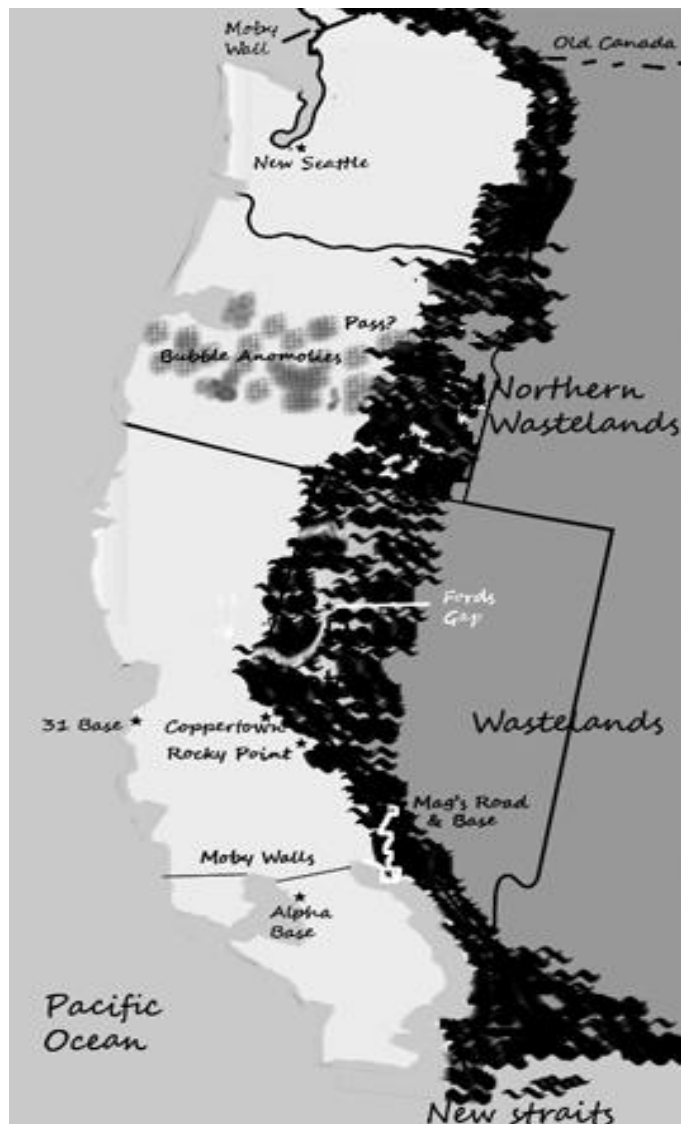


# Hawk's Legend III

“West Coast Journals.”

By

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## Chapter 1.

**“Ok gang!”** Charlie quieted the small team of researchers. “As you all know this was the Hawk’s house for many generations and is in the process of becoming a museum for The Hawk family of the legends. These three adjoining rooms have all Hawk’s amassed documents and relics. Over two hundred and thirty years worth. Not to mention some things of his children and their adventures. Our job is to get all documents and papers, whatever we find here in order for that museum and to write a book on the complete Hawk’s legend....”

“Or books it appears, Chuck.” It was Tom Simmons that interrupted.

“You’re the only one that calls me Chuck, Tom, it would be nice if you stopped someday.”

“Christ, Chuck. I’ve know you all my life, been your partner and publisher for eleven years now.” He grinned, “you’ll always be Chucky to me.”

Charlie frowned as the two women in the team chuckled. It was fun to watch the two guys banter. It was one of the reason Sue and Deb had been with the team for the last two years. Charlie broke the lightness of the moment.

“Ok enough! Tom’s funny, ha-ha, now let’s get to work. Funny Tom can go into the huge room at the end. Girls, we need to move all these boxes and stuff back against the wall and I’ll move that big table over to here.” He pointed to where he was standing. “I can move that floor lamp over here.” Charlie looked around the large room where they were standing and pointed to a spot in the middle of the room. “We can stack the boxes and things we go through there.”

Remembering the last conversation he had with President Keli Hawk before she went back to Michigan with her daughter and grandsons, he smiled warmly.

“President Hawk told me she and the staff kept these rooms spotless, but they never moved anything from where their parents had left them.... So for God’s sake people, handle with care! Depending on when Hawk started keeping journals, there could be some documents over two hundred years old.”

The team quickly, but carefully went about their business for several hours. They moved sorted, stacked, until a neat work area had been created. They proceeded to move things around that were labeled to get some semblance of order. Charlie stood looking at the stacks of boxes while slowly shaking his head at the amassed materials when one of the girls let out a surprised shout.

**“Charlie!! Look!”** Charlie’s neck popped as he twisted to see what one of his assistants was shrieking about. “My God Charlie, look at this box!... and there’s another under this one!” Sue, his assistant squealed with glee as she held the side of an old tarp up. “They were under here.”

Charlie squinted in the poorly lit room. “Good God! ‘The West Coast Campaign.’ It can’t be, not this easy?”

Sue tossed the tarp back and ran her fingers through the boxes, pulled small leather bound books out, reading off the labels. “Charlie, Deb, it looks complete.”

“The president said everything her dad had had were in these rooms somewhere. All we’d have to do is dig through the dust.” He laughed, “Didn’t expect it would be this easy.” He grabbed one of the boxes and gently laid it on the large table as his assistants moved the piles of documents that were on it off. Hurriedly Charlie stacked the papers, books and other files in what looked to be some semblance of order. One of the girls adjusted the floor lamp to show light more directly on the table.

“Is it all there Charlie?” Deb impatiently asked.

“It appears it is. I’ll bet all of it is in these two boxes.”

Before too long the trio had assembled both boxes into huge piles along the back of the table and Charlie started reading through the documents. The girls waited impatiently. Grinning at the find and at Charlie’s excitement of getting to read the missing thirty years of his hero’s life after the loss of his second wife Keli and before he had met his late wife Kylee.

The boxes had been buried back under some old tarps and building materials decades before. Now Charlie could fill in the much sought after gaps during those years.

Before President Keli Hawk was to leave D.C. she led Charlie to the same house Hawk had carried her mother Kylee over the doorstep when they first arrived in the city. It was here on the third floor Hawk had brought most of the things he had amassed over the years. The kids had brought more from the bunker over the years after their dads death. Now in the poorly lit rooms the team of researchers were discovering so much of Hawk’s forgotten life.

Now within his trembling hands lay what they had sought for the last few weeks. Charlie began to mumble as the girls looked at each other, frowned and looked back to Charlie.

Suddenly, Tom the last of their group strolled through the door as the girls quickly filled him in on the events. All the time Charlie never looked up once from his reading. Finally it was Tom that broke the silence being tired of standing there watching his friend move his lips while he read.

“Chuck dammit! All of us want to hear what you found!”

Charlie looked up and grinned. “Hear? You should see.” He laid out some hand drawings of the west coast. In each side Hawk had neatly written miles, dimensions, even important landmarks and battles. Each had been given a page reference of corresponding pages describing what had occurred. Other maps showed things Hawk called bubbled and their locations. Various other maps abounded, some hand drawn others were old military maps.

Tom dropped down into a chair next to Charlie. “My God, Chuck, this is....”

“Oh Hell yeah! Each number is either a page, report or journal entry! Guys we found it! Just about every map is formatted this way.”

Deb pointed to the full map of California and the west coast. “Was Hawk the first to get around the Rockies to map all this?”

Charlie chuckled, “No Deb. I’m guessing this is a combination of existing maps and things he noted that might not have been right on them when they were drawn up for the campaign. See here?” He pointed to some scribbling on one of the margins. “Look, it says, ‘Possible pass over Rockies, check later.’ I remember something about Hawk’s friend I think his name was Ben. He and his family crossing into the Wastelands. This may be where Ben and his family crossed.”

“Who’s Ben?” Chirped Sue.

Tom smiled and snapped back teasingly, “Who the hell cares? Keep reading Chuck!”

Charlie grinned and pointed to another spot farther to the north. “This is the area Virginia’s group crossed. Try to find exact route.” He pointed to the lower part of the coast. “Look here’s the rift along the Rockies that almost broke California loose from the mountains. Well, that is it did for three hundred miles to the north from....”

Sue interrupted, “Broke loose, it didn’t break loose.”

Charlie gave her a small frown and explained. “Ok as you know during the apocalypse over a hundred miles of the southwest United States sunk into the ocean. The southern parts Texas, Arizona and California as well as two hundred miles of northern Mexico. The two oceans joined and the Rockies heaved over one thousand feet higher. The Rockies....”

Charlie pointed to the map, “...extend from the new straights all the way up to parts of old Canada, then turned west and extend over three hundred miles into the Pacific. There are no known paths, roads or other crossings anywhere in the Rockies even though people have been crossing there since the apocalypse. None of the survivors really knew where they crossed at...”

This time it was Tom that interrupted, “So! That’s what Hawk marked on these maps. Locations he had been told to check, where survivors he talked to said they thought they had crossed at?”

“Looks like it Tom, after all it’s near those spots that we now have highways over and through the Rockies.”

But Charlie pointed back down to the map. “Here, See? Look where Hawk’s drawn in the rift along the Rockies for almost three hundred miles from the straights. See how it separates Southern California from the Rockies? That rift is thirty miles wide at most parts, except right here at the end where it tapers down to only a few miles wide.”

“Wow and Hawk explored all that? Deb asked.

“Doubt it Deb, but one never knows. Maybe once we read more,” Charlie pointed to the stacks of documents, “maybe we’ll find out.”

Tom pointed at another map. “Look here guys, here at the north end of the rift across the land to the ocean side it says, “The first base established to combat the mutants and reclaim Ca.”

“What the hell is ‘ca’” Sue asked making the sound ‘caa’.

“I think it was the way they abbreviated the state back in Hawk’s day. Charlie said as he looked up at the girls. Noting a puzzled look on their faces, he added. “I’m not sure but I think people got tired of writing state names on something and started abbreviating the names with a few letters.”

Deb nudged Sue in the arm. “Not everyone had electronic mail back then. Only the rich, so the poor had to send mail on horses. Or something like that.”

Charlie grinned, but decided this was not the time for another history lesson. He pointed back down at the map and added, “See there is a reference number here about the first base established. J2-p1.”

Tom looked at Charlie, “Journal 2 page 1, maybe?”

Charlie shrugged, “Good a guess as any.” He looked through the journals and found one marked with only a plain roman numeral II. “Damned if you didn’t hit that one on the head Tom. Charlie opened to the first page as the girls sat to listen. Charlie started to read....

“This point in time too many men were being lost. Leaders indecisive, perhaps corrupt and worse, morale was low. Something had to be done and done fast so I tossed together a small armada of ships and set sail.....” Charlie looked up like he was about to say something.

Sue and Deb both chirped in at the same time, “Charlie don’t stop reading and make comments like you usually do.” The girls grinned at each other. “Just read!”

## Chapter 2.

The commanders of the military had gathered under a large canvas tent and were sitting around a table that had been placed in the center. Some sergeants with many stripes were also present. A Colonel stood and spoke.

“Gentlemen, it would appear our illustrious leader is going to be late once again.”

“Geez, Ned you mean old ‘three star Buck’ is actually going to be here. He’s not afraid the mutes are going to overrun this base for the twentieth time?” Another officer snidely replied.

A Captain from the engineers added, “Twentieth time, Jack? You mean this month don’t you?”

All the men and women in the tent nervously laughed as Colonel Ned Travers spoke again.

“Ok, settle down.” He looked over to the other Colonel that spoke earlier, “And no more of this ‘three star Buck’, crap either, John. The Admiral is still the Commander of the west coast forces and he is our boss.” Ned gave a huge sigh and shook his head which brought a few uneasy chuckles.

Jack stood and looked at the Colonel. “Ned, We have over one hundred and thirty seven ships sitting out there in the bay. I have more than enough ‘Moby’ walls to do more than toss up a few safe spots for us to meet. Damn that man to Hell! You know everyone thinks Buck’s lost it.

We’ve been allowed to toss them up to protect the entrance to the one damn pier we’ve been allowed to build. That Moby only extends for about a mile inland.

We have this one damned safe area and a narrow corridor to get here from the pier. What kind of commander allows fifteen thousand men and women to sit on ships for two years?” Jack stopped long enough to take a deep breath. He looked sadly in the direction of the bay, then back at the group. Past the open sides of the tent that sat on a hill, the group looked out at the massive buildup of ships. They had sat there for months, many for years. Jack continued.

“Ned, the ships are in poor shape, Christ most of them are over one hundred and something years old to begin with... or later. They’ve been repaired constantly. Our country has just started building ships again in the last decade and they’re keeping them on the east coast for some reason.”

Jack stared at Ned who was second in command. “Colonel, morale is at a low, Buck’s sent every good command officer back east because they disagreed with him. Or sent them out on suicide missions. We’ve had a presence on this coast for seven years now and have not secured one base anywhere. We rot on ships that could sink in any one of these storms we get.” He

looked over the assembled group as he gathered his thoughts. “Christ Colonel, when we do get to get off those damned ships, we hold these stupid meetings, just to hear more excuses from Admiral Buck as to why more men died, why we can’t get started.”

Jack took a deep breath, then continued, “Ned, you have to try to reason with Admiral Buck, I have the men and equipment to proceed with plans the way they are laid out. You know the ones that were sent here four years ago? If you can talk some sense into that idiot...”

**“Major! You are relieved of your command!”**

Heads snapped around to see the Admiral standing in one of the tents many openings.  
**“Return to your ship and place yourself under house arrest until such time I can send you back east...just be glad I don’t have you shot for treason!”**

“What the hell for Admiral?” Jack stood and snapped back. “I’ve done nothing wrong except maybe to try to follow out my orders to build the Moby wall across to the Rocky rift so we can start setting up our bases south of it and those walls should have been established four years ago! Hell Admiral, I can have ‘Giants’ up and running within hours, I can....”

Admiral Buck wrenched his sidearm from its holster and pointed it directly at Jack’s head.

“TREASON! YOU’RE TALKING TREASON AND I....” Buck felt something cold upon his neck and slowly looked down. There pressing into his neck was a long narrow dagger. He tried to twist around to see what idiot had done this treasonous act, but the dagger slightly sliced into this skin and a trickle of blood slowly ran down his neck. A arm clad in a strange black leather looking material passed by his shoulder and grasped Buck’s weapon, then Buck felt the dagger leave his neck and vanish behind him. He spun away stumbling against the table and screamed,

**“GUARDS ARREST THIS TRADIOR!!!”** Buck’s voice was shrill and trembling with anger.

His four personal guards just stood there on either side of the stranger in black yet never moved. Buck screamed once again.

**“GUARDS! I SAID...”**

The stranger interrupted the ranting of the Admiral as he placed his dagger back to the Admiral’s throat and spoke quietly.

“There was a time where I’d just have slit your throat rather than waste time trying to talk to a piece of shit like you Admiral. However my late wife somewhat tempered my anger and you live only because of her memory. Be thankful for that.” He paused, “That being said, if you press

your luck, I may damn well be asking her forgiveness for....” The stranger let his voice trail off and gave a huge sigh.

He looked around the gathered military officers, then back at Admiral Buck. “Admiral Buck, you are hereby relieved of your command and are to be sent back east on the first ship to stand trial for dereliction of duty, failure to obey orders and the useless deaths of personal under your command. You will be tried and if convicted the sentence is...” The stranger sheathed his dagger.

Buck who had been leaning against the sturdy table all this time pushed to his feet and yelled. “Who the hell do you think...”

Colonel Travers broke in, “Holy shit, Admiral. You don’t recognize your own boss? You don’t know General Hawk when you see him?”

“Gener....” Bucked snapped to attention, “Then sir if you are who Ned says you are, then I respectfully request the return of my sidearm and one bullet. I will save you the....”

Hawk leaned into Buck, inches from his face and glared into his eyes. “You don’t deserve an honorable death you sniveling coward. You’ll stand before a firing squad and die like you deserve, a cowards death!” Hawk turned to the Admiral’s guard, “Take this bastard out of my sight before I just tie something heavy to this murdering bastards feet and throw him off the pier.”

As Buck passed, Hawk ripped this emblems of rank from the Admirals shoulders and threw them on the ground, “And take this man to the brig, not his cabin. I’ll not have a coward in amongst the men and women of this outfit.”

The guards grabbed on the ex-Admiral and vanished from the tent amongst applause from the assembled military.

Hawk turned and the applause quieted, but the smiles continued. Major Jack Bellows who was still standing was the first to speak.

“General, sir. My heartfelt thanks. I actually think Buck would have shot me sir. You came at the most opportune time General.”

Colonel Travers started at Hawk, then smiled, “Sir? We heard you died a few years ago. Well that was one of the rumors, you know after your wife... Ah, sorry sir I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s alright Colonel and yeah, I heard the rumors too.” Hawk looked around the tent and smiled, “Look we have a lot of work to do, so this is the only time I’m going to address this and it’s just so time isn’t wasted on speculation.”



He slowly paced the area about the table as he spoke. "First of all.....It's sufficient to say, I'm not dead!"

The assembly laughed.

"As you know my wife Keli was murdered by raiders. Needless to say I was devastated." He stopped and looked at the group directly, then continued. "Afterwards I felt I wasn't together enough to command, so I left the Tribunal in charge by sending word back with General Walters, who as you know is a Tribunal member. I then spent the next few years alone out in the wastelands trying to find... Hell to be honest with you, I don't know what! Something.... Anything... to give some reason to go on."

Hawk looked directly into the group, "I was completely lost and well, to be honest, needed something, reason, purpose, anything to make sense of why my wife was taken from me." He grinned, "Never did find any reason sadly, but I did learn to live with the grief like so many others have to do every day. It wasn't easy in the Wastelands, Hell gentlemen it was like the old west back before I was born. The old west with isolated pockets of people, raiders and mutes. I lived there until I was called back to D.C. Our west coast failures was one of the reasons the tribunal sought me out. Everyone they had sent, failed. Finally they sent Admiral Buck and kept getting excuses."

Hawk started pacing again, "So I put together the fleet that is at anchor in the rift. I decided to scout around secretly, so I came on shore with the ships that came in last month. In the few weeks I'd been poking around out there, I've never seen mutes this thick anywhere. I came back here and started poking around to see what the Hell was going on with this operation. Everywhere and everyone I struck up a conversation with, it was always Buck this, Buck that."

Again the gathering of officers laughed as Hawk added, "Now it will no longer be Buck anything! I will personally see to it!"

Hawk, who's shoulders had slumped slightly during his musings now snapped upright and without hesitation started snapping out orders.

"Colonel Travers you are now promoted to Major General. Guess this group will start calling you two star Ned? This is now your command and I expect things will change for the better."

"YES SIR! Thank you sir!" Ned replied with a snappy salute.

"Somehow I don't think I'm doing you any favors Colonel.... Er, sorry, General."

The group laughed. Hawk continued.

“Major.” Hawk pulled a map from a hidden pocket and laid it on the table. “You fire up the ‘Giants’ and get them started to this point here.” He pointed at a spot on the map and as the Major looked, Hawk turned to the group.

“I came here with a small fleet of ships a few months ago. We sailed up the rift to the end and started our giants working toward the spot I showed Major Bellows.”

“Sir?” One of the sergeants spoke, “Sir, we were told by the ship’s captain there was no way to the end. Too many unmarked rocks, boulders and other parts from the Rockies that fell into it when it was formed.”

Hawk just turned and grinned at the Sergeant, “Well Sarge, damned if I didn’t find a way.”

The assembly broke into laughter.

Hawk looked serious once again.

“The rift along the Rockies was not as wide as we thought. Some reports said it was hundreds of miles across, but other than the wide mouth gentlemen, it is barely thirty mile across.” Hawk grinned, “But whoever first described it a century ago, was close to the length, well half right.”

“Yeah, we found out the hard way General. We were suppose to land and build the Moby’s straight across to the end of the rift. We landed and sent scouts across and found we had landed over a hundred miles too far north.” Jack grinned and added, “And that was all before old Buck was assigned to us.”

The group of officers all chuckled remembering back as Jack finished.

“General Hawk, we tried and tried to talk sense into Buck, but he acted like he was afraid of the mutes. What little progress we made was due to officers that have been sent back east and court marshaled. Those poor souls, sir. Their careers....”

“Jack let me interrupt you.” Hawk turned and paced a few steps, then turned and looked at the group.

“Those officers haven’t been court marshaled gentlemen. Things started dribbling in as Buck sent them back east and the tribunal started looking beyond Buck’s reports. These men all had spotless records, while Buck had a past of being a bit hesitant and erratic. Even so, while I was gone, they put him in charge, figuring he’d do no harm in charge of constructing a wall. After the previous two commanders failed, I think it was a poor choice to put Buck in command, but I too was more or less shirking my duty being away so long. However this crap has gone on way too long and after the last two years, I will rectify it now!”

Hawk snapped back into command mode and snapped off what had occurred on the rift end up to his coming to their somewhat small base. The group quietly sat and intently listened as Hawk spoke about the months prior to this days appearance. He finished by adding,

“Our giants have been dropping Moby walls for a month now. Our ‘Eater’ is a bit larger than yours Major, but it still plows a path fifty feet wide taking trees, boulders and most anything else down in its path. Getting the parts off the ships and assembling the giants was the hard part. Like your Eater, it can stop and drill into any cavities or caves it detects with its ground sonar and fill them with a mixture of soil and concrete. Christ guys, the damned smallest of the Giants is a good thirty feet tall.... The small ones. Nothing stops them, their crews are so high they’re safe from mutes. We’ve been moving right along, so our Eater should be about here.” Hawk pointed to his hand drawn map once more.

“The ‘Strider is the same as what you have Major and has been running along behind the Eater dropping and locking Moby walls as fast as the Crawlers can bring them up from the ships docked in the rift.”

Hawk looked at the group, “Like the Majors, our Strider follows the eater, cuts a trench ten feet deep and five feet wide, placed the Moby wall’s base in it and locks them together. Right now our Strider is staying about a mile behind the Eater, so we don’t have too large of a gap to protect. We do have more ships and Moby walls on the way, a whole fleet of them.”

Hawk grinned at Jack, “That’s one of the reasons why we kept all the new ships in the east.”

Jack looked sheepishly at Hawk, then down at his feet. “I knew there was a reason.” He said quietly as the group laughed.

Hawk continued, “Also on the way to you are the new guard posts.” He reminded the assembly, “As you know the Moby walls are twenty feet long, thirty feet above the ground and sit ten feet into the trench. The new guard towers sit on the Moby wall thirty feet above the ground and can be stocked with plenty of ammo and assorted weapons. This should be able to take care of these mass mutant attacks. There will be two of these towers at every gate we make. There are also several ships loaded with new watch towers to be placed on the walls.”

Hawk paused long enough to take a breath, “As for the crawlers ours are limited until the next fleet arrives. We’re carrying the maximum amount of Mobys’ a crawler can carry, three.”

“Three sir?”

“Three, Jack. Two side by side and one stacked on top.”

“And they haven’t snapped the Crawlers backs yet?”

Hawk laughed, “They’ll hold that much, they just don’t move all that fast with three, but the time it saves to return for more is worth the slower speeds.”

“I got you sir, now if you’ll excuse me General Hawk, I’ll leave now and see about my own giants sir and get them moving. I’ve been keeping them on the ready, sir, just in case Ned could talk Buck into doing something.”

“I know Major. Like I said I’ve been poking around for a few weeks here and pretty much know what’s going on and who can be depended upon.” Hawk grinned, “Like every man in this tent!”

Hawk’s demeanor had put the group at ease, but now hearing that he had faith in them boosted their morale to the highest it had been since arriving on these shores. Things were going to finally get done and they would be part of it.

Hawk motioned at Jack, “You’re excused Major Bellows...oh, one more thing. We all know the giants control cabins sit over thirty feet in the air and the fifteen foot wide by twenty foot high tires will roll over any mute, or just about anything else. I want you to get the new compartments for the three crews to stay in, installed. The ship is in the bay now and will dock soon. Get them installed as each crawler comes in to get more walls. You see, mutes have been hitting us almost nonstop so transferring new crews is really hard. This way your people can have a bit more space, plenty of food storage and parts storage. Unless something big breaks your people should be able to fix things on the fly without needing armed support. This way shifts can be lengthened by adding two men to each crew.”

“Yes sir! My people will be glad to hear that.” With a snappy salute The Major turned and sprinted out the opening toward the pier as Hawk grinned at Jack’s enthusiasm.

Hawk turned to the assembly as several new troops entered the tent carrying papers and started passing them out. “People! These are your new assignments and orders.”

He reached over to Ned and pulled off his Eagles and started replacing them with two star bars.

“I’ve been planning this event ever since the Tribunal called me back to D.C. and told me of these delays. Christ! My late wife and I saw some of these very same troops on the road from Central City over five years ago and they still sit on ships!”

He slammed his fist down on the table with so much force cups bounced into the air and back. “WE”RE DONE SITTING ON OUR ASSES!!! NO MORE!! Today we go to work!”

The tent broke into cheers and applause, then without any prompting people got up grasping their new orders in their hands and left to their various assignments.

Hawk pulled Ned aside and they began to go over his new duties and the new additional things this new commander was expected to do. Now and then one of the officers would come up and ask a question and walk away with a satisfied grin on his face.

After about an hour another group of men and women entered the tent and stood directly behind Hawk.

“Gentlemen! These men and women are your new partners so to speak. They’ll be directly under Ned and Jack. They know construction and the Giants inside and out. Even though some of them may outrank you, they will be under your commands and are to learn your procedures. Eventually they may be needed elsewhere and I want them up to date on how you do things.”

Hawk smiled at the gathering then added, “If I need you somewhere else, then they can fill your shoes. Things are going to happen quickly....I hope. Just keep in mind, no mistakes, your peoples safety is your first obligation.

“General, you sure the Hell aren’t Buck, that’s for sure.” The tent was filled with laughter.

Ned pulled Hawk to the side and whispered, “That’s for sure General, Buck always ended his orders with, “Whatever the cost.”

Hawk shook his head slowly, sadly. But he knew things were about to change. It wasn’t going to be easy by no means, but the push for the west coast was finally underway!

### Chapter 3.

Four and a half months later, the Moby wall was only eleven miles from being completed as the walls from the rift headed toward the ocean pushed and the one that began at the Pacific, was now headed toward the other. Towers had been set on the walls every five miles and small protected bases were set every twenty miles inside the walls. Men patrolled the walls in between the towers as the walls themselves were wide enough to be walked on safely.

Hawk had been right, things were getting done and not one of the officers had let him down. The days were the 'Dog Days of Summer', the heat only tempered by the occasional ocean breeze. Inland, it was miserable, but onward they pushed.

Hawk strolled toward the center of the base when an orderly ran up to him. Hawk was called to the radio room where all communications from the work crews came in. Either by relay or by wire the room could talk to every tower, base and outpost. The Eaters, Crawlers, and Striders could occasionally relay reports through the bases or towers when their radios couldn't. Hawk had cursed the lack of ability to communicate for long distances and the need for so many relay towers. The slowness of relaying transmissions was frustrating to one that could remember what it was like back then, back before.... his musings were shattered as he entered the room.

Shouts of terror and surprise rang from radios warning everyone the mutants were moving in a vast pack to the north. Everyone sealed up gates, doors and any other way mutants could reach them. Convoys of heavily armored vehicles rolled to protect the Giants as they were moved in tight groups at the end of both walls where their construction had been halted. Men and women in the Crawlers along the way, stopped them where they were, locked them down and prayed the mutants couldn't reach them if they came their way. Ladders were pulled up so the mutants could not get up on the walls where many had scampered, preferring sitting in the heat for hours, rather than being pulled apart by mutants. They took along with them enough supplies in preparation for a long siege.

It was a day after the last location was secured by a small base at the two ends of the Moby walls where preparations were being made to span the last eleven miles of open terrain. The scouts started calling back in. From all over the southern part of the state mutants had started traveling north. Now shouts came in over the radio, they had come together in one massive column and were heading north toward the wall.

Hawk ran to the command center's radio and asked for an exact report.

"General Hawk, you were right! The mutants have come together and are still headed north."

“Damn! I hate it when I’m right! That many mutes I figured would eventually link up if they headed in one direction. Have all the scouts reported in yet?”

“Yes sir, about thirty minutes ago. Not looking good sir.” The officer in charge of the radio room looked worried, not for himself, but for the poor souls that were out around the wall hunkered down into whatever defensive cover they could erect.

“General, last reports came in and all the scouts south of the wall have joined and are watching the mutes from about two miles away now and they’re within the range of the wall towers radios. Sir, the mutant column is about four and a half miles wide and over six miles long. Scouts won’t even hazard a guess on how many there are General. And they are about three miles from the wall.... Sir, there could be up to a million .”

“Christ! Three miles? The armor won’t reach their respective ends of the wall for over four hours.” Hawk started pacing, pondering the situation, trying to come up with some sort of a plan. He turned as the newly promoted General Travers entered and spoke to Hawk.

“General, I know this doesn’t look good for me being on the job for only a few months, but Admiral Buck had the entire southern area scouted and they found only scattered mutes.”

“Well someone dropped the ball Ned. There has to be at least several hundred thousand or more mutes heading for the wall. They came from somewhere. Who scouted? The ones we’re using now?”

“No sir, they were Buck’s scouts. He paid them personally. I saw the paperwork...” Ned’s jaw dropped, he dropped into a chair and made the gesture like he was hitting his head with his hand, “... when it passed over my desk. Damn! I always saw the paperwork General, I never saw the scouts. Not once! What a fool I am.”

Ned got up and paced furiously as if putting together a lot in his mind. “General, looking back, Buck never showed any of us scouting reports from the south, only the north which used different civilian scouts.” Ned stopped and turned to look straight in the eyes of Hawk.

“Aw Hell! Sir, I wonder if there were ever any scouts. Do you think Buck would?.... That son of a bitch! He’s put all those people in jeopardy and sir as his second in command I shoulder some of the blame.”

“He did all the paper work Ned, dotted all the I’s, crossed the T’s, showed reports. I hear he had men tossed in the brig for questioning his orders. You’re not to blame Ned...”

Before Hawk could finish Ned excused himself and ran over to his aide, who quickly left. He turned and walked back to Hawk.

“Checking something out sir. You had Buck arrested, so he wouldn’t have had time to get his personal belongings which were stored at HQ. We’ll see if I’m right.” He paused and looked concerned, “That is General, unless we’re too busy grieving over the loss of a hundred or so men, I think we might have a reason for celebration.” He looked at the radio, then sadly added, “or not!”

“Easy Ned, you sent out the convoys as soon as you heard. You had those that could abandon their equipment and get to the safety of the wall to do so and those that couldn’t start creating some sort of defensive protection to hold until the convoys do arrive. You did fine!” Hawk slapped Ned on the shoulder approvingly, “You did all you could have.”

The long wait began, hours ticked by. Until the radio crackled to life.

“West wall point to base. Still no sign of the armor, but, sirs? The mutes are ignoring us, they’re heading through the middle of the opening about four miles away from us! They’re ignoring us! Good God there are a lot of them, but they are ignoring us.”

“East wall point to base, same here General, same here! Damned if it’s like they don’t care about us.”

Hawk and Ned looked at one another, puzzled to say the least.

“East wall point to base. The convoy has arrived and is awaiting orders. But sirs, the mutes are still just passing by about five or six miles west of us. The convoy is moving closer to see more than the cloud of dust we now see.”

“West wall point here General, our convoy has arrived and is moving toward the mutes as well... sirs, they’re reporting in now.”

A few minutes later the radio, which was actually run through relay stations crackled to life.

“I know you all can’t pick up the convoys radios sirs, but they’re reporting the mutes are going through the opening in the wall and scattering in all directions. Generals, sirs, they say it appears to be over.”

Ned looked at the radioman, then Hawk and sighed. Hawk and Ned both let out a huge sigh and grinned.

Hawk picked up the mike and spoke quietly into it. “Tell both convoys to continue following the mutes for a few miles to make sure they don’t double back, then return to the two points and take up defensive positions. Once those areas are secure, move forward about a mile and form a line across the eleven miles. Space out where each unit can see the other. Don’t let the mutes back south of the Mobys.” Hawk paused, “Oh, and Captain, if you would pass along the word to



wait until the convoys return and get back to work if it's still all clear... and give everyone a well done!"

A simple reply came back over the speaker, "Yes sir, I guess we all lucked out this time General,... will pass along your orders sir. Over and out!"

Hawk put the mike down and looked over to Ned.

"Ok Ned what the Hell did we just witness?"

"Damned if I know sir, but if you don't know...."

"Over a hundred and twenty years I've fought these mutants and..." Hawk sat into a chair shaking his head. "... I don't know what just happened Ned. Maybe they sensed something like they were going to be trapped. Christ! But how? More disturbing is, they all sensed it all at once. How did they all know to move as to hit the wall as one mass?"

"Good God Hawk, could the mutes be forming some sort of enhanced pack mentality that spans vast areas?"

Hawk slowly turned his head in Ned's direction and managed a half smile. "That my friend I have a sneaking hunch we'll find out at a later date."  
He started to rise, then looked back to Ned.

"You know Ned, I have a sneaking hunch we'd better start having a backup plan for our attacks on the mutes. Just in case they surprise us with this mass movement again. Pack mentality has always been with mutes, but the size of this group today, we'd better damned well remember. It could save lives. You know expect the unexpected."

Ned shot a glance at the calendar, then to Hawk. "What is so frustrating General, is the scouts were out of communications for so long. If we had known a week earlier we might have been able to destroy a few of those columns before they all merged. Somehow sir, we have to develop better ways to get messages through."

Hawk smiled at Ned's frustration as he replied.

"Ned before the apocalypse we had satellite communications, Hell we..."

"Yes sir I know." Ned interrupted, "But something changed I heard. Some residual energy left by that radiation..."

"Ned, I'm going to tell you something few know. Although this left behind residual energy makes it hard to send radio waves through the air any great distance without a lot of interference, we found the higher we go the lesser it is. So if and when we ever get back to putting satellites

back up there....” Hawk pointed up in the air with a grin, “...we’ll be able to get some real communications going.”

“General Hawk? Why didn’t you have the convoys attack the mutes. They were all together, we could have done a lot of damage.”

“Suppose they had turned around and attacked like they have done so many times in other battles? Those two small bases at the ends of the walls would have been over run in less than a minute. Sure the guys in the armor and the giants would have been ok, but what about all those support troops?”

“Guess that’s why you’ve survived so long General, you see everything.”

“Not everything General Travers, not everything. I sure didn’t see every damned mute in southern California moving north in one huge mass....” Hawk mused, “...but if we could have caught them earlier, out in the open like they were, Wow!”

Ned smiled at the possibilities, but they were short lived as Hawk got up and left the tent. As he did General Travers aide entered, saluted the departing Hawk. Before Hawk got twenty feet, Ned came running after him.

“General Hawk!”

Hawk turned as Ned ran up and snapped a salute.

“Sir I was right. I had my aide go through Buck’s stuff. He found records stating he had been giving ships Captains locked cases to be deposited into...” Ned opened the log book he had under his arm. “...four different banks back east, sir.”

“So three star Buck sold out his command for a few extra dollars?”

“Yes sir, look here.”

Ned handed the log to Hawk and he frowned as he read. The more he read the frown turned to anger. Hawk finished reading aloud for General Travers to hear.

“.... I’ve heard someone from the Tribunal may be on their way, so tomorrow after the assembly, I’ll take out a ship and I’ll say I’m heading out to scout the northern coast and head east instead. Once I get my money, I will catch a ship and head to the Englands, maybe New Europe. I won’t be found there and once those reported mutes wipe out the ground command they might even think I died and give me a medal posthumously. Wouldn’t that be funny, the mutes will cover up all the looting and stolen funds I’ve amassed all these years.”

Hawk looked up from the log and what Ned saw in his eyes, he'd never forget. Hawk slowly closed the book and handed it back to Ned. In a voice that sent chills up Ned's spine, he said....

"Destroy these books. Buck won't be returning to the east, Ned...." Hawk turned and headed towards the ships in the harbor to the one Buck was imprisoned on. ".... If anyone asks about him, refer them to me."

He turned to Travers and said coldly, "Oh and call off Buck's guards..."

Hawk turned again toward the ship Buck was on and said over his shoulder, "....They won't be needed anymore."

That evening a loud splash was heard and Admiral Buck L. Johnston vanished without a trace. Some say old Buck escaped and jumped overboard and drowned, others say he made it to land and was killed by the very mutes he so feared.

The most popular rumor was that night as Hawk left the ship he was overheard by some men on the dock. Hawk was looking at the heavens and asking his dead wife for forgiveness.

## Chapter 4.

Months rolled along and before Hawk knew it the Moby wall stretched from the rift to the Pacific Ocean. Men no longer had to waste away on ships and each day more new ships brought to shore fresh troops as the sweep of the south had begun.

Surprisingly there were almost ten thousand survivors found living within small walled cities in high mountainous areas, old cities and even a few new towns. Reports reached Hawk that these survivors had said the mutants had stopped attacking their cities and strongholds decades ago. However should any of the people wander outside of their walls, they would be hunted and killed by the mutants.

“It’s if the mutants were trying to starve them out Hawk.” Len the lead scout reported. “General, for over a century these folks had to control their populations or they would have starved.” The scout, made wild gestures with his arms in frustration.

“Shit ,Sir I scouted the wastelands for fifteen years like you did. Saw horrible things, did horrible things, but Hawk even the time we put those dozen or so plague victims out of their misery, I can’t think of anything so horrible as what I heard some of these towns did to control their populations.”

“Len, you know as well as I those plague ridden souls we found were dead already. All we did was end their misery. There is no comparison to slaughtering healthy people. Even if it is for the good of many. Like myself, someday they may have to answer for those actions, but living with the fact can be just as fitting punishment.”

“Like yourself Hawk? I don’t...”

“Len, it’s not your concern. It’s sufficient to say, I live with memories of things I’d just as soon forget. But my curse is I cannot forget!”

“Hawk my friend, I’ve ridden with you off and on for twenty or so years. Hell you’re the one that got me to work parts of the wastelands. I know you well enough to know you’re an honorable man and...”

“Damn it Len! Don’t try to sugarcoat things. You know some of my past. Let it rest and stop trying to make me feel better.” Hawk looked at the scout and smiled, “You know how I love to carry the burdens of my past.”

“Ok boss.” Len smiled and shook his head in resignation, “But you have to remember I know how you’d wake up in the middle of the night shouting, dripping wet and in a cold sweat.”

“Enough Len!” Hawk started to walk out of the room, then turned and grinned, “Look at it this way Len, after the first time my screams woke you, you never did sleep that soundly again. So in a way I might have saved your life.”

The men laughed as they left the room of the small shack they had met in on the outskirts of the base.

“Len, I know you have to go back east and I know about your heart my friend. I sure will miss ya.”

“Well somewhere I have a son and daughter and believe it or not, after all the years we’ve been apart, Hawk, they want me to come stay with them. I haven’t made up my mind yet, but...”

Hawk’s loud laugh interrupted Len.

“Len the hermit living in a house.” Hawk grasped Len’s hand and shook it firmly. “I’m not letting you find that way across the Rockies like you wanted my friend. I’ve told Captain Kobarashi of the cargo ship Maru, to give you a berth and take you straight to New Atlanta. He’s going to sail ya right up the Delaware Rift and dock you about ten blocks from your daughter’s door.”

Hawk turned and gently nudged Len toward the newly erected docks and Len smiled and walked toward them. “Oh, and Len, don’t be surprised if there is someone there to meet you when you dock.”

Len’s voice broke slightly and he swallowed with some difficulty, “Hawk you are good people you know, regardless of what you think of yourself. I know we don’t say good-by my friend, but we both know you and I will never meet again.” Len sighed, “This old ticker it’s just about played out my old friend.”

Hawk smiled warmly, “Then this one time Len, I think we can make an exception.” Hawk walked over to Len and shook his hand. Len grabbed Hawk and hugged him. Len whispered into Hawk’s ear.

“You break my heart you son of a bitch, you didn’t get a chance to say good-by to Pops, nor Walt when he died in that jet crash last year. This time you old bastard you’re gonna get hugged!”

For several seconds the two men stood there holding onto one another. For Len it was good-by to his old friend. For Hawk it was the last of his close friends. When they at last separated, both had tears in their eyes. It was Len that spoke.

“Hawk, it’s going to be a bitch living in a city, but even harder not hearing you cussing someone out or just cussing for the Hell of it..”

“ME? Cuss?” Hawk turned and started walking away, turned his head slightly and warmly whispered back over his shoulder, “Fuck you, you ornery old scout. I hope your ass rots off sitting in that arm chair.”

Len roared as he turned toward the ship and yelled over his shoulder.

“Now that’s the Hawk I know and love!!!”

Len boarded the Maru and turned to wave, but Hawk was nowhere to be seen. Len smiled warmly and whispered, “Couldn’t take another good-bye could you my friend. So many good-bys over the years.... Too many, I’ll miss you.”

He turned and walked toward the ship’s door as he shook his head, “So many good-bys.”

Hawk had turned from the docks in sorrow. Another friend would have to slip into memory, another loss, another good-bye. He sniffed and realized he was on the verge of crying. He sniffled again and reached into one of the many hidden pockets of his uniform for something to blow his nose with. Grasping onto a piece of paper he pulled it out and was about to blow his nose when he noticed writing on it. Thinking it might be important, he checked.

*“Hawk you are an ornery old coot. You’re about the most difficult man on earth to get to know or be around because you’re about the most difficult, stubborn, pig headed man in the world.*

*All that being said, you didn’t really think I’d leave you without a really good scout did you? Well, I got ya a scout, two actually, They’re real young and kind of wild, but Hawk they are the best damned scouts I’ve ever seen. They come from this state and have been running messages between towns, ducking mutes, fighting mutes, for several years. My friend, trust me, they are young, but you’ll not find any better. They will be there after they get done making their rounds and will contact you.*

*They will only work for you as I’ve been filling them with your stories. You’ll know them, because they’ll identify themselves by saying ‘Mutes are cute when they’re mad’.*

*Hawk you old fart, you be nice to them, you’ll know why when you meet them.*

*Your friend always, Len.”*

“Good old dependable Len.” Hawk whispered, “Never let me down once in all the years we knew each other.” He chuckled aloud, “You’ve left and you’re still looking out for me you old bastard!”

High atop a tall hill that overlooked the ocean, Hawk watched Len’s ship sail off and silently said one last good-bye.

It had been about a month since Len had left for the east and with the wall completed the forces found that not all the mutants had left that day in mass. The few remaining pockets of them were being eliminated, towns and small settlements were being discovered all over that were not known to exist. Over fifty thousand men and women of the military had arrived on this fortified peninsula once called Southern California. These soldiers started sweeping the entire area south of the Moby wall.

Hawk's plans were to secure the south and bring in more troops for the push to free up the rest of the northern west coast. Already settlers had begun arriving and building small communities or expanding older ones once the walls were torn down. Civilization had returned to the southern west coast.

Eyes and plans were now turning to the north. The entire northern west coast. The coastal shores all the way to the Rockies. From the wall north to the far north where the Rockies turned west and ran in to the Pacific Ocean. Through what once was Northern California, Oregon and Washington. Even some of southern Canada had been cut off from the rest of the continent. This was going to be a costly campaign and all knew it. Yet morale was high! General Travers had gained the confidence of his men. Then there was the fact that Hawk was known to be there for the duration of this campaign.

It seemed Hawk was everywhere driving around on his motorcycle inspecting new towns, bases and more over leading men into the few Major mutant battles that cropped up now and then. It was as if he knew a fight was coming and he would appear in time to lead the way into battle. Once more troops that had only heard tales of this man, grew to admire him, the ones that had fought with him before admired him even more..

In Hawk's spare time he would pour over reports from scouts and runners that lived in the north. Somehow word had reached many communities and they sent people with news of where they were, mutants in the area and even reports about the few small raider bands that made sporadic raids.

An estimated hundred thousand newly reported people lived scattered among cities that had been walled and fortified to create strongholds in just the northern parts of California alone. In the mountainous valleys blocked from mutants, many more unreported communities could have survived.

Their only communication with one another for over a century were messengers that braved the horrors that lay in between. These small strongholds only had communications among a small circle of communities within in their respective areas. Full communication beyond was nearly

impossible. Hawk wondered how many undiscovered settlements might actually have been forgotten.

Horrors like the estimated ten million mutants that roamed freely throughout these areas and only once in a decade would these small groups of people learn there were others. So knowing that there was a campaign on going, would have to wait until the soldiers basically came up and knocked on their gates.

Hawk had earlier poured over the reports of the mutants. The mute reports ranged from roaming in small packs, to groups as large several thousand. Into this nightmare he would have to send troops to eradicate this menace. Over and over in his head he pondered the thought. How does one separate the ocean of mutes without drowning. To kill without losing so many of Ned's men. They had talked for hours and came up with nothing.

General Travers had one fortunate day when he managed to catch wind of thousands of mutes moving along toward a small coastal town. He sent every ship that had any kind of weapon on it and after four hours of shelling an estimated five thousand mutes lay dead. It was shortly after that day scouting reports had started coming in.... the mutants had started moving almost constantly. No one could guess where they were headed or if others were headed where they had just come from. Like water, endlessly moving and no way to damn them up. Once again the mutes had adapted. Not only had they stayed in constant motion, but they no longer amassed in numbers more than one hundred or less along the coast.

This perplexed Hawk even more. Plans that had been made were now useless. So now Hawk could not come up with a Plan B, because for the first time he had no Plan A. Frustrated he stormed out of his quarters and into the streets of the base. It was early evening and the cool sea breezes blew as if to ease his frustration.

He walked along for almost an hour trying not to think of anything, to clear his mind, but failed miserably. Before he knew he passed through the base gates and into the small settlement that had grown outside the gates.

Hawk strolled through the streets of this small settlement named Ocean Side hoping the night air would clear his head. Getting away from the military might change his perspective, perhaps then he could come up with some sort of plan. As he walked along he noticed a couple of youngsters playing under one of the street lights. They were running around laughing as they swung their backpacks at one another.

He grinned at their youthful exuberance trying to remember if he ever had a childhood. He strolled by the kids smiling and they smiled back. He saw them looking at the handles of the swords that protruded slightly above their shoulders. They stopped playing and looked at him as he passed. He noticed one was a thin, but well built teenage girl, then other was a slightly scrawny lad. Hawk nodded at the two kids.



“Ah to be young again.” He thought, then frowned, “Not in this world, not in these times. Why....”

Something snagged his back, he partially turned to see a strap from a backpack hanging on one of this sword hilts. Without warning it jerked him back as he struggled to keep his balance. He ducked, spun while rolling his body up and away from the two youngsters that had pulled on him. As they giggled with glee.

He straightened, put his hands on his hips and glowered at the two teens.

“I suppose you two think that was funny? I could have fallen, hurt myself!”

He looked closely at the teens and it was the girl that spoke with a laugh.

“If you would have fallen, then you couldn’t have been the legendary Hawk we’ve heard so much about. The Hawk legend wouldn’t let a little tug tip him over.” The girl teased.

“I ought to take you across my knees and teach you some manners young lady...I...”

“Oooo, look Tim. Why Hawk kind of reminds me of a mute ‘cuz.... *Mutes are cute when they’re mad.*”

The lass’s face became serious as well as the lads as he repeated his sister’s comment, “Yeah, mutes are cute where they’re mad.”

Hawk’s frown vanished and was replaced by a stunned look. “You two.... You two are...”

“Len said you wanted the best scouts around.” Said the lass. “Well Mister Hawk, you’re looking at them!”

“Christ, I wanted scouts not kids playing hooky.” Hawk snorted in reply.

The girl looked at the boy, “Hooky? What the fuck is hooooky” The lad shrugged.

Hawk frowned at the lass and sternly expounded, “Quite a mouth for a young lady. If you’re going to be scouting for me, that language will stop!”

The lad jumped in defending the lass. “All the other scouts talk the ...”

“You are not the other scouts, lad! My scouts do what the Hell I tell them.”

Both kids laughed as the lass chided Hawk, “You swear....”

“I earned the right to swear!” Hawk snapped back.

“But...we, well we...”

“Look kids fun is fun, but I don’t put kids in this kind in danger.” He leaned up against a large tree and propped the heel of one foot up against the tree behind him. “You two should be out playing. This is dangerous work and...”

Before he could finish, there were two large wide bladed knives sticking in the tree. One on each side of Hawk’s head. He started pushing himself off the tree when two more knives stuck just below the other two, slightly above his shoulders.

The girl with a look of anger stormed up to Hawk, got within inches of his face and looked him squarely into the eye.

“Look old man! Len said you needed the best scouts and that we are. We’ve been on our own since our parents were killed three years ago and the two of us have fended for ourselves since that day. And as for us playing, our childhood stopped the day we saw our mother and father ripped apart by mutants.”

“Look miss, I didn’t ...”

“I don’t care what you did or didn’t mean. I don’t care how old you think someone needs to be to be a scout. We don’t care one Goddamned thing about what you think other than if you want us as scouts or not, and I’ll damned well swear if I want.”

She pressed her tall thin body against Hawk and reached behind him. She pulled two knives from the tree and tossed them backward one at a time to the lad which he deftly caught.

“Len said you were going to need convincing.” She grasped the last two knives, pushed away from Hawk pulling them from the tree. She then put one in her boot and the other in a scabbard on her belt.

Tears started to form, more of anger or frustration, than of sorrow. “You bastard, you see two kids, but we’ve probably seen more horror in our short lived lives that you have in your... what eighty years?”

“EIGHTY YEARS? Hey! I stopped aging just after I turned fifty...”

“Stopped aging?”

“Long story.” Hawk managed a smile. “Look maybe we got off on the wrong foot, I am Hawk, you were right about that....” He paused and with a frustrated look added, “... Do I really look like I’m eighty?”

“I’m Tim, this is Kim.” Tim laughed, “Now she says that to all old men to get them off guard.” He paused a second, then stammered, “Oh, not that your old or anything like that Mister Hawk.”

He reached out his hand and Hawk shook it. “That’s ok Tim, I am old, perhaps too old to remember my manners.”

He reached out his hand to Kim. She hesitated, then smiled and shook it.

“I’m sorry as well mister Hawk, or I guess General would be...”

Hawk blurted out, “Hawk, just Hawk. No mister and you’re not military so no General. Just Hawk, fair enough?”

Tim interjected, “Vardis, Hawk our names are Kim and Tim Vardis.

Kim smiled at Hawk so warmly his heart melted. He hadn’t seen a smile like that since.... Hawk looked away and off to the distance.

“Why so sad all of a sudden Hawk?” Kim pleaded, “Was it something I did?”

“No Kim, something just crossed my mind, something that seems so long ago.”

She reached into the backpack she had snagged him with and held out a handful of papers.

“Maybe this will take your mind off of your sorrowful memory.”

“Hawk looked at her, “And that would be?”

The youngsters grinned at one another, then Kim spoke.

“Why Hawk it’s the movements of the mutes. We found there was a pattern to the larger groups of mutants. At least there are in a hoard about one hundred or so miles north of the wall.”

Tim followed up with, “Why do you think it took us so long to get here, to meet up with you. Kim and I had to make sure we were right, so we went to several spots where the pattern indicated and waited.”

Kim chirped in, “And sure enough within a few days, we had mutes! After we verified this several times, here we are.”

Hawk looked at Kim, then Tim in amazement.

“Christ you two aren’t kids, you’re forty year olds disguised as teens.”

The teens laughed, as Kim spoke, “Well now it seems that we have your attention Hawk.”

“You see we are young, but we know every safe place to the north for over four hundred miles. We’ve been running messages and supplies from settlement to settlement for over a year and a half. We’ve seen and fought more mutes than most of the men in your command.”

She grinned at Hawk. “Don’t you worry about us, we can take care of ourselves just fine!”

Hawk shook his head in disbelief, but then he did trust Len’s judgment.

“Ok Tim, you and your girlfriend come with me...”

“Girlfriend? Tim’s my brother! Didn’t you hear the part where I said we saw our parents die?”

“Sorry, I thought you meant your families, like one of the villages overrun or something like that. Never occurred to me you meant the same parents, I’m sorry.”

Kim looked sadly at Hawk as she spoke.

“I was fifteen and Tim was fourteen, when it happened. Our dad was trying to move us out of an overcrowded community in the mountains. There was a valley that had been walled in and was high up in the mountains, they needed a scholar like our father was. We set out for there, but were attacked by a small group of mutes.”

Tim jumped in, “Dad told us to run and Mom took us back the way we came. We got to a rise and looked back, Dad was surrounded and standing on the outcropping we had spent the night on. He kept slashing down on them, Mom screamed for him to jump and run to us.”

“He was too far away to hear we were safe.” Kim added, “But another small group of mutes heard Mom. Before we knew it they were almost on us. Mom hugged us and told me to watch over Tim, she loved us and her and Dad would always be with us...” With tears in her eyes Kim added, “...she then pushed me away and screamed RUN!!”

Tim added, “Sis grabbed my hand and we ran. We ran until we couldn’t breathe. Once we got our breath, we ran some more and not once did Kim let go of my hand.”

Kim sat on an old box laying next to the walkway and put her head in her hands, tears ran down her cheeks. “We ran for two days, Mom’s screams still ringing in our ears, until we reached the settlement we left from. We banged at the gate screaming to let us in. A group of men came to the wall and said we left and now they would not let us back in. One of them threw us two backpacks with supplies for a week and told us to leave before our shouts brought mutes.”

She raised her tear soaked face and looked at Hawk.

“They all turned their backs on us Hawk, people we had known all our lives.” Kim started sobbing aloud and her brother quickly ran to her side and threw his arm around her. He looked up to Hawk.

“You see Hawk, Kim’s eighteen now, I’m seventeen and all we’ve had since our folks have died, is each other.” Tim choked back a sob as they laid their heads upon one another.

Hawk turned away from the youngsters as a tear rolled down his cheek. Alone! He knew only too well that feeling. These kids had struck a nerve in him. He straightened and turned back to the kids.

“Ok dammit! I think it’s enough sadness for a while. You two come with me.”

He reached down and both grasped his hands. He pulled them upright, got in between them, tossed an arm around each of their shoulders and started leading them toward the base.... and his quarters.

“Tonight you sleep in a warm bed and...” He sniffed the air, “...and get to take a nice hot bath.”

Kim nudged Hawk in the ribs and replied, “Not everyone gets to sit on their ass in a nice house and take baths. Some of us have real jobs!”

Hawk just smiled warmly as he opened the door to his quarters and the kids entered. There were the ohh’s and ahh’s as the lights came on and he knew there would be more once they saw what he was about to order for dinner. These poor kids, had to grow up so fast.

As Hawk followed them into his house, his aide met them before they closed the door and saluted.

“Captain, these scouts will be staying here tonight. Also I think we should put on a spread for dinner.”

Hawk looked at the teens and asked, “Anything special you’d like for dinner?”

Kim looked at Hawk and asked in a quiet voice as it was going to be too much trouble. “Could you find some sort of vegetable that is cooked. We don’t make fire out there too often so anything cooked would be nice.... If it’s not too much trouble.”

Tim hastily added, “Maybe some milk if it isn’t too much to ask for.”

Their soft inquires nearly broke Hawk’s heart. He knew full well the rigors of being in hostile territory, of not bathing and mostly not having hot food or perhaps little if any.

“Captain, let’s have a full spread.” Hawk winked at his aide, “And I do mean a full spread Jim.”

“A full catered spread it is sir. Give me an hour sir, I’ll have the officers mess send everything on the menu.” Hawk’s aide grinned and headed past them and out the door, he turned Momentarily and added with a grin, “..and a couple of bottles of milk.

Tonight, Hawk decided, the teens would be able to forget the past. Forget the worries of the things to come. This night they would have a home.

He turned and as his aide passed by him, then slowly closed the door.

## Chapter 5.

“Hawk, Len was right when he told us to be on your good side and that it was the only side to be on.” Kim snickered, “But little could we have known that your good side included such a feast!”

Tim pushed away from the table and leaned back in his chair. He nodded his head as a huge belch escaped through his lips. He grinned sheepishly and quietly apologized. Tim was quiet most of the meal while Kim had done most of the talking as she usually did. She was Tim’s big sister and the leader.

“So guys, you two have lived out in the wild for three years and traveled all over?” Hawk was fascinated that these two youngsters had accomplished what few other adults had.

“Thanks to my sister we have.” Tim looked a bit on the sad side. “After all she’s the one that got us started and thanks to Dad’s teachings she kept us going while showing me the things he never had a chance to.”

“Oh, your Dad was scout or hunter?”

Kim smiled, “No, Dad was a scholar. He taught school, well that is he taught advanced studies to people that wanted to learn more.” Kim couldn’t stop smiling when she talked about their Dad.

“Dad taught Tim and I stuff that most grownups didn’t know. Things like advanced mathematics, science, cartography, things like that. Not to mention he also hunted occasionally and taught us what he knew about the outdoors. Well Dad and one of his friends who was a hunter for the town.”

Tim blurted out, “Yeah Hawk, our Dad’s father, and his father’s father down the line since the apocalypse had kept the secret of where books were hidden. Dad told us there were people back then that wanted to burn or destroy books because they believed the apocalypse was caused by us, you know mankind and our science.”

Kim looked sadly at Tim and shook her head in affirmation.

“Tim’s right Hawk. Even after generations, when people began to realize this apocalypse was more than men could have done, books became sought after and hidden away so only those that had them to could read. Oh, there were schools in every town that taught the normal things, reading, writing, basic math, survival. Higher schools taught wall construction and how to tend gardens and live stock in limited space. Things needed to live.”

Tim chimed in by adding, “Dad knew much more, because when he went out to hunt he’d go out longer than most to his secret place.”

“TIM! Hush!” Kim looked a bit perturbed at her brother, then smiled sweetly as she turned to Hawk. “I’m sorry Hawk, but the ‘family secret’ that my brother mentioned is, just that, a family secret.”

“That’s quite alright kids, I understand.”

Kim frowned at Hawk and firmly, but respectfully stated, “To you Hawk, I guess every person living are kids to you, at your age. But we haven’t been ‘kids’ in at least three years. The mutants took that away from us.”

Hawk smiled warmly at the two. “I’m sorry Kim, Tim, I realize life has been cruel to you two. Because of that I’ll try to refrain from that, uh, term?”

The youngsters grinned. Kim looked at Hawk and almost apologetically said, “That’s ok Hawk. I guess you can call us whatever you want. You see Len spent many days with us scouting and told us just about everything he knew about you. The men from space, your amazing cycle and that thing you call your bunker or base? He didn’t know much about that, but guess you must have told him something.”

“Ahh, good old Len.” Hawk’s memory drifted back a few decades remembering. As most things these days that thought was short lived as he added, “I’ll miss that ornery old coot!”

The kids laughed and chimed in unison, “That’s what he said about you!”

Hawk chuckled, but decided to find more about the two sitting at the table.

“Tell you what guys, let’s go into the living room and sit around the fireplace and get to know one another better.”

Hawk arose as did the youngsters and they followed him into the living room. The duo’s jaws hit the floor when they looked around the room they just had entered. It was larger than the dining room and in the center stood an oval fireplace in which flames burned gently to take the coolness out of the evening breezes that blew off the ocean. Around the fire there were various plush chairs. Hawk turned to the kids and grinned as he sat.

“Command has its privileges.” He motioned for the siblings to take a seat. “Also I need all this because I’m old.....remember?” Hawk winked at Kim as she plopped down into one of the plush arm chairs. She wrinkled her nose at Hawk and stuck out her tongue.

“I thought General Travers was in command?” Tim asked.



Kim reached over and smacked her brother on the arm. “Tim, remember Len told us Hawk was Travers’s boss?”

“Hey sis, you’re the one that remembers crap like that. Me I just keep us alive through my decisive tactics and intelligence.”

This gathered Tim a stuck out tongue and a hearty ‘HA’ from Kim. Tim just grinned.

“Actually Hawk, Tim is a top notch scout. I just tease him.... I shouldn’t.”

Tim made a fake choke sound and laughed, “If you didn’t tease me sis, Hell you wouldn’t be my sis!”

“Shhhh. Tim no swearing, remember.” Kim teased, then rolled her eyes as she commented to her brother, “Asshole.”

Hawk smiled and remembered the banter he and his late wife had, the banter he so missed. He turned to Kim and asked her to tell more about their time in the wilderness and their past. Kim obliged.

“It was hard at first Hawk. We knew how to hunt, trap and survive. To hide from mutes and other things we had to know or learn quick. We went from town to town asking if they would take us in, in exchange for us hunting for them. To teach, anything, but every settlement either was over crowded or afraid that taking us in would anger the mutes in some way.”

Kim looked over to her brother, “I know you usually leave the room, Tim, but Hawk should hear it all. You’d better go now.”

Tim stayed as he looked down towards the floor. “I know sis, you know I know.” Tim sighed, “Go ahead.”

“Tim doesn’t like to hear this part, Hawk. But I think you should know just what kind of person I am.” Kim got a faraway look in her tearing eyes.

“We could survive without the settlements, so we hunted, we made bows and arrows which are much cheaper than buying ammunition or fixing the two rifles we had at the time. We lived off the land and occasionally would trade with some hunter or scout, but settlements are full of frightened people and lousy child lusting motherfu....”

“KIM!” Tim shouted, then looked as if he was going to cry.

“Sorry Tim, I, well you know.” Kim started to look uneasy, “One late afternoon, we met up with two hunters and trappers. We traded them some deer for ten rounds of ammo. We shared a

meal and camped together for protection. Tim had just come off watch when one of the hunters turned and hit him with a rock. It almost killed him. He was unconscious for two days.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks.

“During those two days, those hunters did things to me no fifteen year old should have to go through. I kicked and screamed, but then they pointed over to Tim’s unconscious body and told me my screams would bring mutes and Tim would be the first to be torn apart as he couldn’t defend himself.... So I shut up and let them have their way. After they’d finish, one or the other would hit me because I just laid there. Then one got the idea to kick Tim until I....” She choked back a sob, “...preformed.”

Tears streamed down both their cheeks.

“I tended Tim after they left. I never told Tim what happened. He thought he had tripped and fallen. Later that day later we found what was left of those two bastards, the mutes did what I couldn’t.”

Tim added, “At the time I couldn’t understand why Kim didn’t want to bury the remains like we usually would do.”

“I told Tim, the mutes might still be around, so we hurried away.”

Hawk looked at Kim not with pity, but understanding.

“Kim, what you did took a lot of guts. You did what you had to do to keep the two of you alive. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. You survived and it was those two bastards that were to blame for hurting you both in body and spirit.”

Kim managed a weak smile. “It wasn’t until several months later Tim found out what happened. The horror was too much and...”

Tim interrupted, “She was a mess Hawk. First I thought it was the strain of being alone or maybe having to take care of me while I was out for those two days. Then after crying for several hours I managed to coax it out of her.” Tears trickled down his cheek.

Kim looked at Hawk with concern, “That’s not all Hawk. I’m not a good person.”

“Sis...”

“Tim, hush! Hawk should know all of it.”

“Hawk, we survived that day and for the next several months we hunted made a series of hidden shelters and ran messages from settlement to settlement. Occasionally we traded meat which as you know is scarce.”

Tim interrupted, “The mutes don’t attack animals for some reason. They never did from what we hear...”

“Tim?” Kim spoke with her eyes lowered, “Stop trying to change the subject.”

She looked over to Hawk and continued.

“We had used all our ammo, one of the rifles needed a new firing pin and we had used what medicine we had. So at one of the gates the local shopkeeper was called.”

Tim added, “Most of the settlements never let strangers in, they trade through the gates.”

“So, if I can stop being interrupted. I had gone to a small settlement of several hundred, while Tim hunted. The shopkeeper had medicine, he even had the firing pin we needed to fix our rifle and would give us a full box of ammunition.... but he didn’t want deer. I guess a sixteen year old girl was more his style.”

Kim leaned toward Hawk, “I turned away, Hawk, honest I did. He just stood there with the supplies we needed. I walked about ten yards.”

Tears again formed and ran down her cheeks, “Hawk we had to have those supplies! I walked over to him and told him to let me in. He laughed at me and told me to head over to the thick bushes nearby and handed the supplies to the guard. I remembered what those bastards that raped me had me do, so I did for the shopkeeper!”

This time it was more that choking back a sob that wracked her body as Tim moved over to sit beside her and put his arm around her.

“Sis, don’t.”

Hawk leaned to her and gently touched her knee, Kim, I...”

She abruptly straightened and looked Hawk square in the eye.

“You have to hear it all Hawk. You have to know what I am. You see after that day I learned there would be times I would have to do things I didn’t want to do to get things we couldn’t get in the wilderness. No man had my heart Hawk, but if it meant getting things we needed for survival, any man could have my body.”

“That’s not so sis!” He looked to Hawk. “Once we got by that year we had explored further than most had gone. We found a buried city, or what was left of it. From that we managed to find or make whatever we needed.”

Kim smiled and hugged her brother, “We started making or finding things like weapons that had been preserved and selling them or trading for the few items we didn’t have. It was then Tim told me....” Kim started weeping once again, “...I’d never have to be with another shopkeeper again. My God Hawk, he had known what I had become. I was so ashamed. I learned to live with what I had to do time to time, but realizing my brother had known. I was so ashamed.”

“She did it so we could survive Hawk. Don’t judge her harshly, I... wanted so many times... to... to...kill...them.”

Hawk stood and stepped over to where they sat towering above the two siblings. He reached down and held out his hand. Kim, with tears streaming down her cheeks, looked puzzled, yet grasped Hawk’s strong hand as he pulled her to her feet. He gently pulled her trembling body to him and closed his arms about her.

Kim burst into loud crying and threw her arms around this man. Sobbing uncontrollably she buried her head into his chest.

Hawk looked down at Tim who was sobbing for his sister. He reached out his hand and Tim grasped it as Hawk pulled him into his arms as well. Both cried as they had been lost for years and now they had been found.

The two stood there locked in Hawk’s embrace as he comforted them. Quietly telling them it was ok. What she done was understandable, that things would be better from now on. After a while Hawk gently lead them toward the bedrooms. He showed Kim her room and she rose to her tiptoes and kissed Hawk on the cheek went in and closed the door. Hawk showed Tim to his room right across the hall from his sister.

He grinned, “I realize you two haven’t been apart too much, so this way if you .....

Hawk was interrupted by Kim’s shouting, “OH MY GOD.... A BATHTUB!!!” and what afterward could only be described as a girlish squeal.

Tim smiled and hugged Hawk and Hawk found himself actually hugging Tim back. Tim entered his room and closed the door. He started to walk to his room at the end of the hall when he hear Tim yelling.

“OH MY GOD I GOT ATUB TOO!!!”

Hawk smiled warmly as he entered his room and closed his door.

## Chapter 6.

Hawk wasn't exactly sure when he first had developed some sort of relationship with the siblings. However one day while out in the wilderness some months later he sat watching the two go about their business. It looked like play time as Tim chased Kim around in a fast game of tag. They were indeed extremely accomplished for ones their age, yet it dawned on him that he felt protective of these two youngsters. These kids were unusual, still so childlike in some respects, yet so adult. Strangely, the siblings started playing now as if the last several years had vanished. They started teasing each other and Hawk as they played. Then as quickly as the playfulness came it vanished.

The kids as Hawk referred to them in his mind, but never aloud, were wise beyond their years. Not to mention they had been correct in predicting the mutes paths. Time and time again cannon and mortar met the mutes and each time many hundreds were killed without loss of one human life. The ability to predict the mutes movement was a boon to the campaign, as long as the mutes moved within the range of the fleets cannon. Scouting areas near the shore, Hawk and the kids time and time again astonished the naval fleet with massive mutant body counts.

During one of the trio's outings the kids had mentioned some ruins to the northeast. It was just out of the fleets big cannons range, but Kim assured it would be to everyone's interest to go. So off they went against the fleet Admiral's suggestions. Now the ruins of a once great city lay in the distance. Hawk scanned the ruins they were in for signs of danger, then once he was sure it was clear, he went back to the youngsters.

"Looks clear guys." Hawk said as he dropped his strange binoculars into a pocket in the cycles faring.

"Hawk, one of these days you're going to have to get us a pair of those field glasses." Kim teased.

"Hmmm... maybe someday I will." Hawk looked back toward the ruins wondering what was so special about them. Kim only hinted at a great treasure, while Tim said nothing. Kim was undoubtedly the leader and Tim had no problems with the way things were.

Kim came running up to Hawk and broke his ponderings.

"Hawk, my brother and I have been talking things over." She paused hesitantly, then shrugged, "We want to take you somewhere down there if you'll let us." She grinned, "And no! Don't ask where."

The three rode down to a section of ruins where they could conceal their cycles and dismounted. Hawk sat down and waited as the siblings whispered just out of Hawk's hearing. Kim walked over to Hawk and held out her hand as he grasped it. She pulled him upright as he stepped up over a pile of rubble and led him through and around several partially collapsed buildings.

"I know you know the name of this old city, but most call it Hells Acre or HA for short." Kim chuckled.

"HA?"

"That's what Dad called it. It was his secret way to tell Mom and us that he was coming here so we'd know he would be gone longer than normal."

"I think this is about where a city once called Bakersfield once was, so I'm guessing this is where your family secret is."

"Tim said you'd figure that out once we said we wanted to show you something."

Hawk smiled at Kim and she led him through the tumbled walls and rubble. In and out of the ruins, all the time grasping his hand. At times she moved so fast Hawk was afraid she would rip it from its socket. Other times, she'd freeze and listen to make sure no one was following. Then without warning off she'd go again almost dragging Hawk behind her. Tim always brought up the rear making sure no one or thing was following. When Tim reappeared, off Kim with Hawk in tow would sprint to the next spot. They continued this for quite a while.

"You know Kim, if mutes spot us, it's a long way back to the bikes." Hawk half teasing her, half serious as he scanned the ruins ahead. They were crouched down behind a short wall. She started to move ahead.

Suddenly Kim froze, "Shhh." She motioned toward a dark doorway and whispered, "Someone is there."

Hawk grinned and nudged her with his arm.

"Do you really think you were going to scare me that way Kim? Christ I recognized the sound of Tim's pace even walking through rubble."

Kim frowned and turned toward the doorway. "Ok Tim you can come out now!"

Tim appeared from the door into the light with a strange look on his face.

"Tim he knew somehow."

“Tim?”

From behind him an arm appeared and in the arm was a pistol. The scruffy bearded stranger that followed the arm was obviously a lone hunter or scout because he had no gang with him.

“Well little missy, don’t think you can fool old Ripper with that ‘someone is with you crap!’”

Kim twisted her head to see Hawk was nowhere to be seen. She turned to speak but the stranger beat her to it.

“I’ve been markin’ yer root, fer yars now. Every time I saws ya I made a note. I knows ya know where them books are and thar worth a lot of scratch to me.”

“Root?” Kim puzzled.

“Root, root! Stupid girl. I followed you and this boys root every time you two came here.”

Kim snorted, “Oh route. And you called me stupid?”

“Route, root whatever girl.....” He jabbed Tim in the back with his gun. “....now ya leed me to whar them books be hid or I’ll kill your boy here.”

“Hey old man if you had teeth you might be able to be understood better.” All heads turned as Hawk walked out of the shadows from the very same door he had just came from.

“There ain’t no other openings in that thar room, how the hell did....”

Hawk interrupted the surprised stranger. “Wow, if it isn’t the Ripper, damn I heard tales of ya for many years.”

“Ya know of me?” Ripper replied somewhat impressed people had been talking about him.

“Why sure everyone knows of the Ripper. Hell, you’re not afraid of no one human or mute. Why I heard you killed more people than anyone else in these parts.”

Ripper grinned and straightened, “Yer durned right I have.” He poked Tim once again and added, “And this youngin’ will be my next if ya don’t show me whar them books are hidden. I know these youngin’s pappy came around here and they been coming here to this old place for years... it has to be here, the books fer lernin’ I knows thar here. ”

Hawk just stood there in the doorway, hands on his hips, watching Ripper who had grabbed Tim by the collar and spun him in between himself and Hawk. Hawk grinned and spoke to Ripper.

“It’s also said that you’re pretty stupid and fall for old tricks Ripper.”

“It ain’t no trick! Them books are here somewhere, I knows it.”

“Books?... Oh the books, Yeah you’re right Ripper the books are here. That wasn’t the trick I was referring to.”

“What trick is you.....” The Ripper choked and instantly dropped to his knees, then fell into the dusty brick covered street. Blood poured from his head.

Behind him stood Kim, she reached down and pulled her hunting knife from the back of Rippers skull. Kim grinned at Hawk and looked down at Ripper’s corpse, “The trick of distraction you scum covered idiot!” She looked back up at Hawk and laughed, “I wondered where the heck you vanished to.”

She paused wrinkled her brow and commented. “Hawk, Tim and I both have been in that ruin you came out of and Ripper was correct. There is no other opening for you to have gotten in there.”

Hawk winked at the siblings and started walking away. As the two quickly followed he added, “There is if you make a new entrance.”

Kim grabbed him and came to a halt, “Hawk, that rubble is a couple of feet thick.”

He patted her hand and laughed, “All you need are the right tools Kim.”

“Tim, why the hell are you laughing, Christ you have no idea what Hawk’s talking about either!”

Tim wiped the smile off his face. She was right.

After about another ten minutes of sneaking through the rubble the trio stopped. Tim moved a large beam from a door and the three entered. Kim closed the door and they allowed their eyes to adjust to the near darkness of the room. There were scuffling sounds, then a light came on as Kim lit a match, then the lantern she had pulled from the debris.

“Tim, it’s all yours.” She handed it to her brother and he lowered it. There in the dim light was a large old dilapidated sign touting the ‘2012 expo’. Tim raised it, looked under it and chimed with relief, “It’s ok sis, no one’s been here.”

Tim leaned the sign against the wall and as the dust settled a bit Hawk saw him unbury a handle of sorts. With a huge tug of the handle the floor opened just a bit to the left. Kim grinned at Hawk as her brother raised the trap door.



“Watch your step Hawk.” Tim retorted, “Some of these steps are old and we haven’t replaced them yet.”

Hawk walked toward the stairs, but stopped to look at the sign. He slowly shook his head and quietly said as if talking to ghosts of the past, “The 2012 Christmas Expo.” He lowered his head and added solemnly, “Never made it that far did we.”

Tim turned to Hawk. “Huh?”

Hawk turned from the sign and weakly smiled. “That was a long time ago Tim. It doesn’t matter now.”

Tim looked at his sister and she just shrugged. She nodded to Tim to head down the trap door. Down the winding staircase the three moved. Dust flew as each step was trod upon. It had been a while since anyone was there. That point must have been obvious as Kim whispered from behind Hawk.

“We haven’t been here much since our father died.”

Tim reached the bottom and held the light against the wall. He flicked a switch and the room lit. Hawk looked in amazement there was one large room, then in three directions long halls, each aisle had bookshelves. So many bookshelves Hawk couldn’t imagine the number of books in each aisle. At the end of each aisle there was another room with more books.

Kim moved along side Hawk and looked out over the rooms, “Our family legend had it that this once was some rich guys wine cellar. He stored all kinds of wines and other things down here.” She paused and nodded to the lights. “There are things Dad called solar panels hidden atop this building and it charges those old batteries.” She pointed to stacks of old batteries. Some were old and broken, others weren’t hooked to the power.

“Dad showed us how to store the batteries we find, so we can use them when the others die.”

She walked out into the room and turned to face Hawk. “Many generations ago one of our ancestors found this place, we don’t know how or why, but one did. He was a professor at one of the many collages that were in this state at...”

“Colleges Kim.” Hawk replied knowing she wouldn’t take his correction as an insult.

“Ah, ok colleges then. He and several other professors collected books from all over, risking their lives just to save knowledge for mankind. It was cool and the humidity was just right for saving things so they brought all they could find down here.”

She looked sadly around, “But it was for naught. All this and only a few knew of its existence. People started killing people that were thought to be scientists, scholars or military. The people back then blamed them for the apocalypse. Books were burned, the colleges?...” She looked at Hawk as he nodded, “...colleges were burned. Laboratories, museums and things that even appeared to have anything scientific about them were destroyed.”

“That must have been hard for your ancestor and his friends.” Hawk replied with a knowing smile.

Tim added, “It was Hawk. He and the others were hunted and most likely would have been killed if anyone found out what they had done. Each generation would be secretly brought here and told of the family secret and made to swear to keep it until such time all this could be revealed to the world. Like Tim and myself, we were taught here as well.”

Hawk could see the pride in the faces of these two remarkable youngsters. They had no idea exactly how proud their ancestors would have been of them.

“Each generation would bring their offspring to study in secret and the children would learn the meaning of this precious treasure. Dad would spend weeks here and when we were old enough we used to come with him. People used to criticize him for taking us out hunting for such a long time.” Tim mused.

Kim quickly added, “No one suspected why we knew so much because he was a teacher, like his Daddy before him. And so down the generations we were all taught so much. The hard part was not being too smart and risk someone guessing our family secret.”

“Ok guys, let me get this straight. You said your ancestors gathered these books and I see documents from all over?”

“Yeah, Hawk all over, why?” Tim asked.

“I wonder if they found any of the old aircraft...”

Kim jumped in, “You mean planes and jets and things like that?”

Tim added, “Oh Hell yeah, Hawk!” He grabbed Hawk by the arm and hurried down one of the aisles, then turned and ran between two racks laden with tomes. He opened a door to a room Hawk could not have seen from the main room and entered, tugging Hawk behind, with Kim bringing up the rear. Tim skidded into the room and flipped a switch. He stood in front of Hawk and waved his arm over the entire room.

“You mean things like these?”

Stunned Hawk walked through the large room. On tables, on shelves and even stacked on the floor were tomes of aircraft manuals, blueprints, schematics and more. Hawk plopped down onto his knees as the dust flew.

“My God!” His voice trembled as he reached out and gently touched book after book. “There are even alloy formulas.” He gasped and took a deep breath, “Everything we lacked, so much knowledge, my God!”

Kim dropped to her knees behind Hawk and hugged him from behind.

“Are you ok?” She asked quietly.

Hawk snapped back from his thoughts, “Ok?... Am I ok?” Hawk started laughing which started the siblings laughing as well as Tim knelt down beside Hawk. Hawk now was laughing so hard, so hysterically, that tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Ok? Kim, Tim, I fear you two will never realize what you two... and your ancestors have done for humanity.” Hawk felt he was on the verge of hyperventilation.

Hawk hugged them both, then stood and slowly walked throughout the dimly lit room. Stopping at each stack of books, each table overflowing with documents. He’d slowly, ever so gently touch the aged paper. All the time whispering how so much was lost, so much now found. Of all known libraries, none had survived the apocalypse. Not any museums, no forms of mass document storage. And now Hawk walked among tens of thousands of treasured tomes.

Hawk slowly turned to the youngsters and whispered to them....

“Thank you.”

Within days the largest military convoy the west coast had ever seen, cautiously moved the entire library to be sent back east for restoration. There were so many armored vehicles even the hoards of mutants fled. Hawk took no chances. This treasure would not be lost.

There would be a new library erected and that library would be named “The Vardis Family Memorial Museum.”

“I’ll be damned!” Charlie’s shout snapped everyone out of their visions of days gone by.

“What is it Charlie, what did you find?” Sue asked as everyone snapped out of their mental versions of what took place back then.

“But then I should have guessed.”

“CHARLIE!!”

“Charlie’s head snapped up from the log book, “Oh, sorry guys. There’s a note added to the page.” He looked back down to the log and began to read.

“Note: Remember to send message to Tribunal to release enough of my funds to pay for the museum I told them to build in honor the Vardis family. This museum will house all the recovered documents and any other items of interest we find here on the west coast.”

Tom grinned and leaned back in his chair. “You know Chuck, somehow that really doesn’t surprise me at all.”

The girls grinned and leaned toward the book as if to check if there was more. This was obvious to Charlie as he slowly closed the log book.

“Well, that’s all that is in this log. So logs I & II are about the beginning in the west coast. Tom, hand me the next log please.”

Tom who had been looking over the other stack of logs broke his partner’s train of thought “Charlie, there are no logs numbered III, IV or V.”

As if of one mind, Charlie and the girls all chimed “WHAT!!”

“No kidding guys three through five are not here....” He looked at a loss for words, then added, “....we did check all the boxes, remember? There were none of the west coast boxes with anything in them.”

Deb thinking aloud muttered, “Hmmm... maybe Hawk might have put them elsewhere or maybe something happened to those logs.”

Charlie reached over to the pile of unread logs and opened the one marked VI and grinned as he read. Then the smile on his face vanished as he read aloud....

*“Page one, log six. (Logs 3-5 destroyed)*

*“I’ll start this log by saying I lost the logs of the last few years on the collapse and fire of my quarters during the last big earthquake. A lot of the base was lost as parts near the shore sank into the Pacific. As mentioned my house fell and burned to the ground. I was out with Kim and Tim on a mission.*

*Note: We never felt more than a slight tremor. It’s obvious the coast did not settle along the fault lines like first believed. It would appear the coast is still heaving.”*

*“I’ll never be able to remember what I wrote in the destroyed logs. Mostly clearing the areas south of the Moby wall. All mutes have been destroyed in those areas. The southern areas have been used to amass the troops needed to start to free the northern parts of the coast.*

*We moved out en masse eight months ago pouring out of the two gates and moving along the walls with troops and armor. Only a few large groups of mutes attacked. Forces held and we now have men and armor along the full length of the wall moving north. Last week the forces came to a complete halt as we hit the ruins of a Major city and it is estimated it will take over a month to go through every building and sewer to make sure we leave no mute or gang behind us. The rest of the line of forces will advance only as far as the slowest Division. Fresh troops are coming up to assist with the ruins and will move to where ever they will be needed after that. We span the entire width of California.”*

On the side of the page there had been some numbers scribbled, but they had faded to the ages and were lost forever.

*“While the ruins are tying up the troops, Kim, Tim and I will scout several hundred miles to the north. There are quite a few settlements there and east hidden in the mountain passes. We plan to seek them out. Tell them to prepare for the mutes should they move in the settlements direction. To reinforce their barricades to withstand any mute onslaught. I fear for some of these small communities if the reports were right.”*

The group of researchers began to allow their thoughts wander back all those decades as they imagined what was taking place while Charlie read from the logs.....

## Chapter 7.

“Hawk I love this vehicle you gave us.” It was Kim’s melodic voice coming over Hawk’s radio’s ear piece. “It barely makes a sound and handles so nice... You called it a Himmer right?”

“Hummer Kim.” Hawk chuckled back over his mike.

Hawk heard a squeal and Tim laughing in the background. “...damn!”

“What’s up?”

“Oh Hawk, Kim is doing those things you warned her not to do, whatever you called it. She just hit a little hill and we went airborne.” Tim was still laughing. He too was enjoying the ride.

“Ah, you mean when I told her, no hot roding?”

Kim chuckled over the radio, “Yeah and I love it!”

Hawk’s voice got serious, “Kim! I mean it. You two have driven those things you all called vehicles. Granted they don’t go very fast, but dammit! This one does and like I told you it can be flipped over and....”

Tim interrupted and teasingly chided, “Yes Daddy Hawk.”

To which Kim roared with laughter. However as Hawk noticed as they appeared over a hill and moved close to him, Kim had slowed down. He knew she would never jeopardize Tim’s life in any way. At times Hawk mused she acted more like his mother than his sister. But then the realization came to him, that Kim had basically been sister and mother to Tim since the loss of their parents that dreadful day.

There were times Hawk had caught himself thinking that if he and Keli would have had children, he would have been proud if they had grown up into two fine adults like these two had.

Kim had just had her twenty-first birthday two weeks after her brother had his nineteenth and for that occasion he had given them the Proff powered, four wheel drive vehicle that Kim was so busy hot roding.

Hawk had his thoughts interrupted again as he heard what could be best described as an impish laugh ring out over the radio. Within a few seconds Kim pulled way past Hawk’s cycle and onto the dirt road he was on. She hit the accelerator and showered Hawk in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Hawk let off his throttle and let the siblings move well ahead of his. He grinned and shook his head.

“Come on old guy....” Hawk thought, “....you were young once...” He frowned, “...if you can remember back that far!”

“SHIT!!!” Kim yelled over the radio. “Sis, you’d better make that more like... OHH **SHIT**, oh, **Hell no!!!!**”

“Ok you two, enough is enou....” Hawk looked ahead and saw the youngsters had skidded to a complete stop on what appeared to be a rise. He cranked the throttle and quickly pulled alongside of the two and stopped. He looked over at Kim and saw she and her brother both were standing up on their seats and pointing ahead down into a vast valley the road wound down into.

“**Hawk, my God.**” Kim gasped loud enough where he didn’t need the radio to hear her. The dust from her vehicle started to dissipate. Hawk who had been standing, straddling his cycle, dropped back down into the seat in shock.

There in the valley separated by mountains to the north and the south, which the trio were on were more mutants than Hawk had ever seen. They were just milling around or some just were standing, still some others sat while others seemed to form small groups.

Tim turned his head toward Hawk, but his eyes refused to move from the valley below. “Hawk, what the Hell are they doing?”

“I have no idea Tim, I’ve never seen this many in one place, not actions like that.”

“All the years you fought mutes Hawk?” Kim’s voice trembled even though the mutant hoard was several miles below them.

“You two hold the chatter down, I’m going to make a call back to the base.”

“It’s too far Hawk, none of our radios will reach...” Kim teasingly smacked her brother behind his head and scolded him, “Tim? Remember? Hawk’s riding his cycle, you know damned well it can do just about anything.” Then she added, “Geez, Tim he spent a whole evening telling us about it and you’ve forgotten already?”

She looked at her brother, but he was staring into the valley. She smiled and looked over to Hawk on the other side of her, he too was staring into the valley. Kim turned forward and the grin vanished. The mutes were moving... All of them! The strange thing was they were just moving in random patterns. They weren’t going anywhere, just all moving, then just as quick, they stopped and started randomly moving.

“I’ll be damned.” Hawk scratched his head. “It was like they all got a command to move at once.”

Tim, who was the least serious of the siblings, grinned, “Maybe they were dancing Hawk.”

Again he got a head slap, this time a bit harder. “Shhh!” Kim said quietly, “Hawk wants to make a call.”

Tim clasped both hands over his mouth and looked apologetically at Hawk. Hawk just smiled and turned his radio back on.

After a few minutes the duo saw Hawk pull off his ear piece. “We’ll just keep an eye on them for now guys. I called for something a bit heavier than what we’re carrying.”

For two days the three watched the mutants rambling around in the valley. Now and again the entire mute population would move as if commanded to get up and walk around. After a bit, they’d go back to doing random things, but never did they attempt to move from their hidden valley. The only way in was either the road Hawk was on heading north, or the long winding road on the other side of the valley over five miles away that headed south toward them. To the east were more high cliffs and to the west, another six or seven miles to the Pacific Ocean.

Hawk turned toward the kids and in more of thinking aloud, rather than actually confirming his thoughts. “The valley looks that maybe it was another rift and sometime in the past people have built this road.”

“But they’d be in this deep valley, two ways in or out. Any town built there would be a sitting duck for disaster Hawk.”

“Guess maybe someone found that out Kim.” Hawk pointed to what appeared to be trampled down ruins. “Guess after that people just used it to get across the valley.”

The trio began to settle down and wait. A makeshift camp was setup, but with that many mutes, that close, nothing permanent would be set up.

The first night the two took turns on watch and the one not on watch slept. The second night was different. It was as if they knew the mutes weren’t going to change their strange movements, so after several long days the two that weren’t on watch slept and did so soundly. The six hour shifts went by quickly.

Tim awoke Hawk to stand his watch. Hawk walked over to the edge of the cliff near the road down into the valley. Scanning the valley below with his night vision goggles, he made sure the mutes were still there. They were and they still were just milling around. Hawk found a large boulder to sit upon and settled in for his six hour shift.



Hawk put on his goggles and slowly started scanning the entire area and as his vision neared their campsite something blocked his entire vision. He tossed his goggles aside with one hand and with the other reached for one of his swords.

Before his eyes could adjust to the darkness, he heard a soft chuckle.

"I'm so sorry Hawk. I didn't mean to startle you."

Hawk's eyes squinted into the darkness and saw Kim.

"Geez o Christ Kim, I could have cut you in half. I know your quiet when you walk, but..." He caught his breath, "...at least cough or clear your throat first."

"Sorry Hawk, you know it's just years of walking quiet to survive out here. I heard Tim snoring and now doubt if I can get back to sleep."

"Everything is ok Kim" Hawk grinned in the low moon light. "No bogymen will get ya."

She gave Hawk a gently slug on the arm and sat down beside him.

"It's going to get bad tomorrow isn't it Hawk? I mean when the forces you called get here."

"It won't for the three of us honey, they're coming by sea. All we have to do is sit here and let someone else do all the work first."

Kim shivered and Hawk put his arm around her.

"You know Hawk that's the first time you called me anything other than Kim!" She laid her head on Hawk's shoulder and shivered again.

"Strange as it might sound coming from someone like me Kim, I'm seeing you two as more than just a couple of scouts. We have spent a lot of time together these last few years."

Kim leaned away from Hawk and looked into his eyes. She arose and stood in front of him doing a slow turn. Her slim body would put most women to shame, her golden shoulder length hair glistened in the moonlight.

"Hawk do you think I'm pretty? I mean for a woman my age."

"Honey, you'd make any man proud to call his."

Kim slowly walked to Hawk until she was touching his knees with her thighs. She leaned in toward him and whispered, "I know there is an age difference." Her face inches away from his, "But as you don't age and I'm still young...."

Kim's lips neared Hawk's lips, Hawk placed both his hands on each side of her cheeks. With one gentle, but quick motion, Hawk pulled Kim's head down and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Kim you're like a daughter to me. Honey it will always be that way, I'm sorry."

"I... I." Kim's eyes started filling with tears. "I love you Hawk... I really love you!"

"I know you do Kim, and I love you... and Tim as well. But did you ever think that maybe that love you feel is confusing you. Kim sit down."

Hawk patted the boulder he was sitting on. Kim did and Hawk placed his arm around her as he felt her snuff back a sob.

"Kim you've had a hard life, you and Tim. You've been a sister and mother to him and now you're grown, things are changing, your body is changing, your needs change. Tim goes out alone on many missions now. He leads men out to scout. You, I'm guessing are feeling like he doesn't need you anymore...."

Kim buried her head into Hawk's chest and sobbed, "He doesn't need me any more Hawk! He's only nineteen and he doesn't need me anymore. I love you Hawk and thought if I gave myself to you, maybe you wouldn't leave me...." She burst into tears.

"Kim, I know sex must be confusing considering your past. But honey you don't have to buy my love and Tim will always be your brother, he'll always love you and that'll never change trust me."

Kim raised her head and looked at Hawk. "There's times I feel so.... So alone Hawk. And I have no one, if Tim leaves."

Hawk turned and cupped Kim's face in his strong hands and smiled warmly. "Honey, I'll always be here for you." He grinned and added, "That is until you find some lucky fellow and fall in love with him. Real love Kim, and honey, I know when that time comes, you'll make a terrific wife."

Kim buried her head into Hawk's chest and cried openly. It was as if some great burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Hawk wrapped his arms around her and gently stroked her hair. Perhaps Kim finally found the love she had missed those long years away from her parents. She finally realized Hawk had now become her Dad in so many ways.

Hawk smiled down at this wonderful person in his arms. He knew that this night, she had realized, love comes in many forms and she found a love that would not desert her.... Nor take advantage of her.

She raised her head and looked at Hawk, sniffed loudly, “I refuse to call you Daddy...sniff, but Hawk just sounds too...sniff..”

Hawk got up off the boulder and held out his hand. Kim took it and rose. He put his arm around her and led her the few steps back to the camp next to her Hummer. Kim slid under the covers of her sleeping bag and Hawk bent down kissed her on the forehead. Kim smiled and covered her head with the cover and rolled over.

Hawk got up and walked back to the boulder. But as he passed Tim’s sleeping bag he felt something grab his ankle. He looked down and saw Tim was awake. He stooped down.

Tim winked at Hawk and whispered, “Thanks Hawk.”

Hawk whispered back, “I didn’t do a thing Tim, she was just confused.”

“I know there will be a time when I’ll have to leave Hawk, for my own life. I’m just glad you’ll be here for her, both of us.”

Hawk straightened and smiled as Tim added with a grin....

“And I’m not going to call you Daddy either!”

Hawk grinned widely and replied over his shoulder as he went back to his boulder...

“God I hope not!”

## Chapter 8.

Hawk awoke with a start as Kim gently shook him. “Are you awake enough? I need to awaken Tim. I’m hearing loud static on the radio.” She hurried over to her brother and started shaking Tim.

Hawk jumped out of the sleeping bag and ran over to his cycle. Sure enough there was loud crackles. Something was close, yet just out of range. The siblings ran over to Hawk and Tim asked.

“Hawk your troops?”

“Troops? Tim”

“Kim put her hands on her hips and glared at Hawk. “Troops, remember, you called for more troops? Don’t go making out like I don’t remember Hawk. Or perhaps you aren’t awake yet? Is that it?”

“Oh!” Hawk roared with laughter, “Not troops, remember I said I called for something bigger than what we had with us.”

“The siblings were now at a loss of for words and just stared at each other. Tim started to speak, but never got the chance as the radio on Hawk’s cycle sprang to life.

“Dagger to Big Dog, come on in Big Dog.” The radio crackled.

“Big Dog here Dagger. Glad to see you made it.” Hawk replied.

Kim laughed and winked at her brother, “Big Dog?”

Hawk grinned at her and replied, “Wasn’t my idea Kim, the new Admiral thought it might be wise to use code names, in case someone heard out transmissions. Remember there are gangs skulking around here and there?”

“Who the damned mutes Hawk? We haven’t seen any gangs of raiders in these parts for years.” Tim laughed.

“Admiral Hamm, I think it’s safe now, anyone hears us it’s too late at this point.”

“Yes sir, General Hawk. Just calling to let you know we’re here and on the ready.”

Hawk winked at the youngsters, “Hamm’s new to this area guys. He’s used to moving along the coast lines of the wastelands where raiders could listen in.” Hawk looked over and down into

the valley at the moving mass of mutants. He turned, walked back to his cycle and grabbed the mike.

“Admiral, you may commence operations when you’re ready. You have the coordinates I sent you.”

Just a short “Yes sir.” Crackled back in reply.

Tim walked over to the edge and looked down and wistfully muttered, “If only everyone had radios that could reach as far as yours Hawk.”

His musings were interrupted by loud whistles followed by huge blasts from the valley in the distance. Those explosions were followed by more and those by more still. Kim ran over to her brother as Hawk smiled.

“You two better stand back over here.”

“We’re ok here Hawk.” Kim replied, hesitated and before Hawk could reply, Tim latched onto Kim’s arm and pulled her over to where Hawk was standing. She grinned at Hawk and added, “On second thought if Hawk says to....”

There were several monstrous blasts that nearly knocked them to the ground. Those were followed by many more. Tim spun around toward the valley, but could only see smoke rising from below and over the top ridge.

“New mutant cleaners guys. They’re brand new guided rockets that Hamm brought here with him from back east. They fly at about one hundred feet off the ground following the terrain. When they get over the target, they drop two hundred little bombs which in turn explode at thirty feet. The little bombs are loaded with about three hundred steel balls that fly downward on all directions. The bigger explosions are high explosive shells. They’re designed to explode fifty feet off the ground and crush everything within a one hundred foot circle below them.”

The radio crackled once again as the Admiral wanted to know how his fleet were doing. The trio walked to the cliff edge and waited for the smoke to drift away. For miles in all directions nothing moved. In less than fourteen minutes not a mutant moved. In fourteen minutes just under one million mutants were put to rest.

The siblings, stunned fell to their knees, but it was Kim that managed to speak, her voice trembling.

“OH MY God.... They’re... all...”

“Sis?” Tim reached out and put his arm around her.

“Tim, Hawk... I know they are... are mutes, but so many, so...” Kim burst into tears.

Hawk walked over to the youngsters and knelt.

“Now we know why we haven’t seen mutes in a few weeks. They must have been gathering here for some reason.” He reached over and laid his hand on Kim’s arm, “Look at it this way honey, maybe the mutes that killed your parents are down there.”

Kim looked up with tear stained eyes, “I hope so Hawk, I hope so!”

Hawk walked back to the radio and called in to the fleet. “Admiral Hamm, mission accomplished! Well done, and tell the fleet I told them so.”

“General were the new missiles effective?”

“Nothing but devastation Admiral. Granted the damn things only have a range of twelve miles, but any mass of mutes within that distance of the coastline will be toast.”

“I wish we had more General, we used almost seventy five percent of our stock.” There was a short pause, then, “Sir, I know more are on the way, but if we keep patrolling the coast. How are we going to kill them all?”

“Do your best Wayne. You and your fleet have cleared the coast for over four hundred miles north of the wall, our forces are making good time. Your new shipments will be here before you know it. Until then, shell them and use your missiles only when you think you must. Hawk out.”

“Understood General! Over and out!”

Hawk walked back over to the cliff and joined the siblings. For the next few hours they just sat there scanning for movement. There was none.

They watched all day and nothing moved. After about six hours some mutes started to vaporize, soon more and more. The small clouds of vapor were pushed out toward the ocean by the prevailing winds off the Rockies at the eight hour mark. Soon it was a steady ground hugging column of vapor as the Majority of mutes vaporized and drifted back to the seas whence we all sprang.

Hawk could watch no more, nor could the siblings. There had been too much destruction this day. The trio went back to their camp. They all knew within six to eight hours there would be no more to see, not even vapor.

“In the morning we’ll take a drive down and see what those mutes were up to.” Hawk looked toward the ocean and saw the setting sun. “They were doing something, we need to find out what.”

Kim turned to Hawk and more or less just mused aloud, “What were these mutes up to? You say you’ve never seen mutes gather in such numbers since the mutant’s early days after the apocalypse.”

“I wish I knew Kim. Maybe because here in the west coast they’ve had more of a free run. Perhaps they’ve developed some sort of mass intelligence. Who knows?” Hawk glanced back over his shoulder to the now empty valley. “Maybe tomorrow we’ll find out.”

Tim laughed, then as if he had scared himself added, “Ya know... If something in that valley drew them here...” He glanced around nervously, “...I think to night I’m sleeping with one eye open!”

Hawk and Kim laughed, but as the men sat down, Kim snuck a glance around the entire area.... Just in case!

The morning came slowly for all but Hawk, who once off watch, slept like a baby. But morning did finally shed its golden rays upon the trio’s camp and breakfast was eaten. Little was said about the day before. All knew where they were going and the two youngsters were starting to see mutes like Hawk did. They were glad to see them die, yet part of them felt Hawk’s sorrow as they knew his feelings about mutes once being humans like they were.

The camp was struck and loaded into the vehicle. Off down the road they drove. This time however Kim let Hawk lead the way down the winding road into the valley. Today there would be no hot roding.

Down they rode until they reached the valley floor and Hawk took the lead. Then across to the center of where they had seen the mass of mutants. Hawk who was several hundred feet in front of the vehicle slammed on his brakes. As the siblings caught up to him they too hit their brakes.

Kim got out and walked over next to Hawk while Tim sat in the vehicle.

“My God Hawk! Is that... a.. I forget what it’s called.”

Hawk looked at the hole in the ground that was about two hundred feet long and a good seventy feet wide. Another caved in area about the same size could be seen in the distance and another next to it.

“It’s called an underground bunker Kim. Or at least it was.”

“But the mutes, they couldn’t get into it could they?”

Hawk looked to the still smoking ruins as Tim joined them.

“No the mutes couldn’t get at whoever was in that bunker.... But we could.”

Tim looked puzzled and glanced at his sister. “Ok sis, they couldn’t get in, but we could, then why the hell were they moving all around? They couldn’t stomp it in either.”

Kim sank to her knees. She understood what Hawk meant. She clasped her hands over her face and burst into tears.

Tim looked to Hawk puzzled, “I don’t get it.”

Hawk slowly sat down on the ground next to Kim and put his arm around her and looked up at her brother.

“Tim the mutes couldn’t get in the bunkers. So they couldn’t get to any people living in them.”

“So? I still don’t get it.”

Kim raised her voice just short of a yell.

“Damn it Tim. The mutants gathered here in the valley, don’t you see? They knew we’d find them, shell them, use the same tactics we’ve been using all along. They led us here so we’d kill them....” She couldn’t control her emotions any longer and completely broke down. She buried her head into Hawk’s chest as Hawk gently stroked her hair. He looked back up at Tim and finished what Kim at started....

“Tim the shelling I ordered is what destroyed these bunkers for the mutes. The same shelling like we’ve done time and time again. Year after year.”

“CHRIST all mighty!” Tim sunk to his knees so fast he almost fell over, his body slumped. “Hawk? You mean the mutes allowed themselves to be killed just to destroy these bunkers and kill whoever was in them?” Tim sat from kneeling to sitting so fast he made a thud!

“Mutes can do that?” Kim mused, “Kill themselves, so many? Just to rid this area of people?”

“They did, and by amassing like they did, they covered the bunker entrances.... And I gave the orders to kill all those people inside.” Hawk paused, a strange look crossed his face.



“You didn’t know..” Kim reached around Hawk and hugged him as Tim did the same from the other side. Tears flowed freely as they sat and stared at the gaping indents in the earth where once there were a series of bunkers.

“NO!” Hawk shouted, “The mutes must have collapsed the bunker with the rhythmic movements they were doing, remember? That makes sense. Mutes never have sacrificed themselves needlessly in the past. Not to mention the mutes knew once they were killed more humans would repopulate this area eventually.”

“That has to be it Hawk.” Tim replied, “There’s no way we could have seen this depression where the bunker collapsed with all the mutes and dust.”

Kim thought for a few seconds then asked, “Ok so if that’s the case, why were the mutes still here? Were there more bunkers here?” A shocked look appeared upon Kim’s face, “My God! If that’s the case, then there must be more peop....”

Hawk stood quickly and put his finger over his mouth. “Shhh!” He listened, “Do you hear that?”

“No.” Kim whispered.

“What did you hear Hawk, more mutes?” Tim slowly started pulling his revolver from its holster.

Hawk swung around and pointer to a nearby cliff face just below the road on the far end of the valley. Rocks started to fall. A few at first, then several. After a few seconds a part of the cliff face started moving.

Kim wiped tears from her face and screamed, “IT’S A DOOR!”

No sooner did she get those words out many people came walking out. The trio leapt into their vehicles and raced to them as the now growing group of survivors came into the daylight. Hawk came to a stop and dismounted his cycle as the man that appeared to be their leader approached. The man held out his hand and Hawk shook it.

“Damn near killed us with that shelling stranger, good thing we were already up in the escape area near the road. Hell those mutes have been stomping on the ground for weeks. They’d start and stop, then start again until plaster was falling from the ceiling and walls. We thought they were going to bring the roof down so a few days ago we all packed into the garage area back there. Shortly thereafter the entire bunker ceiling fell in. Both of them! Christ all mighty we thought we were done for. Mutes or starvation. The emergency garage and storage area was really packed.” He pointed toward the huge door people were still pouring through.

Hawk let out a huge sigh of relief and smiled.

“We thought we had killed you. the mutes covered the entire area, your entrances, everything.”

“We heard the first shell hit and prayed nothing hit the hidden wall. Luckily whoever build this complex about a century ago thought to connect all the bunkers together and have this hidden garage.” Their leader laughed weakly, “We haven’t had any working vehicles in my life time, but the garage sure came in handy these last few days.”

The siblings had been standing behind Hawk all the time moved along side of him. Tim put his hand on Hawk’s shoulder and grinned, “You know Hawk. It might be a good idea if you can catch Hamm before he gets too far away. These folks will be needing a ride.”

Kim smiled at her brother and said, “Damned if you can’t think for yourself.... Sometimes!”

They all chuckled as Hawk added, “Damn Tim. I should have thought of that.” He hurried over to his cycle and made the call. A few minutes later Hawk returned.

He looked at the leader of the bunker dwellers and smiled.

“I’ve recalled those ships that almost killed you and they’ll be back to the shore by the time we get there. Guess we can relocate all of you back to where there are no more mutes. The way to the ocean should be fairly clear as it looks like all the mutes were here.” Hawk smiled at their leader, “Hope your people are up to a ten mile walk.”

All those from the bunker within ear shot started cheering as their leader commented, “No more mutes? But there has always been mutes. There were mutes here.... How?”

Kim slid her hand through the leaders arm and led him back toward all his people. She grinned back at Hawk and her brother and winked.

“What’s your name sir? Or should I just call you leader?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m called Bill Rouch, most just call me Rouch.”

As they vanished onto the cheering crowd Kim smiled and said....

“Ok Rouch.... I have a story to tell you!”

## Chapter 9.

Months turned to years as the military dropped its idea to have a living wall of men and machines sweep across the coast northward. The mutants kept hitting the line east out of range of the ships. Time after time the wall broke and mutants rushed behind the lines and scattered. The death toll among the humans was climbing.

General Travers and Hawk finally gave up on the human wall and fought northward to the old state boundary. There they established costal bases within range of fire support from the fleet. Up and down the coast of California these bases were established. Across the northern state line more fortified bases were built and heavy patrols to keep mutants from the last two northern states out. The rest swept back down the state and once hitting the Moby wall the troops rested.

The campaign had now taken two more years. The stress showed on the faces of the troops. From bases scattered throughout the state. The forces rested and tried to maintain order with the badly reduced numbers they had. Many land locked bases became nothing short of well kept prisons. Troops shot from the walls and used cannon, but mostly were confined to the base. The mutants were winning as hoards poured down from the northern states.

From back east Hawk got word of wasteland raider armies threatening the foothold the military had in the southern wastelands and coupled with other raiders sneaking across the Mississippi to make raids. Soldiers were being sent to reinforce these areas. The west coast would not get the badly needed replacements they needed. This bore even worse news as all land locked bases were supplied from the seaside bases by heavily laden six by sixes. These heavily armored, high riding vehicles were the only way to ship supplies. Dark days loomed for the campaign.

It had been over two weeks since Hawk left the siblings at one of the costal bases mid state. He had been called back to what had now been called Alpha base, back behind the Moby wall. The siblings now twenty three and twenty two and both were now more than able to defend themselves. With Hawk's guidance they had become the best scouts on the entire coast. Now they would cover the scouting as Hawk rode to Alpha.

"Hawk my friend," Ned slapped Hawk on the back. "It's good to see you in person for a change."

Hawk grinned and sat. "Ok Ned, we've know each other long enough where I know you didn't call me back here so you could see my pretty face."

Ned tried to laugh, but Hawk saw through it.

“Dammit Ned, you’re trying to hide something and doing a piss poor job of it!”

Ned sat across from Hawk as Hawk leaned forward and looked Ned straight in the eyes. “Out with it Ned!”

“Hawk my friend, I have really bad news. With all the problems in the east, we’ll not be getting any reinforcements this year. None! No new armor, no equipment, just food and medicines and other necessities.”

Hawk swore under his breath as Ned continued.

“Wait! It gets better! Seems the Tribunal wants most of our supply ships and half of our armed fleet as well. Seems there is some problems in the New Britain’s some costal raiders or something raiding the few surviving cities and they asked for some help.”

“Well Ned, I know the Tribunal and if they say they need them that bad, sadly they must. I’ll not over ride their decision.”

“What the Hell am I suppose to do about the mutes Hawk. My people are bone tired! They’ve been fighting steady for two years.”

Hawk arose and paced a bit, turned and grinned at General Travers. “Then Ned, give them a well deserved rest.”

“I don’t understand Hawk. Christ, we still have mutes a few small gangs killing hunters settlements send out....”

Hawk interrupted, “Relax Ned. And tell all your troops to do so as well. You have bases all up and down the coast, many more scattered inland that the mutes can’t overrun. Just keep sending out small forces to patrol and keep the larger convoys just to run supplies and attack mutes when they’re found.”

Hawk sat back down and sprawled his legs out, put his hands behind his head and grinned.

“Like I said, tell them to relax.”

“Ok you’re the boss, Hawk. I guess we always can use the break.” Ned grinned, “But a year of it? Guess I’ll order up some drills and exercises to keep the troops from getting soft.” He laughed out loud.

“Well they’re your people Ned, but somehow I’m guessing there’ll be enough trouble to keep everyone busy.”

The men laughed somewhat nervously as they had seen the mutants use different tactics. This was strange for mutes and several times had caught them off guard.

Hawk started to rise, but half way out of the chair he heard a female voice.

“Well I see the men get to sit around and laugh it up while the women do all the work! But then I guess it’s been that way throughout history.”

A wide grin spread across Hawk’s face, but he never turned around. “Maggie Reed, can’t be anyone else!” He winked at Ned and without looking at the newcomer he shot back, “Who else would be so insolent to her superiors!”

Hawk turned and saw the beautiful redhead standing in the door way. She walked into the room and saluted Ned, grinned and stuck her tongue out at Hawk.

“That’s Vice Admiral Reed to you Robert Hawk. And you’ll get no salute from me after walking out that day and never a note or anything.”

Ned smiled nervously, “Uhh, I have something to do... or I’ll find something, it looks like you two need to be left alone.” He started out the door.

Hawk walked to Vice Admiral Reed, looked her directly in the face. She smiled, Hawk smiled and they threw their arms around one another and she gave Hawk a huge kiss.

“Wow! You still can make a girl weak in the knees Hawk.”

“I refuse to say aloud what you still do to me Maggie.”

Ned reached for the door knob, “Now I know you two need to be alone.”

Maggie laughed, “Nawww, Hawk and I go back many years. Back before...” She looked at Hawk. “...I was so sorry to hear about Keli Hawk.” She hugged Hawk again. Maggie turned to Ned before he really did leave and added, “General, Hawk, the reason I’m here is to fill you in on the progress of the road over the Rockies.”

Ned looked puzzled. “Ahh, there isn’t a road over the Rockies.”

Maggie smiled, “There almost is now!”

Hawk pulled out a chair and Maggie sat. Slowly crossing her slender legs making sure her knee length uniform skirt rode up high enough teasingly, but still not that it was unbecoming her rank. Maggie knew Hawk would look and she missed the way he looked at her.

Hawk and Ned sat as well as Hawk spoke.

“Ned. Maggie brought me here and was the fleet commander of our fleet that mapped its way into the rift. As we were constructing the Moby wall Maggie brought up the idea of building a road up to the one spot we saw coming in, where the Rockies looked like they had collapsed and partially fell into the rift. The summit was a good thousand feet lower than the mountains around the gap.”

Maggie leaded toward Ned and continued where Hawk had left off.

“You see General, about forty miles south of the rifts end there was one part of the Rockies that were much lower than the others. Some of the mountains had slipped into the rift. My plan was to build a road up and over the mountains into the wastelands and south, then east to the nearest cities.”

Hawk smiled at Maggie, “I told her there was too much of a chance of the raider armies finding it and some of them might try to invade the coast. Way too much for us to handle as we were spread so thin,”

Maggie, who was sitting next to Hawk, nudged him in the arm.

“So I asked him what about building a road to the top and across the mountains, but not down the other side. I figured this way we’d have half a road and a base at the top. We’d be close enough to the wastelands to see some of it through telescopes and keep an eye on the area and hopefully some day, I could finish the road down and connect the country to the west coast.”

“HEY! You two ease up a bit on me will ya?” Ned chuckled, “Christ you’re trying to lay a lot on me.” He frowned at Hawk, “So let me get this right. For let’s see...” He started counting on his fingers, “...four almost five years and no one bothered to tell the commander of the west coast forces a road was being built?... Really damned efficient of you Hawk.”

“We told you, now, so see we told you...” Hawk looked over at Maggie, “...ahh, what are we exactly telling Ned, Mags.”

Maggie smiled at Hawk, “Wow, no one’s called me Mags in years Hawk.” She laughed, “Well actually no one has, except you and then it was usually when we were in....” She snapped out of it and looked at a reddening General Travers, then at the grinning Hawk.

“It’s like this Ned. Mags and I were together for several years. Uh, by together I mean we...Uh...”

“Were lovers General.” Maggie blurted out. “I’m not ashamed and at the time it sure wasn’t any secret.”

Hawk grinned sheepishly, “Ned several years before I headed out into the wastelands, Maggie and I met in D.C. Her mentor and my old friend introduced us at a function and...”

“And I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him.”

“Nor her hands either Ned.” Hawk laughed.

Maggie blushed and straightened her hem line as she fidgeted slightly.

“Seems I remember it was kind of the same with you as well Hawk. Shame on you, here I was but a lowly ship’s Captain and you were the big General and you took advantage of poor little old me.”

Hawk looked over at Maggie, then to Ned and laughed aloud, “Well anyway that’s one of the little games, you used to play.”

Now Maggie was really blushing as she poked her General in the ribs a bit too hard. Hawk winced as she added, “Maybe that was a bit too much information to be passing out General.”

Ned roared with laughter.

“Looks like you two have some catching up to do...”

“OH SHIT!... I mean, oh... SIRS!” Maggie grinned. “Seeing Hawk side tracked me. It always does, forgive me. Generals, I’m here to report the road had been completed. The Rockies have a thirty foot wide road to the top, across to the eastern side. A base has been established at the summit and a smaller base and road have been run down the eastern side to eight hundred feet from the ground on the wasteland side. The way up is extremely steep and we have it well guarded. Both bases are fully staffed and well guarded and secure.”

Maggie stood, snapped to attention, looked at Hawk and added, “Mission accomplished, SIR!”

Hawk beamed back at her, “And almost a year early, why the Hell do you think you got that promotion Vice Admiral.”

“Hawk? You knew?” Her smile turned to a glare. She narrowed her eyes as she stared at Hawk. “You had me promoted? You had....”

“Mags!...er, Admiral Reed! I had you promoted because you are one of the finest officers I’ve ever had the privilege of knowing. You got your promotion because of your achievements, not because you have terrific legs or that we once were a couple!”

Hawk smiled warmly, “Mags, you earned every stripe and you know it.”

Maggie smiled back at Hawk, I know it Hawk.... I just wanted to be sure you knew it.”

They stood there looking at one another only about a foot apart.

“Damn Hawk it sure is good to see you again after almost four years.”She leaned closer to Hawk.

“You don’t know how I missed that smile of yours.” He leaned closer.

“You two going to get a room or do you want to use my office?”

Both Maggie and Hawk snapped out of it. It was Maggie that answered Ned. “General, it’s not like that sir. You see Hawk and I had this thing years ago, but when we met again and he was on my ship, he had just lost his wife and my fiancée had been killed months before when the old tub he was on broke in two mid ocean. My boyfriend was on his way to the Britts. Everyone knew these ships that were well over a hundred years old were just a disaster waiting to happen.”

She looked at Hawk, then Ned. “So you see when Hawk and I were reunited...”

Ned nodded and replied how sorry he was for her loss.

“So we kept it all as to business Ned. Maggie and I still had dinners in her cabin and we caught wind of the rumors, but neither of us at the time were ready for any involvements.” Hawk smiled over at Maggie then added, “Guess both our emotions had pretty much been drained by our losses.”

“You see General, we parted years ago as friends. Hawk had all his never ending work and I was promoted to the Atlantic fleet as number two to Admiral Edwards command.”

Ned held up his hand. He grinned at the two. He walked over to them and put a hand through each of their arms so one of them would be on each side of him. He led them toward the door.

“Ok, Admiral Reed, you’ve reported. And let me add, a job well done.”

“Hawk I know you have to get back to your station in a day or two.”

Ned pushed them out the door and as he closed it he added.....

“Now you two go get a room!”



## Chapter 10.

Hawk strolled arm in arm with Maggie as he showed her around the base. Their little walk proved a bit difficult as Maggie was in her uniform and every soldier they passed snapped a salute and she returned it.

They both laughed as Hawk led her up the stairs to his quarters.

“Wow. nice house General. Looks like rank does have its privileges.”

Hawk laughed, “Now you see why I don’t wear a uniform Mags. All that saluting, I don’t miss it one bit.”

“Hawk you’re so full of it. I know you just don’t like uniforms. Hell the only time I’ve ever seen you in a uniform was at funerals and when you went before the Tribunal with bad news.”

“Well I have to admit this old thing I wear is much more comfortable.” He waved his arm across his chest noting he was referring to his thin, black, alien body armor.

Maggie grinned and leaned backward a bit as she looked behind him.

“Really makes your ass look good too General.” She teased.

“Speaking of which Admiral, it would seem your skirt is a bit above the knees for a regulation uniform.”

They entered the house and Hawk closed the door. Maggie walked into the center of the living room and turned.

“So you don’t like my uniform? I had it tastily shortened for you, or is it just my legs you don’t like?”

“Mags you have great legs.” He said teasingly and gave her a wink.

“Why the hell did you think I shortened my skirt then General? I wanted to pass your inspection...” Maggie paused and looked longingly into Hawk’s eyes, “Hawk... It has been so long since I’ve been with... Since we’ve...”

She took two long steps and flew into his arms as their lips met. Far too long had they been apart and now the passion that had been missing from their lives burst. No longer would loneliness prevail, no longer would they be alone.

His breath hot on her neck, his passion grew. Her gentle gasps rose as he slid his hand under her uniform blouse.

“Oh Hawk, you sure know how to make a girl...Ohhhh!” Maggie, stopped nibbling on his neck and looked at Hawk. She removed her hand out of his waistline and started him in the eyes.

“Why General, it would seem you’re at attention.” She grinned impishly, then gasped as he slipped his hand around behind her and fumbled at the hooks of her bra.

“Darling, hurry....” Maggie kissed him passionately, “..Hawk?”

Hawk slid his hand back out and with a frustrated half smile shook his head.

“Mags honey, guess I’m just out of practice, Hell I....”

Maggie gave him a sexy grin and with one hand pushed him back onto the sofa. She straddled him and gave him a sexy smile.

“General Hawk, let me show you how it’s done.” And with one quick motion she grabbed the front of her blouse and tore it open. “See it really isn’t that difficult!” She reached behind her and with ease tossed the bra flying across the room.

“Well, well Admiral, it would seem I’m not the only one at attention!” Hawk teased.

“Oh shut up Robert Hawk!” Maggie grinned and lowered to kiss him again. Locked in a heated embrace Maggie nibbled on Hawk’s ear. “My darling...” She panted, “...are you going to promote me if I’m a bad girl?”

Hawk gasped back, “Promote you Hell!, I’ll give you my job!” He tried to chuckle, but all he managed was a gasp as Maggie slid her hand downward.

She moved her head to Hawk’s other ear and kissed it gently, “Your job?” she was breathing heavily now, “Are you trying to turn me off?”

They both managed a light laugh, then Maggie raised herself slightly and as she lowered herself back down all ideas of humor instantly left their thoughts and again both were locked in burning passion. Now longer could she remain upright as she locked her arms around Hawk. Kissing, writhing, they found in each other’s arms what both had forgotten. For Hawk the sadness would be lost for a time. For Maggie she would re-live some of the more passionate months of her life.

For they both knew it would be their last time together.

They laid upon the sofa wrapped within each other's arms just enjoying the warmth, the compassion that they had for each other. Knowing their time together was going to be far too short.

Hawk stroked Maggie's hair as she laid her head upon his chest.

"You know it just doesn't seem fair sometimes." She whispered. "I have to sail on the evening tide to head back east. Now the road is done, I've finally got the command I always wanted." She raised her head and looked Hawk in the eyes, "And don't try to hide it Robert Hawk. I know you're the one that signed my orders."

"Maggie, darling, you're one of the most capable women I know and a damned fine commander." She laid her head back on Hawk's chest and gently hugged him as he spoke. Maggie was truly going to miss him when she would have to leave him once again. She knew duty would call and she would answer.

"You deserve the European fleet command and you know you paid your dues. Mags, you've done so much when so many tried to hold you back..."

Maggie poked him in the ribs as he jumped slightly. She interrupted him, "Yeah, some did. But there was this high ranking officer that always seemed to notice me and kept advancing my career...even before I met him...."

She laughed aloud, "..... or slept with him!"

Hawk grinned, "Well I'll have to admit, you looked as good on paper as you do in person."

Maggie raised up where Hawk could well see most of her as she cupped her breasts and teased, "Awww... you mean you'd rather see these on paper?"

Hawk gave a hearty laugh, "Hell no Mags! I'd rather see them in person!"

Passion, teasing, it mattered not. This was their last time together and once again love overtook them. This time Hawk scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Once again the two would lose themselves in each other. For this moment in time, there was no past, no future, just now.

They lay naked entwined around each other. Living for this the Moment, their past almost a memory. Sleep was sneaking in as passion lulled.

"OH SHIT!!" Maggie screamed and jumped up in the middle of the bed still quite naked as Hawk laughed. "Hawk, what time is it??" She looked quickly around the room for a clock.

“Christ don’t tell me you don’t even have a clock!”

Hawk was still laughing. “Just my wristwatch, I try not to think about time too much Mags, you know that.”

She still stood completely naked on the bed, running her fingers through her hair to straighten it. She bounced down to the floor and slipped into her panties and shot Hawk a concerned glance as she reached for her skirt. “Mags?”

“Hawk. The tide, I can’t miss the tide!”

“Aw Mags you’ve got...” He looked out the window and saw the lowering sun close to the horizon, “... CHRIST! You don’t do you?”

Hawk leapt from the bed and started pulling on his hunters uniform as Maggie ran from the room to gather the rest of her clothes. Hawk raised the top half over his head as Maggie ran back into the bed room. She stared at his muscular chest and powerful arms and sighed.

“Now that I’m going to miss.” She grinned then added, “Well the rest of you too.” She put on her bra, then her blouse and started to button it.

“Damned if I didn’t not only tear off every button, but look!” She pulled her blouse closed and one side of it was ripped so much her entire bra covered breast poked through.

Hawk roared, “Why Vice Admiral Reed, you would appear to be out of uniform. Shame on you.”

He was greeted by Maggie’s tongue sticking out at him. Hawk darted over to his closet and pulled out one of his uniform shirts and tossed it to Maggie. She quickly put it on, sucked in her bust and buttoned it. Once closed she exhaled and two buttons popped off and flew across the room, one hitting Hawk square in the forehead.

“Admiral, it would seem your bust is too well endowed for my shirt. Talk about a stuffed shirt!”

“Hawk, it’s not funny! I have to get to my ship!” Maggie stopped, calmed down and grinned back at Hawk, “Ok so it is funny.”

Hawk turned and reached back into the closet and tossed Maggie his buckskin jacket. She threw it on and as she zipped it up. She grinned, “At least this won’t pop buttons.”

“Mags?” Hawk pointed at her chest area, “I’m guessing you should zip it all the way up.”

Maggie turned and looked at the mirror and saw her rather large breasts spilling out of the tight jacket. She sucked in her chest and finished zipping it up. She exhaled, paused, then smiled.

“Think I’m safe wearing this one.”

They both chuckled as Hawk slipped on his last boot and adhered it to his pants. He grabbed her hand and led her out of the bedroom and towards the front door.

She stopped and Hawk turned. Maggie wrapped her arms around Hawk’s neck and kissed him passionately. He kissed her as he held her tightly. She reluctantly pulled free from his embrace. There were tears in her eyes.

“My loving General.” Maggie stroked his cheek with the back of her hand as a tear rolled down her cheek. “We’ll never see each other again, will we?”

Hawk looked longingly, sadly at her, “No Maggie, you have such a bright future and I a much longer one.”

“I know Hawk, I know.” She tried to manage a smile. “I’d just grow old and die, while you’d remain the same as you are now. I can’t imagine how....” She choked back the urge to cry. How sad she felt for him and for herself a Moment of self pity.

Maggie kissed Hawk gently and stroked his face once more as if to freeze this moment forever in her mind. She turned and walked out the door. She would not look back for if she saw Hawk’s sadness, she might never leave. She ran down the road leading to the pier where her flag ship was docked.

Hawk went back inside, gathered his swords and pack, went out and attached it to his cycle. Ten, twenty minutes passed, then he glanced over his shoulder as Maggie’s large flagship was being pushed from the dock by a tugboat. Hawk threw a leg over his cycle and cranked the throttle.

The evening sun was slowly sinking into the ocean, a lone man standing beside his cycle stood upon a windy cliff. He stared out to the ocean and watched a fleet of ships sail southward. Their silhouettes against the backdrop of the darkening red sun as it sank into the western sky. He watched as the ships sailed out of sight as the shadows crept toward shore.

He tossed a leg over the cycle and twisted, looking once again toward the ocean. His head low, his shoulders slumped as he headed back to his base.

Once again someone he cared for would leave his life.

Once again he would be alone

## Chapter 11.

Kim hugged her little brother and gently stroked his cheek. “You take care of yourself baby brother. Hawk won’t be back for a month or two and it’s up to us to do what has to be done around here.”

“Aw, sis! You know I love you, but I’m only your baby brother by a year and think I’m old enough now....” Tim’s grin beamed as he realized the futility of his effort. He shrugged and ceded, “...Oh Hell Kim, guess when I’m ninety I’ll still be your baby brother!”

“You got that right mister.” She smiled and pinched his cheek teasingly. “Seriously now Tim. You watch yourself. These dispatches have to go to all the settlements along this stretch of the Rockies. Granted the mutes usually stay out of the higher areas, but remember Mom and Dad.”

Tim looked at the ground, “Yeah, I remember sis, I remember. Even that old bastard that damn near killed me and his pal got ambushed. They said they’d been out in the forests for years. Sis I’ll be careful.” He leaned over to her and kissed her cheek, “You be careful as well. Big sister or not, I still worry.”

Kim squeezed Tim’s hand got on her motorcycle as did her brother. They were in arms reach of one another and Kim held out her hand as Tim grasped it.

“Damn Kim, we’ll be ok, relax.” He grinned at his sister, “ We’ll be done in about two weeks, meet up with the patrols where we’re suppose to and be back in time to tease Hawk about not finding that mid state passage through the Rockies.”

Kim laughed, “Well we did try to tell him, but you know Hawk. We know this part of the state too well and even if it did exist, Hollow, Cedarville, or Coppertown, someone in those parts would have mentioned it when we were there last with Hawk.”

Tim chuckled, “Hawk trusts his friends far too much Kim. His friend from Oil City told him they crossed in the area of the Eagle Peak.” He grinned, “You and I know that’s one of the highest coldest parts of the mountains and his buddy got through? And with a wife and kids? HA!”

“We tried Tim, that’s all we could do. If Hawk has it in his head, to check it out....”

Tim gave Kim’s hand a squeeze and switched on his cycle. Kim followed suit. He grinned at her and smugly added.

“You know sis, Hawk sent back east for these Proff drive cycles just for us. But he only got yours so you wouldn’t be jealous that I’m his favorite!”

Kim laughed, then stuck her tongue out at her brother. She cranked the throttle as the cycle’s rear tire swung around and kicked up dust and gravel all over her brother. Tim coughed and grinned as she sped through the main gate of their small base. He twisted the throttle of his cycle and it quietly jumped to life and he too passed through the gate and quickly caught up to Kim.

They rode side by side for a short distance, then Kim turned northeast and Tim to the southeast. They would miss one another as the longest they had been apart since the dreadful day their parents were killed, had been about a week. Watching each other’s backs had become as natural as breathing to them. Now for the next two weeks they would ride alone.

Within a few hours Kim had reached the foothills and headed due east. At the top of a rise she looked south and wondered how Tim was doing. She scanned the hills with her binoculars for mutant signs. There were none. In the distance she thought she was a small dust cloud and knowing it was too far for Tim wondered if maybe Hawk had left Alpha base early and begun his search for the hidden passage.

She smiled and started moving toward the first of the smaller settlements. The smile was for the fact that now word had gotten around of the military, Hawk and themselves, all the settlements that had once turned their backs on them, were now greeting them with open arms. She knew there would be free food and lodging as they made their rounds. The setting sun warned Kim she’d best hurry as her headlight would light her way in the darkness, but also alert any mutes of her approach. In the darkness of night that would be fatal.

Tim pulled off the road next to a high cliff. The next town was still too far for him to make before nightfall. He climbed a short ways up the mountain side, found the wide ledge that he and Kim had used so many times and tossed his pack down. He untied a rope from his belt and found a good foothold along side of a huge boulder and looped the rope over and around it. Putting both feet on the back side of the boulder he started straining on the rope.

“Damn good thing these cycles are so light.” He mumbled as he strained. His muscles strained, sweat ran from his brow. He grinned as he tied the rope off and peered over the edge to make sure the cycle was secure and high enough for the mutes not to see.

“At least tomorrow night I sleep in a bed!” He mumbled as he prepared to spend a cold night on this ledge he knew so well. “Tonight the wind blows and I freeze my ass off.” He mused.

“Sleep well big sis.” Tim mumbled as he slipped into his sleeping bag. Before pulling the bag up over his head he grinned and muttered one final thought, “A safer route my ass! You just wanted a warm bed every night.”

The night breezes that whistled through the mountains tossed the curtains of the inn’s small window. Kim looked out the open window from her bed and giggled.

“I’ll bet Tim has realized by now why I suggested taking the northern towns.” She mused, “Ok there are a few more, but I’ll be warm every night.” Once more she giggled as she reached up and turned out the light next to her bed. She snuggled down into the soft, warm, covers and pulled them up around her chin. Most of the small settlements had wind generators and electricity.

“I should be ashamed of myself!” She giggled again, then added, “Nawww.”

Once again she wondered about Hawk. Was that dust she’d seen him? Had he even left the base? As sleep overtook her she pondered being alone for the first time in so many years. How far she’d come from those painful first days after losing their folks. How much she’d grown mentally. She snuggled deeper into her pillow.

No longer was she the frightened little girl striving to protect her brother, but a woman, confident, sure and smart. She knew Tim would be fine. And Hawk? Well he was always ok. But for the first time Kim knew she would be fine as well.

Morning came and with knowing both the siblings awoke about the same time, ate breakfast and headed out on their separate ways. Each taking time to ponder the well being of the other. Each going about their duty without pause. It was only Kim that wondered if Hawk had left Alpha yet as there was a slim chance they might pass close enough to wave.

Kim had no more romantic thoughts of Hawk as little by little it became clear to her, she did think of Hawk more as a substitute father. He had become their friend and mentor, but there was something more, he was someone that she felt safe with and trusted. He could have taken advantage of her years earlier, but didn’t. When she needed to find solace or comfort Hawk was the one she ran to. She and Tim came to love him as well as admire him. He had taught them so much and now they were able to confidently stand alone as well as together. Hawk had become their father figure and it was obvious to all that he felt the same towards the siblings.

Kim was out of the forests and into the higher scattered tree line. She knew this area well and would be in the next settlement by late afternoon. She smiled knowing that her brother would have a warm bed this coming night.



She stopped to have a quick bite for lunch along a tiny waterfall. She moved far enough away so the peaceful sounds would not cover approaching intruders. Sitting on a high out crop she ate as she scanned for any movement. Occasionally she pulled out her binoculars and looked in all directions, even above. Hawk had taught her well.

Noticing movement in the valley below, she adjusted the field glasses. Mutants and a lot of them. She noted their movements and hopped on her cycle and headed off to Cedarville, her next stop.

Hours passed as she threaded her way over the narrow remains of roads that once connected one town to another. Where the roads had fallen into the valleys below, Kim found ways around. All the time being extremely careful not to go into areas the mutants might be able to catch her off guard.

About two hours after her quick lunch she rounded a curve in what was no more than a narrow path on the side of a mountain, Kim saw the gates of the large settlement of Cedarville. It was a town founded just after the apocalypse in a wide mountain valley. Like most settlements back then people found valleys that had water and enough ground to farm. These valleys were blocked by tall walls of various kinds with massive gates to stop the vast tides of mutants.

After decades of living in these communities the populations became overcrowded and sometimes harsh laws were passed to prevent starvation. Cedarville always had controlled their population by having to have permits to have children. Cedarville looked at those that wished to leave as population control and would not allow couples to have babies to replace those that left, as did most of the other communities. Until recently strangers would be turned away. Cedarville was no different. Cedarville had a population of over twenty thousand living in the vast valley. Cedarville was where Kim was born!

“State your business lady or leave.” Was the shout from the guard tower at the Cedarville gate.

“My name is Kim Vardis and I’m here by the request of the military of this zone. I bring communications from the military commander of this zone for the mayor and council.”

A rude reply was shouted from the man hidden behind the tower’s wall. “Yeah, and how do I know when I open the gate some gang isn’t going to rush in? Prove what you say is true!”

Before Kim could answer the gate slowly groaned as it opened enough for her cycle to pass through. She slowly drove through and passed the high walls inside and stopped as the outer gate closed and the strong, but smaller inner gate opened.

Kim rode through that one and stopped as two armed guards stood in her path. She heard the second gate close, but never took her eyes off the guards.

One of the guards stepped forward and looked through the backpack strapped to the rear of her cycle. When he was satisfied, he nodded and the other guards stepped back and motioned her to a small building at the base of the watch tower.

As Kim reached the building the door opened and a short bald man stepped out. Kim got off the bike and walked to meet him.

The man grinned.

“Don’t remember me after these years do you Kim?”

“Remember? Do I know you? You do look familiar.”

“Kim...” A tear rolled down his cheek, “I’m your Uncle Zack!” He held out his arms wide.

“Uncle Zack?” Kim struggled to remember, “Uncle Zack?” She squinted then jumped into his arms and tearfully added, “You had hair the last time I saw you.”

They both laughed as the tears still flowed.

“I was nine years younger back then.”

“But you went to Rockypoint to run their security. We never heard from you...” Kim choked back a sob, “Dad... we thought you were dead.”

Zack laughed, “Damned near was Kim. Took me over three months to get there the mutes were so thick.” He pushed Kim back to arms length and looked her up and down. “Damn girl, you have sure grown into a fine looking young lady. Aw, you don’t know how much I missed all of you. It took me almost two years to get a letter through and almost another to get a reply.”

“Zack? You know Mom and Dad...”

“I know Kimmy. The letter I sent was sent back from the old mayor with a note explaining everything.”

Kim smiled weakly, “Good old Mayor Lewis. Zack he was the only one that came to the gate when Tim and I returned. He was the only one that fought to let us back in. The council back then over rode him and turned two teenagers out into the wilderness to die. But we didn’t!”

Zack hugged her again.

“Christ niece, I thought you two were dead. Then stories of a brother and sister scouts started trickling in from the south. I hoped, but then...” Zack just hugged Kim as emotions took over.

Kim and Zack hugged for minutes then, she slowly removed herself from his embrace.

“Zack, your brother was killed by mutes and Mom a short time later. They gave their lives so Tim and I could get away.”

“That doesn’t surprise me Kim. Your parents loved you two so much. Why hell they’d do anything for you two. That’s why they wanted to move wherever that place was, so your Dad could teach.” Zack looked in Kim’s eyes, “Kim your mother was pregnant! When that guy came from...”

“I don’t remember the towns’ name anymore either Zack. And I knew Mom was pregnant Zack, she told me a week earlier. If I recall she said she was about two months along. Of course Tim didn’t know and I never told him until years later.”

“Well anyhow, Sam Lewis knew the mayor of the other town and fixed it so your family could move there. I carried the messages back and forth while I was trying to get that security job. I remember the note said they had lost a large family in a house fire. So Sam made the arrangements.... Say! I stayed, but sent the word back to my brother to come....” Zack’s head lowered, “Which I never sent the message now. Kim, Where is Tim?”

“Tim?” She laughed, “Tim is making the rounds of all mountain communities south to the Moby wall. Like I am here in the northern areas.” She chuckled again, “And probably cussing me out because I stuck him with the ones that are farther apart. A lot of cold nights on the road this time of year.” Kim paused then added, “Uncle Zack, our family would have had to leave message or not. You know as much as I our parents would have never given up the baby or allowed it to be put to death.

Zack latched onto Kim’s arm and started walking toward a third gate. As it opened Kim could see into the valley below. It was still as beautiful as she remembered. She wondered if the citizens were still as cold. All her families friends, those that she had known for years had turned their back to them. If anyone still remembered her, she wondered if she could forgive them. That was then and this was now, but a lot of hatred had passed through her thoughts over those same years.

“Kim? Day dreaming?”

“Huh? Oh, sort of Uncle Zack. I was wondering if any of our old friends were still around. If I would remem....”

“Kim... Oh Shit! You couldn't have known. About two years after you left, Cedarville had a sickness. Over four thousand died. Including Mayor Lewis. One of the areas it hit was where your family lived on the south slopes in district seven.”

“Sam, dead?” Kim shook her head, “I can still see him on the wall screaming at the council to let us in. And the guards removing him because he was causing a scene. He was a good man. So sad.”

As they strolled arm in arm Kim told Zack of their adventures. Of scouting for the military. Of running messages between the southern settlements, of the library that was being built back east and then she mentioned....

“Hawk! The guy that we've heard stories of since I was a kid? That Hawk? You know him? Christ, I used to dream I was him when I was a little boy. Your Dad and I would hear tales of him from explorers that came from back east. They'd come through some pass east of Rockypoint. Your Dad and I would play like we were this great mutant fighter. Christ and you met him?”

“Met him? Zack...” Kim roared with laughter, “... Oh Tim and I met him alright!” Kim paused, then it hit her. “Pass through to the east from Rockypoint?”

“Yeah we had one traveler that made it through two springs ago. He said he started out with over one hundred in his party, but raiders killed all but six of them. The rest died coming through the pass his great grandma drew him a map of. He was pretty beat up and damned near dead, but he did make it all the way from some town called Centerville or Center something. Hell he even let me keep his map he was so grateful to be here.” Zack laughed, “He wasn't once we told him what things were on this side of the mountains.”

Zack stopped and thought for a second, then added, “Why Hell's bells, I even think I brought it with me. You can give it to that Hawk fellow if you want. I'm here for about another week.”

“Oh, Uncle Zack!” Kim hugged him again, “Hawk will be so happy to hear this.”

He looked at Kim suspiciously, “Say, do you really know Hawk or are you just having a bit of fun with your old Uncle?”

Kim, latched her arm through Zack's. She chuckled as they walked down the road into the breath taking valley.

“Uncle Zack! Do I have a story for you!”

## Chapter 12.

Tim had finally spent a night in a warm bed and was off to the second settlement on his list. The town he had just left had been cold to him when he arrived, then cheered him as a hero as he left. Bringing word the military had plans to send troops to the small community and start making supply runs had overjoyed the village.

So now he was on toward another small town of about a thousand tucked away in the foothills near one of the vast forested areas. The trappers called it Boonesville and the name stuck and eventually the small town's original name was forgotten. It had been built within an area of high hills that had been walled up in between them to form a secure community. The outer sides of the hills had been excavated so they had high sides that no mutant could scale. Tim had heard there was a small creek that passed through the settlement, which meant fresh food. Vegetables, that was something the last town didn't have or at least didn't share. Every family there grew their own food. Every family had a deep well of collected water from the rains or the one community well. Although overjoyed with his news, only meat was offered the bearer of the good news as vegetables were scarce back there.

Tim actually caught himself pondering the strange fact that as a child there wasn't a vegetable he liked. Now after all these years, he looked forward to any vegetable he could put a fork into. Now he was only an hour away from real food. "Funny how one changes throughout the years." He pondered.

Tim sped up as he got into the lower foothills as the boulders and rocks gave way to rolling grassy hills. He kept an eye out for mutants and scattered gangs that roamed the area, but food was on his mind and food he would soon have. Each high hill he would stop and scan the areas around him, then back in the direction of the next town he would go.

Tim chuckled aloud as he sped along. "Sis are you ever going to owe me big time for taking this route!" He then licked his lips, "Food he thought!" Boonesville was no different now the military was going to have a presence in these areas. The towns were warming to the military's representatives and that meant food at the end of the day.

Visions of food danced through his head as Tim topped one of the higher hills, he came to a skidding halt! There about a mile away lay Boonesville or what he guessed was the ruins of Boonesville. The town was one of the few in this area that actually had high walls to protect it where there were no mountains or other natural things that could be used in place of walls. There were no standing buildings, just charred remains. Many of the ruins still smoldered as wafts of smoke drifted lazily upward. Tim dismounted and ripped the field glasses from his saddlebag and scanned the area.

“My God, where are the people!” He muttered aloud, “There are no people!” He continued scanning for mutant signs and when he was sure nothing was in the area, he mounted his cycle and sped toward the devastated town.

Tim stopped at the main gate somewhat stunned. The main gate had been blasted open! He drove cautiously down the main street, then when he reached the end of the towns other gate, which was opened normally, he began a patterned search of the side streets. All the time he searched he kept telling himself there had to be some survivors.

There were body parts scattered throughout the rubble filled streets, some charred some were not. Obvious panic had occurred in this town. After hours of searching Tim rode back to the small town square, dismounted and walked over to the small fountain near what he thought to be the main council hall. The amount of bodies and parts laying around suggested to him that perhaps this is where many made a last stand.

Tim, weary from the horror and stress of being on high alert for so long sat on the fountain edge and looked in the shallow waters. Something glinted! He reached into the cool water and found a glass jar. The jar had some odd paper in it.

“Ok this is getting weird.” Tim turned to Kim for a reply out of habit, who wasn’t there. He grinned as the ‘old habits die hard’ passed through his mind. He kept forgetting Kim was elsewhere. As he slowly unscrewed the lid and removed the paper, Tim nervously looked around to make sure nothing or no one caught him off guard. He unrolled the worn paper, which had some hastily written words on it.

*“Whoever finds this message please contact the military. Tell them to find and hang a man called “Scratch”. Last week Scratch came here to trade. He got drunk and killed a man by knifing him repeatedly for no reason other than Scratch didn’t like the way he looked at him. We took him to our stockade, but on the way Scratch managed to overpower the guard and escape. After two days of searching for him, we gave up.*

*Yesterday Scratch showed back up. He would run, then stop then repeat the same things again. From the forest several thousand mutes came screaming after him, he’d run toward the gate, then stop long enough to let the mutes get closer to him, then run toward us again.*

*He was leading the mutes to us.*

*We closed the gates as Scratch neared. That son of a bitch dynamited the towns gate, then ran through the opening the blast created. As you have seen by now, both gate doors are gone.*

*The mutes have chased him into the town and are killing everyone.*

*Most ran to the back gate and flung it open, only to see a lot of the mutes had gone around and were trying to get in that way. With mutes pouring through the only two gates, we must fight.*

*Some of us are trying to hold out in the square now that fires have started breaking out and are spreading, as this is the only open area in this cramped old town.*

*As most strangers stop at this artesian fountain to drink, I'll leave this message there in hopes someone will find it. I write this with hope someone will avenge this town and find Scratch. Hang him slowly, make him suffer. Avenge us. Scratch can be identified by several long scratches on his left cheek that look like claw marks and his left ear is split where the scratch stops. The mutes have broken through our hastily made barricades... Screams can be heard from all over.... Somehow I must get this to the fountain.....God help us all!*

*Will Arnold, Boonesville shopkeeper."*

Tim slowly put the paper into the jar and laid it on the fountains wall. He stood and shook him head.

"They'll never know...." Tim turned and looked at the corpse laying on the ground at one of the entrance's of the square, The face had several old scratches and one ear was split. "...They'll never know Scratch got what he sowed."

Glancing one last time around the square, Tim mounted his cycle and headed out of the town and into the foothills toward his next destination. As he drove along the narrow dusty trail from Boonesville he saw something in the road ahead.

"My God!" Tim almost shouted, for there in the middle of the road walked a young woman. Her hair a mess, clothes torn, she walked in a trance like state.

"Miss! Miss!" He shouted as he approached. There was no reply so he pulled slightly ahead of her making sure he gave her a wide berth as not to startle her. Tim leapt off the cycle and slowly walked up to her.

The lass's dust covered face was tear stained and the blank stare from her eyes he had seen many times before in his young life. The girl was in shock.

She walked up to him and stopped, not saying a word, not looking directly at him, but more through his chest. Her eyes not seeing him, but some unknown horror.

"Miss? Are you alright?" Tim reached out gently and touched her arms with his hands. She screamed and started beating him with her fists. So violently he had to spin her around and grasp her in a bear hug. The lass kicked out and screamed as if she was fighting hell itself.

Tim leaned forward risking a head to his chin and whispered into her ear over and over again, "It's ok now miss, I have you, you're safe.", then "I'll take you to Coppertown, you'll be safe there. No one's going to hurt you anymore!"

Eventually his words took root. The lass slowed her violent actions, her screams turned to sobs and as Tim relaxed his grip on her. She twisted around and planted her small frame into chest, his strong arms wrapped around her as she sobbed.

Tim stroked her hair and continued his calming tones. He could feel her body relax. He hugged her as her sobs slowed, then stopped as she fainted in his arms. Catching her limp body, he carried her over to the nearest tree and gently laid her on the shaded grass. He propped her head on a protruding root and ran to fetch some water from the canteen.

By the time Tim returned to the tree, the lass was sitting up. She still looked dazed and disoriented, but at least he thought, her eyes were following him as he neared. Tim sighed a bit, the lass was coming out of the shock. He knelt beside her and handed her the bottle and she responded by taking it.

“My name is Tim. What’s yours lass?”

She looked at Tim and put the canteen to her mouth and started gulping down the water so fast Tim had to reach out and pull the canteen from her lips.

“Easy miss, you’re really dehydrated and if you drink too fast, you’ll get sick.” Tim smiled at her and took his hand away as the lass put the canteen back to her lips and took only one large gulp. She slowly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked into Tim’s eyes.

“I... I’m...” She took another swig of water, “...I’m Jill, Jill Ord.” Jill paused and stared back in the direction of Boonesville. “They’re all ... dead. I know I watched. Today I saw you looking, I...I ....” Tears trickled down her cheek. Jill handed the canteen back to Tim and quickly wiped her eyes as if to stop the flow of tears.

“My father and I were out gathering fruit from an old orchard a mile down the road behind Boonesville.” She choked back the urge to cry and Tim gently patted her hand.

“We heard the screams and saw mutes at the rear gate, so we ran up over there.” Jill pointed to a really large rocky outcropping protruding from the high hill they were on.

“It’s called ‘Lovers Rock’, as guys would take their girlfriends up there to watch the moon or sunset. My father told me to climb up there because there is only narrow foot holes and one way up and mutes can’t climb anything like that. It’s the highest place around.” Once again tears started to flow, but Jill made no attempt this time to stem the flow.

“Father, yelled to me as I neared the top to stay there while he went to town and tried to rescue his brother and family.” She was sobbing as she continued her story, “I laid up there for two days and father never came... I know.... he’s...” Jill shuddered as if a cold wind had encased her, “....or he would have come back.”



She burst into uncontrollable crying and buried her face into Tim's chest so hard he fell back onto his rear, with Jill following still with her arms tightly wrapped around him.

Yet Tim managed to embrace this frightened lass. "Jill, I'm so sorry. I did look for survivors and..."

"I know you did Tim, I watched." She gently pushed away from him and tried weakly to smile, "You drove every street, checked the few houses that weren't burned to the ground. You risked being jumped by any mutes that might still have been around just to find survivors..." She smiled and gently touched his hand, "...and for that I thank you."

"Jill? Two days you stayed? The top looks pretty small."

"It's only large enough for maybe two couples to sit... or me to lie down upon. I had enough room to sleep what little I did. I had a few apples that we had picked before we...heard..."

Tim could see fear starting to creep across her face as she continued, "Just before evening the first day some of the mutes must have seen me. Maybe it was another group, I don't know. All I knew was I heard them scratching at the out crop as they tried to climb, but couldn't."

"My God more mutes? Jill that must have been horrible for you."

"Tim,..." Jill actually gave him a big grin, "...you'll never know. I knew they couldn't make it up there with me, but I screamed and it wasn't a little scream either." She sniffed and put her head on his shoulder for comfort.

"I screamed, then later I cried. Night fell and I could hear them scratching and moving around in the dark all around the out crop, but eventually I fell asleep or passed out." Jill chuckled, then sniffed back a sob. "In the morning, they were still there and I screamed at them out of frustration. Then I screamed at them because I got mad. I swore at them, I threw what few rocks there were up there at them. When I ran out of rocks, I spit at them until I had no more spit."

Jill's voice became quiet, "Then I just sat there staring at them. The funny thing was I came to face the fact I was going to die of starvation up there. I swung my legs over the edge and just sat there staring at them and the damned things stopped wandering about and just stood there staring back."

She moved her head off Tim's shoulder so she could look him in the face. "We stared at each other for hours, almost a day, I think. It was strange, almost like I couldn't move. Didn't want to move. I can't explain it Tim. I sat all night staring into the darkness and into the morning, almost into noon. We stared at one another..... then they all just turned and walked away back toward the rear of the town, turned north and walked into the forest."

“Just before noon? Christ!” Tim swallowed hard, “If I had taken the back road in I would have met them head on!” He smiled at Jill, “That at least answers my question if you knew which way they went.”

Tim knew Jill was coming out of the shock she had been in and gently removed his arm from around her slim shoulder and slowly stood. He looked around to make sure they were alone and reached out his hand. Jill grasped it as he helped her to a standing position.

“Jill, you’ve been through a lot young lady and I think we need to get you to Coppertown, you’ll be safe there.”

“Coppertown? That’s more than three days walk.” Jill added, “If we can use that cycle thing of yours, maybe a day and a half?”

Tim smiled warmly to assure her, “It’ll be ok Jill. I know of several safe places to stay for the night. Places a lot safer...” He grinned at her, “...and damned sure warmer, than the place you spent last night on.”

They walked to the cycle and Tim stopped. He turned to Jill, looked her up and down. She was almost as tall as he. She tried to hide the fact she had a terrific shape under her loose top shirt and long skirt.

“Jill that skirt is going to have to go...”

“WHAT!!”

“OH, sorry, no. I meant... uhh, oh crap! I meant I’ll have to give you a pair of my pants. You can’t ride the cycle in a skirt, it could get caught in the rear wheel and we’d both be in trouble.”

Jill looked at Tim’s embarrassment, then her skirt, then the rear wheel. Without hesitation, she smiled and chirped. “Ahh, Ok!”

He reached into his other saddle bag and pulled out a pair of pants, then handed them to Jill.

“OH My God! Blue jeans? I’ve seen them a few times in my twenty years, but never... thought...” She looked at Tim, “...are you sure?”

Tim patted her arm and smiled at her warmly. “Sure Jill, run into the woods there.” He pointed at a stand of small trees and brush, “Change and we’ll get under way.”

“No way in Hell I’m going over there alone. One never knows what’s in there!” Jill grinned, then gave him a stern look, “You can just turn your butt around... And no looking!” She knew this gentle person would never hurt her, nor look while she was changing. They were out in the

open and she wanted it to stay that way. If anything came out at them, they would have plenty of time to ride off.... Or at least she hoped!

Tim scanned all the areas that would not turn him around. Jill in turn untied her skirt, then slipped out of it and her old torn petticoat and rolled them up into a tight roll so her escort would not see her underclothing. She slipped on the blue jeans and zipped them up.

“Wow!” She thought as she looked herself over. Tim was taller and his jeans rode high on her calf, but the fit was tight as she had more than he in all the right places. This was obvious as she twisted and looked at how snug the jeans caressed her behind. Once again her mind shouted “WOW!”

She smiled and turned toward Tim who still had his back to her. Jill started to say something, then noticed what she had missed before. Tim was like her, a medium build, but his sleeveless, tight buckskin shirt showed off his well developed arms, then tapered down to his narrow waist. His darker buckskin pants revealed the lower half was as nice as the upper half. She just stood there grinning.

“Hey! You back there....”

Jill jerked as Tim had startled her and broke her ponderings.

“...You know we don’t have all day.”

“Oh, sorry Tim, I was, just looking.”

“Looking?”

“Oh, ohhh, ah, looking out to make sure there were no mutes coming up from your behind.” Jill gasped, “Oh God I meant looking at our behinds... er, behind us!”

Tim spun around and looked at Jill in a priceless, puzzled stare. “What the Hell are you talking about? Mutes, behind us? There are no mutes behind us.”

Jill grinned, took the roll of her clothes and held them over Tim’s cycles rear saddlebag, “Ok to put these in here?”

Tim stood there still puzzled, then shrugged and replied, “Yeah, sure. In there’s fine.” He scratched his head and walked to the cycle. He kicked down the foot pegs for Jill to rest her feet on, swung a leg over the cycle and pointed to the area behind him. Jill bounded onto the cycle behind Tim, wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned forward to his ear.

“I thought you said we were going.” She said teasingly, “So why are we still here?”

She squealed with joyous wonder as the cycle leapt forward. She had seen pictures and heard stories from some of the old friends of her grandfather of motorcycles, but never dreamed of actually being on one.

Her emotions had run the gauntlet these last few days. Now she was safe, now she had someone to accompany her to the next town. Jill was not alone anymore, at least for now. She smiled as the cycle bumped along the old washed out road. Her mood had improved. All the death and destruction she had seen, then the fact she had given up all hope of reaching the next town, all had faded now she was with Tim.

Tim turned his head and shouted above the wind noise.

“Hawk had a special suspension put on these when he ordered these cycles for my sister and I. Good thing too, or these roads would probably break our backs... or butts.” He chuckled and went back to watching where he was going.

Jill smiled as if she knew what Tim was talking about. What she did understand was this really cute guy had a sister and caught herself wondering if his sister would like her when they met. Jill nestled her head into the small of Tim’s neck and closed her eyes. So much had happened, so many emotions and now this! Strange feelings were now creeping into her mind and body.

Her mind was in conflict. Every female in these parts looked for mates for security, for survival and if lucky enough would find love eventually with their mate. This was also new for Jill. She was starting to feel something strange happening to her. She had never had a mate as her father had always cared for her and his brothers family as the eldest always did in their town. But now with this man there was something, something he did to her. She became aware of the strong muscular stomach her hands were holding onto.

“No wait, something I feel... Damn!” She frowned and just snuggled her head deeper. “Whatever it is can wait.” She thought, “After all the sadness, I feel better.... Strange!” She squeezed him tighter without knowing.

Tim looked ahead and smiled as he drove the cycle up into the higher foothills. For him it was strangely nice to have this beautiful creature riding behind him. Holding onto him, depending upon him.

“Poor thing has been through so much. Now riding on a cycle, she’s squeezing me so hard, she must be frightened.” He patted her hand gently.

Jill felt the pat on her hand and smiled. She liked riding on this cycle thing. Moreover this man that had found her seemed to enjoy her company. She snuggled her head deeper into Tim’s shoulders and made sort of a purr.

A strange look crossed her face as her eyes popped open. “What the heck was that I just did?” Jill silently mused and slowly closed her eyes feeling the warmth of Tim’s back. “Who cares.” She sighed to herself.

While riding on this cycle thing, she discovered she liked holding on to Tim. And she noticed Tim seemed to like having her there behind him.

The ride was going to be long and soon night would fall upon these two riders and as Jill’s mind wandered, she couldn’t help but ponder the fact they would be without walls to protect them when night’s deadly veil of darkness fell. As much as Jill found she trusted Tim, she had never been without walls at night.

Again she trembled and once again she felt a strong hand gently pat hers.

## Chapter 13.

Up into the lower mountains they rode. The sun sank low in the early evening sky as Tim slowed to a stop and pointed up to what appeared to be a ledge.

“That’s where we’ll spend the night. There’s a wide ledge and a deep over hang if it should rain.”

Jill got off the rear of the cycle and walked past the front of it several steps, then just couldn’t help herself any longer. She stretched, bent down and touched her toes moving from the right foot to the next without straightening up. When she finally stood, the lowering sun silhouetted her glowing through her loose billowy and somewhat transparent blouse, Tim could see the silhouette of the woman that hid beneath.

Tim stifled a gasp and started to look away.

“My fanny took a pounding. Don’t know how you stand it. My butt feels like someone flattened it out.”

Tim grinned and mumbled quietly, “Looks just fine from here.”

“Hmmm? Did you say something Tim?”

“Oh nothing, Jill... just was looking out at the sun. It’s getting low almost to the ocean. We need to make camp before it gets dark.”

“Dark!” Jill snapped upright, “Yeah! Camp. Guess now would be a good time?”

Tim laughed and dismounted. He pulled the coiled rope from where it was tied onto the front of his cycle, just below the handle bars.

“I’ll climb up, lower the rope and pull you up. That way once your safe I can climb back down and tie off the cycle.” He added, “I tie off the cycle every night and pull it high enough so any mute that passes by can’t see it. Or if it did, can’t reach it.” Smiling he started toward the cliff face.

“MEN!” Jill huffed as she passed Tim, grabbing the coiled rope off his shoulder.

“Just because I used to wear a skirt, doesn’t mean I can’t climb!” She looked back over her shoulder as she pulled her long blonde hair back into a ponytail and added, “And just because a woman can climb doesn’t mean I’m not feminine. Women can be both you know!” She leapt to a small foot hold and proceeded to climb.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck and puzzled what that was all about. He shrugged and decided it was best to get out the rope harness used to tie the cycle off. Rather than to try to understand this pretty woman he had found.

He began to tie the harness for the rope to attach it to, all the time muttering to himself. “Christ! Kim talks to me like I’m not on the same page she is. Jill talks to me like she doesn’t know what page she wants me on..... Women!”

Tim was surprised as Jill helped him pull the cycle up and tie it off. For someone her size she was stronger than he’d imagined.

“Thanks Jill, you’ve sure made it easier for me.” He laughed, “Sure beats pulling this up by myself like I have to do most nights.”

Jill just returned his smile and knelt down looking out over the trees below in the foothills. The sun was setting, their small camp had been set up. An orange glow from the setting sun back lit the scattered clouds with various shades of purples and reds. The blue skies darkened as the sun sank into the horizon.

“My God Tim, how can a world that looks so beautiful be so ugly hidden beneath it?”

Tim who had sat next to Jill looked over to her to see a tear trickle down her cheek. He put his hand on her shoulder, but she leaned over and rested her head on him as Tim slid his arm around her gently. He could feel her body tremble as she spoke.

“My father was dying Tim. He had told us less than a year. Now my Uncle, his family and father are gone. Mutants roam freely, gangs, thieves...” She sighed woefully, “...I pray father died quickly.”

Tim started to speak, but Jill sighed once again and added, “Now I look at the world below and see all this beauty.” She tilted her head up to look at Tim, “It’s so beautiful and so deadly and ugly underneath.”

Tim tried to find something to say, but couldn’t. Then before he knew it words seemed to flow from his lips as he raised his hand and pointed westward.

“Out there is the ocean Jill. It’s so beautiful this time of day. But there are sharks and other things that would kill you. Hawk said it was that way even before the apocalypse. So you see Jill, this is just the world we live in. We take the good with the bad, be happy or sad, love or hate, but we either live or die. We make the best out of whatever we get handed and occasionally...” Tim looked over to Jill, who in turn was gazing at him warmly, “...something wonderful and unexpected crosses our paths.”

Jill leaned slightly toward Tim, but he quickly pulled back. He slowly got up, dusted himself off, helped Jill to her feet and they moved back to where he had set up his sleeping bag.

“You sleep here tonight Jill, while I take watch.”

“But you need to sleep?” Came her reply.

Tim smiled, “I’ll sleep in the morn for a few hours. We should be in Coppertown by late afternoon. You can watch while I sleep.”

“Why watch, we’re safe up here?”

Again Tim grinned, “Jill you have a lot to learn about being out here....” He chuckled, “Good thing I did come along.” He chuckled, “The reason I watch, is so no mutants pass during the night.” He stepped over to his backpack and started rummaging through it. He turned to Jill and added, “If they slipped by during the night, we might run straight into them tomorrow.”

“Ok, you win, you watch.” Jill grinned back as Tim pulled out a couple of foil packages and handed one to Jill. He could see she was puzzled as she turned the packet over and over.

“It’s a meal in a package Jill. You tear it open there where you see the tab and the dotted line.” He laughed, “It’s not that tasty, but it fills one up and Hawk says it’s full of everything that keeps a body healthy.”

She managed to open it easily enough and tried a bite, paused, took another bite, then smiled at Tim.

“Aww, it’s not that bad!”

“I know.” He laughed, “When Hawk first introduced Kim and I to these, he waited for us to take the first bite, then told us it was made from mutants. We spit the mouthfuls out so fast our eyeballs popped.”

Jill laughed at the thought, “Seriously? You two really believed that?”

“Well, no.... but we just reacted so fast, the food was out before we actually had time to think.”

“Tim, I hope I get to meet this Hawk friend of yours....” She leaned toward him and teased, “He sounds like my kind of guy. I love a good laugh.”

“You’ll love him alright, he’s quite a guy. He took Kim and I in as his own. Not that we needed anyone, but...” Tim looked her in the eyes and with a serious tone added, “...the things



he's taught us has kept us alive. The things he's told us would make your hair on the back of your neck stand on end."

Tim reached over and patted her hand gently. "But somehow listening to Hawk, always gives us hope for a brighter future. That's why we do what we do. Why we're out here. You should hear the things he tells us about back east. How civilization had flourished there. Someday Kim and I would like to go back east with him and see it."

"It sounds wonderful Tim. Perhaps someday..." A sad look crossed her face, "...no that's stupid, I'll never go there. It's just something a girl thinks of, but never does."

"You can go with us if you want Jill." Tim blurted out.

Jill paused for a second, then slowly reached over and laid her hand on Tim's. "Really? You'd take me?"

"Well that is if you wanted to go. Kim teases me all the time I'm not much good in the company department."

Jill slowly leaned in toward Tim, "You would do that for me?" Her eyes slowly closed, "No one has ever been so nice, so kind..."

Tim jumped to his feet and walked toward the ledges edge. Jill quickly got up and caught him.

"Was it something I said? Did I..."

"Jill, I, ahh..."

"Tim, I know we just met, but I really like you. A lot!" She stood close as the rising moon peaked over the mountain lighting her face, "I hope maybe you'll come back to see me in Coppertown Tim, after I get settled."

"Jill I might be young, but I know you've been through a lot these last few days. I really like you too," He smiled, "A lot, but with all that's been going on in your life, I don't want to take advantage of..."

Tim was interrupted with a gentle kiss on his lips. He felt his eye slowly close. Then as quick as it started it stopped and Jill stepped back and looked at him.

"Tim, kissing me isn't taking advantage. I like you and you like me. I'd like to see more of you when all this is over. I didn't say I was going to sleep with you."

Jill suddenly stepped back a step and covered her mouth with her hand, “Oh Tim, I didn’t mean I wouldn’t sleep with you...” She clamped her other hand over her mouth, “Oh, crap! I mean ... I mean I might but,... Oh God, I’m so embarrassed!”

She spun around and burst into tears. Tim reached out and gently, but firmly grasped her arms and slowly turned her back around. He leaned toward her and in the silver moon light she saw him smile warmly.

“Jill, I know what you mean and I feel the same way. But look at the emotions you just ran through in only a few seconds. We’ll have time to get to know one another.” He leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips then whispered, “We’ll have all the time in the world because Jill, I do want to come and see you and maybe if we still feel the same way...”

“What?” She cooed in a whisper.

“Well once the patrols are established...”

“Tim, what are you trying to say?”

“Well some of the guys girlfriends travel with them when they move from base to base, and I know Kim will love you, so maybe... I mean if you, er, we...”

Jill threw her arms around Tim’s neck and gave him a kiss like which he’d never dreamed of, then she buried her head into his neck and hugged him. She stepped back and in a warm gentle voice Jill said, “How can someone our age be so wise? We’ve just met, yet you know so much about my emotions. More than I know.”

She reached out her hand and stroked his cheek. “I know that someday, when you come back to me.” She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it, then looked deeply into his eyes, “Tim I know I’d be happy to go with you to where ever you go. Where ever your scouting takes you. Men like you are hard to find and I’d consider myself lucky to be your girl.”

Jill turned and headed toward the sleeping bag.

“Jill?”

She turned slightly.

“Jill, I would be the lucky one. That’s why I don’t want to rush things.”

She spun around and ran into Tim’s arms so hard they stumbled, but that didn’t stop their embrace. After several long heated kisses, Jill stepped back and looked into Tim’s eyes.

“I can tell I’m going to fall for you hard Tim.”

She turned and rushed to the sleeping bag and crawled in pulling it up around her neck against the cool evening breezes. Tim in turn sat down near the edge of the ledge they were on and peered down with the night vision goggles Hawk had given him.

From behind him he heard Jill whisper in an almost apologetic voice, "I've never been with a man, I hope you don't hold that against me. I know a man wants..."

"Jill," Tim interrupted, "Jill, I've never been with a woman. If and when the time comes, we can enjoy the experience together."

Jill smiled warmly and raised her head as if to say more, but instead just looked at Tim's silhouette bathed in the glow of the moonlight as he added....

"Once we figure out what the Hell we're doing, it ought to be great!."

Jill giggled and pulled the covers up around her head. These days had been a gambit of emotions for her. She had lost her father, she had found love. She closed her eyes and this night would dream of her new love.

Tim smiled and once again put the goggles to his eyes and scanned the forest below. Today he found love and this love would steel him against the cooling breezes that blew across from the ocean.

And tomorrow, would be another day. Tim would take Jill to Coppertown and would leave knowing she would be fine. Jill, he had learned was quite a cook and Coppertown had many taverns. He in turn knew he would have to leave and get to his last stop, then head back west to meet his patrol. They then would head back north to meet Kim and her patrol.

He grinned at the thought of what Kim's reaction might be, him finding a girl. All the time Kim and he had been together, she teased him about being a virgin. Deep down he knew Kim wanted him to find someone. Perhaps because Tim knew Kim figured no man would want her because of her past. Maybe if he found someone, Kim would at least try.

As he scanned for signs of mutes, Tim couldn't help but grin to himself. Somehow happiness had crept into his life.

He felt a touch and jumped slightly. He twisted his head around to see Jill holding the sleeping bag. She laid it slightly behind him and once she got back in, reached and pulled him back. Tim scooted back and she laid her head upon his lap.

She snuggled her head onto his leg, yawned, and in a voice that sounded half asleep whispered, "See now we can say we slept together." She yawned again, "Guess that makes us a couple doesn't it?"

Tim stroked her hair gently as he looked through the field glasses with the other. He smiled and whispered, "Guess it does, sleep well Jill."

From the bag came a sleepy whisper, "Goodnight my love."

This passing day a new found love.

For tomorrow, a new beginning.

## Chapter 14.

Kim arose early and for some strange reason she felt great! Her Uncle was still alive and all was wonderful. Tim would be thrilled to know they still had family. Little could she have imagined the news Tim would bring when they next met. She hurried down to the tavern area of the small inn at which she was staying. Zack already had breakfast and was sitting there waiting for her. She stumbled toward the table as he handed her a cup of coffee.

“Here ya go sleepyhead!”

“Oh, Uncle Zack you’re a life saver.” She plopped down in a chair across from him.

“Kim, early this morning there were some military vehicles that came in. You know those vehicles with the six wheel drives, they call Sixes. The Captain in charge was looking for you.”

“Probably ready to head south to hook up with Tim’s troops. We’re suppose to meet at the old crossing at mid zone.”

“Don’t think so Kim, these troops had been in some scrap with mutes, but the Captain wouldn’t say anything. Hell, I’m just a civilian.”

Kim jumped to her feet and rushed toward the door as she yelled back over her shoulder, “Something has happened then Uncle Zack. I’ll be back and let you know.”

She sprinted up the narrow streets toward the front gates. As she rounded the last corner she saw ten armored personnel carriers and they were covered with blood! Kim headed toward the larger one knowing it would be the command vehicle. As she neared she could see the rear door was open and seeing Kim, the Captain stepped out.

“Tom! What happened? All that blood, mutes don’t bleed, that means...” She stopped as she almost answered her own question.”

Captain Tom Richfield walked up to where Kim had stopped and extended his hand. As Kim shook it she kept starrng at the vehicles that had all parked haphazardly near the inner gate.

“Kim it’s good to see you’re safe. We had reports that a large group of mutes were roaming around the area and the Commander knew it was the area you were in so he sent us out to make sure you were ok and try to get these mutes and mostly make sure word got around to all the communities.”

“I know Tom, I saw them in a valley below me as I was coming in yesterday.” She paused and thought a second, “But Tom, there weren’t enough to give you any problems. Ten vehicles?”

“Kim we had fourteen when we started. We ran into the mutes and wiped them out. Least most of them. Once the machine guns and the troops firing out the gun ports couldn’t see any more we got out and proceeded to mop up the rest. They ran into the forest and my men followed them. We had the Sixes circled just in case.” Tom started shaking his head slowly.

“Tom?”

“Sorry Kim. I was just thinking I should have known. Christ, Hawk has told everyone over and over to expect the unexpected from mutes.”

“Tom! What happened?”

“Kim I lost almost half my men.”

“Oh, Tom. I’m so sorry...”

Tom interrupted, “Kim there was no excuse and I’ll have to face the Base Commander when I return.”

“Tom! Dammit! Tell me what happened!” She stood there with a frown on her face and her hands on her hips. The Captain could see he’d better start talking.

“Well Kim, after my guys went into the woods to clean up the mutes. We were so busy watching the trees in front of us, the men I posted to the rear of the circle of Sixes must have been watching as well.” He paused as the color drained from his face.

“Kim, they snuck up behind us, hundreds of them! None of the usual grunting or screaming, they were completely quiet!

The next thing I knew we were fighting for our lives. Hell if it wasn’t for the men in the forest hearing the commotion and returned, we would have been dead. The damned mutes actually got into several of the Sixes and pulled wires and hoses and disabled them.”

“What? No way! Mutes have never pulled a stunt like that before.”

“I know! Kim they disabled four so bad I had to leave them, three others we managed to fix. The rest their crews managed to get inside and close the doors.... Kim, the mutes hit the Sixes while others hit the men on them before they could get in and close the hatches. It was as if it’s the way they had planned it.”

“My God Tom. Again the mutes have starting to act like they have some sort of hive mentality. Or at least are planning some of their attacks, somehow...” Kim struggled to imagine

what she was inferring. "...They don't talk, just grunt. Maybe they're developing some sort of language?"

"I don't know Kim, I just don't know. But one thing's for sure, they were after the Sixes. I'm guessing to disable the rides we travel in. That way we could be on foot."

"Which way did they go Tom, Tim's out there south of here."

"Don't worry Kim, this may be my last command, but I made sure we got every last one of those critters. We found mute signs that this second bunch came from the south."

"Oh my God, Tom.... Tim?"

The Captain reached out and touched Kim's arm gently, reassuringly, "Tim can take care of himself just fine Kim. I'll bet he'll beat you to the rendezvous point."

Kim laid her hand on Tom's and nodded, "Thanks Tom! You always seem to be showing up at the right time."

"Hey babe, 'cuz I love ya so much!"

Kim smiled and slugged Tom on the shoulder kiddingly, "Why Captain Richfield, what would your wife and kids think if they heard you saying that?"

Tom laughed aloud and replied, "Easy Kim. My wife would laugh and tell me to stop trying to rob the cradle, my kids would tell me I'm too old...." He laughed once again, then added, "...and my dog would piss on my leg as usual."

"Tom you still have that old mutt? Geez, that dog must be, what forty by now? Kim smiled, "Seriously Tom say hi to Ruth for me. I have to go get my cycle and get to my last stop, then head on south to meet Tim."

"Ok Kim." Tom looked seriously at her, "You be safe now Kim. No taking chances. Take old route seven to the cross roads, it's clear of trees most of the way."

Kim trotted off to retrieve her cycle shouting back to Tom and waving, "You worry like an old woman Tom. I'll be fine! I know of a road high up in the mountains and it'll be a lot safer."

As Kim sprinted back to the inn she wondered if Tim was really ok, but then it hit her, if there was anyone she trusted when she was out there, it was Tim. She calmed down. Tim was fine. She took a deep breath and slowed as she approached the cycle.

"Here!" It was Zack.

Kim looked up just in time to catch her backpack. "Thanks Uncle Zack."

"No problems Kim. The way you lit out, I figured you'd want to be hurrying off."

"The troops killed several hundred mutants Zack. That should make your trip back to Rockypoint a bit easier." Kim threw a leg over her cycle and flipped the switch that turned it on. She smiled at Zack and added, "I promise I'll, er, we, will come to visit when we get a few days off."

"A few days? Kim Rockypoint is at least two weeks from your 31 base you told me about."

Kim reached over and grasped Zack's arm, "Zack, once I tell Hawk about the pass through the Rockies...." She grinned, "...I have a hunch, we'll have more than a few days. Hawk will want to explore it, which should take weeks and if we come along...."

"Got ya!" Zack laughed, "You behave yourself Kim, and watch your back!"

Kim barely heard Zack as she sped off toward the main gate. As she passed the convoy she waved at Tom as he shook his head and muttered to his Sergeant,

"Just like when she was a child, fast, faster or not at all!"

Kim knew she would get to her next and last settlement by late afternoon. This task was something she had been looking forward to. This was the town where that low life shopkeeper first took her into the bushes in exchange for supplies that her and her brother so desperately needed, after she had been raped by the two hunters.

She remembered when he had first suggested the trade, she told him of how she had been raped a month before with tears in her eyes. All the shopkeeper said was "Well then girl it should be easy for you as you know what it's all about."

It was this man she remembered, not the ones after, those in the other occasional trades she had to make to survive. It was this man that made her realize that what she had to trade she could get anything. It was this man that made her hide all her pain all these years.

This shopkeeper was just a normal man, not a cut-throat like the two that raped her. The scum she could accept, but this shopkeeper had hurt her the most mentally.

There were the times she would stand nude looking in the mirror at the girl, then eventually the woman reflected there and gag with disgust at what she had grown up to become. She would then cry knowing that she would go to those very same men and lay with them in the bushes for the rare items they needed to survive.

When she got old enough, she refused them and they got mad and threatened not to do business



with them. In turn she told them she would tell their wives or family what they had done if she ever got inside their walls and reluctantly they ceded to her demands. All but this man. He had no wife or family. The outpost was remote and not many lived there. He didn't care what or who she told as he had bragged about having her those several times.

Now Kim was older, wiser and Hawk had taught her how to handle herself. Now it was she that would seek a trade. A trade of his flesh for that which he took from her so many years ago.

She wrenched the throttle and the cycle leapt along the broken road toward that dirty little settlement that she never knew the name of. That settlement of mineral miners that cared not for a broken little girl. Of men that shouted obscenities and laughed at her cries while she was being violated by the shopkeeper. While she cried, he laughed and those laughs rang in her ears to this day.

"I'll make him pay! Finally, I'll make him pay. They have to let me in now and that man will pay!" Kim never noticed the tears streaming from her eyes, nor did she realize she was sobbing so hard the cycle shook. Eventually she calmed, became cold, as Hawk had taught her to do before she fought a battle.

Stopping at the top of a rise, she scanned the canyon that lay before her. High rocky cliffs narrowed toward the dull gray high rock wall and the rusty iron gate. The brush she had been taken into as a teen was now almost as tall as the scattered trees and as she looked for mutants the anger grew as she headed off toward the huge gate.

Her cycle neared the gate she figured the patrols must have been there before her as the tall narrow gate swung open and she passed through. She could hear it thump as it swung closed and the solid clang as it locked. Kim dismounted and looked around. Not really impressed as she scanned her surroundings.

The canyon widened quickly. There were dirty shacks and small houses everywhere. All along the cliffs were old rotting scaffolds and mine entrances. As she wandered toward the trading post Kim couldn't help but notice, there didn't appear to be any mining going on. As she stepped up on the posts wooden porch, she glanced over her shoulder and saw many of the small mining settlement starting to gather and proceed toward her. Kim turned as one man approached.

"Miss, are you the one the soldiers told us about? The one that is suppose to set up some sort of supply schedule?"

Kim smiled, then stopped herself. These were the same folk that years before went about their business as she was raped outside of their gate. She looked over the gathering throng. There wasn't one person that had clothes that didn't have some sort of patch or open tear showed. Most were dirty and the rest gaunt and pale. Many of the adults coughed and showed signs of sickness.

“Miss?”

Kim snapped out of her shocked observations and replies, “Yes, that I am.” She paused, “What is going on here? I thought you had several hundred living here.”

“We did Miss, until the mines ran out the year before. A lot tried to leave and we never heard from them again. The soil’s so poorly here we can’t grow much. Game’s scarce and most of us that mined all our lives are sick or dying. If it wasn’t for the convoy two days ago giving us most of their food...” The man looked around and weakly continued as he waved his hand showing Kim the folks gathered, “...most here would have been too weak to be here today.”

Emotions flooded over Kim as the realization that all these years she had held anger toward this town, it wasn’t them, just the shopkeeper and a few others she didn’t see. Her anger waned.

“Mister I am here to set up a schedule for supplies to be delivered and trade to be established between the military for now and the other nearby towns at a later date once the mines have been destroyed in this area.”

The folks cheered, then the cheers quieted as the man that appeared to be in charge of this small nameless town stepped forward.

“The soldier in charge said your name would be Kim?”

“That’s correct. I’m Kim.”

He removed his worn and torn dirty hat from his head, “The folks here call me Boss Miss Kim, we ain’t got nothin’ to trade anymore, them mines are played out. There ain’t no more gittin’ to the ore, the rocks too hard and we can’t make no more blastin’ powder. Wouldn’t make no difference, mines are too weak to blast in.”

Kim held up her hands and spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“General Hawk heard about your plight last year and has had new mining machines and safety supplies brought from back east. He authorized me to say that the military convoys will start bringing these things in the first shipments. You may pay for these as you get back into production.”

All started cheering and hugging one another. The man in charge Kim would find out, is the mine boss and the boss runs the town. Boss told everyone to go back home and let him talk to Kim and the crowd slowly dispersed.

“You show me what I have to sign miss and I’ll...”

Kim smiled and interrupted Boss. "Boss, you don't have to sign anything. That's Hawk's way. He'll trust you to make good on a fair price, if that's ok with you."

Kim saw tears starting to form in the eyes of Boss as he tried to speak without letting his emotions show. With his hat in his hand he reached out and grasped her hands and kissed them. He straightened back up and as a tear trickled down his cheek, he spoke quietly, "Thank you miss, thank you from all of the folks here at the mines."

"That's alright Boss. I'll let Hawk know in my report. You should see the first convoy in about two weeks." Kim motioned at the trading post behind her and added, "I have some unfinished business in there, so if you'll excuse me."

"Sure miss, sure." As Boss backed away he kept thanking her until he turned and walked away with a much happier step than when he came. Kim grinned and turned to face the door. Her smile vanished. It was time to meet the man she held responsible for much of the pain in her life. She slammed the door open which startled the few sitting around the post's tables. Kim strolled over to the bar as the shop keep turned.

"Well holy Christ, if it isn't the little whore I've been bragging about all these years boys! And damned if she ain't a real looker now." He licked his lips and sneered, "Come back for some more lovin' bitch?"

Kim put her foot on the wooden rail at the bar as one of the guys pushed his hat back. "Oh shit Bart, this gal is the one from the base." He looked at Kim and backed away adding, "Miss look... We, I, er, we..." He motioned toward his brother, "...we... didn't do nothing back then. We didn't do nothing to you."

Kim squinted at him and remembered back. "I know you two now, you stood on the wall and laughed. Yeah you didn't do anything, that's the problem."

"Miss we were young at the time, we never..." He and his brother turned and ran from the post in shame and fear. Kim still without showing emotion turned to once again face the keeper.

"So it's Bart is it? You know Bart, you took advantage of a young girl that needed help."

Bart Roared with laughter, "Hell gal, I gave you help. Every inch I had." He laughed again then smugly added, "But then you kept coming back once you found out I had what supplies you needed." He grabbed his crotch. "Hell maybe this was the only supply you wanted."

Kim fought the anger to kill him out right.

"Why Hell if that damned brother of yours hadn't tricked me..."

“What about Tim, you bastard!”

Bart looked at Kim, then with a grin spreading across his face, “I’ll be damned you don’t know. That boy never told ya.”

“Told me?”

“Hell gal, after about the end of the first year, he came back. He told me you all had forgotten to get something. I told him I wanted to talk to you and he said you were in the bushes where we normally conducted business. When I got there, that bastard brother of yours jumped me, beat the shit out of me, then told me he finally wised up at how you were paying for the supplies.”

“Tim? He didn’t know until much later...”

“BULLSHIT! That damned brother of yours...” Bart held up his right hand that was missing the small finger. “He did this to me. He told me if I told you, or if I ever touched you again, he’d sneak over the wall someday and...” Bart swallowed hard and grimaced, “...cut something else off.”

“So that’s why you started trading even up for meat and pelts.”

Bart leaned toward Kim and squinted, “He didn’t say I couldn’t brag on what I did though.”

Kim heard a few chuckles from those sitting at the tables.

“Oh so everyone thought it was funny that you raped a fifteen year old girl who needed medicine and supplies for her and her brother to survive. You felt safe because those same folks wouldn’t let anyone in need into your dirty little town So I couldn’t tell what you did.” Kim looked at the folks sitting around the tables. Some hung their heads in shame, others glared at Bart. As a couple of guys got up and left, one turned and looked at Kim and shamefully said....

“Miss, all these years Bart and those brothers that hang out said it was you that suggested the trade. Bart just kept adding that you were so happy with his loving and that’s why you kept coming back...” He looked at Bart, then back at Kim, “...we should have known better. No woman would have that filthy thing if she had a choice.” He turned and left as more and more got up and left.

“Christ girl, now look what you went and done to me all my customers are leaving!”

Kim looked as the last one left the tavern area and out the door leaving it wide open. The sun streamed in and lit the bar where they were standing. Bart just stopped and grinned, “Well Hell it

doesn't matter I'll get them back the boys are the town's only hunters, they have to come back for supplies."

Kim chuckled, "Hmmm... I wonder how many will come back now I told the Boss there'll be supplies coming on a regular basis now."

Bart sneered, "So the rumors were true...."

"True enough and it's a shame I can't stay to see you become the outcast like what you made of me."

"Outcast, I'll show you outcast bitch!" Bart reached across the bar with his greasy hand, "Guess I'll be having to leave this shit hole, so I might as well have a little tail before I do."

As Bart's hand neared Kim's buckskin blouse he felt a 'THUD'. Bart looked down and screamed as he saw Kim's wide bladed hunting knife pinning his hand to the bar. Bart grabbed the wrist of his pinned hand with his other and screamed. He grasped the knife's handle and tried to pull it out but Kim had buried the knife not just through Bart's hand but a good half inch into the bar.

Kim stepped back a step and grinned, "I'm not some frightened little girl anymore you son of a bitch!" She leaned back toward him. "And I'm sure as Hell not going to let you ever touch me again!" Kim spit into Bart's face.

Bart reached up and wiped his face then in one quick motion, grasped the dagger in his belt and pulled it back to throw at Kim.

"THUD!" Another scream ripped from Bart's throat. His head swung around and up to look at his other hand. Kim had been so swift he never saw her grasp the dagger in her boot and in an underhand motion throw it and pin his other hand, through the wrist, into the ceiling support behind him. Blood gushed from his wrist as he watched his knife slip from his grasp and fall to the floor.

"Nor am I the helpless little girl you knew. This woman has teeth and isn't afraid to use them." She reached over and grasped the knife stuck into the bar, wiggled it back and forth as Bart screamed as she wrenched her knife from his wrist, wiped it on his shirt, then sheathed it. Kim walked around the bar slowly, reached up and claimed her other knife and strolled back to the other side leaving Bart there feebly trying to stem the gushing blood.

Kim tossed Bart a towel that was laying at the end of the bar and he wrapped it around his wrist.

“Hawk taught me well, you remember that. If I ever hear of you molesting anyone else, I’ll come back and finish what I started.” She turned and walked toward the door. She froze, there was the distinct click of a guns hammer. She spun around toward Bart to see his bloody hands fumbling with a shotgun.

**“BANG!”**

A hole appeared in Bart’s chest. A big one! The shotgun dropped from his blood drenched hands and fell to the floor. Kim spun back to the open door. There in the doorway bathed in sunlight stood Boss. He took one step inside so Kim could see who had fired the shot.

“Well Miss Kim, I reckon this town owed you for what he did to you....” Boss lowered his rifle, “....Please accept this as our formal apology.”

Kim glanced back over her shoulder just in time to see the life drain from Bart’s face and slowly drop to the floor. She shook her head slowly, then looked at Boss. Kim smiled and replied.

“Apology accepted.”

A few hours later, matters and schedules had been set. Kim straddled her cycle and headed out of the gate and toward the forest below. Beyond that lay the grassy plains of mid California where she would meet the patrol she was suppose to meet. From there they would head south to meet Tim and his patrol. They would be coming up from the southern route and it would be good to see Tim again.

Kim smiled and spoke quietly to herself, “So Tim knew along.” The smile broke into a wide grin, “And my little brother took care of his big sister!” She frowned as she cranked the throttle, “Wait until I see him, taking a chance like that, I’ll give him a piece of my mind!”

Then she just couldn’t help it. As she vanished up over a hill in a cloud of dust, a huge grin burst out across her face.

“Then I’ll give him a big hug!”

## Chapter 15.

Kim met with her convoy and within minutes was on the lead truck's radio. Although there was a huge amount of static, she found out her brother was still in Coppertown.

Coppertown was one of the more fortunate communities in the state because few their size had survived. Coppertown had a massive valley and extremely productive mines. At first all they had was copper, which was a godsend, but eventually several other metals were discovered. Heaved up from below during the apocalypse, it now had become the savior of this entire area. Mined and smelted, traders from all over the mid state risked death bringing goods for trade for surplus metals.

Food aplenty grew in the rich soils surrounding this huge valley. Produced in vast quantities and many varieties as well as fodder for the livestock starvation was never a problem. So plentiful the supplies, the valley's residents were allowed to reproduce over the decades, but only to a point.... Space. Thriving and productive Coppertown's populace was now starting to run out of room. Not yet critical, even so news of California's liberation from mutants was great news.

The siblings had been there a few times and pretty much knew where things were. Now came this message that Tim would meet them there. This didn't bother her as the convoys were going there eventually. It was Tim that suggested she ride out to meet his patrol's convoy instead of them all meeting at the rendezvous. This puzzled Kim as her brother was so predictable she always knew what to expect of him. Now suddenly he changed his mind?

Kim managed to get the message back to Tim's convoy that they all would meet in Coppertown. "What the Hell has gotten into Tim now?" She mused as the convoy turned east and towards the mountains.

Tim had driven into Coppertown a few days earlier. Jill who had held onto him for the trip was somewhat startled at the town's size as they had slowly rolled through the massive gates. Up a small rise they rode until they topped the hill. Jill gasped as she looked over the vast valley below. She leaned forward and spoke in a voice that was half excited, half frightened.

"My God Tim, it's so beautiful." She paused as he pulled over to the side of the road. "It's so big. My God I can't see the end." She gasped again and almost in a childlike tone squealed, "Oh a lake.... And a river, no two rivers. Tim so much water!"

"Jill, this is only part of the valley. It wraps around those mountain off in the distance." Tim pointed toward the line of mountains to the southeast. He then swung his hand back to the other

side of the valley. "Over there, where you can't see, there are the mines." He began to swing his finger all along the range to the north. "And over there as well."

"My God Tim and you're going to drop me off here? There has to be so many people, so many..."

He reached behind him and gently touched her cheek.

"Jill, you'll be fine. We know some people here that Kim and I helped get through the wilds and mutes when they were kicked out of one of the over populated towns to the south. They trusted a couple of kids to lead them here." He laughed, "Guess they figured two kids that had survived outside of any settlement as long as we had..." He grinned again, "...had to be better at getting along than they could. So we brought them here. We stumbled across Coppertown about a year earlier. These fine folk even had offered us a home here, but Kim and I had already been out there too many years and didn't want to live in a town anymore."

"But you told me last night that you two took up with this Hawk guy and live on a base. Wouldn't you consider maybe staying here?"

Tim twisted around and looked at Jill and patted her knee. "Jill if I ever decided or if anyone ever could convince me to settle down. It would be here with you. Over these last few days I found someone I really enjoy being with, talking with, listening to. I could see settling down eventually, but I still have a lot to do with Hawk and Kimmy."

Before Tim could say anymore, Jill put a hand on each of his cheeks and kissed him warmly. Tim in turn twisted himself around even more so he could hold Jill. His back and neck popped. Jill started snickering and Tim soon followed suit.

"Guess maybe I shouldn't kiss you anymore until you get us to where were going, huh?"

Tim swung his leg over the handlebars and got off the cycle and stepped back to the rear. He slowly put his arms around Jill's waist. His lips closed on hers. Jill in turn pushed her lips into his as she threw her arms around his neck. Tim took a step backward and Jill still firmly in their embrace slid off the cycle. They stood alongside the road kissing.

**"CRASH!"**

Startled the two stopped kissing and looked behind them to see the cycle laying on the ground.

"Maybe the next time we do this Tim, you'd better put the kickstand down?"



Their lips inches apart, Tim could only manage a weak, “Who cares!” Once again they were locked in loves warm embrace. They kissed and held each other as if there would be no tomorrow. They stood there in each other’s embrace until a huge ore truck drove by at a high rate of speed and blew it’s loud air horn as the driver teasingly cheered the two on.

Tim stepped back and looked at Jill, he chuckled, “Maybe we’d better get going.”

“What the Hell was that that went by?”

“Oh the truck?” He smiled warmly, “It’s called a diesel truck Jill. They were made back before the apocalypse. Probable not much of it is original anymore. They kept them running, replacing parts, things like that. Generation after generation of different trades have kept things pretty much like they were back then. The whole city is, with the exceptions of the many wind turbines mostly like it was before the apocalypse.”

Jill focused down in the valley. “Geez Tim, it just dawned on me the size of those wind generators. They’re huge!”

“Yep! Coppertown has made its own stuff for generations.”

“But so few heard of this place.”

“They had to Jill. Look around down there. There is not one run down structure. No pollution, no waste. They have enough land, crops, and livestock to sustain a valley of over 70,000 people.”

Jill gasped, “That many?”

Tim chuckled, “There wasn’t always that many Jill, but they’ve grown some. But over our travels Kim and I have visited several cities like this scattered throughout the Rockies. Some existed before what Hawk calls ‘Day Zero’, others were discovered by people fleeing the mutes that over ran cities. Like your small valley and others even smaller, people managed to survive. Most towns and cities that didn’t get leveled during the apocalypse and were up in the higher elevations survived just by walling off the entrances. I was told this entire valley raised along with the mountains that surround it.”

“WOW!” Was all Jill could manage as she kept scanning the valley below. Tim could see all kinds of thoughts running through Jill’s mind. He nudged her with his elbow and grinned.

“We’d better get going so we can get you settled in.” He bent down and raised the motorcycle upright and added with a smile, “That is if I haven’t damaged this thing too bad.”

Jill laughed and helped him steady it as he looked it over. Soon they were on their way cruising down various sized streets. Jill twisting one way then another as something would catch her eye. People walking along the paved streets and sidewalks.... Paved streets and sidewalks!!

“TIM! These streets are all paved! And the walkways are paved too!”

Tim grinned and explained the walkways were called sidewalks and Coppertown produced its own concrete for the roads and buildings.

They continued on until finally Tim pulled up in front of a three story building. Jill dismounted as did Tim, who remembered to put down the kickstand this time.

“Mary’s Hotel and Restaurant?”

“It was Mary and her late husband we helped get from Fowlerville. Well there were a couple of other couples with them, they all live in this part of town.”

“TIM!! KIM!!... OH, I’m sorry dear, I thought you were Kim.” An elderly slightly plump woman ran up to Tim and gave him a huge hug which Jill could see embarrassed him a bit.

“Hi Mary, it’s good to see you again!”

“Where’s Kimmy?”

“Aw ya know Kim. She’s out scouting, killing mutes and all that kind of crap!”

Mary winked at Jill, “Just like her little brother!” She paused and looked back at Tim, “And who would this pretty little lady be? Your wife maybe?”

“MARY!”

“Well it has been a couple of years you know.... A lot could happen.”

Tim grasped Jill’s hand gently. “Mary this is Jill. She’s the only survivor from Boonesville.”

The color drained from her face. She grasped Jill’s hand from Tim and patted it motherly like.

“You poor dear. Well, you’ll be more than welcome to stay here with us as long as you need my dear.” She looked to Tim, “They said some trapper came through yesterday and told the guys at the trading post. Rumor spread quickly. But we’d hoped it was rumor.”

“I lost my father and my uncle and his family.” Jill sadly added. Tim put his arm around her to comfort her. “I don’t have anything to trade for a place to stay Mary, but I...”

Mary grasped Jill in a warm hug and kissed her on the head, “Oh baby you don’t need to trade anything. You can stay here for nothing. I’d be happy to have the company.”

Jill stepped back and with tears in her eyes, looked at Mary, then Tim. “People aren’t this way with strangers...” She sniffed, “...thank you Mary, thank you.”

“Oh baby, it’s quite alright. If it wasn’t for your beau there and his sister being kind to some strangers, I wouldn’t be here either.” She chuckled, “Guess we’re all just some of these kids collections of good deeds.”

Tim smiled and winked, “We only save the good ones.”

Mary turned and with Jill walked toward her hotel, “You kids come in and get some food. Then we’ll see about getting you two a room.”

Tim stammered as they passed through the door. “Ah, Mary, we aren’t, er... that is we haven’t... Shit!”

“Timothy Vardis you watch your language!”

“Yes ma’am.” Tim sheepishly replied as Jill snickered.

Jill added, “Ma’am we just met a few days ago and to be honest, we’re just falling for each other.” She looked over to Tim and wrinkled her nose at him as she added, “So you see he hasn’t, er, that is we haven’t...” Now it was Jill’s turn to blush and Mary laughed.

Mary stopped as she walked behind the counter and grabbed two sets of keys. She handed one to Jill the other to Tim and grinned.

“I didn’t say a thing about one room for both of you.” She grinned at the two again and winked, “Seems the way you two feel about one another, made you two to hear what you wanted to hear.”

Both Jill and Tim looked at each other and blushed as Mary continued, “Now I gave you rooms next to each other and I’ll just add, I’m not a nosy person. What you two do or don’t do is just fine.” Mary turned and started into a room that was behind the counter, stopped and said over her shoulder, “Tim there would be one fine catch Jill. I’m so glad you two found each other.”

Jill smiled and looked longingly at Tim, “So am I Mary.” She grabbed Tim’s hand and started toward the stairs.

“Jill? Do you have any idea where you’re going?”

Jill came to a screeching halt, looked at her key and replied, “301! Third floor room 301! Where else would I be going silly”

Tim just grinned. He knew after going through what was left of Boonesville there had been no structure over one story. Somehow he just had figured that all this might be a bit confusing. His thoughts were interrupted as he heard Jill’s melodic voice.

“So are we going up to our rooms or are you just going to stand there until you rust?”

“Sorry Jill, was thinking how confusing some of this must be. This city, meeting new people.”

Jill walked over to Tim and kissed him gently on the lips, turned and walked toward the stairs, pulling him along by his hand.

“My father and uncle once talked about places like this and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you slow me down now I get a chance to see what they were so thrilled about. If this room is half as nice as the rest of this hotel....”

She had reached the stairs and nearly jerked Tim’s arm from its socket. Up the stairs she dragged him and down the third floor he was pulled until they stood before a door with 301 on it. She paused and looked down at the key.

“Uhh, Tim?” Jill looked a bit puzzled. She held the key up to her face, looked it over, then looked at Tim. “Key? Mary called it a key. Tim we never had a key, what does it do?”

A strange thought passed through Tim’s mind as he pondered the fact that all these isolated settlements could be so different from one another. Something so simple as a key would be unknown to an entire group of people. The same group of people that had no use for keys or locks, yet would turn away strangers seeking help or aid. Yet here are others that use locks and welcome strangers without fear. This was the world he and Kim had grown up in. This was...

“HEY! Are you going to show me what this damned thing is for or not! This door won’t open”

“Oh Jill I’m so sorry.” Tim looked flustered which caused the frustrated Jill to smile.

“Tim...” She leaned over and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek, “...you do have a tendency to daydream a bit don’t you?” She smiled and handed him the key.

“Daydream? Yeah, guess I have since I met you.” He smiled back, held up the key and slid it into the lock and stepped back.

“Now turn the key, then turn the door handle and that will open the door. When you leave to go somewhere, just turn the little lock on the inside and the door will lock when you leave.... And don’t forget to take the key with you or you can’t get back in.”

“Lock the door? Why?”

Tim shook his head slowly. How does one tell someone who’s community never had the need for locks, never had thefts or worse, why locks are needed? How does one shatter the beliefs of one that trusts everyone? The people of Boonesville always turned strangers away, yet it took only one that returned to destroy them. Maybe that’s why. Maybe back generations the fear of betrayal began this practice. Perhaps...

“TIM!”

“Oh Christ Jill! I did it again didn’t I?”

Jill turned the key and opened the door. She walked into the large room and gasped! She was spell bound.

Tim entered and grinned. “Guess Mary has plans for you to stay.”

“It’s so beautiful Tim!” Jill turned toward him, her eyes filled with tears, “It’s so beautiful.” She looked around as she spun slowly. “Where do I put my sleeping bag? On one of those long chairs?”

“Jill Mary gave you a suite. She knew you’d be staying for a while, so she gave you a suite to live in.”

Jill turned and placed her hands on her hips as she frowned at Tim. “Oh great now you tease me! She wants me to stay so she’s going to give me a sweet, come on Tim. This room is enough.”

Tim chuckled, but caught himself before Jill thought he was making fun of her. “Oh Honey, not S-w-e-e-t, it’s s-u-i-t-e. A bunch of rooms. This is the living room. Tim grasped her hand and led her through the open doorway into a small kitchen.

“Oh Tim, this is mine too?”

“Yep!” He grinned and led her back through the living room and threw open the door to the bed room and she froze in awe. “No more sleeping bags for you either.”

Jill turned and threw herself into Tim’s arms. She burst out into tears. He stood there for quite a while just holding her. This last week had been an emotional ride for her. So much had happened, so much she would have to learn. They stood there until her crying turned to gentle

sobs, then sniffles. She stepped back and looked at Tim with her tear soaked cheeks. Jill wiped her eyes softly and in a whisper said, “Tim I’ll never be able to thank you for...” She looked around, “...all this. For saving me, for...”

Tim put his finger to her lips, “there is no need to thank me Jill. These last few days you have made me forget there is a violent dangerous world out there. That there is something else to live for other than survival.” He shook his head slowly, “I think I’m beginning to understand what Hawk has been trying to get us to understand. That there are some things worth fighting for, if need be to die for...”

Tim never finished as Jill leapt back into his arms and kissed him passionately. Tim never made it to his room that night. Love had found him in the form of this beautiful woman named Jill. This night of love they discovered how perfect this world could be. They both knew this night would end and Tim would have to leave, they loved each other as if it would be their last.

Mary smiled as if she had known all along what was coming as Tim sheepishly turned in his key the next morning before breakfast. He feebly tried to explain, but Mary just told him to shush.

“Timmy I could see you two were in love the minute I met Jill. The way you two looked at each other, the way you two acted, trying to make like you two were still unsure.” Mary laughed out loud. “I’m guessing the only two that were fooled were you two.”

“We do love each other Mary, I guess I’m just worried about Jill.” Tim looked concerned, “You know Mary, I... well, Kim and I don’t live what one would call a safe life. I don’t want Jill to lose someone else...”

“Tim I think Jill is the best judge of who she wants to fall for. I’m guessing that by now she has a pretty good idea of what you do. You just let that young woman’s decision be and live for the day. I lost my Henry a year and a half ago, but I never regretted one minute, even during the bad times, we had each other. You and Jill just love each other for no other reason than you do.”

“And I really do love her Mary.”

“And I love you too my handsome scout!”

Tim turned to see Jill standing at the bottom of the stairs smiling at him. She walked over and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips and grinned at Mary.

“I hope you don’t mind, that we...” She looked over to Mary and smiled, “...shared my room.” She caught herself, “I mean the wonderful suite you provided me.”

Mary looked to Tim and chuckled, “Beautiful and polite, you’d better keep this one Tim.”

Tim tossed his arm around Jill’s waist and hugged her, “That I will Mary, that I will.” Mary could see something crossed his mind, but before she could speak Tim responded thoughtfully.

“Mary, you know Jill said she was quite a cook back in her town. She and her Dad had a small tavern and...”

“Someone that knows how to cook? Oh Jill if you would. My hands are so painful now I can barely run this place, if you could do some of the cooking... We have so many at times....”

“Mary? I’d be more than happy to do the cooking. I love to cook and I’d be more than happy to run your kitchen as you gave me such a wonderful suite.”

“Work for me? No child. I’m getting older and am sick a lot. I need a partner and if you work out, I think I’ve found that partner.”

“I have no money Mary. You see when my home was destroyed I...”

“Oh No dear, I don’t mean buy into the hotel. Just work here and help me run it. When the day comes for me to retire or die, the hotel will be yours.”

Tim looked to Jill and was about to hug her, but Jill clasped her hands over her mouth and tears flowed from her eyes. Her body gently jerked with the soft sobs that wracked it. Mary walked over to her and hugged her and Tim followed suit.

Jill had found a love. Now she had found a home!

## Chapter 16.

Jill and Tim spent another glorious day together and another passionate night loving one another, holding each other and talking of plans. Tim told Jill all about his sister and their life together to this point. He spun tales of the adventures the siblings had with their hero Hawk. How Hawk had taught them to survive better than they had. Mostly they whispered what they hoped the future would bring.

Morning came and went as noon neared. The two dressed and went down stairs and grabbed a quick bite to eat. Jill had worried about Tim radioing Kim to meet them here might start them off on the wrong foot. Tim just grinned and reassured her that Kim would understand, but they would have to leave soon after Kim arrived.

“Tim? Seriously?” Jill teased, “You would leave your new girl alone here with all these men?” Jill motioned around the small dining area with her hand.

“Not by choice Jill.” Tim frowned, “It always seems like great things happen when you can least enjoy them.” He slowly arose from his chair giving Jill a warm but quick kiss on her pouting lips.

“When will you be back my love?”

Tim paused and did a bit of quick adding, “Soon I hope Honey. A week at the most. I have to meet with Kim...” He grinned and added, “...and tell her all about us. First though I have to meet up with the convoy I told you about. This morning I heard we’re going to head back to base, then out to look for some outpost we might be able to use as a midpoint base for this sector. So looks like Kim won’t be coming this way for now.”

“When will I get to see you?” Jill got up and slid her arm through his, “A girl could get lonely falling in love with a scout. And I really want to meet your sister.”

As they strolled toward the door Tim hugged Jill one last time, kissed her and moved into the open doorway.

“Tell you what. Kim and I were going to take a break while Hawk went back to Alpha base to go over some things with the Commander of the west coast military. Think he said a couple of weeks, so that means if Kim and I get moving we should have four to seven days to ourselves. I’ll bring Kim here to meet you and I’m sure she’ll love you as much as I do once she gets to know you.”

Jill walked out the door as Tim stepped out onto the road and mounted his cycle.



“Tim? You be safe and come back to me!” She walked over to the cycle and pressed her more than ample breasts into his arm, moved her mouth next to his ear and in a deep sexy voice whispered, “Just remember what you have waiting here for you when you return.”

Jill spun around and walked into the hotel as Tim tried to remember where his jaw had landed when Jill spoke. He had awakened the woman in her and she the man in him. Now he sat there stunned with how sexy she had become. The poor zombie like girl he first had met on the road in shock and fatigue, was now so vibrant, so full of life. Tim glanced at his new love as she wiggled teasingly through the door.

“Whew!” He whispered as he slowly shook his head and put the cycle in gear. Tim started moving down the road fighting the urge to return to his new love’s arms before remembering Kim and the troops he was suppose to meet. He sighed and cranked the throttle as the cycle jumped toward the gate. Tim figured the faster he rode, the faster he would get back to Jill. He was frustrated his plans for Kim and his convoy to meet in Coppertown fell through.

Tim rode hard, yet kept his head. Running into some pocket of mutes or a gang might end his chances of any future, so as fast as he moved along, he wasn’t going to be reckless. It was late afternoon when he met up with the convoy he was suppose to meet a day earlier. He pulled into the huge meadow and rode into the circle of Six’s parked there.

Tim dismounted and walked over to the Captain in charge. He noticed a concerned look on the Captain’s face.

“Well about time you showed Tim. Thought we’d have to send out a search party to find ya.!”

“Sorry Cap. Got slowed down a Boonesville. It’s been wiped out....”

The Captain looked sadly at Tim, “Yeah, Tim, We know. We ran into a trapper a few days ago. He told us about the town....” Cap grinned, “...and some guy on a cycle that had a woman on the back of it heading toward Coppertown. We kind of figured that would have been you as only you, Kim and Hawk have cycles. I knew where Hawk and Kim were.”

Tim just grinned and rubbed the back of his head shyly, “Cap, it was like this...”

The Captain roared with laughter, “Hell Tim, it doesn’t matter. You’re here now and we can get started toward Kim’s convoy. We should get back to base just before midnight if you two put your bikes on the Six’s. That way we can just speed along and plow through any mutes we stumble across.”

Cap quieted his laughter to a chuckle, “By the way, your sister contacted us and sounded a bit pissed when she heard you hadn’t met us yet. First you were going to meet us, then Kim radioed you weren’t, now she radioed us you were..... Sheesh! Scouts!”

Tim motioned for a couple of troops to load his cycle on one of the Six’s and strap it down.

Tim grinned, “Look at it this way Cap, if we all didn’t have to return to base, we’d all be in Coppertown by now and you’d be stuffing yourself on some of the finest grub in the Rockies. Ok Cap, as far as Kim’s concerned, I’ll deal with her when we meet, but first what say we get this show on the road!”

The Captain stopped in his tracks, “Show? What show?” He looked at Tim, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Tim grinned, “It’s a thing Hawk is always saying. We asked him what it meant and he said something about traveling shows back in his day. He lost us, so we just let him say it and follow his lead.” Tim just shrugged and climbed up on the huge Six and lowered himself into the top hatch as the Captain did the same on the lead vehicle.

Over the radio Tim heard the Captain shout, “Head ‘um up and move ‘um out!”

Tim picked up the mike of his radio and asked, “What the hell is that suppose to mean?”

Cap replied, “Got me Tim, I heard Hawk use it several times to get us moving along. Figure it’s kind of catchy, so I use it....” Tim heard the Cap chuckle, then add, “Hawk has some strange sayings, but damned if some of them aren’t real catchy.”

Both men grinned as the Cap’s Six passed Tim’s Six and took the lead. The convoy moved out of the field and onto the badly worn road towards Kim’s location.

Close to dark the two convoys met and after a short greeting Kim’s convoy moved behind the one her brother was in and off to the 31 Base they went.

Tim all the time was wondering how to tell Kim about Jill. He had pondered the way to tell her before they met up. Now they had joined and were heading to base, he still couldn’t come up with the right words. Kim had been looking after him for all the years since their parents had been killed. Now he was going to have to tell her he had fallen in love. There would be someone else in their lives. Someone else he would want to spend his free time with. Even marriage had come into the equation.

How would he tell Kim who was his sister and many times a mother to him, that he had someone else?

The long convoy pulled into 31 Base earlier than anyone had expected. As the Six's all rolled to a stop and the troops piled out. Tim pulled Kim aside.

"Kim, what say we head on over to the tavern and have a drink?"

"I'm kind of tired Tim, think I'll pass."

Tim grasped his sister's arm and looked her squarely in the eyes, "Kim let's have a drink..." He swallowed hard, "...I think I'll need one. Ah, you too."

Kim stopped for a second, then continued alongside of her brother all the time shooting strange glances in his direction. Tim tried not to let on he noticed his sisters muted frustration. Finally Kim couldn't stand the suspense.

"Ok little brother what the Hell have gotten yourself into now?" Kim nudged Tim gently as they passed through the base's tavern doors. Tim led them to a small out of the way table and held up two fingers to the barkeep. Then Tim swallowed so hard the sound he made started Kim chuckling.

"Sis? I, well..." He looked around as if trying to find someone to save him, "...sis, I..." He stopped stammering and looked at Kim seriously.

"Sis! I've met someone. A girl."

"Well a girl is nice Tim, better than..."

"SIS! I'm trying to tell you I met a woman and I've....I mean, we've fallen in love."

"Love in a week?"

Tim smiled warmly at his sister, "Seriously Kim, I do love her and she loves me. Her name is Jill Ord she's from Boonesville, the only survivor." Somehow the words tumbled out all too quickly.

"In a week Tim?"

"Yes dammit in a week! Really less than a week and it's real love Kim." Tim paused then added, "We've been together."

"I know..."

"YOU KNOW?!!"

“Yeah Tim your Cap told my Cap, that you were seen together riding on your cycle.” Kim chuckled.

“KIM DAMN IT!!” Tim looked around sheepishly, sunk into his chair and began to speak in a voice that that didn’t get the rooms attention. Kim just kept chuckling at Tim’s uneasiness.

“Kim I meant we slept together.”

“Aww, I’ll bet you two were so tired....”

“KIM WE HAD SEX!!!”

Several in the small tavern broke into teasing applause as Tim dropped his head onto the table with a hollow sounding ‘Thunk’.

Kim reached over and lightly touched Tim’s hand, “I knew what you meant Tim. And I’m happy for you. I knew this day would come.” She paused and warmly looked into her brothers eyes, “I know how hard it must be for you to tell me as we are so close.”

“Sis, I don’t..”

“Tim, you aren’t going to hurt me or my feelings. This is a natural thing. You know a man, a woman, they meet, fall in love have sex.” She grinned and added, “But not necessarily in that order.”

Tim let out a huge sigh as the bartender figured it was safe to bring over the drinks Tim had ordered. Kim got up from the table and smiled at the barkeep.

“He’ll drink mine, I’m going home and hitting the sack.”

“Sis?”

Kim strolled toward the tavern door, then turned and winked at Tim, “Now I won’t have to keep my boyfriend a secret anymore!”

“WHAT!” Tim leapt up from his chair, plunked down the money for the ales and ran out the door after his sister.

“Kim? You have a boyfriend? Why the Hell didn’t you tell me?” Tim stopped and watched his sister vanish into the dark. All he heard was her quiet reply....

“I couldn’t think of how to tell you I’d been seeing a guy for about eight months now!”

Tim plopped down on the tavern's step and frowned. Then as an afterthought he shouted into the night after her...

"Ha-Ha, very funny!"

Which was followed up by him adding even louder....

"You are kidding aren't you?.... KIM, You're kidding...."

Tim looked at the ground as one of his pals walked up to him. Still sitting on the steps with his head down.

"Evening Tim, how goes it?"

Tim looked up and shook his head. "Burt? You have a sister right?"

"Yeah two years older than me. Why?"

"Do you ever know what the Hell she's talking about?"

"Sue? Aw Hell no. Christ Tim women are hard to figure out.... Sisters impossible!"

Tim nodded as Burt pushed open the tavern's doors and vanished inside.

"Yeah, that's kinda what I figured." He mused as he arose and moved into the shadows toward his quarters.

## Chapter 17.

It was two more days before the message came. The messenger banged on Hawk's door and handed it to him.

"This came in last night sir!" The sergeant said quietly, "I was told you couldn't reply as the sender said they were on their way back out sir."

"That's ok Sarge, thank you."

The sergeant saluted and left as Hawk tore open the dispatch and began to read the message.

*Hawk;*

*Kim and I are heading out earlier than we talked about due to the fact that the military in this zone had had a Major victory over the mutes. As you've probably heard by now they drove a vast number into the range of the fleets guns and destroyed them all. Another smaller victory was won by our patrols.*

*—break—*

*Major win for our side. Other than perhaps the usual small pack of roaming mutes this zone should be cleared of Major masses.*

*—break—*

*The base commander wants us to see if we can locate any of these small packs and eliminate them. The patrol Kim was with got several hundred earlier this week. Kim scouted for one company and I another and old Fred took the third. Fred got back yesterday, Kim and I, are leaving in about an hour. Fred is heading for the coast, while Kim and I will scout the northern mountains of this zone, then we're going to take a little rest and relaxation.*

*—break—*

*We'll be out of communications for about a week as you know, the base can hear us, but our radio's aren't powerful enough to receive. Sure wish we had those radios you always reminisce about.*

*-break-*

*I came up with an idea this morning. Some old trapper told me of an old outpost some guy took over, way back in the foothills near Davisville About fifty miles south west, called 'One Eyed Jacks'. It should be good and safe as it's built on a hill with only one way up its steep sides and it has a double gate for security. Kim and I can relax a bit and do some hunting. We'll be there about a week or so and will check it out for the military to use as a midpoint outpost. Come join us if you get back soon enough.*

*Tim.*

Hawk swore under his breath, grabbed his swords, sheathed them and ran out the door. He sprinted down the road toward the communications building. He saw the Sergeant that had delivered the message.

“Sarge!” Hawk bellowed.

The sergeant turned, saluted Hawk and asked, “Sir? Is there something else?”

“What time did this come in Sarge?”

“Early this morning sir. I can tell you exactly if we go back to Communications General Hawk. The message came in as non- military so it wasn’t prioritized. However every message is logged at time of ...”

“That’s good Sarge, thanks.”

Hawk spun and dashed toward the command center. He burst through the doors and sprinted in the direction of Ned’s office. He burst into Ned’s office and looked around. He hurried around and opened Ned’s bathroom door, no Ned. Hawk turned to see Ned’s aide standing in the office’s doorway looking somewhat puzzled.

“General Travers is out General Hawk. He left last night on the inspection of the Moby wall and the surrounding settlements..”

“Christ, I forgot all about that!” Hawk looked dismayed, which must have been apparent to the aide.

“Is there something I can help you with sir?”

“Maybe so...” Hawk replied as he tried to remember back a month or so during his last visit. “....Seems you were there when Fred Tomms and I were here a few months ago. Remember we were all briefing Ned, er, General Travers, on the situation in Zone 31?”

“Yes sir, I remember, you all were talking about the day you first arrived and gave General Travers this command and other stuff since that time up to now. Sure was a lot to remember sir.”

“Well do you remember after Fred left to go back to 31’s base, Ned and I were talking about some of the various things we might try to bring some law and order back to areas north of the wall until all the mutants could be killed off and regular enforcement could be re-established?”

“Yes sir. General Travers was suggesting having military patrols act as the law, but there weren’t enough to cover more than the larger coastal cities.”

“Yeah that was the conversation. Major, do you remember when we were talking about the mountain areas and the gangs of outlaws roaming those zones?”

“Sure thing General, I remember you were so frustrated by the lack of fresh troops and the ability to police those areas.”

“Major, that Captain that was at that briefing...”

“Captain Rogers? Yes sir, I know him. We used to be in the same outfit. Well that is until Robertsville. That’s where I got my leg nearly ripped off. If it wasn’t for Rogers, I’d be dead. He came just in time to kill the mutes that over ran our position and it was his medic that saved what’s left of my leg... and most likely my life.”

“Yeah, he’s the one I was talking about Major, Remember the gangs he was talking about? How they were sticking mostly to the mountains now because of our patrols and the lack of mutes ability to climb up steep grades?”

“Oh yes sir. I remember he was rattling off the names of the outlaws and their gangs. Their areas of raiding, towns they’ve tried to hit, things like that. Is that what you were referring to General?”

“That’s the chat. Major Rogers mentioned some gang operating near Davisville, do you remember who they were?”

The Major started a slow pacing as he tried to remember back. He stopped and shook his head.

“General, damned if I can remember.”

“Can you remember any other times Captain Rogers mentioned anything around Davisville?”

“No sir, sorry.”

Hawk thanked the Major and started out the door when the Major stopped Hawk’s departure.

“General, there was one thing I seem to remember. Seems there was some place around that neck of the woods, where trappers and hunters have been vanishing or been held up. Seems he suspected some trading post was involved someway.”

The Major shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “Other than that sir, nothing comes to mind.”

Hawk pulled the message he received earlier. He wadded it up and tossed it onto the floor as he hurried from the room.



The Major bent down and picked it up to throw in the trash. He glanced down at the wrinkled paper and froze.

“Oh Shit!” He sprinted out the door and caught Hawk who was almost out of the building.

“General Hawk! Sir! I can call ahead to Zone 31. Maybe they can get hold of the patrols. Even if they can’t sir, there’s no way a gang would take on a company of trained soldiers.”

Hawk shook his head as he replied, “Major, they’re out of receiving range and will be for a couple of weeks. My kids departed this morn.” Hawk turned and headed for the door and as he did yelled back over his shoulder, “It’ll take me days to reach 31 base, then more days to find Kim and Tim. By the time the companies get within range it’ll be too late and they have no idea where this outpost is either!”

The Major ran to the door Hawk had just sped through and yelled after him.

“I’m still going to call them anyhow General, couldn’t hurt.”

All the Major saw was Hawk’s back and an outstretched hand with a thumb up. The Major headed toward Communications. Hawk headed back toward his quarters and his cycle.

It would be days to the Zone 31 base over fairly good roads. However the inland roads were another story. Full of holes and eroded, few had been repaired since the apocalypse. Once in toward the mountains most of civilization had been erased and only a few scarce decent paths between settlements existed. These paths and roads were high up in the mountains and mostly were only footpaths.

Hawk’s mind raced as he mounted his cycle and one thing kept running through his brain.

“There just isn’t enough time! I’ll be too late!”

## Chapter 18.

A few days dragged by as Hawk raced along the roads. Now and then swerving to avoid sudden disaster. Using the cycles ability to jump distances he leapt over collapsed expressway overpasses. Three days, four days passed and reluctantly he pulled over at a small military outpost to sleep.

After five hours he was back on the road cussing to himself that he had slept so long, yet knowing that he did would get him through the next two days until he reached the Zone 31 base.

A guard at the gate was interrupted by a second guard running in. "General Hawk has been spotted by the tower about two miles away."

The first guard strolled over to the lever that rolled open the huge steel gate. He stopped and grinned back to the new guard.

"Hells bells Marty, two miles is plenty of time. You didn't have to run all the way. They ought to have the phone working again in a few minutes. Old Hawk is still a mile away."

"God dammit Dave push the freakin' lever!"

"Come on man, don't be...."

"Dave you don't know General Hawk, **Throw the damned lever!**"

Dave looked out the window and saw a cloud of dust moving in his direction and pushed the gate lever so fast and hard he almost broke it. The massive gate groaned and slowly started to move. He moved over to the window and nervously added, "Don't worry, he'll slow down."

"Don't think he's slowed any." Marty shouted.

"Oh, geez Marty, you're right." Dave leaned out the window and started a waving motion to warn Hawk to slow down. Marty on the other hand started backing away from the window.

"Oh man, he's not slowing." He stood in the corner of the tiny gate room afraid to look. "Dave, get away from the window!"

The cloud of dust neared and the two could see from the large second story window a small rider. Before either could say another word, Hawk was almost on the gate.

"Christ he had to be going over one hundred."

Both men cringed as Hawk sped out of view under the window.

The cycle roared through the main gate which was still opening, with only inches to spare as his cycle's handle bars made a slight 'tick' as they grazed the opening gate and the wall. The guard slumped back against the wall and wiped his forehead and gasped a huge sigh of relief. The other guard hung his head out the window and tried to see Hawk's cycle, but only saw an enveloping cloud of dust Hawk had left behind as he past.

Marty managed to gasp out, "See what I mean you jerk!"

Hawk roared up to the small radio room as the base commander came to meet him. The Major saluted Hawk.

"General, we got the message from General Travers aide. But to be honest sir, we didn't expect you for another day and a half."

"Any word from either patrol Major?"

"No sir. If your message was right, your friends should have left the patrols two days ago."

"TWO!" Hawk roared, "Two? I should have made it here a day before they parted company."

The Major lowered his eyes and quietly muttered, "I'm sorry sir. Our radio was down for two days sir. We haven't had parts in over a month. One of the radiomen got the parts from one of the newer trucks and that's the wrong wattage and more than likely will burn out by tomorrow."

Hawk reached out and patted the Major's arm. "It's ok Major, I know how scarce parts and supplies are since things in the east are shaky. Did you find anyone that knows the location of this outpost? Or even if it could be the one we heard about?"

"No sir. No one has been that far out from this post General." The Major looked at Hawk and added, "General, you're dead on your feet. Why don't you go catch a few hours and I'll try to contact the scouts at Zone 32 Maybe those scouts can head south and snag a radio signal."

Hawk grinned, "Major those two are like my own kids, could you sleep if your kids might be in danger?"

"Ok General have it your way. I'll call you on your frequency if I hear anything else. But once you hit the forest, you'll be out of our range to contact you.... or call for help if you need it."

Hawk looked at the Major and with a coldness in his voice that sent chills down the base commanders back, added, "If anyone has hurt those two.... It won't be me that will be needing help!" Something came over Hawk. The Major couldn't put a finger on it, but it scared the Hell out of him.

Hawk turned and almost knocked down a Sergeant that was waiting to get into the radio room. He saluted Hawk as Hawk went by then turned to the Major.

"Jesus Major! Did you see the look in his eyes?"

But the Major never heard. He had turned and went back into the radio shack. He too had seen the look. There were stories about how Hawk would get when angered. The look had said it all. There would be death and he hoped it wouldn't be Hawk's friends. He was their mentor, their father, their friend and if need be....their avenger.

The Major sat down as the radioman tried vainly to reach someone. Anyone!

The two guards at the gate saw a cloud of dust coming from the base and roared past them at a high rate of speed.

"Now do you see Dave? Why I told you to leave the gate open? I was with the General for almost a year and he never once slowed down."

Dave looked at the dust cloud vanishing in the distance. "Wonder where he's off to in such a big hurry."

Marty laughed, "Hey, we just open and close the gate. Don't worry about where he's going, just when and how fast he comes back. Stay on your toes man!" Marty grinned and headed out the door while Dave stared out the window and sighed...

"Man I wish I could be General Hawk! Even if it was just for one day. That would be so cool!"

Hawk knew the outpost he was looking for was somewhere just on the other side of the forested areas about one hundred miles to the northeast. He also knew there would be no one there to help the siblings if they got in trouble. He grinned nervously as he sped along wondering why he was worried. "Hell these are Kim and Tim I'm worrying about. Nonsense, whoever crossed them is who I should be worrying about."

He chuckled under his breath, “Why those two have killed more mutes and bandits than just about anyone, but myself.”

His smile vanished, “Then why am I so worried?” Hawk twisted the throttle on his cycle as he ran across a vast field of wheel high grasses and brush.

“Why can’t I shake this feeling...” His cycle slid sideways a bit. “Ok easy old man!” He chided himself, “Before you dump this thing and wind up back in the Medcomp!”

Over the rolling hills and through the lightly forested valleys he pushed. He used no roads this day. There were too few good roads and those he saw were worse than riding across a grassy field.

After several hours, he saw smoke. He steered toward it. Hawk quietly came to a stop several hundred feet from the spot where the smoke came from. Quietly he stalked through the woods until he could see what was burning. There in a small open glade was a man burying something or someone.

Hawk’s heart skipped a beat. It was a grave! He pulled one of his swords and quietly moved toward the single man with the shovel. Undetected Hawk gently put the tip of his sword against the back of the stranger’s neck.

“I’m hoping it’s not someone I know in that grave you’re covering stranger.”

The man froze and without turning to see who was jabbing him, spoke slowly and quietly.

“Don’t know them mister. Found them earlier, looks like mutes got the man and his wife.” He pointed out to the middle of the glade. “Looks like the youngster ran back to this wagon and either he or the mutes knocked over something that caused it to burn.”

The stranger slowly turned and pointed back to the tree line. “Found those two young’uns hiding in the brush. Think they’re in shock” He glanced over his shoulder and added, “Mister if you’re gonna kill me, do it! If not how about lending me a hand. I’d like to catch up with that patrol I ran across this morning.”

Hawk lowered his sword and with one smooth motion slid it into the hidden scabbard on the back of his uniform.

“Patrol? You saw it? Where? Was there a scout with it?”

“WHOA down there mister. Yeah I saw the patrol this morning. Had about thirty or thirty five troops. No scouts. I know ‘cuz I asked them if they needed one, but they said they were on their way back to their base.”

Hawk calmed down realizing being hasty could cost him time he could not afford to lose. He reached out his hand, "They call me Hawk, just plain old Hawk."

The stranger shook Hawk's hand and grinned, "Guess you can call me just about anything you want Hawk, but most call me Eff.... Short for Effrim. Don't rightly know what my folks had against me, giving me that name." He chuckled, then continued,

"I heard about you and your kids. Cleaning up the coast are ya? Well it's about damned time someone did."

Hawk grinned as he grabbed the shovel and helped Eff finish the grave.

"Eff, by chance did anyone on the patrol mention about where the scouts had gone?"

"Naw. I didn't stay long, but the lieutenant said something about the girl was suppose to meet her brother over at the foothills somewhere, guess he left earlier." Eff tossed his hand up and pointed toward the mountains.

"Ah, ok Eff. Thanks for the info. I'm guessing she's heading for the outpost. Maybe...."

Eff dropped his shovel and stared at Hawk. "Outpost? Mister Hawk, the only outpost in these parts is old 'One Eye Jacks' place over near the foothills and no one in their right mind goes anywhere near there. Why he's a low down, cheating, cut throat, lying bastard!" Eff was waving his hands all around in frustration.

"Why that SOB took all my money, my pelts and some rare things I found in an old city. I was lucky to get away with my life! And that was just running into him and his pals out here in the wilds. Christ o mighty, if that little gal goes there alone...."

Hawk was now worried.

"Eff, do you know where this outpost is? Kim wouldn't go there alone, she's too smart. She'll wait for her brother."

"Yeah, I know where it is alright!" Eff pointed toward the mountains. Ya see that there peak? Well head straight for it. About twenty miles from the base of that mountain, is old Jacks. It sits on a high mesa like hill." Eff paused for a second, then... "Holy shi.... Hawk, you know her name? Don't tell me it's your kid?"

Hawk looked sadly at Eff and muttered, "It's both of them Eff." Hawk's voice trailed off as he turned and headed toward his cycle.

Eff yelled after him, "Hawk you need my horse? I should be able to catch the patrol on foot by going over....."

Hawk turned and interrupted Eff.

“Eff I have transportation, you take your horse and those kids and get them to safety. Those mutes might be back this way.” He started to turn, but stopped and shouted back, “And Eff, Thanks for your help!”

Hawk never saw Eff wave so long at him. Nor see him gather up the two little survivors and put them on his horse. Eff never saw Hawk mount his cycle and race through the woods toward the peak Eff showed him. His last glimpse of Hawk was when he blew through the small meadow at close to one hundred and twenty.

As the hours passed, Hawk felt the worry return, he was taking too long.

Far too long.

## Chapter 19.

Kim had let Tim drive up the winding road to the outpost and as they approached, the first of two gates opened. The tavern sat atop a mesa like hill with steep sides and only one way up. The siblings couldn't see any structures until they approached the two heavy steel barred gates that had steel fencing welded to the bars on the gate. As they approached the first gate rose up high enough for Kim's Hummer to pass under.

"See sis, I told ya! Look at the security. No mutes are getting in here. That old hunter was right!"

He stopped and the first gate closed, then the second gate opened. He drove in and stopped as the lone gatekeeper approached the vehicle.

"Hey there kids, welcome to old Jacks place." He pointed back over his shoulder. "Ya can park yer truck or whatever that thing is, over there."

"Thanks stranger" Tim replied, "It is modeled after something that used to be called a Hummer."

"Names' Al" Al looked at the vehicle and grinned, "Whee doggie! That one of those Proff drives?"

"Sure is Al. I'm Tim and this is my sister Kim."

Al looked over to Kim and smiled, "Why howdy there little lady. Why ain't you the prettiest little thing to come visit in a long time."

Kim just smiled uneasily. She had grown to be a beautiful young woman and had been flattered, asked out on dates and had contact with all kinds of men asking about her. Yet somehow she started feeling uneasy. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something....

Al spoke slow, but kept grinning, "Guess ya won't be needing any fuel of any kind then. But hey, we got us some great vittles inside."

Tim waved at Al as he drove over to the side of the small outpost. The two got out as Tim mentioned to Kim. "I keep hearing something rattling. Think I picked up a stick or something and it's stuck underneath. I'll pull it out and meet you inside sis."

Kim smiled at her brother and nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. "If you're going to fix anything Tim, I'll be finished eating and having a after supper drink by the time you get done."



Tim laughed and pushed Kim toward the front of the building. “Get going sis, before I make you crawl under this thing and fix it!”

They both chuckled. Kim turned and walked away and vanished around the corner of the building while Tim slid under the vehicle.

Kim walked around the front of the outpost and Al who had left his post at the gate, opened the door for her.

“There ya go missy enjoy your food.”

“Thank you Al, I’m sure we will.” Kim replied with a warm smile.

Al walked through the door and leaned against the door just to the right, leaving it open. He shouted to Jack and two guys standing at the bar.

“Hey guys, meet Kim she and her brother, who’s working on their vehicle outside, just dropped in for some food.”

The two men at the bar both nodded at Kim and turned back to each other and went back to their conversation.

Kim walked up to the long bar, put a foot up on the wooden rail and leaned both elbows on the top of the bar.

“Nice area around here.” Kim said to the bartender, “Would you be Jack the owner?”

Without turning, Jack looked at her in the cloudy mirror and replied, “That it is miss, that it is. And yeah I’m the owner.”

Kim squinted to see if one eye Jack actually had one eye, but the mirror was far too filthy.

“Well if you have some rooms, my brother and I would like to stay for a few days to do some hunting.”

Old Jack laughed, “Well I’ll be damned! I knew I recognized you sweet cheeks.” Jack turned and grinned at Kim. Jack looked familiar, but looking at the huge scar running from just above his eye, down almost to his mouth, Kim figured she’d remember. His eye had been crudely sewn closed as well as the entire scar. Someone had done a fast field stitch on this man and not a very good one at that.

“You don’t recognize old Jack do ya!”

“The voice sounds familiar, sir. But I can’t remember....” Kim looked puzzled.

“Well seems like it was about seven or eight years ago. Kim isn’t it?”

“Sorry Jack I still...”

Jack grinned and walked around toward the end of the bar that was about ten feet from Kim and covered his right eye and the scar that ran across it.

“How about now, little lady?”

Kim strained to see him in the poorly lit room. The place was dirtier than she had first noticed. The small windows had no shades and it was just dirt that filtered the light. Jack took one more step and a strange look crossed Kim’s face. Within seconds the look was gone and she spoke quietly.

“Ah, looks like you don’t have rooms, so maybe, we’ll just camp out.”

Jack took another step and stopped, he grinned, “No sense in trying to hide it Kim, I know you have an idea who I am now and just like when we met the first time, you’re cool and calm as ever.” Jack nodded and the two men at the bar grabbed Kim from behind. Each held one of her arms with their hands and grasped her around the waist with the other. She struggled violently, yet nary a shout escaped her lips.

“Aww, look guys she still trying to protect her brother from getting involved. Hell I’ll bet I can rape her again and she wouldn’t let out a peep.” Jack looked over to Al and added, “You asshole you should have killed the kid before you came in.”

“I can do it now boss.” Al said as he pulled a long nasty looking dagger from his belt.

“Naw, let him come in and he can watch. You might go out and hurry him along though.”

The thugs laughed as Kim shot a glance to the door. It had just closed and Al was gone. She looked back to Jack who had moved a bit closer. He was still grinning.

“Boys, this little lady was probably the best piece of tail I ever had. Got her cherry too.” He laughed, “Damned if she didn’t bleed like a stuck pig. But she didn’t scream, even then she was trying to protect her brother. Wouldn’t have mattered though my pal had nailed him with a rock from behind while he was making his rounds.”

“I thought you were dead! We found bodies and....” Kim shouted, “....you bastard I don’t know how you survived but you and your kind are going to be hunted down and killed.”

“Damn near was killed missy. Why hell if I hadn’t stayed that morning to do ya one more time, I wouldn’t have been late for the meeting with my other men. Hell girl, by the time I got there the mutes were pulling them apart.” Jack laughed, “I thought the

mutes had gone and snuck out of the bushes I was hiding in, when one of them came into the clearing. Had to shoot the damned thing and that brought others. While I was running back to your camp I tripped over the body of my pal.” Jack grinned, “Ya know the one that got your brother and bounced you a few times the night before? Christ all mighty, they’d pulled his head right off. So I couldn’t go back to your camp, figuring they’d got you two, so I just ran into the deep forest.

“Too bad they didn’t get you!” Kim added in a voice full of hatred.

Jack roared with laughter, “Wait until we get done with you in a day of two, you’ll really wish I was dead.”

His men laughed an evil laugh that sent chills down her spine. She could stand the humiliation of being raped if she knew Tim was safe. She prayed he had heard and gone for help.

Jack ignored her struggles and stepped another step closer and continued his tale.

“Hell I must have run for hours, those damned mutes nearly got me several times. Close to noon, I heard more of them. I’d been hiding in the bushes, so I got up and turned to run some more and ran right into a broken branch. The thing caught me right in the eye!”

“You put your own eye out?” Kim laughed.

Her mocking enraged Jack as he rushed forward the last few steps and hit her on the jaw. The room spun he had hit her so hard, but Kim still conscience, raised her head and with blood starting to trickle from her lip managed to add, “Knowing you blinded yourself is worth anything you do to me now you bastard! All the time you’re humping me you can be sure I’ll be laughing at you... every second until you kill me, I’ll be laughing my ass off!”

Jack pulled back his meaty fist, paused, then slowly lowered it. He grinned at Kim, “I’ll be damned, you tried to get me mad enough to kill you. Ain’t workin’ missy. Wouldn’t want to ruin our fun.”

Kim who was almost face to face with Jack, spit on him. “Having fun yet Jack?” She spit again. She felt her head snap back as one of her two captors grabbed a hand full of her hair and jerked her head rearward. She looked down over her cheek to see Jack pull his knife from his belt. He leaned in and put his cheek next to hers.

“See how much fun you have as I cut those tight buckskins off that little ass of yers bitch!”

His breath was hot and smelled like a garbage pit. She felt his hand grab her belt. Then with a jerk he cut it and sent it falling to the floor. Jacks hand crept up along her body until he roughly grasped one of her breast and squeezed. She heard herself gasp in pain.

“Not having fun anymore are ya little Kimmy? About as much fun as I had stitching up my own face!”

Jack squeezed harder as Kim thought she would pass out from the pain. Her breast throbbed as tears ran down her cheek. She felt his other hand moving toward her waist. He grasped her waistband.....

**‘CRASH!!’**

Everyone looked at the door which was laying on the floor. In the doorway stood Tim silhouetted in the mid day sun that poured through into the dimly lit room. In his hands was a M-16 rifle. One of Jack’s men walked through a door next to the end of the bar with a rifle and Tim ended his existence with one quick decisive shot. The crony fell to the floor with a thud!

“Now as I was about to say....get away from her you bastard!” Tim commanded, then added, “You two release her!”

“Don’t do it guys.” Jack yelled. “If we move away from her, he’ll shoot!”

Jack slid around behind Kim knowing her brother would never risk hitting his sister.

Tim took a step forward. A strange look came over him. “Strange!” He thought, “Feel a bit sluggish.” He looked at Kim’s captors. They were slightly smiling.

“This is....Weird.” He mumbled as he looked at his sister. “Kim?” Tim asked. The room was darkened but as he strained to see her clearly, he could see she had a look of horror on her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her eyes fixed on him.

“You don’t have to be scared now sis, I’m here!” Tim’s foot slipped in something slick, but he regained his balance and kept pointing the M-16 at the thugs.

Jack stepped away from his sister and Tim thought it would be a good time for this bastard to die. Tim raised his arms to aim the rifle, but the rifle was gone.

“Gone?” His mind wandered as he looked down and saw it laying on the floor. “What the hell?” ran through his head. He turned slightly to stoop and pick up his rifle and something glinted in the sun. He looked down again and noticed a pool of blood that was rapidly expanding under the rifle.

Tim raised his eyes a bit and looked at his chest. About three inches of a long dagger was protruding through his buckskin shirt. From the blade trickled blood in spurts. He looked to the door laying on the left side of the entry, then back toward Kim.

“Christ, I didn’t feel a thing.... I’m sorry sis.... Looks like you’re going to be on your own from now on.” Tim weakly said.

He managed one step more to try to help his sister, then sank to his knees as Kim cried aloud and shouted his name. There was a roar in his ears which changed to a high pitched whining.

Tim looked at Kim and with his voice trembling spoke.

“I’m... so...” He fell forward onto the wooden planks of the floor as blood flowed out from under him.

“....sorry..for.....letting...you..... down.” His voice stilled as blood ran from his lips, he gurgled something no one heard, his eyes closed and the last thing Tim heard was his sisters screams of anguish. Her brother Tim would ride with her no more. Tim was dead!

Kim looked up through tear filled eyes to the doorway. The gateman Al stood there. He stepped over to Tim’s body and reached down and grasped his huge dagger. He pulled on it violently, but Tim’s body held it tightly. Al put his dirt covered boot on Tim’s back and jerked his knife out, wiped it on Tim’s pants and sheathed it in a long scabbard strapped to his waist. He stepped back and leaned against the wall to his right, next to the doorway. Al grinned at Jack and then to Kim.

“Guess he ain’t gonna be joining you after all, sweetheart.”

The fight left Kim. Her struggles stopped. They had lived through so much, survived so long, but now Tim was gone. There was no need to allow Jack to do anything to her. She no longer had a brother to protect. Her body went limp. Whatever Jack did to her from this point on, Kim knew it wouldn’t hurt as much as this moment.

“Damn boys, looks like that took the fight right out of her.” Jack winked at his friends, “Always is more fun when they fight you....”

No sooner had Jack spit out the his last sentence, Kim snapped upright and planted her boot toe directly into his testicles.

Jack’s men grabbed back onto Kim harder than before. But it was too late! Jack sank to the floor desperately grasping his crotch. All the time he made a high pitched whimper as the air in his lungs couldn’t be contained as he knelt on the dirty tavern floor.

“That’s for what your man did to my brother!” She screamed, then kicked Jack so hard in the ribs one of them cracked aloud. As Jack’s two cronies pulled her back on a table, face upward. Although Kim couldn’t see Jack slowly getting to his feet. Nor see him slump as he hung on to the bar, she screamed at the top of her lungs, “And that’s for what you’re going to do to me you bastard!”

Jack stumbled over to the table near the bar where Kim was being held, grasped the collar of her buckskin blouse and pulled her upright. Jack pulled back his fist and slammed it into her jaw so hard the table moved when she slammed back down on it.

The room spun, then to her surprise it only moved side to side at strange angles. “No wait...” She thought, “...it isn’t the table it’s the room.” She couldn’t focus. There was a loud ringing in her ears. A strange calm crossed her thoughts.

“So this is what death feels like.” The room tipped to the other side, “Wow, this is really...” She felt nothing holding her down, “...strange. I wonder if I’m flying..”

Kim looked over towards Al who had been standing next to the doorway. In her woozy state she began to chuckle. Al was still against the wall and he was doing some sort of funny, jerky dance. She strained to see him better and saw he was pinned to the wall by his own dagger sticking through his throat! She chuckled and tried to speak, but her jaw just wouldn’t allow her to.

She looked over to her right, she grinned as the ceiling tipped one way then the other way. She tried her best to focus. In her stunned delusion she started chuckling again. She looked back to the guy who was holding her on the right and mumbled, “Your buddy is pinned to the wall and ....you don’t have a head do you?” She laughed weakly.

She looked at the man as he fell backward as blood spurted from his neck. She muttered in a stunned whisper, “Wow I made your head go away.” She shook her head trying to stop the ringing. She giggled again.

Kim’s head started to clear enough to realize she was not going to die. At least not yet. Still stunned and not clearly thinking, she rolled her head on the table and looked at the other guy. “No I can’t do that can I? Make someone’s head go away?”

Kim woozily grinned as she looked up at her captor. She raised a wobbly hand and made a slashing motion at the man holding her left wrist.

“Hey! Your friend don’t have a head! So, swish off with yours!” She drunkenly laughed as she kept looking at the guy towering over the table she lay upon. As she watched his head slid from his neck and toppled toward the floor. She heard it hit something then a gooey splash as the falling head tipped over the spittoon.

Kim grinned at the headless man, “Hey you don’t have a head either!” She shook her head as the body fell from her view. Kim looked at her right hand with its outstretched finger. As she strained to focus on it, Kim chuckled, “Damned if it didn’t work!” The mirth she had been feeling left as her cognitive abilities started to return. Again she shook

her head and the events of the last minute or so snapped her upright. She sat on the table looking around. “What the Hell happened?”

Kim slid up off the table, still extremely wobbly. She glanced out of the corner of her eye to the left to see one body, then to the right to see the other. Kim then remembered Jack! She turned as quickly as her bewildered state would allow and looked over at Jack who was standing upright about six feet in front of her. He had backed up right into a large square pole that helped hold the ceiling.

Still trying to clear her head completely, Kim squinted at Jack. He was just standing there not moving. Sweat ran from his brow. For some reason her attention was drawn to his feet. His dirty, torn and raggedy blue jeans were dark along the legs. She looked back to his feet and saw he was standing in a puddle. She squinted and focused a bit more. Jack was wetting himself!

Kim staggered from the table to the bar and leaned on it facing Jack. Then it dawned on her! The same thing raced through her mind over and over again. She dared not look.

What would make this murderer and cut throat wet himself she asked. What did Jack fear the most? Jack feared mutants more than anything echoed back in her mind. Kim afraid to turn, just closed her eyes and awaited the grunts or screams of the mutants, but they never came.

“Are you alright Kim?” The voice came from behind from her. She knew that voice! Kim slowly turned, still wobbly she managed to get far enough around to turn her head the rest of the way. She tried once more to focus as she felt an arm wrap around her and pull her into him.

“HAWK!” Kim sobbed loudly, “They killed Tim!” She almost collapsed, but Hawk held her firmly while all the time keeping an eye on Jack.

“That’s the man that almost killed Tim back....” She choked back a sob, “...and raped me.”

“You sit here honey.” Hawk answered, “I’ll take care of things.” He grabbed one of the knocked over chairs and sat it upright sitting Kim down gently in it. She looked up into Hawk’s eyes and saw that thing that always frightened her. Jack was going to die.

Kim grasped Hawk’s arm as he walked past her.

“NO! Don’t kill him Hawk! He’s mine!” Her mental state had returned, her head cleared. Kim looked at her reflection in the dirty mirror and gasped at what she saw. She too had ‘that’ look!”

“Ok baby, he’s yours, you rest and clear your head. I’ll tie him up....” Hawk’s voice cracked, “...Then I’ll bury Tim deep and up here where the mutes can’t get him.”

Kim went back to crying, but gave Hawk's arm a gentle squeeze. She let him know she was ok with a soft nod of her head. Kim walked over to another table away from the bar and the wooden beam where Hawk was tying Jack up to. She laid her arms on the table, then put her head into her arms and passed out.

She would rest, her head would clear and her injuries would heal. Hawk gently picked her up and carried her over to a small bench, laid her upon it and covered her with a coat that was on the wall. He bent down and kissed her head gently. Tears trickled down his face. Hawk loved these kids, now one was dead. He had failed them both.

Hawk had arrived in time to save Kim, however he could not find solace in that fact. He had been too late to save Tim and now he was digging Tim's grave. Hawk stood in the grave and, reached over to the blood stained blanket that wrapped Tim's body and softly cradled it in his arms. Hawk buried his head into the Tim's cold chest and sobbed.

"I'm so sorry Tim. I wasn't here fast enough to save you. It's my fault you died..."

Kim's gentle hand grasped Hawk's shoulder as she knelt across from Hawk, who was still standing in the makeshift grave and reached over Tim's body. With her other hand she laid it upon her brother.

"I know you got here as fast as you could Hawk. You're a good man, you've replaced the Dad we never got to grow up with. I know how much you loved him.... Both of us."

Hawk looked at Kim with tears running down his cheeks. He took Tim's body and lowered it into the grave. He pulled himself out as he and Kim began pushing soil in to cover Tim's final resting place.

Hawk piled some large rocks around the top of the grave and put a wooden plank as a marker, he then slowly backed up until he stood alongside Kim. They stared down at the grave.

Hawk reached over and pulled the weeping Kim to his side. There they stood as the sun lowered behind the giant redwoods.

Hawk struggled for words. He had no religion, his belief was only in remembering in what had been lost, what the future held. But even now things just didn't seem right. Just to leave and not say anything.

First he thought perhaps the hunters prayer, but the siblings never knew his past world or much about his life in the wastelands. Yet somehow words flowed from his lips without thinking what to say, but rather letting hidden emotions loose the words he felt deep inside.

Hawk looked at Tim's grave and reverently spoke.



“God, I don’t know if you exist. If you do, you know for my soul there is no hope, but Lord don’t lose this poor boy’s soul. He was a good person.

He loved his sister and his parents.

He never did anything unkind to anyone that didn’t deserve it.

And Lord, he sent many of those poor bastards we call mutes, back so you, so you could claim them and keep their souls. Watch over Tim up there until the day his sister joins him. You do that for me Lord and I’ll watch over Kim down here for you.”

Kim threw her arms around Hawk and buried her head in his chest sobbing. Hawk held Kim gently and kissed her on the head.

“I’ll watch over you honey until that day you find someone to take my place.”

A muffled voice spoke out from under Hawk’s chin. “No husband will ever replace you Hawk. There is no man alive that could ever replace you.”

Kim kept crying as Hawk led her back into the outpost for the night. It was safer even though it held so much sorrow for them both.

Hawk led Kim through the doorway and smiled as he took the broken door and placed it back on the hinges, then slowly closed it. He glanced back out towards Tim’s grave, then to the setting sun.

He smiled warmly and whispered, “No man can live up to me?”

Hawk chuckled silently so Kim could not hear, then whispered back towards Tim’s grave.

“She doesn’t know does she Tim? Someday she’ll find love. She’ll change her mind then. You’ll see.”

## Chapter 20.

They slept there in the tavern that fateful night. Their sadness eased only by the weak sobs from Jack who was tied to a wooden ceiling support. Now and then he would bemoan his future and what Kim intend to do with him. Kim would wink at Hawk, then yell out some blood curdling plan to his demise and Jack would start crying all over again. Hawk in turn would chuckle and yell back at Kim.

“Wow, bet that’ll hurt like Hell!” And Jack would cry louder. The two would grin at each other.

Hawk had grabbed some food from his cycle and brought it in to eat. Jack whined about being hungry, which Kim would add something about him not needing food much longer.

“I think you’re enjoying this too much Kim.”

“Maybe Hawk. Seeing this Bastard squirming, hearing him sobbing won’t replace Tim. Won’t repair the damage he and his pal did to me years ago...” Kim grinned, “Ok, it does help a bit!”

They ate and tried to get some sleep, but Jack kept begging to know what his future held. Hawk got up, walked over to Jack, looked him in the eye and nailed him squarely on the jaw. So hard Jack’s head slammed against the post to which he was tied. His neck popped, head slumped.

Hawk turned and walked over to where he and Kim had laid their sleeping pads on the floor. He sat on his pad and looked over at Kim and winked, “Guess Jack’s immediate future held sleeping.”

“Hope you didn’t kill him Hawk, that’s going to be my pleasure.”

“You mean after you keep scaring him, berating him and the like?”

Kim, who was laying on her back, turned her head to look at Hawk. “You don’t approve? After what he did...”

Hawk interrupted her and raised partially up, rolled to his side facing her and stared into her eyes in the poorly lit room. With only the fire in the fireplace Hawk still could see the deeply buried rage that still lurked within Kim’s memories. He knew she would have to do what it took to purge this hate. If was this knowledge that Hawk feared, he would not allow her to become like him at any cost.

“Kim, if someone needed killing, then I killed them, I take no pleasure in it. That being said everyone has to do what they think they have to do.” He laid back down.

Kim lay there with the day’s events swimming through her mind. Tim was dead. Her brother, the only reason she found to keep going when things troubled her. Now the man that took her reason to live stood bound to the post not twenty feet away. She closed her eyes dreaming of the morrow when she would repay that bastard Jack for all the pain he had caused in her life.

“My life?” Kim’s eyes popped open. “I meant for killing Tim.” She closed her eyes once again. As she lay there the thought kept creeping back, “But I said my life.” This night Kim would sleep a fitful sleep.

The following morning Kim sat at one of the tables with her head hanging over a cup of coffee Hawk had made using Jacks supplies. Hawk walked over and sat across the small table from her. He placed a plate of eggs and salt pork down in front of her.

“Thanks Hawk, but I’m really not hungry.”

“You have to eat Kim. You know Tim wouldn’t want you to be acting this way.”

“I know, he wouldn’t Hawk.” She paused, sighed, then continued, “It’s just I hate that bastard so much.” She nodded over to Jack still tied to the post.

Jack responded with a grin. “Well if you don’t want that food gal, I’ll eat it. My stomach has been growling ever since I smelled that coffee.”

Rage pounced upon Kim like she’d never felt before. She leapt to her feet and hurled the plate of food at Jack hitting him squarely on the chest. She paused and glared at him, then threw her coffee splattering his face with the hot liquid as Jack screamed in agony.

“There’s your breakfast you bastard, just be glad the coffee has cooled some!”

She sat back down. Hawk placed his elbows on the table, then put his chin on his propped up hands and stared at Kim in a puzzling manner. Kim tried to look him in the eyes, but found every time she did, she couldn’t keep her gaze. She lowered her head.

Hawk stared at her for several more moments, then arose out of the chair, walked over to Kim’s repaired belt where she had hung it on the wall. He pulled her 9mm automatic pistol from its holster. Kim looked puzzled as Hawk walked back over to her and laid it on the table in front of her.

“If a man needs killing then you kill him! You can’t make it personal, and you sure as Hell don’t treat him the way you are doing or you become what he is.”

Kim slowly grasped the pistol and looked at Hawk, her eyes starting to fill with tears. In the background she became aware of Jack starting to whimper as he bemoaned his possible demise. Hawk pointed toward the hastily repaired door.

“I’m going out and have a look around to see if any mutes are roaming around below.” He looked sternly at Kim, “And you young lady,…” he sighed, “…have business to take care of. You do what you have to do!”

Hawk turned and walked out the door closing it slowly behind him. Kim started at the pistol for several minutes then slowly arose. She looked at the trembling Jack. He was quietly pleading for her to spare his miserable life. Kim slowly walked over to within a few feet of Jack, racked a shell into the chamber and slowly raised the gun upward until it was only a few feet from his head. Jack stopped pleading and closed his eyes. Kim’s thumb flicked off the safety. As her hand trembled she aimed down the barrel.

After several moments Jack opened his one good eye and was looking down the barrel of Kim’s gun. Her hand was shaking so hard he couldn’t focus on it. He looked over and into Kim’s face.

“Well bitch, get it over with!”

Tears streamed down Kim’s cheeks, her hand trembled violently.

“I’ll be damned! You can’t shoot a man in cold blood can ya?” Still staring into Kim’s eyes Jack yelled “Hey Hawk! You’d better come in here and do what his bitch can’t. She’ll let me rape her, watch her brother die in a pool of blood, but the bitch can’t shoot me. How about that!”

Outside Hawk heard Jack yelling something, but couldn’t understand what he was yelling. What Hawk did understand was the loud gunshot that followed Moments later. That was followed by another, then another. So many Hawk lost count. He turned away from the edge of the tall fortified hill and slowly walked toward the tavern. Sadly he reached for the door knob knowing that Kim had stepped into a place where she should not have. That place he himself had first tread so long ago, that place he found himself going far too often, that place he had so much trouble returning from. Hawk slowly pushed the door open.

The room was filled with gun smoke and as he peered through it, Hawk saw Kim sitting on the floor a few feet in front of the slumped Jack still tied to the post. Hawk walked over to Kim who was still holding a now empty pistol. He bent down and gently raised the weeping Kim to her feet and took the weapon from her fingers.

Hawk heard a whimper from behind him and spun to see Jack looking back at him. There wasn't a drop of blood on him.

"God help me Hawk.... I couldn't kill him! He raped me, he was going to do it again. His men killed my brother and I couldn't shoot him in cold blood! I failed Tim, Hawk. I failed my brother." Kim burst into tears as Hawk turned and held her tightly.

"Kimmy, you didn't fail me...." Hawk whispered into her ear, "...I prayed you couldn't do it."

After several minutes Hawk gently pushed Kim out to arms length and looked her seriously in the eyes. "Kim! Look at me!" Her eyes raised to meet Hawks. "Kim, Tim wouldn't have wanted you to murder Jack. Even though he sure deserves it, it isn't your nature to kill a defenseless man."

"But Hawk..."

"Kim..." Hawk hugged her, kissed her on the top of her head, then whispered warmly, "...you did good Honey. You remained true to yourself and didn't let rage take you over. Make you do things you didn't want to do."

Kim managed a weak smile and sniffed, "But I wanted to..."

"Baby, wanting to and doing are two different things. Someday you'll understand that better."

Hawk turned Kim and sat her back into a chair and proceeded to get her a fresh cup of coffee. As she sipped on it Hawk walked over to Jack and untied him from the post, still keeping him tied with the rope so it wrapped around his chest pinning his arms to his sides. Hawk headed toward the door with Jack in tow.

"Hawk, you're not letting him go are you?" Kim shouted after him.

"Let him go? Naw, I just don't want him in this place with good people like you."

Kim smiled, and added, "and you"

Hawk looked back over his shoulder as he pushed Jack out the door, "Me? Kim Honey, I stopped being good people decades ago."

Kim lowered her eyes once again. She had known Hawk too many years. She knew how he thought of himself and knew he was so wrong. She could only hope that someday he would be able to forgive himself, to understand the way he is, was what was holding this campaign together.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty. The door opened and Hawk strolled back in. He walked over and got himself a cup of coffee and sat once again across from Kim.

“Well dammit Hawk, what did you do to Jack? Is he dead?”

“Dead? Naw, I just tied him back up.” He pointed toward the open door. “Out there out of the way.”

“Ahh.” Kim lowered her head, “I thought you would kill him. You said if a man needed to be killed.”

“I say a lot of things Kim, they don’t always apply to all situations.” Hawk leaned toward Kim. “You know if you’d let me give you one of these suits of armor, you’d have a better chance against things like what happened. Tim refused too and it would have saved him. Those bastards couldn’t have cut it off of you.”

Kim smiled weakly, “We explained it before...” Teasingly adding, “...Daddy Hawk. It isn’t us... well now, it isn’t me. For you Hawk it gives you a way to continue doing what you must do. But Tim and I always believed in whatever fate hands us...”

Hawk frustratingly interrupted, “Kim! ....Christ!... You’re stubborn enough to drive a man to drink!”

Kim laughed, “You already drank before you met us! Besides that suit don’t protect your head. That bastard could have just as easily shot or stabbed Tim, or you in the head!”

Hawk leaned back in his chair, thought for a second, then leaned back toward Kim.

“I’m going to tell you something few know about this suit I wear Kim.” Hawk pointed his finger at what looked to be a small raised seam that ran around the suit about six inches from the neck. “You see this circle that looks like a seam? Well it is a shield of sorts.”

“A shield from what ants?” She chuckled thinking Hawk was teasing her.

“Kim this suit as I told you stores up energy. It keeps me cool in hot weather or warm in cold times.”

“Yeah I remember Hawk, you told us that back when you tried to get us to wear them.”

“Well just like the suit senses when I’m hot or cold and adjusts itself, it can sense if something is coming at my head. Like a bullet. When it does, an invisible shield of some sort throws up around my head to protect me. It takes a massive charge to do it though and takes several minutes for the suit to recharge to do it again.”

“So your head can’t be hurt?”

It was Hawk’s turn to laugh, “I wish it was that way Kim. You see because it takes all the suits stored energy to throw up that shield, the suit ignores any blow or damage that it deems that won’t kill me or seriously injure me as acceptable....”

Kim laughed then clamped her hand over her mouth, “Sorry. But it sounded like the suit decides how much it’ll let you get hurt.”

Hawk grinned, “That’s about it Kim. If someone sneaks up behind me and hits me with a large limb, the suit decides if it will kill me, seriously injure me or knock me out and if so, it will throw up the shield. If not, then I wind up with a lump in my skull.”

Kim roared with laughter, clamped her hands over her mouth once again and with a giggle replied, “Sorry.”

“Actually it is kind of amusing Kim, yet it has saved me from, hmmm.” Hawk paused to phrase things a bit better, “It’s like this Kim. There was a time when I was three stories up on a ledge almost to a window. I was after some raiders that had holed up in a room on that third floor. We couldn’t get to them from the hall so I climbed out a window moved along this ledge.”

Kim chuckled, “That sounds like the Hawk I know and love.”

“Ok now Kimmy.” Hawk made a phony frown, then grinned, “Anyhow!... I was up there and from what I was told, another group of raiders a ways off saw me there and fired a cannon. The shell ripped through the window I was about to burst through, exploded, and hurled me thirty feet back from the ledge.”

“Oh my God Hawk, and the suit protected you?”

“That it did Kim. I was completely protected from the blast, including my head.”

“So you were saved.”

“Well yes and no. The suit saved me from the blast, but used every bit of energy it had stored. So it couldn’t help me when I dropped about thirty or so feet to the hard ground. Let’s see if I can remember. I broke both legs, fractured my skull, broke my back in four places. Internally I bled, oh yeah and had hemorrhaging in the brain.”

“Christ Hawk if the suit didn’t save you how the Hell did you survive?”

“I didn’t Kim, I died.”

Kim started to giggle, but noticed Hawk was dead serious. “But you’re here. Aren’t you?”

Hawk laughed, Remember I told you and Tim if anything ever happened to me where I seemed to be dead to get me back to my cycle and lay me on it?"

As if a light switched on, Kim's face lit up, "Keli! You said your late wife had saved your life, she put you on the cycle didn't she?"

Hawk smiled as he reached across the table and patted Kim's hand. "Smart girl Kim. Didn't think you had remembered." Hawk pulled his hand back, pulled up the sleeve slightly and looked at his extremely thin watch. He shrugged, "Would have thought by now...."

Kim started to ask something else that had puzzled her about Hawk's suit, but was interrupted by startled screams. She jumped to her feet, but Hawk just sat there. More screams of terror, which quickly changed to screams of unimaginable horror and pain. Kim started toward the door, but Hawk's strong hand snapped out and grasped her arm.

"Ah! Guess my estimate was a little off." Hawk gripped her arm as she struggled to see what the commotion was about. "You don't want to go out there Kimmy."

"Hawk, that's Jack screaming. Maybe there are some mutes that got in we need to defend ourselves."

Hawk gently pulled Kim back to her chair as the screams fell silent.

"Mutes didn't get, in I lowered Jack over the side of the cliff Kim. Until his feet were close to the ground, but not touching."

"But it sounded like something got to him Hawk."

"Probably the mutes I saw wandering around the base of this outpost earlier." Hawk calmly took a sip of his coffee.

Kim squinted her eyes at Hawk accusingly, "What about all that kill a man if he needs it, but don't torture him spiel you gave me."

Hawk got up and walked over to the coffee pot for a refill, poured himself a cup of coffee. He looked back over his shoulder and grinned.

"Never said a damned thing about not letting the mutes doing the torturing."

Kim lowered her head and sighed, "Well he did have a real fear of mutes, so I guess his end was fitting enough although it won't bring Tim back." She raised her head and looked at Hawk with tears in her eyes added, "Thank you for doing what I couldn't."

Hawk walked back to the table and sat down.



“Kim, I did no more than give Jack the fear and death that he gave others. A man like that will eventually reap what he sows.” Hawk grinned as he brought the cup to his lips.

“All I did was sow him where he could be reaped.”

Kim grinned as for the first time she felt peace. Tim had been avenged, her past was now at rest. Almost thoughtfully she mused.

“Guess mutes do have some good points. They aren’t choosy about who they pull apart.” She mused with a grin, “No accounting for taste, I guess.”

For the rest of the morning little was said. The two gathered up their belongings and packed the Hummer and Hawk’s cycle. As they prepared to leave, Kim stopped at the place where her brother had been murdered. She had spent an hour the day before cleaning up every trace of his blood. Her eyes filled with tears once again. Hawk put an arm around her and led her out. They walked over to Tim’s grave and stood in silent remembrance.

“He was a good man Kim. I know how proud you were of him. I know how proud he was of you.”

Kim smiled and nodded lest she start crying.

Static from the radio on Hawk’s cycle crackled. That something unintelligible. Finally there came words, “General Hawk are you there? Do you read? Tim or Kim Vardis, do you read? Hello?”

Hawk walked over to his bike and picked up the mike and replied. The next few minutes the news of the past few days crackled to the approaching convoy. Kim could hear the sadness of the convoy’s commander when Hawk told him of Tim.

Before long many shots could be heard. At times it was like the shots were combines into one long report. After ten minutes or so only random shots could be heard. Then nothing. Hawk walked over to the two gates and raised them both. Within a few seconds the roar of many engines could be heard as the convoy drove up the inclined road to the top of the hill. Twenty or so vehicles passes through the gate, some with their machine guns still smoking from the mutants demise.

The Commander of the convoy stepped from his Hummer and walked over to the two. He saluted Hawk and walked over to Kim and gave her a hug.

“Kim, I’m so sorry to hear about Tim. He was a fine young man and one Hell of a scout. We’ll all miss him.”

Kim smiled, "Thanks Louis. He thought the world of you as well." Kim moved her arm in a sweeping motion. "Major Taylor, this outpost is all yours now. This was Tim's idea and it should fit our needs well. If you level the rest of the hill back behind the tavern you could station a hundred men here."

The Major smiled at Kim. "Your brother was right Kim, this place is just what we were looking for. It's a shame such a high price was paid."

Hawk put his arm around Kim and they headed toward her vehicle. "I'll drive Kim, you need to take it easy for a bit." Kim just nodded.

The Major shouted, "Kim, Hawk? If there are no objections, I would like to call this place Camp Vardis after your brother."

Kim looked over her shoulder and smiled warmly at Major Taylor.

"Thank you Major, I think Tim would like that." Then Kim looked at Hawk, "But your cycle?"

Hawk just grinned as Kim remembered and added, "Yeah I know it'll be there... wherever, whenever you need it."

Kim would tell Hawk of Tim's new girl. Together they would go to Coppertown to meet Jill. To give her the sorrowful news. Jill was devastated, and the meeting cut Kim to the bone. Jill was a wonderful woman and Kim knew just how happy her brother would have been. But Jill now had a home even if it was without her love. They all knew that someday they all would meet again. Once the pain had gone.

Hawk and Kim would go back to 31 base, then back to Alpha.

A bittersweet surprise would await Kim. The Vardis Library had been completed and she and Hawk would go back east for its opening. This bittersweet experience would remain with her until her death. She saw the wonders of a civilization she had never dreamed of. What rumors or what she had read could not have come close to describing the marvels she witnessed.

She made a tearful speech at the opening that had everyone present sobbing. She told of the devotion of generations of Vardis's that dutifully watched over the books. She told of the terror of the west coast and the fear they all lived with. She told of a future she hoped that one day would grace her home and the homes of all those living there. And she told of a brave soul that gave his life in that struggle. She told them of Tim.

“My God that was sad.” Deb blurted out. Then she looked at the others to see there wasn’t a dry eye among the small group.

Charlie closed the journal slowly. His head lowered, his voice low.

“So many wondered why Kim’s brother never came to the opening. I kind of wish we didn’t know now. Sometimes I hate digging up the past. Sometimes maybe the rumors, the stories are better left untold.”

“Aww, Chuck, you know you don’t mean that. So we tell the truth, Tim wasn’t away fighting mutes. But do you really think people walking through the library will think less of him because he died fighting for a better future.” Tom patted his friend’s arm, then added, “Besides Tim Vardis is still a hero no matter which way you look at it.”

Sue smiled at the group, “Two journals and we know so much more than before. Look at what we know about the Vardis’s... Guys, come on! We’ve just found stuff that has only been guessed at! The Vardis family will live again. Not just in a library, but in fact, in these journals.”

Deb smiled at Charlie. “Charlie, it’s common knowledge that neither Vardis ever came east again. At least we now know why Tim never did.” She swallowed hard and gasped out what the others were afraid to say, “I hope Kim’s fate was better than her brothers.”

Sue looked through the pile of journals and pulled out another. She shoved it into Charlie’s hands and beamed. “Now fearless leader, start reading. I’ll bet there’s a lot more to come!”

Charlie slowly opened the old volume and turned the fragile page, then another. “Seems this refers to some of the ones that Hawk said were destroyed.”

Charlie started to read, “*Can’t remember what I had written in my journals as I wrote them usually on a weekly basis. But will try though as I’m doing this several years later.*”

Charlie stopped reading in shock. Listen to this guys. “*Won’t attempt exact detail, just generalize as I doubt if anyone will ever want to read this crap.*”

Tom laughed, “My God he never did realize the part he was playing in all this did he?”

Charlie looked up, “Sadly Tom, rarely do great men know they are great. And sadly people only find out how great they were after they die and it’s too late.”

Deb chirped, “Not in Hawk’s case everyone knew he was something to be reckoned with. He was a great man and just about everyone knew it!”

Charlie smiled, “Except for Hawk.”

Tom nodded, “Yeah, except for Hawk.”

Sue reached over and teasingly grasped Charlie’s head and pushed it into a reading position.

“Ok enough talk, back to the journal!”

## Chapter 21.

Hawk and Kim returned from the east coast and over the next year or so the mutes were mostly pushed out of California and life there started to greatly improve. Cities in the lowlands and coastal cities still kept their walls. The cities in the foothills and mountains that had natural protection left their gates open, even though twenty four hour watches were still kept as there were still rumors of small bands of mutes roaming around.

These rumored mutes were rarely reported and had vanished by the time troops got to the reported area. It was as if the mutes were hiding. As if they knew their days were numbered. So they ran, they hid and they left man alone. That is so everyone thought.

The banging on the door of Hawk's quarters startled both Kim and himself. They got up so fast both their chairs fell over and they quickly headed for the door.

"I have a hunch that roast you made is going to waste Kim."

She glanced to Hawk as he reached for the door knob, "I knew it was too quiet around here lately."

Hawk opened the door to see a pale faced Sergeant. Behind him was General Travers's staff car. "Sir, Miss Vardis. "The Sarge made a quick salute, "General Hawk, General Travers wants you ASAP, sir!

The Sarge took in a huge gasp of air, "Sir big trouble! Sir mutes, lots of them!" He turned and ran to the staff car and opened the rear door.

Hawk and Kim just glanced at each other, then as if someone had slapped them, they both sprinted to the car. The Sergeant slammed the door, got in and the driver sped down the hill toward the Headquarters of Alpha Base.

Once at HQ the pair ran into Ned's office to see all the Major officers of the west coast sitting around the long conference table. Ned paced nervously as Hawk sat at the head of the table. Ned stood before a large map of California and Hawk noticed several large arrows pointed southward from the north. "Hawk, sir, it's as if the mutes hit some sort of invisible wall and turned around."

"Hawk, sir, we have a disaster in the making. Mutants, estimated at over a million maybe two, are pouring down from Oregon into southern California. Christ Hawk, they over ran Mills and Ridgeview." He paused and looked sadly at Hawk, "We haven't heard from either town since."

Before Hawk could respond, Colonel Jack Bellows stood and walked over to the map. He started making motions pointing to lines between most of the city's north of the Moby wall.

"Sir they would have responded if they could have General. As you see we completed the entire network of communication towers. We have the ability to talk to every town, city, even the small settlements." Jack walked over and sat back down slowly as he added, "I think, they're all dead."

Kim, who was sitting next to Hawk, grabbed his arm and gasped loud enough for all to hear, "My God Hawk, those two cities? That has to be over four thousand dead!" She tried to stop the tears from forming and wiped her eyes. As she looked around Kim noticed there were a few other moist eyes around the table.

Hawk slowly spoke as if fearing the next reply, "Ned? The Brigade that was sweeping the border....."

The reply that Hawk feared left Ned's lips. "Dead!" General Travers pointed to the map, "Here. They were here sir. The mutes came out of the forests in several places some of the men managed to get back into the Sixes and call for Navel support. They screamed all the other vehicles were being turned over by the mutes and they were trying to turn over the Sixes as well." Ned looked to Hawk, "The radio transmission abruptly stopped."

Hawk leapt to his feet and shouted, "The whole Brigade? God dammit!" He slammed his fist on the table, "I can't believe Dave Harris let his guard down like that."

"General, Lt. Colonel Harris was reported overdue on his way back from Mills just before the mutes hit."

"Well now we know why don't we!" Hawk was furious, but all knew it was at the loss, not in blame or trying to place fault. Hawk got up and paced the floor as Ned continued.

"Hawk, we have contacted every town and settlement. Sir they're locking things up. They'll be ok now." Ned paused then added, "General, we think the mutes are splitting up now and scattering back over California. Sir, the last few years of work have been lost. The mutes are back."

Hawk turned slightly and looked at the gathering. His head lowered, his voice now soft and weary. "Gentlemen by the time we get reorganized, the mutes will have made it half way to the Moby wall." He turned and faced the group, "We're back to square one."

"General Hawk." Admiral Winters spoke as he arose, "Sir, I ordered the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade to get on board the fleet at Seaport. Ned here ordered them to pull back to there until we regroup. I was thinking that maybe we could sail south and...."

Hawk stood interrupting the Admiral. He looked around the gathering of officers shaking his head. "People don't you get it? We've lost this battle. It's over! There is no counterattacking. We have to concentrate on winning the damned war!"

The officers looked nervously at one another as Hawk continued his pacing. One of the command officers started to stand, but Ned motioned for him to sit. Hawk paced back and forth for several minutes as the room sat in quiet gloom. Each wondering what could be done. Some whispered between one another. Hawk stopped pacing and the whispers stopped. All eyes looked to Hawk as he spoke quietly and slowly.

"It was the forests of the northwest. The damned forests! The mutes fled there and just amassed. We pushed them and they pushed back. Christ! I was so blind!"

"General, you couldn't have known..." Ned spoke, but was quickly stopped by Hawk.

Hawk stepped up to the table and looked at Kim then the officers. "No one could have known, but we damned well should have planned for the unexpected."

Hawk slammed his fist on the huge table so hard the table shook! "We'll not make the same mistake again." He turned to Ned, "Ned, I want you to pull every troop we have over to the coastal cities and tell them to be ready to be picked up.

All the cities are safe enough. Move the troops out before the mutes can get to those areas. The troops in towns where mutes have passed, tell them to stay put and await orders.

Now the Moby wall spans the peninsula to the west of Alpha I want a new camp set up there. All bases are to stop patrols until further orders. Use those new 'eights' to run supplies" Hawk grinned, "A thousand mutes couldn't tip one of those eights. We'll go back to supplying the coastal cities and bases and run supplies inland from there."

General Travers motioned to his aide and he ran from the room to send the new orders as Hawk continued. He walked over to the map on the wall.

"Kim? You and Tim were up in what used to be Canada." Hawk motioned to the map, "Here where the Rockies take the turn to the west and head out into the ocean for several hundred miles. You, Tim and Sam are the only ones that have fully explored that area."

"As far as I remember Hawk. It's a rough area with rocky terrain south for a hundred miles or so, not much cover. Most of the forests were destroyed when the Rockies heaved and never returned, just a few scattered trees"

Hawk grinned at Kim and winked, "That's what I had hoped. How wide is it from the Rockies to the coast?"

Kim laughed, "Hawk where the Rockies go into the ocean, there is only really rocky mountain sides after about three or four miles it widens to about six miles from the mountains to the shore, but there is no way to land men north of the Rockies and move them over." Kim looked at Hawk questioningly, "You can't move men over, we looked for months."

Hawk burst into a huge grin, "GREAT! That's what I wanted Kim." He looked at the group, "Admiral, we're going to land troops on the shore within a mile of where the Rockies go into the ocean. As many as you can carry and enough supplies to keep them until you can return with more troops."

"General, the shores are all cliffs in that area." Admiral Winters replied.

"Well Admiral, that's what you have the big guns for. You blast those cliffs until you blast a good landing area. Make sure the landing is wide enough and inclined enough for the Giants to get up." Hawk paused and with a wide grin added, "Then Admiral, it looks as if you have some work to do. How many men and supplies can you take at one time?"

"Sir..." The Admiral did some quick figuring, "...probably around ten thousand give or take. Most of the fleet has been sent back to the east coast for fresh troops now the borders of the wastelands have enough. We were going to use them in the push north."

"Well Admiral, you'll be using them to push south from what we'll call "Delta Base". We know the mutes can't come through the Rockies, so we'll land at the point where Rockies go into the ocean and push south for those six or so miles. Ten thousand can easily hold that small point of land. Once you bring up ten more from south of the Moby wall, you have orders to push south until you near the forested areas."

Hawk looked at Kim who anticipated his next question and answered. "Hawk, it's close to about thirty miles to the heavy forests. And there was the ruins of a small town if I recall. They might be able to use some of the ruins to make temporary shelter. The area you wanted to know about is about fifteen miles from steep mountains to the coast... all flat land only a few small hills."

"Great Kim. There you have it gentlemen, push south to those ruins and hold. Admiral Winters will bring the one set of Giants and we'll build a Moby straight across. Once that's built it'll be our turn to amass behind it until we've built up sufficient forces to move south."

"Sir? Through hundreds of miles of forest? Some of the mutes will undoubtedly slip through our lines."

"No they won't Ned, I'm going to send for every soldier we have that isn't needed to hold the line against the raiders along the Mississippi." Hawk stopped and thought, "I'm guessing



maybe thirty thousand if I pull the troops that are being trained to go overseas for the European expansion.”

“But those towns over in Eurasia General.” Admiral Winters looked uneasy.

“There have been reports of few mutes there mostly small gangs and thugs that fled there from the Britons in the early days. They have enough forces there to hold those settlements. It’ll be their turn to hold up their expansion until we’re done with the campaign here.”

Hawk grinned at the group. “You see no mutes will be able to slip through holes in our lines as we’re going to do what we did in the south. Gentlemen, we’re going to march shoulder to shoulder in one massive thick line. As the mountains move eastward, we’ll move more men into the lines. We’ll build roads to make sure we have supplies and armor support where ever and whenever we need it. If we have to, we’ll hold the line and wait until all supplies get caught up.”

Jack spoke up, “Geez General, cutting roads through to support all those troops? Shouldn’t be too hard at first, but once we get deeper into Washington and then Oregon.”

Hawk smiled at the Engineering Commander. “Jack, There are some roads, that can be repaired, not to mention you’ll have as many of the soldiers that aren’t needed up front to help your people. I want divisions of reserve troops marching behind the line in several places. This way when a hoard of mutes is spotted the divisions can move through the line and wipe the mutes out.”

Hawk looked around the room to make sure everyone understood. “As fresh troops are brought up from the south, the divisions behind can replace the troops on the line. The line troops move back to make more divisions and follow the line to be used as needed.”

Hawk put his hand to the map on the wall and made a sweeping motion. “We’ll push the mutes south and right back into California. Right down to the southern Moby wall and hopefully eliminate them once and for all.”

Ned looked around the room, then added, “Ok men you have the plan. Now it’s your turn. Figure out what you need to do, and get it into this office the day after tomorrow.”

The officers arose and left the room mumbling ideas among themselves. As the last one left the room Ned looked at Hawk.

“My friend, I sure hope you know what the Hell you’re doing.” He slapped Hawk on the back as the three of them headed toward the door.

Kim added, “Ned, it’s Hawk, of course he knows what he’s doing.” She glanced over to Hawk. Hawk wasn’t smiling anymore.

Hawk saw her concern and managed a weak smile, "Sure I know what I'm doing!"

"See Ned." Kim chided.

"But just in case... I'll come up with a plan B.... or maybe C."

Ned and Kim stopped smiling.

As the trio left the meeting, Hawk caught up with Admiral Winters. Ned and Kim walked along behind just out of ear shot. Now and then they would look at the two in front of them talking, planning. Occasionally they could hear one or the other give a loud chuckle.

Suddenly Hawk came to an abrupt halt.

The Admiral stopped as did Kim and Ned. Kim saw Hawk say something to the Admiral, then walk away down the hall. His head hung down. Kim stepped quickly to where Hawk had been and looked as Hawk slammed the door to the outside open so hard it almost flew off the hinges.

Ned walked up to Kim and inquired as to what the problem was. Admiral Winters turned to the two and said, "I guess he's upset over the news about one of his friends. We were just talking about some things we needed from back east. He asked about Admiral Reed."

Kim nervously looked at Admiral Winters. "Maggie Reed? What about her?"

"Maggie? You know her Kim?"

"Of her Admiral. What about Maggie?"

"I told Hawk the last ships that came in said she and some of her fleet were lost at sea during a storm."

"Maggie? Oh God no!" Tears started flowing from her eyes, "Oh no! Not Maggie Too!"

Ned got really concerned. "Kim?"

"Oh God Ned, Hawk and Maggie, they were.... more than just friends. Hawk told me at one time they had considered getting married." Kim burst into tears, "My God Hawk just lost someone else he loved, it just isn't fair."

Admiral Winters looked at the floor and quietly said, "I'm sorry I didn't know. He asked if I had heard anything, so I told him."

“My God how this has to hurt him. He’s lost so many over the decades.” Kim cried openly and headed for the door after Hawk. “It’s just not fair.” She cried, “It not fair. Not now, not ever!”

Ned shook his head. “Poor girl, she looks to Hawk as her Dad and she feels his pain.”

“I’m truly sorry Ned.”

“Admiral, you couldn’t have know. Hell I didn’t know the full story and next to Kim, I’m the closest thing he has to a friend.” Ned shook his head again. “Kim just met a new guy she was dating. Now just like the others, she’ll go with Hawk so he won’t be alone.”

“That’s not fair to her Ned, someone should mention it to Hawk.”

Ned smiled sadly, “You know Admiral, Kim wouldn’t have it any other way. Hawk will be her world until the day she finds someone like Hawk. Don’t know who this new boyfriend of Kim’s is, Hell I don’t even know if it’s all that serious.”

The Admiral managed a smile, “Find someone like Hawk? Christ, all the luck in the world to her.”

Ned just smiled. Kim was in her mid twenties and even though she dated now and then, Ned could never see her settling down. She was too much like her mentor. She lived for the excitement, the adventure. Yet she too felt life’s sting. She too lost a loved one. Ned at least for the present, it would be Kim as Hawk’s side.

Admiral Winters went into his office and closed the door as Ned looked out the outer doors window. Kim had caught up to Hawk and was walking next to him arm in arm, comforting him in his grief. After a few minutes they headed off toward their quarters.

As Ned turned and walked back to his office he couldn’t help but wonder aloud. “When the day comes, how will Kim be able to tell Hawk. How do you tell someone like Hawk whom she so admires and loves, that she’s found someone and wants to settle down?”

He sighed and added in a whisper, “Poor Kim, it’s going to be so hard on her the day she’ll find out she has a life of her own.”

“And Hawk will lose another loved one.”

## Chapter 22.

Two years and a couple of months flew by as plans were made for the landing at what had become to be known as Rockypoint Base. The fleet amassed, troops were embarked, supplies were loaded. Smaller forces had landed and established temporary bases for the Giants to begin their work.

More troops from all over the coastal cities were picked up and steamed toward their destiny as more troops headed toward Alpha Base from all over south of the Moby wall. Word had arrived the fleet from the east had sailed and would arrive in time to be shipped north. Giants were loaded upon the returning ships for their trip to make secure an area for the assembling troops.

Behind this Moby wall troops would assemble for miles behind and treacherous as is was to move everything during winter, it was done. When the spring came the push would begin.

Hawk had faith in Kim and had said good-by to her all the time hiding his nervousness. She was to be the lead scout and reported only to Admiral Winters and the ground commander Ned had put in charge of the military once on land. The Admiral would oversee all operations and it was a newly appointed young General by the name of Jeff Starr.

Kim had no one else over her, nor did any of the officers mind. Her deeds and adventures had made her as famous along the west coast as Hawk. No one questioned her suggestions, no one knew mutes better and her abilities of command were so much like her mentors, she had the respect of all under her. It was Kim that eventually would lead the advancing forces. It was Kim and a handful of handpicked scouts that would venture out beyond the new Moby wall and seek out the dangers that lay ahead. These handpicked scouts would lead other groups of scouts just as Kim had organized.

The Moby had been up for a month and troops poured in from the south. The day was near. The day of driving the mutes south from out of the heavily forested states of Washington and Oregon as well as the one hundred miles of Canada they were now in.

The plan was to drive the mutes south into the northern California areas or even a bit lower. Into the open areas of the state when forces could close in. If the mutes were more than expected, they would be driven south to the Moby wall and crushed. Or so was the plan.

Hawk had taught Kim well. No longer did she expect the usual things from mutes. The only constancy from the mutes was they were getting more and more unusual in their movements. Kim and her scouts had all mounted their specially built Proff driven cycles that Hawk had sent

for from back east. A final briefing and they were all set to depart. Kim did a quick check of her three scouts.

“Ok guys, remember we’re to scout not fight and for God’s sake, keep your eyes open! As I told you earlier, we’ll do a sweep about five miles apart scout for large parties of mutes that might overwhelm our troops. Look for smaller groups that are close enough to merge.”

Doug who lead one of the scout groups grinned back at her, “Ok Mom we’ll be good.”

Kim squinted her eyes at the upstart, then teased back, “You could be replaced you know. Except I can’t find anyone else as stupid as we are.”

They all heard a loud laugh from behind and turned to see General Starr standing there.

“Stupid Kim? Why would you say that? Just because you all go out into mute infested forests on bikes, with little supplies and no armor?”

Kim winked back to General Starr, “Jeff you know there isn’t a mute around that can catch me.”

“Kim, I know that. It’s the scattered packs I worry about.”

“Why General Starr, I almost believe you’d miss my whining about how long things are taking to get Operation Sweep going.”

Jeff chuckled, “Actually Kim that I wouldn’t miss one bit. You’re too much like your mentor Hawk.” He smiled again, “You know the old ‘Why is this being done tomorrow when it should have been done yesterday’ philosophy.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Hawk that next time I see him.” Kim looked serious which made General Starr worry if perhaps he’d said too much. Then Kim beamed and with a wink added, “Naw, I wouldn’t want to lose my favorite General.”

Jeff walked over to each scout and shook their hands and they in turn headed for the gate of the newly finished Moby wall, to join their groups. He walked up to Kim’s cycle and placed both hands on her arms, looked her in the eye.

“Most of all Kim, you be safe! I really would miss you. I just worry about you, you’re just so young to be doing what you do.”

Kim put her hand on Jeff’s and smirked, “Jeff, Christ. I’m only two years younger than you and have been ‘out there’ while you were still in Officers Training School back east.”

General Starr looked seriously at her, “Kim, I just want you to make that thirtieth birthday of yours. It’s only a little over a year away and I sure would like for both of us to be there.”

Kim laughed, “Then General I would hope you would be careful and not get yourself killed.”

Kim blew the General a kiss and sped off in a cloud of dust as he just stood there and shook his head. She was so lovely and the thought of him having to identify her body and telling Hawk about her demise, just didn’t sit well with him. He watched her vanish through the gate as it closed. He turned and headed back to his HQ and with one final whisper he added.

“Be safe all of you.”

Three weeks went by and Jeff became increasingly worried as the scouts had now passed radio range. Constant listening by around the clock operators and nothing. The General had stopped in to check for reports before going to breakfast and now walked out of the radio tent and almost ran smack dab into his aide.

“Excuse me sir!” The aide saluted with one hand and held out a message with the other, “From Kim sir. One of the scouts came in a few minutes ago.”

Jeff quickly ripped open the envelope.

*“Jeff, We’ve covered from the Moby wall, Canada and half of the state of Washington. Only scattered mutes. The fifty extra scouts I sent for a week after I left have reported the same thing. They covered everything we did, but better, and Jeff, they saw nothing that we didn’t.*

*If it was up to me, I’d say begin Operation Sweep! I expected that we’d only be to the Canadian border by now, but in the hundreds of miles we’ve gone, we’ve seen only about a total of a few thousand mutes widely scattered.*

*We’ve stopped in the fortified city of Leavenworth, which has survived since the before apocalypse. This city is in the center of a group of small settlements that are scattered across the state. The people said they haven’t seen mutes in numbers larger than a few hundred or less in over a century.*

*I’ve sent half the scouts back along the routes they took to double check. When they get back to you and still report no large masses of mutes, I say start the operation. I’ll await your orders.*

*Kim.”*

General Starr looked at an area just in front of Kim's name that had been scratched out. He rubbed some of the pencil away and held it to the light. He smiled warmly and headed on to his headquarters. Kim had written 'Love Kim' then scratched out the love.

"Maybe she thought it was just too personal for a report?" He shrugged, "Must have been the reason." He looked at the paper once more, then gently folded it and put it in his pocket.

Before he could get to his HQ his number two ran up to him and reported with a quick salute.

"General, all scouts are in and have reported all clear."

Jeff grinned, "Damned if Kim wasn't right!" He paused for a second, "Colonel, assemble my command officers. Operation Sweep is starting."

The Colonel beamed from ear to ear. This was the orders that every man and woman had been waiting for. He hurried off stopping only occasionally to shout out to some sergeant to get his commander. The troops would run toward their command tents screaming "We're going to get underway!"

The entire camp broke out into cheers as all in ear shot started scurrying about preparing to break camp. The cheers continued until they had proceeded back so far away from Jeff he could no longer hear. He sort of chuckled to himself wondering what the commotion would have sounded like if all sixty thousand troops had received the word at once. He grinned once more and walked through the doors of his command HQ.

Plans had been made for a couple of weeks. They had been ready to pour troops out the three gates of the fifteen mile wide Moby wall and align the troops where each squad could see the other and they would do this until they were in a line that cut straight from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This line would move forward and another would fall in behind the first and they would begin to sweep southward. As the line moved away from the mountains, the second line would fill in the first so no squad lost sight of the other on their right or left. The first line would adjust as needed so no mutes could slip by to the north.

Behind the two lines of squads would be Divisions scattered along to reinforce the main line if too many mutes were found. This way scattered fights could be waged without slowing the rest of the Sweeps line. Should fighting occur, the second line or the Divisions behind, would move troops to that area. Behind the second line and the scattered Divisions, were the supplies and long columns of more support troops to fill in where needed.

Jeff sent a few scouts ahead to tell Kim to stay put and warn the surrounding towns of their plans so they could be protected appropriately. Kim would get some rest and now it was Jeff's turn to go to work.

Operation Sweep was underway.

Jeff sent word back to Alpha base that Sweep was moving. Yet during the times where there was no contact and the lines had to pause to wait for adjustments in troop numbers, he couldn't help wonder how Kim and her scouts were. Even if the mutes were as sparse as reported, it would take many months to reach Kim's new HQ. Even with fresh troops being able to land at better beaches and coastal towns freed from mute threat, it took time for them to reach their positions.

And again the Sweep line would have to pause. It was this impatience that caused General Starr to come up with the idea to take the new troops as soon as they disembarked their ships and use them to replace the troops along the shore line. Those replaced troops would move inland to replace the next body of troops, who in turn would move further inland to allow the next groups to move further. Things began to move better and morale grew.

The line began to move.



## Chapter 23.

Months went by and Kim and her fifty or so scouts were now all together in the city of Leavenworth. They had constantly been scouting the outlying areas and found only scattered mutes. Even though they had expected some to be seen fleeing to the south by now, there had been none... and they were getting bored.

Some of the outlying settlements had moved their people back into the main city and kept only their local troops there. There were no reports of fighting from the support troops. Only scattered reports of limited mutes moving southward and the local militia took care of them quickly as they had been doing for decades.

Life was dull and boring. They longed for the sweep to get to Leavenworth so they might get some action. It seemed like they had no sooner pondered their feelings of boredom when the tavern door burst open and in the flash of sunlight that lit up the room stood General Jeff Starr.

"Hmmm, figured I'd find all of you here." General Starr mused. He strolled over to the large table Kim and her five top scouts sat.

One of the scouts held up a tankard of ale. "Drink sir? Ya look kind of dusty."

Jeff grabbed the tankard, looked at it, then downed the frothy brew. He clunked it down and grinned at the group of scouts.

"My staff and I just got in. Figured this city would be as good of HQ as any. The sweep line is about twenty to thirty miles back and should be here in a few days or so, a week at the most. Jeff, smiled at Kim, "Damned if you weren't right Kim. The Sweep has killed a couple thousand mutes and we never ran into more than a few hundred or so at a time."

Kim smiled as Jeff continued, "Kim, it's weird really. Kind of like the mutes all went south decades ago, but you say you've never seen any signs of more."

Before Kim could reply the bartender handed Jeff a mug and refilled the scouts. "General." The barkeep said, "Hell, there's never been more than a few hundred at a time since people around here started recording attacks and that was right after the apocalypse!"

"Told ya!" Piqued Kim, "A week or so ago I sent a few scouts further south and all the way to the Oregon border it seems to be about the same. Cities all over, more than we had expected are to the south."

"How many more Kim?"

Again the Tavern owner spoke as he rattled off names of cities, towns and their surrounding settlements. “Guess that would be about twenty or so General, maybe more. See we just are able to travel so far because of the mutes.

A hundred against even a small settlement can be handled, but to travel to other areas, would take far too many fighters. So we just rely on those brave trappers, hunters and those other damned fools that come here to rest safely for information about other towns.”

“Jeff, if he’s right maybe it was just California that had the inordinate amount of mutes.”

“If only that would be Kim, that would make my job so much easier. “Jeff paused with a sigh, then added, “But we know that isn’t going to happen don’t we?”

The scouts all laughed as the General took a swig from his mug. He put it down and gently grabbed Kim by the arm and pulled her to her feet. “And you fearless scout leader, I need to have a long talk with you. Remember that little thing called a debriefing?”

“I suppose you want me to write it all out as well?” Kim smirked.

“Don’t give me any ideas Kim, I might just do that.” Jeff frowned and slowly pushed her toward the door.

Kim turned and looked at her scouts as two more came into the tavern and looked at the General and her moving quickly past them. “I’ll be back in a few minutes guys...”

Before she could finish, the General butted in and said, “Not likely Kim, I want your report in full detail. Remember it’s been a while since you reported in person?” Jeff looked at the group of scouts and grinned, “Don’t order her any ale too soon or it’ll get warm!”

Out the door the two vanished as the scouts all shot glances at one another. “Heh, heh. Poor Kim seems to be on the General’s shit list again.”

Another shot back as they all laughed, “Yeah, bet he keeps her up all night doing reports.”

A third shook his head slowly, “You’d think she’d go AWOL as much as he’s always sending for her.”

“Yeah, report this or report that.... Poor Kim.”

“Yep! That’s why she’s our boss. She always takes all the General’s whining and other crap, where any one of us would walk out.”

They all laughed and went back to drinking, yet all the time glad they weren’t having to put up with the endless reporting Kim had to do.

One of Kim's lead scouts, got partially up and glanced out the window, then sat down and shook his head.

"Sam? What's the matter?"

"Christ Lou, the General still has her by the arm and is damn near dragging her along."

The group all looked down into their ales and shook their heads.

"Poor Kim!" They all winked at one another with a grin.

Down the street Jeff pulled Kim by the arm. Not hard enough to hurt her but firmly enough to let her know which way to go. They walked at a hurried pace as they turned a corner and he led her toward a building with two guards in front.

"Your new HQ I take it." Kim grinned, "The flag and guards kind of gave it away General." She looked at General Starr, but he was not smiling as he led her through the door, while the guards saluted.

Down the hall they moved and through a huge double door. The guard at the door closed it as they passed through. General Starr led her through another, then another closing each as they passed. Finally he opened the door to his personal quarters, let go of Kim's arm. He walked over to a bottle of liqueur and opened it.

"Stuff's hard to get hold of Kim, want some?"

Kim walked briskly to him, snapped to attention and saluted. "Do I want a drink? You want a report or not?"

"Ok let's have it." Jeff put the bottle down.

"Yessir!" Kim replied. She threw her arms around Jeff's neck and kissed him deeply. They both stood there in each other's embrace for several minutes, then it was Kim that stepped back, grinned and added, "And that's just the beginning of my report my General."

Jeff looked deeply into her eyes, "Kim when are we going to stop seeing each other this way?" He stepped away from her and walked over to a chair and sat down. "I want everyone to know, how we feel about each other."

"Jeff my love..." Kim walked seductively over to him and sat on his lap throwing her arms around his neck and giving him a gently kiss on the lips. "...when the time is right, we will."

She kissed him again, but he pulled his head back and frowned. "When will the time be right?"

Kim thought for a second then grinned, "How about after the Sweep?"

"Christ Kim, that could be years. Many years once we hit northern California." He grinned, "How about a compromise?"

"Compromise?"

"Yeah," He kissed her on her nose. "We'll tell everyone today!"

Kim stood up and put her hands on her hips and frowned at him. "You compromise like Hawk!" Jeff stood and began to apologize, but Kim added, "Maybe that's why I love you so much. I don't know."

She turned and looked away. "Jeff my love, I had a crush on Hawk, you know that. But what you don't know is once I started looking to him as my Dad, I realized that although he was a great second Dad and a terrific mentor, I didn't want to fall for someone that was like him."

Jeff looked puzzled, "You say I'm like him? Then why the Hell did you fall for me? Christ girl, you have me so damned confused I...."

"Damned if I know!" Kim spun around and planted a kiss on him that ended any confusion. Kim loved him and there was nothing either could do to dissuade her. This time there would be no talk as each held one another in their arms. Kissing passionately, Kim gently pushed him to the large sofa.

"Oh no you don't!" Jeff stopped just before she could push him down onto it. He scooped her up in his arms and headed toward the bedroom as Kim squealed in glee.

As they entered Kim kissed Jeff gently and moaned, "We've been seeing each other since we met on my trip to Alpha all those years ago."

"And?"

"And we've been in love and making love for almost a year now."

"And?"

"And this is the first time I've been in your bed."

He stopped and grinned at her. "What about the time we met on your supposedly solo hunting trip."

Kim teasingly hit him on the arm, “Your sleeping bag does not count General.”

They reached his bed and he gently laid her upon it.

Kim started to tease Jeff a little more, but passion overcame any desire to delay their love any more. She pulled her buckskins off as Jeff hastily removed his uniform. He put a knee on the bed and noticed Kim sort of frowning.

“Kimmy, what’s the matter?”

“Hmmm... I think I fell for you because you were a man in uniform, now that you took off your uniform, think I’ll leave.”

Jeff jumped into the bed and onto Kim poking her in the ribs. She giggled and squealed like she was little again. Jeff stopped tickling her and the laughter stopped. They looked longingly into each other’s eyes for a quick second. Kim could no longer contain her love as she reached her arms toward the ceiling, wrapped them tightly around Jeff’s neck and pulled him to her.

They had been apart far too long, now it was time to make up for that time and Kim’s debriefing would take all night. Jeff slowly lowered himself as Kim gasped one last time before passion totally engulfed her...

“Mmmmm... Maybe this is why I fell for you so hard.”

The next morning Kim awoke with the sun bursting through the high window. She shielded her eyes with her arm as she turned to look at her love. Still squinting she tried to focus. “Jeff? Honey?”

Kim pulled the sheet around her slim frame as her now long blonde hair cascaded down. She looked around and there was no Jeff. She started to head for the door, then remembered.

“Oh Hell! The sun’s up! Bet Jeff’s been gone for hours.” She looked at the clock and... “Oh! Shit! It’s ten o’clock. Damn!”

Kim quickly moved toward the bed to get her clothes that she had thrown on the other side in her haste to get undressed the day before. She dropped the sheet and threw it on the bed. She glanced over and saw her reflection in the mirror. Suddenly it hit her as hard as a mutant with a log. No longer did she see a young woman there but someone she hardly had time to know.

Kim looked at her nude body standing there. Her breasts firm and shapely, her golden hair no longer in the usual ponytail, but falling over her shoulders, that ended gently touching her nipples. She slowly moved her hand downward to her well shaped hips.

“Well not bad for a scout if I do say so myself.” She giggled and threw herself onto the bed so she laid across the crumpled bedding. Her feet faced the door and her head was facing the wall as she stretched for her clothes.

“Damn woman, that sure is one fine ass you’re wiggling.” Kim recognized Jeff’s voice.

She wiggled her rear even more and teased, “Well if you liked it so much, you wouldn’t have left without saying good-bye to it!” Kim paused then grinned, “But as you’re here....”

“I’d love to honey, but some of your scouts are looking for you.”

“My scouts? Why they’re all here in Leavenworth except the three I sent south toward....SHIT!”

“Kim? What’s the matter.”

Kim pulled up her pants and Jeff had a hard time focusing on Kim’s worry as he couldn’t help but see her breast swaying as she jumped up and down wiggling into her tight buckskins. She grabbed her shirt and looked at Jeff.

“Baby, I sent the scouts south a few weeks ago. They’ve been overdue. If they just got in, something must have come up.”

Kim looked over to Jeff as she slipped her shirt over her golden locks. She froze when she noticed Jeff’s face.

“Kim you said you sent three scouts.” He shook his head slowly, “Only one scout showed up this morning at the gates. He was badly hurt from what I hear and spoke to your number two. That’s when all the scouts started looking for you. Babe, I tried to cover for you but I had to tell them I knew where you were.... I’m sorry.”

Kim walked over to him and kissed him gently, “That’s ok my love, it had to come out sooner or later.” She smiled warmly at him and stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. “I saw a woman in the mirror this morning. I think I was surprised to see it was me. Not the scout nor the girl, but a woman in love.”

She kissed Jeff on the lips and turned toward the door, “That woman I saw, wants to shout her love for you to the world.”

Kim opened the door and started through it, tucking her shirt into her pants. She skidded to a halt.

“SAM!”

“Aw Christ Kim...” Sam stumbled for words, “Aw Hell, all of us... your main scouts that is, knew about you and General Starr.”

“Knew? How? I...er, we were so careful not to....”

Sam broke out in a wide grin, “Damn Kim, remember we’re scouts, we know how to recognize signs?” He laughed as Jeff entered the room. “Besides, you taught us most of what we know. Hell boss, you’d kick our asses if we hadn’t figured it out. The only one you need to worry about is Hawk.” Sam laughed thinking of how Hawk would react once he found out. Kim was more or less Hawk’s little girl and he was real protective of her.

Jeff chuckled as he interrupted Sam’s musings, “Oh I see she keeps you in line too!”

“Oh Hell yeah General Starr, one wrong move and she’s on our arses.”

“Sam I know what you mean, my friend.” Jeff winked at Kim as she slugged him playfully on the arm.

“Ok Sam as long as you’re here, let me have the bad news.”

Sam looked sadly at his leader. He knew this news was going to hurt her. “Boss, one man came back.... Bud. The other two were killed when they ran into some mutes.”

“Dead? How? I gave them orders to only move in areas that they could see in all directions.”

Sam looked seriously at Kim. “Kim I couldn’t get all the story Bud’s in some kind of shock. Hell Kim, he’s all cut and scratched up. Looks like he lost a lot of blood. He rode through the gates all bandaged up and the blood on some of the bandages was dry so I know he drove a long time in that state.”

As Kim headed for the door of Jeff’s quarters she grabbed one arm of each of the men and pulled them violently along with her.

“Enough of this crap! Let’s go talk to bud.” She glanced over to Sam, “I’m assuming you had enough sense to take him to the hospital?”

Sam was being pulled so quickly, he could only manage to gasp out a “Yes ma’am!”

Down the halls of the hospital the three moved until they stood before Bud’s door. She reached for the handle and was startled as the doctor came out for Bud’s room.

“He’s sleeping now and need’s his rest.”

“He can rest once I find out what the Hell happened!” Kim shot back at the doctor.

“I’m sorry miss, but...”

Kim pushed by the doctor and entered the room, walked over to the bed and gently shook Bud awake.

Sam looked over to Jeff and grinned, “Remind you of anyone?”

General Starr grinned back as he and Sam both chimed simultaneously “Hawk!” They laughed as Bud looked in their direction.

“Hi boss, Sam, General. How’d I get here, last I can remember I was on the road.”

Kim stroked his head gently. “You drove here Bud. Bleeding, bruised, battered, you drove back.”

The trio could see Bud straining to remember. Then as if all came pouring back at once, his eyes filled with tears as he slowly spoke.

“We found a town south of the Oregon border, not too far, I think. Rolling hills for miles in all directions and this little town right in the middle of it. Not a mute in sight. Hadn’t seen one for a good twenty miles. A small farm this side of the town too....I think.”

Kim smiled and calmly prodded him to remember more.

“We went into the town, I think. The guys and I...” Bud teared up again, “...I can’t remember Kim, but it was important.... I think. We were heading back to tell you something and about twenty miles from town....” Bud started sobbing, “...mutants, lots of them. Soon as we hit the forest... I can’t remember more.” He cried and Kim tried soothing him. “I seem to remember we split up...better chance to get back here... news... important...I can’t remember.”

“Who patched you up?”

“I don’t know... I can’t remember...I... I think I remember being on the road. I think for a long time... I can’t....”

Sam looked over at Bud, then Kim, “He passed out.”

“Most likely from exhaustion!” They turned to see the doctor standing there. “I told you he needs his rest.”

“Doc,” Kim walked over to him and pointed to the pile of old dressings laying on the table. “Who bandaged him up?”



The doctor smiled, “He did! The way they were wrapped, it had to be him. They were tied with one hand and the splint on his wrist was put on the way a man would if he had to do it himself.” The Doc grinned, “And by the teeth marks in the wood I’d say he was in a lot of pain when he put it on.”

“Teeth marks?”

“Yeah, like this.” The doctor made motions like he was holding a splint in his teeth while wrapping a bandage around his wrist.

Sam looked at Kim, “He rode that far with his wrist sprained?”

“Sprained?” The doctor smiled at the three, “Hell his wrist was broken as well as his lower forearm.”

Jeff looked at the two scouts. “Ok, I’ve never driven one of those cycles you drive, but I’ve watched you. How the Hell did he drive all that way with a broken arm and wrist yet having to hold the throttle in the turned position?”

Sam shook his head and looked at the passed out lad laying in the bed and grinned at the others in the room.

“It took balls!”

“Oh, I almost forgot. I found this shoved into his splint, guess he thought it would be found if something happened to him.” The doctor handed Kim a small piece of paper with a map drawn upon it.

“My God!” Kim shouted, “The map... It’s drawn in his own blood!”

“He made the map and put this map in his splint so if we found his body it would be intact?” Sam looked back to the sleeping lad and grinned.

“Balls bigger than mine!”

## Chapter 24.

Kim assembled her scouts all forty or so that were there in Leavenworth. They had a quick briefing, then were on their cycles and out the gate. Bud's bloody map would lead the way. Kim was going to find out what happened in that town in the middle of nowhere and what it had to do with the death of her two scouts. More over what they had found there that was so important that gave cause for her scouts to come back through such a dangerous route. The rest of the scouts Kim had strung out along a line from mountain to coast as they had done before.

The farther they got from Leavenworth, the madder she got. Nothing she could fathom, should have caused such carelessness. She'd fume at the thought of Bud sitting beside the road patching himself up after... After what?

The scouts scattered and scouted as they moved toward the town marked on the map. Kim send reports back to Jeff who sent the scouts back to Kim with good news.

Kim and Sam stopped on a high hill where they could see all around. Her scouts were keeping a fairly straight line although far apart. This way once a day she could talk to all of them be relaying her messages down their ranks. As one scout received the message, he would relay it to the next and so forth. This day brought news all was awaiting.

"Ok guys or at least those of you that can hear me. I have great news. General Starr's Sweep has reached Leavenworth and is now continuing the sweep south about fifty miles behind us."

Although she could not see the reactions of each scout she knew what it would be. She had ended her message by telling everyone to head for the next checkpoint marked on their maps where she would contact them again. And this continued for several more days.

On the morning of the fourth day Sam and Kim broke camp after splitting the watch all night, they had a quick snack and prepared to leave.

"Kim, I'll sure be glad to get somewhere where we can have a fire again. Sure miss my coffee in the morning."

Kim grinned at Sam and nodded. She too missed her cup of morning coffee. She wadded up the wrapper of the bland food she had just managed to choke down and chuckled at Sam who was commenting on that as well, when something caught her attention.

"Sam, something's coming from the east." Kim started to turn when a cycle burst through the brush in the large clearing they had camped in.

The cycle skidded to a stop and the rider jumped off and pulled off his helmet.

“Josh!” Kim slapped him on the arm, “Damn scout busting into a camp like that could have gotten you shot!”

“Sorry boss, my radio’s been acting up. Terry sent me to find you.” Josh walked over to his cycle and pulled a slip of paper from the saddlebag and handed it to Kim. “A scout I don’t know brought this in early this morning. Don’t know what it says, but Terry sent it and as I was leaving all his scouts headed out in a hurry.”

Kim opened the message that had been folded in a hurry. She began to read aloud.

*“Kim, one of your mountain scouts just brought the enclosed map into our camp. I sent them out ahead of us last night and it sounds like they ran into something. They said they saw hoards of mutes, but the mutes didn’t see them... They’re keeping an eye on them.*

*The scouts are about ten to fifteen miles ahead of us. I’ve relayed for all my scouts to head to the point of the map where there is an ‘X’ marked. I suggest you do the same and join us as soon as you can. I don’t know if all of us will be enough, but your scout said bring everyone ASAP!*

*Terry.”*

Kim looked at the map Terry sent. A strange look crossed her face and she pulled the map Bud had hastily drawn in his own blood.

“Holy Shit!.. Sam! Look at the river, the mountains. Even the forest.”

Sam looked over the maps, then looked up to Kim, “Sure looks like it could be the same place.”

“Well if it’s the place we’ve been looking for boss, it’s smack dap in the middle of the state of Oregon between the mounts and the sea.” Josh pointed to his real map indicating the spot Terry had shown him.

“Damn all those mutes and out of range of the fleet. That’s assuming we could get them here.” Mused Sam, “Assuming a lot that is Kim. We don’t know how many mutes.”

“We’re scouts Sam. We’re going to scout, not fight. But if there are a lot, then we’re safer in numbers. But I’m calling in the fleet just in case. At least if we have to get away safe we hopefully head toward the coast.”

“Good thinking Kim.” Sam grinned as he picked up the mike on Kim’s radio and called down the line explaining the situation and not to proceed beyond their check points until she reported back.

Kim pointed to Josh's map. "Ok get back to Terry, Josh and tell him once we're assembled here, we'll head through this pass and meet here. From there we can head straight for the others at the spot they indicated."

Josh smiled and jumped on his cycle as Kim shouted after him to be careful.

Kim paced back and forth as more and more of her scouts trickled in. She looked over to Sam and bemoaned, "Too long Sam, way too long! We were too spread out."

"Kim, it's only been two days and the rest should be in this afternoon. Relax a bit boss, it'll only take us two more days to get there and that's a day earlier than they expected us."

Kim looked to Sam. "A lot can happen in two days Sam and by the time we get there it could be four."

Sam got up off the rock he was sitting on and grasped Kim's shoulders and smiled warmly. "Kim you worry about us too much. You want to do everything yourself, take all the risk." He broke into a wide grin, "Hell I rode with your Hawk for almost a half a year and he didn't mother us as much!"

Kim grinned back, then broke into a huge smile as she pointed to the small road from coming from the west. There were more cycles that were on it and heading toward the camp. "That's the rest of them!"

She sprinted to the center of the camp and shouted to all her scouts, "MOUNT UP! WE'ER OUTTA HERE!"

The scouts jumped into action as the last of the scouts rode up beside her cycle. "Sorry we're late boss, but we had to skirt a bunch of a few hundred mutes."

Kim grinned, "Jeff can take care of those with the Sweep! Sorry to say we're leaving. Your scouts can stay a while to rest up and catch up to us later." Kim started to reach for the map, but was interrupted.

"Naw that's ok boss, something is in the wind and we don't want to be late again. We can rest up tonight with everyone else."

Kim grinned at her scout, then cranked the throttle and off they sped all scouts following her and Sam in rows of two. She had about thirty in her group and Terry would have less than ten. Adding in her ten mountain scouts she had sent south for....

Kim did some quick math and shook her head. She glanced over to Sam, who kept glancing over at her.

She shouted over the wind noise. “Less than fifty Sam. We’d better not get jumped where ever that X is.”

Sam just tossed one of his wide grins back to Kim. “Yes mother!”

Kim would have stuck her tongue out at Sam, but she knew he’d never see it through her full helmet visor. So instead she just decided to give him a one finger salute.

Two days later the scouts all met up at the rendezvous. Kim met with the head of her mountain scouts by the name of Lew. He tried to explain the circumstances, but just couldn’t find the right words.

“Kim, I know you’re tired, but it’s best I show you.” Lew headed to his cycle and Kim, Sam and a few others followed. They drove along for a few miles and Lew pulled over to the side of a rise alongside the road. He got off and with the others in tow, he led them up the moderately steep slope to the top. They stood there looking out over a vast area. As far as the eye could see was open land with only scattered small wooded areas.

Lew turned to two scouts, “You two stay here and guard our rear.” He turned and led the rest to a ledge overlooking the southern areas.

Kim looked over the vista and turned to Lew, put her hands on her hips and frowned. “Lew if you brought me here to look at pretty scenery, I’m going to skin you alive!”

Lew reached into this backpack and pulled out a large telescope. “Here boss..” He raised his hand and pointed, “...toward the west a little and south.”

Kim scanned the horizon, then gasped. “Christ! There must be tens of thousands of mutes scattered over fifty miles or so. At least as far as I can see.”

Lew laughed, “Kim look beyond the mutes to the south, just past that large line of trees.”

“A big city?”

“Look closer Kim. I know the city is just about beyond the scopes range, but look closely nearer to us.”

“Yeah, there is something....but, just can’t put my finger on it.”

Lew laughed, then added, “Walls Kim.”

“What walls Lew.” Kim lowered the scope, then quickly raised it again. “There’s no walls! No rubble, no walls at all.” She lowered the scope and grinned at Lew. “So ya found a city that is intact with no walls, big whoop! With all the mutes around you know damned well there’s no people around.”

Lew grinned at his scout and, then winked. He turned once again to Kim and chuckled.

“Kim, we made it about ten miles from that town. Well at least three of us did.” He pointed to another rise in the ground further away. “There are people living there. I’d say maybe a few thousand.”

“What? How?” Kim was shocked. No walls, lots of mutes. Her mind reeled.

“That’s not all boss, there are other smaller towns to the south and to either side east and west.”

“How dammit? Unless everyone of the townsfolk are soldiers, the mutes are a good ten times more.”

“Don’t know Kim.” Lew shook his head, “That’s why we sent for you. You make the decisions around here.” He grinned at Kim, “It’s your call boss. Do we wait for the General or do we go on?”

Kim slowly sat on the ground and looked out over the scenic view that lay stretched out before her. as far as she could see with the telescope mutes moved in strange patterns, but never neared the one city she could see. She puzzled over the day’s events and sat there pondering into the evening as darkness fell.

She spent the night there as a few of her scouts kept watch and as the morning sun poked over the Rocky mountains in the distance, Kim was still sitting there watching with the scope. Sam walked over to her with a steaming cup of coffee.

“Hot coffee Sam?”

“We checked Kim, no mutes twenty miles in any direction.” He grinned, “Guess the advantage of high ground works.” He nodded to the coffee.

Kim sipped on the hot java and stared out over the land beyond.

“Sam, I’ve been watching them all night using the night vision attached to the scope. They keep moving along in the same areas, got to what appears to be the end and walk back. Further

away they move around this one large area, then move west. Now and then more come from the direction of the mountains.”

“They never go toward the town.”

“Never Sam. They always go over the same areas never new. Some of the closer areas to us you can see where they’ve actually worn a road into the earth. It looks like decades of mutes have taken these same paths.”

“Come on Kim, you actually expect anyone to believe mutes have followed the same road for a century or more?”

Kim just shook her head. Finally she pointed. “Sam there is an area about eight miles away. It looks like plowed fields.”

“Fields? Like someone farming?”

“Sure looks like it Sam. Anyhow there is an area that the mutes don’t seem to go. The fields that are plowed go right up to that area and stop. We’re going to head there. Tell all the men to check their weapons and be prepared for a fight.”

Kim looked strangely serious, which was unusual for her and Sam knew she was pondering losses. He had seen her this way a few times before they had gone into a battle. This time though there were only scouts and not a lot of them.

Kim arose and followed Sam down the rise they were on. When they got to the bottom she saw all her scouts were mounted and lined up. Sam turned and grinned to her and with a sly wink told her, “We kind of figured you’d want to head out once you had a plan.”

“Plan? I have no plan.” She looked at Sam and winked back, “I just want to find out what the Hell is going on around here!” She smiled again and added, “Guess my plan is to get to there from here and find out what happened to my men. What happened to Bud.” She paused again and frowned slightly, “Mostly I want to find out how a town in the middle of tens of thousands of mutes is thriving!”

Kim mounted her cycle and the scouts moved out. Once the procession got to the lowlands, Kim motioned with her arm and the scouts moved into a column of three wide for better protection.

They sped along for miles turning now and then to follow Kim’s lead. Occasionally they would open fire on small groups of mutes in their way, but little deterred the procession. Onward toward the small outlying farm they sped. Finally the last group of mutant lines had been burst

through with no causalities and the convoy of cycles slowed and moved between the rows of crop furrows.

All in the convoy drove carefully between the rows of beans and other vegetables. Everyone was glancing around at the crops in amazement. No mutant tracks! This was a normal farm, or so it would appear.

The cycles slowed once they realized the mutes were not following them. Things just kept getting stranger and stranger. The mutes stuck to the wide path they'd been on. The one wall was some little line of rocks barely a foot high that surrounded the farm and the fields.

Slowly the scouts drove along the furrows.

"Kim these beans have been growing for a while, they're almost ready to pick, maybe a week more or so."

"Sam I have no idea, this is something we aren't going to understand for a while I'm guessing." Kim pointed toward the large farm house and several more buildings. "Look, Sam... And there, there, smoke coming out of those chimneys."

Sam just shrugged, he was as puzzled as Kim. Mutes all around, yet none attacked.



## Chapter 25.

As the lines of cycles moved toward the farmhouse, they could see a man come from inside. He stood on the covered porch and stared at what must have been a strange sight. Yet he stayed there and watched, only moving toward the steps as the convoy moved closer.

Kim held up her hand and the scouts all deployed in one straight line two cycles deep, then stopped as she and Sam slowly drove up to the house. They dismounted and walked to the man who was now joined by his wife and two kids.

“Howdy there little lady. My name’s Fred Jestin, this here is my wife Anna and my kids.”

Kim stepped forward and extended her hand. “I’m Kim and this is my second in command Sam. We’re from the military trying to rid the west coast of mutants.”

Fred shook her hand and looked over her scouts. “Fine bunch of men you have there Miss Kim. Figured it was something like that. We been getting rumors for over ten years or so about fighting mutants.”

Fred and his wife grinned as Anna added, “But we really don’t worry too much about mutants around here.” She looked over their group, “Guess I’d better set a few more places for dinner honey.” Anna kissed her husband on the cheek and vanished into the house.

“That’s ok Fred we have our rations.” Kim smiled and handed a food bar she had in her jacket pocket. Fred took it and opened it, sniffed and looked at Kim shaking his head all the time.

“Whoa Miss Kim, y’all eat that stuff? Seems like some fresh garden veggies and some beef roast would sit a bit better.”

“Beef!?” Sam started licking his lips, “Wow! We haven’t had real meat since Leavenworth and before that, I can’t remember.”

Kim grinned and added to Fred, “Ok Fred looks like your invite has been accepted.”

Fred walked over and sat in the chair on the porch as Kim motioned for the men to dismount and set up camp. She was giving orders to set watch when Fred interrupted. He just rocked back and forth and chuckled as he spoke.

“Durned Miss Kim if y’all need guards. There has never been a mute step foot anywhere on this farm.” Fred made a motion with his arm spanning the entire five or six square miles of his farm. “Y’all see those lines of trees out there?” He pointed to rows of trees bordering his farm.

“Well the mutes never come past those trees.”

Sam butted in quietly, yet seriously, “Trees? You mean those trees keep the mutes out?”

Fred laughed, “Well, no sir they don’t. But somewhere along the line one of my great granddaddies planted them so we’d know where the mutes as you call them, never pass.” Fred smiled at Kim, “Why Missy, I’ve plowed right up to the trees and the mutes just stood there and watched or just ignored me. Same with my hands. No mute ever bothered anyone inside this area. We just used rocks to mark the other safe places and we don’t go any further.”

Kim and Sam just looked at each other as Fred continued his story. “It’s like that in the city, ‘cept bigger. Further south there are parts of the state that there are only small roads the mutes travel, the rest of the land is all ours. Durned Miss Kim, there are almost one hundred thousand people living in the two or three hundred miles below us and to the east and west. Last I heard there were eleven cities and towns in this area alone, but they’re always putting up a new one somewhere.”

Again Kim and Sam stared at each other in disbelief.

“My God Sam. All those people since the apocalypse and no one knew?”

Fred smiled and added, “Oh no Miss Kim, Guess this farm has always been in our family, but only a small town was south of here. After the ‘big one’ seems there were a lot of people moved north to escape the mutes. Guess someone figured everything out down the line where the safe areas were and built cities and farms. Marked the mutant areas with rows of trees, bushes and rocks. So now everyone knows where we can go and where we need to stay out of.” Old Fred grinned and pointed south. “Of course there are those areas that we have to cross to get around. Like I signal the next farm when my crops are ready to be sold.”

“Signal?” Sam quizzed. You don’t have radios? I see a small wind turbine.”

Fred chuckled at the two, “Y’all have to excuse my explanations, I’m not sure what words y’all use that are like mine. I use a small radio, but it don’t go far, just to the next farm. Further south they have wires that run from town to town and uses phones. They put the wires on high poles and stretch them across the mute roads.”

Kim just had to interrupt, “Fred? Just how many towns or cities are there to the south?”

Fred scratched his head and smiled, “Durned if I really know Miss Kim, seems there’s a new town sprouting up every ten years or so. If I had to guess I’d say a couple dozen more or less. Maybe a hundred farms of different sizes. I know we must be running out of room, about twenty years ago, folks started to need a permit to have kids.” He chuckled, “‘cept for us farm folks. We

mostly keep our kin here with us and of course our farmhands.” He pointed toward a few scattered buildings among the rockier areas of his farm.

Kim looked at Sam as a broad smile crossed her face.

“Kim? I’ve seen that look before. What just popped into that mind of yours?”

“These ‘safe’ areas Sam. It has to be something in the soil.”

“Sorry Miss Kim, it ain’t the soil, we tried making roads along the mute trails by throwing our safe dirt on the mute roads, but they walked right over it.”

“They say it’s something much deeper, maybe some mineral deposits, who knows.”

Fred grinned again, “That’s what some of the smarter people figured, but never found out why. So I guess we just decided to let things stay as they are. We only have to cross certain areas and fight mutes. Mostly we just watch them and when they move on to another area, we cross. We get trucks from one farm to another that way too.” Fred chuckled, “We kind of built our roads across the mute roads, you know along the narrower parts. We wait till it’s clear if the mute trail is really wide, then speed across with the trucks.

Kim jumped up, trotted over to her squad, She shouted a few orders and a dozen men hopped on their bikes and headed back the way they came. With that done she walked back to the porch and sat.

“Sent word back to Jeff and told him to relay this info to Hawk at Alpha base.” Kim looked to Fred, “Hawk is kind of my father, you...”

“That the Hawk all the travelers talk about? Durned Miss Kim, we all thought he was just a legend. Ya know a fable? Geez, I remember my pappy telling me stories about him.” He scratched his head and added, “And you’re his daughter? How old are you if you don’t mind me asking?”

Sam and Kim just grinned as Kim replied, “Fred it’s a long story, but let’s just say Hawk is sort of my adopted Dad.” She saw that was sufficient enough of an answer, so Kim let it stay at that.

“So Fred you say you just wait until the mutes move on to another area and cross? So I’m guessing more eventually move back in this area?”

“Kind of like they just wander around these parts hoping for someone to stumble into their areas to kill them. My pappy said he saw mutes that had the same clothes on come back around every few years.” Fred chuckled again, “My pappy even had names for some of them.”

“Sam they seem to have a cycle maybe it takes a few years for them to wander around the entire area of these anomalies. Maybe we could figure how large an area by their speed.”

“Sorry again Miss Kim, Our safe areas are kind of like bubbles, really big ones of different sizes. The mutes walk around the outsides of these bubbles, except where two bubbles might meet Then the mutes have to go around both. Some of these bubbles come together, most don’t, those we mark the spaces in between the bubbles and around them. This way we know the safe areas from the mute areas” He looked at the two and smiled, “You don’t want to get caught in between the bubbles if mutes are around.”

As Fred was finishing two of Kim’s men rode back to the house, dismounted and ran up to her.

“Damned if you weren’t right Kim! Oh and the others got off just fine, there was only a small group of mutes near the boundary.”

Sam looked at Kim, “Right about what?”

“Boss had us run out and grab a mute and drag it back into the safe area. We wrapped it up in ropes and you should seen it struggle. And the other mutes never lifted a finger to help it. We just had it tied up for about five or six minutes and it stopped struggling. We thought it died.” The scout laughed, “But as we got closer to check it, it started flopping around real violently like, then it stopped and within a few seconds....damned if it didn’t start smoking. A few more seconds and it vaporized.”

Old Fred rubbed his head and grinned, “I’ll be damned! Never thought of doin’ that.”

From the window his wife could be heard, “Fred you watch your cussin’”

Kim jumped up and hugged Sam, then smiled at Fred, “I had a hunch, but never dreamed of such results.”

“I’ll be durned, you know all these years and I never heard of anyone doing that. Guess we’re all just so set in our ways....”

“So now we know it’s not in the soil, but there is something in the earth or at least below it in spots. Whatever it is it must go straight up not at an angle or the mutes would have stayed further away from the parameter. Hawk will be so happy we found something like this.”

“Yeah boss think you’re right, we tossed the tied up mute only about four or five feet from the stone markers.” Kim’s men turned walked back to the other scouts.

Fred looked at Sam and smiled, “She likes making her pappy happy eh?”

Sam just smiled and nodded.

“Say, I durned near forgot...” Fred shouted at one of his boys playing in the field near his house and they scampered toward the rear of their house and out of sight.

“What language was that Fred.”

“Oh sorry Miss Kim, my pappy said it was called Swedish. I try to get my boys to speak it now and then to keep it going from one generation to another. I think there used to be a country named Swedish back before the big one.”

Kim noticed some of her guys rising to their feet. Kim turned to see what they were looking at as a thin man walked around the corner of the building. He wore an old tattered scout uniform and had only one arm.

“Bill?” Kim started walking toward him, “Bill?” She now was in sprint mode and hugged him so hard he almost fell over.

“Hi yas boss!” Bill replied as Kim stepped back and looked him over he added, “Knew you’d get around to finding this place sooner or later.” He nodded to his missing arm that was missing from the shoulder, “Couldn’t ride my damned bike this way.” He smiled and Kim returned his smile warmly.

“I’m so sorry Bill, about the arm.”

“Aw, it’s ok boss. If it wasn’t for Fred and his wife, I’d be dead. Damned mutes jumped us just the other side of that hill.” He pointed in the direction the convoy had come from. “The mutes got Erwin, ripped my arm half off, but Bud saved me. We got on his cycle and came back here. Bud knew how important this areas info was and told Fred he was going to try to get through.” Bill lowered his eyes, “Guess he didn’t make it huh?”

Kim patted Bill on his one good shoulder and smiled. “Bud is alive, but he was badly injured. Doc said he’d be ok, but he lost his memory mostly due to shock. We found a map he made and that led us here.”

Bill smiled, “Good old Bud. He’s the youngest of the scouts but can handle himself on a bike better than anyone of us. Glad to hear he made it ok.” Bill thought for a second, then added, “Kim, I’ve been healthy enough for a day or two to look around and have an idea to grab a mute and pull it in the safe area to see what happens.”

Sam laughed, “A bit late lad. The boss already thought of it and the mute went poof!”

“Guess that’s why she’s the boss eh, Sam?” The four of them laughed.

The evening went along very well as Fred filled them in on what he knew and Kim told all about the sweep that was coming.

“The men I sent back were to tell General Starr to inform his men to only go along the mute routes and not to disturb your farms or trample your crops. You see we’ve been moving where one man can always see the other. The entire line stops if a cave is found and is being explored. If it’s a small cave more men from the rear move up to fill the line while it’s being explored. This way once the sweep passes, the area behind is free of mutes. Same for the ruins of old cities.”

Kim paused to let all the info sink in for Fred, his family and the hired hands. This was something new and brought hope even though they had always been safe. The idea of being able to travel between farms or towns without fear was a strange concept.

“When the troops get here they’ll move the sweep line along the mutant trails, my scouts will show them. When the sweep is gone you’ll never have to worry about mutes again.” Kim paused once again, then continued, “You see Fred, the sweep will push the mutes to the south where they’ll be destroyed once and for all. More can’t get through the mountains from the east and mutes can’t exist in deep water. So the west coast will never see another mute.”

Sam grinned and added, “Except for a few that might have gotten into areas in the mountains. But if any do get by us that way, there won’t be enough to worry about. Our guys are covering pretty far up in the mountains. That’s why the line takes so long to move.”

Kim laughed, “Better slow and sure, then skip mutes or have men falling just trying to keep up.” She looked around the small group sitting at the two long tables and added, “I’m guessing the Sweep will be here in about a month or two there is a lot of forest between them and us here.”

Anna shook her head as she pondered aloud, “Being able to go see family and friends I only get to visit a few times a year, if that. Going to the towns when we want.” She laid her hand on Kim’s as tears formed in her eyes, “That will be so wonderful. Thank you so very much for bringing us a new kind of hope.”

Kim looked around the table as all were nodding. This was truly going to be a change for the better. This was why Kim had devoted so much of her life to scouting. To helping Hawk in his quest to reunite the country. Seeing people, good people freed from the fear of mutants.

Kim could feel tears of happiness well up in her eyes as well as she looked around the dimly lit eating area that was just outside of the main house. A cool evening breeze caused her to shiver as she pondered another upcoming winter.

Kim knew it would be late fall or early winter before the Sweep got to this area. The snows would fall and the push south would once again slow to a crawl. The men were more important than speed, Jeff would see to that. But with all the precautions, some would die.

She slowly shook her head, this was also the part of scouting she didn't like. But as with most life these days, death was a huge part of life.

Her thoughts turned toward Jeff and seeing him once again. It would be even longer as she and her scouts would leave in the morn to scout the areas south and continue to do so until they reached the last 'bubble'. There she would await her love and his warm arms.

Everyday more scouts either brought information to make maps of the bubbles or briefings were held so the scouts that stayed behind could lead General Starr's men along the mute trails. Kim found that these bubbles extended from high in the Rockies to the Pacific. She and her men mapped every road and un-safe area with the help of the locals.

Kim and the rest of her scouts moved southward until they reached the last bubbles. When the last map was drawn she and Sam were stunned to see the band of bubbles spanned the entire state from mountains to ocean and was over seventy eight miles wide.

She smiled as she rolled up the last map and made a mental note to leave her best scouts behind to show the General how the mute trails were to be navigated. This way Jeff could be in her arms so much sooner. They could once again sleep wrapped in loves embrace.

## Chapter 26.

Over the next few weeks Kim's scouts mapped all the mutant trails and the 'bubble' areas. She came to realize the sweep through this part of the state could go along rather quickly. The bubbles were much larger than she had expected and ranged from Rockies to the ocean almost to the California border. This was great news she could pass along to Jeff.

Months were spent covering each and every trail and as Kim's scouts reached the last of the bubbles it was as if a prayer had been answered.

Kim and Sam sat at a table at one of the last small towns that edged the mute trail. To the south mutes could be seen swarming, but as before, not one crossed into the safe zones. The last of Kim's scouts had arrived and dashed into the inn where the scouts had been staying. The dining area had made a perfect place to meet. Sam pushed back his chair as he gulped down the last bite of breakfast as the scout reported.

"Kim, Sam, man have I got great news for you! The bubble to the east? Damned if it don't got all the way to the Rockies. We watched the mutes move along the tree line and a short wall to mark the safe areas. Guys, the wall goes up into the mountains, so high we couldn't get up."

Sam looked to Kim and with a huge grin slammed his fist down on the table. "Wow! We have a natural wall, or at least will have once the Sweep gets here. Kim, this means there are only six trails through to the south."

"Easy Sam." Kim grasped his hand gently to settle him down. "I'll send a few scouts back to tell Jeff. I got word this morning he just passed that large city south of Fred's farm. The troops are moving along at a good pace now they don't have to worry about anything other than the trails. They should be here in a week or less." Kim smiled at Sam, "Jeff's moving ahead to meet us here, he should be here in a few days."

Sam settled back in his chair and ordered up a slice of pie. "Guess with this news we can relax a bit more." He grinned at Kim and added, "Don't much like going out into the cold now winter's close."

Kim motioned to the scouts that were there awaiting orders. The twenty or so scouts formed around Kim's table. "Ok guys, you all split up into six groups and watch the trails to the south. Those are the only ones heading toward the southern border. Stay there until relieved. Write down what the mutes are doing, when, what direction they move. I'll send more support as they get food and rest a bit." Kim looked at her scouts and with a more serious tone to her voice added, "No slip ups guys. This is our chance to seal everything north of here once the Sweep gets



to your positions, then they will take over. Go to the closest towns to your assigned locations, set up watch rotations and I'll send fresh men, when I get them fed and rested"

The scouts all grabbed their gear and left as Kim finished her morning meal. Just the thought of Jeff being on his way to her sent her head swimming. She looked over to Sam who was grinning at her.

"Am I that damned obvious Sam?"

Sam nodded as his mouth was filled with blueberry pie.

"Sam you need to find a good woman for yourself, you know. Maybe you'd stop stuffing your face with pie!"

Sam just gave Kim a big blueberry stained grin. "Maybe so Kim, maybe so, but the way you act when your love nears sure lets everyone know how you feel about him."

Kim's face reddened as she chided, "Sam, you know me all too well."

The next three days were torture for Kim. She knew Jeff was hurrying to her, but where was he? She knew he was safe and in the next somewhat larger town to the north of her location, yet he had stopped there. The more she pondered the subject the more she got riled. Kim paced the floor of her room.

"This bubble is over one hundred miles in diameter and that so called boy friend of mine stops in a city that is ten miles away and in this same bubble!" Kim tossed her hands up in the air as her voice got louder. "Dammit Jeff if you think you're going to get any loving, you'd better think again!"

She stopped and looked in the mirror. Kim fluffed up her golden locks and ran her hands down the length of her body to her waist as she straightened her clothes. Her hands stopped only long enough to cup her breasts as she grinned and said to herself, "Not gonna lay your hands on these babies when you get here either!"

She stared at the woman in the mirror and fumed some more as she looked down at her slim but muscular legs. She twisted a bit so she could check out her posterior and beamed as she touched his rear gently. "Yep! You'll miss all this mister Starr. You'll just have to dream of humping all this General Starr, because....."

"Kim?... ah....the door was open and we heard someone talking.... Ah, we thought maybe you were having a meeting..."

Kim spun around to see Jeff standing in the entry to her room. He was pale as a ghost and it looked like Jeff was trembling as he stood in the partially opened door.

Kim ran towards her lover as she shouted, "I missed you so much my darling....my bed's been so cold at night!" She threw out her arms and was about to rush into his arms..... Kim skidded to a sliding stop!

Hawk appeared from the other side of the door where Jeff was standing. Jeff who had no color left into his face leaned against the wall for support and weakly uttered, "Guess who else is here, Miss Vardis."

"Oh shit!! How long..." Kim's color drained from her face.

Hawk stopped, looked at Kim, then Jeff, then Kim again. "Ok you two...." Hawk motioned toward Kim's bed, "....Get over there and sit down."

Kim and Jeff walked over to the bed as Jeff sat. Kim turned to Hawk and with a trembling voice said, "It wouldn't be proper for a woman to sit on a bed with the General, Dad."

"Hmmm.... You know Kim, that's the first time you called me Dad. I kind of like that."

"Dad...."

"Uh-uh!" Hawk waved his hand.

"General Hawk... I should..." Jeff swallowed hard.

"I SAID SIT!"

Kim plopped down on the bed beside Jeff.

"General Hawk sir..."

"Uh-uh!" Again Hawk waved his hand, this time to General Starr.

Both Kim and Jeff swallowed hard again and shot a quick glance at each other, then back to Hawk. Kim hid visions of Hawk slicing Jeff in half as Jeff pondered what his career would be as a private. Hawk paced as if trying to find the right words without losing his temper or perhaps he was pondering if it would take one or two hacks to cut the trembling General Starr in half. With that thought he held back his grin.

Hawk stopped pacing and Kim was more worried for Jeff. She knew Hawk would never harm her, but she also remembered the time in a tavern some trapper grabbed her breast and

propositioned her. After three weeks in the hospital the trapper left in the middle of the night in hopes Hawk wasn't looking for him. The worry was just too much. Kim stood!

"Hawk!...Dad, I love you more than anything, I think you know that. But Jeff, er General Starr, and I, ...er, Jeff." Kim was trembling. She never had stood up to Hawk. She knew he could be a terror, but he had never said a cross word to her. He had been just like her real Dad.

"Oh, God Hawk.... I never wanted to hurt..."

Hawk raised his hand as if to say stop and seeing that Kim stopped and sat back down her head lowered. Tears flowing from her eyes. She sniffed back the urge to cry. Jeff looked over at his sobbing love and despite the fear, reached out and put his arms around her. Kim laid her head on Jeff's shoulder and through tear filled eyes, looked at Hawk as he stepped toward the two lovers.

Hawk reached out his hand and gently touched Kim's face.

"This has gone on long enough young lady!"

"I'm not young anymore Hawk, I'm almost thirty three." Kim sobbed as Jeff held her close.

"That's not what I meant Kim. I meant, long enough, as in isn't it about time you told me about you and Jeff? After all you've been seeing him since Alpha Base, what about a few years now."

"You knew?" Kim looked up at Hawk as Jeff's jaw looked like it had become unhinged and was about to fall off his face. "All this time you knew?"

"Sure. Guess just about everyone that knows you figured it out."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Well Kim. You do have your own life to live. I figured you'd tell me at some point. I'm just kind of hurt that I'm the last one you two saw fit to tell."

"Hawk....Dad, I'm so sorry, I..." Kim's voice was soft and warm, her tears vanished as she smiled.

Hawk again waved his hand and added, "Just is, I didn't expect to hear what I did as I entered." He grinned at the two lovers, "Was a bit more than I ever wanted to hear, you know."

Embarrassed Kim sprang up and ran into Hawk's arms and hugged him. "You knew, you didn't say anything and you let me come and do the sweep knowing Jeff and I would be together?"

“Yep!”

“So all that and you still let me come. Knowing the woman you love like a daughter was going to be with someone else?”

Hawk reached around and gently smacked Kim on the back of the head. “Let’s not get too graphic now. I try not to think about that part of it.” He looked over to Jeff who was trying to sink down into the bed and vanish from sight. Hawk grinned at Jeff’s miserable attempt to hide.

Hawk maneuvered Kim around so she could still lay her head on his chest as he kissed Kim on the head and once again focused on Jeff.

“General Starr. I want you to know I sent you here to run the Sweep because of your outstanding record and the ability to get things done.” Hawk added under his breath, but Kim heard his next comment anyhow, “...Just didn’t figure it was going to be my daughter.”

Kim giggled.

“Anyhow Jeff, you’ve done a fine job. But let me state one thing and there’s no exceptions.”

General Starr leapt to his feet and snapped to attention.

“Jeff... You may not ask my permission to marry until you are out of the military!”

Jeff’s eyes sped to Kim and their eyes locked as Hawk finished.

“I will not accept your resignation until this sweep is finished. You’ll have plenty of time to decide then what you two want to do.”

“Hawk..” Kim moaned, but was interrupted once again.

“I’ll not see you married to some military guy that you’ll never know if he’ll be coming home or not and Kim I’ll not have him worrying if you are going out on a scouting mission and...”

“Oh Dad! You don’t...”

“Kim! I’m serious!” Hawk gently turned her and held her in his arms. He kissed her on the head. “Honey, you and Jeff are in love. You both have been through more than a lot have. Especially you. You two deserve to be able to spend the rest of your lives together without worrying if you’ll ever see each other again.”

Jeff stepped forward and looked Hawk in the eyes. “Sir, if that will be what it takes to get your blessing, then I’ll resign my commission at the end of the campaign! He turned and looked at Kim, pulled out a huge diamond ring and got down on one knee.

Kim clasped her hands to her face and gasped “Oh Jeff.”

Jeff looked at Hawk. “I want to marry your daughter sir... Once the Sweep is over, sir. Whatever your terms are I want her for my wife.” Jeff pulled out the ring and showed it to Hawk.

Hawk grinned and snorted, “Ask her, not me you dolt. Kim’s the one you’re wanting to marry.” He shook his head. But even Hawk couldn’t pretend any longer that he was angered as Jeff slipped the ring on Kim’s finger and she in turn flew into his arms before he could arise. This sent the two lovebirds sprawling as Kim kissed Jeff deeply. He in response wrapped his arms about his newly betrothed.

“Ahem! You two need a room?” Hawk chuckled.

Kim rolled up on her elbows and grinned, “We have a room Hawk. You’re standing in it!”

Hawk smiled and gave a humorous salute to the General sprawled out on the floor next to his Kim. “Well then, guess it’ll be me that’s leaving... I’ve already seen way too much!”

Kim laughed as Jeff jumped to his feet. “I’ll see you in a while Kim.” He kissed her quickly and started to leave with Hawk.

Hawk stopped Jeff in his tracks. Hawk put his hand on the General’s chest and gave him a push back toward Kim.

“You really think I want to hear how I kept you two from each other from Kim for the next week or so?” Hawk winked at Jeff, “General Starr! Take the rest of the day off!”

Jeff snapped to attention as he winked at Kim, “Yes Sir!!”

Kim through her arms around Jeff and kissed him while all the time pushing him back toward the bed. She giggled, then sighed, “Oh baby you don’t know how much I’ve been wanting you to....

Hawk walked out of the bedroom and from around the corner the two lovers heard....

“Too much information.... I really didn’t want to hear all that.... Waaay too much information!”

All Hawk heard as he closed the door to Kim’s rooms was a giggle and a shrill squeal. “Way too much information!

## Chapter 27.

General Starr's Sweep pushed to the last line of bubbles and had either driven out the mutes or killed them right to the six trails that led to the south. It had been a duck shoot as Jeff had sent many troops to set up crossfire from the safe zones and literally had a duck shoot as Hawk called it.

Mutes had died by the thousands as the Sweep pushed toward the last bubbles and with troops covering the six trails as well as posts along the southern edges of the safe zones, the Sweep now covered one massive line across the entire state. From the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean the line now reformed.

An old seldom used group of buildings that had been ruined back a century before became the new headquarters for the Sweep. The two adjoining farms to the new HQ became the main suppliers and the troops still needed more food. One town on the shore of the ocean became a port for new troops and supplies. Supplies that the good folk of the bubbles as they had become to be know, were now enjoying the boon of goods shipped from as far away as the east coast.

With nearly one hundred thousand troops scattered throughout the Sweep's line, many of the small towns now became boom towns. Supplies were traded, the new federal money was introduced. From this point north living without fear, without population restrictions, living with open trading among the communities would be the normal way of life. Things were truly looking up for the peoples of Washington and the upper two thirds of Oregon. Word spread and celebrations abounded.

However for the military there was just the normal mundane routine of everyday life and the dread of trudging through the frozen land once the Sweep continued.

Several officers sat around several tables in the meeting room. Jeff, Kim, Sam all were standing at a large wall map when the doors of the room burst open. Jeff spun around to see who interrupted the meeting, but before he finished his turn, he saw and shouted.

"Room Attention!"

The entire room stood and snapped to attention. As Hawk walked into the room.

"As you were!" He shouted as Hawk walked through the aisle that separated the tables. Hawk got to where Jeff, Kim and Sam were, motioned for all to sit and turned to face the gathering. Hawk's voice boomed throughout the briefing room.

“Gentlemen...” Then nodding to Kim and a few other female officers in the room, “...excuse me, and ladies. You’ve done a superb job to this point and I’m am very proud to say I’m privileged to know so many of you personally. Pass along my appreciation to your troops.” Hawk paused as his officers smiled at one another, “And I’d like to give a special thanks to my adopted daughter Kim and her scouts...”

The room broke into applause as Kim and Sam smiled and slightly blushed.

“...And let me thank my future son-in-law General Jeffery Starr. Who to this point has had less than one hundred and seventy casualties in this operation. Not to mention an estimated million and a half mutants destroyed.”

The room full of officers stood and applauded and cheered.

Hawk held up his hands and all sat and the room quieted once more.

“The mutes cannot pass into the safe areas, the roads are covered by our troops.” Hawk paused, then a wide grin broke out on his face.

“I’ve sent for some Moby walls that are to be built across the six mute trails and into the safe areas for a short distance. Once they are erected, there will be six solid gates and no way for the mutes to ever get back north beyond this line we now hold.”

There were some quiet murmurs throughout the room as smiles broke out at a job well done.

Hawk stepped toward the gathering and smiled. Kim had seen this smile before and grinned at Jeff who to this point had maintained a very professional demeanor. As Kim squeezed his arm and saw her wink, he relaxed and began smiling as well. They both looked back at Hawk who was about to finish.

“I’ve sent for some of the nation’s best scientists to study this phenomena we found here that just about covers the entire mid to southern state of Oregon. It will take them a month or more to arrive and as winters is coming on...”

Hawk slowly looked over the room full of weary officers. “...I propose to erect the Moby walls and gates. Once secure.... The entire Sweep be halted here, camps be set and we stop here for the winter where there is plenty of shelter, safety and lots of food and drink!”

Everyone including Jeff, Kim and Sam leapt to their feet and cheered, hugged, applauded. The room went wild. After several minutes that Hawk allowed them to celebrate, he raised his arms and the room came to order.

“My friends, tell your troops, enjoy your rest and winter break. Come spring, the Sweep will continue.” Hawk looked sadly around the room and sighed loud enough where many heard him.

“Unfortunately since this sweep southward began over a year ago.... This has been the easy part. From here on the mutes are plentiful and sadly our casualties are going to be high. The estimated number of mutes between here and the southern California Moby wall has arrived and it’s not good.” Hawk paused and shook his head. “The estimated number.... Just under ten million!”

The quiet whispers began. Hawk gave time for the info to sink in, then added, “Of course those numbers will have been reduced by our troops in the south and the fleet if any move near the ocean. But we will have our jobs cut out for us.”

Hawk paced slowly, but his voice calm. All eyes followed him as he paced. The room was so quiet one could have heard a pin drop. He stopped and grinned at the gathering.

“Orders will be cut where to move to, who will support the wall construction and things like that. But all you officers, I want you to set up regular schedules for rifle practice, drilling, etc. Now your troops will probably piss and moan about everything, but I want them ready for spring! When the push restarts, we’ll need the troops to be well prepared and ready for whatever we run into.” Hawk paused, “Soft troops will not have a chance. Drill them steady, but not over do. With the harbors freezing up by the end of next month there’ll be no new troops until spring. Keep the ones you have sharp and ready.”

Most of the officers just nodded their agreement with Hawk. He was right as usual. Hawk nodded to Jeff and he stood and shouted for the assembly to snap to attention, once Hawk left the room. He then shouted...

“Room dismissed!” The room quickly emptied as Jeff looked at Kim and smiled, “Looks like we have a few months to be together.” Then added sadly, “I just dread spring when you have to go out there again....”

Kim stopped his worry with a loving kiss, then calmed his worries a bit more by adding, “Guess I should have told you earlier baby.... Hawk said he’s going to stay here and lead the scouts in the spring.”

“That’s great baby!”

“I guess Jeff, but I think it’s more that Hawk thinks like you do. He’s just making sure he’s there to watch over me with all that is going to happen.” She smiled, “You two are so much alike!”



The winter months were more severe than usual and all the troops under Jeff's command were glad they were in somewhat permanent quarters for winter's duration. The Moby walls were put into place and the gates locked and guarded. Patrols were regularly sent along the unwalled bubbles and still no mutes could cross much to the relief of the soldiers.

Occasionally groups of mutes could be seen along the parameter of the Sweep, but they were hastily destroyed by patrols safe from attack. The troops began to call these patrols 'The Duck Shoot!' The patrols just stayed back in the bubble and shot out at the mutes. The mutes would wander around trying to find a way to the troops, then eventually would vanish out of sight or stay and be wiped out.

Many of the men kept individual scores and no one discouraged the practice. Little could have anyone known that by the end of winter the mutant killed count would number in the tens of thousands.

During this time the scientists from the east arrived and began to study the anomalies known as 'the bubbles' They dug, they took samples of everything, even water from the water tables. Digging was hard, but many of the digs had managed to reach depths beyond the frost line.

Eventually the minds of science were baffled and took their tons of samples and headed back east to study them with better equipment.

As spring neared and the ice floes lessened, shipping was now regular and supplies came on a steady basis. From the ruins of the old port of Seattle grew a new and vigorous city and port as goods were shipped all over the newly claimed territories. Settlers came from the east and it was a good time for the once forgotten northern coast. Settlements and towns were built in the areas north of the bubbles as they were as safe as any place north of the new Moby wall.

As for the military plans were constantly being made, updated and prepared for. The troops were kept sharp and well drilled. Discipline and morale was strong. New troops arrived as preparations were made for spring.

Kim kept her scouts in shape with short excursions south of the safe zones and to track mute movements. To their surprise the scouts found a few more smaller bubbles about one hundred miles further south and within them were several warring raider gangs that had been raiding and fighting since they founded their settlements over a century earlier.

The door burst open to Kim's temporary office and a few scouts pushed a slovenly appareled and somewhat smelly man through the door, his hands in cuffs.

"Kim this is the guy we sent word back about." From behind the men walked Sam. He grinned and walked over to Kim and gave her a hug.

“Sam! Man it’s good to see you’re safe my friend.” Then she looked over to the captive. “Why did you bring him here, this...” Kim looked the captive over and sniffed the air, her nose wrinkled as she added, “...whatever this is, should be General Starr’s problem not mine.”

“Aw boss, this asshole said he wouldn’t talk to the military. He claims to know all kinds of routes through the mutes.”

Kim shrugged and sat back down. She looked at the captive, then grinned. “Why would we want to know routes? Hell we’re going to sweep every square foot of terrain all the way to the southern Moby.”

The captive grinned a wide missing tooth, grin at Kim. “Ya’d better play nice with me and mine gal we know stuff ‘bout dem forests out der. Stuff people like mine been gittin’ fer decades.”

“Stuff? We don’t need stuff.” Kim sat back into her chair and propped her feet on her desk.

“Oh y’all want this stuff alright there sweet cheeks....” The captive was interrupted by a hefty slap in the head by Sam and a warning to be civil to his boss. The captive continued as he tried to rub his sore head with tied hands. “...As I was saying... ah miss, I got me some stuff ya should know. Important stuff, but first you gotta go kill the Snake clan. Then I be tellin’ ya.”

Kim jumped to her feet and slammed her small fist on the desk. She glared into the captive’s eyes. “You dare bargain with me? Why you filthy son of a....” Kim caught herself and sat back down. With hardly a pause she added, “Sam take this person to Hawk and see how long he’s so stubborn.”

“Lady I don’t care who you send me to, I ain’t tellin’ ya nuttin’”

Sam grinned and grabbed the captive by the arm and led him out the door. As he got to the entry he looked back at Kim and laughed, “You know Kim this asshole and his clan killed four of our scouts.”

“I know Sam I got the report.” She winked, “That’s why I’m sending him to Hawk!”

The captive twisted around and walked back to Kim’s table, slammed his hands down on the table and smirked, “Don’t matter I still ain’t talkin’! No way, no how, nobody makes Clyde talk, no one!”

“**EEiiiEEEEAAYYYYyyy!!!**” Screamed the captive Clyde. Tears rolled down his cheek and his eyes lowered to his hand pinned to the table with one of Hawk’s rather large daggers.

Hawk leaned toward the man from the other side of the table at the inn where Hawk had been having a late afternoon ale. He glared at Clyde and snarled, "You bastard, you kill my men, then you come here and tell me I have to make deals with you?"

The scouts that had brought Clyde to Hawk had stepped back. They knew Hawk was mad, but also would get any info he needed out of this murderer anyway he could without killing him. Hawk ripped the dagger out from the table.

Clyde grasped his bloody hand and snarled at Hawk, "Think that's gonna make me talk asshole, you're wrong!" Clyde held up his bloody hand. "This is just gonna make me make you gimme more now!" The captive spit over the table and onto the floor near Hawk's foot. "Ya don't scare me none Hawk. I don't know who the Hell ya think ya are, but yer nuttin to me!"

The captive still holding his bloody hand at the wrist shook it in Hawk's direction. Hawk looked at Clyde and in one lightning fast move, drew his sword, cleanly sliced off Clyde's bloody hand as Clyde looked down to see he held just a bloody stump. He looked up at Hawk who had already sheathed his sword and stepped around the table and stood next to him. Hawk walked over to the fireplace and grabbed a partially burning log. He walked back over to Clyde, grabbed his arm and shoved the burning end against the bloody stump. Clyde screamed so loud Kim thought her ears would burst.

Hawk leaned into Clyde's ear and growled, "As you don't feel like giving out any info, then I guess we won't be needing you or your clan." Hawk looked at Sam and his scouts, "Take this rubbish out of my sight and toss this bastard and the rest of the captives to the mutes. I wouldn't waste a good bullet on this piece of shit!" He turned and sat back down as Sam and his men headed toward the door dragging the screaming Clyde along.

As they got to the door Clyde screamed in a high pitched voice, "WAIT! You win you son of a bitch, I'll tell you what I know, but you have to make your sign that y'all kill the..."

"I don't bargain Clyde, now get this scum out of here and carry out my orders."

"Wait, ok, ok..." Clyde gasped in panic, "...I tell ya. Just make yer mark, y'all let us go."

"How many of his people are there Sam?"

"Fourteen Hawk."

"Ok Clyde you got yourself a deal. Now talk!"

Clyde sat at Hawk's table as Hawk motioned for Sam to bandage Clyde's stump. Clyde whimpered as Sam wrapped his arm but he kept his part of the bargain and spoke in a trembling voice.

"Well all this started about seventy years ago or so our clan was trying to escape the raiders from the east. We came across an old pass in the mountains from the wastelands, my grand-pappy told my pappy about. We stumbled against this area when we came out of the mountains. The Snake clan was over in that western safe area and told us about the one we're in now."

Clyde's face angered as he continued, "Those damned Snakes just wanted us to settle then kill us and take our stuff. So since then we all been fighting twixt our settlements. They kill us we kill them and both our clans kill any trespassers, cuz no one steals from us!"

Clyde pulled up his dirty torn shirt and stood so Hawk could see his belt. "This here belt has these stones on it, see? Well they keep the mutes away from us. We wear them all over." Clyde showed his arm and on it was a ring and bracelet and pointed to his other hand laying on the floor. "Hell all our kin wear them, Snakes too. This way we can go out of the safe areas and not fret about gittin' killed. Dem mutes surround us but they won't grab us, we jest walk through dem."

"Clyde those rocks aren't protecting you, they're just a form of Igneous rock that flowed here from some old volcano millions of years ago." Hawk grinned at the captive's strange reasoning.

"You ain't so smart after all Hawk, you being a leader and all. Y'all come with me and I'll show ya." Clyde reached for his coat and Sam helped him on with it. As Clyde got his coat on he pointed to Hawk's map. "There's where my kin come over the mountains at. My pappy said it's a hard climb, but we all made it. Now come with me and I'll prove my stuff is good."

Hawk, Sam and two other scouts walked out into the brisk winter air and plodded through the deep snows that lay upon the wide field behind Hawk's HQ. They reached the edge of the safe zone and Clyde yelled at a small group of mutes. He started counting.

"Let's see four, five... That'll be 'nuff to convince ya!" The mutants rushed toward Clyde as he stepped beyond the safe zone marking poles sticking out of the snow.

Sam raised his rifle, but Hawk pushed it back down to his side. "Easy Sam if the damned fool wants to kill himself, let him. Hell who knows maybe he has something actually going on." Sam shook his head and grinned, then they all turned to Clyde.

The mutes were fast approaching him. They got to about five feet then quickly came to a stop. The mutes circled Clyde, yet they moved as Clyde would step toward any of them. The group with Hawk all stared in disbelief. Clyde just turned and grinned at the group, then shouted,

“Watch this mister big shot leader!” He pulled off one of his rings with his teeth and spit it at the mute. The mute caught it then dropped it like it was a chunk of red hot metal.

“Christ all mighty Hawk did you see that?” Sam was so stunned he almost sat in the snow. The mute looked at its hand and were it had caught the ring, it’s hand was still emitting vapor.

“I’ll be damned Sam. It is just igneous rock of some kind. Aw man how could I have been so stupid!” Hawk smacked himself in the forehead, “The radiation that caused the apocalypse, it must have changed something in this kind of rock. Something that the mutes feel.”

“Mutes feel?” Sam looked at Hawk, “I’ve shot mutes for years they never acted like they felt pain. Christ Hawk, I blew ones jaw off years ago with a bad shot and it was like it felt nothing.”

Hawk laughed as Clyde walked back toward the group. “Well those mutes sure as Hell felt something. Remember these bubbles has tons of this stuff under them. It all makes sense now. The radiation in these rocks don’t affect people, but they do mutes. So naturally they’ve learned to fear it. Maybe they can feel some sort of vibration or something. You know some sort of ability to sense this stuff can hurt them.”

Hawk looked at Clyde as he stepped back on safe soil. “Ok so how do you tell which rock is not mute friendly?”

Clyde held out his hand and told Hawk to remove his ring. “See them little black flakes? The shiny ones? That’s how ya tell.”

Hawk tossed the ring to one of the scouts and barked an order for him to take it to one of the remaining scientists. Then looked back to Clyde. “Well Clyde you lived up to your end of the bargain, you and your kin are free to go.”

“Hell man, it’s over twenty miles south.” Clyde screamed, “It’s winter.”

Hawk glared at Clyde. “You and yours killed four of my men! I told you I’d let you go... so go! You have your mute protection and we’ll give you enough supplies to get back to your bubble.” Hawk paused for a second then added, “Come mid spring the Sweep will reach you and I’ll let General Starr deal with you and those other murders you call the Snake clan.”

Clyde checked that all his kin were present as they walked toward him.

They all stepped out into the mute area and the mutes walked away from Clyde’s clan. After the clan got about five feet away from Hawk, Clyde turned and held up his stump.

“Ya know Hawk if ya didn’t cut off my hand, I’d never believed ya’d kill me. Smart move maybe you ain’t so dumb after all, you got me to spill dem beans.” Clyde started to turn, then stopped and looked back at Hawk. “Ya really would have killed me and my kin wouldn’t ya?”

Without hesitation Hawk replied, “In a heartbeat!”

Clyde turned and rejoined his clan and they vanished into the winder snow. Sam looked to Hawk and smiled. “Hawk that was the best bluff I’ve ever seen. Cut his hand off, bloody but effective.”

Sam’s blood ran cold as he heard Hawk’s reply as Hawk turned and started to his quarters....

“Who was bluffing!”

## Chapter 28.

Winters fury eased to early spring's cool breezes. The sun warmed the earth and mud abounded. As the world greened and the mud dried, the military once again began its sweep.

Kim and Jeff once again were parted by duty, yet Jeff knew his love would be safe with Hawk at her side. Parting was hard and Hawk still could remember the pain of leaving Keli on his trips back east. Even still the sadness when Maggie left. Perhaps more so now he knew Maggie was forever gone. Now watching Kim and Jeff holding one another, sadness once again pricked his memory. The sting brought back that flood of so many lost, so many good-byes.

However once back out on the road doing what he and Kim did best the sorrow of good-byes turned to the joy of being outdoors after that long hard winter. Spring had come at last and as it warmed and the sun stayed out, the scouts began their sweep ahead of the main body of troops.

The days turned to weeks, then months as small bodies of mutants were found and dispatched. Kim's scouts had to wait for the main Sweep to catch up to them. Finally Jeff's Sweep arrived to the scout position and once again the scouts were off.

Hawk and Kim rode to the top of a hill overlooking another large expanse of flat land near the northern California border. They both scanned the areas below carefully.

"Looks clear this way Kim." Hawk casually mentioned as he kept the field glasses to his eyes, "Don't see any mutes, but there looks to be a small community to the southwest. We'd better call to the rest and let them know not to enter the area. It could be that Clyde's clan or worse the Snake clan."

Kim grinned even though Hawk couldn't see it, but he heard it in her voice. "Don't trust any of them to do anything other than kill us." She called on her radio to her scouts. As each scout group heard the call they relayed it on the next group.

From Hawk's vantage point he looked west. "There's one group and they're holding where you told them... there's another just in range of my glasses. Guess they all got the message."

"Same here Hawk, I can see two groups east and they're holding as well. Guess it's about time we go down and check those buildings out."

"Whoa young lady! There isn't any we. I'm going down and you and your squad watch from here."

Kim glared at Hawk. "First! I'm no little girl anymore! And second mister, this keep Kim safe is crap. If you weren't here, it would have been me going down there! And lastly, These are my scouts, not yours and I lead them the way I see fit! I do not send them anywhere where I wouldn't go first!"

Kim squinted here eyes at Hawk and added, "So don't be getting bossy with me! I'll let you lead if you want, but we're coming along whether you like it or not!"

With that said, Kim spun her cycle around and headed back down the hill as Hawk and Sam sat in a cloud of dust. Sam who hadn't said a word all this time smiled at Hawk and started to say something witty. Hawk just held up a hand and shook his head. Sam's smiling changed to a loud chuckle as Hawk sped down the hill after Kim. Sam knew only Kim could stand up to Hawk that way and she would be there behind Hawk, as would he.

A few hours later the small group of scouts pulled up to markers just outside of the small settlement. Hawk held up his hand and the group stopped.

"Damned smart! Look at those lines of stones, all the new stone Clyde showed us." Hawk pointed to one of the larger rocks, "See look at the black shiny flakes in it." Hawk glanced to Kim, "You're left, Sam go right. The rest spread out behind us and be ready to run if fired upon. They have the cover and we're in the open. Be smart people!"

Hawk waved his arm forward and the scouts moved toward the small group of dingy hovels. They got to what appeared to be a main road where the shacks were spaced to each side of this mud road. Hawk motioned for the scouts to halt and they obeyed. The next thing anyone saw was Hawk speeding down the short road, Sliding his cycle 180 degrees and roaring back down the road. When he got back to the scouts he stopped and shouted to Kim.

"Dismount your scouts Kim. You're with me, Sam the other side. Half of you scouts with Sam, the rest with me. Scout one shack at a time starting with the closest."

The scouts moved along from shack to shack. Each time a few scouts would bust down the door, then quickly come back out. There were eleven shacks in all and when the last was done Sam walked over to Kim and Hawk.

"Christ guys, they're all dead! Either they're dead in bed or buried out back. A lot of new markers behind the buildings Kim."

"Same here Sam, dead or buried. No living." She turned to Hawk. "What happened?"

Hawk just shook his head in puzzlement. He ran back to his cycle and got something out of his side compartment. He went into one shack, then another. Finally he returned to the scouts.



“Well guys looks like we killed them!”

Kim and Sam looked at one another, then back to Hawk. “Us? How? We weren’t even here.”

“When Clyde and his group were at our winter camp. Remember some of the scouts came down with the flu? Then two others got measles? The clan didn’t have a chance guys. They’ve been living more or less isolated with only contact with this Snake clan. Their immune systems couldn’t handle all these new viruses and diseases they were exposed to at our camp.”

“So they died of measles and the flu?”

“That’s about it. Who knows what they picked up from us.” Hawk motioned with his arm. “Have the scouts move up and let’s begin scouting to the south. Let’s see if we can find that Snake clan. Watch yourselves!”

Kim checked to see that the scouts she could see through her binoculars were moving again and off they went. About two hours later through some dense forest a call came in scouts to the west found the Snake clan village and they too were all dead. As Sam took over Kim’s squad, she and Hawk headed over to the Snake clan settlement. As they arrived both were amazed at the size.

As the two rode down the main street they noticed even a couple of two story buildings. Hawk shouted over to Kim who was looking at the structures on her side of the street.

“Looks to be about thirty or so buildings.” Hawk glanced over to one to the other squad’s leader. “You checked every building?”

“Yes sir we did!”

“Not one survivor?”

“Not one General. There are a few graves but most died in their beds or were laying on the floor.”

The guard was interrupted by Kim’s shout. All stopped and looked where Kim was pointing. There between two buildings was a man. His arms nailed to a makeshift wall. His feet had large spikes as well through the ankles. A strap held his head upright. He had been severely beaten and tortured.

“Hawk look! You lopped off that Clyde fellow’s hand right? Sam got closer and replied, “Damn Hawk, it is that Clyde guy.”

Hawk pulled the device he had used back at Clyde's clan's village and held it up to Clyde's dead body. He looked at the device, then back at Clyde. He turned toward the small group of scouts that had gathered.

"Old Clyde had Measles, the flu and chicken pox."

Sam scratched his head, "Pox, like what killed Ollie last winter right after we let Clyde and his people go?"

"The same Sam. Picked up traces back at Clyde's settlement. Looks like after most of Clyde's clan died, he came here for one final payday." Hawk shook his head and added, "It's amazing what hate can do to a person."

Memories flooded back into Hawk's mind as he said it, then added sadly, "I know from firsthand experience." He said no more and returned to his cycle.

Kim and Sam looked at one another, then back to Clyde's body. Without a word both fell in behind Hawk and they rode out of the small town. There was no more to be said. What was left had said it all. The troops and the bubble towns had all been inoculated in late winter right after Clyde and his clan left. No one thought if perhaps their captives may have been exposed. The Sweep pushed south and passed the northern border of California.

Just below the border the scouts had to await the Sweep. Reports of mutants crackled over the radios. From all along the scout's lines came reports of mutes so Kim gave the order to wait for General Starr's Sweep line to catch up.

"Guy's, it'll take the Sweep a good month or more to reach us. Keep your eyes open and find safe places to stay where ever you can. Keep in range of each other and report as you get more info. Good luck men!"

Kim's group found a large outcrop and build a wooden wall across the only way up. After two days Hawk was satisfied with the groups safety and allowed small campfires to be built. Now and then over the next month and a half few mutes came to their wall and those mutes that did, died.

Some of the other scouts had to move their camps as huge mutant hoards roamed nearby and it became obvious it was the safest thing to do rather than chance fighting and be overrun.

When Jeff's group reached the scouts thread bare line, Jeff was amazed that the scouts had pretty much kept the line from mountains to ocean intact. Every group had managed to stay within radio range of the groups on each side of them. Each squad had sent out regular patrols

and Kim knew where all the mutes were. It would be the mutes south of them that would present the line with many battles. Now it would be Jeff's turn to run the Sweep southward. Tens of thousands of mutes had been spotted and more had moved south as they fled the Sweep. The mutes escaping from Jeff had now joined the mutants to the south and Kim would not allow her scouts to move until the Sweep killed what there was to the south.

To everyone's chagrin the next twenty miles took almost another year. The mutes kept counter attacking and Jeff would have to pull the entire line back lest the mutes breach it and get to the north. But his troops held the Sweep line intact. Casualties mounted. The dead buried in mass graves. The massive mutant tallies were guessed at as they vaporized before the troops could safely enter the area to count.

More troops came from the south along the cover of the fleets big guns and slowly the line would push southward again. Mostly it would be driven back, then it would push south once again. Scouts were assigned to the line and the fighting continued. The one year grew into two, then three as the line finally got enough fresh troops to make the drive. Twenty miles, thirty miles, fifty, then sixty.

Six long hard years the one running battle dragged on. Even the fleet sitting off shore managed to get mutes within its range. The lines rotated as troops moved to the rear to rest and heal, fresh new troops would move to the front. The lines of weary bloodied troops could be seen for miles passing new troops with worried looks as they passed one another. Clawed and scratched one watching the procession of broken and torn men wondered how a modern army could be so decimated by an enemy with no weapons but teeth and claws.

Six years turned to seven, then seven and a half and the Sweep pushed further south. Now less than one hundred miles separated the Sweep from the southern Moby wall. Jeff's troops now numbered a little over seventy thousand.

The mutants between them and the wall were estimated to be near two million! The Sweep stopped as makeshift fortifications were constructed to keep the mutes from breaching the line northward. Hawk gave the order and a second wave of soldiers moved eastward from the ocean. Mutes were being pushed east toward the mountains to where the Sweep line was closer to the Moby wall. As the mutes moved into the bottleneck men atop the wall and the fortifications fired relentlessly. But all knew the final push would be slow. The mutes had their backs to the wall and no one dared rush things now. A break out would be disastrous!

"Another year, maybe sooner.... Then.." Hawk sighed.

Kim reached out and slid her arm through Hawk's. She laid her head on his shoulder and wistfully added, "Then the real battle begins. Once we get the Sweep from the ocean stopped just within the fleets maximum range, we'll start the line up once more. We'll use the Giants I

brought up as observation posts. Hell they can drive right through the mutants and the crews will be safe.”

Jeff stepped up to Kim’s other side and looked at the two as the sun slowly settled in to the western horizon casting its long dark shadows which made the Giants look even more menacing. He kissed Kim on the cheek and gently grasped her other hand. Miles away dust clouds could be seen as the mutants constantly moved about in the areas they had left for themselves. There would be carnage like was never seen before. So many troops would die. Jeff looked at Kim, then Hawk and back out over the surrealistic scene below. There was just nothing else that could be said....

All three just gave a huge sigh! Once the artillery finished, men would have to go in and end the mutant reign. It was a shame the artillery only had limited ammunition so much had been used and supplies from back east again had to be cut. They were once again on their own.

Silhouetted in the setting sun the three stood there looking out across the scene in the distance. As if one all three sighed deeply, sadly.

## Chapter 29.

The following years not much was written about in Hawk's journals. Occasionally there was a "we had a rough day" or "I'm too tired to write". A year or so did eventually drag by and the mutants eventually were killed off. Page after page Charlie and his crew found only "Same old, same old, Too tired to write, or rough day".

"Listen to this gang!" Charlie shouted, which snapped the rest out of their visions of days gone by and what it must have been like. "There is an entry."

"After how many pages of too tired?" Quipped Deb with a smile.

Charlie ignored her and began reading.

"Damn there is no year, the page has been partially torn, but listen to this." Charlie read the entry.

*"July 19:*

*Almost lost Kim today due to a mutant rush on our lines. Jeff and his officers and the sentries not only saved her, but held until the reinforcements arrived from the secondary line. Jeff sustained Major injuries and had been transported to the hospital ship anchored at the coast. I sent Kim with him knowing there'd be no stopping her.*

*July 20:*

*Got word back from Kim. Jeff will be ok although he's suffered some kind of setback, he'll live. Told Kim we have things well in hand. Mutants are falling like flies and are near the end of the sweep.*

*July 23:*

*We can see the mountains our line is so deep with our soldiers now there will be no chance of mutes breaking through. Expect to complete the Sweep in a few weeks.*

*July 29:*

*Incredible thing happened today. As the mutes neared their destruction, they ran into a small bubble near the foot of the Rockies and vaporized themselves. Sam reported back that there must have been ten to twenty thousand over the last few days that have done this.*

*NOTE: Are the mutes committing suicide?*

Aug 2:

*Got word of the bubble's material. Seems the scientists believe the material that kills mutes actually cancels out the residual radiation that stayed in mutants holding them together. Am guessing this is the same radiation that hit us on Day Zero. The brains tell me this material is common in the Earth's mantle and the many scattered pockets there and in the core may have saved what was left of the human race. It canceled or absorbed the radiation blasting through our planet. The heavier the concentration of the material, humans survived. The weaker it was, mutes formed. No material and the radiation passed completely through the planet and people vaporized. If it wasn't for this stuff, they think the Earth would have been ripped apart. God, we're all so damn tired of killing, of burying the dead, hearing screams ....Just tired!*

August 11:

*The Sweep is at the foothills of the Rockies. All scouts report no mutes anywhere. Lots of celebrating going on. The west coast is mostly free of mutes now. To the north of the northern Moby there are no mutes. To the south of the southern Moby only a few reports of tiny groups of mutes. In between the two Mobys, I see ways mutes still could be here, but a few may have escaped into the mountains, but it is doubtful there are many as they haven't been known to climb very well.*

*The west coast has been cleared of enough where local towns can handle what's left. I'll leave troops here and at the three passes through the Rockies we've found. Someday if we can clear the Wastelands, we'll have roads ready to be joined to the rest of the country. Once secure we can start building the roads.*

*All in all, the mutes have been put to rest. The men will get a well earned rest. I'll have no more troop movements once they get back to their bases other than the regular patrols. Next spring I'll start sending any not needed here back east.*

Aug. 12:

*Kim radioed Jeff will be out of the hospital tomorrow. Will try to get back to Alpha Base where he was sent and will recuperate. Haven't seen either Kim or Jeff in a couple of months. Kim isn't telling me everything. I know Jeff should have been out sooner. So tired of killing, so tired!"*

Charlie's crew heard him gasp as he lowered his eyes toward the floor. Tom stood and walked over to Charlie.

"Chuck?"

Charlie pointed to the journal and Tom's jaw dropped as his face saddened. The girls jumped up and asked what happened. Charlie once again spoke.

"There's one more entry on this page near the bottom...."

*"Estimated mutants killed since coming to the coast..... 28 million.  
Since Sweep..... 11 million.*

*Civilian losses since Sweep... 1132.*

*Military loses since Sweep.... 162,872."*

Deb who was a history Major for that time slipped back down into her chair. "My God!" She sighed loudly, "That was half of the military of the entire country during those times. That would mean that the line that held against the raiders in the Wastelands were ...." Deb looked at the rest of the crew as she leaned forward. "...not enough, if they had hit anywhere in force. My God they could have broken through at any place along the Mississippi."

Sue looked puzzled and Deb noticed as she added, "Don't you see? That many troops dead, over twenty thousand were overseas in the Britain's and New Europe. Perhaps another one hundred thousand still in California."

"So? Sue kidded.

"So? Sue, there were troops scattered all over the eastern states, that would have left only a few more than fifty thousand covering the Mississippi and the Wastelands border. There was a man that united all the Wasteland armies under his command. If he would have know how thin we were on our side of the river..."

Tom smiled at Sue, "You see Sue, the old Miss was a natural barrier between us and the Wastelands. But to the north where there is no Mississippi and the feeder rivers turn toward the west, that's where the Majority of the soldiers were. Had El Diablo known, he could have invaded across the southern bridge as well as used boats and rafts to cross in the south. By the time we could have gotten troops amassed and headed south, he could have controlled three or four states in the east and held one of the two bridges across the Miss. Maybe both!"

"Holy Shi...." Sue dropped into her chair. "History would have been changed!"

Everyone in the old dusty room looked at one another as the realization sunk in. The country had been in a state of transition. It was not until this journal brought to light just how close we had come to disaster, did anyone come close to grasping how dire things were back then.

Charlie flipped through the last few pages and spoke with amazement. Enough so his crew stopped what they had been doing and turned to him.

“That was the last journal. There has to be another somewhere that we missed.”

“Why Chuck?” Tom asked.

“There is just a few lines on how troops were scattered and based. Nothing about the next spring.” He frowned, “Nothing more about Kim or Jeff. What happened to them. What about Hawk’s last year in California?”

Charlie jumped to his feet and scanned the room. “Ok guys. We need to find the next journal, paper, book, whatever!”

The group of researchers scattered throughout the rooms of Hawk’s old home. Each hoping to find the completion of the West Coast Journals. Dust flew as people scurried around and about the dusty rooms until a shriek came from the distant room. The shriek was followed by Deb scrambling into the reading room they had prepared earlier. In her hand was a much smaller book, which she waved gleefully.

“I found it Charlie!” She giggled, “You’ll never guess where.”

“Deb Dammit! Don’t tease!” Replied Tom.

Charlie started to speak, but Deb couldn’t hold it back any longer. “Guys! This book was in the trash can and by the dust, I’d guess Hawk tossed it there....” Then added as an afterthought, “...or maybe he knocked it there accidentally. It doesn’t look like he threw anything away.” She beamed as she handed the last tome of Hawk’s West Coast Campaign to her boss.

Charlie slowly opened the book as dust dropped onto the table. The crew sat back into their chairs and listened intently as he began to read. As the words flowed from Charlie’s lips the small group began to imagine once again those days long since past. The time gone by when this country was still divided. The visions of yore played once again in their minds.



## Chapter 30.

Hawk sat in his quarters pondering the loneliness of his life. Almost twenty seven years had passed since the loss of his wife Keli. The memories flooded into this mind of years gone by. Now and then a chuckle or a tear. His life had been so long and he had experienced so much it was at times overwhelming.

Hawk no longer had Kim to talk to as she had gone to live with her love Jeff in his quarters. Hawk had been devastated when Kim finally told him of Jeff's loss, his leg. After his release from the hospital Kim moved in with him to help with his recuperation and a fine nurse she was. For over a year now he got along great and even rode the cycle Hawk had adapted for him to ride without the use of his missing leg.

It was during their vacation when Kim and Jeff had gone on to visit Kim's almost sister-in-law Jill, that Hawk felt the strongest loneliness. They had been gone two weeks now and with Sam assigned to another base, Ned gone making rounds of the rebuilding of the west coast cities and infrastructure, Hawk was going insane with nothing to do but ponder his past. He sank deeper into this thoughts. So deep he never heard the door open, nor the footsteps entering the living room where he sat.

"Hi Dad!"

Hawk startled leapt to his feet and spun around to see Kim and Jeff standing behind where he was sitting. Hawk was enjoying Kim referring to him as Dad for the last few years since the end of the Sweep. She had little to do scouting wise and after training some new scouts, she decided to give Sam command and settle down to help Jeff. No longer did she adorn her body with buckskins and denim, but fabric and frills. She had admitted to Hawk several times over the years that she wished she had time to be a girl and do girl things. Now Kim was making up for lost time by doing woman things she may never had a chance to do.

Now as Hawk arose a beautiful woman stood before him, glowing in loves embrace and her warm smile said it all. Not only was she in love, but she was content with her new life.

"I missed you Kim!" Hawk replied, then glancing over to Jeff added, "Yeah even you too."

Jeff grinned and replied, "Yeah I kind of missed you too." He chuckled, "But not your damned shouting orders."

Hawk walked over to Jeff and shook his hand as Kim stayed locked to Hawk's arm. "Jeff looks like you're doing ok with the new leg. How's the pain?"

“Gone mostly Hawk. Kim even had me dancing again in Coppertown while we were there.” Jeff winked and added, “The slow dances that is..” He laughed, “...not quite ready for Jigs or Reels.”

Hawk looked over Jeff’s shoulder and saw Jill walk through the door. Although Hawk had only seen her a few times, he recognized her instantly.

Kim tugged on Hawk’s arm before he could say anything. Hawk turned and looked at Kim who’s eyes were filling with tears.

“Kimmy, baby, what’s the matter?”

Kim threw her arms around Hawk and sobbed in his ear. “You know I’ll always love you Dad. You’ve been more of a Dad than my own Dad ever had a chance to be. You took me and Tim in when we had only ourselves, you loved us, taught us....” She started crying gently.

Jeff stepped over to Hawk and smiled. “General....” He handed some papers to Hawk. “Sir, these are my papers of resignation. I turn these in with regret that I can no longer be under your command, nor be part of the military. This last year you’ve given me that desk job I fully appreciate, but General....” Jeff took a deep breath and in a shaky voice added, “Sir, General... Now I’ve resigned... I, er, we, er I would like to ask your blessing to marry your daughter Kim.”

Kim stopped sobbing and moved her head off Hawk’s shoulder to look him in the eyes. “If you say no, you know I’ll never leave you....”

Hawk gently pushed Kim away and with a warm smile. “Kim, baby, you’re the only living person I love and want the best for.” He beamed widely, “It’s about time you two decided to get married. Christ I figured you two would tie the knot last year!”

“DAD! You knew we wanted to marry, why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Kim I wished you two the best when you moved in with Jeff. Got you two bigger quarters.” Hawk chuckled warmly, “What you wanted me to ask Jeff for you?” Hawk looked over to Jill as he motioned for her to join them. “And I’m guessing Jill is going to be your matron of honor?”

Kim hugged Hawk one quick time and flew into Jeff’s arms. “I was so worried that you’d be so lonely. We put it off, but during our trip we saw how happy Jill and her new husband are, well that’s when we decided.”

“Married? Why Jill, I’m happy for you.” Hawk hugged Jill and looked around, “So where is this new hubby of yours?”

Jill beamed, "Hawk, Lewis is in charge of the building of the new passage over the Rockies at Coppertown. He gets to remain in charge once the road gets built to a mile short of the other side. Then he's going to be in charge of making sure no raiders from the other side find it."

"Congratulations to your husband Jill. The roads are only going to be built slightly over the summits and down far enough where raiders can't be spotting the work."

Jill smiled back at Hawk, "You know there is going to be a town built once the road gets to the other side. Kind of a town and base for the roads protection I understand?"

Hawk nodded as Jill continued, "Kim said if I asked maybe you could make that town our home? Maybe cut orders for Lewis to stay there? But if it is too much...."

Jeff grinned at Hawk, "I've checked into Major Lewis Deveroux's records and he's doing a fine job Hawk. Sure as Hell wouldn't hurt to have a good man in charge of the new base."

Hawk looked at Jill and slowly shook his head, then looked at the three who's faces started to show worry at Hawk's tone. He walked over to Jill and put his hands on her arms and looked eye to eye at her.

"Jill, Lewis is a fine man and a good soldier but he's only a Major and the base is going to have to have a Colonel in command because of the vast area." Hawk turned and walked away from Jill and as they all sighed their disappointment Hawk grinned, then added....

"Guess I'll have to promote him."

Jill flew to Hawk and hugged him, she was quickly followed by Kim. They almost knocked Hawk over onto the couch. Hawk looked at Jeff who was walking toward him and grinned, "If you hug me too, I'll fire ya!"

Jeff grinned and replied, "HA! Remember I just handed you my resignation!"

Hawk softly pushed the girls away and looked at Jeff, then down at the papers. He looked at the three as they stared back in puzzlement.

"Ned told me he wanted you for his number two in command last week Jeff, soooo...." Hawk tore the papers in half, then in quarters and handed them back to Kim. "Baby it's up to you if you want to be a military wife or not."

Without hesitation Kim tossed the papers into the trash and flew into Hawk's arms once again, sobbing, "You know Jeff's life is military all the way and whatever Jeff wants, I want!"

"Permission to hug the General, sir?"

Hawk sighed and got a bear hug from General Travers as he sighed again and added, "God! Just don't let this get out!"

After a few moments the hugging stopped and Hawk walked over to the other side of the room.

"Dad?"

"Nothing personal kids, but I think this is going to be safer over here."

"DAD!" Kim shouted was getting perturbed at Hawk as she knew something was up.

"Second in command of the west coast comes with another star Jeff, looks like you're going to be a two star General now."

Kim flew across the room and into Hawk's arms as they tumbled onto arm chair tipping it backward onto the floor. From behind the chair Hawk's voice could be heard lamenting, "Maybe this wasn't far enough away."

Jeff walked around and pulled the two off the floor and shook Hawk's hand. "Sir I'll never forget your kindness...."

"Whoa!" Hawk interrupted, "Kindness Hell! You earned it and Ned requested it...." Hawk grinned, "...So if you're gonna hug someone, hug Ned!" Hawk turned and walked back to his desk. "I've had enough hugs for today."

The four all laughed as they sat and made plans for the upcoming nuptials. Not to mention the party that would come after. This was Hawk's daughter, or at least the closest he had to having one since losing his real daughter during the apocalypse. Kim would have the best wedding and everyone knew it.

After the plans were made Jeff and Kim were headed home, Jill started to leave for a hotel, but Hawk insisted she stay in Kim's old room. So the next week wasn't so lonely for either.

Little could anyone have guessed Hawk was as good at planning a wedding as he was a battle and all made sure they teased him about it afterward. And Hawk? Well, he loved every moment of it! He knew it would not be long before he was alone again.

More so he dreaded the news he would have to tell them after the wedding.

Warm ocean breezes danced across the green meadow Kim and her soon to be husband had chosen. Birds glided in lazy circles as if nature was trying to make their day more perfect than it

had been so far. There had only been a few of the couples friends invited as neither cared for large crowds and those in attendance beamed widely as Jeff took his place with the reverend up front.

Jeff leaned over to Ned, whom had agreed to be Jeff's best man and whispered, "I thought you said there was only going to be a few extra people. Geez Ned there had to be over a thousand out there standing along the road."

Ned grinned and replied, "Couldn't stop them Jeff. Let's face it Kim and you are probably the best known couple in California. The fifty or so that you and Kim asked are here, but this meadow is open. So what if they have to stand way back there near the road..." He grinned at Jeff, "...I don't think they mind."

"Aw man! Ned, Kim's going to go nuts when she sees all those people. It won't matter if they're staying back by the road or not. Ned you know how it was, just her and Hawk, her late brother, and a few scouts most of her life..."

Jeff was interrupted as Ned elbowed him gently as he looked beyond Jeff toward the road. A black limo drove up to the packed road escorted by several military vehicles with their sirens screaming. Jeff glanced back to Ned with a puzzled stare as Ned grinned and answered Jeff's unanswered question.

"I know there are no limo's in the west coast, but you know Hawk. He had it shipped out here just for Kim. Again you know how Hawk is, nothing is too good for his adopted daughter."

"Yeah, I know Ned. Though sometimes I wonder who adopted who."

The crowd parted as the sleek limo pulled up to the grassy meadow and came to a slow stop. Hawk's aide got out and opened the rear door and Hawk got out.

"Ned, damn, Hawk's wearing a dress uniform?" Jeff squinted at the well tailored uniform. "I think that's a uniform."

"Only a hand full of people get to wear them Jeff. Military members of the Tribunal and the civilian members have similar dress garb. Damned smart looking though isn't it?"

Jeff grinned and retorted, "Wouldn't mind wearing one of those sometime in the future. Why I'd....." Jeff's jaw hit the ground!

Hawk had put his hand into the darkened limo and out of the shadows and into the sunlight stepped Kim. She was wearing a full length wedding gown. The gown was pure white satin and glistened in the sunlight as she stepped from the car.

The thousand or so people gathered on the one side of the road and all began to applaud. As Kim slid her arm into Hawk's and he led her away from the limo. Kim stopped and leaned to Hawk and said something the guys couldn't hear. Hawk stepped toward the crowd and shouted.

"By request of the bride. You are all invited to come to the wedding. Thank you all for coming."

Hawk walked back to Kim and held out his arm, which Kim took and they slowly walked toward the flower laden alter. Jeff and Ned both straightened and made sure their dress uniforms were in order, Hawk and Kim paused as Jill and three others stepped in front of them. Hawk nodded and the small string quartet began playing the wedding march.

Few of the guests had ever seen Kim in a dress or skirt, but even Jeff was stunned at Kim's beautiful dress. She glided beside Hawk as if on love's wings. Jeff marveled at the fact she was wearing high heels and walking in them so gracefully. As she approached he could make out her face through the bridal veil as she would reach up and gently wipe tears from her eyes.

Kim was led to the altar and Hawk raised her veil and kissed her gently as Kim forgot all protocol and threw her arms around her mentor and father. She sobbed gently and whispered, "Thank you for everything Daddy.... And for giving me my life."

Hawk took Kim's hands and laid them into Jeff's hands as he looked at Jeff. "I know you'll make my Kimmy happy and keep her safe Jeff. As he raised Kim's veil Hawk gave Kim one last warm smile. His eyes filled with tears as well as he went and stood with the guests. His little girl was getting married and so many emotions welled up inside of him. He had watched her grow into the beautiful woman she had become.

Kim watched him all the way with tears in her eyes, then turned to Jeff. He had never seen her so radiant, so glowing. Rarely did Kim have to wear makeup, but today she did and it was perfect. Jeff stepped next to her and gave her a loving kiss. They both turned to the reverend as they held hands he began the ceremony. There wasn't a dry eye in the meadow.

All knew Kim's story and she was as famous as Hawk along the coast. Her bravery and courage always stood out. Her leadership had inspired so many and now in this moment of complete happiness, the people's love for her had shown its brightest. The throng had come from all over the west coast. People whose lives she had touched, people that barely knew her, but had followed her adventures.

Jeff in turn had his own crowd of admirers. Like Kim he too had inspired through his leadership during those long deadly years of the Sweep. Now all in the mid-sized meadow smiled, cried and shared in the joy of these two lovers that so deserved the happiness they had found in each other.

The ceremony ended and the bride and groom kissed their first kiss as man and wife. They both turned to face the cheering throng. Jeff held up his hands and the meadow quieted.

“Tonight in the park at base there is going to be our reception. Kim and I would like to ask you all to attend.”

The crowd cheered again, which turned to applause as the couple quickly walked down the aisle. The crowd walked along on each side of them cheering all the way back to the road. Into the limo the newlyweds jumped and down the road they went.

Hawk turned and walked toward the other end of the meadow to where his cycle had been hidden. He mounted the bike and looked off in the direction the limo had gone. He wiped away a tear and smiled as he whispered to himself,

“May you two find the happiness I lost so long ago.”

He slowly drove off through the beautifully landscaped meadow and out onto the road that ran along the ocean until he arrived at a high spot that overlooked the vast bay. From here Hawk could see the ships that lay at anchor, the base he had called home for almost three decades and a tiny black limo weaving its way toward Kim and Jeff’s new quarters.

The ocean breezes tousled Hawk’s silvery hair as he stayed until the sun began to set. The reception would soon be starting and Hawk would have to.....

He slowly shook his head, started the cycle up and headed back to base. First the celebration, he would not spoil that. Not Kim’s day. Nothing would spoil that and Hawk would make sure of it! A broad smile crossed his lips.

The news could wait another day or so. Perhaps this evening would not be so bad after all!

## Chapter 31.

The party was more than anyone could have imagined and not one person could be seen without a grin or smile. Laughter and mirth abounded, food and drink aplenty. This would truly be a night folks would talk about for years.

Several days past and there seemed to be a sort of sadness that crept into Kim that began to worry Jeff.

“Kim what’s wrong baby? Is it something I’ve done? Maybe working too much?”

Kim smiled at her new husband. “It’s not you, baby....” Kim gave Jeff a quick reassuring kiss, “...it’s Hawk. He’s been so distant I fear the day I’ve always dreaded is near.”

“Day? What day my love?” Jeff reached out to comfort Kim, but she moved away.

She turned and looked him in the eyes, “I’d rather not say my love, I just hope I’m wrong, but it’s something that popped into my mind years ago.” She turned and walked toward the door as she added over her shoulder, “It’s just I’ve come to know Hawk too well and....”

Just as Kim reached for the door knob there was a loud knock on the door and Kim jumped and pulled her hand back. She looked back at Jeff, then slowly grasped the knob and turned it.

In the door stood Hawk, a solemn look on his face. He walked past Kim.

“Well how have you two love birds been getting along?” He smiled at Kim and added, “If that husband of yours has been ignoring you, I can hurt him a bit.”

Jeff grinned at Hawk and snorted, “Well General if you’re going to hurt anyone....” He pointed at Kim, “...she’s constantly molesting me. Haven’t slept in two days!”

Kim laughed and strolled over to Jeff and gave him another peck on the cheek, then with her hand pinched it and giggled, “Naughty boy.”

“Ok you two, you’re giving me far too much information.” Hawk almost smiled. This made the newlyweds stop their clowning around and look at Hawk. Before Hawk could speak any further, Kim stepped towards Hawk.

“When?” Kim’s gaze dropped toward the floor, “When?”

“You were expecting this Kim?”



She looked back up at Hawk with tears in her eyes, “Hawk you’ve been my Dad for around two decades now, my mentor, my idol, my life. I know you better than you know yourself and most of all, I love you.” Tears streamed down her cheeks freely as a puzzled Jeff moved along side of her and put his arm around her.

“Kim...” Hawk too had tears in his eyes, “Then you know why. You have a life now, a life with a loving husband. My job here is just about done. I’m needed back east sometime within the next few months.”

Kim was sobbing quietly as Jeff spoke. “So you’re leaving I take it Hawk?”

Hawk held out his hand and Jeff shook it as he added, “General we’ll all miss you and will look forward to seeing you when you return.”

Kim looked at Jeff with her tear stained face and kissed her husband. She then flew into Hawk’s arms and hugged him violently, all the time with her face buried into his shoulder. There they stood for several minutes.

Kim sniffed and leaned back and gave Hawk a big kiss on the cheek, wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled.

“I know I’m making this harder by all this crying, but I can’t help it.”

Hawk reached out and gently stroked Kim’s cheek. “I know baby and it’s ok.... But honey you know I have to go, don’t you?”

Kim shook her head and threw herself into Jeff’s arms. She began sobbing once again and sniffed, “I know you have to go. Always remember I’ll never stop loving you. You were my father, my friend, my life.”

After several minutes Kim’s crying slowed and she turned and looked at Jeff, “Sorry for being such a crybaby.”

Jeff smiled warmly and hugged Kim. Kim hugged Jeff back and then released him and turned to apologize to Hawk.

“Hawk, I’m so.....”

“Kim, he’s gone. He nodded to me and winked. He mouthed the words ‘Take good care of her’ and left.

Kim started toward the door, but Jeff grasped her arm and added, “He’s gone Kimmy, I heard him drive away.”

It was as if all the energy drained from her body as Kim flopped down onto their sofa. Jeff quickly ran over and sat beside her and cuddled her in his arms as the sobs began once again.

“Kim, baby, Hawk will be back....”

The sobbing Kim interrupted her love.

“No he won’t Jeff...” She sniffed and raised her head to look him in the eyes. “...We’ll never see Hawk again my love. This time he’ll be gone for good.”

“But he’s like a father....”

“Honey, I know Hawk will always love me and will always hope for nothing but the best for us, but I knew years ago that this day would come.”

Jeff was now completely lost and his face must have shown it as Kim managed a warm smile and continued.

“Don’t you see baby, I’ve known Hawk since Tim and I met him around twenty years ago. He once told me that I had spent more time with him then any one since the apocalypse.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Jeff was really lost as Kim gently gave him a quick kiss.

“Hawk had to shoot his wife and daughter.... and grandkids, they had become mutes.”

“Christ I never knew.”

“Few know that part of Hawk’s life Jeff. Throughout the decades, Hawk has watched people he called friend die, loved ones parish or be killed, age and die. Not one of them since Day Zero, knew him as long as I.”

Jeff pushed Kim gently to arms length and whispered in almost a gasp, “He doesn’t want to see you grow old and die.”

Kim smiled warmly “Now you know. I guessed this day would come if I ever found someone and married, so I’ve been expecting this day since our wedding. You see my love, Hawk knew if I stayed with him or not, he’d have to leave the west coast someday. That’s why he always encouraged me to ‘get a life’. Oh sure he’d always joke about it, but we both knew he was serious. He always wanted me to find the happiness I’ve found with you my love.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand now Kim. If we had children, he’d have to watch them age and grow old as well....” Jeff thought for a moment, “...My God how horrible that would have to be.”

“Now imagine over one hundred and some odd years of that kind of grief.” The tears once again started flooding in Kim’s eyes as she looked up to Jeff. When she saw the tears in Jeff’s eyes, Kim smiled warmly and added.

“We’ll all miss Dad, but we’ll never forget how he touched our lives.” Kim got up and walked over to the window and in the distance caught a fleeting glimpse of a lone rider sitting on his cycle at the top of the hill, looking back for one last time. The rider turned and vanished from her view forever as Kim whispered.

“Farewell my loving father. May you find the happiness so deserve....”

## Epilog.

Hawk had pulled into the town called Coppertown to say good-bye to Jill. After a short visit he headed over to say his farewells to Jill's husband and commander of the road through the Rockies at Rockypoint. He walked into the office to see several officers looking at maps.

His musings were broken as Colonel Deveroux walked over to Hawk, saluted, then shook his hand. "General Hawk I know you're on your way back east and hate to delay you a bit, but we seem to have a problem."

Hawk grinned, "Seems there is always a problem Lewis with one thing or another. What's your problem?"

Lewis walked over to the map and pointed. "General, a ways from this base, here at this railroad spur that goes up into the mountains, well General we're putting together a few companies of men to head up and see if some reports are accurate or not."

"Reports? What reports, I've been on the road and out of communications."

"Well the commander in 27 base got word of a few hundred mutes moving through the mountains from some trapper. We got word of a few hundred mutes moving around there as well, but much further south. Both reports came from the trappers and were kind of vague. Today another report came in from a third person and said about the same, but put the mutes in between the other reported areas, so we're guessing the mutes are moving."

Hawk grinned and headed out the door. "I'll drop on over and see what the confusion is about Lewis. Relax, I'll take it from here."

"Ok Hawk you take care of yourself.... and have a good trip back east!"

Hawk jumped on his cycle and was at 27 base by noon. He entered the base commander's HQ and everyone saluted as he was led to their map table.

The Major in charge filled Hawk in.

"Sir..."He pointed to the map in three places, "...these are the areas mutes were reported. As you see they are only a few miles apart and we pretty much think the three reports are about the same bunch of mutes and the trappers that reported them just saw the same mutes and were wrong about the location. Problem is none of us here have fought mutes out in the open...."

Hawk interrupted the Major and grinned. "Ok Major, I'll take this one. First, I see a train track, so give orders for the troops to load up on the train."

Hawk smiled, “Don’t want a bunch of tired troops. Second I want each man to carry an extra rifle. I want triple the ammo and I want more than a company or two. Maybe a light Brigade?”

“Not sure if all our troops are back yet General, but you’re welcome to take all you need.” The Major chuckled, “But personally I think it may be a bit of overkill, sir.”

Hawk laughed and added, “I can see you haven’t fought many mutes Major. I learned a long time ago to expect the unexpected from whatever enemy you’re up against. Mutes are no different.” Hawk paused and looked over the map, “You know Major, if you stop and think about it...” He pointed to the marks on the map, “...if the reports aren’t wrong and your planners are, then we could be facing a lot of mutes. Then what if there are more mutes that haven’t been spotted?” Hawk laughed, “You see Major how I think?”

“But General, let’s face it no pack of mutes larger than about ten or so have been spotted since the Sweep a little over a year ago. A bit of over kill?”

“Over kill is preferable Major, rather than getting killed.”

The Major nodded in agreement, “Well you are the boss, err, General.” The officers in the room all chuckled as Hawk grinned and turned toward the door.

Hawk turned slightly and asked, “Say Major, the map didn’t show a name of that place.”

The Major laughed, “Aww, General it’s some little valley in the mountains should be a nice ride up and back, a real scenic area. It’s some little place called Ford’s Gap.”

Hawk grinned and added as he left the room....

“Good I could use a vacation.”

The End.