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The Godsfall Chronicles

– The Fallen God Records –

- Book 1 - The Wastelands (II)

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[RWX (Wuxiaworld)]

Chapter 51

Fugitives

It was a reconnaissance team, scouts – maybe twenty or thirty of them. A pair of three-meter-tall maneaters trundled among them, and a third were rangers. Several were mounted on enormous lizards that slithered over the sands of the wastes.

These beasts were a class above the mutated ostriches Tartarus mercenaries had used. They made effective war mounts that could fight back. They were fierce, had skin thick as armor and had incredible endurance. Their riders had longbows slung across their backs.

They were mobile, and good at close range or at a distance. Hunters.

Cloudhawk hadn't felt them coming. With Mantis gone, chances that the two of them could fight their way out were slim. Their enemies were about a hundred meters away and closing.

"Goddamnit! They have rotwolves!" He spotted the closest of them, a wolf rider. Bristling with coarse, black hair the wolf had its muzzle pressed to the ground as it searched for them. Hiding wasn't going to do them any good. "Go... we gotta go!"

The two of them scrambled out of their hiding place as quietly as they could then tumbled over the far side of a sand dune. They slid down to its base.

"Awooo! Awoooo!"

Rotwolves were sensitive to all kinds of movement. It raced to the spot Cloudhawk and the Queen had just fled, picking up their scent.

"We got 'em!" The wolf rider beamed a hideous grin, he saw the bloodstains on the ground. It had to have come from a wound. He swung his arms to get the others' attention. "A few of you get ahead and cut them off. Give the signal for the others to come."

Lizard riders bounded off to either flank and made their way around the sand dune.

Thanks to their webbed feet they dashed across the sand like the wind. There was no question they could overtake their prey.

One of the sweepers pulled an arrow from its quiver and doused it in fuel. Lighting it ablaze he fired it into the night sky. Instantly the burning red light split the darkness, visible for kilometers in every direction. When it reached the apex of its trajectory, it exploded.

A signal?

Cloudhawk cursed inwardly. When the others sweepers saw the signal they'd come running.

"That damn wolf will be able to follow us anywhere. We can't shake it." Cloudhawk said to the Queen. "You gotta use your cross to kill it!"

She was speechless at how stupid his suggestion was. Yes, the holy light could be used at a distance, but using it once drained her of almost all her energy. It was supposed to be used as a last resort. Turning it on a single sweeper and his dog was like smashing a fly with a war hammer.

By now the lizards had overtaken them. They were scrambling up a sand dune up ahead. The wolf rider was guiding the others by scent. They were just too damn fast!

When he saw that the Queen was unwilling to use her powers he skidded to a halt. Under the Queen's curious and incredulous gaze he picked up a sharp rock and began to weigh it in his hands.

What the hell was this moron doing? The Queen thought.

They looked back and saw the wolf slinking over the dune, like a shadow flitting through the moonlight. It was coming closer, merely a few dozen meters. The beast's keen green eyes peered through the night for its victims.

Close enough!

Cloudhawk kept his eyes trained on the rotwolf. He suddenly launched himself forward running one step, then another, and another, and another. The wolf spotted him but was stunned that its prey would choose to charge. The other sweepers spilling over the dune also saw the young man coming. They pulled their longbows free and

began knocking poison arrows.

Danger! All of Cloudhawk's hair stood on end.

A handful of archers took aim, perhaps only ten meters from their target. These were practiced killers, hitting their prey from this close was not difficult. Yet Cloudhawk made no effort to dodge. With precise control over every muscle in his body, his legs dug into the sand and sent him skidding. Everything worked in concert to send power up through his calves, thighs, waist, shoulder, arm, and finally his wrist.

Woosh!

What speed! The stone he threw streaked through the air and crashed right into the rotwolf's snout. It yelped in pain and surprise from a crushed nose and bucked the rider off its back.

Direct hit!

Mantis once told him not to rely on complicated weapons. Any killer worth his salt could end a target with whatever was at hand. Only someone with those skills could call themselves a real master of the wastes. Cloudhawk learned to throw after seeing what Mantis could do with a scalpel.

Cloudhawk had incredible control, speed, strength and perception. He drew on those to pelt the rotwolf's nose through the darkness... but there was no time to celebrate.

The twang of bowstrings warbled and a hail of arrows followed, many of them aimed right at Cloudhawk. He hunkered down and held up his alpha-wolf pelt. *Thud, thud, thud!* The arrows pummeled him, but couldn't fully pierce his coat. All they managed were several nicks and scratches.

Some, though, were aimed at his head where he had no protection.

He was having trouble tracking the black arrows through the darkness but he felt the danger they presented. There were too many for him to dodge or deflect. Then, in this critical moment the Bloodsoaked Queen appeared, dagger in hand.

Ting, ting, clang! She knocked the remaining arrows away before pulling Cloudhawk after her in retreat.

Cloudhawk managed to shout his thanks as they ran. He'd succeeded in taking the rotwolf's nose out of the equation, but it didn't improve their situation much. Sweepers continued to close in on all sides. They were in danger of being surrounded.

In a matter of minutes their escape would be completely cut off. Once the three mutants got here they would be in even deeper shit.

They didn't get far. A pair of lizards reared up on their hind legs right in front of them, their riders brandishing weapons. They swung thick, barbaric falchions over their heads, and they sliced deadly arcs through the air as their lizard mounts propelled them forward.

The blades were right in their faces.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's body wrenched to the side. As though flung from a catapult her slender and dexterous body flitted through the air, slipping passed the sweepers' blades so she could open their throats with her dagger.

She landed a foot on the head of the lizard mount, then pushed herself off again. She spun like a lethal top, a dervish of steel that severed the arteries in another rider's throat.

By now, Cloudhawk had seen a few experts at work, such as Mad Dog, Slyfox, Grizzly and others. But he never saw anything close to the Queen's graceful, flexible, and lethal abilities.

The riders were dead – but their lizards were still breathing. Without their riders they were furious and even more brutal. Weighty bodies crashed back to ground and they hissed at her, revealing a maw filled with razor-like teeth.

The Bloodsoaked Queen, still in mid-air, shrunk into a defensive posture. She waited for her prey to attack, ready to bury her dagger in its eye.

Then, something happened that no one expected.

Neither lizard tried to bite her. Instead, barbed tongues shot out at her fast as a whip, with enough force to shatter stone. More importantly their tongues were peppered with poison-secreting glands. One scrape from those spikes and the consequences were too gruesome to contemplate.

The Queen had no leverage to move herself out of harm's way, she could only avoid one of them.

Cloudhawk rushed at her brandishing a metal pipe. He brought it crashing down on the head of one of the mutant creatures, cracking its skull and drawing blood. The blow rattled it and altered the trajectory of the beast's tongue.

The Queen fell back to the ground safely, only to spring up in a cloud of sand. She charged at the other lizard like a gust of wind. Scores of brutal gashes appeared on the lizard's vulnerable underbelly from throat to abdomen.

"Leave the other one alive!"

Sweepers kept pouring in from all sides. Capable as the Bloodsoaked Queen was, she was just one person and was quickly nearing her limit. Beyond that, her wounds were serious. All this movement was going to be the end of her!

The hunters' numbers swelled. How could they hope to outrun them on just two legs? This wasn't a siege, they were running them down until they were too weak.

Cloudhawk swung himself on top of the other lizard and wrapped its reins around his fist. It immediately started to swing and buck in protest. His eyes filled with that blood-red hue as he expertly smacked the creature on the head with his pipe again. *"Chill! The fuck! Out!"*

The threat of death from this crazy human caused the lizard to tremble in fear. It was suddenly much more compliant.

He reached out a hand toward the Queen. "What the hell are you staring at? Let's go!"

She couldn't believe he'd tamed this creature with nothing but his voice. This guy was chock full of surprises and powers she didn't know he had. The Queen didn't hesitate to leap up onto the lizard's back. She steadied herself by wrapping her arms around Cloudhawk's waist.

"Get me out of here!"

With the reins in one hand Cloudhawk whipped the lizard's hide with his pipe. Thick as its hide was Cloudhawk was no weakling. The triangular pipe hit hard enough to break skin and the lizard let out a piteous hiss of pain. It bolted, running wildly

through the darkness.

“Faster!”

“Faster!”

Cloudhawk saw his pursuers gaining. He beat his pipe against the lizard again and again, urging it on. Desperate to escape the pain the lizard kicked its webbed feet faster. It raced over slopes and dunes, slowly increasing the distance between them and the sweepers.

They were coming up on a conical pit. The lizard was preparing to scale it when Cloudhawk noticed its sandy depths. Something was moving and sand had begun to tumble down the sides.

This was *not* reassuring. Cloudhawk shook as he broke out in a cold sweat. This wasn't a normal valley – it was a gateway to hell!

“Stop, stop!”

Cloudhawk pulled hard on the reins and beat his mount with the pipe at the same time. The lizard, confused, took it as a sign to speed up.

“It's dangerous, we gotta bail!”

He released his hold on the reins and almost immediately the two of them were pitched off. The lizard continued its headlong rush until it hit the bottom and the whole thing seemed to come alive. An enormous creature burst forth, frightening the lizard. It tried to scramble in another direction, but it was already too late.

The monstrous thing was long, and weighed hundreds of pounds. It lurched through the air, bloody maw agape. In a single snap, half the mutant lizard's body was ripped away.

The Bloodsoaked Queen stared dumbstruck at the creature. “What the hell is that thing?!”

Dozens of hideous legs wriggled on either side like a giant, fat centipede. A marked difference was this thing was covered in leathery flesh, though it kept the same segmented shape. It was at least twenty meters long and was as big around as five

burly men tied together. A carapace covered it from the top of its head all the way down its back. Its sides were covered in tumor-like poison glands, and although it had no eyes, ears or nose it had a savage bite that put a shark to shame.

Chapter 52

The Edge of Life and Death

The sands shook, the world pitched. In the dim light of dawn the monstrous thing was revealed. More than a hundred scythe-like legs wriggled, the ones sprouting from its upper half scarlet red and keen as daggers. They were so tightly packed they chattered against each other like a host of blades. It was a show of dominance.

The monster also let off a fetid stench of putrescence. It was an agent of death, so terrifying as to petrify even the most elite soldiers.

Cloudhawk was a model of his upbringing, a denizen of the wastes. Aggression steamed from his bones, and he was by no means a coward... but before this hellspawn he stood absolutely stupefied. Those sweepers who were giving chase witnessed it too, watching as the creature burst from its secret nest like a majestic emperor of its territory. It reared up the first third of its body and released from its gaping maw a screech rife with pure fury.

The sound was more terrible than any thunder. Worse than the sound of an erupting volcano, more deafening than a flood! It rolled across the vast wasteland and into the heavens, telling all who dared enter its territory that here, *it* was master!

Cloudhawk jolted back to his senses. "Run!"

The sweepers' mounts panicked when they came face to face with the monster. Their riders fought to keep them under control while the one in the lead thrust his crude axe in the air. "Don't let them get away! Kill these two rats!"

The other sweepers growled like a pack of cornered wolves. Although this monster's appearance had startled them, they were not going to give up the chase – an act that seemed crazy.

But one mustn't forget... this was the wastelands!

As the sands blew in on gusting winds it brought with it the sounds of bowstrings twanging. Dart after poisonous dart was fired, filling the air with terrifying whistles.

The fugitives urged their mounts forward and raced headlong into the sand pit.

Cloudhawk was struck by two of the arrows. They didn't completely pierce his mystical cloak but they bit into him anyway. Two cuts like knife stabs ached and though he didn't stop to look, he knew there would be blood.

The desert monster made its move. It sped across the sand as smooth as any vessel, propelled across the granular sea by its constantly wriggling host of legs. Plumes of sand were kicked up behind it as it made a mad dash forward.

The reeking smell of rot mingled with rolling clouds of sand. Cloudhawk's eyes, mouth and nose were choked shut. He couldn't see or hear anything – helpless as a drowning man, struggling aimlessly.

The monster slithered up behind him. A hundred blood red, knife-like appendages reached out to impale Cloudhawk.

Shafts of light were reaching them from the eastern horizon. As the beast opened its maw to devour its prey the light disappeared into its cavernous mouth. Countless needle-like teeth lined the cavity, like a living meat grinder. Hell, with skin of copper and bones of iron you'd still be ripped apart, and Cloudhawk had none of those things.

He teetered on the razor edge of destruction.

The Bloodsoaked Queen appeared, cloak flapping, kicking up sand in her wake. She snatched Cloudhawk, leapt off of the ground and landed right on the monster's head. It replied by swinging itself back and forth and raising itself higher. But no matter what the monster did the Queen was fixed to it like a magnet to the carapace that formed its skullcap. Agile as a sparrow she slid down its back to the midpoint of its body.

Cloudhawk was in shock. He felt like he'd been snatched from the jaws of death, literally. He'd been so close to dying it felt like his soul had fled his body! He'd never experienced such a terrifying sensation before.

It was only thanks to the Queen's fantastic skills that he survived. If he'd have had ten lives the beast would have devoured them all. When he looked at her, though, she was not reveling in their escape. Blood dripped continuously from the bottom of her mask. All of this motion and strain was only making her worse.

“Are you alright?”

With her mask on he couldn't tell by her face. Her response was a cold and dismissive grunt, but it couldn't hide her weakness. "Worry about yourself. Don't count on me to save your ass every time."

Cloudhawk felt extremely unhappy when his well-intentioned question was repaid with contempt.

There was nothing he could do about it. Ten of him couldn't equal one wounded Bloodsoaked Queen. It would be hard enough for her to break encirclement alone, twice as hard if she had to drag Cloudhawk with her.

Cloudhawk hung to the borders where the monster's chitinous armor connected. There he was flung from one side to another like some nightmarish rollercoaster. He managed to shout, "If you see a chance to make it, you forget about me!"

"I wasn't waiting for your permission," she snapped back.

He knew she'd say something like that, he understood her personality by now. But it was still a blow to his ego. *This apathetic, grumpy woman*, he lamented to himself. *She still thinks I'm a piece of shit!*

Cloudhawk opened his mouth to say something, but his words were cut off when a bolt from a sniper's bow buried itself in the Queen's chest. She gasped as it pierced her and she threatened to collapse.

"Queen!"

Cloudhawk grabbed her, and covered her in his cloak. Arrows fell like a lethal hail while the monster - enraged - flung itself at the sweepers. It reeled left and right at the same time, trying to rid itself of the pests latched to its back.

Its multitude of razor sharp arms chewed the earth in front of it. Any sweeper or mount unlucky enough to be caught in its path was cut down like weeds! They were chopped up, disemboweled.

It only served to enrage the sweepers. Two maneaters laden with heavy armor flung themselves forward like crazed bulls, enormous war hammers crashing down on the beast's head. The blow was powerful enough to send the mutant creature staggering. Meanwhile other sweepers surrounded it, and started to stab at it with spears and swords.

Squelch! Squirt!

Each wound the monster suffered opened poison glands, and they spurted with corrosive toxins. The splashing filth blinded many sweepers, and yet the mob did not retreat. Dozens more of them charged forward, some of the sweepers even trying to climb onto the creature's back.

Cloudhawk held tightly to the Queen while waving his staff with lethal intent. He put it through the neck of one sweeper that got too close, leaving behind a gaping fountain of blood. It was dead before it hit the ground. He swung around and bludgeoned another sweeper, striking it so hard on the helmet that sparks flew and it was knocked away.

The mutant centipede heaved its girth in any direction it could, trying to break free from the trap it found itself in. But the sweepers were like maggots, and clung to it no matter where the monster tried to run. It lashed out at everything that came close, but it couldn't hold out forever.

Cloudhawk had lost count of his injuries. He was too weak to use his exorcist staff. All he could do was cling desperately to the monster's carapace and be flung around. If he lost his grip and hit the sand, the sweepers would be on him in a minute. He was promised a brutal death, a seemingly inevitable reward for his frantic attempts to live. In its mad haze the monster didn't realize the number of sweepers was only increasing. If this continued, no matter how strong it was it would soon also be slain!

The Bloodsoaked Queen feebly extended a hand, letting it fall upon the monster's body.

From her fingers a scorching flame sprang out. The outer part of the creature resisted the lapping fires, but the heat was boiling it alive on the inside. It screeched in pain and raced forward with wild abandon. The man eaters were knocked aside and the monster plunged into the sea of waiting sweepers.

The Queen never ceased infusing the monster with her burning power. Like a beast gone mad with pain, the mutant insect rampaged through the press of enemies.

Thanks to the overwhelming power of this monster Cloudhawk and the Queen were freed from the encirclement. It was ignorant of how far it had run, focused only on the pain the burning angels had caused charring its innards. As its life force quickly began

to drain away, it heaved a forlorn cry and fell limp on the sand.

At last neither Cloudhawk nor the Queen could stem off the wave of exhaustion that consumed them. Due to her armor the arrow lodged in the Queen's chest was blessedly shallow ^[1]. They figured the arrow tips were poisoned, but they weren't sure which toxins they'd used. Cloudhawk could only resort to emergency measures, so he pulled the Queen's armor to the side and helped her pull out the arrow. Her wound began to bleed freely.

The Queen never resisted. She likely didn't have the strength to. Dawn had arrived but the sun had yet to bath the wasteland in its callous light. Cloudhawk made his way to the peak of a dune and looked out to where the yellow-brown horizon met the equally repellent sky.

The cloud of opaque brown grew thicker, faster. The closer it got the darker things became until they were nearly plunged into night once again. Cloudhawk had grown up in the wastelands, so of course he knew what this was.

He threw one of the Queen's arms over his shoulder. "Mother fucker, we got a beast of a sandstorm headed our way. We have to find a place to hide otherwise we're gonna get blown away!"

This was a real sandstorm, one birthed by nature. The area these storms covered was massive, and they were powerful. Gusts so intense they'd throw whole cars into the air were not uncommon. It was one of the most devastating natural disasters they could face!

The Queen's mouth lolled open. "Leave me."

He gaped at her. "What did you say?"

For the first time this mighty woman looked like she was ready to succumb to defeat. "I won't survive the sandstorm. You have to go alone."

She wasn't being dramatic. Be it physically or mentally, she had long ago passed her limits. Her wounds, the pain – none of that hurt her as badly as knowing she'd failed her mission. She'd ignored all the opposition and violated demonhunter rules to come out here herself and hunt her prey. In the end she'd never even glimpsed the demon's face. Now she faced a miserable, choking death.

It was hopeless! All was lost!

Even at her best the Queen was no match for the demon, much less his control over the wastelands. Now, with her task doomed to failure, it looked like her sins would be carried with her to the grave.

“What sort of bullshit are you spouting?”

Cloudhawk refused to acknowledge her pleas and lifted the Queen onto his shoulder. She wasn't heavy, but he had the wind and sand to fight against as he stumbled onward, and he was drained. Ten minutes later the full brunt of the sandstorm swallowed them up. Stone-laden winds buffeted him like a storm of blades.

Beyond the danger of being cut apart or crushed by a rock, the winds could also send them flying into the wastes.

Cloudhawk found a mound somewhat sheltered by a boulder. He huddled close and use his cloak to cover the Queen from the elements. It didn't stop airborne stones from pelting them constantly.

The storm was here, and they had no choice but to wait it out!

In the back of her mind the Queen rued the idea that she and some young wastelander would die side by side. With effort she opened her eyes and dragged them along his dirty face. Suddenly she didn't find him so repugnant. She saw the anxiety on his face, the fear, but what was important was in his eyes – a calm that said he would accept death, because he did all he could.

This tenacity in the face of hard times, this unyielding persistence in the face of suffering, this defiance when the whole world seemed to be against you – all of this was only something the wastelands could teach!

If we survive this tribulation and he becomes a demonhunter, he'll definitely surpass me!

But almighty gods, why would you cause such a man to be born into a life within these blighted lands?

1. I believe in typical people the thickness between the dermis and the lungs is an inch and a half on average. Not a lot of room to play with.

Chapter 53

A New Relic

Like a roaring yellow earth dragon the cloud came roiling over them. Dense and thick, the choking sands spread over a vast area. Like ten thousand trampling elephants the thunderous sound swallowed up the wasteland, as spectacular as it was formidable.

Gusts of wind were like knives and each grain of sand stabbed like a blade. Day became night, and for two hours the wrath of nature held sway.

The sandstorm had passed relatively quickly but sunlight couldn't permeate the dust-muddled air. So shrouded and chaotic was the scene that one couldn't see ten meters in front of their nose.

Stranger Black, Vulture and Longhorn had just arrived at the scene of the chase. Their sweepers had scattered to avoid the sandstorm and were busily trying to gather back together and resume their search.

"Did they *really* slip away again?" Vulture beat his large wings, enough to keep him suspended in the air. "They're badly injured, have no water or food and they ran headfirst into a goddamn sandstorm. Barring some miracle they have to be dead."

"If they're alive, we hunt them down. If they're dead, we get their corpses." Stranger Black was able to speak again, though clearly his newly formed nerves were still adapting. He spoke and moved sluggishly. "The sandstorm probably erased any trail so we'll have to expand the search area. Letting them get away again is not an option."



Cloudhawk clawed his way out from the sand-filled rubble, gasping for breath. He hacked violently to try and expel the sand from his lungs while pulling the Queen out of hiding.

"Wake up – let's go, wake up!"

He pulled off her mask and gave her back a few sharp slaps, to which the Queen answered by coughing up a mouthful of half-congealed blood. Her pretty face was caked in grime and streaked with blood, framed by hair that had lost its glossy shine to a film of dirt. Her wretched state inspired pity.

The Queen's eyelashes quavered for a moment as she struggled to open her eyes. Grave as her injuries were, the demonhunter's eyes were as bright as starlight glinting off a lake surface. Like invaluable gemstones they had an enigmatic, almost mystical attraction.

She looked all around them curiously. "I'm still alive?"

"Fuck, of course you're still alive!" Cloudhawk beamed happily. "All throughout my shit life I've been able to scrape my way out of hopeless situations like this!"

She pursed her parched lips and said lifelessly, "I guess I should thank you."

Cloudhawk didn't let it get to his head. He may have saved their lives for the time being, but they weren't out of the woods yet. He had been under assault from the wilds to the outpost to now. Wounds peppered him from head to toe. His healing prowess stitched the wounds but did not eliminate the risk of infection. He just hoped his body would be able to hold out.

Cloudhawk hadn't had an opportunity to close his eyes for two whole days and nights. Even his natural affinity for healing required energy and he hadn't had so much as a scrap of food or a drop of water. He was exhausted, drained, hungry and thirsty – and the Queen was worse off. How could they get to safety under these conditions?

Cloudhawk croaked through his dry throat at the Queen. "Can you move?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen stretched and twisted, trying her beleaguered muscles, but couldn't get herself to stand. Her outward wounds weren't terrible – relatively shallow punctures in her chest, shoulder and thigh. She was certainly strong enough to handle those. What threatened her life were the internal injuries, damage to her organs from the blow Longhorn had given her. If she'd been almost anyone else the punch would have powdered her bones. The fact she was still breathing was nothing short of extraordinary.

"Nothing we can do about it, then. Rest, try and feel better." He scanned the horizon. "After the sandstorm I figure it'll be a little while before they find us again. I'll look

around nearby and see if I can find us some water.”

Both of them were on the cusp of dehydration. With no water or liquid alternative, Cloudhawk couldn't go far even if he were twice as strong. Finding something to drink in the wastelands was difficult on the best of days, and especially difficult after a sandstorm.

Cloudhawk knew their chances were slim to none, but he had to try. What option did he have? If he didn't find some water they would die!

Feebly he stumbled into the wastes. Now that the sandstorm had passed the temperature was steadily rising, and the wasteland became a sauna. It was quickly sapping what little fluid Cloudhawk had left in him. His vision had begun to grow dim, and the dunes beneath his feet seemed to undulate. Legs shook like blades of grass in the breeze, threatening to give out at any moment.

Everywhere he looked he saw rocks and sand. Not even a single sad weed could be found. Things were bad. Things were really bad.

Just as Cloudhawk was beginning to give in to his despair, he caught a glimpse of something. His eyes went wide as he realized what was right in front of him. It was the body of the mutant centipede, the one the Bloodsoaked Queen had burned to death.

The meat of the creature was toxic, and poison flowed through its meat like blood. It was inedible to humans, but that didn't mean it was inedible to everything. A group of strange creatures had appeared around the body, each one roughly fifteen to twenty kilograms. The fur that covered it was the same as its surroundings making them hard to spot from a distance. Sharp claws and teeth glinted in the harsh light of day, and they used them to carve out scraps that weren't dipped in poison.

Meat eating scourge hares! Mutant rabbits!

These creatures ate meat, but they preferred insects. They were timid by nature and didn't often go after things bigger than themselves. Scourge hares were fast, faster even than rotwolves, so chasing them down was no easy task.

Cloudhawk was in no condition to be chasing rabbits around the desert. He doubted he could even run if he had to. What to do!

Perhaps he could throw a rock and kill one?

It was the best plan he could come up with, but the rabbits were vigilant. There wasn't any cover to hide himself while he snuck up to them so Cloudhawk likely couldn't get closer than thirty or forty meters. Too far to be confident of hitting one of the rabbits, much less killing one before they got away.

But it was his only shot! For him and the Queen, the difference between living and dying could be his success right now.

Cloudhawk only had his exorcist staff as a weapon. He'd used his revolver on the rat king, but in the ensuing struggle had lost it somewhere.

But wait! He had another relic!

When he passed through that mysterious, unknown realm Cloudhawk had pilfered two artifacts from the remains he found. Up till now he hadn't tried to use them and didn't know what they did.

Only, whatever these relics were they were of a much higher caliber than his exorcist staff. He had enough willpower left to try one, he figured. But which?

His cloak hadn't shown any special qualities so far, though it was tough and protective. Neither arrow nor sword had been able to pierce it, yet. In fact it'd already saved his life. He decided to give it a shot and pour what power he had remaining into the cloak.

He shut his eyes and opened his mind, seeking resonance with the relic.

Immediately he sensed that the cloak was of much higher quality than the exorcist staff. Using the novice weapon once or twice was doable, but this time communicating with the relic took several times the effort. Eventually he achieved that resonance, and it began to quiver and vibrate.

Much to Cloudhawk's surprise he suddenly felt much lighter, like resistance from air and gravity were gone. All of a sudden he felt like he could bound ten meters in a single stride. As the seconds ticked by the inky black cloak dulled. Rather, it was more accurate to say it *vanished*.

He wrapped the cloak around himself and peered down at his body, only to find he could look right through where his ass should be to the sand below. This relic made him lighter, removed obstructions, bent light around him *and* made him faster.

Cloudhawk wanted to smack himself in his own stupid face! If only he'd known he wouldn't be so far up shit creek!

He experimented for a few moments, unhurried, before discovering the vibration of the cloak wither and die. It appeared the effects lasted only for a dozen seconds or so, meaning he had to pay close attention to timing. He flung the hood over his head and wrapped himself in his cloak, and all of a sudden he was gone.

Cloudhawk moved quickly but made no sound. He was hardly adept at sneaking, so from time to time a length of his leg or a portion of face was revealed. It was more than strange to have disembodied limbs and features appear out of nowhere only to vanish again a second later. He inched toward the scourge hares as quickly as he could.

Several minutes later.

The scent of blood slithered into the Queen's nostrils. Her eyes fluttered open, and she saw Cloudhawk holding up two fat rabbits in his hands. The hares had large puncture marks in their throats, continuously leaking blood.

"We're shit outta luck for water, but the blood will keep us from being thirsty. At least it might help us recover some strength." [1]

The Queen's brow wrinkled, apparently displeased with the prospect. This fur-eating, blood-drinking diet was no different from the fiends of the wasteland. She was a noble demonhunter! But there was hardly a smorgasbord to choose from so she was left with the pungent, salty rabbit blood to sate her thirst. He was right, at least it'd help her regain her strength.

Cloudhawk took up the knife and began to flay their meal.

The Queen began to take tentative sips of blood. She already was beginning to feel better. "These wounds on the rabbits look like they were from an exorcist staff. How were you fast enough to get in close enough for a strike?"

"You shouldn't underestimate me," Cloudhawk said haughtily. He paused as though thinking of something, then wiped his bloody hands on his clothes and dug something out from within his cloak. It was a gourd; an exquisite specimen about the size of his palm. He handed it to her. "Right, take a look and see if you can tell me how to use this."

"This is..." She knew it the moment she saw it, its shape and texture was nothing like

what they'd find in the wastelands. When she saw a familiar rune etched on the bottom of the gourd she audibly gasped. "How do you have this relic?"

"I found it," he said, honestly.

"Impossible!" She didn't believe him for a moment. "This isn't some low-level trinket, these sorts of relics have to be registered in the holy city. Anywhere, in any city or territory, if a demonhunter's relic goes missing it's a big deal. The city would certainly dispatch a team to investigate where it went and recover it. And you just find it lying around?!"

"Yup." His response was flippant and irritated. "So how the fuck do I use it?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen took a moment to get her emotions under control. Clearly Cloudhawk wasn't interested in sharing more details. She turned the relic over in her hands a few times, examining every inch closely. Her attention fell on an inscription, god script carved into its surface. "This relic is called the 'Phoenix Furnace.' From the inscription we can assume it has to do with fire." [2]

Cloudhawk was overtly curious. It was one of the relics he'd come across in the other world, but did that mean these two worlds shared a similar system of writing? It wasn't a coincidence, it couldn't be that simple.

He didn't worry about it now. "Can you use it?"

The Queen's will was particularly attuned to fire relics. When she cradled the small gourd in her hand Cloudhawk could feel ripples of power radiating from them. He knew it to be a sign that the relic was awakening.

An inferno sputtered to life from within.

The fire itself was strange, rising maybe three or four meters. The fires didn't melt the gourd, and instead coalesced together into the image of a large-winged phoenix. The mystical bird of fire circled around her.

The Bloodsoaked Queen waved her hand, and at her command the phoenix lunged as though it understood. With breakneck speed it raced toward a boulder and smashed into it. Flames devoured both rock and bird.

"By the almighty gods above..."

“This is an absolutely perfect relic!”

The Queen was so excited that she nearly prostrated herself in worship before the relic. An artifact like this was as excellent as any godly heirloom, and it had somehow fallen into Cloudhawk’s dirty clutches!

That same scummy wastelander stared at the molten boulder in awe. He could sense that the Queen had summoned only a small portion of what the gourd could do, and even that was highly destructive. If she poured all her will into it she would be unthinkably strong.

“Well shit, you seem able to use it. Keep it.”

“You... what did you...” She stared at him with eyes like he was some freak. “Do you have any idea how much this relic is worth?”

“Doesn’t matter how much it’s worth, if I can’t use it then it’s garbage.” He wagged the exorcist staff and went on. “Tit for tat, you gave me something and I’m returning the kindness. I’ll get more use out of the staff than this gourd.”

The Queen was speechless. She could get a hundred exorcist staffs for this relic and it still wouldn’t be enough.

He didn’t care what it was worth. On the one hand he had no concept of what a relic went for in some market, and he couldn’t use it even if he did. Right now the two of them were sailors in the same proverbial busted rowboat. The stronger the Queen was the safer he would be.

Besides, there was another important reason.

Cloudhawk had the nagging feeling that once he could control the mysterious stone in his possession, he’d be able to strafe between worlds at will. He could use that power to search for these discarded artifacts by the resonance they produced. Obviously he couldn’t do that if he was dead, so the first order of business was to make sure he kept breathing. Anything else was not important and could be given up.

1. Gross as this is for many westerners, in the East it isn’t uncommon to eat congealed blood. Human placenta, for example, is used in Chinese medicine. For hot pot they love congealed (duck?) blood the size of sticks of butter. Purportedly it’s very good for your health, but every time I ate it I felt distinctly un-good.

2. Gourds feature heavily in Chinese mythos, representing longevity, prosperity and luck. Here is Gourd Boy, and the song which my students used to irritate me to no end.

Chapter 54

Supported in Life and Death

The wastelands were a barren, scorching hellscape. Like a sea of fire this blighted plane devoured every ounce of water from the humans who traversed it. In order to avoid being burnt to a crisp or dying of dehydration, the two fugitives were forced to stop in a shaded crevice to wait out the hottest part of the day.

The skin of the scourge rabbits was left out to cure on a scorching rock. Its meat, chopped into small squares, were roasted as well.

Rabbit was a delectable wasteland treat, rich in fats and oils. It was also a rare find. Cloudhawk didn't eat much for two reasons. First, there was no water to wash it down and overeating would make him all the more thirsty. Second, he wasn't sure when their next opportunity to come across a meal would be. The beasts of the wasteland were many, but only a few of them were safe to eat. It was smarter to save some of the rabbit just in case.

"If we wander around blindly we're gonna die." Cloudhawk looked out over the rolling expanse of desert. His eyes betrayed his thoughts – he was at a loss, he didn't know where to go. "Let's go to the elysian lands."

Vengeance for Slyfox and Mad Dog would have to wait. Now wasn't the time.

The power of the black hand behind the curtain was too great. At least a thousand sweepers answered his beck and call, with three mighty lieutenants to guide them. Of course this was just what they knew about it, how many soldiers there really were in service of this demon was still unknown. They didn't even know what the demon himself was capable of.

They were one badly wounded Bloodsoaked Queen, and a weak Cloudhawk. The fact they were still alive was in itself a miracle. If they didn't find water soon that could change, and it was increasingly unlikely they'd last through the night. How could they even begin to talk about how to fight back?

Hunting down demons was now a hopeless task. But would making their way to the

elysian lands bring them hope? Leagues of wasteland stretched far and wide, covering every inch of this territory. Making their way across would take as much luck as nerve, and no one knew what they might encounter in the unknown kilometers between here and there.

If they were destined to die in the wastelands the Bloodsoaked Queen preferred to go down fighting. It was the nature and pride of the demonhunter.

“Ah, I just don’t get it.” Cloudhawk could see the resolute light in the Queen’s eye, her determination even in the face of death. “Why the hell are you so pissed at this demon? Why would you give up the safety and comfort of the elysian lands to go on a suicide mission you refuse to let go of. What did he do to you?”

The Bloodsoaked Queen was young, intelligent, beautiful and skilled. She was perfect and filled with such potential. He just didn’t get why she’d give all that up, a bright future, for a weird obsession with this monster of the wasteland? Cloudhawk couldn’t help but voice his confusion.

Typically the Queen’s haughty nature would prevent her from explaining anything to this faithless, dishonorable heathen. But Cloudhawk was surprised to hear her voice, heavy with sorrow and pain.

“He killed my father.”

She was weak, her body shook. In this moment the iron-like façade of the female warrior cracked. Her eyes were red, and in their depths he could see a seething hatred.

The one who took her father had to pay!

She bore the disgrace of her father’s death. It had to be her who exacted revenge. This was the thought that consumed her when she, only sixteen, had secretly left the elysian lands. For an entire year she had hunted for closure.

The Queen was an exceptionally talented demonhunter, but young. She was too self-confident and arrogant, and her hatred of the demon had blinded her. She never even stopped to consider what sort of foe she faced.

Cloudhawk really didn’t understand her but he couldn’t be blamed, for he had no concept of what a father was. He heaved a sigh – everyone lived their own stories, their own views, their own motives. Who was he to tell someone that their path was wrong?

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

For two days and two nights Cloudhawk hadn't so much as closed his eyes. His nerves were frayed, leaving him anxious. He'd cut his way out from the wastelands and into the outpost, only to slaughter his way out of the outpost and back into the wastelands. At no time did he have a chance to rest. Even the most steadfast will had its limits and Cloudhawk was reaching his. Fighting his exhaustion was like trying to run against floodwaters.

His eyelids felt like they weighed a thousand kilograms. Eventually they won and his eyes slipped closed.

When he woke back up he couldn't tell how much time had passed. Burning thirst had been what stirred him. His eyes popped open and his first instinct was to grip his exorcist staff and glare all around. The sky had dimmed toward evening – he hadn't thought he'd slept that long.

Cloudhawk's mind was clear but his throat was dry as a bone. He was dehydrated, he knew, and that was dangerous.

The Bloodsoaked Queen huddled nearby with her long raven hair flowing free. Her eyes were closed, also asleep, but her face was painted with an unnatural blush. It sounded like every breath was a struggle. When he saw how she looked Cloudhawk scrambled forward and pressed his hand to her forehead. Her burning skin radiated heat right through his palm.

This was bad!

Cloudhawk hadn't thought the dozen or so wounds he suffered would end up so trivial, while the Queen's few external injuries would become infected. He figured one of the arrows that hit her had to have been poisoned.

“Hey, hey! Wake up!”

“You can't die!”

Cloudhawk felt his frayed nerves tremble. The two of them were a team, and by now the sweepers saw him as a demonhunter as well. If she died they wouldn't show him any mercy. With the mighty Queen at his side he had a chance. If she didn't make it, a novice like Cloudhawk had no hope of escape.

The Queen's cracked lips worked, unconsciously muttering a single word. "Water..."

Water? I'm dying of thirst too! Where am I supposed to find water?

Cloudhawk ran his hand through sand-streaked hair anxiously. They'd run out of rabbit blood a long time ago, so what was he supposed to do?

Suddenly a calm came over him. He pulled out the knife the Bloodsoaked Queen kept in her boot and pressed the tip against his wrist. He dragged it down his skin, opening up a hole. Blood began to spill forth.

This was the only way!

The Queen was unconscious. Like an infant she gulped at whatever her mouth clung to. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth and it was enough to bring her back from her stupor. Her eyes snapped open and she stared at what was happening.

Cloudhawk tried to reassure her with a less than comforting grin. "You're finally up."

She was still weak but her eyes trembled with feeling. This wastelander was using his own life blood to save her? If he'd tried it at any time before this would have thrown her into a rage. She was a noble demonhunter! How dare his ignoble blood be used to continue her life!

The rage did not come. Perhaps it was because she was weak, but perhaps it was because of other, deeper reasons.

"We have to go. We have to find water tonight or we'll die."

Cloudhawk had fashioned the rabbit skin into a crude backpack and put their surplus meat inside. Next he dug a hole and buried any trace that they'd used this place for shelter.

They had to keep hidden. The Queen's fever was scorching, so much that it had started to affect her consciousness. She couldn't fight, much less summon power from relics. She could hardly walk. It was the weakest she'd ever been.

"You're too slow in your condition," Cloudhawk muttered. He removed the rabbit skin bag and wrapped it around the Queen's shoulders. "Hold this, I'll carry you on my back!"

Odious as the choice was the Queen was no fool. There was no other option.

Cloudhawk pulled her onto his bony back and the two of them set off into the dusky desert. Their dim footprints stretched out behind them.

Light from the setting sun painted the dunes in color. The Queen's long hair took on a burnished bronze hue. Even in her half-conscious state she could sense that her time was fleeting, but her heart was calm.

She never thought... never imagined... the one helping her through the end would be this wastelander youth she had always looked down upon.

Eventually the sun dipped below the horizon and stars emerged. The broiling desert quickly dipped in temperature. Cloudhawk panted like an old ox and yet he tenaciously pushed on, one foot in front of the other, by will alone. He was dizzy, his eyes refused to focus, but he kept on beyond the point any reasonable person could hold on. And never once did they come across a single living thing, much less water.

Whoosh!

The sound pierced his ears. Cloudhawk saw the shaft of an arrow race past his face, hissing through the air in its passage. It buried itself in the sand before his feet and quivered. Cloudhawk blanched as he swung his head toward the arrow's origin, where he found five figures picking their way through the dim light toward them. Two lizard riders were at the front and the three others were archers, all in pursuit. The arrow had come from one of them.

Cloudhawk felt his heart sink.

These five were a vanguard. Scores more dotted the desert on the other side of a nearby dune. All of them wore armor and hefted dangerous looking weapons. Cloudhawk was sure the sandstorm would have wiped away their scent and any trace of their movement, they couldn't have caught up with them so fast. Now it looked like he'd been too optimistic.

"Don't move!"

The three archers had arrows knocked and bows draw, but did not yet fire. A handful of wasteland riders trampled by and cut them off with a semi-circular formation.

Cloudhawk carefully leaned down and let the Queen off of his back and hefted the exorcist staff. They weren't getting away this time, but now that they were caught he was going to make sure someone paid for it. Yet though he'd been surrounded Cloudhawk's enemies didn't rush in and attack.

Two figures separated from the pack.

One of them was a big man, thick and muscular. His face was covered in bushy, ashen whiskers. He looked like an old, grizzled veteran dressed in typical wastelander attire. Of note was his steel armor which looked like it was well made. Although he looked like an old, arthritic lion, he seethed with the aura of someone who wasn't to be fucked with.

The second fellow was brawny, and not too old. Half of his face had been burned by acid or fire leaving hideous scars behind. His hair was sparse and patchy, and grape-like tumors grew in patches from his throat down his chest. They had to be some kind of mild mutation.

Aside from a few deformed soldiers, Cloudhawk noted that most of this group looked like normal humans. They weren't sweepers, but then who were they?

Cloudhawk barked a challenge. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Who we are isn't important!" The brawny man answered with a hideous, savage grin. He lifted his hand and waved it at the two of them. "Go, take 'em down!"

Chapter 55

Fiends of the Desert

“Hold!”

The call wasn't loud, but deep and commanding. Like a lion's roar it was stately and powerful, and promised that those who dared disobey would feel teeth on their throat. Everyone lowered their weapons, forced to capitulate.

The burly, ugly man's expression revealed his displeasure. He glared at the tall bearded man who stopped them. “Goddamnit, Leonine, what are you doin’?”

Apparently the lion-esque leader of this tribe had a name to match his appearance – Leonine. He grinned and it called to mind the image of a lion baring its fangs.

Earning a nickname like that in the wastelands was no easy feat. Although they listened to the older man this team seemed loosely organized, probably several groups patched together. If despite that they jumped when Leonine spoke, it said a lot about this complicated person.

Leonine pierced Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen with his eyes. They were small, seemingly weak, but the grizzled warrior could see the signs of battle writ in wounds all over Cloudhawk's body. It told him that these children had seen vicious fighting. For someone to suffer that many wounds and still make it out alive meant they were real wastelanders.

“Who are you? What are you doing wandering around out here?”

“We're from Blackflag Outpost.” Cloudhawk didn't know if these men were friends or foes, but he gave them a straight answer anyway. “We were attacked by sweepers and managed to get away. We got separated from the others and now we're here.”

“Blackflag Outpost? I've heard of it, they say it was a big settlement. I'm surprised to hear a group of sweepers could break through.” Curiosity was thick in Leonine's rumbling voice. The others tightened their grips on their weapons for they knew his next command was probably going to decide whether these kids lived or died. After a

few moments of thought Leonine continued. "We're headed toward the Greenland Outpost. The road's dangerous, and we can always use another arm to swing a weapon. If you've got nowhere else to go you can follow us – but just follow, you stay behind the group."

Leonine's decision was unexpected. Cloudhawk was desperate to live, and death seemed inevitable unless they followed these people. What choice did he have?

Whatever kind of place this Greenland Outpost was wasn't important. All he heard was 'outpost,' and the two of them needed a safe haven where they could nurse their wounds.

Leonine nodded. "Then you're coming with us."

The bearded warrior turned and made to leave. His companions relaxed their weapons. No one gave the two any more trouble, because going against Leonine's decision would make him seem weak – and that would have consequences.

Cloudhawk blurted out. "Can you give us water?"

"Are you fuckin' deaf? He said you can follow, that's it!" The brutish man barked. "You think we're a goddamn charity?!"

A dagger made a raspy thud as it buried itself in the sand. The weapon was from the Elysium fields, brought here by the Bloodsoaked Queen. It wasn't a relic, but one could tell at a glance it was made from a special metal. It was keen and straight, and even decent wasteland weapons couldn't compare with it. When the Queen opened her mouth she spoke with a quiet tenacity, concealing her weakness. "Take this dagger in trade!"

The brute snatched the dagger from the ground and turned it over in his hands in appreciation. Water was precious out here in the wastelands, but her dagger was more than a worthy exchange.

Cloudhawk added his own impatient voice. "Well? Are you gonna take it or not?!"

"A shitty broken dagger isn't enough." The brute drew his eyes over the Queen's body. Her face was covered by the hideous demon mask but it couldn't hide her full chest, round backside and long slender legs. She was still getting a lot of unsavory attention, and the evil look in the brute's eyes left no question as to his intent. "It's your lucky

day, woman. My boys and I have suffered a bit of a dry spell ourselves. You show us a good time, and we'll give you water!"

How could the Bloodsoaked Queen ignore such an insult? If she'd even been able to walk unaided this reckless idiot would be a carcass left to rot in the desert sun.

Everyone's eyes were on the Queen now, hungry and violent. None of them made an effort to hide their wild, lascivious desires. Out in these wicked badlands a woman of her caliber was like a sheep among wolves. It didn't require much imagination to know what would happen to her.

Cloudhawk moved forward to block them, but two burly men grabbed him tight.

The brute and a dozen other men surrounded the Queen and she stumbled backward to try and avoid them. Reaching out with her will to summon her relic's power only earned her a tearing pain in her skull. She couldn't pair with its resonance, she was too weak.

One of the men lunged at her ravenously.

She managed to sidestep his assault. Her right leg whipped out and caught the man between his. He let out a piteous whine and collapsed to the ground, rolling in agony. When the other men saw their friend's plight they broke out in raucous laughter. A few of them saw it as their chance to cause trouble.

A bestial yell erupted from behind the Queen and suddenly her hands were caught in a vice-like grip. Struggled as she might she couldn't get free, her only response was to yell. "If you *dare* try anything I'll make you regret being born!"

"It's a wild place, girlie!"

"What the fuck are you wearin' woman?"

"This bitch is feisty! I'm gonna like this one!"

"What the fuck are you in such a hurry for, huh? I haven't had my turn yet!" He kicked the man who was still curled up on the ground and prepared to take off his pants. "Get in line boys, I'm first."

The brute thought of something then and turned his head to the two men holding

Cloudhawk back. "Bring that punk over here. I'm gonna make him watch me take his woman!"

As the rowdy group prepared for their fun, Leonine watched with an indifferent expression.

Out here in the wastes women were tools, a way for men to vent. Now that the girl was here she had to understand that. If she wasn't strong enough to protect herself then she would be used as they liked. It was true for the men, too. If they weren't strong enough to protect their women then they had to deal with losing them.

These were the rules out here in this wretched place. Without power you had to resign yourself to your fate!

A bloody red hue crept into Cloudhawk's eyes. Suddenly he felt a deluge of energy burst through his exhausted body, like an erupting volcano. He wrenched himself free from his captors. "*You're fuckin DEAD!*"

His voice was wild, ferocious, murderous. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him. Cloudhawk snatched up his inconspicuous staff and charged through a group of men like a rabid rhinoceros. The brute, who was fumbling with his pants, felt a crazed and lethal sensation wash over him. His face curled into a savage scowl.

"Don't blame me for this shit, Leonine. This fuck brought it on himself!"

The brute hefted a long heavy knife. If Leonine was their leader then this man was certainly their number two. Any man who could order a dozen degenerates like these around wasn't your typical wastelander. He wasn't as strong as Mad Dog, say, but he would definitely have been comparable to the strongest fighters of the Tartarus mercenaries!

The brute's short sword was thick and sturdy but he wielded it like it weighed nothing, bringing it down in a chopping motion toward Cloudhawk with pinpoint accuracy. He wielded it masterfully.

Cloudhawk's will suddenly burst out! The exorcist staff started to spin rapidly.

Before the other men could react Cloudhawk brought the staff down on up in a crushing strike. Like glass the brute's sword shattered into a million pieces while Cloudhawk's staff didn't seem to slow at all. It collided with the brute's chest, hitting

him so hard that blood and flesh exploded everywhere like he'd pummeled a rotten tomato.

The brute never made a sound. He was flung back three or four meters then bent backward, nearly broken in half. He fell to the ground at a grotesque angle, and only the bones of his spine and a few strips of flesh kept the two halves of his body connected.

His eyes were wide as saucers and blood sputtered from his mouth in a torrent. Any air that had been in his lungs was replaced with thick, fresh blood. For a few seconds his arms twitched before he stopped moving entirely.

Cloudhawk was caked in gore. He didn't even look at what was left of the brute as, like a crazed demon, he howled at the others. *"Get your hands off her!"*

"Ahhh!"

"Monster! He's a fuckin' monster!"

The brawny man holding the Queen was scared stiff. Half a moment later his wits returned enough for him to let her go and go tearing off into the distance.

Cloudhawk pulled the weakened Queen behind him. He pointed his exorcist staff at the slack-jawed miscreants, his face a deranged mask. *"Anyone else want to try their fuckin luck?!"*

It was a bluff, he'd only had enough energy to use the staff once. There was no way he'd be able to protect himself or the Queen from the rest of these outlaws. But his terrifying display had scared them completely. They'd seen him break the brute nearly in half with a stick, and they were absolutely terrified they might be next.

The brute's subordinates kept about ten meters between them and the demon kid. No one dared step forward to challenge him.

Cloudhawk's lithe frame was reflected in the Queen's shimmering eyes. Like a feral beast he'd put himself, small as he was, between her and a group of vile and vicious men.

He was young, and weak, but he threw himself at the others and risked his life to protect me. Again... I owe him again.

Leonine appeared once more with several men in tow. Cloudhawk watched him come nervously. He hadn't fought the old man but he knew he was on par with the likes of Mad Dog. If it came to a battle he was sure to lose.

"Alright, put away your weapons." An eerie calm was in Leonine's voice. He spoke unhurriedly. "Number two wasn't worth shit. He started a fight he couldn't finish, even death won't clear his shame. From today onward you're gonna take his place as my number two."

That was all the attention Leonine was going to pay toward the brute's death. Now Cloudhawk was his victim's replacement?

"You got fifteen minutes to prep." Leonine plucked a canteen from his person and threw it toward Cloudhawk. "After fifteen minutes we're movin'."

Cloudhawk caught the canteen and shook it. Inside water sloshed around enticingly. It was full, much to his delight. Full of life-saving nectar!

He pulled open the bung and handed it to the Queen. He didn't do it out of some altruistic moral sense. Cloudhawk knew he wasn't strong enough, he needed the Queen at her best to keep him safe.

These wasteland savages were vicious and cruel, but they were good at adapting to circumstances. Cloudhawk's bloody showing had made a deep impression, to say the least. They were like different people now, and respectfully addressed Cloudhawk as 'Second Brother.'

The Bloodsoaked Queen gulped down half the canteen's contents. She felt like a sunbaked desert after a blessed rain. From head to toe, from inside out, it was like she could feel every cell of her body being nourished. Like being reborn.

Cloudhawk drank what was left. He really was parched and didn't leave a single drop of water left. As he drank it down he felt the water infusing him with vigor. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this good.

Fifteen minutes later...

Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen found themselves part of this band of wasteland outlaws, headed for a place called the Greenland Outpost.

Chapter 56

Land of Ruins

Cloudhawk and the Queen rode atop a giant lizard, the light of the dawn casting their shadow long across the dunes. Here the monotony of the wastelands was broken when the desert gave way to a cluster of ruined structures.

Metal husks rusted beneath the beating sun. High walls crumbled away like the flesh of ancient, long-dead beasts. What remained of the city stretched out across the horizon as a concrete and steel jungle, far as the eye could see. Baked by the sun, beaten by the winds and sand, the magnificence of dilapidation was lain bare before them.

The group wandered for a few dozen meters until they found a crack in the wall and slipped into the wasted metropolis. Even after years of erosion, even now when the weeds had reclaimed this place, the towering wreckage was a testament to the splendor of the old world.

As the humans picked their way through the ruins they were dwarfed by its scale. Cloudhawk and the others were insects by comparison. More than just broken skyscrapers peppered the landscape as well. Statues, temples, and palaces dotted their paths. Great peaks, collapsed burrows, and all manner of debris were interposed throughout. Strange sites with stranger histories. Who knew what this place used to be like in its heyday? What sorts of experiences waited along its streets and in its buildings? All of it was lost to the inevitable march of time.

The ruins would probably protect them from the winds and sand. Shrubs and low foliage could be seen all around, traces of life everywhere they looked. The city had become a collapsed labyrinth that Cloudhawk and the others could get lost in forever. Even experienced wasteland rangers would have a hard time finding their way out.

It wasn't Leonine's first trip to the Greenland Outpost. He was experienced enough to avoid detours and misleading roads. He also knew when to skirt dangerous lairs where fell beasts lay in waiting. As they made their way through the ruins nothing made passage difficult.

About an hour later...

A strange howl echoed through the cluttered, dilapidated streets all around them. No one could distinguish what it was or where it was coming from. That is, until an arachnid-like monster skittered from the ruins. It leapt from the darkness, whipping its four limbs with incredible speed, and landed before one of the soldiers. The human victim brandished his weapon for protection and was quick enough to thrust it at the beast.

But the monster was faster than anyone could have imagined. It allowed the weapon to plunge into it as the creature opened its black maw and buried its fangs in the warrior's shoulder.

"Kill it!"

A handful of the men attacked, stabbing it repeatedly. But even after a dozen or so strikes the beast still lashed about. Eventually it stopped moving when a war hammer smashed its brains to bits.

Cloudhawk had a chance to look at it more closely. It only had four limbs, a head, eyes, ears, and a nose... familiar features except for the greyish-black flesh. Its legs and arms were twisted grotesquely. "Did this thing used to be human?"

Leonine pulled out a saber. The weapon was roughly five feet long, large and unadorned, with a blade just as long as the hilt. It was perfectly straight, and about as wide as one's palm. Though it was nicked and etched by blood the saber still managed to twinkle with a cold and lethal light. The grizzled veteran was sinister enough, but with the saber in hand he looked like he could cut down a whole host of enemies.

"Leonine, what the hell are you doing!?!"

Leonine had just thrown himself into the crowd like a shooting star. His saber streaked through the air with all the force of a raging river, right for the wide-eyed warrior that'd been bit. The unfortunate man's head soared high and hit the ground several meters away. Meanwhile, his body collapsed in a spray of blood. He was dead before he knew what had happened.

The others gaped at Leonine.

"That wasn't a mutant, it was a walking corpse." Leonine stood tall with the dagger

tight in his grip. Not a spot of blood was on it. "If ya get bit by one of em, you turn in less than a day. You join the ranks of the walkin' dead. He had to be dealt with."

It was the first time Cloudhawk had ever heard anything like this.

Leonine continued. "Zombies like this move in packs. We gotta leave, now."

As though on cue, the wailing rasp of zombies called out from all around. Like nightmarish insects the dead started to close in on them, skittering over walls and out through cracks in the ruins. They crawled and groped, with hungry scarlet red eyes. Dozens of them were closing in already and there were more coming.

Cloudhawk's face fell. "There are so many of them!"

Leonine hefted his dagger. "Y'all come with me. Careful you don't get bit, and try not to get any of their blood on ya."

Indeed these corpses weren't mutants. They were monsters, human flesh turned to beasts through some evil poison.

A zombie's poison was in their saliva and secondarily in their blood. One bite and their disease was passed on. Anyone unlucky enough to feel their teeth was as good as dead. If any of their blood got in an open wound the chances were also good the disease would be passed on.

There was no medicine. No cure. That's what made these monsters so terrifying! Cloudhawk was willing to fight against all sorts of creatures, things that lived only in nightmares and the darkness of the wastes. But he sure as shit wasn't interested in tangling with the dead.

Leonine led the way, racing ahead. His dagger flashed and two rotting beasts barring their way were cut in half. Still more poured in from all around – they clearly did not know fear and were willing to die en masse during their attack.

"*Shit!* One got me – it bit me!"

One of the warriors let loose with a crisp shout of pain. One of the zombie had bitten off half his hand. The sound of his cries were heavy with pain and horror, filling the others with fear much worse than the sight of his injury.

“You fuckin’ animals, I’ll wreck ya!”

The warrior threw himself at the zombies hysterically only to get pulled down by a host of them. He screamed in bloody agony as their blackened claws disemboweled him and pulled his intestines free of quivering, shredded flesh. Zombies fell on his body like he was a rare delicacy. The scene made the other humans shudder with a bone-deep terror.

Cloudhawk was suddenly blocked by three of the beasts. He didn’t know which one to attack, they were too fast and focusing on one would leave himself open to getting bit by the other two. If one of them took a chunk out of him, that was it.

The three corpses didn’t give him any time to think.

Cloudhawk was frozen in a panic and so the Queen made the first move. She seized his exorcist staff, whipping it around with practiced movements. One, two, three – the monsters’ heads exploded in no particular order, spraying brain matter all around.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was far more skilled than Cloudhawk. With the slightest influence of her will she summoned the strength of the staff, so little in fact that no one could tell she’d galvanized the relic at all. It was just enough to crush these zombies’ skulls and nothing more. She used only as much energy as was needed, as opposed to Cloudhawk who always struck with his full power.

Leonine’s voice rang out. “There’s more of ‘em comin’! Don’t let ‘em surround you or you’re dead!”

Cloudhawk then noticed that as they fought the undead were only increasing. Sooner or later they would be overrun. *How many of these fucking things were there out in these ruins!?*

The Bloodsoaked Queen flipped around and lashed out at anything nearby. She dealt with the zombies while Cloudhawk steered the giant lizard, following the others as they fought to break free of the slaving horde. All the while Leonine led the escape, his long saber cutting this way and that. A dozen corpses were cut down, left in pieces on the sand.

They continued to fight and run wildly. The undead gave chase.

Scores more humanoid beasts joined them until there were more than a hundred

zombies chomping at their heels, skittering like spiders all around. No matter what they did the monsters stuck to them like foot maggots ^[1]. So far six of Leonine's crew were gone and that number was only going to keep rising if the living dead kept on them.

Just as the unpleasant thought was crossing his mind, the ground began to quake. A disk-shaped titan erupted from the earth in a shower of sand and debris. This new monster was the very image of a crab, only several dozens of times larger. Six gnashing pincers clacked and swiped, and it was covered in a shell so thick even bullets would be useless!

Two unfortunate men were too slow in getting away. The crab-monster's pincers unceremoniously snipped them in half.

Cloudhawk gaped at what was happening before him. They couldn't catch a fucking break! Before them was a giant mutant nightmare, and behind them was a whole mob of shambling corpses. What were they supposed to do? Yet Leonine wasn't alarmed with the appearance of this newest threat. He pointed in another direction and shouted at them. "This way!"

They followed him down a fork in the road. But the zombies had caught up.

The crab lurched forward as the wave of zombies closed in. It Used one of its pincers it smashed a group of them against the ground and used another to pick them apart. Severed limbs were conveyed to the crab's maw and disappeared down its horrifying gullet. The other zombies hesitated when they saw the fate of the first wave.

These giant crabs were a zombie's natural enemy. They survived by feeding off these poisoned corpses.

Though the dead didn't have a mind of their own, they were still creatures of instinct. When they came face to face with their natural enemy their immediate reaction was to flee, for their teeth couldn't crack the monster's armor-like shell while its pincers felled them with ease. Fighting it served no purpose other than giving the monster a free meal.

The giant crab's timely arrival had saved them.

Leonine's party kept moving forward for fear the living dead would find a way to reach them.

“Listen up. There’s a canyon ahead, and the oasis region of Greenland Outpost is on the other side.” When he spoke there was no note of relaxation in his voice, like the journey was nearly over. Just the opposite – his voice and countenance grew more severe. “No matter what you see, don’t touch. You’re dead if you do!”

Cloudhawk was puzzled by Leonine’s warning. Oasis? What oasis?

He wasn’t curious for long. By the time he and the others reached the lip of the canyon a jaw-dropping scene spread out before him. The basin was an expansive area of rolling hills that separated the valley into different areas. Every dip and crevice was covered in a blanket of green. Plants of all sorts covered everything and grew with abandon, and in the very center was a glittering lake.

It was an oasis, huge and awe-inspiring.

Never in his wildest dreams would Cloudhawk have imagined a place like this existed in the wastelands. Whole forests of trees spread out below him, carpeted with grass and weeds that flourished while surrounded by desert. It created a natural barrier, a maze of green that kept out wasteland fiends and roving monsters – protecting the oasis camp from the terrors that plagued other outposts.

It was an emerald paradise in the middle of the desert!

Chapter 57

The Desert Oasis

Walking into the oasis was like entering an entirely different world. Cloudhawk could not believe there could be so much green in one place. He was shocked by how tall the trees were and how many colors of flower were all around. The whole area was rife with natural vigor and simply standing before it filled him with excitement.

The fanciest words Cloudhawk knew couldn't describe what he was looking at. The oasis was a wonderland that left an impression on his very soul.

The Bloodsoaked Queen also concealed surprise as she gazed upon the lush green landscape. For such a beautiful place to exist in the harsh and perilous wasteland was just as astonishing to her as it was to Cloudhawk.

Anyone witnessing this for the first time was stunned by the view.

“Don't forget, this is a *wasteland* oasis. You underestimate it and you're underestimating the wasteland!” Leonine warned. “I'm tellin' ya, this place takes more life than anywhere else. It was blood, not water, that fed this place and made it grow so large.”

Leonine pointed ahead to a tree laden with fruit. They were fist-sized and thickly dotted the tree, red as fresh blood. Both sight and scent were delectable. Leonine fished a scrap of dried meat from his pack and threw it toward the base of the foliage. Suddenly a writhing mass of vines whipped out and caught the meat mid-air. The vines wrapped it up and squirmed like hungry serpents, issuing a sound like sloppy chewing sound.

The others stared in shock and horror. The tree was *carnivorous!*

Leonine waved his hand, a sign for them to go on.

As they traipsed through the jungle Cloudhawk encounter one unbelievable sight after another. He learned that any flowering plant had the potential to kill him and the briefest moment of inattention could spell disaster. Leonine was richly endowed with

experience and pointed out the predators hiding in the brush. His keen eyes caught mantises trying to blend in with the deadly flora. Every encounter was heart-pounding, but they were in no danger with him at the helm.

“I thought we found a paradise. Instead this place is more dangerous than the wasteland.” Cloudhawk muttered to the Queen while he watched his feet, carefully picking their way along the path. “Without Leonine’s experience we’d be dead before we knew it.”

“Don’t you find it suspicious?” Her voice was made deep and coarse by her mask. Her physical condition had continued to improve over time. “Judging by his degree of knowledge he’s most likely a mercenary for the Greenland Outpost. He seems to come and go often – but for what purpose?”

When she said it Cloudhawk realized she was right. It was strange.

If Leonine was a mercenary most of the others in his party clearly weren’t. At least two thirds were scoundrels picked out of the desert, so why was he bringing them back? Was it really just for protection? Often smaller groups were safer out in the wastelands.

If he was a merchant or digger he’d be out to make a profit. Merchants sometimes wandered the wastes selling cigarettes and wine, ammunition, machinery... these items were widely sought and could fetch a good price. But Leonine’s crew wasn’t carting anything. It certainly was suspicious.

Wastelanders were sinners by nature. Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen had to be on guard!

The Queen was recovering well. She still couldn’t move around too much but she’d kicked the fever. Now she had enough strength to resonate with a relic if needed, so even Leonine wouldn’t be a threat. Throughout their journey she’d made it a point to avoid fighting. Instead she’d focused on regaining strength and hid her power in case she’d need to use it.

Just then one of the fighters exclaimed as he looked at another companion. “Eh? When the hell did you get so skinny?”

The other looked at him, baffled. “The hell are you on about? Whadda ya mean ‘skinny’?”

Cloudhawk sized the man up and indeed he spotted the problem. He'd been a bulky fellow before, even a little fat. Now the fighter looked like that sheen of blubber was entirely gone and his face was pale to boot. His appearance was more than strange.

What was going on? He had to be sick! But what kind of sickness worked so fast?

The fighter realized something wasn't right. He tenderly lifted up his shirt and suddenly everyone's face drained of color. His abdomen, waist and back were covered in bulging critters that pulsed as they took in blood and fat.

"What the *fuck?!?*"

"That's gross as shit!"

The others sucked in breaths of surprise and disgust. They instinctively backed away from the man.

The poor fighter began to panic. When did he get covered by these things? He never felt them. Desperate to get free he began to slap and wipe at where the creatures were attached to him. ^[1]

They were leeches, albeit monstrous ones mutated by the wasteland. They hid themselves on leaves and twigs, in muddy ground and gravel. When they weren't feeding they were thin and brown like twigs, making them difficult to spot. When something got close enough the parasites latched on and began to gorge.

They didn't only drink blood but ate fat beneath the skin as well. Once that was gone the leeches began to consume muscle, continuously releasing a numbing agent to make sure the host wasn't aware. By the time the victim was weak or started having dizzy spells they were already on death's doorstep.

"Not your hands!" Leonine cried. "Ya gotta burn 'em off!" ^[2]

Everyone else was checking themselves and each other for the nasty hitchhikers. Cloudhawk found several, and though he didn't know how long they'd been feeding on him they were already round and fat. He was covered in a cold sweat of fear, but thankfully there weren't many. It could have been much worse.

So far there wasn't much Cloudhawk liked about this devil jungle.

They quickly fled the leech breeding ground and came upon a place where the sound of trickling water tickled their ears. They found a brook whose sound was pleasing as a jade wind chime. It wasn't a large stream, but in the parched and baked wasteland where they came from it was deluge worth more than any treasure.

"Stay away from the water." Leonine spoke in a manner that left no debate. "We go around!"

Enticing as the brook was, Leonine had shown them he knew the dangers of the oasis eight or nine times by now. If he said not to go near it, the others weren't going to question him.

They started to trek around the banks.

All of a sudden a strange animal call sounded from the trees nearby. Leonine, his face stiffening, lifted his hand. "Stop!"

Everyone froze, still as the trees that closed in around them. What new terror was in store?

As Cloudhawk carefully looked around he found a creature lying on its stomach amidst the foliage. Its skin was a magnificent bluish-green and was covered in a slick fluid that made it glisten. Its cheeks puffed out as an air pouch bulged from its throat. Elaborate patterns were etched on the skin of its dorsum and its underbelly was a plain white. Altogether this new monster was about the size of a wild dog and was the source of that strange cry.

In the old days it was called a frog.

This creature had since been mutated, like everything else. In addition to its size, its moist skin was also covered in scales like armor.

One of the fighters reacted by firing a bolt at it from his crossbow.

Thud.

The arrow tumbled into the forest. The front half dug harmlessly into the ground while the back clattered into the brush, and it was then they noticed that a corrosive fluid was eating away at it. Too fast for them to see, the giant frog had used its tongue to knock the bolt out of midair.

“You fucking jackass! Who told you to shoot?!”

Leonine had to fight the urge to cut the moron apart with his knife. A frog’s dynamic vision was highly attuned and they could pick out targets mid-flight no matter how fast they were moving. However staying still made the frogs effectively blind, and if one was lucky they could avoid detection. Now that this idiot attacked the frog it could guess where they were.

Rrribbit! Rrrrrrrribbit, ribbit! ^[3]

The sounds came from all around them like a tide. As many as six or seven frogs appeared, until now perfectly camouflaged in the jungle around them. If they were still and quiet there was practically no way to pick them out of the surroundings.

“Move!”

Leonine cleaved one of the frogs with his saber and made to retreat. These monsters could leap tremendous distances and used their tongues to attack prey. Not only were their muscular tongues as dangerous and speedy as bullets, they were also coated with a powerful toxin. One hit and its victim went numb and lost consciousness.

Luckily the frogs weren’t interested in humans as meals. So long as offenders left their territory they weren’t known for chasing over distances. Leonine lost three more warriors in the course of their escape, and they were forced to find another way around.

“Eh? What’s that?”

Not long after fleeing the threat of death by frog, the diminishing group came across a grove of trees. Blanketing their roots were red and purple fungi growing from the decayed remains of... something. The largest of them was about as tall as a man, its cap wide as an umbrella. Its particular shade sparkled like a gemstone, beautiful to behold.

What in the world was this growth? Even Leonine had never seen anything like it before.

The oasis was a never-ending parade of strange and fantastical things so coming across something new wasn’t uncommon. What Leonine did know was that these kinds of plants usually grew on the corpses of dead mutant creatures and humans.

Fresh and delectable as they looked, did these also feed off of flesh?

Whether they did or not wasn't important. The fewer mysterious and unknown things they came across, the better.

They didn't have a choice. Leonine would have to lead them along another detour.

The others didn't offer a different opinion. Only a fool would look at the bones strewn along the floor and think they were safe to cross. Who would go out looking for trouble? Finding a longer way was better than dying, certainly!

The thirty-some who remained tread along the outer ring of the grove and around.

Suddenly, a mighty gust swept through and spores from the mushroom forest were rustled up. Like a cloud they spread over a wide area, some on the travelers' clothes or skin. A few were inhaled deep into unwitting lungs.

Bad. This was bad.

Everyone's face changed when they realized it. They didn't know what these spores were, but they knew anything from the mushrooms touching them had to be bad.

1. I went walking through wilds of Shangri-la once with a group of people and my wife. We stopped to take some pictures and I wandered through a bush. When I got out on the other side I noticed something squirming on my calf and realized it was a leech. I'd never felt it grab me but it was quickly getting fat. I had to really pull to get it off while my wife was hysterical. When we got back to the van the driver just said to slap em a few times and they fall off, or failing that take a lighter to their tail. You might be surprised to learn that leeches are used even today in modern hospitals as an effective way to draw out stagnant blood.

2. See.

3. In China they describe a frog's sound like 'gua', which I think is more accurate really.

Chapter 58

The Fatal Forest

Cloudhawk was one of the unfortunate ones to breath in the spores. The initial reaction was a pungent and burning sensation that ran all along his throat and into his lungs. It felt like breathing in burning coal dust.

It only lasted four or five seconds and then things began to change. Sensations Cloudhawk didn't expect emerged.

A sense of elation welled up in him, a joy that went beyond anything reasonable. It started in his brain and spread out to every part of his body until he felt like he was floating among the clouds. He no longer felt the pain from his wounds, or even remembered they were there.

These spores stopped pain?

Cloudhawk began to notice other changes. His heart began to beat faster and images flitted out of the corners of his eyes. His head felt heavy and muddled like he was in a dream world which only increased this enigmatic happy mood he found himself in.

These spores had to be some sort of neurotoxin, a natural hallucinogenic. Victims felt joyous and filled with contentment, but also hallucinated and were numbed to the outside world. However it was also intensely addictive. The moment Cloudhawk breathed it in he couldn't stop, he wanted more. Like a drunk man he swayed unsteadily, fighting a bone-deep itch and a stuffy ringing in his head. He had to have more, he needed to keep this high going.

What to do? Why, the cadaver-strewn cluster of mushrooms had plenty more spores!

Enticing as the thought was, Cloudhawk recognized the danger. He sharply bit his tongue in an attempt to clear his head. He covered his mouth and nose with a cloth used to keep out wind and sand.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had also started to sway and her eyes were glassy. Cloudhawk lurched toward her and covered the mouth hole of her mask with his hand. He loudly

called to her. “Don’t breathe it. Don’t breathe! The spores are poisonous!”

She was a willful and tenacious woman, and when Cloudhawk called to her she quickly recovered her senses. Angry and ashamed, she growled at him through her mask. “Touch me again and I’ll cut your hand off.”

Clearly the Queen wasn’t being negatively affected by the dust anymore. Cloudhawk sighed in relief and removed his hand.

Seemingly the effects of the neurotoxin were quickly expelled, but just as quick were the withdrawal symptoms. Cloudhawk felt like there were a hundred ants crawling along his bones, a sensation that was maddening.

Luckily he and the Queen had only inhaled a small amount. A few of their companions were not so fortunate and were subjected to a much larger dose. The resulting hallucinations broke their minds.

“Ah! Ah! Aaaaaahhhhhh!!”

A few of them were red from head to toe like they’d been boiled, their mouths working like fish out of water. There were not enough spores in the air to feed their addiction so desperate eyes fixed on the mushroom cluster.

Cloudhawk shouted. “Quick, grab ‘em!”

His words fell on deaf ears. Most of the fighters had taken in the spores and were battling its effects themselves. How could they stop these three crazed addicts when they could hardly handle it themselves?

Cloudhawk could only watch as these three poor bastards stumbled into the mushroom forest. They barked and howled, pulled off their clothes, and dug dirty nails into their skin to reach itches they’ll never scratch.

Pop! Sllluuurp.

They ripped off strips of their own skin and cast them to the ground with wet slaps. Insane, they ran from invisible foes and inflicted terrible wounds on themselves in their all-consuming hysteria.

In a blink they were fonts of blood. They wandered through the mushroom forest

nourishing the earth with their vital fluid, sowing the earth with their own flesh like attentive farmers in their fields. The gruesome, gory display continued for ten minutes until – no longer able to hold up their mangled bodies – the men collapsed in the center of the mushroom patch.

More flesh and blood were scattered over the field than was left on their bones. Cloudhawk tried not to think about what he'd just witnessed.

Fuck, that's how these evil mushrooms have grown so well. It also explains all these twisted bones! Watching these killers wander to their own death, turn themselves into fertilizer... if I didn't see it with my own eyes I'd hardly believe it.

Eventually the others snapped out of it, and when they saw the grisly fate that had befallen their companions everyone was eager to leave. They fled as quick as they could, but were exhausted from the trying journey and were still suffering the after-effects of the mushroom spores. They found what they hoped was a relatively safe place to rest and recover.

“Hey Leonine, how much farther to the Greenland Outpost?” Cloudhawk was throwing bits of rabbit jerky into his mouth and chewed on them to regain some strength. “Can we get there today?” He asked.

“It aint far,” he replied. “But it aint a question of gettin' there – it's about gettin' there 'fore night falls.” Leonine swept his eyes around their dimming surroundings with visible concern. “If we get caught here over night, not half this crew will see the next sunrise!”

Hunters preferred to stalk their prey in the dark.

The wasteland was vast and sparsely populated by both beasts and foliage. This, of course, came with its own risks. The situation they found themselves in here within the oasis was different, for though it was small it had a hundred times the number of fiends hidden inside. During the day predators stayed in their lairs, but when the cloak of night descended the forest was a thousand times more dangerous.

Cloudhawk was dispirited but also curious. “Leonine, I can tell you know the oasis well. You've gotta be from the Greenland Outpost, am I right?”

“Nope.”

“So why are you headed there?”

Before being brought to this damn oasis Cloudhawk wouldn't have even thought to ask the question. After all the dangers he and the Queen had been subjected to he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Leonine's response, that he wasn't from the oasis, took him by surprise. If that were true then what was the whole point of this escapade? Traveling through the oasis, the ruins, and the wasteland was nothing but a parade of personal risk.

Leonine lifted his head and stared at Cloudhawk. “My business is my own, you don't need to understand. Just like I'm not askin' you any questions about what y'all are up to.”

Cloudhawk furrowed his brows at the answer. There was something off about this old man!

He believed that there was always a reason for everything someone did. There had to be some purpose for Leonine to risk his life again and again in the oasis, even if that reason was he was looking to die. But if he wasn't going to fess up, what could Cloudhawk do about it?

Besides, the wasteland was covered in sweepers that would kill him without a second thought. Any situation was better than where he had been.

Leonine used his saber to help push him to his feet. “We're movin'”

As the oasis got darker some of the soldiers fashioned makeshift torches, and the group used the light of these fires to grope along. As the light of day slipped away they could see less and less of their surroundings, while the creatures that hunted through the night could move through it like fish to water.

The Queen trudged along beside them until suddenly she came to a stop. She called out with a harsh whisper. “I hear something!”

Cloudhawk stopped and focused, holding his breath so he could pay closer attention. From the depths of the trees he could indeed hear something, like the wings of insects. As the buzz grew louder he could tell there were a bunch of them, and they were getting closer.

Cloudhawk carefully listened for the precise location of the sound. Then, drawing his

exorcist staff, he swung around and struck! His weapon connected with a hard shell and something hit the ground. It was like a locust from the old days, only huge and writhing frantically on the ground. It was about the size of a pigeon from the history books but with a hideous head and eight long, black talons. Most frightening was its scorpion-like tail, which he knew at a glance was filled with poison.

“Scorpion Locusts.” Leonine could hear the sound closing in around them, too. “Douse those torches, we gotta get outta here!”

The makeshift torches were hastily thrown to the ground and put out. Leonine wasted no time taking the lead and guiding them away.

As they wandered through the darkness Cloudhawk could see and hear all manner of hideous bugs flitting around. Suddenly the forest was full of them, no less than a hundred pairs of wings buzzing by their ears, and aggressive. Once they spotted the humans they gave chase.

“Ah!”

One of the locusts rushed at a fighter and latched onto his face with its sharp claws. Blood poured as the black talons dug into flesh. Although several of its companions were coming to join the fray, the scorpion locust whipped its hideous tail and jabbed it right in its victim’s cheek. In a matter of seconds he swelled up like a balloon. The fighter couldn’t scream, couldn’t flee, he just collapsed to the ground foaming white froth at the mouth.

Ten more swarmed him. He managed to struggle, but only for a few short moments before he became dinner for these carnivorous insects.

Cloudhawk stared in horror. Its poison was that potent?

He screwed his focus to its limit, determined not to let *any* of these monstrosities get close. Luckily he was still close to the Queen so if any of them got past his stick she could deal with them. If not for her Cloudhawk was sure he wouldn’t survive the night even if he had ten lives.

Another pained cry rang out. Their crew lost another one.

Leonine hadn’t planned on running into creatures like this, either. They were coming in from every direction. The most frightening thing about this threat was that one tiny

scratch was enough to seal one's fate.

There was no choice. They had to do whatever they could to survive!

Leonine took off and the others followed him into a host of cobwebs. The locusts gave chase but were predictably caught by the sticky tendrils that thickly covered the trees. Struggled as they might they couldn't break free.

The humans didn't have a chance to catch their breath.

Scores of enormous spiders leapt from their nests in the trees. Each one was a meter or two long, too numerous to count. The oasis had gone from a cloud of insects to a maze of spiders and spider webs. Quicker than they thought possible, the spiders' prey were wrapped up like mummies and left to dangle in the wind, hanging like ghastly fruit from the trees.

Thud!

One of the spiders spat a glob of sticky spider web, striking one of the fleeing humans. He was immediately stuck, but more terrifying was the quality of the spider silk. It was coated in some sort of corrosive fluid, and the skin it touched first turned red then a necrotic black, sizzling all the while.

Spiders chattered closer, more than the travelers could believe.

Cloudhawk couldn't help it, he shouted through the night. "Leonine, what kind of fucking hell did you lead us into!"

"It's a shortcut!" He didn't mention that it was a shortcut he hadn't wanted to take, but if they hadn't taken this risk they surely would have died. More of the locusts were fighting through the webs and the spiders went after them. Natural enemies, the two sides continued to take each other out.

"The outpost is straight ahead!"

Chapter 59

Selling the Goods

Cloudhawk peered through dusk, through the dark press of trees. Nests for these hideous spiders graced the crown of nearly every tree and the victims they didn't eat hung from branches and cracks in the bark. They were used as fleshy sacks for their young to grow in. Like gloomy and gruesome fruit they swayed in a stuffy breeze.

The trees were their homes but also hunting grounds. Thick ropes of acidic webbing stretched across them creating a network the spiders used to get around and communicate. Through their network of webs they could race from one tree to another and never had to touch the ground.

Besides being everywhere, the webbing was exceedingly sticky and tough as steel. Getting caught by one wasn't an option, because even a knife couldn't cut you free.

But *every* tree was home to at least one spider nest. There were too many of them!

The spiders used their webs as the main means of attack. They skittered along the tendrils to quickly descend upon unwitting victims from overhead. Corrosive spidersilk spit coated their prey, then they moved in to seal the kill with a poisoned bite.

Cloudhawk continued to move forward with the rest of their team. But rustling sounds were coming from the trees around them.

Shhrrr! Shhrrr!

Three or four of the spiders traveled amongst the trees along their network of spider webs. The thick trees sometimes hid them, and sometimes their beady eyes appeared glinting in the darkness. Every time they reappeared the spiders were a little closer.

"Kill 'em!"

Fighters began to fire arrows into the forest. In front of them, one of the spiders took a shaft to the head but didn't die. Instead it pounced at the humans with a hiss and its

eight legs outstretched.

Leonine heaved his saber, carving a deadly arc through the air. By the time it finished its trek the spider was on the ground in two pieces, jerking erratically. Purplish-red blood, thick with poison, flowed out of its mangled body like sludge.

The rest of the spiders charged at them from the left and right.

Globs of corrosive spit flew at the star-crossed travelers and they dodged best they could. One of the beefier fighters swung his war hammer and knocked a spider to the ground, to which Cloudhawk answered by jabbing the sharp end of his staff into its brain repeatedly. The mutated insect screeched and struggled to flee while its wounds hemorrhaged violet filth. Wounds like these were difficult to recover from, even for creatures that healed quickly. Even if Cloudhawk's vicious strikes didn't kill the thing, it was at least out of the fight.

Several more spiders took its place, more were coming with every passing moment.

It didn't take a genius to know the spiders outnumbered the humans, a fact Cloudhawk was intimately aware of. If they got surrounded the chances of getting out alive were slim to none.

"With me!" Leonine cut away some webbing and cleared a path out over the corpses of several spiders. "This way!"

Before them spread an area carpeted in spotlessly bright eggs. Each one was roughly the size of a fist and as Cloudhawk stomped through them the fluid that burst out was sticky as glue. It caught his feet while a gut-wrenching stench permeated the air. This had to be the spider spawning ground, where their eggs were gathered and hatched. Crunching beneath their feet were some new eggs and some long-split shells. The spots between, earth and shrubs, and all along the trees was a writhing mass of brown. Everything was covered in palm-sized spiders.

"Mother fucker! It's all spiders!"

Cloudhawk's legs, head, and back were covered in spiders large as his hands. Young though they were, it didn't make them any less fierce. They charged at the intruders without fear, ready to kill.

"Ah!"

“It bit me!”

“Ah fuck me! This is a spider nest!”

As the crew stumbled through the egg fields it took no more than fifty meters for them to be covered with spiders from head to toe. Cloudhawk thought he had to have a dozen spider bites along his arms and neck. Blessedly, young spiders had weaker poison and their hunting skills had not yet developed. Though the sites of the bites had swollen sizably they wouldn't be life threatening.

They waded into a sea of spiders; in front, behind and on either side. Twenty to thirty more fully matured spiders were catching up. Desperate, hopeless, these were the only way to describe how they felt - but pure survival instinct urged them on. Eventually, just as the large spiders were catching up, they left the nest and into what was beyond.

Cloudhawk plucked a particularly hateful spider from his neck and smashed it against the ground. It sprang back up and tried to run, but Cloudhawk brought his foot down on it and smashed the bug into paste.

The young demonhunter was in a pitiful state. His neck and face were swollen, his hands were inflated to twice their normal size. The rest of the crew certainly wasn't much better, except for the Bloodsoaked Queen who looked completely free of bites.

The trees above rustled as suddenly a large spider emerged. Rays of silk fired at them like arrows, trying to pin them down as they fled but falling short. Acid sizzled against the ground releasing caustic white smoke.

These goddamn things are still chasing us?!

These unpleasant surprises continued to waylay them. The spiders didn't let up, spitting corrosive silk at them from up to twenty or thirty meters away. Each shot was like it was fired from a gun, so the humans couldn't slow even a little. They ran headfirst as fast as they could through the oasis.

Spiders kept on them, until...

Bang-bang!

Two cracks rang out from the darkness around trees, like a pair of muffled gunshots. The arachnids in pursuit hit the ground, dead. Cloudhawk fought through his surprise

– judging from the sound the shots had to have come from far away. Was there anyone who could make a shot like that, from so far and through a forest?

“Snipers from the Greenland Outpost!”

“We made it!”

Another salvo rang out. Each crack of a gun being fired meant another spider was dead. Cloudhawk noted that more than being far, each shot was deadly. They entered the head and shot straight through the whole monster leaving a large hole behind.

Finally they broke off and disappeared into the brush. A short distance later Leonine was shouting out his identity to the marksmen.

Several men appeared. They sprang up from nowhere, covered in leaves and their faces smeared with camouflage to make them blend in expertly. More appeared from behind rocks and dropped from the trees above, equipped to tackle the forest and bearing sizeable guns.

In skill they were no less impressive than Blackflag Outpost’s elite squad, yet hundreds of times better equipped. There were only a handful of places in what was left of the world with the power to raise a force like this.

Greenland Outpost had power.

“Not a bad harvest this time, Leonine.” One of the jungle rangers, who appeared to be the leader, looked over those who had survived the forest. “Alright, let ‘em in.”

Cloudhawk didn’t understand. ‘Not a bad harvest’? What did he mean! Leonine had come across the wastes with nothing but them, twenty-odd foreigners.

Two of the jungle soldiers flanked their group with weapons half raised. They spoke harshly. “What the fuck are you dopes gaping about? *In!*”

For the first time Cloudhawk saw the large walls, choked with vines. The wall itself was the remnant from some ancient architecture, tall and thick like some kind of fortification. It kept most of the oasis terrors at bay.

When the Outpost spread out before him, Cloudhawk was absolutely floored by what he saw.

The center of the outpost was an ancient metropolis, its grace lost to time but still useful. Most of the buildings were still standing, though badly rusted, and were covered in moss and vines. In the gloomy evening the buildings cut out dark shapes against the sky, dense and somehow otherworldly. Through the darkness they could faintly see people bustling along the streets.

This outpost was built on the ruins of a bygone city. They used its foundations as their own to make a new settlement.

In terms of scale it was huge, at a minimum several times the size of Blackflag Outpost. Eighty percent of the place was arranged around the city where most of the population lived. A fifty or sixty meter tall building, with a four or five thousand square meter base, towered over the smaller structures like a titan.

Lights flickered inside, and it was a tower large enough that the whole Blackflag Outpost could fit inside.

It was called Greenland Fort and was situated in the center of the settlement with several other structures scattered around. A conservative estimate revealed there were perhaps forty to fifty thousand residents altogether.

“Hurry up, mutants!”

They were lead to a dig site in full operation, where a dozen or so burly mutants were combing through the remains. Occasionally they picked out some ancient tool or useful material.

Mutants lived in the Greenland Outpost? Most deformities made them quick to anger. Keeping them here was like living with ticking time bombs.

The Bloodsoaked Queen gave Cloudhawk a sharp slap. She had a strange look in her eye as she extended a finger. He followed where she was pointing to spy then stopped like he'd been struck by lightning. His eyes went wide as saucers, and a cold sweat sprang up all over his body.

A large, wasteland-style airship was moored to one side of Greenbelt Fort.

It was Cloudhawk's fourth time seeing this vehicle.

The first time was after his first mission with the mercenaries, when they finished

their task. The second was when these benefactors betrayed his former colleagues. Third was when Blackflag Outpost was overrun. The black-clad freak's airship was here, before his eyes, and yet none of the Outpost's people seemed bothered by it. What did this mean?

Did they brazenly walk into a trap? Did they slip the noose around their own necks?

Whatever else, if the airship was here then it meant there were sweepers nearby as well. But more importantly, they couldn't ignore the possibility that their three mutant lieutenants could be around the next corner!

Cloudhawk spoke to her in a whisper. "It's too dangerous here. We have to slip out fast as we can."

As Cloudhawk was preparing to lead the Queen away a crowd of outpost soldiers rushed their way. Populated with humans and mutants, they quickly surrounded the group.

"Tie 'em up!"

The twenty newcomers did not resist, even as iron shackles were fixed to their wrists.

"This is a quality crop," Leonine said to the leader. "Among the best survivors from out in the wasteland. The price –"

The guard leader cut him off with a grunt. His manner was gruff and abusive. "*You* don't set the price. Bring 'em inside first!"

"What are you doing?"

"Leonine, you fuck, are you selling me?!"

The wastelanders shouted in anger and disbelief. Suddenly Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen understood why the grizzled old man would take such risks while apparently empty handed. His goods were with him all along – it was them!

This piece of shit was a slave trader!

Bang! One of the guards brought his fist down on a particularly vocal wastelander. "Don't get outta line! Starting now you all are the property of Greenland Outpost."

Slaves. If you start trouble I'll personally waste your ass."

Guns from the outpost guards were trained on the twenty freshly sold captives.

They were livid, horrified. After surviving the devil forest they were all exhausted, and couldn't fight back even if they wanted to. These soldiers were well trained and even better equipped, leaving them no hope for escape!

"Take 'em away, lock 'em all up!"

With their shackles affixed the slaves were forced to waddle like ducks after their captors.

Cloudhawk and the Queen surveyed their situation with tightly knit brows. This outpost was much larger than the one they'd come from, so it was safe to assume skillful fighters were as common as clouds. If they tried to get away with no plan they weren't going to get anywhere. Yet if they didn't try to flee they would be slaves in a place that had some connection to the demon. Staying here was clearly very dangerous.

Run? Even if they could get away from their jailors where would they go? They hadn't forgotten the terrors of the oasis all around them!

Chapter 60

Exposed

Greenland Outpost was able to sustain a population of fifty thousand because, unlike the rest of the wastelands, they had food and water aplenty. They also had acres of unexcavated archeological sites which were rife with tools and materials. In other words, the only thing this place needed the most was people to dig those things up.

There were kilometers of dig sites waiting to be plundered, and fields of fertile soil which needed to be cultivated.

Considering its surroundings, the outpost needed many soldiers to help keep the oasis' less friendly critters at bay. Workers were needed to forge and maintain equipment, and pretty girls were needed as entertainment for the affluent denizens of the Outpost who wanted for nothing.

Laborers, soldiers, and women were the goods Greenland Outpost sought. And where there was a need, there was a market and merchants to meet demand.

Greenland Outpost had a cadre of slavers, with Leonine being one of their most notable. He scoured the wastes and attracted the unfortunate with promises of surplus and comfort in Greenland Outpost. Those who survived the journey were sold as slaves, put in shackles, and thrown in cages where they were 'domesticated' through torture.

It wasn't the first time Leonine had sold a batch of humans in this way. He alone had brought a hundred and fifty high-quality chattels to work in the outpost. Most became soldiers or laborers, but he'd brought a few valuable women as well. Leaders from the outpost were pleased with his product.

As the prisoners yelled and spat, levying curses on him and all he touched, Leonine was unmoved. He watched with cold, unfeeling indifference.

His goods would be escorted by armed guards to the slave vault, one of the most highly policed area of the settlement. Guards were posted everywhere inside and out, and they were locked behind massive iron doors. Once slaves entered the prison, any

chance of escape was gone.

Slaves were forced to bear inhuman treatment, molded little by little until they were broken and gave in to their fate. They were worked to death digging wells and then fed to beasts while the women were reduced to toys. All of them were consigned to a terrible fate, and eventually they would die.

Leonine felt guilt for none of this. There was no place for it in the wastes.

The outpost guard leader spoke as they walked toward the slave camp. "As always, we take forty percent, you keep sixty. For the time being just wait for the word."

This fuckin vampire. He was making a killing without any risk, but Leonine had no option but to accept the guard leader's shakedown. If he didn't the guard leader would either fudge the reports or undersell his goods and Leonine would suffer because of it. He had to swallow his pride and take it.

Leonine used some water to scrub himself clean, changed his clothes, then went home. He made his way to a squat stone building, one of the remaining structures from the old city, and gently rapped on the door.

"Who is it!" An anxious voice called out from inside. It sounded like a young boy.

"It's me."

The door opened only a crack and a small head peeked out. A boy no older than ten looked up at Leonine, and though young he was very vigilant. He clasped a revolver in his hand.

When he saw who it was the boy's eyes lit up. He threw his arms open and gave Leonine a hug.

Suddenly Leonine's loaded, wrinkled scowl disappeared and he smiled. He wrapped one of his arms around the child in a hug of his own. When he spoke he did so with a gentle and fatherly tone. "Look at this guy with the gun I gave him. You plannin' to use it on me?"

The child vehemently shook his head. "You said that I was a man. I have to protect my mom and my sister!"

“Yeah, good boy.”

Leonine picked him up and walked into the shabby dwelling. Inside, a modest-looking middle aged woman was perched on the side of a bed. She was looking after a small girl, maybe five or six. The little one had a head of tousled flaxen hair that made her look like an adorable little imp, only she was all skin and bone. A large growth had taken over the left side of her neck – some kind of malignant tumor.

This woman, the boy, and the sick child were a family. Yes, a family. This frail clan was everything Leonine had in the world!

Although they were staying here, they weren't citizens of the outpost. It cost a significant amount of money to house them here, and just getting water and grains for his young ones was a great expense, especially since they couldn't work. Sometimes it was so much of a weight Leonine found it hard to breathe.

One disaster after another had plagued the slaver.

Half a year ago his daughter had started to show signs of illness. The growth had started to show, bulging out of the left side of her neck. Day by day she seemed to get weaker, frailer. Leonine did everything he could think of to try and save her and brought her to doctors in the outpost who were equipped with high technology from the old days. However, enlisting their help came at a staggering cost.

Leonine had to earn more, and risks would be necessary. Slave trading was a way to increase his income so he could save enough for his daughter's treatment. It was an arduous situation, definitely, and he wasn't sure how long his little girl would last.

Leonine put the boy down. He made his way over to the bed and took the woman's hand in his. “How is she?”

“It's getting worse.” She was a common looking woman, time and stress had made her haggard. “She doesn't eat a thing and she sleeps all day. She'll wake up maybe once and complain that she wants to see her daddy.”

She couldn't keep the knot in her throat from creeping into her voice.

With all the talking, the afflicted little girl's eyes fluttered open. They were brown and beautiful, and clear as pure crystal. In this putrid wasteland, it was hard to find eyes like these.

The little girl struggled to extend her stick-thin hand and put it in Leonine's calloused own. There was joy in her sparkling eyes as she looked at him, like she'd forgotten all the pain wracking her little body. She called to him, her voice as thin and frail as the beating wings of a mosquito. "Don't go daddy... okay?"

"Stop your nonsense and get some rest." He kissed her tiny hand. "I've almost got enough money. We're gonna get you the best doctors and it's gonna be just like before."

"Brother and Mommy are always being bullied by bad men. You have to stay, Daddy." Tears had begun to gather in her eyes, twinkling in the dim light. "I don't feel bad. Honest. I don't."

Leonine's eyes were red. She was eight years old, but she knew she didn't have much time left. The little girl didn't want her father to be in danger when her mother and brother needed him here.

Leonine shut his eyes against the painful thought. He couldn't give up, he couldn't. Even though he knew there was so little hope.

The middle-aged woman wiped the edges of her eyes and spoke to Leonine. "You must be tired after all that travelling. Let me fix you some food, we'll eat together tonight."

No matter how dark the world had become, no matter how cruel the wasteland, no matter how hard just living was, whenever he finished a task and laid his tired bones down at home surrounded by family, Leonine was happy. He was willing to do anything to protect this.

They weren't together long before...

"Hey, is Leonine home?" A guard barged in. "Your batch has been looked over. Please go to the Fort to collect your earnings."

Leonine didn't delay. He headed toward the fort at once.

Greenland Fort dominated the outpost from its center, the ivory tower from which its leadership rules.

The building occupied about five thousand square feet of land and was forty or fifty meters high. It was big enough that ten thousand people could live in it, and those that did were the best of the outpost. Denizens of the fort had cleaner water, better

healthcare, and safer accommodations.

Leonine's dream was to one day move his family into the tower.

The highest floor was reserved for the outpost leader. Over a hundred and fifty hand-picked bodyguards were permanently stationed there, who also acted as caretakers of the more than two hundred women he kept for his personal use. Anyone else without official business wasn't permitted to enter.

Leonine followed the guard, who led him right to the boss' lobby.

The boss was entertaining someone, and so Leonine stood silently to one side and waited his turn. While he did, the slaver took furtive glances at the people the boss was meeting with. They were three strange men. One of them was dressed entirely in black and a tubed mask covered his face. Another also wore black but it was the natural hue of his coal-black skin, and a pair of bulls horns grew from his skull. The final one was younger, and his back hoisted a pair of wings.

Greenland Outpost's boss was known for being fierce by nature – they called him Hydra. However, as he spoke with the three mutants he was clearly being deferential. If he didn't know better, Leonine would have said there was some fear there as well.

The black-clad one spoke in a voice cold as death. "Don't forget, Hydra, this place would be nothing if not for the master's help. Without his support you wouldn't be the boss. Now suddenly you're wearing big boy pants and want to stand on your own?"

Hydra was actually wearing a suit of armor with a sword strapped to his waist, and one dead eye was covered by an eye patch. His face was craggy and fierce, far from attractive. He was a burly man, tall and muscular, but the look in his single eye was deep as a well. He scowled somewhat as he spoke with the man in black but spoke in respectful tones. "Like you said, everything I have is all thanks to our master. I wouldn't dare to betray him. Only, for you three to request two thousand men... you are asking a great deal for this outpost, and you'll forgive me if I'm not eager to agree."

"Hydra, you clearly have no idea what's good for you!" The winged youth ripped a falchion from its sheath. He thrust it toward the outpost leader, fast as lightning. "If you won't follow orders then what the fuck are you good for?! Might as well kill you and install someone else!"

The bull-horned man caught his companion's sword with his bare hand. The keen

metal rang against his fingers like it was striking steel or stone, and left no wound. “Don’t be so hasty, Third Brother.”

Hydra’s hand rested on the pommel of his weapon. “You have to at least tell me why you need so many people.”

The one in black answered, his voice light and aloof. “We’re chasing a pair of demonhunters.”

“Demonhunters?”

“In short, we lost them in a sandstorm. We need more men to help pick up the trail.” He paused for a moment then went on. “Also, I’m prepared to offer a reward to the outpost’s mercenaries. If anyone finds these two and delivers them to us, they’ll be richly compensated.”

A strange look came over Hydra’s face. “How will we know them? Don’t misunderstand, I ask because I might take part in the search personally.”

“One male, one female. The female’s age is unknown – perhaps around twenty. She prefers a mask, wears gloves, and has a cross pendant she wears around her neck. The boy is fifteen or sixteen with black hair and eyes. He is thin and carries a strange staff with him, rather prism shaped...”

As the man in black gave his description a voice called out from below.

“Them?!”

The three mutant commanders and the outpost leader were strong and skilled individuals. Of course they heard the words, and when they turned their heads to find its source they spied a tall man with a large beard looking back at them.

Hydra narrowed his eyes. “Leonine? Did you just say something? Don’t tell me you have an idea where these demonhunters might be?”

“Oh, I know where they are. Hell, I can bring ‘em right to ya!” But he suddenly had a thought, and stepped forward to face the man in black. “But you gotta keep your word!”

The three men looked quietly at each other for a moment. Eventually the man in black

spoke. "You have my word... so long as you deliver."

Leonine blurted it right out. "I already brought 'em here. They're in the outpost, locked up in the slave vault!"

They fell silent again and the mutants looked at each other in obvious surprise. Could it be they wouldn't have to wear out the soles of their shoes scouring the Wastelands? Did their prey come in from heat only to land feet-first in the fire?

Hydra glanced at Leonine, a dark look flashing through his eyes, then immediately spoke out as well. "I'll bring them to you!"

Chapter 61

The Dungeons

The slave vault was one of the cruelest places in all of the Wastelands. Day and night cries of pain and despair rang through its chambers, day and night slaves died at the hands of their torturers. Blood and bones from the slaves that died here carpeted every inch.

Dark, sinful, and cruel. They'd been brought to hell.

The dungeons were set up in the building's repurposed sewer system. Dingy hallways extended in all directions like a maze, however the outpost denizens had only occupied the more complete sections. From time to time mutated creatures wandered in to attack and eat slaves they caught.

Cloudhawk was ushered into the dungeons in shackles. One of the guards had taken his exorcist staff. The Bloodsoaked Queen didn't bear any visible weapons so none were taken.

Several guards forced them forward at gunpoint. When they entered the dim, moist dungeon they could see that five or six hundred slaves were currently locked up here. Gore-caked implements of torture were splayed around, waiting to be used. From somewhere nearby there was a constant series of wails echoing through the dark.

New slaves were brought in and placed in complete darkness. For weeks or months they underwent the domestication process where through demented torture their will was broken. That's how they made these wild wastelanders compliant.

"Hurry up!"

One of the guards used the butt of his gun to bash one of the slower moving slaves.

The dungeon was rife with slave cages. What remained of Leonine's crop was split up to prevent any revolt and consigned to cells while they waited for domestication to begin. Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen were being escorted into a deeper section of the dungeon, with only a handful of other wastelanders with them.

Cloudhawk looked around, trying to get a grasp on the situation. He counted four guards behind them with guns trained on their backs, and another five or six prison guards nearby. No more than ten captors all together. None of them knew how skilled the guards were, but if they were average fighters they were too much for Cloudhawk. The Queen was a different story.

But like him, the Queen was in shackles. With her movement inhibited he had to assume it would affect her skills. She'd have to kill the four with guns as quickly as possible and that was difficult while injured and restrained. Under these conditions it seemed that even the mighty Queen was helpless.

What should they do?

Cloudhawk wriggled his wrists but was unable to free them from the shackles. As he looked around it was clear the dungeons were well-guarded – after all, slight as it was the slaves could still have a chance at escape. Their chance lay in the relics hidden on the Queen's person. If she could get free, they might be able to fight back.

Both of them were quietly mulling over the same concern. The demon's lackeys were close, they knew, and if the Queen managed to get free of the dungeon the chaos would reveal their presence here. Wasn't that the same as advertising their location? Sweepers under the command of the black-clad freak need only surround them and their daring escape would be undone.

But if they didn't do anything, would they be forsaken to these dungeons as slaves?

A voice cut through their dark thoughts from behind.

"Halt."

The guards stopped and turned around to see who called. They faced the newcomer with respectful countenance. "Captain," they hailed, "what are your orders?"

The man who approached was the same one from outside who'd had them shackled. His dark eyes hovered over the Queen's full figure and round buttocks for a moment, and several of the guards figured they knew his intent. "You, - you there. Come here."

Cloudhawk knew nothing good was to come of this.

The Queen separated from the group. Through her tattered cloak her voluptuous and

tight figure could still be picked out. Her face was still hidden behind the mask but her body alone was enough to awaken the brutish nature of these guards.

“I wanna see this alone... leave her with me.”

“Yes, captain!” One of the guards saw that Cloudhawk wasn’t moving and kicked him hard with the heel of his boot. “What the fuck are you staring at? Move!”

“I didn’t think Leonine would bring back such quality merchandise.” The captain slowly approached the Queen. “Let’s see what you look like.”

A murderous glare slowly crept into the Queen’s gaze.

Cloudhawk knew the moment he saw it that keeping a low profile was no longer an option. With the Queen’s temper what it was, things were about to get violent.

One of the guards moved in to push him again when suddenly Cloudhawk flung himself forward. He slammed into the guard and managed to seize his exorcist staff.

The captain looked up and saw the situation. His face darkened. “Fighting back, you brat? Get him!”

“Queen!”

Cloudhawk whipped his staff toward her. She spun around and held out her hands.

The steel staff whistled through the air at high speed and smashed into her shackles. In a shower of sparks and a deafening screech it tore through the cuffs like a cutting tool. The Queen flung the shackles from her wrist and chopped her hand toward the captain.

Greenland Outpost’s guard captain was an able warrior, no less capable than the commanders of the Blackflag Outpost’s elite guard. However the Queen’s attack was fast, sudden, and unexpected. In an instant he knew that this woman was a top-class fighter and it was too late to dodge her blow.

The captain lifted his arm to deflect her attack. Pulling a dagger from his cuff with his left hand, he thrust it at her abdomen. The outpost leader was fast – but the Queen was faster. Her chop became a grab and she caught his arm in a vice-like grip.

“Ahhggg!”

He howled, an inhuman sound filled with pain. In an instant his entire arm burned black like spent coal. The Queen whipped her slender leg and connected with the captain's chest with enough force to snap half a dozen bones. His right shoulder split and his arm was torn out of his socket, and even still he was flung back so hard he smashed into the far wall. This was not a wound he'd survive.

She flung herself around and used the captain's blackened arm as a bludgeon, smashing it into a guard's face before anyone could react. While the rest of them fumbled to raise their guns she was on two more in a flash. Her gloved hands pressed against the skin of their faces.

Whoosh! Fire belched from their every orifice. When the Queen let them go they fell to the ground, and everything above their necks had become carbon coke ^[1]. The charred holes that used to be their eyes, nose and mouth were now hideous craters.

To say the remaining two were terrified of this woman was an understatement. They stumbled backward in retreat while trying to aim their guns. Cloudhawk lunged forward and planted his staff in a guard's chest, but was half a moment too late pulling it out to attack the second one.

Bang!

The last guard got the shot off, but their rifles were crude and single-shot. The Bloodsoaked Queen artfully dodged the bullet, and the guard fumbled with the rifle's bolt to clear the barrel. When the second shot was ready he lifted his head, but his target was gone.

Crack!

The Queen had slipped behind the guard, wrapped her hands around his neck and wrenched the muscles. His spine snapped like a twig. The body collapsed and, panting, she made her way to Cloudhawk to help with his shackles. Once free her hoarse voice croaked at him. “Go.”

This was one hell of a tough lady! She'd managed to put down a handful of crack guards without much effort, and wounded to boot.

They'd dealt with the guards, but gunfire had alerted everyone around. Soon they'd be

surrounded by dozens of prison guards, more than the two of them could handle.

Cloudhawk dropped to the ground and started to search the corpses. He grabbed a handgun from the waist of the captain and one of the guards' rifles, as well as a store of bullets. The wastelanders who'd been brought back here with them grabbed up the other weapons.

"We're not gonna escape like this," Cloudhawk said to the others. "You free the others. If we can get a force together we might be able to fight our way out."

They were much too frightened by the Queen's deadly display to respond. The woman was as terrifying as the demon mask she wore!

Too stunned to think much beyond doing what they were told, the men left to get others. They managed to open a few of the cells and free a dozen or so slaves before a group of prison guards appeared.

"Everyone run, scatter! Free as many as you can!"

Cloudhawk knew he and the Queen couldn't hide, so their best bet was to cause chaos. If they could free the slaves it might give them the cover they needed to get out.

"Queen! Let's go!"

Cloudhawk fired at a prison guard blocking their path and blew him away, opening a path toward the exit. As they ran they smashed opened locks to the cells to free more of the slaves, and generate more chaos. There were too many for the guards to suppress, and they were quickly overwhelmed.

The two of them reached the exit, but as they were about to burst outside they were met with a thunderous sound. A huge number of figures, armed to the teeth, were charging their way.

The Queen knew them instantly. "Sweeper troops!"

A mob of troops in armor wielding broad headed axes poured in, followed by the arrival of a winged man from above. His descent kicked up a cloud of dust. Through the dim light and grime, the mutant's keen eyes picked out the two figures preparing to flee.

“It really is them!” Incredulous laughter bubbled up in his throat. “Brothers, we’ve found the two rats!”

How did they get here so fast?!

The Bloodsoaked Queen and Cloudhawk both felt their hearts seize in their chest. They were surrounded, with the three mutant leaders and the outpost’s best fighters closing in. The two of them definitely couldn’t fight their way out, and with so many enemies they could lock down the dungeons by spreading out like a dragnet.

“Hide!”

Cloudhawk and the Queen ran down the first path they saw.

The three mutants closed in on where they used to be with a dozen or so crossbow-wielding subordinates in tow. It took them only a couple of minutes to find what direction they’d fled in.

The slithery cold voice of Stranger Black hissed in their ears. “They’re here, they couldn’t have run far!”

The mutants brought teams with them and began to comb through the dungeons. However none of them noticed something different in the air, like a portion was missing.

Cloudhawk and the Queen were pressed together, face to face. He’d thrown his relic cloak over them and channeled his psychic energy through it to hide them temporarily. The mutants couldn’t see anything and so passed right by, completely unaware their prey was inches away.

“The main halls have to be full of enemies by now. We can’t go this way, we have to think of something else.”

Cloudhawk’s invisibility cloud slowly regained substance.

Surprising as Cloudhawk’s latest toy was, the Queen didn’t have time to question him. They had to find a way out!

1. Coal and coke are the main means by which people start fires in China, and is arguably the main reason for their pollution issues. Coke looks like burnt wood, very

light, and is the fuel of choice for outdoor barbeques and water boilers.

Chapter 62

Hydra's Scheme

At least three hundred sweepers had flooded the outpost's dungeons, along with an uncountable number of guards. Although the sewers were large, interconnected, and rife with unexplored areas, they had enough people to sweep the whole thing and search every corner. There was nowhere to run.

Luckily, Cloudhawk had the foresight to release the slaves. The dungeon was in chaos, and the lights had been broken plunging it into darkness. Huge sections of it were blanketed in impenetrable shadow. Shots could be heard coming from every direction, mingling with shouts and sounds of combat. The chaos wasn't going to last long, but it gave Cloudhawk and the Queen a sliver of hope for escape.

Bang!

Cloudhawk fired at a guard a dozen meters away, ending his life.

Other guards who'd been with him spun around, just in time to see a demonic visage lunge at them from the darkness. The Bloodsoaked Queen flitted among them with a dagger she'd pilfered, spinning gracefully like a dancer – a butterfly riding the breeze through a forest. She swept through the pack of guards so quickly they couldn't even tell where her blade was going, and where she passed fountains of blood splattered droplets against the walls.

The two of them continued on, eventually coming upon an intersection. Suddenly the sound of approaching footsteps emerged, about twelve pairs from what they could tell. Cloudhawk pulled the Queen into a corner, covered both of them in the cloak and poured his psychic energy into it. They vanished.

Moments later a group of guards and another group of sweepers met in the center of the junction. They quickly spied the four dead guards and knew their prey had to be close. They shouted commands for those nearby to be vigilant, then soon afterward split up to search the halls.

Cloudhawk allowed the power of the cloak to dissipate. "My focus is fading. The more

I use the cloak the more tiring it is, so we have to find a way out of here soon. If we don't we're gonna die. The problem now is which direction do we choose?"

The dungeon was a complicated place. How where they supposed to know where to go? They didn't have any sort of map.

"We're just going to have to take our chances."

The Bloodsoaked Queen picked a route at random and strode forward. What was Cloudhawk going to do, did he have a better suggestion? Whether or not this way was the way out wasn't as important as staying on the move. If they were caught they were finished, so their lives were entrusted to lady luck!

The hallway was narrow, more like a large pipe. It was only large enough for two people to walk through side by side.

Cloudhawk frowned, for he knew that if a group of enemies came this way it was too tight for them to hide beneath the cloak. As though his thoughts had summoned them the sound of footsteps echoed their way, five or six this time. The pack of guards rounded a corner and the two groups came face to face.

"Here they are!"

"Kill 'em!"

Cloudhawk answered by blowing a hole in one of them with his gun.

Two of the guards crouched and lifted their weapons, while three more from behind shot from a standing position. The two groups stood about twenty meters apart, too far for the Queen to cover no matter how fast she was, and the pipe was too narrow for them to dodge five gunners.

Bang-bang-bang! The guards fired a salvo at them.

These makeshift guns weren't the best quality, but at only twenty meters away they were lethal. Bearing a pair of daggers the Queen whipped her blades through the air, summoning a host of sparks. By virtue of her incredible speed and accuracy she cut the bullets right out of the air. *So she had this ability as well?!*

Their faces fell as the guards hurried to prepare another volley. Meanwhile the gourd

hanging from the Queen's waist shone with rays of light, and spouted flame. The fire gathered into the image of a phoenix, then crashed into the group of five guards setting their clothes ablaze.

The smell of burnt flesh and hair filled the pipe. Five guards rolled and whined as the fires consumed them.

Cloudhawk loaded them with a few final shots then followed the Queen down the route. Eventually the pipe opened out into a cavernous room, but it made things more complicated. There was no longer even a single beam of light, and the darkness was so complete one could stretch out their arm and not see their hand in front of their face. But it meant they were out of the dungeon.

Groping through the darkness was better than waiting for death in the dungeons.

The two waited at the edge of the abyss for two seconds, and just when they were preparing to step ahead an earth-shaking roar assailed them!

Cloudhawk felt an oppressive, savage intent wash over him. He turned and saw a bearded man of fifty or sixty years leveling a huge weapon their way. He was charging at them like a crazed rhinoceros.

Leonine! That asshole!

Cloudhawk fired his gun without even thinking, but Leonine had decades of experience. The moment Cloudhawk lifted his weapon the old slaver changed direction, and the bullet buried itself harmlessly in a wall. Cursing, the young wastelander flung the broken down rifle to the ground and pulled the handgun from his waist. By the time he brought it up to fire Leonine was in front of him, his saber glinting as it traced an arc through the darkness.

Clang!

Two small blades blocked the slaver's dagger. The three weapons collided, eliciting a deafening screech.

The Queen's daggers shattered under the strain – Leonine was as strong as he was cunning. There was enough momentum behind the strike to keep it cutting through and the Bloodsoaked Queen stumbled backward half a step to avoid him. She shook, and a trail of blood crept from the corner of her mouth. The shock of their collision

must have caused some internal injuries.

With a feral roar Leonine launched into another attack, bringing his two-handed war machete down over his head with enough strength to split her in two.

“This old mutt is asking for death!”

Cloudhawk fired his handgun several times in quick succession.

Leonine stopped dead in his tracks and used his sword to block the shots aimed at his head. The rest found their mark in his chest. *Thud, thud, thud!* He staggered back a few steps, only the bullets didn't kill him. The crafty slaver wore a thick coat and hardened leather underneath which preventing the bullets from doing much damage.

Leonine prepared for a counterattack when, from the darkness of the cavern, a figure stepped forth.

The stranger was tall and burly, clad head to toe in full armor with a sword at his waist. His ugly face was twisted in a sneer that warped scars around the patch covering his right eye. He was covered in an aura of menace like a viper, and slowly emerged from the darkness to stand before the fugitives.

When Leonine saw who it was he blurted out. “Hydra, these are the demonhunters!”

“Demonhunters?” Hydra reached for his weapon and slowly pulled it forth. He glared at the two with his one good eye and chuckled darkly. “Since when were demonhunters such trash? And still you can't put 'em down... you're a real disappointment, old man.”

Leonine glowered at the newcomer, while Cloudhawk's face was a thunderhead.

Leonine was no less powerful than the late Mad Dog, and the cyclops spoke to him like he was worth nothing. It could only mean he was stronger than the slaver. With the Queen injured, was she strong enough to handle this character?

Whether she could or not, her eyes were filled with anger and defiance. Being a demonhunter was a source of pride, and this heathen dared to insult her illustrious order.

She reached up and yanked the cross from around her neck. Right away the cyclops

saw her fighting spirit and leveled his shimmering blue blade her way. His weapon was long and thin, and masterfully fashioned. “There’s nowhere for you to go. You aren’t escaping. But, if you defeat me I will help you.”

What the hell was this guy saying?

“However,” he went on, “if you can’t even beat me, you’ll die right here!”

He said nothing further, charging at them with blinding fury. His wrist flashed and in a blink he peppered them with eight or nine thrusts.

Cloudhawk had never seen someone wield a sword so fast!

The Queen was just as quick, dodging his attacks as they came. All but the last, when suddenly her wounds began to take their toll. They slowed her by just enough that the cyclops’ sword reached her, and pierced her shoulder. A trickle of fresh blood stained her clothes.

Hydra’s cackles rang off the walls. He attacked again, like nine steel vipers hungry for blood.

This series of attacks was more dangerous than the last, the Queen seemed to be surrounded by his onslaught. Yet she appeared calm like a placid lake surface, her heart and body as one. All of a sudden a bouquet of white light erupted from her hand, forming into a blazing cross of holy light.

“This is...”

The pupil of Hydra’s one good eye contracted and he lashed out reflexively. His treasured sword met the holy cross mid swing, and broke into a thousand pieces. Hydra felt like he’d been run over by a raging bull and was flung a good five or six meters away.

The Bloodsoaked Queen held her mighty weapon aloft, and it painted the area in dazzling holy light. All the energies of her sword crackled as it coalesced. If she released it upon her enemy Hydra would be cleaved in half.

He called out to her, tripping over his own tongue. “Y-y-you win! I’ll get you out of here!”

Cloudhawk called out from one side. “Queen, don’t trust him!”

Hydra tried to explain himself. “We have the same goal, I can *help* you.”

Hydra hadn’t planned to the kill the two of them, for the simple fact that they were worth more alive. They were demonhunters, and killing demons was their duty. The one Hydra wanted to see brought down wasn’t two children, but the wicked demon itself and his lackeys.

It was the only way Hydra could become the true ruler of the Greenland Outpost, and now that he’d witnessed the true power of a demonhunter he thought he had a chance. If he succeeded then Hydra would have all he desired. If they failed the blame would lie at the demonhunter’s feet.

Bit by bit the light of the Queen’s holy sword faded. Though she did not show it, it was not her intention to let it go. She was too weak, too wounded to cut his head free.

Hydra pointed down one of the pathways. “This is the only way out of the dungeon.”

“Hydra, what are you doing?”

Leonine couldn’t understand what the outpost leader was doing.

Hydra slowly turned, fixing the slaver with a deathly glare. “I’m doing whatever the fuck I want to do, and I can’t afford to have someone behind me waiting to put a knife in my back! Time to die!”

His voice was cold, and cruel. All color drained from Leonine’s face.

Chapter 63

Escaping the Dungeon

Cloudhawk couldn't be bothered to guess at Hydra's motives. After using the sword of holy light, the Bloodsoaked Queen had no more energy to spare for fighting. They couldn't exactly rely on Cloudhawk alone to cut a path to back from where they had just fled, right? There were no better options. They had to take this risk. Cloudhawk helped the Queen along as the two of them disappeared into the darkness of the ruined sewers.

Hydra paid them no mind. His attention was fixed on Leonine.

The slaver turned and sprinted down another pipe.

He hadn't been in the Greenland Outpost long, so he didn't know much about Hydra. However, he had to assume that if the cyclops led the outpost he would be a problem to face in combat. Wastelanders only respected strength. He wouldn't rule this place if he wasn't the strongest and most skilled.

Hydra had shown what he was capable of in his bout against the demonhunter. Leonine was definitely no match for him!

Flee! Find the demon's lieutenants! They could definitely handle Hydra!

Hydra grinned a dark, sadistic grin, like a cat watching a mouse struggle moments before death.

Leonine tore down the narrow pipe, but footsteps rang off the metal hall like a hurricane from behind. Hydra caught up faster than Leonine could have believed. Despair filled him.

In a matter of moments Hydra had gone from stationary to fifty or sixty kilometers an hour. Even in these twisting narrow quarters he wasn't slowed down at all. He charged, like a raging bull, right for the despairing slaver.

Turn! Leonine suddenly flung himself through an opening on his left. Hydra was going

too fast, maybe he wouldn't be able to turn in time.

But as Leonine pushed himself as fast as he could go, Hydra's silhouette appeared in the opening. His steel boots clanged against the ancient pipes as he ran along the wall at a ninety-degree angle to the floor for four or five paces. Every pounding step left fissures and fractures in their wake.

He launched himself through the air, drawing his sword. The tell-tale sound of steel on leather filled the air as Hydra's blade reached for Leonine.

The slaver lifted his hefty saber to block the blow and sparks lit up the darkness. He didn't wait around to keep up the fight, changing directions again after deflecting Hydra's deadly attack. Now he was running blindly through a pathway completely void of light.

His enemy was strong, but if he couldn't see his target he couldn't use that strength.

"Heh heh heh... you're a sly one. Good reaction times." Hydra reached up and pulled off the patch hiding his right eye. The orb wasn't useless, but mutated – the pupil was slit like a snake's or lizard's and glowed with red light. "But it's nothing more than someone struggling on his deathbed."

His eye wasn't just mutated, he'd also cultivated its abilities. The eye was sensitive to light and couldn't be relied on during the day, so he hid it behind the patch. In the darkness, however, the eye sensed heat. Even in darkness Leonine was too weak, too slow.

How could he get away?

A smear of fresh red blood splattered down the hall.

Leonine yelled and fell to the ground, clutching a deep wound. Hydra's slice cut through two layers of protective clothing and left a nasty gash behind. The snake-eyed hunter didn't pause and lashed out again like lightning. His lithe blade was like the poisoned fang of a cobra.

Leonine's mind went blank as death loomed over him. Only one thought screamed through his brain – *what happens to them if I die?*

"W-wait! Don't kill me!"

Leonine knelt upon the ground in defeat. Was this rugged and majestic veteran groveling on his knees? Hydra hadn't taken Leonine for the sort!

When Leonine didn't feel the kiss of Hydra's blade he spoke again. "I got no interest in fightin' ya. My daughter's sick... real sick. I had to do this! If you promise to look after my girl then my life is yours. I'll be your dog, anything you ask. Killin' me ain't gonna earn you nothin'!"

Leonine's daughter?

The slaver's plea touched him, albeit only a little. Leonine was new to the outpost but it was clear he was useful, a man of skill. Hydra had heard tell of the slaver's story before. Reputedly, it was his family that brought him to the Greenland Outpost in the first place. He'd been skeptical of the story, for who cared about kin like that in this day and age?

Leonine, as strong and dignified as he looked, prostrated himself before Hydra and pressed his head to the ground. "I'll do whatever you ask, just save my girl! I'm beggin' ya, I can't die now!"

How interesting... Hydra slowly returned his sword to its scabbard.

His Greenland Outpost was strong, stronger than the Blackflag Outpost had been. Yet though it was much stronger in total, Greenland Outpost only had roughly ten people with skills comparable to Leonine. Blackflag Outpost, though small, had five or so. Wastelanders who lived long enough to get this skilled were prideful and difficult to control. Leonine was particularly able and yet he had a clear soft spot. He was precisely the kind of person Hydra could use.

"Very well, I accept your life." His right eye shimmered with a dangerous red light, like the eye of a demon. He sized up the slaver kneeling before him. "If you betray me in any way I'll make you regret having ever lived. You know who I am, and here in the outpost no one can protect you from me."

Leonine didn't have to imagine how much influence Hydra held.

He was afraid of the demon's henchmen, but here in the outpost if there was someone Hydra wanted dead, there was no stopping him. Leonine put the fate of himself and his family in Hydra's hands – no different than selling his soul. It was the only way to keep breathing.



Cloudhawk helped the Bloodsoaked Queen along as they followed the path laid out by Hydra.

It was so dark they couldn't see an inch in front of their noses. With what little energy was left to her the Queen summoned a miniscule phoenix that followed them. The fiery bird's luminescence lit their path and allowed them to examine their situation.

The Queen's condition had been improving but the battle for their life had weakened her once again. Her willpower was like steel – were she anyone else the tribulations she'd suffered would have put her in the ground – however she was still finding it difficult to push on. Fighting was out of the question.

Suddenly the sounds of screams ran through the pitch-black cavern.

Anxiety was clear in Cloudhawk's voice. "You go first!"

The road to freedom was like wandering through a dark mist. Burning motes of red were interspersed within it and closing in.

Cloudhawk swung his staff at one, striking it and sending whatever the creature was smashing into a wall. He saw it clearly then, a winged thing about half a meter long with sharp talons and scarlet eyes.

Mutant bats!

When the tide of mutant beasts had attacked the Blackflag Outpost he'd seen what a swarm of these monsters could do. He hadn't thought he'd encounter them here, beneath the Greenland Outpost.

That horrid night was still fresh in his mind, when the fiends of the wastelands came looking for blood. These creatures were smaller but there were dozens of them. More than Cloudhawk could handle on his own.

He heard the Queen's rasping voice in front of him. "I see an exit!"

Two hundred meters away a shaft of moonlight pierced the darkness. Cloudhawk felt a surge of vitality, Hydra had told them the truth after all.

“Go ahead, I’ll hold them off!”

He gripped the exorcist staff tight in his right hand, waving it to fend off bats that got too close. He pointing the handgun in his left hand and, firing randomly into the darkness, managed to hit several of the bats. They kept coming but the smell of blood sent the other bats into a frenzy. In a blink the mutants fell upon their own and tore them to shreds like a pack of starving devils.

They were unthinkable ferocious, bloodthirsty! It was appalling to behold.

It didn’t take long for Cloudhawk to run out of bullets, and though he managed to kill a few, more bats were coming all the time. Their numbers continued to swell. Several got passed him and headed right for the Queen, for she was bleeding and the scent fomented their ravenous hunger.

She sent the phoenix of fire at one and set it alight, but there were four or five more closing in.

Cloudhawk called the power of his cloak and suddenly air and gravity ceased to restrain him. He leapt forward at full speed like a blast of wind, lashing out with his staff upon reaching the Queen and knocking away two more bats. He didn’t stop to deal with the rest and instead dragged her toward the exit.

Finally, they’d escaped!

It was night and the bats poured out of the cavern like a lethal cloud, circling overhead ominously. Their sudden and violent appearance startled Greenland personnel and several shots could be heard as they fired into the flock.

Meanwhile Cloudhawk continued to draw on the cloak’s power, making them faster. He frantically searched for somewhere safe where they could hide.

“I found them!”

An errant sweeper team combing the area had picked them out. There were more than ten of them armed with axes and crossbows. Like a swarm of bees they descended on the two demonhunters.

Cloudhawk glowered at them and the situation they faced. “Mother *fucker!* These twisted pieces of shit are everywhere!”

Experienced killers with close and long ranged weapons encircled them leaving Cloudhawk no way to escape or fight back. Their only option was to find cover.

The sweepers were dark shapes in the moonlight, deadly shadows that surrounded their prey and started closing in.

However they were so fixated on their victims that they missed the unassuming figure behind them. Like the specter of death it soundlessly approached, the glint of a dagger in hand.

Without so much as a whisper the silhouette buried its dagger in a sweeper's spine. The hunter crumpled to the ground, having lost all ability to move. Before he could scream a calloused hand clamped his mouth shut and cold steel opened his throat.

Ruthless, swift, and efficient. The figure carefully slid the corpse onto the ground.

A second and then a third were silenced by the dagger-wielding shadow – dead without a sound. Whoever the murderous shadow was they appeared and vanished through the night, each corpse left behind slain by a different method.

Eventually the sweepers knew something was wrong when they heard fewer footsteps. The ones in front looked behind and saw five of their brethren dead, throats cut and bubbling blood.

They stared in horrified shock. There were only corpses and no killers. Who was the culprit? Five of their companions were dead without warning and in a matter of seconds!

One of the sweepers stumbled backwards a few steps. "Look out!"

The sting of a dagger severed his spine and no more words were spoken.

"Over here!"

Sweepers spotted the assassin and almost by instinct fired their weapons. The killer used the body of their dead comrade as a meat shield to absorb the bullets and arrows, leaving this mysterious shadow unscathed. A pair of daggers whistled through the night.

"Ahh!"

“Ugh!”

Two shouts. Two more sweepers collapsed.

What was left of the sweeper team raced forward, equal parts surprised, afraid and enraged. But by the time they got to the corpse the assassin had used for cover, they were gone.

Sssshhht!

Another fell clutching an open throat. And another, with a dagger in its neck.

Fear descended on the sweepers, filling them with terror. Their assailant was death incarnate come to take them in the night. Scared witless they ran to look for help.

Cloudhawk was hiding behind a boulder. He saw the whole scene unfold.

A silhouette emerged from the darkness, not large or particularly imposing, to stand before him. He was Asian, dressed in ragged clothing and pale of face. His expression was a mask of indifference, though the scent of death hung over him like a cloud. Moonlight glinted off his dagger.

Cloudhawk looked back, eyes wide with shock. “Mantis, is that you? What are you doing here?!”

Chapter 64

Rebuilding the Team

There were few in the Wastelands who could kill this way – ruthlessly efficient and completely silent. Mantis was one of them. Only, Mantis had disappeared after they escaped from Blackflag Outpost. After days of being hunted by sweepers and deadly sandstorms, how could he show up here?

Mantis had tailed the sweepers, even managed to infiltrate their airship. It brought him to Greenland Outpost.

This revelation confounded Cloudhawk. Mantis followed the sweepers *and* snuck on their ship without being detected at all? The size of the brass balls on this guy was unthinkable. How stealthy was he? Cloudhawk didn't dare think about what else he was capable of.

“Come with me.”

Sweepers were everywhere and oasis guards were in the hundreds as they combed the area. Hydra had let Cloudhawk and the Queen go, but his subordinates didn't know that. If they were caught the consequences would be bad.

Luckily Mantis was a master assassin. Assassins weren't just adept at killing, they had to be experts of stealth as well, and the night was Mantis' playground. As they crept through the darkness Mantis picked off the weaker hunters, ending their lives and leaving no trace. One by one he ambushed their pursuers and ushered their spirits to the afterlife.

The small crew escaped through the opening provided.

Greenland Outpost was large and boasted over fifty thousand souls. Finding three people in that press of humanity was like trying to find a needle in an ocean. Mantis led them to a basement below one of the common residences in the outpost, without the owner knowing a thing. Cloudhawk helped the Queen to a corner and settled her against the wall. She wasn't doing well, her condition was less than optimistic.

Cloudhawk turned to Mantis. “Help take a look at her.”

Mantis obliged, stretching out his hand but the Queen glared back at him. Her right hand shot out with lethal intent and pale fire undulated around the burning angels.

Cloudhawk hurriedly made to put her at ease. “Hold on, Mantis is a doctor. He can check your injuries!”

Mantis paid her no mind. He grabbed her wrist and after a moment spoke in his typical detached tone. “She has less than a day.”

Cloudhawk gaped at him. “Mantis, c’mon stop screwin’ around. You just touched her wrist, how do you even know where she’s hurt?”

Mantis had diagnosed the condition of her internal organs by feeling her pulse ^[1]. His knowledge came from an ancient and exquisite source, far superior to what anyone found in the ruins these days. How could a yokel like Cloudhawk possibly understand? The Bloodsoaked Queen had more than a few external wounds, but they were not of much concern and would heal on their own in a few days.

Her internal injuries were far more serious. After days of running and fighting, the strain of the demands she’d put on herself had deteriorated her condition. It was miraculous she still lived. Switch her with any normal person – even someone like Grizzly – and she’d have been dead already.

Despite his impatience Cloudhawk knew Mantis wasn’t one to play around. “Why aren’t you saying anything? Aren’t you a doctor?! Think of something!”

“I am a doctor,” Mantis affirmed patiently, “I am not a god.”

Without tools or medicine there was nothing he could do. Was he supposed to use magic?

Cloudhawk fidgeted restlessly, wracking his brain. “Can’t we think of anything?”

“Enough, begging won’t serve anything.” The Queen’s time was short, but she was calm – the demonhunter did not fear death. She closed her eyes as she spoke. “You have the potential to be a demonhunter, you aren’t like this wastelander.”

Mantis pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. “Everyone has their own

path. Hunting demons doesn't suit him."

The Bloodsoaked Queen opened her eyes again and looked at Mantis with a glint of curiosity and surprise in her eyes. "Who are you?"

He didn't answer.

Cloudhawk had always been interested in Mantis' story. He had been a part of the Tartarus mercenaries, and yet different. He was a mercenary leader like Mad Dog and Slyfox but no one dared give him orders. There'd been some sort of unspoken understanding he wasn't aware of.

Mantis also never directly participated in missions. He always remained behind and did logistics work.

Cloudhawk was a hundred percent sure Mantis had always known the Queen's identity. This fact alone meant Mantis wasn't your typical wastelander.

Yet Cloudhawk didn't care about any of that, the Queen's critical condition was most important. Despite her shitty temperament, she was the strongest fighter Cloudhawk knew. At peak condition the demon's three lieutenants together couldn't stand against her. What was he going to do if she died? Those fucking freaks would hunt him to the ends of the earth!

Mantis asked, "How did you escape the dungeons?"

He answered honestly. "We ran into someone named Hydra. He helped us escape."

"Hydra?"

"You know him?"

Mantis didn't answer. He turned and made as though to leave.

Cloudhawk shot to his feet. "Where are you going?"

Mantis didn't stop. His soft voice hung in the air as he vanished out into the streets. "Stay here."

By now the hundreds of sweepers and outpost guards had put down the dungeon

rebellion. Yet even with all of these soldiers, no matter how rigorously they searched, the two escapees had vanished like smoke on the breeze.

The demon's servants were understandably furious.

Were these two able to hide in the sky? Disappear into the ground? They slipped through their clutches every time!

Greenland Outpost was sealed off, and the surround forests were deadly to put it mildly. Beyond that the wastelands stretched far into the horizon. Escape would not be easy for this pair of troublemakers, and slipping out of the dungeon didn't mean fleeing the outpost.

The three mutants ordered the gates closed and simultaneously dispatched scores of guards to canvas the area. Every house was searched, every ruin picked through, every stone overturned as they hunted for leads.

With every passing minute the search team was getting closer to where they hid.

Cloudhawk felt anxiety welling up within him. It was only a matter of time before they came to this basement. How were they going to escape?

Suddenly the door to the basement was pulled open. An outpost guard pushed his way in bearing a rifle.

Cloudhawk sprang to his feet like a leopard and threw up his fists, ready for a fight.

"It's me."

"Mantis? What are you doing dressed like that?"

"Shut up and change. We have to go."

Mantis had brought two more disguises for them, also outpost guard attire. They included two sets of worn-out armor, veils and rifles. Once they changed clothes they were practically indistinguishable from real personnel.

Mantis led the other two from the basement. They swaggered through the outpost trying to blend in among the sweepers and guards that were searching for them. Hundreds of sweepers went from house to house searching for them while they

pushed past headed the other direction.

Cloudhawk felt like his heart was going to burst through his chest.

Mantis, by contrast, walked around as though he'd done this a hundred times. Be it posture or attitude he was the spitting image of any outpost guard. The three demon lieutenants were leading their teams from the inside of the city to its far reaches, for they didn't think their targets would be heading *deeper* into the outpost.

What they saw when they entered the Greenland Fort was nothing short of stunning.

It looked like the outpost was preparing for war. Everyone was affected, however they were used to the turmoil and seemed numb to it. The first floor of the fort was a market where they sold alcohol, tobacco, various materials and components, weapons, food, and medicine. You could find almost anything here, including whatever they might need to help the Queen.

But that's not where they went – where in the world was Mantis taking them?

The small group picked their way through the fort until they reached the top level. The entire floor was rife with guards. It was obvious by the way they held themselves that these fighters were the elite, far superior to the rabble they encountered outside. If Cloudhawk didn't know Mantis better, he might be afraid the assassin was getting ready to sell them out.

Mantis fed a pair of bodyguards a line about his identity and purpose. They seemed content with this information and led them through the hallways.

Eventually they stopped in front of an office.

Cloudhawk had never seen a room this large before in his life. It was even larger than the Queen's former chambers and decorated with tidy furnishings. There was a lengthy couch where a middle-aged woman sat with her small son. On a nearby table there was a collection of four or five brightly colored fruits – a luxury among luxuries in the wasteland.

There were also two people dressed in doctor's attire working busily.

Then as they looked on, a burly figure appeared amongst the small crowd. Cloudhawk and the Queen exchanged a frightened glance.

Cloudhawk gripped his staff tightly and grit his teeth. “Leonine? Fuckin’ you again!”

Leonine didn’t respond right away. He looked at the woman on the couch and spoke to her first. “Go and take a look.”

She knew how to act in delicate company and left the small gathering.

Once she’d gone the slaver returned his attention to Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen. “Starting now, we’re a team. I’m here to help you do whatever needs to be done.”

Cloudhawk snorted like he’d heard a funny joke. “You? Help us? What a goddamn joke!”

“He is serious.” Hydra appeared from outside. “Leonine is under my command. He works for me. From now on he’ll be part of your group.”

Cloudhawk stared at Hydra incredulously.

Hydra went on unperturbed. “Listen, those bastard mutants are scouring the outpost looking for you. They’re ordering my people around as they please and fuckin’ up my territory – exploiting me and my resources like they own the goddamn place. *I* am the leader of this outpost, and I’m not going to put up with this bullshit. We may not have the same goals, but we have the same enemy. I need you, and you need me. Am I wrong?”

Cloudhawk was forced to agree. Without question, Leonine’s addition to their team added real combat power.

Hydra had taken charge of Leonine’s wife and children. They lived in the fort, but more like hostages than guests. Leonine wouldn’t dare betray Hydra, for it would mean putting his family in danger.

No one could have anticipated the twists and turns that brought them to this place. A new team had been assembled.

For days Cloudhawk had fled from one place to another with the Bloodsoaked Queen, and goddamn was he tired of it! Now he had Hydra’s help, along with Leonine and Mantis by his side. He finally felt like he could take a breath!

1. This is a standard method of pattern differentiation and diagnosis in Chinese medicine. There are six pulse locations that tell the practitioner the condition of a patient's organs. Here is a nice chart that explains the basics. When checking pulse we make a determination based on; location (cun, guan, chi), strength (strong, normal, weak), depth (superficial, normal, deep), speed (fast, slow, normal), rhythm (regular, irregular, regularly irregular, irregularly irregular), length (long, short, stunted), and several miscellaneous manifestations like sluggishness, scattered sensation, etc. Someone who is on the cusp of death for a condition like the Queen's would likely have a very weak or almost impalpable pulse that feels 'empty' like there's no blood, deep, slow, and likely irregular as the heart fails. In the final moments before death the pulse will suddenly become superficial and rapid, which in TCM we call the last light of the setting sun – the body gives a final burst of energy and then gives in.

Chapter 65

Temporary Accommodations

In the barren, hostile wastelands the presence of an oasis attracted a lot of attention, no matter how out of the way it was. Scavengers, sweepers, excavators... everyone fought for territory and water. They didn't only have to battle their environment, but each other as well.

Back in the day the oasis was a place of chaos. There was no set leadership, not until Hydra emerged as a force strong enough to exert his influence.

He didn't have a lot of clout in the beginning, not until the mysterious stranger arrived. He agreed to act as a benefactor, and to accept Hydra as an autonomous hireling. The stranger would help him conquer the oasis, and in exchange half of its spoils and products would be shared.

Hydra had found it difficult to protect himself in the harsh environment of the oasis. What would it serve him to compete against this mysterious stranger? He'd been so without hope at the time he hardly thought about the deal before accepting.

The wasteland visitor proved to be powerful. He gave Hydra advanced weapons and support from many experienced mutant fighters. In a snap Hydra's influence expanded throughout the oasis and Greenland Outpost was born.

Hydra emerged as its ruler. And what of his promise?

Every month the mysterious guest would appear in the outpost, and every month he would leave with half of their food and purified water. Hydra was a puppet, lording over the outpost in name alone in service to this dark figure. Sometimes it was painfully clear the stranger had a louder voice in the oasis than he did.

This enigmatic wastelander was undoubtedly the 'demon'. Hydra had been cultivated to lead at his whim, guiding the Greenland Outpost as an important fount of power and resources.

Hydra wasn't interested in any bullshit ideals – he was only ever interested in wealth,

power, and women. After years of enduring the humiliation of servitude, he was finding it difficult to suffer any more of it.

Everything here – the women, the weapons, the food, water – everything is mine! Who the fuck does that guy think he is? What right does he have to order me around? I am master of this outpost, and only I can rule it! These agreements are pointless games.

In the Wastelands, power was the only voice that mattered. For years Hydra cultivated his supremacy and he was ready to stretch his wings. The seed of revolt had grown within him.

It was time for all of them to *fuck off!* Greenland Outpost didn't need anyone, and anyone who dared encroach on his territory was dead!

Even if he'd never met the demonhunters Hydra was planning to make his move within the next six months. When Cloudhawk and this Bloodsoaked Queen were hunted down Hydra was sure they could be useful to his plans. That was why he'd let them go.

Of course, Cloudhawk didn't have any of this inside information. There was only one thing he was sure of, and it was that these two men were bad news.

Hydra was ruthless and unprincipled, a person who killed without conscience and wantonly traded in human lives. His hands were covered in blood, and to him the lives of others meant nothing. Leonine wasn't much better. He'd tricked scores of innocent people into coming to the outpost and sold them into a life of unthinkable torment. He turned people into commodities and playthings.

Yet in these wretched wastelands, how could one determine where was good and where was bad?

If one took the traditional view then Mad Dog, Slyfox and Hydra were all scoundrels. Not one of them was worth pity or mercy. However, Mad Dog and Slyfox had saved Cloudhawk's life more than once. To him that made the two slain mercenaries good men.

The measure of a person in the Wastelands wasn't their morality or their public image. Whether they were good or bad was determined in the hearts of those they met. A man was good to those who he did good to – he was a villain to those he hurt.

For now Cloudhawk needed Hydra's protection, and the Bloodsoaked Queen needed his medicines.

Mantis had acquired the medicine they needed to treat the Queen at Cloudhawk's demand. Still he made sure to emphasize his earlier warning. "Her injuries are more than what typical medicine can heal in a short time. I need a dose of panacea."

Hydra scowled. Panacea was a very special type of restorative medicine. They had to be purchased through special channels at great expense, and not for no reason. Panaceas were created through the use of superb techniques and high technology, distilling reagents extracted from mutated plants and animals to create a serum. This ancient scientific technology was all but gone from the world now, making panacea as precious as it was rare.

The thought of what it would cost was a painful one, but Hydra knew it paled in comparison to what he would earn if they helped him take control of the outpost.

A syringe nestled safely within a box was handed over. The liquid within was completely clear, like water.

What precisely was in the panacea was unclear, only that it was some substance taken from mutated biology. Injecting it into a patient stirred their own restorative abilities. Almost right away healing increased seven or eight times its normal rate.

The Bloodsoaked Queen already surpassed the capabilities of a normal person, and with the help of this injection her life was no longer in danger. After a few days she would be mostly healed, especially with the help of such a masterful wasteland healer like Mantis. He used natural remedies extracted from mutated plants to help recover faster.

Hydra watched the Queen undergo treatment. "When are more demonhunters coming?"

He'd never been to the elysian lands, but the demonhunters wouldn't send just one of their number to stalk a fiend. Demons were typically extremely powerful, and often surrounded themselves with mighty followers. It required a team of hunters and a well-thought strategy to succeed.

"There are no other demonhunters."

“What are you saying?” Hydra’s face twisted into a scowl.

How phenomenally stupid did this girl have to be to make a decision like this? She came *by herself* to the wastelands, hoping to kill a demon? How was this different from suicide? She could be twice as strong and it would *still* be moronic to think she could face the demon and all his power throughout the wastelands by herself!

Cloudhawk stood and answered for her. “When the Queen is fully healed those three mutants the demon sent after us won’t be a problem. What more help do we need?”

Hydra couldn’t dispute this.

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s combat prowess was impressive. Hydra himself was about as strong as one of the demons’ lieutenants and he hadn’t been able to withstand her attacks. It spoke volumes as to how strong she really was.

An entire squad of demonhunters would have better chances, true, but it was important to remember that they didn’t view the wastelanders as fellow humans. After they annihilated the sweepers, they could easily level the entire Greenland Outpost as well. It wasn’t as though something like this had never happened before!

If there was only one, so be it. As for Cloudhawk? Hydra didn’t take him into consideration at all.

Hydra retorted. “To avoid unnecessary trouble you’ll stay here for a few days. I’ll arrange something for you.”

“Sir... hey boss.” One of the men dressed as a doctor hastily approached. “The girl’s condition is too severe. We don’t have any way to save her!”

Leonine heard the diagnosis and shouted at the man angrily. “What?! Say it again!”

These men were the best doctors the outpost could provide. If they said they couldn’t save his daughter, it was practically a death sentence.

However, Mantis had just finished treating the Bloodsoaked Queen. “Allow me to try.”

He saw a little girl lying in her bed, skin thin as paper outlining the bones beneath. A large fleshy growth was affixed to the left side of her neck – a tumor that was threatening the poor child’s life. Only... the dangers of cutting it out were just as lethal,

and the difficulty of such a procedure was beyond the scope of the outpost's doctors.

"A minor matter." Mantis uttered the diagnosis after taking a glance in her mouth. He turned around and slapped one of the physicians upside the head before washing his hands and the instruments with a disinfectant. "You can assist me."

The doctors were immediately and visibly embarrassed.

Mantis didn't care about how they felt, he was already working. First he cleaned the flesh around the tumor with the same solution, then began to cut.

Cloudhawk, looking on, couldn't help but admire Mantis. Not only was he an assassin that frightened enemies to the bone, he was also a stupendous surgeon. It was like his eyes could see through flesh and knew implicitly where healthy and diseased tissue lay. Every incision was precise to the tenth of a millimeter – as exact as a machine. He never made a mistake.

Soon every trace of cancer or mutated skin was removed.

He applied the antiseptic solution to her wound then cleaned his hands as though he'd done some trivial thing. "She'll be fine as long as it doesn't get infected."

"Thank you!" Leonine, his voice shaking, fell to his knees before Mantis. "Thank you!"

Hydra was secretly shocked by what he had just seen. Mantis was clearly a master pharmacologist and had created the antiseptic solution using only mutated ingredients from plants and animals. In addition, Mantis was an excellent surgeon. Every slice from his scalpel was meticulous, perfect to the millimeter.

He had to be a very high level agility metahuman.

Mantis' frontal combat abilities were likely less developed than Leonine's, but when he entered under the cover of night he could kill three Leonines. Assassins weren't always the strongest, but they were undoubtedly among the most dangerous.

Cloudhawk was arranged a room nearby where he went to rest. It was a room about twenty meters squared with few in the way of luxuries. However it was clean and tidy with a bed and sheets. It was the nicest treatment he'd ever been shown.

He found a place to hang up his cloak and took off his tattered wolf fur. Wounds

peppered his emaciated and unimpressive body, twenty or thirty of them. There wasn't a part of him that hadn't somehow gotten injured. Some were still leaking reddish-purple blood.

It was hard to imagine how a waif like him could have endured so much punishment!

He'd been fleeing for days, a fugitive fighting for his life. When did he have time to worry about how he felt? Now all of a sudden it was hard for him to calm down as the pain and exhaustion washed over him. It was almost unbearable and it took all his will to stumble over to the bed. He climbed up, and fainted.

Fatigue... such absolute fatigue! And pain, gut-wrenching pain.

Cloudhawk felt like a whole mountain was crushing him. A thousand saws cut him apart and a hundred drills tore into his bones. He hardly wished to live.

This torture persisted for a while until it eventually eased, only to be replaced with the feeling of being burned alive. Drills and saws turned into a hundred thousand flickering fires dancing along his flesh. Every muscle, every fiber felt seared.

What the hell was going on!

Cloudhawk's body began to undergo a series of positive changes. Although it was agony, every cell in his body felt invigorated, more alive.

Chapter 66

Uncovered

As dawn broke over the outpost, behind the hazy air, stars twinkled in the pale blue sky like a cloak of muslin. Shafts of sunlight fought through airborne sand and painted the landscape red like it was drenched in blood.

Hunters from the Greenland Outpost searched all night for their prey, to no avail. The light of day played over the outraged faces of the mutant lieutenants – could demonhunters sprout wings and fly away?

Stranger Black and Longhorn watched the sun rise in contemplative silence, both acutely aware that something didn't seem right.

“First Brother, Second Bother, look here. What is this?”

Vulture landed nearby, kicking up a cloud of sand and leaving long troughs where his feet met the ground. In his hands he held the broken remains of a rapier, thin and exceedingly sharp.

Longhorn took it from him and scrutinized the broken weapon for a moment. “Is this Hydra's sword? A clean break... no one in the outpost has the ability to do this. Where did you find it?”

“In the dungeons!” Vulture replied.

“The dungeons?” Stranger Black was silent for a time, then his cold and raspy laughter emerged. “Hydra... oh Hydra. When this was over we'd planned to remove you. It seems you were one step ahead of us.”

Longhorn flicked his wrist with enough force to warp the fracture blade. “The Bloodsoaked Queen had to have fought Hydra. He returns unscathed and she vanishes into the night. This explains it.”

Vulture's face bore a savage, hateful sneer. “I knew there was something off about that little shit, we should have killed him yesterday! We've searched everywhere except the

fort, Hydra must be hiding the demonhunters there. We'll kill our way in and cut off that snake's head like we were planning to anyway."

Hydra's wild ambitions were not a secret to any of them. How would their master be blind to his betrayal?

Hydra had always been a puppet through which their master rules Greenland Outpost. Now, this marionette wanted to take advantage of the chaos and become a real boy? It wouldn't be as easy as he thought... but he'd been lucky. The appearance of the demonhunter in the Wastelands and her continuous assault on the master's power forced their benefactor to be vigilant, careful in case the holy city had its eyes set on him. Were it not for this troublesome woman the master would have come himself long ago to deal with Hydra's betrayal.

Now was as good a time as any! He dared collude with these fugitives and betray them?

"Calm yourself, Third Brother. Hydra is no threat, but he has ruled here for eight years. Greenland Outpost has near ten thousand soldiers who follow his commands and we aren't ready for a war with this place. It would be unwise to rashly foment conflict." Stranger Black stared at the towering building through his gas mask. "Now that we know who the hunter's friends are, we'll report to the master. He will devise a plan to remove these thorns from our side."

"First Brother is right," Longhorn said with a nod. "We make our move when the time is right. You should amend your impatient nature, Third Brother. We do important work for the master. Even the slightest carelessness could spell doom."

Vulture answered with a chuckle. "Not an issue with the help of you two. I am the master's knife. Anyone who dares oppose my brothers or the grand plan will find my talons buried in their heart, even if the fight grinds me to dust."

Stranger Black and Longhorn silently shook their heads. No one questioned Vulture's loyalty, but his bloodthirsty and impulsive nature was more suited to a soldier, not a leader. Sadly Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Brother were no longer with them. Three of them had been discovered and slain by the demonhunter early on, while Fourth Brother died during the assault on Blackflag Outpost.

Ah, if all seven brothers were still here, what would they have to fear from Hydra – even with ten thousand fighters behind him?

Their greatest enemy was the Bloodsoaked Queen. They had underestimated this demonhunter, assumed her foolish and self-righteous solo crusade would be easy to put down. Because of her involvement they had suffered, and much of the master's plan had been thrown into chaos. They could add Hydra's early retirement to the list of things she'd spoiled as well.

But now maybe they could fix everything all at once!



More than comfortable, Cloudhawk had never had a deeper night's sleep. On the one hand he'd been so exhausted that when he closed his eyes he was like the dead, and on the other he was secure in the knowledge that this was Hydra's territory. As ruler of the outpost no one would dare sneak in and try to kill him in his sleep!

Simply put, when sleep overtook him he forgot the evils of the world, the chaos and turmoil. He forgot everything, forgot himself.

He didn't awaken until noon the next day. Cloudhawk fought off a strange sensation as he shook the grogginess from his head.

He best described it as though he'd taken off armor he'd been wearing for years. He felt light and relaxed beyond words, but also like someone had dunked his head in ice water. All of the confusion and uncertainties were gone, and his mind was clearer than ever before.

His hearing was more acute, his vision was sharper.

From inside out he felt remolded. His wounds itched as they healed at an accelerated rate. Scabs covering scrapes and cuts from days ago were already falling off. His deeper wounds had already knit themselves back together.

Cloudhawk knew he had excellent regenerative abilities, but nothing to this extent. Maybe these struggles had awakened his potential, spurred his abilities? What else could explain what in the world was happening to him?

Cloudhawk clambered out of bed and practiced the thirty-six postures taught to him by the Bloodsoaked Queen. They felt more fluid this time, less intense. Though he started to tire at the eighth movement he could still fight through it. Eleven, twelve,

thirteen... fourteen... fifteen!

Every muscle in his body twisted in pain. He couldn't take it anymore and was forced to stop, but without question he had developed somehow after a good night's sleep. The speed with which he was maturing was nothing short of astonishing.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had once said that if Cloudhawk could get through all thirty postures even the likes of Mad Dog and Grizzly couldn't stand against him. So far he'd only managed fifteen, but he figured he was already a match for one of the elite soldiers or the best mercenary troops.

If anyone knew this, it would blow their minds. Wastelanders were constantly battling hardships, urging their potential to reveal itself. Even the likes of Hydra rose through the ranks this way. However, this was usually a slow and painstaking process. Without some special technique it would be impossible to make such dramatic improvements.

Cloudhawk didn't have the time to carefully examine every change he felt, for a stabbing pang in his stomach reminded him of how hungry he was. He reckoned he could eat a whole cow.

A few minutes later...

Cloudhawk was seated before a dining room table, stuffing fruit and barbecued meat into his mouth.

The fort's servant women kept bringing in plates, whispering to each other and eyeing the young man in shock. Watching him eat was like witnessing a wild beast gorging itself on a kill. This skinny guy had one hell of an appetite!

Up to this point he'd eaten two bowls of meat and vegetable stew, three rolls of bread, six portions of barbecued meat and eight bunches of berries. It was enough to satisfy three grown and burly men, and if he kept eating the women suspected the boy's stomach would explode.

Yet Hydra had let everyone know that he and the others with him were honored guests of the fort. Anything they wanted – including the women themselves – was to be offered until they were satisfied. Still, they suspected the kid might eat every scrap of food in the place.

“This is goddamn *delicious!* These guys sure know how to live.”

Cloudhawk took another gulp of soup but still felt like there was room to spare. Greenland Fort was lacking in spices but they had more than enough food and water from the surrounding oasis. Because of this they had a veritable smorgasbord of food to offer; from mutant bird meat to lizard skillet; from common scourge hare jerky to wild boar. Then there were the plethora of fruits and vegetables seen nowhere else in the Wastelands.

“You got anything else?”

Cloudhawk was like the ghost of a starved traveler reincarnated.

Even Cloudhawk could tell he was digesting this stuff at ten times what was normal. Whatever he put in his mouth hardly had time to pass through his stomach before it was absorbed and turned to energy. The sustenance of it spread through every cell in his body.

“Yes, right away...”

The housemaids brought in a dish of fruit, and a large copper basin. When the basin’s lid was removed it filled the room with a mouth-watering aroma. As the steam cleared Cloudhawk was met with a sight he’d never before experienced.

It had a large head, a long scale-encased body and its open mouth was full of razor-sharp teeth.

Cloudhawk gaped at it. “What in holy hell is this? Where are its legs... it’s a python!”

One of the maidservant’s answered in demure inflection. “Sir, this isn’t a snake. It’s a fish, fish don’t have legs.”

What the fuck was a *fish*?

Water was a rarity in the Wastelands, much less any sort of creature living in it. So when something this big that supposedly *lived* in water appeared before him, Cloudhawk had a hard time wrapping his head around it.

This was a carnivorous species caught from the lakes peppered throughout the oasis. Ferocious as it looked, its meat was absolutely delicious. Even without condiments and boiled in clear soup it was nothing short of divine.

Cloudhawk had never seen anything like it, but he was a child of the Wastelands. His only concern was whether or not his food was poisonous. He'd slurp down ants, beetles, and worms with relish, so who was he to turn down cooked delicacies?

He dipped a wooden spoon in the soup and took a sip of that first. His eyes lit up. "Goddamn, this is incredible! I've never eaten something this good before."

The maids secretly chuckled among themselves. "We're just pleased you like it."

He sighed emotively. "You got fruit, meat, this weird snake... I want to stay here forever."

"Sir, this is called a *fish*."

"Tch, leave him be!"

"These aren't the only riches in Greenland Outpost." One of the maids sashayed suggestively closer to him. She leaned down enough for the young lad to get a good eyeful of her chest. "If sir has had his fill we'd be happy to... look after you. I think I know something you'll like even better."

These maids had been hand-picked and trained by Hydra. They were some of the most attractive women the wastelands had to offer. The scrawny kid wasn't much to look at, but for him to be treated so well by the barbarous Hydra meant that there had to be more to him than meets the eye. They saw him as an opportunity – if he liked them, maybe they'd get lucky and Hydra would present them as a gift.

But Cloudhawk was transfixed by the delicious fish-thing they'd given him and hardly noticed her. "Yeah, right, fine," he muttered absently.

Their faces lit up.

Hydra had several hundred women he called his own. He was the kind of man who took pleasure in hurting others, and all of the girls were frightened of what he was capable of. This could be their chance of being liberated from that brute!

"Cloudhawk!"

The shout was cold, full of rage and indignation. The women turned their heads and gasped when they saw the ferocious demon mask stomping their way. They shuffled

backward and dropped their eyes.

Cloudhawk blinked, stunned. Damn, the Queen recovered fast! But why was she so mad...

Chapter 67

Tested

The Bloodsoaked Queen looked like she was recovering well. The way she was stomping forward made her look like she could stride right through an iron wall. The women trembled in fear and surprise, for the aura that poured from this woman was more intense and threatening than Hydra's.

Cloudhawk quickly spoke up. "You got here just in time! You gotta try this."

The Queen glared through her mask at Hydra's maidservants. "Get out, *now!*"

The women immediately left, feeling as though they had just been pardoned from death. "Yes, of course. Right away!"

Cloudhawk watched the exchange in confused surprise, and not a little displeasure. "Hey! What are you doing, what's with the attitude? They didn't do anything to offend you, why'd you snap at 'em?"

Share glared daggers at him. "Have some dignity. If you want to go to the holy lands, become a citizen of the city – if you want to be a demonhunter then you *mustn't* consort with these sordid wasteland women."

"Who the hell wants to live in the wastelands? Who wants to be someone's slave? Do you think *anyone* here has a choice?" Cloudhawk hated to see the Queen treat his fellow wastelanders with such disdain. Her sense of superiority didn't come from anything other than being lucky enough to be born somewhere else. He had come to know the Queen, and through their trials they were closer so he was frank with her. "We don't get to decide where we're born – not like your high-and-mighty gods. Lemme tell you, if you'd been born in the wastelands you'd be no better than the rest of us!"

"Shut your mouth!"

Cloudhawk could say what he pleased, all except any word against her god. Blasphemy was a sure way to incite her rage.

“All I’m saying is life dealt us different hands. Maybe what Mantis said was true. Even if I get to where you came from I’ll never be like you.” Cloudhawk couldn’t understand what was wrong with this woman. He knew nothing he said was going to change her mind – it was like beating his head against a wall – so he wasn’t going to fuss. “There’s all this good food in front of us, I’m not gonna busy my mouth fighting with you!”

This child, the Queen fumed. His manners are getting worse by the day!

She wanted to beat him so badly her teeth itched!

However, after a moment’s thought she had to admit that her reaction had been a tad overblown. He was a wastelander, after all. Why was she so upset? Without another word she pulled the mask from her face.

Cloudhawk couldn’t help but steal a peek.

No matter how many times he saw it, the Queen’s face was a blessing to the eyes. Beauty like hers just didn’t exist in the Wastelands. Thankfully the maids had left, otherwise seeing her might shame them into never again showing their faces.

“Is the food serviceable?” The Queen partook in a spoonful of fish soup, only to spit it out. She sniffed disparagingly. Her voice took on that familiar, petulant scornfulness. “The wasteland is the wasteland. Even the lowest caste of commoners from the elysian lands eat food ten times better than this.”

Cloudhawk kept his thoughts to himself. *Eat it or don’t. Why sneer at what we got?*

“For some, will is in short supply – they cave at the slightest temptation and abandon their dreams. These people will never achieve greatness, and will never succeed.”

Who the hell is she preaching to? Cloudhawk kept eating.

The Queen felt both awkward and angry. *He wasn’t actually being enticed away by the joys of this place, was he?* She didn’t know when, but the Queen had started to look at Cloudhawk differently. He wasn’t like the others – he might have what it takes to walk the path of the demonhunter... or at least be useful.

But wastelanders were wastelanders. You couldn’t convince a dog to stop eating shit, and slinging mud at a wall wasn’t going to make it stronger.

Neither of them said anything more, they just busied themselves eating.

Cloudhawk ate until he could hardly walk, and the Queen had her fill as well. As they were picking at the last bits they heard footsteps approaching. From the sound they could tell one was large and walked with a purposeful stride. The second set sounded like steel boots, but the tone it made ringing against the ground made them sound homemade. Clearly, it was Leonine and Hydra.

The Bloodsoaked Queen slipped her mask back over her face.

“The two of you come out for a moment, we need to make a plan.”

Hydra noted that the Queen was recovering faster than he’d anticipated and it put him more at ease. With someone as strong as her to help him, victory was all but certain.

In the Great Hall.

Mantis was already seated within when they arrived.

Hydra faced the four of them and shared what he knew. “Those fucking mutants were always suspicious of me, and now that you’ve ‘gone missing’ they’re on my ass like stink on shit. We’re out of time, we have to act before they do – let me introduce you to some people.”

He clapped his hands.

Cloudhawk watched as eight people walked into the hall. They were all roughly the same in build and bearing. Though he couldn’t sense anything right away, Cloudhawk could tell these men were first-class wasteland warriors. All of them were at least comparable to Leonine.

“These eight warriors are the best of the best here in Greenland Outpost. They’re my handpicked bodyguards, and they’ll be splitting up into two groups to help you fight. Once the mutants are dealt with, we’ll have a shot at the man who commands them.” Hydra waved his hands as he spoke. “Snaketooth, Artemis – introduce yourselves.”

One of the men with long straight hair stepped forward. His eyes were wide and slender, sharply outlined, with a keen gaze. He had a somber air about him. “I am Snaketooth, and I’m responsible for the three others in Team One.”

“And I am Artemis ^[1], leader of the remaining three on Team Two.” This one was actually a woman, somewhat more petite than the others. She had clean, short-cut hair and was clad in leather armor that constrained her chest, whereupon the tattoo of a red rose was visible. Her thin waist splayed out into a large buttocks, and she held herself with an alluring posture. All in all she was an attractive wastelander woman. “Such a shame the demonhunter is a woman... I was planning on seeing what a hunter was like in the sack.”

Her voice was lilting and seductive, like the purr of a feral cat.

The Bloodsoaked Queen stared at her with frigid eyes. Her harsh voice croaked through the mask. “I wouldn’t mind burning the tongue out of that filthy mouth.”

For emphasis she slowly raised her hands, then rested the burning angels against the wooden table. An intangible energy hidden from the eye surged through the furniture and in an instant it was a charred ruin. It clattered to the ground.

Everyone gaped at her, utterly shocked. None of the wastelanders could understand what they’d just witnessed. Even the coquettish and bold Artemis broke into a cold sweat. If a single touch from that woman didn’t kill her it’d at least leave her permanently crippled.

The Queen, in contrast, was completely casual. She’d made sure her prestige was apparent to everyone gathered.

After a brief moment Hydra gathered everyone’s attention with a cough. “So everyone’s met. Now it’s time for the plan – are there any doubts before we begin?”

“I have one.” The man with long hair, parted in the middle and falling to his shoulders, cast his eyes toward Cloudhawk. “It’s an important mission, why is this mangy rat scampering along?”

Everyone’s eyes landed on Cloudhawk.

He was only a kid, maybe fifteen years old without any vigor to speak of. What’s more because of his malnourished upbringing he was little more than a stick. How could someone like that positively impact a mission this important?

Cloudhawk rose to his feet. “Who the fuck are you callin’ a mangy rat?!”

He hoped the Queen and Mantis would speak up, get his back. Neither of them said a word.

Shit, they still think I'm just getting in the way?

The long-haired one named Snaketooth was Hydra's true brother. He was only saying what Hydra thought – the kid was too weak. He was useless. Hydra only kept him around because he saw how close he was to the demonhunter.

“Fine. If you're not convinced that's exactly what you are I'll give you a chance to prove me wrong. Panther.” Snaketooth peered down his nose at Cloudhawk before glancing to a man by his side. A man with coal black skin stepped forward. “If you can go ten rounds with Panther I'll take back what I said. You can come on the mission.”

In reality, Cloudhawk wasn't thrilled to be participating in such a dangerous mission. But anger swelled up in him, stoked by the snide looks from all sides and the fact they still saw him as garbage. No one actually expected him to accept, but then...”Good! I'll give it a shot!”

This kid is a fucking moron! He sure had a high opinion of himself despite clearly being nothing better than average.

The crew Hydra had put together were his best men. Compared to the fighters of Blackflag Outpost they were no less impressive than Mad Dog, Slyfox, Grizzly, Mantis or Wulf. This was the level they stood among, how was Cloudhawk going to be any sort of match for one of them?

Cloudhawk sometimes was perhaps a little too courageous and didn't think through consequences. Yet the Queen and Mantis didn't try to stop him. He could stand to be knocked down a peg or two.

Cloudhawk and Panther separated from the others and the young man pulled the exorcist staff from his waist. Panther was a compact black man about five feet and a handful of inches – roughly the same height as the fifteen year old he planned to pummel. Black clothing covered almost everything, including his face. For weapons he produced two sai that'd been tucked into his waist.

These weapons were about two feet long and impressively sharp – deadly, in fact. One could guess Panther's fighting style based on the tools he'd chosen.

Leonine's weapon was a two handed saber, designed for a heavy and powerful strike. Strong, but it demanded a lot of energy to wield and dramatic sweeping movements. Panther's weapons were compact three-pronged daggers, which alluded to his style being more focused on speed and agility. For Cloudhawk, he was more trouble than a heavy hitter.

He didn't think too much about it. He dropped into a battle stance and called out a challenge. "Bring it on!"

Panther looked back with scorn in his eyes. He rushed forward fast as a whip. Faster than Cloudhawk could blink the small man appeared to his left jabbing at him with his sai in a reverse grip. It all happened too fast. This guy had to be just as fast as Blackflag Outpost's elite commander Wulf had been!

Mantis lifted his hand, ready to release one of his flying knives.

Anyone could tell, even without thinking, that Cloudhawk couldn't cope with attacks this fast. But then the unthinkable happened, and Cloudhawk brought his bladed exorcist staff around in a counter attack from below.

Panther could drive his sai into Cloudhawk's neck, but the kid's attack was just as fast and just as vicious. If he went through the attack the momentum would cause him to fall right on the staff where it would impale his belly. The end result would be a life for a life.

No choice.

Panther redirected his weapons, bringing them down on the exorcist staff. As the two struggled against each other their weapons elicited ear-piercing screeches. One sai kept Cloudhawk's staff out of the way, while Panther whipped his second dagger around right for the center of his opponent's chest.

"Fuck - off!"

Cloudhawk's eyes were red. A dreadful power welled up within him, infusing him with strength. He wrenched his staff free from Panther's firm control.

Panther staggered backward. The attack aimed for Cloudhawk's chest only managed to leave behind a shallow gash. Meanwhile the kid's sudden rush of strength had thrown him off balance, too, and he stumbled away a few paces.

Contrary to what everyone thought, this kid's reaction time, speed and strength were pretty good!

Panther was angry, ashamed at being shown up by this brat. He was ready to attack again when, before he could take a step, Cloudhawk wrapped himself in his cloak...

...and vanished.

1. Her name is 麗 – beautiful – but she's also a badass. Grecian goddess of the hunt seemed fitting

Chapter 68

Operation Fiendslayer

Cloudhawk had silently vanished like a drop of dew before the morning sun. Something so supernatural as disappearing into thin air wasn't something typical humans were capable of – did this mean this kid was also a demonhunter?

Hydra, Snaketooth and Artemis were absolutely shocked. Were their eyes deceiving them?

Leonine had witnessed Cloudhawk kill a man with a single blow when they first met. The scoundrel had been no weakling, but was nonetheless broken in half. He'd known there was something special, but he figured it was the staff he used and thought nothing more about it. Now he thought this had to be the legendary power of the demonhunters he was seeing. This unremarkable kid was wielding the power of that holy order. It was almost unbelievable.

The scene had also startled Mantis and the Bloodsoaked Queen, though they were surprised for different reasons.

Both of them had spent more time with Cloudhawk and knew what he was capable of. He was average, another face in the crowd, nowhere near the skills of an outpost's elite fighter. And yet, though there was a clear difference in abilities between him and Panther, the kid was holding his own. At least he had a chance to hit back.

His speed and strength, all of his abilities had substantially increased seemingly without foundation. How could he have changed so much literally overnight?

Before they could puzzle out an answer a scream pierced the air. Cloudhawk's exorcist staff appeared from the ether, aimed at Panther's abdomen. The fighter caught it by clamping his sais crossways over the shaft. Amidst the screech of steel the staff's keen tip pierced his leather armor. A moment later and it would have pierced flesh.

Whoosh!

Cloudhawk wrenched his staff back and juked left. He brought the staff crashing down

from overhead.

Panther deflected them again. Their weapons met amidst a loud clang, and the power that vibrated through the blow made Hydra's hand-picked operative ill at ease. Like a ghost Cloudhawk disappeared only to emerge somewhere else with a deadly attack. His cloak made him invisible but also imbued the boy with a burst of speed that put him and Panther on even footing. His attacks kept coming, as indomitable as the tide.

Their weapons might five or six more times punctuated with grating squeals.

Little by little Panther fought off the disadvantage. He couldn't see his target so his response was to shut his eyes. Without the distraction of vision he used the eddies of wind and the whistling sound of movement to determine where the attacks were coming from and defend against them. Cloudhawk's invisibility was troublesome, but it would take much more than that to beat someone as experienced as Panther.

Cloudhawk's onslaught achieved nothing and his opponent's defense was only getting more impenetrable. He couldn't hold on much longer. Once the relic's power gave in he'd lose the one advantage he had.

Time to go all out!

Cloudhawk sprang up and planted his feet on a nearby wall. He coiled in like a spring, then shot forward off the wall as quick as an arrow. With all the momentum behind him he swept his exorcist staff down toward the nape of Panther's neck.

Panther sensed the incoming attack. A sneer touched the corner of his lips. His right arm swung around bringing his whole body with him, sai quick as lightning as it moved to knock the sneak attack aside. His left hand responded half a second later by bringing his weapon up toward where he determined Cloudhawk's chest would be, like a viper moving in for the kill.

The kid was finished! He had strange tricks to help him, but in the end he lacked experience.

Who could expect that in this instant, as Cloudhawk let loose a bestial roar, a surge of unnatural power would explode from the exorcist staff. The three-edged head of the weapon began to rotate at an incredible speed, meeting Panther's block with such intensity it nearly ripped the weapon from his grip.

What the hell?!

That wasn't a staff, Panther thought. It was more like an electric saw. He was forced to bring his other sai up early and used both to catch the staff in between.

The friction as they collided lit up the hall with sparks. Spectators almost had to cover their ears from the sound.

Lucky for Panther, his sais were of good quality. Despite the severity of the blow they didn't break, but as more power flowed through Cloudhawk's staff Panther had to struggle harder to keep from being skewered.

Threads of bloody veins increased through Cloudhawk's eyes. His muscles bulged as power flooded his body, catapulting his fortitude to a whole new level. All the latent force of the staff reached its peak, and suddenly a concussive shock burst forth from it.

"Go to hell!"

Both sais shattered!

Panther let go of the cutting shards, and when the shock wave hit it threw him high into the air. However the man was an expert killer, and as he was flung aloft he executed a series of masterful backflips. Mid rotation he pulled a dagger from his waist and by the time he landed back on the ground, he curled ready to launch into another attack.

"Enough!"

Hydra's shout brought their battle to an end. Cloudhawk reappeared, drenched in sweat and chest heaving. His psychic energy was depleted. The webbing between Panther's thumb and forefinger ^[1] was split and leaking fresh blood. His clothes were ripped and cut, and the force of the impact had caused some mild internal injuries. Yet he was still ready to keep fighting.

Cloudhawk had appeared to have the upper hand, but if they'd continued the fight it was uncertain if the kid would have come out on top. But the fight had been finished before his exhaustion could play a role, and now Snaketooth had nothing to say.

Artemis looked at Cloudhawk with bright and curious eyes, like a rotwolf with a

scourge here in its sights. “This little brother looks like he’s got no teeth, but for a young’un you’ve got some spunk. I like talented men like you, it makes me wonder what other... talents... you might have.”

Nothing was said, but Artemis felt a distinctly murderous intent settle on her.

It was the Bloodsoaked Queen’s frigid gaze. As strong as Artemis was, she could feel their pressure weighing on her. Even without lifting a finger she knew she was no match for the young woman.

Was this delicious boy toy her lover, she wondered? *Such a pity!*

Hydra dismissed the exchange with a wave of his hand. “Everyone take a seat.”

Cloudhawk returned the exorcist staff to its makeshift sheath on his waist and, fixing Snaketooth with a hateful stare, sat beside the Bloodsoaked Queen.

Hydra went on like the entire surprising exchange had never happened. “Our ultimate aim is to draw out and kill the demon pulling the strings. But before we can, we have to go through his lieutenants.”

“Ugh, you men are so boring. They’ve got a few hundred scrubs, are they really that much of a threat?” Her voice dripped with ridicule. “We organize the thousands of troops we have here in the Outpost, surround them, and that’s the end of it!”

A chill flit across Hydra’s eyes. “Artemis, you know I don’t like questions or interruptions. I *especially* hate having subordinates second-guess my orders. The next person who does, I’ll cut out their tongue, chop off their limbs, and throw them in the leech pit.”

Artemis shrugged noncommittally but didn’t say anything more.

“They didn’t bring many with them but you can bet your ass they have informants all over the outpost. If we try a large-scale operation they’ll see it coming a mile away and get out before we have a chance to move.” He paused for a moment before going on. “The most we’ll use are a few hundred trusted soldiers. That’s how we avoid scaring our prey off.”

Hydra’s worries were well founded, for although he was ruler of the outpost there were definitely agents of the demon lurking everywhere. If they made this a big ordeal

the spies would alert the demon's lieutenants and they'd miss their opportunity. If they slipped away and got back to their master, fighting them would be much harder.

Snaketooth spoke up. "What's your plan?"

"Their hearts are set on killing the demonhunter. That means we got bait." Hydra looked pointedly at the Queen and Cloudhawk. "We trick 'em into a place where they'll be surrounded and get rid of their people in a single stroke."

No one offered an opinion. Amidst the silent consent Hydra snapped his fingers.

Maidservants entered in an orderly line like a school of fish. The one in the lead held an enormous bottle of liquor and all the rest bore dishes of various sizes. Delicate wine glasses were presented. Hydra took up the large bottle himself, pulled the cork, and filled the glasses. Maidservants then took them and distributed the alcohol among the others.

"Drink with me! When our work is done you can rest assured I'll treat you well."

They all lifted their glasses and emptied their contents in one gulp.

Cloudhawk thought he could taste the fruit and vegetables they used to make the beverage, filling his mouth with savory sweetness. It was actually quite pleasant, much better than the stuff the mercenaries made in Blackflag Outpost.

They rested for what remained of the day, tomorrow the operation would begin. Everyone went their separate ways to prepare.

Leonine returned to his wife and children, where his son was cutting fruit and his wife was looking after their daughter. The little girl's eyes were open and bright. She was awake.

Leonine didn't even stop to put down what was in his hands and moved to her side. "How do you feel? Does it hurt?"

She sleepily blinked her eyes and stared up at her father. "No daddy, it doesn't hurt. I had some fruit, it was so good."

His son happily bound over beside them. "I like it here, it's clean and they have a lot of good food. When you left no one came to bully mommy."

“If ya like it here, then here’s where we stay.” Leonine’s face split into a delighted smile. “I got one more thing I gotta do then we can stay long as we like.”

His wife’s gentle and concerned face turned his way. “Is the mission with Hydra dangerous?”

Leonine shook his head and squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Don’t fret, now. I’m makin’ it back no matter what. Our family’s finally safe. I’m not lookin’ to get myself killed.”

She nodded. “I trust you!”

“I’mma go get some good food. Little one’s just gettin’ better, we need to strengthen her up.”

Leonine opened the door to step out, but the way was blocked by a dark figure. They were small, like a child before Leonine. It was the one who’d fought Cloudhawk, Panther.

Leonine scowled down at him. “What are you doin’ here?”

“You really have a nice family, it’s something to envy.” Panther’s eyes were dragged across the room as he made the enigmatic comment. “Hydra said we’re starting the mission tomorrow, so no one’s allowed to leave. It’s to make sure we don’t accidentally lose the element of surprise.”

“I’m just getting’ some food.”

“Ah. I’ll go with you.”

“Hmph, whatever.”

The two men walked together toward the storeroom.

When he stepped inside Leonine saw someone else and stopped dead in his tracks. Panther paused too, right behind him.



At the same time, outside Cloudhawk's room nearby, a full-figured form crept along the corridor. She was a provocative and alluring wastelander woman, and the look on her face evoked the feeling of a hungry wolf.

She was one who had enjoyed the gratification of many men, but never such a fresh and tender prey.

Artemis' mouth watered.

Only, as Artemis prepared to pull open the door to Cloudhawk's room, every hair on her body stood on end like a frightened cat. She lunged to the side just in time to avoid a fiery bird screaming down the corridor. It crashed into the ground where she'd been standing half a moment before and burst into flame. The intense heat reddened the woman's face.

Fuck! *Fuck!* Artemis yelped and skittered away down the hall.

Cloudhawk poked his head out of the room. "What's going on...? Shit, fire!"

"It's fine." The Queen's artificially croaky voice wafted toward him from down the passageway. "An irritating fly was buzzing around. It's gone now."

Cloudhawk blinked at the bricks in front of his door, burned black and cracked from the heat. She sure had an interesting way to deal with flies!

The Bloodsoaked Queen turned and walked back from where she came from. "I'm leaving."

"Wait a second."

"What is it?"

"I've got a bad feeling..." He fixed her with a serious look. "I don't think things are gonna go so well tomorrow. Somethin' really doesn't seem right. You be careful."

The Queen stopped, and then continued down the hall. "Drivel. Worry about yourself."

1. Referred to as 'the tiger's mouth,' something I've never heard of.

Chapter 69

An Uncertain Feeling

Forlorn cries rattled in Hydra's room for more than an hour. Then, there was silence.

Hydra had given vent to all of his appetites, with several women sporting wounds as souvenirs. They lay gasping on the floor, not an inch of them unscathed. Even their wrists were brutally broken. The more excited Hydra became, the more violent were his delights. For him joy and anger were interchangeable, so all those near him feared him like a wild animal.

He was also a clever man. He resolved his darker proclivities on slaves and those who disobeyed, and lured those with any skill to obey him. This allowed him to enjoy stable rule, and for eight years scores without number were tormented to death while the elite were in his grasp.

"Get them the fuck outta here..."

Hydra put on his clothes and replaced his eyepatch, summoning people to remove the women like sexual detritus. Women he had plenty of, and these were broken now. He didn't care whether they were cut up and fed to the beasts or sprinkled on the fields like manure, because that was all they were worth to him anymore.

He wandered over to the window and basked in the morning sun, peering out over his territory and intoxicated with joy.

This plentiful oasis, this fertile earth, this perfect pearl in the Wastelands was difficult to match. He was ruler here, a king in his kingdom, with its more than fifty thousand residents his subjects – or rather, his livestock and slaves.

If he wanted he could kill any one or all of them. He could have any woman for any reason or none. Who would dare oppose? He was like a god in this place, and it was a sensation more enticing than anything. He craved it like a drug, drunk on power.

The only thing, like a bone stuck in one's throat, was that hiding piece of shit. Once a month on the dot he showed up to take half of what was rightfully his. It was robbery,

extortion. It was an *insult!*

It was an insult Hydra was forced to swallow... but everything would be settled today.

He didn't know many spies and loyalists those mutants had here, but he had to expect they knew he was acting suspicious. In the battle ahead defeating them wasn't enough, he had to exterminate them, like a cancer, or fighting was pointless.

To do this he planned to fabricate the Bloodsoaked Queen's escape. This would give him the cover to assemble his best men, while the mutants would be forced to come. They were too invested in getting the demonhunter to stay away. That is when Hydra would spring his trap and so long as the sweepers were lured into the right place none of them would survive.

Their lieutenants would be disposed of. The shadow man would have to show himself.

With the whole outpost behind him and the might of the demonhunter it didn't matter how strong this bastard was. It didn't matter what influence he wielded. At least his domain had the strength to fight back!

Sitting around was to await one's own death. Why not act first, give it all or nothing?

Someone entered the room. Judging by the sound of their footsteps his gait and speed was surprisingly consistent, almost supernatural. He didn't have to look to know who it was, only those closest to him were allowed in here. It was his brother, Snaketooth.

Hydra swept his eyes out over the outpost. "How are the preparations?"

His response was grim and firm. "Relax, brother. The bait's been set, and we have fifteen snipers nearby that'll keep the situation in our control. No one's going to slip through."

The outpost's snipers were its ace in the hole. They had been cultivated to be masters of their craft, crack marksmen. Fifteen of these men hidden in the nearby ruins would be like angels of death.

Snaketooth went on. "The eight of us are leaving to join the demonhunter."

Hydra suddenly turned and looked Snaketooth in the eye. "Listen, no matter what happens, you'll always be my little brother. If there's anyone in this world I care about,

it's you. These years you've been my mighty right arm, and my greatest weakness. I don't want anything to happen to you, do you hear me?"

Snaketooth frowned at him. "I'm a soldier, brother. I'm willing to die for the cause."

"No doubt, you're a damn good soldier. But more importantly you're my brother, so don't do anything stupid. You get your ass right back and report the moment the mission's done." Hydra's tone left no room for argument. "All of this place – all the food and drink and women – you're the only one I'm willing to share it with. Whatever I got, you got."

Snaketooth bowed low. "Thank you, brother."

Hydra waved his hand. "Go, be careful."

As merciless as Hydra was everyone had something they cared about. He'd grown up with Snaketooth as scavengers, living a life no different than Cloudhawk's had been until they were ten. They supported each other through countless sufferings and now Snaketooth was his right-hand man.

As Snaketooth took his seven companions and set out, Hydra put out the word that the demonhunter had been spotted and had escaped the oasis. He was dispatching eight of his best to hunt them down.

The minutes ticked by, one by one. Now the bait had been laid, would it be enough to entice their prey?

Hydra sat in a chair and shut his eyes, drumming his fingers rhythmically against the armrests as though he were waiting for something. And then he stopped.

A sound reached his ears, the din of doors being thrown open. The demon's lieutenants stormed in.

"*Hydra!*" The winged one came to ground before him. With the scrape of steel on leather he pulled forth a machete and put it against Hydra's neck. He roared in unbridled anger. "You filthy dickweasel! Why didn't you tell us the moment you knew where they were?!"

"Now don't be angry, gentlemen," his eyes opened and he regarded the three of them with the utmost respect. "I only just found out. The moment I heard I sent out eight

people to get them. Don't worry, we're going to get them."

"These two demonhunters are important to the master. We can't let them escape no matter the cost. But we don't have enough people." Longhorn leveled an order directly to the outpost leader. "I need you to send out more men – and you will go personally."

This is what Hydra was waiting for. He shrunk as though he could not resist. "Of course, of course!"

"Quickly!" Vulture was clearly impatient. "This is the last time. The LAST fucking time! If these rats get away again because you were dragging ass I'll make you *pay*! Do you hear me?"

Stranger Black interjected. "Alright. Brothers, we can't waste time here either. We have a lead, we have to follow it."

He watched the mutants leave, sneering laughter at them once they'd gone. Leonine then approached, clad in armor, and addressed him respectfully.

"We've got four hundred handpicked men ready to go."

"Let's go."

Hydra and Leonine left for where the soldiers waited. They were arrayed in clean formation wearing good leather and breathing masks. Each one was equipped with a modified rifle or powerful crossbow in addition to broadswords or machetes strapped to their backs. Like statues they stood without moving a muscle, indomitable like a proper army.

"These fighters are the most elite in all the outpost." Hydra walked ahead with Leonine at his side. As the outpost's leader marched before the formation his eyes were filled with pride and arrogance. "I've been preparing for this moment for years."

There weren't many, but his people were heavily equipped and they fought like devils. They were no less destructive than the sweepers themselves. Most importantly these fighters were handpicked by Hydra. They were loyal, and answered only to him.

He only had one command – follow him even into the depths of hell.

The fiends those mutants brought with them didn't number over three hundred. Even

in a straight fight it wasn't sure they'd win, much less when they didn't know they were about to get stabbed in the back. His enemy had nowhere to go!

“Move out!”

Not long after the sweepers had left, Hydra gathered his people and crossed the valley into the treacherous oasis. When they reached the wilderness-devoured ruins it was like a maze that stretched out before them.

It was a labyrinth of death, one that'd taken many lives. And it was their best shot! Hydra had a chance to kill his overlords in one fell strike. And yet he felt a sense of disquiet.

Strange... why would he feel so anxious? He thought for a moment and realized that it'd all been too easy. So easy it was starting to seem dangerous!

Chapter 70

Sudden Changes

Ten years in the Wastelands had tempered Hydra. He had risen from being a useless scavenger to becoming an outpost ruler, but it was a long road. To make it this far he'd needed more than brute strength and luck. He had relied on his ambition, intelligence and keen awareness of the dangers around every corner.

On the cusp of entering the ruins Hydra hesitated. His intuition was warning him.

Danger lived in every corner of these dilapidated ruins. It came from deadly plants and animals, but now there was something else. It would be wise to wait for a moment and see what may be lying in wait.

"Brother!" Snaketooth made his way to Hydra and spoke anxiously with him. "What are you waiting for? Leonine and our troops have almost surrounded the sweepers, they're completely absorbed with finding the demonhunters. Now is the best time to launch our sneak attack, if we wait any longer it's going to cost us."

Now was not the time for indecision. If Hydra was too slow to act the demonhunters and his most trusted men would be left on their own. They were capable fighters, but not capable enough to fend off nearly three hundred savage sweepers.

The bow was drawn, the arrow knocked – it was too late to call it off now.

Once the fight started it would serve nothing for Hydra to hide. Being overly cautious was more risky than charging ahead with everything they had. He had the advantage in numbers, and his men were among the best – he didn't see how they could lose!

"Listen up!" Hydra cast aside his distracting thoughts, hopping up onto a boulder and addressing his warriors. "This fight is integral to the survival of our outpost. If we win, our home will finally belong to us. We will drown in food, water, and women. But if we lose we die together, to the last man, do you hear me? Losing is *not* an option!"

"Yeah!" Several shouts of agreement rose from the crowd.

“Onward!”

Hydra lead Snaketooth, Leonine, and his crack troops into the ruins, following a safe path laid out by his brother that would lead them to the rear of the sweeper company. With every step closer to their target the thirst for blood increased.

They could hardly be called human. They were more like a wolf pack with the scent of blood in their noses, hunting down their prey.

Hydra pushed everything else to the back of his mind. His every thought was consumed with destroying the sweepers, and the mutant bastards that led them!

Then a scene he hadn't expected was unveiled before his eyes!

They came around a bend in the ruins leading to the ambush site, but instead of seeing what they expected they were met with the image of three hundred sweepers aiming guns their way. They looked to have been waiting.

Hydra felt his heart seize. “Snaketooth, what's going on?”

There was no answer.

Crack!

A sense of impending danger flooded Hydra's body as a sniper's bullet whistled through the air from hundreds of meters away. Though he'd known something was off and his reactions were fast he still couldn't avoid it entirely. He dodged to one side and the shot tore through his armor to embed itself in his abdomen.

A sniper!

Hydra's face was painted with absolute shock, and deep in his eyes was incredulous disbelief. The sweepers didn't have snipers, they could only have come from the outpost. The fifteen snipers had been chosen by his own brother who he trusted explicitly.

Then it was obvious. It must mean...

As Hydra dodged the assassin's bullet Snaketooth pulled an envenomed blue dagger from its sheath. Like a bolt of lightning he lashed out, his dagger – toxic as his

namesake – aimed at Hydra’s chest.

“Snaketooth! You treacherous fuck!”

Anyone in the outpost could have betrayed him and Hydra would not have been surprised. Anyone except Snaketooth, his own brother.

How many times had they shared tragedy? Helped themselves through life and death situations? How many times had they escaped calamity together?

Why? *Why?!*

Hydra’s first reaction wasn’t despair, but pain. He couldn’t believe it, or maybe he refused to believe it. The proof was before him; Snaketooth’s surprise attack was bearing down, his murderous intent revealed. There was no question about it, as his brother’s deadly weapon affirmed. A single nick from the envenomed dagger and he wasn’t leaving here alive.

“Snaketooth! Why?”

With a mad roar he ripped his saber free and knocked aside Snaketooth’s attack. As he hesitated to counterattack another stifling sense of jeopardy washed over him. A terrible breeze came up from behind that made him shudder.

Hydra felt the shadow falling over him before he saw it.

Leonine’s two-handed sword came from behind, with all of the slaver’s force behind it. The attack came from the side, chopping toward his waist in attempts to cut Hydra in half.

First the sniper, then Snaketooth in front and Leonine from behind. One sneak attack after the other, all in order to cut him down!

But Hydra was no simple man. He fended off Snaketooth’s deadly onslaught and was still able to swing his sword around to ward off Leonine’s strike. But in his haste he couldn’t get a tight grip on his weapon and the shock of the slaver’s blow tore the skin of his hands. He was hit so hard that he was knocked backward and hit the ground with bone-jarring force. Already Hydra was sorely wounded.

Everything happened in the space of a breath. Hydra’s crack troops were cast into

turmoil, shocked by the sudden coup. Even these elite warriors were at a complete loss.

“You two...”

Leonine had betrayed him as well? *Bastard! When?!*

Hydra’s leverage over Leonine only worked because he knew the slaver had a weakness, a soft spot he could exploit. He thought he had Leonine well in hand, how could he even think of betrayal? Did he not care what happened to his wife and children?!

“Surprised? You were so sure you could manipulate people through their weaknesses, but you never imagined someone would use the same method on you.” Snaketooth’s sinister features broke into a smirk when he looked at Leonine. “It looks like your slave trader trusts me more in the end. After all once you’re gone, I will rule the Greenland Outpost and I will treat its people better than you ever did.”

“That’s why you betrayed me? So you could lead?”

Hydra, always so fierce and brutal, was like a child who’s last toy had been thrown away. He still couldn’t fathom if any of this was real. Why would his brother do this? Why would he?

“Think of it like this: Greenland Outpost is a jewel in the Wastelands, and any jewel comes at a price.” Fiery passion burned in Snaketooth’s dark eyes. “I swore my allegiance to the master years ago. I love you, brother... I really do. But your greed and ambition impede the master’s plan. The only option left is to bring you the death you deserve!”

His brother had been bought by that fucking demon coward! *When did he steal my family from me!?*

“What the fuck are you assholes gaping at?” Hydra roared. “Kill them! Kill *all* of them!”

Yet none of his warriors hurried to Hydra’s aid. Suddenly plumes of sand were kicked up from the ground, and amidst a tumultuous wind an enormous black silhouette emerged from behind one of the ruined buildings.

It was an airship, black as night.

As it came around and pointed its broadside toward them the sound of its heavy guns whirring filled the air. It spat fire and bullets like an apocalyptic monsoon that swept over the tight-knight formation of warriors. In the blink of an eye dozens fell to the ground, screaming as hot led ripped through them.

The rest fled for cover and started to fire wildly.

“Kill them!”

Three hundred sweepers opened fire. Greenland Outpost’s greatest warriors were mowed down ruthlessly.

Crack!

Snipers began to fire again. Hydra pitched and rolled to avoid their bullets, but traded one danger for another.

From his left and right Snaketooth and Leonine caught him in a pincer attack. Leonine brought his sword down toward Hydra’s skull which Hydra knocked away one-handed. But the dual daggers of a treacherous snake were coming his way.

Hydra was forced to stagger backward.

Leonine came at him again with his enormous sword. *Clang!* The outpost leader was knocked several meters away.

Individually Snaketooth and Hydra were quite strong, and the two of them together were almost more than Hydra could handle. What’s more, snipers had him in their sights. All of the outpost’s snipers were control metahumans, masterful sharpshooters, so Hydra knew it was only a matter of time before one of them got him.

“So this is how you plan to kill me?” Hydra pulled the patch off of his head. His demon-like gleaming red eye fixed the two men with a glare. “You’re digging your own graves!”

Leonine scowled, brows knit tight.

“Don’t worry.” Snaketooth knew his brother. “His right eye has night vision and can track bullets. But it doesn’t do well in the light.”

Hydra’s eye was not dissimilar to a snake’s or lizard’s. He could pick his prey out of

pitch darkness and follow the fastest objects. These were Hydra's greatest capabilities and he could rely on them to help him dodge the hail of bullets and track attacks so they would do the least damage possible.

Crack! Bang!

Two more sniper shots, but Hydra nimbly dodged them both. He raised his sword then came at them like a force of evil.

"Close your eyes!"

Snaketooth pulled something out of his pocket and threw it. Leonine had just enough time to cover his face before whatever it was exploded in mid-air. A dazzling light like fireworks lit the area, so bright that it felt like a dagger in Hydra's snake eye. He let out a shrill scream.

This was their chance!

Snaketooth, seizing the moment, rushed forward with his daggers aimed for his brother. Although Hydra was blinded he dodged out of instinct. One of the daggers missed his throat, but the other left a jagged wound along his chest.

Instantaneously Hydra felt his body start to numb. He knew his brother was a master of poisons – his despicable toxins were in his blood.

"Snaketooth!" He screamed all of his rage and sorrow. Hysterical he shouted, "You fucking disappointment! Die!"

Too fast! A streak of cold light – Hydra threw his sword and Snaketooth was too slow to get out of the way. It buried itself in the traitor's chest, bursting out from his back and pinning him to the ground.

Crack!

Another sniper bullet tore into Hydra's abdomen and burst out the other side – through and through. Hydra could feel the cold hand of death groping for him, closer by the moment. His plan was a complete failure. Without even thinking he turned and ran.

Leonine rushed to Snaketooth's side to help him up, but the moment he saw the man's

wounds he knew he was beyond saving.

Fuck! Leonine's face darkened. He dropped Snaketooth and gave chase.

Snaketooth's eyes stared blankly at the ground while blood pooled beneath him. He hadn't expected he'd be the one to lose. A bone-deep cold started from his limbs and crawled deeper in, and his mind grew hazy. All of a sudden it was like he was a boy again, hiding in a hole in the ground with his brother trying to escape the cold.

Ten years as a scavenger. Ten years of hardships and tragedy which the two of them faced together.

Misery, darkness, misfortune, cruelty... these plagues covered every corner of the Wastelands. They suffered all manner of torture and humiliation as they built their lives, promising to change everything.

The two brothers were tenacious, clinging to life and making themselves stronger. Over time they earned a reputation, earned status. They wielded power.

The elder brother had always been the stronger of the two. He was more driven and energetic, but also more cruel. As his power grew he lost more and more of his humanity and his mind became twisted. He never sensed him and his brother drifting apart.

Their nature had always been different. After Hydra lived through their hardships he was determined to revisit the torment on the wilds ten times over – a hundred times! He tortured slaves and did unthinkable things. He was a man mad with vengeance. Snaketooth wanted revenge, too. But what he wanted was to wipe out the things that made life hard, not add to them. The mysterious stranger saw that in him, that was why he approached Snaketooth in secret five years ago.

He adored the master's strength and wisdom, subscribed to his ideals. In all the wastelands there was only one person who could change everything, and that was the master! This putrid world they'd inherited needed someone like the master to save it.

That's why Snaketooth was determined to do whatever he was asked. He had no interest in leading the Outpost, a fact his poor brother would never understand.

As death claimed Snaketooth he did not regret his actions. Only his failure.

Chapter 71

Crisis

The sun burned high in the sky, hot enough to roast a man. At the hottest point of the day nine people were picking their way through the ruins, like a line of ants scrambling over the piles of stone and twisted metal.

Cloudhawk still felt like something wasn't right. It was strange, he felt uncomfortable from the very start like something bad was just around the corner.

Originally their group had sported eleven people. They were Cloudhawk, the Queen, and Mantis of course. In addition there were those from the Outpost; Snaketooth, Artemis and the teams they commanded. At this moment Mantis had vanished somewhere in the wilds as was his fashion and Snaketooth had yet to return after leaving to guide Hydra.

"They're so goddamn *slow*! Can they just fuckin' take the bait already?" Artemis impatiently swung her right arm, smashing the melon hammer she bore against a wall and breaking it into rubble.

Cloudhawk couldn't help but shoot her a glance. Typically women were lower on the social ladder in the Wastelands, they had naturally weaker constitutions and were less inclined to bravery. But nothing was absolute, and there were exceptions in all cases – Artemis was that outlier. All of Hydra's elite soldiers were special, but this woman was unique above them all.

She was attractive in face and figure, but more than that her equipment made her all the more striking. Attached to the bracer of her left arm was a three pointed shield, and in her right a metallic melon hammer she wielded with ease.

The shield was large and thick and peppered with metal spikes. Its pointed base was as sharp as any blade. The hammer's business end was round and larger than Cloudhawk's head. It was streaked with red and didn't seem to have ever been washed. He wondered how many bones it'd broken, how many skulls it'd crushed.

For all their weight and dramatic appearance they hung off Artemis' petite form. They

looked particularly out of place.

She felt Cloudhawk's eyes on her and knocked her iron mallet against the shield, eliciting a clang like dull thunder. "Hey little brother – my toys ain't bad, right? Wanna play with 'em?"

Her bright eyes sized him up, like a hungry wolf eyeing a delicious little rabbit.

Cloudhawk felt a trickle of sweat drip down his spine. "Nah!"

That hammer had to be a hundred pounds or more, too much for your typical person to handle. Heavy was an understatement, and her shield probably wasn't much lighter. There was no way he'd been able to use them effectively in a fight. Meanwhile Artemis wielded the hammer like a bamboo stick. Despite the weight of it and her shield, after walking fifty kilometers she didn't seem at all winded.

This woman was a monster, but when he thought about it she was typical at the same time. Among the Bloodsoaked Queen and the seven other elite fighters she was one of their leaders. That meant she was at least twice as strong as any of her subordinates.

As for her, the kid was only proving more and more amusing.

She was about to continue their banter when suddenly the sound of a heavy gun firing in the distance interrupted her. Everyone's face stiffened – had the fight already started?

But there were no sweepers to be seen!

The Outpost didn't have a chain gun, the only group they knew who did were the sweepers. The deadly weapon was affixed to their airship. But why would the airship be using it? Had their plans already been ruined?

Snaketooth was still nowhere to be found.

"God fuckin' damnit, why is there fighting?!" Artemis seemed to have trouble deciding what to do next. She turned to the others. "Should we go see?"

No one gave an opinion.

Cloudhawk suddenly felt an unsettling sensation, like needles digging into his flesh.

Overcome with a sense of danger he ducked and instinctively looked toward the ruins. A flash of light – like sunlight on glass or a mirror – glinted back at him.

“Down!”

Snipers were hiding in the ruins with their sights set on Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen. Half a second later they were firing. Only one of the snipers was on Cloudhawk, the others were focused on the demonhunter. It was clear who their main target was.

Whoosh! Crack!

The Queen had been warned, she could hear the bullets tearing through the air. Although she couldn't see them she was skilled enough to track them by sound. She instinctively dodged out of danger.

Bullets sped past the spot she'd just occupied, missing her and instead burrowing into one of the fighters' heads. It struck with so much force it blew the top of his skull off. Bits of bone and brain burst in all directions like gruesome fireworks.

Hot blood splattered over Artemis' face. She gaped at the body of her comrade as they slumped to the ground. What the *fuck* was going on?!

The snipers were Outpost soldiers, there to assist the operation. So why were they turning their guns on them? Now wasn't the time to wonder, though. Who knew how many more snipers were hiding nearby!

The crack of gunfire rang out again.

Artemis instinctively lifted her shield to cover her head. She shuffled backward to try and find cover in the ruins as a bullet smashed into her shield. It hit with such force she felt her arm vibrate and go numb.

“What the actual fuck!” Artemis' screeching voice called to the others. *“Take cover!”*

Outpost sniper rifles were specialized weapons of death, manufactured to fire a bullet at near supersonic speed. The soldiers who traveled with them were her outstanding fighters, but were no match for the likes of the Bloodsoaked Queen. They couldn't track the bullets, much less dodge them. If these snipers had them in their sights, the threat to their life was critical.

Everyone scattered, all but Panther whose face adopted a stony expression. He pulled out his daggers and lunged at one of his companions, stabbing him twice in the chest then opening his throat.

“You...”

The one Panther attacked was not inferior to the small man, but he hadn't expected the treachery. He'd been too busy trying to avoid the snipers to keep an eye on his back leaving Panther an opening.

Panther wasn't alone, either.

Two more from Snaketooth's team lashed out at their brethren. The last member of Artemis' team was killed before they could fight back.

Even stunned the wasteland woman knew what had befallen them. “Snaketooth betrayed us, that rancid piece of dog shit!”

It all happened so fast they barely had time to think. But the proof was there; all three of Snaketooth's team were attacking them, and the snipers had been arranged by Hydra's brother. No question, Snaketooth sold them out.

The only ones left were Artemis, Cloudhawk, the Queen and Mantis – wherever he was. Panther and the other three were enemies. The Bloodsoaked Queen was still recovering from the surprise attack, but she was still more than a match for them.

There were at least ten deadly snipers in the ruins nearby, however. Even the Queen had to take care, for if she got tangled up that would be all the chance they needed to riddle her with bullets.

Cloudhawk had managed to avoid a shot and rolled behind a dilapidated wall for cover. But no sooner had he ducked behind it did he feel a gust of wind on his head. One of the traitors was standing over him with a battleax aimed right for his scalp.

He was done for!

Cloudhawk lifted his exorcist staff to block the strike but he could tell immediately that this fighter was a strength metahuman, and a dominant one at that. He couldn't defend himself with his strength alone.

The grating sound of metal on metal rang out.

Just as Cloudhawk was to be chopped in half a petite and agile figure dashed in front of him like a leopardess. Her shadow fell over him, shield held high, and as the ax struck her with thunderous force Cloudhawk could see the stone path beneath her feet shatter.

One could imagine how much force was behind the strike.

“Burn in hell!”

Thick veins bulged as Artemis thrust back, her pretty face twisting into a fierce sneer as she jumped straight at her attacker. She used her shield to knock his ax away and brought her melon hammer around in a sweeping arc. The ax-wielding betrayer, eyes wide, leapt out of the way and her hammer struck ground instead of bone. It crashed into rock with an explosive sound and turned stone to dust. The impact shook Cloudhawk and muddled his head.

Holy shit! Was she even human?! Her strength was nothing short of spectacular!

Cloudhawk had run into many impressive people lately, and of all of them the only one who surpassed her pure power was the two-horned mutant. Even the Bloodsoaked Queen couldn't meet her blow for blow.

Artemis' weapon was cumbersome and unwieldy, making her attacks slow. Strong as each attack was, that was also her weakness.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was still the snipers' main target, and their guns were trained on her. Yet she raced across the ruins like a phantom, dodging each shot as they came, switching directions on a dime. Using sound alone she avoided them and remained unscathed.

Panther, his daggers bared, suddenly leapt at her.

She knocked his weapons away easily then whipped her powerful leg, once then twice. Each kick struck Panther's wrists and sent his daggers flying. A third kick caught him right in the center of his chest and the small man was hammered into the air. She snatched one of Panther's daggers before it reached the ground and reeled back to bury it in him.

Another soldier made his move. He pulled out a handgun, swung his arm toward her and fired. Judging by his finesse and precision he was as skilled a shot as Slyfox! A marksman like him was lethal.

Until now the Queen had been too fast for him to take his shot, but he saw his opportunity. It was now or never. If she killed Panther he was next.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was forced to change targets. She rotated the dagger and blocked two bullets aimed at her. She was so fast it seemed nothing could touch her, her skills were simply fantastical.

“What?!”

Just like Slyfox had once done to a sweeper’s bullet, the Queen knocked away a shot she couldn’t avoid with nothing but a dagger. Her lightning speed was complimented by exact precision. The shooter could hardly believe his eyes.

However, there was more than one enemy the Queen had to worry about.

A host of guns were leveled at her. While she was defending herself from the close-range gunfire the snipers nearby were taking aim. Even the Bloodsoaked Queen couldn’t protect herself from all directions.

Then the unexpected happened.

Sweepers began to appear all around them. There weren’t many – maybe a couple dozen – but they were skilled and savage. A winged mutant led the charge.

Things had gone from bad to worse!

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s heart sank. Suddenly she was caught between the frying pan and the fire. Now it seemed in addition to the snipers they had to survive the mutant lieutenants and their army!

A short distance away Cloudhawk spotted a narrow slit among the ruins. It was somewhere the snipers couldn’t get them. He turned and shouted toward the Queen. “Don’t fight them! Let’s get out of here!”

The Queen dashed toward him in retreat. Artemis followed using her shield for cover. Their group fled toward the fissure.

Hidden in the ruins a sniper's muzzle moved. He peered through his sights, following Artemis as she desperately ran for safety. He had a good angle on her, from the side where her shield didn't reach. The woman's head was right in his line of sight.

Cloudhawk was clearly the weakest of them, but he had a keen sense. He seemed to intrinsically know when a muzzle was pointed at him. Hitting him was harder than the sharpshooters would have thought. The Queen's capabilities were too high for them to overcome, and since she could hear the bullets coming it was too difficult to hit her so long as she was alert.

That just left Artemis. There was no way she could escape this shot.

The sniper waited until he lined the shot just right, and pulled the trigger. The muzzle of his rifle belched fire and a bullet whistled through the air.

Chapter 72

The Desert Titan

Just as the gun fired, the soft blue light of a digger glinted. It slipped into the base of the sniper's skull, severing his spine from his brain stem. The strike was perfectly clean, and in an instant his body's systems shut down; his heart, breathing, digestion – everything that kept him alive was turned off like flipping a switch. An angel from heaven couldn't save him.

The bullet's trajectory was off as a result of the blow. The bullet cut through her hair before burying itself bloodlessly in the ground. The boiling heat of its passage scorched Artemis' cheek, contrasting with the cold sweat that suddenly covered her. She yelped in surprise.

Cloudhawk watched from the safety of cover, and when he saw the bullet kick up dust an idea hit him. "Sand! Use the sand for cover!"

Right! Why didn't she think of that?

After her brush with death Artemis' mind snapped back to the present. She raised her melon hammer high, and like a furious tempest the sound of her weapon striking the ground rumbled through the air. The ground shook from the tremendous force, causing debris from the ruins around them to collapse and belch plumes of dirt into the air.

Cloudhawk couldn't help but be pleased.

The sweepers brought by Longhorn and Stranger Black caught up to Panther and the three others then made to follow the survivors. A few snipers also rose from nests hidden in the ruins to try and find better vantage points.

Through the clouds of dust the Bloodsoaked Queen could see a few sweepers approaching, leading the pack of hunters. She glared with eyes cold as death. Time and again she – a noble demonhunter – had been foiled by these filthy freaks.

Her pride had been injured. Despite the obvious dangers, a need welled up in her to

charge into the fray and deal with the three lieutenants then and there. But Cloudhawk was by her side and shouted through the haze of anger. "Gotta look at the big picture. Let's go!"

Her fist tightened into a white-knuckle grip. She thought about her mission, her final goal, and grit her teeth against the rage inside her.

The three of them ran.

Bang!

One of the snipers toppled from the ruins, stopped by a bullet to the chest. The shot had come from a few hundred meters away. Clearly Mantis had skill with a gun, too. He was no less accomplished than these outpost snipers.

Bang! Crack!

Each shot punctuated the death of another sniper.

Mantis hadn't come to their aid right away, not before finding where each one of the snipers had been hiding. Now was the time to clear out these dangerous stalkers. If not now Cloudhawk and the others would be unable to escape.

Mantis couldn't avoid detection, not after taking out three of them. The rest of the snipers dropped into cover. One of them was caught in the open in the center of the ruins and flung himself to the ground, half-buried in the sand. He covered the rest of himself in a tan cloak to blend in with the surroundings. He peered through goggles protecting his eyes and searched through his sights for Mantis.

Bang!

Just as the sniper was ready to pull the trigger a crisp snap rang in his ears. A bullet shattered the glass of his scope, tore through his goggles and left eye, and exploded from the back of his skull leaving a jagged tunnel through his brain. The bullet was flattened by the impact and ripped out chunks of brain matter in its passage.

Just half a second late! That was all, and in the end that half a second had been what killed him. In a battle of snipers time determined the victor.

Mantis had taken out four snipers, but he knew there were at least three more lurking

in the ruins. He couldn't stay put. The assassin turned and dropped to the sandy floor below, only to disappear once again into the rubble.

Now that they had seen what became of their comrades the other snipers carefully picked through the area, sticking to cover. A rash decision, a quick movement, could be the only thing between them and doom.

Cloudhawk and the two women slipped into the crevice without further incident, finally escaping the deadly outpost snipers. However that didn't necessarily mean their situation was any better. There were still the demon's lieutenants, three elite outpost assassins and at least a dozen crack sweeper warriors on their tail. These forces far outstripped what the Queen could handle. If they caught up there was no chance she and the others would survive.

Even weighed down by her bulky equipment, Artemis kept up with Cloudhawk just fine. "What in the name of a rotwolf's hairy asshole is going on? Did Hydra sell us out?"

Hydra couldn't have given them up to the demon! Whatever the case they were facing a disastrous situation.

Whatever led to this, Hydra's company was likely mulch after facing the sweeper's chain gun. That could only mean there would be even more sweepers coming any moment, and Hydra's support wasn't something they could count on.

"Watch your heads!"

Vulture had picked them out from the air and was firing at them with a gun in each hand. Artemis lifted her shield for cover, while the Queen and Cloudhawk ducked and weaved. Luckily he was not an expert marksman, otherwise with his speed and high vantage the three of them would be done for.

"This fuckin' bird brain is tryin' to slow us down. We can't let him!" Cloudhawk knew what the mutant was up planning. "Queen, maybe one of the fire birds can deal with him!"

Their only choice was to rely on their relics. The phoenix gourd Cloudhawk had given her had proved to be a powerful tool.

The Bloodsoaked Queen reached out with her psychic power, filling the relic with it. A wave of energy pulsed out around her and a column of fire belched toward the sky.

Fire roared and roiled, billowing out until it gathered into the shape of a fiery bird slightly over two meters long. Its crisp cries resonated through the area, calling for blood like it had an intelligence of its own before charging at the winged mutant.

“What is this?!”

Vulture gawked, dropping his guns and pulling his swords free of their sheaths. He flung his dual machetes, cutting a fine arc through the sky like a pair of cyclones aiming for the phoenix. When they struck the bird it was cut clean in half.

Pa!

Vulture’s machetes came back at him like boomerangs and he snatched them out of the air. They were so hot he almost had to let them go, giving credence to the amount of energy that had been contained in the phoenix. But what shocked him most was that the two halves of the bird melded seamlessly back together and kept coming, like nothing had happened!

What normal soldier could destroy an immortal bird summoned by a demonhunter? Vulture was forced to break off his attack. The phoenix circled the area, chasing off Vulture before dissolving into a cylinder of fire and crashing back to earth.

“Move!”

Stranger Black sprang out of the way but two of the sweepers were too slow. The phoenix struck the ground between them, releasing a blast of fire and energy so intense it swallowed up everything in a three meter radius. The sweepers were enveloped in flame and rolled on the ground, screaming in agony. A short time later they were blackened husks.

Stranger Black’s voice betrayed his fright. “So she’s recovered to this point?”

Longhorn shouted. “Third brother – don’t risk it!”

Although Vulture was livid with anger, he didn’t dare rush in again after seeing what the demonhunter was capable of. But it didn’t matter, they had nowhere to run!

Cloudhawk knew it too.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was strong, but even she had her limits. The enemy was too

numerous and had many capable fighters. The Queen couldn't take them alone, and though she also had Cloudhawk and Artemis at her side they weren't enough to make up the difference.

"Wait!" Artemis suddenly shouted at them. "We can't go on, the area ahead is uncharted territory. Any further and we're asking to die!"

The Greenland Outpost continuously sent out scouts into the surrounding areas to map their surroundings, but there were some places no one ventured. These sections of the ruins were home to terrible mutant beasts which made them too dangerous to chart.

Artemis was a longtime citizen of the outpost and knew the ruins well. What lay ahead of them was one of those dangerous sectors and if they went rushing in they were sure to meet trouble.

The Queen's coarse voice rasped at them. "There's no other way."

Artemis looked left and right, they were blocked in on all sides by rubble. Towering piles of rusted metal like mountains stretched overhead, at least a hundred to a hundred fifty feet tall. All other routes of escape were sealed off.

They didn't have any choice – the only way was forward!

Artemis was no coward. They were out of options, it was time to bite the bullet.

The three of them fled into the unknown territory. It was a maze of ruins constructed out of rock and metal, random piles strewn haphazardly every which way. All they could do was push on, practically blind, with no idea of what lay ahead.

They hadn't taken but a few steps into the ruins when Cloudhawk felt a wave of apprehension wash over him. "Wait a second!"

Both women stopped and looked at him questioningly.

He pointed in front of them, at a pile of stones riddled with stalagmites. At first glance it didn't look out of the ordinary, but after close inspection they were surprised to find that it was a cluster of large monsters. Half of their bodies were buried with only their backs showing above ground. They seemed as yet unaware of their presence.

Well shit. Mutant monsters barred the way in front of them and sweepers were coming to kill them from behind. No detours to the left or right. What were they going to do?

“I have an idea! You two hide.”

Cloudhawk instructed the Queen and Artemis to find a place and stay low while he rushed toward the monsters. By the time he came within thirty feet, four or five of them began to stir.

The monsters looked like enormous iguanas but were eight to ten meters long. Each of them had eight thick and stubby legs and a sizeable head, split by a crocodile-like maw full of razor sharp teeth. Their whole bodies were the color of sand and stone and natural spikes grew from their backs like armor.

And there were a bunch of them!

Cloudhawk skidded to a halt and didn't even think about it before turning tail and running in the opposite direction. Three or four of them immediately gave chase. Before two minutes had passed he ran headlong into the army of sweepers and their lieutenants, who reared back in surprise at what was coming their way. Cloudhawk, proud of his timing, immediately wrapped himself in his relic cloak and disappearing from view.

His plan was simple; lead the monsters to the sweepers and have them fight it out. He figured the creatures would do a lot of their work for them. However things did not end up so simple.

Moments after the two sides met a truly enormous lizard titan appeared from the wilds. This one was a full 80 feet long and each step caused the earth to tremble. As a result the crumbling buildings around them gave way, and toppled into one another like dominoes.

Hidden by his cloak Cloudhawk could avoid the lizards and sweepers. But now he was caught in an earthquake where buildings dozens of feet high were crashing down all around him. Like ancient warriors felled in battle they came rumbling to the earth spewing crushing rubble everywhere.

Holy shit!

The way back was suddenly blocked by debris. In this crucial moment the Queen's

absence was distinct and possibly fatal. Luckily, the sweepers and lizards had begun to fight each other. For now, they didn't know he was there.

Chapter 73

Decisive Battle in the Wilds

Towering ruins were brought down by the unbridled rampage of the giant lizard, like building blocks knocked away by an angry toddler. The area was plunged into chaos, punctuated by the crash of buildings that sounded like erupting volcanoes. In a tsunami of debris the remains of the ruins covered everything.

Cloudhawk whipped his head around but couldn't tell up from down. Nearby, another building several stories high came crashing down like an avalanche overhead.

“Son of a bitch!”

Cloudhawk ran like his life depended on it.

Blocks of concrete weighing hundreds of pounds smashed the ground on either side as he fled. Everything shook and the sound of crumbling stone was deafening. Every passing second was an eternity while Cloudhawk feared the next block could flatten him into a meat patty.

But Cloudhawk was lucky. Before the bulk of the building collapsed he found cover, though a rolling boulder caught him in the back and sent him sprawling. It struck with such force he saw stars and it felt like he'd broken several bones. He lay there, pinned beneath it.

Meanwhile the lizards were gone. The young scavenger was filled with pride and determination – at least the danger had been rewarded.

The titanic lizard awakened by Cloudhawk's ploy lumbered closer. The sweepers fled, hoping to avoid destruction themselves. Thankfully the invisibility offered by Cloudhawk's relic cloak was far-reaching, concealing both his heat and any sense of his presence. Without him in the monster's sights, the sweepers became his scapegoats.

You fuckin' freaks, Cloudhawk cursed to himself, let's see how nasty your deaths are!

Stranger Black stared at the iguana-like monstrosities. "It's a wasteland wyrm!"

The full name of these creatures was 'eight-legged tyrant lizards', but the people of the wastelands usually just called them wasteland wyrms.

Wasteland wyrms were some of the most ferocious creatures in all the wastelands, living and feeding off what remained of the old world. Their hide was thick and unyielding like rock, and they were strong enough to uproot mountains. Through brute force alone they tunneled their way through the ruins and ripped apart anything in their path. They accounted for the honeycomb of tunnels that were often found through the remnants of cities.

These thick-skinned behemoths were more than difficult to contend with. With so many together they were nothing short of terrifyingly deadly – even the savage sweepers were powerless.

One of the relatively smaller wyrms was fastest and led the charge.

It was over twenty feet long, and though it looked like a lizard it was covered in bulging muscle. Spikes ran along the length of its spine like sword blades, wagging as four pairs of thick and powerful legs quickly conveyed it across the terrain. Its head was lizard like, its maw as terrifying as a crocodile's, and its worm-shaped body swayed like a cumbersome machine as it gave chase. So far it had to be moving at over thirty miles per hour and rising.

Longhorn stepped forward to face it.

Although he faced a creature several times his size Longhorn wasn't fazed in the least. He charged ahead, each step leaving deep trenches as powerful legs propelled him forward. Like a goliath from the ancient tales he bore down on the beast, indomitable and defiant, terrifying anything that dared bar his path.

No fancy tricks, no flashy moves – Longhorn plowed into the wyrm head-on!

The two disproportionately-sized but equally resolute foes crashed into one another so hard their surroundings exploded into dust and shards of rock. Neither was knocked aside, and they struggled mightily while not giving ground.

"Aaaarrggghh!!"

The wasteland wyrm roared and swiped at Longhorn with its claws. He blocked with his left arm and the force kicked up more debris. The monster responded by spreading its toothy mouth wide and lunging for a bite. Longhorn, in turn, punched it in the face!

Crrrack! A dozen of the wyrm's teeth splintered and the impact knocked it several paces away!

Longhorn didn't let up, rushing forward to re-engage. His fists were like cannonballs – two punches, three – each blow landing with unparalleled force. Every punch was like a blast of lightning, cracking open the beast's skull and drawing blood.

Cloudhawk, watching nearby, was absolutely stunned!

Not only did the mutant hit with the terrifying force, he seemed to be made out of reinforced iron! His punches were like strikes from Artemis' hammer.

He could hardly be considered human! He was a monster!

Even one of the wyrm's larger brethren couldn't survive an onslaught like this. In the midst of the brutal thrashing it tried to turn and flee but Longhorn grabbed it by the tail. The monster had to be seven or eight tons, but no matter how much its legs churned it couldn't wrench itself free from his grip.

By now a second wyrm had caught up. Longhorn was suddenly faced with two of them.

"Huh!"

Muscles all over Longhorn's body bulged and a burst of stupefying energy filled him. Dragging the monster by the tail he whipped it around in a circle and threw it right into its companion. The two collided and crashed into the ground in a tangled heap.

Forget Cloudhawk, even the sweepers gaped at the scene, all color drained from their faces!

Panther and the others inwardly rejoiced that they were on the same side. Judging by the display they'd just witnessed one punch from this man would turn them into paste. Who among them could stand against power like that?

Longhorn's chest heaved as he fought for breath. A fight like this was exhausting, and he feared spending too much energy here. After all, there was a dangerous

demonhunter still to face.

But the wasteland wyrms did not flee.

The larger of the two monsters fought back to its feet and slowly approached, much to Longhorn's dismay. He was capable of handling several smaller wyrms if he had to, but this one was at least twice as large as the first. Even so, one on one he might've been fine... but against two?

Kill him... kill him! If these things can kill even one of the demon's henchmen that'd be fantastic! It'd take a lot of the pressure off the Queen and really improve our chances.

Yet the heavens did not hear Cloudhawk's desperate pleas. Just as his heart was filling with dark expectation, an equally dark figure appeared on the horizon. The sweeper's airship drifted into view moments before the whir of a chain gun filled the air. Bullets rained down on the wyrms and they exploded into chunks of blood and flesh.

Even stony flesh could not withstand the airship's weapons. They could be made of steel and the chain gun would still rip them apart. What hope did mere skin have? The remaining monsters were peppered with a few of the bullets and fled into the ruins to hide. One of them was headed right for Cloudhawk while he was still laying prone on the ground. One well-placed step and he'd been crushed flat.

Time to go!

Stranger Black was watching the creature run. Out of the corner of his eye he spied the boulder that pinned Cloudhawk move, and saw the young man clambering with some difficulty toward the safety of the ruins. He was so infuriated he saw red – this was the little shit that'd almost killed him at Blackflag Outpost. How could Stranger Black deny the rage and resentment in his heart?

“Stop! Come with me, kill this irritating whelp!”

Vulture sprang into the air and began circling the area to hunt Cloudhawk down while the others bore down on where they saw him last. Cloudhawk hid in a dead-end, trying to hide from the birdman's keen eyes. He was too weak – if they found him he was a dead man!

A dozen sweepers spread out and were headed his way. Nearby the airship had descended and dropped a rope, conveying several more sweepers to the ground to

help with the search. More and more enemies flooded the area and soon he would be found. Cloudhawk's demise seemed certain, and soon after him the others would be caught as well.

How far could his invisibility cloak get him?

Several sweepers came upon Cloudhawk's hiding place and spotted him. They hurriedly reached for their weapons, crying out for the others and attacking

"Sons of bitches!"

Cloudhawk had no choice but to brandish his exorcist staff and charge ahead. He swung at one of them and met their hefty sword with a loud clang. Cloudhawk was stronger than ever but he was facing a group of hardened sweeper warriors. He wasn't going to get the upper hand here.

Another sweeper came in from the side brandishing an iron cudgel. Cloudhawk lunged to the side just in time, the displaced air from the attack whipped his clothes.

Two more sweepers nearby saw him and leveled their crossbows his way. Powerful arrows were ready to skewer him, but before they could a nimble figure leapt from the ruins nearby. The shadow skittered by so fast it seemed to defy gravity, surprising the two archers.

A flash of metal and throats opened like fountains of blood.

Had the Bloodsoaked Queen come to save him? But that would be stupid! Coming here was like putting the noose around her own neck!

The airship saw the Queen and started to bring around its broadside. The chilling, tell-tale sound of its chain gun started to whir and moments later the area was carpeted with gunfire. Strong as the Queen was she couldn't ignore the hail of lead and ducked back into the ruins to use them to cover her escape.

The Queen knew she couldn't save Cloudhawk.

However she was the demon's main target, and her reappearance would get the attention of her hunters. If she could lead most of them away Cloudhawk would have a chance, but it would ultimately be up to him.

“Second Brother, Third Brother, take the troops and get after the demonhunter!” Stranger Black shouted out his commands, but he himself looked in Clouthawk’s direction. “I’ll join you after I wring the life out of this brat.”

The sweeper army split into two groups. Longhorn and Vulture gathered the three outpost assassins, ten sweepers and the airship to chase down the Queen. Stranger Black and the rest of the sweepers closed in on Clouthawk’s position.

“Form up, surround the area! No matter what I’m not letting them get away this time!”

More sweepers were arriving after mopping up what was left of Hydra’s resistance and spread out across the sector. All paths leading away were sealed off. Though uncharted the area wasn’t large, and the sweepers had both air support and superior numbers.

Clouthawk and the others were caught in a deathtrap! There was nowhere to go!

No matter who won or lost, the long hunt across the wastelands ended here!

Clouthawk understood this. There was no escaping this time, so he wasted no time thinking about it. It was time to fight these damn sweepers to the end!

Chapter 74

Rock and a Hard Place

Cloudhawk was surrounded by seasoned sweepers, elite denizens of the wilds. They were burly, strong, and adroit with their weapons – Cloudhawk couldn't break through. He juked in one direction to try and get by but one of the sweepers swung his ax at him.

Cloudhawk sidestepped the swipe and leapt up, bringing his exorcist staff down in a vicious chop.

Bang!

The metal staff cracked the sweepers on top of its head. A trickle of blood marked a path down the mutant's hideous face, but his armor was too thick to kill him outright. Try as he might, Cloudhawk wasn't strong enough to get past his foe's protection. The best he managed was to make the sweeper dizzy.

Cloudhawk attacked again, at another sweeper charging his way. His staff struck the attacker in the chest but was stopped by an iron chest plate. The staff's sharp point only managed to leave a gash along the armor, causing no real damage.

Goddamnit! What am I supposed to do?

Vital areas were protected from his blows, and neither Cloudhawk's strength nor his weapons were good enough to get past their defenses.

Grinning hideously, a sweeper heaved his enormous ax. With nowhere to hide Cloudhawk was forced to meet the attack head on, and the powerful strike crashed into his staff like a thunderbolt. The sweeper's twisted companions seized the opportunity and rushed in all at once. Cloudhawk could only barely stave off one or two of them, what was to do against four or five?

Would he be forced to use the exorcist staff? But using the relic on these minions was draining, he'd have nothing left for the black-clad freak!

As Cloudhawk hesitated another figure joined them from a nearby corner. Nimble as a bird she leapt six feet into the air, despite her cumbersome equipment, and brought her melon hammer down on one of the sweepers' faces. The faceplate and half his head caved in, reduced to a mess of mangled flesh and broken bone.

Artemis!

Cloudhawk heaved a sigh of relief.

Artemis' weapons and abilities were especially good against these heavily fortified enemies. She knocked their counterattacks away with her shield while her hammer destroyed another sweeper's kneecap. She hit it with such force that bone practically disintegrated, forcing the sweepers to collapse onto its one good leg. Her melon hammer never stopped, rebounding off his knee and around in a deadly circle before landing right on its head. The helmet protecting his skull crumpled like a piece of paper, the bone below shattered like glass.

Another sweeper tried their luck.

Artemis swung around and bashed the mutant with her shield, knocking him back. She wobbled for a moment but her right leg planted and kept her stable. Pivoting her hips she whipped her hammer back around and rammed it into the sweeper's chest. A dent too deep to be healthy was left behind. In fact, the mutant's lungs and heart were completely destroyed. Blood leaked from every orifice, but he died too fast to notice.

Cloudhawk scrambled over to the corpse and picked up the crossbow by its side.

Whoosh! Thud!

One of the sweepers nearby had their crossbow ready for a flank attack when an arrow lodged itself in his eye socket. He screamed and collapsed to the floor before he could fire his weapon. Meanwhile Artemis was fighting off the last of them. The first swing of her hammer broke the sweeper's weapon to splinters, and the second lifted him into the air. The third strike knocked him down and buried him in the dirt, virtually every bone in his body shattered. It was a miserable way to go.

No wonder she was one of the outpost's best fighters! In all of Greenland maybe only Hydra could stand against her. Panther and the others were strong, but they still didn't quite match up to Artemis' abilities.

Broken corpses littered the ground. When they were breathing they were the elite, sweepers who were among the strongest, fastest and most skilled of their number. But faced with Artemis' hail of blows, they were as defenseless as children.

She rested her gore-caked melon hammer on her shoulder and sashayed toward Cloudhawk. "Looks like I just saved your ass. How do you plan to pay me back, hm?"

Cloudhawk was in no mood for banter. "It's too early to say you've saved shit."

Artemis followed the young man's gaze to a ruined building thirty feet high. There at the top was a dark silhouette – a man wrapped in a black robe and a beak-like breathing apparatus. He was as mysterious as he was unsettling.

It was him! Artemis' face hardened.

The freak in black was the leader of the sweeper forces, she knew. Though he wasn't the strongest of the demon's lieutenants, he was the first to answer the monster's call. Not only was he cruel, but smart – he wasn't one to underestimate.

Cloudhawk looked at him to, quivering with hatred. This was the man who destroyed the whole Tartarus Mercenary Company!

How many lives did this creature have? Back at the Blackflag Outpost Cloudhawk had personally cut his head from his body, yet there he stood like a living nightmare.

Stranger Black wordlessly picked off a glove and his five bone-speckled tentacles writhed free. They twisted together until his left arm resembled a disgusting saw-tooth blade. It was nauseating and frightening to behold.

What aberrant construction put this freak together? Beyond his unimaginable regenerative abilities he could also change the shape of his body.

"Show me what you can do."

It was Artemis who spoke, and as she did her leg whipped out at a nearby rock. It went rocketing toward Stranger Black like a soccer ball.

She kicked it so hard the rock screamed through the air like a shooting star, right for Stranger Black. He waved his left arm, casual as swatting a fly, and the rock was cleaved clean in two. The break was so perfect not a single flake of stone was missing.

His bone blade cut through rock like a hot knife through butter! No flesh or bone could stop its keen edge.

“You are reasonably strong.” Stranger Black did not rush to attack. He stared at her from behind the darkness of his hood, like a viper sizing up its prey. “I should tell you that Hydra is finished. You are only fighting to follow in his footsteps.”

Artemis’ gaped at him. “What did you say?! Hydra is dead?”

Stranger Black did not respond, but the fact that he was here and Hydra was nowhere to be found lent credence to his claim. The mutant went on. “You are a decent warrior. Our conflict is not with you – I am giving you a chance to live.”

Cloudhawk searched desperately for a way to escape. All the while Stranger Black’s hissing voice slithered like cobras through the air.

“Kill the child. Join us, and you will live a better life than that traitor gave you.”

Uncertainty was writ plain on Artemis’ face. She hesitated.

Cloudhawk had no chance against the man in black. If he had to face Artemis as well, what else could he expect but a gruesome death? He called out to her. “Don’t believe him. He is no good man, he’ll throw you away the moment he doesn’t need you anymore!”

Stranger Black’s icy cold voice replied. “The choice is yours. Live, or die.”

Cloudhawk watched her with wide eyes. After a moment of quiet thinking she turned. As she did – her eyes filled with murderous intent – she lifted her hammer high. Fast, deadly, without mercy. Even before the hammer reached him, Cloudhawk could feel its crushing momentum like a bolt of lightning.

Son of a bitch! She changed sides faster than she changes clothes!

Cloudhawk flung himself to the side, narrowly escaping her hammer. A hole was left where he’d been standing, and he’d be a puddle in it if he’d been half a second later.

She didn’t stop when her hammer missed. Her next move was to thrust at him with her shield, whose triangular base had been grinding down sharp as a blade. Although she wasn’t very fast, Artemis wasn’t slow either. Her attack was aimed to be swift and

malicious and gave Cloudhawk no chance to dodge. He could only throw all his strength behind smashing his staff against the shield and redirecting it. It still caught him, though, and left an ugly wound.

Cloudhawk staggered backward several feet. Artemis wasn't giving him any leniency, it was clear from her ferocious attacks that she'd decided killing him was the right decision. "You disloyal piece of shit!"

"I'm not too thrilled to be killing you, either." Artemis planted the base of her shield in the dirt then used her foot to help kick the melon hammer out of the pit it'd dug. She heaved it back up onto her shoulder. She looked Cloudhawk over one more time and sighed. "But the two of us can't take him. One death is better than two, right? You know you've gotta go, so be a good boy and lemme land a hit. Don't be scared, it'll be quick – no pain."

Cloudhawk answered with a string of curses. This bold bitch!

He thought about the Queen, thought about her raging temper and – for better or worse – her unyielding stubbornness. If she was here instead of Artemis, she never would have betrayed him like this.

"Cussin' me out isn't gonna do you any good. If you want something to blame, blame the wastelands."

It was the last breath she was going to waste on him. Her powerful legs launched her forward, leading with her shield. If he was hit full on the spikes all along its surface would turn Cloudhawk into a sieve. Meanwhile Artemis' hammer was waiting for an opening. If he tried to block her shield that hammer would come crashing down and he'd be a pile of shattered bones before he knew it.

He was out of choices, he had to use his cloak. Cloudhawk disappeared.

Artemis scowled, scanning all around. She cried out to him. "Come on little brother, don't hide. There's nowhere to run!"

Stranger Black looked on from his vantage. When he saw Cloudhawk vanish he suddenly understood how they'd fled the dungeon under everyone's noses. But invisible didn't mean disappeared. A skilled killer knew to watch the ground for signs, or listen to the changes in the wind to find them out.

And Artemis had seen this before.

When Cloudhawk went invisible he was almost as fast as Panther. He was an agility metahuman and Artemis couldn't match the small man for speed or reaction time, so to evade Cloudhawk's sneak attacks she swung her hammer indiscriminately all around.

"Hmph!"

Stranger Black spotted Cloudhawk's footsteps some distance away. The boy was trying to run? He sprang from the top of the building, bounding across the ruins and blocking Cloudhawk's path. He hacked toward the boy with his sword-like left arm.

His bone blade could cut through steel, the child didn't stand a chance.

Faced with the freak's tyrannical assault Cloudhawk was locked down. He couldn't dodge and nothing he put between him and that sword would stop it from carving him up.

Clang!

His bone blade and the exorcist staff collided!

Cloudhawk felt the tremendous flood of power through the impact and his staff was knocked away. His whole body lifted into the air. The freak in black kept coming, swinging his bone sword to cut Cloudhawk in half.

From the other side Artemis' hammer was coming down toward him. He could hear it whistling through the air.

Cloudhawk's pupils contracted to tiny black points as the realization of his doom dawned on him. He was caught on two sides – it was over! His death was certain! Where was the Queen to save him?

Chapter 75

We Die Together

The Queen was not coming. She was too busy trying to save her own life.

She was being pursued by two of the demon's lieutenants, three outpost assassins, most of their sweeper army and their deadly airship. There could be two of her and she'd still be too weak to face them all. Her situation was no better than Cloudhawk's, and each passing second was a march toward death. She just had to slow down for one moment, her luck had to give just once, and she'd be struck down.

Cloudhawk's only option was to shut his eyes and wait for death.

But then the unthinkable happened.

The moment before Artemis' hammer reached Cloudhawk's face her hand jerked, stretching out just a little farther. He felt it graze his cheek before sweeping by. Then, with a sound like a blast of thunder, her hammer bashed Stranger Black in the center of his chest.

Boom!!

Cloudhawk could hear his bones break and his organs tear. The mutant's back bulged outward as everything was pushed out of place. He flailed through the air over thirty feet, whipping around like a broken kite before ultimately smashing through the side of a building.

It had all happened so suddenly. Artemis attacks were meant to kill him, without question. She'd held nothing back. Who'd have thought that she'd spare him in the last instant? How could anyone suspect she'd turn her hammer against the demon's henchman?

What the hell was going through this woman's head?

As though she read his mind she gave him a flippant answer. "I changed my mind!"

What kind of fuckin' reason was this?! This woman was unstable!

But it was her fickle choice that took the mutant by surprise and left him no chance to dodge. It was the only way she would have gotten close enough to hit him, much less lay him out with a hit that good. Artemis had seemed careless, until the very moment when a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity revealed itself.

“This ugly rodent nutsack aint worth shit!” Artemis was well pleased with herself. “I can’t fuckin’ stand people who think they’re so clever – tryin’ to screw with my head.”

Hmph, you’re so full of shit. If your hammer had turned me to pulp you’d be singin’ a different tune. Cloudhawk had no illusions, this woman’s loyalties changed with the wind. She wasn’t someone he could trust.

His head was a mess, he tried to put his thoughts together. Now that Artemis had sent the man in black flying she’d burned whatever bridge he’d been pretending to offer. Although Cloudhawk couldn’t figure out what was going through her mind, right now she was the only one he could rely on.

She slung her mallet back onto her shoulder and blinked at him. “Well, what the fuck are you gapin’ at? Let’s go!”

“Go?” Cloudhawk heaved a small sigh, if only their enemy was so easy to defeat. “You don’t know shit about these guys!”

She tilted her head and looked questioningly at him. “What do you mean?”

Before he could answer the sound of clattering rubble reached their ears.

Realization dawned on her face as she stiffly turned her head around toward the source of the noise. At first she saw the rubble stirring, then slowly a figure rose from within. His chest was concave, internal organs were completely ruined, but somehow it did not stop Stranger Black from rising back to his feet.

The freak had lost his mask, and his unsettling tentacled face was revealed to the light. A pair of sinister eyes, burning with hatred, was fixed on the two of them. If looks could kill they would be dead several times over.

“This is...”

Artemis was at a complete loss. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, for no one had ever survived a direct blow from her hammer. She hadn't even thought it possible.

What the hell *was* this guy? He had to be immortal!

Cloudhawk was also in awe of the mutant's abilities, but he had come to expect it. He'd lived after having his whole fuckin' head cut off, so a few broken ribs and a torn up organ or two wasn't going to kill him. Unfortunately the asshole would recover.

He could hardly be called human anymore!

Stranger Black did not fear blade nor bullet. As destructive as Artemis' hammer was it was effectively useless against the black-clad man, unless she turned his brain to mush. It was part of what made him so terrifying.

Stranger Black fixed his eyes on her. "You disappoint me."

Artemis didn't know what to do.

Cloudhawk's shout woke her from her daze. "Stop wasting time! The longer you wait the more time he has to heal. We've gotta kill him as fast as possible!"

Artemis hammer had shattered bone and pulverized flesh, forcing Stranger Black to rely on his supernatural healing abilities to keep him mobile. Although he wasn't dead her blow did affect his agility and combat. They had to take this opportunity to put him down for good, because if he was allowed to recover they were both doomed!

Stranger Black rose from the dust, leaping clear of the ruins. He took the initiative and attacked first, his target – Artemis!

When they were ten or fifteen feet apart he swung back his left arm, hacking the sword-like appendage at her. Logically speaking he was too far to hit her, but the freak's limb actually shot out, extending toward her like a whip. Not only did it catch her unprepared, it also made his attack faster.

A deafening screech filled the air! Artemis lifted her shield just in time. Stranger Black's bladed arm left a deep fissure in the metal.

Her shield was made of steel, so one could imagine how deadly Stranger Black's attacks were. She hadn't recovered before the freak reached out with his right hand.

This one was humanoid shaped but was powerful and covered in bone-like armor. He couldn't change this one into anything but it was strong enough to crush someone's throat.

Boom!

Artemis was punched a dozen feet away. She felt like she'd been run over by a rhinoceros, every inch of her hurt. When the warrior looked at her shield her frown deepened. Now, in addition to the gash was a hand-shaped dent.

He had as much force in one punch as the horned guy! He was a walking horror!

Stranger Black advanced on her, ready to finish her off when suddenly he froze. Likely some of the damage he'd suffered was slowing him down.

Cloudhawk didn't waste a moment, and launched a sneak attack at the freak's back. His exorcist staff vibrated as power surged through it, and knocked the mutant off balance. Cloudhawk struck with such ferocity he ruined another area of bone and muscle, adding to the monster's wounds.

Seeing his attack land filled Artemis with hope. "He's pretty hurt! Let's kill this piece of shit together!"

Artemis unceremoniously threw her shield away and grabbed her hammer with both hands. She brought it down toward his head with every ounce of strength in her while Cloudhawk plunged his staff toward the mutant's gut.

Stranger Black tried to defend himself. His bone sword cut at the exorcist staff and knocked it away with a loud clang. Surprisingly, whatever the staff was made of somehow stopped the sword from cleaving it in half.

He blocked Artemis' hammer with the bare hand of his bone arm. The impact shattered the outer carapace, and a crack traveled through his appendage to the bones in his body.

He hacked and coughed, fresh blood pouring from his mouth. They could see bits of bone and organ mixed in it.

Strong as he was Artemis' sudden betrayal had wounded him severely. He needed time to recover, but he found himself surrounded with attacks from all sides. He started to

recognize the serious danger he was in.

Cloudhawk noticed him slowing down. Now was their chance to kill him for good!

Stranger Black let loose with a bestial roar, filled with fury and hatred like a cornered animal. "You think you two can kill *me*?!"

Cloudhawk felt the resistance against his staff disappear as the freak's sword-arm suddenly changed. It unraveled, separating again into five bony tentacles and lashing out at each of them at the same time.

Not good! This trick again!

The mutant's arm was versatile. In addition to becoming an impossibly sharp blade it could also change into five barbed tentacles. The former was deadly in close combat, but the latter adaptable. Mad Dog hadn't been able to protect himself from them.

Artemis was much stronger than Mad Dog had been, but she wasn't as agile. These tentacles were a dire threat.

"Get back!" Cloudhawk shouted.

Artemis recognized the danger too. She reeled backwards and lifted her hammer to protect her vital parts. She managed to block one, but the two others caught her; one in the right shoulder, and the other in her left leg deep enough to reveal bone.

She screamed in agony.

Her right hand couldn't hold the hammer anymore and let go, sending her weapon tumbling away. Without the support of her left leg she lost balance, and Artemis hit the ground.

It was all over! She was too wounded to keep fighting.

"Now it's your turn!"

Stranger Black's voice was as shrill and angry as an evil spirit, and his two remaining tentacles lashed out at Cloudhawk. The young fugitive's mind was blank, stuck on the knowledge that if he dodged or blocked these attacks any chance of defeating the man in black was gone.

Fight!

Don't stop!!

His eyes were invaded by a blood-red hue, turning everything into a sanguine hell-scape. Every ounce of his body was saturated with power and focused into the exorcist staff. His simple demonhunter weapon vibrated as unparalleled levels of energy permeated it.

Mad Dog!

Slyfox!

Here's your revenge – vindication or death!

For any other creature trading one lethal blow for another might give them pause, but this was not so for Stranger Black. Even the most well-placed blow was no threat, and so he reached for Cloudhawk with the tendrils of his left arm and brought his mangled right around to block the staff.

Thud! Squelch! It was the sound of rending flesh.

Artemis watched with wide-eyed horror as the mutant's barbed limbs buried themselves deep in Cloudhawk's body. She could foresee the young man's death. Yet in the same instant, spurred by mortal peril, Cloudhawk felt the stone around his neck pulse with an intense psychic energy. It rose from somewhere deep within him and poured into the exorcist staff.

Here it comes again!

Stranger Black sensed the spike in power. He'd experienced this once before, but this time the torrents of energy ran even deeper.

"Then we die together!"

In the midst of his heedless lunge Cloudhawk's staff began to whirl like a controlled tempest. The mutant's doughty right arm was there to meet it, but didn't impede its power in the least. It ripped through the limb and right for Stranger Black's face.

His eyes widened.

“Master, I -“

He never had a chance to finish the thought before his head was obliterated. The power that surged through Cloudhawk pushed his staff straight through the mutant’s arm, and reduced his brain to pulp. Like a cyclone, the energy churned all his blood and brain and bone into an indiscernible mass and spat it fifty feet into the ruins. Unidentified bits of what remained were spread all over like a gruesome abstract painting.

This went on for a full five seconds. Walls in the distant ruins collapsed under the strain.

Cloudhawk felt drained, of energy as well as life. The world began to darken as his head fell backward. The wounds in his chest and abdomen were frightful, so bad that his guts were exposed to the air. Cloudhawk had impressive regenerative abilities but these were wounds the man in black would need time to recover from.

These injuries could kill him!

Artemis sat there, stunned at their mutual destruction. How could there be so much strength and willpower in his adolescent form? In the face of overwhelming odds and certain death he threw himself at his foe and took the freak down with him!

Chapter 76

The Final Confrontation

The sweepers were closing in. Longhorn, Vulture, Panther and his fellow conspirators, and twenty sweeper troops... all of them were closing the distance between them and the Bloodsoaked Queen. She was outnumbered and outclassed, and what's more the black terror that was their airship hung overhead like an ominous cloud. In addition to its heavy firepower there were scores more sweepers ready to join the fight.

"Don't waste time. Kill her!"

She was in firing range of the chain gun and a doughty mutant swung it around to aim her way. Peering down the old-style sights he fixed the weapon on the nimble figure below and pulled the trigger. Its barrel started to spin and suddenly a storm of bullets came raining down. Crumbling buildings were blown apart.

The Queen couldn't escape. It would only be a matter of time before she was cut down by the torrent of hot lead.

The mutant gunner howled in excitement. It was a rare joy and opportunity for a wastelander to slaughter a demonhunter!

The bullets didn't stop, in fact they seemed to increase. She couldn't see anywhere she could escape them.

Crack!

The shot was almost inaudible, drowned out by the screaming chain gun. Suddenly the airship gunner's head exploded as a sniper bullet ripped through it with pinpoint accuracy. Just as the Queen was about to be peppered with bullets the airship's heavy gun went silent.

"What the hell - ?" Longhorn barely uttered the words before one of the outpost traitors in front of him let out a pained scream. A bullet burst from his back and buried itself in the dirt with a thud. In place of his heart was a gaping cavity. He was dead before he hit the ground.

“Sniper!” Longhorn’s urgent shout rang across the ruins. “Where is he? Find him!”

Snipers were the most dangerous hunters of the Wastelands, but none of the marksmen Snaketooth gathered had joined them here. Somehow they’d been killed.

That meant there was only one person this could be – Mantis!

He’d slain over a dozen snipers single-handedly, which in itself was a glorious feat. Now this grim and deadly assassin was lurking nearby and with his presence the Queen was snatched from the jaws of death.

The Queen skidded to a halt and lifted her head. The airship was getting closer, people were struggling to remove the gunners corpse and take his place. Soon the chain gun would come alive again and she’d find herself in the same mortal danger.

She had no choice. She had to go all out!

She grabbed the phoenix gourd tight in her hand. It spat a roaring flame that spread out like a huge fiery lotus, belching light and heat from its center. Even those who’d never witnessed such a thing immediately knew its power.

As the Queen screamed toward the fires, a phoenix of tremendous scale was slowly forming. The bird she summoned this time was larger and stronger than ever before, wreathed in power and a regal aura.

Longhorn knew what she was going to do. “She’s attacking the airship! Stop her!”

Vulture sprang into action, launching into the air. But he was too late.

The outpost marksman clambered up to the top of one of the ruins. A gun in each hand he leveled them both at the Queen. She was absorbed with using the relic, and wouldn’t see his shots coming.

But before he could fire – *crack!* A shot came from the side, drilling through one temple and tumbling out from the other ^[1]. He didn’t even react. His brain ceased to function before he knew what had happened. But the shot came with a cost, for Mantis had just revealed his location to the others. Seven or eight of the sweepers rushed his way, trying to surround him.

Now that he was found he couldn’t offer any further support. The Bloodsoaked Queen

was on her own.

Vulture shot at her and arrived just as the thunderous cries of a bird shook the earth. Stricken faces were lit by holy fire as the phoenix flung open its wings. Its fifteen foot wingspan pushed it into the air.

The living fire was larger than ever before, and more real. It was covered in flaming plumage that lent to its awe-inspiring image. Stately and prideful it towered over the area like an immortal.

The phoenix started by belching an orb of fire, keeping Vulture at bay. Then it rose into the air amidst the sounds of crackling flame and waves of blistering heat. The air around it was warped from the intensity, like the fires of Armageddon. Its cries promised death and ruin to the world.

By now another mutant had taken up the chain gun just in time to feel the suffocating heat bear down on him. Then... everything was consumed by fire. He cried out in terror and tried to escape, but it was too late.

It was an endless deluge of fire, first charring him black then consuming the ash left behind. The heat was so intense even the chain gun barrels turned red, showing signs of melting. A short time later all the bullets and gunpowder started to explode.

BOOM -- !!

From the vantage of those below they witnessed the giant bird tear through the sky, leaving a wake of flame behind its brilliant tail. Like a fiery comet it seared across the horizon and ultimately erupted once it hit the center of the airship. In a moment all the hodge-podge of materials that made it up were ruined. Acrid black smoke traced its arc through the sky as the vehicle smashed into the ground in a second explosion. Smoldering debris pelted the area.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had destroyed their airship in a single attack! Power like that should have been impossible from a mere human! Was this the legendary power of the demonhunters?

Her greatest threat had been dealt with, and only two of the demon's three henchmen were nearby. Two of the outpost's traitors had been dealt with. An insurmountable fear filled the hearts of the sweepers.

It was the perfect time to fight back.

Her agile form was on the move. The Queen's powerful legs catapulted her off a nearby boulder and sent her tumbling like a cannonball toward her foes at an oblique angle. Her target was Panther.

For better or worse Panther was one of the outpost's apex warriors. When he saw her coming he hurriedly swiped at her with his daggers. To the average person he was almost too fast to follow, but to the Queen he was ordinary at best. She whirled around his dagger effortlessly and lightly placed her hand to his chest.

"AAAGGGHHH- !!"

A bloodcurdling scream bubbled up in his throat and was quickly snuffed out. The power of the burning angels set his heart on fire and the flames could be seen flickering from his eyes and throat. In his final moments Panther's body exploded and coated the area with burnt innards.

Of the eight mightiest soldiers in the Greenland Outpost, Artemis was the only one who remained.

As Longhorn and Vulture watched, their faces turned to frightened scowls. It was unfathomable that the demonhunter could come back from what should have been her assured destruction. She must have used most of her energy, but the damage to their sweeper forces was astronomical. Now, with their brother absent, the difficult task of defeating this hateful woman fell to the two of them.

Standing amidst the remains of Panther, the Bloodsoaked Queen felt a wave of exhaustion sweep through her. She'd depleted her energy, and she knew that if the remaining sweepers surrounded her she might not be able to kill her way free.

She *had* to take care of their leaders.

"Almighty God, grace me with your blessing."

Uttering a quiet prayer the Queen grasped the cross around her neck. A white light, holy and pure, emerged to create a luminous sword. She gathered all the power she had left.

Vulture screeched apprehensively. "Go! Stop her!"

The sweepers were hesitant. The Queen rose like a wraith from the ruins, her feet never touching the ground as she swept right by them. In a blink she hovered above Longhorn with both hands held high, saintly blade aloft.

Blood red eyes stared back at her and Longhorn bellowed a challenge like a wild animal. Muscles bulging, he tore a three-ton boulder from the ground nearby and flung it at her.

The light of her holy sword flared. The boulder was cleaved perfectly in half.

Signs of internal injury were beginning to show from the Queen, but her attacks were sturdy. She summoned the might of her holy sword of light with indomitable force. No living thing could stand unscathed before it – not even Longhorn’s metal flesh and iron bones.

In this decisive moment a shadow appeared in the sky near her. Vulture launched an attack, waving his dual machetes, heedless of the dangers. He didn’t fear the holy light or the sword it came from. In fact it was his target. Even if in the end he was cut in two, he was going to open this demonhunter’s throat!

Longhorn screamed from below, “Third brother! *No!*”

The Bloodsoaked Queen swung her blade around to meet the young lieutenant. When his machetes met her sword they shattered like glass, but her arms didn’t stop. She whirled around, the light of her sword carving out a brilliant circle in the sky that swept right through Vulture’s waist and wings.

The demon’s soldier slowly split in two.

He wasn’t afraid, only angry and resolute. His swords were destroyed but he still had his talons. Vicious and stubborn he groped for her arms, desperately fighting even though he only had half a body.

Vulture was born a mutant.

He had no name, no parents he knew of, no companions.

He had nothing until the master came and liberated him. Until then he’d been shackled, kept as a caged pet in some outpost. The leader of the camp treated him like a humanoid bird and raised him as a monster.

If he hadn't met the master or his brothers, he'd have had no reason to live. He would never have known what freedom or dignity was. He would have spent all the rest of his life in darkness, treated like a monster.

"Second brother! Kill her! *Kill her!*"

He clung to the Bloodsoaked Queen with the remains of his body, both of them crashing into the ground. Longhorn came running at them and lashed out. His punch landed on Vulture, its force ripping through him and into the Queen.

Die you hateful demonhunter! Die, you self-righteous zealot! And fuck you, fate!

The Queen coughed a mouthful of blood as she was knocked into the air. With what power remained to her she focused it into her right arm and swung her sword. The weapon dissolved into a cutting wave of holy light that swept through Longhorn like a burning glaive.

Longhorn's face was painted with a complex and bitter expression.

...they had lost!

1. The author describes it using an acupuncture point – Tai Yang, or Utmost Yang – but as it's in the center of the temple I used the more recognizable anatomical description instead. Tai Yang is a point used for certain kinds of headache and excess conditions in the head – although one might expect it to be often used it rarely is, because the patients find it too sensitive.

Chapter 77

I Want Your Life

Leonine chased and fought Hydra through the oasis. Hydra had been shot twice by snipers and had tasted his brother's poisoned knife. He was weak, too weak to fight.

But he kept running.

Leonine kept chasing.

They kept it up for over an hour.

Leonine hacked at Hydra with his sword, fierce and angry. Hydra juked to the side and met the hysterical attack with his dagger. The two weapons collided and neither budged.

Hydra was in a sorry state. Half of his body was soaked in fresh blood, and the loss had turned him pale and weak. His breath was quick, haggard – he was in no condition to defend himself. He was only still standing because he was ten times stronger than a normal man.

The outpost leader was more ferocious than ever, and he glared at Leonine through his glowing red eye. Face twisted, he growled at him through gritted teeth. “You think you can kill me, you piece of garbage?”

Leonine heaved his strength into his sword, slowly pressing it closer to Hydra's throat and worsening his wounds. He growled back. “Your plan is ruined, Hydra. The Outpost is finished. *You* are finished!”

“The outpost is *mine!* No one can take it from me. *No one!*” He was so filled with rage his whole body shook. The veins in his head and neck stood out red and throbbing like earthworms. He summoned a burst of strength and pushed Leonine away. “Fuck *off!*”

Leonine stumbled back and caught himself by burying his sword in the ground. He was shocked Hydra still had the strength to fight back! The outpost leader's wounds were beyond severe, and after an hour of racing through the oasis they'd only gotten

worse. He'd lost a lot of blood. But Leonine underestimated Hydra, he had to be stronger than ten men. He wasn't going to fully recover from his injuries, but they weren't fatal yet. Snaketooth's poison was already starting to run its course so he was regaining some measure of strength.

Leonine grit his teeth and heaved his saber. It kicked up a cloud of soil as it was wrenched free of the earth that pummeled Hydra. He used it as cover to rush forward and hack at Hydra's head.

Too slow!

Hydra saw every grain of sand, every spot of soil and where it would land. Behind them he saw the nuances of Leonine's every movement and their weakest points. He took half a step to the side, enough to have the slaver's blade sweep harmlessly past his face. Meanwhile his dagger darted out and struck his broadsword in just the right spot. The metal rattled as Leonine's weapon was knocked aside. An opening in his form revealed itself to Hydra's snake-like eye.

Leonine was a battle-hardened veteran and used the rebound force of his sword striking a tree to bring it back around for another wild slice. Leaves and shrubs rustled in its passage.

Hydra's daggers rotated, flipping backward in his grip.

He deflected the blow while dashing forward, his daggers grinding against the sword and sending sparks flying everywhere as he advanced. Hydra ducked, the slaver's sword passing by inches overhead. He spun his daggers, completing a full rotation while springing back up. He gripped the hilts, bringing the daggers swift and fierce down against Leonine's chest. They cut through two thick layers of armor and embedded themselves in Leonine's body.

The slaver's broadsword hit the ground with a thud.

Leonine's eyes were wide as saucers. He couldn't believe what he saw. He clung to Hydra's wrists, too late to stop him from digging the daggers in deeper, inch by inch.

"Do you feel... despair? Terror? *Rage*?" Hydra was soaked in sweat, a twisted and insane grin on his face. "This isn't enough. Not *nearly* enough!"

Hydra yanked his daggers free, and as Leonine stumbled forward he swept around

behind. One dagger severed both of his Achilles' tendons and sent Leonine to his knees.

"It's my custom to cut traitors apart, piece by piece. But I don't want to kill you today. Do you know why?" Hydra's chest heaved like a mad bull, he could hardly stand straight. In the midst of his madness he was never more like a demon. "Because that would be letting you off too easily. I want you to learn – what real pain is. What real *despair* is."

"No... no!"

Leonine understood. He watched Hydra's hideous grinning face disappear into the jungles. His right leg was already useless and when he tried to pull himself by his sword the slaver collapsed back to the ground.

"Hydra, you motherfucker, get back here! Fight me!"

He wailed into the trees, a scream full of fury and anguish that echoed through the oasis like the cry of an impotent beast. He pulled himself step by agonizing step toward the outpost.

If he could choose, he would've chosen to die with Hydra. He would've chosen to end his own life rather than risk theirs. But now... now, there was nothing he could do!

With the image of Hydra's psychotic face in his eyes, Leonine struggled for fifteen minutes before exhaustion overcame him. There was rustling from the undergrowth. Glossy green eyes stared at him.

These were dangerous wilds, where mutant leopards hunted. They had jutting fangs sharp as swords like saber-toothed tigers, and now they were circling a wounded prey waiting for the moment to pounce.

Suddenly a dagger whistled through the air and planted itself into one of the creatures' eyes.

The other leopards roared in anger and threw themselves toward where the sneak attack had come from. When they plowed through the jungle they were met with an enormous melon-shaped hammer which smashed one of them into pulp. Suddenly their foe was too dangerous to bother with and the creatures bounded off into the distance.

The last four people he'd ever imagined seeing appeared before him.

Cloudhawk had fallen unconscious and was slung over Mantis' back. He had several obvious wounds on him that had already been sutured closed. Artemis staggered on a wounded left leg and carried her hammer in her left hand to favor an injured right shoulder. Both had only been bandaged. As for the Queen, she had broken one of her arms and several ribs. Although she could walk she was completely spent.

Mantis was in the best condition. However, towards the end he had to face over a dozen sweepers in close combat, which wasn't his forte; in fact, he wasn't even as capable as Leonine in this regard. Four or five patches of his body were clearly covered in blood.

They actually survived? This had to mean they'd beaten the sweepers!

Leonine couldn't understand how the mutants could have lost. Their appearance drained the last little bit of hope out of him. It meant they hadn't taken the outpost, that Hydra could return to his territory safely as the one and true ruler.

"What are you doing here?" Artemis gave him a queer look. "Where's Hydra!"

Leonine hurriedly cried out, "Take me back to the outpost. Bring me back there!"

The outpost's forces had suffered a huge blow by this struggle for power. Most of their best men and elite troops were dead.

When its leader returned his first order of business was not to see to his wounds. Instead he pulled out three people and tortured them with every method he knew. In the end one large and two small savagely brutalized corpses were nailed to the outer wall, flaunting his handy work.

When they got back to the outpost and Leonine saw the scene, he let loose an unhuman wail. The slaver shoved off Artemis and flung himself at the base of the walls, holding out his ten mutilated fingers pleadingly like a beaten vagrant. He threw his head against the ground again and again until blood was flowing freely.

This stoic, powerful man completely lost his mind. Everything important to him, all of his hopes, his reason for living – they were pinned to that wall.

Artemis shook her head when she understood what had happened. "Poor bastard."

Suddenly a group of soldiers rushed out from the outpost and tried to drag him inside. He fought them off with the last of his strength and staggered back toward the others like a man grasping at his final straw.

“Help me kill him. Help me kill Hydra! HELP ME KILL THAT BASTARD!”

Half a dozen soldiers pulled him away. He flailed against them and his mangled fingers clawed trenches in the ground. He clawed until there was little more than bone, screaming for help as they disappeared from sight. His voice rang through the air, insane and savage. *“Help me kill Hydra!”*

Mantis watched all this happen with his customarily impassive face. Artemis, however, had a mocking smile on her face. “He really is an absolute dumbfuck.”

The Queen was most conflicted. She raised her head and looked at the grizzly result of Hydra’s anger. Her eyes watered as she looked at these bodies, tortured so badly they didn’t even look human. “Gods,” she whispered to herself. “Please forgive me!”

Hydra had injected himself with a syringe of panacea. His wounds were slowly healing. The outpost leader had been preparing to fight those sweeper bastards to the death so when the four people appeared before his eyes he could hardly believe it.

“Ah-hahaha!” He bounded over to them grinning broadly. “Never woulda thought. I never woulda thought you’d make it when it all went tits up. I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to know you killed those three assholes. Without them the demon’s power throughout the wastelands takes a big hit. We’re gonna kill that bastard!”

Hydra felt like he was walking with the blessings of the gods themselves.

He survived betrayal from the one person he trusted most, then he took care of the slaver that tried to hunt him down. Then in this precarious moment he finds that the demonhunter – a gift from the elysian lands – had dealt with the sweepers. Indeed the outpost had suffered for it, but any cost was worth killing those three lapdogs.

“I imagine the bastard will hear the news soon. He’ll definitely show up now, he has to. We’ve gotta prepare.” Hydra clapped his hands and a group of handmaidens gingerly scampered in. “Look after your wounds. Feel free to take whatever you need. Starting now we have to be battle ready.”

This demonhunter was something else! With her by his side he couldn’t lose!

Her cold voice rasped through the air. "I need two syringes of panacea."

He winced slightly when he heard her. "Why two?"

Her eyes looked toward Cloudhawk who was still unconscious, Hydra knew what she meant, but the kid was hardly worth his salt. Even if he lived to the final fight he wasn't any use.

So his voice turned distant as he answered, "He's too badly hurt. He's lost so much blood even panacea won't save him. We've only got two of the precious stuff left and it'd be better to save 'em for when they're needed most, right?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen tepidly responded, "Fine. Then I want something else from you."

Hydra had planned to give a little push back, but when he saw her abandon the request he relaxed. It looked like this kid wasn't all that important to her after all. "Anything for the mighty demon slayer! Say the word."

Her hoarse and sinister voice crackled from the mask: "I want your life."

Before he could react she was in front of him with her hand on his chest. Frightened, he tried to shove her away but it was too late. He was filled with a wave of heat that swept through every inch of him like a burning train car of coal.

"Aaaahhhh!"

Hydra was turned into a statue of solid black carbon. The last thought running through his mind before it all burned away was why she'd want to kill him.

Chapter 78

Another Endowment

The maids screamed and scattered in all directions.

Artemis stared dumbly at the blackened remains of what had been Hydra, whose limbs were frozen in a defensive posture. Tendrils of white smoke slithered from his wide open eye sockets and distended mouth. She couldn't believe this was the way the tyrant of the outpost was fated to die.

Mantis frowned at the Queen. "Why?"

Her breathing was slightly rapid as she responded. "You don't understand what it feels like to lose someone close. What he did disgusted me."

"So you killed him for that?" Artemis wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. Outside she'd mocked the slaver, then moments later she watched the Queen burn Hydra to a crisp. The contrast was a slap to the face. "Do you have any idea how important he was? Now that he's dead there'll be anarchy in the outpost. Who's going to organize the forces when the enemy comes?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen didn't think too deeply on it. Hydra had some skill, but one more or less of him wasn't going to make any sort of difference. He'd lost his worth when she saw his hateful acts. So she killed him.

"The outpost has a new leader."

"A new leader? The only people with the prestige and abilities to lead were Hydra and Snaketooth, and both of them are dead. Who the hell will lead?"

"You."

In one sentence the Queen shut Artemis up. She gaped at the demonhunter in disbelief. Artemis was probably one of the top three strongest in the outpost, but being a woman put her at a disadvantage. Only a woman with the overwhelming power of someone like the Queen would be able to overawe and tame a group of unruly wastelanders.

However, the situation right now was rather special. Hydra was dead, as was his brother and most of their best fighters. The ones that remained hadn't been trusted by the brothers or were too weak. It seemed like maybe there really was a possibility for Artemis to assume leadership.

Artemis was at a loss. Everything was so sudden.

She voiced her doubts. "Won't there be a problem if a woman leads? I'm not sure of my chances. Let's forget about it!"

The Queen didn't bother to argue with her. Artemis didn't seem to quite realize the reality of the situation – she was going to do it, whether because she wanted to or because she had to. Artemis had quite the reputation here, and with the demonhunter's backing anyone who challenged her would die. Why was she hesitating?

It was decided – no more discussion needed. The Queen required the power of the outpost to help her against the demon. He surely would come, but she didn't know when. For now they had to get everything ready.

Mantis found three more panacea syringes in what used to be Hydra's living quarters and gave one each to the Queen and Cloudhawk. Her wounds weren't too serious and would be gone in a matter of days. For the boy, it was up to luck. Both his injuries were life threatening, and in fact he was only still alive because of his recovery abilities.

Panacea was a powerful regenerative agent, and Cloudhawk's own capabilities were decent. The two effects together would compound and give him the best shot, so maybe there was hope. Whether or not he made it would be decided by fate.



Cloudhawk felt like he was falling through a dark abyss. He tumbled for what felt like an eternity, never reaching the bottom. Was this what death felt like? He felt his mind grow hazy, become more muddled by the second. He knew that when he lost consciousness he would never wake up again.

I can't die! Not here, not now! There's still so much I want to do!

He hadn't taken revenge on the one who ordered his friends' death. Mad Dog and

Slyfox's killer still roamed free. He hadn't achieved his dream of leaving the wastelands, either. How could he die now? He was filled with defiance, an anger that burned away the confusion that threatened to consume his mind.

When his eyes shot open Cloudhawk found himself lying in pitch darkness. Eventually the haze cleared from his eyes and he looked out over a vast dark sea.

Splash!

He tumbled into the water. Suddenly, an endless pressure closed in on him from all sides. It was so intense he was afraid he'd be crushed into pulp, both suffocating and excruciatingly painful.

Cloudhawk struggled, trying not to drown.

Suddenly a powerful consciousness appeared from the recesses of his mind. "Please focus your will!"

Cloudhawk felt like something wasn't right. For some reason this place seemed familiar, like he'd been here before in a dream. He recalled meeting someone here, a mysterious stranger who claimed to be the previous owner of the stone Cloudhawk wore around his neck.

Of course he couldn't forget it. Ever since then he'd been able to recognize and call on the resonance of relics. He'd been a typical scavenger who somehow was able to survive until now because of this power. Without that strange experience he'd have been ignored by the Queen – he'd likely be dead.

The profound and mysterious consciousness continued to speak through his mind. "*Please focus your will!*"

He didn't understand what the voice was trying to say. All he could focus on was the intense pain, both from the crushing waters and the suffocating pressure. Together they threatened to shatter his psyche.

"Please focus your will!"

For the third time the voice pleaded with him. He couldn't grasp what it meant when faced with this situation, so he did the only thing he could. He relaxed his whole body and calmed his mind.

A sense of ease came over him. The pressure and sensation of drowning melted away.

Cloudhawk then felt the waters infiltrating his body; through his eye sockets, his ears and every pore in his body. Things began to change, sensation running through his body that were familiar – just like last time.

But there was something different. Before the mysterious figure had injected him with the power directly, while this time Cloudhawk's body drank it in of its own accord. Judging by the scope of his absorption it was a far greater volume now.

This was some kind of power transfer! Cloudhawk could feel it empowering his psychic energy, making it surge!

The mysterious stranger locked his consciousness in the stone and Cloudhawk was able to resonate with it. Because of this he was able to inherit the stranger's power – only, there was far too much of it. It felt vast as an ocean, endlessly stretching in every direction. It proved that when he was alive this stranger had to have been even stronger than the Bloodsoaked Queen!

Someone this strong had to have been a famous figure. What was his background?

Cloudhawk could sense that whoever he was considered himself a failure and wanted Cloudhawk to finish what he started. But Cloudhawk found the thought curious. If someone as strong as this mysterious man had failed, what made him think a kid like Cloudhawk could succeed?

It was all too convoluted, too strange, too mysterious.

Cloudhawk pushed these distracting thoughts from his mind. His body was consumed with a sudden tearing pain which he knew meant he'd reached his limit.

The vast sea disappeared. His consciousness returned.

The first thing he felt when he opened his eyes was intense pain. It was an anguish that wracked his whole body, and just below it a maddening itch that wouldn't go away. Cloudhawk pulled up his clothes to survey the damage and found his wounds were stitched. He could tell by the sutures Mantis had done it.

They'd won. *Fuckin' a!*

The pain and itching both came from his healing injuries. Pain was obvious, since there wasn't much in the Wastelands that acted like an anesthetic. If you got hurt out here you gritted your teeth and bore it.

As for the itching, it was a reaction from the panacea. It increased healing by more than a factor of ten – a wound that would likely take ten days to heal was fully recovered in one. The intense itch was from skin, muscle and bone knitting back together at break-neck speed. Altogether it was worse than agonizing.

Panacea wasn't perfect and was intended to be used with antipruritics and nutrient supplements. These days, however, supplies were limited. Such impressive medicines were gone, so having the panacea alone was the best they could do.

There were two primary side effects.

The first was the itching, which could get so bad it drove some sufferers insane. In the old days anti-itch medications were a requirements because most normal people couldn't stand it.

The second was the strain it put on the victim's body. Panacea itself didn't have any regenerative benefits; in fact, it was just a powerful steroid hormone. Agents within it stirred the latent potential of every cell to instigate recovery. Using too much of it was like trying to squeeze the last bit of water from a dry sponge. The victim drew too much from their own body and it ultimately reduced life expectancy. To prevent this it used to be paired with nutrient supplements.

Cloudhawk didn't know any of this. He was focused on the intense hunger and the sound of his angry bowels, probably due to the strain put on his body's healing factor. He struggled mightily to get out of bed, then hunted down one of the maidservants and told her to prepare a large table of food. Whatever they had, everything the outpost could offer. He thought he deserved a big meal, to help him recover quickly.

Chapter 79

Power Spike

Cloudhawk engorged himself on food and drink, using the nutrients to help his wounds recover faster. At the current rate he figured he'd be back to normal in three days. While the panacea certainly helped, his rapid recovery was mostly due to his own regenerative abilities.

In the midst of his meal Cloudhawk could hear boots approaching.

A lithe and beautiful woman appeared, short of hair and stature but very well proportioned. She wore no armor and her chest was concealed by nothing more than a tube top that left her enticing abdomen bare to the eye. The ample protrusions in front caught many eyes, as did her leather-wrapped rump. Her pants were skin tight and outlined every curve of her powerful legs – not long, not short, but well sculpted.

Artemis wasn't as beautiful of face as the Bloodsoaked Queen, but the demonhunter had been born in the elysian lands. Her family was respected and affluent, and she had been given the best growing up. Artemis, on the other hand, was a wild woman from a wild place. She was a wastelander, through and through. The two ladies had led very different lives, and from the eyes of a wastelander Artemis was a rare and incredible specimen.

"Well, well... I didn't think little brother was going to make it – or that he could eat like this. No wonder I have an eye for you, eh?"

She wrapped him in a hug.

One might expect a hug from a beautiful woman to be a pleasant experience, but she snatched him up with all the force of a grizzly bear. Far from appreciative, Cloudhawk's eyes nearly popped out of his skull and his neck nearly snapped. He slapped her arms, entreating mercy. "Let go. Lemme go!"

"Sorry, sorry – I got excited. You alright?" Her words were apologetic but her face told a different story. She released Cloudhawk and pressed a hand to his cheek. "I want to tell you some good news. From now on I'm the leader of this outpost!"

The news surprised him. “What about Hydra?”

She rolled her eyes at his stupid question. If Hydra was alive, how could she lead? Speaking of Hydra, she was reminded of something the Bloodsoaked Queen had ordered. “Are you full? Come with me, we’re taking a visit to the dungeon. We’ve got to let someone out.”

As they traversed the fort – and in fact the whole outpost – Cloudhawk could hear the sounds of battle. Everything seemed chaotic, and neither the Queen nor Mantis were anywhere to be found. Presumably they were out dealing with those rebelling against Hydra’s replacement.

Artemis wobbled unsteadily as they walked the streets, favoring her bandaged leg and shoulder. She couldn’t help clean up the rioters in her condition. Instead they made their way to the dungeons and stopped in front of one of the cages therein.

When Cloudhawk saw who it was he was both perplexed and curious. They gradually gave way to astonishment. “This is Leonine? What the hell happened?”

The last time he’d seen him the slaver was a bearded, stalwart veteran, deadly as a lion. The man before him now was completely different. His eyes were sunken and dull, his hair had all gone white. He sat there like a husk, with no spirit to speak of. He seemed to have aged forty years overnight, and the man in the cage looked like a walking corpse waiting to rot away.

That tenacious, stout warrior had completely disappeared. The person he was now was all-but a lifeless corpse.

Artemis approached him and unlocked his shackles. “Sorry, I guess I forgot you were in here. I’m sure you already heard that the demonhunter killed Hydra. So, you’re free – off you go!”

Leonine’s legs were mostly useless. Hydra had severed his tendons, turning him into a cripple. But even if he was completely healthy, all reason for him to live had been taken away. That made him no different from a complete cripple. He lifted his withered face and stared at the two of them as though through a haze. A hoarse voice croaked through his mouth. “My wife? My children?”

Thirty minutes later...

Three grave mounds had appeared in front of the outpost. They'd been made with dirt and stone, humble resting places no one would recognize. But they were the product of Leonine's own hands, and the effort turned his already mangled appendages into bloody messes. He didn't seem to feel pain – or feel anything at all. His face never changed all throughout the process.

Three unrecognizable bodies were interred within.

Cloudhawk remembered a passage about funerals from the ancient books. He found three candles and placed one before each body. Their tiny flames flickered valiantly in defiance of death. Their tiny rebellion was touching.

Leonine knelt before the graves, staring dumbly at the lights.

The candlelight fought off the encroaching darkness, like a border between life and death. In their dim light Leonine thought he could see familiar figures, hear familiar voices.

“Daddy, you said that I’m a man. I have to protect my mom and my sister!”

“Brother and mommy are always being bullied by bad men. You have to stay, daddy.”

“I don’t feel bad. Honest I don’t...”

“It doesn’t matter what happens... I believe in you!”

Leonine's face twisted into strange expressions, somewhere between wanting to cry and laugh. He muttered to himself, face covered in tears, unable to separate the real from the imagined. He'd lost his mind.

“Look at that poor bastard. He's gone nuts.” She could hardly look at him, and though she made no effort to keep her voice low Leonine didn't seem to hear. “He helped make me leader. We should help.”

Cloudhawk knew what she meant. He thrust out with the sharp end of his exorcist staff and pushed it through the back of Leonine's neck. The drill point slipped out from the base of his throat on the other side and his steaming blood spilled out over the graves. Their spray extinguished the three tiny candles.

A few minutes later a fourth grave had been dug.

It was situated in front of the other three, like a staunch protector against the wind and rain. Leonine would protect them in death as he tried to do in life. Cloudhawk and Artemis had left, leaving the graves alone with no markings or tombstones. No one would remember them or the torture they'd suffered.

Leonine had been the definition of a wastelander. Countless graves marking countless stories like his were strewn across the blasted lands. The world was like a callous and indifferent bystander, watching the tragedy that was life and humanity play out its sad stories.

Artemis hobbled back toward the fort and asked, "Do you think people need faith?"

"Of course!" Cloudhawk answered her with a serious expression. He looked at her. "Everyone has faith. I do, the Queen does, even the sweepers. It was the same for Leonine and Hydra. It's how we know we're alive, you can't survive without it."

"So what do you believe in?" She asked. "Can you tell me?"

Cloudhawk had nothing to hide. "I have faith I'll leave the wastelands. I want to see the rest of the world, find a place where there isn't any killing or pain. I want to find a paradise somewhere without schemes."

Artemis clicked her tongue. "Is there such a place? Quit fuckin' dreaming! I never had my head in the clouds, is that living? People like you are just senseless, you need to get over yourself."

Cloudhawk was in a sour mood. He didn't bother with her anymore.

Three days of recovery passed. By now Cloudhawk's wounds were mostly healed and he could get around without any pain or impediment. The young scavenger thought about his near-death experience, the power he'd found within the stone that was funneled into him.

Unless he was mistaken, he should be stronger than ever now.

He began by practicing the postures of the demonhunters that the Queen had taught him. He'd managed to get to number twelve before having to stop. This confirmed his guess that the stone hadn't improved him physically, only mentally. The next question was how much had his psychic energy developed?

Cloudhawk covered himself in his invisibility cloak and channeled his psychic energy through it. Almost immediately he resonated with it, summoning its powers. A vibration thrummed and spread out through the area, causing the light to warp. Then he disappeared.

It was different! Completely different!

Using the cloak now didn't feel draining to him at all, even after maintaining it for more than ten seconds. He also sensed immediately that he was faster and more buoyant.

Extrapolating by what he'd experienced, Cloudhawk figured he'd been using twenty percent of what the cloak could do before. Now maybe it was closer to forty percent. Whereas before the longest he could stay hidden was twelve seconds, now he could maintain the relic for several minutes.

Judging from how the Queen used relics – especially the phoenix gourd – one could understand how a relic worked. Specifically, they relied on the power of the bearer. The more psychic energy the Queen poured into the gourd, the more powerful was the phoenix she summoned. When she was weakened the phoenix was correspondingly weaker.

That was the relationship between demonhunters and their relics.

In the hands of the legendary demonhunters even the simplest relics could summon earth-shaking power. Give a rookie demonhunter the mightiest relic in the world and he wouldn't be able to use it. He'd be better off with an exorcist staff.

Cloudhawk could see that his psychic powers had improved considerably.

Chapter 80

Salamander

Greenland Outpost always had unstable elements within its walls. Hydra wanted to stand on his own, but certainly there were those who had different ideas.

Independence meant conflict, and conflict meant combat. Combat lead to death. Unless one had a vested interest one wouldn't be eager to fight and possibly lose one's life. And so, even if Hydra were still alive it was unlikely it would have maintained the same level of stability it had before. Unrest flourished without the former leader's iron-fisted hold and the threat of a cruel end.

Artemis was powerful, at least more powerful than most. But since she was a woman it was hard for others to recognize her authority. The demon would strike back soon. He had to, after what happened to his lieutenants. Stabilizing the situation and preparing for his arrival was a priority.

In the last several days the Bloodsoaked Queen had only come to visit Cloudhawk once. The rest of her time was spent purging the outpost of dissidents. She ruthlessly eliminated opposition to Artemis' reign while generously showering followers with food and water. She tempered brutality with mercy to pacify the masses and bring the situation under control step by step.

The Queen was young, and she still found herself vulnerable to rash and reckless decisions. She proved it by running into the wastelands to hunt a demon on her own, as well as killing Hydra. However, one could not deny her effectiveness. Blackflag Outpost had been in turmoil when she arrived, but through her bloody methods it was reorganized. She brought rules, built a foundation, and in less than a year the chaos had largely subsided.

Greenland Outpost was ten times more complicated than Blackflag Outpost had been. Nonetheless, the Queen's oppressive strength was an important deterrent. As they shared Hydra's stores of personal wealth the condition of the general populace improved. Gradually, most of the outpost's denizens came to accept the new status quo.

Her specific methods were unclear to Cloudhawk. As he recovered he spent most of his time with the outpost's new leader. Although Artemis was subject to changing moods, she was a denizen of the wastelands and knew their plight. Speaking with her felt more relatable, less stuffy than when the young man tried to talk to the Queen.

Artemis, on the other hand, felt Cloudhawk was unique.

At first she'd thought he was a demonhunter, or perhaps an apprentice. She'd wanted to bed him and add another special notch to her proverbial belt. But over time she found that he was just a special sort of wastelander. There were things about him that were completely unlike any other wastelander she'd ever met. He was pure and naïve.

Those were not words one usually used to describe the wretches of the wilds.

Cloudhawk was a miracle in a place where evil reigned. For him to live so long in the face of cruelty and indifference, and especially for him to keep the views he held, surpassed whatever thrills of the flesh she'd entertained.

Today, Artemis picked up her fifty-pound hammer and called a dozen soldiers together. "Y'all are coming with me. I'm gonna lead you into the fight."

Her proclamation took Cloudhawk by surprise. It was quite sudden. "The fight? Who are we fighting?"

"I just got some news," Artemis said, a cloud of anger crossing her face. "There's someone in the outpost called Salamander – the asshole always hated me and now he's gathered a few people he's planning to take out of here. We've gotta deal with 'em, otherwise others will think it's ok to just up and leave."

"A handful of people isn't going to make a difference. Plus, you aren't healed yet, and the Queen said you shouldn't leave the fort." Cloudhawk eyed the men she'd gathered suspiciously. Clearly this hadn't been the Queen's idea, it was Artemis playing out a personal grudge. "Anyway, do you think we have enough soldiers? How strong is Salamander?"

Anyone in the wastelands with a title had earned it somehow.

"Salamander didn't follow the rules even when Hydra was alive, so Hydra didn't pay him much mind. He isn't weak, but not strong enough to be any sort of threat. He's only got a handful of people who listen to him." Artemis rested her hammer on the

floor. It struck hard enough to crack stone. "I'm no cripple. I'm more than healed enough to deal with this irritating shit."

This woman was as rash as she was unreliable.

He couldn't help but continue to challenge her. "We should at least tell the Queen. Or if not have Mantis come with us."

"They're busy, when will they have time? I've always had enemies, and this guy's pissed me off before. I won't sit by and watch him swagger out with my people." Anger had crept into her voice. "So are you fuckin' comin' or not?!"

The decision was already made, Cloudhawk could only agree. Anyway, he wanted to try out his new powers and see what he could do.

"I knew I wasn't wrong about you. Wait till we deal with this asshole and big sister will treat you right!" She beamed at him. "Come on, let's get our stuff."

Salamander had taken his people out into the oasis and was camped in the ruins. Although he was considered an elite member of the outpost Artemis never saw him as anything but an asshole. Now she was the leader and had access to the best equipment in camp. What did she have to fear?

Cloudhawk picked out a revolver from the armory, one with a nasty punch just in case. A few minutes later he was following Artemis and her group into the oasis. He was wary, for although Salamander wasn't as capable as Artemis he'd gotten the better of her before. They couldn't be careless.

Artemis didn't rush in recklessly. She sent scouts ahead to see what they were walking in to.

The oasis ruins weren't far from the outpost. All along the path it was bestrewn with grotesque statues in various states of disrepair and the twisted remains of structures. The style of these ruins was different from other sectors, like they were deposited from somewhere else. They seemed much older, plucked from several thousand years ago by some mysterious power and dropped into the middle of a jungle.

These sorts of bizarre scenes weren't a rare sight in the wastelands. No one knew where they'd come from, but they weren't anything special to those who lived in these blasted lands.

“Boss, I found ‘em!” One of the outpost scouts came trotting over to her. “They’re in the center of the statue garden, getting ready. I counted ten or twelve, with three or four outfitted for long-range combat.”

“As expected.” A grin spread across Artemis’ face. Her soldiers were skilled and well equipped, and with the advantage of a sneak attack their chances were better than good. She waved to the left and right. “With me!”

Statues and pillars spread across the area, which in turn were blanketed in moss and crawling vines. There had to be hundreds of them, set up in a strange sort of formation. It was a good spot to avoid the oasis monsters and fight back if they chose to attack, making it an ideal place for those trying to leave.

Only Cloudhawk felt something was off. It was already afternoon. Anyone who’d want to defect would have to take time into consideration. Why would they have stopped here? But Artemis was thirsty for revenge and there was no dragging her back. Instead he stayed back toward the rear of their group, so that if things went sour he could run.

“Kill ‘em!” Impatience got the better of her and Artemis screamed the order. “Salamander, you’re a dead man!”

The sound of twanging bow strings and igniting gunpowder echoed through the area. Several of the men in the center of the statues fell. Artemis led their charge, swinging her mighty hammer. She caught one of Salamander’s men and sent him flying. The momentum swung her around then flung her into the air. She completed a full circle before heaving her hammer down toward one man in the center of the crowd.

“Artemis, you actually came!”

Salamander was a towering white man wearing a helmet, goggles and a breathing mask. He was covered in armor, with gloved hands and leather boots rising to calf height. There wasn’t an inch of him revealed to the sun which lent him a mysterious air. When he saw Artemis he was not surprised, and in fact met her with a taunting sneer. Like an eel he slithered out of harm’s way and Artemis’ hammer buried itself bloodlessly into the ground.

She didn’t lift her hammer back up and instead used it to support herself as she flung her right leg at him. It streaked down from overhead like a battleax, but Salamander capably dodged again. But no sooner did her two legs hit the ground than she sprang

up and kicked again. One of the statues in her way exploded into fragments.

The flurry of attacks was making it difficult for Salamander to keep out of reach.

Although the two of them were considered peers, Salamander's abilities were primarily regenerative in nature. He was comparatively weaker in attack and speed and no matter how good a healer he was it wouldn't help him against her. He couldn't recover if he turned into a fleshy puddle.

As he watched the scene Cloudhawk recognized how far apart in skill they were. He didn't have to be involved, Artemis had the fight well in hand.

Artemis flipped her head back, flinging her hair from a wild and feral expression. She looked like a vengeful panther. "You've almost killed me a couple of times, you think I'm just gonna let your worthless ass go?"

"As always, you're all muscle and no brains. That's why I've been able to teach you lesson after lesson." From outside it looked like Salamander was in a difficult spot, but he was perfectly calm. He seemed unaware, or perhaps unconcerned, with his hopeless situation. "If I wanted to leave without you knowing you'd have never heard a thing. You only knew because I wanted you to."

Artemis' thin brows scrunched together. What was this guy saying?

Cloudhawk had already been fighting the nagging feeling that something was wrong, when suddenly an acute sense of danger washed over him. From behind he heard the sound of heavy footsteps followed by a gust of air and pressure. Cloudhawk reflexively threw himself to the side just fast enough to avoid the spiked iron cudgel that whipped by and smashed into the ground. The stone floor he'd been standing on was turned to powder.

Shards of rock like bullets scattered in every direction. Cloudhawk's cheek burned. Some of the shrapnel must have hit him. He turned to see the one who'd attacked.

The man was a giant standing at nearly ten feet tall and covered in plate armor. All of it had to weigh a hundred pounds, not including the vicious fifty pound cudgel he wielded like a meat grinder.

"Sweepers!"

One, two, three... monstrous maneaters appeared from behind the statues where they'd been hiding. The demon's slain henchmen hadn't brought this many with them to the outpost, and these sweepers were better outfitted than any Cloudhawk had seen before.

Where the hell did they come from?!

Could it mean...

Salamander fired a few darts at Artemis, forcing her to knock them away. Unfortunately, she didn't notice the bulb-like protrusions covering them. When she smacked them with her hammer they exploded into clouds of multicolored smoke. She sucked in a noxious breath and immediately her head felt muddled, while her limbs lost all strength.

"That's why you'll never beat me!"

Artemis fumbled with her hammer like a drunk woman. She stumbled several paces before she lost control and toppled to the floor.

Mother fucker! Trapped again. And she'd gotten Cloudhawk tied up in this. Artemis was humiliated and enraged.

Chapter 81

Rescue

The maneater swung its spiked weapon, smashing the nearby statues apart as though they were made of tofu. They exploded into shrapnel. Cloudhawk had dodged the attack but the resulting force of the blow struck him like a blast of thunder and knocked him to the ground.

“Aaaaaooogghh!”

It didn't give Cloudhawk a chance to run. The beast roared and lifted its cudgel for another strike.

Lying helpless on the floor the boy whipped his revolver from his waist and let off a shot. What happened next shocked him – as big as the maneater was he moved with supernatural agility. He pulled the cudgel down in front of his face, deflecting the bullet aimed for his eye. The sparks that leapt off his iron cudgel seemed to mock Cloudhawk.

Son of a bitch! This goddamn freak is too good!

Cloudhawk didn't bother with his exorcist staff. Even if he landed a blow he doubted it'd be more than a tickle against this thing. But if he stayed within range of its cudgel he was sure to be smashed to bits. His enemy was way more than he could handle.

The maneater lifted its cudgel again. Cloudhawk tried to slither to the right like a desperate snake.

Everywhere he scrambled the thunderous sounds of impact followed half a step behind. He was showered by rubble as stones were blasted apart.

Each time his monkey-like prey skittered out of reach the maneater only became more enraged. His twisted maw emanated roars that would make mountains tremble. He swung his cudgel ever faster as he chased down Cloudhawk. The cudgel was headed right for the boy's skull and there was no way he could dodge.

Boom-!

The spiked club struck ground, forcing the stone statues nearby to tremble and crack. But when the man eater lifted his weapon he found nothing in the pit he'd made. The mushy heap of blood and flesh he expected wasn't there. A perplexed growl rumbled from his throat.

His pitifully limited brain couldn't comprehend what happened to the human!

By now the other man eaters had appeared from their hiding places and were attacking the outpost soldiers. One of them charged into the group club first like a rhinoceros, which the humans responded to by blindly firing their weapons at him. But neither bow nor gun could pierce the monstrous mutant's armor. More than a couple of the outpost soldiers were crack shots – able to place a bullet right in their eyes – but their targets were just as capable. In the midst of their charge they used their weapons to protect their vital parts.

The man eater barreled through the hail of gunfire and into the group of hapless humans. The enormous iron club and the behemoth who wielded it bore down on them.

Bang!

A mangled body hurdled through the air and smacked into one of the half-collapsed statues. The corpse fell to the ground like a broken doll, leaving a crater where the statue used to be.

“Run!”

The soldier hardly had time to scream the word before a cudgel came crashing down on the back of his skull. Bits of bone went flying in all directions like broken glass but the cudgel kept going. The soldier was smashed flat. Armor, weapons, clothes and flesh were crushed into an indiscernible mess.

Every one of these creatures were terrifyingly strong! There was nothing these outpost soldiers could do against them!

After falling prey to her foe's poison Artemis lay in a heap on the ground, numb. Though she couldn't move her body her mind was sharp. She could see and understand everything that was happening around her. Her pretty face was twisted

with anger and regret – she had underestimated Salamander, and now it meant her death and the deaths of all those she brought with her.

“Salamander, you soft-dick shit sock! Now you’re the sweepers’ bitch, eh? You fuckin’ traitor!”

“Me? A traitor? You don’t see the irony in that, coming from you?” Salamander’s hoarse voice was heavy with disdain. “It was fine that you were one of Hydra’s flunkies, but to throw in with a *demonhunter*? You’ve brought the outpost to the edge of war – *you’re* the damn traitor! The hunter sees us wastelanders as pawns, tools she can use up and throw away. Do you actually think she gives a shit about any of us?”

There wasn’t anything she could say to that.

Salamander was one of the oldest veterans of the outpost. He’d lived there for a decade before Hydra came and took power, but the former leader had never elevated him to a position of power. Hydra simply didn’t trust the man.

Salamander, face full of rage, hissed at her. “I lived half my life in the outpost. I watched as it was built, as it grew prosperous and populated. I love this place more than anyone, and I would *never* betray my home! On the contrary, everything I do is to save the outpost from disaster. You and your people come along and want to use it as a tool. Your greed and ambition have tainted this jewel of the wastelands!”

Artemis gritted her teeth. “What are you gonna do?”

“The outpost needs a real leader. Someone from the wastelands who can bring *real* peace.” His voice grew cold. “As for the demonhunter? That self-righteous bitch? I’m going to kill her!”

Artemis erupted in derisive laughter. “You think the demon gives a fuck about you? That asshole is gonna turn the outpost into nothing more than his personal farm. Why do you think Hydra was fighting for independence? You’re such a dumb-ass. Hahahaha!”

Salamander’s eyes grew dark and spiteful, and he drew himself up like a man slighted. He kicked her brutally, so hard she spat blood. “Shut your fucking mouth, you stupid bitch! Better a farm than in the hands of some demonhunter!”

In less than five minutes the field of statues was caked in gore. Not a single warrior

from the outpost survived.

Ten maneaters trundled by, their footsteps making the ground quiver. Salamander didn't trust them – maneater was just what they called these fifteen-foot tall mutants who were the elite of the sweeper forces. These ten in particular were the cream of the crop. If they turned on him Salamander would only be able to tangle with one of them.

One of them made for Artemis, who still lay prostrate on the ground.

“No, this one might still be useful.” Salamander's voice was strange and monstrous as it scratched through his mask. “It isn't safe here, let's go.”

The maneater snorted at him in irritation.

Cloudhawk hid behind one of the statues, watching everything unfold. If Salamander wanted to kill Artemis right now there wasn't anything Cloudhawk could do. He couldn't save her, not with these monsters at his beck and call. He'd only succeed in getting himself killed.

Salamander took Artemis and left. Cloudhawk heaved a sigh.

Should he return and tell the Bloodsoaked Queen? He was afraid there wasn't enough time, and who knew if he'd be able to find them again if he left. The worst of it was that sweepers had reappeared in the oasis. This was a bad omen.

Artemis was a jackass, but she was the leader of Greenland Outpost! This was the worst time for her to get kidnapped, he had to get her back!

Cloudhawk mulled over the choices in his mind. A direct attack was out of the question; that would be simple suicide, as the chances of success were practically zero. But he had to make a decision, and so he did and began to follow Salamander.

The masked man was none the wiser, continuing to lead the maneaters through the oasis for two hours. The sky had begun to darken, and after a little while longer night fell.

Salamander figured that soldiers from the outpost wouldn't follow even once they found out. The oasis at night was too dangerous. Even the maneaters didn't want to risk it.

“Take a break, fifteen minutes!”

Salamander dropped Artemis against a nearby tree and ordered a few of the maneaters to keep an eye on her. She was still incapable of moving her body. Meanwhile Salamander was pondering how to get close enough to a nearby brook for some water without getting snatched up by man-eating trees.

Suddenly...

A growl arose from within the underbrush, followed quickly by several bear-like figures closing in from all sides. Salamander had been a denizen of the outpost for over twenty years so he knew the best routes through the oasis. This sector should *not* be hunting grounds for dire bears. Why had they appeared outside of their normal territory?

Altogether, there were four or five dire bears. They were very different from the species they'd evolved from in the old days. They still had the recognizable characteristics of bears but were twice as big, had hide thick as armor and were strong enough to tear a man in two.

Several of the maneaters answered the dire bears with challenging growls of their own.

Oasis creatures were known for their foul temperament. Even though they knew their enemy was dangerous, they would never show any weakness... and so the dire bears roared back, with a few charging straight at the maneaters. Suddenly, the two groups of enormous beasts were locked in combat.

This was, of course, Clouthawk's handiwork.

He'd led the bears here, then hid with the help of his relic cloak, leaving the bears with no other target than his foes. Now that the maneaters were completely focused on the dire bears, he stealthily crept up behind where Artemis lay. He gently nudge her shoulder and whispered in her ear. “Hey. You alright?”

“The fuck? You aren't dead?!”

Clouthawk flung her over his shoulder. Invisibility was pointless now so he stopped channeling the relic's power and ran for the outpost.

Salamander hadn't been caught up in the battle with the dire bears and so he immediately saw that Artemis had been taken away. His face became a scowl. "Son of a bitch! Someone's taken her. We have to go after them!"

Cloudhawk hadn't been running for more than five minutes before he heard footsteps fast approaching. Artemis glowered over his shoulder. "You can't outrun Salamander. Forget about me and get out of here!"

Salamander threw out his hand and four or five darts were whipped toward them. They were envenomed and accurate, Cloudhawk knew, and if any of them hit they'd be finished. He used his senses to dodge as many as he could, but one of them was aimed straight at Artemis. Cloudhawk gritted his teeth and spun around, using himself as a shield. Artemis gaped at him. "You're crazy!"

He wasn't, of course. The dart found its target but couldn't pierce his masterwork relic cloak! It struck hard enough to leave a wound, but couldn't deliver its venom.

Cloudhawk and Salamander were faster than the lumbering maneaters. Some of them were still fighting the dire bears, and those that had come with their human leader fell behind after a few minutes.

As he'd demonstrated, Salamander was not only fast but also adept at throwing darts. So long as he was alive they weren't getting away. With no other options, Cloudhawk skidded to a halt and put Artemis down. He turned, brandished his exorcist staff, and glared threateningly at Salamander.

"Heh. Take a good look at yourself, kid. You haven't even grown any facial hair and you want to fight me?"

Cloudhawk's response was to propel himself forwards on his two legs... and then, all of a sudden, he disappeared.

Salamander stared at the empty air in disbelief. A moment later an evil wind gusted his way, but by the time he reacted to protect himself it was too late. The tri-bladed end of a metal staff was buried in his chest.

Evidently, Cloudhawk's skills and speed were far greater than he had imagined.

Chapter 82

Conflict

Cloudhawk's exorcist staff was constructed so that its sharpened end was a vicious three-edged point. The wounds it caused were large and difficult to heal. Salamander was caught off guard, resulting in the staff drilling four inches into his body ^[1]. Once it had buried itself in deep Cloudhawk twisted his wrist, tearing open the wound even further.

A typical person would not survive trauma like this. Even if it missed critical organs the victim would bleed out and die. Cloudhawk heaved, trying to shove the staff in deeper and open the wound wider.

Salamander's left hand gripped the shaft of the weapon while his right hand flung poison darts toward the left side of Cloudhawk's neck. The young scavenger jerked his staff free and dodged out of the way. Fresh blood spilled over the ground.

"So this is... the power of a demonhunter!"

Raspy breaths hissed through Salamander's mask. He pressed his hands to the wound to try and stem the bleeding, all the while staring dementedly at his foe. He could hardly believe this young punk had the talent of a demonhunter.

Cloudhawk lamented that he hadn't killed him with his opening strike, but he figured the masked man had to be half-dead at least. Not only was the wound deep, but it was ragged and grave.

He soon discovered he was wrong.

The ugly wound bled for ten seconds before the flow stopped. By the time Salamander withdrew his hands from the area it had almost completely closed up. *What incredible healing ability!*

His talents weren't in strength, agility, constitution or control. Instead, he had a level of regenerative ability that was rarely seen. While it wasn't to the level of that undead nightmare, the freak in black, Cloudhawk had never seen a normal human with this

level of healing talent. It was at least several times superior to Cloudhawk's!

Clang!

He knocked away the darts that were aimed his way. Salamander rushed ahead in their wake, throwing more darts with his left hand while his right gripped a glowing green dagger. The dart exploded in a hissing cloud of smoke right in front of Cloudhawk's face, mere moments before a deadly shadow fell over him.

Salamander's fighting style was insidious and relied on poison. Artemis had discovered that the hard way, but Cloudhawk was prepared after seeing what had become of her. The moment the cloud of poison spread he disappeared once more. It gave him cover to retreat.

Salamander lunged into the spreading mist of poison. His mask protected him from its ill effects so he could move through the toxic area freely. His target was gone, and he had no way to know where he'd vanished to. Worse, the power of the relic cloak made it so that Cloudhawk was too fast for Salamander to keep up.

However, so long as Salamander remained in the embrace of his poison, Cloudhawk couldn't reach him either.

The booming footsteps of maneaters shook the area as they neared.

The veteran wastelander felt like victory was in his grasp. This young demonhunter's invisibility was troublesome but not insurmountable. Salamander slowly lifted his left hand, aimed a deadly dart toward where Artemis lay helpless, and let fly.

No! Cloudhawk scowled. This old fucker was crafty!

He'd remained invisible, looking for an opening to launch his next attack on the man. He hadn't expected Salamander would turn on Artemis, who was unable to defend herself. He was forced to reveal himself.

Cloudhawk was far away from the dart, he couldn't get to it in time to deflect the hateful thing. His hand went to his waist, gripped the handle of his revolver, and pulled it free. With all his psychic energy focused on the dart it seemed to slow in mid-air.

Bang!

His bullet knocked the dart off its trajectory.

Dread crept into Salamander's heart. He witnessed the dart being shot out of the air, which meant his foe had superior control and reaction skills. The only other people with those talents in the outpost were their elite marksmen. In addition to this the kid could vanish which only made him more deadly.

Hiding in the poison mist was no longer safe.

Without hesitation Salamander jumped, followed by the second crack of the pistol. Had he been half a second later Cloudhawk's shot would have hit him but instead it missed. He landed back on the ground but in his rush he couldn't get his legs stable under him. Taking advantage of the moment Cloudhawk charged toward him whipping his exorcist staff around. With no way to dodge Salamander pulled out a dart and lifted his left arm to block the strike.

Clang!

The force of the blow made Salamander's arm go numb. In the instant the staff was knocked away he brought his sickly green dagger around to cut into Cloudhawk's flesh. But he didn't feel the expected rending of skin. Instead, his dagger rasped harmlessly against the kid's cloak. Whatever it was made of, his dagger couldn't punch through! It was thin enough that he lacerated the skin, but the poison couldn't be delivered.

Cloudhawk called on the power of his exorcist staff!

His psychic energy was mightier than it ever had been and calling the power of the staff no longer required him to focus so intensely. His staff came alive in an instant, unleashing unparalleled impact and tearing force so overwhelming it broke Salamander's dart to splinters. It continued to press down until the staff was stopped by the veteran's left arm.

Salamander screamed in agony as his arm was smashed clean off!

Cloudhawk followed up immediately after with another lunge at his enemy's chest.

The exorcist staff struck him so hard that Salamander's armor was demolished. Vibrations from the impact shuddered through him and broke every one of his ribs and scrambled his organs. He was thrown fifteen feet away, hit the ground and rolled

away like a discarded ragdoll. He was covered in blood, his flesh a mangled ruin. Even Salamander's impressive healing abilities couldn't save him anymore. At best it would force him to linger on in pain until death finally took him.

Cloudhawk approached, ready to deliver the killing blow.

"Why are you so intent on destroying our paradise?" Salamander's helmet and mask had been ruined, revealing a head of white hair and a gaunt, wrinkled face. Blood trickled from the corner of his lips in thick rivulets. With what strength remained he hacked out his words. "Devils... you're all... just devils!"

Cloudhawk looked down at the old, broken man beneath him. Another aged face swam up at him through his memories.

It was a humble face; ordinary, undistinguished and old. He'd kept Cloudhawk by his side ever since he was a child, teaching him to read, how to live. Cloudhawk was already forgetting what he looked like, just his snow-white hair and wrinkled face. He thought the old man always looked like one who'd suffered the world's ills yet still mourned the state of humanity. He was always staring out into the wastelands with eyes full of longing. In the end he'd died, never escaping the life of a scavenger.

In this instant Cloudhawk saw the two old men as one. He couldn't bring himself to use his staff. Inwardly his heart clenched.

What have I done?

With eyes full of hate Salamander glared at him. "You demonhunters are all hypocrites! May the wastelands curse you, may you all languish in suffering – may you rot in hell for eternity!"

He groped for his dagger with a quivering arm, lifting it from the ground.

He used it to open his own throat.

"Get your head out of your ass!" Artemis was screaming at him from behind. "The sweepers are coming. We've gotta go!"

Her pleas reached deaf ears. Cloudhawk didn't feel any sense of victory or accomplishment after cutting down this old man. On the contrary his heart sank. He just stared at the bloody corpse for a few moments, then sank to his knees and closed

its dim, glaring eyes. "I'm sorry. Go in peace," he whispered.

Two maneaters burst into view.

Cloudhawk's head snapped up and he glared at the beasts with blood-red eyes. He vanished, only to appear a moment later bearing his exorcist staff high. With the force of a hurricane he plowed the staff right into a maneater's chest.

Boom-!

The pure force of his rage caved the beast's armor. Even the maneater's sturdy body couldn't stop the impact from scrambling its organs.

"Fucking DIE!"

Cloudhawk leapt into the air, summoning another tempest of power which he brought crashing down on the maneater's head. Its helmet cracked and fell away in pieces while the bone below was split. Its brains were splattered everywhere.

He turned, once more summoning the might of his psychic power. Holding his staff with a white-knuckle grip, he brought it around to meet the second maneater's cudgel!

Like two tornadoes meeting, the area was buffeted with the force of their collision. Dirt and stone choked the air. Both the hulking monstrosity and Cloudhawk were knocked back a single pace. The young human quickly regained his footing, though, and with eyes the color of murder he charged again. Incensed with an insanity to match the maneater he thrust his staff forward like an arrow. It planted itself in the sweeper's chest more effective than a drill and chewed through its armor, its leathery flesh, and exploded from its back through a hole the size of a soup bowl.

The maneater crumbled to the ground with a wail.

Cloudhawk stood amidst the carnage, gasping for breath. He was soaked with blood from head to toe.

Artemis stared with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. The kid had slain two maneaters by himself – it was simply inconceivable. That meant he was almost as strong as she was!

When did this kid become so tough?

To Cloudhawk, the scope of his improvement was clear. In the past, he would have only been able to use his staff twice in a short period of time. From the start of this fight to its bloody end he'd used it four times. Each strike was stronger than before, and he could use it twice as much.

"Let's go!"

Cloudhawk's berserker rage had exhausted the agitation and sadness in his heart. He hurried over to Artemis, lifted her onto his back and set off as fast as he could for the outpost. The maneaters were strong but not that fast. Escaping the rest of them was not difficult.

After they returned, Mantis looked over the new outpost leader. He quickly diagnosed the poison Salamander had used and concocted an antidote. Once he injected it into her she quickly began to recover.

When the Queen heard the news she hurried back to the fort. She was furious. Their little excursion had almost been fatal. "Did I not make it perfectly clear that you weren't to go off on a whim?! What were you thinking? Were you thinking *at all*?"

Artemis was in no mood, and in the face of the Queen's rebuke she shouted back. "That's enough! I'm not gonna sit here while you order me around. Who the fuck do you think I am? Your goddamn toy?!"

The Queen's fist was coiled tight, ready to strike. A boiling heat flooded the area.

Artemis felt it but was undeterred. "What? Are you gonna kill me? Go on, show us how little our lives mean to you!"

Cloudhawk stepped between the two women. "Alright that's enough. It wasn't pointless, we managed to find sweepers hiding near the outpost. That was important."

"Hmph, what are you worried about?" Artemis cast Cloudhawk a withering glare. "Our self-righteous demonhunter won't kill me. I'm still *useful*. Aren't I?"

How prideful was the Bloodsoaked Queen? This wastelander's insubordination was a naked insult. With every passing moment the threat of murder burned brighter in her eyes.

From the start these two women had not liked each other, and now their conflict was

coming to a head. Eventually, Cloudhawk managed to diffuse the situation once more... but the bad blood was there, and it was only getting worse.

1. Depending on the location and one's BMI, typical chest wall thickness is about two inches.

Chapter 83

Relief

Night fell, revealing the twinkling stars strewn across the dark sky. They shone from positions they'd held from time immemorial, like the eyes of the gods silently serving vigil over the toils of mortality.

A petite figure sat atop Greenland Fort, the wind tossing her short hair. Though she'd lived all her life in the wastelands her skin was smooth and free from blemishes. She suffered no tumors, and her features were normal and healthy. There was only the impetuous expression spread across her face to detract from her beauty.

She was like a lioness of the wilds; untamed, beautiful and ferocious. A fifteen year old boy was with her and the two drank beneath the starlight. The young man was thin as a rake, with a head of tousled black hair, but lithe and shrewd. His eyes were especially unique – clear and bright.

“I know that demonhunter doesn't think I'm shit.” Artemis threw back her bottle and fiercely gulped down its contents. “What about you, huh? You think I'm some filthy peasant?”

“The fuck are you blabbering? If you're filthy, what the hell am I?” Cloudhawk shook his head. “Two months ago I was a worthless scav. I've never viewed anyone as being 'lowly', and I've never thought of her kind as 'noble'. We're all just people. How does where we're born make us better or worse than anyone else?”

Artemis couldn't help but chuckle. “You're so stupid it's cute.”

“I admit the Queen's got a shit temper, but overall she's not too bad. She's not completely unreasonable.” Cloudhawk had come to see the wasteland woman beside him as a friend. He wasn't sure what the Queen thought of him, but he saw her as a friend too. He hoped the two of them could get over their differences. “Anyway, you did kick up the shit. Recklessly chasing after Salamander nearly got our asses killed. So what if the Queen chewed you out a little? Why get all pissy about it?”

She scowled and persisted. “So you also think it's my fault!”

Cloudhawk gently tried to persuade her. “The outpost is about to find itself in a nasty fight, and the Queen is the strongest fighter we got. You’re the leader of this place. Now’s not the time to pick fights with allies.”

“That goddamn woman’s always throwing her weight around. It pisses me off, but that’s not what really makes me angry.” Artemis paused to take a few swigs from her bottle, then wiped her mouth with her forearm. She swung her eyes toward the young man, her vision already blurry from drink. “Salamander was a lousy dog fucker, but he had a point. Demonhunters aren’t worth shit!”

She pushed herself up onto unsteady legs and looked out over the outpost.

“She just wants to use this place as a weapon against the sweepers, yeah? Willing to sacrifice all of us on the altar of her ‘mission.’ In that way Hydra was fuckin’ right, at least he an’ his brother cared about this place, because they needed it for their power. But the demonhunter? Nah. She doesn’t give a shit if these people live or die. The future of this place doesn’t even cross her mind. To her were just pawns – useful only to get what she wants!”

Cloudhawk couldn’t help but break into her diatribe. “I think you’ve got her wrong.”

“Whaddid I saw that wasn’t true, hm?” She turned around and looked at him. “You tell me then. What happens after she spanks the shit outta the demon. What then? What’s the outpost gonna do? Has she thought about our fate? Aren’t we wastelanders worthy of determinin’ our own destinies?!”

Cloudhawk opened his mouth but no words came out. He still saw the loathing in Salamander’s eyes, heard his curses ringing in his ears. They still nagged at him.

When he spoke again his voice was low. “There’s a lot in life we have no control over. The Queen, the sweepers, Salamander, you, me... there’s no difference. It’s all a matter of perspective. If the Queen is trying to use the outpost to kill the demon, why can’t the outpost use her to fight for its freedom? No more brutal rule from Hydra, no more life under sweeper control. From now on all your food and water belongs to you – isn’t that a good thing?”

Artemis was rendered speechless. She hadn’t thought about it that way.

“You’re the leader now, so you have to take on a leader’s responsibilities. You gotta take a longer view. You work for no one, fight for no one. Greenland Outpost only

belongs to the wasteland. War might be cruel, but it might also be a rebirth for this place.

Hydra was a puppet of the demon. If that monster could create one Hydra, what was to stop him from creating a second? A third? Why did the Greenland Outpost have to be somebody's tool? Why couldn't it own its own fate?

Cloudhawk grabbed the bottle from Artemis and took a hefty gulp. The burning warmth slipped down his gullet and into his belly, making his eyes water. When he looked back up at the stars his own eyes were a little hazy. "Down here under the stars it doesn't matter whether we agree with our lives or not. It doesn't matter if we're obedient or stubborn – we're all just dust. It doesn't matter who you are, how strong you are... no one can take control of the future. We only got the present, and the only thing we can control is ourselves."

A laugh bubbled up in Artemis' throat. "Now you're speakin' in fuckin' riddles."

Cloudhawk scratched his head. "It's something an old man told me once."

"Where's that old man now?"

"Dead. I buried him."

She shrugged at the revelation.

Cloudhawk went on. "I think the Queen has her own reasons, her own troubles. You shouldn't make 'em worse. If Greenland Outpost survives this fight it'll be better off than ever."

"You're right, the demonhunter isn't our enemy. We gotta fight for ourselves – fight for our freedom!" She sounded like she'd made up her mind.

"When it's all over, how 'bout you stay here with me? Whadda ya say?"

Cloudhawk was stunned by the sudden offer. "Huh?"

"You got a good head, better than mine, and got the power of a demonhunter. In time you're gonna be even stronger than Hydra." Her eyes brightened with every word. "Didn't you tell me you were looking for a peaceful place? You an' me, together we can *make* one!"

Her words stirred him.

Nestled in the midst of the oasis, plenty of food and water... sure, the oasis was dangerous, but it was nothing they couldn't overcome. Cloudhawk was only around fifteen and Artemis was in her early twenties. Both of them were young. In twenty or thirty years, maybe they could build their own paradise.

Artemis looked at Cloudhawk as he considered the matter. "Whadda ya think? We can switch places – you lead and I can be your right hand, how's that?"

"I'm thinking!"

He hardly finished the sentence before he was suddenly being dragged through the air. With one hand Artemis lifted him up and pressed her soft lips to his. With a wild and heated passion she tasted him. Cloudhawk was too stunned to react, not that he could have pushed her off anyway.

He'd never felt a sensation like this before. He heard the sound of blood rushing in his ears and the thud of his heart against his chest. His muddled brain was alive with sounds. There was a certain stirring...

Then all of a sudden Artemis let him go, licking her lips and grinning at him from ear to ear. She wagged her fist at him in a sign of dominance. "That's my mark, you belong to me now. That damn Queen can go to hell. Hahahaha!"

She stumbled backwards and forth in a fit of mad laughter.

Cloudhawk could feel the idea worming its way into his heart. Maybe staying here wasn't so bad. After their exchange Artemis was in much higher spirits, even going so far as to start humming some unknown tune. Swaying her alluring hips, she left.

However, neither of them noticed the solitary figure nearby. The crisp, cold moonlight made her appear all the more lonesome. The Bloodsoaked Queen removed her mask and let the light of the moon play over her beautiful features – outlining her conflicted expression. A shadow of pain flit across her eyes. She didn't know how to shed the tightness she felt in her chest.

It was a difficult feeling to bear.

She didn't know when it'd begun, but the Queen had started to view the wastelands

differently. She'd begun to question the values she'd held for years. She didn't know when, but at some point she'd come to care about that young wastelander.

These thoughts were a mistake. A lot of what she'd done lately was a mistake. She'd violated so many tenets of her order, but she couldn't rebel against her own heart and will. Ever since coming to the wastelands, something had been eating at her pious heart.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had never had friends. Even though she and Cloudhawk had staved off death together several times, there was an invisible barrier separating them. She wanted to lead Cloudhawk down the road of the demonhunters, partially because she wanted to bring them closer. But now he was growing closer to that repugnant wastelander every day – and further from her. For reasons she couldn't understand, the thought filled her with anger and jealousy.

Almighty gods! Your loyal follower is lost. Every passing moment I'm filled with guilt. If you can hear me, please rinse me of my sins, lead me down the righteous path. Help me finish this...

The Queen sat in prayer, trying to clear her mind of confusion and doubt. She held the metallic demon mask in her hands – an inheritance from her father.

She'd already given so much to hunt this demon, to avenge her father's death! There was no going back. For retribution, for atonement, for shame, for glory – she was prepared to exact vengeance at any price, even her life.

Help me finish this!

She replaced her mask, and in that moment any sign of confusion or fragility was gone. It was replaced with determination to face whatever hell stood before her!

Greenland Outpost went on like nothing happened. No one seemed to pay any more mind to the skirmish between Artemis and the Queen. The outpost's new leader seemed to accept her new post and took over the business of leading. She started by calling on all the remaining troops of the outpost and set patrols. They were ordered to sleep in their armor with weapons at the ready, for battle could break out at any moment.

The outpost's walls were reinforced with four times the normal garrison. Hydra's personal warehouse was opened and all weapons dispersed to equip everyone, even

the common man. When the time came, every able person would fight.

Meanwhile the Queen mopped up the last of the resistance. Soon, it was made crystal clear that there was only one ruler of Greenland Outpost.

Artemis, the Bloodsoaked Queen, Cloudhawk and Mantis sat with severe countenance within the fort.

Artemis slapped her hand against the table and shouted angrily. “Not *one* of our scouting parties have returned!”

The scouts they’d chosen for the mission were the best of what remained to the outpost. They knew the oasis inside and out. It was impossible for whole teams to completely succumb to the wilds. Given the experience Artemis and Cloudhawk had with the sweepers and the unsettling silence, they could be almost certain the outpost was surrounded by enemy forces.

Sacrificing scouts wasn’t necessary. The gates were closed, and no one was allowed to enter!

Greenland Outpost had come upon a moment that would decide its fate. They would live or they would die. From this moment on, they were prepared for the worst!

Chapter 84

Night Raid

Greenland Outpost mobilized every soldier they could, including those who weren't part of the outpost at all. A massive conscription campaign put a weapon in the hands of anyone who could fight. Stone was one of those wastelanders-turned-soldier.

He was in his early twenties, and like many denizens of the wastelands he didn't have a proper name. Stone picked something he saw often as his moniker, and it turned out to be an apt description. As he grew Stone became as tenacious and unyielding as his namesake, eventually reaching his potential as a doughty soldier.

During his enlistment Stone was able to best two professional soldiers by himself, so they made him part of the wall's defense. From that moment on he was a true warrior.

"You new?"

A craggy and unpleasant voice assailed him.

Stone saw an older man resting beneath a crenel, two massive black broadswords for weapons. One was in his hands and he ground its edge against a whetstone. Better than average leather armor protected his body and head. The armor seemed to have been personally customized and reinforced. Most discomfoting, however, was the man's hideous face. Half of it was caved in like he'd taken a hammer to the cheek. How was he still alive?

Stone nodded but didn't say anything.

"Man as young and healthy as you... why'd you join up?" The veteran put his sword to the side and fished a rough hand-rolled cigarette from his waist. He put it in his mouth, lit it, and took a long drag. "Seems t'me life as a bandit'd be better. No one tellin' you what t'do, go where you please... you'd probably earn more, but most importantly you'd pick yer own targets. Come across somethin' stronger'n you, just run."

Stone was taken aback by the strange man. "You don't like being a soldier?"

“Soldiers are always facin’ the unknown. Even if you know yer gonna die, if the cap’n says fight, you fight. Followin’ orders, that’s the life of a soldier.”

“Doesn’t seem to me a bandit’s life is much better. They don’t even have a steady place to lay their head.” Stone objected to the grizzled warrior’s opinion. “The new leader said it, anyone who joined up has a place in the fort. All I’m looking for is a safe place to sleep.”

“Hrmph. The fort, eh? Gotta be breathin’ to earn that blessin’.” This time it was another soldier who spoke, a large and burly man with not a thread of hair on his smooth head. His weapon was an iron spear resting on his shoulder. “Maybe if it was Hydra leadin’ us we’d have a shot, but this woman? She was just one of his flunkys. You even know who we’re fightin, kid? Sweepers!”

Stone continued to challenge them. “The new leader might not be as strong as the old boss was, but she’s got that banshee helping her. They already turned the place around. They say anyone who refuse to accept the new leader, the banshee shows up and snuffs out their life. If I were you I’d be careful what I say.”

The bald man clearly paid the warning no mind.

“A’ight now that’s enough, we’re here so no use yappin’. We’re all brothers now. We need to be smart in these dark times.” The veteran plucked the cigarette butt from his mouth and flicked over the side of the wall. His patchwork leather armor creaked as he rose and clapped a hand on Stone’s shoulder. “You an’ Baldy got night watch, I’ll bring the others ‘round for patrol. Holler if you see anything. Baldy, you look after the new blood.”

“Will do, captain!”

Night fell quickly. The oasis was enveloped in an unsettling silence.

Stone and Baldy sat across from one another, lit by the flames of a campfire between them that dispelled the chilly night air. They took turns talking and feeding the fire.

Baldy fished out a large biscuit and broke it in half. He handed a piece to Stone. “Night shift is long and tough. If you don’t eat you won’t keep up your focus.”

The biscuit was a jerky-like pulp made from smashed roots and stems, all coarse and bitter fiber that was no fun to chew. But at least it filled their bellies, and out in the

wastelands anything that eased the hunger was appreciated. Who'd complain over taste?

"Thanks."

Even this small piece of biscuit was worth a lot out here – more than a few people would kill for it. Your typical new recruit was not well-off and often went days without a meal.

With longing in his face, Stone spoke to his comrade: "The new boss has started to hand out all the food that was hoarded in the fort. Folks are getting more and more for themselves and their lives are improving. We've gotta beat these sweepers, not pay tribute – life will improve even more."

Baldy, on the other hand, had never liked the new boss. What did that distant future have to do with anything, anyway?

Stone stuck a piece of the hard biscuit in his mouth, chewed it to soften it up with his spit then gulped it down.

A gust of wind blew particles of sand at them.

"*Pa*, sand?" Stone scowled at the wind. The oasis was protected by ruins that kept the desert at bay, so where did this grit come from? Strange though it was, he paid it little mind as he continued his discussion with the older warrior. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Three years, maybe four. I forget." The sound of sand whipping against the walls increased, filling their ears with rasping noise. Baldy sighed. "A guy like me with no real talent to speak of, almost forty... this is about the best I can hope for."

Stone chuckled. "Come on, out in the wastelands making it to forty is an accomplishment. I hope I make it to your age. I'd be happy."

"You're young, you got potential." Baldy shook his head, full of envy. "If you make it to my age you'll at least earn a name for yourself here. You'll be somebody."

But Stone didn't seem interested in such a fate. "Was Panther somebody? Snaketooth? They're dead, even Hydra... ah, doesn't matter how strong they were, they were still insignificant to the wastelands. Me, I just don't want to starve to death. I just want to

sleep somewhere safe and enjoy a woman from time to time. I'd be content to do that for forty years."

The kid's demands were a tall order. Wasn't that the dream of every wastelander?

Baldy was getting ready to ridicule him a little when he noticed the sand getting thicker. The grit was starting to affect his vision and the sound of it blowing against the walls made it difficult to hear. The sand was startling to sprinkle like sheets of rain, covering both of them in a thin layer of it. Their campfire was sputtering, barely keeping itself alight.

"What the fuck is all this?" Baldy had never experienced something like this. He picked up his weapon and rose to his feet then stuck his head out of the crenel to take a look. "Where's all this goddamn sand coming fr- *ahh!*"

A shrill scream broke the night silence!

Stone was fiddling with the fire when suddenly he felt a warm spray skitter across his cheek like a spider. One moment he was listening to Baldy talk and the next his new companion was on the floor, limbs twitching. His eyes stared into the distance and his lips twitched, trying desperately to form words, but nothing but unintelligible syllables sputtered out. A hand ax jutted from between his eyes, half buried in his skull and deep enough to sever a third of his brain.

"Sneak attaaaack!"

His scream changed the night from dead silence into chaos. He picked up his weapon and leapt to his feet with no hesitation, moments before the huge silhouette of a sweeper bore down on him. Its deadly hatchet was aimed right for Stone's head.

Clang!

Stone held a sheet iron shield between him and the attack, whose impact shook and numbed his left arm. Without thinking he shoved the knife in his right hand deep into the sweeper's chest. It cut into the mutant's heart and caused blood to spew everywhere like a fountain. Stone wiped his face clean and ripped his dagger from the body.

Whoosh-whoosh!

Two sharp and ice cold crossbow bolts punctured his flimsy armor and jutted out from his chest. Eyes wide, Stone turned around and the charging figure of another sweeper filled his vision. He saw the glint of its ax aimed for his throat.

Stone's whole world spun.

The young man's head thudded to the ground and rolled off the wall. His headless body followed.

Thousands of sweepers were clambering over the parapets, slaughtering soldiers as they swept past.

The sweepers were of all sorts; from heavily armored wasteland rangers to emaciated things that scrambled on four limbs, seemed to defy gravity as they clawed at their victims with deadly talons. Some of them even had wings, and though they couldn't fly they used the twisted appendages to glide on the evil wind into the outpost.

"The sweepers are breaking through! Stop them!"

The scarred veteran came rushing to the fore with a hundred warriors and suddenly the sounds of bowstrings, guns and clashing metal filled the air. No one expected the sweepers to climb over the walls in complete silence under cover of night. Most important had been this strange sandstorm that'd given them cover. Without it, this many sweepers would definitely have been discovered long ago.

The old veteran was certainly capable. He split several sweepers in half as they came before him, shouting orders as he charged forth. "Keep 'em *out!*"

Suddenly, a tornado appeared before them.

The veteran captain came to a dead halt. A tornado, here? He peered at the dervish that shouldn't have existed and suddenly saw a figure hidden within. He couldn't make out any details, but there was definitely a human figure inside the whipping winds. The stranger seemed to float above the ground and was clad in otherworldly armor. Two red eyes crackled like hellish lightning through the darkness.

"*Die!*"

The veteran charged ahead, lifting a broadsword with both hands. The dark figure responded by flicking a finger, as though he was simply shooing away an irritating

pest.

In the midst of his headlong rush the veteran was unceremoniously blown apart. The grizzled captain became a cloud of dust on the wind, vanishing with the breeze like he'd never even existed.

Chapter 85

Unstoppable

An intense feeling of danger woke Cloudhawk from his sleep. Something wasn't right.

The discomfort was more intense than ever. It felt as though even his spirit trembled, like an instinctual fear of some ultimate predator. Cloudhawk felt like he could be swallowed up by the terror any moment.

Tonight was the night!

He snatched up his exorcist staff and leapt out of bed. In the same instant a thick energy hung over the whole outpost – like the seeds of a dandelion were blanketing the whole world, or musical strings invisible to the eye. From somewhere nearby the pulses of a powerful psyche rippled around him, each wave different.

The demon! He was here!

Cloudhawk was certain because it wasn't the first time he'd sensed this presence. He felt it in the distance when the Blackflag Outpost had been attacked, just before the tornado of sand toppled its walls. He was back now, and close.

Cloudhawk could even sense his precise location. This meant the demon wasn't watching from afar – had he finally lost patience? Was he taking matters into his own hands?

Cloudhawk pulled open a window and was immediately blasted in the face by a gust of sandy wind. He winced against its intrusion, which confirmed his suspicions. The demon had to be in the camp. A dust storm like this came from the wastelands, they didn't just appear here spontaneously. The demon had to have used some strange power to create it.

The abilities of demons and demonhunters were very similar. Both used relics of power to create supernatural phenomena. Cloudhawk had no way of knowing what this relic was, but he could speculate about how it was used.

Cloudhawk had traversed dimensions twice, and each time he could sense the essence of whatever reality he visited. Everything – from the water, wood, metal, stone – everything had a certain ‘vibration.’ Because this resonance was unique their manifestation in the physical world was different. The resonance organized atoms and molecules into specific shapes that appeared to them as water, wood, metal and so forth.

Thus a power that could affect resonance could alter that thing’s fundamental properties. Earth could become iron, gold could change to water. Anything could be realized by manipulating this power. Of course normal humans could not observe or access this power, and only through the miraculous effects of relics were able to manipulate resonance.

So this sand wasn’t natural, it didn’t come from the wastelands. The demon spread it through the air with his power, changing the constitution of the wind and reorganizing atoms ^[1] to create sand. Hence, seemingly from nowhere, the sandstorm arose. The level of power it required was nothing short of fantastic, and though Cloudhawk had never encountered the demon he could tell by his handiwork that he had to be even stronger than the Bloodsoaked Queen!

“Has the coward finally showed its face?” After Cloudhawk tracked down the Queen and let her know her eyes were filled with a terrifying cold. Her hands were curled into fists and suddenly it felt like the air was boiling. She’s been hunting this beast for a year; a whole year of waiting, of enmity, finally culminating in this moment. “I’m going to kill him!”

“Slow down!” Cloudhawk blocked her path and tried to calm her down. “You can’t just rush out, I can tell he’s no weakling. Just throwing yourself at him is too dangerous. We have to come up with a plan.”

The Queen stared at him through her hideous mask. “What is there to think about? None of you can help me in this task. Don’t get in my way!”

Artemis agreed, she felt it was time to act. “If we don’t act now the outpost could be destroyed.”

Blackflag Outpost’s bane and the murderer of Mad Dog and Slyfox had been difficult to flush from hiding. Cloudhawk also wanted him to pay for his crimes, but was a handful of humans enough?

Mantis, who until now had remained silent, added his quiet voice to the discussion. "He's only one person, and no matter how strong everyone has their limits. We can keep sending people at him until he's exhausted."

Artemis reacted by stomping forward in a rage, grabbing him and lifting him off his feet. "Are you suggesting we just sacrifice the outpost's people!?"

The assassin hung in her grip. His expression never changed, and delivered his words in detached and frigid tones. "That's how we survive. Otherwise, nothing will stop him. Better them than you – is that not so?"

Artemis fell silent. Everyone was quiet. Mantis' method was to throw lives at the demon. Logically it was the most effective course of action – force the demon to waste his psychic energy on lowly soldiers and once his abilities were exhausted the Queen could mop up. It was a reasonable strategy.

"The sweepers didn't have much time to prepare. Unless my guess is wrong, there shouldn't be too many of them." Mantis continued in his deathly cold voice, "Otherwise they wouldn't have hidden in the oasis for so long, trying to keep us in the dark. The outpost has an advantage in numbers. This is now a battle of attrition."

Artemis considered his words and found that Mantis had a point. Although she didn't agree with throwing lives at the demon, she also didn't want them all to be destroyed by a single encounter with the fiend. She answered, "We're gonna throw everyone we have at them!"

A piercing whistle arose from everywhere, alarms that announced sweepers were breaching the walls. Their locations meant the enemy wasn't coming from one location but many, creeping through the sand and darkness to attack from all around. It was a tactic used to confound the defenders so that they could not know how many there were, or which direction the main force was attacking from.

Cloudhawk called out without any further thought, "The demon is to the east."

Artemis nodded. "Alright, then we ignore the other alarms. Concentrate our forces to the east, I'll lead them myself to deal with this so-called demon!"

Greenland Outpost's regular troops numbered in the thousands, and if they conscripted everyone who could fight that number rose to almost ten thousand strong. Given enough time to prepare, no force in the wasteland could stop a legion

like that no matter how strong this demon was.

But no sooner had Artemis made her decision than one of the outpost soldiers stumble into the room. “Shit’s gone off the rails, boss! The east flank’s getting crushed, we can’t stop ‘em!”

Artemis’ face darkened. “What are you saying? Where’s the enemy?”

The soldier stuttered through his report. “I-if they keep this p-pace up, they’ll b-be at the fort a-any minute.”

Her face fell. Artemis knew this mob of sweepers would be strong, but she didn’t expect them to be this overwhelming. She made a quick change to their strategy. “Shut the fort’s gates and call back the rest of the soldiers. We make our stand here!”

The night was doomed to chaos. Biting winds whipped through the outpost, and sand blotted out the sky like waves crashing on the settlement. Light from the moon and stars disappeared and all outpost’s braziers were extinguished. Everything was plunged into a darkness so complete no one could see their hands in front of their faces. But soldiers could see the inky shadows of the sweepers, darker than the night, moving their way.

“Fire! Now, fire!”

As the soldiers prepared a volley the sand-saturated wind was gathered together by some inexplicable power. All of a sudden the sand turned to spears and the wind cut sharp as blades, racing through the darkness. The soldiers had no way to know where they were coming from.

Whoosh!

One of the sand-spears tore through a defender’s chest.

Squelch!

An intangible cutting wind opened another’s throat.

The soldier tried to scream but only managed to spray blood all around. One by one the doomed fighters fell to the ground, dead. The din of hundreds of footsteps closed in – the returning soldiers, who met the enemy and their leader head on while on their

way to the fort.

The quality of the air changed. The countless granules floating in the wind became like flecks of iron gathered together by an invisible magnet. They coalesced into an enormous figure that began to take on a humanoid shape. A head, eyes, arms, legs, a body...

A giant of sand eighty feet tall appeared in less than twenty seconds. It was composed of yellow grit, covered by a cracked shell that covered it from head to toe. Sand issued from the fissures and spread out all around like a fine mist.

It was so large that the humans who stood before it were like insects!

Who among the soldiers had ever seen something as terrifying and fantastical as this? Though it was like facing a nightmare the defenders instinctively fired at it, to no avail. Arrows and bullets tore chunks out of the creature, but the sand was simply swallowed back up and the holes patched closed. It didn't matter how much firepower they leveled at the titan, it made no difference.

The sand colossus' eyes glowed scarlet red. Ever so slowly it raised its right hand then brought it down with earth-shuddering force. Spikes of sand jutted up from the ground and impaled dozens of the defenders, killing them instantly.

It was horrifying to behold! It was like the power of a god! How could any normal person defeat such a creature?

The outpost soldiers threw down their weapons and fled in all directions. The colossus paid them no mind as it trundled toward the fort's entrance. Each footfall made the ground shake, and when it arrived the creature threw wide its arm and wrapped the fort in a crushing embrace. A terrifying scene emerged.

A strange power issued from within the sand titan that permeated the stones of the fort. The sturdy granite dissolved into sand and fell away. Everywhere the monster touched it was like the stone was being weathered by time and the elements, only instantly. Huge sections of wall crumbled apart and exploded into particles of sand once they hit the ground.

The humans looked on in shock and terror. The fort was Greenland Outpost's oldest and staunchest structure. It had persisted for thousands of years, firm against the trials of time and weather. It had become a symbol of safety and the haven so many

desperately dreamed of. Caught in the grip of this monster, through some power no man or woman could fathom, they were forced to watch as bit by bit it eroded to nothing. Bit by bit their dream was being destroyed.

1. The author originally wrote molecules, but he's wrong. The molecular structure of sand is mainly composed of silicon dioxide. While you can get two molecules of oxygen from air, you can't magic silicon – its own element – out of nothing. I'm no chemist but I imagine to do that you have to change the atomic composition of another molecule and restructure it into silicon by stealing electrons and reorganizing them. So I changed it to atoms.

Chapter 86

The Fearsome Colossus

The air of the outpost was thick as mud, choked with sand. When the news that the sweepers were closing in on the fort got to Artemis, she called together the several hundred warriors within. They immediately made for the warehouse where everyone rushed to prepare for the fight.

Greenland Fort was an ancient building that had been reinforced over time. Its tall, sturdy walls gave its denizens a sense of safety as well as ample space for many to live. As a result it had become the symbol of Greenland Outpost.

However, not everyone lived in the fort. Housing within became a reward for the outpost's elite, so in addition to being the safest place in the compound it was also where the strongest congregated.

"Quickly, quickly! Get everything that can be used!"

Artemis opened the warehouse to anyone who could carry a weapon. The outpost's best equipment was stored within, but in this moment of crisis she didn't mind offering up items she'd typically be loath to part with. Everything was on offer, so long as it could be used to protect them from the demon; bows, guns, rockets, anything.

Cloudhawk spotted a ballista and started to push it out of the warehouse.

This old style defensive artillery weapon was taken from the wilds, snapped up when an Antiquarian passed through. Seekers were the next class up from excavators – explorers who not only dug up useful tools from the past but also researched their functions and knew their secrets. Hydra had also gotten his panacea injections from the Seekers.

When Hydra bought the ballista it was nonfunctional. It took the better part of a year to fix it but was ultimately too heavy to put to use. It was a defensive tool used to ward off invasions, and Hydra's rule had been a stable one for the most part. Thus it sat in storage, gathering dust.

At this moment the sounds of combat surrounded them. Had the sweepers killed their way to the fort so quickly?

“You all come here and push. Artemis, let’s take a look!”

Cloudhawk waved a group of soldiers over to take his place behind the ballista then ran with Artemis toward the sounds of fighting. They first ran into a group of a dozen terrifying fort residents fleeing the other direction. Artemis easily snatched one as they passed and was pressing him for information when suddenly the whole fort began to tremble like they were caught in an earthquake.

All of a sudden Cloudhawk was struck with surprise so potent he was rendered senseless. “I can feel a power – a huge power coming this way. We can’t keep going forward!”

Artemis looked at him in confusion. “What are you talking about? What power?”

The building continued to shake, more intense with each passing moment. Sand shuddered off the walls as tremendous cracks appeared. They spider-webbed across the sturdy stone, joining into even larger fissures that stretched deeper into the forts hallways. Once the cracks reached the sides of the wall huge chunks began to fall away. The way forward was reduced to rubble.

After it collapsed an enormous figure beyond belief was revealed to them.

Cloudhawk stared in absolute shock as before his eyes rose a monster eighty feet tall.

Son of a bitch, what the fuck is that?! Is this the demon?

The colossal sand beast was enormous! By comparison it was like a grown man standing over an ant. Not only was it massive, it was also incomparably strong. It obliterated anything in its path like an eroding gale, be it flesh or fortress.

Greenland Fort was hardly an obstacle!

The wastelands were not lacking for massive creatures dozens of feet tall, but in contrast to this thing humans had ways to deal with those titans. The wasteland beasts were flesh and blood – living things that needed air and a beating heart. They could be injured, they could be killed.

But this thing before them? He didn't even know what it was! The monster was far outside the scope of human understanding. Like the mythical demons of old this thing was immortal and stronger than anything ever seen.

“Use the molotovs!”

Guns and melee weapons weren't the only things stored in the fort. Molotov cocktails were also among its goodies. When Hydra took over the Greenland Outpost he had a wealth of oil and other explosive materials which he used to create throwable weapons. The outpost was a difficult place to assault and the fort itself was a fortress. Molotovs were concocted to make taking it even harder.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on these facts!

Several soldiers that had followed them lit the molotovs and flung them toward the monster. They sizzled through the air like comets, ultimately exploding into blinding balls of fire as they struck the sand colossus. Strong though the creature was it was also slow, and as a result six or seven bottles of burning liquid were smashed against it.

Its chest was a lake of fire but it didn't seem to concern the sand giant in the least. It had no flesh to worry over, so the fiery bottles were nothing to fear.

“It isn't helping.” Cloudhawk shouted to the others. “Be careful, it's going to attack!”

Boom-- !

A group of soldiers who were too slow to get out of the way were struck by the colossus' massive hand as it raked by. All of the water within them was soaked up in the blink of an eye, after which their desiccated bodies were flung backwards. When they struck floors and walls their corpses shattered into chunks.

Those who'd managed to evade the attack gaped at the horror. No normal person could fight this thing!

No bullet, arrow or blade could cause the colossus the slightest harm. Slow though it was every attack from the monster was catastrophic, leaving its victims dead or irrevocably harmed. Besides that the power it released turned everything it encountered into lifeless sand.

Artemis was thoroughly dumbstruck by the scene. “What in the name of the demon’s puckered asshole is this?!”

Fire was useless, as were guns and blades. How were they even supposed to fight this creature?

In that moment the sand colossus noticed their presence. It slowly stepped back and lifted its enormous right arm, whereupon sand all over its body began to ripple like chorded muscle. Hundreds of millions of grains of sand gathered together to form a fist the size of a car, and compressed so tight it was solid as stone.

“Run!”

The sand colossus’ truck-like fist plowed into the fort.

In the midst of his desperate escape Cloudhawk felt everything behind him shake with bone-jarring force, followed by a deafening crash that hurt his eardrums. Its fury was conveyed all through the stone walls, which instantly cracked and fell apart like shattered glass.

Artemis and Cloudhawk, covered in dust and debris, survived the attack. But they didn’t dare catch their breath.

The sand colossus was throwing a second fist their way and once again it pummeled the fort like a wrecking ball. A dozen soldiers were smashed flat before they could escape.

The outpost’s leader saw that they couldn’t escape. Unwilling to give in she heaved her massive hammer and swung it at the monster’s fist as it bore down on them. Steel and stone collided, the force of their meeting causing the stone beneath Artemis’ feet to break apart. Every bone in her body popped as blood leaked from her nose and mouth – and yet she’d managed to hold the blow back

Even Artemis’ impressive strength was only barely enough to keep them from being crushed.

Yet to their shock and terror her mighty hammer was showing signs of erosion. Metal turned to sand and fell away, little by little eating at the only thing between them and the monster’s fist. As Artemis began to feel it give, suddenly a nimble figure darted into view. She exploded onto the scene from within the fort, soaring through the air

and slamming into the creature's wrist.

The Bloodsoaked Queen wielded a long sword which she buried in the monster's appendage. Her feet stuck to it like dual magnets as she whipped around and around its arm leaving blazing sword light in her wake that seared against the beast's sandy exterior like the threads of a screw.

Crack!

The sand colossus' entire arm broke off, instantly dissolving into a torrent of sand that spread everywhere. [1]

In reaction to the Queen severing its right arm, the sand colossus swiped at her with its left. However, to the eyes of the demonhunter this creature was laughably slow. The Queen shuffled a few steps to the side, leapt up, then landed on its left arm as it came her way. Step by step she sprang up the appendage like her shoes were made of spring. She was in front of the colossus' face before it could react.

"Aaaaaoorrghhh!"

A spray of sandy arrows issued from the creature's maw.

A curtain of light from her sword separated her from the arrows. They dissolved harmlessly back into sand before causing her any harm. Left with an opening the Queen counterattacked by thrusting her longsword into the monster's throat. All four feet of steel were buried in the sand with only the hilt left jutting out.

She held the grip with both hands and dragged her blade around its throat in a full circle. A cold light shimmered in its wake. As they watched the sand colossus' enormous head peeled off of its body, ultimately exploding into a cloud of sand as it crashed into the ground.

Artemis stared with shocked and hopeful eyes. "Is it dead?"

Cloudhawk's eyes were pinned to the beast's body. "It's still going!"

This creature was not created through conventional means, so conventional logic did not apply. Its body was a creation, so losing its head was akin to losing a finger. It was perhaps irritating, but not fatal.

Just as Cloudhawk figured, the loss of its head had almost no affect. Once it crumbled into sand the grains were immediately swallowed back into its body. The humans looked on as a head-shaped structure began to emerge anew from its neck.

But the damage had to have weakened it!

Cloudhawk shut his eyes and searched the sensations around him. He could feel waves of power faintly emanating from the center of the colossus' body. Unless he was mistaken, that's where its power came from.

“Get that ballista over here!”

1. hmph

Chapter 87

Vanquished

The Bloodsoaked Queen didn't let up her attack. She swept through like a deadly wind, never in one place for more than a moment. Cutting blades of sand continuously shot at her, and though the demonhunter's reactions had slowed she was able to dodge out of the path of danger and keep herself safe.

The Queen ran her left hand along the blade of her weapon. In its passage the burning angels sizzled, saturating the metal with energy and causing it to glow red hot. The air around it warped from the heat.

Blazing light hung in the air where the blade passed. It whipped around, following the movement of her body.

Her blade plunged into the sand colossus' shoulder and she whipped around in a spiral. In no more time than it took to gasp, the beast's thick arm was severed from its body and crashed onto the ground. The wound that was left behind was a scalding red and the sand had fused together.

This attack had finally done some damage. The sand colossus couldn't recover its limb as quickly from a melted gash, giving the humans a little bit of breathing room.

By now the Queen's sword had cooled and the damage to it became apparent. The metal was coarse and blackened from the burning angels. Her relic could infuse a blade with more lethal properties but clearly came at a cost.

She couldn't keep up the fight!

She leapt through the air like a sparrow in elegant freefall. From a hundred feet or so high the fall wouldn't kill her, but if she hit the ground without any sort of support she could be gravely wounded.

She continued to somersault through the air.

Moments before the hard ground came up to meet her, the Queen planted her sword

into the wall of the fort to break her fall. It curtailed her momentum and she landed safely within the fort. Meanwhile the hundreds of soldiers who had arrived to help defend gaped at her dramatic and agile display.

The demonhunters certainly earned their reputations! Even without a weapon she was a whole other class from Hydra. The Queen really was a one-of-a-kind warrior!

Grains of sand continued to gather, the colossus' arm began to repair itself. The Bloodsoaked Queen watched with knitted brows.

Fighting this giant thing was draining her psychic energy. She'd approached the monster with the intent to use only a moderate amount of her abilities, so that she could face her real enemy with the bulk of her strength. But so far it seemed her efforts were in vain.

Her chest rose and fell with gentle gasps – combat at this level was exhausting. If this kept up she wouldn't have enough energy to spare for the demon. Her powers were running out.

Behind her a dozen of soldiers were pushing the fort's ballista into place. Under Artemis' direction it was placed behind a gap in the fort's walls.

Cloudhawk was among the soldiers. He called out to the Queen when he spotted her. "The monster's being powered by a relic, your attacks aren't doing anything. We have to find its weak point!"

Meanwhile Artemis was loading the ballista with a seven-foot long spear made entirely from iron. "Wind it up!" She ordered.

A soldier answered her in a desperate voice. "Boss, the winch is broken!"

The ballista's spring was reinforced wasteland wyrm tendon, no ordinary man could stretch it alone. The winch was designed to do the work for them, but whether from disuse or mishandling they discovered this integral piece wasn't functioning.

"This fuckin' piece of junk. Move!" Artemis shoved the two people in front of her to the side and gripped the tendon with her own two hands. The coarse material of the wyrm tendons tore the skin on her hands, but with the veins of her forehead bulging she kept struggling. Inch by inch, she pulled the string in place.

The Queen failed to see how the ballista could do anything. “How is that shoddy thing going to help?”

Cloudhawk aimed the cross-shaped ballista, staring down the shaft of the black bolt toward the sand colossus. “I can feel the relic. It’s hidden in the monster’s chest – that’s how we kill it. Help me!”

The consolidated granules that made up the colossus’ body made for an effective defense. If he wanted to strike true he needed the Queen’s help.

She thought for a moment, then shouted back. “Alright!”

By now the sand colossus’ arm and head had reformed. Silently it lifted its giant fist, gathering even more of its strength in preparation for a fatal blow. Nearby soldiers quailed at the knowledge that this beast was planning to tear down the fort with its bare hands!

Just as the colossus was reeling back for the blow, a column of fire belched from a fissure in the fort’s walls. The flames danced through the air like it had a life of its own, until eventually it coalesced into the form of ten-foot long phoenix.

The sand colossus had some measure of intelligence, or at least was being controlled by someone who did. When the phoenix appeared it held back its assault.

The phoenix screeched at it, a loud and resounding cry of challenge! It’s mighty and grandiose appearance awed and frightened every eye.

The bird spread its fiery wings wide and streaked across the air like an asteroid. In preparation for the impact the sand colossus began to gather sand toward its chest, thickening it and sharply improving its defense.

Under the Queen’s control the phoenix began to corkscrew through the air as it charged at the colossus, ultimately ramming into the beast like a flaming drill. Despite its enormous size the torrent of fire forced the beast back, overwhelmed by the energy brought to bear against it by the phoenix. A pit was carved out through its thick chest.

Cloudhawk grit his teeth, narrowed his eyes and made some last-minute adjustments to his aim. He strained against the heavy war machine until the black barbed head of the arrow was right where he wanted it. Hitting the creature anywhere but this one small target was useless – worse than a needle in a haystack, he had to hit a relic in a

sandstorm.

He needed perfect control, precision and calculation! And this was his first time using a ballista!

The phoenix was releasing more and more of its energy as it drilled deeper into the monster's chest. It was almost completely buried in it now from head to tail. Instead of detonating as before this time it just kept trying to push itself deeper through the creature, fighting for every inch. Unfortunately it simply wasn't strong enough, and although the scorched cavity it made was deep it didn't reach the monster's core.

Sand from all around rasped as it began to fill in the hole. Cloudhawk knew this was his only chance – if he missed his target all of the Queen's efforts were wasted.

But he couldn't see where to aim!

Cloudhawk had impressive control, but manipulating a ballista with such precision was no easy thing. He didn't know the weapon's speed, range, damage, or his enemy's reaction speed. What hope did he have of confidently hitting his mark from hundreds of feet away?

“Do it!”

His eyes weren't helping, so Cloudhawk shut them, locking out distractions. Without the chaos of vision he could feel every hissing grain of sand within the colossus. They danced to the flows of energy that pulsed around them. It formed a sort of tide, a force field that created the monster's figure.

The sand was simply attracted into the shape desired, so attacking the *shell* of the monster was useless – like swiping at the fragments of metal gathered by a magnet. Although you might temporarily clear away the shards, the magnetic field remained. It would only gather them up again.

So the goal had to be to destroy the magnet!

Once he shut his eyes Cloudhawk could feel the fount of the colossus' energy more clearly. It contributed energy to the monster like a torch contributed light, spreading it all throughout the colossus' body. Just like a torch, the light was brightest at the source.

This was it. *This is the place!*

Cloudhawk screwed all of his concentration together and focused on that single point. That single flickering point of torchlight got brighter and brighter. And then he fired.

The bowstring let loose!

The seven-foot long spear cut through the air with a harsh whistle. Straight and true the bolt buried itself into the hole carved out by the phoenix with a thud.

The sand colossus stopped, frozen still.

The humans stared at it with baited breath.

Eventually cracks began to appear along its sandy surface, and like a nightmare lost to the sands of time it began to crumble apart. Grains of sand were swept away on the wind and vanished altogether.

They did it! The monster was defeated!

A raucous cheer went up among the outpost defenders. The monster was completely destroyed!

“Cloudhawk, we got the mother fucker!” Artemis shouted at him, full of joy and relief. “One hell of a shot! How the hell did you do it?”

Cloudhawk could no longer feel the suffocating energy of the monster. The beast was no more, and tumbled away before them. But if he listened closely, the young wastelander could still hear something in the piles of sand.

His eyes grew hard. “Don’t celebrate yet!”

Artemis and the other soldiers stopped their jubilations and followed Cloudhawk’s eyes to the sand piles. At first all they could see was the sand shuffle and slowly dissolve...

...and then a dark figure appeared before their eyes.

The figure held the ballista arrow between two fingers. They pinched, and like a bolt cutter his fingers sliced through the several-inch thick metal like butter. The bolt

clattered to the ground in two pieces.

The shadowy figure slowly raised its head, completely unscathed. He paid no mind to Artemis, Cloudhawk or the others, and immediately brought his attention to the Bloodsoaked Queen. When he spoke his voice was strange and unsettling.

“You’re weak, even compared to your father.”

Chapter 88

Disastrous Defeat

When did he come to the wastelands?

Why did he come to this rotten place?

What was his real name?

How old was he?

These were all mysteries no one knew the answers to.

All they knew was that he held sway over an army of sweepers, and that he was one of the most powerful beings in all the wastelands. Everywhere he went sandstorms followed, so the people had come to call him Caliph of the Sands.

Since ancient times demons had been synonymous with chaos, war, turmoil and death. A thousand years ago they were locked in conflict with the gods and were defeated. However, although they were never able to recover, the forces of evil were never completely eradicated. They waited in the darkest corners of the earth, and where they emerged strife and disaster followed.

One of those legendary creatures stood before them now. It seemed so surreal. The demon's voice was strange, and though they saw where he stood it was difficult to tell precisely where his voice was coming from. It echoed over itself like it was being folded over and over, as though calling at them from the depths of a quiet valley. It sounded as though it were coming from every direction at once.

He was a little over six feet tall with a typical humanoid silhouette; a body, head and four limbs. Only the surface of his body was savage, hideous and pitch black. Coarse threads of crimson were etched along his skin that seemed to glow and pulse like blood vessels. It was a grotesque and uncomfortable sight to behold.

The beast's face was covered in a red mask – or, could it be called a mask? It wasn't placed on his face but seemed to have grown naturally over it. Except for the eyes there

were no holes or cracks in its smooth surface and the beast's silvery hair framed it, lending a strange contrast. A cloak covered most of his body. Probably his most striking feature was a pair of scarlet eyes, for when they fixed upon you it felt like they pierced through your soul.

When Cloudhawk looked at him he didn't feel like he was looking at a demon. It didn't feel like this was a living thing at all, but a doorway to the old times from whence issued a frigid breeze – like a portal to the depths of hell. That sinister and desolate sensation made all the humans shiver.

No wonder the living feared these creatures so completely. Looking on it was like peering into one's own nightmares.

The demon didn't bear any visible relics, but Cloudhawk could feel the resonance of them radiating from him. They appeared to be coming from his body, something that was starkly different from the demonhunters. Perhaps demons were capable of empowering themselves in such a way that they didn't need relics to wield supernatural power?

Anyway, that didn't matter right now.

Now that the demon appeared before them it didn't take someone with keen senses like Cloudhawk to know what they faced. Even Artemis, dull as her special senses were, could see how evident the monster's strength was.

Hostility poured from the Bloodsoaked Queen. Countless days and nights have passed as she searched for him, and in the process she'd suffered many tribulations and hardships. Yet despite setbacks her determination had never wavered, instead growing day by day.

She couldn't remember how many times she fantasized about the moment she would find him. She'd imagined cutting him down with her holy sword again and again, and now here he was in front of her. He was stronger than she'd imagined but it was no excuse to back down.

She was a *demonhunter*! To her kind there was no greater glory than to sacrifice oneself to destroy evil!

When she left the elysian lands she never expected to return alive. Victory or defeat, battling this tyrant of the wastelands was her fate.

Hummmmmmm! The Queen's hands shook, and a sword of holy splendor emerged!

"Ah, a sacred crossblade of light. It brings back memories." An expression of nostalgia crossed the demon's eyes. He gazed upon the wrathful Queen, himself perfectly calm. "I can feel your hatred. But you are too weak, young demonhunter. Your father couldn't defeat me, what do you expect to accomplish?"

Cloudhawk couldn't see her expression behind the mask, but he could sense the surge of murderous intent that came from the Bloodsoaked Queen. It was stronger than he'd ever felt before, vast and boundless like a storm, potent as a thunderbolt.

The Queen made her move. A resplendent light burst forth from her hands, and her holy sword audibly tore through the air. As she chopped her weapon in a vicious attack toward the demon, its roaring passage left a trench in the ground as it passed.

Everything within thirty feet was swallowed up in blinding light. The force ejected by the sword was like a furious rolling wave that threatened to obliterate anything in its path.

Young as she was, the Queen was a high-class demonhunter. There were few creatures alive that could withstand this attack. However, the demon was calm in the face of her lightning-fast onslaught. He raised his right hand, where hundreds of thousands of sand granules had begun to gather into the shape of a dull gold sword. The weapon's metal-like surface was covered in strange archaic symbols, and a cutting wind surrounded it.

Clang! The two swords met. In that moment there was an intense release of energy that burst out all around them. Their clash persisted for three seconds before the Queen's sword was knocked into the sky and detonated. It fractured into countless twinkling lights like a sea of stars, or fireflies floating in the breeze.

Cloudhawk's face darkened. Although he'd always known there was a significant power difference between the Queen and the Demon, it was worse than he'd thought.

The Demon knocked her attack away like it was some insignificant task. His red eyes swept over the remaining human forces quick as lightning and spoke to them in a calm and even cadence. "You have a choice. Submit, or be destroyed."

Before his words could disappear on the wind the Queen was soaring through the air, wielding her dazzling sword anew. She swung it at her foe with unbelievable speed

and power.

He stepped nimbly to the side like a specter and her dazzling sword of holy light struck nothing but air. The Queen swung her blade around and pummeled him with four or five more strikes that were almost too quick to follow, but the demon saw her every movement perfectly clear. Dual swords of sand and light met again and again, and each time they erupted in flares of pure energy and deafening blasts.

The spectators looked on in slack-jawed shock. Was this what it was like when the world's supreme powers battled each other? The wars of the wastelands were child's play by comparison!

Swinging her holy sword with unbridled rage the Bloodsoaked Queen poured every ounce of strength she had into the attacks. Once again her sword was blocked, and as the blasts of energy cast the monster's sand about they bit into the soldiers' faces like windswept daggers.

The Queen was already fighting with everything she had, but the demon deflected her blitz with just his hand, easy and proficient. "If you'd trained for another five years, perhaps humanity would have a great young demonhunter. Alas, you are left wanting!"

No matter how hard she swung at him the Queen's sword couldn't break his defense. This creature's grainy sword was as impenetrable as an iron curtain. It easily blocked and parried the Queen's rage-filled assault.

When the monster spoke, his voice did not contain any enmity or anger. Instead, it almost sounded like pity. His tone did more than make the onlookers uneasy. The Bloodsoaked Queen was a demonhunter! What was a demonhunter? As the name implied, they were masters at eradicating these evil creatures. Could this unholy monster feel pity for one determined to kill him?

Not only had the Queen been hunting him for a year all across the wastelands, she'd also killed all seven of his disciples! In her ears his disparaging temperament was an affront! A latent power burst from within her and her sword gleamed ever brighter. It was a blaze of daylight that threatened to cleave the night in twain. Cracks began to appear upon the demon's weapon. The Queen's sword might cut through his at any moment!

Just then, the vein-like channels along the demon's left arm flared with ominous light.

Sand began to gather. As his sword threatened to give way he thrust his palm toward the Queen, and a dozen dagger-like shards were whipped together into a deadly tornado heading her way. It struck with enough force to blow her backwards while the cutting sands dug into her flesh, leaving a bloody fog in its path.

Thud!

By the time she hit the floor the Queen was a bloody mess. She didn't even have strength to stand. The pure white cross necklace lay three feet from her, but all energy was gone from it. Inch by inch she groped for it, crawling piteously along the ground.

The demon heaved a sigh. He'd spent more energy today than he'd anticipated. However, the Queen was now spent. She could no longer fight. She was so young and full of potential, but coming out here on her own was foolish. How was this any different from suicide?

The others watched in horror and alarm. Cloudhawk especially couldn't imagine seeing the Queen so thoroughly beaten. In all the time they spent together no one had been able to stand in her way!

The demon brought his eyes around to the others once again. "What is your decision?"

"We surrender!"

"Don't kill me!"

One by one the doughty outpost warriors dropped their weapons. Seeing the strength of their foe, Artemis had also lost any taste for conflict. She spoke almost before she could think. "I surrender. This wasn't my decision – it was all the demonhunter's plan! Isn't that right, Cloudhawk...?"

There was no way the Bloodsoaked Queen could win. Other than surrender, what other option did they have?

Artemis turned to look for Cloudhawk's answer, but was surprised to find he wasn't there.

What was going on? He was just by her side, how could he just disappear?

Suddenly, something snatched up the bloodied Bloodsoaked Queen from the ground

and ran with her. She was spirited away fast as the wind, and in a blink she'd been carried dozens of feet away.

“Another demonhunter? No... no that's not right. This one is too weak.” The demon muttered to himself in bewilderment. What wastelander had the capability to use relics? As Cloudhawk fled the demon paid him little mind. There was no rush to follow, for with the monster's capabilities he could catch up without effort.

Chapter 89

The Showdown

The demon was too strong for the Bloodsoaked Queen. Cloudhawk's best option was to create as much distance between them as they could. He considered submitting before making his decision, though. He thought maybe he could beg for his life – he was no hero, no powerful warrior. He was just a scavenger who wanted to live.

But then a series of faces marched across his memory; Slyfox, Mad Dog, Woola, Cooke, and all the rest of the Tartarus mercenaries.

Mad Dog had given his life so they would have a chance.

Slyfox made Cloudhawk promise to avenge them moments before his death.

But now the one who was responsible stood before him – could Cloudhawk gain that vengeance? The answer was clear: No, he could not!

Ten Cloudhawks, a hundred Cloudhawks together wouldn't be enough to defeat this demon. But he couldn't bring himself to bend his knees and ask for mercy. He couldn't watch the demon murder the Bloodsoaked Queen before his eyes.

Artemis wouldn't understand his thinking. It was what made him different from every other wastelander – he couldn't ignore what was in his heart. He'd rather risk his life to save the Queen than sell his soul. He would have his revenge. The Queen couldn't die!

Cloudhawk poured all of his psychic energy into the invisibility cloak, which in turn boosted his speed so that he could try and flee the demon's grasp. Only, as Cloudhawk ran he could feel a sinister gale whip around him. Suddenly a dark figure blocked his path. The young man paled as he rushed headlong towards the monster's groping hand.

The demon was too fast. Cloudhawk couldn't get out of the way.

Cloudhawk could feel the power pulsing from the creature before him. It washed over

the boy and permeated every corner of his body, threatening to change every fiber of his being into grains of sand.

This power was several orders of magnitude stronger than the Queen's, Cloudhawk couldn't resist. Yet just as he was about to succumb something the demon did not expect occurred – a strange vacuum force was revealed within the wastelander's body.

“Hm?” Confusion flit across the demon's eyes as he explored what seemed like a black hole drawing in his power from within the child. It began to turn just as he was on the verge of transforming the child into a pillar of silt and drank deeply of the demon's power, even drawing from the demon's body himself.

A demon's eyes could see through clothing, so those hideous red orbs picked out the stone against Cloudhawk's chest through his armor. The once-ordinary stone was now bursting with blinding light as it neutralized enough power to kill Cloudhawk ten times over.

Cloudhawk himself was drenched in a cold sweat. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened, though. He'd felt the specter of death when he saved the Bloodsoaked Queen. In the darkness of his shack she'd nearly burnt him to a cinder with her burning angels. The stone had saved his life that night.

Cloudhawk didn't have time to sit there like an idiot and think of the past. Holding the Queen over his back with one hand he thrust his staff at the demon's chest with the other. The demon was of course more than capable of deflecting the boy's feeble attack... and yet, he seemed frozen in place, dumbfounded.

Bang! Cloudhawk put all his strength into the thrust, driving it into the demon's chest. In that instant his exorcist staff belched its power and sent the monster flying backward dozens of feet. However, despite the ragged appearance of the cloak that protected the demon, Cloudhawk's attack didn't seem to displace even a single thread.

That hit would have put any normal wastelander out of commission, but it didn't even wrinkle the demon's clothes. Unbelievable. Yet more surprising was that this child, with only minimal ability, was able to knock the demon back even when the mighty Bloodsoaked Queen couldn't land a single blow. The scene was nothing short of bewildering.

While the onlookers were shocked, Cloudhawk himself knew he had no hope to defeat

the demon. After creating some space between him and the monster he fled without thinking.

“How interesting...”

The demon slowly got back to his feet. There was a sinister glimmer in his scarlet eyes, but no one could fathom what was going through his mind. Ever so slightly he turned up his right hand to which the nearby piles of sand began to react. They gathered together to form a long half-moon shaped khopesh sword. Though made of sand it was sturdy enough to cut a slab of metal the size of a man in two.

The hellspawn brought his arm back, ready to throw the weapon when suddenly a bullet the length of a finger came tearing his way.

Crack!

The bullet struck the demon in the center of his chest. It didn't hit him with the same force as Cloudhawk's staff, so he only staggered backward a couple of paces. However, it was fast, sharp and compact, and fired from an upgraded sniper rifle that made it even deadlier.

Cloudhawk's exorcist staff hadn't done any damage, but this sniper bullet managed to insert two-thirds of itself into the monster – or, more accurately, into the shell-like armor that covered him. A cold and lethal light crept into the demon's eyes, but before he could react the second bullet was already on its way.

“Do you think these piddling human trinkets can harm me?” The demon reached out, and with his dark red nails plucked the bullet from the air. He stared toward where the attack had come from. His supernatural vision cut through the ruins to fix on a tall and slim figure who bore a lengthy rifle. After the second shot he was up and running.

With as much concern as one might remove a mosquito the demon pinched the bullet buried in his chest and pulled it free. It left behind a small indentation, but otherwise there was no indication it'd done any damage.

The wind began to violently blow. The demon rose into the air amidst the gusting winds, preparing to chase after the sniper. However he paused as he floated by Artemis. Without looking at her, he spoke. “You are the outpost's new leader?”

Artemis was overwhelmed by the menacing, ice-cold demeanor of the monster as he

drew near. She could feel droplets of nervous sweat trace lines down her cheeks. Any thought of confronting the demon was gone from her mind, and in fact all she could manage was a meek response. "I... I am."

"You shall have a chance to live." His words were cold as the grave. "The other two have not yet escaped. Find them, bring them to me. Whether you live or die depends on the success of this mission."

Artemis' eyebrows knit tight as she scowled. She was more than happy to kill the demonhunter, but Cloudhawk... her hesitation was evident.

At last the demon turned his head and looked at her. As its evil gaze fixed upon her, the hesitation fled from her heart like smoke in a tempest. She went from a fierce leopardess to a frightened kitten. All uncertainty and resistance vanished: "I will!" She waved her hands at the soldiers gathered nearby. "Let's go, find them!"

The demon said nothing more, rising into the air to pursue the figure that had fled into the darkness.

After taking two shots at the demon Mantis made for the relative safety of the night. As he fled he felt a strong breeze rise up from behind. He couldn't see what was coming from behind him, but Mantis knew the speed and power of his foe. He'd captured the attention of this monster. There was little chance of escape.

Mantis stopped and slowly turned around. His expression never changed, even as he saw the savage figure and his murderous red eyes approach. He looked back, perfectly calm.

The demon stopped a few feet away. For several seconds he looked the assassin up and down searchingly. They simply stared at each other this way for a time while a strange sense hung in the air.

At last the demon spoke, breaking the silence. "It really is you."

Mantis pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. "It's been a long time."

Discontent was thick in the demon's voice. "You've known for quite some time, I imagine?"

He was silent for a moment. "So then... what are you planning to do?"



Cloudhawk ran with wild abandon towards the outpost's exit. When he got there he saw it was thick with figures barring the path. He skidded to a halt and it was then he heard the footsteps catching up from behind. Artemis, hammer raised, was almost on them.

Cloudhawk stared at the predatory wasteland woman, glaring at her with a dark expression. "Artemis, do you have to kill us?"

She looked fiercely back at him. "You fuckin' *liar*! You said you wanted to stay, that you'd help me lead this place! You broke that promise when you decided to save the demonhunter's life."

Cloudhawk was speechless.

He couldn't remember agreeing to anything. He said he'd think about it!

"This is different. What's between me and the demon is personal. I can't just surrender." Cloudhawk shook his head. "It has nothing to do with you. Let me go!"

He ventured a step toward the exit, but the warriors that had surrounded them raised their weapons.

Artemis heaved her hammer high and rushed toward him. "The demon told me to bring you back. If you escape he's gonna kill me! I can't hold back this time, watch out!"

Cloudhawk leapt back and Artemis' hammer slammed into a nearby wall. The stone collapsed under the force. Half a second later she was back on the attack and swept her massive hammer toward him. He staggered to the side to avoid her.

"Then come *with* us!" Cloudhawk's face was grim. She wasn't playing. "The demon had this place now. You'd be nothing but a puppet, don't you understand? Is it better to live here under his rule than to come with us? We can find somewhere safe and start again!"

Chapter 90

Fleeing the Outpost

Artemis was strong, there was no denying that. Cloudhawk had no interest in fighting her. What's more, every second they delayed the danger grew. Once the demon caught up with them there was no chance of escape.

He hadn't spent a lot of time with this woman, but compared to the Bloodsoaked Queen they shared similar outlooks and values. They'd spoken about many things he could never discuss with the Queen, shared ideas she wouldn't understand. Their chats had brought him and Artemis closer, and at least Cloudhawk had no desire for it to come to this. In all the world Cloudhawk didn't have many friends, he considered Artemis one of them.

He continued to try and talk her down. "This world is big, I refuse to believe Greenland Outpost is the only place for us. I know that together we have the ability to find somewhere better. Why would you agree to be on that fucker's leash? Artemis, we can't waste time – come with us, quickly!"

The outpost soldiers that'd come with her brandished their weapons, ready to join the fight.

"Hold your ground! This kid is mine!" She wasn't going to take this from him. She allowed her hammer to slip from her shoulder and thud onto the ground as she glared his way. "You've been here so long and you and I haven't wrangled yet. You and me, one on one!"

"Does it have to be this way?"

"Cut the shit! Today one of us is dying!"

Artemis face was a mask of rage as she heaved up her hammer and charged at Cloudhawk. She bore down on him with deadly ferocity and every attack was intended to kill. If he was half a step late his bones would be crushed to powder. He didn't want it to be a fight to the death, but Artemis' attacks held nothing back. He couldn't just sit by and wait for death.

“Why don’t you ever fuckin’ listen!”

Anger swelled up in Cloudhawk as well. He thought Artemis might be different, but in the end she was willing to kill him to save her own life and keep leadership of the outpost. “Fine. If you wanna fight, then I’ll give you a fuckin’ fight!”

Artemis’ hammer came crashing down, like a meteorite from the heavens. If it hit Cloudhawk there would be nothing recognizable left. As power surged through his exorcist staff he brought it up to meet her hammer, and in the moment they collided that power was released to buffer her blow.

Clang!

He was knocked back fifteen feet and a nasty pain radiated from his wrist. He thought using the staff was more than suitable, but he was wrong. However there were only a few in the outpost – maybe even the wastelands – who could face down one of Artemis’ attacks and live.

This wasn’t how he was gonna die!

Cloudhawk’s improvements were evident, but he wasn’t going to survive this situation against Artemis on his own. Beyond her there were also scores of outpost soldiers closing in, and sooner rather than later that demon would return. If he didn’t find a way to get out now his chances of escaping were practically zero.

Thus with a plan to escape in mind Cloudhawk channeled his psyche through his cloak. Like a leaf floating on the breeze he dashed through the throng of outpost soldiers. Under orders from Artemis to hold their attacks, they weren’t sure what do.

“Fuck!”

Cloudhawk swung his staff and it whistled through the air so fast it left ripples in its wake. A handful of warriors were caught off guard and were smacked to the ground. With the Queen on his shoulder Cloudhawk leapt over them toward freedom.

“He’s getting away!” The soldiers were ready to give chase. “Get him!”

“Hold your fucking ground!” She stalked toward the pile of soldiers like a lioness. “I said he’s mine, and if any of you pieces of shit try to join in I’ll crush your fuckin’ brain pan!”

Artemis was a well-known name in the outpost. Her temper was famous, and they knew that once she was angry it didn't matter if you were friend or kin, you stayed out of her way. The soldiers all exchanged quiet, nervous glances but none of them dared disobey. If she wanted to smash every one of them into pulp she would, and she'd do it easily.

Cloudhawk's strength was surprising, but he wasn't a match for Artemis. She could easily deal with him herself!

The outpost warriors were left alone, dumbfounded and unsure what to do while Artemis and Cloudhawk disappeared.

With the help of his cloak Cloudhawk was fast, but he was also carrying someone and that affected his speed. Artemis wasn't a speed-focused metahuman, but her powerful legs helped her bound over terrain with impressive momentum. Soon she caught up.

Goddamnit! Is this woman really dead-set on fighting?

Cloudhawk stopped and spun around again, furious. Artemis was bearing down on him with her hammer raised while she threw something at him in her left hand. He thought it was some sort of weapon and made to dodge, but she'd thrown it slowly. As it came his way he saw that it wasn't a weapon, it was a syringe.

"Panacea?" Cloudhawk caught it instinctively. It was the last injection from Hydra's stash they hadn't used. "Artemis, this –"

She stared at him with hard eyes. "What the fuck is your dopey ass standing around for? Run!"

Suddenly he understood her intention. She'd been acting, there were too many soldiers around for her to simply let him go. If she'd tried the soldiers definitely wouldn't have let it happen. Artemis was helping him escape.

Only she was a shit actress!

Yes, she couldn't fake it so her attacks had to be real. Each attack would have turned his guts to soup, but they had to in order to keep her heart's desire secret. No one suspected anything, so when she went racing after him no one thought twice.

Cloudhawk heaved a sigh of relief then promptly injected the Queen with the panacea.

“Next time give me some sorta hint, would ya? I coulda been hurt!”

“You dipshit,” she spat. “You belong to me, you think I’m gonna kill what’s mine?”

Who would have thought that would be her answer!

If Clouthawk had been even a little bit slower, a little bit weaker, he’d have been straight up murdered. She hadn’t held back one bit!

The Bloodsoaked Queen started to recover immediately after the injection, but their foe had done a number on her. He didn’t think she’d be up for a fight any time soon. But even if she could, what would that accomplish? After such a brutal beating would she be ready for a second round?

Clouthawk blurted out. “Artemis, why are you helping me?”

“I told you – you belong to me. If I don’t help you, then who?” As they ran for safety she rolled her eyes at his silly questions. “Of course there’s another reason. The demon doesn’t know how that freak in black died, but once he figures it out you think he’ll go easy on me? I’m no idiot! I have to get the fuck outta here too!”

Truth be told that was probably the main reason!

Clouthawk thought back to their fight with the black-clad mutant. Artemis’ surprise attack was what slowed the freak down, and without her intervention Clouthawk absolutely would have been killed. The mutant was one of the demon’s seven henchmen, first among them. His status probably didn’t indicate ability but instead likely meant he was the first one the demon recruited. He had probably been the demon’s longest serving subordinate.

Once the demon found out his most important disciple had been killed by Artemis she could forget about breathing.

Right now even the demonhunter was up shit creek without a paddle, canoe or nose plugs. Greenland Outpost had no hope of being free. Unlike Salamander, Artemis hadn’t spent most of her life in the outpost, but it was where she’d spent her most formative years. She was unwilling to leave, but there was no other choice.

At least she still had Clouthawk, that cute little morsel.

When she thought about adventures with Cloudhawk she thought it wasn't such a bad life. As for the demonhunter that couldn't seem to do anything right, now that they saved her life they could tell her to fuck off!

Of course Cloudhawk didn't know Artemis' plans. The injection continued to work its way through the Queen's battered body, helping her heal. He knew she'd recovered consciousness already but until now she was mute as a log.

He didn't even need to think about it to know what was up. This time she'd suffered quite the blow.

Ever since coming to the wasteland the Bloodsoaked Queen had been practically invincible. The only people to get the drop on her had to use dirty tricks, traps or full-on sieges. Even back in the elysian lands she'd been the most talented among her peers! A demonhunter at eleven, an elite demonhunter at fourteen.

She was a singular talent the likes of which had never been seen, truly amazing. One after the other she broke every demonhunter record in the elysian lands. She was the only hunter with a chance to become a Master before thirty years old.

This was her history, and today she was pummeled into the dirt. A failure.

Her failure was so straightforward, so brutal. So *absolute!*

She'd given up her honor and her future to waste a year scouring the wastelands. In the end it was all a cruel joke. She couldn't even accomplish dying with the demon.

The Queen was too young, she'd never even participated in a proper demon hunt. Without that experience she didn't know what to expect, or how strong a demon was. If she were a little more sensible she'd remember that these monsters used to war with the gods themselves. They'd lost, but they were a race that could stand toe to toe against the most powerful being in the universe. Was that not enough to explain her problems?

Cloudhawk tried to comfort her. "Don't feel bad, it wasn't a complete loss. At least now we know how strong that fucker is. We'll find somewhere to hide, train for a few years then try again!"

The Bloodsoaked Queen shut her eyes, drained of all strength.

Before them stretched the oasis, barring the way to freedom.

Cloudhawk sighed at the sight, but no sooner did he allow himself to relax than all of his nerves went taught. His whole body shook, for he felt the waves of a relic's power permeating the air.

"Watch out above!"

He barely had time to shout before the cloud darkened from a hail of countless sandy arrows. They fell from the heavens like a plague of locusts, a deadly rain. And they were caught in the middle.

How strong was this monster? The scale of this attack was staggering!

Chapter 91

A Bitter Victory

As the arrows came at them from above, Cloudhawk and Artemis scattered. Cloudhawk carried the Bloodsoaked Queen into a copse of nearby trees, but not before a few of the arrows found him. They were as effective as any real arrow, but luckily he had his cloak to protect him from the bulk of the damage. By the time they were safe he was bruised from head to toe.

Son of a bitch! He's right on our asses!

Brandishing his staff the young wastelander glared into the forest. There a dark figure emerged, surrounded by a mist-like haze of sand. A strange, echoing voice hissed at him.

“Do you think you can run?”

The demon! The motherfucker was back.

The Queen's body was still recovering but she gripped her cross tight in her hand. Holy light radiated from it anew. Although she was already beaten bloody and subsequently wracked with pain from the panacea, she was still determined to die in combat.

After their first encounter she saw how inadequate she was before him, she was no fool. She didn't expect to win – but perhaps she could help Cloudhawk escape!

Everything, all of this had come about because of her. Getting him involved was an accident.

He's a good man with a lot of potential, maybe even more than me. Perhaps he can do what I've failed to accomplish. He has to get to safety, even if it kills me!

The demon's eyes were unblinking, like deep and ancient wells. He seemed capable of peering into one's heart. A strange chuckle issued from him like the quiet call of an owl, and as he extended his right hand the sand that surrounding him reshaped into an awl-pike suspended in midair.

The beast slowly extended his hand and the pike fired off like an arrow. The air warped in protest from its rapid passage.

The demon's target was not the demonhunter, or the new outpost leader that had betrayed him. It was the one between them, Cloudhawk. While they watched the pike none of them noticed the sandy tentacles creeping along the ground that held Cloudhawk fast. His legs and half of his body were quickly wrapped up, preventing him from dodging. He could do nothing but watch his doom approach.

Shit!

The Queen watched with wide-eyed dismay, for he knew it was already too late for her to protect him. The danger that pike presented would be fatal to her, much more so for the untrained Cloudhawk.

In this critical moment a lithe figure swept in front of the young man. Artemis swung her mighty hammer, knocking the sand pike from the air. But the indomitable power of the attack also broke her weapon into metal splinters and sent her flying like a kite with broken strings. Flesh and blood splattered over the peaceful green of the oasis.

Suddenly Cloudhawk's eyes turned a bloody red!

He broke free of the sandy tentacles like an enraged fiend. With a speed and strength he'd never displayed before the young wastelander charged forward.

The exorcist staff awakened! Its three-edged point spun like a tornado, followed by a fiery light that swallowed the whole area.

The exorcist staff was not a fire-element relic, but the intense friction it caused released heat. It was so extreme that the oxygen in the air caught fire. Cloudhawk had channeled all of his psychic power, all of his strength, all of his anger into his staff for this attack.

B-o-o-m!

Trees shook as concussive force ripped through the area, with buffeting winds tearing off chunks of bark and countless leaves. The demon did not dodge, did not flinch. He just stood with his open palm raised, the tip of Cloudhawk's smoking stave resting inert against its center.

“Respectable.”

The demon’s understated praise was punctuated with a gentle push of his hand.

Cloudhawk was launched away as though from a cannon and crashed into a tree.

The exorcist staff was flung to the side like so much detritus. When the demon looked down into his palm he noted cracks had formed around the point of impact and purple blood had begun to leak free. Less than two seconds later the bleeding stopped.

The Bloodsoaked Queen raced into the bushes where she found Cloudhawk convulsing on the ground. He was covered in wounds, but his glaring red eyes burned with murderous intent. The will remained but he hadn’t the power to lift himself up off the ground.

Several of his ribs were broken.

The damage wasn’t from the demon – the creature throwing him away could not be considered an assault. He’d done it to himself from overexertion. Berserker rage like this was rarely seen, he was like a wild dying animal. “Let go of me! I’m gonna kill him!”

This isn’t your fight, the Queen said to herself. It isn’t your war! This battle is for demonhunters!

She held him tight, tears mixed with blood streaming from beneath her mask. *This is my fault, it’s all my fault. My fault!*

The demon’s unblinking, unfeeling eyes watched everything. His hands began to accumulate power once again, but this time it was the Bloodsoaked Queen – blazing cross in hand – who stood to meet him. She fixed her enemy with an unyielding gaze. That pious holy warrior had returned.

Her sights never left the visage of her arch-enemy. “You can have my life, but you must let him go!”

He answered her with a curious expression writ on his face. “A demonhunter giving her life for a lowly wastelander? If your gods knew this they would be disappointed!”

She made no attempt to argue. She growled each word through gritted teeth. “Let. Him. Go.”

The demon's voice was cold as the depths of the grave. "In reality our world is a fair one. Bad decisions come with consequences. His death is not on my hands. Your stupidity, arrogance and pride is what killed him."

The Queen had no hope her request would be granted. The brutality of demons was well known, what mercy could she escape for those they deemed a threat? No, if she wanted to protect Cloudhawk the only way to do it was to fight with all she was worth. Perhaps she might harm him enough to dissuade the monster. She had to try, no matter the cost.

The Queen's holy sword blazed ever brighter. With her left hand resting on its pommel she channeled the power of her burning angels through it, turning its pure white light a fiery orange. The heat was so intense the grass around her withered and shriveled up.

"Very good. This is the proper posture for battle. Asking for mercy is a display of the weak." The demon reconstructed his sandy blade, held it tight in his grip. "As a reward I shall tell you something. Whether you believe me or not – I was not the one who killed your father."

"Do you think I would trust anything a demon says?"

"It doesn't matter. You are young, the world is not as simple as you think. Unfortunately you won't have an opportunity to learn this for yourself."

The Bloodsoaked Queen drew on all of her power, all of her potential, and swung her burning blade toward the demon in a vicious chop. A roiling plume of fire and smoke followed in its wake that lit the dark forest.

He lifted his sand-sword before him to block the attack. Strong as he was, confronted with the brunt of the Queen's potent faith he was forced back. The lapping flames started to burn and crack his sword of sand – but he could see cracks forming in hers as well.

The sound of something snapping filled the air! Both the demon's sandy blade and the Queen's burning holy sword shattered!

The demon reeled, his body peppered with wounds. They leaked a viscous purple fluid that did not stop. This time the Queen's attack had wounded him.

But it was not enough! Still not enough! A few superficial cuts meant nothing to this nightmare.

The Bloodsoaked Queen fought for breath as the cross slipped from her fingers and fell gently into the grass. Despite being covered in her blood it still gleamed with blinding light.

The demon slowly lifted his arms whereupon wicked spikes protruded all over his body. "Are you prepared?"

She forced herself to quit panting and stood tall like the image of the goddesses of old. Even though she was covered in blood and faced an impossible situation, she stared at her conqueror with adamant courage.

Cloudhawk fought back onto his feet. "Stop!"

The demon paid him no mind. He pressed forward with a hand and the spikes were cast forth. Sharp as daggers they pierced the Queen, some even running her through and bursting out the other side.

Cloudhawk watched with wide, stupefied eyes as the strongest warrior he'd ever know collapsed to the floor. It was like watching his whole world crumble. From Mad Dog and Slyfox to Artemis and the Queen, everyone he'd ever known was gone.

As the demon recovered he looked upon Cloudhawk, peculiar fluctuations rippled through its pupils. "Are you... angry? Do you feel hate? Indignation? Humiliation? Let those emotions free, let me see the depths of your potential!" [1]

Cloudhawk didn't have his staff, it was lost somewhere in the grass. Instead he rushed over toward the glimmering cross and snatched it from the ground. A relic this powerful was outside of Cloudhawk's abilities to command, but he didn't think about it. His mind was caught in a white-hot rage where nothing existed except going forward even in the face of death.

It didn't matter how strong or how fierce he was, this demon *had to die!*

In the midst of his blinding rage the stone resting against his chest once more began to resonate. A psychic pulse a hundred times stronger than Cloudhawk's own poured into the cross and vibrated with it. When the holy sword reappeared it was so bright it was like the sun appeared in the middle of the dark forest. Everything was bathed

in light.

The light was a column of dazzling power that pierced the heavens. Even the soldiers far away in the outpost could see it splitting the night sky.

A fervent light sparked in the demon's dead eyes. "Good... very good!"

Cloudhawk swung the sword.

The demon reacted by lifting his hand, and the sand around him reconstituted into four or five walls. When the light came crashing down it split them like paper before finally devouring the demon himself. The power struck the beast head on, pushing back thirty feet until – with a shrill and terrible scream – the beam drilled through him.

"Die!"

Cloudhawk heaved the sword high then brought it crashing down again. The demon was cut into two halves, with the light of the holy sword disappearing the moment it split him. Cloudhawk slumped to the ground, supporting himself on hands and knees as he gulped breaths.

He was dead. Finally, dead! At last that fucking demon was gone!

Only, Cloudhawk didn't want to accept what it had cost.

1. This is similar to the exchange between Cloudhawk and Stranger Black, perhaps indicating how much the demon builds a cult of personality. Or it could just be the author likes this method of taunting.

Chapter 92

A Cunning Game

The column of light split the night then disappeared, all in less than three seconds. The severed halves of the demon lay in a pool of blood. All of it happened so fast... it was inconceivable that this invulnerable enemy could be laid low by the weak and insignificant Cloudhawk.

Despite her terrible injuries and the blinding pain, the Bloodsoaked Queen was still conscious. She couldn't believe what had occurred before her very eyes. The beast was so powerful, and yet Cloudhawk had killed him. How had the young wastelander done it?

Yet that wasn't what confused her most. How was she even still alive, much less alert? It made no sense that she should survive after being impaled by the demon's spikes!

As she examined the damage the Queen discovered something odd. While the demon's attacks had run her through they had also completely avoided any major organs. Stranger still, it didn't sever any important arteries or even bone. They had slipped through her body with perfect precision.

What was going on? Did the demon spare her life? Had he done it just to infuriate Cloudhawk?

She found it difficult to accept, but what other alternative was there? It couldn't have been a coincidence, could it? Why would the demon do this, why wouldn't he kill her? She was a demonhunter – they were mortal enemies!

Was his aim to humiliate her? That didn't make any sense! Demons didn't trouble themselves with such nonsense.

What's more the demon had recognized her potential. Why would he risk letting a future master demonhunter live? If she survived to become a full-fledged hunter, even if she didn't come for him she would put down other fiends like him. His actions just didn't fit the essence of who he was!

The Bloodsoaked Queen painfully pulled herself back onto her feet. Though these wounds would have been fatal to a normal person, she would recover. Moreover the effect of the panacea was still working through her body, so she didn't need to take any special measures except to pull the spikes out.

Dozens of finger-sized wounds oozed blood, but after a minute they stopped. Her flesh was slowly knitting itself back together before her eyes thanks to the panacea. Despite the number and severity of the injuries, with the help of the injection they would be gone in ten days to half a month. She'd be back to fighting condition.

Panacea was a medicine that drew on a person's potential, essentially overdrafting the body's own function. The Queen had used three of them over a very short period which could make the rebound effects worse. There was a risk it could cause long term damage that would be difficult to recover from. Now that her mission was done she would need to rest for at least a couple months.

She stood on unsteady feet and looked at Cloudhawk. "How were you able to summon that kind of power?"

The Queen's cross sword was an heirloom relic. Not only did one need a particular level of talent, even her father would have found it difficult to command the holy sword like Cloudhawk just did. How many secrets did this kid have hiding up his sleeves?

When he saw the Queen standing, Cloudhawk's face lit up. "You're alive?"

She looked back at him, speechless.

"Artemis... where's Artemis?!"

He remembered how she threw herself in front of him, but when he found her Cloudhawk discovered that she hadn't been as lucky as the Queen. In deflecting the blow her hammer had detonated, spewing hot metal in all directions. Many of them tore through her own body.

He knelt beside her and saw that her chest was a bloody ruin. Several of her organs had been critically damaged.

Artemis didn't have any healing capabilities, and she'd given the last panacea injection to the Queen. They didn't have anything to help her, no method to bring her back. She

saw the concern and anxiety on his face and smiled through the mask of blood. “You idiot, you should see your face.”

“Don’t worry, this is nothin’.” Cloudhawk wrapped Artemis in his arms and pulled her close. “We’ll go back to the outpost and find Mantis. He’ll fix you right up, you just hold on!”

Artemis’ pretty face was decimated and covered in blood. She coughed and tried to speak with him through a rigid windpipe. “N-... No. Don’t waste your effort. I’m not gonna make it.”

“We killed the demon!” Cloudhawk’s eyes were red and puffy. “Didn’t you say you were gonna lead the outpost with me? I agree, you live and we’ll be here together to make it our own. We’ll turn it into a real paradise, okay?”

“You know I thought about it, the outpost isn’t what you’re lookin’ for. I can’t be selfish and force you to stay here.” Artemis scowled against the bitter words. “Motherfucker, I think... I think I really fell for you. Such a... such a shame...”

She lifted a shaking hand and placed it upon his cheek. As her strength failed her and her hand dropped she left five stark red streaks against his skin. It fell limp to the ground as Artemis serenely shut her eyes, a small smile on her face.

Cloudhawk stared dumbly at the body cooling in his embrace. His mind was blank, but it felt like something had been taken from deep inside his soul. It was a pain unlike anything he’d felt before.

Artemis was dead, another in a line of people who had given their lives for him.

From Slyfox to Mad Dog to Artemis, as he grew the weight of their sacrifice was crushing him. Every step was wrought with pain and helplessness, with nowhere for him to escape. All he could do was shoulder this suffocating burden and honor them by spending his days getting stronger.

Was this the price of growing up? The price of seeking something better?

With her hands pressed against the wounds in her stomach, the Queen walked on shaking legs to Cloudhawk and the corpse he held. The look in her eyes was equal part guilty and uncomfortable. “Are you... are you alright?”

Cloudhawk didn't respond. He lifted Artemis body and walked into the trees.

"Cloudhawk..." She called after him.

He acted like he didn't hear, focusing on putting one step in front of the other back toward Greenland Outpost. The Queen tried to follow but her wounds slowed her down. In the end she just watched him disappear into the darkness.

He hates me!

She felt a pressure on her chest that made it difficult to breathe. She was filled with a harsh and bitter sensation, for she knew that while the demon was the culprit, she had provoked him. Her ignorance and arrogance led to the destruction of Blackflag Outpost. Her folly and obsession was the doom of the Tartarus mercenaries. Her actions in the Greenland Outpost forced Cloudhawk to watch Artemis die before his eyes.

In the end the demon was slain.

Ironically it was the worthless wastelander, the boy she'd looked down on this whole time, who had killed her enemy. What did she do? She hadn't harmed a hair on him – she hadn't done a single thing right since coming to the wastelands!

The Bloodsoaked Queen sadly learned that every decision she'd made had been the wrong one.

Ever since fleeing the Blackflag Outpost, suffering the slings and arrows of fate, her pride and self-esteem had been eaten away. All that was left was introspection and regret.

She stumbled over to where the demon's body lay and her eyes swept over the blackened pieces. She found several things, namely a book with a pale yellow metal cover and a roll of parchment made from some animal skin.

The book had to be the demon's relic.

She picked up the book and unrolled the parchment to see its contents. Scrawling handwriting covered its surface, and when she read them the Queen's face changed. Her hands curled into fists as for ten minutes she stood in contemplative silence. Then, using the tree trunks for support, she limped off.

What she did not witness was that after she left, what remained of the demon began to change. The bloody sheen dried away until the pieces were like rock. They dissolved into fragments of sand and blew away on the breeze leaving nothing behind.

Just then, standing atop the partly ruined Greenland Fort...

Two figures stood side by side. One was a tall thin man with a pallid face, messy hair and glasses. Physically he seemed very ordinary, but his personality was that of a learned figure – cold and distant – very atypical for the wastelands. Beside him was a strange and savage figure, easily over six feet tall with burning red eyes. Their vision, far better than any normal human, watched Cloudhawk slowly approach from the Oasis.

Mantis spoke in his typical drab tones. “What do you think?”

“My sand doppelganger has less than half the strength I possess, yet I didn’t expect him to defeat it. Extraordinary, really.” The demon’s deep, echoing voice was filled with curiosity. “The boy has potential. It is no wonder he is the chosen one.”

“You did not kill the demonhunter,” Mantis remarked. “Why?”

“I find her interesting, there is much about her that is special – different from the others of the elysian lands. She might serve as a malleable pawn, and if played properly she could be quite useful.” He didn’t appear to mind the question. “In saving her life we may be pleasantly surprised. It will certainly make things more amusing. Of course, in your eyes, ancient one, this flourish is hardly noteworthy. You know, you are easily both the maddest and wisest man I’ve met. We should play this game together.”

“Please don’t confuse me with your kind. We aren’t the same, and neither is our purpose. If necessary we will be enemies.”

Mantis’ cold voice held nothing back. “He was able to sense your energy. If you don’t leave you’ll be discovered.”

A glint flashed in the demon’s eyes. “Just think about my offer.”

Chapter 93

The Queen's Gifts

The sun's gleaming light faded as the day waned, becoming a golden disc peaking over the horizon. Its luminescence dimmed as it fought through the haze of sand and grit in the air. As sunset kissed the outpost its dying rays played over the remains of Greenland Fort. In the golden red hue it looked especially noble.

On one side of the ruins...

The late hour stretched the shadows of tombstones long against the ground. A young man in tattered clothing bent over an unmarked grave and placed a flower at its base.

Cloudhawk's face and body were scabbed over, and his ribs that were broken in the fight against the demon were set. Although his condition was not a pleasant one he would be fully recovered in three to five days. Or, at least recovered enough that it wouldn't affect moving around.

But Artemis was dead. There was no changing that fact.

Cloudhawk stood before the grave for a long time in silence, unsure of what to do next. Greenland Fort was finally free – there was no one to enslave them, no puppet at its helm. At last Greenland Outpost belonged to its people. Only, Cloudhawk didn't intend to stay.

With Artemis' death Cloudhawk had no friends here. More importantly, though, he found that Greenland Outpost wasn't where he wanted to be. It was a flower blooming in a desert of evil, but the hearts of its people were twisted. Killing was the way of life, and even though Hydra was dead another Hydra would surely take his place. The sweeper leader was dead, but inevitably they would install someone else to guide their massacres. The wastelands weren't going to change in a day, it probably wasn't going to change at all. Peace and safety wasn't part of the fate of this cursed land.

Cloudhawk had made up his mind. He had to leave the wastelands, to follow the dream that had been carved on his spirit since he was a child.

The sound of footsteps approached from behind. Cloudhawk didn't need to turn his head to know who it was.

She walked with both hands on a walking stick to support her weight. Her mask was missing leaving her beautiful features exposed to the world; clear eyes, high nose bridge, small mouth, and elegant black hair that fell to her shoulders in a silken waterfall. Her shimmering tresses flitted with the breeze lending her a luxurious air.

Who could imagine that this seventeen-year-old girl, who looked barely able to withstand a stiff breeze, turned into the infamous Bloodsoaked Queen when she put that demon mask on.

Her skin was smooth and pristine as jade ^[1]. Maybe it was because she was weak, or from a lack of blood ^[2], but she was certainly more pale than normal. The wrinkle in her brow spoke of nagging pain and melancholy.

The effects of the panacea injection were still working through her body, but her wounds were serious and thus recovery was even more difficult to endure. Even so she hardly showed it on her face. Step by unstable step, she slowly approached where Cloudhawk was standing.

When she came nearer Cloudhawk finally turned his head. She looked back at him, tranquil and bathed in dying light like she'd just stepped out of a painting. She seemed completely out of place among the gritty, crumbling ruins.

She'd replaced her clothing with the crude and simple garb of the wasteland. Bandages covered her in a dozen places and outlined her curves. He wasn't sure whether or not it was because the mask was missing, but that arrogant and domineering air didn't seem to follow her around anymore.

Cloudhawk turned back toward the unmarked grave. "What are you doing here?"

Without the mask her voice was clear and melodious. "Can't I come pay my respects?"

"You should be recovering." Cloudhawk didn't know what to say to her. She seemed different now, like the battle with the demon had affected her deeply. Or maybe something else changed, she seemed more restrained and introverted now after surviving that catastrophic battle. The young demonhunter had experienced much, perhaps she'd grown up.

The young woman looked at the mound, at Cloudhawk quietly standing over it. They stood close, but it felt like they were a thousand miles away from each other. "I'm sorry," she said in a quiet voice.

Cloudhawk didn't think those words would ever come out of the Queen's mouth. She really had changed – but was her apology a good thing or a bad thing?

"Ah, there's nothing to apologize for." He sighed and looked off into the dimming horizon. "A lot of what happened comes down to fate. The demon's dead. You've avenged your father, and I've avenged Artemis, Slyfox and the others. Yes, everything that's happened was because of you... but it's done."

The Bloodsoaked Queen was quiet for a few moments before she spoke again. "Are you preparing to leave the outpost?"

"Yeah. Once I'm healed." Cloudhawk nodded. "It's not bad here, but in the end it's not where I should be. I've put it off too long with all this, it's time to hit the road."

"I have some things I want to give you." It was then he noticed the mask and several other items resting in her hands. She gave them all to him. "Please take them. They'll help you."

She's giving me gifts? Isn't this her mask?

He didn't know what use the mask served, but he knew it was something the Queen kept on her at all times so it had to be important. It seemed to be made out of some special material as well, for despite all the many battles she faced in the wastelands there wasn't a scratch on it.

Besides the mask she'd also given him a book with a pale yellow metal cover and a strange token.

Cloudhawk looked at the book first. Its style seemed ancient, and its cover was engraved with the scene of a vast desert. The closer he looked the more it seemed like the scene was actually moving, like it was alive.

It pulsed with powerful resonance. A relic, and judging by the energy it released it was no less powerful than the Queen's cross – maybe even stronger.

The token had indecipherable script and symbols etched on the sides. He figured it

was one of her personal items.

“I’m sure you feel it. That book is called the Gospel of Sand. I took it from the demon’s corpse.”

“Demons use relics?”

“Demons were once the greatest enemies of the gods. Their powers used to be very similar. The relics that demonhunters employ were gifts from the gods, and in the same vein demons created relics of their own. However the way they use them is unique, employing different methods to seal them in their bodies. When we slayed the demon one of its relics was all that remained.”

Cloudhawk furrowed his brow. “Only one? Where are the rest?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Although it’s just a piece it is a very famous and important relic. Taking it proves you’ve bested a demon.” She then pointed to the token. “As for that, it’s the token that identifies me as a demonhunter. It will allow you to travel through the territory of Skycloud without trouble, and it’s also my recommendation for you to meet the Governor.”

Cloudhawk was at a loss. “Why would I want to meet him?”

“The Governor of Skycloud is my uncle,” she said. “If you bring my token and that relic to him, it’ll prove you’ve killed a demon. I’m sure that with my uncle’s prestige and influence, and the fact you’ve killed a demon, you could live the rest of your life in the elysian lands and want for nothing. You said you were looking for a pure land without pain or conflict, right? That’s where you’ll find it.”

Cloudhawk looked at the three items he held in his hands. He felt moved and grateful for her treasures.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had made many errors, but to swallow her pride and say these things to Cloudhawk couldn’t have been easy.

“What about this?”

“That mask was made for me by my father. Don’t mistake it for a normal item, it’s also a relic.” She gently ran her hand along the hideous scowling demon mask, and in an instant it became a white smiling face. In the space of a blink it was like an entirely

different item. “This is my personal gift to you. For a friend. Sometimes you rush things, and whether in battle or with people this mask will help you avoid trouble. Take it.”

It certainly was a special relic.

Cloudhawk had sensed that the Queen carried another relic, but it was unique somehow. The resonance from it was weak, too faint for Cloudhawk to pick it out before. This must have been what he was feeling!

Most surprising of all was how different the Queen was now. The prideful woman he’d known was gone, and overnight she was someone else. He was speechless.

He just stared at her. She looked away.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

He reached his hand out, as though to touch her and make sure she was real. “Are you really the Bloodsoaked Queen? Are you a copy or something?”

Slap!

Cloudhawk felt the sting in his hand and he yanked it back. She hadn’t struck him lightly and the back of his hand was already getting red and swollen. The embarrassment gave rise to irritation. “Why the hell did you hit me?!”

She brandished her walking stick, suddenly very much like the old Queen. “We may be friends but don’t think for a minute about getting physical with me! This time it was a warning, next time I’ll snap your arm.”

“Friend?!” Cloudhawk snapped back. “Is this how you treat your friends?!”

She sniffed at him, spun on her heels and left. However she wasn’t nearly as rigid or stuffy, and the faintest trace of a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Cloudhawk didn’t bear her any grudges. In the year that she’d spent in the wastelands, meeting this kid was the one good thing that had happened to her.

Fraternizing with wastelanders was a serious violation of the demonhunter code, but she’d broken so many of their rules already. What was one more? Before, having such thoughts would have terrified her, but after a year in the wastes had her time here

corrupted her will and soul?

The Bloodsoaked Queen remained true to her faith, that went without question. Only, she wasn't sure how to deal with her own heart.

Cloudhawk sighed and rubbed his hand. At least he was sure of one thing – she was still the Bloodsoaked Queen. He turned back and looked down at the unmarked grave. “Artemis, rest easy. I'll see you again someday.”

1. Jade can come in a milky white color, another Chinese standard of beauty every woman desperately seeks to attain. My persona theory is that cases of anemia are high in China in part because anemic women are very pale and thus more highly sought after. For comparison the rate of anemia in the US is ~10%, and ~20% in China.

2. See he knows what I'm talking about

Chapter 94

Determined to Depart

Concealed in the silent night, several large men gathered in a bar conspiring with each other. One of them was relatively smaller than the others, but made up for it with a particularly cruel face. There was a flash of metal, a thud, and suddenly a nasty looking dagger was lodged in the table between them.

“Brothers! It’s a fine opportunity!” His malicious, wolf-like eyes swept over the others. “Hydra is dead and so is that woman. There isn’t anyone left to lead, so chaos is soon to follow. It’s finally our time!”

Excitement gleamed in the other men’s faces. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity, for with Hydra and his henchmen dead who was left to oppose them?

One of the men seemed less than convinced. “Ratscratch, boss, aren’t you forgetting the demonhunters? They killed a damn demon!”

“Demonhunters? Pah!” Disdain dripped from Ratscratch’s response. “Demonhunters won’t be here much longer. Now that the Caliph of the Sands is gone I suspect they’ll be leaving the outpost sooner rather than later.”

He wasn’t wrong. The demonhunters wouldn’t chose to live here, after all.

Ratscratch’s beady eyes glinted with an ominous light. “But there’s no time to waste. We gotta take control of the fort as quick as possible. I got eyes in the fort that tell me the demonhunters are wounded, so now’s our best chance to sneak in and put ‘em down.”

The others stared at him, shocked. Attack the demonhunters? He was crazy! Demonhunters were immeasurably stronger than Hydra had been. It was suicide!

Another one of Ratscratch’s subordinates chimed in. “We’ve all seen what the demonhunter can do. If she’s still got even a tenth of that power left she can easily handle all of us. It’s too dangerous.”

“Fuckwit! Why would we attack head on? Poison, ambush, traps... we already gathered some toxic spores and made a powder. All we gotta do is to find a way to sneak into where they live and slip it in their water. Poison doesn’t give a shit how strong you are.” Ratscratch’s face twisted into a nasty expression. “We got hundreds of brothers and the fort’s in ruins. They don’t got enough people to keep it locked down. All we gotta do is kill *two people*, and the whole outpost is ours! Relax, it’s under control. Once our people do their job we’re on the move.”

The others were uncertain, even fearful, but it was hard to conceal their greed. When Ratscratch’s eyes swept over them they were filled with awe.

Ratscratch was a well-known figure in the outpost. Now that Hydra, Artemis and Salamander were gone there was almost no one to stand in his way. As for the demonhunter and – what, her apprentice? They were outsiders, they didn’t have any clout here. What did it matter if they were strong? Sometimes in the wastelands it was better to know how to fight dirty than be strong.

“Alright!”

“We’re gonna beat the shit out of ‘em!”

“I’m with you, boss!”

Like gamblers they were all in.

If they could take the fort it didn’t even matter if they couldn’t hold the whole outpost. If the territory split they would at the very least be the major influence. Women, food, drinkable water – who would be there to stop them from carving it up for themselves?

Ratscratch nodded his head in satisfaction and picked up his glass. “Relax, brothers. Win or lose we do this together!”

The simple cups clinched together in a toast, sending alcohol splashing.

Now that the decision was made Ratscratch began his preparations. None of his ambitious men were going to back away from an opportunity like this. Besides Ratscratch was getting on in years, he didn’t want to throw away this precious moment. It was probably his last chance to turn things in his favor.

If there was one thing the wastelands didn’t lack it was scoundrels. Ratscratch wasn’t

the only one with spies keeping an eye on Greenland leadership. If he wanted to take it for himself he had to be faster than them. The earlier he moved, the better.

“Number two, get fifty men together and set ‘em up to ambush the fort. Number Three, fifty men with crossbows to give ‘em cover. The rest of you are under my command, once we get the signal we’re on the move.”

“You got it!”

Everything rested on this operation!

After deploying his lieutenants Ratscratch started making arrangements. He was practically buzzing with fervor and excitement, like he was in his twenties again. He was already fantasizing about life as leader of the outpost!

But then an intense sense of disquiet filled him.

Ratscratch was near the bottom of the barrel when it came to the outpost’s elite, but he was a veteran of the wilderness. This experience had developed the instinct of a wild animal, a nose for danger!

He didn’t know where the danger was coming from but a sound from somewhere tipped him off. He flung himself to the side.

But it was too late!

A bullet shattered a nearby window and half a moment later a hole appeared in the back of Ratscratch’s head. It drilled through his right eye, leaving a ragged tunnel as it exploded out and buried itself in the wall behind him.

Ratscratch hit the ground rigid as a board. Just a moment ago he had been filled with spirit and gusto. One second later he was dead, the victim of a shooting.

“Sniper!”

Ratscratch’s men were all old hats around the outpost, so when their leader was shot down they didn’t panic, or get enraged or afraid. The first thing they did was hit the deck to protect themselves from becoming the next victim.

Six hundred feet away from the bar, nestled in a pile of inconspicuous rubble, the

sniper pulled back the rifle's bolt which kicked out the spent casing. The shooter slowly readjusted his aim. The rifle was a special wastelands rifle, every component of it handmade and crude. Its bullets were high caliber. It lacked a scope and the shooter was guided only by the iron sights fixed to the end of the barrel. A gun like this definitely required a skilled marksman to use properly for it lacked anything to help with aim or control, much less hit a target hundreds of feet away.

One bullet, one target down.

The shooter didn't rush to leave. The sights moved toward the front door.

One of Ratscratch's men slowly rose to his feet and cautiously opened the door, preparing to make a run for it. But the sniper was fast as a bolt of lightning, and the moment the door opened just a crack he pulled the trigger.

The sharp report of the rifle rang out once more.

This bullet ripped through the wall and into the common room where it buried itself in the man standing by the door. As it ripped through his waist the man toppled to the ground and began to scream. He clearly wasn't going to make it.

The rat pack only had three rodents left.

Now they knew where the sniper was. When the second shot fired they leapt out of the window, abandoning cover and racing toward where the sniper was hiding.

It didn't take them long to reach the spot where he'd been hiding, where they found a blanket he must have been using to remain in cover. A shadow caught their eye from the ruins.

"Get him!"

The three men lifted their weapons and gave chase. They spread out, looking for any trace of the sniper. One of them suddenly felt a hand clamp down on his mouth, and then the cold kiss of steel as a dagger opened his throat.

The other two sensed something was wrong and whipped around toward their dead comrade.

Their compatriot had collapsed, eyes wide and mouth gasping for breath like a fish

out of water. Only his attacker had vanished back into the shadows. The last two men standing immediately stood back to back and stared with wide-eyed fear and surprise at the darkness.

Whoosh!

A black figure swept by.

In his passage a dagger whipped out and planted itself in one's throat. The unfortunate soul clutched his neck and hit the ground. When the shadowy assassin's feet hit the ground he swung around and lunged at the final thug with a staff that had a three-edged spike at the end.

"Die!"

Ratscratch's last henchman was as shocked as he was infuriated. He heaved his weapon and flung himself forward. Their weapons met in the darkness three or four times with neither taking the upper hand. Then, just as the warrior was preparing to go on the offensive he heard the assassin's weapon whir.

His weapon was ripped apart like it was made of paper! The last thing he felt was a vicious energy tear through his chest.

That was how Ratscratch's fledgling rebellion was ended.

Cloudhawk wiped the blood clean from the tip of his exorcist spear, then turned to look at the person behind him. "What do you think?"

A tall, thin figure was half hidden in the shadows. He seemed almost like a part of the darkness, and if he remained still it would be almost impossible to know he was there. Mantis slowly emerged, surveyed the corpses, then offered his evaluation.

"Very average."

Cloudhawk shrugged.

Over the last several days Cloudhawk's injuries had recovered well. He'd wanted to learn a few new skills before setting out again, so he took the Queen and Mantis as his teachers. From one he learned the basics of close-quarters combat, and from the latter the skills of the assassins and surgeons.

The situation in Greenland Outpost was growing more unstable by the day. Several groups had started to instigate the turmoil for their own gain.

Mantis used his skills to locate these troublemakers then arranged for Cloudhawk to deal with them as a means of training. Although he wasn't even half the assassin Mantis was, his skills at murder had improved impressively over the last few days.

Cloudhawk swung his arms, loosening the muscles. "Seems like the outpost has been mostly cleared of thugs, and my wounds are about healed. I think it's about time I got out of here."

Mantis looked at Cloudhawk, who was wearing the Queen's mask. "Are you sure you want to go to the elysian lands?"

He nodded. "Definitely."

"It isn't the flawless place you think it is." Mantis' voice was flat as ever. "I suggest you remain in the wastelands, but some lessons require that we experience them first hand in order to learn them more deeply."

"This fuckin' guy, always so cryptic. Can you talk straight for once?"

Cloudhawk didn't get where Mantis was coming from. Now that he'd made up his mind to go no one was gonna stand in his way. Greenland Outpost was left to Mantis, because weird as he was the assassin was at least reliable. So long as he was in charge things wouldn't fall apart.

Chapter 95

Traversing the Wilds

Cloudhawk slowly practiced the postures taught to him by the Bloodsoaked Queen in Greenland Fort's training room. He was now able to reach the fifteenth stance of this exercise used to condition a demonhunter's body – an improvement over his performance prior to his injuries. It showed that Cloudhawk was getting stronger. The better he got the slower and more purposeful the stances became, taking several hours for only three repetitions.

He was absolutely exhausted by the end. He stopped, covered in sweat and breathing heavily.

Seven days had passed since the battle with the demon and his wounds were no longer a concern. In fact there was hardly any indication he'd been wounded at all. The time for him to leave Greenland Outpost and leave for the elysian lands was near.

The young wastelander hefted a metal bound yellow tome in his hands. He looked at the cover whereupon the scene of a vast desert seemed to undulate beneath his gaze.

The demon's relic; the Gospel of Sand.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had given him this relic as a trophy to symbolize his victory over a demon. With it, and the identifying token given to him by the Queen, he would be granted passage through the territory of Skycloud and favor from her family. At the very least he would be accepted into the elysian lands, and maybe even given the honor of becoming a demonhunter. Then at last he could leave the wastelands behind.

Only Cloudhawk didn't see the Gospel of Sand as a mere trophy!

If this was one of the demon's greatest relics it must mean a fair amount of his power came from it. To Cloudhawk it meant the thing had to be very useful.

The restrictions and classifications demonhunters put on relics meant nothing to him. He could use whatever relic he wished, from the Queen's holy cross of light to the invisibility cloak and the exorcist staff. The book he held in his hands should be no

different.

Ripples of power wafted from the book as it resonated with his psychic energy. A faint and inexplicable power suddenly permeated the air.

Cloudhawk was still weak and using the Gospel of Sand was a difficult task. However he persisted, and eventually the tome began to respond. It started to shake – so imperceptibly that no human sense or scientific method could detect it, but with such resonance that it reacted to the fundamental threads that constituted matter.

It was too difficult! It felt like it weighed a thousand pounds!

Dripping with sweat Cloudhawk fought on, pouring ever more psychic energy into the effort until at last the Gospel awoke. The frequency of those threads changed, thrummed in a different pattern, and thus matter began to change. At last the Gospel of Sand revealed its power.

A gust of wind rustled through the training room. Fine granules of dust danced in the breeze.

Eventually sand covered most of the spacious training room like a self-contained sandstorm, dancing in time with Cloudhawk's will. However his stamina was quickly drained and the weightlessness was stripped from the room. The dust and grit fell back to earth to cover the training hall's floor with a thin film of sand.

Is this how the demon controlled the sandstorms? Cloudhawk could barely summon a breeze!

The demon's storms had swallowed up the outpost while Cloudhawk's hardly filled a room. Still, it answered his question; the book was definitely useful. Only, he was still too weak to call its full potential.

Cloudhawk suspected that if he managed to become as strong as the demon he could also summon a titan of sand. He'd be able to defend himself capably against anyone, probably even a whole army!

It certainly earned its reputation as a famed relic! It was one hell of a tool!

Cloudhawk was putting the book away when the sound of footsteps caught his attention. He looked up to find the Bloodsoaked Queen in the doorway. Her wounds

were not entirely healed but she no longer needed the cane to help her walk. She still looked weak and haggard, but had already recovered a third of her fighting ability. She could go one on one with anyone in the outpost in a fair fight and win.

When she saw the sand-covered floor and the book in Cloudhawk's hands, she gazed at him in surprise. "You used the Gospel of Sand?"

"Isn't the answer kind of obvious?"

She found it hard to believe. "The Gospel of Sand is very powerful, but also a very unique type of relic. There are only a very few people with the ability to use it, and if you did it means you have a special talent. How is it you seem to have so many gifts?"

Cloudhawk was largely ignorant of the science and history of relics. He knew nothing about special talents or whether he had any, to him every relic he encountered was the same. He hadn't thought they came in classes or categories.

"Well anyway you showed up right on time," Cloudhawk said as he made his way over to her. "I was just gonna go find you to say goodbye. It's time for me to leave the outpost."

"So soon?" She was actually pleased that he was heading out. The more anxious he was to go the more it showed how eager he was to reach the elysian lands.

She'd long suspected that Cloudhawk had a talent that surpassed even her own. If he could make it to Skycloud and undergo training from her family the title of youngest demonhunter would surely pass to him. Her home would grow stronger and thus would be better able to fight back any attempts by the hellspawn to invade.

A fervent light clearly danced in Cloudhawk's eyes. "I wanna to see if the elysian lands and Skycloud are as nice as you say."

She answered without hesitation and filled with certainty. "The wastelands and the realm blessed by the light are like two different worlds. I know you'll love it there."

Cloudhawk certainly hoped so. And speaking of hope he grew curious. "The demon's dead, are you still sticking around?"

"A year ago I went against the wishes of my family and violated the laws of the demonhunters to come here in secret. If I go back it'll be a while before I can leave

again.” Her expression grew stern as she dropped her eyes. “I learned something new about my father’s death. I need to try and learn more so I may stay for a while longer.”

Her quest still wasn’t finished?

Curiosity continued to dig at him. “Do you need help?”

She politely turned down his offer. “No, I can handle it.”

The Queen didn’t want to drag Cloudhawk into any more danger than she already had. Besides his abilities were unstable, and only manifested themselves in extreme circumstances. It was a dangerous gamble to rely on. Without his sudden bursts of power he was more of a liability, so it was a wiser choice to get him to the elysian lands as fast as possible.

She fixed him with a serious look. “I hope when next we meet in the elysian lands you’ve become a strong and honorable demonhunter!”

Demonhunter? Pfft!

Cloudhawk inwardly rolled his eyes. Were demonhunters honorable? Not that he’s seen. Anyway he didn’t have any beef with demons until the Queen came around, why would he want to go traipsing around looking for trouble?

He saw what a demon could do and as far as he was concerned that was about all he was interested in learning. Although demons certainly gave him a rotten impression so long as they didn’t screw with him, he wasn’t going to screw with them. And if they did he’d get as far away as possible. The only way he’d want to tangle with something so dangerous ever again was if he had no other choice.

“No matter where we turn up in the future,” Cloudhawk said, looking back at her, “we’re always going to be friends. Right?”

A faint smile suddenly spread across the Queen’s pallid face, filling it with a poignant yet stunning beauty. They each had their own road to walk, and neither of them could stop until they reached the end. They were the same that way. As for what was to come, who could say what the future held?

Mantis had prepared a care package for Cloudhawk. With him he carried: a map of the wastelands, a custom 13mm sniper rifle ^[1], a nine millimeter handgun, around twenty

throwing daggers, a knife from the elysian lands, two canteens, and another set of leather boots, gloves and a vest all made from dire bear skin that would be difficult for a bullet to pierce.

Then of course there was the exorcist staff, the Gospel of Sand, the invisibility cloak, and the demon mask – Cloudhawk’s collection of relics.

As for tools? The outpost didn’t have any vehicles to speak of since it was surrounded by forests and ruins, they didn’t make much sense. However the Queen hand-picked a wasteland lizard he could use as a mount, and fitted it with travel bags containing water, field rations, medicine and other supplies.

Ten experienced and reliable elite soldiers were selected to travel with him, to help him avoid the dangers that surrounded the outpost for a few hundred miles. Beyond that the outpost maps were ambiguous and of little help. From there on he was on his own.

Everything was in order.

As Cloudhawk climbed atop his mount and set off for the wastes he never once looked back. He resolutely headed out from the comfort zone he’d built and into the unknown.

Mantis stood atop one of the ruins and watched the young man disappear into the horizon. There was a fierce gust of wind and suddenly another figure appeared by his side – a ferocious and familiar figure.

“It seems you were right.” The Caliph’s voice was a rasping echo through the desolate ruins. His red eyes were fixed on the shrinking black dot that was Cloudhawk. “He certainly is an interesting kid.”

“We can’t let the path he’s chosen be too easy,” Mantis replied emotionlessly.

The Caliph of the Sands answered with a deep, haggard laugh. “I’ve been ready. But if he can’t prevail and should meet with misfortune, ancient one, then your plans...”

“He won’t die that easily.” Mantis quietly turned away. “It’s time to prepare the next step.”

The Caliph watched the human walk away, staring at him with a strange expression in his burning red eyes. Had the man finally decided to join his cause? Their goals were

different – even opposed – but it appeared the beginning of their journey followed the same road. So why not cooperate?

1. I'm the opposite of a gun guy, but I think that's a .50 caliber rifle, so huge.

Chapter 96

A Mistake?

The wastelands' sands swirled on hot winds. Heat caused the air to warp, twisting the line of wasteland riders that appeared on the horizon. A young boy of about fifteen years led them, looking especially small and frail atop his lizard mount. A black and grey cloak protecting him from the sun, and a large rifle was slung over one shoulder. A gun of that caliber was a symbol of status out here in the wastelands.

The unobtrusive youth was followed by ten burly men, each one of them clearly a practiced warrior. Their leader was a strange looking man with an apish jutting lower jaw and a pair of arms twice the size of any normal man. His hands were thicker than kneecaps. For a weapon he had a metal bow slung over his shoulder with an wasteland wyrm bowstring. It was clearly one powerful tool.

They garnered attention everywhere they went.

Cloudhawk could hardly believe that only three months ago he was a worm, crawling over the ruins of the wastelands for scraps. Now he rode at the head of a small band of capable fighters and went where he pleased. All he had to worry about was the occasional beast. Your typical bandits or sweeper party were nothing for him to fear anymore.

There hadn't been many setbacks to bar their path over the last couple hundred miles.

Cloudhawk's confidence soared. If they kept up this pace he'd reach the elysian lands in about ten days. The others who rode the lizards beside him were elites from the outposts. The strange-looking one was named Depp, a brawny man in his thirties. Though his mutation made him appear ferocious he was actually pragmatic and composed – a fighter no less capable than the likes of Panther or Salamander.

One of the outpost warriors spoke up. "Up ahead is rotwolf territory."

A small group of ruins appeared on the horizon, partially buried by the desert and peppered with weeds. It was home to a pack of twenty or thirty rotwolves. Their alpha leapt onto a crumbling wall and challenged them by bearing its saliva-dripping fangs.

The coarse hair on its body was raised in warning – typical posture for defending one’s territory. If the riders wanted to keep going they would have to fight their way through.

Cloudhawk unraveled his map and looked it over. “The map says there’s an outpost nearby. If we deal with the wolves we’ll be doing them a favor. We can skin ‘em and sell their hides for food while we’re at it.”

The soldiers were here to follow his lead, so they did what he commanded. They obeyed because their friends and relatives were back home. Even if that weren’t the case, though, they were promised a rich reward for getting the kid to the specific spot. After delivering him and getting back they were even told they’d have a place in the Fort. It was a tempting offer they couldn’t refuse.

Whoosh!

Depp’s meaty arm pulled back his massive bowstring, knocking an arrow the size of a man without much effort, and let fly. The arrow whizzed through the air and buried itself in the alpha wolf’s brain. The beast hit the ground with a thud and twitched for a little while, struggling against the inevitable. The rest of the pack let loose a series of howls then twenty to thirty of them came charging their way.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Depp fired two more arrows in quick succession. Two more rotwolves died.

The guy was able to hit a target from over three hundred feet away as well as any sniper, all thanks to his wasteland wrym tendon longbow. The materials it used were similar to the outpost’s ballista which gave it incredible stopping power. Between the impressive weapon and Depp’s incredible strength, the rotwolves didn’t even have a chance to dodge before getting pinned to the ground.

Cloudhawk hefted his rifle and aimed down the old-style sights at one of the beasts. As he pulled the trigger he could feel every component of the gun move until at last the bullet was spat out in a crack of gas and fire. He hit his target flawlessly from several hundred feet away.

The rest of the pack came running their way.

The outpost warriors fished out their weapons and began to fight back. The wolf pack wasn’t a particularly large one and they were all experienced wastelanders, so the

creatures were killed before they could even reach melee range.

Cloudhawk urged his lizard mount forward and entered the ruins, followed by Depp and a few others. They drew their daggers and set about relieving the corpses of their valuable hide. Humans had no use for the poison glands on rotwolf corpses, but wasteland lizards found them appetizing so the eleven mounts they'd brought with them happily ate their fill.

"We got two rotwolf cubs!"

One of the soldiers lifted his arms with a rotwolf in each hand. They curled like kittens as they hung from the scruff of their necks. Their fur was pitch black and they were still too young to even open their eyes – young enough that there was a chance they could be domesticated. They could fetch a good price in the outpost.

Once the lizards were sated Cloudhawk led Depp and the others to the nearest outpost. Outpost was hardly the right word for it, since it couldn't even begin to compare with Greenland Outpost. It didn't even match up to Blackflag, no more than a third the size of the first encampment Cloudhawk experienced. It was obviously weaker as a result.

It was the first settlement Cloudhawk approached since leaving the oasis, where he'd hoped to replenish some of their dwindling water supplies. However as they approached the entrance of the outpost the young man was unpleasantly surprised by the scene.

Bleakfire Outpost looked like it'd barely survived some recent disaster. Its walls served that function in little more than name only, and the defenders who peered from their craggy tops were armed with only bows and arrows. A few residents were busy trying to scrub bloodstains off the stones. Though it was clear the battle had past some time ago, the smell of carnage still hung in the air.

Things only got worse when Cloudhawk and the rest of his group rode in to Bleakfire Outpost. There were at least a thousand corpses that had yet to be disposed of piled up in a mountain of broken bones and rotten flesh. The unfortunate souls had become a feast for an uncountable number of insects that buzzed around. The whole display was sickening.

Most of them were human. A few were mutants.

So many corpses rotting in the wasteland sun would quickly produce an ungodly stench. There was the danger they could spread disease, and if they weren't dealt with the threat could destroy the whole outpost population.

"I'm the leader of Bleakfire Outpost." An old man with a staff looked at him warily through a leathery face. "You are..."

Cloudhawk answered. "I come from Greenland Outpost. We came hoping to spend the night, but... strange, were you attacked by sweepers?"

"Greenland Outpost?" Something that might have been recognition flashed through the old man's eyes. The soldiers around them also reacted, and they fixed the newcomers with wide-eyed stares. Bleakfire Outpost's leader passed his staff from one hand to the other and reengaged them with a low, strange voice. "We hear the Caliph of the Sands was killed in Greenland Outpost."

Caliph of the Sands? Ah, he'd almost forgotten – that had been the demon's name.

After being attacked by sweepers the denizens of this outpost had to hate them with every fiber of their beings. The demon was the sweeper's greatest leader, so hearing word of his death likely came as great news to them!

Cloudhawk replied without giving it much thought. "That's right, the demon was dealt with just outside Greenland Outpost."

"Fuckin' bastards!" One of Bleakfire Outpost's soldiers shouted at them, his eyes red with anger. "Why the hell did they kill the Caliph? Did they have any idea how important he was to the wastelands? Now that he's dead everything's gone to shit!"

"That's right!"

"I hope Greenland Outpost fuckin' burns!"

"Nah, they all deserve to be hacked to pieces!"

The destitute people of the outpost began to gather around. Cloudhawk and his companions watched the crowd gather with concern on their faces. The hostility of these strangers definitely took them off guard – completely the *opposite* of what was expected!

The Bleakfire Outpost leader heaved a defeated sigh. “If the Caliph was murdered it could only have been at the hands of a demonhunter. Everyone put your weapons away!”

Cloudhawk didn’t let their unwelcoming attitude trouble him. “The demon was brutal and wicked. He was the leader of tens of thousands of sweepers – how is his death a bad thing?”

“Young man, you see things too simply.” The old man gave another lengthy sigh. “Whether or not the Caliph is alive or dead, the sweepers remain. If he were still alive, the sweepers would get what they needed from places like Greenland. They would have no need to turn on a smaller outpost like ours. With the Caliph dead these fiends have no leader, and the tributes once offered to appease the sweepers go unpaid. They are an army without a territory, and there are tens of thousands of them that are out of control. In the ends the ones who suffer are smaller tribes like ours!”

His words made Cloudhawk think. Could it be that the demon’s existence was a *benefit* to the wastelands instead of a bane? Did that creature somehow keep things stable?

Sweepers were a reality of the wastelands, one they could never completely erase. Under the demon’s influence they were organized, restrained. They used the threat of their ferocity to coerce places like Greenland into paying tribute, ultimately removing the need to attack easier targets like Bleakfire.

With the sudden removal of their leader the sweepers were dealt a serious blow, and the once mighty army splintered and spread out into the wastelands again. Over the last few days many outposts had suffered just like this one.

“My son died at the hands of the sweepers! If the Caliph were alive he’d have kept these damn monsters in check, and my son would still be alive!” The larger man with puffy red eyes shouted at them, full of enmity. “If I ever see that goddamn demonhunter I’ll fuckin’ kill him, even if he tears my body into pieces!”

“No doubt!”

“They killed my brother, too!”

“And my friend!”

“Fuckin’ demonhunters, they’re all goddamn lowlives!”

Cloudhawk looked over the angry, twisted faces and a shudder went through him. It all seemed so absurd!

Demons were a curse, the root of all conflict in this world. But there was order in chaos! The demon had been an important element in the wasteland that kept the outposts safe. Without him the might of the sweepers was unchecked, and for places like this that fact was a catastrophe. Thousands, even tens of thousands of wastelanders would suffer!

And the one who created all of this suffering was none other than Cloudhawk. But he didn't know it would happen, of course he hadn't hoped for it. As he looked on that mountain of corpses, their faces twisted in pain and despair, he imagined they were looking at him in hatred. A cold sweat trickle down his back.

They couldn't stay here. Cloudhawk had to leave as fast as possible!

Chapter 97

Heedless Ruin

Cloudhawk couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that he'd somehow become an enemy of the wasteland – a sinner in the eyes of the innocent. His actions had brought untold unrest and suffering to a people who were already awash in trauma.

This mountain of corpses... created by my hand?

Cloudhawk stared at the carnage in the midst of Bleakfire Outpost with wide eyes. The scene dug its accusing fangs deep into his soul.

He never pretended to be a good man – there was no such thing as a good man in the wastelands. However he hoped to never have to see what unfolded before him now. These rivers of blood, these twisted faces, these broken and entangled bodies, these stinking corpses which would become a nightmare of pestilence all were seared into the depths of his heart. Cloudhawk knew these images would haunt him in the darkness of the night when things were quietest.

But even if he had to do it again, it would be difficult to change the result.

Cloudhawk didn't know if his actions were right or wrong, good or bad. He was just a normal kid, he couldn't see the big picture. Nor was he one to give up his life for this poisoned world, all he pursued was his own dream.

Maybe it was just like what the old man said. We could rail against the fact, but in the end everyone under the stars was nothing more than a speck of dust. It didn't matter how hard you tried, the only thing you had control over was yourself.

“What's wrong with you?” Bleakfire Outpost's leader saw the discomfort in Cloudhawk's face. “Night's falling, now that you're here you might as well stay the night. I'm afraid we're in poor shape, as you can see. We have nothing in the way of entertainment.”

“No need!” Cloudhawk didn't want to stay here a moment longer. “Depp, let's go.”

Depp figured Cloudhawk might be a demonhunter, but he was also familiar with the kid's abilities. He wasn't strong enough to defeat the Caliph of the Sands. He figured it was the Bloodsoaked Queen who'd defeated the demon.

"It'll be dark soon. If we leave now we're spending the night in the wastelands."

"So let's not waste time talkin' shit. Move it!"

Cloudhawk payed no mind to Depp's helpful suggestion, he would rather spend the night out there than sleep under the accusing eyes of these corpses. Every second he spent here felt like torture, a sensation no one else would understand.

Just then a piercing sound rang out through the dusk! It was the outpost's alarm!

"The sweepers are back!"

Bleakfire's leader was preparing to press Cloudhawk about his strange behavior when the alarms rose. Shocked by their suddenness and what they meant, he and his soldiers blanched. They ran toward the alarm, Cloudhawk in tow, and when they got to the site they saw a host of several hundred figures dotting the horizon.

Sweepers. They were back, and their numbers seemed endless.

The Bleakfire Outpost's soldiers, numbering near a thousand, nervously fingered their weapons. They couldn't understand why the sweepers would be back so soon after their last raid.

What could they benefit from hitting them again?

Bleakfire's infrastructure was in tatters, and any supplies they'd had were pillaged two days ago. Attacking the outpost again didn't seem to be worth the cost. Were they just here to murder the hapless people?

All of a sudden the atmosphere within the outpost was grave. In its fragile state the outpost would be totally wiped out if they were attacked again. Thousands would be displaced, most would lose their lives.

From the looks of them the sweepers numbers around four hundred, not a lot but all were vicious fighters. There were various kinds of them, but all were at least six feet tall, covered in muscle and thirsty for blood. There were also a dozen or so monsters

ten feet tall – man eaters. They were among the strongest of the sweeper forces, more than a match for any outpost guard.

This mixture of crack sweeper soldiers had to be a remnant from the Caliph's army!

The demon and his lieutenants were dead, leaving the sweepers with no one strong enough to unite them. The mutant killers fractured into smaller groups, unable to threaten the bigger outposts like Greenland but more than menacing enough to raid the smaller settlements.

This was why the poor souls of Bleakfire Outpost hated the demonhunters so much!

Greenland Outpost was rich in supplies and could single-handedly supply the sweepers with most of their needs. Now that they could no longer rely on Greenland as a source of sustenance, the thousands of sweepers were forced to split up and spread across the wastelands to take what they needed.

“Must you force us to perish with you?!” Bleakfire's leader stood before his people, shouting bitterly at the host of sweepers. “Very well! If we're to die then we'll take as many of you fiends as we can with us!”

Most sweepers had lost all ability to reason. They were little more than beasts who relied on instinct. However, in each group there were a handful that had some measure of intelligence left who served as leaders. This group was no different.

Several individuals stepped out from the crowd, men who could almost pass for normal humans. The one in the center stood out furthest, likely their chieftan. His face was covered, hiding any detail, but his skin was covered in mutated tissue that made him look like a man in the throes of late stage skin disease. “We're not here for you today. We want the demonhunter.”

The faces of the outpost's people sank. Demonhunter? Where was there a demonhunter in their ruined home?

“There's no use pretending, we already know.” The sweeper leader glared at them, his growling voice angry and threatening. “The demonhunter who killed our master left Greenland Outpost two days ago with ten men. He's there among you. If you continue to hide him we'll be forced to slaughter every last one of you!”

Greenland Outpost? Demonhunter? *Ten* outpost soldiers...!

The outpost leader's face first betrayed confusion, then surprise, and at last anger. His face darkened as suddenly he turned to his people. "Grab the travelers from Greenland Outpost!"

Cloudhawk had mounted his lizard the moment he felt things were going south, and was leading his men from the outpost. But he was a few second too late, and the outpost soldiers were already closing in.

"That's them!"

"These are the fucking Greenland bastards!"

"There's a demonhunter with them. Don't let them go!"

All of Bleakfire's people glared at them with eyes that burned with hatred!

As much as they despised the sweepers, these unfortunates hated the demonhunters even more! These bastards looked down on the wastelands from their holy palaces, seeing the people as little more than weeds. They'd destroyed the balance in the name of their precious honor. They deserved to be forever cursed by the wastelands and its people!

If looks could kill, Cloudhawk would have been murdered a thousand times.

Incensed with rage, a handful of Bleakfire soldiers charged at them with wild abandon. The sound of twanging bowstrings thrummed all around them followed by soldiers flailing weapons.

"Ah!"

One of Greenland's soldiers hit the ground with an arrow in them, screaming. He was beset by the soldiers in an instant and disappeared beneath their blows. The unfortunate soldier was literally torn apart.

The Bleakfire leader snatched a gun from one of his subordinates and leveled it at Cloudhawk. He pulled the trigger and a powerful flat-headed slug came tearing through the air. Even Cloudhawk couldn't dodge it, and he felt the bullet strike him.

A bullet this size would blow a fist-sized hole in a normal man, but it first had to encounter Cloudhawk's cloak and then the bear-hide armor beneath. It left a dent but

little more, for the dire bear armor was incredibly tenacious. It was sturdy enough to stop bullets, but even so this shot was a mean one.

To Cloudhawk it felt like someone struck him with a sledgehammer. It was almost enough to knock him off his mount.

Meanwhile another Greenland soldier fell. He was quickly surrounded by the mob and viciously murdered! By now more of Bleakfire's soldiers had blocked their escape and there was nowhere for Cloudhawk and his people to go. As anger fueled him the young warrior channeled his psychic energy through the Gospel of Sand tucked away in his coat. Immediately the sandy ground rose up to create a wall.

Out here in the desert, the demon's Gospel had many uses.

Cloudhawk thrust out his palm and the towering wall reacted by rushing forward. Although he wasn't strong enough to kill his foes with the relic, he could at least block off his attackers and prevent them from shooting his people.

"Cut your way through!"

Depp pulled back his bow and impaled two people with a single shot.

"Kill 'em!"

The seven remaining Greenland Outpost fighters brandished their weapons while all together their lizard mounts heaved powerful legs. Several of the mob blocking their path were knocked aside, and a lizard tore into one with its bloody maw. Riders swung their weapons as they passed to cut down anyone who got too close, and before long there was a dozen corpses in their wake.

Bleakfire's leader was mad with rage. "Kill them! *Kill them!!*"

Depp reached back and pulled out a special-purpose iron arrow. He pulled back on the string and let loose. His shot tore through the sandy cover toward its target. After the battle the day before yesterday, Bleakfire's leader was exhausted and slow. By the time he saw his death coming it was too late to get out of the way.

Depp's special arrow was incredibly powerful.

First it struck the leader's gun and smashed it into shards of metal. Once it buried itself

in his chest the outpost leader stumbled backward. He stared at the iron shaft jutting from his body in shock as blood trickled from his mouth. Finally, with his face twisted in an expression of defiance, he collapsed to the ground.

Bleakfire's leader was ended by the arrow. The outpost was flung into turmoil, which gave the Greenland party the opportunity it needed to escape.

Cloudhawk was free, but his heart was conflicted. He hadn't killed any of Bleakfire's people personally, but to them he was worse than the demon. He was especially saddened by the fate of their leader. He could tell that the man was a rare specimen, intelligent and kind. Under different circumstances Cloudhawk would have been pleased to meet him.

Now he was dead. Cloudhawk hadn't been the one to kill him, but he was the reason the old man was dead. How was this any different than if Cloudhawk had done it himself?

It wasn't that Cloudhawk cared what others thought. No, he felt like a pawn, like fate was playing with him. The feeling stuck with him as he and the eight remaining Greenland warriors raced off into the wastelands.

They had to get away from this place as quickly as possible!

But would getting to safety be so easy?

Chapter 98

Enemy of the Wastelands

There was nothing for a hundred miles north of Bleakfire Outpost that could hide them, nowhere for Cloudhawk and the others to hunker down while their pursuers swept by. As the party from Greenland fled, they were set upon quickly by a hail of arrows.

One of the Greenland soldiers shouted. “The sweepers are catching up!”

Aside from lizard mounts, sweepers also had a host of vehicles they also used to hunt down prey. Each one was strange and unique, patched together from various parts dug up from the wastelands. There were a couple of dune buggies that were a hodge-podge of mismatched metal, motorcycles with two or more wheels, and a few other kinds Cloudhawk had never seen before. Altogether there were about fifty on their tail, and though that wasn't many they were all top fighters – especially the three ringleaders.

One was tall and thin and raced after them atop a fabricated motorcycle with six wheels. Affixed to the front was a bull skull with its two vicious horns pointed forward. Judging by his equipment this one was a marksman.

The second was a fat man, strong, who swung a flail overhead while he sat astride a wasteland lizard. His whole body was encased in steel armor as was his mount, and the wind whistled around them as he swung his weapon. It was a stick with a six foot chain attached, which ended with a nasty looking spiked ball. He wielded it with such ease Cloudhawk shuddered to think of the damage it would do to flesh and bone if it hit him.

The main leader of the group was covered in weeping sores and dead skin. The creature was certainly an odd sight, both for his weapon and his mode of transportation. He held a scythe the size of a man, with a serrated blade stretching out from a staff and curving into a vicious point. Instead of riding his transport, he had it strapped to his back.

It was a heavy and cumbersome device which whined like a jet engine. Four wheels were strapped to his feet like shoes and thus the thrust from his rocket pack sent him

shooting forward. Black smoke belched from exhaust pipes, leaving a clear trail in his wake. All the sweeper needed to do was keep his balance and he was able to ski atop the sands like water.

This oddly equipped handful of sweepers were a perfect representation of a typical wasteland-style elite squad. Cloudhawk looked back and watched them gain on him.

“Deal with ‘em!”

Depp replied quickly, knocking an arrow and drawing back his wasteland wrym bow. In less than a second he picked out a target, aimed, and with a twang his bowstring went slack. The scythe-wielder saw it coming and wrenched his hips to the side, which spun his wheeled feet off trajectory and carved an erratic trench in the sand. The arrow swept by and missed him, but shot through the tire of a buggy just behind.

The raggedy vehicle immediately lost control, pitched to its side then hit the ground. Like a boulder splashing into a lake huge plumes of sand were flung into the air while parts of the vehicle shot off in all directions. The sweepers nearby darted out of the way to avoid being crushed but never slowed down their pursuit.

In response the sweeper on the motorcycle leveled his crossbow and fired off a few bolts.

His weapon was a type rarely seen in the wastelands, a crossbow that was relatively weaker than others but capable of firing off several shots in close succession. It was especially suited for situations just like this. A couple of the Greenland fighters' mounts were hit with arrows the sweeper had smeared with numbing poison. They were already slowing down.

“Catch up! Kill them! Vengeance for the master!”

The scythe-bearer snarled hideously, his companions whooped and roared like a pack of wild wolves. The sound of it made the humans shudder.

Cloudhawk pulled the rifle from his shoulder in preparation. The .50 caliber gun was a handmade product of Greenland Outpost, outwardly crude but packing an incredible punch. He tightened his legs against the lizard's flanks, released the reigns and aimed his gun. “You die first.”

Crack!

The sound of the rifle was just as striking as its power. It took him a second and a half to find his target, but the bullet his gun spat out was faster than any arrow. Still the sweeper chief was an enemy of uncommon skill, and just as Cloudhawk was pulling the trigger he moved. His wheels carved an arc through the sand, but didn't take him far enough to miss the bullet.

Cloudhawk's shot struck him in the back and ripped open a ravine through his skin.

The young wastelander yanked back the bolt to clear the bullet cartridge and clear the gun's chamber just as his mount was racing toward a boulder. With no concern for what Cloudhawk was doing the lizard leapt up to avoid the obstacle, forcing his rider to nearly get pitched off. Luckily he was able to catch himself and retake the reins.

The chief pressed ahead until he was by Cloudhawk's side. He raised his scythe high then brought it down with a deadly whistle – enough strength to disembowel the human if not chop him in half!

Cloudhawk threw himself forward and the scythe swept by overhead, shaving off a fair bit of hair. His foe swiftly and deftly brought the scythe around and prepared for another swing. He was at least as capable as Mad Dog had been.

Releasing his gun, Cloudhawk reached for his exorcist staff instead to block the attack. The scythe was both knocked away and their impact took a chunk out of his weapon's shaft. Seeing this the chief changed tack, and buried the head of his scythe in the back of Cloudhawk's mount.

The wasteland lizard screamed in pain and bolted forward faster while the sweeper was pulled along. He yanked backward and tore open the beast's back, driving it into a pained frenzy and making it impossible to control.

The chief came in for a second attack, but did not bother with Cloudhawk or his exorcist staff. Instead his scythe was aimed toward the lizard's rear left leg. The beast suddenly lost balance as its limb was cut from beneath it and hit the ground, sending up a cloud of sand. Cloudhawk was thrown from its back and into the air. If he hit the ground going this fast he would break his neck, or at least a few ribs.

The other sweeper leader fired off a few more bolts.

None of them expected the young demonhunter to vanish in midair, but that's what he did. As he tumbled haphazardly through the sky Cloudhawk focused his psychic

energy into his cloak, and through its power he floated along like a feather. Nimble as a bird he shot forward thirty or so feet, enough time to get his body under control before hitting the ground. Sand was kicked up and he hit hard enough to roll two complete circles. His rifle was flung to the side, but luckily Cloudhawk hadn't been hurt.

The scythe-wielding sweeper's ugly face was twisted into a hateful snarl as he lashed out with incredible speed. Cloudhawk brought his staff up between him and the deadly blade. However, the chief cleverly heaved himself forward and brought his arms up, so that while the exorcist staff didn't budge the scythe's blade was brought down behind it. It swept down with such force that not even Cloudhawk's dire bear armor could stop it from digging into his skin. The pain cut him to the core.

As the crude metal bit into him Cloudhawk's face turned ferocious. Rage awakened the power within him and focused it into his staff, which he used to knock the sweeper leader back a few feet.

The wound in his shoulder was not a shallow one. Fresh blood stained his cloak.

In this moment the sweeper with the flail charged into the group. He whipped the spiked ball around on its long chain toward one of the Greenland soldiers. Luckily the fighter saw it coming and dodged with just enough space to avoid it, but his lizard mount was not as lucky. The iron ball crunched the side of the lizard's skull. Immediately the beast's brains were splattered and the warrior was thrown to the ground. He was slow to get up.

Thud!

The flail swung around and connected with skull again, this time sending pieces of the Greenland warrior all around. His body collapsed while blood spewed like a fountain from his ruined head, right in front of Cloudhawk.

The rattling chain didn't stop. This time it was headed toward Cloudhawk, while at the same time the chief's scythe was slicing at him crosswise.

The wastelander found himself in a precarious position, forced to contend with two moderately strong sweepers. There didn't seem to be any hope for survival. Although he was still invisible beneath the cloak his enemies knew precisely where he'd fallen.

"Depp!"

Cloudhawk yelled the name then jumped up onto Depp's lizard as it passed. With his right hand he slipped the exorcist staff back onto the loop on his waist, while with his left he whipped out his revolver. Meanwhile the crossbow sweeper didn't give him time to shoot before firing off a bolt first. Depp answered by whipping out an arrow lightning fast and shooting back.

Both arrows met midair.

Cloudhawk glared through the sights of his revolver, focusing everything on the crossbow sweeper in the middle of the crosshairs. He pulled the trigger, and the full-metal jacket conveyed the bullet through the front of the motorcycle and into the sweeper's chest where it left a massive hole.

"No!"

The cries came from the other two leaders as they watched their brother die. The scythe wielder hacked his weapon and unceremoniously split one of the Greenland soldiers at the waist. The other leader's flail caught a soldier in the back. Two more of Cloudhawk's crew were dead.

Cloudhawk's allies were growing fewer by the second. It was all going wrong. He looked desperately around until he spotted a spot of rugged terrain, and told Depp to head for it. It was clever – he and his people were mounted on beasts while the sweepers were using vehicles. They would have a hard time managing the uneven land with their machines.

Cloudhawk stretched out his gun and fired again, this time at the lizard mount beneath the burly flail sweeper.

Crack! The lizard hit the sand, flinging his rider off.

"Don't fight 'em," Cloudhawk ordered. "Let's get outta here!"

The sweepers could only watch as that hateful demonhunter and his friends fled out of reach. The chief's hideous face grew ever more outraged and repulsive. "You can't run! You're an enemy of the wastelands, everyone from sweepers to scavengers have their eyes out for you. Every mercenary, bandit and hunter knows who you are! Wherever you go we'll be right behind you! You're *dead!*"

The sweeper's words were like an icy grip on Cloudhawk's heart. Had the whole

wasteland been turned against him? He was a pariah, a criminal who would be hunted down and slaughtered at the first opportunity.

It all seemed so bizarre. Even if killing the demon had caused so much trouble, how could word have spread so far so quickly? If what the sweeper said was true, Cloudhawk's journey had suddenly become a lot more difficult.

Chapter 99

Stealing Wheels

Cloudhawk and his companions slipped away from a gang of mercenaries. It was the fifth time since leaving Greenland Outpost that they'd gotten in a skirmish. The ten soldiers he'd brought with him were now down to three – seven had died, and the supplies they carried with them were gone as well. By now Cloudhawk completely believed the sweeper chief's parting words. Dark days were ahead, as he was now the most wanted man all throughout the wastelands.

The Caliph of the Sands was dead, but his influence still made Cloudhawk's life hell.

The demon's carefully organized army fell apart because the sweepers were incapable of choosing a new leader for themselves. Lesser chieftains refused to obey just anyone and none were strong enough to lead the sweepers as a whole. Collapse of the structure was inevitable. However their loyalty to their demon master never faded, and once word spread that Cloudhawk had been responsible for his death he was immediately labeled as enemy number one.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

The most terrible result of his actions was the effects it caused throughout the wastelands, the chaos. Harrowed denizens of every small and medium-sized outpost hated Cloudhawk down to their bones. All manner of rewards were offered to the person who could kill the young demonhunter.

It didn't matter whether he was crossing the wilds or passing a settlement. Bounty hunters, mercenaries, sweepers, bandit crews – everyone was looking for him. They also knew his location, everywhere within a hundred miles was crawling with enemies. Cloudhawk's troubles were many.

He just didn't get it. What the hell was wrong with this world!?

Hadn't the Bloodsoaked Queen taught him that demons were the most vile, cruel, sinister creatures in the wastelands? Weren't they the root of all the wars and disasters humanity had faced? Didn't she tell him it was the demons that had brought

about the end of days?

How could killing one suddenly turn *him* into the villain?!

Dusk settled over the area as the beating wasteland sun descended. Cloudhawk, Depp and the other two remaining Greenland warriors found a place to hide out in the wilds. All four of them were as filthy and beaten as vagabonds. It'd been days already without any opportunity to rest, awaiting death around every corner.

"We're out of water." One of the soldiers tipped over a canteen and shook it. Not a single drop came out. "At this rate even if the hunters don't get us dehydration will. We need to find a settlement and get supplies."

"Where, though?" One of the other soldiers shot back. "Fuckin moron. Every outpost, mercenary company and outlaw group for miles knows who we are. They know what we look like and what we're carrying, anywhere we go we'll be walking into their net."

His companion shot back in irritation. "It's better than dying from thirst!"

Meanwhile Depp was quietly maintaining his bow.

"We're surrounded on all sides by a hostile wasteland. The pressure's only gonna get worse." Cloudhawk saw how their situation had destroyed the morale of his compatriots and he felt sorry for them. "Staying with me is too dangerous, you should leave. It's the only way to keep you from getting wrapped up in this."

The two soldiers were moved and surprised by his words.

They had been tasked with escorting Cloudhawk five hundred miles or so. By now they were about that far, so they could technically call their mission over and head home. If they dumped the kid now their chances of survival went way up.

"No." Depp, who had been silent until now, spoke up. The way he said it left no room for doubt. "We aren't done with our mission."

Not done? Was this guy a moron?! Who would even know? They were within a few dozen miles of where they were supposed to go anyway, what difference did it make?

Depp held his bow in his hands and fixed the others with a steely gaze. "Our mission is not over. And if anyone decides they want to disagree with that my bow will have

something to say.”

Depp was the best Bowman in Greenland Outpost. Not a man among them would survive if he turned his bow on them.

The two standing soldiers slowly sat back down.

Cloudhawk looked over the odd mutant. He couldn't help but feel appreciation. Depp was no weakling, and given a few years he would be a force to be reckoned with. Now after all they suffered, to stick to such an arduous task was not an easy thing.

Cloudhawk couldn't stop himself from asking, “It's just a mission. Is it really that important to you?”

Depp placed the arrows he'd been sharpening back in his quiver. When he answered he did so in a soft voice. “Don't worry about it.”

Cloudhawk was going to push him further, but it was then he noticed a sizeable group on the horizon. They were combing the wastelands and heading their way in a group of five or six vehicles. A host of ugly sweepers were among them.

It was that bastard's crew again!

It was the same group they'd faced at Bleakfire Outpost, only larger. Their chief must have taken or recruited more sweepers and vehicles from the surrounding areas. They even had a pack of tamed wolves – eight or nine of them. That's how Cloudhawk was being tracked.

“This motherfucker doesn't know when to quit!” Cloudhawk was sick and fuckin' *tired* of these sweeper assholes!

One of the Greenland soldiers had to make himself heard. “They must have already caught our scent. It's not safe here, I need to go!”

“We can't get away, not on two legs.” Cloudhawk's eyes were fixed on the cars among the group of sweepers. There was a glint in his eye, and then he said something that surprised the others. “Wait here. I'm gonna go steal a car.”

Steal a car? Was he fuckin' joking?

He planned to get away with one of their vehicles, right under the noses of a few hundred sweepers. How was his plan any different from suicide? But in reality they were in a nasty spot, and a sufficiently fast car was the only way they were going to escape these sweepers and everyone else out for blood.

“Relax, I got it under control.” Cloudhawk affixed the Bloodsoaked Queen’s mask to his face and pulled up his hood. He croaked at them through the mask as he slid down from the high ground. “Please wait for me here.”

This stretch of wasteland was peppered with boulders. Cloudhawk used them as cover, slowly inching closer to the sweeper group. He didn’t have his staff or his gun, this time forsaking both of them for a simple dagger. It was the knife the Queen had given him, the one she said was made back where she’d come from. It was fine craftsmanship, better than any of the crude weapons found in the wastelands.

Cloudhawk first determined the direction of the wind so he could find which side was leeward. Pressing himself against the northern side of a boulder he tried to get a better look at his target.

He could tell right away that the several-hundred strong sweeper contingent was overconfident. They certainly weren’t expecting a sneak attack, and due to their speed moving forward their formation was weak and haphazard. What caught Cloudhawk’s attention was the large vehicle situated in the rear of the group, a wasteland cargo truck covered in reinforced steel. Despite the fact that it was somewhat separated from the rest of their crew, there were still four or five sweepers hanging around.

They were getting closer.

Cloudhawk was hidden from their wolves’ keen noses so long as the wind kept steady in the opposite direction. Once they were close enough he lifted his hand and a small sandstorm arose.

Between the darkening sky and Cloudhawk’s sandstorm the sweepers were finding it difficult to see. They were none the wiser as the wastelander slipped from cover, turned invisible and began to creep through their ranks. Like an angel of death he slowly snuck up on the very last sweeper in the crew. His target had no time to react. In a flash his neck opened and Cloudhawk dragged his writhing body behind a nearby rock to die.

The Cloudhawk who stalked the sands now was completely different from the scavenger that crawled over it before. His time under Mantis' tutelage was short, but he put the foundational skills he'd learned to good use. Taking advantage of the choking sands Cloudhawk quickly dispatched five of his enemies – foes that would have taken a few chunks out of him had this been a fair fight.

There was no time to disguise himself as one of them, so instead he pulled open the truck door and jumped in directly. Before the driver knew what was happening Cloudhawk silenced him with a thrown dagger that landed right in his voice box.

“All good!”

As he took up position in the driver's seat Cloudhawk was surprised at how smoothly it'd gone. His foot hit the pedal and suddenly the trundling vehicle shot off like a bat out of hell. Several sweepers were caught under its wheels and crushed to death.

“What's going on?!”

“Where's this car going?”

The sweeper chief was hollering abuses when suddenly the truck turned. He saw the driver, a young boy – it was him!

“Grab him!”

The scythe-bearer and his men were stunned by the sight, for none of them could believe someone could sneak in right under their noses and steal a car. As Cloudhawk whipped through the host of sweepers he swung the wheel back and forth, slithering through them like a serpent. Sweepers and boulders alike were crushed by the truck's reinforced body, nothing could stop it from tearing off into the distance.

“With me, follow him!”

When the sweepers snapped back to their senses they gave chase, almost on instinct. By then the truck was already several hundred feet away, though, and in a car whereas most of the sweepers were on foot. By the time the chief's orders were relayed and people started to react, Cloudhawk was already too far.

The cheeky wastelander pushed the gas pedal all the way to the floor, kicking up a plume of sand as he broke free from the sweepers. The distance between them was

already stretching by the time they started to chase him. He picked up the remaining three Greenland warriors and headed west toward the setting sun like the rippling orange orb of fire was their destination.

Chapter 100

The Brutal Wastelands

The blood-red light of the setting sun painted the roiling sea of sand. Out in the wastelands even dusk was swelteringly hot.

The sound of old engines rumbling was an analog of the anxiety and restlessness within the hearts of modern man. It was a world of blood and fire, cruelty and madness around every corner. In this moment that madness was a group of more than ten vehicles tearing across the sands, in a deadly game of chase.

Wasteland vehicles were cobbled together from whatever excavators could find. It didn't matter whether it was the right part, whether it was attractive, or whether it was convenient. All that mattered was that the machine ran.

The truck Cloudhawk pilfered had a chassis of crude metal, and its body was composed of light but sturdy bones from unidentified wasteland behemoths welded together with slabs of steel. It looked like some nightmare creature made of bones slithering over the dunes. Its cab was a mess of circuitry and pipes and there was no windshield to speak of. Stinging sand was constantly pelting Cloudhawk's face.

He didn't know what any of the instruments meant on the dashboard in front of him. All he knew – all he needed to know – was how to turn the damn thing on and keep it moving!

One of the soldiers with him shouted over the din of the engine. "They're catching up!"

The truck didn't have a rear view mirror so Cloudhawk didn't know what was going on behind them. But he did have ears, and the sound of screaming engines were getting closer. Frantically he began to pull on levers and twist knobs interspersed through the mess of wires, hoping something would help.

Bang-bang-bang!

The truck shook violently and smoke began to belch out of the exhaust pipes. The wheels kicked into high gear, kicking up a winding cloud of yellow sand behind them.

The whooping yells of the sweepers chased them from behind.

Regardless of their boost in speed the other cars were closing the distance. Figures popped out of the cars bearing spears and hooks, every one of them glaring at the truck with demented and twisted features. They looked like madmen, ready to give their lives for glory.

But they weren't insane. It was the wastelands that were insane. It was a whole crazy world they lived in!

One of the buggies, refitted to be spiked like a hedgehog, pulled up behind them. The driver flipped a lever and bolts fired out of his car that buried themselves in Cloudhawk's bone truck like nails. Chains attached to the bolts tightened and the metal of both vehicles groaned in protest.

Suddenly the truck jerked and its speed cut. The inertia almost sent Cloudhawk hurdling through the missing windshield but he grabbed whatever he could, managing to steady himself before being flung from the vehicle. The barbed bolts from the spiked buggy were deeply imbedded in Cloudhawk's truck and were slowing them down.

"Kill! KILL!"

A sweeper popped out from within the hedgehog's cab with a large javelin in hand. He heaved it at the bone truck. Instead of a metal head the javelin was affixed with a wrapped bottle, filled with rat's blood, oil and other combustible materials.

Boom!

A ball of fire swallowed the rear of the truck. Cloudhawk could feel it shake and start to break apart. At least one of their tires were blown!

The sweepers pulled out a second javelin and reeled back for another toss. Cloudhawk grit his teeth and yanked the wheel, sending them peeling off in another direction. The sudden force flipped the hedgehog off balance and flung it to the side still connected by chains. It shattered like a house of building blocks, sending debris in all directions. The sweeper who had a javelin leveled at them had half of his body decimated, crushed by the impact. A series of beautiful, eye-stabbing explosions followed as his and all the rest of their javelins detonated.

Cloudhawk fought to get the truck back under control. The remains of the hedgehog

buggy rolled along behind him, on fire and flinging burning slag every which way. Cloudhawk didn't have time to catch his breath, for just then two agile lizards and their riders pulled up on either side.

One of them chucked a bottle into the cab.

Rooooar! Everything was engulfed in fire!

Luckily the invisibility cloak Cloudhawk wore wasn't flammable, otherwise the fires would have turned him medium-rare. Unfortunately the Greenland survivors weren't as lucky. One of them found himself in the middle of a lake of fire and, screaming, flung himself out of the truck to escape the flames. He tumbled through the air like a burning moth, hit the sand and began to roll. The sweeper vehicles coming up from behind ruthlessly ran him over half a dozen times.

The lizards themselves were equipped with small flamethrowers that constantly emitted fire, which their rider used to light the bombs. Their riders pulled out a second set of fire grenades from their pockets and prepared to light them.

Roaring in anger Cloudhawk gripped the steering wheel with his burned hands and pull it to the side. His hefty truck slammed into the lizard on his left, knocking both beast and rider over and crushing them beneath the truck's wheels. It was difficult to tell from the smear of red behind them which parts were human and which were beast.

Boom!

The sweeper's bomb lit all the explosive material he'd kept in his pockets, turning his corpse into a pillar of flame. Sand kicked up from the explosion rattled against the left side of the bone truck and the blast set almost half of it on fire. Another firebomb struck them from the right side, causing even more damage.

Depp knocked his bow and fired out an arrow that pierced the fire-thrower in the chest. Like a puppet with its strings cut the lifeless body of the sweeper was knocked off the lizard. It hit the ground some distance away with a sickening crunch.

"Kill them! For the master!"

The sweepers were incensed, caught in an insane bloodthirst that was hard to imagine. They continued to chase after the flaming bone truck, getting close enough

to fire off more chain bolts. Like a brutal version of tug-of-war the two sides heaved against one another.

Depp kicked open the truck's ruined door and leaned out, firing his bow toward the cars behind. His arrow hit a tire and the car careened out of control. It flipped on its side and rolled into another car. The chains that affixed them to the truck dragged the cars along behind, but while it destroyed those vehicles its drag allowed the rest to get closer.

The flail-wielding sweeper chief came bounding up beside them on his lizard. When Depp spotted him he let loose with another arrow, but it was not aimed at the portly killer. Instead the arrow ripped through his lizard mount's head.

The chief was skilled, and as his steed was cut down from beneath him he lunged forward. He grabbed the truck and scrambled on top in a fluid motion. In less than a second, flail waving, he charged at the driver's seat with a deafening roar.

Thud!

The chief's spiked ball and chain whistled over Cloudhawk's head, barely scraping his scalp before getting buried in the mismatched instrument panel in front of him. Immediately sparks filled the cab.

"You drive!"

Cloudhawk dragged the remaining Greenland warrior into the driver's seat. He grabbed the flail's chain and as the chief yanked it back he pulled Cloudhawk onto the truck's top with it. The young warrior released the chain in midair, pulled his revolver from his waist and fired.

The sweeper wasn't slow, but at close range the shots still struck his chest. But his armor was hefty, and the small caliber bullets didn't pack enough punch to cause damage.

Grinning hideously the sweeper brought his flail back around. Cloudhawk met it with his exorcist staff.

The two of them fought as the truck rumbled along below them. Though the sweeper chief's flail was a nasty weapon, he couldn't get good momentum with the ground below him in constant motion. Cloudhawk juked and dodged, finally getting a clear

shot off into the sweeper's helmet. The impact forced the chief backward, and that's when Cloudhawk's exorcist staff jabbed forward.

Armor and flesh split as the staff's sharp end found its target!

A power like being struck with a sledgehammer flung the chief from the top of the truck. Not a moment later bullets and arrows started whizzing by Cloudhawk's head. He couldn't linger out here in the open, but as he was preparing to swing back into the car two explosive javelin's struck. One of them hit the fuel tank.

B-O-O-M!

Cloudhawk felt weightless. The javelin had pierced the truck's fuel tank and ignited the gas inside. A massive blast rose from below them and the back half of the truck was pitched up several feet, sending debris everywhere.

The sudden force of the explosion kicked the truck up as well as all the cars connected to it, flipping them all. They tumbled over the dunes like so many discarded toys, leaving explosions and twisted metal in their wake. Sand and smoke filled the air like a rain from hell.

Peace settled after the chaotic scene.

Survivors were unlikely in a catastrophic suicide attack like this, but Cloudhawk had been thrown from the wreckage. He immediately poured his energy into his cloak to try and break his fall, but even striking soft sand at this speed would be deadly.

It all happened fast as a thunderclap.

It felt like Cloudhawk was struck in the head. The whole world spun out of control as he was flung through the air. He was rotating so fast the centrifugal force felt like it was scrambling his innards.

Then, just as he was about to hit the ground –

-Everything went black. It was like he cut through reality to enter a dream.

Cloudhawk felt himself float in the air, flying though he had no wings. Space around him felt thick like mud and lifted him up. As he floated along he could feel himself striking countless small things, things he could neither see nor touch.

Eventually a burning sensation crept up all throughout his body, painful enough that it brought Cloudhawk back from the brief coma he'd been in. With great effort he struggled onto his feet and surveyed the scene. Wreckage, stretching every which way; bits of lizard, car, human... sand and blood, fire and iron, complete devastation!

To Cloudhawk it felt like every bone in his body had shattered, however luckily the fact was he hadn't been badly wounded. That certainly wasn't the case for the bone and metal truck he'd tried to steal, which could hardly be called slag at this point. He didn't know whether Depp or the other Greenland soldier were still alive.

But the fight wasn't over! Sweepers kept coming.

The one leading them was blurry through the sand and smoke, but his weapon was unmistakable. The scythe's blade glimmered from the fires of the wreckage, like the eyes of death peering through the darkness. It marched his way promising a bloody end.



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