

## **The Bounty Hunter**

*He knew where they had taken her. Why he would be drawn to follow it was hard to say. He hadn't thought that he was made this way any longer, but that which had been stirred these last days led him to discover feelings like familiar strangers, at first approaching warily, kept at a distance. And now they consumed him, led him to decisions he didn't want to make. It was so long since he thought of himself as even human. He had become a shell, a machine, he was conditioned by the world to be ruthless, the steel in his eyes matched only by the dry desperate emptiness in his soul.*

*It was dark now, where he lay. The ruins of the town no longer cast shadows, but the foundations rose around him, blacker shades of darkness in the bitter light of the stars. He looked upon the stars differently tonight. He implored something to come, to arrive and finish the job that had long been begun. The world no longer deserved its place in the firmament, riders were long overdue, the horsemen he thought that he had seen all those years ago, the harbingers of the end of an age; the warped earth and then the blinding flashes of billions of souls annihilated. Yet life had carried on. It seemed interminable to him, as he looked up into the sky. Life carried on to bring him this new source of pain.*

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He had met her as he passed through one of the new hamlets that were appearing in the desert as a flicker of life in the West twitched even in its death throes. He was just riding through another slow, endless day, observing the world around him as if he truly belonged somewhere else, in the way he always did. Blank faced, eyes fixed, impassive and forever unsurprised and unmoved by the world's cruel ironies. He was in between missions, waiting in the West, waiting for the call to come. A leat dug out of the desert by hundreds of desperate hands brought water from the Great River to the shadow of the vast dunes beneath which the fledgling settlement clustered. Tendrils of water, the new liquid gold, strung out across the valley here, a vast life giving arterial system which was reviving land scorched and shorn of life. Around the settlement that people called Temple, some sparse grasses could now be seen, and hopes were rising that soon food could be grown outside of the solar hydroponic cells that they still used. There were few that did not wish for change, and yet fewer still who truly believed that they would ever live to see it. To survive so long, to procreate, to further the increasingly tenuous line of human existence they had no choice but to try, and to hope. Nobody killed themselves, people had become too tired for that. Their lives had been spared, after all.

The Bounty Hunter, he who spared no-one, rode into this town. Here, he was a man who inspired fear and caused the wary to draw back from the streets to their houses of blasted timber. As he rode in mounted upon his sturdy looking camel he saw a girl returning from the desert, pails of water slung across her back from the deep well nearby. He stopped and looked to the sky. Evening, he judged, was close at hand. The blinding daylight blaze of the sun now glowed a paler yellow, the waxing glare from the rancid atmosphere alleviated by the declining temperature. Sunset

would soon come and darker things were stirring beneath the desert. Nothing threatened the Bounty Hunter, yet when he saw the girl returning he stopped, and sat up in his saddle. Maybe he should rest a while – he never knew when the call would come.

He told himself that he needed to rest, although he knew it was not true. There was a gaping hole where his soul used to be before he was hollowed out by time, before the blood that pushed through his hard narrow veins turned cold like liquid fluorine, before he ceased to love or care for anyone or anything. Before he would become a killer. Now, where he thought there was nothing, he felt an ancient primeval stirring, something that was not quite lost, something flooding into that emptiness and encroaching upon the rest of his being. For the girl's face, he knew, would never leave him.

In a world of despair, hope blazes like sun flashing across the hulk of a circling aluminium airframe, or the muzzle of a gun flaring as the powder strikes and the charge explodes. It is startling, unexpected, lethal and glorious, a ripple in the dull march of time. This girl was beautiful beyond description. Not in a way that was open to interpretation, not equivocally, uniquely beautiful; each to their own. Not like that. She was stunning, undeniable, all consuming pretty – dusky golden hair bouncing off her shoulders and flowing down her neck, her strong delicately sculpted frame held erect and equal to all the burdens of the world, not bowed by them. With her strength, her elegance came too; an ease of movement which spoke of more than logic can comprehend, affecting in a deeply subtle way, a knowing way. You see her and you know, that you could want for no other should you ever claim her. That here in the form of this one fragile creature all dreams are answered. Her skin was tanned but not tarnished – a healthy glow unheard of in this part of the world. Her blue eyes invited all questions but revealed no answers, eyes you could look into forever until your mind became unhinged, fractal globes of purest knowledge, endless and timeless and utterly destructive. Her face once beheld was never forgotten, mobile and yet set, permanent in its beauty yet transparent with her moods; changeable, each circumstance opening new facets of her unyielding wonderfulness. She was knowing enough – you could tell from the way she walked, the way she held herself, that she was no blushing maiden unaware of the ways of the world. She was not brazen though, not proud or inaccessible or ever mocking in her manner. She was just so.

In this girl The Bounty Hunter saw hope, because she carried hope in her. She was unlike the cracked and broken remnants of humanity he saw every day, strewn upon this land as if seed scattered by a careless hand and left untended. She was full and blossoming and looked of this world, this new world that humanity had founded. The hope was not just in her beauty or her manner, but her very existence; that life would not be rank forever, that even in the hellpit of the West new wonders could be nurtured. He did not need to rest, he was not tired. He was taken aback by this hope, of that lost concept he had long ago given up; many people no longer even knew its name. She drew him because she was unlike anything he had seen since he was sent out into this wasteland long ago, by people he remembered only vaguely

and with a mission that he still didn't really understand. As light flowed into the darkness at the centre of him he knew, that this girl could bring meaning to his existence, define his being. She had that potential. For years he had done what he did best, because that was what he did, he knew nothing else. This change was what she brought, and he knew in his bones that he stopped that night because of her, whatever lies his mind wrought.

The Bounty Hunter sought no inn, rather he set himself in the ruins west of the town, camped under the stars, as he always did. He would build a smokeless fire in his own artful way, and hunt for whatever could be found in the brush. Mostly snakes and lizards, for not much better moved over these lands that could be caught easily, at least without wasting good ammunition. That evening he walked slowly back to where his beast of burden stood, having set traps out on the edges of his line of vision, out where he knew that creatures would dare to roam; he saw far. Swinging down the shotgun that he always carried across his gaunt shoulders he sat out under the great ragged vista of the broken evening sky to watch the sun set over the endless horizon of the desert. He thought, as he had not done for a long time.

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*Looking back he wished that he had not stopped but travelled on through the night, entered the wilderness with the same relentlessness that made him the most dangerous creature for miles around. Normally he would. When he had no task to sate his will he wandered remorselessly, with no thought to his purpose. He roamed the wilds alone, unapproachable and unreachable, driven from town to town only by the tides of the wind. When the call came a switch turned in his mind – a purpose enveloped him that he did not know at any other time. To what end each call would lead him he never knew, the purpose of his work was never revealed. He needed no reason because this was all he had. Dark, languid days in the scorching and unforgiving sand, punctuated by brutal bloodletting. This was his life, and to him it was as good as any other.*

*The call had still not come – it had been 8 long months now, and he had wandered far without reason that he could comprehend. His mind twitched in his head, awareness pricking at him. It had never been so long before. Even if the call never came, he would not suffer agonies but for that girl's eyes, he would happily wander forever. Those eyes had told him something, and whilst the light that fired them lived he had new purpose. An understanding that he had never possessed took him; he too was now a helpless passenger. Sometimes, he told people that he himself was fate, some nameless angel of darkness come from the desert to avenge their sins, and put their little lives to rest. He never believed this, no superstition moved him, no force but his own ego and his knowledge of the desire that people have for reason. Whilst he was mostly carried by the world, in his mind it was so because he allowed it. Now he knew he held no power. Life called him; those depthless eyes. A band of night tinged an ashen blue was spreading across the sky, foretelling the coming of dawn; another day of these most perilous times, and still he survived. He looked within himself, and saw once again that his mind was keen as a newly sharpened*

*blade, ready to face those who would oppose him. When the day came that it wasn't, it would be the day he died. The honour of that merciful release from the trial of existence would fall to others in the coming hours.*

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When he came to Temple he had then too spent the night sitting, long awake under the stars. The sunset smote the land all the colours of death; glittering guttural orange of a billowing deadly fireball, and bright crimson red of the blood that had fertilised the soil. The sky dark, his thoughts followed. He knew not what to do, but sensed a flourish of menace in the land. He was drawn to find the girl, and this alarmed him. Yet he would obey his instincts, because they had never failed him – he had nothing else to do, not yet.

The next day he awoke, early, before the sky had brightened fully. It was still pale and lank and the sun feeble as it struggled reluctantly over the horizon. He patrolled what he had established as the perimeter of his camp, checking the traps and marking the land in his mind's eye. If he was to remain a day or two, he needed to be vigilant, for whilst powerful there were still those who would threaten him – desperate men wrenched free of their senses by the hopelessness that surrounded them, and foul creatures, mutant carnivores that hunted in the night. He returned to his camp, his territory marked, grasping a dead lizard by the tail. As dawn rose he kindled a small fire of brush and made ready his breakfast.

He arrived in the hamlet just after noon, and in much the manner as he had previously; seated easily upon the camel's stout back, staring out over the town set amidst the lunar landscape. Still, this was not the same man as the day before. His slate grey eyes, if anyone dared meet them, were less remote than usual. Today he had a purpose; he sought the girl. He found a place deserted, such streets as there were emptied; a dead place. He was not surprised, fear usually preceded him, for that he could blame no-one. If he feared anything, it was himself, his own terrible power. The houses were built of whatever could be gathered – fire blackened driftwood bolstered with brush and stone, mean and crude and roofless dwellings. Quick and sure as death, he pulled his shotgun from his back, cocked it, and fired it in the air in one fluid practised motion. The gunshot sounded across the dunes like thunder of the rains that never came. There followed a deathly silence – even the wind did not dare to speak.

“Come forward, or I will burn this town to ashes; come forward, whoever may be the leader among you”

He did not shout, but to the cowering folk in their humble abodes his voice must have sounded louder and more fearsome than the gunshot that preceded it. They knew from the tone and command that The Bounty Hunter was among them, but could not tell who he came for. They could never tell. From one of the grander dwellings, roofed and permanent looking, came a middle aged man. He emerged slowly and walked forward nervously. He seemed unsure of procedure, walked in a

half-crouched cowering pose which made him look smaller than he ought to have been. He drew within ten yards of The Bounty Hunter, and beheld him. To people of a hamlet such as this, The Bounty Hunter was a terrible legend, a mythical creature of darkness. He wore a black broad brimmed hat, with his mop of dark hair held fast beneath by a red and white bandanna. He wore camouflaged trousers and leather boots with deep soles that seemed almost as timeless as his weathered, ageless face. Over his crisp white shirt he wore a thigh length coat of time ravaged suede, and across his shoulders a dark travel-stained cape sat limp against his back, tumbling down over the flanks of his steed. He looked enormous before their eyes, more threatening for the blemishes and imperfections of time. The man could say nothing.

“I am looking for a girl of this town, more beautiful than any other. You will bring her here now.”

The man looked thunderstruck, then defiant. The defiance evaporated on looking into the bright hot coals of the Bounty Hunter’s narrowed pupils.

“I will bring her. She is my daughter.”

The Bounty Hunter nodded, but made no other movement. He had no doubt that the man knew the exact girl of which he spoke. Almost perceptibly, all of Temple exhaled as one. Rather the girl than them.

The Bounty Hunter remained motionless, only his eyes following the man as he hurried away. He imagined him cursing his ill fortune, that his girl should be taken from him. The part of him that was changed by her beauty and bearing, perhaps prompted by some deeply buried stirring of humanity, now drew his mind elsewhere. He asked himself what it would be, to live as other people do, and speak as they speak. To use means other than fear and the voice of command to communicate his wishes and obtain his desires. He pitied these people, but at the same time experienced a longing long absent – not strong, but there, like a forgotten memory that refuses to surface, nagging at the corners of his mind. Perhaps the answer lay in those eyes.

It was a full twenty minutes before her father returned, leading the girl by the hand. He marched boldly towards The Bounty Hunter almost dragging his charge behind him. The Bounty Hunter, who had not moved a muscle in this time, saw a desperation about the man’s eyes, and readied himself. He doubted the haggard figure could cause much trouble, but set his brain in motion anyway, to get the edge he needed. The man returned to within ten yards of him, and as he approached fell to his knees in the dust dragging his daughter to the floor alongside him. Whatever course of action he had determined, he had thought better of it at the last. He looked up at the impassive form that towered above him, sobbing tears of pain and rage and frustration.

“Please don’t take her”

The scrawny, scrabbling figure looked pitiful, rolled in dirt. The girl looked on, grave and silent; noble and beautiful and like nothing else in that bitter blasted place.

“I will protect her”

The Bounty Hunter let the words pass his lips before he could halt them. Some new instinct was aroused in him. He did not let his momentary confusion show in his eyes or in the way he held himself. His endless certainty made him seem invulnerable, the fear this nurtured was his armour. He held out his hand to the girl, who stood and took it with a far firmer grasp than he was expecting. Without allowing himself pause to consider this, he flicked his arm and hauled her up and across his legs, where she dangled like baggage. He set off immediately, leaving the man floundering helplessly in the dirt behind him, wondering at what he had just witnessed.

It was a short ride back to his camp, and they did not speak a word. He could see that the girl was numbed by terror, unsure what fate lay ahead. Now he was with her, The Bounty Hunter too was lost, because he did not know what he expected to find. The truth would reveal itself, he knew. It always did in the end.

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*Before dawn had so much as flickered at the horizon, his breakfast, a pale green desert snake, was gutted and mounted above the embers of the fire. He sat closeby as it cooked, the packs that were normally slung over his mount unwrapped, his shotgun stripped and oiled in front of him. Also laid out were two automatic pistols, newly reassembled, and the knife that he carried in his boot, newly sharpened. It was a ritual for him, this methodical maintenance of the tools of his trade. His power was no secret – a clear mind and the best tools he could find; lightning hands, strong grip and a bullseye aim. This was how he killed.*

*He looked down at his shotgun, in pieces before him. He could do it with his eyes closed, had done in fact, in more carefree times. Now he was methodical and precise, every piece put together with fatherly care and endless patience. He would put his life in the hands of this weapon, and the lives of others as well. It was no time for games or frivolity. He never had much time for that. The wind whistled like an old drunk as it played across the surface of the dunes to his east. He saw vast swathes of sand whirling as they moved across their heaped surfaces, playing on the horizon. The sky turned as blue as infinity as the sun slowly rose, and the world became too hot to bear. The Bounty Hunter did not sweat though. He was grim as he rose and shouldered his arms, grim as he tucked the pistols into the holsters at his side and the knife back into his left boot. His face was set in the same expression it always carried, distant and impassive and haggard and terrible. The eyes that saw everything looked out across the sand.*

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He had spread his canvass blankets either side of the dead fire, giving his guest the cleanest one, which wasn't saying much. His capacity for delicacy and tact was limited by what he was, what he had to be. Still he thought of the man he once was and what he might have done, and followed those conventions. The girl, once he set her down, had still been afraid, and he had still been reticent. It was just past midday when they returned and four hours had passed, with no word spoken between them. He looked at her intently, focussing his gaze upon her every feature. She just lay and rested, occasionally lifting her head to look about her at the world she knew. He was sure that she thought it would be her last day upon this earth, as she lay there in front of him. She was not to know the truth. He was impressed by her silent defiance, her endless dignity.

"Who are you?"

Her voice was strong, and resonated through the night all the more strongly for the strange silence that had preceded it.

"I am The Bounty Hunter"

The simplicity and immediacy of his reply invited no argument.

"That is what you are. I want to know who you are, who is this man that I see before me, who takes me away from my village and stares at me all day?"

The Bounty Hunter regarded her gravely. He was not used to conversation, to people speaking to him in this way. This girl, given time to conquer her fear in his presence that he had never granted to another soul, had become reckless in her hopelessness.

"I am nobody. But I have not seen such a girl as you in many years, this is why I must speak to you. I take a terrible risk in doing this, you understand?"

"But why, Bounty Hunter?"

"I don't know yet."

This admission numbed and shamed him. They sat again in silence, for a long time. As their breath grew visible in front of their faces The Bounty Hunter moved to swiftly build a fire, more for his guest's sake than his own. Once he had kindled the brush into flame, he carefully built a small pyramid of driftwood, an altar of all that was gone and lost forever. The tinder dry fuel exploded into sparks as it caught alight; snapping like pistol shots, echoing across the sparse landscape.

"Have you ever loved anyone?"

The question was unexpected and unwelcome, but in his mind he knew that this was what he had come to find. He had not, he didn't think.

"This was a mistake. I will take you back tonight."

She was silent a minute more, but unperturbed.

"A lot of the men in the town have said they love me, and some of them meant it I think. Others just want to touch me, to sleep with me, because they say I am beautiful, that I speak so well. I do not love any of them though, none of them move me; they are all foolish, cowards really. None of them inspire anything, they just fight for the scraps they can find in life. I do not mind this attention, in a way I feel it is my role, to be this figurehead for them, something to aspire to. All they aspire to. I am privileged, although you probably find this hard to believe. I am Jeb Golding's daughter, leader of our hamlet, and he has raised me to read and write and learn. A lot of people aren't so lucky. Not everyone even has houses to live in, out here. We are forgotten, unwanted, left to rot in the desert – people take hope where they can find it and I don't mind. Where do you come from, Bounty Hunter, who raised you? What is your name?"

The girl offered so much information it was almost a challenge to him, to respond in kind. They sat in silence as the sun dipped lower and the shadows lengthened before them. The fire too, cast strange shadows across the camp, made the girl look a lot older than she was as the light danced across the hollows of her features. The Bounty Hunter looked at her, and felt pity; regret. Feelings he was deeply unaccustomed to. He felt a sudden responsibility for the disastrous world this girl was forced to grow up in, the hardships she faced with worse to face still. He was of this world, too, and his place in it was far from hers. There was no unifying purpose to what he did, but he decided if it were anything it should be to let creatures such as this live life without such cynicism and coldness. He trusted nobody, ever. And yet he relented.

"I have lived longer than you might think. You must know from my age, that I have seen the world as it was, and you should guess that I serve those who made it so. I have.... survived, by any means. There is still a war in these lands, and I am but a weapon. I know nothing of why, but I believe in the cause that I once fought for, and I fight for it still. In the East the world is different, you know. You may rarely see those who come from so far away, but there still exists some of that which the world possessed before – knowledge and electricity, buildings buried deep underground – many people, many lives. I serve them, that life may continue. I brought you here to see you and know you, because you show me that my mission is not in vain. I only know this now, now you have stirred my mind into thought for the first time in decades - you represent more than all the vast complexes of the east. Because you represent the future of our race, a new beginning. My time is nearing an end, and now I mostly exist only to serve myself, to fill my days. From today I know why I have existed so long, why I fight - I exist to protect such as you."



The girl silently nodded. The Bounty Hunter looked down at his boots.

“I will take you back now”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Your question?”

“Have you ever loved anyone?”

The Bounty Hunter looked steadily into her eyes, following their path straight to her soul but unable to reach it or make sense of what he found. In turn she gazed upon the pale reflective surfaces of his sheer slate grey irises, trying to unpeel the layered defences that he had spent years erecting. As she looked away, they could both feel frustration. But there was also something else.

“I don’t know” He replied.

When he got back from returning the girl it was late, and the moon was large and looming above him in the velvet sky. The remains of the fire smouldered in the blackened pit, embers still glowing faintly, reaching out for something to sustain them before dying in the cold desert breeze. He sat and looked over the land, his awareness heightened, ready to react. It was a sixth sense he had, although he did not really believe in such things. He was not spiritual, but practical; his ears and eyes were straining against the night air. He had told the girl too much and put himself in danger, he knew this much now. He had put her in danger. He could feel that something was wrong, was against all logic aware of it in his soul, and he primed himself for what he felt was to come.

Across the desert from the direction of the village, he heard a sliver of sound carrying through the night air. The wind was not in his favour but the noise was there, somewhere carried on the night air. He settled and watched, adrenaline flowing now. Half an hour later, a rider entered his vision, a ghostly figure in the monochrome desert. This was remarkable itself in these lean times, that anyone should possess a mount in such a town. As the speck on the horizon grew to a solid form under the light of the moon and the stars, it was revealed as more a beast of burden than a battle mount, a mange-ridden tick infested mule. With his keen vision he could almost see the fleas jumping, a mile or more in the distance. It carried upon it the man the girl had called Jeb Golding. He let the man get close before he rose to greet him. Jeb Golding dismounted and bowed. He was sweating, and looked distressed. The Bounty Hunter read fear in his eyes, of what he did not know.

“Please, I did not know where else to turn!”

“Why have you come?” And more importantly in The Bounty Hunter’s mind, how did you find me here?

“My daughter... they have taken her..”

“Who? Where?”

“Some men, they came into town – when she returned she insisted in sitting outside for a while, I told her not to, but...”

“Tell me who, and where?” The Bounty Hunter thought he knew the answer to both questions – he knew that outsiders camped in these parts, and raided the villages for what they needed, but something did not sit right with this handsome, cowering man.

“They were outsiders – we knew of their presence, they are camped out by the old wreck... but I wouldn’t think that they would take her.”

Jeb Golding knelt and wept bitter tears into the fine desert sand

“Go now, it is late”

He looked up, abashed, as if caught unawares doing something he shouldn’t be. His cheeks were still wet with grief; windswept sand and hair stuck to them.

“Will you help find her?”

“Go now, or die” The Bounty Hunter said, in the voice of command.

Jeb Golding scrambled back onto his steed, and galloped as best he could in the direction from which he had come.

As the absurd mount and its unlikely rider vanished over the horizon, a shrill tone carved through the distant echo of hooves. The shrill tone came from the bounty hunter’s rolled up carpetbag, containing his few possessions. He walked to his camp and retrieved the satellite phone from the bag, wrapped in rags so that it would come to no harm. He pressed respond and lifted it to his ear. As he listened, his shoulders dropped and his face became set and harsh as granite. The call had come.

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As mid-morning approached The Bounty Hunter had scaled most of the almost impassable rocky outcrop that overlooked the area known as The Wreck. He had taken a roundabout route so that he would not be spotted from afar, and come this most difficult of ways in order to avoid sentries, and be able to have a clear view of the task awaiting him. The Wreck was the almost mythical site of a crashed war machine, a type now in existence in very small numbers only in the deepest bunkers of the East, awaiting a time when they would be needed again. Few vehicles now roamed anywhere in the world, and evidence of these vast machines was as rare as the oil or the uranium that used to power them. The Wreck itself had been thoroughly looted, and now consisted of a large crater in the middle of a canyon and a few scattered shards of carbon fibre. It was still an outpost and a meeting point for outlaws and vagabonds, for anyone who needed somewhere neutral to conduct their business. A small range of jagged cliffs overlooked the site, most of which were only accessible through the canyon, that itself could only be reached by braving the narrow entrance which led back towards the town. The Bounty Hunter had always known this route, but had hoped he would never had to climb it. It was more dangerous to him than any of the men that he knew were lying in wait for him, scanning the desert for signs of his approach.

For Outsiders this amount of caution would be unnecessary – they were shabbily armed, poorly trained and frequently drunk – merely showing up at dawn would be enough to catch them unawares or still paralytic from the night before, and the sound of his voice enough to disperse them. The people he faced were no Outsiders though.

He looked sharply about the rim of the canyon as soon as it came into view. Snipers were spaced around the canyon edges, camouflaged against the yellow grey desert hues and scarcely visible to the naked eye. None had observed him. Looking down into the bowl of the canyon he could see the bait for the ambush that was intended for him - the girl bound and gagged and attended by 3 idly smoking, ragged looking sentries. He was not sure, had the call not come, how this would have ended. If he had come for the girl directly, would he have been so cautious? To approach the men from the entrance of the canyon he would never even have been aware of his mistake before he fell dead to the dusty canyon floor, pierced by a dozen sniper bullets. He doubted that he would ever have been so brave. These Rebels would have died either way, as they would die now. He had counted 4 snipers, and he doubted the men on the ground were unarmed. With luck they wouldn't even see him before they died. He pulled the shotgun from his back, armed it with explosive shells. The pistol shots to take out the snipers would be difficult but not impossible – in the confusion and confines of their positions at the rim of the canyon they wouldn't be hard to hit. The men on the ground would doubtless scatter, but he wanted them out of the way for now. There was a pile of their gear ten yards behind them. He theorised that it would contain shells and ammunition as well as food and water. He aimed the shotgun there – even if it contained nothing more than rations the explosive shells would cover him.

The shotgun shell found its mark with a tremendous burst of sound and flame. The bundle at which he had aimed exploded and lit ammunition spiralled around the canyon, the pyrotechnics flashing off the walls and fizzing across the floor leaving trails of sparks. This was the best outcome he could have hoped for. He immediately took cover, pulled one pistol from his belt and aimed, using the crook of a rock in front of him to steady the grip. The nearest sniper didn't even have time to look surprised at the commotion before the back of his head and most of his brains lay scattered across the canyon wall behind him. The next had time to turn and think about seeking an assailant before the Bounty Hunter shot him through the neck, sending spirals of blood leaping into the void above the canyon floor before the man's flailing corpse followed it. The third tried to take cover behind a rock in front of him, but he had no idea where the gunfire was coming from such were the acoustics of the canyon. As he crouched, quite pathetically, he left The Bounty Hunter a full view of his profile. A single bullet entered the sniper's temple, leaving a smoking circle of slowly oozing blood that flowed like a river delta down the side of the man's head as he slid lifelessly to the floor. The fourth sniper decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and was hastily descending the cliff path to the canyon floor as the bounty hunter brought his sights around. As he aimed the man lost his footing and dangled briefly at the edge of the precipice, scrabbling desperately for a better grip, before losing the fight with gravity, pirouetting

helplessly towards the jagged unforgiving rocks below. As he landed his limbs erupted at unlikely angles, and he was still.

The Bounty Hunter had already turned his attention to the canyon floor. Two of the men had vanished, whilst the other looked more or less directly towards the place where The Bounty Hunter was secreted, indicating that he had managed to trace the source of the carnage. He was roughly pulling the girl's head back by her beautiful tousled hair, holding a mean and rusty looking serrated knife to her throat. The Bounty Hunter calculated that he had a little over ten minutes to end this stand-off before one of the missing two men could get a shot at him. He wouldn't need that long.

"I've got two guns and a blade on this girl, Bounty Hunter. Give yourself up or she dies today."

The man talked in the sneering tone of somebody who believes he cannot be bested, that he holds the winning hand. The Bounty Hunter took aim with his pistol once again, and put a bullet right between the girl's eyes.

Incomprehension just had time to colour the man's features before the same fate befell him, and they both slumped, hair and knife and girl and her desperate rebel lover in a bloody lifeless pile on the canyon floor. Blood spilled and pooled and instantly drained into the thick cloying dirt below their bodies. The Bounty Hunter turned and followed the path to the canyon floor, swiftly and stealthily descending, shotgun slung over his back, pistol in one hand and a knife in the other.

His senses sharpened by the fight and the starkness of it all, he easily located the two men rushing up the path towards him. Finding a blind turn in the track he waited until the first one was almost upon him before dragging him hard up against his body and brutally slitting open his throat, showering the pathway with blood. He released the soundlessly screaming man to fall forward and die with his face in the dirt. Judging that the other was close behind, he stepped into straight into his path and emptied the pistol clip in to his torso, screaming wordless oaths as he did so, before the rebel could even register his presence.

By the time The Bounty Hunter reached the canyon floor 10 minutes later his senses had returned to normal. His bloodflow slowed, and time speeded up. Thoughts and feelings crowded him as life reasserted its authority over death. He did not look to the corpses that lay on the valley floor. He could not look into the lifeless eyes of the perfect young Joan of Arc who he now knew was the leader of the local rebellion, and the target of his latest assassination. He wanted to remember them as they were, hard and clear and deep and pure; defiant and full of life and purpose. He stopped and looked to the sky and guessed the time to be a little before midday. The sun beat down on him without mercy, the sun that continued to rise, day after day after thankless soulless day. As he turned and walked away a single tear struggled to forge a path down his cheek, through stubble and grime and sweat and blood.