

# IRONCLAD WASTELAND™ 3



MATT WALLACE



IRONCLAD  
A Wasteland Novella  
By Matt Wallace

### Destiny: As Crooked As a Broken Jaw

Superstitious folk will tell you that, if there's one thing you can't escape, it's fate. If any of those folks were from the weed patches and broken pavement of the Kansas plains, however, they'd tell you the only thing you can never hope to escape is the wrath of Cordite, the Warlord of the Wakarusa Redlegs.

Bullman Downs of the Dover Doom-Bringers found that out under the blood-soaked sun of one particular late autumn afternoon, when his gang and Cordite's gang—the two biggest in that part of the world—met for a final winner-take-all brawl.

The Doom-Bringers had long opposed the Wakarusa Redlegs for supremacy over eastern Kansas. Both hunted in that area's vast, open spaces, their prey caravans, nomads, and small towns on the edges of the "civilized" areas around the bigger cities, the citizens of which they could sell as slave labor to the giant plantations of Wichita, Omaha, and Kansas City to till and tend their endless fields of wheat and corn.

Bullman was a squat, fat kettle of a man whose entire head was surrounded by a frizzy cloud of black and gray hair. He wore a ring through his septum large and gnarly enough to be a doorknocker on a haunted house.

In Cordite's eyes, the individual members of Bullman's gang weren't worth shit, but they did have the numbers. By taking any old broken-down ragamuffin into his fold, Bullman had swelled the ranks of the Doom-Bringers to three times that of the Redlegs. Thus far, owing to Cordite's policy of only bringing in the biggest, toughest, and best-trained killers he could find, those numbers hadn't been able to overwhelm the Redlegs—yet.

The day was coming soon, however, and Cordite had decided it was time to stomp on the Doom-Bringer anthill before the infestation grew any larger. So for the past month he'd had his squads harassing Bullman's crews everywhere they went—stealing slaves from them on the trail, burning down their clubhouses and outposts, hunting deep within territory the Doom-Bringers considered their home, and leaving human calling cards impaled on stakes, their legs painted red with their own blood, so there would be no question who'd come a-poaching.

Finally, after longer than he expected, Cordite got the response he was looking for. From the four corners of Kansas, Bullman gathered his entire strength together—more than fifteen hundred members—and led them into Redleg territory.

Cordite lured them on with quick engagements and quicker retreats, pretending that the Doom-Bringers were forcing them into a corner. And really, he actually *was* cornered, hemmed in by the I-70 to the south and the radioactive pit that was Lake Wilson to the west. If Cordite's gambit didn't pay off, it would be the end of the Redlegs, and he could hear his lieutenants grumbling to each other that he'd lost it at last as their five hundred troops prepared to make a last stand in the overgrown parking lot of a collapsed Food Emporium. The only remnant of the store was a faded sign that towered high above the ruined building—high enough that it could be seen from the nearby freeway and for miles around.

The Redlegs put the wreckage of the shopping center at their backs and waited at the ready as the glinting line of Doom-Bringer vehicles crawled over the I-70 overpass and filled in the parking lot in front of them.

Cordite had forged a special weapon for the battle—an eight-foot-long pitchfork fashioned from a piece of wrought-iron gate topped with three wicked, barbed prongs awaiting soft flesh, but he expected most of the killing to be done by the guns mounted on his vehicles and slung on straps over the shoulders of his troops. He expected it to be a massacre. The Redlegs were hungry for blood and power and conquest, chomping at the bit to vanquish their old enemies once and for all and plunder whatever goodies the Doom-Bringers had accumulated—not to mention move into all their old territories.

Cordite stared across the cracked and weedy cement of the parking lot. He had expected to be outnumbered three to one. It looked more like four to one, but he wasn't worried.

He knew it wasn't his destiny to die here today.

"After today," Cordite roared into an old police bullhorn, "the Wakarusa Redlegs *own* Kansas!"

"The Dover Doom-Bringers have somethin' to say about that!" Bullman fired back through the PA of the truck at his back, and shook the machete in his hand.

"We'll see how much you have to say after I rip out your goddamn tongue!"

With that, Cordite held his pitchfork high above his head, rallying the Redlegs, who roared in response, whooping and hollering bloody murder, ready to charge headlong into their rivals.

But instead of calling the charge, Cordite looked over his shoulder to his young second-in-command.

"Thrush! Now!"

"You got it, boss!"

Standing in the back of a truck, Thrush slammed down the plunger of an old-fashioned detonator box.

Cordite smiled as a small explosion puffed dust and concrete into the air on the right side of the Doom-Bringer army. He hadn't chosen this parking lot by accident. He'd had it planned from the get-go, and he'd primed the ground in advance.

At first, the Doom-Bringers didn't know what had exploded, and he could see them looking around in confusion. Nobody was hurt. Nobody was screaming. What had happened?

Then there was a groan like an iron giant with a stomachache, and a shadow moved across their ranks.

They looked up and saw that the giant Food Emporium sign was toppling their way, its concrete piling blown out on one side, just as Cordite had planned it.

Bullman's troops shrieked and tried to run. Tried to reverse their vehicles out of the way, and only succeeded in smashing into each other before being crushed under the ten-ton, hundred-foot-tall pole and sign. Dozens of vehicles were destroyed completely, and scores of Doom-Bringers were squashed like bugs and died instantly, but that was not as important to Cordite's plans as the chaos and confusion the sign's fall had created. That was gold.

"Now!" he roared. "Redlegs, cut 'em down!"

With the chain guns and assault rifles of his troops chattering over his head and chewing up the tangled mess of the Doom-Bringers' vehicles, Cordite led his shock troops toward their front line. He was the first to reach them, running five steps ahead of his retinue. He thrust his

pitchfork like a lance, its barbs tearing through the face of a backpedaling Doom-Bringer and sending him spinning like a top.

Cordite bowled over the bodies that clashed with his like a pre-war linebacker, giving himself room to unleash mayhem. He used the heavy iron of his weapon's haft to deflect any blow that came within range. He skewered Doom-Bringer necks with the pitchfork's barbs and used the leverage to pop heads from shoulders like bottle caps.

As he leapt for the second rank, one of the little fuckers he'd already put down sat up and slashed open his right calf. Cordite pinned his skull to the pavement for his trouble, then moved on, killing with every blow.

Despite the confusion sown by the sign and the fusillade and the screaming charge, it was not a rout. The Doom-Bringers were seasoned troops, and they soon rallied, using the pole of the fallen sign as a barricade to try to keep the Redlegs at bay.

The fiercest and thickest of the fighting lasted almost ten minutes, with bodies steaming and bleeding in the waning sun, so thick atop the parking lot that the concrete was invisible, and vehicles on both sides were burning down to the ground. Still the Doom-Bringers kept coming. Coming and dying. It seemed there was no end to them. Eventually, however, the skill and toughness of Cordite's troops won out, each cutting down three or more Doom-Bringers for every Redleg that fell. Soon they outnumbered their rivals by two to one, then three to one, and the war cries and gunshots that had been deafening when the battle was joined were soon reduced to scattered shouts and pops, usually as a Redleg delivered the next kill strike.

What remained of the Doom-Bringers gave Cordite a wide berth, wanting no further part of his wanton death-dealing. He scanned the dying chaos for Bullman, knowing the battle would truly be over only when he held the bulbous, bearded man's heart in his hands.

The Doom-Bringers' leader had fallen back to the edge of the parking lot with one of his men, holding the filthy young fool at his shoulder as a shield.

Cordite began wading toward them, his bloodied and entrails-adorned pitchfork leading the way.

"It's payday, you puffed-up shit-bird!" he snarled.

As he spotted Cordite, Bullman's eyes widened beneath his blood-matted whirl of graying hair. "Fuck you, you cheater! Fuck you and your dirty tricks!"

Cordite raised the pitchfork. In response, Bullman hoisted his human shield over his head with both hands and flung him. Surprised, Cordite sidestepped too late, and the man fell on the prongs of his pitchfork, shrieking as they pierced him to the spine.

Cordite struggled to free the dying kid from his weapon as Bullman fled. The brave leader of the Dover Doom-Bringers hopped up into the cab of a nearby stake-bed truck and floored it, abandoning what remained of his forces.

Cordite dropped the pitchfork and the dead Doom-Bringer and looked around for a way to pursue.

“Boss!” Thrush yelled.

He turned to see his lieutenant skidding to a stop behind him in a souped-up Mustang that was five different colors of rust. Cordite dove through the broken-out back window.

“Go! Go!”

“Yee-haw!” Thrush stomped on the gas and fishtailed after the stake-bed as the muscle car’s grossly overpowered engine screamed like an angry lion.

“You let that son of a bitch get away and I’ll peel your skin off with a blade dipped in shit!” Cordite growled as he righted himself in the back seat.

Thrush scowled. “No need for threats, boss.”

The two vehicles tore across the parking lot, grinding dead bodies into the pavement as they went. Bullman veered wildly into the street and raced toward the entrance to the freeway, cutting frantically across three lanes of debris to make it onto the connector.

“I’m on him!” Thrush announced, launching the Mustang after the truck.

Their vehicles roared onto the freeway, weaving around the long-abandoned husks of cars left there to rust, and skimming perilously close to a slow-moving caravan of refugees in patched-together cars and trucks. The people in the caravan shrieked and swerved in terror.

On the floor of the back seat, among a sea of empty beer cans and bottles, Cordite found a greasy riot gun loaded with pumpkin shells. He picked it up and racked one into the chamber.

“Get on his bumper!”

“Trying!” shouted Thrush.

Ahead of them, Bullman swerved around a dead bus that lay sideways across two lanes, then powered up the next off-ramp, scraping along the guardrail as he went.

Thrush clipped the front of the bus with the Mustang, then angled up after him as tail-light glass tinkled behind. He caught up to the stake-bed at the top of the ramp as it wallowed into a wild left onto the overpass that crossed the freeway. A second later he was alongside, and Cordite slithered his head and arm through the open passenger's side window, pushing the large shotgun out ahead of him.

He could see Bullman's frightened eyes in the stake-bed's rearview mirror. Cordite leveled the riot gun at the truck's left rear tire and pulled the trigger. The blast tore the rubber clean from the tire's rim.

The stake-bed swerved violently, then bumped up onto the rubble of a cement divider. It went airborne briefly and then tumbled along the overpass, flipping several times before settling on its side in a smoking heap.

Thrush turned the wheel and slammed the brakes, bringing the Ford to a screeching halt several yards from the beached truck, then let out a high-pitched victory holler that could've curdled milk.

"Save it till it's over!" Cordite barked.

Thrush flashed him a wounded look. "Sure, boss."

Cordite climbed from the back seat and stalked to the flaming wreckage, racking the riot gun as he went.

He heard a clumsy rustling as he stepped beside the exposed undercarriage of the stake-bed. Something was crawling up through the interior of the cab.

Cordite planted his feet and waited. Soon the rustling was replaced by frustrated, anguished groans. Those mutated into animalistic growls filled with desperate rage.

A moment later Bullman's shadow blotted out the sun, and Cordite looked up to see him struggling to stand on the cab door above him. Cordite raised the shotgun, but then Bullman's foot slipped and he dropped down like a curse from Heaven.

Cordite could've jumped back and let the man face plant on the tarmac all by himself, then finished him off with a shot to the face, but he wanted to feel this kill in his bare hands. He dropped the shotgun and reached up his arms.

Bullman was four hundred pounds if he was an ounce, and would've crushed any average man who was fool enough to stand under him, but Cordite had never been anything resembling average. His thick, muscled arms intercepted Bullman's body like an errant football,



then redirected the Doom-Bringer's momentum and spiked his frizzy head straight down into the overpass concrete, adding his weight to the slam.

Cordite couldn't see Bullman's skull bursting like overripe fruit, but he certainly heard it.

He released his bearlike grip and allowed what remained of Bullman to topple to the pavement. He noted with mild amusement and less than mild disgust that the Doom-Bringer smelled worse dead than he did when he was alive.

By then a swarm of Redleg vehicles had caught up to Thrush's Mustang, and bloodied, battered, but celebratory members of the gang were flooding out onto the overpass to meet their victorious leaders.

Cordite stomped over to the guardrail, ignoring the searing pain in his calf where it had been opened by a Doom-Bringer blade, and ascended the cement barrier to address his battle-hardened minions.

"Everything you can see is yours, boys and girls!" he declared, spreading his arms wide. "Kansas is *all* Redleg territory now!"

They cheered and fired their weapons into the sky, filling the air of the overpass with their bloodthirsty revelry.

"And that means it's time to cross off a scar," he added, more for himself than for them.

The twelve scars on his chest represented Cordite's sacred tasks that he had to complete before he could attain his destiny—prophesied by a witch at his birth—which was to rule all of Kansas and unite the gangs to eventually take Kansas City.

Today's scar was the third to last. There would be only two left after this. Cordite pulled his shirt open to expose his chest and removed a Buck knife from its sheath on his belt. Before attending to his scar, he turned, raised his face to the setting sun, and allowed himself a brief moment to bask in its rays, enjoying the fullness of his victory, and the smell of blood and shit that was victory's eternal scent.

Then he opened his eyes and looked down at the ruined freeway stretching into forever. The same ramshackle convoy of beaten-up vehicles that he and Thrush and Bullman had raced past earlier was still streaming beneath the overpass, probably fleeing his war with the Doom-Bringers and seeking greener pastures. Not that they would find them. More often than not, what the weary, unprepared sheep who scattered before wars found was that the road was no safer than home—often less so.

As he heard Thrush step up on the guardrail beside him, Cordite dismissed the refugees from his mind and returned to the matter at hand, lowering his blade to his chest and preparing to cut across the third-to-last scar.

“Witness this, Thrush,” he said. “Witness my next step.”

The knife never touched his flesh, but he did suddenly feel a sharp, metal edge pierce his body.

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Cordite had often contemplated how destiny is never a straight line. To his mind, only fools expected their destiny to fall in front of them like a neat, easily followed path. Destiny, as Cordite knew it to be, loved its curves, sharp and winding and unexpected. If you weren’t careful, if you weren’t *watchful*, and most especially if you weren’t fully and solely committed to the ground beneath your feet, you’d walk right off the path of destiny and over the edge of a cliff.

So it was now.

One moment Cordite was standing on the guardrail of the Route 70 overpass, triumphantly surveying his newly won land, secure that he had at last grasped the next handhold in his ascent to ruling all of Kansas. The next moment, his entire body was seized by the godlike grip of the all-consuming pain of a Bowie knife the size of East Texas piercing his back so deeply it felt like the tip of the blade was trying to locate his soul.

That was destiny’s version of a sudden curve, and Cordite had no one to blame but himself for taking his eye off the road and missing it.

There is nothing about being stabbed in the back that doesn’t hurt like a hobo storyteller’s drunken recounting of Hell, whether that backstabbing is of the figurative or literal variety. In this case it was both. The hand wielding the knife belonged to the closest thing to a friend Cordite had ever found in this world. He never trusted Thrush—Cordite didn’t trust anyone—but he’d trained the younger man up proper, and had been looking forward to passing on the title of warlord to him once Cordite had become king of Kansas. And Thrush had seemed to want that future too, always seeming to idolize Cordite as a leader, a teacher, and a mentor.

Apparently not anymore.

Cordite wasn't even angry at Thrush. He was more pissed at himself for not seeing this coming a mile off. He'd recognized the boy's ambition and treated it like a bone he could hang in front of him as motivation. He thought Thrush's obedience was proof he had him under his thumb. As soon as that knife entered his back, however, Cordite knew Thrush had only been waiting for Cordite to defeat the Redlegs' rivals—that, with the hard part over, the gang could do without him.

The pain of the blade in his back was another world of hurt. A shrieking fire. A punch like a body blow. A cold star spreading from where his precious juice was escaping around the blade. He dropped his own knife. It spun down to the highway below.

"Me and the boys talked it over," Thrush whispered in Cordite's ear, peppering his neck with greasy spittle. "It's time for a change in leadership, and I'm nominatin' myself!"

"Election's... gonna have to wait," Cordite said through a painfully clenched jaw, then he drove the side of his skull into the younger man's nose and mouth.

The sudden movement and the power of the blow surprised Thrush, and that only proved how stupid the boy remained. He should've known his leader better. Cordite only grew more dangerous and lethal the more he was hurt.

Thrush stumbled drunkenly and slipped off the guardrail, leaving the Bowie knife stuck in Cordite's back. He landed hard on the cracked pavement of the overpass and clutched his nose, which wasn't just broken—it was shattered. The blood poured over his mouth, chin, and neck.

"Shoot him!" he gargled. "Kill the fucker!"

The words made Cordite banish all thoughts of the knife in his back. He turned and went for the pistol stuck through the front of his belt.

Not fast enough.

He didn't feel the first bullet, or the second, but the third made a distinct impression on him.

He never saw the faces of the shooters. He only saw their hands clutching their guns. His own men, shaking as they fired, scared he might survive, because, if he did, he'd spend days peeling the flesh from their bones.

A lot of those frightened shots went wide, but the three that struck him were more than enough to knock him backward over the guardrail. The shock almost took him out of the world. He was only vaguely aware of the air rushing past him as he fell.

He was slightly more aware when that air stopped rushing, and his spine collided with something metallic and hard, and possessing very little give. All he knew for certain was that he hadn't landed on the freeway, he wasn't currently being run over, and his skull was still intact.

Today destiny was a mountain switchback, and fortunately for Cordite he'd caught the next bend on his way down. That moment of relief lasted all of ten seconds before darkness finally claimed him.

Alice

Cordite wasn't surprised to wake up alive. Destiny would never let Thrush and the rest of his traitorous cadre actually kill him. Destiny was just reminding him that nothing would ever come easily, and the moment he started treating a single victory like it was the end of the road, everything would be snatched from him. He had to stay sharper than that. He had to remain vigilant and committed to the future he knew awaited him.

The world rattled unevenly around him, jogging his wounds and making them scream. Cordite moved his eyes around and saw he was laid out in the back of a wagon fashioned from an old flatbed truck. The makeshift cover was a ratty blue tarp with the flap strung closed, and the inside was dark except for the wavering light of a few candles. He smelled sweat and musk, which was expected, but something else stung his nostrils too—a chemical smell, sterile and cloying and tinged with a sharp bite of alcohol.

A medic wagon. He must have fallen onto one of the caravan vehicles belonging to the refugees fleeing the Redleg/Doom-Bringer turf war.

He'd been stripped down to his dungarees and boots. Among the gnarled and scarred topography of his torso, Cordite's latest wounds were covered with seeping hemp bandages. It struck him immediately that these were precious resources to waste on a stranger. These refugees must be stupid or wholly benevolent, which in Cordite's eyes amounted to the same thing.

Everything hurt, but to Cordite pain was like breathing. It wasn't something he noticed or worried about until it stopped. That's when you were in trouble. If you could still feel pain, then you were alive, and if you were alive you could still defeat your enemies.

"I wouldn't try to move just yet if I were you."

The voice was young, but raspy and tired. There was a weight to it that should've exceeded the capacity of a person in their early years.

Cordite turned his head and blinked things into focus, squinting in the dim light.

She was eighteen if she was a day. Her eyes were harder than brass bullets, and the sweaty ends of her short, dirty-blond hair clung to the corners of them. She wore faded, ripped jeans and a threadbare t-shirt from some pre-war amusement park, the name of which had long since chipped from the fabric. She was cleaning his blood from her small hands in a bowl of murky water. They were alone in the close confines of the wagon.

Cordite tried to sit up and found the best he could manage was lifting his head and shoulders.

"Untie me," he demanded.

"You ain't tied and you ain't paralyzed," she assured him without a lick of reassurance in her voice. "You just lost a lot of blood. It'll take a while. You're lucky to be alive."

"Luck's got fuck all to do with it," he muttered under his breath.

"Three slugs and a half-foot knife in you," she recounted. "I'd say luck lent a bit of a hand. Those Redlegs up on that overpass wanted to kill you bad."

"Bad is how they killed me," he said. "Useless curs couldn't even get that right."

Bitterness crept into Cordite's voice as the full brunt of his rage and disgust at the betrayal of his gang finally hit him. Did they think he was dead?

He looked at the girl. "Those Redlegs come looking for me?"

She shook her head. "Nah. Saw 'em laughin' from the bridge."

Cordite snorted, then grunted at the pain that caused. The fools. Hadn't he told Thrush to save the celebration until he was sure it was over? He swore to himself that they would all pay in full for their treachery. It didn't matter how long it took. He would circle back to the Redlegs and dangle Thrush by his shriveled dick from the top branch of a pepper tree.

"The bullet holes weren't so much," she informed him. "The bullets all passed through you, and none of them managed to hit anything that won't heal, from what I can tell. It's that



stab wound that almost did you in. I cleaned it out and stitched it. Then re-stitched it when you popped those. It finally stopped bleeding.”

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Cordite asked.

“From my mother. Not that any of it helped her when her time came.”

He studied the girl’s prematurely aging face.

“You don’t seem all that happy your labors have paid off,” he said.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t wake up,” she stated plainly.

“You don’t mince words, girl,” Cordite observed dispassionately.

“My name is Alice.”

“You don’t mince words, Alice.”

She only shrugged.

“If you didn’t want me wakin’ up, then why heal me?”

“My father told me to.”

“And you let other people tell you what to do?”

“I don’t ‘let’ him do anything. It’s just the way it is right now.”

Cordite smirked to himself at the “right now” at the end of her answer.

“So why does your father want me to live?”

“He thinks we’ll need you.”

“What for?”

“To fight.”

“Fight who?”

“Whoever will be trying to kill us all as we travel. It’s clear you’re some kind of fighter.”

Cordite ignored that for the time being, thinking it unwise to make declarative statements about himself to these people.

Instead, he asked, “Where’s this sad little caravan of yours headed?”

“Away from Kansas. My father thinks we can find a better life in Colorado, but his plan gets a little sketchy past that.”

“I take it you’re in disagreement with your daddy about my usefulness.”

“From the look of you, you’re exactly the type we’re running away from.”

Cordite finally started to get annoyed. “If you think I’m so damn dangerous, why are you hunkered alone in this flatbed with me?”

“You aren’t in any kind of shape to do me harm right now,” Alice said with confidence.

“You’re sure about that, are you?”

In response, Alice reached down and lifted up Thrush’s Bowie knife, which she’d removed from Cordite’s back. With surprising strength for one with such a slight frame, she rammed the tip of the blade into the bed of the truck beside her.

“Pretty sure,” she said with the faintest ghost of a grin.

### A Conspiracy of Jackasses

Alice's father smiled like a snake-oil salesman, and Cordite knew before he spoke his first word that he was packed full of mule shit.

It was a few days later when the old man finally paid Cordite a call. In that time, between sleeping for hours on end, Cordite had plied Alice for more information. He learned that her father was the self-appointed leader of the refugee caravan and its hundred or so people. Alice made him sound like the kind of yokel who had just enough balls to lord over unarmed rubes but not nearly enough balls to fight his own battles.

There were few types Cordite respected less, not that he respected much of any type at the end of the day.

The old man had a too-red face and steel-gray hair he'd obviously spent a good deal of time combing into something that looked like a roadkill sculpture. Cordite eyed him the way he might look down at a tick latched onto his arm.

"Glad you're feeling better," the man said by way of a greeting.

Cordite gave the slightest of nods.

"Those fellas surely did want you dead. Mind if I ask why?"

"Puppies."

The man's withered features twisted in a hangdog expression of confusion.

"Puppies?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm," Cordite confirmed. "Whole mess of puppies. Those scoundrels wanted to kill 'em, cook 'em, and eat 'em. I was trying to save 'em."

“So them fellas put all these holes in you for trying to save... puppies.”

“Just the kind of man I am, I suppose.”

Behind her father, Cordite saw Alice stifle a giggle.

“Well, my baby girl surely did a fine job patching you up. How are you feeling?”

“Alive.”

His benefactor smiled disingenuously and nodded.

“Well, we’re all hoping that when you’re able to get up out of this bed you’ll consider joining us in our journey west. As you can imagine, we could use a man knows how to handle himself. And you seem to be that.”

Cordite was quiet for an uncomfortably long time.

“I suppose I owe you something,” he finally said, his tone betraying nothing.

That seemed to satisfy the old man. Alice, on the other hand, seemed to take Cordite’s meaning much differently, though she only frowned and said nothing.

Her father offered some further platitudes, but Cordite stopped listening. Eventually he had to pretend to drift back into unconsciousness to get the fool to leave him be.

They’d made camp for the evening in the remnants of a “Scenic Overlook” off the turnpike, which was a parking lot that looked down on a canyon that would more accurately be described as a hole in the dirt. Alice fed him bites of a beef jerky stick that tasted like an injection of salt directly into his tongue. Sips of water from a sports bottle she squeezed for him failed to fully wash away the taste.

It was clear she resented having to do all of this. The disdain was written openly on her face.

Cordite decided she wasn’t afraid of him, and it wasn’t because he was laid up, either. It pissed him off, but he had to admit to himself he also liked that about her more than a little.

They didn’t speak much. After downing her own meager rations, Alice curled up in a chair balanced precariously in one corner of the flatbed, reading a comic book so sun-faded the words were mostly illegible, until she fell asleep.

Cordite waited until her breathing became steady and even and gently thrumming, then tried to get up.

Moving felt like taking a tack hammer to every bone and muscle in his body. He’d been slowly working those muscles in his sickbed over the past several days, though to the casual onlooker it would’ve seemed as if he was merely lying there, convalescing. He thought it best to

keep his rehabilitation efforts to himself. Though the refugees said they wanted him for his strength, he knew their attitudes might change once he no longer appeared weak.

Alice never once stirred as he climbed from the little spartan cot and crept across the flatbed. He slipped through the flap and immediately ducked under the rusting frame of the vehicle, the darkness swallowing his large body whole.

He crawled on all fours beneath the chassis of the circled vehicles like a jungle cat stalking prey through the brush. As he did, he surveyed the refugees who were lingering in the makeshift camp's interior. They were not a hardy people. He saw pale, sunken faces and big cow eyes. He wondered how most of them had survived this long. They were only a step up from feed animals as far as Cordite was concerned, and letting themselves be led by an oaf like Alice's father, they would likely end up as such soon enough.

The old fool was huddled up with a few other aging fossils around a fire, swilling cheap rye in old coffee cups. The mug Alice's father was drinking from was a chipped red and pink thing that read "World's Greatest Lover."

Cordite slithered between a school bus and an ice cream truck, creeping closer to hear their words.

"It's too dangerous, keeping him around like this," one of the old men was whining. "You saw his scars. Lord knows what he's done or what he could do when he gets his strength back."

"It's dangerous keeping anything valuable in the wastes," Alice's father insisted arrogantly. "But he's worth as much as gas or gold, boys. I guarantee it. Those were the Redlegs up on that overpass. And they wanted him dead something fierce, judging from what they did to him. They'll want him if they know he's still alive."

That was about what Cordite had figured. He wasn't angry that the fools wanted to trade him like a sack of salt. He was angry that the old man looked at him and thought Cordite was someone he could get over on.

"He's not going to let us just deliver him tied up in a bow to the Redlegs."

"We're heading west toward the Colorado border, where the Redlegs' territory ends. They've got outposts all up and down the Kansas side, and patrols move between 'em. We'll just wait till we run across one of those patrols, then we'll tell the big fucker we'll hide him inside the freezer of the ice cream truck. Then we just lock it up and turn him over. Easy!"

“Who’s to say the Redlegs won’t take him and then everything else we got for good measure?”

“The Redlegs aren’t like the Scar Collectors out in Colorado. They aren’t psycho slavers who chop themselves up and peddle flesh. They’re businessmen.”

*Scar Collectors. Out in Colorado.*

He’d heard the name but didn’t know much about them. They sounded like a nasty pack of cutthroats, at the very least. That was certainly a thing worth knowing. Cordite would need a new nasty pack of cutthroats to command sooner or later, and it sounded like the Scar Collectors valued good human stock.

“They’ll be reasonable,” Alice’s father insisted. “Even grateful, by my reckoning. This’ll go a long way to making them happy until we’re out of their territory.”

Cordite had heard enough. Alice’s father was a tiny little man who thought he was big. To Cordite’s way of thinking, men like that were made to pop like blisters. They were ticks on a dog, and Cordite would need to flick them off before they sucked enough blood from him to become a nuisance.

He retreated into the shadows and crept back to the medic wagon, slipping in as deftly as he’d slipped out. He was actually grateful to return to his sickbed. The jaunt had taken a lot more out of him than he would ever admit openly.

“You enjoy your walk?” Alice asked him without raising an eyelid or moving a muscle.

Cordite jerked toward her, surprised, and ready to snap her neck for exposing him.

She stayed curled up in her chair.

Cordite relaxed. “The walk was fine.”

Alice gave the slightest of nods.

“By the way,” she said. “If you’ve got that kind of strength back, feed yourself from now on. I’m not a wet nurse.”

With that she turned away from him and curled up again. A moment later she was snoring.

Cordite decided she was the only one worth a damn among these sheep. That wasn’t saying much, of course, but it was something, and at the moment he didn’t have much else to work with.



### The Fucking-You-Before-You-Can-Fuck-Me Tango

Cordite would have liked a bit more time to get all his parts working to his satisfaction again, but the caravan reached the Kansas–Colorado border in four days, so that’s when he made his move.

He found Alice’s father in the center of camp, lording over his subjects as they went about the tasks of the morning. The old man was surprised to see him mobile.

“You’re up and around!” he called out, trying to sound bright and cheery.

Cordite stalked up to him with a deliberately slow gait. “Your daughter has a natural touch for healing.”

“Gets it from her mother.”

“She told me.”

“Can we get you something to eat?” the old man asked, flashing that disingenuous smile.

Cordite shook his head. “I can see we’re gettin’ near the border,” he said, casting an ominous gaze to the horizon for effect.

The old man nodded nervously. “Looks that way, yeah.”

Cordite drew a deep, contemplative breath. “You were right about it being the Redlegs up on that overpass, chuckin’ me to my doom. I was one of ’em. I didn’t exactly agree with what we were doing to people like you folks, who keep getting caught up in our little turf wars. So I guess they decided I had to go.”

“I... I appreciate you sayin’ that, I suppose,” said Alice’s father.

“Yeah. Anyway. The last Redleg outpost in this part of Kansas is smack-dab between us and the Colorado border. Lies right along Route 70. Best we wait till they’re out on patrol before trying to cross. Otherwise the toll they take is going to be heavy. I know a spot off the highway where we could scope it out without being seen.”

He’d definitely succeeded in throwing the old man off his game. Cordite could see his wheels grinding slowly, his eyes full of hesitation and fear.

“If they’re not at the outpost,” Cordite added, hoping to sweeten the pot, “we can raid it for supplies, too. Redlegs usually have a pretty decent stock of booze.”

The idea of a free poke in the Redleg larder seemed to do the trick. Cordite watched as greed drowned out the more practical emotions in the man’s eyes.

“So then you’re volunteering as scout?” he asked.

Cordite nodded. “Seems our fates are coupled up for now. I want to make sure we avoid as many problems as we can.”

“Sure you’re up for this kind of thing?”

Cordite grinned. “I expect I’ll manage.”

He waited, watching Alice’s father’s eyes closely. Cordite was counting on his ego overpowering his suspicion and whatever small bits of common sense rattled around inside his mottled head.

The smile he put on in the next moment confirmed Cordite’s faith in the gambit. The man had a shit poker face, and his expression completely betrayed that he thought Cordite was playing right into his hands—practically volunteering to be turned over to the first pack of Redlegs they came across. From the old man’s perspective, it couldn’t be more perfect.

“I had a feeling about you!” he declared gleefully. “I *knew* you’d be a good friend to have!”

“Always gotta play your hunch,” Cordite offered neutrally.

They agreed to gather what supplies they’d need for the expedition and convene at the edge of camp in an hour.

\* \* \*

Cordite returned to the medic wagon. To his surprise, the rest of his clothes were laid out for him neatly on his cot.

Alice had done her best to clean the bloodstains from his shirt and coat and stitch up the holes in both with the same precision with which she'd sutured his skin.

"You didn't have to do that," he said.

"We don't have any other clothes in camp that would fit you."

Cordite grunted at that as he began to dress.

"Are you sure you're up to going out there?" she asked.

Cordite fixed her with a curious stare. "If I'm not, what's it to you?"

Alice shrugged. "I worked hard keeping you alive. Don't want to think I wasted all that time and energy for you to drop dead because you pushed yourself too hard too fast."

"I like to think my limit is higher than that."

"I'm sure you do."

Cordite said no more on the subject. He wasn't sure where her concern actually sat—with him or with the men he was leading out into the wastes.

\* \* \*

The old man met Cordite with two of his elderly cronies, a weaselly little shit and a tall, gaunt skeleton of a man who looked like he was about two steps from the grave. A broad-shouldered kid as tall as Cordite and even thicker through the middle joined the trio. He looked like he could lift an engine block, although he didn't look like he could out-think one.

"This is Randy," said Alice's father. "He's our best man. Figured he might come in handy if things get thick out there."

If he were a less mirthless individual, Cordite probably wouldn't have been able to stop himself from laughing.

Cordite took note of the weapons they were toting for the expedition. The grubby little crony had a fire axe, and his tall, decaying companion was packing a rusted crowbar. Randy hefted a weighty-looking wooden bat wrapped with dirty athletic tape. Alice's father was the only one of them packing iron. He had an automatic pistol stuffed down the front of his pants. Cordite figured him for the type who wanted to be the only one in the room with a gun.

Cordite himself was unarmed, but it didn't concern him, not one little bit.

The five of them set out from the circle of vehicles just as the sun began to climb high over the barren concrete and dead grass landscape. It was mostly freeways running through dead fields here, with the occasional off-ramps to small, deserted towns.

The others tried to make conversation here and there, but Cordite largely ignored them. His stab wound began to throb about an hour into their trek, and he couldn't remember ever feeling that winded so soon into physical activity. He'd always been a horse, someone who could drink and fight and fuck all day and all night without slowing down until he meant to.

There was one subject in which he *was* interested, however.

"Alice was saying somethin' the other night about... Scar Collectors?" he said when the conversation lulled. "I've never heard of an outfit called that before."

"Slavers!" the gaunt one burst out. "Pitiless freaks!"

"They're a gang that raids in Colorado," Alice's father explained. "They cut themselves up as some kind of point of pride. Raid and pillage and take people to sell and trade. They're supposed to be the worst of the worst across the state line. We're hopin' to avoid them."

"Of course," Cordite agreed.

After noon they came across a boarded-up truck stop café along the I-70 that sat atop a fair incline.

"That's the spot I was telling you about," Cordite said. "The Redleg outpost is about a hundred yards to the west of that rooftop, down the hill."

Alice's father nodded eagerly.

One by one, they climbed a service ladder up the side of the building and onto the roof. From it they had a panoramic view of the western edge of the state. It wasn't much to look at, but then nothing in the wastes was anymore.

An old roadhouse sat at the bottom of the hill, half hidden by scrub. Alice's father used a pair of binoculars to get a better look at it. Cordite waited, figuring it wouldn't take long.

"Oh, hell!" the old man announced a few minutes later. "You were right! That's the place. The Redleg colors are flying high above it."

The others bunched around him to gawk into the distance.

"Is it empty?" Cordite asked, keeping his tone flat and even.

"No. There's about a half dozen bikes parked out front. I see a few Redlegs boozin' around them."

"They can't see us, can they?" the little weasel asked, anxious enough to be trembling.

“Nah, we’re too far off and too high,” the old man reassured him.

Cordite frowned. That complicated matters beyond his liking. He hadn’t lied to Alice’s father about their need to assess the Redlegs’ presence here. He’d hoped his former comrades would be out on patrol, or called back home to support Thrush’s coup. The outpost being occupied meant the refugee caravan would have to wait until the Redlegs lit out to make their crossing.

More annoyingly, it also meant the old man would want to make the move to sell Cordite out to the Redlegs as soon as possible.

Cordite suddenly had a choice to make, and, as he usually did, he chose to go with violence.

He positioned himself smack dab in the middle of the other four. Such a move might’ve seemed like suicide to the uninitiated, but he figured it was his best play. The only way these rabbits could overtake him was if they rushed him in a wave. If they all had to come at him from different angles, he could swat them away like gnats—even Randy, he hoped.

“You wanna go on and flag ’em down?” Cordite asked Alice’s father. “Seems like as good a time as any to hand me over to ’em.”

The mood on the rooftop changed immediately. Cordite could smell the stink of panic and fear wafting off the men in that moment, except for Randy, who either didn’t know the score or was too dumb to follow.

Cordite watched the old man stiffen, then slowly turn back toward him, looking like the cat with canary feathers stuck through his whiskers.

“What... what are you talkin’ about? We saved your life! Why would we—?”

“It’s a fair play,” Cordite assured him. “Only, I would’ve had the balls to kill me and turn my body over for the bounty. Your way is sneakier than I go for, usually.”

The old man was too dumbstruck to reach for his pistol, so Cordite decided to skip to the end of their little chat. He straightened his spine and used the power in his shoulders to ram the hardest part of his head into the old man’s soft, pulpy face, crushing his nose and breaking his teeth as he stole the pistol from his belt.

The old man grunted and wheezed wetly through the sudden torrent of blood that filled his nose and throat, then fell on his saggy ass and held his face in his hands.

Cordite could’ve plugged them all then and there, but he didn’t want to alert the Redlegs. He tossed the pistol over the side of the roof and waited.

The weaselly elder was the first one to panic. He let out a whining yell and charged Cordite with his axe held high above his beady little head.

Before he could take a swing, Cordite's right arm shot out and his fingertips speared the little man's eyes, popping them like rotten grapes. The man screamed, a horrid, high-pitched sound, and staggered around the roof while taking wild swipes with his axe that only savaged the air.

Randy managed one giant stride forward before Cordite cut him off, chopping him in the throat with the calloused edge of his hand. The shot didn't quite collapse the young man's windpipe, but it gave him plenty to think about.

As Randy doubled up and clutched his throat, gasping for air, Cordite launched a short, powerful blow into the boy's forehead with the knuckles of his fore and middle fingers. It snapped Randy's head and neck all the way back, and smacked his brain against the inside of his skull.

The other crony started forward with his crowbar as Randy dropped to his knees, but predictably, Alice's father chose to remain in the background, nursing his face and obviously hoping he wouldn't have to intervene himself.

Cordite kicked the tall man's balls up into his body, enjoying the way his eyes bulged out of his skull as he dropped his crowbar.

Cordite snatched it mid-fall. A second later it was stuck through the man's eggshell skull and poking out the back of his neck. Cordite left it there.

It finally dawned on Alice's father that he was out of fodder to insulate his frail body from the sudden murder machine that was Cordite. He scrambled to his feet, bloody face and all, and charged him.

Cordite used a toe to flip Randy's baseball bat up into his hand, then jabbed the old man in the gut with the thick end. The blow stopped him cold and doubled him over.

While the old man was sucking air, Cordite turned and swung the bat at Randy's head, hard enough to cave in his skull and snap the boy's neck at the same time.

Cordite let the bat clatter to the roof. The runty little man he'd blinded was still chopping down invisible trees. Cordite strolled up to him carefully, dodging a wild swing, then intercepted the next one. He ripped the axe from the little man's grip and hefted the tool experimentally before taking the weasel's head clean off with one swipe.



Cordite stood over the body, breathing harder and heavier than he had in a dog's age. He wasn't nearly back to top form yet, but it was more than enough to deal with these peasants. He was also aware he'd torn out the stitches Alice had so meticulously woven into his back, and his stab wound was bleeding anew.

Despite all of that, a sudden, guttural roar escaped his lips. It wasn't smart and he knew it. He'd managed to dispatch the idiots without drawing the attention of the Redleg patrol, and now here he was howling like a drunk on payday.

He couldn't help it. It wasn't so much a cry of victory as one of continuation. Whatever he had been before his own men had filled him full of holes, he had now proved he remained that thing, and that was worth celebrating.

"Please," Alice's father was wheezing near the edge of the roof. "I wasn't gonna... I swear..."

"Yeah, yeah," Cordite muttered impatiently, already bored. He stalked over to where the old man was curled up, hefting the axe and deciding where to chop him.

That's when he heard the roaring of engines and eager voices hollering in their wake.

"Shit," he muttered, ducking and staring from the rooftop in the direction of the outpost.

Sure enough, two Redlegs on motorcycles were heading up the hill toward the truck stop. Had they heard Cordite's roar? It seemed too soon. Maybe they'd heard the little runt cry out when Cordite had poked his eyes out. Either way, this was trouble. He had to finish up and get going.

Cordite looked back to Alice's father just in time to see him roll his withered body over the edge of the roof with a girlish shriek. He stepped forward, but it was too late. The old man was beyond his reach. Great. The afternoon had gone from bad to worse, and then to totally fucked.

Cordite scanned the rooftop. At the far edge there was a caved-in hole large enough to accommodate his wide frame. He strode to it and carefully lowered himself through it, dropping down through a dusty layer of conduit, air ducts, and rat shit into the remnants of the truck stop's mini-mart. It had been ransacked dozens of times over and smelled like a swinger's party inside an outhouse.

He wasn't much for hiding, but neither was he in shape to take on two armed Redlegs in open combat, especially after the flurry of activity on the roof. He'd popped his stitches, and the

seeping wound burned through his middle. He was already starting to feel feverish. He wished now he hadn't tossed the old man's pistol.

Cordite ducked behind the mini-mart's counter. Leaning his axe against it, he raised his head up just enough to peer out through one of the truck stop's broken windows.

He watched as Alice's father hobbled out into the parking lot to meet the approaching motorcycles. The Redlegs circled him on their bikes for several moments, toying with him, whooping and hooting and swerving at him. Cordite hoped they'd cut him down without questioning him, but he knew luck was thoroughly not on his side that day.

After they grew bored, the Redlegs finally halted their Harleys and started asking questions. Cordite couldn't hear the ensuing conversation, but he was able to glean the gist of it through their actions—Alice's father pointing repeatedly in the direction of the truck stop, the Redlegs' heads swiveling in Cordite's direction, Alice's father wringing his hands and begging, probably for supplies, and then one of the Redlegs abruptly driving the butt of her shotgun into the side of his head, laying him out.

Cordite ducked down as the Redlegs began walking toward the truck stop, and looked around behind the counter frantically. He wasn't sure what he was hoping for. If the owner or staff of this shithole had ever kept a gun back here, the weapon had long since been pilfered. All he found were a few industrial-sized cans of beans, all of which had been opened and cleaned out, of course.

Cordite leaned back against the counter and closed his eyes. Certainly there was a plan to be made, but damned if he could see it at the moment. He knew he wasn't meant to die here today, but he didn't know how he was going to survive. Perhaps he was meant to get captured? Taken back to Wakarusa to face Thrush? Was that his path back to the top?

It seemed unlikely. If that was destiny's plan for him, Cordite didn't reckon he'd have been led down this refugee path to begin with. If killing Thrush was a necessary task, he could've done it back at the overpass without all this fuss. So, if he wasn't meant to be captured or killed, then obviously he was supposed to triumph. He just needed to figure out how.

Cordite reassessed his surroundings, and finally an idea occurred to him.

"All right!" he heard a gruff voice shout in the general direction of the counter a few moments later. "Come out from behind there, hands first, or we're lightin' this fucker on fire!"

That sounded more painful than taking a few bullets—something Cordite knew from recent experience—so he did as instructed, forsaking his axe and standing slowly with his empty

hands held high above his head. His entire torso felt like it was on fire now, and just that gentle bit of movement hurt like hell.

The shotgun-wielding woman leveled both bores at him from the other side of the counter. Her friend was toting an old carbine rifle. Neither weapon was an ideal choice for such close quarters, but Cordite couldn't exactly call that an advantage.

"The geezer outside said he could lead us to someone we were looking for."

"He was right," Cordite confirmed, deciding to make the only play he had left. "I'm a brother. Redlegs forever."

"You're a Redleg?"

"And proud of it. I downed three of the old man's pack up on the roof after they jumped me. He got away."

"What the hell you hidin' in here for, then?" his friend with the carbine asked.

Cordite slowly walked around the counter, making each step deliberate and measured. He carefully lowered his hands to his side as he moved to stand directly in front of them.

"I couldn't tell who was coming this way," he said. "I thought it might be more of the old man's people."

The woman with the shotgun was studying his face closely now. She narrowed her eyes and let the wide bores of her weapon drop idly toward the floor.

"I know you," she said.

Cordite nodded. "I told you. I'm a Redleg. We probably partied together."

She shook her head. "No, that ain't it. You're... aw, hell!"

Surreptitiously, Cordite let the large bean-can lids he'd spirited up his sleeves drop into his hands. The edges were still sharp, and disturbingly jagged.

Ms. Shotgun turned to look at her comrade, grinning like a kid on an Easter egg hunt. "That's Cordite! The warlord! The one who's supposed to be dead!"

The other Redleg didn't lower his weapon, but he did likewise take his eyes off their target to regard his partner in surprise.

"For true? Holy balls. We're gonna be rich!"

Cordite girded himself for the pain he knew moving so quickly would cause him. He gripped both industrial can lids like throwing stars, took one fast step forward, just past the muzzles of their guns, and swiped, lightning-fast, at both Redlegs simultaneously.

He slashed the throat of the one with the carbine, tearing flesh and arteries. A shot rang out, but the bullet went past Cordite and into the old mini-mart counter. The man dropped to his knees, seized by shock, like an antelope with a lion at its neck.

Cordite's aim wasn't as exact with the woman, though the result was no less gruesome. He slashed her across her eyes. A particularly jagged barb on the edge of the can lid snagged one of her eyeballs and tore it halfway out of the socket.

The Redleg screamed and dropped her shotgun to clutch at her face, then turned and scrambled toward where she remembered the door being.

Cordite sighed. All he needed was more damn Redlegs waking up from drunken stupors and descending on the truck stop. That gunshot might have already done it, for all he knew. He quickly dropped the bloodied can lids and retrieved his axe from behind the counter.

All that activity had indeed caused his wounded body to begin throbbing, but having to run after the blinded Redleg was even worse. Fortunately it was a short jog, as the woman had barely pushed out the door when Cordite's axe blade caught up with the back of her head and silenced her agonizing screams forever.

Cordite stood in the doorway over her corpse and stared across the expanse of desert at the Redleg outpost, breathing hot and heavy. He waited as silence retook the landscape around him. No one else emerged from the converted roadhouse. Maybe the others were passed out or otherwise occupied. He couldn't know.

Despite wanting nothing more than to sit down and rest, he knew there was a remaining piece of business that needed his immediate attention. Cordite slowly stalked over to where Alice's father was still laid out in the dirt.

The old man was just beginning to regain consciousness as Cordite came to loom high above him.

"Aw, hell," he whined, still dazed. "How are you still alive?"

"Today wasn't my day to die. Can't say the same for you."

"Wait—"

Cordite buried the axe between the man's second and third ribs.

"That's what being a rat gets you."

Cordite was guilty of a lot, but that was one crime they wouldn't chisel on his tombstone.

### I Mean, It's Clearly a Lie, But We'll Go Ahead and Call It the Truth

Hauling the old man's carcass back to the refugee caravan was a hell of a lot more laborious than killing him and his friends. Several times Cordite had to drop the body in the dust and have a sit before continuing on. He'd ripped up Randy's shirt and used the strips to bandage his torn stitches, but the more he trudged with the old man over his shoulder, the more he bled.

*This is just another task*, he told himself. *It's just another task to finish.*

He knew the tasks were set before him by destiny, and the seepage from his popped stitches was just another pint to add to the lake of blood he'd already shed in pursuit of completing those tasks.

It was dusk by the time he reached the caravan. He heard the rubes that had drawn guard duty yell out to the rest of the refugees in alarm when they spotted him and his increasingly stinking burden. Soon a hundred or so people were gathering at the edge of the encampment, confused and afraid and not at all prepared for a fight.

Cordite almost felt bad for them. Then again, "almost" might've been too strong a word.

He waded through the bottleneck of refugees without slowing down or saying a word. There were a few gasps as they recognized Alice's father's slack-featured face hanging upside down against his back, but mostly the assembled refugees were stunned or scared into silence.

He laid the old man out in the middle of the camp as carefully and reverently as he could manage, then waited until the refugees reformed around him and had time to soak in the sight and accept that their leader was sprawled out dead in the dirt.

“Redlegs,” he told them raggedly. “They ambushed us about two miles outside of camp. The others didn’t make it. The two of us barely got away. They ripped me open good, but that axe bite... he... he just lost too much blood. I couldn’t stop it up. He finally fell out about halfway back.”

He heard a woman burst into loud and animated tears, though he couldn’t spot the source of the sound. Everyone else just stared, either at the old man’s body or at Cordite standing over him.

Cordite figured it was about a fifty-fifty split between faces that looked scared and sad and faces that looked angry and suspicious. He waited for anyone in the latter group to speak up. He hoped they’d make it easy and just go along with it, whether out of fear or because they were too dumb to see through him. If a voice of dissent raised up to challenge him, things would get nasty, because Cordite had decided these people were now his. It was up to them how bloody their acceptance of that new reality needed to be.

In that moment, Alice finally pushed her way through the thick of the crowd, stopping cold as she caught sight of her father laid at Cordite’s feet.

It was hard to read her reaction. She didn’t say anything.

“He fought for y’all bravely,” Cordite assured the crowd, his eyes boring directly into Alice’s. “In the end, he asked me to lead you on. And that’s what I’m gonna do. We have to double-time it to the Colorado plains. The Redlegs are too thick in these parts. If we don’t get a move on, they’re gonna track us back here and wipe us out.”

That much was true, at least. He’d reconned the Redleg outpost before hauling the old man’s body back. The two he’d killed were only a third of the squad stationed there. The rest would be hunting for their friends’ killers as soon as they noticed they were gone. The refugees needed to find a side road that avoided the outpost before that happened.

He checked to see if his speech had had any effect. It was hard to tell. Most of the other refugees were looking at Alice.

That made sense. She was the daughter of their leader. If she called Cordite out, more would back her. Then there would be no telling how many he’d have to kill to bring the rest in line, and that was assuming they couldn’t overwhelm him with force and numbers.

Finally, Alice dropped her chin to her chest, that short hair of hers falling just enough to obscure her eyes, then turned away without a word. It seemed her silence was enough. Nobody dissented. Cordite hid a sigh of relief.



For the sake of appearances, he oversaw the burial of the old man in the hard, cold ground of the camp. No one said any words of eulogy, not even Alice, but a few of the more church-minded among them sang a pitiful hymn as half a dozen shovels poured dirt onto the body.

Afterward, Cordite gathered a few of the sturdier-looking refugees and promoted them to crew chiefs, assigning them various tasks to keep their simple brains busy so he could rest without worrying they'd plot against him.

It was midnight when he finally climbed into the medic wagon and started peeling off his bloody garments. He hadn't hurt this bad since first waking up after Thrush and his crew had turned on him back on the overpass.

A while later Alice returned to the wagon, slipping through its flaps quietly with that somber look still plastered on her face.

He watched her as she came to his cot, straddled her favorite chair, and began cleaning his wound in preparation to re-stitch it.

"You didn't even bother coming up with a believable lie," she said.

He wasn't surprised she knew, but he still wasn't quite certain why she stayed quiet about it in front of the others.

"I thought it played good enough," he said.

She shook her head. "No one would ever believe my father was brave."

"You don't seem too broken up about it."

"He was a son of a bitch," she said dully. "My mother was terrified of him. He never gave a damn about any of his kids past what we could do for him."

Cordite wondered absently where her siblings were. It was clear enough Alice's mother had died of some sickness she couldn't heal.

None of it really mattered to him, however.

"It wasn't for fun, if that means anything. He was fixin' to do me. I just did him first."

"I don't care a lick about that," she said bitterly.

"Fair enough."

She finished sewing the final stitch, snipping the thread with a pair of orange-handled office scissors.

As she began taping fresh bandages over her handiwork, Alice looked him in the eyes for the first time.

“Do you know what you’re doing? Do you really know?”

Cordite nodded, though he doubted if what he knew and what she hoped he knew was the same thing.

“I want you to understand something,” she said. “I’m not going along with this because I’m grateful to you for ridding us of him. I’m not doing it because I think you’re some kind of secret hero. I have my own reasons for going along.”

Cordite had suspected as much, though he couldn’t guess what truly motivated her.

“We all have our own reasons for everything,” he told Alice.

She cocked her head, eyeing him suspiciously. “Yeah? And what’s yours?”

“Destiny,” he answered without rancor or irony.

Alice didn’t say anything to that. He might’ve expected her to mock him over the idea, but instead her expression was something akin to fear.

Probably because she could see plainly that Cordite meant it.

## You Were All Dead Already

It turned out Alice's father had been holding out on the rest of the caravan. While his people were chewing jerky as hard as shoe leather, the old man was hoarding a treasure trove of packaged snacks, the kind of fare that was as good now as it had been before the war.

Cordite sat behind the wheel of the beat-up old Caddy Alice's father had used to lead the caravan, munching on a sponge cake filled with a "cream" that was mostly air. The heater was busted so it was colder than a raider's heart, but it beat the hell out of the medic wagon. Although it did lack for the company.

He'd seen little of Alice since taking up lead position in the caravan. She approached him once to check on his dressings, but they only exchanged a few inconsequential words. She didn't question him further.

With his knowledge of Kansas back roads, he had easily navigated the refugees out of the Redlegs' territory and into no-man's-land. They'd hit snow and cold weather a day after, and the temperature continued to drop rapidly the farther west they went. Cordite didn't mind. He liked the cold. He felt it was helping him heal up faster.

A day after their first snow, a sign pocked with bullet holes welcomed them to the Centennial State, and they crossed into Colorado without incident. Cordite dearly hoped that would soon change.

It soon did.

There was no sign letting them know they'd entered Scar Collector territory, just a change in... smell. The air was as fresh and sharp as new ice right up until it turned unbearably

foul. It stank more like rot than outright death—a subtle distinction to most, but Cordite was more than qualified to make it. This is what he'd been waiting for.

Three hours into the smell and an hour before sunset, the refugee caravan entered a wide, open valley. Cordite brought his lead vehicle to a halt in the dead center of it, giving the long line of cars behind him a chance to slow to a gentle stop, one after the other.

He leaned out the Caddy's window and called to the vehicles behind him.

"We'll camp here! Send the word back to circle up the convoy!"

By now they were used to doing what he told them. They even seemed to take comfort in it. It was clear they didn't want to be responsible for making choices about their own survival and were happy to have someone else do it—even someone as terrifying as Cordite.

Not everyone approved of his choices, however.

Fifteen minutes later, Alice came striding up the line to him, pretty much as he'd expected she would.

"Why are we making camp here?" she demanded.

Cordite drew in a slow, calming breath. In another life he would've knocked her head off for questioning him so flagrantly. Although he expected to return to that life presently, he knew he wasn't quite there yet, and thus had to keep playing the patient caretaker of their convoy.

"It's as good a place as any," he reasoned.

"It's out in the open," Alice persisted. "Shouldn't we at least find a spot with more cover?"

He shrugged. "Where do you expect to hide around here? You don't know the terrain. You wouldn't even know which way to run. So what difference does it make?"

She stared up at him in silence, but her eyes were calling him out on his lies. Cordite waited, staring back at her with no give to his expression.

A challenge was clearly bubbling up inside her, but Alice couldn't seem to pull the trigger. Cordite could only guess it was whatever mysterious reasons she'd alluded to before that were holding her back. Eventually she turned and stomped away, steam rising from her face as if she was literally fuming.

The refugees circled their beaters with practiced efficiency and began making camp between them. Cordite remained in the Caddy, watching them scurry about like insects in a busted ant farm.

He lit one of Alice's father's cigars and reclined in the old man's seat.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

He hoped his new flock stoked their campfires nice and hot so the smoke would fill the air high above like a halo—or, more appropriately, a bull's-eye.

Sometime later he'd almost drifted off to sleep when a subtle glint caught his eye, snapping him back to full consciousness. Cordite leaned over the steering wheel and squinted into the night. There were lights in the distance, closing rapidly. He leaned back. It was another five minutes before any of the camp's lackadaisical sentries saw them and raised the alarm.

He climbed from behind the wheel of the Caddy and exited the vehicle, tromping through the snow. The able-bodied members of the refugees were beginning to muster their few meager weapons in preparation to face the midnight callers.

"Don't bother!" Cordite shouted at them. "Put that crap down! You'll only get yourselves killed faster!"

They all stared him in abject confusion, but they did what he said—the fools.

Soon the smell of burning diesel and other compounds that weren't any type of standard fuel poisoned the chilled air around them. The sound of engines was like thunder.

Cordite heard a woman's shriek as a cowcatcher strapped to the front of a big rig smashed through two of the refugees' parked vehicles. The hole it opened up in the steel circle was soon flooded with half a dozen smaller conveyances that all looked cobbled together from a junkyard. The squat, ugly trucks, cars, and bikes were teeming with whooping and hollering figures that almost seemed like part of the machines they rode upon.

The invaders' vehicles quickly formed a skirmish line near the center of camp, right in front of the slack-jawed refugees who stood frozen like statues in the snow.

As Cordite stepped through his terrified charges, he decided the Scar Collectors were the ugliest lot of raiders he had ever laid eyes upon, and for the wastes that surely was saying something. Every face he could make out past the bright lights was missing at least one prominent feature, be it a nose or an ear or an eye. In addition, they were all cut up and scarified in downright decorative ways. They also seemed to have a penchant for janky-looking mechanical appendages, most of them weaponized. Jagged blades and greasy barrels replaced the arms of several members. Metallic breastplates were fused into the flesh of more than one chest.

"Now what do we have ourselves here, boys?" the hulking leader called out to the rest.

A six-inch spike wreathed with tiny strands of razor wire protruded from the hollow of the big man's right eye. A claw fashioned from spirals of rebar replaced his right hand.

"A gift!" Cordite answered, despite the fact that it had been a rhetorical question.

The head Scar Collector looked amused. "Is that so?"

"I picked 'em up on the road," Cordite explained. "Killed their leaders. Took 'em as my spoils. I brought 'em here to offer up to you."

He didn't have to look back at the refugees to know they were staring at him in shock.

"That is mighty generous, stranger. Why would you do a thing like that?"

"I've heard the Scar Collectors are the meanest pack of motherfuckers in the Colorado plains."

They all laughed at that.

"He's got that right, Necrow!" said a girl with a saw-blade mohawk. "We do fuck a lot of mothers."

Necrow chuckled, then leered at Cordite, showing filed teeth. "You could say we know how to have a good time."

"That's a group I'd like to join," said Cordite.

Necrow looked past Cordite to the refugees. "Figure on buying your way in with these sad cows?"

"Like I said, just an offering. A show of respect."

"Well, it's a start, but it'll cost you some of your own flesh to be one of us."

Cordite eyed the man's rebar hand, then shrugged. "I've got flesh to spare."

He heard a metallic "click" to his right. Cordite turned to see one of the refugees, a young man of maybe twenty, raising a rifle that looked like it had come out of some pre-war museum.

Cordite closed the gap between them with two giant, fast strides. He snatched the rifle from the boy's hands and rammed the butt under his jaw, shattering it and collapsing him into a heap.

The Scar Collectors laughed again. Some exploded in catcalls and applause. Cordite tossed the antique rifle into the snow and spat on the boy's quivering form.

"You've got sand," Necrow shouted down at him. "And as gifts go... I'll admit it, I've seen worse. We do like free flesh, don't we, boys?"

The others cheered their assent.

Necrow regarded Cordite in heavy, contemplative silence for a moment.

“We’ll take the offering,” he finally said. “As far as you go... we’ll see how much flesh you’re really willing to give up to be a Scar Collector.”

Before Cordite could respond, Alice broke from the crowd of refugees and charged headlong into Cordite, growling like a feral cat. She swiped wildly at him with Thrush’s Bowie knife, forcing Cordite to back up several paces to avoid the sharp edge.

“You son of a bitch!” she shrieked with untamed rage. “You killed us! You killed us all!”

Cordite snatched Alice’s wrists and wrangled them under control, though the rest of her body continued to thrash and kick as she cursed and screamed.

“You were all dead already,” he whispered before pasting her across the jaw with the flat of his hand.

The blow rattled Alice into semi-unconsciousness. She slumped against him.

It wouldn’t be entirely accurate to say he felt bad about it, but striking her did pang him a bit more than it usually did when he inflicted violence on anyone.

Cordite took the knife from her slack hands and slung her gentled body over his shoulder.

“This one I’m keepin’!” he announced in a voice that brooked no argument. “All the rest are yours!”

A wave of laughter spread through the Scar Collectors. They clearly appreciated a cold bastard who took what he wanted.

### Saint Blaise of the Throat

Cordite woke up with the blade of the Bowie knife already piercing the flesh that covered his Adam's apple.

He tensed against the front seats of the Caddy but didn't move. The penetration told his brain to tell his nerves that doing so would only make things worse.

It was dark inside the car, but Cordite could just make out the lines of Alice's face and hair looming above him, holding the knife to his throat. He'd left her tied up in the back seat, but it seemed she was as adept with knots as she was with stitches.

Outside in the night, the sounds of raucous yelling and what may or may not have been agonized screams could be heard coming from the Scar Collectors' camp.

"Well," he said, calm and cool, "you waitin' for an invitation?"

"What do you think they're doing to the others right now?" Alice asked him hoarsely, her voice dripping with accusation.

Cordite was unmoved. "Nothin' good."

The pressure of the blade's edge increased. He pushed the back of his head further into the brittle vinyl of the seat. He could feel his neck weeping tears of blood. She was all the way capable of opening his throat to the bone, and he knew it.

"You wanna talk about reasons again?" he asked through his clenched jaw.

Alice was near tears, but her hate was clearly more potent in that moment.

"You're a heartless bastard, *that's* the reason."

"That's one of 'em."



She silently swallowed tears and snot, the pressure of her knife hand never relenting.

Cordite wasn't sure if she was curious, or steeling herself to spray the roof of the Caddy with his juice.

Instead of doing the latter, she recalled, "You told me we were all already dead."

"That's right."

"And that makes it okay?" she demanded.

"Makes it a fact, that's all. Without me guiding you, you never woulda made it to the state line. You'd be splayed out with the rest of 'em on the interstate, or worse. None of you were ever gonna make it. You were food for the wastes, nothing more. You say I killed your people. I say I saved you. Just you."

Alice was crying full out now. "Why?"

"Maybe I felt I owed you."

She laughed bitterly through her tears. "You don't feel anything."

Cordite gave the barest shrug. "Maybe I thought you'd come in handy, then."

"That I believe."

"Well, then?" Cordite pressed, chancing the judgment of her blade.

Alice didn't answer at first, but neither did she relax the knife piercing his flesh.

"I have a sister," she said, finally. "She ran off a year ago. Couldn't take our father anymore."

"Sounds about right."

"She said she was going to go to Colorado, to a place called Colorado Springs. She said she'd heard it was better there. A man named the Patriarch runs things, practically the whole state. She'd heard it's like it was before the war."

It was Cordite's turn to laugh, though he had to restrain it to keep the bloody gulf in his throat from widening.

"The only reason I came along," Alice went on, ignoring him, "was to find her. That's the *only* reason. So you're going to help me do that. You're going to help me find her. You're going to swear it, or I'm going to cut your fucking head off here and now and take my chances on my own."

"What would me swearing anything mean to you?"

"Because you're going to swear on this 'destiny' of yours," she said definitively. "That's the one thing in the world I *know* you believe in. Now swear it to me!"

For emphasis, she opened the slit in his throat another millimeter. It felt like a country mile.

It should've been easy, but Cordite found himself hesitating. Words were just air to him. They meant shit. Yet invoking destiny dishonestly would mean openly challenging destiny, and the last time he did that he took three bullets and the same blade now pressed to his neck sunk deep into his back—the irony of which was not lost on him in that moment—and had enjoyed a nearly lethal tumble off a freeway overpass.

“I swear,” he said to her. “On the destiny I know is mine. I’ll help you.”

He couldn’t see her eyes, but he knew Alice was searching his face for the truth.

Apparently she reached a conclusion, because she took the blade away from his throat.

Cordite immediately pressed a hand to his Adam’s apple. It was a shallow cut, and the blood didn’t feel as much as it had seemed.

Still, it wasn’t as nice as a kiss on the cheek by any means.

“Helping you doesn’t necessarily mean not belting you in the mouth for this, you know,” he reminded her.

“So go ahead,” Alice challenged him, not sounding the least bit afraid.

He didn’t belt her.

Alice and her Bowie knife climbed over the Caddy’s front seat. Cordite could hear her settling in the back, and soon he was listening to her cry herself to sleep.

He stayed awake for a goodly while staring at the ceiling of the car. The small wound on his neck stopped bleeding.

Cordite knew the nick was nothing compared to what came next.

## Initiation

The camp of the Scar Collectors was vast—almost as big as the main Redleg camp back in Kansas—but with more vehicles, more cages, more spiky armor, more strange machines, and a far worse stink. As Necrow’s raiding party rolled through it toward the center, with the refugees-turned-slaves driving their own cars behind, Cordite counted tents enough to house a thousand troops at least, as well as garages, open-air saloons, fighting pits, and medic tents. The only thing the Scar Collectors seemed to have less of was slaves. All their slave pens were empty, and their cage trucks looked long unused and in need of repair. It looked like the Scar Collectors had fallen on hard times of late. Cordite wondered why.

The spoils parade came to a halt near one such set of empty cages, and the Kansas refugees were dragged out of their cars and shoved behind bars, screaming and weeping and dragging their heels the whole way.

The only two who were spared were Cordite and Alice. Necrow let them stay in the Caddy and waved at them to follow him farther into the camp.

“Time to meet the boss,” he said.

\* \* \*

The “boss” was a Scar Collector named Rotter, and he lived up to the moniker. The man had what looked to be a steel ashtray lid in place of his lower jaw, and the flesh of his face was black and necrotic where the lid’s hinges had been bolted to his skull. What few teeth he had were

metal and serrated and plunged into blackened gums, and the smell of him made Cordite's eyes water before he got within ten paces.

His "throne room" was a big open area in the middle of the camp that looked like the center ring in a circus of pain. Dissection tables and instruments of torture and mutilation were arrayed on all sides of the central space, with Rotter's throne—a gutted World War Two tank with a Naugahyde recliner mounted where the turret should be—at the north side, flanked by two huge Scar Collectors armed with SMGs and chainsaw halberds.

The torture machines showed signs of frequent use and infrequent cleaning. Every attached blade was caked with several layers of long-dried blood and gore. Little enclosed kiosks with signs proclaiming "Suture-Self!" in cheerful letters were situated between many of the wickedly edged appliances.

The place was crowded too. Apparently Necrow had called ahead, and a big mob of Scar Collectors had assembled to see the stomper who'd made such a grand entrance into their never-ending horror show and brought them such a vibrant bundle of human stock as tribute and overture.

Looking around at them all, Cordite quickly saw that—as advertised—this gang of sadists and masochists valued self-mutilation above all else. It was pretty much spelled out in the name, and the rank and file that jostled all around him only illustrated that fact further. There was as much scarification on display as knife and bullet wounds, if not more so, and some of it was even artful, with intricate and often lewd patterns carved, burned, and stamped into almost every inch of exposed flesh within sight. And beyond these glorified tattoos, there were the artificial limbs. Chainsaw hands, pneumatic legs, targeting goggles fused to cheeks and brows—Cordite even spotted an entire neck that had been replaced by tubes, metal, and hydraulics. Whether arms, legs, hands, or fingers, every mechanical appendage was elaborately constructed and adorned, usually with wicked-looking weaponry, and attached to blackened, necrotic flesh. And it reeked. They might've been the wastes' leading practitioners of elective surgery, but the Scar Collectors clearly weren't big on hygiene.

Necrow, who was apparently Rotter's second-in-command, guided Cordite and Alice through the hooting, shoving crowd to where his boss sat on his elevated throne, swilling what smelled like battery acid from a mug fashioned from an old muffler.

"This is the one I was tellin' you about, Rotter!" Necrow proclaimed. "He's a strong hand with cattle and one heartless son of a bitch!"

The introduction struck Cordite as something akin to the affection one might show a stray dog they'd taken a liking to.

Rotter gave Cordite a quick, disdainful look—and Alice a longer look—before turning to Necrow.

"You want him?" the leader asked, his ashtray lid mouth flapping. Cordite thought that, when he talked, it sounded like someone taking a shit in a tin pan.

His second shrugged. "He peddles flesh good and kicks ass. What else are we lookin' for?"

In answer, Rotter grunted, belched foully, and went back to his drinking. "Long as he passes the test."

The Scar Collectors, it seemed, weren't big on ceremony or speeches.

"That means he likes you," Necrow informed Cordite, and then, loudly for the rest of them, he hollered, "Now let's see if he's got the stuff!"

Equal parts dark laughter and drunken whooping rose up to meet Necrow's prompting.

"Okay, tough guy," said Necrow. "This is the test. Pass it and you're a Scar Collector. All you gotta do is lose a piece of yourself—hand, arm, leg, eye, organ, your choice—then step into one of the Suture-Self booths and replace it with an implant or prosthetic. You can choose whoever you want to do the cutting and push the buttons on the machine—maybe yer girlfriend over there—but you gotta do it right here, right now. Otherwise we kill you, right here, right now. Got it?"

Cordite nodded. He knew he had been chosen by fate to rule, and that the course of events that had led him to this moment was destiny presenting him with that opportunity. His tasks were clear, but to accomplish them he needed the right weapon. The Scar Collectors were that weapon. Cordite couldn't have dreamed up a more brutal collective of scumbags willing to do anything, to themselves or anyone and everyone else, for a piece of someone else's pie. He just needed to put them under his thumb, and he couldn't start to do that until they'd accepted him as one of their own. So this, right now, was the make-or-break moment. He'd made a passable first impression on these crazies. Now he had to seal the deal with something show-stopping.

"Having second thoughts?" asked Necrow. "Want me to pick you an assistant?"

"I don't need any help."

That quieted the nearest Scar Collectors, and the quiet started to spread. Necrow stared at him in surprise, and something that was perhaps even quiet admiration.

That told Cordite that all of their so-called self-mutilation was actually assisted mutilation, and going it alone wasn't the norm.

*That's a good start, then,* he thought.

He strode around the circle of torture devices and finally picked out a guillotine fashioned from what looked like car parts and the empty frame of an old vending machine. The blade had teeth, but they at least appeared sharp. He wanted something that would get the job done in one swipe, preferably as clean as possible.

He thought about anesthetizing himself with a bottle of booze—there were plenty being swigged among the crowd—but he wanted to give his new cohorts a show. He wanted them to see who they were dealing with, and why they should not only respect him, but think twice about fucking with him.

Cordite stripped down to his bare torso. His scars weren't decorative. He'd earned every one, and the keloid topography of his chest, stomach, and back spoke of a world of pain and survival. He could tell they were catching more than a few eyes, and that was good. All of this would pay off later when he unseated Rotter and took control of these mongrels, just as he'd claimed the refugee caravan for his own and the Redlegs before that.

There was a greasy chain attached to the guillotine's heavy blade. Cordite wrapped it around his fist to take up the slack, then hauled the heavy blade to the top of the guillotine's frame. It wasn't easy, and holding it there was even more difficult, but Cordite never fell short once he put his mind to a thing.

The other Scar Collectors were whipped into an absolute frenzy by the sight of the guillotine blade poised to strike, but they just about came apart when Cordite stuck his left arm in its path.

It was a damn foolish thing to do to yourself, Cordite thought, unless you were the rare soul who sees beyond the immediate and understands the bigger picture of life. Cordite was that rare soul, so he let go of the chain and watched the blade fall.

The world around him became silent and time seemed to slow to a June bug's scuttle. It took an hour for the teeth of the blade to bite into the flesh of his arm, and then another hour to cleave clean through it. It was strange, seeing it before he actually felt it, almost as though it was happening to someone else.

Then his pain receptors lit up like a brushfire in a dry summer, and Cordite knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that this was definitely happening to him.

He also knew, even through the silent screams in what was left of his arm, that how he handled this was as important to the Scar Collectors as him doing it in the first place. So he didn't make a sound, though he thought every muscle in his face might burst from the strain of keeping those sounds inside of him.

Meanwhile, the sounds around him were unabashed in their appreciation and even downright amazement. His ears picked up scattered jabbering about how no one could remember the last time an initiate, or any Scar Collector, had removed their own limb.

He stumbled feverishly toward the nearest Suture-Self kiosk, which looked more like an abused pre-war portable shitter than any kind of surgical contraption, and eyed a series of illustrations printed in faded relief on its side. They were instructional panels, demonstrating a variety of procedures the kiosk performed. One series showed a stick figure getting a wound sewn up. Another featured a bullet being removed from a bloated belly. The panels that really caught his eye illustrated a prosthetic limb being attached to an armless body.

Cordite fumbled drunkenly for the door, first with his missing hand, which didn't work, then with the one he still had, then he stuffed his anguished, too-big body inside the cramped cabinet.

The interior was slightly more reassuring than the exterior, if only by a slim margin. Cordite's hazy first impression of the Suture-Self inner works was that they appeared to be ingeniously built and horribly maintained. He didn't know if the Scar Collectors had invented the technology or stolen it, and he didn't care. He just hoped it still worked.

There were screens and scanning equipment arranged around an intricate mechanical harness to which a plethora of surgical tools were affixed. Every inch of that surgical steel, however, was rusted and grimy. The interfaces and screens were stained and scratched and sticky with crusted blood and other fluids Cordite decided it was better to neither examine nor think about.

No wonder every Scar Collector was festering with gangrenous rot.

*Get used to the idea, boy,* he instructed himself.

He squeezed into the harness and found to his surprise and relief that it automatically adjusted to fit his frame, even if the sound of the thing's gears grinding was like nails on a chalkboard. It locked him into place as a scanner shaped like a dust buster on an animated tube

moved lazily over his body, zeroing in on his severed left arm. As it did, the screens and interfaces in front of him came alight, and the cabinet began assessing the damage to his body and diagramming the surgical procedures necessary to attach an artificial limb. Cordite could scarcely believe the big piece of crap was actually doing what it was supposed to.

Another screen gave him a variety of options for that replacement appendage. All he had to do was scroll through a menu with his remaining hand and tap what he wanted. It was hard to think with blood gouting from his ragged stump, but in the end, he decided to go with a big, mean-looking robotic bastard that would also cover his bicep and shoulder, armoring both. It came complete with a mechanical hand with fully opposable fingers and thumb.

There were even options for customizing his new arm. Cordite wasn't big on frills, but he did opt to add a shotgun to the forearm. He figured it would be useful for opening doors, as well as the last-minute involuntary bowel dis-impacting of his enemies.

The only thing left to do was press the "start" button. He didn't think much of it at that point. He figured he was pretty much beyond pain. How could anything hurt worse than cutting off your own arm?

He was wrong.

Cordite watched as one of the cabinet's arms, a nozzle-shaped thing this time, attempted to spray his bloody stump with what he could only assume was supposed to be some kind of antiseptic and/or anesthetic compound. Unfortunately, it appeared no one had topped off the fluid lately, as all that came out was a hiss of air.

"Well, fuck me," he muttered.

The reality of surgery performed by a cold, emotionless machine set in quickly. The thing treated his body like a mechanical component to be stamped and welded and reshaped by brute force. His brand-new robotic arm popped out of the cabinet wall with a pleasant "ding," like it was a loaf of bread fresh from the oven, but that was the last pleasant thing that happened. The feeling of it being clamped around his stump was excruciating, but it was nothing compared to the cabinet integrating it with his flesh, literally bolting the chassis into his bone with anchor screws while its controls fused with the exposed nerves and muscle tendons of his wound.

In that moment, at long last, he screamed his guts out. He hoped the cabinet interior would dampen the sound.

At some point he must have lost consciousness, which was a blessing. When he returned to the present, every part of his body that wasn't on fire was stone-cold numb. The



harness had unlocked, and he was free to move again. As he tried to do so, Cordite became aware of two things: one, even the slightest twitch made him want to die, and two, he had the ability to command his new robotic arm as if it was his own limb.

Gritting his teeth, he curled and flexed his new metal fingers experimentally, surprised to find there was very little lag time between his brain sending the signal for them to move and them moving as instructed. The grip seemed strong, too. He could even jack a shell into the chamber of the shotgun just by tensing his biceps.

The last remaining rational corner of his brain reminded him that there were a few steps left to take in this macabre process. The first was to emerge from the cabinet as forcefully as he'd entered it, so with a deep breath, he hauled his knee up to his chest and practically kicked the door off its hinges, then pushed out all in one motion, though the pain of doing so made him wobble on his feet, as black spots exploded at the edges of his vision.

The Scar Collectors cheered wantonly at his emergence. There were even pockets of the group who chanted his name.

He'd definitely made the kind of impact he wanted. The final step was to stand tall and raise his tooled-up stump of an arm to the sky, letting out a blood-curdling battle cry.

"I am Cordite! *Ironclad* Cordite! Of the Scar Collectors!"

"Ironclad!" roared his new family. "Ironclad!"

Cordite basked in their approval. All in all, he decided, it had been a productive first day.

## Your Reputation Bleeds Through

Cordite refused the offers of drinks and food and sex from various back-slapping members of the enthusiastic Scar Collector crowd and returned as quickly as he could to his Caddy with Alice, where she mixed up a batch of ointment to treat his newly crowned flesh. She told him it was made up of lavender oil and oregano and a few other things that he shouldn't expect her to be able to replace once it was used up, but it would fight the infection that was almost certainly already spreading through his system, which he figured was fine, as he didn't plan on cutting off another limb anytime soon. She also told him that he was an idiot for grafting a shotgun-adorned robot arm onto his body.

"I hope you don't jack off with the hand you lost," she said as she finished up the treatment. "That metal one doesn't look like it'd be very comfortable."

He shrugged. "If this arm makes me the king of this place, I'll have somebody else to do that for me."

"Yeah. Somebody else other than me."

Despite the searing pain that was driving him to the edge of madness, he laughed at that. Then Rotter and his shit-chewing ashtray jaw came tromping up to them and leaned on the driver's side door. He glanced at Alice, then snorted.

"If your cock ain't in her mouth, then whaddya even have her for?"

It was crass even by Cordite's admittedly low standards, but he was more concerned in that moment with Alice mouthing off. He had come to enjoy her fire in small, manageable doses, but giving lip to Rotter would probably mean her losing those lips.

Fortunately, it seemed Alice was smart enough to know when to shut up, and she was also smart enough to slink away, out of sight and in a hurry.

"I know who you are," Rotter proclaimed stonily, and he didn't sound the least bit impressed. "Took me a minute, but I remember hearing stories about this big, bald, mean bastard that took over the Redlegs back east. That's you, ain't it?"

Cordite didn't see any percentage in lying.

"It *was* me," he confirmed, and then raised his weaponized arm. "This is me now."

Rotter nodded, his rusty jaw squeaking unpleasantly.

"So it is. And we can always use a big, mean bastard like you, especially one knows how to bring us good, healthy flesh. But I'll tell you what I don't like, and that's you gettin' any ideas about runnin' things here like you did back east. I call the shots for the Scar Collectors, got it? I don't care how big a show you put on for the troops back there, it don't make you the new flavor in this camp."

"Nothin' like that," Cordite assured him. "I just wanted to fit in. Can't be on your own in the wastes."

"Yeah, well, you're on shit duty till you show me you know your place," Rotter said. "And I'm gonna be keepin' my eye on you. Welcome to the Scar Collectors."

He left without waiting to hear if Cordite had anything else to say. Alice returned as soon as he was out of sight.

"He seems nice," she said ruefully.

"He's just what I want," Cordite assured her.

"And what's that?"

Cordite fixed her with a lupine grin.

"He's smart enough to know he should worry about me, but too stupid to kill me before I become a problem. You can't ask for more than that."

## Digging

When Rotter said “shit duty,” he meant it literally.

Cordite was assigned to dig latrines alongside a withered old Scar Collector named Craven. Cordite hadn't seen many elderly people among the gang, and that wasn't at all surprising. He doubted many Scar Collectors lived long lives. If they managed to not get themselves killed by rival factions, what they did to their bodies would eventually rot them to dust. Craven was either very tough or very lucky.

Cordite would've put his money on luck.

Using a shovel was never going to make Cordite's personal list of favorite pastimes, but he managed well enough. In fact, it wouldn't have been so bad, as the intense physical activity helped keep a body warm in such cold climes. Unfortunately, no one seemed to want to wait until they'd finished digging the trenches to use the latrine, and Cordite was soon up to his ankles in a steady stream of piss and other fluids that were not piss. Even worse, his stump, still healing within his new robotic arm, constantly felt like rats were chewing on it. It was all he could do to banish the unending pain far enough into the background of his mind to allow him to function.

If he hadn't already made up his mind to skin Rotter alive, that morning would certainly have clinched it for him.

Within the first hour of digging Craven looked like he was going to keel over. Cordite was more annoyed than sympathetic, but he quickly snatched away the old man's shovel and

told him to hunker down in the snow before his heart gave out. It would be quicker to do the job on his own.

"My bones didn't use to ache like this," Craven insisted. "There was a time I could rip the head off any man in this camp and use what was left as a toilet."

"Well, that time has passed, my friend," Cordite informed him.

Rather than take umbrage, Craven laughed. It was an unpleasant, wheezing sound closer to a death gasp than anything.

"I thank you for the break," he rasped. "Rotter's starting to think I should be put down like a rabid dog for my uselessness."

"Maybe he's right."

Craven nodded. "Maybe, but as long as I can drink and my dick works, I'd just as soon go on living."

"Doesn't sound like Rotter bein' in charge is altogether good for that aim."

Craven fixed a serious eye on Cordite for the first time, the words—or at least their implication—clearly resonating with him.

"How do you figure?"

"Well, this is a rich gang, but it's not gonna stay rich long if it don't have any slaves to sell. And when the money starts runnin' out, that's when gangs start infighting—and people like you start gettin' caught in the crossfire."

"I suppose so," Craven said carefully.

"So maybe it's Rotter who's responsible for the Scar Collectors havin' a low inventory?"

"I, uh... wouldn't like to say."

Cordite nodded and dug another foot of trench before probing further. "Necrow a better choice, you figure?"

Craven waved a wrinkled hand dismissively. "He and Rotter are cut from the same rusty sheet metal."

"So who's the third man around here?"

"Slippery little shit called Half-Face."

"How'd he get that handle?"

"He has half a face."

"Oh. Right."

“He’s a raid leader, and a good one, at least he was. Takin’ parties nearly all the way to where the Patriarch’s territory starts.”

Cordite found that piece of information interesting.

“That’s as far as we range?”

Craven spat. “Rotter’s piss-scared of the Patriarch, so he’s put a ban on raidin’ beyond his borders—not that I blame him, exactly. You won’t find a Scar Collector who’ll say it out loud, but we all know if the Patriarch wanted to move on us with his full force, he’d turn this shithole camp into a graveyard, and the Scar Collectors into a memory.”

Cordite nodded. Knowing Rotter was afraid of the Patriarch would be useful when the time came. He knew he needed more for his immediate plans, however.

“You say Half-Face *used to be* a good raid leader?”

Craven shrugged. “He was a sharp hand till he got hooked on the Jitter.”

Cordite stopped shoveling, puzzling over that one.

“What the hell is Jitter?”

“It’s a hop that a lot of the boys use to tune themselves up. Some of them get strung out on it bad. Half-Face slid past that benchmark a while back.”

“Must make him sloppy,” Cordite remarked as he stabbed his shovel into the soiled ground anew.

“It used to, but mostly now it just makes him sick. He’s running low and it’s getting harder to find. All the makers are in Colorado.”

“Is that so? Ain’t that a shame.”

“Breaks your heart,” Craven agreed ironically.

Cordite stuck the shovel into the snow and left it there, leaning back to stretch his spine and think.

The old Scar Collector watched him curiously.

“You’re cookin’ somethin’ in that knotted skull of yours, ain’cha?”

Cordite looked back at the old man, his eyes narrowing. “And if I am?”

Craven shrugged, flashing him a weak, cattish grin. “Just remember who filled you in when you needed the lay of the land, that’s all.”

Cordite nodded. “Fair enough.”

It didn’t seem an unreasonable request—especially considering Craven would probably be dead by spring, if such a thing ever came around these parts.

## Man of the People

Keeping his Caddy parked on the outskirts of the Scar Collectors' camp had its advantages. It proved a useful sanctuary, removed from the constant madness of a thousand violence-obsessed maniacs who managed to imbue even the simplest menial task with chaos. It gave Cordite a place to examine and refine his plans as he gathered more information about the Scar Collectors and the rest of the eastern plains of Colorado and beyond.

Even more beneficially, one night the Caddy's location provided a singular vantage point to spot a gang of sneaky fuckers who appeared to have penetrated the camp and boosted as much swag as they could carry.

It was long into the wee hours of the morning, several weeks after Cordite had arrived in camp and chopped off his left arm. He was propped up in the driver's seat of the Caddy, enjoying a cigar while Alice snored delicately in the back seat.

He spotted the half-dozen skulking figures emerging from the shadows of the camp. They were loaded down with bloated bags and overflowing bins that they were ferrying between them. It seemed less like they were running away, and more like they were gleefully skipping.

"Who the fuck are those clowns?" he asked no one in particular.

The question was a literal one. The figures creeping away from the camp all had faces slathered in greasy clown paint. From what Cordite could make out in the near dark, they were trying to look like scary clowns, a concept that would've amused him if he hadn't found it so desperate and sad.

The other Scar Collectors had mentioned a gang around these parts who favored that look—Los Payasos—who were supposed to be some kind of cult of nihilist assholes who believed life was one big joke. They clearly cared enough to steal everything from their neighbors that wasn't nailed down, however.

Cordite grinned over the wheel, clutching its cracked and withered leather cover with his metallic fingers. He didn't see a gaggle of jackasses running in the night. He saw destiny giving him a gift.

Sticking his stogie firmly between his teeth, he turned on the engine and popped the Caddy into gear.

"What's going on?" Alice asked groggily from the back seat, as the motor woke her up.

"You might want to buckle up," he advised her, speaking casually around his cigar.

He kept the Caddy's headlights off as he slammed on the gas, aiming the old-world-tough vehicle directly at the fleeing pack of Payasos. Ideally he would've liked to come up behind them, but maneuvering the Caddy to do so would've given them too much time to scatter. He decided to settle for T-boning the pack of them.

The Payasos froze when they heard the engine roar, but because Cordite was running dark, it took them a few seconds to see where it was coming from. And those few seconds were all he needed to close the gap between them and his grill. At the last second, the clowns all tried to flee—and they might've made it too, if they'd been willing to abandon their swag.

As it was, they were still clutching the handles of their bags and bins when the Caddy plowed into them, sending half of them flying, as the other half turned to red paste under its wheels.

"What the fuck?!" Alice shouted angrily from the back as they screeched to a halt.

"I told you to buckle up, didn't I?"

Cordite threw open the driver's side door and climbed from the Caddy. None of the Payasos were moving, or at least not so much you'd notice. Their bodies and their pilfered swag were scattered for yards around.

Surveying the wreckage, Cordite had to believe they'd hit more than just the Scar Collectors that night. He recognized booze, rations, weapons, and tools from his new gang's coffers and equipment sheds, but there was also a wealth of rich furs and shiny trinkets that didn't look like it had been soiled yet by Scar Collector hands.

"Get out here and help me gather up all this crap!" he ordered Alice. "On the double!"



“What did you do?” she demanded as she joined him and looked around at the damage.

“Just do what I tell you!” he barked, already refilling the Payasos’ spilled bins and bags and piling them beside the car.

Alice fixed him with her searing, judgmental stare the whole time, but she helped him gather the stolen swag.

More than the roaring engine or the impact of steel on flesh and bone, it was the screams of the few Payasos who recovered consciousness that drew the Scar Collectors out from the camp a while later.

By then Cordite and Alice had every loose trinket scooped up and tucked away.

At first it was just a few curious troops who stumbled out to see what was happening, but within minutes there were a couple hundred Scar Collectors bunching up around the broken forms of the Payasos.

Cordite leaned back against the Caddy, still puffing on his stogie. He let them all gawk and puzzle over the sight, offering no explanation while he waited. Eventually Necrow and Rotter pushed their way through the crowd, looking every bit as confused and annoyed as Cordite had hoped they would be.

“What are *they* doing here?” Rotter demanded, kicking the twisted spine of a horror clown.

“Dyin’, looks like,” Cordite said.

That drew a nice wave of laughter from the crowd.

Necrow was less interested in the Payasos and more interested in the swag piled up beside the Caddy.

“And what’s all that?”

“The clown crew here had quite a night, I’d say. They hit our camp, and somebody else’s by the looks of this loot.” He patted the Caddy. “They would’ve gotten away clean if I hadn’t introduced them to Motor City’s finest here.”

Rotter and Necrow stared at each other in silence for a while, obviously trying to say a good deal to each other without saying a word.

“And I suppose you figure since you made the kill,” said Rotter, “that all them goodies are your personal spoils now?”

He shook his head. “Hell, no. I mean, I suppose I could be a stingy fucker like that.” He raised his voice. “But when Cordite makes a kill, everyone who runs with him shares the spoils!”

With that, he picked up the first bin and chucked its entire contents into the air above the crowd, raining furs and gold-plated fixtures and packaged snacks of varying staleness down on them.

Hundreds of grabby hands went up as if exalting him. He kept the deluge coming, tossing the rest of the swag at his fellow Scar Collectors and their slaves. Beside him, Alice finally understood, and began helping him distribute the bounty.

By the time they were done, the gang was whipped into a frenzy. Cordite remembered how he'd heard small pockets of them chanting for him after he'd guillotined his own arm. Those voices had numbered perhaps a few dozen. Now a few hundred were repeating his name in unison.

He knew that once he turned that few hundred into a thousand, the Scar Collectors would be his.

Rotter and Necrow watched it all go down in silence. There was nothing they could do to take away that moment short of killing Cordite, and they knew it.

Rotter seethed openly at him. He wasn't a subtle man. Necrow, on the other hand, was more reserved. His eyes were calculating as they looked on Cordite.

When the commotion began to die down—largely because Cordite had run out of gifts—Necrow stepped to Cordite.

When he spoke, his voice was just for the two of them.

"You know, I'm beginning to think bringing you in might've been a mistake on my part."

Cordite grinned. "I'm just trying to be part of the team."

Necrow nodded, smiling a small, rueful smile.

"We'll see," he said, and walked away, while Rotter continued to stare at him with dumb, open contempt.

His second-in-command was definitely the sharper of the two, Cordite realized, and the one who would need to fall first.

### Half-Face, Whole Lie

Craven wasn't lying about Half-Face. Cordite could hardly understand how a man could still be walking around with that little of their face intact.

He found the raid leader lying under a thick stack of furs on the back of a stripped-down flatbed sitting on cement blocks. He was snoring like a big rig tumbling down a mountainside.

Cordite studied the man's skull, quite a lot of which was bare to the world—utterly skinless. It looked like someone had dunked three-quarters of his face and head in acid and left it there to simmer for a day or so, which meant that his name was wrong, but Cordite supposed “Quarter-Face” didn't sound quite as spiffy as far as monikers went.

The remnants of that face looked pale and sweaty and drained. Cordite figured him for going through withdrawals from that shit he was on.

He kicked the prolapsed bumper of the wreck hard, rattling its frame. Half-Face tossed from side to side for a moment and then sniffed the air with a nose that was just two black hollows in his head.

“What smells like shit?” he asked wearily. The man's voice sounded like each word was being chewed up in a wheat thresher.

“Shit,” Cordite explained in a flat tone.

“Oh. Makes sense, then.”

“I hear you're the man to see about joinin' a raidin' party.”

“How's that?”

Half-Face blinked the eyelid he had left until the world came into focus, then really looked at Cordite for the first time. He studied the shotgun protruding from his metal left arm.

"You're the new hard-ass, huh? The one who brought in all them plump rubes?"

"Sounds a bit like me, yeah."

"What do you want?"

"They got me diggin' shitters."

Half-Face croaked something like a laugh. "Rotter must have a shine for you."

"Yeah, well, I'm lookin' to do some real work. Deal out some real damage. I want to join your next raiding party."

"If Rotter put you in the shit ditch, then that's where he wants you."

"Convince him otherwise."

That single eye stared up at Cordite incredulously. "Why should I?"

"Because I know where you can find more Jitter," Cordite offered.

Half-Face suddenly found him much more interesting. He sat up in the flatbed and the cobwebs finally cleared from his eye.

"Where?" he demanded.

Cordite shook his head. "Get me out of shit duty and put me to some real work, and I'll see you fixed up for the next six months. That's the deal. No, wait—one more thing. I want Craven to come along too."

"What? The old guy? He's about ninety-nine percent dead."

Cordite bit back a crack about that being only twenty-four percent more dead than Half-Face and just shrugged. "That's what I want. What's your answer?"

Half-Face licked the remaining corner of his mouth sumptuously at the thought.

"How... how do I convince Rotter to let you come along?"

"Tell him you wanna use me as cannon fodder. I'll lay odds he sees it as a good chance to get rid of me."

"And what if that don't work?"

Cordite shrugged. "How bad do you want a fix?"

He walked away, leaving those words hanging in the air. He knew no one was better at convincing a junkie to do something stupid than the junkie himself.

### Everyone Has Their Fix

Standing behind Half-Face at the top of a wooded hill about fifty miles west of their camp, Cordite, Craven, and the other fifteen Scar Collectors in the raiding party could see that the mine he'd led them to was a big operation. Cordite counted at least forty men and women, all in good health, going into the mine and in and out of the various out-buildings. More importantly, there didn't seem to be that many guards. A couple at the facility gate, a few more in towers at the corners, but that was it.

Half-Face grinned. "I love this place. The perfect honeypot. Just beyond the Patriarch's borders, filled with gold, and already set up and waiting for some hotshot who thinks he can beat the odds to come in and make it pay. Happens every few years. People think the last raid was just bad luck, so they come out here, put their hard-earned money into getting it up and running, hire a bunch of miners, and just when they've got everything ticking along nice and steady, we come back, check the trap, and harvest everyone and everything inside."

He motioned the squad to start down the hill. "Raided it four times already. Never gets old."

This was a very different Half-Face from the one Cordite had talked to back at the camp, and Cordite knew why. The man had just snorted the last of his Jitter to prepare for the raid and was unworried about his next fix because of Cordite's promise to get him more. Thus, he was positively jigging with happy energy. Which was almost sad, considering how Cordite was planning to disappoint him.

When Half-Face had told Cordite he'd gotten permission to bring him and Craven along on the raid, he'd mentioned that Rotter had seemed almost giddy at the idea of Half-Face using Cordite as a disposable skin suit. Too bad Rotter was going to be disappointed too. He really did seem to lack any kind of strategic brain. Cordite would've seen the con coming around the corner from halfway up the street.

As they got closer to the mine, they started to smell the smoke of grilling bison steaks wafting through the trees, which got everyone even more excited. The camp had been living on wild carrots and watered-down prairie dog stew for weeks.

"We'll be kings when we get back," said a young raider named Uggo. "I'll be sellin' those steaks for two guns each."

"Biggest raid we've had for months," said one named Araña.

"You think they got booze in there?" asked Craven.

"Miners always got booze," said an older raider named Hacksaw. "And drugs. Only things that keep 'em sane."

"I'm gonna drink it all!" whooped Uggo.

"Not if I drink it first!" laughed Araña.

"Shut the fuck up!" snapped Half-Face. "We're gettin' close. We—"

He stopped cold as he saw a wire strung with yellow rags between two trees. The crew looked left and right. The wire and the rags continued out of sight in both directions.

"What the fuck is that?" asked Hacksaw.

There was a piece of paper tacked to one of the wired trees. Half-Face stepped up to it. Cordite read over his shoulder.

*Warning - This is the border of the Patriarch's land. No entry is permitted except at the official checkpoints at Limon, La Junta, and Fort Morgan. Illegal immigrants will be shot on sight.*

"Goddamn it," breathed Half-Face. "Goddamn it all to hell."

"What's the matter?" asked Uggo.

"The Patriarch moved the border," said Half-Face. "That motherfucker! It used to be two miles on the far side of the mine."

“Well, so what?” asked Araña. “Ain’t no border guards here, and a little string of wire ain’t gonna stop us.”

More raiders were speaking up behind the front rank, all saying the same thing.

“It’s just a wire.”

“Fuck the border.”

“Let’s go get that loot.”

“No no no!” Half-Face’s happy Jitter jabber was rapidly deteriorating into twitching snarls. “Rotter’s law says we don’t raid into Colorado, ever. Ever! He’ll skin us if he finds out.”

“Well, why would he find out?” asked Craven. “Why don’t we just pretend we didn’t see the sign? It wasn’t Colorado the last time you came, right?”

“No,” said Half-Face, and started pushing through them. “We’re turning around.”

Cordite stepped in his way. “You serious? There is a literal gold mine less than fifty yards away, and you’re walking away because it’s on the other side of a wire?”

Half-Face jabbed a finger at him. “You are here for one reason, big shot. So shut up until you want to talk about that.”

He stepped around Cordite and kept going, back the way they came.

“Come on. We’ll find something else.”

\* \* \*

But they didn’t.

It was two more days before the raiding party came across anyone else even remotely worth robbing. Their scouts spotted a small ice-fishing expedition pulling big-mouth bass out of a nearby lake. The fishers didn’t put up much of a scrap, and didn’t have much worth taking except for their pick-up truck and themselves. At least the Scar Collectors had fresh fish for dinner that night.

The rest of the trip was even worse. They took down an Arapaho courier, but he was only carrying mail. They killed a trapper and took a few furs. And that was it. All in all, Cordite felt like a dog hunting scraps—particularly considering the prize they could have had—and he was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one in the party who thought so.

After four days out, Half-Face was a mess—he’d long since started going through the stages of withdrawal—and announced they’d be turning back and heading home in the

morning. The raiding party made camp for the night, with Half-Face choosing to lay his bedroll down away from the others so they wouldn't see him convulsing and puking the night away.

Cordite waited a goodly while, until everyone else had their fill of boozing and fighting and began to settle down for the night. When he felt it wouldn't be noticed, he made his way to where Half-Face was sitting in the snow, still very much awake and rocking back and forth like a madman.

"Bad dreams?" Cordite asked, hunkering down beside him.

Half-Face was so deep in his sickness that he didn't even start at the man's sudden appearance.

"You have to sleep to dream," he muttered miserably.

"Why don't we go back to that mine tomorrow instead of going home empty-handed?" Cordite asked. "The Scar Collectors are going to wither away if we keep takin' slaves in ones and twos. It ain't a sustainable business model."

Half-Face was shaking his head before Cordite finished.

"I told you. We don't raid the Patriarch's land. Rotter's rules."

"And that sits fine with you? Lapping up whatever crumbs happen to spill off the Patriarch's table?"

"I don't call the shots!"

"But what if we—"

"Enough with the fucking questions!" Half-Face yelled at him impatiently. "Let's talk Jitter. You're on the raid like you wanted. Where and when do I get my part of the deal?"

"Right now," Cordite assured him.

Half-Face lit up like a little kid on Christmas morning.

"You... you got it on you?" he asked excitedly.

Cordite nodded. "Surely do."

He dug his hand into the deep pocket of his long coat while Half-Face watched his every tiny movement like a dog waiting for a treat.

When Cordite's hand emerged and he opened his palm, however, it was empty. What remained of Half-Face's face collapsed in despair.

"What the hell is this?" he whined. "A joke? Where's my shit?"

"I told you, it's right here," Cordite said, bunching his fingers and ramming them into Half-Face's throat.



The man sputtered and hacked, his eyes glazing over from the blow.

Cordite raised his shotgun-adorned arm and swung the barrel into the spot on Half-Face's neck he'd just weakened. The cold steel crushed his larynx and caved in his windpipe, killing him in short order.

Cordite nudged the still body over onto its side with the muzzle of the shotgun, then covered Half-Face with his bedroll and left him there in the snow. He looked around. No alarms had gone off. The rest of the raiding party was still sleeping off their regular evening drinking binge around the roaring fire.

Time to wake them up.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Nobody moved.

"Hey!"

Still nothing.

He raised his shotgun arm over his head and fired off a cartridge. The boom was deafening. Even the drunkest of the Scar Collectors were immediately awake and sober and reaching for their weapons.

"What?" yelled Araña. "What the hell happened?"

"Half-Face is dead," Cordite announced. "Must have missed the Jitter too much. I found him twisted up like a ropey shit."

There was no great swell of sympathy or grief as they took in the news.

"So now I'm takin' over," Cordite continued. "It's time you had someone callin' shots who isn't piss-scared to go after a bounty worth the work."

Hacksaw was the first one to step forward.

"Half-Face died from the shakes?" he asked. "I don't believe it. He's been strung out worse than this before. Far worse. Did you kill him?"

Cordite chambered another shell into his shotgun and leveled it at Hacksaw's face.

"I won't be takin' questions at this time. Now are you in or not?"

Hacksaw stared into the muzzle, and then back at Cordite, clearly unimpressed.

"Fuck you," he spat. "If anybody's takin' over, it oughta be me. You only been a Scar Collector for a month. I—"

It took only a twitch of a muscle for Cordite to fire the shotgun, and Hacksaw's head became a foggy red memory.

Cordite jacked two more shells into the shotgun's chambers before anyone had the time or chance to make a move, then swung the muzzle around him threateningly. He had their attention.

Cordite knew everyone had their fix. His was destiny. Half-Face's had been the Jitter. He hoped that, for the rest of the raiding party, their fix was ambition, and if not, then at least the salving of their egos.

"Pickin' up roadkill," he spat. "That's what we've been doin'. Eatin' scraps. Is that what warriors do? No."

No one spoke up, but that might've been more because of Cordite's shotgun and the fact that blood was still shooting out the top of Hacksaw's neck. His body hadn't actually fallen over yet.

"Why are we tuckin' tail and runnin' when we know where the big score is?" he asked them all. "I'll tell you why—because you follow a leader who licks the Patriarch's boots. The Scar Collectors are the biggest and baddest motherfuckers on the plains, aren't we? Why the hell shouldn't we take whatever we want, from whoever we want?"

Hacksaw finally toppled. Almost no one paid attention. Their eyes were all on Cordite, but were they for him or against him?

It was clear there was enough greed and shortsightedness among them that they were tempted by his suggestion, but there was also a fair amount of fear in the faces staring at him—maybe too much.

Cordite needed to put more bait on the hook.

"I say we head back to that mine and take the slaves and gold and supplies we came out here for in the first place. I say we help ourselves to all the booze and bison steaks we can put in our bellies, then go back to the camp with our trucks filled to bursting and show Rotter and Necrow how raiding is fucking done!"

He was hoping that would draw at least a few gruff cheers, but instead he was met by more silence and suspicious stares.

He looked at Craven, sitting behind the rest—glared at him. Craven blinked, then nodded.

"What's the matter?" asked the old man. "You afraid Cordite's gonna take all the glory for himself? Don't you remember how he dished out all that Payaso loot? Everybody got some, right? Not like when Rotter leads a raid. Nobody gets nothin' then. Nobody but Rotter."

“That’s right,” said Cordite. “Whatever we get from this, we divide it up evenly. Equal shares. What do you say?”

The raiders still hesitated.

Behind them, Craven started chanting. “Cor-dite. Cor-dite. Cor-dite...”

Another raider picked it up, then another. Pretty soon the whole camp was shouting it.

Cordite grinned, relieved. “All right, then. Let’s go cross that wire.”

### Triumph (the Kind That's Like a Parade)

Alice had had an easy enough time of it for the first few days after the raiding party left. Cordite had been thoughtful enough to split the skull of one of his new brothers as an example of what would happen to anyone who sniffed around “his” property while he was away.

As the days wore on, however, Rotter seemed to become increasingly unconcerned with Cordite’s return. She caught him more than once spying on her from a distance while licking his disgusting metallic chops. She knew it was only a matter of time before he started prowling around the Caddy after her.

When that time finally came, Alice woke up to his hideous mug rapping its steely chin against the glass, and was grateful she’d been diligent about locking all the doors and keeping the windows rolled up tight—not that she had a choice in this climate.

She had a blanket tucked up around her shoulders, concealing the Bowie knife whose handle she always slept clutching. Alice decided she wasn’t just going to impale the mongrel, but that she would take his head clean off if she could. If more of them came for her after that, she’d try to take at least a few with her.

The tapping of Rotter’s bionic chin became violent bashing, and soon the window began to spiderweb with cracks. Alice readied to rip the blanket away and stick the blade through his face as soon as it poked through the broken glass.

She was so focused on that impending moment that she didn’t notice right away when the pounding on the glass ceased. When she did, she saw that Rotter’s face had disappeared

from the window. She looked around, listening for him, and instead heard some kind of commotion rising from the rest of the camp.

Peering out of the Caddy to ensure the coast was indeed clear, Alice cast away the blanket and unlocked the door, creeping from the car with the big knife still in her hands.

The source of the commotion was easy to ferret out. It seemed as though every Scar Collector had emerged from their hole to watch the return of Half-Face's raiding party, as if there was something abnormal and exciting about the event.

She squeezed through to the front of the crowd and watched the procession. Their trucks were rolling slowly on either side of a long line of people on foot—it looked like a hundred or so—each chained or tied to the next by their necks. Their wrists were bound and tethered as well. None of them looked particularly happy about their predicament.

The raiding party's trucks were also loaded down with supplies. Food, clothing, generators, coils of wire, fuel tanks, crates of alcohol, and various other sundries were piled high atop the beds of each vehicle.

They received a hero's welcome from the rest of the Scar Collectors, who whooped and hollered and fired any weapon they happened to be carrying into the air.

Rotter and Necrow did not join in these festivities. In fact, they didn't look pleased at all.

As the head of the procession rolled into the middle of camp, Cordite hopped down from the hood of the lead truck and sent a celebratory shotgun blast into the air.

It was the first time Alice had seen him truly smile.

"Where's Half-Face?" Rotter demanded, yelling over the cacophony of cheering Scar Collectors.

"Probably in a block of ice gettin' pissed on by groundhogs by now," Cordite answered.

"What happened to him?" Necrow pressed.

"Dead."

"Who killed him?"

"Bad habits," Cordite explained. "But me and the crew made do... once we came to an understandin'. I took charge and we managed to salvage the trip. Didn't we?"

The members of what was now Cordite's raiding party shouted their agreement, and his name. "Cor-dite! Cor-dite! Cor-dite!"

Rotter and Necrow exchanged concerned looks.

"So you took the mine?" Rotter asked, eyeing their prisoners.

"That's right. Easy as pie."

"And no problems?" asked Necrow.

"Not a one!"

"The Patriarch will destroy you for this!" shouted one of the shackled men. "We are his citizens! That was his mine!"

Rotter and Necrow froze at these words. Rotter turned to Cordite.

"You entered the Patriarch's territory?"

Cordite hesitated, then made up his mind. Why lie? Why wait to make his move? Just get it all out in the open and see what happened.

He shrugged. "We took the same mine Half-Face always takes. Only the Patriarch expanded his borders, so now the mine's in Colorado. That ain't on us."

Rotter practically came unglued. "Are you out of that cracked dome skull of yours? Do you know how the Patriarch defends his property?"

Cordite shrugged. "I guess I'll learn."

"This is practically a declaration of war!" Necrow shouted.

"So what?" Cordite cast a glance back at his prisoners and the loaded trucks. "Would you rather we came back empty-handed? Would you rather this gang die by inches instead of flaming out in battle? Look what we brought you! Look what's just waiting out there for the brave to take."

"You die for this, baldy," Rotter seethed, taking a step forward.

He stopped when his metal jaw clanked against the muzzle of Cordite's shotgun arm.

"I guess making me third man around here is out of the question then, huh?" Cordite asked with a grin.

Rotter was speechless for a change. Necrow was not.

"Why settle for third man?" he asked Cordite. "We got ways to settle succession around here."

Cordite cocked his head. "Oh yeah?"

Necrow nodded slowly. Piqued, Cordite lowered his shotgun arm. "Tell me all about it."

Necrow turned back to Rotter, who nodded his approval.

"One-on-one challenge," Necrow explained. "You kill me, you take my place. I kill you, we forget you ever existed."

Cordite looked around at the cut-up and gleefully disfigured faces of the other Scar Collectors. Every one of them was watching the encounter unfold expectantly.

“Sounds like a good time to me,” he said.

## Getting What You Want

Cordite fixed a makeshift bayonet onto the business end of his robotic arm's shotgun, just in case things went hand to hand in the challenge ahead.

Necrow seemed the type to take seriously.

He sat on the edge of the driver's seat of the Caddy, legs hanging out of the open door. The dashboard light provided as much illumination as he needed to finish strapping the long, serrated blade to his already-lethal appendage.

Alice sat cross-legged on the ground near him, warming herself by a small campfire. She watched Cordite with a mixture of curiosity and subtle horror.

"What happens if you win?" Alice asked.

"*When* I win," he corrected her.

"Fine. *When* you win?"

"Then these animals are mine to command, and I will prepare them for war."

Alice's eyes darted around, as if she were afraid someone might've overheard him say that.

"Why the hell would you want to take on the Patriarch?" she whispered.

"Because when I defeat him, every gang in the Colorado plains will flock to me. I will rule them all."

"O...kay, and then what?"

Cordite shrugged. "I fulfill my destiny."

"What destiny is that, exactly? You've never said."



He looked up from his handiwork to hold her gaze seriously.

"A witch told my mother on the day I was born that one day I would rule all of Kansas as the leader of the Wakarusa Redlegs. That is my destiny, and I will bring the gangs of Colorado back there to achieve it."

Alice raised an eyebrow. "You really believe something a witch said?"

"As much as you believe you're gonna find this sister of yours."

"You ever think you might just be crazy?" The question sounded more genuine than sarcastic.

"I don't think 'crazy' means much in the world we got," Cordite answered without hesitation or umbrage. "All that matters is who's on top. And that's gonna be me."

Alice shook her head, staring into the fire.

It was Cordite's turn to watch her with curiosity.

"What's up your ass, anyway? When Colorado's mine I can send a thousand men to every corner of the state to find your missing sister. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that what you were ready to open my fucking throat to get?"

Her eyes snapped back to him. "And what about those people you brought in today? In chains? Why do they have to die so you can fulfill your damn destiny?"

"Why do cattle have to die so we can eat?"

"They're *people*!"

Cordite leaned toward her, staring into her eyes intently.

"If there was ever a time in this world when that distinction mattered, it's a long time gone now. The only thing that makes you not cattle in the wastes is standing up and proving you aren't. Those people couldn't do that. *Your* people couldn't do that. So they're cattle. But not me. I ain't gonna be cattle. Not ever."

Alice continued to fume, but she didn't say anything else.

Cordite sighed. "You made it this far, girl. Don't get sentimental now. It costs too much."

Alice climbed to her feet in a huff and stomped out the fire while shooting invisible bullets into his face with her eyes. Once it was extinguished, she opened the Caddy's back door and climbed inside, slamming it shut behind her.

Cordite stared down at the burnt twigs steaming in the snow, shaking his head in the dark.

"You'd think we're fuckin' married or somethin'," he muttered to himself.

## Demolition Derby

It was kind of like a joust from medieval times, but instead of horses they were seated behind the wheels of armored wrecking machines, and instead of lances they had hood-mounted chain guns.

Cordite gazed through the windshield of the converted, porcupine-spiked, VW Bug they'd given him, staring across a hundred feet of dirty snow at Necrow's vehicle, which... was a goddamn bona fide monster truck. The hulking thing was sitting on tires as tall and thick as Cordite's entire car, and the clouds of black smoke belching from its backside obscured the crowd that packed the area around the fighting ground.

"Seems fair," Cordite muttered.

Slaves had spent the whole day erecting lights around the ground to create a makeshift arena, and now every Scar Collector in the camp had come to watch Necrow and the upstart from Kansas face off for the right to be Rotter's lieutenant.

Cordite tested the straps holding him to the seat and gripped the wheel with one hand, resting his bayonet-crowned shotgun on the dashboard.

He revved the engine and tried to remember how the gear shift worked. The whole driving thing was strange and unfamiliar to him, and he hated it. As the warlord of the Wakarusa Redlegs, he'd rarely driven—he had minions and lieutenants to do that for him—which meant he wasn't much of a driver, and they'd given his opponent the equivalent of a fucking tank while he was squeezed inside a toy car.

*This is just one more task, Cordite reassured himself. Just one more task.*

“Let’s get it on!” Rotter called through a megaphone.

Cordite slammed the stick into first and stomped on the gas.

He and Necrow’s spiked battle rigs flew headlong at each other in a snarl of engines, both of them letting loose a hail of bullets from their mounted cannons.

Cordite jerked the wheel from side to side, zigzagging to avoid Necrow’s volley even as he fired off his own.

A swarm of lead slugs peppered the Bug’s porcupine chassis, piercing steel and shattering glass, and he felt a sudden sting. He’d caught one in the shoulder, but there was no time to inspect the damage, and, strangely, there were hardly any follow-up shots.

Cordite peered through the dense spiderweb of cracks that had frosted his windshield, wondering why, and a great swell of hope and a new spike of adrenalin ran through his body as he understood the answer.

Rotter may have thought giving him and Necrow such disparate combat vehicles was a cute trick, but one aspect of it had fatally backfired. Because of how high Necrow’s truck was elevated, as the distance between him and Cordite closed, more and more of Necrow’s shots went high, and because of how low to the ground the Bug was built, virtually all of Cordite’s fire was emptying into the monster truck’s front tires.

Those tires were the heaviest of heavy duty, to be sure, but they weren’t made to withstand military-grade ammunition hotly spit from a chain gun. The rubber had shredded completely, and the monster truck was tilting dangerously forward as it barreled on, grinding sparks off its rims and bobbing and dipping like the bow of a speedboat riding heavy waves.

Cordite tried to swerve out of the way and let Necrow wreck himself, but his bayonet got jammed against the windshield and he couldn’t turn. He braced as the two vehicles collided in the middle of the field with a deafening crash. The nose of Cordite’s Bug wedged under the lip of Necrow’s lurching grill and scraped backward as the sheer weight of the bigger vehicle drove him back, while at the same time almost flipping over and crashing down on top of him.

If that had happened, it would have turned the Bug into Cordite’s tomb, but fortunately, after standing on its nose for a full two seconds, the monster truck dropped back down on its back tires and came to rest.

The frame of the Bug had been reinforced with a roll cage, but the vehicle folded up behind and in front of Cordite like an accordion from the impact. His knees pressing to his chest

was the last thing he felt before the back of his head hit the too-low roll bar behind him hard enough to knock him out of the flow of time for a spell.

It was actually quite restful.

Then he came to again just in time to see Necrow's rebar hand smash through the shattered driver's side window and close around his face. He might've succeeded in wrecking the second-in-command's truck, but Necrow himself had been thoroughly protected, and was thoroughly pissed.

"Why don't you just die!" he roared.

His rebar hand smelled like burning, tasted worse, and felt like an industrial press smashing Cordite's nose and mouth and cutting off his oxygen. Cordite couldn't breathe and couldn't move. A feeling that was undeniably fear was paralyzing his brain. For the first time in a long time, he wondered if his destiny was going to come to an abrupt end with his death.

No.

Fuck no.

He shook off the fear and wrenched his shotgun arm from where it was pinched between the dashboard and the partially collapsed roll cage, then crooked his elbow and stabbed blindly out the window with the bayonet, hoping the resistance he felt was its blade meeting Necrow's flesh.

His suspicion was confirmed when he heard a scream, and the stinking, vice-like rebar hand left his face. He turned his head to see Necrow throwing his body away from the Bug to free it from the serrated length of steel.

Cordite tore at the buckle of his seat harness, freeing himself as quickly as he could, then began wriggling his large body out from under the Bug's compressed dash and through the half-flattened driver's side window, plopping from it to the snow-covered ground as if the wreck had just birthed him.

He scrambled to his feet just in time to be tackled by a pissed-off Necrow. They sprawled across the hood of the Bug, narrowly avoiding the long spikes soldered to its sides.

Necrow had Cordite's shotgun arm pinned to the hot hood of the car. Cordite balled his robotic fist in vain and let off a harmless blast from the shotgun's muzzle. He felt the impossibly strong, ribbed fingers of that rebar hand clawing its way up his chest toward his throat.

"I should've killed you as soon as I laid eyes on you!" Necrow growled.

"You and everybody between here and the Mississippi River!"

With his right hand—his flesh hand—Cordite reached up and seized the barbed spike sticking out of Necrow's eye socket. The razor wire that wrapped around it sliced into the meat of his hand, but Cordite ignored the pain. He snapped the spike from Necrow's face, making him howl in agony. Cordite didn't imagine it felt any better when he rammed the tip of the spike into his throat.

Necrow staggered back, releasing his hold on Cordite and clutching at the spike with hands operating solely on instinct. For all intents and purposes, he was already dead.

Finally, he realized it and fell over.

Cordite slid from the hood and dropped to his hands and knees. He could hear the Scar Collectors cheering approvingly. He was bleeding from a dozen places, and he was pretty sure at least five of his ribs were good and cracked, but he was alive, and he was victorious.

That's what he thought, anyway.

Then booted feet entered his field of vision. He looked up, blinking away blood, to see Rotter standing over him, a pistol leveled at his head.

"I won," Cordite croaked. "That makes me your new second."

"Fuck that!" Rotter snarled, cocking his piece.

Cordite stared over the gun at him. Then he laughed. Because what else was there to do?

He was still laughing when Alice leapt onto Rotter's back with a feral growl, driving all six inches of her Bowie knife down through the Scar Collector chief's right shoulder.

Rotter wailed and whirled around with surprising power and speed, bucking Alice off like a prize-winning bronco. Her body flew through the air as if shot from a circus cannon.

Cordite reached after her with his human arm, hand extended, but it was a futile gesture.

She crashed back-first into the side of Cordite's wrecked Bug and was impaled on one of its long, sharp porcupine spikes, the rusty iron thorn sprouting from her stomach like a cheap magic trick. She didn't even scream. She only quivered and stared at the lights of the arena with wide, surprised eyes.

Something erupted within Cordite as he looked upon her small body hanging from the spike. It was a fury he couldn't recall feeling before—not when his own men turned on him, perhaps not ever. He let out a roar loud enough to liquefy organs and leapt from his doubled-over posture like a great predatory cat.

Rotter was still on his feet, turning in circles as he tried to reach the Bowie knife stuck through the top of his shoulder. As he came around again, Cordite swung his shotgun barrel with enough force to completely dislodge his metal jaw from his skull.

Rotter shrieked wordlessly and fell backward against Cordite, who grabbed the Bowie knife in his powered metal hand and dragged the big blade down through Rotter's torso until it slid out between his legs, cutting him in twain.

Rotter collapsed into two separate piles, both of which were soon steaming in the cold.

Cordite turned away from the gory sight and approached Alice, mind frantically searching for some plan of action to free her from the spike.

There was nothing to be done, of course. The light was already fading from her eyes.

"That was a stupid thing to do," he said. "I told... I told you, don't get sentimental."

Alice tried to talk, but only managed to bring up a pint of blood, which she coughed all over the spike that had killed her.

Cordite swallowed what felt like a grown man's fist.

"I'll... I'm gonna find that sister of yours, all right?"

"You... are a lying son of a bitch," Alice said through a mouthful of gore.

She was actually smiling.

Cordite had to stumble away from her then. He had to. Standing that close to her was throwing off his equilibrium more than the battle had.

He looked down at the bodies of Rotter and Necrow, and then out at the Scar Collectors watching him in stunned silence.

For the first time he could recall, Cordite didn't know what his next move should be. He just kept thinking about Alice with that spike stuck through her, looking like a doll unstrung by a vengeful god.

Then, deliberately, he stopped thinking of her, and swore he would never think of her again. Her death was the last piece of the armor he'd been crafting his whole life, finally fitting into place. He had said, back when he'd got his arm, that he was ironclad, but that had only been for show. Now he was *truly* ironclad, and nothing in this world would ever pierce that iron, ever again.

This was the price destiny demanded.

Cordite's eyes found a particular face in the crowd, its aged wrinkles swallowing most of its long-healed decorative scars—Craven, his former latrine-digging comrade. He gave him a nod.

The old Scar Collector raised a clenched fist into the air, mustering all the power his ragged voice had left as he began to chant, "Cor-dite! Cor-dite! Cor-dite!"

No one answered the call at first, as they were too busy laughing and whooping, but Craven would be neither denied nor deterred. He kept fanatically yelling the name, over and over again, until finally a few voices near where he stood picked up the chant. A few more, and then more on top of them. Soon every Scar Collector who'd watched the epic battle was chanting Cordite's name.

Cordite smiled. He had wanted the Scar Collectors to be his weapon. Now they were.

He grasped the front of his bloody shirt with fingers made of flesh and others made of metal. Tearing the soiled cloth away, he exposed the scars on his chest that represented his sacred tasks. All but three had been ticked off—the last two, and the one he'd started to mark off atop the overpass in Kansas when he'd been interrupted by Thrush. The first step on the path to *this*.

Using the bayonet attached to the shotgun of his now battle-tested machine arm, Cordite drew a thin, bloody line through that third-to-last scar.

There were only two left, and he could now see a clear path to crossing them out, and to the fulfillment of his destiny.

First the Patriarch.

Then Kansas.