugged herself tightly and she bit her lower lip.

Looks like that promise was broken.

Rich looked behind them then turned back to his cousin. "I've got an application to fill out," he said standing up. "Good luck." Richard walked swiftly to the exit, never once looking back as Ralph sat in fear and desperation.

Ralph gathered the courage to see his fate, Simon from HR walked towards him. The woman stayed at the door.

Everything was falling apart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



She descended to the bottom deck quietly. Publicly killing the biggest guy on the ship had the added benefit of making sure that no one fucked with her—so at the very least she knew that no one would follow her. Still, these sorts of things required cunning and stealth. It was important that she merged with the shadows, that each step was as silent as a fox's breath.

“Hey Rabia!” said War.

Goddammit.

“Oh ah, what's up?” she replied.

The bottom deck was a collage of junk squeezed together to make walls. The stern of the deck was an old rusty trailer, presumably where the captain lived and an empty wall of drums. Flanking each side of this trailer were two long storage containers, each missing a wall on its side. This was where most of the walkable space of the deck was. The bow wall that completed the enclosure was the very same custom cowcatcher that had swallowed them whole. These “walls”, all of them were welded and bolted together around the multi-level car trailer that sat in the center, Rabia's destination.

Her plan was not particularly original, but it had the benefit of not being complicated. While darkness fell she was going to find a way off of *The Salty Beard*. Steal and prep whatever car, motorcycle, or savage go-cart she could get her dirty hands on and then fetch Arthur at the very last second so that he did not have any time to muck anything up. Bringing him was a mistake. He would not survive for very long on this ship. Having Salt's aid and fleet on their side would have made their Sisyphean task easier but she couldn't fight off and kill every motherfucker that wanted to strangle the toe-counting bastard.

Hell, if he apologized and didn't act like an ass, Rabia would let him ride shotgun instead of being locked up in the trunk like she currently planned.

But, of course, all of this required that no one was below deck that she did not want to kill.

War stood over *The Shark* with a rag in her hand and a proud smile. Rabia had not known War for very long, but something about her stoic and warrior-like demeanor gave her the very clear impression that she did not smile often. *The Shark* was now shiny and cleaner than she had ever seen it. War must have been shining it for hours. War stopped her task and dropped the rag in her hip pocket then stood straight and regarded Rabia companionably. "This car drives like a monster," she said.

"That car *is* a monster," Rabia corrected her.

War nodded her head. The slight motion from the otherwise still woman seemed almost eccentric compared to the rest of her composure. This might be the closest thing War came to being giddy.

"You kill good," War said. "I spared that man to humiliate him. Make him suffer in his defeat. Make him watch as I drive my new prize around the dust-covered roads slaying my enemies. You did him a favor."

There was no escaping it. Rabia was now trapped in a conversation. She couldn't just turn around and go back up to the top deck and pretend that she was lost or did not mean to be down below. War was not someone she wanted to kill (she was also not totally confident that she *could* kill her). If she wanted *The Shark* back then she would have to wait the conversation out. Resigned to her current fate she sighed and pulled her cigarettes out. "The bastard had it coming," she said as she lit one of her cancer sticks. "Threatening what's mine aside, of course."

"The former emissary had it coming for years," said War. "He treated us women like dogs. Death would have been happy to see you shoot him." War looked away. She idly picked the rag out of her pocket and with less zeal than before continued to shine *The Shark*.

Sympathy? Empathy? Maybe. Seeing War suddenly sullen at the mention of her dead friend was no easy thing to see. But Rabia was also a natural fan of arena fighting, and half of the appeal of an arena fight was always the preflight soap opera. Her curiosity could easily have been due to an unresolved story.

"What killed your friend?" Rabia asked after a puff of smoke.

War paused in mid-swipe. "Botched raid," she said simply then continued at her task.

Dammit. Maybe it was empathy after all. "Listen," said Rabia, "before declaring war on the IRS's slave trade I grew up in a caravan, even became sheriff." Rabia offered War a cigarette. If she was going to conference instead of sneak out during the night she might as well do so properly. War took the cigarette. "We never got into pirating, but believe me when I say that I have lost precious people to the wastes. What happened?"

War too lit her cigarette and inhaled on it deeply. The

rag found its home in her pocket once more. "Death was brilliant," said War, "but she was also reckless." War was facing Rabia but she was not looking at her. "We, the Four Horsewomen of the Apocalypse, are the first ones to arrive before a plunder. We act as scouts. If the people we encounter are not assholes we suggest trade. Otherwise: *plunder*."

"That's a pretty good gig," Rabia said. "Deciding who gets to live or die? That just comes naturally out here."

"Yes."

"Yes...*but*?" This story does not have a happy ending.

"*But*," War continued. "We have a reputation. We are The Eternal Traveler's harbingers. Assholes have learned to fear us, but they know that what follows us is far worse." War examined her cigarette, looked at each side of it. She seemed to contemplate its ember. "Motorcycles are fast. They are nimble. They do us well in our job. But riders have no authority, no respect, and *no safety*."

The rider's hierarchy, Rabia knew it well. It existed in her caravan. Rabia was blessed with a very slight facsimile of a childhood in large thanks to the fact that her mother owned a big rig. Your ride was your status. Everything about War's presence spilled out pride and confidence but no one else in the fleet thought of her more than they would a fly.

"We had been on many a scout mission," War said, "each was successful, but we remained in our positions. We should have been granted bigger rides. Death should have been given a sedan at the very least. But..."

"But you were too good at your jobs," Rabia intuited.

"Yes. We tried too hard. We did it too well. It got so that the Cap'n didn't want to replace us. So Death had a plan."

The ship rattled around them. Rabia had not yet totally earned her road legs back. She stumbled but caught herself. She hoped that Arthur, arrogant as he was, had not fallen

overboard just then. War, however, stood as if nothing had occurred. She breathed the road.

"We had spotted a smaller fleet of pirates," War said. "Caravans we ignore, tribes and settlements we trade with if they don't hide, slavers and raiders we attack on sight, but pirates we give a choice: join or die. It is why the fleet is as big as it is. Even if they decide to join us, The Traveler's harbingers still get to decide whether or not they are assholes."

Rabia's Cheshire cat grin peeled across her face. *Who lives and who dies*, she repeated romantically in her head. It was batshit and totally wrong, but so was frosting spread on amyls. Dangerous, sure, but it had its appeal and Rabia liked to flirt with the devil just enough to be a total tease.

"Death's plan," continued War, "was that we 'meet and greet' the pirates, tell them what for and heavily imply that a bribe big enough, like a car, would help us decide whether or not we would return as friends."

"It didn't go so well, did it?" Rabia asked.

"No."

The rig shuddered once more. This time Rabia went down. Yet, before her face could be roommates with the floor War caught her. War's cigarette fell out of her mouth in the action. She did not go looking for it. Instead, War helped Rabia upright. She was merciful enough not to taunt Rabia for the fall. Road legs were a matter of pride for women like them, and being weak was often ridiculed. Apparently, Rabia was on War's good side. "Thanks," Rabia said meekly. "Want?" she asked holding her lit cigarette toward War to offer as a replacement. War shook her head.

"We knew that the other pirates were assholes even before we met them. But the reward of having a car, of having *respect* was high. I let her gamble. The other pirates never

wanted to join us in the first place. They bashed her head in with a baseball bat covered in ice-skate blades.”

“That is so unoriginal,” Rabia said shaking her head sadly. “*Everybody* has an ice-skate baseball bat. They could have at least respected her enough to kill her with something imaginative.”

The two women stood in silent agreement. “At least it wasn’t covered in nails,” War said. She sighed deeply. “Me, Pestilence and Becky barely made it back.” Then, unexpectedly, War looked Rabia straight in the eyes: “Thank you for your bounty.”

“Ummm, yeah, you’re welcome,” Rabia replied, her face tight. Offering up *The Shark* had not exactly gone well. She definitely should have told Arthur about it, and just moments ago she planned on stealing it back. It was an awesome ride, but clearly it meant more to War than ever it could her.

“With this ride I will climb the ranks higher,” War said. “With this ride I can assure the other Horsecowmen prestige.”

“It’s really no big deal,” said Rabia.

“Oh no, it is the biggest deal. This car will elevate us and ensure a permanence in rank. My girls can sleep without worry now.”

“Mother fuck biscuits,” Rabia cursed under her breath. Her ticket out of here was now a symbol of women’s freedom. There was only one thing worth trying now. “What happens if another were to challenge you for the ride? Doesn’t this make you a target?”

War did something then that seemed unnatural. She laughed. She laughed heartily. She laughed for way too long and Rabia shifted her weight twice before she was done. “No one will challenge me after my fight with the emissary,” War said when she was finally finished. “I am now the top bitch on the totem pole, the only fighter more frightening than me is Salt, and the Cap’n has no reason to challenge others.”

"I don't know about that, how often do people challenge Salt?"

"Often."

"And you don't think that same pattern will happen to you?"

War laughed the same hearty laugh once more. When she was finished Rabia decided to drop it. Maybe she was going about this the wrong way. Even if she could convince War to give up *The Shark*, she wasn't sure if she could take it back, not without War getting an even better ride. Her heart just wasn't in it. But War's old ride was now free, and War might even be willing to just give the motorcycle to her out of gratitude.

"What happened to your motorcycle?" Rabia asked finishing her cigarette.

"It will be given to the lowest crew member tomorrow. Maybe you."

"Riddle me this," Rabia said, "how is it that your pirate tribe worships a dead man on a motorcycle, but reveres none who ride one? The hierarchy was the same for my caravan, but..."

War shrugged her shoulders. "Religion is weird," she said simply. It was an understatement.

So that was that then. She only had to wait and soon she would be the next generation of Horsewomen. Arthur could ride bitch and they could get the fuck out of Dodge the moment they were made to scout or trade. No fuss no muss.

Except, of course, that they would return with less than they came with. The railroad would be on a permanent hiatus until they could magically come up with an Army, and she would probably have to drag Arthur off of the ship by force. There was no way that he was going to give up now that his pride was wounded.

She settled her mind then. It was a plan fermented in

lunacy, and it would probably get her killed. She had only three cigarettes left anyways, something desperate had to happen. She took another cigarette out and decided she would run it by Arthur first, if only to prepare him for what was about to go down. There was just one last thing nagging at the back of her mind.

“Hey War,” she said with a mumble as her lips held her new cigarette tight. “Who does your hair? The dye, I mean. Surely scavenging a popular color like that has made it rare!”

War raised her chin and lowered her eyes. “Where do you find your cigarettes?”

Rabia smiled wickedly. “That’s something I plan on taking to the grave,” she said. If everything went as planned, that might be sooner than she wished.

CHAPTER TWELVE



It had been two days. Table sat at the edge of his bed, a luxury that he was still not used to, listening to bullshit.

His room, in every way that did not count, was identical to Dinner's. The dimensions were the same, the steel frame bed with a mattress made during the cold war was the same. Everything was the same. Except that Table's room wasn't covered in psychopathic doodles. Except that Table's room was tastefully decorated with crochet doilies and not violent tapestries that would scare dollies. His room was welcoming to dollies, his room was pretty. Dolly liked Table's room better.

He had waited patiently in his room, not that he had much of a choice. Without his fake leg, all he could do was sit and feel pain from a limb that no longer existed. When the klaxons rang he spent a good ten minutes screaming in abject fear, but that was okay, it was good to get your heart rate up now and then. He was told that everything would be okay. He was told that he would get Dolly back. So when that asshole who called himself Ralph came by Table was elated. Until the bullshit began.

Ralph had entered the room with much fanfare. He announced that everything was good and that he had something important for Table. Ralph did not produce Dolly from behind his back. Instead, he revealed to Table his fake leg, now wet and without the straps. Not only did Ralph not deliver Dolly, like he said he would, but he also barely delivered on bringing back his leg, as there was now less of it. Table understood everything that he needed to at that moment: Ralph was not to be trusted.

The bunker was not to be trusted.

Then the bullshit began.

"We're still working on getting you your doll," Ralph, the LIAR said. "She's uh, she's going through some extra cleaning first but will be as good as new!" said Ralph.

Admittedly, Table was not that clever. Or perceptive. Or well, sane. But Ralph was not a good liar. Maybe he was to his own kind. Maybe the other bunker dwellers ate up his bullshit because they were fed nothing but all of the time. But Dolly was immaculately clean before the imp child stole her back. Table had spent hours making Dolly pretty.

So Table sat, his head clouded in dread *and whispers*, his amputated leg somehow in pain, and without a doll that was promised to him, listening to bullshit.

Denounce the Demi-Moon! His mind offered, as it often did in times of stress. *He lies about Dolly, he sits on thrones of supple wombs!* Table shook his head violently, trying to dislodge the whispers, but they just grew from the action. *He thinks you are stupid, eat lint to spite him. EAT LINT FOR THE COMMUNION!* "No!" Table screamed, still shaking his head. "I am not stupid! Dolly was pretty, where is Dolly?"

Ralph took a step backward. The half-hearted plastic smile he had been wearing was now a thin mask for the fear that he felt. Table knew fear. He knew it intimately. "Dinner

said that you killed the doll," said Ralph. "What did she mean by that?"

Table had not expected the change of subject. The whispers subsided. The pain in his not-leg throbbed. "You think I'm stupid," Table repeated. Ralph seemed to think that Table thought of the doll as real. Table knew that it was just a doll. He knew that it was not alive. It was just a doll. But dolls were nice. They calmed him. Brushing their hair calmed him, making them pretty was soothing. In the vast and violent wastes outside, there was nothing that soothed, except for maybe drugs. He felt centered around the toys. The whispers stopped.

Everything in Table's life was cruel and vicious. Everything was jagged and made for death, or *was* dead. Dolls were just made to be pretty. It was simple, juvenile even, but beauty was short-lived in a world where The Colonel was king. Table just wanted to be a part of those moments. He did not appreciate being condescended to.

"Dolls can't die," Table said. "I'm not stupid."

"Right right right," Ralph said with a half-smile. It was the same kind of smile that the other slavers gave him when they wanted something of his. When they tried to trick him. "Of course they can't die, but the little girl seemed to think so. If we knew what you did maybe it would help us clean it faster."

Chew his face off! The whispers suggested with their first helpful input. Table examined the leg that Ralph had retrieved for him. He knew not how he would reattach it, but maybe he could beat Ralph to death with it. Ralph would probably just run away and there was no way for him to catch up if that happened. "I just told her that I killed Dolly so that she would leave me alone," his eyes focused hard into Ralph, "I didn't actually do anything to it."

Caught in his lie, Ralph just smiled. "We'll get the doll

back to you as soon as it is cleaned. It's uh, irradiated, needs to be scrubbed, you understand?"

Table just stared.

"Ah, um, good," declared Ralph taking another step back towards the door. "Everything okay then?"

Wolves devour darkness to hide their pods. "Yes," Table said, "everything is okay." *God won't catch you when he blinks, bury him in meat.* "Okay forever."

Ralph seemed good with that. Was Table clever? No. Sane? He was pathologically eccentric. But could Table tell a man what he wanted to hear? He did so to The Colonel all of the time.

"Right," Ralph said. "Well then, I'll just be going and I'll let you know when the doll is ready." He opened Table's door and was halfway out when he turned around. "Just one more thing," he said. "Come to *me* for any questions about the doll, okay?"

Table nodded while his brain screamed.

Before Ralph shut the door behind him, Table saw the man. He was decked out in leather, was an "Enforcer" as the bunker moles called them. The door shut, but Table could make out most of what was being said. "Stay here Richard," he heard Ralph say.

So... He was a prisoner now. Just like The Colonel.

The moment it became silent, the whispers turned on him. They became mean. This was often what they were. Between the nonsensical and jarring conspiratorial babbling, they were more often critical of Table. *You ARE stupid.* They said. *Your leg went away because you smell.* They insisted. *You were better off with a book on your crooked back.* He hated it. He wanted to be soothed. They were only going to get worse.

Ralph was a liar. He could not be trusted. All of the bunker moles were liars. Was Table better off here? He hated the book, he hated The Colonel, but The Colonel did not lie

to him. Oh, The Colonel was brutal and mean, even beyond the whispers, but he did not lie to him. Table could barely walk. He needed help. He wanted the imp child dead. He wanted Ralph dead. He wanted Dolly back so that the whispers would shut up already. He could not do these things. Even assuming that Table could rig his prosthetic back on either foe could best him easily. All they would need to do was take his leg out from under him, just as the imp child had done already.

There was one who could help him. It was decided.

Table examined his prosthetic leg and tried to ignore the pain from his not-leg. He used a push broom to right himself, the same one that Ralph the liar had offered him two days earlier as a crutch. He hobbled over to his janitorial supplies, ignoring the whispers as they insisted that he was adopted and that his "parents" did not tell him. This, of course, was ludicrous. Table watched his parents die in a fire. No one adopted him after that. Silly whispers. He found the duct tape.

The job was not an easy one. Holding yourself upright on a broom while trying to fasten a mannequin leg to your stub with tape was not ideal. Yet he did it. It took much cursing and several tries before he got the angle right (the whispers denouncing him the whole time), but he got it done nonetheless.

With the job done he reached for the box cutter that they had given him to scrape gum off of the walls. This was his favorite part of the job because, well, *free gum*, but the blade could be used for a more sinister purpose. The man on the other side of his door, the man named Richard? This could end him quickly. He extended the blade all of the way out, saw its impossibly thin and sharp edge. He had to be quick.

He walked as quietly to the door as his rig allowed, which admittedly was not quiet at all. He took a deep breath when

he reached the door. The whispers always quieted down before violence. They knew not to interrupt. He opened the door with a slam, the cutter in front of him, ready for meat. But no one was there.

Richard would never know it, but his laziness had saved him once more.

The hallway was clear.

He had been there once before, just to see. As it turned out the bunker moles let him go anywhere if they thought that he was there to clean up. He went back inside for his cleaning supplies. *You are not clever!* The whispers hissed, *but that is a good idea.* He knew where he was going. Without his leg, it would take him longer than he wanted. But he could get there.

The hallways in the living quarters' sublevel were empty. All personnel were summoned to the cafeteria, and since The Colonel's main client had taken over security few would make it back down to the quarters until very late. When agitated most bees move toward the surface of the hive, leaving the inside bare. Table was very familiar with bees. The Colonel used them for genital mutilation.

Table hobbled forward with intention and caution. Each step was a dry test to see if the duct tape would hold. When he was satisfied with his craftsmanship he shifted into second gear.

When the bunker moles invaded Slaver City and made buddy buddy with The Colonel's main client, only one slaver was taken back to the bunker. Table had heard that the majority of his "friends" were taken into custody by The Colonel's main client, for something called draft dodging. The bunker moles arrested The Colonel for tax evasion. There was no other way that this could have happened. When the government built the bunker they only had the foresight to build a single holding cell in the detention area.

So much faith did they have in the civility of their federal employees that they not only just built one, but built one without bars. If he had not been told of the room's purpose the first time he cleaned nearby it, he would never have known it was there. It was so unlike the cages back home. Punishment was only a secondary concern for the room's purpose. It was originally built in case of mental breakdowns.

Table made his way to the detention center. In Slaver City there would have been a couple of guards posted near the prisoner, if only to mock those in the cage. But here in the bunker there was trust, unless of course, you were talking about lunch rations left in a communal refrigerator, in which case the social contract was torn asunder. All were suspect of treason if another man's lunch was eaten. Yet that was the one exception. The bunker moles were so confident in their system and walls that no one was posted in the detention center.

The detention center itself looked like everything did in the bunker. It was a concrete slab lit by a cold fluorescent sun. The walls were naked except for a single poster of prewar citizens baring their teeth. Table had no idea what a "smile" was. He couldn't read either, but if he could the words "mental health" that was printed on the poster would mean nothing to him. In the very center of the small room was a steel coffee table hosting a candy dish, each rock of sugar older than Table, none of them touched since before the bombs fell. Each one was likely to outlive him too. Behind the coffee table was a steel door framed around a large window with a wire mesh between two panes of glass.

He did not see him, but he knew that he was in there.

Table hobbled over to the door. He peered inside it hesitantly. The whispers grew louder, each one competing to put Table down and insult him better than the others. Each one

The Colonel's voice. He needed The Colonel's help, but he did not want it.

The Colonel stared back at him. Table flinched.

"Howdy boy," The Colonel said stroking his ugly wattle. "How's the life of a deserter treating you?"

The whispers ceased. They too feared the man behind the glass.

Gone was The Colonel's white shirt and bolo tie. Gone too were his boots with the jaws of dead men pasted to the toes. The Colonel stood before Table clothed in the same jumpsuit that the bunker moles had dressed the slaves in.

Table did not answer The Colonel. Years of subservience had suddenly made him meek in front of the man who gave him his namesake, his duty, his telos.

The Colonel continued to stroke his wattle, his sausage-like fingers coming just short of the missing chunk that the scary black woman had bitten off. The Colonel's eyes were soft around the edges, they looked fatherly even. Table knew that was a facade. He was comforted by them nonetheless.

"What troubles you son?" The Colonel asked, his voice as soft as his soul's eyes.

"The imp child took something of mine," Table said. "She took something important and won't give it back! The others here don't care, they lie! They lie and they don't help!"

"So you came to ol' Papa Colonel to make it all better, did you?" The Colonel more mocked than asked. "She took your dolly, didn't she son?"

Table's mind leapt into fear. The Colonel always knew Table better than Table liked.

"That's the only reason you'd be here havin' a palaver with 'ol Papa Colonel, isn't it?"

Table looked down at the chessboard tile beneath him and nodded. Fear grew to anger. "She took it!" Table yelled,

"the bitch imp child's room is scary and mine is better and she took it!"

The Colonel chuckled to himself, a movement that made his wattle move from side to side. "Did you come here for advice on how to get it back, or did you come on down here *to get back at the girl?*"

"Yes," Table said then blinked hard. "Both, I want both!"

"Tough shit boy," The Colonel replied with a wave of the hand as he turned around. The Colonel took a single step away from the door before he looked back at Table. "Why the shit should I help you boy? After you ran away like that and left me?"

"Because—"

"Because nothin'!" The Colonel bellowed with rage. Table felt himself shrinking. The Colonel was back to the window. His face centimeters from the glass. Fog flared from his nostrils. "I ain't helpin' you for the sake of it boy," The Colonel said. "You want my help? You gonna help me." In an instant The Colonel's rage subsided, and his hollow fatherly eyes returned to his face. "You help me son," he said, "I'll help you."

Table looked behind him, suddenly afraid that someone was near. He knew what was coming next. Only the stale and ancient candies would be witness.

"I'll get ya your dolly back and I'll get revenge for you on the child." The Colonel licked his lips. "Let me out."

He knew that this was coming, hell, this is what he came here to do. He could not get Dolly back on his own. He came here to let the animal out of his cage. Still, now that he was here, now that he was inches from The Colonel, he hesitated. "You'll punish the child?"

The Colonel just smiled.

There was no padlock, no key to be turned. The door's lock was in the handle. It just needed to be on the outside of

the detention room. Table unlocked the door and took a step back.

In an instant The Colonel's sausage-like fingers were wrapped around Table's neck. The Colonel squeezed hard as all of his weight came down on him. Table's fake leg peeled off as they fell to the floor. Spitfire fell from The Colonel's mouth as he strangled him. The Colonel's eyes were filled with rage, yet somehow still hollow.

Table tried to kick with his leg. But it was no use. The Colonel weighed more than he did. He couldn't breathe. He could barely move. Table drew out his box cutter. The blade was still fully extended. He slashed at The Colonel's face, cutting deep into one of his murderous shark eyes.

This did not deter The Colonel.

The Colonel howled in animalistic pain as blood ran out of his eye like juice from a split grape. He eased one hand off of Table's neck but only to then hold down the hand that held the cutter. Having one hand on his neck instead of two was not a relief. The Colonel just clutched tighter.

Table went limp. The whispers ceased forever. He was just like the ancient candies on the table. Just another decoration that no one wanted.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Arthur was not eating for the second time that day. This was not because there was nothing to eat but because “farmed fresh dog meat” was not something he ever wanted to eat. Oh, he knew that on a long enough timeline if he and Rabia did not get off the ship that he would have to resort to eating whatever was put in front of him— but he was optimistic that they would get off before he had to resort to that. Despite the fact that Rabia was not talking to him. Despite the fact that every minute they traveled further and further from home. Actually, if he counted, there were more reasons to be pessimistic than optimistic. Actually, being optimistic in the United Wastes, in general, was probably more akin to being delusional.

He just didn’t want to eat dog, okay?

Night had fallen on the road. Still, *The Salty Beard* drove on. It broke all of the rules that Rabia had told him about living topside, but then again, they were the predators. Driving at night was a privilege reserved for those with the highest murder count.

Arthur sat on the upper deck next to Lizard Shits who

was getting drunk off motor rum. Arthur had delayed telling Captain Salt that they would need to raid soon. Lizard Shits insisted but Arthur had convinced him that if he was to make a decision he probably should know more about The Traveler so that he could learn how best to honor him. Lizard Shits was surprisingly amicable to this suggestion and had spent the rest of the day teaching Arthur their creed. This, of course, was just a ruse for time. He needed to talk to Rabia, alone, warn her that the pirates wanted to attack her own kind. He needed to come up with a different source of gas.

If he could find a way to keep the fleet from marauding caravans, keep them gassed, find a way off the ship while simultaneously convincing Salt to help the railroad, then maybe he could prove to Rabia, and himself, that he could make it topside. This was an extremely tall order.

To Arthur's surprise, Lizard Shits was totally into teaching him about the Eternal Traveler. At first, he was full of snark and ill will, but the moment Arthur started writing down what he said he lit up like a dry Christmas tree next to a lit cigarette. The ways of The Traveler were wholly learned by spoken tradition. The grand majority of the pirate fleet was illiterate, and the books that the previous emissary owned (now dead by Rabia's hands) were pornographic magazines. So when Arthur pulled out his pen and a pocket notebook and started writing, the ways of The Traveler seemed suddenly more legitimate to Lizard Shits.

This had an odd and manic effect on Lizard Shits. He tried to rapid-fire anything and everything that he knew about The Traveler. All of it quickly became more important, and the leathery boy did not seem to want to leave anything out, lest it be lost to the official record that Arthur was now keeping. All of it horrified Arthur.

"Condoms are for losers," Lizard Shits quoted. "Like, does it even really count as sex if there is a sock on my junk?"

Arthur cringed. Lizard Shits looked at him. "Make sure you get that one down," he said pushing his glasses further up his nose.

The Eternal Traveler was a revered dirty old biker. The grand majority of what Lizard Shits had told him boiled down to bad advice that your unemployed uncle solicited to teenagers who were unlucky enough to wear a Led Zeppelin t-shirt in his presence. Yet Arthur was having fun.

Oh, everything he had to write down was terrible. "The safety on your gun is for bitches," Lizard Shits announced as if he were reading Mosses. "Unless you are going to do coke off of it but you can still leave one in the chamber, *like a boss*." But this was the first time since leaving the bunker that Arthur got to do some paperwork. Even if that paperwork was the ramblings of someone who collected DUIs and STDs like they were Pokemon.

An hour in, Arthur had to seriously question if Lizard Shits actually believed that this stuff would help Arthur make a decision.

As the glint of the moon lit up The Eternal Traveler's skeleton and old chopper, Lizard Shits knelt. His eyes went wide and he spoke the next words as if they were a secret spell that could only be uttered to the chosen one: "Fuck the government, youth culture forever, fuck your mother."

"What ah, what *exactly* was the context for that one?" Asked Arthur.

"Nobody knows..." replied Lizard Shits with wide eyes.

Then it came together in a gestalt leap. He could not believe that he hadn't seen it before. It was right in front of his eyes: he could register The Eternal Traveler's "teachings" as a religion.

Since the bombs fell no one in the IRS had ever gone through the process to register a new religion. But Arthur had seen and researched the paperwork in his off time for

fun. He knew which forms he would need. He knew what the pirates had to do to meet the criteria. A nonprofit religion was tax-exempt in the United States. If he could register them then the *Salty Beard* could trade with the bunker, they could get gas without raiding.

He did not yet know how that would help with the railroad. He did not yet know if that could get them off the ship. But it did mean that he could work as a freelance tax agent with the pirates!

...But most of all, it meant that he had a place topside. Quitting was no longer a mistake! Rabia wanted to criticize him for wanting to “play house”? *Fine*. She would sing a different tune once she found out that he saved a caravan.

All he had to do now was sort out the mythology and convince the captain. This was *far* more in line with his bureaucratic skill set than anything he had done in the past months.

“How did the Traveler die?” Arthur asked.

Lizard Shits stood up at this and began to pace. “It was *awesome!*” he declared. “When the world ended he survived. He was already out on the road and away from the city centers. They left some of the smaller cities alone at first, but the Traveler knew that they would bomb ‘em soon, so he rode out toward near one of the unbombed cities and bet his motorcycle club that he could outrun the blast. ‘The world is ending anyways so fuck it,’ he told them, ‘let’s have some fun!’ Can you believe it?” Lizard Shits had to stop because he was so excited that he had forgotten to breathe. “When they saw the rocket coming he peeled out.”

“Did he make it?” Arthur asked.

“Fuck yeah he did! But the blast had blinded him, and the radiation made him sick. He refused to stop riding though. He put that bandana over his eyes—” Lizard Shits said pointing at the Traveler’s skeleton. “...And he started

riding blind. His gang begged him to stop riding but he said 'a man doesn't need to fear the road! I'm gonna live forever!'"

"Then what happened?"

"Oh, he like immediately crashed and died. But it's like, a metaphor, you know? He lives forever on the endless road now."

It made no sense. It was perfect for a religion.

As Arthur started to scribe what Lizard Shits had told him Rabia walked up to them. Arthur was at once relieved to see her, angry, and full of dread. If Rabia felt the same way she only wore dread and anger on her face. "Kick rocks you dirty shit dangler, the adults have to talk,," she said to Lizard Shits with her teeth clenched down on a cigarette.

Lizard Shits' eyes darted from Rabia to the deck floor. The kid was taller than Rabia, but he knew the pecking order. He started to turn away, but Arthur was not having it.

"Stay if you want," he said to Lizard Shits, who now looked beyond conflicted.

"So it's like that huh?" Rabia said with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah," Arthur replied, "It can be just as public as last time."

Lizard Shits took a few steps back, electing to do something in-between leaving and staying. He pretended to look at The Eternal Traveler.

Arthur knew that he was being an ass. But he was lied to. Well, not *lied* to, but an omission was just as bad in as many cases. All he was guilty of was being naive. Naive and petty.

Rabia put her hand on her hip. "I might deserve that. Neither of us is being all that kind to the other," she said. "About yesterday..."

Arthur stood up. Now that it was night Rabia had her shades off. He hadn't seen it earlier that day, but without her glasses to shield her eyes Arthur saw it now: she was hurt. Or

was it that he was too busy being hurt himself that he didn't see it? That was the last thing that he wanted her to be.

"Not talking to each other is childish, we have to find a way off this thing," She said and then looked behind her to gauge Lizard Shit's ability to hear.

And to think. Arthur expected an apology.

It didn't matter. He'd get the satisfaction when he saved the day.

"I have a plan," he said. She wanted to discuss business instead of the obvious. That was fine. It was better than not talking, and frankly, getting back to the railroad was more important.

"I have a plan," Rabia said, hand still on her hip.

"Lotta good your last one did us," he said.

Rabia grit her teeth. "The fuck do *you* plan on doing, G-Man, file some paperwork?" she said mockingly. "Look, I'm trying to make am—"

Arthur's patience was out. "As a matter of fact I am and it is going to work," he said interrupting her.

Rabia's anger was suddenly flushed. Her eyebrow cocked upward in amused surprise, "Wait, *really?*" she said then laughed. Arthur could not tell if the laugh was somehow pleased with him or mocking him, though in his current mood it was easy to assume the latter.

Before Arthur could reply they were interrupted. If booze didn't shower it would have smelled better than Becky. She stumbled her way over to the two of them. "Sup?" she said with lazy eyes. Although she looked like the entirety of Bukowski's tenure as an alcoholic, and despite the constant shaking of the deck's floor, Becky stood upright. She was a true land pirate through and through. As annoyed as Arthur was with the interruption, he could not help but wonder how many pirates fell off *The Salty Beard* yearly. Whatever that number was, Becky was not among them.

"Good job today!" Becky said pointing at Rabia. "Fuck the old emissary, guy was an asshole."

Rabia crossed her arms and took a puff of her cigarette. "Thanks," she mumbled.

"Why did'n ya'll tell us ya were gonna join the crew?" Becky asked, missing any social cues that told her that she wasn't wanted at the moment. "Had I known that I woulda tried to challenge for that Chevy myself. Shit is a wicked sick ride. Glad War got it though, that was a helluva fight."

"Hell yes it was," Rabia agreed, stealing a glance at Arthur. "Say, do you know if War is into girls?" She shot an angry look at Arthur.

"I dunno WHAT that bitch is into!" Becky replied with more frustration than either Arthur or Rabia was prepared for.

Silence. Becky laughed then as if to fill the void in the conversation.

"What do you *want*, Becky?!" Rabia said arms still crossed.

Becky drew both of them near her, one arm on Rabia's shoulder, the other on Arthur's. "Say, do you guys have any more of those taxes that I can have, I need a pick me up."

It did not immediately click in Arthur's head that she meant *drugs*. She still had not understood the analogy that Arthur had tried to use about Rabia's drugs to explain taxes to her. By the time that it did, Lizard Shits spoke up.

"Taxes?" he asked adjusting his glasses, "what taxes?"

Arthur had already forgotten that the boy was there.

"Shut up Liz, just tryin' to get some taxes from the taxman here," Becky said patting Arthur on the back aggressively, almost knocking him down.

"She means drugs," Arthur said to clarify.

Lizard Shits looked Arthur up and down trying to decide

something. "Where did you learn how to read and write?" he asked with suspicion.

"Ah, I learned, well, um—"

"All Yesterday's Saints learn to read the good book," Rabia said coming in for the save. "Beat it you foul eyed rat bastard," she said taking a step toward him, "didn't I say that the adults were talking?"

Lizard Shits did as he was told. He walked away and descended to a lower deck.

"Seriously though, where the drugs at?" Becky said through a slur.

"They're all in the trunk of my old Chevy, they're War's now, go ask her!"

"That bitch," Becky stated as she lifted her arms off of the two of them. She then turned around and walked away.

"One of God's own prototypes," Rabia remarked at Becky. They were finally alone.

Rabia cleared her throat. She gave Arthur a half-smile, though her eyes had said that there was no heart in it.

So, this was it. Did he suck it up, talk about what neither of them wanted to talk about? Or did they exchange plans and keep it to business?

He clicked his pen. She shifted her weight.

"I still need time to work it out," he said, "but I think I can get it so that the pirates can trade with the IRS and—"

"I need to get you off this thing," said Rabia.

He couldn't agree more. What troubled him was that the lack of "we" in that sentence.

Rabia uncrossed her arms and took off her hat, something she had not done since before their time with the pirates. Her hair, normally kinky and lamb-like was now molded perfectly to the shape of her cap. She held the cap at her hips, the word *Professional* still clear across it. "I can fit in here G-

Man," she said. "Hell, I can even *thrive* here. If we need these pirates to help our cause I can stay behind until it happens. But you? You aren't meant for this." She held her hands up in peace, "No offense." She said.

Arthur just stared, trying to form a word or two, but ultimately failing.

"I have a plan," Rabia said, "but it might take me a week to get there. In the meantime, I'll try and find a way off for you and—"

"We don't have a week," Arthur interrupted, urgency finding ground in his voice. "The pirates are running out of places to get gas, Lizard Shits thinks that they will resort to raiding caravans soon."

Rabia's eyes went wide at the taboo. She dropped her hat. "What?!"

"That's why I need to stay," he said, "the only place in these barren wastes with a glut of gas is the bunker. This is a matter for a bureaucrat."

Rabia bit her bottom lip, then picked her hat up and once more covered her bowl formed hair. A few rebellious curls stuck out. She looked shaken. "How are the pirates going to trade with the IRS *and* raid them at the same time?" she asked, there was no criticism there.

"I don't know yet," Arthur admitted, "but maybe we can still blame the raids on 'the witch'."

She smiled back at him ever so slightly.

A bell-like chime of a steel pipe hitting the deck in anger rang out into the air. Arthur and Rabia turned to see the origin of the noise.

Behind them was Captain Salt wielding a rusty water pipe with the length and effect of a wizard staff. His face was sharp with anger. Now that he had their attention he hit the deck with his pipe once more.

Lizard Shits peeked his head out from the lower deck, just enough to see, but not daring to come up any higher.

The captain's beard, all dreadlocks and motor oil, blew to the side of him from the wind. The deck was still. No one dared to breathe. Captain Salt squared his shoulders up. His stature was still short, but the tense muscles his posture revealed were imposing enough. He clutched the pipe tightly with one hand and pointed a finger at Arthur with the other.

"You're a snake!" he yelled between his teeth. "A god damn Judas snake!"

Rabia inched herself between the two men. Arthur did not see her packing her usual arsenal. She might have a knife, but otherwise, they were unarmed, and the pipe had more than enough reach to put any knife fighting to bed.

"How long have you been a spy for the IRS?!" Captain Salt bellowed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Arthur was not impressed.

“Yesterday’s Saint huh?” Captain Salt said with a sneer. “It was a good lie, at least ya didn’t have to have a wardrobe change.” Salt slammed his pipe down on the deck once more. His face was red with rage. He pointed at Arthur with the tip of his long and rusty weapon. “Bring him to me!” he cried.

The rest of the crew had gathered from below, a mixture of tattoos and savage cuttings, including War, Pestilence, Becky, and Lizard Shits. No one moved. Rabia pointed at herself. “Are you talking to me?” she asked in earnest.

“Yar! Bring the cowardly spy over SO THAT I CAN BASH HIS HEAD IN!”

“Fuck you!” Rabia spat back, “Touch him and I’ll shove lye up your ass!”

Salt blinked. He looked behind him at his crew. “I said bring them to me!” Pestilence and Becky took a few steps forward.

Arthur, once more, was not impressed. Sure, death by

Captain Salt's pipe would be horrible. It would be brutal, long, and he would probably feel all of his bones break minutes before he finally succumbed to the final sleep. There was no way for Rabia to take all of them, especially unarmed, and let's be honest; Arthur was useless in a fight. In all actuality, they had two choices, a long death by the rusty pipe, or a relatively quick one by jumping off of the rig. There was a small chance that they would live if they jumped. Everything pointed to disaster. But Arthur was not impressed.

Here was another warlord that had risen to the top through brutality and a ravaged dress sense. Shit, at least The Colonel had put time and effort into his Terror Throne. Salt's groove was cliché. *Yar?* Who the hell says *yar?*! Actual pirates didn't even say *yar!* Arthur was going to do what seemed to work best for him when faced with a tyrant. He was going to mouth off.

"Did Lizard Shits tell you the *other* thing?" he asked with his arms crossed. "The *more important thing?*"

Lizard Shits' face turned white. He hadn't. Lizard Shits was as afraid of the outcome as Arthur. He rode on Lizard Shits' silence for dramatic effect. The one thing that he had learned for certain about wasteland gang members was that they loved drama. You don't don a hubcap on your head otherwise. When he was satisfied with the results, he continued.

"The gas levels are past the halfway point, *on both of the tankers,*" Arthur said. He had their attention. "Rabia and I were responsible for the last bit of trading, and we were only producing a few canisters once a month. The roads are not wide enough for us to leave and the area is dry. *Except* for two sources..."

Captain Salt's shoulders fell. He knew the writing on the wall. The crew, once energized by the accusation that Arthur was a spy, were now totally attentive to his words.

"I am not an IRS spy, though I am from there."

"Fucking hell Arthur," Rabia muttered just loud enough for him to hear.

"The IRS has the largest cache of gasoline in the United Wastes," he said. "We can either trade with them or raid a caravan."

"How convenient!" Salt declared with venom, his posture still deflated. "An agent of the IRS who is *totally not a spy* wants us to trade with the IRS!" He spat to the side. "Which side of your head do you want me to work on *first?*"

Lizard Shits took off his glasses and wiped his forehead with the arm holding them, then replaced them onto his nose, his forehead the worse for it, now covered in dirt. "It's true," he said. "The part about the tanks at least. We are gonna haveta raid one of our own."

The crew began to murmur amongst themselves. "We're out," War stated, "The Four Horsewomen don't raid caravans." Pestilence nodded her head in agreement, a drunk Becky gave it a thumbs down and razzberried her tongue.

"Arthur is right," Rabia said. "I've seen the bunkers, they have a glut of gas and will trade. They keep a whole goddamn fleet running with no end of the stuff in sight."

Salt swung his pipe over his shoulder, then turned around to face his crew. "Do y'all know what the IRS will do if we try and trade with them?" Salt asked. The crew remained silent. "They'll take a third of our booty *and* charge us thirty percent more with what we trade them for taxes. 'One rule of the road: be free,' *that* is the creed we live by. What's mine is mine and I am fucking free to keep it." A few heads in the crowd nodded in agreement. "The IRS is *The Man*, the same that the Eternal Traveler fled from and fought against. Do you think that *he* paid taxes? FUCK NO! He did not pay for anything! What would he think of his children if he saw us peddling

with The Man?" He turned around removing his pipe from his shoulders and pointed it once more at Arthur. "Who cares if you are a spy or not? You are trying to lead us astray!"

Arthur could feel Rabia tense up. She was seriously prepared to fight for him, was seriously willing to take on the ship if she had to. It was only then that he realized how deeply he had cut when he accused her of not respecting him. She loved him. It went beyond respect.

He had to defuse this.

"You don't have to pay taxes," he said as he pulled out his notepad. "Lizard Shits and I have been committing The Traveler's word to writing. With a little work, I can help you register The Way of the Eternal Traveler as a non-taxable nonprofit religion!" Eyes lit up then. "*The Salty Beard* can be recognized as a mobile church, its maintenance a crucial part of the religion. The IRS won't just trade for gas then, they would do so without the addition of any taxes. Hell, anyone working on this rig would technically be a part of the clergy! Which means *no taxes*." Arthur clicked his pen, but this time not because of anxiety. He clicked it in confidence. "You don't have to raid your cousins. You don't have to bow down to the man. You can keep The Traveler moving. I can help you achieve this... for a price."

They were all watching him then. Even Rabia. He had surprised even her. He could see approval in her soft almond eyes.

"And if it's a trap?" Captain Salt asked with a cocked eyebrow.

Rabia turned to face the Captain. "If it's a trap we all die. If it isn't we raid our kind until even they are gone and The Traveler stops, and then--"

"Damnation," Lizard Shits chimed in.

Captain Salt squinted. His grip on the pipe tightened, but

he crossed his arms instead of wielding it above his head. "What's your price?"

He knew that he was pushing it. Fate favors the bold.

"I will trade my expertise and services in tax law in exchange for you agreeing to help us free some slaves."

The Captain's dreadlock beard and tattered kilt fluttered in the wind. The light of the moon illuminated his chromed hubcap hat. His rusty pipe remained at his side. "No deal," he said.

It was War who protested before Arthur could make a move. The tall mohawked woman, decked out in street signs and leather moved in front of her captain, a move she would not have dared make when she was a lowly motorcycle keeper. She was a whole head taller than him. "There is nothing but good on the table!" she yelled. "I have partied with them, *done drugs with them*, what intention here is bad?"

"We cannot trade with the IRS *and* raid 'em!" Salt bellowed up at War. Despite her imposing size, she flinched. Captain Salt was not at the top of the food chain for being soft and kind. He looked past War and straight into Arthur. "What do we do when the IRS finds out that we have been raiding them of their slaves?"

Arthur shrugged. He had honestly not figured out that one himself. Hell, this entire plan was not up to scrutiny. He had wished he had more time to think it out, but Becky had to give them away and Lizard Shits had to tattle. At least Salt was no longer threatening to bash his skull in.

Rabia took a step forward. She was relaxed enough to light a cigarette. She adjusted her hat, flicked her chin upward, and put her hands on her hips. "Don't get caught," she said. "I was doing it all by myself for weeks, never got a scratch on me and they think that it was the work of a witch. Play that up, use their superstitions against the bastards."

War nodded her head. "Cap'n," she pleaded, "half of us

came from caravans. This is a good deal. We get gas, we don't get taxed, The Traveler moves on, we free slaves, *and* we stick it back to the taxman by raiding them." She looked over the Captain's shoulders and addressed her fellow crew. "That's punk rock as shit!"

"YAR!" the crew yelled in unison. Arthur rolled his eyes. Yes, he was the one that insisted on wearing a collared shirt and tie, carried around a clipboard, and looked like a tool in a world ruled by psychopaths and wrecked by radioactive dust. He had no right to call something ridiculous. So he thought it instead.

Still, Salt was unconvinced. "This is a test," he said. "The Eternal Traveler is testing us! Punk rock or not if we work with *The Man* we betray The Traveler! I don't want to attack our own, but ask yourselves, are the caravans *really* like us? Do they *believe* in The Traveler? No! They follow the old religions, the ones that destroyed our world! Do they fail to worship The Traveler out of ignorance? No! Each one of you tried to tell them about The Traveler's way before you left them. They are *heathens*." The pipe came back up in aggression. "They are *heretics*! They had a choice to join us, they had a chance to follow The Traveler on the road and *still* they refused. I say *fuck 'em*!"

Arthur flipped the pages of his notebook, desperate to find any kind of quote from The Traveler that would help him. "Uh, did The Traveler not once say 'fuck the government, youth culture forever, fuck your mother'?" Arthur said, cementing that moment as the most professional that those words had ever been uttered. It was the only quote without context. The first part of it was admittedly problematic. He was flying blind.

"What of it?" Salt asked.

"Uh, er, well..." Arthur stated, doing well to fail at showing how good he was at articulating. "Did he not say it?"

"He's got you there Cap'n," Becky slurred holding out a jug of booze. "We fuck the government after they pay for dinner, the caravans are as innocent as a babe and don' get touched never," she took a swig of booze. "And *fuck your mother!*" she declared with drunken gusto.

Rabia slow clapped. When no one joined her she shrugged. "I like cursing," she said under a cloud of smoke.

Salt lowered his weapon and rolled his eyes, "No one knows what he meant by that!" he said. "We all know The Traveler did cocaine through a crazy straw and huffed paint for sport. That quote has nothing to do with this."

Arthur rummaged through his papers once more. He knew ahead of time that he would find nothing. They were at an impasse. Salt said no, but the crew seemed more sympathetic. Lizard Shits had even said earlier that day that raiding a caravan was likely to cause a mutiny. "We are all free," Arthur said, "put it to a vote."

For the first time in their confrontation, the Captain looked at Arthur with amusement. A smile spread on one side of his face as his beard blew in the wind like angry tentacles. "You heard the man," Captain Salt said, "you've heard each side," he looked at his crew and raised his pipe over his head. "Those for registering as a religion to trade with the taxman say 'yar!'"

The whole of the crew, save for Becky, cried out "YAR!" in unison. Arthur suspected that Becky was too drunk to pay attention to what was happening.

Captain Salt lowered his pipe, his half-smile still cracked on one side. "Now, watch *this*," he said to Arthur. "Those in favor of a holy crusade instead say 'nar!'"

Arthur blinked hard. There was just no way that *nar* was an actual thing.

"NAR!" Captain Salt bellowed in rage as a spray of spit from his mouth was illuminated by the moon. The air had

been taken out of the crew. They stood with slouched shoulders, they looked at the ground. "The nars have it!" Salt declared.

"That's not fair!" Arthur yelled. It was all he could think to say. He felt like a child saying it.

"Not *fair*?" Salt mocked, "I'm the *bloody fucking captain*, my word is the only one that matters. I don't give a rat's dry booger about what's *fair*!"

Rabia elbowed Arthur gently. "It was a good try," she said, "now for my plan." She sheltered another cigarette from the wind with her hand and lit it. She was now smoking two cigarettes at the same time. This was the calm before the storm.

Rabia took a step toward Captain Salt and removed one of the cigarettes between two fingers while she held the other in the corner of her mouth. She upturned her hand casually, sensibly even. She exhaled her smoke and made a scene of breathing in the cool air as if it were refreshing. Her Cheshire cat grin sliced across her mouth. "This is going to be very simple," she said in an even tone. "I challenge you, Captain Salt."

Shock was shared between the crew. Even Salt was taken aback. War shook her head and mouthed "no", doing her best to warn Rabia of just how bad an idea that was. Rabia returned the second cigarette in her mouth and drew in heavily from both of them.

Salt laughed.

"*You*?" he said, "you want to challenge me? For what?" He suddenly became very serious. "What are your terms?"

"Your goddamn ship you dense nazi melon-fucker!" Rabia roared, smoke erupting out of her like fire from a raging house. "What kind of question is that? Do you have any wretched idea in that sprained frontal lobe of yours as to who I am? I wouldn't want anything *less* than your command you

rotten bilious diseased bastard! I AM A PROFESSIONAL! I AM LONO!"

Her vocal cords frayed. The veins in her arms were visible. Arthur had no idea when she started calling herself Lono. The Captain, for the briefest of moments, actually looked afraid.

"War challenged that twisted maggot fuck for my convertible. She lacked imagination. I challenge *you* for your *fleet*!"

She took a deep breath, killing the first cigarette that she had lit. She let it drop out of her mouth, raised her knee to her chest, and stomped it out with all of her might. "What say you?" She asked.

Although the crew had disagreed with the captain, their body language told a dire tale. Arthur got the impression that Salt was challenged on the regular. With a crew as anachronistic and twisted as his there was no way that he wasn't challenged every now and then. Despite his stature, he stayed on top. He was at the top of the food chain for a very specific reason: fear. And it looked by the reactions of those who stood on the upper deck that fear was wholly justified.

Arthur knew that Rabia could handle herself in a fight, hell, she could handle herself better than anyone he had ever met. She fought like the devil. That was not hyperbole, if the devil was real then they had grown up in the same dojo. But something told Arthur that Salt was the absolute last man that Rabia wanted to be fighting.

He got the very real and utterly paralyzing realization that Salt could easily murder her.

Salt handed the pipe over to Pestilence. He then cracked his knuckles against his head. His smile was ear to ear. "I accept your challenge," he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Mr. Ralph Siemens,” Simon from HR said. “Come with me.”

Shit. This was not good. Simon had got Ralph’s name right. “Oh, hello Simon, how can I help you?”

Simon said nothing. The blonde woman said nothing. Simon turned around and beckoned Ralph to follow him by waving his hand over his shoulder. Despite the awkwardness of Simon’s gait, he moved quickly. Simon had no time for Ralph’s bullshit tonight.

Ralph was surprised to find himself having to jog now and then to keep up with Simon from HR.

The halls were empty.

Already the slaves were taken topside.

The blonde woman avoided Ralph’s eyes. She had snitched. The problem was that he knew that she feared HR as much as he did. She would not have come to him first the way that she did otherwise. Only the worse possible scenario would have made her turn.

When he saw the first crimson blotch of blood on the stark white tile, he suddenly realized what the problem was.

Richard had failed to do his job.

They reached the end of the hallway, a section that Ralph had heard about but had never bothered to explore. They were at the psychological detention center. The man not unlike Simon from HR stood in front of the door with his arm crossed. He nodded at Simon as a greeting, but nothing was said. All four of them kept their words to themselves.

Simon from HR opened the door. Splayed out on the tile unceremoniously was Table, now as cold as the floor that he lay upon. Ralph's heart sank. Table had been murdered. Dark bruises were painted across his neck. The box cutter that he held was stained in that same crimson he had seen outside. He was so shocked at what he saw, so saddened by the madman's unwarranted death, that he hadn't noticed the other bad thing. It had to be pointed out to him.

"The cell was opened," the man not unlike Simon said. "It looks like the man we were keeping killed him."

Ralph did not need to be told that this was The Colonel. The entire bunker knew that they had him in custody. Boyd had paraded that fact and had taken the credit of his capture as his own. Ralph had no words for what he was seeing, for what he was being told. The blonde woman remained silent.

The man not unlike Simon grimaced at Ralph. He walked over to Table and picked up his mannequin leg. "Does this look familiar to you?"

It took Ralph a solid second to recognize the significance. They had found Table's leg in Dinner's room. Ralph had attributed the find to topsider eccentricities, but now the source of the leg was clear. They had found a direct connection to Dinner.

"Dinner's room," he said without thinking. It did not matter if he lied, if he tried to cover for her. The question was not meant to be answered.

"We know that this custodial worker was an underling to The Colonel," Simon from HR said. "We are not actually too

surprised to find his body here. It seems reasonable that he would try and make some contact with him.”

“What we can’t figure out,” the man not unlike Simon said, “is why the little girl had his leg. It seems very suspicious that she would set off the fire alarm—”

“Set off a *distraction*,” Simon offered.

“ - just days before The Colonel’s escape...”

Dinner was in trouble. The exact thing that he did not want to happen was happening now and this time he could not sweep it under the rug.

Still... These men were not detectives. This was not two gumshoes looking over a crime scene trying to figure out the motive and seek justice on the murderer. No, these men were from HR. They wanted to know who they could fire for this. Table’s death was a *liability*. They had to tighten a tourniquet on the problem, then paint over the gangrene.

If that was the case why was Ralph here? As a supervisor was he a confidant here to help them build a case just believable enough to have Dinner terminated? Or was he the one that was in trouble?

Simon dismissed the blonde woman. She glanced at Ralph just once before slowly walking away. If he only knew how much she had told them, then he could still spin this their way.

The man not unlike Simon from HR shut the door behind them, isolating the three of them into the grisly detention center. He bared a plastic smile, something that Ralph was sure he had learned to imitate over the years by watching the real humans interact. “So that no one sees,” he said when no one asked, referring to the closed door.

“Has anyone found The Colonel?” Ralph asked, surprised that neither man had brought it up yet. The Colonel was an incredibly dangerous man, were they not worried about it?

“The Army hasn’t seen him,” Simon said. “They think it is

possible that he was able to sneak off with all of the confusion going on topside. Honestly, if the Army can't find him then he is probably long gone. Have you seen them at work? They make our Enforcers look like children."

There was at least one child-like Enforcer that Ralph could think of that he wanted to strangle right now.

"Are there no cameras?" Ralph asked, "how are there no cameras at our detention center?!"

"Patient-doctor confidentiality," said Simon. "It is not a 'detention center', officially, it is a 'therapy zone'."

"The question I want answered," the man not unlike Simon said, "was whether or not the little girl was working with them."

And there it was. The real reason he was there. Like he had suspected. They had summoned him here because one of his underlings needed to go. Ralph was in no trouble, at least not with HR. To them, he was an ally. They were building a case and he would be the one to do the firing. To execute the banishment.

"I think that they probably knew each other," Simon said. "They all came from the top."

Suddenly the sheer casualness of their conversation seemed very perverse to Ralph. Table was a lunatic. No, that wasn't fair. Table was a *colossal* lunatic. He was the bane of Ralph's existence for at least a few days now and he wasn't even good at his job. But he didn't deserve this. No one deserved this.

...And here they were, discussing how best to cover the agency's ass from a legal system that no longer existed as if Table was just another water cooler. Perverse was the exact word for it.

"That's two infractions," the man not unlike Simon said, reminding Ralph that this was it for Dinner. The man not

unlike Simon wanted Ralph to say it. He wanted Ralph to fix this.

Ralph hesitated.

He knew what his role here was. He knew what these men expected of him.

His hesitation had stirred something base from the HR mutants. His weakness had hungered them.

"A single murder has never happened down in this bunker," said Simon. "This is *big* Ralph. People need to feel safe down here. Above everything else, a safe workplace is our number one concern. We need to solve this quickly."

Ralph stared at Table's cold body. Guilt had seized him. Would Table have come here seeking The Colonel's help if he had told him the truth about the doll? Maybe. But this could just as easily have been Dinner's room and Dinner's body if he hadn't. He suddenly realized that he was probably the last person that Table had talked to before he sought out The Colonel. Before he was brutally murdered. Was he compassionate, was he kind to Table before he left his incompetent and cowardly cousin at his door? He knew the answer. He knew the answer because he was not a good person.

"As I see it," the man not unlike Simon said. "There are two outcomes from this. People are going to need to know that everything is okay. They need to know that they work in a safe and legal environment. We can either punish someone who was involved in this, or we can punish the person *in charge* of this."

Ralph knew then, without a doubt in his mind, that HR could smell fear. "Do we know for sure that Dinner was involved?" Ralph asked, knowing what they would say. "She is just a child."

Simon from HR shifted his great weight. "The Revised Operations Manual is very clear that because of unideal circum-

stances minors are able to join the workforce.” Unideal circumstances here meaning near-total nuclear holocaust. “Regardless of age she is subject to the rules upon being hired by the IRS.”

“You guys have not been topside,” Ralph said. “Let me remind you gentlemen that I led our auditor division into The Colonel’s tax raid and was an auditor myself. It is brutal out there. *Beyond* brutal. Did you know that the definition for Sunday barbecues is now trapping a radioactive raccoon in a dumpster and lighting the whole thing on fire? Not just the contents of the dumpster and the raccoon, *but the entire dumpster?* Termination has a more literal meaning now. Letting her go is a death sentence!”

“That *little girl* could be co-responsible for the biggest crime in the bunker,” The man not unlike Simon said. “May I remind *you* that a custodial employee dying is not what we are worried about here.”

“It’s not?”

The man not unlike Simon’s eyes grew twice their size. “Capturing The Colonel was the biggest thing that the IRS has done since the bombs dropped. It sent a message to the United Wastes: civility is back. If you do not pay your taxes, if you do not participate in your duty as an American citizen, *then we will come for you*. Capturing The Colonel was like ringing a bell across the savage land that said *do not fuck with us*.”

Hearing a man from HR curse was nerve-rattling. It had the same effect of seeing a man unhinge his jaw to swallow something whole.

“Let’s speak frankly,” Simon from HR said. “Things around here are changing. A government needs only two institutions to rule. It’s not law, it is not any of the three branches that the constitution holds dear. It’s tax collection and a military. Right now, we are the government and Henry S. Boyd is at the head of it. We aren’t just collecting taxes any

more, we are *reclaiming* the land. The Colonel was Boyd's trophy, and now that trophy is gone. We need to solve this."

Simon stopped speaking, but his counterpart continued as if they shared a brain. "We have been preparing secret training material," he said. "Training material for when the Army gets all of the 'supplies' that they need. Once they have enough soldiers and materials then they are going to escort us as we expand our own operations. The Army still considers us at war. No one surrendered when the bombs fell and ICBMs flew. Each side did its best to annihilate the other, but no white flags were ever raised at the end of it. Anyone who refuses to cooperate with the government will be considered an enemy of the state. There are no more prisons. If you don't pay your taxes, you die."

Simon walked over to Ralph and set a hand on his shoulder. "Boyd will not be happy when he finds out that his biggest trophy is missing. When he finds out that the symbol that he was prepared to use to frighten the rest of the country back into civility has escaped because one of his supervisors and his HR department failed to act in removing an *outsider* what do you think he will do?"

The question was an ominous one. It sounded like "President" Boyd was preparing to be a dictator. Dictators usually thought that due process was a myth and had a fetish for firing squads. Ralph's voice went low. He was afraid. "He'd kill us."

"What?!" Simon exclaimed. "No, he'd probably demote you and write us up. *Jesus* man, maybe you've spent too much time on the top."

"Oh," Ralph said with a little relief. Well, with as much relief as was allowed when one was standing next to a dead body.

"That's still very bad," Simon from HR said.

He had choices, neither one was very good. He could do

what HR wanted him to do. He could blame the whole thing on an outsider and a proven troublemaker, and keep his position. Dinner would be banished and would most likely die and if Rabia got word of it then he too would most likely die. But without his position, without having the power of a supervisor, then the railroad would be nearly neutered. He still had not had time to tell Arthur that the Army was preparing to ship everybody at once, but maybe there was still time to stop it? He could request the entire inventory to be counted. He could stall them. Maybe Rabia could pick up Dinner and protect her? Maybe they would see that this was for the greater good?

He could also take the blame. Let's be honest, this was all on him anyway. He would be demoted. The railroad would no longer get any more pertinent intelligence. A resistance was crippled without intelligence, but Dinner would survive. She could stay. If he was honest about the situation, if he admitted the truth, that this was all due to his gross incompetence and not to a grand conspiracy cooked up by outsiders, then he would be the one to blame. To be the one that would be punished.

The one that now had a dead man on his hands because he couldn't be bothered.

The pair from HR stared at him. They waited.

What would Arthur do? He thought.

No. No that was a terrible idea! Arthur was a bleeding heart.

Shit.

Ralph looked from one man to the other, both so uniform, both so alike. They had come to him out of fear. Just as the blonde woman had come to them. They came to him because he was a leader. Not a good one, by any measure. He had inherited the position because Arthur was assumed dead and it needed to be filled. But they came to him, nonetheless.

Well, Ralph would do what he did best: disappoint.

"This was my fault," Ralph said at a near whisper.

"What?" Simon from HR said.

Ralph cleared his throat. It was the first time he had ever uttered the words. "I said, this was my fault. Dinner is a child who was bullied by an unwell man. When things came to a head I tried to sweep it under the rug. She is not responsible for this, nor was she colluding." He cleared his throat once more "*This*," he said referring to an escaped psychopath and a dead man, "this is all my fault. I am their supervisor, I am the one responsible."

He hated every word of it. The whole thing felt like pulling needles from his skin. He regretted it the moment that he had said it, but was somehow relieved that he had. The two men from HR shook their heads. The man not unlike Simon wrote furiously on his clipboard.

"Sign this," the man not unlike Simon said.

The paper that he had handed Ralph was a recommendation to Boyd to suspend Ralph without pay for a month, a demotion from his position, and a recommendation for a full reeducation in bunker etiquette. The form required that he sign it as being present and informed. He did.

"You can leave," Simon from HR said, the venom in his voice unmasked.

Ralph turned to exit and grabbed the door's handle. Before he had it fully open the man not unlike Simon coughed and faked a smile. He wore it like a pauper wore a gentleman's clothes to fit in; pitifully and somehow wrong. "Keep it up and we'll run out of janitors to clean this," he said. If it was a joke, it did not land.

Ralph ignored him. He opened the door fully and paused. He turned around and looked at the broken man now dead on the floor. "I'm sorry," he said to Table. Then he left.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



As she looked down to black as night pavement, all rock and no forgiveness, rushing past them like an untamed river, Rabia began to regret her decision.

That won't do. There was no time for regret. No time for doubt. *No sympathy for the devil,* she recited in her mind, *remember that always.* She bought the ticket...

Jesus fuck! What a terrible ticket, she thought as the occasional imperfection in the screaming road beneath her lit up like a tiny star in the void. The fight could end even before she got to the arena. If she fell here, she would be a jam that looked vaguely human spread across the road.

Rabia was at the edge of *The Salty Beard* watching as the arena once again coupled to them. Once attached, the chains were thrown over and subsequently tied to the great steel maw of the arena. This was it. In no time she and Captain Salt would have to climb down to the razor-wired stage below and fight for supremacy of the pirate fleet. Was her plan any better than Arthur's? Well, Arthur's failed, so as long as she lived to rule under an iron fist then she had gloating rights.

At that very instant she regretted spending the last two

days mad at him. It was a terrible waste of precious time. What a way to spend your last time together alive.

She pulled on her cigarette until it was ash and styrofoam. There was only one more in the pack. She could smoke it for victory... or as a last rite.

Searchlights lit with piercing beams, cutting into the night to illuminate the sins that were about to be performed. No sense in hiding this terrible deed from the gods, the lights were bright enough to give them a front seat. The thunderous sounds of *The Salty Beard's* drums cried out from beneath her. They sounded more somber than before, almost dirge-like and dire. The crew was not excited. They knew the score. Rabia was their only hope next to full mutiny to keep the fleet from raiding the caravans. The bets were not on her.

The bets.

She turned around with mad urgency. "Arthur!" she screamed to a man that was already beside her.

"Jesus!" Arthur said in a startle, "yes?"

"If you see anyone make any bets *you put everything down on me*, you hear me G-Man? The odds against me have got to be stupid goddamn high. It's the worst bet you could make but if I live we'll make a killing!"

"You're not exactly instilling confidence right now," Arthur said with worry lines as bumpy as the road.

"Something you should know about me G-Man," she said lightly touching his side. "I live without confidence. I live in fear and guilt and loathing. I try to outrun those things with a battle cry."

What she said was true, though it was not what she was supposed to say. She couldn't say *I love you*, you only said things like that when you knew you were going to die. *No sympathy for the devil, buy the ticket, take the ride*, her mind recited.

Captain Salt looked at Rabia with eager bloodlust. "Try

not to fall," he said then swung himself under the chain. He locked his feet together and grabbed on with both hands, then pulled himself toward the arena and climbed down.

This was no time to be afraid of heights. But she was. This was no time to doubt herself. But she did. She filled her mind with images of ravenous wolverines. It did not help, but it did set the mood right.

One of the searchlights followed Captain Salt down, lighting the way forward. When he was at the platform it followed him still until he reached the inside of the arena. He beckoned to Rabia mockingly with his hands.

This was the only thing that made her eager to fight him. Captain Salt was a tool. She'd twist him the wrong way.

She tried to swing over the chain like Captain Salt but found the movement too awkward. She immediately lost her grip and fell on her ass landing way too close to the edge for comfort. The howling of wind and the fatalistic beats of drums would have drowned it out, but Rabia did not need to hear it to know that Arthur was clicking on his pen like there was no tomorrow. Probably because there might not be a tomorrow. She couldn't look at him. She couldn't let him see the look of horror on her face. So she tried again.

This time she got her footing right, this time she gripped it tight enough. The chain swayed from her weight, the wind deafened her ears. She was only glad that she was faced upward. Better that the last thing she saw was the cold glare of the moon than the black river of road beneath. She tried to focus on the chain lit by the searchlight.

Captain Salt stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharp and loud. In an instant, the searchlight illuminating her path cut out. She was only halfway there. "You sackless dirt weasels!" she cried. She could not see ahead of her. *Those dirty fucks*. Her heart raced with the pace of a horse from a burning barn. She had to calm herself. She breathed deeply and slowly.

Panic was her first enemy. She could still feel the chain. She didn't need the light. She just needed to climb down and think of nothing else.

Just then *The Salty Beard* took a wide turn. Her chain swung with the turn and she almost lost her grip. She found herself now facing her side. No longer directly behind the great heaving rig, the air speeding past her hit her like a tidal wave. Her hat was knocked clear off, now lost to the darkness of the road. The whistling wind was strong enough to dislodge her tightly packed afro. Her mind sprinted to invent a new form of cursing, English not having the proper level of fear to abuse. Instead, she made a squeal that she was not proud of. It was too girly.

When the turn ended she swung back and forth wildly. With her eyes closed, she could not tell if this was from the momentum or because Salt had decided to shake it.

It was both.

She breathed out. She cleared her mind. She ignored the howling of the wind, ignored the beating of the drums that were faint from distance. She pulled herself forward and thought only of the next action. Despite the universe's best effort, she made it down.

She climbed up on the arena's dirt mover and hugged it tightly. Captain Salt, now standing beside her, laughed. "Good show lass," he said then cackled louder. She had half a mind to start the fight there, had half a mind to trip him and kill him now. He sure as hell was not playing fair. But she needed the blessing of his crew. She pushed herself up and ignored the rancid mirth of her opponent as she crawled to the ring.

The razor wire enclosure was sharper and larger than it looked from afar. She had seen many arena fights. Most gangs in the United Wastes had their own form of it. This was the first time she was partaking in one. Hopefully not the last.

She would only admit it to Arthur, and only alone, but the

fangirl inside of her was giddy the moment she entered the ring.

Brutal cage matches, next to dying alone, were the post-apocalypse pastime.

Captain Salt entered the ring. There was no referee, there was no signal to start. They could destroy each other as soon as they wanted to. The searchlights illuminated the ring, making the light of the moon seem pitiful. Rabia shifted her weight, making sure that neither foot would carry her whole weight. She was a better shot than she was a pugilist, but Rabia had been fighting from the moment she had her first period. Her whole life had been spent fighting off the brutal and the stupid. Her whole life had been spent fighting the other gender. Salt would be just one more giant ego among many for her to wreck.

Salt's fingers found their place in his mouth once more. He whistled loud and shrill. Before she could react something came flying from the top deck of *The Salty Beard* and landed only feet from Captain Salt. Someone had thrown him his rusty pipe.

"What sleaze shit is this?" Rabia demanded as Salt picked up his weapon.

"Captain's privilege." He said. Cries of anger and disapproval rung out from the crew. Salt ignored it. "They don't have to like me," he said, "they just have to obey."

Salt carried the pipe with confidence. She was at a serious disadvantage now. A single blow from the pipe could crack bones, and the reach of the savage tool was long. There was no way for her to get close.

Unlike War's fight, there were no microphones. There was no grand drama or smack talk. Somewhere, a luchador cried. Salt raised his pipe over his head with both arms and swung at Rabia. She jumped to the side and heard the pipe whistle as it came down. Horns from the fleet blared in excitement.

The fight had begun.

Faster than Rabia thought he was capable of, Salt brought the pipe back up and swung it. She fell to the ground, once more hearing the whistling of the pipe. He had just barely missed her head. She clung to the ground on her belly. The whole arena vibrated as it was tugged forward into the night. She pushed off the floor but Salt had already swept back in the opposite direction. She was back on the ground.

She was going nowhere. This was not a fight. She could only react and dodge his swings. She was only so fast. She rolled to her feet but the end of the pipe shot out at her. She was back on the ground.

So far she was unhurt. So far she was still alive. She had to get closer.

Rabia lunged up at a sprint, meaning to tackle him. Pain erupted out from her side. Salt had finally landed a blow. She winced and lost control. The constant movement of the road made her footing impossible. She missed him by a mile.

Her hip screamed out in agony. Nothing felt broken, but then again she had never broken a hip, it felt like this for all that she knew. Her flesh felt bruised. Salt laughed.

The crew booed.

It was not a large consolation prize, having the crew's support meant nothing if she was dead, but at least no one was happy that the fight was one-sided.

Salt was at the other end of the arena. He threw the pipe over his shoulders and stood casually. "I can make this quick lass," he said. "I can crack your head open, be merciful. You keep moving like that and it's going to be slow."

Rabia cradled her wound. Arrogant bastard. She'll take whatever time he gave her. "Fuck you Salt," she said with clenched teeth.

Something crashed by her feet. Something hollow and metallic screamed like a bell as it bounced and rolled. A long

licorice twist of brass with a sharpened tip lay next to her. She looked up at the deck and saw Arthur next to War. "You are horrifying!" he screamed with affection.

It was War's lance, fashioned from a merry-go-round pole. The same that was tied to her chopper. Rabia picked it up with a devilish smile.

Salt charged. Rabia parried. The pipe was denser, its momentum great. The lance was already dented. The fight was still not even, but now she had a chance. Rabia thrust and Salt dodged. She advanced and pushed him back. She wanted nothing more than to stab the kilted bastard in the heart.

She had Salt on the defense. Inch by inch she took more ground. Each stab was parried. Each blow was blocked. Salt was as dense as his pipe. His blocks had as much force behind them as her blows. Her lance became more mangled with each attack.

He was waiting her out. He wanted her to whittle her lance down to nothing. She stabbed and Salt slammed his pipe down with all of his might. The sharpened tip of the lance bent down like aluminum foil. He lunged at her screaming at the top of his lungs. Swing after swing hailed down at her. The lance was now a mangled mess. She backed up. Still, his fury came down. All of the ground that she had gained was lost in a minute. All she could do was concentrate on stopping his blows. The arena shook like an earthquake. Rabia lost her footing.

She fell.

She could feel the top of her afro snag on razor wire.

Salt attacked.

Rabia protected her face.

She watched as the lance bent forward, giving way to the pipe. It stopped just before touching her nose. The lance was no longer a weapon. It was a liability. Fine. She pulled on one end of the abused lance and sandwiched it over the pipe. It

bent and wrapped around the better weapon. Rabia yanked on the pipe with all that she had, throwing both over the side of the arena. The rattling of the rig was too loud to hear it crash onto the road.

Salt's fist went right to her hip.

She heard the cry of an animal. Only seconds later would she realize that it was herself that she was hearing. She bit down on her tongue and tasted liquid copper. Her hip wailed and pain reigned. Salt hit her again.

There was no panic. She hit him in the face. Her fist came back covered in blood and oil. Salt backed off. She had slipped further back as the arena turned with *The Salty Beard*. Razor wire now inches from her face. She saw a foot coming down. Rabia rolled. Foot and razor wire came down on her hair. Another blow struck her hip.

"I tried to be a gentleman," Salt said. "You could have had a nice guy, m'lady. Looks like you chose an asshole instead. Now you die slow."

He had her pinned down. Each strike on her hip bleared her vision with pain. She looked up at Salt. "Go fuck your hand," she said spitting blood at him.

Salt leered down at her. It was the primal look of a lizard. She knew the look well. He was deciding if the violence was going to be sexual. His tentacle-like beard flapped in the wind. She could smell the stench of motor oil even from down on the floor.

What Salt did not know was what had happened to the other men that had contemplated what he was now. He might have thought twice.

Rabia reached in her pocket. The action was quick. She was an addict, the motion was habitual. She kicked behind Salt's leg. He fell down to her. His disgusting beard now an inch from her face. She pulled out her lighter.

She flicked the mechanism.

Salt's beard lit in a blaze. His lizard-like stare turned to abject horror. The fire spread with thirst. In seconds his face looked like it was being eaten by an orange squid. His howls of pain were shrill. He patted the fire with his hands in a panic. Black smoke hid his face.

Rabia jumped to her feet, leaving a large chunk of her hair behind. Her hip screamed from abuse. She got behind the panicked captain and shoved him with all that she had left.

Captain Salt fell into the razor wire, still burning.

"You're *horrifying*!" Arthur screamed with no affection.

Horns blared in approval. The crew above her yelled their excitement. The fight was over.

Rabia Duke, consummate professional, was now the captain of an entire pirate fleet.

Oh yes, she thought. They are not ready for this.

She lit her last cigarette and watched it burn.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The general mood of the crew was somewhere between jubilant and self-destructive. Arthur assured himself that this was as good as it got in a pirate fleet.

The fleet was eager to celebrate their new captain, and Rabia? She was happy to oblige.

“All hail our new captain!” War roared out sonorously.

“Yar!” the stereotypes cheered. Rabia was only a second puff into her cigarette before she was declared their new leader.

Motor Rum was passed out, drugs were unstashed, and fights broke out. Those who were loyal to Salt, *and only Salt*, learned quickly that life goes on. Violence is a fast teacher.

Whatever passed for music for land pirates thundered out from the drums below. The pace of beat ranged from manic heartbeat to chaotic beating, but never once did it die down. Car horns blared and toothless lunatics screamed at the moon. Becky eased into the situation faster than the others, having already met this party halfway before the fight began. War, whom Arthur had only seen as stoic and intimidating,

actually smiled. He wondered how long the fleet had been yearning for a change of leadership.

Rabia was now in charge.

It was hard for Arthur not to feel elated during the impromptu celebration. Life had been nothing but doom and gloom for a very long time. The change of pace was a welcoming one. He steered clear of everything being handed out, not trusting the gasoline percentage in the alcohol, and certainly not trusting the origin of the meat. Still, he loosened up his tie and did more than his fair share of shouting out support for Rabia's victory. For more than a moment, it looked like Rabia would not have come out of it alive. Arthur was beyond relieved that she now lived.

The party was not for everyone. Salt ruled with dogma, superstition, and terror. A quarter of the mutant chimera fleet parted. They would either start their own fleet together or part and become raiders. While Rabia climbed back up *The Salty Beard*, War moved over to Arthur with an arm slung over Pestilence's shoulder. The tall woman drank from a large stein then motioned at the deserters as they broke off into other directions. "Good riddance!" she declared while Becky looked at Pestilence with a mile's worth of jealousy. "Let the weak leave, we are stronger for it!"

The sentiment was shared by all.

Arthur looked out to the parting headlights as they disappeared into the night. Would they make it alone? He could not help but worry about the free slave couples that he had befriended early that week. Would they cross paths with these vicious rabid men? Would they survive?

Could *he* survive?

The nagging question had dug its way to the front the moment Rabia made the final climb back up. Her curly hair raced itself outward in every direction, her clothing was tattered, and she was preferring one side of her hip to the

other. Despite the visible beating written across her body, her face showed no sign of struggle. Her Cheshire grin cut across her dark face and she winked upon seeing Arthur. Rabia Duke, former Caravan Sheriff, IRS Enforcer, and wasteland witch, was now captain of her own fleet.

War handed Rabia her stein, grabbed her hand, and held it above their heads. "This is our new captain!" she screamed to a cheering crew.

Mirth collapsed away from Rabia's face. "Listen up scum-sucking weirdos!" she yelled, "I am not your captain! I AM THE PIRATE QUEEN!"

Power had gone to her head way faster than Arthur had anticipated.

The crew ate it up. "ALL HAIL THE PIRATE QUEEN!" they yelled.

Rabia, her wicked smile back in place, then raised War's hand into the air. "I appoint War as the new captain of *The Salty Beard!!*" No one was more stunned than War, and at that moment Arthur thought he saw the tall stoic warrior blush.

"Does anyone object to their queen's decry?" Rabia continued. There were none.

If the party was at eleven, it somehow found its way to twelve. Rabia turned to face War. "You take over this ship immediately, and you hand over my goddamn car or I'll light your face on fire," Rabia said. War smiled at this, an action that Arthur was not sure was appropriate. He never doubted that Rabia's threats of harm to others were real, but he suspected that they were peppered with hyperbole. After literally seeing her light a man's face on fire, he now knew completely that hyperbole was not something that Rabia was in business for.

"Aye Cap— *Queen* Rabia!" War corrected mid-sentence.

Rabia patted the tall woman on the back, "Congratulations, Captain, put the fear into them." She then limped her

way to Arthur with kindness in her eyes and excitement on her lips.

"My plan was better," she said through a half-smile. The ecstatic screams of the mobile party, now turned happy riot, kept Arthur from vocalizing his thoughts. He was incredibly happy to see her alive, was eternally grateful that she had stood up for what she believed was right... and super goddamn regretful that she had to be constantly sticking her neck out for him. Instead, he smiled, and Rabia smiled back at him.

"Where the fuck is the captain's quarters?!" Rabia demanded to anyone who was listening.

Pestilence pointed downward. "It's in the deck below us," she said, "behind the drums."

Rabia grabbed Arthur's hand and led. It was a slow journey below deck, she limped the entire time, her hip still screaming in pain. The journey was made longer as every single crewman on the way wanted to congratulate Rabia with either a cordial slap on the back or an offer of drugs. Arthur was surprised to see Rabia wave the drugs away.

There were no less than two dead bodies on the way down to the lower deck. Dissenters or deserters not quick enough to see the writing on the wall. Mutiny is just a small revolution, and most revolutions purge, and they purge with violence. The dead was something that any United Wastelander had seen a dozen times, Arthur included. The bodies did not disturb him, but the festive grins on the would-be murderers did. These divisions had to have been deep. "Hail the Pirate Queen!" one of the grins squeaked. Arthur looked up and saw that the voice belonged to Lizard Shits. He made a note in his head not to piss off his young acolyte. Then he made a note in his head to actually write that mental note down.

The lower deck was the one that Arthur had spent the

least amount of time in, only having been in it when they arrived. *The Shark* was packed safely in the car carrier between other rusty and mangled motorized beasts. In the back was a line of hollowed-out oil barrels repurposed as drums. Two men, both crazed, muscular, and naked, beat on the instruments like titans trying to kill the world. Their pupils were the size of coins, and they smelled like condensed gym room desperation. As Rabia and Arthur passed the drummers they paid them no mind. They were lost in their feverish task of keeping the party moving at a lunatic pace. "Party's upstairs!" Rabia yelled at them, "That's an order!" The drummers ceased their beatings and obliged. Once they went topside Rabia and Arthur were alone.

Behind the drums was a trailer that had been shoved into the great behemoth that was *The Salty Beard*, its dirty and stained walls older than the fleet itself, likely cultivated by years of abuse when it grazed a spot in a trailer park. The words *FUCK OFF!* had been spray-painted on the door of the trailer just above the words *Captain's quarters*. Rabia spent no time dawdling. She yanked the screen door open and then parted the aluminum door behind it from its sill. Arthur followed her inside.

What Arthur was expecting was a room not unlike Rabia's tent that he had stayed in just days before. He expected a frenzy of guns and eccentricities that would mirror the savage look that Salt had carried with him on the outside. He expected to see what he had seen a dozen times auditing raiders at their dens. He was expecting testosterone and cruelty with a splash of lunacy.

Instead, they found a clean and quaint trailer that any old woman obsessed with turquoise who lived before The War would have enjoyed. The fact that it was so ordinary shook Arthur to the core. Besides the larger than normal POG collection (which is *any* amount of POGS, to be frank), there

was nothing that would suggest that Captain Salt was a murdering and cruel pirate of the apocalypse. Arthur now knew that Salt was a fan of Kincaid, as there was a print of log cabins on every wall. This was mental real estate that would always be filled with that knowledge. He did not know how he felt about that.

Arthur, a man whose own bunker quarters was filled with paperwork for recreation and had more calculators than it did corners, felt embarrassed for Salt.

"What the fuck?" Rabia said.

"This is *haunting*," Arthur said.

Rabia found herself a seat on an old green sofa decorated with a quilt. "I did the man a favor, he was already dead inside," she said checking her pockets for cigarettes that no longer existed.

Arthur watched as she fidgeted as she found no cigarettes on her person. "I'm surprised you turned down those drugs up there," he said.

"No need to mix, I ate a tab of acid on my climb back up. It should be kicking in soon."

Arthur was disappointed that he wasn't surprised.

"Sit down G-Man," she said patting the sofa. "We need a heart to heart before my lobe goes haywire." She smiled as she looked at him, but winced as she shifted her weight. Arthur hoped to God that her hip was not broken. He sat down carefully, gentle as not to upset her wound any further. "Do you really think you can make this fleet good with the IRS?" She asked once he was settled.

"I do," Arthur said, "this would be the first organized and registered religion added since before The War, the IRS might even be excited to recognize them." His eyes darted to the floor. "Not sure about the gas situation though."

Rabia nodded. "There is no way that this fleet is sustain-

able." She said, "I figure we get to fill up the gasoline stocks once before we start raiding their slave shipments."

"Do you think we can keep the IRS from knowing that it's the pirate fleet that's raiding them?"

"No. My witch routine worked because I preyed on individuals, but you saw where that got us. On a long enough timeline this fleet runs out of gas then cannibalizes itself."

He did not want to talk about the next part. About the logistics of her staying. At this point, Arthur was used to doing things that he hated. "So," he said, "Pirate Queen?"

Rabia smiled through her pain. It was only then that he realized that she had been desperate to keep up a facade of control. Their retreat to the captain's quarters was not just for privacy, it was so that the crew did not take advantage of her weakness. "Hell yes!" she said, "I will take no less of a title," her smile waned, "but seriously, this is for insurance. A captain has to stay with her ship, if they perceive me as some sort of Admiral I can at least leave this crazy goddamn rig." She winced and breathed in deeply. She too was looking at the rug. "I can't have you in this fleet."

There was no such thing as silence on *The Salty Beard*. The rig was always shaking as it moved forward, and the shouting from the celebration above could still be heard, even below deck. Still, the pause in conversation seemed unbearably quiet.

"I know," Arthur said finally. "I don't belong here." He looked up from the rug and met Rabia's brown eyes, "I don't belong outside of the bunker," he admitted.

She grabbed his hand. Hers felt callused, slightly cold. His own were soft. It was the longest his hands had gone being dirty. There was no hiding the fact that Arthur was from another world. It was written all over his body. "You're a good man Charlie Brown," Rabia said tenderly. "I like you because of it. Kindness is no weakness..." She Patted her pockets once

more expressing her phantom cigarette syndrome. "But the wastes *eat* good people." She sighed. "I don't just mean that literally, the wastes turns good people into survivors, and survivors are monsters."

He was starving. He had not eaten in days. He was seriously considering eating dog. She was right. What would he look like in a week's time? In a month? How callused would he be in a year?

"I don't want to see the wastes destroy the only good man I have ever known," she said as tears filled the edges of her eyes. They refused to fall. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about *The Shark*, I wanted to protect you, I hoped that this would turn out better."

He couldn't bear it. He squeezed her hand and kissed her gently. She rested her head on his shoulder. This whole time their relationship had been Auditor and Enforcer. It was time that ended.

"I'm sorry I have been a burden," he said. His pride hurt. His *masculinity* hurt. Arthur was no action hero. He was a tax auditor. He needed the walls. He needed to go back.

"You are useful in the bunker," Rabia said. It was intended to be reassuring. It felt like a dagger. "We have a small army now, it won't help us in the long run but we can do some real damage with it. Maybe we can't free all the slaves with it, but we can add a serious blow to Boyd and Oswald's operations." She lifted her head off of his shoulder and looked him in the eye. "But we need you on the inside if we are to finish the fight."

He would have to swallow his pride. He would have to beg for his job back. He would need to grovel to Boyd if he had to. It sounded like hell. But he knew that she was right. His record, despite a single write up and his head-butting with Boyd, was sterling. He could get back. God knew that Ralph was no substitute for him in the bunker.

"You are right," he said. "I need to go back."

Earlier, she had accused him of wanting to play house. The sad part was that it was true. He had convinced himself that he had quit for ethical reasons, yet the greater good demanded that he stay where he was best able to help their cause. Really, he quit to be by Rabia's side. The scary truth was that this would not be a possibility for a very long time. Neither of them said it while they sat in Salt's quaint home, but their relationship, at least their romantic one, was impossible until their goals were accomplished. Neither said it because they both understood it, and saying it out loud made it real.

So, they sat together in sadness. Both quietly yearning for the day that they could only worry about each other.

The crew of *The Salty Beard*, however, had no care for their sore hearts or tender moments. Yelps and screams and terrible laughter screeched out from above them.

"What do we do if I fail?" Arthur said finally.

Rabia cocked an eyebrow. "If this fleet ever even thinks of raiding a caravan it will die in flames," she said. "There will be no *if I die trying*. If I die these savage bastards are coming with me screaming. Mark it on your calendar Arthur, because that is a goddamn *fact*."

"You're horrifying,"

"You won't fail."

He had been a burden to her, she had gone out of her way to protect him more times than he could count. Seeing that Arthur owned more than one calculator for recreation, this was a great number of times. Yet still, she respected him. Believed in him. She had nothing but confidence in his character. He contemplated once more just how deeply she must have been wounded when he said otherwise.

"I'm sorry that I—" Arthur had begun but stopped when Rabia touched his face.

"You're sticky," she said with thin irises and giant pupils.

"You're high."

"Take me up top, I'm the right kind of weird and they need to know that I am the devil. This is my party."

It was no comfort knowing that she would have uttered that lunacy regardless of whether she was sober or tripping.

Arthur got up from Salt's homely sofa, extended his hands, then heaved Rabia up to her feet. She looked him in his eyes. She did not let go of his hands.

"Promise me that we'll have something like this when all of this is done," Rabia said.

"Like this trailer or like this giant pirate rig?"

She squeezed his hands. "I don't care," she said. "So long as we call it home."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The ruins of the city was a sight that he was relieved to see, but not thankful for. The engine of *The Shark* cut out as Rabia parked the convertible. Their stop had a slight jolt to it, evidence of War's tinkering during her short ownership of the mutant car. Aside from an engine that was somehow more hungry for road than before, she had also added a couch to the back and mounted a gun on a swivel that Rabia was eager to try. They parted ways with the pirate fleet in the early morning, arriving at the outskirts of the city in only hours. Cold clouds hung in the air, still not burnt off by the day's sun. It looked as bleak as Arthur felt.

The old spires of man that still stood, huge skyscrapers built by the wealthy and powerful, now stood at odd angles. It was not hard for Arthur to imagine the strength and hold of the mythical corporations that built them. His imagination was fed by years in the bunker. It allowed him to extrapolate on his experiences. The cruelty in the savage wastes let him fill in the rest. Once, the power-hungry and cruel built upward, each attempting their own Tower of Babel to tempt the hand of God. Now they built giant mobile death rigs.

At least today's psychopaths were more outwardly honest with how they expressed themselves.

The roads of the old city were covered in dust, and what was not dust was ash. The streets were littered with pre-apocalypse trash, that, and the bones of the dead. The day's sun had yet to peek out from behind the massive and empty buildings of old. The only occupants now were the occasional radioactive pigeon, creatures that could fly until their tumors grew too big and weighed them down. In the heart of the city was the IRS bunker.

"This is as far as I go," said Rabia. "We can't risk the IRS seeing me giving you a ride. Have you memorized our story?"

They had gone over it a dozen times on their drive over. Not so much to make sure that Arthur knew all of the details, but because it was better than talking about parting ways. It was better than talking about a relationship doomed until the biggest military force in the United Wastes was somehow obliterated.

"Yes," Arthur said. "My van was ambushed by the wasteland witch. I only got away because she was full from eating everyone else."

Rabia nodded her head in approval. "Couldn't be any more airtight," she said. Arthur let it be.

"I'm dead if my escort made it back," he said.

"You should have let me kill him, but never mind that. He ran in the opposite direction."

They sat in silence for a minute. It was time for Arthur to leave, it was time to part ways. Neither could bring themselves to make it happen.

Arthur looked at Rabia. She looked tired and spent. Sleep had not come for either of them that night. The pirates celebrated until dawn blasting music into the early morning. Not that Rabia could have slept if the pirates were chill, the LSD she had dropped made sure that sleep was a

faraway and forgotten friend. Midway through the night War had decided to renovate the captain's quarters, now her own, by tossing everything inside of it over the front of the rig. The crew watched in glee as couches and quaint knick-knacks came crashing down into the giant cowcatcher that pierced the way in front of *The Salty Beard*. The couch erupted in splinters and upholstery. Rabia screamed: "Purge! The great magnet demands we purge!" as the pirates threw more of Salt's things overboard. Apparently, it was very good LSD.

It was not until the stars of early morning began to fade away that the pirates settled down. Arthur even witnessed a "changing of the guard" as the great rig's driver was replaced for the day shift. Arthur was still drunk when he and Rabia got in *The Shark*. There was no protestation from the pirates still lucid and awake enough to see them leave. Rabia was their queen. She could come and go as she wanted. Only now did the threat of a hangover tease Arthur's brain. He knew that he looked as exhausted as Rabia.

Good. It would help with his story. A man miserable from no sleep and a killer hangover speaking delusions about a wasteland witch had to look no different than a man who had just trekked the United Wastes without food or drink. He could work with it.

What drinking he had done that night was only that which Rabia handed him. Becky had brought out her stash of pre-war tequila and Rabia was quick to claim it.

What drinking he did that night was also not celebratory. Oh, he was glad that Rabia was victorious. The prospect of having a fleet of slaver intolerant pirates having their backs in the war against Boyd and Oswald was a good one. The mood of the party, though destructive, was cheerful, and he did find it contagious from time to time (when he was not terrified by it). But the drinking he did that night was to drown out his

woes. Sadness and tequila were like mixing oil and wolverines: no one is the wiser for it and the consequences are physical.

Rabia made Lizard Shits the new Emissary, an honor that she made sure he knew was not deserved. Once he received this title, and the crew had thinned out as much as it would that night, Rabia declared a single standing order: keep on trucking.

When they left the arena was still connected to *The Salty Beard*. Captain Salt's mangled body would likely cook under the sun for hours before the hungover pirates decided to do anything with it. Arthur wondered what sort of burial the land pirates would give him, if any. Would they honor him? He had half the mind to ask Rabia as they drove off. The drive, however, remained silent.

Truth be told, at this point they were both procrastinating. *The Shark* was stopped. The engine had been cut. It was time for Arthur to unbuckle his seatbelt and head out. Rabia had a long drive ahead of her, especially considering that *The Salty Beard* was moving away from them. Yet, neither said a word or made a motion to end their company. They sat in desperate silence for a moment and looked toward the giant concrete cemetery that used to be a thriving city.

Rabia broke the silence. "How long do you think it will take for the fleet to be recognized as a religion?" she asked. Business was just easier to talk about than a relationship doomed by circumstances. "War wants to order the fleet to forage for themselves gas-wise and leave the rest to the rig. I'd love to park the sonovabitch, the gas *and the fleet* would last much longer if that diesel devil wasn't always on the move but the crazy bastards consider the thought to be heresy. Frankly I'm still too wounded to try to fight them all about it." Rabia drummed the rim of the steering wheel with her fingers. Her hands had to find new habits now that she was out of cigarettes. "Rationing the remaining tankers to *The*

Salty Beard gives us more time, but I'd like to refill the fleet at once before we bite the hand feeding us to free some slaves."

Arthur pulled out his notebook. His head pounded as hard as the pirate's drummers, and the light of the day made reading his notes a harder task with his sensitive eyes. Despite this, and the sinking feeling that this was his last moment with the woman that he loved, he still felt a little excitement for the bureaucratic task ahead of him. "This will be the first official religion of the new world," he said. "I think Boyd will let me back in just to claim another victory for his legacy. I wouldn't expect the process to take more than a week."

"Good," Rabia said with a final smack on the top of the steering wheel. They had stretched the inevitable as far as it would go. "Arthur," she said.

"Yes?"

"We will win this."

"I know."

She turned to him. "Don't forget your promise to me."

"I won't," he said. They kissed, both knowing deep down that the promise was nearly impossible.

Arthur got out of the car.

"Good luck G-Man," Rabia said as she turned the ignition keys. She put her shades on in a hurry. Arthur could not see her eyes now, she would not let him see her cry. *The Shark* moved away. Arthur watched her leave until she was a tiny speck on the horizon. She did not once look back.

As if his heavy heart and bittersweet goodbyes were not enough, he now had to swallow his pride and beg for his job back.

Arthur started his walk.

Even if Rabia could get closer to the city without being seen, *The Shark* would not have been able to, at least not on this road. The street was packed with derelict cars. All

pointing out of the city. This was one of the few metropolises that knew that the bombs were coming. They had warning. The citizens of the old world packed their bags and immediately caused a traffic jam like no one had ever seen before. Everyone had been on the road at the same time and they were all going in the same direction: away. The IRS had enough time to evacuate into the bunker, but no one else could get far enough, or deep enough, to avoid the miniature sun that bloomed from foreign ICBMs.

At least for this journey Rabia would not protect him. At least for now, he was a burden to no one. It was unlikely that raiders of any kind were around these parts, but it was that same mentality that had got them ambushed by The Colonel on the opposite side of the city. He had to stay vigilant. He had to stay spry. These are both tall orders when your head is being strangled by the after-effects of tequila and sadness.

Naturally, Arthur had his pen out. He scanned what horizon he could see that was not obscured by cinderblock building or concrete spire. He idly clicked the pen out of habit, inadvertently testing the acoustics of the dead city. His anxiety was echoed back to him.

He moved forward.

Years ago, when Arthur was still a child, his father was sent out into this same wasteland alone. The Enforcer program had not yet been built, and all auditors journeyed alone, or with other auditors. The wasteland was new then. Oh, it had grown into the cruel absurdities that it had merely flirted with since, but people were merely gangs and survivors then, not warlords with skull fetishes. But the landscape itself was practically the same. The skyline was as dead then as it was now.

The first mile in, as the horizon behind was swallowed by the hollowed-out husks of buildings, Arthur tried to imagine what his father felt. He realized that he did not have to imag-

ine. He had felt terror, loathing, self-doubt, and desperation. The crux of his introspection was not that his father never got to see the city from this angle, as he never got the chance to return. Arthur had now spent more time on this planet than his father had, and he was spending it crawling back to the job that killed him.

Great.

His second mile was a quicker pace than the first. The further into the city the more unrecognizable the structures became as he came closer to the blast zone. He was not yet close enough to see the permanent shadows that had been burned into the walls, but this far in he could see where cars had been abandoned in desperation. The doors to every rusty car that sat on the road were open. If they were not opened by their original owners trying to evacuate on foot, then they were opened by scavengers that survived the blast.

He tried to think big picture. He tried to remind himself that he could do more damage to Boyd's and Oswald's efforts on the inside. He could be a useful saboteur instead of a useless pirate, watching listlessly as the others did things he could not yet bring himself to do. He had no idea that he would soon have a master's class in brutality. He had no idea that he would soon be taught by the best. He tried to think big picture, he tried to give himself credit. Instead, he cursed himself for not saying the one thing that should be said when lovers part.

Arthur was no longer vigilant. He was nearly where the snipers watched, he assumed that inactivity meant security.

Ahead he recognized the telltale markings of the border: a large particle board with a picture of the IRS badge. He ceased clicking his pen, now aware that he had been idly clicking at it for miles. By the time he saw them he no longer had the option to run.

Four men dressed in army fatigues and frowns stood

square-shouldered where there should be snipers unseen. They each held rifles that were polished and well maintained, an odd sight in the United Wastes. They had identical crew cuts, and each eyed him with the calm unblinking stare of a hawk. Of course, these things were not the first detail that Arthur noticed about them. Strapped to the groins of three of the men was the unmistakable shape of two grenades on top of where their balls should be, fastened to uniform chastity belts. If Arthur had further time to examine this crime against humanity, he would have seen that one of the grenades was attached to a plastic casing labeled "discharge". These three were the men that Oswald had kept hidden from the IRS. These men were slaves.

"Arthur McDowell?" The man without the explosive chastity said. Arthur knew that there was no point in saying no. He knew that it wasn't a question.

Arthur took a step back. Before he knew that he had to run he was tackled to the ground. One of the men with an explosive chastity belt was on top of him. Arthur tried to fight him off. He was not nearly strong enough.

Arthur dropped his pen.

He screamed for help, knowing it was in vain.

He was flipped over, face in dirt and chest on rock. Two of the men were now on top of him, handcuffs came down on his wrists. He lifted his head, tried to see what was happening, tried to see if there was any way out of this. A green burlap sack came over his head. His world now darkness.

"Arthur McDowell," he heard the man without a chastity belt saying. "Terminating your employment with the federal government made you eligible for the emergency wartime draft lottery." The voice came closer, he could feel the man's warm breath through the sack on his ear. "You are hereby detained for draft dodging. We're taking you to boot camp."