

Hawk's Legend II

“Déjà vu”

By

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Chapter 1.

The funny thing about time is that it never seems to be on ones side. If you have something important to do, there's never enough of it. Try to forget something, there's always too much of it. And try to manage it... Impossible! So time goes on doing whatever it damn well wants and there is little anyone can ever do about it other than try to ignore it.... Or complain.

"Twenty five years ago I told them, *Two to three decades* I told them. *Two or three decades!* Christ I hate being right!" He glanced out the window across the room, then looked back down at his journal and shook his head. "If only we really had known" His thoughts trailed off. "I hate being right and not being able to do anything about it!" He cursed once again.

For some time is as simple as planning. To others it's a matter of not worrying about it. Then there are the few that time has absolutely no meaning for. Nor do they care. Time to them is a mere inconvenience, a nuisance. For one man, it just meant it would drag on decade after decade and no matter how he tried to ignore it, it was there to remind him its effect on others. He would watch people wither and grow old, friends aged. All around him children were born, grew, lived their lives, aged and died. He didn't age, nor did he care anymore.

"Damn it's been about thirty years since..." He pushed that thought out of his mind. Even now it was painful to dwell upon. "Damn! Now where was I?"

Time had become something he merely drifted through. Something to be indifferent to and at times something to hate. To this man time had become no more than just existing, nothing more, nothing less and the years passed. All around him either aged... or died.

Now years after the West coast campaign it seemed there was far too much time to kill. The campaign had been long and costly to the country but even with the losses of so many, there was so much gained. Too many had died, lives that the country could not afford to lose. For the man named Hawk, he continued to live. He was so tired of killing, of seeing others die. These years Hawk decided to pass time once again back out in the wastelands. This time around he was scouting the northern boundaries searching for information or maybe once and for all his time would end and it would be of no more concern to him.

He wrote into his journal;

"Day 23.

It seems I was right six years ago. This Ed Diablo has been building his army and those raids over the last six years have been only a subterfuge to keep us from invading his territory. At this point I don't believe he ever intended to invade the east or at least for a few more years. This maniac wants to stomp out all resistance in these parts first.

All his plans so far seem to indicate everything I foresaw. All my plans are still going well. I'm at the halfway lodge in time for the 'Selling' Maybe I can find out more here. Note to self: Stop being right! – H."

The halfway lodge at the edge of the northern plains was packed this time of year. The compound consisted of several buildings, a tavern and lodge, with not much of anything else. It laid four hundred miles west of the Mississippi and bordered many of the trade routes north of the southern wastelands.

Traders, hunters, merchants as well as locals had all come for what had become to be known as "The selling", which was a time of the year when trappers came to this place to sell their pelts. Explorers and scavengers sold artifacts and other things of worth they had found during their months in the northern wastelands or the wide desolate plains north of the wastelands. There were items found from the ruined cities that only few dared to venture into as they were deep into the areas controlled by Diablo's army or mutants. Areas of the desert so hot and so far from water, only the bravest... or most desperate would go. Deals were to be found, strange items from a time long past, a world only one man on Earth remembered.

Then there were the farmers and caravans that brought goods to sell, it was a time of merriment and a chance for some to prosper. Fresh produce, wheat, corn and livestock rarely came this far east, save for this time of year. While others just came to observe. Mostly it was a chance to see old friends and join in some merriment. The bustling crowds scurried from one area to another buying up what they could. Goods were needed to resupply those heading back out into the deep wastelands of the deep forests to the north.

This was neutral ground and even soldiers from the huge, newly consolidated raider army run by a leader named El Diablo were there, observing, hiding always in the shadows, always watching.... Waiting.... They too observed the neutrality of this outposts inn... or at least as it suited them. Although far from the main raider army, most steered clear of them. And then, there were those that always watched and would sell information to any one that paid. These people were hard to spot except for those that lived within the world of deceit.

This peculiar day had turned out to be a rather pleasant day with the early fall weather bringing only warm clear skies and a gentle wind. Sounds of merchants, traders and farmers filled the early noon time air as they set up their camps and showed their wares to anyone that would stop by. While in the tavern people filled the tables demanding food and ale. It roared with the sounds of rowdy men making the best of their short time before they struck out once again, either in pairs or solo. Now was the time to forget hardships.

An old retired trapper with one leg walked through the door and glanced around the inns large room. He squeezed through the crowd near the bar being careful he did not hit some hot

headed character with his crutch or nudge some drunk. His days of brawling had long been past and the last thing he wanted was trouble.

He glanced around the room and spotting an empty chair, he headed toward it. The tables were full, the bar packed with men standing, the barmaids hurried among the throng carrying huge trays of food and ale. Loud talk and raucous laughter rang throughout. Yet as crowded as this place was, there was a table with only one man sitting at it. No one sat with the stranger, no one took the extra chairs. For whatever reasons this stranger sat alone, the old man didn't care. It had been a long journey, especially with one leg and he was tired and hungry.

The old trapper worked his way through the packed tables squeezing, bumping and occasionally getting bumped, toward that table in the corner next to a wooden wall that hid the stairs going up to the second floor. Only that one man sat there and the old trapper decided asking to sit, would at worse bring a resounding 'no'.. He finally pushed through the remaining crowded tables, removed his worn shabby hat and looked at the stranger sitting at the table and with a shy grin spoke just loud enough to be heard over the din of the room.

"Pardon good sir... all the tables seem to be full...." He motioned around the inn with his hand.

"Perhaps you'd allow me to join you?" He said grinning with a mostly toothless smile. His scruffy white beard and moustache failed to hide his years. This was a trapping man and by the looks of him, he had been for many years. His patched buckskins told the stranger this man hadn't been any farther east than this outpost inn buried into the bowels of the northern part of the wastelands. This man demanded respect. Trappers of this kind braved the areas to trap that regular men rarely ventured. Farmers that had little livestock, inns and compounds like this one needed fresh meat. Hides were used for many things as caravans rarely got into these areas. Even so, at his age it would best stay away from the likes of others in this tavern. All this ran through the stranger's mind as he looked down to the chair he had his feet on. The stranger gave the trapper a half grin...

"Sure old timer." The stranger replied removing his feet from the chair that was directly across from him. As he lowered his boots he pushed out the chair with one foot. The old trapper reached down and swiped the dust off the chair with his hat and smiled at the stranger.

"Thanks... Heh, heh, I've been on the road for about thirteen days and sure am mighty hungry there stranger... durned if there ain't any other places to rest me arse and I doubt if your boots are as dusty as the seat of my pants."

The stranger motioned to the barmaid, but before he could speak the trapper grinned again as he tossed his hat on the side of the table.

"My names Jed.... What's yours?"

"Howdy Jed..."

The barmaid took Jed's order, left two tankards of ale and left.

"Jed I don't toss my name around...sorry, but seems every time I do..."

"Heheh, that's ok stranger, I gotcha... What brings ya to these parts?"

There was no reply as the stranger looked out one of the windows across the room.

"Guess you ain't much fer talkin, so I'll just eat and leave ya be."

The stranger smiled at Jed and went back to staring out the window which was a few tables away from where they sat.

Food was brought and the old hunter ate, but over an hour went by with barely a half dozen words said.

Old Jed wiped his jaw and grinned to his table mate.

"I thank ya fer letting me share yer table there stranger..."

"No problem Jed, guess I should apologize for not talking with you more, but it's been a long time since I've been around people... I've been out California way and just got back." He smiled at Jed.

"Good God! California?... Damn, heard it was bad out there. They been fighting mutants now for.... Shit! Thirty... thirty five years.....At least that's when the military went out there to clear it... or longer. Damned if I can remember that far back any more!"

"Yep... though has been a few more than thirty five, Jed.... Me, hell I've just been there a bit over twenty, give or take. I'd come back east, take care of business, then found it was too quiet and went back again."

Jed pointed down to his missing leg. "Hell, I wanted to hunt mutes, so about twenty years ago I figured on going out there myself... Got ambushed and left for dead by some of El Diablo's soldiers, back before he got all the armies together. Hell by the time I managed to crawl to a ranch for help..." Jed made a slicing motion across his missing leg. "Guess I'm lucky I got to keep most of the upper half."

The stranger nodded, Jed grinned at the stranger. The old timer swallowed down the last morsel of food on his plate and gulped down the last of his ale.

"Strange uniform ya got there... Not raider, not military and sure the hell's not Diablo's troops."

"Nope!"

“Ahhh, guess ya ain’t sayin?”

“Nope.” He replied with a slight smile and a wink.

“Heheh, well then I guess I’ll be pushing on a bit.... Have a long way to go and with a missing leg and now the good one’s going bad on me.... Takes me a while to get where I’m going.” Old Jed smiled and held out his hand, the stranger shook it and Jed hobbled out toward the door on his crutch.

Two tables over old Jed cautiously threaded around a rather huge mountain man. Just as he squeezed to the back of this human giant, the mountain man stuck out his foot and tripped the cripple. He leapt from his seat and screamed at old Jed who was laying on the floor cowering. The mountain man’s two companions roared with laughter at the helpless old man laying behind their friends chair, sprawled upon the floor... Their huge friend standing over him growling profanities.

Jed looked up and pleaded.... “Please mister... It was my mistake...all my fault... A man with one leg can’t...”

“You goddamned cripple...” The mountain man moved his left foot rearward in preparation to give Jed a good kick, **“I’ll teach you to be more careful!”**

Jed closed his eyes and covered his face and prepared for the worse when he heard a crash! He peeked through his fingers and noticed the human mountain was no longer looking at him.

The mountain man had spun around and his two chums had risen and all were looking toward the rear of the room...

The mountain man roared...

“Who threw that chair... ‘cuz I’m going’ ta find out... and when I do thar gonna die... Slow and painful like!” He ground his fists together as if to prove his point while his pals laughed. All three were spoiling for a drunken brawl as a hush fell upon the tavern...

“I SAID WHO THREW THE DAMN CHAIR!!!”

The tavern filled with nervous whispers as a lone man at the back of the tavern slowly stood, took one last swig of his ale and spoke.....

“Guess that would have been me and I guess you have my chair laying on your table...”

Old Jed twisted to see who was speaking. He peered down the now empty aisle between the tables. It was the stranger he’d been sharing the same table with for the last half hour or so... and the chair he’d been sitting in was laying on the mountain man’s table after it had bounced off his back.

The stranger glared at the three trappers, yet stood there in a relaxed way and continued...

“So as you have my chair... Looks like I’ll have to come over there and get it back...”

The mountain man threw up his hands in front of him.... “**NO!**...Ahhhh, Hey, my mistake sir.... I’ll bring it right back to you... Must have grabbed it be mistake.... Is that ok there Mister Ha....”

“**Enough!**....” The stranger sneered at the trio, “ Ok fair enough,... your buddy in the nasty looking coat, brings back my chair...and...”

The mountain man motion for one of his friends to return the chair....

“Now you help Jed up off the floor... Apologize... AND MEAN IT!... Then maybe you owe him a drink...maybe two...”

The brute reached down and scooped Jed off the floor, reached into his pouch and pulled enough money to buy Jed three or four drinks and nervously placed it into Jed’s hand as Jed fumbled with his crutch with the other. Once Jed straightened up, old Jed tipped his hat to the stranger as the bully helped him through the crowd, and gave him a tankard of ale snatched from a passing barmaid’s tray...

The mountain men looked over toward the stranger, then his men. The stranger slowly looked after Jed and saw him wander up to the bar. The brute looked back to the stranger who nodded back that all was ok with him as the three bullies sat down and continued eating...what was left after the chair knocked most of it onto the floor.

The tavern crowd seemed to sigh and went back to the loud din it was before.

Jed gently nudged the guy standing next to him and whispered...

“What the hell just happened? Christ, partner.... that guy’s twice the size of...”

“I don’t know his name... but trust me old timer... That’s one guy no one messes with...”

“Who...”

“I told ya... I don’t know his name... and if I did I wouldn’t tell ya... I heard he’s killed men for less....”

Old Jed turned slowly and looked at the man he’d just been sharing a table with...

“Him?... Nawww...Hell partner we just shared a table... we....”

“I tell ya old timer... I heard he’s killed hundreds of men, some say thousands.... Hell even more mutes... There’s rumors about him... rumors you don’t want to.... ” The guy just turned back around to the bar as his words trailed off....

Jed snuck a quick glance back toward the rear of the tavern... Then back at his new drinking companion, who in turn nodded the affirmative to Jed...

“Damn.... But I just ate...I mean I sat.... Him?...Naawww!”

He took a hearty slug of his drink! He looked over to his new pal and wrinkled his face as if remembering...

“Seems I recall twenty years.... Maybe thirty or longer... some hunter way down in the deserts... can’t remember for sure but seems like he killed off a bunch of raiders... AH! I remember a couple o hundred all by himself.... You tryin’ to tell me that’s... Aw hell that was way over thirty years ago....That guy was about the strangers age back then.... Can’t be the same one...”

“I told ya ta shut up dammit! We don’t talk about shit like that ‘round here partner... If you’re gonna, git outta here...least...away from me....”

“Damn!” Old Jed turned and looked across the room again where he had been sitting... He turned back to the bar and his drink, then glanced at the stranger in the mirror who was now back in his chair, sipping his ale and staring out the window once again.

“Nawww!...” Old Jed went back to drinking.

Chapter 2.

The stranger had propped his feet back on the newly returned seat and leaned his chair back so his head was resting on the wall. He turned his head and looked out the window that was directly across the room from his table. The tavern had returned to normal which was fine with him.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining, blue skies were dotted by tiny white clouds. Now and then he'd get a glimpse of a bird flying past the window. It was truly a glorious day, but the stranger felt nothing, the day was just another day. Time was no longer an adversary to him, he no longer fought to maintain his memories like he once strived to do. It was just like the days past.... Like those yet to come. Sun, rain, snow, he cared not. His mind wandered as visions from the past crept back from the darkest recesses of his memory. Visions of death, killing. Visions of long lost loves. Of his wives long past. Memories he either wanted to forget or could not remember.

It was the 'could not remember' that bothered him the most as it ate at his tortured soul and no matter how hard he tried, he had forgotten things... Time had won out where his memory was concerned.

"Christ how long has it been since I could no longer remember her face?" He muttered in a whisper. "Ten... twenty...?" Sadness filled his thoughts. It had been far too long.

He was a stranger to these parts, he'd gone to California hoping killing mutes and that maybe keeping busy would hide the pain. There he found that as the years passed only the visions of his love slowly faded from his mind not the pain or loss. Then one day he realized that he could only remember she once existed.... and for a time he had been happy. Pain still filled his heart and there was no solace, only doing what he did best kept him busy. It was these quiet times that were the hardest for him. The west coast mutant war had been over for some time and with only some remote areas left to search, life had become somewhat boring.

This tormented man had gone back east by ship years earlier and had been about to return to California by land to visit his adopted daughter and her husband. She really wasn't adopted, but she was the closest thing he had to family. Yet the thought of seeing her... how much she may have aged since the last time he saw her... The thought of seeing her so much older changed his mind... It would have been too painful.

Since all of the west coast had been cleared for over seven years and was in the process of rebuilding, things had become way to tame and boring, he'd decided instead of California, he would tackle a new and growing problem..... Rumors, the kind that made those back east uneasy. As he had reached the Mississippi port, the rumors of some of El Diablo's army was

causing problems, He decided it was about time to check the rumors out. The rumors had been true!

That had been six years ago.... He planned things out, packed up and headed west once again.

El Diablo had amassed his huge army and now controlled this entire country from the Mississippi to the eastern Rockies and from the northern most wastelands to what used to be southern Idaho to the areas about two hundred miles north of Wall City, which now had a huge military garrison.

As Diablo's army grew, so did the rumors of expansion east of the big muddy. The eastern army was believed to be weakened from years of the war along the west coast and Diablo faced only scattered outposts to control this sparsely populated land. The southern garrisons were too well armed and he would be out in the open. Rumor had it Diablo wanted to strike east of the old Miss, which he figured would force the country to pull its troops out of the southern wastelands where he would control with one final swoop wiping out any remaining troops that remained. But these were still rumors...

So with the rumors abounding, this was the place to be. Watching, listening... And finding out nothing. Not the slightest hint of information other than Diablo had a small army in the south and his main force was.... farther north.... but where?

Now here the stranger sat here in a tavern looking out the window watching an occasional bird fly by.

"Boring!" He pondered, but there was absolutely nothing going on... No rumors, no raider army, nothing! So there he sat looking out a damned window playing stupid games to pass the time. Now and then a human would pass by the window as he was too far to see much beyond what passed directly in front, but it took his mind away from his depressing thoughts.

His thoughts changed again to a game, something to pass the time.

"Bet the next guy will be a trapper."

"Crap... wrong!"

"Ok... trader next."

"YEAH!!! Knew it..."

"Hmmm... another trader..."

A man wearing a beaten down top hat with a feather jammed in a lace side band and a fancy beaded buckskin jacket stopped and peeked into the window holding his hands to both sides of

his face. He wore heavy eye makeup and pink lipstick which smudged the window slightly as he scanned the room. His scruffy black beard hid the rest of his coat.

The stranger chuckled to himself in a low whisper....

“Geezzz... Have no idea what the hell that was!”

He gave a little smile thinking that if anyone could hear his whisper, he'd be laughed out of the tavern. He glanced around the room making sure no one was looking. He turned to look back out the window.

“Hmmm... let's see... next will be a.....”

His feet fell from the chair, he sat upright almost falling over. He leapt to his feet, legs flailing as he did....

He was stunned!

There was a flash of a woman's shape from the waist up, walking past the window. She of slight build and had jet black hair.... Done in a ponytail.... As she had glanced around... her face... Keli's face! Memories came flooding back he remembered her face!!! He remembered!

“Wait... that wasn't her... it couldn't be her!!” His mind raced trying to make sense of what had just happened, his head spun.

“AW CHRIST.... I'm having delusions.... Come on Bob, get hold of yourself guy!!! Keli died thirty years ago... ”

He looked at the window again and there was no one there.... He sighed.

“Maybe even though I don't age physically...” A puzzled look crossed his face, “Aw CRAP!.... Maybe my brain is starting to deteriorate... Hell maybe I'm just losing it...” Then he stopped when he realized he was whispering aloud as he looked around once more to see if anyone had heard.

He moved hastily across the room to the window, checked left, then right. There was nothing unusual out the window and once again he walked back to his table and started to relax. As he got neared his table, he found two rather large men sitting there. As he approached, they looked at him, jumped up and moved away back toward the bar apologizing all the time for sitting at his table. He sat back down, looked back at the window, then the other windows. Nothing! He shook his head in disbelief

“Whew!” He sighed once again and whispered to himself, “Getting old guy.... Having dreams in the middle of the day....or delusions? Man, I need to get more sleep I guess. Maybe I...I... need to stop talking to myself!!”

His thoughts were interrupted by the inn's door opening abruptly. So much so it slammed against the wall startling the patrons. The large room quieted....

All eyes turned toward the door.

A gust of wind blew into the room swirling dust in the sun lit doorway. It was as if the golden afternoon rays were announcing the entrance of the shapely woman. She was silhouetted in the doorway as the sun beamed in from behind her.

She stepped into the room and slowly walked over to a bench about five feet from the door she had just entered from. Stepping upon the bench and holding up her arms, she made a motion for all to be quiet, even though everyone pretty much was by this point.

Hawk gasped at this vision. Before the room stood a beautiful woman dressed in a cutoff grey sweat shirt and blue jeans. She was wearing black leather boots with a slight heel. Around her waist was a gun belt with what appeared to be a huge automatic pistol on one side and a short sword scabbard on the other. Her skin was a beautiful sun tanned hue and her eyes dark and slightly oriental in appearance. She moved with the grace of a feline and the sureness of a hunter as she stepped onto the bench.

He had not been having delusions, she was a spitting image of his beloved. Now he was totally confused at what he saw, it was his Keli... but it was not. His mind raced as she spoke.

“Please may I have your attention?....”

The stranger gasped... Her voice tore memories from within his soul. It was musical, it was...

“NO... not like....but yes.. like hers.... NO it wasn't...or... It's just been so long I'm confusing memories....” His head spun...

He moved forward a bit so he might get a better look at this lovely vision before him. She continued as he pushed slowly through the crowded room.

“Gentle men...My name is Kylee... I come from a village about two hundred miles northwest of here... Fieldview... Perhaps some of you know of it??”

She paused hoping someone... anyone would respond. No one did! Some started to talk again. She frowned and continued as some of the room turned from her and continued about their business.

Please... Listen! In a little more than a week a group of El Diablo's bastards said they would be back to collect food from them... You all know how poor the crops were this year... Fieldview will starve!... Please, they need volunteers to fight off Diablo's troops... there aren't going to be more than a few hundred.....”

Laughter erupted and one of the patrons mid way across the room shouted.

“Are you nuts or just plain crazy? One hundred... twenty... two! It makes no different girl... Kill them and the whole damned army will come and kill you! Then will burn every town around!”

Once again she held up her arms.... This time she spoke in a more normal tone, but with a much more serious demeanor.

“Please listen to me... we have plenty of weapons and ammunition, we already have over thirty men coming from Palms and Waterford... some from Pineview.... There’s over twenty more in Fieldview...My brother and I have a bus, it has some armor, you’d be fairly safe..... We...can even pay some mon....”

“Girl, get your ass out of here before Diablo gets the idea my inn is helping you!” It was the innkeeper pushing his way through the crowd. He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the bench.

She stumbled toward the door as he gave her a slight shove.

“Woman! We don’t want any trouble around here... You go and take your problems elsewhere!”

“But...but...”

“I said out!!!” He pointed to the door with his outstretched arm....

She lowered her head and slowly walked through the inns door and vanished as eight men arose and followed her out. They turned and yelled back at their friends to join them, they were going to help. There were no more takers...

They would go alone.

Chapter 3.

Hawk headed outside and looked around to find this vision he had just witnessed. He quickly passed through the door, rounded the corner of the tavern just in time to see the new volunteers getting on the bus. A young man in his mid to late twenties shook their hands and patted each man on the back. A few of the men had their wives or girl friends along and they too got on the bus. Hawk relaxed a bit as there were no families with children. Times were hard and some would fight and chance dying just to find somewhere to live, to make a living, a few others were just guys looking to make some fast money and had no idea what they were up against, nor did the Hawk figure they would stay for long once things they realized what they were actually going to face.

On the bus's roof there appeared to be openings so men could stand on the seats and shoot from those top openings. There was barbed wire welded along the sides and the windows had sheet steel or grating welded over them. Tires were protected by more plating. This bus was well built and ready for combat, that is, if one could overlook the rust and the other minor damage indicating the bus had been well used. Sadly he shook his head as he knew it would not stand up to anything more powerful than bullets and if Diablo came after them with cannon it would be their end. One grenade or two, would be the end of their mission.

As he walked toward the bus shaking his head in disbelief, he kept his eyes out for this vision he had seen. The bus was off a ways from the tavern and he hoped by the time he got to the bus, perhaps he'd talk himself out of what he was about to do, but then if this woman went, he knew he would have to as well. He had to know who she was.... And why the hell she looked like his dead wife.

"Damn old man, since when did you start going on suicide missions?" He mumbled to himself as he kicked a rock, sending it rolling across the dirt road sending up little clouds of dust every time it hit. They were all going to die and he was about to join up.... He had to, it's what he did and his curiosity demanded.

"Crap!... Stupid....stupid." He kept muttering lowly as he neared the bus.

All the volunteers had gotten onto the bus and Hawk wondered why he was walking in the same direction as the doomed volunteers. "Man I'd be crazy to join this group...." He grinned at his thoughts. "But then I guess I lost my sanity years ago...." Still trying to make some sense of what he was about to do....

"Well.... maybe I could... ahh... scout ahead and find a safe route for them... Aww... crap!... Here I go again!!!"

His thoughts were interrupted as four of Diablo's men strolled out from behind an old barn and walked up to the young man standing at the door of the bus and pulled him into their midst. The first grabbed him, flung him to two of his pals, they each grabbed one of his arms and held him fast. The third grabbed him around the neck while the first walked up to him...

Without a word, the first smashed his fist into the youngsters stomach causing him to gasp for air so hard he was on the verge of throwing up.

"So you and your bitch of a sister want to start trouble eh?...Well let...."

The attacker froze suddenly as he felt something sharp prod him in the back of the neck. It was the woman he was trying to find, the reason he was headed toward the bus.... And she had her dagger deftly prodding the attackers neck and was grinning all the time at his quick change of attitude.

Hawk started walking faster toward the bus, but not fast enough. Two more of Diablo's men came up from behind the beautiful woman that had asked for volunteers, one pinned her arms to her side causing the sword she had held at the squad leaders neck to fall to the ground. The other grabbed her arm and held it out stretched. The squad leader turned and stared at her.

"You stupid little bitch!"

He backhanded her so hard her head jerked to one side and even with two men holding her up, she reeled and almost fell. They all struggled to keep their feet as blood seeped from her lips. Hawk broke into a sprint. All the time he passed other brave men running from the scene. Hawk sneered at them for their cowardice.

All the time the others kept beating her brother.

The squad leader, pulled his fist back as far as he could and aimed it at her beautiful face once again. He laughed.

"Well I did enjoy the feel of your face against my fist so much... Guess I try it again!... Say goodbye to your looks honey!..." He paused for his men to chortle at his sick humor,... " But don't worry,... My men will still have their fun with you, they don't care how ugly a woman is or bloody."

He and his men laughed as he swung his fist forward. She closed her eyes waiting for the predictable bone crushing impact. She felt blood splatter!

She winced!

"Where was the pain?" She slowly opened her eyes.

The squad leader had swung with all his might but felt no impact. He looked around to his fist. There in its place was a stump of flesh a few inches below his elbow with blood pulsing from it. He looked around behind him and saw his arm with his hand attached laying on the ground. He looked at his men, then back at the arm once more, tried to grab what was left of it, but passed out from loss of blood and hit the ground with a thud as his life oozed from his paling body.

A sword slashed through the air and dropped the man holding the woman's right arm. She looked to the right in time to see one of her captors hit the ground with a bloody thud! She heard something from the left, turned just in time to see the last of her assailants falling to the ground, blood busting forth from his midsection as the point of the sword that caused it quickly twisted, then vanished back into his body. His face frozen in a look of disbelief and horror. As he fell he made a feeble attempt to look behind him to see where the sword came from. Life waned before he could see his assailant.

One of the guys holding her brother shouted when he saw his comrade fall. The remaining three pushed the brother to another of their men that just arrived and turned to attack this stranger that was barely more than a blur. They pulled their swords and moved toward him. The stranger stopped, then spun once in a twirling motion as if to scare the three attackers, then stopped and stepped back from the trio.

The three grinned at him thinking all that sword swinging and he had accomplished nothing, but noticed this stranger was grinning back.

"You know guys...." He said in a confident tone, " One of the first things a hunter is taught? Never line up for the enemy!"

The three looked at him, then each other. Two of them looked toward the third man on the right end. He looked back at the two and shrugged his shoulders.... the one to their left fell.

They snapped their heads around and looked at him as he crumpled to the ground in a pool of blood, then again at each other.....

Their looks were puzzled, then as if something had dawned on them, they looked down toward each other's midsections, then to their own... The two saw their partially severed midsections as blood gushed from both of them. They too joined their comrades on the ground and without a word....

They too died with that strange questioning look upon their faces that this stranger had seen far too often. If they had only known how often.

The last raider to enter the fray late, looked over to the others laying on the ground, pushed the young man toward the stranger, turned and started to run. He took one step and stopped. He looked down and noticed a point of a long dagger point protruding from his chest. His eyes went blank, he dropped to his knees, then fell face forward into the dusty road.

The stranger walked over and retrieved his rather strange, long dagger, wiped it on the dead man's body and placed it back into his boot. He turned and walked over toward the youngster who was lying on the ground, his sister had already reached him and was pulling on his arm, trying to get him up to his unsteady legs.

The lad looked up at the new comer. "Thh..Thanks stranger... We.."

"We could have taken care of them ourselves, Edward."

"Sis... dammit, I'm twenty seven now... stop calling me Edward! And NO we couldn't have taken care of them."

He looked sadly at his sister and her eyes dropped toward the ground, then back at her bother.

"I'm Sorry Ed!" She said softly. Then looked at the new comer.

"I AM truly grateful for your help.... Really!"

"That's quite alright miss, I was getting bored sitting around doing nothing. Guess it was about time to get some exercise. You did say you needed some help."

He smiled at the two and held out his hand.

"If you can use someone to scout for you, guess I'll tag along for a while, my name is...."

"Hawk!" The woman interrupted....

"You know my..."

"I know who you are Hawk. There's only one guy running around with a uniform that looks like that and those two swords on your back are a sure give away. Ed, meet the legend himself."

Hawk smiled at her. "Beautiful... and smart." He thought.

He stopped himself before old memories rushed back into his mind, but the woman had heard his comment and smiled sweetly. The woman held out her hand and shook his, then pulled it back and put her hands on her hips all the time grinning.

Hawk in turn stood there trying not to stare at this lovely creature. The way she stood, tossed her head, her height... she was Keli!! But yet, not. The confusion grew.

She looked Hawk up and down, then starred into his eyes with a sly smirk on her lips she added.

"This is my brother Edward...errr, Ed. And my name is Kylee, I guess I should explain."

Hawk smiled at her and started to speak, as old memories flooded back. Kylee, that name... Where had he heard?...

".... I'm your sister in law, Hawk. Keli was my half sister, the one that I never got to meet! She looked over to her brother, "Ed meet your brother-in-law!" Then she turned back to Hawk...

"Keli sent mom a picture of the two of you. I keep it on the wall of my room. To remember, to honor her memory."

Stunned he staggered back against the bus and Hawk, for the first time in his life, could find no words. He leaned back against the bus and slowly slid to the ground. Still there were no words, no thoughts. For the first time that he could remember he was completely caught off guard and he was shaken, stunned and silent!

Life had thrown him some curves before, but this was far beyond anything he could have ever imagined. Stunned hardly described the way he felt.

The look on his face caused big grins to appear on both Kylee and Ed's faces, not to mention slight chuckles as he sat on the ground.

He knew Keli had a mother, had remarried and she had mentioned a half sister, and seemed to remember Keli mentioning a half brother as well. There had been so few letters and sadly events had kept them from ever visiting his area.

Usually when he returned from his trips, Keli had replied to them and completely forgotten about letters, so he knew so little about her family. Only a few times she ever spoke about her past, her dad. Hawk never pressed her as he was well aware of the horrid memories her past brought forth. She had opened up to him emotion wise, but like him, she too would relive her days of horror in dreams that would start her screaming. He loved her so much and could calm her down as she did him, in each other's arms.

But now to remember that she had a family, still living...

He never actually thought of them as anything else than people Keli talked about. It had been so many years since Keli had seen her mother, so many years wasted on her need for revenge. Now here he was face to face with two of them... He had relatives, sort of. Thirty years was a long time. He took a deep breath and tried to gather his thoughts.

"I know...er.... knew she, that is, uh, Keli, had family, but I thought you were much farther north. Besides there were no more letters that came after her death...."

"We live in Pineview that's about five hundred miles north of Fieldview, some of us came down to help our neighbors against Diablo's thugs. I know mother sent letters... that is until we heard of Keli's death. She heard you went back to the east and she had nowhere to write you... the last letter came back unopened... Then we heard tales of you coming from the west coast for years. So many stories..."

“I’m sorry Kylee, in my grief I sold our place, the hotel... I couldn’t bear to look at anything in it... Too many memories... I just couldn’t... It never occurred to me that... well, there would be letters...” Then it hit him like a shotgun blast to the head “Oh crap... Kylee....Ed.. I never wrote you two or your mother after Keli’s death... I’m so sorry, I was so broken.... Confused..”

Kylee interrupted as if to keep Hawk from his painful memories.

“I understand Hawk. Mother said how much you two were in love. And yes! We’d be thankful if you joined us.”

Ed grinned at Hawk, “So then I take it you ARE joining us?”

“Yeah, guess I have to now... have to protect my in laws now don’t I? I’ll take my motorcycle and scout ahead.” He winked back at Ed.

“You know we can get along just fine without you. No one’s forcing you....”

Hawk just sighed, smiled at Kylee.

“Yep! I can tell you and Keli share the same blood... You’re both stubborn as mules.”

Ed let out a loud laugh, then sucked it back in as Kylee shot him a dirty look! Hawk roared with laughter, then he too sucked it back in as she shot him a dirty look as well.

Ed looked down at Hawk... “Yeah... she does that to people...”

“Yeah so did her...er your sister. She could stare people down and...”

Kylee interrupted as she reached down and held a hand for Hawk to grasp.

“You going to sit there all day or are we going to get started?”

It dawned on Hawk all this time he had been sitting on the ground, slightly embarrassed he grasped her hand, got to his feet and began to dust himself off.

“Yep! Sounds just like her sister too... Impatient!”

Ed started to chuckle, but paid the price of Kylee’s ire. Kylee spun Ed around, grabbed him by the collar and the seat of his pants and pushed him into the bus, informing him he was driving and she would ride with Hawk and scout the road ahead.

Hawk in turn, although concerned about having anyone riding with him, decided it was for the best. He had never been where they were headed and reluctantly agreed. He was even more relieved once he realized that Kylee had her own cycle. She was too much like Keli, he didn’t cherish the thought that she might have been riding behind him, the memories would have been too painful.

Chapter 4.

Kylee kicked her cycle into gear and started rolling, Ed pulled in behind her. She yelled back over her shoulder.

“Hey old man.... You coming or do you need me to slow down for you?”

Kylee twisted the throttle and headed off across a field toward a rise that would make a good vantage point to look out over the route in which they were headed. She raised an arm and waved to Hawk to follow.

He shook his head in amazement, then sped off after her as he mumbled under his breath...

“Christ! Two peas in a pod ...Keli and Kylee...two peas in a...!”

The thought quickly vanished as he heard the crackle of static from a radio. He looked around his cycle to see where the static was coming from. There hanging from the gun scabbard on the front wheel was a strange looking radio.

“I’ll be damned, an old walky-talky! Someone had modified it, but...” His imagination couldn’t go further. Something that old...here?... Now?

He reached down and grabbed it, moved it to the faring of his cycle placed it within a deep solid pocket lest it would fall out with all the bumping going on crossing the plains. He noticed a small wire with an ear plug and mike. It was an antique, but it functioned as a voice crackled forth from the tiny ear piece...

“You find my little present yet old timer?”

Hawk put the ear piece on and adjusted the attached mike. Hawk grinned and replied,

“Call me old man one more time and when I catch up to you, I’ll spank your....”

“Well first.... I doubt if your fast enough to spank anything at your age and secondly, you ride like an old lady! I’m almost half mile ahead of you. So you see.....”

Kylee was interrupted by the whoosh of Hawk’s cycle roaring past her as he sped up the hill leaving her in a cloud of dust, dried grass and straw. He had startled her so much she almost lost control. After regaining her composure...

“Where the hell did he come from? I didn’t hear a thing!” Kylee replied as she spit out a wandering piece of straw and pulled another from her raven colored bangs. She cranked the throttle on her cycle to catch up to Hawk.

Back on the bus, which had been on the road only about thirty feet from the field Kylee was in, were chuckles from the passengers. Ed was laughing at his sister and Hawk as they tried to outdo each other. He just couldn’t resist and raised his mike.

“Children...children... Now you two stop showing off and drive safely.” He chuckled into the mike as his sister pulled alongside of Hawk.

As if they had practiced it for weeks, their reply came perfectly timed as it came blasting over the bus’s speaker....

“SHUT-UP Ed!!!”

The bus passengers erupted in laughter, Ed frowned, then couldn’t resist grinning at the two as they sped off and vanished up over a hill.

Kylee and Hawk pulled close together once they reached the second hilltop and scanned the road ahead. Her cycle was quite a bit smaller than his and had a homemade kickstand that once was down, Kylee could stand upon her cycles seat and using binoculars had quite a vantage point. As she stood atop her bike scanning the horizon, Hawk couldn’t help but stare at her. Sadness overtook him, memories came flooding back.

Kylee now was older than Keli was when Hawk met her at Pop’s, although it would be difficult to see she was. The way she moved, her hair, her ponytail, all was just like Keli. Even her body shape, her face, it was more like they could have been twins instead of half sisters. The memories pained him, but he knew he had to help them...her. She was family in a way and he liked her brother Ed. Watching her small form atop her bike almost rattled Hawk, even after thirty years, so many memories. Yet he was drawn to her not because she looked so much like her sister, but it was because she was so unlike Keli in many ways. The confusion returned and Hawk frowned at his puzzlement.

“Well looks clear ahead, we can head on over to that hill with the trees about five miles that way.” She pointed to the northwest. We can wait for the bus to catch up once we’re there.

“Thought you said we were heading more west?”

“Damn Hawk I thought you were smarter than that....You never tell the enemy the route your taking.”

Hawk just grinned as Kylee took off and headed toward her new destination... Indeed, she was Keli’s sister. They had never met, yet it was as if she knew how Keli would have handled

things. Then he'd realize, she couldn't know, this was Kylee's way of handling the situation, again they were so much alike....

Again he frowned at this confusion.

He rode off after her.. but this time he would ride alongside her, no grandstanding, it was down to the business of protecting the bus. They continued on this way riding ahead and making sure the road ahead of the bus was clear. The rolling hills could hide the enemy, but also kept them hidden as well.

As they topped the hill and looked to see the bus miles back, they both relaxed a bit. Hawk got off his cycle and stretched. Kylee swung her legs to the rear of her bike and leaned back against the handlebars.

"Hawk, if it isn't too painful. What was Keli like? Was she really a hunter? How did she like the big city? Did she...."

"WHOA down little lady! Christ, one question at a time..." Hawk turned and slowly moved over to Kylee on her cycle.

"Your sister was not just a hunter, but second in command of guarding the entire Wall City and the surrounding area..."

"Second in command! WOW!"

"Not to mention she wiped out a small raiding party that included Cordon's two brothers all by herself."

"Ok now wait just a minute mister! I appreciate you trying to make Keli into the person I hoped she was, but I know better... She wrote and told mother that she got her revenge, but you had to save her at the end" Kylee's eyes lowered, "...because she let revenge win over caution."

"Well that's true Kylee, but your sister had already dealt the last brother a fatal blow... heh, I kind of just cleaned up some of the mess she left."

Kylee reached out her hand and gently touched Hawk.

"Thank you"

"For what, telling you a story?"

"For saving her life, for being my sister's husband. For everything. All the horror mother said she lived through, you gave her back her life..."

Hawk looked down upon this lovely woman and smiled warmly.

“No Kylee, it’s I that thank fate every day that she came into my life. And curse fate that she’s gone!”

“I always knew how much you loved her, she put that in every one of her letters. But Hawk? Hearing you talk of her over thirty years later.... I know how much...”

“HEY!! Where are you two at? We’re coming up to the top of a hill with a huge oak on the left side..”

Kylee and Hawk snapped out from their memories and Kylee, whom had almost fallen off her bike, swung her legs around and grabbed the mike of her radio.

“You’re about two miles behind us Ed. Remember don’t broadcast your location... We haven’t seen anyone... But that doesn’t mean no one’s out there...”

“Sorry sis. We should catch up to you soon.”

Kylee laughed and replied, “If you catch up to us Ed, then we aren’t doing our scouting job very well now are we.”

They heard Ed chuckling over the radio, then he ended his call. The duo scanned the area that lay ahead and mounted their cycles onward they proceeded.

Hawk had amazed himself. Since Keli’s death there had been other women, but he never emotionally got involved. Nor had he ever talked about Keli with anyone. Now here he was chatting away about his late wife... and though there was sorrow.. there had been no pain! He clanked over to the beautiful woman riding next to him and smiled. This sister-in-law of him was some gal. She got him to open up like only one other ever did....

Now the confusion returned. Kylee looked over in Hawks direction smiled and pointed toward the next rise miles ahead, then turned toward it. Hawk followed suit although his mind was racing. This woman was getting under his defenses and he didn’t know why... He had a slight frown on his face and Kylee noticed and pulled closer to him. She looked at him and smiled that great smile she of hers. Hawk in returned grinned back all the time wondering how she did it. Keli could do the same thing if he was down, sad, or even mad, she would smile and Hawk would reply with a big grin. Now this slip of a woman was doing the same thing. He grinned said in a loud voice....

“Must be hereditary!”

Now it was Kylee’s turn to give a slight frown. She turned to Hawk, but he had pulled a ways ahead of her. She shook her head and shrugged, then sped off to catch up.

The hours rolled by until it became well over a half of a day and eventually they came to a hill crest and Kylee pointed to a spot in the distance.

“Fieldview! We’ve made exceptional time today.”

“Ahhh, where?”

“Geezzz are your eyes that old you can’t see a town eight miles away.” She was teasing him and she knew that he knew she was, which made it even more fun.

Over the time they had been riding and occasionally talking, Kylee decided she did like Hawk or at least he was ok for a brother in law. She couldn’t help admire him because Keli had told her mother that his so called legend was true and although she had never met her sister, she knew her mother loved and trusted Keli.... Keli loved and trusted this man... and that was good enough for her.

Keli’s few letters also told them of how much she was in love with this man, and Kylee would dream of meeting someone like him as her mother would read the letters...over and over through the years.... at least the parts of the letters a young teen could hear. It wasn’t until after her mother died that she reread the letters trying to somehow connect with the sister she never knew and realized just how happy her sister Keli was and this man beside her had made her all too short life so wonderful.

Kylee also had decided to at least give Hawk the benefit of the doubt and held back the fact that she did harbor a little resentment that he never brought his wife to Pineview while she was alive. She also realized that their time together was far too short, so she couldn’t hold any blame on Hawk for their not meeting before now. She too was confused. So many times she dreamed of what she might say should they ever meet. Now that they had, it was unlike anything she had ever thought. She had thought she would chastise him, or other times run into his arms and hug him to welcome to the family. Meeting him in a fight, listening to him talk about Keli and now riding along with him she was seeing this man in a new light... and she was fascinated!

Now if she could just control this feeling like a little girl when she was around him.

Ed on the other hand had always been fascinated by the stories of Hawk and once he was old enough Kylee told him Hawk was actually his half sisters husband, Ed went nuts. He ran around bragging Hawk was his brother in law and was teased unmercifully as few believed him. Ed on the other hand never cared if he was believed or not. He and Kylee knew the truth.

Hawk looked over the plains the small town was located on. This ridge was the only high ground around which would leave any attackers out in the open. While the townsfolk would be safer behind the buildings of Fieldview.

“Could work girl.... Could work... They’d be out in the open for miles and assuming there aren’t too many, you could take them on.” He looked sadly over at Kylee and in a solemn voice added, “You do know the town eventually will be overrun.... destroyed....”

“They know, Hawk. Sadly they have decided rather than let Diablo starve them to death, they’d fight. One way or the other they figure they are going to die. I...we... tried to talk some sense into them, but....”

Kylee looked downward, then over to Hawk. She spoke so hesitantly, struggling for each word.

“...their families are either gone or are about to leave. Some are going to where Ed and I live in Pineview, others are heading back east. Just the men that are able bodied enough are staying behind to give their families a chance to get far enough away from Diablo’s troops that have been running this area.”

“Kylee? You know there is a chance this El Diablo as he calls himself might be with them, he moves around a lot.”

“We know, but his full army is scattered all over the west. Hell we can...”

“Kylee!...” Hawk snapped her ponderings. “Diablo travels with his personal troops which means those townsfolk will be facing twice the troops you were planning on, that is if he’s with them.”

The blood drained from Kylee’s face and she shuddered.

“Oh God, Hawk... We... I never thought of that... I could never live with myself if...”

Hawk interrupted her and with a smile said,

That’s ok Kylee, there’s always plan B.... or plan C...or...”

Kylee relaxed a bit and smiled back to Hawk. She reached over and squeezed his arm.

“Thank you for that Hawk.”

“Kylee... I mean it. Somehow things have a way of working out. One just has to believe in ones’ selfand trust in others. Yeah I know...All this coming from a man that rides alone.... you’ll just have to take my word on that bit of wisdom.”

Hawk’s face formed a more serious demeanor.

“Besides, this El Diablo and his cutthroats...”

Kylee interrupted, "It matters not Hawk. Those men are prepared to die for their homes, their land."

Hawk changed his demeanor quickly to a stern look which got Kylee's attention.

"Kylee, there was an famous general in my day that said something to the effect of, 'The point of any battle, is not to die for your country, but to make the other poor bastard die for his'...

The point being those men do not have to die. Fight if they must, but know when to retreat, live to fight another day... at a place of their own choosing. You know a thing called tactics?"

"I tried to tell them that Hawk. Really, but they refuse. It seems like they would rather....

The radio crackled to life, "**Hawk, Kylee, Hey you two, are you out there? Is the damned road to Fairview clear? Or are you two still trying to best one another?**"

Kylee grabbed the mike, grinned at Hawk and spoke into it.

"Yeah little brother.... There's no big bad men to hurt you out here. You drive safe widdle bubba..." She teasingly replied as she winked at Hawk who was grinning from ear to ear.

Neither of the two on the ridge could quite hear what Ed was muttering over the mike, which was probably for the better, as it definitely was something that the two didn't want to understand. This was evident by the laughter in the back ground coming from the bus as it drove by on the road below.

It was early evening and the sun was near the horizon. The evening breezes were swirling the dust in the prairie below and farther out it was making the tall prairie grass swirl as it danced over the plains. Kylee raised up off her cycles seat and looked over the scenery and the huge reddish orange sun hovering above the horizon. She looked at Hawk, then sadly to Fairview...

"So beautiful. Too bad it won't last, a real shame."

But Hawk never heard her lamenting, he was too busy trying to figure out plan 'B'....

Or 'C' if needed, he was still trying to remember if he ever had to go to plan C...

He let out a sigh!

Kylee looked over at the frown on Hawk's face. She sighed and now she began to worry!

Chapter 5.

Night fell and the group of around fifty or so men sat around the large fire they had built in the town square's small park. They had said their tearful goodbyes to the families that had remained until now and made sure they had safely made it out of sight. Road blocks had been already set up and the town fortified as well as possible. There was little for the fresh arrivals to do other than make peace with themselves in how ever they saw fit. It was going to be one hell of a battle. Within a day or so they knew would be fighting for their lives.

Fortunately most of the small prairie town had been built with the windowless rears of larger buildings facing outward to the vast plains and high stone walls between the two story structures. The entire towns were fortified against the hordes of mutants that once roamed the wastelands before the armies of raiders wiped most of them out. This past now came in handy fortifying against small raiding parties. Diablo had only three ways into town, but all knew he would come in through the main entry point. That is if he allowed the town to stand in the first place. He feared no town and all couldn't help but think of Desert Grove. It was a small town on the northern edge of the wastelands. Diablo made an example of them ten years before by leveling the town of nine hundred in three hours. This made some of the defenders worry if they had made the right choice.

Already many of the volunteers that came to fight for money had left with the women and children once they heard the odds, figuring escorting them to safety was better than dying for a few ounces of gold. Those that remained behind at least hoped the few men would provide a little extra protection for their families, yet Fieldview lost more than a few men that decided to depart to assure those seeking pay of protection lived up to their contract. Men such as those couldn't be trusted and those that stayed behind knew those among them were there for the long count. Diablo could not be allowed to follow the families as they headed to the east or on to Pineview. These few men would be their chance to get away.

Now the remaining few were all gathered, save a few lookouts, here at the fire. Fieldview's mayor stepped upon the bed of a truck and motioned for all to move in close enough to hear him clearly.

"My name is Tom Dunkin folks. I'm the mayor of Fieldview and I'd like to welcome all of you new comers and try to catch you all up on what's been done so far. We have twenty eight buildings in town. The walls between the buildings should keep the raiders out. All roads into town have been blocked with the exception of the main street, which we'll keep open until the last minute and the road to the north so we have somewhere to go if we're overrun... Assuming there are survivors left to run."

He paused, looked around at the small party of brave souls, then continued.

“We have used what little explosives we had, those that we use to use in the mines. We buried them around in the streets with hopes of slowing down any vehicles, but to be honest, I’m not sure it will be enough. At the last minute, I have a man stationed at our oil well to the northeast of town, to blow it if we’re overrun so at least Diablo won’t be able to use the oil and natural gas for his army. We..”

“Tom! Excuse me...” Hawk stepped forward, “ People call me Hawk, no mister, just Hawk.” Hawk grinned, “You said something about an oil well and gas?”

“That’s correct Mr. Hawk.”

“Hawk. Tom, just Hawk.” Hawk smiled again, it was obvious the Mayor was nervous, then continued. “You said mines?”

“Correct Hawk... We started mining some minerals many decades ago after we dug a basement for a building a block over from here. We mined some small amounts of copper, silver and other metals.”

He grinned at the crowd, “Hell we thought we’d all be rich selling extra metals, but after we mined under most of the town, we hit some sort of odorless gas. It blew up a couple of buildings that were in an area where we dug too close to the surface.”

Hawk replied thoughtfully, “The gas is called Methane Tom and it is not only explosive, but can suffocate miners as well. Colorless, odorless and packs quite a pop!”

“Yeah Hawk, we found that out the hard way. Anyhow, the town voted to seal and fill in the crater from the explosion and the mines entrance, we even welded those useless vents closed. It made everyone feel safer that way.”

Tom started to climb off the truck as he finished...
“So again I’d like to say thanks and welcome. We have group leaders and they will get with all you new comers and assign you areas to fight from.”

Tom paused and managed a weak smile.

“We...The folk of Fieldview...well let’s just say we appreciate what you newcomers are doing for us. We realize we cannot hold this town forever. Diablo has bled this town dry and won’t be happy until it’s dead! We only can hope to take enough of them down so perhaps it might be too costly for him to do the same to other towns, if it gets too bad and we’re about to be overrun. Well those of you new comers, may leave by way of the northern road. We will fight as long as we can, to give you a chance to get towards Pineview. Again thank you all for joining us.”

The mayor hopped off the truck and walked over to where Hawk, Kylee and Ed were standing. He shook all their hands and hugged Kylee.

“Thanks for the fresh people you brought in Kylee, I knew you wouldn’t let us down.

“Tom... Hawk thinks Diablo and his body guard will be with his sons company. If that’s the case, you know we can’t hold this town not even for one attack.”

“Then we’ll die trying.” He looked sadly around at the people that had gathered “There’ll be no where we can run to... where ever we run, he’ll follow us, so we can’t go to Pineview. We can let those that don’t live here escape...” Tom looked over to Hawk.

Hawk drew puzzled looks from the small group he was with. It was almost as if he had left mentally. Kylee was a bit concerned. She so admired this man of legend, but now he seemed to be elsewhere when she needed him here. She leaned closer to Hawk and stared into his face. She leaned closer. Hawk snapped out of his thoughts spoke... Kylee jumped at the abruptness he returned to their conversation and noticed a slight grin. She began to wonder if perhaps he did that on purpose because she had leaned into him a bit too close.

Hawk looked at the mayor. “Tom, I have an idea, if you can spare a few men to go with me.”

Hawk then looked toward at Ed “Ed I need you to get as many men as you can, go into every store, house you can and seal up all doors, windows, fireplaces, where ever air can leak into the buildings at. I’ll have more for you to do later.”

Ed looked puzzled but was just pleased Hawk treated him like an equal instead of a little brother like Kylee had a tendency to do. He walked over to the men and choose about twenty.

Hawk turned back to the mayor.

“Tom I need about five of your well operators. Ahh, drillers, pipefitters, that is if they’re still around.”

“Hawk my friend, the oil rig is five miles from town, we only have a day or two at most, I don’t think they’ll be needed. What’s your plan?”

Kylee grinned at Tom and patted him on the back, then winked at Hawk.

“Hawk doesn’t tell anyone anything, but my sister always said she trusted him. Maybe it would be wise if we did as well.”

Tom walked over to the remaining men and eventually returned with four. He introduced them to Hawk and Hawk took the four off into the darkness.

Now and then over the next few days one or two of them would be seen wandering from building to building. Sounds could be heard banging in the distance from the vicinity of the well. Hawk came and went, none of them stayed to eat, spoke except for the times they picked up meals to take to the rest. All the time Kylee reassured Tom to trust Hawk and that he was an old hand at combat. Then the men were gone... out to the towns oil rig. No one saw them again until mid morning of the third day when the alarm sounded.

Kylee who had been out scouting came roaring back into town yelling that Diablo's son was coming with about two hundred men and vehicles. About ten miles back was another large convoy she thought might be El Diablo himself. From the dust it kicked up, she knew it was at least as large as Diablo's sons.

The defenders ran to their defensive positions, others prepared other options. But all kept glancing toward the plains in the direction the small army was approaching from. Tom ran up to Kylee as Hawk strolled calmly across the street from between two buildings and joined them.

"Maybe if the first attacks we can kill most of the before the other army gets here." Tom lifted the mike to the radio he was carrying on his side. "Attention men, This is the Mayor, take positions. prepare for attack." He was trying to sound calm, but failing to do so in some degree.

The radio crackled back....

"Well, well mister Mayor. Sounds like you're refusing my most generous offer to loot your town."

"Max you son of a bitch, I'll ...we'll fight you if you try. You'll lose a lot of your men and equipment, it won't be worth it.

Even if that's your daddy coming up behind you won't help you any. We're still going to resist you, fight if necessary!"

There was a shout and everyone ran to the road block and looked over the prairie. Diablo's son Max had come to a stop and his dad's convoy pulled up behind them. Diablo himself had closed to his son's position since Kylee had left to warn Fieldview...

"Christ Diablo must have been pushing his men to make up that much time so fast..."

"That's ok Kylee." Tom patted her arm, "The important thing is you got here in time to warn us he was here."

The radio crackled one again....

This time it was El Diablo himself. Few outside his army had met him, fewer lived to tell about it. There were those that were allowed to live so they could tell the horrors he had wrought upon

their towns. Occasionally some of his victims managed to survive their wounds.. Those were rare occasions.

“Mayor of the town about to be destroyed, you have one last chance to surrender, you have rebuked my sons generous offer to protect your town in exchange for supplies. You now have ten minutes to talk it over then we’ll start shelling your town until nothing is left, then we’ll come into town and take everything you’re trying so hard to protect. We need supplies and as you refuse to give up what we need, then we’ll take everything and leave your town as an example to those that think about refusing to supply us.”

Hawk took the mike from the mayor, winked and grinned, then put it to his mouth.

“Diablo you jerk, do you actually think we’re stupid?... We’ve moved all the supplies and scattered them in various buildings... You blow up a building, you destroy some of the very things you have come to get. Hell I even wired some buildings to blow up if you destroy the one next to it.”

“Who the hell is this? I’m going to personally rip.....”

“My name is Hawk, you asshole you think that you’re so...”

“HAWK! I know of you... you’re dead meat!!..You!....You....” The radio fell silent.

Kylee laughed. “Damn Hawk, I’m a thinking ya might have pissed him off a bit.”

Everyone gave a worried laugh, which was shattered by Diablo’s command over his radio.

“Max take your guys and half of mine into that town and kill everyone. You heard what that bastard Hawk said, so no cannon, no explosives, get in there and kill them and take that town... NOW!!!”

Max’s convoy started to move forward as Diablo screamed over the radio something about not to kill Hawk and the things he was going to do to him. The mayor and the others close by looked over to Hawk. All saw him grinning like what some would call an impish grin.

Hawk looked at Tom and Kylee, then back toward the now advancing army.

“It’ll take them about ten minutes to reach the town because of the terrain, am guessing another five to push through a few of the road blocks and to make sure there aren’t explosives in them.... Tom, Kylee, I had the guys I was working with put the busses and trucks around the corner, everyone else is waiting at the north road out of town, I pulled them off the walls a while back. Load everyone here and get to the rest and GO!”

Kylee and Ed were puzzled, but nothing compared to the looks of those at the roadblock. Kylee was the first to speak, knowing that her home of Pineview was the only place they could head.... And eventually Diablo would follow!

“Tom do it, if Hawk says to run... then run, he has something planned and doesn’t need you to mess it up.”

She winked at Hawk while Tom motioned at his men to pull back and they headed toward the vehicles.

“You too Kylee.” She looked sad, but turned and left, only to return as the sound of vehicles vanished in the distance. Kylee walked slowly over to Hawk.

“I can’t leave you, Hawk.”

“GO DAMMIT!” He frowned at her reluctance to leave.

“What part of ‘**I can’t**’ didn’t you understand Hawk.... I can’t leave you!”

She pointed back behind her toward her cycle. There at the curb was her bike, laying on its side, the front tire bent as if someone had backed into it. He glanced up the road as the bus and trucks pulled out of sight at the other end of town.

“SHIT!” Hawk frowned again, then glanced at the approaching mass of men and machinery.

“Guess you’re stuck with me.” She teased and tossed her head defiantly, her ponytail whipped over her shoulder. She stood there grinning in the face of incredible odds on just Hawk’s word. He on the other hand did admire her ability to follow orders without questioning him, her courage. Damned if he’d let her know, as she was way too much like Keli... and this worried him. Perhaps he was being too cautious with her... Perhaps she was putting too much faith in him! He turned and sprinted toward one of the buildings on the towns parameter. Kylee spun and followed, she needed no commands.

They scampered up the fire escape of one of the two story buildings in the town. They walked over to the edge, to a small wall and scanned the prairie as Max and his small army advanced.... He didn’t have to say a word. Kylee followed his every lead as if she knew exactly what he was going to do. Hawk looked over to her expecting to see worry about the advancing menace, but in turn saw this lovely creature standing there with her foot on the short wall grinning. The two of them were alone in a town with a few hundred men advancing on them and she was grinning....

Again Hawk started to worry about her, or at least her seeming lack of fear!

“Ok woman, you do as I say, when I say and no questions!”

“Understood my fearless leader.” She stuck her tongue out at him and wrinkled her nose as she gave a comedic salute, snapped the heels of her boots together. She grinned.

Hawk frowned, shrugged his shoulders. “I’m serious Kylee... No questions, just react, there won’t be a lot of time to.....”

“Hawk! I’m thirty seven years old! I’ve been fighting bandits since my husband and kids were killed years ago. I know how to handle myself and I can follow orders... Have I made myself clear on that?” She was upset and angry.

Hawk beamed a wide grin and Kylee kind of blushed as it dawned on her she had just talked the way she did to this man she had admired for so many decades. She was about to say something when he pulled a small object from a backpack that Kylee had not noticed he had held in his other hand. He flipped up a cover and grinned at Kylee.

“Watch this... Plan ‘A’.”

He pushed a small glowing button under the cover and many loud whoosh’s could be heard from parts of the town close by. Plumes of smoke could be seen reaching toward the sky. At the end of each plume a small dark object could be seen. Kylee strained her neck to follow them, but they vanished, lost among the bright blue sky.

“What the hell was that?”

“The guys I was working with the last few days, finished up sooner than I expected, sooooo..”

“You did that in a day and a half?”

“Hahahaha... Naw... The guys I was with did, they were all oil men, pipe fitters, welders. It was a simple matter to make some thirty projectiles, load them with the explosives the town had, I added detonators to them programmed the first fifteen of them to explode at four feet above the ground, the second fifteen to explode at twenty five feet. The guys made some pipes to be launchers and hooked them up to the natural gas and I triggered them just now with this remote control. “

“I see, instant mortars.”

“Bright girl there Kylee.” She smiled back at Hawk. He had complimented her.

But looking at the advancing vehicles she frowned, “There are so many.”

Hawk’s eyes saddened, “It’s just a delaying action Kylee... It’ll make them slow down and proceed with a bit more caution expecting more surprises. We can use the chance to escape. Heh, that would be Plan ‘B’.”

“But, Hawk, we were...”

“Kylee, you and I... hell, everyone knew this town was gone before we started, this way I just gave people a chance to live.” He looked at the advancing hoard of trucks and men.
“Sometimes it’s good to know when to run or to stay and fight, or.... Or go to plan ‘B’.”

“Plan ‘B’?”

“Run... I had to think of some way to get these fools out of town before they all died pointlessly.”

“I don’t believe we’re going to run Hawk, not you.”

Kylee looked sadly at Hawk, this man whom she had worshipped all these years, was going to run, her voice sounded as if she was going to cry. Running had not been part of her plan and just of thinking of Hawk running away.....

She felt a tap on her arm.

Hawk pointed to the prairie. The attackers were only a few miles away, but in the distance a slight whistling sound could be heard. Louder and louder the whistles became, then started to wane. Just as Kylee looked to Hawk and was about to ask what the whistles were....

“This is gonna hurt!!” Hawk mumbled while chuckling. He pointed back out to the advancing raiders. Suddenly the prairie burst into smoke, fire and dust as the first volley of shells erupted.

Men fell screaming to the ground, trucks were riddled with shrapnel, while others burst into flame. No sooner had the smoke started to blow away the second volley hit, bursting over head and downward onto the survivors that had lain on the ground for cover. More screams and explosions were heard even at the distance of several miles from the town. Kylee, heard faint screams. About this time many of the vehicles exploded as the flames reached the gas tanks and ammunition causing even more destruction. The plains were ablaze with flame and blinding smoke billowed skyward.

“I almost feel sorry for them... Almost...”

She turned to smile at Hawk, but he was already heading for his cycle. He turned long enough to shout at Kylee.

“You gonna stand there gawkin’ or are you coming with me?”

They slid down the ladder and he leapt on his cycle and felt it bounce when Kylee bounded on the back. Without hesitation Hawk cranked the throttle, pinning Kylee back against the ‘buddy bar’. She strained to move forward, finally reaching out her hands and grabbing onto

Hawk's waist and pulled herself up against his back. She tried to yell in his ear, but the force of the wind drove her to duck behind him. She glanced back at the town as they sped away... Hawk was already on the open road... Kylee gasped at the speed.... She wanted so bad to tell Hawk his Plan 'B' sucked! She did not like to run, but it had saved her life. She turned her head back toward town knowing that Diablo had his supplies, he had won.... again!

Chapter 6.

Along the straight part of the road the bike screamed. Kylee managed to peek over Hawk's shoulder and looked at the speedometer. She winced, ducked back and buried her head into his back when she saw they were traveling well over one hundred and ten miles an hour. Where the road was straight, he went faster and she cringed where the road curved... Hawk still went straight... straight across the plains until the road curved back around. Then back on the road they went...and faster yet!

The cycle slowed and Kylee looked out from behind Hawk's back. Instead of following the road that ran along the side of the mountains to the west around to Pineview, Hawk turned and followed a narrow, poorly paved road that led up along the side of the mountain to the north.

Half way up the mountain Kylee managed to get the courage to open her eyes as Hawk careened along the winding road. There were times he rode inches from the edge, other times she could feel the dust of the cliff side of the road as they sped past.

She leaned close to Hawk's ear, **"This is the long way around to Pineview Hawk."** She screamed over the wind noise. **"We have to go back the other way. It'll take days this way."**

Kylee felt the cycle quickly slow down. So much so, she wondered if perhaps she had angered Hawk. But instead of saying anything to her, he merely pulled off the side of the road about a good two thirds of the way up the mountain. They came to a stop and he told her to get off, she again got worried that he'd leave her there. Just as she was about to ask if she had angered him, he too swung a leg over the cycle and got off.

Hawk walked over to the side of the cliff and motioned Kylee to follow. There below in the distance lay the town of Fairview. Kylee pulled her binoculars out of the case attached to her belt and stared at the scene below.

The air was stifling and the late afternoon heat made her feel more uncomfortable that she already was. A swift breeze tossed her raven bangs as it brought faint sounds of the invading army... She sadly looked down toward the small town that was being overrun.

Diablo's son and the rest of Diablo's men had reached the town and entered. Trucks were driving up and down the streets looking for the townsfolk. His soldiers were climbing to the tops of buildings looking for snipers. The town was engulfed by the raider army, while in the distance just beyond the town El Diablo sat with a few men watching. Some of Max's army were nearing the back of the town.... While others in trucks stopped and dismounted in preparation to begin looting. Max swung his truck back toward the center of town. It slowed and he could be seen waving his arms to his men to spread out.

Kylee lowered the binoculars and turned to Hawk. “Wow, Hawk.... Great plan ‘B’. Give them the town, give them the supplies that we couldn’t take with us. Give them everything.... Just freakin’ wonderful...”

She raised the binoculars once again, then lowered them and under her breath mumbled...

“Shit... what a freakin’ great plan!!” She stood there on the edge of the overhang, hands on her hips glaring at Hawk, her field glasses dangling from her neck. Hawk just kept staring at the town, he removed his hand from under his uniform jacket and pointed it at Fieldview.

She no sooner had muttered her obscenity when there was a tremendous blast from the town. The entire town had vanished in one gigantic blast of smoke and fire. So much so she could see no part of it. Not buildings, not walls, not streets, just a huge fireball and smoke.

She raised her binoculars.

She could see the shockwave coming toward them moving along the ground rapidly. She lowered her glasses and opened her mouth to speak, but the shockwave knocked her to the ground. Kylee, still half stunned raised herself to her elbows and looked toward Hawk, who was still standing.

In his hand was a small black detonator like he had used earlier. He looked around at her sitting on the ground and smiled almost gleefully.

Kylee frowned slightly at Hawk.

“Plan ‘C’ I take it?”

“Heheh, yup! I like to always have a plan ‘C’.”

Hawk reached down and helped her to her feet.

“But the town...”

“Kylee I told you earlier... it was dead a long time ago, I merely buried it.” He beamed a wide grin. “And Diablo’s men along with it. Kylee you know Diablo would have burned it to the ground as an example...”

He paused for all this to sink in, “...an example that maybe now Diablo will get, people will always resist men like his kind.”

“And as an example you scattered his son Hawk, over a mile or so. He’ll come after us with vengeance! You realize that don’t you?”

“Yeah! But it’ll take him weeks to get his whole army together.”

“Then what? Watch him destroy Pineview as well? Or do you plan to blow that up as well?”

Still on the ground, she twisted around and looked at what was once a town and now was nothing more than a huge smoldering crater as the billowing smoke cloud drifted across the prairie .

Diablo was speeding through the huge cloud toward the town. Thoughts of knowing he was present when his murdering son vaporized did give her some satisfaction. Max had been running the northern areas of his dad's domain and did so by murder and terrorizing the local towns. Seeing Diablo stop and get out ranting and raving at the vast hole in front of him gave Kylee a moment of puzzlement about such an explosion.

“Ok. I give up! How?”

“The guys I took, remember, pipefitters, oilmen?”

“Yeah, but..”

“I had them tap the natural gas pipeline from the town's oil well and pump it into the mine tunnels below the town. We also ran a second line and pumped fresh air to mix with the natural gas and the methane gas. Then all I had to do was press my detonator to trigger the one I tossed down the pipe before we started pumping gas..... Boom!.... Simple!”

“I knew the part of the plan you told me, but, you could have told a gal what the hell you were up to...”

Hawk grinned at Kylee and in a teasingly tone interrupted her.

“What and spoil the ending?”

Kylee got to her feet and stood there shoulder to shoulder with Hawk as they watched Diablo staring at the devastation in the distance.

“Man Hawk, that crater's still smoldering. Looks like it will for quite some time.”

“I suspect not as much as old Diablo himself will be.”

Kylee grinned at Hawk's last comment, but secretly worried about the future of her home, her friends. Sooner or later Diablo would come to exact his revenge. She knew it would take time for him to head back south and assemble his army, yet she had little doubt he would!

Hawk turned and headed toward the cycle. Kylee noting his lack of presence, spun and in turn followed knowing that there was no more to see. Diablo would not follow without his army... his full army. Hawk had shown him what happens when he got careless and over confident. Diablo was no fool, he learned today's lesson and would not underestimate Hawk again.. She glanced back at the smoking crater and shook her head....

“I have to admit....” She said, “That was one hell of an impressive bang!”

Hawk grinned back over his shoulder as he walked toward his cycle.

"It was kind of nifty wasn't it!... Bet old Diablo's head will ring for a few days."

"Well Hawk I have to say you do know how to teach someone a lesson." She laughed as she caught up to Hawk.

"Lesson? Hawk asked.

"Never piss the old guy off?" Kylee replied as Hawk grinned ear to ear.

She smiled and added "I Hope that bastard chokes to death on the smoke!" Kylee's reply hid the fact she secretly wondered how long it would take before Diablo would reach her home.

They had plenty of small arms and now many people to handle them, but would they be able to withstand cannon fire? Diablo had tanks, cannon and a well equipped army scattered throughout what was left of the middle and northern wastelands. Once it was assembled, it would be an awesome force. They mounted the cycle and her thoughts were broken as her body lurched backward by the force of Hawk speeding off the outlook and back onto the road.

Hawk twisted slightly and grinned at her, "Guess we'll have to take the long way because the road below is too full of debris from the explosion. You'll have to tell me the back way into Pineview..." He winked at her as she leaned forward, "...never had cause to head this far north before."

"There's only one road up here Hawk" Kylee winked back at him, "Kind of hard to get lost!"

Once again Hawk headed the cycle up the mountain and into the mountain range that eventually connected to the back roadway into Pineview.... Or so Kylee had said. He knew the blast would have sent boulder sized debris in every direction. Including the other road to the west. Only Kylee knew this so call 'back route' she had mentioned earlier in the week. She was now his guide. It had been ages since.... His mind started to wander.

The long way to Pineview was going to take them the rest of the day and most of the next and Kylee was dead tired. Most of the townsfolk had been awake for several days. At least some of the ones that left could take turns sleeping while others drove. She knew Hawk would never allow her to drive his cycle and pondered as to how much sleep Hawk had gotten since.... Her mind started to drift, she started to feel her body slumped into Hawk's back, her grip around his waist eased.

The long winding road through the mountains was soothing, the white line hypnotizing in the lowering sunlight. The cycle was almost silent, but the sound of the wind brushing her ear as she lay her head upon Hawk's back, lulled her.

She fought sleep.... Her eyes struggled to stay open.... she lost as sleep overcame her.

Hawk felt her hands that were wrapped tightly around his waist ease and knew she was sound asleep. He reached down and gently patted her hand. So many memories, flooded back. This man that had rarely shown emotion all these years, admitted to himself, that it was nice to have a companion once again, if only for a short time. So many years riding alone.

Before the last rays of the setting sun vanished behind the peaks and darkness fell, Hawk allowed himself to wonder at the majesty of the scene. The sunlight flickered through the tall pines until it slipped away behind the high mountains in the distance. They rode on through the early evening and onward into night.

Too much had happened in too short of a time. He felt himself getting sleepy. Darkness had fallen and only that which fell into his headlights was visible. The long faded white lines flickered as they sped by.... hypnotizing... steadily flashing by.... darkness....

His eyes popped open, the cycle swerved violently to stay on the road as he had drifted toward the road's shoulder.

He slowed the cycle, glancing back over his shoulder and caught himself grinning at Kylee who was still sound asleep, still holding onto his waist.

"Ok Hawk, time to call it a night." He spoke out loud to himself, half from frustration of allowing himself to almost crash and half out of trying to stay awake!

He nudged Kylee's head with his back.

"MMmmmm... Huh?...What?"

"You dozed off for a bit."

He felt her trying to bury her head into his back once again.

Once again he nudged her. This time she snapped fully awake.

"Ohhh... Sorry Hawk, I just got so tired..."

"That's ok Kylee, it's just I have to sleep too. Know any safe place to camp for the night?"

"Hmmm...."

She looked around to get her bearings, then added "Ahhh... I think we're close to some caves a few miles ahead. I think, remember I only have your headlight to go by. The road winds so much here it's hard to tell."

"Caves? There haven't been any mutes reported in these woods in a decade or so."

Kylee laughed “It’s not the mutes you worry about up here, it’s wild animals. Bears, wolves, cougars... You know things that eat your face off while you’re asleep! They’ve made a strong comeback since the apocalypse. And they still eat just about anything they can find.... Including us!”

“Gotcha! The caves it is. Don’t care to be critter munchies!”

She smiled and returned her head to Hawk’s back to block the breeze. It was cold and he was warm, so warm... She felt his chest as she readjusted her grip..... and muscular! She sat upright and into the cold night wind!

“Christ! This is my brother-in-law! What the hell am I doing??” She scolded herself mentally. She looked around again to get her bearings.

Keeping an eye out for the secret marker leading to the caves, she allowed herself a smile and ducked back behind Hawk and snuggled up to him.

“Well, brother-in-law or not, the night is cold..... and he IS warm!”

Chapter 7 .

“THERE!!” Kylee shouted, “There, the cut tree...”

Hawk was startled at her shout and hand shooting past his face, but his eyes followed the direction Kylee was pointing and slowed as he strained to see in the darkness to the side of his headlights. Then he noticed the only thing that was different about the roadside.

“I’m guessing the tree that’s been cut off about four feet off the ground?”

“Yeah! Our outriders and scouts cut one about one hundred feet from a path that leads to a safe camp.... This case it’s the caves. There’s another tree cut the same distance from this path down the road as well, so those that know what to look for and can find them from either direction.”

She leaned forward, looked over his shoulder and grinned at him and added..

“Handy to know if you ever get lost and need a place to stay.”

“Lost? Me? Hell I ought to move to one side and let these damned bugs I’ve been eating for the last twenty miles hit you right between the eyes for that comment!”

Hawk made like he was going to move aside and Kylee smacked him on the arm!

“Don’t you dare!”

The Cycle slowed until a narrow path appeared in the headlight. Kylee pointed to the side of the road.

“Turn here Hawk, follow it around those high bushes. The caves should be there. It has been a long time since I was here, at least ten years or so. I don’t recall anyone saying they’ve been here since....”

She leaned forward and smiled, “I just don’t know what shape things are in.”

“Christ Kylee, it’s just a damned cave, what’s there to change?”

Hawk turned into the narrow path and just as Kylee had said, just around some thick tall brush was a steep cliff wall hidden by the brush and trees. He stopped the cycle and looked up, nothing!

He pulled a small light from the cycles faring and swung the beam upward.

“Wow! Never would have guessed....” Hawk looked around, “...Uhhh Kylee? How the hell do your people get up there?”

“Silly! Why we just.....” Kylee grabbed Hawk’s hand and swung the light to the left of the caves entrance, then up and down as if searching for something. Finally the beam stopped at a pile of rope splayed at the base of the cliff.

“**Oh-oh!** Looks like we have to go on. We camouflage the hanging ropes to the left. Looks like this one rotted away, sorry Hawk, the next safe area is over fifty miles ahead a third of the way to the Pineview cutoff, I know you’re....”

“Yeah and I’m tired and not driving that far!”

He paused as if deciding something, then twisted around and looked sternly at Kylee.

“Ok... I’m going to show you something only a very few people know about and less have actually seen. I need your pledge never to reveal what you find out... ah, I mean ALL things I show or tell you about myself that isn’t.. ahh, well....Let’s say isn’t normally known!”

Hawk could see Kylee grinning at his awkwardness in the back glow of his headlights. Grinning actually wasn’t the word he hunted for, she was chuckling so hard the bike was shaking. She saw Hawk was really serious and managed to wipe most of the grin off her face, only to have a small smirk pop up on her lips now and then.

Hawk relaxed a bit and smiled back at her trying to control her mirth. She straightened to her full height. A serious look washed over her face. She raised her hand with her thumb pointed at her heart with a stabbing motion and her other pointed to the sky.

“I promise never to reveal any of your secrets. I pledge my word to you as I swear under father sky may he pierce my heart and ravage my soul, should I ever break this vow. May Mother Earth turn my bones to dust!”

Hawk relaxed and turned back and looked up the cliff, paused, cocked his head to one side, then twisted back around and looked Kylee directly into her eyes.

“You know that was the biggest load of shit I’ve heard in years.”

Kylee, looked back at him and with a deadpan stare replied..

“Yeah it was, wasn’t it?”

Neither could resist any longer and both laughed so hard the cycle shook. After several seconds, Hawk gave a huge impish grin in Kylee’s direction, he turned back forward, reached deep into compartment and flipped a hidden switch within the cycles faring, placed both hands on the handlebars and cranked the throttle.

Kylee let out a loud yelp as the cycle jumped... Not forward,... but UP! She threw her arms around Hawk nearly squeezing the breath out of him. He gasped a huge raspy gasp and Kylee relaxed her grip slightly. She chuckled and let out a girlish squeal, but this time it was of glee instead of shock. She looked down at the ground which was barely visible in the darkness, then up at the cave entrance and it was getting closer. Again she looked at the ground and realized she could no longer see it in the dark.

Hawk had switched off his headlight as they neared the tree tops. Up they rose into the night sky. Kylee looked over the forest as they cleared the highest pines.

The scenery that lay before her was stunning. Trees bathed in the harvest moons golden light, casting shadows upon one another as they swayed gently in the cool night breezes. The stars twinkled as if to welcome her to where few had been, she laid her head on Hawk's back, but this time there was no girlish giggle, all he heard was a huge sigh, then...

"Oh my God Hawk, it's.... it's soooo beautiful!"

Her voice trembled perhaps at the beauty she beheld, perhaps at the coolness of the early autumn night air. She cared not! As they rose to the caves entrance slightly above the tree tops, the cycle turned slowly and moved toward the narrow ledge at the caves mouth.

Hawk broke the tranquility of the moment, "Only a few know of the cycles ability to do this. It's really slow going up like that. It's really suppose to be used to break a huge drop. Like from over a cliff."

"A cliff?"

"Yep! For example I once drove over a cliff to save a friends fiancé. The cycle goes over a cliff and as it gets close to the bottom, it uses this ability to slow the decent, I found I can use it to raise upward as well, but only for an extremely short heights of about fifty feet or so and then it can only move forward or horizontally a few feet."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, wow! Thing is now it'll have to sit all night before it has enough power for us to get down. And if you noticed it moves really slow horizontally, too slow to be much use for anything other than this. Well full use that is...

The main purpose I'm guessing was to get across ravines, rivers, things like that.

I turn it on in the faring, then I can speed up, hit this button just beyond the right hand grip and the bike will jump various distances, depending on how fast I'm going. I found it's really great in battle where I'm out numbered, I can fly through the air and swing down on the enemy, from flat ground and not use a ramp of any kind. Actually kind of cool really."

"That is cool Hawk." Kylee listened intently, but still refused to ignore the splendor she beheld. She leaned her head forward and put next to Hawk's shoulder,

“This all is so cool!”

“One day I wondered what would happen if I hit the button while sitting still and...”

“You really don’t know much about how this stuff works do you?” Kylee interrupted.

“Nope! Just that it always has. And of course, how to work it, the exact hows and whys, I never concerned myself with, or would I even understand! I have enough crap to do without thinking about all that. I wish all these things came with manuals, but they didn’t or at least not complete ones. There wasn’t much time for... Well...”

He felt her give him a gentle squeeze as she chuckled.

“As long as you know enough so we don’t drop out of the air, I’m happy.”

“I know Keli said she wrote your mom about my past.”

“She read those parts to Ed and myself many times Hawk.”

“Well the base? The one that was built for me? Well the computer in it was partially damaged. There was a lot missing about how things worked. I lot I had to learn by trial and error.”

“What if you would have ‘guessed’ wrong Hawk? Didn’t it ever occur to you something might be dangerous?”

Hawk just shrugged and Kylee realized he was way beyond worrying about danger. The thought also made her ponder the fact that this man had stayed alive this long... How! She smiled to herself...

“Guess it really doesn’t matter, you’re here aren’t you?” She mused in a barely audible voice.

“What was that?”

“Nothing...” She looked at his back and smiled again, “Nothing at all.”

As soon as the front wheel was on solid ground again the cycle pulled its self into the caves dark maw. The sudden lurch forward snapped Kylee from her thoughts and the beauty she had been staring at. Within a few seconds the cave loomed before them. They had reached the ledge.

“The bike has two wheel drive Kylee, that’s the...”

“I’m not exactly stupid Hawk. I can pretty much figure out what two wheel drive is compared to one wheel like my bike. Duh! Or should I say my bike HAD... You remember my bike don’t you... or what’s left of it is in a smoking crater back in Fieldview.”

Hawk grinned, then changed the topic.

“It’s clear of critters and any other undesirable things.”

“How the hell do ya know that. Dammit it’s dark in there. I don’t like going into...”

“Relax Kylee...” He pointed at a small light on the faring. “If it flashes, we worry, no flashy, no worry.” He felt her grip on his torso relax as he flicked the headlight switch and it came back on flooding the interior of the cave with its bright glow. They proceeded into the caves maw.

“No flashy, no worry.” She laughed. Hawk did have a sense of humor and she loved it when he made her laugh.

When she actually chuckled and Hawk caught himself smiling. It was nice to hear her laugh. It reminded him so much of the days he had with Keli and how much he was enjoying Kylee’s company, then back to how much he missed his late wife, even after thirty years, he couldn’t remember her face until he met Kylee, but all those years he did miss being with her. Hawk didn’t have to remember what Keli looked like to remember those glorious few years they had together. He hated being alone once she had shown him how lonely he truly had been.

He reach down and patted Kylee’s hand.

“What was that for Hawk?”

“Thank you for reminding me what a woman’s laugh sounds like. Sometimes I forget why I do what I do, sometimes I forget there were happier times in all the sadness.”

His lamenting was eased by a gentle hug from Kylee. She in turn felt her eyes welling up with tears, but he’d never know, she’d never let him. Once again she had someone in her life. a brother-in-law, a hero, whatever... She didn’t care, she had someone she could care about other than Ed. Someone she felt safe with. Hawk sounded so sad, so lost, so....

The cycle came to a quick stop about ten feet into the cave. So sudden, it snapped Kylee from her ponderings.

“All off.”

“Okies Hawk.. To be perfectly honest my butt was getting a bit on the sore side.”

She got off the bike and walked into the small ‘L’ shaped cave. As she walked she tried to rub some circulation back into her behind.

Hawk shook his head. She was so much like her sister, even the way she rubbed her butt when she had ridden a long way. Her raven hued pony tail swayed from side to side and shimmered in the cycles light as she walked to the end of the side cave and started back. The

light spotlighted every bit of her body and in the glare Hawk caught himself. Thoughts that startled him.

“CHRIST Bob, What the hell are you looking at??? Damn! She’s your sister-in-law!!”

He bounded off the bike and kicked a rock across the cave, frustrated at himself.

“Ok what did I do now?”

He looked up and saw Kylee standing there, hands on her hips, head cocked and that little puzzled look that Keli used to get on her every time Hawk did something strange.

“Sorry Ky. Wasn’t you... errr, ahh, just trying to get some circulation in my legs.”

“Well next time let a girl know will ya? That rock almost circulated into my shin.”

Damned if she didn’t even scold him like his late wife....

Hawk gave her a sheepish look and turned back to his cycle. He opened up one of the side compartments on the cycle and pulled out several small lights. He placed them about the cave. Then tossed two mats on the cave floor. As they unrolled, Hawk grinned and squeezed. The mats gently thickened and expanded.

He stood back up and went back to the same compartment and pulled out several tiny objects. He walked around the cave. As he did, he would drop one now and then and as soon as it hit the floor a fairly bright glow burst forth and lit that area it was in.

Kylee still standing watching Hawk, still with hands on hips, did a quick scan of the cave, lights and mats.

“Wow! Tiny lights that give off such a warm glow.... And those pad. How??”

“How?? Hmmm... Do you really want to know?” He grinned teasingly.

“Sure Hawk, tell me. Tell me everything. Keli never said much other than how much she loved you, but never about you, your things? Whatever, I really want to know, though I doubt if there’s much you can say to stun me after the ride up to here....” She made a flying motion with her hand and smiled at Hawk.

Hawk in turn grinned that impish grin of his at Kylee, motioning for her to sit on her mat and once comfortable. He sat on the other pad and began talking.

Although there was not enough time to tell her a lot, tell her he did. About his suit, his cycle, how Keli saved his life at the halfway tavern and his base and of course the Aliens! He finished and looked over at Kylee who was sitting a couple of feet away. Her eyes as wide as he’d ever seen, her jaw almost to the ground. The perfect stunned look!

Hawk leaned toward Kylee and slowly raised his hand to her jaw and gently pushed it closed. He was tempted to say “Catching flies!”, but old memories returned, that was his and Keli’s thing. Instead he smiled and uttered....

“You’re drooling...”

“I AM NOT!” Then quickly glanced at Hawk, then wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

“Am I?... Was I?” She saw Hawk smiling and she too began to smile. It was so fascinating, he was so fascinating. Kylee grinned and thought to herself.

“I probably was drooling, my God Hawk, what technology, what a life!” Hawk was living the life she had dreamed about since those days when her mother would read Keli’s letters. Her thoughts faded as a sound snapped her back to the present.

“eerruuupp” She grabbed her stomach and looked over to see if he had heard. Kylee gave a sigh of relief as it appeared Hawk had not.

“I don’t know about you good sir, but this gal is hungry!”

Kylee walked over to the cycle where Hawk was busy doing something in one of the rear compartments and pulled her rather large backpack that was on the cycles buddy bar almost hitting him on the head as she swung it loose.

“oops...sorry.” She said in an innocent musical voice, grinning all the time.

She reached inside the sack and felt around as she sat on the caves floor. started bringing things out, a small cook stove, a fuel packet, food in unmarked packs, and bottles of water. As she started throwing things in a pot she had packed, she glanced over to Hawk who was still back at his cycle pulling out a couple of other items.

“If he wasn’t my brother-in-law, I’d say he isn’t too bad looking in a rugged way. I can see why Keli loved him so much, he’s so.” She slowly closed her eyes....

Her eyes popped open!

“HE’S YOUR BROTHER-IN-LAW STUPID!!!”

Her thoughts stopped so abruptly, she jerked and almost knocked over her simmering concoction. Hawk hearing the gasp as Kylee almost fell over her cooking, turned and grinned at her, but she never saw the grin as he quickly pretended he didn’t notice her near accident.

“Besides he’s way too old for you, stupid!” She jerked upright again as if she had been stung, “Damn! There I go again, I shouldn’t even be thinking about him...” She grinned nervously to herself as her mind once again answered....

“ Girl you have to find yourself a boyfriend! Soon!”

Her nervousness was obvious to Hawk, but she did try to hide it as she chirped,

“Hope you’re hungry, I tossed a few things in the pack before I tossed it on your bike, seeing we left in such a hurry, be glad I thought to grab food. Wasn’t a lot of choice when I packed the bag, so I’m just mixing what looks like it might be good together.”

“You’re rambling a bit, Kylee, what’s wrong.”

“Rambling...me? I’m not rambling, I’m just saying.....”

She stopped and grinned, “Ok! I’m just rambling.”

She grinned sheepishly and went back to cooking.

He looked over at her as she would open a can or package and toss it into the old antique black Dutch oven, then add some water, sniff, then dump something else in. He figured she was nervous because of her lack of variety, so he attempted to ease her mind a bit as he walked over to her and said,

“Lugging that old pot around, wow, must mean a lot to you to put up with all that weight.”

“It was my mothers’ Hawk, Ed’s and mine and...Keli’s.
It would have been hers as the oldest child always got family’s cast iron pot. You know Hawk it was from your day... er, that is back before. I’m not trying to say you’re old or nothing... I mean... you look good for...”

She sighed loudly as she realized she had talked herself into a corner and just finished,
“...your age.”

Hawk smiled warmly.

“That’s ok Ky, no apology needed for the age thing. Hell Ky, I’m the first to admit I’m older than dirt and Keli would have wanted you to have it anyhow, that I am positive of!”

Kylee relaxed and realized she just couldn’t stop smiling at this guy. He was so different than the man she knew hours before. It was as if he had put on a new self. Again she caught herself smiling and telling this man more than anyone else since her late husband.

“When mom passed away just after I got married, I took the pot and let Ed keep the house... I mean I was married, had a home, children. I didn’t need a house.”

She looked off in the distance almost like she could see through the solid rock of the cave walls.

“Then when....I lost my family...out there...”

“Lost?”

“They....”

Kylee never looking away from the cave wall, sighed...

“Died. Don’t ask... not now.”

“Ok, It has been a long day. Sorry I dredged up bad memories.”

Kylee turned and looked at Hawk, managed a weak smile, looked back down and attended to her cooking.

Hawk looked at Kylee then the pot, then back at Kylee.
He swallowed hard wondering just how indestructible he was. She had put a lot of whatever in that damned pot. The problem was, Hawk decided he really like this woman, she had a lot going for her and didn’t want to hurt her feelings. He had rations in the bikes compartment.
He looked at the pot again and the substance within it.
His mind started screaming at him, “Oh my God... That stuff looks like bubbling mud!”

She motioned for him to join her and poured the food out and what appeared to be some unknown lumpy substance within, into this bowl, then hers.

She smiled sweetly at Hawk.

“I hope it isn’t too awful Hawk.”

“It looks.... Ahhh...”

She chuckled... “Not too appetizing?”

“Uhh... No I was going to say.. uhh ...”

“Just give it a try.”

“Well it doesn’t smell terrible...”

He grinned sheepishly, took a sniff of his bowl. He looked up at this pretty woman sitting across from him smiling warmly at him, waiting impatiently for him to try her offering.
Hawk decided he would not hurt her feelings no matter how bad it was.
He raised his spoon as some food dripped off and plopped back into the bowl with the consistency of thick lumpy mud.
He closed his eyes and swallowed hard thinking he must have had worse...
Then again, perhaps not...

The spoon entered his mouth... He paused and looked at this pretty face looking back at him. "I will not hurt her!" Ran through his mind.

He dumped the spoon into his mouth and slowly started to chew.

He stopped chewing...

He looked back at Kylee. She in turn looked at him for any sign of approval. He chewed a bit then swallowed!

"Damnnnnn this stuff is GREAT!!!"

He smiled at Kylee who was now grinning back in his direction, hiding the fact she was so worried he would not like her cooking.

"Told ya!"

"I should have know Ky, you do everything else so well. Forgive me for doubting you." He started gulping down the concoction.

She beamed back at him, "You'll give me a big head if you don't stop."

"Heh, sure hope ya remember what you tossed in this. You'll have to make this again for me."

"Anytime you want, I'd be happy to."

She hesitated.....

"Well that is assuming you stick around long enough for a gal to make you dinner, but I'd really like to show you that I really can cook, not just throw stuff in a pot. I'd love to make you a real dinner."

Her smile vanished, she sat upright.

"Christ... I mean... That is if you'd like... I wouldn't want you to.... feel like... er, don't feel like you have to..."

Hawk smiled that warm smile Kylee loved to see as he reached over to her and patted her hand to assuring he understood.

"I'd love to have you cook me a meal Kylee, it's been a long time since someone took the time to make something like dinner for me. And I'm sure you're as fine a cook as you are pretty."

It was Hawks turn to jerk upright....

“WOW, what the hell??? He thought. How that must have sounded. He had called her pretty and wondered if she would think he was flirting with her.

“Hope I didn’t give the wrong impression. CRAP! What the hell do I mean wrong impression, come on guy, you can’t talk to her that way, she’ll think you’re coming on to her. NO! You just said she was pretty.... That’s not flirting.... Is it? Aww.. man... It’s been so long since I talked to a woman I don’t know anymore!.....Crap! I’m stammering in my own mind....”

Hawk got up smiled strangely at Kylee and walked toward his cycle. He kicked another rock, sending it flying over his cycle and crashing into the wall.

“Poor Hawk... Legs fall asleep again?”

He muttered a few things under his breath and walked over to his cycle, but all she heard was...

“YEAH!.... again!!”

Chapter 8.

The evening drifted by as the two talked well into the night and although extremely tired both found the other to be quite charming as well as interesting.

Hawk on the other hand came to realize that Kylee was quite different from his late wife. She never had the traumatic life that Keli had. Well not as traumatic. Nor was this lovely woman the warrior her sister had been, however Hawk had noticed, she handled herself incredibly well in a fight.

Their features, movements and voices were as if they were identical twins, but Hawk found this she was as different from Keli as night and day. She did not have that childlike quality that her sister had. Not to mention Kylee had more of a formal education. She had also been to larger cities with the delegates from Pineview that kept trying to seek help from the east. She knew what civilization was and was wise to things beyond her small town of Pineview.

They had swapped stories throughout the evening, only stopping to turn off a few of the glowing mini lights.

Hawk had lost himself in his thoughts. Thoughts that for the last several hours he had seen this woman that had sat across from him as Kylee, instead of the spitting image of his late wife.

“Guess we can do away without these extra lights too, Hawk.” Kylee mentioned as she gracefully moved about the cave turning off then collecting the small lamps, until there was only one light by their mats and one by the cycle.

Hawk watched her as she went about the small cave, lost within his thoughts, “Amazing, Kylee seems to know all about me, guess she’s always been curious about...”

“There, those two lights should be enough for the night.” She smiled at Hawk.

His mind ran on without completely understanding what Kylee was saying. He just heard words. “Strange though, I know she’s got to be in her mid forties, she looks at least ten years younger, perhaps it’s because...”

“I’ll just put these lights back into your cycles compartment.” She walked toward Hawk’s cycle.

“Pretty, smart and sure has quite a thirst for information, heh, kind of reminds me of...”

Hawk jolted upright, “Cycle compartment... CYCLE COMPARTMENT!!!”
It hit him what Kylee had just said and he snapped out of his thoughts abruptly! He started to jump to his feet!

“SHIT!!! KYLEE... NO!!”

“ZAAAAPPPP!!!!”

“AAeiiiiiiiiieeeeeee!!!”

The next thing Hawk knew Kylee flew across the cave backward and landed in his lap knocking him from a half standing position to the caves floor and cracking his head and shoulders against the caves wall.

He looked down to see Kylee who had landed face down across his legs rolling over. Her raven hair spilled out of her ponytail and skewed itself everywhere and partially covered her face. She turned her head slowly toward his face and peered through her dark locks.

“What the fff...err... hell was that!!!”

“Sorry, Kylee, it was my security system, I...”

A strange look crossed his face, then the corners of his lips turned upward. He chuckled, then burst out in unstoppable laughter.

Kylee at first was not amused, but seeing this man roaring in mirth, was just too hard to be mad at and she too started chuckling, more at him than what happened to her.

Snickering she looked up at Hawk and leaning on one elbow, still splayed upon his legs, half laughing she added.

“You know that wasn’t so funny to me.”

Hawk laughed harder.

“Hawk, it really wasn’t that funny.”

She start to laugh louder as Hawk tried reply between his gasping for air.

“Kylee..... your sister.... Keli.....”

“What?”

“She..., you..... she...”

“WHAT DAMMIT???”

They were both laughing so hard now neither could barely breathe....

“Keli.... Did the exact same thing....Wound up in just about.... The same spot you did!!”

Hawk’s laughing eased and he took a deep breath as he reached down and gently swept the hair from Kylee’s face as she still laid upon his legs, head propped upon her arm. Hawk took a deep breath...

“Keli... the first time we camped out. She did the exact thing you just did. She pretty much landed just like you did and we laughed, like now.”
Just the memories started Hawk roaring once again.

They both laughed until they both had tears in their eyes. When the laughing finally stopped Kylee looked up at Hawk. He figured he’d best explain. Once again he took a deep breath.

The cycle senses the persons weight that touches it and adjusts the shock for the maximum effect without killing them. Otherwise it would kill a child if it used the shock setting it did on you, so instead the youngster gets only a tingle, but enough where they won’t touch it again. As a rule I just turn it off in towns as no one but me can open anything or make anything function. It’s kind of tamper proof.
Out here I forget to turn it off when friendlies are around. Hell if I hadn’t turned it off back at the half way inn, you would have been shocked when you put that radio on my cycle...or back in Fieldview when you put the backpack on the buddy bar.”

He smiled at Kylee, “ When I’m out with someone in the wilderness. Now and then with people like you. You know, that I can trust. I turn it off, well, usually I remember to. Sometimes I just forget the security resets its self once I start the cycle back up.
Sadly, I forget, someone gets stung, like you...”

His face changed to sadness once again as old memories crept back into his mind.

“....or Keli, get jolted and kicked back about ten feet, like you did.”

Kylee noticed Hawk’s voice change again, it got quieter.

“Hawk I know you loved Keli very much. I see the sadness in your eyes every time you talk about her, She wouldn’t want that, because she loved you so much. You need to let her go...”

“I have Kylee, I have. It’s just she died so young, she had so...”

“That’s what I mean, Robert Hawk! You gave her so much, she wrote how happy she was....”

Kylee saw new tears forming in his eyes.

“...Hawk, She had no regrets in loving you. That’s what you need to remember, she loved you from the first day she saw you, it just took her a while to admit it to herself and to you.”

Hawk once again touched Kylee’s cheek, gently, softly and with tears in his eyes.

“Thank you Kylee. Maybe I needed to hear that, maybe I just needed to hear you don’t resent me for never getting around to bringing her to visit.”

“Oh Hawk, no... No I don’t blame you or her. I did kind of, a long time ago, but I realized neither of you could have known the future, nor how short hers was going to be. How could I blame you?”

She leaned her head into his hand and nestled her cheek into his palm holding his hand to her cheek with hers. She raised into a sitting position with her back against his raised knees, she turned and looked deeply into his eyes and as if she could see into his soul she added...

“There is so much sadness in you Hawk it makes me hurt.”

“Kylee? Why?”

“I read her letters, she never regretted on moment you two were together, but Hawk, let her go.”

“I know I have, but you bring back so many fond memories of her. You two are so much alike... yet so different.”

She moved closer to him. He could feel her warm breath, hear her soft voice. Her beauty was evident, even in the lowly lit cave and she was breath taking. He brushed the hair once again away from her cheek.

“I feel that I’ve know you all my life Hawk. I used to dream of you..”

He leaned toward her, their lips brushed.

“Somehow, I feel your sadness, your....”

“CHRIST!” She yelped as she pushed away!

“OH HELL!” He gasped!

Both sat up, pushing apart, noting their arms were around each other. Kylee quickly ran her hands through her hair as if trying to brush it back in place. Hawk glanced around the cave as if looking for someone else to talk to. He jumped up and stumbled around acting like the thing that almost happened, didn’t.

She moved over to her pad so fast, that she almost fell over backward. Both looked away from each other. Kylee cleared her voice.

“AHEM! So what were the aliens called??”

“Ahhh...uhh... Oh the aliens! Yeah the aliens! They pushed their races name into my head, but damned if we could pronounce it with our human vocal cords.”

“Ah...I see...”

She turned and looked at Hawk and he at her as he sat down once again. This time at a distance on the far side of his pad.

“Soooo, you seem to take what I say pretty much for gospel?”

“Why would you lie to me?”

They both stopped and looked at each other as Hawk grinned and said, “We are rambling aren’t we?”

She looked at Hawk and returned his smile.

“Look Hawk.... What just happened... well, I... We..”

“Kylee?” He smiled back at her.

“Look, we’re two adults, you don’t have to apologize, I know you’re what mid forties? I’m what a little over two hundred. I was fifty when ‘it’ happened. But there are about one hundred and fifty years of memories. All those memories, I cannot forget, so although I look fiftyish... Hell I can’t even remember anymore without figuring it out with paper and pencil. Besides you’re my sister-in-law, I can’t blame you for not... my age and all...”

“Hawk, it’s not that you’re too old, nor my late sisters husband, it’s just that... Well...” Her eyes lowered, “I’ve had a crush on you most of my life and now I’ve realized after spending almost a week with you, it may be more than a crush....”

“Kylee...”

“Hawk,” Kylee interrupted, “I’m not sorry for what almost happened a moment ago. It’s just I’m confused! It feels so right, but so wrong...”

“Kylee...” His voice had changed and she saw him smile warmly.

“What?”

“Kylee.... Look.” Hawk pointed toward the caves entrance as the early morning light cast it’s golden glow against the wall of the tunnel entry.

“It’s morning and we’ve yet to sleep.”

“Oh Hawk, I’m so sorry, all that driving and I’ve kept you up all night with my foolish questions.”

He smiled, sat down on his pad, reached over and gently laid his hand on her knee.

“Kylee, we both kept each other up, we both wanted to know more. No one’s to fault... no one!”

“Perhaps it’s best we pretend that nothing happened. “She hesitated as waiting for a response.

Hawk sprawled out on his pad and put his arms behind his head.

“What happened? Where?”

Kylee’s pad was touching Hawk’s and without thinking, she lay on her side almost next to him almost touching. Her head propped up on her hand she looked at him and smiled.

“Why nothing happened at all, did it?”

“Not a thing!”

She laid completely down and stretched out.

Hawk caught by several days without sleep started drifting off.

Kylee’s eyes fluttered, then closed. She moved her head over toward him and rested it upon his shoulder and he in turn put his arm around her. Neither was aware of what had just occurred. At this point neither cared, they were almost asleep.

“You know I am..... really sleepy.... Kylee, we’ve had.... busy.... ZZZZZZZZZZZZ.”

But she never heard him for she was already fast asleep, wrapped within his arms.

This night, for the first time in decades, Keli did not haunt his dreams.

As for Kylee her dreams had come true.

This night would be pushed back to the deepest recesses of their minds. Both had deep feelings of guilt, of longing, of confusion, the upcoming events would have to take priority. As for this night they, without even being aware of it, had allowed themselves a moment of emotion neither had not experienced in a long time..... They slept.

Chapter 9 .

After those long days in Fairview and being up all night, the sleep that had enveloped them held them in its embrace for nearly another day.

Stress and exhaustion had taken its toll without either realizing just how much. However, the just how much part, Hawk was about to find out as he awoke and finding Kylee still wrapped in his arms gently nudged her back to her pad and quietly arose. He rubbed his arm in a feeble attempt to get feeling back in it.

Hawk double checked the small thin watch that was hidden under his uniform sleeve, as his numb arm dangled lifelessly. He tried again to get his arm working after realizing that Kylee had been sleeping on his shoulder for almost a day.

“Crap! Twenty, no, twenty one hours. Man Hawk you’ve got to be kidding”

He grinned to himself and replied, “Getting old, old man? You never sleep this long.”

He kept swinging his arm around in circles all the time the nearly lost day ran through his thoughts. Mumbling profanities quietly as the numbness turned to painful pins and needles that seemed to prod every nerve within his arm.

Kylee slowly peeked through her eyelids at the commotion Hawk was making with his pacing around while swinging his arm. She wearily pushed herself into an upright position and sat there grinning without knowing what she was actually finding so amusing.

“You know if you swing both your arms like that.... I hear you can fly.” She gleefully added, then beamed a warm smile in his direction as if to tease him because she had caught him doing something very un-Hawk like.

Hawk’s arm came to a grinding halt. He turned, almost stumbling and sheepishly grinned at Kylee.

“Awww, the damned thing fell asleep on me. Must have slept wrong or something.”

Hawk strolled over to his bike and grabbed some items out of his cycle, walked over near the pads and laid down a strange small device that he unfolded and placed two silver packets upon. He grinned over to the half asleep vision of loveliness that sat across from him. His mind started to slip back in time, then to the previous evening. His thoughts were snapped by Kylee’s somewhat frustrated comment.

“That thing is a heating device? Dammit Hawk you could have told me you had something like that before I wasted all that fuel!”

Hawk grinned back at her and quipped, “It’s this way Kylee, Look at all the weight you don’t have to carry around in your back pack now.”

“Oooohh you’re soooo funny this morning!”

She frowned teasingly, which quickly vanished once Hawk replied, “Uhh, Ky? Morning? We slept through the whole day! It’s almost evening again!”

“WHAT!!! OH Shi...uh, damn, Ed and the others will worry. They’ll think....”

She snapped out of her sleepiness and calmed down. Once again she smiled that warm grin at him and added, “Awww, they know I’m with you Hawk. They won’t worry too much.”

Hawk smiled back at her as he passed the rations through the small device. They expanded within a few seconds and he tossed her one of the packets.

“Careful it’s hot Ky, and open it slowly so you don’t burn yourself with the steam in it!”

“Steam? Hawk the things not even hot!”

“Trust me Kylee, it’s hot inside and there is steam!”

She watched to see how he opened it so she wouldn’t appear uneducated. She guessed that these rations were actually provided by Hawk’s alien technology or at least the heating device. She looked the packet over nodding her approval. Now and then she would glance up through her dark bangs to see if Hawk was opening his yet.... He wasn’t!

“Eat up” He grinned “These have all the stuff one needs to keep going and stay healthy. Doesn’t taste bad either.”

He sat there and watched, as she sat there and stared at him waiting, but he never opened his ration. Hawk was doing as she had the night before, sitting there awaiting her approval of the night’s meal.

Kylee’s stomach gave a loud growl and with a defeated look she gave him a little frown and spoke.

“Ok how the hell do you open this damned thing?”

Then as she spoke she noticed a small silver tab and turned the packet upright and pulled it. Steam rolled out and enticed her nostrils with such a scent her mouth instantly started watering.

“Smart girl. Took me almost five minutes to figure it out the first time.”

“That’s because you’re a guy and we all know how smart you men are!”

Hawk just stuck out his tongue at her and opened his meal. They both ate and Kylee never stopped marveling at the flavor of the food.

“Oh my God Hawk...This stuff is great!!”

“Hard to believe it’s made from mutants, eh?”

“**WHAT!!!**” Kylee jerked, turned her head and spit her mouthful of food in the direction of the cave wall. She looked over to Hawk as he tried to laugh, but choked instead... He choked so hard tears formed in his eyes and his face turned red. Kylee knew he had said that just to tease her and was greatly satisfied that his prank had backfired somewhat.

“Awww... poor Hawk, did you choke on a mutant bone?” She paused, then decided to add,

“Serves you right mister legend!” She gave him a satisfied grin and huffed, “Tease a girl just because you show her something new.... Shame on you!”

Hawk caught his breath and wiped his eyes.

“Kylee I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to tease, I just wanted to...”

He looked over to Kylee and she was trying not to laugh.

“Gotcha!”

They both laughed. When the laughter subsided, they slowly began to finish their meal. Barely a word was spoken beyond that point as they ate and never a mention of the previous nights events were recalled, at least out loud.

They ate, but as they had slept all day and night was once again falling, decided to sleep once again. This time each lay upon their own mat. Although touching mats, it was not the same for the two as they prepared for sleep.

Neither mentioned the night before, but neither forgot, each knowing the other did not want to pursue these feelings further. Even sleeping as long as they did, both were soon fast asleep. Exhaustion is funny that way and strangely enough they both slept through to dawn.

Hawk awoke with a sense of being stared at. The cave was aglow with the mornings first light. He squinted, then his eyes popped open.

There a few inches from his face was Kylee looking back at him. She held his hand that had been around her, with a couple of fingers as she had tried to remove it from her shoulder so she could rise.

“Uhhh...Good morning?”

“Oh sorry Hawk... I... must have....uhhh, sometime during the night..... scooted over...”

“Oh...Ohhhh!” He looked at his arm around her shoulders, “Ahhh, probably got cold?”

“Cold?... Oh COLD! Yeah, I must have gotten cold. Probably moved over here for body warmth.”

“No Doubt.” He smiled at her with that smile that she first saw back at the inn. That damned smile that made her heart flutter and frustrated her so much now that she had decided to ignore her feelings toward him.

“After all why would he want anything to do with me? I remind him of his late wife, He thinks he’s too old for me... I..”

She let her thoughts fade as she moved around the cave picking up and thing they had laying around. She wasn’t thinking about much, until Hawk had to ruin the peaceful moment by speaking.

“Maybe we’d better pack up and get on the road Kylee? You’re brother is probably thinking we were killed by Diablo or never got out of Fairview. Depends how far away they were when the explosion went off.”

“Oh crap! Hawk, I completely forgot about.... oh just about everything!”

She got up and with an arm full of the mats and items they had used the night before. Kylee hurried over to the cycle. She reached for the compartment Hawk had retrieved the hotplate and rations from. She paused, twisted her lithe body at the waist and looked at Hawk as he smiled back and replied to her unspoken question...

“I put you into the security system after you got shocked the first time. It’s safe!”

Kylee opened the side compartment and pulled out the heating device and two packets, tossed in the armful of empty water and food packets into the now empty compartment. She walked over to the pads, unfolded the device and started heating the food by passing the packets through the device just as she had seen Hawk do the night before.

“You are one amazing lady, Kylee.” He beamed at her. “One time and you figure out everything for yourself. Simply amazing.”

“Well I haven’t figured you out yet, somehow I think that’ll take me a little longer.”

She smiled warmly back at him, tossed him a packet of food. The two hastily chowed down on food barely taking time to chew, packed up the cycle and off they went.

Once again she mounted the cycle behind Hawk and he headed toward the caves opening and Kylee once again squealed as they drove over the edge and dropped toward the earth. This time it was much faster going down than it had been going up. That is until the bike slowed and gently came to a stop at the bottom. No sooner had they hit the ground and Hawk had them off speeding along the winding road that lead to the cutoff that led to the back road into Pineview.

The cool morning air blew by Kylee's ears and caused a deafening cold roar. She tucked her head into the area between Hawk's shoulders and held on for dear life as he careened around the corners. Hawk sighed, those old memories flooded back of Keli always tucking her head in the exact same spot. Almost as if over time, somehow these two shared a connection. Somehow Kylee knew.

Hawk shook off the weird thoughts that had dropped out of nowhere. Then it hit him.

Christ! I'm no longer referencing Keli to Kylee.... I'm thinking of Kylee, then Keli. What the hell is going on?"

The cycle swerved a bit, but the startled Hawk got it quickly back under control. He felt her grip tighten, but not a word or comment was spoken. He felt her snuggle her head back to his back.

"Was that a little hug? Naw she's just...."

He felt another slight squeeze and she snuggled in a bit more...

The two were making good time and would be in Pineview by late afternoon by her calculations. Provided he didn't wrap them around some tree first. He got his thoughts under control.

Hours passed and Kylee tapped Hawk's shoulder, leaned forward next to his left shoulder and pointed towards a barely visible dirt path.

"Sorry Hawk it'll be dirt from now until we hit the road back to Pineview. Guess dirt is a bit nice to describe what we're going to be driving over." She chuckled, "Just try to remember you're the one that came this way from Fieldview, not me!"

Hawk just grinned back, little knowing that Kylee had not quite accurately described the road. This became apparent when he hit the first rather large rock. Onward they pushed, zigging and zagging around rocks and trees. At times the path couldn't be seen, but thanks to Kylee's knowledge of the areas surrounding her home of Pineview, she was able to show Hawk a narrow and sometimes difficult path through the woods. Only one on foot or a skilled motorcyclist could traverse. She mentioned to Hawk, she had never heard of anyone

making it through by motorcycle. Eventually they found the partially paved back road into her hometown, turned onto it heading back south and on to Kylee's home. When they got safely onto the pavement, Hawk turned his head slightly and spoke to Kylee.

"A shortcut you said? Geez woman, it took us three hours to get through that whatever the hell you call it and now this paved road is so full of chuck holes."

"Well it did save us another five or six hours Hawk, and Pineview is just about two miles ahead. As far as the road, lighten up, we're a small community and there's not a lot north of us to warrant repairing this road."

He turned his head a bit more so he could barely see Kylee as she had leaned toward him to talk.

"I sure hope there's a good hot bath somewhere I can soak in. Your shortcut has just about beat my ass to death!"

Kylee leaned closer to his ear and teased, "Awwww poor baby, does your widdle bottom hurtsy?"

He squinted his eyes, frowned at her and turned back toward the road ahead, being careful not letting her see the smile pursed upon his lips. He actually enjoyed the banter and teasing. She was not her sister, nor was he seeing her as Keli's spitting image anymore. She had become an individual to him, not a shadow of her sister. Hawk had found to be quite a rarity. Someone he connected with and more yet. She connected to him and actually seemed to like him. Strange thing, this woman, she did seem to like him even when he was a bit short with her and he found himself attempting to be human once again... to care. Strange!

He cranked the throttle and Kylee let out a little yelp as the bike jumped onto the now better paved highway and off south to the town of Pineview they went, at a much higher rate of speed.

After moving along what Kylee considered to be much too fast, especially with his swerving around the occasional pothole, the cycle slowed and finally stopped as it crested a small hill. She managed to peek out from behind Hawk's back, gave a huge grin, reached her arm over his shoulder and pointed at the widely spread out town that lay below.

"Pineview! You can see it's much more spread out here at the north end than at the southern part. Most of the rest is hidden back to the west around the forest."

"Forest that's an understatement if I ever heard one Kylee. Jungle would be more like it. geezzzz girl, I haven't seen trees this thick in years. Since we hit this road and topped these mountains, I had almost forgotten how much I love forests, the sounds, the trees..."

She grinned at Hawk.

“Why do you think Diablo wants us so bad. He can’t fire shells at us for fear of burning the timber he needs so badly. He blows up the town, there’s a chance the forest would go as well. Maybe in desperation, he thinks we might set fire to it as we escape.”

“It would appear you and your people have him over a barrel.”

Kylee lowered her eyes as if not trying to accuse Hawk.

“Maybe, until Fieldview. Now I fear revenge over his son’s death will lead to our destruction. I doubt now if he cares anything about the wood we control.”

Hawk without a word slowly started moving toward the town. Kylee wondered if perhaps she had hurt Hawk, she had not intended to, but she had said what was on her mind and unfortunately on his as well. How far would Diablo go to avenge his son’s death?

Down the road they rode toward the sentries at a road block. Kylee stood upon the foot pads of the cycle so the guards could see her they neared the road blocks. She waved and they in turn waved back.

Onward toward the town they sped, then the road widened and through the winding streets of Pineview they drove. All the time Hawk followed Kylee’s directions through the streets and up to the town square.

As they drove around a large statue in the center of the town’s square to the large building Kylee was pointing to.

Those within the towns square cheered and applauded when they saw Kylee riding on the back of the cycle. Again she was standing upon the foot rests so all could see it was her and not some stranger.

Ed had informed everyone of Hawk’s coming, but today the cheers were for Kylee. Although she had met only a third of the townsfolk, they all knew of her and loved her for what she had been doing over the years for the town.

Hawk would find out later, due to Kylee and a few other representatives, many of the towns improvements were due to them risking their own safety for the towns sake. Their visiting cities east of the Mississippi for supplies and items like the one small wind generator the town had, gave her pleasure knowing she was helping her home town.

She was known by the townsfolk for herself sacrificing ways and now here she was again bringing much needed help in the form of the Fieldview folk and of course the legendary Hawk.

Ed on the other hand had been boasting about Hawk and his exploits. Not to mention the fact that he had destroyed Diablo’s son and a part of the army that went up in smoke in Fieldview. It seemed when the last of the convoy had heard the big explosion, one vehicle had gone back in time to see the huge cloud rising into the sky.

From their vantage point on a high hill, Tom had spotted Hawk and Kylee with his binoculars on

the other mountain side to the east of where they were. Ed had deduced Hawk and his sister would have to take the road they did as Diablo was still down on the prairie at the time.

Ed of course embellished Hawk's deeds so much Hawk could never live up to them. Seeing the remains of the explosion, he had only guessed what Hawk had done to bring it about. Now he hoped not too many would laugh at him once Hawk or Kylee told the truth. But at this moment all Ed cared about was they were home.... And safe!

The city hall's door burst open and several men and women came running toward the pair as they stopped at the base of the stairs. Of course Ed who had been standing at the bottom of the stairs, was the first to greet them.

"Kylee!

"ED!" She leapt off the cycle as he gave her a bear hug. Hawk slowly tossed his leg over the bike and stood, stretching the kinks out.

"HAWK!" Ed moved over to Hawk and gave him a big bear hug. Kylee chuckled as much as Ed tried, he just couldn't lift Hawk off the ground. Hawk on the other hand, turned his head and looked at Ed.

"Uh, Ed?..."

He uncomfortably managed to gasp out that much as he was somewhat startled by the show of affection from his new found brother-in-law, "...I do have to breathe at some point you know."

With a sheepish grin, Ed released Hawk and stepped back. "Sorry Hawk, just glad to see you two are safe. You had us worried.

The pair moved away from the cycle and Ed grabbed Kylee in another bear hug, lifting her feet in the air and flinging her around all the time shouting how everyone thought she had perished back in Fairview until he and Tom got back. He let his sister to the ground and with a delegation close behind walked back over to Hawk.

"Hug me again Ed and I'll hurt you real bad!"

Ed grinned, slapped Hawk on the back and introduced him to the town's officials in a way that actually made Hawk blush a bright red.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to my long lost brother-in-law. The legendary Hawk! Yep the one and only... in the flesh."

Kylee looked over at Hawk's reddening face and added to his embarrassment.

"OH My God! Hawk's blushing!!!"

Then realizing what she had just said placed both hands on his arm and leaned to his ear and whispered. It was too late, the crowd started politely laughing.

"Oh Hawk I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..."

He patted her hand and smiled. He started shaking all the out stretched hands and the amenities began.

Eventually all went into the hall and talk turned toward upcoming events, but these were short lived as Kylee mentioned that they really needed to rest and get cleaned up and there would be plenty of time over the next few days for planning the defense of their beloved town.

A party had been planned for later that evening in the towns square and all would be invited. Hawk and Kylee would be the guests of honor. Kylee declined and said Hawk is the one that should be honored and preceded to tell of the 'exact' events of the battle of Fairview and how between two to three hundred of Diablo's men had been destroyed along with his much hated son. From that point on, it was to be Hawk's night of honor.

Ed was pleasantly surprised that his version of the Fieldview events were pretty close and there would be no teasing his story telling abilities.

Kylee ended her report by telling everyone how bravely Hawk handled everything. How courageous he had been and how proud and honored she was to have met him.

Hawk blushed once again as Kylee strolled across the floor. She slid her arm under and around Hawk's arm and led him from the meeting hall with Ed close behind.

Ed was thrilled when Kylee mentioned that they'd be honored if Hawk would stay with them in their spare room. Hawk on the other hand was reluctant until Kylee mentioned they had a huge bathtub that was wider and deeper than a normal bathtub. And that Pineview had a natural gas supply, which meant a hot bath! Hawk gave that wide grin that Kylee loved to see and said,

"Ok you sold me. Lead the way! As he practically pulled her out the door. A hot bath, it had been way too long since he had felt hot water!

Ed grinned and Kylee still holding Hawk's arm leaned into him and gave it a hug. Ed noticing how enthralled his sister seemed to be, just grinned and thought that perhaps....

"Naw, well maybe, she and Hawk? Hmmmm...." He watched Kylee as she walked along with Hawk and they chatted away, smiling, grinning at each other. Playfully bumping into each other.

"Well then..... Maybe..." He grinned again.

Chapter 10.

Hawk took a bit too long sitting in the tub as it had been a while since he had felt hot water. He had slid down into the hot water until it hit his neck. He sighed! His thoughts drifted off to the last few days... His eyes closed, his body relaxed, sliding a bit farther into the water, he sighed again as he thought to himself...

“Sure beats those cold streams or hand bathing from some damned water pump.”

His thoughts were interrupted by Ed banging on the door, so much so, Hawk jumped out and headed to the door, with his towel wrapped around his waist almost slipping on the floor with his wet feet. As he opened the door Ed walked in, Hawk grinned and said,

“Man your sis is going to kill me for getting her floor wet.”

“Naw... don’t worry about it Hawk. She.. ARGGGggg!!!”

Ed slipped, but caught himself on the sink and righted himself “Well she might if I slip again and miss the party!” He laughed back at Hawk.

“Seriously Hawk, you’d better hurry up and get down stairs. I’ll bet Kylee is ready by now. Kylee never takes more than ten minutes to get dressed and she hates to be kept waiting... She’s a real fanatic about being late too. Sooo...”

“Gotcha Ed, heh, hate to get yelled at on my first day here.”

Ed smiled at the thought of Kylee chastising Hawk and closed the door yelling back through it to Hawk, “Y’all just go ahead don’t wait for me. That way Kylee can’t blame me for being late. Tell her I’ll be at the party soon, I have to pick up my date.”

Hawk turned the hall corner toward where the bed rooms were located, trying not to slip with his still partially wet feet.

Just then the door opened and Kylee dashed through it and ran directly into Hawk with a resounding thud!.

She looked into Hawk’s eyes, blushed and replied.

“Oh Hawk, I’m so sorry it’s all my....” Kylee’s eyes widened, she looked down, her mind started to wander, “Wow for an old guy he has quite a nice chest.... Nice arms....”

She grinned as she checked out his stomach and thought, “Nice abs!”

She looked down a bit lower before it dawned on her he was only wearing a tiny towel, which he was trying valiantly to hold together where it came together at his side....

She looked at his muscular upper thigh peaking through the split in the towel.

She gulped and looked back up to his eyes as he spoke,

“I’m really sorry Kylee, I shouldn’t have been in such a hurry. All my fault!”

“Ohhhh, no Hawk, it was all my pleasu.... CHRIST! I mean my fault!! I should watch where you’re going.... I mean where I’m... going...”

Kylee turned a bright red and spun around and vanished through her bedroom door!

From behind the door Hawk heard a muffled “Shit, stupid.... Stupid, arrrggg!”

A strange look crossed his face. “What the hell was that all about?”

Hawk entered his room and closed the door, pausing long enough to glance back to Kylee’s room and shrug his shoulders. This woman was truly acting strange he thought, glanced once again at her door and shook his head. He had to get ready as Ed said it wouldn’t take her long. Hawk gently closed the door.

Ed had rushed to get ready and stumbled slightly as he ran down the stairs so he wouldn’t be too late and Kylee wouldn’t be cross. Instead he skidded to a halt after noticing Hawk sitting in the living room on a chair close to the stairs.

“Hawk, Kylee leave without us?”

“Don’t think so Ed. Heard her humming a while back and she hasn’t come down yet.”

“Hawk... My sister does not hum, she hasn’t since.... Well since her husband and children died. Did Ky mention about their deaths?”

“She told me about a husband that had passed away, but nothing about children. I don’t think, she did. If she did, Ed my memory lately just seems all screwed up for some reason.”

Ed grinned at Hawk. Then got a serious look on his face.

“It’s no secret Hawk, her husband and two children were killed out on a hunting trip about ten years ago. A search party found what was left of them several days after they failed to show up.”

“Damn Ed I’m sorry to...” Hawk struggled to find the right words, but Ed sensing his awkwardness continued.

“Ky got over it eventually, until then she had been a good little housewife and mother. But after that day, she became withdrawn and.... well, we all thought she might...”

He paused, “...anyhow she didn’t and she began to change. She started learning how to use weapons and fight using knives, axes, hand to hand whatever someone could teach her. It was as if she feared dying the same way. Then it was like she went out and tried to get herself killed. We all started to worry again, but every time she returned and seemed mentally stronger each time. Sometimes she was a bit chewed up, battered and bruised, other times she didn’t have a scratch. Ky never said what she did on those outings, even though we asked.”

“I had no idea Ed, but obviously she didn’t get her wish to end her life.”

“Heh, oh, she went out a lot. Alone! But she always came back, just as sad and lost. That is until one day she saved a couple of travelers and their kids from some mutants. There were more mutants back then, and Hawk, it changed her completely! She found a new mission in life and started bringing settlers in to Pineview, checking on the few outlying farms and lumber camps to the north, helping the other towns.”

“Heh,heh, sounds like her big sister.”

Ed noticed Hawk started to look around nervously as if remembering something, but at the same time trying not to get lost in those memories. And he knew what Hawk was remembering.

“Ya know Hawk, from what I hear, Keli was quite a warrior. But Kylee’s nothing like that. She can handle herself, just ...well... she isn’t afraid of a lot and that attitude can get you killed.”

“Hahaha, Ed. Now you’re starting to sound like me.”

“Wow, Hawk, That’s quiii...”

Ed stopped talking and his stare moved to behind Hawk....” Dammmmm....”

Hawk who had been sitting with his back to the stairs, spun around to see what Ed was staring at. Ed’s jaw had damned near hit the floor and his eyes were fixed on something behind Hawk.

As he spun around, half standing, half sitting, he almost knocked the chair over. His eyes hit the stairs and.....

Stunned he fell backward into the sofa where Ed was standing. Hawk swallowed hard, then slowly rose to his feet and moved forward a few steps, then froze again.

From behind him he heard Ed’s gasping voice... “Wow.... Sis, you....WOW!....”

Kylee stood mid way down the staircase looking somewhat unsure of herself. That is until she saw the reaction of the two men below. She gave a warm sexy smile and down the stairs stepped Kylee, at first all Hawk noticed was the long slender legs clad in Dark hose and dark green heels wrapped her small feet as she gently came stepping down one stair at a time, ever so slowly until she hit the bottom. The guys were stunned!

She was a knock out!

The two men could see why Kylee was running late. Her raven locks were no longer in a ponytail, but curled slightly and cascaded over her soft lightly tanned shoulders. Her strapless dress wrapped delicately around her bust, then flared out just below the hips into a swaying, hypnotizing mass of beautiful green printed silk like material that stopped several inches above the knees.

She was a vision of loveliness like Hawk hadn't seen since.... Since... his thoughts went no further. No longer did Keli haunt him and it was only Kylee he now saw.

Kylee walked over to the two men, smiling, stepping one foot slightly over the other, moving slowly, gracefully. She smiled at Hawk.

"Well guys are we ready to go or what?"

"Sis? Wow, I haven't seen you in a dress in..."

"Ed, now we don't want to be late and Hawk surely isn't interested in when I was or wasn't wearing anything..."

Hawk swallowed really hard and Kylee's smile vanished.

"OHhhh... I meant... wearing a dress... I meant a dress..."

The guys roared, looked at each other then back to Kylee who was standing there, hands on her hips glaring.

"It wasn't that funny, it was just a..."

"Oh yes it was sis! The look on your face... the..."

"OHHrrrrrrr." Kylee spun and headed back toward the stairs, but Hawk's hand reached out and gently stopped her retreat.

"Kylee. I'm sorry! Really! You look beautiful tonight and no doubt will put any other of the ladies in town to shame. That's a very beautiful dress."

"Thank you, Hawk. I..."

“Sis you are beautiful, and I agree with Hawk.”

“Thanks Ed.” She smiled warmly with a forgiving smile that could have melted ice.

“But it was funny... the look on your face...”

Kylee laughed as she gave her brother a hard rap on the arm... Ed stopped laughing. She looked at Hawk while Ed rubbed his arm.

“I suppose you think it was funny as well?”

The grin left Hawk’s face.

“Me? Nawww... shame on you ED!”

Ed followed Hawk and his sister out the door and he was grinning from ear to ear... She had not worn dresses in many years. Now all of a sudden here she was wearing a dress. He watched the two as Kylee latched her arm around Hawk’s arm and off they headed toward the fire lights in the square.

Again he stopped for a moment and smiled at the sight, both Hawk and Kylee walking arm in arm, talking and neither aware of how they appeared....

Nor did it seem as they cared what others thought. Ed grinned at the two until he remembered he was late picking up his girlfriend. He burst past Kylee and Hawk and sprinted out into the evening.

The party was long and drifted into the early morning hours. Hawk had carried a buckskin jacket along to the party, which had become useful as he noticed Kylee shiver as the night wore on and the temperatures dropped. He chivalrously draped it over Kylee’s shoulders and she in turn had reached up to hold it in place catching one of Hawk’s hands in hers. She made no move to release him.

“Poor thing.” Hawk thought “She must really be cold.”

Kylee leaned into his shoulder and stood next to him and shivered once again. He pulled her into his chest holding her close, wrapped in his arm, she laid her shoulder on his chest so her forehead laid next to his cheek. She grasped the fact this man had no clue how she felt about him. It frustrated her some knowing as hard as she tried, her feminine charms drew his notice, but nothing else. She glanced up to his face as the firelight shimmered, wondering if perhaps he was just good at hiding his feelings.

She felt the warmth of his body and snuggled into his chest.

“Maybe we’d better go, you’re shivering...”

“NO! I mean, I’m ok now Hawk. Thanks.”

She smiled up at him and noticed he was looking off toward the high stone wall the town had built overlooking the valley. He starred and had a strange faraway look on his face even though he was smiling.

Kylee snuggled against him, tipping her head back slightly and whispered in his ear.

“You must have loved her very much.”

“I did Kylee, she was everything to me.”

He heard her sigh slightly, then she continued.

“I’m sorry if I dredge up old memories of her. I..”

“Kylee... I wasn’t thinking of your sister, that is until you mentioned her...”

“Oh Hawk, I’m sorry.”

Hawk looked down at Kylee, “Kylee, look, I loved Keli very much, but you and she are so different, yet so much alike. Sometimes this confuses me, that’s all.”

“But you seemed so distant, like you were...”

Hawk moved his head back a bit and looked Kylee in the eyes. Her face lit by the flickering firelight, her dark eyes had tears in them. Her voice trembled as she continued.

Hawk I know you were thinking of her. And I’m glad you...”

“Kylee, to be honest, I was thinking about you.”

“Me??”

“You!”

She pulled back from Hawk’s warm embrace and looked into his eyes in half belief.

“You were thinking about me?”

“I was thinking about the fact that when I met you I thought you were, well, Keli! Back at the inn, the times in Plainview.

Ok, maybe a few times after I compared you two, but just now I was thinking about the fact that I keep seeing you as Kylee.... not Keli’s double, nor as her sister, but as Kylee. A wonderful woman I met and now keeps amazing me in so many ways. Why I haven’t”

Kylee quickly leaned into Hawk and gave him a quick but gently kiss on the lips, grasped his jacket tight to her shoulders and hurried back toward her house, heels clicking, hem darting back and forth around her thighs in the early morning breeze. She stopped once and looked back, smiled, then turned and hurried off into the darkness.

Hawk peered into the darkness, but could see nothing. He smiled at her actions, but was confused as to why she was acting weirdly. Then from out of the dark he heard a faint,

“WHeeeeee!”

Now he was really confused!

Ed walked over to Hawk.

“What’s with her?”

“Think she has more than a crush on ya Hawk.”

“Naw!”

“Yessir... believe she does!”

“Christ Ed, I’m over two hundred years old. That makes me about one hundred and fifty years too old for a woman in her mid forties. Yer outta yer mind fella.”

Ed just chuckled.

“Hawk... add it up, she hasn’t hummed in years, never worn a dress or put on makeup, snuggled up to anyone if she got cold. Not even me. Yep, she’s got a thing for ya.”

“Christ! Nawwww, besides I, we couldn’t... well....we’re related kind of...”

Hawk frowned, “Quit trying to confuse me dammit....”

Hawk stormed off into the darkness. He turned his head long enough to shout from the darkness.....

“You’re crazy Ed what the hell would someone like her see in an old guy like me? Yer nuts!”

Ed watched as Hawk vanished and smiled to himself. Hawk had no clue as to how much he meant to people... To Kylee. He grinned and in a low voice spoke to the darkness....

“You’ll see!”

Chapter 11.

The next few weeks were more than one would describe as hectic. The town prepared for all out war. The huge boulder wall at the towns entrance was reinforced, buildings that faced the valley were boarded up and small openings were cut so guns could be fired out onto any enemy that breached the wall.

Additional gun placements were scattered throughout the town. Hawk could see the townsfolk had decided there would be no running this time. These people were making Pineview their last stand against Diablo and he knew Kylee would not leave, thus he too would stay.

This time there would be no blowing up the town, no running, no retreat. What worried him most, were the preparations to destroy the town and everything in it. The townsfolk had voted to fight to the last and if that happened, the town was to be set ablaze. Diablo would not get his needed lumber or supplies.

To Hawk this was unacceptable and after much persuading he got the mayor and the townsfolk to remove anything that might be set off by accident. He gave them the old 'Plan A or B' speech and reluctantly they gave in.

Instead roadblocks were set up and on the one road leading into town from the south they placed piles of rubble and a movable barricade toward the roads center.

The huge boulder and earthen wall with a stone rampart reached from the rocky cliffs to the west to the single two lane road into Pineview.

"The wall" as the townsfolk cleverly called it, was built out of monstrous boulders with a good twenty feet of earth fill, then more boulders to the town side. A wide earth and stone rampart paralleled the wall on the town side. This worried Hawk due to the bottom of the rampart was next to the main road. If Diablo burst through the roadblock, he could drive his tanks up onto the wall and fire directly on the town.

On the other side to the east of the wall, about twenty feet of open ground was blocked with old vehicles and huge trees, all the way to the cliffs to the east that reached southward to the huge lake. The mayor had done well in leading the defense. All Hawk did was suggest a few improvements.....

All the time Ed, Hawk and Kylee had worked together, Ed saw no more indication that these two would ever get together. He had hoped, as he could see what they apparently could not and these two had been lonely far too long.

Hawk was his step brother-in-law and considered his family, he found he liked Hawk and even caught himself imagining what it would be like to have him as a brother-in-law, not a step brother-in-law. Though a fine line in thought, the concept of was quite different. Hawk his sister's husband! The thought made him grin, but then he would remember neither showed any sign of interest in one another.

It wasn't because he was a living legend, nor the confident leader he was, but just because he

was a friendly down to earth kind of guy and he knew this man would be the right one for his sister.

Then the realization... this was Hawk and he knew the legend.

The stories of his coldness and ruthlessness had been around for years, yet the man he came to know was far from the tales, confusion abounded. This man would make his sister happy.

Little could he have know how much Hawk had changed since their meeting at the inn almost a month earlier. No longer was Hawk the quiet moody man in black that stalked parts of the wastelands. No longer did he try to hide the fact that he was once again enjoying being with people. Hawk for the first time in a long while was actually enjoying life.

Hawk, Ed and others would spend nights at the tavern a block away from Ed's house. They laughed and begged Hawk to tell stories of the battles he been in. The townsfolk would nod or greet him as he walked through the town. Now and then he and Kylee would walk out in the northern woods, but always stayed within range of the town. Diablo was later than they had expected, yet everyone knew he would come.

Kylee on the other hand had been warm to him, yet no longer seemed to act like she had a crush on him, which put Hawk to ease a bit and he relaxed and as he relaxed, he warmed even more to people. And people warmed even more to him. As far as the townsfolk, they knew of his legend and had put themselves in his capable hands for the defense of their town, their lives. Even the mayor who had done so well in defending the town so far, put his town totally in Hawk's hands.

Evening fell on the new month that had just begun and still no sign of El Diablo or his army. Hawk stood upon the buttress of the towns' wall that overlooked the valley below. He stood marveling at the beauty and serenity. The townsfolk had done well. The defenses were strong, Hawk had several plans in effect. There were signs of confidence within the townsfolk he had not seen since he got to Pineview. They held the high ground and had many lookouts scattered along the northern roads to prevent a surprise attack from behind. Even when Kylee approached him, she too marveled at how far they had come. The towns' defense was done.

The evening was a warm one for this late in the year as Hawk and Kylee strolled along the boulder wall which was a little over fifty feet thick and build from rock, earth and other debris. It was over seventy yards long and lined with huge boulders on the side toward the valley. They had strolled here every evening looking for any campfire that might indicate Diablo was near.

"You know Kylee this old wall kind of reminds me of the old forts they built during the civil war... And no I wasn't alive back then!" Kylee chuckled at Hawk, "I just remember seeing pictures. The walls like this one build on mounds of earth. Whoever built this wall knew what they were doing."

Kylee chuckled again and with a grin replied, “Oh Hawk don’t be silly, I’m not so dumb that I thought you were that old. Plus I know about the civil war. We learned about that in school. No pictures, but I guess it was kind of like what we’re doing here, you know fighting mutes and raiders. The fighting that is.

As for the wall, Hawk our great grandfather built it, to protect the town sometime just after the apocalypse. You know, to keep the mutants out. He was an engineer!”

She yawned and Hawk decided now wasn’t the time to explain the differences of war. He knew to Kylee war was just war. In slightly over the two hundred years since the apocalypse, there had been no wars between countries. There were no more countries. The war was just one long ongoing war to survive. Hawk paused to speak but noticed Kylee was yawning again and shooed her off to bed.

“You need sleep too Hawk.”

“I’ll be along later Ky, I have to check the guards one more time. Then I have one other thing to take care of.”

“Ok, just try not to be too late. I know it’s silly, but with Diablo coming, I feel better locking the front door at night.”

She turned and headed off to her and Ed’s house and Hawk headed to the woods at the end of the wall where it met the cliffs overlooking the valley below. He strolled along nodding at the sentries as he passed and vanished into the night.

Sometime later Kylee glanced out her window as she prepared to retire and noticed Hawk standing in the area behind the building directly across from their house. She turned the light off and strained to see in the moonlight. She called to Ed as he walked down the hall. He came walking into the room, looked out the window and nudged Kylee’s arm...

“Looking at the legend eh?” He blurted out teasingly.

“Strange, he appears to be talking to someone. No, I don’t see anyone.. Wait, yes! There just in the shadows!” Ed looked to where Kylee was pointing.

Ky, I don’t see anyone, you’re dreaming or looking for an excuse to watch Hawk.”

He grinned again, but this time he got an elbow in the arm... rather sharply! However before Kylee could prove her point, they saw Hawk walking across the street toward their house.

Ed chuckled and walked out of the room. Kylee was infatuated with Hawk and times like this he wondered if perhaps it might be more or hoped it was. Ed closed his door quietly as he heard Kylee scampering about through her door. He heard the

front door close and footsteps coming up the stairs. Hawk was quietly cussing, but he couldn't hear about what. He turned and shrugged, maybe his sister was right. Maybe Hawk was talking to someone and ticked him off. Either way Ed decided it wasn't any of his business.... Nor Kylee's.

The next morning, bright and early, Hawk was once again pacing up and down the wall stopping now and then to strain out into the morning light, looking... waiting! Hawk noticed Tom, the towns leader and walked up to Hawk to chat a bit, but as Hawk turned to greet Tom, another man ran up and in a semi panic blurted.

"They're here...errr... they're at Meadlow's Plain, about two or three thousand of them..."

Paul the towns defense officer smiled at the man.

"Easy there son, slow down and start at the beginning and tell us what the scouts saw."

"Sorry sir!" He looked at Paul, then Hawk and seeing no concern, calmed down. "I mean Sirs... Diablo's army or at least part of them are at Meadlow's Plain about two or three thousand. The rest of the scouts have reported more, about another five thousand converging on the Plain as well, from different directions. El Diablo is with the group farthest south....."

He gasped for air, "He should be joined up within a few days. Meadlow's isn't far from here."

"Easy there son. Go get some rest! I know you've come a long way to give this report." Paul patted the young scout on the back and the lad headed off for a long deserved rest. He turned to Hawk with a concerned look on his face.

"A day or two to join his men and another couple of days to get here Hawk, we're running out of time."

"Paul, You've done a great job setting up these defenses to protect the townsfolk, have a little faith in me to get you through the rest."

"Best listen to him Paul, he does know what he's doing. Uhhh, you do know what you're doing don't ya Hawk?"

The men turned to see Kylee and Ed had walked up. Pretty as ever, smiling, the two men couldn't help but smile back. Paul made a little two fingered saluting gesture and said.

"G'morn Kylee... You too Ed."

"Good morning Hawk... Hawk? I said Goodmo..."

She noticed Hawk was looking beyond her and turned just as someone she had never seen before ran up toward them. He had left four others standing back at the base of the rampart. She started to reach for her pistol, but Hawk gently put his hand on hers and shook his head. She relaxed her grip on her weapon.

“CHET!.....Ya old dog, good ta see ya!”

“How goes it Hawk?”

The two men grabbed each other’s hands. Shook hands, then hugged each other.

“Was wondering when you’d get here Chet, damn guy you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Sorry boss, took the long way around this morning..”

“Boss?” Kylee was confused.

“Heh, sorry Kylee, Paul, Tom, Ed, this is Chet! He...uhhh, kind of works for me now and then. He and his men are some of the finest scouts in the country.”

“That we are...”

“Plus he’s modest.”

Everyone chuckled and Chet pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and looked it over.

“Ok boss... Diablo can be here in four or five days depending on how fast he wants to move... but not before four... He pushed through the night last night... Once the rest of his cutthroats link up.... Well... boss, he’ll be coming and he’ll be coming strong....Four days at the earliest! “

“How many Chet?”

“All but about two thousand he left to the south to control his territories there... All the rest are with him.”

“Wow, that’s about.... Ah...”

“Eight thousand Paul.”

“Christ all mighty!” It was Tom that spoke this time and to say he was concerned was an understatement as his face had drained of color.

Chet added, yeah eight thousand, but they’ve been traveling, some for weeks. Maybe Diablo will rest them a day or two. If not, then we’ll be facing dead tired troops. Kind of a win, win situation Boss....”

“Yeah!...heh, if you can call facing eight thousand troops a win situation Chet.”

Kylee latched onto Hawk’s arm and looked over her town, then to Hawk.

“Can we...can we protect them Hawk? All of them?”

“I think we have a good shot if things go to plan Kylee.”

“Plan? Standing here shooting with one cannon, while that bastard is coming at us with an army of tanks and cannon and God knows what else??” She squeezed his arm “I know Keli trusted you and I do, as well as the townsfolk. Really I do Hawk, but there’s so many and we’re so few.”

“Paul, go on down and introduce the new men to the townsfolk and Chet will put them in charge in various areas. Chet and his boys are professional soldiers Paul, they know what to do and where to best place your people. Trust them.”

Paul had become to trust Hawk, thus trusted his decision to put his men in charge. He and Chet headed off toward the defensive positions with Chet’s men.

“Professional soldiers Hawk?”

“errr.. Yeah, Kylee. They volunteered to come here and scout for me, they’re a great bunch of guys. That one with the red hair came to see me last night to report.”

Kylee shot a look over at Ed and stuck her tongue out at him... “See! I told you!”

With a puzzled look Hawk replied, “Told him?”

“... Uhhh, nothing Hawk, just something I said to him last night. So, these soldiers just get to leave the military and come to join you. ‘Cuz you asked them? Really! I’m suppose to believe that?”

As she spoke, she saw admiration in Hawk’s face for these men, as she too admired anyone that would come to a fight like this knowing full well there would be no leaving. This was a fight to the death. She continued without little hesitation,

“.....These men came to fight with you knowing what the outcome is going to be Hawk? That says a lot about you as a leader... if they’d die for you.”

“Die? Why Kylee? You giving up already?”

Kylee started to respond, but Hawk had already walked away and met Chet who had returned. She quickly moved to catch up to Hawk. She got close enough to hear,

“...the lake to the east. Then mountains all the way to the west, Diablo can’t flank us due to the cliffs... Damn boss you were right. He has to come straight for us. You picked a great spot!”

“Picked?”

“Ahhh... Kylee he meant we’re at a good defensive position..”

“He said “picked” Hawk. You know “picked”, like in chose...”

Hawk smiled at Kylee, then put his arm around Chet and led him toward the walls rampart. They chatted a bit and Chet walked down the rampart and out of Kylee’s sight. Hawk walked back to where Kylee was standing grinning.

“Hell of a fight coming Ky, hell of a fight”

“Hawk....tell me we have a chance?”

“Sure Ky, we have a chance.”

She stepped back, placed her hands on her hips and made like she was mad at Hawk.

“Well you could have at least tried to sound sincere, that was the biggest load of crap I’ve ever heard!”

Hawk looked at her and winked.

“Yeah it was ...wasn’t it.”

They both grinned as Kylee put her arm through Hawk’s arm and they walked over to the rampart and headed down toward the town.

“Sometimes Hawk I think you thrive on all of this...”

“All of what?”

“Planning, fighting, leading.”

He looked downward, then out to the wide, soon to be filled, valley.

“Perhaps Ky, perhaps, but someday all this killing will be over. I won’t miss that...”
His voice trailed off as he stared to the direction the approaching army would be coming from.

It was going to be one hell of a fight alright. Kylee pretty much figured Hawk’s plans out. Fight Diablo until he decides he’s lost too many troops and withdraws. She never wanted to ask Hawk what would happen if he didn’t withdraw.
But then again.... She really didn’t want to know.

Chapter 12.

The two walked into the tavern for a bite of lunch just in time to hear Ed and some of the guys talking.

“Hey Hawk! Kylee come one over and join us.”

Kylee frowned at her brother, “Ed... Hawk and I just want to eat, not get involved in one of your ‘what if’ conversations.”

“Awww sis. Dammit, ya take all the fun out of...”

“Ed was just wondering what if some mutes might sense all the men in Diablo’s army and maybe attack him and....” It was Barbra, the tavern owner that tossed in the topic they had been chatting about.

“Barb!” Kylee frowned at Ed, then back at Milt, put her hands on her hips and snapped, “Barbra Harris, you know damned well no mutes have been seen in these parts for a decade or more. Besides Diablo would make hash out of them before they got near his army. So Ed, drop it!”

She grabbed Hawk’s arm and started pulling him toward a table at the back of the small room, but Ed piqued up halting her attempt to have a quiet, private lunch.

“Hawk... What about mutes? That Chet fella said you know all about them.”

“OH? Like what?” Mused Hawk thinking all the crap Chet might have spewed into their heads. Chet and Hawk had been friends for quite some time and Chet at times would tell some tall tales just to start something and over embellishment was Chet’s specialty.

Kylee stopped and with hands on hips, glared at the brother as Hawk had stopped to answer. The quiet little lunch she had hoped for was slipping away.

“Well for instance he said you talked to some professors or doctors or someone back east about the mutes your last time back..”

“ED! Dammit we want to eat!” Mumbled Kylee already giving up. She plopped down into a chair, arms crossed and fuming at her brother and his friends.

“That’s ok Kylee, people should know.” Hawk replied, still clueless on how Kylee felt about him.

That was all Ed needed he leapt to his feet and quizzed Hawk until Hawk relented. Kylee gave a deep sigh and leaned back into the chair she had sat in at the large table knowing full well her quiet lunch with Hawk was not going to happen this day!

“Ed it’s like this. Back at what I call ‘Day Zero’ when the radiation blast hit this planet, the scientists have it figured this way. Something in the Earth itself must have blocked some of the radiation.

People that got a very low dose were fine. Others that got higher doses became mutants... about four mutes to one normal human.

The rest of humanity, the ones that got the highest doses, vaporized and it appears there are few if any survivors outside of the North America and the British isles. Or at least that we know of, well maybe Japan.

Seems that blast of strange radiation interferes with the atoms that hold us together and a high enough exposure, our atoms just stop and shoot off in all directions... Poof! No more people. Give a person the right exposure and this radiation holds the atoms in place.”

Hawk paused and a sadness crossed his face, “Sadly it also mutates the features to some degree and almost destroys the mind, save the most basic instincts.”

“But mutes, they don’t bleed. How the hell do they keep going, you know, living. They are living aren’t they?”

Hawk amused by Ed’s curiosity continued, “The latest theory is the radiation that hit people hard enough to change them, but not vaporize them basically changed their entire being. They died, ahhh, more or less, so they are not alive in that sense Ed.

This radiation had some new kind of magnetism contained within the blast that hit us, that causes the molecules stay together... hold their form. Their pitiful brains tell their lungs to breathe, their hearts to beat, but in truth, they need neither. It’s the magnetism, the energy, that keeps them together, like the brain tells nerves to work the body, except now the entire body is the nervous system.

That’s why they move slightly slower than we do, it’s also why they don’t die, nor can’t be killed unless their head is severed or their brain suffers massive damage. Kind of like an electrical circuit, sever the connection and the light goes out. In this case it’s the mute that goes out. They think this is also why they don’t rot away. The magnetism encloses the cells and protects them, but, flip the switch, this magnetic current stops, the mutes go out like a light bulb!”

They all laughed at Hawk’s analogy and Ed had been paying attention like the others, started to speak, but it was Kylee that said, “So no brain there’s nothing to tell the body to stay together and they die?”

“Kind of Kylee, Damage the brain, the brain stops sending signals to the body, it collapses, then eventually the molecule’s cease moving. Dies I guess would be a fitting word, and the body turns to its basic elements...as the atoms disperse.

Then after a period of time even the dust or cells that are left vaporize as well. It would be

similar to cutting the north pole of a magnet off. Why they don't just vaporize like the people did during the Apocalypse, is any bodies guess." Hawk paused once again, "Science just doesn't have the answers."

Kylee snapped in the general direction of everyone at the table, "So you're telling us the mutes can only be killed by brain damage. Great! Now let's go eat!"

"Heheh, there's more Kylee, massive amounts of damage to the body itself caused them to fall apart as well. Explosions, a lot of fire, like I said massive damage. Too much damage and they just start turning to dust, kind of a slow disintegration."

"Yeah, somehow I figured that much and there'd be more!" She put her elbows on the table, propped up her head on her hands and sighed.

"For years the scientists have thought the magnetism had a frequency of some sort and last year they found it."

"And that's good?" Ed perked up at the new information.

Hawk laughed "Yep, Ed, that's good news. If they can find a way to counter the frequency, block it in some way, then it would block the movement of this energy in the bodies and they would literally disintegrate."

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard Hawk. When you turned off whatever makes them stay together, they go poof, then when you turn it off, wouldn't they just go back together?"

Kylee looked over to her brother and frowned. "If Hawk says they'd be gone, then they'd be gone! You can't put a magnet back together."

She sighed and looked at Hawk, "Can we go eat lunch now?"

Everyone chuckled at Kylee's obvious impatience.

"Kylee's right Ed. It would be like melting a snowman with heat, once you remove the heat, the snowman doesn't reappear. It's gone for good."

"Wow! That would be great! Sure we haven't seen them around, but that doesn't mean they might not be out there somewhere. Maybe in the deep forest, but how would you destroy them on such a scale? It would have to be massive to do be much use." Kylee grinned hoping that was all, but she was learning something new and found herself getting deeper into the conversation.

"That part Kylee, wouldn't be hard. The theory is a device could be built small enough to be put into an airplane and flown across the country sending out a pulse that would vaporize the mutes and send them to their final peace. From 30,000 feet a pulse could cover a little over one hundred square miles.

Or maybe from a satellite, the range would be much greater if the pulse could be made strong enough and the best thing is it's safe for humans to be exposed to the pulse, assuming we ever get back to building rockets. So we could wipe out the last of the mutes in one swift blow. Sadly enough."

"Hawk you sounded like you felt sorry for the mutes, hell you're the most famous mute killer in the world." Ed had a puzzled look.

Hawk gave Ed a weak smile and arose from the table, turned to the door and headed toward it.

Kylee gasped and jumped up and went after Hawk stopping only long enough to scold her brother, "Ed, remember some of Hawk's family and friends were turned. He... he had to"

She turned and ran after Hawk.

Hawk had heard and turned to Ed and the others quietly said.

"That's ok Ed. You didn't know."

"I'm sorry Hawk, I remember now Kylee reading some of Keli's letters... I forgot..I'm..."

"Forget it Ed, you were young and that was a long time ago Just try to remember mutes were once people like us. They try to survive like we do. I guess there is something in them that tells them we'll destroy them if they don't destroy us first. And of course they're right."

Hawk started to turn toward the door, but stopped and added one more thing for the group to ponder. "I try to see it as putting them to rest. A rest they've long deserved."

He once again turned and went out the door with Kylee close behind. As she headed out the door after Hawk, she shouted an order to Barb and that she'd pick it up in a bit.

Her quite little lunch with Hawk would not be this day.

The rest of the afternoon was spent making plans and other sort of duties. No more was said about the mutes. Ed had not meant to hurt Hawk or dredge up bad memories. Hawk knew this so he gave Ed some important tasks as Ed's mood changed and once again he became the happy go lucky guy that all knew and loved.

Kylee? She only fell for this man of legend more! She knew that sometime in the near future she would have to tell him or burst. At times her heart would scream for her to tell Hawk how she felt, yet she remained silent, for his sake. He had enough to worry about without worrying about her or how she felt about him.

After a stressful day the evening meal, that Kylee had prepared, was fairly quiet and little said as all knew time was growing short for the town and those that lived there. Conversation was limited to all the prep work that had been going on and what needed yet to be done.

After the evening meal Kylee looked around for Hawk, but he was gone. She finished the dishes while Ed dried and put them away. She headed outside looking for Hawk. After scanning the area in front of her house, she noticed movement on the wall. She squinted to see in the darkness with only the golden glow of the harvest moon shining down upon the town, the wall, the legend.

When Kylee first saw him, she noticed her heart skipped a beat, but then this was nothing new. She had come to terms as to her feelings toward him, but still seeing him and not being able to say anything to him made it extremely difficult to live with.

At times she thought she would explode if she couldn't shout out her love, but somehow managed to keep it inside. As long as he gave no sign as to how he felt, she decided that she would remain silent.

As usual he was out planning, thinking doing for others instead of taking it easy. Kylee knew the pressure he must be under, but she smiled as she walked up the rampart toward Hawk. She could see this time he was taking a moment for himself. She did notice that he seemed to be more at ease when she was around or at least Ed told her he was.

Perhaps just by being there she could help Hawk relax a bit and just talk. Perhaps joke around.... She loved his warm smile, the warmth of his touch.

She smiled at her own thoughts, "Easy gal, don't make a fool of yourself." She giggled aloud her thoughts running wild as her heels clicked gently on the hard stone walk.

Kylee checked herself over, straightened her dress and made sure all was perfect. She knew Hawk always noticed her, even though he never said a thing, she could see it in his dark eyes.

Hawk stood looking through the wide stone buttress staring out over the valley below. Wondering at the short lived beauty of the vast plains and the lake that soon would be the scene of....

"A penny for your thoughts." She placed her hand through his arm. "Or do I really want to know?"

He reached up with his other hand, patted her hand and turned to face her with an uncertain smile.

"I'd love to tell you, but, I think I'd scare us both. We've done so much, but there is so much that can still go wrong...."

"SHhhhhhh" She moved toward him and with slight motion, took his arms and placed them around her waist. She laid her forehead on his shoulder, shivered slightly, then leaned back and looked into his eyes.

“Tell me it will be alright Hawk...Tell me that we’ll all be ok, that we won’t...die, that’s all I need to hear.”

He gently put his finger upon her soft lips as if to hush her.

“It WILL be ok Kylee, trust me! I was making a poor joke about the scaring us thing.”

She stepped back a pace and looked deep into his eyes, then returned back into his strong warm arms and nestled her face into his neck.

“I’ll always trust you. No one can.... can ever break that trust.”

She felt his warm embrace, he wrapped his strong arms around her slight frame, lowered his face to her hair and gently kissed her head. He softly stroked her hair. She moved her arms around him and held him as if there would be no tomorrow.

“Hawk for the first time in so long I’m frightened.”

“There’s nothing to be frightened of Ky...”

“I’m frightened that I’ll lose you.” She hesitated as the words slipped out.

Kylee felt Hawk relax his embrace, gently grasp her arms and push her to arms length. He looked deeply into her eyes. Her face aglow in golden moonlight, a golden tear ran down her cheek. He reached up and softly wiped the tear away, slid his hand down to her chin.

“Never. Kylee, never again...”

“Never Hawk? What...”

“I made the mistake of never being there for Keli and I lost her....when she needed me most. I’ll not make the same mistake with you. I’ll be there, here...for you, if you want me to...”

Kylee gasped and threw her arms around Hawk’s neck and kissed him passionately, he in return responded with a passion equal to her own. He had no longer thought of Keli and it had bothered him, until the truth hit him. He was in fact in love with Kylee, this wonderful creature that now haunted his dreams. Not his Keli, but her sister. .. Kylee! He knew they had both fought this passion, thinking it was wrong. Fearful of damaging her reputation in the community of falling for her brother in law, he had resisted. She on the other hand had the feeling that somehow that her half sister would have been happy for her, for Hawk. For them! She sighed as they embraced and she once again snuggled her head into Hawk’s shoulder.

“Well, well, it’s about damn time you two stopped acting like you didn’t notice each other.”

The two of them snapped out of loves trance to see Ed and Paul walking their rounds.

“Christ Ed everyone in town knew how they felt about each other just by looking at them.” Paul chuckled back to Ed teasingly.

“Everyone but these two knew..” Replied Ed. They kept walking. Toward the end of the wall where it looked down on the lone road entering the town and stood.

Kylee smiled at Hawk and he at her. She buried her face into his chest and they both quietly laughed.

“I knew I loved you back on the cliff overlooking Fieldview.”

“Ahh... I see, so explosions turn you on?”

She hit him gently on the arm and grinned.

“Silly I meant...”

He leaned down and gently kissed her once again. The kisses became more passionate. Their bodies pressed closely, arms entwined.

“Ahem!”

They looked over to see ED and Paul walking back. Paul had been more tactful with his ‘ahem’, than Ed was about to.

“Hey! You two get a room!.” Ed half shouted.

They all laughed.

“OH! And by the way sis, I’ll see you in the morning. I have guard duty all night tonight!”

Kylee looked at Hawk, then at the two men, then back at Hawk. She grabbed his hand in hers and took off so fast she almost wrenched his arm from the socket. Kylee started pulling him in the direction of the rampart that led down towards her house. Hawk happily in tow, followed as they vanished into the night. In the distance the two men could hear Kylee’s giggle.

“Ed? You don’t have guard duty tonight....”

“Heh, I know Paul, I know.”

“Oh?... Ahhh!”

Chapter 13.

It took Diablo and his army three days to gather into the valley below Pineview. No one saw Kylee or Hawk for those three days. Not did anyone try. It wasn't Hawk's wrath they feared, it was Kylee's. She was loved by those that knew her, but they also knew that she had a temper, but it was not her temper they feared this time. It was that no one would ever think of interrupting her happiness. It had been too long since people had seen her this happy, she deserved her time alone with her new love. And no one was happier than her brother Ed. Ed knew she could remember her happier days with her late husband and their children. He saw her change, become hard and cold. Even when time started to heal her broken heart, she never returned to the Kylee he knew all his life.

Now people wouldn't dream of bothering either of them. They had put aside their feelings for the sake of the town. Now was their time... What little they may have left. So Ed stayed away, but then it wasn't an inconvenience for him either. Ed had fallen for a lovely woman a few months earlier and he stayed with her as he had done occasionally in the past. That is until the third day when Ed HAD to go home.

And the news he carried wasn't good.

"Babe? Did you hear something?" Hawk strained to peer through his half closed eye lids as the warm autumn sun poured through the window. "Damn it's daylight already!"

"Like what my love?" Kylee stretched, rolled over and snuggled up to her love.

As her hand reach around his chest he gently stroked it, "I don't know for sure Ky, but, something woke me." He looked over to the clock "Aw geez, Ky, it's mid morning already... but I did think I heard something..."

"Yeah right, woke you over that snoring you were doing. Darling, I doubt if anything is that loud." She chuckled as Hawk gave her a little smack on the arm.

"BANG!!"

The door burst open as Ed rushed into the spare bedroom Hawk had been given. He tripped on a pile of clothes Hawk and Kylee had left and landed face first on the foot of the huge bed which startled both of the bed's residents. Ed raised himself up off the bed and looked up at the startled duo. Kylee let out a loud "Yelp" and covered her breasts with her arms. Ed was

so embarrassed and turned so fast he fell off the foot of the bed and back onto the floor with a resounding thud.

“**ED!!!** What the hel....” Kylee screamed at her embarrassed sibling.

“Oh god! I’m soooo sorry sis, I was looking for Hawk. This is his room. I knew you two were...uhh, well I didn’t expect you’d still be...uhhh. Oh hell Ky, I’m...”

Ed slid back up and sat down on the foot of the bed with his back to the pair, never looking at either of them.

“Well you found Hawk..... and ME... and saw more than any brother should have!!!”

“Oh god sis...I...I...”

Hawk interrupted trying hard not to laugh, “Will you two shut up long enough for Ed to say why he’s here. I never got the impression your brother was in the habit of breaking into bedrooms.”

Kylee gingerly pulled up the covers over her breasts and slid down onto her pillow as Ed looked at the ceiling and stammered.

“I... ah..well...I...”

Hawk who had one leg out from under the covers, used it to kick Ed squarely in the back.

“Dammit Ed out with it!!!”

Ed peeked around cautiously, then noticing that everyone was covered, relaxed and then hit them with news they’d just as soon not heard.

“Guys... Diablo’s here!! Well not here yet, but almost...”

Ed paused to catch his breath, “His army is in the wide part of the valley and moved about six miles from the road up to us and stopped. There’s dust about two miles back that Chet said is old Diablo himself. Hawk, we’ve been counting them all morning as they positioned themselves. Chet’s guessing a little over 8000 men, eight to a dozen tanks over a dozen cannon and hundreds of trucks jeeps, hummers, most of them with machine guns mounted on them, Hundreds Hawk! They even have some troop transports....”

Ed stopped and with a worried look upon his face, “Hawk there’s already an army there and there’s still more coming!”

Kylee, still clutching the covers tightly to chest sat up and stared at Hawk.

“My God. Hundreds of vehicles? That many tanks and cannon? Darling, can we...I mean, they could just shell us, they can just charge, we can't take that many out, we..”

“SHhhhhhhh....” He put his finger softly on her lips, “Honey it'll be ok, Honest.”

He looked into Kylee's eyes and saw tears. Tears he knew were not out of fear of dying, but of fear of losing all she knew, her friends, her brother, her love.

“Ky... You trust me?”

“Always my love.” She sniffed and wiped away a tear that tried to escape down her cheek.

“Then believe.” Hawk smiled at her and it was as if all the weight of the last few weeks had been lifted from her mind. She returned his smile with one of her own. One look and Hawk knew she was completely at ease now. He turned to Ed and saw him smiling as well.

“Damn Hawk I don't know how you do that. Christ I actually believe we have a chance as well. Maybe you'd better go smile at those bastards out in the plains, maybe they'll turn around and go home.” Ed grinned widely.

“Ok little brother, get your ass out of here. We have to get ready.” Kylee stuck her foot out from under the sheet and nudged Ed gently.

Ed got off the bed and moved toward the door as Hawk yelled after him.

“Ed... Tell Chet and the other officers. Meeting in fifteen minutes up on the wall.”

Ed slammed the bedroom door on the way out just to make sure his sister knew he was gone. Still embarrassed, he ran down the stairs stomping so the two could hear him leaving out the front door, slamming that one as well. Kylee and Hawk broke out into laughter. The laughs faded and one quick glance at each other and they were up and scurrying about as well. They both got dressed in record time and headed toward the door. Hawk stopped and grabbed Kylee by both arms and kissed her passionately, grabbed his two swords that he had rarely worn the last few weeks and shoved them into their scabbards that were concealed on the back of his uniform.

Before Kylee stood the warrior Hawk! Not the man that she had spent three wonderful, passionate days with, but the man of legend. He had changed almost instantly. Passion drained from his face. The tone in his voice became cold, yet he turned and gave her a reassuring wink as he vanished through the bedroom door.

Kylee started to worry a lot as she quickened her pace to catch with him! She quickly remembered the stories of how he had gone after those that killed her sister. The rumors had it that that bloody day Hawk had killed two hundred or more raiders single handed. He almost died doing it. She decided that she would not allow him to face Diablo's army that way, that is if she

could help it. But her love was Hawk and no one stopped Hawk when he was out for blood! If she couldn't stop him from doing something rash, then she would be at his side, no matter the outcome. If death would claim them, so be it.

Out the door they scurried and headed toward the wall. As they ran, so did the rest of the town's defenders toward their positions, while those that could not fight, ran for cover. Everyone knew all hell was about to break loose. Everyone showed it in their faces, that is with the exception of Hawk and Kylee. Once they reached the top of the wall, the two just started walking at a leisurely pace. As they passed those that saw them calmed down. Ed standing on the wall with Chet, Paul and Tom, just shook their heads as Ed quipped.

"Damned if I know how he does it, but look at sis, now she's got that same look!"

Chet smiled and replied, "Ed, I've seen him do that for years now and I still can't figure out how he does it, but he just seems to calm people down without saying a word. Looks like your sister has a good teacher."

The trio along with the officers watched as Kylee and Hawk strolled over to the buttress and peered out to the valley, grinned at each other and walked toward the group of men and women awaiting their orders. A quick briefing was held and all took their places. Only one order was given....

"No one opens fire until Hawk gives the word! No one!"

A couple of hours passed and the town's valiant defenders became uneasy as the numbers of Diablo's army increased as they formed lines to attack. Row after row of vehicles could be seen through the many sets of binoculars that watched them. Those without, saw only a vast advancing cloud. Eventually the cloud stopped moving and it drifted back the way it came. Every time the dust cloud moved back some, there would be another row of some sort of vehicles that came into view, then another row. The town's defenders looked worried as those with field glasses, relayed what they saw to those that had none.

Paul and Tom the town's defense commanders, along with Chet walked up to Hawk and Kylee who were standing next to one another, arms wrapped around each other's waists, she with her head upon his shoulder, as if nothing was going on.

"Hawk, people are getting uneasy, there's so many vehicles...cannons, more than your scouts reported." Paul mentioned as if to sound casual. But failing.

Chet added, "No doubt the extra armor was hidden in the dust as they moved. It's unlike our scouts to miss that much."

Paul frowned a bit and added, “Maybe there were more that joined after the scouts reported back? Anyhow there is a lot more cannon and tanks then we thought. Hawk? Do you think he’s going to attack now?”

“Paul relax a bit, I have a hunch old Diablo will want to parley before he attacks.”

“Parley? Why the hell would he even think about chattin’ with us. Well, except to demand that we surrender.”

“Well Paul, probably because he’ll be curious why his spies haven’t reported back.”

“SPIES?? What spies?” Tom and the others looked around like they would actually see spies and Hawk chuckled at Chet who in return winked at Hawk.

Chet spoke up with a big grin on his face and winked at the puzzled town commander.

“The spies Hawk had assigned us to take out. Tom, You see, Hawk sent some of my men in a month or so ago to mingle in with the volunteers for Fieldview. Even some of the refugee’s that came in from other towns.

We had heard there was someone going around asking towns to help defend their town. Hawk figured that Diablo would be sending spies to see how much of a threat this was going to be. So my spies watched and found their spies.

They watched and kept notes, verified when they left the camp and returned and eventually followed them out of the town to where they were leaving the reports, where the drop points were.”

He glanced over to Kylee and smiled “When we showed ourselves here in Pineview, we had all the spies names. Well anyhow those that we knew of. Hawk told us later that night to take them all out. Heh, heh, and that we did!”

“So those are the men that vanished and we thought ran away?” Paul added.

“Some of them did Paul, some just got scared and ran. The spies were, well, let’s just say, were removed! As I said, we think we got them all. We even took out some back in Fieldview, the ones we knew of at the time. No spies, no messages, no intelligence!”

Kylee chuckled, “So by removing the spies, you think Diablo will want to talk, thus give us a bit more time?”

“Hope so babe.” Hawk gave her a gentle squeeze, “Hope so.”

Chet added with a somewhat assured tone “Paul, Tom, Hawk figures with that huge lake and dense forest to the east and the mountains to the west and the cliffs that run right up here to Pineview, they form a natural funnel right to this point here, we have a good chance of defending Pineview and defeating...”

“You planned for Diablo to attack here!!” Paul’s voice was almost a shout, but he got hold of himself and lowered his voice once he remembered who he was addressing. “You put this town, our town at risk? Just because it makes a good place to defend. Just becau...”

“PAUL!!! Remember who you’re talking to! This is my town as well and...” Kylee looked at Hawk, her voice wrought with affection as well as tempered concern. She was defending her love even though he had never told her of his plans. It was fast becoming obvious the plans to fight Diablo here in Pineview had been in the works for months. Long before Hawk had met her. Yet there she was backing her man without question. Without hesitation.

“...This man would never put this town, us, in unnecessary danger.” She gave Hawk a gentle squeeze.

“Kylee, I’m sorry to say I did put Pineview in danger to some extent. If plan A or plan B doesn’t work...”

Chet glanced at Kylee, Tom and Paul then before Hawk could speak added.

“All the years I’ve know Hawk he’s never had to go to plan C. Well not too many times at least.”

Kylee nervously laughed out loud.

“Hahahaha. And I’ve seen firsthand what plan C can do.”

Everyone remembered Kylee’s telling of several hundred of Diablo’s men and his son vanishing in the massive explosion of Fairview, they all laughed, that is until Hawk added,

“Uh, guys? You really don’t think I’m going to blow up the entire valley do ya?”

“Oh baby, I know you have something fiendish planned in that mind of yours...”

“Yeah, I hope babe, I hope...”

Everyone stopped smiling as Hawk walked away to the very edge of the stone wall and looked over the sun drenched valley as the dust cloud from the advancing army had almost vanished. He looked worried and Chet, Kylee and Paul could sense something wasn’t right.

All their thoughts were interrupted by a sentry’s cry. All looked to where she was pointing.

From within the remaining small cloud of dust a man on a motorcycle could be scene. His cycle kicked up a narrow trailing cloud of dust until he drove off the grassy fields of the valley and unto the road leading to the town. Tied to his cycle was long pole and a white flag!

“Guess we can rule out Diablo saw us and wants to surrender, eh boss.” Mused Chet.

“Chet, more than likely he saw Hawk’s towering form on the wall and wants to give up before he gets hurt.” Replied Kylee with a teasing grin.

They all chuckled uneasily and looked at Hawk. Again all mirth stopped when they saw Hawk’s face, there was no smiles, no mirth, no fear, no emotion what so ever.

Little could they have guessed that Hawk had once again slipped into his combat mode, pushing all fear, all emotion from his being, they only could see the results. Strangely enough, everyone of the defenders that saw him started to focus and calm. The results could be seen as he walked by them. As he passed the defenders on the wall, it was as if any nervousness completely left the men and women. This reassured the rest and as Kylee, Tom, Paul and Chet watched the defenders on the wall began picking up their weapons and turned toward the valley and calmly took up their positions.

Tom excused himself and headed over to his area to command. Chet smiled as he leaned over to Kylee and Paul and spoke softly so Hawk could not hear as he passed.

“He has a way of doing that to people. I’ve seen it time and time again. Don’t know how, don’t really care, but damn. Look at them now...”

“Chet, I saw men obey Hawk without knowing him back in Fieldview, just do what he said without question. They even left their own town because he said so. He was just like he is now.” Kylee smiled and shook her head, “I guess I did as well.”

Chet sighed and managed a weak smile as he gently shook his head. “He’s been doing this a long time Kylee. Sometimes I wonder if maybe too long. But he sure has a way to inspire his troops.”

“I know Chet. Sometimes there’s a sadness deep inside, I can’t seem to reach him... I.”

“Like I said Kylee, he’s been at this a long time.” Chet patted her hand and jogged to catch up with Hawk as he headed toward the rampart.

The cycle stopped at the bottom of the wall where a road block had been erected and handed a defender something in a bag, he opened it, said something to the rider and handed the bag to a guard to take up the rampart to Hawk.

The cycle turned and sped off back toward the enemy lines that had formed from the lake west to the mountains, almost a mile wide and several miles deep, nothing but men and machines forming attack groups as far as they could see back toward the rear of the valley. Or at least as far as the massive dust cloud would allow.

While waiting for the bag to be brought up to them, they looked out over the valley and Diablo’s army. Row after row of the smaller, faster vehicles were aligned next to one another.

They in turn were followed by the larger equipment like trucks, then his two rows of ten tanks each. Mixed in among the vehicles were thousands of men. Cannon were placed at the rear several miles back and ready to fire on the town. As the dust could vanished it was obvious Diablo was not holding anything in reserve.

The small bag was brought to Chet, who checked it out again from the others lest it be booby trapped. After satisfying himself it was not, he pulled out a small shortwave radio and walked over to Hawk. Paul hooked it to the make shift power supply on the wall for their radios and Diablo's radio squawked to life with a burst of static.

Hawk looked at the radio and grinned "What an antique, if Diablo's armor is like this, we have it made!"

Those around him tried to manage a smile, Hawk put the mike to his mouth...

"Yeah? Diablo? You there? You want to surrender or something like that?"

Ed nudged Kylee with his elbow and they both looked at each other, then back to Hawk and grinned as he winked back at the two.

"This is El Diablo, Commander of the New Western Federation... I demand to talk to this Hawk bastard that was responsible for killing my boy!"

Hawk held the microphone up to his mouth and spoke coldly and cynically. "You mean the Oppressed Western states don't you? You little rambling dictator, sounds like you're kind of full of yourself!"

There was a pause, then Diablo roared over the speaker, "You're nothing! You aren't the one I will talk to! PUT THE MURDERER OF MY SON ON..... **NOW!!**"

Hawk winked at his friends and keyed the mike once again,

"Yeah, Diablo you're talking to the guy that had the privilege of burying that idiot of a son of yours. He wasn't much good at tactics was he? Probably got it from you. You don't sound too bright yourself! But getting back to your idiot kid, yeah removing vermin like that was my pleasure."

"ERRRRRRGGGAAA!!! You son of a bitch I'll kill you... I'll..."

"Oh yeah and by the way, I had your spies killed too and left their bodies to rot in the woods.. You just don't seem to have very bright people working for you. Guess hiring people at the point of a gun wasn't such a good idea after all was it?"

Again there was a scream of pure hatred as it became apparent that Hawk was really getting to him.

“Baby, if you piss him off any more, he’ll blast this town out of existence and we won’t even fire a shot.”

“You bastard... You killed my son... my spies... my men...Now you dare make fun of my pain?.... I’ll..”

Then as if he caught himself and his voice calmed,

“...You’re going to die today Hawk, And everyone in that town of yours, just to make sure no one ever defies me again.”

Hawk spoke into the mike again, but this time he was laughing.

“Diablo you half assed scum sucking idiot, hell you’re just stupid enough to blow us up, destroy this town and you’ll never be completely sure if I’m dead or not. Then some night, you’ll wake up with my blade at your neck. I’ll be sure to wake you first, I wouldn’t want you to miss your own death as I slit your throat....”

Hawk was grinning, Kylee starred in disbelief, he was toying with a man that had an army!

“... Not to mention that if one shell over shoots this town and sets the forest on fire, this whole town goes up in flames and everything you covet goes up along with it. All those supplies, gone!”

Hawk paused just long enough to let what he said to sink in, then started to go at Diablo again.

“All those cannon and tanks and I’ll bet half of your men are idiots and you don’t trust them to shoot straight, but hey, we all decided we’d die here anyway so knowing you won’t get the timber, machinery and weapons, I can live with that. Well maybe not live, but die happy knowing that you failed! Bet you’re men are good at failing you! That is if I die, but then again you’ll never be sure until I come for you and I promise you someday I will kill you.”

Hawk chuckled into the mike, “And I will kill you, you can bet your life on that!” Hawk paused, then added, “ Oh wait! You already have bet your life..... You’re here!”

Perhaps it was the way Hawk said it, or the tone in his voice, but those that heard what was said felt themselves shutter. The effect became apparent with Diablo as well.

“You win Hawk. Not one fires one shell on the town. Yeah it’ll cost me a lot of men, but like you said most of them are idiots anyway. Not to mention it’ll be worth tearing that town down piece by piece!”

Diablo paused as if trying to think of something that would rile Hawk, “Not only that, before I kill you, you watch me have fun with that little bitch that was with you when you killed my boy. Then I’ll toss her to my men and see how many she can take before she dies. Then I’ll walk over to you and”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, Diablo, you sound just like a widdle bitty spoiled brat who got smacked around by the girls in the playground. All threats, no balls. Hell I’ll even bet your momma made you wear dresses when....”

“You’re gonna die you bastard.... You’re gonna..”

Diablo was once again on the verge of screaming. The sounds coming over the speaker were not even intelligible.

Hawk reached down and pulled the power cord from the socket, pulled back and threw the radio toward the slowly advancing army knowing Diablo was undoubtedly watching him through field glasses. He figured throwing the radio would just infuriate him more. Little could Hawk know he was right as Diablo shot one of his men that was laughing.

“Well he’s pissed and being hung up on ought to piss him off more.” Hawk was grinning that wide satisfied grin of his.

“BABY!!! I just got it PLAN A! Get old Diablo pissed enough to attack without cannon, without blowing Pineview off the map!”

Kylee grinned and hugged Hawk. “Oh baby that was so cool the way you egged him on. And he’s so pissed he’ll make mistakes. Now that’s what I call a plan A!”

Paul looked worried.

“Ahhh.. getting a guy with an army that size pissed isn’t exactly what I call a good plan Kylee.”

“If that’s the way my Hawk planned it, then that’s what he wanted! And my baby always has a plan.” She glanced over at her love and poked him in the ribs.... “Right baby?”

Hawk sighed and said, “I hope so...”

From the wall, the town’s defenders could hear the sounds of the vast number of military machines starting their engines. Before Paul could utter his thoughts of “Looks like they getting ready to attack.” The lines of vehicles and men started moving forward, once again.

Chet rejoined his men that were waiting at the bottom of the wall on some old beat up trucks and vanished toward the rear of the town. Paul in turn ran over to his command center at the highest part of the wall and Kylee stood there surprised that the man she loved, just stood

there looking out at the approaching hoard of men and machinery.

He spoke so quietly she almost missed what he said next. “This is could be one long day.”

Chapter 14.

A strange thought vexed Hawk. He started to worry for the first time in years. Not for himself, but for Kylee. What if an errant shell found her? Or even Ed, or Chet? The “what if’s” raced through his head. Kylee had broken down his barriers and now he worried about everyone. Caring again was a strange feeling.

Hawk paced nervously, then as if something snapped inside he knew he must push these feelings aside for the good of all. He no longer mattered, only his love, his friends did. If he allowed himself to feel now, it could spell their doom and perhaps his. He stopped pacing and turned his gaze once again toward the prairie and Diablo.

The advancing invaders approached and the defenders prepared to fire when they got into range. Everyone was scurrying about as the wall leapt to life. Men and weapons were at the ready and all but a few seemed ready to defend to their last breath. This was their home, even the folk from Fieldview were not going to be pushed by Diablo any more. This was truly their last stand.

As the huge army continued to advance some of that bravado seemed to wane, that is until all looked to the highest part of the wall where Hawk, Kylee and the rest of the leaders continued to stand for all to see. The townsfolk saw Kylee and Hawk with their arms wrapped around each other’s waists, their leaders grinning and calmly talking, all felt a sense of calm. That calmness was soon shattered by the distant sounds and rumbles of the first wave of the advancing enemy moving onto the paved road that ran along side of the lake. The main force advanced along the open prairie toward the wall and cliffs that stood between them and the town. The dust was blowing toward the lake on the defenders left, so it obscured nothing. The advancing army slowly rolled forward, steadily... menacingly.

“Baby, they’re about four miles away.” Kylee looked to Hawk and he said nothing. The army advanced, a few minutes passed.

“Baby, They’re about three miles away.... They’re in range of our three cannons...we..”

“Naw, we need to wait a bit.”

The army advanced and once again minutes passed.

“They’re about two miles....baby...we really need to...”

Chet and some of his men ran up to the pair, a bit out of breath Chet still managed to gasp a few words to Hawk. He managed to get out what he was saying which surprised Kylee, as he was in such a harried state.

“Sir! We’re ready……. Finally!!”

“Good job General!” Hawk beamed a huge grin.

Kylee was stunned as Chet and his men removed their coats and jackets to reveal military uniforms and on each of their shoulders were insignia of rank.

“Baby? What’s going on? Those are military uniforms…”

“Well yeah Ky, I told ya Chet and his men were military.”

“I thought you meant ex…”

“Now baby, did I say ex military?”

“Ooww!” Was the reply that bounded from Hawk’s lips as Kylee smacked him teasingly on the arm.

“There still may have been one or two of Diablo’s spies left so we couldn’t let on who Chet really was, lest he let his boss know there was real military in town.”

But baby, a hand full of military? Baby I don’t think that would….”

Hawk looked over to Chet and grinned.

“General, think it’s about time for plan B.”

“Yessir, plan B sounds good about now.” Chet removed a hand held radio from a backpack one of his men was holding, while another did the same. Kylee watched as several of the others also produced radios that had been concealed. Before she could say anything else a truck came to a loud screech below the wall and the cover flew off revealing several more men sitting on benches, all were talking on larger radios. Taller antennae’s were hurriedly raised, the men shouted into their mikes.

“Baby?”

“Shhhh… Hon, plan B!”

In the distance from behind the town a dull muffled thumping could be heard, almost like someone was beating the earth with a giant hammer. Then there were so many they became as one. It started to sound like distant thunder or perhaps a stampede, but instead, the heavens were about to let loose….

Overhead shrill whistles could be heard and as the sounds became louder all looked up to the clear blue sky and saw nothing.

“Honey, you’re looking in the wrong direction.” Hawk gently reached up and turned Kylee’s head in the direction of the prairie.

“Baby, I don’t see...”

Then she saw where Hawk was pointing her.... She looked at the approaching army.

“OH MY GOD HAWK!!! It’s their artillery?”

“No Ky, ours.”

“Ours?” Kylee and the rest of the leaders shot quick looks over to the three cannon that had not yet fired.. “Baby, we haven’t...”

Hawk spoke so softly she almost didn’t understand why until she looked out at the valley. There in the valley the massive army rolled toward the town. The whining screamed over head and started becoming fainter. All looked toward the direction the sounds had gone. All around the advancing hoard of men and machines the ground erupted sending man and machine flying into the air. Flames erupted, smoke burst in all directions, then from the distance the sounds of the explosions could be heard.

Before anyone could speak more whistles could be heard over head, and the valley below became black with dust and smoke as men died and machinery burned. Death was visited upon the raiders as the burning vehicles exploded killing even more. The sounds of the shells flying over head and explosions in the valley were deafening, but somehow Paul managed to yell above the din to the leaders of the towns defense.

“Hawk...There.” Paul had pointed toward the road leading into town where over twenty fast moving vehicles had managed to get to and were now speeding toward them. “They’ll be here in less than four minutes Hawk. We’d better get some...”

“Easy Paul, it’s covered.”

Hawk turned to Chet, who in turn said something to the captain standing next to him. The captain yelled into his mike. Hawk turned and pointed to the west. All on the wall looked and were stunned at the sight that was unfolding. Out of the heavily wooded cliff area to the west of the wall rolled three rows of heavy tanks. Each row had eight tanks and everyone of the twenty four tanks were moving their cannons toward the road. At one command all cannon fired and all heads turned to look at the approaching enemy vehicles.

As if the hand of God had reached down and swept them from the areas around the road, the vehicles flew in all directions, burning, exploding, crashing. Diablo’s men lay motionless, some in flames, some in pieces. A cheer went up from the defenders as all eyes looked toward Hawk.

There was no emotion on his face as he stared out to what he had wrought upon the enemy. Once again he was doing what he did so well, doing what he passionately hated. Making men die!

In the distance flashes and smoke billowed from Diablo's cannons, but they were no longer aimed at the town, but at the tanks on the cliff. Some shells fell short, others hit among the U.S. armor. A few shells hit the western part of the town that sent the defenders scurrying about to douse the flames. Some hit in the woods behind the armor and the townsfolk that had been held in reserve went about putting out any fires that ensued.

"Impressive to say the least Hawk, but you've taken out maybe ten percent if you're lucky. You know..."

Paul was once again interrupted as Hawk turned to Chet.

"Ok Chet... Plan C."

"Yessir! Plan C." Chet yelled into his headset. Hawk turned to Kylee, Paul and the other town commanders.

"When I was in the service, back before the apocalypse, we had aircraft we called bombers. After the west coast campaign in California we had some old aircraft plants so the U.S. could start building bigger airplanes again. The hardest thing was getting Proff drives downsized enough so they didn't rip the wings off these newly built bombers."

Hawk grinned.

"As you know Proffs are basically two sizes, one large enough to power small cities or small enough to put into vehicles. Hell we even got them a little larger to run tanks. But when we put four on one of these bombers the damn wings broke off before we could even get it to fly. Well, we redesigned the planes and last year, then they figured out a way to make a Proff drive the size and power we needed."

Kylee nudged Hawk in the ribs with her elbow,

"Uhh, baby what's with the history lesson." She pointed to the valley. "There's a battle going on...Remember?"

"Aw, crap, sorry baby, heh, you know me I love talking about..."

Hawk was interrupted by the sounds of screaming as bombs dropped from the sky and slammed into the ground toward the end of Diablo's army. Monstrous explosions of fire and smoke sent even the largest of Diablo's cannons flying. The defenders stared in awe at the devastation they were witnessing. Hawk heard a gasp from Kylee who had never left his side gasped in horror. The bombs moved forward along the rear ranks of Diablo's army to the front hitting the front rows last. Men and machine alike were

tossed high into the air, smoking, burning. Parts of Diablo's tanks that weighed a ton or more flew high into the air and came crashing down upon the earth and those unfortunate enough to be in the way. The debris rained down on man and truck crushing all.

"My God! Hawk My God!" Kylee gasped!

Hawk gave Kylee a gentle squeeze and she looked into his face. She felt tears welling into her eyes. She looked at Hawk and he too had tears in his eyes.

"I'd hoped that this world would never have to see such destruction ever again and now...I.. I bring it back to a world that had forgotten..."
He lowered his eyes in sadness, then looked back toward the prairie...

"Remember well what you see here today..... never forget!"

"Sir, bombers have dropped their loads and are returning to base."

"Thanks Chet"

"Baby, I see so many of Diablo's army still attacking. Will the bombers be back?"

"No Ky, their base is too far from here."

"But...but..." Then Kylee looked into her love's face and saw the sadness, "You aren't done are you?"

Again he gave her a squeeze, looked at Chet.

"If there is a God, I hope he'll forgive me...."

Chet spoke to one of his men and another order was called over the radio.

A rumbling sound from behind was felt more than heard. Louder and louder until the sounds started to be deafening, people could feel their bodies vibrating from From what?

Then without any advanced warning, a wave of jet fighters screamed overhead and out toward the valley's vast plains. Another wave, then another and another. The defenders had read of planes like these in old history books and now seeing them started them cheering so loudly they almost drowned out the massive explosions from the valley below.

The jets dropped bombs, then rolled upward and turned once again to the smoldering valley. This time plumes of smoke trailed from their wings and once again the valley erupted in fire and smoke as the rockets wrought death upon the battered army of Diablo. Once again the jets flew upward, then swung around and dove toward the burning earth below. This time they came in lower, faster and firing their guns strafing the battered army once more.

Earth and dust mixed with a reddish hue of the enemies blood erupted throughout the grassy plains. Explosions burst forth as trucks and other equipment was cut in half by the heavy fire. They finished their strafing run and once more flew over the town, back in the direction they had come.

The townsfolk cheered and waved as the aircraft vanished beyond the tall trees of Pineview.

The defenders looked at the valley below and almost as far as they could see, there was smoldering vehicles and men, grasses were burning in areas as if trying to clean the evil out of the plains. Diablo's army was in full retreat, but as the townsfolk watched, they turned back toward the town. Slowly one by one, then several, then many of Diablo's faster armed trucks started once again to move toward Pineview.

The radio one of the soldiers had crackled to life.

"Hawk you bastard you haven't killed me yet and I'm coming for you and your bitch... I'll..."

Hawk looked around to see Chet standing there holding a radio.

"Figured we might need to hear what that nut job might be saying to his men, boss.. So we found his frequency."

"Good God what does it take to kill that man?"

Kylee looked over at the commanders and added, "You see my baby has one golden rule.... 'Never piss the old guy off'. I'm guessing Diablo being alive has just pissed him off."

They all laughed, that is until Hawk spoke.

"This has nothing to do with being pissed off Ky." Hawk looked sad once again, then out to the rest of the advancing army. He took the headset from Chet. Chet resisted, but he knew better and relented. Hawk put the set on and looked at Chet.

"I don't want you involved in this Chet.... or any of your command officers."

Chet looked sadly at the ground and Kylee grabbed his arm.

"Involved in what Chet? What?"

Hawk keyed the mike.

"This is General Hawk speaking, from now on you will follow only my orders and I take full responsibility for all orders from this point on."

He looked around, then out to the valley.

“Cobra leader... Commence operation Delta Foxtrot Zulu.”

The radio crackled back, “Roger sir, Delta, Foxtrot, Zulu.”

“Not one vehicle is to be spared, everything destroyed, not just disabled... destroyed!”

“Roger, General Hawk. All vehicles destroyed” The reply blared from the command radio. What followed next sent chills down the spines of all that heard.

“Cobra leader to all units. There are to be no survivors. Repeat... No survivors.”

A shaky voice replied, “Sir, what about if they throw their hands up, give up???”

“No survivors Major White you heard the order! My soul responsibility.”

There was a short silence, then...

“Orders received and understood sir. No one left standing... No survivors.”

“General Moore? Did you hear the orders?”

“Yessir orders understood. Under protest sir, but your orders will be carried out if I have to do them myself.”

“Very good General. Bring in your divisions.”

Kylee hated Diablo as well as just about everyone else, but to murder those that surrender in cold blood was something she could not believe. She started to walk over to Hawk, but was interrupted by loud rumbles coming from the town. So loud that those on the wall could actually feel their feet vibrating. Kylee turned and froze.

From every road in the town, converging toward the one road that led down to the valley came green camouflaged vehicles, many loaded with men dressed in military uniforms. There were wheeled tanks with smaller cannon, hummers with mounted machine guns and other various weapons. Townsfolk were cheering, dancing, as the light armored divisions rolled toward the road that led down into the valley. And toward Diablo’s decimated and now disintegrating army.

Overhead roared something the people had only read about.... Helicopters! And lots of them! They screamed toward the remains of Diablo’s army.

Several of the smaller Jeeps pulled up to the wall and men walked up the ramparts and onto the wide wall.

As they approached Kylee and Paul noticed one had two stars on his uniform. He walked up to Chet and saluted, Chet returned the salute. Kylee was watching the officers, then turned to Paul....

“Paul I know stars mean generals, but...”

“Kylee, the two stars mean he’s a major general.”

Kylee looked over to Chet with the three stars and Paul added,

“Chet is a lieutenant general, three stars, he out ranks the other generals.”

Kylee smiled and said she understood, then looked over to her love who was watching the troops roll past and down the road occasionally giving the brave men a salute.

Ed walked up and tried to pick up part of the conversation.

“Hawk’s a General?”

Kylee looked at Chet, then the stars on his shoulder, then back into his eyes.

“Chet? Paul was just describing generals and their ranks.”

“Ok Kylee, and?”

“Well you out rank the guy with two stars?”

“Yep!”

“Ok so if you out rank him and Paul said three stars is one of the highest ranks a general can get...”

“Yes?”

“Then why the hell do you call Hawk boss???”

Chet looked at Kylee, then at Ed and Paul, then over to where Hawk was standing. He grinned and looked back to Kylee.

“Because he out ranks me!”

Kylee’s jaw dropped and she staggered a bit as Ed steadied her.

“You’ve GOT to be kidding Chet, my Hawk doesn’t even own a military uniform.”

“Yeah and sis, he never called Chet general either, er, well until today. Oh crap!”

“What Ed?”

“Sis, they have been calling him sir now and then....”

Kylee watched the vehicles roll by and saw the officers in the convoy, as they passed by, all were snapping to attention and saluting Hawk. She looked back at Ed, then Chet.

“YOU GOT TO BE KIDDING! He out ranks you?”

Chet gave a small laugh and winked at Kylee.

“Kylee.... Hawk, your boyfriend there, out ranks every man in the military!”

Kylee slowly slumped back into Ed, her knees trembled. Ed grabbed his sister to steady her as she looked over to her love.

“Ohhhh!!! You’ve got to be kidding me.... Hawk? I knew he...well, he’s... aww, shit!”

Ed struggled to keep his sister upright.

Sis, if you love him, it shouldn’t matter...”

“Ed, I’ll always love that man! If he was poor..or... or..”

She looked over to her brother, “...or if he’s a... a... general! I just wish he would have said something.” Then added “I’m not mad. I just wish he...”

Chet grinned at her and added, “Kylee, the reason Hawk didn’t tell you, was mainly so not to endanger you. If you accidentally let it slip, or if anyone knew...

There was one of Diablo’s spies we didn’t get until just about an hour ago. The scouts caught him trying to slip out to warn Diablo we were here. If he would have known Hawk was in charge of everything military, he could have held you captive or worse yet, killed you to shake Hawk up. And the way he talks about you, that would have devastated him and demoralized the town!”

Kylee steadied herself and walked over to where Hawk was watching the last few vehicles drive down the road toward the valley. She smacked him on the arm hard enough to make him teeter on his feet for a second. Hawk rubbed his arm and looked at Kylee.

OWW!, What the hell was that for??!

“Because you deserved it.... GENERAL HAWK!”

Hawk shot a glance over to Chet who looked in another direction and started whistling. Hawk looked back to Kylee to speak, but it was too late.

Kylee threw her arms around him and kissed him deeply, passionately. She then stood there arms wrapped tightly around him, head nestled under his chin.

Hawk pushed her gently back and looked at her in a puzzling stare.

“What the hell??”

“I just wanted to tell you.... my General, how much I love you! I’m still pissed, but I’ll always love you.” She wrinkled her nose, smiled, then turned and walked away toward the others so her love could get back to business.

“General??” Then it hit him... someone spilled the beans before he had planned to tell her. Hawk had meant to tell her just before the battle. Now the cat was out of the bag. He shot a look over to the men standing around her and they all stopped grinning and went quickly about the tasks at hand. Then it dawned on him...Chet!

Hawk glanced over to his friend Chet. He nudged him as he passed and grinned as he spoke, “You know General Adams paybacks are a bitch!”

But this light moment soon changed as the part Hawk dreaded began and what followed was not something anyone, including Hawk, had ever wanted to see. Any enemy vehicle or man that tried to escape was gunned down. The soldiers in the trucks following orders shot those that were wounded or tried to surrender. They placed explosives on anything that was repairable and destroyed it. Smoke and flame billowed skyward partially blocking out the sun, casting an unworldly scene over the once beautiful valley. An occasional muffled shot could be heard in the distance as another survivor was put to his death. In the distance the choppers were destroying anything or anyone trying to get away. It was a massacre.

Some of the trucks of men that first went into the valley, were returning to the town. Those on the wall could not see one returning soldier that did not have his eyes filled with tears. Some were just outright weeping. No man should have to witness such horror. None should have to shoulder the responsibility of giving the order. Kylee looked over to her love, now standing alone, looking out over the valley. His eyes were lowered, then his shoulders slumped. He forced himself to look at the valley again. This time his stare would not lower. He would force himself to live through each mans pain.

Kylee looked over to Paul, Ed and Chet. They too had eyes filled with tears. Kylee choked back the urge to weep at what she beheld. She looked to her love for comfort. She walked over to where he stood looking out over the valley still giving an occasional order. She reached up and stroked his cheek as he turned to her.

Kylee gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

Hawk showed no emotion! There were no more tears. There was no sign of sorrow. All she saw in his eyes was emptiness. He slowly turned away from her and once again looked back toward the battlefield.

She ran from the wall crying. Back to her house....

Back to where she felt safe!

Kylee had read in her sisters letters of how Keli felt Hawk had at times had lost his soul. Of how he would be so distraught that he would turn himself inward and become as cold as death itself. He would freeze even Keli out for days until she, with loving patience, would bring him back. Show him she still loved him no matter what and that she would always be there.

Now Kylee had seen Hawk at his worst. He could kill dispassionately. He could watch as men on both sides died horribly. Was this the man she loved? She had dreamed of someone just like him all her life and now she had him. If this was the case, then why did she run from him?

Why did she run here instead of to his arms? Her thoughts ran amok.... She looked into a small mirror, the ashen face within replied to her...

"You'll always love him... Always!" She walked into the living room and sat trying to gather her thoughts and plopped down into a chair. Puzzled and even a bit mad at herself for the way she had acted.

She calmed, took a deep breath and sighed, "I do love this man... and...I... I"

She stood from the chair she had collapsed into, "I'll stand by him, no matter what!"

Kylee walked back over to the small mirror in the hall by the stairs and looked at the beautiful and strong woman that it reflected back.

"I know he must finish what he has started. Oh God! He has to feel the pain, the horror. How can he live with..."

Her face dropped any sign of sorrow. Instead she saw the look of the woman that was always there. The woman that had fallen in love again. The woman that was confident not only in herself, but in the man she loved.

She smiled!

He would be back after all the meetings, the debriefings at the end of the day. There would be no partying this eve. Not after what was happening.

He would be back and it would be late and she, well she would be waiting for him. To affirm her love, to ease his pain. To do as her sister had said in her letters, Bring him back from this "dark place" he had to go in order to do what had to be done", she would be there waiting for her loves return.

She winked at the image in the mirror and said in a whisper.

“For better or worse, isn’t that how it goes? Hawk’s going to need you more than ever and girl. You’re not going let him down!”

Kylee smiled as the woman in the mirror winked back...

Chapter 15.

The evening wore on. The sounds of war, of men dying ceased, the stench of burning flesh that drifted in toward the town subsided and Kylee knew the battle was over. Sounds of the military returning, the townsfolk cheering them, soon vanished as late afternoon turned into the late evening. Kylee knew Hawk would have hours of meetings, reports and other important things to discuss before he could return to her. But she had made up her mind she would be there for him no matter what time he returned.

Kylee hummed as she went about her chores. She smiled now and then as she caught herself humming knowing that she too could love again. Without realizing how much she had enriched Hawk's life, she only could think of how much he had brought to hers. She would be there when he returned, not the warrior, but the woman. Kylee hummed and she danced up the stairs to prepare herself for his return. She was acting like a little girl in love for the first time she thought to herself. Then she corrected herself as she glanced into the mirror in her bedroom. 'Like a woman in love!'

Knowing neither had eaten all day and once she had changed into something she thought Hawk would like, she went and started preparing a late night dinner. Which soon became a later night dinner. However as the night dragged on to the late hours and the fine meal Kylee had prepared started to dry out, she began to get a bit frustrated. She repeatedly walked over to the door and looked out into the cool night. Feeling a cooler than normal breeze gently toss the hem of her dress and the slight chill of the night air caressed her. She stepped back into the doorway and glanced back at the mirror and the reflection that stared back at her.

Kylee saw the reflection of a beautiful woman dressed in a silken pale blue dress. She smiled at this image before her because she knew she glowed with the love she held for Hawk. Then a mild frown crossed her red lips and her eyes narrowed as she stared at the woman in the mirror.

"No! I won't let them run my Hawk into the ground. He needs his dinner, his rest!" And with a wink, a smile and a toss of her head, added "...and me!"

Kylee didn't even bother to grab a wrap, she just headed out the door and stormed off in the direction of the town hall. The heels of her pumps clicked furiously at the cracked pavement as she braved the cooler than normal evening breezes. She felt goose bumps cropping up all over her body, but she ignored her chill. She found it was easy as the chill was overrun by the heat of her anger at the thought of her Hawk sitting in meetings all night, hungry and without her! She

glanced toward the women sitting upon their porches wrapped with shawls or coats waiting for their men to leave the town hall. In the distance men could be heard laughing and cheering. Kylee, stopped walking for a second, took a sigh and decided she wouldn't lose her temper. After all this had been a day of victory as well as sorrow. She once again began her walk toward the hall. Still somewhat angered, but in control, her footsteps clicked on the dimly lit street as she approached the meeting hall.

Over at the town hall things had been going on what seemed forever. But for the townsfolk the adrenaline from the day was still coursing through their veins. Excitement of Diablo's demise was intoxication. The mood, though they were tired, was keeping them going strong.

"Hawk, our town is safe. Hell the entire wastelands are safe! For that we'll be forever grateful. So please don't get me wrong, but our beautiful valley, well, it..."

"Mister Mayor, council members..." Hawk looked around the table where most sat, then out against the wall where there were more men folk sitting or leaning. Behind or beside him were members of the military still worn and tattered from the days fighting.

He continued. "...Over a century ago laws were passed where we would recycle as much as we could. Not just reusable things, but we even tried to find uses for items that had no value."

Hawk paused, looked around the room, then, "Well let me put it this way. After the apocalypse, so many cities had been destroyed they had to be removed before the land could be reused. What metal and things that could be reused or re-smelted were. Some of the concrete was even reused, but that which couldn't, was used for things like building up sea walls, barriers to prevent flooding... You get the idea."

Hawk scanned the room to make sure he was being understood.

"So for over a century we've had time to develop a system for recycling and cleaning up disasters." He winked at Chet and gave him a nod. "Chet here, has already planned for not just the defeat of Diablo's army, but the removal of the debris.... Chet, it's all yours."

A weary Chet stood next to Hawk and looked out at the audience. His gaunt battle weary face managed to give a slight grin.

"Thank you Hawk. As I speak the pyres that are burning the remains of Diablo's army light up the night sky. The ashes will be buried in the long ravine to the west and covered over. By mornings light the first of hundreds of trucks carrying heavy equipment will be here and busy loading up the damaged vehicles and equipment from the battle to be taken back east and recycled. Within two weeks everything will be gone! There are more trucks behind, many more."

The townsfolk applauded Chet as he held up his hands to quiet the hall.

“Wait! There’s more. In three to four weeks the entire valley from the towns edge to the farthest battle scar, whether blast crater, or fire burn, the entire area will be plowed and new grass and brush will be planted. So my friends by winters first snowfall, you should never be able to tell there was a battle there.”

Chet and Hawk smiled as the room burst into cheers. The Mayor stood.

“Perhaps not my friends... you see many of your men lost their lives here today as well. They were complete strangers to us, yet they died fighting so not one of Pineview’s citizens were killed. We of the council talked it over while waiting for you all to get here this evening and decided to erect a monument in honor of this day.”

“Mister Mayor, that is most gracious of your people, but it, isn’t nesses...”

“Hawk we owe so much to you and the military, please.” The mayor pulled out a scrap of paper from his pocket and held it up for all to see, then he read aloud...

“This memorial is dedicated to those that fought here on this field of battle. It is here in this valley the final battle to reunite the United States of America was fought. Some paid the ultimate price so we could once again be free from tyranny. A grateful country will forever remember their sacrifice.”

Hawk and Chet along with the rest of the room were silent for several moments, then the hall burst into applause.

It was Hawk arose and finally spoke.

“Thank you...all of you. For those that died today, for those that fought.... Thank you all. May those that survived today always remember the horror of war so another war may never be wrought upon humanity again.”

The erupted once again with thunderous applause as Hawk turned to Chet, but it was Tom that spoke first.

“Now Chet, forgive me General Adams.” Tom stood and spoke...

“That’s ok Tom, you all knew me as Chet for all these weeks, Chet’s fine.”

“Thanks Chet. About this reconstruction, we should have more information. Like what we the citizens of Pineview can do to help, to assist you in supplies, or to discu....”

“BANG!!” All heads turned toward the door.

The door had flown open and in walked the beautiful and somewhat pissed off Kylee. She walked slowly, but sternly across the room to the table, nodded at the Mayor and council members. She smiled at Ed and Chet, then glared at Hawk.

“You sure don’t know how to treat a woman very well General ‘in charge of everything’ Hawk!. You didn’t come home for dinner, nor could you tell me how lovely I looked this evening as the evening has already turned to late, late night. The dinner is cold and so will be your girlfriend, if you don’t come home with me right now.”

Many in the room gave some chuckles under their breaths. Others gave muffled “OOOOooooo’s”

All were silenced once Kylee spun around and shot her glaring frown around the room. As she spun the hem of her dress twirled well above her knees, but no one dared notice, her wrath was that well known. She glared at those in the gallery,

“That goes for all of you that are married, have girl friends or are expected home! All this can wait for tomorrow, there’s nothing that important...”

Chet interrupted.

“Kylee is right people. This can be put on hold until the morning.”

“MORNING??? Chet it’s almost morning!!!” Kylee snapped back, spinning back around to face him.

“Oops, sorry Kylee, we, heh, well...” Chet eased back into his chair.

She turned from Chet and once again focused on Hawk.

“Almost morning and your dinner is ruined...”

Kylee put her hands on her hips, threw out her ample chest and cocked her head and looked into Hawk’s eyes. She could see he wasn’t angry for her interruption, it appeared that he was actually enjoying her frustration or maybe it was the fact that someone actually cared this much for him.

“And as for you mister ‘I have to have my nose in everything’... Your dinner is cold, your girl is cooling and....” She saw Hawk look down, then a somewhat embarrassed look crossed his face, his eyes darted around as if to see if something had been noticed.

She looked around and several of the men at the table were looking at the ceiling or away from her.

“What the hell is the matter with all of you??”

“Ahh... sis...”

Kylee looked over at Ed who was also looking at the ceiling and stammering. She looked around puzzled, then by accident looked down at her dress.

“Oh....OHHH!!!”

In her hurry to get over to the hall, she had run out into the cold night air in her thin sexy almost transparent dress that Hawk liked so much, was a bit too transparent without a bra. Her dark hard nipples were pushing at the thin material so hard they looked as if they'd burst through at any second.

Hawk pulled a jacket from a chair, walked around the table he was sitting at and attempted to give Kylee some cover, but to his surprise she pushed the jacket back and just pushed her bust out even more.

“Well, I hope everyone got their eyes full and can remember what breasts look like.... Because if those of you that have wives and girlfriends don't get home now, these beauties are the last breasts you'll be seeing for quite a while! I saw a lot of angry ladies sitting on the porches on my way over here and everyone of you are in the dog house!”

Panic! Panic was the best way to describe what happened next. Many of the men suddenly looked at their watches, rapidly rose to their feet and scurried to the door, knocking chairs over in the process, bumping into one another as they fled the hall. Ed who had told his girlfriend he'd be there for dinner ran from the room as well stumbling and almost falling.

Chet who had met and started dating a woman named Missy, who ran the general store, excused himself and vanished out the door as well.

Hawk roared with laughter.

“Well honey, you sure know how to clear a room.”

He looked around at only a handful of unattached men left. They too were all grinning at the mass exodus that had just occurred. The entire hall had mostly emptied in less than a few minutes.

Kylee smiled and looked once again at Hawk.

“Baby, did you like how I made those people listen to common sense? Did I show them or what?” She grinned at Hawk, then realized he was looking somewhat lower than her face.

“Oh hell yeah hon, you showed them something alright! And they're...er... you're fantastic!” He winked at her.

Kylee reddened a bit as she had calmed down and rethinking her 'unlike Kylee' actions caused her to blush slightly, but it didn't changed her demeanor. She headed toward the door grinning so Hawk could not help but see, her hips swinging. She tossed her head so her raven locks cascaded down her back, then twisted her head back to Hawk.

"I'm so glad baby.... 'cuz, that's all you're going to see for a long time if you don't leave with me now."

Well Hawk was never one to be blackmailed, but then he never considered himself a fool either. He scurried and caught up to her before she vanished from the room... To the laughter of the few remaining men. He stopped, grinned back at the few remaining younger men and shrugged.

"Someday guys, someday you'll understand."

Hawk and Kylee got back to the house and she noticed that Hawk was starting to wind down after what must have been a horrible day for him. Tonight he looked as if those burdens were weighing him down. The weariness showed.

"Baby I'm really not mad, but dinner is ruined." Kylee paused, then a smile crossed her bright red lips. "I know! I'll make us up some breakfast!!!"

"Ok Ky, I'm going take a bath and I'll be down in a bit."

There was no answer for Kylee had already vanished into the kitchen and was busily banging pots and pans, while humming.

After about a half hour or so, Hawk crept down the stairs wondering if Kylee was still a bit perturbed at him, but then he was really too tired to worry much about anything. He slowly turned the corner of the kitchen adding in a soft voice....

"MMmmmm... Baby something smell good, Why I....."

There before him was a breakfast feast served up by Kylee and he stumbled toward the chair and plopped down in it so hard it almost broke. Eggs, bacon, even fresh coffee and juice! Hawk started to reach for his fork when the door from the kitchen flew open which startled him....

Hawk's jaw dropped!

Kylee had walked in from the room where her stove was and she was almost completely naked. She wore only tiny white lace panties, sheer white stockings and heels. She had on an apron that was so small on top that her nicely shaped breasts peeked teasingly out from behind revealing enough, but not everything.

She laid a plate of hotcakes on the table bending as to make sure he saw she was not mad.... Nor no longer cold, that what he saw was because she loved him.... Wanted him... Kylee had decided that no matter how much she wanted to be in his arms... Hawk would pay for standing her up. She would make him suffer a bit first!

“And my love here are your hotcakes...”

“Why yes they are!” Hawk said with a wink.

Making sure he saw how much she wanted him, she turned and walked back toward the cooking room swaying seductively. Making sure she stepped just right to make her well formed bottom move in all the right places.

Hawk grinned widely “Oh, Ky, You know how I love your hotcakes and somehow the hotcakes seem a bit hotter tonight...”

She wiggled in a more exaggerated way, then turned kicked out her right leg straight and bent slowly down. She placed both hands on her ankle and started slowly moving them up her leg as if straightening her stocking. Her apron fell away from her as she intended, revealing her firm breasts. She straightened all the way, but her hands didn’t stop at the tops of her stocking. Upward they crept, slowly moving over her hips, her flat stomach and up to her apron covered breast. She paused and slowly caressed herself, then moved her hands up to her neck, then face and if touching her forehead to check for a fever, pursed her pouting red lips and moaned....

“Oh dear, I seem to feel suddenly warm. I must be coming down with something.”

Hawk leapt to his feet nearly knocking the table over and rushed to Kylee’s side grasping her gently in his muscular arms.

“I hope the only thing you’ll be coming down with, is a case of me, my love.”

She teasingly pushed him back and wiggled her forefinger at him.

“Oh! So now you’re interested in what was waiting here at home for you. Seems like just a little while ago you just wanted to be talking with the guys.”

She pushed him away again teasingly.

“Baby.... Talking isn’t what I had in mind!”

Hawk walked up behind her and slid his warm hand under her apron, she gasped, then sighed.

“Funny I can’t seem to remember why I was mad at you anymore.” She sighed deeper...

That flash of hesitation came and went. No longer did she have any intention of making him pay. There'd be no more teasing, no more talk. She spun around, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. Their bodies pressed together.

They never made it up to the bed room as Kylee turned and cleared the sturdy wooden table in one swipe of her arm. Dishes shattered, food flew as she made sure the table was cleared. Not once did they stop kissing, not once did they loose their embrace. The table creaked under their weight, yet neither cared.

As far as those other important matters, Hawk decided they could wait for the next day. The matters, were handled without Hawk as he wasn't seen for several days and for some strange reason, neither was Kylee.

Ed stayed with his girl friend least he suffer the wrath of his sister. But then Ed found his love didn't mind when she wrapped her in his warn embrace and he hoped Hawk and Kylee would stay locked up even more. Staying with his girl was great!

Chet had left the next days' meetings to his underlings as well, for he found love in the arms of his beautiful shopkeeper. And he too found something in the arms of this woman. Like Hawk, Chet found peace.

Battle took it's emotional toll and the men and women throughout Pineview realized that night, that it was in the arms of their loved ones they could only find peace. It was in the arms of those loved ones they found refuge. Their sorrow turned to passion. In those arms they found their reasons to fight for survival renewed. It was in those darkened rooms they lay afterwards, while their loved ones slept, they lay awake with tears trickling down their cheeks.

Hawk quietly moved from his sleeping loves bed and walked into the hall to stare out the window that overlooked the valley beyond the wall. The sky was aglow from the pyres of the dead. With his eyes filled with tears, he leaned against the cool wall and slid to a sitting position. He laid his head upon his arms, that rested upon his bended knees. His body shook. Kylee he decided, should never see him like this... Never!

He never heard her as she walked into the hall where he sat until he felt Kylee's arm gently lay across this shoulder and gently pull his head to her breast. Her other hand stroked his silver hair, she cradled him in her warm embrace. She lay her head upon his and wrapped the sheet she wore, around him as well.... They both wept.

"Time eventually heals all..." As Hawk had always told his men, "...It's just the time in between then and now, that's a bitch."

Chapter 16.

The sunny golden days of Autumn turned to the snow filled days of early winter during the long days of reconstruction for Pineview. Everyone pushed to get the work done before they would have to face winter's icy breath. However as the cool breezes of fall turned to frigid blasts of icy air from the north the days grew shorter and reconstruction slowed. It looked like the town of Pineview would have to put off some work until Spring once again thawed the frozen earth with its warmth.

Waiting for Spring meant a somewhat larger population for the town this winter. The convoys came and went with supplies and materials to be stockpiled for when construction continued. A small tent city grew along the rocky cliffs as workers came in from various areas to sit the winter out.

Communication towers, large Proff generators were brought in to the area. Word of Diablo's southern army's defeat came only weeks after his death. The entire face of the wastelands was changing and all could see reconstruction and reunification were moving along at rates that even surprised Hawk.

He caught himself pondering many times that perhaps he had been away far too long from civilization. He had lost touch with all the advancements, they were just coming so fast and so many.

Mankind had nearly caught up to where it was before the apocalypse. Even surpassed old technology in many fields. Roads were being built and within days the first settlers were moving along these new highways to new and wondrous lands.

The eastern parts of the nation had become too closely packed for some and those that hadn't gone toward the new lands in old Europe, had decided to build new cities and repopulate what was once called the wastelands. Right up to the snows first fall, settlers could be seen passing to the south.

Now the heavy winters snows rolled through the forests and the finishing work was slowed to a crawl as men and machine sought shelter within the many small towns that dotted the northern landscape. Pineview was no exception. The population increased, changes came along with the personnel. Even Chet delayed his departure back to Washington for a short time. And things changed for Chet even a bit more.

Chet was no easy man to live with, but Missy who ran the general store near the tavern had caught Chet's eye. No longer were they content with dating or sleep overs. So one frosty day in December Chet proposed to Missy and they were married a week later in time for her to return with him to Washington. Now they would be able to arrive there before the holidays and Chet could show his new bride a city filled with lights and holiday splendor.

Ed had married his sweetheart in mid January and took over the general store Missy sold him at a reduced price, along with her living quarters on the second story. So with his bride, store and a new place, Ed gave Kylee their mother's house. This left Kylee and Hawk happily living by themselves in a place she could call her own. The first since her husband and children perished so many years before.

There were days of staying indoors and sitting by the fireplace as the winds outside howled and the temperatures dropped below zero. Days of love and laughter. Days that Hawk could not remember being so happy. Even with Keli there was running back east, scouting, reports, planning, and doing things Hawk did so well.

Now there were no more armies to defeat, no enemy other than a few mutes scattered throughout isolated areas of the country. Nothing to do but once again enjoy being in love... of belonging to something greater than himself or work.

It was a lull in mid February by the time winter had eased enough where folks could get out of their almost snow bound dwellings.

Kylee and Hawk were walking home one night after an evening of dining and visiting Ed had his new bride. Streets were piled high on each side where the snow had been cleared. Frozen snow crunched beneath their feet as they strolled along arm in arm.

Snow gently fell in huge fluffy flakes that appeared like glistening diamonds as they drifted under the newly installed street lights. Now and then a brisk gust would cause them to swirl at their feet or making the hem of Kylee's dress dance flirtingly up her thigh and causing her to shiver giving Hawk an excuse to hold her even tighter as she struggled to keep her dress down. Even this minor inconvenience never dampened Kylee's spirit.

"Look Hawk, look how they seem to twinkle. It's as if they're trying to hypnotize us." She wriggled free from his embrace and danced over to a street light. And under its glow she whirled and spun with the falling flakes as the light spotlighted this beautiful creature.

Hawk wasn't looking at the flakes this eve. He walked over to just outside the light's silver arc. He watched her spin and dance, he smiled warmly.

"Not as beautiful as the twinkle in those dark eyes of yours Kylee."

"Aww, I'll bet ya say that to all the girls." She giggled as she dashed to his arms and snuggled once again into Hawk's embrace, turning to bury her face into his chest. Hawk still holding onto her, started walking toward her place. Kylee stopped to shield herself from an icy blast and he turned to hold her with both arms as she shivered slightly once again.

"Think we need to get someone home before she freezes to death. Especially since that certain someone refuses to wear any kind of pants in winter, it's a good thing we're only a few steps from your door."

"I use to, but I noticed how a certain someone likes to look at my legs. You can't fool me baby, I see how you look at me when I wear a dress."

Hawk grinned at her and added “Hon, I love to look at your legs, but only when they’re flesh colored.... not blue!”

She pulled away and teasingly hiked the hem of her dress up her thigh, to where her coat hem was, stopping just short of showing a bit too much, she looked down at her legs.

“Oh my God! They are blue!”

“I told ya! Now let’s get...”

“Awww, let’s stay out a bit longer my love. The snow is so pretty.” Kylee threw her arms outward and did a slow spin.

“Ok, but just for a few more minutes, then in you go for some warming.”

“Ooooo Hawkie now that sounds like fun...”

“Well that was NOT what I had in mind Ky. But now that you mentioned it...I..”

Hawk was interrupted by a warm passionate kiss.

“Hawk you’ve made me so happy these short few months we’ve been together.”

He started to speak but Kylee held her fingers to his lips.

“I know what you’ve been putting off telling me the last few days. You have to go back east, this time for good.”

”How the hell...”

“Baby, remember the mayor is my cousin? Not to mention how well I know you.”

“He’s got a big mouth!”

“Well that’s true...” She grinned gleefully. “...but he thought you’d told me already. Besides if he has such a big mouth, then what about me knowing and me telling you I knew.”

“Heh, babe, I love your mouth.... Well your eyes as well, aw, hell, I love everything...”

“Hawk! Don’t change the subject.” She interrupted showing a slight pout to those lips Hawk loved so much.

Hawk frowned, “I wanted to tell you when the time was right hon....”

Again Kylee interrupted him, “Baby, nothing is more right than things are now. I just want you to know, if you want me to, I’ll go with you and stay for as long as you want me.”

Hawk cradled Kylee's face within his hands and gazed deeply into her eyes....

"I know you would my love, that's why it's taken me so long to talk to you.."

"I don't understand Hawk... I always..."

"Kylee, I know how deep your love is for me and, well dammit, I know you'd go with me so I just didn't want to have to think about leaving all of this ."

"Robert Hawk!!!" Kylee stepped back from him and put her hands on her hips and frowned, "Do you seriously think I'd ever regret leaving here as long as we're together?"

"Aw babe, I didn't mean it that way....I..."

"As long as I have your love Hawk, nothing...."

Hawk reached out and grasped her shoulders, "Christ sakes, Kylee! Let a guy get a word in edge wise will ya??"

"Oh I'm sorry baby. You wanted to say?"

Hawk looked at this beautiful, fantastic woman and wondered how he became so lucky to have her fall for a guy like him. Words came rushing into his mind until nothing made sense. He turned and walked a few steps away, then turned to see Kylee's puzzled look.

"Kylee... It's been your love that has made me stop and realize how dear life is to me. I stop to look at rainbows after a gentle rain. I see the glistening snow and feel the bite of winters cold wind. I enjoy the crunch of the fresh snow under my feet. All because you've made me feel alive once again!"

He walked back to her, put his hands on her arms and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Kylee, you have given me more than just my life back. Once more I feel...." He stumbled over his words as his mind raced, "... I love again and it's all thanks to your warmth, your love. There was such a long time I was alone a long time."

She felt tears well up in her eyes as his words touched her deepest emotions. Kylee noticed that Hawk, this man of few words was having no problems speaking now as he was allowing his feelings to pour forth in the form of words and for this man that was unheard of.

"Why you love me the way you do I'll never completely understand, but I'm so thankful you do..."

"Hawk..."

“Shhhh... baby I have to say this.” He straightened, then dropped to one knee while still holding Kylee’s two hands firmly in his.

“Kylee I could never leave you even for a few days. The thought of not feeling you snuggled up against my back while we sleep or seeing you, talking to you. Oh crap! Kylee I love you with all my heart and want you to be my wife.”

There in the snow, glistening flakes falling all around Kylee slowly sank to her knees and threw her arms around Hawk’s neck. She kissed him warmly, deeply. They knelt there in each other’s embrace. Finally her lips withdrew and she was before him eye to eye, looking into his soul. She for the first time since they left the tavern, felt truly warm. Hawk reached into his pocket and pulled out a huge diamond ring.

“My love you’ve made me the happiest woman on earth, and soon the happiest wife on the planet, yes my love I will be your wife. With all my heart, with all my being.”

He placed the ring on her tiny finger and they kissed once more, longingly, lovingly, then once again looked into each other’s eyes. They just knelt there and looked at each other for several moments.

“Was there something else you wanted to say my love?” Kylee smiled lovingly at her now soon to be husband.

“Other than professing my love and asking for your hand in marriage. Guess that’s about it, why hon?”

“Because I can’t feel my damned knees.” She looked down and Hawk’s eyes followed her gaze to her bare knees buried in the frigid powdered snow!

“Oh... whew! I thought you wanted to neck some more and my wips are frozen.” He blurted out.

“Wips?” She chuckled “Wips? Poor baby, we’d better get my future husband inside and I’ll thaw them out.”

Kylee got to her feet and held her hands out for Hawk, “Come on baby, I’ll help you up.”

“Rut-ro!”

“Baby?”

“Crap!!! My legs are frozen in this position. Don’t think I can get up hon.” He winked teasingly at her.

Kylee smiled and turned toward her house which was only a few feet away, trotted up the few steps, opened the door and stepped into the darkened hallway, never turning on a light. Within a few seconds her coat came flying out the shadows and landed on the stairs. Hawk looked puzzled.

Her sweater flew out of the dark house and hit Hawk in the face, followed only seconds later by her dress.

“Aw babe I was just kidding...I..”

A pair of dainty blue lace panties flew through the air and fell softly into the snow on the stairs.

“Wow!!! Babe, A miracle just happened!!! I CAN WALK!!!”

Hawk leapt to his feet, grabbed Kylee’s discarded garb and vanished into the darkened doorway.

A loud giggle, then.

“Ohhhhh baby, It appears the cold hasn’t affected you in that wayyyy...Oooooo!”

Only a quiet giggle broke the still night air as the door closed....

Chapter 17.

Kylee and Hawk were married in a small ceremony in early March days before they had to leave to go back east. It was as Kylee had wanted with just close friends and family as was the tradition in the Pineview part of the country. This was fine with Hawk as he once again had found love and all he wanted is what Kylee wanted. It was a small ceremony with only a few people and Ed was the best man, which thrilled Ed to no end. Chet had gone on to Washington to take care of some important matters, while Hawk's few other military friends had moved on following the reconstruction further west. Hawk had put off going back east as long as he could. One by one all of the military had to leave for other duties and Ed who was going to walk his sister down the aisle, now became the best man.

So when the day came, Ed with all his humor going strong, walked out with Hawk and when the music started playing, he ran down the aisle through the doors and shortly appeared with Kylee on his arm. He gave his sister to Hawk, then quickly jumped over next to Hawk producing the ring. The church erupted in quite laughter.

Kylee, stopped, walked to her brother, with tears in her eyes, smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek, a hug, then walked back to her spot. The church filled with quite sighs.

Hawk noticed Ed's face turning red, turned to Ed and gave him a kiss on the cheek as well! Everyone, save Ed, burst into laughter. Ed glared at Hawk momentarily, shrugged and smiled, leaned over and gave Hawk a big kiss on the cheek!

It was now Hawk's turn to turn red. His humor had backfired and as he tried to conceal his embarrassment, he looked to Kylee who with the preacher were holding on to one another to keep from falling down laughing. Hawk smiled and looked back to Ed, patted him on the arm and congratulated him.

"It's not often I get bested my friend, I'll now consider you as one of the few that have. Just remember what they say about pay backs.'"

Ed beamed and Kylee threw her arms around Hawk, kissed him and thanked him.

"That's for taking Ed in as family."

"He is family Kylee." He looked to Ed and winked "Twice over, you, on the other hand are going to be my wife just once."

Kylee laid her head into Hawk's chest, then straightened and nodded to the preacher to proceed.

And that day Kylee and Hawk became husband and wife. And Ed? A brother-in-law for the second time.

The time to leave became near and Hawk's mood changed more towards the time when they had first met. This puzzled his new wife even more.

She'd look over at him sleeping and he had become restless once again. All the time Kylee had the feeling that Hawk had more on his mind and as the time came closer for them to move on to Washington, he became more and more distant as if a huge weight had been placed upon him once again.

The more Kylee questioned him, the more he withdrew into himself and the more his new wife became concerned. She had never seen him like this and that worried her even more.

Within a short week the newlyweds were headed toward the big muddy. Then on to the new Washington. Kylee was heading to what would be her new home with her new husband. A home outside the one she had known all her life. Perhaps not a home as Kylee would be used to, yet with her Hawk close by she never once thought twice about leaving.

Nor was it going to be like the home her sister Keli had known, as Hawk had sold the hotel he owned while he was wracked in grief of her death. He could have never faced entering their suite again... ever.

They were north of Central city so she knew they would not go through it. Her husband was headed back to the nation's capitol with some determination.

This would be a new environment and if it wasn't for the happiness in her heart, she might have worried.

Kylee had visited large cities in the past, even dressed formally as one of the ambassadors of the northern wastelands. She knew her way around politicians, style, etiquette, but to live in a major city away from all the trees and friends, she decided it was a good thing her love for Hawk was as strong as it was or she would have been headed in the other direction.

Visiting big cities was one thing, living in one sort of frightened her.

Then there was the thought of other things that excited her, other than being a newlywed. She looked forward to meeting any of Hawk's friends, to see Chet and Missy again and then there was what would be her new home. Kylee would finally have a home. Hawk had asked Chet to purchase it for them when he decided to ask Kylee to be his wife. Hawk seemed to know their new city well, which puzzled her as to how he did.

Hawk had told her he asked Chet to buy a certain house for them, which puzzled her more as it seemed more like Chet was suppose to know what Hawk wanted. How did he know?

She finally just gave up and decided to see what Chet and Hawk had been discussing that one evening. Even Missy had been puzzled as Chet never talked about Hawk or what the two of them talked about. All had been confusing, but then this was he husband and there were few times she found that he wasn't confusing. All those years alone. All those decisions? No wonder he never

spoke about his plans. But somehow Kylee knew he would change for her. He would open up. She grinned to herself knowing it wouldn't any time soon.

Chet joined them in a city called Overton, just on the east side of the Mississippi to catch a train. Air travel barely existed as most aircraft production had been for military use in defeating Diablo.

Besides, she decided, this was a chance for her to see the country. As much as she pleaded, Hawk refused to take her to Gateway to see where he and Keli had lived.

As for her new house she did get excited about seeing it and the closer to Washington they got, then more excited was Kylee. Kylee had been on short train rides, but as she was about to find out, this country was much bigger than she had ever imagined.

Chet was Hawk's closest friend and knew his tastes. Of course Hawk would also be surprised as he had never seen the new house in Washington either, or at least she didn't think he did. But then this was her Hawk and he always tended to puzzle her. Then before she knew it, it was time to board the train. It had been a long bumpy drive from Pineview to Overton, now riding a train was a blessing!

The train ride was much longer that Kylee had guessed, but the days of looking out the window would stun her. So much to be seen. So much of the country had been rebuilt. Since crossing the Mississippi, she had seen not one sign that this country had ever been through the apocalypse. All that would lay before her was sights that stunned her. So much more that she had seem in old books.

Kylee had been amazed that once they boarded the train headed for the east coast, that every stop there were throngs of people shouting, waving. Although Kylee inquired why, Hawk never answered. He'd just walk away mumbling. This aggravated Kylee to no end. People had gathered along the trains route in small groups to wave and cheer as the train passed. Hawk never looked out the window. This was not the man she loved, there was something going on and she decided that she would find out what, one way or another.

As soon as Kylee could get Chet alone the questions started to flow. Kylee was not unwise to the ways of the east as her many trips in the past had taught her. As far as the workings of government, the military and other such matters, she had never needed to learn much more than the basics. As Chet sat down across from her, she could see Chet was somewhat uneasy as everyone that knew Hawk, knew he did not like to be talked about. Good or bad.

Kylee cleverly started by congratulating Chet on his marriage to Missy that ran the general store in Pineview. This got Chet beaming from ear to ear.

She told Chet about how Ed was getting along and other small talk. Kylee knew flattering someone always helped before questioning.

Then she started in with the easy questions, so when Chet started hesitating Kylee put him to ease a bit by saying.

“Chet I know how uneasy this is for you. Just tell me what you feel comfortable letting me know. I’m sure Hawk will tell me the rest when he’s ready.”

Still looking a bit uneasy, Chet managed a smile and began.

“Ok Kylee.... Let’s see... Well you know we said he’s a General.”

“Yep”

“Ok and you know he’s the highest ranking general in the military.”

“Yep”

“Hmmm... Aww Hell! I’ll start at the beginning or at least what I know.”

“GREAT!” Kylee sat upright as the train rolled along, she leaned so far forward she almost fell off her seat.

“But if I see Hawk coming I’m out of here, understood?”

Kylee smiled and nodded, her eyes wide open, she leaned forward even more toward Chet who was seated directly across from her.

“Back in the days right after the Apocalypse. I’m not exactly sure of the exact story, but somehow Hawk got a bunch of survivors together and block by block took back his city which was one of the few undamaged by all the quakes, rifts and upheavals. Well they made him their leader, as more and more of the city was brought back under control of the survivors. I guess he was just kept in the position. Sometime in those first weeks, the military reservists followed his lead as well and they gave him top rank so there would be no question who was in charge. Why or how he came to lead the military, I have no idea!”

“But Chet, how could he...”

“Kylee, I can just tell you what I know, not a bit more. I know he said that as other cities and even states that had their own military or the U.S. forces joined them, he was just left as their leader. When it comes to Hawk, I can see why, he’s a natural born leader. Why he stayed in that position I won’t even hazard a guess, he likes being on his own so much.”

Kylee laughed out loud and nodded, as she knew half the things she heard about Hawk were only the tip of the ice berg.

“Well as the country was being taken back from the mutants and raiders, bandits, etc, Hawk just seemed to be the natural choice for leader. More and more cities had survived, more and more people than anyone could have imagined had survived and eventually we took back everything east of the Old Miss.

Hawk was always up front of his troops, always first in battle, rumors spread from town to town. He was the first the townsfolk saw, he was becoming a folk hero and eventually a legend. Hell his men would follow him anywhere he asked them to.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt Chet, but Hawk will be back soon and I need to know about now.”

Chet chuckled and continued.

“Well Kylee... let’s see, during all that time the military tribunal Hawk set up to handle things while he was away doing Hawk things would remain in charge until he returned from whatever he was doing. They controlled everything as the country was under martial law and will continue to be until a new president can be elected. Even after each state had their own governments, congress needed to be formed in Washington. The tribunal ordered states to form a new national government. You know, send congressmen to form a new house and senate. They pass laws, the tribunal approves them, things like that. It will stay until the country is united and a new president can be voted into office. You know Hawk’s pledge that he made over a century ago. Well all that is in keeping with that.”

“Ok! I see and Hawk is one of that tribunal?”

“Ahhh... well kind of my dear. Hawk is the head of that tribunal.”

Kylee jerked upright so hard she almost slipped off the seat, gave Chet a puzzled look, then leaned back toward him.

“No way! If he holds such an important position. Then how come he’s spent so much time out in the wastelands or those years fighting in the west coast. Not to mention this last fight with Diablo?”

The look on Chet’s face changed. No longer was he smiling.

“Mrs. Hawk.... Your husband, Hawk? Damn!”

“What Chet?”

“I don’t know if I should be telling you this or not but I guess you’d hear it someday. No one knows exactly what or why....”

Kylee’s look softened she laid her hand on Chet’s knee and smiled.

“Chet if you don’t want to...”

“It’s ok Kylee, sorry I got so, abrupt.”

“We’ve been friends long enough Chet, it didn’t bother me..”Chet relaxed a bit and continued.

“Thanks Kylee. Sometime in the past, something tragic happened to your husband. No one knows exactly what, but it must have been horrible. Perhaps as bad as when he lost your sister Keli, I just don’t know, I wasn’t alive back then, of course, but something really bad happened. It drove him into solitude. He handpicked trusted generals to run things on the tribunal that had been formed. Hawk had know them for years. He always came back if any of them died or retired.... God only know how he’d find out one had died, but the story goes that he would always show up when he was needed. Then he would place a new trusted General into the tribunal. Sometimes even a trusted civilian. Always someone he had worked with and known for decades.”

Chet looked at Kylee and she could see the admiration in his eyes for her husband.

“Kylee, even when Hawk was at his lowest points in his life, he never abandoned his love for this country... or his devotion to it. That’s why as soon as a state was free of mutes and raiders he demanded they form a new state government. Like back before the apocalypse. When Washington was cleared and rebuilt, he made sure all states had congressional representatives. He reformed the Supreme Court to uphold the old and new constitution. But all that never mattered, he still couldn’t rest as he always swore he’d never stop until it was returned to a country with a sitting civilian president. That was his pledge! It’s most likely why there has never been any one man in power. I don’t think Hawk wanted no one person in charge until that person could be called “President! The funny thing is Hawk had always been in charge, but as long as I have known him, no one has ever wanted it any other way.”

“But Hawk is one man and he seems to have a lot of power. He never sees himself as ‘the leader’?”

Chet smiled, “Kylee, I don’t think Hawk ever thinks of himself as in charge totally. He just always has been. At least in my life time. He likes to think the tribunal is, but then they follow his lead when he’s around and follow his rules when he isn’t.”

Kylee felt so much pride in what Chet had been telling her. Even with learning more, just added to her love of this man she had married. She began to see why he was so driven, this man she really knew so little about, but she didn’t care, because loving him was enough for her. She had chosen the right man. She looked out the window.

“So these crowds that keep appearing?”

“Word got out Hawk’s returning to Washington D.C. perhaps this time to stay. Well people just want to show him how much they love him, respect him, for what he’s done for this country. For them! Others I guess, just hope to glimpse the legend.”

“But he acts like it disgusts him so!”

“Kylee... You know Hawk, he never feels anyone owes him anything. He feels he does it because it’s something he should be doing for the country. Hell Ky, I seriously doubt Hawk has any idea how people feel about him.”

Kylee looked out the window at the sun drenched landscape as it hurried by. She wiped away the tears as they formed. So little she knew about her love and the more she learned, the happier she was. The more she understood why he was Hawk, the man of so much mystery.

She looked over to Chet who was smiling warmly at her.

“Thank you Chet. So very much.”

Chet patted her on the knee, stood, gave her a knowing wink and walked down the aisle to his seat.

She looked up and saw Hawk walking her way from the other direction. She quickly checked to make sure there were no signs of tears and straightened her dress, smiled at Hawk.

Hawk walked up to their seats and sat down. He sat down and leaned forward. He started to say something, but was stopped by Kylee throwing her arms around him and kissing him like he had been gone for months. Kylee relaxed her embrace and Hawk pulled back and looked into her eyes.

“Wow babe! What was that for?”

“Because I love you!”

“Silly I know that you love me, but...”

Once again she kissed him. This time it was for a much longer time.

“Kylee my love..... there are times you really puzzle me!”

“Hawk my love there are times..... you puzzle me!.. “

She kissed him again as she move to sit next to him, never once letting her warm lips leave his. Hawk was now totally puzzled, but then again, he could have cared less as he was in Kylee’s arms and loving every moment of it.

There was so much Kylee wanted to know about Hawk's past. So much, so many questions, but she knew there would be the rest of their lives to try to pry it out of him. She would smile at him as he always looked so embarrassed whenever the train stopped and people would be there waving and shouting. Kylee would nudge Hawk and tell him to wave back and the crowds would go wild. Other times, he would walk away from the windows as if carrying a heavy burden or bad memory. This was disconcerting and several times she tried to ask, but he just remained quiet.

Chet had arranged for a private car on the train. All Kylee knew that nights in that private car, that he was all hers and she made him forget all his problems. As for her worries about him, when he held her in his arms all her worries vanished well.

The week or so they spent on the train was a joyous time for Kylee. She had Hawk mostly to herself and she knew that might not be the case once they arrived in Washington D C. There were enjoyable evenings with Chet and his wife. The conversations were light and pleasant, she always listened for clues that would let her know more of Hawk's past. At times she tried to coax Hawk into saying more, but he only stuck to the present, not the past nor even the future. This concerned her deeply because she had know him long enough to see something big was about to occur in his life..... their lives! This bothered Hawk enough to where he didn't seem to know how he was going to handle it. She could sense his uneasiness, his confusion.

"How bad could it be." She pondered, looking into the mirror as she fixed her hair. "He's a folk hero, a legend. He has some importance, everyone seems to love him....I love him!" She smiled "How bad could it be?"

She then one thought about the look on Hawk's face, the worry that seemed to increase more as they neared their destination.

"How bad..." She felt tears starting to well up in her eyes, "...could it be?"

All those bad feelings returned and she clasped her hands over her face, slipped into a nearby seat and started sobbing quietly.

Chapter 18.

The train pulled into the D.C. station and there were throngs of people to meet them. With Diablo's defeat, months before, the country well on its way to unification, celebrations were breaking out everywhere. There were rows and rows of dignitaries and military standing in line to shake Hawk's hand and waiting to be introduced to his new wife. Already delegates from the new states had been elected and were in the crowd waving and cheering. Other important people rushed forward to greet Hawk... and his new bride.

Kylee dressed in a tasteful dark blue chiffon dress smiled and graciously shook everyone's hand that Hawk introduced her to and smiled sweetly to those he did not. She occasionally glanced over to Hawk to see if she was doing ok and every time she saw him proudly smiling back at her. Hawk was astounded at the way she was handling herself in what had to be an uneasy situation for her. There she was, full of grace and poise, as if she had been doing this all her life. Already there were the fashion reporters taking pictures. Little did Kylee know she would become the trend setter for the next few generations. Eventually they worked their way through the crowd and finally they got to the last of the well wishers and were ushered into a limousine and quiet!

The limo drove slowly through the city as people stopped and waved. Along some of the wide avenues large crowds had formed and cheered as the procession passed. Kylee figured it had to be the procession of three limos escorted by twice as many military vehicles. She looked over at Hawk, put her hand on his leg and laughed.

"Baby, we look more like an invasion, than visitors."

Chet grinned at Hawk, then Kylee... "Visitors?"

The idea of visitor quickly dropped from her mind, what was she thinking? This was going to be her new home!

They pulled into a huge red brick building. It was monstrous. It had three floors and looked like it might have twenty rooms or more. Although on a small lot, it was well landscaped and the half circle drive in the front, was done in old red brick that was hundreds of years old. Luxurious did not describe it!

Chet got out, opened the door and held his hand out for Kylee. She gave Chet her hand and slowly got out of the limo followed by Hawk. As she got out, she scanned the sight before her as Hawk jumped out the other side and walked around to his wife.

"My God Baby... This is the most lovely hotel I have ever seen! It's small, but so beautiful"

Chet and Hawk laughed.

“Glad you like it darling, it’s going to be your home.”

“We’re going to live in a hotel until the house is bought??”

“No babe, this is our new home. I had Chet buy it when he returned here to D. C. It was being renovated and sold by a guy I knew. I figured it would be done by now.”

Kylee stopped in her tracks!

“New home? Bought it? A HOTEL? We own a hotel?”

“Hotel? This isn’t a hotel honey this is our new house, our home.”

She stumbled back into Hawk’s chest and scanned the enormous building. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the back of her neck, which was interrupted when it fully dawned on her as she scanned not just side to side, but upward..

“Holy Shit!!”

The two men roared with laughter. Kylee caught herself and gave Hawk a sheepish grin.

“Oopps! Sorry, I meant....” She looked back at the building scanning it’s immenseness, “Oh crap..”

It was sinking in and the two men were roaring with laughter. Kylee’s grin turned more to that of a puzzled frown.

“Wait! Baby, you said bought it? Look at this, Oh Hawk can you....uhh.. we afford it?”

Chet roared and tears rolled down his cheeks as he leaned back against the limo to steady himself. Kylee looked over at him.

“Hawk? You haven’t told her?” He roared!

Kylee pulled away from her loves embrace and with her hands on her hips she glared at Chet!

“Just how much money does my husband have.”

Chet’s laughter was so contagious Hawk could barely stand as he too started laughing, they were quickly getting weak from all the laughter. Chet looked at Kylee through a teary haze laughed out.

“You don’t want to know.... Hell, I don’t know, no one knows...” He gasped for air, “...except Hawk! He’s been giving money to the new government for years to bolster the economy in times of

need, he even gave the government back a place called Fort Knox!!! It was rightfully his. I guess as he took it back single handed from some raiders over a hundred years ago.”

Hawk frowned, “Not funny Chet, Knox always belonged to the U.S. and always will!”

“Sorry boss, but...” Chet looked at Kylee, “... Robert Hawk has to be the richest man on this planet!”

Kylee who had been starting to laugh because Chet was so funny when he laughed, stopped! She looked at Hawk, then Chet. What Chet had said started to sink in. She fell back against Hawk once more, her knees started to feel weak and she felt his strong arms wrap around her once again as she started to slump. Her head was spinning and all this fairly well educated woman could manage to utter once again was...

“OH, CRAP!”

Hawk scooped Kylee up into his arms and nodded to Chet.

“See you this evening Chet.”

“OK boss, think you have some explaining to do. Seems you stunned your bride.”

Kylee who wasn’t that stunned stuck her tongue out at Chet and wrinkled her nose at him. As usual Kylee had quickly recovered.

Chet grinned and headed back to his vehicle.

“Baby you can put me down I wasn’t going to pass out... I, well, you just took me by surprise a bit.”

“Hush up woman! I know you know the custom of carrying the bride across the threshold.”

“But baby you did that the day we got married.”

“I carried you across the threshold of your house Hon. This is OUR house!”

He stepped through the door as Kylee almost fell out of his arms as she twisted about, first one way, then the other. She craned her neck to take in all the splendor of her new home. Especially the monstrous chandelier in the huge entry.

“Whoa easy there girl, before I drop you on that cute little butt of yours...”

“Oh baby this is so...so beautiful!” Kylee interrupted.

They stepped fully into the foyer where Kylee could see a huge winding staircase that led to the floors above. She looked left and right to see room after room spreading in all directions.

“It’s, so....soooo...Big!! My god baby, it’ll take me weeks to clean it all.” She looked at her love that still held her in his arms. “But for us, baby, I’ll make this place spotless.”

She looked around more closely. The house was immaculate. There wasn’t a spot of dust anywhere.

“Well, more spotless? How...”

The left door toward the rear of the immense winding staircase opened and six people walked out. Each was dressed in black and white uniforms. They all walked into the huge foyer and stood in line.

Hawk walked down the line, still holding Kylee in his arms and introduced them one by one. Each woman curtsied, each man bent slightly at the waist. Kylee unable to do anything but give a little nod, did so.

At the end of the line Hawk added.

“These are your staff, they clean, cook, and everything else. They..”

“STAFF? I have staff? Baby you’ve got to be shitting me! Uurrrg.... Sorry...”

She spoke too fast in her excitement, a few quiet chuckles that came from the staff and she blushed, buried her head into Hawk’s chest and mumbled. “Please forgive my language...”

“Quiet all right ma’am, you’ve said nothing that your husband hasn’t, many times. I mean.. I’m sorry sir...I never....”

Hawk grinned and nodded it was ok, while Kylee peeped out and looked up at Hawk who was grinning so sheepishly. Kylee smiled at the maid who had spoken, then back to Hawk.

“Ok my love I can live with staff.”

She looked at the staff. “As long as I get to do some things for myself now and then, Ok?”

“Yes ma’am, understood.” The butler turned and nodded and the staff vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

“Wait just a damned minute my love! We just got here, yet you knew all their names as you introduced them to me, they knew you.”

She paused and grinned, “Well everyone knows YOU, but how the hell did you know all of their names mister?”

“Oh, the staff? Awww baby they’ve been with me for years. They kept my old house for me while I was away!”

“But I know you were out of town for years.”

“Yep!” Hawk beamed a wide grin, “And the house was always spotless when I got home too.”

A gentle smile crossed his lips, “Actually Ky, Evan, the butler and Betty the upstairs maid... Well babe, their grandparents and their parents worked for me.”

“Somehow my love that really doesn’t surprise me in the least. I know how you’ve always looked after people.”

“I owed them Kylee, both their grandfathers were wounded while under my command. I didn’t know them at the time, but I needed someone to do gardening on a place I had. It was brought to my attention of two wounded men that had been gardeners and Well..”

“And of course Hawk had to help them out!” She smirked teasingly.

“Oh they were terrific gardeners, so I kept them on as I moved from place to place here in the east. They met women and got married, had children and a couple of their kids came to work for me to earn some money, liked the work..... well the rest you can fill in yourself.”

“So Keli knew about...”

“Yes Ky, Keli knew eventually. I stayed here in D. C. when I had to come back here, my old place that is.” Hawk looked sadly at Kylee, “She never got a chance to see it though.”

Hawk perked up a bit, “But Evan’s dad, Wilson was the doorman at the hotel we had when we were married. Evan was just about ten when I decided to sell the hotel, his mother had just passed away. Honey, with my grief from losing Keli, I knew what Wilson and Evan were going through, well, I asked Wilson if he would like to move to DC and work for me here. We had known each other for years and he agreed. That made me happy, because Wilson’s dad was one of the guys I told you about that was once my gardener.”

Hawk smiled warmly as he reminisced which made Kylee smile as well, “Wilson passed away three years ago, but Evan had taken over his duties as butler and house manager when his dad retired.”

“So Wilson’s dad, Evan’s grandfather? You knew him before he came to work for you in Central city?”

“Heh, heh, babe that’s a long story, he was also military, so was Wilson and Evan... and that’s another long story.”

Before Kylee could respond with a myriad of questions, Hawk gave Kylee a little bounce as he readjusted her slender body in his arms and started toward the stairs as she squealed!

“Uhh, baby, I love you with all my heart. And I trust you with my life, but I’ll be damned if I trust you carrying me up all those stairs!”

She laughed as she kicked her slender legs in false protest, “If you drop me, that’s a long way down! There’s no way in hell I’m going to let you carry me up those stairs!”

She smiled and looked at Hawk, he smiled back. Then she stopped smiling as Hawk squinted his eyes slightly got that devilish look he always got when he was about to....

“You wouldn’t.....you wouldn’t dare!!! You, EEEeekkkk...”

Kylee squealed like a little girl as Hawk tossed her over his shoulder and proceeded up the stairs to their rooms, kicking her trim legs all the way as if protesting the way she was being carried. While all the time she was loving this moment!

What Hawk never saw was once she was safely over his shoulder, was the warm loving smile she had on her face. She hoped this day would never end, for at least this moment, she had her Hawk all by herself.

This was the happiest time of her life!

Chapter 19.

During the rest of the day, they prepared for the planned gala evening. There was to be a huge dinner to welcome Hawk and his new bride. Afterward there was going to be some function at the monstrous building Hawk pointed out on the way to the dinner. He called it the new Capitol of the United States. The building was huge and had been constructed in such a way it could be expanded should additional states be added.

Of course Kylee had to know how many states there were now. How congress worked. Not to mention she wanted to know everything about her new home and the surrounding city.

There were the endless questions and Hawk answered them the best he could in the time Kylee gave him before the next question ensued. Questions about the new house, the staff, how things worked in her new city. The only thing Hawk never answered were questions about the upcoming evening. At times he'd look worried and stumbled over his words and Kylee began to worry. Other times Hawk seemed elated to be giving her answers to what she asked. This continued until they were dressed and it was time to go. They exited the house and headed to a small half circle drive in front of their new home. In the drive sat the limo that had brought them here earlier.

"I assume this is our limo?"

"Limo Hon. Limo, it's short for limousine."

"Ok limo, but it's ours?"

"And the driver is staff as well Hon."

Kylee stopped as the chauffeur reached and opened the door. She looked back at Hawk puzzled.

"So this driver just sits around and waits to take us somewhere in this 'limo'?"

"This is Don, Kylee, and basically. Yes! He will drive you anywhere you want, that's his job and he's very good at it."

"Great! Then he can take me home whenever I get homesick, Right!"

Hawk stammered a bit and looked uneasily at Don, then back to Kylee who was grinning from ear to ear at both of them.

“Gotcha both!!! Hahaha... You should see your faces... Hahahaha!”

Kylee got into the limo and scooted over. Don looked to Hawk and replied, “She’s not as naive as you said sir. She seems to be getting a grasp of things quite well.”

“That she is Don. That she is.”

The dinner was a fantastic experience for this woman that Hawk loved so much. She had never seen so much food, nor such a variety. Kylee was somewhat wise to the world even though she had come from humble beginnings. Back in the world which she had been born, such feasts as these were unknown.

There was music, entertainment, it was truly an evening to remember. She was introduced to some of the people, there was polite conversation, but yet in the back of her mind something just didn’t feel right. Kylee couldn’t help but notice as the evening wore on, Hawk became more quiet... distant. She asked as to why, but as usual he would never burden her with his problems or thoughts. This always concerned her, but then she understood this man of hers and had decided that was his way and for at least this night, she would not press the issue further.

As they danced the last dace he held her close. So close that the worry returned. She had always felt so safe and secure in his arms, but now he was holding her as if it were for the last time. The music ended and they walked from the dance floor as it became time to depart for another function The announcement was made that the Hawks would have to depart. The couple waved to the crowd and walked out to thunderous applause.

As they headed down the stairs toward the awaiting limo, Kylee turned to Hawk.

“These people love and admire you so much. They...”

“They’re fools!”

Kylee stopped in her tracks and grabbed Hawk’s arm so hard it spun him around to where he was facing her.

“Robert Hawk! That’s a horrible thing to say. After all the respect and kindness they’ve shown you...after all..”

“They don’t know me! They don’t know anything! They’re all a bunch of fools!!” He turned and stormed off.

Kylee quickly ran after him as they got into the limo, she started to speak, then looked in his eyes. There she saw something she had never seen and it scared her, she started shaking and carefully reached out her hand and put it on his thigh.

Hawk still staring ahead, gently placed his hand on hers and held it, but his stare never changed. It was as if he was looking through the solid roof out into the dark night sky or perhaps into his past and that even frightened Kylee more.

She looked over at him and in the light of passing street lights could see his cheek was wet with tears, though he did not weep. She managed to choke back her urge to cry. Kylee knew something was about to happen. What she didn't know, or care. She would be there for her love. She had sensed something in the wind, something that changed her fear to terror. Somehow, she knew he would need all her love, all her support.... And strength!

The limo pulled up in front of a huge structure with a new dome in the center. It was the building Hawk had pointed out to her earlier. The door was opened from the outside and Hawk stepped out and held his hand for Kylee to hold onto. She stepped out of the limo to see two formally dressed sentries stood to each side of the pair, one had opened the door, the other held a salute until Hawk returned it. Kylee smiled at the two sentries and looked up at the structure in front of her.

"My god darling this building is huge! It sure looks much larger close up. It's all just for congressional members? Wasn't the old one good enough?"

"This is the new congressional building Kylee, the old one was destroyed back during the apocalypse and this one was built about fifty years ago once we realized there were going to be more than fifty states in the new U.S. You see the Canadian provinces were taken back from mutants and raiders, there was no central government, so one by one over the years they petitioned to become states. "

"All of them?"

"Not all... most, others are in the process, along with Some of the countries of the British Isles. Well back then that is. Now most of Canada and British Isles have joined the United States. It's more 'of the world' than 'of America'."

"I knew that part, just not how huge this is."

"Well the old capitol we built was not going to be large enough, so in a special meeting of congress we swallowed out pride and dropped the "of America" to just The United States."

"You should have made it 'of the world'. Then.."

"Heh, heh, Kylee we thought about it, but it seemed a bit pretentious. So we just made it United States. For the first time in history, this world can be under one rule, one set of laws. Do you realize that if things continue as they are, with New Europe, assuming they vote to join eventually, this planet could see peace."

“A noble thought my love. With one army for all, no wars, no one to fight.” She chuckled and added, “But mankind being what it is, dare we hope?”

Kylee eased a bit. Hawk was talking again, joking, he seemed more at ease. She thought perhaps this time of worry might pass. She relaxed and smiled as she saw a familiar face walking toward them.

Chet walked up to the two and greeted them. He shook Hawk’s hand and gave Kylee a quick hug, then held out his arm for Kylee who looked somewhat puzzled.

“Ky, Chet will escort you to where you’ll be sitting. Chet make sure she gets a good seat my friend.”

Chet chuckled and said he had a couple right up front in the gallery, then added...

“I had to sweet talk a lot to get those seats.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you did, but then I know you wouldn’t lie to a friend now would ya?

Both men laughed. Chet looked at Hawk and chuckled, “That was a load of crap, wasn’t it? But then I did have the best mentor to teach me, didn’t I sir!”

Kylee interrupted, “Honey? I’m not going with you?”

“Oh no babe, I’m sorry. I have to go over a few things, change, then I’ll get around to coming into the area where you’ll be seated.”

“Into?...Change?...What the heck are you....”

Kylee got that strange look she always had when puzzled. She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head and gave Hawk that little frown that said “I’m more puzzled than mad” look, then continued, “.....I suppose you’re going to tell me we won’t be sitting together or something like that?”

“Sorry hon, it’s something like that, but, you’ll see me. Fair enough?”

Kylee leaned over and kissed her husband on the cheek, looped her arm through Chet’s and tossed her head.

“Come on General Adams! Unlike some men around here, I’ll bet you know how to treat a girl!”

Chet grinned sheepishly at Hawk, but neither saw the concerned look that had claimed Kylee’s beautiful face. Something was unquestionably wrong and for the first time in a while she was getting frightened again.

Kylee was led into a huge open spaced room that held several hundred people. Missy had joined them inside the hall. She, Missy and Chet were on a mezzanine of sorts that was filled with people sitting in rather plush seating. They moved along and to the right side of the seats until they came to several seats separated by a velvet rope. Kylee was about to ask Chet where they would sit as all the seats were full, but never got the chance as a guard in a military full dress uniform opened the rope and allowed them in.

“Why Chet it would seem that you do have some pull around here.” She laughed and winked at Missy.

Chet just gave her a silly grin and started Kylee wondering what the hell was so funny. Just as she was about to ask, she noticed everyone on her level was looking in her direction. Some were smiling at her, others would smile, then start talking as if about her. Kylee tried to look elsewhere, but saw people down on the main floor were doing the same.

“Chet... What are all those people looking at?”

“Why you Kylee.”

“Me? Why, is my dress ripped? My makeup running? My hair.... it’s my hair isn’t it?”

Missy laughed and replied “My dear, you look lovely and there is nothing wrong with you or your attire. Everyone just wants to see how beautiful Hawk’s new wife is. They had word of you two getting married the day it happened.”

“The same day??? Why would anyone want to....” Then it hit her “Chet, Hawk’s that well known here in the east? His legend is always told back in the west. Nothing was ever said about him being famous in the east.”

Chet just grinned.

“Well I can’t say Hawk didn’t warn me things were going to be a lot different here. Oh Chet I just hope I can make him proud of me.”

Chet reached over and patted her hand.

“Kylee listen to me. Hawk could not have found a more perfect woman to fall in love with! Don’t worry yourself sick, you’re doing just fine! It would seem you have the entire building captivated!”

Kylee gave a little sigh of relief and looked around. This time however when she saw someone smiling at her she gave them one of her warmest smiles and a gently nod. Within minutes she had won the audience over without saying a word.

Chet was grinning from ear to ear. He knew Washington and even if she was Hawk's wife, she would have to win approval and from what he was seeing, not only had she won approval, but without a doubt, she would have the entire city charmed once she was seen on television. Just as he was starting to relax, it hit him....

He hadn't mentioned anything about TV to Kylee. She knew what it was, but back from where she was from, They had never had it there until after Diablo's defeat.

Now not only would all in this city get their chance to see her, but most of the country would as well, including her friends and family back in Pineview!

"Maybe it's better I didn't say." He mumbled to himself.

"What was that Chet? I'm sorry, I missed what you said." Kylee sat there looking puzzled at Chet's mumbling. He sat upright and looked elsewhere.

"Ahh, nothing Kylee, was just thinking aloud."

He glanced over to her once she was looking the other way and he decided it was much better if she didn't know millions would see her in her national debut. Chet grinned and leaned back into the chair. Missy on the other hand looked at her husband sensing things were not right, gave him an uneasy look. She grasped her husband's hand and was about to whisper to him, when Kylee turned and looked at Chet.

Kylee was about to ask when 'her' husband would join them... but there seemed to be a commotion down on the main floor where all the members of Congress and the members of the Supreme Court sat. Everyone started to stand and look down to the main floor. Kylee looked over to Chet who was starting to rise, so she did likewise.

"Ladies and gentlemen! The Commander in Chief of the United States!"

The audience went wild, whistling, applauding, cheering. Kylee had never heard such commotion. As all in the audience stood and applauded, she arose and focused on someone coming down the aisle below. He was shaking hands with a few of the members of congress, waving at others, then he turned and waved, this time he was facing her."

"OH MY GOD.....THAT'S...."

"Kylee I told you Hawk was my boss.."

"But.... I..I got the impression...that...."

"He's my boss alright, as well as everyone in the United States military's boss too." He laughed. "Matter of fact you could say he's every citizens boss as head of the Tribunal."

"OH SHIT!" It had slipped out as she covered her mouth with her hand and looked around nervously, but no one heard, they were too busy cheering for the man she loved so deeply.

“My God Chet, look how they love and admire him Chet! There are some people crying..”

But Chet never heard either for he was swept up in the moment. Chet was applauding as vigorously as anyone in the auditorium. He knew pretty much what was going to be said or thought he did. But Hawk had a way of doing the opposite of what people thought he was going to do. This worried Chet somewhat. It worried Kylee a lot!

Kylee looked around the room. The emotion had swept over this huge hall as well. Tears formed in her eyes and she looked down at her hands. She was applauding like all the rest. She cried, clapped and trembled, for she felt something in the wind and the fear returned, but somehow she just couldn't stop applauding or crying.

Hawk walked up on the podium and waved. After a few minutes the audience started to pay attention to his motions to quiet down. Slowly the applause quieted, people returned to their seats and the huge auditorium became quiet. One could hear a pin drop. Hawk adjusted the mike and began to speak. Kylee looked around. He had their complete attention. She was so proud of her husband, she thought she would burst!

“Ladies and Gentlemen. My friends and fellow citizens of the world...” Then with a grin added“ ...I hope that covers everyone. Now most of you know I'm not much of a public speaker, so please excuse me in advance if I make any faux pas.”

Everyone laughed!

“As you know the last raider army was defeated a several months ago.....”

More cheers and applause.

“That defeat ushered in a new era of civilization. A new beginning for the United States. For once again the original United States IS truly united!!”

More cheers and applause! This time however it was more thunderous. But as all applause does, it to, soon quieted.

“Much has taken place since that day several months ago. What were once the violent wastelands now have law and order. New roads are being build or repaired, new power grids are being put in place and broadcast towers are being built. There are over one hundred thousand men and women working in the old wastelands, working to rebuild cities and infrastructure. Cities are being resupplied and rebuilt as I speak. Once again people can live free from worry about raider armies, free from poverty, free from tyranny.... Free to be free!”

People leapt to their feet and the roar was deafening! This time it took over ten minutes to subside.

Hawk looked around at the audience, then up to where Kylee was sitting.

“Yes my friends much has changed for the best. And for me that was falling in love with my wonderful new wife.” Hawk paused and raised his arm and pointed toward his new bride.

Everyone looked at Kylee and stood and applauded.

“My God Chet they’re all looking at me! What do I do...Am I...”

“Just stand up for a few seconds and wavy at the people Kylee.”

Kylee stood, at Chet’s prodding, waved, then looked around the room and smiled, all the time turning a most lovely shade of red as she blushed.

She finished looking at everyone and leaned over to Chet.

Oh my god Chet, I’m blushing so bad! It’s a good thing my friends back home can’t see me now.. Ed would never let me live it down!”

Chet tried his best to behave, but the imp in him won out and he pointed in the direction of the other side of the room. Then another spot, then another. Kylee followed where he was pointing and saw TV cameras!

“Chet tell me this isn’t on TV....”

He kept grinning.

“ Just city wide, right?” She looked over at Chet and the way he was grinning.

“Awww Crap!” Kylee sat down so hard Chet felt his seat wiggle. He just grinned wider.

The audience quieted once more and Hawk continued.

“Many things have changed and the change was for the better. We are now once again united as we were in the past. I have fulfilled my vow to never rest until this day came.”

He paused and took a deep breath as if he couldn’t believe this day had come. Many things now raced through his head.

“The United States now will stand as tall and proud as it ever did. We have created a new country from the old....”

The applause started again.

“We have created a new world!”

The cheers and applause raised in tempo.

We have a Congress...” He yelled over the applause.

We have a Senate...”

The applause never ceased as Hawk shouted over the din.

We have a judicial system, civilian police and law in the land....”

More cheers and applause!

“We have everything the old United States had. Except a President!”

There were murmurs’ throughout the auditorium as the applause slowly stopped.

“We are once again united. **We must have a civilian in control of the government! We must have a President of the United States!!! Now is the time for us to elect a new President!**”

People leapt to their feet! There was such a roar of which Kylee had never dreamed possible. People screamed and jumped up and down. Some wept outright and never tried to cover it up, others hugged and danced. Kylee could only imagine the reaction of those back home in Pineview. Then she noticed that she too wept. Her loves dream was about to come true. The dream he so often talked about to her. Kylee looked over to Chet and tears flowed down his cheek.

This was a great day for all.

Hawk motioned for all to be seated and quiet and eventually the auditorium fell silent once again.

“My friends, I am here by mandating, that in eight months from now, on the second Tuesday in November..... Elections for the next President of the United States be held.....”

Once again the crowd roared!

“For the first time in over one hundred and fifty something years the military tribunal will be dissolved and we will once again have a civilian Commander in Chief instead of a military leader...”

This time the applause was polite but somewhat quieter.

One Senator stood and yelled, “**You’ve done alright by us Hawk!.**”

Another stood and yelled, “**Hawk for President!!!**”

The people in the auditorium went wild and before long a chant could be heard in the rear. It grew louder and louder until Kylee could understand what the people were screaming.

“HAWK FOR PRESIDENT!!!

“HAWK FOR PRESIDENT!!!

Kylee looked through the tears that once again formed in her eyes to her love who was motioning for all to be quiet, but was greeted with...

“HAWK FOR PRESIDENT!!!

“HAWK FOR PRESIDENT!!!

Finally after many minutes the throng began to quiet and eventually became silent enough for Hawk to once again speak.

Hawk stood there on the raised podium and looked out over the audience, then to Kylee, Chet and Missy. She looked at Hawk and although didn't know exactly why she did.... She clasped both her hands over her mouth as if awaiting something ominous.

Hawk did not disappoint!

“I thank you for your vote of confidence my friends and I guess you think I've been doing things right all these decades... But you are all wrong!”

People looked around at one another, puzzled. An uneasy hush fell over the hall.

“From today on until the new President can be sworn in the Tribunal can take care of business as usual. As for myself...”

Hawk placed both hands on the stand and sadly looked out over the people that so much admired him.

“... I swore about one hundred and fifty years ago, in memory of some aliens who sacrificed themselves to help this planet, our race, that I'd never rest until this country was once again united.

That their sacrifice would not have been in vain!

My friends that has been accomplished thanks to those that have fought and died these many decades.”

Kylee noticed Hawk becoming more solemn and she became more concerned.

“Things were not easy back then, I guess not much better in the last battle. Things had to be done...”

Murmurs began at Hawk’s stumbling over his words.

“Things I have not been proud of...”

Silence fell over the audience!

“It is because of these things, and those I have done in the past, I have given the direct order to the Provost Marshall to arrest me here tonight for all to see and to stand trial for crimes against humanity.”

The audience stood and screamed as if practiced over and over again, they screamed

“NO!..... NO, NO!”

No one applauded, yet no one fell silent as they all stood in defense of their leader, their legend.

Kylee whom had stood upon hearing her loves last words, was cried without caring who heard her, she turned and buried her face into Chet’s shoulder as Missy stroked her hair and held her as well.

Hawk yelled above the throng, **“For which the penalty is death!”**

Kylee turned and screamed **‘NO’** so loud all could hear above the din of the room. Before her scream could die, was in turn joined by the throng of people yelling at Hawk to stop his actions.

Hawk yelled over the din of the room...

“PROVOST!!! AS MY LAST ORDER AS YOUR COMMANDER IN CHIEF, I ORDER YOU TO ARREST ME AND CONFINE ME TO MY QUARTERS UNTIL SUCH TIME AS MY TRIAL CAN BE CONVENED!”

A half dozen men marched down the aisle toward the podium and stood on other side of Hawk.

The soldiers all had tears in their eyes. Hawk looked from man to man gave them a smile and a knowing nod as he placed himself in their midst.

“Ok men, you know your duty!”

All seven men turned and marched toward the door to the crying and jeers of the crowd. But not one person moved to stop these proceedings. Such was the respect Hawk had gleaned from people. Such was his presence, none would show their disrespect by disobeying.

As Hawk walked down the aisle surrounded by his guard the audience rose as he passed their rows. Each put their hand over their hearts in silent salute, Military Officers saluted. Tears flowed. There were sounds of people weeping, while now and then a muffled scream of “Please God, NO!” would pierce the air.

Chet caught Kylee as this amazingly strong woman fainted completely in his arms. Missy sat with her head on the small railing weeping openly.

The doors closed as the prisoner vanished into the hall outside. The auditorium fell silent save a few scattered quiet sobs and murmurs.

This day of celebration had turned dark for this night, a legend fell. A veil of despair hit the nation on the day of its rebirth and many wondered if it was worth the loss.

Chet picked Kylee’s quiet limp form up into his arms and carried her through the doors while people still wept. The crowds parted to allow them to pass, bowing their heads in respect as they passed. Even in their disbelief of the evenings events, many inquired as to the condition of Hawk’s wife.

Chet would nod and tell them she would be fine, that she had just fainted.

But in truth he knew if her loved had his way, she would never recover.

For her soul would die with him!

Chet carried Kylee out into the evening air as Missy led the way toward the limousine. Kylee’s eyes popped open as she struggled in Chet’s arms.

“Put me down Chet. I have to go to my husband!”

“Easy Ky, Hawk will be at the house, remember he put himself under house arrest?”

“Oh Chet! What will we do? We need to get a lawyer, we need ...” She could no longer think as she stumbled over words, thoughts.

“Don’t worry Kylee, I think I have someone in mind.” Chet grinned, “ Me, I was military Provost for years.”

He paused for a moment, “That is if Hawk will let me.”

“Let you? You make him!”

“I wish I could Ky, I wish I could. You see Hawk gets to choose his own attorney, I have no say in the matter.”

Kylee could think of nothing more to say, she was stunned, and like everyone else, this night had taken its toll. Her thoughts raced, her emotions would run rampant, she could no longer think. All Kylee wanted now was to be in the arms of her husband. For in his arms she would be safe..... At least for a while.

Chapter 20 .

Kylee slammed the door to their home as she followed Hawk in and up the stairs to their room. She was mad, beyond mad and she let him know it. He stopped in the middle of the room and turned to Kylee as she came storming through the bedroom door slamming it behind her.

Her tear soaked face twisted with fear. Fear not rage. For the first time in years he felt ashamed for his actions.

Kylee hastily moved toward him and started pummeling him on his chest. Crying and half screaming, "Why?..... Why?..."

She fell into his arms and he caressed her lovingly.

Her body wracked with spasms brought on by her sob's, her fear of losing her love.

"Kylee, my love, my wonderful..." But Hawk's attempt to calm his wife was interrupted as she gave his chest one last hit. Her arm slid down his chest and dangled in despair.

"Why baby, why?"

She moved her head back and looked into Hawk's eyes. They too were filled with tears, but he did not cry. She knew he would not, there was always that something about him where he'd start to show deep emotion, but always pulled back into this shell he kept around him. Except his love for her, that he never held back on. She knew so little about how he really felt inside. Kylee could remember the frustration in her sister's letters about how Keli could comfort Hawk, but never get him to talk about why he was withdrawn. Now Kylee knew the feeling of helplessness her sister had felt so many years ago.

Hawk scooped her small frame up and carried her over to their bed and gently sat her on the side, then he sat next to her. He looked straight ahead, staring at the wall. Perhaps through the wall, for Kylee had seen that look before. She had awoken in the night to see him staring out the window, or sitting looking at nothing, remembering. About what he would never say. There were times he shook as if cold and she would stand next to him and wrap her arms around him, but he never acknowledged her presence. It was as if he was no longer in their time at all, but in the past, remembering, reliving some horrific time long ago.

It was now this look that stopped her sobbing and in turn she felt cold as if his memories were radiating from her loves body. She leaned her head to his shoulder and softly kissed it.

“Kylee I told you months ago about the vow I made to never rest until a president was once more at the head of this country.....”

She sniffed back a sob and dried her eyes, “I remember.”

“What I never told you Kylee, no one, not even your sister knew. After several decades of killing mutes, bandits and raiders. After I had to make some... calls,... I didn’t want to make. I did things a man should never have to do....”

She felt him tremble and she wrapped her arms around him as he searched for words.

“...One night while we were on a campaign after days of fighting, I pulled out my pistol, racked a shell in the chamber and put it in my mouth. I knew it would destroy my brain in such a way even the Medcomp couldn’t put me back together.”

Kylee gasped and the tears began once again to flow as she held Hawk tightly, her head buried snugly in his back, her hand moved to her mouth to stifle any sobs.

“Baby... I had the trigger half squeezed, when I remembered the aliens and their sacrifice for this planet and for me!

Just to give us a chance to survive! Christ Kylee they didn’t even know if their dying would even save us. They sacrificed themselves just in the hope it would give us a chance.

Just a HOPE Kylee, not a guarantee and I was that hope for a race that didn’t know we existed an hour before. I was chosen by fate to give us back the information they had stored, to try to fill in the gaps where man forgot. Little could they have known their super technology would have been damaged.” He paused, “Or that I wasn’t good enough to save all those that were killed....”

“My God baby!” Kylee screamed in shock, “You blame yourself for all those that have died! All those that perished since....”

She felt Hawk choke back a sob and she started crying softly.

“No Ky, just those that have died because I made the wrong decision or because I didn’t get there in time. I blame myself for being so weak I had to shoot men for running because they didn’t have confidence in my leadership.

All those years, I tried to be what people expected of me. Perhaps I took on too much, but all that ran through my mind. I kept remembering the aliens and their sacrifice, I took the gun from my mouth and looked at my hands....” He turned and looked at Kylee.

“...Honey my hands, they weren’t shaking, I was calm, I was ready to die! My God how I wanted to die.”

Kylee twisted Hawk around and buried her head into Hawk’s chest crying aloud. Hawk laid his chin upon her hair and encompassed her in his arms.

“Ky, I made another vow that night. It was the only thing that allowed me to keep going all these years. To keep on living. The vow allowed me to keep my sanity. This vow allowed me to continue making those decisions. Long enough to see this day, to meet and fall in love with you.”

“And Keli... don’t forget Keli.” She had raised her head and managed a weak smile.

“Baby, yes, I won’t forget Keli, even though my only thoughts are of you now.

Kylee it was that vow made more than a century ago that kept me going. I knew that someday I would have to pay for the things I did in the name of survival.

Kylee, I never should have fallen in love with you knowing all the sorrow that would lay before you. Before I knew it I was in love with you I should have left once I got you back to Pineview. I’m so sorr...”

Hawk never got to finish his sentence because Kylee would not hear any more of where he was going. She kissed him, then kissed him again. She was not sorry she loved this man, nor would she regret any time they had together. Even if it was shorter than she had hoped for.

The following days Hawk refused to allow anyone other than those in the house to see him. He refused those that volunteered to defend him. Even refusing to see friends that came to show their support or acknowledge the vast crowds that formed outside their home to show their overwhelming support. He ignored all but one and every night Hawk would fall asleep within his loved arms...

The only place in the world he could forget....

This was a time of sorrow for Kylee. Knowing any day there would be that knock on the door, the soldiers coming to take her love away.

Although Hawk wouldn’t let Chet in, Kylee snuck several of Hawk’s logs, reports and other information that might provide some sort of defense.

Kylee didn’t know who was going to be the prosecutor, but decided that Chet would defend Hawk one way or another.

Then there were the hours of quiet, of being alone with her thoughts. Kylee cried everywhere Hawk couldn’t see her. Hawk would spend the hours thinking of ways to make sure he was found guilty.

Chet read Hawks journals. From the journals he found notes where other documents, reports and information were being stored. He would sit and shake his head in disbelief how Hawk could do everything he did and still managed to fill out so much information in his reports. He was a good soldier no doubt, but reading this material made even Chet grin. Hawk really had no idea how much he was doing. His reports were filled with praise for his men instead of taking credit for his own actions.

Now and then Kylee would glance out the window and see Chet standing there, she'd dash out and get the items she had given Chet and pass along more. Whatever she could find she gave to Chet. Then she would go back in the house and smile knowing she was helping in some small way.

The weeks dragged by. Then the day came and so did the dreaded knock. Hawk opened the door and was handed a message.

"What's that baby?"

"Trial starts tomorrow Ky." He turned away from the open door and headed back toward the stairs past Kylee, "Now we can get this thing over once and for all!"

Hawk had walked from the entry up the stairs and out of sight. Kylee didn't move, she couldn't move! Slowly with her back to the wall, she slid to the floor and cupped her hands over her face and cried as if she was a little girl once again. And for the next hour, that is where she sat.

Suddenly she perked up! A smile crossed her lips. She would fight for her Hawk! She hadn't backed down from any fight in years and she was not going to start now! Whether or not he liked it. He had fought for her and her town, for her, now it was her time to fight for him!

The night Hawk had himself placed under house arrest, Kylee ran quietly into one of the spare rooms she had seen Hawk take several really old boxes. He never spoke of what was in them other than to say old records and data. What Kylee found were several journals. Correspondents from her husband to the tribunal. Personal letters from Hawk's old friends.

She grinned as she read through the reams of paper, journals, and letters. Without knowing it, Hawk may have provided her with the help she so desperately needed. Over the time it had taken to set up a trial, Kylee had been slipping small amounts of Hawk's documents out to Chet every night, then retrieving them the next night and passing Chet more.

Later that evening Kylee slipped out to meet Chet and retrieve the last of the things she had found for Chet. She walked quietly through the rear door and saw Chet standing next to a high hedge. As she approached he handed the last of the papers to Kylee.

"Kylee, I've read everything you gave me and had my staff go all over this country digging up documents about your husband. Thanks to these papers you've found, we've been able to locate tons of documents from your husband's past. We found many back in his old HQ in Michigan, here in D.C. and even some in California. "

"And? Chet! Please don't keep me in suspense."

“Kylee I cannot defend your husband, it’s impossible!” Chet shrugged as if he was at a loss of ideas, “As Hawk’s defense attorney, there’d be no way. Hawk wants to prosecute himself, but can only file charges on himself, he can’t be the prosecution. So I can’t sit at his table and defend him as he levels charges against himself. Not to mention he can fire me anytime he wants! If I do too well in defending him, he just fires me.”

“Oh Chet what will we do? If my Hawk won’t let anyone defend him, how do we...” She stopped in mid sentence, in the light from the back porch, Kylee saw Chet grin.

“We can’t defend him Ky, but I can prosecute him!” Kylee felt shock hit her as the words rebounded in her ears. This must have been apparent to Chet as he added, “You’ll just have to trust me Ky.”

Chet reached out and gently held Kylee’s arms in his, smiled, “....Trust me! If Hawk can be the accused and try to prosecute himself, why can’t the prosecution, defend him?” Chet laughed, then slapped his hand over his mouth as Kylee gave him a quiet ‘Shhhhhh!’

“I don’t get it Chet? This isn’t a laughing matter.”

“Ky, you know I wouldn’t do anything to hurt your husband... Right?”

“I know that Chet, I didn’t mean to...”

This time it was Chet that shushed her with a finger to her lips.

“Trust me Kylee. You hubby taught me well.”

Chet turned and vanished into the late evening darkness and all she heard was....

“Trust me!”

Chapter 21.

The court room was packed on the first day of the trial. It overflowed out into the halls and outside of the building. Kylee had never seen such a gathering.

When the motorcade, Kylee escorted by Chet, arrived at the courthouse area the throngs of spectators cheered and screamed their support to her.

Police and military held the massive crowds back to clear the streets. Loud speakers that had hurriedly been placed for the tens of thousands of people that had come in support, blared **“Please stay back and allow the motorcade through!”** Yet over the sirens and loud speakers people could be heard screaming their support.

Kylee just smiled as Chet commented there had to thousands, perhaps tens of thousands that were present to show their support for Hawk. The majority of them had arrived the day before or had arrived during the night. They like, his wife and friends, cared not what he had done in order to reunite this country.

Everyone present that had come to this courthouse wanted Hawk to be free. Sadly those that knew of the man or had read about him, knew he demanded that he pay his dues. Victory always comes at a price and Hawk was now ready to pay it.

The rest of the country did not blame Hawk, nor want him to pay for anything and now they were shouting their affirmations in the streets. Proclaiming it for all to hear.

For almost two centuries, life had been a nightmare. Few souls managed to pull this country together and of the few, all knew had Hawk led the way. Even his legend had its darker sides, but people accepted it even though the man could not.

The limo stopped and Chet got out, turned and held his hand out to Kylee.

Kylee stepped from the car that she was in and the crowd started to cheer and applaud. They went wild screaming their support for the woman that was standing at her mans side.

During the few weeks it had taken for the trial to be arranged, it was she not Hawk that was seen out in public. It was she that was constantly on the TV praising Hawk, telling the country about her love and his valiant devotion to make this country whole once again. Explaining to those unaware of the decisions he had to make. Attempting to show people examples of all the good that he had done. Reading letters of praise from military leaders as well as people that never had met Hawk, but had know someone that had been saved by him in the past. The citizenry began to love her as much as they did her Hawk. Not so much that she was Hawks wife, but that she defended him so passionately.

Now as she walked up the courthouse stairs, so proudly, so defiantly, the thousands that awaited outside cheered their support for this woman they had come to love and admire. This was the day she and the country would find out together how much of the dark parts of her husband’s legend was true and Kylee feared not for what she might learn, but if her beloved

Hawk who could ever allow himself to forget, would somehow manage to convince a jury to convict him. As she took each step, she'd nod to one side or the other to the bystanders on either side of the long stairs up to the door.

She would say "Thank you" and smile. Tears filled her eyes, but she remained strong. At the top of the stairs she turned to the cheering throng, straightened to her full height, raised her hand and defiantly made the 'V' sign of victory.

The onlookers went wild! The throng screamed their love for this marvelous woman. She gave them that beautiful grin that had always warmed Hawk to the core. She once again turned, vanished through the door and it closed solidly behind her.

Chet who had been walking beside her, stopped and gently grasped her elbow.

"Damn Kylee, how the hell do you do that? Christ it was all I could do to keep from crying like a little boy!"

Kylee smiled at Chet and patted his hand and with tears now starting to form replied, "Chet...I ... WE had to be strong, for Hawk!"

Chet nodded while quashing a lump in his throat. Hawk had been his mentor as well, like generations of leaders before him and he owed everything to him. Hawk had taken the very best of military and civilians and put them into places of power. And not one had ever disappointed him.

Hawk on the other hand never expected anything in return for their advancements, except for them to serve with honor and for that Chet admired him even more.

The two wiped their eyes and smiled at each other.

"Now Kylee my dear, let's go and see if for once we can get Hawk out of this mess!"

"How Chet? He doesn't want..."

Chet just smiled warmly "Honey, Hawk isn't the only one that has a Plan B."

Kylee was puzzled, but Chet never gave her time for an answer as he gently grasped her arm and headed toward the courtroom door.

They both stopped, straightened their clothes and the two guards opened the door to the packed courtroom. As they stepped in, all heads turned. The crowd rose to their feet and applauded Kylee as Chet escorted her to her seat in the front row directly behind where Hawk would be sitting. She would be within arm's reach of her love and that put her at ease.

The two had barely been seated when a door at the other side of the room opened and Hawk was escorted in by a guard on each side of him. Everyone noticed that he wore no

handcuffs or shackles which was against protocol, but no one would ever consider putting this man in chains.

The crowd erupted in cheers as he slowly walked over to his table and moved to his chair. As he reached his chair Kylee leaned over the short rail and hugged Hawk from behind, then gave him a kiss.

One of the guards gently reached over and grasped onto Kylee's arm and said.

"Ma'am, you cannot have contact with the prisoner."

The other guard gently placed his hand on the first guard's arm and replied.

"Are you seriously going to break that up?"

The guard looked at the two holding each other and slowly removed his hand from Kylee's arm. He smiled and the two just stood there as if nothing out of the usual was happening.

Within a few minutes the civilian judge entered the court room and the crowd stood. The judge walked over to his bench, looked at the packed court room, shook his head and sat. He once again glanced over the room, then at Hawk sitting alone at his table. He spoke and slammed his gavel on his bench.

"This court is now in session!
General Hawk, I do not know why I'm even here sir. The civil courts have no jurisdiction over military personnel. You know that as well as I do that this would fall under the responsibilities of a military tribunal..."

Hawk rose and interrupted the judge in the same commanding voice everyone was so used to.

"Your honor. I am indeed a civilian, I resigned my commission this morning in General Chet Adams' presence and turned all commanding powers over to him and the command tribunal. Thus under the amendment of the constitution I created seventy some years ago, I now fall under the civilian court system for prosecution as I am now a civilian. I can be tried for past military crimes. For crimes against humanity!"

There were gasps from the courtroom, cries of disbelief. The country for the first time in about one hundred and fifty years was no longer under Hawk's fair but firm leadership.

Even the judge rose to his feet and uttered, "General... errr... Mister Hawk, you've put all the power into another man's hands? Why there's no telling..."

“Your honor, General Adams... Chet, Is a good man and I trust him implicitly to carry out the elections this fall.”

Hawk turned to Chet. “Chet? You wouldn’t overthrow the government would you?”

Chet looked at Hawk, gave a huge grin and replied, “Not today boss, I have a dentist appointment this afternoon!”

The courtroom erupted into laughter as well as the judge, as Chet said it the way he did, it was what they needed to hear. The new man in charge was Hawk’s friend and would not betray his trust and Hawk obviously trusted this man.

The laughter stopped as the judge slammed his gavel on his desk and brought the courtroom back to order.

Outside laughter could still be heard. It was then Kylee realized not only was the trial being broadcast, but was being heard over loudspeakers placed outside for the thousands gathered in support for Hawk.

The judge looked toward Hawk.

“General...I’m sorry, mister? It doesn’t sound right....”

“Your honor, please, I’ve been called Hawk most of my life. I’d be grateful if the court would address me the same. You see as my last name is Hawk, most just called me Hawk. After the apocalypse everyone knew me by Hawk and to be honest your honor after all these years, it’s strange to hear anything but Hawk.”

There were scattered chuckles throughout the courtroom.

“Very well miste.... Er, Hawk....”

The judge looked a bit uneasy and addressed all.

“It has been brought before this court that the defendant is being charged with Crimes Against Humanity! And miste....errr, Hawk you are going to prosecute yourself? This is highly irregular. I normally wouldn’t allow one to prosecute one’s self, but as you have all the evidence and are a somewhat unusual person in a somewhat unusual circumstance. I have to allow you to proceed in the name of justice.” The judge frowned, “You are positive you want this to continue, mister..., sorry, Hawk?”

“I do wish to continue and it’s correct your honor. I had to prosecute myself..... I couldn’t find anyone willing to do it for me.”

The room erupted with many snickers and mild applause. Although Hawk didn't get the humor in his statement, everyone else did.

Chet stood, "I seriously can't blame them your honor. Hawk's far too well liked and admired, but if anyone disliked him enough or was ordered to prosecute him. Their career, their lives would be ruined, that's why Hawk's going to handle his own prosecution."

Hawk spun to his right to see Chet standing there grinning at him and knew Chet well enough to know. Chet had something up his sleeve.

"Not only that your honor, as Hawk refused any defense, I hereby request that I be allowed to defend this man. As stated in the case of Williams versus Lacombe your honor, you'll note it was determined that a person may not act as a prosecutor and defense at the same time."

"You are entirely correct General Adams." The judge looked at Hawk, "You may prosecute yourself Hawk, but there must be some sort of defense! As you are the Prosecutor, then it's the court's decision to allow General Adams to act as defense."

Hawk spoke from his seat, calmly and self assured, "I refuse any defense your honor, and that is my right!" Hawk grinned ear to ear.

Chet walked over to the table across the aisle, plopped his briefcase down and continued, "Well then your honor, if I cannot defend Hawk, then I request that the court allow me to be the second prosecution. Being Hawk is the first chair and I the second he cannot refuse as I intend to prosecute in such a way that the truth will be known."

Hawk arose and started to speak, but the Judge waved him down, "And as you are the Prosecutor, you have no say in who the second chair is going to be. The second chair may handle his prosecution as he sees fit."

Chet looked over at Hawk who was about to protest once again. Chet looked directly at his once commander and firmly added, "Boss.... As you're no longer in charge, just sit your ass down and shut up! I'm going to be your damned defense one way or the other! Like it or not!!"

The courtroom burst into applause and smiles as Hawk plopped down into his seat with a somewhat shocked state. However he did manage to reply to Chet in more of a thought, than comment....

"Damn! I've created a monster!"

Once again the room burst into laughter, Chet looked over to Kylee and mouthed the words.... "Plan B."

Kylee grinned from ear to ear and mouthed the words back to Chet...

“Thank you.”

The judge looked to Hawk and said. “Hawk as you have brought these charges against yourself, you may begin.”

Then motioned to Chet to take his place at the defense’s seat.

Hawk stood and Kylee felt the fear of losing her love once again. She knew this man and he never lost! Not to mention how convincing he could be. She shivered again as Hawk began to speak.

It was not the thought of what he might say that scared her, it was the tone on his voice. The tone she had heard before, in Fieldview, in Pineview the day Diablo was defeated. It was that cold emotionless voice. She shuddered again as Hawk spoke.

“Your honor, the first charge is the murder of my best friend! I freely admit to shooting down my best friend in cold blood. I did it in front of witnesses, I do not deny this charge! I..”

“Your honor!” Chet interrupted Hawk and walked to the center of the court in front of the judge. He looked over to Hawk, who was still standing.

“Your honor... Since Hawk announced his insistence on facing these perceived crimes in his past, I and my staff have spent that time digging through old military records and documents. My staff dug this one up back in Michigan that was filed over one hundred and fifty years ago....”

“Your honor! I must protest on the..” Hawk who had decided to sit, now started to arise...

“SIT DOWN Mister Hawk! The defense may have his say.”

Hawk sat, then started to rise once again but Kylee leaned forward and whispered into his ear in that musical tone that Hawk knew so well.

“You were the one that insisted in going to court. You were the one that decided to bring everything out in the open.” She leaned even closer. He could feel her warm breath in his ear.

“Now darling, sit your ass down and shut up!”

Hawk had a shocked look on his face because this was the first time Kylee had ever spoken this crossly at him. A strange smile crossed his lips as he turned quickly and gave Kylee a quick kiss on the cheek.

Chet, who had seen it all, grinned, turned back towards the judge and continued.

“Back in the first year after the apocalypse Hawk had already been more or less tossed into being in command of the military. Or at least what was left of it in his area, your Honor. It seems one of the patrols consisting of two armed Hummers and four men each heard a weak

radio call for help from a news team that was trapped at some farm ten mile from the expressway the patrol was on. They in turn relayed the message and headed on to the farm.

Well it was Hawk's patrol that got the call to assist and they passed it on to headquarters while they went to back up the first.

When they arrived at the top of a rise they saw the first patrol backed up against the farm house trying to get the news crew off the roof into the gun openings in the top of the Hummers...

The men were out of their vehicles firing on the hoard of mutes, so Hawk's patrol laid down cover fire from the top of the rise. Once the news crew was in the Hummers the rest of the troops got in and proceeded toward the rise...."

Chet looked over to Hawk and noticed most of the room was looking at him as well. Hawk sat staring at the wall as if reliving the moment all over again and there was Kylee leaning forward with her arms around Hawk, her head on his back comforting him. For it was she alone that knew of the nights he spent hounded by night terrors, sweating, groaning, screaming, while dreaming of past events.

"...The first HumVee made it to the rise after plowing through hundreds of mutes. The second, the one his best friend was in, did not! It seems the driver blinded by the mass of mute bodies climbing on the vehicle, apparently ran off the road enough to hit something that held the vehicle in place. Of course the vehicle was swarmed, the troops got out and fired at the mutes trying to protect the last civilian inside, Hawk's friend was firing the machine gun from the top...

There were just too many and the troops fell one by one due to the mass of the hoard. The mass surrounded the Hummer and climbed on it as Hawk watched his friend point his pistol down at the screaming civilian! The report said she was yelling for Hawks friend, Bill to shoot her... Not to let the mutes get her! Then Bill shot her, expending his last round."

There was stunned quiet from the courtroom. Chet knew what he was about to say was going to cut Hawk to the bone, but he had no choice. He would defend Hawk, even if it meant hurting him...

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The report filed by the men and civilians there that day said the following and I quote!

"Commander Hawk knew there was no way we could get through hundreds of mutants, we all fired until we were out of ammunition. Then we saw Major Bill Mayor shoot the news woman at her pleadings.

The Major then turned towards us dropped his empty gun to the ground and held his arms out stretched from his sides. Through our field glasses we could see him smile in our

direction, then he closed his eyes.

Hawk put one round through his head and terminated Major Mayor. There was no doubt in any ones' mind what the Major wanted Hawk to do!

Our commander Hawk has not spoken of this to anyone since and we fear he wrongfully blames himself for Major Mayors death.

Signed Lt. Coronel Howard Banks."

Your honor, Hawk did what any good officer.... or friend would have done. He shot his friend rather than to allow him to be torn apart while still alive. He was not responsible."

"I SHOT HIM DOWN IN COLD BLOOD!" Hawk stood and yelled at Chet, startling everyone in the courtroom.

Chet turned back toward Hawk and yelled back.

"YOU SHOT HIM DOWN OUT OF COMPASSION!" Chet's voice became quite, "Don't you think you've suffered enough with this memory boss? You did for your friend what I pray you'd do for me in the same situation."

Hawk slumped back into the chair, eyes looking down to the table as Chet turned back to the judge.

"You honor I humbly request that this charge that was brought against this defendant be dropped! This report was signed by every man, woman and soldier that was there that sad day. It is only Hawk that blames himself for the tragic loss of his friend Major Bill Mayor."

Chet slowly walked back to his seat and sat.

The judge looked around to Hawk, then loudly said for all to hear.

"THIS MOTION FOR THE CHARGE TO BE DROPPED IS GRANTED!"

The room burst into cheers and even through that roar another could be heard from outside as the word was heard out there.

Kylee hugged Hawk, but knew he was not done. His life had been long. Longer than any man should have to endure with all the pain he had felt, all the guilt.

She knew he had more to say and that he was not done, nor did she want him to be. Perhaps this was the time for her love to cleanse himself of the guilt he had carried all these years. Kylee had noticed something changing in Hawk, what she wasn't quite sure. Perhaps this was what he needed to purge his soul. his past. Yet she worried still. This was her Hawk and she knew he didn't like losing.

Chapter 22.

Once again Hawk stood. Glancing at the packed courtroom, then Kylee. He turned and addressed the Judge.

“Your honor the next charge is one that ordered my men to massacre any and all survivors of the raider army of El Diablo. I take full responsibility of that command and that I also, over the years, have purposely murdered the survivors of raiding parties, including the one that was responsible for the death of my second wife Keli. I butchered any one left breathing at that time. Both acts should be considered crimes against humanity...”

Chet stood, but the judge waved for him to sit.

“Mister Hawk, sorry, Hawk.

As for the second charge, it is only your word as to any crimes, I have to throw out that charge as I would not, nor could not convict any person on just their admission to a crime without any evidence. As you can offer no physical evidence or witnesses, that charge is dismissed.”

The Judge paused, then continued.

“Now as far as the first charge of ordering the demise of the survivors of Diablo’s army. The court knows of the standing order of executing EVERY raider due to the fact that after a century of raider survivors starting up new raiding parties the Tribunal, which I believe was led by you, made the decision to execute all raider captives.

That decision, although not popular with all the population, was in fact created and I have to sadly admit, was totally effective.

I think most of us can only try to imagine what someone with your ethics has had to endure making decisions like that for as long as you have sir, but this court has read the records and as much as a man of law, I see the eradication of raiders has stopped the spread in the areas where they once ruled supreme. While a debatable subject, it was also a military decision and stands today as military law!

The military should not set policy for civilians, nor civilians set military policy until the new civilian government is installed and the tribunal is decommissioned. And as last week the civilian congress passed a law granting full immunity to all Tribunal members past and present, this now forgives all your military actions.

Due to this fact, this court cannot, nor will not, attempt to preside over military decisions.”

The judge looked toward Chet, then Hawk and grinned.

“I guess you could try yourself in front of the military tribunal if you’d like Hawk, but somehow I tend to think, they wouldn’t touch it either.

BOTH CHARGES ARE DISMISSED!”

Once again cheers rose from those within and without.

Kylee could begin to sense signs of defeat in Hawk, which to him might be unsettling as she knew her love had never know full defeat. At least in her lifetime. She could see he was indeed perturbed that he was gaining no ground on Chet. No matter what he had tried to put forth as a charge, Chet or the Judge was dismissing the charges. Kylee hoped that by seeing the courtroom full of people cheering each dismissed charge, perhaps it would quiet his nightmares, perhaps not. All she wanted was to keep him free a while longer if Chet could keep doing what he was. She could only hope Hawk would continue to lose the charges of what was in his past, so he could win his future. So she too could have a future!

Once again Hawk stood and spoke. This time however his voice was unsure. Kylee wondered if maybe he was unsure of his ability to condemn himself. She quickly figured out it was not his lack of confidence, but sorrow. She listened carefully to his voice and even seeing him from behind recognized the tone...

He had once told her once, upon her insistence, of what happened that day he avenged Keli's attack. The tone then of the time he slew Keli's captors and now were the same. He also spoke of the time of Cordon's demise, the way he told her sent chills down her spine. He always spoke not in tones of hate, sorrow or anger, but in a monotone cold emotionless voice.

It was this voice he was now speaking!

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this next charge cannot be so easily dismissed as the court seems to be trying to do.”

Hawk scanned the twelve men and women to make sure they were listening to him and not thinking about how easily Chet and the judge had dismissed his other charges.

“I freely admit to ordering the deaths of at least sixteen or more innocent civilians!”

The entire courtroom gasped as if on cue.

Kylee stood and screamed, “Tell the truth... Tell all of it.... You're no murderer! I know there is more... Tell it!”

“Mrs. Hawk SIT DOWN!”

The judge slammed the gavel upon his bench. Kylee sat down sobbing and several of those nearby her tried to comfort the crying woman. Missy hugged Kylee tightly as both quietly sobbed.

“It’s true your honor, there is more. I ordered an air strike on their small settlement....”Hawk looked at the floor, shoulders drooping, his voice lower than before. Everyone there sensed his shame of it.

“...There is no more. I ordered the strike. Those people died. Men, women... and... and children. Some merely babies... All died!

There was no accident, no miscall, it was intentional, on purpose and wholly my decision. There is even a record there showing the leader of the three aircraft followed my orders, did so under protest!” Hawk walked over to the Judges bench and held up a folder full of papers for all to see, then handed them to the judge, “You have all the evidence you need, to convict me in your hand your honor!”

Hawk walked back to his chair and sat down as if some heavy weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Kylee leaned forward and held him closely, still weeping she laid her head upon his back. She knew this man and she knew there was more. Apparently those in the court did as well, because as Chet stood to answer the charges, many were whispering encouragement to him.

Chet paced the floor, then began to speak, “My friends. As usual the prosecution seems to be leaving out details...”

“I left nothing out...I killed those...” Hawk leapt to his feet!

“BANG!” The judge slammed the gavel down so hard the courtroom echoed. “With all due respect Hawk, **SIT YOUR ASS DOWN AND DON’T INTERRUPT AGAIN!!!**”

The courtroom burst into nervous laughter at the judge’s comments as his face reddened and he apologized.

“I must apologize for my outburst” He looked over to the stunned Hawk who had obediently sat in his chair. “Your determination at time frustrates this court!”

“Try being married to him your honor!” Piqued Kylee as the courtroom burst once more into laughter.

Hawk stood as if to comment, but the events had stunned him and he plopped back into his chair causing it to skid backward into the short guard rail separating the spectators from the defendant.

Chet grinned at Hawk and Kylee, then proceeded,

“I could read the entire reports that my team dug up back in Michigan where Hawk had his main command for so many years, but I’ll just add in the important relative parts. Those pertinent to the charges, if that is ok with the court.”

“That’s fine with the court General as long as nothing incriminating is left out. Hawk will be allowed to cross examine.... ahhh, himself. Well you know what I mean General!”

“Yes your honor. Everything is in these two reports.”

Chet looked over to Hawk.

“Everything!”

Up to this point Kylee wasn’t worried as Chet seemed to be holding his own against his mentor. But this time Hawk didn’t seem worried at Chet’s reply as if the ‘everything’ Chet said would just further back up his charge.

Kylee looked to Chet, he looked so confident, yet did he really have enough to. She heard Chet speak and her troubled thoughts were shattered.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this first statement is from a woman by the name of Virginia Falkes.

To sum it up, about fifty years after the apocalypse, she and about two hundred survivors heard that east of the Mississippi was being taken back from the mutants and raiders. So the entire town packed up and made a daring move to resettle in the east. Just as thousands had over the previous decades had tried...or died trying!

The main problem was even though the east was fairly well patrolled, the areas they had to go through were extremely dangerous. But they had voted to head east and they did just that. Sure and just as others had done before them, they too ignored the rumors of the horrors the wastelands held for unwary travelers.”

Chet paused to allow the potential of danger to sink in for the jury.

“Sometime just before they arrived on the shores of the Mississippi, the group split up with the majority going to the north with hope of finding a narrower way across, while the group Mrs. Falkes was with decided to stay, build rafts and cross where they were at.

A little less than sixty of them crossed on rafts they built carrying about twenty people per raft along with their carts and animals. The few vehicles that they had come across in the wastelands, had to be left behind because of weight. Three rafts in all your honor.

Virginia’s group made it across first. The others were carried further downstream by a few miles. The entire group Virginia was with, went to find them figuring it was wiser to stick together for safety even though they had made it across the old Miss and figured it would be safe at this point.

A day later they found them.... or what was left of the second of the three rafts of people. They had been butchered and she said appeared to have been ‘partially eaten’. They never found the third raft your honor.

It was then her group decided to head east rather than run into whatever did those atrocities. I'm guessing they thought that third group would head north to find what Virginia's party had and head east as well. Just to make sure they wouldn't waste time hunting for Virginia's group, their leader left a note.

Chet sadly looked out to the courtroom, then the jurors.

"That was their undoing. The following night Virginia and another woman went out into the heavy brush to take care of their bathroom needs when shots and screams could be heard. They carefully crawled through the dense brush like their husbands taught them to do in case of emergencies.

What they witnessed was so horrid Mrs. Falkes could not bear to remember enough of what she saw to put into her report. All she would say is she saw her husband decapitated and her friend had held her down and clamped her mouth shut with her hand.

It was about fifteen minutes of them watching the others being tortured that her friend saw her three year old son. One of the raiders had him under one arm, walked up to the huge fire and tossed the screaming child into it and laughed. The child tried to scramble out of the fire, but the raider knocked him back with his fist. It was too much to take for her friend and she ran to the camp, then to the campfire. Several raiders grabbed her and started ripping her clothes off, but she managed to get away. Her son stopped screaming by then, so her friend who had run to the huge fire, stopped running turned and looked at the raiders, then quickly turned and jumped into the fire before the raiders could grab her."

There were tears flowing in the courtroom. Chet found even after reading this report a few times, he still found his voice trembled at the thought of Virginia's horror...

"The report continued by saying Mrs. Falkes walked for days before Hawk found her, still partially in shock.

He had been out searching for these monsters that had once again come back to the eastern side of the river to satisfy their horrid lust for killing. These so called people were not mutes, but raiders ladies and gentlemen of the jury, raiders! I feel I should emphasize that over and over...these were not mutants, but human beings! If one could call them that!

Hawk, fed her, dressed her cuts and scratches, gave her some clean clothes they stumbled across at an old abandoned farm house. They headed south toward a settlement he knew of to warn the people there to be ready to fight or leave!

Virginia, as I mentioned, all this time had been mostly in shock."

Once again Chet looked uneasy as he scanned the room. His report was sinking in.

"The two of them drove to a bluff that overlooked the small settlement from about three miles away. They saw smoke through his binoculars... It was the raiders!

They, the raiders, had the settlers rounded up in a small circle in the middle of the settlement. They were running up to the settlers grabbing one or two at a time and either killing them or raping them. Men, women, children, it made no difference. Some were just horribly killed by various means! Even eating some of their victims!

Virginia's statement is so gruesome I am just summing it up to spare this court the horror of hearing it word for word. These raiders were no better than animals ladies and gentlemen... Animals and that might be phrasing it kindly."

Chet stopped and looked at the jury,

"I won't go any further on how they were killing them, but let me just say, it was so horrendous, that when I read the report word for word. I was horrified!

Virginia reported she begged Hawk to let her look so she could identify the raiders and she did ID several of the vehicles.

Hawk then called someone on his radio..."

Chet paused and looked at the judge.

"...Your honor I'll now switch over and sum up the military reports.

Hawk called three fighters under the command of a Major J. Willis. These three fighters were a few of the last aircraft in this part of the country. It had been many years after the apocalypse and although many of the aircraft still existed, the ability to make new parts had been lost and slowly just like most other technology, it was falling into disrepair. Due to the poor condition of the aircraft, they could only stay in the area for a short time.

This is critical information as this had a lot of bearing on Hawk's final decision. Hawk called in the airstrike giving the order to drop bombs called 'Brimstone' on the entire settlement which would destroy everything within three quarters of a mile from the center of the small village.

Major Willis flew a spotting run and notified Hawk there were civilians in the village. General Hawk told him to bomb everything and that he'd take full responsibility for all actions. The Major followed orders, but under protest which Hawk acknowledged and the bomb run was made. The village and everyone in it was destroyed!"

Chet looked over to Hawk who looked very satisfied that Chet had just verified his charges. Chet walked almost to Hawk's table and continued.

"There were no survivors! But ladies and gentlemen, we all know why he ordered the strike.

By the time Hawk could get there, they'd all have been dead. Murdered by the raiders, horribly like their friends and other family members had been moments before. The village was

on the other side of a small river and it would have taken hours to get to a crossing, then head back to the village.”

Chet looked back at Hawk.

“So General Hawk, You knew those folks were going to die a horrible death! You knew there was no help available. So I submit that you ordered the village to be bombed out of pity for those remaining settlers and they would die knowing those murderous raiders were going to die as well and that their death and their loved ones death would be quick and merciful.”

Hawk slowly rose from his seat and looked Chet directly into his eyes.

“Yeah I knew they were dead! I knew there was no hope for them. But I also knew I couldn’t let those raiders slip away from us again! They’d only could pop up somewhere else and kill again. Yeah, I ordered everyone to die and they all did! They were either blown to bits or burned instantly!” Hawk replied as he remained standing.”

His voice changed to almost a snarl, “Yeah I ordered everyone to die and the fact remains that the civilians died as well that day!”

Chet turned to the court and continued, “Mrs. Falkes saw them die and she went into shock and had to be hospitalized for several years. She had seen too much horror in such a short time. But Hawk did what had to be done that sad day.”

Hawk snapped back, “Major Willis a few weeks later took his service revolver and put it in his mouth and blew his brains out. All because I gave an order he had to live with.”

“Hawk... My friend... You cannot be blamed for what you thought was best, you saved those innocent folks a horrible death...”

“I murdered them!!!”

“You saved them from...”

“Three minutes after the bombs dropped, a two hundred man military convoy came around the bend! Some of those civilians might have survived!!!”

The courtroom gasped and Kylee started to cry openly. Hawk’s words had hit everyone so hard it was as if the pain he had harbored all these years had been released and had blasted everyone in that room.

“Hawk, you didn’t know.”

“Chet, if Major Willis had turned east instead of west on his dry run, he would have seen the convoy.”

“But he didn’t Hawk. It said so in the report, neither of you could have known.”

“The fact remains I called in the air strike and even if Willis had seen the convoy I sincerely tell you, I would have still called in the strike rather than have many of the raiders escape.”

Again there were gasps, which Chet quickly put to rest by adding...

“As I might have your honor...” Chet turned toward the jury and continued, “Making a command decision to sacrifice a few for the good of the many is a hard call and has been since man first battled with the concept.

Then again ladies and gentlemen, Hawk did not know!!! He merely said he might have made the call if he knew. That in itself is not something you can convict a man on. I submit to the jury what a man might do is not grounds to convict!”

The judge interrupted...

“Even though this was a command decision, in this case I’ll allow the jury to take this charge under consideration. Hawk is now a civilian and it was he that confessed and this time there are written records the jury can examine. In a sense those written documents may be considered testimony from civilians, about the demise of other civilians.”

The Judge glanced over to Hawk, “ If that is acceptable to the Prosecution.”

Hawk smiled and nodded his affirmation.

Kylee who was sobbing through the whole proceedings of this charge reached over and hugged Hawk once again. This time she was worried.

This time the charge stuck!

And to make matters worse the judge called for the trial to be halted and to adjourn the next day! At Hawk’s request, Hawk would be held in custody. Even the judge was willing to let him go home for the night. But Hawk felt it wasn’t right.

“Your honor any other man would be held in jail overnight and I am but a man on trial. I expect no different treatment than any other person being on trial for murder!”

The judge looked at Kylee and sighed,

“So be it.... I’m sorry Mrs. Hawk, I tried.”

Kylee smiled at the judge and kissed Hawk goodnight as she had done every night since they had pledged their love to each other. She never let him see her tears as she turned and proudly walked through the door.

The two guards walked up to Hawk and held out the cuffs, then looked at Hawk's outstretched hands, paused, then stated defiantly,

"General, there is no way in hell I'm putting these on you!"

He put them back into his belt and Hawk smiled.

"That's ok Corporal, you have my word I won't try to escape. That is unless I smell fresh pizza." The guards both joined Hawk in a chuckle.

Sometime later that evening, Hawk awoke from a nap... and found a large deluxe pizza sitting on his small table.

Chapter 23 .

Morning came and Hawk could see the sun beaming through his cell window. He arose and dressed. This morn found Hawk at odds with himself. In light of the proceeding day's events, there was some feeling of guilt on his part. The people seemed to forgive him to some extent and this confused him as how anyone could forgive his past actions no matter what the reason. Then there was the emotional distress he had been putting Kylee through. She had nothing to do with his past, yet it was she that suffered the most. The pain he caused her was unrelenting and for the first time in decades he regretted making his long past vow to stand for his crimes. Hawk's dedication to his conscience once again pushed through. Once again he was prepared to stand before the people and accept his punishment.

Hawk finished preparing himself for the new day and moved to his cell door as he heard footsteps coming down the long narrow corridor.

Two guards came to escort him to the courtroom and he grinned at his escort...

"Strange someone actually delivered a pizza to me last night, you wouldn't have any ideas as to whom that would have been would you?"

"Why no sir, that would be against the rules." The guard paused and grinned at the General. "Strange thing though."

"Yes it was and now I have no way to know who to thank. So if you find out who broke the rules. Tell them I thank them from the bottom of my heart for their kindness."

The guards grinned and smiled.

"I'm sure they know sir. I'm sure they know. And no doubt, would do it again. That is if the General should find he must spend another evening with us."

Hawk managed a weak smile, "I'm sure he will be guys, but this time I'm buying."

The guards grinned back at Hawk, opened the cell door and led Hawk out into the long narrow corridor leading to the courthouse.

Out of his cell he felt so free, even if it was only the open hallway. He starred out the window at the morning sun. He could feel the bright morning sun warming all it touched. Hawk's gaze lowered toward the ground and was stunned.

“My God look at all the people that have come out so early...”

“Early sir? General, the majority of them stayed here all night!”

“All night? What the hell for?”

“Sir? You really don’t have any idea how much you mean to this country do you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m famous... I’m a legend.” Hawk grinned a half smile.

“General? “ The guard looked over to his Sergeant “Sarge, he has no idea!”

Hawk never heard as he passed into the final door before entering the courtroom for his second day of trial. It had been years since he had even considered his self as a person of importance. All this support couldn’t be for him as he was and had always been, no more than a man doing his duty for his country. Hawk, just thought of himself as Hawk, a man like so many others, just trying to survive and until lately a loner, nothing more.

To him a president would be of note, but not just a military commander such as he had been for so long. It was true, he wielded power, but had no idea of how people felt about him. He was only a man doing his job. But it was that job he now felt he had to answer for. It was to save his sanity, he must stand trial for his actions.

The court was called to order and Hawk rose once again, only this time there was a self assuredness in his voice that gave Kylee shivers. She once again sat behind her love hoping he would give in on his quest to punish himself. Once again she looked at her love praying for a miracle because Kylee knew Hawk never failed. One charge had been accepted and she knew he would have more. Kylee looked over to her love as he spoke.

“Your honor the charge is the murder of three men under my direct command and I have a witness that has agreed to testify to the fact! I had someone contact him last week and this witness will appear before this court as I ordered him to do! He will tell the truth your honor. The court wanted witnesses. I shall provide what the court wants!!”

Hawk slowly turned and added, “Well your honor, I found you one. He is an honorable man and a soldier that has been decorated many times for valor. He will provide testimony verifying the charge I’m about to present.”

Once more the courtroom came to life as people shouted their denial of the charges. Not once did it occur to Hawk that these people were there to support him. Every time they voiced support, he merely thought it was because their legend was being tarnished. That he could live with. The concept of anyone actually caring for this loner, other than his wife, was unthinkable. The more they voiced objections, the more he strived to condemn himself.

Kylee who knew Hawk so well started to worry and once again. Her husband was at a point where he must prove his need to be punished without a doubt and do it in front of the world for all to see.

Chet would be put to the test defending the man whom he owed him everything to. He knew the pain of making the hard decisions, the sleepless nights. To do this for as long as Hawk had, was unfathomable.

Hawk looked over to Kylee and regretted his stubbornness. Sadly his sense of honor and guilt stood in his way of just walking over to her, wrap her in his arms and going home. Instead he walked to the center of the room, slowly scanned the hoard of people and news cameras.

“Your Honor. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury.

During the final year of the West coast campaign, I shot down a civilian and two soldiers in cold blood. To prove my charges I call Captain David Hart. The Captain is one of the most decorated men of the west coast campaigns. This should be more than enough to attest to his reliability and honor.”

All heads turned to see a tall dark haired man enter the courtroom and proceed down the aisle and toward the stand. His chest full of bright colored campaign ribbons. His Shoulders and back straight as if he were marching in a parade, his demeanor gave a strong presence of confidence. He sat and was sworn in.

Hawk slowly walked over to the captains chair.

“Captain Hart! We fought together in several battles in California. Is that correct?”

“Yes sir!”

“During a battle that has become known as the Battle of Fords Gap, did you see me shoot down civilians in cold blood?”

“Yessir, during...

“Thank you Captain, but a yes or no answer is all I require. Did you see me intentionally shoot down a private in the back during the same fight?”

“Yessir you did!”

There were gasps from several people in the court.

“And Captain did you see me intentionally shoot a sergeant I had just given a field commission to, in the back... in cold blood?”

“YES SIR I DID!”

“Captain was that sergeant your older brother?”

“YES SIR HE WAS!” The Captain snapped back at Hawk.

Hawk turned to the court and looked toward the jury.

“And these charges in themselves are more than enough to find me guilty. You may step down Captain.”

As Captain Hart started to rise Chet jumped to his feet and complained to the judge and Hawk.

“Your Honor! It seems to me like there is something that allows me to cross examine the witness your Honor, regardless what General Hawk wants! So let’s see exactly what the Captain tried to say.”

Chet strolled over to the Captain, leaned slightly forward and stared into his eyes.

“Captain, I can see you’re a man of action by all those ribbons on your chest, as well as honor. I can also see that there is some hatred in your eyes for General Hawk. Is that because he shot your brother?”

“Partially.... Yes sir!”

“Captain, you wouldn’t have those bars if it weren’t for this man you hate, is that correct?”

“Yessir, General Hawk gave me a field commission after the battle.”

“Well I know Hawk and he wouldn’t hand you a commission out of guilt just because he killed your brother. Perhaps if you don’t want to tell me I can swear in General Hawk and he can tell me the whole story.”

“Sir, I was promoted due to my experience and the fact that most of the officers were killed and the General promoted a few of us Sergeants to officers to fill the losses.”

“And you were promoted because you showed valor in the face of danger, rather than just being there when promotions were being handed out?”

“Yes sir, I guess so sir.”

“Ok Captain, now that we know why you got promoted and that you’re an upstanding, honorable man and wouldn’t lie...” Chet turned toward the gallery, then the jury. “... how about you tell us in your own words about the battle of Fords Gap?”

The captain looked uneasily over to Hawk, then toward the jury and placed his hands in his lap. He paused as if rolling back the veils of time, took a deep breath.....

“It was early fall when our company got word we were heading to some place called Fords Gap up in the mountains. Our Division had been fighting mutants for six years and had less than forty out of nearly six hundred of the original battalion that came to California. We had just been sent back to the rear for some rest after fighting mutes for about two months straight when the word came down about heading back into battle. Up to that point we were trying to train the hundreds of replacements we had been getting.”

Captain Hart managed a weak smile,

“Needless to say we were demoralized. Not that it was any excuse, just we were tired and had seen a lot of our friends killed. My brother and I had been in on the fighting since the beginning. We knew nothing about fighting mutes as we had come from the east part of the country that had been mostly cleared a few decades before. But we learned fast about mutes from General Adams.

Now here we were a little over six years later and my brother and I were the ones everyone looked to when fighting mutes. Men learned fast out there...or died. You see mutes learned to run and hide in their own primitive way, then once they gathered in huge hoards, they'd attack towns, travelers, hell even military convoys. When they would attack, they just keep coming. We'd shoot them at a distance with rifles, when they got too close, we'd use our pistols, then it would come down to hand to hand.” He paused for a few seconds, then continued.

“We were tired of fighting, tired of killing, battle weary. As I said moral was as low as I had ever seen. Then we heard that General Hawk was leading us up the mountain. Well we all stopped moaning and moral jumped up one hundred percent. You see General we had fought under General Hawk before and never when he was around did the military lose to the mutants. Sure men died, but he was always up there in the front lines with us.”

Hart looked over to Hawk, who in turn he could see was reliving the day over in his mind. A day, like the captain, he'd sooner forget.

“The General, got us a train to take us there to meet a hoard of mutes heading toward a tiny town of Fords Gap. There were over seven hundred or so mutes supposedly coming through the far end of the pass which was located between two mountains in the Rockies. The numbers of mutes seemed to keep changing, so I guess we were all glad someone with the Generals experience was leading us.”

The Captain reached back envisioning the scene as they had first seen Fords Gap those many years before.

“The town is located toward the western end of the pass. There was one road to, through and out of the town with the train tracks alongside the side of the road all the way up, through and beyond the town.” Trying to describe the area better he added.

“The town had the road and tracks going to one side of it and a cliff of about three hundred feet next to the tracks. The other side of the road for miles is Fords River with about a drop of over one hundred feet or so.

So basically there’s the mountain on one side and the ravine on the other and it stays that way for miles.

At the far end of the town the tracks crossed over to the eastern side of the town then crossed over the ravine by rail bridge cutting the road to the town in half. This is where General Hawk had the train to stop. The trains engine on the bridge and the flat cars and box cars we all were on created a wall between the town and the oncoming mutes.

Needless to say it was a cool ride there for those of us on flat cars, yet still better than marching up those mountain roads...”

“I see Captain, so basically you and the others could lie on the flat cars and use them as a fire platform?”

“Yessir! Some men climbed up on the box cars, others laid down under the train. A few civilians with weapons came and wanted to help. Against his better judgment the General said ok and gave them to my brother to put in our squad as we were the most experienced squad in the Battalion.

We had a lot of casualties that had not been completely replaced, so we could use them. The general told them very sternly they would be under complete military control and would follow orders and they agreed!”

“Was it any of these men Hawk shot in the back?”

“Yes sir it was!”

“Continue Captain.” Chet was speaking much more confidently now and Kylee detected he was leading the Captain towards the entire truth, not just what Hawk wanted the court to hear.

“The townsfolk were evacuating as fast as they could, except for the small hospital which had a lot of patients as it was the only one for about a hundred miles in any direction. So the town decided to board it up and try to protect it. The town itself had only about twenty or less buildings. The General sent a squad to assist in the evacuation then set up a fallback position if it should come to that. He sent another squad to escort the evacuees, that still left well over three hundred men to handle seven hundred mutes.”

Then Captain Hart looked at Chet.

“Christ General, Hawk...er then General Hawk that is, had us bring extra rifles and tons of ammo... more than a whole battalion would need!

The scouts came running in. Once they reported to Hawk, he gave the command to get ready so we all laid on the flat cars, well some sat and aimed out to the road. We had the mutes to our advantage, General Adams. The mountain to one side, the cliffs of the ravine down to the raging flood waters to the other side and only about a quarter mile wide open space in between for the mutes to squeeze through. We couldn't see around the bend in the road, but it was over three quarters of a mile away. Plenty of time to aim and shoot.”

“Sounded like a duck shoot Captain?”

“We thought so General, that is until we heard them! Sure sounded like a lot more than what the General was told we were going to be facing. We had heard mutes rushing us before and from what we had heard in the past, it sounded like many more, but then there echo's in the mountains, so well we weren't too concerned.

At first it sounded like distant thunder, then more like an avalanche, kind of a low rumble, then we could hear their grunts and yells as they got closer to the bend.

Then they came around the bend. They were shoulder to shoulder from mountains face all the way to the ravine.... Christ General there were so many, they were so tightly packed together.

Some were even being pushed off the cliff and into the flood waters below, by their own.

It was estimated later we faced over four thousand mutants, maybe more!. They must have been massing there in the mountains for months, perhaps years.

There are places in the Rockies you could hide a full army, it must have been in one of these areas they had been hiding or scattered over several of the areas. But there they were General, thousands instead of hundreds.”

Once again everyone was snapped from their visions of that day by some of the on lookers muffled gasps. Again the Captain looked toward the jury with sweat forming on his brow, he continued,

“We fired our rifles and we fired until they got too hot to shoot, then switched to the extras the General had us bring and they kept coming from around the bend, there was no end to them!

We fired rifle grenades, threw hand grenades, that is until we ran out! We ran out of mortar shells as well. Intelligence had given us the wrong information General, so we supplied accordingly.”

The Captain looked in Hawk's direction and added,

“If the General hadn't been with us and had the foresight to load extra weapons and ammunition, we would have had to retreat... or die.

The civilians used our extra rifles and did well until the hoard started to get close enough where some of us had to use our pistols. Then one ran, then another, then another. The officers yelled

for them to stop, but another ran and some of our men started getting edgy. It doesn't take much to start a mass retreat when you have men panicking and running."

"Mass retreat? Captain you really mean mass desertion do you not?"

"Yes sir it would boil down to that! The general yelled for them to halt, but they ignored him as well. Another got up and started running and the General pulled out his pistol and shot him in the back. Killed him instantly!

The General yelled at the officers that any man that ran would be shot down and **'We were to hold!'** He walked up and down the flat cars hopping from one to the next telling us to be calm. Yelling up to the men on the box cars at each end of the row of flat cars. Then he'd walk down the four flat cars, back to the other box cars on the other end of our train. All the time yelling to aim and make the shots count. All the time he was shooting his pistols. To be honest sir, it was the only time I ever saw the General use pistols in all the years we fought together. That's how close the mutants were to the train and us!

He motioned toward the hospital and said that this was it, we stand or die. He stood on the side of the flat car the mutants were coming from. Right in front of me and my brother, winked at us and yelled **'Shoot until we run out of ammo, then we fight hand to hand... there is no retreat! They will not get to that hospital!'**

"Sounded like General Hawk was going to be the first one to fight hand to hand."

"Sir, every man knew Hawk would be the first on the battlefield and the last off. He never asked anyone to do something that he wouldn't do first. Hell sir, he stood there firing his pistols, reloading and firing again. Never flinching, never moving back an inch. Well that is except to walk back and forth to reassure the men. Everyone started to calm down and keep our minds on the task at hand."

Chet walked back to the center of the courtroom and looked around uneasily, then spoke to the Captain once again, "So everyone was back in line doing their jobs then Captain?"

"Mostly sir, there were a few that looked scared and as the mutants closed on our positions, one of the soldiers got up and ran. By this time the mutant bodies had piled up so high the men under the train had to join us up on the cars.

Our officer turned to shoot him, but couldn't. General Hawk did not hesitate, he aimed and shot him in the back, then relieved our lieutenant and put my brother in command. My brother was the highest ranking non-com sir! Our Lt just froze, sir. Not even the General could get the Lt to move, shoot or anything. The General yelled at him to go to the hospital, but he never moved. After about a minute or two, the Lt just screamed and jumped into the sea of mutants... We never found his body General Adams."

"I see Captain so your brother then took over command of the squad?"

“No sir!” The Captain said proudly, “Actually he took command of two squads. The other officer had been pulled from the train by the mutes and killed.”

“I see Captain, so he had control over two squads of men and they would follow him and his orders. Is that correct?”

“Yessir, he was the one everyone looked to anyhow sir. We had been with the 2nd Battalion since coming to California. We were the only two left out of our entire company. All the men looked up to him!”

“And to you as the number two sergeant?”

“I guess sir.”

Chet looked toward the jury.

“Ok Captain. So your brother is now in command, spot promoted a field commission, then what happened next?”

“Actually not a lot sir! We were just sitting there shooting mutes for the longest time. We’d shoot one in the head and it seemed another two would appear from around the bend. Christ General, one of the men made a comment something like, who the hell was making these guys so fast. The barrels on our guns were so hot they were smoking. Someone else commented not to lay them on the wooden floors of the flat cars or we’d set them on fire.”

A few in the room managed a quiet uneasy chuckle.

“They got really close and once again we started using our pistols, they got closer and some men began to pull out their knives and stick them in the wooden floors next to them. One wave of them had almost over run us earlier, but we managed to kill enough of them to give us a bit of space before the next wave. This time they wanted their knives handy, just in case! Some of us were trying to guess why the mutes were coming in what seemed to be attack waves, but that didn’t last long. There were just so many!

My brother looked in my direction and told me he thought it was stupid holding here and have men dying, when we could fall back to the buildings, the hospital and fight from there. But he kept firing all the time sir.

The mutes were to the cars in a few places and some of the officers, including General Hawk would run over to fight hand to hand or shoot the mutes with their pistols until the line could hold their own. It was mayhem!”

“So all this time your brother was questioning the decision to hold at the rail cars?”

“Mostly General... I saw a lot of stress in him I’d never seen before. Maybe it was the months, or years, of fighting, maybe it was being responsible for all the men now under his command, but he kept looking at the buildings about a hundred yards behind us and saying we’d

be better off there.

To be honest sir, he was starting to worry me.”

All could see just the stress of reliving this day was making the Captain perspire and at times his voice would tremble and crack,

“Well sir, the mutes had reached the point where many were getting within a few feet of the train. Hand to hand was starting to break out all over, some men were falling back to the far side of the flat cars to force the mutes to climb up and in doing so made them easier targets because it slowed them down a bit.

All but the General that is. Hell he just stood there swinging those two swords of his, like he was cutting grass. He’d cut them down, then move to the next place the mutes were about to overrun. We had killed so many mutes that they were piled as high as the rail cars we were on. The oncoming mutes were using the bodies of their fallen like ramps up to us, but the men on those cars kept holding their ground.”

Captain Hart looked out over the courtroom. He could see the faces of the people there staring, hanging on to every word, but he knew they would never completely understand what went on that day. Thankfully!

His voice trembled, he started speaking slowly, hesitantly,

“We did the same... My...my brother yelled,No screamed... I’m sorry sir I can’t say what he said here . The thing is sir, my brother never swore, not even the occasional damn.”

“Captain tell it as it happened. Word for word as best as you can remember.”

“Yes sir. Well sir, he screamed and I mean General, he screamed at the top of his lungs, **“FUCK THIS!! Men retreat to the buildings!!! Hold there!!”** He turned and jumped off the flatcar and started running toward the buildings. I yelled for the men to stay, but he was in command. A few started to turn to follow him.”

“Then what happened Captain?”

“I heard a shot. I turned and saw General Hawk had shot my brother in the back! All I could see was the end of his pistol and the smoke coming from the barrel. I looked at him and he at me, then he turned and put his pistol away and pulled out his swords again, yelled and started cutting the mutes from the flatcars, like nothing happened!”

“And that’s why you hate General Hawk so much?”

“No sir. I hated him for putting my brother in command, I can’t help it, that’s the way I felt then, the way I feel now...”

“You sound hesitant Captain!”

“As a commanding officer sir, I know why he put my brother in charge, why he promoted him. Even why he shot him in the back. I admire him for the ability to do that...to...”

“You mean to take charge Captain? To command? Like you agreed to when you accepted this commission?”

“Yessir I accepted this commission, it wasn’t tossed at me where I had no say. I know why the General gave my brother the field commission. I understand everything.”

“Then why do you hate the General so Captain?”

The Captain leapt to his feet almost knocking the witness chair over.

“BECAUSE I WAS ABOUT TO SHOOT MY OWN BROTHER IN THE BACK FOR RUNNING! FOR DISOBEYING THE ORDER TO STAND!!! I... I would have...”

The Captain slumped back down into his chair, his voice low and trembling.

“... shot my own brother down to keep men from deserting their posts.”

Captain Hart with tears in his eyes looked at Chet, and looked over the room. Then to Hawk who too had tears in his eyes.

“You see General. My sight narrowed to General Hawk’s pistol and the smoke coming from it. I saw him turn and draw his swords, I saw him go back into the fight. It was then looked down at my own hand and the pistol that was in it. The hammer was back and it was aimed directly at where my brother fell.”

Captain Hart looked over to Hawk.

“Hell General you didn’t just kill my brother that day. You kept me from a life time of pain knowing I killed my own brother!”

“So you don’t hate Hawk, Captain?”

“In some ways I still do General. I probably always will to some degree. Don’t get me wrong though, I at the same time, am thankful to him for doing what I am better off not knowing what I would have done that day.”

“I see Captain Hart. So as an officer you understand all of his actions?”

“As an officer, I fully understand everything he did that day General. I even found out later why we held at the track and didn’t fall back to the town.”

“Just out of curiosity Captain. Why was that?” Chet asked the question as he looked to the jury. His stern facial expression and tone of voice left no question as to why he asked. Chet knew

why already!

This was for the court to know, for them to see the stress of command, for all to see the kind of decisions Hawk had to make all these decades.

“The General had found out from one of the squad he sent to help with the evacuation that when our train had come through the valley, the vibrations combined with weeks of rain, had caused a landslide. It must have occurred right after we passed.

No one could have gotten out, not even us. The road, the tracks, everything was blocked! Hell, General it took a better part of a week for us to clear away the rocks and mud!”

“The building were still there Captain.”

“General, if we would have fallen back to the buildings, the mutes would have followed us back into town.”

“So?” Chet had now steered the Captain right where Hawk didn’t want him to go.

“The towns streets were full of people returning from the avalanche area. They would have been caught out in the open! General it would have been a massacre!

You know that’s why orders aren’t supposed to be questioned! You yourself know commanders can’t go around explaining why. Nor should they! Orders are orders.

Over a hundred civilians would have been caught in the open. That’s why the General shot my brother. We couldn’t have retreated that day.

That’s why an order is an order and, yes, I would have shot him if General Hawk hadn’t! When he looked at me that day I knew why he shot him. Because he saw I was going to!”

“Well Captain your testimony seems a bit confused, but I think we all get the point...”

“Perhaps General, perhaps. You see General Hawk is the kind of man any soldier would walk through the fires of Hell for, even if he said he was going in to fight old Satan himself.

He’s the kind of leader that is always the first man to set foot on the battlefield and the last to leave. He’s always honest with the men and can make the hardest of decisions.

That being said, some decisions may be questionable to some, but he sticks to them and since I’ve been in the military, he’s always made the right call. I might have personal issues with him, but I’d follow him through the gates of Hell if he asked!”

He paused, “That’s all I can say about this charge.”

“Then Captain if Hawk has no cross examination, you may step down.”

Hawk slowly shook his lowered head and the Captain stepped off the witness stand and walked toward the small gate separating the courtroom from the proceedings. As he approached Hawk’s table he stopped in front of it and snapped to attention so smartly his heels clicked. A sharp salute followed, then the Captain did a quick military left turn and walked around Hawk’s table toward the gate.

Hawk still sitting with his hands clasped on the table, still looking forward, spoke in a soft, quiet voice.

“Captain! There was no need to salute. I’m no longer your commander in chief!”

The Captain abruptly came to a stop and turned his head to Hawk.

“The Hell you’re not!! SIR!”

He then turned and walked out of the court to the sound of applause, while the judge slammed his gavel on the bench to bring order back to the proceedings.

Chapter 24.

General Adams walked to the bench and slowly turned to Hawk.

“Your honor, if I may?” He smiled warmly to Hawk, then added, “I’d like to call General Hawk to the stand..”

Hawk stood and started to speak, but instead just slowly shook his head, walked to the witness chair and sat.

“Hawk? You’ve already been sworn in, so why don’t you finish where the Captain left off?”

Hawk who up to this point had been sitting at attention, relaxed and gave Chet a smile of resignation. Chet had done more than Hawk had even dreamed possible, he had gotten the whole truth from the Captain and done it in such a way he had shown the horror of that day. Many good men and women died that day at Fords Gap. It was out of respect for those that died during that battle that Hawk would tell it as it was. He had to, it was their legacy.

The entire audience gasped as Hawk blurted out the first sentence. “The entire battle took a little over three hours and I lost two thirds of my command!”

“Two hundred men died that day?”

“Slightly over, Chet. We had arrived in the late afternoon almost evening. We weren’t there too long before the mutants had attacked. Captain Hart gave a fairly accurate statement about the battle, so I won’t bore you with rehashing that part.”

Hawk paused and looked over the crowd in the courtroom. “After the battle I looked up and down the flatcars we were standing on. Men were crying, staring out over the sea of dead bodies blankly or pacing back and forth as if in shock. But damned if they didn’t hold firm and beat back the hoard of mutants.

Now and then we could see a mute push its self upright and drag itself toward the train. of course someone would kill it.

There were a dozen to a dozen and a half mutants scattered throughout that sea of dead, but they didn’t approach in our direction. Instead one of them turned toward the ravine and just stepped off into oblivion to the flood waters below. Then another and another as if some unknown realization had become apparent to them. It was over and one by one they stepped off to their deaths...”

“They committed suicide?”

“Who knows with mutes, but it appeared so. They vanished over the edge of the cliff into the raging waters of the flooded river. As most of you know submersion in water for ten minutes or so causes mutants to dissolve. It has something to do with the water short circuiting that energy that keeps them going and they just dissolve, I think. Yeah Chet, I guess it was a mass suicide. Can’t think of anything else to call it.

After that day there was never another, what some called ‘organized’ mutant attack, ever! Fords Gap was also the last major battle to win back the west coast. It was as if all the mutants from all over the west coast or what was left of them joined there in that part of the Rockies for one final battle.

Why they came out of hiding... why they attacked... we have no idea. All science knows is that after all those years the mutes had started developing some sort of group thinking. A collective mind so to speak.

I’m guessing why we rarely see mutes these days except when some campers or hunters are attacked out in the woods. They no longer attack just because they see a human. Like practically everything else that still exists on this planet, they have learned to fear man.”

Hawk paused for what he said to sink into those present in the courtroom. Understanding mutants was difficult even at this point in time and it was apparent that Hawk had an idea why the mutes came out of hiding. Instead of just staying safely in the mountains where there were no people they had come out and attacked. Hawk had paused, then seemed to snap out of his puzzlement, grinned, then shrugged.

“I guess it was just their last stand Chet. If they won, they’d just continue to attack until there were no more humans around. They had no concept of how many of us were there on the west coast. They were doomed from the start.”

It was Chet that spoke next, “So other than mutes scattered around the west coast, those were the last of large gatherings, General?”

Hawk smiled warmly at his friend, “Pretty much General Adams. Sure there were some groups of twenty or thirty seen and killed. After that day never more than fifty or so were ever seen again. It was like the mutes just decided to vanish into the mountains and deep forests. As I said, they have learned to fear us, so they hide. They can’t breed, so now their survival depends on how well they can keep away from us.”

“I see General Hawk, about the Battle of Fords Gap? Please continue.”

“Ok! Anyway getting back to the day of the battle. We all were there looking out at this sea of dead mutes and what was left of our troops and it slowly sank in the horror of the scene we were looking at.

From the bend in the road to where we were it was almost solid bodies for almost a mile. The closer to the train, the higher the bodies were piled. Chet, the bodies were piled up and over the height of the flat cars!.

The eeriest part was there were no sounds other than the wind. No moaning or screams of pain. Some men had cried, but even as they looked over the scene, they too fell silent at the horror!

“One soldier standing near me looked out over the mass of bodies and with tears streaming down his cheeks he quietly said.

“My God.... So many....So fast...” He then looked down at the remainder of our troops and said “General... there’s so few of us left...”

The trooper was right, somehow we had survived against all odds. We... they, the soldiers paid the price, physically and mentally.

The mutes, they were finished, we had done like man had done since his appearance on the Earth, tried to destroy another species, but this time it was our own species we killing off. Only those hiding in the wilds away from man will continue to survive.”

Hawk leaned forward and looked Chet square in the eye.

“And someday we will find a way to destroy those hiding from us as well! That’s what we do, what I do. That day will come and the last of those that used to be us will finally rest.”

Chet looked toward the jury and spoke more to them than to Hawk. “My God Hawk, I’ve read the reports of the fight, but hearing you and the Captain telling it, made me shutter.”

Hawk leaned back into his chair and quietly spoke, “That’s not all Chet. We had no way of knowing if all the mutes had left or not. Perhaps some were still crawling through the mass of bodies that remained. Those of us that still lived, battered and bruised stood on guard there all night long.

Now and then you could hear the dull crack of someone activating a green globe light and tossing it out into the darkness. The sea of dead laying there in the eerie green light of the scattered globe lights. Before the lights would fade out, someone else would toss another. We kept that up all night, well that is until....”

Hawk paused and looked over the people in the court who were in turn sitting on the edge of their seats.

“.... A little after midnight we were all starting to notice a fog roll in. Light at first, then eventually we barely could see the glow from the lights we had thrown out.

Finally we could only see a slight greenish glow from our lights, that seemed to highlight this fog. The fog was so thick we could not even see the end of an out stretched arm...

One of the troops looked at his hand with a flashlight, then sank to his knees.

There was a slight covering of dust on it... Dust from vaporizing mutants! One by one we all started to realize. It wasn’t fog!

It was the vapor of mutes dissolving!

My God Chet, we had killed so many mutes their vaporizing bodies created a dust fog that filled the entire part of the valley we were in!”

Several of the onlookers gasped at the immenseness of the thought of so many bodies vaporizing that it had made it impossible to see was too much to grasp. All this just added to the shock of the past day. Hawk continued,

“By morning all that remained were the bodies of our soldiers. We solemnly gathered them or what was left of them. We placed them on some of the flatcars....”

Hawk glanced over the audience, then back to Chet, “.... later came the shock that we couldn’t burry them, there was no ground more than a few feet deep in the pass. What there was, had large rocks and tree roots. We had no place in town to store the bodies and it was going to take at least a week to dig out the road and tracks from the avalanche.”

“Tell the court what you had to do General Hawk!”

Hawk gave a slight sigh and lowered his eyes to the floor.

“I ordered funeral services to be held and afterward, to throw the bodies into the flood waters below.”

People in the courtroom made more, louder gasps this time. They too lowered their heads or shook them in disbelief.

Hawk in turn sat upright once again and continued in a low, saddened tone.

“Later that day, after some much needed rest, we started the long process of digging the road and tracks out. By the end of the week, battalion sent another train to see why we hadn’t reported in. They found us, the tracks almost cleared and the broken wires. After that we finished up in no time. No one that lived in Fords Gap wanted to stay after the battle, so once the tracks were cleared, everyone military and civilian left. I took a party back weeks later. The area is difficult to get through. Not to mention the debris left behind by the flood.” Hawk stopped as if to remember back to that time. “

We found after a month or so that the bodies had been carried down to a large lake that had been formed in the lower Rockies during the apocalypse. The lake had never been named, hell Chet it wasn’t even on anyone’s map! As for recovering all the bodies it was impossible, we left them there and named the lake ‘Monument Lake’ after those that had fallen at Fords Gap.”

Hawk raised his gaze from the floor as his voice went back to a normal tone.

“ That’s pretty much it Chet. Many mute died that day and many of soldier as well. The men that lived, found valor in themselves, those that died bravely, found their mortality, such of war. A small town was saved, some souls never recovered. You see General Adams, it was just another day for those that fought in the west coast campaign.”

Hawk sadly shook his lowered head, “It was just another day... another battle.”

“That will be all General Hawk, you may step down.”

Hawk got up from the chair and slowly walked over to his loving Kylee, who sat there in tears once again. He could but wonder if he had done the right thing by loving Kylee. Since they had met he had wrought so much sadness upon this kind, loving soul.

He made up his mind, that if by some chance he ever found freedom, he would spend the rest of her life making her happy.

Hawk slowly lowered himself into his chair. Sorrow and guilt filled his heart, he had kept his promise to stand for his crimes, but in doing so, deeply hurt the woman he loved. This burden had become almost unbearable. What he was doing to Kylee just added to it.

Chet looked over to Hawk who now had his head hanging down. His wife, as always had reached across the railing and was gently squeezing his shoulder, comforting him. Chet walked over to the jury.

“General Hawk did in fact shoot several men down that day. And now you know why! You know the circumstances. You know what happened that day at Fords Gap!”

Chet paused to let all the proceeding sink in, then added,

“You know how everything unfolded.”

He walked over to the jury and put his hands on the rail that was in front of them and leaned toward them, staring at them.

“You know that Hawk is NOT GUILTY!”

Chet’s voice lowered so low most barely heard,

”Hasn’t...” He cleared his throat and spoke loud and clear.

“Hasn’t this man paid enough for any crime he thinks he committed? He’s suffered for over a century or more for something he feels guilt over.

He’s had to do so many things that were against his beliefs, things he hated to do. He did these things not for himself, but for this country. ”

Chet scanned the jury, then mused loudly enough so everyone in the courtroom could hear his next statement.

“ I wonder if any one of us could have done what this man has done.”

Chet turned and walked across the floor, walked behind his table and once again looked at the jury.

“More than a century of suffering. He did and has suffered the guilt. The cost? To his morality, his sense of right and wrong. To his life. Unimaginable! I wonder if we could have done what Hawk has done all these years and stayed sane? Not to mention the loss of things he gave up or lost, all in the name of reuniting this country! He’s given up his entire life. He’s lost many friends and a wife whose name was Keli to the violence he’s fought for so long!”

Chet walked turned to the people in the gallery as he posed his next question loud enough for all to hear.

“All this General Hawk has given of himself. Are we now going to condemn him as well??”

The throng in the courtroom screamed back at Chet in unison, “**NO! NO!**” The judge slammed his gavel on the bench. Finally the court settled down and smiled at the gallery, then the jury. He had them! All of them! General Adams walked back behind his table and placed both hands on the table and looked at the judge.

“Your honor the defense rests!”

The courtroom burst into applause as Chet lowered himself into his chair. Cheers and screams could be heard from the thousands outside of the courthouse. Chet’s new wife reached over and hugged him as Kylee ran across the aisle and did the same. She looked over at Chet’s new bride,

“Quite a man you have there Missy!”

She smiled at Kylee and replied over the cheering crowd,

Yeah! Think I’ll keep him a while longer.”

Chapter 25.

Once the judge restored order to the courtroom, he gave the jury orders and they left the room. All knew there were the two charges that stuck and they were serious enough to carry at least long sentences, the worse scenario, Kylee didn't want to think about. Chet had preformed marvelously and his defense flawless. Kylee wondered if it had been enough because all of this had been during turbulent times. There was always room for doubt.

While the jury deliberated, those in the courtroom stayed, while Hawk, Kylee and Chet left to a small alcove just outside the courtroom in a roped off part of the corridor. Guards stood nearby, but let Hawk have his privacy.

Hawk turned to Chet and grinned, "Damn Chet. You were good I'll have to admit that. But I curse you for standing in the way of me getting what I deserve. You had no right! I never asked to..."

Kylee, who had seated herself, leapt to her feet and slapped Hawk across the cheek!

"DAMN YOU!! Damn you for this strange way you see things. Damn you for not being able to forgive yourself for doing what others would have done. Damn you for your guilt... Damn you for being you."

She fell into his arms weeping, separated by only the thin, short railing. The tears in Hawk's eyes were not caused by the slap, but by knowing, seeing, what he had done to the woman he loved.

Chet looked down the hall as his wife Missy came hurrying toward them.

"Chet honey, Kylee, Hawk, the jury is in. You're all wanted back into the court."

Hawk and Chet started walking back toward the door, but Chet's wife latched onto Kylee, leaned into her ear and with a big smile said,

"Don't worry Ky, my baby did a great job and I really don't think anyone wants to see your Hawk.... Our Hawk, Be convicted."

Kylee squeezed Missy's hand and managed a weak smile.

"I so hope you're right Missy." Then looked at the courtroom door where Hawk had just entered, "But the law is the law and everyone knows how Hawk feels about keeping it uncorrupted.

It could be bad, the jury. It's been only about twenty minutes. They say a fast deliberation means conviction!"

They both looked at one another and the smiles vanished as the courtroom doors closed behind them and once again they took their seats.

No sooner than the two women sat, the judge walked into the room and the court all stood. Within a second or two the jury entered from another door and everyone was seated. Kylee thought to herself things were happening far too fast!

Kylee shivered when she saw Hawk smile slightly, for she knew he was aware that a jury that deliberates for a short time usually means guilty. She started to tremble and grabbed Missy's hand. Her head snapped over to Chet's wife. Missy was shaking just as hard as Kylee. Missy leaned over to Kylee and whispered.

"Chet told me a short deliberation, doesn't always..."

"I know Missy!" She choked back the urge to cry for the thousandth time that day, "I know, it can go either way!"

The judge slammed the gavel on the bench and called the court to order. He looked toward the jury and said.

"Has the jury reach a verdict?"

The jury's foreman stood and looked at Hawk with an emotionless gaze, then to the judge. "We have your honor on both accounts."

He looked toward Hawk.

"The defendant will rise."

Hawk slowly rose and glanced back to his wife and for the first time he put all of his feelings of guilt of the past aside and truly regretted putting this loving creature through all he had put her through. He had not been fair to her in the short time they had together. Guilt returned, but not for the past, but for the way he had treated her.

Never thinking what all of this might put her through. He could be on the verge of losing another wife and this time she would suffer as much as he.

"The jury foreman may read the verdict. The judge turned sadly and looked toward Hawk. He knew deep down inside he didn't want Hawk to be convicted either. He respected this man deeply although some of the decisions Hawk had made he didn't agree with, he didn't want to see him imprisoned or worse. Then it crossed his mind, what of the nation? What would this do to it seeing the leader they had had all their lives behind bars or executed?

The jury foreman continued to stand and held up a piece of paper and began to read.....

“You honor I request that the court orders the citizens present to withhold any outbursts until I, representing all members of the jury, finish this statement. The verdict was unanimous, but we feel due to the notoriety of this case we as the jury should make our reasons clear to General Hawk and the rest of the country, as to why we arrived at our decision. This was an extremely difficult decision and we do not want the country to believe we didn’t take this seriously just because we took a short deliberation to arrive at this verdict. ”

He turned and scanned the gallery, the judge, then the other jurors.

Tears flowed down Kylee’s cheek. She looked over to Missy who was sobbing as well. The toneless voice had many in the court starting to tremble. Was their legend about to fall?

“You may proceed mister foreman, and I caution the courtroom to remain quiet so all the statement may be read.” The judge even looked worried. He had seen this look before.

“We the jury in the case of Hawk versus er...Hawk. Wish to read this statement in the presence of the defendant.”

He turned from the judge and looked at Hawk standing at attention, staring straight ahead, shoulders back, awaiting his punishment from the people. He knew the people, would not, could not, forgive what he had done. He was ready to accept his punishment!

“General Hawk. Resigned or not, you are still and will always be General Hawk to us! We cannot deny that you have undoubtedly have killed and have done so in ways that most men would have been tried and convicted for....”

The courtroom gasped!

“...However...”

The foreman looked directly at Hawk, then back down to the paper he was holding...

“.... General Hawk, you have done nothing that other men haven’t in the past during those horrible years long ago. There are probably many more things you have done, that haven’t been brought before this court, nor should they have been.

We feel that as you’ve just had to do so much more than most men, so many times, it makes people wonder how any man that has lived like you have all these years.... and could do so, as long as you have and kept their sanity.

Sir... This country owes you so much, we HAD to give you the trial you so desperately wanted to resolve your deep feelings of guilt. But to be perfectly honest, no one wanted to find you guilty of any crimes.

Even when we heard the testimony, read the reports, they just reconfirmed our feelings.”

The foreman looked at the judge, then directly at Hawk,

“General Hawk. You made many valid points and we have no doubt that under different circumstances, it may well have been murder. What you did and why... no one living today has the right to say or question. Nor can we attempt to conceivably understand! We only see the good you have done. What you’ve achieved, the results speak for themselves. A country now reunited!”

Hawk slowly turned his head toward the jury’s foreman and met his gaze before he looked down and finished reading the paper he held in his hands.

“This was, and has been war, a war of survival in which, sir, you have fought the longest, the hardest. Hopefully the most terrible war mankind will ever have to fight.

Sir! You cannot.... You must not, feel you have done anything wrong.

You fought to reunite this country of ours and have done so with whatever means it took to achieve this goal.

We as citizens of this nation, cannot fault you, nor second guess your decisions, in any way, because your goal has been attained. And we are the beneficiaries of your labors General. To condemn you would condemn ourselves. We are united once again.

This country, our history, has always stood for justice. As a jury of your peers it falls upon us to determine what those laws were meant to accomplish. To arrive at a decision how to best apply these laws, to apply them to best serve humanity.”

The foreman looked up, then directly to Hawk, “Well sir. We the jury feel that you, at no time, have never done anything other than to put this country and it’s unification first and in that light we could only come up with the verdict of .”

He looked at those people in the courtroom, then the judge, grinned and proudly stated.

“NOT GUILTY!”

There was a roar like no one had ever heard in the court as the courtroom burst into cheers. Then from outside came a thunderous roar as the news spread. People hugged, some cried, others just danced around hugging anyone that they could.

Missy ran through the short gate to be with her husband who stayed slumped at his chair, eyes flowing with tears of relief. They hugged so hard Missy had to sit in his lap to keep them both from falling onto the floor.

Hawk just stood as if at attention showing no emotion. Kylee had run around and hugged him so violently she almost knocked him over, but he stood fast. Hawk knew well the trail was not over. Under the laws, he could still get remanded to a military trial if the judge felt it was warranted.

The judge slammed his gavel on his bench repeatedly, until the courtroom once again was still.

“I AM the Judge in these proceedings and will get the last word in!”

There were giddy chuckles arising throughout the courtroom as the judge continued, staring at Hawk all the time while his loving wife held him tightly.

“General Hawk, you have served this country well. For perhaps more time than any man should be expect to... But then again you’re just not a normal man are you? I guess by now you know being a legend has its disadvantages as well.

The judge smiled as chuckles arose from the people.

“Generations of this countries citizens have put you on a pedestal, as well has this generation. Why you might ask? Well that’s hard to determine. Why does any country need it’s heroes, it’s legends? Why do we as a nation need someone to look up to? Ask any man, woman or child and you’ll get a different answer. We need our heroes General, we MUST have our heroes!”

The judge paused and smiled to the gallery.

“And you sir have the distinct honor of being ours. Like it or not sir, you are! You have been for every generation that worked with you, served with you, fought by your side, read about you in stories. All these generations of people have honored you if only in tales told around campfires. This day we have forgiven all what you consider your sins. General Hawk, if this country can forgive any transgressions you may have committed. Don’t you think it’s about time you allowed yourself to forgive your past as well?”

The judge straightened up and glanced over those in attendance...

“As the jury has found the defendant not guilty, this court rules this case and all charges are DISMISSED!”

Once again the court burst into applause and once again Hawk never noticed for he was hugging and being hugged by his beautiful Kylee. She smiled up at him and moved to his side, Kylee was still latched onto Hawk’s arm he walked over to Chet and clasped his hand. Both men smiled at each other, yet never said a word.

Chet stood and shook Hawk’s hand in return and the four of them walked toward the door as those spectators near the aisle, patted all four on the back as they past. While others just reach out and touched them on the arms. History had been made this day and all wanted to be part of the moment.

Yet still Hawk never showed any sign of emotion. When they got into the hall the crowd in the roped off area burst into cheers and applause, but Hawk turned left instead of toward the crowd and Kylee followed.

Missy started to follow Kylee, but Chet gently put his hand on her arm and stopped her. They

watched Hawk and Kylee go to the shallow alcove where just minutes before they had sat awaiting the verdict.

Hawk walked to the bench, but did not sit. Instead his head lowered and his posture slumped. Kylee quickly moved to his side and held him tightly.

From a distance all quieted. Hawk sank to his knees and Kylee stood cradling his head as he wept.

He looked up at her and said something no one could hear and Kylee who was weeping as well, dropped to her knees and started to cry out loud.

The spectators in the hall felt tears in their eyes as well, but there was a respectful quiet as they watched the two kneeling, holding each other tightly.

Within a few minutes murmurs started as they noticed Hawk stood and he straightened to his full height and held out his hand for his wife. She took it, he gave it a gentle squeeze as she arose. They both gave each other a quick hug and she wiped the tears from his eyes, then hers.

They turned and walked toward the crowd. The cheers and applause began once again. The four once again joined and walked through the cheers in the hall and out the door.

There they were greeted by the screams and applause of thousands. People as far as the eye could see filled every open space.

Slowly they walked down the stairs of the courthouse and toward the awaiting limos. Hawk giving an occasional wave to those that had come to show their support.

When they reached the bottom of the long stairway and strode across the wide sidewalk to the street. A sergeant opened the door to the limo for Kylee and Hawk. Hawk entered as Kylee asked him to get in first so he would be on the side the throngs of spectators were on because she knew they wanted to see their hero, their legend.

“Baby move to the other side and wave to the people. After all they’ve been standing here in your support so long.”

So Hawk scooted across the seat and rolled down the window and the crowd went wild as the window rolled down and he waved and silently mouthed the words “Thank you”, his eyes still filled with tears. Kylee slid into the limo and the sergeant closed the door and moved away.

As Hawk was busy on the other side of the limo, Missy and Chet leaned into Kylee’s window and asked.

“Kylee? If you don’t mind telling us. What did Hawk whisper to you.... You know, there in the alcove?”

Kylee’s eyes began filling with tears once more as the words stumbled out as she tried not to cry.

“He whispered.....”

She choked back a sob...

“...They forgave me!”

All three looked over to this man and with tears in their eyes. They knew it was not time for this legend to die, but to continue.
For his legend was not yet done.

This would be just another long chapter in his even longer life.

His legend!

Chapter 26.

The stranger took his feet off the chair opposite where the pretty barmaid had been sitting most of the day. He sat upright and glanced at the watch on his wrist.

“It’s sure a good thing you weren’t busy today lass. Seems I’ve come in for breakfast and it’s late afternoon, if I didn’t have to run, I just might stay for dinner.”

“I didn’t mind sir. I always enjoy the company of one such as yourself.”

“Myself?”

“Good sir, although you have not removed your coat, I can see by your pants and boots, that you too are a hunter. Not only that, but the way you talk about General Hawk and can’t hide the fact that you admire him immensely, I’d be willing to bet that at one point in time, you actually met him, perhaps he may have mentored one such as yourself.”

“You’re very astute my dear, as a matter of fact Hawk was... well, was kind of my mentor for a while. It’s a long story, but I have a very short time before I have to leave, so I guess I could tell you a little more. Perhaps a shortened version?”

“Ah-ha. I have you there stranger, you see I pretty much know about Hawk from where you left off. That is without the part where you’re involved with Hawk. However sir, you are not the only Hawk’s legend fan in this tavern!”

Grinning the stranger looked around the room teasingly as they were the only two in the room. He leaned forward and propped his chin upon his hands and tried to look as if she could tell him something he didn’t know.

Thinking this could be interesting he decided to let this slip of a young woman tell her tales. It could be fun hearing what parts of the legend had been exaggerated on this side of the Atlantic. So he leaned back into his seat propped his feet in the chair next to him as he had earlier and accepted her offer.

“Well then my pretty little lass, while you get me another ale. You can tell me.”

The maid walked behind the bar and poured a fresh ale for the stranger.

“Well let’s see.” His mind filled with visions of the past. “After the trial the people demanded Hawk run for President of the new United States and if I recall even his wife Kylee agreed. How am I doing so far?”

“Not bad for someone so far from the states. And so long ago.”

The lass stopped in her tracks and glared at the stranger, but a small smile broke out as she rattled out a few facts that seemed to slip his mind.

“New Germania is now a state since the Eurasia pact. So don’t say the states and exclude the European states. Remember the vote two years ago?
I went to the finest school in New Germania so I’m well aware of world history! Besides everyone knows of Hawk’s legend to some extent. I too was a big fan of the legend in school, so the more you fill in, the more I can tell when it’s the story time for some of the young ones every Saturday morning.”

She plopped the ale down on the table and stood there with her hands on her hips and a little smirk on her face as the stranger puzzled.

“Story time?”

“Every Saturday morning I have some children that come to town with their folks and I watch them while they go about their business. I tell them stories... the ones about Hawk are the favorites. Kind of like Pops in your first story of Hawk and Keli.
The children come here for story time. At first it was stories from books, then one day I told them of one of the Journals Hawk published after his two terms of President. Well after that the children would have nothing else other than Hawk stories. I tell them what I know or heard over and over. They never get tired of hearing these tales. Hahaha, true or not!”

She paused and smiled warmly at the stranger, “So you see sir, whatever you tell me I can add something new to my story time.”

“I see lass, so you ply me with this fine ale in hopes for more stories for the young ones?”

“Of course, making children happy, makes me happy. I hope to have several myself someday.”

The stranger grinned at the fact she once again had distracted herself, “Ok so you were telling me about Hawk and were doing such a fine job of it as well. Please continue miss.”

The lass smiled warmly at the stranger and did a little curtsy. The stranger stood and gave her a courteous bow and sat and began to sip on his ale. She grinned at this gesture and continued...

“Hmmm... Let’s see, Hawk became President in late March with an overwhelming popular vote. He had changed elections due to one of the coldest winters in decades, deciding spring was better than late winter and it’s been held the last Monday in March ever since...”

“Impressive M’lady, I see you do know your history.”

“Hawk served two terms and refused to allow congress to amend the constitution to allow more than two terms. Seems he was distressed by whoever they were for even mentioning it..”

“That he was lass, that he was. He had fought so many years to get a civilian government in place, then people wanted to change things.”

His voice trailed off to a softer tone, but the lass jumped right back in.

“After Hawk’s two terms he retired to a small town in his home state of Michigan. A small town of less than one hundred. It was in some hills so he could overlook the valley below.”

“Damn lass! It looks like you are quite a Hawk fan yourself. Let me add the reason he moved there was because he loved the trees during autumn, the colors are fantastic. He could look out his window and see the entire valley in all its splendor.”

The maid gave him a smile as she continued.

“He and Kylee had a son the first year he was President and twin girls about two years later.”

The stranger grinned at the lass. “I thought I was telling you the story...”

“Ah, but kind sir, you said I could finish and as you see I do know about Hawk. Better than most.”

“You got me there lass, please continue!” He leaned back in his chair once again, put his hands behind his head and nodded slightly for the lass to relate what she knew.

She looked a bit sad and walked away carrying a few dirty dishes from lunch. She looked back over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry to say, I know little of Hawk’s life after he and Kylee moved and he retired.”

That was all the stranger needed to jump in and continue, “Well lass, Hawk had built a school for hunters back....”

“Seventy three years after the apocalypse!!!” The lass blurted out. “At first it was for military scouts and was located in Michigan, but as the east became more secure, it was moved to the south, then near Wall City so the hunters could train for the wastelands.”

She saw the stranger make a slight frown, then he grinned.

“OOppsss, sorry sir, continue.”

“Anyhow....” The stranger cleared his throat. “The hunter school is really in all three locations. Students move from one to another as they progress over the years. But then I’ve strayed off course once again haven’t I?”

Again the stranger had to remember where he had left off.

“Let’s see.... Oh, Yeah! When his children became of age they attended the school, which by their time, had become one of the finest military schools in the country. They still taught hunter ways and traditions, as well as everything else one wanted to learn. Only the finest were chosen to continue on to hunter training. Some of the children came to the school as soon as they had their sixth birthday.”

“I bet you attended the school too, oopppsss, sorry again.” She smiled sweetly and sat once more across from the stranger, put her elbows upon the table and propped her head in her hands.

“Well Hawk and Kylee would vanish now and then on trips, but in reality would go and spend a week or two with their children. The school rarely allowed parents to visit but twice a year. “

He smiled at the girl, “But then this was Hawk and although he never demanded to be treated different he always was.”

The maid began to say something, but clasped her hands over her mouth rather than to interrupt the stranger lest he decide it was time for him to leave and she would miss something she didn’t know.

“There was even a time where Hawk actually took older students out for wilderness training. His children would go along, I know he really cherished those years. There were no more mutes after the synchronized detonation of the two hundred and sixty three EM -51 bombs that had been put into orbit. The blasts produced EMP’s that disrupted the mutes magnetism or whatever it was that kept them going. They vaporized and were finally put to rest after over two centuries. Once that project was done Hawk had little to do once he finished his last terms as president. A man that for over two hundred years had lived with violence and death.”

“It must have been rough for him in some ways, wasn’t it?” The lass interjected.

“I guess it was lass, there were no more mutes, no more raider armies, police forces were in place in every city. The military was training for moving overseas to protect settlers and to search for any survivors. Not to mention Kylee made him promise to stick to his retirement..”

The lass laughed. “So I think those wilderness trips with students made Hawk happy.”

“That it did lass..... that it did! You see Hawk had actually mourned the death of the mutants. He had fought them for so many years. It was only he that could completely grasp the fact that at one time they were as you and I. I think getting back to the wilderness was his way of remembering, reflecting.”

“Sir?” The barmaid looked deep into the strangers eyes as if she were afraid to ask what she was about to ask. “Sir, I know Hawk died, but no one seems to”

“Lass I’m going to tell you something that isn’t general knowledge. It’s no secret either, just not commonly known.”

“Sir..” She leaned over the table and gently touched his hand. “Sir if you’d rather not, since he was perhaps more than your mentor, maybe your friend?”

“It’s ok my dear.”

“Forgive me if it’s too personal, but did you know him well enough, I mean were you there... Ahh., when...”

“Yes lass I knew him well enough and yes I was there when he passed from this world and his legend ended.”

“You make it sound like he died of old age, but everyone knows he never aged....”

“AH-HA!” The stranger shouted and sat upright.

The barmaid jumped and the stranger chuckled.

“Heh, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. It’s just something that you actually don’t know about your hero!”

The lass stuck her tongue out at this stranger. She had come to like and admire him in this short day she had known him. Teasing him just came natural for her. He just grinned back and continued.

“When Hawk was sworn in as President?”

“Yeah?” She put her chin back onto her hands and leaned toward this man who had so enriched her day. She batted her eyes in just, like a little girl waiting for a treat. He chuckled back at her exaggerated posture and added, “Well the night before he told Kylee that he had decided to return to his base.... the one the aliens made for him?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember.”

“Well Hawk decided he had lived long enough and that it was time for his to live out his life, to grow old. Of course Kylee vehemently objected, but, well, he told her that the best reward he could have for all the years of living, fighting and horror he had been through.... would be for them to grow old together, with the woman he loved. That way only death would part them.”

“OOOHHHHH!!! That’s just Soooo sweet, awww, he must have loved her soooo much!”

The stranger stopped and frowned at the pretty little lass.

“MAY I CONTINUE?” He frowned at the interruption, then smiled at the lass to show he really wasn’t mad.

“Oops sorry.” The lass plopped her chin onto her hands once again and stared into the stranger’s rugged face.

“Well Hawk and Kylee had many happy years together and as Hawk was actually fifty years old when he stopped aging and Kylee was in her mid forties, well they aged pretty closely as if he hadn’t lived all those extra years.”

The stranger stopped and grinned. He propped up his feet back in the chair and leaned back and the maid could see his mind drifting back to a past life. Then she saw a sadness fall over his face as he pursed his lips to speak. The lass saw a glimpse of confusion cross this face as he spoke.

“You know lass, there was so much Hawk accomplished while he was in office. So much he did after he retired and started aging. Why hell, lass, I completely forgot the west coast campaign. In my ramblings I have skipped so much, when all you originally asked me was if I knew anything about Hawk’s legend as I was from the other side of the Atlantic.”

The pretty barmaid smiled warmly, “Sir, you have told me so much. I’ll be able to tell so many new tales to the children. For that I will ever be in your debt..” She smiled warmly, “If you were perhaps to remember another story?”

The stranger leaned forward and looked at the lass grinning, “Well there was one short time I could tell you about. Back when I was in the Hunter Academy. It was my first big outing into the deep wilderness. There were six of us, one instructor and Hawk who had come to be with us this time out. Needless to say, I...we, were thrilled!

It was on the second night all of us had finished eating dinner and were sitting around the campfire when one of the older students looked at Hawk and asked him a very profound question that had never crossed my mind.

He asked him something to the effect of, back during those first few weeks or months after the apocalypse, when they all realized that civilization as they knew it would cease to exist, how does one go about rebuilding a civilization? Well needless to say that started a vigorous debate!

Hawk just smiled and asked us what we thought would be the first thing that needed to be done as one then another replied.”

“Of course security and safety would be the most important as people needed to be safe to rebuild!” One of the older guys injected.

Another replied, "I don't think so, as weapons run out of ammunition, making weapons that can be reused would be a priority. Like swords, spears and the like."

He was interrupted by one of the girls stating they were both wrong, "It would have to be infrastructure! Civilization needs to have clean water, power, food."

Of course I had to add something like, "All that is useless unless you have leadership, laws, order."

The instructor grinned and added, "Let's not forget medical. People need to be healed, or what about sewage? Without that terrible diseases would run rage through a populous like back in the dark ages we studied about.

What about communications? For without that how does a civilization communicate with one another?"

The older girl who was on her last outing before her graduation was silent up to that point. She looked over to Hawk sitting on a log across from her.

"Sir... How DO YOU restore civilization back to the way it was. How did you restore our world?"

"Well Hawk just sat there starring into the fire. His face solemn, the years had started showing their toll upon him. He looked up at all of us, glancing at each of us one at a time, then looking at the next. He looked over to the instructor, grinned and arose, giving us a wink as he vanished into the darkness.

From the shadows of night we heard. "When you figure out how one goes about rebuilding a civilization . Then you will have the knowledge be a true hunter wise in the way of life...."

The stranger grinned at the lass and leaned back into his chair once again,

"...and you know nothing else was ever said again other than the instructor told us that each of us must figure out what that first thing was ourselves. No one would tell us. No one figuring it out should tell the others. It was something each young person must figure out on their own to truly be an adult!"

"I suppose you wouldn't tell a girl the secret now would you?"

The stranger winked and replied, "I would have thought a pretty lass would have figured it out by now. But, no I won't. This way the day you figure out the answer, you can be proud of yourself for answering one of the most important questions ever put to humanity. How does one start to rebuild a civilization? After all they had to do what all humans have done before them. But they didn't just have to build, but rebuild and do so where mankind had everything we had before the apocalypse and make it better. So lass the day you figure it out, you will have achieved something few take the time to consider."

“Sir, you flatter me and I will not press you on the answer. Your kindness and patience with me this day is to be admired. I will cherish these stories and will endeavor to retell them as best and truthful as I can.”

“So pretty and polite as well. This day has been a pleasure for me as well lass. To find one that tried to tell the legend truthfully, is a rarity these days. You should hear the somewhat over exaggerated stories I hear! Why it seems the.....”

“BEEEEEEP!!!!”

The stranger’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a horn blowing out in the street. Followed by another, then another.

“Aw Crap!! I think I’m in trouble now!”

“Trouble?”

He leapt to his feet and gently patted the lass’s hand.

“ Oh not really bad trouble. Well least I don’t think so.”

He swallowed hard... “At least I hope not!”

Chapter 27.

He rushed to the door and the lass followed close behind. As he ran out the door and down the few stairs to the street, the lass saw two more cycles had pulled up next to where the stranger had his parked.

Both cycles were a dull hunter black, just like her new hunter friends' and two people dressed in hunter gear sat upon them. She couldn't see through the dark helmet visors, but sensed they were no danger. The stranger stumbled toward his cycle making gestures with his hands to stop blowing their horns, to quiet down, lest they disturb the people around the tavern.

As the tavern maids story teller reached his cycle with her close behind, the horns stopped. He stopped and glared at the two new comers. Hands on his hips he shook his head and with his voice slightly raised shot at his two companions...

"Yeah right! I wasn't the ones that had a bit too much to drink last night. I wasn't the ones that probably slept in until noon today!"

The riders both reached up and slowly removed their helmets, cautiously, which the barmaid thought strange...

Until she saw beautiful long raven colored locks fall from the helmets and cascade down upon the two riders shoulders. The helmets slowly came away from their faces and the lass gasped at two of the most beautiful women she had ever seen!

One woman looked at the other and grinned.

"Well actually big brother. it was closer to one, wasn't it Kylee?"

"Ahh... one thirty I think Keli!"

They both laughed and looked at the stranger.

"Come on big Bubba we were just funnin' ya a bit!" The girls laughed, Keli looked toward the maiden.

"I'll bet he's been boring you with tales and legends all day." The girls laughed again.

The lass never heard the chuckles nor the look of mirth as they noticed her face as it hit her like a rock busting through glass. She snapped her head to the strangers cycle.

"Oh my God! There's no kick stand!"

She snapped her gaze to the two women.

“Oh my GOD! Raven hair....twins.... hunter gear...”

Her neck made strange crackling sounds as the lass snapped her gaze back to the stranger.

“OH...MY...GOD!!! You...You’re him! Hawks son!! You’re, you’re...”

Kylee interrupted the girl and grinned.

“Hawk, you mean you didn’t introduce yourself, again?”

“Aw Ky, when has our brother ever paid attention to manners?”

Both girls roared with laughter. Hawk on the other hand just sheepishly grinned and turned to the lass.

“I’m sorry Miss, I guess I should have told you my name, but it seems every time I say who I am, everyone falls all over themselves and I never get treated like a normal human being. It was an enjoyable day with you just treating me like I was, normal!”

He shot a sneer at his sisters and they stopped laughing as Keli interrupted.

“It’s true lass. People find out we’re Hawk’s children and everyone wants to come and talk to us, meals are interrupted, we’ve even been awoken late at night by someone wanting to say they talked to us, shook our hand... whatever.”

“Interrupted us is more the word Keli!” Kylee replied.

Hawk laughed.

“Yeah, lass you should have seen the poor guy that came banging at our doors in the middle of the night back in New Amsterdam Proper. Kylee threw him out the window and into some little canal...”

“MEeee, noooo, Hawk, that was Keli.” Kylee quickly replied.

“No it wasn’t lass it was her...” Keli shot back as she stuck her tongue out at her sister.

“Both of you cool it!!” Hawk turned to the pretty barmaid once again, “The point is, well, people treat us different and I just wanted to spend my last day here in your beautiful city talking to a beautiful woman without her fawning all over me.”

“Fawning all over him, Ha! Bet she did anyhow.” Keli laughed.

“Poor baby.” Kylee chirped.

The lass blushed and smiled at Hawk as he missed Keli making a motion like she was sticking her finger down her throat and gagging, then both girls snickered at their brothers charm.

Hawk turned to his sisters with a more serious look.

“I had been telling her about mom and dad, Aunt Keli, everything. She asked about the day dad died and I was about to tell her when you two showed up.”

“We’re sorry...” They both chimed at the same time.

The maid smiled at the two girls.

“I can tell you two are twins, I’d be willing to bet you two finish each other’s sentences as well.

“We do not...” Said Kylee.

“Finish each other’s...” Replied Keli.

They looked at each other and started giggling once again. Then Keli looked at Hawk and added...

“Hawk, we should be pushing on, we need to be over the Alps by Friday.”

“Yep! I guess I should get moving, this pretty lass has filled me full of her wonderful cooking all day, so I shouldn’t be needing to stop for dinner.”

The girls both stuck out their tongues at their brother.

“Sir... er... Hawk? You never finished. About the day...”

“Ah, sorry lass. I guess I was interrupted so rudely.”

He glanced at the girls again and was once again greeted by them sticking out their tongues at him, again!

He sighed and smiled at the lass.

“You can see what I have to put up with, and had to, for all of these years!”

Hawk winked at the lass as his back was to his sisters and whispered, “I’ll bet they stuck their tongues out again.”

She peeked over Hawk’s shoulder at his sisters and sure enough they both had stuck out their tongues. She looked back at Hawk and giggled as she nodded the affirmative.

Hawk tossed a leg over his bike and sat upon the seat. He leaned forward on the handlebars and looked over to the lass who was eagerly awaiting the tale to continue. He began, but this time there was a quiet solitude to his voice. The lass looked over to the twins and they too had the look of deep sadness.

“If it’s too painful...” She laid her hand upon his and gave a gentle squeeze.

“It’s ok, the girls and I talk about it time to time. It helps us remember mom and dad.”

Kylee added “We talk about them all the time to remember. In many ways it keeps them alive in our memories.”

Hawk leaned forward and smiled gently at the lass as she had hung onto his every word all day. He seemed to know now would be no different. It seemed everywhere they went there was always someone that wanted to know all about the legend. The things that amazed the trio most, was the fact that even in the farthest reaches of the wilderness. People had the majority of the legend right! Perhaps some minor embellishments had snuck in, but in the most part there was always at least one person in each town that knew the legend and told it correctly. At least what they knew.

Now it was time for the part that most didn’t know. The part he didn’t like to tell as even fifteen years later the sorrow of that day returned. This was a part of their lives that was a time of sorrow, but, perhaps it was time for at least this young story teller to know.

So when she sat with the children, to tell her tales, she would know the truth and tell the tale correctly. So many years after his death, his legend lived on.

Hawk smiled warmly at the petite barmaid to assure her she wasn’t causing them too many unpleasant memories...

While his two sisters looked solemn, small smiles warmly appeared upon their faces. For all three it was a time of sadness when their parents died, but talking about them brought joy as well. It was as if they got another chance to celebrate their mom and dad’s lives.... once again their loving parents lived again within their words and memories.

Hawk looked at the twins, then at the barmaid he smiled again to reassure her and quietly spoke...

“It’s ok my lovely little lass. Let me see, it does bring back a lot of sorrowful memories, but also brings back a time of warmth... of...”

She could see him starting to drift through the shadows of times long past, into deep memories that flooded over not just him, but of his two sisters. The love and admiration for those memories touched her heart and she felt as if she too were traveling back and living memories that she had never experienced. She felt tears welling in her eyes just looking at the three and feeling their joy and their sadness.

For as he spoke it was as she too was there. Pulled into their past, reliving what had been lost to them in all but memory.

“I told you about dad allowing himself to age so he could be with mom to age together. They did have many wonderful years together and they came and visited us whenever they could at the school. That time I told you about was one of those wonderful times. They told us over and over how proud of us they were. The three of us loved them very much, not to mention just how proud to have them as parents.

Well the girls had just had their nineteenth birthday. I had turned twenty one earlier that year, it was late July and I was out on my ‘Walkabout’ Dad said it was an old Australian term for finding one’s self in the wilderness, which is pretty much what every student has to do to graduate from the hunters school. Students had to go out into the wilderness for thirty six days, which is the time our fathers mentor taught him to survive off the land. We take no food or water and only have a knife, hand axe and a small shovel.”

Keli chirped in, “Some of us take backpacks!”

“That’s true lass.” Hawk added, “Since the mutes and raiders are gone, most of the students are allowed packs with personal items and even weapons to hunt with.”

“All except our big brother.” Kylee tossed in teasingly, “You see Hawk demanded to test as his father had seventy something years after the apocalypse. He’s stubborn that way.”

The girls giggled as Hawk tried his best to ignore their teasing and continued.

“Seems if I remember right, it was in my third week out in what used to be known as the Wastelands, when word came that dad was dying. Kylee and Keli had already been notified and had left for home.”

Hawk gave the lass a slight smile.

“I kind of figured it was bad news when ‘Uncle’ Chet had me hunted down and picked up in a military chopper....uh, sorry helicopter.”

Hawk looked puzzled, shrugged and continued.

“You know, I never did ask Chet how he found me way out there. I was all by myself.... Hmmmm.. To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t exactly sure where I was at that time.” Hawk gave kind of an embarrassed grin as the girls laughed. The twins just shrugged their shoulders.

Hawk snapped out of his ponderings as the lass spoke. “ Chet... er the General Adams you mentioned was your uncle?”

“Heh, no lass, We just called him ‘Uncle Chet’ from the time we were old enough to talk. He was actually our godfather, but uncle was easier to say.”

“Yeah Kylee wasn’t really good with talking.” Blurled Keli.

Kylee reached over and smacked her sister on the arm and all four shared a much needed chuckle. Hawk smiled warmly at the lass and continued.

“Chet more or less became our counsel after dad passed on. Whenever we needed advise or had an idea we knew Chet would always respond as dad would have. It was truly a sad day when he too passed from this world. He was the last of our fathers era.”

The maid could see tears welling up in the trio’s eyes and it was obvious to her they missed their ‘Uncle’ very much. She looked over to this days’ companion as he still related his tale.

“There were vehicles as far as the eye could see heading into the small town as we flew over and landed in a field near our parents house.

As I ran toward the house, I found that our parents small community had all gathered outside of mom and dad’s house. As I got closer I saw people I recognized from business, government and the like, I got really worried.

I remember thinking, it had to be serious, I think that’s when it all started to sink in...

Our father was dying. Dying? But it couldn’t be, not yet. Not now I thought. Perhaps I still had a few days.

Once inside I knew just how serious it was as our families closest friends were there sitting, standing... waiting. Their faces said it all. I ran up the stairs and to be honest, I almost ran into the door because my eyes were filling with tears.”

He looked at the lass, then his sisters.

“IWe.. Never EVER, though of dad dying. We all knew the legend, hell, we ate meals with him, we played with him.

Other kids dad’s died, but ours never would. He hadn’t told us until we were much older about his decision to allow himself to age. I don’t think even then we ever dreamed of the idea he could actually die of old age as well. He had lived over two hundred years, to us his death wouldn’t ever happen, it couldn’t, this was Hawk, the legend.”

The twins had tears running down their cheeks. Hawk could see the pretty maids cheeks were wet as well. He felt wetness on his face and quickly brushed his own tears away as he tried his best to compose himself.

“There on the large bed laid dad with mom sitting next to him on a chair. She held his hand and they spoke quietly to one another.

In the room were my sisters and Chet, his wife Missy and the new President of the New United States! That’s when I pretty much started trembling. Everyone had tears in their eyes,

Christ I did my best to be strong like dad always told me to be. But it's different when it's your dad."

The twins were openly sobbing now and the lass stood on the curb tears running down her cheeks as Hawk continued.

"I walked over to dad and we hugged, then I hugged and kissed mom. Dad kept quietly talking to mom while I went around the room and greeted Chet, Missy and my sisters.

I started back toward the bed where my father lay, when everyone in the room kind of gasped as if we had been mildly shocked.

There was a slight strange glow coming from somewhere... everywhere. There was a bright light in the room, but we couldn't actually see where. I looked over towards dad and he was smiling."

Keli grinned and added, "Our big brother figured it out later that the reason dad was smiling, was because he had felt the tingling before and knew what was coming!"

"Yep, Keli's right. I guessed that dad felt it back just before the apocalypse. When he was first contacted. But at the time no one could have guessed what was about to happen. You see the room started getting brighter. We all were looking around for the source of the light when we noticed the light was actually coming together into four small orbs that appeared out of nowhere. The orbs started getting longer until they were about five feet high and about two feet in diameter. They..."

"They were breath taking....." Kylee added, "...they were columns of golden light with silver sparks?"

"That's how I would describe them Ky." Added Keli "Shimmering golden columns of light with sparkling silver accents."

Hawk chuckled at the girls and snorted "Christ Kel, you're describing aliens that are hundreds of thousands of years old.... maybe millions, not a damn ball gown!"

The girls started chuckling.

"Anyhow we could actually see them. The amazing thing was, not only see, but hear their thoughts.

They explained that the extra gene dad had allowed them to extend his life through the use of the base and other things. Also that extra gene dad had was the reason he couldn't use the Medcomp on mom to extend her life. They explained it all within a few seconds. Like they injected it into our minds.

Dad could have seen them if they had taken form as they had now done. They had found a way to slow their thoughts even slower than they had to do with dad. Without his extra genes, they had to, so the rest of us could hear them. Maybe hear isn't the right word. Think maybe?"

Hawk looked at the twins and they nodded back, though with a somewhat puzzled look. The ‘Old Ones’ had explained, but even to this day, the three were unsure of what the aliens had explained. They had the general idea and that was always good enough for their dad. So it was good enough for them.

“We could know what they were thinking, heheh, or at least wanted us to know, but I like to say heard. It was like me trying to push all of dad’s journals, centuries of notes and logs into your mind in a few seconds. You get everything, but retaining it all. Well you know what I’m saying anyhow...right?”

The lass just shrugged and grinned back at Hawk. She was following along, or at least thought she was, but shook her head in the affirmative. She just figured it was something you had to be there to fully appreciate.

“Mom sat there with her mouth open. Hell, I guess we all did. Dad chuckled and asked if everyone in the room was trying to catch flies. I guess we all would have laughed if we all weren’t so much in shock at the vision before us.

Then our heads started to ache, just a little, which soon passed. And then we could feel or hear or whatever as the aliens communicated with dad. It was more like we were eaves dropping. Later, after talking with my sisters I found out their heads ached, but for some reason mine never did. It wasn’t until later I found out I had the extra gene as well.

Their thoughts almost were reverberating within our minds. Almost as if the room was echoing.”

“You are the human known as Robert Hawk, our brethren had called to us about you, but we arrived far too late to help your world or to help them. We knew that those of our kind had perished when we could no longer sense their presence.”

“It was more a statement than a question.”

“Hawk just tell her the way it was” Keli added.

Hawk smiled at Keli and looked at the lass. His mind drifted back through the years.

“As I recall the alien spoke next. Heh, that is after my dad told them to call him just Hawk. He never liked being called anything but Hawk.”

“Kind of like you big brother?” Chided Keli.

The twins giggled, Hawk smiled at his sisters and continued but the lass noticed as he spoke his voice deepened when he talked as the aliens, but held back the urge to snicker at his dramatics.

“We have been observing you and your race. Since arriving a few of your years after our brethren called for help. We were too far away to arrive in time to help save your world, nor are we even sure we could have. We have watched as your race slowly fought its way back from the brink of extinction.”

Hawk rolled his head on the pillow and smiled at one of the columns of light.

“Thanks to the sacrifice of your kind my friends”

“Yes our race assisted yours, however we have no doubt that your kind would have survived even without our help. Be it known that through your efforts and our technology your race has made tremendous strides, even surpassing the point your civilization was at before what you call apocalypse...”

Your struggle over the last two centuries has show us things we have long ago forgotten. What it is to fight for what one believes in. What it is like to face the unknown, to see all that once was known to be destroyed, to see ones you care for die. Even death like our brethren faced we had forgotten, sacrifice all for another.

All these things we have observed and that... that taught us the most, was watching you finding someone to love, to bond with emotionally. Both times when you thought there was nothing left within you. By opening your heart, loving again you showed us the depth of the human spirit.

We have existed longer than your human minds can conceive. Sometime within that existence we lost that which made us feel, care about things other than our travels. We lost compassion for others, love for what was all around us.

As we evolved into beings of pure energy, we watched out planet, our solar system grow old and die. We have seen races, civilizations vanish. Perhaps it was too painful to us, we cannot remember, but we stopped caring. Something within your civilization brought out the need to care once again that must have been buried deep within our consciousness. We realize now, it was the human ability to sacrifice ones' self for the good of others.

Knowing your thoughts, your dedication to rebuilding your civilization, your pledge to those of us that gave their existence to your people, to sacrifice all so their lives would have been for naught. Those qualities human named Hawk... Those are the qualities that have show us our brethren did not perish in vain. You are truly worthy of their sacrifice and your race worthy of yours...

“I did no more than...” Hawk interrupted, but the aliens continued over his protest.

“We knew your thoughts all these years, you may deceive others but we know the severe suffering you did over that time frame, the anguish of your decisions, the loss of loved ones, of those under your command.”

“There were tears in dad’s eyes and mom laid her head upon dad’s shoulder. She too was weeping, but this time it was more for the pride she felt for him than sorrow. She had told us how dad always felt he had let everyone down. That he had never done enough. Now he had not just his friends and family telling him he did well, but the aliens that had been observing us all this time since their arrival on Earth.”

“It is, human called Hawk, with deep honor we have decided to offer you what our brethren offered you over two hundred years ago. Then you chose to stay with your planet, your people. Now we make the offer once again now that your mortal life is at its end. We can take your consciousness from your dying body and you will be able to travel with us throughout the galaxies for as long as you wish. You will see things never dreamed of or even conceived of by your species.... You can live as long as....”

Hawk smiled and with a weak gesture of his hand interrupted the alien.

“I thank you my friends for your kind offer, but here is my family, my friends, my world. I made the decision to allow myself to grow old. To die. I deeply thank you for your offer my friends, but I prefer to die here among those I love... The world I fought to keep.... When the time comes, I will go with no regrets.”

Hawk’s voice was now very weak and those in the room also sensed what was about to come. Even the aliens seemed to sense there was no use in offering something that would not be accepted. That the one they had watched all these years was about to perish.

“Then human called Hawk, we shall depart your world, knowing full well it is once again thriving and prosperous. That your people will survive. Even without your guidance... We bid you.... farewell... “

The columns of light grew fainter, as their final thoughts echoed still within their minds the last thing we heard was.

“Our friend...”

Chapter 28.

“We were so proud of dad.” Keli mused wiping away a tear.

“We loved him so very much, lass.” Added Kylee.

“We still miss.” Keli replied as tears flowed once again. She could say no more as she struggled to control her emotions.

The girls seemed to gather themselves as Hawk continued.

“Mom sat beside dad’s bed, holding his hand to her breast, tears streaming down her cheek. We all could see dad give her hands a little squeeze and he looked at all of us standing there.... He looked back to mom and said weakly.”

“You know my love, I’ve led an amazing life. I’ve had three wonderful wives. Raised children I’m so proud of...”

“Shhhh.... Dear.”

Dad smiled a weak smile at his wife. A tear trickled down his cheek.

“I’ve seen more than any man should, and as much as I love you my love.

I’m really so very tired...

I have traveled so far.....

I’m really.... so.... Sleepy.... So tired my love.”

“Mom, smiled that wonderfully warm smile of hers at dad. She got up on the bed and laid next to him gently resting his head upon her shoulder, then quietly whispered,”

“Then sleep well my love.”

“Dad, slowly closed his eyes, his hand went limp. Mom laid it gently to his side, she stroked his brow softly and quietly whispered to us.

“ Shhhh... My love is finally at peace.... He sleeps.”

The lass who was sobbing quietly, looked over to Hawk. He had tears in his eyes and tried to hide the emotions that had surfaced, then he looked to the twins who were furiously wiping tears from their cheeks as well.

The pretty little barmaid that had kept him company all day and listened so eagerly to his tales leaned over to him and hugged him. She kissed him on the cheek sobbing all the time.

“I can see how much all of you loved your dad.”

Hawk cleared his throat and wiped his eyes and continued,

“That day the legend died. We could hear the loud screams of disbelief from other parts of the house as the word got out dad had died. Then within seconds from out in the street, then the small town as word spread.”

“Our nation mourned for a year. The legend was dead! We all said it, but after all those years, decades, we knew him, it was hard to accept.”

Keli smiled weakly and added, “The nation cried and wanted our father to be laid in state, which mother agreed to.”

“Although dad would have never wanted it that way.” Added Kylee.

Keli looked at the lass. “Dad always wanted to have a hunters funeral, but mom, wise as always, knew the nation needed to have him buried where all those that admired the man or at least the legend... could come and visit his tomb. So there was part hunters funeral, and his ashes were interred in his monument. There in the city he strove all those years to see rebuilt into something the country could be proud of, his ashes were laid to rest. Entombed in marble for eternity. “

The four momentarily paused to dry their eyes, to remember. Then Hawk looked at the lass and continued.

Sadly our mother passed away five months later. The doctors never found what the cause was. But we three knew... She just wanted to be with her love. Mother had mourned dad day and night. She ate and went about her daily business, but we could see it in her eyes, he was gone and she missed him so. Part of her had died that day as well. Even though she continued to function normally, the light in her had gone out. She was so sad those last month's. She so missed her love. “

Kylee picked up as Hawk choked back a sob.

“So at long last they were once again together....”

Hawk slowly straightened up in the seat of his cycle and with a tear in his eye looked at the young woman.

“As much as I loved your company lass, we really must be off. Thieves and robbers and the like you know.”

“Sir, I mean, Hawk. Will you ever come back by this way? If you do...”

“I’m sorry lass, I won’t. We’re on our way towards the Mediterranean area after we take care of business over the Alps. There’s a lot of trouble back in the inland areas.”

“Yeah just waiting for us to come and kick ass!” Kylee added as she composed herself quickly wiping her tear stained cheek.

“Kylee!! Watch your mouth, we ladies we don’t kick ass. We merely hand out attitude adjustments!” Keli added with a smile, after a rather loud sniff.

All four laughed, then the lass stood back from the curb as Hawk shifted the cycle into gear. The lass blew him a kiss and he smiled back at her, looked at the long road ahead and cranked the throttle.

As his bike reached the top of the hill he stopped and yelled at the twins...

“YOU ALL COMING? OR AM I GOING TO HAVE ALL THE FUN ALL BY MYSELF!!”

And with another crank of the throttle he vanished from the maids view as she sighed.

The maid looked at the girls and spoke, “Hawk told me about the question his dad, uhh, your dad asked him back at the campfire. You know the one about what is the first...”

“...It’s how do you rebuild a civilization?” Kylee replied.

“Ah, yes, that was it. How does one go about rebuilding a civilization?”

“That lass you’ll have to find out for yourself, once you do.”

This time it was the lass that interrupted, “I know, I know...” She grinned at the duo as Kylee tossed on her helmet and gave a quick wave to the lass and she too, like her brother, sped up the road and vanished out of sight.

Keli, put on her helmet and raised the visor. She looked over to Hawk’s new admirer.

“You know, Hawk usually ends the story saying the ‘legend died that day ‘But the truth be told The aliens didn’t leave Earth, they stuck around. They asked us if we would be interested in taking over where our dad left off. There was still much to do overseas... here...”

Hawk is the only one of us that has the extra gene that allows him to live as long as he wants. The aliens did adjust the base where we all can used it is we get critically injured and the other

things dad had. But Kylee and I will continue to age and eventually will leave Hawk to carry on by himself.”

“I’m, sorry to hear....”

Keli reached over and patted the lass on the arm.

“Don’t be, Kylee and I want to find mates, get married someday, have families. Our brother will continue on without us just fine without us holding his hand.”

Keli grinned at the maid.

“Who knows how long he’ll live, but when you think of Hawk’s legend, don’t feel bad. You see my brother doesn’t realize it, but the legend didn’t die with dad, it still continues, through his son.”

“And his daughters!” The pretty lass added.

With that Keli beamed a wide smile at the maiden, slammed down the visor on her helmet and over the hill she vanished as her siblings had a few minutes before.

The young lass was smiling from ear to ear, turned and slowly walked back to the stairs and up to the door. She looked down at her foot upon the stair. The day’s wonderful events echoed through her mind. She looked down as she took another step, a wide grin appeared upon her lips.

“How do you rebuild a civilization?”

She looked to the hill that the three had vanished over, then back at her foot on the stair.

“One step at a time!!!” She whispered.... “One step at a time.”

She momentarily paused at the top of the stairs and looked off in the direction the three at gone.

A warm smile upon her lips and a knowing look upon her face she sighed.

“And your dad would be so proud.... of all of you!”

She stepped through the door and it slowly closed behind her....

Chapter 29.

The elderly woman peered from the window of her office, looking wistfully past the lawn and to the bustling city beyond. The sun was shining glistening off the high ebony colored iron fence making it hard to see the street on its other side. Birds flittered about in the spring breezes, darting among the rose bushes that grew in the garden near the fence. She sighed as her thoughts returned to the present. She slowly turned and smiled as the young man beside her spoke.

“Wow.... Madam President that was incredible. I felt as if I were there. I mean I know you’re a great speaker, but to be able to tell a story that well, makes me think that perhaps you should have not have hired me to write the Hawk family story, but done it yourself. I am but a mere journalist and writer, but you, the way you retell stories.... Incredible!!!”

The elderly lady walked toward her desk and leaned upon it, “Oh Charlie, Flattering me will get you nowhere! You have to get all of my dad’s papers, his four books and all those decades of his reports, and journals, sort through everything and put them in some sort of chronological order. Dear me I’d never be able to do that. Why I’m an old lady now.”

“Madam President, you may be getting old but....”

“Now Charlie, I warned you about flattery.” She said with a slight grin upon her lips.

“You must take after your dad.” He paused grinned at the President, then continued, “Speaking of which his museum will sure be something when it opens ma’am.”

“That it will Charlie, that it will.” She walked around to the front of her desk, leaned back upon it and folded her arms, her eyes ever looking at the man before her as he added.

“It seems there are rumors that your dad had a lot of artifacts from his adventures.”

“Ok Charles, just for you,” She chuckled, “It’ll get out eventually though. Remember I told you the aliens came to us and asked if we’d care to continue dad’s work?”

“Yes ma’am, but...”

“When we jumped at the chance they took us to the base their predecessors had made for dad. In one large room we found, things Charlie. Things that dad had saved throughout his life.”

“May I ask what ma’am?”

President Keli Hawk chuckled once more at Charlie's childlike glee at finding out something new about her father. Not to mention although he had never stated the fact, she knew well that her dad was Charlie's hero. She looked at his young exuberance and teased him with a few tidbits as to what was coming when the museum opened.

"Well let's see Charlie... Every item dad had written a short note about why he kept it. There was the rifle he had used to shoot his best friend. We always thought he had used his 'alien made' rifle, but it was an old .308 sniper rifle that he never could bring himself to use again... There were the ropes that Cordon had tied Aunt Keli to the tree that fateful night. As you know she was my namesake. Some Captain gave him a pistol he had dropped after shooting his brother in the back, which the Captain had been keeping for years. Remember I told you about the trial?"

"Oh right! Yes ma'am I remember."

Keli turned toward Charlie as if remembering something, then added, "The little tavern maid I told you about? Well when Kylee was elected to the Eurasian Governorship, she sent her congratulations, a really nice letter and a picture her neighbor took of the four of us in the street that day. It looked like she took it from a second story window." Keli grinned, "Plus she made sure she let us know she did figure out Hawk's Riddle that day."

"Oh yes the riddle, Ma'am. The civilization one."

"Back then it wasn't so well known, Charlie." Before Keli could continue Charlie inquired.

"Ma'am? Speaking of riddles. Your dad, his legend mentions several various publications I've read, some over one hundred years old."

"Go ahead Charlie."

"Well ma'am, many of them said he was over seven feet tall and his eyes glowed red..."

Charlie was interrupted by Keli's musical laugh, "CHARLIE! Shame on you. Believing those old tales."

"So they weren't true." He chuckled, "It's just strange so many tales, the same, you know over the years."

Keli walked over to the journalist and with a smile whispered..

"Shhhh, don't tell anyone but dad was only about six foot, maybe a little taller."

Charlie frowned a bit, "I know that ma'am."

Keli laughed again, then added.

“I will tell you a secret though Charlie and you may put it in the Hawk family book. My dad’s eyes did in fact glow red.”

This time it was Charlie that interrupted with a muffled snort.

“Sure they did Madam President.” He started to laugh, until he saw the serious look upon the President’s face.

“My sister and I were about twelve, Hawk was around fourteen. Mom and dad came to visit us at school. The one in the south. We were studying swamps and things in them. One evening we were sitting around the campfire when word arrived that the then President canceled the launch of the first mission to the Moon. It seemed he thought it was too dangerous, even with the new technology dad had provided from the alien data base.”

“Canceled? Ma’am, the mission to the Moon took place.”

Keli roared with laughter!

“You’re damned straight it did once dad got to D.C. and read them the riot act!” Keli paused, then continued.

“That night, once the messenger brought our father the word. He leapt up and started cussing a blue streak. We never had seen him that mad in all our lives! Charlie, our dad turned around and his eyes were glowing red! Little Hawk as he was known back then, ran up to dad and hugged him, along with mother. Mom told us she would tell us all about it in the morning.”

She paused and grinned at Charlie, “Christ Charlie, none of us kids slept that night, we were all afraid something was wrong with our father. My sister and I cried all night long.”

“So Hawk’s eyes really did glow red? Those old stories were right?”

“Yes Charlie, they were right. Our parents told us the next morning before they left, at least as near as dad could guess. He figured it had to do with being in the Medcomp during the Apocalypse. He didn’t know for sure as some radiation did slip by the field the aliens threw up. Perhaps it was some of that radiation that hit the Medcomp, but he had the ability to completely dilate his eyes! He actually could see in the dark about three times better than a normal person. Well nearby that is, beyond fifty yards or so his night vision was reduced somewhat.”

“You mean like some cats have red eyes if light hits them just right at night?”

Keli smiled and nodded an affirmative. “Dad thought that’s also why his hair turned from the salt and pepper gray to that great silverish color he always had. When we were allowed to use the Medcomp to repair damage to us, it never changed our eyes or hair. And Hawk, our brother,

has the same gene dad had and his hair is normal. It must be as dad figured, it must have been the radiation.”

“Wow, Ma’am and all these years I thought.” Charlie’s voice trailed off.

Keli smiled warmly and returned to the conversation they were having before. “We were talking about things we found in dad’s base and in the attic at home?”

“Forgive me President Hawk.” He paused, “President Hawk. Every one said you dropped your late husband’s name when you ran for office? I know you didn’t do it for the recognition.”

“The truth is Charlie...” She laughed, “...is a really long story and my husband actually suggested it! Someday I’ll tell you that one.”

Keli gave a little frown and spoke softly.

“The old items Charlie?”

“Oh, I am so sorry ma’am, I keep getting off the track. There is so much I thought I knew, yet I find that even my book didn’t even scratch the surface of your dad’s life.”

“That’s understandable Charlie. Many more than you have discovered that very same thing!” Keli laughed and continued.

“Just a few more of the things we found...” Her memory drifted back to those days she and Hawk cleaned out the base to create a museum for their dad. “....There is even an old disk of some kind the aliens took some video off of for us. The disk I think was called a DCD or something like that. Kind of like the crystal recorders we use now, but it was flat and made of some sort of plastic. It was of the days or weeks right after the Apocalypse of some of the survivors and documents some of those days. Kind of a video journal. They imprinted into our minds how to use the computer that was in the base. They fixed most of the things that had been damaged, but lost data was still just as lost.”

Keli grinned, “But Charlie, we have several months of viewing. Video records from before the apocalypse that was saved by the aliens that perished. Old movies, news footage, things dad never knew he had.”

“Good God! Madam President that would be incredible!! What a find!”

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg Charlie. The three of us decided that we would eventually build a museum to honor dad and put all that stuff in it. The world should know everything the good and the bad, we think he would have wanted it that way. Of course Hawk still being overseas and Kylee passing, it’s all fallen to me now. Dad’s legacy will be up to you to assemble. At some point I’ll send for you and you and your team will be the first non-Hawk to ever enter the underground base the aliens built for our dad.”

Charlie stood there dumbfounded and it must have shown as Keli walked over to him. She put her arm through the young biographers arm and started walking toward the door of the Oval Office, but he stopped, looked at Keli and added...

"I know about you and I know your sister Kylee was the first Governor General of Eurasia many years later, they became part of the United States of Earth. Plus Kylee was the first and last Governor General due to the bill she helped write making each governor have as much authority as Governors here in the states. They have congressional representation like any other state. And eventually they voted to become the newest block of states to the union."

He paused as if to remember correctly the events in order.

"Hmmm... Ah! I know she was married for thirty years and her husband died after that horrible accident. I know she never remarried nor had children. And may I add, I was deeply saddened to learn of her death just after your election to your second term as President. It must have been such a sad time in what should have been time for celebration."

Keli patted his hand and smiled at her companion, who had hung onto her every word for the last several days.

"Thank you Charlie you're such a kind caring person, but then that's why I hired you to write the true 'Hawk's Legend'. I know you'll do a fine job! Just as you have done with your series of books on dad."

"Thank you ma'am, but what of your brother Hawk? I haven't heard much about him for a while..."

Keli turned to Charlie and with a warm grin added,

"Oh you know Hawk! A typical male who never writes. The last letter I received about a month ago, he said he was off to some small village somewhere east of the Black sea. Seems there were some groups of bandits robbing, raping and looting. Just what my brother loves to get involved in. I pretty much think he'll keep on going until all of the world is resettled. Heh, heh, or at least I think he'd like to. But, just between you and I Charlie..."

Keli paused and a warm smile passed her lips, "...His last few letters, well, without saying so I think he's starting to think about settling down in, oh maybe in twenty or thirty more years."

They both chuckled at the notion, but deep down inside really wondered if that might not have some truth to it.

"Well ma'am he is your father's son. But if he does retire in a few decades it will be a sad day for us. I mean ma'am, for the first time that anyone can remember, no Hawk out there

protecting settlers. Until then he's still quite the guy to be out there protecting folks. Guess he always will be. Quite the guy, I mean."

"That he is Charlie. That he is."

"Not to mention you ma'am, all you've accomplished.
First woman President. First daughter of a President to be elected President."

"Oh hush now you'll give an old lady a big head..."

"Let's not forget all the things that have happened since you were elected. First mission to Mars and now small colonies on both the moon and Mars."

"Charlie you know I can't take credit for that. Most of the data came from the computers the three of us got to access in dad's bunker. We only added to the data our father gave humanity a few decades before."

"Ok so the 'Old Ones' left us a few surprises to boost our knowledge, but it was you that implemented the programs, found the additional data to begin with."

Keli glanced at the mirror hanging on the Oval office's wall and primped her hair.

"You look fine President Hawk!"

"President only for a few more minutes Charlie."

Keli laughed and nodded toward the door. "In a few..."

She stopped, sighed, glanced toward the door and once again started walking toward it.

"...I'll walk through that door and I'll turn over the keys to the White House to the new President. And I'll get to be just plain old Keli Hawk once again."

"Ma'am....Trust me, you were never just plain anything. You have to remember I grew up on tales of you, your sister and brother.

Not to mention stories of your dad, his wives. My God Ma'am when I stop to think about it, what a family you all were, errr... are... Have! Are we ever going to miss you."

Keli once again patted the young man's arm and they walked toward the door, smiling all the way. She paused once again and looked toward her companion.

"I tell you what Charlie. My daughter is coming tomorrow to take me back to stay with her and the grandchildren. Why don't you come over to the park tomorrow morning. You know at dad's monument. I'll introduce you to my family."

“I’d love to ma’am. I was so sorry to hear about your son-in-law’s death last year. How’s your daughter doing? And the kids?”

“Fine Charlie fine. The boys miss their dad, but my daughter keeps filling them with stories about him. He was in the military you know and had plenty of action overseas. Not to mention tales about their grandpa.”

She chuckled and added, “Those grandkids of mine seems to understand about everything they’re told. Except maybe why I changed my name back to Hawk after my husband died. They don’t quite understand politics Charlie. And to be honest I hope they never have to....”

Keli grinned as Charlie opened the door for her and the secret service and soldiers snapped to attention. She looked over to Charlie and playfully nudged him with her arm.

“After all Charlie, they’re Hawks. We always manage to get by. They understand their father was a hero and died saving all those people. They even understand why their dad took the Hawk surname, instead of my daughter taking his... or at least as best as they can at that age.”

The young writer just smiled and patted Keli’s hand and nodded in acknowledgment. The Hawks always did seem to survive through the good and the bad, the world cherished them.

He had written columns for his paper and published a couple of books about the legend Hawk and his family. Charlie had been friends with Keli when she first started running for President. She knew he would give their family name the credit it was due.

Perhaps that was why the President had chosen him, or perhaps it was because Charlie knew more about their family than any other person alive. He admired the entire family. And now he would finally get to meet the President’s grandchildren that she talked about so much.

He opened the door to exit the hall of the west wing of the White House pausing only for a minute.

He watched the President walk down the hall toward the exit with her entourage of secret service close behind. She paused and turned.

“Tomorrow morning, ten o’clock!”

“I’ll be there Madam President.”

The guards opened the door to the awaiting limousine. Outside stood the staff and other well wishers cheering, crying, applauding all for the most loved woman of these times.

Charlie noticed her turn and with a tear in her eye glance over her surroundings. She smiled warmly and slid into the door of the limo.

She would be missed!

Chapter 30.

Charlie walked along the sidewalk wondering at the beauty of the day. The late morning sun heralded the late spring days just before the summer heat. The birds sang loudly as if saying farewell to a dynasty that had been around what seemed forever. It was a day of sadness for him and the nation, as the last Hawk no longer was in charge of the country and would soon leave to her family's home. Sure there had been gaps when no Hawk was in charge, but now there would be no Hawk in any form of leadership, nor to use as consul. No Hawk directing some department or running behind the scenes. The thought of no Hawks in power in the continental U.S. he found somewhat unsettling.

For as long as Charlie could remember there had been stories of one or more about the Hawks floating around. Now this country was able to stand tall once again and all knew that this day would come. Sure he admitted to himself there had been other Presidents, but only because the three Hawks were overseas doing what they did best. Even their parents were in D.C. doing something now and then over the years.

"My God no Hawk in power, no Hawk leading. The President's brother is so far away, they never heard much from him. Just the stories trickling out from whatever region he is in. Things will just not be the same. He sighed, things always change. He sighed again.

Charlie strolled along the wide sidewalk and glanced over to the narrow reflection pool that lay aside and marveled at the calmness of the waters. A few ducks had stopped by to rest and swim. Children played in the distance darting among the park benches as their parents looked on. It was a beautiful day!

Ahead he saw Keli standing gazing up at her dad's statue in reverence from a distance. He had seen her there before many times over the years. Every time of crisis, she would visit her dad's statue as if to seek solitude or perhaps guidance. Charlie could see why, for it was an impressive statue. The statue stood upon Hawk's final resting place.

Charlie always wondered why such a famous man had such a simple resting place, that is until he became involved with the Hawk's history. That would have been the way Hawk would have wanted it... Perhaps Hawk might well have frowned at the statue atop his monument. Hawk always thought himself a simple man of little importance. Keli had said to her father's dying day, meeting aliens, living for several hundred years, seeing and doing all that he had... Hawk considered himself just another man.

Charlie stopped near the statue and waved as Keli headed in his direction. He turned and looked at the statue as he had so many times before. Still amazed at how it affected him emotionally. This was his hero's resting place.

The statue sat upon a granite mausoleum about five feet high and was crafted from the finest bronze. It depicted Hawk sitting upon his cycle with two women, one on each side of Hawk. The bronze figures and motorcycle stood upon a marble outcrop placed upon the granite tomb that was looking out over the busy park. It appeared as if they were still on guard, protecting, waiting. At the base of each of the woman's feet, their name was inscribed, but all that knew the legend needed no name plates.

As she approached she wiped a tear from her eye and smiled that wonderfully warm smile that Keli had always had.

Charlie held out his hand, but Keli hugged him instead....

"Ma'am..."

"Oh hush Charlie, I'm not the President any more and I can damn well hug my favorite writer and friend if I want to."

Charlie's face started to redden and Keli noticed.

Look Charlie I've been working with you for years and for several months now organizing all my dad's stuff, things we've accumulated over the years, and I consider you to be my long time friend."

"Thank you ma'am, I too....."

"And stop calling me ma'am, My name is Keli and..."

"And you are and always be President Hawk to me ma'am! I'm sorry, you are my friend and I hope you always will be ma'am. But to call you by your first name? My mother would crawl out of her grave and smack me along side of my head, for showing poor etiquette."

"Ok Charlie, have it your way." Keli laughed. "Ma'am it is then and I'll call you, uhh.. Charlie!"

They both smiled, then as quick as the smile appeared, Keli's smile became a wide grin as she heard.

"GRAMMA.....GRAMMA!!"

Charlie turned to see a lovely raven haired woman standing waving at the two, while two boys came running down the wide path toward Keli. She stooped as the smallest ran into her arms, followed by the biggest. She kissed them and hugged them both, then rose and turned toward Charlie.

"Charlie these are my two grandchildren..."

“I’m not a graham children gramma..”

“She said grand not graham, dummy!”

“Boys!”

They both calmed down, looked at their feet and quietly chimed in unison, “Yes ma’am.”

Keli beamed from ear to ear as she introduced her daughter, Kay. Then tussled the hair of the youngest.

“This here chatty one is my youngest ‘graham’ child, his name is John. He’s four. ”

“Awww.. gramma.. four and a half!”

“He was named after his daddy!”

She then pulled the oldest to her side as he kept struggling to run over to the statue and looked down at him.

“And this one here is named Robert after...”

“After my great grandpa Hawk!” He blurted out proudly as he stuck out his chest. Robert pulled away as he and his brother were now free from Keli’s grasp. They all chuckled as the young ones ran over to the statue followed by his big brother.

“Robert’s nine and a spitting image of dad. He’s been after his mom to let him go to Hunters school since we made the mistake of telling him his great grandpa started it. “

“Well he is old enough ma’am.”

“Oh Charles, just because my sister, brother and I all started before we were nine, doesn’t mean my grandkids will.” She laughed, “My daughter almost didn’t speak to me for a week when I told Robert how old we really were.”

Keli’s daughter looked over to Charlie and laughed.

“That was only one of many mistakes we made. The first was when mom put him on her knee and started telling him Grandpa stories. The other was telling him the minimum age to enroll now, not the age mother was when she and her siblings were when they started! Then once he found out we were coming here to get mom, well there was no keeping him away from coming to see his great granddad’s statue.”

She wrinkled her nose at her mom and got one right back. Charlie started to speak, but John turned and looked at his mom and asked.

“Is that grampa on the alien bike?” Chirped John.

Robert put his hands on his hips and frowned at his little brother, while Keli and her daughter just rolled their eyes knowing what was about to come.

“No silly it’s your great grampa and IT’S NOT A BIKE! It’s a motorcycle!”

“Is that gramma? It’s looks like gramma...”

“No John, that’s grammas’ mom Kylee.” Kay replied.

“Gramma? What’s the sign say?”

Before Keli could speak, Robert once more frowned and gently moved his brother to the side.

“It says....

This memorial is dedicated to the memory of Hawk.

The man who gave so much for so long, so this country could once again be reunited.

We are forever grateful and he will live forever in the spirit of this country.”

Young Robert turned to his grandmother and looked puzzled.

“Yes Robert?”

“Grandma? If I’m named after Great Grandpa Hawk. Why doesn’t the statue say Robert Hawk?”

Keli, just grinned.

“Robert I don’t think you’d fully understand until you’re older, let’s just say that’s the way your great grandfather liked it.”

Robert’s puzzled look turned into a frown. Then a slight smile formed upon his lips and finally he burst into a wide grin.

“Well then I want to be called just plain old Hawk from now on!!”

He got a serious look on his face and added...

“At least until I’m old enough to understand.”

Keli and Charlie just laughed as the boys ran over to their mother who had sat on one of the many benches that encircled the monument. She arose as the boys tugged at her hand. Charlie knew the time had come to say his good-bys to his long time friend.

Keli reached up and hugged Charlie once more and said her farewells as she looked one last time at her dad and mother, then over to her aunt, then once again to the face of the bronze Hawk...

"I'm sure going to miss talking to you dad... and Mom."

She then looked over to Robert and nodded to Charlie.

"Just like my dad. Confident and fearless."

Charlie smiled back.

"And the legend will continue Madam President?"

"Perhaps Charlie..... Perhaps..... Time will tell."

She turned and Charlie watched the four of them walk away. Arm in arm with her daughter as the two lads skipped around the two women.

He watched as the four vanished beyond a small rise in the distance, then turned and looked up at the statue. Centuries of Hawks leadership was ending that day, but Charlie smiled warmly as Hawk's bronze eyes seemed to stare down at him.

This was a sad day for him, but then there was all the work he had to do so the legend would never die.

He glanced toward the way Keli had gone, Charlie smiled and spoke solemnly in almost a whisper.

"After all, Madam President...."

He then turned and walked away into the mid morning sun.

"....We must have our legends!"

The End.