

★ ★ ★ LEGEND ★ ★ ★
WASTELAND™ 3



★ ARI MARMELL ★

LEGEND

A Wasteland Novella

Ari Marmell

CHAPTER ONE

They came from the winter haze, howling, roaring. Amidst the gusting winds, the rattling sleet, the buzz of their automatics and the thunder of the long guns sounded almost mundane.

Almost ordinary.

It was a lie. About the Monster Army, there was nothing ordinary at all.

Without the veil of that haze, they might, on first glance, have looked less than fearsome. Gimmicky, maybe even just a bit silly. From tactical or motorcycle helmets painted in bestial designs, to balaclavas stitched with jagged lines, to masks of hand-carved wood or age-cracked latex salvaged from the pre-apocalypse ruins, they were to the last of them disguised as creatures of myth, legend, fairy tale, or cinema. In a world where the radiation of the nuclear fire still lingered, where potential famine lurked behind a single bad harvest, where wild and even mutant beasts stalked the edges of what laughingly passed for civilization, such masks might easily be dismissed as a child's idea of intimidation. A ludicrous signature adopted solely to stand out from the other countless raider bands spawned by the wasteland.

Until they were coming at you, screaming, bloodstained, their numbers obscured by the snow. Until their guns and bludgeons and blades proved lethally real. Until one heard the tales, from fear-awed throats, of the empty storehouses and smoldering wreckage that had once been whole towns, the mass graves and scattered bones—some of which, it was whispered, bore the marks of *human teeth*—they left scattered in their wake.

Now, after carving through half the state like so much roast, the Monster Army had come to the outskirts of Colorado Springs, one of the few remaining spots where resources weren't quite so scarce, were ripe for the taking.

But here, too, dwelt the descendants of an entire community of survivalists, men and women who had prepared for this since before the first bombs fell. And one of those men, from one of the greatest of those families, had the will, and the plan, to stop them cold.

Or so he'd thought.

Folding his massive frame tight behind a rocky outcropping barely large enough to shield him from the incoming rounds, Saul Buchanan's will remained as solid as ever, but his plan was melting away faster than the snowflakes against the searing metal barrel of his hard-used rifle.

Around him, Buchanan's ranch hands and soldiers occupied the high ground atop various knolls and hills, or fired from the cover of scattered copses. Between those hills and in the flat plains beyond,

they'd placed an array of tripwires, barbed-wire barricades, punji sticks, even a few mines—obstacles that the defenders would have to clear out before the herds were allowed back out to graze.

He'd known the Monsters were coming for his bison, if not precisely when; had even known—since the raiders weren't exactly shy about their presence—where their base was located, and thus from what direction the attack would come. He'd placed his troops expertly, taking full advantage of the land he'd worked his entire life, terrain he knew well enough to walk blind.

He didn't have a prayer. Not against the sheer ferocity of the Monster Army, against their vastly superior weaponry and ammo stores, collected from a dozen Colorado communities. Not alone.

He wasn't supposed to *be* alone.

"North flank, boss! Allie's unit!" The shout, steady at first but rising in pitch as panic threatened to spread its subtle infection, came from Sergei Greatski, Buchanan's lieutenant and closest confidant. At several inches over six feet and two hundred and fifty pounds, he was still smaller and slighter than Buchanan—almost everyone was—but certainly tough enough in his own right, not a man easily prone to losing his cool. "They've had to fall back to the fence line!"

"Dammit!" Buchanan started to turn, then flinched back as something high-caliber pinged off the rock. "Have DaCosta close on their position, try to back them up! I'd rather lose the woodland over there than the fences!"

Sergei squeezed the switch on his radio, relaying the order. That was his primary duty in this particular engagement: handle communications so Buchanan could focus on both the battlefield before him and the larger one he worked at keeping in his head.

"Anything?" he demanded as soon as Sergei's voice had gone quiet again. His friend knew without asking what he meant.

"Nothing, boss. At last check-in, spotters reported that all roads to town were clear. You know I'd tell you if—"

"Ask them again."

"Scheduled check-in's only nine min—"

"Ask them again!"

Even without looking, Buchanan knew Sergei well enough to picture the scowl, but also the shift of the radio as he moved to obey.

An incoming transmission beat him to it, though.

"Sergei?" The electronic crackle distorting Rita Martinez's voice sounded an awful lot like the falling sleet. "*You reading me? The boss there?*"

"Yes and yes," Sergei told her. "What've you got?"

The interference masked neither the excitement nor the frustration in her voice when it came through again. *"Medusa's on the field, Sergei. Tell Buchanan Medusa's on the field!"*

Sergei didn't need to tell him; he'd heard. Kicking away from the boulder, scrabbling and sliding across the frozen earth, Buchanan fetched up against his lieutenant and snagged the radio from his fist.

"This is Buchanan. Are you sure?"

"Unless they've stuck someone else in her mask, yeah, boss. Positive ID."

Holy shit. The MA's very own commander herself. No doubt she was staying back, away from the engagement, but if they could take her out of play...

"Got a shot?"

"No." Her frustration turned the simple reply into a curse. *"Between the wind and the sleet... Sorry, boss. Don't think anyone in the world could take her from here."*

The plastic creaked in Buchanan's tightening grip. He didn't bother asking if she or one of her people could try closing, get near enough to take a shot they couldn't manage now. If she'd thought there was even the slightest possibility, she'd have said so. "And the rest of the objective?" he demanded instead.

He trusted Rita almost as much as he did Sergei, and her skills as a field leader even more. He'd sent her and her unit around the flanks, assigned to identify the officers, team leaders—anyone in the Monster Army's command structure, anywhere they might be able to cut the lines of communication, sow some chaos.

The brief hesitation before she replied was answer enough. *"No. I dunno how they identify each other in those damn masks, but however they do it, I can't see it. Other than Medusa herself... I got nothing. I'm really sorry."*

Buchanan handed the radio back to Sergei before he could break it in his mounting fury. He'd get the full report later, figure out if Rita'd fucked up or if the failure was legit. Right now, he had to think.

"Okay, we can do this," he began. "We just have to hold them until the others get here."

"Boss?" Sergei tried to interrupt, to speak even as he kept half his attention on yet another incoming report. Buchanan didn't hear.

"Doesn't have to be that many. Just Bleu and Cogan, maybe. We hold the line until then, let the fresh troops hit the Monsters from the flank, draw some attention..."

"Boss..."

“That should be enough to shore up the lines, maybe even enough of a distraction to send a second small team around the outside undetected. I just need to get one rifle close enough to Medusa to—”

“Boss!”

“What?!”

“That was DaCosta.” Sergei raised the radio in a helpless gesture, as though Buchanan wouldn’t know what he meant otherwise. “Allie’s people were down by the time he got to them. The fence’s been breached.”

For a long moment Buchanan said nothing. The constant gunfire in the distance, punctuated by occasional screams, was everything, as though the world beyond the sleet and the haze was gone.

Finally, he spoke. “The traps will hold them. Not long,” he admitted, “but long enough. As soon as the others get here—”

“They’re not coming, Saul,” Sergei told him softly. “You know that.”

“Goddammit, Sergei! I made it pretty fucking clear—!”

“I thought so. I guess we were both wrong.”

He refused, absolutely refused, to let anyone—even Sergei—see the battle he waged internally, the one that made what was happening around them look like a children’s slap-fight. To see the roiling of conflicting emotions, the fury, the pride.

He refused, but Sergei had known him long enough to see it anyway.

“I know what that herd means to you,” the younger man said. “To your family. But how many people are you gonna let die trying to protect what’s already lost?”

Buchanan’s shoulders sagged, so sharply and suddenly that it appeared Sergei hadn’t seen the exhausted nod that went with them. He was going to have to say it aloud.

“All right, Sergei.” The words were hotter, and hurt far more, than any bullet. “Get on that damned thing. Tell everyone to fall back to the main compound. We’re done here.”

* * *

When the first of the so-called Hundred Families—doomsday preppers the world had mocked as paranoid right up until the first bombs fell—had emerged from their bunkers to find that much of Colorado Springs still stood, they’d come together to erect a new gathering place, somewhere for all and sundry to celebrate their survival.

It was, of course, a bar. What else would it have been?

Constructed on the quick out of what was available, constantly repaired and rebuilt across the decades since, it had picked up the name Scrapwood. Even now, with sturdier old buildings and better-designed newer ones readily available, it remained the small city's favored watering hole.

The door, when it slowly drifted open that afternoon, somehow managed to convey the idea that the man beyond had wanted to slam it open instead. Buchanan—who had scarcely slept at all in the two nights since the raid on his herd—stepped inside, clenched jaw jutting before him like a prow, Sergei following in his wake. A few dozen eyes landed on him from a haphazard array of tables and a long length of countertop, and then slowly slid away in a mixture of disdain, fear, or shame, and though conversation resumed as swiftly as it had broken off, the tones were just a touch subdued.

A moment to look around, to make sure everyone knew he was here, to let his sinuses adapt to the constant sting of slapdash spirits, and then Buchanan made his way toward the far end of the bar where a middle-aged woman, leathery and dark of complexion, sat with a large mug and a plate of some sort of hash.

"Ida," he greeted her as he took the seat beside her.

She didn't seem to want to look straight at him. "Saul. How's Livia?"

"Good days and bad. She seems to be past the worst of the morning sickness, at least."

"Glad to hear. That's rough."

"It is. Of course—"

Jed the bartender appeared before them, flannel shirt bulging over a gut that said *I sample all the cooking* and a squirrel-tail-thick beard bristling over a blocky face that said *I dare you to make something of it*. "Get you anything, Saul?"

"Sure. Whiskey."

The man nodded, started to turn away.

"The real stuff, Jed. Old world. Ida's got this round."

She winced but didn't refuse, instead digging into a pouch at her belt for the carefully stamped metal scraps that served as a promise of goods or labor: the informal but universal currency of Colorado Springs.

"Look, Saul—" she began.

"Of course," he said, picking up his earlier train of thought, "she'd be feeling a lot better if we hadn't just *lost our entire herd to the goddamn Monster Army!*"

Again all conversation stopped.

"Saul..."

"You know, I actually thought we were friends. The Bleus and Buchanans, we go back to before the bunkers."

"We are. We do."

"Seems I remember a time, when I was a kid, that the Knoxes damn near overran your farms. Seems I remember Buchanan blood spilling alongside yours, and Buchanan bullets helping you hold fast."

"God damn you, Saul!"

"I thought you understood what I've been telling people, even if most of these fools are too blind. And hell, even if you didn't? I really thought you'd come anyway."

Buchanan reached for the glass Jed thumped down on the bar, downed it in one gulp without looking.

When he put it back, his hands had almost stopped shaking with suppressed fury. Almost. He figured the whiskey ought to take care of the rest.

He had to be calm. Had to be able to talk without throwing fists, much as he wanted to break every jaw in Colorado Springs.

Ida finally turned to meet his gaze. "We are friends," she insisted. "And my family does owe yours, no doubt. But things ain't like they were back then, and you know it. Every Family stands on its own, or they don't deserve to *be* a Family! That's just the way it is!"

"Aw, what's wrong, Buchanan? Running out of people willing to carry you?" The voice, smooth yet mocking, like honey spiked with metal filings, sounded from behind him, and he wanted to curse. He hadn't seen her from the doorway, which means she'd entered the Scrapwood while he was here and he hadn't noticed the door opening.

Careless. Too careless.

Composing himself first, he turned. "Kristen. A pleasure as always."

Kristen Avery was maybe a decade and change younger than his own mid-thirties, and while he had to assume her face was capable of more than a snide smirk or an angry scowl, he'd never seen it any other way—not directed his way, at least—since she'd hit adulthood. Then again, he wasn't precisely full of warm and fuzzy feelings for her, either.

"I hear you got your hide handed to you by a smattering of bandits in Halloween masks," she said, plunking herself down at the far end of the bar and dropping her heavy coat over the neighboring

chair. Her pronouncement was met by an admixture of snickers and frowns, depending on exactly which side of Colorado Springs's newest Family feud a particular patron's sympathies lay.

"You're not gonna find it near as funny when that smattering is coming for *your* property, girl. None of you will! And you shouldn't be laughing now! You'll be missing my bison something fierce in a couple months, when your stores run low and there's no meat to replace them."

"Other farms have livestock, Saul," Ida muttered. "We'll tighten our belts for a season or two, sure. But either you'll have recovered by then, or someone else'll have stepped up and increased their own production. Those can stand, will stand. Just how it is."

Buchanan came *this* close to demanding another drink. *Why wouldn't any of them see?*

He turned back to Kristen, the bar's most recent arrival. "You happen to know where I might find Althea?"

She froze, drink halfway to her lips. "You're not seriously going to... You can waste your own time all you want, Buchanan, but some of us still have property to tend to!"

He ignored the dig. "That a yes or a no?"

The young woman hesitated, but apparently decided that lying or refusing to answer would come across as too petty, maybe lose her points with the audience. "Saw her heading into Dorsey's shop about twenty minutes ago. Probably still find her there." The smirk was back. "If you're willing to show your face around the store."

Buchanan was only slightly more eager to run into a Dorsey than he was an Avery, but he had no argument with most of the shop's employees. Even if he did, at least the Dorseys, whatever arguments they had with him, were civil.

He offered Kristen a sharp, distant nod—and the same to Ida Bleu, who at least had the grace to flinch from it—and made for the door.

Sergei once again fell in, just behind and to the left, as snow crunched beneath their boots and the chill air reddened his cheeks.

"I didn't want to interrupt your conversation," the younger man said before Buchanan had decided whether or not to demand an explanation. "But I clocked her when she walked in. She couldn't have pulled anything without me warning you."

"Other than being insulting as hell to me."

"If you're going to ask me to get involved every time someone does *that*," Sergei replied with a low chuckle, "I'm going to need a raise and at least a dozen dedicated staff."

Buchanan snorted and said nothing more, but at least the very roughest edges of his irritation had softened.

I probably should give him a raise. The grin that had threatened to actually settle across his mouth vanished. *Assuming I can afford to pay anyone at all, the way things are going.*

The buildings they passed were a haphazard assortment of old-world stone and newer wood construction, with a few here and there a mixture of both. The people here kept what worked and replaced what didn't, or what fell apart, with whatever materials they could muster.

Fortunately, construction materials—in the form of unused, half-dilapidated structures—weren't hard to come by. Colorado Springs had been a sprawling city of the old world, but while the nukes had never landed here, radiation, predation, and the starvation of endless winter had taken their toll. The bulk of the city lay long abandoned. With a population less than a tenth of what it had been, it simply wasn't useful, or even feasible, to occupy or maintain the whole place.

Thus, it didn't take too terribly long for the pair of them to cross the bulk of what was *functionally* Colorado Springs, where they found themselves before the massive general storefront, an old-fashioned wooden façade hiding sturdy but pitted stone. The Dorseys' primary contribution to the community.

They were fortunate, too, in their timing, as the woman Buchanan had come to find was just exiting, pulling a rickety cart full of supplies behind her.

"Althea."

She stopped, her expression not unfriendly but certainly wary. Althea Wesson was roughly Buchanan's age, but that was about the last of any obvious similarities between them. She was small, thin, not really built for the rigors of this harsh, cold world. Had survival been a matter solely of physical labor, she'd have been a drain on the community—or long dead.

Althea was one of the most brilliant people Buchanan had ever met, though, with a mind for logistics and organization like nobody else's. It made her not only one of Colorado Springs's leading citizens, but one of the few people for whom he felt genuine respect.

Well, most of the time, anyway. Today, maybe not so much.

"Saul," she said finally. "I was sorry to hear about—"

Buchanan was in no mood for pleasantries. "Would you mind terribly ringing the bell?"

That elicited a deep sigh. "What's the point, Saul? You know as well as I do that nobody's going to change their—"

"I still lead one of the Hundred Families. I still have the right to request an assembly, don't I?"

“Yeah. You do.”

“The bell, then.” And, grudgingly, “Please.”

With a second sigh and an almost invisible shake of her head, Althea hauled the cart around and set off in the opposite direction.

The bell rang out minutes later, from the steeple atop what had once been New Hope Baptist Church and was now the communal meeting hall for Colorado Springs. One knell, an attention-getter; four in slow sequence to signal a non-emergency meeting of the Familial heads; and then a number of peals to indicate the time of the meeting—in this case, six o’clock. It would repeat several times throughout the next few hours, to ensure everyone heard and understood.

Of course, “hearing” and “understanding” didn’t necessarily mean “showing up.”

At six, from the podium, which had once been the pulpit, Buchanan examined the sanctuary with growing dismay. The leading Families of Colorado Springs didn’t actually number a hundred, despite the rather grandiose title they’d given themselves, but they *did* exceed several dozen. Between the leaders and their advisors, lieutenants, and other companions, a full meeting of this sort ought to have come close to filling the massive chamber. Buchanan hadn’t expected that level of attendance, but the place was barely at half capacity. He had a clear view of the opposite wall, with its heavy wooden patches, gaping holes, and scattered tools where the workers doing their latest round of repairs—the church needed touching up almost as often as the Scrapwood—had left off their labors so that the meeting might commence.

Among those who *had* bothered to attend, he spotted as many hostile faces as friendly or even neutral ones: community leaders opposed to his peculiar notions, dismissing them as weak, cowardly, even heretical, or at least allied with those who did. The Buchanan line, and Saul himself, had earned a great deal of respect in Colorado Springs, but he knew well that more people had taken the opposite side in the current feud, and his continued efforts were losing him support even among those who hadn’t.

And speaking of the opposite side, there they were. Seated in the back, whispering to one another and pelting him with disdainful sneers. Kristen, the family hangers-on... and her father.

Henry Avery, God damn him.

Steeling himself, fully aware he couldn’t delay any longer—and that nobody else was likely to show up even if he did—Buchanan cleared his throat and began.

“I want to thank all of you for coming. I know everyone here has a lot of work, so I’ll try not to take up too much of your time.

“By now, most of you have heard what happened out on my property two days ago...”

He told it, as clearly as he knew how. The preparations, the battle, the slow but inevitable loss. He didn’t berate anyone for not showing up to help, but he made it clear as the bell hanging over their heads that it wouldn’t have taken too much more manpower to hold on, maybe even to rid themselves of the Monster Army’s leader.

More than a couple of the listeners scoffed at the accounting, refusing to believe that any “pack of wasteland raiders” could possibly boast the sorts of forces and equipment he claimed—or at least pretending not to believe, if it meant making him look weak—but at least nobody interrupted.

And he was gratified to see a good quantity of worried faces when he broke down what the loss of his herd would mean, just how many pounds of meat the Buchanan bison provided Colorado Springs on a monthly basis. Bodies shifted on old pews and mismatched chairs; mutters and cleared throats echoed in the rafters.

He’d never have a better time to make his point.

“It’s not too late to take them all back,” he said. “If we work together, hit the Monster Army as a unified force...”

More scoffs, several boos, some raucous laughter. Most of it came, unsurprisingly, from Avery and his allied families, but it punctured the fragile bubble of concern Buchanan had been building.

“Would you just hear me out?” he demanded, and though his voice remained strong, he felt he’d drifted way too near to begging. His face flushed. He hoped they’d all attribute it to passion and anger, rather than shame. “I brought written copies of the agreement I’m proposing. A Colorado Constitution. You’ll see—”

The objections and mockery grew louder still.

“You’ll see,” he tried again through gritted teeth, “you’re not giving up any of your freedoms, any of your self-sovereignty! It’s just a pact to support one another, to—”

“You’re a sorry sort of coward, Buchanan!” The man who’d shouted, rising to his feet, was Morton Reed, an old and cantankerous fellow who *could* have been objecting in his own right. The fact that the Reeds and the Averys were close cousins, though, and that Henry’s father had grown up Morton’s best friend, left Buchanan little doubt as to who he actually spoke for.

“You weren’t strong enough to protect what was yours,” Reed continued, “and now you want us to bleed for you to get it back. Simple as that, and shameful!”

“I’m not the only one who—”

“This ain’t what our fathers wanted, and I’m old enough to know! I grew up in the bunkers, listenin’ at the knees of the men who kept us alive when the world died! They stood tall, each on their own! They knew a man’s gotta be strong enough to thrive alone!”

Buchanan’s fingers clenched tight on the podium. “It won’t just be Buchanans going hungry, Morton!”

He couldn’t quite hear the entirety of the older man’s response through the blood pounding in his ears, but he got the gist. The same prepper-worshipping bullshit Ida had spouted at him in the bar. Belt-tightening for a while, other people stepping in to fill the need, their own herds would grow as the Families paid and traded with them, Colorado Springs would actually grow stronger in the long run, blah, blah, blah. Other voices joined in the chorus, and though a few of them disagreed with Reed’s tirade, many more were raised in his support.

And then Henry Avery stood, and the church went silent.

“Some of us haven’t forgotten,” he said, arms spread to encompass everyone sitting around him, “what it was like the last time someone thought they ought to be in charge. How the warring Families almost tore Colorado Springs apart before we had a chance to rebuild. We trade with each other but stand alone, not just because it’s how our forebears wanted it, not just because it makes us strong, but because we’ve seen what happens when we try any other way. A man who loves this community as much as you want us to think you do would remember that.”

“I do remember that, Henry,” Buchanan growled. “I’m talking about something different, something new. It’s not going to go like it did then.”

“Well, you’re right about that, Buchanan. It’s not.” With that, Henry Avery turned and all but paraded from the hall, Kristen and the rest of his cadre following behind. Morton Reed and his own people were next, and then more.

True, most of the audience were polite enough to wait until the assembly had formally ended, but the message—not merely from the Averys, or even their allies, but from nearly all of Colorado Springs—was unmistakable.

* * *

The last of the Family matriarchs and patriarchs were gone from the hall. The workers had returned, saws buzzing and hammers driving, hoping to regain a bit of time that the futile gathering had cost them.

Saul Buchanan sat on the steps beside the podium, idly twisting the handle of a sixteen-pound sledge some mason had left against the wall. Back and forth, left and right, hand to hand, like a man hypnotized.

After God only knew how long, Sergei settled beside him. "That could've gone better. Sorry, boss."

"It *should* have gone better." Twist. Twist. Twist. "They're fools. Blinded by idol worship of how they *think* our grandparents lived. I *knew* my grandparents, Sergei."

"I know, boss."

"My great-aunt Ellen, too. She was a professor before the bombs. Smartest woman this town's ever seen. Knew more than any ten of these morons' forebears."

"Yeah."

Buchanan heard the *You've told me all this* even though Sergei was far too polite to utter it aloud. He bit the tirade off before it truly began.

It mattered, though. Their history mattered. The truth mattered.

Especially if they were going to last long enough to make their own history.

"I'm done, Sergei."

Judging by the twist of his lip, whatever the younger man heard in Buchanan's voice, he didn't like. "Done?"

"Done playing their game by their rules. Things have to change around here. If they'd rather be dragged than help clear the path, that's their call."

He stood, letting the hammer fall back against the wall. For the first time in days, he felt something other than sheer rage. He felt *hopeful*.

"Time for Plan B."

Sergei looked puzzled for a moment, perhaps trying to figure out just what Buchanan was talking about—and then launched to his feet as though stung by something. "Are you serious?!" Then, at his elder's narrowed glance, "Boss... Saul. I thought you were kidding."

"I told you half a dozen times I wasn't."

"I know, but..." Sergei flailed his arms as he struggled to keep up with Buchanan's sudden march toward the door. It would've been comical if his face wasn't so twisted in agitation. "This isn't smart, Saul. This isn't *right*."

Only when they were outside, the electric glow of the streetlights reflecting off the snow and the cloud cover above, did Buchanan stop and face his friend once more.

“Colorado Springs can’t go on like this. It needs a cause to unite it. More than that, it needs a story to *keep* it united, give it something to be proud of. The start of a new history.

“We’re doing this for everyone here. For our home. That *makes* it ‘right.’ And ‘smart’ is all about how we pull it off, isn’t it?”

“But—”

“I need you with me on this, Sergei. Are you?”

“I... Yeah. I mean, of course. Always.”

“Then let’s get moving already. I want to check on Livia before she’s out for the night, and we’ve got a lot of prep ahead of us.”

CHAPTER TWO

Despite the near-constant overcast, several relatively dry days in a row had melted a portion of the accumulated snow. What remained formed snaking paths of dirty off-white along grassy plains and old roads, punctuated by uneven heaps beneath the thicker foliage.

Lying flat atop a small rise just within the tree line, Buchanan and Sergei watched a trio of masked figures proceeding slowly along a cracked and jagged length of highway. Sergei held a sleek, fearsome rifle to his shoulder, peering through the scope. Between the clouds and the branches, both men were confident that no glint of sunlight off the glass would give away their position.

Buchanan wore a pistol and a combat knife as his only weapons, or at least his only visible ones. He didn't anticipate keeping them long.

About time to get started, I guess. It was a shame, when all was said and done, that he wouldn't be able to tell anyone about this part. It was a damn clever plan—assuming it worked, anyway. But it would ruin the story he needed to tell.

Oh, well. I'll just have to be clever again, in public.

"One more time," Buchanan whispered.

If Sergei found the repetition exasperating, he kept it from his voice. "'I don't think you want to do that' means a warning shot. 'You really shouldn't do that' means put holes in heads."

"Good."

"And you running away screaming, or bleeding out under a tree, means put holes in heads very fast."

"Your confidence is what inspires me to keep going, Sergei."

"Delighted to hear it. You know this is crazy, right, boss?"

"So you've said. Over and over and over again."

"Figure it might eventually sink in."

Buchanan nodded, waited until a curve in the terrain hid the patrol briefly from view, then stood. "Maybe. Try again when it's all over."

"Boss? Don't get shot."

"That's sort of an unspoken assumption of all my plans."

"Yeah, but today?" Sergei gestured toward Buchanan. To any observer, it would've been patently unclear what he meant. Buchanan, though, understood perfectly. "Today, *really* don't get shot."

Buchanan jogged down to the highway without further reply, pulling on his own mask as he went. It wasn't an exact match to anything they'd seen the enemy wearing, but then, it wasn't supposed to be. This mission wasn't an infiltration.

Not exactly.

By the time the patrol wandered back into view, some fifteen or so yards away, he was waiting for them, hands held wide enough to show them empty, not quite raised enough to suggest surrender.

"Afternoon. Can we talk?"

They froze, all three of them, in their monster masks, then trained a rifle and two machine pistols on him. Despite his certainty, Buchanan felt a single line of sweat trickle down one side of his face.

A complete stranger in their territory, less than a mile from where the Monster Army made their headquarters, wearing a welding mask painted with a jack-o'-lantern's gaping eyes and slash-mouthed grin, not attacking, not sneaking, not running. A band half as organized as the MA had proven themselves would want to find out more, a *lot* more, about what he was doing here before making any decisions. Particularly any irreversible ones.

But even the most disciplined army—and the MA, while more so than most raiders, was hardly that—had their jumpy, nervous members.

Buchanan stared down a trio of barrels. A trio of masks stared at him.

"I have a deal for you," he told them. "Something a hell of a lot more lucrative than raiding border farms."

One of the patrol, wearing a faded green latex mask with dark hair and weird bolts in its neck, gestured with his weapon. "So let's hear it."

"Not you personally. I want to speak to Medusa."

"Man, fuck you! You think she takes *visitors*? How about we start putting bullets in your joints until you talk?"

Sigh. So soon with the threats. Buchanan found himself a tad disappointed, though unsurprised. "I don't think," he said, "you want to do that."

The frozen soil between the patrol leader's feet burst upward in a miniature geyser at the impact of Sergei's single, silenced round from deep within the wood.

Give them credit, they didn't panic. All three dropped to their knees, two scanning the trees, eyes and barrels tracking, while the third kept his weapon trained on Buchanan.

"If I was your enemy, at least one of you would already be dead, and you know it."

“So would you!” one of the Monsters spat back from behind the wood-carved face of an Asian dragon.

“Right. So this *really* doesn’t make sense unless I’m telling you the truth, does it?” Then, at their silence, “Take me to Medusa. If I *am* telling the truth, she’ll probably reward you. If not, you get to watch whatever she does to me.” Another pause. “Or we can all die together right here. Not my preferred option, but I can work with it. Just make a decision.” And finally, sarcastically, “It’s cold out.”

As Buchanan had anticipated, counted on, prayed for, the sentries decided, after a moment of whispered debate, that this was above their pay grade. Take him to Medusa, let her decide what was what.

Also as he’d anticipated, but was rather less thrilled about, they insisted on carefully searching him first. They took his pistol, his knife, a handful of utility tools he’d frankly forgotten he had on him, and the radio he’d kept in an inner pocket, with which he’d kept an open channel to Sergei.

He knew his lieutenant would shadow them as far as possible, ready to open fire if anything went wrong. He also knew there were limits to how far Sergei could go.

Well, either this would work out in his favor, or it wouldn’t. If the latter, at least he wouldn’t have to argue with muleheaded townsfolk any longer.

He shook his head and retreated a step, though, when they reached for his mask. “No. When this is all said and done, Medusa and I’ll both be a lot happier if she doesn’t know exactly who I am.”

Dragon mask shrugged. “Whatever. We’ll see who you are when you’re dead anyway.”

It took some time, marching back along the highway, for them to reach the home base of the Monster Army. The structure was massive but dilapidated, covered in the scars of years. Once upon a time it had been a shopping mall, some miles beyond the city limits even when Colorado Springs had been far larger than it was today. The parking lot beside it was so full of vehicles—some recovered and refurbished pre-war classics, others made up of jury-rigged junk from countless different sources, and a few even drawn by livestock or prisoners rather than engine-powered—that it almost appeared the center was still in business.

It was also surrounded by a disturbingly large contingent of monster-masked guards, with whom Buchanan’s escorts constantly exchanged an array of passphrases and countersigns. A good thing he’d ditched his first idea of simply ambushing a patrol and sneaking in wearing their garb. He’d have been screwed at the first meeting.

Once they'd stepped inside, entering the small chamber between the inner and outer doors—doors that had once been nothing but glass, since replaced with heavy sheets of scavenged steel—the latex-masked patrol leader ordered a halt.

“Hold him here.” With that command, the patrolman and one of the mall sentries opened the inner door just enough to slip through, sliding it shut again behind them. Buchanan caught a glimpse of broad chambers, probably former storefronts, with all manner of masked raiders and ruffians laughing, joking, eating, drinking, and performing various other –ings within. The brief gust of air from inside smelled of leather, gun oil, roast meats, and, more than anything else, the sweat of countless unwashed bodies.

“Got any cards?” Buchanan asked the remaining guards. He somehow felt the disdainful expressions behind their masks, even though he couldn't see them.

He'd lost track of time before the other two finally returned and led him into the mall proper. The atrium beyond was nearly empty now, and the masked raiders who remained stood with weapons ready.

“You folks didn't need to get all gussied up on my account,” Buchanan told them as he passed.

Through the chamber, around old, sagging counters, out into a great hall with more former shops gaping open like missing teeth on either side, until finally they led him into what had once been the food court.

Scores of the Monster Army had assembled here—standing, sitting on chairs or tables, crouched on the countertops of what had once been tiny restaurants.

And in the center of it all, seated on a raised dais that had once been a decorative fountain, was Medusa.

She reclined in a chair of welded scrap-iron that was almost a throne, gazing down at her forces and at Buchanan himself. She wore hammered metal chest armor over heavy leathers, and her mask glimmered, made of—or at least covered with—an array of hand-placed scales, reptilian and feminine at once. It boasted, as well, a wild mane of stringy black hair, from which an array of wrought-iron serpents coiled. Buchanan couldn't help but feel it would be impossibly unwieldy, until he realized that the snakes were part of the chair, not the mask itself.

It was, he had to admit, an impressive look.

Almost as impressive was the second figure looming over her shoulder, over her winding metal snakes. Face hidden by a mask of scales similar to Medusa's own, it was something Buchanan had rarely seen in all his adult days: someone larger than even he. The man had to be seven feet tall, with

shoulders more like a bison's than any person's. Buchanan wouldn't have been remotely surprised to find, beneath that mask, not a human face at all, but some fallout-spawned mutant or gleaming machine.

"I appreciate you seeing me," he said, turning his attention back to the occupant of the makeshift throne.

Medusa's response came in the rough, ragged voice of someone who greatly enjoyed smoking something or other that the human throat wasn't really equipped to handle. If it was an affectation to go with the mask, as opposed to genuine, it must have been agonizing to maintain. "You made my boys curious enough not to split your skull outright. That makes *me* curious."

"I'm glad to hear it. You're obviously as wise as you are—"

"It's not too late for the skull-splitting option, though, so cut the bullshit." She leaned forward, and a shift in her mask somehow suggested the beginnings of a wry grin. "And I don't think you really have any more love of the empty pleasantries than I do."

"Honestly, no," Buchanan replied with genuine relief. "They were about to make me gag."

"Then get to it. Who are you, what do you want, and why shouldn't I just have you shot in the knees and then find something in the woods to eat you alive?"

"I'm a man of importance in Colorado Springs. That's all you need to know about who I am."

"Not sure I agree, Man of Importance. You told my people we'd both be happier if I didn't know. Why is that?"

"That... might have been a bit of a fib on my part to get me here, Medusa." Buchanan reached up to tug on his own mask a bit. "*I'm* happier with you not knowing, and you'll be happy enough with my proposal to let it slide."

A wave of angry muttering and shifting bodies rippled through the assembled audience, and the giant behind her shifted, leaning forward.

"Not off to a promising start, here," Medusa warned.

Buchanan bulled on, undaunted. "You've hit a few of the larger properties on the edge of Colorado Springs, but that's only going to be worth your time and effort for so long. And the town itself? We're armed and equipped enough to make it a tough go for you. We may very well hold you off, and even if we don't, you'll lose more in lives and equipment in the effort than the attempt would be worth.

"*But* there's the power plant. It's owned and operated by the Avery family, supplies pretty much all of Colorado Springs's electricity. You take that, you demand tribute to keep it operating. An... electric

bill. You'll make a *lot* more in the long run than you could ever get from a raid, without the constant risk, and you can keep it going long term."

Medusa snickered. "And this power plant is just waiting, defenseless, for us to walk in and take it, I'm sure."

"Not at all. It's waiting, with incredibly heavy defenses, for you to take it. Defenses that I, as a... 'Man of Importance,' have seen firsthand, several times. It's got holes, if you know where to look for them."

Silence, for a long moment. "And you expect me to believe you're willing to share that information? Just like that?"

"I'd have come a long way for nothing if I wasn't."

"Why? And be convincing, because right now this sounds like an utter crock. Or a trap."

"No trap. And I'm happy to let you have your scouts watch the plant for as long as you like before moving, to verify everything I tell you."

"Oh, I'm so glad I have your permission."

"As for why? Internal politics." This much was true. "And I want a cut of the tribute." That part was sheer hogwash, but it would sound believable enough to people like the Monsters. "Not a lot, just a steady income."

"Hard to do without knowing who you are."

"We'll arrange a code word for my messengers to identify themselves, or something."

Medusa scratched her chin, as though the mask and the scales were her actual skin. "It's not the worst plan I've heard, assuming the intelligence you provide is at all accurate and actually does show some exploitable weakness."

"Good. So shall we—?"

"What seems like an even better plan, though, is for you to give me the information for free. I have people who'll be more than happy to *persuade* you to share." Multiple vicious laughs from the surrounding Monsters followed. "And don't think you're too tough for that, Mr. 'of Importance.' Everyone breaks, sooner or later."

Buchanan nodded. He'd have been a fool not to anticipate something like this. "You can give that order, sure. And then quite a few of your people will be dead—maybe you along with them—and my intelligence will be lost."

This time, the laughter included Medusa herself. "Think quite highly of yourself, don't you? And I suppose you'll commit this incredible feat of violence with your bare hands?"

“Nope.” Buchanan reached to his chest, took what looked like part of his coat, a simple flap of fabric for opening a pocket, between his thumb and forefinger. “With this pull-tab. Which will trigger the couple yards of det-cord sewn into the lining of my jacket.”

Which had been—beyond the obvious—why Sergei had been so worried about the possibility of Buchanan being shot.

Several of the nearby Monsters jumped to their feet. Medusa’s massive companion clenched his fists. Even she recoiled. “You’re bluffing!”

“Det-cord’s not the strongest explosive,” Buchanan continued mildly, “and I admit I’m not an expert. I’m told this amount will take out a decent number of folks in my immediate vicinity, though. Your *best-case* scenario is that you walk out of here with nothing. And I’m strong enough, and fast enough, that I bet I can get close enough to you—even with your pet ogre beside you—that you don’t get your best case.” Then, as those around him began to shift, “Uh-uh. Stay still.”

Countless eyes watched Buchanan. Buchanan watched Medusa.

“There’s no call for any of this, though,” he said. “Work with me. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

Medusa stood—and gestured at her people, a slow, calming wave. *Stand down.* “You’ve convinced me you think things through, if nothing else. Maybe not so much that you’re *sane*, but that’s not a requirement. Tell me about this plan. Tell me enough to make me believe it’s sound, and we have a deal.”

He’d never have admitted it, but Buchanan felt the knot of tension that had gathered in his gut begin to unravel. He didn’t release his grip on the pull-tab, though. Not yet. “Ultimately, it’s all about their schedule...”

* * *

Worn tires screaming against cracked asphalt, exhaust pipes belching thick smoke as the engine chugged and gasped at the unaccustomed exertion, the ancient jalopy of a truck raced down the mountain road.

Decades-old potholes jarred the frame, sharp turns threatened to send it tumbling off-road, and still the drivers pushed the rattling contraption ever harder. Occasional chunks of coal flew from the load piled high in the bed.

A few miles ahead of them waited the high-walled and heavily fortified sanctuary of the Avery power plant. And behind them, hooting and hollering and firing occasional wild shots while hanging

from the windows or open sides of their own slapdash vehicles, the soldiers of the Monster Army slowly closed the distance to their prey.

Standing on the edges of the Southern Rocky Mountains, the multi-winged plant was both fortress and generator, constructed with equipment salvaged from several pre-war installations—primarily the Manitou Hydro Plant and the Drake Power Station. Luther Avery, father of the current Avery patriarch, could probably have provided the new, smaller Colorado Springs with sufficient electricity via either hydroelectric power or coal, but had opted, due to his prepper background, to make use of both rather than relying solely on any single method.

Which meant, of course, that while the water was happy to deliver itself, the Averys had to go mine for said coal and transport it to the plant. As a truckload of fuel would make a tempting target for raiders even before a force as large as the MA had moved in, the family, along with the leaders of Colorado Springs, kept their delivery schedules a closely guarded secret.

As of today, the secret was clearly out.

From guard towers atop the wall, Avery's security staff spotted the coal truck and its pursuers while they were still a good way off. Alarm klaxons sounded, red lights flashed, and several score heavily armed soldiers sprinted for their defensive positions. Machine guns covered the main gate, which rumbled open to receive the fleeing truck, and emergency pistons engaged, ready to slam it shut again at speed before the bandits could follow the truck in.

And indeed, that was precisely what happened. The coal-bearing vehicle careened down one slope, chugged up another, and sped through the gaping portal. A massive slab of steel shot across the gap with a terrible *clang*, and the sentries opened fire even as the Monster Army vehicles peeled off, finding cover behind trees or rocky outcroppings in the small valley or along the banks of the chilly river.

Avery's people ceased firing, but nobody let their guard down just yet. It'd be foolish for the Monsters to lay siege to the plant's defenses, but that didn't mean they wouldn't give it a go before wising up and leaving. But at least all the security training and drills had paid off; everything had gone like clockwork, and the truck was safe inside.

Just as Buchanan and Medusa had planned it.

Henry Avery was a suspicious bastard, and this plant represented not just power for Colorado Springs, but his own. Security here was tight as a drum, with constant checks even among people who knew each other's faces well, saw one another every day. If that coal truck had arrived on any normal afternoon, soldiers would have examined driver and passenger thoroughly, demanding the day's pass codes and other forms of ID.

With bullets flying and the enemy charging, though? Who had time for that sort of thing?

Watching carefully for the Monster Army's next move, it never occurred to the guards to look behind them, and few of them even registered when the driver cut the truck's engine and the cab doors opened. Nobody saw that the plant uniforms worn by the two men still sported bloody holes, nor that several masked raiders—including Buchanan and Sergei—rose from beneath the coal in the back, automatic weapons in hand...

* * *

Taking the gate, then opening it wide and sabotaging the mechanism, had proved easy. Now, with the Monster Army's raiding party inside the walls, the operation might take a while, might very nearly drown in blood, but its conclusion was inevitable.

Which didn't mean things still couldn't go sideways for Buchanan's larger plan.

"Hey!"

He squeezed off a round over Sergei's shoulder, a risky shot even for a marksman of his skill. The soldier who'd been about to put a burst through the younger man gurgled once, then collapsed.

"You're hesitating!" Buchanan barked through his jack-o'-lantern welder's mask. "Get on the goddamn ball!"

"I'm sorry, Saul, I... These are Coloradans! Most of them aren't even Averys, they're just employees! We're shouldn't be—"

Buchanan stepped in, shoving his friend up against the blood-spattered doorway. "First," he hissed, "no names! We've been over this!"

"Sorry." Sergei's own expression remained invisible behind the undecorated motorcycle helmet that was his only concession to anonymity, but the tone of his response suggested he was, while upset, rather less contrite than Buchanan needed him to be.

"And second, if the bigger picture here isn't enough to get you to squeeze the fucking trigger, keep in mind that as far as these people are concerned, you and I are just two more bandits, and they *will* kill you if you let them!"

"I... Yeah. I know."

"Then *act* like it! We—"

The radio at his belt, marked with a snakelike symbol and set to a specific channel reserved for command staff on this particular operation, crackled and beeped.

That symbol was, he'd come to learn while planning the raid, why Rita and her team had never been able to identify the Monster Army's rank and communications structure. With the exception of her gargantuan second-in-command, Medusa's lieutenants and other team leaders, called Skinwalkers, looked exactly like everyone else in the group. No special badges or uniforms, and they even changed masks regularly. Only their specially marked radios, tuned to secret frequencies from which they could receive orders from Medusa herself, marked them as officers. It not only kept enemies from recognizing them, but also meant the Monsters themselves were never entirely sure when their leaders' eyes were watching them.

It was that uncertainty, more than any particular training, that kept these raiders so much more disciplined than the norm.

Medusa had recognized the need for her anonymous ally to serve a command role here, but she'd made it clear in no uncertain terms that this radio had better be returned at the end of the operation. No excuses short of "Mr. Man of Importance" already being dead would be accepted.

"What?" Buchanan demanded into the radio.

"Got a band of guards holed up in the storage chamber behind the hydroelectrics," someone informed him. *"Not sure we have explosives precise enough to breach the door without damaging the nearby generators."*

Buchanan sighed audibly, skimming through the mental map he'd been building of the place, looking for options that wouldn't risk impacting his future plans. "Is the door airtight?"

"Uh, don't think so?"

"Then haul over some coal from the other wing and smoke them out! Christ!" Then, with a look at Sergei, "Give them a chance to surrender unless they come out shooting. Won't hurt us to send survivors into town ahead of your ransom note, really let people know you're not to be underestimated." He'd already allowed a few scattered guards to escape into the wild behind him to spread the tale; more wouldn't hurt, and if it made Sergei feel better...

He released the radio button, clasped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know this is ugly. But I need you with me."

The helmet dipped in a nod. "I'm here."

"Good. Come on."

Buchanan wasn't sure how long they spent scouring the plant, nor how many soldiers he and Sergei were forced to shoot. Probably around a half dozen? Sergei would doubtless know for sure, if he

ever felt the need to ask. Whatever the case, by the time the pair of them finally completed their sweep, the last group of stragglers had just been smoked out, precisely as he'd suggested.

The generator hummed in the center of a massive chamber, but that sound was almost lost amidst the rushing roar of the waters below, visible through large, safety-railed pits around the great machine. Buchanan imagined that room usually smelled of the river, of growing things below, of oil and ozone above, rather than the current coal-fire miasma currently wafting about.

A small group of Monsters held the coughing, soot-covered prisoners at gunpoint. Beyond them, through the smoke, Buchanan could just make out the plant's ammunition stores in the room those men and women had sheltered in. Made sense, and he'd anticipated as much; it was one of the few chambers of the plant large enough for such use that wasn't already occupied by machinery.

"All right," he said. "Make sure they've been stripped of all weapons and equipment, then escort them to the main gate and send them on their—"

"I don't believe we'll be doing that, no."

Several additional Monster Army soldiers swept in through the opposite door, Medusa herself in their midst. She'd insisted on participating personally in the raid on the plant, leaving the Gorgon—her giant of a lieutenant—in charge back at the mall.

"I think, instead, we'll shoot them all," she continued.

Most of the prisoners, those not still caught in the grip of a choking fit, stiffened.

Buchanan glared from behind his mask. "That seems uncalled for. They've surrendered. They're not a threat. Besides, we agreed this operation would be under my command—"

"It was, and you've done a marvelous job. And now it's over, and you are in command of fuck-all. I don't mind a few stragglers surviving, but a group this big? After they challenged us? I don't believe letting them go sends the right message. No, it does not."

"I—"

"I also don't believe I require any further input from you... Mr. Buchanan."

Aw, fuck.

Every one of the prisoners turned widened eyes his way, as did Sergei, face hidden beneath the helmet.

Again Medusa's mask somehow seemed to shift to suggest the smirk behind it. "Did you think we don't scout out the towns we're planning to hit? That we didn't know who the power players were, what their rivalries were? You dumb townsfolk gossip about everything to any passing merchant!

Between your mad-on for Avery's plant, your need for income days after you lost your herd, and your general build, it wasn't difficult to narrow down."

I should have come up with a different lie. Goddamn it.

"So, Mr. Buchanan, what was it you wanted us to do with these fine Colorado Springs citizens?"

Buchanan scowled fiercely behind the mask, cursing Medusa, cursing himself. If he felt any hesitation at all, however, any remorse, it never showed. Without a hint of hesitation, he raised his own weapon alongside Medusa's guards and opened fire.

For long minutes afterward, Buchanan stood, watching, outwardly calm but inwardly seething, as low-ranking Monsters hauled away the corpses, washed blood from the walls, checked to ensure that none of the shots fired during the battle or that ricocheted from the stone walls during the execution had damaged the turbines. Others cataloged the ammunition stores in the room beyond, which they would gleefully add to their own, or studied the workings of the machines.

Sergei had moved to the doorway, studying the hall—probably so he wouldn't have to look at what they'd just been party to.

"I figure we'll give them most of the night," Medusa said. "Let them panic a bit at the survivors' tales, wonder what we're doing. Then we cut the power, let them stew another few hours before we send them the light bill. Who do you think, Buchanan? Althea Wesson? She seems like the right person to contact."

"I'm sure whoever you choose will get word out to the others," he told her.

"Oh, no doubt, no doubt."

Buchanan spun on his heel. "We'll be on our way, then."

"Will you?"

He stopped at the tone in her voice, carefully turned back her way. The doorway to the hall was a few yards that way, seconds at a sprint. He could outdraw almost anyone there, probably, and most of the Monsters were distracted with their own tasks, but even so, even with Sergei's help, the odds weren't good. If she ordered him stopped...

"You still have my radio. And we haven't even arranged our code word yet. You *did* want to get paid, didn't you? Oh, but we don't need a code word anymore, do we? Not since your couriers can just tell me they're working for you. By name."

"Right. Yeah."

Medusa barely leaned forward, yet somehow made it look like a lunge. “Heard a lot about you from our scouts, you know. You’re ruthless. Savvy. My kind of guy, really. But it makes me wonder if you’ve got my best interests at heart. Makes me wonder if I shouldn’t kill you here and now.”

He tensed, fingers drifting toward his submachine gun. He didn’t *think* she’d be so foolish—she had to know he’d get a few good shots off at her, personally, before her people gunned him down—but he couldn’t be sure.

“On the other hand,” she continued, “knowing who you are, what you did here? And you one of the most powerful men in Colorado Springs? That’s leverage you can’t buy.

“So go on, Buchanan. Leave. Go back to your life and your bison-less property. Who knows? I might even decide to pay your messenger when you send him, if I’m in a good mood. And you’re going to make sure the townsfolk stay compliant. You’re going to let me know about any move against me or any decisions that’ll affect me, give me any intelligence I ask for. Because otherwise I might just have to let someone know how I took the Avery plant so easily. And I’m pretty sure your good neighbors will take it out on you in ways I could scarcely dream of.”

With that she waved a final dismissive hand and turned her back.

And damn if, for a red-hot searing instant, he didn’t almost do it. A quick grab for his weapon and he’d have half a magazine emptied into her back before she finished her next sentence.

He’d be dead a second later, of course, but the twin thrusts to his pride—her identification and then casual dismissal of him—almost overruled his head.

Almost.

Instead he dropped the radio to the floor and moved to—and then, with a gruff “Let’s go,” past—Sergei’s side.

They walked in silence through the cavernous power plant halls, across the yard, through the main gate already under repair. With every step Buchanan scanned the movements of the Monster Army soldiers, their body language, the attitude at which they held their weapons. Only when they were well down the slope and out of sight of the walls did he relax by even a fraction, certain that, at least for the moment, Medusa indeed meant to keep him alive.

Alive and dangling on her string. *Well, let her keep thinking it.*

With a grunt, he hauled the painted welding mask from his head and sent it spinning off into the river flowing and gurgling off to the right. Sergei’s helmet followed an instant later.

“What now?” It was the first time the younger man had spoken in quite a while. He still sounded a bit distant, as though no longer occupying the same world as Buchanan.

“What now what? We stick to the plan. We may have to push the others to act sooner rather than later, if they want to dally, but otherwise nothing changes.”

“Nothing...? Boss, she knows who you are!” Not quite a shout, but loud enough to startle a few nearby birds from their winter perch among the branches.

“That’s unfortunate, yeah,” Buchanan admitted. “And it might be a problem we have to deal with down the line. For now, though, the next phase goes on as planned. If it works, either she’ll be dead or we can worry about it then. If it doesn’t, I’ll be too dead to give much of a damn either way.”

“Oh, good,” Sergei said. “I knew there had to be a silver lining.”

CHAPTER THREE

Roughly an hour before dawn, the lights of Colorado Springs went out.

So did the heat, which was rather a bigger deal.

Normally, nobody would've been bothered much. In a community such as this, everyone had their own gas-powered generators, emergency batteries, or at least fire- or coal-burning stoves. Those would keep them going for days if need be, and power outages—hardly unheard of, given the age of the equipment and the jury-rigged repairs—rarely last that long. Avery would shout and grumble and curse and get a few extra people up to the plant to help find the problem, whatever it was, and fix it.

Today was different. Today, during the final hours of the night, survivors of the Monster Army's attack had been filtering into town and telling their tales to anyone awake enough to listen. Word had quickly reached several of the town's leading citizens, and Colorado Springs had already dispatched a team of woodsmen to sneak up to the plant and get some idea of how bad things were, how exaggerated the panicked stories might be.

When only a single staggering survivor returned, with Medusa's bloodstained demand for tribute clutched in one trembling fist, the answer was clearly "not exaggerated at all."

According to him, the plant's gate was fully functional and the place was guarded by at least twice the number of sentries Avery had ever used. That still left the bulk of the Monster Army ensconced in their shopping mall headquarters, but as heavily fortified as the plant was, no way the Coloradans could retake it before those reinforcements arrived.

When the church bell rang out from New Hope Baptist later that morning, it came in rapid-fire peals of six.

Drop everything. Emergency meeting. Right the hell now.

The sanctuary was a zoo, packed more tightly than Buchanan could ever recall seeing it—a fact that didn't stop him, tricky as it was, from identifying every single face in the crowd, from heads of Families to the lowest employees. Medusa might still have spies in town, but at least he could be certain there were none at the meeting.

Althea stood at the podium but had apparently given up trying to control the discussion some time before he arrived. People yelled back and forth while a few others sobbed in the background, and the room was sweltering despite the chill of winter beyond the doors. He doubted anyone could even make out what anyone else might be saying. The shouting was, at this point, solely for the sake of shouting. Emotional release, not communication.

Eventually, by leaning into the wall of syllables until it almost supported his weight, Buchanan was able to pick up the gist of things. The situation was more or less as he expected: only a very few Family leaders wanted to pay the tribute. Everyone else wanted desperately to fight, but nobody had the slightest notion of how to go about it. The Monster Army's position was too secure, the plant's defenses too solid.

So instead they argued over why this approach was even more hopeless than that, called one another fools and cowards, demanded answers and explanations they knew nobody could provide, and accomplished nothing.

It wasn't just what Buchanan had expected—it was everything he could have hoped.

Give them another five, ten minutes, let them really marinate in the futility and frustration.

They'd be willing to hear him out then, oh yes.

And then something happened that Buchanan, for all his acumen and all his wiles, had *not* foreseen.

Henry Avery rose from his seat at the rear of the chamber and slowly made his way around to the podium. A few souls quieted and watched him as he walked; the rest shut up when Henry, unable to gain their attention by shouting or even pounding on the wood, drew a pistol and fired a shot into the rafters, much to Althea's chagrin.

It wasn't that his rival had chosen to address the assembly that shocked Buchanan. It would have surprised him more had the man said nothing at all. It was, instead, the meat of what followed.

"My friends," Henry began, sounding perhaps a hair older, more tired, than he had a few days before, "we're facing a catastrophe unprecedented in the history of Colorado Springs. An enemy that threatens the survival of not one Family, but our entire community and way of life.

"I hear you. I hear your fear, and I hear your anger. We *built* what we have! We earned it with the sweat of our brows!"

Sporadic shouts of affirmation rose from the crowd, as though he'd truly become a preacher of old.

"These raiders, these animals, want us to pay them for the right to live the lives we made! That doesn't sit right with me, and I know it doesn't sit right with you!"

More cheers, though a handful of unhappy mumbles here and there served as a reminder that a few of the Hundred Families' leaders weren't entirely opposed to just paying the ransom.

"And we don't have to! My family built that plant, and I can help design a plan to take it back! It's gonna take all of us, though, working together to—"

Buchanan couldn't hold it in anymore. The laughter that burst from his lips silenced not only Henry, but the crowd as well.

"You?" he demanded when he could finally speak once more. "You've got the balls to stand up there, look us all dead in the eyes, and tell us we need to organize? *You?*" A quick spit on the floor at his side—an unpleasant missile that his nearest neighbor had to scramble to avoid—punctuated his disgust.

Henry's glare would have done credit to Medusa's namesake. "You got something to add, Buchanan? Maybe you disagree?"

"Not at all. It's the first smart thing I ever remember you saying. Seems to me, though, that you were the loudest voice raised against the idea of unifying until it was your own property on the line."

"This isn't about who owns the plant! It's about the good of everyone here in Colorado Springs!"

Even Morton Reed and many more of the Avery allies narrowed their eyes or quirked their lips at that one, not quite willing to swallow what the man was feeding them.

Henry apparently sensed that doubt, not least because Buchanan and several others openly scoffed. "It's true! Look, I get why you'd all be suspicious. And maybe..." His faced seemed almost to fold in on itself, as though he'd bitten into a lemon made of wasabi. "Maybe I was wrong, Buchanan. Maybe I should've backed your call when they took your herd."

Buchanan froze briefly, long enough to wonder if this was what having a heart attack felt like.

"But whatever you think of my motives, you know I'm right. Taking back the plant's going to require a force bigger than any Family, any ten Families, can field. And no matter how many of us there are, we're never gonna dig them out of the plant without losing more people than it's worth unless you've got me and Kristen helping to plan the attack. We need each other, *all* of us."

Again the crowd rippled with mutters and nods of assent. Althea stepped up to stand beside Henry, but her attention remained fixed on Buchanan, halfway across the chamber. "He does have a point. I know we weren't exactly receptive when you first raised the idea, but we need to at least consider it now."

"Oh, I get that, absolutely." Buchanan couldn't entirely keep the snarl from his face, his voice. This was what he'd wanted, but not exactly how he'd wanted it—not with Henry Avery taking the lead. "But you'll have to forgive my being a bit skeptical here, Althea. I can't help notice that Henry's not just steered us away from his motives, but right into a corner where he's got an indispensable spot right at the top."

Kristen shot to her feet, shoving between several other attendees violently enough that she nearly knocked them over. “If you think you can just stand there questioning my father’s loyalty to this town—”

“It’s all right, Kristen,” Henry interrupted. “If he’s saying it, you know others are thinking it, and I don’t blame them. Which is why—well, partly why—I’m nominating Buchanan himself to lead the recovery effort.”

It wasn’t the first time that afternoon that Saul Buchanan found himself shocked, but he’d never before found himself genuinely speechless.

Kristen didn’t seem far behind him, though her high-pitched squeak could potentially have been interpreted as a “*What?!*”

“I’m not disagreeing, mind.” The speaker was Tamara Reyes, matriarch of a Family that had, to date, stayed largely out of the Buchanan/Avery feud and remained on good terms with both. “But maybe you want to explain your reasoning there, Henry?”

“Well, it’s partly like I said. It’s my family’s plant, and it’s no secret I’ve been opposed to this whole ‘centralized government’ thing since Buchanan first floated the idea. I want to make it *real* clear I’m doing this for Colorado Springs, not just for me and mine. I can’t think of a better way to do that.

“But more than that, Buchanan’s fought these Monster Army bastards before. I mean head on, not just a few hit-and-run skirmishes. And since he’s been the one pushing for this ‘Colorado Constitution,’ I’ve gotta figure he’s been thinking about how best to govern a bunch of muleheaded independents like us for a good long time now. Even leaving aside anything I’m trying to prove, there’s just nobody else with as good a shot at actually making this whole thing work.”

Buchanan had long since regained his voice, but for moments more he kept his teeth together, letting his thoughts run wild behind them. Every argument Henry had put forth was solid. They were, in fact, with the exception of the man’s supposed desire to prove his motives were genuine, precisely the reasons he’d planned to put forward himself. He *was* the most sensible choice. It’s just that he’d expected to have to debate the point.

He couldn’t reject the offer, certainly. Even if it wasn’t what he’d wanted, what he needed, he would look petty as all hell if he refused, would lose popular support that would prove essential down the road.

But damn if he almost didn’t want to. No matter what the man claimed, no matter what gestures he made, Buchanan truly, deeply didn’t trust Henry Avery.

Straightening to his full height, swallowing his questions and his doubts so they wouldn't show in his face, Buchanan strode forward and stretched out his hand. "If nobody here objects, I'd be delighted, and honored, to serve as military commander for Colorado Springs."

Nobody objected, at least not aloud—anyone inclined to do so had had the legs cut out from under them when Henry had made the surprise nomination—and Henry clasped his hand as though all possible disagreement and conflict were behind them.

Buchanan wondered just how soon one or the other of them would be dead.

"All right, then." He turned to stand shoulder to shoulder with the man he hated most in the world, addressing the congregation. "First thing we've got to do is figure out our resources. I need each of you to go home, meet with your people, and prepare a list of everything you can contribute to the war effort. Weapons and ammo. Tools. Vehicles. Food. Medical supplies. Fighters, medics, mechanics. Anything and everything."

He paused, thinking, then leaned over to speak far more softly. "Althea, you mind playing quartermaster? I need someone to tally everything up and organize it into useful categories and lists. Be a lot quicker than if I have to do all that myself."

"Sure thing, Saul."

He offered a quick smile, repeated to the crowd that Althea Wesson would be their clearinghouse and point of contact. "Have all your information to her by this time tomorrow. I know it's a quick turnaround, but the sooner we get this done, the quicker we can hit the bastards."

"And speaking of," he continued, raising his voice to be heard over the people who were already rising, preparing to leave, "we still don't know how the Monster Army knew when and how to hit the plant." *Well, you all don't, anyway.* "We have to assume they've got spies watching us. Probably not anyone from the community, but folks passing through. Traders, traveling craftsmen. So keep your lips *shut*. Don't tell anyone what we're doing—not even your own people, if they don't absolutely need to know. If they learn we're coming, we're screwed."

Especially if they learn we're coming and I didn't warn them in advance. This whole thing could fall apart quick if Medusa decided he'd betrayed her while she still had time to spill the beans.

The church slowly emptied, small pockets of people whispering and planning and worrying to one another as they filtered out into the winter-chilled evening. Buchanan, Henry, and Althea watched from the podium, joined after a moment by a still-scowling Kristen.

"We'll need blueprints of the plant, of course," Althea was saying. "And any maps of the surrounding terrain you might have are probably more detailed than anyone else's."

Henry nodded before she finished speaking. "Sure, absolutely. Whatever we can provide."

"Like competence," Kristen said, baleful glower fixed on Buchanan. "Smarts. Courage. Maybe—"

"Now, sweetheart," her father interrupted, his tone making the reprimand a mild one. "We're all on the same side here. We need to put all that behind us, give our town's new general all the support he needs."

Laying it on a little thick there, Henry.

Buchanan didn't say that aloud, of course, instead going with, "How are we doing on explosives? I figure any plan to breach the defenses is going to require a whole lot of things that go boom." His family had a small stockpile, of course—such as the detonation cord, albeit rather less than he'd implied, that he'd used to threaten Medusa—but as the owners of the plant, and therefore the ones who had to mine for coal, the Averys had far more call for the stuff than almost anyone else in Colorado Springs.

"Got you covered, Saul. We'll get you a full inventory, but it's a lot. I'd, uh, prefer not to completely take down any of the walls if we can help it, though. Not just for me," he added quickly, "but to keep the Monsters from just taking the place right back."

Uh huh.

"The generators are going to be an issue," Kristen said almost reluctantly, idly digging dirt out from under one fingernail with another.

Buchanan and Althea traded quick glances. "Not sure I follow," he admitted.

Henry was nodding again. "She's right. Those things put out a lot of electronic interference. Radios cut in and out constantly, in and around the plant. Usually that's just a pain in the ass, not anything too problematic. But..."

Now Buchanan understood. "But it means we need to have everything set in advance, because we may not be able to communicate on the fly. And," he added after a moment's thought, "it means no radio detonators."

"Yep. Too unreliable. We can make use of wires, when we're close enough and not trying to lay 'em down in the middle of a firefight, but anywhere else, we're gonna have to rely on timers."

"Have you got any?"

Now it was Henry and Kristen's turn to trade looks. "Not a lot of call for them in coal mining," Henry said. "But we've got the makings laying around. We'll come up with something."

"Assuming," Kristen added, "you know how to count high enough to use them."

Since that didn't really seem to call for a response, Buchanan said his barely civil and deeply suspicious farewells to those two, a more heartfelt one to Althea, and the lot of them went their

separate ways to begin cataloging resources and developing the first seeds of potential strategies in their heads.

Maybe this thing with Henry would work out after all. It would certainly give him a boost among the Hundred Families, would leave a lasting memory, that even his most abhorred rival had wanted him in charge. *Assuming I can find a way to counter whatever the bastard's actually cooking up.*

Reliable as a genuine shadow, Sergei fell in just beside and behind Buchanan as he stepped from the church. Though the dusk was both colder and darker than normal, thanks to the lack of power, the street hosted sporadic bands of stragglers from the meeting. They were all engaged in their own conversations, but however distracted, they were still potentially unwanted ears. Whatever he had to say, the younger man wisely waited until they'd cleared several blocks on their way toward the Buchanan homestead, and the last of the townsfolk had been left well behind.

Apparently, his thoughts had been running closely in tandem with Buchanan's own. "Please tell me you're not buying this 'I have seen the light, united we stand, hallelujah' crap, boss."

Buchanan actually laughed. "Sergei, you remember a couple years back, when a few of the bison got out through the east fence and we spent two days trying to round them all up?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"And remember how we never did figure out what the hell Coolidge got into while he was roaming, but whatever it was gave him those horrible watery shits for a week?"

"Not like I'm ever going to forget that, boss. The barn was damn near radioactive."

"Well, those horrible watery bison shits are about what I figure Henry's newfound spirit of cooperation is worth."

Sergei grinned, but only briefly, before the weight of his concern pulled his features back into the worried frown they'd worn so frequently of late. "So you think they'll betray you."

"Never been more sure of anything. They won't risk the whole operation—they want their plant back—but they're scheming *something*, as God is my witness."

If Sergei felt the need to make any comment about the fact that this whole thing was happening because Buchanan had schemes of his own, he chose to swallow the urge. Instead, he asked, "So how do you plan to stop it?"

"Stop it? Sergei, I'm not going to stop it. I'm going to give them the opportunity of their goddamn lifetime."

* * *

“Was it really necessary,” Sergei asked him as they departed the church two evenings later, after a throat-parching, headache-causing day of arguing back and forth over a table strewn with blueprints, “for you to take on the single most dangerous part of the operation?”

“Of course it was,” Buchanan said.

“Was it necessary for you to assign *me* to it?”

That earned him a rare chuckle.

“Seriously, though, boss. You know half of them just think you’re being a glory hound, right? That it’s all about making yourself look courageous?”

“Let them think whatever they want.”

Such accusations weren’t, Buchanan admitted silently, the night air biting at his cheeks, *entirely* without merit. It wasn’t that he sought accolades for his own sake, of course, but it *would* help solidify the reputation upon which he meant to build the future.

It was more than just that, though. He felt a genuine responsibility, as leader of the operation. He wouldn’t ask a man or woman under his command to take a risk that he’d refuse.

And he had one other reason, besides, a decision he’d made specifically with Henry and Kristen in mind.

“I’ll explain when we get home,” he told Sergei, quickening his pace. “And along those lines, I’m going to need you to make something for me real quick...”

* * *

On the afternoon of the third day after that fateful assembly, in a series of quick, coordinated actions, the citizens of Colorado Springs arrested every outsider in the town and locked them up inside an old warehouse under constant guard.

Not that Colorado Springs *had* much of a population of visitors; perhaps six or eight all told, consisting primarily of traveling merchants. They’d be released when all was said and done, and the townsfolk knew they might have burned some bridges unnecessarily. It was entirely possible, even likely, that none of the unhappy prisoners were secret scouts for the Monster Army. Still, Buchanan wasn’t about to take the risk.

Several hours later, just after dusk, a small squad disappeared into the gloom, heading toward the highway on which Buchanan had first met the Monster patrol. Carrying a large stock of Avery

explosives, their task was to mine that roadway, along with any others that provided access from the rundown mall to the power plant. It wouldn't be enough to *stop* Monster reinforcements, but it should slow them down—long enough, hopefully, to make all the difference.

The Colorado Springs defensive forces—numbering far more soldiers and far more weaponry than they were throwing into retaking the plant—split into shifts and took their positions, or to their beds. If the main body of the Monster Army decided to strike at the town once they discovered they couldn't easily reach the plant, they'd have an ugly surprise in store.

And then there was nothing left but to get to it. With a splotch of glowing silver showing the moon rising high through the cloud cover above, Buchanan led his forces out of town and up into the wooded hills.

* * *

"Haven't you got them yet?" The voice crackled in Buchanan's ear, rather than from the radio at his belt. He and the smaller team he'd led away from the main force all wore headsets, the better to keep their approach silent.

Unfortunately, it meant that, as far as the commander of the larger division was concerned, she could pester her "general" whenever she wanted without fear of consequences.

"You happen to have a copy of the Monsters' patrol schedule you neglected to show me, Kristen?" he hissed back.

"Uh, no?"

"Then I'll damn well have them when they decide to show up, won't I?"

"You should have let me lead that team. I know the area. I could go out and hunt them down instead of waiting for them to come to—"

"Stay. Off. The. Radio."

While he'd rolled his eyes and thought ugly thoughts about cowardice when Henry Avery "volunteered" to take command of the forces remaining behind to guard Colorado Springs, Buchanan had actually been relieved. He hadn't been looking forward to trying to command the bastard in the field, no matter how much Avery insisted that his rival was officially in charge.

Now he wondered if that might not have been preferable to having Kristen Avery along as "lieutenant" and "tactical advisor" instead.

He'd been in no position to refuse, however. The Averys had come through, and then some. Their blueprints of the power plant had been precise, down to the relative strengths and potential weak points of individual interior walls, and their understanding of the surrounding terrain was indeed thorough. They'd produced hundreds of pounds of explosives, mostly in the form of dynamite formulated of their own special blend. It was far more stable than its traditional cousins, and while Buchanan still would have preferred something like plastique, he felt a lot better lugging this stuff into battle than he would standard TNT.

Most of the load he carried at the moment, in fact, consisted of the stuff, along with his radio, his guns and ammo, a three-minute detonator the Averys had provided—and that one special little goody he'd asked Sergei to whip up for him in secret.

For several minutes, the channel remained blessedly silent. So did the night around them, save for the rippling of multiple streams, each of which flowed through the plant's intake pipes, eventually combining into a single current that powered the hydroelectric generator before rushing out as a larger river from beneath the plant. Under other circumstances, that sound might have been relaxing.

Through a pair of nightvision binoculars, Buchanan and several of his people scanned the thick foliage between their position and the target. They'd spent an hour creeping around to approach from upslope, and a second—with more possibly to come—waiting for the right opportunity.

He leaned back, squatting, stretching the small of his back until it popped. This stage probably *would* have gone quicker with Kristen in charge. Her familiarity with the terrain would've let her go out in search of a Monster Army patrol, rather than lurking in wait. As soon as they'd developed a plan that relied on an initial infiltration, though, Buchanan had insisted on leading it personally.

"If we're really going to work together as a unified force," he'd explained, "we need to put past feuds behind us, just like Henry did by nominating me. If I'm to lead the attack, everyone needs to see that I'm willing to put myself directly in harm's way, even though it's my 'rival's' property."

He knew they wouldn't buy it, of course, even before Sergei's warning. They'd assume he was trying to grab the glory for himself, make himself look good to the troops, to the town. Well, as he'd told his lieutenant, that was fine. Let them think it, for now.

Nobody'd protested at first, but a few objections were raised when Buchanan announced that, while the main force would be mixed, he was taking only his own people as part of the separate strike team.

What he'd told them was, "I said we *need* to put old feuds behind us. I didn't say I believed everyone would be so quick to do it. I don't want anyone with me who might think they can curry some

favor with Henry or Morton by lying about my behavior on the mission—or by maybe putting a bullet in my back and claiming a Monster did it. Don't get me wrong, Henry, I'm sure you'd discipline anyone who embarrassed you like that. But that wouldn't help me be less dead."

And of course, since they'd put him in charge, they couldn't really argue it any further.

Oh, he knew what he was doing in the bigger picture, Buchanan did. But right now, at this moment, it meant a whole lot of waiting. Not just for him and his strike team upslope, but for the bulk of the Colorado Springs attack force, hiding in the woods below, still a couple of miles from the plant.

"Hey, Buchanan?"

"For Christ's sake, woman, if it's not important, stay off the radio!"

"Oh, yes, General Buchanan. Of course, General Buchanan. So sorry, General Buchanan."

He felt his fist closing of its own accord around the device at his belt and had to will himself not to hurl it into the stream.

"Tell me, General Buchanan, does enemy activity qualify as important, General Buchanan?"

"What've you got?"

He swore he could hear Kristen debating whether to keep snarking at him before she answered. *"Jeep just passed us moving along the main road. Couple of dirt bikes a minute after. At a guess? Patrols coming back in for the next shift. So you'll probably be seeing a few coming out your way before too long."*

"Understood." Then, though it nearly choked him, "Thanks."

"You're welcome, sir, General Buchanan, sir!"

Yeah. He'd definitely have been happier with Henry here.

She wasn't wrong, though. Perhaps ten minutes later, crunching leaves and snickering voices announced the approach of an enemy patrol. More disciplined than your average raiders the Monster Army might've been, but they were still raiders, not professional soldiers. These men and women believed themselves in no danger, their position completely secure, so they weren't even remotely pretending to take their duties seriously. They laughed, made crude jokes, bragged about past conquests that never came anywhere near to happening; one of them smoked something that smelled an awful lot like he'd scavenged it from a buzzard's breakfast. Buchanan managed to count them—they, like the first patrol he'd ever encountered, numbered three—from their sounds alone.

He drew his knife, pointed silently at Rita Martinez and four others, and waved at Sergei to hold the others here. Then the six of them slipped silently into the underbrush.

"Hey, what—?!"

It was the only sound any of the patrol made, other than a final few seconds of gurgling substantially less pleasant than that of the various streams.

“All right!” Buchanan called softly. “On me!”

By the time Sergei and the rest had gathered around them, Buchanan had stripped the three Monsters of their masks, weapons, and—most importantly—radios. It took only a moment to locate the mark on the base of one of them, identifying the bearer as a Skinwalker, and granting Buchanan access to the Monsters’ command channel.

During the planning, he had justified his knowledge of the Skinwalkers and their hidden radios by claiming he’d tracked down and interrogated one of the raiders who’d stolen his herd. Althea, Henry, and the others had no cause to doubt the story, and if it sounded off at all to Rita, she hadn’t said anything.

A quick examination of the readout, and then he was back on his own radio. “Okay, Kristen. Current Skinwalker frequency is 27.595.”

“27.595, copy.”

They’d discussed the idea of sowing chaos by sending false orders, but... “They’ve almost certainly got a backup channel ready, so *receive only* as long as possible. The longer it takes for them to realize they’re compromised—”

“Yes, I was at the planning table, General. You might have noticed. I was the one who looks like me.”

For the love of... “We’ll notify you when we’re ready for you to move.”

The Skinwalker radio pressed to his ear, Buchanan listened for several minutes. As best he could tell, either the patrols didn’t have regular check-ins, calling only if they ran into a problem, or the time between scheduled checks was substantial. Given how choppy the reception was on those few conversations he *did* overhear—doubtless the interference from the generators the Averys had warned about—perhaps that made sense.

It was, either way, good news for him.

“Okay, move!”

A prolonged scramble through the underbrush, and his squad reassembled beside one of the streams at a spot overlooking the intake pipe. The metal tube was a tight fit, but passable—or it would be if not for the heavy grating and the water rushing through it.

Both solvable problems, assuming the Averys had steered him straight.

Scurrying like ants, several of his people placed an array of small charges around the grating, and some much larger ones along the rocky stream bed. Others went to work with spades, digging a shallow channel in the earth.

As the activity began to wind down, Buchanan stepped over to Rita's side. "You ready?"

"I'd still rather be here with the rest of you," she protested.

"I'd rather you were, too, but I need you where I need you. Go."

Rita vanished into the forest with four more of Buchanan's soldiers following behind her.

"Boss?" The question came from Sophia Kellog, a cousin from a distant branch of the Buchanan line. Like most of these soldiers, she'd been told only the portions of the plan she needed to know—which didn't include Rita's little side mission.

"Contingencies, Sophia. Always contingencies."

She turned back to her own duties, content with that answer. He hoped he was being extra paranoid, that this *particular* contingency would prove unnecessary, but he felt a lot better knowing Rita and her people were out there.

"Everything in position, Sergei?"

"Ready, boss."

A quick call to Kristen had the main force moving. Minutes later, the first crack of gunfire in the distance told them she'd engaged the Monsters.

"Detonators stand by!" he ordered. Sergei and others hefted switches, connected by cable to the charges they'd just laid. Then, into the radio, "Rockets ready?"

"*Locked and loaded!*" Kristen said.

"Firing in three... two... one... now!"

Downslope, Kristen's people fired a barrage of RPGs at the plant's main gate. No way they'd penetrate, but it looked like a real attempt, a logical part of the assault they'd just launched.

More to the point, it *sounded* like a real attempt.

At the same instant, Sergei and the others pressed their own buttons.

Shaped charges carved the grating out of the pipe like prying off a bottlecap. Additional blasts sent heaps of rock pouring into the water, accompanied by a couple of tree trunks, while simultaneously opening up a channel into the newly dug trench. Had the stream been any larger, had it recently rained, such subtle changes to the terrain would have produced no effect at all. As it was, the stream followed the new channel, though it would doubtless find its way back to its accustomed course in a matter of days, if not hours.

But for a brief window, the intake pipe ran empty. And with any luck, the coordinated detonations at the gate and the sounds of the battle raging downslope had concealed every trace of their efforts.

Instantly Buchanan was in the tube, Sergei following and dragging a large sack of supplies behind him while the others held their positions. Every instinct and every urge screamed at him to rush, to crawl through as fast as elbows and toes could propel him.

Not the plan, though, and for good reason.

Instead he held himself to a slow, steady pace, playing out a length of twine behind him. One of his men held the other end at the entrance of the intake pipe. At a precise distance along the unraveling twine, a pre-tied knot would indicate when he'd reached...

There.

According to the Averys' blueprints, Buchanan was now directly beside a storage closet, one that opened up into a hallway behind the hydroelectric generator room. All that separated them was a thin layer of metal and a couple of inches of stone wall.

"Batch two!" he whispered to Sergei. The younger man reached into the bag and passed him another satchel of Avery-brand dynamite, pre-wired into a metal cone to direct the blast. Buchanan stuck it to the side of the pipe with thick putty and retreated back the way they'd come, spooling out wire as he went.

"Shield!"

Occupying the bulk of the bag was a disk of cut steel, which Sergei heaved free with a grunt and rolled toward Buchanan. The scrape and screech of metal on metal was near-deafening in the pipe. Teeth clenched, Buchanan heaved it upright in front of him.

Just to be sure, he had confirmed what the Averys had claimed was the minimum safe distance with his own explosive experts. He wasn't surprised to learn Henry and Kristen had told the truth; it would screw up the operation to kill him this early.

One more moment for the pair of them to don earplugs, and then...

He felt the explosion in his chest and winced as the pipe howled around them like a church organ. He let the shield fall and was crawling again before the dust settled, reaching into a pouch at his belt. While the storage closet had almost certainly been empty, any Monsters in the nearby hall would likely come running at the sound of the blast.

Buchanan had no intention of looking to see if they had or not. The instant the newly formed hole came into view, he pulled a pair of grenades from his pouch—not *all* the mission's explosives were repurposed mining gear—and rolled them through.

An abortive scream told him at least one of the enemy had, indeed, come to investigate the sound.

He and Sergei dove into the now rubble-strewn chamber, submachine guns spraying lead through what had once been the closet door. Sergei stumbled once on blood-slick rock, but between them they made quick work of the soldiers in the hall who hadn't been near enough for the grenades.

They paused long enough to reload, and to hear the rest of their squad scrambling down the pipe, and then moved into the hall, each covering the other as they advanced.

The Skinwalker radio at Buchanan's belt crackled. *"The fuck... that? That sounded... came from inside!"*

Time to do more than just listen. Buchanan handed the radio to Sergei. It was highly unlikely that any of the Monster Army would recognize his voice, especially over the lousy connection, but why take the chance?

"Breach!" Sergei shouted into the mouthpiece. "Breach! They're in the coal storage room! Repeat, they're in coal storage!"

The older man couldn't help but smirk. Coal storage was in the other wing, about as far from the hydroelectrics as you could get.

More of his people falling in behind, Buchanan advanced. Between the firefight at the walls and Sergei's false directions, the rest of the hallway was nearly empty. They encountered only a single enemy soldier between them and their objective, and he was smart enough to raise his hands in surrender.

He got a bullet in the head for his trouble. Buchanan had neither room in the plan nor any particular inclination to deal with prisoners.

Other than a few rear guards left to watch the hall, the entire team stepped inside the massive hydroelectric chamber. Squatting like a multi-ton insect of metal, the great turbine hummed as it turned. Before it, the large gap in the floor surrounded by safety railing allowed access to its undersides, and to the river that ran from beneath it to continue on down the mountainside.

The generator itself wasn't a tactical objective, but the room made for a good staging ground. All entrances were readily visible, and there was no reason for the enemy to be here in the early stages of the siege.

Later, yes, absolutely, since the ammunition storage was located just beyond, but not yet.

“You have your assignments!” Buchanan shouted over the beast’s mechanical song. “Get to it!”

The squad broke into teams, scattering from the chamber. Three of them donned the masks taken from the Monster Army patrol. If luck provided an opportunity, they’d target the front gate itself, see if they could get it open for Kristen’s larger forces. Assuming that proved too much to ask, they’d move through the enemy ranks as long as possible, taking out small groups or heavy weapon emplacements.

Others headed for important junctions, equipment storage, anywhere they could bottleneck the Monsters by holding position or placing charges. One team made for the vehicle pool, another for food and water storage.

All of which left, as planned—and as Sergei had half-jokingly complained about—one of the most vital objectives for the general and his lieutenant to handle personally. Buchanan made one last check of his final pack of explosives, the timer, and the extra surprise he’d packed. Then, with a silent glance, the pair of them headed straight for ammunition storage.

* * *

The blast shook the entire plant. Even the Colorado Springs forces outside the walls and farther downslope felt the shockwave in their chests, in their bones. A column of flame seared away the darkness for long seconds, transforming night into day, and bits of stone that had been the roof above the Monster Army’s stockpile rained over the mountainside.

A cheer ran through the besieging forces. Even those who weren’t aware of the specifics, who didn’t know Buchanan’s infiltrators had just achieved one of their main objectives, recognized that the detonation had to indicate *some* manner of victory, some successful strike against the raiders who’d dared try to take what Colorado Springs had built.

Kristen exulted with them, though not entirely for the same reasons.

Already her mind was working. She hoped that the inner walls had proved more resilient than the roof, that the destruction in the adjoining chamber hadn’t damaged the hydroelectric turbines. Even if it had, though, the generator could be repaired. They could get by on just coal in the interim. And no matter how difficult or how costly that proved, it was worth it.

Not just for the blow they’d struck against the Monster Army, but for finally ridding themselves of Saul fucking Buchanan.

He just had to have the glory for himself, had to prove his nonsensical ideas. Arrogant bastard had *handed* himself to them.

No wires, not for the ammo dump. No way they could guarantee a minimum safe distance, not without knowing exactly how large the Monsters' supply was, how big the blast would be. No, they'd realized early on in their planning that this one would have to be set off via timer.

A timer Henry and Kristen Avery provided.

Three minutes would have been more than enough for Buchanan and his little sycophant to reach safety. Too bad the timer had been rigged so that, no matter how much time it indicated, it would instead blow instantly.

And without identifiable bodies? Nobody would ever know how Buchanan and Greatski had died—just that, at the end of the day, when the battle was done, they hadn't returned.

Don't get ahead of yourself, girl. Wait for it, wait for people to realize they couldn't locate their precious general, wait for the questions to start flying over the radio. *Wait until you're sure.*

Until then, Kristen turned to her lieutenants and, taking advantage of the chaos the blast had caused among the Monster Army, redoubled their assault on the gate.

* * *

"Mr. Avery! Ms. Wesson!"

Althea sat on the steps of New Hope, staring eastward at the brightening glow of early morning seeping through the overcast, the steaming cup of soup in her hands all but forgotten. Avery had been inside, praying or staring intently (and uselessly) at the blueprints, or God alone knew what else. He came dashing outside at the sound of his name, though, even as Althea rose to greet the runner.

The young man was gasping for breath, face chapped red by the chill, and accompanied by several Colorado Springs soldiers who'd met him at the edge of town and escorted him here. Althea opened her mouth to speak, but Avery beat her to it.

"Got a report for us, son?"

He nodded, still gasping in lungfuls of air cold enough to burn. He tried to speak and produced nothing but a series of painful coughs.

Avery scowled, but this time Althea acted first. "Here."

The runner gratefully took the offered soup, sipped at it until his chest had calmed.

"Thanks, ma'am. Ms. Avery sent me to tell you... We've taken the plant!"

Althea felt a fist unclench from around her heart, and Avery whooped aloud.

"It's taken a lot of damage," the runner continued. "She said to tell you we'll be limited to the coal generators for a while, might have to ration power. But everything else should be fixable. She's already got people shoring up the defenses, in case the raiders come back, but most of the survivors scattered."

The two town leaders grinned openly now, at him and each other—grins that slowly faded, as they realized as one that he didn't seem to share in their elation. Althea thought at first it was just his exhaustion, but...

"That's not all, is it?" she asked gently.

"Uh, no, ma'am. No, I'm afraid it's not.

"See, we, uh... Well, they were still looking when I left. So, I mean, it's not *necessarily* bad news. I don't want you to think, that is, I don't—"

"Out with it, son!" Avery barked.

"I—Yes, sir. We can't find General Buchanan. No response on the radio, and no sign of him anywhere. We think... I mean, they think he might be..."

Just like that, the fist was back in Althea's chest. She gawped at the young man, not wanting to believe what he was saying. Then, without conscious effort, her gaze shifted toward Henry Avery.

Whatever he might have been thinking, might have been feeling, he kept it well clear of his expression. But if someone had put a gun to Althea's head in that moment, she would have sworn she saw a twinkle in his eye that came from somewhere other than the morning light.

CHAPTER FOUR

Over half a mile downslope, far beyond the battlefield, the river formed from the outflow beneath the plant gushed and burbled along the uneven terrain. Though far broader and deeper than any of its constituent streams, it remained a relatively placid flow, cutting a gentle swath through the woodlands.

Along the banks, its crackle masked by the voice of the rushing water, a small fire burned. Encased in a shallow pit, carefully surrounded by stones and fed by meticulously collected woods, it belched remarkably little smoke.

Of course, even a little was a risk, but they had to take it. The river might not be fast, it might not be deep, it might not be violent, but by God it was *cold*.

"Explain something to me," Sergei said, hunched over and hands extended above the warming flame. He and Buchanan had already stripped off their wet garb, towed themselves and redressed in the backup clothes that had been stashed in wait, but the lingering chill still had the younger man shivering.

Buchanan, who was busy checking the watertight pouch he'd worn at his belt—every other piece of gear and weaponry he carried was expendable, but *this* had to survive!—gave no indication, beyond a brief frown, that he'd even heard. *We've been through all this!*

It had, all of it, been a calculated gambit. He knew the Averys would pull something, but without knowing what and when, he couldn't really prepare against it. So he made sure the plan included an opening they couldn't resist, present a situation he *could* control.

He'd been sure, from the moment he insisted on handling the ammo dump himself—with their explosives and timer—what they would do. A quick test of the detonator late that second night had confirmed it, and while it wasn't exactly Sergei's specialty, he knew his lieutenant could cobble together a replacement.

After that, it was a simple matter to use that replacement instead of the original, leaving them just enough time prior to detonation to flee the storage chamber and make a diving escape through the open pit into the waters below.

All of which Sergei had been in on from the start. When he repeated the question, however, Buchanan put down his pouch with a sigh. "What?"

"Why the river? Why all this hiding? Why not just switch out the detonators and let Kristen stew when the plan failed? Or even expose her then and there?"

"In the middle of a firefight? Come on, Sergei, work it through. You think her people would just accept our word that she'd sabotaged us? We'd have wound up fighting each other, or at least so wrapped up in suspicion that we couldn't cooperate against the Monsters.

"Besides, if I were her or her godforsaken father, I'd have had a backup plan in place in case the attempt failed. And if they did, I'd have been right back to looking over my shoulder, not having a clue how they'd strike, or when."

"Oh. Right. I guess that does make sense."

He'd had another reason too, the same reason for so many of the choices he'd recently made. A sudden miraculous reappearance after everyone believed him dead? You couldn't concoct a better dramatic moment than that. And as Buchanan had already decided, if he was going to lead, to truly unite everyone behind him—not just for today, but for years to come, for his heirs after he was gone—he needed to be larger than life.

Sergei sighed. "I suppose I should just be grateful the replacement detonator even worked. I really only gave it about a sixty-forty chance, honestly."

Buchanan's head snapped up, but Sergei was gazing into the dancing flame. For all that his lieutenant wasn't always the best liar, Buchanan couldn't begin to guess whether he was kidding around to get back at him, or deadly serious.

After a moment, the older man laughed despite himself.

"Okay, everything seems to check out, or at least everything that needs to." He paused, thinking. The sounds of battle had faded away about fifteen minutes earlier. "We'll give it another hour to warm up and make sure we don't run into any early runners Kristen may have sent back. After that, we'll stick to the forest paths, so we—"

"So there are enough branches for us to hang your limbs and your fucking entrails," Medusa rasped from the shadow of the trees. "Eventually. Once you've spent hours *begging* to die."

She stepped into the light, pistol in hand, along with seven of her Monster Army soldiers. With eight barrels gaping at them, Buchanan and Sergei didn't bother going for weapons.

"Medusa," Buchanan greeted her. "I figured if you weren't already dead, you'd be long gone from here by now."

"Oh, I plan to be. Was working on just that, in fact, when we spotted your fire."

Goddamn it.

"I'm afraid you're headed the wrong way," he said helpfully. "This is the way to Colorado Springs. Your base is *that* way. Just hang a right at the tree. You can't miss it. It's right in the middle of all the other—"

"You think this is *funny*?!" He'd never heard her so enraged, right on the edge of losing it. "I don't know what game you thought you were playing, what you hoped to accomplish by betraying me, but we're going to take enough time killing you and your pet here for you to spill the whole story!"

"I'm sorry to decline, but I'm afraid Sergei and I have other plans."

"What could possibly make you think you have any—?"

He saw her expression shift even through the mask. Medusa had never been stupid. She just wasn't quite quick enough.

"Take them!" he shouted.

Rita Martinez and her people were outnumbered, but with the element of surprise and fully automatic weapons, the conclusion was never in any doubt. A few seconds of gunfire, shredded leaves, and spattering blood, and it was over.

"Gather what you need," Buchanan ordered Sergei. "If anyone heard that and comes looking, you and I need to be long gone."

Medusa choked, blood spurting from beneath her mask. Buchanan walked over to her side, kicking her gun away just in case.

He hadn't known it would be her, of course. It could have been any other Monster Army survivors, or a patrol of Kristen's men. Or they could have gotten lucky and never encountered anyone, here at the river or on their walk back to Colorado Springs, but Buchanan hadn't come this far to leave the last stretch to luck.

Plus, he'd needed someone to prepare the site. Hence, Rita and her squad.

"Won't... stop us," Medusa coughed at him. "The... Gorgon... just take my..."

"And we'll kill him, too." Buchanan raised a boot and brought it down hard on her throat, saving her a few final minutes of agony.

It was a response that somewhat belied his true worry. Who else among the Monsters knew? Medusa had been accompanied by only a handful of her people when she'd addressed him by name in the plant, but had she told anyone after that? Had she ever told the Gorgon or her other lieutenants who he was? It seemed unlikely, given what he'd seen of her, but not impossible. If their new leader tried to expose him to the people of Colorado Springs...

Well, he could probably weather that. Some of the townsfolk would believe it, but he could convince most of them it was a lie, meant to sow discord.

And if worse came to worst? Maybe it had been one of his people who betrayed them, acting in his name, hoping to get back at the community for leaving Buchanan to defend his herd alone. It would have to be someone everybody knew Buchanan trusted, someone they'd never believe he'd throw to the wolves just to save himself.

For an instant, his gaze flickered to Sergei, who was scooping up the last of their gear and kicking mud and dirt over the fire. Could he...?

Yeah, if he had to. If the future of Colorado truly hung in the balance, if he had no other choice, then no matter how much better the kid deserved, he could.

The good Lord willing, it would never come up.

"Ready, boss."

"Okay, Sergei." He clapped a hand on his lieutenant's back. "Let's get moving."

* * *

"My friends, my neighbors, this has been nothing less than a day of great victory." Henry Avery stood at the podium of New Hope, addressing a chamber that, though packed to capacity and beyond, nonetheless sported a few conspicuous absences, faces that should normally be staring back from the crowd but were still being collected from the battlefield where they'd fallen.

Or who could not be found at all.

"But it is also a day of great sadness, as we mourn those we've lost to godless raiders, to the violence we never asked for, bloodshed we never wanted.

"Unasked for, unwanted... But maybe, just maybe, not unnecessary. For you see, friends, beyond joy, beyond victory, beyond sadness, this is a day of great change."

He had them rapt, or at least most of them. Avery wasn't always the best public speaker, but his passion rang true and his words were unusually well chosen. Clearly he'd thrown his all into preparing this speech.

Almost, Althea Wesson couldn't help but think from where she stood at the back of the room, leaning against the wall, *as if he'd been working on it for a lot longer than half a day.*

"We learned something today. Something, maybe, we should have learned a long time ago. Yes, the Hundred Families grew strong following the teachings of our forefathers, standing on our own. But

Colorado Springs is stronger together. We only learned half the lessons of the America That Was. We can be individuals, we can keep our freedoms, and still be unified.”

Real convenient for you to come to that conclusion now, Avery.

“It’s no big secret that me and Saul Buchanan had our differences,” the speaker continued, eliciting a few grim chuckles at the understatement. “But his loss is a blow to all of Colorado Springs. He proved himself leading the attack to take back the plant. He fought for us all, even though it was my property. But he didn’t just prove himself, friends, he proved what he’d been trying to tell us for years. I wish he was here today, so I could tell him to his face that he was right, and I was wrong.”

A ways to Althea’s left, the church door creaked open, admitting a figure in a heavy coat, hood pulled up against the winter wind. She scarcely noticed, in part because this was hardly the first straggler to show up late, but mostly because she was too busy rolling her eyes.

Unfortunately, while she knew she wasn’t entirely alone in her skepticism, most of the crowd were eating right out of Avery’s hand.

And he wasn’t done. “When we’ve gathered our fallen, when we’ve secured the plant and our own borders, we’ll sit down and really hash out how this is gonna work. Policies, bylaws. The stronger our foundation, the stronger we’ll stand.

“I only hope that whoever you all decide to put in charge can live up to the memory of General Buchanan. The man who set us on the path.”

She wondered if anyone else had caught the phrasing there. “*Whoever you put in charge.*” Not “we.” Althea doubted they’d even get to tomorrow before someone—one of Avery’s allies among the Family leaders—put the man’s name up as a nominee.

Town’ll probably elect him, too.

Maybe she ought to step forward. Probably couldn’t beat him in a head-to-head contest, but *someone* ought to speak for the people of Colorado Springs who hadn’t been taken in by—

“Spare a minute, Ms. Wesson?”

It came from the hooded newcomer, who’d worked his way over to her side. Avery was still speaking from the podium, but Althea no longer had ears for him. Not after recognizing the voice, no matter how low the speaker had kept it.

“Holy sh—!”

Sergei looked up, just far enough to show her his face, and pressed a finger to his lips.

It took every ounce of self-control, but Althea dropped her reply to a whisper. “You’re alive?! They told us—”

"They told you a lot of things. Now I need to tell you—and show you—a couple."

"Is Buchanan here?"

"He's about to be."

"Then shouldn't I—?"

Sergei's hood rustled and bulged in what was probably a head shake. "Trust me, Ms. Wesson. You *really* need to see this first. Not just for the boss, or for you, but for everyone here."

"I... all right." She caught a few curious or disapproving glances as she made for the exit and followed Sergei outside.

Just as they passed through the door, another figure—wearing a heavy coat and hooded, like Sergei, but taller and bulkier—passed them on his way in. Althea desperately wanted to stop, to turn back, to see what was about to happen. Maybe to keep what seemed a potential disaster from spiraling out of control.

But Sergei sounded serious, even borderline desperate, and while she had no doubt the younger man would lie at his boss's order, she didn't think he could do it convincingly. So with a brief nod to Buchanan and a silent prayer to God, she continued on her way and let whatever was about to happen in the church behind her, happen.

* * *

He let Henry speechify a few minutes longer, waited until the man had well and truly gotten into the rhythm of his message, until the crowd was borderline hypnotized, before finally stepping forward.

"Those are the nicest words you've ever spoken about me," Buchanan said, pushing through the back rows and throwing off the hood of his coat. "And I don't want to sound unappreciative, but I've got to tell you, I'm finding them a little premature."

The mood shattered like spun glass. Gasps and exclamations rippled through the surrounding throng. A few of those nearest Buchanan actually fell back in shock, or reached to brush their fingers against his sleeves as though unsure they should believe what they saw.

Both Henry at the podium and Kristen at the far end of the front row turned as pale as the corpses Buchanan had left behind on the mountainside.

"I... you..."

Buchanan grinned. "Never seen you speechless, Henry."

Kristen's lips moved, muttering something inaudible even as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Well, I..." Henry gripped the podium tight, giving himself an almost visible shake. "We're all just so relieved. It's a miracle to have you back. Everyone thought you were lost to us."

"I can imagine." Buchanan rubbed his chin, an exaggerated parody of thoughtfulness. "I mean, especially after you and your daughter went through so much trouble to kill me."

The church went dead silent.

"How *dare* you?!" Henry demanded. "We put all that aside, worked together for the good of—"

"The only good the Averys ever worked for was their own. You sabotaged me, Henry. Only reason Sergei and I aren't as dead as you all thought is because I saw it coming."

Kristen began pushing her way through the crowd, trying to reach him. "You lying bastard! I—"

"I know it wouldn't be real chivalrous of me," Buchanan warned, "but after what you did, if you come within arm's reach of me, I will drop you where you stand."

The young woman scoffed—but stopped where she was.

By then, however, Henry had worked up a full head of steam. "This is outrageous! You never planned to work together at all, did you? You're seeing that someone other than you has united Colorado Springs, and you can't stand it! Well, we're none of us about to let you destroy this out of some petty jealousy! Someone arrest this bastard!"

A few of Henry's closer allies advanced, only to falter as they realized the bulk of the throng wasn't moving along with them. Most of those assembled, including many who were no personal fans of Saul Buchanan, still stared either at him or at Henry.

"I'm thinking," Philippina Dorsey said from somewhere in the middle of the chamber, "that you should answer the accusation, Mr. Avery."

"Seconded," Ida Bleu added from off to her left.

Buchanan crossed his arms and smiled.

Henry flushed so dark he looked about ready to keel over. "Are you kidding me? It's bullshit! Of *course* it's bullshit! Ain't even a proper accusation! 'Sabotage.' What's that even—?"

"Oh, you want specifics?" Buchanan advanced, the crowd parting before him like the Red Sea, until he stood only a few feet from the raised podium. "How specific should I get? Should I just mention the detonator you supplied me to blow up the ammo dump? Or do I need to spell out that it was tampered with to go off as soon as it was activated instead of how it was set?"

The glares aimed Henry's way grew ever more hostile.

"We did no such—!"

Buchanan, of course, wasn't done. "Before you finish that sentence, you might want to know that Sergei's with Althea Wesson right now, demonstrating. And since she's the one who cataloged and coordinated all the supplies everybody provided, she'll be able to confirm it's the same one you gave me."

Kristen gawped helplessly at her father, who seemed now to be supporting himself solely through the strength of the lectern itself. "That... that's deadly serious, if it's true. But it still doesn't mean that *I* was responsible!"

"No. No, I suppose it doesn't prove you were. I mean, you weren't the one who gathered and delivered the supplies. You weren't the one who delivered the detonator. You weren't involved in all the details of the plan, or the assignment of strategic objectives.

"You're right, Henry, it doesn't prove your betrayal. But it does prove *hers*."

The accusing finger aimed straight at Kristen Avery was frankly an unnecessary bit of added drama. Not a soul in the room could have had the slightest doubt who Buchanan meant.

With an enraged, even bestial bellow, Henry slammed the podium from the elevated stage, sending it hurtling toward his accuser.

Belying the density of the crowd, everyone around Buchanan managed to scatter from its path, but all he could do was raise his arms, taking a bruising blow across them both as he knocked the wooden projectile aside. By the time it clattered to the ground before him, granting him an unobstructed view, Henry himself had already taken to the air, crashing into his hated rival in a flying tackle that drove them both to the hardwood floor.

The breath rushed from Buchanan's lungs and a shock of pain ran up his back, but he was able to roll aside before Henry could settle his full weight and pin him down. He caught a glancing punch to his shoulder, but otherwise scrambled to his feet without taking any additional blows.

Henry, too, hauled himself upright, and for a second the two men stood motionless as they faced each other.

Though it meant pressing tight against their neighbors, the crowd had backed away and even dragged a few benches and chairs with them, leaving Henry and Buchanan a small but clear arena for their conflict. The ubiquitous workers' tools clacked and clattered as cramped bodies nudged them where they leaned against the walls, and the throng seemed to breathe as one, but otherwise all was silent.

Inwardly, Buchanan cursed himself. He hadn't seen this coming, had expected Henry to pull any and every rhetorical trick he could, not to resort to immediate violence. The threat against Kristen had pushed him over the edge, and that... was a problem.

On any other day, Buchanan would've welcomed the opportunity. He was bigger and stronger than Henry Avery, and a good fifteen years younger too. Today, though? Buchanan was near to exhaustion from hours of planning and preparation, from the infiltration and the battle, from the swim in near-freezing waters, from the long walk back. Today, he had solid reasons to doubt the outcome.

Nor could he expect any aid from the crowd, even those who believed his accusations. Generations of worshipping the virtues of strength and rugged individuality hadn't been washed away by a week's cooperation and a single battle. Every person present wanted to see how these two rivals, their two potential leaders, handled themselves one on one.

Well, so be it. Buchanan hadn't let anything or anyone stand in his way yet; he wasn't about to make an exception, not even for his own body.

His hand dropped to the gun he still wore at his side. His rival sucked in a breath, the audience around him whispered... and then he drew the weapon with three fingers and passed it back to the nearest observer.

It would've been the easy victory, the smart victory, but not one the people would accept.

Idiots.

Buchanan lunged with a wordless shout and both fists raised, and Henry came to meet him.

Initially it was a pure maelstrom of flailing limbs. Buchanan grunted, wincing away from a nasty, rib-bruising body blow before he was able to drop an elbow and take the next two strikes on his arm instead. A sudden knee followed, and he barely twisted away in time. It left Henry just a hair off-balance, however, and bought Buchanan an extra step, bringing him near enough to further stagger the older man with a pair of quick jabs, splitting his lips and bloodying his nose.

The crowd roared around them, many just reacting to the brutal shots but some cheering on one contestant or the other. For the most part, Buchanan couldn't begin to tell which was which, or who any given person might be rooting for, though he had no doubt from whom the sharp, vicious call of "Kill him, Daddy!" came.

Henry recovered from his stumble—perhaps propelled by a shove from the observers behind him; Buchanan wasn't sure—and lumbered back at him, hunched for what was probably intended to be another tackle. Buchanan countered with a swift kick to the chest, sending the older man reeling yet again, and charged in to finish the job.

He realized too late that his fatigued legs had betrayed him. Maybe he hadn't landed that kick as hard as he thought, or he took an instant too long regaining his balance and closing the distance. Henry caught the roundhouse that was meant to drop him, twisting and hurling Buchanan across the makeshift ring. People scattered as he landed in their midst and fetched up against the sanctuary wall in a clatter of falling tools, starbursts clouding his vision.

The shape of his opponent loomed over him, and for a split second... Buchanan hesitated.

He'd had a clear shot, thanks to Henry's wide stance, at perhaps the most vulnerable spot of the man's anatomy, and had they battled in any other circumstance, Buchanan would have struck without a second thought. They fought before an audience, though, an audience who would tell stories of today to everyone else in town, to their children and grandchildren. Would they respect a leader who fought all-out, who took advantage of any and every opportunity? Or would a low blow come across as dishonorable, inappropriate from a man who wanted them to follow him?

Then the moment had passed, and the point was moot.

Henry dove at him, Buchanan rolled into the older man to avoid the bulk of the oncoming weight, and for a time they struggled and thrashed on the ground, knuckles landing, fingers clenching, each trying and failing to snag the other in a hold he couldn't break.

Almost unwillingly, as though forced upright solely by the pressure of each pushing against the other, they found themselves standing again. Buchanan stamped hard on Henry's foot, eliciting a pained shout. The older man's hands briefly dropped, and Buchanan landed another punch to his jaw, a hammer-blow to his ear, and finally an elbow across the bridge of his nose. Henry dropped like a sandbag and hauled himself across the floor, crawling away from his opponent.

The room had gone silent. Buchanan moved to follow his enemy and saw Henry's hands close around the mason's chisel, one of the many tools scattered by their earlier struggles. Saw it, knew what was coming.

And again his exhaustion thwarted him.

Not *entirely* so. He was able to avoid the worst of the sudden stab that, had it landed straight on, would have punched through muscle to chip away at the bone of his shin, possibly breaking it if not crippling him for life. As it was, he still suffered a nasty gash. Pain shot through his leg, a reverse bolt of lightning, and he found himself lying flat with no memory of collapsing. He scrambled backward to buy himself a moment and found himself once more against the wall, even as Henry struggled back to his own feet, wavering but closing yet again.

The church door swung wildly open, smacking two of the assembly who'd placed themselves in its path to make room for the duel. Althea Wesson stormed through, her face a mask of barely restrained rage. Following her came Sergei Greatski and half a dozen of Colorado's citizens, all wearing pistols conspicuously on their belts. Without apology they shoved members of the throng from their path, making a beeline toward Kristen Avery. Her own expression of righteous anger swiftly gave way to panic, but the situation offered her nowhere to run. All she could do was glare helplessly as two of the party took her by the arms.

Buchanan's evidence had clearly been more than sufficiently convincing.

Henry froze long enough to see what was happening, then launched himself yet again at Buchanan with another mindless scream. His pause, however, brief as it was, had allowed Buchanan to snatch up a weapon of his own. His questing fingertips found a massive hammer—the same sixteen-pound sledge he'd been fidgeting with days ago, in fact, though he didn't remember that at the time—and tilted it forward on its head.

The long handle caught Henry in the solar plexus like a readied spear. He folded around it, breath catching, and then slowly stumbled back. He coughed once, a weak, ragged sound.

Using the hammer as a crutch, Buchanan hauled himself upright. Henry, bent and stumbling, made a final, awkward stab. Buchanan easily knocked the blade from his enemy's grip with a backhand, then reversed his grip on his own weapon and swung.

Ribs cracked like so much kindling, audible throughout the church. Henry flew aside like a rag doll, rebounding off the spectators. Buchanan moved in to catch him; they stood, locked together, until Henry coughed again. Blood sprayed from his mouth to spatter Buchanan's shirt.

Kristen began to scream incomprehensibly, to thrash, though whether to rush to her father's side or to attack the man who'd just felled him was impossible to tell. It took all six of Althea's people to drag her from the church.

Unmoved by the distraction, Buchanan slowly lowered Avery to the floor, whispering as he knelt.

"If she takes the entirety of the blame for tampering with the detonator," he said, "she'll be hanged. Confess that you ordered it, and I promise we'll go easier on her."

"God... God damn you... Buchanan." Even the words seemed to drip with blood.

"Choose quickly. While you still can."

With that, he stepped aside, slumping against the wall to clutch at his own wounds while Althea and many of the bystanders clustered around the dying man. And though Henry used some of his swiftly

failing strength to snarl at him one last time through crimson-stained teeth, he did indeed pull Althea and Morton Reed close enough to whisper. To judge by Althea's nod and Morton's sadly lowered head, he'd told them precisely what Buchanan had demanded he say.

A sudden wave of contentment washing away the worst of the pain, Buchanan leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

* * *

Saul Buchanan sat back against the headboard, legs stretched out before him under the sheets, listening to Sergei's report on the day's deliberations.

It should, thank the good Lord, be the last time. Although he was absolutely covered in deep bruises slowly turning green at the edges, as well as a variety of bandages, it was only the gash on his leg that had kept him housebound this long. Doctor Woolworth and Livia both encouraged him to give it more time, but the ministrations of both surgeon and wife had kept the wound from going septic and alleviated the worst of the pain, and that was all that mattered. Tomorrow, he'd march himself into town, whatever it took, and address the community in person.

"...still asking what we plan to do with Kristen Avery," Sergei was telling him. "I said she wasn't going anywhere, and we could decide that after the larger issues were settled, but we're going to have to—"

Buchanan waved an interrupting hand. "Yeah, we'll get to discussing that later."

He had no intention of "discussing" it at all. He couldn't have the woman alive and plotting against him, whether in Colorado Springs or in exile, especially not with the Monster Army still out there. He'd given Henry his word that he'd go easy on her, and he meant to keep it. A sedative in her meal and a bullet in the back of the head was, indeed, far easier than hanging.

But that had to wait, much as he'd prefer to get it over with. He had to be in charge first.

"Just bottom-line it for me," he continued, reaching over to the end table beside the bed for a glass of water. "Save the details for now."

"Sure, boss. Got a few of them playing it close to the vest, but the way I figure, if you put your new constitution to a vote tomorrow, you'll have better than seventy percent signing on."

A few sips, and then a thoughtful nod. That would be enough. Some of the holdouts would change their minds as soon as they saw which way the wind was blowing. The rest would buckle eventually, once raiders or lack of resources proved too troublesome for them to handle alone.

It should go similarly with their formal selection of a new leader. Some of his old rivals would die before voting for him, and a few heads of the Hundred Families still didn't entirely believe the accusations against Henry Avery. With both Althea and Morton as witnesses to the confession, however, they were greatly outnumbered. Buchanan had led the attack that retook the plant (a plant that had now been claimed by the community as a whole, leaving the surviving Avery branches no influence at all). Buchanan had identified the traitor in their midst. Buchanan had beaten his rival in front of the assembled town.

Even if everyone opposed to him could somehow come together behind a single candidate—and he strongly doubted they could—it wouldn't be enough to stop him. He'd have preferred a more overwhelming victory, of course. It made for a better, more dramatic story. But it would do for now, and down the road? Once he'd cemented his power? If he started tweaking the numbers in the tale, it wasn't as if anyone would stand up to say, "Wait a minute, I didn't vote for you!"

Yeah, it would do. It would do nicely.

So what was with Sergei's perpetual frown?

"Something on your mind?"

"Huh? Oh, no, boss. Not a thing."

"I took that chisel in my leg, Sergei, not my eyes. Or my brain."

The younger man sighed, put down his pad of notes, glanced around to make certain the bedroom door was shut. "I'm just... Doesn't this feel a little wrong to you, Saul?"

"Doesn't *what* feel a little wrong?"

Sergei said nothing for a moment. Then, as though forcing it out, "How we got here. I know why things had to change, I really do, but... Everyone's calling you their savior, and Avery a traitor. Well, almost everyone."

"And?"

"Well, we... I mean, we *did* betray them first."

Slowly, stiffly, Buchanan pushed the covers aside and climbed from the mattress. Refusing to wince at the pain, to even acknowledge the pronounced limp, he made his way around the room to stand before his lieutenant, face to face.

He needed Sergei to understand, needed him to never again so much as think that, let alone utter it aloud. Whoever told the stories of this time, these great days when the direction of Colorado Springs—perhaps all of Colorado, or even beyond—changed forever, it was they who shaped the truth. And the kid needed to comprehend that truth if he was going to help do the shaping.

“Everything we did, Sergei, we did for the good of Colorado Springs. Of its people, all of them. Good or bad, friend or rival. They needed this. They needed me to push them, just like they need me to lead them. And if we did this for them, it *can't* be treachery, can it?”

“Uh... I...”

“So you remember this, Sergei. You remember this until the day you die. Saul Buchanan never betrayed anyone in his life.

“And he never will.”