

Borderlands: Lost

(A Short Story)

Sand. A vast dry desert. Dunes and valleys, endless flowing waves of rippling sand. So devoid of water that he could smell its dryness. Taste it. Feel it on his face. So very parched, it felt as if he would never know water again.

A voice spoke his name.

“Solomon.”

Not friendly, not threatening, just – a voice. A voice he had never – no, he knew this voice. He’d heard it before, from some time ago. From before the desert. From before the dry, dry sand...

“Solomon.”

How did the voice know him? There was no face to go with it, just the sound of the voice, echoing in his head. Why couldn’t it leave him alone? Leave him to this vast expanse of desert, this blistering sun, and the aching dryness all around...

“Solomon.” It was nearer now. Familiarity taunted him, just out of reach. He could almost remember. “Come on, Solomon. You’ve got to get up.”

His eyes slowly opened, and he was blinded at first, blinking, until the vista of the desert slowly came into focus, laid out before him. But it looked different. Smaller. Closer. Shapes in the background. It wasn’t a desert, it was...

“The sun is going down. We’ve got to get back to the settlement before the skags come out.”

He felt an arm reach underneath him, pulling him up. He tried to resist, but his muscles didn’t want to cooperate.

“Come on, you have to help me out here. We don’t have far to go, but I can’t take all your weight – not with my arm.” His arm was thrown across someone’s shoulders, and his weight shifting, he stumbled and almost fell. A scarred face, suddenly, in his field of view. Pierce. The voice belonged to Pierce.

Then it came back to him. Pierce coming to see him, the night before – or was it two nights? His “mission.” Beck and his gang of thugs. And Julia...

He pushed Pierce away, fell to his knees, and vomited onto the sand.

* * *

The day had been cold when he’d first arrived on Pandora, but clear. The mid-day sunlight, more harsh than he was used to, was slightly closer toward the blue end of the spectrum than the last world he’d been on. The air was thinner, too - they had told him it would take a little while for his lungs to adjust to the atmosphere. From what he’d heard from the other passengers on the transport, clear skies were typical here in the winter, though during the summer season much of the planet was plagued with constant electrical storms.

He stepped off the short-range shuttle, feeling the dry soil beneath his boots and the wind on his face, and instantly knew, on a gut level, that he was somewhere else. Somewhere alien. Somewhere that was... not home. *And where was home*, he wondered idly. Prometheus, where he grew up? Kronos, at the training base? Or was home the *Magellan*, the troop transport that had shuttled him and his men across the Cluster

throughout most of the war? None of those seemed right, seemed like they fit anymore. *Never really had a home. That was the problem.*

He heard the shuttle's engines power back up, and rose above the dry ground. The pilot obviously didn't want to remain dirtside any longer than necessary. As the craft lifted off behind him, the engine wash kicked up sand and debris from the ground, buffeting him, the cargo crates the shuttle had been delivering, and the few possessions he'd brought with him. A couple of duffel bags, the contents of his pockets, and a dented metal trunk contained everything he owned in the world. *This world, at least.*

The settlement didn't look like much from outside. The shuttle pilot had told him it used to be a plasma crystal mining facility, back when the planet had first been settled, but the mining conglomerate had abandoned it when the vein had tapped out a few years back. Most of the miners had left – the few of them that had remained were either unable to afford or not wanting to risk the journey to another world. Additional settlers had drifted in over the years, and while not exactly thriving, the settlement seemed to be surviving despite the odds. It was close enough to the spaceport at Sanctuary, in case he had to make a quick getaway, but isolated enough to suit his needs.

What a shithole, he thought. *To think I've been reduced to this, a life on the edge of the Cluster, the frontier of the frontier.* It was humiliating, really. But what choice did he have? The old anger, the rage that always burned within him, threatened to boil up and spill over. But he pushed it back down – anger was not going to get him anywhere, here. He had to blend in, become part of the background, and be forgotten. *No other choice at this point.*

Looking at his surrounding, he saw that the main settlement windbreak was built into a rift in the range of hills, a gap between two small peaks of black basalt. A long metal wall ran from one side of the rift to the other, separating the barren land outside from the buildings and people within. He could make out a rusty sign standing near the door in the center of the wall, the thin metal clanking in the wind. Most of the sign's message was missing due to the holes that had been shot in it, and the corrosion over the rest of it made it unreadable.

The surround terrain was had a harsh beauty, in a horrific sort of way. Jagged stone peaks dotted the landscape, as if a giant had dropped his toys into the sand...

"Lost?" a woman's voice asked. He turned to see the voice's owner peering at him through the glare. She and two men had come out through a secondary hangar door, riding a light runner mounted with treads that looked like they'd been pulled off some obsolete piece of mining equipment. The two others with her ignored him completely, more interested in the supply crates that had been dropped off than the passenger. He watched as they broke open the seals, checked the contents, then closed the crates again and hoisted them into the flat platform on the back of the cargo runner. One of them eyed the trunk he had brought with him, but one look at its owner convinced him not to try to open it.

"I supposed that depends on your definition of lost." He replied, turning back to the woman. "Where am I, exactly?"

The woman gave him an odd look, as if she were trying to decide whether or not to answer him seriously. She seemed a sturdy woman, someone who was used to getting her hands dirty during the course of a hard day's work. Settler-type – long on labor, long

on patience, but short on luck. This kind of planet was full of them. *Pretty enough, though. Especially for a place like this.*

“Grid point 31774. Former mining camp, established 521 G.E.” She gestured to the barren landscape around. “Also known as the pimple on the ass end of nowhere. And you are?”

He was about to respond, then reconsidered his answer and closed his mouth. She cocked her head slightly, as if wondering how it was he didn't know his own name. Putting out his hand, he said, “Solomon.”

She shook it – her rough palm had a stronger grip than most men he had known, even ones from the military. “Welcome to our little hole in the world. It ain't much, but once you get to know it... well, it still ain't much.” The two men drove past them, their runner loaded with the supply crates. Her eyes followed the battered vehicle for a moment as it drove past the main wall and entered a hangar-sized door cut into the hill to the left of the settlement's weather door. She turned back to him. “So are you just passing through, or are you here for a reason?”

“Why? Are you the welcoming committee?”

“Let's just say that we value hard work and useful skills around here, if someone who's planning to stick around can make themselves useful. Anyone who ain't, we don't have much time for - the last thing we need is another mouth to feed.” He didn't respond, so she asked, “So what can you do?”

He looked at her, weighing his reply.

“I dunno.” He gestured to the settlement, and the surrounding landscape. “What do you need?”

Sighing, she turned around and walked back towards the main entrance. After a few steps, she looked back, impatiently waiting for him to catch up. He slung a duffle over each shoulder, and then followed her, dragging the heavy trunk behind him. “I didn't catch the name.”

She punched in an access code to the main door, and stood back as it rolled aside. “Julia.” She glanced back at him, but didn't offer any help with his luggage. “Welcome to New Haven.”

At first the settlers had been distrustful, and had mostly shunned him. His refusal to answer any questions about himself or his past, including how he came to Pandora, hadn't helped any. But as he'd surmised, there were others there who didn't talk much about their own histories - a lot of people here had something to hide, it seemed. This type of world, this type of life, tended to attract those who wanted to start again, to escape their pasts, to wipe the slate clean. *Though 'clean' in this environment is a relative term...*

They started him with shit jobs, at first. Stacking supply crates, cleaning corrosion from machine parts, flushing out the sewage lines, and occasionally dragging carcasses of the local indigenous predators that had wandered too close to the sentry guns to the ravine on the other side of the hill. When they got a little more comfortable with him, they had him stand guard watch occasionally, patrolling the settlement wall and keeping an eye out for skags and bandit groups in the barrens during the planet's 92-hour night cycle. There wasn't any more room in the barracks, so they set him up on an old military-surplus cot in a corner of the storage shed at the back of the settlement.

He performed every task asked of him, without comment, and without complaint. Sometimes one or two of the settlers would try to engage him in conversation, asking him where he had traveled or whether he had any family. He rarely replied. Occasionally, he would overhear a few of them talking about him, though they would clam up as soon as they saw him approach. He ignored it, concentrating on his assigned tasks and retreating to his bunk at the end of his long shifts.

When he wanted to be alone, he would climb up the cliffs behind the settlement buildings and sit on a ledge, overlooking the barren ground surrounding the tiny outpost. At times, he thought he could see some kind of creatures flying in the distance, something he hadn't heard the settlers talk about. He could never quite make out what they were, though, so he never mentioned them to anyone else.

One day, walking past the mechanic shop, Solomon heard a scream from inside. Brock, the settlement's resident gearhead, was lying on the floor, his legs trapped underneath the hydraulic lift which was used to elevate the settlement vehicles for undercarriage maintenance. One of the high-pressure lines had obviously ruptured – there was hydraulic fluid all over the floor and the lift was tilted at a crazy angle, pinning the mechanic beneath. Running in, he saw the younger mechanic, a grease monkey with the unlikely name “Jimbo,” trying to drag Brock out from under the lift. As he pulled, blood from a gash in Brock's thigh sprayed across the floor, and the older man screamed until Jimbo stopped pulling.

“Help me pull!” Jimbo yelled at him. “I can't get him out by myself!”

Solomon reached under his jacket and pulled out his combat knife from the holster slung across his back.

“What are you doing?”

“We have to cut the other line,” he replied, raising the knife.

“Are you insane? He's already trapped under this side – if you bring that side down you'll kill him for sure!”

He eyed Brock, who was white as a sheet and staring up at him with terrified eyes. “Trust me. He's going into shock,” he told the other man. “If we don't get him out now, he's not going to make it.”

He brought the knife down in an arc to slash through the hose, which began gushing more of the purple hydraulic fluid. Immediately, the other side of the lift began to sink toward the floor, eliciting a cry from the man underneath. But with the release of torque on the opposite side, the end trapping Brock loosened, and dropping the knife to the floor, Solomon was able to get his hands underneath the metal. He planted his feet firmly, grabbed the side of the lift with both hands, and pulled with all his strength. The lift rose a centimeter, then two, his bulging muscles slowly overcoming the dead weight.

Jimbo stared at him, astonished. “Pull him out!” Solomon gasped, through clenched teeth. “I can't hold it... much... longer!” Jimbo reached down to grab Brock under the armpits, and with a grunt, pulled him out from under the lift. As soon as the man's leg was clear, Solomon dropped the lift, and without any hydraulic pressure, it came down with a crash of tortured metal.

Solomon collapsed onto the floor, panting, shaking his head to clear the spots that were dancing across his vision. Looking over at the other two men, he saw Julia was standing behind them, her mouth open and her eyes wide as saucers. He hadn't even

noticed her come in. Pierce, the settlement manager, ran in behind her, assessing the situation and immediately moving over to the wounded mechanic.

“Julia!” Pierce snapped, unbuckling her belt and pulling it off. “Call Sanctuary and tell them to send the shuttle. Tell them we have a wounded man who needs immediate evac to their med center. We’ll square it with them for whatever they need later on.”

Julia, wild-eyed, didn’t move, but just kept staring at Solomon, and at the blood on the floor.

“Now!” Pierce bellowed, and the other woman snapped out of it and ran out the door. Pierce tied her belt around Brock’s leg, cinching it tight and using it as a makeshift tourniquet to cut off the blood supply to the wound. The bleeding from the gash in the man’s leg slowed almost immediately. She grabbed Brock’s chin with a blood-smear hand, and forced him to look at her scarred face. “You’re going to be all right, Brock. You hear me?” The ashen man nodded, his eyes glassy. “This is just a scratch. They’ll get you patched up in Sanctuary and you’ll be back here before the day is out.” The obviously broken leg was bent at an odd angle, and as she gingerly probed Brock’s leg with her fingers, he gasped, causing her to withdraw her hand.

Solomon, slowly catching his breath, looked down at his hands. *Damn things feel like they’re about to fall off.* Pierce looked over at him, asking “Are you all right?” He nodded, and she watched silently as he picked up his knife, and with some difficulty, slid it back into the sheath under his jacket.

Julia came running back in. “Shuttle will be here in seven minutes. They’ve alerted the med center, and the med-tech will be ready as soon as he shows up.” She looked down at Solomon, putting her hand on his arms. “I’ve never seen anything like that. It’s a good thing for Brock that you were here, Solomon.” He nodded, cradling his bruised hands to his chest.

Life was different for him, after that. The other settlers began greeting Solomon with a nod when they saw him, and occasionally starting conversations with him about the weather, skag sightings, or even asking his opinion about settlement matters. With Brock laid up at the med center, he was asked to fill in at the mechanic shop, and showed an aptitude for repairing and upgrading the settlement’s vehicles and equipment. Gradually, he began to feel like he fit in, like he belonged.

It was something he hadn’t felt for a very long time.

Occasionally, he saw Julia, usually when she walking back to the female barracks from the command center. She usually manned the settlement radio, though she did her fair share of manual labor as well. Everyone at the settlement wore several hats, and though it seemed like there were rarely enough hands to get everything accomplished, somehow it all managed to get done. After the incident with the mechanics, Julia had been much friendlier, smiling at him when she passed him in the common area and occasionally eating lunch with him at the cantina.

When Brock got back from the med station a few days later, he insisted on thanking “the man of the hour” personally for saving his life. He had brought back two bottles of whiskey from the Sanctuary base exchange, and demanded that the two of them drink them both that very night, with the rest of the settlers, in celebration of his “brush with death.” Two hours after the sun went down, the entire settlement was singing

outlandish drinking songs, offering each other toasts, and laughing until their sides hurt. It was the most pleasant time Solomon could remember having for a very long time – despite the fact that with the thin atmosphere of this planet, everyone was going to be incredibly hung over the next morning.

Pierce, apparently not much of a drinker, hadn't shown up for the party – but Julia had stayed until the very end. As she, Brock, Jimbo, and Solomon stumbled out of the main building and headed for the dormitory, she leaned on him for support, her alcohol-laced breath warm on his cheek. Brock and Jimbo veered off towards the male barracks, but instead of heading to the female building, Julia asked to see where he slept. She walked with him to his cot, matching his stride, her arm around his waist.

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Cool water, touching his lips, trickling into his parched mouth and down his throat. He almost threw up again, a purely reflex action as the water hit the back of his esophagus. He settled for coughing, his lungs convulsing, and the cup was drawn away. When the spasms had subsided, the hand pushed the cup back, and he grabbed it. Fighting the urge to cough again, he swallowed the water as quickly as he could, feeling it flow down his ravaged throat. He emptied the cup, and handed it back.

“More.”

He emptied the refilled cup that was put in front of him, and the one after that.

“Slow down! You'd think you'd never seen water before.” The empty cup went away. “How do you feel?”

Better. The desert in his head had receded, and some semblance of normality came back to him. He turned his head, looking up towards the voice, and instantly regretted it. A dull explosion screamed inside his head, his brain feeling like it was rattling in his skull. Steeling himself against the pain, he peered up again, seeing Pierce staring down at him. From where he was sitting, the sun was behind him, shining in through the scratched and pitted window, bringing back the image of the desert. He pushed the thought back, buried it within. *No – only a dream.* He focused on Pierce again.

“Where...” he croaked.

“About 10 clicks from the settlement. You were lying in the sand, beaten to hell, blood all over your face. When I first saw you, I thought you were dead. I can't believe that I was able to find you out there.” She paused a moment, looking pensive. “What happened?”

He reached a hand up to touch his face, and immediately drew it back. There was sticky, half-dried blood on it. His stomach heaved again, but with great effort he clamped down on it, gritting his teeth.

“Bathroom. Now.”

Pierce helped him up, the servos in her mechanical arm whining in protest, and together they staggered towards the stall at the back of the room. Thinking he needed to vomit again, Pierce pulled the lid up on the steel toilet, but he pushed him back and turned to look at his reflection in the mirror.

Hammered shit. That's what his old drill sergeant, Sgt. Pulaski, would have called the face that was staring back at him. *You look like hammered shit, son. Hope you*

gave as good as you got. His entire face was puffy and swollen, and covered with purplish bruises. His left eye was cut open above the brow, and there was sticky brown blood all over his face. He didn't even want to look at the rest of his body. *Looks like you took quite a beating, soldier. Shoulda fought back harder. Now drop and give me twenty.* He ran the water in the rusted metal sink, splashing the thin cold stream onto his face, and cleaned off the dried blood as best he could. The backs of his hands ached, and his knuckles were raw with scrapes and bruises. When he turned around, Pierce handed him a cleanish rag – wincing, he wiped his battered face off, dropped the rag into the sink, and sat back down on a crate next to the bathroom stall.

“Feel any better?” she asked. He nodded, lying. He felt worse, but only because he was fully conscious, and thus aware of how badly his body hurt. He could barely move. The previous night's events, though hazy, were coming back to him piece by piece.

“Jesus, Solomon. You could have died out there, the shape you were in. You're lucky I saw you when I did.” He stared up at her, his eyes involuntarily being drawn to the deep scars the cut into the left side of her face, and the milky damaged eye which stared at him intently now. She'd lost the left half of her face during a skag attack, he'd heard. Arm too. Julia had told him that she-

“Julia...?” he managed to get out, already knowing what the answer was going to be.

Pierce was silent for a moment, then shook her head. “I'm sorry.” She paused for a moment, a silent moment for the news to sink in, before continuing. “Solomon – for God's sakes, what happened?”

* * *

He'd been in the garage, lying underneath the settlement quad-track and replacing its burned-out compressor control chip with one he'd salvaged from another vehicle. Hearing someone approaching, he glanced out from under the vehicle, to see a long pair of boots, made from local chinth-hide, approaching his shop from across the hard-packed dirt street. Immediately he knew who it was - there weren't many women in New Haven, and only one who wore those kinds of boots.

“Solomon?” the owner of the boots called out. “It's Pierce.” She paused. “We need to talk.”

Ignoring her, he plugged the salvaged chip into the housing and snapped it shut. He'd never liked the administrator much, and unlike the other settlers, after the incident in the mechanic shop she had been even more standoffish, and hadn't said a word to him. Though she never mentioned it, he knew that the strength he displayed in saving Brock, along with the knife she had seen that he kept under his jacket, had made her suspicious. He didn't go out of his way to talk with her either, but he didn't cause her any problems, and had never called her “Ms. Dealbreaker” behind her back like some of the other men in the settlement. They generally just ignored each other – as much as any two people could in a place this small. *Sure, it was a shame what had happened to her, the skag attack and all, but lots of bad things happened to people out here.*

Re-mounting the controller unit next to the compressor, he started re-attaching the cabling. Now if he could just get the thing to start...

“Solomon, could you come out from under there? Please?”

That got his attention. In the eighteen months he'd been at New Haven, he'd never heard Pierce use the word “please” before – she must need something pretty badly. Making one last attempt to get rid of her, Solomon replied, “Kinda busy here, Helena. Can't it wait until later?”

“No. No, it can't.” She paused again, and he was suddenly concerned. Pierce was never at a loss for words. He felt something gathering behind his ribcage, putting pressure on his chest and making it hard to breathe. “It's about Julia.”

He froze. The ratchet he was using clanked to the plasteel floor as he rolled out from underneath the quad-track.

All it took was one look at Pierce's mangled face, and he knew.

“What about her?” he asked anyway. “She's was on her way back from Waterfront with that set of new power cells. What happened?”

Pierce looked pained. “I'm... I'm sorry, Solomon. Marcus was on a salvage run to the old military bunker, down by the mud flats. He found her runner out there, crashed on the rocks near the trail, picked clean of armor and weapons. It looks like the bandits got her.” She bit her lip, and looked at the floor. “Julia's gone.”

He swallowed, his face as impassive as stone. He picked his next words carefully. “Why are you telling me?”

She shifted her weight, still staring at the floor. “Because I know that you too are... friends. I thought you would want to hear about it first.” So Pierce knew about them – well, they'd tried to keep their relationship a secret at first, but in such a small town that was pretty much impossible. But by the tone of her voice, he knew there was something else.

“Yeah, we're friends. So what are we going to do to get her back?”

“Well, that's the problem. The closest bandit group around here is Beck's band of criminals over in the alien ruins, about 5 klicks to the west. They're probably the ones that got her. But none of us here have much in the way of combat experience, and the bandits have rigged booby traps all over the canyon between here and there. Anyone going in probably won't make it out alive.” She looked back up and gazed at him intently. “Anyone but you.”

“Me? Why me?” he asked, dreading her answer.

“Because you used to be a soldier.” *Damnit, she knew somehow!* “Because I know you must be running from the military – they don't let someone with your kind of training go willingly.” She shifted her weight, as if steeling herself for what she had to say.

“Let me be clear - I want Julia back. She's one of my people – I've known her since she was seventeen. She's part of my family here, and I will not lose any of my family.” She eyed him evenly.

“So here's how it's going to be – you are going to head over to those ruins. You are going to do whatever it takes to get Julia back to us. And you are going to ‘do what soldiers do’ to those bandit assholes, and make sure this kind of thing never happens again, to any of us – or I'm going to place a call to the local military attaché and tell them where you are – and they will drag you back for trial and execution.”

After Pierce left, he went back to the storage shed, and walked past the racks of supply crates, tools, boxes, broken and dead mechanical components, and other detritus to his cot at the back. The narrow bed's rusty springs squeaked in protest as he sat down, and it bowed somewhat in the middle, but the sheets barely crinkled, tucked in tight under the thin mattress pad with military precision. *Can still bounce a 10-credit coin off the sheet*, he thought idly. *Old habits die hard*. It suddenly seemed ridiculous to him, that he had ever thought he could hide from his past. That he could hide who he was. What an idiot he'd been - it must have been obvious from the first day he arrived.

He felt the anger again, then. The ever-present rage he kept deep inside. He kept it on such a tight leash, caged inside him, but he could feel it now, straining and pushing to be released. No - not now. He had to focus his efforts, to use his anger to fuel his resolve, not let it get the better of him. He had to focus - the way he was trained.

Analyze the situation, examine the options, and make a decision. But it's obvious that there's only one course of action that's really open here. No avoiding it. He sighed, stood up... and heaved the cot against the far wall.

The floor underneath was comprised of several mismatched sheets of plasteel. Removing his knife from its sheath, he carefully slid the 7-inch carbon-fiber blade between two of the panels. He pried up one corner, bending the thin metal until he could get both hands underneath, and tugged it out of position, slicing his hand open on the sharp metal edge in the process. Wrapping his hand in a towel to stop the bleeding, he slit the laminated sheeting underneath, cutting three long slices, and peeling back the resulting rectangular section to reveal the bare Pandora dirt underneath.

Using the knife as a trowel, he started digging into the rocky soil, compacted from a year and a half of the weight of his sleeping quarters pressing onto it. He scooped dirt out by the handful, digging down 6 or 8 centimeters until he hit something hard. Clearing the dust away revealed the top of a tarnished metal footlocker, military issue, with a bar code laser-etched across the top. He dug down the side of the trunk until he found a handle, then wiped off his knife and returned it to its hiding place under his jacket. With a grunt of effort, he grabbed the handle and pulled the trunk up out of the hole, spilling dry soil onto the mismatched metal floor around it.

The electronic lock, though corroded, still functioned, and the latch released with a slight hiss of equalizing air pressure. It had been sealed on another world, with a different atmosphere. He closed his eyes for a moment, memories flooding back to him. *Shoe polish on spit-shined boots. Cold rain on his face, legs aching as he ran through the training course. Flags flapping in the wind.* But the memories turned dark, as they always did. *Orphaned children, missing limbs, crying over the dead bodies of their parents. Screams of dying squad mates - friends. The smell of burned human flesh, mixed with ash and blood. The rage, burning so hot inside him, driving him to...* Pushing the memories away, with a gasp he opened his eyes. Willing his heartbeat to slow back down, he forced himself to focus back to the task at hand. There would be time enough to unleash his rage, to uncage the demon inside and let him run free. He took a deep breath, and swung open the lid of the trunk.

Everything was just as he had left it. As he began removing the contents and placing them on the bed, his mind fell back into old patterns, rattling off names and equipment specs that had been drilled into him. *Semiautomatic M220 combat pistol. ZX900 ballistic body armor, with integrated IR HUD headset and built-in*

compass/rangefinder. FE-99 fragmentation grenades. Ceramic trench knife. Web belt and battle harness. Military-grade steel-toed combat boots. Tracking flares. Ammo clips. All of it appeared to be in good shape, the sealed trunk protecting its contents from rust and dirt, but... He frowned. It's just not enough. Not nearly enough for what I need to do.

At the bottom of the trunk, after all the weapons and gear had been removed, was an old army blanket, hiding sixteen small, brick-shaped objects underneath, wrapped in paper with official seals stamped on them. On top of them was a small synthwood cigar box with a faded, peeling yellow label. He picked up that last item, his hand trembling slightly, and cursed himself for his own weakness. Staring at the box, the memories threatened to come back, to overwhelm him. *Goddamnit. I thought I'd put all this behind me.* But he now knew that it was untrue. It was why he had buried the trunk in the first place, instead of getting rid of it. It was why he'd come here, into the middle of nowhere, lost in a tiny settlement on a backwater world, trying to outrun his past. He saw now how foolish that all had been. *It catches up, eventually. No matter what you do, where you go, or how far you run, the past always catches up.*

He couldn't bring himself to open the wooden box. He pulled the brick-shaped bundles out from under the blanket, stuffed all but one of them into a heavy duffel bag. The last bundle he pushed into the pocket of his jacket, then placed the cigar box back into the trunk and closed the lid. He pushed the dented box back into the hole, packing the dirt back over the top and re-sealing the plastic and metal covering it, until at a casual glance, one couldn't tell it had been dug up.

Sitting on a crate in front of the cot, he started to methodically strip and clean each of the weapons, preparing himself for the task ahead. Every so often he would glance at the duffel bag, thinking about its contents. As heavy as the bag was, it was nothing compared to the weight he felt pressing on his soul.

Pulling the hatch open, he stuffed the duffel bag and his gear into the cargo compartment of the quad-track, and closed the hatch, testing it for strength to make sure it wouldn't rattle loose while he was driving the vehicle. The armaments he had retrieved from the trunk would get him part of the way, but they weren't going to be enough. To do what he needed to do, he was going to need something more serious.

Braving the mid-day wind, he left the garage and crossed the settlement to the supply building. Marcus, the base exchange officer, had the awning up, and was busy re-stacking crates of supplies in the cramped space. Not afraid of hard work, Marcus, and a nice enough guy, for the most part – though he seemed to enjoy his position a little too much, especially when it came to denying supply requests from people he didn't like. He was definitely someone you wanted as a friend instead of an enemy.

Marcus looked up as he approached. His usually jovial face was somber, and for once he didn't offer his customary handshake.

"Solomon. There you are. Pierce said you might be stopping by." He paused a moment, and looked down. "I heard about Julia – I'm sorry. Awful shame, what happened to her. Awful shame. It seems like we've buried so many--"

His voice was tight. "She's not dead." *Not yet.* He didn't want to drag this out any longer than he had to, so he got to the point. "Do you have something I can use?"

Marcus looked up at him intently. “Uh, yeah. Got something right here. No problem.” He broke off, looking uncomfortable and searching for words. “But Solomon, man, don’t you think... I mean, have you thought this through? Are you sure you want to do this?”

He stared defiantly back at the older man, but seeing compassion on his face, not recrimination, he relaxed his tone somewhat. “I’m sure,” he told him. Marcus meant well, but now was not the time.

“But shouldn’t you –”

“I’m sure.”

Marcus looked at him for a moment, sighed, and gave a resigned shrug. “Suit yourself.” He turned and went to the table behind him, picking up an oilcloth-wrapped oblong package from the stained surface. Returning, he put it onto the counter between them, and slowly unwrapped the leather.

“Pierce said that if you came asking, I should give you the best gun I’ve got, ‘no questions asked’.” He gestured towards the piece lying on the table. “This is it.”

Solomon hefted the weapon, getting a feel for its weight and peering down the sights.

“You ever use one of these before?” the smith asked him. “I mean, I’m sure you’ve fired a gun or two in your time, but have you ever used one of these? It’s not your typical scattergun, if you catch my drift.”

He looked up at Marcus. “Enlighten me.”

“This here is a Jakobs SG-101 20-gauge semi-automatic combat shotgun. As fine a close-quarters, hand-held anti-infantry weapon as has ever been created.”

He peered at the gun, inspecting the hammer and gas-powered loader. “Range?”

“This will knock a man down at 50 feet, provided you aim it anywhere near his general direction.”

“Action?”

“3-chambered, magnum-style shell revolver. Shoots 2 rounds per shot, six shells in a row, with a custom quick-release ejection system for faster reloads.”

He opened the breech, inspecting the interior. It has been fired at least a few times. Good. “What kind of ammo does it fire?”

“Standard buckshot as well as heavy slug rounds. I also re-tooled the chamber to handle interceptors. You can even use phosphorous loads, provided you don’t fire more than five or six at a time. Any more than that and you’d melt the barrel.” He picked up a box from the shelf behind him, and put it down on the counter. Shells with casings of various colors were jumbled up inside.

“How is this thing gonna hold up out there?” He jerked his thumb to the barrels past the settlement wall.

“Better than you will, I’d imagine. Rust-proof, nickel-plated, self-sealing against dust and moisture. It’ll still fire even if you pour a handful of sand into the chamber – though I wouldn’t advise that. Rugged and durable.”

He flipped the gun over, spinning the barrel, and watching the chambers rotate by smoothly. The gun smelled of oil and cordite, and despite a few scratches in the finish appeared to be in remarkably good condition, especially for an environment as harsh as this one. *Probably stolen from an offworlder...*

Solomon set the gun back down on the counter, next to the box of shells, and looked up at Marcus. “This will do. How much?” He started to pull the wrapped brick from the pocket in his jacket.

“Well, that’s the thing. When Pierce came by, she said that I should make sure you get the best gun I have. I been holding onto this one for a while now – did most of the retooling myself. Been saving it for a special-”

Leaving the bundle in his pocket where it was, Solomon leaned forward, and grabbed the front of the shopkeeper’s jacket, pulling him up against the counter. “How. Much.” he repeated slowly, with menace in his voice.

Marcus looked back at him, and smiled thinly. “Well, since you put it that way... don’t worry about it. It’s already been paid for.” Solomon released the man, staring at him for a moment, then filled his pockets with ammunition from the box before picking the shotgun back up and shouldering it. As he turned to walk away, he heard Marcus’ final remark.

“Pierce said to tell you ‘good hunting.’”

He made his way back down to the garage, carrying his new friend with him. Settling behind the wheel, he plunked the shotgun down next to his seat, and gunning the quad-track’s engine, plowed forward out of the hangar and into the dusty daylight beyond the settlement wall.

* * *

“Solomon, can you hear me?”

He was staring at Pierce’s skag-skin boots. There was something unusual about them – something he’d never noticed before. The boots were dusty, like everything else on this planet, but not dirty – beneath the thin coating of dust was black leather, polished to a high sheen, and as meticulously maintained as was possible – for here, anyway. It was as if the owner of the boots in question had rarely had an opportunity to get them really dirty, and when she did, she had meticulously polished them to a high shine, despite the fact that they would just get dirty again. *I guess the administrator doesn’t have to do a lot of the manual labor around here. Not like the rest of us.*

He looked up at Pierce, and saw the administrator looking down at him with a frown on her horribly scarred visage. His stomach lurched again, but he ignored it. Sighing, he resigned himself to the fact that Pierce wasn’t going to just go away.

Not that any of this mattered now. He’s been ready to die, out there in the barrens. Would have welcomed it. Until Pierce found him lying in the sand, a few hours from complete dehydration and a painful death. Found him out there, in the middle of nowhere, kilometers from the settlement and any landmark...

“What were you doing out there?” he asked. “And how did you find me?”

“I went out looking for you. You’re lucky I did, because if you’d been out there for a few hours longer-”

“But how did you find me?” he asked again. “They dumped me pretty far north of the ruins, out by the mud coast. I must have made it at least ten clicks before I couldn’t go any further, and still didn’t recognize the terrain. There’s no way you could have known where I was unless you...”

He looked up at Pierce, and she looked back at him evenly, but for a moment, her eyes flicked over the far corner of the garage. Over where... the trunk was buried.

He started getting a sinking feeling in his gut. Something wasn't right here. He looked over at the floor under his cot, and saw it had been pulled up. He had been very careful to replace the plasteel sheeting after he had retrieved his weapons and gear from the trunk. Someone had been in here – someone who knew right where to look...

The click of a hammer being pulled back returned his attention to Pierce. She was holding a pistol pointed in his direction, her organic hand rock steady on the gun's grip.

"You were following me," he said.

"Yes," she replied evenly. "I was. I needed to know if you had completed your task." Her dead eye gazed at him, sightlessly, while the live one seemed hard as a brown chip of stone. "I'm not one to trust someone's abilities purely by their reputation. Not even a reputation like yours – Mr. Steele."

He stiffened, his pulse racing, his battered hand unconsciously clenched into a fist at his side. He tried to force himself to relax, afraid his facial expression would betray him.

"Never heard of him."

"Oh, come now. Don't insult my intelligence."

Steadying himself, he asked, "How long have you known?"

"How long? Since you got here. I am the settlement manager and local security administrator, after all."

"Bullshit."

Pierce was silent for a moment, then sighed. "You're right, of course. Sealed military records aren't something that someone in my position would normally have access to. Let's just say I have a friend, and this friend knows someone who works in the records building at the military facility on Kronos."

He didn't reply. He realized that he had never really seen her uneasy before. Her face was a contradiction – high cheekbones, full sensuous lips, and a strikingly blue eye, right next to that hideous scar tissue. She must have been quite beautiful, before, but he realized now whoever she used to be, whatever she had gone through, that she had never been a victim.

Appearing unnerved at his silence, she continued. "Come now – this is Pandora. It's not the kind of planet that anyone comes to unless they are dim-witted enough to believe the Resettlement Bureau's propaganda, or they are running from something." She shifted the grip on his gun. "And you don't strike me as particularly stupid, 'Solomon.'. As soon as I saw you rescue Brock from under that lift, it was clear that you had undergone military muscle enhancement, but it was when I saw that elite corps knife you keep under your jacket that I figured it out. It wasn't hard to confirm your identity - I mean, even out here we've heard of Colonel Corran Steele – the Butcher of the Ninth Brigade."

The next statement was obvious, but he said it anyway. "You set me up."

She actually laughed, nervously, something he didn't know she was even capable of.

"Yes. Yes, I did. We've put up with those bandit assholes for far too long. The men here were all too scared of them to do anything about it. So I knew I needed someone else, someone who could get the job done. I knew that someone was you."

“What do you want?” he growled.

She feigned ignorance with an expression of mock sincerity. “What makes you think I want anything from you?”

His fist clenched again, and he could feel the rage welling up inside him, ready to burst. “What... do... you... want?” he spoke from between gritted teeth.

“What else? I want you.” He frowned, prompting a wry grin from her. “Not that way, I’m afraid. At last posting, the bounty on your head was worth 2.3 million. Almost as much as the bullion shipment you stole after you escaped from custody.”

His fist tightened even harder. He could feel his fingernails digging into the cracked flesh of his palms. “And you think that you and your little town of losers can deliver me to the military and collect the reward?”

Pierce’s grin faded somewhat, though didn’t disappear – but her voice turned hard as stone. “Not at all. The moment you left our camp to go on your misguided little errand of revenge, I called in a few favors to some gunners I know. They are already on the way here, and when they arrive, I will hand you over and be done with this.”

He played a desperate card. “Do you really think Brock and Marcus are going to go along with that? I saved Brock’s life, for Christ sakes.”

“Please! As soon as I tell them who you really are, they’ll deliver you to the feds themselves. Your reputation proceeds you, Colonel.” She laughed again, an empty, humorless sound, and he knew that she was right.

“It’s funny – your bounty states that you are worth more alive than dead, but for the sake of ridding ourselves of those filthy vermin out there, I was willing to accept the smaller of the two rewards. It made perfect sense – once you went tearing through that lot, their forces would have been dwindled, and when the gunners arrived they would have had no trouble cleaning the rest of them out when they went in to retrieve your body for the bounty. But to my surprise, you survived. So it looks like the settlers of New Haven get a share of the full reward after all.”

“And you? What do you get out of this mindfuck?” he growled.

“Isn’t it obvious? With my cut of the bounty on you – say, 60/40 – I’m going to get enough credits to keep this place running for another five years, and some decent food and equipment for a change. And I got rid of Beck and most of his bastards out there in the ruins.” She shifted the gun to her other hand, the mechanical one that had replaced her arm after the skag had chewed the original off. “I also get rid of you. I’m not in the habit of keeping mass murderers around.” Her tone changed. “It’s a shame, really. I liked you, Solomon. I thought you would work out here – really, I did. You worked hard, you never complained, and you had skills that are valuable.” She tightened her grip. “But once I found out who you are, I’m afraid I just couldn’t take the chance that you’ll go back to who you were. Others here have black marks in their past, but nothing like yours. You are just too much of a risk, and I have to protect my people.”

She looked resolute – the look of someone who didn’t like what they had to do, but who believed in the righteousness of their actions.

“You know, I could hear the gunfire, and the screaming, even as far away as I was. Did you enjoy it? Did it feel good, get your blood pumping, after denying yourself for so long?” He didn’t answer – nothing he could have said at this point would make any different anyway.

“I don’t imagine you killed them all, no matter how good you are, but you certainly reduced their numbers enough. And I doubt you could’ve escaped unless you disposed of Beck.” She cocked her head. “Not that it really matters at this point, but just how did you get away, exactly?”

* * *

An hour after leaving the settlement, he had negotiated the 15 kilometers of treacherous terrain between New Haven and the bandit encampment, and was approaching it from the south. The bandits were currently squatting in some alien ruins – they had rigged up some kind of floodlights, so the rock columns and walls of the structures were easy to spot, shining like a beacon in the darkness. *Probably afraid of the dark, ignorant bastards.*

Built on a plateau and constructed of locally quarried stone, no one knew who or what had left the ruins behind. The early survey expeditions of the planet had missed the towering plinths due to the planet’s low cloud cover in this particular region. One of the early mining crew had stumbled across the city during a survey expedition – but after a thorough search of the broken towers, fallen arches, and winding bridges, nothing of value was found, and so they had lain largely ignored for the last 10 years. Recently, a group of bandits had taken up residence, inhabiting the crumbling monuments and defending the place as their home, using it as a base to conduct raiding parties and prey on passing travelers. *People like Julia.*

The bandit group usually posted sentries, so when he reached the outskirts of the plateau, Steele killed the engine and parked the quad-track under a cliff overhang. Dismounting the vehicle, he pulled the bag from the storage compartment and strapped on his gear. Leaving the heavy bricks still inside, he re-sealed the bag into the quad-track’s cargo compartment and left the vehicle behind.

Walking up the trail towards the ruins, he scanned the path ahead of him until he came across the first of the traps – a crude snare nestled amongst the rocks. Silently laughing to himself, he easily sidestepped it and went on. He came across several other similar traps hidden in the underbrush or half-buried under the trail – pits dug and then covered with dead foliage, tripwires, and the like – each wildly obvious to anyone who knew what to look for and thus easily avoidable.

Eventually, he came across one of the leather-clad bandits, crouched amongst the rocks, holding a gun in one hand and rubbing his arms to stay warm. Stepping off the path, Steele crept through the bracken and silently moved up behind the lone sentry. Grabbing him from behind, he disarmed the man with one hand and forced him into a chokehold with the other in one swift movement, cutting off both his ability to speak and most of his oxygen supply. He struggled for a moment, forcing Steele to increase pressure on his throat.

“Hold still and I won’t have to kill you.” he growled. “Got it?” The man nodded, and he relaxed his hold on his neck slightly.

“Are you out here alone?” Another nod. *Amateurs.* “How many of you are there altogether?” The man thought for a second, then raised his hands, displaying all 10 fingers, three times. *Thirty – probably all armed.* “Is everyone asleep now?” The bandit hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. He tightened his grip on the man’s throat.

“Don’t lie to me - your life depends on your answers. How many of you as on guard watch?” The sentry slowly held up four fingers. “Good. Now I’m going to loosen my grip, and you’re going to answer one more question. You tell me the truth, and you’ll just take a nap – lie to me and I’ll snap your neck. Got it?” He lessened his grip on the man’s throat when he felt a nod.

“Where’s Beck?”

Crouching outside the doorway, Steele considered his options.

Predictably, Beck occupied the highest habitable building in the ruins. The stone tower housed several of his men in a lower room, with a long set of stairs leading up to it from the front. Steele had climbed around the back of the structure, his hands and feet easily finding purchase in cracks and nooks in the centuries-old cracked stone walls. After silently dispatching the guard outside the tower, he had snuck inside, and found two more men sleeping on chairs in the antechamber leading to Beck’s quarters. He made sure neither of them would be waking up anytime soon, and then paused to consider his next move.

The obvious action would be to sneak around the back of the tower, find an opportune moment to enter the window, and try to take out Beck and anyone else in the room before they work up. But he wasn’t sure he could hold on to the sheer side of the tower without climbing equipment, and he was likely to be spotted by one of the sentries before he made it in.

Or, he could kick this door open, charge into the room, and kill everything that moved until he had cornered Beck, then beat the information he wanted out of him. That course of action would surely bring every bandit in this place running to this tower, and make escape nearly impossible, even using Beck as a shield. Besides – based on what he’d seen so far, these men were not only badly trained and organized, but they were far more likely to kill him and Beck before they realized what was going on.

And none of this was going to get Julia back.

Julia. He had to admit to himself the possibility that she might be in the room on the other side of this door, being used as a plaything by Beck or possibly his men. The thought of it made his blood boil, and it was all he could do not to rise from his position and barge in, gunning down everyone he could see. But he’d overheard a conversation between two sentries on the way in, and neither of them had mentioned their hostage or anything about the kidnapping. Something about all of this just didn’t feel right.

Forcing himself to calm his rage, he came to a decision. Bracing himself against the stone wall, he faced the door to the antechamber and kicked with all of his might. Light from the spotlights in the hallway spilled into the room, and the two men inside – one on a cot, the other sitting in a chair by the window – were suddenly visible.

Before either of the just-woken men had time to reach for a gun, Steel was on them. He tackled the man in the chair to the floor, kicking his gun away. Planting his boot firmly in the man's neck, he leveled his shotgun at the other, who had just grabbed a machine gun sitting on a pile of crates next to the cot. *Beck.*

“Don’t.” Beck’s hands released the gun, and he turned to face Steele.

“You have a choice here, Beck. You have something that belongs to me, and I want it back. The life of this man,” he wedged his boot into the throat of the man on the floor a little tighter, eliciting a grunt from him, “is in your hands. His life, and then

yours, are going to continue or end based on your answer to one question. Do we understand each other?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Beck demanded, to which Steele replied by striking him across the face with the butt of his shotgun, knocking him backwards onto the cot.

"I'm asking the questions here. And I asked if you understood me?"

Beck glared back at him, wiping blood from the side of his mouth. He glanced down at the man on the floor, and then back over at his gun on the crates, as if trying to figure out if he could make it before he got shot. Apparently he decided his odds weren't in his favor, because he left the gun where it was and looked back at Steele. "I heard you. What the fuck do you want?"

"Where's the woman you kidnapped yesterday, from down by the old military bunker?"

"Woman? What woman?"

Without taking his eyes off Beck, he pulled a pistol from his belt, and shot the man on the floor in the forehead. Beck flinched back, and looked up at Steele with defiant hatred in his eyes.

"I'll ask again – and if I don't get the answer I want, you're next. Where is the woman?"

At that moment, two more of Beck's men crashed through the doorway into the room, their guns drawn. Steele grabbed Beck and pulled him to his feet, putting him between the two newcomers and himself, and jamming his pistol to Beck's temple, and training his shotgun on the other two.

"Easy, guys. You don't want to shoot the boss."

The two kept their weapons raised, and glanced at each other, unsure what to do next. Shaken, Beck still managed to sound indignant. "This is my backyard, asshole. I run this place, and these men. You shoot me, and you'll never make it out of here alive. Who the fuck do you think you are, coming in here and giving me and my men orders?"

He considered the question for a moment, and then answered. "The name is Steele. Corran Steele."

Based on the men's reactions, they had obviously heard of him.

"You still haven't answered my question."

Beck, still defiant and refusing to lose face in front of his men, spat on the stone floor. "Fuck you."

He felt his rage flare up again, and this time there was no stopping it. No sooner had the man's response left his lips, before Steele made a decision. Dropping the pistol to the floor, he reached under his jacket and, pulling his knife from its sheath, slit Beck's throat from one side to the other. Despite the swiftness of the cut, the bandit leader still managed to let out a single strangled cry before falling to the floor, blood gushing from his neck. The sensation of relief was almost physical. *Serves you right, you fuck.*

The other two men started forward, but Steele raised the shotgun and they stopped in their tracks.

"Don't," he told them. "I didn't come here to kill you, but I'm not leaving without what I came for." He sneered at the corpses crumpled on the stone floor. "Beck was weak – how many of your number have you lost since he took over? Ten men? Twenty? Thirty? How many raids did he go on with you? Did he lead you from the

front, or direct you from safety? What has he done for you that you are so willing to die for him?"

The two glanced at each other again, obviously unsure as to their next move.

Jesus.

"Let me make it easy on you." He dropped the shotgun onto the floor, followed by the combat harness and his web belt. "You've heard of me, yes?" The two nodded, unsure of what to do. "Then you've heard what I stole after I escaped from prison." Slowly, deliberately, he reached into his jacket, and pulled the brick-shaped object from the pocket. Tearing off the wrapper, he tossed it down onto the cot in front of them. Their eyes widened, as they looked at him, down at the cot, and then at him again.

"It's yours. I just want back what you took from me."

* * *

"So your reputation saved you? Honor among thieves, is that it? Or were they just so afraid of you, that they let you walk out the door with nothing more than a few bruises?"

He didn't respond, so she shook her head. "I suppose it doesn't really matter." Standing, she walked over to the door.

Steele spat. "After all that crap about Julia being 'your family', and wanting her back - aren't you going to ask me what happened to her?"

"No," she replied. "I'm not."

His mouth tightened, and he could feel the rage starting to burn inside again. "You fucking bitch. You sold her out to those bastards, didn't you? What, did you 'forget' to encrypt a transmission to her while she was on her way back, so it would reveal her position over an open frequency? Or did you just radio some other group of criminals and tell them when she'd be passing by the bunker on the way back to the settlement?" His anger threatened to spill over again, and it was all he could do not to rush her, bullets be damned, and tighten his hands around the scarred flesh on her neck and squeeze... "Or did you just KILL HER YOURSELF!"

"Not exactly."

Both of them twisted their heads around, to see a figure standing in shadow by the door.

Julia.

"What the hell...?" Pierce demanded, still keeping her gun trained on Steele. "You were dead! Brock said he saw-"

"Brock saw what I wanted him to," Julia interrupted, stepping into the light. She had a pistol in her hands as well, not pointed at Helena, but not pointed away from her either. "He was so scared of being killed by the bandits himself that he didn't even check my vitals - he just saw the blood and me lying there and ran back here to tell you, just like I knew he would." She turned to Steele. "But it turns out I still have unfinished business here."

Helena's grip wavered, and for a moment, her aim drifted from him enough that Steele thought he could grab her gun - but she realized her mistake and aimed it back at him almost immediately. Despite the rage building in him, he realized that wasn't sure

he could even stand up in his weakened physical condition, let alone wrestle the pistol from her.

“Why?” he croaked at her. “Why would you do this to me?”

Julia looked down at him coldly. “Sorry to disappoint you, but you aren’t the only one here who’s been lying about themselves. Who do you think it was that told Pierce here who you really are?”

No. That wasn’t possible. Not Julia - Julia couldn’t have betrayed him as well. She was the one thing that had made his exile on Pandora bearable.

The sinking feeling in his gut opened up into a gaping maw.

“I’ve gotta say, I found it hard to believe that you, of all people, would be so naïve,” she continued. “Did you really think I was after you for your charm? Your winning personality?” She shook her head. “All I have ever wanted was to get away from this hellhole of a planet. Didn’t you listen to what I told you ever since you arrived? My parents were miners here, before the plasma crystal vein dried up. They were killed in a cave-in. When the mining corporation pulled out, only ‘essential personnel’ were given passage off-world – and that didn’t include fifteen-year-old girls.

“There wasn’t anyone here who could help me, not to get me away as far as she wanted to go. And don’t think I didn’t try. Merchants, traders, settlers, I did everything she could think of, everything they asked, to convince one of them to take me with them to the one of the core worlds. *Everything*. I didn’t care which one, really, or what it took. But the settlers all had one-way tickets, and none of the traders was willing to pay what it would take to get me off-world.” She looked down for a moment, a crack in her facade showing. “No matter what I did for them.”

Helena, finally getting over the shock of seeing her alive, smirked. “I guess you just didn’t have what it took to convince them.”

“Shut up, you!” she snarled, glaring up at her, then turned back to Steele, her brief moment of vulnerability passed as if it never existed.

“So when I figured out who you were, I knew that you would be my ticket off this rock. I was positive that you brought that stolen shipment with you when you arrived – I remember you dragging that heavy footlocker from the shuttle. I just couldn’t figure out where you had stashed it. Once I started sharing your bed,” she said, smiling that ice-cold smile again, “I was free to go through this entire building, inch by inch, but I still couldn’t find it.” She smirked. “Little did I know that she was less than a half a meter from it every night I was here.”

Julia went over to the cot, and kicked the flooring away to reveal the hole beneath. She chuckled. “I figured that you would keep your weapons close to where you kept the swag from your little heist, and that once you found out I’d been ‘kidnapped,’ that you would come after me. Apparently you were so caught up in your despair over my ‘death’ that you never noticed me watching you from just outside the window. As soon as you left, I dug your little stash back up.”

“So why did you come back?” Helena demanded. “A ferry ship pulled into orbit this morning. If you hate this place so much, then why didn’t you take whatever was in that crate and use it to leave?”

“I should be halfway to Prometheus by now,” Julia responded. “I... persuaded a certain shuttle pilot at Sanctuary to give me a ride up the gravity well just as soon as I could get there. I should be in first-class cabin right this moment, climbing into a

cryotube and dreaming about my new life away from here.” She pointed the gun directly at Steele. “But I’m not, am I sweetie? When I dug up his trunk, there was nothing in it.” She pulled a small box out of a pouch on her belt. “Nothing but this.”

She threw the box onto the floor near his cot. The lid fell open and pictures, discharge papers, and various other memorabilia fell out. He glanced at the contents, strewn across the floor, and then looked back up at Julia. In the harsh light of the ceiling-mounted spotlight, she looked about 10 years older than he remembered. He could feel the rage inside him about to explode. Everything he had worked for, everything he had sacrificed – all of it was for nothing.

“So where is it?” she demanded, cocking back the hammer on the pistol. “Where’s the gold bullion you stole from that government transport when you escaped custody?”

Suddenly, something broke inside him, and despite everything, he started to laugh. The absurdity of all of it finally came crashing down on him like a ton of bricks - these two were such pathetic creatures, with such small lives and insignificant agendas.

“WHERE IS IT?!” Julia screamed at him, enraged by his laughter.

He stopped laughing just long enough to speak. “You silly bint. There were almost 30 of them out there in the ruins, armed to the teeth, and just itching for a fight. There was only one of me. What did you think I was going to use to convince them to let you go?”

“What? But I saw you pull all that military crap out of that thing,” she indicated the trunk on the floor. “You must have had a dozen grenades in there. And Marcus gave you the best gun he-“

“And what? I go running in, guns blazing? Against 30 armed men? Go out in a blaze of glory?” He laughed again. “Great plan, you stupid girl. I gave it all to them - all the gold, all my weapons, even the runner I drove out there in. All of it, turned over to them, in order to get you back.” He laughed again, unable to hold in the absurdity of the situation. “And do you know what happened? They took it. They took it all. And after I had nothing left to bargain with? They told me they didn’t know what the hell I was talking about, or who you were. Apparently they haven’t kidnapped anyone in months, and certainly not any blonde tramp from New Haven.”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up!” she squealed, and dug the barrel of the gun into Steele’s neck. “Where is it? WHERE’S MY GOLD!?”

“Julia, for God’s sakes-” Pierce began.

He kept laughing. “You want it? You’re gonna have to hike about 5 clicks east of here and ask some nice men, real polite-like, to give it to you. But you might not like what they might want in return.” He grinned nastily. “Then again, maybe you would...”

“GODDAMNIT-” she began.

But suddenly he lunged at her, punching her in the jaw and wrestling the pistol from her grip in one smooth motion. Pierce stepped in instantly, cocking her own pistol, but it was too late – he had Julia by the throat, and had her gun pointed at her temple.

“Back off! Now!” he yelled at Pierce.

Pierce complied, but kept the pistol pointed at his head. “Easy, Steele! Let’s not get excited here-”

“Excited? Who’s excited? I’m as calm as a fucking spring day. Now drop the gun!”

“Not going to happen,” she responded, keeping the gun leveled at him.

He twisted Julia’s arm tighter. “Helena, please - he’s breaking my arm!” Julia squealed. “Put it down!”

“What makes you think I give a shit?” she shot back. “You manipulated us both, you money-grubbing little whore. At least if he shoots you, I won’t have to listen to any more of your pathetic little rants about getting out of here, and ‘becoming someone respectable-’ ”

BANG!! Steele’s pistol went off, deafening them all in the enclosed space. Helena shrieked as the gun was shot out of her hand, clattering against the wall. The bullet had passed through her palm, and she clutched her bleeding organic hand in her mechanical one, staring at Steele with a terrified look on her face.

“I told you to drop it.”

Releasing his grip on Julia’s throat, he roughly pushed her down to the floor next to Pierce’s feet. They stood there for a moment, eyeing each other, panting with exertion.

“So now what?” Julia demanded, breaking the tension.

He thought for a moment, balancing his feelings for her against his fury about what she had done.

The fury won.

In a single quick motion, he aimed the pistol at Julia’s head and pulled the trigger, splattering her brains all over the other woman.

Pierce screamed again, falling to the floor as she recoiled from the blood and gore that landed on her. He stared at Julia’s corpse for a moment, then shifted his gaze back to Pierce, gun still in his hand.

He pointed the pistol at her, and slowly pulled the trigger. She squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating the shot...

Click!

Steele chuckled. “Hmph. Empty. I guess this is your lucky day.”

Dropping the pistol, he grabbed her suddenly by the neck, holding her closer until he was looking directly into her mangled face, her one good eye opened wide with fear. “But you listen to me, Pierce” he said slowly. He pulled his knife from its hidden sheath, where he had kept it the whole time, waiting for the right moment. “Get rid of those gunners you called. Tell them to get lost, that you were wrong, and there is no bounty here for them.” He leaned even closer. “Forget about Corran Steele ever being here, and I’ll let you live,” he told her as he waved the blade across her field of view, causing her eye to open even wider in terror. “Do we have a deal?”

She nodded, still in shock and unable to speak.

“Because anyone comes looking for me, I’ll be back to finish this – and you won’t get off as easily as she did.” He nudged Julia’s corpse with his foot.

“Understood?”

She nodded again.

“Good,” he said with a smirk. He let go of her, returned his knife to its sheath, and walked slowly out into the night.

Ears still ringing, he limped across the settlement. The lights were on in the dormitories, and Brock, Marcus, and a couple of others were running toward the storage building with their side arms drawn. No one noticed him as he crossed behind the

headquarters building, kicked open the door to the vehicle hangar, and went down the stairs.

At long, long last, he had given in to his rage, and it felt like a relief. He hadn't realized until that moment just how much effort it had been to put on a settler's face every day. But now that was all over. No more pretending to be someone he wasn't, no more playing nice with the other kids so he could lay low and be forgotten. No more Solomon – only Steele, now.

The settlement's two remaining runners were still there, though he knew only one of them was functional – he and Brock had been in the middle of replacing the other one's drive shaft. He fired up the intact one, hit the hangar door release, and throttling it, raced off into the night, leaving New Haven behind him forever.

As he stood before the group of men, he gazed out at a sea of faces – most of them hidden behind masks and goggles, to better shield them from the elements.

“And so I ask you - how many of you have died from New Haven guns? How many lost to skag attacks, left bleeding to death in the sand? How many have died of cold and starvation while they sit behind their wall, warm and content and well-fed?”

“Follow me, and I promise you the settlers of this planet will tremble at the very idea that they share the same air as you. They think you are scum – I will make you into soldiers. They call us criminals – we will show them what crime truly is! They say we are bandits, outlaws – I say we are Brigadiers. And together, we will bring not just New Haven to its knees, but the rest of this godforsaken planet. We will own Pandora!”

Cheers rose from the group, followed by gunfire as they fire their weapons into the sky. One of the bandits – one of his Brigadiers, rather – stepped forward, holding something wrapped in oilcloth, which he presented to Steele. Pulling the leather wrapping away revealed his shotgun – the one he had left behind in Beck's quarters. But instead of the nickel-plated finish it had sported when Marcus had give it to him, one of these men had used some of the old foundry equipment to re-plate it with gold – the same gold he had brought to barter his and Julia's lives.

He held the gun high to show it to the rest of the men present, and pointing it at the sky, fired off a few rounds. Their cheers and screams rose into the night. One word, over and over, until their throats were raw and the dry air in the canyons echoed with their cries.

“STEELE! STEELE! STEELE! STEELE!”