

Hawk's Legend.

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By

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Chapter 1.

Sixteen years ago.

The old beat up truck sped down the dusty road, now and then it would skid almost as if the driver was losing control, but then the truck would recover and continue its maddening journey. The driver drove like a man possessed as the deep desert heat caused rivers of sweat to cascade from his face. Inside the truck the man with his wife scanned the horizon as the truck plowed through the hot desert sun tossing up a cloud of dust over a half mile long. The truck swerved now and then as the man leaned out the window straining his eyes... Looking.... Searching.....

“Ted, you grabbed my arm, threw me into the truck and now we’re out here deep in the wastelands and the mountains....He could be out here. We never head out this way, it’s way too dangerous. What the hell has gotten into you!” Sara yelled above the roar of the trucks engine. Sara was a slightly overweight petite woman, but could well handle her own in a fight, if she had to.

“I’d never put you in danger Sara my gal. There’s someone watching our back.”

“Someone?”

“Heh-heh, don’t worry your pretty little head about it... You ought to....”

“Ahhh that mysterious friend of yours.. The one no one but you has seen.. I love you my darling, but I wish we would have brought that nice guardsman friend of yours... You know that Gris. He seems like he would be nice to have fighting alongside of.....”

Ted just laughed.....

Their truck was not more than a pile of junk, but Ted kept it running like it was new and now it seemed it would pay off. The truck careened along, at times, for a moment, a bump would send the truck into the air. No sooner would it hit the ground and the driver would once again floor it and it would lurch back into its nerve wracking pace.

“Honey I got a radio call from that old friend, he said.....” Ted’s eyes narrowed, his eyes squinting in the blinding desert sun, his foot slammed down on the brakes tossing them both forward...

“Christ!! The truck came to a skidding halt on the old dirt road. When the dust cleared, Ted pointed *“There!”*

He pointed to something reflecting off the side of the road, next to some scrub brush. Ted jumped out of the truck so fast he almost fell. Catching his balance ran to the area where he’d

been pointing.... His wife Sara, close behind. *"What honey, slow down....."* Sara came to a sudden stop along her husband. They both stood looking down into a shallow ravine close to the road. There in a small depression was a thermal blanket set up as if to shield something from the blazing sun.

"Oh my God...Ted, it's a girl" Sara knelt beside the naked, beaten, motionless body. Just peering at the scrawny thing she felt tears well up within her eyes. She gently lifted the thermal blanket and looked at the girl beneath.

"She can't be more than seventeen or eighteen and...." She began to weep *"Oh my God Ted, she's so...so..."* Sara wiped a tear from her cheek *"Look what they've done to her... Is.. is... she still alive?"*

Ted felt for a pulse *"Barely!"* He frowned and shook his head slowly. *"This looks like that bastard Dirk's handiwork... or his men."*

Sara added *"The grounds wet, someone has been pouring water over her to cool her down"* Ted smiled and added *"..And made this sun shade to keep her from blistering any more than she already is."* She added *"And why go through all this and not stay around to help this poor girl?"*

"Don't worry dear, he's around here somewhere." Ted took a quick glance around. *"I hope!"*

"He just likes his privacy... No truck, no way to move someone this bad off..." Ted looked at the girl and shook his head, *"Christ Sara, it looks like she hasn't eaten in a week...or more."*

"Ted, we need to get her home!"

He wrapped the girls thin, naked body in the thermal blanket, careful not to handle her too roughly. He gently laid her into the bed of the truck with her head resting on his wife's legs while Sara dabbed her with cooling water. *"Someone has cleaned her some and it looks like they treated her with something I've never seen before"* Puzzled she continued *"Maybe a plant or moss?"*

Ted made a cover for the trucks bed out of the thermal blanket, then poured water from the cooler onto a rag and laid it on her head. *"Traces of Asian.... pretty little thing... Someone beat the crap out of her and by the looks of her injuries, then, I'd say threw her out of a moving truck by the fresh cuts and scrapes she has."*

He paused while Sara adjusted the blanket around the girl. *"Hasn't been anyone with Asia heritage in these parts in the last ten or fifteen years... Wonder where she came from?"*

"I heard there were some of Asian descent far to the north in the tree country. They moved there to log or mine..... something like that decades ago."

"Ted... that's so far away!" Sara glanced around nervously. *"Ted, we need to get going."* Looking more concerned

"If Dirk or his men are nearby..." But Sara was calmed by her husband's confidence in his friend. If he was calm, she tried not to worry too much.

Ted looked down at the frail body. *"By the looks of her, I'd say she's been held by that murderous Dirk and that killer son of his Cordon"*.

She looked at the girl with tears in her eyes. *"What those bastards must have put her through... My God Ted...She's barely alive."*

Before Ted could get out of the trucks bed and get moving Sara yelled *"Honey, she moved!"*

Ted knelt back down and looked. The girls eyes fluttered. She weakly squinted at the couple. Too weak to struggle, her head slumped as she watched the two blurry images.

Ted struggled to attach the thermal blanket lower to the trucks bed as to protect the two women from the burning desert sun, while Sara tried to reassured the girl...

"You're safe now honey..... We have you....You'll be ok now... Can you tell us your name sweetie..... someone to try to find to tell them that....." She stopped speaking when the girl weakly waved her hand and gave her a sip or two of water.

After several attempts to speak the girl managed *"Keli"* She whispered, her voice raspy from the sun and dust *"My... name is..... Keli.....They killed... my father... They...."* Her eyes closed as a tear ran down her cheek as once again she slipped into unconsciousness.

"Shhhh... dear, we'll take care of you now." Sara cradled the girl in her arms rocking her gently, she stroked her dark dust laden hair, *"You're safe now....Keli.... sleep, everything is going to be fine now..... You're safe dear, you're safe."*

Ted jumped from the trucks bed and went around to the driver's side, opened the door, then paused while standing on the running board he tossed his arm into the air and extended his thumb upward and with a big grin got behind the wheel and started the engine.

He thought to himself *"Had he seen? Of course he saw.... He always seemed to know, to see...."* Ted smiled to himself. He knew his friend had been watching from a distance.

They headed back to Wall City.... Their home. Sara smiled lovingly at her husband of many years and yelled *"If she has no one honey, perhaps.... Perhaps we..."* She looked at Ted *"Perhaps we could let her stay with us..."*

Ted could barely hear her through the missing glass of their truck as his wife always spoke so gently. He remembered back.....

Sara and Ted had lost their daughter at an early age and now Sara could never have children. Ted knew it would mean so much for his wife to have someone to look after. He smiled and yelled back trying to overcome the loud wind noise as he sped through the choking heat.

“If she wants to stay with us dear, it would be ok” He knew his lovely wife would make a great mother and could easily love this poor child as if it were her own.

And so for several months the tiny teenage girl made her almost miraculous recovery. Ted and Sara had the daughter they couldn’t have naturally. But the winds of fortune blow in both directions....

Ted couldn’t know that his beloved Sara would not make it through the year, but this girl, would allow him to care for her. He would educate her, teach her about the wastelands and how to survive, teach her as he himself had been taught. And he would love her like the daughter he never had.

Keli was driven, she had vengeance in her heart. The years passed, and the little girl became a woman. But the memories from the past would haunt her, shape her life, and she would become so much more, more than Ted had ever hoped for. And she swore that someday she would avenge her father’s death. And every day for years, she vowed to make those that hurt her pay..... She remembered and those memories, that need for vengeance consumed her.

Sixteen years later.

“What”... His eyes fluttered.....

Slowly opening, squinting upon seeing the morning sun. Already the heat was unbearable as he strained to

“Huh.... ohhh.. Over slept again” *“Crap!”* He sat with a start....

“Noise!”

Had he let his guard down one time too often?

“No, this was further away more distant.” He thought.

He crawled over to the edge of the outcropping he had camped upon for the night and peered out over the wastelands. Across the ravine, about a half of a mile to the west he saw an old beat up car. He mumbled to himself *“Hmmm... No solar panels, no smoke.... What the hell is a Proff drive doing way out here?”*

He noticed something to the side, reached up to his motorcycle and pulled his rifle from its

mount and peered through the scope. As he scanned the scene through the scope, the stranger's jaw dropped. The commotion was coming from a woman and two guys fighting a small group of 'mutes'. They looked to be doing quite well fighting the mutants and handled themselves really well.

"Someone trained them well." He thought.

Just about that time one of the guys tripped and was about to be crushed by a mutant holding a small bolder over its head. The fighter looked up, arms extended as if to keep the bolder away. But knew it was far too late to protect his self.... Just as he was prepared to die there was a slight whine and thud. The mutant still holding the bolder over its head as if frozen, then fell backward still holding the bolder over its head. It hit the ground with a crash.

The fighter jumped back up with a puzzled look upon his face but got right back into the fight. *"I must have scared this one to death"* he yelled. The two men laughed and jumped back to the melee. Swinging their swords rapidly they dispatched the remaining couple of mutants on the side of the car they were on.

Looking over the small battlefield, a thought snapped into his head *"The girl!!"* Swinging the scope around he found her. She was small, clad in what appeared to be buckskin pants and a cutoff woven top, she swung her sword as well as any man. She looked tired, but he could tell she was in top shape. The woman had a Samurai like sword and wielded it well and he watched as she dispatched one mute after another. One mutant after another fell to her blade and occasionally he could hear her scream when the wind blew in his direction. She strained to defeat one after another. After finishing the last mutant, she was fighting, she looked to assist her comrades but saw them walking her way. The fight had ended....

The stranger could see her chest heave as she let out a big sigh and leaned against the car to await her comrades. They walked up to the car and laughed and sat on the ground wiping the blood off their swords while the woman sat watching them, shaking her head. The onlooker wished he could hear what she was saying, or at least read lips through his weapons scope. A slight movement caught his attention. To his horror he noticed the woman didn't see a mutant stalking her from the far side of the car.

The mutant heaved a huge wooden club over its head... the guys pointed and yelled something....

The woman swung around holding her arm up to block the mutant's deadly swing, but instead stumbled and fell to the ground..... The mutant growled, tightened its huge muscles and prepared to bring the wooden limb down upon the victim's head. The woman closed her eyes.....

There was a low whine and thud! The mutant's head jerked, a large red hole appeared in its forehead, as it fell to the side with a crash. The party leapt to their feet.

Through the scope the stranger could see they knew what happened, but were uncertain of how safe they were. There were those out in the wastelands that would kill the mutes, then anyone else, just to get whatever they were carrying. All three stood and looked at each other for a few seconds, then off in the direction opposite of the mutant but saw nothing.

The stranger knew they could not see him at the distance they were at. A quick command from the woman's lips and the three dove into the car and drove off as fast as they could, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

"Well that's gratitude" He thought with a grin, *"Not even a wave of thanks!"*

He tossed the rifle back into the scabbard, straddled his cycle and rode off down the other side of the outcropping.

"It'll take them several hours to get to Wall City driving around a rift that size" he thought. *"Guess it's about time to see what civilization has to offer"* He muttered with a half grin.... It had been months since he had been in one of the few cities or towns that were sprinkled throughout the wasteland. Moreover it had been years since he was in this area.

On the way he wondered if he'd see that group again. That little gal could really swing that sword and wasn't hard on the eyes either.... Or at least from what he had time to see. Heading to the city he figured it would be good to get out of this sun for a few days... Not to mention good to wash all this dust off and sleep in a clean bed.

He smiled and sped off to the east.

Chapter 2.

Wall City was one of the larger settlements in the eastern wastelands. Built from the remains of one of the old cities that existed back before civilization was nearly wiped out, it was named after the huge wall that surrounded it. Areas of the city themselves had smaller walls surrounding various blocks. There were no buildings taller than three or four stories and were made mostly of wood or brick. It reminded him of an old English village he'd seen pictures of in his younger days.

In the distance tall wind generators could be seen and water towers showing the stranger that this small city of about eight or nine hundred had at least the beginnings of modern technology. The streets were paved and in fairly good shape. And from the higher ground he was on, could see over the wall and watched the people walk around doing their daily business. Although many of the buildings needed paint they were in good repair and he noticed shops!

"Shops... Well now it looks like caravans make it this far on a regular basis." The stranger knew that was something in its self. Most caravans never came this deep into the wastelands without being heavily guarded which was expensive and still didn't guarantee it would reach its destination. Perhaps he could restock and resupply. Lizards and other wasteland denizens were not the tastiest things to have for a meal as he had run out of regular food weeks ago.

The stranger had stopped at the guard post and got directions to his destination in Wall City. He pulled up to a tavern and inn just inside the gates of Wall City. He parked and walked into the tavern.

"Christ if it would have been a mute it would have bitten me! No wonder the guard laughed when I asked where the tavern was.... Less than a hundred yards from the gate.... In plain sight!"

The inn had been within eyesight of the guard post. It was a small three story building and the serving room had only ten tables. It reminded him of the old English style décor, with its wooden beams and tables. To the right of the door, a small fireplace and the eating area with a cooking area toward the back of the room to the left. Also another smaller fireplace to the left near the door. It did have its charm. His mind drifted back.... To.. to.. It was so long ago, he could barely remember.. His thoughts were broken.... By the sound of children....it had been so many years since he had heard children.

An old man sat to the far side of the tables with a group of children sitting on the wide stairs in front of him. They never noticed the stranger walk through the door. He moved to the corner of the dining area and sat with his back to the wall. He seated himself near a slow turning fan, wiped the sweat from his forehead and leaned back in his chair until it leaned against the

two walls of the corner of the room.

“Pops, tell us about the time you knew Hawk”

“Yes, please, tell us” They all chimed at once. *“Please....”*

A man appeared from a doorway aside the fireplace.

He was tall, stocky with graying hair and wore the uniform of the Wall City Guard commander.

“Yeah pops, tell us about how you were so important to this giant of a man... oh, yeah, and how you and he were such good friends. Oh... oh yeah and why this legend of a man would let someone like you tag along with him”

Some of the older kids laughed while Pops just gave a little frown and started telling his tale.

“I was about seventeen or eighteen when Hawk found me scrounging for food. Heh, that was a real long time ago. The mutes had killed my folks and the home steads we were with some months before and I’d been fighting them to survive since. I’d spent all that time hiding, running struggling to survive. The city he found me in was nothing but ruins, but it gave me a chance to survive with lots of good hiding places.” Pops seemed a bit uneasy while he remembered back. *“What food we had with us was gone and I subsisted by eating whatever I could find. I’d been out digging through some ruins, it looked like a spot where some raider might have hidden food under the rubble. Well, I was so hungry I got careless and was jumped by a bunch of those nasty old critters and they were out for blood!”* Pops smiled a bit. *“Mutants, that’s what we called mutes back then, were as nasty then as today and I figured I was as good as dead.”*

Pops laughed *“You know I was screaming like a little girl and scampered atop this little wall. I got on top and saw there was nowhere to go from there. I looked down at the mutes looking up at me and figured I’d starve before I came down. It’s lucky for me those things don’t climb worth a damn..... I’m not ashamed to say I was bawling and it was probable a good thing because someone heard me...”*

Pops leaned back in his chair as if he was reliving those moments. *“I heard something like a whistle, then a voice yelling. **“Come over here ya lousy mutes and pick on someone your own size!!”***

Pops smiled *“There was this man standing on this pile of rubble with two swords in his hands. Swords like I’d never seen... or have seen since. He wore a black leather looking uniform and at that time, well hell, he was the best thing I had ever seen.”*

Pops paused to wipe his brow, then continued *“Why some of those mutes charged him and he cut them down before they got within arm’s reach. He walked down that pile of rubble and killed*

any one of them that came toward him... Old Hawk came over to where they had chased me up an old wall and told me to stay thereLike I was actually going to come down while those mutes were there Man, he killed about twenty or so at this point, I'd guess."

"Pops?" Gris said. *"Wasn't there just a dozen the last time?"*

The kids giggled, Pops frowned *"Well Hawk stormed into them yelling "Leave the kid alone" Pops added "Of course mutants can't understand what he was yelling, but they sure noticed him at least for the short remainder of their lives."*

Again the kids laughed.

"He swung those swords of his, mutants fell left and right. Heads rolled, limbs were severed, he even cut a few right in half!!!" The kids gasped.

Gris walked over to the pot and poured a cup of coffee. *"Is this the place where you died Pops?"*

The kids roared with laughter.

Pops ignoring Gris's comment continued. *"Hawk saved my life that day and I rode with him for over a decade or so And yes! Gris, we were friends For a long time."*

As if old memories came flooding back he added *"But times change and although Hawk never seemed to age, I got older and wiser. I knew I couldn't keep up to him, all the time and the nice guy Hawk is, I knew he'd never tell me to leave."*

"Then one day a caravan told us of this city. One of them told me of a survivor from my old group of settlers. Some of them had survived and I recognized one of the family names so I came here... That's when I heard that my girlfriend Sara's family was here and hoped for the best. Guess you know by now, I found her living with them."

One of the oldest girls quipped *"And you two found each other and lived happily ever after."*

The boys laughed when the girls all went *"Awwwww."*

"Now scat!!!" Gris told the kids, *"I have to talk with Pops for a bit".*

"Awwwww!!!" They said as they scampered out of the inn into the hot midday sun. *"We'll be back after school Pops"* the youngest chirped as she closed the door.

Gris pointed at the stranger that had seated himself against the wall back in the corner of the room.

"Pops ya got a customer"

Pops turned, gave a wide grin and started to speak, but the stranger interrupted

“Pops is it? That’s ok, I enjoyed your tall tale. Sounded like you had quite an adventure when you were younger”

“Er.. Yep! Sure did feller... Ahhh something to eat?”

Gris added *“Yeah Pops tends to embellish it over the years..... assuming this Hawk fellow even existed. I know you’ve heard all these tall tales of this immortal hunter that comes to the aid of travelers in peril”* He chuckled *“If you believe Pops he was seven feet tall and his eyes glowed red when angered. Oh yeah and he had these two swords that were indestructible and a rifle that didn’t go bang and....”* Gris stopped as Pops reentered the room carrying a tray.

Pops brought food, carefully laid it before this man in dusty old clothes and talked a bit with the stranger, Gris couldn’t hear what was being said, but now and then they would burst into laughter.

Pops walked away to wait on some customers that had just entered the inn, so Gris strolled over and sat down. Gris looked at the stranger *“Which way you coming from mister?”*

“West!”

“Ahhh, we had a party out that way somewhere” Gris said. *“We send out parties trying to find a new way to the west without running into hoards of Mutes.... Or that bastard Cordon! Ya know...intelligence..Helps to know where not ta go.”*

“Heh, yup, saw your party...” The stranger chuckled, *“They had a little delay of sorts”*

A melodic voice interrupted their conversation. *“So I guess if I were the thanking kind... it would be you I’d have to thank for this morning?”*

The strangers head snapped around to the entrance. Leaning against the door was the prettiest woman he’d ever seen. Her musical voice, overshadowed by her stern demeanor. It was the woman he had watched fighting earlier.

She slowly walked toward Pops, her jet black ponytail swinging gently as she swept her raven bangs from her eyes. He noticed her well shaped breasts moving beneath her faded tan cut off woven sweat shirt and her skin tight buckskin pants hugged her hips and legs right down to her western style boots. Even without the boots heels, he’d guess she was only about five foot five, maybe six, not quite what one would imagine would as a city guard.... nor could imagine, handle a sword like she did.

She wore the patch of the Wall City Guard on her short sleeve. Her tanned olive skin tone and eyes announced her Asian heritage and though sweaty and dusty from the road, her beauty was more than obvious and she moved so gracefully the stranger was taken aback by her overall

appearance.

She walked over to Pops and caressed his head in her hands and kissed him on the top of his head.

"Hi honey. Glad you made it back ok." Pops added.

"Well I had a little help, assuming I needed any help, from...."

Tossing her head at the stranger and with a look of disdain.. *"him!"*

Gris flipped his thumb in the direction of the woman. *"And that little lady is Keli, she's my number two in command of the city guard.... and if you want to keep all the body parts you were born with, don't piss her off!"* He grinned.

Keli stuck her chest out and made motions like she was brushing her nails on her top *"Yep, and I'll bet I could even whup up on Pops imaginary friend in a fight.... But then he don't exist!"*

Pops laughed, so hard that tears rolled down his cheek. He wiped his cheek and noting the puzzled look on Keli and Gris's faces, he added, *"Sorry, someday you'll get it."* Then added *"Whatever baby, I'm glad you're home....safe and sound"*.

Pops smiled and explained as if more for himself than to the stranger. *"I found her when she was about seventeen, in shock, dirty, out in the wastelands, brought her back here"*

Pops shot a glance at Keli, *"I cleaned her up... She was quite a mess."*

Keli looked back at Pops, leaned forward, cocking one of her shoulders toward Pops and stuck her tongue out at him.

"....and she's been like a daughter ever since".

"No other family Keli?" The stranger asked.

She turned with her hands on her hips *"Well assuming it's any of your business.... Yes!... I have a mother to the north and a thirteen year old half sister I've never seen...." I've never been back there... and won't until I take care of some business here"* Then wistfully she added *"Someday I'll make it back there, but we write though, if I can find someone going that direction... As you can imagine it takes weeks to months to get a letter way up there.... Assuming the one taking it survives. Some never make it.... And worse yet most letters never make it back here...."*

"Sorry to hear that Keli, but I might be headed that way, eventually,.... maybe I'll drop off a letter if you want". There was almost a smile from Keli, she turned and headed toward the stairs.

The stranger gave a slow long whistle. Keli spun and with one quick movement, pulled her

hunting knife, and threw it. It breezed past Gris's ear and stuck into the wall about four inches from the stranger's head.... He never flinched.

"Take it easy girl, I was whistling at your demeanor not your ass!"

He reached to the knife, pulled it from the wall and tossed it underhanded, and it buried itself into the post in the hand railing next to Keli and never left his chair.

"Besides you're way too young to suit me. Pops said you're thirty something, so that makes ya just a bit young for my tastes!"

Pops and Gris laughed.

"Pops!!! You told a perfect stranger my age? Arrrggg! She shot a frown at Pops, then looked at the stranger.

"Yeah well, Pops talks way too much!" She tossed her head defiantly and trotted up the stairs. The stranger liked the way she tossed her head so her long black ponytail would fly around her shoulders or would swing side to side as she walked. It had been a long time since he had been in the company of a woman, let alone a pretty one. Seeing was just fine with him, relationships, were not to his liking. And this lass was too young... way too young for him.

"Going to take a nap Pops, wake me in a few hours." Keli vanished up the stairs. She pulled the ribbon from her hair and it cascaded down over her shoulders, glistening as she trotted upward.

"WOW, Pops ya have a handful there" The stranger grinned.

Gris replied before Pops could *"You said a mouthful, pal, but let me tell you one thing.... If your back's ever against the wall, you want her on your side."*

Pops smiled and nodded.... *"I've got dishes to wash, your rooms at the top of the stairs, second door"* then thoughtfully *"Oh and never go to the third floor, it's Keli's, the whole floor is and if you do.... she'll toss your cold dead body back down the stairs!"* He walked away chuckling....

The stranger went to his room. *"A bed was going to feel really good"* He thought. It too had been far too long since he slept in a bed.... He smiled *"And didn't have to sleep with one eye open."* It had been months of sleeping on the ground, no roof over his head and always trying to sleep, but not too soundly for the wastelands were a dangerous place to let one's guard down.

On the second floor he looked toward the stairs leading to the third floor. Remembering what Pops and Gris had said, he smiled, shook his head and entered his room without a thought of going up and knocking on this Keli's door.... Something told him he'd like this woman... girl.. whatever, but decided chatting with her could wait for later. He kind of liked his old body

exactly the way it was..... In one piece and.....Alive!

Around dinner time people started to gather to the inns eating area. Some guests, others were townsfolk out for a night of dinner and a stroll. There were even a couple of hunters from the wastelands in for a night of food and drink.

The inn's door was open and the cooling night breezes were swirling, bringing the smells of food and ale to his nostrils.

The stranger was sitting in his usual spot in the corner with his back to the wall, leaning back in his chair. Gris walked over and joined him. *"Kind of busy tonight, mind if I join you?"*

"Naw, have a seat... plenty of space here" Replied the stranger. *"If you don't mind me not talking a lot.... Not used to having people around"* He motioned toward the wastelands *"... out there"*.

A young man in his late twenties walked up to the table.

"This is my son Dave" But before Dave could sit. Gris said *"He's a bit impetuous, but a good fighter....A damned good fighter"* Pride was in his voice. *"Plus sometimes he acts like he has a crush on Keli although she's a bit old for him"*

"Dad!!!" Dave blushed *"She's a bit old for me"* Then grinned *"But wouldn't say no"*.

Before Dave figured out, why his dad and the stranger were smiling..... He felt cold steel at his throat.

"You'd have to shave a bit closer to suit me Dave" Snickered Keli as she lowered her blade.

Dave embarrassed, turned and walked hastily out the door without uttering a word. They all held their laughs until he had gone Then the three burst into laughter.

"He's a good kid" Said Gris, *"Just embarrasses easily."*

Keli standing next to their table laughed *"Dave's pulled my ass out of the fire several times, he's a top notch fighter and I know how proud Gris is of him."*

A new stranger walked into the inn, sat at a table. Saw Keli hand Gris a tankard of ale, mistook her for the waitress the stranger yelled ***"HEY baby, why don't you wiggle that pretty little ass over here and have a seat"*** Motioning to his lap.

Keli who had been standing, leaning on the table, quickly straightened up and turned. Gris crouched down in his chair a bit and replied

“Oh crap, this could get messy”.

Pops from the other side of the room started pushing through the filled chairs toward Keli.

But to every one’s surprise Keli just walked over to the newcomers table, swinging her hips, moving her shoulders seductively and upon reaching the low stool, she swung a leg over his lap and sat facing him.

“Yeah, baby that’s what I call service”

“Before I take your order let me make a dinner suggestion for you sir”

He ran his hand slowly up her leg *“Whatever you suggest honey?”*

With lightning speed Keli’s hand appeared at his throat, holding one of her long thin daggers she had pulled from her boot. She pressed it closer. He moved his head back as she pressed the dagger’s blade tighter into his neck. He winced and a drop of blood trickled down his neck.

“My suggestion is....Take your Goddamned hand off my leg you bastard or you’ll have cold cuts.....No one talks to me that way... No one touches me.... No man, no where.... Ever!!”

“Keli!” Pops yelled out.

She jerked and stood up, turned and stormed out of the room.

“She’ll be back once she calms down” Gris told the stranger. *“It’s a long story”.*

The newcomer lightly touched his neck and gulped ***“Old man you need to fire that bitch!”***

Pops was an old guy in his seventies and this new comer was not small, but Pops grabbed this guy by the collar of his shirt with one hand and by the belt with the other, pulled him backwards out and over the back of his stool, dragged the mouthy hunter across the floor and tossed him out the door.

Gris added *“Oh yeah... and you don’t ever want to piss off Pops either!”*

They both laughed as Pops reappeared dusting his hands off.

Chapter 3.

An hour or so after dinner Pops had cleared everything off, washed up the dishes. Most of the guests had left, so he walked over to join Gris and the stranger. They sat around talking for a few hours.

The earlier incident came up and the stranger asked, *"So what's the story on Keli Pops? She lost it there for a second, I actually thought she was going to slit his throat..... She a little crazy or something?"*

"Crazy?" Keli had walked back in the room just in time to hear the comments and shouted from across the small dining room *"Crazy?"*

Her voice was clearly agitated although not angry *"Yeah I'm crazy.... And I'm not afraid to admit it and if any man ever touches me again, I'll kill him too!"*

Pops interrupted *"When I found Keli she had just spent eight or nine months as a prisoner by Dirks group. I found her half naked, beaten, bruised and half way dead."*

"Prisoner? That's an understatement!" Keli spoke with hate like he had never heard before. *"Guess that depends on what you consider a prisoner. That bastard Cordon's dad raped me after his gang killed my father and then gave me to his to his sons.... Cordon and his two younger brothers"*

Gris spoke up *"They're called Dog and Mutt... Cordon, who's the oldest, started calling them that when they were born...and it stuck"*.

Pops added *"Cordon took over his father's raiders when someone killed him northwest of here."*

Keli looked at the stranger with hate in her eyes *"For all most a year they raped me, beat me, kept me leashed to their truck at night, naked with only one flea infested blanket to cover myself with"* She paused. *"If they had a bad day, I was beaten, a good one they'd rape me"*

Her voice quieted a bit. *"After about a month I stopped crying, fighting or struggling, which pissed them off even more... So they'd beat me more and I just laid there and took it. As hard as they tried, they never could make me cry again..... I swore no one would ever see me cry again... never!"*

Pops eyes were filled with tears, as was Keli's.

"So they'd rent me out to other gang members when they needed a little extra spending money. Their older brother...." She started shaking in rage. *"Cordon... That bastard...."*

She glared into the fire her voice trembled with hate, *"One day he told his brothers that they had to punish me for not showing them respect, so they held me down and Cordon branded me...."*

Keli stood, turned slightly and raised her shirt just a little, revealing a round burned spot just behind her left hip and to the top of the cheek of her behind. The scar was deep but not large.

"He took a old fifty dollar gold piece...." She fought for words. *"That bastard, threw it in the fire for ten minutes while they held me down. All the time Mutt beat me with his belt until my rear was bleeding.... Waiting between lashes for the pain to really set in, then he'd strike me again. When the coin was glowing red, Cordon picked up some pliers and grabbed it"* Tears spilled out of Keli's eyes and down her cheeks.

"Mutt still sitting on my legs and Dog still on my back, Cordon laid it on me, I screamed. But that wasn't enough for that bastard. He put his boot on it and pressed it into my hip.... He held his foot there...I...I could smell my own flesh burning" She fought back tears and her voice trembled *"After several minutes I passed out and when they threw water on me, the coin was stuck to my flesh."*

She was trembling with the memories that flooded her mind *"Cordon reached over and ripped the coin off of me laughing. He said I wasn't worth wasting any coin on."* She paused long enough for the rage to appear back in her face. *"And that scar is going to be the last thing those three will see before I kill them"*

Keli could see the stranger was touched by the circumstances of her unfortunate early existence and added

"One day, months later, after several days of bad luck the raiders weren't in too good of a mood. I overheard Mutt saying they were going to rent me out again. Well I was going to make sure not one of those bastards ever would touch me again...." She paused and the stranger could see she was telling no lies.

"I ran up behind Dog and grabbed his knife, but I was a starved teenager and was so weak I almost fell. But I did manage to slash his coat.... Before... before.. he... they"

The stranger smiled kindly, *"That's ok little lady, I can see this was a painful time for you... I get the idea, you don't have to finish."*

"Look stranger! I'm no quitter! I wasn't then and sure as hell am not now."

She paused again, then in a much stronger voice, *"They beat me, I don't know how long, I'd come to and they'd beat me some more. I can remember hearing Cordons father yelling something about I was too much trouble and...."*

"Pops and you said you were found out in the wastelands?" The stranger asked.

"Yeah, those low life bastards didn't think beating me half to death was enough, so the next morning, they dropped me out in the desert, seventy miles from nowhere near some old sign post.... Beaten, naked, they never even bothered to stop the damned truck! They just heaved me out of the moving truck."

"The sign post?? Hell that's a good five miles from where I... err, Pops told me where he found ya!"

"What part of 'I'm not a quitter' didn't you understand stranger? I crawled that far on my hands and knees because I was almost blinded and was suffering from a mild concussion... Well, or that's what Pops told me I had..."

"So you crawled all that distance? Where the hell did you think you were going??"

"Damn stranger you sure ask a lot of questions!"

"Sorry, my dear. You don't have to answer if..."

"Hey! I don't do anything I don't want to do!" She actually smiled at this stranger that seemed to care.

A frown crossed her lips. *"I don't know where the hell I was going... Just somewhere... Anywhere to stay alive! That's the only thing... the only reason I lived. I knew that if I survived, someday I'd get my revenge on those four! ... Sorry, I mean three. Cordons father was killed a while back... If I find out who did it, I'll either give him a medal..... or slit his throat for robbing me of the pleasure."*

Pops smiled at the stranger.

Keli slowed her tale as if trying to remember...

"Even to this day I remember... There was this shadowy figure... He picked me up, but I was too weak to struggle. He... he was speaking softly to me.. I remember feeling a cool towel on my forehead, he gave me water...treated my wounds...I think..... I wish I could remember more, but I was pretty much on the verge of dying.."

Pops nodded and added, *"Crawled five miles, that's how Keli got to where yo.... Uhh she was found by this mystery man of hers."*

The stranger uneasily shifted his weight in the chair and looked at this small statured woman, so beautiful, so deadly, so deeply enveloped in hate.

"Someone so.. well, you're way too young to have that much hate in you. The day for revenge will come, but if you hate like that all the time, it'll destroy you. Leave things like that to people that do that kind of thing....."

She looked at the stranger, wiped a tear that was running down her cheek and said *"I know your kind.... you're a hunter, you kill mutes and raiders all the time, so, let me make this perfectly clear"*

Her voice again filled with anger *"If you or anyone else kill any of them, I'll kill you..... Those bastards are mine and mine alone.... no one kills them but me"* She slammed her knife into the table turned and walked out, almost at a run wiping more tears from her cheek.

"I didn't know" the stranger replied and started to rise as if to go after her.

Pops waved him off.

"I'll go calm her down" Pops replied. He walked out the door. After about ten minutes or so, Keli walked back in and toward the stairs as if nothing had happened. She shot a smug glance over in his direction as she removed her dagger from his table.

"Ok old timer you'd better get some sleep.... Pops told me he wanted you to go with us to scrounge for parts and metals at the Dead City tomorrow. He seems to think, you'd make a good scrounger or if nothing else a guard. I don't care.... Just stay out of my way and you'll get along fine."

The stranger jumped to his feet and stared at Keli *"Old timer!! I'll have you know I'm only about twenty years older than you are...."* His voice trailed off as he looked over at his reflection in a mirror hanging on the wall. *"Oh crap! She's right!"*

Keli, Gris and Pops roared. The stranger allowed a little grin as he ran his hand through his graying hair.

Keli had smiled and when she smiled, she was really beautiful. About then twenty years seemed to be quite a long time. He sat, leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee watching her bound up the stairs.

Coffee was not that easy to come by, so he was going to enjoy every drop, and for the moment decided that the morning could take care of its self. Tonight was his time to take it easy.

He had been to the Dead City before about six years earlier and didn't relish going back there that soon.

At seven in the morning Keli, came bouncing down the stairs, waved at her squad that would be going with them. *"Where's the old guy Pops? Sleeping late?"*

Pops laughed, *"He was down already, had a few cups of coffee and went back up to get his stuff"*.

Gris, who had come to see them off, added *“Hah, another of Pops buddies. Does he have super swords too, like this Hawk character of yours?”* The squad laughed.

Dave chided *“Yeah swords that cut through wood as thick as this bench?”* He pointed toward the bench he was sitting on that was made from a six inch thick wooden beam that was about a foot wide.

Everyone but Pops laughed.

Then several slow steps were heard from the floor above as if heavy boots were walking towards the head of the stairs, then on the old wooden stairs, one then another. Slow and steady.

The squad stopped laughing. From the top side of the stairs, one boot appeared, then another. Then a leg as the stranger came down the stairs more and more came into view until the stranger stood at the bottom.

One of the squad stood there cup to his mouth, drops of coffee ran down his chin, he stared as did the others.

There stood the stranger, clad in what appeared to be leather, but of a softer appearance. Looking like armor, but not appearing like it could protect against anything. Boots matched the dull flat black outfit and he was pulling on a pair of jet black gloves which were the same color as the uniform. The uniform was worn, but still had a new look to it. It surely drew attention.

He took a step forward, then another. The guard stepped back out of his way and nodded. The stranger nodded back. They noticed sticking slightly above each of his two shoulders were the black hilts of his two swords. To the outside of his boots were the hilts of two large knives. The suit was obviously two piece, but where it overlapped at the waist it was joined as to make it appear one piece.

The stranger walked over to the bench Dave had perched himself, smiled for a second, then in one lightning fast motion, grabbed his left sword with his right hand, pulled it out, swung it down upon the far side of the six inch thick wooden bench, severing it cleanly. He then swung the sword upward and with a twist of his wrist sent it back into the scabbard in one smooth motion.

Dave spilled down onto the floor spilling coffee everywhere. The stranger turned, looked at his gloved hand and said *“Heard it’s going to be cold this morn”*.

He walked over toward Pops.

Old Pops was grinning ear to ear. He looked at the stunned crowd gathered at his inn.

“Everyone.... Meet Hawk... You know the legend that you keep telling me doesn’t exist.”

Keli was standing next to Pops, her mouth agape, hands draped to her sides.

Hawk smiled, gently put his hand up to her chin and gently pushed it closed...

"Trying to catch flies?" He winked at her and turned to her squad.

"As you see I'm not seven feet tall, nor do my eyes glow..... Well unless I'm drunk"

There were a few uneasy chuckles.

"And my sword, as you see, can cut through quite a lot. And yes, I'm over one hundred and seventy years old"

They gasped.

"And yep!.... That's about all I intend to say on the subject!"

Everyone had heard that Hawk never aged and of rumors that he had been born back before the day the Earth changed forever, back before the apocalypse, the time that was known as 'Day Zero'. But they were rumors, no one took rumors seriously.

Well at least not until today.

He turned slightly, looked over his shoulder at Keli and replied *"And no! I doubt if you can beat this old guy in a fair sword fight."*

Everyone laughed, but there for a second Hawk saw a glimmer of a smile on her face.

Keli snapped out of it and barked out *"OK enough, days wasting, lets got going!!* She glanced over to Hawk *"And we'll see about that fight someday..... if you're up to it..... Old man!"*

Everyone laughed and out the door she went, followed closely by her squad. They were well trained and obeyed her instantly.

Hawk moved his hand to his forehead and gave Gris and Pops a little two fingered salute, nodded and followed them out the door only to be greeted by Keli yelling

"Hurry up old man, you're slowing us down!"

Hawk leaped from the stairs to the truck bed and sat down.

"Yep! This is going to be an interesting day all right"

The squad all grinned. They too knew that these two clashing would provide more than an interesting day.....

The truck sped down the road, out past the sentry post on the southern wall and out into the wastelands. The heat was almost unbearable. The sun baked the surrounding ground and the remaining road shimmered as waves of heat rose upward. Sweat rolled freely, breathing was labored. This was going to be a hot one!

Roads weren't the best after more than a hundred years and it was more like being shaken in a mixer then riding in a truck. Hawk longed for the old days of expressways. He didn't say a word..... this group wouldn't know what he was talking about.

"Man" he thought "I'm getting old."

Then he looked over in Keli's direction.

Sweat was starting to appear on her body in the hot desert sun, her flat stomach glistened, her breasts jiggled under her cutoff sweatshirt as the truck bounced along, her dark ponytail blew in the wind, her tight buckskins fit her so....snugly....

*"Well maybe not **that** old"* He thought with a smile.

The truck bounced along, a hot breeze blew as they gasped in the dusty desert air.....

Yep! It was going to be hot one.

Chapter 4.

The trip to Dead City was uneventful and for the first time the city lived up to its name. They found no mutants, no scroungers and no raiders. The road had been mostly covered with sand and other natural debris.

“So the great legend himself is with us guys. Maybe he can tell us exactly what Dead City was.” Keli was smiling at Hawk almost like she really wanted to know if he knew. She had been there many times over the year scrounging parts for Pops and the things he would build or items to be repaired.

“Actually Keli, Dead City used to be one of the largest industrial complexes in the southwest” Hawk knew they had an idea what that was, but didn’t go in to more detail. He figured if they wanted to know more they would ask. This bunch were not stupid and Hawk figured they could give a good guess as to what he was talking about.

“So Keli, I take it you’ve been here quite a bit?”

“At least a few times a year” She laughed *“Half of Wall City’s wind and solar power came from parts we found there.”* She looked away as if that was all she intended to say and Hawk moved back to the rail of the truck and looked out toward the direction they were headed.

The sun beating down on the truck made things a bit uncomfortable and the random gusts of wind only brought choking heat and dust that made talking strained. If it weren’t for the occasional cool gust from the north this trip would have been almost unbearable. Then there was the glaring unrelenting light from the sun. Their eyes teared up from all the squinting as much as the dust. If it weren’t for the occasional jest or story this journey would have been harder than it was. Watching out for signs of raiders and mutants was the normal pastime and her squad was determined not to miss any signs as they constantly scanned the horizon. Now and then someone would yell and cuss as they found how hard a beetle’s body to the face can be.

Occasionally Hawk would catch Keli glancing over at him and he found this to be somewhat strange. She was sometimes warm to him, then she’d grow cold. He’d never met any woman that was playing on his mind like this lovely creature was. She obviously had something eating at her, but asking her was another problem and Hawk decided to leave it be for the moment. The last thing he wanted was to raise Keli’s hackles anymore than he had seemed to earlier and still could not figure out exactly why he had ticked her off. Then as quickly as she got angry, she start joking around....

Hawk decided to let her lead, it was much safer that way.... But then, for some reason, he seemed to find some enjoyment in teasing this creature and this puzzled him more than her

actions. After a while he decided to lighten things up a bit. So the next time he caught Keli glancing over at him, he joked,

“Every time I see you looking over at me, I keep checking to see if my fly is unzipped.”

“Fly? How the hell do flies have zippers?”

Hawk wondered if Keli was playing with him or not...

“Some pants and clothes have zippers Hawk, but flies having zippers, I doubt that very much?” She laughed but Hawk didn't mind Keli had such a beautiful laugh he tried to say something funny often, just to hear those musical tones, to see the way her lips would turn up as she fought the urge to laugh. Keli on the other hand couldn't figure out why she was laughing so damned much and the idea that she was enjoying Hawk's jokes was annoying to her usually serious demeanor.

Hawk was about to tell the group another joke, but they all were suddenly thrown forward. The truck has stopped on a small rise. There before them was the place they called Dead City. It sprawled for at least several square miles or so. The buildings that remained standing had walls caved in, roofs had fallen into the midst of some. There were buildings that appeared to have burnt ages before and some explosive craters scattered here and there from what appeared to be a fierce battle. What streets remained were covered with debris and the battle scars had long been covered with dust. The once thriving complex was now silent, it was truly a dead city.....

Remembering back Hawk said as if more a thought he spoke to the group, *“It really wasn't a city at all, but a huge industrial complex, you know”* He noticed the others were listening and continued...

“It was been built just after the apocalypse by a large group of survivors trying to restore some industry to the nation. They came from several cities bringing machinery, everything they could pack onto whatever they were driving....” He paused as if trying to remember.

“....to this old factory complex they came, restoring it, sending parties to gather building supplies, food, whatever they needed for hundreds of miles. Little by little it grew, but their population was steadily reduced by mutants, raiders, lack of food. The meager food they could plant died off or it just got too dangerous to farm out side of the complex, so they grew food in side some of those buildings.”

Keli smirked *“Indoors, what a load of crap! There's no sun, not enough soil...”*

“It's called hydroponics, Keli. It's a way to grow food without soil and they use artificial sunlight.”

She frowned and thought to try to make more out of what Hawk had told them, but held her tongue. If she asked for Hawk to tell them more, then she'd sound dumb to her squad. If she

made light of what he had said, Hawk would no doubt tell them more and make her look dumb. She frowned again!

Hawk saw Keli frown and wondered what he'd done this time to piss her off. He couldn't know how this lovely creature actually desired to know more. She wanted to know all about everything and deep down inside really wanted Hawk to tell her, teach her, but she couldn't tell him, the squad she could handle, but she just didn't want Hawk to think she wasn't smart..

So instead Keli just asked *"What happened to all the people Hawk?"*

"Oh, they managed to survive, for a time. They gathered all kinds of machinery and materials. They even had small manufacturing buildings to help them make weapons, ammo, parts for their trucks, things like that." He paused,

"Sadly the complex took six years to finish and was destroyed about six or seven years later when it was over run by mutants. Thousands of them."

The squad looked uneasy, but Hawk added *"Those mutes are long gone by now, that's why you've been able to make trips here fairly easily. Once they kill everything in an area, they seem to wander off in separate directions. It's almost like they just want to kill off everything that isn't one of their kind.... Ah, kind of like "This is our area" but they kill rather than drive you off"* Hawk smiled *"And I just kind of do the same thing to them."* He patted one of his swords and with his other hand stroked his rifle.

"Mutes we all know don't speak, only grunt....." The squads Sergeant queried, "

"We know they're smart enough to lie in wait and ambush those not alert enough to watch out for their signs, but Hawk, How smart are they? Do they talk in some way we don't know?"

"Sarge.... They seem to be able to use body language to some extent, maybe some sort of pack mentality, who really knows.... but what it boils down to... They see me coming, they run!"

The squad laughed and glancing over at Keli he saw those pretty thin lips of hers turn upward and her eyes twinkled and she smiled.

"Come on guys, we've work to do... can't stand around here chatting all day."

She looked through the open rear window to the driver. *"Let's get this piece of junk down there."* And off the truck sped onward toward the complex churning up a large plume of dust as it went.

It only took them a short time to arrive at one of the larger buildings in the complex. It was four times the size of an old aircraft hangar elsewhere in the complex and in width and over a mile long. There was barely a window left in it that was still intact, parts of the roof had

collapsed into the interior. All along the walls were huge missing sections as sun and dust streamed into the huge building. There were huge piles of debris everywhere.

Hawk had been there one time as the complex was being built... It was hard... the memories, a momentary sadness crept over his face. But he did remember something from long ago he knew would help.

"Follow my lead!" He shouted to the driver and leapt from the truck. Many of the buildings looked similar and it took over an hour for Hawk to find the building he was looking for. The squad mostly stood by as he prodded through the debris, knowing his frustration not finding what he was looking for.

He stopped and straightened, slowly looking around, then frantically started digging. Throwing bricks and other debris he looked back at the squad standing near and on the truck....

"It was night the last I was here, but I'm pretty sure this is the place."

Keli barked and the squad jumped. Grabbing their weapons they leapt from the truck and moved like a combat team should with each covering the man that moved to the front. Others would constantly check the sides, then they would advance again. Moving through the ruins checking anywhere someone or thing could hide. Once the area was secured all relaxed and the mood became lighter.

"You've trained them well, m'lady" Hawk told her with a little bow, then thought he'd faint when she turned to him, smiled a huge smile, then.... Did a slight curtsy!

"She curtsied? You've got to be kidding.... Her!" The thought ran through his mind and Hawk managed a huge grin, then turned to follow the squad.

"Curtsied? I curtsied?....Christ, I've got to be kidding!".. Keli frowned. *"He caught me off guard... Oh crap...I can't believe I curtsied"* She cursed under her breath a few more times then turned and she too joined her squad. She shook her head as she sprinted to catch up to him.

Hawk led the small group back to the pile of debris. *"A few years ago, before this wall collapsed there was a stairway to the basement"* He pointed to the rubble. *"If this is the place, I think Pops will want what's down there."* He knelt down and started to remove bricks once more, tossing them as far as he could. Then added, *"It'll take time.... but trust me, it'll be worth it."*

They dug and hammered away for a few hours before they broke through to the stairs down into the basement. He walked over to a huge steel door that showed no signs of age. He banged his hand on the door and it sounded solid...too solid to break.

"I used to sleep there.... Heh, there was a big steel door and when it was closed, an army couldn't get through it." He paused *"Someone had written the combination on the wall"* Then

added *"Of course, once I found out no one had found this place I destroyed the combination and locked the door."*

"Oh great!" Dave added *"This thing will take hours to bust through! Did it ever occur to you that maybe this could be useful to others?"*

"Dave, Hawk isn't stupid. You don't seriously think he destroyed the combination and not memorize it do you?" Keli leaned over to Hawk and whispered into Hawk's ear *"Please don't make a liar out of me"*

"Well I knew at my age, being an old man and such" He glanced over at Kel and winked, *"I'd never remember the combo.....soooo..."* He walked about ten feet from the door to a pile of rubble and turned over a large piece of broken cement.

"23 clockwise, twice counter clockwise to 18, then clockwise to 4, then back around to 7" He again smiled at Keli *"Can't trust this old mind to remember everything, so I didn't take any chances"*

And damned if she didn't smile back Hawk was stunned. *"Her smile could melt this steel door."* He thought. But the thought was interrupted by a squeak as Dave pulled the huge door open and was surprised at how easily it moved.

"Wow Hawk, this door seems to be in good shape."

The squad walked into the room and in the glare of their lights saw it was cavernous.

"Damn my light can't even show the far side of this room" Keli quipped. Then fell silent at what she saw.

Old motors loaded with copper. There were ingots of other valuable metals and alloys scattered around the room. There was enough treasure that Keli would have to radio for another couple of trucks. *"Bill! Run up and radio for more trucks..... and more people!!"* Keli looked around just in time to see Hawk vanish into the blackness of the room.

Hawk walked over to a small room and within a few minutes, there was a hum a flicker and....

"LIGHTS!" They all gasped.

Hawk reappeared through the door, looked at the group. He flipped his thumb back toward the doorway *"Proff generator... A big one!"* They all smiled, this would definitely make their day a lot easier.

"But how... Here?" Keli was amazed *"Proff came from east of the Mississippi..... or at least that's how Pops taught us."*

“Pops was correct Keli, but he invented it here and his team found a new element and created Neutrainium to power it here as well.”

Hawk frowned a bit *“He and a few others made it back to the east..... just before this place was over run and destroyed. There were several expeditions that tried to return here, but none ever returned. He recreated most of his work and inventions, but died before he could finish the bigger one... Somewhere down here perhaps we might find the rest of his work....”*

Hawk looked frustrated. *“At the time what was left of civilization didn’t have the strength to mount any kind of a force to return and what was captured just added to the power of the raiders”* He looked sad *“A lot of good men died when the SOB that was in charge sent those two expeditions. I’ll never forgive him for that!!”*

Keli said no more. She saw in Hawk’s eyes that there was a lot of grief. The way he said it made her think that perhaps he was the SOB that sent the parties to their death and over the years Pops had hinted that Hawk had quite a bit of power.... Maybe it was himself that he could not forgive. Keli knew far too well, that some memories should stay buried, she said no more.

Hawk vanished once again into the many rooms. The others rummaged through the various old parts gathering what they thought would be useful and carried them up to the surface and piled them up so they could be quickly loaded into the trucks when they arrived. A few of the more valuable items were put on the truck they arrived in, just in case they had to leave in a hurry.

“Ok guys, I’ve got something to show you” Hawk had appeared from out of the shadows.

Dave just about fell over *“CHRIST!!... Hawk, you gotta quit sneaking up on people! Aw man, I almost stained my shorts!!”*

Keli and the others about fell over laughing at Dave.

“Sorry Dave, you know that’s how one survives out here.” He motioned for them to follow and vanished back into the shadows from where he had come... They quickly followed as he lead them down a long corridor and into a large room.

Keli gasped *“My God Hawk... the blue glow... is that....”*

“Yes Keli It’s Neutrainium” Then added *“Don’t let the bluish glow worry you, it’s completely safe. This is refined and not dangerous.”*

Dave sat on an old chair that almost collapsed due to the age. *“Hawk, there’s no dust in this room.”*

“I know Dave, this room was hermetically sealed for the last century... heh, that is with the exception of the few times I’ve been here.”

"You said earlier you were here once, back when...."

Hawk interrupted Dave *"Sorry Dave.... Once while there were people living here. A few other times when I needed a safe place to stay for a while, when I was passing through this area..... One does get tired of sleeping with one eye open. Here I could seal myself in and spend a few days and not worry about if I'd wake up or not."*

The group chuckled until Keli shrieked *"OH MY GOD!!!"*

Everyone turned and looked in the direction she was pointing. *"Hawk?? Is that a Neutrainium refiner?"*

Hawk smiled *Yep! Figured once the others get here it can be disassembled and Pops can have fun teaching someone to operate it."*

No one said any more, but Hawk knew he had just given Wall City the best present in the world. A present that could eventually help change this entire section of the wastelands. And Pops would have a new toy. They all went back to work.

After several hours the truck had been loaded and they sat around taking a well earned break while awaiting the other trucks and men to arrive. Hawk had sat on a pile of rubble off to one side of the squad, while the others had made a small fire to make coffee.

"Even in this heat, coffee is great" Dave added at Hawk *"Want a cup?"*

Keli was more concerned about the trucks she'd called for hours ago. *"They're too late"* She looked worried *"They should have been here over an hour ago. We have only about seven or eight hours of light left and we don't want to be here after dark"* Looking at Hawk *"Not that we can't handle ourselves"* She tossed her head defiantly.

Dave was about to say something, when Jason came rolling down a huge pile of debris. Everyone but Hawk stood up with a start.

"Donk anyboody move.. not neber... hands ups" The words came from a large grubby man standing at the top of the pile. He held a double barrel shotgun.

Yeah! Youse pebles stand rit dare" Two more men in tattered clothes came around from the other side of the rubble.

Keli knelt down to check on Jason *"He's out cold"*

"Webe takin' dis truk" He their leader said *"I be called Worm and deez are me brodders. Webe da best scroungers in dis parts and y'all will be livin' if'n ya dunt tryun stop us. Webe scroungers that dunt kill yous.... Less yous gib us truble... Den we kills yous real slows. So dunt mess wid usuns....yous heer??"*

Worm was waving his gun around at everyone and Hawk was thinking how to best use this to his advantage, when he saw Keli, whom had remained kneeling at Jason's side, reach both her hands slowly down to her boot tops and the narrow hilts of her daggers. He slid his hand down to his boot on the side where the scroungers couldn't see. She winked at him and he in turn nodded. It was her move.

Keli looked into the lead scroungers eyes and with a slight smile upon her lips said *"Sounds like you three are the most ignorant scroungers in the area to me. Damn I can hardly understand you at all. Who taught you to speak? Some mutant? Or maybe it was your mother? Or maybe your mother was a mutant!!"*

Worm glared at her raised his shotgun *"Nobody taks to me or me brudders lik dat yu bidich!"* Worm's finger moved to the trigger.

"Thud!" Hawk's hunting knife buried it's self into the left side of Worms head. His knees folded and Worm fell to the ground with a thump and rolled half way down the pile of debris he had been standing upon. His two brothers turned toward Hawk and raised their handguns. *"Thud"* Keli's dagger stuck into the biggest brothers head and he dropped to the ground. *"Swish"* The other dagger had missed because the smaller brother had turned so quickly. He saw his brother fall and spun toward Keli and stumbled over Worms body.

"Swish!" Hawk's other knife missed the falling scrounger and stuck into the sheet metal side of the truck. The surviving brother, still laying on the ground, raised his pistol and aimed it at Keli. Hawk reached for his rifle, then realized he had left it on the truck. He sprinted toward Keli, but knew he could never reach her in time.

There was a loud *"BANG"* that echoed throughout the huge hanger like building. Keli, who had closed her eyes, opened them and slapped a hand to her head as if to feel for blood. She looked at her hand, then at Worms brother. His head collapsed to the ground with a blank look on his face that she had seen too often. Blood trickled from somewhere under his head and formed a small dark red pool.

"Looks like you all could use a bit of help".

"GRIS!" Keli yelled *"You're late!"* She ran over and gave Gris a huge hug, then added *"But better late than never or at least in my case"*

Hawk walked over to Gris and shook his hand. Then bent over and picked up the dagger that Keli had thrown and missed with. He tossed it back to her *"Of course if someone wouldn't have missed, you wouldn't have had to waste a shot"*

Keli walked over to the truck and wrenched Hawks knife from the door and tossed it back to him.

"Funny I was just thinking the same thing" And stuck her tongue out at Hawk teasingly. Hawk laughed and slid his dagger back into his boot and turned back toward the squad.

Keli then winced and mumbled under her breath, *"You got to be kidding me, I just stuck my tongue out??? What the hell is the matter with me??"* She kicked a small brick so hard it sent Bill who was just coming around a truck, ducking for cover. He looked puzzled..... Keli looked confused by her actions!

Gris motioned for the trucks he'd brought with him to back into the building.

"I figured it might be a good idea to bring an escort along with all Keli said you'd found here." Then grinned at the two of them *"Good thing too, seems you two keep getting into trouble"*

Keli and Hawk looked at each other, then back to Gris and as if they were of one mind, said at the same time *"Was his fault"* *"Was her fault"* Both paused, looked back at each other and again said in unison *"It was"* There was a pause, then Hawk saw Keli's lips starting to move upward. It was too much for him. He made a snorting sound and grinned, which was too much for her and Keli burst into a roaring laughter, followed by Hawk. They turned and walked toward the rest of the group that had started to load the trucks. Keli bumped Hawk's shoulder with hers. *"We had it covered"*

Hawk bumped her shoulder gently back *"Of course we did"*

"We were just assessing the situation" She replied.

"Of course we were"

Gris just stood there shaking his head. *"And while you two assessed, I took care of business!"*

They all laughed!

The rest of the day and that night was spent removing the Neutrainium processor and loading the parts into the trucks. More trucks had been sent for and finally all the things that Hawk had shown them had been loaded.

Gris put his hands on his hips and smiled at Keli and Hawk *"You know if we didn't have to use a third of our men to stand guard, we would have been done much earlier."*

"Yeah and probable be dead without guards" Keli added with a toss of her head. *"No telling how many more like those scroungers are around."*

Gris smiled at Hawk *"Trained her well didn't we? ... Me and Pops that is."*

Keli overhearing them looked back over her shoulder and added “*And now I’m the best!*” She walked away swaying her hips in an exaggerated way, rubbing her nails on her shirt. She knew they were chuckling at her, but also knew there was no question in their minds she was as good or better than any man there.

Chapter 5.

By late afternoon all had been loaded and the other trucks had headed back to Wall City. Keli and Hawk were about to get the squad into their truck when Jason spotted dust heading their way.

"Surprising you can see anything with that lump on your noggin Jas" Keli quipped.

Jason rubbed his head and smiled.

Hawk sighted through his rifles scope. *"It's an old vehicle we used to call a Hummer"* Hawk replied. *"And not in too bad of shape either... Must be piece work... Damn! And it's a fuel burner!!"*

The truck came closer and straight towards the group. He laid the rifle back into the truck and said to Keli *"I'll see what they want, they don't look like raiders or even scroungers."*

As Keli and the squad covered Hawk, he walked forward to meet the new comers. The Hummer skidded to a halt, their leader opened the door and leaned out, looked at Hawk and the guns aimed at them and yelled *"Hey! Hi there.... We mean no harm."*

The man who appeared to be their leader stepped down and approached Hawk. *"We spotted your trucks leaving and hoped to catch up to y'all. You all didn't look like raiders or scroungers and mutes don't drive trucks... Well.... We saw some uniforms and.....well, we sure could use some help."*

Hawk motioned to lower the squads weapons and Keli moved up to join Hawk.

Their leader continued *"We colonized Rift City a little over a year and a half ago and have lived in peace... until now."*

"Rift City?..... Never heard of it!" Keli replied.

"It used to be an old farming community, part of this complex's food source. We had heard stories that it existed and found it and decided as it was unoccupied, we'd settled there." He paused then got back to his purpose to be there. *"I don't want to beat around the cactus, so I'll get right to the point."*

Worry crossed his face and the squad that remained could see he was near panic. *"Our scouts found a hoard of mutants headed toward us...our valley..... about thirty or so."*

Keli chirped *"30? Only 30? And you need help?"*

Their leader frowned and looked over to Hawk. *"We have only 23 families in Rift, mostly farmers and workers, women and children. We're no fighters and lack in shooting abilities. We would have fought them rather than let them run us out of our homes, but, when we saw you and your guns had hoped you'd lend a hand."*

He looked over at Keli *"We aren't cowards lady, we just aren't fighters. We've been watching you from that ridge for hours and no raiders move with precision like your people do."*

"We saw those scroungers sneak into the building and started to come down and help..." He nodded at the dust cloud kicked up by Gris's convoy that was leaving back toward Wall City *"We saw them and thought they might be raiders, so we couldn't do anything without giving away our position."*

Looking at Hawk, Keli said *"Yup! Sounds just like a bunch of helpless farmers."* She turned to her truck. Keli barked a command at her squad *"Load up guys!... We're going on a hunt!"* She headed back to the truck.

The leader held out his hand *"Sorry, my manners aren't what they once were."*

"My name is Lou, Lou Davies" Hawk introduced himself and pointed to the others and named them off, then added as if it just hit him.

"Hawk?....Ah....Like in the stories?"

Keli looked back at Lou and joked *"Don't ya believe a word of those tall tales, Christ, he's been hearing those lies for the last hundred years or so"*

Lou stammered, *"Hundred years??...Oh crap! You are him...damn!... Wow!.... Wait until I tell my kids."*

Keli was hanging out the window as her truck that had pulled alongside of Hawk, she just rolled her eyes and made motions like she was going to stick her finger down her throat.

"Ohhh it's Hawkie, the legend." The squad laughed.

Hawk glared at them. They stopped laughing abruptly.

He smiled, they all started laughing again. Hawk liked Keli's sense of humor although he tried never let her know.

"I'll ride with you Lou if you don't mind.... You lead the way." Hawk sat in the front seat as Lou moved to the rear.

"Keli... My rifle!"

Keli tossed Hawk his rifle. With a smoothness like they had worked together for years Hawk caught the rifle on the move as the trucks sped off and they were on their way to hunt down this band of mutants. The Hummer led with Keli and her squad's truck close behind.

Once again they were off into the late afternoon sun, but not to Wall City as they had planned.

After a few miles a cloud of dust could be seen in the distance. Hawk who was standing up through the cut out roof, yelled to the driver...

"Get to about a half mile from them and pull up"

The trucks came to a skidding halt. Hawk climbed up and sat on the half roof of the Hummer, slowly pulled out his rifle from the back seat. He snapped the scope caps up, pulled one of his legs to the roof and rested his elbow on his knee.

Keli walked up along side of the driver's window and with a grin said to the driver and Lou who had just finished moving to the front seat...

"Watch this... this is gonna be good."

Hawk aimed and within a few seconds there was a *"Psssst!"* Another and another.... Through the binoculars the party saw the mutants fall one by one. Five, ten, twenty. The mutants dropped to the ground and within a minute or so stopped twitching, others just fell lifelessly. Then suddenly Hawk said, *"Well crap"* Pointed at his rifle *"Has to recharge."*

Keli looked at the driver who was somewhat puzzled by Hawk's statement *"It looks like a regular snipers rifle."* She chuckled *"But it's far from it.... Or so Pops says!"*

Looking at Jason she yelled *"Jas... My turn!"*

Jason tossed Keli her scoped .308 rifle. She steadied her arm on the hood of the truck and fired off four rounds, killing the last three mutants. She straightened back up, tossed her rifle back to Jason and looked at Hawk.

"Not one word about using four shots to get three, Hawk.... Not one word!"

Hawk grinned at the squad *"She would have had them in only three shots guys.... If it wasn't for hitting that fly a half mile away with the second bullet."* They all snickered, until Keli shot back a glare that removed any thought of further laughing.

"Man those mutants must never drink to get this far out in the desert." Jason stated in more of a question than a statement.

Hawk glanced over to Jason. *They drink now and then, but don't have to. They eat, but don't have to, it's more of a reflex than need.*"

"Then how the hell do those damned things stay alive?"

"Have no idea Jas.... Back just after the apocalypse one of the guys that fell in with us recognized one of a couple of mutes we ran across as his dad. He didn't have the heart to put it down, nor would he let anyone else."

"So you just let it go free?" Keli who had been listening piped in her two cents worth.

"No Keli, we didn't let it go free. We roped it up tight and tossed it in the truck. There was a high fenced in area of the compound we had formed, so we tossed it in there. We watched it, tried to see what effected it, finally decided to see how long it could live without food or water.... Three years later I returned and the damn thing was still alive. It was still being studied."

"Dammnnnn...." Added Dave.

"Ya know I went back to Michigan a few decades ago and that thing was still going strong after ninety years!"

"Dammnnnn!!!"

Hawk laughed at the expressions on their faces.

Keli blurted out *"I believe he's making fun of us guys."*

Hawk raised his hand and pointed it toward the sky *"I swear every word is true gang..... Honest. Those damn things could possibly live forever as far as I know. That's why there are so many still around, no one turns into mutes, the ones you see are the ones that were turned on Day Zero!"*

Jason grinned. *"Holy crap and all this time I thought if one bit you, you'd become one."*

"Hahaha... Jas if one bites you, you'd better just hope it don't give you rabies or something like that....Don't think they brush their teeth...."

That got a rousing laugh from all in the party, then the conversation took a turn toward the more at hand concerns.

Lou suggested that as it would be dark in a few hours and perhaps that they might come back to Rift City with them to share dinner and a safe nights rest. *"We also have a radio and small tower.... You can call back to your base and let them know you're ok. We occasionally heard your radio chatter, but without knowing who.... Or what you were...."*

Keli replied *“Great, we’re out of range of our truck radios now and I want to be sure our trucks made it back ok. This is no place for anyone to get caught out in the open and in the dark. If the damn raiders didn’t see the headlights, then any mutes that are around would.”*

She told her guys to take the truck back home and that she planned to go with Hawk and find out more about this new village.

“That the only reason you’re going with Hawk, Kel?” Dave grinned at his leader.

Keli looked back at Dave puzzled *“Ahhh...Yah, why else would I?”*

Dave nudged Jason to step on it. He figured they’d better get going before Keli figured out what he had suggested. And off they went leaving her in a cloud of dust. And sure enough Keli figured out what Jason had meant as she bounced a rock off the rear of the truck as it sped away.

It only took about an hour or so for them to reach what they called the ‘Rift’. On the way Lou told Hawk and Keli about their colony.

They had moved westward looking for some land and heard rumors of this small green valley with water hidden somewhere in the wastelands. It had a large rift on one side and small but steep ridges on either side leaving one the opening to the valley for an entrance. It had been a farming community at one time. But passersby’s would see only a tall outcropping in the desert.

“Even the entrance to the valley is concealed by large outcrops. The whole valley floor is actually fifty feet higher than the wastelands that surround it. Hell it even has large Artesian wells they make a stream that runs half way through the valley before it falls into the rift.” Lou added *“It even had a few old ruined buildings we used when we first settled here. We used them at first for temporary shelters, then some of the materials to build our own structures, the rest we scrounged from the place you call Dead City.”*

“I never knew it existed, we must have driven right by the entrance a few years back when we were exploring this area” replied Keli, then she added *“This area is so desolate, we never come here. Amazing we’re only about seventy miles or so from Wall City.”*

Hawk added *“Seventy miles is as good as two hundred out here with the roads being so bad or nonexistent, the mutes roam everywhere and let’s not forget the raiders.”*

Lou explained that he had come by an old map hidden in a book he had found in Dead City that showed the way to the valley. The rumors of the complex’s hidden farmland was no myth and now it was going to be their home.

The sun was getting low in the sky and the desert heat started to wane as they approached what appeared to be a section of cliffs and boulders. They pulled up to a well hidden outpost. The guards waved them on as Lou signaled it was ok.

They traveled up a narrow road that opened into a larger canyon. Less than a half mile in the two were stunned by the lush green valley that lay before them. The valley wasn't huge, but could easily support more than the families that resided there. More notably was the fact that this valley was so much cooler than the surrounding desert.

The Hummer pulled up in front of a small building. Keli, Hawk and Lou got out and the Hummer drove away.

"This is what I'm looking for" Keli chirped *"I'll call Gris and maybe Pops later? If it's ok with you?"*

Lou nodded and Keli went through the door.

"She know how to use a radio" Lou quizzed Hawk.

"Hell, probably better than any of your people. Pops told me she was building them before he found her, something about her real dad knew electronics and taught her since she was old enough to hold a soldering iron."

Lou smiled *"Heh, maybe we can talk her into staying and fixing some of our other radios that have broken on us."*

They walked across the road to another building to get a drink and waited for Keli to join them when she was done.

Keli called Gris and informed them of the situation and told Gris she and maybe Hawk would call back later to speak to Pops. She told them of their new found friends and their location. Even that Lou had mentioned they may set up some sort of trade agreement between the two cities. Wall City had many small gardens, but no huge farms and only limited kinds of fresh produce. This was a boon for them and the technology and security they in turn could offer Rift City would be well received.

Later that evening, after eating and swapping some information, the drinks and tall tales abounded. Keli looked around for Hawk, but he was nowhere to be seen. She walked out and saw him talking to a couple of rugged looking men. *"Hunters!"* she thought to herself. She walked up cautiously and heard one speak.

"Well Hawk, sure is good to see you after all these years, heh, figured you'd have worked your way to the west coast by now"

Hawk slapped the hunters shoulder *"Red, ya old dog, I figured you be mutant munchies or your head adorning a raider car by now.... But it's good o see yer still kicking."*

Hawk's demeanor changed to serious *"Anywhere but the west coast Red. I hear there's only seventeen fortified communities west of the Rockies. And over ten million mutes."* Hawk paused thoughtfully *"Hell if it wasn't for the fact that two hundred miles of the northern part of Mexico sank into the ocean, those damned mutes would be swarming around here instead of being trapped on the west coast."*

Red laughed *"Geezzz Hawk we'd sure be busy then, huh?"*

Hawk added *"Or dead!"* The two men laughed in a nervous manner.

Hawk motioned toward Keli to join them.

"This here is Keli, she'll be interested in what you were telling me about Cordons brothers"

Keli's face drained of emotion, then changed to rage. *"Dog and Mutt?... What about them?"*

Red looked at her face and had never seen such a change in any living person. He could see the hate, then anger and the want of revenge.

"Well, seems some guy on a cycle has been killing off Cordons raiding parties"

He gave a sly wink at Hawk. *"Well this kinda depleted Cordons little army, so he sent his brothers north to recruit some new cutthroats."* He paused, *"I heard they'll be headed back just the other side of the rift near Wall City."*

Keli gasped, *"We have to leave now Hawk, I'll contact the squad to come get us....."*

"Wait Kel.. They won't have had time to get back this soon. The earliest they could be back by the rift would be in two maybe three days.... We have plenty of time"

All of them could see Keli was enraged, but was calming down... at least to a slow boil.

"I'll tell you what. If you wait and calm down, we head back in the morning and I'll take you out with me and find them" Keli looked at Hawk, her face much calmer. *"Remember what I told you about killing either of those bastards!!"*

Hawk chuckled *"I remember Kel... I like keeping my head right where it is!"*

She actually smiled at Hawk. She was relaxing a bit and that made Hawk feel better. He pondered about his rash offer to Keli about allowing her to go with him to hunt them down, but she looked like she could control herself if she needed to.

The two hunters turned and walked away not saying a word. Hawk turned and walked in the other direction. Keli was left standing alone. She looked at the departing hunters, then ran to catch up to Hawk.

"You guys didn't say good-bye or anything, I thought you all were friends?"

Hawk snapped back at her *"Friends? You don't make friends out here, you just know people. You don't say good-bye because you don't want to jinx them. You don't say anything"* He looked back at Red and his pal. *"Chances are, I'll never see them again..... So if you don't say good-bye.... All you remember is...."*

Hawk paused his steady strides, turned and looked at Keli... *"Hell I don't know why no one says good-bye.... We just don't, it sounds just too final!!!"*

Keli thought *"Wow, he got a little angry.... Emotion?"* It dawned on her that the days she had known Hawk, other than a laugh or two, he had never shown much emotion.... And never anger.

"Hawk!" Keli asked she quickened her pace to match his *"You seem a bit mad, was it the way I acted back there?"*

"No Kel... I understand how you feel, I can accept that... It's just... well... killing those mutes today..." His voice trailed off. *"At some point in time, a long time ago, these things were human. They had hopes, dreams..... families,they were at one time.... us. They for some reason don't die of old age... They don't seem to have to eat, they don't age, they just live their damned, miserable existence until someone kills them or they are killed due to an accident."*

He paused and stood facing her once more, *"All these years, there's no telling how far they've roamed..."* Sadness crossed his face *"Some of those poor bastards could have been my neighbors back when."* He turned and slowly walked away toward the small makeshift inn.

Keli was stunned, this wasn't the Hawk of legend she'd been raised on. She heard sorrow and pain in his voice and felt for him. This was something new to her, she'd just met this stranger the other day and now she was feeling... Feeling?... feeling what? She shook her head and shrugged it off. She gave Hawk a quick look and headed over to the radio hut to call Pops.

After she relayed all the information and days events, she told Pops of Hawks strange ponderings on mutants. *"Pops, he hunts and kills mutes, but still laments over killing them... Sometimes I can't figure him out."*

Over the radio Pops spoke softly *"Honey if you ever tell Hawk I told you what I'm about to... I'll turn you over my knee and wail the tar out of ya"*

She had never heard Pops threaten her like that.... even in jest.

"One night when I used to ride with Hawk, we got a little drunk.... Well, ok...a lot drunk. He told me that after the radiation hit during the apocalypse, the first place he headed was home."

He tells everyone that all he found of some of his family were a few piles of dust, where they had died” Pops paused.

“What he doesn’t tell people is when he got to his house, there was a group of mutants, he recognized some as his neighbors” Pops voice slowed. “Hawk put them out of their misery one by one. Walking through them, shooting each one of them in the head, watching his friends and neighbors fall, he thought he’d never be able to finish.... But somehow he did.”

Pops could barely be heard over the radio, his voice trembling.

“He turned to go into his home and saw his wife, daughter and his grandson walking toward him..... They too were mutants” Pops took a long pause “One by one Hawk put them down. He stayed by their bodies until they vaporized and turned to dust. As you know Kel it takes up to seven hours for the mutants to vaporize. Imagine sitting there surrounded by your dead loved ones for that long knowing you had killed them.

Pops sounded like he was on the verge of crying *“When Hawk told me this, he was completely drunk, he instantly sobered up and with tears in his eyes made me swear I’d never tell a living soul” Pops sounded shaken “Honey, Hawk told me, he sat there with his hands full of dust and cried,he buried the dust that was left behind..... and he’s never shed a tear or cared about anything since”*

Keli felt her own eyes filling with tears from the deep sadness in Pops voice..... and imagining how Hawk must have felt *“What pain Hawk must feel! Perhaps as much as hers?.... Perhaps more....”* She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“I miss you Pops, we’ll be home tomorrow.... I’ll see you soon...I love you.”

Pops turned from the radio and thought to himself. *“I love you?...Miss you?... What the hell has gotten into that girl?”* But he caught himself smiling. Whatever had gotten into her.... he liked this new Keli.

She walked back to the inn pondering what Pops had told her, feeling her own pain, Hawk’s and how it even affected Pops. She saw Hawk on the inn’s porch leaning on the railing. He stared far off into the now darkening valley. She walked over and stood next to him, leaned over onto the rail, looked at him, then out over the small valley.

“Pretty isn’t it. If someone didn’t know what dangers were out there beyond the valley, one would think it’s a beautiful place” Keli remained silent. Hawk glanced over to her, then back to the scenery and the setting sun. “ “Impressive! She knows when not to say word”, he thought....” She is just enjoying the view.”

Little did Hawk know how deeply Keli was affected by what Pops had told her. She wondered how anyone could live as long as Hawk has and feel that kind of pain, year after year and still feel empathy for all that he kills.

"If you feel so strongly about killing, how.... Why do you keep on doing it" Keli said softly half hoping Hawk wouldn't hear her.

"You just turn your emotions off....Stop feeling... Do what has to be done" Hawk replied coldly. *"You do it and ignore everything else. Eventually you get good at it, emotions get you killed!"*

Keli heard the pain in his voice. She knew there was still emotion in this man. She knew that someday he would realize it.... and the day he did, it well could be his downfall. She moved closer to Hawk so their shoulders touched and leaned her head over towards his. Her lips close to his ear she whispered *"I don't think you're such a hard ass as you'd like people to think you are"*

Hawk straightened up and stepped back a step from Keli..

"And this comes from one that wants to kill a couple of guys with her bare hands?"

He turned and started to walk away. Keli was startled, but recovered quickly.

"Oooooo touched a soft spot did I?"

She chuckled as Hawk stormed off. *"Seems he really isn't as tough as he lets on"*

She looked back toward the valley. The sun had set, the last rays of day had vanished and the cool night breeze gave her a shiver. She peered at the moon as it started its flight across the night sky.

Tomorrow they would head back and she would hold Hawk to his promise to take her with him. To track down the bastards that had made her life a living hell for almost a year. She would finally get her revenge. She shivered again and stared out into the darkness.

Keli whispered *"I'll watch the life drain from your eyes as I twist my sword in your guts!!"* This time there was no emotion in her voice, no hate..... Just determination. She realized that she and Hawk had one more thing in common..... her emotions, as his, were slowly dying and when they did, what would she become? Her life had not mattered to her since she was a teen and it mattered less now. Her only reason for being was to avenge her father and herself.

She shivered again.... This time it was not the cool night air, but what she saw in her mind!

The morning came and the small party from the Rift City headed back to Wall City. There the two were welcomed by cheers and congratulations for the treasure they had found. Also for the new friends that had brought them back home there was a large group of city officials to welcome them and to arrange trade between the two cities.

While they ate the squad told tall tales of how Hawk had dispatched just about a whole hoard of mutes all by himself. Keli just sat back, grinned and shook her head slowly. They admired him, but she could hold no envy for that. Hawk was a legend and it's hard to compete with a legend. She smiled again.

Sometime around late afternoon Hawk loaded up his cycle. Pops had said his farewells to Hawk and Hawk straddled his bike.

"Forgetting someone Hawk?" It was Keli standing in the doorway. *"You did promise you'd take me with you....or are you one that goes back on his word?"*

Hawk frowned, then motioned for her to get behind him. She strapped her bag to the 'buddy bar' on the rear of the seat, swung a leg over and sat behind Hawk.

She slipped her arms around Hawk's chest and snuggled herself into his back, leaned forward and with her lips next to his ear whispered *"Ok tough guy.... Let's go"*

The cycle jerked to a start barely making a sound and off the pair went, down the road, through the guard post and off into the wastelands.

Pops looked at Gris that had joined him on the inn's porch and said *"Ya know Gris... I kinda feel sorry for whatever's out there... with those two hunting them"*

Gris looked at Pops *"You know she has Hawk twisted around her little finger don't ya?"*

Pops looked in the direction the two had vanished and replied. *"Somehow Gris, I don't think he minds, He's ridden alone far too long.... Company will do him some good!"*

"Yeah, maybe..... if they don't kill each other first!"

The guys laughed and went back into the inn, as Gris added *"With those two out there Pops, I'll bet there'll be some great stories for you to tell.... assuming they live long enough to get back to tell them to ya."*

Pops stopped for a second and even though he knew Hawk would die before he'd let anything happen to his lovely Keli, he still worried. As he turned and closed the tavern's door he took one last glance out the city's gate.... *"Be safe my little one"....*

Pops sighed and closed the door.....

Chapter 6.

The desert air was uncommonly hot and the sun was beating down with its usual relentlessness. Keli had seen motorcycles, but had not ridden on one in years. She could sense that there was something different about Hawk's, but had never dwelled on the thought. The wind rushing past her body was exhilarating. At times she would look over his shoulder to see in which direction he was taking her and feel the wind whip her pony tail around her shoulders. Other times she'd bury her head into the space between Hawk's shoulders when the wind became too dusty.

There were times she'd wonder about this man, his life, a life that was so much like her own. She at times caught herself gently squeezing him and marveling at his muscular physique. *"Not bad for an old guy"* She'd think with a sly smile, *"If he was about twenty years younger...."* Then she'd frown and reprimand herself for even considering showing interest in any man.... *"Especially this egotistical one!"* She gave a wide grin as she knew at times the same could be said about her attitude.

They rode for a few hours to an outcropping in the wastelands desert over one hundred miles from Wall City. Hawk drove up the rear face along a narrow path to the top about eighty feet above the ground.

"If they come back this way, we'll be able to see them. This overlooks two of the three passes and the last pass there are all those mutes to avoid. They'll come by this way!"

Keli walked around stretching. *"I agree Hawk, this way and I'll bet through this first pass. It's steep, but this side is quicker to Cordon's territory..."*

She stopped and gave a huge stretch and felt her back pop several times...

"How the hell do you ride for hours on this thing Hawk?.... I feel like, my butt is attached to my neck"

Hawk chuckled *"You get used to it".....*

"Keli?".... She turned and looked directly at Hawk, his face showed he was doing some serious thinking.

"Keli... You must never tell anyone what you are going to hear and see..... Never!... On your honor!"

"You're starting to worry me Hawk..... Everyone knows about your legend" She teasingly chuckled "Or has made things up about it....or you.... How do you figure it's such a secret?"

"I'm serious Kel....Never"

She raised her hand and made a crossing gesture over her heart *"Okies Hawkie, I promise.... On my honor"*

Her smile vanished when Hawk added, *"Ok, like myself, I know your honor means everything to you."* He took a deep breath, *"We're going to be getting into a scrap, against odds we just don't know about..... and, well, you're just too damned pretty to be dead. I'm going to tell you things you need to know... Well... Damn!"* She had never seen Hawk this serious in the short time she had known him, nor so unsure of... of.. What was with him?

Hawk took a deep breath, rolled his eyes upward and looked at the sky almost like he knew she would not believe him. *"Where to start."*

Keli blurted out. *"Well if you're going to be telling me secrets, how about starting with... uh... How the hell does your cycle always keep standing? You never put down a kick stand, it never falls over, I saw you lean against it back in the city and it never fell?"*

Hawk had seen that puzzled look before and just ignored the other questions she been asking the last few days, so Keli was lucky to get *"It doesn't need a kick stand, it doesn't fall over..... Maybe later I'll tell you why. There are more important things that you need to know at the moment"*

Keli inquired about the five compartments on the rear of his cycle. There were two smaller ones on each side and one large one that overlapped the smaller ones and the rear fender. A buddy bar was built into the front of the top one so a passenger could lean back against it, not to mention it was wide enough to partially protect the riders from bullets fired from behind. The two lower compartments could be opened from the rear, the ones on top of those two, opened from the top and the top one opened from the top and either from the front or from the rear which was handy if moving. But Hawk never added anything more about their purpose to ease her curiosity.

Hawk grinned, stooped down and opened the lower compartment on the cycle and pulled a strange device from the open door. *"Stand up straight, hold your arms out stretched, feet apart"*

Puzzled Keli did what she was asked. It was a strange request, but then, this was the Hawk Pops had been telling tales about for years. She knew if Pops rode with him and this man was her friend and would not harm her in any way. Still Keli complied but only warily. She would trust him only to certain limits, it was Pops after all that knew this man, not her. She slowly complied to his request.

Hawk held up the device and it hummed, lit up for a few seconds glowed and emitted a strange green light that moved from her head to her toes. It turned blue then worked its way up her body. The hum stopped and he reattached it back inside the compartment and glanced back to Keli *"Heh, you can relax now"*

He sat on a rock looked into her eyes as if trying to find words.

"Ok, dammit, we have some time.... I guess I'll just tell you and let you decide how much you'll want to absorb."

He shook his head almost sure she would laugh in his face. *The rumors you heard....about the aliens.... Ah, beings not from this planet..... Well its true! They came to me only hours before the Earth was engulfed by some unknown anomaly. I was a simple man and didn't understand most of what they were telling me."*

Hawks face looked pale, *"I had this gene that allowed me to hear their thoughts. Jesus Keli! At first I thought I was going insane Eventually I realized I was actually communicating with these beings from another world".* He looked at Keli to see if she was laughing at him, but instead he saw a woman that was hanging onto his every word.

" They told me of the oncoming disaster and offered to allow me to come with them... but I'd be the last surviving human. I refused, how could I leave everyone, my wife, my kids, grandkids.... "

Keli saw the immense pain in his eyes. *"They offered me a chance to survive to be around to help humanity rebuild."* He paused as to let her absorb what he'd told he so far.

"Someday maybe I'll tell you why.... how I was chosen, how things work, but for now, it's just take it as....Well... It happened."

He paused as if to look back into a woeful past *"They were beings of pure energy that could turn energy into matter just by thinking of it. They could travel among the stars by just a thought.... A race millions of years older than humans."*

"Some of them had stumbled on this vast cloud of unknown radiation and studied it, some died within it.... As powerful as these beings were, this cloud destroyed those that entered within seconds. While they studied this radiation from a distance, a few of them had decided to see where this cloud was headed and if it would affect any of the planets in its path. They found Earth and to their horror, life.....us...we existed there. They knew..... well, something had to be done" His voice trailed off *"They found me, I guess they could sense my.... Hell I don't know"* There was anger in his voice.

Hawk stood and started to slowly pace. *"How could I refuse? I couldn't refuse them if there was any chance some of us would survive. So they created what I call a base of sorts, a shelter from the radiation deep within the earth in soil that they thought had the best chance of*

shielding me from the this unknown radiation. They loaded it with devices and equipment they created. I have no understanding of how the crap does what it does, and just barely know enough on how to use the things they gave me. They teleported me to it as it's deep underground, and put me into some sort of medical device" He slowly sat down on another rock and lowered his head as in deep pain. *"Some things they pulled out of my mind... like using a motorcycle, but even that they improved on..."*

"It all happened so fast Keli, I...didn't have time...I...I couldn't even get to my family" Hawk's voice now filled with pain *"They died Keli.... I couldn't save them and I had to let them die... All the time I communicated with these ancient beings only took seconds.... Although it seemed like an hour.... Not enough time to go home.... To be with..."*

She walked over to Hawk and gently laid her hand on his shoulder *"I know.... Pops told me"* She choked back the urge to do what he could not.... weep. *"I'm so sorry Hawk, I truly am..."*

He reached his hand to hers and squeezed it gently *"Thanks, Kel"*

She couldn't believe Hawk, this man of iron, had actually opened up to her. He allowed emotion to creep to the surface. But before she could finish her thoughts...

He paused and perked up some, and with a half hearted chuckle *"Damn... it must be something about seeing Pops again that effects me to open up like this... Sorry, it won't happen again I don't want anyone to think I'm getting soft in my old age"* He stood and walked toward the cycle.

But Keli knew, she had glanced into this man's soul, he had a side of him that he had forgotten. A side she would like to see again. A warm smile crossed her lips.

Hawk walked over to the cycle and bent down to the same compartment he had been earlier but this time he didn't remove the device from the compartments door, but reached inside.

"Here!!"

She snapped out of her thoughts abruptly, only to see something flying at her. She flinched but threw her hand out and caught what Hawk had thrown at her. Her reflexes were not unlike Hawks, fast and efficient.

Hawk smiled at her *"Nice reflexes"* Then added *"For a girl"*

Keli made a face and stuck her tongue out at him. Then looked down at what he had thrown at her. She raised the bundle up and it unfolded.

"Pants?.... They're really nice Hawk, but...."

“Don’t let them fool you Kel, they’re actually a kind of soft armor. I don’t age, but how the hell do Ya think I’ve lived this long? Don’t tell anyone, but I can be killed.....” He pointed toward his suit *“This thing has saved my ass many times..... Literally.”*

Keli looked at the pants, they were of the same material Hawk’s uniform was made of. A sort of black material that looked like leather and felt like leather, but were some sort of cloth.

“Duck behind that bush and put them on.... Oh, and... no underwear...”

Keli glanced back over her shoulder *“You wouldn’t peek would you.... I’d have to hurt ya”* She smiled, she knew Hawk was too honorable to do something like that.

She slipped off her buckskins and panties. She pulled up the black pants. When she pulled them completely up, it was like they instantly formed to every part of her body. They fit her like a pair of tights with the exception of the waist area that seems to expand and give the appearance of a leather chastity belt. She giggled, she liked them and she looked good. And they showed off her well rounded behind!

“Wow, Hawk.... These pants are great!” She stepped out from behind the bush and did a little slow spin. *“And they fit great!”*

Hawk let out a whistle..... Keli smiled a little sexy, sly smile tossing out her hip *“Well, well... Hawk, was that a compliment? From you?... I don’t believe it!”*

Hawk frowned slightly and tossed her a top *“Put this on”* Keli looked at the top and it was of the same material as the pants. She was so excited on getting something new, she turned partially away from Hawk and forgetting to duck back behind the bush, pulled her top over her head in excitement. Hawk turned away, but not before catching a glimpse of her firm rounded breast that in her haste, Keli hadn’t turned quite fast enough.

“Ahhh...Oops!” He said as he turned away from Keli.

She gasped and covered herself with her two arms and ducked behind the bush dropping the top Hawk had tossed her.

“Ohhh, I’m sorry” She said in an almost girlish voice from behind the bush.

“Heh” Hawk chuckled.

He bent over to pick up the uniform top still with his back turned to her, he held out the top behind him and started to slowly to back toward the bush.

He chuckled and said *“I’m not.”*

"OWWwww..Damn!" He said as a rather large stick bounced off his shoulder blade.... He let her top drop onto the bush.

She pulled the top over her head and zipped it up just passed her breasts.... Just enough to reveal a little cleavage. She stepped out from the bush and once again was greeted by a whistle from Hawk... this time it was longer and louder. She caught herself giving him a big smile.

"Ok Keli... The top will stretch a bit, so pull the top down until it reaches the pants, to those two small darker areas on either side of the waist and hold it there for a few seconds with your fingers to the outside" She did as he asked and felt a slight pressure. The top had joined to the pants and became a one piece outfit even though it still looked like pants and a jacket.

"Wow! Nice!"

"You can leave the top unattached if you want, just remember to attach it before a fight, but there are other advantages to attaching it as well..." Then grinned, *"I'll tell you in a bit"*

He tossed her a pair of boots, She sat on a large boulder and pulled them on kicking each leg in the air seductively, slowly pulling each boot slowly up and over her calf.

"Do the same as you did with the top. Hold the pant legs to the boots Kel" And again the slight pressure *"Now the boots are one with the suit."*

"Hope you don't mind the slight heel... Figured some height might be useful in a scrap. It's narrow enough to be useful in a back kick, but wide enough so it won't get caught in things....It's about the same as your old western style boots."

She stood and looked at herself. Glancing along her shapely tapered legs, along her trim waste and up to her ample breasts. *"Not bad"* she thought *"Not bad at all.... I like the fit."* She turned and kicked a leg out backwards and glanced along her rear and down her leg to the boot. Keli bent forward and placed her hands down along her calf and ran them up along her well shaped legs as if smoothing the material, but found no folds, nor creases.

Hawk couldn't help but see the cleavage she was showing, laughed and quipped *"And if you zip up the zipper so you don't spill out of your top."* He said glancing at the way she had left the zipper undone. *"It will seal right on up to your chin when the collar turns up. This protects you from electricity, chemicals, even fire for a while"*

He turned and walked back to the bike. *"The little pocket on your thigh holds gloves that bond with the sleeves on you suit....like the boots, so you're protected from your toes to your neck"*

"Hawk? Is this from...."

“Yep! That good old alien technology that everyone laughs at the thought of” He smiled at Keli as she kept checking herself out. *“Damn Hawk.... Pops wasn’t lying about you all these years”* She thought to herself. Then she felt something happening.

“Wow,.... Hawk, I’m cooling down!!” She was puzzled.

Again he laughed *“Forgot to mention the suit detects when you are getting too warm or cold and adjusts its self to what temperature you feel comfortable at. It’s loaded with sensors”*

He added *“The suit will protect you from some damage, but always keep in mind, you can be hurt and even killed.... It just helps, not prevents damage So don’t go playing like your Superman or anything like that”*

“Superman??” Keli looked over her shoulder at Hawk *“What’s a Superman...”*

Once again Hawk felt old.... He shook his head and let out a small sigh!

He strolled over to the bike, opened another compartment and pulled out two dark blue packs. He tossed one to Keli. She watched as he unfolded his into a nice sized blanket. She did the same and laid hers next to Hawks.

“Squeeze the two little tabs for a few seconds” She kneeled down and did as Hawk instructed. The blankets thickened to a few inches thick. She gasped, then smiled at Hawk, *“I know... alien technology.”*

“Yep! And you can fold it over and hold it on the sides for a few seconds and it will become a sleeping bag... It too has sensors and will keep you warm or cool, depending on what you are comfortable with.”

“WOW!...Nice.”

“She learns fast” Hawk thought *“Pretty and smart... Nice combination, she’d make some lucky guy a fine wife....”* He smiled at his next thought, *“That is if she hadn’t swore to kill any man that touched her”*

Hawk turned and scanned the desert below, they might be there for a day or two, but it never hurts to check. He walked back to the center of the small mesa where they had set up camp. He decided he liked this woman named Keli which was rare. Hawk liked few people and formed even fewer bonds. *“What a shame... she deserves to find someone.... Someone to make her forget her past”* He thought, then sighed. He knew what hate could do to a person.

It was unfortunate that Hawk had allowed his mind to wander for a few seconds. *“Oh Kel, by the wa.....”*

There was a loud **“Crackle”** Then, **“ZAP”!!!**

Hawk turned just in time to hear Keli's "*Yiiiiieeee*" and see her flying through the air. She hit him directly in the chest, knocking them both to the ground. They lay on the ground Hawk on the bottom with his head and shoulders propped up on a boulder and Keli laid sprawled on her back, her head and shoulders propped upon Hawk's chest, her head just below his chin.

"Damn.... What the hell was that!!!"

"Ah, geeezzz Kel.... I was about to say not to touch the bike, it turns on a security system whenever I'm over ten feet away or gone for a few minutes..... I forgot to turn it off.... Sorry"

He started chuckling. Keli felt his chest heaving with mirth and started to laugh herself.

"Thanks for the warning Hawk!" She laughed harder *"I thought you said this suit protected me from electricity?"*

Hawk who was now roaring with laughter replied *"You... Hahaha... weren't wearing.... Hahaha.... your gloves!"*

"Gloves? Ohhhhh now you tell me!"

"I did tell you dammit... remember? I just didn't tell you about the security.... Did it give you a little tingle?"

"Yeah it tingled me ten feet through the air you bastard!"

They both broke into uncontrolled laughter.

Keli rolled slightly and looked at Hawk, tears of laughter rolled down his cheek. She took the palm of her hand and smacked Hawk along the side of the head.

"You're getting quite a kick out of this aren't you!"

He laughed even harder, gasping for breath. She laid her head back onto his chest and they laid there for a while.... Just laughing, enjoying a moment of each other's company. It had been a long time since either had enjoyed a good laugh and even longer since they had enjoyed another's company. But like all good moments, they are fleeting and soon the laughter became a few chuckles, then just smiles.

They went about setting up the camp for the night. Hawk arose and walked over to the bike and did something on the small device he had used to measure Keli earlier.

He smiled at her.... *"No more trips through the air, you're safe to touch the cycle any time you want now..... Sorry about not programming it in earlier... I could just turn it off, but I set it so you have full access to the bike even with the security system on.... No more shocks... Sorry!... Really!"*

"I'm not." She replied *"It was worth it just to see you laugh"* She smiled back at him thinking that it had been years.... *"years!"* She mumbled under her breath. Years since she had laughed like that. This old guy brought out something in side of her that she thought had been lost.

"Well old isn't really the word....older" She thought. Then the more serious side of her cropped up and she pondered as to why she had even thought what she just had..... *"What's the matter with me"* Keli held out her hands and looked at them as if they'd answer her back *"Why am I thinking like this. Why am I acting like a silly.... girl?"*

She stood there puzzled by her actions, head up looking, staring out into the darkening prairie, she was stunned by her thought, her actions, her mouth agape, one word kept popping into her mind *"Why???"*

Hawk but an end to her quandary in an instant. He walked by her, put his hand gently to her chin and pushed her mouth closed.

"Catching flies?"

He chuckled and started to walk toward the cycle.

She snapped out of it and as he walked by, gently slapped him on the back of the head. *"That's twice now you said that to me!"*

He turned and looked at her. *"Well then stop leaving your mouth open....,There's no telling what might fly in!"*

She put her hands on her hips, looked at him and in a teasing voice *"It's none of your business what I do when I'm thinking."* She stuck her tongue out at him..... Then thought to herself *"Damn there I go again"* She gave a little frown.

Hawk smiled, shrugged and walked to the bike and pulled out a pair of night vision goggles. He motioned toward Keli's pad.

"You sleep the first five hours, then I'll sleep till dawn"

He put the goggles on and scanned the now darkened prairie, *"Sleep well partner"*

"Partner" She thought *"That sounded nice. I think he really respects me."*

She watched him lean against a bolder, scanning the horizon for any signs of a camp fire... or anything else that may be a sign of danger.... Or Cordon's brothers.

Although they couldn't build a fire, she was warm in her new suit. She snuggled into the soft pad folding it over her and thoughts of what had transpired this day danced through her

mind. She grew drowsy and in the quickly dimming light took one more look in Hawks direction, smiled. Feeling safe she fell into a deep sleep.

And she dreamed wonderful dreams for the first time in many years.....

Chapter 7.

The night hours passed slowly for Hawk. Old memories would always flood back into his mind during these long watches, but somehow he didn't mind. Now and then he'd glance over toward Keli to make sure she was still sleeping. He could barely see her in the low glow of the three quarter moon, but he knew she'd be waking soon to relieve him and he'd try to sleep.

"Pointless to try." He mulled over in his mind. Hawk trusted Keli, but not that much.... Not yet. He'd been alone far too long and trust was in limited supply. He'd still sleep with one eye open, just in case she pulled her watch with both her eyes closed. He smiled and turned back toward the desert.

The time passed and Hawk just kept scanning the horizon for any signs of camp fires. Only the raiders were brash enough to light fires, so if he saw one, it would most likely be Cordons brothers.

"Hey there handsome.... You awake over there?" Keli whispered as she walked over to his spot.

"Handsome? What the hell you been drinkin'? I shave this mug every morning and it isn't what I'd call handsome!" He laughed, *"I know.... You're just trying to flatter me so I'll pull your watch!"*

Keli caught herself and thought *"What the hell are you doing talking to him that way? But then admitted he wasn't bad looking in a rugged sort of way."* She smiled to herself and sat down next to Hawk.

"Your turn to hit the sack." Nodding at the dark night sky *"Dawn will be here before long and if we find them, I need you at your best!"*

Hawk said little and there were so many questions Keli wanted to know, but had no idea how to ask. Her face aglow in the silvery moon light, the cool night air tossed her bangs now and then, she turned to Hawk. Her dark eyes glistened. *"Hawk..... I'll understand if you... well if you don't want to talk, but I really would like to know..... About.... About.... Before. Your world, how you got here, the aliens, your bike....."*

Hawk thought he'd laugh out loud at her, but bit his tongue. She was like a little inquisitive girl asking her mommy about things. He smiled, but held back the amusement he found in her manner.

“Hmmm... Well Keli that would take some time.” He laughed “Too little time for a long story... But I will tell you a little.. That is as YOU do your job and keep a look out.”

Keli smiled and lifted the night vision goggles to her eyes and adjusted the strap to her somewhat smaller head. She scanned the desert.

“Ya know Kel, I really don’t know where to begin. Pops told me what he mentioned to you, so you know that much. The aliens were exploring this area of space and found a massive radiation anomaly. They didn’t know what it was, nor where it came from. I guess you can figure out where it was headed...” Hawk shifted his weight as if he was getting uncomfortable.

“A few of them had died in the field and I’m guessing one of them thought to figure out where it was going. These were beings of pure energy, so when they found earth in the fields path, they had no way to contact us, nor enough time until they found me. While they were trying to gather information about our race, as time for us was running out, they detected my thoughts.

Hawk frowned *“Truth be known I was no more than a genetic freak that had an extra gene or something that leaned me toward being telepathic just enough to allow them to communicate with me. I was miles from home working on our cabin when they contacted me. Their thoughts came so fast it almost killed me. I guess they realized it and slowed down their thoughts..... He laughed out loud, “Hell it must have been like us talking to a worm, they’re so advanced above us! I couldn’t understand them at all at first, then as they slowed their bursts of thoughts my head stopped splitting and I began to understand them.... Well mostly!”*

His smile vanished *“They told me this anomaly would hit the Earth within minutes! Needless to say I was stunned. Didn’t have the time to get back to my family, didn’t have time for anything. I think they detected my thoughts and told me they could take my consciousness and allow me to travel with them.... The last existing remnant of humankind. Of course I declined.*

“But Hawk, we survived Hawk we survived...well our fathers, fathers did.... Earth wasn’t destroyed.” Keli was puzzled.

Hawk leaned back against a large bolder, his voice low.... Sad.

“They told me there was a chance that some would survive on the opposite side of the planet where the anomaly hit. Luckily they were wrong to some extent. Everything on the Asian side of the planet was.... But something in the Earth itself stopped small areas of the radiation.”

“Were there a lot of survivors Hawk?”

“Survivors? Guess that depends on your view of what a survivor is Keli. Enough radiation was deflected to leave over seventy and a half million living....No one knows how many others turned to mutants. But guessing we figured more than double the survivors. The rest of humanity just vaporized in a puff of smoke, unlike the mutants after they’ve been dead for several hours,

humanity or most of it vaporized within seconds. They actually turn to dust, the body's molecules just stop holding together and all that's left is dust.

We started calling them mutants because they changed. Some became misshapened, others not so much... They just look like dead walking... but all of them lost all sense of being civilized. It was like that had regressed back to the caveman days, maybe farther than that... Only the most basic instinct... Killing and survival."

Hawk knew she didn't understand half of the words he used, but knew she was smart and easily filled in the gaps.... She knew what he was telling her.

Keli tried to imagine how Hawk felt watching his family... vaporize. She choked back the urge to cry. How the heck did this man keep going?

"The aliens created a bunker for me in what they considered the best protected part of the Earth.... About four miles under ground and teleported me there.... Just by thinking me there! They could create solid things from energy, It wasn't until years later I got to realize exactly how amazing that feat was."

He sounded tired... tired of living, tired of fighting, tired of being Hawk.

"Over two hundred aliens were in this area of space exploring... Keli.... After they put me in this medical chamber, they entered this bunker they made for me and while I was unconscious, used their minds to help protect me..... None survived!"

"Wow, Hawk all of them?"

"All Kel... Just to save one man, to leave all the knowledge they could recover in the massive computer that controls the base... To preserve what would be left of our race.... To help us rebuild, if there were any humans left."

He looked at Keli and wondered if she could grasp what he was telling her.

"So they gave you a choice. Go with them, or stay and help mankind rebuild! What if no one but you would have survived? Did you even consider that mister?" She smiled warmly at him.

"Well, Keli... I reckon I would have made a bad choice." They both chuckled and Hawk continued in a more normal tone.

"It must have been terrible for you Hawk... All you knew...loved...." She caught herself. Keli did not want to make him dredge up too many bad memories... *"It must have been horrible all those what hours?...Days?"*

"Keli... Civilization as I knew it changed... Our planet's face was forever changed, mankind would forever be redefined..... And it only took 13.7 seconds!"

Keli gasped so loudly Hawk snapped out of his long forgotten memories. Seeing tears starting to seep out from under the goggles and trickling down her cheek, Hawk decided to change to a lighter subject, if that was possible.

“They gave me all kinds of things to work with and honestly I only know how to use them.... Not the principles that make them work. He once again smiled at Keli “Take the cycle... or bike as you call it...”

No one ever seems to notice, but I never have to put down a kick stand... it never falls over, even when it’s not running or moving. You saw the scanner I used to fit you for a suit earlier. You saw the compartment above was empty, but within a few seconds of putting the scanner back, your uniform was there. It doesn’t use fuel, it’s not a Proff drive... It just works!

Hawk sounded a bit unsure of his next statement *“Keli these uniforms can’t stop us from dying. They can take massive amounts of damage..... but... Kel, I’ve died a few times and have been critically wounded many more.”*

“Yeah! Right! Wouldn’t try to pull a girls leg, now would ya?” She laughed out loud, then caught herself. She covered her mouth with her hands and looked sheepishly in Hawks direction for she knew sounds traveled a long way in the desert.

“Seriously Kel, I have things in one of the other compartments that takes care of most wounds and damage, but now and then the damage was too great and I’d crawl onto the cycle figuring I was a goner. Next thing I’d know, I’d awake in the medical chamber I told you about.... Heh, I call it my Med comp. I’d be fine, no signs of a wound or scar. It’s a weird feeling to know how bad you’re hurt, then wake up fine.

It’s set up for only my genetic code, soooo... you young lady had better not get damaged too bad or I’ll be burying you out here. Don’t get feeling too secure in that uniform.... Or you’ll get real dead...Real quick!”

Keli went to chuckle again, but saw Hawk had said it lightheartedly, but his face showed he was dead serious!

“So I just get on the cycle and “poof”, I’m back near where I was when it ‘ported’ me. It never puts me where I can be seen appearing out of thin air.... How?.... I have no idea! How it knows I’m hurt bad enough, I can only guess it scans me every time I get on the seat. Things just work and I use them, that’s about it.” Hawk smiled at her.

Keli scanned the horizon once again....

“Hawk? What other things did they give.....” She glanced around to where he had been sitting, but Hawk was no longer there.

She watched as he walked over to the sleeping mat and crawled inside. She adjusted the goggles and turned to the night desert and peered out. *"No fires, no raiders tonight...."*

Keli knew her revenge would come and Hawk would help her and for that she felt grateful... *"No not grateful, not... what am I feeling? I'm eager to make them pay, but... if it means putting Hawk in danger, then...."*

She pulled off the goggles and dropped them next to where she sat. She raised her knees up to her chin and folded her arms around her legs and stared out into the blackness...

She whispered lowly into the cool desert night air, *"I just don't understand..... Him!"*

Then with a sigh *"Or me...."*

The next day went by quickly, but Hawk volunteered no more information about his past and Keli although tempted, didn't ask. She knew someday, she get him to loosen up and tell her more.

They took turns scanning for raiders and from their high vantage point on the out crop, knew no one would get past their vigilance.

The day turned to dusk, then to another dark cool night.

"I'll take first watch Hawk, I'm not tired and you probably could use some extra sleep..."

She winked at him *"As I kept you up asking all those questions last night"*

Then somewhat frustrated thought to herself *"OH NO! Tell me I didn't just wink at him!..."*

As Hawk walked away all he heard was a muffled *"Arrgggg....."* He glanced back over his shoulder just in time as Keli kicked a stone off the cliff, made another strange sound and walked over to the bolder they used for a lookout.

The wind blew toward him and yet again he heard a muffled *"Arrgggg!"*

He shrugged and stretched out on his pad. She was cute..... but also very puzzling!

Chapter 8.

Hawk awoke with a start! Keli's hand was firmly over his mouth. "*Shhhhh!*" She whispered. She had relieved him for watch and he had been sleeping only about a couple of hours.

"CHRIST!!! I don't know what got into me... I never fall asleep on watch." She whispered *"I'm so sorry... I must have dozed off"* She paused *"Something woke me and..."* She removed her hand and motioned toward the darkness.

Hawk squinted to see her in the dark of the desert night, but as the moon partially cleared a cloud, he saw her pointing to the west. He moved over to the edge of the small out crop they had been using for the last few days and peered over. There about two hundred yards from the base of the outcrop were two camp fires. He quickly pulled the goggles to his eyes. He twisted the lenses as the images from afar focused. He could see men and trucks moving in the light of their campfire.

"Is....is it them??" He could hear the hate coming back into the tone of her voice *"Is it?"* Her voice was trembling with what Hawk knew to be pure hatred dredged up from the months of her captivity all those years ago.... This want for revenge had festered within her for so many years he hoped she would not allow it to get the best of her better judgment.

"Yeah , Kel, I see Dog leaning back against one of the trucks. Don't see Mutt, but ya know he's around if Dog is".

He scanned the camp... Adjusting the goggles as he counted *"I see three, four.. six..."* He paused *"Ones talking to someone out in the shadows, so maybe seven or eight, not counting the brothers"*

Hawk continued to scan the raiders camp to get all the information he could.

"It's just not too wise rushing into the enemies camp without knowing what one is up against."

He strained to see *"I wish these damned things focused a bit better at a distance."*

He shifted his weight a bit and leaned forward

"There could be other sentries I don't see... We'll just have to watch for a while and get a good count. Just don't do anything stupid..... Remember what I told you about letting emotion take control of you."

He paused then reiterated louder than before to make sure Keli heard, *"You did hear what I said about letting emotions get the better of you....right?"* He waited for her answer and when none came he repeated *"Right???"*

He lowered the goggles and turned toward where Keli had been kneeling.

She was gone!

He quickly put the goggles back to his eyes and scanned the darkness. He spotted her, already at the base of the outcrop, sliding, leaping, yet still moving silently and as soon as she hit the bottom, she was off sprinting toward the brothers encampment. Her sword in hand.... Running.... Stumbling, she caught her balance and was once again off toward the gang.

"Dammit Keli" Hawk mumbled scrambling to his feet. And with a leap, he headed down the steep side of the cliff face and ran after her. *"Oh great! Forgot my rifle..... Well these will have to do."* He pulled his swords from their sheaths and vanished into the desert night.

The cool night breeze hit him like a slap in the face as he continued to stumble into the darkened area just beyond the small out crop. When he hit the desert floor he could actually see his breath. Cold was bad especially when running it made your lungs hurt and having any pain detracts from the ability to concentrate... and his lungs were hurting as he sprinted across the sparse terrain....

"Damn....damn" He kept repeating to himself. Her hate was going to get her killed and even though he could run with the best... There was no way he could catch her. No way to....

He heard her scream. The clash of metal to bone, shots.... She screamed, more sounds of decapitating bodies. Her screams were not of pain, but of rage. Hawk knew those sounds well.... far too well!

He ran gasping for air, his lungs aflame, burning as the cold air mixed with his warm breath, he gasped again.... His lungs screamed. But his focus was on the woman he had become to like and admire... His pain was secondary and irrelevant.

"I'm getting way too old for this shi...." Hawk stumbled crashing into several tumbleweeds.

As he picked himself off the ground, he turned to see what he had tripped on.....Two bodies. *"Sentries"* he panted aloud. He could see the camp. Still many yards away he could see the carnage. Bodies lay everywhere. Slashed... hacked... none had survived Keli's wrath.

Hawk looked to the sound just in time to see Keli plunge her knife into Dogs abdomen with so much force he slammed back into the parked truck and slid to the ground with a look of terror and disbelief frozen on his face.

Keli then turned to Mutt, who was clicking an empty six gun in her direction. With the sword in her other hand she drove it deep within his chest. She took her other hand and grasped the hilt and twisted... Mutt shuddered and gasped. The look of finality came over Mutt as he accepted what was about to happen and with one heavy push, she buried the sword to the hilt and twisted once again.

And she once again screamed, not in pain, but in primeval hatred, this was not the Keli he knew, nor anyone Hawk could recognize, but someone that had given up on any remaining form of human qualities.... So much like the man he had become... Now she too was at that crossroads, she too had given her soul to revenge!

Mutt dropped to his knees, Keli followed him to the ground, still grasping her sword. Kneeling, she was face to face to Mutt, inches apart, she just stared into his lifeless eyes. Still gripping the sword, she let the sword slip from her fingers as they both hit the ground, she stood once again. She stared down into his face, now drained of any life. She once again screamed a blood curdling scream and the desert echoed it back from in the darkness.

She slumped down half kneeling, half sitting on her ankles as if her legs could no longer support her weight, *"It's over"* she said softly, her head lowered, *"At least this much is over."* She let out a rush of air *"Whew..."* She felt her anger subside.

She heard something from behind and she turned her head.

There stood Dog!!!

Her other sword, still buried deep within his stomach. He raised his hands over his head. He held an axe in his hands and it was aimed at her head.

Keli had been caught off guard, she had let her guard down, she knew she had done exactly as Hawk warned her not to... Let her anger make her careless and now while she had been on her knees facing Mutt's body, Dog had come up from behind. All she could do was twist her body out of the way of his deadly swing. Mutt's lifeless legs entangled hers, she fell to her side and feebly held up an arm as to block a blow she knew would be fatal. She closed her eyes and awaited death.

Keli waited for the blow.... It never came.

She opened her eyes and looked at Dog. He stood there as if to make her beg for mercy. Rage filled her eyes.... She screamed,

"Get it over with you bastard.... I'll see you in Hell!!!"

She focused on Dog's face, his eyes no longer held emotion, no hate, nothing. Keli slowly lowered her arm. Dog's arms started to lower. She held a protective arm back up, but again there was no swing.

She saw a hand reach from behind and grasp the axe. Dog's hands slid to his sides limply. His body turned to his right and started to slowly sag, bending from the knees, his shoulders slumped.

There stood Hawk, his large knife buried deep between Dogs shoulders. It had been thrust upward deeply into his heart cavity. She knew he was dead.... This time.

"NOoooooooo!" Screamed Keli.

Hawk jerked his knife from Dog and let his dead body fall to the ground, blood still pouring from the gash in his back.

"NOoooooooo" Screamed Keli the rage and hate that had left her returned.

"You let your emotion get hold of you Kel..... You got sloppy.... You made mistakes!" Hawk said sternly, yet softly. Then added with a deep understanding he knew far too well... *"That mistake almost got you killed."* He had been to that place many times.

Keli jumped to her feet screaming, no words, just guttural sounds, roaring almost animal like. She swung at Hawk slapping him on the face with her open hand.

She screamed ***"You bastard, they were mine"*** and slapped him again.

Blood started forming in the corner of his lips.

Again she slapped him and pulled back to strike him again.... Hawk grabbed her arm ***"Enough!"***

Angrily he added *"Your sloppiness, ... your hate... is what robbed you of killing Dog, not me. Not that he wouldn't have died from your wound eventually, but I couldn't let him kill you now could I?"*

"They were mine" She said quietly as a whisper, her eyes looking at the ground *"Mine.... Mine to kill..."* She looked up into his eyes *"Hawk I had to kill them! I had to hurt them... hurt them bad... I had to...to... hurt everyone here...everyone...."*

She saw Hawk reach a hand to his face and wipe away the blood from his lips *"That you did Kel... congratulations!"*

Keli looked into Hawks face. His face lit by the camp fire, she saw the blood smeared on his cheek. She gasped. She **had** hurt everyone! Even him.

The way Hawk was looking at her... She looked deeply into his eyes and saw herself reflected back as he released her hands he had been grasping by her wrists. She raised her hands and covered her mouth and nose. Tears started to form in her eyes. She slumped to her knees,

face covered she started sobbing. She had her revenge, she had killed them, killed them all... but in doing so she had hurt Hawk. She knew it wasn't the slaps to the face that had cut him so deeply, but her betrayal.

She had pushed him aside to get her revenge. She had ignored what he had taught her. She had screamed words of hate to this man that had taken her under his wing. He'd given her so much, shared moments, emotions she hadn't felt in years, bared his soul to her. He had trusted her.... and she threw it all away in a moment of rage.... She sobbed and the tears flowed.

“Stop yer damned crying..... grab that cooler of water and toss it on the fires!”

Keli's head snapped up, the tears vanished. He walked away from her, but this time his voice was quieter.

“When you stop feeling sorry for yourself come back to the camp, we have a long way to go.”

She leaped to her feet, hands clenched ***“You bastard!”***

She stomped over to the truck, tossed the lid from the cooler to the ground and in one move poured it over one of the two small campfires. She strained to see in the darkness, raised the cooler with both hands over her head and heaved it out into the darkness in the direction Hawk had taken.

From the dark she heard a hollow sound, then..... *“Owww??”*

She slapped her hands together as if to clean off dust. Tossed her middle finger into the air toward the direction Hawk had walked and mumbled to herself *“Asshole!”*

She headed back toward the outcropping. At first her pace was that of someone mad at the world, but after a short distance she started walking a bit slower, calmer. Her thoughts clearer.

On the way back she had time to ponder the events one at a time. The flood of emotions returned. She had her revenge, Dog and Mutt were dead. The gang of cut throats they had hired were dead as well.... It was a good night. Then there was Hawk. Sure she had gone against him, slapped him, yelled at him..... and hurt him. She sighed, *“But why did he treat me that way? So heartless, like I was nothing to him? ...Why?”*

She stumbled along as the first rays of light started to caress the prairie with a golden glow. Perhaps it was the new days warmth that struck her, perhaps something else..... it hit her like a ton of bricks. Hawk had to be mad or disappointed at her, but she knew deep down inside that he would have never treated her that way.

“Why?” She kept asking herself. *“Why?”*

Then it hit her like a ton of bricks, and said in a voice so quiet only the morning breeze could hear *“Because girl, you lost it... because he knew treating you that way would snap you out of it..... Because he cares!”* With tears still in her eyes, Keli allowed herself a little smile... *“He cares but doesn’t want me to know it”*. She sniffed back more tears.. *“He does care! I was so busy feeling sorry for myself he treated me like that so I’d snap out of it... That had to be it!”*

The rising sun brought a small refreshing burst of breeze. She squinted toward the warming globe that was now casting light across the desert. It was going to be a nice day... It had to be. So much had transpired, so much anger, relief.... Sadness.

Keli dusted herself off, ran her fingers through her hair as to straighten it, wiped the remaining tears from her eyes and climbed up to the camp, strolled over to Hawk, who was now sitting atop the cycle. He motioned to the seat behind him.

“We have to get going.... We’ve a long way to go before tonight”

There was a chill in his voice, but Keli knew that would pass. He was still disappointed in her, but she was getting to know this guy that liked to show his tough side, but Keli had spent too much time with him already. There was so much more inside him than he wanted to let on, perhaps more than he knew he had...

She smiled sweetly at Hawk as she strolled over to the bike, swung a leg over and plopped down behind Hawk. She reached cautiously around his chest and locked her arms. She felt him gently pat her arm.

“Rough night tonight wasn’t it?”

“Yeah! Rough night...” She laid her head on his back and sighed as they headed off to... where?

Chapter 9.

As Hawk cautiously maneuvered the cycle down the steep hill something occurred to her.... This wasn't the way back toward Wall City. Hawk turned back toward the brothers camp to the west, drove passed it, then turned off to the southwest. But then she really didn't care. Too much had passed this night, too many thoughts ran through her head.

She turned her face into his back and started once again to sob. But Keli made sure if she cried she wouldn't let Hawk know. He'd seen her cry too many times, more than any other man. *"Never again"* she thought.... *"Never again will I appear weak to this man"* Tears rolled off her face as the wind caught them and cast them to the dry desert floor.

The rising sun was warm to her back, but she still shivered. It had been a long night. A night of revenge... A night of regret.... She felt herself starting to doze off. After all that had transpired, she felt safe with her head resting on his back. Her arms wrapped around his waist.

She nodded off.

It was noon before Hawk pulled the cycle off the main road onto a small dirt path. Over the last few hours the landscape had changed from a dusty sagebrush covered prairie to sparse grasslands, then to lush green plains with rolling hills scattered with trees. The roughness of the dirt road snapped Keli awake. She had been dozing and occasionally awoke to see the changing scenery, but never fully noticed. But now she was awake and wondered in awe at what surrounded her.

Trees full of leaves, huge trees. Outside of Wall City Keli was used to seeing only dead trees or stunted trees with only a few dying leaves on some branches. Inside Wall City there were trees in the small park outside of Pops place and scattered throughout the city, but nothing compared to the giants she was beholding. These were beautiful! And there were so many....As far as the eye could see.... And then... Foothills, rolling ahead of them, foothills covered with trees and bushes. It was a wonderland, her breath was taken away. She gasped at this amazing scenery.

Hawk pulled up close to a little brook. Keli couldn't help but stare. It had been years since she had seen water like this, not flowing from a pump or faucet.

"Ok all off" He said and Keli swung her leg over the cycle and walked up next to him.

He motioned to a clump of brush.

"Ladies to the left, guys to the right" It took a few seconds to grasp what Hawk meant, then off to the left she went. Keli wandered perhaps farther than she should have, but in this

wonderland she didn't care. After she took care of business, then she took a slow walk back along the brook. The sun darting through the trees, birds singing.

"Wow!" She mused. Keli had heard Pops talk about places like this and remembered some place similar from her childhood, but to actually see this...

"Wow!" She said once more almost in complete awe. Stepping through a small opening in the brush she noticed Hawk sitting on a huge rock with his feet dangling over the brook. As she walked closer, he put his right leg over his left and began to remove his boot. She knew he hadn't seen her yet, so she quietly snuck up behind him.

"Awww" Keli thought *"Isn't he cute, this big tough guy's going to soak his little toes"* She began to chuckle. The smile vanished! As Hawk removed his boot and held it up.... Blood dripped from it making little red splashes in the water. He dropped the boot in the brook and gently pulled up his pant leg.

She gasped as she saw his leg.

Around his leg was gauze, wrapped about six inches up his calf starting from his ankle and it was solidly soaked in blood. Blood dripped from the gauze into the water as he gingerly unwrapped the gauze. He winced and stopped.

Keli hurried over to him and slowly, reached out toward his calf and touched him with her fingertips. Gently she began to unwrap the bandage. Slowly a long gash appeared, partially healing but still bleeding in spots.

"Hawk" She said *"Why didn't you tell me you were wounded...How? You said these suits couldn't be slashed.... And this IS a slash... Did I miss a guard?...How?"*

"It's nothing Kel. I wrapped it this morning while I waited for you to get back to camp" He continued *"Besides, I don't know about you, but I wanted to put some distance between us and Cordon... Just in case he was around."* He smiled at Keli *"I think he's gonna be a tad pissed at whatcha did to his brothers and the new men he was expecting."*

She smiled and threw the bloody wrap to the ground. She hurried over to the cycle and pulled out the medical kit Hawk had shown her the day before. As she turned, there was Hawk soaking his leg in the water.

"Aren't there fish or something that are attracted to blood in water. Pops said..."

Hawk interrupted and laughed *"Not in this kind of water Kel"*

She walked over to him and carefully removed his leg, patted it dry and emptied the strange contents of the packet on the wound. He winced!

"Sorry tough guy" She purred with a smirk on her face as she carefully wrapped the bandage around his calf and taping it so it wouldn't come undone, she slapped his thigh and in a voice unlike a little girl as she pursed her lips and she teasingly said...

"Ok....Is it all better now?"

"Much...Thanks"

Keli stood up and put her hands on her hips and said. *"Hawk?... How?... Really"* She was puzzled *"You did say..."*

"Kel, trust me, you really don't want to know how it happened." He looked serious.

Now she was determined to get to the bottom of this. A smile came over her lips *"You did this to yourself didn't you? Did you trip over something without your boots on?"... You did,.... didn't you"*

Hawk looked into her eyes for a minute as if questioning if he should tell her or not.

"Ok,... Yeah! I slashed myself with my knife"

Keli started to laugh at him.

Hawk frowned and decided to let her know the truth..... and she wasn't going to like it.

"This morning after the fight, I headed back to camp and started to put my knife back into my boot..... And out of nowhere a cooler flew out of the darkness and struck my arm causing me to jam the knife into my boot.....and calf.....right between the boot and pant leg.... now are you happy I told you?"

There was no anger in his voice. He had just answered her questions and he was right. What she heard unsettled her....Again she in her anger had hurt him and again he did not hold it against her. The blood drained from Keli's face. Her hands covered her mouth, tears welled up in her eyes. She slowly dropped to her knees as the realization of what she had done sunk in.

"Ohhh Hawk, I....I'm...."

"Keli" Hawk said with a knowing smile *"It's over. I know that you realized how much your hate and rage can cost. I know you've come to understand how it can destroy you as well as those around you."*

He pulled his boot out and drained the water from it. He paused.

"You know how I know you're sorry?" He winced as he pulled his boot on.

He stood and turned to face Keli *"I know how you hate Cordon just as much as his brothers, yet you haven't mentioned him once since.... Well, since you killed his....."*

Keli stepped up to Hawk put her arms around him. Hawk hesitated, then gently put his arms around her. *"All the things I've done to you and you still don't hate me. I didn't listen to you, I disappointed you, I slapped you, and... wounded you... How can you not hate me?"*

Hawk was silent for a long moment, then *"I couldn't hate you Keli...I..."*

Keli loosened her arms, leaned back slightly and looked into this eyes. *"You?....Hawk? You... what?"*

Several seconds passed as they looked into each other's eyes, their faces inches apart.

Then as if something had stung Hawk, he pulled his head back while pushing her to arms length *"Nothing Kel, Not a thing!"* He stepped back from her *"We need to get going, I want to get to Oil City and we have hundreds of miles to go."*

Keli looked at Hawk as he turned and put the medical kit back into the bikes compartment, sighed, then looked at her hands. She held them out slightly in front of her and they were shaking. *"Trembling??? My hands never tremble!"* Disgusted she slapped her hands to her side and walked briskly over to the bike. Pushing these strange feelings out of her mind she strolled up next to Hawk.

"Oil City Hawk?" I've heard of it, but never been there" Then said thoughtfully *"Hell I've never been anywhere in the last ten or so years, unless you want to count Dead City."*

Then added with a smile *"Naw, we won't count Dead City."*

Hawk smiled back and with a swing of his leg Hawk, straddled the cycle. Keli followed suit.

"You'll like it" Hawk tossed back over his shoulder and off they rode.

Back on the main road, he kicked the speed up and Keli once again nestled her head between his shoulders to protect herself from the wind.

"Why does the wind bother me on this motorcycle" She thought *"I've been riding in the back of trucks, in cars with no glass in the front and wind never bothered me before."* She twisted her body so it nestled into every part of Hawks back, she laid her head on the back of his neck as if snuggling into a plush pillow and thought *"I just can't figure out what is happening to me, must be coming down with something"...*

She snuggled closer to Hawk and sighed.

Chapter 10.

The pair had ridden for a few days and Keli was beginning to wish that this trip would soon end. She leaned forward and yelled into Hawk's ear as the warm wind tried to silence her voice. *"I don't know how much more of this my rear end can stand."*

"Yeah!" He shouted back *"These roads aren't what they used to be in my day! But hang in there, we're close."*

Keli smiled as she was ready to get to their destination. The scenery was beautiful and even more as the sun was casting long shadows as it crept toward the horizon. There were parts of her that really needed to get circulation restored. She smiled again thinking of the last few days and now he had said they were now close, she almost wished they would take longer.

Within a half hour they began to slow down. The cycle topped a small rise in the road and there several miles ahead stretched out before Keli's eyes was Oil city. Almost from horizon to horizon it lay. Just beyond there was water. Water so vast, she'd only heard rumors and stories about it. And the city its self.... Almost stunned her, she let out a small gasp! Buildings.... Not just buildings, but tall buildings. She had seen the ruins of such tall buildings, but to see them standing in one piece. They stretched almost as far as she could see.

She got off the bike rubbing her legs as if to restore some feeling into them. She stepped up next to Hawk.

"My God Hawk..... It's beautiful!!"

He smiled and looked over to Keli. She stood basked in the light of the late afternoon sun. Bathed in the reddish glow, her eyes wide open, mouth agape, transfixed at the vista before her. He smiled as her eyes were staring at the vista that laid before her.

Hawk reached over to her and gently put his hand on her chin and pushed her mouth closed

"Trying to catch flies?"

She snapped out of it and gently hit Hawk's arm, stuck her tongue out at him and bounced back onto the cycle. *"Come on Hawkie, we have a few more miles to go and it's going to be dark soon... You said we'd be there BEFORE dark didn't you"* Then she leaned forward and purred into his ear *"And you wouldn't want to lie to a girl now would you?"* Keli had fun teasing this man and once she found out she could get by with it, she had to fight the urge to do so. She knew if anyone else had called him Hawkie, they would not have woken up for days. Keli grinned with the fact she could call him that and suffer no consciences.

Hawk on the other hand decided it was time for a payback and gave her a big grin.

“Ok girl..... Just remember you asked for it.”

The tires on the cycle smoked as Hawk cranked the throttle. The bike leapt forward so hard that Keli almost was tossed from the rear, but somehow she managed to hold on as she was slammed back against the buddy bar. Somehow she managed to pull herself forward and ducked back behind Hawk’s back, peeked around his left shoulder straining against the ferocious wind.

“What is this all you’ve got” She yelled in his ear.

Hawk cranked the throttle even farther as the cycle sped even faster, she began to think perhaps once again she should not have opened her mouth. She looked at the speedometer, then wished she had not! On the other hand they were moving and after the initial uncertainty, she found the experience of high speed exciting.

She also noticed that the road they were now on, was new. They had ways to make new roads!

The city that once was far, was now growing quickly. It too had no wall around it, but the many roads out of it had what appeared to be guard posts.

As they got closer, Keli noticed guards. And GUNS! The guns were aimed at them! As Hawk rapidly slowed the cycle somewhat, but not enough to stop. She winced expecting to hear shots ring out as they neared the gate.

They passed a small guard post, but only slowed, the guns were lowered and the guards waved them on.

“They seemed to know you.” She said as she leaned to his ear.

“They know my bike.... I’ve been here a few times before.”

Keli wanted to ask more, but then this was Hawk and she knew that was all she was going to get out of him for the moment.

Smaller buildings on the outskirts of the city gave way to larger ones as they proceeded toward the inner part of the city. Until the road became wider she couldn’t get an idea of the scope of the city, but once the road changed to a large boulevard it became apparent. They stopped at an intersection she could see blocks in all directions.

“Oh my God Hawk, this place is huge!” She kept shifting her weight as she tried to see everything *“I’m not sure if I like this place or not.”*

The traffic light changed and off they went once again as Keli squealed after nearly being tossed off the bike.

"If you don't quit squirming you're going to fall off the damn bike!"

"But there's so much to see and you're going too fast."

Hawk smiled and mused, *"Wait until you get a bird's eye view."*

"Are we going to a cliff?... Here in the city?"

"Cliff?"

"You said a bird's eye view.."

"Uhhh...." Hawk patted her hand and grinned, *"Why don't you just wait and see."*

It wasn't too long before the pair were driving along a wide street, buildings towered upward above the others here and there. Then finally they arrived in what must have been the main part of the city. Buildings towered over the streets casting faint shadows from the fast fading light in the now darkening city. Lights of all kinds began to flick on as if a chorus of color had begun.

"I never knew anything could be so beautiful." Keli sighed almost religiously, marveling at the lights of Oil City. Flashing lights, neon lights, multi-colored lights almost had a hypnotic effect on her. Tears welled up in her eyes. She had heard of things like this, but to experience them... The city scared her and fascinated her at the same time.

"Hawk! People walking around and they aren't carrying any weapons! The cars and trucks don't have armor or guards."

He smiled and replied *"Kel, they don't need them, they're safe. Oil City has a United States military outpost here of over five thousand soldiers and there are more on the way. Cordon or anyone else would be a fool to try to raid this city. There isn't a raider within a hundred miles or so... They're shot on sight by the military patrols. Oil City has its own police force that's larger than all of Cordons army!"*

They stopped in front of a hotel. Keli got off and stood next to him, then looked at Hawk *"Then why the hell haven't they gone out after Cordon and mutants?"*

"They've cleared out everything for miles around, twenty or so, the patrols go out even farther. But these last years have been tough for the country. Too many people were lost in the apocalypse, too much knowledge. This country has had to rebuild, relearn, and materials are sparse. The army could only protect this area and a few more cities along the coast, but not

much more. Getting supplies out here have been the biggest problem... They have to come by ship from the east coast.... Assuming there are enough things to ship."

Ship? Hawk, ships are those the things that Pops told about that travel on those ocean water things?"

"That's what they are Kel, you might even get to see one while we're here."

He paused thoughtfully, *"We lost so much, and it's taken way too long to get just to this point."*

His voice trailed off *"The country has been at a standstill for the last few decades after we used up what resources there were. Mines had to be reopened some processes were lost....."*

He looked sad as if things just weren't happening fast enough to suit him, then added *"Someday, Keli,someday..."* His ponderings were abruptly interrupted.

"WOW!"

Hawk jerked his head around to look at Keli.

"Wow, this place has to be twenty stories high Hawk. Makes Pops inn look like a stable."

"Actually it's over thirty stories Keli. Come on, this is where we're spending the night."

Hawk reached forward into the cycles faring, did something Keli couldn't see, but the door on a small building next to the hotel started to raise. He gunned the engine and into the building they went, cycle and all. The lights came on as the bike came to a stop.

"I bought this shop many years ago and use it whenever I'm here"

"Bought?"

Then she remembered *"Oh you mean with that money stuff, Pops told me about money. We just trade and barter with the caravans that make it through to us in Wall city."*

He chuckled *"Yep, with that money stuff. There's no bartering or trading here Kel, no swapping something for fixing something."* He added *"Only a little over seven hundred miles from Wall City and this is a whole different world girl.... I'll try to let you know what and how things are working as we do things, but just remember this is NOT your world and you have to act according to this world"*

"I know, Pops told me about large cities..... and rules" She frowned at the thought of obeying someone else's rules.

"Come on woman, get your stuff and we'll go next door.... Oh and leave ALL your weapons here!"

Keli grabbed her bag and caught up to Hawk, then grabbed his arm. *"Uhhh Don't these places use that money stuff? Pops said back the other side of the Mississippi people use money.... Isn't this like those places?"*

Hawk smiled and squeezed her arm gently *"I got it covered, we're good"*

He led her through the door.

"Like I said...everything costs money here, but I have some saved....." Then added *"We're ok as far as money goes. I wanted to....."*

"HOLY SHIT HAWK.... WALL TO WALL CARPET!" Keli said with a yell, then quickly covered her mouth with both hands. She glanced around to see if anyone had heard, then looked sheepishly at Hawk.

"Oh Hawk I only dreamed of things like this" She said as she hugged his arm.

It wasn't a large hotel, but it was luxurious. There were chandeliers and long inlaid walls and paintings hung upon them. Huge marble columns reached to the ceiling and on down the long hallway. She was stunned by the luxury, her jaw dropped, then realizing her mouth was open, she snapped it shut before Hawk could get her with the 'Catching flies' line again. She grinned.

Her amazement was shattered. Her body jumped into defensive mode.

"HAWK!!!... You old son of a bitch you!!!"

Keli pushed Hawk to the side almost knocking him off his feet, whipped out her dagger and stood in between him and the man that was rushing toward him.

Hawk put his hands on Keli's arms and moved her back to the side of him.

He smiled *"Down girl,.... he's good people"*

The guy looked at Keli, then at Hawk, then again stepped toward Hawk. The two guys hugged and shook hands. All the time Keli was thinking, *"Hawk hugged a guy?? Wow!"*

"Damn Hawk you're a sight for sore eyes. What's it been five, six years? Come on in.... Ya hungry?"

He moved between Hawk and Keli grabbed them each by the arm and let them into the small dining room. Hawk shot a glance over to Keli and said, *"Thought I told you NO WEAPONS!"*

Keli stuck her tongue out at him and wrinkled her nose. Their host just laughed as he led them through the dining room doors.

Once again Keli gasped.... Crystal chandeliers, white linen table cloths and sparkling white and gold china marked each place setting.

"It's after hours, but nothings too good for you Hawk... and.... Oh, sorry, I forgot my manners.... Who's your lady friend?"

"Oh sorry Ben. This lovely lady is Keli White....kind of my...uhhh, my guest."

Noticing the puzzled look on his friends face added, *"Well let's just say she can kick ass with the best of them."* Then added *"And this is Ben Benerman, Keli.... We go back a few years. Keli grinned and extended her hand "It's a pleasure to meet you Ben. I take it you've know Hawk for a while?"*

Hawk interrupted *"Long story"* He looked at Ted *"Come on Ben, you know better. Let's go into the tavern area... It's more my style."*

Keli frowned slightly *"But this is sooo beautiful Hawk.... I"*

"Maybe later Kel.... Just not this time...besides its late, Ok?"

She shrugged and reluctantly nodded.

They went into the small tavern near the dining room and sat Ben ordered the waiter to bring them whatever they wanted.

Before long there was quite a spread placed in front of the two of them.

Both men looked at the somewhat demure Keli packing away her third helping as Ben leaned over toward Hawk and said. *"Where the hell she puttin' it Hawk?"*

Keli looked up gave Ben a wink and cleaned off her plate.

Hawk laughed *"They don't get food like this out in the wastes.... Remember?"*

"Yeah Hawk, it's been a while, and sometimes it slips my mind how hard it is out there"

"So I take it you two were out there... together" Keli asked *"Did you ride with Hawk too?"*

Ben chuckled *"Something like that Keli"*

*"Ahhh... Ben, would you mind if I had another slice of this pie?"*Keli asked sort of sheepishly.

The guys laughed and Ben added *“Damn Hawk, she’ll weigh two hundred pounds by the time she leaves this table”* Ben nodded at a passing waitress and within a minute or two, Keli was gulping down more pie.

They had no sooner finished and a soldier approached the table. He gave Hawk a salute as Hawk stood and shook his hand.

“Major Todd, it’s good to see you. I was coming to see you in the morn.”

“Hawk, my friend, it is good to see you as well.” He slapped him on the shoulder.

“Guards at the outpost saw you ride in... I have a description of you and your cycle posted everywhere. That’s why you never saw any patrols, though I’ll wager they saw you.” Then added thoughtfully *“Besides I wouldn’t want you to hurt any of them if they did challenge you.”*

“I figured something like that Sam” Hawk said and introduced him to Keli. *“Major Samuel Todd, this is Keli White. Keli this is... Heh, heh... Just call him Sam.”*

Sam, shook Keli’s hand, then gently pulled Hawk by his arm to the side and said *“We need to talk.”*

Hawk excused himself. They both walked out of the bar.

Hawk looked back at Keli *“I’ll be back in a little while.... Ben will keep you company, right Ben?”*

She waited until Hawk was out of sight. *“Ok Ben, now that Hawks gone, what’s this long story and why didn’t he want to talk about it?”*

“Keli you should know by now Hawk doesn’t like to hear about himself.”

“Ok then, you tell me all about him or at least what you know.”

“Well if you really want to know... it’s not all pretty... There’s some thin...”

“Come on Ben, Spill the beans... I want to know everything.”

Ben gave this lovely woman a warm smile.... then leaned back in the chair and looked as if he were reaching back through time. *Ok pretty lady, you asked for it.*

Chapter 11.

“Eighteen years ago my wife, two daughters and I came from what was left of a state called California. We’d crossed the Rockies after getting some information there was still one well hidden passage. We decided to head to anywhere other than where we had been.

The people there had been fighting nearly every day since the apocalypse. Mutants were everywhere and after over one hundred and twenty years there were still hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of those things left.

My wife, myself had never know one day without shooting, killing, trying to stop the mutes from killing us....It’s hell on earth out there my dear, so we packed up what little we had and left for... well anything had to be better. We tried to talk others into coming with us, but to be honest no one expected us to make it to the Rockies, let alone make it over”

He looked somewhat pale, “Keli... It’s been said that the west coast has more mutes than anywhere else... I can believe it! I never knew a day without them attacking our compound since I was a little boy. I wanted things to be different for our girls.”

“How large was the compound Ben?”

“Oh our ancestors had walled off a small city of several square miles, but over the decades, even with all the deaths we were over crowded... and rather dying by mute attack while out foraging for food or supplies we....”

“Food, Ben?”

“Yeah, Keli we were over populated and could only grow food in limited supply, livestock had priority over people when their food was low, we had to go outside and hunt game. For some reason mutes never eat and never saw wild game or animals as a threat, so they left them alone.... Getting out far enough to hunt was extremely dangerous.”

He paused as if reliving that time over again, sighed and continued.

“We lived like...” He snorted a laugh “... cavemen.. with little of anything, other then what we could salvage. Were hungry most of the time unless I could go hunt something to supplement our rations. I just wanted my girls to have a better life, so we headed east.” Ben wiggled uncomfortably in the chair.

“The Rocky Mountains heaved up much higher than they were in Hawk’s day. During the Apocalypse, they not only rose, but changed drastically according to Hawk. These days there are only two known passes through them and they only can be traveled by foot.....Most never made it, killed by rock slides if they ever made it to the mountains.... but this new hidden one was

slightly better. We almost died several times, but somehow we made it over to the wastelands and after a few weeks on foot found an old truck that actually ran. I kind of figured the previous owners were killed... There was a lot of blood. I figured by mutes as raiders would have taken the truck.

I managed to get the truck running.... Barely.” He paused, then continued,

Our guide over the Rockies had died a few days before, so we had no idea as to which direction to go, so we decided to follow the remains of this wide road. It headed easterly.”

Keli noticed beads of sweat forming on Ben’s forehead.

“About three hundred miles to the north west of here we ran into a gang of raiders. We were nothing to them. They beat me while my family watched, then tied me to what used to be some sort of an old light pole. Their leader took off his belt and strapped it around the post and my forehead. Some of the other gang members held both my girls and wife.... They told me they were going to... to... “Have some fun” and if I closed my eyes or tried to look away.....” Ben’s voice trailed away.” He’d kill them. Keli... He gave me a choice watch my family get raped or watch then die.”

Keli covered her mouth with her hand *“Oh Ben... I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to make you relive this again.... You shouldn’t hav..”*

He reached over and patted her other arm *“Heh, It’s ok lil darlin’.... You see that’s where Hawk came in. And he did it before those murderers could harm my family.... In any way!”* His face changed from solemn to a slight grin,

“I heard some commotion but couldn’t see very far behind the gang of men around me and my family and there were a lot of old wrecked vehicles piled around.

Then I saw a head fly up over the men’s heads, then an arm. There was a lot of screaming, lots of shots, shouting. They let go of my girls and wife, so they got up and came running over to me sobbing. They untied me, hugged me, but all I could do was look forward toward the gang. They weren’t paying any attention to us, but I just couldn’t run, they’d hurt me pretty bad. The girls tried, but my legs just wouldn’t support me and I was too big to carry very far.”

He broke into a wide grin.

“Then I saw what all the commotion was about. There was this guy dressed in black leather armor like stuff, swinging these two swords, roaring like a mad man, cutting his way through the raiders like they were prairie grass. He actually cut one of them right in half. There were body parts flying everywhere.”

Ben gave Keli a big grin.

“Their leader stood in front of him, raised his double barrel shotgun and shot him with both barrels. Hawk flew back through the air a good six feet, slammed up against our truck, kind of slumped. We figured he was done for, but we were wrong.

He shook his head like trying to shake off the impact, straightened back up and walked toward the leader. Hawk had stopped roaring, Hell, I knew he was hurt, but damned if he showed it”

Ben was talking so fast Keli could hardly understand him.

“That poor bastard was trying to reload his shotgun, dropping shells on the ground, pulling more out of his pocket. He finally got it loaded and shot Hawk again.

Again Hawk flew backward. Again he straightened and walked back at the leader.”

Ben was almost laughing now.

“Again the guy loaded his shotgun, but this time he wasn’t quite fast enough. Old Hawk swung his sword and split that bastard from the top of his head down to his heart, pulled his sword out and finished killing the last few that were still standing. Hell one of those bastards was so scared he just stood there and peed himself, frozen in the spot where he stood, Hawk walked up to him, looked down to the puddle on the ground, then back up into his eyes, pulled back his sword.... And the guy fainted... or died from fright...Hell he was still laying there when we left.”

Ben paused and quietly said *“He walked around and finished any that were still alive....Save the one that fainted. You know I hated those raiders for what they were going to do to us....but IWell...”*

He said quickly like he was hoping Keli wouldn’t hear him. *“I almost felt sorry for them. Hawk looked around to make sure he had gotten all of them.... He had.... All twenty two of them.... I know I counted them. Then just like his legs gave out, he dropped to his knees and screamed or roared, I’m not sure what it was. It wasn’t like a victory yell... it was almost like he hated himself, not for what he’d done, but more like because of the way he did it.”*

Ben’s voice came back to normal *“He cut my bonds on my wrists that my family couldn’t untie and got us into our truck. And we followed him blindly like he had instructed us.”*

“It was really strange Keli. This man killed all those raiders, he showed all that rage and violence, yet, we all felt we could trust him, really a strange feeling.”

Keli chuckled, *“Ben.... I know exactly what you’re saying.”*

He smiled at her and continued *"He wasn't headed here to Oil City but he escorted us here. He told us we'd be safe here, that we could settle here if we wanted. And to be perfectly honest with you dear, none of us wanted to go back..... out there."*

He stopped staring at the ceiling and looked into Keli's dark eyes *"That raider leader Hawk killed was Cordons dad Dirk."*

Keli gasped, and her eyes showed Ben there was something going on with that gang of raiders....

"I have a bad history with Cordon" She broke into a smile *"Maybe someday I'll tell you about it Ben."*

"But now I know why he hates Hawk so passionately" She thought to herself, then looking at Ben she smiled and said *"I knew there was something I liked about Hawk. Maybe someday I'll thank Hawk for killing Dirk too."*

"After Hawk brought us to this city, I started working here for the owner and when he died, he left it to me...." He added *"He had no family....and as for that Hawk, hell I keep the penthouse empty just in case he shows up. The old owner did it.... so do I."*

"It's been years since he said he was here last. Seems like a long time to keep it empty. You must have lost a lot of that money stuff." Keli said almost as if she were asking.

"I owe him a lot Keli, this is just a small token of what I really owe him Every time I look at my girls or remember my late wife, I remember I have Hawk to thank, I owe him more that I can ever repay....."

"Ben, you know Hawk never wants to be repaid for anything..."

"I know," Ben just laughed *"I know, but I think he lets me just because it makes me feel better."*

"Now that sounds like my Hawkie!"

Ben looked at Keli strangely as she grinned back.. *"Aw darn Ben, please don't tell Hawk I said that..."*

Ben grinned back at her, winked, paused for a few seconds and decided to change the subject.

"That small narrow building you two parked the motorcycle in next door. Hawk bought it from the owners years ago. Stored his bike in it when he's in town."

Keli nodded *"I was there."*

"Hell one day he brought my wife and I here...." Ben paused "Just before she passed away. The building was filled with books... over a thousand that weren't there a week before. He instructed us to take them to someone to start a library. There were all kinds of books from what he called the "works of the masters" to books on how to do things, science, manuals" Ben paused again looked at Keli

"It was amazing. And the following week, there were more."

Ben grinned once again. *"I don't know where or how they got there and you know Hawk... If he didn't say...I knew better then to ask."*

They both grinned. She grinned because she knew, or at least suspected how those books got there. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying *"Alien technology"* out loud. So she just smiled back at Ben.

The two of them chatted about everything for the next hour or so until Hawk returned. He joined them and told them he would have to go back to the Majors office in the morning. They all got up and headed into the lobby and Ben walked behind the front desk and tossed Hawk a key.

"Your usual." He gave Hawk a big grin as to say Welcome Home!

Instead of heading toward the stairs Keli saw, Hawk put his hand under her arm and lead her toward the door.

"Kel, before I take you up to the room, there's something I'd like to show you"

Puzzled she followed Hawk back out aside. They walked down the street for several blocks and turned. As they passed along the streets, she couldn't help ask questions of Hawk, who in turn answered as best he could. One question after another about the city flowed forth from this inquisitive woman.... until.

Keli stopped and stared across the street.

"Hawk look at that woman! Why she.... Her.. look at her skirt! She dresses like that in front of people? And look... Why I can see through her shirt... ?"

Before Hawk could answer Keli chirped *"I know she's waiting for her mate... No one would dress that way unless it was for her mate!* She looked at Hawk and smiled. Hawk decided to leave it at that and they continued their stroll.

But Keli kept glancing back *“Ah, I was right,”* She said as they had gone a short distance *“Her mate just came up to her and handed her some of that money stuff and they went inside that other hotel.”*

Hawk bit his tongue.... but never laughed.

After another block Hawk turned to Keli and said *“Ok we’re here. Now close your eyes and take my hand”*

Keli did so without question, as she had finally set into her mind that she would trust this man completely, nor question what he told her. She extended her hands and felt his fingers wrap around hers. He began to gently pull her. They turned a corner and walked several steps and she felt him turn her slightly to the side. She could hear him move to her side and she sensed him move close to her. She felt his warm breath in her ear as he whispered....

“Ok you can open your eyes now”

“Ohhhhh Hawk..... It’s... it’s....” Keli couldn’t find the words.

Before her in all its splendor lay the ocean, the full moon glistening across it’s dark waters. The small gentle waves broke upon the shore and in the distance a large ship sailed across the horizon, its lights shimmering in the darkness.

“Hawk.... I ...” she felt her knees shaking.

“It’s part of the Atlantic Ocean called the Gulf of Mexico, or at least was before the top half of Mexico sunk into it and connected the Pacific ocean and the Gulf together.” He sighed, *“Lost lower parts of California, Arizona and Texas ...A lot of people died.... A lot.”*

He felt her grab onto his arm so tight he thought she’d cut off his circulation.

“Back during the apocalypse, as I said a large part of the U.S. sank and the Gulf ran into this area. About eighty years ago east of the Mississippi was pretty well settled, so expeditions came sailing along the coast line to see if anyone or cities survived. It was too dangerous to travel inland, so exploring the coast by ship seemed the safest. That’s when we stumbled on Oil City.”

Whenever Hawk spoke about... back then, Keli hung onto his every word. She thirsted for knowledge.

“It seemed they had not only survived, but flourished. Over the years, it’s grown and then they requested the Army move a detachment here to protect it and the thought of becoming part of America once again was just too much for them to turn down....So a military base was established.”

Hawk paused and wondered how much Keli was actually understanding. *"It gave the U.S. a foot hold in this part of the country and although slowly, has made this area mostly safe."*

He stopped as Keli started walking toward the beach pulling Hawk behind her. Keli would not hear anymore. She was mesmerized as she stepped out into the sand.

"Here, take your boots off."

"Uh... is there a reason?" She put her hands on her calf, unattached first one boot, then the other loosened and she removed it as well.

"Oh Hawk its... its, so cool....The sand is cool!"

"Yep unlike the wastelands the wind off the water keeps the sand cool enough so at night it's much cooler then what you're used to."

"Ok, now remember how to loosen the bottom of your uniform? Loosen and push up over your calf's..."

Then it hit her what Hawk was going to say next. She dropped her boots and ran for the water yelling over her shoulder *"Pops told me about oceans and lakes, but I've never seen water larger then our water storage tanks."*

She screamed as she hit the water. *"It's so cold!!!..."* Then as if she remembered something horrible, she leapt back several feet from the water's edge.

"Oops! This IS where those fish things live that bite people and eat them, isn't it!"

Hawk laughed *"Yep...."* Then he gently took her arm *"But it's rare now days, even though they've made a comeback their numbers are still small. So much sea life was destroyed back then as well."*

Keli looked up into his face. In the moon light she could see the sadness in his face as Hawk stared out across the water.

"It must be horrible to have lived back then, known so much, then see it all taken away" She moved against him and laid her hand on his arm. *"I wish there was something I could do to..."*

He patted her hand softly and smiled *"I lost a lot, but have gained so much more over the years.... and now....."* His voice trailed off.

Keli knew that was all he would say. Hawk's thoughts had gone back over his too long of a life and he was lost in time. Things that were, are, could have been. Mistakes, triumphs, and then.....He felt Keli's hands on his arm, her head leaning softly against his shoulder and it was

like she coaxed him back to reality, his thoughts waned and they just stood there enjoying the moment.

After a while he whisper to her, softly, as if he didn't want to wake her from thoughts *"Tell you what.... If you'd like, I'll bring you back here tomorrow after I take care of some business and we can go swimming. I'll ask Ben if his youngest girl has some free time and she can take you shopping for a bathing suit."*

It was if Hawk had thrown cold water on her. Keli perked up, her head snapped around and looked at Hawk. *"Like in my catalogs?"*

Then she paused thoughtfully, then slowly *"Errr... Hawk, I've seen those swimming suits and they look like the women were wearing fancy bras and panties."*

Still looking puzzled *"I'm not sure I could go out in public dressed that way."*

"Hahaha.... Keli they make one piece swim suits too, they'll probably be more your style."

He gently turned Keli and let her off the beach, picking up their boots on the way.

"Not my style, what the heck did he mean by that?" She pondered.....

Chapter 12.

Hawk led Keli back to the hotel and walked through the lobby. They entered the elevator.

Keli looked puzzled as the door closed and Hawk pushed a button.

“Pops never taught us about this. What does it dooooo....”

She tumbled to the floor as the elevator rose abruptly. She sat there, then struggled to her feet, rubbing her behind she looked sheepishly at Hawk.

“I know alien technology!”

Hawk laughed *“Naw... We thought up this one all by ourselves.”*

Keli brushed herself off and within seconds almost fell again when the elevator stopped. She had grabbed onto Hawk’s arm again almost falling to the floor.

“I’m not sure if I like this thing or not”

The door opened and Keli blurted out *“It changed, every things different, where’s the lobby??”*

Again Hawk chuckled at her.

“Yep we just came up thirty something floors....that would be thirty something flights of stairs we don’t have to walk up.”

She stepped out of the elevator and glanced back at Hawk over her shoulder

“I’ve changed my mind... I think I like this elevatery thing.”

Hawk smiled and nodded. Thirty floors in a few seconds, he liked this ‘elevatery’ thing too.....

Hawk unlocked the door and motioned Keli to enter first. She strolled into the darkened room. Hawk turned on the lights and her jaw dropped. There before her was a large living room. Across the room to each side was a doorway leading into two bedrooms. Straight ahead was a wall of glass and through it a veranda overlooking the city. She walked as if a trance toward the veranda, opened the door and stepped out into the cool night breeze.

"Oh... my.... God!" She stared out over the city now lit up in all of its splendor. She knew of lights and electricity, but to see all of what had befallen her eyes.

"Hawk.... I never"

He looked into her eyes, they were filled with tears. She looked back toward the vista. Hawk knew what this poor woman had gone through so much in her life, what she had endured. She well deserved something like this and he felt privileged to have been the one to bring her. He led her back into the living room and motioned over toward one of the bed rooms.

"That one is yours. I know you didn't have any night things as we pretty much sleep in our uniforms out there. So I asked the girl at the front desk, before we left, to run into one of the ladies shops in the lobby and pick you out something."

He gave Keli a sheepish grin. *"I don't know a damn thing about women's clothes, so I couldn't tell her what to pick out. So hope you like it, or that it fits."*

"What about my uniform?"

"Just run it under the shower and hang it up somewhere, it sterilizes it's self"

Keli went into her room with kind of an excited skip. Within a few seconds There came a loud squeal *"A bathtub.... A BATHTUB!!!"*

She appeared at the door and leaned through it. *"Hawk... you know how long it's been since I got to use a bath tub? We have to use our water sparingly, so only showers are allowed,... short quick showers...."*

"Kel.... Here you can use as much water as you like.... And as long as you like."

She vanished from the door and within seconds he heard water running. Hawk smiled, turned and went into his room.

Hawk slid into the warm water of his tub to ease the soreness in his body. He was almost invulnerable, but he was still a man and the last few days hadn't been easy on him. He allowed himself a quiet sigh as the steaming water caressed his body, his mind wandered over the last few days. Thoughts of Keli's reactions to Oil City of her glee, her being like a little girl...of her. He snapped out of his thoughts when they were broken by loud squeal, then another much louder this time. Then another, but he realized these sounds were not of fear but of.... What? He got out and hastily dried off, pulled on a pair of his pajama pants and headed into the living room.

He no sooner got there when Keli's door burst open, she stood there beaming from ear to ear. She was wearing a sheer white full length night gown that billowed as she moved. She stepped

into the room and holding her hands to her sides so as not to have the gown raise up too high, did a quick spin.

“Oh Hawk isn’t it so beautiful? I have an eleven year old fashion magazine, from back east and dreamed of owning something like this.....” She paused her eyes started filling with tears. *“I never dreamed... Never hoped to have something this pretty”* *“Oh Hawk...Thank you sooo...”*

Hawk made a stop motion with his hands. He stammered.

“Ahhh... Kel...Uhhh.. Err... Keli” He swallowed hard.

“He’s blushing... Hawk is blushing” She chuckled.

Then it hit her. *“Why is Hawk blushing?”*

He turned away from her in a quick spin.. *“Keli, when the light hits the gown a certain way....ah... errr.... Aw dammit, you do know the gown is mostly transparent don’t you???”*

Keli snapped her head downward and looked at the light shining through her gown from her room behind her. She could see the outline of her slender tapered legs, she could see her knees, she could see her..... She let out a yelp!

Her face became a bright red, she looked at Hawk who was looking at the ceiling, she looked back at her.... her... *“Ohhh..”*

She looked farther up her legs to her waist, then to her breasts, *“OHHHH CRAP!!*

She spun around and ran into her room and slammed the door.

Hawk let out a whistle. Loud enough for Keli to hear.

From behind the door he heard *“Shut up!!”* then she gave a little sob.

He walked over to the door and gently whispered *“Kel, honestly I didn’t see anything”*

“Liar!!!” She sobbed.

“Keli, I’m sorry I whistled to tease you, I was only trying to lighten things up a bit.... We were both embarrassed, don’t worry about it.”

Hawks voice was gentle, soothing, *“I know it’s easy for me to say, don’t worry about it, but you were just excited and with everything that’s happened in the last couple of days.... Well, it’s understandable”*

After a few seconds he heard the door click. The door knob turned and the door slowly opened. Keli now dressed in a fluffy white robe stepped through the door, stepped to Hawk and laid her forehead on his chest.

“Thank you for that..” She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. She smiled as she wiped the tears from her cheek. *“I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately, I seem to be all thumbs. I keep crying, can’t think straight half the time.”*

Hawk pulled her head into this chest and stroked her raven hair...

“You’ve had a rough few days Keli.... That’s probably all it is” He gave her a little hug and pushed her gently toward her door. *“Now off to bed with ya”* He started to give her a swat on the butt, then looked down at his hand, and pulled it back.

She went through the door and Hawk still looking at his hand thought *“Her?? What the hell is wrong with me?”*

“She didn’t even close her door” He thought *“At least she feels safe here.”*

Then he frowned. *“Hmmm... Doesn’t say much for me does it??”*

He grinned and headed for his room shaking his head.

“What the hell IS the matter with me?”

Chapter 13.

The next morning Hawk went out and took care of some of his business and Ben's youngest daughter Jill came knocking on the door to take Keli shopping. Hawk had asked Ben the night before if one of his girls would show Keli around and help her do some shopping and Jill had been the one to gleefully agree to help Keli spend her money.

The two women grabbed a quick bite to eat and off they went to the shops and stores that lined the street.

In all her years in the wastelands, she had never once had a close girl friend. Only a few acquaintances that were female. She never had the time to do girl things and now, this shopping with Jill... and Jill's tales of Hawks rescuing her and her family were wonderful. Then came the stories of times when Hawk came to town and would come over and chat with the family. Keli could tell by the way Jill talked, that even though she was only in her late twenties, that she had a serious crush on Hawk.

Hawk had invited Jill to accompany them swimming after they shopped, then gave Keli a wad of money to get what they needed. They'd go buy something and Keli would hold out the money and Jill would take what was needed and pay the sales clerk. As the morning continued Keli had only bought a few personal items not wanting to spend all of Hawk's money. She had thought of Pops and Gris and her squad and bought presents for all of them. Then her and Jill would return to the little building next to the hotel, drop off the packages, then back to shopping. And all the time, Keli bought little for herself.

This was about to change however as they passed by a shop, Jill grabbed her hand and pulled Keli inside, nearly giving her whiplash. Through the door she was pulled until she came to a stop by grasping onto a wooden column. She looked around this place Jill had dragged her...

"WOW! Keli gasped as she ran her hand over the huge selection of swimming suits.

"Let's go try some on." Jill sounded like a little girl and Keli couldn't see why or what excited Jill so about shopping. She shrugged her shoulders and started looking through the suits. After a short time and lots of girl talk a sales lady walked up to the two women.

"If you two see something you like, there are dressing rooms over there so you can try them on to see if the swimwear fits."

Within seconds Jill had a couple of suits and headed off toward the fitting rooms, while Keli looked at one suit and slowly walked toward another fitting room. After a short time Keli walked

out of the fitting rooms wearing a blue one piece swimsuit and yelled at Jill who was in the other fitting room. *"Think this looks ok Jill?"*

Jill pulled back the curtain and walked up next to Keli. They both looked into the huge mirror. Jill was wearing a really tight, really small green bikini. She did a slow turn while peering into the mirror. She was slight in build but as she straightened her top Keli noticed her nipples pushed through the material of the suit.

"Do you think Hawk will like this suit Keli?" She stuck out her behind and added *"I hope he does."*

"Jill!... Why he's...he's... old enough to be your father... or older than your father!"

"Soooo?" Jill let loose a big grin and winked at Keli *"Maybe one of these days he'll notice I've grown up, not to mention he's a man any woman would love to get her hands on."*

Jill dashed back into the fitting room.

Keli frowned and looked back into the mirror at her well covered body, then back at Jill as she vanished behind the fitting room curtain and muttered to herself... *"Damned if I'll wear something like Jill is out in front of people."* She wrinkled up her nose *"Why hell, the girl might as walk around in front of Hawk in her bra and panties."*

She looked back into the mirror admiring her figure. Keli stuck out her chest noting she was much more endowed then that little twenty something girl. She twisted around and looked at her rear *"Much nicer then.... Hers!"* She let out little sigh.

Jill popped back out wearing an even tinier red bikini that made her small breasts bulge out over the top. And the bottom was so tight..... *"Oh my"* Keli noticed *"Why she...she's shaven all the way up.. Ohhh"* Keli blushed slightly.

"That hussy" she thought. Then Jill turned, Keli gasped. The bottom vanished into the crack of her rear exposing the cheeks of her.... *"Jill you're kidding!.... You wouldn't wear THAT out in public?"*

Jill bounced a bit just to make sure everything stayed in place, then chirped *"Yup! This is the suit for me"* Then added *"Oh Keli, don't be silly...everyone wears these."*

"That little slut" Keli mused *"No friggin' way would I ever wear...THAT!"*

She looked back at her image in the mirror..... There stood a beautiful woman. She was much prettier, then Jill, better endowed, and much much... more covered.

Keli let out a big sigh. *"Covered... covered is right!"* She sighed again.....

Around the hottest part of the day Hawk picked the girls up at the hotel lobby. Both had put on cut off jeans and T-shirts and were carrying bags with them that contained their suits and towels. Hawk had gone up and changed, putting on his tank top and cutoff jeans that he intended to swim in. Jeans had been a rarity in the wastelands and Keli had seen only a few, but here in Oil City they were plentiful and those were among the items she got for her friends back home.

They all headed on to the beach. Once there, the girls dashed over to the small changing cabanas and vanished behind the closed doors.

Before too long out popped Jill wearing her tiny little red bikini. She trotted over to Hawk making sure everything bounced so he would notice. She stopped a few steps in front of him, put her hands on her hips so her chest stuck out a bit more and Purred...

"Do you like my bikini Hawk?.....Hawk???"

Hawk wasn't looking at Jill, but just starred passed her. Jill turned to see what Hawk was looking at.... Her jaw dropped!

Keli had just stepped out of the changing hut. She strolled toward the pair, slowly through the hot sand, her hips swaying gently from side to side. She was wearing a tiny black bikini that fastened in front and made her cleavage bulge. She hadn't been brave enough to buy the thong, but what she was wearing left little doubt that she had learned from Jill on what and where to shave. The sand was hot and as Keli approached she took little hopping steps until she got to where Hawk had set up the beach umbrella. Each hop her breasts looked like they were going to burst free from their prison.

Hawk just stood there.... Starring, eyes unblinking, mouth agape! Jill's jaw looked as if it was about to fall off.

Keli finally got to the blankets he had spread in the shade of a beach umbrella.

She walked up to him raised her hands to both of their chins and slowly pushing them closed.

She purred. *"Catching flies?"*

Jill looked at her and gave a slight frown as Keli passed and whispered under her breath *"Hussy!"* but realizing that she too was showing quite a bit, smiled at Keli and Hawk, then to the ocean where there was this really good looking guy she had dated a few times stood with his friends and off she trotted.

Keli and Hawk watched Jill run off and Hawk nodded toward the water.

"You know I've never been in water any deeper than my shower.... Right?"

Hawk smiled at her and replied *"I won't let those nasty old sharks get ya Kel"*

She smiled latched onto his hand with a vice like grip and off they sprinted into the ocean. Keli waded out until she got to about knee deep then hesitated. Jill who had finally decided she couldn't compete with Keli figured she might as well be friendly. She knew Hawk would never think of her other than a little girl, just sighed and said,

"Come on Keli I'll take you out where the water isn't any deeper than your waist."

Slowly Keli learned this water, though cold at first was enjoyable and soon all three were splashing around and having fun.

While the girls were standing in chest deep water Hawk's playful streak got the better of him. He sunk beneath the water and started swimming toward Keli. Through the murky water he saw her legs. He reached out with both hands and grabbed her right leg.

Keli let out a shriek, then with the other leg kneed Hawk right in the face. Hawk popped out of the water, both hands covering his nose. Blood trickled from beneath his hands.

"Oh my God.. Hawk!... I'm so sorry.... I thought you were one of those shark things! I'm sooo sorry..." She paused, frowned at him and said, *"Noooo. I'm not sorry, you got what you deserved for scaring me like that!"*

Keli stormed out of the water while Jill laughing so hard fell over and almost drowned. Hawk grabbed her by the hair and gently lifted her head above the water. And Jill was sputtering, but still laughing.

As Jill and Hawk walked out of the water and toward the blankets, Keli had already beat them there. She had undone her ponytail and let her long hair free. She bent over, grabbed a towel and began to dry her hair.

From behind her a well tanned guy strolled up. With muscles bulging and a confident grin he patted Keli on her butt.

Hawk winced! *"Jill you'd better turn away...This is not going to be pretty..."*

Muscle man grinned as Keli turned *"Hey baby, what say you and I leave this plac....."*

"Crash!" The guy went sailing.

Keli had swung around and without hesitation put the palm of her hand into his chin, sending him crashing into another of his friends, sending them both to the ground.

"Hawk you'd better go help" Jill yelled.

"Who the guys?" He replied with a smile.

A third guy ran towards Keli with his fist upraised. Keli spun and with her heel sent the third guy to the ground to join his pals. She straightened up and dusted her hands together and walked slowly back to the blanket and sat down to finish drying her long locks.

Jill and Hawk got back and sat down.

“Wow Keli, you’ve GOT to teach me those moves” Jill snorted “I sure would like to have them handy, just in case.”

Keli smiled at Jill and opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by one of the guys getting up from the sand.... He screamed,

“You Goddamned whore... You bitc... uurrrg!” Hawk had moved so swiftly that neither of the women had seen him go past them, yet there he stood holding the muscle bound jerk by his throat. Hawk had such a grip on his throat he was actually holding a fist full of the louts skin. He pawed at Hawk, his eyes bulging, face turning blue.

The second guy jumped up and swung at Hawk hitting him square in the jaw, but Hawk’s head just jarred a bit, then Hawk just looked back into his assailants eyes.

“Crack!” Number two hit the sand.... Out cold!

Jill had never seen one move so fast *“My God Keli, I barely saw his fist move. I’ve never seen a guy move so fast in my life!”*

Keli just laughed and leaned back to watch the fun, *“I have.”*

The third still sitting was yelling in terror for Hawk to let his friend go before he killed him. Keli jumped into action ran up to Hawk pulling on one of his arms.

“Let him go Hawk, you’re killing him!!”

Her voice quieted, she gently pulled on his arm, *“Please for me?”*

The jerk fell to the sand gasping, rubbing his neck. He looked like he was going to say something, but better judgment won out as he scrambled back toward his friends as they all did a hasty retreat to a much safer distance.

Jill pointed and yelled *“Here come the Police.”*

Keli looked at the two guys in brown uniforms running toward them. Both pulled long thin clubs from their belts.

“You there, you’re under arrest! Don’t even think about resisting!”

“They... he grabbed my ass and Hawk was just....”

Looking at Keli one of the officers Shouted *"Shut up or you'll go to jail too!"*

The other kept yelling at Hawk to put his hands behind him, while two more police ran up to the group. Off in the distance a fifth was running toward them.

Keli stood next to Hawk and yelled at the officer *"He was defending me....Leave him alone!"*

The cop grabbed Keli's arm and yelled *"OK I warned you"* He pushed her away, then out came his 'Stun stick' and the cop moved it toward her. Before he could say or do anything more Hawk had him by the belt and shirt and he was flying through the air at his comrades and all four of them went tumbling to the ground. A couple of them pulled out their stun sticks and got to their feet, pointed them at Hawk.

Hawk in turned and took a defensive stance.

"You're damned lucky he didn't put you all in the hospital!.... At ease men!! That's an order!"

It was the fifth officer. He wore an officers insignia *"You friggin idiots, this here is Hawk...the guy I told you to keep an eye out for, Remember to let him through into the city"* Then added *"To keep away from.... If Hawk is in a fight, all you have to do is wait and arrest whoever he's fighting, because I'll guarantee you he didn't start it...."* Then he winked at Hawk, *"Heh, but that he'd be the one to finish it!"*

He looked at Hawk *"Hey Hawk, How goes it?"*

Hawk grinned, walked over and shook his hand *"Long time no see Jed.... How's it hangin'?"*

Keli put her hands on her hips, cocked her head slightly to the side and looked over at Jill

"Does he know everyone in the city?"

Jill just laughed *"Pretty much."*

Chapter 14.

Jed and Hawk chatted for a while, then it was back to the hotel. The girls watched as Hawk joked and talked with not just Jed, but all the policemen he had tossed to the ground earlier. He still amazed her how easily he could slip from being a normal guy to the violent, emotionless being, then back to normal again. Yet she was awed by his very existence. People seemed to love this man, or at least admire him. It was almost as if she too was being swept up by his charm. And she grinned as she thought.

“He can be verrry charming..... at times that is.”

It was late afternoon and Keli’s wonderful day at the beach was ending much too soon. As the three of them walked back toward the hotel. They chatted and joked and Keli was totally stricken by this new Hawk. When he got out of dangerous areas, he was... Normal or at least as normal as... Again she became frustrated by her train of thought! But this day was completely wonderful and she would not let thoughts distract from it.

They reached the hotel and Hawk gave Jill a little hug, nodded and thanked her for her help, Keli said good-bye as she too hugged and thanked to Jill for the wonderful time and all the help she had given her. Jill had to get home and Hawk took Keli to dinner. Before long Keli once again was enjoying her dinner, several helpings of it.

“Damn woman, keep eating like that and we’ll need a truck to get you home.”

“I’ve never eaten food like this in my life Hawk. I may never again. Do you really think I’m not going to stock up on it while I can?”

He smiled at this lovely creature. How could he argue with logic like that?

The evening passed and they went to the room, cleaned up. After a bit, Hawk entered the living room to find Keli looking through a couple of magazines.

As he entered the living room Hawk noticed that she had remembered to put on a robe this time. He smiled.

Keli had grabbed a magazine and looked at the date. It was only four months old.

“By the time those get to Wall City they’re over a year old. Would Ben mind if I took one home with me?” She asked almost childlike.

“Naw, take them all I... err... he won’t mind in the least bit.” Then added, *“When you finish that one, ya might think about hitting the sack, we have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow.”*

“WE’RE LEAVING!” Keli sounded upset “But we just got here... Maybe a few more days.. Please????”

“Sorry Kel, things need to be done” His voice trailed off “Seriously, we really have to go.”

He turned and headed off to bed and Keli turned toward her room. She was truly enjoying herself and for the first time since.....Since...since.. Ever she thought *“I am having fun... I haven’t thought of home or the wastelands since I came here.”*

Keli awoke with a start as she peered into the darkness, straining to see what had awoken her. Then realizing that she was somewhere safe, she slumped back onto her pillow.

“Ohhh, it must have been just a dream...whew!” She lay there for a while thinking, smiling about what she has seen and learned this day. She snuggled down into the soft bed and gave a quiet purr like sound. She hugged her pillow.

“What!!” She heard something, she had started to doze and...something..... *“There again!”*

She quickly got out of bed, threw on her robe and moved into the living room like a cat stalking its prey. Her eyes darting, head motionless as she moved.

“There it was again” the noise. Her gaze darted to the veranda. The door was open and the wind was blowing the draperies against the table, magazines were lying on the floor. *“Whew”* she sighed. Keli walked toward the open glass door to close it, the cold night breezes gave her a slight shiver as she looked out onto the veranda.

Outside stood Hawk as if he were in a trance, right next to the railing dressed only in his pajama bottoms he stood straight as a rail, arms stretched out slightly to his sides. The cold night winds blew over his body, his hair gently tossed by the breezes now and then. He was encased by the silvery glow from the moon, his body glistened as if he were a marble statue.

Keli stepped out into the patio.... *“Hawk?”*

She moved closer, *“Hawk?”*

Keli was worried. She had never seen him like this. She walked over behind him and gently touched his arm, then pulled it back startled. He was so cold! She laid her hand on him once more.

“Hawk? Is everything alright? Are you ok?” She put her other hand on the same arm. His skin was cold, so very cold. She ran her hands over his arm as if to warm it.

Without moving, eyes still closed he spoke quietly, trans like...

"It helps to numb the body. Numb the body you numb the pain"

He spoke ever so quietly. His words drifted upon the cool night wind...

"Whenever I come here, I stand out here. I try to let the wind.... The cold... cleanse the pain." He made a motion to his head, then to his heart.

Keli recognized the ritual, the words as an old hunter custom. She looked at this man standing in the night air, silvery moon light bathed them both as she stared at his face.

"There is...has.. been so much killing, so much I've had to do...I..." His head lowered, his arms slumped to his sides, he stared out into the cold night sky.

"There's times I can feel.... too much.... to continue to do what I have to do. The ritual... and the cold helps."

Keli once again started to feel her eyes well up with tears. *"My God, the pain he must feel"* She leaned into his arm and gave it a warm squeeze. *"Hawk, look at all the lives you save, the lives you've changed"* Tears ran down her cheek.

"Look.... at how you've changed my life.... Me."

He pulled away from her **"NO!!"**

He turned and looked into her eyes. The pain there almost brought Keli to her knees *"Don't you realize.... Don't you see.....Over the years I've lost who I am.... I mean was... I've lost my soul long ago!"*

He paused trying to find words to describe his pain *"I kill without compassion. I don't care how, as long as they die. I feel no remorse, I should feel,... but I don't,... but yet there are times I do... but I can't let myself feel...I..."*

Her voice trembled *"Yes I see Hawk!..... I see a man tortured by his past afraid of what he might become. I see a man that taught me to smile.... To laugh. A man that has been helping mankind for almost two hundred years. A man that has done more than any human being should ever be asked to do."* She tried to catch her breath....

"I see a man with a soul and a heart that cries inside at what he has to do." Tears streamed down her cheek. It was almost as if she were angry at him for trying to hide his emotions from himself. Then as if he could no longer support his weight Hawk stepped back from the railing, slumped to his knees. Head down in a defeated posture. The wind whistled around them, but she knew he felt no cold.

Keli stood before him and caressed him to her. She whispered *"I see the man I love."* She knew Hawk didn't hear, she wanted it that way. She knelt down in front of him. Thoughts swirled within her mind, confusion at what she had come to realize, yet she was sure.

Keli has sworn no man would ever touch her. But Hawk HAD touched her, time and time again. Not physically, but touched her soul. The soul she feared she had lost. She didn't care about the difference in age, she didn't care if Hawk loved her or not. For the moment she was content kneeling there on that patio, holding him, easing his tortured mind.

She knew nothing more would come of this night, but she held him tightly caressing his hair, laying her head against his. She felt the warmth return to his body at her touch. For a short while there was only the two of them, bathed there in the silvery moonlight.

She gently pulled him to his feet and led him to some large lounging pillows and sat gently, nudging his head into her lap. Stroking his hair, his cheek. It was if he were still in a trance, but deep down inside she knew Hawk was exhausted. Exhausted from living years beyond his time, from being who he was.

Little could Keli have guessed meeting her had awaken emotions deep within and he was realizing that he was beginning to enjoy life once again. Talking to people, finding he could enjoy someone else's company.... Live a life he had not known in decades. Feeling safe and secure, exhausted from anguish and the last few days. He slept. Not the light, restless sleep of the hunter, but the sleep of a man safe from all things and he was safe wrapped within her arms.

Keli looked down at this man, bathed in the silvery glow of the moon. She touched her fingers to her lips, kissed them and lowered them to his. She knew soon he would awaken and they would go to their own rooms, but for now she had him and nothing would ruin this moment.

She looked down at the sleeping Hawk.

"Sleep well my love...."

Morning came all too soon and Keli awoke to the sun streaming through her window. She stretched and smiled. What would this day bring? Ever since she had met this Hawk ... *"My love there has never been a dull moment"* She thought.

She pondered if she should tell him. Was she really sure the way she felt? Perhaps it was the adventure or the excitement that he had brought into her life. She lay there for over an hour. She had to be sure, he was older, much older, but why did this not bother her? In all her years since her captivity, she had not allowed herself to feel like a woman, but now Dog and Mutt were dead... *"Perhaps I'm allowing myself to feel again?...Like a woman should to love and be loved?"*

Keli would frown, then just as quickly smile, then frown again. Time after time, she'd tell herself it was wrong somehow... Then she envisioned his smile, the way he looked at her, how he felt when she touched him. It all made sense.

"I've never loved anyone, like a woman loves a man" She thought, but only for a second or two as memories of this man that had stolen her heart flooded back into her mind, washing away any doubt.

She stretched once again and smiled an ear to ear smile. She was sure, she was in love....and he was going to be hers, *"Whether or not he knows it"* she whispered. Then it hit her like a ton of bricks.

"Ah ha," she said aloud *"So that's why I've been so screwed up!"* Pops had told her years before how love effects some people, but she had forgotten.... Until now that is.

She scrambled out of bed and twirled around, arms outward, then falling back onto the bed *"Her mind screamed 'I'm in love!!'"* She giggled like a giddy little girl. Then a slight frown crossed her lips. Should she tell Hawk how she feels?

She started mumbling to herself as if she was trying to argue with an invisible Hawk. *"You'll tell me the age thing.... Oh! And the... I can't love anyone or anything crap, but I know better."*

But she made up her mind instantly *"NO!"* She thought *"Not yet! There will be a time to tell him.... Hmmm.. or maybe I'll just...."* Her train of thought was broken when she remembered the mysterious meetings Hawk had been involved in during their stay. He was up to something, she knew him well enough to figure that out. She knew he would tell her eventually. This was not the time to let him know how she felt.... not yet! Hawk's mind was elsewhere and would be until he took care of whatever business he had going on.... Then Keli knew there would be the perfect moment, the time for her to let Hawk know how she really felt. And when she did, Keli knew he would be hers. He wouldn't stand a chance!

She gave a wide grin at herself as she passed by the full length mirror. Standing there in her filmy white nightgown she slowly ran her hands over her body pushing the gown in to show off her well toned curves. She whispered quietly, *"After all I am a hunter now.... And girl.... You have the perfect bait"*

Keli twisted and turned, kicking a leg out backward and wiggling her rear, then twisted her pony tail into a large bun on top of her head, squinted and shook her head as it fell back down behind her back. After several poses she decided that drop dead gorgeous woman in the mirror did have all the right equipment to trap whomever she decided to....

She gave herself a wink, as her image vanished from the mirror and into the bathroom pulling her gown over her head she changed into her uniform and got ready to see 'her' Hawk... She grinned from ear to ear knowing that when the time was right.... He did not stand a chance!

Hawk had ordered up some breakfast and was sipping his coffee when she entered the center room.

“Good morning sleepy head”

She smiled her prettiest, warmest, smile and replied *“Good morning my....”* She clumsily hesitated....

“errr, fearless leader” She sighed as she thought she had pulled that one off and that she should be much more careful.... *“If I tell him at the wrong time, he may not...”* She couldn’t go on any further...

“What’s for breakfast?”

Hawk lifted a large white silken tablecloth and waved his arm in a sweeping motion.

Keli looked and laughed aloud. He had ordered about seven different dishes for her just because he didn’t know everything she liked or didn’t. But she decided she would try a little of everything. After all treats like these were far and few back at Wall City.

“I have to go out for a few hours Kel. I saw you looking at the shops when we came in, so about 9:00 stop by the front desk. The night clerk, Penny, said she’d take you shopping if you wanted. Penny is Ben’s oldest daughter and knows where all the good stores and shops are.”

He paused and sipped his coffee.

“You get whatever you want for yourself and if you’d like, something for Pops. I should be back around noon or one this afternoon and we’ll hit the road.”

Hawk got up and headed to the door. He glanced back *“Heh, heh, and make sure whatever you buy will fit into a pack like the one you brought with you.... Not a bit more than that!”*

At 9:00 sharp Keli went down and introduced herself to Penny. Keli had learned it was fun to shop the day before from Jill, and soon found out that her older sister knew even better shops to visit. Penny took Keli to a row of shops that ran toward the more expensive and Keli who was beginning to get a grasp of this new money thing and expressed her concerns that she would spend all of Hawk’s money to her escort.

“Spend all of Hawk’s money?” Penny roared with laughter *“Honey, you couldn’t spend all of his money if you went to every shop in town!!”*

Keli looked puzzled *“I don’t really know how money is come by, but I know Hawk spends all his time out....there... in the wastelands”*

“Keli, Hawk has been around for over a hundred years. He’s traveled all over. Through almost every ruined city out there.... Including all the gold, jewels and whatever else there was out there from his old world, that mankind of this one, would pay for. Honey the one thing you won’t do is run out of Hawk’s money!”

Keli smiled *“I take it that’s a good thing.... Having a lot of money?”*

“Girl you have a lot to learn... Why Keli there’s so...” Penny turned to find Keli had stopped several feet behind and stood standing in front of a small boutique. She stood there eyes wide open and jumped when Penny touched her arm.

“Honey? What’s wrong?”

Keli snapped out of her trance. *“Oh Penny those are just like the things in my catalogue. We have to go in here.”*

“Ah...Keli aren’t those things a little too... uh, frilly or dainty for use out where you come from. Don’t get me wrong honey, you’d be a knockout wearing anything in this shop, but...”

Keli tossed her head to the side and looked at Penny, then it hit her what Penny was talking about. *“Ohhh...I get you!”* She smiled.

“Where I plan to wear this isn’t going to be on the back of a motorcycle Penny. Let’s just say I intend to introduce a certain group of people to a new me....” She paused, *“....and show a certain someone there’s more to me than the warrior he, err... everyone thinks of me as. They all see me as a hunter and city guard... I’ll show them I’m something different than a fighter and killer.”*

Penny looked at the dress Keli was looking at, then back to Keli, nudged her on her arm, *“Baby girl, if you wear that... you’ll still be a killer!!”*

The girls laughed and Keli couldn’t wait for the right time to show it off.

Penny lead Keli over to another area and once again Keli fell into a trance like state, *“WOW!”* There were isles of dresses and skirts, blouses of all colors, styles and shapes.

The sales girl stacked the items up as the two went here and there grabbing, buying. Then Penny pulled Keli around the corner.

“Well honey, if you’re going to buy that dress you need these things to go with it”

“Penny that’s silly, no one can see what I’m wearing under my dress.”

Penny put her hands on her hips, cocked her head to one side and stared at her new friend.

Keli looked back at Penny, then her face lit up, she understood...

"Oh" Her face reddened....

"Ohhhhh!" Keli was in full blush.

"Penny... I... I...."

"Oh yes you can honey" Penny smiled *"And wearing things like these will make that certain someone....uh... well trust me Keli, I've been married now for eight years and my certain someone takes notice every time I put something like these on."* Penny held up a pair of sheer black nylons, *"You know how scarce these things are out here... I'll bet Haw... er, that certain someone hasn't seen anyone wearing these in a while!"*

Keli was blushing so hard now she was afraid the sales clerk would start laughing. But instead Penny added *"My husband loves those over there"* She pointed toward some sheer night gowns of different colors and lengths.

Keli remembered the night before and her experience with her first gown. *"Hmmm, You might have a point there."* Then she paused and remembered the trembling in Hawk's voice when he told her of her gowns transparency. She gave a huge grin, *"Ok... I'll buy some!"*

Penny and the sales girl looked at each other and smiled. It was fun to see someone like Keli who was so beautiful, finding her feminine side.

"Haw.... Ahhh....that special someone won't stand a chance Honey."

Keli winked at Penny *"Not if I can help it he won't!!"*

Around noon Hawk returned and they ate lunch while Keli related how much fun she had. Avoiding telling Hawk exactly what she bought for herself and focusing more on what she found for Pops, Gris and a few others back home. Especially the jeans, she knew how hard pants of any kind were to get in her neck of the woods and were much lighter than the buckskins a lot of them wore.

They went down and said their good-bys to Ben and Penny. As usual Hawk didn't say good bye, just a *"See ya later..."* and headed toward the building next door to get his cycle. Keli said her goodbyes, hugging both and added *"Tell Jill thanks as well... And Penny,.... thanks!"*

She gave a sly wink to Ben for telling her about Hawk. *"And as for you Ben, I'll be eternally grateful."* And off Keli trotted to catch up to Hawk before he got to his bike, but she was too late.

Hawk almost tripped over his jaw when he saw his cycle! Keli had packed four large canvas packs to the rear of his bike. They were tied efficiently, neatly and balanced so he

couldn't say a word on how the bags wouldn't fit.... Even if they did bulge over the rear of the cycle to the point he wondered if the bike would tip over backwards.

He stood there, mouth agape, eyes affixed on the gigantic pile of items attached to the cycle. Keli looked over at him and nudged his arm playfully as she passed by and with her other hand, reached back and slowly pushed his mouth closed.

"Catching flies?" she purred.

Hawk knew she had him, she had fit the bags in, he couldn't say a word. He just smiled as Keli did that playful little strut she did when she knew she had bested him at something.

"Times a wasting" She cooed.

Hawk pushed the button and the door opened. Keli knew she had bested Hawk, she had balanced the bags perfectly and they all fit and contrary to what he had told her, nothing was left behind, he knew she was going to rub this in.... Hawk knew it was going to be a long day.

They mounted the cycle and headed toward the main gate and into the beautiful sprawling plains before them. Soon that beauty would turn into the harsh desert wastelands of the home she knew. She was going to miss all of this, but then she longed to see Pops and all her friends.

And boy!.... was she going to have some stories to tell!!!

It took two days for them to reach Wall City. The trip was uneventful and the two nights they had spent on the road was split by taking turns on watch. The only thing Hawk noticed during the whole trip, was Keli was always in a much lighter mood, smiling, humming, which he attributed to her getting revenge and the easing of her mind. He had watched her as he started to nod off.

She was sitting in the moon light staring out, watching for intruders. But all the time he watched her, all he could see was this beautiful woman he hardly knew silhouetted there in the moonlight. It struck him over and over again that he hadn't talked to anyone so much in.... way too long. The thing that puzzled him most was the cold hard truth that he had told her more than anyone.... And he enjoyed showing her things, telling her things.... But still he was puzzled exactly why he was acting this way.

Sleep closed in and the last thing that crossed his mind was he trusted her, to watch his back, to guard his sleep.... He trusted her... He had dreamed of her several times and this was unsettling, yet as sleep overtook him, he hoped she once again would grace his dreams.

She did....

Chapter 15.

They arrived at Pops inn in the late afternoon and went to their rooms to grab a quick shower and prepare for dinner. Hawk caught himself whistling several times and stopped quickly lest he be heard. So long had he been without friends, without people to talk to about more than what was needed to exist. He knew somehow he was changing but at every turn, he fought it, out here change could be dangerous.

At dinner Hawk asked Pops, who was on the city council, along with, Gris, to gather all the officials and invite anyone else that wanted to come to do so. The meeting was set for the following day for the afternoon. Word spread that the legend himself would address the council. Rumors abounded... Some good, some bad.

When the next day arrived people and representatives from all seven of the walled communities of Wall City were present. If Hawk was going to speak, all knew it would be important. Little did they know, how much it was about to change their lives....

The meeting hall held over four hundred people and it was over flowing. People talking, laughing, speculating.

Hawk took the floor and the noise stopped as if someone had turned the sound down quickly.

Although few had seen him, it was as everyone there knew exactly who this man was. Those standing sat, those sitting listened intently. Hawk had not used a microphone in years but there was no sign of him being nervous. This man demanded attention just by his presence. He stood on the small stage in front of the city commission, turned and looked out over the audience. After he had slowly scanned the entire crowd, he raised the microphone Pops had handed him.

He spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully so there would be no misunderstandings.

"As you all know this country has been really slow at coming back. The Apocalypse destroyed so much..... So much was lost..... So many died. It has been a never ending struggle for you and your parents and their parents. So long have you all fought to retain what you have built here."

He paused... Then, *"Even Wall City several years ago tore down all the walls between the seven cities so as to become one city. You decided to become one city. Your seven districts are called walled in name only. You have succeeded where no other city in this area has."*

He paused again as if trying to find the right words, *“Soon you may even be able to tear down the last wall..... The outer wall!”*

The people started talking among themselves with concern and puzzled on Hawk's statement, but fear was their main concern.

“Things are about to change for the better.” He decided to pause again at least for a moment for that to sink in.... He was about to give them some information that was about to change their lives. Perhaps he thought, that some might not want change, but it was too late to stop now.

“As some may have heard, Oil City has had a military presence for quite a while now. They've kept the area around Oil City clear of mutants and raiders for years. During my last visit there a few days ago, I learned they were ready to expand outward slightly.” The hall erupted with louder murmurs.

“Over the last few years the military has slowly increased their numbers by sea and now are ready to make a new base.... a permanent base. After several meetings earlier this week, I convinced them to make that base here in Wall City..... They will be coming here to stay permanently!!”

The hall erupted into applause and cheers! Hawk waved his hands and the crowd settled down once again.

“Sometime tomorrow there will be a convoy containing the first of the U.S. Military, around three hundred. With them there will be several tanks, supply vehicles and other support. There will also be a large number of civilian trucks carrying the following.”

Hawk paused as if to remember his mental list.

“They'll be bringing larger drilling rigs so you can drill deeper into the aquifers for water.... drill deeper oil wells. There's machinery for manufacturing, for smelting, larger construction machinery to assist rebuilding Wall City.” The hall broke into murmurs once again, but Hawk spoke above the din.

“Eventually there will be over three thousand soldiers stationed here, there'll be no need for fear from mutants or of raiders, the city guard can concentrate on policing duties. They will build a new base, just outside of the city. This will mean more business for your shops, your restaurants.”

He paused and looked at Keli, Pops and the rest of the council and winked. *“You might have to change the name of your city..... There'll be no more need for the walls....”*

The hall erupted into cheers, people leapt to their feet, jumping, hugging. The city council stood and shook each other's hands. One by one walked over to Hawk and either shook his hand or just hugged him.

Keli walked over and hugged Pops, then slowly moved over to Hawk. She peered into his eyes

"So this is what you were up to." She shouted above the din of the crowd. She stood on her tip toes, slid her arms around his neck and hugged him. Perhaps a little longer than she should have, but she noticed Hawk didn't seem to mind.

The mayor and Pops walked over to the mike and announced that there would be a huge celebration for the entire city to be held in each of the communities the next evening. As each community had torn down their inner walls over the last few years, Pops suggested that people stroll from party to party, meet new friends, try the different foods.

The hall cheered. There would be parties, food and drink, music from different bands. There would be a good time for all to enjoy.

Pops looked around for Keli, she was still hugging Hawk, her head nestled upon his shoulder and Hawk was hugging Keli back.

Pops gave a knowing smile, then turned back toward the crowd that had gathered near the stage.

The next day Hawk and others were busy setting up the park for the party. The park in front of Pops inn was long and narrow as it lay between the city's outer wall and the street that was in front of Pops inn. Wood was stacked for the several bonfires that there would be. Tables and benches set up.

Dave and Jason brought a large armless wooden chair and put it right near the larger of the fire pits. Half way between the food and the ale. Setting it back in a spot where everything could be viewed

"Here ya go Hawk" Dave said *"Just for you!"*

"For the guest of honor" Jason added *"Without your help none of this would have been happening."*

He handed Hawk a stein of ale. *"You can sit back and keep an eye on us to make sure we behave."*

"Here's to Hawk... King of our park!"

The three laughed and clunked their mugs together in a toast.

In the mean time Pops had walked back across the street and found Keli sitting on a bench inside the inn, staring into the cold dark fire place. Her hands cupped her face and she was deep in thought. Noticing that she had sort of a sad look, he walked over to her and sat down next to his daughter.

"What's bothering you honey?.... Are you ok?"

"Pops.... I'm so confused. I really love Hawk...I mean I think I love him." She sat up and looked at Pops.

"I mean I do love him, but....it's ...so confusing. So many years I never thought about being with a man..... even swearing I'd kill any man that touched me. And now all I can think of is how I feel when he does touch me...."

She lowered her head *"and I want for him to touch me....To...hold me... to... to kiss me..."*

She looked back into Pops eyes. *"Oh Pops I'm so confused. I want Hawk to love me as much as I love him. I think he does love me, but he just hasn't figured it out yet."* Keli was clearly confused. *"I want to tell him, but think he'd just find some way to push me away...."* Her voice quieted *"....To try to protect me from the way he lives his life."*

She looked at Pops, her voice got louder, yet it trembled *"But Pops I can handle myself....my life isn't that much different from his.... We are so much alike... Oh Pops I don't know what I should do"*

Pops put his arm around Keli and pulled her to him, he stared into the fireplace and replied as she put her head on his shoulder.

"Baby, I saw you two at the meeting yesterday and if Hawk doesn't know how you feel, then he's just a damned fool..... and a blind one at that!"

He felt Keli giggle in his arms. *"I saw the way he hugged you back and have never seen Hawk hug any female, let alone anyone for that long."*

He turned her toward him and looked into her eyes, *"Honey... I wish I could tell you what to do, but it's not up to me. You have to make up your mind. You have to figure it out for yourself and when you decide, you're going to have to do what you think is best..... for both of you!"*

Keli stood, kissed Pops on his forehead like she had done so many times before and sighed. She turned and walked slowly to the stairs, looked over her shoulder at Pops.

"I don't know if I could ever leave you Pops."

He smiled knowingly *"Baby....Every little bird must leave the nest sometime."*

He stood and smiled *"And honey maybe this is the time for my baby to leave her nest."*

Keli's chest heaved with a huge sob, she ran over to Pops and threw her arms around him. Tears ran down her cheek. Pops held his baby girl, stroking her hair.

"Oh Pops, you've been a real father to me, taught me so much..... loved me like I was your own daughter.... How can I leave?"

Pops leaned down and kissed her on the head. *"Baby I'll miss you if you decide to go, but I know Hawk... and if you get through that hard ass shell of his, I know He'll love you like no other man could. He just has a lot about him that most of us will never know, but honey..."* Pops looked deep into Keli's eyes *"I know he'll never mistreat you."*

He sighed again, *"But honey remember Hawk doesn't age, you'll grow old and he won't."*

Keli looked back at Pops He could see her mind was already made up, she just hadn't figured that part out completely...yet. That is until she spoke.

"Then I'll stay with him until I'm old and wrinkled and can no longer follow him, then I'll tell him to go..... and after he leaves, I'll love him..... I'll love him until the day I die."

Pops held his baby girl, cradling her in his arms. Keli truly loved her Hawk, not the legend, but the man. The man she knew, the man she loved.

He knew it wouldn't be long before his daughter figured this out and pushing aside her past, would go after him. She was stubborn and always got what she was after... Always.

Pops held his girl knowing full well she was finally realizing that she was a woman not just in body, but in mind.

She would leave and he would miss her....

But for now Pops held his daughter.... this woman that was his little girl.....

And he held her tight, while she sobbed in his arms.....

His baby had grown up!

Chapter 16.

The night air was filled with music. The park in front of Pops inn was aglow with the light of several large fires. Some held delicious Bar-B-Q with the scent swirling throughout the partiers. While some of the fires were just for light, most provided a welcome warmth to the cooling desert evening air. As always the desert during the day was overly hot and dry which made the ale all so much nicer.

Some people ate, while others danced, while some like Hawk, just sat and watched the merriment. He had sipped a few ales, some food and would pace around the area where they were and kept asking Pops where Keli was, if she was ok. Pops just kept telling him she would join them later and Hawk would return to the large wooden chair he had claimed for the night and Pops would smile once again when Hawk wasn't looking. He knew something Hawk still could not get into his thick skull, he in fact did have deep feelings for his lovely daughter.

Occasionally Hawk would look at the huge full moon hanging in the sky, and once again think of Keli and how she seemed to glow that evening on the veranda in Oil City. How beautiful she was. Then he'd shake the feeling off.

"It's got to be the Ale!!" But he knew he wasn't intoxicated.

The din of the gathering started to quiet. The music stopped as the musicians one by one ceased their playing. A hush fell over the small park and soon became noticeable to Hawk. He looked around as if aware of some immanent peril. He glanced quickly around, his hand slowly reached for his boot. He had left his swords and daggers in his room...

"Awww Crap!" Scanning the crowd, *"I'm so stupid coming here unarmed....Crap!"*

He stood quickly prepared to meet whatever challenge was to appear. Every so often some drunk would come and try to prove their metal by trying to fight Hawk, which of course ended with the poor drunk being carried home or to the nearest doctor. As always Hawk was ready and as always Hawk regretted having to harm someone even if he was a bully or a drunken lout.

The crowd around the area in front of Pops, started to part slightly. Hardly noticeable at first, Hawk noticed everyone had turned and was staring in one direction. The only sound was from the music from those parties in a distance blocks away. It was here in this park that heads turned, then whispers. All eyes were transfixed on Pops porch.

There standing on the steps, stood Keli. She was wearing a dress and she was beautiful, more so than usual! No one had ever seen her in anything feminine.... Never!

The street light in front of the inn shone down on Keli as if it were her personal spotlight that bathed her in a silvery aura. The gentle night breezes gently rippled the hem of her dress as if she commanded nature it's self to high light her mood.

There she stood dressed in a beautiful dark blue backless dress. Her jet black hair was no longer in her usual ponytail, but softly cascading over her shoulders. It clasped at the back of her neck and curved around to gracefully cover her bust, tastefully revealing the cleavage of her ample breasts but careful not to reveal too much. The top was sequined and ended at her narrow waist. From there it seemed to caress her hips. From her hips to just above the knees the material seemed to be alive.

As she slowly stepped down the porch steps, her dress swayed almost hypnotically. With each step her shoes sparkled and drew attention to her well shaped, black nylon clad legs. Even from that distance Hawk could see she was wearing stiletto shoes that when stepped, they clicked as if calling to him through the warm night air. She walked across the street she was as steady as if she had worn heels all her life. She was a model of poise and grace. She walked, not slow, not quick, placing one foot slightly in front of the other causing her hips to move in a way that made her dress sway even more seductively.

Her head slightly down, while her eyes affixed onto Hawk who had risen from the chair he had claimed all evening. Across the narrow lane in front of Pops inn and up on the parks sidewalk she stepped. The crowd was so quiet now that Hawk could hear the steady click of her heels on the slightly winding sidewalk of the park.. Her head still slightly lowered, but her eyes never left Hawks, her eyes glistened in the firelight. Her shoulders swayed opposite her hips unlike a lioness on the prowl for prey.

The crowd stepped out of her way as she approached them.

Hawks jaw dropped! He was speechless, his mind went blank.

Keli walked through the people smiling, nodding gently in reply to those *"Good evening Keli."* Or the *"You look lovely tonight"* Never once did she speak, nor did her eyes leave Hawks.

Donna was one of the few females she knew and liked. She looked at Keli's stare, where she was looking, then back at Keli. She leaned close to Keli as she passed and whispered to her.

"Go get him girl."

Keli turned her head, looked at Donna and gave her a sly wink. To which Donna replied with a huge grin while once again Keli's gaze locked onto Hawk. There stood the man she loved. He was still standing... Still in awe! He was stunned like an animal caught in bright lights, only this time the lights were the lights of love in Keli's eyes. She walked slowly up to Hawk, turned slightly and gently put her right shoulder into the center of his chest, then slowly slid her shoulder over toward his right arm and leaned her back into him. Tipping her head back and leaning it on his shoulder, she raised her left hand and gently touched his left cheek.

She slid her fingers down, tracing his jaw line with the back of her hand. She traced his lips with her fingers and down along under his chin slowly, gently, she pushed his mouth closed. She turn her head slightly toward him.

Her lips brushed his ear "*Catching flies my love?*" she purred.

She stepped away from Hawk and walked slowly over to Pops who was standing several feet away. She smiled and Pops grinned ear to ear.

"*I see you solved your little dilemma.*" Pops said with a warm knowing smile. He knew his little girl had truly grown up into a woman. Even more he could see her painful past had drifted into oblivion as she discovered that she too could find love as she had seen so many others do.

Keli gave Pops a little kiss.

"*Thanks Pops... for everything.*" She gave him a wink and again turned toward her prey. Her eyes fixed on Hawks as she started toward him once again. And he had not moved in the slightest, nor could he as Hawk had become completely transfixed with this ravishing beauty gliding toward him. Her walk was slow and she moved so gracefully Hawk was hypnotized, he couldn't speak, couldn't move, he couldn't even think.

She wasn't aware of anyone else other than her love, but then she heard something from the stunned but quiet crowd. Several of the men standing near her started asking her if she would care to dance with them. Keli looked at them and smiled with a smile that made these men feel like they were going to melt as they looked into her sparkling dark eyes.

"*Sorry boys*" she purred "*I'm a one man woman.*" and spun back around toward Hawk, her dress playfully moving outward rising slightly exposing a few more inches of well formed leg. Then she once again locked onto Hawk and pointed...

"*And THAT is my man!*"

Keli lowered her head, her bangs fell slightly over her dark brown eyes, she peered through them seductively. She slowly strolled toward Hawk, her shoulders and hips swaying, one step, then another until finally she once more came face to face with her chosen, the love of her life. She raised her hands and gently brushed his arms with her finger tips. She placed just the tips of her fingers on his shoulders and slowly pushed.

“THUD!”

Hawk tumbled back into the large wooden chair. She tossed her head victoriously, her black silken hair flying. She slowly circled the chair Hawk was sitting in. Moving seductively counter clockwise around the back of the chair all the time smiling at her love. Hawk in the mean time stared at her until his neck popped. His head whipped around in time to see Keli emerging from over his right shoulder.

She slowly stepped to Hawk's right side and lowered herself down onto his lap and slipping her right arm around his neck. She nestled her head into his neck as if trying to create a warm pocket in a pillow. Her head tilted up slightly so her lips once again brushed his ear.

“I love you Robert Hawk and there's nothing.... Nothing.... you can say or do to stop me!”

Her voice was low and seductive. Her perfume blurred Hawk's senses, he was snared and he didn't care! She sat upright in his lap, looked him in the eyes put her other arm around his neck and moved her lips close to his. First gently brushing, she parted and slowly pressed her lips into his. Hawk could not resist, nor did he want to. Something deep inside of him told him it was futile to resist. She felt his lips part. Their mouths pressed tightly, their arms holding each other, kissing deeply, passionately, completely absorbed in this moment. They were committing themselves to the desire that had been held back so long.... Too long. They kissed deeply.

Something was happening, slowly the two of them became aware of sounds. First soft sounds, then louder. They both froze, lips still touching, they slowly turned their eyes toward the crowd as they became aware of the fact that there were others there around them.

Those standing in the area close to them were whistling, cheering and clapping. Keli and Hawk stopped kissing and just sat there with their foreheads touching. It was Keli that started to chuckle first, with Hawk quickly following.

Keli whispered to Hawk *“You know we're never going to live this down”*

Hawk sighed *“Ok time to end this”*

“Not us baby?” She sounded concerned.

“Hell no...Them!”

As if a cue had been given both Keli and Hawk's heads snapped around and glared at the crowd. It was instantaneous, they stopped, turned and started walking away from the two and went about their partying. The talking and merriment started once again to fill the night air.

Hawk yelled *“Hey! Wasn't there suppose to be music tonight?”*

The small band began to play once again and the dancing began once more as it became apparent there would be no more for them to see.

Keli laid her forehead to Hawk's and they both chuckled. Both were out in front of everyone acting like a couple of love struck kids, but no one there would ever dare to raise the wrath of either one of them, let alone both! They continued, staring into each other's eyes, touching at the forehead, snickering at what had just transpired. They were so different, so much alike.

As the moment passed Keli once again laid her head to Hawk's neck, once again her lips brushed his ear.

"I love you so very much Hawk, I just couldn't keep it inside any longer." She hugged him so very gently *"I love you and don't care if everyone knows it. I don't care if I'm making a fool of myself.... I love you!"*

Hawk felt her nestle closer. *"You don't have to say anything my love, I'll love you still.... forever... Even when you're through with me and leave, I'll love you... cherishing the moments we shared."*

Hawk stiffened.

Keli gasped and thought *"Had she said too much?"*

He pushed her upright. Hawk frowned looking at her tear filled eyes.

"Where's that beautiful, confident woman I fell in love with?" He said softly but firmly. It was more of a statement than question.

"Wait" she thought *"He said it..... HE LOVES ME!!!!"*

"I have no intention to ever let you go, nev...."

He never finished as Keli's lips pressed against his. She crushed his body to hers. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck she began kissing him passionately and Hawk responded, warmly... passionately

After their kiss, Keli once again laid her head on his shoulder and once again nestled into his neck. She pulled her legs up into his lap. He wrapped his one arm around her back and arm, while his other arm covered her legs with his hand resting gently on her thigh.

They just sat there watching the partiers. Occasionally he'd reach over and give Keli a bite of food or a sip of ale, but neither seemed to have the want to move, to part, even for a moment.

It had taken way too long for love to enter their lives and for the moment nothing would separate them. This night was theirs, nothing else existed. They sat in the glow of the fires, while

the full moon seemed to smile down upon them from the heavens. They were warmed by the love they shared hoping this moment, this night would never end.

Hours past and the two still sat there entwined in one another's arms, kissing occasionally, but mostly just enjoying being together, finally allowing themselves this feeling they had suppressed for these last few weeks. Some of the people had left the party, while others stayed, but as in life, even the good moments have to end and it was time for this moment to end as well.

The bonfires had started to dim and the crowds departed back to their homes. The night air cooled even more but she wasn't cold as she sat entwined in her loves arms. Yet she knew it was time....

Keli was first to move. Standing slowly, she got to her feet and stretched. Framed by the glow of the dying fires, Hawk was mesmerized by her beauty, not fully understanding why she chose him, but thanking his lucky star she did.

She leaned over to him making sure her dress fell slightly, teasingly away while not showing too much beyond her cleavage. She leaned in and grabbed his hands and gently pulled him to his feet. She looked deeply into his eyes. There was a love there she had never seen nor felt before. This cold hearted man, this hunter loved her without question. The love within her could no longer stand to be without his lips she threw her arms around his neck and they kissed passionately once again.

Keli turned and took his hand, swung it over her head and pulled it around her back and down, placing it on her hip. She leaned into his arm grasping it with both of hers and they strolled back toward the inn. Their bodies fit perfectly together like destiny had planned it that way all along. She laid her head on his arm and they disappeared into the inn.

They walked by Pops who was just finishing up his nightly chores. He did his best to ignore the lovebirds but found himself grinning ear to ear.

"It's about damned time you two admitted what we all knew." He whispered and went back to sweeping, but neither heard.

They were just staring into each other's eyes. Up the stairs they went.

Chapter 17.

It was Hawk that first broke their walking embrace. He kissed her gently and lovingly told her good night as he started toward his room.

Keli stopped and put her hands on her hips and looked puzzlingly at him. Hawk sensed something was not right, he turned.

Keli slowly shook her head, then a strange look crossed her face. She tossed her head, pursed her red lips as if to say something, but didn't. Instead she stepped forward grabbed his arm and gently turned him back to her. One at a time she grasped each of Hawk's hands. Then slowly, gently, stepped back toward the stairs up to the third floor...her floor. Stepping backward pulling his hands outward she turned and lead him to the stairs. Hawk resisted slightly, no man had ever been to Keli's floor, he knew how she felt about her past, about anyone coming up there and he respected her feelings.....

"Keli perhaps you should think abo....."

She pulled him to her kissing him long and deeply. Keli looked into his eyes and he could see there was no doubt. She was his!

For the first time in decades, Hawk trembled with fear.... Fear not of Keli, but rather in himself. She had been through so much in her short life, so much pain, so many bad memories, he feared he would let her down. She put her arm back around his waist while all the time leading him slowly upward toward the third floor.

They reached the top and started walking down a short hall toward her door. Pops had told Hawk *"... that no man, no person had ever set foot on Keli's floor... Not since we brought her to the inn about two decades ago."* This kept ringing in his mind.

The hall was dark and dusty. The other rooms unoccupied, the doors had been nailed shut.. The hall lights were mostly burned out save a few needed for lighting the way. This was the sure sign of a woman that had lived in terror, of fear. Hawk slowly shook his head. This area showed the darkness that lived in her mind.

Keli opened the door and pulled Hawk in, closing the door behind them. The room was extremely dark and he could hear her heels echo as she stepped across the wooden floor.

"Click" The lights came on.

Hawk realized how wrong he was about how his love had been living her life!

He was stunned. Keli's room was really an apartment. Walls had been removed from the other rooms and what an apartment it was.

They were in the living room and as he scanned his surroundings, he couldn't believe his eyes. This fighter, this huntress.... was also a quite a woman. The walls and furniture were all done tastefully in pastels and white. There were frilly curtains and thick plush throw rugs. Pillows adorned the couch and chairs. Even the lampshade had lace.

Keli walked over to Hawk and once again grabbed his hand, walking backward, started pulling him slowly seductively toward an open door, then through it.

"Click"

"Wow!!"

Hawk said with a voice that made Keli chuckle *"Now this I'd never expected from.... Ah... well..."*

"A tomboy? A girl that never wears anything but pants?" Keli asked.

He grinned sheepishly and shrugged, as she continued pulling him by the hand into the large bedroom. The whole room was done in white, the walls, the furniture, the linens on the huge king sized bed. As she continued to tug on him, his eyes darted from side to side trying to absorb the beauty of her room.

"You did all of this?"

Keli blushed slightly, but kept moving him along.

"Had to do something in my spare time. It took years and a lot of late night sneaking all this up here, but no one ever knew..... Until now my love."

She let go a few feet in front of her closet. She turned and leaned back into him pulling his arms tightly around her as if for security.

She tilted her head back, her hair smelled of lilac. She paused as if uncertain as what to say next. *"I have a dark secret that only you will ever know."* Then added with a chuckle *"Don't spread this around or I'll have to hurt you."*

Then continued *"Nights when I'm up here alone... I... Well.. I... Oh hell!"*

She stepped over to her walk in closet and flung the doors revealing its little secret.

It was filled with dresses and skirts. Lacy and frilly dresses and skirts.

On the floor were several pairs of high heels. Even stiletto boots.

This was truly a woman's closet and Keli was making sure he knew all about her.

"Oops!" Keli turned and rushed over to a dresser and slammed several drawers full of nylon stockings, lacy undergarments and other sheer items...but not before Hawk had seen what was in them. She again blushed slightly and gulped. Then she paused and realized it no longer mattered what Hawk had just seen. And once again she stepped toward him, reaching down and pulling his hands toward her, around her. Once again she was in his arms, she looked into his eyes.... Searching.

"Ok.. now you know my little secret." She lowered her eyes *"I'm not exactly as you pictured me."* She looked back up at Hawk *"I've always loved looking at old fashion magazines I'd get from the caravans. They'd show fashions from back east."* She smiled at him *"While the traders were in town I'd buy ammo and knives... things like that. Then once they left I would sneak out meet them outside the city and buy these.... I'd order furniture and things, have the caravans leave them out in the old ruins until I could sneak them up here piece by piece. Most of all I liked to buy.... Uhhh...."* She appeared to be searching for a word *"....Girly things!"*

Again she looked deeply into his eyes, tears started to well up. *"Hawk I wasn't trying to deceive you... honestly. It's... well...I know you never knew this darker side of me..."*

She stumbled over her words *"things happened.... so.... fast. One moment I met you and before I knew it....I fell in love with you. It wasn't until I was getting ready tonight... putting on makeup... It dawned on me.... I wasn't trying to deceive...."*

He stepped to her and placed his fingers across her lips.

"Shhhh...."

Kissing her softly on the forehead *"It's ok, I love you the way you are. It doesn't matter if you're the tough gal you try to be or a soft warm woman.....Tomboy or feminine woman, I love you either way."*

That did it! Keli couldn't stand it anymore, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.... The kisses became more intense, more passionate.

She gently guided him toward the bed. Still in a passionate embrace, still kissing she pulled his hands to her neck and the top of her dress, guiding his fingers to the clasp. Hawk undid the clasp and felt the dress slide down between them. He felt her hand reach up and grasp his, slowly she pulled his hand down pressing it against her warm shoulder, down to her breast. She squeezed and as he grasped her firm breast, Keli let out a loud sigh.

"My god...." The thought raced across her mind *".....This feels so right!"*

The last doubt also fled from Hawk's mind, she was in his life now and there was no sense in resisting. There would no longer be excuses for him resist. She moaned, her blood raced, she

pressed herself closer to him, kissing him, reaching down she grabbed his shirt and untucked it. Pulling it over his head and throwing it onto the floor.

Once again she pressed herself to him, kissing him passionately and he in return lovingly kissed her back. Hawk had never felt passion like this. Her warm breath as she kissed his neck. Her nipples teased his chest. He lost all thought of self as they became one. Pressing into each other, feeling passions heat rise.

Keli stepped back from Hawk, pushed him down onto the bed, then stepped over to the small light next to the bed and turned it off. She took her time. She turned and there in the silvery moon light that bathed the room, she slowly stepped out of her heels. She stood before him clad only in her black stockings and a pair of black lace panties that hugged her hips as if painted on.

She moved toward him seductively making sure, he could see her, she would not hide her body from this man and she wanted to make it clear there was no question as to what she had in mind and moreover, that there were to be no regrets in the morning.

Keli's past terrors, had left her completely and she no longer had any doubts about her womanhood. She had Hawk, body and soul, as she was about to give hers to him. She reached out and caressed his face, bending down and kissing him. Then not exactly knowing why, she pulled his head to her breasts. Hawk gently kissed one.. She sighed.

He kissed the other, then..

"What was he doing??" she thought...

"Oooooohhhh....." she purred.

He nibbled gently on one, then the other. It was driving her crazy with passion. No longer could she wait, she wanted him. Finally she would be with a man that would love her like a woman should be loved. She felt her past vanishing, the present had won.

Pushing him back on the bed, she lowered herself on him, arms entwined, bodies writhing. In one swift move she rolled to her side, pulling him along, while never breaking their embrace. He paused kissing her long enough to look deeply into her eyes as if to make sure that she had no doubts, but Keli would have none of that. There was no doubt in her mind.

She kissed him once again and rolled, pulling him on top of her. He slid his hands down along her naked sides down to her panties and slid them down.... She trembled with passion.

She felt him shift his weight and then the warmth of his naked body on hers. She kissed him passionately...then grasped her hands to either side of his head pulling him slightly back from her face and stared deeply into his eyes. She felt his body heat, and saw the passion in his face. He could feel Keli's heart pounding in her chest, felt her rapid breathing.... Bathed within the silvery glow of the moonlight, her eyes barely open, she whispered....

“Now” she whispered, “Now my love.”

Hawk lowered himself, gently, slowly at first, until they lay as one, embracing, caressing. Keli sighed, moaned. She felt her body starting to move like it had a mind of its own. She raised her hips, her lips parted, she heard sounds coming from her that she had never heard, she began to writhe, while deeply kissing Hawk. She would know love as it was meant to be. This time there would be only passion, only...

“What were these sounds?” She thought in her haze. Then did she realize these moans were coming from her lips, she was making these sounds of passion, but she no longer cared. Keli had become lost in a world of passion she had only dreamed of and now.....

She held Hawk so tightly, he thought he would break in two. She felt her body tremble. Her feverish thrusting became more intense. She felt something she had never felt before welling up in side of her until she thought she'd explode. She let out a low scream, as this feeling became more intense, so did her screams, her moans.

She could no longer control her movements, her body spasmed, her back arched. She screamed! And deep within her there was an explosion, she shuddered.....

They lay there for minutes, feeling each other's heavy breathing. Their bodies glistening with perspiration in the moonlight. Hawk gently moved to her side and she nestled herself deeply into his chest and arms and purred.

“I love you Bob Hawk!”

Hawk stroked her soft dampened hair *“I love you too Keli White.”* hugging her once more.

“That's the first time you ever called me by my first name or at least the shorter version of it.”

She replied with kind of snicker *“It'll probably be the last.... I think Hawkie is much sexier.”*

“Hawkie?... well if you call me that in public, I'll have to start calling you.....”

He paused for a second...

“Snookums!”

“You wouldn't!” She raised up and twisted her body so she could look him in the eyes and saw that impish look she had seen now and then over the last few weeks.

“You bastard!! You would, wouldn't you?”

She dug her fingers into his ribs and Hawk jumped.

"Ticklish? The Hawk is ticklish?" She gleefully chirped.

She poked him again and again he jerked. Hawk reached out and poked Keli's ribs and the tickle fest was on.

It lasted for only a few seconds with Keli coming to rest again on Hawk's chest.

He thought she had put a couple of rocks on him and was pressing them into his chest, then it dawned on him.... Keli was aroused once again. And what Keli wanted Keli got! She would make sure of that..... Keli got what she wanted..... And she found out she loved it!

Once again their passions raced. Once again they entwined.

The night waned.

"We really should get something to eat Kel....I don't know about you but I'm, starved."
Then snickered *"You tend to give one an appetite."*

Keli gave a huge stretch, threw back the covers and still quite naked dashed off into the other room.

Hawk could hear doors open and slam, drawers open and close, clunking, then silence.

From the bedroom doorway, there stood Keli. Her naked body glowing in the morning sun, with only a small tray of food and beverages being held as if to hide her lower charms. She moved toward him, her breasts swaying gently. She approached the small nightstand and slowly bend down to lay the tray on the table.

Hawk stared in amazement at her beauty, her flawless skin, her soft black hair sliding over her shoulders, her well formed breasts, her large hardening nipples.

"I'm sure you'll find something here to your liking." Still bending, she tossed her head so her hair flew up and around onto her back and down the other side away from Hawk revealing her in all her splendor.

"See anything you like yet my love?" She said teasingly.

He grinned at her. *"Well...maybe breakfast could wait for a bit."*

She, quickly set the tray on the small table next to the bed, jumped back in bed, pulled the covers back and snuggled next to Hawk, pulling the covers back half over them.

Leaning to his ear she purred *"You've make me so happy my love."*

She kissed his neck.

"Now perhaps..."

She kissed his shoulder.

"...It's time I show you"...

She kissed his chest.

"...How happy you've made me.."

Her head vanished beneath the covers.....

Hawk gasped!

And for three more days no one saw hide nor hair of either of them.

Chapter 18.

Buzzzzzzzzzz..... Buzzzzzzzzzz. Hawk snapped instantly to alert. His head raised off the pillow so fast his neck popped....

“What the hell was that!”

Buzzzzzzzzzz..... Then as if just yesterday he knew what it was.

He slapped his hand on the off button of the alarm clock and plopped back down on the pillow. Turning over he noticed Keli was nowhere to be seen. He squinted around the room noticing it was day and by the warm golden sun light pouring through the window estimated it was around seven or eight in the morning.

“Kel?..... Honey?” He called out. There was no answer, so Hawk’s head began to slump back into the pillow again, his eyes closed once more.

“An alarm clock..and an electric one at that!!!.. Awww Christ all mighty I haven’t heard one of those for years!” He moaned half aloud, half whisper, then once again half asleep whispered, *“And of course this would have to be a town with electricity.....so she could use one of.... those....”*

Buzzzzzz!.....Buzzzzzzzz! Again Hawk smashed his hand down upon the alarm clock and once again it was silenced. He rolled back onto his stomach, buried his head in the pillow and muttered, *“...and of course... Keli would have ... a..... damned....elec... ZZzzzzzzzzzz.”*

Buzzzzzzzzzz!..... Buzzzzzzzzzz!..... Buzzzzzzzzzz! He slapped the snooze on the clock again.

Buzzzzzzzzzz..... Buzzzzzzzzzz... He flopped back and pulled a pillow over his head. This was going to be a long day!

Buzzzzzzzzzz!..... Buzzzzzzzzzz!

Pops had put in a small stove in the nook next to the stairs to handle small tasks for busy nights and there Keli was busy cooking breakfast for her love. She had an idea he’d be hungry and was preparing a morning feast. She was in love and now all could see, not only could she handle anything out in the wastelands, but in the kitchen as well.

The guests which were mainly city guard and a few of their wives. But all were amazed at what they were witnessing.

Keli cooking! Not only was she cooking and occasionally humming. But she had been smiling all the time they'd been there. The most stunning aspect was the fact that Keli was wearing a dress. No one, not even Pops had ever seen Keli in anything but pants!

As she cooked the white floral printed dress would sway at the hem as she moved about the nook. Some of the unmarried guards would take a quick glance at her legs being careful not to let her know they were looking. The hemline was slightly above the knees and they noticed it would rise slightly whenever she bent to reach things in the oven. She was once again wearing high heels that tapped gently on the floor as she moved throughout the nook. Occasionally she would turn and carry something to the table she had reserved for her and Hawk. The second she turned the guys eyes would divert back to their food or the ceiling and Keli would chuckle to herself and pretend that she was oblivious to their gazes. She was truly as confident in this setting as she was in the deserts around her home.

Keli had discovered her sexual side and was finding not only did she like it, but found its effects on men fascinating..... At least to a point!

As she bent over the table to put plates on it, she heard a clatter as one of the newer military patrons at the inn, dropped his fork and leaned over to pick it up.... For the third time!

The first time Keli figured it was a mistake, the second time put her on alert and this time she turned her head in time to see him trying to look up under her dress. As he reached for his fork, Keli stepped backward placing her stiletto's heel right in the middle of his hand.

"SNAP!" One of the bones in his hand snapped.

"ARGGGgggg... Ahhhh, my God! My hand....get off my hand."

"Oh dear, I'm soooo sorry, I didn't see you back there" Keli grinned at the soldier. She shifted her weight, he screamed again.

"AHhhhhh... Stop, stop, my hand! You bitch you've broken my hand!"

Keli removed her heel from his hand and he jerked back up into his chair. Keli slid her hand up under her hem to her thigh, pulled out a small thin dagger and pressed it to the soldiers throat forcing his head backward.

"You got what you deserved for looking up my dress, but you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" She pressed the dagger harder to his neck. *"So you have to go insult me by calling me a bitch."*

Two of his buddies sitting at the table stood up as to help their comrade. Seven city guards stood as if to help Keli.... The soldiers looked around, then decided it was best to sit back down.

There were footsteps coming from the stairs and Hawk's boots came into view. Slowly, but methodically he came down the stairs toward the dining room.

"That would be my boyfriend, Hawk coming down the stairs." She removed the dagger from the soldier's neck, raised her skirt high enough to slide the dagger back into its sheath strapped to her thigh and dropped her skirt quickly. She looked into the soldier's eyes and the soldier saw in hers, not rage, but pity.

"You'd better leave before Hawk finds out what you said, I'd hate to see him kill someone before breakfast....He'd be grouchy all day." The people watching chuckled.

The soldier and his buddies knew well of Hawk and shot a glance toward the stairs, then glanced at one another, decided it might be wise to leave and burst toward the inn's door. The rest of the customers roared with laughter.

Hawk came down the stairs puzzled at the laughter, but as he was still half asleep, let it go with something funny happened, just shrugged his shoulders and continued his descent.

"Good morning Hawk"

"Hey!.... Hawk!.."

"Welcome to the living." greeted him from some of his new friends in the guard.

Keli spun around quickly, her hair flying outward to match the lower part of her dress that was billowing just above her knees. In one smooth graceful motion she scooped up a plate and walked by Hawk, leaned toward him long enough to give him a quick kiss on the lips.

"Morning my love" She walked toward the closest table. She turned her head and looked over her shoulder *"Did you sleep well darling?"*

Hawk could hear a few muffled snickers from the guard hearing Keli talking to Hawk this way. He'd glance in their direction and everyone would snap back to what they were doing.

She laid the plate next to another. There on the table lay a feast, there were eggs and bacon, waffles with butter and syrup.

"Syrup! Bacon! I haven't seen those in...err...days." Thinking back to Oil City...

Pops interrupted with a chuckle *"The convoy came in two days ago Hawk while you and Keli were.....uh.. resting."*

The room burst into a myriad of loud snickers.

Keli shot Hawk a sexy little wink and headed back to the nook for coffee.

Hawk, still standing at the bottom of the stairs looked a bit out of sorts. Keli turned toward him as she was pouring him a cup of coffee.

"Something wrong honey?" The room quieted.

"Sit down darling, I made you a great breakfast" Then added *"As you see I also cook."*

She smiled sweetly at him, Hawk just stood there looking sheepish. Keli stopped and looked at him, her hands on her hips, her head cocked slightly to one side as she always seemed to do when she knew Hawk was about to give her some bad news.

"Uhhh... Kel... Hon.. Well it's about your alarm clock."

He struggled for words.....

"Well I just couldn't figure out how to turn the damned thing off and it kept buzzing..."

Keli smiled sweetly and replied in that warm soft voice she used to reassure Hawk things were fine with her.

"Don't worry about it baby, I'll turn it off when I go back upstairs."

Hawk looked at his feet and mumbled aloud *"Uhh... that's ok hon, it's off."* He pulled his hand from behind his back and held it out stretched.

Dangling from his hand was the clocks cord.

Dangling from the cord was the rear case of the clock.

Dangling from the rear case were wires with a broken circuit board.

And dangling from that were more wires attached to the broken clocks face. The parts of the clock swung back and forth from Hawk's out stretched hand.

The room roared with laughter which went on for several minutes as Hawk stood there dangling Keli's clock. Electricity was very limited and it appeared, thanks to Hawk, there would be a little more to go around.

"Poor baby...." She said and the room erupted once again with laughter.

Hawk let the clock fall to the floor in a heap of wire and broken plastic. Still looking a bit sheepish, he strolled over to the table and sat, while Keli started across the room with his coffee.

Pops, now sitting because his legs could no longer hold him up, had his head laying on his arm on the table, he looked up at Hawk. Still laughing Pops said *"All that technology he uses and he can't even turn off a friggin' alarm clock!!"*

The room once more erupted into laughter. Keli was laughing so hard she spilled half of Hawk's coffee while crossing over to his table. Hawk who had been looking down at his plate, glanced over at the half empty cup. He started to smirk, which in turned changed to a chuckle. The chuckle became a hardy laugh and all there at the inn had a good laugh.

Keli sat next to Hawk and had a few sips of coffee. She snickered, but only loud enough for Hawk to hear.

"I restocked my cupboards upstairs while you were sleeping, as we seemed to have cleaned them out the last few days." She winked at him and purred *"You give a girl a healthy appetite."*

Now and then someone would toss a witty comment to Hawk or Keli and they in turn would toss something back and everyone would laugh. This was an enjoyable morning. Mornings that Hawk had not experienced until meeting Keli, Pops and their friends.

Keli watched Hawk eat until he was almost finished as it was now his time to astound Keli with how much he could eat.

"Being in love makes a fella a tad hungry, hon." He grinned from ear to ear.

Keli leaned over to him and whispered in his ear. Her voice soft, her breath warm.

"So does making love, my love."

Hawk grinned and Keli smiled at him as she noticed he was blushing slightly.

"Why baby you're blushing." She said as she leaned back to his ear.

Hawk gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek, she gave him a big kiss on the lips!

Keli got up, walked to the stairs and gave Hawk that sexy little look over her shoulders, head tilted to the side and her hair cascading down her shoulders.

"Honey... I think I'll go up to the room for a while..." She gave Hawk a smile and a longer than usual wink.

Hawk wiped his lips with his napkin and started to rise.

Still looking over her shoulder, Keli cooed *"Hon, take your time and finish your breakfast"*

Hawk sat back down.

She put one foot on the first stair, leaned back against the banister, causing her hem to ride up her thigh slightly. She continued with a seductive smile.

“Remember a hearty breakfast gives us strength to finish the day.” Still leaning back against the banister, Keli tipped her head backward so her hair cascaded over the railing, turned her head toward Hawk.

“And baby.... You’re going to need all your strength!”

With that, she twisted upright and bounced up the stairs, the hem of her dress darting side to side.

There were slow quiet whistles, while others made a gentle “wooooo” sound. Then all burst into laughter.

Hawk rose to his feet so quickly that his chair crashed over backward. The room became deathly quiet. He squinted and slowly scanned the room. His face changed to a sheepish grin, shrugged his shoulders, turned and headed toward the stairs. Once again the room broke into laughter. Hawk turned toward them with his upper body and gave them all a quick wink and up the stairs he went.

Dave turned to Jason and commented. *“Ya know I think he’s whapped!”*

Jason replied *“Well next time you see him....you just go ahead and tell him that.”*

“Ahhh, think not Jas, I like my head right where it sits now.” Both laughed.

“Let’s face it Dave, if Kel had chosen any man in this room... or either of us.... We’d be whapped too!”

“Jas... If she had chosen anyone in this room, we’d be dead” Dave added *“I’m thinking it’d take someone like Hawk to keep up with her in the field.... hehe... or elsewhere.”*

Jason knew he meant no disrespect to either Keli or Hawk and nodded with agreement.

It would be two more days before either of the love birds would appear again....

For a couple of weeks Keli and Hawk had decided they were on vacation, no scrounging, no missions, no escorting, they were just going to enjoy each other’s company and no one, nor thing, was going to interfere. The two could be seen walking hand in hand in the park or on the streets strolling along with their arms wrapped around one another’s waist. They walked everywhere just so it would take longer to get there and give them more time to be together.

The days were cooling slightly now as the fall was coming. Fall only meant temperatures in the double digits, rather than the triple. Now the winds would blow from the north and cool the

steaming desert to tolerable levels. It was the time to enjoy life in these dusty and dry wastelands.

Hawk took Keli to a few new shops that had opened by new settlers that came up with the Oil City caravans. The caravans were now coming in steadily due to the large military escorts. And as soon as someone opened a new shop, there they were, looking, arm in arm. Hugging and kissing acting like a couple of love struck kids. Just seeing them together made people feel happy, young again. And no one doubted these two were madly in love.

Eventually like all good things, it had to be interrupted by that ugly little thing called life. They were the best at what they did and they were needed. One or the other was asked to lead some expedition or group out into the wastelands as there were none better than Keli or Hawk.

Upon returning from being away from each other they would disappear for a day or two after getting back. There was nothing that was going to ruin their time together.

Hawk led a small military convoy down to Rift City so they could set up a small outpost there. While Keli led a group of city guards to do some repair work on the southern most bridge that crossed the rift near Wall City.

Hawk introduced the Captain in charge to Lou and filled him in on the convoys, supplies that were now becoming more abundant. The military in Wall City was now at full strength and decided at Hawk's prodding to put a small detachment in Rift City to extend the patrols and establish a much larger radio tower. There would now be commerce to Rift City from Wall City and exploring what all called "Dead City" would be free from the usual dangers.

The area was truly more secure and travel was becoming more common. There were good times for an area that had suffered for so long.

After a few days everything had been agreed to and Hawk decided to leave and take any orders back to Wall City. He had a bite and a few ales with Lou and the captain and with a smile, excused himself.

"I have Keli waiting back home for me, so see you two later."

They walked him outside and as usual Hawk only said "See ya." No good-byes, but then all knew that was his style.

Glancing at the captain he added *"Oh... and if you need help, just give me a yell and I'll come pull yer asses out of the fire."*

Lou flipped Hawk the middle finger, they all laughed, shook hands and off he went on his cycle.

It had been two days and Hawk was already missing his new love. Every time he'd picture her, he'd crank the throttle open a little more until anyone seeing him would think him a madman. There was a large cloud of dust that his bike tossed in the air as he passed. It left a trail along the road where he had been, obscuring the road. Onward to his love he sped.

He'd been gone for four days and longed to see his gal. So when he pulled up in front of Pops inn, he hopped off the bike and quickly walked through the door. He tossed his bag on the floor and walked past the room full of guards and soldiers and headed toward the stairs, not even bothering to stop and talk to his pals.

Gris and the commander of the military command stood talking. Gris noticing Hawk, yelled. *"Hawk, Need your help"*

Hawk turned and could see from where he was at, that the two men had concern on their faces.

"The Major just told me he got a radio message from a convoy from Oil City. The convoy picked up a faint radio signal from the Halfway outpost on the north side of the mountains..... Hawk, they're under attack by a bunch of raiders."

"No one attacks the outpost Gris, everyone uses it. It's neutral ground... not to mention that sorry bunch of mercenaries there can handle just about anything"

"Hawk" the Major interrupted "My troops said the outpost told them it was some of Cordons men and it looked like that had a cannon of some sort."

"Shit!!" Hawk headed toward the door, then added..

"I can take a small group of your cycle troops up over the pass Major, but it'll be late tomorrow evening before your motorized company can reach them from around the mountains."

"I dispatched a patrol already, but they won't be there until tomorrow morning, too late I suspect."

Gris added *"I got off a message to Keli's squad, but it will be late evening or perhaps nightfall before they can get there."*

"Ok Major, we'll just have to cut through to the outpost and hold until Keli's squad and more help arrives." Hawk jumped on his cycle and sped off, As he went down the street the militaries' cycle squad, which had already been assembled, pulled in formation behind him and off they went at top speed, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

Deep in the back of his mind Hawk feared Keli and her squad would get there first.

He knew they were armed, but also they were on a repair mission and didn't have the ammo for a big fight. For the first time in a long time he felt fear creep into his mind.... Not for himself, but for Keli and her squad.

He twisted the throttle on his cycle a little more.....

The others could barely keep up!

Chapter 19.

The squad of cycles hit the mountains hard and fast as Hawk led the squad through narrow winding passes, over ledges that looked too narrow to drive on. After a little over an two hours of hard riding, they rounded a tor and below in the distance could see smoke.

“We’re too late” The officer in charge shouted at Hawk ***“Damn!... Too late”***

“There may still be some down there alive Cap....We have to see...” Hawk replied in a calm voice.

The Captain never waited for Hawk’s reply and drove off down the incline toward the outpost with some of his men close behind.

“The damn fool” Hawk shook his head *“Where the hell did he get his training!”*

“No training at all.. His daddy is some low ranking general back east... or was before he died last year.”

The man speaking was Sergeant Morris and he knew his Captain well.

“He was promoted right after we lost so many officers during the excursion to the north Hawk. He’s the type to get men killed, so keep your eye on him.”

“Not on my watch if I can help it!”

Hawk cranked the throttle on his bike and sped after them.

The rest of the group followed as Hawk sped after the reckless Captain... Cussing all the way, yelling for him to stop, the Captain did not. He was going to be a hero no matter the cost.

Again Hawk cussed under his breath!

As he neared the post, Hawk could see only a few vehicles. The barn of the post was burning, but the outpost seemed intact. He pulled up along the side of the captain who had finally stopped.

“Cap, we can’t sit here, we’re right out in the open.... Not to mention if anyone is in there you sure let them know we were coming. I don’t know where the hell you got your training, but you never approach an unknown threat head on. Let’s get ove....”

The Captain snapped his head in Hawk's direction *"Who the hell do you think you're talking to? I'm in charge here and everyone follows my orders. Now when...."*

Sgt Morris stared into the Captain's face and without hesitation said *"Sir! We all heard the Major tell Hawk he was in charge."*

Hawk raised up off the seat a bit and strained to see through the smoke.

"At least we beat Keli's squad here." Then suddenly pointed toward a part of the outpost through the open gate.

"Think I saw movement..."

Everyone stopped and stared in the direction Hawk was pointing.

"Take half your men to flank east and go through that breach in the wall near the rear. I'll take the other half and we'll go through the hole to the west. Don't send anyone through the front gate... Cordon's men could be waiting for us to go through the gate... Least that's where I'd lay in wait if I was those cut throats"

The group split as they neared the post dividing as planned.

Hawk took his guys toward the west and watched as the captain split his men. One group went through the front gate while he took the rest around the east wall toward a breach in the rear wall.

"That idiot" Hawk shouted to the men with him. *"I know they'll be laying in wait."*

There were shots. The soldiers at the front gate fell off their cycles and even where they lay the ground erupted around the bodies as Cordon's men fired to make sure none would survive. One of the cycles burst into flame.

Hawk's group stopped outside the west breach and dismounted, unslung their weapons and slowly following Hawk's hand signals moved inside.

The outpost consisted of the inn and tavern, plus the now smoldering barn and a couple of small one story houses and sheds. Shots were sounding as the captain's men had encountered raiders. By the time they got to the captain most of his men were dead. Raider bodies lay on the ground dead or dying. The captain sat propped up against the wall.

"We got them Hawk.... We Got...." His head slumped.

Pointing to the captain's last two men the sergeant barked *"You're with us now."* They fell in behind as the remainder of the squad followed Hawk searching through the small houses.

"Why the hell we followin' a civilian Sarge?"

“Want to live trooper?” The Sarge replied “With him we have a chance, without... you can kiss your ass good-bye.... Simple math son.... Simple math.”

They finished clearing the houses and knelt along the side of the house nearest to the inn.

“It’s a three story inn, lots of rooms and there has to be at least a dozen raiders left,” Hawk sounded cautious and concerned.

“We hit the first floor and clear that, keeping one man to watch each of the two flights of stairs going up. Then we can worry about the rest of the floors” He smiled at the guys *“Make sure you have plenty of ammo, it’s not good to try to shoot someone with an empty gun.”* There were a few uneasy snickers.

He nodded at the rear two of the squad *“You two head on over to the tower and if you see anyone or thing coming.... Yell out, shoot a couple of times, just don’t let them catch us trapped between them and the raiders on the upper floors”*

The two snipers headed to the water tower and Hawk led the rest toward the inn. Bullets tossed up dust at their feet as they sprinted toward the inn. Firing their weapons as they moved. All that is but Hawk, who knew firing blindly was almost pointless. While the others ducked behind several junked cars, Hawk had continued running toward the inn.

As he ran he pulled one of his large knives from his boot and heaved it into the wall where it buried its self deep into the wooden side of the building. Without stopping he threw the other several feet higher and over to the left from the blade. Pulling one of his swords he repeated the same thing. The rest of the squad tried to peek around their cover and wondered what he was up to.

The squad kept firing as Hawk hit the wall at a run, leaped to the first knife, then the next using them like stairs he vaulted from the sword to the low roof of the rear porch.

Wood and shingle alike flew as the raiders below fired through the roof, while glass shattered as the squad returned covering fire for Hawk. Without breaking stride Hawk kicked off the lid of the flue stack and tossed a hand grenade down into the small room. The grenade rattled down the flue, the raiders inside stopped and looked at the stack. They turned toward the windows to leap out and saw Hawk sailing passed the window to the ground rolling as he hit.

The blast was so powerful that not only did the doors and windows of the room fly out into the yard, but parts of the roof and one wall did as well.

Hawk got up, dusted himself off and walked over to the wall and started removing his blades.

“Come on and join the fun guys.....want me to do all the work?”

The squad cautiously rose from behind their cover.

"I think that's most of the men they had on the first floor, but there could be a few more up front, be careful... or be dead!"

Sarge grinned and sent his men to mop up the first floor. The rest of the floor was easy to clear with only a couple of stunned or wounded raiders left. Men covered the stairs to prevent more from coming down.

"I'm guessing however many is left up there will be hiding waiting to ambush whoever comes up those stairs"

Hawk paused as if pondering the situation *"Ya know, I remember a large vent several feet over the roof of the kitchen. I'll bet I could climb back up on the roof and assuming I can get the grate off, I could get to the second floor through that."*

Sarge nodded *"Better then walking into an ambush Hawk.... Just don't try to take them on all by yer self.... Save a few for us!"* He grinned as Hawk patted him on the back and vanished into the back room toward the kitchen.

Hawk scampered out the door and up onto the roof which was lower at the rear. Leaping on an old truck parked behind the inn, he was able to leap onto the roof easily.

He wrenched the grate and after a few tries, pulled it free. He ripped out some old hole riddled filters and peered into the darkness. Only a few feet away was light streaming from the second floor. He crawled in. Moving along the vents crawlspace he heard shots coming from outside. *"The tower"* He thought *"Someone's coming over the prairie."* He knew he'd have to hurry.

A raider stood looking out a window, he too had heard the shots, but turned when there was a slight noise that came from the vent on the wall near the floor. He cautiously moved toward the rear of the building, gun in hand he leaned toward the large vent in the wall.... He lowered the gun to the vent, then himself and peered into the grate. A knife pushed through the grate and plunged deep into the raiders head. He collapsed to the floor. Hawk strained to push the dead raider away from the vent, but finally using his feet to push the grate and the dead raider back into the room, he had managed to free the grate and slowly stuck his head out and looked around the room.... It was clear. He climbed out and stuck his ear to the door.... Silence, but was the hallway clear?

Sarge heard a commotion from up the stairs and signaled his men to advance. At the top they found a hallway strewn with the dead bodies of the raiders. They slowly, cautiously moved down the hallway....

Out of one of the rooms ahead a raider backed out of the room, the squad raised their weapons to fire. The raider backed into the wall behind him and dropped to his knees as the

sword that was sticking through his body was withdrawn by an arm from within the room and then back out of their sight.

“Man Sarge... I’m glad he’s on our side” One of the troops whispered as they continued down the hall.

The Sarge grinned, *“So am I trooper.....so am I.”*

From one of the last rooms before the stairs to the third floor, Hawk appeared signaling for the squad to continue up the stairs they were at, and he would go up the ones where he was at. Once again they complied.

The third floor was cleared one room at a time, but only one raider had been killed.

As the squad met Hawk he was standing in front of the last room. As the remaining four men joined Hawk he put a finger to his lips *“Shhh...”*

He held up two fingers to show there were two raiders inside. One of the squad knelt down to look through the keyhole and Hawk tried to grab him.

The soldiers head erupted as a bullet ripped through it. Shells ripped through the walls. Sarge hit the floor and signaled his men to do the same....those that were left.

Bullets ripped through the wall from the room and into the hall just over the heads of the men that fell to the floor. One man that was too slow, never knew it.

Sarge signaled Hawk.... He and two others were still left.

Hawk crawled over to Sarge.

“I’m going around the corner... there’s a window and a ledge. I can move along the ledge and when you hear me, you two hit the door.”

Sarge and the remaining soldier both nodded.

Hawk opened the window quietly and stepped out onto the narrow ledge. Inching his way along until he came to the first window. He lowered himself slowly to the ledge, pressing himself to the wall of the building. Cautiously he maneuvered along the narrow ledge almost to where he could glance through the second window, he lowered his head and started to peer in.

An old truck with a small canon had been waiting off in the distance waiting for whoever came to the call for help they had made. They never dreamed that the legend himself would show up. Not to mention seeing him creeping along a ledge with no place to go..... Out in the open,

this was just too good to be true! One of the raiders loaded the cannon with the last shell and carefully aimed it toward the inn's third floor.

Hawk would have kicked himself for not seeing the fairly well hidden truck, but that moment would never occur. Whether or not it was luck or a well placed shot the raiders shell broke through the window Hawk was about to look through, slammed into the inside wall, which on the other side of that wall, was the hall.

The explosion ripped through the room blasting the door and wall out into the hallway killing Sarge and the remaining soldier instantly as well as the remaining raiders in the room. The window and part of the wall where Hawk was standing blew out blasting Hawk outward. His body spinning as he fell three stories slamming onto the roof of a small wooden shed across the road from the inn. He rolled off and fell limply to the open street with a thud.

The cannon truck skidded to a halt sending a cloud of dust billowing upward in the hot desert air. Three raiders ran through the open outer wall toward Hawks unconscious body. The closest raised his shotgun , but never fired as the last wounded sniper on the water tower put a round through the raiders chest.

The second raider fired a burst of machinegun fire... The soldier slumped and fell from the tower as the last two raiders walked up to Hawks body.

"Cordon's gonna reward us big time fer this kill, Jake...BIG time!"

"Look Snake!.....Well I'll be damned... that son of a bitch is still alive."

"No way man!" Snake replied.

"I saw the SOB move!" He paused *"There!! He moved again!!!"*

This time Snake saw him move.

"Damn Cordon was right, you can't kill this bastard!"

Jake pulled out his hunting knife and kneeled next to Hawk. *"He'll die if I slit his throat. Hell, maybe we'll take his head back to Cordon"* They both laughed.

Hawk tried weakly to raise his head, but it fell back with a thud. He tried to focus but everything was a blur. Things kept fading from black to grey, then back to black. The ringing in his ears almost blocked out the two raiders talk, but he heard enough. Hawk knew he would have to do something and do it quickly.....He leapt to his feet mentally, but his body refused and he merely twitched. He moved slightly and pain wracked his body. He moved his eyes and looked at the man kneeling next to him trying to focus, but even failed to do that. All he could see were blurry figures.

The blurring cleared some. The raider that was standing was no longer there. The one kneeling beside him was making strange sounds. Hawk raised his head slightly. Although he couldn't focus at a distance he did manage to focus close up at a sword poking through the raiders neck, his eyes staring blankly, he fell off to one side. Hawks head fell back things were going grey again....fading to black. The ringing became louder, then became a steady high pitched whine, he knew he was either going to pass out from the pain....or die!

As the darkness veiled his eyes he thought he heard a scream...

“Oh my God Hawk!!”

He dreamed it was Keli, but she was too far away.....

He heard once more *“Oh Baby,.... You'd better not die on me!!”*

Things were no longer visible, his head spun the whine became a loud buzz. But just before the blackness overtook him, he felt tears falling on his cheek, he felt lips pressed against his, a hand stroking his hair.... He heard *“My love please.... don't...”*

He was no more, the ringing stopped. Keli held his limp head in her arms sobbing uncontrollably.

Hawk stopped breathing!

Keli's tear filled eyes looked up at her squad, they too held no emotions back. Some knelt down beside the lifeless body of the man, the legend was dead..... Their friend no longer would roam the wastelands.

Tears fell freely, then as if something had stung her, Keli started pulling on Hawks shoulders, struggling to get him upright.

“Keli... don't... it's no use”

“Dave.... We have to get Hawk to his bike.... Trust me!” She kept struggling, trying to sit Hawk up.

“He told me once he was critically injured and made it back to his bike” She strained at Hawks arms pulling him upright, his head slumped backward.

“Something happened, he never said, but somethingDave...help..”

Dave hearing her pleading could not help but aid her in lifting Hawk. He knew nothing would come of it, but went along. Perhaps it would ease her loss for the moment if she thought she was doing something...anything.

The squad lifted his limp body as Keli pulled the group toward his cycle. They laid Hawk's body gently upon the bike and stepped back. The guys bowed their heads as a last tribute to the man that in such a short time, had become their hero, a man they respected, a man they'd miss.

Keli stood there watching her love as if expecting him to move.

There was a hum.... Quiet at first, then it became louder. They all stepped back. The cycle started to glow. The glow became so bright some of the squad had to turn away, while others shielded their eyes completely. All but Keli. She stared until her eyes could no longer see and there was actual pain felt from the intense light, then she too covered her eyes.

There was a loud "**ZIPpppp...**"

They all looked at where the cycle had been.....It was gone!

And so was Hawk!

Keli dropped to her knees not sobbing this time, but crying, loudly, uncontrollably. Her body jerking as she let burst her sorrow. Her Hawk was gone, her love.... How could she keep on living?

"My love I'm coming!!!" She cried as she pulled her dagger from its sheath and aimed it at her throat.

Dave and Jason grabbed her arms and wrestled the knife away from her. They held her arms wrapped around her, kneeling beside her. The rest of her squad knelt around her and all put their arms around her as if to ease her pain. She screamed a woeful cry..... Dave pulled her head into his chest as her body shook with sorrow. She cried, they stayed with her and would do so as long as she needed them.

They would head back to the inn later that evening once all the bodies were buried. There would be no talking, no idle chatter, all were in no mood to do anything but stare out into the dark wastelands.... Remembering their fallen comrades..... and most of all Hawk.

Keli never stopped sobbing the rest of that evening and all the next day and that following night.

Because they had come in their squad's truck, they had to return to Wall City the long way and Keli never stopped sobbing once...

Her love had gone....

Her life ended with him. She was alive in body only..... She continued weeping for the loss of her love.... And of her life!

The next morning was no better as they passed through the city guard post. What was Keli going to tell Pops. She didn't even know how she was going to live through this, she had lost the only love she ever had known. The only love she ever wanted to know and now she was alone once again.

Chapter 20.

The truck pulled to a slow stop in front of the inn as Pops stood in the doorway. Keli jumped out, ran up the stairs and hugged Pops so hard she pushed him back into the inn. Tears flooding down her cheek, she sobbed *"Oh Pops....Hawks gone.....He's no longer with us!"*

Pops stroked Keli's hair gently *"I know baby, I know..... But why the tears?"*

As if Pops had wrenched her heart out of her body, she pushed off of him and glared into his eyes *"That's a horrible thing to say....I... I can't belie.."*

"Hi honey, what kept y'all."

Keli jerked upright and pushed Pops all the way aside.

There stood Hawk. Not a scratch, his uniform looking like new, not a hair out of place.

"HAWK!!!" Tears of joy now filled her eyes. She started running to her love.

"HAWK!!" she squealed once more as she leapt into the air wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Without a word she slammed her lips to his so hard they could taste blood, yet neither would stop. There they stood Hawk holding Keli who still had her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him kissing like they had been apart for years.

Pops and the squad stood in the door grinning from ear to ear until Pops motioned them out and pulled the door quietly closed.

"Let's give them a little privacy."

He then grinned, *"Heh, heh, Hawks got some explaining to do...."*

After several minutes Hawk felt Keli pull away and lower her feet to the floor, she sniffed a couple of times, wiped the tears from her cheek and released his neck. She stepped back and slid her hands down along his chest, she felt about his torso lightly with her finger tips. She wiped her tear stained cheek again and stared into his eyes. A frown crossed her face, then anger.

"You bastard" She whispered.

Then she hit his chest with both her hands, *"You let me think you died!!"* She was not hitting him hard, but to more show how drained she felt. The last day had run her emotions into the ground. Her strength had waned as well, she could barely lift her arms at this point... However

She managed to hit him again although this time it was not hard. It was not to hurt, but rather to show her sorrow and frustration. Keli knew so much about this man, yet so little.

"I cried all the way back, while you sat here drinking coffee with Pops.....You ...you"
She looked at Hawk, then up and down to his toes. Keli reached out her hand once again as if to double check that he was really there. She lightly brushed her fingers against his chest...

"Baby are you really alright? You vanished into thin air, I... we... thought you... were..."

"I was Keli."

She snapped her gaze to his eyes. *"You... you.... Died?"*

"Thanks to you, putting me on the cycle saved me. Hell I awoke in the Medcomp and can't remember a damn thing. The last thing I remember I was on the ledge... then... nothing..... I keep thinking you were there, but finally realized you had to be. No one else knew other than Pops to put me on the cycle.... I have you to thank for my life!"

Keli could no longer stay from his arms as she stepped to him and Hawk wrapped his arms around her to assure her that he truly was there and all was once again as it should be. She buried her head into his chest and hugged him with all she had left.

"Thank God for that alien technology. I... we thought we'd lost you my love." Keli tipped her head back and again looked Hawk in the eyes as if to say more.

Hawk interrupted. *"Last thing I remember was thinking you were holding me as I died.... I felt so safe ... so at peace.... Well that is, until I remembered it was you and I wasn't dreaming.... At least I don't think... Hell I can't remember, Kel. The Medcomp can repair me, but not my memory."*

He hugged her and kissed her on the top of her head lovingly.

"Honey... I would have been dead if it were not for you.... Even in your grief, you must have remembered what I had told you and you put me on the my bike. Thank the fates for a strong woman."

Pausing Hawk added *"I am so sorry about allowing you to think I was dead all this time, but I have no real choice as to where I get teleported back to.... It would have been somewhere near the outpost and I figured you'd be gone by then or back here...."* He smiled *"I chose a place near the main gate, where I wouldn't be seen reappearing."*

Hawk looked really sad *"Baby, that was the only other place the computer had for a location other than the outpost, Oil City and the mesa we spent the night on. I chose here, so I'd be waiting for you when you returned."*

“Hawk... My love, I don't care, I have you back, that's all that matters to me.”

Once again they embraced, kissing. Passion soon set in as the kissing became more heated, neither had believed they would see the other again and now that fear was over. Keli pressed herself harder into Hawk's body. Hawk's hand slid down along her back down toward her....

“HEY! You two get a room” Their heads snapped around. *“OH... let me rephrase that... You two use the room you've got!”*

They turned their heads, their cheeks touching, only to see Pops standing in the door way with the squad right behind. Everyone laughed.

“Pops.... That my friend.... is a great idea!” Hawk swung his arm around Keli's narrow waist, lifted her into his arms and they headed up the stairs.

Dave looked at Pops. *“Ya know that's the last we'll see of them for about a week don't ya?”* Laughter once again broke out, but Keli and Hawk never heard....they were already running up the stairs.

Several wonderful days went by and as expected neither were seen for those days. It wasn't until Keli came down to finish the bridge repairs that she and her squad had left to go backup Hawk at the outpost, that anyone saw them.

As usual Keli was there in the little side kitchen fixing Hawk his breakfast. And as usual they only looked away from one another to glance at their food while they ate. They sat there staring at each other until Keli had to run up stairs and change from her sexy little dress to the more practical flexible armor Hawk had given her.

She bounded down the stairs and gave Hawk a peck on the cheek. He grabbed her arm as he arose from the chair he was sitting, pulling her to him. He embraced her kissed her deeply, then pushed her toward the door slapping her on the behind as she turned.

Keli took a few steps, wiggled her hips seductively, knowing Hawk was watching.

She looked over her shoulder and winked *“I'll be back before nightfall.... And this will be back too..”* She stuck her fanny out and wiggled it again teasingly.

Hawk looked around just to make sure the dining room was still empty. Then spent the rest of his day pondering the evening to come. He had released the animal in her and now he was joyfully paying the price. Still weak from his death and resurrection, Hawk went up to the room to nap not knowing how exhausted he actually was.

He slept.... Far longer than he expected.

His eyes fluttered as the sun poured through the window. He slid his legs off the bed realized he had not even taken off his uniform. Rubbing his face, trying to get himself awake.... He froze!

His hands slid from his face and he jerked his head around to the window, the sun was shining through it.

"Damn!Damn...damn, that's the morning sun!!!" He had slept through the night *"Where was Keli?"*

He stumbled through the bedroom and out toward the stairs.

"Ahhh... Probably making breakfast, that's where she is...but why didn't she wake me??"

But that thought passed quickly and another raced into his mind.

"Something wasn't right, something was wrong." The thought kept invading his mind as he sped down the stairs to the second floor. He hit the bottom of the second floor and around to the stairs down to the dining room.

"She'll be down there I know she will!"

He skipped so many stairs he almost fell, but managed to grab the railing and swung around as he got off the last step saving himself a hard landing. He pulled himself upright.

Hawk suddenly froze. There were a small group of men standing near the door.

All faces turned toward him.

"They're too quiet...."

He looked at Pops. Pops eyes were filled with tears, he held out his hands toward Hawk as if he were lost and shook his head slowly. *"I was just on my way up to get you."*

"Ok dammit! What the hell is going on. You all look like you're at a funeral." Hawk choked on his words as he saw their solemn faces.

There was no Keli!

"WHERE'S KELI?" Hawk roared not wanting to hear the answer that he feared.

"If something has happened to her... TELL ME!!!..... NOW!"

Gris stepped forward and looked sadly into Hawk's eyes.

"They were out repairing the south bridge. Cordon's men jumped them while they were working."

Gris's eyes filled with tears *"They killed my boy Hawk.... they killed him."*

Gris's voice trembled *"Cordon took a gun while two of his guys held him down and shot him in the head!"* His voice quieted, *"Cordon took Keli, Hawk.... but she's alive"*

Hawk let out a little sigh.

"One of the squad was allowed to live... after they beat him badly. He brought you a message Hawk." Gris sounded uneasy as he pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket. His hand trembled as he reached out and handed the scribbled note to Hawk.

Hawk shaking in anger opened the wrinkled note..... He read the note aloud.....

"Hawk:

I have your pretty little whore.... Or should I say my pretty little whore now! You want her back??

We'll be near where you killed my father. I'm sure you remember that don't you Hawk? You have two days to get here. Come alone!

We can see for miles around and if there is any sign of anyone with you, if you don't get here in time, I'm going to"

Hawk stopped and read silently to himself,

"...make what my brothers did to her seem like a picnic.... Then after my men have all had a go at her and we cut her up a bit.... I'll kill her myself and make sure I take my time doing it! You have no idea what I am truly capable of... How much pain I can make her feel. How much I'll enjoy.... You get the idea don't you Hawk!

It's you or her.... You show up...She lives and I'll let her go. You stay! Your choice!

I'd sign this, but you know who I am!"

Everyone watched as Hawk wadded and dropped it to the floor as he turned toward the door. Pops grabbed Hawk's arm and looked into Hawk's eyes and shuddered violently as if he suddenly was being frozen.

"My god!...." Pops lowered his hands and they dropped to his sides as Hawk turned and walked toward the door. In his Hawk's face Pops had seen there was no sorrow, no hate, nothing. That look had sent a chill down his spine so hard and fast he thought he'd pass out. There was

something in Hawk's eyes that made even him afraid. Pops recovered enough to yell after Hawk as he neared the door....

"Hawk I know this won't change your mind, but I have to say it..... You now they'll never let her go. God knows I love her like she's my own blood, but we all know Cordon will kill you both."

Hawk got to the door and turned... *"No one follows.... NO ONE!!! Keli is not going to die!"*

Pops yelled back at Hawk *"What about you?"*

"We'll see..... He broke the first golden rule Pops..."

"Hawk what are you going to do?"

There was no reply.

Hawk turned back toward the inn's door and pushed it open with such force, it broke from the hinges and crashed down the stairs. The door itself broke into several pieces which flew in all directions..

Gris looked at Pops

"Hawks going to kill them...all of them"

He paused and sighed

"Or die trying."

"Gris, you know Cordon has way to many men."

Gris shook his head *"Maybe it'll be ok Pops.... Hawk said she'll be ok and he's not an easy fellow to kill."*

They walked over to the inn's doorway to watch, but Hawk's cycle had already vanished into the distance.

"Pops.... Hawk said something about a golden rule?"

"Years ago when I rode with Hawk, a gang wanting to get even with Hawk, jumped me.. They beat me pretty good Gris. As I thought I was going to die, one of them pulled out a knife, I heard Hawk's voice through the haze just as I felt like I was going to pass out. He was telling the guys that were beating on me... They had broken the 'First Golden Rule!'..."

He stepped toward them and in a roar said... "Never piss the old guy off!"

Pops swallowed hard, *“Gris...I didn’t pass out and I saw Hawk kill those three guys in less than ten seconds, then three more that came to help their friends.... Christ Gris, he killed six men in less than twenty seconds!”*

Pops looked in the direction Hawk had ridden. *“May God protect you Keli”* Pops said in a low voice, soft as if he were saying a prayer.

Gris added *“And may the devil take all that stands in Hawks way.”*

“Gris...” Pops lowered his head and spoke so softly it was hard to hear.

“I looked into Hawk’s face and I saw hell!.....Then I looked into Hawks eyes Gris....”

“I saw death looking back.”

Chapter 21.

Darkness blanketed the vast desert wastelands as many eyes strained out into the ominous black. Cordon's men had lit many campfires as to light up the night, but the fires light only brightened the immediate area of the camp. It did not hide the gloom within their hearts, not the fear in their minds. He would be coming.... and then there were the stories, the rumors, fear reigned supreme. The raiders stayed alert even though it was well past midnight... It was the last day and HE would be coming.

Cordon had put out over a dozen sentries, while another dozen or so peered out into the night from behind the cars and trucks they had parked around the perimeter of the encampment, other vehicles of all kinds were scattered in the camp for cover. The rest of the men paced around the fires or other parts of the camp. While others still, had hidden out within the darkness awaiting to ambush.

Armed with guns, knives, axes, machetes and anything else that they could find, it was easy to see even with so many, they were worried as they kept glancing out into the darkness of the desert. All knew their leader had incurred the wrath of Hawk and had concerns, so they made sure plenty of weapons were close at hand. He had brought his entire army of raiders or at least those that Cordon didn't have to leave on the roadside disemboweled as a warning to the rest of his men of the consequences of trying to desert.

Cordon and his next in command had tied Keli, almost dangling from an old dead tree. Her hands tied over her head, arms stretched so her feet barely touched the ground. The rope that bound her made the tree's limb creak every time she struggled. Cordon feeling joy over having captured her would occasionally slap her across the face. Keli's mouth would once again trickle blood and she'd spit it at Cordon. And like the other times, his second in command would throw a heavy punch into her stomach so hard her feet would come off the ground and she dangled from her arms while struggling to regain her footing.

In the dry desert night she'd gasp for air, hoping, praying she'd die before Hawk got here. Keli knew Hawk, and knew he would come. She knew he would be hurt bad or die trying to rescue her. Tears starting to well up in her eyes, but she held them back, lest Cordon think they were from his beatings. Then the truth would appear within the mist of her pain... Hawk would come into the camp even if she were dead. Tonight she knew there would be hell to pay for Cordon and his army.

She knew he'd get as many of them as he could before.... She pushed the rest from her pain racked mind. Her last hope, was she'd remain alive long enough to see Cordon fall.

For her, there was no hope of resurrection with Hawk's alien Medcomp as it would only work with his DNA, but perhaps if he was not hurt too bad, he might survive long enough to return to his cycle. She smiled with the thought that her love may live even though she might not. The smile brought the wrath of Skull....

Skull was Cordon's next in command and next to Cordon was the biggest, most sadistic, killer around. Now and then he walked over to Keli and kicked her shins just to see her wince, then shout to Cordon.

"She still has some fight left in her boss"

Cordon would shout back *"Easy Skull, we need her to at least appear like she's alive until that son of a bitch Hawk walks into this camp."*

Skull pulled back to hit her once again in the stomach, but Cordon grasped his arm.

"I said wait! Let the bitch recover a bit"

Keli's head was slumped forward, but her shoulders started to shake, then her whole body.

"What's wrong with that whore Skull, you hit her too hard?"

"Haven't touched her boss."

Skull stepped to Keli and pulled her head up by her hair and stared at her face.

"Boss!... That little bitch is laughing!"

Cordon looked, *"Damn Skull you're right."*

He looked at Skull, then back at Keli's slightly swollen lips. He and Skull both leaned toward her. Only inches from her face Cordon smirked *"What the hell is so damned funny, BITCH!"*

In a voice weakened by her ordeal yet somehow surprisingly strong, Keli stared right back at Cordon and his henchman.

"I really must look a mess" She was chuckling *"Lips split, Skulls sure messed up my hair, I'm filthy where you two have dragged me, beaten me."*

She paused then laughed aloud.

"Boss...Man, she's lost it."

Skull let go of her hair and Keli's head slumped. Slowly, still weakly laughing she gathered enough strength to raise her head on her own. Her eyes filled with pain, she still laughed.

"I really feel sorry for you and your army of cut throats."

She swallowed with difficulty but managed to continue.

"Hawk's going to check out your camp before he comes in..."

She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry.

"He's going to see what you've done to me.... and... and"

Her head started to droop. *"There's nothing.... You'll... be able.. to do ... to stop him from killing you..."*

Cordon was enraged ***"YOU DARE TO THREATEN ME, YOU BITCH!!"***

He pushed her head upright and pulled back to hit her, but her head slumped forward once again.

Looking at Skull Cordon snapped loose a verbal tirade of swearing, then got hold of himself, *"Hold her head up I want to watch her when I mash in those pretty little teeth."*

Skull stepped behind her and grabbed her hair and snapped her head upright. Cordon pulled back.....

There was a thud as something hit Cordon in the back. He turned to see if one of his men had tossed something at him, but his guys were all looking the other way. He looked at Skull as if to ask if he saw anything, but never said a word as Skull was staring at the ground.

It was a severed head.

"Boss...That's....Dick... or was!!"

"Thud" Another head landed about ten feet away. They were coming from the far side of the camp....

"Clunk" An arm hit the hood of one of the more distant trucks as a scream pierced from out of the dark.

Cordons men were yelling and running around searching the darkness. A scream, another, then another. One of his men ran up to Cordon and in a high pitched, panicky voice.

"Boss...He killing our men out there and throwing their heads into the camp..."

"I don't think he's throwing them boss... Looks like they're just flying here because he's swinging so hard."

Cordon shot a nasty glance over to Skull ***“No Shit,! You Freakin’ idiot!”*** Then turned in time to hear someone in the distance scream.

Hawk had intended to instill panic within the camp and had succeeded completely! The raiders were running around aimlessly, shooting into the black desert night. Total chaos had erupted as they knew Hawk was there and the killing had begun. Silent on his motorcycle Hawk swept the blackness of the parameter of Cordon’s camp. First he got the snipers awaiting within the darkness. As he closed he finished off the outer sentries, then the inner ones. Ever on the move, none survived as he sped in circles, slashing, killing, sending a fear through men that none had ever dreamed possible.

Skull dropped Keli’s head and pointed toward the outskirts of the camp ***“EVERY MAN BACK TO HIS POST.....SHOOT ANYTHING THAT MOVES OUT THERE..... KILL HIM!!!!”***

Keli slowly raised her head and looked at Cordon and Skull who were looking at the other side of the camp.

“Psssst” They both turned.

Keli was now weakly grinning from ear to ear.

“My boyfriend’s here..... And BOY is he pissed!” The big smile hurt like hell, but it was worth it. *“And as he says...Never piss off the old guy!”* Keli laughed a bit harder as she regained some of her strength now that her tormentors had stopped beating her. Although Skull stayed close, both he and Cordon were otherwise occupied as more screams were heard and they were getting closer to the camp.

Cordon yelled orders and his men obeyed. There was movement from outside the camp. There were large bursts of gunfire off in the direction the noise came from. The sounds stopped, then out of the darkness one of their own guards staggered into the firelight and collapsed, dead at their feet, riddled with holes from his comrades gunfire.

“You idiots!” Skull cried. But his yell was over shadowed by more screams and yells coming from the southern side of the camp.

Gunfire erupted, more screams. They watched as one of their men about thirty feet away leapt onto the roof of a truck and opened up with a machine gun at something there in camp. Hawk’s cycle roared past from out of the darkness and into the light, a flash of something appeared, the man screamed and fell off onto the ground screaming in agony, both of his legs severed just slightly below the knees, while his feet remained standing on the truck’s roof still clad in their dirty boots.

Some of Cordon's men started running away from the area toward Cordon. He pulled out his pistol and shot them yelling ***"You cowards get back there!!"*** But they preferred to die by Cordons hand rather than face the terror that was befalling their fellow raiders by Hawk.

More shots, screams and movement. Keli managed to raise her head just enough to see Hawk fly by on his cycle once again. Sword in hand, slashing, bodies falling. She smiled weakly.

Hawk flew through the air on the other side of the large central fire cutting down four more men on either side of his cycle as he passed. Cordon stared at the four dead bodies laying on the ground twenty yards away.... *"He... jumped his cycle...HOW? There is nothing around to use... how?...HOW??"*

"No friggin' way!" Skull murmured... *"No friggin' way!"*

Keli just grinned weakly.

On the northern end of the camp there were more screams, shots...Then silence.

"PULL IN" Skull screamed at their men ***"EVERYONE TO THE CENTER... Get into the light!"***

Only a handful of men were left.

"WOOSH!" From the far side of the truck that was next to Skull as Hawk soared by, two more men fell to the ground.... As Hawk sped out into the darkness away from them, two more fell to the ground dead on the other side of the camp.

"He's using the cars to jump his cycle you idiots!....it has to be.." Cordon screamed, ***"Look up and shoot him in mid air!"***

Hawk flashed by on the ground and cut down a few men aiming their guns in the air! The raiders would aim around the cars and he'd cut them down as his cycle flew by their heads. Those left felt their impending doom.

The camp was quiet except for the occasional sound of Hawk's cycle crushing the ground beneath, or the wheels whining as it flew by their heads. The sound rose and fell as he'd speed in their direction, then off again, cries would break the night air from those dying or those waiting to die.... It was total pandemonium!

The last one of Cordons men jumped up onto a truck about five feet to the side of the main campfire. He pulled off a canvas cover revealing an old .50 caliber machine gun. He wrenched the bolt back and began to fire in the direction Hawk had last vanished into the night. Casings sparkled in the firelight all most sounding musical as they tinkled off the truck and onto the ground. Round after round he fired until the entire box of ammunition was emptied.

There was dead silence..... Nothing. They became aware of some sounds, sounds of moans from the few that lay dying.

Skull looked at Cordon *"We're all that's left? Out of over seventy men, we're the only three that's left??"*

Cordon looked over at his gunner and gave a salute.

"Nice work"

The gunner stood upright and gave his boss a feeble salute in return.

The air hissed. One of Hawk's long knives flew out of the darkness, sailed through the camp, glistening in the firelight and slammed into the gunner's chest with a resounding thud! The blade hit him so hard, not only did it penetrate his chest, but went through him and impaled him to the metal cab behind the gun.

Skull's jaw dropped and looked at Cordon *"No fucking way.... That's impossible!!"*

Keli could see Skull was actually shaking....

"Yeah he has a way of doing that...." She quietly mumbled. *"...and you two are next!"*

Skull was scared, really scared and Keli could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice.

Cordon and Skull both turned their gazes to the still twitching gunner, then back at one another.

"Shit!" Replied Cordon as his gunner stopped twitching and went limp.

Before either could react there was a noise from the far side of the camp straight across from the two. They strained to see into the darkness.

"Almost sun up." Skull shouted pointing toward the east. A slight glow could be seen behind the mountains.

"He won't be able to hide in the dark much longer... Then we'll have him!"

There was almost total silence with the exception of the desert wind howling occasionally in the distance as if wailing its mournful cry for those laying dead or those mortally wounded souls scattered about the camp. Then the wind stopped as if on cue.

Their gaze changed to movement just the other side of the camp about twenty yards away. A shadow....something? They strained to see. The shadow moved and stepped into the faint light of the far side of the camp.

Keli raised her head..... It was Hawk and he was coming for her.

Hawk walked slowly, staring at Keli's two remaining captors. Onward he paced never removing his gaze from Cordon and Skull. A wounded raider leapt out of the shadows at Hawk and he dispatched his soul to hell with one deadly swipe of his sword. He fell to the ground and Hawk's gaze never left Cordon. Another lay moaning as he passed, Hawk ended his misery with a sickening slash. He was leaving no survivors. A man possessed, there was no life being spared this night... Cordon's reign was going to end this night and Hawk was the one bringing hell on Earth to these murderers!

He stopped and looked over the large main campfire at Keli. Seeing her condition, pain washed over his once emotionless face, then as quickly as it appeared, it vanished.... Hate replaced the pain as Hawk then looked over to her captors. Keli had never seen such hate, such rage. Even looking in her mirror at the hate she held for Cordons brothers, she had never seen hate like that.

Cordon glared at Hawk and said *"If this is going to get done, I'll do it myself!"*

He ran at Hawk, skirting the huge campfire and slammed into Hawk tumbling backward.

Leaping to his feet Cordon pulled out his machete and held it over his head. Hawk, laying on the ground kicked Cordon back into a truck seven feet from the fire, slamming him into the tailgate. Cordon fell to the ground as Hawk slowly got to his feet stumbling, then he fell back to the ground.

"Looks like yer boyfriend's done for" Announced Skull as Cordon grabbed a double barrel shotgun out of the hands of a nearby corpse. He aimed it at Hawk and *"Click...click"*

Cordon reached over and grabbed two shells laying on the ground, cracked the shotgun open and shoved them into the chamber. Cordon swung the shotgun upward and....

There was a sickening *"Thushhh"*

The shotgun fell to the ground, Cordon's arms fell to his side. From the rear Skull and Keli could only see Cordon, then as the fire flared it became obvious.....

Although Cordon was on his knees, Hawk had lunged forward stabbing downward hitting Cordon slightly above the navel, right between the arms that held the shotgun.

Hawk slowly knelt before Cordon until he was face to face with him. He paused as if to see his enemy's shocked look of disbelief.

Hawk slowly put his other hand on the sword and quickly pushed it up to the hilt into Cordons abdomen. Cordon moaned with the pain he so richly deserved.

Hawk leaned into Cordons face and whispered....

“You’re slower than your father.... He at least shot me a few times before I killed him!”

Then a slight grin appeared on Hawks face, *“But you’ll suffer the same fate.”*

With a twist of the sword, the extremely sharp cutting side turned upward as Cordon made a painful sounding gurgle.

Hawk ripped the sword upward tearing into Cordons chest... his heart. Then with both hands Hawk ripped the sword from Cordons chest in a explosion of blood he lowered his face once again to Cordons.

“And that you Bastard..... was for Keli!”

He watched the life drain from Cordons eyes, his body slumped to the side. Cordon was dead!

Chapter 22.

What came next was a blood curdling scream like hell it's self had been born. Tears filled Keli's eyes for she knew it was Hawk's tortured soul screaming at the death and destruction he had brought forth. She sobbed at his pain but that moment quickly faded as she felt Skull move along side of her but slightly to her rear.

Hawk slowly rose to his feet. With only the once roaring fire between him and Skull...He looked at Keli, then Skull cowering behind her.

The fire was only about knee level now, but well lit Hawk's entire frame. Skull and Keli stood there staring at Hawk's bloodied figure.

There in the firelight stood a man in the black uniform. There was blood dripping from everywhere and Keli gasped as she realized some of it was his own blood oozing from the many bullet holes that riddled his armor and had partially penetrating Hawk's body. His face splattered with blood from those that he dispatched as well as blood seeping from small holes in his suit. Then there was the look on his face that sent shudders down Skull's spine.

"STAY BACK YOU SPAWN OF SATAN!!" Skull screamed. He grabbed Keli around the waist and cut the rope that had bound her. Keli slumped slightly, her arms useless, numb from the hours she had been dangling from the tree, but her cut ropes fell from her wrists. But she held her head up weakly.

Hawk stepped forward almost to the fire's edge, his suit glistening with blood, sweat on his brow, hate in his eyes.

Skull put a knife to Keli's neck.

"STAY BACK!" He pressed the knife harder into her neck ***"I'll kill her if you don't!"***

Keli turned her head slightly toward Skull *"Over seventy men?and only you're left? If you kill me Skull, do you have any idea as to how long it'll take you to die?"*

Skull glanced to her then Hawk, then back to Keli.

"I'll bet Hawk can keep you alive for a week, never letting you sleep, never unconscious and always in pain.... Pain like you've never felt"

"SHUT UP!!!"

"I almost feel sorry for you Skull."

“I SAID SHUT UP!!”

He looked at Hawk still standing at the far side of the fire.

“I’ll bet you wind up begging for him to kill you.”

The truth had finally sunk into Skulls mind *“Shut up....”* His voice now quieted, still trembling he added toward Hawk... ***“I’ll let her live if you let me go.”***

“Skull! If you let her go..... I’ll let you live, I won’t kill you, you have my word.”

Skull thought, then ***“What about her?”***

“No one will kill you Skull...” Hawk choked at the next thing he said *“I give you my word ...and you can go...only if you don’t hurt her anymore”*

Skull looked like he was thinking, but Hawk was wrong.

Keli could feel Skulls body *“My God he’s trembling... No, he’s shaking.... Skull is shaking!”* she whispered under her breath. She couldn’t believe it. Skull was terrorized!

“You have until I reach you Skull...then....” Hawk moved, not to the side around the blazing fire, but into it!

One step, then another he slowly paced through the camp fire. Flames leapt up around his legs, licking at the blood on his uniform. His hands hidden by the flames while smoke rose off his armor.

Keli prayed that he was wearing his gloves or the flesh on Hawks hands would be seriously burnt.

Embers danced into the air as his smoldering feet crushed down on the coals. Now and then a flame would travel up Hawks armor burning along a trail of blood, flash, then die as a puff of smoke and Hawk never flinched. Another step toward Skull....

Smoke billowed toward the dawning sky. Hawk was mid fire as the pre morning breezes gently blew toward the raider and his captive. And the smell of burning blood.... Was horrible!

“ARRRRRRrrrrr!!”

One of the wounded raiders covered in blood ran toward Hawk’s left side... A large pipe grasped within his bloodied fists. He pipe raised above his head.....Dashing in a sprint toward Hawk he screamed again....

With one smooth motion, Hawk, pulled one of his swords that had flown into the campfire and imbedded its self into a burning log and threw the sword with his left hand in a sideways sweeping motion across his body. It came flying out of the flames still burning from the blood that had covered it. The red hot sword flashed into flame as it hurled through the air.

To Keli and Skull the sword appeared to be a flaming mass that struck the raider in mid chest, sending him flying back in the direction from which he came. He came to rest, his back against another truck, he looked down at the still burning sword lodged within his chest, then back at Hawk, then at Skull, all in disbelief. His head drooped, his body slumped to the side as he slid to the ground.

Hawk's eyes had never left Skulls all this time. Skull and Keli turned their heads back to Hawk.

Onward he walked passing slowly through the flames and finally, out of the fire he stepped. One last time the flames flared up Hawks body to his chest, once again the stench of burning blood filled Skulls nose. Hawk stopped, still glaring at Skull. The scent of burnt blood, steam and smoke still wafting from Hawk's body was overpowering.

Hawks sword glowed cherry red from the fire, his eyes seemed to glow red from the fire behind and to the side of Skull. To Skull this man was truly spawned from the depths of hell.

Slowly Hawk raised his sword. He pointed the cherry red sword at Skull while smoke rose from the glowing red blade. Before him stood what appeared a demon from hell.... The legends were true, his eyes glowed red... Skull made some strange sounds....

*"I said... **LET HER GO!!!**"*

Skulls knife loosened from Keli's neck, his arm slid downward over her chest, stomach, then dropped away from her and to his side. She heard the knife hit the ground. His other arm loosened from her waist. Skull made some more strange sounds.

Hawk stepped slowly forward as Skull stumbled backward until he backed into a truck that was ten feet behind him and as if his knees could no longer support him, slumped to the trucks bumper and sat there staring at Hawk. The campfire to his side now lit Hawk and Skull trembled in fear.

"You.....you....said... you..... no one would kill me.... You'd let me go....."

Hawk silently moved to Keli who was barely able to stand. He put his arm around her while Keli threw her arms around Hawks neck and laid her head onto his shoulder. They hugged for several seconds, all the time Hawk kept an eye on Skull.

Keli's voice was racked with pain and dryness but she managed a weak smile....

"Hi baby, what kept you?"

Hawk smiled *"Traffic was a bit heavy."*

She hugged him tightly. He paused and squinted at Skull who was still half leaning, half sitting on the truck's bumper. He was shaking so hard the pickup was shaking. He looked to Skull's feet....

"Damned if he didn't piss himself honey." Hawk said grinning.

Keli managed a short hearty laugh. *"That's not all he did baby.... When you came through that fire.... Well..baby...you **were** quite fearsome..."*

Hawk raised his head and flared his nostrils, *"Sniff....sniff"* He glared at Skull...

"Awww Christ, Skull....that's just wrong!"

Keli laughed only stopping momentarily to press her fingers to the split in her lip, *"Oooooo."* Then laughed some more.

Hawk made a motion with his arm and pointed toward the desert to the west, *"Go on get out of here before I change my mind you mangy bastard!"*

Skull turned and stumbled, fell, got up and ran toward the prairie.

Hawk yelled at him as he started to run

"And every time you touch your left ear remember tonight! I'll always be around... Waiting for you or anyone else that wants to be a raider... murderer.... Or...."

Hawk stopped for he knew Skull had run so fast, he could no longer hear his shouts.

Keli watched Skull stumble into the orange glow of early morning light.

"But there's nothing wrong with his left ear baby...."

Hawk drove the sword into the ground and wrapped both his strong arms around Keli pulling her into him, holding her, caressing her. He leaned forward, laid his forehead on hers and stroked her hair. Kissed her gently on the hair, then her forehead. He brushed her bangs from her face and gently kissed her cheek, then the other.

Keli whispered *"Hey....You forgot the most important spot"*

"Honey your lips split I know it's goin...."

She pressed her lips into his ignoring the pain. Keli was holding her love, he was safe and alive that was all she needed to make her feel better.

They kissed, then Hawk pushed her back gently. He stepped back and Keli noticed his cycle was right between them and the fire he had minutes before passed through, but then nothing that happened around Hawk surprised her any more. He walked over to it and from one of the rear compartments pulled out a small squeeze bottle.

"Where the hell did that come from..... Oh! Never mind... I know...Alien techno.." She stopped as Hawk squeezed the blue liquid on each of the six or seven wounds he had.

He winced and grunted.... The bleeding stopped.

"Damned bullets will have to come out later."

He walked over to Keli and poured the last of it onto a small bandage and gently wiped her lip, she winced. The pain went away. She wiped her lip, there was no blood.

"That is some really good stuff you have there baby!"

She looked into Hawk's eyes for several seconds, threw her arms around his neck and they were once again embraced in a long passionate kiss.

"Crap!" Hawk spouted as he pulled away from Keli.

"I almost forgot" He turned and walked over to the cycle. He pulled his rifle from its mount on the front wheel and walked near the truck Skull had been sitting on.

He started to raise the rifle, but Keli's gentle hand stopped him.

"No baby... I can't let you." She looked lovingly into his eyes. *"You gave your word and it would kill you if you ever broke it.....even on scum like him."*

She squinted in Skull's direction. *"Not even to avenge what he did to me, my love..... Let him go."* Then added *"Besides he's got to be over a half mile away by now"*

Hawk lowered the rifle and paused and smiled sweetly at her.

He spun quickly, the rifle whipped upward, he sighted, he fired *"Ssssstttt"*

"Oh baby...." Keli said her head looking downward. *"What have you done?"*

Hawk handed her his rifle. Keli looked through the scope at Skull still standing there. He had stopped running and was just standing in one place almost as if he was in shock.

Hawk handed Keli a pair of binoculars from the cycle as he took the rifle from her. She sighted in Skull. There was a slight whirr as she zoomed in.

"You... Why... you shot off his left ear!"

Hawk saw a huge grin form on her lips as she peered through the binoculars.

She lowered the binoculars and turned her head to Hawk *"You never intended to let him go without leaving him with...."*

"I told him to remember this night whenever he touched his left ear.... I just figured he might forget if I didn't leave him something to refresh his memory."

He beamed at Keli, she smiled back, then looked over her shoulder.

"Ooooo... It was a nice shot though, baby."

Hawk grinned *"Yeah it was, wasn't it."*

Skull was now stumbling through the desert like a zombie arms limp to his side. Babbling, raving. He would spend the rest of his days wandering from town to town, telling tall tales of how he got his ear shot off. Of how this legend Hawk was always out there, watching, waiting for someone to do evil so he could strike them down. He would keep his word to Hawk, not out of loyalty, but out of fear.

The men would toss coins at him and laugh, the kids would throw stones as he passed. Hawk had known even though he had spared Skulls life, he had done him no favor.

Skull would continue to live for another ten years before dying alone and destitute along the side of a dirt road, with no one to mourn his passing. No one caring.

As if they could foresee all these events that would befall Skull, they stood there in the morning light watching him vanish into the desert, standing there, arms wrapped around one another, cherishing that they were once again together with their love, with their lives, safe.... at least for the moment.

Once again like so many times before Hawk straddled his cycle and Keli climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, nestled her head into his back and off they rode toward Wall City, Pops and their friends, home!.

Rays from the morning sun peeked over the mountains in the distance and lit the road that lay before them. It had been a rough night, it was going to be a painful ride home, but then, they had each other.... And they both were safe!

Chapter 23.

Pops settled into this chair between the stairs and the tables. The dinner crowd had never left when they finished, the teenagers were sitting on the stairs as usual, while some of the adults sat around the tables. Pops stories were no longer mere fables and story time was now for all ages and tonight was story telling night at Pops inn.

And as usual all had been waiting for Pops to tell his tall stories. But something had changed. In the three years since that fateful night when Cordon faced Hawk's wrath no one laughed at Pops stories anymore. Every week Pops would sit in his chair and tell of Hawk, Keli and their adventures. The part most wanted to hear was where Hawk destroyed Cordons small army to save his love and Pops would oblige.

He would tell the tale over and over to a mostly new group every week and every week the listeners would range from the soldiers, to the teens, men and women, all would listen intently. And Pops would tell it as it was told to him by Keli. Pops would always finish this one familiar story with....

"The two of them got back here, tired and wounded. Holding onto each other, helping each other through this very dining area and up the stairs. Neither spoke and none of us dared to ask. As they got to that first stair...."

He pointed to the stairs the three of the teens were sitting on *"Hawk turned to us and told us it was over.....Cordon was dead, his small army had been destroyed."* Pops shifted his weight.

"No one cheered, we just all sighed and grinned. We all could see how much these two had gone through in their faces. We were so worried about the shape they were in, but they'd wave us off and headed up the stairs."

Pops would always add, *"Keli told me later they went up to her rooms and pulled off their boots, flopped down on the bed and slept for over twenty four hours. They got up, ate, and slept for another twelve."*

Pops voice sounded lighter, relieved. *"Those two had a bad habit for not being seen for days and we all left it that way."*

He paused and smiled *"When those two did come down we were all stunned. They looked great! Keli's face showed no signs of damage. Doc had suspected she had some serious internal injuries, but it was obvious there was nothing wrong with her anymore. Hawk who had several bullet holes in his uniform showed no signs of any holes. His head and face had been cut and bruised badly....all gone. Neither had any signs of damage or injury. We knew something had*

happened, but knew better than to ask..... Heh, Hawk would never say anything and Keli always protected her loves secrets."

What Pops couldn't have known, was the fact that Hawk's cycle had appeared within Keli's room, just like a pet he had called. In reality all Hawk had to do was press a command device within his suit and the cycle would teleport to his location, it had been added to his suit after his death experience. Before he allowed it to return him to his base to be attended to, He got several med packs out and applied healing medicines to Keli's wounds. The blue liquid repaired her external injuries and some strange orange capsules put her to sleep while they repaired her more serious internal injuries.

Hawk never fully understood exactly what these medical supplies actually did.... Only where and when to use them and that they worked. He then weakly got onto this cycle and was taken to his base. Somehow he always awoke in the med chamber and his body repaired. He never knew how he got there, just that he did.

Every time he climbed out of the chamber, he was naked as the day he was born and lo and behold, behind a clear paneled door in the wall was his uniform or at least another one, he never was completely sure. Completely repaired and looking like new or brand new, it didn't matter. He hurried to put it on knowing that his love would soon be awakening and would be frightened to find him not there.

There was a slight whirring sound, a quick flash and Hawk was back in one of Keli's side rooms. He hurried to send the cycle back to its stall in the barn behind the inn, with a flash of blinding light, it vanished from the room.

He moved quickly into Keli's bed room and strolled over to the bed... as he sat on the bed Keli's eyes started to flutter. *"Hawk?"*

"I'm right here honey."

"Are you..."

"I'm fine Keli...." He motioned to her uniform lying upon the dresser, *"That's fixed just like new."*

Keli lifted the covers and looked under them.

"Daaaammm! That blue stuff didn't even leave me a scar to brag about."

Hawk chuckled as he removed his uniform, then got serious. *"We still need to rest up for a few days. These meds fix us ok, but our bodies still need to recuperate and regenerate to get back to normal."*

She pulled back the covers exposing her soft breasts *"I'm sure we can find something to occupy our time."* She lay back on the pillow as Hawk climbed into the bed.

"Ah, honey, your body has gone through a lot, maybe we ought to take it easy for...."

Keli's lips pressed to Hawk's as he lay beside her.

Hawk whispered into his love's ear *"You'll see what I mean... those pills... Well they also make sure we..., well you'll see."*

She slightly opened her eyes and whispered back *"See..... What..... My....Lovvv..."* Keli fell into a deep, healing sleep and Hawk would soon follow.

He smiled knowingly, kissed her on the nose *"Sleep well my love."*

For over a day they slept.... For over two more they were not seen again!

All Pops knew was what he saw, but knew Hawk well enough never to ask, nor would Keli betray Hawk's trust, so he never asked her either. However he continued his story telling to the mesmerized crowd.

"You know, when those two came down, you would have never guess they'd been so battered and bruised a few days before." He paused for a moment.

"Funny thing is, they never mentioned anything more about the battle.... Like it never happened. It wasn't for weeks later that Keli told me what happened exactly. One time, then she never mentioned it again."

He let out a huge sigh, *"Something happened out there... something neither will talk about. I can see it in Hawk's eyes. There were over seventy or so men that died out there that night and only Hawk and Keli know what horrors Hawk had to do to free her."*

Pops felt tears well up in his eyes.

"There are times when I looked at my baby girl looking at Hawk. Usually he'll go and stand on the porch and stare out to the wastelands. Keli will have tears running down her cheeks and struggle to wipe them away before Hawk sees them..... It's eating away at him what he did.... Had to do...."

Pops stared momentarily at the ceiling.

"I think what eats at Hawk is the truth that he'd do it all over again if he had to... to save Keli from that bastard Cordon or anyone else."

A few of the young girls sighed and giggled at the thought that some day they would find someone to love them like that. The young lads smiled and dreamed of someday becoming a hunter like Hawk..... Their thoughts were interrupted as Pops leaned forward once more and stared at the teens.

“Now the funny thing is that area where Cordons men died.”

Pops paused for dramatic effect.

“All these years not a living soul, not scroungers, not the few raiders left in this area, no one has set foot within a mile of there. The guns and trucks lie a rustin’, the remains of Cordon’s men mummified by the relentless sun. Nothing has entered the area.”

Pops shifted uneasily. *“Predators on leg nor wing have never entered that area. Some say it’s because it’s haunted, some say it’s cursed, others say it is the scent of fear and death that still lingers.....Some people say Hawk lost part of his soul that night and it remains there lurking to destroy any that wander into the camp..... But no one has entered since.... no one dares. Gris and I went there a few months after it happened to destroy any guns..... I know this is going to sound crazy my friends, but we got only within one hundred yards of the camp and turned away.... We just felt so... uneasy... things felt....”*

“Wrong!” Gris added.

The kids gasped and Pops smiled. He was a great story teller and all hung on his every word. And it was fun to embellish his tales a bit. That was the story Pops would tell for his remaining days, but his mind wandered back, as he leaned back into his chair.... back to those days right after Cordons demise. Back once again three years, back to when his little girl left the nest.

The weeks came and went. The two stayed pretty much to themselves, only appearing now and then to go for a walk or to eat in the inn. They exchanged pleasantries with their friends, but rarely spent time talking in length. All gave them their space... They had earned it the hard way!

But something was eating at Hawk, Keli sensed it, but didn’t press him. When it was time, he would tell her what needed to be said. She was secure with Hawks love for her and knew it wasn’t about them.... She just wished he would open up and let her know.... Soon she hoped!

Hawk awoke and felt the warmth of his Keli’s body pressed up against his back. Her arm was gently wrapped around under his and laid upon his side.

“Baby? Are you awake?”

“Yeah hon....” He stretched so hard he almost got a muscle spasm in his back. He rolled onto his back hoping it wouldn’t cramp.

Keli slid out from the covers and laid her half nude body half over his, so her head rested just under his chin. He wrapped his muscular arms around her and she sighed.

"Baby..." He said softly, "...Baby.. I've been trying to tell you something for about a week now."

Keli knew it was something important, something she probably wouldn't like, because of the way he was hedging and stumbling over his words.

"Kel honey.... I.. We.. need to go."

"Where we goin' baby?"

"East, Keli... Back east. I have some business to take care of. There needs to be a report made about Cordons demise. And I... well... Told the Colonel I'd take his reports when I went and turn it over to the military command. You know baby it's so much faster than sending it by ship as there's no long distance radios out here in the wastes!"

Keli grinned *"Ohh baby, I thought it was something bad, you had me worried."*

Hawk raised up to one elbow and looked into her eyes as if to see if she was truly ok with his decision.

"Kel you don't have to go, if you'd rather not leave Pops. I could always....."

She put her finger over his lips

"My love.. I go wherever you go. I know you have things... Well things I'm not aware of that have to be taken care of."

She kissed him gently, *"I know what responsibility is and I can follow as well as lead. Don't you spend time worrying about me Hawkie..."*

The time for talk was over. Hawk had talked more in the last few months than he had in the last few decades or at least it seemed at times like that was the case. He looked at his beautiful love snuggled within his arms once again and sighed. He was a very lucky man!

Pops looked at the listeners.....

"A few weeks later, one fine morning, Hawk and Keli came down. Ya know it's kinda funny, but I could sense that it was time for Hawk to move on. The road was calling him and this part of the country was going to be too tame for him....and Keli...."

Pops paused and gave a warm loving smile as he thought back to that day, *"...And Keli.... I knew that she too would go where Hawk went, he couldn't refuse. You see Keli had Hawk wrapped around her little finger, but somehow I don't think he minded. Hawk is the strongest*

man I have ever known, but although he never shows it, he has a passion for life and now that he had found someone to share it with.... Well, he like my little girl, wasn't afraid to show it."

Pops once again paused and sighed, *"They packed the cycle one morning soon after. When they were done loading....."* He chuckled and added *"Keli had added a few more bags to the load.... Anyhow we stood there watching the workmen tearing down the walls that surrounded our city for a while.....We didn't need walls anymore thanks to Hawk and the new military base that was being built."*

Pops voice got soft, *"Hawk shook Gris and my hands and got onto the bike and said "See ya guys."* Pops explained *"Hawk never says good-by....Never! If you're lucky enough to be one of his friends, then you might get a 'See You' or something like that."*

Pops smiled warmly, *"Then Keli hugged Gris, then came over to me. She swore she wouldn't cry..... but she lied."*

His eyes filled with tears *"She told me,"* he sniffed *"Pops, if my dad was here, he'd thank you for being the father to me, that he never had the chance to be."* Pops sniffed again and wiped a tear rolling down his cheek, then smiled. He stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles, leaned back into his chair.

"Hawk had to go back east to take care of something, so Gris and I watched as they rode off to the northeast down the road and out of sight....."

His voice trailed off as his mind reran memories of that day. But, his thoughts were abruptly ended.

"Pops!" One of the kids asked *"What about Hawk and Keli?"*

Another asked *"Did they have more adventures?"*

"Adventure?" Pops stretched out so far his chair tipped back on two legs and it creaked.

"Adventure....Heh, heh.... trouble will always find those two..... or they will find it...."

He leaned back further, the chair creaked a bit more.

Gris who had been sitting quietly in the corner of the room stood and spoke with a chuckle *"Where Hawk goes Keli will follow and where they both go... Well let's just say, those two will never be bored!"*

Pops spoke quietly, his hands clasped behind his head, he closed his eyes, gave a broad grin. *"Oh I have no doubt they'll find more trouble!..... I just feel sorry for trouble!!!"*

All laughed as Pops lowered his chair and looked at his audience.

“Now all you kids get out of here and go home, it’s time for bed.”

He was greeted with a chorus of “Awwwww’s” But the children obediently left for their homes and Pops closed the door while the adults quickly finished their drinks and left. All thanked Pops for the great stories.

Pops closed the inn’s door and slowly locked up for the night. He went about putting the chairs upon the tables and tidied up for the next day, visions danced through his mind of finding the poor little girl in the desert so many years before, of teaching her to hunt and track.... To survive. Of how she always could see through him. Of the times they laughed.... The times they cried. Of his adventures with his friend Hawk.

Pops stared at the ceiling as the firelight flickered, sending shadows dancing across the wooden beams.

“Be safe my baby girl.... My friend Hawk..... Take good care of her.”

He slowly went from lamp to lamp, turning each off as he passed. He walked to the stairs and paused long enough to gaze into the flames of the fireplace.

“I wonder what she’s doing this moment.”

Pops snapped into reality and blushed realizing that it was late evening and with a sheepish grin muttered “Orrr... maybe I don’t want to know.”

He smiled and walked up the stairs. Pops would keep her room unchanged even though Keli had told Pops to take it for his own. Knowing that someday the pair would return for a visit and it would be as they had left it.

The stairs creaked as Pops walked into the darkness.....

There would be many more years of stories that Pops would tell to the eager listeners. And he would get letters from his girl apprising him of her new life. Those however he would keep secret. Keli would always be his baby girl and her personal life was not to be told.

Now and then she would write about some adventure she and Hawks had. The legend would once again have a new chapter. Getting mail was slow due to the lack of caravans into the area, but when her letters came, he was thrilled. And once again Pops would sing the praises of his friend and his lovely companion.

And all would listen intently as he told of their adventures. Pops always ended each tale with a teaser of some other adventure... Then add to his listeners disappointment....

“But then that would be another story.”

Chapter 24.

Keli had written Pops and it seemed he wasn't far from the truth about them finding trouble. It seemed that these two love birds would stumble across some form of danger or another. Hawk would normally ride from the Mississippi river to Wall city in about four weeks. The roads were always bad, not to mention finding food was getting scarce. However this time with Keli along, there was twice as much food that needed to be found. After all he could go for days without eating, but he'd never let his lovely creature he loved so much go without eating.

Then there was the fact that Keli would stop and talk to every brave traveler or caravan. Should any of them mention trouble with bandits or mutes.... Off they'd go to take care of business. This resulted in a much safer route toward the wastelands. Sure they lost time, but Hawk really didn't care anymore. The nights spent with his wonderful Keli were fantastic. The days traveling with her snuggled at his back were the happiest days he could remember... and that covered well over a century!

Thieves and cutthroats fell before them and Keli made friends. These were times that neither would ever forget. Hawk knew that the routes they had taken were not the straightest, but this lovely creature that was now his companion loved helping those in need. And it seemed that every few days, she would hear of someone or something that needed attention and off they'd go. Keli had a knack of making friends and it seemed everyone whose path they crossed, needed some sort of assistance. Hawk protested weakly, but the truth be told he enjoyed the adventure as much as Keli enjoyed helping people. And the weeks became months.

The cycle topped a slight rise and before them lay the Mississippi river. Hawk stopped on top of the rise so Keli could take in the beauty. Keli on the other hand almost fell off the bike in awe. So much water in one place, but unlike the ocean in Oil City, this water was drinkable, could be used for growing....

"Wow baby, too bad there isn't some way to make part of this go into the wastelands..." She smiled at Hawk, *"Pops and the gang sure could use some of this."*

Hawk smiled back at her. This was his loves way, thinking of others and he'd found that just being with her, that he too was becoming aware of starting to care about more than just wiping out mutes and raiders. She was showing him there are other ways to help other than through violence and in turn he found himself more at peace. He reached down and patted her hand that was resting upon his leg. They took in the beauty for several minutes before Hawk shattered the moment.

"Hon, now we'll head south a bit, there's a bridge a few miles from here that spans the river, we can cross there."

"A bridge that long?" Keli tried to absorb the image "It's got to be over a mile across.... How?"

"Heh, you'll see baby.... You'll see."

After about an hour or so, Hawk turned down a small dirt path which rose upward until they topped a small hill. There in the distance stood a mighty bridge. He stopped and turned his head back to Keli.

"There's a small town on the other side that has been doing upkeep on that bridge for over one hundred years. They charge a small toll and people use it to cross back and forth to do their trades. Even the caravans that reached Wall City probably came across here or the toll ferries further north."

"It's hug...." Keli exclaimed, then added in a slightly worried tone, "...baby is it safe? You know I can't swim very well, just what you taught me back in Oil city."

Hawk patted her arm *"It's safe, and wide.....Don't worry. And the townsfolk that watch over it are really nice. They are generations of tradesmen and women. Their families have passed down the skills needed to keep the bridge just like it was new."*

He added, *"I was through here about seven or eight years ago scouting for a survey party, even though we never went into the town, then two years ago on my way back to the wastelands, I passed over the bridge, it was still in great shape."*

Hawk motioned for Keli to climb back on and off they rode, down the hill toward the bridge. Along the narrow path until they once again were on the main road, they drove onward toward the bridge. Keli kept staring at the bridge as it kept getting bigger and bigger as they neared.

"It's massive" She shouted at Hawk over the wind, "It's amazing."

Hawk turned onto the bridge's road and stopped behind a long line of carts, trucks, and people. He slowly weaved the cycle through the crowd that was mostly on foot with small carts scattered throughout. The one side of the bridge that lead into the wastelands was completely clear as the crowd stayed to the east bound side.

As the two skirted the crowd along the clear side Hawk heard someone yell....

"Might as well turn off your cycle stranger" A man dressed in ragged clothes said "Those bastards starting charging too much for most to pay, so they go through all the supplies and take what they want..... or turn you away." He shook his head, "We just let them take what they want or we can't cross. We don't cross, we can't sell what we have left... We can't sell, our families

starve. Then when we do cross and sell our goods on this side, those bastards take more when we cross to get back home. Most of the people here are barely scraping out a living... Those that didn't sell or were robbed... Hell they're stuck over here unless they work the damned toll off at slave wages over in the town."

"This doesn't sound like the Bridge people. Maybe I'll go on up and have a little talk with them and see what's going on."

The man grabbed Hawk's arm *"I wouldn't if I were you stranger. They've shot people for less than that. Just pay them what they want....or take."*

Keli reached over and gently pulled the man's arm from Hawk's. *"I wouldn't worry too much about him,"* She rubbed her hand on Hawk's back *"He has this nasty little habit of taking care of trouble really fast, faster if they piss him off."*

"Me?" Hawk looked back to Keli, *"Me? I seem to recall someone breaking a drunk's arm who was grabbing that little barmaid back in...."*

"We don't talk about that my that my love.... Or I'll mention the time..."

"Ok...ok... heh, heh, let's just say WE don't like bullies..." Hawk grinned back over his shoulder as the cycle slowly started forward.

"Well good luck stranger, but remember I tried to warn ya!"

Keli smiled at the man, but before she could thank him for the warning Hawk was heading out onto the bridge, driving on the oncoming lane occasionally swerving to avoid the few carts that had crossed and were headed west.

They stopped at the bar that was lowered across the eastern side of the bridge, while four heavily armed men motioned for them to stop. Two of them raised their weapons and aimed them at Hawk.

"That's far enough stranger or you and the little lady wind up as fish food."

He nodded toward the water.

"Two people, one motorcycle. That's gonna be...Ahhh.... Two bits, or fifty coppers!"

The crowd that was standing around gasped.

"Fifty cents isn't that much" Keli whispered to Hawk.

"Honey, in these parts money is rare. It used to cost only a penny to cross or maybe an egg or two. A loaf of bread would get you a week of free passage....."

“SHUT UP ASSHOLE!” The guard pulled his pistol and put it to Hawk’s head. *“Pay up ...NOW!”* He shoved the pistol hard into Hawk’s head, then added, while his men laughed *“You lost your option to turn around, pay or die.....”*

He looked at Hawk’s swords *“Tell ya what asshole. Give me one of those swords and we’ll call it even.”*

Keli thought *“The asshole, wants his sword.... Uh-oh.”* She slowly slid off the bike and walked over toward the rest of the people.

“HEY BITCH....Where do ya think yer going’!” One of the other guards yelled at Keli as she stopped next to a couple of travelers.

She looked at the couple of bystanders and with a big grin said. *“I have a hunch we’ll all be crossing before long.”*

The guard kept the pistol held against Hawk’s head as he dismounted and Hawk slowly raised his hand to his shoulder, while the guard grasped the sword’s hilt and pulled it from its sheath.

He stood back and held the sword in the air for all to see and laughed.

The other guards laughed and applauded their squad leader, but the applause quickly stopped.

“THUNK!!”

The other guards dropped their vision and saw their leader’s hand laying there, his fingers still wrapped around the handle. They looked up as the leader turned. His hand had been cut off slightly above the wrist and was gushing blood. He jerked as several inches of Hawk’s other sword appeared through his chest.

The sword that had removed the leader’s wrist, hurled through the air and planted its self to the hilt into the chest of the guard aiming the rifle at Keli and the crowd behind her. He dropped to the ground with a quieter ***“Thud”***.

The third guard stared at the sword, with his squad leader’s hand, but the sword that was in his hand, was no longer there, he swung his rifle around, but never got to point it at Hawk.

Hawk had taken one step forward, did a spin and with a furious upward slash, removed both the arms that held the weapon, did a reverse spin and screamed as Hawk finished his worthless life with one clean thrust.

The fourth guard dropped his pistol that he had pulled from its holster and raised his arms. *"DON'T KILL ME!!"* He pleaded *"WEI Just follow orders from the counsel. They make us do this."*

Hawk walked toward the soldier *"Make you? Make you kill, threaten. Steal from these people?"*

"If we don't our families will suffer, starve..... or worse."

"Put your hands down son" Hawk's voice became calm *"Come on over to your guard house, we need to talk"* He looked to Keli *"Keep everyone here while I straighten this out."*

Hawk and the guard walked through the door.

Over the next few minutes the guard explained that a new council had been elected. They had let the bridge fall into disrepair for over a year and now that major work had to be done, it was no longer enough for them to just accept food for passage.

"The council has to have new steel brought in from the east because major beams have to be replaced and we can't afford it. Stricter rules were created, higher tolls, some guards like those you killed became mean, others are just plain crazy. Most of us don't agree with what's going on, but are too afraid.....Not for myself, but my wife and son. There are the other soldiers that enforce the councils rules... They're just killers in uniforms... You..."

Hawk smiled *"Relax kid. I think I'll head on over to the town and have a little chat with your leaders.... You just hold everyone here until I send word back."* The guard nodded and promised that he would.

As he stepped through the door and motioned at Keli.

"Come on Babe, we've got a bit of work to do."

Keli grinned as she mounted the bike *"Hahaha, I figured as much... Oooohhh, you're so bad when you're mad."*

"I'm not mad hon... We'll just go and have a little chat with the council and....."

"And if they don't see it our way?"

"Then we will be required to do a slight attitude adjustment...."

The cycle shot off across the bridge at a high rate of speed toward the other side. Hawk slowed as he reached the post at the other side and told the guards there he had important matters to discuss with the city council. They let him pass and told him where to find the council

members. While other guards kept him covered lest he head east instead of south toward the town.

The cycle drove through the small town until it came to the town square. Hawk and Keli dismounted as people looked on at these two strangely clad strangers. It had been years since any kind of uniform had been seen in these parts, other than their own city guard and the new enforcement troops and these two wore neither.

They walked up the stairs of the building in the center of the square. Hawk burst through the door.... Heads turned. He walked up to a guard sitting behind a desk.

"Where's the council room!"

The guard looked at Hawk, then back at his book.

Hawk reached across the desk and grabbed the guard by the collar and pulled him over the desk to where the upper half of his body was dangling in mid air while his legs lay on the desk top. The guard's hand slid down toward his holster, but stopped when Keli's dagger was at his throat.

"I believe my boyfriend asked you a question!"

The guard, swallowed hard as he nodded toward the stairs to the second floor.

"The council is up there?" Hawk said.

Again the guard nodded. Hawk let go of the guard and he fell forward over the desk to the floor and Keli and Hawk walked toward the stairs.

Keli looked over her shoulder at the guard and smiled *"Thanks for your help. Have a nice day!"*

The guard looked at those standing around, threw his badge on the desk and yelled *"I quit, no one's paying me enough to put up with his shit!"* as headed through the door.

At the top of the stairs, directly in front of them a man ran through the door slamming it shut and locking it with a loud click. Without slowing his pace Hawk walked up to the heavy wooden door that had '**Town Council**' painted on it and put his fist through it, reached in and unlocked the bolt.

The door flung open and there stood all five of the council huddled in one corner of the room.

"I know it's you Hawk.... It has to be you" Said the youngest member *"We had to change your rules in order to keep the bridge open."*

Keli looked puzzled *"Your rules?"*

"Ok...In a nut shell. About fifty or sixty years ago we completely repaired this bridge to what you see today, they had been keeping it open since shortly after Day Zero, but it was only one lane and that was in poor shape. We continued to have this town to watch over it. They were to charge each person or live stock, one penny to cross and 3 pennies for anything with wheels.... No more. If they couldn't pay, then one piece of food, loaf of bread, whatever. This way this town would have money and food to continue on and maintain this bridge for all to use. I'm guessing no one has checked on how things have been in quite a while."

The oldest member stepped forward *"I remember you Hawk, I was just a lad back then and I remember how happy my dad was to have a place to live, to work...To have steady income as you never charged us for all the materials. We were happy ...well... two years ago things changed."*

Another member came forward. *"Hawk, the town voted for a new guard commander. But little did we know Rote rigged the votes. He then announced that he was in charge. Rote had a group of guards loyal to him and no one dared to oppose him. He kept us here to keep up an appearance of some sort of government, but we have no power. He just tells everyone we make the rules."* His head lowered *"And we're just too afraid...our families... he.. he's mad. They started wearing different uniforms, threatening people. Those that opposed him disappeared..."*

Hawk smiled at the group *"Guess things will be changing soon."*

One of the council grabbed onto Hawk's arm *"Hawk we know of your reputation, but Commander Rote has many men and weapons, and they know how to use them. His men all came with him when he first moved here."*

"Guys, If Hawk said things will change, count on it." Keli smiled *"We heard about the problems a few days ago from a caravan we passed, not to mention the people stuck on the other side of the bridge."*

"But if you two knew, why come here, put your selves in jeopardy?"

"Sometimes it's wiser to appear to feign ignorance, then information seems to come easier." She grinned at Hawk *"Sooo baby who exactly did you radio last night.... I'll just be willing to bet this is why we came in this direction."*

Hawk winked and started to speak, but was interrupted by a loudspeaker from outside.

One of the council members peeked out the window. *"It's Rote! He's got all his 'Special guard' with him."*

Hawk strolled over to the large window, pushed it open and leaned out scanning the group below and yelled

“Impressive!..... Rote, isn't it?... ” Hawk glanced over those that had pulled up in front of the city hall and yelled down once again, “Two small armored tanks and....Wow! Even an old half track. Haven't seen one of those in decades. Looks to be about forty...maybe fifty men.... All loyal to you I'll bet.... and three Hummers too, looks like you have quite an army there Rote.”

Hawk scratched his head. *“Damn Rote, looks like you caught me with my pants down.”*

“No need for anyone to die Hawk.... You just come on down here... the council and your girl can go. Just you need to surrender! We know who you are and I issued a warrant for your arrest for inciting civil unrest!”

“WOW! Rote, you even know who I am.....Wh..”

“People recognized you as you drove through my town and told my men, well, with a little persuasion that is.”

Hawk turned and sat on the windows ledge kicked a leg up and leaned back against the windows jam. He paused for a few minutes.

“You going to surrender or not Hawk?” Boomed Rote's voice.

The council members looked uneasy *“He won't hesitate to put a cannon shell right through that window Miss.”*

Keli grinned a bit *“Shhhh.... Watch and learn... That's my Hawk and even though I don't know exactly what he has up his sleeve, I've learned.... Heh, heh, there is always something up it.”*

“HAWK....You have ten seconds to surrender...or die!”

Hawk shifted his body and swung his legs out of the window and dangled them like a lad at a fishing hole dangling his toes in the cool water.

“six.... ”

“five... ”

“four... ”

“Thr... ”

He raised turned his head at a slight angle to gaze down at Rote, then pointed directly at Rote.

“Tell you what Rote..... I'll give YOU just five seconds to surrender or die.”

Rotes men roared with laughter.

Hawk looked at Rotes men.

“Ok guys.... Let me show you a feat of magic... I’m going to kill your boss with this one little finger.”

Hawk looked back at Rote, who was roaring with laughter.

“OK your five seconds are up.”

Rote yelled for someone to shoot this idiot out of the window he was sitting in.

Hawk raised his index finger *“I warned you!”*

Hawk’s hand with the index finger pointing outward, lowered and pointed toward Rote. His men roared with laughter.

Rotes chest exploded and he fell to the ground along with a man standing next to him. The laughing stopped!

The rest of his men startled, started looking around pointing their guns in all directions.

Hawk yelled *“OK... Now that I have your attention.... I suggest all of you put your weapons down and hands up..... Or.... He moved the index finger he had pointed at Rote and pointed to the rise just beyond the small town about one hundred yards away.”*

On the rise, near where they were, sat six heavy tanks, eight armored Hummers sporting large mini guns. Over the rise and heading into the town were several hundred soldiers. From the blocks on either side of them soldiers and vehicles roared toward the group of guards.

The guards dropped their weapons and climbed out of the vehicles.... It was over.

Keli walked over to the window and looked out, leaned back in and smacked Hawk on the back of his head almost knocking him out the second story window.

“You could have let me know what was going on!”

“Owww?”

“Whap!” she cuffed him again.

“What the hell was that one for?”

“BECAUSE!”

Hawk just grinned *"Aww, honey, I didn't want to wake you last night. And by this morning remember I did mentioned I used the radio... the rest just slipped my mind."*

He got cuffed again.

"Owww!"

Hawk, slid back into the window and went out to meet with the military he had called in for support. Within an hour Hawk and Keli had watched the Army clean up the remainder of Rotes men and haul them off back east for trial. The town folk cheered as they were lead away.

Hawk turned to the councilmen *"This Army detachment will stay here from now on just to make sure no more guys like Rote try to take over. They will also set up an outpost on the other side of the bridge to protect that end. Eventually within a few months there's going to be a new military fort built about ten miles north of here... Your town will never have to worry about more Rotes taking over again and your townsfolk can concentrate on the bridges upkeep."*

He smiled at those in the room and said *"There are all kinds of wars and battles. But this is the kind I prefer Short, little violence and all wrapped up in a few hours."*

No one could fault his logic. This had been a good day... And a good night was to ensue! One by one, they all came over to Hawk and shook his hand, then Keli's. Each giving his thanks, then walking away to set things back in order. But there were a few more things these two had in mind as they climbed back on the cycle. Hawk shouted at those nearby...

"We'll be back in time for the merriment, but right now we have some business to attend to."

Keli and Hawk rode back to the western side of the bridge and dismounted. He handed Keli the bullhorn he plucked from the guard shack as he passed and nodded toward the guard truck.

"You do the honors baby."

She smiled and with one leap was on the hood of the truck, she raised the bullhorn to her lips.

"It's over!! There is a new government in the town and the U.S. Army is there to protect it."

A cheer arose from the crowd.

"Things....tolls...will be back to where they should be!"

A louder cheer and applause arose from the gathering crowd.

"And for today only... There will be free passage for all that wish to cross!!!"

The crowd yelled and applauded. There were hugs all around. Some danced and sang. While others cried with joy. They once again could make a living for themselves and their families.... there would be a lot of merriment later this eve.

Keli jumped down from the hood and walked through the throng of revelers. They parted to make way for her, some kissing her, others patting her on the back. One woman grabbed her hand and kissed it.

Hawk could see tears welling up in her eyes. She walked back to Hawk, threw her arms around his neck. *"So this is what it's like to be a hero..... You must be so proud."*

He gently kissed her, but she could not see the look on his face as he held her, then added,

"If only it were like this....."

Keli knew he was once again thinking of the killing, the death that is the other side of the coin. She kissed him lovingly.

"My beloved Hawk, if only you would..... could allow yourself to enjoy this part of life. If only you cou...."

He kissed her again *"I enjoy only one thing in this world Keli..... my love for you"*

This time Keli kissed Hawk..... Long and hard.

They paid no attention to the crowd as the guard Hawk had allowed to live started motioning the travelers to proceed across the bridge. Although Hawk and Keli were still locked in their embrace, neither saw the travelers, one by one as they passed. Men with hats would tip them or those without would nod in thanks. Some women would pause long enough to give a quick curtsy or cross themselves as if thanking God for the blessing that had witnessed this day. Hawk and his love never noticed. Once again they had faced adversity and once again triumphed. Another page had been added to the legend.

Hawk holding onto Keli's hand started heading back to the cycle and slowed as a strange looked passed over his face....

"Free passage for the day hon? Geezzz, they're backed up for miles, the town is going to lose a lot of revenue."

Keli snuggled up to Hawk's arm and leaned her head on his shoulder... *"Oh baby, you know you can afford it cover the cost."*

Hawk just grinned at his lovely companion. Once again she was helping strangers and once again... He didn't mind.

Later that evening a town wide party roared to life. Singing, bands, games, dancing and food, all kinds of food... and drink abounded for all. Keli and Hawk would spend as much time being hugged by strangers as they did eating. It was a truly fine evening. But as all things must end, eventually they became aware of time and once more had to move on. They had expected no celebrations, no thanks. Hawk was just doing what he did so well and now Keli was doing the same. They had each other and that was thanks enough. Not that they didn't enjoy the celebration, but the road was long and Hawk had told Keli business had to be taken care of back east.

What business she didn't know, nor did she care. Hawk would handle it and she would be by his side should he need her. They got on the cycle like they had done so many times before and without anyone noticing headed off into the now fading light.

Evening was falling and they would have to camp soon, so she just snuggled into Hawk's back, closed her eyes and wondered what else might befall them. She was really enjoying her time with Hawk. So many adventures, thrills, the things he showed her, the wonderment of things to come.

"I'm having the time of my life." She thought as a big grin spread across her face.

Then there were the nights. The nights that they would not have to take turns standing guard once they crossed the Mississippi. The thought of nights she could sleep wrapped within his arms. A warm feeling came over her as she squeezed him...

"UHH!"

Perhaps a bit too hard. Keli smiled and kissed the back of his neck.

"Sorry baby." She kissed his neck... *"Didn't mean to squeeze you that hard"* She heard him chuckle. She kissed the other side of his neck. *"It's getting dark my love... Perhaps we should stop for the night?"*

"That's ok, babe, we can go for another hour or so"

She leaned forward into him, pressing her breasts into his back. She leaned her head forward and kissed his ear, then nibbled on his lobe. He could feel her warm breath in his ear...

"Well maybe fifteen or twenty minutes or so."

She slid her hand down off his chest, down onto his stomach, lower and lower downward her hand crept, her tongue slid gently into his ear, he could feel the heat in her breath.

The bike turned sharply off the main road and headed down a narrow rarely traveled path into the woods along the side of a small creek.

Keli had decided it was time to stop for the night.....

Hawk decided she was right!

Chapter 25.

The next morning turned to noon before either decided to arise. The night before had been a long and passionate one under the stars. These two were in no hurry to reach their destination and this day was a glorious day with the warm sun beating down, the light breezes and the birds, birds that sang just for Keli as she was hoping it would be one more day. Another day she'd have Hawk all to herself, another day in the part of the country where they had little need for weapons. Where the constant danger was almost non-existent. Keli was for the first time in decades, someone completely different. She had found the woman that had laid dormant deep within her. She learned her past life had not destroyed the sexual beast that at times raged up in side of her. She was wanton when it came to Hawk and she loved it.

"So does Hawk" She giggled to herself as she went about preparing a late breakfast. There was also a little girl she discovered that was curious about everything new. Then there was this intelligent female with need to know all about Hawk's world and it too raged within. She had become a whole new person and Keli liked this person she had become. She glanced over to the stream where Hawk had found a deep hole to bathe in.

Keli walked over to the pool of water where Hawk was splashing around in. She watched him as he dipped beneath the water and popped back up shaking his head. She smiled and unzipped her top and the pants followed close behind. She stepped into the cool water behind Hawk and sat behind him putting one leg to each side of his. Reaching around his chest, she hugged him.

Hawk had heard her walk up to the stream so she didn't startle him, heard her enter the water, but now he felt the warmth of her against his back, her nipples crushed against him, her hot breath upon his neck, her hands sliding downward, her lips pressed against his ear.

"Mind if I join you my love?" Her hand slid lower until it found what it had been seeking. *"Hmmmmmm"* she cooed in his ear, then chuckled. *"Seems the water is a bit cold and has taken its toll.... Awww the poor little guy..."*

After only a few seconds she added *"Ohhh, I guess the water wasn't that cold after all"*

Hawk twisted around, water splashing everywhere. He slid one hand under her legs and Keli squealed. His other hand slid to her back and he wrenched her from the water with a burst of crystal droplets. He raised her naked body upward and she threw her arms around his muscular neck. She pressed her lips against his as he carried her to the tall grass on the bank. He laid her gently on the grass and gazed into her eyes.

"We don't have time for this! You know we should have been on the road an hour ago"

Keli just wrinkled up her nose and cooed *"Since when has that ever stopped us?"*

He kissed her and lowered himself upon her warmth. She parted her legs briefly, then wrapped them tightly about him.

Once again they would be getting a late start. So late in fact, that Hawk knew there would be another night under the stars. But then he really didn't care. This day would be just for them, their departing could wait. This beautiful day would be spent talking, loving and resting. Although Keli did a lot of asking and Hawk answering, the day would not be wasted. She wanted to know so much and he had not answered until now. Hawk had opened his past to her and she would spend the day crying, laughing and hanging onto his every word. Hawk on the other hand was stunned that this lovely creature before him had delved so deeply into his soul that he actually wanted her to know everything... The good and the bad.

And the day passed into darkness and once again they slept wrapped in each other's arms. Yet when dawn came, it became another late start, but eventually they packed up the cycle and hit the road.

The destination he was headed for was not that far from the river, but it was quite a ways north of the bridge. They traveled all of the daylight hours, stopping only when needed. Keli loved the scenery as this side of the river was green, had trees and flowers scattered all throughout the landscape. It was an entire different world, than she was used to. Only the foggiest memories of her home north of the wastelands were ever this beautiful. Then her memories of her home flooded back into her mind, her mother, her half sister, the thought she never got to meet her stepfather. Just as sadness would creep into her thoughts, she would feel Hawk's chest as he took a deep breath. She would give Hawk a big squeeze, which always brought a reply something like, *"What was that for?"* or *"What did I do to deserve that?"*

"Because I've never been so happy in all of my life my love." Would always be her response. She was in love with everything... And not afraid to admit it. Nor did she push aside that she could feel changes in everything about her. And another day passed....

An hour or so after dark, Hawk again pulled well off the road into a small wooded area and camp was made. Dinner gulped down and into the sleeping pads they crawled. But Keli knew there would be no love making this eve. Hawk had been quite most of the day, so she let him sleep. And Hawk was exhausted! He had been driving for days, which never bothered him, but as he neared their destination, memories, responsibilities started eating at his mind. Sleep over came him quickly and Keli just snuggled up against his back, wrapping him in her arms, then she too fell into a deep sleep.

Keli awoke with a start! There was something... a noise! She sat up and strained to see in the darkness. She reached over to awaken Hawk, but he was gone!

Her mind screamed for her to call out to him, but the years of training knew better. She slid out from the sleeping pad and without putting on her boots, slowly made her way in the direction of the sounds. She had snatched her dagger from her boot before leaving camp and now held it in readiness.

The sound had come from just beyond the clump of brush in front of her. She scanned the sky.

"The moon is about to come out from behind the clouds." She thought. She readied herself to strike. She arose from her crouch as the moon flooded the glade with its silvery glow.

There in the middle of the glade sat Hawk, arms resting upon his legs, shoulders slumped his head lowered looking at the ground.

Keli slowly approached him from the side, but Hawk never noticed her. As she neared, she could see sweat beaded upon his brow glistening in the moonlight.... He was trembling!!

She knew Hawk's night terrors had returned. Some memories from his past, something had caused them to rend his mind as they had done several time since she had known him. Tears welled within her eyes as she sat beside the man she loved. Keli gently placed her arm around him and laid her head upon his shoulder. Fighting back tears at the pain this man was radiating, she whispered....

"Baby, what's the matter... 'Are you alright?'"

Silence.

"Hawk, baby.... Talk to me.... Please?"

"Sorry hon, I had a dream.... A nightmare... I get them now and then.... This one was a bad one Keli, but it'll pass.. Go back to....."

"OH No I'm not going anywhere dammit! Not until you tell me all about it. You talk about it, it will leave you! Wasn't that what you told me?"

Hawk tried to shake her arm loose from his shoulder, but Keli held on tight. He tossed one of his legs over the log slid off unto the ground looking like a defeated man. Keli too kicked her leg over the log and slid off with him, still holding him, pulled his head over to her shoulder.

"Come on baby, I'm your woman now, we do things together.... Remember? This means we share the bad as well my love."

She could hear him give a huge sigh. Whether it was relief or him just giving into her demands, she didn't know, but he sighed once again and started speaking in almost a whisper.

"Keli... Now and then I have dreams... no nightmares of the past. Sometimes it is just old things back before the apocalypse, you know things the way they were and I see them all crumble. Other times it might be the days of trying to rebuild some semblance of civilization. Tonight it was back during the first few days after 'Day zero'... What we called the day the radiation hit the Earth."

Keli could feel Hawk shaking fairly hard. *"This had to be a time of terror for him and for the other survivors."* She thought. Little could she have guessed the horrors he had seen.

"Baby, I... we...I couldn't save everyone. The mutants outnumbered us ten or twenty to one. We found a fairly safe place to start.... A local armory. I figured any national guardsmen that survived would go there. There'd be weapons and plenty of ammo... And I was right on all accounts."

His shaking stopped.

"I and a few others I found along the way got there and found over thirty soldiers along with their families... or what was left of them. It was complete chaos! Their leader, a Colonel, had no idea how to handle the events that he... we had been thrown into and everyone was on the verge of panic."

Hawk paused and looked up at his beautiful Keli now bathed in a silvery glow. He patted her arm and smiled warmly, his voice now much calmer.

"Well I'd always been organized my whole life and after suggesting several things... Ahh, well make that a lot of things...., everyone decided they were going to follow me and made me their leader. At first the Colonel hesitated, but I think he followed along because all his men did."

"Baby that's nothing to have nightmares about..."

"Kel... Honey... The first week or so we had made a compound that was defensible, gathered food from markets, supplies and never lost one person.... Not one. We had short wave radios broadcasting our location... Hell we were in a lot better shape than I had hoped for."

His voice got quiet again.

"One day I took a small party of my best shots and headed to a nearby town to bring a small group of survivors back to our compound. We fought our way there and it took hours.... I lost half of my people once we had to get out of the vehicles and go on foot. We got to an expressway overpass and looked to the building the survivors were in. The fences had been torn down, the barricades had been over run and upwards of four thousand mutants were in the process of killing the survivors..... Keli... I had six men left!"

She felt tears once again rolling down her cheek, before she knew what Hawk was about to say.

“Kel... We sat there and watched them die... We could hear their screams.... One girl about eleven or twelve jumped from the roof and started running toward the field. There were two dozen mutes after her. As she came around the last building, she ran into a dead end that was all fenced in except a hole at the other end..... Baby... there were over fifty mutes coming through that spot..... I.... I... Raised... my.... Rifle.....” He said no more, nor did he have to.

She heard Hawk choke back a sob, his whole body spasmed and that was the excuse she needed for her to let flow the torrent of tears she'd been holding back. She would remember this night.... Not of the horror of Hawk's story, nor the horror of it. But of the pain that this man felt. She knew this was but one incident, one small occurrence in his life. She now understood why he was like he was.... Is! There was pain and she knew in her heart that she, in time, she would ease it. Keli led Hawk back to their camp and cradled within her arms he slept. As sleep overtook her, she felt one last tear run down her cheek. She gently kissed his head.

“Sleep well my love.”

Hawk had been silent most of the morning, unusually so, but Keli never pressed him. Nothing was said about the night before. Breakfast was finished, the cycle packed and off the two rode toward whatever Hawk was headed to.

Keli as usual just laid her head upon Hawk's back and watched the vast expanses of green and flowers pass by. These roads since the river were all paved and smooth. Now and then she would marvel at how nice the sun felt when out of the wastelands. The glow of morning turned to slightly afternoon as the road ahead seemed to open, Hawk slowed the cycle. He then pulled over to the side of the road.

“Hon, guess I'd better prepare you for what's ahead. You remember when I told you the eastern part of the country has been pretty much reconstructed?”

Keli nodded.

“Well it's going to be a lot more than you can image. You'll see in a few minutes, but just to give you a heads up.... The east rebuilt, though the more advanced technology like aircraft, advanced electronics and stuff were either lost or too many people in certain fields died. Oh we're getting that knowledge back, but it'll be decades before we rediscover everything.”

He paused for her to assimilate what he was telling her.

“ Things like construction, farming and the like excelled. Just a few miles over that rise is Gateway City. It was build because it’s half way between the Gulf of Mexico and the Canadian border. Not to mention it’s only forty miles from the Mississippi.”

He paused, then, *“ Now with the southern bridge back under the countries control, all of the eastern part of the country is one hundred percent united.”*

“That’s good baby, but why....”

“Kel... honey, you’re about to enter real civilization and it may be a little intimidating to you. Gateway is three times the size of Oil City.”

“Three times?....”

She paused *“Oh....Ohhh!* Then added after a second, *“Baby as long as I have you nothing frightens me anymore. Let’s go, you have my curiosity up now”*

Hawk gave her a huge smile and cranked the throttle on the bike and up the hill they went. As they rode over the crest, Keli gasped. There before her was a huge city with skyscrapers, much taller than Oil City, roads filled with vehicles and people. As they got closer and entered the suburbs there were a lot of people. They drove past many military convoys.

“Baby, all these soldiers....Why....why haven’t they gone past the river?”

He pulled the cycle over to the side and turned to her.

“They’ve been waiting, hon. Fuel is scarce due to the new laws that were passed limiting fuel burning engines that applies to most vehicles. There are only very few oil refineries in the east and even fewer oil wells. Proff drives are plentiful, but... uhh, you remember the fuel rods we found back in Dead City? Well it’s going to take years before we get enough of that to power any large amount of vehicles. Things like tanks need bigger drives and Proff drives never work if you make them bigger. Limited fuel, haven’t figured out a way to make the drives work when their size is increased... We.. the east can only protect what we have.”

His voice again became sad.

“So much knowledge was lost Kel. Entire factories have to be build, not just to make something like those tanks, but factories to make parts to build those tanks, foundries to make the steel for the parts, mines to get the metal for the foundries.... And honey, all that is just to build a tank. Imagine all the things you’ve heard we had in the east.... Like trucks, airplanes, things to build with....”

He sighed!

"It's going to be decades longer before there is enough equipment to try to free the wastelands and the areas north... Where you originally came from. You know there are at least seven large armies out there... We can prevent them from crossing the Mississippi, but manning the many military outposts that boarder the old Miss, well there just isn't enough resources left to invade the wastelands."

Hawk stopped and shook his head.

"Plus the only intelligence the military has is from hunters or scouts, like us. Those that have military training.... Experience in fighting raiders and raider armies are needed elsewhere."

He could see she wanted more answers, reluctantly he added.

"Last I heard baby, was all efforts were concentrated toward the state they once called California and to the north of the west coast. All the old aircraft factories were located there and everyone is hoping we can get more information on that kind of technology. Trouble is....the whole western seaboard to the Rockies has been reported to have over thirty million mutes or more roaming there, so clearing that side of the country is going slow. Kel, there is one of our armies over there trying to clear out the mutes, but have been doing it for about eight years and they need reinforcements bad....really bad. There are only twenty or so survivor compounds which are basically large fortified cities like Wall city or at least bigger versions, about a half million people total, but maybe some information has been handed down through the generations to those survivors that can help mankind gain more knowledge... Especially about airplanes. Not to mention... A half million lives to save.... Oh some information trickles out. Last year some data on one type of aircraft was found, plans were made and they're going to build one version of it to see if they can make it work!"

Hawk laughed and added, *"Not to mention a special kind of fuel has to be made for it with limited abilities... Don't look for any planes to be roaring overhead any time soon."*

Keli nodded. She knew he was right. No one knew how many people lived in the wastelands, but she could dream that someday those people would be reunited with the east.

The military convoy passed.

"Right now they're just fortifying the east side of the Mississippi and building a few bases on the west side, so no one will have to worry about mutes or raiders and anyone reaching this side of the river can count on being completely safe. But before the wastelands are freed, we have to get more troops and supplies to the army in the far west... Eight years Kel, eight years and only one of those cities I told you about has been reached. Too many have died, it's taken too long... and the east has lost over twenty one thousand soldiers.... What's left of humanity cannot afford to lose live like that."

He ended his ponderings abruptly as the last truck rumbled by, but did add one more pondering.... *"They're headed south, then eventually when there's enough men and supplies they'll ship out to California.... There just aren't enough supplies yet.... They wait here while soldiers die on the west coast...all because of lack of supplies!"*

Keli heard the sorrow in his voice and said nothing more, she knew he probably longed to go west with them, but sincerely hoped he wouldn't. Deep inside she felt he had done enough and deserved a few years of rest and hopefully fun.... Hopefully!

Hawk watched as the convoy shrunk into the distance, knowing some were on the way to fortify the bridge they had left a few days ago and that area of the country would now be secure forever. While the rest headed south to the port city of Oceana and then someday.... To the west coast! That day would come sooner or later, but this mission he would miss.

He patted Keli's hand as he headed once again out onto the road, cranked the throttle and off toward Gateway City they rode.

It was a gorgeous day, the sun high in the sky, the late summer breezes were warm. This was going to be a momentous day for Keli and he could hardly wait to see her reaction.... He had so much to show her, yet what she was about to experience might be overwhelming.

Hawk turned down a large multilane highway, upward toward a rise and beyond a city that would astound his love and he grinned from ear to ear anticipating her reaction.

This was not just a good day... it was going to be a great one!

Chapter 26.

The tallest building Keli ever saw was one thirty five story building in Oil City and now there were blocks of them. Some reaching forty or more. And stores! Stores of all kinds.

"Penny and Sara would love it here." She mused as she twisted her small frame one way then another, straining to take in everything. So many cars, trucks of all sizes, people scurrying around, it was almost too much for her to take in at one time.... But Keli was going to try!

The streets were in top condition. But there were only limited amounts of vehicles, even though it looked like a lot to Keli. Most had a faint whine as they passed, while now and then one would pass that sounded like the old gasoline engines that she was familiar with. Her truck was one of the few Proff drives in Wall City. Out in the wastelands Proff drives were few and as hard to come by as gasoline was, and it was those engines were more prominent.

Her eyes darted from side to side just as they had when Hawk had taken her to Oil City, but there was so much more to see here.....

Keli grasped Hawk even harder. *"Baby all this makes me feel so.... So... small!"*

She felt Hawk give her hand a gentle knowing squeeze and replied,

"It does, doesn't it."

They turned into a large half circle driveway and came to a stop in the middle of it. A man in uniform came out to greet them as they dismounted. He started unhooking their bags from the bike.

Keli nudged Hawk with her elbow and whispered...

"If he's trying to steal our bags, he isn't very good at it."

Hawk smiled and gave Keli a little hug.

"That's his job hon, he'll take them to our room when we check in."

The guy walked up to the two of them and nodded his head at Keli, then looked at Hawk.

"The penthouse as usual sir.... and will the lady be staying with you or should I have her bags sent elsewhere?"

Keli looked at Hawk, eyes filled with uncertainty, *"I'm not staying with you... honey.. I.."*

The lady is my fiancée and she WILL be staying with me Wilson.”

He looked at Keli *“Keli this is Wilson, he’s the doorman here..... Wilson this is Keli and she has full access to everything.... Everything, she asks for.... Do I make myself clear?”*

“Very good sir!” Wilson walked away carrying several of the bags.

“This is a hotel, but also has suites that people can rent or buy and I... uh, several years ago... well...I kind of got one... I guess you could say.....”

“Like at Ben’s hotel?”

Hawk smiled, *“That’s right honey.”*

He threw his arm around her waist and they headed into the hotel. Past the front desk, through the wide lobby Keli’s jaw dropped.

“Is that real gold darling?”

“Sort of, it’s real gold paint and plating.”

The elevator doors opened and Wilson stood there holding the bags.

“He’s waiting for you to go in to the elevator first Hon.”

“Why?”

“Because around here ladies go through doors first.”

“Oh so they can take care of any danger and protect their men?”

“Ahhhh.... Not exactly babe, it’s more because men open doors for women and they go through, then the men follow.”

“OHhhh... I see so the men can look the ladies over! “

Wilson, who was somewhat embarrassed, looked over at Hawk who was laughing, started to snicker so hard he almost dropped the bags.

“Tell ya what baby, just get into the elevator and I’ll explain it all to you in a bit.”

Keli shrugged her shoulders and stepped into the elevator car followed by Hawk. Wilson brought up the rear and turned the key, the door closed.

Keli leaned over and whispered into Hawk’s ear *“Did he check out your butt too?”*

Hawk lost it! He sank to the floor laughing. Keli puzzled looked over to Wilson but he too was leaning against the wall laughing uncontrollably.

"This is going to take some time to get the hang of" She puzzled *"You really have weird customs here."*

The elevator was an express and it lunged upward to the thirty third floor, spilling Keli to the floor with a girlish squeal. The two just sat there on the floor and laughed. Keli remembered how much she liked riding in these elevatory things.

She was so much a woman, yet so childlike. Hawk never ceased the awe at the way this lovely creature experienced life. She was not afraid of this new world he was introducing her to, nor did she attempt to hide her feelings about it.... Or of him.

There would be many new things for her to learn and she couldn't wait. But most of all she remembered the catalogs she had read until the pages had started to wear out. She wanted to look like those women. Keli had no idea that her beauty put them all to shame.

They entered the penthouse and Keli's jaw again dropped.

"OH MY GOD!!! Hawk...this....this makes Ben's place look like.... Like..."

"I know sweetie and it's all ours" Hawk added with a wide grin.

Wilson left knowing Hawk never carried money in the wastelands, but also knowing he would not go unrewarded at the end of the month. Hawk would explained the finer points of tipping which Keli had no problems with.

"Ok hon...Now..." Hawk scooped Keli into his arms, she giggled and tossed her arms around his neck. He turned down a short hall way and carried her into a huge bedroom slowly turning so she could absorb the grandeur.

Several times she almost fell out of his arms as she twisted so violently to see something that would catch her eye. He carried her over to the bed and tossed her on it and she caught herself squealing like a little girl once again. Keli leapt back to her feet and smiled at Hawk.

"Darling, not on that beautiful bed, not in these" She motioned to her dusty uniform.

Hawk told her to wait a bit and vanished into another room and closed the door. Keli sat in a chair, her eyes trying to take in everything she saw.

After a while, Hawk reentered the room.

"Close your eyes baby."

He grabbed her hand and lead her toward the bath room, *"OK open...."*

She squealed loudly, bouncing up and down she clasped her hands to her face. There before her was a huge tub, big enough for at least four people filled with water so warm she could feel the heat radiating from it. The beautifully tiled tub was build into the floor and only sat a few inches higher than the black tiled marbled floor and the wall behind was covered in gold veined mirrors. Her glee was evident.

She again squealed while peeling off her uniform, she was in the tub within a minute. Keli pulled her hair free from the ponytail band as her raven hair fell over her shoulders. Disappearing beneath the water for a few seconds, she popped back up.

“Oh baby!”

She didn’t have to say more, Hawk knew how happy things like this made her.

He reached down and turned a knob on the side of the tub. The water started bubbling around her, she gasped. He turned the knob more and the water bubbles increased. Keli put her hand on his and laughed gleefully....

“All the way baby.... Give it to me!”

He cranked the knob all the way and the water churned about her. Keli grinned ear to ear and sank to her chin into the hot water...

“Oh baby, I’m never coming out of here..... never!”

Hawk chuckled and walked into the other room.

From the bathroom he heard....

“You ARE going to join me aren’t you?”

“Yep, have to make a quick call... Be right there.”

He knew Keli was well aware of telephones although she had never seen one until Oil City. Now and then he’d hear her giggling or splashing and didn’t want to miss her fun, so when the call was done, off toward the bath he headed.

About half way to the door of the massive bedroom he heard Keli squeal,...laughter.... Then a yelp! Then more laughter....Then the dreaded...

*“OH-NO!.....**HAWK!**”*

He sprinted to the bathroom. He pushed the door open and was greeted by a wall of..... pink and blue bubbles that were chest high and covered the entire huge bathroom!

“KELI! ... BABY.... Where are you!...”

From the wall of bubbles came....

"Hawk I added some of this pink stuff... and some of the blue stuff and it bubbled so fast..... I can't see you... Hawk? ... Baby??"

"Aaaahhhh CRAP!" Then a resounding....

"SPLASH!"

Then next thing Keli knew Hawk had fallen into the floor level tub. His head popped up out of the water right between her knees. The splash had separated the bubbles in the tub, but it wasn't long before they started creeping back toward the two.

"Honey? How much of that stuff did you use?"

"Both bottles baby.... It was so pretty the pink and the blue was so great smelling... and well they both smelled so great, I couldn't decide."

She reached out and pulled him to her throwing her arms around his neck.

"Oh baby, I love you so very much! Thank you for everything." She hugged him again.

He arose, covered from head to toes in suds

"I think I need to get out of this uniform... I'm guessing it should be clean by now..."

Keli was laughing hysterical. He got out of the tub and headed toward the direction he thought the door was in. She could hear Hawk struggling to find his way through the bubbles.

"Arrrrhhh...."

"SPLASH!"

Keli saw a wall of water and bubbles headed in her direction followed by Hawk.

When Hawk's head once again appeared from the soapy mass, Keli gave him a wide grin,

"Didn't quite make the door I take it?"

"No baby I didn't.... Floors all wet for some reason.."

"Well if you didn't keep falling into the tub the floor wouldn't be wet."

They both broke into laughter. Hawk stripped off his uniform, tossing it to the far side of the room with several rather large squishes as each piece hit the wall.

Keli was laughing so hard she was gasping for air and tears rolled down her cheek...

"I... couldn't even see it hit the floor... the bubbles...." She gasped for air.

From the bubbles she heard Hawk laughingly reply

"Man the cleanup crew is gonna be mad in the morning."

They roared with laughter.

Keli was gasping with laughter but managed to add, *"Think...they'll.....throw...us out?... They... might.. decide ... to...to....."* She was laughing so hard she couldn't continue

From the bubbles Hawk roared with laughter

"They....can't..... I...ownthis... building."

Keli sat up, her laughter stopped as she swept away the bubbles so she could see Hawk.

"YOU WHAT!!!!!!?"

Hawk's head finally appeared through the wall of bubbles, then his hand. In his hand was another bottle of pink bubble bath, he dumped it into the water. Reaching over he turned the knob and started the bubbles again. He was roaring with laughter.....

"This...all this...is... mine.....OURS! The building...the suite, this bath.... These bubbles..... all ours!"

It hit Keli!

"Holy Shi....."

She looked at Hawk and splashed water in his direction....

"Well then quit wasting MY bubbles!"

They both almost drowned while laughing.

After a time they could laugh no more, their sides were wracked with the strain of excessive laughter. The bubbles had subsided and only soft soapy layer of them remained. Keli, who had left for a short time, pushed her way back through the wall of bubbles that had remained beyond the tub area, stood, splashing herself with water to clean the soap off.

"You made me laugh so hard...I almost... ahh.. almost.. Well I had to go find..."

"Here hon" Hawk turned another knob and water gently fell from the ceiling over the tub area.

As the tub over flowed the water ran into a channel that surrounded it. Keli just stared in wonder as the few remaining bubbles in the tub slowly started to vanish. She stepped back into the tub and stood under the warm water letting it run down her body. Turning slowly Hawk couldn't take his eyes off this beautiful creature that stood before him as the layers of bubbles vanished revealing her shapely curves. He still found amazement in the fact that this woman was so beautiful and warm and she had chosen him above all others.

Hawk rose to help her so she wouldn't fall, they both slipped but caught onto one another.

Keli looked at Hawk the smile gone from her face, then a strange look came over her.

"Ohhh, we're so...so"

"Slippery?"

A sexy grin pursed upon her lips

"Yes.... Slippery..."

She pressed herself against him, she grabbed his hand slid it over her back, downward, lower and lower. She purred into his ear *"See... how slippery...."*

"Slippery is good!" He grinned back at her.

Once again they were in the water, she reached over and turned off the shower, and she purred, *"Slippery is more than nice...."*

But this time there was no laughter.

Slippery was nice.... and it appeared things were going to be even nicer soon!

The late afternoon came and Hawk had another surprise for his beloved. There was a knock on the door and in came two ladies pulling a cart full of dresses.

"Honey, I have to run out for a bit, but I'm going to take you to dinner, so pick out something or a few something's. These ladies will help you out and answer any questions. I'll see you when I get back." He kissed Keli and vanished out the door.

Keli looked at the two women and was obviously embarrassed as to what she was expected to do.

The oldest woman spoke first.

"Hi Keli, my name is Trish" She spoke in a calming tone and Keli started to feel at ease.

"Relax honey, I know what you're going through. My husband and I came here eleven years ago from a place called Hillside. It was a small town out northwest of here. I never saw a building taller than two stories until I got here." She smiled at Keli *"I've learned, you will too honey.... I can tell you're smart, you'll learn."*

The youngest of the two, smiled and extended her hand.

"I'm Beth."

Keli grinned *"I can tell we're going to be friends."*

Trish chuckled and added *"Oh no honey, you're rich now, you can't associate with the hired help."*

"If I'm so damned rich..." Keli frowned, putting her hands on her hips and defiantly added *"Then I can be friends with whomever I wish!"*

All three smiled. Keli was catching on real fast and her logic was faultless!

Beth added, *"Well then friend... Let's get you into something that will blow your man away and leave him drooling!"*

Trish finished *"We'll have him staring at you all night."*

Keli looked at Beth and grinned *"Oh I know we're going to be friends.... I like the way you two think."*

The trio laughed, this was going to be a wonderful afternoon. Keli had new friends, friends that were female. She never had a lot of girlfriends and none that could tell her anything she didn't already know. She had figured out this love thing pretty much on her own and did extremely well, but from what she had experienced so far this civilization thing was going take some getting used to.

Keli tried on various outfits and asked three times as many questions. How should she act in public, what were the rules of this civilization thing. She had asked, they responded and she learned. The two women were amazed at the ability to learn that this lovely creature displayed. In only a few hours she was walking, talking and acting like she had been born and raised in a large city. However Keli wasn't surprised on how fast she learned new things... In the wastelands she had learned to adapt quickly to survive.... This civilization thing was no different!

Trish turned as they were leaving and smiled at Keli.

"You know Keli, you have so much going for you, I can't see you having any problems at all. But remember one little trick I always use if I make a mistake.... Just smile sweetly at him, flutter your eye lashes and say 'Oops, did I do something wrong.' Men usually will just smile back and tell you, It's ok.... Don't worry my dear..... you'll do great!"

The two women left Keli to be alone with her thoughts. Keli knew these two women were going to be her friends. She closed the door and turned her attention to the things she had bought.

There on the bed lay dresses, skirts, blouses, and other female apparel. She had already shown she knew how to put on makeup the night of the party back in Wall city. But tonight she would show him the total package of glamour. She walked by a full length mirror in the bedroom and paused as she looked at her underwear clad body. She had never worn bras before, but her new friends had told her the finer points of their uses. As she peered into the mirror she ran her hands down the length of her well formed body and smiled and said confidently....

"Baby!.... You are going to be drooling all night!"

She gave herself a sly little wink and proceeded to try on everything she had bought.

Chapter 27.

Later that evening, when Hawk returned, he took Keli to dinner at one of the most exclusive restaurants in town. As they entered all eyes turned to the pair. Hawk's reputation was more than a legend in Gateway and rumor had spread like wildfire about Hawk having found a girlfriend. The patrons were rewarded by an astounding sight.

There stood the legendary Hawk and his companion. What no one had expected was how stunning she was. As they walked through the room toward their table no one took their eyes off the couple. Word had gotten out that Hawk's lady was a city guard, but the only thing people saw was a woman with such poise and grace as she moved, one would have guess she was a model. Keli had truly adapted and by looking into his face she could see how proud he was of her.

Hawk nodded at a few of the patrons. When they were seated things returned to normal and the regular dinner noise once again filled the dining room.

Keli who was now getting used to being impressed by the grandeur of Hawks 'other' world, had in truth been slightly unsettled by this experience.

"Darling..." She leaned across the table and spoke softly.

"I love you deeply, but next time warn me."

She paused, then smiled *"That was worse than walking through a hoard of mutants."*

"You could be right honey... there were a few of those guys that would have been more than happy to latch onto you."

"Why baby... you sound jealous!"

Hawk smiled *"Well maybe a bit, but I know you're a one man woman...."*

"Baby you got that right!!! And don't you ever forget it!!!" She gave her love a reassuring wink.

Over the course of the evening the two talked, drank and had a wonderful time.

Keli surprised Hawk with the grace she wielded at the table. Her new found friends had coached her well and she learned with ravenous hunger for the knowledge to live within strange new world. She was a survivor and learning how to survive in this civilized world was a snap compared to ... out there!

The evening ended with a short walk back to Hawks hotel. Arm in arm they strolled laughing, stopping occasionally for a quick kiss or to peruse the offerings in a shops window.

Hawk dreaded this moment. A moment he had put off all night.

"Hon. " He stopped and turned to Keli.

"Baby... dammit, There's no easy way to say this. I have to go back east for about a week, maybe two and as much as I hate to leave you here It can't be helped." He lowered his eyes *"I'm sorry honey... I really am."*

Keli responded in such a sweet voice Hawk really felt bad..

"That's ok darling. I told you I met a couple of new friends. This will give me a chance to learn more about things."

Her voice became perkier *"Plus I can shop and explore this city a bit more..."* She thoughtfully added *"Don't worry about me my love, I'll be fine."*

She stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. Even in her five inch heels, she had to stand on her toes to be face to face with him. With her arms around his neck and looking deeply into his eyes, Keli purred *"I'm guessing you're leaving in the morning?"*

Hawk nodded sadly.

"Well then, we'd better get back to the hotel and make the most of this evening shouldn't we??"

This time her kiss was longer and deeper and left him with no question of what she meant. The night went all too fast!

The morning came all too fast as well and Keli packed a bag for Hawk. They sat and were finishing breakfast on the patio, when there was a knock on the door.

Keli bounded up from the table and went to the door. She opened it and saw two officers standing there.

"I'm General Walters, Miss White... This is General Samuels"

"Miss White? You know me... my name?"

The two men smiled *"Everyone knows of you Miss White."*

Keli stepped aside and motioned for the two men to come in. *"Hawk's on the patio finishing breakfast. Would either of you like some coffee?"*

“WALT! SAM!” Hawk entered the living room.

The three men shook hands and patted each other on the shoulders. Keli could see they were old friends.

“No Ma’am, thanks we have to get going, the train leaves in about twenty minutes”

“Train? I’ve never seen one....”

She added *“I’ve seen old rusted tracks and Pops told me about them.”*

Keli looked at Hawk *“You know baby, when you get back, you’re going to have to take me on one.”*

“Ok hon, it’s a promise!”

He kissed her on the cheek *“You and your friends have fun and I’ll see you in a week or so.”* Then added *“If the lines are up, maybe I’ll be able to call you on the phone.”*

He smiled at the two generals *“You’d think after one hundred years we’d at least have good phone service.”*

Walt laughed *“Might have if mankind hadn’t spent so much time doing things like trying to survive, killing off mutants and raiders and the like.”*

Sam added *“Then there was rebuilding cities, roads, rail lines, farming...”*

“You’re just too impatient Hawk” Walt interjected. *“Just too damned impatient to get things back to the way you knew them.”*

Keli was amazed and thought *“These two know about Hawks age and the world he once knew?”*

She was stunned, but then again it was Hawk and she had learned that when it came to him, surprises were not uncommon. She smiled and kissed him.

“Have a good trip my love.”

The three left and Keli slowly closed the door after watching the elevator doors close. She turned and leaned against the door, a sad look fell upon her. She was alone and already missed him. Alone and for the first time since they met, she didn’t know what she would do with herself.

Her thoughts wandered for several minutes as she leaned back, how wonderful things are.

There was a banging on the door. Keli jumped to the side with such force, she knocked over the small table next to the door sending a lamp crashing to the floor.

She spun and opened the door.

"Keli you all right?"

"We heard a crash."

There stood Trish and Beth looking a bit frightened.

Keli chuckled *"Everything is fine girls. Ahh... It seems my training, my life out there in the wastelands hasn't left me completely."* She pointed at the overturned table and lamp.

Beth grinned *"They wouldn't have stood a chance."*

Trish added *"We decided to take the day off and left our boutique in the capable hands of our staff"*

She continued *"Hawk called me this morning and asked if we'd show you around later... We decided now would be a good time."*

Trish giggled and pointed at the broken lamp and table

"As long as you don't get startled again while we're standing next to you."

Again laughter.

"Yep" Keli thought *"We're all going to be good friends."*

They knew from where she had come and didn't fear her for it and would joke about it in ways that were not mean spirited.

"I really don't know what to wear girls." Keli looked confused *"You two look like you're going out to... to... I don't know what. Dressed like... That!."*

"Beth isn't married, doesn't have a boyfriend honey. That's why she's wearing that tight little mini dress and me? Heh, well... I figure if we can get the guys looking in our direction, then maybe Beth will snag one."

Then Beth added with a sly grin *"Besides honey, I love the way we can get the men drooling."* They laughed loudly as Trish handed Keli a box.

"A little present from us to you. You should look cute in this, now run into the bedroom and change. We have a big day of shopping to do!"

Keli ran into the bedroom and the girls heard her squeal. A short time later, the door flew open and there stood Keli in a hot pink mini dress that was so tight it looked like it had been painted on.

"It's gorgeous guys, but it showed my bra, and now since I took it off, everyone can see the outline of my nipples." Her face reddened *"I couldn't wear this out...there... in.."*

"It's fine honey.... You'll knock 'em dead." Added Beth.

"Besides neither of us are wearing bras, Keli."

Beth added *"Wow! With a body like that..."* Then grinned *"...good thing you have a fella, I wouldn't stand a chance finding a guy!"*

They all giggled.

Keli looked down at her lower half *"But everyone can see the outline of my panties."*

"Oops" Trish grinned toward Beth and winked *"We'll stop by the boutique. It's about time we introduced you to the thong.... Hawk will love them!"*

Keli knew about thongs and wasn't sure if she would like them, but if it might please Hawk, then she decided she would give it... Them, a try. She knew Hawk really didn't care what she wore, he loved her in anything.... Or with nothing....

Shutting the door, off they went towards the elevator. With a quick stop by the girls' boutique, the trio were off for a day of fun. Fun, enjoyment, friends, shopping, no weapons, no cares. She could relax and enjoy herself. Keli never had experienced anything like this. It was as if she had been reborn into this new wonderful life and she reveled in it.

This was her world now and she knew there were going to be times that she would miss her old life, the excitement, the danger and home. She would miss Pops, Gris and the gang. But she had Hawk and now friends.

With a little smirk Keli thought *"Somehow I think I'll survive."*

She threw an arm through each of her friends arms and the trio headed out the door and onto the street.

This city would never be the same and these times were going to be the best she had ever experienced. The city might never be the same, but with these three beauties, neither would the guys of Gateway. They would soon find out that there would be a price to pay for touching instead of looking.... Keli never carried a weapon in the city, but then she'd never needed one to handle any man that touched her....

Chapter 28.

During her weeks in Gateway she met many of Hawk's friends, but Keli's favorite was Walt. General Walters had served with Hawk for years and many times, while Hawk was away, she would head on over to his office and he'd tell her stories about her new love's past.

General Walters was the commander of the forces along the Mississippi and charged with protecting the east from incursions by raiders. He was also one of the highest ranking officers in the new United States military, but he always took the time to regale Keli with stories of their adventures.

One day while Hawk had gone back east on business, Keli was invited over to spend some time chatting with Walt. He never discussed Hawk's current business or the trips he took, but was more than happy to talk about the old days. She sat down and Walt offered her some coffee.

"Were you ever married Walt?"

"Once long ago my dear.... She passed away about fifteen years ago from pneumonia."

"I'm so sorry Walt, I didn't...."

"That's ok Keli. We had a wonderful life together and two lovely children we were so proud of. Both sons, both serving in the military."

"You must be so happy they're following in your footsteps Walt."

He smiled and gave Keli a slight chuckle.

"Well one did. Todd, the youngest, decided to go into the Navy. There are some expeditionary forces over to what used to be Great Brittan. We sent them over a few years back, to see if any one toward the side of the planet the radiation first entered the Earth at. Surprisingly we found survivors."

He sighed *"Only a little over a million. Europe was even worse. Almost no survivors."*

"Anyhow some Americans wanted to go settle in those areas of the old Europe and start civilization going there again, so military forces had to go and clear out mutes and make some of the sea side and coastal villages safe. The survivors in the British Isles Like those in Canada, have decided to join the new United States, at least until they get back on their feet. Europe on the other hand was overflowing with mutes and what few survivors there are there have little or

no communication except maybe with the next village.... It was bad Keli, but my boys are over there working to provide some form of protection to the coastal cities."

Walt frowned "Just wasn't fair. No one could settle in the larger cities that weren't destroyed and as so many mutants survived, while the people did not. The mutants were so numerous in the larger cities survivors had to settle far away from them.... Not to mention they were more or less just piles of rubble. So my sons wanted to be part of that and that's pretty much that."

Keli smiled at Walt, she could see the pride in what his sons were doing.

"You know Keli... If it wasn't for Hawk, I'd had no wife.... No sons."

Keli leaned over towards Walt's desk excitedly *"Ok now you've gone and done it Walt! I'm not leaving until you tell me everything."*

"Heh, heh, Somehow I figured you were going to say that my dear."

He leaned back in his chair, placed his hands behind his head and smiled a smile that Keli could see his mind peeling back the years of memories, back to the time of his much earlier days.

She leaned back into her chair tucking her legs under her and smiled back at Walt. She could tell by the look on his face, this was going to be good. But then again so were all of Walt's tales..... Especially when they were of her love.

"Back then I was a Captain.... Matter of fact I'd just made the rank. Anyhow, there were reports of a large hoard of mutants that had been stalking the Catskill Mountains for decades, for some reason started attacking settlements in masse. Over the years they had come to fear people, which was strange in itself, but now they had started hitting farms and houses that were isolated. So a force was sent out to engage them. It wasn't until we got under way, that the Major in charge told me we were headed."

Keli could see in Walt's face this was also dredging up some memories that were unsettling to him.

"I'd been seeing a widow that ran a halfway tavern in the same area. Her husband had been killed by some drunken hunter a few years earlier and I was the one sent to take a report and track this hunter down."

He smiled *"And I did... or my squad and I did. I took her the news and we talked. On the weekends I'd go and visit to see how she got along. It had taken me over a year to get this killer, but by the time I did, we had become friends... Then it became more than friendship.... Much, much, more....."*

Walt's face reddened a bit.

"That's ok Walt.... I'm a big girl now." She smiled and gave Walt a knowing wink.

"Well anyway, this convoy we were in stopped on the high road that lead into the valley where my Caroline lived. Through our binoculars we could see the mutes... There were hundreds of them! And they were only about a mile or so from the tavern.... Keli there was no way we could have gotten there in time along that winding road. I was praying that Carol had gotten out in time."

He squirmed in his chair.

"We stood along the road looking for signs that no one was down in the valley where the mutes were, when Hawk yelled to look at the tavern. We all moved our binoculars to the second floor where Caroline was there trying to board up the windows."

"Christ Keli, she had heard of the mutes in the area, but had no idea what was coming her way. Even at that distance she wouldn't hear shots if we tried to get her attention."

Sadness drifted over his face.

"I begged the major to lower me down on one of the winches on the trucks, but he refused. I could have run at top speed from the bottom where we were and made it about the same time as the mutes and told him so. Again he refused!"

Walt looked at Keli and said *"Of course now I have commanded I know now why he refused, but back then I didn't."*

"I understand Walt. Hawk tells me things at first I can't understand, but I do what he says, I have commanded a squad and know what happens if troops take the time to ask why."

Walt went back to leaning in his chair.

"I was so frustrated at the Major, I ripped off my captains bars and threw them on the ground. I screamed that there was nothing he could do to stop me!"

He started smiling a warm friendly smile.

"I felt this strong firm hand grasping me by the scruff of the neck. Heh, I turned my head the best I could and saw it was Hawk that had grasped me I, like every other man in the company had served with him and would follow him into hell if he'd ask us to, but I wasn't going to let even him stop me. But... heheh, this man had me by the neck pretty good. He wasn't hurting me, but I wasn't going anywhere until he decided I would. I yelled at this hero of ours, screaming he'd delayed me too long.... That there was no hope for her now!"

Walt straightened up in his chair once again and looked at her. With a fondness for this man she had heard in his voice many times before...Walt continued.

"He looked me square in the eye and said quietly, calmly "Son if we give up on hope, then, what's the point of trying to rebuild this country of ours"? I felt his hand let go of my neck and I glanced back at the tavern.... The mutes were in view now and Carol could see them. Christ Keli, just by her body language you could tell she knew she was going to die. She just sat down on the roof in front of the window she was trying to board up and put her head in her hands and started crying."

Walt grinned that grin he always gave her when something great was going to happen.

"I heard shouting and turned just in time to see Hawk on that cycle of his flying down the road toward the next bend. Instead of following the road, he went straight for the area where you pull over to look at the view, crashed through the wooden markers and over the edge.....Christ, Keli, It was two hundred feet straight down!!"

Even Keli was straining to figure out how he did this. Hawk surprised her many times, yet somehow there was always something new.

"Obviously Walt it wasn't two hun...."

"Keli.... we ran the distance to the place where he went over and could only see two things... The first was a flat area about seventy feet below, the second was the spot where they had pushed rocks from a slide that was about fifty feet below that flat area... Then there was the valley floor!"

We were looking for the wreckage of Hawks cycle..... I head a shout and one of the troops was pointing in the direction of the tavern... It was Hawk and he was almost there.... And boy was he flying!"

There was so much admiration in Walt's voice that Keli could tell Walt would do anything for this man.

"Before we knew it, he'd pulled alongside the tavern and Caroline had climbed down and was on the back of the cycle... He had saved her and was bringing her back to me!"

Tears had formed in Walt's eyes and seeing this Keli felt tears starting to form in hers as well, just from his pure emotional look on his face.

"To this day I have no idea how he got down that cliff.... How he did it in one piece to save my fiancée... I really don't care.... Just that he did."

"He brought her back to where we were and the major allowed me to stay with her while they went and took care of the mutes. But before Hawk rode off with them, he told me something

I'll always remember.... "Things don't always work out lad... but if one has no hope, then what the hell are we doing here? Why don't we just lay down and die?"

Walt grinned *"I knew Hawk well enough back then and just like today, if I ever asked how he got down there, he'd just shrug and walk away, pretty much like he does every time he does something heroic."*

There was so much love and pride in his face Keli had never seen before from Walt.

"All he cares about is rebuilding this country.... The people.... And now you!"

Keli felt a tear trickle down her cheek. She too loved and admired this man they spoke of and today she had learned a bit more of his past of which he rarely spoke of...

And she would have another question for her love to answer when he returned from his trip.

Of course how his trip went, but then there was a question about a two hundred foot cliff.....

Chapter 29.

Hawk returned a few weeks later and no one saw the two of them for several days. No one answered the phone, their meals were ordered, eaten and the trays left outside the door. It was their time together and no one would dare interrupt them. With these two the “**Do not disturb**” sign on the door meant exactly that.

Keli told Hawk of her new friends and all the tales of how they were showing her the tricks to getting along in this other world that she was fast becoming rather fond of.

She jumped out from under the covers and ran over to the small table and clicked a button.

“Oh Baby I love this television! There’s so much to see, to learn....”

“Ahhh, Keli honey? Watching that thing can lead to all kinds of things, that aren’t really good for you.”

She turned her half naked body toward the bed, placed her hands on her hips and frowned at her love.

“How can anything so wonderful, be bad for you??”

Hawk chuckled. *“Well back in my day it lead to a lot of people winding up with rather large rear ends, for one.”*

Hawk sighed *“Now we have television, by cable and transmission, but can’t broadcast very far. Same for radio signals.... someday maybe we’ll get back to getting signals to the western side of the ole Miss...at least farther than a few miles.”* He sighed again....

“Oh baby, you’re always worrying about everything but yourself... Come on ease up on yourself just for a while will ya??... Besides how could someone’s butt get bigger from watching this TV thing??”

Then it hit her that she HAD been watching a bit too much lately... Keli gasped and twisted around to check out her nicely shaped rear end. She looked down and glanced over her slightly rounded form clad in tight fitting lace panties, turned so Hawk could see. And gleefully wiggled her rear end.

“Oh, it seems ok... and the way you look at it, I’d say you wouldn’t kick it out of bed.”

She reached out and shut off the television and in on smooth move leapt toward the bed giving out a girlish squeal.

Once again watching TV wasn't on her mind.

Weeks went by and never a thought of the wastelands, nor the violence that was so prevalent within it crossed their thoughts. The weeks turned to months and time really didn't exist. This was their time and they had well earned it.

Hawk would tell her of his past, of the world he had known. Keli would sit and listen fascinated by the wonders and troubles of a time long since past. She wept at the sorrow in his voice, and laughed at the mirth he related in lighter stories. Then there were those wonderful days of walking through the city hand in hand doing absolutely nothing but being with each other.

They walked into a small café and Hawk lead Keli to a small out of the way table near a wall that had a view out over the rest of the tables and the busy sidewalk. They sat and the waiter took their order.

"Hon. I used to come here to this café, sit by the edge here and watch people."

His voice filled with a kind of sorrow, *"I'd look at all these people walking by hand in hand and wonder what they were feeling. Amazed at the happiness in their faces... in their voices. It really had been so long since....."* He looked down toward the table, *"Well, I'd forgotten what it was like to hold someone.... be close...to love."*

Keli reached across the small table and gently squeezed his hand.

"Then I met you Keli..." He smiled at her, *"Of course the first time I saw you, you were just this small slip of a girl, naked and beaten, tossed to the side of the road... Little could I have known that one day you'd grow into such amazing woman....One that would show me I still had something inside.... That I wasn't dead... and mostly that I still could love."*

"OH baby, I lov....."

A sound smashed the moment!

They both turned to see a man standing next to a woman a few tables away.

He'd pushed her table over and the dishes had fallen to the tiled floor of the outdoor café. She had one hand on her cheek the other was held up as if to protect her from another blow.

Hawk began to rise from his seat, but was knocked back into his chair by a blur of the bright yellow dress Keli was wearing. Before he could get back up, Keli was standing next to the assailant. She tapped the guy on the shoulder.....

Hawk sat back down and smiled to himself.

“Excuse me sir, but I think you should leave the lady alone and leave... But before you do... apologize to her!”

“You want some of this too?... BITCH!!!”

Hawk grimaced and sank farther down into his seat, but before he could look back up again, Keli laid the crude rude dude on the floor and was standing over him with a menacing grin. She had done so with one graceful move, put her four inch stiletto on his throat all the time holding her billowy yellow dress to her legs in a lady like fashion and quietly said.

“Now you own her and me an apology!”

With slight pressure on his Adams apple, he wisely begged their forgiveness and ran from the premises. Keli released her dress, fluffed it a bit to get it back into shape then strolled back to the table accompanied by the applause of the patrons. Looking somewhat red in the face she looked sheepishly said to Hawk.

“If I found out he was looking up my dress, I’d be soooo embarrassed.”

“Baby... Trust me he was more interested in where your heel was than anything else.”

She chuckled and sat back down.... These two were having the times of their lives. And when Hawk looked at this wonderful creature, so graceful, so loving.... There were things he felt he just couldn’t put into words.

Some weeks later the two had gone on a trip to the country side. He’d figured Keli would like to see more of what things looked like on this side of the Mississippi away from the cities. The green rolling hills, the beautiful lush forests. Small rivers and streams, fields planted with crops that she’d never dreamed of.

Tears would fill her eyes just at the thought of how Pops and the others back home would love to see this. Hawk would cradle her in his muscular arms and hold her head to his chest and they would stand there watching the fields of endless crops being harvested. So much food, she had never dreamed of seeing anything like the sights that beheld her. It was a vacation that would live in her thoughts forever.

But all too soon, they had to leave. He had his duties although Keli never quite understood what they were, nor did she ask. She could see whatever they were it was a huge burden on her love and rather than press him, she decided just to be there when he returned. She knew when he was in her arms the world... his burdens, all vanished.

Hawk left for a few hours in the evening of the third day of their returning, bringing back some wonderful treats that were new to Keli. Something that Hawk called chocolate dipped strawberries and this bubbly thing called Champaign. She found she liked this Champaign, perhaps a bit too much. That night she would sleep really well.

It was late morning when Keli and Hawk had finished getting ready. Keli was going to take her first train ride. She walked into the living room wearing a tight shimmering black dress like the pink one she found Hawk liked so much. She looked over in his direction as he strolled out onto the patio. Keli followed him out and they stopped at the railing that overlooked Gateway.

The sun made the city glow as if made of gold. Warm breezes blew and leaves swirled and danced below along the wide tree lined avenue.

Hawk turned to Keli and kissed her deeply. *“Traditions from my long dead world, this new world and the wastelands have all come together, so you may not understand all of this...”*

Keli started to speak, but Hawk touched his finger tips to her lips.

“Since I met you my love, you’ve completely changed my life. You’ve shown me how to love again, how to care for all things.... For you!”

Keli started to tremble slightly, but knew not why.

“Hawk...Baby..”

“Shhhh!”

He looked nervously at her.

“Our lives have changed so much in such a short time...” He struggled for words, *“There are times I can’t think because you intoxicate my senses.... I can’t stop thinking about you when we’re apart, I can’t stop holding you when we’re together.... Every time you touch me I still tremble, just knowing you’ve chosen me to love, to let me share your life.”*

Hawk dropped to one knee, Keli was no longer trembling.... she was visibly shaking! And she didn’t know why!

“I know you won’t completely understand all of this honey.”

He pulled something from his pocket. It was a small box.

“Keli I love you with all my heart. I want you for my wife.... Honey, will you marry me?”

He opened the box. Keli gasped. Inside the box were three wide golden rings for each of her three center fingers, as was old hunter custom.

When a hunter accepted a mate he would present her with three rings. The first was for their bond, the second for a long life together, the third for the future and hope they would be forever bonded. He then would present her with a small branding iron made of whatever metal he could find and within it, his mate would then heat the iron and brand her own neck on each side as to put his brand, his mark, so all would know this female was taken.

She gasped once again, tears welled up in her eyes, she was trembling so hard she thought she too would fall to her knees.

"My love..." Keli almost was crying.

She turned to faced the sun *"The sun gives us light, may our bond be eternally bright!"* She put on the first ring.

She looked at the ground below *"The soil nurtures and sustains us may our life together be so sustained."* She put on the second.

She looked at Hawk *"With this ring, I pledge to forever be your mate. I shall be yours until I return to the earth!"* She put on the third ring and now all the first three fingers of her left hand had a ring.... Hawk's rings.

She looked upward to the heavens and raised her hand in the hunter tradition *"I thank all that is for your life and for bringing you to me."*

Keli knelt before her love and picked up the necklace... She was puzzled! A choker made of what appeared to be black silk and on either side of the choker was a small golden 'H' The necklace was one inch wide and beautiful but Keli didn't understand.

"This is too beautiful to ruin in fire my love. Could you not make me an iron of something less precious than gold?" Then her face lit up and she smiled *"I understand my love, I'm to heat it and fuse it to my neck?"*

"My God!!" Hawk thought, *"This woman would do that for me?"* He always hated that particular tradition of branding, seeing a woman with the scars on her neck....It was barbaric! Hawk never liked some of the hunter customs, but always tried to live within the local customs that had become so varied due to separation from normal society, but in this instance he could not bear to think of Keli burning her own neck, so he had the necklace made.

He smiled warmly, *"Honey, it's to put around your neck to honor the hunter tradition, but not to brand. How could I ever think of scarring that pretty little neck of yours?"*

She threw her arms around his neck *"But what if I should lose it?"*

"All will know who you are and who your mate is." He grinned *"And you don't need to be branded to remind you, do you?"*

Keli hugged Hawk harder, kissed his neck and quietly whispered into his ear. *"My love, I am your mate forever. I need no reminders other than my heart and I swear that only death will part us."*

Still kneeling she pulled her head back and looked at her mate, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks and they kissed a long and passionate kiss. They would now be recognized as mates in the wastelands and all good people would honor that. Even this side of the river wasteland traditions were recognized, but that was not enough for Hawk.

"That's not all baby." Hawk smiled warmly and looked into her beautiful dark brown eyes. *"You're my mate forever in your world... I want you to be my wife in mine."*

Keli knew what he was speaking of Pops had told her of how mates were married in the east. From his other pocket came another box. He opened it.

Keli almost fainted as her body started to tremble once again.

"OH MY GOD!" Is...is that...aa Diamond?" She squealed like a little girl getting her first doll. *"A real diamond? Oh, Hawk I didn't know there were diamonds that huge!"*

He kissed her finger and slowly put it on. *"It's not as beautiful as you, but..."*

Her lips were on his, her head spinning. She never dreamed her life would ever be more than it was before she met him.... But now she was his mate.... And soon his wife. She kissed him deeply. Keli was in love body and soul. Once again no one would see either of them for days. Her train ride she decided could wait.

Hawk married Keli in a simple ceremony because that's the way she wanted it. Just the thought of many people staring at her as she walked down the aisle, sent chills down her spine. She loved her Hawk and wanted to join with him in his worlds traditions and was relieved when she found out huge ceremonies were not required. As usual her love would understand, and chuckle at how simply she wanted to live life... He would hold her close, tell her it was alright and she would snuggle deeply into his arms. After all that was all she ever wanted from Hawk... Everything else he introduced her to, was a plus.

These times for the pair were the most wonderful days that they could ever remember. Days of just being together, holding each other, of just loving. Days of shutting out the rest of the world, the violent lives they had lived but would someday have to return to. It was these days that would nourish them in the future, when they were apart.... no matter what it held.

Both knew that some day they would be once again expected to do what they both did so well, but for the present, this was their time together and they made the best of it.

Needless to say that both were surprised at the calm that followed for the next few years.

Almost three years passed without news of raids from the west.

Almost three years for happiness without the thought of fighting for survival.

Almost.....

Chapter 30.

During the happiest three years of their lives the wars to reclaim, the United States continued and Hawk made more and more trips back east or to the north or south. The battle for the west coast was in full swing, but losses were heavy and little progress was being made. This weighed heavy on Hawk's mind and Keli could see it.

She knew he was in the midst of whatever plans were being made, but he had sworn to her that he'd never get involved in the fighting. She knew her love longed to be part of it, but Hawk on the other hand became comfortable to be part of the planning and be with his Keli instead of fighting. Some nights she could see the longing for adventure in his eyes, other times it was her, but both quelled their need for excitement in the arms of each other.

Of course both knew that one day they both would have to take up their profession once again, but for now these few happy years they both managed to keep up the illusion that they no longer wanted to put on their uniforms and join the fighting.

Things were changing constantly. Both from events that had been put in motion before they had met and even more. Hawk at times would be quiet and moody and Keli knew he hated the thought of not being there scouting ahead, planning, making changes, fighting. She had figured out that this other side of her love was deeper and more complex than he would let on. She also knew that he had a lot of pull... A lot of pull. He would say something and people would jump and then there were those trips back east.

This power he wielded did suffer a toll on him that Keli could see starting to eat away at their time together. It seemed as the battle for the west coast came to a stalemate and the losses became worse, Hawk would withdraw deeply inside of himself. It was only being in Keli's arms that he could sleep. It was in her arms he relaxed.

There was a change in the wind and she would tremble at the thought that soon it would engulf their lives once again. She would hold him close as he slept and silently weep.

The push to reclaim the west coast had been going on for many years, but the military was holding what it had. Neither would be needed there as the majority of the military was being used there, the rest holding the line at the Mississippi and a narrow band of coastal cities along the Gulf including Keli's home of Wall City. The caravans were fairly regular and mail much quicker now the military patrolled the areas between Oil City and her home.

Even the way between the Mississippi and home were safer, with only some group of raiders occasionally sneaking into the area.

The deadliest part of the country was the areas bordered by the Rockies to the west and the mighty Mississippi to the east, the old Canadian border to the north and a line through Oklahoma to the south.

It turned out there were eight armies of raiders instead of the seven thought to exist. They were of various sizes and controlled this vast unclaimed part of the country and they were so busy fighting among themselves, they were left alone as the military was far too weak to fight on two fronts and supplies went to the far west.

Keli and Hawk had little to do toward the end of their third year together. Now and then Hawk would leave to go back east for a few weeks. Keli who had learned to live in this new world, so strange from the one she had been raised, had no desire to go further east. The loneliness was always celebrated upon his return as they would be able to spend weeks if not months together.... And they did make the best of their time together.

For three years Keli and Hawk existed in this world. Life was good. Life was easy. Both occasionally found themselves longing for the old days, the open spaces or at least without the violence they had become so used to. That life that almost destroyed the both of them. That life that made them who they were, that had defined them...

She had her friends now, a large number of them and Hawk his trips to the east, but when they were together all left them alone. Keli still loved Hawk as much as the days when she first met him and Hawk missed her more and more each time he had to leave. But still they knew they once again would have to return to what they were so good at. Life wouldn't leave them alone and their past would once again seek them out.

It was shortly after Hawk had returned and life was once again good and the two still celebrated their new life. All was right with the world until the mail arrived....

Keli walked out onto their veranda into the bright sunny day, but Hawk could see there was something wrong.

"Baby? What's wrong? You look pale as a ghost."

"Gris wrote and said Pops is ill.... He didn't say what, but he didn't write, so it must be something really bad.... Gris said Pops was telling him what to write... but..... OH HAWK!"

She sat on his lap, grasped her love and buried her head into his chest as he enclosed her in his arms. He could feel her heart beating wildly. Although she held back the tears, he knew his wife enough to know she was worried about her father. He also knew she would not leave him during these days that were causing him so much anguish. Hawk stroked his lovely wife's hair as she moved her head to his shoulder.

"Hon, you know we should really go visit Pops and the gang, I'm free for a while. So if you'd like we could leave in a day or two."

Keli threw her arms around Hawk and kissed him over and over again, showering him with kisses. She was ecstatic with the thought of going home and seeing Pops and all her friends once again.

"I've been hoping you'd say something like that!!"

She kissed him again.

"Well Ted...er, Pops is sick and I know you've been worrying about him, so I think this would be a good time to take a vacation, visit Pops, do a little scouting, kill some mutants... Ya know...fun stuff." He grinned *"Assuming there are any left in that area with your old squad and the military there now...."*

Again she hugged him and showered him with quick kisses, leaving little traces of her bright red lipstick all over his face.

Hawk held her at arm's length *"Whoa, now girl."* He was chuckling at her glee. *"We need to dig out the suits, figure out what to take. Remember we'll have to take the cycle. Not to mention...."*

She planted a long hard kiss on his lips. *"I know my love and believe it or not, I'm actually looking forward to getting back into the uniform again"* She beamed *"I kind of missed that drab old thing."*

Then gave a slight sexy smile and finished with, *"Although it does make my butt look really good!"*

Hawk gave her a wide grin, remembering back a few years *"That it does.... That it does."*

She gave her rear that little wiggle that she always teased him with and headed into the bedroom to pack.

"Oh by the way my Hawkie..." She snickered *"You might want to wash your face.... You look like you have the red plague!"*

Hawk grinned and used a napkin in an attempt to remove the lipstick and added as she trotted out of the room.

"Baby, I just want you to remember how little we can carry and as you'll have to leave those closets full of dresses, skirts and... and... All those shoes of yours behind...."

She glanced back over her shoulder long enough to add *“Don’t worry baby, I’ll still pack some of the things you like to see me in.”*

She gave him that sexy wink that Hawk never tired of *“Besides if I remember correctly, we don’t wear anything under the suits.”*

She started doing her little wiggle walk and vanished through the door.

“Ahhhh... Yesss....”

His mind wandered for a second, shrugged his shoulders and followed her into the bed room. Packing could wait.....

The following morning bags were packed and put on the cycle, both were once again in their uniforms. Some of Keli’s friends had come to see her off, while others seemed to come to see Hawk back in his hunter outfit. Keli would look over and see women and girls alike staring at Hawk.

“I really can’t blame them” she thought looking at him astride his cycle. But her thoughts were shattered.

A car came to a screeching stop and General Walters and his aide jumped out.

“HAWK!..... HAWK! WAIT!”

Walt ran through the crowd of Keli’s friends. He ran up to Hawk.

“Walt, you look kinda pale my friend you been getting...”

“Hawk, Two of the raider armies have joined forces.....” He was breathing heavy.

“.. We’ve heard two of them that control the areas north along the Mississippi..... Hawk, they could be planning to cross to the north where our forces are the thinnest.”

“Dammit baby, those bastards did that just to stop our vacation.” Keli was pissed *“We ought to go and wipe them all off the face of the earth.”*

She wrinkled up her nose her eyes narrowed *“Well baby, I guess you’d better go set them straight... or just wipe them off the face of this planet...Show the others not to interrupt out plans ever again!”*

The group all burst into uneasy laughter.

Keli grasping what she had just said started grinning while Hawk just slowly shook his head. *"No hon, I think I'll just go and scout things out. I doubt if they'd be that stupid. They know our forces are thin, but they also know we can put large numbers of troops and supplies where ever we need to on this side of the river."*

He grinned and added, *"More than likely, they'll start trying to take over the other armies and just fight among themselves for the next few decades or so."*

The people standing around them once again started their uneasy laughs.

Walt slapped Hawk on the back *"You're probably right Hawk... The sooner you check it out the easier we can breathe. If we have to recall some of our troops, it can leave us thin elsewhere."*

Hawk and Keli started tossing bags off the bike.

"Baby you be careful... Come back to me in one piece." Keli stood on her toes and threw her arms around Hawk's neck.

"I'll only be gone about a month, then we'll head on over to Wall city. Or if Walt has any convoys headed in that direction, I could meet you there, if you want to go ahead....I'll hurry back.. I promise."

Keli kissed him with a passion that was so familiar, then she said in a much more serious tone *"Baby I mean it...you be careful!"*

Hawk kissed her on the forehead, *"Good-bye my love."* He tossed a leg back over the cycle and off he rode.

Keli's body started to tremble, tears welled up in her eyes.

"Keli don't worry about Hawk, he....."

She turned to Walt, her eyes darted back and forth as if she were trying to find something in her mind. The tears started to flow steadily, she sobbed aloud! Keli buried her head into Walt's chest and started to cry heavily, her body was wracked with uncontrollable shaking.

"Easy Keli, easy" Walt patted her back, *"I don't think Hawk is..."*

"You... you don't understand" She was shaking so hard now that Walt felt his body moving, she raised her head and looked at Walt, then off in the direction her love had left.

"Walt.... You don't understand.... Hawk, never says good-bye!"

Tears were streaming heavily now. *"Because ... good-bye Is... final."*

Once again she buried her tear stained face into Walt. She never saw the look on Walt's face, nor could she read his thoughts.

"My God..... she's right!"

Two weeks, then three went by before word got back to command that Hawk was fine and returning. Keli almost broke General Samuels neck hugging him, when he brought her the news. She knew she could leave to visit Pops with the small military convoy the general said he was sending Wall City loaded with supplies.

Pops had gotten worse and she'd have to leave early. Keli figured it would take Hawk about a week to get back, then another week or two to travel back to her at Pops inn. She even hoped that Hawk might catch up to them on the road. Convoys were slow and Hawk at times had a tendency to push his cycle. Moreover she was ecstatic. His 'good-by' was for naught, she could stop holding her breath.

Hawk on the other hand couldn't wait to see his Keli once again. The thought of her had kept him filled with hope, but his love for her made this time away from her quite painful. He had become human again, he cared about things like the future again. They could pick up their lives once more... He twisted the throttle a little harder and the cycle went faster.... And toward home and Keli. He grinned and cranked the throttle even more until he wasn't much more than a blur to those he passed on the road.

The raiders had indeed started turning their attention to the other armies and were fighting among themselves for more and more territory. Everyone could breathe easier now. Or at least for the present. Hawk had seriously figured he might die if he was forced to hold back some advance until the military could bring up more troops. He too started breathing easier knowing they were fighting among themselves.

Hawk sped along the highways as quickly as he could. He missed Keli, she was his life. He really had thought he'd never see his love again. He was prepared to fight with whatever troops he could muster to stop them at the river. These thoughts kept running through his mind... Thoughts of death... Why? Was he getting soft? He had never thought of death for decades and now....

But the raiders had never thought of invading, they just wanted to control their part of the country and now he and Keli could finish their vacation. So why couldn't he shake these feelings?

Hawk knew duty would have to come first. He skidded to a stop at the military's headquarters and bounded up the stairs. He burst through the doors to where he was told Sam and Walt were in conference.

"Guys, I just dropped off the full report at your desks... All's well and I'm off to Wall City, to see Keli.... see ya!"

He spun and headed to the door. Walt yelled...

"Hawk!... Keli's not there!"

Hawk stopped and turned.

"Well then where's she at? The hotel? Didn't your convoy get off?"

Walt walked over to Hawk and lightly grasped his arm.

"Three days ago she got word Pops had a turn for the worse, there was no stopping her."

Sam added *"Hawk we sent another convoy of six heavily armed trucks with her....."*

"Ok, then why are you two looking like that." Concern had crept into Hawk's voice.

"Hawk they were ambushed!"

He felt the blood drain from his head the room spun. Hawk reached out a hand to Walt and steadied himself. *"Keli....is...is"*

"She's alive... barely." Hawk could feel his knees start to buckle. He had to lean against the wall to keep upright.

Walt shouted at Hawk before he passed out from concern. *"She's at Fort Mason about four hours from the Mississippi, on the west side...It's a new fort, they have the best facilities... take the Harrison ferry, then..."*

Hawk was out the door. He would waste no more time listening! He flew down the stairs and leapt on his cycle. He cranked the throttle so hard the indestructible tires actually started to melt the blacktop and sent up a dense cloud of black smoke. When the smoke cleared, neither Hawk, nor his cycle could be seen, just a long cloud of more smoke vanishing in the distance.

Hawk would ride throughout the night and God help the man or beast that stood in his way. There was nothing that could stop him, nor detain him. The wind blew the tears from his eyes as he struggled to see the road ahead....but he did not slow, not for the rain, not for the darkness, nothing!

Chapter 31.

Shortly after dawn Hawk roared through the gates of the small outpost where the remainder of Keli's convoy had brought her.

The guards had been warned that he was coming, so when they saw a cycle moving at high speed they just raised the barrier and let him through.... He wouldn't have stopped if they wanted him to. He sped along the short road to the hospital and leapt off the bike even before it had stopped. He ran up the few steps and burst through the door with a huge...

"Bang!"

At the front desk the nurse had pretty much figured who this man was and as he neared the desk, pointed down one of the halls. Hawk was walking quickly down the halls of the one story hospital. It seemed the halls went on forever, but at each corner someone would stop and point the direction for him and onward he would go. He rounded a corner and saw a dozen or so men standing around. Among them were the outposts officers. All held their hats in their hands.... All were looking solemn. As Hawk approached, one of the officers noticed him and held up his hand in a salute.

"She's still alive sir, she's in critical condition, but still alive."

Hawk breathed a cautious sigh.

The men parted as the officer motioned to the room behind them

"The doctors in there with your wife."

As Hawk passed, one of the men stepped forward he was in tears *"Sir... It was my command... They hit us with rockets...they hit our Hummer first..."* Tears streamed down his face *"I was suppose to protect her..... my company... I..."*

Hawk stopped and put his hand on his shoulder *"Son... If I for a moment thought you had failed... You'd be dead."*

He looked into the Captains eyes *"You.."*

Hawk looked around at all the men *"All of you.... killed or drove off the raiders and brought my wife back here..... You all did good..."*

Hawk smiled weakly at the men and entered the room where his beloved lay.

The doctor turned his head toward the door and grinned, *"You must be this legendary Hawk she keeps talking about..."*

"She's talking?... Keli's awake?"

"Sir... She's in extremely critical condition, I'm not sure if she'll make it or not.... I.. We've done all we can do. She's talked about you, her home, her life while she was delirious. She slips in and out of unconsciousness..." The doctor looked Hawk in the eye sadly *"It's all up to her now"*

Hawk walked over to the bed *"Baby....."*

Keli opened her eyes.

"Oh baby...what have they done to you?"

Tears rolled down Hawk's cheek. He hadn't cried in decades, really cried and now here he was choking back the urge so he could be strong for her. He looked at her bandaged head, lightly touching her brow, then pulling his hand back afraid he might hurt her.

"Baby, don't cry... I'll... be... ok" Her voice was unsteady.

Hawk leaned over her and gently kissed her lips. *"You'd better be ok... You know how I get when I'm alone."*

Keli managed a weak smile. *"Pops got worse baby, I.... I had to.."*

"SHhhh... It's ok Keli, it's ok... save your strength... I love you and need you to get better... Then we can both go and see Pops."

She raised her hand. It trembled as she struggled to touch his face. Hawk grabbed it and held it to his chest, she raised it higher and stroked his cheek Hawk could no longer speak. He fell to his knees and laid his head upon her bed holding her hand, kissing it gently.

"They saved me my love... They brought me back to you.... I had to come back for you.."

Hawk raised his head and slowly stood *"Honey, I need you to rest now, the doc said you'll be fine, you just have to rest."*

Her eyes closed, a tear ran down her cheek and he softly brushed it away.

"Sleep... my love.... My wife."

He saw a faint smile appear upon her face as sleep overtook her.

Hawk reached into a small bag he was carrying and pulled out a tiny syringe filled with a strange orange liquid the doctor had never seen before, he pressed it to her tiny neck, then bent and kissed the spot gently.

“This should help Doc, but... I... I...”

“Sir. I’ve heard the rumors about the things you have at your disposal, not to mention I know you’d never do anything to harm her, you don’t have to offer any explanations to me.”

Hawk smiled at the doc, *“Watch over her Doc....”*

Hawk turned and walked out the door and looked at the Captain. *“What the hell happened out there.... That whole area was suppose to be clean?”*

“Sir...” The Captain spoke up *“I’d guess there were several hundred of them. It must have been one of the smaller raider armies.”* He paused *“If I had to hazard a guess I’d say they probably were driven south by those two armies that joined up north of here. We’ve gotten word they’re fighting among themselves.”*

“How the hell did you get away Captain?”

The Captain looked pale *“Sir two trucks and about a dozen men stayed behind to cover our withdrawal. There hasn’t been any word from them since... They sacrificed themselves for us... Her!”* Tears filled his eyes with pride *“Sir as we left, they told us to get her back safely.”*

The Captain could no longer speak his voice trembled.

The base commander spoke instead *“Hawk not many have met you, but you...your legend has given us hope where none existed.... There’s not a man in this army that wouldn’t follow you into Hell its self if you asked.”*

He paused *“There’s not a man here that wouldn’t have given his life to save hers.”* He nodded toward Keli’s room.

A few hours later Hawk and Keli were holding hands. The orange liquid in the syringe seemed to be working its miraculous healing.

The base Commander entered the room.

“Good to see you awake Mrs. Hawk”

Keli, still weak managed a smile and looked at Hawk *“I still love to hear Mrs. Hawk.”*

“Hawk, if you have a minute I’d like to have a word or two with....”

Just then a messenger came into the room and reported to the commander.

“Major, The group that attacked the convoy was spotted by a convoy from Wall City. They’re about six hundred miles from here and heading to the northwest. Looks like they may be headed back to the north. Our convoy can’t get to them from the mountain they’re on, but relayed their location and direction back.”

“Thank you sergeant.”

The Major turned to Hawk *“I’m going to call for reinforcements. If they can get here in enough time, we can nail those bastards!”*

“You won’t need any reinforcements Major” A look of hate that Keli had never seen before crossed Hawk’s face. He leaned down and kissed Keli on each eye, then the lips.

“I’ll be going for a while... see you in a few days.”

He turned and walked toward the door, *“I want to see you up and running when I get back”* He turned his head and looked over his shoulder and gave her a wink *“We have a bit of catching up to do!”* She smiled weakly back at her love.

Hawk burst through the door and vanished.

“Don’t tell me he’s going after that army of cutthroats alone” The Major glanced at the door, then back at Keli.

“There’s around two hundred of them, Christ, two hundr...”

“Major,” Keli said weakly *“Feel sorry for the those raiders not my husband.”*

“But ...”

“Major, my husband said he’d be back, he didn’t say good-bye.”

” She managed a weak smile *“I’ll guarantee you Major..... He’ll be back!”*

When Hawk had burst through the door it had startled the troops standing around, so when he walked quickly down the hall some followed. Some had over heard him and the major talking. They knew where he was headed and were going to ask to go with him for some payback.

Hawk was walking quickly but they managed to follow.

“Sir... We’d like the chance to get even as much as you. Take us with you. Maybe we can find some survivors from those that stayed behind....”

“Sorry men, there’s only room for one on this trip, you’ll have to get your own convoy together....”

There was a small waiting room near where they had stopped. They could see two orderlies talking in the next room. Even though they were not seen, all overheard what came next.

“The whole damn hospital makes way for this Hawk asshole. Don’t go here, don’t go there... Make sure you’re really quiet... Make sure you don’t do this... or that... Christ! Maybe the bitch will croak and things will get back to normal.”

Hawk took his arm and slowly pushed one of the corporal’s aside and glared, then vanished into the small room.

“This isn’t gonna be pretty” The corporal smiled, then the smile vanished.

“CRAP!.... Sarge, suppose he kills them? Maybe we should go in and stop him from.....”

“Corporal... Are you willing to go in there and stand in his way?”

The small group stepped back away from the door. But it wasn’t the door that they had to worry about.

“CRASH” The sound of breaking glass echoed down the halls as one of the orderlies flew through the glass partition.

“CRASH” The other window was shattered and the second orderly followed in the general direction of the first. Both had skidded to a sudden stop when they hit the nurses’ station almost knocking over the startled nurse.

Hawk stepped over and through the broken glass and again headed down the corridor toward the door, with the troops closely behind.

One of the orderlies raised himself up on one arm *“That son of a bitch thinks he can get away with that... Nurse you saw that!... He assaulted us!”*

“I didn’t see a thing....” She said, then preceded to kick his arm out from under him. His chin smashed into the floor and as she walked away added, *“You must have tripped on the wet floor you clumsy bastards!”*

Hawk walked outside and stopped, looked at his watch.

“We want to go with you sir, we.....”

“Sorry guys, it’s not that I don’t want your company, but I just can’t take you.”

“Sir, You can’t stop us from following, you..”

Hawk smiled at the small group.

"Thank you for wanting to help, but I really won't have room for you," He looked at his watch, then back to the sky. "I don't think we all can fit into that."

The men looked upward and to their surprise saw an aircraft and it was landing straight down onto the base.

Over the roar of the jet engines one of the troops yelled *"A Fighter? We don't have fighter We've all heard rumors the last few years, but...."*

To which the Captain replied broadly grinning *"Be sure to tell the guy flying that jet that."*

The aircraft landed and a General climbed down from the cockpit walked over to Hawk and the group as the man snapped to attention, all but Hawk. The small group of soldiers were shocked that their military commander personally flew this aircraft to Hawk. They stood there looking at one another as the importance of this man of legend began to sink in as their commander saluted Hawk.

"Ok Hawk here it is, but be gentle with it...It's the only jet fighter the U.S. has!"

"Not promising a thing Walt." He shot back over his shoulder as he climbed into the cockpit.

Walt climbed up to the cockpit behind him and helped Hawk strap in.

"Hawk I know you can fly this as well as I, just try to remember what can happen to you if you crash.... That suit can't protect you from everything.."

"I know Walt.... I know.."

Hawk managed a weak smile *"Maybe I just don't care anymore Walt. You and Sam probably know more about me and what the aliens gave me, more than any else on this planet."*

He paused as if to get a hold on himself *"The aliens gave me everything I could use in this new world I awoke in..... Everything but the thought that someday I wouldn't have to be alone. The med chamber they made for me is set to my DNA and won't work on anyone else. I used all the medications I had... I don't know if it's enough.... Walt, there isn't anything else I can do... I...."* Tears once again formed in Hawk's eyes *"For the first time in over a century, I feel so helpless.... I...."*

A soldier ran up to the jet.

"General, the raiders have been spotted to the..."

"I know trooper, I got the message on the way." Walt looked back at Hawk and winked, *"Hawk wanted this aircraft here and I made sure he got it, but the only other pilot in these parts*

broke his leg playing football, that left me. I received the message about the raiders last known position and entered the co-ordinates into the on board computer... ”

He laughed *“I’m damned lucky Hawk didn’t chew me out for being late.”*

The soldiers gave the General a puzzled look so he added *“It’s a long story...”*

Walt climbed down and ran to stand clear as Hawk throttled up the engines. He turned and looked at Hawk. Once all were clear, Walt gave Hawk the thumbs up.... Then snapped him a salute.

The sound of the engines reaching their peak rpm’s drowned out the cheers from the large group of soldiers that had gathered. The men fell back as Hawk threw the throttle to the modified Harrier jet fighter all the way open and the aircraft rose with a scream. A cloud of dust blew in all directions as the jet slowly rose into the air. When it reached only thirty feet Hawk slammed the afterburners wide open and the jet screamed off toward the northwest.

Again the soldiers cheered.

“Our only jet, only limited rockets and ammo.... ” said Walt to the base commander.

“I sure hope he knows what he’s doing.” The sergeant wistfully shook his head.

Walt looked back at the Sergeant and replied, *“Son I fought with Hawk when I was nineteen years old and have fought with him in just about every major campaign since.”*

He patted the soldier on the back *“I know we won’t see any ammo, nor will he bring back any rockets.”* He laughed *“Probably won’t even see my jet again..... But Hawk will be back, he’ll come back for his wife.”*

Walt shook his head *“If he has to land and kill every last one of those bastards that hurt Keli bare handed, he will.... ”*

There was but a faint vapor trail in the direction Hawk had gone. The men turned and walked back toward the hospital.

“General seriously.... Shouldn’t we mount some sort of force to go and.... ”

Walt glanced over at the Sergeant *“Sarge, by the time anyone could get there from here, it would be over.... ”*

He sighed and looked back toward the vanishing vapor trail and in a somewhat concerned tone added....

“... one way or another.”

Chapter 32.

The Harrier roared onward toward the last known position of the raiders. The more Hawk thought about what they did to his love, the more hatred and rage filled his entire being. If it meant his death, he cared not, these raiders could not be allowed to wantonly kill. Hawk knew full well if this raider army got away with this incursion, this raid would not be the last. Just thinking of the destruction and death they had caused filled him with rage and the more he filled with rage, the faster he pushed the jet.

"Come on Hawk...dammit... THINK!" He stared at the fuel gage and mumbled aloud.

"Damn! I'll run out of fuel before I find them. We really need to make Proff drives big enough to fit into these things, then I'd have plenty of fuel to find them."

During his excursion into the wild zone. Hawk had discovered that the eight major raider armies had divided up the vast country from Northern Oklahoma to the Canadian border, then east of the Rockies to the Mississippi into eight sections. Several of the larger armies had been rumored to be thinking of taking over the smaller raider's territories. This group must be made out of some of the smaller raider groups that have banded together it was always in the back of his mind, but he just never could focus.... Until now. These raiders were running from the larger merging armies and headed more to the west where the smaller groups were.... They must have fought one of the larger armies or were escaping them. One way or the other this group was killing everything in its path!

"That has to be it!" Hawk managed a wide grin.

"Those bastards dropped south into the wastelands.... They'll turn west, then back north to hit some of the smaller settlements a few hundred miles east of the Rockies.... This way they avoid the large raider armies that are forming and the military patrols to the south. Christ! That's why they're here they're hitting the farms for supplies! They will move back north through...." Hawk scanned the map on his knee.... *"Crag's Pass.... **I got them!**"*

He frowned *"And they're killing everything they come across... with hopes of keeping their incursion secret so their intended attack won't be uncovered.... And Keli... the convoy... was hurt because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."*

Again he filled with rage.

"Come on Robert Hawk you know better... Get a hold of yourself.... Hate makes you make mistakes...mistakes will get you killed! Remember you told Keli that..."

Another frown passed over his face, then kind of a half hearted grin. He ran his fingers through his graying hair, a sheepish look took over.

“Christ! Now I’m even talking to myself. Time to pay attention to the business at hand you idiot.” Once more he allowed himself a slight grin.

He dropped the external fuel tanks and swung the aircraft northwest. For almost an hour he redlined the jet, praying the engines didn’t seize up.

The sun was high, just past noon when he noticed something in the distance.

“Smoke?” He thought *“No there’s more then smoke..... DUST and SMOKE!!”*

Hawk rolled the jet toward the clouds of smoke and dust in the distance. He pushed the stick forward, rolled the jet over once more and dropped the jet down to where he was skimming the hill tops. The trees cast off their leaves in the wake of his speed, the tall grasses were not immune to the blast of his fighter. The aircraft was now pointed in the correct direction.

He slowed the Harrier to ground attack speed.

Passing over a small settlement, he saw a dozen or so buildings on fire. Bodies of men, women and.... children.... scattered over the ground. Across the burnt fields there were more bodies. This group were composed of more women... and... more children!!

They’d been gunned down as they fled.

“Those bastards” Hawk clenched his teeth. *“They killed everything.... Burned everything...”*

But even in his rage Hawk still garnered enough compassion to circle once more to look for survivors.

As he passed over the second time to the north he noticed a small ground of people cowering within the tree line of a field. Many were wounded and thankfully there were many children that had been saved. As he passed over the survivors the third time he wagged the jets wings to let them know he’d seen them, but wondered if anyone would know his signal or even if they knew what this thing in the sky was.... Or perhaps even if it was friendly or not..

“CHRIST!!! What have we become? Why have we taken so long to rebuild?” But there were survivors down there and he knew revenge would have to wait a bit longer.

“Maybe if I gain a lot of altitude I can contact Walt... or some other base. Do I have enough fuel to do everything? Save the survivors and perhaps losing the raiders.....”

There was no question in his mind... He wrenched back on the control stick and fired off the afterburners. The Harrier climbed. He pressed the radio call button.

"Walt can you read?..... Walt!"

Through the static of the headphones Hawk could barely hear *"Hawk you're almost out of range, change to channel four.... It's for a small reinforced base in the wastelands a few hundred miles north of that old halfway outpost Keli said you almost died at. We just established last month.... They should be about one hundred miles south of your position... Hawk, they have patrols all around, they should be able to ..."* Static crackled over the headset.

Hawk changed the channel and contacted the fort, gave the map co-ordinates for the survivors location.

"Good old Walt" he thought. Walt had contacted the fort and had alerted them to keep an ear out for him. When he told them of the survivors, they dispatched a heavily armed patrol, saying they should be there within a few hours.

Hawk once again flew back over the survivors. This time he threw the jet into vertical decent and hovered a few feet off the ground. A few of the brave souls stepped from the woods and into the edge of the field. Hawk waved, pointed in the direction of the way the rescue party would come and gave the thumbs up. He slid open the canopy and threw out his first aid kit knowing with a hastily scribbled note under the flap of the kit simply saying... 'Help on way!' Hawk knew full well he wouldn't be needing it. It was all or nothing for him. He watched as a man ran toward the med kit, but never stayed to see him pick it up....

The jet rose and once again sped toward the cloud of dust about ten to fifteen miles in the distance.

The hatred left as ice filled his veins. As Hawk had trained himself to do decades before as he prepared to do battle.... All emotion left his mind. His demeanor became calm and determined. His heart rate slowed, his hands steady..... His look deadly and focused.

Barely above the tree tops he rose and dropped, skimming.... Seeking.... Closing toward the dust the raiders convoy was throwing into the air.

There in a series of larger open fields lay before him the raider army of several hundred men along with their vehicles. Some were old military, others were more makeshift, but all had some kind of armament on them. If not mounted, then the fire could come from the men that were lucky enough to be riding. As most were on foot he knew they couldn't go far and that was the reason for the destruction.... There were many foot soldiers it became apparent this was why they were killing everything to cover their movement.... They could not move fast.

Hawk decided that when he left they would not be moving at all. Old instincts returned, the way he once was, he had become once again.

He flew around to the west so he could make his first pass from out of the now lowering late afternoon sun. They would not know what hit them..... They would die!

About one mile out he fired four of his rockets.

The first two ripped into the small army before they even heard the jet. The missiles exploded tossing men and machine upward, while sending shrapnel in all directions. The next two missiles tore into their fuel truck and ammo truck rendering men and landscape into a mass of burning debris scattering in all directions crushing all it fell upon, burning those unlucky enough to be close by. For several hundred yards small fires broke out in the dry fields. Fire flashed across parts of the fields and some were caught in the flash burn of tinder dry brush.

He once again rolled the aircraft over and headed back in the direction of his victims.

His next pass dropped two huge canisters. When about two hundred feet from the ground, they burst apart scattering hundreds of small mini bombs in all directions. The smaller bombs exploded about twenty feet off the ground, sending shrapnel in all directions. Though he could not hear the screams of the raiders as they fell in droves, but he could imagine the devastation, the horror they were having reaped upon them. He glanced back to see most of their vehicles bursting into flame, exploding and smoke billowing from many more.

Once again he rolled the jet over and it screamed toward the horrified raiders.

This time as he passed over the carnage, Hawk released all of his remaining rockets and his final two bombs. Men fell in droves grasping gaping wounds, screaming..... dying. Vehicles erupted into flame, then exploded. Hawk had opened the gates of Hell on the raiders and they would not close until he or the raiders were destroyed.

In that one last pass Hawk had wiped out most of their small army. The fields were aflame. Hawk pulled up on the stick and the aircraft rose into the sky. Slamming the stick rearward, the jet violently rolled over and swung back at the stunned army, back from the direction he had just come from. None had ever seen such a machine. Nor had the raiders seen such carnage in so short of time. They had no time to think before Hawk had come back at them with the Harriers mini guns blazing. The ground around them erupted.... Stunned men fell to the ground cowering while their comrades around them died.

Hawk passed over the remnants of the army, again he pulled back to make another pass.

As the aircraft came around once again an alarm sounded and before Hawk could think one of his two engines flamed out.

“Shit!!!”

He scanned the gauges.

"Fuel.... It has to be fuel!"

He pressed the trigger and once again the guns spit forth fire. In the distance the ground once again erupted and men died. There was a loud sigh, then silence from the remaining engine as it too ran out of fuel, but Hawk kept the trigger pressed. The jet couldn't glide and Hawk knew it, but he kept firing.

Over the sound of his guns and the rushing wind speeding by the cockpit Hawk heard himself speaking aloud..

"Ok smart guy, now what the hell are ya gonna do? Best you can hope for is a controlled crash and assuming you walk away from it....Then what?"

The aircraft dropped lower and he aimed for the few remaining trucks.

"Well babe, looks like I won't be coming home after all..... Have a happy life my love...."

The trucks came closer the raiders had now gathered their wits and were firing back at the jet. Bullets flew by the canopy as Hawk leveled the jet even to the ground.

"Ok ya old fart, you can't allow yourself to get trapped when you hit the ground... Assuming you survive!"

Hawk blew the canopy from the jet. He looked at the remaining five trucks he was closing in on. Thoughts of his lovely Keli flashed through his mind.

"Damn baby... This is really gonna hurt!"

The aircraft dropped lower and lower until it was feet off the ground..... Hawk winced at the upcoming crash, but the jet was going where he had aimed it.....

The aircraft made horrible sounds as it plowed into the men and trucks everything burst into flame as the wings sheared off the jet and fuel vapors left in the tanks ignited. Bodies flew into the air as the vehicles themselves burst into flame. The gunner standing in the trucks bed stopped firing as he watched the flames and burning jet skipping along the ground towards him.... He never tried to run, he never had the time. The jet bounced over him and he watched in amazement as the other debris flew to each side of him. He grinned and turned back in the direction it had come..... Just in time to see the flames that would engulf him.

He opened his mouth to scream, but it was too late as his lungs were charred by the ensuing inferno.

The remains of the Harrier came to a skidding halt. Lying on its side, smoldering it teetered slightly on the edge of a drainage ditch, then stopped. There was no sound for several seconds. Hawk's body slumped to the side held in by his harness, was still.

Slowly his eyes fluttered. The sound of moaning, screaming in the background started to become clearer. Now and then a small explosion could be heard. The smell of burning flesh... of death filled his nostrils.

He felt heat... partially stunned he mumbled.

"Something must be burning nearby."

His eyes popped open! He glanced at what was left of his aircraft... His burning aircraft!
"Crap!!!"

Hawk jerked the harness open and he tumbled out into the dust muddy ditch. He scrambled out and toward another shallow dry ditch about fifty feet away. As he rolled into the dusty ditch he saw a hand full of raiders run up to the wreckage only to be greeted with a huge explosion.

Their burning bodies flew through the air. One landed only a few feet from Hawk. He looked at Hawk. Hawk looked back at his badly burned face. The life was draining from the dying raiders' eyes.

"Welcome to Hell you smoldering bastard!"

The raider feebly tried to speak, but death silenced him.

Hawk stood up and opened the bag he had pulled from the wreckage as he ran for cover. In it were two semi automatic machine pistols and many rounds of ammunition in long clips. There was retribution to be dealt out and no one did it better. Covered in mud and dust he arose like a demon from hell. A demon that walked calmly through the fields shooting anything that moved. Some raiders tried to play dead, but found that to be useless in their last moments on Earth. At times bullets would hit him and he would jerk from the impact, occasionally one would find an already weakened part of his armor and slightly penetrate. Hawk never flinched at the pain, there was nothing, no feeling left within his body... or his soul!

He had become death incarnate!

Hawk walked through the fields slaying those that tried to flee and those that tried to plead for their lives. When he ran out of bullets, he pulled his swords. Cowering or wounded, it made no difference. The fields ran red with blood and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. The scent of death was all around.... Hawk had become what he feared most.... and he didn't care!

Even those taking their last gasp of life were deprived of it as his swords would stab them as if trying to drive their souls into the ground and straight to hell.

Hawk had lost all track of time, of himself. He wandered the fields slashing, killing, severing. stopping only to listen for the faintest sound of life, then the slashing would start over again. He killed..... He murdered.... Never saying a word...

A short ways from him he noticed movement and the last of this murderous army was put asunder. Never again would they harm a soul and Hawk wondered if perhaps this time he might have lost his.... He looked around, then stopped..... there was no longer any sound, no movement, no life. His legs trembled as he slowly turned and scanned the killing grounds. He stood there, a sword in either hand..... his throat tightened, tears filled his eyes, there was an animal like scream that pierced the air around him.

It stopped as he raised his head looking around, he then realized the blood curdling scream had come from him. He screamed again as he sank to his knees on the blood soaked ground. The scream sounded as if all the demons from Hell had arisen. He knew they had come to earth...in him. He had become a demon, the soulless, cold blooded killer that he had fought so hard not to become.

Only Keli's love had pulled him back from the edge and these bastards had hurt her. Now he had struck back and his soul no longer could be found... He felt dead inside.

Hawk remained there on his knees, tormented by the thought at what he had done. Time passed, but he never moved. Wounded, bruised, his incredible uniform had actually been shredded in places and was covered in blood. His swords planted firmly in the ground on either side of him, he looked at his trembling hands wondering if he could ever come back from this dark place he had entered. Could he ever live with what he had done here this day. He lost track of time as he kneeled there lost within the depths of sorrow, hatred, self pity. The fields smoldered around him and the late afternoon breezes blew the few remaining wafts of smoke past his face. The setting sun cast eerily misshapen shadows across the fields as he tried to regain his humanity, for the first time in a long while he was truly afraid for his sanity! He trembled....

Hawk never heard the trucks out on the road, nor did he hear them stop or the soldiers that came running toward him. Only when he heard someone speak did Hawk rise and grasp his swords. He recognized the uniforms of the handful of soldiers that had come in his direction. They in turn couldn't believe what they were seeing.....

In the now fading light stood a man, battered and torn, covered in blood, a sword in each hand amidst a field of carnage.... And he was alive!

"Where are the rest of your troops sir?"

"Do they need medical help, sir?" Another asked.

Hawk looked blankly as if in a trance, quietly he spoke almost in a whisper, his voice raspy.

"There was no one else, no one needs help...."

“But sir.... All these bodies.... They’re all the enemy, where are your troops?”

Hawk looked at the officer and spoke in a chilling raspy whisper.

“There was just me.”

The officer scanned the field as if straining to grasp what had occurred in this place.

“But... There are.... So many....” He turned back to Hawk *“So many....”*

Hawk stared back at the officer with a look that sent chills down his spine.

“Who are you sir?”

The officer in command felt himself tremble, his knees almost buckled when Hawk looked at him with dull eyes and whispered his reply in a quiet raspy voice that echoed through the officers head.

“Death....”

The soldiers looked at one another, then back towards Hawk, but he was walking over to a motorcycle they hadn’t noticed before. He sheathed his swords one by one and straddled his bike.

“Sir... the bodies?”

“Bury them, leave them... I don’t care.”

There was no emotion there and the soldiers would not press the matter.

One of the officers gave the order to start digging mass graves as Hawk rode off.

“LT, is he expecting us to believe he killed errr, destroyed all....” He looked around *“...Aw, shit LT, you’ve got to be kidding!... One man?”*

The officer in command looked at his Sergeant.

“Sergeant? Did you look into this eyes?”

The Lieutenant shuddered and added *“I did...”* And I’m going to have nightmares the rest of my life because what I saw there....He turned and walked back toward the convoy trucks.

The sergeant felt a chill pass through his body, he shuddered as he scanned the battlefield.

“Holy crap!”

He looked at the man on the cycle that was now vanishing over a hill in the distance, then around the bloody battlefield once again, the burning aircraft, the smoldering trucks, the bodies.....

“Dammmm.....” He shivered again.

Hawk would drive on through the afternoon, then on through the night. He had survived a brush with death, then the jets crash and the many wounds he had managed to receive from both. At no time did he consider having himself repaired. At no time did he stop to administer any form of medical help he could avail himself to other than what he could reach and do while driving. It would take precious time from his journey back to his beloved Keli, his love, his wife. The more her thought of her, of her warm smile, her tender touch, he could feel his humanity returning. He felt himself smiling.... Once again it was Keli that was bringing him back from that dark place.

Not the cool night air, nor the driving rain that cleansed him of blood, could slow him down. He would soon be with his love, his wife and her love would once again replenish him.... Save him from himself.

They would soon be home and their life would once again return to normal. Perhaps somewhere then he too would return to normal. He had become a primeval beast, a demon, never did he want to reach that point again. He had finally seen hell and knowing it was in him, never again wanted to allow that beast to emerge.... Never, because the next time he might not be able to return from that place he always vanished into. That dark place that some go and never return. Each time that dark place seemed to hold him longer, each time wanting to return became harder...

The rain washed down upon him. A smile crossed his lips. He was on his way home and he dearly missed his love. Hawk twisted the throttle and the cycle roared through the driving rain leaving only a trail of swirling spray in its wake and into the cold darkness he rode.....

The night was long and cold, but the thought of his loving wife kept him warm...

Chapter 33.

The rain had stopped and the morning sun cast it's light across the fields as a light fog drifted in the lower parts of the road. The grasses along the road would dance in the back draft of Hawk's cycle as he sped by. Onward he pushed, onward to be once again with his beloved. The fog parted as Hawk's cycle careened down the deserted old highway.

The night had been long and his body tired. He had driven over seven hundred miles at sometimes break neck speed. Where the roads were good speed was not the issue, but rather on the poorer roads, where he would swear and be forced to slow down. Now he was on passable roads and nothing could hold him back. Hawk could feel his heart quicken and mood lighten every mile he moved closer to his love. Morning had awakened a new energy within him. He was closing in on his goal to be at Keli's side when she awoke.

The guards saw him at the top of a distant hill and hurriedly raised the arm of the barricade. No sooner than they had raised it, Hawk's cycle roared through. They had seen nothing but a blur as he passed and stood looking at one another thankful they decided to raise the arm when they did. He had passed through the gates not stopping for the guards, not stopping for anyone in the way. Hawk was close now to seeing his love and the troops walking around the base found that out as they were sent scurrying out of his way as he swerved through the streets.

He skidded to a stop in front of the hospital and dismounted. He leapt up the few stairs and was soon headed for Keli's room. It would be so good to see her radiant smile, the smile that warmed his very soul.

Hawk burst through the door and saw Walt, a nurse and the doctor by Keli's bed. There was his love, his wife, but sensed something wasn't right.... Then he saw the doctor lift the blanket and pulled it over her still face....

Keli, was no more.....

He had arrived too late! Hawk stopped mid room as if he had hit some invisible wall, his arms dropped to his side...

"Keli?....."

The doctor looked in Hawk's direction and from the look in his face, Hawk knew..... He staggered toward her bed, fell to his knees as tears flowed freely from his eyes, his body wracked

with pain, his mind with devastated sorrow. It was almost too much to bear. His love, his life was gone and he was not around to comfort her during her final moments of life.

Walt, the doctor and the nurse turned their looks to this battered and bruised man sobbing on the floor. His wounds obviously unattended were still bleeding and all that mattered to him was his woman... his wife... his love.

Hawk looked up at Walt as if to ask for answers. Walt in turn was crying. He looked into Hawk's eyes.

"Hawk....Bob.... She... Keli... Her heart stopped several times during last night, the doc called me in, just in case, but she made it through the night and this morning. Somehow she always came back... back like she was fighting to see you one more time."

Hawk struggled to his feet and made it the rest of the way to Keli's bed side before collapsing once more. The doctor uncovered her and Hawk laid his head upon her hand sobbing. This was more than the nurse could stand, the sight of this man, sobbing over his lost love. She burst into tears and ran crying from the room. Even the doctor that had fought back tears, could no longer stem the flow.

"Hawk... It appeared that she had massive brain damage. The stuff you gave her seemed to work well, until early this morning. I... We... did everything we could.... I'm so sorry sir."

Walt tried to speak without sobbing, but the grief in the room was just too much, but he managed to add.

"Hawk.... Keli, during one lucid moment told me to tell you... how much she loved you... How much life you gave her..... and not to grieve because you made her so happ....."

Walt could not continue. His body wracked with emotion, his head lowered. He, as the others, sobbed without shame. This was his friend's darkest day, he felt Hawk's pain.

Walt knew, even in his grief what must be done. He gently grabbed the doctor's arm and started leading him out of the room and quietly closed the door.

There was a small group of the surviving soldiers that Keli had been with, that had been holding vigil. Seeing the sadness of the general and doctor, they knew what had happened. No words were necessary.

"Hawk will mourn her for three hours as hunter tradition calls for. He is not to be disturbed within this time."

Walt motioned a guard over to the door *"This is an order corporal, no one enters this room...no one and if any one tries...."* Walt looked solemnly at the soldier *"You put a bullet*

between their eyes!!!” His eyes still filled with tears, his voice trembling continued as he looked back to the doctor.

“Doc after the three hours are up, Hawk will come out of the room and you’ll help Hawk take her to the morgue... just the two of you! Then you have her cremated immediately.”

Walt paused *“Hawk will come down and claim her ashes.....”* He brushed away a tear *“When he does you and anyone else are to leave the room..... understood?”*

The doctor nodded and walked away to make arrangements.

Walt turned to the corporal *“And you remember what I told you soldier.... No one enters.”*

The Corporal and a few soldiers that were present had never seen a General cry before, not before nor after a battle, not even when they were against huge odds. They understood though. All had heard the legend, the stories, but none had known the man, yet they all seemed to share in his grief.

Hawk mourned for three hours and later claimed the ashes. He then vanished into her old hospital room for another three weeks of mourning. This was the hunter tradition, but Hawk didn’t care. This sorrow wouldn’t leave, nor did he expect it to. His love was gone, his soul would die with her, nothing would be the same. Life without Keli was just unimaginable, but he would go on.... Just because he knew she would expect him to and a long ago promise he had made to keep going until his country was once again united and free from raiders and mutants.

And for those three weeks he mourned. Food would be taken to the door but when it was time to be picked up, little if any would be gone. This was a time for sorrow and Hawk would eat only enough to survive and only then because he knew Keli would want him to live. Few knew of what traditions were observed during these weeks. Those that had some knowledge of hunters wouldn’t speak of it. This was a time of deep solace, of living within ones grief and of memories.

General Samuels had arrived and General Walters had filled him in on the events that had taken place. The reports from the rescue convoy had reached the fort. The survivors from the small town had been rescued, the remains of the raider armies equipment had been taken care of and then there was the report.....

“Over two hundred?? Christ! ,....Walt, I’ve known him half as long as you, but geezzzz two hundred??”

“That’s the report we got back from the relief column that went after the village survivors.”

“How’s Hawk taking it??”

“He’s morning in the hunter tradition Sam....”

“I’ve heard of it, but to be honest Walt, I have no idea what it is or if there is anything I... we should be doing.”

Walt smiled a slight smile at Sam’s concern for Hawk as it was apparent, but he knew there was little to be done.... At the moment.

“Sam... This is what I know... Hawk will spend three weeks mourning for his wife. During that time he has taken her ashes and placed them on three pieces of Tarnoe paper. To each he has added different metallic powders, silver nitrate, and Winnowe root and lastly he will slash his palm and add his blood to her ashes.”

“Blood?”

“Yes Sam... Blood. Don’t ask me the meaning, I have no idea. All I know is when Hawk went to the wastelands he adopted the hunter way of life to fit in. Something just seem to fit him I guess, he follows many of the traditions...”

Walt continued *“... Anyhow...then each of the three bundles are tied with Tornee filament paper.”*

“Walt... How do you know all of this.... It’s like yo.....”

Walt’s eyes lowered, his voice became soft.

“Because Sam.... I’ve seen Hawk go through this over forty years ago....”

Sam heard a faint gasp as Walt held back sorrowful memories. It was more than obvious that Walt not only admired this man, but considered him a close friend. But to think that Hawk had gone through this before. General Samuels started to ask, then decided not to dredge up the past and Walt probably wouldn’t speak of it anyway. His thoughts were broken as Walt continued.

“Sam, he’ll come out in two more days and we’ll have to be ready for him. As we’re the two closest friends he has it will be our duty to witness the final rite.”

“Rite? What will...”

“Just be ready to leave Sam.... Just be ready to be there for him...”

On the last day of mourning shortly before evening Hawk emerged from the room. Looking gaunt and weary the years showed their toll and the loss of his wife had almost been too much to tolerate, but somehow he did. His eyes red and still filled with tears as he walked slowly,

reverently down the halls toward the doors followed by Walt, Sam and a couple of guards. Hawk carried a black cloth bag containing the three small bundles, cradling it like a baby in his arms.

The two guards sprinted ahead and held the doors open for this grieving soul, but they staggered when they got the doors open and looked out to the hospital grounds. They stood there at attention with the doors against their backs, facing away from the building.... They were stunned by what lie before them.

In the fading light stood many men and women that all snapped to attention when Hawk appeared. There were military officers and people in civilian clothes. The golden suns glow glinted off the shoulders of these soldiers that came to honor Hawks loss. There were three and four star generals. Generals of only one and two stars, sergeants with many stripes, all in dress uniforms. Most faces showed their age, their respect, their sorrow. Civilians that the guards recognized as Governors and congressman and women, famous business executives and others that stood up straight and placed their hands over their hearts.

As Hawk slowly passed both sides of the line snapped a salute and held it until he passed, then turned with tears in their eyes to watch as he passed... this broken man....carrying his loves ashes.

The guards in turn felt their eyes fill with tears. These men and women over the last two weeks had come from all over the country. The United States top generals, Governors from many of the eastern states. There were famous businessmen and women, famous scientists all dressed in black.... All with eyes filled with tears. All mourning this man's loss. They had dropped what they were doing and come here... here to this small outpost in the middle of nowhere... Here to show their love and respect for this man.... This country's legend.

As Hawk came to the end of the line they all turned and followed Hawk as he walked to the entrance of the base. Hawk gently laid Keli's ashes in the carrier of his cycle and slowly closed the lid. He swung a leg over his bike and sat astride as he turned and looked at the throng of people. With his tear stained face he gently nodded, turned and slowly drove out toward the far side of the valley.

Walt and Sam got into a Jeep behind and the three rode off out into the early evening. One soldier looked over at another *"Just the three? Where are they going?"*

The other shrugged.

"Hawk and two of his closest friends will finish the ceremony soldier." Said one of the Generals that had overheard them.

"I'm sorry sir.... I just was wondering... I"

"That's ok private.... The ceremony is a private thing, as is the time of mourning. His friends go to witness her transition ... her return to"

He smiled at the two soldiers, but never finished as he turned and slowly walked away. He had once witnessed the rite and just couldn't begin to explain to someone that had never seen it. The beauty of it, the sadness.... nor the meaning of the rite could be explained. And this general also knew this wasn't the first time Hawk's friend Walt had seen this rite. There had been other times, other rites. Walt and Hawk had been through a lot over the years, the sadness was the worse. The General walked away shaking his head as the two soldiers turned toward the gate and watched as the three drove off toward the high ground on the other side of the small valley.

Hawk drove across the small valley and turned off the main road onto a narrow dirt road that followed up a trail to the top of a cliff that over looked the land below. In the distance he could see the lights of the fort as he stood atop the rise, then looked to the west at the last rays of the setting sun. The deep orange globe was being swallowed by the mountains and the oncoming darkness of night crept over the valley as Hawk opened the small cloth bag.

Walt stopped the Jeep about fifty feet from where Hawk had pulled up at the top of the high rise where the road had a bend. He walked toward the edge of the cliff.

Walt and Sam wouldn't have been able to see Hawk if it weren't for the orange glow from the setting sun that was silhouetting him. He knelt down and picked up something. They knew what he held in his hands and tears once again started to flow from their eyes. They looked at one another, then back toward Hawk.

Sam nudged Walt *"God Walt, I'm going to lose it..... Damn if I know what's coming and I'm still gonna lose it."*

"I know Sam, I know.... I.." His voice trailed off to an almost prayer like tone, *"It's as beautiful of a ceremony, as it is sad Sam.... I lost it the last time I saw Hawk this way.... This rite..."*

Walt choked back a sob.

Both men could barely see through the tears that were forming.

The evening shadows just had reached the top of the small mountain, while Hawk was silhouetted in a reddish orange glow. The shadows started to creep down the mount toward the cliff where Hawk was. The slight breeze vanished and the valley became still as if waiting for what was about to become.

A flicker....then a small flame could be seen. There were two small barely visible torches on either side of him that he set ablaze, then they faded to a warm glow rather than on fire. He held something gently within his hands. Hawk touched the object to one of the torches and lit what he was holding, then pulled his arm rearward and threw.

A ball of bluish fire arched across the sky, small at first, then bursting into a huge bluish waterfall of sparks, burning through the darkness as it fell toward the earth. The flame got larger until the fireball burst forth into a cascading blue flame that flashed, then slowly vanished into the darkness of the valley. And in the distance they could hear Hawk's voice echoing through the valley.

"HUNTER...We guide by the stars..... May your soul soar to the heavens to guide those of us that are lost!"

Another flame appeared, then sparks like the one before, but this one was a bright green, it too burned and burst as the first, setting the evening sky a flame, until that too vanished into the darkness.

"Hunter....From the Earth we are born.... it sustains us through our years.... To the Earth we shall all return!"

The sun's rays had reached down the mountain to the cliff side where Hawk lovingly threw the third and last remains of his beloved.

The fire blazed in the fast vanishing light. This flame was a beautiful silver and burst into a huge golden shower of sparks descending toward the earth. Then vanished into the blackness below as Hawk shouted once again.

"HUNTER.... We hunted together and you will live forever in my memory...."

Hawk dropped to his knees.... Then as if whispering a prayer Hawk said,

"You will forever live within my heart.... my soul, forever."

His head lowered.

"Good-by Keli.... my wife..... my love."

Walt and Sam two of the highest ranking generals in the new U.S. military, yet there they were sobbing and wiping away the tears from their cheeks like a couple of schoolboys.

"I have never heard Hawk say good-by....Never!"

"You're right Sam" Walt said solemnly *"I hope neither of us will ever have to see this again."*

Walt nudged Sam's arm and nodded toward the Jeep. The two men turned and got into their Jeep and headed back to the base. They knew Hawk would not talk to them and they knew there would be no consoling him.

Sam glanced back from the main road and saw Hawk who was now completely silhouetted in the last rays of the setting sun, was surrounded in a deep red glow. He swung a leg over his cycle, glanced at the valley below, turned and gave a slight wave to his two friends, put the cycle in gear, then vanished from sight.

They knew Hawk... and they knew he wouldn't be seen again for years.... He had lost something that he'd never be able to reclaim. Something that Hawk would not be able to recover from for a long time. He would have to return to the wilderness, it would be there he would find solace, if it were to be found.

But they also knew that someday he would return.

That was his way.....

Thus was his legend.

Epilog:

Hawk wouldn't be seen for several years. Now and then reports would trickle back about some deed he had done, but eventually, once he had mourned long enough, he would return. He would return and once again continue doing what he had been doing all these long decades.

His legend would be told around campfires.. His fame would from time to time fade.... Only to raise again and once more be told to a new generation.

For these times.... These moments would forever be burnt into his memory. He stopped his cycle and for one last time, looked back toward the valley. Through the cool night air came a warm breeze that seemed to caress his cheek. He looked to the road ahead as he shielded his eyes from the sun's final glow as it slipped into its long night's sleep.

In the glow he envisioned his lost love, the way she tossed her head when she had bested him, the giggle when she first found something new and the heart wrenching smile that always would make his heart soar. Hawk's body shook as he choked back the urge to weep. As he turned toward the long road ahead, he closed his eyes. He could feel his Keli, there behind him. Her warm arms wrapped around his chest. Her head laying gently upon his back. The warm breeze blew once again and as it caressed his face and tickled his ear.

Hawk could hear his wife's gentle voice whispering...

"Be strong my love, for I shall always ride within your heart" and he knew that at least for a while she would ride within him.

It would take a long time for this wound to heal for there was no medicine strong enough to cure the pain he felt. Tears blew off this cheek as he drove his cycle off into the night that was now as dark and cold as his soul.

The young stranger removed his feet from the table where he had been resting them and sat his chair upright. He looked at the tavern maid with wistful eyes and spoke so softly she could barely hear his words.

“ Little could Hawk know, almost thirty years from that day, fate would throw him a curve that would set his world spinning. ”

He grinned as if he too were there, but yet she sensed he had not, as the stranger continued....

“ He’d be blindsided by circumstances that no one could have foreseen and once again he would be thrown into a sequence of events that would forever change his life. His very soul..... His legend. And this time..... ”

The stranger looked up and smiled at the barmaid as she lay a fresh ale upon the table and sat back down adjacent to him. She leaned forward in anticipation....

“This time.... Well my dear..... ” He grinned, *“That would be another story.”*

The End?