



THE
MASK

视神记

播放平台： 腾讯视频
不负好时光

出品方： 企鹅影视
TENCENT PENGUIN PICTURES

 原力
ORIGINAL FORCE

The Godsfall Chronicles

– The Fallen God Records –

- Book 1 - The Wastelands (III)

**-Author-
Topsy Wanderer
半醉游子**

[RWX (Wuxiaworld)]

Chapter 101

Mercy Gets You Killed

Cloudhawk tried to shake the fuzziness from his head and eyes.

The only way he was going to escape was if he dealt with this scythe-wielding fucker. The other sweepers would arrive soon, and once he was surrounded it would be difficult to break free. He had to put an end to his enemy quickly!

The sweeper chieftain fixed him with a burning, hateful gaze.

This child was more troublesome than he looked, fighting tenaciously even under these conditions. In addition to his supernatural strength and skill, he also seemed to possess supernatural luck. Even without the abilities of a demonhunter the kid was a threat. In twenty or so years of honing he could probably be one of the strongest humans in the wastelands. It made the sweeper hate him even more.

He was a child of the wastes, with tremendous potential, who decided to throw in his lot with those damn demonhunters. Because of him the Caliph's dream of unifying this barren landscape was crushed. Now they were forsaken to an eternity of chaos and strife.

Thinking about the consequences deepened the chieftain's seething anger. Without the Caliph to lead them the sweepers were nothing, synonymous with hideousness and evil – delegated to the lowest caste of society.

Ruined. Everything was ruined. All because of the demonhunters!

The sweeper leader harnessed all of that resentment and turned it into power. Like a howling banshee he raced through the sandstorm with his scythe at the ready, prepared to cut all the wastelands in two.

Cloudhawk lifted his exorcist staff to defend himself. He was met with a harsh blow.

The charge was so intense it knocked him back several feet and left tranches in his wake. A sharp pain ran along his arms before they went numb from the impact. His

fingers felt like they were nearly broken off.

He wasn't given an opportunity to catch his breath. The silver light of the scythe blade carved an arc through the air!

In both speed and strength, Cloudhawk's foe was his superior!

With his normal abilities Cloudhawk wouldn't last three rounds, so his chances for victory were slim. He had to focus his power into the exorcist staff and use it to protect himself from the deadly scythe as it sought to remove his head from his body. In the moment their two weapons connected he released the gathered psychic energy in a forceful blast that not only neutralized his enemy's powerful strike, but also cracked his scythe staff and knocked him back several steps.

Cloudhawk was preparing to follow through but the chieftain was too quick. He followed the momentum of the riposte to bring his scythe around the side, switching hands behind his back and bringing the weapon back around crosswise in a vicious swipe. Cloudhawk was forced to move from attack to defense.

The scythe's blade hooked onto Cloudhawk's staff. Suddenly the young man's hands were empty.

He watched as the exorcist staff was flung away. Cloudhawk scowled, he was left with no way to protect himself. The sweeper leader didn't let up leaving Cloudhawk no space to find a way out. His knuckles were white as they gripped the scythe tight, bringing it down on the boy in a definitive slice.

Cloudhawk had nowhere to go!

They were too close for Cloudhawk's invisibility cloak to help him. He threw up his hands with throwing daggers held crosswise to catch the scythe and managed to deflect the blow. He staggered backward again, but this time he let the throwing daggers fly.

Clang-clang! Two crisp ringing sounds hung in the air. The sweeper deftly whipped his scythe around to knock the hidden weapons away before coming in for another attack.

The only weapon Cloudhawk had left was the dagger from the elysian lands, the one the Bloodsoaked Queen had given him. Holding it tight in both hands he held it overhead where it met the scythe. It hit him like a thunderbolt, so strong he was

brought down on one knee. His legs were half buried in the sand and every joint in his body started to pop.

Rage poured from the sweeper as he screamed into Cloudhawk's face. "Die!"

Cloudhawk was clearly no match for his foe. The pressure of the scythe kept growing and every passing second that blade came closer. He growled back at him through gritted teeth. "Was that demon really so important to you? Do you really think he gave a shit about the wastelands? He was a demon. *A demon!*"

"What does a moron like you know?" The loathing in the sweeper's face made his hideous appearance even more terrifying. The Caliph's death was a disaster, he would gladly exchange his life for the master's just like any number of his followers. "You're going to pay for your life, young demonhunter. You'll pay for what you did to the master!"

"Sorry, I'm not in the mood for dying!" Red was creeping into Cloudhawk's eyes, and with it a strength that steadily rose to counter the sweeper's. As his scythe was slowly pushed back the chieftain stared in shock, unable to comprehend how this small human had so much strength within him. But he pushed his surprise from his mind and heaved back. The razor-sharp edge of the scythe inched closer to Cloudhawk's scalp.

Then, in this critical moment, the sweeper's body shook and went rigid.

An arrow made of sand shot out of Cloudhawk. The sweeper chieftain was too close to dodge and could only watch the sneak attack tear through his weeping flesh and rip out through his back.

"This... is... the master's power..."

He stumbled backward, staring wide-eyed at the hole in his chest. spurts of fresh blood gushed out and splattered on the sands below. Even as strong as he was the sweeper couldn't fight after such a serious wound. Cloudhawk lunged forward and grabbed his enemy's weapon, fighting for control. He planted a foot in his foe's wound, flinging him away.

Blood erupted from the mutant's mouth as he struck the ground. He stared up at the sky, staring into the middle distance in shock. This human, a mere child, had taken his life – and with the master's own power?

“Why...? Why must it be like this?”

He coughed, thick blood bubbling up from his lungs. Before he closed his eyes the last image he saw was Cloudhawk standing over him, scythe in hand. He'd lost, but it didn't matter. They'd lost their leader, their pillar. Death was nothing to fear.

Thud!

The wicked blade of the scythe did not separate the sweeper's head from his body, as anticipated. When the chieftain opened his eyes he saw his weapon buried in the sand half a foot away. He watched the flapping cloak of that masked youth retreating into the sandstorm.

Disbelief was writ plain on the sweeper's face. *Why didn't he kill me?*

He managed to grab his weapon and use it to help him stand. His wound might not be fatal, but it certainly left him unable to fight. Cloudhawk could have separated his head from his body and ended his troubles – but he didn't. He simply couldn't understand why he didn't.

Cloudhawk recovered his exorcist staff and returned to the site of the crash. There he found the two remaining Greenland soldiers. One had been crushed by the wreckage, and the other – Depp, the mutant – was unconscious. His wounds were bad, but there were still signs of life.

He managed to find one of the wasteland lizards roaming the area and brought it under control. Cloudhawk draped Depp over the back then climbed up himself. He urged the beast away from the carnage.

About ten minutes later the rest of the sweeper contingent caught up to their leader. Several of the more intelligent warriors helped their wounded chieftain stand.

“Boss! Are you alright? Where's the demonhunter?”

“I'm not gonna die, don't bother with me. He didn't get far, go after him!” He waved them off and shoved off the one helping him stand. The hatred in him hadn't eased at all despite Cloudhawk sparing his life. “We have to kill him!”

“Yes!”

Hundreds of sweepers picked up the trail.

However it wasn't easy. Most of the sweepers were on foot, especially now that their vehicles were destroyed. In less than an hour the sands and wind wiped away his trail. He'd escaped.

By then night had fallen.

Cloudhawk found a relatively safe place to rest. He hadn't had a drop of water for what felt like ages, and after that fight he was both parched and starved.

"Why didn't you kill him?"

A deep, weak voice caught his attention from behind. Depp had woken up, or perhaps he hadn't been fully unconscious.

"Why should I? He couldn't fight back."

"You know they aren't going to let up." Depp slowly managed to sit up. His dull expression and sharp eyes were an odd contrast. "Mercy doesn't mean shit to them. They'll just keep coming."

It wasn't mercy, nor was it pity.

Cloudhawk wasn't entirely sure why he spared the sweeper, he just felt like it was the right thing to do. He was just following what he thought was right. Thinking back on it he figured his moment of compassion had something to do with respect.

Where did that respect come from? He couldn't say!

"They can't catch up to us for now." He was exhausted, and it was showing. He'd summoned the Gospel of Sand's power at that final moment, but it had drained what little energy he had. "You stay here, I'm gonna see if I can find us some food and water."

A strange look crossed Depp's face.

With one weak hand he gripped his bow, and with the other he removed the last iron arrow from his quiver. Slowly he knocked the arrow, pulled the string, and pointed it at Cloudhawk's back.

The young wastelander was unsuspecting, he didn't feel the need to guard himself against the dim-looking Bowman. After all, Depp had been nothing but helpful and obedient. When the other Greenland soldiers were talking about leaving he forced them to stay displaying a tenacity the others couldn't muster.

So never in his wildest dreams did Cloudhawk think Deep was aiming an arrow at him.

However, even though he never suspected Depp he had not lost his keen danger sense. As the wasteland wyrm tendon bow was pulled taught that unsettling itch made Cloudhawk turn his head.

Too late!

The iron arrow shot out like a devilish serpent, faster than he could believe. In his weakened and sluggish state he couldn't dodge the unforeseen attack. When the arrow hit his chest he flew back like he'd been yanked by a dragline. All Cloudhawk heard was a sharp whistle and a thud before he was knocked through the air a dozen feet. He hit the ground hard.

There was no leather armor that could stop this arrow. Not even his cloak, which could stop bullets, could protect him.

"You're view of the wasteland is naïve. Just like your view of people." Depp slowly rose. His dim and honest expression was gone, replaced with the cunning hunger of a feral wolf. "Out here, mercy gets you killed."

Chapter 102

The Marshes

How could a place like the wastelands – a poisoned cesspool of villainy – produce a sincerely honest man?

The answer was it couldn't.

Growing up among the scavengers Cloudhawk saw the savagery and violence of humanity. He knew that humans were no different from beasts when conditions were right. Humans were capable of anything if it meant saving their own lives. But truth be told, he was inexperienced in how cunning and malevolent a man's heart could be.

After the Queen's painstakingly thorough selection process he thought he could trust Depp – that the taciturn, somewhat slow man wouldn't scheme against him.

He thought that Depp would keep to his promises until his mission was done.

Cloudhawk really didn't understand the world yet. The wastelands were still a mystery, as were the people he surrounded himself with. Depp was right, that's how he got the drop on him.

The Greenland traitor slung his bow back over his shoulder and pulled out a short hunting knife. Meanwhile Cloudhawk lay upon the ground, writhing in pain.

Depp's iron arrow was powerful enough to shoot right through a boulder, but it didn't do that to Cloudhawk. It did managed to bury itself in his chest, however, likely only thanks to his spectacular cloak. The typical blades and bullets of the wasteland couldn't penetrate it, but that didn't mean it couldn't cause damage. The arrow likely pushed the cloak into his skin, through flesh to shatter bones and ultimately implant itself and the cloak in his organs.

Depp moved in toward Cloudhawk, confident his prey was finished. He paused to pick up his exorcist staff which had been discarded to one side.

It was Cloudhawk's main weapon, now out of reach. He had no way to fight back.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why?” Though Depp felt Cloudhawk was finished he still walked warily around the young man. He would wait until the kid died or lost consciousness, talking while the seconds ticked by. “Actually at first I did plan to complete the mission, bring you safely to the destination. The commission was sizeable, the task attractive. But the more we traveled the more I came to realize your head was more valuable detached from your body than on it. Tens... hundreds of times more valuable. If that’s the case, I asked myself, why should I give my life for Greenland Outpost? Really it’s all thanks to your skill and your luck that we escaped the sweepers. But now we don’t need to worry about that.”

It’s always been this way! Always about self-interest!

With the mask concealing his face Depp couldn’t see Cloudhawk’s expression, but he could see the weakness creeping into his eyes. Eventually he continued with a bitter laugh. “All of your flashy toys belong to me now. I’ll cut off your head and trade it for a fortune, then I’ll be sittin’ pretty. Enough to set me up for a good long time. What would be the use of going back to Greenland then?”

Inconceivable. After the sweepers, after that bloody battle, in the end Cloudhawk was felled by his own people. He couldn’t move, curled like a steamed shrimp as blood leaked from the bottom of his mask. Slowly his chest stopped moving altogether.

Depp’s face twisted into a cold, callous grin. It was time, even if the kid wasn’t dead he couldn’t fight back.

He flipped the hunting dagger around in his grip and held it reversed. Step by step he closed in on Cloudhawk’s inert body and the boy didn’t react at all. Still, despite the arrow and despite his stillness, Depp was cautious. He’d been with Cloudhawk long enough that he understood the boy’s strength.

That strength came from his tools. Alone the kid wasn’t much, only once he awakened his relics did he become a threat. At best he was comparable to some of Greenland Outpost’s elite soldiers. With his relics, though, he was on the same level as someone like Snaketooth or Artemis.

In his fight with the sweepers Cloudhawk had used up everything in him. He hadn’t the strength to summon his relics anymore. Without them what did Depp have to fear from the runt? Besides, he was injured. Even if he suddenly sprang back to his feet and tried to fight he couldn’t stand up to the hunter.

“Time to die...”

Depp leaned over and pulled Cloudhawk around, bringing his knife down toward the kid’s throat.

But at that moment something felt off. He couldn’t see clearly through the dark holes of the mask’s eyes, but he could *feel* the sharp eyes, like the glare of a hawk. Suddenly his whole body shook and a single thought gripped him.

This is wrong! He’s pretending... he isn’t dead!

He reacted quickly he jerking his hand back and stumbling away. Cloudhawk sprang up fast as a bowstring and pulled Depp’s iron arrow from his chest. With the last of his strength he tried to plant it in the man’s eye socket.

Depp wasn’t some extraordinary creature, no special man. He reacted on instinct when Cloudhawk lunged at him and swiped his dagger toward the boy’s chest. He wasn’t a skilled hand-to-hand fighter, but being strong enough to pull back an earth wyrm tendon he could do some significant damage. His dagger reached its target before Cloudhawk’s arrow did.

Chink!

Depp felt it clear, the dagger tearing through the bear hide armor and catching on the cloak. But instead of being buried in flesh it struck something hard – it wasn’t armor, it was something much harder than any iron protection.

What the hell was it?

Cloudhawk pressed the arrow through the soft flesh of Depp’s eye and deep into his ocular cavity. As the arrow head carved a path through bone blood spurt out like a gruesome fountain. He followed up with a kick in the center of Depp’s chest that sent the mutant reeling a dozen feet. Five or six rolls later Depp was prone on the ground.

Cloudhawk finally paused for a moment, clutching his chest and wheezing. When he pulled his hand away a metal-bound book was in his hands. It was the Gospel of Sand that had saved him from Depp’s arrow, and the swipe from his dagger. Cloudhawk kept the demon’s relic hidden inside his armor and luckily for him that was the precise spot Depp’s traitorous arrow had landed.

It was a mighty treasure, taken from the corpse of a demon! There was no way a shit like Depp was going to pierce it!

The book spread the impact of Depp's arrow over a wider area, diffusing its power and rendering it useless. Indeed Cloudhawk's armor had been split like butter, but there wasn't a mark on his skin. The kid's body might have been exhausted but his mind was still sharp, so he grabbed the shaft of the arrow once it hit him and held it fast. He stumbled around like the shot had done him in, but it was all a ruse. It'd been necessary, since even unarmed Depp was still a threat.

Depp pitched and writhed in pain, but he wasn't in danger of dying.

But under present circumstances he was in no condition to complete his gambit. His body twitched and jerked, as his powerful arms groped blindly out around him. Gibberish poured from his mouth as he tried to form words, but nothing intelligible would come. The arrow had damaged his brain [1]. His flailing was just a reflex response.

Cloudhawk looked at the man who'd ridden with him for so many days, the one who'd protected him on the road. He couldn't help but sigh in regret. He picked up Depp's knife and slipped it into the man's heart, putting him out of his misery.

Exhausted, Cloudhawk's chest heaved as he fought for breath. When he pulled off his mask his face was covered in sweat and blood flowed from his nose.

The arrow hadn't ended his life, but it sure as fuck almost did.

He figured his ribs were broken, judging by the sting. He could move but the pain brought tears to his eyes. He was spent, both mentally and physically, so much he couldn't even keep walking... but he had no choice!

He was surrounded by enemies.

Even Depp eventually gave in to temptation, so there was no question bandits and mercenaries would continue to pursue him with even more fervor. If he stayed here, Cloudhawk didn't dare imagine what evils would catch up.

Struggling against the pain Cloudhawk managed to pull himself back up on the wasteland lizard. Every step the beast took sent an electric pain through his torso, but he managed to stay on as they rode away. He continued for most of the night,

eventually coming up on a valley by the time morning started peeking over the horizon. So far none of his hunters had closed the distance.

The valley was complex, with peeks and dips that stretched out before him at random. The ground was muddy especially near the center. It was a marsh that was covered in a low-lying fog that smelled of rot. Murky water sat in stagnant puddles as far as he could see, some of them gathering into sizeable lakes.

Cloudhawk pulled out his map but was only able to discover that this place was unknown to the people of Greenland Outpost. He seemed to have stumbled on an altogether unfamiliar place, one undoubtedly filled with hidden dangers. But it was also a place where *he* could hide.

It quickly became apparent that his lizard mount was only going to slow him down here. They were accustomed to dry places with a lot of sand, and the muck that swallowed its feet halfway up made the beast cumbersome and uncomfortable. It anxiously and awkwardly picked its way along, getting slower the deeper into the marshes they traveled.

“Graaawwgh!”

The lizard belched a growl in protest and stopped moving.

There was nothing for it, Cloudhawk was forced to abandon his mount and proceed on foot. He trundled off into the bogs, toward a foggy horizon that stretched beyond where he could see. It was a curse, for he was thirsty and surrounded by water but none he could drink. Even his lizard didn't dare drink the water, and it was as thirsty as he was.

It had to be toxic. He didn't dare risk it!

He had to find a settlement, or at least somewhere with drinkable water. If he didn't he wasn't going to last the night. The fact that he was *persona non grata* everywhere he went made things a lot more difficult.

As though summoned by his hopes he heard a sound coming up from behind him. It was a large group bearing torches, not normal sweepers by the look of them but mercenaries judging by their formation. Not only sweepers were out to kill him.

He couldn't catch a fuckin' break!

They had to have caught his trail already. Running wasn't an option, he had to think of something else.

1. Speech is located in the frontal lobe of the brain, but that sits slightly *above* the eye socket. If he jabbed the arrow straight back he'd hit the midbrain and medulla, which would instantly stop all vital functions. He'd have to angle the arrow slightly upwards and wait a minute you crazy assholes better now use this information to murder anyone!

Chapter 103

Dead End

The sun rose over the wasteland, its harsh light dispelling the shadows that clung to the marsh's valleys. Yet the grey haze never burned away.

The marshlands were deathly still and silent as the grave. From time to time bubbles broke the stagnant surface and belched fetid gas into the air. The colorless landscape was like a black and white photo, a sketch of some dead expanse rife with secrets.

A hundred or so men dressed as soldiers were lit by the pale sun, each equipped with protective masks to protect them from the toxic fumes. They stood around a pit, cautiously looking in. A large beast called the trench its final resting place.

The wasteland lizard's corpse had been attacked by something. Its belly was torn open and what innards had not been eaten were strewn around. The acidic waters had already begun to dissolve the beast's corpse, and in twenty four hours it would be no more than a skeleton.

The formation of this caustic landscape was simple. First, the valley's natural shape prevented the wasteland's sandy winds from encroaching. The low-lying terrain made it easier for water to collect. Second, it was being fed by some abundant underground water source, but one that had been contaminated by some ancient pollutant. Whatever it was made the water acidic enough to dissolve flesh. Third, that fetid water was continuously being pumped to the surface where it made the dead earth an uninhabitable marsh. The excess fluid was quickly evaporated by the beating sun, but the pollutants remained until year after year this noxious expanse was created.

It was dangerous, a land of poison and decay.

Although the mercenaries were experienced, that experience was earned in the sandy deserts. None of them had ever experienced a place such as this and didn't know what to expect. They were taking a risk, venturing into the unknown.

"Judging by the tracks the kid couldn't have gotten far."

The mercenaries knew little, but they did know this was not the typical habitat for a wasteland lizard. Someone had to have impelled the creature to enter, and a skilled bounty hunter could read the signs, well enough to know that Cloudhawk had passed by not long ago.

“Seen enough or what?” One of the mercenaries, a man with a shotgun, muttered in irritation. “This kid’s life is worth a fortune, but there’s a buncha critters out here who’d like to take a bite out of him too. If his corpse falls in this water and we’re left with nothin’ but bone, we lose out on our payday.”

Everyone shared his worry.

There was no time to lose, they had to follow Cloudhawk’s trail. As experienced hunters they could tell where the boy was headed by the direction of his footprints, and could even tell he was injured. He was thirsty, hungry, and wounded. Easy pickings once they found him.

Yet the revelations did not please the bounty hunters.

In his weakened state and wandering these dangerous marches, the kid was in dire straits. He could be snatched up and eaten by some monster, fall into an acid pit or slip into the bottomless marshes. They could lose his corpse for any number of reasons and thus the bounty.

As the mercenaries continued on, growing ever more anxious, suddenly they were surprised by a thin figure in their path. He was clad in a tattered grey cloak that fluttered against his frail frame. A black staff was strapped to his waist, and in his hands he clutched a crude rifle. The kid stood in the middle of the marsh, who knew where he was heading.

“We found him!”

Who thought it’d be so easy? The mercenaries beamed with joy.

Cloudhawk’s face was covered in that white mask, a false face with a strange and ferocious smile. It was especially unsettling in this morbid backdrop.

The kid was quick. He saw them at the same time they spotted him, and he pointed his rifle their way. The mercenary veterans scattered – seasoned killers like them would not be so easily defeated.

Cloudhawk's shot hit nothing but air. He gave up the fight and struggled deeper into the bog.

The area was covered in murky green water that bubbled suspiciously, making it look as though it were alive. Any unfortunate creature that wandered into the bog was quickly swallowed up and dragged to the depths. Cloudhawk managed to stay above it by picking his way along driftwood and other detritus, dancing along the surface to increase the distance between him and the mercenaries.

Their meal ticket was escaping!

The mercenaries didn't have time to examine their surroundings, not with their target fleeing. They ran after him as quickly as they could.

Cloudhawk looked like he was deftly bounding over the bog, but in truth it was not so easy. One of the mercenaries stomped onto a plank of wood which quickly disintegrated beneath his feet. It'd probably been there too long and made fragile by the caustic waters, and thus the mercenary slipped into the muck.

"Ah-ah-ah-ahhhh!"

His shrill cries were dulled by the heavy air. In a matter of moments his face had started to melt and he no longer looked human. He lifted a hand above the bog and the flesh bubbled sickeningly, sloughing off in sizzling chunks.

The other mercenaries could only put a bullet in their comrade and end his suffering.

Cloudhawk had already bound across the bog, headed for a cluster of grey reeds to hide in. When he slipped from view the company's marksmen began to fire wildly at his position.

Cloudhawk could hear the bullets coming. The tell-tale danger sense flooded him with adrenaline. But even knowing the danger the shooters were too skilled, the time it took to draw their guns and fire was less than two seconds. The hail of bullets blocked anywhere Cloudhawk could run.

All he could do was try to keep the bullets from hitting key areas. In the end he was struck twice. One slipped past his cloak, through his bearskin armor and left a bloody hole in his back. Thankfully the sturdy leather armor took most of the punch out of it, so the wound wasn't too serious.

The second one hit him in the thigh and forced Cloudhawk off balance. He immediately crawled into the relative safety of the reeds.

The kid's got nowhere to run!

The mercenaries closed in, but an ominous sense filled them.

Moments later the marsh erupted, countless bubbles frothed up to the bog's surface and popped, releasing a cloud of toxic gas into the air. Whether it was the sound of gunfire or something else, the mercenaries had captured the attention of the marsh's denizens.

Bang!

The marsh began to pitch and roil.

An enormous tentacle slithered out of the waters, covered in slimy purplish-black flesh. It was over thirty feet long, covered in barbs, and interspersed with something that looked like *mouths*. The flat area split open to reveal rows of hideous teeth that gnashed hungrily.

"What the fuck is THAT?!"

Nightmare beasts were *not* something they were prepared for!

Taking advantage of their sudden misfortune, Cloudhawk managed to completely hide himself in the reeds. He pulled out a piece of cloth and bound his leg to stop the bleeding, then lifted his rifle. Ever so slowly he aimed through the reeds, getting a bead on his target.

Crack!

One shot tore through two of the mercenaries. It finished its trek in the chest of a third. The bog monster was dragging them into the murky depths moments after they hit the floor.

Now suddenly the mercenaries knew what Cloudhawk was up to. The kid wasn't running, he'd been waiting here for them. It was an ambush. He knew he couldn't run so he picked a place to make a stand – a place where he could use the bog monsters and terrain to fight back!

Those tentacle creatures were exceedingly dangerous – the whole marsh was deadly!

But although this place was a threat, how could Cloudhawk hope to take on a hundred mercenaries with only his gun? These bounty hunters earned their living wandering the wastelands, they'd encountered all manner of beasts. The monstrous tentacles were fierce, but not so much that they deterred these veterans.

They lifted their guns and fired, reducing one of the tentacles to ground meat. Chunks flew off in all directions. Another one of the mercenaries rushed forward with a machete and hacked at another one, a tentacle about as thick as a man's waist, chopping it in half.

“Move up! Don't bother with these damn things!”

The mercenary leaders kept their eyes on the prize. The tentacles killed several of their men, but killing them didn't earn anything. Cloudhawk was still sniping at them from the reeds, and he was more dangerous.

A handful of more capable mercenaries were the first to act. They dashed in erratic patterns to confound Cloudhawk's aim, hopping along planks and stones to get closer. Before long they were on the other side.

“Die!”

The one with the shotgun blasted a round of pellets into the bush Cloudhawk had slipped into. Bits of plant matter were blasted in all directions. Another one swiped at the reeds like he was harvesting them, cutting the foliage away.

Cloudhawk was gone. The hunters' eyes went first to the pool of blood where Cloudhawk had bound his wounds. They knew right away he'd fled, and the blood from his leg hadn't completely stopped. He'd have a hard time moving, there was no way he was going to give them the slip.

Mercenaries continued to pick their way across the acidic bog. They'd suffered significant losses, but most of their crew was still breathing. Besides it didn't matter, it wasn't like Cloudhawk had the strength to fight back. Even if he were at full strength they were more than he could handle.

“Get after him!”

The hunters continued to follow the trail.

Things were not going well for Cloudhawk, but he kept moving forward. His superhuman will and tenacious desire to live was astonishing to his pursuers. Not shocked enough to give up the chase, though.

How long would his perseverance sustain him when he was losing so much blood? How long would his desire to live keep him from the inevitable? This kid was only marching toward a dead end!

Chapter 104

Seekers

Shouts and cries echoed through the mist-covered marshland. There were countless terrors that hid in this deadly place. What concerned Cloudhawk the most, though, were the sounds of footsteps getting closer. He had to move faster, but his wounded leg made that difficult.

If it'd been Mantis in this situation, things would be different.

He was out of his depth. Still, in the three months since he left the ruins as a scavenger he'd become a hardened wastelander. A warrior. It was a quick transformation to be proud of, but still limited. He wasn't an expert like Mantis, nor a mighty fighter like Hydra.

What could he do now?

Cloudhawk had bandaged his wounded leg, but while it stopped most of the bleeding it still continued to leak fresh blood. Droplets of bright crimson were left behind, leading right to him. To skilled hunters they were as clear as signposts but he had no time to try and hide them.

To summarize his failure, Cloudhawk had underestimated his foes.

He had refused to give in when his lizard proved useless, but his condition had been quickly deteriorating. When he found the spot where the tentacles haunted it was a good plan. Where he failed was in understanding just how good his enemies were at survival. The tentacles hadn't stopped them, instead it was Cloudhawk that had been hurt.

There were still several dozen mercenaries left.

What could he do?

Getting out of the marsh didn't seem possible. So what was he supposed to do? Die nursing his grudges? No! That was unacceptable!

Reeds that lined the path in front of him suddenly parted, and a dark figure darted out from within. The stranger had a machete aimed for his heart and Cloudhawk responded by lifting his staff in defense. The force of the impact knocked his staff away.

“You think you can make a clean escape after killing so many of our brothers?”

The mercenary idly slapped the flat of his machete against the palm of his hand. He looked at Cloudhawk with cruel eyes, like a hunter watching his prey struggle. But he never dropped his guard, for he could smell the danger coming off his target.

He was like a wild animal, and an animal was most dangerous when wounded and cornered.

Cloudhawk threw himself toward the reeds and rolled into cover. He was gone.

A disdainful grin split the mercenary’s face. A flash of his blade and a large swath of foliage was cut away. But even though his chop cut away the kid’s hiding place, the hunter was surprised to find that he was gone. He leaned over, looking for any trace.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Two streaks of cold light flit by. Two throwing daggers hit the mercenary; one in the chest and the other in his neck.

He stared in shock and horror as Cloudhawk reappeared, unable to understand what had happened. Indeed the young man had managed to recover a little of his mental energy but used it up again by employing the invisibility cloak. He snatched the dead mercenary’s canteen of water and poured its contents down his dry throat. It was clean and refreshing, and he drank down half of it before he finished.

He continued to fish around in the corpse’s pockets, look for anything he could use like bandages or astringents.

Before he could, though, things got noisy. Guns started to peek out of the reeds and aim his way.

The mercenaries stepped into the open, their faces twisted and angry. The kid had killed many of their companions, good men, but now he was surrounded. He’d run out of chances. One of the mercenaries called out to him. “He’s got special powers. We should start by cutting off his arms and legs!”

“Yeah!”

None of them had met a demonhunter. None of them knew what unique abilities they possessed! If they cut off his limbs, though, it didn't matter what skills he had. He wouldn't be able to do shit.

Cloudhawk's hands curled into fists, a murderous glint swept across his eyes. If this was it he was gonna take a few of them with him. The mercenaries could feel it too, they sensed how dangerous he was. The kid looked scrawny, but the threatening sense that wafted from him was akin to a feral wasteland beast.

But so what? If they filled his limbs full of bullets they'd be useless, and it didn't matter how much willpower he had. Guns moved to aim at his arms and legs while Cloudhawk's tightly gripped hands shook. Death was staring him in the face.

“Hold your fire!”

A voice shouted at them from the mist.

The voice was gruff and unpleasant, like the growl of some beast whose vocal cords had been wounded. A group of shadows split from the mist, armed to the teeth – something rarely seen in the sparse wastelands. Most belongings, whether defensive or offensive, were cobbled together on one's own through their adventures. As such equipment differed in a thousand ways from person to person.

But these men, their equipment all looked of the same type. Each of them wore breathing masks that covered their faces and waterproof clothing. As opposed to many in the wastelands they looked slick. Each of them had the same weapon, too – a strange gun without a magazine. They were connected by tubes to an apparatus on their backs.

The one in front wore a large grey cloak. From the shadows of the hood was revealed half a man's face. It looked as though he'd been burned, something had left him covered in heinous scars. His slightly raised lips made him look feral.

The leader of the mercenary company was a large bald man. He fixed the newcomers with a cold glare. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Who we are doesn't concern you. This one belongs to us.” The mysterious stranger swept his eyes toward Cloudhawk. “Now you all fuck off!”

The mercenaries had suffered and labored for this, going through significant danger to capture Cloudhawk alive. Now this guy just shows up, and with a word expects them to leave? Ballsy! A company half their size wouldn't put up with bullshit like this, much less wasteland veterans like themselves. Did these scrubs think they were pushovers?

Those were fighting words!

But the mercenary leader's face was calm.

The others in his company slowly lifted their weapons but didn't fire. The mysterious group of men reacted first. Their guns came alive, but they didn't fire bullets. Instead they exploded with bolts of what looked like lightning – lethal streams of electricity that could fry a bull!

A dozen mercenaries hit the ground, wracked by convulsions. The others fell back, for though electric weapons were deadly they had limited range.

After a brief moment of surprise the bald mercenary leader regained his composure. "You're –"

The mysterious stranger cut him off by removing his hooded cloak and dropping it to the side, revealing his burned features. His strong and robust frame stood out against the mist. He remained at the head of his cryptic contingent, unmoving, only every pore on his body started to writhe. Coarse black hair slithered out from every inch of him, even his face underwent the astonishing change. Where half a moment before he'd been a normal man, now his canines extended into sharp fangs.

In the space of a horrified gasp the man became some sort of human-wolf hybrid. It wasn't only the mercenaries who gaped in surprised alarm, Cloudhawk also looked on wide-eyed and uncomprehending.

What the hell was this guy?!

Some sort of mutant? Impossible! They couldn't control their mutations, unlike this guy who seemed able to switch at will. This was completely outside of the realm of anything they thought possible.

But there was no time to think!

The wolfman leapt forward faster than anyone could have expected. The mercenaries

had their weapons raised but the creature was on them before they could pull the trigger. In a single swipe of his sharp talons the first mercenary's weapon and armor were shredded. His chest was split apart by a series of deep gouges.

The second victim was set upon before he could blink. With an inhuman fury the beast man burst his head like an overripe watermelon.

He was too fast. Everywhere he went fountains of blood followed, and though he looked like a beast he clearly retained the intelligence of a man.

The bald man charged at the beast with ax in hand. He was no weakling, probably comparable in level to Panther or Salamander. However he only managed three or four quick exchanges with the beast man before his weapon was knocked away.

The creature grabbed the mercenary leader by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Inch by inch his sharp claws dug into the man's soft flesh as he taunted him through his half man, half beast face. "This is all you've got, and you think you can best me?"

The bald man was consumed by fear, having never encountered anyone – or anything – as strong as this creature. He fought to speak through his quickly closing windpipe. "Let me... go. I'll... leave!"

"I gave you a chance. You chose to ignore it."

With as much effort as though he were flicking away an insect he threw the mercenary aside. He flailed through the air for thirty feet then landed on his head. The sound was sickening, like every bone in his body broke at once. His head was a bloody, soggy mess as he lay in a heap on the floor, unconscious or dead.

Gradually the thick black hairs on the wolfman withered and disappeared. Once again his burned face became human, and he covered himself in that grey cloak. Glimmering eyes slowly slid sideways to where Cloudhawk watched, still as a board and eyes wide. "Will you come, or do I have to bring you myself?"

Cloudhawk veritably shook in terror. "I-I can walk."

If this guy wasn't stronger than Hydra they were at least close. Beyond that his mutation was incredibly strange and unique. Cloudhawk knew what he was capable of, and the only one he knew who was capable of defeating this monster was the

Bloodsoaked Queen. He couldn't oppose the wolfman, so rather than inciting him Cloudhawk figured he'd behave.

"Who *are* you?"

"This valley belongs to us. We knew the moment you and the others crossed into our territory. Relax, we aren't interested in the bounty on your head. We're only interested in you." He spoke as they began to make their way through the marsh. "You can call me Hyena. As for who we are? The people of the wasteland like to call us Seekers."

They were Seekers?

Cloudhawk was dumbfounded. The first time he'd heard of them was from Cooke, back when he was with the Tartarus mercenaries. He'd learned that the Seekers were one of the most mysterious powers in the wastelands. They controlled technology and knowledge typical people didn't even know existed.

The panacea from Greenland Fort were treasures purchased from Seekers. What kind of lives did these mysterious people lead?

Chapter 105

Blackwater Base

The Seekers group brought the unconscious mercenary leader with them as they left. As dutifully as he promised, Cloudhawk followed. He had no intention of causing trouble, especially since he was surrounded by several men with lightning-spitting weapons. Any wrong move could result in receiving a few hundred volts, not to mention the unfathomable Hyena was always nearby.

The one Seeker he knew was as strong as Hydra, so far as Cloudhawk could tell, maybe a little weaker. The likes of Snaketooth or Artemis, however, wouldn't have stood a chance against him.

Before long several peculiar looking vehicles appeared. They were a strange combination of beast and machine, wooden sleds led by a contingent of something like deer? It was well suited for the marshy terrain, certainly. The pack animals were wrapped in copper pipe, some of which dug into their bodies, which made them look like some nightmarish amalgamation of flesh and metal. The wooden sled they dragged had some capability to move on its own as well, making it even faster.

Hyena gave Cloudhawk a light shove. "Get on!"

Cloudhawk dutifully clambered up on the odd vehicle. When everyone was aboard Hyena somehow turned the grotesque contraption on and the machine-creatures started to move. They were sailing along the marsh in short order. Cloudhawk could tell that the sled itself could move, which as well as being pulled made it exceedingly fast.

The valley marsh was much larger than he'd anticipated. The further in they went the denser and quieter it became. It was no wonder no one had found the Seekers, even after so many years. Typical wastelanders didn't have the means or interest to travel so deeply into this dangerous territory.

As they continued ruined buildings appeared more regularly, peaking up through the bog. It was hard to judge scale or number since most of the wreckage was scattered and half buried. They swept past like towering sentinels, and before them rose a single

peak. They were headed toward the grotto at its base.

The grotto was a dark and serene hideaway which narrowed into a hall. Its walls were smooth and the floor was paved with smooth and even stone, clearly not natural features. Despite what had to be years of use there were no cracks or blemishes to catch their toes.

Hyena led Cloudhawk down the passage and deeper into the mountain.

The young wastelander noted that the hall was sloped downward and the deeper they went the further underground they were going. He couldn't imagine this being possible with current technology, so this place had to be a holdover from the ancient days. The large, metallic polygonal door that arose to block their path confirmed his suspicions.

The door had been cleaned up, but corrosion was still visible along its surface. It spoke to the many years this door must have seen march by. Letters etched on its surface read 'Blackwater Base.'

Blackwater Base? That's a strange name...

A cluster of sentries with guns guarded the door. Compared to those at Greenland Outpost they were orders of magnitude better equipped. Cloudhawk lifted his head and above the door he spotted a small alcove. The barrel of a minigun, black as pitch, was pointed their way. Anyone who dared try to fight their way past the door would be shot to ribbons before they could get close.

Several of the sentries approached. "Hyena, boss, back so soon?"

Hyena didn't pay them any mind. "Open the door!"

"Yes, sir!"

The guard captain fished out a complicated-looking seven-section key and inserted it into the door. Once one section was properly inserted and turned the rest of the key could be pushed in like a seven-digit passcode. Cloudhawk heard the squeal and grind of gears before the heavy door parted.

Cloudhawk had never seen mechanisms so exquisite before, and the shock only increased as he walked in to view the scene beyond. It was magnificent. Though they

were clearly underground the base was far from gloomy, for it was peppered with strange trees that released light. Several electric lamps supplemented them.

Everywhere he looked machinery whirred. Pipes snaked along the walls and released pure water clear as crystal. This place had to have a state of the art water purification system that allowed them to turn the poison bog water into something drinkable.

If nothing else that made Blackwater Base a unique jewel in the wastelands.

As they made their way through the base Cloudhawk noted that there weren't many people. Eyeballing it he figured there couldn't be more than ten thousand residents. The biggest difference he recognized was how they dressed; Seekers wore more refined clothes like people of the ancient days, whereas excavators were clad in simple and primitive clothing.

Hyena was not in the mood to stroll about. He led Cloudhawk quickly through the common area to arrive at a heavily guarded cave entrance.

"This is –"

Cloudhawk gaped at what appeared before him. It wasn't humans guarding the cave. They were beasts.

Each guard was reptilian in appearance, but very different than one might expect. They stood back on two legs, slightly hunched over, and their beady black eyes carefully scanned their surroundings. From time to time a black forked tongue would slither out of their mouths to taste the air. Their equipment was humanoid; leather armor and bows in their man-like hands. Vigilantly they guarded the cave.

These things weren't the least bit human. They were creatures, head to toe!

Hyena saw Cloudhawk's stunned expression and offered a languid explanation. "Don't worry, the lizard guards are loyal. They'll only attack if you give them a reason to."

Cloudhawk had completely forgotten about his pain. He stared at one of the creatures in curiosity for a long time. "Why does it look kind of human? I've never seen a lizard that can use bows!"

"It's been mutated." Hyena's face never changed as he patiently explained. "And that's all you need to know. They were created by the Academician."

Cloudhawk fought with the word. “Aca... de... mician?”

“A title taken from the ancient books. It means someone who is wise, learned.” Hyena punctuated the explanation with a note of assurance. “The Academician is the wisest person in Blackwater Base. We’re headed for the laboratory, you’ll meet soon.”

Cloudhawk hobbled after Hyena as they made their way into the heavily guarded area. As he looked around the young man noted that he’d never seen a cleaner or more organized place in all his life. The floors and walls looked painstakingly cared for, even polished. They were so spotless he could almost see his reflection.

Cloudhawk had lived his life in the presence of filth; filthy places and filthy people. Here, amongst this immaculate environment he was clearly uncomfortable. The next thing he noticed were several dozen steel cages housing various creatures.

Wolves, panthers, lizards, giant rats, and some creatures Cloudhawk couldn’t identify. These ferocious beasts hunched in their cages listlessly, hardly even opening their eyes as they passed.

Hyena explained that they were experimental subjects.

Cloudhawk was puzzled. How was this Academician guy able to capture and experiment on these creatures for so many years? They passed through an iron door and were met with the squeals of pained animals.

He saw a giant rat, its body painted with blood, strapped to a platform. Infusion tubes impaled it; all sorts of medicinal fluids – green, blue, red – were being pumped into its body. It was apparently a painful process, for the rat screeched and writhed. The pores along its body tore and blood leaked freely from them like it’d been flayed.

Cloudhawk couldn’t keep his curiosity inside. “Why are they tormenting this mutated rat?”

To Hyena this was clearly a standard scene. “These subjects hold a very high value. Through special procedures the Academician has a high probability of instigating mutations. We then harvest valuable medicinal materials from them. Some even develop intelligence.”

In all the wastelands only the Academician was able to perform such shocking and incredible feats.

As Hyena explained he did not notice the strange look that came over Cloudhawk's face. The young man suddenly remembered something he'd encountered before – the rat king. He remembered it clearly, for it was one of those rare mutations that turned a beast intelligent. Or was it? Could the rat king have escaped from here? *Released* from here?

Cloudhawk watched the rat scream and struggle upon the operating table in quiet thought. This whole laboratory was unimaginably strange. There were perhaps a hundred Seekers performing experiments on these monsters. He spied a specimen containment room where thousands of wasteland beasts were held. Another room was where they left the failed experiments. Perhaps a hundred corpses were piled up awaiting disposal.

Cloudhawk was completely taken aback. This was like nothing he could have imagined.

Hyena led them to a room framed in glass, wherein a tall and thin person was standing. When they were perhaps a dozen feet away he was able to see that the person was a youngish woman. She was clad in clean white clothes – a rarity in the wastelands, for sure – as well as gloves and a mask. Her attention was concentrated on one of her experiment subjects.

Although he couldn't see her face, her figure was alluring and her bearing refined. Her backside was especially pleasing to the eye, round and plump, and leading into a pair of shapely long legs. She was built to catch a man's attention.

Was this the Academician?

Definitely not what Cloudhawk had imagined. Was the most prestigious person in Blackwater Base her? A woman? He didn't know how capable this place was compared to Greenland Outpost, but if he was going by Hyena no typical person could demand obedience from a creature like him. How could a woman like her who was still young in years command them?

The only thing he could think of was that she had to have skills comparable to the Bloodsoaked Queen.

Sensing their arrival the woman stopped her work and slowly raised her head. She fixed them with two shimmering eyes that were like deep twin pools. In addition to

her round backside and long legs, she also had a plump chest. She looked at them through a pair of safety goggles framed by silvery hair rarely seen in the wastelands. It only increased her mature and dignified appearance.

“This is the Academician’s assistant, Manjusaka [1]. Most just call her Hellflower.” Hyena quietly introduced her before respectfully stepping forward. “The demonhunter our Academician wished to meet has arrived.”

1. Red spider lily. They are considered ominous plants in Asia, used in funerals, guiding souls through the underworld to reincarnation. So we can expect this lady to be cray-cray.

Chapter 106

The Academician

In all his life Cloudhawk had had two women he counted as friends.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was the first. She was about his age, strong, tenacious, persistent and devout. Physically she could be called a peerless beauty, and even out in the elysian lands she was special. It was hard to speak of her without sounding overly keen. Still she had been hard to get along with. They were closer by the end, but there was always a distance between them.

Artemis was the second, a model wastelander in her twenties with all the bad habits that came with her upbringing. She was as loose as she was zealous, straight talking and stubborn. In a lot of ways she was inferior to the Queen, but she had been closest to Cloudhawk.

Hellflower did not possess the feral flavor of the wastelands, nor the delicate and flawless mark of the elysian lands. Hers was a unique style, like someone from those bygone days.

That was a little abstract. To be more specific she reminded Cloudhawk of the pictures he'd seen when he was a scavenger. He and the old man would gather them and pore over the images from that long-past era. Hellflower looked like she'd strode right out of one and into this lab. Her bearing, from the way she stood to her mannerisms and gestures, all spoke of poise and intellect. She was altogether different from both the wastes and the elysian lands.

Like looking out over a winding river, Hellflower's beauty was inexplicable – unattainable. She looked back at Cloudhawk and sized him up while he looked at her, and in her eyes he could see doubt. She said nothing, but the slight contempt in her eyes made her opinions clear.

Consider the reputation of the Caliph of the Sands, what that beast had been. Asking her to believe this scrawny wastelander had killed a demon was like telling her an ant could eat five elephants in a single bite.

Hyena respectfully conveyed Cloudhawk into the room.

“We’re running low on samples for the Promethean Project. I’d like you to set aside some time to collect more.” She picked off her gloves while she conveyed her orders to Hyena. She made her way over to Cloudhawk and stood before him. Her lithe figure was roughly 1.75 meters tall, half a head taller than Cloudhawk. She looked down her nose at him. “You’re a demonhunter?”

Cloudhawk looked at her carefully. She had a mature and attractive face framed by that peculiar silver hair that was fastidiously kept. Cloudhawk didn’t suspect she was strong physically, however her presence was nonetheless heavy-handed.

Cloudhawk answered her in his typical straightforward fashion. “Nope.”

This took Hyena by surprise. “How could that be?!”

The shapeshifter fixed Cloudhawk with a searching look. He saw a young man around fifteen or sixteen, scrawny from years of malnutrition. His rough wastelander features were revealed since his mask was removed, and a mop of long and messy hair sat atop his head. His face was crusted with either mud or dried blood, but in contrast his eyes were sharp and clear.

The dark grey cloak he wore was so dirty it might as well have been a blanket of filth. The trousers he wore were so tattered they could barely count as clothing. Almost every inch of skin that was exposed was wounded. The belt that held his pants up housed a handful of throwing daggers and a revolver, and strapped on his back was a crudely made wastelander’s rifle.

Demonhunters didn’t use firearms. Everyone knew that.

The mystical tools they used were often far superior, and besides the guns and bullets of the wastelander were recovered from the ruins of ancient days. People of the elysian lands felt such things were evil and viewed as taboo. Demonhunters as well as typical folk were forbidden from touching them. Any member of the holy order seen traipsing about with one was in danger of being severely punished.

Hyena had never seen a demonhunter, but if they were all like this hobbling mess of a kid the elysian lands was no place to fear.

“So we’ve made an error?”

“Yup. I’m not a demonhunter, and I have something important I need to do. So if that’s it I’d appreciate it if you let me go.”

Hyena’s melted features twisted into an awkward and irritated glower. “Ms Hellflower, this – “

The Academician’s assistant glanced at the exorcist staff strapped to the young man’s waist. Her lips slowly curled into a grin. With a quiet glance to Hyena the Seeker seemed to understand and dropped into a combat posture. He fixed the kid with hard, merciless eyes.

As the sense of danger washed over him Cloudhawk balked in surprise. “What the hell is this?”

“The Academician was expecting a demonhunter as his distinguished guest. If that’s not you...” Her lilting voice was easy as though she were speaking with a friend over a cup of tea. She made her way over toward a sink and dipped in her slender fingers as she continued. “I do happen to be short a test subject for this compound.”

This hateful woman!

As Hyena came swooping down on him his body rapidly changed. Once again that coarse black hair slithered from his pores and he became half man, half dog amidst the sound of popping joints. He groped for the boy with claws several inches long at incredible speed.

How fast was this mutt!

Cloudhawk didn’t have time to grab his staff or draw a gun. He only had time to dodge to the side, whereupon he vanished from view. Hellflower, though her back was turned as she washed her hands, seemed to know something happened. Her lips spread in a small smile.

Hyena was stunned at the suddenness of his disappearance, but only for a moment before finding his target again. He dropped on all fours then launched into the air like a spring. His right hand reached out and snatched something from seemingly empty air.

“Let go!”

Cloudhawk involuntarily shimmered back into view. His throat was caught in Hyena's iron grip and he knew the shapeshifter could crush his larynx with the slightest effort.

How did the guy do it? Until now no one had been able to pick him out of invisibility so easily.

Hellflower turned back around to regard Cloudhawk. "Hyena's nose is keener than a bloodhound. He could find you from the scent of your wounds."

Cloudhawk scowled. Smell, then? The invisibility cloak could mask sight and sound, but moving caused blood to drip from his wounds. For a creature like Hyena that was easy to track.

"Then I'll make you let go!"

It was getting harder to breathe, his vision was becoming hazy. In his anger the exorcist staff still kept on his waist awakened. It released a blast of energy toward Hyena's head. It struck him and the Pathfinder shoved the young wastelander away. Cloudhawk stumbled backward a few steps then caught his feet but not before aggravating his injured leg. He collapsed onto his backside, pale faced and gulping air.

"If you aren't a demonhunter, why do you have a demonhunter's relics?" Hellflower looked at him with eyes that seemed to know all. "Your weapon is an exorcist staff, standard armaments for the elysian lands. If you didn't have the talents of a demonhunter you wouldn't be able to use it – how do you explain that?"

Cloudhawk just scowled at her. He actually didn't know how to explain it.

"He has to be a demonhunter, without a doubt." Hyena slowly returned to human form. "Only he is pitifully weak. I've never fought the Caliph of the Sands, but I suspect he was much stronger than me. If he really did fight the demon there was no way he would survive."

"That's one explanation. There are other demonhunters out in the wastelands. In fact half a year ago I learned there was a particularly talented one who came from the elysian lands who was searching for the Caliph. If he is truly dead, my suspicion is that demonhunter was the one who did it." Her voice was gentle and calm. It was as though the violent encounter hadn't happened at all. "This boy, however..."

"The both of you are woefully disrespectful." Suddenly a quavering and hoarse voice

interjected. Its owner was an elderly man in white who hobbled along with the help of a cane. He approached, flanked by two robust lizard guardians. “He is our guest. Why are you making things difficult for our young friend?”

Immediately Hyena’s face dropped its fierce expression and he bowed low at the waist.

Hellflower, in contrast, never changed the indifferent look on her face. However with the appearance of this old man she promptly shut her mouth, visibly restraining herself.

The wrinkled and unassuming old man was perhaps only about 1.5 meters tall, even Cloudhawk was a head taller.

The geezer could have easily been a hundred as seventy or eighty. He was so emaciated he looked like skin stretched over bone, and he tottered along as though he might topple over any moment. He kept his balance with the help of his cane. Sparse white hair sprouted around his head but a bald spot had claimed most of the territory. Rheumy eyes peered at them from behind thick glasses. His already frail form stopped visibly, like he had one foot in the grave. Was this half-dead geezer the Academician? The leader of the Seekers?

In all his experiences through the wastelands Cloudhawk knew that a leader had to be strong. This old man looked like he’d be bested by a strong breeze, yet the likes of Hyena and Hellflower worked diligently for him. It was certainly unexpected.

“You’re the Academician?”

“Actually, I have a name.” The skinny fossil chortled at him and pushed his glasses up on his nose with knotted fingers. “You can call me Roste.”

Cloudhawk got the sense that though this Academician Roste was the leader of the Seekers, he was exceedingly gentle. He had the bearing of someone who had experienced much in his life.

“And the reason you brought me here...”

“Young man, don’t be in such a rush.” Roste stopped to relieve himself of a few feeble coughs. He didn’t appear to be in the best of health. “I know you’re in a hurry to get something done, but as far as I can tell the whole wasteland is out to kill you. If you leave here now you’ll only be trudging toward your death. Don’t you agree?”

Cloudhawk couldn't say he was wrong.

"Blackwater Base is very safe, you can hide here for a while. Now that the Caliph is dead no one would dare to trouble us here." The Academician looked Cloudhawk over. "You may discover that you'll learn a lot if you stay among us. Of course there are also some things we will need your help with. I hope we can assist one another."

Cloudhawk thought for a moment.

The old man Roste made a good point. Continuing his journey now with no friends and potentially thousands of enemies would be difficult, to say the least. What would be the harm in staying here for a little while, out of sight? At the very least these Seekers were very interested in him, though Cloudhawk wasn't sure if that was a good thing. At any rate if they really wanted to keep him here it was too late for Cloudhawk to resist. It made more sense to keep calm and capitulate.

"Hyena is my most loyal agent, and Hellflower is my most competent assistant. If you should need anything you can bring it to them." His words were interrupted by another series of coughs. The effort made him weak. The old man waved to those around him. "You lot tend to his wounds."

Chapter 107

The Deal

Academician Roste watched Cloudhawk as he left. His turbid but astute gaze was infected with a fanatic light, like a fire was lit in their depths. It lasted only a moment, however, and then it was gone like nothing had happened.

He coughed and leaned on his cane for support. His bodyguards escorted him into the laboratory.

The old man's lab looked like a devious slaughterhouse. It was covered in blood and bits of flesh, which a small coterie of workers were busily trying to scrub clean. The air was thick with the cloying scent of gore, and tied to a table was a beefy bald man.

A man approached, full of deference. "Shall I start?"

Roste coughed at him then answered. "Begin."

The man was the same bald-headed mercenary leader that had chased Cloudhawk through the bog. After the beating from Hyena he had not died, and instead was brought into the base's laboratory. By now he was awake and stared at the nightmarish surroundings with wide eyes. He looked half mad with fear, unsure what fate awaited him.

A pipe had been inserted through his abdomen and into his stomach. Some inexplicable substance was being pumped through it and it made the bald man feel like his insides were on fire. He didn't know what these assholes were filling him with, but he knew it couldn't be anything good.

Several more Seekers surrounded him and jabbed more transfusion tubes into various parts of his body. Liters of unknown substances were pumped into him that made the unfortunate mercenary twitch and jerk. To him it was like they were pumping him full of fire, or acid, or a hundred cutting knives. A pain he could not put into words wracked every inch of his body. The cruelest punishment he could imagine paled in comparison to this torture.

He wanted to scream but no sound would come out. He wanted to struggle but he couldn't move a muscle.

Every pore was tearing, every muscle ripped apart, every bone breaking. His eyes were flooded with blood as the capillaries couldn't take the pressure and burst. Blood leaked from his pores and in a matter of seconds he was covered in it. As the inhumane torment continued his bones popped audibly, again and again, as though he were being remolded from the inside out.

If he was given a choice, he would have gladly asked for death!

"This process may cause you some pain." Roste watched the poor man suffer, his face an expressionless mask. "Don't be afraid, take it easy. We are building you a new life, and when you are borne again with the power I bestow upon you it will all be worth it."

The Academician and his fellow surgeons ignored the plight of the subject and focused solely on the data. The evidence suggested their chance of success was roughly thirty percent. This bald headed mercenary was a doughty patient.

He was a good test subject for their important work.

Roste absent-mindedly fiddled with a string of bones around his neck. The ornament was a string of finger bones fashioned into a necklace. Gruesome though it was, the bones didn't appear special in any way.

Hellflower walked ahead. She moved with graceful poise and her white lab coat outlined her ripe figure, especially her backside. Each swing of her hips was like a metronome, and the men watched her sway with apt attention. She was a contradiction; both modern and classical, modest and enchanting. She was as dizzying as she was a fascinating distraction.

Cloudhawk was no longer the young and naïve child he had been. The allure of the opposite sex had dimly begun to intrude on his thinking, so he couldn't keep his eyes from stealing peeks. However, as appealing as she was to look at he was more curious in the Seekers and their influence throughout the wastelands. "What makes you all different from other wastelanders? Why are you called Seekers?"

A distasteful expression crossed Hellflower's face. "We are the ones who carry the flame of the old days. Every true Seeker is loyal to our mission, to scour the ruins for the truths and secrets left behind by the ancient civilizations. Most wastelanders are savages, subsisting on whatever they can get their hands on. Meanwhile we have spent years researching medicines, weapons and tools that were once thought to be lost forever, all in order to change the dire fate of the wastelands. If not for us the world outside would be ten times more barbaric than it is."

Carry the flame of the old days. Scour the ruins for truths and secrets. This was the purpose of the Seekers? This is what made them different?

Cloudhawk couldn't understand. "But the world is already like this. What's the point of digging up some long-dead society's garbage?"

"Every day the world is more deformed, more twisted. The wastelands are becoming more deadly, not less. The elysian lands, meanwhile, are a place of deceit and hypocrisy. Our goal is to learn everything we can about how this all came to be. What was the world like before everything collapsed? Where did the gods and demons come from? Clearly humanity became lost down the wrong path. That is why Seekers are needed, to guide humanity back down the road we were meant to travel. Isn't that what we're meant to do?"

Hellflower's ideal was a simple one. She wanted to see the world as it had been.

Cloudhawk was intrigued. "Interesting. I knew an old man once. He liked to collect things from the old world. He even taught me how to read their language."

He mentioned it offhand, thinking little of it. But Hellflower stopped dead in her tracks. Cloudhawk nearly collided with her shapely rump.

Her face changed little, but the light in her eyes glimmered with doubt. "You can read?"

Was that somehow special?

Wastelander writing and the language of the old days were two different things. Over the several hundred years since civilization's collapse wastelanders created their own scripts, which differed through all the various regions. Usually it was close enough that one could get their point across. Cloudhawk had been born with an innate curiosity and thirst of knowledge, though, and since the life of a scavenger was often spent bored in dark holes he learned the ancient words.

“Come with me.”

Hellflower turned and lead him down another hallway.

A few moments later she pulled open a door to a large apartment; it had a living room, a bedroom, bathroom, and several supplementary rooms like studies. All in all it was a very all-encompassing setup. The living room alone was quite large and many tables had been pushed together within it. They were covered with medicine vials, specimen jars, test tubes and so forth.

Cloudhawk’s keen senses picked out the odd scents wafting through the air, among them strange pharmaceuticals and unidentified materials. One thing he could pick out was the musty scent of books intermingled with a delicate fragrance that matched the one coming from Hellflower.

This was her room?

Hellflower didn’t say anything at first. She brought Cloudhawk through the apartment and into her study where she picked a decrepit tome from a bookshelf. Only when she opened it did Cloudhawk see that it wasn’t a book, but rather a collection of papers glued together into a large volume.

“Do you understand what’s written here?”

“There are a lot I haven’t seen, but I think I can understand the general meaning.”

He began to translate a paragraph. Jerky, difficult and sometimes inconsistent, he was still able to get the gist. Hellflower was truly taken aback by the finding.

Yet she was still suspicious. “And you’re telling me that the man who taught you this was an old scavenger?”

Cloudhawk never had any reason to suspect the old man was anything other than he appeared. “How could he be anything else? We lived together for seven or eight years.”

Her face tightened as though she were carefully considering something. “No, that can’t be right. That means the old man... is he still where you came from?”

“He died a long time ago.”

“Dead? What a pity!” Her face fell with regret.

As Clouthawk watched her his own suspicions began to emerge. Were there really so few people who could understand ancient writing? If these Seekers, who knew so much, didn't understand it then how could the old man read the words?

Hellflower continued to press him before Clouthawk could ask his own questions. “Tell me about yourself. Your history.”

There wasn't a lot Clouthawk thought to hide, so he gave her a brief explanation of what had happened to him. The first fifteen years of his life were uneventful, and he spent most of his time picking through the ruins and hiding in holes. They were long years marked with thirst and hunger, struggling on the border of life and death.

The last few months were more eventful than all those previous years combined.

Hellflower was stunned that this unimpressive child could have experienced so much. She was also interested to discover that he had been traveling for the elysian lands when they picked him up. When his tale ended her erudite eyes flickered. “Let's make a deal.”

“A deal?” He replied inquisitively.

“You are not prepared to make your way to the elysian lands.” She spoke to him slowly to make sure he understood. “On the one hand you're too weak, and on the other you don't understand the language they speak. What sort of life do you think you could lead under these conditions, if you even make it there?”

Clouthawk furrowed his brows. “So what are you saying?”

“It's simple. I'll teach you the language of the elysian lands and you teach me the ancient scripts. I'll also use the resources we have here to make you stronger, improving both your abilities and body, so long as you agree to work with me and follow my every command. Whatever I tell you to do you will perform unconditionally without complaint.”

Clouthawk was unprepared for her offer. She understood what they spoke in the elysian lands? And she was promising to make him stronger?

Ignoring the former, the resources commanded by the Seekers could certainly benefit

him greatly. After all, whatever medicines and materials were found in the wastelands were produced by them. With their support Cloudhawk could reap considerable benefits.

And yet there was something about this woman Cloudhawk didn't trust. In fact he trusted few people anymore, especially someone as intelligent and puzzling as her. "How do I know you aren't trying to trick me?"

Hellflower's plump lips spread into a smile. "The Academician is very interested in the abilities of the demonhunters. He will certainly want to experiment on you. During this process no one would dare harm you, myself included. You don't need to worry about your health." She left out the fact that during this process he wouldn't be permitted to leave, either.

Cloudhawk had no reason to trust her.

However, it was also true that right now there were no better options. Cloudhawk was also interested to learn what he could from the Seekers. If he spent some time here and learned their knowledge perhaps it could serve him well in the future.

She didn't wait for his reply. Her keen and insightful mind could see his decision on his face. She spoke softly to him. "I'll set up a cot here in the study. For now you'll live with me, and your primary job will be translating data."

Chapter 108

Examinations

Hyena often had dreams. This time he was in a dark forest, surrounded by fog and ruined buildings coated in damp moss. The trees were twisted and ferocious, like terrifying demons that groped at him from the darkness. The sky was vast and felt heavy as an iron curtain, settled over the stretching nightmarish landscape.

He was lost.

The darkness was stirring, and an unsettling rustle came from the trees. Something was coming.

Hyena was wracked by an unexplainable fear that made him shiver, like he knew something terrifying was about to happen. Just as he was preparing to flee the mists parted, and an ethereal grey figure crept into view. It was a wolf.

This was no ordinary creature of the forest. Its shoulders were wider than its hips and the muscles of its upper body were vastly stronger than its lower half. He could tell the beast could both walk on all fours and also upright like a man. As he looked the wolf fixed him with glowing green eyes that were replete with some dark magic. They were calling him closer.

“Have you already forgotten who you are?”

As the creature spoke in human words Hyena’s hair stood on end. His panic was interspersed with an inexplicable wrath and with a roar he flung himself at the beast, ready to tear it apart with his bare hands. Only, when he reached the wolf it vanished.

A lake of limpid water appeared next, without any ripple or wave, clear as a mirror. Slowly he approached the shore, and when he saw his reflection in the waters his pupils shrunk to black dots. A green eyed wolf was staring back at him.

“No!”

Hyena snapped out of the nightmare with half his body drenched in sweat. Dark hairs

had begun to slither from his pores, but vanished once he was awake. With heart pounding he pushed himself out of bed and approached a mirror. When his familiar ugly face greeted him his ragged breathing slowly calmed.

Bang!

Hyena put his fist through the mirror, sending blood-smearred glass scattering every which way. Each one reflected a part of his twisted features. With pained expression he dropped to the ground with his head in his hands, pressing in on his scalp with all his might. A bestial growl issued from his throat.

It was breakfast time.

Hyena sat in a rather luxurious dining room. He was the greatest warrior the Seekers had, so he was treated with amenities a normal wastelander couldn't imagine even in their wildest dreams. There was bread, milk, fruit – things a typical person wouldn't dare imagine.

Several attractive servants addressed him respectfully. "Please help yourself sir."

With a scowl on his twisted face Hyena sniffed the air. He plucked up a piece of bread, took a small bite, then quickly spat it back out. Enraged he flipped the table over, sending the delectable meal rolling across the floor. "This bullshit is fit for people to eat?!"

Rivulets of fresh goat's milk were marking a trail along the ground. This treasured luxury of the wasteland was cast away like garbage and the stink of raw meat hung in the air. Several of the maids hurried to clean up the mess. They were at a loss, over the last half year their master's temperament had become more and more strange.

Before he had been vigorous and lively. Every night he would take three women to bed. Now, though, he barely touched any of them. Where before he could eat as much as four or five men, now he barely picked at anything they brought him.

The problem wasn't with his appetite. When he stared at them now there was a hunger in his eyes, but not a hunger for pleasure. It was a hunger for their flesh!

Hyena stomped from his residence and, snatching up two large chunks of raw meat,

made his way toward the Academician's sample collection room. There were many subjects gathered for Roste's experiments, from giant rats to lizards and even wolves.

His intention was to do what he always did in the past and feed the beasts to keep them strong. Instead, he found himself in front of the wolf's cage staring at the mutated creatures.

The wolves kept here were the offspring of experiment subjects. Their original stock were normal wasteland wolves, but the Academician's medicines had increased their mutation rate. Each evolution was faster and more dramatic than the last. Now they were stronger, smarter, and more cunning.

Every one of them had undergone incredible strengthening. Even the weakest of them would be a wolf pack alpha if released back into the world. A handful of them were even displaying signs of higher intelligence.

Academician Roste was a genius – but he was also a madman.

The wolves had gathered round, jostling for position to grab the fresh meat. The largest one, by contrast, was seated calmly nearby. Her fur was a silvery white, majestic and awe-inspiring. Without any anger or feral madness she calmly watched the man standing outside of the cage. She and Hyena stared at each other for a long time. It sent a shiver up Hyena's spine.

They called this mother wolf Subject Zero. She was their most successful trial yet, coming from a strong and stable pedigree. As such Roste didn't experiment on her and instead used her for breeding. Her offspring had the same doughty breeding, thus giving the Academician no shortage of good experimental material.

The truth was that Hyena wasn't entirely human. The strongest of this majestic creature's offspring, their blood and essence flowed through his veins.

The old matriarch caught his familiar scent. Her sharp, calm eyes settled on him. A steady gaze that filled him with dread.

He felt like he was losing his sense of identity.

Hyena had lost all interest in women, the same with breads and fruit and alcohol. He felt more of a kinship with these beasts now, like a connection that grew out of his very bones.

He dropped his head and stared at the bloody slabs of meat in his hands. The stench of it filled his nose and made his mouth water. He fought the desire to lick it, to just taste the fresh blood and uncooked meat.

He gulped down a mouthful of spit.

In the end his human will won over and he managed to fight down the call of the beast within.

Moments later a researcher stepped into the room. "Hyena, sir. The Academician has called for you."

Hyena cast a final look toward the mother wolf, then threw the meat into the wolf cage.

When he arrived at the laboratory there were three people already waiting. One was the shapely and attractive Hellflower. Another was the unassuming, balding old Academician who feebly held himself up with a walking staff.

The final person was a lascivious man, thin as a rail. At a glance one could tell he was a vulgar man, he couldn't keep his eyes off the swell of Hellflower's chest and the curve of her backside. He was director of the laboratory, both a Seeker and a scientist. Although he certainly had a name taken from the older days, most of the Seekers preferred to call him by his nickname; Chimp.

At one time Hyena had drooled over Hellflower himself. He had to fight the urge to tear his pants off and mount her like a beast, ravaging that peach-shaped tail for his pleasure. Now, though, his tastes had changed. It didn't matter how attractive a woman was, he was no longer excited by the view. To him they might as well be beautiful monkeys. He simply wasn't interested.

Academician Roste coughed feebly before peeling open his dim eyes and fixing them on Hyena. "You seem a little off today. What's the matter?"

"Thank you for your concern, Academician." His feelings toward the old scholar were complicated. On the one hand he'd brought Hyena back from the brink of death, yet on the other his current troubles were a result of the Academician's work. Whatever the case he held the man in highest esteem, he barely dared to look him in the eye. Hyena addressed the old scientist with the utmost respect. "I'm fine."

Academician Roste stared at Hyena for a moment, his turbid eyes seemingly able to

pierce all the world's obfuscations. He spoke again through a series of coughs. "You are my greatest work, and the only one whose memory I did not erase with pharmaceuticals. If there are any problems we can solve them together. I am your creator, but more than that I am like your father."

"Hyena, I really do envy you!" The expression on Director Chimp's face matched his words. "You were a first-class soldier once, and thanks to the Academician's efforts you have been turned into one of the greatest warriors of the wastelands. Even Greenland Outpost's leader, Hydra, has nothing on you. If only I had the kind of power you possess."

Hellflower answered with a pretty laugh. "At best, the process only offers a fifty percent chance of success. Without the appropriate willpower or constitution, do you think you'd survive?"

Her biting words angered Chimp, and though it was just banter he couldn't endure her disdain. His response was deliberately ambiguous and thick with contempt. "My constitution? Find us a bed and you can see for yourself, you'll learn what a real man is!"

"Stop wasting time." Roste's words quavered soft as gossamer. He really did seem like he would keel over at any moment. "Bring the young man in. We must begin the examination."

The young man entered shortly after, clad in his cloak and his features hidden behind a white mask.

Cloudhawk wasn't entirely sure what situation he found himself in. He looked around at his surroundings in confusion, while his right hand never left that shaft of his exorcist staff. He let off the air of one who was on edge, vigilant for any danger. When he saw the Academician, Hellflower and the others he approached without hesitation. "Why did you call me here?"

"Don't be nervous, my young friend." The Academician greeted him with an amicable smile. "We've asked you here because we're interested in testing your unique abilities. Please relax, you're in no danger."

Cloudhawk glanced at Hellflower, then walked into the test chamber.

Several Seekers got the tests underway.

The first in the series of examinations was designed to analyze his skills as a demonhunter. By asking him to awaken his relics they tested his abilities and used the data to extrapolate his strength. They determined that his psychic energies surpassed those of a typical novice, yet was still slightly inferior to a full-fledged demonhunter.

Weaker than they expected!

Even master demonhunters were of little concern for the Caliph of the Sands. By comparison Cloudhawk was hardly worthy as cannon fodder before the demon. However, his skills as a demonhunter were worth noting. Anyway where else were they going to find a proper demonhunter out here?

Next they tested his physical abilities.

Wastelanders didn't possess the holy inheritance of the gods, nor the elysians' methods of cultivation. Typical denizens of the wastes were forced to awaken their potential through hardships, facing death in order to make themselves stronger. There were gene activating medicines but they were few and far between out here. Mutagens also varied by effect depending on the individual, and like panacea they drew on the latent potential of the subject to overdraft what their bodies were capable of. Using them to improve one's physical characteristics wasn't always a wise decision.

No such substances were detected during Cloudhawk's physical test.

Everyone's constitution was different, and as such so was their developmental process. Some people were strong enough to easily lift a thousand pounds; some were so agile they had supernatural reaction times and movement speed; still others could recover from injuries faster than normal; some were abnormally intelligent. No two persons were alike.

However Cloudhawk was especially unique. They discovered that his mutations were not particularly rapid, but they were systemic. He was stronger, faster, and smarter than any normal person, in addition to increased regenerative capabilities. Whether it was his muscle or neural connections, he was better than average across the board!

Unbelievable! It was hard to accept! It was only more astonishing after he answered a series of questions about his personal history.

His increased capabilities had only manifested in the last three months. At this rate of speed his improvement would be spectacular in a decade or two!

Academician Roste was so excited his veiny hands were clenched into fists. This boy wasn't strong now, but his potential was incredible!

The elderly scientist spoke softly with Chimp. "Go make the preparations. Use Subject Zero."

Chimp's expression betrayed his surprise. Subject Zero? Hyena reacted as well, the knuckles of his scarred hands whitening as he curled them into fists.

Chapter 109

The Dark Atom

The final test measured Cloudhawk's endurance and willpower. The methodology was simple, such as having him lift something that was just heavy enough that it nearly exceeded his abilities and see how long he could hold it, or enduring increasing amounts of painful stimulation.

Once again the results surprised the researchers.

If normal subjects were given a measure of one for their stamina and willpower, Cloudhawk was a three or more.

The young man was a model wastelander, at least in terms of mannerisms. He was fanatical, tenacious down to his bones, and even when brought to the brink of death his will was unbending.

Cloudhawk, meanwhile, was becoming more and more infuriated by the process. These tests were going on for fuckin' forever! What the hell were they doing?!

Roste, leaning heavily on his cane, led his three subordinates into the testing chamber. By now he regarded Cloudhawk with entirely different eyes, like the treasure hunter who'd found his buried riches. He drew on his several decades of preparation, careful not to reveal his deep excitement at their findings. He carefully sized Cloudhawk up as they entered. "Tell me, are you interested in becoming the strongest organism in the wastelands?"

Cloudhawk found the old scholar's question baffling. "Who wouldn't be?" He flippantly replied.

Academician Roste idly fingered his bone necklace and sighed emotively. "Indeed, who doesn't want to be stronger? Our biology is so fragile – we humans are so easily broken. The smallest injury or illness could take away the ones we love. Only the strong can protect that which means the most to them."

Why did everything this old man said sound so mysterious?

Hellflower suddenly chimed in. "As I recall, the Conclave of the Dark Atom should be smuggling in a shipment of materials from the elysian lands this afternoon. None of our other subjects would be able to handle the steroids, we can use them on Cloudhawk."

"Alright." Roste answered without hesitation. He winced as another set of hacking coughs overcame him. When he caught his breath he opened his eyes once again, turning them toward Hyena. "Gather some people and head out to meet the Dark Atom party. Offer double the price they ask, and have Wolfblade bring more materials from the elysian lands."

"What the fuck are y'all planning?" Cloudhawk was becoming less comfortable with his situation by the minute. "I'm getting pretty damn tired of being kept in the dark!"

Cloudhawk was not one to believe that gifts were magically showered on people from on high. The Academician had taken him in, given him fine food and drink, and now was preparing to use precious materials smuggled from the elysian lands to make him stronger. None of this was cheap.

This sent the old man into another fit of hacking coughs. His chest heaved and he fought for breath. This time it was so bad he was having difficulty staying on his feet.

"Don't be so ungrateful!" Chimp's creepy face was twisted in a look of indignation as he glared at Cloudhawk, supporting Roste at the same time. "The Academician thinks highly of you, he wants to help! To have this sort of patronage would be a dream come true for many in the wastelands!"

Roste eventually caught his breath and waved his hand, entreating Chimp to silence. He regarded Cloudhawk with that calm, erudite expression and those rheumy wise eyes. "Young man, you can see what condition I'm in."

Indeed the old man could hardly stand and swayed like a blade of grass in the wind. He constantly seemed on the verge of toppling over. His hair was a thin mop of spindly white and his face carved deep with crisscrossing wrinkles. His skin was dry and stretched over his emaciated frame. All in all he looked more corpse than man.

He went on. "I am over eighty years old, closer to dying than anything else. At this age riches, honor, titles, influence... none of that matters. But I am left with regrets, and a desire to leave this world with something I've created – a powerful being as my final

mark.”

Cloudhawk half-believed the old man’s diatribe.

“You have the power of a demonhunter, and tremendous potential as well. Better still you are young and thus my greatest seedling. It serves nothing to hold back.” He spoke to the young wastelander, full of earnestness. He fought through another series of coughs. “I give you power so that you can make this land better. You are the final extension of my dream, the last goal to reach so I can die in peace. A success for the good of us all.”

Cloudhawk couldn’t help but feel moved. Staying alive this long in the wastelands was no easy feat. After that speech he chose to wait and see what would occur.

He gave voice to another small doubt. “What is the Dark Atom Conclave you were talking about?”

Hellflower answered in place of the Academician. “They are a group of Seekers established on the fringes of the elysian lands, hiding from the ire of its denizens. Their current leader is Wolfblade, a wild and ambitious man. They smuggle things from within their territory to us, and we trade for things of our own. They earn a lot from us to use in their fight against the holy cities, and so make several trips to Blackwater Base to trade.”

Seekers lurked in the elysian lands as well?

That was unexpected! Of all the denizens of the wastelands it was the Seekers the people of the elysian lands hated most bitterly. Not only were they godless heathens, but they toyed with the unholy relics of the past while denying the supremacy of godly men. They even refused to accept the divine histories as truth, making Seekers enemies that were to be killed on sight.

Was it even possible that this group, as incompatible to the elysian lands as fire and water, could survive in such hostile territory? How did they do it?

Cloudhawk was always a victim to his curiosity. He directed his words towards Hyena, the one who would encounter the Dark Atom. “Can I go with you?”

Hyena had been lost in absent thought when the young boy’s question piqued his attention. His eyebrows shot up, and he looked at Roste for the old scientist’s

determination. The Academician nodded consent. The location for their meeting was only at the gate of Blackwater Base and there was nowhere for Cloudhawk to flee. They still needed the young man's cooperation, his request was not unreasonable. The Academician saw no harm in allowing him to satisfy his curiosity.

"I'm a little tired. We'll finish here for now."

Roste was old and as such his vigor was waning. They'd spent quite a long while in the process of these tests and though he was eager to continue his body would not capitulate. They were forced to postpone their efforts.

Cloudhawk followed Hyena out of the testing chamber. Chimp was the last to exit. He shut the door, extracted a set of keys from his coat, and locked it behind them.

Chimp was the laboratory's director and also the Academician's student. He wasn't as capable a fighter as Hyena, nor as astute as Hellflower, but he was unfailingly loyal to the Academician. He was rewarded by being responsible for all the confidential and important matters of the lab. He held all the keys.

A sweet breeze flit past. Hellflower appeared by their side.

Chimp brazenly salivated over her proud chest and firm buttocks. He hardly even blinked.

Hellflower suddenly stopped and, intentionally or unintentionally, stretched her back forcing her rump higher. "Enjoying the view?"

This woman was always so calm and dignified, so her sudden teasing words immediately dug into Chimp's lewd mind. His blood pumped faster, his body unconsciously reacting to her implications. He answered her with an obscene grin. "A fine view is one thing, but I wonder if you know how to use your gifts."

"Is your whole head clogged up with sperm? I really don't understand why the Academician would pick a man like you to run his laboratory." Her blunt abuse was not tainted with anger. In fact it was almost teasing. She continued with a sigh. "But I have nothing to do and boredom is a terrible affliction. I want a drink."

Chimp's eyes lit up like a cat who'd caught the scent of fish. "What would you like? I'll treat you."

Hellflower cast a fleeting glance toward the director's keyring. "Oh, I couldn't ask you to spend any money on me."

"It's nothing, not an issue!"

"Alright... tonight then."

It was unlikely that this woman would suddenly be interested in satiating her loneliness. Yet Chimp couldn't help but be excited by the scenarios playing through his mind, making his body's physical reactions more acute. That woman was far more dangerous than she looked, otherwise he'd have taught her a lesson a long time ago.

The unique sounds of the base's hydraulic systems – the winches and gears – whined as they worked to pull open its massive front door. Near a hundred people stepped through the portal, all clad in protective biohazard gear. They bore all manner of weapons, brandished for anyone to see.

As Cloudhawk stepped through the door with Hyena and out into the swamp he saw something emerge from the fog. It looked like an airship, and it crept through the marsh toward them. It looked a full one third larger than the one commanded by the Caliph's lieutenants. Six or seven motley looking flying machines followed as an entourage.

Were these the Seekers from the elysian lands? They even had an airship – they had to be a force to be reckoned with!

Hyena kept his eyes on Cloudhawk's back. His fists slowly raised, fingernails growing longer centimeter by centimeter. However when even the slightest rotten thought intruded his mind Cloudhawk seemed to sense it. His head swung around, eyes sharp, and fixed his vision on Hyena.

"What are you looking at?" Hyena was surprised at the kid's keen situational awareness. By now the dark thoughts had passed. "Out of my way!"

Cloudhawk frowned suspiciously. He had definitely felt something... or was it an illusion?

He trusted his intuition without a shadow of a doubt. It wasn't a mistake, he'd felt the

danger, so his eyes followed the scarred man. Still he didn't spot anything untoward.

They'd left the base with twenty or so items in tow, odd things that were a little like crates and a little like cages. The outsides were tightly wrapped in cloth but the sounds of creatures could clearly be heard from within.

The Dark Atom' airship slowly touched down and a tall man with a sharp, hawk-like nose stepped out. His sharp and beady eyes swept over the Blackwater contingent before eventually settling on Hyena. He smiled. "It's been a long time, Hyena my friend. I'm glad to see you're still breathing."

"Cut the shit, Buzzard!" Hyena clearly wasn't interested in playing nice with this fellow. Among these illustrious Dark Atom Seekers this one wasn't anyone to bother with. "The Academician said to give you twenty this time. Next time it's double."

Buzzard glanced at the crates, pleasantly surprised by the news. "The Academician is as generous as he is prosperous, I see! I offer thanks on behalf of Wolfblade."

Their exchange was cut short when one of the crates tipped over. An angry snarl issued from inside followed by the sounds of struggle. Whatever beast was within was fighting to get free.

Several Blackwater soldiers rushed over with their weapons belching lightning. It resulting in one side of the crate bursting open, and a scaled monstrosity leaping out from within. As bolts of electricity struck it sparks went flying, completely ineffective.

"Aaaarrgghh!"

The green-scaled beast grabbed one of the soldiers and unceremoniously ripped him in half. He then lunged at another and crushed his head with a single punch.

Hyena reacted immediately. Black hair sprouted over his body and his two powerful legs sent him charging toward the beast. The scaled monster sensed Hyena coming and it only seemed to enrage it further. There was a deep, seething hatred in its feral eyes.

The two humanoid beasts clashed, punch for punch. Hyena was clearly stronger.

The green-scaled monster was knocked backward a few steps but was unharmed from Hyena's blow. Its strength and endurance were impressive, to say the least.

Even before the creature could regain its balance Buzzard swept in like a ghost. In terms of speed he was at least thirty percent faster than Hyena. Already at a disadvantage against Hyena, the green-scaled monster was suddenly faced with another just as strong. The surprise attack forced it to the ground.

Hyena and Buzzard pinned the creature down, one on its left and the other on its right. Eventually the scales receded back into the creature's skin, revealing a bull-like bald man beneath.

As he watched the scene Cloudhawk's eyes widened in shock. "It's him!"

Wasn't this the mercenary captain, the one who'd tried to kill him in the marshes? He remembered that Hyena had knocked his out and dragged him back to camp, that was about ten days ago. What had happened to him since then? How did he get so strong? Why was he suddenly part of the base's trade goods?

The bald-headed man never lost consciousness. He screamed and roared in impotent hatred until one of Blackwater's soldiers gave him an injection. He almost immediately sunk into a coma. Thus neutralized he was returned to the crate.

"This new one isn't stable yet. His memories haven't been completely erased," Hyena explained to Buzzard. "I'll go back to the base and change it out for another one."

"No need." Buzzard eyed the bald man's crate. He chuckled through a dark grin. "We've been getting into more scraps than ever. Fighters with his kind of gusto are few and far between, I think Wolfblade will like this one. We'll teach it how to behave. Send the Academician our thanks."

The members of Dark Atom quickly gathered the crates and brought them onto their airship. Meanwhile Blackwater soldiers collected the rare elysian materials traded in exchange.

With their transaction completed, the Dark Atom packed up and prepared to leave. They didn't leave any trace of their presence behind. Buzzard bade Hyena farewell and then their airship lifted off. Cloudhawk followed Hyena and the others as they returned to base, only this time his curiosity was replaced with something more like concern.

Chapter 110

Stealing Secrets

Cloudhawk closed his eyes and focused on the sensation of the cool and refreshing water flowing over his body. From his head to his neck to his chest, all down his body every pore relaxed as the magnificent sensation washed through him. His mind began to wander, and the situation of Blackwater Base intruded on his relaxing moment.

This place was a legacy of the past – a refuge of the old days. Fifty years ago the base was discovered by the Seekers. Luckily they were able to get the water filtration system up and running, and from that point on the base was a functional sanctuary. By now most of the living quarters, laboratories, testing areas, manufacturing centers, logistics zones and the central control area were operational. Altogether there were about eight thousand people living here – not many in the grand scheme, but they commanded incredible influence and power. Here they were able to manufacture panacea, advanced weaponry, and special materials which they traded for essential goods. They were rich, more affluent even than Greenland Outpost.

The water slowed to a trickle and eventually stopped. Not even a drop was wasted.

More than once Cloudhawk nearly died of thirst out in the wasteland. He cherished water as one of the world's greatest treasures. He couldn't help the guilt that crept up within him at wasting all of this water to wash. Although the base certainly wasn't lacking for water, he didn't want to use any more than he already was.

After ten days under Blackwater Base's state-of-the-art care, there wasn't a scratch left on Cloudhawk. He was comfortable and safe for the first time in a while. Every day he would study the elysian language with Hellflower and the amount of information he retained was surprising to her. He already had most of the foundational vocabulary committed to memory.

And yet, though safe and comfortable, Cloudhawk was ill at ease.

He wanted to know what Academician Roste's plans were. What was he up to?

Today's tests had seemed without rhyme or reason. It was especially suspicious that

they were willing to spend so much just to get resources for Cloudhawk's improvement. Where there was smoke there was fire, and the young wastelander wasn't convinced with the excuse Roste had given him. After seeing what had become of that bald mercenary his sense of unease had only grown.

Only ten days ago that baldie had been a normal guy! How had he suddenly become a monster? There was no mutation he knew of that worked so fast.

Cloudhawk knew there had to be more than they were telling him. However he didn't know what it was, where it was coming from, or who was behind it.

"Are you interested in becoming the strongest organism in the wastelands?"

Roste's strange offer echoed through Cloudhawk's mind, and for some reason it caused a chill to crawl up his spine. "Strongest organism"...it was a strange and specific phrase. He hadn't paid the detail much thought at first, but now it seemed uncomfortably telling.

But he still didn't look too deeply into it, for as the thought crossed his mind suddenly the door opened. Hellflower swept into the apartments smelling of booze, clearly she'd had a few. Her typically dignified and poised face was painted with splotches of red. Her first order of business was to put down the items in her hands on her work desk; a folder and a set of keys.

Part of Cloudhawk's training with Mantis had been to develop a habit of paying close attention. Most of the details from today's meeting with the Academician and his subordinates were still fresh in his memory – and unless he was mistaken, those keys used to be under the care of that thin and creepy laboratory director. Why did Hellflower have them now?

Somehow her face was even redder than when she entered and her eyes were blurry. However she was clearly fighting to keep her head clear as she spoke to him. "This data's very important, it needs to be translated right away and finished by tonight. I'm gonna make a copy and you start translating."

Cloudhawk took one look at her and knew this was no trivial matter.

He remembered their agreement; she would teach him elysian and getting him whatever resources she could, and he would perform whatever duties she required.

But he noticed that Hellflower was out of sorts. He couldn't help but ask. "Are you alright?"

Since coming into the room and sitting down she'd started burning up. Even from a few feet away Cloudhawk could feel the heat radiating off of her. The first few buttons of her blouse had been undone, and the attractive plunge of her bust was clearly visible. Any man would be hard pressed to keep his head when that was his field of view, especially someone like Chimp.

Evidently the laboratory's director was caught in a honey pot, but Hellflower had paid a price herself.

"That repugnant monkey used a *very* strong dose." Hellflower tenderly rubbed her temples. "But that's not important. Get to work."

Chimp had spiked her drink with a powerful hallucinogenic or perhaps some sort of aphrodisiac. Any lesser woman would have been entirely at his mercy, but Hellflower had been prepared. She'd taken something to inhibit neurotransmitters, thus reducing the withdrawal effects of his drugs and negating the unsavory results of his aphrodisiacs.

She'd only managed to escape his filthy plans because of these precautions.

She clamped her legs shut and took a deep breath. A drop of sweat trickled down her uncannily smooth face, down the line of her chin and ultimately dripped into the valley of pale skin below before vanishing in that crevice. Sweat was pouring off of her now and made her clothes cling to her every curve. Her white clothes were nearly transparent – a fact that did not escape Cloudhawk's notice.

He stared at her, dumbfounded.

The scientist's face was beguiling and yet serious. She tried to pull herself together by pushing her glasses up on her nose and arranging the data in the folder. Delicate fingers snatched up a pen and she started to transcribe its contents. Even drugged her hands were dexterous and scrawled across the page like flowing water.

She certainly had supernatural levels of willpower to actually keep her mind on her work.

Cloudhawk looked over the data, covered in a mess of formulas that seemed

haphazardly scribbled across the page. All of the figures made his head spin. However he did see that they were annotated with the ancient script, words he recognized.

The parchment and ink were fresh so Clouthawk figured the data had to be only a few years old. This told him that there had to be someone else in the base who could understand the ancient text. Based on Hellflower's status among the Seekers, if she still wasn't being taught how to read it this meant the only person who could understand the writing had to be the Academician.

Hellflower must have planned to use her charms to pilfer the keys from the Academician's most trusted student, Chimp. That must mean she stole this data – she was brazen, that was for certain. She would dare to steal from the Academician!

“Start translating!”

As she transcribed the information she hid large chunks of the formulas, and restructured the paragraphs in such a way that they made little sense. For Clouthawk he was given a veritable mess of words and figures to sift through and couldn't puzzle out its meaning. All he could do was focus on one sentence at a time, translating what he was given line by line. [1].

This woman was incredibly cautious!

Clouthawk wasn't able to piece together everything, but there were several words that kept cropping up; transformation, organism, strengthen, gene... Clouthawk's thoughts sudden went back to the bald-headed man and how he could have suddenly changed so much. What method turned him from a normal man into that green-scaled monster?

And Hyena! His abilities certainly didn't come from any normal mutation. Was he also a result of whatever process was hidden in these notes?

The gall of this woman to actually steal something like this. Was she trying to pilfer his research for herself?

Clouthawk worked quickly. By the time morning came he had translated almost all of the Academician's work. Hellflower took it when he was done and locked it in a safe in the wall of her bedroom.

Then she collapsed.

Cloudhawk unconsciously reached out and grabbed her. As she rested against him she felt as soft and full as a cotton doll. Sweat beaded on the bridge of her nose and her warm breath trickled from plump red lips to wash against his ear. For some inexplicable reason he felt his heart rate increase.

Hellflower was anxious. She was helpless, the neurotransmitter inhibitor had run its course. Right now, even the slightest of sparks would be enough to set off an explosion. She had only the faintest bit of will left to support her against the base urges the drugs inspired in her.

Luckily this kid looked like an idiot. He wasn't going to take advantage of her in this state.

She kept her breathing even and spoke softly to the young man. "I don't think I can move. Help me with something."

When he didn't respond she struggled to press the files into Cloudhawk's hands. "In Academician Roste's first secret lab, on the bottom of the right wall, there is a safe. Help me return this to it. It's already getting light, you don't have much time. Half an hour at the most – you can't delay."

Was this necessary? Cloudhawk was not the sort to stir up trouble. Although he wasn't sure what was in these papers he could tell by Hellflower's nervous expression that this was a matter of life and death.

"Here are the keys you'll need to open the laboratory." She pressed the keys into his hands. "Chimp should be at the bar, still asleep from the anesthetic I slipped him. If you can, try to sneak the keys back to him without him noticing."

"What makes you think I can do this?" He looked at the stack of papers and then at the keys. He was at a loss. "How can you be sure I won't turn you in?"

She laughed bitterly at him. "Then so be it. But if you help me I'll owe you one. I'll help when you need it most"

"Alright!" That was enough. What Cloudhawk needed more than anything right now were friends. He nodded resolutely. "You rest."

She answered with an appreciative smile. She wanted to stand, but she couldn't move her limbs. Cloudhawk had to carry her to the bed and lay her down. He gathered up

his invisibility cloak, donned his mask, and left the apartment.

“He really is a simple guy.”

She was surprised by how pliable the young man was. He was as pure as a sheet of unused paper. If he had wanted to do anything at all to Hellflower she would have been completely at his mercy.

She hoped it would all go smoothly!

In the three years she'd spent in the base she had desperately wanted to get her hands on this data. She knew she could no longer delay, that it was a gamble to make her move now, but with those formulas solved there was no longer anything here that interested her. There was nothing to keep her here.

1. Pfft, good luck getting a decent translation without context!

Chapter 111

The Monster in the Lab

Academician Roste's laboratories and test rooms were sealed behind an iron door only Roste and his director could open. It was among the more secure areas in the whole of the wastelands, adding a patrol or soldiers opening and the closing the door constantly would only detract from that. As such, besides scientists who remained in the labs full time, there was no need for internal security.

Cloudhawk slipped past the heavy iron door without any trouble with the help of his invisibility cloak. From there the rest was easy. He followed Hellflower's directions to the specified lab, located Chimp's safe and slipped the data back inside using his keys.

Hellflower had taken a great risk to steal this information. It had to be valuable. And yet, few precautions seemed to be taken to keep it safe. Wasn't that careless?

In fact, in all of Blackwater Base only the Academician could understand the ancient texts. Besides him only Hellflower knew where his notes were kept, and the key to it was held tight by the lab's director under normal circumstances. Both its contents and location were quite safe, for even if others knew where and what these notes were, who could understand them? Why should Roste risk revealing its importance by posting a guard?

What's more, Academician Roste was a man rich in self-confidence. As far as he was concerned there was no one alive who could crack his research!

The scientists in this base could study half a century and still have no hope of grasping what he knew. Roste was a singular talent, unique throughout the wasteland. He'd spent his life researching these old technologies, so in the unlikely event someone got their hands on his notes *and* understood them, it was exceedingly unlikely they could do anything with the information.

Cloudhawk made sure the safe was securely closed.

The safe's door fit flush against the wall, it was only visible if you knew where to look. He'd had to push aside two bookcases which further hid its location.

She sure as hell owes me one. What sort of favor can she offer?

Cloudhawk was careful to replace everything precisely as it was before he arrived out of habit. It was unlikely anyone would notice, but he'd become more cautious lately. He didn't want to leave any opportunity for trouble.

He left and carefully locked the lab door behind him. The whole process was done without leaving a trace.

Cloudhawk was proud of himself. His first clandestine mission and he nailed it. Sneaking around would have earned him a decent living – it was a shame he hadn't picked the life of a thief.

At any rate, once he got to the elysian lands he would be fine. Between the Bloodsoaked Queen's recommendation and his trophy from the body of the demon he would live a life of luxury, no doubt about it. His pilfering skills would go unused.

Such were the lofty thoughts that swam through Cloudhawk's head. He had the key to a good life, but the question was whether he'd live to enjoy it. Currently he was locked in Blackwater Base, a heavily fortified modern fortress with one way out, guarded by a heavy minigun and surrounded by a deadly bog. Escape didn't seem possible. He was too weak to fight his way out, too. The problem was enough to give him a headache.

Such horseshit!

Whatever the case, right now the most important thing was to protect himself.

In the same vein he realized that an opportunity like the one he found himself in was rare. Since he already had access to the secure laboratories, why not take this chance to have a look around? So little was known about the Seekers, they were more mystery than anything else. Perhaps there was some intelligence he could uncover that could give him a measure of control over his situation.

He stood among their most secret areas. There were scores of research papers, medicinal concoctions, weapons schematics and whatever else. None of that interested him, though. He couldn't understand any of it if it bit him in the ass. Ignoring all of the documents he wandered on, in search of something he could recognize as helpful.

He snuck down the hallways, careful to avoid the areas where work was being done

until he ultimately reached a room completely different from the others. When he pulled the door open Cloudhawk was met with a shocking sight.

Rows upon rows of tanks with metal shells were scattered around, arranged around pipes that continuously dripped some unknown fluid. Although the containers were iron many were covered with rust. The whole room smelled strange, chemical.

Cloudhawk approached one to get a better look. It was about twice his size and had a viewing port. He pressed his face to the glass and inside he saw it was filled with a green liquid. Small bubbles rose through it toward the surface. He wiped the glass to try and see more clearly.

“Ah!”

A face suddenly appeared through the fluid of the tank. It was a man, naked as the day he was born, suspended in the tank. He was completely submerged in the strange fluid and his long hair floated through it like kelp. His eyes snapped open and looked straight out through the glass toward the masked stranger.

Cloudhawk was so frightened he threw himself back and fell hard on his backside. He scrambled away until his back was pressed against a corner.

What the ever loving fuck was that?! A living specimen? Or something else?

Cloudhawk took a few moments to settle his breathing. The tanks were definitely closed tight and whatever was inside couldn't get out. Standing up he peeked into several more tanks to see that they were also filled, but not with people. They were mutated monsters, captured in dozens of tanks situated around the room.

He knocked on the glass. No response. Next he kicked a tank's metal casing, still nothing.

Cloudhawk worked up a mouthful of saliva and spit. *This fuckin crazy old man, what the fuck is going on? Is he growing these freaky things?* Cloudhawk continued to curse the Academician but knew he shouldn't stay. He slipped out of the room as silently as he'd entered.

He wandered past a few more doors before coming across a room full of cages.

Hundreds of mutated creatures were locked up inside, and each one languished in

their prisons. Suffering. He walked past them but none so much as lifted their head to acknowledge his presence.

They were big and strong, but it was clear they'd been bred for generations in captivity. These mad scientists were injecting them with drugs to stimulate mental development and increase the rate of their mutations. Survivors of lethal and crippling experimentation, these monsters endured unthinkable torment every day. No wonder they seemed so lifeless.

As he passed the dire rat cages Cloudhawk suddenly stopped. There were about ten of them in the cage, and they all had the same appearance and bearing. It was one he recognized, exactly the same as the rat king he'd encountered months ago. The one he saw in the experiment room when he first arrive was in the process of transformation, so these had to be the finished product.

Cloudhawk was sure of it. Those rats that nearly put an end to the Tartarus mercenaries had come from here!

Weren't these the rat king's brothers and sisters? He remembered the strength of that creature and shuddered in fear. Ten of them fighting together was a terrifying thought.

The royal rats sensed that someone was standing nearby. They opened their eyes and glared at him with beady, cold orbs. Their gaze made him shiver, filled with calm and loathing. It was a look he was only accustomed to seeing from humans.

Cloudhawk felt his hair standing on end.

Super rats were unsettling enough, but there were cages upon cages stretching through the room, each one with ten or more different sorts of monsters. Every one of them had been brutally mutated and even given intellect! If one day these creatures escaped it would be a catastrophe. Hundreds of them, so strong the thought of them running free was horrifying.

One day these freaks would be free to terrorize the wastelands and that nightmare would be realized. Mad experiments had made them impossibly strong and cruelly gave them intelligence. A disaster waiting to happen!

Cloudhawk hadn't recovered from the shock when he heard a sound coming from down the aisle.

Splat!

It sounded like a slab of meat striking the wall. Based on the blood-curdling wails, it sounded like one of the mutated beast. Strange, would any of these creatures have the will to fight?

Cloudhawk slowly picked his way down the lane to have a look. When he reached the dim area near the far wall he saw the outline of a burly figure kicking a hundred pound panther against the wall. The strength of it was hard to believe as it tore the massive predator apart.

Such terrifying strength!

Cloudhawk didn't know what these panthers were capable of, but they had to far surpass the likes of any dire rat. Despite that whatever monster this was shattered its bones with its powerful kicks.

The panther lay on the ground like a pile of refuse.

The lumbering figure, seemingly incapable of holding itself back, lunged down and clamped its mouth on the panther's throat. As the skin tore the mysterious beast drank deeply of the hot, fresh blood. Its victim struggled feebly but to no avail, in half a minute the panther was drained dry.

Still the dark figure was unsatisfied. It ripped open its flesh and tore at the organs within, stuffing the bloody meat into its mouth with relish. It ate quickly, as hungry as a dozen starving refugees.

Whoever it was ate these creatures alive. Who the hell could they be?

After sizing it up Cloudhawk figured the silhouette was roughly the size of Hyena. Could this be him? He'd spent some time with the Seeker and though the man had the strength of a wild animal he was usually calm and collected. He didn't think Hyena could have such a vicious, bloodthirsty streak.

Beasts were beasts. It didn't matter how they hid or pretended, a monster couldn't change its nature! Even if you cloaked it in a human's skin.

The man-shaped beast stopped its gruesome meal suddenly. It seemed to have caught a scent, and a dangerous growl issued from its throat. Its powerful legs shot out and

the beast bound like an arrow toward its target.

The snooper was nowhere to be found.

Looking left and right the monster searched with a puzzled expression. Blood dripped from its maw onto his bare chest. Half his body was unclothed and drenched in fresh blood. Razor sharp teeth peeked from behind its lips as it gave a wolf-like snarl, and glowing jasper eyes hungrily glared all around.

Cloudhawk slipped out of the lab, shuddering and gasping for breath. His stealthy excursion was draining, especially consider the danger he'd just desperately escaped.

It was dangerous, but revealing!

That blood-drinking horror was almost certainly Hyena. He was the only one who could kick the life out of such a powerful wasteland beast in one blow.

It was perfectly normal to find beasts in the wastes that ate its prey alive, Cloudhawk had witnessed it plenty of times before. But the expression he saw on the monster's face was different. Down here in Blackwater Base they weren't starving, so he had to *want* to eat raw flesh. It was like he'd lost control, and for a moment gave in to the beast.

Odd did not begin to describe it.

Cloudhawk wasn't eager to be Hyena's next meal. There was still much for him to do.

Although the Academician hadn't spelled it out, and although Hellflower hadn't revealed anything to him, Cloudhawk was beginning to guess what they were planning to do to him. He had to find the key, something that would make it all clear.

Eventually a smile crept onto Cloudhawk's face. He plucked the string of keys from his pocket and chuckled dryly. They belonged to the Academician's right-hand man, the lab's director had to know plenty. He was faced with an opportunity, and that creepy bastard deserved a little bad luck.

Chapter 112

Dead Men Tell No Tales

Blackwater Base was constructed underground. Day or night the time crept by with everyone living their same routines. The only real difference were the lights, with two thirds being extinguished during night hours and turned back on when it was day outside.

In about ten minutes the rest of the base's lights were scheduled to turn back on.

Chimp stumbled along the road back to his apartments, fighting through the fog that swallowed his brain. He still hadn't realized the keys were missing from his waist. Instead the fraught and irritated expression on his face was from other matters.

The object of his desperate desire was not easily obtained, he found. He thought the time to finally unwrap that devil woman had come, where he could have his way with her without a struggle. To ensure success he'd even spiked her drink.

Any normal woman, no matter how chaste, would have been begging for it after just a sip. The effects should have lasted a full day and night. But on the contrary the more she drank the more willful that damn woman became! He was the one who ended up overdoing it.

She was a difficult one to deal with! It was no wonder why the Academician once said her talents were comparable to his!

Of course, Hellflower was young and her knowledge came nowhere near that of the Academician. What's more, he was specialized in a single field while Hellflower's thirst for knowledge wasn't focused. Her interests were wide, so although she had come to be one of Roste's most outstanding assistants she would never rise to his level.

Chimp's throat was dry, his tongue swollen, and his eyes muddled. He winced against the urgent fullness in his bladder and looked hurriedly around for a vacant corner. Upon finding one the director opened his trousers and prepared to relieve himself.

Huh!?

As Chimp brought his hands around his belt he finally noticed that something was missing. The sudden realization cleared some of the mist from his brain and painted his face with pale understanding.

He fished around for the keys when suddenly his desperate search was interrupted. A mighty gust of wind whistled from behind!

Chimp was in a rare moment of distraction, not to mention recovering from his night of drinking. He reacted too slowly to Cloudhawk, who dropped from overhead with his white ghost mask and tattered cloak. A fierce and forceful karate chop to the neck knocked Chimp down and dazed him. Cloudhawk, peering left and right to make sure no one was around, flung the scientist over his shoulder and fled.

An indeterminable amount of time later...

Chimp groggily awakened to find himself in an unfamiliar place with his wrists tied behind his back and his ankles strapped together. A black cloth covered his eyes while his mouth was stuffed with fabric to keep him quiet. He couldn't see, and no matter how he struggled he couldn't move either.

"Hmph! Hmm-nngh-mmph! Phhmph!"

He tried to shout through his gag to no avail. He was Academician Roste's lab director! One of the top five most important people in the whole damn base! He was only passable as a fighter, but nonetheless was one of Roste's most important scientists. Blackwater Base didn't consider physical strength among the most respected traits, otherwise the Academician wouldn't be leader.

As a result Chimp wasn't strong but that didn't mean he wasn't important. Usually when he left the labs he walked around with an escort, but his mind had been clogged with images of what he planned to do with Hellflower's body. A security detail would only have gotten in his way, but he didn't think leaving them behind would have led to this!

Who the hell would dare? Who was the asshole *stupid* enough to kidnap him!?

He continued to struggle but got nowhere. The fear inside him was growing by the moment. Suddenly someone snatched the cloth from his mouth.

"Who! Who the fuck – obviously you must be fuckin' blind, otherwise you'd know who

the hell you're dealing with!" Now that he once again had the ability to speak he recovered some of his courage. He spoke like a man chastising his subordinates. "How *dare* you kidnap me! Do you know you just signed your own death warrant?"

Someone gave him a nasty punch in the ear.

Suddenly Chimp's new-found courage was gone.

"You-... you *hit me?! I-I'm Academician Roste's lab director!*" The more frightened and angry he became the more comically the lab director wriggled around. He was like a funny little worm flopping around in his chair. "If anything happens to me, you can bet your ass you won't leave this base alive!"

Another mean-spirited slap hit him across the side of his head.

The smack was so hard it stunned him for a moment. His assailant knew who he was, and that realization frightened him all the more deeply. Chimp lost control of his full bladder and its contents soaked his crotch then slithered down his legs. A foul smell followed. He pleaded with his kidnapper, choked with sobs and his blindfold blotched with tears. "Don't kill me – don't kill me! What do you want! I'll help however I can!"

The voice that answered was raspy and unsettling, like it came from the throat of a demon. "I'm going to ask you some questions. You're going to answer."

This was an entirely unfamiliar voice to the director. Did an outsider somehow sneak into the base? It seemed most likely, since there was no one in Blackwater he could think of who would be brazen enough to kidnap him. After all, who didn't know that he was Roste's student and confidant? Yet besides being an important person, lustful, and all around gross, he didn't have anything worth being kidnapped over.

The voice returned, low and threatening. "What experiments are being performed in Academician Roste's laboratories?"

His assailant's question only confirmed Chimp's suspicion that this was an outsider. Otherwise how could he not know? Eager to keep breathing he answered. "Biological experiments. B-b-biological recombination experiments. The Academician has found a way to c-combine different organisms."

His inquisitor was silent for a few seconds, then continued. "Combine? How?"

“There’s a fifty percent chance of success on average, but even if successful eighty percent of our subjects lose their humanity. They lose all racial identity so we use drugs to wipe their memories.”

“What about Hyena?”

“Hyena is an exception. He hasn’t shown any signs of losing his humanity, so the Academician let him keep his memories and free will.”

“Is there a chance he could lose control?”

“This... this I don’t know. He is the only test subject who has managed to stay cognizant. He’s still considered a test subject but is our most stable product to date.”

Cloudhawk didn’t continue his questioning. Chimp got nervous. “Killing me isn’t going to help you at all. Just say it, anything, I’ll tell you everything I know. I’m begging you please don’t take my life!”

What a fuckin’ worthless ass! How did this spineless shit-stain manage to live so long in the wastelands?

Cloudhawk already confirmed everything he wanted to know. He didn’t need to keep up his questioning.

So Academician Roste wanted to use him as a test subject, eh? He wanted to use Cloudhawk’s body and turn him into some puppet supersoldier! One with the strength of a wasteland beast and the power of a demonhunter. Just think of what kind of price a weapon like that would fetch!

This old fart never had any good intentions!

Cloudhawk unceremoniously knocked Chimp out again, cut the ropes that tied his hands and feet, then returned his keys to his waist. His task completed, Cloudhawk quickly fled the area.

At last the kid understood why Roste saw him as so important.

Somehow the old coot was using ancient scientific methods to transfer mutant animal powers into human bodies, thereby turning them into incredibly strong fighters. Like Hyena. Before the procedure he was probably about as strong as the Tartarus

mercenaries captains – nowhere near what he was now.

Two years ago Blackwater Base was attacked. At the time Hyena was a normal man, a leader of one of the base's defense teams. During the attack one of the enemy flamethrowers caught him full in the face, nearly killing him right then. He was done, and even if by some miracle he lived he would be an invalid.

Academician Roste felt that losing such a good soldier was a terrible waste. He decided to combine him with the essence of a mutated wolf, resulting in an unexpected and unprecedented success. After half a month, his body neither rejecting the mutagens nor collapsing from the stress, he began to change. More importantly he kept his mind and as such Roste promoted him to one of his most important subordinates.

Hyena, it could be said, was Academician Roste's single greatest stride in these experiments.

Only now the Academician wasn't satisfied with just creating the likes of Hyena. He desired progress, to push the limits by attempting his methods on a demonhunter. Just think, a warrior with the build and strength of the most ferocious wasteland animals, and simultaneously in possession of superhuman demonhunter abilities. That would be – in a word – perfection!

Of course to Cloudhawk this was unacceptable. Setting aside the high mortality rate, the vast majority of the successes lost their minds. They became beasts. Even in the extremely unlikely event he came out like Hyena he wouldn't even be considered human anymore. The essence of who he was would be something else – a monster. How could they know what problems would arise in the future?

Cloudhawk did desire strength and power, but a transformation like this...!

He was starting to put the pieces together, but Cloudhawk knew that he was being closely watched. If he made his move now the only thing he'd accomplish is to tip off his captors that he knew what was up [1]. He had to pick the right moment or getting out in one piece would be difficult. It was just like Mantis would always say; an excellent soldier or assassin had patience and superb timing. The right time to act was when things were under your control.

For now, his best bet was to continue pretending he was on board. It was unlikely the old man was going to risk his ultimate experiment.

Cloudhawk pondered his situation as he walked back toward the residences. The only person who could help him was Hellflower. How she could help him he was yet to figure out, but he knew he would need her. He was too weak to escape on his own.

Academician Roste was a crafty old fox with a few dozen intelligent mutated warriors at his beck and call. Not to mention Hyena who was devoted as any zealot. On top of that Blackwater Base was ten times – a hundred times better equipped than anywhere else in the wastelands.

And once he escaped? What then? There was still a marsh between him and freedom.

Luckily he had options for Hellflower as well. The translation he'd helped her with was kept in the safe in her apartments. He could use that knowledge to threaten her if needed. So far it was his one hope to flee this evil place.

When he was a few hundred feet away from his destination, lost in thought about his circumstances and what to do with Hellflower, he was met with something unexpected. Suddenly he felt a tightness grip his heart, an omen of danger he had come to know intimately.

Before he could react an enormous iron net fell on him. He was captured!

Eight poison-tipped darts shot at him from several directions. His face fell – someone was trying to kill him! Was it Roste? Hellflower? Hyena? Or had Chimp somehow found out who'd kidnapped him?

1. 'Hit the grass and surprise the serpent.' Chinese is cool

Chapter 113

The Weapons Master

Aside from being heavy and tenacious, when the iron net fell over Cloudhawk it was immediately flooded with electricity. If he were a normal wastelander the shock would have either killed or paralyzed him.

It felt like a hundred million ants were slithering through his skin, but Cloudhawk didn't lose his senses. Luckily the cloak he wore deflected or absorbed most of the electricity. The young man was continuously surprised by the otherworldly relic, which in addition to being a very useful relic was also great for defense.

So who on earth was trying to poison him? Cloudhawk's mind was racing, several possibilities coming to mind.

Academician Roste was unlikely to make a move against him, and Chimp didn't have enough time to plan an ambush. The only other people with the means and motive were either Hellflower or Hyena; he had dirt on the former, and he'd stumbled on Hyena's dark little secret not long ago.

So they were trying to kill him to keep him quiet? Of course the reason wasn't important right this moment.

His assailants knew what they was doing. The iron net was meant to pin down and incapacitate their prey, breaking down his defenses. Each one of them carried guns as well, though they fired darts instead of bullets. They were a better choice since darts didn't make much noise, allowing them to kill Cloudhawk without alerting anyone nearby. When the deed was done they could flee and no one would be the wiser. When they found the body, nothing could be traced back to them.

A flood of anger raced through Cloudhawk. He'd faced death many times, even going toe to toe with a demon and coming out alive. Was he going to allow these contemptible shits [1] to kill him? Fat chance.

Cloudhawk's eyes became blood red.

A burst of energy his assailants were not prepared for exploded forth.

The iron net could not be broken by hand, but when the spinning edge of the exorcist staff struck it the metal threads were split like a sword through tendrils of hair. A gaping hole was carved open.

Another dart was shot his way and struck his mask. It belched sparks and made him dizzy, but what weapon was capable of shooting through the Bloodsoaked Queen's relic mask? Impossible! It wasn't a very powerful relic, but even a point blank shot to the face wasn't going to break it!

It was the darts from behind that hit their mark. They lodged in his dire bear armor and managed to deal some impact damage, but the upas poison [2] smeared on it was useless. The two layers of protection saved his life.

While Cloudhawk's would-be assassins stared in shock he effortlessly rolled out of their trap. In response a dozen or so masked men attacked from all directions. Their ambush had failed so there was no choice but to attack head on. They charged at him, brandishing electrically charged batons.

Cloudhawk didn't need to experience it himself to know their weapons were dangerous. If it came to a straight up fight things weren't going to break in his favor.

So what could he do? Run!

As he got back up onto his feet Cloudhawk pulled out his revolver and fired a few shots randomly toward his attackers. It forced them back, giving him enough space to leap into the air. At the top of his jump, the young wastelander vanished into thin air. Now was his chance to flee, while they couldn't see him.

"Don't let him escape!"

One of the masked men yelled the order and they pulled out their lethal weaponry. They were already exposed, stealth was now unnecessary in the face of killing their target quickly. Several of them pointed their guns at where Cloudhawk had been and sprayed the area with bullets. Typical wastelander weapons were single-shot, the rarer ones were maybe semi-automatic. These weapons were clearly superior and flooded the alleyway with hot lead.

Cloudhawk desperately flung himself around a bend, allowing his invisibility to fade.

He was so scared that he was drenched in sweat. The footsteps were getting closer, so he spun around with hands outstretched. Gritting his teeth Cloudhawk pressed ahead with both arms as though he were trying to shove a thousand-pound boulder.

The air was suddenly choked with sand.

Like a flailing serpent the sand writhed toward his pursuers and swallowed them up. It caused them no harm, but they were made blind by the sandstorm. Cloudhawk turned back and ran from them.

“Where the hell did this sandstorm come from?!”

“Never mind! After him!”

The unsuspected weather only slowed them down a little. They were practiced assassins, obviously, and though Cloudhawk could probably handle two or three of them there were ten on his tail. If they caught up and surrounded him he wouldn't stand a chance. He had to keep running.

He was unfamiliar with the base's layout so he bolted down streets at random. It was only a matter of time before he came across a dead end. He stopped in front of a tall wall with his face twisted in panic. The others were close and would be on him any moment, he couldn't go back the way he'd come.

Had this all been for nothing?

Even before one considered skill Cloudhawk was severely outmatched in regards to equipment. They didn't even have to get close and they could turn him into a bloody honeycomb with their advanced rifles. They must have known he was caught because Cloudhawk could hear their footsteps slowing. He saw a dozen dark gun barrels pointing his way.

“Kill him!”

Cloudhawk felt like he was staring death in the face.

Just then a figure agile as a mountain lion leapt from behind them. Hellflower soared through the air with a gun in each hand. They roared as she fired, four or five shots, each one ripping through the skulls of the assassins.

His attackers were taken completely by surprise. Struck dumb with the sudden change in circumstance they spun around to defend themselves. The newcomer tread along the smooth stone of the wall as easily as though she were running along the ground, and her hands moved with the speed of a phantom. *Bang, bang, bang, bang!* She continued to pull the trigger as fire belched from the end of her guns. The weapons themselves were unique, shooting so fast it was hard to believe, and not a single bullet was wasted. One after the other they drilled deadly holes between the assassins' eyebrows.

It was absolute perfection, to the millimeter. Her gunplay was more than skillful, it was an art form.

“Hellflower!”

She languidly returned the guns to holsters on her waist while landing on the ground. From her appearance, to running along the wall and landing in front of him, the whole process had taken seconds. Her targets were dead before she reached the ground – a hurricane that even Cloudhawk couldn't follow.

If you'd have asked Cloudhawk, Hellflower was the last person he expected to save him. He'd always known she was a dangerous woman but not this way. In the end Hellflower revealed herself to be a peerless wasteland gunslinger.

Until now the best shooter Cloudhawk had seen was Slyfox, but compared to what he just witnessed the mercenary wasn't even in her class. Hellflower's gun control and aim were bordering on flawless.

What Cloudhawk didn't know was that Hellflower was a famed weapons master.

It didn't matter what gun or tool she wielded, Hellflower could learn it almost immediately. She was a warrior no less lethal than Hyena, though the beast could easily tear her apart in close range. So long as she kept her distance, though, Hellflower could kill ten Hyenas before they got close.

Cloudhawk felt like his heart was going to burst out his chest. Suddenly he was very thankful he hadn't mistreated the scientist in any way. If he had Cloudhawk was sure he would have very quickly ended up with a few dozen bullets in his brain.

Hellflower didn't even pay the host of corpses any mind. Swaggering over toward Cloudhawk she addressed him in even tones. “Did you do what you were supposed

to?”

Cloudhawk quickly nodded his head. “Yeah no worries. The papers and keys are back where they’re supposed to be.”

Hellflower sighed in relief. At last she turned her head around and looked over the bodies, puzzled as she muttered at him. “Where did these men come from? Why did they want to kill you?”

Academician Roste didn’t have any reason to want him dead. Chimp didn’t have the time or opportunity. Hellflower just took herself off the suspect list, leaving only...

“Hyena!” Cloudhawk blurted out. “I learned his secret!”

Before Hellflower could open her mouth to learn more the streets were cast into a noisy din. Ten or so base security guards came rushing their way. When they came upon the scene they were shocked and confused for these sorts of violent encounters were rare, especially when they resulted in so many bodies.

The crowd parted, and a thin figure hobbled toward them with the help of a cane, flanked by two lizard mutants. Academician Roste surveyed the crime scene, then spared a glance for Cloudhawk and Hellflower. His wise and peaceful face was replaced with an iron hard and dangerous look. Though the scholar was hardly more than skin and bones, the authoritative air he let off made it difficult to look him in the eye. It was an air cultivated from years of practiced command.

“Who is responsible for this!?”

Hellflower approached some of the bodies and looked them over, eventually straightening up and answering her superior. “These are all strangers. The only people with the ability to hire this many assassins are you, Chimp, myself... and one other.”

Academician Roste’s voice became cold as ice. “Get some men and bring Hyena to me!”

Hellflower bowed slightly at the waist. “Yes, sir!”

Several dozen crack soldiers equipped with high-tech guns left with her to arrest Hyena. Roste hobbled over to Cloudhawk and looked him over with concern written on his face. “My young friend, my subordinates are sorely lacking in discipline. What is going on?”

Cloudhawk was preparing to share his experience in the laboratories when suddenly he thought better of it. He was so close to sharing everything that he broke out in a cold sweat.

He'd almost done a very foolish thing! If he told him what he saw he'd be confessing to breaking into the labs! How would he explain how he got there? Eventually he would implicate Hellflower.

The Academician's sharp eyes seemed to catch his hesitation. "What is it you aren't telling me?"

"I don't know!" Cloudhawk shook his head. "I was going out to stretch my legs when they attacked me for no reason. I haven't given Hyena any reason to seek revenge, I have no idea why he wants me dead!"

Cloudhawk was nervous. Things were bad, for once Hyena was brought here the Academician would ask what this was all about. The story was bound to get out.

"Is that so..." Roste knew that Cloudhawk was hiding something, the young man was not a skilled enough liar to deceive him. However, he didn't press for any more answers. Instead he slowly turned around and spoke to the bodyguards following him. "The two of you go help Hellflower fetch Hyena. I'll handle this matter myself."

The lizard men, merely intensely mutated creatures, could not speak but were nonetheless as intelligent as young teenagers. They had no trouble understanding the order and executing it.

Whoosh!

In a blink they were gone.

Academician Roste turned back to Cloudhawk. "Come with me."

Cloudhawk watched as the old man hobbled down the street with the aid of his staff. The young man's fingers itched, fighting the urge to pull out his gun. The scholar's talents lay in his intellect. He was capable of building an army of beasts loyal to his every whim. But his body was weak, and he was alone. Cloudhawk could kill him right now if he wanted.

But, for reasons he didn't understand, each time he thought about drawing his gun a

voice in his head held him back. Something was telling him it was a stupid and fatal plan.

1. 'Bridge jumping clowns.' Wtf Chinese? Also, hilariously, it also means Insane Clown Posse.

2. According to Wikipedia it was used commonly for poison darts. It's a type of mulberry, and is used very often in Chinese medicine for a variety of uses, depending on what part of the tree you're using. I don't think it's the same species of mulberry, though.

Chapter 114

Hyena's Capture

“It’s no good, boss. Hellflower has us surrounded!”

“What?!”

Hyena growled like a feral animal but he didn’t lose his cool. There was a string of gunfire from outside, followed by screams and the sounds of struggle. Something hit two of his men so hard they burst through the door. They lay on the ground, still and covered in blood.

Hellflower strut into the room with her safety goggles and white lab coat. An ammo pouch hung from her waist and she held a pair of pitch black handguns, looking as valiant as she did beautiful. She’d arrived at the base three years ago, no one knew from where. In fact they knew practically nothing about her.

In all that time she had served as a scientist and researcher. There had been few occasions where she’d needed to fight. As such most ignored or disregarded her. Most of the base’s soldiers had never had an opportunity to see what she could do.

Now the ground before her was littered with corpses, their heads blown apart from gunshots right between their eyebrows.

On average Hellflower was able to kill five targets a second, headshots all. It was a display that made those who witnessed it shudder. Now at last the soldiers knew that this sexy and dignified researcher was also a first-rate killer.

Clack Clack!

Her empty clips hit the ground. Hellflower slapped the butts of her guns against her waist and pressed fresh magazines into place.

Hyena and the dozen or so men that remained walked out of the room. The two faced each other across a stretch of about fifty meters. When Hyena stepped out to see his people dead all around his anger was restrained. Not diminished, just hidden deep in

the pits of his feral eyes. His steady gaze made anyone caught in it tremble.

“Mr. Hyena, our venerable Academician always held you in such high regard. Your actions have hurt him deeply.” Hellflower’s guns were loaded and bullets sat ready in their chambers. She regarded Hyena with a perfectly calm demeanor. “I’m here at the Academician’s request. Will you come willingly, or will I have to smack you around a little first?”

“So he sends his mad bitch to kill me?” Hyena knew the assassination plot had failed. He could no longer remain in Blackwater Base. His eyes began to change, and the muscles all over his body bulged unnaturally. Black hairs slithered out to cover him from head to toe and when he spoke again it was through a throat that was no longer human. “We’ll see who dies!”

Hyena was strong and fast. If they let him leave here alive he was only going to cause problems. Hellflower didn’t want to give him any opportunity and so her modified pistols immediately started spraying. In an instant everywhere he could go was blocked off by gunfire. However Hyena was no less of a threat than the sweeper lieutenants who had attacked Blackflag Outpost. If his enemy were any average marksman – the likes of Slyfox, for example – then even a few well-placed bullets were not insurmountable.

Unfortunately for him, Hellflower was no typical marksman. This woman was many grades better than Slyfox had been and Hyena was not going to be able to dodge her shots. Thus he had no intention of dodging. His hands shot out, and before they even knew what was happening two of Hyena’s henchmen were dragged before him like meat shields.

They were instantly peppered with Hellflower’s spray of bullets.

Hyena’s men were the elite of Blackwater Base, and as such were thickly muscled. Hellflower’s guns were modified to sacrifice stopping power for rate of fire, so they didn’t pack enough of a punch to blow through the beefy men’s bodies.

Suddenly the calm fled from her face. Hyena was fast.

The two of them were equally skilled, but Hellflower wouldn’t stand a chance in close quarters combat against Hyena. Shoving his human shields before him Hyena covered half the ground between him and Hellflower quickly. By now the others were reacting,

turning their weapons on the wolf man.

“Fuck off!”

His meat shields were a badly mutilated mess by now. He flung one of them at Hellflower and the other toward the men who'd come with her. She rolled to the side, avoiding the body. However the other group was struck full on by the dead weight flung at them by Hyena. They all hit the ground in a heap of broken bones and snapped tendons.

He certainly wasn't welcome in the base anymore!

If Hyena was determined to take his enemies down with him he had a chance to kill Hellflower. Only, he had no intention of dying. He leapt over the tangle of bodies, tearing out the throats of any soldier who got too close with his razor sharp claws. Skin split in his grip like it was made of tofu. Their carotid arteries were instantly severed, but before they could start spewing blood Hyena bound past them. He was several dozen feet away and free before the fountains of blood began.

Two green figures who had been lying in wait suddenly made their move.

Hyena knew the moment he saw them, they were the Academician's bodyguards. Though they'd once been mere beasts the monsters were now incredibly strong. Appearing suddenly they caught Hyena unprepared, blocking his path and dealing him several wounds.

One of the base's snipers lifted his gun and aimed for Hyena. His finger applied pressure to the trigger, but a slender hand reached out and stopped him. Hellflower slowly lowered the barrel of his gun as she addressed those soldiers still standing. “What's the rush,” she said calmly. “There are three of them, how can you be sure who you'll hit?”

“But, they-“

“No chit-chat. Sweep his room. Leave Hyena to me.”

Though she said she would take care of Hyena, Hellflower casually walked his way without any hurry. Her guns were lowered with no intention to use them. The soldiers, however, would not dare disobey her orders, so pretending as though they didn't see her strolling away they entered Hyena's apartments. Inside they fought the rest of the

wolf man's henchmen and shot them dead.

Hellflower muttered to herself. The skill of the Academician's bodyguards were impressive and not a little surprising. However, remarkable as they were the things were little more than especially clever beasts on steroids. They were no match for a seasoned warrior like Hyena.

One of the lizard men slammed into Hyena and forced him up against a wall. They struck with such force that they left a crumbling indentation in the sturdy stone. The other lizard snapped at Hyena's throat like a viper, which the wolf man dodged. He managed to juke around behind one and grabbed it by its tail. He swung it around, flinging it into the wall and causing another cascade of fractured stone to shower over them. He followed by grabbing the second and heaving it into the first, making the dent deeper.

Hyena fought like he'd lost his mind, slamming his fist into his enemy again and again. Each strike spread the cracks along the wall farther. Both lizard men were reduced to pulp, smeared across the stones.

Bang-bang-bang-bang!

With a clear shot Hellflower planted bullets in his shoulders and legs. Hyena, unable to dodge, collapsed to the ground with an impotent roar.

A self-satisfied grin on her face, Hellflower slipped her guns into her holsters and absently waved at the wolf man. "Tie him up."

Even after being shot four times Hyena would be quick to recover. He was set upon by the base's soldiers quickly and had his limbs bound.

Hyena was carried to the labs and brought before the Academician. Hellflower reported what had happened. "Academician, Hyena's been captured. He resisted quite forcefully, and in the struggle I'm afraid your bodyguards..."

Roste, Chimp and Cloudhawk were all within the laboratory.

When Roste saw the sorry state Hyena was in he broke into a fit of coughs. His withered chest heaved as he fought to catch his breath. It wasn't clear whether it was Hyena's betrayal or the death of his guards that set him off.

“Hyena, you ungrateful wretch!” Chimp glared at him with two black eyes. Portions of both sides of his face were swollen with patches of blue and purple. He looked in bad shape, but right now no one was paying any mind. Before the Academician could get a word in he was verbally abusing the traitor. “You *dare* betray the Academician, betray Blackwater Base?! We should never have saved you!”

“Saved me?” Hyena slowly lifted his head, revealing his ugly and savage face. “You think you *saved* Hyena? *No!* You only kept Hyena in pain and prolonged his death! For a year Hyena died, little by little, piece by piece. His thinking and behavior twisted – now I am monster in human skin. Every day is torture, a struggle! This is what you call saving?!”

Cough, cough! “I... see.” Academician Roste’s coughing subsided. He looked over the bloodied, manic face of Hyena while his every wrinkle was writ with disappointment. “I thought you would be special. I never expected... ugh!” [1]

Cloudhawk felt a creeping uneasiness.

“This traitor has caused many losses,” Chimp said to the Academician. “We can’t let him go unpunished!”

“Enough! Enough...” Roste looked exhausted. He waved his hand in exhaustion as though wiping away the matter. “Send him below. Heal his wounds, then wipe his memories.”

When he heard the verdict Hyena’s face twisted into a mask of rage and despair. He roared at them, “Kill me! *Kill me!*”

The brainwashing process involved infusing Hyena’s body with drugs that did irreversible damage to his brain and synapses. He would lose all emotion but retain his combat abilities. He would become a puppet soldier like the ones he often sold.

Puppet soldiers had a very limited capacity for independent thought. They were weapons and little else, incapable of performing any order more complex than murder. Sending Hyena down to get brainwashed was a great loss for Blackwater Base. With his strength and capabilities he had been one of their most effective agents, but once the process was done he would just be another tool.

Hyena screamed in anguish as he was dragged away.

Cloudhawk could hardly believe it. The Academician didn't even ask him any questions, meaning that his excursion into the secret labs would remain unknown. His task had been entirely successful.

"Academician, what is going on..." Hellflower still seemed at a loss. "Why would Hyena want to kill Cloudhawk?"

Roste cast a glance toward the young wastelander before answering. "Our young guest has been hurt. Chimp, if you would see to his treatment?"

"Yes, sir!"

Cloudhawk only shot Hellflower a glance before leaving with the lab director.

"Hyena was unable to resist the beast in his heart. His mind was separated from his body and now he sees himself as a creature and not a man. He may have looked human, spoke like one, but he was no longer anything like us. He now has more in common with the animals locked away in our lab. If it had not been for Cloudhawk's arrival speeding up our process, he might have been able to resist for a while longer."

Academician Roste stopped to hack and cough, continuing after a moment.

"As you know we used Subject Zero in our experiment. Physiologically speaking she is tied to Hyena, she is like a mother. This, along with outside catalysts have affected him fundamentally. It awakened the creature within him. This is why he tried to kill Cloudhawk."

Hellflower suddenly understood. "I didn't think we would lose Hyena."

"It doesn't matter. We will try again." Roste no longer seemed troubled by the loss. "He was responsible for administration of the base's soldiers. Now that he is no longer capable the men will need a leader. I must request you take on that responsibility for the time being."

A light glimmered in her eyes, but beyond that she betrayed nothing on her face. She respectfully bowed before him. "Don't worry, Academician, I'll take care of it. I'll take my leave."

"Wait a moment."

Academician Roste slowly turned around, leaning heavily on his cane. His face was pale and sickly, but the weakness of his body never took away from the keen bite in his eyes. He fixed Hellflower with his stare, like a pair of scalpels that cut down to her soul.

Hellflower froze, meeting his gaze with a puzzled expression. “Is there something else you’d like me to see to, Academician?”

“Do *not* disappoint me.” He held her frozen for a moment longer and then the strength drained from his gaze. Once more he seemed to the frail old man. “You may go.”

“Yes, sir.”

Roste shut his eyes and quietly listened to Hellflower’s receding footsteps. Her gait was perfectly even, in speed and rhythm, all the way until she was out of earshot.

When Hellflower was free from the labs she picked the glasses from her head and wiped her brow. Beads of cold sweat had accumulated on her forehead.

Strange... how could this feeble old man be so imposing?

1. ‘Ugh’ in Chinese was ‘ai’ is a character used in several ways, sometimes pain, sometimes surprise. Here it’s disappointment and regret.

Chapter 115

Secret Room, Secret Intrigues

The world was divided up into two parts, completely different from one another.

The first, the elysian lands.

The other, the wastelands.

The wastelands were a cruel place, barren and blood soaked, where the denizens used whatever tools they could scavenge from the old world to survive. The ancient and modern lived side by side without order, without law, and without civilization.

In contrast the elysian lands were refined and beautiful. Fertile tracts spread far and wide, replete with flora and fauna. Their tools and weapons were filled with magic that technology could not explain, and humans lived in peace and harmony.

They were almost like the two halves had come from entirely different realities.

Everything that lived in the wastelands was twisted by thousands of years within the harsh environment. People desperately sought to realize their potential, molding themselves in order to become stronger. The elysians, bathed in divine favor, had faith that they never would need to worry about staying clothed and fed. Under the guidance of their gods and with the artifacts provided to them, they each were possessed of superhuman abilities.

No one from the elysian lands could explain where their powers were derived from. They were considered miracles, inexplicable but for the glory of the gods.

Blackwater Base's Academician Roste was perhaps the first great talent of the wastelands. He was able to uncover some of life's mysteries. With the use of medicines and outside catalysts he could create something new from the old, galvanize mutations, and even fuse two different living things together. He was even able to combine beast and man so that the soldier kept the intellect of humanity and the strength of an animal.

In the eyes of the ordinary man, it was like a miracle. He was performing the impossible.

However Cloudhawk could not understand or accept giving up himself in the pursuit of power. If he was no longer himself, it didn't matter how mighty he became... he had to get free of this place!

Cloudhawk sneaked a peak into Hellflower's study. Since coming back she'd spent all her time pouring over the data she'd pilfered.

If he was going to get free he couldn't do it himself. The only way it was going to work was if he could convince Hellflower to help him. The problem was, why should she?

Could he threaten her? If word got out that she stole from the Academician it could land her in serious trouble. He'd been giving the idea serious thought yesterday, but after seeing what she was capable of he was having second thoughts. If he rushed to action he would be the one in trouble, or even dead.

Knock-knock-knock!

A young man knocked on the open door. He was clad in long robes with his face hidden beneath a deep cowl that concealed his features. Very mysterious.

Cloudhawk was in a sour mood and had no patience. "You're in the wrong place!"

"Is this not Lady Hellflower's home?" The young man presented Cloudhawk with a typed letter. "She requested a report on the most recent findings of our research. Please be sure to give this to her."

Cloudhawk took the paper with some interest. He looked it over front and back and saw that it was covered in complicated data – intelligence about the base and the most recent information gleaned from subject dissections. There were also some strange mechanical schematics.

Things like this were very rare in the wastelands, but relatively mundane in Blackwater Base. They had wasteland scientists, ancient research technology, experimental biological material and state of the art research equipment. What was a typed sheet of paper compared to all of that?

Cloudhawk pushed open the door to Hellflower's room.

She was leaning over her desk, absorbed in the scores of paper spread out before her. Mountains of reference material were scattered around her feet. His arrival didn't even register with her as she peered through threads of silver hair, fully engrossed in whatever she was scribbling. From time to time her brows would knit in contemplation and then relax as an answer came to her. Every expression was intense and appealing.

Of all the women Cloudhawk had met, the Bloodsoaked Queen was undoubtedly the most beautiful. However, she didn't have the mature carriage of Hellflower. The Queen was too young, too naïve. She didn't have the unconscious grace of the older woman, while Hellflower was also absent the underlying scorn that always played in the Bloodsoaked Queen's eyes.

"Hey, someone brought you something. Do you wanna see it?"

"I'm busy, please don't bother me!" To Hellflower being interrupted in her research was like being bothered in the throes of passion. She lifted her head to glare at him, but upon seeing what was in his hands her expression softened. She muttered, "He's in such a rush... wait. Come here."

Hellflower looked it over then used her pen to circle something on the report. It was a time and place – it looked like a general store. She thought careful for a moment as though she was measuring something.

Sudden Cloudhawk came to understand. He thought this was a report, but it was actually a secret message! This woman was shady as hell, all full of secrets!

Hellflower rolled the paper up then set it on fire. As the flames lit her face she spoke to Cloudhawk. "Come with me. I'm taking you to meet someone."

Her cryptic actions were making him nervous. "Who?"

"Nervous? Don't imagine I don't know *exactly* what's going through your mind. If you want to get out of here, come with me. Otherwise you can figure it out on your own."

As she spoke Hellflower slipped her belt and holsters onto her waist then left. Cloudhawk was not one to be timid so he followed, and anyway if she'd wanted him dead she could do it whenever she wanted.

The two of them took a long circuit around the base before eventually arriving at a

general store. It was a somewhat inhospitable looking place. Hellflower rapped on the door in a specific rhythmic pattern and a few seconds later someone opened the door a crack. An affable looking man saw who it was and opened the door the rest of the way. He greeted them with a smile. "Ah! Lady Hellflower! Are you here to pick up some research materials? Please come in, come in!"

She answered with a small smile and a nod of her head. They followed him into the shop.

The interior looked like any other store. There were guns and other weapon components, a hodge-podge of machinery, all haphazardly scattered around. Besides the boss there were also his assistants. The friendly old caretaker led them toward the back where an inconspicuous rack of odds and ends occupied the wall. He gave the shelves a good shove which forced it and the wall back a few inches. Another push and it revealed a hidden door.

It had its own hidden sanctuary!

Cloudhawk followed Hellflower into a large room with no lights but well-lit with candles. A dozen or so chairs were scattered around, each one occupied by an elder. And each of them were accompanied by a small entourage of well-armed fighters.

On the highest set chair was a particularly ancient man flanked on either side by two very large warriors. One was covered in thick armor and a shield, and the other bore a pair of iron war hammers. Cloudhawk could tell at a glance that those two were the strongest of all the warriors here – not to the same level as Hyena, but certainly first-rate wastelanders.

Cloudhawk inadvertently rested his hand on the shaft of his exorcist staff and scanned his surroundings out of habit. The secret room had three exits that spread out in three different directions. The area felt safe from prying eyes. As they made their way in the handful of old men sounded as though they were squabbling about something, but when they saw Cloudhawk and Hellflower come in they closed their mouths and stood respectfully.

Hellflower addressed them as she approached. "With things up in the air it's dangerous for all of you to gather. It's unnecessarily risky. If the Academician were to find out the losses would be tremendous."

“We’ve taken every precaution. How could he find out?” One of the white-haired gentlemen rose to his feet. “Has Lady Hellflower forgotten her promise? It was with our assistance that you were installed in such a high position within Blackwater Base. Now that you are in the Academician’s inner circle have you gone back on your word?”

She replied with a dismissive laugh. “How could I renege on my promises?”

“Very good then. Iron Bear, Black Jackal, set a place of honor for Lady Hellflower.”

The armored one called Iron Bear and the other called Black Jackal went to fetch a chair which they set beside the eldest gentleman. Although Hellflower was less than pleased she did not let it show. As natural and graceful as ever she took her seat, folded her legs daintily, then went on. “Speak quickly, tell me what you’re in such a hurry to say. This gathering is too dangerous and I advise you all to be careful.”

The oldest man drew his eyes over Cloudhawk with his ghost mask and tattered cloak who was yet to say a word. Cautiously he inquired, “Who is this?”

“Don’t worry, he’s one of mine.”

He furrowed his bushy white brows but said nothing. He knew that Hellflower was a smart and cautious woman. He stood before the others and went on with their business. “I suspect everyone’s already heard the news. A lot happened yesterday. First, we can confirm that the Academician has shut Hyena away. At least for the time being he will not cause us any problems. We have Lady Hellflower to thank for this!”

Cheers of praise spread through the gathering.

As the old man went on his voice grew more excited. “What’s more, Hyena has lost his title as leader of Blackwater Base’s troops. That responsibility has now been passed to our honored Hellflower! This means that she can deploy whoever she pleases to guard the laboratories.”

“Excellent!” Another of the elder men couldn’t help but jump to his feet in excitement. “The Academician has lost his bodyguards and his strongest soldier. Now that Lady Hellflower can dismiss the guards at will we should use this chance to finally overthrow that old dictator!”

Cloudhawk looked on, speechless.

“What are you so surprised about?” Hellflower said to him. “Did you think Blackwater Base was united? There’s no denying that we’ve grown fat under the Academician’s leadership, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’d a dangerous lunatic – an absolute tyrant. All of the base’s riches have been funneled into his research, starving all the rest of the scientists. He’s made quite a few enemies because of this.”

Chapter 116

Roste's Snare

Roste, both genius and madman. But whichever he was, the Academician was certainly paranoid.

These twelve old men were influential and important. They hated Roste with a passion, were jealous of his resources. It was this shared displeasure that made them create a group determined to see him brought low. Punishments under his rule were harsh and doled out often to the point where most of the Academician's opponents were executed in the early days after he came to power. These old scientists were wise enough to hide their mutiny behind false smiles, while secretly meeting to plot his ouster.

They existed to this day because they were cautious. However, recent events had made Roste vulnerable. At last they had an opportunity to remove him from power.

Hellflower was not a revolutionary, though she was their chosen agent.

She hadn't grown up in the base like the rest of them. Rather she was a well-renowned wandering scholar and weapons master of the wastelands. Her intellect was known among the Seekers, as was her strength among the excavator crews. Ultimately it was her wanderlust and thirst for knowledge that these old rebels used to convince her to join their cause.

Hellflower was a superior talent on her own, but with the help of this secret coterie she quickly gained the eye of Academician Roste. Before long she was one of his most treasured assistants, and her help greatly benefited the mad scientist's research.

With Cloudhawk's help she'd obtained the most important notes from the Academician's work. With it in hand there was nothing left in Blackwater Base to hold her interest. Like the young wastelander she was also looking for her chance to get out from under Roste's thumb. She could do this by helping these subversives in their quest. Once Roste was overthrown new leadership could take root.

Now this white-haired elder... he'd go down in one hit.

Once Academician Roste was out of the way it wouldn't be difficult to deal with the ancient scholar. It was the most logical way to take control of Blackwater Base. Hellflower had spent years with various Seeker groups, and over the years she'd come to find that it was the best way to gain knowledge. Eventually she struck upon the idea of taking a base for herself, where she could establish her own laboratory.

But overthrowing the Academician wasn't so easy.

Roste's rule of Blackwater Base spanned decades. His power was deeply entrenched, and he enjoyed great popularity among most of the base's populace. Destroying him would require careful planning. And yet these old fogeys were impatient! The big changes they cheered had occurred only yesterday, and already they were eager to act!

They were wrinkled old men. Were they anxious to get underway because they were afraid they would die before seeing Roste overthrown?

That was fine with her!

It would be a simple thing. Let them handle Roste, then with a little help she could guide the rage of his supporters down on their liver-spotted heads. In a single stroke she could deal with the madman and these petty rebels – two birds with one stone.

Cloudhawk, on the other hand, didn't need to ask to know this woman's hunger and ambition. She wouldn't balk at any method in pursuit of her goals.

Good... this was good. The more turmoil the more opportunity!

Another one of the aging scientists rose and added his voice. "This is a chance delivered to us from on high. Most striking is the sudden schism between Roste and Hyena. But why? What could be the reason for his complete shift in loyalty? We must know the details of how it came to pass."

Hellflower sat among them perfectly calm, revealing nothing on her face. When she spoke she did so in even, almost languid tones. "For that you must thank our young friend Cloudhawk. Without his sudden arrival this break would have taken much longer to develop."

Most of the intelligent men present had already guessed who the young man was. He had to be the demonhunter Roste so desperately had been searching for. But how did Hyena and Roste's issues involve the young man?

Hellflower lifted a cup of tea and took a dainty sip. "Cloudhawk, you explain."

He obliged, giving them an abridged version of events. "It's like this. I was able to break through his mask and see the real him. I ran before he could see me, but he knew me by scent. Hyena tried to kill me to keep me silent, but luckily mistress Hellflower showed up in the nick of time and saved my life."

Now they understood. So that's how it happened...

"Wait a moment!" When she heard his tale Hellflower's face suddenly changed without warning. She shot to her feet, forgotten tea cup shattering against the floor as she fixed him with hard eyes. "You're saying you witnessed Hyena in his beast form, before daylight? Are you sure it wasn't day? Are you sure you aren't misremembering!?"

"No doubt!"

How the hell do you not know? Wasn't I there at your request?

"Impossible! That can't be!" She stared at Cloudhawk's face, at his expression of certainty. Standing before the others a dire and serious expression painted her pretty features. "Hyena was an important person here but he was no scientist. He was just a soldier. Even I couldn't get into the labs without someone opening the door for me first. How could Hyena be in the labs before the doors were open at start of day?"

The old men gathered around also considered this with confused expressions. Indeed it shouldn't have been possible.

"There is no logical explanation..." Hellflower ruminated to herself, brows knit tight. "Hyena might turn into a creature but he thinks like a man. Why would he eat the creatures here in the base? He had to know their mutations... he had to know the risks!"

Everyone's eyes fixed on Cloudhawk.

It didn't make sense. There were only two possibilities; one, Cloudhawk was lying, or two – that wasn't Hyena he saw in the labs.

When she spoke again Hellflower's voice was pointed and earnest. "Are you *absolutely sure* it was Hyena you saw, not someone else?"

“Well... now that you say it...” Suddenly Cloudhawk looked troubled. “It was dark, I sort of guessed based on his size and shape. I can’t tell you for certain if it was Hyena.”

Hellflower shut her eyes for a moment and sucked in a sharp breath. When they opened again there was something in them Cloudhawk hadn’t seen before. Panic. She ripped the guns from their holsters and hurriedly shouted to the others.

“It’s a trap! *Run!*”

Bang-bang-bang!

All three doorways burst open at once.

Followed by a gentle cough.

A withered and emaciated figure hobbled into the center of the gathering with the help of his cane. It was the Academician.

Everyone’s face turned deathly pale.

He was as fragile a sight as ever. Spindly white hair peppered his balding head, sprouting out from skin that seemed completely devoid of moisture. His wet and cloudy eyes peered through thick glasses perched on his oversized nose, through a pale and solemn face. Although it seemed a stiff breeze would knock him over, the old scholar nonetheless filled the room with a dangerous aura.

A dozen or so soldiers stood beside him like statues.

These warriors were very different from typical bodyguards. None of them wore armor and their chests were left bare, revealing layers of corded muscle that looked like they were sculpted from iron. They saw all, and yet their eyes were unsettlingly empty – like the eyes of ghosts peering emotionlessly from the abyss.

Academician Roste kept himself on his feet with his right hand holding tight to his staff. His left pressed against his mouth as he shook with coughs. His rheumy eyes didn’t pay any of the elder scientists any mind. They swept over Cloudhawk for a moment before finally stopping on Hellflower. The old sage shook his head. “Did you think you could help this rabble remove me? Hellflower... here I thought you were an intelligent woman!”

Hellflower's guns were held tight in her hands. "I thought the only thing in your mind was the research. You're craftier than I expected. I underestimated you."

Ten mutated soldiers were a terrifying force to reckon with! However the old man had made a fatal mistake, and that was coming here himself. Strong as his body guards were, there were but ten of them. The other creaky scientists had twenty fighters between them. If they rushed at him, even if they couldn't defeat all of his guards the old man was certainly dead.

"Go!"

"Grab the Academician!"

The eldest was first to react and shouted the order. Twenty protectors surged forward. They were the handpicked chosen of the revolutionaries, uncommonly strong – especially Iron Bear and Black Jackal. Both of them were first class warriors, and even fighting alone they would make the transformed body guards pay.

Bang-bang-bang-bang!

The crowded meeting room rang with the sound of gunfire.

Academician Roste's contingent also made their move. Their skin suddenly became thick with scales or fur and then they turned on their prey like hungry phantoms. All of a sudden a violent skirmish broke out. The sound of bones breaking, pained screams and angry roars reverberated off the walls. Together the mutants charged and in a blink killed one third of the revolutionaries. Meanwhile they only lost two of theirs.

These beasts... they were killing machines! A combination of human intellect and unbreakable animal ferocity.

If their arms were cut off they attacked with their feet. If their legs were broken they gnawed with fangs. Bullets seemed useless against their tough hide. So long as they drew breath Roste's monsters kept fighting.

With ice-cold indifference they killed anything in their path, so ruthlessly efficient that it was hard to believe. The best way to put them down was to sever their spines or pierce their brains, otherwise they would never stop.

There was no winning a fight like this! They had to capture Roste alive.

Iron Bear and Black Jackal worked together. The former snatched up his smaller companion and flung him through the air. Black Jackal traced a perfect arc over their attackers' heads and outside their encirclement. He planted his knees on the ceiling and thrust off to add momentum. Like a comet he was crashing down right toward Roste.

One of the body guards tried to bar his path, but Black Jackal knocked him away with the hammer in his left hand. With an open path, he brought his other hammer around for a killing blow, one that would shatter the old man's skull. All the while Academician Roste stood perfectly still, as though he did not even have the strength to defend himself.

Was this the final moment! Were they going to succeed?

Everyone was sure of it.

Academician Roste's eyes flashed with a cold light, and suddenly his frail and sickly exterior melted away. That keen, wise light shone in his hard gaze and his eyes turned bloody red. A stifling murderous aura surged forth from his wrinkled body.

Cloudhawk knew it right away. He foresaw the conclusion, his heart sank – they were done for!

Chapter 117

The Strongest Mutant

Academician Roste went from slow to blinding fast in the space of a blink. He planted his staff in the ground beside him, easily sidestepped the hammer blow, then shoved his attacker's wrist away with his twig-like palm. The old man's movements were as easy as though he were brushing away a branch.

Snap! Black Jackal's wrist bent back at an unnatural angle. Sharps of jagged bone split his skin and poked out from within.

The burly warrior screamed in pain and surprise. Reacting instinctively to the pain he attacked with his other hand.

Roste effortlessly caught Black Jackal's fist in his hand and crushed it as easily as though they were a handful of leaves, leaving nothing but a bloody mangled mass.

This eighty year old invalid was handling the seasoned warrior like he was a child! His defenses were almost thoughtless, like swatting a fly.

In the decades he'd spent here as their leader no one accused Roste of being a powerhouse, much less a font of vitality that would shame a man one third his age. He fought as well as though he were at his peak, when all laws of nature dictated that at his age he should hardly be able to walk.

A series of pops and cracks issued from the old man's robes. It was the sound of his bones dislocating and restructuring!

Everyone looked on in utter shock!

As though suddenly filled with air Roste's body started to swell. His eyes adopted a deep black-green hue that shimmered with strange colors. Withered dry skin regained the elasticity and vigor of youth, and all the while he was getting *larger*. Five feet... five and a half... six feet... At last he completely transformed from a frail emaciated dwarf to a muscled behemoth!

Any trace of the damage eighty years had lain on him was gone!

His skin had taken on a pale blue tint and muscles rippled tight beneath. All his hair fell away leaving him bald but with a skull thick as a helmet. This *definitely* wasn't any sort of ability metahumans or mutants were capable of. The most telling sign was that this new form was perfectly normal looking; his body was symmetrical, every muscle like it was masterfully carved from stone, aesthetically and mechanically perfect from head to toe. It was like he was designed from a human blueprint.

"You worms... you wish to kill me?"

Roste grabbed Black Jackal in his hands then began to squeeze. Like kneading dough he crushed the poor warrior in his enormous fists until his bones were splintered. Black Jackal's neck was crushed and bent, his hands and feet smushed together until ultimately he was turned into a butchered orb of leaking meat.

"Did you think that I was only researching how to transform soldiers after all these years?"

His incredible strength, his grotesque and terrifying methods, sent a chill through everyone's spine.

Hellflower immediately threw up her hands and fired off half a dozen shots at the freak, but he didn't even try to dodge. Once the bullets hit, Roste's grey-blue skin instantly hardened until he was practically made of iron. The bullets even made a metallic ringing noise as they ricocheted off of him.

"This body is perfect, allowing me to adapt to any environment or condition. In the cold I will grow a fur coat to protect myself; underwater I will develop gills; when I need to jump my bones and joints will change accordingly; if I need to run, the muscles and structure of my leg will change as needed. And in the event of serious threat I can even grow a protective exoskeleton." In one hand Roste gripped the crushed remains of Black Jackal. Nothing remained of the frail old man they'd known and the sound that came from his throat was like the growl of a hundred angry animals. In fact Roste was now a complicated amalgamation of genetic material – no longer a human in the true sense of the word. "What can any of you do to stand against me?!"

Horribly, although Black Jackal had been broken into the shape of a fleshy ball Roste was careful not to kill him. Piteous whines issued from the orb of mangled flesh.

Roste heaved the meat sphere, the muscles of his arms bulging, flinging it with enough force that it was as destructive as a boulder shot from a trebuchet [1]. Black Jackal's tortured body came at a soldier fast as a runaway car, there was no way for the warrior to avoid him. They collided with such force that every bone and joint in both men shattered, then they smashed into a third. In an instant all three were snuffed out.

The ancient white haired scientist looked on in soundless horror at the three massacred fighters as their remains barreled toward him. He was the fourth victim, and when ultimately they hit the wall it was impossible to tell the parts of one from another.

This mad Academician seemed to be even stronger than the Caliph's dual-horned lieutenant!

As the chaos ensued around him Cloudhawk saw his predicament clearly. It wasn't *Hyena* he'd seen in the labs...

...it had been Roste!

The Academician had long known of this little pocket of resistance. He also knew that Hellflower was their chosen agent, only she had also proved to be a very effective assistant. For that reason he chose not to reveal that he knew. However, she'd crossed the line when she tried to steal all of his painstaking efforts for her own. It had sent Roste into a rage and convinced him that now was the time to deal with these irritating malcontents.

To that end Roste purposefully arranged it so that Hellflower would inherit *Hyena's* position as captain of the guard. He knew that he would have to appear completely vulnerable in order to galvanize these old men into meeting. Once they were all together he could catch them all at once.

Working with this mob of degenerates had been Hellflower's first error. Her second had been to underestimate his schemes.

Of course her most fatal miscalculation was that she did not expect the old man to be so strong. This level of tyrannical capability was simply outside the scope of what she thought possible. Roste was a freak, a monster through and through, a humanoid weapon of pure might and power!

Yet she fought on, unwilling to resign herself to death.

However, her piddling handguns were no threat to what Roste had become. He was an abomination that could quickly adapt to any situation, even his skin could harden the instant her bullets hit him and knock them away.

Academician Roste's twisted face bore a mocking sneer. "Mine is a perfect body. Perfect power. I have become the pinnacle of all that lives in the wastelands, and once I consume the essence of the demonhunter I will be the strongest being in the entire world!"

Many kinds of metahumans roamed the wastes. From enhanced power to blinding agility, fortitude to intelligence – all sorts were a common sight. However, there was one sort of wasteland denizen that was rare to encounter, those that were actually able to reconstruct their bodies. The freak in black Cloudhawk had once contended against had abilities somewhat like that. It had been a surprise when he learned the freak could turn his left arm into barbed tentacles or a bone sword.

Roste was naturally gifted with considerable reconstruction abilities. All these years experimenting on soldiers was so that he could forge his body's own talents. Through his natural gifts and rare intellect it was his goal to turn his own body into the perfect being; one that combined all the best traits of the wasteland's myriad beasts, who could survive in all the world's harshest environments. Be it sweltering heat, bitter cold, intense pressures, or forceful blows, nothing was beyond his ability to adapt to and overcome!

And the shapeshifting soldiers? They were just experimental byproducts! Roste needed materials for his research and the best place to get them was the Dark Atom. Their trade arrangement was where he got what he needed, for the process of research was costly.

For decades Academician Roste's body was a perfect specimen. He was sure he was the greatest force in the wastelands and so didn't bother with the creatures therein. He'd turned his sights to the elysian lands and the demonhunters who resided there.

Just one final step!

If he could transplant the abilities of a demonhunter into himself he would succeed in combining the best of the wastelands and the elysian lands. The ultimate, elusive marriage of science and magic! If he could do this Roste would become the most powerful creature in all the world! This was why his desire to capture a demonhunter

had been all-consuming.

Before Cloudhawk's arrival his plan had been to work with Dark Atom, and through them capture a demonhunter alive from the elysian lands. However, such a brazen ask was risky, likely turning the ire of the elysians on Blackwater Base. Then, like a gift from heaven a demonhunter wandered into his territory from the wastelands. His greatest desire was delivered right to his doorstep.

This had to be fate! How could Roste not be ecstatic with this turn of events?

"Are you out of ideas?" Roste pulled out a sword four feet long. "Then I suppose it's my turn!"

Hellflower's clips were empty and Roste was completely unscathed.

Cloudhawk pulled the rifle off his back and threw it at her. "Use this!"

Roste's legs suddenly began to change. His knees popped and twisted, bending backward like a kangaroo's to help him jump farther. He began to bound forward at incredible speed, easily cutting apart anyone who came too close.

The heavily armored Iron Bear leapt into his path, shield raised. Of all the base's fighters he had the sturdiest defense, especially with his shield. It was a thick slab, plain and flat, but made from a strong metal alloy. Few things in the wasteland could even scratch it.

Roste's sword came hacking down.

As easily as a hot knife through butter, Roste's sword cleaved Iron Bear's shield in half. It didn't stop, cutting the mighty warrior down the center of his body from his head down to his legs. As he began to split apart Roste swiped his weapon crosswise at the waist, removing his legs. The mountain of a man, who moments before had seemed like a moving fortress, tumbled to the ground with his shield in six pieces.

But his sword! There was something going on there! Hellflower could see it.

Roste was enormously powerful, but certainly not strong enough to cleave someone like Iron Bear so cleanly in half. His weapon was particularly narrow, and its edge was outlined in a faint black line. It was that strip of black that was responsible for the sword's unparalleled keenness. This was no ordinary sword – it was a high-frequency

particle blade!

Hellflower had only ever heard of them. Supposedly somewhere else in the wastelands someone had dug one up. It was a masterpiece of the old days that vibrated on a molecular level and could cut almost anything. A weapon like this was sharper than anything they could imagine, and could even cut iron apart as easily as paper.

Roste was a terror, and with this weapon in his hands who could stand against him? Even before Hellflower could fire her gun he was bearing down on her – too fast to defend herself!

Just as the Academician was preparing to cut her in two, Cloudhawk – invisible and sped up through the power of his cloak – swept in between them. He held his exorcist staff up in the path of the particle blade. Surprisingly, even the ancient technological wonder couldn't split this minor relic from the elysian lands. However the screech that issued from their clash was deafening and cracks appeared along the exorcist staff's surface.

“Now! Do it now!”

Hellflower fired the rifle right into Roste's chest. The impact shoved him back several feet, but his adaptive body curled back on his legs like coiled springs. In the midst of being knocked back he was preparing to launch back at them!

“Get out of the way!”

Cloudhawk, benefiting from the speed granted by his cloak, grabbed Hellflower and yanked her out of Roste's path. Moments later Roste's powerful legs shot him forward like a rocket and he slammed into the wall at full force. Half of it collapsed, leaving an enormous hole.

Roste clambered out of the dusty hole with his sword in hand, grinning darkly. “You are no match. Submit, make this easier on yourself. Do not fret giving your power to me, you will not be entirely destroyed. Your will and tenacity will live on within me. Stand with me, stand at the peak of biological perfection!”

Cloudhawk could not deny that in terms of skill Roste was no less capable than the Bloodsoaked Queen.

The Queen, aside from her extraordinary skill, derived her powers from the might of

relics. In contrast Roste's abilities came from him alone. His body was an unnatural freakish thing that could adapt to anything. He feared neither fire, ice, water, knife or bullet. Perfection was not an exaggeration.

"You think you're the most perfect thing in the wastelands, eh? Stop your bullshit!" Cloudhawk spied the spot in Roste's chest where Hellflower had shot him. Although it hadn't injured him or left a hole, he could tell the muscle tissue was damaged. "You aint shit compared to someone else I've come across!"

1. The superior siege engine.

Chapter 118

Mad Torture

Cloudhawk was naturally referring to the Caliph of the Sands. When he fought the demon, before the end he was barely able to make a dent in that monster's skin. The demon had even been able to catch bullets out of midair.

Roste was strong, but he was at most comparable to the Bloodsoaked Queen. His body was changeable but at best he was like a combination of the demon's fallen lieutenants. Compared to the demon? He was nothing.

"What did you say?!"

Veins bulged out against his pale blue flesh. This body was his pride, his masterpiece, the tool he'd spent his life cultivating to perfection. Cloudhawk's scorn was an affront he couldn't tolerate.

The wound to his chest healed quickly. After a few moments only the slightest mark remained.

Hellflower was preparing to take another shot when Roste once more began to change. His body shifted from burly and muscled to slithery and streamline, built for explosive speed and power. When he moved toward them again he was wholly one third faster than he was before.

Cloudhawk swung his staff to try and dissuade the Academician, but missed and swung through a vague afterimage. With realization spreading across his face Cloudhawk was too late in turning and felt a fierce blow to the back of his neck. Everything began to spin and he hit the ground with a dull thud.

Hellflower's finger was on the trigger when Roste's particle sword sheered it in two. Quick as a flash he swung again and the weapon master's hands were severed above the wrist. Before she could even feel the pain Roste shoved his masterwork blade into her body.

Struggling to get back up, Cloudhawk turned his head in time to see Hellflower

collapse in a pool of blood and lose consciousness. With his work done the Academician snatched up his cane once again as his body shrunk. Little by little he withered until the five foot bag of bones he recognized returned. He put back on his glasses and the strange finger-bone necklace.

“Take them away!”

Another blow. Cloudhawk’s world went dark.

Two mutant body guards lifted him up and they left the secret chamber.

Roste was exhausted, drenched in sweat. For all the power inside him it seemed his old body could hardly bear the strain. As his boney fingers played over his necklace, the light in his eyes hardened. “I will succeed. I must. All that remains is the power of the demonhunters and then I will be the most perfect specimen in all the world!”

Roste pulled his cane out of the ground and led what remained of his transformed bodyguards away from the slaughter. Almost as an afterthought he ordered someone to come and clean up the mess of blood and bone left in his wake.

When Cloudhawk came to he found himself laying in a lab, hands and feet bound to a table. A strap kept his neck fixed so he could barely turn his head. His cloak, mask, staff, the gospel of sands, and even his bear armor was gone.

Things were very, very bad. They’d captured him alive.

He lay flat on the operating table in only thin clothing. When he got his bearings he began to hear whispering all around. People were coming and going, a fact that was making him both anxious and angry. He began to struggle.

“He’s awake!”

“Give him another dose of tranquilizers!”

“No need.” This was a curt and familiar voice. Chimp walked within Cloudhawk’s line of sight and looked coldly down at him. “We must gauge his reaction as we administer the serum. Keep him awake.”

The gathered scientists nodded.

Cloudhawk had the distinct sensation that he was a sheep in a slaughterhouse. “What are you gonna do? Let me go!”

Chimp’s laughter was mocking and sinister. “We wanted to keep you in the dark. We’d have less to worry about and it would have saved you some suffering. Things being what they are now, however, we have no other choice.”

One of his assistants arrived carrying a flask full of strange green liquid. Something that looked like red plant matter floated within it.

“This is an herb from the elysian lands, Antirrhinum ignis. It is phenomenally expensive so none of us are able to enjoy its particular functions. I hope you appreciate it.”

Struggle as he might Cloudhawk couldn’t fight them. The scientists forced his mouth open and shoved a tube down his throat into his stomach. The strange concoction was poured in.

What awful way of taking medicine was this? It was like gulping down a powerful acid!

Immediately Cloudhawk felt as though every organ in his body was on fire. The burning quickly spread until he could feel every blood vessel searing, every muscle ache. He couldn’t bite back his agonizing screams.

“You bastard! You better kill me or I’m gonna fuckin’ tear you apart!”

“Tsk tsk. You still have the energy to threaten me?” The lab director went on in enigmatic tones. “You shouldn’t waste it struggling pointlessly, you can’t escape. You know, this medicine is a precious component, smuggled out of the elysian lands at great expense. It will greatly improve your physique. No typical wastelander would ever be able to enjoy its benefits.”

If Cloudhawk’s eyes could spit fire this wretched pervert would be burnt to ash. If he’d known this was his fate he would have killed Chimp when he had the chance!

Chimp checked the time. Cloudhawk had suffered for hours now and he still wasn’t exhausted. This strange brew simultaneously increased his strength but cut off stamina. For Cloudhawk this was a painful combination that extended his torment

considerably.

“That’s enough.”

When they felt he’d absorbed enough of the concoction the doctors produced a series of syringes. Sharp jabs to his veins and their contents were pushed inside. The young wastelander didn’t know what they were giving him now but before long he felt muddled and dizzy. His whole body was weak.

Two transformed soldiers walked in and removed his constraints.

Cloudhawk regained freedom of motion but could do nothing with it. He felt like his bones had been pulled out, or like he was trying to swim through mud. His captors dropped him in a prison, locked behind iron bars.

Scientists came in and out with bottles of colorful liquid they hung from the walls. Their contents were dripped through a series of transfusion tubes that joined into a single one inserted in Cloudhawk’s neck. Every ounce of this hateful serum that entered his veins felt like fire raging throughout his body.

“That’s enough for today. We’ll pick it up again tomorrow.”

They closed the door and shut him in behind three sturdy locks.

Cloudhawk lay in his cell, unable to summon an ounce of strength. He tried just to lift his hands but they wouldn’t obey his will. He didn’t know what that bastard Chimp had given him, but not only did it burn like a motherfucker, it also felt like thousands of ants gnawing his bones and crawling under his skin.

He could feel that somehow this process was strengthening his bones, though the pain was more than a normal man could stand. Cloudhawk managed to drag himself to the door of his cage and peered out where four guards stood as silent sentries. They were still as statues and stared at everything with a stoic indifference.

They didn’t take a chance with him, even behind thick iron bars. Were these damn guards really necessary?

They’d taken all of his equip, but even if they’d left it with him he couldn’t bust out of this prison much less escape from his four steely-eyed guards.

Furious, he screamed in vain several times, raging at his helplessness. He didn't even have the strength to bash his head against the wall and try to kill himself.

The second day.

Scientists brought him back into the labs where he was pumped full of all manner of drugs. One such substance was something they called elysian balm. Wherever they smeared it his body drank it up, followed by the agonizing sensation of his pores being torn open. He passed out when he began sweating blood.

Before he lost consciousness Chimp explained that this famed medicine came from the cities of the elysians. They called it transfusion balm.

It was said transfusion balm was part of the foundational training of a demonhunter. Although the process ruptured countless capillaries and caused serious hemorrhage, it also cleared out any toxins or impurities from within the body. The recipient's bones and muscles were highly strengthened by it.

Day three.

They put him in a pool filled with a frigid, milky white substance. The moment it touched him it froze, and within the space of a few minutes Cloudhawk was sealed in a block of pale white ice with only his face open to the air.

That cold that seeped down to the depths of his body was another special kind of torture.

Day four... day five... day six... every day the evil scientists employed some new hell to torment Cloudhawk with. They were the most painful and frightening days of his whole life. A living nightmare.

At the end of the sixth day he was thrown back in his cage. He was left in the dark, where it was moist and silent. Four guards had since become eight and now they kept him shackled hand and foot.

He sat up and took stock of everything. Over the last few days he could have sworn he'd grown a few inches at least. He ran his hand over his abdomen and the muscles felt firm and well defined. No longer the waif he was before, his clothes seemed several sizes too small all of a sudden.

The benefits of these medicines were evident.

The Academician didn't officially begin the power transfusion right way. When Cloudhawk arrived he was too weak. He was Roste's most important subject and so he had to be strengthened before the real process could begin. That was the focus of this week of torture.

More than his physical abilities Cloudhawk's sense of sight and smell had also improved in addition to strength and constitution. Under any other circumstances he would be thrilled, but as it was he felt more like they were fattening a pig for slaughter.

Was that evil old fuck going to have his way? Damn it!

He strained against his shackles, making them creak. Bulging muscles caused his clothes to burst a few seams. They'd taken everything from him, everything except the stone that hung around his neck. His captors were a cruel lot, they hadn't even given him a change of clothes throughout the week so the rock didn't even catch their eye.

Cloudhawk slipped the rock over his head and held it in his hand.

He was out of options, his only hope was this unreliable stone.

Transport me out of here! I beg you, get me out of this place!

Since he found the stone it had only awakened twice, and then only passively as a reaction to circumstance. Cloudhawk knew that Roste was cunning and cautious, and would leave him no chance to get free. He was nothing more than a lab rat caught in the madman's clutches with no recourse but to face his suffering day in and day out.

If he hoped to survive it would be through this unassuming stone clutched tightly in his hand. If he could learn to use its power of teleportation he could escape from this fucking place!

Chapter 119

Excitation

Academician Roste lit a candle, its frail light spreading out through the dark room. He removed the finger bone necklace from his neck and carefully rubbed each one. Clearly this odd choice in jewelry and the dozen or so bones that made it were special to him.

Raped by bandits... wife slain... brother, eaten alive by mutants... a son starved to death and a daughter killed by illness. His teacher taken by old age.

From ignorant youth to haggard old man, Roste had lived a harsh life that no one could know. Everyone who was important to him had died, and each time he took a single finger bone to remember them. Eventually he gathered enough to make his necklace, which he wore every day. Those he'd loved and lost were always with him, their tales a part of his own.

Why were humans made to be so frail? So weak?

The slightest injury or illness could take them. Disaster both natural and man-made could snuff their lives out in a blink.

As he ruminated on these bitter thoughts Roste stroked the bones one by one. He did not know whether it was his hazy vision or a trick of the candlelight, but he could almost see the smiling faces of those he'd lost behind the veil between life and death. It'd been years but every detail stood out vividly in his mind's eye as though they were right in front of him.

Happiness, sadness, sweetness, despair, pain, confusion, hesitation... these complicated and intense emotions lived within the mementos. They traveled with Roste through every day of his struggles.

I will succeed! I will create the mightiest creature in the world, one that does not grow old, or sick, or die. My creation will be invincible!

It doesn't matter if no one understands. I don't need anyone to understand, because the

road to greatness is a lonely one. One day they'll know. My work is for the good of humanity, my research will reverse our sorry destiny and save this broken world! I will wipe away history and create a new future!

Roste did not fear death for there was nothing left in this world he cared about. He would sacrifice anything and anyone in pursuit of his dream. Answering to no one, he alone would transform the future of the planet and create something new!

He had already learned all the secrets of the wastelands, it was time to turn his attention on the elysian lands. Once these two disparate realities were combined a new golden age would arise.

“Do you see? My work is almost complete! I ask that you be with me.”

He doubled over, coughing into a clenched fist. The deep crevices carved through his face grew deeper as he winced against the strain. When he could breathe again he slipped the bones back around his neck. Footsteps were approaching from behind, and from them he could tell the disposition of who they belonged to. This gait was rapid and unrestrained, meaning it was someone familiar with him. Someone with good news.

Chimp appeared with a smile on his face. “That kid’s tolerance is much better than we figured. He’s already gone through one round of drugs and the process is advancing quickly. He’s strong, we can likely begin the next phase.”

Roste had been prepared for this for quite some time. He produced a box and handed it to Chimp. “Go.”

The director reverently took the box and held it tight in his hands. Suddenly something came to mind. “Academician, what are we going to do with Hellflower and Hyena?”

Roste knew the desires that lived in Chimp’s black heart. “We wipe their minds. I leave you to deal with that.”

A twisted grin split Chimp’s face. One of the labs was already prepared for just that purpose. Once the drugs broke their will the two of them would be as compliant as all the rest of their mutated soldiers. Hyena mattered little to him, but he’d coveted Hellflower’s supple flesh for a long time. Before long she would serve him in whatever way he wanted. Just thinking about it made him salivate.

“But our work is first and foremost. Do not ruin everything we’ve strived towards.”

“Don’t worry, Academician. I will personally supervise Cloudhawk’s process. I swear there will not be any problems.”

Academician Roste’s frail body shuffled away.

Chimp bowed to his boss’ retreating form. His respect and loyalty was absolute. He was different from Hyena and Hellflower who joined the cause later, he was one of the first to follow Roste. Although he was a lascivious and timid man, he believed in the Academician with every fiber of his being.

It was more than just that Roste was his teacher, after so many years he knew that the old man’s heart was true. He wasn’t evil or ambitious for ambition’s sake. Chimp fully believed in their mission to transform the wastelands and humanity’s destiny.

There were many in this base, even around the Academician himself, who had no choice but to serve the scholar’s will. However Chimp was certain in his belief that one day Roste would be hailed as a savior. His name would be forever remembered in the beautiful future they envisaged.

And that bitch Hellflower... she actually dared to try and steal the great man’s research? Laughable!

Academician Roste’s accomplishments were the result of decades of careful study. He was the only one in all the world capable of completing this research. Trying to pilfer his important work for selfish gain was an unforgivable sin!

Hmph, she’ll have to wait. Right now the Academician’s work is more important than anything else.

When their work with Cloudhawk was finished he would make that woman understand what desperation was. He would teach her the meaning of pain. Let Roste have his fun and then when her will has been broken the traitors would be punished. At last he could vent his hatred.

Chimp brought several scientists with him to Cloudhawk’s cage. When they arrived they found him crouched inside with his hands tightly held together. He was saying something, too quietly to hear. Perhaps he was speaking with his god, though it was not the typical posture or style.

He'd been kept in a confused state of mind for several days.

"He hasn't lost his mind has he..."

Cloudhawk was desperately trying to awaken the stone, but all through the night no matter how hard he tried or what he did there was no reaction from it. He was so filled with rage and resentment that when he heard Chimp coming he would have torn him apart with his teeth if he weren't shackled down.

"He still has his faculties? Good, that's good." Chimp gestured with his hands and the guards opened Cloudhawk's cage. They forced him to the ground long enough for the scientist to inject him with a sedative and once again Cloudhawk was rendered helpless. "Take him," Chimp ordered.

Was it all beginning again? Was today another day of torment?

The drugs made him feel like his muscles were replaced with mud. His mind was clear but his body wouldn't cooperate. The first thing he noticed was that they did not bring him to the lab they used normally. This room was different, narrow, and filled with crude wasteland equipment.

Transparent vats filled with colorful liquids lined the walls. An empty tank rested in the middle.

"Today we begin the first phase of transformation."

Chimp did not waste time with talking. At his command two of the guards produced daggers and cut away Cloudhawk's clothes. They forced a breathing mask over his face, foisted him into the tank then sealed the lid.

All the while Cloudhawk was acutely aware of everything that was happening. He was forced to watch with no way to protect himself or fight back.

Chimp flipped a switch and the vats surrounding them began to drain their fluid into the sealed capsule. In about ten minutes Cloudhawk was entirely submerged.

"Injecting the Academician's supercells. Begin the culture stage."

Chimp personally opened a nearby refrigerator and retrieved a syringe from inside. Without wasting any time he pressed the needle into a tube's injection orifice and

slowly pushed out its contents. Meanwhile Cloudhawk floated in the brew, breathing with the help of the mask. It felt like he was being aggressively stabbed by a hundred thousand tiny needles. Every inch of skin, every cell felt like it was being cut up.

“Beginning Phase One cultivation.” Chimp ordered the eight guards to remain and look after him, adding, “Arrange for a hundred of our best men to be posted all throughout the area. Absolutely nothing can go wrong, or I’ll make sure every single one of you pays for it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

Cloudhawk’s fist was still tightly clenched. Within his palm the rock remained.

He wasn’t going to let that stone go easily, not until his final breath. Despite constant failure he still tried everything he could to awaken it to no avail. There was no reaction at all.

Then he began to feel like things were growing dim, like something was separating him from the world outside. The pain, the itching, the hot and cold all remained while all of his senses were cut off. Suddenly he was in an infinitely dark hell of torment. No light, no hope, no future. Just endless anguish.

He could feel something invading his body, a hundred million tiny pinpricks that stabbed at every piece of skin, muscle and bone. Was this the beginning of the transformation?

Cloudhawk’s anger and fear were gone. His mind went blank like he finally lost all power of thought. Perhaps he’d given up, there was no way to fight back. Was this his fate? To die here, after so much, halfway on his road to the elysian lands? It was so ridiculous he would laugh if he had the strength to!

In the end even Cloudhawk had his limits. After days of agony his will was broken, brought to brink by a week of torture and finally pushed over the edge in the darkness of this tank. He couldn’t see any way out.

Little by little his body relaxed.

Little by little he abandoned this meaningless struggle.

Only, as that numb stillness took over his mind Cloudhawk could feel something

coming from the stone. A pulse, followed by a pale light that radiated from within his tightly clenched fist. A strange and unexplainable power filled the space around him.

The stone... the stone was awakening!

All of a sudden he was filled with a joy that threatened to drive him mad. He'd managed to use the stone only rarely since obtaining it and never when he called. This was the exception, the one time it awakened at his request.

The difference between this odd stone and normal relics lay in the fact that using it was far more rigorous. Only when he entered a perfect state of stillness, where everything else melted away, was his will able to resonate with it.

This was a very large and important discovery! It was the first time his desperate groping revealed any truth about the stone.

The light from the stone grew more intense and the fluid around him began to vibrate. It roiled like it was boiling, followed by an intense rattling noise. All at once the glass tank that held him shattered sending shards of glass and caustic fluid in every direction.

“What the hell is going on?!”

Two bewildered scientists rushed in and gaped at the mess that greeted them. They hurriedly rummaged through the debris only to be more shocked by what they found.

Nothing! Cloudhawk was gone!

Chapter 120

The Bird Egg

Cloudhawk gradually regained consciousness and opened his eyes to find himself lying face down in the dirt. The call of a bird chirped in his ears and he could feel something hairy moving around over him. One of them stretched out its tongue and licked him.

“What the fuck?!”

Cloudhawk jerked and scrambled to sit up. Eyes wide, his sudden movements caused a flock of bird-like creatures to scatter. Though frightened the creatures didn't flee far. They gathered a dozen or so feet away and continued to watch this stranger who had tumbled from the sky.

What fresh hell did he find himself in? It wasn't the desert, there were no ruins... it was some sort of forest.

Cloudhawk was stupefied by the view. Creatures were everywhere, thousands of them. Cloudhawk had never seen so many animals gathered in one place. He sat among them naked as the day he was born and covered in sticky fluid. A pungent medicinal scent wafted off of him, probably what attracted these creatures.

They weren't large. The smallest ones looked something like squirrels and were roughly half the size of his palm. The biggest looked like meerkats and had to only weigh a couple of pounds. There were birds too, owl-like ones that watched him from the trees and could turn their heads two hundred degrees. Those were a little larger than his fist.

Big or small every one of them was adorable and interacted peacefully with each other. It was a shocking reversal from where he'd come from since the wasteland was filled with vicious things that would sooner kill you than look at you.

Cloudhawk stood and noticed the ground was littered with nutshells and fruit husks. The forest had to be rich with food, no wonder there were so many critters. Perhaps that was also why they were so docile. At least for the moment he didn't feel like they

were a threat.

“The hell are you doin’? Go! Fuck off!” Once they saw that Cloudhawk wasn’t violent several smaller animals tried climbing on his back. He swatted at the fuzzy things to keep them at bay. “You annoying little shits! Keep fuckin’ with me! See if I don’t have you for dinner!”

You could take the boy out of the wasteland but never the wasteland out of the boy. He was as crass and grouchy as ever, and the woodland creatures had never encountered a beast so ornery. The offending critters bounded away a few feet then sat back on their hind legs to stare at him.

This place was *weird!*

The forest was lush and crowded with plant life, some of which were heavy with delectable smelling fruit. One tree in particular caught his eye, an ancient of the forest with creatures climbing in and out of holes in its trunk. It must serve as a home for many of the animals.

Looking around Cloudhawk saw it wasn’t just one. Many enormous trees were evenly spaced among the area, every one of them at least a hundred a fifty feet tall. Ten people couldn’t surround one with their arms stretched around it. The distance between them was very small but it was the canopy he thought was most intriguing. Each tree’s crown was perfectly round and hung over him in a near-perfect half sphere. The ground was covered in grass and foliage, but as Cloudhawk spread his eyes toward the horizon he could see hundreds of these trees. They looked almost like giant mushrooms.

Each one the same shape, the same size, and evenly spaced...

What natural forest had such neat arrangements?

Animals crawled in and out of holes that, to Cloudhawk, looked a lot like old windows set in the tree trunks. He imagined this place could have been a village sometime long ago where intelligent creatures lived. For some unknown reason society had disappeared and animals moved in. Over time the place became a forest.

Cloudhawk’s skin still burned and itched, residual damage from whatever those drugs were they’d kept him in. He absently scratched but paid the sensation little mind. Instead Cloudhawk set about picking a couple enormous leaves off the trees to fashion

himself a makeshift skirt. He had to cover his dangly bits before the critters mistook them for berries.

Thankfully the denizens of the tree village proved harmless. There were plentiful nuts and fruits for them to enjoy so Cloudhawk felt as though he could relax around them. But he was still vigilant, for just because he didn't sense danger right away didn't mean there wasn't danger right around the corner!

Each time the stone had transported Cloudhawk it'd brought him somewhere different. The one thing they all had in common was that they were places that harbored intelligent life, or used to. But for reasons he could never tell they all seemed abandoned for thousands of years and left behind ruins that made him imagine what life must have been like.

Where culture gave up control, the wilds crept back in to lay claim. It was strange, Cloudhawk noted, he didn't see any meat-eating animals but there had to be didn't there? How else did the ecology keep in balance?

After wandering for a little while Cloudhawk came upon several strange bones scattered along the ground with tufts of fur. It seemed to verify the wastelander's assumption, something out here was the natural enemy of the peaceful forest critters. Whatever the case he had to find somewhere safe to hide out. Until the sedatives wore off, out here unarmed and defenseless he made an easy meal for any sort of predator.

Could he go back? Unacceptable! He refused to get caught up and become the Academician's lab rat again!

"Move! C'mon, out of the way!"

A flood of animals had poured out of the trees to look at this bizarre newcomer. They craned their necks from windows, hung from tree branches and skittered around his feet like a tide. Everywhere he looked were bobbing heads, no open path. Clearly they did not fear man, and if he'd wanted Cloudhawk could pluck one up off the ground without resistance. He felt like if he weren't careful he'd crush a bunch just trying to walk around.

Just then a faint pulse caught Cloudhawk's attention.

It was a pulse he'd come to be familiar with, the energy of a relic. Could one be nearby? When he transferred before he'd found two, so coming across another here wouldn't

be such a strange thing.

Naked and alone, maybe this relic could help him out of the situation! Without giving it any further thought he tried to track down the source of the resonance.

It lead him to a tree unlike the others, twice the size with a doorway large enough for him to pass through. He crossed the threshold without hesitation. It was more spacious than he thought on the inside, and several thousand small animals had made it their home. Fruits and nuts were gathered up in piles like a hidden storehouse... wait, were the animals working together to store food?

The resonance was coming from one of the food stacks. He started to dig without regard for the painstaking work of the forest critters, popping a berry or nut into his mouth from time to time. They were juicy and sweet. These animals were lucky to be living here, Cloudhawk thought.

Digging through the stockpile was an exhausting process, but about halfway through he spotted the source of the pulses. Yet, he looked at it confounded. This was a relic? This bird egg?

The egg was gold, about the size of his fist, and radiated a faint light. Tenderly he used both hands to lift it from the pile, sure that the resonance was coming from it. From what he could tell it appeared to be *made* of gold and there were strange lines etched on its surface, likely decorative.

What he didn't understand was what natural living thing produced eggs like this? He was definitely at a loss, but regardless of his confusion this discovery was a good one for him.

Suddenly Cloudhawk sensed something was off. His noisy surroundings were suddenly a lot quieter. When Cloudhawk lifted his head to look around, cradling the egg in his hands, he noticed that it'd become dark. The forest creatures were no longer dashing here and there, but remained stone still exactly where they stood.

“What's this? They're asleep?”

No, they weren't asleep. As the light faded from the sky their eyes changed, as did their bodies. They started getting bigger, taller, and stronger. Tiny claws became keen daggers and fangs peaked from their lips.

“Holy shit! What the hell?!”

Cloudhawk gaped at the dark figures gathered around him, and they stared back with fierce glowing red eyes. They were special, these forests creatures. In the daylight they were peaceful and friendly, but when night fell they entered a murderous frenzy!

Hungry screeches and angry chitters rose all around him. All of a sudden the happy friendly critters had become flesh-eating monsters! Without warning they began viciously attacking each other!

A large number of the berserk creatures set their eyes on Cloudhawk.

“Son of a...”

He was surrounded and they came at him like an army of ants. They were about to overrun him when the stone against his chest shimmered with light and – poof! Cloudhawk was gone.

Bang!

Cloudhawk hit the floor of the laboratory. With his head spinning he stumbled back onto his feet.

What the fuck was going on with those things? It didn't matter, now wasn't the time! Cloudhawk despaired to find that he was back in Blackwater Base, right back in the labs he'd tried to escape. Luckily it wasn't the tank room, it was somewhere different.

The mystical stone was silent. Something told him it was going to be a while, half a month maybe, before he'd be able to use it again.

As Cloudhawk was wracking his brain for a plan he heard noises coming from the hall. Guards on patrol, he figured. They heard sounds coming from inside and had come to investigate, weapons raised.

“What is this?”

Two large tree leaves had been discarded on the floor. Broad foliage like this didn't come from anything in Blackwater Base, they knew. Hell, there wasn't anything like that all through the marshes, or even Greenland Outpost. So how did they end up here?

Very much out of the ordinary.

The two guards were carefully examining the leaves when suddenly a figure shot out at them. It grabbed them by their heads and knocked them together, hard. *Crack!* Both of their skulls were dented from the impact. Cloudhawk wasn't sure whether they were alive or dead.

It was about then Cloudhawk discovered he was significantly stronger than he had been. His power had noticeably improved after days of torture. He pulled the two bodies into a corner and took one's uniform and weapon.

He had to find a way out of here, only he knew the lab was heavily guarded. There were bound to be several of the Academician's transformed warriors as well. He wasn't going to fight his way out.

He was under no illusions that his chances of escape were slim, but even if it was one in a million he had to try. He took a breath, calming himself for he knew the more he gave in to the fear the more irrational he would get. He had to plan his next move carefully and do whatever he could do increase his chances of survival.

Cloudhawk grabbed one of his captive guards and shook him awake. "Where are they keeping Hellflower? Speak!"

The guard stuttered and tried to speak though his brain was rattled. "S-she's being kept in Sector Two."

Cloudhawk chopped the guard's neck with his hand, knocking him out. Hellflower wasn't far. He slipped out of the room disguised as one of the guards and picked his way down the hall toward where she was being kept. Although Cloudhawk knew freeing her was likely hopeless, if he could find a way to save her there might be hope for him.

Chapter 121

An Accord

Cloudhawk vanished! His sudden disappearance had thrown the labs into chaos.

Academician Roste had no idea how it'd happened, but he could guess. Cloudhawk hadn't really escaped – rather, he hadn't run. He had to have used some mystical technique to vanish, something science had no way to explain. He put the blame on the abilities of the demonhunters.

When he received the news, Roste immediately locked down the laboratories. He didn't vent his anger at Chimp; that was the way of weak men. He needed his director to lead the search. Roste didn't believe people could just disappear so Cloudhawk had to be hiding somewhere. If they had to tear this place apart to find him they would!

Under the Academician's orders, Chimp started to canvas the area. No closet, box or corner was ignored.

The day past with countless people combing over the lab with a fine-toothed comb, twice. Not a single trace of the wastelander was found. Chimp was beyond furious as he led two scientists with him to a cage.

“Bring me the whip!”

A strikingly beautiful woman was locked away inside the prison. Her hands, which had been chopped off, looked recently reattached and the wounds to her body had healed well. Her wrists were bound by two heavy locks and her ankles were tied to her waist with chains. She was left with no way to move.

Hellflower's talents lay in her weapons mastery. Physically there was nothing she could do, so they felt no need to keep her sedated. There was no way she could free herself from her restraints.

Her hair was tousled and messy. Her pretty face was pale and bloodless, making her seem alluringly delicate.

When Chimp stepped into the cage he immediately laid into her with the whip. Her unblemished skin split beneath the lash. His blows rained upon her chest as well, tearing gashes in her clothes and damaging her supple flesh within.

But Hellflower was a tenacious woman. She gritted her teeth and didn't give him the joy of even a single grunt. Chimp was spent after only a few lashes and stood before her panting heavily. Slowly she raised her head to look at him, her face pale and sweaty, and split in a derisive sneer. "Let me guess. Judging by how upset our dear director is, I suspect something's gone wrong with Cloudhawk."

"What do you know about Cloudhawk's abilities? Tell me everything!"

Her eyes were full of scorn and contempt. It was like she didn't even regard him as human, he was like a moving pile of shit. She almost giggled. "It looks like my hypothesis was correct!"

"You *dare* laugh at me?!" He drew his dark and indecent eyes over Hellflower's curves. With a wave he summoned the scientists forward. "I don't think you'll be laughing for long."

They approached with a box and retrieved from within it a large syringe. A pale yellow fluid sloshed inside. When she saw what it was Hellflower's mocking smile vanished. "What are you planning to do?"

Chimp felt back in control when he saw the smile flee from her face. He chuckled darkly and replied in an enigmatic voice. "The mechanism of this drug destroys the synapses in the brain, causing permanent damage. Any memories, emotions and untrained skills will be lost, and you will lose the ability to make any independent judgments. You will serve between my legs as a slave, a bitch anyone can ride. I have to say I'm looking forward to it."

Hellflower knew this was the Academician's 'brainwashing' drug. The damage it caused was irreversible, and once injected she would become whatever sort of slave Chimp wanted her to be. She would much rather choose death!

"Are you ready to talk?" Chimp stank with confidence and pride. No one could resist his questioning, especially not someone as self-centered and faithless as Hellflower. "What are Cloudhawk's powers!"

"I don't know."

She had spent the most time with the young demonhunter. Chimp was certain she was his answer. As her words hung in the air his face darkened, more depraved. He approached her step by step, then reached out a hand and stroked her face. "You won't talk? That's fine, we can take our time."

Hellflower clenched her fists. "I really don't know!"

"Turning you into my sex puppet would *really* satisfy my craving. It'll be such a shame not to see this expression on your face anymore. Now may be my last opportunity to try the *real* you, before I take it away.

"You – get your hands off me!"

Chimp grabbed her collar and tore, revealing what was beneath. The angry bleeding welt where he'd struck her with his whip only made him more excited.

Chimp fumbled with her pants, filling Hellflower with rage and embarrassment. She cursed and struggled but even so her clothes were tugged down, revealing her firm buttocks. She couldn't fight him, she was only making the pervert more excited. He couldn't hold himself back any longer, he needed to feel all the pleasures her body had to offer.

Moral chastity wasn't a privilege wasteland women enjoyed, but she could think of nothing worse than becoming a sex slave for this pig and his equally perverse friends. It was a hell she couldn't endure.

She would rather die, if given a choice. But she wasn't given a choice.

The other two scientists stood nearby, watching expectantly. Hellflower was the most enticing beauty in the whole base, no straight man would give up his chance to have his way with her. After Chimp has his fun perhaps he would let them have a go. It would be a rare delight.

No sooner had the thought crossed their minds than the two men screeched and hit the ground, wracked with convulsions. Both of them frothed at the mouth and their head stood straight on end as every fiber in their body felt like it was set on fire. Chimp had his pants halfway down his legs when he saw what was happening. "What's going on?!"

A guard approached, the electric gun in his hand still crackling with sparks as he

pointed it toward the lab director. Chimp was shocked at first, then in a rage began to shout at him. "Which unit are you with! You actually *dare* –" The threats died in his throat when he saw the guard's face clearly. His eyes got so wide they threatened to roll right out of his head and he stumbled back until the bars of the cage wouldn't let him flee any farther.

A cold grin spread across Cloudhawk's face. "Surprise, motherfucker!"

Chimp answered with a high-pitched wail and tried to run.

"You absolute dick, you think you can run?" Cloudhawk took a large stride forward and buried his knee in the director's stomach. The lustful man curled up like a broiled shrimp whimpering as though his organs had been pureed. Cloudhawk gave him a sharp smack for good measure. "I said I was gonna whoop your ass, didn't I? Fuck, I didn't think I'd get lucky so soon, but here you are. Die you sack of shit!"

Chimp blubbered through a face full of tears. "No-no-no! No, please! I don't want to die!"

Cloudhawk was unfazed, however, and raised his hands.

Hellflower stopped him. "Cloudhawk, hold on."

He turned his head to look at her. She was in a tough spot, haggard and messy with most of her clothes ruined but still beautiful. Her unfortunate situation could easily arouse a man's darker desires.

"You don't think we should *spare* him, do you?" Cloudhawk was surprised by her mercy, but he was resolute. "If I could kill him ten times it wouldn't pay back what he's done to me over the last week. He dies today." How could Hellflower not want this disgusting man dead?

"He can still be useful." She saw Cloudhawk looking back at her with a dumb expression. "So have you had enough of an eye full? Help get me out of these shackles!"

Cloudhawk gave Chimp a sharp kick to the ribs. "Keys!"

Hellflower had nearly lost hope, but suddenly Cloudhawk had appeared just in time. The young man was Roste's most cherished treasure, whose worth was far beyond her own. She knew Roste had to have stationed any number of guards to watch the boy,

including many of his transformed freaks. Clever and calculating as the Academician was, how could Cloudhawk have gotten free? Something didn't seem right!

But however it happened, Cloudhawk had risked himself to save her. Hellflower was grateful. "Did anyone see you?"

"The lab's in chaos and I'm dressed as a guard, people are running all over and not paying any attention. For now no one knows where I am."

When her shackles were removed Hellflower tenderly rubbed her wrists. She searched the unconscious scientists and found a gun and some ammo. Cloudhawk might not have been discovered yet, but they couldn't take this situation lightly. It wouldn't be long before someone discovered there was a problem and once the old man came for them things would go from bad to worse.

Cloudhawk's daring rescue wasn't entirely altruistic. "You got a plan? We've gotta get outta here!"

By now she had recovered her typical poise. "The two of us aren't strong enough ourselves. We need some help if we want a shot of getting out of here alive."

Cloudhawk immediately thought of someone. He grabbed a fistful of Chimp's clothes and dragged him back to his feet. He gave him another punch to the face before snarling the question at him. "Where's Hyena?"

Chimp hesitated, unwilling to answer. But when Cloudhawk lifted his fist for another punch he knew he wasn't going to get away with silence. Quivering, he answered. "Don't- don't hit me. H-he's here, next door!"

"Hellflower, do you really want to keep him alive?"

"He may be a piece of shit, but he's been here a long time. He has people who listen to him, and maybe they'll listen to us. We can use them to fight the Academician. Maybe, with Hyena's help, we can actually fight back!"

She'd nearly been raped by this weasel, but her gaze was calm and steady like nothing had happened. Her mind was already making plans and countermoves. This level of poise was almost unnatural. She was the most mature and composed woman Cloudhawk had ever met both physically and emotionally.

She returned the brainwashing syringe to its box and handed it to Clouthawk. "Take this. Let's go!"

With the box in one hand and Chimp in the other, Clouthawk followed Hellflower down the hall. Although her clothes were in tatters she was no less threatening. She kicked open the door to the next room and charged in. With her hair flailing she looked like a Valkyrie.

Bang-bang-bang!

She fired several rapid shots, too fast for anyone to strike back. The guards were dead before they hit the ground.

In the center of the room, submerged in a glass tank floated Hyena. He was unmoving but still awake. Hellflower raised her hand and fired a couple rounds into the tank, shattering it. Glass and fluid poured free, and a figure coated in bristling black fur leapt out right after.

Half man and half beast, Hyena swept past. Neither Hellflower nor Clouthawk could react before he had them both by the neck. He lifted them off the ground and squeezed as he fixed them with murderous green eyes. "You two actually came back here to let me go? What makes you think I won't kill you!"

Hellflower didn't seem scared of him or the threat of having the life choked out of her. She fought out her response through her half-crushed windpipe. "If you kill us you're giving up your shot to get out of here. You'll end up just like the others, a puppet soldier!"

Hyena's fierce visage twisted into a snarl.

He loosened his hands.

Clouthawk gasped for breath, acutely aware of how dangerous this guy was.

Hellflower explained the situation. "The Academician is stronger than either of us could imagine. Fighting alone we don't stand a chance, but maybe together we can put that old man down. I know you aren't my biggest fan, and I don't much like you either, but we need to put that aside and come to an accord."

Chimp became flustered. "You're doomed! You can't fight the Academician, you've got

to give up this foolish idea.”

Cloudhawk’s animosity toward Chimp was particularly keen. “Who the fuck asked you to open your whore mouth? Shut the fuck up!”

Hellflower stood in front of Chimp. “I know you’ve got a lot of people here who listen to you, and I believe you’re an intelligent man. You need to make a choice; you help us, or you die.”

Chimp gave her a pained look. “Why are you so dead set on fighting the Academician?”

Her response was delivered in even tones. “Everyone should be allowed to make a decision based on what they believe. I cannot pledge allegiance to that mad man. I suggest you think carefully before answering.”

Hyena picked Chimp up in his bone-crushing hands. “But don’t. Waste. My. Time.”

“Don’t kill me. Don’t kill me!” Chimp’s face was red and he sputtered in abject fear. Hyena’s twisted half-beast face so close to his scared away any courage he had. “Alright, I promise I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll call all my people together in the lab. Cloudhawk’s equipment is there, too. I’ll take you!”

He really was a rotten bastard!

Hyena unceremoniously threw Chimp to the ground with a look of utter disgust.

Chapter 122

Not A Traitor

Chimp's cowardice and perversion were secret to no one. It was these fatal weaknesses that Hellflower and Hyena were able to exploit. Indeed Academician Roste held a high and unshakable position in Blackwater Base, but his subordinates – Chimp, Hellflower, Hyena – also had influence. If the three of them stood together in opposition to Roste they stood a decent chance.

The conflict between Hellflower, Cloudhawk, Hyena, and the Academician was intractable. Either he would die or they would, and so no effort was spared or method ignored. If Chimp dared to disobey, things would turn out very poorly for him. He knew this intimately.

“Let's go!”

“Don't kill me!” The director stumbled along as they shoved him onward. He whined submissively, “I'm begging you, please don't kill me!”

As Cloudhawk watched the cowardly man he could not see him as the least bit reliable. Was there anyone who would listen to this wretch? But this was their best option, their only option. Perhaps they could use him to gain control over a few fighters and improve their chances of taking the labs, then ultimately the whole base.

Hellflower and Hyena had lost their voice when Roste took them. For Chimp things were different.

He was perverted, obscene, and afraid of death, but he had also been with the Academician for several decades. He had clout, especially among those who worked in the labs since he handled most of its business.

If they could incite a rebellion from within using Chimp's influence and his people, they might have a way out. Every leader from Blackwater's opposition faction had been killed by Roste's ploy. Only Hellflower remained to call for their aid, but all that remained were a few hundred insurgents. That wasn't enough to take over the base and truly change things, but it was enough for them to fight their way to freedom.

“You know what you need to say. Don’t make me teach you.” Hellflower pressed a gun to the back of Chimp’s head and shoved him into a small lab.

“Don’t hold on to the delusion that you can outrun my bullets. Do your job and I’ll forget about what you tried to do to me. If you don’t, even Roste won’t save you from what I’ll do.”

His whole body trembled but he managed to nod emphatically.

“Hey, where’s my shit!” Cloudhawk stomped forward and snarled in Chimp’s face. “Where the fuck did you put it?”

In the face of the young man’s seething hatred the older man shrank back. He knew that Cloudhawk – more than Hyena or even Hellflower – was looking for any excuse to kill him. After all, his torture had been looked over and orchestrated by the lab director. More than once Cloudhawk fantasized about what he’d do to him. The kid was young and impulsive, and if it weren’t for Hellflower’s intervention Chimp would already be dead.

Cloudhawk found his staff, cloak, book, mask and demonhunter token in a nearby box. Everything was there! Every item was important and he was thankful they hadn’t tossed anything out.

He flung the invisibility cloak over his shoulders, the mask over his face, and fixed the staff to his waist. Finally he felt like he could take a breath, at last he could protect himself.

Chimp placed an emergency call to his subordinates.

Over fifty fighters directly under Chimp’s control were summoned. In addition there were some fifty scientists who came as well. The fighters were decent, and their leaders were first-rate, about as skilled as the two men Roste had killed – Black Jackal and Iron Bear.

Cloudhawk was admittedly confused. How could this cowardly shit have underlings this skilled? What were they thinking? Out in the wastelands strength equaled respect, yet they were willingly allowing themselves to be bossed around by this man?

When they had all gathered, Chimp’s people stared in wide-eyed surprise. How could they not? They were face to face with Hellflower, Hyena and Cloudhawk! They knew

Hellflower and Hyena were traitors and had presumably been locked away. They knew Cloudhawk had fled the labs right under their noses, but... here they all were!

Hellflower poked him in the back with the muzzle of her weapon.

He started to shake. Without any verbal command he stepped forward to speak.

His guards looked at him with dumbfounded expressions. The atmosphere was tense, heavy, as they waited for him to explain.

Chimp pushed his cracked glasses higher on his nose. He was clearly conflicted and uneasy with the situation, anxious eyes scanning the crowd. And then he sighed. "Everyone, you have eyes for yourself, you can see the situation. I have a very important announcement to make. But before I do, I will ask you right out – are you willing to fight with me?"

His men exchanged uncertain glances.

"We're just awaiting orders!"

"Good, very good." Standing amongst the crowd many thoughts flit through Chimp's mind. The Academician's image seemed to hover just behind his eyes. Despite how precarious the situation seemed, his face was resolute. "Twenty years ago I was a Seeker scientist, like many of you. We were betrayed from within, and a death squad from the elysian lands came. They wiped us out. Thousands of us were killed, it was genocide. By some stroke of luck I survived and became a refugee. Then, the Academician found me out in the wastes and brought me to Blackwater Base."

Hellflower and Hyena watched nearby. Their faces hardened with every word. Where was he going with this?

Hellflower's finger tightened on the trigger and her gun inched forward. Chimp trembled again but his voice remained steady. "Everyone, I've been here for a long time. I've watched as everything has changed. Every day the Academician has become more dictatorial. He doesn't allow anyone to breathe a word of opposition. By whatever brutal methods he pleases Roste will go at any time of day or night to capture innocents and use them for his sordid experiments. All resources are directed to this research, all other options rejected. You'll note that after years the population of this base has not increased and in fact has been *reduced*. Many of our most excellent scientists are gone since we've gotten in bed with the Dark Atom, and that's a slippery

slope.”

This was more like it. Hyena and Hellflower were less on edge.

But then, trembling even more acutely, his voice suddenly raised an octave. “But I still believe the Academician is right! I trust in his vision, in his greatness! Not everyone will understand what he is doing, but all he does is in the best interest of humanity! Although he has never formally accepted me, for years I have looked up to that man as the greatest teacher that has ever lived!”

“Chimp! Do you want to die?!”

“*Hahahaha!* Want to die? Yes, I do! Are *you* afraid of death?” The lab director spun around and glared at them through bloodshot eyes. His face was full of anger and reprimand. “Hellflower, you have always worked toward your own selfish ends, and in spite of the consequences you conspired to steal the result of the Academician’s decades of hard work! Hyena, you once begged the Academician to save your life, but now you betray him? Ever since he elevated you to your position he never once mistreated you and yet this is how you repay him. Do you think you’re worthy of his brilliance?!”

Cloudhawk was stunned into silence. Hellflower and Hyena were no better off. Chimp’s reversal was so entirely unexpected they weren’t sure how to react.

“I can’t fight like you, Hyena! I’m not as talented as you, Hellflower! Neither of you have ever looked at me with anything other than contempt, like garbage! But do you know what? I find you repulsive, too. I could murder, I could rape, I could perform all evil deeds under the sun and live in shameless depravity. But there is one thing I will *never* do. I am *not* a traitor!”

Bang!

A bullet tore a hole in Chimp’s chest.

“Tell the Academician... that Chimp never betrayed him!” Chimp swayed unsteadily and looked down at the gushing hole in his chest. All of his strength left him all at once but he kept on his feet. The anxious, weak man seemed to summon all the strength of his lifetime to let loose a final scream. “Brothers, avenge me!!”

Hyena, roaring like a feral beast, lunged forward and nearly twisted Chimp’s head from

his body. The frail man's neck spun around like a lump of fresh dough a hundred and eighty degrees until he was looking straight back behind him.

When he hit the ground Chimp's eyes were wide. He knew these were his last moments, a realization that made him deeply afraid. But he didn't regret what he did. His last hope... his last wish... his last desire was that his bones might adorn the Academician's neck.

"Chimp, boss!"

"Kill them! Avenge Chimp!"

The director's men were loyal and seeing him die instead of betraying his leader set their blood to boiling. Dozens of guns were leveled at the murderers and fired. In an instant the whole room was a deafening cacophony of gunfire, a deadly tempest of bullets.

The three offenders dove for cover.

Hyena was almost mad with anger while Hellflower was at a loss. Never in their wildest dreams did they think Chimp would get one up on them like this. Cloudhawk looked at Chimp, laying on the ground and unable to breathe. He was just as angry and surprised as the others, but also puzzled.

Why did the world have to be this way?

Not long ago Hyena and Hellflower respected the Academician, now they were at odds. Meanwhile Chimp, that worthless man desperately afraid of death, chose to die rather than give up on the man he adored.

Great treason is like loyalty. Great loyalty is like treachery. Great falsehoods are like truth. Why did the world make people so inscrutable? Why where their hearts beyond comprehension?

Dozens of soldiers emptied their clips wildly at Cloudhawk's hiding spot. Everything in the lab had been nearly blown apart. If any of them so much as stuck their head out they would immediately be sporting several new holes. There could be twice as many of them and they would still have no way to fight their way out!

Academician Roste would be here soon and the three of them together couldn't face

him, much less with the addition of fifty well-armed guards. Hiding here wasn't an option.

Hyena's talons anxiously clawed at the ground leaving ragged gashes in the metal. He was like a cornered animal, desperate and furious. He would rather die than be captured alive again, as a soldier he couldn't suffer the indignity of being someone's puppet.

"Kill our way out! If we die, we die together!"

But Cloudhawk called him back. "No! Don't give up, we haven't lost yet. There's still something we can do."

Hellflower turned skeptical eyes his way. "What's your plan?"

"It's not certain, and very dangerous. But if it works we can kill the Academician!"

"Well now's the time! If you've got an idea then get to it!"

"Alright, first we need to get out of here and still be breathing." Cloudhawk pulled out the Gospel of the Sands. He went on. "Remember to work together!"

The gunfire was beginning to wane as many of the soldiers reloaded their weapons. Cloudhawk focused his psychic energy into the Gospel and all of a sudden the room was engulfed in a sand storm. The fine grains not only impeded vision but got in their eyes and forced them shut.

"Now's the time!"

Hellflower's powerful legs launched her into the air. She soared out of cover with a gun in each hand and though she also couldn't see she knew where every target stood. She pulled the triggers in rapid succession, each bullet dropping one of their attackers.

Hyena bounded out from behind cover on all fours and charged into the crowd. As easily as a wolf among sheep he flung aside three soldiers effortlessly. Another he mangled into ribbons of flesh.

Suddenly blind and under attack, Chimp's people lost their composure. They couldn't keep up their barrage.

“Don’t get caught up in the fight! Run!”

Cloudhawk grabbed Hellflower and dragged her behind him out of the room. Hyena leapt through the throng tearing through opponents with his razor-like claws until a path was clear and he, too, fled.

Three minutes later.

Academician Roste arrived at the lab, followed by a contingent of mutant soldiers. What he found was a gory mess of a dozen or more corpses and the rest of the soldiers in disarray.

“Academician. Boss Chimp, sir. He...”

Roste saw his director’s broken body among the dead. He hardly seemed to register the fact. Cutting off the soldier, the old scholar pressed him for information. “Where are they?”

“They fled. I think toward the animal containment section.”

Academician Roste left without another word, beckoning for the flock of mutant soldiers to follow.

Chapter 123

Liberating the Beasts

A hundred years ago there was once a wise and knowledgeable Seeker. In the ancient ruins he uncovered an ancient piece of biotechnology, only, most of its secrets had been lost to bygone ages. For years he diligently studied, decades of hard work resulting in numerous advances and discoveries. In the twilight of his life he took on a young and brilliant student to pass on everything he had learned.

That young man's name was Roste.

Roste inherited that old scholar's legacy. Decades past like days as he dedicated himself to this singular field of study. He compared ancient knowledge with the crude modern practices, ultimately creating 'Roste's Alteration Procedure.'

At first his experiments were performed exclusively on wasteland animals. By promoting and accelerating beneficial mutations he made the creatures smarter and stronger. Eventually he succeeded in cultivating beasts with the capacity for critical thought. He called the evolved creatures a new class, *Sagax Brutumilia*.

However in Roste's eyes the beasts were never more than creatures. They were 'other' and thus he spared them no part of his heart. Besides, endowing these monsters with strength and intelligence would one day put them at odds with his own species. So he stopped his research, but used the basis of what he learned from creating these animals for something new.

This was the origin of Roste's quest to transform humanity. He wanted to take the benefits of *Sagax Brutumilia*'s abilities and transplant them into a human body. This mad endeavor sounded absurd, but after countless attempts he finally succeeded in creating half-beast soldiers!

These transmuted warriors were able to retain the intelligence and memory of a human while attaining the survivability and combat prowess of a wild animal. In theory, they possessed the same capabilities to learn as humans and the raw physical prowess of their animal forbearers. In essence his research was complete, ready for mass production and dissemination. Only, his beast warriors had one critical defect.

Through testing Roste discovered that the subjects were predisposed to contracting strange diseases. He called it Racial Cognitive Disassociation Syndrome.

As the name implies, sufferers of this affliction retained the memory and cognitive abilities of humans but also the base nature and emotionality of animals. Due to how these two overlapped and conflicted, sufferers ended up rejecting their humanity despite their human bodies. The mind deteriorated until victims were something that wasn't human and not beast.

Roste was never able to completely solve the problem. The best he was able to do was develop his brainwashing serum. It didn't cure the syndrome, but instead destroyed the portion of the brain responsible for emotion. After administration of the serum subjects lost their capacity for emotion as well as most of their memory. In essence, they became pliable puppets.

Production of these half-beast warriors began and many were produced, eventually reaching the point where they could develop a dozen or so a month. Due to their strength, abilities, and capacity for following orders the soldiers became a hot selling commodity. An organization like the Dark Atom was more than willing to pay top dollar and this made Blackwater Base very rich in a matter of a few short years.

Many of the instruments, firearms and weapons were given to them by the Dark Atom as a means of payment.

It was irrefutable! Academician Roste was a mad genius.

How could any normal Seeker, surrounded by this barren backwater, create so many inconceivable inventions? In fact, Roste's most successful accomplishments weren't his beast soldiers or the transformed humans. It was his medicines, all sorts of incredible pharmaceuticals which were unavailable to anyone.

Most incredible of all, for decades he turned those medicines and methods on himself. He performed experiments in secret, spending most of his energy in developing his own adaptability mutation. Roste extracted the mutagen factors from many other creatures, strengthened them, then introduced them into his own body to produce a nearly perfect specimen. It was the only result he was truly satisfied with.

Now the might of the wastelands was within him and there was nothing left for him to take from it. He turned his sights on the inscrutable elysian lands and the mystical

demonhunter who came from them.

Like most scientists, Roste was an atheist. He did not believe the power of the demonhunters came from any mystical god. For years he yearned to capture one so he could determine precisely what it was that made them special. Once he learned their secrets he could take it for his own. Thus he would become the first creature in history to combine the best of the wastelands and elysian lands, a perfect human specimen!

The strongest, the most resilient!

Cloudhawk was the manifestation of all his desires, especially since Roste knew at a glance that the boy had grown up in the wastes. It proved that their gifts did not come from some god!

The news that Cloudhawk had fled to the cage room spread. Soldiers converged on the location.

However they were too late. Cloudhawk had used the key taken from Chimp's body to open the doors, and slipped in with Hellflower and Hyena. The few soldiers already inside could not contend against the two first-rate fighters and were dealt with in under half a minute.

The animal containment sector was one of the most important locations in Roste's laboratory!

It was separated into two floors by a steel-framed set of stairs. The lower area was arranged in a grid pattern with eight passageways making escape easy. Twenty-some cages were arranged throughout with roughly half housing mutated beasts of all sorts. All told there were about a hundred creatures kept here.

Sagax Brutumilia was a fitting name. Not only were they more intelligent but their bodies had undergone changes as well. These mutations enhanced their primitive capabilities to make them more agile, more ferocious, and more efficient.

After Cloudhawk and the others broke in and dealt with the guards they were met with absolute silence. Unless they were looking right at them it was hard to believe there were so many creatures here because none made a sound. They all sat in their cages in quiet self-restraint.

Cloudhawk approached the closest one and peered through the bars. Inside were

perhaps a dozen lizards muzzled and chained to the ground. They looked back at him through an apathetic and resigned fog.

Cloudhawk knew right away that they were the result of constant failures and painstaking breeding. Each one of them held high research value, and of course they were dangerous.

Hellflower was no fool. On the contrary she was smart as a whip. She guessed his plan the moment he led them here. "You're crazy. You can't be thinking of letting these animals out... Do you think they'll help you?"

"I know someone in there can understand what I'm saying." Cloudhawk paid Hellflower no mind, there wasn't any time. He spoke to the animals instead. "If you want to live, if you want your freedom, then here's your one opportunity. If we work together we can all get out of here!"

Several of the creatures were roused from their lethargy when they heard Cloudhawk speak. Several knowing pairs of eyes stared his way.

"I'm like you, a victim of their experiments. We have the same enemy and the same goals." Cloudhawk wasn't a fool, he knew that his plan was dangerous. But he couldn't think of anything better, they had to take the risk. "I'm going to let you go and give you back your freedom. In return I want you to help me fight Roste and the evil scientists who did this to you!"

Hellflower moved forward as though to stop him, but Hyena's growling words stopped her. "Let me do it!"

Cloudhawk didn't have time for any nonsense so without hesitation he fished out Chimp's key and unlocked one of the cage doors. Resolutely he strode in and unlocked the shackles, the only thing keeping the creatures from eating him alive.

Hiss! Hiss! Aooooghh!

Several burly desert lizards charged. Their mutations made them more like miniature dinosaurs, capable of standing up on powerful hind legs. Not only were they much larger than a normal wasteland lizard, they were also smarter. They headed right for Cloudhawk.

"Watch out!"

Hellflower was ready to shoot but Hyena held her arm.

Hyena fixed his sharp eyes on Cloudhawk. The thought of using these creatures had never crossed his mind, nor did he suspect Cloudhawk would think of it. All that was left was to see if the kid's luck would hold out.

In fact even Cloudhawk saw it as a gamble. But his confidence came from experience.

Back with the Tartarus Mercenaries was when Cloudhawk had encountered the rat king. It was nearly as smart as any human. These creatures were no different, and after being locked up with the scientists for so long he bet they understood human speech.

They had to know what he was saying.

If they had even a shred of logic they had to know this was their only chance to get out. If they let it pass or killed him they would spend all the rest of their lives chained up in these cages oppressed by these hateful scientists.

He faced the oncoming lizards with a calm exterior, not even flinching from their roars.

The first one to reach him spread open its maw to take a bite! But then the largest of the herd lunged forward to knock it away. This one was the alpha, and the smartest. It communicated with the others through a series of growls and hisses which caused them to calm down.

It paid off! *It paid off!*

Cloudhawk had been nervous, especially when the sharp teeth of the lizard were coming for his face. Thankfully he was saved by their leader otherwise Cloudhawk doubted he would be able to fight off even just one. No one would have been able to save him.

"Quick, open all the cages!" Cloudhawk spun around and threw the key to the others. "Fast as you can!"

With every minute precious they flung open the cages, one by one. The distribution of intelligence was different and uneven and each time they were nearly attacked only to have the ones who understood step in to protect them.

A particularly sturdy cage had its doors flung open. A pack of wolves came screaming

out, a flurry of tooth and claw.

Their alpha padded out and stopped by Hyena's side. She was a female, but if she stood on her back legs she was easily ten feet tall. Her body was covered in a sleek white coat that made her look exceedingly majestic and noble.

This one was the most highly evolved of all the creatures here. Physically she was very different from normal wolves, highly agile and capable of explosive force. When she came upon Hyena she stopped as though she recognized him and licked his hand – an elder showing an affection to their brood.

Hyena's heart was in turmoil. He was a patchwork creature, part man and part beast. The blood of these wild animals pumped through his veins. He had the thoughts and memories of a man but he no longer shared their emotions. To his eyes the lives of the wolves was more pleasing.

It filled him with a sense of identity.

Hyena knew this was that condition Roste would talk about, 'Racial Cognitive Disassociation Syndrome', the most serious side-effect of his transformation. It was an unsolvable challenge that Hyena knew meant he would never really belong with humans ever again.

Chapter 124

Last Stand

Amidst the flood of a hundred or more ferocious wasteland beasts, the three humans were left untouched. It was a miracle.

Cloudhawk was drenched in sweat, he heaved a sigh as finally he was able to let the fear go. Siding with a pack of wild animals was probably the craziest idea he'd ever had.

Roste's arrogance lead him to believe he had created a new species. He'd even given them a name. These mutated victims looked much the same as their wild counterparts, but in fact they were orders of magnitude more capable. They were changed, but not so exaggerated that they were unrecognizable. The difference lay in evolution versus forced transformation. Both led to improvement, but whereas evolution was always a positive influence, forced transformations were often unpredictable.

The biggest disparities after these mutations were in intelligence, strength and agility.

Cloudhawk didn't have time to open all the cages before he started hearing footsteps coming their way. They were approaching from several angles amidst shouts and harsh commands. Judging by the sound there was a large group closing in.

Cloudhawk looked to his left and right. "They're finally here?"

Hellflower raised her guns and Hyena began to slowly shift into his beast form. The beasts around them could sense the danger bearing down and bristled threateningly. The fight was about to begin!

Bang!

Several of the doors to the containment area were kicked open and several hundred fighters poured in. They had crossbows, stun rods and electric nets that they brandished as they flooded both floors. In no time they had the area surrounded but it was clear they were frightened by the scenario they discovered.

“Kill them! Kill them all!” When he recognized how dire their situation was, one of the scientists shouted out the order.

The soldiers raised their guns, loading bullets and winding back arrows as they prepared to fight. Cloudhawk didn't need to give any orders or warnings for the beasts that had been locked up here were all smart enough to know what was coming.

“Squeak squeak!”

Several of the rats chattered and suddenly they were off, almost too fast to follow. In a blink they scurried from the first level up to the second. Moments after the scientist gave the order they were already in the crowd of humans, biting and clawing at crucial areas. A series of pained cries preceded several of the warriors falling from the walkways.

The rest of the beasts howled and joined the fray. The scientists shouted hysterically as they bore down on the humans. *“Hurry! Kill them, kill them!”*

An enormous eagle with golden feathers dove at them. It didn't look much different than the ones found in the wastelands except for its coloring and the fact it was twice the size. Each feather was a gleaming bronze which was especially bright at the edges of its wings. They were light, hard and sharp like dozens of blades strung together. As it swept by those feather easily cut open the fragile throats of the humans.

It swept through the room like a bolt of blood-tinged golden lightning. In mere moments it'd killed more people than they could count.

It grabbed a man in each of its taloned claws by the head. One was a scientist who screeched piteously as they wheeled high overhead. The bones of their skulls were crushed as easily as eggshells before they were unceremoniously flung away. Fast and agile the bird of prey carved a path through the warriors unscathed despite their guns and numbers.

Wolves, lions, and leopards urged their powerful bodies forward as the fight unfolded. The soldiers had always known these animals were here, but until now they hadn't need to worry what they were capable of!

These creatures were as different from their wasteland counterparts as clouds and mud. Typical beasts reacted to instinct, but these were not typical animals. They knew to avoid gunfire, seek cover, and cooperate during attacks. They even employed

trickery and misdirection.

Although they were smart the creatures weren't taught how to fight and relied on their feral instincts. Those instincts were powerful and even without training they fought like veteran warriors. It was knowledge that lived deep in their bones, muscle memory evolution couldn't breed out of them.

The soldiers outnumbered them, but none could compare to the sheer ferocity of these animals. It was a massacre even before they started shooting.

Cloudhawk was surprised at how effective the animals were at killing. More than once he saw a soldier's head casually ripped off like they were made of paper. These creatures could fight as well and as hard as the likes of Slyfox or Mad Dog, some even better. It was almost more than he could believe.

However, a few minutes after the fighting began, more figures began pushing their way in from the corridors. They leapt over barriers and scaled walls with ease, bounding up to the second floor as agile as the animals themselves. One of them crouched on the iron bars of a handrail and launched itself into the air, leaving behind a dent where powerful legs had kicked off. Fast as a missile it caught the golden eagle mid-flight.

Two powerful arms held tight and *ripped*.

The eagle replied with a screech as its wings were savaged. However, the creature was not your typical bird. It kicked at its attacker, tearing away chunks of flesh with its talons, but this new foe didn't seem to feel any pain. They grabbed the eagle by its leg, and between the momentum of their fall and the bird's injured wing the majestic creature was brought down to earth.

Another enemy leapt at it on all fours. Sharp teeth clamped around the eagle's throat.

Its head was bitten clean off. Fresh blood splattered over the area.

Aaaaooogghh!

Hovering over their kill the soldiers didn't see the flash of silver bearing down on them. With a bone-shuddering roar the silver wolf matriarch charged, hurling her burly body into them like a runaway truck. Mighty claws swiped at each of them leaving nasty, jagged wounds behind. These mutant warriors were tough but even their transformed flesh couldn't protect them. Thick bones couldn't bear the attacks

and splintered. Still they struggled to fight back.

The matriarch belched a fog of acid over them.

Roste's transformed soldiers did not feel pain or fear. As they fought through the fog there wasn't an inch of them that hadn't started to melt. Skin, fat and muscle fell off in sizzling chunks even as the warriors continued to run ahead. They scampered toward the wolf like a pair of mad, peeled rabbits.

Incredible! What powerful acid!

Cloudhawk had seen the outstanding damage rotwolves could cause with this attack, but even that was hardly worth mentioning compared to the matriarch. In moments her prey's armor, skin and sinews melted into an unrecognizable mass they certainly weren't going to survive.

The two mutated fighters were handily defeated. Subject Zero was a force to be reckoned with.

Hellflower's hands were a blur. She was beautiful and deadly like a flower from hell, and any soldier within her line of sight was shot down. She hardly even glanced at her targets before they were slain, killing more than even the vicious animals could match.

Amidst the carnage of the base's guards, a frail and thin figure slowly picked its way down the corridor. Seven pitch black mutated soldiers followed. As Academician Roste looked upon the ruin that was his lab his expression changed little. He offered a wheezing cough, then unhurriedly picked off his glasses and necklace and slipped them into his pocket. When he spoke he did so naturally, entirely unperturbed by what was happening around him. "I underestimated you lot."

Cloudhawk was on high alert. Had this monster finally showed his face? The soldiers hadn't known what they were walking in to and suffered for it, but Cloudhawk and Hellflower especially knew what Roste was capable of. Neither were foolish enough to consider his presence lightly.

And then there were the dozens of creatures that hated him down to their very core! Could he even grasp that?

Slowly the Academician began to change. His body swelled and color drained from his skin leaving him with a pale blue hue. Meaty hands lifted his staff and pulled, revealing

a hidden blade attached to the handle. The blade was no wider than the width of two fingers, thin and narrow, and exceedingly common in appearance. In fact it was a high-frequency ion blade, one that could cut iron as easily as a stick of butter.

Hellflower took the first shot.

Roste moved like the wind, jerking his enormous body from side to side so easily the bullets danced right by. Hellflower's accuracy was legendary, but even so close and in the narrow confines of the corridor she could not hit her mark. He was too fast, her attacks were hardly worth his consideration.

Three of his animal victims charged, thirsty for revenge.

Roste raised his weapon and swept by, fluid as a specter. All three animals were cut in half mid-leap, discovering firsthand how deadly his weapon was. Their flesh and bone meant nothing to something that could split sheets of iron.

One of the wasteland lizard saw the result of coming in close and instead spat at Roste. A plume of fire consumed the corridor in scorching heat that would cook a normal human in moments. Yet as the fires engulfed the Academician his body's surface was covered in a heat-deflecting shell. The intense heat caused him no damage.

A flash of steel. The lizard's head hit the ground with a thud and rolled away.

His movements were as deft and easy as though he were cutting a stick of wood. He buried his sword in the body of a rat that had tried to move in for a sneak attack when it did not dodge. Even impaled by the humming blade the rat lurched forward, desperately clawing at the Academician. Its whole body began to smolder and turned red.

It exploded, flooding the hallway with blood and concussive force.

Self-destruction? Cloudhawk had seen this before. One of these had killed his friend Woola.

These detonating lab rats were much more dangerous. The explosion had blown Roste's clothes to shreds but he was left without any major injuries. Parts of his body exposed to the blast were covered in a ribbed heat resistant crust. He hadn't been hurt by it, but the force of the explosion had thrown him into the air.

Hyena raced forward. Strong legs launched him into the air, and when he reached the Academician's side he swung himself around and whipped his leg at the scientist. Roste was smacked out of the area and hit the ground so he left a small crater.

To Hyena it didn't feel like he'd kicked a body, but rather a sturdy lump of rubber. Any force from the momentum of his kick was diffused. Roste's body could adapt to any outside stimulus immediately, rendering all attacks useless. Guns, knives, fire, explosions – even critically powerful attacks were shrugged off like they were nothing.

Then, to add insult to injury, the freak had freakish regenerative abilities as well!

Roste slowly gathered himself up from the ground. His massive, stately, blue-tinged body towered over them like a giant. Every muscle in his body, even his facial features, were finely chiseled so that he looked less like a man and more like a carving of the ancient gods. "I told you it is no use. My body is perfect."

Chapter 125

Hysteria

This nightmare of a man possessed terrifying strength, speed, power, regeneration, adaptability... if he stood still and let them attack they still couldn't do him any harm. In addition he bore a sword that could cut bone like tofu. Like the grim reaper, a god of death, he was invincible.

“No, not perfect!” Cloudhawk railed against Roste's domineering aura, shouting his defiance. “I don't think he can keep it up!”

Hellflower and Hyena were enlightened and inspired by the boy's words. Yes! He had to be right, there were limits to any power. The energy in Roste's cells couldn't be limitless, so if they kept up their attack he would continue to weaken until eventually he burnt out.

Roste hacked at the sturdy scales of a lizardman attacker and brutally split him from skull to coccyx. The Academician was covered in the blood of the mutant beasts but never once did his blackish-green eyes change their dull expression. “Everyone has their limits. I am no exception. But do you think you few are capable of forcing me to reach it? Do not overestimate your power.”

Roste cleaved apart two more beasts as he spoke. Each action seemed at ease, almost lazy. There was no indication that he was tiring out. The creatures he killed were the fruits of his labor, built through his own efforts and yet he cut them down without the slightest hesitation. The lives he took were worth less to him than rotten wood. In his ambitious heart there was only progress and the tools needed to achieve it, leaving no space for the respect for life. Under his heartless assault the animals were pushed back step by step.

Today either he died or everyone else did. There was no third option!

Two transformed soldiers attempted a sneak attack against the rebels from both flanks. Hellflower, ever vigilant, lifted her guns and unloaded several shots into both of them. There was a bullet for each aimed at their skulls which punched right through the sturdy bone. Mutant soldiers were sturdy, but their bodies were not impenetrable.

However as she was busy dealing with them Roste made his move. No one barred his path and so he was on them in a blink. Hellflower didn't even have time to stagger backwards but Cloudhawk stepped up in her defense. The exorcist staff whirred in his hands and as his cloak flapped in the artificial breeze Cloudhawk disappeared.

“Kill! Kill!”

Hyena refused to be pushed back. Steeped in the throes of bloodlust he charged ahead, without regard for his own safety. His words were almost indistinguishable, not human but the roar of an alpha wolf commanding its pack. All the mighty beasts around, faced with the threat of death, summoned every ounce of ferocity bred into their bones. Without fear or hesitation they charged at the Academician.

Though they were creatures of the wilds, they had emotions. They felt rage! They yearned for life and freedom!

Many were bred in captivity and from a young life suffered pain that made them beg for death. Unthinkably agonizing experiments and terrible drugs stimulated brain development, imbuing them with the capacity for memory and critical thought. With it came emotion, and underneath it all that unyielding feral spirit which made them refuse to be cowed.

Days of torment turned into months, turned into years. They were forced to watch as their own brethren were drained of blood and marrow. It did not escape notice that their numbers were constantly dwindling. The only thing these tortured, mutated creatures could hold on to was hatred. It was a loathing that brewed in their hearts for years.

Roste was the culprit! It was all because of him! Countless nights of random killing, of being eaten alive were fresh in their memory. He consumed them to fuel his own need and hunger.

Roste was the root of their fear and the focus of their enmity. At last they could act on that all-consuming anger, to kill the hateful demon who'd imprisoned them!

The Academician faced Hyena, the frenzied shapeshifter leading his brethren in their desperate charge. A taunting light glimmered in his hateful eyes. *This pitiful man*, he thought. *The beast had consumed what remained of his humanity. Keeping him alive was a danger to the wastelands. It is time to eliminate this failed experiment.*

Hyena was as strong as Greenland Outpost's former leader, Hydra. Roste had capabilities on the same level as the Bloodsoaked Queen.

At her peak the Bloodsoaked Queen could destroy the likes of Hydra without breaking a sweat, he was nowhere near her level. It was the same between Roste and Hyena. The shapeshifter was fast, but his maker was faster!

The Academician's cane sword split the dim light of the lab like a comet, light glinted off the steel like a flash of lightning. Without any fancy moves, without any wasted motions, he thrust forward. Simplicity in its purest form, but leaving Hyena no way to dodge or block.

Looking upon him it was like Hyena was giving his heart away. Roste's sword was poised to run him through as though he were made of paper when Cloudhawk appeared from the ether. In that crucial moment the young warrior materialized between them with his exorcist staff held high. A burst of energy pulsed forth as staff met sword and amidst the sparks Roste's deadly sword was knocked off course.

However, it was not far enough to miss Hyena completely. The shapeshifter suffered a nasty gash but it did not slow him down in the least. He unleashed all of his stored up energy through his fist into Roste's chest. As expected the Academician's flesh hardened into a thick shell just before impact. But this time Hyena's blow left a mark.

Cloudhawk followed on his heels with the exorcist staff. A tempest of energy blasted outward.

Roste could retaliate but Cloudhawk was too precious, he was loathe to harm the young demonhunter. In turn, Cloudhawk was emboldened with this knowledge. If he were anyone else then fighting up close in this way would be a death sentence. He would have been stomped into paste right away.

"Now! Before it's too late." Cloudhawk hollered. "Attack!"

A dozen animal experiments dashed forward. Poisonous lizardmen spat acid at the Academician, wolfmen belched caustic fumes, and giant rats skittered forward ready to sacrifice their explosive bodies. All of them charged, ready to face death without blinking.

Hellflower raised a large caliber rifle and leveled it at her target.

Bang!

She hit Roste right in the head, the bullet striking so hard that he lost his balance and fell to the ground. The animals set on him, trying to rip him apart.

His cane sword whined and shuddered like a weapon from the depths of hell.

It was as though he was paralyzed, and yet he fired up from the ground so quickly the creatures on top of him were blown backward. Anything in the path of Roste's high-frequency sword was severed and several of their animal allies were sliced to ribbons. A fog of blood surrounded the Academician several feet in diameter and the walls were painted with the remains of his victims.

Roste himself was showing signs of damage. Even if he were made from steel inside and out, after such quick and ferocious attacks he couldn't have escaped without injury. Hellflower's shot to the head had ripped off a section of scalp revealing fractured bone beneath. Severe injuries marked his back, torso and arms.

Only, it was no use!

Roste's fractured skull knitted itself up in seconds, so fast they could see his flesh grow over the patch before their very eyes. The other injuries healed just as quickly and it made the defenders' hair stand on end. There was no way they could beat him, not like this. Even with fresh animal attackers coming in waves, even with all of them fighting with every fiber of their being, they still couldn't cause him any permanent damage!

However Roste seemed to fear the present danger. Most especially the threat came from Hellflower and her gun. It packed an incredible punch, and as unlikely as it was to penetrate his skin it was better to be safe. She had to be dealt with quickly.

She aimed and fired again, this time pointing the barrel toward his eye socket. Roste flung himself to the side, fast enough to protect his eye but not fast enough to stop the passing bullet from tearing off the skin from one side of his face.

Without expression he slowly bent his knees, coiling like a spring. He gathered up pressure then released it all at once to shoot out like a cannon ball. He broke through the crowds of vicious beasts while at the same time a pair of meaty wings slithered out of his back. After a moment he stabilized and traced an arc through the air.

"Motherfucker! He can fly!"

Cloudhawk stared in disbelief when the wings appeared from Roste's back. Compared to the eagle before, they were weak, the freakish mutation didn't allow for effortless soaring. But they were good enough to allow him to glide, and high above the animals he avoided their sharp claws and jagged teeth while he headed for Hellflower. He came down toward her with his cane sword held tight in both hands.

She turned white as a sheet. Hellflower wanted to run but she was caught in his sights, it was too late.

Clang!

The grating sound of metal on metal made her teeth grind.

Cloudhawk, again!

He was channeling his psychic energy through the staff, and once again used it to deflect Roste's sword. However even his relic weapon was only able to protect them from so many blows. What's more the Academician's strength was overpowering. Although Cloudhawk had grown stronger through the last torturous week, it felt like having a mountain dropped on top of him. The force of the impact nearly forced him to his knees. His joints popped audibly from the strain and he could tell his right elbow and shoulder had been dislocated.

Hellflower stared wide-eyed at the edge of Roste's blade, stopped inches before her nose. A single bead of sweat rolled off her forehead. Without even thinking she pulled the trigger and her gun fired point blank into their foe's chest. The Academician was blasted backward but spread his wings in mid-air to regain balance.

Ka-cha! She instinctually pulled back the rifle bolt and cleared its chamber, the empty casing rang as it hit the ground. *Bang!* She fired again and this time her shot tore through one of his bat-like wings. Academician Roste hit the ground like a kite with its string cut.

Hyena was on top of him in an instant, claws bared.

Roste was faster, though, and met Hyena with a kick from his powerful leg. The shapeshifter was knocked back while Roste lunged at him once again with his sword. This time Cloudhawk was too far to help, even if he engaged his invisibility cloak. Hyena had to face his creator on his own.

It was a close call, but a figure even larger than Hyena came tearing through.

The wolf matriarch was faster than the other creatures and covered dozens of feet like a bolt of silver lightning. Its mighty clawed forelimbs struck Roste square on his shoulders and the inertia flung the Academician back more than thirty feet. The other mutant wolves caught up and began to gnaw at the evil man's arms and legs.

Hovering over him the matriarch opened her maw wide and coated him in caustic fog. It poured over Roste's head and face, and being at least ten times stronger than that of a typical rotwolf even steel would melt under a direct gust.

Roste was weakened through the course of the fight, his abilities had begun to wane. Even so he wrenched an arm free from the tearing jaws of the wolves and jabbed his cane sword into the matriarch's body. The wound was harsh, deep, severing her spine.

Hyena screamed, a wail full of rage and anguish. *"No!"*

Piteous whines arose from the others in their pack but the matriarch never stopped. For five full seconds she released her noxious cloud over the Academician, turning even the ground into a bubbling pit.

Roste screamed at her in mad fury. He hacked at her waist until it was cut apart. With his left arm he struck her jaw and shattered her teeth. The upper part of her body was knocked several feet into the air while organs spilled from her wounds and over the ground. What remained of the matriarch lay in a bloody heap several feet away. She pawed at the air for a moment longer. Then her vibrant green eyes went dark.

Chapter 126

The Fall of a Genius

A melancholy he could not restrain flooded Hyena as he witnessed the wolf matriarch die saving him. The anger and pain that arose came from deep within his soul.

Roste stumbled back onto his feet with some effort, reeling from the acidic fog. His head and most of his chest was a rotted mess and his eyes had melted leaving him blind.

With bloodshot eyes filled with rage Hyena charged again. Roste could not see but his hearing was fine, so when he heard the shapeshifter coming he swung wildly with his weapon. Meanwhile Hyena had lost his mind to fury and his only interest was in tearing this man limb from limb. He didn't even attempt to dodge.

In this crucial moment Hellflower lifted her rifle and fired. The bullet caught Roste in the shoulder and stopped his swinging.

Hyena struck him first with his right leg. The kick brought Roste up into the air and smashed him against the nearby corridor wall, then quickly followed by a flurry of blows to his head. Each blow had enough force behind it to collapse a normal man's chest, Roste was like a punching bag that threatened to burst at the seams. Bones all over his body were broken and even the iron wall he was up against was dented.

These injuries were enough to kill a man ten times over!

"You foolish thing."

Roste still refused to die. The sound that came from his crushed vocal chords hardly sounded human. The Academician grabbed Hyena's right hand mid punch and squeezed. Amidst the sickening cracks and pops his former experiment released a shrill wail. His hand was destroyed but he still had his left, and the keen claws jutting from it were thrust into Roste's left thorax. They slipped through the bubbling flesh and into the freak's heart.

Roste did not react except to plant a kick in Hyena's chest. Their ally was hurled several

dozen feet away before he hit the ground. He struggled to rise but ultimately couldn't.

Aimed for another shot Hellflower pulled the trigger, but blanched when she discovered she had no bullets left. She threw it aside and reached for her last weapon.

Roste was already locked on her position. He heaved the sword toward her, its keen edge whistling as it split the air. Cloudhawk was close enough this time to awaken the power of his relic and block Roste's onslaught.

The two weapons met once again, and this time both broke from the impact. Roste's cane sword snapped right in the middle and ceased its high-frequency effects. The top half snapped backward and flipped just past Roste's eyes.

Hellflower had her gun draw and ready.

Roste jumped up and caught the spinning half of his broken sword with a kick that sent it racing toward Cloudhawk. It passed him by and shot into Hellflower's stomach as she prepared to fire. The jagged, bloodstained metal tore right through her then became lodged in the wall behind where it quivered. She slumped on her metal peg as a pool of blood quickly grew around her.

The flesh of Roste's face was halfway healed but it somehow only made him look more terrible. He reached out and grabbed Cloudhawk by the throat, lifting him off the ground. "I trust you now understand what's good for you."

Cloudhawk felt like a helpless little bird. No matter how hard he struggled he could not break free. The jagged claws that Roste's fingernails had become dug into the flesh of his neck. He was suffocating, the pressure had cut off all air to his brain.

He needed only squeeze the slightest bit and Cloudhawk's neck would snap.

Hyena lay in a heap, too wounded to stand, while Hellflower was pinned to the wall. None of the mutated animals could do anything to harm Roste. After all of this horror and carnage would it be the Academician who won in the end?

No! It wasn't over!

Cloudhawk took advantage of this rare chance, so close to their enemy, to do something no one expected. He wrapped his hand around a syringe he'd kept hidden, lifted it high, then jabbed it into Academician Roste's neck. The flesh of his neck was

still recovering and so couldn't harden against the needle. It slipped right in and Cloudhawk squeezed the plunger with his thumb, forcing whatever liquid was inside into Roste's body.

"What did you do!" Roste plucked the syringe from his neck. He was blind and could not smell, but he feared what Cloudhawk had done. He knew, he just couldn't believe it. *"What have you done!"*

"Your body is powerful, Master Academician. I can't do anything about that..." Cloudhawk's neck was red around Roste's tightening fingers, but he grinned nonetheless. "I was just curious how you would react to a dose of your own brainwashing drugs."

"The brainwashing...? No... no, no, no!"

Blood leaked from the corners of Hellflower's mouth. She had given up hope when this sudden reversal of fortunes revealed itself. The brainwashing drugs! The same ones Chimp had planned to use on her.

The adaptability of Roste's body protected him from her bullet, how could such a flimsy needle pierce his skin? It was timing, for Cloudhawk knew that while Roste's mangled flesh was recovering he was vulnerable. Vulnerable enough for a tiny needle.

Roste screamed, so loud and so ferocious it threatened to deafen them. He spun around and burst through the crowds of animals, fleeing the containment area with Cloudhawk held half-dead in his grip.

The Academician hurried to his own labs where he frantically began rummaging through his things. Several medicines were quickly imbibed or injected but nothing would help. Roste had invented the serum, he knew better than anyone that his fate was sealed.

Its actions were quick. In a few minutes the damage to his brain and synapses would be wide-spread and irreversible.

After all of his painstaking work Roste could take a bullet to the brain and survive. But there was nothing even his perfect body could do against the permanent damage from his medicines. He could already sense his focus waning. It was becoming harder to think, like he was being dragged into a dark hole.

It was too late!

Numbness crept through him. With great gulping breaths he slumped to the ground in the middle of his laboratory. Roste stared at Cloudhawk with newly regenerated eyes as he struggled to crawl away. Never... never in a hundred thousand years did he imagine this boy would get the better of him.

His body continued to heal, even as his mind was being destroyed.

The Academician knew his time was short and in his final moments a calm overtook him. With a soft and gentle voice he called out to Cloudhawk. "Do not struggle. If I wanted to kill you, you'd have been dead long ago."

At the close of this conflict Cloudhawk felt a broad sorrow. There was no anger or animosity within Roste, as though a sudden epiphany had drained all resistance from him. He stared at Cloudhawk with serene green eyes.

Roste was not a capriciously cruel man. Although his hands were coated in the blood of countless victims, there was a reason, a motive behind everything. Would killing Cloudhawk reverse his fate? Such was life!

Cloudhawk gasped for breath and replied in hoarse tones. "You brought this on yourself!"

"Maybe." Roste managed a self-deprecating expression. "You know... when I first saw you, you reminded me of myself at your age. We're a lot alike, you and I."

"Oh fuck off! I'm nothing like you!"

"You haven't reached my age yet, it's too early to say what you'll become." He punctuated the thought with a bitter laugh. He was quickly losing control of his body, he already couldn't move his legs. "I've nearly reached my end, an old man in his final moments. I'd like to entrust a few important things to you."

It was almost laughable. Cloudhawk thought the old man really had lost his mind. Cloudhawk had been very anxious to tear the old man into pieces, helping him didn't seem likely.

"First, after I am dead please destroy all of my notes. You must not let these materials fall into Hellflower's hands. You don't understand... Hellflower, she... she is even more

dangerous than I! Her hunger for knowledge and her ambition is ten times greater than mine ever was.”

“Second, all of the intelligent animals we keep here must be destroyed, by whatever means necessary. Letting them go is opening a Pandora’s box of tragedy. In a thousand years, history will look upon us as sinners and monsters. Do you understand?”

Cloudhawk replied with a contemptuous snort. Even in his final moments this old man was a dramatic blowhard.

“Finally, though I have reached my end the cause I fought for shall continue. I don’t want it to end this way, I must ask you –“

Cloudhawk sensed something funny. “What the hell are you on about?”

Suddenly Roste’s neck stretched to horrific proportions. Like a viper he whipped his head toward Cloudhawk and bit him in the throat. The young man yelped and scrambled back, feeling like he’d been bitten by a poisonous snake. As Roste’s neck retracted back to normal Cloudhawk thrashed and screamed in pain upon the ground.

The bite had infected him with something, some sort of toxin that ran throughout his body. Whatever this freak had done to him, it couldn’t have been good.

With his final treachery complete Roste’s body shriveled up. His long years came creeping back and he was once more the withered old man Cloudhawk had first met. Only, not entirely. His skin remained that strange blue hue, and his eyes blackish-green. The twisted man slumped, appearing to have aged two hundred years.

The rattling sound from his throat was haggard and uncomfortable to listen to. “Here is some... advice. When I... am dead... Leave. The quicker... the better!”

It was done. A new beginning was on the horizon. Such was the world, an endless cycle, a spark passed on.

Trembling hands pulled the finger bone necklace from his pocket, and Roste held it tenderly. Fingers like dead branches stroked each one as his memories brought him back. He thought about his old teacher, and regretted never taking a student of his own. In all the vast wasteland he had never found anyone worthy of inheriting his knowledge.

Ten minutes later.

Hellflower came stumbling by with a hand pressed against the wound in her abdomen.

Cloudhawk twitched and jerked in pain upon the ground. Broken flasks and caustic potions were flung all around. Roste sat placidly on the floor with his necklace in his hands, but all focus had left his eyes and he sat muttering nonsense to himself. He'd lost his mind.

Hellflower stood in the doorway, looking at Cloudhawk as he thrashed and Roste as he muttered incoherently.

Brainwashing wasn't accomplished in a single dose of the medicine, the shot Roste had been given was just the first step. There were several more processes required, and considering the particular abilities of Roste's body the medicine affected him differently than others. It was not surprising it had driven him crazy.

"How are you doing?"

"Motherfucker! He bit me! I think I'm poisoned!"

Hellflower paused and looked around. With all the drugs strewn around it was likely at least some were biotoxins. It would make sense for him to punish Cloudhawk in his final moments. However, it didn't look like Cloudhawk was in danger of dying.

Roste remained kneeling on the ground fondling his finger bone necklace. He continued to mutter to himself, words no one but he could understand.

Hellflower didn't even want to bother with him. She pressed the muzzle of her gun against the back of the old man's head.

Bang!

Roste's head exploded, spilling brain matter all over the ground as his eighty-year-old body collapsed. As his necklace hit the ground the cord broke and sent bleached bone scattering in every direction, stained by the blood of the Academician.

Cloudhawk gaped at her. "You killed him, just like that?"

“Roste lived his life walking down the wrong path. If we want to save humanity, his way is not the right one.” Hellflower unceremoniously threw her gun aside. “He was obsessed his whole life, this was a liberation.”

Cloudhawk fell silent. The world had one less madman in it. One less monster. One less genius.

Chapter 127

Pandora's Box

The news of Roste's death spread like a stone thrown in a placid lake. Blackwater Base was flung into chaos overnight. Although they were factions opposed to Roste they had remained secret for a reason, and not just because of his cruel methods. The Academician enjoyed stellar prestige in the base, he was their foundation. No other faction could come close to the influence he wielded, and so they waited and bided their time.

When the news that Academician Roste had been slain in a fight with Hellflower and Hyena, opposition arose almost immediately. The call went up for anyone loyal to Roste to gather and vigorously oppose his murderers.

"Hellflower and Hyena are traitors!"

"They killed Academician Roste and took over his laboratory!"

"What do you say, should we fight our way in? Should we avenge the Academician?"

"Absolutely, we can't let Blackwater Base fall into the hands of these ambitious snakes!"

Before long hundreds of armed fighters were marching on the labs. They hoisted their weapons, firing their guns into the air and shouting. "Kill the traitors! Kill, kill, kill!"

Many of these rabble rousers were supporters of the Academician, but more still were only seeking to profit off the chaos. Roste was dead and neither Hellflower nor Hyena would escape the matter unscathed. If they could be dealt with as well there would be nothing to stop those hungry for power from reaching out to take it.

Blackwater Base was hidden in the swamp and protected by strong fortifications. It had a water purification system that would be the envy of the wastelands if anyone knew they had it. Whoever controlled this place would instantly be elevated to one of the mightiest positions in the wastes, it was a worthy question to wonder how many were tempted by the thought.

Hyena was strong, but to put it bluntly he was a well-developed attack dog and little more.

The Seekers were different from other groups as they respected scientists above warriors. Hellflower was intelligent and capable, but a woman. Even among Seekers women were largely considered without influence.

A woman's place was on a man's crotch, what business was it of hers to vie for power? Besides that she was an outsider and didn't have any standing to lead. No, instead whoever was the first to take power would use her for their own pleasure, for many wanted to enjoy the woman they called 'first of the wildflowers.'

The mob clamored for blood, preparing to siege the labs.

Before they could, however, the sound of angry growls rose up from all around them. Suddenly they were filled with fear as they searched for the source of the noises. What was it? How could there be wild animals here in the base? When the mob recovered their wits they saw shadows all around, just moments before a hail of bullets and arrows descended upon them.

"It's a sneak attack!"

They stopped screaming and took up a defensive posture, but before they could gather up beasts assailed them from several directions. Brutal eyes were set in ferocious faces, which snarled and howled as they descended upon the mob.

"Shit! Mutated animals!"

"Everyone, kill them quickly!"

"The lab animals have gotten free!"

How could these men hope to stave off over a hundred wild beasts? In the space of a few moments a good number of the rioters were slain. The rest were forced to throw down their arms and surrender. A large contingent of wasteland fighters followed behind the creatures with their guns and crossbows pointed at the mob.

One of them separated from the rest, dragging the leader of Roste's followers along with him. He fired a few rounds into the air then spoke to everyone through a loudspeaker, "We are the Opposition, and currently our highest ranking leader is

Hellflower. Roste was a narrow-minded, power-hungry despot who over the years has done much to harm our base. He has been removed by the efforts of Lady Hellflower, at the behest of the people's wishes, for this is a benefit to all of us. Starting today Hellflower is our new leader, and anyone who disagrees is welcome to stand up and say so!"

The head of the mob whimpered in the man's grip. "Please don't kill me!"

His captor apparently did not hear. Pointing his gun at the piteous rioter he pulled the trigger until the clip was empty. The gun's kickback rattled against his hand again and again, then abruptly stopped. Once he was finished the man on the ground was riddle with smoking holes.

These were the soldiers who opposed Roste, over a hundred strong. They were joined with the hundred or so creatures the Academician had tortured and prodded. Together they were a strange and formidable band. How could anyone stand against them?

"Take them all away!"

The Opposition leader's people tied up the rioters and took them away to await sentencing. Scenes like this had cropped up several times now, but none had lasted very long or managed to achieve much.

Hellflower had been a member of the Opposition for a long time already. She didn't share their mindset precisely, but it wasn't long ago that nearly their entire leadership had been wiped out during their ill-fated secret meeting. Who knew how Hellflower truly felt? Roste's efforts had saved her the work of having to deal with those old fogeys and paved the way to make her leader. Ultimately it was thanks to him that she was now master of this base.

That group that dispersed the crowd was not the only power the Opposition had. The organization's reach and influence was large and each one of those old scientists Roste had killed had a reputation and followers. With so much support Hellflower was able to muster a team of three hundred warriors under her command.

But that was still not enough.

Hyena and Hellflower came to some agreement, though no one knew what it was. He gathered his former supporters and convinced them to join with Hellflower as well as

organizing the animals to do their bidding. In the end, with their power consolidated, those who chose to rebel were viewed as only a small and irritating part of the new climate of Blackwater Base.

When all was said and done it was Hellflower who gained the most.

After stabilizing the situation, the first thing she did was break into Roste's secret lab, despite her serious injuries. She ravenously searched for every scrap of notes and data left behind and took them for her own.

Cloudhawk saw how she managed the situation and found her both capable and moderate. It eased his heart and he felt that Blackwater Base was in good hands. However, there was a ghost of concern when he saw how covetous she was on Roste's work.

The Academician's research was vast and far-reaching, from various medicines to biological mutations. This included his ultimate work he spent his life on.

Although Hellflower had pilfered and translated the key parts of his research it still wasn't enough for her to grasp the bulk of Roste's technique. She needed to study all of the Academician's notes to acquire what secrets he'd uncovered.

"Hey Hellflower. I'm tellin' you, this stuff just doesn't seem right." Without any particular reason Roste's final words whispered in Cloudhawk's mind. "I really don't think keepin' it will bring anything good. Better to just burn all this shit up."

"Now you're on about this, too?" She chuckled at him, a laugh that was charming. She was as ever a beauty that was inexplicable and just out of reach, always leaving people guessing. "I assume Roste said something to you before he died?"

Cloudhawk was insistent. "All I'm sayin' is this stuff was created by taking countless lives and spilling a lot of blood. None of this is any good!"

"That's where you're wrong. In fact in my eyes knowledge is neither good nor evil. Since this research has taken so many lives, don't we have even more responsibility to protect it? Otherwise won't all those sacrifices be in vain? One day there will be someone else like Roste, then another."

Cloudhawk was silent as he thought on her words. They weren't entirely without merit.

“In this world every eventuality will have its time, it’s inevitable.” Hellflower pushed her goggles higher on the bridge of her nose. This simple motion made her seem erudite and beautiful all at once. “Mankind’s knowledge is the fuel that feeds the fires of civilization. It is our responsibility to pass on what we learn so that there is always progress. The destitution of today is because that lineage was broken. We lost our history and all the knowledge that came before us. I refuse to cast away the knowledge we’ve worked so hard to scrape together. It’s work that must continue.”

Cloudhawk wasn’t much interested in Roste’s warning before, and after Hellflower’s lofty words he paid them even less mind.

“Alright, enough about that. We have someone to send off, Hyena’s ready to leave.”

“Hyena’s leaving? Why?”

“The beasts he commands have harmed people since they were released. You know they’re wild animals, even if they’re smarter than normal. They can’t constrain their wild nature forever, and the people of the base won’t tolerate them staying. I can’t put them back in cages, so the only option is to let them leave.”

She said it calmly, but Cloudhawk suspected her intentions.

Hyena was popular in the base and the animals he commanded were a staggering force. If he remained at Blackwater Base he would enjoy a high position. However, the wolf matriarch’s death showed him that he was no longer a man. He could not control his wild brethren, and sooner or later their feral nature would lead to disaster. He made the decision to lead the intelligent animals into the wilds once he helped Hellflower take control.

“Is it safe for him to just go like this?”

“There are conditions, of course.” She shrugged and spoke nonchalantly. “They wanted the notes related to Roste’s mutation process. I’d already studied it, so I let them have what they wanted.”

This was unsettling news for Cloudhawk. She gave them this precious and dangerous material so readily?

Cloudhawk finally understood the difference between Roste and Hellflower. The Academician was responsible for incredible things, but he never released his findings

into the world, not even to Hellflower or Chimp. It wasn't that he was covetous of what he learned, but rather that he knew knowledge could be dangerous. He did not want to pass on that power to those who did not understand its implications.

For Hellflower things were different. She believed the farther knowledge spread the more meaningful it became. She felt that wider dissemination was integral. But giving this away to Hyena... somehow this felt wrong.

A hundred figures hovered around the gates to Blackwater Base. Hyena stood in the center of the crowd, his body half man and half beast. Among the beasts he did not seem the slightest bit out of sorts. Be it bearing or countenance he was just the same as the mutated beastmen around him.

Hellflower strode forward, her silvery hair dancing in the breeze. Her mouth was arched in a crescent smirk. "Where are you going to go? Is there some way I can help?"

"Thank you for your kindness, but no." Hyena had no kind feelings toward this woman. He knew her gentle smile was just a mask. Her heart could be as black and malicious as Roste's, and if he had any other choice Hyena would rather have nothing to do with the likes of her. "All of the wasteland is our home. I'm ready to lead my people out to create our own history."

Hellflower nodded. "Then go with my blessing."

Hyena nodded, then turned and lead his people out of the gates.

Hellflower watched them go with that smile still on her face. "Interesting... very interesting. They were never completed, but maybe if they were there'd be another race. A fourth race along with the gods, demons, and humans... the werebeasts!"

Cloudhawk's face turned into a slight scowl.

Hellflower always knew the possible consequences.

He thought again about Roste's second request; find a way to destroy all of his sordid creations. All of a sudden Cloudhawk felt like he was releasing a danger onto the world, but how could he accomplish Roste's task on his own? He posed no threat to this new race.

But he saw it clear. This species of intelligent beast-human hybrids was a danger to

the wastelands. They would grow and multiply, spreading out until some years later a new society, with its own history and goals, would emerge.

The scene today at the gates of Blackwater Base would one day find its way into the annals of history. Its consequences, however, were hard to determine. At least as far as Roste had been concerned, this was a mistake that would lead to terrible suffering.

Hyena galloped off on all fours. He and his people disappeared into the marshes.

Cloudhawk didn't know if he'd run into Hyena again one day. If they did in some distant time, he wasn't sure whether they would meet as friends or foes.

But for now, this wasn't important.

He remembered something the old man once said. Here beneath the stars men were naught but dust. However much they tried, a man could only control his own life. In this twisted era no one cared for what was right or wrong.

"Come on, let's head back."

Hellflower lightly clapped her hand on Cloudhawk's shoulder. She kept it there as the two walked back inside.

Chapter 128

The Caliph's Warning

Several days had passed since the big conflict.

Hellflower appeared in Roste's laboratory – though now, of course, they were called Hellflower's laboratory.

She was clad in short leather shorts and a jacket that clung tight to her figure and put her curves on full display, especially the proud swell of her chest. A gunslinger's belt was slung around her waist where her tailor-made guns and several lines of bullets were housed. It was perched on the pert apex of her long, shapely legs. Over it all was a snow-white lab coat that combined her wild wastelander appearance with that of a studious erudite. On her, the dual natures did not conflict.

After many setbacks, she ultimately succeeded. Roste's secrets were within her grasp.

Hellflower had begun wandering the wastelands when she was a teenager. Throughout her travels she had visited more than ten Seeker crews, sometimes staying only a few months, the longest for a few years. Her goal was always to learn everything she could.

Her time in Blackwater Base was the longest and also the most dangerous. She'd almost lost her life, but the risks were worth it. She'd gained more here than she ever expected, it would take years of meditating on the knowledge to truly understand it all.

"Exalted leader." A scientist respectfully intruded. "Cloudhawk's blood sample has been collected."

She lifted her head from the piles of data before her. Cloudhawk was a very interesting young man to her, not only because he'd saved her on several occasions but more because there was a lot about him that piqued her interest.

Lately he'd seen a great deal of trouble. He claimed to have been bitten by Roste as the old man lost his mind which infected him with something. However, none of their

checks or scans revealed the presence of any toxins. Moreover there were no symptoms in days, but to be on the safe side she'd had some of his blood drawn to see if they could find anything.

She stretched out her long, delicate fingers and took the vial of blood from her assistant. She moved as though to do something, but paused. Something flashed behind her beautiful eyes. "How is his recovery coming along? Has there been anything noteworthy?"

The scientist found it difficult to stare at his leader's bright eyes directly. He was jealous of that vulgar boy and the care he got from this beautiful woman. He truthfully reported what he knew. "None of his injuries were serious, they're mostly healed by now. He certainly eats and drinks a lot, only... he's always asking to leave."

"Asking to leave? Why?!"

"I'm uncertain. He's become more irritable lately as though he's displeased with this place. He is preparing his things now in preparation to go."

The revelation clearly bothered her. What was going through this kid's brain? The whole base belonged to her now, and Cloudhawk was one of her most cherished people. As long as she was here what could he be lacking? She simply couldn't understand, were the elysian lands really so appealing?

No matter what, Cloudhawk couldn't leave.

Hellflower needed his help to translate the Roste's notes and he still had more to learn about elysian language and culture. That should be enough to pacify his wanderlust, at least for a while. They'll take it a day at a time.

In the end she hoped he might choose to remain here and help her. He was young but full of potential, and the only person in the wasteland she could rely on. She would be much more at ease if he stayed.

When she thought about it Hellflower remembered that she was already past thirty. In all those years no one had made her feel comfortable. She'd only known Cloudhawk for a short time, though, so where did this assuredness come from?

"Exalted leader, someone is asking to see you."

“Who is it?” She was busy analyzing Cloudhawk’s blood sample and didn’t look up, everything else had been put to the side. Her first inclination was to dismiss whoever it was.

“Someone from outside, a stranger. He’s very tall... much taller than a normal man. Maybe a representative from the sweepers.” The guard could tell from her body language that Hellflower was uninterested. He bowed and said, “If your Excellency is busy, I can tell them you aren’t interested in visitors right now.”

“Wait a moment!” Hellflower stopped what she was doing, shut her eyes and thought for a moment. “Let them in.”

Several minutes later...

The sounds of heavy and determined footsteps came from the hallway. Each step was like a battering ram, every thud rattling deep into the depths of her heart. The sound made her body shake ever so slightly and the air grew oppressively heavy.

She could feel the pressure on her chest and she thought she could smell the scent of carnage in the air. Even before she could see his likeness, Hellflower knew this man was more powerful than anything she’d encountered before.

The visitor entered, revealing his strange physique. His whole body was wrapped up tight as though hiding some unpresentable reality beneath. From beneath the shadows of his cowl were a pair of blood red eyes that glowed like embers. They pierced her like bloody daggers.

Hellflower felt as though the tip of an ice-cold blade was running along her spine, and her hand went instinctively to the handle of her gun. However she quickly caught herself and forced her hand to relax. Drawing her weapon or leaving it holstered, the end result would be the same. Making a show would only reveal her fear to this stranger. It was better to remain calm and collected. She turned to address her subordinates. “Leave us, and do not let anyone in without my explicit instruction.”

Her guards left the room. She and the mysterious stranger were the only ones remaining.

“How did you get here?” She stared at the man in front of her. “The word is you’re dead. What’s the meaning of this? I’ve told you I will no longer work for you!”

“Heheheh...” The slithering laughter was uncomfortable on the ears, like the croaking of a frog. He removed his hood to reveal his face, or rather something like a mask where his face should be. His head was covered in white hair, and he stared at her with burning red orbs that served as eyes. *“You killed Roste? Such a pity.”*

The Caliph of the Sands! The apex power of the wastelands!

He belonged to the world’s most mysterious race, those who were blamed for the destruction and turmoil that tore society apart. He was a demon.

After the war with the gods there were few of his kind left in the world. Those that remained hid on distant islands or in the depths below mountains. Those who forsook hermitage and chose to live in the wastelands or near the elysian lands were particularly scarce. The Caliph of the Sands was one of the more famous.

Terror hung over demons like a fog and infected any human that came close. It was the sort of terror sheep had when the wolf crept into their midst, or the worm when the shadow of a bird passed overhead. Without reason or embellishment that fear seeped into the core of one’s soul.

It was said that the fall of civilization was directly connected to demons. Their arrival brought the slaughter of billions and caused mankind’s collapse. Those places destroyed by demons became the wastelands, a barren hellscape where hardly anything grew.

If not for the arrival of the gods, demons would have conquered the whole world.

The flood of trepidation Hellflower felt upon facing the demon almost paralyzed her. Sweat had begun to collect on her brow. She did not know why this danger had visited upon her now.

Were there really those so stupid to believe Cloudhawk could defeat the likes of the Caliph? Hellflower hadn’t believed it from the first moment she heard the news. She was intimately familiar with the Caliph’s terrible power, as well as his cunning and acumen. He was older than anyone knew, and for a young demonhunter and her pet to kill him... it was absolutely laughable.

The Caliph’s strange and sinister voice slithered through the room. *“If I wanted to kill you, you would already be dead. Do not fear. I am here so that we might work together.”*

Hellflower was no typical wastelander. She clenched her fists and responded coldly. "What makes you think I'll cooperate with you?"

"Because you have no choice." His illusory voice sounded like it came out of a nightmare. It was both infinitely far and right in front of her. "First I will offer a warning: the self-destruct sequence Roste arranged for when establishing this place has begun. The destruction of Blackwater Base is inevitable, and if you choose to remain here you choose to die."

Hellflower did not believe him. "I've never heard of anything like that. Your alarmist nonsense will not persuade me."

"You shouldn't underestimate Roste. His methods of ensuring Blackwater's destruction were numerous, and the most guaranteed is assured with the help of outside forces."

"Outside forces... you must mean the elysians!"

"Your powers of comprehension continue to impress." The praise was odd coming from his rasping voice. "Unless I misjudged, the elysians have likely already heard the news. To them, the Seekers are mortal enemies, a bleak sin to be wiped out. This is especially true given the shocking experiments performed here, wouldn't you say? This army of elysians is sure to contain a number of demonhunters, so do not presume this place can survive. Blackwater Base's fate is sealed."

Hellflower felt her heart sink into her stomach.

Roste... ah, Roste! Again I underestimated you, you shrewd fox!

In all the wasteland, Seekers were the most intolerable to the people of the elysian lands. This was clear in their doctrines, wherein none of their citizens were permitted to use vehicles, guns or any of the artifacts of the past. In the eyes of the faithful these tools invited the destruction of man and had become synonymous with filth.

In contrast, Seekers craved the secrets of the past and explored the ruins for their treasures. That made every Seeker a blasphemer.

The war between elysians and Seekers had gone on for years with the denizens of the holy lands destroying much of the Seekers' influence. Each time they rooted out any and all traces of their organization and eradicated them with extreme prejudice.

Especially the abominations created here, in Blackwater Base. Their creation was the result of demonic technology and if they were burned a hundred times they would never be cleansed.

What came of the elysians' rage was frightening to behold. When it was time for cleaning they dispatched more than just elite warriors. When someone truly needed to die they sent their season demonhunters, warriors whose primary occupation was to destroy the root of human suffering.

How strong were demonhunters? A handful of them were as formidable as an army! If a contingent of them were dispatched no power in the wasteland could withstand their ire.

A cold sweat broke out all over Hellflower's body. If not for the Caliph's warning she would have never known they were coming. If they arrived at the marsh before she could leave it wouldn't matter if she were a once-in-a-generation master, there would be no escape.

"You called me a traitor. Why are you telling me this?"

"Mistakes might be forgiven for those with talent. Besides, there's something I need *you* to do for *me*. Not just now, but in the future as well."

Hellflower didn't even need to think about it. "You're talking about Cloudhawk."

It was not hard to guess. Cloudhawk possessed the Gospel of the Sands, one of the Caliph's most treasured relics. There were only two possibilities in which he could have come across it; either he'd really killed the Caliph, or the demon had given it to him. Evidently it was the latter.

She knowingly went on. "He's important to you, otherwise why go through all the effort."

"He's an investment." A glimmer of mirth twinkled in the beast's hellish eyes.

Hellflower was an interesting human, one of the reasons why he was loathe to kill her. In addition she was in a position to help. She could not remain here and needed a way to escape with the data, find somewhere safe to uncover its secrets, all while avoiding a gruesome death at the hands of the elysians. The Caliph was the only one who could make it happen.

Chapter 129

Trespasser

Cloudhawk was practicing the demonhunter training exercises. He found his body had improved again by no small measure. Now he was able to perform twenty movements easily. Though it was a far cry from what the Bloodsoaked Queen could do, his improvement was still impressive.

He still remained in Blackwater Base, studying with Hellflower. There was much to learn, otherwise he would have already left to continue his journey.

Cloudhawk hated the struggle and intrigue of the wastelands. He despised fleeing from place to place, fighting for his life. Getting out of this hell hole was his greatest wish. His friendship with Hellflower was more about mutual benefit than anything else and there was nothing she could offer that would keep him here.

Sooner or later, Cloudhawk would leave. Without a doubt!

A guard approached and made his report. "Master Cloudhawk. Our leader wishes to speak with you."

Cloudhawk made his way to Hellflower's laboratory. She was crouched over a series of strange instruments, too absorbed to notice him enter. She was beautiful as ever; her firm breasts and pert backside outlined in her lab gear, and her silvery hair hung loose at her shoulders. The others in the room stole furtive glances as often as they could.

These days no one challenged her authority. She was more intelligent and a physically capable person in the base, without question.

She never raised her head, keeping her eyes fixed on the equipment before her. However, words slipped from her attractive mouth when she heard Cloudhawk's footsteps. "I heard you're getting ready to leave?"

Cloudhawk was direct in his response. "My time here was an accident, I've already stayed too long. I'm planning to leave in a couple days."

He already had the Caliph's book as proof, and the Bloodsoaked Queen's token for passage. A life of ease and plenty awaited him in the elysian lands. There Cloudhawk would live as a hero, a life which he imagined to be far better than anything out here in the wastelands. The young wastelander was not an ambitious sort, all his life his only desire was to find somewhere peaceful where he could live out his days in comfort and quiet.

"It's your decision where you'd like to go, I respect your choice. But you should see this first." At last Hellflower straightened and approached Cloudhawk. She handed him a piece of paper. "The analysis of your blood."

"This doesn't make any sense to me, just tell me what you found."

Roste's final bite had nagged at Cloudhawk ever since it happened. Only, everything had seemed normal, and over time his worries eased. In the off chance that something was wrong he'd entrusted Hellflower with checking his blood. Once he left, he figured it would be difficult to find someone who could help examine him even in the elysian lands.

Hellflower paused in thought. This bumpkin could read but that was about all, she couldn't expect him to understand the results. She pushed her glasses higher along the bridge of her nose with slender fingers. "Long story short there's an unknown microorganism we discovered in your blood. We've come to call it Trespasser."

The news and ominous name gave him gooseflesh. "It's in my blood? That can't be right!"

"If you think I'm just trying to scare you come and have a look for yourself." She led him to the lab table and situated Cloudhawk before the strange instruments she had been staring through. "This device was created out of materials we found in the wasteland, crude but capable of magnifying the contents of blood."

"Why do you have three samples?" He asked.

"Stupid, for contrast of course!" She pointed to the various slides as she explained. "On the left is normal blood. In the center is a specimen from Roste. The one to the right is yours. We are able to find the differences by analyzing the three samples against each other."

Cloudhawk leaned over the left device and peered through its lens. Inside he saw a

field of red, thickly dotted with round specs that were difficult to differentiate. Those had to be what made up human blood?

The sample in the center device was completely different. There were red dots, only these weren't smooth plates like the last sample. Roste's blood contained red spikey material of various shapes with tendrils of dark green reaching out from them. The space between the mutated blood cells were thick with strange green organisms – so many in fact that the blood was tinged green.

Roste's blood was absolutely monstrous!

The last sample he looked at was his own, and when he looked through the lens his face fell. In all it looked much more like the normal blood, but for the bright green dots around the edges. There weren't many and they wandered freely through the serum. A small number had attached to the red blood cells.

The green microorganisms were few but lively. Even as he watched they were reproducing, slowly permeating through his blood serum.

“Yeah, I see it. The green things are Trespasser?” Cloudhawk lifted his head to look at Hellflower, worry on his face. “But what the fuck is it?”

“I don't know. About all we can guess is that it's some sort of peculiar form of life.” She looked at Cloudhawk with an earnest expression. “When we examined Roste's body we found that it was completely infested with Trespasser, present in every cell. We suspect this was what gave the Academician his high-grade adaptability.”

Cloudhawk pressed her further. “The ones in Roste's blood were different. They were darker.”

“Trespasser reproduces quickly, and once it reaches a certain concentration we can be sure it will begin to infiltrate the rest of your body. What we learned from Academician Roste's body was that this organism will fundamentally alter your biology eventually, but how it will manifest we have no idea.”

A chill shuddered through Cloudhawk. “How long do I have?!”

“Around ten, twenty years. You might start seeing changes in a year and a half – we really can't say for certain.”

“Son of a bitch, what the hell?” Cloudhawk angrily grabbed fistfuls of his ratty hair. He knew the Academician was up to no good. “Is there a cure?”

“Roste didn’t leave any notes about it, I can’t think of any way to reverse the infection.” She spoke to the young man with a teasing smile. “But look at it this way, I think you really got a bargain. Ten to one you become a super shapeshifter, inheriting a lifetime of the Academician’s work. How can this be a bad thing? You’ll have abilities wastelanders could only dream of!”

Even though his transformation hadn’t been complete, Roste already could fight about as well as the Bloodsoaked Queen. Given another twenty years to perfect his body Roste would have broken the expected lifespan of a human – he would have become a super-lifeform.

None of that interested Cloudhawk. He wanted to train and become stronger like the demonhunters, not deliberately turn himself into a monster! What would power mean if he wasn’t even human anymore?

Cloudhawk was at a loss.

Hellflower was one of the best minds around, and even she didn’t know what to do. Did that mean there was no hope to reverse the process? Although there wasn’t any evidence, was there a chance this could affect his memory, will or personality?

Cloudhawk was somber and uncertain but Hellflower found his trepidation amusing. Cloudhawk had been willing to stand up to Roste, but this situation frightened him. To many including Hellflower, his situation was not pitiable. The Academician’s abilities had been clear to everyone.

Who wasn’t twisted by the wastelands? Capability was the way to power!

Hellflower considered the situation for a moment. “There’s nothing we can do here, but I know of someplace that might be able to help. If you go there maybe they have a way to help you.”

“Tell me, where?”

“The Dark Atom, out in the elysian lands!” It was a name he’d heard several times already. Hellflower explained further. “The Dark Atom is the most complete and influential Seeker organization in the entire wasteland. They’re as full of talented

people as the sky is full of clouds. If you can get to them, I think they'll be able to help you."

"So where can I find the Dark Atom?"

"I have no idea." She chuckled at her own disappointing response. "Skycloud's been trying to wipe them out for over a decade with no success [1]. They're crafty. Wherever their base is, it's almost impossible to find and no one knows for sure. I think your only bet is to search for them yourself when you get there."

"Thank you!" Cloudhawk's mind was made up. "I'll set out as soon as possible!"

"Come with me first." She pulled him into an adjacent room. "Since we aren't sure of your body's condition, I want to give you a thorough examination."

The room she'd brought him to was not large. Uniforms hung from pegs on the walls, revealing it as a locker room for lab workers. Hellflower slipped her lab coat off her shoulder and hung it on a hanger, revealing her form-fitting, short-cut clothing beneath. With a snap she pulled her gloves off and threw them aside then interlaced her fingers. A series of cracks and pops issued from her knuckles.

"Take off your clothes."

"I need to take off my clothes for the examination?"

"Stupid question. How can we do a full body check if you have your clothes on?"

Hellflower's deft fingers quickly had him out of his clothes. His rough, dark skin was revealed to her, but different than before. His complexion had become a healthy bronze, and he'd gone from emaciated to pleasantly muscular. Often the fact was hidden beneath his clothes, which made him look thin and unassuming. Without them he looked like a cheetah, corded muscles taught and ready to pounce.

"These, too."

Hellflower pointed a dainty finger at his underwear.

1. Skycloud is the city led by the Bloodsoaked Queen's uncle, as explained in Chapter 93

Chapter 130

Profound Education

Cloudhawk felt slightly uncomfortable. But he was a wastelander, since when did they care about this sort of thing?

He was hardly a moral model, and this was just in order to do his physical. What was there to squirm about? Without saying anything else, he removed his last remaining scrap of clothing.

Hellflower didn't begin right away. She took a few moments to look over Cloudhawk's naked body, a teasing light in her eyes as they hovered over his crotch. "Well, you're... manlier than I expected."

"That's enough, Hellflower. I'm getting irritated!" He didn't mind the lack of privacy, but her gaze was stripping him of his dignity! "Hurry up, for fuck's sake."

"Alright, alright, what's your hurry? We're just getting started!"

Hellflower's hands were like works of art. Although she wielded guns with the skill of a master, they were not calloused or rough. Her touch was as gentle as water, to the point where Cloudhawk had to wonder if she bathed her hands in some medicinal fluid to keep them so soft. Hands like hers just weren't found in the wastelands.

Her soft, cold hands rested on his face. They stood close, almost touching, and he could smell the scent wafting from her. The heat of Hellflower's body caused Cloudhawk's pulse to race.

"Heart rate has increased by thirty-two percent." Her hands gently ran through Cloudhawk's hair, across his face, down his neck. Her touch explored every inch, even the curve of his ears. Her voice was both casual and impish. "You're nervous."

To Cloudhawk it felt like there was a fire in his chest. It was a sensation he found difficult to control, but he grit his teeth to fight through it. "Hey, what kind of physical is this? I feel like you're screwin' with me!"

Hellflower masterfully combined coquetry with dignity. Outwardly she teased him with a seductive air, but her actions were diligent and earnest, her words serious. “There are very few in the wastelands more capable in control meta-abilities than I am. With a touch I can determine material by texture and the state of internal structures. I can feel your muscles, blood, organs, even bone through your skin. If there are any abnormalities or mutated growths, my hands will find them.”

So that’s how it was. Cloudhawk had almost forgotten that she was an expert marksman and a rare wasteland weapons master. It didn’t matter how precise or complicated the tool, after only a few moments in her hands she knew how to wield it intrinsically. It was that ability that made her such a force to be reckoned with.

“Hmph, you hardly seem willing. I’ve never given anyone else this sort of treatment, you know!”

Her grumpy and flirtatious mannerisms made his bones turn to jelly. Goosebumps sprang up along his flesh. Hellflower was a complicated, inscrutable woman, who knew what she actually felt in her heart?

She was both thorough and careful in her inspection, her fingers tracing every inch of him from his head to his chest to his back. Eventually her gentle touch reached his groin, to which Cloudhawk replied with a voice a little too loud. “No reason to check there, I’m sure there aren’t any problems!”

But she paid him no mind and stretched out her hand.

Her agile fingers explored in such a way that Cloudhawk couldn’t restrain a physiological response. Hellflower’s brows danced flirtatiously as, whether purposefully or simply to be mischievous, her touch lingered for a full two minutes.

Her next question was offered almost absently. “You’ve never been with a woman?”

The question took Cloudhawk off guard and he wasn’t sure how to answer. However, Hellflower knew simply by looking at his reaction. He really was a pure young man.

The wastelander wasn’t strong, but nor was he weak. In any normal outpost Cloudhawk would be considered one of their elite fighters. In these times when women were weak and vulnerable they often attached themselves to strong men for protection, yet Cloudhawk was unsullied. It was a little difficult for her to believe.

Her curiosity was clear in her voice as she continued to question him. “You aren’t one of those fools who’s saving themselves for someone, are you?”

“Stuff it, how about you pay attention to what you’re doing?”

In the fifteen years prior to recent events Cloudhawk’s life had been a series of painful struggles – simultaneously tedious and uninteresting. As a scavenger picking through the ruins his only goal day in and day out had been to find enough food to eat. He hadn’t had the time or opportunity to think about the opposite sex, so an appetite for women just wasn’t part of his life. In fact, he hardly thought about it at all.

That was until recently. After several months with the Bloodsoaked Queen, faced with her beauty every day, the hazy idea of attraction played in the back of his mind. However the concept of ‘attraction’ and ‘romantic love’ were foreign. As for the sort Hellflower was talking about, they were even rarer than a creature like Roste.

More and more Hellflower found the young man fascinating.

Eventually her examination was completed, much to Cloudhawk’s relief.

After a moment of quiet thought Hellflower gave her determination. “There are no traces of mutation that I was able to feel. All of your internal structures, vessels, and bones were all normal. However... the toughness and activity of your surface muscles are several times stronger than average. It’s also too pretty for what one would expect from a wastelander.”

“Chimp had me in one of those tanks with the medicine for several hours. Could that be what’s caused the change?”

“Relax, it won’t have any adverse effects. You’ll find that having thicker skin won’t be a detriment.” [1]

“Somehow the way you explain it doesn’t make me feel better...”

“Don’t overthink it, I didn’t mean anything other than what I said. We only have a couple days left, anyway.” Her eyes lingered over him for a few moments before she went on. “I have one more thing to teach you, something that you’ll find very helpful in the future.”

Hellflower was a mysterious woman, but she was precise with her words and mature

in bearing. Whatever she had to teach him indeed had to be important.

“Alright!” Cloudhawk didn’t even question what she meant before agreeing.

When night fell Hellflower found him, bringing with her several bottles of liquor. She said they were vintage bottles, treasures of the base that he couldn’t find anywhere else.

“You should be congratulated, there aren’t many wastelanders lucky enough to leave this place.” She lifted one of the bottles and clinked it against the one held by Cloudhawk. “But you need to mentally prepare yourself.”

Cloudhawk thought the liquor was sweet and pleasing. Hellflower wasn’t exaggerating, this had to be a rare and special brew. “I can tell there’s more to what you’re saying. Just come out with it, there’s no point being secretive.”

Hellflower watched him drink but did not sip from her own bottle. “The people of Abrha, all of the elysian lands in fact, look down on wastelanders. They’ll treat you with prejudice and discrimination. Leaving the wastelands is one thing, but *escaping* the wastelands is something else entirely. Have you thought about that?”

“It won’t be a problem,” Cloudhawk answered her with confidence. “I’ve met a demonhunter, part of the upper class of Skycloud. The Governor is her family, so with her recommendation there won’t be any issues.”

“Oh? I hope that’s true!”

“But there’s nothing to talk about. What did you want to teach me? Why don’t we just get started-”

Cloudhawk hadn’t even finished his sentence when suddenly his vision doubled and his mind grew hazy. The alcohol couldn’t be that strong, he thought, not enough for him to get so drunk so quickly. As he struggled to understand, his body heat soared and his panting breaths were like breathing fire.

“You still don’t understand?” Hellflower draped her arms around him. She pressed her hot lips first against the flesh of his neck, then against his mouth as she hugged tightly to him. “We’ve already started!”

Cloudhawk’s mind was a flurry of confusion, like he’d suddenly lost the ability to think

straight. Reason had collapsed in the face of instinct, he reacted to what his body wanted.

A pair of guards who happened to be walking by heard the creaking of the metal bed inside the room and the moans of a woman. They made their rounds, but when they returned on their second patrol the sounds were still there.

The second day.

Last night was like a dream. The details were fuzzy and hard to remember. Cloudhawk could remember a warm and tender body, pale white flesh...

Groggily he awoke to find himself in Hellflower's bedroom, more specifically in her bed. His first instinct was to spring out but then she noticed the woman beside him, her silver hair disheveled and enticing. She was half-covered by the sheet like a perfect image from an ancient painting.

She had been fast asleep, but upon feeling Cloudhawk stir her eyes fluttered open. She languidly pushed herself up and yawned, then put her lithe figure on display as she stretched.

"Awake?" Her long legs swung over the bed and she stood. She grabbed some clothing and haphazardly flung it over herself. When she turned back and saw Cloudhawk's slack-jawed expression a sweet smile spread across her face. "Don't think too much about it. You're cute and you needed it, so it happened. Consider it payback for saving me."

"You put something in the liquor?" Finally he understood. "Why? You didn't even ask me!"

"Heh, someone as thick as you is going to have a hard time making it in this world." She chuckled. "This was a lesson to teach you that our bodies and emotions are both a weakness and a weapon. The more importance you attach to it the more it chains you. It'll be used against you, stop you from growing up. On the other hand if you learn to use it, they will become your tools. It's an important lesson for your maturity, and you need the practice. Please keep this in mind in your future life."

"You forced yourself on me!"

“Don’t take it so hard, kid. Your future is going to be a tough one. I just wanted to leave you with a nice memory. When you think about it, in the most profound way, I wanted to be part of your coming-of-age.” She walked over to him and placed a gentle kiss on Cloudhawk’s forehead. “You were much more tender than I expected. I enjoyed myself last night.”

To Hellflower, last night was little more than a pleasant distraction. But to Cloudhawk it was an unforgettable experience.

Cloudhawk didn’t understand why Hellflower did what she did, but last night opened a door. What they did would have a deep influence on him. If her intention was to educate him or leave an impression, she certainly succeeded.

For the next two days the two of them spent most of their time together. The beautiful and mature woman was an ideal partner; one who filled Cloudhawk with many conflicting emotions. At first their relationship was just about mutual benefit. There was no emotion there, and even ‘friendship’ wasn’t right. It would never have occurred to him that their relationship would end this way, that they would be connected so physically.

“I have a feeling we’ll meet again.” She waved at him, clearly reluctant for them to part. “When we do I hope to meet a stronger and more grown man!”

1. This may be in reference to the phrase 脸皮厚, ‘thick face skin’, which means being shameless or having an over-inflated ego.

Chapter 131

The Skycloud Army

Hellflower watched as Cloudbird disappeared out into the wastelands. She stared absently at the horizon for a time with a sense of loss nagging at her. Teaching Cloudbird as she had wasn't about emotion or desire, but now that they were apart she couldn't help but feel something was absent.

"You went beyond what was needed." The Caliph of the Sands' raspy, unsettling voice whispered in her ear. He'd appeared behind her unnoticed, his own bloody red eyes following her gaze to where Cloudbird had been. In fact, a demon's eyes were far superior to that of a human, and they penetrated the dense fog and thick trees that hid the young wastelander from her. "I didn't ask you to take him to bed."

Her face scrunched in annoyance and she slapped herself on the forehead. "Yeah. What the hell was I thinking? I feel like I'm starting to miss the kid. Maybe we should go bring'm back."

"Skycloud's forces will be here in two days," the Caliph abruptly changed the subject. "You have a day to prepare."

Hellflower furrowed her brows.

Skycloud's soldiers were fast, too fast for her to transfer everything from the base. She'd only have time to escape with the most critical notes and data. Other than that she had to concentrate on fleeing with the base's most talented scientists.

Blackwater Base's leader paid close attention to the evacuation plans. When she released the information there were actually three separate routes, and each one was a decoy. Hellflower herself didn't intend to follow any of the plans she publicly announced, instead she would use the base's secret passage only a very few people knew about. Together with twenty or thirty scientists and about a hundred elite soldiers, they would escape in secret.

The moment Hellflower announced the escape, Blackwater Base exploded into shocked action. She had been leader only a few days, and already they had to abandon

their homes? Unthinkable!

When they burst into the labs after news broke they were dismayed to find it practically cleaned out. All of the most valuable data and medicines were gone, even the scientists themselves. It was like everything vanished into nothing, leaving no trace.

Chaos enveloped Blackwater Base and people quickly broke into two main camps. One group was already in a rush to go. After all, the danger had to be great enough to scare off their leader. They had to get out of danger!

But the others had called the base home for close to forty years. It was home, a place they had affection for. Most importantly, their defenses were among the best in the wastelands. How could anyone break through? No, now was the time to fill the power vacuum.

It was pandemonium.

A day later.

Out of the swamp and back into the deserts. The sound of marching descended as though from the clouds.

The sound rumbled down from heaven, rattling from the shackles of space and time. With it came rays of holy light that spread across the desolate land, cleansing vast tracts. When the hunters of the wastes lifted their eyes to the horizon against the glare, they were met with a scene they never would have expected in their lifetime.

A small host of ships appeared in the sky. Each one was a vision of holy purity encased in hundreds of intricate engravings. Every detail etched into it was rich in meaning, scenes and phrases that created a mural stretching from mast to hull. Spotless, all of them. One could pick an inch at random and find the masterpiece of what had to be the effort of a whole school of artisans.

Among a blinding holy light four enormous ships were suspended in the air. Their lofty crowns were ringed in clouds and they looked like carved jade. A melodious accompaniment of bells sprinkled over the land, mingling among reverent prayer. Like a contingent of angels they appeared from the heavens – god’s army, here to cleanse

the wicked from the earth.

This refined, this beautiful, this precise, this outlandish, this magical, this noble... it was so out of place among the blasted landscaped of the barren desert as to be almost comical. All of a sudden it was as though heaven and hell had collided. Shock was the only acceptable response.

A miracle! They were witnessing a miracle!

Who else in the wasteland had ever seen something so spectacular?

Especially surprised were the scavengers, who had no idea a place like the elysian lands existed. How could they not immediately fall in worship to jade ships wafting through the heavens as languid as clouds? How could they not be in awe of the chorus of heavenly sounds that heralded their arrival? The sheer spectacle made them want to fall to their knees.

Hanging in the air, no part of the ships actually moved. They appeared to simply float in and an air of nobility and authority that seemed to say the laws of man meant nothing. Science and its rules ceased to apply before the face of god. All of mankind's achievements were laughable by comparison.

From a distance their pace seemed slow but in truth the ships raced across the sky. Marching determinedly overhead their target was clear, a murky swamp surrounded by desert. They began their descent.

“Warriors of the Gods, take up your weapons! For honor we fight, and blasphemers must be eradicated!”

The holy light projected from the ships flooded the landscape and from each a single brilliant beam shot down. Like four jade suns exploding on the earth's surface a light so brilliant one could not look directly at it choked the sky. Moments later a ferocious wind roared out in all directions, bringing with it dust and debris, and the stench of the marsh.

When the light and winds eventually died the ships were safely stationed on the ground. About five hundred soldiers milled around each one. Their weapons and armor glimmered like polished jade, more priceless treasures than implements of war. Each piece of equipment was constructed to be both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

Soldiers from Skycloud, an army of the best holy warriors in service of the gods.

Equipment was precisely the same among all the soldiers. It included an exquisite, handcrafted longbow that was tailor-made to match the size of its bearer. Both ends culminated in razor-sharp edges like scimitars which glimmered like they were made from glass or jade. It was absolutely unique.

It was easy to see the intention was to seamlessly join close combat with ranged attacks, to which they succeeded. The bows could just as easily pierce a man from yards away as skewer him face to face.

In the midst of each of the five hundred-man battalion was a towering standard-bearer, who in contrast to the others was encased in resplendent and ornate armor. They carried no sword and were more spartanly equipped than the typical soldier. All they wore was the masterwork leather protection and a pure white cloak.

The soldiers knelt upon the ground, and from them fifteen hooded men arose. Capes dancing in the wind they approached the head of the troops. More than their capes, an air of sublimity hung over them that was in stark contrast to their bleak surroundings.

It was a unit of demonhunters. Few in numbers, but tremendously effective, each one a warrior in possession of mysterious powers.

The man at the forefront was a middle-aged man, perhaps in his forties. Despite no longer being a young man his skin was still fair and smooth and nobility poured from him.

In a variation from the younger demonhunters accompanying him, he did not have an exorcist staff or bow. It meant he was above those low-tier tools, a leader.

A subordinate softly intruded. "Lord Augustus Cloude, the blasphemers have revealed themselves."

A line of figures emerged from Blackwater Base having spotted the attackers approaching. They were armed with cannons and other artillery, creating a fortified defensive line.

The demonhunter commander, Augustus Cloude, nodded. "Cleanse them."

The other soldiers arose from their prayers as the order was given. With firm resolve

and indomitable demeanor they marched forth toward Blackwater Base.

A formation like this was foreign to wastelanders. One after the other battalions fell into line, and the sight quickly sapped the fighting spirit of Blackwater's warriors. However what wastelanders lacked they made up for in the will to fight back, even though their enemies were a force two thousand strong. To have a chance they had to find some way to route the army.

"Attack! Fire!"

Blackwater Base's defenders let loose with a loud volley, include two heavy machineguns. Only, as the hail of gunfire struck the rapidly approaching soldiers they did nothing. The holy light that hung over them protected the soldiers as well. Even sprayed with hundreds of rounds none of them suffered so much as a scratch. Bullets were ricocheted away from the holy aura as though it were made from steel.

Altogether the Skycloud soldiers lifted their bows. Line upon line knocked pure white arrows and pointed them forty-five degrees skyward. *Tang!* The arrows were let loose and filled the air as dense as a jungle canopy.

"Are they crazy?"

"Can they even shoot this far?"

The soldiers of Blackwater Base were completely confounded by this. They were hundreds of feet away and an average bow could only shoot a couple hundred. Even the best wasteland bow lost its lethality when the target was further than four hundred feet away and the Blackwater defensive line was at least twice that distance. How could their arrows even reach them?

Skycloud bows were complicated and exquisite weapons that looked as though they were made from precious stone. It was power in pursuit of art, both beautiful and deadly. Their arrows were peculiar as well. They were plated in a holy brilliance like the blessed arrows of legend.

Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh!

The arrows shot by at incredible speed, descending on the defenders like a biblical plague!

A strange scene then emerged as arrows fell like as hail and fast as bullets. Strangely they did not slow from the moment they were shot from the bow, and instead flew faster. Under the holy light neither gravity nor environment impeded them, making the arrows deadly over a much larger range.

At their highest point the arrows were like a sky full of twinkling stars. The tell-tale whistle of them carving through air emerged as they hung, still for but a moment. Then the arrows came crashing down like a meteor shower, streaks of white light cast from heaven. A chorus of wails arose from Blackwater's fighters for these brilliant arrows each hit their mark. Most terrifying was that they were semi-autonomous – even in midair they could slightly change trajectory toward their target. Although the bow-bearers had appeared to fire at random, in fact their accuracy was very high.

“Ah!”

One of the defenders' leaders fled for a few paces, but to no avail. Half a dozen arrows pierced him from several directions.

The arrows did more damage than they might expect, piercing through iron shields and armor like they weren't there. In a single volley the Blackwater soldiers were routed and fled every which way, more a mob than an army.

Skycloud's forces had summoned a rain of death! The result was overwhelming, the disparity between the adversaries was too great.

Chapter 132

Demonhunters

Skycloud's four battalions marched indomitably forward in square formation, moving with impressive speed while also firing arrows toward their foes. Wave after wave of glimmering arrows peppered the battlefield, a torrent of deadly fire.

Each movement was precise, showing that the holy warriors had practiced this thousands of times. Two thousand warriors drew their bows and fired in perfect unison so that their arrows peppered the distant enemy all at once. Faced with this terrifying assault the wastelanders broke ranks and scattered.

Over the course of a few minutes the swamp became a miserable tract of corpses, bleeding into the fetid waters. Everywhere one looked was struggle and pain. Countless shafts of holy light traced the path of Skycloud arrows as they buried themselves in the flesh of Blackwater's defenders. Resplendent though they looked, each one was a wastelander's ticket to hell. They could not run, only die.

All the while the two armies drew closer and closer, but Blackwater's soldiers had long since ceased to fight back. Waves of arrows had collapsed their organization as well as their morale. Those that remained were only concerned with fleeing to save their lives with no thought to fighting off the invaders.

Augustus Cloude's face split into a contemptuous smirk. He motioned to his left and right with a wave, then spoke in an almost flippant tone. "Kill them!"

Skycloud's soldiers stopped, shifting from their long-range formation to a charge configuration. Even their bows underwent a miraculous change as bowstrings retracted of their own volition. The curved, carved jade bows bend at an angle and their sharp ends jutted out another half a foot. In seconds the bows transformed into six foot long melee weapons with blades on each end. The soldiers held them from the middle.

In fact these weapons had four unique forms. The first was the long-ranged bow, and second was the double-ended glaive. In addition it could also be detached at the center to be dual wielded, or affixed side by side as a double-headed broadsword.

These were works of art, masterfully crafted weapons of destruction. They were perfect for any situation; long ranged, glaives for charging, powerful two-handers. It put the holy warriors' skill and ingenuity on display.

Skycloud's army began their charge!

Two thousand soldiers arranged themselves in charge formation and as they raced ahead either side swept around to the defenders' flanks. The two battalions in the center went straight in and started the slaughter. More than their training, it was clear Skycloud's soldiers were of a much higher quality than Blackwater's, even before one considered equipment.

How could a band of wasteland rabble hope to stand against them?

One of the Skycloud officers brandished his glaive and broke through the enemy ranks. Holding his weapon in its center he spun like a deadly steel dervish, leaving blood and severed limbs in his path. He was a tempest and where he passed there were shouts of pain and misery. The rest of his battalion followed in his wake, easily destroying the wastelanders' weapons and armor. Death's own scythe would struggle to claim as many lives.

All told the battle lasted an hour. By the end the marsh was a graveyard, and the wastelanders' weapons were discarded where they died like tomb markers. To the warriors of the elysian lands these crude tools were filthy and inferior.

One of the Skycloud officers trotted over to Augustus Cloude. "Milord, the blasphemers have been destroyed. We've suffered no losses."

Augustus Cloude stood on the slope of a hill and surveyed the field. Behind him fourteen demonhunters clad in pure white stood in a line. None of them had reacted as the battle raged, for they were the champions of god, the greatest warriors of the elysian lands. In war they were deployed to handle particularly stubborn foes, thus their lack of participation showed just how easily Blackwater's defenders were defeated.

Augustus Cloude fiddled with the cuff of his right arm. "Have you found the entrance?"

Respectfully, the officer replied, "We have sir, but the gates have been shut. Our men are searching for a way through."

Blackwater Base's defenses were designed around hydraulic systems. Forcing the doors would not be easy.

Augustus Cloude swept his eyes across the scene once more then signaled with his hand. The officer interpreted the motion and relayed the order. "Everyone stand your ground!"

Like robots Skycloud's soldiers froze, not moving a muscle. Meanwhile Augustus Cloude made his way to the thick door that barred their passage. He merely had to place his hand upon the sturdy iron, and all of a sudden cracks began to appear from where he touched. Chunks weighing several tons split and fell away, creating an opening large enough for them to enter single file. The tunnel stretched all the way through the door, which was several feet thick, to the other side.

"Luna Cirrus, Raith Umbra. With me."

From the fourteen demonhunters, the two youngest stepped forth. From the looks of it Augustus Cloude was going to use this as a training opportunity.

Part of the base's defenses included a defensive post with a turret, manned by a single soldier. Once the door was breached he began flooding the hall with fire from the chain gun, and no normal person could withstand the pain it put out.

It was a choke point, and in theory one man could hold the gate against a whole slew of attackers.

Augustus Cloude came prepared, however. While the turret was too much for the junior demonhunters, he could hold out against it for a time. Before the turret gunner had time to react, Augustus Cloude let a small black metal orb slip from his sleeve. It was a relic, and as it floated into the air an invisible force field sprang to life. Bullets thick as carrots were met with a repulsive force that held them fast like they were caught in glue. Each bullet struck with hundreds of pounds of force, only to instantly stop. But while their forward momentum was cut off, they began to turn red and smolder from an intense heat.

In a brow-raising display, the bullets were arrested in mid-air to create a curtain of red-hot lead. They were so hot that they began to melt, but not a single one got close to the demonhunters.

How could this be? The turret gunner gaped in shock, for he had never seen a living

creature able to survive his heavy weapon. Nor had he ever seen a power strange as this that could stop bullets.

The female demonhunter, Luna, shut her eyes. She reached out with her will and used it to scan the area like a radar. After a moment she pointed toward a direction, and that was when her male counterpart reacted. Raith lifted a primitive-looking bow that was vastly different from the sort normal soldiers used. It was an unassuming weapon, but for the runes etched along its pitch-black length.

Without knocking an arrow he pointed the bow and pulled back the string. But an imposing gathering of energy coalesced before the weapon and an arrow appeared from the air.

His fingers relaxed. *Twang!*

The arrow effortlessly penetrated the turret gunner's cover and lodged itself in his gun, culminating in a loud thud followed by an explosion. Shrapnel tore through his body, even blowing his eyes from his skull.

Augustus Cloude didn't waste any time. Just as he had from the outside, the master demonhunter approached the inner door and placed his hand upon it, reducing it to rubble. The other demonhunters entered once the coast was clear. Fifteen figures in white lead the way into Blackwater Base.

Skycloud's soldiers were close on their heels. They exploded through the base, leaving behind a desolate vision of blood and mangled flesh. Those from the elysian lands gave the wastlanders no quarter. The old, the young, and the sick were cut down without hesitation for anyone with the blood of the wilds in their veins was the spawn of evil. Killing them was no sin, on the contrary it was an act of faith and honor.

Blackwater Base knew they were coming, the most important materials were already gone. Their leader had also vanished, leaving no trace or body.

Augustus Cloude scowled. He ordered a hundred survivors spared, but this was worse than a death sentence for them. They were beaten, abused and tortured until they gave him the information he wanted.

Before very long an officer returned to Augustus and reported the situation.

"The base's leader fled a day ago, taking the evil technology with them. Our

interrogations revealed three separate escape routes, but we aren't sure which they took. We also learned that this base had produced a batch of those intelligent monsters but released them into the wild several days ago. No one knows where they went."

"Hmph. Even for blasphemers I would not have expected they would do something so despicable." The young female demonhunter spat the words with disdain. "We can't let those wicked experiments reproduce, or for that evil research to get out."

Augustus Cloude nodded then spoke to the officer who gave him the report. "Any other information?"

"A few of them, well..."

"Out with it!"

"Yes sir. A few of those we interrogated claimed that a demonhunter had appeared in the camp. He helped the base's current leader revolt and take over, he stayed for about twenty days. They claimed he left a few days ago."

Astonishment appeared on the faces of the younger demonhunters. Their order had nothing but the most devout warriors, how could something like this be true? Was he some sort of turncoat? That would be a crisis for the entire demonhunter community!

"Our primary concern must be that research and those monsters they created. As for the demonhunter, from their description he is not very skilled – a novice at best." Augustus Cloude absently played with a ring on his hand as he spoke to the two demonhunters beside him. "Luna, Raith. I leave him to you. Can you handle it?"

"Yes, sir!" Both of the junior demonhunters perked up. The one called Luna confirmed, "We will certainly complete the mission!"

"Take a hundred soldiers with you." Augustus Cloude nodded as though the matter was settled. "This is your first mission in the wastelands on your own. Convey yourselves well, don't disappoint me."

Raith's brows knit as he spoke. "Milord, the two of us should be more than enough for some piddling renegade. You should keep the men for chasing down blasphemers, we can do this without support.

"These evil lands are more dangerous than you think, and what's more we know

neither the identity nor true strength of this stranger. We must ensure that you remain safe throughout the assignment.” Clearly he had made up his mind. “Very well, you have your orders. You have seven days, bring that turncoat back here dead or alive.”

“Yes, sir!”

With their task made clear the two young demonhunters selected a hundred men and left in search of the traitor Cloudhawk.

RWX's Thoughts

Cloudhawk can't catch a break... and the elysians are pure badasses.

Working on the names with Xiao Lai is actually one of the most mentally challenging part of this novel. Having spoken to the author at length, it's clear that he wanted this to be a western setting with western characters, but for the most part he went with Chinese-style names primarily because that's what he's familiar with. So a lot of what I work on with Xiao Lai is making those surnames in particular sound 'proper' in English while retaining the flair the original Chinese had. This is particularly important because the novel often references later how elysians have 'proper names' compared to the barbarian names which wastelanders give themselves.

For example, Augustus Cloude was originally Xiyue Hong. Xiyue means 'cloud lover', while 'hong' means 'big' or 'grand'. The Cloude family plays a big big role in this novel and also has a strong connection to Skycloud itself, so we went with a modification of that.

Luna Cirrus and Raith Umbra. In Chinese they were Lingyun Yue and Ying Wuhen - directly translated, they would be Spiritcloud Moon and Shadow Traceless. But translating them in that way makes them sound just like wastelander names + clunky; no civilized Americans would have names like that! So for Moon Spiritcloud we went with Luna Cirrus (Luna means Moon, while Cirrus refers to high altitude clouds). Raith is a purposeful misspelling of wraith (something invisible/spectral) while Umbra means shade/shadow.

The thing is, none of these are 'throw away' names because unlike in many other novels, characters and clans will make lots of repeat appearances (the ones who survive, anyway!). We have to take good care of them.

Chapter 133

The Lighthouse

The sky darkened as dusk approached. In the center of the small outpost was a lighthouse, whose inviting light guided travelers to safe harbor. A sole traveler appeared on the horizon, neither tall nor strong but alone against the wastelands. That fact alone made him a man not to be underestimated.

The rifle slung over his shoulder was a symbol of status. The lizard he rode upon signified means.

Equipped in this way one would be the focus of attention anywhere. Women felt safe around such a man and were willing to give up much for his company. The guards of Lighthouse Point were delighted when they saw him and scurried to open the gates.

“He’s back! He really came back!”

“Quick, quick! Open the gate!”

The masked man claimed to be a bounty hunter, who had come earlier in the day to replenish his food and water. Unfortunately the situation at Lighthouse Point was poor and they had little they could trade. Instead the leader struck a deal. He told the hunter of a creature nearby threatening the outpost. If he were to kill it the leader would be happy to generously compensate him.

Reappearing from the wastes the first thing they noted was the head hanging from his saddle. It was enormous, with two jutting tusks and looked like something between a lion and a leopard. The one head had to weigh at least several dozen pounds.

Judging by the skull alone one shuddered to think what it used to be attached to. Beyond being incredibly ferocious, the beast had also been cunning. It was a surprise to find that this hunter could so easily do away with it, he had to be a real talent of the wastelands!

“Hahaha! Good lad, a real benefactor of Lighthouse Point! Come in, come in.”

A burly man in his forties or fifties came close, hobbling on an injured right leg. A pair of copper teeth twinkled in his wide grin. This was the outpost's leader, and he went by the name Coppertooth.

Cloudhawk greeted him with a small nod.

The wastelands were a forgetful place. After a while in Blackwater Base it seemed like everything had blown over. Mercenaries and bounty hunters had moved on to other prey, his wanted status old news. The rhythm of the wasteland was quick, twenty days was like an eternity.

Even the most affluent mercenary groups couldn't afford to go most of a month without income. They took a great risk sweeping the deserts for Cloudhawk. Especially once he'd disappeared, rumors began to circulate that the young demonhunter had been eaten by some wild critter. With not even so much as a corpse to recover, his pursuers lost interest.

The changes his body had undergone were another thing. He was still thin, but taller than before – a little over five and a half feet. The former scavenger was more muscular, too, and the weapon that had previously marked him as a demonhunter were replaced by weapons from Hellflower and Blackwater Base.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's mask was able to change at will. Everywhere he went he wore a different face. The invisibility cloak to any untrained eye looked like any other ratty piece of clothing. After such a profound transformation he could strut across the outpost and no one would know who he was.

Four days and five nights had passed since Cloudhawk left Blackwater Base and things had gone smoothly. The only danger he'd encountered was a sandstorm a few days ago that cost him some food and water. That was what brought him to Lighthouse Point.

Coppertooth prepared a feast for Cloudhawk in thanks, consisting mostly of mutant animal meat. The meat was tough and stale, but it was not hard to see that it was a rare treat here in Lighthouse Point.

"Thank you, brother. Our resources are limited, so we can only show you our thanks in this way."

Cloudhawk didn't mind. He removed his mask which earned shocked looks from the

people around. They'd thought he was just thin, but in fact he was quite young.

Cloudhawk addressed Coppertooth. "What about the things I asked for?"

The hunting job he'd done for them was not out of the goodness of his heart, His price had been simple, enough jerky and water to last ten days.

It didn't sound like a lot, and in fact, since his ordeal in Blackwater, Cloudhawk's appetite had only grown. He could eat as much as five large men and he didn't know why. He figured it had something to do with the Trespasser virus inside him, maybe in multiplying it was consuming a lot of his energy. It caused him no small amount of concern.

He didn't know what changes his body was going through. He had to find the Dark Atom quickly and the cure he hoped they had.

Coppertooth's smile fled from his face, replaced with an awkward unease.

Cloudhawk was clearly irritated by what he knew was coming. "Is there a problem?"

"Uh, brother. You asked for more than I thought." His sheepish grin was sincere. "We don't have ten days of jerky meat."

Cloudhawk's frown deepened. Not even ten days of jerky?

Lighthouse Point was unique in that it was a very small outpost. There were fewer than two thousand people living here, which was much smaller than most other settlements. The elderly, women, and children made up about half of that number.

Old, women, children. They were synonyms for weakness out here, and the weak depended on the strong to survive. If there were too many they became a burden and for this reason most other settlements tried to keep those numbers low. Women and children had some value, but the old and infirm were often cast out before the needs of survival.

The consequence of Lighthouse Point's unique population was that they were small, weak, and always lacking for resources. Their main diet consisted of whatever roots they could dig up and insects they could catch. Meat was a rare delicacy, especially the sort they could store for a long time to turn into jerky. It was one of their most important stockpiles.

If Cloudhawk's appetite matched that of a normal man, ten days of jerky would have been a stretch but not an impossible order. However eating as much as he did his needs were several times that of anyone else. What he asked for was too much for them to absorb.

They could curtail their soldiers' rations, but they already only had a few scraps of meat each. If the leader ordered them to give it up, they'd surely be angry and too weak to defend the outpost if something were to go wrong.

Cloudhawk was honestly surprised. He knew the settlement was small – two thousand was a pittance – but they couldn't even manage such a small amount of food? However he saw the earnest apology in Coppertooth's face, and it wasn't hard to believe a place like this would struggle.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to deceive you. We really are pretty hard up here, but if you'd like we can try to get some more food from elsewhere." The uncomfortable sound of grinding copper arose as Coppertooth grit his teeth. He slapped the table. "Asha! Why haven't you brought him his liquor yet?!"

A young girl of around thirteen or fourteen hurried over with a large bottle in her arms. She shot Cloudhawk a timid glance. Asha was rail thin and was covered in a worn but surprisingly clean gown. She had a head of wavy flaxen hair, and though her skin was dark and rough her body was soft, healthy. Elegant and pretty, for a wastelander.

Coppertooth introduced her. "Asha is the most beautiful girl in Lighthouse Point. About a year ago she fled from a slaver, moving from place to place until she found her way here."

She poured his glass and curtsied, enough to show the lines of her immature figure beneath her collar.

She furtively lifted her head and stole a glance at Cloudhawk. Beneath his scruffy black hair was an angular and handsome face, and his lithe body was laden with equipment that was never far from his person. There was a light of awe in her eyes.

Coppertooth also cast a telling gaze toward Cloudhawk. "She lives a hard life here selling wine, hardly makes enough to eat. Perhaps she should go with you."

Cloudhawk lifted his glass and sniffed its contents in silence. It was a habit he'd developed – nowhere in the wastelands was it safe to let your guard down. If there

was something in the wine his keen scent would pick it out.

He knew what Coppertooth was getting at.

There was hope in the young girl's eyes. Her life had been a series of hard breaks without a day of respite. If she could attach herself to a strong man, so long as her body retained its allure she could have a better life.

Cloudhawk was no longer ignorant to the appeals of women. Asha was attractive for a wastelander, and Cloudhawk was a young man. He wasn't opposed to the idea of being accompanied by a pretty girl, but he also knew that out in the wastes he couldn't even guarantee his own safety. Bringing along someone who was hardly strong enough to carry a wine bottle seemed like asking for trouble.

"Three days jerky, and plenty of sleep." Cloudhawk took a sip of liquor and changed the topic. "How far from here is the holy city?"

"Holy city? Ten days, unless you run into trouble. You aren't planning to go there, are you?" Coppertooth's expression changed visibly when they started talking about the elysian lands. His surprise only became more apparent when Cloudhawk nodded his head. "There are a lot of wastelanders who want to enter the holy city, but it never works out. I think it'd be best if you gave up on the idea."

"You seem to know a lot about the place."

"I'll be honest, I lived there twenty years ago."

This took Cloudhawk by surprise. He looked Coppertooth up and down, a man with rough skin and crude clothing. Not to mention those false teeth. There wasn't an inch of him that looked like an elysian. "Then why did you come back here?"

Coppertooth proceeded to share his life's story with Cloudhawk.

Twenty years ago, as a soldier in Skycloud's army, he participated in a raid against a group of blasphemers. He took pity on several infants they encountered during the attack and secretly took them away. In the end he was found out, and in the elysian lands his actions were a grave affront to god.

Coppertooth lifted the right leg of his trousers. Beneath, instead of flesh there was metal. His leg was replaced with an artificial limb. "I betrayed their warrior's code, so

they took my right leg. I was exiled into the wastelands and told never to return.”

Cloudhawk frowned as he examined the result of Coppertoath’s charity. “Because you saved a couple kids?”

Taking someone’s leg for sparing the life of children seemed way out of line. What sin had they committed, why did they have to die?

“I bet you regret it.” Cloudhawk picked up a chunk of meat and took a bite. “To go from the paradise of the holy city to this fuckin’ shit show... I bet most people wouldn’t be able to accept it.”

“Hey brother, that’s not true at all. At first I had trouble, but now I’m living fine.” Coppertoath lifted his glass and drained it. “As far as I’m concerned the holy city is no paradise, and not everywhere in the wastelands is hell.”

Cloudhawk almost gasped. “What are you saying?”

Coppertoath heaved a sigh, like it was a topic he wasn’t thrilled to rehash.

“Brother, you’ve worked hard. You have to be tired. Let Asha take you up to your room where you can get some rest.” Coppertoath shot Asha a glance. Her face turned red and she shifted uncomfortably. “Make sure our brother’s satisfied, yeah?”

Chapter 134

Sudden Crisis

Cloudhawk left the small tavern and took a walk around the outpost. Its namesake landmark towered over the rest of the buildings from the settlement's center.

Cloudhawk had seen it from far away. It was what drew him here. When he went inside he found a stall had been placed at the lighthouse's base, and several withered old pilgrims shuffled around it. They bowed with hands pressed together and muttered prayers.

Curious, Cloudhawk muttered his question aloud. "What are they doing?"

Asha had followed Cloudhawk from the tavern and still held the large bottle in her arms. She answered him respectfully, "Master Coppertooth believes that everyone should carry faith in their heart. Life is difficult here, but faith can bring us joy. This monument is from the holy city and it was brought here so that we may pray. It represents our faith and respect in the gods."

Coppertooth may have looked crude and uncouth, but he really was a good man.

Perhaps this is what made this place different from all the other settlements. Lighthouse Point was a feeble place, but its citizens longed for the purity of the elysian lands. Of course they knew that none of them would ever get there, but that knowledge didn't hamper their admiration and worship of the ideal the elysian lands stood for.

Cloudhawk spoke over his shoulder to the young girl. "Do you believe in the gods?"

"I do!" She nodded and continued in her tiny voice. "Master Coppertooth told us that if the gods hadn't come, demons would have destroyed all of humanity. The gods saved our world and established the holy cities. Master Coppertooth is a good man, it's a shame I'll never meet any more elysians."

Her regret earned a sigh from Cloudhawk. "Maybe it's for the best. Not all elysians are like Coppertooth. As far as I can tell they hardly consider wastelanders to be human. It's probably better if you don't meet any more of them."

But Asha emphatically shook her head. “Master Coppertooth said the ire of the elysians only comes down upon blasphemers. We may be lowly wastelanders, but so long as we keep the gods in our hearts, pray day by day and generation to generation, one day our faith will cleanse us of our sins. When that time comes the people of the holy city will appear and take us in.”

What inherent sin did wastelanders have? Cloudhawk harbored no love for this barren land, but he didn't think that its people were born evil, or twisted, or filthy. If a child from the holy city grew up in the wastelands their noble heritage wouldn't change anything. They would be the same as everyone else! But Asha's self-loathing was deeply ingrained. That was the saddest thing about most wastelanders.

With an exile living here perhaps Lighthouse Point was on the margins of the wastelands. It didn't seem like they had to deal with waves of monsters or roving sweeper gangs. There weren't many people here who would be strong enough to fight back if they did, since most were old and infirm. Instead of signs of fighting there were more traces of elysian influence.

This filled Cloudhawk with hope. He had to be close to his goal.

The northern part of the settlement was a cluster of ancient ruins. Perhaps a hundred collapsed towers interspersed with a ruined fleet of ships create a sprawling junkyard that Lighthouse Point's denizens crawled through for supplies. Most of the outpost's materials came from there, it was how they made their living.

Cloudhawk wasn't enthralled with the camp, not like he would have been before. Months in the wilds had stripped him of his naïvete and he knew that danger lurked around nearly every unfamiliar corner. It'd become habit for him to look around wherever he intended to lay his head for the night. Where were the good hiding places, where could he lose pursuers, if things suddenly changed where were the escape routes... these were important things to know.

Eventually they made it to his room and Asha pushed open the door. Coppertooth's hospitality was on display, for the room was clean and had its own water supply. He could take a three minute shower, which was a rare luxury in the wastelands.

Enticing as that was, though, Cloudhawk was exhausted. He was getting ready to settle in when he heard the rustling of clothing from behind.

When he turned he saw that Asha had slipped out of her crude gown. She was turned away, the burnished flesh of her back visible in the dim light. Asha was thin and she'd only just begun to grow into her body, immature like a fruit still on the branch. The red in her cheeks showed this was her first time, but she didn't hesitate. Her gown was down around her ankles, and her fingers hooked into the edges of her underwear.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I don't want to waste my energy here."

She immediately slumped to the ground, flustered and earnest. "Please accept me, sir. I'm clean, I don't have any tumors. I'll listen to whatever you say."

Cloudhawk had no intentions of taking on responsibility for a young girl. "I'm sorry. I'm only staying here for the night, then I'm leaving forever. My life is miserable, spent out in the wastelands drifting from one place to the other. I don't have the ability or energy to look after someone else. Go back to Coppertooth and tell him that I appreciate his generosity, but I don't need anything else."

The expression on Asha's face was one of disappointment as she pulled her gown back on. With a respectful bow she left the bottle of liquor behind and shut the door behind her as she left.

A few minutes later Copperooth was surprised when Asha reappeared. He knew she'd been refused.

Such a pity, he thought. The man was young but already possessed surprising ability. If he could be convinced to stay Lighthouse Point would be much safer. That was Coppertooth's hope when he sent Asha with him. The girl knew it too, she was interested the moment she saw him. Whether for the outpost or just for herself, she'd hoped he would be interested in return.

Coppertooth treated Asha like a daughter. What sort of parent wanted to see their child taken away? Sadly, after losing his leg he wasn't the warrior he used to be. He was getting older, and he couldn't take care of this precious young girl anymore. If he could take this opportunity to put her in Cloudhawk's care then it was for the best, even if she was just his servant. Just so long as she was safe and had a full belly he would be content.

More than that, if Cloudhawk stayed maybe he'd be leader one day. He was young. Lighthouse Point would survive for a long time under his guidance.

Asha hung her head, speaking in her small and timid voice. "I'm sorry, I wasn't good enough."

Coppertooth patted her on the shoulder. "Don't take it hard, girl. Go rest."

She wiped the moisture from the corner of her eyes and dutifully took her leave.

He watched her tiny figure retreat and inwardly sighed. If she'd had the fortune to be born in Skycloud, in a few years she'd likely marry a noble. She would become an honored Lady. At worst she would find a wealthy merchant for herself who would give her a good life.

Unfortunately, she had been born in the wastelands, and from the moment she was born Asha was fated to experience all the evils of the world. The fate of women out here was a dark one, and Asha was even refused the life of a serving girl.

Was this her destiny? How could it be so unfair!

This Cloudhawk kid didn't seem so bad, at least he was responsible. People like him were hard to find. He was a good young man.

The night was dark, impenetrable but for the beam from the lighthouse. Below it the outpost was still and silent.

Cloudhawk was jolted awake, his heart beating like a drum in his chest. An electric shock tore through him as though someone had jabbed a needle into a nerve. Even before his eyes opened his body was on the move. A flash of metal and his revolver was in hand, pointed at a shadowy corner.

Cloudhawk's eyes had grown keener over time. Once the fog of sleep was lifted he could see everything with the help of the moonlight filtering through the window. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

Strange. Outside then?

Cloudhawk got to his feet, approached the door and slowly turned the lock. There were no sounds coming from the hall, nothing moved. He checked out the window to the ground before, even the roof but there was nothing to see. What was going on?

That sense of danger never left.

Every hair on his body stood on end. He felt ice cold. The only time he'd had a reaction this intense was when the danger was life-threatening, like the eyes of a vicious predator were trained on him. He didn't know where it was coming from, but the danger – and the bloodthirsty intent it bore – was close and getting closer.

Shit! I can't stay here!

Wherever this danger was, Cloudhawk could at least tell it was closing in on Lighthouse Point. It was coming for him. Defenses here were weak and couldn't protect him, if he stayed he was putting everyone in the outpost in danger.

It was time to go!

Cloudhawk decided to flee immediately. Forget the jerky and water, escape was paramount. He slung his rifle over his shoulder then dropped from the window soundlessly to the ground below. As he was inching toward the stable to get his mount, he heard a strange sound.

Chapter 135

Slaughter

Wind whipped through the dark night like daggers.

Two young and noble-looking demonhunters stood out in the desolate wastes. They stared at the sweeping light shining from the lighthouse ahead.

Luna was around five and a half feet tall, with flaxen hair and pale skin. Her face was pretty and a pair of crystal blue eyes stood out in the darkness like precious gemstones. She held an exorcist staff comfortably in her hand, heroic in bearing despite being a woman.

Raith was a little taller, almost six feet. He was tall, well-muscled, but agile despite his size. Short brown hair sat atop his head above a masculine and daring face. The demonhunter was charming, both in appearance and bearing, only perhaps a little overconfident. He gave the impression of always being ready to leap into conflict.

Two days was all it'd taken for them to get here. It showed their quality and efficiency.

The lighthouse's beam reflected in the depths of Luna's eyes. "Should we launch a surprise attack?"

"We are demonhunters, and there are a hundred soldiers with us. Why waste time and effort on a sneak attack against some piddling traitor?" Raith's handsome features might as well have been chiseled from stone. His words dripped with arrogance. "Besides, this is a sizeable settlement, we can't be sure where he's hiding. Kicking the bushes might shake the snake from its lair."

He had a point.

Fifty soldiers would surround the outpost and lay in wait, while the rest of them would kill their way in. Eventually the traitor would be forced to reveal himself, but no matter where he fled an ambush would be waiting. Once his location was discovered the two of them would make sure the mission was complete.

Skycloud's one hundred soldiers separated into two units. The first group of fifty spread out, five men to a team, and established ten points of ambush nearby. Lighthouse Point was quickly surrounded.

Those who were left marched toward the gate, led by the demonhunters.

No need to pretend, no need to skulk. The pride of the elysians and the self-confidence of the demonhunters shunned such practice.

Denizens of Lighthouse Point had never witnessed such a scene. As the resplendent soldiers of the holy lands strode through the gates its defenders simply looked on in astonishment. They didn't even call out a challenge or raise an alarm.

"What are – *ah!*"

Screams erupted! An arrow sprouted from the defenders chest and he toppled from the walls.

Raith had lifted his bow, drawn the string and released. A thunderous power struck the barricade and blew it apart. Shards of wood and metal exploded out in every direction, impaling several guards who had come to see what was happening.

The exorcist bow, like the exorcist staff, was one of the lower level relics in a demonhunter's arsenal. Both were standard equipment for inexperienced members of the order. Obviously the exorcist staff favored close combat while the bow was more suitable to dexterous and control-focused warriors.

One could tell the demonhunters' respective styles by the weapons they bore. Luna's staff showed that she preferred getting in close, meanwhile Raith's bow revealed a penchant for long-distance engagements.

A relic's power depended on two things. First was the inherent quality of the relic itself, and second was the skill of the demonhunter who wielded it. Judging by Raith's display in breaking down the gate, he could use a relic as effectively as Cloudhawk.

The citizens of Lighthouse Point didn't expect their small and poverty-stricken home to be attacked. More shocking was that these invaders weren't from the wastelands. They weren't beasts or some raider gang. With glimmering suits of armor and magnificent weapons they couldn't be.

Every soldier bore spotless equipment. Each piece was like a work of art.

Striding over the remains of the barricade Raith surveyed the outpost with a cold grin. "Luna, gather up all these filthy barbarians."

The fifty soldiers they brought with them began to search the outpost, grabbing everyone they could find and herding them together like livestock. Before long over a thousand hapless denizens were assembled in the center of the outpost.

Fifty Skycloud soldiers drew bowstrings. Glimmering arrows shimmered with faint light.

Meanwhile the wastelanders were completely ignorant of what was happening. There were certainly more of them than there were invaders, but none were soldiers. With no fighting experience they were completely overwhelmed by the ferocity and speed of this attack. They could do nothing but huddle together pitifully.

"Wait, wait!" Coppertooth huddled out from the throng. He threw himself to the ground before the two who were dressed as demonhunters. "I was a captain of the Skycloud army, second division, and I offer my respects to the visiting demonhunters. I beg you to see that although these people live in the wastelands they live in the light of our gods. They are not blasphemers!"

Coppertooth's reaction surprised them.

Asha huddled near the back of the crowd, her eyes red and swollen. These men in their fancy armors were holy warriors? She and the others did not know what was happening. Their piety had to have moved the elysians to come and deliver them. Otherwise, why would these good and noble warriors come to this wretched place? What other purpose would they have in their inconsequential outpost?

"We welcome you, lords of the holy city!"

"Welcome, warriors of god!"

One by one everyone dropped to their knees in submissive deference. An old man whose hair had all gone white openly wept. "Merciful god has not forgotten us!"

Raith's eyes turned a bitter cold. With a wave five glowing bows released their arrows. Every one of them hit the old man, striking him so hard that he was flung up into the

air and nailed to a distant wall.

The old man's mouth trembled as blood leaked into his snow white beard. He struggled for a few seconds before going limp, all the while confused and unsure of what was going on.

Why? Why did they do that! Why would holy warriors slay the faithful in cold blood?

Coppertooth's face went ashen grey. Asha stared in disbelief. Everyone's faces changed when they realized what happened.

"They killed him! The soldiers from the holy city just... killed him!"

A handful rose to try and flee, but they couldn't outrun arrows. The lethal and perfectly accurate arrows cut them down. In a blink dozens more were dead.

"Lowly worms, your rotten faith only sullies our mighty gods!" Raith took up an exorcist staff, and devoid of expression, approached their holy tablet. With a single swing he reduced it to dust. That which represented the faith and hope of the town, destroyed. Cold, heartless, he spoke again, "Who gave you heathens permission to pray in their names?"

The crowd huddled in shocked silence, as though struck by lightning. Already in awe of the demonhunter's frightening power, his cruelty made them speechless. Everything they thought they knew of their faith was a lie. They couldn't believe their eyes.

Raith placed his bow aside and addressed the frightened masses with savage tones. "I already know you are harboring a traitor to my people. Where is he? Speak quickly!"

"Impossible! There's no way!" Coppertooth sputtered, trying to force the words out as quickly as possible. "How could we have a traitor here?"

Raith dismissed him with a wave. "Kill them."

The soldiers drew their bows. Another round of screams rang through the outpost.

A dozen more bodies littered the ground, pouring blood into the dirt.

Like the worms they were said to be, everyone lay prone on the ground. They shivered

uncontrollably for the Skycloud soldiers seemed to kill at random. Anyone could be the next victim.

Asha's wide eyes stared at the nearly one hundred fellow residents who now lay dead. Unarmed men, women, the old, the young. Before this moment they had admired these soldiers, had yearned to become a part of their world. But now? This domineering young tyrant had destroyed the emblem of their faith, as small and pathetic as it had been. A demonhunter, who they had worshipped as an agent of the gods, treated them with only cruelty and contempt.

Asha wept bitter tears. Wastelanders were born into sin, but was there no path to redemption for them? Why were these noble men and women refusing to even give them a chance? Why would the representatives of the holy lands slaughter innocents?

Raith did not look at them as humans. They were like beasts that needed to be exterminated. However many he killed would not be enough, and no matter how cruel he would not feel guilt. In fact it filled him with pride, for to him he was cleansing the world of their filth. "I will count down from five. If no one answers I will kill more of you until I get what I want. Five. Four. Three. Two!"

"I know!"

It was to be expected that someone would break when the threat of death was so clear.

Coppertooth's face was crestfallen. He didn't know whether there really was a turncoat, but he knew how zealous the people of the elysian lands were. They couldn't admit it, they couldn't! If they did, they would all be killed. If this traitor was never found perhaps a few of them could be spared.

If, on the other hand, this traitor was found, or if they admitted to hiding them – intentionally or not – them and everything they'd built would be destroyed.

But it was too late for him to stop it.

"Someone came from the wastelands today that might be who you're looking for. Coppertooth greeted him himself, and I saw Asha lead him away into the camp. He's in the lodge! That's all I know, I beg you not to kill me."

Raith's lips twisted into the model image of a sneer.

Luna took several soldiers with her to search the lodge. Several minutes later she returned empty handed.

“It’s him, but he’s already gone.”

“Escaped?”

Raith’s grim scowl made the man with loose lips turn pale. He staggered backward a few feet before throwing himself to the ground.

“T-this has nothing to do with me! I told you everything you asked!”

“Yes! Indeed you did... but I never said I would spare you.”

An arrow struck the citizen in the center of his head and pinned him to the dirt. A pool of blood quickly pooled around him.

None of the slaughter registered on the female demonhunter’s face, for she could see nothing wrong with her compatriot’s methods. She was focused on spreading her senses wide, her hearing as accurate as sonar within several hundred feet. She was instantly familiar with every nook and cranny of the space around them.

The traitor knew they were there but none of the ambush teams had raised the alarm. He had to still be hiding somewhere nearby. Good news for the demonhunters since Luna’s perception was exceptional. She would find him before long.

Raith, however, had never been a patient man.

He wanted this mission completed as soon as possible. Rather than slowly making his prey uncomfortable, he would do something drastic to force him out of hiding. Rage was always the best tactic.

The traitor would have to show his face. Raith would make sure of it.

Chapter 136

Fighting Back

Cloudhawk had hoped he could leave the outpost before his enemies caught up with him. He didn't want to get them caught up in his troubles. Unfortunately, danger came with the night. He could feel it gathering to strike. Although he couldn't be sure, his premonition told him foes were lying in wait for him to show himself.

It was all so strange. These were not typical wastelanders.

He was at a loss, and before he could puzzle out what all of this meant Cloudhawk heard the sound of a door opening from behind. A group of people surged in from the outpost, but what really caught his attention was the tell-tale sound that came with them.

A relic? Demonhunters! But why would demonhunters appear here? Were they the ones here to kill him? He didn't dare underestimate them. The only demonhunter he'd met was the Bloodsoaked Queen, so he didn't know how capable others of her order might be. If they were as strong as the Queen – no, if they were *half* as strong as the Queen, Cloudhawk was in serious trouble!

With the situation unclear he couldn't just break past them. Nimble as a monkey he pulled himself up onto the roof and found a hidden spot to watch from. No sooner had he hid himself than he witnessed the demonhunter and a dozen soldiers begin rounding people up. The Lighthouse Point's citizens were herded toward the center of the town, too far for him to see what was happening. But he could hear the screams. It'd started.

Cloudhawk covered himself in his cloak and vanished, reappearing several dozen feet away. He was silent as a ghost, slipping through the night with the dexterity of a cat. He slipped an armor-piercing round into the chamber of his gun and peered through the sights until he found the two demonhunters.

These soldiers were outfitted in superior equipment, far better than anything a wastelander could manage. Along with the demonhunters, it wasn't hard to guess where they'd come from. Cloudhawk couldn't remember offending any elysians,

though.

Perhaps something had happened to the Bloodsoaked Queen? Unlikely. She had a background of strength and experience, nothing would happen to her.

Whatever motivated these elysians Cloudhawk didn't know, but he could see over a hundred dead civilians through the scope of his gun. It didn't matter what their aim was, the wanton murder of innocents wasn't something Cloudhawk was willing to accept. He was still trying to decide what to do when they singled Coppertoath out from the crowd.

"We've done nothing to sully the name of the gods here!" Panic had set in when Coppertoath saw who'd come for them. Their lives were forfeit the moment the demonhunters arrived, but he tried one last gambit. "We've lived our lives in reverence of the holy lands and its people. We have never dared disrespect your righteous doctrines. Never! I was once a soldier in the Skycloud army, I made a mistake and was exiled but I have always remained loyal. Always!"

"A soldier of Skycloud?" Raith approached Coppertoath and trampled on his left leg. The sound of snapping bone and Coppertoath's screams mingled in the heavy air. Raith's face was a hideous mask of ruthless loathing. "You filthy worm. You dare call yourself a Skycloud soldier?"

He pulled Coppertoath up from the ground, then slammed his fist into the crippled veteran's face.

Coppertoath hit the ground hard. Half of his face had caved in from the blow and several teeth tumbled from his mouth. He sputtered through a mouthful of blood and his limbs twitched erratically. Raith's punch had broken his neck. He would never stand again.

"No. *No!*"

Asha scrambled out from the huddled crowd. Tears cut streaks through the dirt on her face as she ran toward Coppertoath. He saw her and gurgled through his ruined mouth. "Go back. Stop!"

Two soldiers grabbed Asha before she could get far. One slapped her hard across the face. What frail child could withstand a strike from a trained soldier? She crumbled to the ground unconscious.

The sound that came from Coppertooth was something between a roar and a wail.

Raith pinned Coppertooth's head to the ground with a foot, while fifty wastelanders were chosen from the crowd. They were shoved into a line – old men, women, children – trembling as grim soldiers towered behind. Calloused hands gripped their glaives tight and brought them high, waiting for the order.

“Coward! I know you're hiding somewhere!” Raith dragged his eyes around the camp. *“If you have any shred of honor, then show your face!”*

He didn't hesitate. Raith waved his hand, and in an instant fifty innocent lives were snuffed out.

Luna didn't even bat an eye at Raith's murderous rampage. Her eyes were closed as she searched for any sign of the traitor they'd come to kill. Her companion's actions were bait to lure out their prey, to anger him so that he would act rashly. The moment he did she would know where he was hiding.

“Are you watching? These innocents die because of you! Coward! How long will you let this go on?”

Raith raised his hand again and snapped his fingers.

Cloudhawk struggled to quell the rage burning inside of him.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was one of the harshest people Cloudhawk had ever known, but compared with what he witnessed she was a saint. To her the lives of wastelanders were a trifle, but she at least loathed killing indiscriminately. These monsters killed for the sake of killing.

They do this to get to me, eh? He knew their ploy, but Cloudhawk couldn't sit by and watch. He wasn't from the elysian lands. He didn't believe in their bullshit code of honor or pretend respect. He only felt the wrath and indignation that came from a wastelanders' heart, from hearing people like him scream and die.

Fifty more people were lined up and forced to their knees. They swayed and cried and begged forgiveness.

Raith turned a blind eye to their tears and blood. He would kill them one batch after another, their lives held no value. If their pitiful deaths drew out his prey then he was

killing two birds with one stone.

“Kill them.” Fifty soldiers raised their weapons.

Cloudhawk could hesitate no longer. He glared through the cross-shaped aiming reticle at the female demonhunter. Disgusting as her male companion was, she was more dangerous. All this time the relic she'd been channeling resonated threateningly.

It was probably some sort of probing relic, or something that empowered her perception, Cloudhawk guessed. In other words, she was the eyes and ears. If she got a lock on him, escape would be almost impossible. He was in an inferior position, both in numbers and in strength. In a position like this, he had to make the first shot count.

His gun was special. Blackwater Base had had only one and it was picked out for him by Hellflower. In addition to firing conventional ammo it was also capable of accommodating special rounds. The armor-piercing bullet nestled in the chamber could punch through a sheet of iron several inches thick. No fleshy human body stood a chance. Even Roste's freakish skin wouldn't have been able to withstand a shot!

Raith raised his hand to give the order, then Cloudhawk pulled the trigger.

The moment his finger moved, the female demonhunter's eyes popped open. She slid to the right. *Bang!* The bullet exploded from Cloudhawk's gun and half a breath later struck one of the Skycloud soldiers. His jade-like armor shattered into a thousand pieces and he hit the ground screaming. The bullet kept going, piercing through a second man before ultimately lodging itself in a third.

Fuck! Missed!

Even the Bloodsoaked Queen would have found it hard to dodge this attack if she wasn't looking out for it. The woman's demonhunter skills alone didn't account for her ability to dodge the shot. She had to have a high level of perception to do that.

Her abilities were similar to Cloudhawk's. The sense of danger leveled her way had tipped her off with enough time to get out of the way. Killing her at a distance was a challenge.

Luna's azure blue eyes fixed on the shadow in the distance. “Raith, to the north!”

Raith lifted his bow and stretched back the string. An arrow appeared out of thin air

when he released, which soared toward the shadow almost a thousand feet away. Running along the hotel roof Cloudhawk could feel the power closing in. He threw himself to the side, suddenly changing directions. The place where his foot had just left exploded into splinters.

“Where are you running!”

Raith’s face bore a vicious scowl. Without another word he leapt onto the roof of a nearby six foot building.

His talent was agility. He jumped across the rooftops so quickly that half the distance between himself and his prey was covered almost instantly. As he soared through the air Raith drew his bow again and released an arrow no less deadly than Cloudhawk’s gun. If it hit the consequences were unbearable to contemplate.

Thud!

The arrow was stopped by a shield of sand, but the impact also blew the shield apart.

The air became choked with yellow dust that impeded the demonhunter’s vision. Raith waved his hands in front of his face to try and dispel the cloud. When it was gone, so too was his target.

Escape was going to be difficult. Cloudhawk knew the soldiers were waiting to ambush him nearby. Although they couldn’t compare to demonhunters, Skycloud soldiers were nonetheless capable fighters. Their weapons were as deadly as sniper rifles.

When the soldiers saw him they burst into action, but before they got far Cloudhawk threw a round object in their midst. The explosion that followed shook the whole area. The blast wasn’t lethal, but the sound and light incapacitated his attackers – another toy Cloudhawk had brought from Blackwater Base.

Luna and Raith gave chase, followed by a contingent of soldiers. However, by the time they got to where the blast had been, Cloudhawk was gone without a trace. Neither demonhunter had anticipated he’d be this cunning. He’d slipped passed both Raith and the soldiers left in ambush.

Raith’s expression was both savage and infuriated. The turncoat had escape from right under their noses, killing two Skycloud soldiers and wounding several others. It stung worse than a slap to the face.

“He’s injured.” Luna dug her fingers into a patch of blood soaked soil, then brought them up to her nose to take a sniff. “The traitor won’t get far.”

Chapter 137

Lifedrinker Arrow

Sunlight crept over the desert, dispelling the darkness. Wind cleaved the night's cloud cover, allowing shafts of blood-red light to peak through.

The moment day broke temperatures began to rise. The heat sent creatures of the night scurrying for their nests and in only a few minutes hot air warped the horizon. It was hard to see anything more than a few hundred feet away.

Cloudhawk struggled over the dunes while the wind whipped around him. He clutched his gun and leaned against the biting gusts, trudging at an even pace. What he experienced at Blackwater Base had made him strong. Now, he recovered faster than his energy was spent. So long as he had energy to spare, he could keep moving.

He made sure to keep a safe distance between him and his enemies. Whenever they were poised to catch up he would lose them in the ruins. They continued like this, over and over again for six hours, never clashing but never losing track of each other.

Cloudhawk knew where he had the advantage, and he knew how to make use of it. His enemies were many, but that made them slow and unwieldy.

The trail of blood they'd found? Cloudhawk had planted it on purpose. For one thing, he had to get them away from Lighthouse Point. Otherwise, they would have continued killing those poor people. It also gave them the mistaken impression that he was hurt. The aim was to make them feel overconfident. It was the same reason he didn't use his relic cloak to escape.

The young demonhunters aimed to exhaust their wounded prey by keeping up the chase. However, they were starting to question their decision as they struggled back and forth to gain ground without catching sight of him.

He still hadn't collapsed. On the contrary, his pursuers began to tire while Cloudhawk just kept going. Luna, who had been using her senses to track him this whole time, was quickly becoming exhausted.

Both of the demonhunters were far stronger than Cloudhawk, and the soldiers they brought were each about his equivalent. It was a sharp disparity in strength, but out in the wastelands it wasn't always strength that won fights. Experience, patience, and luck were one's weapons. Often times the weaker beasts of the wastes could take on a foe vastly stronger and win handily.

Eventually Cloudhawk's intentions became clear to the elysians: pretend to be weak and force them into exhaustion!

Like many wasteland creatures he was pretending to be weak so as to confound his pursuers. At the last moment he would turn and attack, taking them by surprise. Much like a pack of wolves Cloudhawk would take a bite out of their forces, slowly chipping away at their strength. Then when they were exhausted he would strike – expending the least and maximizing the damage he could cause.

The wastelands were a cruel and effective teacher. Cloudhawk was a talented student. Over time the Skycloud soldiers slowed to a crawl while he hadn't weakened at all.

Luna turned her head and looked at the soldiers. Stragglers were falling farther behind, stretching their group out. She could tell at a glance they were tired, not at their best. Their prey was more cunning than she'd given him credit for, more tenacious than predicted. Their soldiers wouldn't be able to keep this up for very much longer.

Stragglers were left behind to try and catch up, while the demonhunters pressed ahead. However, this spread them thin. Was this not the traitor's intention?

"I think we've been tricked. The turncoat isn't injured at all!" Raith had come around to the realization as well. Though he was dripping with sweat his eyes were as hard and as cold as ice. He regularly scanned the horizon. "He's clearly skilled at traveling through the ruins. But if he thinks that will be enough to save him, he's gravely underestimated us."

He reached to his waist where an elaborate arrow had been strung through his belt and pulled it free. It was unclear what the arrow was made from, it was about the length of a hand and arcane runes had been carved all along its surface. The marks of a relic.

Luna looked at him with the light of surprise in her eyes. "You're going to use the

Lifedrinker?"

The Lifedrinker arrow. Raith's heirloom relic!

He'd only acquired it recently, and as such he wasn't very proficient in its use. Employing it cost him a lot in energy and psychic power, making it unsuitable for most situations. Now appeared to be the time.

The arrow emitted a crisp and melodious sound, then like an extendable baton its ends snapped out to make the arrow three feet long. The runes on its surface glowed mysteriously and shrouded it in a cocoon of light – an indication that the relic had been awakened.

"Our group is too slow getting through these ruins. If we continue, when will this chase end?" He slowly lifted the arrow in his hands. "It is a disgrace to use the Lifedrinker on this turncoat, but we are beset by dangers all throughout these blighted lands. Our enemy is cunning. It is worthy to use this arrow to ensure the safety of our holy warriors, and to end this farce quickly!"

Once the arrow was loosed, the turncoat would surely die. The result was indisputable!

Luna produced a small bottle, within which was Cloudhawk's blood they'd gathered from the dirt back at Lighthouse Point. A single drop was extracted, then spilled onto the Lifedrinker arrow's triangular head. The moment the blood touched its smooth surface, it vanished. Archaic runes shimmered hungrily in response and turned red. The arrow had its target.

Raith and Luna exchanged a wordless glance. She nodded and stepped back.

The young demonhunter placed his foot atop a nearby rock and adopted a bowman's stance. He drew back the bowstring with a deep sigh. Energy gathered quickly around him, causing the dirt and gravel below his feet to tremble, even the rock beneath his feet began to crack under the strain. Inch by inch the exorcist bow, bearing the Lifedrinker arrow, was drawn back toward its limit.

Nearby the Skycloud soldiers looked on with envy and admiration.

The young demonhunter's bow was a relic that did not need any arrows. By itself the bow could lay an enemy low, but with the arrow together these two relics could do

truly frightening things. Young though he was, Raith commanded such impressive power. He was an outstanding talent among the younger generation of demonhunters.

Slowly he drew back the bow, face red and veins stark and throbbing on his forehead. He wasn't pulling on a mere string, instead it felt like he was trying to hold back a thousand pound weight. It took five seconds just to draw it half way.

His Lifedrinker arrow was becoming brighter. The force field around him was becoming more intense.

At last he reached his limit. With his heart filled full of bloodlust and rancor, he released it all with a single shouted command. "Go!"

The Lifedrinker arrow vanished in a streak of red light. Silent as death, faster than the eye could follow.

Raith swayed and nearly fell over, but Luna had been ready. She stepped forward and made sure he kept his feet. She looked even more excited than he did, for witnessing the use of his heirloom was a special thing. "You did it!"

When she caught him Raith's heart began to flutter. It made him proud and filled with manly vigor that he was able to manage the act of using the arrow in front of her.

The two of them had known each other for ten years. Chosen as children, they had trained together, grown and improved together. Both were young, barely twenty, and trusted one another implicitly.

Luna was a year younger than Raith. She looked up to him like an older brother, while he had long ago developed feelings for her. All of his bluster, all of his bravado, all of his great effort was just so that she would see him.

Filled with pride and self-confidence, Raith was sure the turncoat had been slain. "The rest of you wait here for our orders. Captains, come with us."

Ten soldiers separated from the crowd and made to follow. These captains were much stronger than the typical holy warrior. Leaving the burden of the others behind this smaller group could move faster. With Luna and Raith in the lead, they left in search of their prey's body.

As the Lifedrinker arrow was released a flood of foreboding swallowed up Cloudhawk. It was a terrible sensation, like something tore open his throat and pierced his spine. He couldn't imagine what sort of thing would make him feel this way.

Then the ripples of a relic's power reached him.

His face fell when he knew what was coming. Without looking back he threw himself to the side.

An arrow, moving faster than he could fathom, screamed past. It was frightening enough that he could hardly follow it with his eyes, more terrifying still the arrow didn't make any noise at all. Not even the sound of rustling wind as it swept by. Cloudhawk had survived solely because of his danger sense and the sound of the relic's resonance. Anyone else would have died on the spot.

Missing by mere inches the arrow raced by, only to spin in midair a few dozen feet away and head back toward him. Left with no recourse, Cloudhawk hit the ground hard enough to make his vision blurry.

Whatever relic this was, it sure was difficult to deal with! Once it locked on to a target it would adjust trajectory until it struck. If the first pass missed it came around for a second, then a third, and a fourth. It would only stop once he was dead.

When had Cloudhawk ever encountered a weapon like this? It was too strange, too wily!

The second pass missed. It was coming by for a third, still moving fast as lightning!

Cloudhawk pulled himself forward with his hands, but with every movement the arrow followed like the specter of death hungry for his soul. His eyes went wide as it headed right for him, but he flopped behind a low-lying wall just in time. A fraction of a second later the sound of splintering rock assailed his ears as the whole wall crumbled. The Lifedrinker arrow pierced his cover, searching for his rapidly beating heart. *Rrrrip!* His armor split like it was made of paper, and it was the Gospel of Sand beneath that saved his life.

It ricocheted off and rocketed into the sky. He'd hoped the wall would protect him but it might as well have not been there. The arrow soared high overhead before turning back one hundred and eighty degrees and beginning its descent.

It was coming right for the top of Cloudhawk's skull. Too deadly, too frightening! Nothing seemed to slow it down!

He was so frightened that his whole body was drenched in a cold sweat. He wrenched the iron dagger from his waist and, with a scream, swung it wildly at the arrow. He put all his power behind it for if he failed to stop it, the arrow would take his life!

Clang!

Snap!

Half the dagger's blade lodged itself in the sand. Cloudhawk was left with only the hilt.

But the Lifedrinker arrow was knocked aside. It continued a few feet into the distance before turning around and picking up speed once more.

He was left stunned, at a loss. *What the fuck was this goddamn thing?! How was it so hard to escape?*

There was no other avenue of escape left to him. He activated his cloak. Perhaps if he disappeared, the arrow couldn't follow... but if it could, he was out of luck.

Chapter 138

Fatal Hit

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds!

Cloudhawk anxiously searched himself with his hands but found no wounds. The Lifedrinker arrow hovered in the air less than a foot away from his chest, frozen in air. Its razor-sharp tip was pointed directly at his eye.

The sanguine runes etched on its surface flickered then dimmed. As he watched, the possessed arrow turned and flew into the distance.

The Lifedrinker arrow deftly maneuvered through the ruins. It avoided obstacles, retracing its route back to where it'd come from. Eventually it found its way back to Raith.

He snatched it from the air. With his chest puffed out the young demonhunter proudly proclaimed. "Moon, don't worry. The traitor has already been dealt with."

Yet she peered at the arrow with doubt. "So quickly?"

"Don't underestimate this relic! This is one of Skycloud's greatest hunting relics!" Were anyone other than Luna to question him, Raith would have flown into an imperious rage. He might have even killed the offender. Yet before her there wasn't even a hint of anger. On the contrary, he patiently explained the relic's power. "This relic was created by a master demonhunter a hundred years ago. Shot from his hand, this arrow would hunt its target relentlessly for five days and five nights. Once his target was more than three miles away, but in the end the arrow still took the life it intended."

The others blanched at the story. It hunted its target for five whole days? Killed it from three miles away?

How could such a deadly tool exist in this world? Only the gods could have created such a righteous and powerful thing.

"This relic has three special qualities. First, it's able to locate its target and attack with

extreme precision. Second, it's silent so as to take its target's life before they even know what's happening. And third, if somehow its first attack misses it will just keep coming. Either the relic's holy powers are used up, or its target dies. Those are the only outcomes." He flicked his wrist and the arrow contracted, back to the small rod it once was. He slipped it back into his belt. "It had enough power to return to me, so that means the job is done. If you need confirmation you can use your perception to try and find him yourself."

Until a life was taken, the arrow would not come back. That was what made the relic arrow so special.

Raith did not possess the skill or power of a master demonhunter, but the ten minutes he could manage was more than sufficient. Actually only a couple of minutes had passed since he fired the Lifedrinker arrow and it was back already. Their target had to be dead, Raith was confident of this.

Luna nodded then focused her psychic energy into the torque necklace around her throat. The tracking relic hummed to life. Just like her companion promised she could not find any sign of their prey. In all likelihood he was dead.

"Do you believe me now?" He wanted to maintain a level of modesty before the girl he admired, but it was difficult for him to hide the arrogance behind his eyes. "Let's hurry, before some monster makes a meal of our prize."

The twelve hunters from Skycloud picked up the pace toward Cloudhawk's last known location.

Before long the terrain became a complex maze of buildings, thousands of them in various states of disrepair that towered like ancient sentinels. In the center was an enormous ship that had crashed to earth. It was phenomenally large, and half was buried in the rubble with parts strewn all around.

So this was their prey's chosen cemetery?

Luna shut her eyes and channeled her focus once again into her relic necklace. It shimmered in response to her call. Waves of invisible resonance reached out like a radar in all directions and in an instant she knew the terrain as well as if she'd walked the whole thing herself.

"There's nothing dangerous nearby."

Strange. No corpse, either?

Both demonhunters were young and talented, outstanding members of their class. Luna's expertise was investigation and probing, while Raith was a gifted hunter and assassin. Together they were a frightening pair, made all the more formidable with ten Skycloud captains at their back. It was probably better for the traitor that he was already dead before they found him.

"He has to be nearby." Raith looked around the dilapidated surroundings. "This place is a mess. Spread out and search!"

Cloudhawk hid in a fissure along the mothership's hull. Once the girl's probe swept by, he cautiously allowed the power of his cloak to fade. He perched amidst the ruins, so well matched that he might as well have been a chameleon. With slow, deliberate movements he pulled his rifle off his shoulder and loaded an armor-piercing round.

This guy is way too overconfident. Egotistical prick.

He wasn't downplaying how dangerous the Lifedrinker arrow was, but every relic had a weakness. Cloudhawk's invisibility cloak masked everything; his sound, body heat, and aura just vanished. Any indication he was alive had vanished as well. Without any means to find its target, the arrow assumed its mission was complete.

Luna's tracking was troublesome, too. It didn't seem to tire her out too much but was very effective. All this time it was through her that they were able to pinpoint his location. However, with some effort and time Cloudhawk was able to find her weakness as well.

She couldn't sustain the pulses for long. They came in waves, roughly three minutes apart.

Once Cloudhawk saw the pattern he started to take advantage. When the pulses were due to come he hid beneath the power of the cloak. Her powers seemed to act similarly to the Lifedrinker arrow, so once he was safely erased by the cloak her tracker relic was rendered effectively useless. He knew their tricks, and because of his cloak these demonhunters were lulled into a false sense of security. Now was the time to strike back.

Cloudhawk tentatively crept out from his hiding spot and inched forward, using the ruins as cover until he found a good spot. A choke point where both demonhunters

would have to cross.

He was ready, but who was his target this time?

The girl's relic could pin him down, and she had a strong awareness of danger. If Cloudhawk chose her she would be able to feel it, so he wasn't absolutely sure his sneak attack would land. The boy was quick, nimble, and well trained. After using the arrow he would be physically and mentally drained. He was at his weakest... making him the right call.

Both of the young demonhunters had made a fatal mistake. They shouldn't have left their entourage behind. They were scattered around the complicated terrain and couldn't quickly reorganize if something happened. It gave Cloudhawk all the time and opportunity he needed.

He saw them coming, still vigilant. They thought Cloudhawk was dead, but this sort of place was the perfect hunting ground for other beasts of the wasteland. They were on high alert for any danger that might be lurking around the corner.

Three hundred feet.

Two hundred and fifty feet.

Cloudhawk slowly exhaled, then held his breath. He controlled every pore, controlling his body to the point where he was practically stone. Below, the demonhunters picked their way through the ruins slowly, carefully examining everything they came across. Meanwhile Cloudhawk's focus was running short. Deal with one, then face the other, that was the plan. He had to save as much energy as possible for that fight, or an escape if he failed.

Closer.

Closer.

Demonhunters had to be more than just excellent warriors. They were relentlessly trained to be killers. Even against two relatively young and inexperienced members, Cloudhawk didn't dare underestimate what they could do. Every ounce of concentration, every bit of power had to be put into these critical seconds.

A hundred and fifty feet... A hundred thirty...

Cloudhawk remained still. He had one chance. He had to wait for the perfect moment.

Something must have seemed off, for both demonhunters stopped suddenly. They held tight to their weapons and scanned their surroundings.

They somehow felt the danger.

Suddenly a series of shrieking barks echoed off the crumbling walls as six or seven mutated rats slithered through the cracks. Their beady red eyes glared at the two intruders, ready to tear them apart with their dagger-like claws.

That was what they sensed, the monsters!

Luna brandished her exorcist staff which hummed with power, then launched at their attackers. She moved with incredible speed. Before the rats could get close a blast of power knocked them into the air and ripped their hairy bodies apart. A rain of blood and gore showered the area.

The moment the rats appeared Raith felt a frigid sensation bubble up from deep inside.

It caught him off guard for it was the first time he'd felt something like that. By sheer coincidence he turned his head, and a hundred feet away he could clearly see a figure rising from the ruins. Time slowed, he saw every grain of sand as it fell off the figure's shoulders. His gun was the same color as the grit around them, except for the dark maw of the barrel. A magnificent bloom of fire reached for him from that darkness.

No! He went cold, all over his body and deep into his soul. He could even feel the friction of the thick bullet as it ripped through the air, the sound of it leaving the barrel, the promise of death in its wake. Raith tried to get out of the way, but the sneak attack was too sudden, his murderer too close. He couldn't escape.

He watched in excruciating detail as the bullet entered his chest. It slipped through his cloak before collapsing his leather armor. Although it was of the best quality, there was nothing his armor could do to stop the bullet. Skin split, muscles tore, bone shattered. A spray of blood followed as the bullet exited his back.

"RAITH!!"

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Pieces of mutant rat still fell around them.

A wail, filled with inconsolable anguish, spilled from Luna's mouth as she watched the bullet pass through him. She reached out and grabbed him, almost immediately drenched in something hot and slick. The wound in Raith's chest was the size of a fist, gushing like a fountain of blood.

Cloudhawk reloaded the rifle with his left hand. His window was mere seconds as he aimed for another shot toward the fallen demonhunter. He was not the target, however. Cloudhawk was hoping to hit the girl behind him.

Cloudhawk was fast but his luck was limited. Luna sensed the bullet coming and leapt into the air to avoid it, but so far things were still under his control.

He flung the rifle to the side. It was too slow for his needs. He reached back and pulled two revolvers from his waist, then fired a series of shots at the surviving demonhunter. Each bullet exited with a spat of fire and traced a blazing line through the air. Each one was aimed at Luna, who would find it difficult to dodge while in midair.

In this fatal moment Raith summoned the last of his strength to throw himself at Luna. He shoved her out of the way, but not before two of the bullets struck her, though neither hits were effective. Cloudhawk's revolvers weren't strong enough to get through her armor.

Raith took the rest of the shots. One hit him in the side of his face and blew off his ear. Another hit him in the throat and tore out a huge chunk of flesh.

Failure! Cloudhawk scowled and made to flee.

Chapter 139

Luna's Madness

Thanks to her danger sense, which was as keen as Cloudhawk's own, the girl demonhunter had avoided his hail of gunfire. Emptying what was left of his clip, he slipped back into the ruins and vanished before she could recover. It was all over in five or six seconds.

Their brief skirmish was over faster than a flash of lightning.

The demonhunters were more capable than I'd expected. Cloudhawk wasn't able to deal with them in one go like he'd hoped, but it didn't matter. He got the one he wanted.

Luna lay on the floor, her flaxen hair splayed around her. Her pale skin was smeared with blood and dirt, and an aching pain radiated from her shoulder and lower abdomen. If it weren't for whatever secret materials they used to make her exceptional armor, the two shots would have taken her out of the fight as well.

Her first instinct was not to go after their assailant but instead to check on Raith. She collapsed at his side and held him close. When she saw the state of him something snapped in her. "Raith... Raith, are you alright? Come on now, don't scare me like this."

His handsome face no longer bore that self-assured expression he was famous for. Dim eyes stared sightlessly at the sky, empty. Blood continued to leak from his nose and the corners of his mouth. Even her screams seemed separate, somehow disjointed. All the energy drained out of her.

The shot to the neck was the one to actually take his life, but he had been a dead man walking once the armor-piercing round hit its mark. That bullet had destroyed his lungs, shattering several ribs and his sternum along the way. No first aid or emergency medicine would save him. Now the haughty young demonhunter lay in the dirt, and the only part of him that moved were his legs. They twitched as death loomed near.

Raith's mind was in chaos, like sinking in a bottomless black hole. He dimly felt a few hot drops strike his face, nourishment for his worn-out soul. His eyes regained focus and the tear-streaked face of a young woman came into view.

Luna. Is she crying for me?

A stifling sadness filled him.

Ever since they were small he'd tried so hard to be gallant, strong and manly for her. Subconsciously, his brutal massacre of the wastelanders had been to show her his boldness and skill. He just wanted her to see him differently.

But what did it accomplish? For all his pride and conceit, now he lay amid the ruins like garbage.

He wanted so much for her to be his. He would protect her, love her – but the chance had passed. He mustered the life that was slipping from him, forcing words through his shattered lungs and lips. “Please... when you report to Lord Cloude... tell him the failure was mine. Let me shoulder the... shame, and responsibility. Luna... you're still young... so talented. You can't... let this failure tarnish your potential. Don't go after him. Give up the mission. Go back! Please... go back!

Luna shook her head. “Don't speak. I'm bringing you back to Skycloud!”

But that was not true. It was already too late. Raith looked up at her, filled with sadness and despair. *My very first mission, and it ends with me dead at a traitor's hand, out in the wastes.* His shame would disgrace his whole family. How could he ever face that?

In her heart, Luna also knew that Raith was certain to die. Had she only known their first incursion into the wastelands would end so bitterly! The boy she'd spent her whole life with, who'd grown up with her, lay in her arms struggling for his final breath. And there was nothing she could do, only watch as his labored breathing grew shallower.

“There's something I need to tell you... I...”

Whatever he wanted to say, he would never have the chance to tell her. His pupils contracted and a deluge of blood poured from his mouth, thick with bits of bone and organ. His chest quivered like a broken bellows and then went still. The last signs of life slipped away.

His eyes went wide.

Unbelieving.

Reluctant.

Luna hugged his bloody body to her own and cried. She threw her head back and gave voice to her pain. The two young demonhunters had been too brazen. If they'd kept their guards with them they might have caught Cloudhawk after his attack.

Of course... when one descended into irrational thought, they continued to make mistakes.

When the soldiers heard the gunshots, they came running towards Luna's direction. If she waited just three minutes for them to arrive, the eleven of them working together could easily overwhelm the traitor. But the rage that burned in her beautiful eyes demanded blood. The tracking relic against her chest glimmered and released a resonant pulse.

This fucking scumbag can't be far. He was hiding in the ruins! Waiting for a chance to strike again.

Luna snatched up her exorcist staff and gave chase.

Cloudhawk had reloaded his revolvers, and as he broke out of hiding he started firing. His wrists bucked from the recoil as he sprayed the narrow passage with bullets. The girl was just as strong as her fallen companion, but he was adept at fighting from a distance. She was most dangerous up close.

She's quick!

Luna eluded the bullets as deftly as a dancer, without even slowing her approach. For those bullets she couldn't avoid she knocked them away with her staff without a second thought.

Incredible! Yet another person able to knock away bullets! The last time he saw someone with that level of skill was back at Blackflag Outpost. This girl had to be about as skilled as that sweeper leader. Meanwhile, Cloudhawk's marksmanship wasn't spectacular, still inferior to the likes of Slyfox.

He wasn't going to kill her with his guns. It was like trying to face off against Hellflower!

She was getting closer. If she got within striking distance Cloudhawk didn't know how

he would protect himself. She was a demonhunter, the real thing. Luna wasn't on the same level as the Bloodsoaked Queen, but one on one there were only a few people in the wastelands who could stand against her.

Cloudhawk's own exorcist staff was gone. What did he have that could protect him from hers?

Luna's azure eyes were red from hatred. She glared at Cloudhawk with such burning rage that it seemed a miracle he wasn't burnt to a crisp right away.

"I find your mood curious. Is it blood-boiling anger? Soul-tearing hatred? Or are you so anxious to share your friend's shame?"

Facing the furious woman Cloudhawk was not stunned. His face was hidden behind the mask, so all she heard was his modulated, demon-like voice. Every word, every sentence, only caused her to become more incensed.

"Now that I know you can actually feel something... where was your anger and hatred when those innocent wastelanders were murdered? You who pretend to be so noble... in my eyes you're nothing but selfish, despicable, *laughable* hypocrites. Are these the great demonhunters of the elysian lands? The *righteous* warriors of the gods? You don't even compare to the worms of the wastelands!"

"Shut your fucking mouth!"

Sure enough, she charged.

Her cloak began to rustle from some inexplicable wind. Her staff began to whirl and thrum with power that made the sand beneath their feet whip into the air. A tempest of agitated energy surrounded her, causing such friction that heat poured out in waves.

Son of a bitch...! She is strong! Cloudhawk hurriedly tried to escape.

Luna lifted her staff and it seemed to split the air. Her anger, as vast and vicious as a waterfall, empowered her attack. A terrifying aura swallowed Cloudhawk, turning the air to paste and making it hard to move.

None of the pressure was life threatening, but her skills were beyond everything he anticipated. Her anger and disgrace was fueling her, making her at least three times stronger than normal.

A scorching, hate-filled air surrounded them. It made their surroundings warp from the intensity. Cloudhawk couldn't escape, only rely on his cloak. He disappeared from her view, with the increased speed helping him move.

The power of Luna's exorcist staff came in a torrent, powerful enough to destroy two rows of ancient buildings. It didn't matter if it was old steel or thick stone, everything was turned to dust.

Cloudhawk barely avoided destruction, staggering out of the way just in time. He slipped into the relative safety of the ruins and unless he let his invisibility drop, she had no idea where he was.

"Coward! Come out!" Luna knew he had to be using relics, and high-grade ones at that. *That's how he deceived Raith's Lifedrinker arrow as well as my own attempts to locate him.* "All you can do is hide and attack from the shadows? You call yourself a warrior?! Stand and fight like a man!"

"Honorable demonhunter, you are in no position to pretend to know what fairness is." Cloudhawk was moving so quickly that his voice came at her from several angles, like an echo. Gunshots followed from all around but none had any effect on her. She didn't even try to avoid them this time and just knocked them away with her staff.

"If your idea of 'fair' is the brutal slaughter of the true faithful... if you call 'fair' the wholesale slaughter of unarmed citizens... if your 'fairness' is the wanton slaughter of the old, of women, of children... if 'fairness' in your world is the slaughter of a *hundred innocent people* just to find me, then I am happy to be a cunning, despicable, impudent scoundrel!"

He said too much. It served its purpose in making her angry, but it also helped her find where he was hiding. Once she knew where he was, she swung her exorcist staff in his direction.

He was knocked back by the blast, the instability causing his invisibility to drop. He stood with both feet on the ground, but two large trenches extended from them.

The girl had a few tricks up her sleeve. When Cloudhawk saw the absolute rage on her face, he knew that a battle was inevitable. He wasn't particularly level-headed himself, and the situation had slipped out of his control. But no one else was like him, with the help of his mysterious stone and the depths of power it afforded him.

Mantis had taught him once that composure was a soldier's greatest weapon. When one's emotions got the better of them, the cadence of a battle was given to the enemy.

Luna wasn't ignorant to this fact. She was well trained as a demonhunter. Alas humans were emotional creatures, and sometimes human nature was difficult to contain. Everything she learned was pushed out of her mind in the face of pure loathing. She wasn't thinking about tactics, all she wanted was to see this masked prick pulverized!

I'm going to kill him.

I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!

Chapter 140

Pyrrhic Victory

In the face of such an intense onslaught, Cloudhawk had no choice but to disengage and hide in the ancient ruins that served as their battleground. Crumbling buildings towered over them like a forest of petrified bamboo. He didn't know why it was here, or what they were used for in those old days. But there were so many that the scope was staggering, randomly scattered all around.

The one demonhunter was trouble enough. If he'd stuck around to get surrounded by the Skycloud soldiers, Cloudhawk would be done for. Choosing to flee into this complicated mess of buildings was for nothing more than to buy some time.

Behind him, the sound of her exorcist staff blasting through the ruins never ceased.

After nimbly dodging his bullets, Luna raced after him, cleaving whatever obstacles crossed her path. Like a crafty rat Cloudhawk slithered between the buildings. He changed directions at random to try and throw her off.

Her answer was to blast the stone buildings to dust with her staff.

Enraged, spewing curses, Luna kept on the trail of this slippery bastard. She was fast as a cheetah, but every time she caught up to him Cloudhawk would dart to the side and pull ahead. She did not slow down to follow, though. She charged headlong into the building before her and began to run along the wall as easily as though she were walking on firm ground. Agile as a monkey she skittered up the building then kicked off.

Bang!

She landed on sturdy feet, cracks gathering where she landed. Less than a second later she jumped off again.

From above Cloudhawk looked like a frightened rabbit darting off in random directions. He himself didn't know where he was going, just that he had to keep moving. Where the demonhunter had been a cheetah, now she was a swallow

hovering overhead. She deftly bound from building to building even faster than he could run.

Cloudhawk had hoped the cluster of buildings would keep her at bay. The girl ended up being more skilled than he thought.

Jumping along the buildings was certainly more tiring, but she was markedly faster than her prey. Cloudhawk could feel the noose tightening around his neck with each passing moment.

“Die!”

Luna’s exorcist staff lashed out again.

She left Cloudhawk no option but to rely on his cloak again. He vanished, dodged, then reappeared. She came again, he dodged. Cloudhawk didn’t even have time to catch his breath. They danced around each other at a staggering pace.

Each time Cloudhawk was in danger of being overcome, he used his cloak to slip away. It went on this way for five minutes.

All of a sudden Luna felt an intense dizziness assail her. She had to slow or risk falling over. Her feet hit the ground with a heavy thud but were stable, despite the fact that every muscle in her body was screaming in pain.

She’d begun to claw her way out of the madness that had gripped her. Covered in sweat, gasping for breath, she saw the masked traitor stop as well. They stood a hundred and fifty feet apart, just staring at one another. Luna could feel the mirth coming off the masked man, even though she couldn’t see his face.

“Evidently your master never taught you to use energy sparingly in a fight.”

She was spent. Cloudhawk could see it. The demonhunter was stronger than he was, but not devastatingly so like the Bloodsoaked Queen. Killing him wouldn’t be easy for her. Exploiting her anger, forcing her to chase him and use her staff, improved his odds.

Seven or eight times. That’s how many strikes she tried with her staff.

Before their encounter she’d been hunting him with the help of her relic necklace. That had also cost her psychic energy. Now not only was she spent mentally, but physically

as well.

Cloudhawk's simple tactic was a success. The idiot had wasted her advantage. As the old saying went, every dog had its day. Now... it was time for the hunted to become the hunter.

"You..."

Luna knew she'd been tricked, but it was too late. They were surrounded by a maze of ruined buildings. No aid would come soon.

Cloudhawk reached out his left hand and pointed a revolver at her while he clutched a knife in his right. He attacked. Luna tried to activate her staff, but this only earned her a tearing pain in her skull. It was too late. The bullets were coming at her.

"Fuck!" She sidestepped what she could, her wrath still alive in her heart and filling her with the energy to continue. But she only had strength enough to run. Behind her, that contemptible man shouted taunts.

"Didn't the honorable demonhunter say she wanted a face to face fight? Does this mean running away is also the style of holy warriors like yourselves? You elysians. So virtuous."

Shame and fury filled her. His words struck her so acutely that she stopped long enough for one of his bullets to catch her in the thigh. Her legs weren't armored, so the bullet dug in deep. In this era, there was no one to teach wastelanders how to be gentle with the fairer sex. Cloudhawk didn't hesitate at all, moving in to finish what he started. His dagger was aimed for the flesh of her throat.

Luna was inexperienced in life or death struggles, but she was trained by the formidable demonhunters. She was weak and angry, but she still was not a helpless lamb before the butcher's knife.

Just as Cloudhawk's dagger was poised to tear open her throat, Luna flung herself forward. The razor edge of his dagger slipped over her head, taking a large patch of hair with it. Luna tumbled forward, planted her hands on the ground and pushed off. Spinning beautifully overhead, both staff and body came crashing toward Cloudhawk.

Even without the added danger of psychic energy, the exorcist staff was sharp and lethal. Cloudhawk thought she was spent, and was surprised to discover that she still

had energy to fight back. He lifted his left hand, using the revolver to deflect her blow. The gun was knocked away so hard its barrel was irreparably bent.

Luna gathered herself for a second attack, but when her right leg hit the ground the bullet wound was torn wider. The pain caused her to lose her balance. Cloudhawk, seizing the opportunity, whipped a kick at her. The demonhunter was knocked a dozen feet away.

Lesson learned. Cloudhawk approached her more cautiously this time. “You really don’t fuck around.”

Demonhunters were known for their abilities, especially in close quarters. The injury to her leg wasn’t severe, so she managed to quickly get back on her feet. It did, however, prevent her from being able to outrun her assailant. More troubling was the fact that Cloudhawk still had the energy to use his relics, if needed.

Luna saw her plight clearly. If she didn’t run, the traitor could get behind her using his speed and invisibility for a blind attack. That could be deadly. The other soldiers had to be close. If she could stall for a minute or two, they would surround the area and he would be trapped. That was her best chance at turning the tables.

“Before I kill you, I want to ask you something.” Cloudhawk had to satisfy his curiosity before finishing it. “Why do you want me dead?”

Luna was guarded. She answered with a voice full of venom and loathing. “You’re a traitor. Do we need any other reason?”

Behind the mask Cloudhawk scowled. Did she think he was a demonhunter, too? What a disastrous misunderstanding! But it didn’t matter. Either she died, or he did. He had no intention of dying today, so it would have to be her.

Cloudhawk grew up in the wastelands. He was a wastelander, through and through. Aggression and viciousness was in his bones. Yes, he was far kinder than most of his kin, but towards those who wanted to kill him he held no pity at all. It didn’t matter that she was pretty or anything else. He lunged forward, flinging a dagger at her with his left hand with lightning speed!

Clang! Her exorcist staff knocked it away.

Cloudhawk spun the dagger in his right hand so he held it in a reverse grip. Several

vicious swipes followed, aimed at crucial targets. Luna danced out of harm's way, protecting herself with her staff.

Sparks flew with each collision. They clashed four or five times in the space of just a few seconds. Their weapons rang out in protest at they met again and again in midair.

Her technique was better than his, allowing her to even go so far as to gain the upper hand. She knocked Cloudhawk's attacks aside, then brought her staff down toward his skull. Yet much to her surprise the traitor flung his hand out, causing an arrow made from sand to appear. The mystical attack easily split her armor and buried itself in her chest.

She gasped in shock and fell to the floor.

Luna looked down at the shaft of the arrow jutting from her chest. Her face betrayed her shock. She couldn't believe it. She simply couldn't believe it! The bastard had other relics! He was just a defector. How could he be so well equipped? And with relics of much higher quality than the likes of her exorcist staff!

Luna's tracking torque and Raith's Liferdrinker arrow were both family heirlooms, true treasures that had been passed down from accomplished demonhunters. Yet this traitor had at least two relics that rivaled theirs?!

Cloudhawk felt exhaustion creeping up on him. This battle had been long and taxing, there wasn't much left of his already minimal psychic energy. Suddenly he heard the sounds of footsteps coming from several directions. The owner of one set shouted. "Mistress Luna!"

Luna and Cloudhawk's faces changed, but in very different ways.

She cried out. "Here!"

Cloudhawk rushed at the injured demonhunter. They'd heard her, but he still had a few moments before they arrived. It was his last chance. She would stop at nothing to kill him. How could he allow her to live? If she were allowed to return to the elysian lands, who knew what sort of danger she would cause?

Luna faced Cloudhawk directly as he came her way. She knew he was going to kill her, but the wound to her chest was too severe. If she tried to fight back, it would only make it worse. Running wasn't an option either, and she could no longer compete with his

speed.

What choice was there? She watched the masked man get closer. So this was how she died...

A bitter unwillingness filled her heart. She was a demonhunter! She wore that mantle with pride. She also bore hatred for this despicable traitor, a hatred that refused to abate. How could she allow herself to be killed by this scum?

The light of his dagger came closer, inch by inch!

Luna gripped her weapon tightly in her hands.

He would die, even if it meant they died together! She would not die in disgrace!

With this determination flooding through her all fear was dispelled. Giving up was not an option. She mustered energy that she did not have, fought through the tearing pain in her skull, driven by the will to survive...

...And a surge of power answered her. Her exorcist staff stirred one last time, power warping the air around it.

It would never have occurred to Cloudhawk that, on her deathbed, this girl could tap into her latent potential [1]. He had already fully extended himself into this attack to back away. All he could do was try to shift his body and direct the blow toward the Gospel of Sand hidden beneath his clothes.

Bang!

Cloudhawk was knocked several feet away.

Luna's face was a twisted mix of hatred and pain. The counterattack had cost her dearly, making her injuries worse and causing them to bleed profusely. She'd drawn more than her body could muster and she could feel her consciousness begin to slip as she collapsed to the ground.

It was unclear whether she was alive or dead.

Cloudhawk coughed up several mouthfuls of blood and struggled to get back on his feet. The Gospel of Sand had managed to block much of the staff's power, but it was

still a potent weapon. He could feel several ribs had been broken, and there was some damage to his organs. It made it difficult to move.

Just then, several soldiers appeared, approaching from different directions. Cloudhawk had to rely on his cloak's power to hide him as he fled.

"Mistress!" Seven of the soldiers she'd brought with her appeared and gathered round. Four of them surrounded Luna on four sides, bows drawn and alert for danger. The remaining three fished medicine from their emergency packs and set about trying to save her life.

Luna's injuries were severe, but for now they were not yet fatal. Two demonhunters were sent on a mission; one was dead, the other wounded. No one could have imagined this was how it would end. One of the soldiers lifted her up onto his shoulders when Luna's eyes suddenly fluttered open. "He's hurt bad," she managed to croak out. "Call the others, get them here to track him down. He has to be killed!"

With her bitter command delivered, she slumped into unconsciousness.

Elsewhere, Cloudhawk pulled off his mask. He stooped over and coughed, spitting blood all over the ground. He hadn't expected to fall on such hard times, or to be so badly injured in their skirmish. If the Skycloud soldiers caught up chances were he'd be a dead man, so he had to get as far away from here as possible.

1. GAAHHH!! You do this shit all the time! How can you not expect it from someone else?! Sorry... sorry. I'm ok.

Chapter 141

The Elysian Spirit

Over ninety angry and well-armed soldiers converged on the ruins. They were quite a sight, with their jade-like armor glimmering in the harsh wasteland sun. Standing dutifully in their rows, they looked like statues someone had inexplicably placed in the middle of nowhere. Two figures lay before them; one dead, Raith, the other severely wounded and unconscious, Luna.

Minutes. It had only been a few minutes, but this was the result.

Powerful emotions surged within the Skycloud soldiers. Not fear, but rage and disbelief. Demonhunters were the elite, blessed by the gods, the pride and glory of the holy city!

Two young demonhunters with limitless potential had been laid low by a single turncoat of mediocre strength. The shame was not the demonhunters' alone. This failure besmirched the illustrious name of these soldiers as well.

“Senior Captain Bolte. What are our orders?”

“Team One, you’ll be responsible for getting Masters Raith and Luna back to Skycloud. The rest of you will continue on with me to complete the mission.” The highest ranking officer currently was a man in his thirties. He was outfitted much the same as the others, with the exception of a delicate silver mask that covered his face. His steady gaze swept over the others. “We’re going to find him, and we’re going to kill him. No matter the cost.”

Captain Bolte’s orders were resolute, crisp, and straightforward. Determination burned in the eyes of his subordinates. This was no longer about accomplishing some task, this was about honor, and to a soldier honor was more important than life itself.

The soldiers’ weapons changed. Their bow shape disappeared as crests straightened and the ends extended into sharp points to create a double-headed staff. Soldiers held them in the middle or slung obliquely across their backs.

Captain Bolte gave the order. "March!"

All at once they moved into the ruins at a quick pace.

Cloudhawk knew Skycloud's soldiers weren't going to let him escape so easily. They had one-track minds, and his blood was the only thing they'd accept as payment for their shame. Hoping they would let things be was like hoping the sun would suddenly rise in the west. So Cloudhawk covered his wounded chest and staggered forward, all the while nursing his grievances.

Why the fuck are they doing this?! I've never gone looking for trouble, why does it always seem to find me?

Cloudhawk couldn't remember offending anyone he shouldn't have, nor could he think of any reason why he'd be the target of a pair of demonhunters and a *hundred soldiers!*

That skilled girl was taken back alive, where they would return her to Skycloud. Who knew what back alley they'd one day cross paths in? There was no way he was going to catch her and finish the job before they took her away. Any soldier he came across would be itching to chop him into minced meat. No, if he managed to escape this shitty situation alive then he would consider himself fortunate.

He knew they were closing in on him like a pack of wolves, he could feel the sense of danger rising. He'd never fought them, but he could tell by their discipline and execution that Skycloud's soldiers were a considerable force. Each one of them could be compared to a highly skilled wastelander.

Not to mention their excellent equipment!

Their armor looked like it was made from sheets of snow-white jade, so incredibly fine it made him furious. Every plate was etched with beautiful and intricate designs, like works of art. They were so beautiful and delicate, in fact, that at a glance one wondered how effective they were at protection. The answer was very much effective. Harder than steel and lighter by half, cushioned against impact, resistant to high temperatures and acid, non-conductive against electricity and more.

Their weapons were exquisite. In addition to firing shots with more punch than a crossbow bolt, these things could transform into bladed weapons that cut iron like

paper. Whatever situation the soldiers were in, they would have the tools to do battle. Cloudhawk had heard once that elysian soldiers shunned the use of guns and bullets, and now it seemed clear why. With weapons like theirs, wastelander equipment seemed unworthy of notice.

Physically, their combat prowess was no less impressive than the demonhunters, and in fact for conventional search and destroy missions like this they were more experienced. Raith and Luna were young, after all. They hadn't yet been hardened by trials of real-world combat. By contrast, these soldiers were true veterans, many even having spent time cleansing the wastelands before.

Using blood from the traitor's wounds, the soldiers were able to get a general sense of where he was headed, whereupon they began to carefully comb through the area. Normally, Cloudhawk wouldn't find it too difficult to evade notice, but he was wounded and exhausted from the earlier battle. Any speed advantage he had was gone.

As for fighting? Any one of his hunters could instantly become a sniper and pick him off from several hundred feet away.

Cloudhawk had no guns, and his psychic energy was almost entirely drained. What was he supposed to do? Fling his weakened body around with a few knives and hope for the best? He might as well smash his own skull in. It would be a less painful death.

They were closing in... but he wasn't overly concerned. With the help of his cloak he became invisible, he just had to be careful not to touch anything or leave any trace of his passage. For the moment, he evaded capture.

Cloudhawk found a hole in the ground to hide away in. It was a situation he found disturbingly familiar.

He thought back to when he was fifteen and collecting scraps, not so long ago. It felt like he was that helpless kid again, cowering in a hole, hiding from the dangerous creatures of the wastelands. The danger that hunted him now was far more threatening, but he wasn't the scavenger boy from before either.

He covered himself in dirt, regulated his breathing and tried to slow his heart rate. He relaxed every muscle in his body like a creature preparing to hibernate, perfectly silent, perfectly dormant. This level of control over body systems, muscles, even pores,

was something only an accomplished control metahuman could pull off. Cloudhawk had improved so much since his escape from Blackflag Outpost, it was like night and day.

Twenty hours passed.

The soldiers hunting Cloudhawk were tired. All of that anger and nothing to vent it on made them more and more agitated. They spread out their search to cover a larger area, growing bolder, but no trace of the traitor could be found.

It was dark, still several hours before dawn.

Cloudhawk felt now was his best opportunity to flee. A patch of dirt stirred and a figure wriggled free into the darkness. He felt like the dead clambering from the grave, heavy and uncoordinated. His joints creaked and popped, and over the next few minutes his nerves, muscles, breathing and heart rate slowly returned to normal.

He breathed a mouthful of fetid air.

His wounds had already begun to heal and his mental energy was recovered. His nerves and muscles returned to working order. The first sensation to wash over him was a burning thirst, for it'd been two whole days without a sip of water.

The thirst didn't bother him, but the soldiers had been busily searching for more than a day without rest. They were certainly worse off.

Cloudhawk shook himself, causing his cloak to flutter and dust to fall in clouds. He slipped from his hiding place to the rocks below and without stopping disappeared into the night like a bat.

A few moments later, two Skycloud soldiers drew near. Both looked dejected and short of temper.

The shorter one muttered from behind his companion. "We've searched this area a dozen times, the traitor has to be miles away by now. There's no way he's going to show up here, and you know I'm right."

The taller one grunted. "Twenty hours and we've seen neither hide nor hair of'm. He probably has escaped. We've been with the army for a year and then THIS is our first mission? Ugh."

“This damn traitor is an embarrassment to all of us!” The smaller one was visibly angry by this point. “I fought for a posting to this wasteland mission. This was my chance to really prove myself. My girl’s mother was going to have no choice but to let me marry her daughter.”

The taller one cast a glance toward his short and scrawny compatriot. “She’s the prettiest girl in our whole town. What made you think she had any interest in you, anyway? I’m taller and better-looking than you are. She’d be much more interested in me!”

Cloudhawk hung overhead with a large rock clutched in his hands. He blended in perfectly, almost impossible to notice even as the two soldiers walked and chatted directly below. His body went taught, and he slowly pulled the dagger from his belt, with the soldiers were none the wiser.

The shorter one held his glaive in front of him, hands tight on the shaft. The other one held his bow ready, alert. They’d passed this area several times but they were still cautious. They might have been muttering to one another, but their attention was still on the mission.

The small one passed by below. Cloudhawk could have reached out and slit his throat, but he didn’t. While the shorter one would be dealt with, Cloudhawk would be exposed to the bigger one behind. His enemies were strong, and he couldn’t risk it.

The short one chuckled tauntingly as they meandered by. “You keep your distance from my girl, you pervert! I swear on my honor as a soldier that I’m going to marry that woman and make her happy!”

The tall one passed below.

Cloudhawk burst into action, dropping down on him while clamping his mouth shut with his left hand. The dagger in his right slipped through the soldier’s plate armor and dug into his heart, forcing his body to instantly go rigid. Instantly all of his vitality ceased, leaving him no energy to struggle. He couldn’t even warn his friend.

The shorter one was expecting a retort from his friend, and when one never came he grew suspicious. When he turned he was met with a face full of coarse yellow sand that tightened around his throat like a ribbon. He was pulled to the ground completely caught off guard.

But he was quick to react.

The short soldier used his wide blade to cut himself free when from outside the screen of sand two flashes of cold light appeared. A pair of thrown daggers were headed his way. Skycloud armor was more than capable of protecting him, but he instinctively waved his weapon to knock them away regardless.

While he was busy protecting himself from the sneak attack a dark figure descended on him like an eagle. Cloudhawk descended through the pervasive sands like a specter. His knee connected with the only part not protected by a helmet, the soldier's jaw. For the short man the world suddenly started to spin as he spun through the air. Ruins overturned in his vision until he hit the ground with a bone-crunching thud.

Cloudhawk was right behind him and stepped on the soldier's right hand with his left foot before he could lift it in defense. With his right foot Cloudhawk stomped on his elbow. Skycloud armor protected them from blunt force impact, but only up to a point. *Crack!* The soldier's right arm folded at an unnatural angle.

Before he could even think to scream the traitor's knife was at his throat.

He was too fast! So quick and brutal!

His right arm was useless, all he could do was stare at the masked stranger crouched over him. Now he could see how this turncoat could have defeated the two demonhunters. He was a terrifying opponent!

In this moment the soldier didn't feel fear. His mind immediately conjured the memory of a bashful face, a beautiful figure... the girl he would never have.

"If you want to survive this experience you're going to behave. I ask the questions, you answer." To emphasize the gravity of the situation, Cloudhawk pressed the dagger harder against the soldier's neck. The knife had already begun to slice through the top layers of his rough skin. "Where are you from, and what is your purpose in the wastelands? Why are you trying to kill me?"

The soldier was young, maybe eighteen. A new recruit, no doubt. His face was drenched in sweat, most likely from the pain of having his arm broken. Even so, he glared at his assailant without fear. There was only loathing, scorn, and provocation.

Cloudhawk responded to the soldier's hostility with a scowl of his own, and his words

came out as a growl: “I was listening to what you said. I can spare your life, let you go back to the woman you love. All you have to do is answer my questions. I am not one to lie, I swear to you.”

“You think you can threaten me?! Not a chance! You insult me.” The young soldier looked over at his friend, whose blank eyes stared unblinking at the dirt. The sight seemed to enrage him further. “My blood, my flesh, *my life itself*, has always been devoted to the gods. I would rather die in defense of their holy name than live with the shame of being a traitor. You, who cavorts with blasphemers... I don’t expect a defector like you to understand.”

Like a mad mongrel the young soldier jerked upward into Cloudhawk’s dagger. With his left hand, he dragged the weapon across his own throat. Cloudhawk was taken by surprise and could do nothing but watch.

The short man clambered to his feet with blood pouring from his throat. He fumbled through his pocket for a bead, and with the strength left to him threw it high overhead. A second later the sky was split by a dazzling beam of light.

Almighty gods...

Please bless her...

Bring her a life of happiness!

The young soldier’s eyes blazed with the light of zealous faith. He turned his gaze to the heavens, toward the dazzling light that was brief but brilliant, just like his short life. He did not surrender. He maintained his faith. He would die with a clear conscience, just the sort of man she would have wanted.

Cloudhawk watched him collapse to the ground, then stared at the bloodstained dagger in his hand. It surprised him that a common soldier would so desperately deny surrender. The man hadn’t hesitated to give up his own life for what he saw as honor.

Was this what the holy city was? Was this the grace that blanketed the elysians?

Cloudhawk was once again shocked at what he learned about these believers. Every time he thought he understood them, they showed him something new.

Chapter 142

Leaving Forever

Cloudhawk didn't get all of the answers he sought, but the soldier indirectly revealed something important. He was considered a traitor for living among blasphemers.

He understood being labeled a traitor. These visitors from the holy city assumed he was a demonhunter. 'Blasphemers' must mean the Seekers who dabbled in old technology, something they thought to be sinful. Excavating and using these tainted things was, to them, an unforgivable slight.

The 'blasphemers' Cloudhawk was supposedly in league with had to be the Seekers from Blackwater Base. Was that their target? Had they already been there? Was Hellflower alright?!

Cloudhawk had played a tiny part in something much bigger, and still they'd sent two demonhunters and a hundred soldiers to track him down. Cloudhawk didn't want to imagine what had befallen the base, nor was now the time. The young soldier, with his dying moments, had given him away to the others. His compatriots would be here soon.

"I'm sorry." Cloudhawk looked to the two dead soldiers in silence for a moment then began to strip them of their equipment. Luckily, the smaller guard had been roughly Cloudhawk's size, although he was stockier so his armor didn't fit perfectly when Cloudhawk slipped it on. Strangely, after Cloudhawk put on the last piece the armor began to reform itself with a series of clicks and snaps. Afterwards it fit snugly around his person, almost as if it'd been tailor-made for him!

As he was moving the bodies to hide them, a slip of paper fell out of one of their clothes. Cloudhawk picked it up and gingerly unfolded it. Drawn in luminous paint was the image of a girl. She was dainty, delicate and beautiful, with flowers all over her body. The painting released a pleasing scent, and though it was only a picture it was as detailed as though she were right there before him.

On the left side something was scribbled: *For my love.*

It was a present, one the young soldier would never send. Cloudhawk felt conflicted with its discovery.

When the girl discovered that her lover was dead she would certainly be sad. She would be yet another person who would hate Cloudhawk for the rest of her life. It brought a bitter smirk to Cloudhawk's face. *Something else for me to bear, another person's hatred to add to the others that only seemed to grow with time.* But what could he do? He was just a minor figure, one who only wanted to live. That was all he wanted!

But there was no such thing as a minor figure in this world, not really. Strong or weak was only measured by comparison. To lovers, family and friends, even the smallest person was a giant. When such a giant fell, all the world they held on their shoulders fell with them.

Cloudhawk pocketed the picture, then dealt with the bodies. Shortly after the sounds of footsteps preceded the arrival of two soldiers who had seen the flare. They spotted Cloudhawk's bloodstained armor before noting his face. It was too dark to tell anything else besides. "What's going on? Where's the traitor?!"

"Right here!" When they got close enough, he buried a pair of daggers in their throats. Their deaths were quick and uneventful, and suddenly there were two more corpses to hide. He looked over their twitching bodies blankly.

Since when had his heart become so numb? He remembered the grief he'd felt the first time he killed another human. Now it felt so natural...

He was disgusted with the change he saw in himself. Only, they were changes that ensured he stayed alive. Perhaps everyone who survived out here turned into something despicable.

Several minutes later, Captain Bolte arrived at where the flare had gone up. The first thing he saw was the corpses, neatly lined up on the ground, nine of them in all. All of them were his soldiers. Anger flooded him, made him tremble. "What is this?! Can someone explain to me how these soldiers were all killed so easily!?"

One of his subordinates approached and gave the report. "They all seem to have been caught by sneak attacks. I'm almost certain the traitor is disguised as one of us and attacks our people while their guard is down. It's the only way he could have killed so many."

Captain Bolte's hands were curled into white-knuckled fists.

The turncoat had been hit by Mistress Luna's exorcist staff, that they knew. He'd never heard of anyone being able to take such a blow and keep fighting so vigorously. This scum wasn't strong, but he was an adept scoundrel – there wasn't an ounce of honor in him, no line he wouldn't cross. His main tactic was to attack from the shadows, and Bolte's men were dying because they were unprepared.

"If he is dressed like us, we can't know if he's still here or not. Should we keep searching?"

Captain Bolte shut his eyes in frustration. Skycloud's soldiers were not pushovers. Their target shouldn't be able to completely escape detection or injury, even relying on underhanded tactics. There had to be something special about him. He had to be more more than just a simple renegade, and he also couldn't have been as injured as they thought. Bolte's people were tired. If they continued the search under these conditions it would only lead to more dead.

"Return to the outpost!"

"Huh? Why?!"

Captain Bolte's eyes popped open. He gave the impression of a desperate gambler, going for broke. "Do you remember what Master Raith did to draw him out? The traitor is obviously fond of those despicable worms. If we go back and exterminate them maybe we can flush him out of hiding!"

Cloudhawk was lurking nearby. When he heard the man's plan, his face fell. This was bad. He didn't have any particular affection toward Lighthouse Point, but he was tired of all the death.

Killing. It was the choice of the weak and pitiful. It was the most final means of dealing with a problem, and the most lamentable.

Cloudhawk didn't even think, he simply vanished into the night. He wasn't going to give his life to save Lighthouse Point, but to the best of his ability he was going to save as many as he could from pointless tragedy.

He reached the outpost before the soldiers did, and when he got there the scene shocked him.

The small, quiet community had changed beyond recognition. The central lighthouse was in ruins, homes were ablaze. Everything was in chaos and blanketed in a haze of acrid smoke.

“Y-You... what are you doing back here!?”

“Haven’t we suffered enough!”

Cloudhawk’s wounds had not entirely healed, and his hasty return left him both tired and weak. When the citizens of the outpost saw him they were angry, frightened. They stared with wide eyes as he passed.

“What happened here?” Cloudhawk propped himself up with the help of the sturdy Skycloud weapon he’d stolen. He tried to speak with some authority. “Where is Coppertooth!”

“Coppertooth? He deceived us!”

“The elysians are nothing but brutal demons!”

“Convincing us to worship those animals... he deserved a far worse death than he got!”

It was then Cloudhawk lifted his head and was dismayed to see the corpse dangling from the lighthouse’s ruins. It was none other than the honest, kind, cunning Skycloud veteran. He’d been terribly injured by the soldiers, but since then something even more terrible had happened. There wasn’t an inch of him left untouched, and his body was covered in burn marks. He hung from the lighthouse by his neck, swinging sorrowfully in the breeze.

No one knew his real name. They only knew what he’d been called: Coppertooth. He’d been their leader, the one who had brought them faith and safety. In the end it was his own people who brutalized him, tortured him, and hung him from the building that was meant to signify their undying faith.

“You aren’t welcome here!”

“Get the fuck out of here! Leave, as fast as you can!”

A group of young agitators had gathered round. Anger had clouded their minds and they brandished crude weapons with the intent to use them on Cloudhawk.

“All of you, calm the hell down!” All manner of bitter emotions raged within Cloudhawk, especially once he saw what had become of Coppertooth. He hated them for what they had done, but he forced the words out through gritted teeth. “It’s done! Your hatred isn’t going to change anything, and right now those soldiers are coming back to finish the job. If you want to live, get the hell out of this place!”

Thud-thud!

Two arrows sprouted from Cloudhawk’s body. The arrows might have done him in if not for the armor he’d pilfered. The sneak attack was like a call to arms, and all of a sudden the crowds were charging at him with their crude weapons.

He was cast from the town, pummeled by the angry masses the whole way, their faces twisted with despair and anger. They’d beaten him black and blue, even through the armor.

In that moment, something in his heart died.

Out in the desert he turned back to stare at the burning remains of Lighthouse Point. Orange flames and belching black clouds rose over it, a haunting image. The heat made the air twist around it like something evil had taken hold. He wiped the blood from his face and stared with fists shaking at his side. Then he turned and prepared to leave.

“S-sir... sir!”

He turned back to see a bit of rock being pushed aside from the outpost’s walls. A small figure slipped out of the hiding place, small and frail and covered in filth. A girl.

“Asha?”

“Coppertooth is dead. Everyone went crazy, so I hid in the tunnels. I’ve been too scared to go out all day.”

“Don’t be afraid. I’ll take you away from here.”

The two of them trudged into the distance, eventually disappearing across the horizon.

That night, Cloudhawk and Asha camped on the top of a tall set of ruins. Looking back toward Lighthouse Point, they could still see the smoke and fire even from this

distance. Sometimes, when the wind turned, they thought they could hear screams. The stench of blood was unmistakable.

Cloudhawk tenderly rested his hand on the girl's head. "Do you hate me?"

But Asha looked at him and shook her head. "I hate this world."

Could Cloudhawk say he never felt the same? But now, his time in this world was coming to an end!

They were close to the elysian lands now.

Asha looked at him in curiosity. "Where will we go now?"

"Somewhere far, far away." He looked back at her. "We're going to leave this place. We're going to leave it and never, ever come back."

Epilogue

Failure

Lighthouse Point had been reduced to rubble. Skycloud soldiers, their resplendent armor covered in gore and their weapons dripping blood, stalked the smoldering carnage. The sick smell of blood and rot filled the air. The soil was all stained red.

The massacre continued for a long time. When it was finished, there were nearly a thousand corpses lying in pools of blood. It was like a vision of the cruelty hell promised.

Although more than a thousand wastelanders were dead, the slaughter didn't produce the expected result. The holy warriors had suspected there was little chance it would work, but they still performed the task with extreme prejudice. It didn't matter that the cost was innumerable innocent lives.

Captain Bolte stared at the heinous scene. There was no pity in his eyes. He simply shook his head and muttered. "We've failed. Let's go."

The representatives of the gods left, leaving only flame and slaughter in their wake. The fires continued for hours, and then there was only ash.

Around midnight a sandstorm swept through. Wild winds brought an ocean of grit, enough to blot out the sky for most of the night. By the time the sun rose the next morning, most of Lighthouse Point was gone. The corpses of its unfortunate residents disappeared beneath the dunes and only the crumbling spire of its central lighthouse remained – the only indication that something that been there at all. No one would know what happened to the doomed outpost.

In this age, where balance had been shattered, power determined who led. Power determined who lived and who died. There were no rules, no obligations, for those only existed among classes of equal rank. When the scales of power tipped, there were no more rules to govern the masses. There were only sheep and lions. The sheep bleated for fair treatment, and the lions ignored them.

Those born in the realm of the gods were the chosen, a cut above the rest.

Wastelanders were heathens fated to suffer. Killing them was no different than eradicating insects.

It was how they were taught. Even from a young age the idea was reinforced, so deeply ingrained it was impossible to separate from their identity.

A thousand miles away an intense battle raged.

Bodies of wasteland monsters rose like mountains, together with the mangled bodies of holy soldiers. A horde of snarling beasts gathered nearby, more than a thousand.

“Gods above! What sort of demons have these blasphemers released upon the world!”

The Skycloud general’s armor was broken in multiple spots. He stared at the host of enemies with hard eyes. He’d never seen so many creatures together, all different sorts, fighting together. They seemed to be controlled by several figures who stood in the center of the crowd, staring back at the hundreds of bloodied soldiers. In addition to their ferocity and power, these monstrous wasteland beasts were also no less clever than humans.

One of his commanders stumbled over, clearly having taken a beating himself. “General, it’s no use. The more of these creatures we kill, the more come to their aid. If we continue they’ll wipe us out. We should return home with this information!”

The Skycloud general looked over what remained of his troops, only about half of what they’d come with. He weighed his options for a few moments. Then, gritting his teeth against the bitter realization, he gave the order. “Withdraw!”

Skycloud’s forces began to retreat. When the wasteland creatures saw them falling back the earth shook with their triumphant roars. Like a victory cry. It made the humans’ hairs stand on end.

Hyena’s body slowly reverted to its human form. He watched the warriors go through narrowed eyes. They’d been discovered, the holy lands would know all about them soon enough. This time the elysians hadn’t been prepared for his people’s attack, but next time would be different. Their luck wouldn’t last.

Hyena bellowed a roar, a sign for them to fall back. The horde retreated like the tide.

They couldn't remain here, Hyena realized. If his people were to survive they had to find somewhere safe that could accommodate them. Now that they were discovered these self-righteous killers and their almighty gods would not suffer their existence on this earth.

But where? They had no home. The roving horde stopped when night fell over the wastelands. Anxious and hungry the creatures collapsed upon the ground to rest. Amidst a chorus of whines and growls they weakly licked their wounds.

Hyena pondered their troubles, searching for any solution. His meditations were interrupted by a warning growl. Had the enemy returned? Where they being chased?

He sprang up, almost immediately in his beastly form once again. Charging toward the growls, he gathered a group of his intelligent shape-shifting kin. Wendigo, they called themselves. [1] When they saw what was causing the commotion, they were understandably surprised. The intruder had come alone. They hovered three feet above the ground, suspended in midair as though they were somehow separate from reality. A pair of burning red eyes peered at them from a pitch-black, hideous silhouette darker than the night that hugged it. Its gaze felt capable of piercing to the depths of one's soul.

The beasts surrounded it, growling threateningly though none dared draw near. Though they did not have the intelligence of the Wendigo, instinct told them this was a monster they should fear.

Hyena faced the outsider with a dignified and guarded expression. Baring his fangs, saliva dripping from his maw, he spoke in a low growl, "You are the one the humans call the 'demon'?"

"Who I am is not important."

The Caliph of the Sand's body swayed ever so slightly. Hyena felt a gust of wind and suddenly the demon was standing before him. Even with his highly evolved senses he was unable to follow the Caliph's movements. He staggered back a few steps, a gripping fear filling his chest. Hyena knew there was nothing he could do if the demon wanted him dead.

The Caliph appeared to have recently survived a great battle. Strange cracks ran along

his body, but none seemed serious.

“Roste was a genius, the likes of which only comes about less than once in a hundred years. Even I must praise his accomplishments.” The Caliph’s voice echoed around them, raspy like flesh on gravel. It was both gruesome and terrifying, like a chill that settled in the darkest parts of one’s heart. “You and your people are exposed out here. If you do not find shelter, you will die. I can show you the way, help you to survive, even flourish.”

Hyena was not so easily charmed. “How does that benefit you? What’s your goal?”

“Do not worry. I bear no malice. We live in a cruel and lifeless world; I simply like to see some more vitality brought to it. You and your people have great potential. You make me... optimistic.”

Were the demons not merely as the legends described? Only concerned with war and calamity? If this were true, Hyena’s race was a grand investment.

“Go!” The Caliph of the Sands granted Hyena the knowledge of where he could go to save his people. Then, he slowly lifted into the night sky leaving only his slithering voice hanging in the air. “Seek your liberation. Prosper!”

“I leave you with a final piece of advice. You might want to consider choosing a new name for yourself.”

That night felt particularly long, especially for the soldiers marching away from their failure.

Skycloud’s forces trudged back toward their home, fatigued and downtrodden. They had planned to join with another contingent, but as the dawn rose over their planned meeting place they were met with an unexpected scene.

Several ships lay in pieces like enormous jade statues, surrounded by the signs of battle. Soldiers’ bodies lay all around, together with the corpses of countless sweepers. Desolation, as far as they could see. Something terrible had happened here.

But what?

This battalion had been sent to hunt down any trace of the evil research that created those intelligent monsters. These had to be the men Lord Augustus Cloude was commanding personally, so how could this be? The Skycloud general pushed through the crowd, and that was when he found the first demonhunter's body, followed by the second, then the third.

He found it hard to imagine that their best warriors could have fallen into a trap. They wouldn't have suffered such a terrible defeat, even against several times their number of sweepers – and even then, never such a crushing loss as this.

“Lord Augustus!”

The general scrambled over a nearby hillside toward a body on the other side. This body was located at the center of a massive crater, with the hill behind him looking as though it had been sheared off by a massive sword that was hundreds of feet long. It only added the shock and confusion about what occurred here.

The Skycloud commander swayed unsteadily, on the verge of collapse. Lord Augustus was a demonhunter who was famous for his skill, yet here he lay. It was unthinkable.

Lord Augustus was not yet dead, but every breath was a mighty struggle. “Go back. Go back! Leave this place!”

The general's mind was blank. He couldn't even fathom what happened here. He only knew the fear that seized his heart was making it difficult to breathe. The carnage that stretched before him would affect the holy city for decades to come. They had never suffered such a calamitous loss, even without accounting for the loss of their master demonhunter. This would surely cause great change in Skycloud, but what sort of change?

Something was going to happen. Something big was going to happen!

A shudder ran through the general's body. He didn't know what sort of impact this would make, nor did he know what sort of impact it would cause back home. It was beyond estimation, but whatever the case they had to get back as quickly as possible.

At last the dawn came. Light dispelled the shadows that had claimed the vast landscape.

Two figures tread over the dunes, their shadows spread out far behind them over the vast and featureless desert. Thirsty, starving, they stumbled forward with a weak but determined gait, like a pair of insignificant insects.

They fought for every step, each one more likely than not to see them collapse. Yes, they looked insignificant. But still they forged ahead in defiance, firm against the unforgiving wastelands.

1. A name I've given them for ease of reference. HDW called them 'orcs', but they have a very specific look here. I chose wendigo due to their bestial, humanoid appearance and proclivity to eat humans. They're also local folklore for North America where this story is reputed to take place.

RWX's Thoughts

Book one has come to an end. I promised you when we first started this novel that of the webnovels I've read, it was the closest to print-quality novels I've found. Do you agree with me now? This is the end of book one... and it feels like the proper end to a proper, real 'book', doesn't it?

Book One - The Wastelander, is over. Let's all take a week or so to breathe, process, and speculate, and maybe even reread. A week from now, on September 17th, we shall begin Book Two - The Elysian. Some chapters are ready, I just want to give everyone some chance to muse over this great ending to a legitimate 'book'.

Major props to Xiao Lai for being the primary translator for the restart and working with me on this project.



PDF by: traitorAZEN