

# The Last White Man

*by* Mason Morrison

I awoke in a daze; it was midnight and I had been camping in the remains of a Jamba Juice inside the long abandoned West Town mall in what used to be Knoxville, Tennessee. After the secession of 2045, Tennessee and the surrounding states had become the Free Republic of Robertson, named after the neo-Confederate lieutenant Max Robertson who'd [REDACTED] inside the headquarters of The New Socialist Front, [REDACTING] commandant XXX during the Bronx offensive of 2038. After the Republic's forces were defeated by a battalion of NSF soldiers financed by Bain Capital in 2052, the state formerly known as Tennessee was where the first camps were built to house dissidents. The facilities were scuttled after NSF withdrew from the area in 2060 but the fences and building frames remain, rusted remnants of where tens of thousands of neo-Confederates were tortured and executed. I had driven by them on my way to the mall, making my way past the bullet casings and barbwire. My older brother Steven had died in a facility like this. I remembered the night I'd gotten news of the capture of his unit. I saw an NSF flag painted on the exterior wall of the ruins of one of the prison buildings, a symbol I had come to hate and fear since the inception of the organization in 2029 following the assassination of XXX.

I got slowly to my feet. My leg still ached dully where I had been ambushed and shot by an automated NSF drone three days ago while scrounging for rations and ammunition in an abandoned military encampment in the area formerly known as Cookeville. I had been careless and gone out during the day. The drones were solar powered due to the NSF's green energy policy and didn't operate at night. Luckily, I managed to deploy one of my EMP grenades and while the drone was disabled, I made my escape in my old gas-powered Dodge Challenger which I'd salvaged from a demolition yard where vehicles that ran on fossil fuel were taken to be dismantled in accordance with the

previously mentioned green energy policy. I removed the bullet and bandaged the wound after I'd arrived at the mall. I had some of my remaining rations and built a crude camp inside the Jamba Juice. The pain in my leg was intense. I reluctantly took half a tablet of *Amednazol*, a painkiller with natural ingredients that had been promoted by Joe Rogan shortly before he had been arrested and tried in front of a military tribunal for hosting a neo-Confederate sympathizer known only as *SneedGroyper* on his podcast in 2031. The pills were extremely hard to come by.

The painkillers worked fine but sapped my energy and gave me some bizarre dreams. It was during one of these dreams that I had first encountered the Demon. But I didn't want to think about that now. I gathered my gear, a first aid kit, a halogen flashlight, several batteries, a sleeping bag, a 1911 handgun with only three bullets of standard 9mm ammo, an energy field scanner I'd used to detect drones, four tins of rations, a makeshift radio I used to tune into pirate bands and try to find anyone who was broadcasting, a hunting knife, a canteen, my three remaining EMP grenades, a canvas rucksack, a small tool kit, my grandfather's watch, and a few tablets of *Amednazol*. All my belongings were precious to me and had been very difficult to find, especially after the NSF mandated weapon confiscations shortly after they seized power.

I walked through the mall's devastated skyway and tried to imagine what the place had looked like before the war had started. My father had told me stories of his childhood experiences going to malls, how glowing neon and concrete expanses had seemed to stretch on forever as a testament to 20th century capitalism and the promise of material wealth to all that entered its doors. But here was nothing but a cavernous husk where bullet holes lined the walls, store fronts had been smashed and broken glass covered the floor. A bomb had taken out a large portion of the ceiling, huge chunks of concrete and steel littered the floor below, exposed wires hung everywhere, any piece of metal had long since been stripped out of the building, the lower levels were flooded with ghastly brown water and moss had begun to grow

on the walls. It stunk terribly.

I looked inside one of the shops as I passed, it had been burnt out by an incendiary grenade or Molotov cocktail God knows how long ago. I saw figures of obese, gender-neutral mannequins lying on the ground, the flames had contorted their plastic faces into hideous masks. Next to one of the mannequins laid a large banner with single marks depicting a pretty white woman surrounded by leering blacks. I hadn't been too familiar with this type of advertising as my parents forbade me and my brother from watching television. My father would tell us stories about how after the NSF was formed a splinter group of black mercenaries calling themselves the Independent African Coalition would go around to what few remaining white towns and villages there were and kidnap women and girls to be used as war brides, anyone who resisted was cut down by machetes or automatic gunfire. The police with their rainbow uniforms and cruisers just sat by and abetted it, their state-backed superiors in the upper echelons of law enforcement considered IAC to be off limits. I felt a twinge of anger thinking about it, and thinking about what had happened to my parents, but anger was just a waste of energy. I needed to be clear-headed, I needed to take time and prepare. My mission was just beginning. My name is Mason Morrison, I am 25 years old, born during the great American schism, and as far as I know, I'm the last white man in America.

# I

## Sakura

I made my way towards the abandoned Kohl's on the second floor of the mall. There was an exit back to the parking lot on the far side of the store. I had hoped no one would notice my Challenger parked outside, I had been losing blood quickly when I'd arrived at the mall and didn't have time to properly hide the car. It had been retrofitted to run on ethanol, which was valuable, granted not as valuable as actual gas, which was a rarity since the Jamnagar oil refinery had been destroyed in a [REDACTED] from Kekistani separatists in 2035, but before then a nationwide adoption of nickel-manganese-cobalt batteries for cars had already been mandated. I had brokered a deal with some of the few remaining corn farmers operating in the outskirts of the Robertson Republic. They supplied me with ethanol, I supplied them with DVDs, electronics and salvaged GPUs I came across so they could mine Bitcoin. I noticed the store's sign had been destroyed by what looked like machine gun fire, only the 'O' and a portion of the 'L' remained. Vines growing from the smashed skylight above wrapped around what remained of the façade, they covered up what appeared to be pro-NSF graffiti. More mannequins were scattered about, some wearing tattered remains of clothing, others had been shot full of holes or smashed to pieces.

As I entered the decimated store I could hear footsteps and voices...and what sounded like a woman yelling. The sounds drew closer from the opposite end of the store. I hid behind a smashed display case and carefully watched in the direction of where the voices were coming from. I could make out five figures drawing nearer, four Hispanic men and what appeared to be an Asian woman. One of the men had his hand clasped around the woman's wrist and his arm locked around her neck, another man

was fondling her breasts and laughing.

“My father already paid you!” The woman shouted; this prompted the group of assailants to laugh.

“Baby we ain’t interested in money!” shouted one of the men excitedly, “We just want your ass! And if your old man was wise, he’d let us take what we want, he knows the price of doing business!”

He produced a large knife out of his jacket and held the blade between her breasts. The woman yelled out and began frantically kicking at him. He backed off with a smile on his face, “Pablo! Time for this bitch to say goodnight!” The man to his left hit the woman in the head with the butt of his rifle, there was a sickening crack and she fell to the floor limp. All four men burst out laughing, the one with the knife kicked her in the stomach hard, she gasped in pain and began groaning.

“Alright sweet thing,” he began, “Time to get my money’s worth...” he knelt on her and rolled her over onto her back, she moaned in protest causing him to backhand her, the rest of the group howled with laughter. From behind the display case, I studied the men, the one kneeling over the woman had a knife, as did the man standing to his right, as for the two men behind him one held a revolver and the other an AR. I weighed my options, I only had three bullets left in my pistol’s clip, I had to get to my car, hopefully it was still in one piece, I needed to get the fuck away from here. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen something like this, it was a daily occurrence among those unfortunate enough to still call the Republic home, I hadn’t always chosen to intervene either, there had been times when I just couldn’t. And I knew the cost of showing my face to these men. The NSF had a bounty on anyone who looked like me, and they paid well. I shifted in my position and accidentally kicked a perfume bottle. It skittered across the floor and hit another display case with a pronounced thud, I froze.

“What the fuck was that!?” One of the men shouted, the guy with the AR began aiming it in my direction. The guy who was kneeling over the woman pointed his knife at the display case I

was hiding behind said, “Pablo go check that out, I’m busy.” Then he turned his attention back to the semi-conscious woman, beginning to cut into her shirt with his knife.

I hit the forward assist of the rifle and began moving closer to my position, I couldn’t sneak back around, they’d spot me, and I knew there was no negotiating with these guys, I drew my 1911 out of its holster and flipped the safety off. From my position I could see a light fixture hanging down near where the group of guys were. Thinking quickly, I booted a nearby mannequin head from out behind the display case, it flew towards a pile of rusted display racks and made a loud crash. Pablo shouted and began firing towards where the head landed. Had to be quick now. I vaulted the display case and fired a bullet at the hanging light fixture, it exploded with a flash and a shower of sparks.

The men began screaming and Pablo was shielding his eyes. I raced towards him. the man with the revolver fired a shot at me, which went wide. Pablo gasped, his eyes grew wide, and he tried raising the rifle at me. I repositioned my free arm and closed the distance, I hit Pablo in the face as hard as I could with my elbow. A jet of blood sprayed out of his nose, I grabbed him by his collar and used him as a human shield. Revolver man fired another shot, closer this time. I threw Pablo’s heavy body as hard as I could at him. It hit him hard and he lost his footing and sprawled on the floor, his head hit the tile with a crack and the revolver flew out of his hand. Rico yelled out but before he could get to his feet I brought my knee into his face, knocking him backwards. As I did so I felt a knife slash my shoulder blade, there was a burst of pain, but I ignored it and wheeled around in time to block another arcing strike with my free arm, from my hip I fired one of my two remaining bullets into the bottom of his jaw, chunks of brain exploded out of the top of his head, and he collapsed in a heap.

“Hey white boy!” came a voice behind me, I turned around to face Rico, who had his arm around the woman’s neck and his knife close to her throat. “I don’t know where your bitch ass came from, but this shit is over now, imma carve this bitch up then

imma bleed your monkey ass slow.” I aimed my 1911 at him, but I couldn’t get a clean shot. That was when I noticed the woman had a long shard of glass in her bloody right hand. Our eyes met and, with my gun still trained on Rico, I gave her the slightest nod. She brought the shard down into Rico’s thigh.

He bellowed and loosened his grip. The woman threw her head back and hit him in the face. Then, free of his grip, she ducked out of the way as I fired my last remaining bullet at Rico. It grazed the side of his neck. Rico brought his knife up and charged at me at full speed, I dropped the 1911 and brought my arms up to counter him. He swung the knife at my face. I maneuvered out of the way but could feel the wind of the blade as it slashed the air less than an inch away from my eye. He brought the knife back aiming for my neck, with my right forearm I blocked the strike and managed to get my right hand around his wrist, with my left hand I grabbed his elbow and managed to lock his arm, I brought my right knee into his stomach. Rico let out a woofing sound and began struggling against my arm bar. I twisted his wrist as hard as I could, there was a pop and a scream of pain from Rico as the knife fell from his hand and clattered to the floor.

Still holding his wrist, I brought my left arm around and got him in a head lock. I noticed there was an open section of the Kohl’s floor that was a long drop to the floor below. The safety railing had long been ripped out by scrappers. With all my strength and against his struggling and cursing I dragged Rico towards the opening. I felt his free hand reaching for the knife on my belt. I brought my knee up into his chest and in one motion threw him off the ledge. There was a scream and a loud splat as Rico’s body hit the concrete below, I peered over the edge to see him sprawled out. Before I could turn to check on the Asian girl, I heard the hammer of a run clicking back. To my right was revolver man. He was sneering and aiming his gun at me. “You know how many of you I killed back in the day?”

I slowly moved my left hand towards my knife, not taking my eyes off his gun, I measured the distance between us and slowly



started positioning myself to lunge at him. Before I could make my move a shot rang out and revolver man's head snapped to the side. With his last ounce of life, he squeezed the trigger of his revolver and fired a shot into the floor before collapsing. I wheeled around to see the Asian girl holding Pablo's rifle with the barrel still smoking.

She lowered it and looked at me, "Those bastards...they did a job for my father...they gathered scrap steel for him...m-my father paid them, but they said it wasn't enough...they grabbed me and clubbed him over the head...they dragged me here and I don't know if my father is alive or dead." I moved toward her, and she aimed the gun at me, I raised my hands.

"Hey," I began, "I'm not gonna hurt you, you can lower that rifle. I just needed a place to stay for a little while, I'm going to be moving on...I can take you back to your father."

"How do I know I can trust you?" She demanded, still aiming the rifle at me. "I haven't seen any of your kind for years, I was told all white men were thieves and liars, I was told it was good you all died out."

I took a step closer to her and she fired a round at my feet.

"Whoah! Relax!" I pleaded, "You were fed lies by the NSF, so was I, if I was really as bad as you think I would've just let those guys rape you."

At this she lowered the rifle and glared at me, "Fuck the NSF" she said, "Those bastards raised our taxes, when we couldn't pay, they took our home and forced us to live in this hell hole. They said my little brother was trans...they sent men to our home and..."

Tears began welling up in her eyes, she loosened her grip on the rifle, I took another step towards her, my arms still raised.

"Hey look," I started, "I want to get those sons of bitches as badly as anyone, they took from me as well, and they said it was for the good of society. I lost so many people, people I loved..."

The girl dropped the gun and looked away from me, tears streaming down her face now. "I just don't know what to do..." she began, I took off my jacket and slowly approached her, gen-

tly placing it over her shoulders. I looked her in the eye and said “You can start by telling me your name.” She wiped tears away from her face and met my gaze.

In a low voice she said “Sakura”.

## II

### Toji

Sakura and I grabbed all the weapons and ammo from Rico's gang, along with a pair of boots, a lighter, and a tin containing eight hand-rolled cigarettes. Tobacco was a rarity and only grown by a handful of farmers in the Republic and even then, it was heavily taxed. I figured I could barter with the cigarettes or maybe even slonk them if the mood called for it. We left the mall and made it back to the Challenger. Fortunately no one had found it. Sakura told me Rico had parked in the adjacent lot. We found his truck and with Sakura standing watch with the AR, I siphoned the fuel and took the battery. In the bed were a couple of high-powered rifles, a case of ammo, a flare gun with several flares, a shovel, an axe along with some other miscellaneous tools, and a large burlap sack with dark stains on it. I cautiously opened the sack and shone the flashlight inside, inside were what looked like severed limbs and a decapitated head stared back at me.

"Oh *FUCK!*" I yelled and jumped back, prompting Sakura to wheel around and point the rifle at the truck.

"What!?" She demanded. Regaining my composure, I told her there were body parts inside the bag. She scoffed and said, "Yeah I'm not surprised, guys like Rico dismember people, sometimes it's to get at tech implants and upgrades in their bodies to sell to NSF transhumanists. But mostly it's turf war shit or what happens when someone can't pay a debt." A small smile crept across Sakura's face, "Don't tell me you haven't seen shit like this before, especially after the way you handled those guys in there..."

I felt a bit embarrassed; I had seen things like this before, more times than I'd cared to remember. My brief time fight-

ing for the neo-confederates had shown me a great deal of God-awful things. I remembered going on patrol in towns after the IAC had been through, the state of the corpses they'd left behind still haunted me. Sakura giggled a bit then walked up to the driver's side door of the truck and tried the handle, discovering it was locked. She used the butt of the rifle to break the glass.

"Careful!" I exclaimed, "There could be more of those assholes out here!"

She scoffed at me again, "You worry too much, white boy," and began exploring the truck's interior. I took the contents of the truck bed, minus the bag full of body parts, and tossed them in the trunk of the Challenger. I turned back to Sakura.

"You find anything in there?" She climbed out of the truck and turned around holding a small statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in one hand and a huge joint in the other. "Say what you will, those s\*\*\*\* know how to party!" she giggled, "Let's spark this shit up!"

I told her I was good, I didn't fuck with weed, and besides we needed to get her back to her father. Sakura rolled her eyes and begrudgingly walked back to the Challenger. We got inside, and she produced a small lighter, "You sure you don't want any?" I gave her a scowl and said, "Just make sure you roll the window down."

We left the mall and I drove Sakura back to her father's farm. Asians didn't fare much better than Whites during the war. A lot of them had immigrated with the promise of professional positions inside the NSF's corporate oligarchy but, they were only wanted for their penchant to vote for the progressive policies offered in the NSF's official platform. Once supreme leader XXX was dead, and the NSF had entrenched itself fully within the institutions, corporations, and academia, there wasn't any need for a high IQ demographic with proximity to "whiteness". Instead, higher up positions were offered to queer, indigenous and brown folx with Asians left working in dangerous or redundant industries for subsistence wages. It didn't help when other major Asian countries like China had begun annexing and ethni-

cally cleansing Africa, or that Japan had developed hyper realistic holographic anime waifus, or that Kim Jong Il had finally succeeded at nuking South Korea. These occurrences soured the reputations of Asian minorities in the States.

I asked Sakura how she had run afoul of Rico and his friends. She told me, in between taking drags of the joint, that she knew them because they had done some jobs for her father in the past, gathering scrap metal that her father used to make farm implements and tools, along with sculptures. He had had a reputation as an artist in Japan before emigrating to America in 2028. She said one day there had been an argument over payment, which had typically come in the form of ethanol refined from her father's corn, apparently the amount her father offered wasn't enough and things had gotten physical. Sakura's brothers wound up fending off Rico's gang at gunpoint, but he had sworn revenge. A few days later Sakura had been out for a walk just outside her father's property when she was approached and grabbed by Rico.

"Always knew he was a piece of shit." Sakura remarked as she tossed what was left of the joint out the window. She turned to me, her eyes a light red color, "Thanks for helping me, I know I didn't say that before...but there'll be more like Rico, those bastards don't know when to quit." I nodded to her, and we sat in silence for a few moments before Sakura pointed towards a large barn on the horizon. "That's my father's farm."

I pulled off onto a dirt road between two fields of corn. I noticed a tall metal structure rising above the stalks with what appeared to be a camera perched on it. It made me slightly nervous. I also noticed what appeared to be a network of hoses crisscrossing above the corn supported by metal risers. Each riser looked like it had a sensor on it. Sakura explained that it was the irrigation system, but accelerant could also be bumped through the hoses to douse and ignite the corn in the event the NSF tried expropriating the farm. She said that her father's property had once extended over 300 acres, but more than two thirds of it had been requisitioned by the NSF for undisclosed purposes and her

father swore they wouldn't get any more from him.

After driving for about a quarter mile there was a clearing with a farmhouse and what looked like a modified antique tractor with a makeshift plow parked out front. About 50 yards away from the house sat the barn and a grain silo which appeared to be made from the fuselage of a commuter plane. Rising above the farmhouse was a large tower adorned with satellite dishes and cameras. There was a piece of machinery installed at the top. I recognized it as a military grade signal jammer. I parked the Challenger and got out, when suddenly I was blinded by spotlights and could hear footsteps closing in along with a gun being cocked. I shielded my eyes and wheeled around to face an Asian man pointing the barrel of a rifle in my face.

"Who the fuck are you?!" he demanded; I was about to make a move for the revolver but just then Sakura's voice rang out:

"Stop it Haru! He's with me!" He lowered the rifle.

"Sakura!" He exclaimed, "Where have you been? Dad's been freaking out!" Haru slung the rifle over his shoulder and walked over to Sakura. He reached for her shoulder, "What happened to you? We were looking all over the property, we thought you had gotten grabbed!"

Sakura placed her hand over his, "I...I did...it was Rico, they took me to the mall..." Haru's eyes grew wide, "He did *WHAT?!'*" Sakura pointed to me, "He stopped them, they won't be showing up here anymore, we made sure of that." Haru turned in my direction and studied me for a moment, then he turned back to Sakura.

"What the hell are you doing hanging out with a White guy?" Sakura became indignant.

"That White guy saved my ass." They began arguing loudly in Japanese, hadn't taken a lesson in a while so I couldn't really make out what they were saying. Occasionally one of them would look over or point at me. I started wondering if it wouldn't be a bad idea to leave when the door to the farmhouse opened and out stepped an elderly Asian man with a prosthetic leg followed by two younger Asian men who stood on either side of him, each

holding guns. Haru and Sakura stopped arguing and began looking sheepishly towards him.

“Sakura,” began the old man, “Where have you been?” Sakura looked down and told him about what had happened with Rico at the mall.

The old man looked at me and asked, “Is this true?” I told him that yes, it was. He stood for a moment, looked as if he was thinking. Haru opened his mouth to say something but a stern look from the old man was all it took to shut him up. The old man turned back to me and made his way towards me. “Those men you killed, there will be more like them.” He said as he strolled, “But you have brought my stubborn daughter back to me, and for that you have my thanks.”

He stopped a couple feet in front of me and began looking me up and down as he paced in a circle around me. “I have not seen one of your kind in quite a while.” He said, “I was beginning to wonder if there was any of you left.” He stopped in front of me. “Tell me my White friend...do you have any family left?”

I responded, “My parents were killed during the secession, my brother was captured and killed by NSF forces after the neo-Confederacy fell.”

The old man shook his head and looked down thoughtfully, “Those boys fought a war they knew they couldn’t possibly win, admirable in a way, to die fighting for what you believe in, yet ultimately foolhardy.” I felt a twinge of anger at his remark, but decided not to respond. The man looked like he had seen some shit, especially if what Sakura had said about her brother had been true. The old man noticed the bloodstain on my pants from where the drone had shot me and asked if I’d been injured. I told him that yes, I had, but the wound had been dressed. He looked me in the eye.

“Come inside, we’ll at least get you something to eat and Sakura can inspect your wound.” He turned and began walking towards the house, then stopped and turned back to say, “How foolish of me, you’ve met Sakura and my son Haru, the other two are my sons Akio and Botan, my name is Toji.”

The farmhouse looked as it had been built in the early 20th century, but Toji and his family had kept it up well. Toji told me he had been there for twenty years and had moved in shortly after the Robertson secession. He had taken his family from San Francisco. The local government was replaced in 2043, and the city had become a massive autonomous zone under control of the BIPOC reconciliation council, a radical group of ex-BLM separatists armed and funded by the IAC and lead by a black trans nonbinary amputee named Kokayne O'Shaughnessy. The city had been renamed New Mali and had undergone drastic changes. Every piece of "Euro-centric art and expression" had been removed from museums and public spaces and replaced by "art honoring the Afrocentric legacy of oppression", corporate chains had their local stores destroyed and employees forbidden from entering the city, police were taken hostage or outright killed until the state acquiesced to the council's demands and refused to police black and brown bodies any longer and the city's police precincts were shut down, as much as I hated to admit it, that was actually pretty based. American and state flags had been torn down and burnt and replaced by the council's official flag which depicted a brown fist smashing a white skull. Local stores, offices, and restaurants had their assets seized and redistributed. Barriers and checkpoints had been installed and a communal system had been implemented which operated as a hierarchy placing any non-blacks remaining in the zone at the bottom. The borders of the city were patrolled by technicals made from SUVs.

The murder rates inside the zone exploded, and it had gotten to a point that military drones patrolling the area captured footage of IAC soldiers could be seen piling bodies on top of each other in the former city square and burning them, the armed forces couldn't intervene because New Mali was recognized by NSF as being independent from government control. Toji said he was among the last Asian families to leave the New Mali; they were only allowed to leave with what they could carry and were spit on and jeered by a large group of gay brown residents as



they entered the bus out of the zone. Toji said, "I had entered the city with hopes of raising my family as forward-thinking citizens and being able to live in prosperity, as the bus left through the barriers for the last time the only thing, I could think of was how only prosperity was now only reserved for the broken and profane among us."

Sakura led me to a back room and had me remove my pants so she could inspect my wound and change the bandage. It was a little awkward to say the least but her and I seemed to be developing a bit of a repour.

"My dad wanted me to be a doctor when I was younger, but it was impossible to get a scholarship even though I kept my grades up." She explained as she looked over my hastily stitched bullet wound. "HmMMM" she remarked, "Not a bad job considering the circumstances, you must have stitched people up before."

I thought about how I'd learned about field dressings from a medic in my brother's unit, but I decided to spare her the gory details. "Yeah, I kinda learned how over the years", I told her, "Used to have some medical files in an old tablet, I'd look through them when I was bored."

Sakura said "Ahhh" in acknowledgement and produced a small jar of a funny smelling substance, she scooped some out with her fingers and rubbed it gently onto my wound, it started to sting.

"Ah fuck, what is that shit?" I blurted out a little more loudly than I intended to. Sakura giggled and told me it was a special organic balm to prevent infections. I kept my mouth shut as she did her work, tried not to think about how long it had been since I'd last had my pants off around a woman. She then placed a fresh bandage over the wound and told me I'd have to rest for a couple days, but that her father shouldn't have an issue with that. I thanked her and put my pants back on, I told her I couldn't be staying too long, that I had a journey to make.

Sakura turned and looked me in the eyes, "Well, at least stay for dinner."

We sat down for a dinner of rice and bell peppers, beef and

other meat was considered a luxury now. Toji told me that he used to raise cattle, but the NSF had taken them shortly after they requisitioned most of his property, the NSF had declared the practice of livestock farming barbaric and all foodstuffs had to be naturally based. This coincided with their green policy and provided massive subsidies to companies producing plant-based products, as long as their executive boards were properly diverse, of course. We finished eating and Toji told his sons to get ready for the next days harvest.

He looked at Sakura and said “Don’t think we won’t be talking about what happened today, young lady.” Before dismissing her from the table Sakura rolled her eyes and gave me a quick smile as she left the room. Toji turned his gaze towards me, “She tells me your wound is healing, but you need rest, you can stay here for a few days, it’s not a problem.”

I thanked Toji for his hospitality and got to my feet, telling him I needed to be moving on. Toji looked at me thoughtfully, “Haven’t seen someone of European stock in quite some time, but your people always had a reputation for being in a hurry. At least stay the night, you must be tired.” I was going to insist on leaving, but something about Toji’s calm demeanor disarmed me. I had been travelling nonstop for days now, the more I thought about it, the more a night of rest appealed to me. Toji got up from his seat and walked over to me, “Tell me young man, where is it that you need to go running off to?”

I hesitated for a moment, then told him, “There was a remnant of my brother’s old unit still operating in the West Virginian woods, I lost contact with them a while ago, but I was heading in that direction.”

Toji eyed me, his expression grew serious. “Your brother, I’m guessing he fought the NSF.” I nodded, there had been nonstop propaganda against the neo-Confederates broadcast 24/7 during the conflict, most Americans had sympathies towards the NSF even as their intentions grew more hostile, I didn’t know if Toji would be one of them, but Sakura certainly didn’t seem to be. Toji stood for a moment, it looked as if he were contemplating some-

thing. He then looked up at me and said, "Follow me young man."

We entered a small room on the ground floor of the house, inside was what looked like a small shrine with portraits of a middle-aged Asian woman and another of an Asian teenager. Both pictures had black sashes draped over the corners of the frame.

Toji said, "That's my wife Yumi and our son Daichi. A few years after we moved here the NSF implemented a system where it began to profile children based on some algorithm they developed, even though me and Yumi homeschooled we still needed to comply. They determined Daichi was actually a girl and would need to be transitioned, me and Yumi were crestfallen. They sent armed men to our house to extract Daichi, I fought with them, and one of the men shot me in the leg and dragged Daichi away screaming. That's how I found up with this..." He knocked on his prosthetic leg. "Yumi was beside herself, and she couldn't cope, she took her own life less than a month after Daichi was taken. We were never told where he was taken to or if he was even alive."

I stood in silence, I'd lost people I'd loved as well, but a child and a wife were something different. Toji approached the shrine and took hold of an old tanto knife that had been sitting on a shelf.

He faced me and said, "My great grandfather fought for Hirohito, a fact I used to carry with shame, but since then I've learned that there are some things men must do to protect what's dear to them, even if the rest of the world disagrees." He pulled back the sheath of the knife and the blade glinted in the light. "My great grandfather killed six Americans with this knife in the Pacific theater before he was gunned down, it was returned to his son, my grandfather, after the war ended." He extended the knife out to me, "Take this, and plunge it into the heart of every NSF soldier you encounter."

I looked at Toji, then at the blade. I couldn't take it from him, if anything one of his sons should have it. I was about to protest but, once again, Toji's demeanor disarmed me, I reached out and took the knife.

I looked at him, “I...I don’t know what to say...”

Toji smiled and lead me out of the room. “You don’t have to say anything, and hopefully you won’t have to use it. Come, I’ll show you where you’ll be staying tonight.” We walked from the house out to his barn. He drew back the large door to reveal a shop inside. There were tanks to refine corn into ethanol with computerized readouts, farming implements made from what looked like scrap metal next to welding equipment. There was a pile of scrap next to a large worktable with all manner of tools scattered across it, there were innumerable sacks of corn, and a large John Deere harvester parked under a hay loft.

Toji explained, “My sons do most of the harvesting and refining, they also aid me in designing tools. I’m getting to the age where I can’t be exerting myself too much so I use what energy I have in...shall we say, creative pursuits.” Toji lead me towards a door with Japanese lettering, through it was what he called his studio. Inside the room were a half dozen sculptures, each one unique in its own way. One looked like it was made from a bomb casing, others had gun parts welded onto them, one was about ten feet tall and resembled a tower with jagged pieces of metal jutting upwards, another was smaller and consisted of several crouched figures underneath a slab of steel.

Toji said he’d get contacted about his work from collectors in coastal cities. They paid well, but he would always use a pseudonym for the transactions and would deal with shipping his pieces through a third party. I walked around his gallery for a bit and examined his work, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen a sculpture or any piece of art that hadn’t been made with the express purpose of valorizing the “Afrocentric experience”. Various chapters of the IAC had gone to museums and universities in urban areas across the US, and removed everything made by European artists, most of it was vandalized or burnt in huge public displays. Neo-Confederates had worked in conjunction with sympathetic artists and curators to save what they could or at least keep a record of what was taken, creating art like Toji’s sculptures could have been considered a subversive act.

I finished my impromptu tour of his studio and Toji pointed me towards the hay loft. He said I could sleep there for the remainder of the night. I said goodnight to him and climbed the ladder to find a bed, a lamp on a nightstand, and a small shelf containing several books. I took off my coat and placed my grandfather's watch on the nightstand, then laid on the bed. It wasn't particularly comfortable, but it was a hell of a lot better than what I was used to. I figure I'd gotten about three hours of sleep before an explosion woke me.

### III

## Banditos

I jumped from the bed and rushed to the small window overlooking the property. Looking down, I saw my Challenger ablaze and a handful of men firing automatic rifles into the farmhouse. One of them broke formation and lobbed an incendiary grenade into one of the second-floor windows. A burst of flame exploded outwards, blackening the siding surrounding the window. There came the sound of automatic gunfire. Someone was shooting out the lock on the big door. The door was pushed back and two men with rifles entered. One pointed to the ethanol containers.

“Load the truck up with that shit, the other guys’ll take care of that old slope.”

I grabbed my pistol and made sure it was loaded. I peered over the edge of the hay loft and spotted one of the men drawing closer. The loft was a good thirty feet above the barn’s concrete floor, and the ladder was creaky as hell. There was no way I could make it down without drawing their attention, and I needed to get to the house to get Sakura and the other’s out.

Thinking quickly, I tossed a spent clip across the barn. It clattered loudly against something metal and the two riflemen below wheeled around and began firing at the far side of the barn. One of the men was standing almost directly under the loft, knowing I had no time to spare. I jumped off and landed on him. I felt his body buckle under mine and there was a loud crack as his head contacted the floor. I rolled off of him and raced towards the other man who was still distracted. As I closed the distance he turned around and I stuck the tanto blade into his throat.

He let out a gurgling cry as blood began pouring from his mouth. I yanked the blade out and a jet of his blood covered my

face. He collapsed backwards grabbing at his neck. I was about to plunge the blade down into his heart and finish him off when there came a voice from outside the barn door.

“Hey, did you guys find anyone in—” A form appeared at the door, it was a short man holding a rifle, he looked at me and at the corpse of his comrade at my feet. He raised his rifle; his draw was quick, but mine was quicker. I got off two rounds, one went wide, the other struck him squarely in the chest. He shouted and squeezed his trigger. Bullets sprayed all over the interior of the barn. I ducked out of the way behind Toji’s work bench and could hear voices yelling outside.

“There’s someone in the fucking barn!” and immediately afterwards there was another hail of gunfire. Jagged holes were torn in the wooded sides of the barn and bullets ricocheted around, they struck the ethanol vats and the yellow liquid began leaking out, pooling on the floor. Sparks were kicked up as bullets hit the metal surface of the desk I was using for cover. Two more men entered the barn. One was firing his gun, the other was grabbing his wounded compatriot and dragging him outside. I reached my arm around the top and began blind firing back. There came more yelling and shouting. Suddenly there was a loud clanking sound as something was tossed inside the barn. I peeked out from my hiding spot to see an incendiary grenade was rolling towards the punctured ethanol vats.

The barn door began closing and I could hear an engine. It appeared they were blocking off the door with a truck. The grenade ignited with a bright spark and flames began engulfing the vats. They grew taller, I could hear the pressure building up inside the vats as the flames raged on, making a loud whistling sound. I knew it wouldn’t be long until they exploded. I looked around for an exit. Flames were blocking the entrance to Toji’s studio, the temperature was rising, and the interior of the barn was filling with smoke. I could hear the wooden joists creaking and splintering under the heat.

I noticed the hulking shape of the Harvester under the loft. I ran over and climbed into the driver’s seat, praying Toji had

enough fuel in it. I started it up. The engine roared to life. It had been a while since I'd been behind the wheel of one of these things. When I was a teenager, my brother and I had done some farming work for family friends. I spent a lot of hours that summer in combines and tractors.

I pulled the harvester forward. Just then, one of the vats did explode, there was a ball of flame, and a piece of twisted metal struck the harvester's window, nearly shattering it. I could feel the flames even from inside the machine's cabin. I drew forward more, then slammed the thing into reverse, with a whine and a loud clunk the harvester moved in reverse towards the far wall of the barn. I built up speed and crashed into the wall as hard as I could. The wood buckled and I could hear a couple loud cracks, but it didn't give way. I hammered the gas, the wheels found traction and I could hear the wall groan under the force of the harvester.

A moment later there came a loud crash as the wall finally gave way and the harvester rolled out into the field behind the barn, which was engulfed in flames. More shots rang out and hit the cab. My little stunt had drawn some attention. I kicked open the harvester door and dove out onto the ground, ducking behind the hulking machine as several gunmen closed the distance. I needed to get to the farmhouse to check on Sakura and her family before it was too late, I didn't even know if they were alive. I readied my pistol and climbed under the harvester. I could see two sets of legs running closer, I fired at them, I managed to hit the knee of one man. He screamed and sprawled out on the ground mid-run.

His gun fell from his hand, and he began scrambling quickly towards it. I aimed and fired again, hitting him squarely in the cheek. He jolted back in a jerking motion and collapsed. His compatriot began yelling in Spanish and firing at the harvester ties. I fired two shots at him from my position, one struck his groin, the other his chest and he fell backwards. I rolled out from under the harvester and got to my feet, racing towards the farmhouse with my gun drawn. I took a moment to grab the rifle away from the



bandit who was still alive. He was still grasping onto the grip and trying to aim the barrel at me with his remaining strength, I fired my pistol twice at point blank range into his face and continued my path to the farmhouse. There were four men positioned outside the house, two were watching it burn and two others spotted me running up from the side and began firing at me. I fired a burst back and ducked behind Toji's tractor. From where I was positioned, I could see movement inside the house, suddenly one of the ground floor windows burst open and I could see Haru firing shots at the bandits outside.

Haru managed to strike one in the gut. They returned fire and hit Haru in the arm. He ducked back into the house. I tried leaning around the tractor and aiming at the bandits, but a hail of bullets forced me back. I peered around the other side of the tractor to see one of the men race up to the front porch of the house, screaming in Spanish and firing wildly into the front door. He ran up to the door and lifted his leg to kick it in, but then a shotgun blast from inside tore a hole in the door and forced him backwards in a cloud of blood. The door swung open, and out came Sakura aiming a Mossberg.

One of the men that had been approaching my cover spot behind the tractor wheeled around and aimed at Sakura. His comrade to the right of him was still firing at me. Bullets hit the metal body of the tractor and kicked up sparks. He also hit the ground and clouds of dirt began spraying up, forcing me to keep my eyes shut. After another burst of gunfire there came a pronounced *click*, his clip was empty. I jumped to my feet and aimed over the top of the tractor. The gunman's face was twisted into a mask of horror and surprise as I fired a burst into his chest. His comrade who had been aiming at Sakura cried out and wheeled around just in time for her to fire a cartridge of buckshot into his back. I fired as well and struck him in the middle of the forehead. His head snapped back and he fell to the ground, I ran from behind the tractor and headed to Sakura, I noticed Haru was behind her carrying a wounded Toji out of the house.

Sakura scanned the area with her shotgun as Haru gently

placed Toji on the ground, it looked like Toji had a chest wound, Haru himself had been shot in the arm. I went up to them.

“Where’s Akio and Botan?” I asked.

Haru turned his attention away from his father and walked quickly over to me. “They’re dead thanks to you, these bastards must have followed you and Sakura back from the mall!”

Haru got up in my face and shoved me backwards. I kept my footing and put my hands up. I didn’t want to have to fight Haru, not after this.

“Haru! Stop!” Came Sakura’s voice from behind us, “It’s not his fault!”

Haru ignored her and took a swing at me, which I side-stepped. He came at me again, trying to swing at me. This time I countered and kicked his leg out from under him, sending him sprawling backwards.

“Mother fucker!” Haru clutched his arm and screamed as he scrambled back to his feet. I put my hands up again and tried to calm him down.

“Look man,” I started, “I know what you’re going through, I lost people too!” Haru closed the distance again, but this time Sakura got in between us.

“Haru stop!” She yelled out again, “You’re shot and father is wounded, this is no time for this bullshit!”

Haru shoved her to the side and drew a pistol from behind his back, pointing it at my head. I drew my pistol in response.

“Go ahead white boy!” Haru sneered, “Put one in me, you may as well have done it to Akio and Botan!”

Suddenly Toji’s voice rang out, “Haru! Stop this foolishness!”

Haru lowered his gun and turned to face his father. Sakura rushed to Toji’s side and began examining his wound, Haru knelt next to his father and took his hand.

“Father,” he said quietly, “You’re going to be okay..”

I approached them quietly, Haru turned to face me and yelled, “You stay the fuck back!” I backed up a few paces, then Toji turned to face me.

“This was always bound to happen, one day it wasn’t going to be enough for them, and they would come like they did tonight... I should have left this place and taken you all years ago...” He began coughing, which prompted Sakura to open the first aid kit she brought outside and begin applying pressure to his chest with some medical gauze.

Toji took her hand and weakly said “It’s over my dear...my journey ends here...”

“No!” Yelled Sakura, “No dad, don’t say that we can find a doctor!” Tears began streaming down her face and Toji used his remaining strength to offer a smile,

“Y-you two...” he began “You get away from here...go with Mason...find his people...” He turned his head towards me and said, “Don’t forget what we t-talked about, Mason.”

I clutched the knife he had given me and said, “I won’t.”

This prompted an angry glare from Haru. Toji turned back to his children and said something in Japanese. After a few moments he touched them both on the cheek, closed his eyes and breathed his last. I didn’t know what to do, had it been my fault? Had Haru been right about them following us back here? I’d been lucky not to encounter any bandits like these for a while, I knew that the Republic was no longer safe, and I’d have to double my efforts to get out of the area. But I hadn’t been planning on bringing anyone with me on my journey to West Virginia, and Haru certainly didn’t seem to want to be anywhere near me. I couldn’t blame him as he’d just lost three members of his family. I was reminded of the time the NSF visited my family, the horror I’d witnessed, and how I’d never wish it on anyone.

After a few moments Sakura looked at Haru and then me, “I need you to check around the property for any survivors, I’m going to fix Haru’s arm.”

I nodded and began making my way around the ruins of the farmhouse and barn, retrieving weapons, and rifling through the pockets of any corpse I came across. I found cash on some of them, dollar bills with Malcolm X’s face, twenties with Harriet Tubman’s face, a couple fifties with Frederick Douglas’s face

on them. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen legal tender with a White president's face on it. They'd even recast coins with the likenesses of various black figures, including George Floyd on the quarter. It was released at the same time a fifty-foot marble sculpture of him was unveiled in Minneapolis. It didn't really matter who was on the money, as cash these days had retained only a small percentage of its value from previous decades since the economy collapsed in 2037. Most financial transactions these days came from cards issues by the NSF after they'd taken control of the federal reserve in 2048 after the directors of the Fed were accused of being insensitive towards colonized transgender furies and arrested and executed. To possess one of the NSF cards you had to swear undying loyalty to the regime and promise to destroy any white, cisgendered society you came across for the betterment of the progressive empire.

I wondered where these bandits had gotten their hands on actual cash when I noticed a trail of blood leading into the cornfields behind the farmhouse. As I drew closer, I could hear dragging and grunting sounds and see the form of one of the wounded bandits slowly moving through the corn. I readied my gun and approached him as quietly as I could. He noticed me when I was about a yard away and attempted to roll on his back and aim his gun at me, I ran up and kicked the gun out of his hand and knelt on his chest, aiming the barrel of my gun at his head. I demanded to know where he'd come from. He moaned in pain and attempted to squirm free. I struck him in the side of the head with the butt of my gun and grabbed him by the collar, yanking him upwards into a sitting position I repeated my question over his protests.

"I don't know man! Me and my boys got the call and rolled out, we got told there was a white man in the area, and he may have been hiding out here, we got told to make it look like a raid, the fucking g\*\*ks have been causin' trouble out this way! Fuck lemme go!"

I pointed my gun under his chin and asked him who'd called them. "I don't know, I just got told our boy Rico got clapped and

we was gonna make whoever did it pay! Got told we'd get more credits for takin out your white ass!"

I figured these c\*cksuckers knew Rico. Some gangs that operated in the Republic were just looking for food and resources. There were rumors that in exchange for protection the NSF enlisted some of these groups to do their dirty work and make it look like random attacks to conceal their involvement. This was a tactic used by the NSF to avoid the prying eyes of the World Global Council, which had been formed from the remnants of the EU to promote globalism and crush any remaining "white supremacist terror" that crept up in ravaged former superpower America after the secession and ensuing civil war. Officially the WGC condemned the NSF's actions but took no action to prevent the hunting down of white Americans as to not cause an international incident. The NSF was allowed to operate so long as their methods were deemed legitimate.

My patience with this assh\*le was running thin. I pushed the run up to his chin and asked him how he knew where we were, again he sputtered and yelled that he didn't know. I heard footsteps behind me, I turned around to see Sakura and Haru standing behind me. Haru had a fresh bandage on his arm and was carrying a rifle.

"Move aside white boy," he said, aiming the rifle at the wounded bandit I'd been interrogating.

"Wait!" I pleaded, "I need to know where he came from and how he found us!"

Haru scoffed, "This motherf\*cker ain't telling you anything, he's just a footsoldier, check his pockets..." I reached inside one of the bandit's jacket pockets and found an NSF card emblazoned with AOC's horse face and stained with blood from where he'd been shot. Holding the card in my hand, I faced the injured bandit again. I was about to ask him who'd given him the card when a shot rang out and his head snapped back with a jet of blood. Haru had just shot him in the face. I jumped to my feet

"Haru! What the fuck are you doing?!" I yelled at him.

Haru slung his rifle over his shoulder and said calmly, "He

wasn't gonna tell you shit, man, and that's the only way to deal with guys like that, parasites the lot of em'." Haru began walking back towards the remains of the farmhouse. There was blood spatter on my face and my ears were ringing. Sakura handed me a rag and gave me an apologetic look.

We spent the next couple hours gathering weapons and anything else we could find on the bandits including a couple more NSF cards. Each of the bandits also carried with them a communicator. Cell phone networks had gone down in the last few decades after radical acolytes of Ted Kaczynski pulled down the majority of network towers, and debris from Elon Musk's exploded space station had taken out a good number of cell satellites. The communicators were one of the few effective means of talking with other people over a certain distance. They had a range of roughly twenty miles.

We searched through the house, my Challenger, and barn to salvage anything we could and buried Toji, Akio, and Botan. Sakura presided over their bodies and recited what sounded like a prayer in Japanese. We found the trucks the bandits came in parked on the edge of one of the corn fields. There had been a handful of cans of ethanol that survived the fire. It might have been enough to get me to West Virginia.

I thought about my journey and the tragic events that had unfolded on Sakura's family because of me. Haru clearly blamed me for what had happened to his family, but did Sakura? I had wanted to leave that night, but Toji had insisted I stay. If I had left would the bandits have still attacked them? Would Sakura's brothers and father still have been alive? I decided it was best not to think about it, what's done is done, and now I'd just wanted to get the hell out of there, out of the Republic and find any of my brothers that remained. I didn't know what to tell Sakura and Haru though, but I knew it would probably be best if I was out of their lives, even though Toji had thought otherwise. I didn't want to cause any more harm to what remained of his family. I loaded up the truck with weapons, fuel, and equipment and was preparing to take my leave when Sakura hopped in the passenger

seat next to me. I looked at her,

“I think it’s best if you stay with your brother, I’ve caused you guys enough harm.”

She gave me a sharp glance, “My father wanted us to come with you,” she responded, “So we’re coming, if your friends are still out there it’s our best chance at survival. I think you owe us that much.”

Haru walked up to the side of the truck. “What are you doing Sakura?” He asked, growing indignant.

“We’re going with him,” said Sakura, “It’s what father wanted, we need to get the hell out of here. Haru, get in the truck.”

Haru became angry, “There’s no way in hell I’m going anywhere with him!” He shouted, prompting a loud argument between him and his sister. They yelled at each other in Japanese for a few minutes, it culminated with Haru throwing open the door to his truck and grabbing his sister’s arm, Sakura screamed in protest and twisted out of her brother’s grip.

“I’m going!” she yelled in her brother’s face, “That’s all there is to it!” Haru stood there scowling.

After a moment he looked up and said, “I’m staying, I can rebuild somewhere else, I’m going to go to the Yamigata’s and the Sakimura’s and tell them what happened, we’re going to take the fight to these bastards and end this shit once and for all!” Haru looked at me, “You take Sakura somewhere safe, and if anything happens to her, I’ll fucking find you!” He said slamming the truck door, I didn’t say anything I just nodded.

Sakura and her brother exchanged more words in Japanese. Haru embraced his sister and kissed her cheek, taking the time to shoot me one more dirty look. Haru nodded after the exchange and walked over to what appeared to be a control panel for the irrigation system. After typing a code into the pad a small hatch opened revealing a red button, Haru pressed it then walked around and gave a final look to his sister before getting in the other truck and driving away. I noticed fluid spraying out of the nozzles above the corn, coating the stalks as I drove through the field. As we approached the road away from the property, I

noticed sparks emanating from a few of the nozzles. Suddenly bright orange flames erupted and began engulfing the corn on both sides. Surprised, I looked at Sakura. She looked back at me and said,

“They won’t be getting anything else from my family,” She turned her attention back to the road. I could see a tear streaming down her face. I wanted to say something to comfort her, but I decided silence was the best option in the moment. I turned onto a paved road and sped away from the fields as they burned, and pillars of smoke reached the early morning sky.



## IV

A short while after we left the farm Sakura fell asleep in her seat. I'd steal glances at her occasionally, as she dozed. Occasionally she'd jostle around and I'd see tears streaming down her cheeks. I thought about waking her but decided against it. She needed the rest, I could only imagine how she was feeling in this moment. West Virginia wasn't too far but we'd have to cut through Kentucky, which held a few NSF strongholds, granted most of their military forces had receded to the coasts but the last reports I'd gotten from my brother's unit had spoken of troops still operating in the area near Mt. Vernon. Granted, that info was months old and a lot could've changed since then; still I decided it was best to take the back roads.

I found a rural back route and drove down it for a bit. It was a dusty stretch and cut through some farms. I'd see small, abandoned houses dotting the sides of the road sitting on plots of land that had been razed in anticipation of the NSF's movement through the area. A few of the houses had been requisitioned by the NSF and had steel barricades placed on the doors and were covered with graffiti. Some other houses had been demolished or burnt, scraps of charred wood were all that remained. This area had been where neo-Confederate troops had hidden when they were forced back from the Republic after a massive NSF offensive. Allowing any neo-Confederate a place to stay or safe passage was punishable by death. There were mass graves around here, the whole place reeked of death, and it gave me a horrible ominous feeling just driving through it.

I passed by a two-story farmhouse on the left. The front of the house looked like a bulldozer had driven through it. I could make out bullets holes and walls stripped of wiring inside. A second story window faced the road I was on. Someone was standing in

it and watching my truck as it passed. It looked like a tall man in a suit wearing a skull shaped mask over his face.

I gasped and stopped the truck as I had seen this figure before. He had appeared in my dreams. I would see him on the edge of my vision, or far away. I could hear him speaking to me, but I could never make out what he was saying, weeks ago when I was camping near the area formerly known as Jackson, Mississippi, I had dreamt I was walking in the woods and I could hear his voice speaking from somewhere deep in the trees. Suddenly there were footsteps behind me and I could feel a skeletal hand clasp my shoulder, that had woken me up. I had figured it was a side affect of the Amednazol, and I hadn't thought much of it, even though I had checked the shoulder and saw the faint outline of what looked like finger marks quickly fade away after I'd woken up. Seeing this figure now freaked me out: was I hallucinating?

The truck stopping had roused Sakura from her slumber, "Wuh...what's doing on?" She asked. I turned to her and told her I thought I saw somebody. Her eyes grew wide, "It might be one of them!" she said nervously.

I turned back around to look at the window but he...or it, was gone. The ominous feeling came back in waves. Part of me wanted to get out the truck and check the house quickly, but another part was demanding I step on the gas and get the hell out of there. I sided with the latter and sped off from the house.

"What did they look like?" asked Sakura in a shaky voice.

"It looked like a guy in a mask, but I might be seeing things, the radio has been quiet for hours, this area is totally abandoned save for some scavengers maybe." This didn't seem to do much to reassure Sakura, who asked me how long it would be until we were in West Virginia. "Should be another eight hours or so if we keep taking this route." I gave her my best guess.

We drove for another hour and came across what looked like a NSF troop transport. It was shot to hell by what looked like armor piercing rounds. I slowed the truck to take a better look. There were skeletal remains of what appeared to be ambushed

NSF soldiers laying in front of it. God knew how long they'd been there. Behind the driver's seat was another desecrated corpse with a couple sizable holes in its chest. On the side among the bullet holes torn in the armor plating was neo-Confederate graffiti.

I took another look inside the truck's cabin, and the man in the mask was sitting in place of the corpse. He turned to look at me, behind the mask I could see his eyes. The irises were a piercing red color. They seemed to be peering directly into my soul. Before I could stop myself, I yelled out and hit the accelerator. Sakura shrieked and asked me what was wrong. I slowed the truck and gathered my thoughts, what the hell was wrong? Was I going crazy? I shot a glance back at the transport. Although the rear-view mirror was smashed I could make out the reflection of the corpse still behind the wheel, glaring out into nothingness as it had been for what was probably years.

"I...I thought I saw that corpse move..." I stammered out to a concerned looking Sakura who appeared to be growing more nervous.

"Are you okay Mason?" She asked. She had been thorough a great deal in the last few hours and my theatrics were likely doing little to help her disposition. I stopped the truck again and looked at Sakura, trying to be as reassuring as possible given the circumstances.

"I'm fine Sakura," I forced myself to say, "I think I'm just freaking myself out, but I'm okay." She didn't look convinced, "Do you want me to drive for a while?" she asked, "You look tired..."

I took a couple of deep breaths and collected myself as best I could. The last thing I needed was to have a schizophrenic episode with someone's life in my hands in a place where the NSF could strike any second. I was about to respond to Sakura when a loud beeping took my attention away. It was the energy field scanner, it had detected something. I grabbed it and looked at the screen. It had picked up what appeared to be a drone heading in from the east and moving quickly, it would be on top of us

in a matter of minutes. Thinking quickly, I spotted a small house nearby. There was a makeshift steel awning sitting on metal supports on the side of a dirt driveway. I drove the truck quickly towards it and parked underneath, killing the engine and hoping the drone wouldn't pick up the heat signature. I got out of the truck, covered it with a tarp I'd taken from Toji, and readied a scoped rifle as me and Sakura hid under the awning.

Looking at the scanner and tracking the drones movements, I used a spotting scope I'd found on one of the bandits to scan the sky and try to pinpoint where the drone was. They usually operated at a high enough altitude that I didn't think my rifle could hit it, and even if I was able to bring it down it would send a clear signal to any NSF outfit that was still in the area, I just hoped the metallic awning would shield us from the drones sensors. Listening carefully, I could barely make out the drone's engine sweeping across the sky. Adjusting my scope I was able to spot it, it was an older NX-90 model, but one that could operate autonomously for extremely long periods of time, this one could have been patrolling the area for years. Ducking down I watched the scanner as the drone left the airspace, Sakura began tugging on my arm,

"Let's get the hell out of here!" she pleaded.

"No," I told her, "It could be circling back around, we need to give it a few minutes." We watched the scanner for a bit longer. It wasn't picking up any more signatures. I thought of getting back in the truck and cutting across the nearby fields. There were a lot of back roads crisscrossing the area. It may have added some time to our trip, but it was a fair exchange for safety from any hardware or troops the NSF still had in the area. After a little while longer, and more begging from Sakura, I gathered the equipment and pulled the tarp off the truck.

Suddenly there came a crashing sound from inside the house, both I and Sakura jumped, and I pointed the rifle at the direction of the sound. I saw what looked like a shadow cross in front of the large window.

"Hey!" I shouted, drawing nearer to the house. Sakura crept

up behind me, tugging at my jacket and begging to go in an increasingly harried voice. I gave her the truck keys and my 1911 pistol and told her to wait in the truck and not come out until I returned. If someone was stalking us, I wanted to deal with them. Sakura reluctantly agreed and returned to the truck, watching me with wide eyes as I drew closer to the front door of the house with my rifle trained at the window. I kicked the door in, it swung back against the wall on creaky hinges. I entered the house sweeping the room with my gun. It was empty save for some smashed furniture. On a nearby wall was a wooden desk with a cracked mirror. I passed by it, loudly demanding for anyone in the house to come out. The ominous feeling returned to me. I had a horrible feeling that I didn't want to be in the house any longer and I was about to turn to leave when I heard a voice say "*Mason*" in a hushed tone, it came from my right.

I looked in the direction to see the mirror reflecting the room and myself, behind my shoulder I could see the masked man standing on the opposite side of the room and glaring at me with his red eyes. His reflection was distorted by the cracks in the mirror, it looked like there were several of them. I wheeled around with my rifle and saw...nothing. Then, again to my right came the voice.

"Over here," it said. I turned and saw him, standing well over six feet tall and wearing a coal black suit I could see the little cracks and imperfections in his mask and his burning eyes behind it. He was inches away from me. I brought my rifle up but in one movement he grabbed the barrel and forced the gun upward. In desperation I pulled the trigger and sent a round into the ceiling. I could hear Sakura screaming, the truck door being thrown open and her footsteps racing towards me. I took my left hand off the rifle and grabbed at the handle of Toji's tanto knife, but before I could bring the blade out the masked man reached out his hand and grabbed my face. I tried to break free of his grip but something flashed before my eyes and I felt my consciousness leave my body. I didn't know how else to explain it, I was there in the house with the man in the mask and then there was

something like a flash of light and the next thing I knew I was standing in the middle of the woods.

After the shock wore off, I readied the gun and looked around, calling out for anyone. The sun cast rays through the tree branches and illuminated a trail. An odd sensation came over me, I knew this place. Yes, these were the woods near my parents' property when I was a kid. Me and my brother had built a fort close to a clearing where the trail led. I looked up the trail and saw something moving, I called out but got no response. How did I get here? Was I dreaming? Was this a hallucination? Who or what was the man in the mask? And more importantly, how the hell do I get out of here?

Not knowing what else to do I made my way up the trail, the leaves rustled beneath my boots, and I could hear birds and other animals in the distance as I walked, but there was something else on the wind, something like whispering voices. I knew that I wasn't really in these woods, that I *couldn't* be. The sky was an unnatural hue, the whispers in the distance grew louder and it began to feel like some sort of nightmare I had to wake up from and make sure Sakura was still okay, yet I still felt compelled to follow the trail. I saw more familiar things on my way, a crooked oak tree where I'd carved my initials when I was ten years old, a cross consisting of two branches banded together with rope that marked the grave of a stray cat me and my brother had found. I knew the path well; if I kept walking, I'd find the fort up ahead, some force compelled me to walk on, it was like my subconscious, but it felt more...direct, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd know what I'd find when I got to the fort.

I came to the clearing and saw the fort on the edge of it, it was made of repurposed wood pallets and had a plastic tarp as a makeshift roof. I remembered sitting in it reading books I'd taken out of piles outside the library after it was declared a propaganda outlet and the NSF ransacked it. Most of them had been burned, but I was able to salvage a few with singed pages. I remembered how they'd smelled of smoke and my hands would be blackened with ash after reading them. I took a step forward and

felt something crunch under my boot, something that wasn't a leaf. I looked down and saw it was a page from a book, the edges of it were black and curled. It looked old. I bent down to pick it up and realized it was from a book of Robert Frost poetry. Before I could read it, I heard something move up ahead in the direction of the fort. I absentmindedly stuffed the page into one of my pockets and moved closer to where the sound was coming from. As I neared the fort, I saw something moving inside of it. I aimed the rifle at the entrance to see a shape emerge. It grew taller and started to vaguely resemble a human, and then I could see it was the masked man.

"Hey!" I shouted at him and began running closer. He turned his head to look at me for a moment and then turned away and focused on something off in the distance. I got next to him but before I could start questioning him, I heard a scream coming from somewhere outside the woods. I followed the masked mans gaze and saw a huge plume of smoke outside the edge of the forest, right near where my old house was, and a memory came rushing back to me so intensely that I was almost knocked off my feet. This was the day the NSF had found my parents; this was the day my childhood ended. This masked guy had known that, and he had somehow dragged me back into the worst memory of my life.

I turned to face him again, but before I could get any words out his hand shot out and grabbed my face again. There was another flash and before I knew it, I found myself back in that abandoned house again. I gasped and fell to my knees. I felt something shaking me and a voice calling my name somewhere off in space, but I was too dazed to respond in my current state, suddenly my consciousness came back in a wave, and I realized it was Sakura.

"Mason! Mason!" she yelled frantically, "What the fuck is going on?!" she demanded. I got to my feet and put my arms on her shoulders, trying to calm her down.

"It's okay, it's okay..." I said, offering my best reassurances to her. She recoiled from my grasp and told me she rushed in after she heard the gun shot to find me just standing there, catatonic

for approximately fifteen minutes, I noticed the side of my face was burning as if it had been slapped. Sakura copped to it as she had been trying to awaken me from whatever state I had been in. I began apologizing to her, but she wasn't having it.

"I should have just stayed with my brother if I'd known you were going to freak out on me!" She said. I couldn't think of a response. I raised my hands in what I hoped was a calming gesture and told her that I was okay now. The thought occurred to me that the masked man could still be in the house. I began looking around, scanning the dark corners for anything that might move. Could Sakura even see him? Should I even bring him up? Was he even real or a product of my traumatized mind? Had travelling the ruins of the southern part of the country and getting into gunfights with murderers and bandits finally taken its toll?

"What are you looking for?" Sakura asked me, and I didn't know what to tell her, but I had to tell her something.

Looking her in the eye I asked "Did you see anybody in here with me? Have you seen anyone that looked out of place? They might have been wearing a mask." There was silence for a few moments then Sakura shook her head no. I felt bad for scaring her, but it hadn't really been my fault, had it?

Suddenly a realization came to me. I reached in my pocket and was shocked to feel the burnt page from the book of poetry inside. I pulled it out and straightened it as best I could.

"What is that?" Sakura asked. Almost as quickly as I pulled the page out it began turning black, first at the edges then it worked towards the middle of the page, it was if it was being burnt but there was no flame. I managed to read the last sentence at the bottom of the page *I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep* and with that it disintegrated into ash. Sakura and I exchanged glances, "Okay" she said indignantly, "You're going to start explaining this to me right fucking now."

I was still coping with the fact that the "vision" I'd had from the man in the mask was real. I really had been back in those woods or at least some part of my mind had been. I was delib-



erating with myself over what I wanted to tell Sakura, and if I could make it sound as if I wasn't going insane, but even that seemed like a huge task because I really couldn't prove I wasn't going crazy.

"Something has been following us..." I told her, she just stood there with her arms crossed, possibly deciding on whether or not she should shoot me and steal the truck.

I continued, "It looks like a man, it could actually be...I don't know but I've seen him...or it, a few times while we were driving and just now when you were here trying to wake me up, he had..." I trailed off and judging from Sakura's reaction she wasn't believing me. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped and looked behind me. Her eyes grew wide, and I thought for a second the masked man had returned until I heard footsteps enter the house and somebody pull back the action of a rifle behind me.

"Don't fucking move, whitey." A feminine yet still oddly masculine voice demanded. "Drop the gun and turn around, and don't try anything funny."

I complied, letting the rifle slip out of my hands and hit the floor, I turned on my heel to face this new assailant. It was a woman of indeterminate race, at least I think it was. "She" stood over six feet tall looked to weigh north of three hundred pounds. Flab bulged out from around "her" body armor, red and black, the colors of the NSF. "She" had a shock of green and blue colored hair that covered part of "her" face and held an AR-15 at "her" hip. On an armor plate on "her" right forearm, I could see a few rows of what looked like white faces with red x's crisscrossing them. "She" was flanked by an emaciated looking black woman with cornrows on "her" left and on the other side stood a Hispanic looking man with tattoos covering his face. They each had similar rifles and armor and they were all pointing at me. I thought of the drone. It must have seen Sakura and I when we signaled this nearby unit. Sakura moved behind me. She still had the gun and I knew she was a good shot, but the odds were stacked against us here.

The "woman" leading the group spoke again. "Don't fuck with

us colonizer! We have two more individuals in our unit!" They said in a weird husky voice. I looked out the window and saw two more soldiers patrolling outside, one had bright pink hair and a nose ring the other had dreadlocks and was smoking what looked like a blunt. It was hard for me to determine either's gender. "We ain't seen no mayo motherfuckers out this way in a minute!" the Hispanic guy quipped; they all began to laugh.

"Fuck off!" shouted Sakura from behind me.

"Shut yo sweet and sour ass up, you yellow bitch!" taunted the skinny black woman. So much for the tolerant left. The NSF's orders were to kill any straight white men on sight, or anyone who aided them, but sometimes they could be bartered with. Domestic supply lines had dried up ages ago and the NSF was forced to import most of its goods from overseas. Lots of lower ranked NSF soldiers got the short end of the stick and were forced to use other means to acquire what they needed to survive, still it was tricky business trying to barter with them. I'd heard stories of desperate NSF soldiers making deals with the remnants of neo-Confederate factions only to later call-in bombing raids on the men who'd helped them. My negotiating skills weren't that great, even if I'd had something they wanted they were just as likely to kill me and take it anyway.

Standing there with my hands raised I asked, "What do you want?" the trio looked at each other and laughed again, then the "woman" in the middle turned back to me and said, "Dead white men!" and aimed her rifle.

I made a move to reach for the gun tucked in my waist band but I was too slow. "She" fired a burst that hit me square in the chest, one bullet in my kidney, one in my sternum, the last in my solar plexus. I fell backwards and hit the floor hard. Pain erupted throughout my chest and the feeling began to fade from my arms. Sakura screamed out and fired a shot. There came some yelling and another burst of automatic fire that hit her, causing her to collapse in a pile next to me. With my strength fading I took another look at my attackers. They were laughing and walking towards me and Sakura as we laid helpless on the dirty floor with

puddles of blood forming around our bodies. Sakura was still alive. I could see her face twisted in agony as she tried to scramble closer to me, I could barely move my arm, but I reached out to her. I took a final look at the NSF soldiers and regretted that I was going to be done in by these dysgenic freaks.

Suddenly, there came a shift in the air, and things seemed to slow down, I didn't know if it was just an effect of being about to die but just as I was about to close my eyes and accept my fate, I noticed a figure standing over me. It was the masked man, had this been what he'd wanted, to lead me to my death? I could barely stay conscious, but I tried to reach my hand out to him, he looked down at me and I could hear a voice...his voice in my head.

"YOUR JOURNEY DOESN'T END HERE, MASON," he said in a booming tone, behind his mask I could see his eyes blazing, he continued, "YOU STILL HAVE MILES TO GO BEFORE YOU SLEEP." He turned and looked at Sakura, who was barely hanging on. The soldiers had their guns aimed at us, and they were moving closer, albeit very slowly as if they were moving in slow motion. Their footfalls came at longer and longer intervals, and I could still see spent bullet casings spiraling towards the ground.

I looked towards the masked man again, he met my gaze and said, "I CAN HELP YOU...AND HER...BUT YOU MUST CONSENT." At this he knelt down closer to me and took my hand, his fingers gripped my palm and felt like steel. He spoke again, "THERE IS NO TIME TO WASTE." Facing death or a pact with a demon, I chose the demon. I looked at him again and nodded, the masked man let go of my hand and stood straight up still staring into my eyes he said: "AVERT YOUR GAZE... AND HERS," and placed a hand on his mask.

I could hear something coming, some sound in the distance like wind howling. It grew louder and louder and became deafening. The house began to rumble. I could see the soldiers faces, each of them looked horrified and they began firing wildly all around them, it felt as if there were a whirlwind surrounding me. With the last of my strength I wrapped my arms around Sakura

and pulled her close, covering her eyes with my hand. I took one final glance at the masked man before I lost consciousness, he looked at me and winked, and then pulled his mask off.

## V

### Refuge

There was darkness, but I was still alive...somehow, I still had consciousness. I had been bleeding out on the floor with my organs perforated by rifle rounds, everything was fading to black but I could still think, and feel. There was a cool breeze, I could feel it on my face and there was a smell, it was like sulfur but there was something else *underneath* that, the horrible acrid smell of burning flesh. It brought back memories of seeing bodies stacked on one another, torn apart by gunfire, and set aflame.

I opened my eyes and saw the sky. White cumulonimbus clouds bleached by the sun shone through a huge hole torn in the ceiling of the house. I raised my head and my surroundings came into focus. There was splintered wood, glass, insulation, and roof tiles covering the interior of the house, it was like it had been hit by a tornado. There were shapes on the floor near me, it took me a moment to realize they were the bodies of the NSF soldiers that had attacked me and Sakura. I was sore, every muscle in my body ached.

I managed to raise myself into a sitting position, I lifted my shirt and checked my chest to see several closed bullet wounds, circular imprints of darkened flesh on my stomach and chest but no sign of blood. I looked to my right to see Sakura, unconscious but alive. I checked her body for wounds and saw similar imprints on her flesh but also no signs of blood. My legs felt numb, but I was able to will them to work and get to my feet. There was a moment of dizziness as I stood, it felt like a hangover, at least what I could remember a hangover feeling like. The last time I'd had alcohol, it was from a makeshift still at an encampment with my brother years ago. We'd been celebrating a successful offensive that had pushed a battalion of NSF troops north

of the area formerly known as Louisville, Kentucky. I remembered how good I'd felt that night, it was one of the last time I could remember feeling truly happy. But a week later another larger contingent of the NSF would attack from the east and wipe out our base with mortar fire, me and my brother had barely escaped with our lives.

I took a step forward toward the NSF bodies splayed out on the floor. There was still the faint smell of gunsmoke hanging in the air, there were bullet holes punched in the walls and floor, it was as if they'd been firing in all directions. I recognized one of the corpses of the obese "woman" who'd been the primary agitator. Their face was twisted into a mask of agony, a look of terror permanently frozen into their eyes. There was what appeared to be a dark fluid emanating from their mouth and nose and pooling on the floor next to their head, it smelled terribly. The other corpses I checked were in a similar condition, upon closer inspection it could see a small pattern of holes in each of their bodies, they weren't bullet holes, they were smaller, judging from the spacing it looked like someone had taken their hand and forced their fingers into their bodies. Had this been the work of our masked friend?

I checked around the property but there was no sign of anyone. There was an armored NSF transport flipped over onto its roof, it looked like one of the doors had been torn off, I drew nearer with my pistol drawn and checked the interior, there was a body inside still belted into the driver's seat. I could see more finger marks in his cheeks and temples, it was as if someone had grabbed his face and forced their fingers inside his skull, the wounds were deep, so deep I could see singed tissue that could have been his brain. His mouth was open in a permanent scream and more of the viscous dark fluid was pouring out into a growing puddle on the upturned roof of the truck. I had seen what terrible things human beings were capable of, dressed wounds, saw my friends torn apart by explosives and artillery fire, it was terrible to admit but this kind of thing hadn't phased me for most of my life. But this...this made me quiver. I felt a twinge of sick-

ness, again something I hadn't felt in years, and I had to take a moment to get my head right.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten in over a day and I knew we were running short on rations. I didn't know if there'd be anywhere to find food along our way to West Virginia. I spotted a pry bar on a rack bolted to the truck's exterior, I grabbed it off and used it to break the lock and pry open the back door of the truck's cargo area. Inside I saw various supplies spilled out everywhere, whatever or whoever had flipped the truck had done it with an unimaginable force. Sifting through the detritus I came upon a stash of MREs wrapped in foil. I grabbed them up and was surprised when I heard the radio on the dashboard explode with static, after a few seconds of noise I could just barely make out a voice.

"Unit 73 what is your status?" Another moment passed.

"Unit 73, confirm your status..." We needed to leave *now*.

I looked under the steel awning and saw the truck still parked there, it looked like it hadn't taken any damage at all. I tossed the food in the bed and raced back into the destroyed house to recover Sakura. Scooping her up I made my way back to the truck and placed her gently in the passenger's seats but before I could enter the truck myself, I spotted something laying on the ground between two corpses of NSF soldiers. Against my better judgement I approached it. Whatever it was gleamed in the sun. Getting closer I could see it was a mask, the same mask my supernatural friend had been wearing. It looked like it was hand made from some kind of resin and vaguely resembled a skull.

I knelt to pick it up but as my fingers touched its surface something flashed before my eyes, it was like a vision, but it only lasted for a few seconds. I could see the man who'd appeared to us yesterday, or whenever it was, "he" had his back turned to me. We were surrounded by what felt like howling wind and spiraling smoke, I could barely see anything save for his form obscured by the chaos, I could make out yelling and see muzzle flashes of people firing guns wildly in all directions. It took me a moment to realize they were the NSF soldiers who'd found us, I was see-

ing what had happened before I'd lost consciousness. Before I could process it the man, the *demon* turned his head to look back at me and I could see was not only not wearing a mask, but he also didn't have a face. I don't mean to say he didn't have any facial features; it looked like there was a jagged hole where a normal humans face would be, it was as if his skull had been sculpted from clay and smashed in. I only glimpsed this for a fraction of a second before I was thrown back into reality, but I could hear his voice booming, "SEE YOU SOON" as it ended. The shock as the vision ended was enough to rob my legs of feeling for a moment. I fell over onto my side and yelled out before I could stop myself. Who or what was the masked man, how did he find me, why did he or "it" *attach* itself to me? I couldn't have been going crazy, this was actually happening.

I didn't have time to ponder the situation: if that NSF unit had found us that quickly after the drone passed by there had to be more in the area. I looked at the mask again, I wanted to kick it away or smash it and run, but I felt more compelled to pick it up. I reached by hand out slowly and poked at it...nothing no vision, no whirlwind, so screaming. I grabbed it up and took it with my back to the truck. I had a metal case in the bed with a lock. I placed it inside and locked it up, one less thing to have to explain to Sakura whenever she wakes up. I got into the driver's seat and started the engine which thankfully fired up with no issue. I pulled away from the house and headed across the nearby field, toward a line of trees, this truck was outfitted for off-roading and I would take full advantage of that, I couldn't risk having another run in with the NSF. There was an old Neo-Confederate supply line that had been cut through the woods near here, to my knowledge it wasn't on any NSF maps. That could've changed in recent months, but it was our best shot of making it to West Virginia undetected. I didn't know what I'd find there, if any of my people were still alive, but it was our best chance at survival. For now, me and Sakura were alive, we'd been given a second chance by our masked friend, whether he was truly on our side, or something from hell, remained to be seen.



The supply line was rough, cut through thickets of trees and going through miles of back woods. The truck's suspension clunked over roots and rocks jostling me and Sakura in our seats. She was still out cold though and the bumpy trail didn't seem to disturb her sleep. I didn't know what I was going to tell her when she woke up, if she even would remember anything that happened over the past 24 hours. I guess I would cross that bridge when I came to it, I wondered how her brother Haru was doing, if I'd ever see him again.

I crested a hill and the truck bounced as I made my way down the other side, I swerved to avoid a tree stump and the wheels lost traction. The truck started fishtailing and before I could correct the truck's direction the right rear tire hit a tangle of thick roots and got lodged in place. I tried accelerating but could only hear rubber burning. I shifted into higher gear and pressed the gas down, the axle groaned and the truck lurched forward a few inches but no more, we were stuck. Cursing under my breath I hopped out of the truck to survey the damage, looking underneath I could see the wheel lodged between two roots. One of them had jammed under the axle itself, near the leafspring. I had a hatchet in the truck bed, but it would take me a while to hack through. There was also the option of tying the truck's winch to a nearby tree and pulling it out that way, but with the way the axle was lodged a winch pull may damage the suspension. I looked at the sky, it would be dark soon and I was growing tired. I'd been on the forest path for a couple of hours, judging by my rudimentary map and the truck's barely functional GPS I figured I had to be getting close to the West Virginia border by now. Should we risk walking through the woods at night?

The passenger side door of the truck opened up and Sakura stuck her head out. She looked at me and asked where we were. I told her in the Kentucky woods near the West Virginia border. She stood there for a minute, contemplating, and then asked "What's wrong with the truck?"

I told her we got caught up on some roots, she gave me a quizzical look and asked, "How'd you manage that?"

I ignored her and began searching the truck bed for the hatchet. Sakura hopped out of the truck and began stretching and yawning. She walked closer and asked how long she'd been sleeping. I told her she'd been out for about ten hours at my estimation, I wasn't exactly sure since we'd both been unconscious for God knows how long after the NSF attack at the house.

"Huh..." she said, "Last thing I remember we were just entering old Kentucky..." she trailed off and began looking around the woods, "I guess this wouldn't be a bad spot to camp, y'know if we *had* to." She added a mocking inflection to her statement which irked me, I thought about telling her off but decided against it, I didn't feel like getting into a fight in the middle of the woods, especially not knowing who or what was lurking. I found the hatchet and began taking swings at the roots surrounding the axle and tire, carefully angling my strikes so as to not do any more damage to the truck. Sakura leaned against the truck and put her head in her hands, "How long do you think this is going to take?" she asked. I summoned my patience and told her I didn't know, but if she was bored, she could start looking around for firewood in case we had to camp here for the night. She scoffed and said "Fine!" but before I let her walk away, I told her to take a rifle from the truck and be on the lookout for anybody. She rolled her eyes but grabbed a gun and made sure it was loaded before slinging it over her shoulder and heading off.

I worked on the roots for a while, damn near an hour by my best guess. I'd succeeded at breaking through the root the axle was propped up on but the truck was still stuck in a precarious position, but now at least it seemed safer to use the winch. It had gotten dark as I worked and the last fifteen minutes I'd spent using a flashlight. Sakura showed up with her arms full of various lengths of wood and asked how the progress was going.

"Good," I told her, placing the hatchet back into the truck bed. I felt my stomach rumbling, I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten anything. I thought of the rations I'd gotten from the flipped NSF transport, they sounded pretty good right about now, but first I wanted to get the truck free. I looped the winch

cable around a nearby tree and with Sakura working the gas I activated the motor, the line grew taut and after some groans from the suspension the truck lurched forward with a loud *CRACK* coming from the severed roots. The truck zoomed forward a couple feet, bounced up and down as the suspension freed itself, then came to a stop. Sakura cheered and clapped her hands; the truck was finally free.

We built a fire and shared a few portions of rations. The food was salty, but it tasted amazing considering the circumstances. Sakura and I sat close together. She remarked that while the rations didn't taste great, but she was sick of eating corn. She began talking about the food her father would prepare for the family and then she stopped and brought her hands to her face, it looked like she was getting choked up. I wasn't sure what to do, I hadn't had to comfort a woman in quite some time, against my better judgement I put a hand on her shoulder, she responded by gently placing her right hand over mine while her left was still covering her face.

"Sakura..." I started, she sniffled and turned to look at me.

"Promise me Mason," she said with tears welling up in her eyes, "promise me we'll make those bastards pay, we'll make sure they don't tear apart any more families." I gave her a solemn nod and she leaned in. We kissed.

It was the first time I'd kissed a girl in years, at least since my late teens when my brother and I had joined the Neo-Confederates for the first go around after the NSF began tightening it's grip on the Republic. I remembered meeting a girl back then. Her name was Katie. She had been in a similar situation as I was, her family torn apart by an NSF incursion. We had gotten close, and were spending a lot of time together, it was like a relationship in a lot of ways. We'd been hunkered down in an outpost in Knoxville with white refugees whose homes had either been burned or requisitioned by the NSF. The order had come down to kill any able-bodied white man and to capture white females for breeding purposes. We'd gotten the order to move out as NSF troops had begun an incursion into Kentucky and were slaugh-

tering anyone they could find. I told Katie I'd see her again. She gave me a heart shaped pendant that her mother had given her as a child. I kept it in the front pocket of my jacket.

After we'd shipped out word came on the radio that the Knoxville outpost had been attacked, and that there were only a couple survivors, Katie wasn't among them. I learned that the NSF troops had tried to drag her away, she managed to fight back and stab one of them and was gunned down for her trouble. After that I never let myself get close to anyone, I knew the world was nothing but tragedy and that forming relationships with people was an exercise in heartbreak, when we got back to the remains of the outpost, I buried the pendant with Katie's body. I wondered if there was someone in Sakura's past, some boy that held her affections only to get ripped away by the war, maybe it was best not to find out, and maybe it was best to not tell Sakura about Katie.

After we kissed Sakura pulled away briefly, she looked down at the fire for a moment and said, "I never thought I'd find someone else...not like this..." Then she smirked and added "Least of all not a white boy." I was about to respond but Sakura placed her hands on my shoulders and leaned in for another, longer kiss. In that moment, nothing else mattered, not the war or the horror I'd seen, not the masked man. Now, all that mattered was I and Sakura sitting in these woods. Still, I wondered if I could allow her in, if I could allow myself to be vulnerable and feel for someone who could be ripped away from me at any second. Could Sakura strip my armor from me? We laid down on a canvas tarp and watched the stars through the treetops, gently embracing one another.

Sakura turned to me and asked "Mason? What happens when we get to West Virginia?" I looked over and met her gaze. "We find out if any of my brothers are still alive, see if we can mount any kind of offense." She looked at me with concern "But...but what if no one's left? What happens then? Where do we go?"

Truthfully, I hadn't considered that, I spent so much time and

energy visualizing my brothers being alive and just hiding out at the old base in West Virginia I hadn't really considered if they were dead. I hadn't wanted to consider that a possibility even though it absolutely could have been. And I hadn't really considered what would happen if I was truly alone, what would I do in that case? Where could we go? Where was safe from the NSF? Was I really prepared to run or hide for the rest of my life? So many of my white brothers and sisters had been killed, were there any of us left? I didn't know how to convey that to Sakura.

I turned back to her and said, "If that's the case, then we just keep driving, we find more people to help us, if they're out there we'll find them, and we'll stop any NSF bastard that gets in our way."

Sakura rested her head and hand on my chest and asked, "Then what? What happens when we beat them, where do we go?"

I thought for a second and then said, "We find a place, we stay there, we hunt, we fish, we dig for ground water, we start a garden, we live our lives."

Sakura raised her head, and her eyes met mine once again, "Do you really think we can?" Again, I nodded, and we shared another kiss. Sakura laid her head back down and drifted off to sleep. I looked back up at the stars and wondered if I had just lied to Sakura. Could it be possible that my brothers were still alive? Yes. Were there resistance networks still operating in the area? Yes, but they were well hidden, NSF was still intercepting radio signals in the area, I wasn't sure how I'd get in contact with any of them, but there had to be a way. I closed my eyes and listened to Sakura's breathing, I felt myself drift off and dreamt about living on a homestead somewhere with her.

## VI

### Traitors

I awoke when it was still dark out, the dirt floor of the forest had caused my back to ache dully, I checked my watch, it wasn't even 6AM yet. I gently rolled Sakura onto her side and got up with a wince to shovel dirt on the dying embers of the fire. It had been risky to camp out in these woods, but I'd kept my pistol at my side and was generally a light sleeper, I checked the truck and supplies and walked around the camp just to make sure we hadn't had any night visitors. I heard Sakura yawn and saw her sit up on the tarp, rubbing her eyes. She asked what time it was, I said "It's about 6AM, we need to get moving, figure if we stick to back roads, we can make it to the West Virginia camp before the afternoon." Sakura nodded and got to her feet, we rolled up the tarp and tossed it in the bed of the truck. I checked the scanner...nothing. The truck had a CB radio, but I'd avoided using it since I knew the NSF had been monitoring old Neo Confederate bands, when the war was still going on my brothers and I had used specially coded language to communicate, utilizing sequences of numbers and letters to signify troop movements or supply requests and constantly changing up the codes to avoid detection. I could remember some of the old codes we'd used, but they'd probably been updated since I'd lost contact with the last regiment of Neo Confederates, or there was the distinct possibility that no one was around to receive radio calls anymore. Before our last transmission, the remaining bands of Neo Confederates had agreed that the West Virginia base would be our fallback point, where we could rally if the ongoing conflict ever caused us to disperse, but I found myself having the same thoughts as I'd had last night in response to Sakura's question, was anybody even there? Or what if there was an NSF trap waiting for us there? I chased the

thought from my mind and got in the truck with Sakura.

After a few more miles of traversing the old route cut through the forest we arrived on a paved road, there was a map the previous owner of the truck left in the glove box that highlighted which routes were blockaded and which were still open, according to this map the road we were on would take us through Kentucky to the western border of West Virginia but on the map the route was highlighted in red marker and there were several X's at certain spots, signifying blockades. This road had been a major route for supplies and weapons for Neo Confederates so it wouldn't be surprising that they'd want to lock it down as much as possible, but there were several smaller routes crisscrossing it at several points. It would add time to our journey, but these routes would probably be our best option, although none of them led into West Virginia, we would need to take the old supply route eventually. I told Sakura how dangerous this could be, she responded with a dour look and a nod, she knew the risks.

We travelled down the road for a while, after a time the forests gave way to more open fields, this made me nervous, there were plenty of spots for snipers or sharp shooters to attack from, areas where I couldn't get a clear view. Sakura held a scoped 30.06 rifle between her legs, her actions when her family farm was attacked led me to believe she knew her way around guns, I assumed Toji had taught her well, she looked out her window, scanning the environment as we drove through. So far it was nothing but fields that had once yielded produce, now burned black by either the NSF or the former farms owners as they evacuated, you'd see vast swaths of fire blackened land, acres long and stretching out into the horizon. I thought of all the environmental initiatives the NSF supposedly championed and how they'd declared that whites owning farms was a direct threat to them, and how black and brown people would take care of the property better and laughed quietly to myself.

"What's so funny?" asked Sakura, turning away from the window.

I looked at her and said, "I was just thinking about all the NSF

propaganda I'd heard talking about how they wanted to create a better world for everyone, and how many people bought into it just to get arrested or killed. And now look at the world they gave us, we were called conspiracy theorists for suggesting the NSF was full of shit, then we were called terrorists for resisting them...I hate being right."

Sakura turned from me to look out the windshield, "My family believed it as well...at least initially, friends of my family thought the NSF wouldn't come for them, they thought they were safe as long as they repeated the party line, they thought it couldn't happen to them until they were dragged from their homes." A mournful expression formed on Sakura's face, I reached over and placed my hand on top of hers and gave it a squeeze, she responded my giving my hand a squeeze back. She continued, "How can people be so evil? How can they turn against their fellow man like this?" Before I could respond the trucks left front tire blew out.

The truck swerved to the left and I grabbed the wheel with both hands and fought to get it back on the road, Sakura yelled out as a bullet came through the windshield, then another, barely missing my head, someone was shooting at us. I pulled the wheel to the right and the truck jumped off the road onto a field, the ruined tire caused us to bounce around in the cab as more shots hit the truck, I saw bullet holes form in the hood, white smoke began pouring out and entering through the holes in the windshield, I could smell the truck's coolant burning as I raced across the field to find some sort of cover. A bullet ripped through the door and narrowly missed hitting Sakura.

"Where is it coming from?!" Sakura yelled out as more bullets hit the truck cab.

"Keep your head down!" I shouted back. I scanned the horizon for any position a sniper could be in and spotted a dilapidated grain silo a few hundred yards north of us, if I had a rifle, that's where I would be, as the truck bounced along I saw a glint from a sniper scope in an opening at the top of the silo. The left rear tire blew out, the truck slowed as the ruined tires tried to find



purchase in the muddy ground. I grabbed the rifle we kept in the cab, Sakura took out her pistol and checked the clip, we would need to bail from the truck, bullets had punched holes in the radiator and maybe the engine block as well, more white smoke poured from the holes in the hood and the temperature gauge was climbing, soon the engine began struggling and flames began leaping from the grille.

“Look!” Sakura motioned towards an abandoned grain thresher sitting on the far side of the field between the truck and silo, it was our best bet for some cover. I looked at Sakura and made a “tuck and roll” gesture, she nodded and as the crippled vehicle drew closer to the old piece of farm equipment, we kicked open our doors and leapt out of the still moving truck.

I hit the ground with a roll and jumped to my feet, racing towards the thresher with Sakura right behind me, I ran in a zig-zag pattern, more shots came, I could see the muzzle flash from the silo. A rifle round hit the ground near me, kicking up a clod of dirt, I ducked down and dove behind the thresher, Sakura reached the thresher at the same moment I did. More shots rang out as I readied the rifle, Sakura leaned her head around the far side of the thresher then quickly moved back into cover. She looked at me, “There’s some cover near the silo, burnt out ruins of a house, there’s a brick chimney that’s still intact, if you lay down covering fire, I should be able to reach it.” I was about to protest, I didn’t want to put Sakura in harm’s way, but considering the circumstances I don’t think we had any other options. My gun was an AR style rifle I’d picked from the corpses of one of the bandits at Toji’s farm, it was chambered in 5.56 NATO and had a red dot sight, it wasn’t ideal but if I judged the distance to the silo correctly, it should have more than enough range to hit the enemy shooter. Clipped onto my belt was a flash bang I’d grabbed before I jumped out of the truck, I’d grabbed it from the flipped over transport at the house where we’d had our encounter with our masked friend. I reached out and gave it to Sakura and said, “When you get close, lob this into the opening at the top.” She nodded and clipped it to her belt. Another shot rang out and hit

the side of the thresher near where I was crouched. Suddenly I had an idea, I took my jacket off and draped it around the barrel of my rifle, leaning against the thresher I raised it high enough over my thresher where the shooter could definitely see it, and waited for a few seconds...nothing. Sakura and I looked at each other, he was reloading.

I ripped the jacket off the rifle and took aim around the other side, squarely at the opening at the top of the old silo, I signaled to Sakura, and she took off around the other side of the thresher, racing her way towards the ruins of the farmhouse. I laid down semi-automatic fire at the opening in the silo, I could see sparks kicked up from my bullets hitting the metal surface near the opening and see hints of movement inside the darkened interior of the silo, I fired a few more shots, conscious that this was the only clip of ammo I had, the others were in the bed of the truck, and flames had engulfed it. I moved from my position with the rifle still trained on the silo, I was able to see Sakura reach the chimney, I could see her take the flash bang off her belt and pull the pin, she looked at me, with my free hand I signaled for her to throw it, at that she ran out from behind the chimney and threw the flash bang. It spiraled through the air in a wide arc and disappeared inside the silo, Sakura had a great arm. After a second there was a bright flash and a loud boom, I drew closer to the silo with my rifle still aimed at the top, I could see movement inside now behind a plume of smoke from the detonated flashbang. I gripped the rifle and raced towards the silo, as I drew nearer to where Sakura was, she left her position and moved behind me with her pistol at the ready. We reached the silo and split up, each heading in an opposite direction and circling around the diameter. I could hear movement inside the silo, it sounded like the shooter was climbing down from his position, we had to make sure to intercept him. Sakura and I reached a steel door on the opposite side of the silo, we slowed and readied our guns, I could hear footsteps heading towards the door, a moment later it swung open, and a figure emerged wearing fatigues and a ski mask, a long-range rifle gripped in his right hand, he was mov-

ing slowly, groaning and rubbing his eyes, the flashbang must have gone off right next to him. As quickly as I could I ran up to him, he wheeled around in my direction and tried to bring his rifle up, but I was too fast. I delivered a strike to the center of his face with the butt of my gun, he cried out and collapsed backwards hitting the ground hard. I kicked his rifle away and aimed my gun at him, he didn't look like he was part of NSF, nor was he decked out like the bandits we'd encountered. I looked at Sakura for a moment, then suddenly the shooter swung his arm out and batted the barrel of my rifle away, with his other hand he drew a knife out of a sheath on his chest and raised his torso upwards, ready to bury the blade in my kidney. Before I could react, Sakura swung her leg around and delivered a powerful kick to the side of his head, knocking him unconscious.

"Fuck!" I shouted in aggravation, mostly at my own mistake. This son of a bitch had caught me unaware, if it hadn't been for Sakura there was a good chance I'd be bleeding out.

"What would you do without me?" Sakura chided. I grabbed up the shooter's knife and inspected it, it was a large bowie knife with a symbol carved in the handle right under the guard, it resembled a tree inside of a circle. I handed it to Sakura and asked her if it looked familiar, after a few moments of looking at it she turned to me and said "I'm not sure but it looks like the insignia of the Brotherhood of Pine, they operated in the pacific northwest for a while but got chased east by the NSF when they started seizing more west coast territory. At least according to my father, he had contacts with certain groups opposing the NSF but most of them had gone radio silent in the last couple of years." She looked down at our unconscious assailant, then back at me. "What do you want to do with him?" she asked. Part of me wanted to put a bullet in his head and be done with it, but I wanted to know more, especially about how this knife had made its way all the way to the Republic.

I looked back at Sakura and said, "Grab his arms, I'll grab his legs, let's get him inside the silo before any of his friends decide to show up."

We got the limp body of the shooter back into the silo and found some old chains to bind his arms to a steel ladder that had been welded to the floor. The guy was big, maybe 6'4" and weighed well over 200 pounds. After we secured his arms and bound his legs, I took his mask off and was a bit shocked at what I saw. He was black, had short hair and an ill-kempt beard and besides the blood running down from his nose from where I'd struck him, I noticed a swastika had been branded into his right cheek, it looked like a quick and dirty job done with a piece of twisted wire and a blow torch. I opened his jacket to see if he had any more weapons on him, under it he wore a tank top and I could see a large scar on his left pectoral muscle, it looked like he...or someone had taken the blade of a knife a cut layers of skin off. I went through his pockets but didn't find much save for an old photo of a smiling black woman in a bathing suit standing on a beach, she was in front of an orange sun and purple clouds, her braided hair cascading down from her head, she held an open hand out to whoever had been taking the picture. In the upper level of the silo where he had been perched, we found rounds of ammo, rations, a radio, what appeared to be caffeine pills, and a canteen full of water. I thought about the supplies we'd lost with the truck, the smoke from which was sure to attract unwanted attention, we didn't have time to waste we needed answers now. I gave Sakura my rifle and told her that if he moved put a bullet in his head, then I took the canteen and splashed water in the shooter's face. It woke him up, spurting and coughing and cursing.

After a moment he regained his senses, he looked at Sakura and the rifle, then he looked at me crouched next to him, his eyes fixated on his steel blade now in my hand and grew wide. He leaned his head back and tried moving his arms, after some rattling from the chains he gave up, he noticed his legs were bound in chains too. At his he sighed, closed his eyes, and said one word "Fuck..."

"Who are you?" I demanded, pointing the knife at him.

He looked at me and smirked, "If ya'll gonna kill me, go ahead

and fuckin' kill me, I ain't got time for this bullshit, I didn't get away from those motherfuckers just to wind up getting captured by some white boy and his Asian bitch!" I back handed him, he turned his head back and spat a glob of blood at me that landed on the front of my shirt. At this I grabbed his hair and put the knife up to his throat. "Alright, alright!" He cried out in protest, "That yellow pussy got ya'll actin' strange!" he exclaimed, followed by a chuckle. My patience was running thin, I drew the knife close to his throat again and asked him why he'd been shooting at us. "I thought ya'll was those New Socialists faggots or somethin' you were driving one of they trucks! But since you is white as shit I guess that ain't the case..."

He smirked, "I thought they done clapped all ya'll, how'd you get so lucky?" I felt anger welling up again, but I couldn't let it cloud my judgement.

I drew the knife back from his throat, "If you're not the NSF, then who are you, and where'd you get this knife?"

His eyes moved from mine and looked at the rifle being held by Sakura again, the look she gave him must have disarmed him a bit. "I was in the IAC," he told me, "We had a unit operating in Oregon, our higher ups took orders from the NSF leadership in San Fran—I mean New Mali or whatever those motherfuckers called it. It was part of a broader coalition to clear out any resistance on the west coast after reports of new confederate niggas attacking supply lines were coming in. One night we found a group of those pine bros in an abandoned nature center not too far from Mount Hood, they were there with their families, women, and young kids...we gunned them all down, no remorse." A mournful look appeared on his face, he looked down at the ground, clearly feeling ashamed.

After a moment he continued. "After the slaughter, we patrolled the area for anyone else, I struck out on my own, heard a noise in one of the offices, I checked and found a family of three, a man with his wife and teenage daughter." He paused again and stared out into space.

"What did you do to them?" demanded Sakura, taking aim

with the rifle, I motioned to her to stand down, she lowered the gun but still kept her fierce gaze trained on him.

“I...” he began again, “I was under orders to kill anyone I saw, but the man begged for the lives of his wife and daughter...I couldn't bring myself to do it, not after I'd just seen kids get mowed down with machine guns. I joined the IAC because I thought it was about liberating my brothers and sisters, not straight up murder. I tried to get the family out, I lead them down a back stairwell and out a maintenance door, two of my unit found me helping them, they'd been waiting in the parking lot. Before I could do anything, they jumped on me, I yelled at the family to run but they didn't get far. They shot the father in the leg, made him watch as they raped his wife and daughter and beheaded them with machetes, then they put a bullet in the back of his head and burnt their bodies along with the rest in a huge pyre they built.” Sakura and I looked at each other, after the horrors we'd both experienced this kind of thing shouldn't have been shocking, but it brought back bad enough memories. He continued, “After they were done with the family, they beat me and tortured me, put this brand on my face...this scar on my chest? Used to be an IAC tattoo, they cut it off me with a knife, can't say I miss it too much now to be honest.” Our eyes met again, I had heard of horrible things done to people who went against the NSF, especially those who betrayed the cause, what few there were had typically been made examples of.

I had remembered my brother was in contact with an NSF defector years ago, someone who'd been feeding us intel on troop movements and arms shipments for months. One day we'd lost contact with him, we were able to triangulate his last known broadcast position, when we arrived to check on him all we found was one severed hand still holding a broken radio. I could only imagine the other horrific things he'd seen in the IAC. I asked him how he'd managed to escape. “They were going to hang me...” he said, “They wanted to leave my body as an example of what happens to traitors, I managed to cut my restraints with that knife you got in your hand and wrestle a gun away from one

of my crew, shot him in the chest point blank, managed to stab another dude in the neck, and ran my ass the fuck out of there, they fired at me, got a round buried in my back, but I managed to make it to the trucks, I hotwired one and took off in a hail of gunfire, thank God that bitch was armored, and thank God I learned how to boost cars when I was a young buck in South Central.”

I stood up and walked around, contemplating what the shooter had just told me, we didn’t have much reason to trust him, but his scars were real, I hadn’t known of anyone who betrayed the NSF or its allies and lived to tell the tale. I looked at him again and asked, “How did you find your way to the Republic with a bullet in your back?”

He met my gaze again and said “The bullet wasn’t too deep, I was able to bandage it pretty well, hurt like a motherfucker though, I was able to avoid detection from the NSF by tearing out the truck’s tracking equipment and only travelling at certain points of the day, lucky I knew where their checkpoints were, I camped out a night and was able to siphon enough gas to make it to Colorado. That’s where I met my current crew.”

“Current crew?” I asked.

“Yeah...” he said, “Dudes were running a convoy, few trucks, few cars, a tanker, and a couple RVs, never stayed in one spot for long. They’d crisscross the country and stay under the radar, mostly made up of ex-NSF footsoldiers who’d salvage any supplies they could and help anyone else who abandoned the movement. Been running with them for about three years now, they call themselves The Horde mostly Mexican bros, and a few Asians and Indians we met along the way. We headed into the Republic because a lot of NSF forces had pulled out after those new Confederate dudes fell, we can operate without too much interference now, but we still have to watch our asses, I’m sure ya’ll know about that.”

I approached him, “Where’s the rest of your crew now? Why are you out here by yourself?”

He answered, “We found a spot a few miles away from here, old campground a fair distance from the main road, we set up

there for a few days and they sent me to monitor for any vehicles coming down this street, there's guys posted west of here as well. Now...let me ask you, where are ya'll coming from, ain't seen any white folks in years."

I explained to him how I'd been in my brother's neo-Confederate unit for a few years before they'd gotten killed, how I'd hid out in old Tennessee for a while before hooking up with Sakura, I told him how we were headed to West Virginia to try to find any body else who was still alive.

Malcolm was silent for a moment, it looked like he was contemplating something, he then looked up and me and said, "We went through West Virginia a few weeks ago, we had intel on old neo-Confederate positions, we checked supply lines, hideouts, old, fortified positions...we even deployed drones to scan certain areas...there's nobody alive there man...sorry."

I was about to protest, I had been so certain that someone must have survived, but I stopped myself. This was an eventuality I had prepared myself for, facing the fact I was the last neo-Confederate alive, not only that, but maybe I was even the last member of my race that was alive.

Sakura walked up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Mason..." she said softly, "I'm sorry...but we both knew this could be the case."

I reached up and touched her hand. "I know..." I spoke. I had deluded myself with fantasies over the last few months, I had to face reality, it was like there was a weight on my shoulders. What the hell was I going to do now?

Suddenly there came a sound of car tires moving over dirt and the faint rumbling of exhaust pipes right outside the silo door. I looked at the shooter, "What the fuck is this?" I demanded.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as his eyes grew wide, "It's my bros, I radioed them after I engaged your truck, I thought ya'll was NSF remember?"

There came a voice calling from outside "Malcolm!?! Malcolm, are you in there man?!" Footsteps right outside the door



then it swung open and two large Hispanic men armed with pistols walked in, they saw their comrade chained up and me and Sakura standing over him with weapons. "What the FUCK!" one of them exclaimed as they both pointed their pistols at us, Sakura aimed the rifle back at them, I managed to pull out my pistol and aim it at the chained shooter, whose name was Malcolm apparently. I looked at the two men who'd just entered and let them know if they took another step their friend was dead.

"Chill, chill, CHILL!" yelled Malcolm, "Ya'll put your fuckin' guns down, ain't nobody needs to get shot!"

The Hispanic man on the left spoke. "Who the fuck are you white boy?" He still had his gun aimed at me; I held my pistol closer to Malcolm's head.

"I'm the guy with a gun to your boy's head, who the fuck are you?"

The Hispanic guy replied, "We got the call that an NSF truck had been spotted, we rolled up here and saw smoke in the distance, I'm guessing it was you in the truck but ya'll don't look like NSF to me my man. But I do know this, you better lower that fuckin' gun!"

The standoff lasted a few more moments before Malcolm spoke again, "Reggie, Miguel, chill the fuck out, this boy ain't NSF you even copped to that, everybody lower their mother-fuckin' guns!"

I exchanged a quick glance with Sakura, she looked back at me and gave me a slight nod. I looked back at the two other guys, apparently named Reggie and Miguel, "How do we know we can trust you?"

The men looked at each other for a brief second, then the one on the left lowered his gun and brought his right arm up as if he were making a muscle, with his left hand he raised the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a large scar similar to Malcolm's. He looked back at me, "I ain't got no loyalty to the NSF, but I do got a problem with that gun against my boys head." I exchanged another glance with Sakura, she kept the rifle aimed at the men, but

I slowly lowered my gun, Reggie and Miguel lowered and holstered theirs and raised their hands, walking slowly towards us.

“Not so fast!” shouted Sakura, still pointing the gun at them. I could understand Sakura being cagey, when I’d first met her, we’d had to fight off bandits who looked like these guys.

“Sakura...” I said, “It’s okay...” and I motioned for her to lower the rifle, she gave me an angry look but after another moment she lowered the barrel. Reggie and Miguel moved closer to us, I knelt down and took the chains off of Malcolm’s legs and arms and handed him a handkerchief I had to wipe the blood from his face.

“That lady of yours has quite the kick.” He remarked as he slowly got to his feet.

I turned back to Reggie and Miguel and asked, “So...what do we do now?”