

# Brooke's Tale

## Arc 1: Changeling

*By Fifth*

fifthsstories@gmail.com

"What did you say?" David Criddle's knuckles cracked loudly as he pushed himself fully upright at his desk. His broad face was tight and crimson with rage as he glared across his study, and Brooke Criddle glared back, something battered but unbroken within her rising behind her eyes to defy the father who had dominated her world for all of her seventeen years.

"I said no, Father. I will not marry the Hanlin boy, I don't care how much you were offered for me." Brooke's voice almost broke with her fear, but her own anger forced the words through her throat. Her mother and her siblings edged further away from her, trying to stay beneath her father's notice.

The desk shook under her father's hands, a double crack that rebounded against the stone walls. "You will do it, you ungrateful rebel girl, and you'll do it quietly and obediently, as God made women to be! The bride-price has been paid, and the banns will be posted tomorrow! Will you shame this family before God and the community? Will you go to the altar with stripes on your back?"

"What about your promise to me, Father?" Brooke shot back. "You said you wouldn't marry me without my consent, what abou-" Her question was broken by the crack of her father's hand across her cheek, knocking her back from the desk to the study's hard floor. Brooke stared up at the ceiling in dazed shock, only broken by the pounding of her father's boots on the wooden floor. She twisted away from his hands as he sought to grab her, rolled past him and came upright on the other side. Her father bellowed something incoherent and turned for her, but Brooke was already moving for the door, and had it open before her father could grab her again.

She dove out into the corridors a few feet ahead of her father's grasping hands. The stone walls of the manor flashed past as she rocketed through the

corridors, out into the courtyards. Long days of working the fields and running up and down the hills after sheep and pigs had toned her muscles well, and she quickly outpaced her father across the vegetable garden to the grove of pecan trees that were the source of much of her family's income. She passed the first three trees and scrambled up the fourth, pieces of bark coming off under her hands.

Brooke finally came to a halt at one large branch, curling into a ball where the limb joined the trunk. Her legs and arms finally began screaming in protest over her exertions, but she grit her teeth and held her silence.

After a moment, she began to think clearly for the first time since her father had announced her marriage. She found that she could not clearly remember how she got out the gates, across to the grove, and up the tree, only a handful of disjointed, confused images. *Why do I keep getting myself into these fixes? Leap, leap, leap, and then look around to figure out where I've ended up.* She thought of the changelings, child-demons that Father Terrethel claimed were placed by the Evil One in God-fearing homes to foment disorder and disobedience among the faithful. Her father had called her a changeling more than once, usually right before a beating. Not for the first time, Brooke wondered if she actually was one of the fabled changelings. Heaven knew she'd had enough trouble becoming her father's ideal daughter.

Her reverie was broken by the snap of a twig below her. Brooke froze completely, breathing shallowly and hoping whoever was below her wouldn't notice her. Hoping it was a human, not a mantis or big cat. She'd seen, up close, what bugs and cats alike did to sheep that strayed from the flock. She'd seen it, over and over again, in her nightmares.

"Brooke?" A quiet voice asked from below her. Brooke stopped breathing at the sound of her oldest brother's voice. "Brooke, I know you're here. I saw you run into the grove."

Brooke squeezed her eyes shut, trying her hardest to imitate a part of the tree. She heard a low sigh from below her, then a few steps and a rustle of leaves, almost directly below her hiding place. "Well, when you decide to come down, I've left some stuff at the bottom of tree number four, okay? You should be able to make it to Somerset. From there, you can start a new life." His voice went a little plaintive on the last two words.

Brooke was so startled she blurted out, “Why?” As soon as she said it, she clapped a hand over her mouth as if she could take the revealing word back.

Edward rustled below her. “Because you fit in here as well as boots on a cat, sister mine.” He paused. “And because if you ever come back, Father’s going to kill you. Or marry you off to Peter Hanlin.”

Brooke’s mind whirled with the sheer impossibility of *Edward*, stodgy, old-fashioned, paternal Edward, of all people, aiding her longed-for escape from her father’s farm. Yet there was his voice coming from the darkness below her. “Get to Haven Market quick, Brooke. There are some couriers overnighing there, they may be able to give you a ride to Somerset.”

“Thank you, Edward.” It sounded horribly inadequate, but Brooke couldn't think of anything else to say.

“You do good out there, sister.” Brooke heard footsteps rustle away from her tree, up the hill toward the house. Her father’s voice bellowed in the distance, her brothers’ names rendered indistinct by distance.

Brooke waited for long minutes, mustering her courage, before slowly climbing down the tree. Once at the bottom, she felt around carefully before her hand fell on canvas. She seized the backpack and opened it with blind fingers, searching for potential weapons to ward off the creatures of the night. Her fingers fell first on a rough metal tube, and she nearly cried out in joy as she recognized one of her father’s precious pre-Storm electric torches. She turned the knob at the base of the torch, and bright yellow light split the dark. Brooke quickly shoved the torch down into the bag to muffle the light and inspected her brother’s generosity.

A packet of food, dried fruit and smoked mutton, wrapped in cloth, along with a handful of unshelled pecans. Two changes of her clothes, heavy wool trousers and tunics. A gray wool sweater, which she pulled on to ward off the cold. The blue wool dress her mother had made for her seventeenth birthday. Brooke had been unable to find it for the last several days, and wondered exactly how long Edward had been planning to aid her escape. *What would he have done if I'd surrendered to Father?* She wondered.

Tucked in next to the clothes was an angular package wrapped in sheepskin. She pulled it out and unwrapped it to reveal a revolver, not one of her father's armory - Edward's? Contrary to Father Terrethel's pronouncements, laying her sinful hands upon the weapons of Men did not cause God to smite her on the spot. The gun was in a sturdy, unadorned leather holster, and she checked with uncertain hands to be sure it was loaded. Six cold brass cartridges stared up at her from their slots, and Brooke closed her eyes and gave a silent prayer of thanksgiving to her father's God for her brother's thoughtfulness, before strapping the holster onto her shoulder.

Under the clothes was a small woolen parcel which clinked. Brooke pulled it out and discovered a stash of coins, mostly pre-Storm pennies, but a few Somerset silver dollars as well. Enough to buy passage to Somerset if rationed carefully, she hoped. She repacked the clothes and food, hiding the money down deep. She drew the pack closed and stood, slinging the pack onto her shoulder. The torch she stuck in her pocket, for use when its light would draw less attention.

She crept out of the grove and looked up at the stars. There was Adam, trapped in the heavens for questioning God's Will, above the green and blue rippling of the aurora. And directly beneath him lay the way to the village of Haven Market. Brooke found the path from the grove and started walking into the night.

\*PART 2\*

Adam was high in the sky when Brooke finally spied the yellow oil lantern hanging over the gate of Haven Market, illuminating the closed chain-link gate and the stone wall to either side. She stepped into the circle lit by the lantern with a sigh of relief.

Her relief shattered with a flash of fear as a harsh beam of light stabbed out from the stone gatehouse, blinding her. “Stop right there,” commanded a gravelly male voice.

Brooke froze in her tracks, her hands well away from her sides. She abruptly realized that she had only come to Haven Market before in the daytime, and most of the local settlements frowned on travellers approaching their gates after dark. “I’m just looking for work. Not trouble.”

“Work, is it?” The voice took on a leering amusement, and Brooke’s stomach sank down to level of her knees. “I got a job for you right -” The voice chopped off, and Brooke debated turning around and waiting for dawn in the wilderness.

“Are you Brooke Criddle?” a female voice asked out of the light, and Brooke almost bolted, thinking her father had alerted the village to her disappearance with some tale, and she was about to be arrested. She glanced over her shoulder, gauged the distance to the relative safety of the darkness, and knew it was impossible to run.

*Well, that was nice while it lasted,* she thought, and nodded.

“All right, we’re opening the gate. Come on in,” the female voice said again, and Brooke cocked her head to the side - she *knew* that voice, but she couldn’t place it. With the clanking of some mechanism in the gatehouse, the gate rolled open a few feet, and Brooke slowly walked forward into the village.

Haven Market was the biggest place Brooke had ever been, consisting of a main square with a dozen stone buildings that were often both dwelling and shop, serving many of the farmholds of the Haven Valley. There was a blacksmith and mechanic, a herbalist, and several merchants who represented

the great Companies, buying farmers' produce and selling machines and chemicals from far-away Texan and Sarsfield.

Waiting just inside the gate was a tall woman in a long gray coat, leaning against the inside of the stone wall with her blond braid trailing down her chest. "Brooke Criddle, as I live and breathe!"

Now that she could see the source of the voice, she found she could indeed recognize the woman, and her jaw dropped in surprise. "Mellie? Mellie Sines?" She asked, feeling like even more of a fool. "Are you a guard here?"

Mellie grinned and shook her head, revealing the stock of a weapon slung over her shoulder. "Nah, I'm just passing through. What are you doing here? Did your father throw you out?" She asked quietly, her eyes on Brooke's cheek and her hand drifting up to the weapon.

"No!" Brooke held up her hands to forestall any attempt of Mellie's to 'avenge' her. Melinda Sines had been her protector and friend on her father's farmhold for years, before she'd run off to Somerset a year before - or to Hell, to hear her father and Father Terrethel tell the tale. "I ran off. Father was gonna marry me off to Peter Hanlin." She declined to mention the aid of her brother, since she didn't quite know how to feel about Edward.

Mellie nodded. "Good for you! I guess you'll need a job now?"

Brooke shrugged uncomfortably. "Yeah, I guess. I didn't, you know, think that far ahead."

Mellie laughed and shrugged. "Why am I not surprised? C'mon, my patrol's got rooms at the inn."

Brooke followed her across Haven Market's main square toward the lit-up inn. "Patrol. So... you're with the Somerset Militia?" she asked.

"No, I'm with the Fifth Legion," Sines said, pulling aside her coat to reveal a blue cloth badge cut in the shape of a V on her shirt.

Brooke didn't recognize the name or badge, but she knew roughly what they were: one of the scores of gangs and militias around Evan that hunted pirates and each other out in the wasteland. The gangs were Brooke's *last* choice to look for employment after the Trade Companies, but if Mellie had joined this Fifth Legion, she wouldn't be totally alone.

“Um... are they, uh, looking for recruits?” Brooke asked.

“Not on this run,” Mellie said, and Brooke’s heart sank. “But... I want to run something past our leader. I might be able to get you a job.”

“Doing what?” Brooke had been trained in all the tasks of a farmwife - planting and harvesting, shepherding and shearing, canning and cooking, spinning and sewing, weaving and making accounts - but she couldn’t see how a gang or a militia could use any of that.

Mellie paused with her hand on the inn’s door. “You’ll see. Just keep quiet and let me do the talking.” Then she pushed open the door, spilling light and sound out into the square.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Brooke followed her into the inn.

The inn’s main chamber was half-full with local farmers and merchants, none of whom looked up at the door. The only notice the two attracted was in one gloomy corner, where two men and three women were watching them with some interest. All wore either long coats or tight-fitting leathers, and all kept guns close to hand. Any one of them was more intimidating than the hardest of her father’s guards, but the woman at the head of the table was the scariest of them all. She was small and slight, wearing brown leathers and a metal Fifth Legion badge on her shoulder. Her dyed-blue hair was cut in a practical bob, and her hard blue eyes were intent on Brooke. “Who’s your friend, Sines?” She asked in a voice ravaged by smoke and dust.

“This is Brooke,” Mellie said, presenting Brooke with a flourish and bouncing on her heels. *She’s nervous*, thought Brooke. “She’s an old friend, and she just ran away from home tonight. I was thinking, since Roy’s laid up,” Mellie gestured at one man who was sitting hunched over his stomach, pale with pain, “maybe we could give her a job?”

The woman at the head of the table examined Brooke. “Have you ever been in a car battle, Brooke?”

Brooke straightened her back and tried to look Qualified, even as the smell of blood and a ripping-canvas snarl assaulted her from her memories. “No, I haven’t. Anytime raiders came close to our hold, we all stayed inside. M-my father didn’t approve of women handling guns.”

“Not quite,” Mellie interjected. “Her hold had a modified Five-Five as a hand-powered nutcracker. And she handled it a lot.”

Brooke suppressed her grimace. Cracking nuts with her father’s nutcracker had been one of her least favorite tasks back on the farmhold. But she hadn’t considered that the complicated and easily jammed machine had been made *from* anything else, it simply *was*, as much as the hills of the earth or the aurora of the sky.

But the blue-haired woman merely nodded and looked Brooke straight in the eye. “Sines thinks you can do what we do. She wants me to leave a sick gunner here to recuperate,” She gestured at the sick man, “and put you in his seat for the rest of our patrol. The rest of a sixty-mile combat patrol out into the desert. Three two-man cars, running out in the desert, looking for trouble, and we’ll be twenty miles from the nearest help. We’ll be looking for people who are going to try to kill us, and we’re going to try to kill them first.”

She paused a moment to let Brooke appreciate her sincerity, then continued, in the same low, hard, deathly earnest voice. “Now, that means every single one of us has to pull their weight. I can’t bring a total novice, because if you freeze up at the wrong moment, we *all* die. Alright?”

It was no more than Brooke expected, and she nodded in understanding, but Mellie broke in, “She won’t freeze, boss. Couple years ago, a big cat took down one of her father’s guards, she grabbed his gun and killed it. She won’t freeze up, I think.”

Brooke froze, remembering the blood and the panther’s snarling - all she could remember from that afternoon. And the beating her father had given her for daring to touch a weapon, to take the role appointed for men. The leader examined her closely, though what she was looking for Brooke couldn’t say. “Sines, would you risk your neck on that assessment? Or do you have an... ulterior motive?”

“Orth.” Mellie's voice went low and dangerous, and one hand drifted to her shoulder, then she shook herself and the hand dropped back to her side. “It’s more complicated than... that. And yes, I’d risk my neck on her. Put her in my car.”



“Well, Brooke, I’ll take a chance on you. Sines, she can sleep with you.” The leader shrugged, though her voice went edged on the last few words. Then she held out her hand. “Welcome to the Fifth Legion. I’m Chasity Orth, Legion Commander.”

Brooke took her hand. “Thank you, ma’am. I won’t let you down,” she said, and hoped it was true.

Orth just nodded and smiled. “Now you get some sleep, *ladies*.” she put an odd emphasis on the final word and pointed toward the inn’s narrow stairway. “We’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

###

In the narrow little sleeping cubicle that Mellie had rented, after the lights were turned out, Brooke finally asked a question that had been bugging her. “Mellie, what did Commander Orth mean when she asked you about ulterior motives?”

Silence reigned for a long moment, and Brooke wondered if Mellie had gone to sleep. Then there was a rustling from the other side of the room, barely an arm’s length away. “I’ll tell you another time, Brooke,” Mellie said in an odd low, sad tone.

### \*PART 3\*

The next morning, Mellie shook Brooke awake into the gray light of dawn, and the two dressed and shared a breakfast of Brooke's provisions. Over the smoked mutton and dried fruit, Mellie said, "I was hoping to come up to your farmhold. If this patrol went well enough, then I could've gotten you recruited the normal way."

Brooke swallowed a slice of dried apricot and asked, "What's the normal way?"

"You go into Somerset, and you tell the people at the Training Facility that you're looking for work, and they'll find a gang that's looking for your skills. Oh! I have something for you!" Mellie dug into her packs on the floor and pulled out a weapon in a brown leather shoulder holster just like the one Mellie wore. Mellie pulled the weapon out of the holster to reveal a double-barrelled shotgun as long as Brooke's forearm.

Brooke gasped as her eyes took in the delicate brass wire inlay that wound in barbed patterns over the weapon's stock and lock. They marked the weapon as either an artifact of the world before the Solar Storm, or the work of a master craftsman. Either way, it was far better than Brooke could see a common gangster affording. "Mellie, how did you *afford* this?"

Mellie grinned like an urchin and slid the weapon back into its holster, offering the whole thing to Brooke, who took it with shaking hands. "I didn't have to. It was my share of a pirate group we took out a couple weeks ago. I got a good gun already," one hand went to pat the stock at her shoulder, "and I figured I could break you out of Criddle Hold on this patrol. So I brought Daisy for you."

"Daisy?" Brooke asked, then turned the gun over to reveal the name "Daisy" on the bottom of the stock, inlaid in the same delicate brass wire. "Thank you, Mellie. How do I use it?"

Mellie gently took the gun from her, and showed her the safety, and how to load, cock, and fire Daisy. A pouch on the strap of the holster proved to

contain an even dozen shells. Brooke nodded, and Mellie handed the gun back to Brooke with, "We'll practice more when we get back to Somerset."

Brooke nodded, slid Daisy back into her holster, slung the holster over her shoulder, and puzzled out the buckle and straps. When she had the holster buckled on, Mellie led her out to Haven Market's main square, where the other Fifth Legion gangers were clustered around three cars parked next to the gate.

As Commander Orth pulled the shroud off the center car, Brooke jumped at the sight of black scales and huge green eyes, before she realized that the shape was not a giant black snake, but rather a car painted to look like a giant black snake. Most of its surface had been painted with light lines like scales, and a pair of semitransparent electric-green eyes stared out from the armored windscreen. It was low-slung and deadly-looking, with a gun barrel peeking from a slit on the left side of the windscreen, and a pair of hand-wide rockets peeking from under the bumper. *Asp* was painted in green letters across the drivers' side door. The car looked like a weapon, a blade, an object for killing, and Brooke swallowed a lump in her throat. Her father's farmhold had a handful of cargo Pickups and an armed Chomper for repelling pirates and hunting, but this lithe little car was to that big, armored tank as a panther was to an ox.

Commander Orth, inspecting the car with a much more expert eye, looked up and caught her staring, and pointed at one of the longer shapes. "Don't worry, virgin, *Asp* isn't for you. That's your ride."

Brooke blushed at the faint mockery in Orth's tone as she walked over to the shrouded car. It seemed several feet longer than the commander's car, and at least a foot thinner. Mellie patted Brooke's shoulder and pulled the canvas shroud off the car that Orth had pointed to.

The revealed car was long and lean, without the broad hood or low-slung deadliness of *Asp*. It was painted black with blue flames crawling across its flanks and narrow hood. Like *Asp*, a gun peeked from the left side of its windscreen, and a pod of five smaller rockets was mounted under the front bumper. *Lioness* was painted in blue letters across the hood below the gun barrel. Brooke glanced over at the third car, on the other side of the *Asp*. It was the same as *Lioness*, but for the word *Panther* and a stylized fang in the same blue paint.

Mellie stepped to *Lioness'* drivers' side and opened the door. "Time to roll, Brooke," she said as she disappeared into the car.

Brooke nodded and hurried to open the passenger door. The interior of the car was black plastic panels and brown wool seats. A complicated array of buttons and knobs was mounted in the center console, next to a pair of headsets on hooks. The passenger seat was dominated by the big boxy gun on a swivel mount just inside the windscreen. She slid into the seat and stared at the gun. If she removed the barrel and replaced the bolt and trigger with a hand-crank, then yes, it looked like the nutcracker on her father's manor. But... not very much.

Brooke closed the door and ran a finger over the gun's leather-wrapped handgrip. It was the first time in her life she was in an armed car, and she felt herself on the edge of something... more. For the first time, Brooke began to truly believe that there might be life beyond being a farmwife. "Oh, wow."

Mellie snorted from the drivers' side as she twisted a key next to the steering wheel, and the car's engine roared into life, and then settled into a low grumble. "Yeah, she's really something, isn't she? Wait 'til we're out on the road. She ain't called a Bullet for nothing." The gate opened before them, spilling the sunrise light into the square, and *Panther* edged past them through the gate and onto the road. Mellie pulled a headset off and put it on, then leaned over and flicked a switch on the side of the gun, and pulled back the slide with a soft click. "There. Now you're armed. Point it at the bad thing and pull the trigger. Aim low, it tends to shoot high. When you run out of ammo, here's how you reload it." Mellie swung the handle of the gun toward her seat, opened the top plate of the gun, removed the belt of little golden bullets, pulled the box of ammunition off the bottom of the gun, pulled another magazine from the storage area below the dashboard, slotted it into place, fed the bullets into the top slot, closed the plate, and pulled back the slide on the gun. "There. Practice that until I tell you to stop."

Brooke nodded and began slowly unloading the gun again, while Mellie drove slowly out the gate.

\*PART 4\*

As the squadron rolled through the folded hills of the Haven Valley, *Lioness* took the lead position from *Panther*. Brooke practiced unloading and reloading the gun, and Mellie scanned the horizon, with narrow, intent eyes.

As they were passing out of the green of farms and into the golden scrub of the arid "rough country" between the Haven Valley and the desert proper. Only the hardest and best-armed herdsmen used the rough country for pasture, since pirates used it as a quick way to get from their camps in the desert into the Somerset region.

After a half-hour of patrol, Brooke could feel her hands unloading and reloading the gun without any input from her mind, her fingers moving through the motions of their own volition.

"Stop practicing, Brooke," Mellie said, and Brooke faltered in her loading and stared at the driver. Mellie shoved the other radio headset at Brooke, and Brooke put it on. "Finish that load and get ready, I think we've found us action." She pressed a stud on her steering wheel and spoke into the microphone at her chin. "Boss, contact at bearing two-eighty, twelve clicks, moving north through Sector Twelve. Bet it's a raider group."

Orth's voice issued from the headset, tinny and washed with static. "Roger that, Sines. Check it out, we'll be right behind you."

Mellie tapped at her microphone, then angled *Lioness* to the right, off the road. *Lioness'* engine rose to a dull roar, and the *Bullet* bucked and bounced over the rough earth, and orange dust clouds billowed outside the narrow slits in the *Bullet's* armor. Brooke held on tight to the gun handles, keeping her fingers well away from the trigger. Her stomach churned, and in between half-coherent prayers, she castigated herself for jumping into yet *another* dangerous situation without thinking. Compared to the unknown hazards of wasteland pirates, Peter Hanlin seemed positively benign.

"What's wrong, little thinker?" Mellie asked over the roar of the engine, and the old nickname distracted Brooke from her fear.

She finished loading the gun and swung it from side to side, testing the limits of its motion imposed by the narrow slit in the Bullet's forward armor. Her legs twitched and shook in the footwell, bumping her knee painfully against the spare magazine storage. "Peter Hanlin... doesn't seem that bad next to this."

Mellie laughed and grinned ferally. "You have a gun, which you wouldn't have if you were dealing with Peter. Relax, little thinker, it'll be all right. There aren't a lot of pirates that can catch us if we want to run."

Brooke nodded. An orange dust plume was visible against the pale sky ahead, its source obscured behind a low ridge of rock. Mellie turned *Lioness* and drove parallel to the plume's course. After a moment, the rock dwindled back into the soil, revealing three dark red vehicles running down a dirt track, shrouded in the plumes of dust from their tires. The one in front was a Pickup, and a pair of sedans followed behind: one a blocky and square Chevalier, the other a low and rounded Voyager. A square, dark gray icon was visible on each vehicle's flank.

"Ironmongers," Mellie reported over the radio. The two sedans behind the pickup began to turn for them, and Brooke's throat tightened with fear. Her hands on the gun were clammy with sweat, and she resisted the urge to wipe them on her coverall. Instead, she made sure the microphone on her headset was turned off.

"Roger that," Orth's voice came from Brooke's earpieces. "Three-Oh-One."

Mellie tapped her microphone, and *Lioness* accelerated sharply toward the road. The sedans began firing at *Lioness*, bright red rockets screaming over *Lioness'* roof. Brooke ducked reflexively. *How did I ever think this was a good idea?*

Brooke glanced out the side slit toward the sedans just in time to spot a pair of low black shapes rocket out of the dust, one long with streaks of blue, the other short with flashing green eyes. Golden tracers streamed into the Chevalier. It turned away and was quickly lost in the dust, along with *Panther*. The Voyager stayed on *Lioness*, jinking and twisting from side to side to avoid *Asp's* guns. Another rocket reached for *Lioness*, but went wide and detonated

to one side, throwing up a cloud of dust and a hail of rocks and shrapnel that pinged off *Lioness'* flank. A bright light flashed from *Asp* to the *Voyager*.

The rocket exploded with a blinding flash and a thunderous explosion, much louder than the rockets launched from the *Voyager*. The cloud of dust thrown up by the detonation obscured the *Voyager* for an instant, and Brooke wondered if it had been destroyed. Surely nothing could absorb that fury and keep driving. But an instant later, the *Voyager* drove out of the cloud, trailing thin streamers of smoke from its dented flank, and veered into a ditch. *Asp* followed the sedan, and soon, both were gone from Brooke's vision.

A hand landed on Brooke's shoulder, and she glanced at Mellie, who pointed forward. Brooke twisted and faced forward, her face flushing painfully with embarrassment. But Mellie was grinning at her as she yelled, "Little thinker, here's our job. Chase down that truck," she pointed at the Pickup that was running down the track ahead of them, some hundred meters distant. Despite the rough road, *Lioness* kept pace with no difficulty. Mellie went on, "And get it to surrender without doing too much damage to it. Shoot to scare, not to kill, got it?"

Brooke didn't, but she nodded anyway. Mellie pressed the accelerator harder, and *Lioness* sang louder and surged forward, closing on the Pickup.

Brooke's throat closed tighter and tighter as fear and excitement chased each other in a whirling blaze behind her eyeballs. Her hands fidgeted on the sweat-slick grips as she waited for the Pickup to cross her sights.

"Fire!" Mellie shouted at her. Brooke jumped, and her finger reflexively tightened on the trigger.

The trigger resisted her finger only a little before it gave way. The Five-Five chattered and shook in her hands, like an unhappy live thing trying to escape, and the smell of gunsmoke filled her nose. Hot brass casings streamed from the slot in the side, to clatter into a metal container under the gun.

Brooke couldn't tell if she hit the truck or not, but it began swerving from side to side, then turned to expose its left flank. Something on its door flashed and spat glowing tracers back at *Lioness*. One bullet deflected off the windscreen with a loud *ping!* Brooke ducked down into her seat, gritted her teeth, and pulled the trigger again.

The gun bucked and chattered again, but Brooke was ready for it, trying to aim for the source of the Pickup's return fire. As she twisted the gun to bring her sights and her fire onto the Pickup's flank, Brooke felt an odd calm come over her. She didn't care that she was being shot at, or that she didn't *really* know how to operate the gun in front of her, or Orth's dire warnings. She felt as if she was floating a finger's breadth away from the rest of the world, except for her target and the roaring gun in her hands.

The Pickup, stung by her fire, tried to twist away, but Mellie drove *Lioness* forward and twisted the wheel, throwing the Bullet into a power slide, keeping *Lioness'* nose - and her teeth - pointing into the Pickup's flank. Brooke raked the Pickup with her fire, revelling in the sparks and shards of armor flying from her bullets' impact sites.

A puff of white smoke coughed from the Pickup's hood, and the machine gun fire stopped coming back at *Lioness*. An empty hand appeared in the truck's window and waved frantically, and the Pickup slowed to a halt. Brooke's hands flew off the gun's handles as if the gun had turned into a live serpent.

She felt sick in the pit of her stomach. She'd been shooting bullets at *people*. *This was more fun when there weren't other people in this.*

Mellie's hand landed on her shoulder, and Brooke jumped in her seat and glanced at her driver. Mellie grinned at her and coasted *Lioness* to a stop, about ten meters from the Pickup. "Boss, Pickup has surrendered. Orders?"

"Hold on. We'll be right there." Orth's voice sounded oddly washed-out in Brooke's headset.

Brooke heard the rumble of engines from behind her, and twisted in her seat to look out the Bullet's rear slit. Coming down the road toward them was an odd parade: The two Ironmongers sedans, both bearing jagged tears and bullet holes, drove slowly in front of the two other Legion cars. Behind the parade came four figures in gray clothing: two walking with guns over their shoulders, and the third supporting the fourth. "Who are they?"

"Ironmongers." Brooke started in surprise, and Mellie grinned. "If they surrender, we let them live, and they return the favor if we're in a fight we can't win."



Brooke nodded, and Orth's voice came from her headset again. "All right, looting time. *Panther's* on guard duty."

Mellie grabbed her gun from the footwell and opened her door. "Come on, Brooke. Follow my lead."

Brooke grabbed Daisy, slung the holster onto her shoulder, then opened the breach. Two brass shells winked back at her, and she opened her door and stepped out onto the dust.

The light breeze was a relief after the stuffy confines of the Bullet. As she walked in Mellie's wake toward the battered Pickup, Brooke hefted Daisy and tried to look as tough as Mellie.

The Pickup's doors opened and two men stepped out with raised hands. Each had a rifle slung over his shoulder, and one had a forearm covered with red-soaked strips of cloth. But the other one caught Brooke's attention.

Even in defeat, with his buff coat torn in several places, he seemed as poised as the rich merchants' agents who came to deal with her father. Under slicked-back dark hair, his dark eyes assessed Mellie and her, and Brooke laid a finger across Daisy's triggers.

The man glanced down at Daisy in Brooke's arms, and stopped dead. "Where did you get that, girl?" He asked.

Brooke snapped the gun up to her shoulder, and her finger tensed on the triggers. The Ironmonger didn't flinch, but slung his rifle onto his shoulder and spread his hands wide. "May I inspect your weapon? Unloaded, of course."

Brooke glanced aside at Mellie, who raised her rifle to her shoulder. From behind them, Orth's voice asked, "What's going on, ladies?"

Mellie, without turning around, said, "He wanted to see Brooke's weapon."

"Unloaded, of course," interjected the Ironmonger, spreading his hands a little wider.

Orth regarded the Ironmonger with narrowed eyes, then unslung her own rifle. "If it's unloaded, I don't see how it can hurt. One wrong move,

Monger, and I'll perforate you. Understand?" The Ironmonger nodded, and Orth waved at Brooke. "Unload your gun and hand it to him, Criddle."

Brooke broke open Daisy's breech and tapped the shells into her palm, then closed Daisy and handed the gun barrel-first to the Ironmonger. The man took the gun carefully and turned it over in his hands, examining every inch of the stock. After a minute, he nodded and handed it back to Brooke, butt first. "Thank you, stranger. That weapon belonged to a friend of mine. Did he die well?"

The question caught Brooke off guard, and she fumbled while reloading Daisy, and dropped one of the plastic shells on the ground. She bent to retrieve it and asked, "W-what?" She hadn't thought of the gun as being owned by somebody else before her.

Brooke retrieved the shell, slid it into Daisy, and closed the breech. The Ironmonger watched her with his head cocked to one side, an odd expression on his face. "What did you mean, s-" She chopped off the 'sir' before it could pass her lips. Even though this man was an enemy, his gravity and authority seemed to deserve a 'sir.'

"That weapon," the man pointed to the gun in Brooke's hands, "belonged to a very close friend of mine. He would not have let go of it if he were alive, therefore he is dead. Did he die well?"

Brooke shut her mouth and glanced aside at Mellie, who shrugged. "I got it as part of the loot from hitting an Ironmongers convoy in the Old City, and gave it to her. I didn't check on where it came from. There were... a lot of bodies in that one."

"I see. Thank you." The man turned and walked toward his gangmates. The six of them disappeared down the road.

"What the hell?" Mellie asked when the Ironmongers were out of sight.

Orth shrugged. "Don't know. You two check out the Pickup. We've wasted enough time already."

Mellie saluted and led Brooke toward the Pickup. The truck's bed was covered by a metal plate, with hinges just behind the cab and a lock at the

rear. Mellie pulled at the locking chain, then held her rifle out toward Brooke. "Lemme show you something. Gimme your gun."

Brooke took Mellie's rifle by the stock and handed Daisy over. Mellie cocked one of Daisy's hammers and laid the barrel next to the chain. "Fire in the hole!" She called, and fired.

The shotgun spoke with a roar all out of proportion to its size, and the lock dropped to the sand. Mellie handed Daisy back to Brooke and pushed the metal plate up.

The truck's bed was filled with a dozen large metal cubes with carrying handles and small round screw-off tops. "Not water..." Mellie leaned into the bed and opened one lid. The distinctive odor of gasoline reached Brooke's nostrils. Mellie grinned and screwed the lid back onto its container. "Good job, girl, you just made us a lot of cash."

## \*PART 5\*

Brooke was assigned to drive the Pickup and its load of fuel back to Somerset. Mellie gave her a quick driving lesson in the cramped, stifling cab, ending with "just stay down, keep your radio on, and don't shoot at anything!"

The squadron drove back toward Somerset with the three captured Ironmongers vehicles in the center of the formation, the Bullets out front, and *Asp* riding just behind. Brooke followed the other drivers' conversation, but she couldn't bring herself to press the button to join in. Twice their convoy was queried by other gangs, who broke off when the Legion's identity was established.

After several hours of driving, the road bent and abruptly Somerset was in front of them, a tall gray fence stretching across the desert, broken only by a single gate on the road. The Bullets slowed for the gate, and Brooke pressed her foot on the Pickup's brake, coming to a stop just behind *Panther*. After a moment conferring with the Somerset Militia, the Bullets started moving into the town proper. Brooke paused to let the two captured sedans precede her into the gate, then goosed her throttle to follow them.

Along the road just inside the gate were a row of metal shacks and a convoy of vehicles. Four enormous lorries huddled just off the road, their cargo doors open and a parade of parcels being stacked inside. They were surrounded by a dozen wide, square Buzzers, sheepdogs guarding their flock. Like sheepdogs, the Buzzers had teeth - each carried a pair of cannons with barrels the size of Brooke's hand with fingers outstretched. A pair of long, low Phoenixes lounged out in front, like her father's hunting hawks waiting on the glove. All the vehicles were painted in the white and yellow of the Merchants of Venice trader gang. A convoy, Brooke realized, taking produce from Somerset - some of it perhaps from Criddle Hold - and trading it for fuel, weapons, and chemicals in far-off Texan and Sarsfield. Brooke almost felt sorry for any bandit that attempted to tackle that convoy.

Beyond the waiting convoy was a second gate, manned by brown-uniformed guards on foot, carrying arm-length stubby tubes over their

shoulders. A gun barrel in the low concrete bunker next to the gate tracked to point at Brooke's truck, and her fingers tightened impotently on the steering wheel.

One of the guards walked up to *Panther's* driver side window and held out his hand. Through the *Bullet's* rear slits, Brooke could see Mellie gesturing, pointing back at the rest of the squadron. The guard walked back to *Asp*, tube-weapon held loosely at his side and an expression of bored indifference on his face. When he reached *Asp*, he leaned down to the window and accepted a small cloth bag, then waved to his fellows at the inner gate. The red-painted wooden bar across the gate swung up, and one of the guards waved the Legion squadron into the town.

Brooke followed the rest of the squadron through the streets of Somerset, too focused on controlling the Pickup to look around, but when the squadron stopped to let a crowd of people through an intersection, she allowed herself to peer around at the town.

Somerset was much, much bigger than she'd ever imagined, a dozen times the size of Haven Market at least, and she had the feeling that she hadn't seen it all. A few black pre-Storm buildings loomed over the gray concrete and brown metal of the buildings that had been put up since. Most of the buildings she could see were arranged in walled compounds, with hard-eyed armed guards at the gates and prowling along the walls.

And then there were the people - the swarming, teeming crowds of people. Each compound they passed seemed to hold more people than Criddle Hold, and they were all over the streets: craftsmen bearing tools and messengers bearing parcels, children playing with toys of scrap metal and plastic, frantic mothers chasing after them, rich merchants and their bodyguards, and of course, the gangers.

The gangers made up at least half of the people on the streets. Men and women both, they were marked from the other people around them by their leather and metal armor and the weapons on their shoulders, and the colorful badges on their shoulders and chests. Brooke saw a group of women in odd robes, and couldn't help herself from staring: black leather covered them up to their necks, accompanied by white coifs and wimples. They looked like the images of holy women in Father Terrethel's chapel, except for the battle-

scarred leather of their clothes and the rifles slung over each woman's shoulder. Unlike the images in the chapel, not one woman looked meek or submissive to her place in God's Plan. They smiled and waved at the Fifth Legion vehicles, and Brooke waved back timidly.

The Bullets turned down a street between two compounds, and then turned into an open compound gate. Next to the gate, Brooke could see a blue banner had been hung on the wall, displaying a pair of silver swords, crossed at their points to form a V. "FIFTH LEGION" had been painted on the wall next to the banner in blue paint.

When Brooke got the Pickup into the compound, she saw that the two Bullets had pulled forward into a garage attached to a large building, while the two Ironmongers sedans had been parked off to one side of the yard that took up almost half of the compound's space. Figures with blue badges were coming out of the row of buildings along the other side of the yard, and Brooke abruptly flushed as they seemed to all be looking at her.

A man in a long black coat pointed at Brooke, then at the captured Ironmongers vehicles. Brooke steered the truck into the space next to the sedans, then stood on the brake and stared at the controls. *Let's see. Mellie said... this lever to park? It has a 'P' right there, so I move it... that way.* Brooke moved the lever, then slowly pulled her foot off the brake. The truck lurched forward, then stopped, not before Brooke cried out in surprise. She pressed her eyes shut, her face going hot with embarrassment. When she opened her eyes, she saw the bustle of gangers around the compound, all going about their tasks without taking any notice of her mistake.

She shook herself, opened the truck's door, and stepped out onto the cracked concrete. Her muscles protested moving after so long in the uncomfortable plastic seat, and she rolled her shoulders and shook her legs in imitation of a few of the other crew. Something went *pop* in her shoulder, and abruptly she felt a wave of relief wash through her muscles.

Brooke looked around for Mellie, and spotted her friend coming out of the building, carrying Brooke's pack over one shoulder. She pointed at the pickup, and a pair of gangers moved past her, opened the pickup's bed cover, and started carrying the fuel cans toward the garage. Brooke started to grab a can, but Mellie put a gentle hand on her wrist and pulled her toward the

building. "Come on, Orth told me you have to meet with Joel, and get the paperwork done."

"Who's Joel?" Brooke pulled her hand free from Mellie's as they entered the building. The walls were made of some rough gray substance, with a texture like sandpaper. An empty antechamber led to a narrow corridor lined with doorways, each with a ragged cloth curtain drawn over it. Square plastic signs hung on the wall next to each curtain. In passing, Brooke saw "SINES" and another name painted on one sign in crude blue letters.

Mellie led Brooke to the end of the corridor and a doorway labelled "OFFICE," which had an actual wooden door opening out into the hallway. Inside, a man in a long green coat sat behind a desk cluttered with papers in metal binders. The wall behind him was covered with shelves, all piled high with more binders, each with a neatly printed label on its spine. A map of Evan dominated another wall, with labelled pins sticking out of every town in northern Evan, and a few on the highlighted roads between towns.

The man looked up at Brooke's entry, closed the cover of the binder on his desk, and gestured to the metal chair opposite his desk. "So you're Brooke Criddle? Sit down, please. I'm Joel Quick, the Legion's second-in-command."

Brooke sat in the chair and studied the Legion ganger. He had the same weathered complexion as any other person who spent much time in the wastes. A network of fine white scars running between his jawline and his lips stood out against his dark skin. After a moment, he smiled at her, revealing a mouth full of shiny metal teeth. "Sines, Strang came into town this morning with a new Vampire. Can you take it down to Jake's and get it painted and adjusted?"

Mellie nodded, set Brooke's pack on the floor next to her, and vanished out the door. The door *thunked* closed behind her, and Brooke was suddenly aware of being alone with the strange man. Back home, she would *never* have been left with a man without a relative as a chaperone. Quick studied Brooke for a long moment. "So you're Brooke Criddle. Commander Orth said good things about you. Why did you leave your farmhold?"

"Ah, sir, it wasn't my farmhold, it was my father's. And he was going to marry me off to the heir of Hanlin Hold."

"Peter Hanlin?" Quick's eyebrows shot up.

Brooke froze, and her stomach dropped to her knees. The Hanlin clan would be as eager to drag her back to the Haven Valley as her father, since her disappearance would make their precious Peter a laughingstock up and down the Valley. And the Hanlins were notoriously touchy about their honor. She looked at her knees to hide the fear in her eyes. "Yes, sir. You know him?"

Quick's coat rustled. "Never met him directly, but his brother Roger is one of our gunners. Recruited him here in Somerset. And if you're over seventeen, the Somerset Militia will never let you be taken away against your will." Brooke looked up at him sharply, and the ganger's face creased in a savage steel grin. His shining teeth held not a trace of humor or pity. "And if they do take you, we'll come and get you back. Watch how those stone walls hold up to a rocket volley."

Brooke stared at Quick with wide eyes and wondered if he was joking. With the grin and the teeth and the scars, the ganger looked more ruthless and pitiless than the most terrible guards in the Haven Valley. "Um... thank you, sir."

Quick's lips closed over his metal teeth, and his smile took on much more humor and cheer. "Anything for one of ours. Do you still want to sign on with the Legion?"

All told, it didn't take more than a second for Brooke to abandon her past and grasp onto her future. "Yes, sir."

Quick slid a paper across the desk to her and handed her a pen. Brooke read through the contract, identical to the contracts between her father and his guards, and nearly the same wages. Her eyes widened, and Brooke filled in her name on the first line, and signed on the last. Swiftly, before the Legioner could change his mind.

"Welcome to the Legion, Brooke," Quick took back the contract and put it into the of his desk drawers. He shook her hand briefly, as if he were her equal, and pointed out his door. "Second door on your left is your room, why don't you get some sleep?"



Brooke noticed that she was exhausted, and pushed herself up out of the chair. "Thank you, sir." She picked up her pack and stumbled to the door, suppressing her yawns.

*\*PART 6\**

*The panther snarled at her, a deep growl like tearing canvas. Its eyes flashed blue in the forest's late-afternoon gloom over a muzzle splashed red with blood. It shifted and dug its claws into the bleeding form at its feet, the whimpering mass that had been Robert, one of her father's guards. The bitter iron scent of blood stung her nostrils, and she slowly bent to pick up the gun which had landed at her feet when the panther had dropped out of the tree onto the guard's shoulder. She hefted the revolver and awkwardly pushed her finger into the trigger guard. Abruptly, the gun wasn't a revolver anymore, it was a double-barrelled shotgun with silver filigree inlaid on the barrel. She brought the gun up to her shoulder, pointed the barrels at the panther's chest, pulled back the hammers with her thumb, and yanked the trigger.*

*Nothing happened. The panther bent over Robert and tore off a strip of flesh off with its jaws. A hissing from her gun drew Brooke's eyes.*

*The stock of the shotgun had turned into a brown-and-silver snake with flat black eyes, coiling around her forearm. It eyed her, flicked its black tongue at her elbow, and then lunged, its jaws open wide enough to swallow the world.*

Brooke snapped upright on the bed, a scream dying to a moan as it passed her lips. She rubbed sleep from her eyes, then looked up at the bright morning light streaming through the room's clerestory window. *That was a dream. A dream, Brooke. Calm down.*

She jumped at a soft growl, before realizing that it had come from her stomach. She chuckled, swung her legs off the side of the bed, and rummaged in her bag for her packet of provisions. The last of the mutton and fruit didn't fill her, but it quieted the unhappy little growling sounds from her midsection.

When the food was gone, Brooke put her pack into the metal box at the foot of the bed, pulled Daisy's holster onto her shoulder, and stuck her head out into the hallway. It was empty and deserted, curtains drawn shut over every doorway. She glanced the other way and noticed that "CRIDDLE" had been freshly painted on the plaque next to her door. Down past the end of the hallway she could hear voices, the words rendered faint by distance.

Brooke walked down the hallway, trying not to feel like an intruder in this new place. She suddenly felt a wave of homesickness for the stone walls of Criddle Hold. *You miss the walls, but do you miss the work? Do you miss not being good enough every second of every day?*

She quashed the mental voice. She'd made her decision, and now she had to live through it. She'd survive the gang the same way she'd survived the Hold after Mellie had left. *And, she thought with a reassuring touch to Daisy's stock, I can run away again if I have to.*

The thought wasn't entirely comforting, but it helped.

###

She followed the echoes of voices to a small room with a window looking out onto the compound's yard. Two men sat at a large round table with steaming cups in their hands. One was one of the men from the desert patrol, a desert-tanned man with a shaved head and a narrow face. The other was younger, unscarred, with a thatch of ragged blond hair and a beak of a nose. He looked up at Brooke's entry, and his face creased in a smile. "Brooke! Mellie told me you came in yesterday. How are you?"

Brooke hadn't seen Roger Hanlin in almost a year. Each Hold in the Haven Valley kept itself to itself, except for the yearly Harvest Festivals outside Haven Market. He still had the Hanlin nose, though his tan seemed darker than before.

The other man waved her to an empty chair. "Good morning, Criddle. Hungry?"

Brooke nodded. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't catch your name?"

The man laughed aloud. "I'm a 'sir' now! You farm kids are so polite. I'm Lonnie Deweese, but you can call me Devil."

"Yes... Devil." Brooke sat in the chair and looked around the room. "Do you know where I can get some food?"

"Strang's out getting breakfast. There'll be plenty for all of us," Roger put in.

"Oh, thanks..." Brooke cast around for a topic of conversation. "Um... what do I do now?"

"Training." Roger shoved his chair back from the table and put his boots up on the table. "You'll be over at the Training Center. Sounds like you'd make a good gunner, but they'll figure out what you're good at, and give you all the basics you need."

"So what do you do?"

"I'm a gunner too." Roger grinned and dug at his teeth with a metal toothpick. "Trying to work my way up to driving. The Legion takes drivers *seriously*."

"If you look at the kind of cars we run, it makes sense," interjected Dewese. "Mostly fast muscle cars, heavy on engine and light on killware. You need really good drivers for that. We don't have a lot of sedans or SUVs. Most of our drivers start off in our merchant line, running food down to Texan, through the Badlands, then fuel and cars back. With Badlands pirates shooting at you, you either get good at going fast or die trying." He snickered evilly. "I got good. Others got eaten."

"What about Mellie? Did she go down to Badlands?" Brooke asked. The Badlands were a distant, evil place, cursed by the Evil One, populated by pirates and mutants and demons. The idea of kind Mellie driving through the Badlands twisted Brooke's stomach.

"Yeah, she did." Lonnie laughed. "Not for long. She got good *fast*. Then again, she had reason to come back quick." He laughed again and trailed off into chuckles as he stared at the ceiling.

Brooke blinked, feeling the conversation shift under her. Combined with Commander Orth's veiled hints at Mellie, she had the feeling that the Mellie out here, the one who carried a rifle and drove a car, and hunted pirates in the wasteland, was entirely different from the Mellie she'd known at Criddle Hold, who'd herded goats and shelled nuts with her. "Sir... what do you mean by that?"

The two men looked at each other, then Dewese waved at Roger. "You're the farmboy, Hanlin, you get to explain it."

Roger grimaced at Deweese, then dropped his feet off the table and turned to face Brooke. "You know that..." His hands waved and spun, and he seemed to search for words, "There are women who take women as lovers. You remember Father Terrethel preaching against them."

Brooke nodded, not seeing Roger's point. Then understanding dawned, and all Orth's strange comments in the Haven Market inn snapped into focus. "*Mellie?* And Orth thought... *Mellie and me?*" She heard her voice going shrill with shock, and clamped her jaw shut.

Deweese chuckled. "Not quite. And we know you and Mellie aren't involved, Mellie's lover would kill her. And you."

Roger explained, "She has a lover in the Gray Riders, a local bounty-hunter gang. Lorna. The Gray Riders don't allow that sort of thing, so they keep it a secret. Mellie hasn't told the rest of us about Lorna, so we pretend that we don't know, 'till she decides to tell us."

Brooke felt her eyes crossing at the layers of deception. "So... you all know Mellie has a... a woman-friend... and you all pretend that you don't know, while she thinks that she's concealing her... lover... from you all?"

"Yup." Roger nodded. "You get used to it after a bit."

Brooke's response was interrupted by the creak of the door, and she glanced up in alarm. A figure stood silhouetted in the doorway, half-hidden behind a large canvas bag. He took two steps into the room and set the bag onto the table, revealing a face out of a nightmare.

Yellow-orange scales covered a face dominated by two fist-sized red-orange eyes with slit pupils, over a puckered red mouth. Finger-sized dark brown projections ran in rows across his skull and down his neck. The thick-fingered hands protruding from the sleeves of the dark blue coat were covered in the same yellow scales, and tipped with sharp black claws.

Adrenaline surged through her veins like bullets through a barrel. Brooke shrieked, kicked away from the table, and pulled Daisy. Her shaking fingers found the triggers and took first pressure.

Roger stepped between her and the mutant, whose hand was at his belt. "Hold on, Brooke, he's a friend!"

"A friend?" Brooke asked, her heart pounding in her ears. "He's a... a mutant!"

The mutant's shoulders sagged, and it gave an odd, low whistling sound. After a moment, Brooke realized that it had sighed. "So you're the new girl. Put the gun away, please."

Brooke looked from the mutant to Roger and back. Slowly, she slid Daisy back into her holster and pushed herself upright. As she gained her feet, she saw the Fifth Legion badge pinned to the mutant's coat. "You're - with the Legion?"

The mutant nodded and blinked, translucent yellow eyelids sliding over inhuman eyes. One of its hands dipped into the canvas bag and emerged with a paper parcel, which it held out to Brooke. "Elisha Strang, Legion Mercantile Department. Want a burto?"

Brooke hesitated, then took the parcel. "Brooke Criddle. I'm... sorry. You startled me." Her hands started unwrapping the burto, and she looked down at it, so as not to stare at the mutant.

"I do that a lot. I'm such a beautiful man that people can't help but feel threatened." Strang ran a hand over its - *his*, Brooke corrected herself sharply - scalp-horns, then reached into the sack for another burto.

Brooke carefully sat down as the other two men took burtos from the sack, then bit into hers. Flatbread wrapped around a filling of meat and vegetable paste, burtos were common workaday food throughout the North. She'd made more than a few for her fathers' farmhands. She chewed and swallowed, then asked, "Where did you get this? This food?"

"There's cookshops all around," Strang shrugged. "So, Brooke, are you from Criddle Hold in the Haven Valley?"

Brooke nodded. "I am. Have you ever been there?"

Strang shook his head. "No, that region isn't healthy for someone who looks like me. But I know where it is. Your pecans and wool fetch a good price down south."

Brooke didn't know what to say to that, so she applied herself to her burto. The men made small talk between bites, all about people she didn't know.

When she finished her meal, she balled up the paper wrapper and tossed it into the sack, as she'd seen Roger do. "So... um... training?"

"Sure." Roger pushed back from the table and stood up. "Let's head over there now."

Brooke stood and followed him out of the room. Once in the courtyard, in the long shadows cast by the compound walls, she said, "I can't believe... that..." She gestured back at the door.

"Elisha scares almost everyone when they first meet him, but he's loyal as hell to Orth. Orth and Quick apparently picked him up on some mission down in the Badlands, and they love him for scouting jobs. They've had him escorting fuel and cars down from Gateway to here, which means they trust him. Giving Strang trouble is a good way to end up in both their Bad Books."

Brooke nodded. When she had pictured being in a gang in her head, it hadn't included eating with mutants. Mutants, the sinners who wore God's punishment on their flesh, the heathens that were fit only to be cast into the torments of the Evil One. Brooke could hear, in her mind, Father Terrethel's angry sermons about purging the mutant with fire and the sword. *But I'm supposed to be past that now. Right?*

She stopped and watched as Roger worked the winch of the compound gate, opening a man-wide path onto the streets of Somerset. As she walked out onto the street, people walked past without even looking at her, or only giving her the single glance required to identify her as a ganger. *If I'm not past where I was, then where am I?*

## Brooke's Tale Arc 2: Too Fast to Burn

\*PART 7\*

"Now!" The referee called, and a dozen white paper balloons sailed into the air, easily visible against the blue sky and green aurora.

Brooke tracked her assigned target, fourth from the left in the row, and squeezed her trigger. The Rocket Launcher hissed and sputtered against her chest, and a phalanx of red rockets streaked toward the tumbling targets. Most of the rockets impacted the balloons and blew them out of the air in white flashes, but Brooke's rocket flew under her target and exploded as its time-fuse ran out at the edge of the Firing Range. She cursed under her breath and rotated the launcher's cylinder to bring the next rocket to the trigger mechanism, but her target hit the strands of razor wire overhead and burst, sending shreds of white paper to the soft sand that covered most of the Firing Range.

"You're not leading enough," said a voice from behind her. Brooke glanced over her shoulder to see Instructor MacGregor step down from the observers' deck onto the firing platform. She limped to a stop next to Brooke and tapped the hook on her right arm against the rocket launcher's cylinder. "Criddle, you're still shooting like it's a machine gun. Rockets don't go near as fast. When you're leading the target, try doubling the lead."

"Yes, ma'am," Brooke said. The instructors at the Training Center were all ganger veterans crippled by injury, and they intimidated Brooke. MacGregor was no exception. "I'll try again, ma'am."

"Be sure you do." MacGregor waved her hook under Brooke's nose. "A well-aimed rocket can do a lot of damage, believe me. But unless you hit the target, you might as well be throwing cabbages, farm girl." She limped away to the next trainee in line, and Brooke turned back to the launcher and watched crews in the far end ready the next set of target balloons.

Whistles blew on the observation deck, and Brooke turned to see the Training Center staff bustling around a slight figure in the brown uniform of



a messenger from the Somerset Militia. A moment later, two of the Training Center staffers rushed over to the flagpole at one end of the Observation Deck and started pulling down the green flag. A red flag took its place, and Brooke straightened. *They're closing down the Center for the day. What's going on?* Her orders were clear - get back to the Legion compound as quickly as possible. She jogged up to the observation platform and across it to the Firing Range exit, navigating through a crowd of every other ganger on the Range, all competing to get to their gangs.

As she was passing the restored pre-Storm tower that housed the Training Center's offices and classrooms, Roger appeared out of the crowd at her elbow. "Any idea what's going on?"

Roger shook his head. "No idea. I've heard something about Slavers, but that could be a rumor."

Brooke's stomach knotted. All she knew about Slavers came from Father Terrethel, who had alternately damned them as heathen sinners and held them up as God's vengeance upon the sinful and impious. Slavers had not penetrated into the Haven Valley in Brooke's lifetime, but the entire farmhold had gone into alert whenever the Slavers had made one of their periodic raids into the Somerset region. Brooke had hid in the basement bunker while her brothers and her father's guards had patrolled the valley with the militias of all the other farmholds. "I hope that's just a rumor. Let's hurry."

###

When they got back to the Legion compound, they found most of the Legion's personnel grouped into the parking yard. Joel Quick was standing on an overturned ammunition crate with his hands in his coat pockets, watching the gangers huddle in the court. When he spotted Roger and Brooke, he held up his hands, and the muttered conversations halted as the gangers gave him their full attention.

"An hour ago, the Somerset Militia received a radio message from a Holy Rollers convoy on the road to Gateway. The convoy reported that it was under attack by a large force of Slavers."

Brooke felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She felt mortally certain that she knew which convoy had been attacked. She'd seen it form up

and roll out the gate at dawn. Six Lorries full of food and over a dozen cannon-armed Buzzer escorts... She could not imagine the force needed to defeat a convoy that size.

"The Somerset Militia is forming up to defend the town. It's quite likely that we'll be part of whatever posse gets organized to hunt down the Slaver band and destroy them before they get back to whatever hellhole they crawled out of. So all of you, stick around. Things are going to get interesting."

"Where's Orth?" asked 'Devil' Deweese from the front row.

Joel pointed to the west. "She's over at Dexter's, signing us up for whatever comes next."

It was at that moment that Brooke realized that Mellie wasn't in the crowd either.

###

Chasity Orth strode across the cavernous hall of Dexter's Tavern, navigating the forest of tables and chairs toward the huddle of gangers on the tiled dance floor, at the foot of a knee-high stage reserved for musicians. Mellie Sines walked silently in her wake.

She stepped up next to a man wearing Raging Scavengers insignia. "What's going on?"

"Dunno. Gray Riders are organizing this thing." He leaned back and crossed his arms as two figures in long gray coats clambered onto the stage. One was a man with ugly shrapnel-scars crisscrossing his shaved scalp, and gold bands on the cuffs of his coat. As he turned to face the crowd, Orth saw the golden "G" insignia on his chest, and she recognized him as Colonel Robert Williams, leader of the Gray Riders bounty hunter gang.

The woman took a space behind him, her black hair cut into short, thick spines like the hackle-bristles of a rad-wolf, with blue plastic beads on many of the spines. Her coat was much plainer than her commander's, with the cuffs and insignia done in black-painted steel, and the distinctive rippled pattern of an old burn-scar marred one cheek, from her snub nose to the line of her jaw.

The Gray Rider woman looked in their direction, and Orth felt Mellie stiffen beside her. She forced a smile off her face before turning to her scout. "Do you know that woman with Williams?" she whispered to Mellie.

Mellie relaxed and shook her head hurriedly, and Orth had to fight not to grin. The prank had seemed like an amusing diversion when Joel Quick had told her about it, but she could feel the joke coming to its end. She made a mental note to break the truth to Mellie after the fight with the Slavers. Assuming, of course, that they all survived, which was by no means certain.

Orth snapped her attention back to business as Williams began speaking. "Seventy-six minutes ago, Cross Convoy Zero-Four reported an attack from a Slaver warband numbering over thirty vehicles. Twenty-two minutes later, the convoy went off the air. Eighteen minutes ago, the radio station at Haven Market reported an attack from a Slaver force of unknown size, and immediately went off the air. Both contacts reported insignia of Wave of Mutilation, so we think these are both the same group. They're our target. We're going to roll out within the hour, and we're going to cut them off before they get to Gateway Truckstop."

Mellie stiffened again, and Orth raised a hand. "Commander Orth, Fifth Legion. If they've hit a convoy on the Gateway road, and then Haven Market, they aren't heading to Gateway. I think they're heading along the foothills to Morgan to fence their loot, then down to Firelight. The Ironmongers have a new route into the North from Morgan that bypasses Gateway, and they may have sold that route to the Slavers."

"I don't have time for - " Williams started, but was stopped by his aide whispering in his ear.

A ganger on the other side of the crowd pointed at Orth. "How do you know this, Fifth Legion?"

Orth glanced up at the stage, where Williams and his aide were still engaged in a low-voiced discussion. "I've been intercepting a series of Ironmonger convoys just south of the Haven Valley, and they're usually coming north from the foothills. We haven't yet found the specific route they're using, but Slavers use Ironmonger routes all the time."

The heckler started to say something else, but Williams turned away from his aide and back to Orth. "Commander Orth, can your scouts guide us to the region where you found these convoys?"

She nodded. "I can do it. What's your plan for killing the horde?"

Williams turned to the rest of the gathered gangers. "We need as many heavy firepower platforms as possible. The Gray Riders are contributing three Apaches and the Fire Truck *Iron Fist*. All the rest of you, muster at the southern gate under the flag of Task Group One."

That sent a hubbub of muttered discussion through the crowd. Fire Trucks were the largest combat vehicles in Evan. Only a few had been scavenged from the ruins of cities destroyed by the Event, and they could carry firepower that could destroy armies of lesser vehicles. *Iron Fist* had racked up a famous kill-tally among the pirates of the Northern Desert.

Other gang leaders stepped forward to contribute more SUVs. Gang leaders who could not afford SUVs contributed whatever of their vehicles had the most firepower. Orth, trying to imagine the mindset of whatever Slaver warlord had put the horde together, frowned in thought. *They've had two good successes, and probably loaded down with food and slaves, both precious commodities down in Firelight. If this warlord is smart at all, he or she will be running as fast as possible.*

When a leader of the Ghosts finished describing the merits of his bid, Orth raised her hand. "The Fifth Legion contributes six fine muscle cars, the better to chase down the enemy: two Vampires, two Phoenixes, and two Voyagers."

The contribution brought sniggers around the half-circle of spectators. "What do you plan to do with that, Orth? Planning for the retreat already?" asked a portly officer of the Children of the Apocalypse.

Orth scowled, though she was grinning inside. "You impugn my honor, sir. My men and women will fight just as brave and fierce as yours, but our tactics are different." She stepped into the center of the half-circle and took up a stiff posture with her hands clasped behind her back. "Colonel Williams, my gang's bravery and honor have been insulted. I request the honor of

leading a fast reconnaissance element, in order to pinpoint the enemy and slow them down enough for the heavier forces to deliver the killing blow."

Williams scowled, but several of the gang leaders, shamed by the slur on the Fifth Legion, nodded enthusiastically. Orth allowed herself a small smile. *Little boys. Their toys and their precious reputations are all that matter. So easy to get what I want.* "Go ahead, Commander Orth. Muster your force at the South Gate, under the name of Task Force One - Recon."

"For honor, Colonel." Orth saluted Williams, then turned and headed for the door with Sines at her side. As she emerged into the harsh Somerset sunlight, she allowed herself to grin.

\*PART 8\*

The Legion had been waiting for an hour when Orth came through the gate with Mellie close behind. The Commander walked across the yard and spoke in a low voice to Marquita Tran, the senior muscle-car driver. Tran nodded her bleached-blond head, waved at several mechanics, and disappeared into the garage with them.

Orth stood on the same ammunition crate that Joel had used earlier. "Folks, we're going to be part of the hunt for the Slaver horde. So far, it's hit a Holy Rollers convoy and Haven Market."

Brooke's stomach sank to her ankles, and she stopped herself from demanding information on whether her family was alright. *Find out later.* Orth went on, "The Gray Riders are taking the lead, but we're forming up as a separate muscle force, called Task Force One - Recon. We'll have to see what else we can get, but for now, we aren't tied to the fatties." The traditional muscle-drivers' slang for heavy SUVs brought a round of chuckles from the assembled gangers. "What we do once we're out depends on how many cars we get from other gangs, but for now, we're going to be deploying in pairs. Recon One is going to be Brown and me in *Tarantula*. Recon Two: Flock in *Scorpion*. Recon Three is Tran in *Hawk*, with Recon Four: Sines in *Kestrel*. Recon Five and Six are Deweese in *Wolf* and Simonsen in *Coyote*. Ulmer, get *Shaman* ready and loaded up. If we can get in front of the column, you're going to slow it down. Strang, you're covering *Shaman* in *Rattlesnake*. You two are Delay One and Two. Drivers, find your gunners, then report to me on radio procedure."

During Orth's briefing, Mellie had circled around the crowd of crew until she was next to Brooke. As the crowd broke into a hubbub of conversation, she laid a hand on Brooke's shoulder and asked, "How are your Five-Five scores, Brooke?"

Brooke shrugged. "Ninety percent in the last balloon exercise, and my reload time is down to five seconds."

"Good. If you want to get some Slaver heads, you're my gunner."

"Um, sure. If you want me." Brooke nodded, and followed Mellie into the garage. Her stomach fluttered with anticipation. She'd faced fire against the Ironmongers convoy, but this was a much more fearsome enemy.

In the garage, the mechanic crews had pulled the dust covers off six cars: two low, rounded, matt-black Voyagers with the conical barrels of Rocket Launchers sticking out of their windscreens, two dark brown Phoenixes with Gatling guns fixed just under their headlights and white skulls painted on their hoods, and a pair of long, curving bone-white Vampires with black flames crawling along their quarterpanels and hoods. The cars were in pairs, like the animals of the Ark in the frescoes in the chapel at Criddle Hold, but none of the animals had been portrayed with wheels or armor or weapons.

Brooke ran her hand across the cold metal hood of one of the Vampires, her fingertips catching in pits where bullet holes hadn't been fully repaired. "Are you sure you want me, Mellie? Y'know, as your gunner?"

"Of course," Mellie said, unlocking and opening the driver's side door of the other Vampire. Brooke caught the name *KESTREL* in black letters just under the steel mesh window. She walked to the passenger side and climbed in next to Mellie. As she pulled the door closed, a surge of adrenaline hit, sending fire through her veins and shivers up her neck. Mellie patted the leather-wrapped steering wheel tenderly, right next to the firing stud for the rockets mounted on the Vampire's bumper. "You ready for this?"

"I-I-I think so," Brooke stuttered through chattering teeth. She bent over the footwell and checked her ammunition storage space.

"Relax, we're gonna kick serious ass. Are we ready to go, gunner?"

Brooke leaned back against the sheepskin-covered seat. "I think so."

"Excellent. I'm gonna report in to Orth. You wait here." Mellie slipped out the door and walked out of the garage.

Brooke rested her hand on the dashboard and tried to look more confident than she felt.

###

A swarm of SUVs bearing the liveries of half a dozen gangs and militias assembled just inside the Southern Gate. Outside, a dozen Buzzers in the

brown of the Somerset Militia waited with their guns turned toward the empty desert beyond. The citizens of Somerset were looking scared, though a few walked among the crews of the SUVs, delivering encouragement and moral support.

Mellie parked *Kestrel* to one side of the gate, across the courtyards from the SUVs, right behind a gray Phoenix with black lines down the sides, and the black 'G' logo of the Gray Riders on its tail. Lounging against its side was a woman in a long coat, the same gray color as the car, with glints of blue in her short black hair. As the Fifth Legion column parked, the woman looked back and waved at *Kestrel*, then stalked back along the column toward *Tarantula*. A young man in the same uniform jogged to catch up. "What the hell is *she* doing here..." Mellie muttered as she killed the purring engine.

Mellie slipped out of the car and stalked back toward *Tarantula* in the gray-coated woman's wake. The other drivers were converging on Commander Orth. Brooke briefly debated joining the huddle, then decided to stay with *Kestrel*. All the drivers were Legion veterans of six months or more, highly trained to earn the right to drive a Legion interceptor. Some of the best drivers in the North were huddling around Chasity Orth, or so the Legion propaganda went.

"Hey, Brooke," Roger said as he came around *Kestrel* from *Hawk*, where he was gunning for Tran. "Hurry up and wait, huh?"

"Yeah," Brooke said, running a hand through her hair. "What are we waiting for? Reinforcements are just going to slow us down, if we have to stay slow for some SUVs or something."

"I've been on one of these multi-gang pirate hunts before. If we hit Slavers suddenly, we'll need their firepower."

"If you say -" Brooke noticed two more cars pulling up, a black Stormer with a long gun barrel sticking out over its wide, flat hood, and a purple Moray with machine-gun barrels nestled in its rounded grille, like fangs in an open mouth. Three figures, all wearing hoods, exited the cars and stalked over to the Legion huddle. Red star badges glinted on their chests. "Who are they?"

Roger stared at the newcomers, and his eyes widened. "The Raging Scavengers. Reds."



###

"Lorna Welt," the Gray Rider said, holding out her hand. "Scout driver. This is Andrew Richter." The brown-haired young man next to her nodded.

"Pleased," Chasity Orth said, taking the hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mellie take a parade posture with her hands behind her back. "I thought you were Colonel Williams' aide."

Lorna shook her head, making the plastic beads in her hair click and clack. "The Colonel's normal aide got shipped out to Elmsfield Hospital yesterday. The Colonel called me in because I scout Somerset once a week at least, and I ran recon the last time Slavers made a run into Somerset. The Colonel told me to load up and join you. I've got two single-seat Phoenixes with Seven-Sixes."

"Good to see you." Orth laid a hand on Mellie's shoulder. "This is Mellie Sines, my chief scout for this trip. After we finish this huddle, I'd like you to coordinate with her on a search pattern."

Lorna's eyes went wide, and Mellie went stiff as a statue at Orth's shoulder. Orth had to suppress a grin. A wave of suppressed chuckles went around the circle of Legion drivers, and Mellie nodded stiffly, trying not to look aside at the Gray Rider. "I'd be happy to," Lorna choked out.

"I know you two have worked well together," Orth said with a completely straight face. "Once we're out, you'll be in our formation as Recon Seven and Eight."

Mellie glared around the circle of furtively sniggering drivers, but Lorna simply nodded. "Thank you, ma'am. I look forward to working with you all." She stepped back to the edge of the circle as two more cars parked behind the column, a Stormer and a Moray. Neither car was personally familiar to Orth, but both looked like solid interceptor builds, and some gangs swore by Morays.

The occupants of the cars got out and walked over to the circle. In the lead was a woman wearing a hood over a crest of fluorescent-green hair. "Is this Task Force One - Recon?" she asked.

"It is. And you are?"

"Kelly Lebow, Raging Scavengers. Sharon Santana, 'Fuzz' Banks." Lebow grinned, and her two companions nodded as their names were mentioned. Santana was a short woman wearing dark goggles, and Banks was an obvious mutant, with dark bristles covering her lumpy face, sharp fangs, and pointed ears that distorted the shape of her hood. "We came to see if we could join in. We have no love for the money-grubbing capitalists of the Gray Riders, but we hate Slavers even more."

Orth glanced aside at the Gray Riders drivers. "Good to see you. I think we have enough for the moment. Any more arrivals will be joining the main column." She paused for a moment, then went on, "Scavengers, you're Recon Nine and Ten. Radio channel is four-forty, with four-eighty as a reserve, scramble six-and-four. Three-sixty, scramble two, to communicate with the main force. Once we get out, stay in pairs, drive as pairs, attack as pairs. Watch your partner's back. Keep your speed high and don't get stuck in."

She let that sink in, then gestured to the black-haired Donald Ulmer and Elisha Strang, standing by her side. "Delay One will be dropping spikes if we can get in front of the Slaver column, and running for Somerset at the first sign of struggle. Delay Two, you stay by One. I don't want Ulmer jumped by some random pirate on his way back to town. Strang, you're in charge there." Strang blinked and nodded.

"Everyone, do a final check. We roll in five minutes. Sines, Welt, give me a search pattern before we roll out."

Lorna nodded and grabbed Mellie's arm. "Sure, we'll do that."

###

Brooke watched the driver huddle break up, and Mellie and the Gray Rider woman walked back toward *Kestrel*. From the furrows in Mellie's brow, she wasn't happy with the conversation. Beside Brooke, Roger said, "I gotta get back to *Hawk*. Good luck out there!" He turned and hurried to the other Vampire.

Brooke looked over her shoulder and called, "You too!"

A thump on the other side of *Kestrel* brought Brooke's head around. Her eyes snapped wide as she saw the Gray Rider woman pinning Mellie to the side of the Vampire, locked together in a passionate kiss. Brooke blushed

furiously and ducked into *Kestrel's* gunner seat, dedicating herself to counting the Five-Five ammunition magazines stocked under the dashboard. Then again.

A moment later, the drivers' side door opened and Mellie dropped into her seat and pulled the door closed. Brooke glanced through the steel mesh of the windscreen, and saw Fifth Legion gangers applauding and other gangers staring. The Gray Rider woman was jogging back to her own car. She grinned back at *Kestrel* before ducking into the Phoenix and closing the door.

Mellie swallowed, grabbed a radio headset, and spoke some route directions into it. Then she started the engine and handed the other headset to Brooke. "Well, Brooke, I think I have to explain..."

Brooke put on the headset and interrupted her driver. "Was that Lorna? She's pretty."

Mellie gaped, her eyes going wide as Somerset dollars. "You *knew*?"

\*PART 9\*

"Good gods," Mellie said for the fourth time as Task Force One - Recon raced east along the highway between sand dunes the size of SUVs. Here and there, blackened pre-Storm ruins thrust their way clear of the dunes, blackened roofless walls rounded into odd shapes by the constant winds. "I'm going to kill Orth. Seriously, I'm going to kill her."

"I don't think she meant to hurt," Brooke said, sensing that Mellie's venting was nearing an end. "I think she wanted you to tell everyone on your own time. And then..."

"I didn't know she was gonna do that." Mellie shook her head. "I thought I'd kept Lorna a secret from all of you."

"They were trying to be nice. I think." Brooke peered toward the horizon, looking for the columns of dust that might indicate a sizeable force. Unfortunately, the horizon was studded with such dust-columns, most of them small windstorms and dust-devils.

*Kestrel* ran a hundred meters in front and to the right of the Recon Force, with *Hawk* just behind, and the two Gray Riders Phoenixes in the same position on the other side of the dirt road. As Brooke scanned the horizon, Mellie had one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the radio, scanning the frequencies for any sign of their quarry. Brooke's headset hissed and popped with static from the aurora, whining faintly as Mellie changed frequencies. "Yeah, but I wish you hadn't. Lorna wants to transfer into the Legion, but I didn't know how to bring it up with Orth."

"It wasn't my choice," Brooke pointed out. "I only just got here. Roger and Devil told me my second day."

Mellie started to reply, but a blatter of noise interrupted from both their headsets. Mellie worked the radio dials and a panicked male voice came into their ears. "-ention, attention, this is Convoy Supply-Six, on Route Seven, under attack from Slavers, calling for assistance. Please, for the love of God, help us!" In the background, Brooke could hear gunshots, the throaty rattle of a large-caliber machine gun, and the high *pings* of bullets ricocheting off

armor. A surge of adrenaline set fire to Brooke's veins, making the edges of *Kestrel's* firing slit seem sharp-edged and her pulse hammer in her ears.

Mellie clicked over to the Task Force One - Recon frequency, then pressed a button on her steering wheel. "Four to all, got Slavers hitting a convoy on Route Seven. The convoy's broadcasting on frequency seven-twenty, scramble two. Estimate they're about ten miles from us. I vote to speed and sting."

Orth's voice came back immediately, with more than a trace of a smile in her voice. "Agreed, Four. Let the convoy know we're on our way, but don't give numbers. Other ears may be listening. All units, go to eighty and form up on Three and Four. Let's collect some heads, people."

*Kestrel's* engine growled louder as Mellie accelerated and turned slightly to follow a bend in the road. A chorus of acknowledgements filled the radio, cut off as Mellie switched back to the convoy's frequency, where the same panicked voice was repeating the call for assistance. Mellie hit the transmit button and said clearly, "Convoy Supply-Six, this is Task Force One - Recon, about ten miles from you. What kind of numbers are you up against?"

"Task Force? Thank God, we're saved! There's a lot of them -"

The panicked voice cut off, replaced with a deeper, calmer male voice. "Recon, we count twelve hostiles, but we've heard there's a lot more out there. No cargo carriers with this group, for what it's worth. We just passed mile-marker eight-seven. What's your ETA?"

Mellie paused, and Brooke glanced aside at her. Twelve vehicles was much smaller than the force they were looking for, and Brooke hoped Orth wouldn't order them to break off and search for the larger Slaver force, leaving the convoy to its doom. "What does 'no cargo carriers' mean?" Brooke shouted over the roar of the engine.

"Slavers always have some cargo vehicles," Mellie shouted back. "Usually Pickups or Box Vans. To carry away their loot and captives. The only ones who don't are scouting parties, and split-off groups. This is too large for a scouting party, so it's like us - a group split off to stop this little convoy until the cargoes can get there to loot it." Mellie pressed the transmit stud again and said to the air, "Convoy Supply, ETA is six minutes and closing. I think I see you now."

She angled *Kestrel* to the left, off the road, to point at a distant vertical line of dust and smoke. "Stay alive, Convoy Supply, we're on the way."

"Roger that, Recon," Convoy Supply-Six said. There was an odd *crump* in the background of the transmission, like a tin can crumpling inward. "We'll do our best."

*Kestrel* raced across the sandy dunes toward her prey, and Brooke clicked off the safety on her gun. Mellie switched the radio back to the Recon frequency and relayed the information.

"Good job, Four. Three, Four, lead us in. Delay, go wide north and call in if you see anything."

A chorus of acknowledgements echoed over the radio, and Brooke glanced back to see the other cars of Recon forming up into a loose column behind *Kestrel*. The Gray Rider Phoenixes, Recon Seven and Eight, took the position just behind *Kestrel's* consort *Hawk*.

*Kestrel* crested a high dune, and Brooke gasped as she saw the convoy of four red Carrier Vans struggling along the roadway, trailed by half a dozen Symphonies and Phoenixes. The escorts' rear-mounted guns were spitting fire at a rough line of dark green vehicles, bearing the blood-red chain logo of Wave of Mutilation swarming along the road behind the convoy. As *Kestrel* picked up speed down the dune, a pair of Slaver Phoenixes darted forward, rockets streaking outward in red traceries of fire. The rearmost escort, a yellow Symphony, caught most of the rockets and blew out in an orange fireball, pieces of its chassis spraying all over the road. The Phoenixes slowed and fell back to their own line, swerving from side to side to evade retaliatory rocket fire from the escorts. Brooke was reminded of the way mantises in the Haven Valley would skirmish with shepherds and sheepdogs - a few darting in to swarm one enemy, then retreating before their foes could concentrate in return.

Brooke flicked off the safety on her gun as the pursuing Slavers noticed the Recon column cresting the dune to their flank. In ones and twos, they peeled off the road and started heading toward their new foes. The two columns of cars raced toward each other at frightening speed. "All, veer right, let's pull them off the convoy," Orth said over the radio.

Mellie steered *Kestrel* down the dune, away from the Slavers and convoy alike. The Slavers fired a few long-range shots that kicked up sand in narrow little plumes, and increased their speed toward the Recon column. The Slaver formation began to separate into clumps as faster vehicles passed their slower consorts.

"Three to Lead, it's time to pounce," Tran rasped over the radio.

"Agreed, Three. Lead to all, hit them!" Before Orth's transmission was over, Mellie was snapping *Kestrel* hard to the left. Brooke was jerked hard against her restraints, but kept hold of her gun. Mellie put the accelerator to the floor, and *Kestrel's* engine roared, sending the Vampire out on a broad arc toward the rearmost clump of Slavers. Brooke glanced to the left, and saw that the entire Recon force had turned toward the Slavers, catching them in the middle of a contracting arc.

"Three to Seven, Eight, you've got our backs?" Tran rasped.

"Roger that, Three," a woman's voice replied, and Brooke realized with a start that the voice had to belong to Lorna.

"Good, let's get some kills." Mellie straightened out *Kestrel*, with *Hawk* and the two Gray Riders Phoenixes close behind, and pointed the Vampire at the rear group of Slavers. Brooke felt her stomach drop into her knees as crisp combat chatter filled her headset. The distance between *Kestrel* and the Slavers dropped rapidly. Brooke fixed her gunsights on a Voyager painted with screaming faces across its forward armor and squeezed her trigger. The Five-Five bucked in her hands, and sparks flew off the Voyager's front armor. Bullets whizzed past *Kestrel*, and then Mellie was steering *Kestrel* past the Slavers. The Voyager rocketed past on the left, close enough that Brooke could have reached out and brushed her fingertips on its paint. A whoop of triumph in Brooke's ears marked the end of the Voyager at the guns of the Gray Riders.

Brooke locked onto the next target she saw, a Symphony with a jagged hole in its right side from some previous battle, fleeing into the desert. Mellie brought *Kestrel* screaming in on the Symphony's wounded side, and Brooke poured fire into the Slaver's breached side.

Brooke's bullets found the Symphony's vitals, and gouts of red fire gushed from its windows. *Kestrel* roared past the burning wreck and pulled a hairpin turn, throwing Brooke against her restraints again.

"Seven needs some help!" Lorna's voice called, and Brooke saw Mellie's hands tighten on the wheel. A moment later, Recon Seven crossed *Kestrel's* path, jinking from side to side in a futile effort to evade a Slaver Phoenix. The Phoenix, splashed with red paint along its quarterpanel and door, clung doggedly to the Gray Rider's tail, spewing salvos of pink-glowing microrockets at Recon Seven's rear. The missiles tore pieces of armor off Lorna's tail, and Brooke fired a long burst, trying to distract the Slaver.

Mellie, snarling, fired a rocket that hit the ground along the Slaver's path, throwing up a cloud of sand, and bouncing the Phoenix into the air. Brooke sent a stream of bullets into its underside, tearing apart its tires and undercarriage. *Hawk*, speeding in *Kestrel's* wake, finished tearing apart the Slaver.

Brooke glanced around, searching for Recon Seven, and hit her own radio button. "Four to Seven, are you alright?"

The Phoenix appeared around the other side of the burning Symphony, its tail armor torn and scorched, but not breached, Brooke thought. Lorna steered into formation with *Kestrel* and *Hawk*. The few remaining Slavers had broken, and were fleeing into the desert with the Recon squadron in hot pursuit. Mellie brought *Kestrel's* speed down and pointed the Vampire toward the rest of Recon as Lorna's voice replied over the radio "Seven to Four, I'm alive and unbreached, I think. Thanks for the assist. Eight, where the hell are you?"

"Right here, Seven. Behind-left of you. Sorry, ma'am." The other Gray Riders Phoenix emerged from between two dead Slavers and took up position just behind and right of Lorna. "Won't happen again, ma'am."

Lorna began a blistering tirade, but Strang's voice broke through the profanity. "Delay to Recon, forty-plus units coming down the road toward you. I see Slaver colors and some captured Lorries. They're moving - " Strang paused, and there was a faint metallic *ping* in the background of the transmission. "Moving about forty, just passing mile marker seventy-three."



Brooke's heart climbed into her throat. She glanced over and saw that Mellie's face had gone the color of goats' milk. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and started reloading her gun.

\*PART 10\*

Chasity Orth stared at her radio for a long moment, her brain spinning. Her hands, meanwhile, did not pause in shoving rockets into the reload slot of her launcher and rotating the cylinder. Once a plan crystallized, she hit her transmit stud. "Delay, break off. Lay some spikes at mile marker eighty-five. Get on the horn to the Task Force and give them the details, then head back to town. Tell Williams I'll be on the channel with him soon."

Two clicks came over the channel, Strang's non-verbal affirmative, and Chasity went on, "All Recon units, regroup and reload. We're heading along the road into the hills. Form up on me."

A chorus of acknowledgements filled the radio channel, and 'Dynamite' James Brown turned *Tarantula* toward the road. As the *Voyager* turned, Orth saw the Scavenger Moray kill the last Slaver, its machine guns sending a Sonic hatchback tumbling boot-over-bonnet across the dunes. The Recon squadron quickly formed into a rough formation around the Voyagers. Orth switched to the channel she used as liaison with Williams, just as Strang was finishing his report, "-be dropping spikes at mile marker eighty-five. Then we'll head back to Somerset. Boss's orders."

"Acknowledged, Delay," Williams' voice replied, sounding peeved. "Good luck, and travel safe. Command to Recon, where the hell are you?"

Orth keyed her radio. "Right here, Command," she said. "We've regrouped, and at full strength. We're heading south, twelve miles away from the Slaver force along their current heading. With our speed, we should be able to stay out of their engagement range indefinitely."

"Roger that, Recon," Williams growled. She could hear the disdain unspoken in his voice: *What good are you, you cowardly little speed-heads, running away while the real men do the heavy work?* "I want you east of the road. Hole up in sight of the road and wait for orders."

"Roger that Command." Orth grimaced. *Lovely. No 'good job' for finding the Slaver column, or rescuing that convoy, or hell, killing a dozen-plus hostiles. Oh well, at least I'll demand a good share of the loot.*

She switched back to the Recon channel. "Delay, report."

Strang came back almost immediately. "We broke free, we're on our way."

"Acknowledged." Orth paused and consulted the small map installed in her car's center console. "All, we're heading back to rip up some Slavers. Four, are there any good ambush points in striking range of this valley?"

"There are, want me to lead?"

"Sure, Four. Take the lead and get us to them. We may need to distract the Slaver column after it hits Strang's spikes."

"Roger that." Off to her right, Orth saw *Kestrel* break formation and turn around. She gripped her rocket launcher as *Tarantula* started its own turn.

###

*Kestrel* led the column off the road, up one ridge and down another into a basin, and up the opposite slope. The dust cloud kicked up by their tires dropped and settled all around them. Mellie spun *Kestrel* around and dropped her speed to a crawl, then drove slowly up the ridge and stopped just short of the crest, where Mellie and Brooke could overlook the road as it emerged from the dunes to the north, wound through the basin, and disappeared below the crest of the slope to the south.

She killed the engine, leaving only the sound of the breeze whistling through *Kestrel's* vision slits. A crunching behind them heralded *Hawk* coming up and parking behind *Kestrel*. The rest of the column parked at the base of the slope.

Delay drove across the valley, first the blue Phoenix *Rattlesnake*, followed closely by the black Voyager *Shaman*, which was jinking back and forth across the sand in what looked like an evasive pattern. "Are they being chased?" Brooke asked, jerking upright and taking hold of her gun.

"Nope." Mellie pointed. "They're dropping spikes. Watch." As *Shaman* crossed the road, Brooke saw tiny glitters tumbling across the road behind it, like a sprinkling of fairy dust. "Swerving from side to side spreads the spikes out wider, and makes them harder to avoid. Ulmer's *really* good at this stuff."

Delay finished laying spikes, and angled up the other slope of the valley toward Somerset. Very quickly they were lost to sight, only a faint cloud of dust betraying their position. "Good hunting, Recon," Strang called over the radio.

"Drive safe, Delay," Orth called back. "Recon Four, call in when you see Slavers."

Mellie tapped her radio stud, tilted her seat back, and crossed her arms behind her head to make a cushion. "That thinking look hasn't left your face since we left Somerset. Spill, Brooke."

Brooke eased her hands off her gun's grips, and ran her fingers through her hair. "They... the Slavers... attacked Haven Market. I was... just hoping my family's alright."

"Those idiots who were about to sell you off to the Hanlins? They're not your family. We are."

Brooke sighed, remembering playing with her youngest brother Paul, his shrieks of delight as she carried him on her back through the pecan grove, his little feet kicking in her hands. "It's not that simple, Mellie. It wasn't all bad there."

"Hmph." Mellie shifted in her seat. "Well, Slavers don't kill unless someone's shooting at them. I mean, accidents happen, but slaves are worth much more than corpses. So if they took anyone, they're probably alive. But until we beat this band, you keep your head in the game, ah?"

"I will." The silence stretched uncomfortably, with the wind making eerie notes as it whistled through the slits in *Kestrel's* armor, like disjointed music from somewhere far away. "So... how did you meet Lorna?"

Mellie shifted again, a little twitch of her shoulders, then spoke, in halting phrases. "Soon after I joined the Legion... I realized what I was. There are a couple... other women like me like me in Somerset, you know? And I bounced around them for a bit. By the way, if the nuns of Cestus Dei invite you to a 'prayer meeting,' it's not what it sounds like. And they're never offended if you say no." Mellie grinned wickedly at some memory Brooke couldn't guess, then went on, with more energy, "But you were asking about Lorna. I was gunning for 'Speedy' Russell on a small pirate-hunt, us and the

Riders. She was driving a Voyager, Russell and I were in a Bullet, and two more muscles from other gangs. You want to see a nasty driver, Russell was a frigging legend, she was damn-near untouchable." Mellie's eyes unfocused and turned inward. "Until... she wasn't."

"So six miles out of the gate, we get jumped by a pack of Xena's Angels, pirates, five on four. Our partner-car takes a bad rocket early on, so leaves her and me without anyone watching our ass. We broke off, Speedy running through the hills, just trying to keep us alive.

"Then out of the blue comes Lorna and her partner, took out two of the Angels in one pass. Damn, wish you coulda seen it! Then they swarm Lorna's partner, Speedy and I scratch two, and the last one ran. We looted fast as we could and hightailed it back to Somerset.

"Back in Somerset, I bought Lorna a drink, and we get to talking... and then we got to flirting, and..." Mellie blushed, and turned her face away from Brooke, toward the armored door. "Then I went up to Badlands for scout training, and came back, and that's a whole 'nother story. But... She was waiting when I came back." Mellie shrugged. "So yeah, that's how I met my woman."

"Oh. Alright." Brooke stared out at the road, her mind buzzing with questions that a well-brought-up girl from Haven Valley would never, could never ask. "I'm... glad you're happy. And if there's anything I can do to help her transfer to the Legion, let me know."

Mellie shrugged. "It shouldn't be a problem, but... thanks." She pulled a lever by her side, returning her seat to its upright position. "Let's see how it looks out there." She peered through the windshield at the landscape beyond, then keyed her radio. "Four to all, I think the Slavers have arrived. Dust cloud at ten o'clock, no visual yet."

"Lead to Four, let us know when you've got visual contact."

Mellie tapped her transmit key and started *Kestrel's* engine. The faint vibration was a little reassuring, to Brooke - over the last few months, she'd absorbed Fifth Legion wisdom about muscle cars, and had become a little uncomfortable in a stationary car. *Speed is Life*, ran the Legion wisdom, with the reverse left unspoken. "How long, d'you think?"

"Not long, I think." Mellie's voice sounded a little distant, as if her mind was elsewhere. "They're close enough for us to see their dust cloud, won't be more than a few minutes. That gun ready?"

Brooke did a detailed check of her gun, doing everything but firing off a few rounds to make sure her gun was in working order. "Yeah."

\*PART 11\*

The minutes dragged out as the dust cloud crawled closer. At last, a pair of acid-yellow Phoenixes with Slaver insignia rolled around the bend in the road, toward the spikes. Just before they hit the spikes, both braked hard and tried to turn away, but one drifted into the sparkling trap. Dust billowed as at least one tire exploded, and the Phoenix skidded to a halt. Its doors popped open and a pair of human figures in dark red coats bustled around the stricken car, as its partner car stopped, plainly taking up a guard position. Mellie muttered a brief report, as if wary of being heard by the Slavers.

Brooke looked up the road and gasped. The dust cloud was approaching faster, and shapes could be made out in it. Big shapes. And no sign of the main task force. *This could go very wrong.*

Brooke pointed, and Mellie switched to the main Task Force frequency. "Recon Four to Command, we have visual contact on the primary convoy. Mile marker eighty-five. Were about to have them stopped at our spikes. Where the hell are you, Command?" Her voice rose to an almost-normal volume on the last few words.

"Keep your skirts down, Recon, we're almost there. You get ready for more orders."

As Mellie acknowledged and switched back to the Recon frequency to report. Brooke watched the Slavers try to change their tire, and the approaching convoy. *Tarantula* and the rest of Recon crawled up the slope until they were idling just behind *Kestrel*. *They have to know we're out here. Will they send some more scouts out to hunt us out?*

The convoy slowed as it drove down the road toward the spikes, its mass rumble growing as it closed. First drove a dozen Slaver combat cars in two ranks, mostly sedans with a few Chomper light SUVs. On the road itself drove the six white lorries, two by two, surrounded by a handful of battered, burned and holed Buzzers. *That convoy didn't go down easy*, Brooke thought. Behind the captured convoy drove a handful of battered Motorhomes and Box Vans, painted faded blue and red and brown. Brooke recognized them as the vehicle of choice for the herdsmen of the rough semi-desert country around the

Haven Valley. Brooke counted enough of them to suspect that the Slavers had captured an entire clan of the nomads and their livestock. More combat vehicles, many carrying red Slaver insignia or fluttering red flags, lined the road to either side of the captured vehicles. Brooke tried to count the combat vehicles, and swallowed when she gave up at forty. And the rear of the convoy was still out of sight in the billowing dust. *There are so many, so many, so many...* She laid a hand against *Kestrel's* dashboard and tried to feel reassured by the growl of her car's powerful engine, though the immobility was beginning to worry Brooke.

As dust fell in raining sheets, the air above the convoy grew clearer. The slope on the other side of the valley came into view, and the vanguard of the convoy halted, then began streaming around the lorries and up the opposite slope, barely skirting the dropped spikes. Brooke grabbed her gun's handgrips, her brain racing. *Did they spot us, are we going to -*

Suddenly, a green-and-white Chomper wallowed backward, its back end jumping up into the air, then exploded into a bright fireball. Flaming debris scattered all over the slope, and Brooke gasped.

As more dust fell out of the air, the air cleared, and Brooke could see a line of SUVs, along with a single hulking Fire Engine with a massive square cab. A gun flashed from the gun on its back, star-bright, and another car went flying, a Symphony shedding pieces as it spun through the air.

Brooke stared openmouthed as *Iron Duke*, with Task Force One arrayed to either side, engaged the Slaver army.

###

*Iron Duke* groaned as its third shot slew a Pickup with a bed-mounted heavy rocket launcher. The Pickup split asunder as the 120-millimeter shell tore through its cab.

Although he usually commanded from his Apache *Khan*, Williams loved the sound of the *Duke* when his - the Fire Engine would never be anything but a 'he' to Williams - his main gun spoke in full fury, reached out with a twelve-centimeter shell and slew cars with single shots. The heavy Gatling gun mounted in front of the shotgun seat swivelled from side to side, waiting for unwary Slavers to come close enough.



To either side of *Iron Duke*, SUVs half his size also let loose their hate for the Slavers. Rockets soared down the slope on tails of red flame, hissing their evil fury, cannons voiced their wrath with heavy, percussive *thumps*, and guns let loose streams of bullets, drumrolls to send the Slavers to Hell. Half a dozen Slaver cars were torn apart before the flank of the Slaver column turned into the teeth of the Task Force's guns, and the fire began flowing both ways. Through the smoke of burning cars, Williams could see more Slaver cars streaming through gaps between the lorries toward the Task Force.

Williams glanced left and right, watching rockets and tracers sheet back and forth between the Task Force and the Slaver army. He ran a thumb over the transmit button of the radio in his hand, then shook his head. Every car was firing, none were wavering, despite the odds. The radio chattered as the leaders of each section of the Task Force line were doing their jobs, calling targets for their cars. The battle was going well, and there was nothing to do but wait for things to go wrong.

Suddenly, a salvo of mortar shells threw up golden fountains of sand along the Task Force line. *Ezekiel*, a Children of the Apocalypse Landrunner anchoring the left flank of the line, took several direct hits and blew out in a white fireball and a cloud of smoke and debris. The Slaver right flank, which had been the vanguard of the convoy, surged forward with a torrent of fire, and the Task Force's left flank fell back in disarray. A green Apache, belonging to some gang that Williams couldn't recall, was flipped over by rocket strikes to its flank, between the beleaguered left side and the Slavers. Its crew bailed out, but two of them immediately jerked and fell to machine gun fire, leaving only one to stagger down the reverse slope toward the Task Force's waiting artillery, whose guns were silent for fear of hitting the captured vehicles. *But not the ones trying to roll up my left flank. Dammit*, thought Williams, but he didn't hesitate. He knew he couldn't afford to.

Immediately, Williams turned to Lieutenant Lisa Dolliger, his acting tactical aide. "Get the artillery to cover the left! And some reserves!" He pointed, and she nodded and brought up her binoculars in one hand and her radio in the other.

Williams switched his own radio to a different frequency. "Command to Recon..."

###

Brooke's heart jumped into her throat as the Slaver vanguard surged up the slope. She'd never imagined a battle this large and loud before, but even she could tell that the left side of the Task Force line - the right side, from her vantage - was in trouble.

"Recon Lead to all, the Task Force is in trouble. Get ready for action," Orth's voice came through the radio, making Brooke start in her seat. "They're getting harrassed by some cannon-humpers and need some assistance. Four, how can we get around the spikes to the artillery?"

Mellie pulled herself up by the steering wheel and pressed her face to the forward view slit. Brooke looked through the slit toward the rear of the Slaver line, where a pack of Box Vans and Pickups had backed a little from the convoy and were firing mortars and rockets up into the air. "Along this ridge, then down, in and away," Mellie said over the radio. "No problem."

"Understood, Four. You and Three take the back of this run, watch for any interference. Five and Six, you take the lead and cut through watchdogs." Just behind the Phoenixes came *Tarantula* and *Scorpion*, then the mismatched Raging Scavengers, then the Gray Riders. The Recon squadron ran along the ridge until they passed the sprays of spikes. Then *Coyote* and *Wolf* turned to the right, down toward the Slaver artillery, accelerating toward their prey.

\*PART 12\*

Chasity Orth gripped her rocket launcher's handles as *Tarantula* sped down the slope. Ahead of her, *Coyote* and *Wolf* angled slightly to the left, away from the Slavers, to give her and Josel Elson, gunner in *Scorpion*, better shots on the targets. "Bluebox," she called, and sighted on a powder-blue Box Van on the end of the artillery line, but she didn't fire, simply waited as the Recon force closed on its prey. With the Slaver host's full attention focused on the Task Force, the Recon strike had the advantage of surprise. *Wait for it... wait for it...*

A Chomper striped in orange and white suddenly backed out from between two captured lorries, toward the Recon column. Orth swore under her breath and pulled her trigger, sending a rocket flying into the flank of her target, then rotated her launcher's barrel and fired again. And again.

Her three rockets rent a hole in the Box Van's side and tipped it over, thick black smoke pouring from its wounded flank. Orth snarled and picked another target, a Pickup with a large artillery-rocket launcher rising from its bed, but before she could fire, the launcher blew out in a ball of red and yellow fury. Its Slaver crew were thrown outward by the force of the blast, turned into smoking ragdolls in an instant.

Orth started to pick another target, but 'Devil' in *Wolf* called "Bandits front!" As Orth turned her launcher forward, she could see her two Phoenixes, guns spraying tracers into a squadron of Slaver muscles.

Orth hit her radio button. "Right-oh, Squadron, we've got some new playmates. Front half, keep them busy, back half, rip up the artillery." She locked onto an enemy Voyager and pressed her firing stud.

###

Charlie Or'nagh was so happy that the horns jutting from his spine were tingling with anticipation as he watched the Civ left flank fall back in disarray. Not only were the hated Civs being slowly bled dry by his artillery crews, they wouldn't even fire back at him for fear of hitting the trucks full of loot and chattel. Typical soft northerner squeamishness, just like the cross-fondling convoy trucks had surrendered as soon as his comrades had threatened to kill

a few of their prisoners from the convoy's escorts. The loads of food and fighting slaves from the convoy were enough to make every man-jack of the expedition quite wealthy once they got it back to Firelight, even without the load of good-quality field slaves from their raid on the Civ hamlet. Now, the Civs had thrown even more high-quality loot and slaves into their arms. As chief of the expedition's field artillery, his share would be quite a bit larger than the ordinary fighters', perhaps enough to buy a volcano-side plantation and retire in comfort, surrounded by slaves.

He heard the impact of a rocket on metal, far too close for his comfort, and glanced out his Box Van's right-side view slit, to see the blue Box Van on his flank tip over with black smoke pouring from its savaged flank, and a squadron of the damned Civs racing into the artillery line. Without thinking, he swivelled the heavy machine gun on his right door toward the interlopers with one hand while triggering his radio with the other. "Sky-Fire to White Knight, we've got enemy muscles, We need-"

A half-inch slug of lead, courtesy of the Raging Scavengers Stormer *Bullit*, entered his skull just above his right ear and sprayed Or'nagh's brains, along with his thoughts of loot and his panic, all across the inside of his Box Van.

###

From the tail end of the strike, Brooke couldn't see much, just the tails of the two Gray Riders Phoenixes. The captured lorries flashed past, like cliff walls, then a handful of destroyed and smoking Box Vans. Before Brooke quite knew what happened, Mellie had driven her and *Kestrel* into the middle of a raging brawl.

A blue Voyager came at *Kestrel* from the left, its guns clawing at the Vampire's flank, bullets landing on armor a few bare inches from Brooke's head. Mellie deftly jinked *Kestrel* around in an evasive maneuver, then brought the Vampire onto the Voyager's tail. Brooke pulled her triggers, and the Voyager tore open and shuddered to a halt.

Mellie turned *Kestrel* around again to look for more targets, but bullets started chewing at the Vampire's rear armor. Brooke glanced over her shoulder, and saw that the Voyager had turned, pivoting on its rear wheels to bring its guns to bear on *Kestrel*. As Mellie jinked to the side, the Voyager's

rear end blew apart, sending the sedan flipping burn-over-bonnet across the sand. *Hawk* roared past the smoking wreck, and Tran called over the radio, "Four, you owe me a drink. Now let's kick some ass."

*Kestrel* covering *Hawk's* back, the two Vampires plunged together into the melee. A Phoenix perished quickly under their fire, and then Brooke had to reload as they passed through to the other side, briefly immune to the bullets and rockets. Ahead, *Hawk* turned on the remaining artillery vehicles, savaging a Pickup with a bed-mounted mortar. Brooke yanked back her arming lever and fired a long burst at a Mercenary that was beginning to turn on them.

The heavily armored sedan rocked back under Brooke's fire, then rolled forward and fired a rocket that screamed past *Kestrel*. Brooke kept up the fire, scoring the Mercenary's flank until *Kestrel's* forward speed took the sedan out of her field of fire. *No problem*, she thought with a bit of a manic giggle, while she put her gunsights onto a Slaver Pickup, *it's not like there's any shortage of targets*.

###

Once the left flank had reorganized, with the addition of a section of SUVs from his reserve, and with artillery support had driven the Slavers' right side back in a bloody repulse, Williams glanced at the rear of the Slaver lines, and noted with approval the large cloud of dust and smoke rising from the Slaver artillery positions. He glanced aside at Lieutenant Dolliger, who noted his glance. "The artillery seems to have been neutralized, sir," she said. "But Recon seems to be in quite a brawl."

Williams nodded with approval. Dolliger was working out well as a tactical aide, anticipating his questions and handling minor problems with efficiency. As *Iron Duke's* main gun roared again, he studied what he could see of his right sections, which were maintaining a long-range gun duel with the Slaver left, and mostly intact. "Send the muscles from our reserve around to join them, break them out if necessary as soon as the right moves up. Get the rest of the reserves to support the right and center."

She nodded and worked her radio, and Williams switched to the frequencies he used to coordinate with his right sections.

###

From the chatter on the Recon radio channel, Chasity Orth figured it was about time for Recon to take its gains and bug out. They had been lucky so far, judging from the number of Slaver cars destroyed with no loss, but that luck wasn't going to hold for long. The Legion's muscle strategy was hit-and-run, not long, draining dogfights, and the artillery was a line of scorched and maimed hulks along the flank of the captured lorries.

She and *Scorpion* killed a Chomper with rocket fire, and the two Voyagers roared past the smoking SUV out of the melee. "Recon, time to break off," she called over the radio as Brown spun the Voyager. The roaring battle on Orth's right side and the silent desert on her left switched places as she reloaded. "Break west, over the ridge."

"Command to Recon," a female voice called in her radio, overriding the chatter of acknowledgements on the Recon channel. After a moment, Orth placed the voice as Williams' acting tactical aide. "Reinforcements inbound from the north flank, what's your situation?"

Orth slammed a rocket home in her loading slot and switched to the command channel. "We're breaking off here. Can you have the reinforcements meet up with me north-west of us, over the ridge?"

"Roger that, Recon," Williams' aide came back. "Good hunting."

Orth switched back to the Recon channel as the Recon cars broke from the melee and raced for the ridge, a few leaking smoke from bullet holes. Brown, like a well-trained Legion driver, slowed *Tarantula* slightly and straightened out so the two Voyagers could keep the others covered. One Slaver Mercenary tried to pursue, spraying tracer fire at the Raging Scavengers, but a pair of rockets from the trailing Voyagers made it turn back toward the convoy, protecting its smoldering flank. Orth glanced up the ridge and smiled, since most of her people were safely over the top.

"Bandits! Band-" called 'Bird' Flock from *Scorpion*, before his transmission chopped off. Orth looked over her shoulder and saw the Voyager, mangled and streaming thick black smoke, flipping side-over-side like a toy thrown by a child. Brown slammed the accelerator to the floor and

tore up the ridge, twisting the screaming Voyager from side to side in evasive maneuvers.

"Recon Two down," Orth called, pushing down a stab of grief as she looked around wildly for *Scorpion's* killer. She felt a stab of grief for her people, but pushed it down ruthlessly. Something bright white flashed past the rear-right slit, and *Tarantula* screamed as bullets ripped through armor.

The Voyager heeled wildly to the left, and Chasity Orth glanced to her left to see Brown hunched over the steering wheel, blood pouring from the back of his head. She undid her restraints and slid over, cramming herself uncomfortably into the driver's seat next to Brown's limp body and grabbing at the steering wheel.

Another salvo of bullets tore at the Voyager until one went through the rocket supply and turned *Tarantula* and Chasity Orth into an expanding ball of fire and debris.

\*PART 13\*

*Kestrel* had just cleared the ridgeline and Brooke was beginning to catch her breath when Recon Eight yelled in her ear, "Lead down! Lead down!"

Brooke's heart slammed into her throat, and the channel broke into a chaos of questions before Tran yelled over the chatter, "Settle down, dammit!" The channel went quiet before Tran continued, "Recon Three is assuming command. Command's got reinforcements on the way, so let's keep moving and meet up with them." *Hawk* pulled ahead and turned a few degrees to the right, and the rest of the squadron followed suit. "Above all, we are not going to - "

"Bandits at our five!" called one of the Raging Scavengers, and Brooke looked back and right.

Half a dozen Buccaneers, heavily armored muscle cars with square bodies, split grilles, and Slaver banners fluttering from their roofs, roared down the slope of the ridge in their wake. At their head rode some long, lean, pure-white muscle car that Brooke didn't recognize, even with the hours she'd put into studying cars at the Training Center. It looked like a Phoenix had been heated and melted like candy, all the harsh lines softened and stretched into something much faster. Round headlights bulged over the barrels of machine guns. Brooke felt suddenly, horribly conscious of how few magazines she had left. And how many hits fleet, fragile *Kestrel* had taken in the brawl. The whistling of air through the new bullet holes along the edge of the roof...

She forced herself to take a deep breath, ignore the bad thoughts, and reload her gun. Her hands moved through the practiced motions without any input from her mind.

"Scatter! Scatter!" Tran's voice yelled in her ear. *Kestrel* jerked sharply to the right, and the ground exploded to their left, throwing up a cloud of dirt and sand. The Vampire's skin chimed like her baby brother's rattle as rocks bounced off steel next to Brooke's ear.

The Recon formation came apart like a flower in a sandstorm. Cars scattered across the basin, fighting for maneuvering room. Rockets rained



down, tearing up more geysers of sand. To Brooke's right, Recon Eight disappeared in a fireball and a static-washed scream.

A dark green Buccaneer passed *Kestrel* on the left side, rockets flying from its nose and missing *Hawk* by bare feet. Human skulls flapped out on chains from its rear bumper, and Brooke pulled her trigger. Her tracers severed one of the chains, and a skull flew off into the desert. *Hawk* and *Kestrel* turned to chase, their tracers sparking off the Slaver's armor and scarring the white insignia on its door.

Metal screamed as bullets stabbed through *Kestrel's* left armor, spraying sunlight and metal shards into the Vampire's interior. Lines of fire bloomed across her face, thighs and arms. Her gun bucked hard, like an angry goat straining against her hands, and fell silent and still. Brooke opened her eyes to find her gun perforated by the bullets, the ammunition feed severed.

She glanced aside at Mellie, wiping blood out of her eyes from a mess of cuts on her forehead, and then past her driver. The unknown white muscle car was turning on the sand outside, coming around for another pass. The white car bore no banners or spikes, only a black shield-and-lance on its door. Mellie twisted the wheel hard to the right, trying to turn faster than the white car, but Brooke could only stare, transfixed, as Death bore down on her car.

Then a gray flash roared past *Kestrel*, slamming into the white car's side and spinning it around. The red tracers bound for *Kestrel* sprayed harmlessly into the air.

"You owe me a drink, lover!" Lorna mocked from Brooke's headphones as her Phoenix turned for another pass, and Mellie's face took on a savage grin under the blood.

The white car turned its spin into a loop, until its nose was pointed at Lorna's car. Its guns flashed with yellow fire as they found a target. "Mel-" Lorna's voice screamed, then cut off. The Phoenix shuddered and came apart in a vortex of metal and smoke, flying into *Kestrel's* path. The white car skirted the Phoenix's wreck and raced for the desert.

"No!" Mellie screamed and hammered her accelerator, taking off after the fleeing Slaver. Brooke reloaded her gun and tried her trigger, but nothing

happened. Mellie bellowed, "Kill it, kill it, killit!" in her ear, but all the squeezing of Brooke's fingers couldn't wake the gun from its slumber.

"I can't!" Brooke cried, blinking away tears and blood from a cut above her eye. Mellie reached over and snatched the gun's handle, her finger clenching the trigger. Again, nothing happened.

Whatever the white car was, it was blazing fast once it got going. Blue-tinged smoke puffed from its exhaust, and it was quickly lost from sight over a ridge.

"Four! Four! Come back, dammit! Status!" Tran asked in both their ears, but Mellie kept driving up the ridge.

*Kestrel* hit the top of the ridge and flew partway down the other side. In the distance, Brooke could see the white Slaver, easily two hundred meters away and receding toward the distant mountains. *Kestrel* rolled down the slope and coasted to a stop. Mellie stared after the Slaver, stone-faced, until it was out of sight, then turned *Kestrel* back toward the highway. "On our way back, Three," she said, and there was no expression in her voice at all.

###

From *Iron Duke's* cab, Williams watched his right flank roar down the slope to envelop the Slaver left, which collapsed under a blitz of cannon and rocket fire. The few surviving Slaver cars backed away and ran for the desert, but a group of sedans from Williams' reserve caught them and tore them apart. Then the survivors of the fight around the Slaver artillery counter-attacked, leading to a vicious brawl around and between the captured vehicles.

Williams glanced aside at his left wing, which was winning its long-range gun duel with the fragments of the Slaver right. He could see the moment that the Slavers began to waver. He nodded, waited a moment, and called over the radio, "All units, advance. Let's end this thing!"

*Iron Duke's* engine revved, and the Fire Engine began to roll down the slope toward the raging battle.

###

When *Kestrel* limped back to the highway, the rest of Recon had parked on the ridge west of the highway, near the spot where they had waited in

ambush for the Slavers to arrive. As Mellie brought *Kestrel* up to the ridge, Brooke watched relatively intact SUVs spread out to the perimeter of the combat zone, followed by teams of people carrying packs of tools toward the two wrecked Phoenixes and one Buccaneer, shimmering in the heat on the basin floor.

Mellie parked *Kestrel*, killed the engine, and stepped out onto the sand, walking away down the slope into the basin. Brooke, caught by surprise, grabbed Daisy's holster from her footwell, opened her door, and followed on shaky legs.

Mellie picked up speed as she walked down the slope, limping to walking to jogging to running by the time she hit the basin floor. Following behind, Brooke noticed that Mellie didn't have her rifle with her.

Mellie reached the shattered wreck of Lorna's Phoenix, bent to look through the side slit, and dropped to her knees next to the corpse of the car. *Kestrel* could have looked like this, she thought, with a sinking stomach. Brooke stepped up behind Mellie and bent to look in the slit.

After a single moment of incomprehension, Brooke realized what she was seeing, and had to stand up and take herself away from the horror of the car's insides. That hole in the other side... the armor must have failed, come into the car like shrapnel... If *Kestrel's* armor had failed like that...

She closed her eyes and swallowed the contents of her stomach before they could escape. She'd seen corpses before, sheep and goats and wolves, and once a person, but she'd never imagined that a body could hold so much blood. Or be in so many pieces... The image of Lorna's mutilated body swam before her mind's eye, but she pushed it back and down. That could have been me.

This is the life you've chosen, a voice mocked in the back of her head, a voice Brooke wasn't sure was her own. Is Hanlin Hold looking so bad now?

A pair of fingers touched Brooke's shoulder, and she jumped, jerking Daisy free of her holster. Roger Hanlin stepped back, raising both his hands in reassurance. "Relax, it's me!" His dark eyes searched her face, for what, she could not say.

"Sorry." Brooke slid Daisy back into her holster. "What's going on?"

"We're checking and clearing all the loots, and Tran wants you over there." He bent down to the Phoenix's slit, and quickly stood, swallowing. After a moment, he glanced at Mellie and went on, a bit shakily, "Well, I think just you, Brooke. I think she'd understand if... if Mellie stayed."

"Go, Brooke," Mellie said, her voice creaking like a rusted hinge. "I'll be alright."

Roger nodded and started toward *Wolf*, parked some twenty feet away. The Phoenix had taken several bullet holes, and lost part of its rear bumper to a rocket strike, but it was still in better shape than *Kestrel*, which looked like it had been chewed by a pack of rats up and down its left side. Brooke put a hand on Mellie's shoulder. Back on the Hold, Mellie had always made Brooke's childish pains hurt less. Mellie wept with hurt, and Brooke felt at a loss to soothe her friend's pain.

Mellie shrugged off her hand. "Just go, Brooke."

Brooke nodded and started walking toward *Wolf*.

###

When she got to the Phoenix, Roger was sitting in the drivers' seat. As soon as she closed her door, he hit the accelerator, driving up the ridge.

At the top of the ridge, Brooke spotted a badly damaged Voyager sitting at the bottom of the other side, and a blackened crater halfway down the slope. Beyond them lay the remains of the Slaver convoy, with figures swarming around the lorries, or picking between the scarred and holed hulks of the Slaver combat cars. "Is that where - "

"Yeah." Roger took a hand off the wheel to point at the crater. "That was *Tarantula*, apparently. And nobody survived out of *Scorpion*, either."

"How'd it happen?" She still couldn't quite believe that Orth was dead, but seeing the crater that had been a proud Legion car helped bring it home a little more.

"That white car. That Osprey, it apparently knocked out *Scorp* first, and then *Tarantula*." Roger shook his head. "I've only seen those on the Somerset racetrack, never in the field."

Brooke nodded, finally recognizing the name. Ospreys were some of the rarest cars in Evan, each of them handcrafted by the finest mechanics of far-off Sarsfield. "She saved us."

"Orth?"

"Lorna." Brooke shook her head. "She rammed the white car, saved us. Then it got her."

"Oh." Roger steered *Wolf* toward the nomad Motorhomes and Box Vans, which had been towed apart from the lorries of the Holy Rollers convoy. Brooke recognized Tran, waiting in her metal-plated vest for them at the foot of one of the Motorhomes. All around, mechanics from various gangs were going from one wrecked combat vehicle to the next, tying red or orange strips of cloth to each. Marking them as salvageable or scrap, Brooke realized.

Brooke and Roger stepped clear of *Wolf*, and Tran looked Brooke up and down with a hunting rifle in her hands. "Good to see you made it, Brooke." She gestured at the nearest Motorhome, a blue model with the rippling black scars of a recent flamethrower attack across its lower half, well below the narrow windows. "I'm late to report to the Gray Riders. You and Roger clear these out, make sure there's no Slavers hiding in 'em." She glanced down at Daisy's holster. "You've sure got the right tool for it."

Roger nodded and slung his rifle off his shoulder. Brooke drew Daisy and checked the shells in her breech, and took some steps toward the Motorhome. The metal around the Motorhome's door was carved with intricate curling designs, filled with colored paints. Brooke laid a hand on the designs, and Roger grabbed the door's handle.

"Cover me," Brooke said, and Roger nodded and opened the door. Brooke stepped up the narrow stairs, Daisy held at the ready.

\*PART 14\*

Brooke had never been in a nomad caravan before, even when nomad clans had come up to Criddle Hold, and she went up the metal stairs slowly, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom. First she checked the cockpit to her immediate right, but the leather seats and carved metal dashboard were empty of any sign of Slavers.

Dazzling shafts of sunlight streamed through the windows on the left side of the Motorhome, illuminating a meager stretch of stone counter, just inside the door, that had served the owners as a kitchen. A ceramic water jug, painted in bright red and white, hunched over a metal washbasin, pots and pans stacked neatly under the tap. Everything was put away as neatly as any farmhold kitchen that Brooke had ever seen. The Slavers must not have stripped it yet. Good for the real owners. They'll have that much less work to do putting their lives in order after this day. As her eyes adjusted to the dim interior, she could pick out more homey touches.

The sun and moon, both ringed with blue-green aurorae, that someone had painted on the doors of the cabinets over the counter. A note in the jagged script of the nomad tribes glued to the side of the pantry. The coils of wire and pieces of scrap metal strapped to the wall opposite the kitchen, above an accordion-folded table that probably did double duty as both dining table and workshop, judging from the tools tied to the corkboard on the forward bulkhead. Brooke could picture a nomad family in their dyed woolen clothes sitting down to a meal of goat cheese and smoked meat, or a nomad woman making small repairs to some scavenged trinket while her menfolk were out with the herd.

A curtain separated the Motorhome's forward compartment from the rear, probably the family's sleeping chambers. She wondered whether the family that had owned this caravan was still alive as she stepped carefully down the central aisle, sweeping Daisy's barrels back and forth as she went. Her boots made only soft scuffing sounds on the woolen carpets. Behind her, she heard Roger come up the stairs behind her. "Clear so far?"

"So far," Brooke said over her shoulder, then a noise to the rear caught her attention. Her eyes and her barrels locked onto the curtain, and her fingers tightened on Daisy's triggers.

She took a step toward the curtain and yanked it open. The space beyond was dimmer than the forward compartment, for metal shutters had been dragged down over the windows on either side, leaving only narrow slits. The narrow bed against the far wall dominated the space, piled high with wool and leather clothes.

Something shuffled in the gloom, and Brooke froze in the doorway. Her breath catching in her throat and her heart pounding in her ears. She touched Daisy's safety with her thumb, making sure it was ready to fire. She slid to the left, into the dubious shelter of the doorway.

Roger stomped up behind her. "Brooke? Wha-"

In the gloom, it looked like the bed exploded as a man leapt off it, scattering clothes everywhere as he charged at them. The light caught the sword in his hand as it came down toward Brooke's face.

Brooke screamed and reflexively clenched her finger. Daisy roared and kicked her in the shoulder, hard as a ram's head, and a dazzling star burst from Daisy's barrel.

When the sparks cleared from her eyes, Brooke could see that the shot had knocked the Slaver down on one knee and perforated his leather armor. But he was reaching for his dropped sword, snarling at her with pointed bloody teeth below wide yellow eyes.

Brooke brought Daisy back up to her shoulder and pulled the other trigger, and the Slaver's head disappeared in a spray of blood and brains. The body fell over and twitched on the floor, the feet kicking spasmodically at the edge of the bed.

Brooke inhaled shakily and broke Daisy open to reload. She wanted to cheer and scream and weep all at once, and instead settled for sliding two more shells into Daisy, closing the breech, and cocking back the hammers. That accomplished, she bent over and retched onto the floor.

So much for the real owners. They'll have a hell of a mess to clean up.

###

While her stomach was emptying itself, Roger had called a couple gangers to help drag the body out of the caravan. Then he covered her while she checked every single space on the Motorhome big enough to conceal a person, even the tiny water closet between the bedroom and the main room.

Once she was satisfied that the caravan was clear, she marched out and down to the sands, with Roger trailing behind her, burbling, "That was amazing, how you took him down, bang-bang, so fast!"

"Roger," she growled over her shoulder, "Shut up and point me at some water."

Roger blinked at her, closed his mouth on something, and handed her his canteen.

She took a heavy swig from the canteen, then spat mingled water and vomit at her feet. Two more swigs almost cleared the rancid taste from her mouth, but for a patch of roughness at the back of her throat. She wiped the mouth of the canteen with her sleeve and handed it back to Roger. He sealed it and strapped it to his belt, looking at her as if he'd never seen her before. "What next?" She asked.

"Uhh... the next Motorhome, I guess. Oh wait." Roger pulled a white ribbon from his belt and tied it to the caravan's door. "Now they know that one's clear."

###

After the searches were done, Roger had a quick muttered conversation with the radio, then frowned, and waved Brooke into *Wolf's* passenger seat. He drove Brooke over the ridge, back toward the basin where Lorna had met her death.

Mellie was still kneeling in front of Lorna's shredded Phoenix when Roger parked behind her. She didn't look up or aside, or react at all. "I'd rather face Slavers than this," Roger muttered as he opened his door to take advantage of the breeze.



Brooke glanced aside as she opened her door, unaccountably irritated by his words, but couldn't bring herself to disagree. At last she steeled herself and opened the door.

Mellie didn't react as Brooke walked up behind her, though Brooke's boots crunched in the rocky sand of the basin. Brooke stood by Mellie's side for a long moment, trying to ignore the smell, focusing her attention on watching the shimmer of heat above the car's roof.

A spurt of rifle fire broke out at the top of the ridge, then the chunky rattle of a heavier machine gun, and Brooke glanced up, her hand going to Daisy's stock. Mellie didn't even twitch. "They do that every couple minutes. The blood and smoke draws scavengers. The dead scavengers draw more scavengers. This kinda thing can get hairy out in the Badlands, but the local critters are weak." Mellie took a deep, gulping breath, and closed her eyes.

Brooke put a hand on Mellie's shoulder, and her friend started, then looked up at her. Dried blood still covered her face, streaked with wet shining lines, though the cut on her forehead had long scabbed over. "Are you alright, kid? You caught some shrapnel there."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Brooke touched the cuts on her face. "Doesn't even hurt. How are you?"

"I'm..." Mellie laughed, her voice spiraling upward, before she gulped and closed her eyes. "I've been better. Oh, gods, I've been so much better."

A shiver of fear crawled up Brooke's neck, and she dismissed it with a shrug. No reason to be afraid of Mellie, you idiot. "Come on, Mellie, let's get out of here. You need water."

"Can't." Mellie shook her head slowly. "She's still in there. Not gonna leave her till she's out of there."

"Want me to get the Gray Riders?"

"Can't hurt. They sent a SUV for her partner. What was left of him. What about Orth?"

"I don't know. Her car blew up pretty big, I don't know if there was enough left to gather," Brooke said, trying to sound tough and blasé like Mellie. She turned and walked back to *Wolf*.

At the car, she slid in and grabbed a radio headset, then stopped. "Is it normal for the Gray Riders to take one of their dead, but not the other?"

Roger ran a hand through his hair. "No. They're usually serious about retrieving their dead. They bury 'em in Elmsfield." He stopped and looked at Brooke with wide eyes. "You mean she's still in there?"

Brooke nodded. "Yeah. Mellie won't move until Lorna's body is moved."

"Oh no." Roger put a hand over his mouth and stared at Mellie. "I knew she broke their rules, but jeez..."

Brooke's flash of anger crystallized into a plan of action. She glanced into the Phoenix's supply-packed back seat and slid out of the car. "Get the tent."

"Brooke -"

"Get. The. Tent," she growled at him. He slid out of his seat and out of the car.

"You know I outrank you, right?"

"I know I'll hurt you if you don't get the tent." Brooke snapped, and walked up behind Mellie. She didn't know if her plan was breaking some rule, or whether it would make problems with the Gray Riders. With the anger burning in her forebrain, she didn't care. It was what she had to do, and she couldn't stop until it was done. Ask for forgiveness later. Act now.

She knelt down next to Mellie and put her arm around her friend. "Hey, Mel," she whispered gently. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

Mellie tried to shrug off her hand, but Brooke held her tighter. "Lorna's still here. I won't leave her."

"I know. We're taking her with us." Brooke slid her hand under Mellie's shoulder and pulled upward. Mellie sniffed, nodded, and tried to stand. She stumbled badly and went down on one knee, but Brooke caught her before she could fall, and started helping her toward *Wolf*. "Come on, big sister, you've been out in the heat too long. What would Lorna say if she saw you like this?"

"She'd... she'd prob'ly kill me." Mellie sniffed, and twisted to look back at Lorna's car. "Oh, God, Lorna..."

Brooke's heart twisted at the anguish in Mellie's voice. "I'm sorry, Mellie. She saved both of us."

"I know." Mellie's voice, next to Brooke's ear, turned dark and hateful. "And I'm going to... to get that son-of-a-bitch if it's the last thing I do."

Brooke helped Mellie into *Wolf's* shaded passenger seat. Mellie glanced up at her, muttered, "Thanks, li'l thinker," and curled up on the seat, closing her eyes.

Brooke stared down at her friend for a moment, then returned to Lorna's car, where Roger was waiting with a bundle of blue plastic at his feet - a survival tent from *Wolf's* boot. "I thought this was for Mellie while she waited. What are you planning?"

Brooke picked up the tent's blue plastic skin and shook out the metal poles. "We're getting her out and taking her back."

"Us?" Roger paled. "She's a Gray Rider, are you sure?"

"Yeah. She got left here when they went and got her partner. I don't want to leave her here." Brooke started circling the car. "She saved my life, Mellie's too. And then she died. I figure that makes her an honorary Legionnaire."

Roger let out a deep sigh, and started to circle the Phoenix. "Alright, but if we get in trouble for this, I'm blaming you."

"If anyone yells at us for this, let 'em argue with Daisy," Brooke said. "Now help me get her out."

\*PART 15\*

Getting Lorna's corpse out proved to be more difficult and smelly than she first thought, but Brooke grit her teeth and ignored the smell. The worst part was that the bullets and shrapnel had cut Lorna's lower body into several pieces, and Roger had to circle behind the car to quietly retch while Brooke gathered up the bigger pieces of Lorna's legs and bundled them into the tent. Brooke's stomach rose in rebellion a few times, but she just clenched her jaw tighter, swallowed, and kept working.

Mellie was so deep-asleep that she didn't stir when they bundled Lorna into Wolf's hard plastic back seat. Roger rummaged in *Wolf's* boot and hauled out two more canteens that sloshed, and tossed one to Brooke. The water within was warm and brackish, but it was the best water that Brooke had ever tasted. She couldn't wait to get back to Somerset and bathe. "Let's head back to the convoy."

Roger started to slide into the driver's seat, then stopped. "You drive, Brooke. I'll take *Kestrel*."

"Uh, sure." She circled the car and slid into the driver's seat. She'd had basic driving lessons in Somerset, so she could drive salvaged cars back to town without incident.

When Brooke started *Wolf's* engine, Mellie started bolt upright and reached for a weapon that wasn't there. Then she bent over and put her head between her knees. "Oh, gods," she moaned. "How long was I out? Where's Lorna?"

"Not long, and she's in the back seat," Brooke replied, focusing on turning *Wolf* around. As she hit the top of the ridge, she grabbed the water bottle off her belt and handed it over. "Drink up. I think the heat got to you."

"Not thirsty," Mellie slurred and tried to give the water back.

Brooke didn't take a hand off the wheel, just let Mellie wave the bottle at her as *Wolf* rolled down the slope. "Not being thirsty's a bad sign. I know you weren't drinking the whole time you were sitting there. Don't pretend you don't know, you taught me this, out on the pastures at lambing time."

"You're a horrid bitch, you know that?" Mellie asked deadpan as she uncapped the bottle and took a deep swig.

"I had a good teacher. And take smaller sips, or you'll get sick." Brooke steered the Phoenix toward a gathering on the rear edge of the convoy, where the rest of the Recon squadron had parked in a square while Brooke had been searching Motorhomes.

As they parked, the first thing they saw was Tran in conversation with a woman wearing the uniform of the Gray Riders and a bearded man wearing a flowing white coat. The survivors of Recon had gathered in a circle some distance away to watch the conversation.

Brooke parked *Wolf* in an empty space and climbed out, her hips and knees protesting the movement after all the abuse she'd put on them today. I'll rest you when we get back to town, she told her legs as she limped toward the others. Several faces were missing from among them - Stephen Flock, the quiet but friendly Jose Elson, the Gray Riders, and most of all, Orth and her driver 'Dynamite' Brown. Brooke missed them like she had missed her teeth as a small child, probing the empty space where something familiar had once been. Two of the Scavengers were missing, leaving their leader as the only non-Legion ganger in the circle, but both their cars were in the square, so Brooke assumed they hadn't taken any losses.

Slowly, Mellie came up behind her to join the circle. She accepted a round of quiet condolences with a grimace and a stiff nod. "Did anyone else see that white Osprey?" Brooke asked, once conversation fell into an uneasy silence.

"Osprey?" Mellie glanced aside at Brooke and scrubbed at the dried blood on her face. Flakes of blood sprinkled off and fell at her feet. "Is that what it was? I... I didn't get a good look."

"A white Osprey?" asked the Raging Scavenger leader, who'd introduced herself as Kelly Lebow. "I didn't get a good look at it either, but it sounds like the *White Knight*. There can't be two such Slaver lords, and only a great war leader would have an Osprey. And he was accompanied by Buccaneers, which fits the profile."

"Who is he? Where does he come from?" Mellie asked.

Lebow shrugged. "We don't know. We only know that he's male, and he's a mutant - six fingers on each hand, and so pale as to be almost albino, but he doesn't burn in sunlight. And that, we only know from prisoner interrogations down in Badlands."

She looked around at the circle. She had everyone's attention but Tran, who was engrossed in her quiet conversation. "He appeared about four years ago, with that Osprey painted that way, at the head of a small band of muscles attacking the Sarsfield-Badlands trade route. He picked targets well: expensive cars being moved north for sale, with only a handful of escorts and their speed to see them safe. A year after his first strikes, he launched his first major raids on minor settlements and nomad groups around Badlands Truckstop. That's when the Scavengers heard about him - we've fought Slavers around Badlands."

"Do you think we can find him?" Mellie pressed, her hands clenching and releasing each other behind her back, an old sign, Brooke recalled, of her trying to control her temper.

Lebow shrugged. "Perhaps. If he put together this expedition, he may go from town to town in the South over the next few months, looking for easy targets to rebuild his fortunes. It may be your best opportunity to catch him. But I recommend bringing quite a few friends. Hunting him hasn't worked out well before."

"What happened?" Brooke asked hastily, forestalling Mellie's angry outburst.

"The battle of the Petrified Forest." Lebow shrugged. Beside Brooke, Mellie took a deep breath. "A band of bounty-hunters out of Badlands set up an ambush, with a decoy convoy, and chased the *Knight* and his retinue into a dead forest. And the *Knight* turned on them. Killed half the hunters there, and left bounty-hunter cars scattered for most of a mile. Two Buzzers died in that forest, and the half-million-dollar reward on his head is still unclaimed."

"Half a million..." Mellie waved off the fantastic amount, then stiffened. "Doesn't matter."

"If you choose to pursue him, I wish you best of luck," Lebow said, watching Mellie through narrowed eyes.

"Hanlin, Criddle, what the hell is that in the back of *Wolf*?" Tran had broken off her conversation, and the man in the white coat was walking off toward the caravans. The Gray Rider woman was watching curiously from the edge of the parking formation. Tran stalked up to the circle and stopped right in front of Brooke and Roger. "Or rather, who was it? Taking a trophy?"

"Sergeant Welt," Brooke responded, straightening her back against the nerves dancing in her stomach. "The Gray Riders had collected her partner, but left her. Since she had saved my life - and Mellie - from the *White Knight*, it seemed wrong to leave her there." After a moment facing Tran's hard brown eyes, Brooke felt compelled to add, "If the Gray Riders want her back, I'd be happy to hand her over."

Tran's mouth compressed into a thin line, and the Scavenger turned her back and walked back to her own car, away from the confrontation. After a moment of eye contact, Brooke dropped her eyes away from Tran's. "It was my doing, Ma'am."

Abruptly, Tran wheeled to face the Gray Rider and demanded, "Lieutenant Dolliger, do you want your Sergeant Welt's body back?"

The Gray Rider stepped closer to *Wolf* and glanced down at the blue-wrapped bundle in the back seat. "Had she survived, Welt," she pronounced the name with a grimace of distaste, "would have been dishonorably discharged from the Gray Riders, for conduct unbecoming a warrior. As such, she is no longer a member of the Gray Riders. You do with her what you will."

Brooke caught the first hint of movement out of the corner of her eye, and grabbed the collar of Mellie's coat before she lunged at the Gray Rider. "You cowardly, no-good piece of -" She screamed, and began to fight against Brooke's grip, before more restraining hands fell on her arms and shoulders and held her back. She fell silent but for the breath whistling through her bared teeth.

"Lieutenant, would you be so kind as to report back to the Colonel? Please tender my best regards." Tran bowed slightly to the Gray Rider.

"I suggest, Miss Tran, that you place more restraint upon your people," Dolliger said as she turned away, toward the other end of the convoy, where *Iron Duke* was protecting a crew clearing the spikes from the roadway.

Tran looked at Mellie and shook her head, then walked toward the edge of the parking square after the Gray Rider, who turned around and walked slowly - no, sauntered - back toward her. Mellie shook off the restraining hands and rubbed at the blood on her face. "Brooke, can you get me some water?"

Brooke nodded, and walked after Tran to *Wolf*. She found Mellie's water bottle quickly, but while she was rummaging for her own, she heard quiet words pass between the two women. She froze, kneeling beside the Phoenix, to listen in.

"What is it?"

"Is that how you treat your fighters?"

"That's how we treat degenerates. We remove them. We actually have discipline, unlike some jumped-up militias I could name."

A long silence. "Lieutenant..."

"If this is some half-hearted love-everybody preaching, just leave off. I know what's right and wrong."

"No, not that. I was about to say, if you'd left my lover to rot like that, I'd rip out your guts and feed them to a razor worm. While you watched. That's all."

"I'll make allowances for emotions running high, but I expect an apology for that when we get back to town, Commander."

"Subcommander, Lieutenant. Joel Quick, back in Somerset, is now Commander of the Legion."

"Well, he'll be hearing from us later. Good-day."

Footsteps receded into the distance. Brooke exhaled a tense breath and stood up, only to come face-to-face with Tran, who'd somehow come around the Phoenix without making a sound. "Criddle?" She rasped.

"Yes, Ma'am?" Brooke stood straight as her aching legs would allow.

"I don't mind you eavesdropping, but I expect you to keep what you hear to yourself. That's all."



"Yes, Ma'am!" Brooke saluted, realized she was holding a water bottle to her forehead, then flushed painfully.

Attempting to salvage her dignity, Brooke turned around and marched the water bottle to Mellie, who pulled a cloth off her belt and started to clean her face. "What was that about?"

Brooke just shook her head. Tran walked into the circle next to her and waved at the convoy. "Hanlin, Sines, stay with our cars." Tran sighed, and went on more gently, "And Sines, you start thinking about your woman's arrangements. See if you can get in touch with Quick in Somerset and relay a report, and get the ball rolling on funerals. Everyone, head in and grab some loot. They've assigned us five cars, and I grabbed one already."

Brooke nodded and started to follow Devil toward the convoy, but Tran stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Criddle, you're coming with me."

"Yes, Ma'am." Brooke turned and followed Tran toward the rear of the convoy.

\*PART 16\*

Tran led Brooke toward the rear of the convoy, where the Slavers had kept the half-dozen Carrier Vans they'd used for prisoner transport. Dozens of freed prisoners milled around in small groups - gangers in various uniforms, dominated by the red and white of the Holy Rollers, nomads in white coats, and farmers and merchants from Haven Market. Each 'type,' Brooke noticed, mixed with their own - nomads did not mix with gangers, nor farmers with nomads. A handful bore injuries, either from their capture or the recent firefight. Brooke was amazed so many could have been fit into so few vehicles. Maybe they were using the captured lorries or other vehicles as transports too.

"We got a subcontract to deliver some of these farmers back to Haven Market, but there's a catch. The unmarried girls, and there's over a dozen of them, have to be suitably chaperoned, as I understand it -"

She threw a questioning glance aside at Brooke, who took the hint. "If they're not chaperoned when they're with a man, they're not considered virgins anymore. And can't be married without... well, yeah, it's not pleasant."

Tran nodded. "And we can't take them back in the Slaver vehicles, as they're really uncomfortable for the passengers. Every other woman in our squadron is a mechanic, so that leaves you. You can drive, can't you?" Brooke nodded, and Tran went on, "Well, you'll be driving in a convoy with some other vehicles back to Haven Market, to deliver the captures back to their families. So report to Lieutenant Soros of the Gray Riders. Then report back here, and bring back whatever car they give you."

"Sure, where do I -" Brooke started to ask.

"Brooke!" a voice screamed from one clump of farmers. Brooke started before she recognized the voice. She closed her eyes and made an effort to control her racing heart. Relax, Brooke.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Tran looking at her with an odd glint in her blue eyes, then turned and walked back toward the Legion's cars.

She saw about twenty feet away a huddle of girls standing in the shade of a Carrier Van, in the calf-length trousers and tunics that every girlchild in

the Haven Valley wore for work. A woman in a long black dress, so old her hair had turned iron-gray, stood holding a parasol and supervising the girls. Chaperoning them, Brooke recognized, so their families could be sure that their all-important virtue was protected. At the edge of the huddle, a girl in a floor-length dress was bouncing up and down on her toes, her blond braids disheveled. She said something to the chaperone, pointed at Brooke, and walked over.

"Esther?" Brooke blinked and removed her hand from Daisy, struggling to find words and taking refuge in duty. "I have to report to someone, have you seen a Gray Rider about? A Lieutenant Soros?"

"Oh, ask Mother Teller. Come on,"

Esther led Brooke back toward the chaperone, who wasn't familiar to Brooke, and who eyed her warily as she approached. "I'm looking for Lieutenant Soros, ma'am," Brooke said, touching her forehead in a vague salute, like she'd seen other gangers do.

The chaperone sniffed with disdain, but pointed past the Carrier Van, at a collection of gangers standing in a huddle around a motley collection of undamaged sedans and muscles, some with Slaver colors, others bearing the liveries of various merchant gangs. Each bore a number crudely applied with black paint. Brooke's eyes were immediately drawn to the brightest, a wide-set Mercenary painted bright yellow with black-and-white checks in a narrow band along its flank, and the number 8 on its door. She couldn't imagine the purpose of the coloration - was it some kind of camouflage in the desert?

The chaperone's disapproving voice snapped her from her thoughts. "Lieutenant Soros is over there."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Brooke saluted and made her way toward the gangers, all of whom were women. One wore the now-familiar Gray Rider livery, with the same rank insignia as Dolliger, and Brooke saluted her, rather more formally than she'd saluted the chaperone. "Brooke Criddle, Fifth Legion. You need drivers?"

The red-haired Gray Rider nodded and held out her hand to shake with a smile. "Yup, you're the last one I need. We're about to get this show on the

road. You're number eight, keys are in the ignition and the radio's set up. You're unarmed, but hopefully this'll be a milk run."

Brooke nodded, the huddle of gangers broke up, each one to her assigned car. Brooke found the yellow Mercenary, settled into the driver's seat, and turned on her radio. Soros walked over to the chaperone with a sheaf of paper in her hand, which she in turn distributed to the children. The huddle of girls broke up, little groups of three or four heading for each of the cars. To Brooke's dismay, Esther led two other girls in an unerring line - straight for Brooke's car. Their high voices carried unerringly to Brooke's ear as Esther claimed the passenger seat by right of her age, being a whole three months older than the other two. They were both dark-haired and stocky, their hair pulled back into matching braids. They piled into the enormous back seat and stared at Brooke with wide, bright brown eyes. "Hello, I'm Brooke. Strap yourselves in, please."

They complied quickly, silently, and Brooke wondered what she looked like to them. Heroine? She-devil? Some mixture of the two?

As the rest of the children settled into their assigned cars, Brooke looked at Esther, trying to find words. What are you doing here? was entirely redundant, so after some fumbling, she settled on, "What happened?"

"Father had me in Haven Market to meet some suitors!" Stars glittered in Esther's green eyes, and the restraints creaked as she bounced up and down in her seat. "The sons of great merchant families, can you believe it? And then the Slavers came and took us from the Barter Hall, and I was so scared! But I prayed, and look! God answered my prayers and rescued us!"

Brooke had no trouble picturing her father marrying Esther off to some Merchant prince twice her age, and Esther being overjoyed at being a bartering chip. Esther rattled on cheerfully, "And what happened to you, Brooke? Did the Slavers catch you too? You know, if you want to turn back to God, he knows a priest - Father Terrethel's brother - who can cast out the demon in you - and even better, Peter Hanlin is still unbetrothed -"

"I wasn't captured by Slavers," Brooke interrupted, pinching the bridge of her nose. Now I remember why I ran away. "I'm part of the militia force that beat the Slavers."

"You? A warrior? One of those manly women? How are you ever going to get a husband?" Esther's eyes drifted down Brooke's clothes, and locked onto Daisy's stock. "Is that a gun?" Esther undid her restraints and opened her door.

Brooke grabbed Esther's shoulder, and her sister froze, eyes wide and afraid. She gently pulled her back into the car, and said softly, "It's alright, Esther. I won't make you touch it. I'm just going to drive you back to Haven Market, alright?"

Esther nodded, slid back into her seat, and closed the door, though once her restraints were secured, she stayed as far as possible from Brooke.

Brooke sighed and glanced in the back seat. The fear-wide eyes and stiff postures of the other two girls warned her not to even attempt a conversation.

Finally a pair of Gray Rider Apaches, battered and dented but bristling with guns, rolled up to the convoy and the radio blared to life. "Haven Convoy, yell now if you're not ready." Silence ruled the channel, and Soros went on, "All right, everyone roll out." Brooke started her engine, shifted into gear, and followed the others onto the road.

###

They rode fast along the road, with the SUVs laboring to keep pace with the faster sedans and muscles, until desert turned to scrub, and scrub to farmland. As they rode closer, Brooke spotted a wide column of black smoke rising from the north, dissipating to faint gray as it was torn and dissolved by the winds. I don't like the looks of that. Is that -? She couldn't bear to finish the question, even in her mind. The three girls were oblivious, lost in pieces of handiwork and darning that someone had rustled up for them back at the battlefield.

As the convoy came in sight of Haven Market, Brooke's heart sank. She'd imagined the town damaged, in what idle moments she'd had before the battle had been joined, but she hadn't imagined this.

The stout stone walls had been torn apart by rockets, until they looked like a jaw full of rotted teeth. Of the town behind the wall, not a single building was clearly visible through the haze of smoke, and most of them seemed gone entirely.

The convoy closed, cleared itself with the town's remaining defenders, then rolled through the gates. They parked and Brooke killed the Mercenary's engine. The sudden lack of noise and vibration startled the girls away from their handiwork. All three looked up, and their eyes grew wide and scared, their mouths falling open in dismay. "Come with me, I'm going to figure out where you're supposed to go," Brooke told them, opening her door and climbing out, her boots crunching on bits of stone and debris blasted out of the wall. The now-familiar stench of burning rubber, metal, and flesh assaulted her nose. It wasn't as bad as the stink back at the battlefield, but it was so wrong to smell it here, along with the acrid stink of burned medicines from the remains of the herbalist's shop.

The chain-link gate lay to one side of the main square, bent nearly in half by some mighty blow, next to the ruin of the gatehouse. The inn was obviously a hollow shell, smoke still trickling from the gaping wounds where its upstairs should have been. Burned out cars still smoldered here and there, mostly around the inn and heading down the main street toward the lesser gate on the other side of the town. They tried to run. And didn't get far.

A handful of people went from building to building, scavenging what they could from the wreckage. Just inside the wall, a row of bodies lay under woolen sheets. Brooke stared at the bodies for a long moment, counting bulges in the sheet. Forty-six. Some of the bulges were distressingly small...

The mechanic's shop, opposite the ruin of the inn, was the source of most of the thick smoke, pouring out through its windows and doors while a handful of people stood simply watching. Brooke thought of all the posters around the Legion garage, warning against smoking, open flames, sparks, and finally understood the reason for the restrictions.

"Dear God," Esther whispered next to Brooke, "Deliver us from the fury of the Southmen..."

Bit late for that, Brooke thought, but she didn't say it aloud.

\*PART 17\*

The girls, sober and silent, followed her down the main street, and the crowd swelled as the other drivers got the same idea. At the head of the convoy, the slender, black-clad form of the chaperone appeared from one of the SUVs, and Brooke made a beeline for her. "I return your charges to you, ma'am," Brooke said, pushing Esther gently toward the chaperone, then walking away before anyone could object.

Soros was surrounded by a gaggle of townspeople shouting questions, so Brooke wandered toward the inn, kicking bits of stone and debris between her boots, like she'd seen Somerset children do with balls made from worn-out tire rubber.

"Brooke!" A voice bellowed, entirely too close, and Brooke spun, drawing Daisy. She froze as five armed men marched toward her from the inn. Her father was in the lead, and behind him the bulk of Mellie's father Rick, a hulk of a man with short-cropped blond hair, scarred with acne from steroid use. The other three... Brooke clenched her jaw as her eyes locked with Peter Hanlin's.

Her ex-fiance's pale eyes were hidden behind the dark glasses perched on his aquiline Hanlin nose, but the two big men behind him, wearing Hanlin Hold badges, grinned at her with anticipation. Oh... this is not good.

"Hello, Brooke," Peter said as the men came to a stop and formed a ragged half-circle around her. He took off his shades, revealing beautiful silver eyes set in his handsome face. "I was sorry that you had run away so suddenly. But now you're back, so put down the weapon. You shouldn't have to carry such things." He took a step closer to her and held out his hand.

Brooke took a step back and pivoted until Daisy's barrels weren't - quite - pointed at him. "Too bad, because this was a gift." She nodded toward Mellie's father. "From your daughter, Rick. She doesn't send her regards." The last sentence was pure spite, and Brooke regretted it immediately for the flash of rage in Sines' eyes. "You want it, come and get it."

"That can be arranged." Peter took a step to the left, forcing Brooke to step back again to keep all the men in her sight. His lovely eyes flashed in the

sun as he smiled at her. A chill ran down Brooke's spine at his expression. "Many things can be arranged. Now, won't you come with us? Your father pledged your word. You wouldn't want to make a liar of him, would you?"

"I'm part of a gang now, Peter. The Fifth Legion." Brooke took another step back, panic rising in her throat, as Mellie's father began circling her on the other side, a thin, feral grin on his face. "They'll back me up."

"You?" Peter sneered, though Brooke had caught the flash in his eyes when she'd mentioned the Legion. So he did know what gang Roger had run away to. "Who'd stand up for you, when we've gone to so much effort to get you back? Your father made a promise, it's up to you to honor it."

"Make me." Brooke brought Daisy up, pointing the barrels into Peter's face.

She realized her mistake, as Rick's heavy footsteps sounded close behind her, but before she could respond, a single gunshot rang out, far too close, pounding Brooke's ears. Everyone in Brooke's sight froze, and Peter moved his hands away from his sides.

"Criddle? Are you alright?" Lieutenant Soros asked from the direction of the shot.

"No, Ma'am," Brooke admitted, her eyes not moving off Peter. "They're trying to take me back to Criddle Hold."

"Oh, you're one of those Criddles, are you?" Soros sounded amused. "You can relax and step back now. We've got this covered."

Brooke risked a glance back at Soros, who had a machine pistol out and pointed at Rick Sines. Behind her, one of the Gray Riders SUVs had turned directly toward them, its twin heavy Gatling guns trained on the gunmen. A pair of gangers, who Brooke recognized as drivers from the childrens' convoy, flanked the SUV with raised rifles.

She took two steps back, removing herself from the line of fire, and Soros nodded approvingly at her, holstered her machine pistol and stepped forward into Brooke's place. "Now, does someone want to explain why you're threatening a member of a gang that's allied to mine? Someone who, by the way, fought bravely to free dozens of prisoners from the Slavers?"



"She's my daughter," Brooke's father rumbled, eyes full of suppressed rage for the Gray Rider woman. "She ran away after I contracted her to an honorable marriage. By our laws, I can reclaim her with the consent of her betrothed." He nodded to Peter.

Soros glanced over her shoulder at Brooke, then back at Peter and Brooke's father. "You can try. You might be able to take her, but I'd be obliged to tell her gang what happened to her. The Fifth Legion may be a small, underequipped militia by my gang's standards, but they have a reputation for loyalty. They take care of their own. They'd come after her."

"She's only a girl! Who'd come after her?" Peter sneered, pointing at Brooke.

Brooke's temper, battling against the inside of her skull like a fly in a jar, finally snapped, and red haze clouded her vision. She slammed Daisy into her holster, drew a knife from her belt, and advanced on Peter with short, furious steps.

Soros turned and tried to grab Brooke's shoulder, but she twisted away and grabbed Peter's collar. His bodyguards took a step back and raised their rifles, their muzzles looming in her peripheral vision, but Brooke was focused only on Peter and his sneer. Her knife came up, but a flash of fear in Peter's eyes cleared the mist from her eyes and her brain before the knife could open his throat. Brooke tapped the flat of the blade against his throat. "Peter, you do not want me for a wife. I have driven a car, and trained with machine guns and rocket launchers. I've fought in a battle, and killed men, with a Five-Five gun and with this shotgun at my side. Try to take me, and I will kill you, even before my gang knows what happened. I will try to kill you at the betrothal, at the altar, at the marriage bed, every opportunity I get, until you're dead, or I am. Am I clear?"

"You little bit-"

Brooke spun the blade in her hand and dug the edge into Peter's throat, drawing a thin line of blood along the edge of the blade, and forcing him to silence. "I asked if I was clear. Yes or no?"

Peter breathed in and out, warm air puffing against Brooke's arm and face. His eyes darted from side to side, avoiding Brooke's gaze. "I..." Brooke

twitched the knife, just a little. The knife vibrated in her hand from the strength of Peter's pulse against the blade. "Yes. I understand."

Brooke stepped back and released Peter's collar. "Good. Remember that." She wiped the knife on Peter's expensive cotton shirt, and slid it back into its sheath. She turned and walked back to the yellow Mercenary, feeling like every eye was following her.

She slid into the seat and slammed the door, the armor cutting off the first raised voices between Peter and her father.

Then the shakes hit, harder than after the battle, harder than after killing the Slaver in the caravan, so hard that Brooke gasped and bent over the steering wheel, gasping for breath with lungs that seemed to be trembling as hard as her hands, black spots dancing and whirling in her eyes. Holy God, she prayed, mouthing silently the word drilled into her in the Hold's little chapel, Holy God, Our Father who watches all, what did I just do?

###

Once the child-convoy returned to the battlefield, Soros told Brooke to take the Mercenary and return to the Legion. Brooke was only too happy to comply. Anything to keep from returning to Haven Market.

When salvage was finished, Tran gathered the survivors at the western edge of the parking square, the salvaged cars gathered around the Legion's own vehicles. The three nomads who'd volunteered to drive cars to Somerset for the Legion stood back among the cars and talked quietly, passing a pungent brown-weed cigar back and forth between them. Every booted step around caused small showers of sand into a shallow pit dug in the ground, next to two forms wrapped in tents, and a third, shapeless tent-bundle containing the mingled ashes of Chasity Orth and 'Dynamite' Brown, as Tarantula's explosive cremation had rendered it impossible to tell one from the other from the car.

Tran cleared her throat, looked around at her comrades, and said quietly, "They died as they lived - fast, courageous, and fighting in defense of the people of the North. Their names will not be remembered, by all but those gathered today. When we have all met our ends, they will be forgotten."

"But as we each meet our ends, we will move on to whatever comes after this world, we can hope to see these comrades, these friends again, whether we continue on to another, better world, or back into this one. So we lay these friends in the ground with grief and hope, surrounded by their friends and enemies."

Then Tran bent and picked up one end of one body, and others moved to help. Brooke stood back, next to Mellie, and watched as the bodies were lowered into the pit. She glanced over her shoulder at *Wolf* and the blue bundle in the Phoenix's back seat. "Lorna's not being buried here?" Brooke whispered.

"No, I'm taking her home." Mellie muttered back. Her wound had only been treated with a bandage across her forehead, half-concealed by matted locks of hair escaped from her braid.

With both bodies in the pit, Tran and the others climbed out, grabbed the shovels waiting on the edge of the pit, and began filling it in.

\*PART 18\*

Brooke walked back into her room, threw the bundle of clothes onto her bed, and began sorting. Her leather pants and jacket, which she'd washed down along with herself, went into her mending pile. Though she suspected that the blood wasn't going to come out of either, it was at least worth the effort to mend the shrapnel-rips.

She pushed back her still-wet hair and dug in her footlocker for clean clothes. Quick had announced an "Assembly" at nineteen hundred. She wasn't entirely clear what an "Assembly" was, but it sounded formal, like the Sunday meetings back home. Not like I'll ever see home again, I suppose.

She'd barely put on clean wool trousers when a knock sounded at her door. "Who is it?" she called.

"It's Mellie. I need to talk to you."

Brooke hesitated, then pulled the door open. "Come on in."

Mellie slid through the door, took in Brooke's half-dressed state, then blushed furiously and tried to back out, but Brooke had already shut the door behind her. "I'm sorry -"

"How often did you see me like this at the Hold, Mellie?" Brooke asked, as she bent to rummage in her footlocker for a shirt.

"Pretty often," Mellie conceded reluctantly, "but neither of us knew that I was... well. A woman-lover. Then."

"Like it matters?" Brooke pulled out a hemp undershirt and a wool blouse in Legion blue, and slipped them on. "You just lost your lover, Mellie. You pined for a year after your father drowned your cat. How many little flowers did you put on its grave in the vegetable garden? I'm not worried about you conquering me, or whatever you imagine I fear." Brooke ran her towel over her hair again, trying to dry it. "How did you... take care of Lorna?"

Mellie sighed deeply and sat on the unclaimed bed, looking down on her dusty boots. Brooke noticed that Mellie was wearing her best Legion-blue coat over a clean black shirt and trousers. A row of silver studs glittered along

the right breast of her coat. "Yeah. I got her burned, then I found a nice place in the hills north of town, under some trees. There's a bunch of hills too steep and rough to farm, and a creek that's only there after the winter rains. Korivak Creek, we used to... that doesn't matter now. I went up to the top and buried her ashes under a pine tree, and made a little clay marker. The south side, overlooking the... the town." She took a deep, shaking breath, then looked up at Brooke and went on, "If anything... happens to me... out there, I'd like to be put there. Near her. If that's possible."

Brooke nodded, but inside she was shaken by the thought of Mellie dying. "Sure. Um, I'll remember that. Is that... normally, how it's done, for most gangs? Burning and burying the ashes?" Back at Criddle Hold, the dead had been buried unburned in the sacred ground around Father Terrethel's little chapel.

She shrugged without looking up. "Sometimes, yeah. The Gray Riders burn theirs and run them over to Elmsfield, to bury around the elm grove. Other gangs, it depends what people want to do. But look, there was a reason I came in." She took a deep breath, and went on, "I want to go after him. That *White Knight* bastard. He-he... he killed enough people today, he deserves to die. End him, put him in the ground, so he can't kill any more. Can't... keep breathing... when she... can't." Mellie fell silent, one hand playing with her braid by her side. Then she dropped the braid, her hand curling into a fist. "My share of the gang's loot is enough to buy a decent car and go hunting. And I want you to come with me."

Brooke sat on her own bed, opposite Mellie, and stared at her friend. Leave the others? Leave the Legion? And go across the distant Badlands in search of a Slaver warlord? "Why ask me? I'm barely trained, why not a better driver or gunner, like Devil or Trent West?"

"You... I trust you. And down in the South, there's nothing more important than trust." A burning intensity was coming into Mellie's pale eyes, and her words started coming faster, "Come on, Brooke, want to help take this bastard down?"

Brooke thought about it, and bit her lip. The idea of going to the dangerous, lawless Badlands dried her mouth and sent a shiver down her spine. But what was the alternative? Say no, and watch Mellie drive out, to die

as alone and broken as Lorna? The Gray Rider's mutilated corpse swam before her mind's eye. Can I prevent that?

I can damn well try. "Uh... sure."

"Great. I... I'm glad. Thanks." Mellie grinned, a little of the old confidence joining the rage and pain in her eyes. "He's not gonna know what hit him. C'mon."

She jumped up and started for the door, but Brooke stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. Before Mellie could react, Brooke stepped close and pulled Mellie into a hug. "I'm sorry, Mellie."

Mellie put one arm around her shoulder, then pushed her away with the other hand. "It's alright. Let's go kill that bastard." Mellie pushed her away and pulled open the door.

Down the hall, Mellie knocked on the door of the office, and at some word from inside, opened the door.

Inside, Quick sat behind the desk, next to Tran, and an array of documents and maps set out between them. Both looked up without much surprise as Mellie and Brooke entered the office, and Quick gestured them at a pair of plastic chairs. Mellie shook her head and walked up to Quick's desk, and Brooke followed suit, standing just behind Mellie. "Mellie, Brooke, what a surprise. What's up?"

"We're here to cash out." Mellie put her hands flat on the desk.

"Let me see..." Joel swiveled his chair, pulled two binders off the shelf, and put them down on the desk. One had a thick sheaf of paper between its covers, and the other only had a few sheets. He flipped through one, then the other, scratching notes onto a piece of paper. "That comes out to... forty-six thousand, eight hundred and four." He glanced up at Mellie with questions in his eyes. No, decided Brooke as Joel's eyes flicked back and forth between Mellie and Brooke, Only one question. He knows why she's here. How did he know?

"Good. Enough for a dual-Gat Phoenix."

"And fuel, food, and fun for quite a bit after that."

"No fun on this trip." Mellie straightened, and her hands grasped each other behind her back. "We're going south."

"And you, Brooke?" Quick's eyes flicked over to Brooke, and she nodded wordlessly.

Joel glanced back at Mellie, and then down at his desk. "I know how you feel, Mellie—"

"I don't think either of you have a clue how I feel," Mellie interrupted, her voice just above a whisper, but firm and... angry? Mellie, what did they do to you?

"I was sharing a bed with Steve Flock for the last five months, Mellie." Tran responded, just as quietly, but with the ring of steel in her smoke-scarred voice. Brooke looked at the driver and noticed that Tran's brown eyes were faintly puffy and red around the edges. "Neither of us wanted to make a big deal about it, so we kept it quiet. And Orth was my gunner more times than I wanna count. And Brown saved my ass a couple times, and Jose Elson used to bring me home from Dexter's when I was drunk. Don't you go thinking your pain is any less than ours, or you're the only one grieving a loss."

"I'm not," Mellie grated, "but if you want to grieve all forted up in this barracks, fine. I'm gonna go out and get even."

"And I don't suppose I can stop you." Quick rolled his chair back and put his boots up on the desk. "Let me make you a deal. You stay until morning, through the assembly and the wake, and I'll double that amount out of my share. You can get a much better car to match against that Osprey."

Mellie nodded stiffly. "Deal. But I don't see the point. You're just announcing that you're taking over from Orth, and heading over to Dexter's to drink yourselves blind."

"You've been with the Legion for a year, right, Mellie?" Quick asked. Mellie nodded, and he went on, "Then you won't remember when old 'Steady' Hernandez was in this chair."

"Action matters, Quick, not talk. As you'd know if you ever got out of this office."

"I got out plenty." Joel grinned, his metal teeth flashing. "You and I never paired because my favorite guns are too big to mount on those little tin cars you love so much. And by the time you came back, I was doing mostly the administration that Orth hated so much. It worked. I suspect I'll be getting out more, since we'll have to integrate a bunch of new trainees into the Legion. We lost a lot of talent out there, and we'll lose more if you two light off on your own."

Mellie sighed, and nodded firmly. "I'll... I'll probably be back, sooner or later. As long as you hold up your end. Double cash, tomorrow morning."

"If you still choose to go your own way." Joel grinned, metal teeth there and gone in a flash. "Stick around for the assembly. Only an hour to go. Grab some food, you two need it."

Mellie nodded and turned for the door, and Brooke followed. Once out of the office, Brooke asked her friend, "Mellie, after... I mean, once we're done, think we can get back into the Legion?"

"Probably. I don't really care." At the corridor junction, Mellie shrugged and jerked her thumb toward the garage. "I'm gonna head out and get some shop food. You hungry?"

Brooke looked the other way, toward the kitchen, and bit her lip. Then she looked at her friend and nodded.



\*PART 19\*

At nineteen-hundred, with the sun descending toward the western hills, all the Fifth Legion members in Somerset gathered in the courtyard. Lamps burned on stands spread around the courtyard, emitting sickly-sweet smoke that kept the night insects whining hungrily around the edges of the gathering instead of sucking the Legion dry. Here and there, bright blue and green spots flickered as carnivorous glowflies fed in turn on the bloodsuckers.

Brooke stood at the back of the crowd, idly counting the flashes over the garage. The rest of the Legion, some two dozen altogether, kept some distance from Mellie, who was standing next to her, tense as a guard-dog and staring at the closed garage door. She'd freed her hair from its braid over a silent dinner of rabbit pie in a nearby cookshop, and now the hair flowed down her back in straw-colored waves, still stained here and there with blood and soot, and concealing the cut across her forehead.

After some time waiting, Joel stepped out of the office and sat on the same crate of ammunition he'd used as a speaking stand... how many hours ago? It seemed like a century ago that she was standing in this courtyard, waiting for news. But now, the hour was different, faces were missing, and shadows stretched long and dark upon the ground.

Joel surveyed the assembled Legion members with a slight smile, then waved his hand at them. "Gather round, everyone. No need to be formal."

The Legion stirred, then moved slowly into a loose semicircle around Joel and his ammunition crate. Brooke moved to the front, then crouched down so Mellie could see over her. Joel looked around the Legion again, seemingly making eye contact with every single person in the semicircle. "In accordance with chain of command and Commander Orth's wishes, I'm taking over as Legion Commander. The rest of you are keeping your existing positions, unless we need to change anything. Talk to me if you need anything, or you just want to talk." One side of his scarred mouth quirked up.

After a moment, Joel sighed and dropped the smile. "I've heard a lot about avenging Orth and the others from various people, and I want to say right now - vengeance isn't going to bring our dead back. It won't even help

us feel better." Did Joel's eyes got to Mellie, for just a moment? "Trust me when I say, I've been all the way to the bottom of that road, and it doesn't help.

"That said, this *White Knight* fellow is a serious threat. Anyone who can organize Slavers into an army that large is a very big threat to everyone who doesn't want to get carted off to Firelight." Joel paused, again sweeping his eyes across the semicircle. "So we are going to put an end to him. Not just for vengeance, but to keep anyone else from feeling our grief because of him. And fulfilling our mission: to protect the people of the North. Tran has volunteered to lead a group to track down and eliminate the *White Knight*."

Mellie inhaled sharply. Joel glanced at her, then at one or two other people. Tran stepped forward from her end of the semicircle and took a position behind and to one side of Joel. "We've done this before, four years ago, when a warlord from the Sabre Dogs had a particular vendetta against our merchant cargoes. Old Hernandez led out a task force, including Orth and myself, and we buried him just north of Badlands. That's where I got these." Joel grinned without humor, his teeth shining briefly in the torchlight.

"Tran and I will be taking seven volunteers now. First come, first go, leaving tomorrow morning. Once we have enough volunteers, we'll all go down to Dexter's and have a proper wake."

Mellie started moving even before Joel had finished her sentence, pushing past Brooke to make a beeline for Tran. Elisha Strang started moving, not much behind Mellie. Brooke bit her lip, wondering why her stomach had seemed to drop. You were ready to go with Mellie, is this different?

The ruins of Haven Market flashed before her mind's eye, and the row of bodies under a blanket, reducing faces, bodies, lives and hopes to anonymous lumps under cloth. There's the difference. Can I make that less likely to happen again? She took a step forward and ended up just behind Elisha Strang as soft words passed between Mellie and Tran. Mellie shook Tran's hand and stalked off toward the gate. Out of the corner of her eye, Brooke saw Roger staring at her. Then he leaned forward, leaned back, and took the place in Joel's line behind Devil.

Elisha shook Tran's hand and moved off to one side, and Tran smiled up at Brooke. "I was hoping you'd volunteer for this. Still up to go south?"

Brooke nodded. "I'm not too - too new to volunteer?"

Tran shook her head. "You survived your first and second fights, we'd have offered you a trip south sooner or later." The driver grabbed Brooke's shoulder and gave her a little shake. "It'll be good for you. Or it'll kill you. Maybe both." She grinned, and Brooke chuckled obediently, feeling obscurely cheered by the gallows humor. Tran released Brooke's shoulder, and Brooke stepped away from the line.

When Tran called "That's enough," it was Tran, Mellie, Strang, and Devil for drivers, and Brooke, Roger, Jose Simonsen, and Trenton West as gunners. Joel looked them over. "You're the sword of the Legion, and the fury of the North. Good hunting. You leave tomorrow morning." He grinned at them, and jerked his head toward the compound gate. "Not too early though, since it's time for the wake! Legion! To Dexter's!"

###

Dexter's Tavern occupied an enormous warehouse that dated to the pre-Storm days, rebuilt with brick walls and tile roof. According to Joel, it had been one of the first buildings repaired, once the survivors of the Bunker underneath Somerset founded the town after the worst of the Storm had passed. It wasn't the only tavern in Somerset, but it was easily the largest.

Mellie was silent for the trip, walking apart from the rest of the Legion. Brooke wanted to comfort her friend, but Mellie's expression was as inviting as broken glass.

As the Legion approached, one of the mechanics darted ahead to pull open the door. Golden light spilled out into the gathering dark, bringing with it a tide of music and laughter. Joel stopped next to the door and waved the rest of the Legion through.

As she stepped through the door, Brooke stopped in place, stunned by the mass of people, the noise of laughter and arguments, the swirling motion of the waitresses carrying trays of food and drinks through the crowd. A push from behind set Brooke in motion again, following Strang through the crowd to a large table. She sat with the rest of the Legion, and then things got a bit blurry.

There was ale. There was ale and whiskey and mezcal, and there were waitresses to bring more whenever they ran out. There were toasts to the memory of the dead. There were jokes, mostly obscene. There were long stories. There was laughter, roaring gales that dissolved into tears, and turned heads at neighboring tables.

As Devil Deweese was telling the story of some past battle, his hands turning in air, Roger leaned close and muttered, "I heard you clocked Peter."

"Not really," Brooke shrugged, shifting nervously in her seat. She'd only reported the barest facts of the incident with Peter to Tran, not mentioning her threats to Peter. "He tried to get me to go back, I said no, the other gangers backed me up, and he backed off, that was it."

"That's not what I heard," Roger smirked at her. "I was afraid after the battle, you'd decide Peter was the safer option."

Brooke frowned, trying to marshal her thoughts through a brain muddy with her first two cactus ales. The memories of the confrontation at Haven Market still sent shivers of fear through her. After a moment, she buried her fears in humor. "Safer? Safer from Slavers, maybe. But Peter wouldn't let me keep my gun."

Roger's hand, rough but warm, found hers, his fingers embracing hers, then withdrawing to lift his ale to his lips. "I was afraid you'd change your mind once you saw how much pain there is in this life."

Brooke touched her glass to Roger's. "Pain and all... I'd rather be here. Pain and all."